

2.7 DAOISM

When we speak of “Daoism” in the Classical period, we generally mean by the term the ideas of two rather mysterious texts that date from the Warring States era. They are the *Dao de jing* (Classic of the Way and of Virtue) by Laozi, and the works of the quirky recluse Zhuangzi, which appear in a book that takes his name as its title.

Daoism appears to have begun as an escapist movement during the early Warring States period, and in some ways it makes sense to see it as an outgrowth of Confucianism and its doctrine of “timeliness.” That doctrine originated with Confucius’s motto: “When the Way (*dao*) prevails in the world, appear; when it does not, hide!” Even in the Confucian *Analecets*, we see signs of a Confucian trend towards absolute withdrawal. The character and comportment of Confucius’s best disciple, Yan Yuan, who lived in obscurity in an impoverished lane yet “did not alter his joy,” suggest this early tendency towards eremitism (the “hermit” lifestyle). In Book 18 of the *Analecets*, Confucius himself seems half drawn to this path of absolute social withdrawal.

In Chu there was a madman known as the Carriage Greeter who passed before the carriage of Confucius singing, “Phoenix! Phoenix! How your virtue has declined! Don’t preach about what is past; don’t race after what is yet to come. Be done! Be done! In this age, entanglements of state are perilous!”

Confucius climbed down wishing to speak with him, but the Carriage Greeter darted off. (18.5)

Chang Ju and Jie Ni were ploughing the fields in harness together. Confucius passed by and sent Zilu over to ask directions.

“Who’s that holding the carriage reins?” asked Chang Ju.

“That is Kong Qiu,” replied Zilu.

“Kong Qiu of Lu?”

“Yes!” said Zilu.

“Why, then,” said Chang Ju, “he knows where he can go!”

Zilu then asked Jie Ni.

“And who are you?” asked Jie Ni.

“I am Zhong You,” replied Zilu.

“Are you the Zhong You who is a disciple of Kong Qiu of Lu?”

“I am,” said Zilu.

Jie Ni said, “The world is inundated now. Who can change it? Would you not be better off joining those who have fled from the world altogether, instead of following someone who flees from this man to that one?” Then the two of them went on with their ploughing.

Zilu returned to report to Confucius.

The Master's brow furrowed. "I cannot flock together with the birds and beasts!" he cried. "If I am not a fellow traveler with men such as these, then with whom? If only the Way prevailed in the world I would not have to try to change it!"
(18.6)

Righteous hermits were much admired in Classical China, and men who withdrew from society to live in poverty "in the cliffs and caves" paradoxically often enjoyed a type of celebrity status. The legend of Bo Yi and Shu Qi, the hermits who descended from their mountain retreat because of the righteousness of King Wen of Zhou, led to the popular idea of hermits as virtue-barometers – they rose to the mountains when power was in the hands of immoral rulers, but would come back down to society when a sage king finally appeared. Patrician lords very much valued visits from men with reputations as righteous hermits, and this probably created the opportunity for men to appear at court seeking patronage on the basis of their eremitic purity.

Possibly during the fourth century, this eremitic tradition seems to have generated a complex of new ideas that included appreciation for the majestic rhythms of the natural world apart from human society, a celebration of the isolated individual whose lonely stance signaled a unique power of enlightenment, and a growing interest in the potential social and political leverage that such renunciation of social and political entanglements seemed to promise. The product that emerged from these trends is the *Dao de jing*, perhaps the most famous of all Chinese books.

The *Dao de jing*

The *Dao de jing* (often called the *Laozi*) as we have it today appears to be a composite text which reached something like its final form during the third century B.C., but much of which existed perhaps a century earlier. Its author is said to have been a man named Laozi, or the "Old Master." Despite the fact that we have a great deal of very specific biographical information about Laozi, including accounts of how Confucius studied with him, it is very unlikely that there ever was any one person known by such a name or title who authored the book we now possess. Instead, the power of the book itself has attracted a collection of legends which coalesced into the image of the Old Master, an elusive and transcendent sage of the greatest mystery.

The text takes its name from two key concepts within it. We have become familiar with "Dao" 道, and will learn more about its meaning presently. The term "de" 德 refers to a type of charismatic virtue or earned social leverage that individuals were thought sometimes to possess. An early use of the word denoted the prestige of a patrician whose wealth and accomplishments had created in others a sense of awe or genuine debt, such that they served him willingly. Confucians used the term to denote the sort of inner moral virtue that they believed spontaneously attracted people and led them towards ethical improvement. In certain religious contexts, *de* referred to mysterious powers that individuals might possess, and various types of self-cultivation schools referred to accomplishments engendered by their training regimens as *de*.

The *Dao de jing* is unlike most other early texts. Its authorial voice is haunting, detached, impersonal. The rhetoric of the text resembles that of Biblical prophecy. It is grandiose and obscure.

The tone of the text itself feels authoritative beyond any other Chinese text; perhaps that is why several new English translations are published – and sell out – each year or two.

The mystery that flows from the *Dao de jing*'s mix of poetry and prose probably arises from two sources. The more intellectually genuine of these is the sincere sense of awe that individuals who broke with their lives of social engagement discovered when they retreated to a world of forests and waterfalls, birds and stars. But also, once the marketability of eremitic sagehood had been established, it is likely that the oracular tone of the *Dao de jing* became the rhetorical stance of the Daoist persuader, the recluse who made celebrated and well rewarded appearances at court to share with rulers secrets learned in the cliffs and caves but applicable to the art of statecraft.

These two voices correspond to two very different doctrinal directions that appear in the *Dao de jing*. As we read the text, we cannot help but be struck by the awe-inspiring isolation of the secluded hermit and the intimate and original vision of nature that he presents. The “Dao,” which in these portions of the text seems to be something close to the inexplicable rhythms of the natural world perceived through wordless experience, is a compelling concept. It combines religious awe, philosophical sophistication, and a deep sense of aesthetic fulfillment. The text links this understanding of nature to an absolute valuation of selflessness and the renunciation of all goal-directed action. Man's project becomes the emulation of nature's spontaneous operation, a return to spontaneous action from instinct alone. This is referred to in the text by the term *wuwei*, which is often translated “non-action,” but really means non-*striving*: the absence of all motivation in one's action, apart from the satisfaction of those needs which humans possess in their most basic, pre-verbal stages.

At the same time, it is disconcerting to find this call for non-striving and renunciation of the self linked to the crassest of political motives: the attainment of the highest political position – to rule the empire. The attraction of the selfless Way turns out to be its potential to satisfy a lust for power. While those devoted to the *Dao de jing* sometimes approach this from a salvationist angle – the desire to be king merely reflects the wish to release the world from the chains of false values – it is hard to escape the impression that the motives of the authors of the book were, perhaps, mixed.

The following selections from the text have been chosen to suggest the range of themes with which it deals. The text itself is very short, a bit over five thousand words divided into eighty-one chapters in the traditional edition. These passages represent a significant portion of the text.

On the Dao

A Dao that may be spoken is not the enduring Dao. A name that may be named is not an enduring name.

No names – this is the beginning of Heaven and earth. Having names – this is the mother of the things of the world.

Make freedom from desire your constant norm; thereby you will see what is subtle. Make having desires your constant norm; thereby you will see what is manifest. These two arise from the same source but have different names. Together they may be termed ‘the mysterious’. Mystery and more mystery: the gate of all that is subtle. (ch. 1)

The first sentence is the most famous pun in Chinese. The word *dao* possesses a variety of early meanings, and among them are the verb meaning “to speak,” and two nominal meanings: “a teaching,” and “the transcendent order of the universe.” The initial six characters of the *Dao de jing* include three *daos* (in Chinese it reads: “*Daoke daofei chang dao*”). They may be taken to mean, respectively, “teaching,” “to speak,” and “transcendent order.”

The Dao is empty yet you may draw upon it; you will never be filled. It is an abyss, like the ancestor of all things.

Blunt the point,
Undo the tangle,
Soften the glare,
Join the dust.

Dim, it seems almost to exist. I know not whose child it may be. It seems the forerunner of the Lord. (ch. 4)

There is a thing formed from confusion and born before heaven and earth. Silent, solitary, alone and unchanging. It revolves everywhere and is never in danger. It can be the mother of all under heaven. I do not know its name, but I style it “the Dao.”

If forced to give it a name, I call it “the Great.” The Great I call “Receding.” Receding I call “Distant.” Distant I call “Reversing.”

Thus the Dao is great, heaven is great, earth is great, and the king is great as well. Within the realm there are four great ones, and the king sits as one among them.

Men emulate earth; earth emulates heaven; heaven emulates the Dao; the Dao emulates spontaneity. (ch. 25)

The term “spontaneity” translates a key Daoist term which at root means “self-so,” signifying that something is a certain way by virtue of its own properties or spontaneous action. The term comes to mean “Nature,” in the Western sense of that part of the universe that governs itself without interference by man. The relation between man and Nature, or man and spontaneity, is a central issue for Daoism.

The Dao is ever non-acting, yet nothing is undone. If a lord or king can preserve this the things of the world will of themselves be transformed.

Transformed, should desire arise, I will press it down with the uncarved block of namelessness. The uncarved block of namelessness – surely then they shall be without desire. Without desire and thus still, so will all under heaven be spontaneously settled. (ch. 37)

The uncarved block is a key symbol in the text. It is paired with “undyed cloth,” and contrasted to pattern (*wen*) and Li.

Reversal is the motion of the Dao. Weakness is the method of the Dao. The things of the world are born from being, and being is born of nothing. (ch. 40)

The Dao of Heaven is like the stretching of a bow: the high is brought down and the low is raised up; it takes from what has abundance and supplies what is wanting. The Dao of Heaven takes from what has abundance and supplies what is wanting, but the Dao of man is not thus. It takes from what is wanting in order to supply what has abundance.

Who can serve Heaven by means of abundance? Only one who possesses the Dao.

Hence the sage acts but relies on nothing. His task accomplished, he does not take the credit: he does not wish to manifest his worth. (ch. 77)

The Dao gives birth to one; one gives birth to two; two gives birth to three; three gives birth to the ten thousand things.

The ten thousand things bear Yin on their backs and embrace the Yang. They exhaust their *qi* in harmony.

People detest being orphaned or widowed or unemployed, yet these are the terms kings and lords use to refer to themselves.

One may detract from a thing and it is enhanced thereby, or enhance it and so detract from it. (ch. 42)

The term *qi* is the identical one we discussed in connection with the *Mencius*. The *Dao de jing* does not focus on the concept of *qi*, but it is mentioned often enough to assure us that if there was a regimen of self-cultivation that lay behind the origin of this text, it probably involved training of the bodily *qi*, although likely through methods very different from those we see in the *Mencius*.

Concerning the world of human values

All in the world deem the beautiful to be beautiful; it is ugly. All deem the good to be good; it is bad.

It is thus that what is and what is not give birth to one another, what is difficult and what is easy complete one another, long and short complement one another, high and low incline towards one another, note and noise harmonize with one another, before and after follow one another.

Hence the sage dwells in the midst of non-action (*wuwei*) and practices the teaching that has no words.

Herein arise the things of the world, it does not turn from them;
 What it gives birth to it does not possess;
 What it does it does not retain.
 The achievements complete, it makes no claim to them.
 Because it makes no claim to them,
 They never leave it. (ch. 2)

Heaven and earth are not *ren*: they treat the things of the world as straw dogs. The sage is not *ren*: he treats the people as straw dogs.

All between heaven and earth is like a great bellows –

Empty, yet it does not collapse,
 Breathing out more with every move.
 Many words are much exhausted;
 Better to cleave to the center. (ch. 5)

“Straw dog” refers to a ritual object which, prior to its use in sacrificial ceremony, was treated with reverence, and afterwards was ceremonially trampled.

When the Great Dao was discarded, *then* came *ren* and right. When wisdom and insight emerged, *then* came the Great Artifice. When the six kinship classes fell out of harmony, *then* came filiality and parental kindness. When the state is darkened with chaos, *then* the loyal ministers appear. (ch. 18)

The word for “artifice” in ancient Chinese was written identically with the verb “to act” or “to do” (the *wei* in *wuwei*). The *Dao de jing* is, in a sense, viewing all goal-directed action as artifice, or artificial.

When the Dao prevails in the world, fast horses are corralled for manure; when the Dao does not prevail in the world, steeds of war are born in the city pastures.

There is no calamity greater than not knowing what is sufficient; there is no fault greater than wishing to acquire. Thus the sufficiency of knowing what is sufficient is eternal sufficiency. (ch. 46)

It is interesting to compare the opening formula to the Confucian formula of timeliness: “When the Dao prevails in the world, appear; when it does not, hide.”

On the art of rulership

Do not honor the worthy. This will keep the people from contention. Do not prize rare things. This will keep the people from becoming thieves. Do not display the desirable. The hearts of the people will not be turbulent.

Hence the rule of the sage:

Empty their minds and fill their bellies,
Weaken their wills and strengthen their bones.

Always render the people free of knowledge and desire. Ensure that the clever do not dare to act.

Act only with non-action and nothing will go unruléd. (ch. 3)

The best: those below are aware that he is there. Next best: they love and praise him. Next best, they fear him. Next best: they insult him.

Insufficient faith above, unfaithfulness below.

Far off, he speaks but rarely. When the work is accomplished and the task is complete, the people all say, "We did it spontaneously." (ch.17)

Cut off sagehood! Cast out wisdom! The people will benefit a hundredfold.

Cut off *ren*! Cast out right! The people will return to filiality and parental kindness.

Cut off cleverness! Cast out profit! Brigands and thieves will nowhere be found.

As patterns, these three are insufficient and only make the people seek to add to them.

Exhibit the plainness of undyed cloth; embrace the uncarved block. Be little self-regarding and make your desires few. (ch. 19)

Make the state small and the people few. Let there be arms for troops in tens and hundreds, but unused. Make the people treat death seriously and not move to distant places.

Though there be boats and carriages, they shall not be ridden. Though there be armor and weaponry, they shall not be deployed.

Let the people return to keeping records by knotted rope.

Their food sweet to them, their clothes beautiful to them, their homes comfortable to them, their customs joyful to them.

Though neighboring states be in sight of one another and the sounds of the cocks and dogs heard from one to the other, the people of one will never visit the other, even as they grow old and die. (ch. 80)

This may be the most straightforward presentation of the Daoist political ideal.

On the person of the sage

Heaven endures; earth long abides. Heaven endures and earth long abides because they do not give birth to themselves. Hence they are long lived.

Hence the sage places his person last, and it comes first; he treats it as something external to him and it endures.

Does he not employ selflessness? Hence he attains his self-regarding ends. (ch. 7)

As you carry your bodily soul embracing one-ness, can you never depart from it?

As you concentrate your *qi* and extend your suppleness, can you be as a new born babe?

As you polish the dust from your mysterious mirror, can you render it free of all blemishes?

As you cherish the people and order the state, can you do so without awareness? As heaven's gate swings open and shut can you keep to the female?

As your brilliant awareness penetrates everywhere can you refrain from employing it in action?

You give birth to it, you nurture it – yet in giving birth you do not possess it, in doing it you do not retain it, in leading it you employ no authority: this is called mysterious power (*de*). (ch. 10)

The five colors blind men's eyes,
The five tones deafen men's ears,
The five flavors numb men's mouths,
Racing at a gallop in pursuit of the hunt
maddens men's minds.

Rare objects obstruct men's conduct.

Therefore the sage is for the belly and not for the eye. Therefore he discards the one and selects the other. (ch. 12)

Without going out your door, know the world; without looking out the window, know the Dao of Heaven.

The further you travel, the less you know.

Hence the sage knows without going to it, names it without seeing, does nothing and it is achieved. (ch. 47)

One who possesses virtue in abundance may be compared to a new born babe. Wasps and scorpions, poisonous snakes: none will bite him. Fierce beasts will not maul him, predatory birds will not swoop down upon him.

His bones are weak, his muscles pliable, and his grasp is firm. He knows nothing of the female and the male, yet his male organ stirs. His essence is at its most pure. He can scream all day and not become hoarse. This is harmony at its height.

Knowing harmony is called constant;
knowing the constant is called enlightened.

To increase one's nature is called inauspicious;
 when the mind directs the *qi* it is called self-coercion.
 For a thing at its peak to emulate the aged
 is called failing to be with the Dao.
 What fails to be with the Dao soon comes to an end. (ch. 55)

The caution against the mind directing the *qi* may be contrasted with Mencius's position in the long section on the "flood-like *qi*."

On Nature

Reaching the ultimate of emptiness, deeply guarding stillness, the things of the world arise together; thereby do I watch their return.

The things of the world burst out everywhere, and each returns to its own root.

Returning to the root is called stillness; this is called returning to destiny; returning to destiny is called constant; knowing the constant is called enlightenment.

Not knowing the constant one acts blindly and ill-omened.

Knowing the constant one can accommodate; accommodation leads to impartiality; impartiality leads to kingliness; kingliness leads to Heaven; Heaven leads to the Dao.

With the Dao one may endure, and to the end of life one will not be in danger. (ch. 16)

Nothing in the world is more weak and soft than water, yet nothing surpasses it in conquering the hard and strong.

All know that the weak conquers the strong and the soft conquers the hard. But none are able to act on this.

Thus the sage says:

Who receives the derision of the state
 is the lord of the state altars;

Who receives the misfortune of the state
 is the king of all under heaven.

Straight words seem to reverse themselves. (ch. 78)

Nothingness

Thirty spokes share a single hub; grasp the nothingness at its center to get the use of the wheel.

Clay is fashioned to make a vessel; grasp the nothingness at the center to get the use of the vessel.

Bore windows and doors to create a room; grasp the nothingness of the interior to get the use of the room.

Thus that which is constitutes what is valuable, but that which is not constitutes what is of use. (ch. 11)

KEY TERMS FOR THE *DAO DE JING*

Dao	<i>wuwei</i>	<i>de</i>
reversal	the uncarved block	

STUDY QUESTIONS FOR THE *DAO DE JING*

1. *What is the relation between speech and knowledge implied by the opening line of the text? How might a Mohist respond?*
2. *What steps towards personal self-perfection does the Dao de jing recommend?*
3. *How will these steps lead to the fulfillment of one's personal desires?*
4. *Can you detect any contradictions in the Dao de jing's ideas?*
5. *Why do you suppose the Dao de jing enjoys such popularity in the modern West?*

Sources and Further Readings

There are innumerable translations of the *Dao de jing*. Among the most reliable is D.C. Lau's (Penguin Books, 1963; rev. ed. Hong Kong: 1989). We now have recovered partial or nearly complete manuscript versions of the *Dao de jing* from the late fourth and mid-second centuries B.C., and scholars' views of the text are continually evolving. A complete online translation – one in which I have intentionally avoided innovative readings, since my own view of the text is unsettled – is posted for convenience on the G380 website "[Supplements](#)" link.

The *Zhuangzi*

The *Zhuangzi* is the most entertaining of all Classical texts. It combines a splendid philosophical intelligence with a brilliant literary imagination and enormous humor. Although it is generally linked to the *Dao de jing* as the second of the two original Daoist texts, it is very likely that the *Zhuangzi* was the earlier of the two, and that the man whose ideas fill the book aligned himself with no established viewpoint.

The tone of the *Zhuangzi* is very different from the obscurantism of the *Dao de jing*, though the text is difficult enough to understand. The structure of the *Zhuangzi* is a series of loosely ordered anecdotes and brief essays. The tales are outlandish, and record straight-faced “facts” that no sane Classical reader could have ever mistaken for anything but intellectual playfulness (though Western readers sometimes have trouble when they find a text of ancient philosophy so lighthearted).

Zhuang Zhou, who is supposed to have authored the book, probably lived during the fourth century, and may have come from the east of China – that is, if he ever lived at all. Although significant portions of the first seven chapters appear to have come from a single hand, and that may have been Zhuangzi’s, the book is clearly the product of multiple authorship, and Zhuangzi the person may have been a construct, as was likely in the case of Laozi. Nevertheless, in these pages we will treat Zhuangzi as the author of the entire text that bears his name.

Zhuangzi’s chief rhetorical strategy is to undermine our ordinary notions of value by claiming a very radical form of value relativity, which he often demonstrates by means of closely observed events – only the events he analyzes so closely seem to take place in a world of Zhuangzi’s own imagination: a shamanic world of mysterious transformations which is, at best, a metaphorical ground for the human comedy. The opening story of the text, the tale of the Peng Bird, illustrates precisely the way that Zhuangzi makes his point through a mixture of nonsense, close reasoning, and alluring literary skill.

If there is a central argument in the *Zhuangzi*, it is that the distinctions that human beings make among different things in the world are all illusory. The world as it is, the Dao, possesses no sort of boundaries, it is a unified whole. The fine lines that we draw as we give things names and use words to make claims about what is so and what is not – these distinctions simply blind us to what is really there. We become able to see only a human world, constructed from language, rather than the real world, which is pre-verbal, or at least prior to any assertions that create in our minds the false notion of a “that which is not.”

To lead us towards erasing these boundaries, the *Zhuangzi* makes us look at things differently. In Zhuangzi’s vision of the world, the impossible becomes possible, the moral becomes merely puffed up, the ugly becomes beautiful, and finally, the distinction between death and life is erased.

Many of the selections from the *Zhuangzi* that follow owe much to the translations of Burton Watson.

From Chapter 1: “Free and Easy Wandering”

The Tale of the Peng Bird

In the dark sea of the north there is a fish; it is named the Kun. The Kun is so huge no one knows how many thousand *li* he measures. Changing, it becomes a bird; it is named the Peng, so huge no one knows how many thousand *li* he measures. Aroused, it soars aloft, its wings like clouds hung from the sky. As the sea shifts, it turns to set its course toward the dark sea of the south, the Pool of Heaven.

The Chinese name for the Kun fish means “roe,” or fish-egg, the tiniest form of fish. Beginnings are important: the location of the story of the Kun-fish / Peng-bird at the head of his book leads us to expect great meaning from it. What that meaning is has been debated for millennia. When you have read through this section on Zhuangzi, see whether you can imagine some possibilities. (Note: A *li* is a unit of measure, a length of approximately one-third mile.)

The *Riddles of Qi* is a record of strange marvels. It tells us, “When the Peng sets its course toward the dark sea of the south, the beating of its wings roils the waters for three thousand *li*. It rises ninety thousand *li* stirring the wind into a gale that does not subside for sixth months.” Shimmering vapors, hovering dust, small breathing creatures blown to and fro in the wind – the blight blue of the sky: is that its true color, or merely the appearance of limitless distance? When the Peng looks down from above, is this what he sees as well?

The *Riddles of Qi* (the title is itself a riddle; Burton Watson translates quite differently: *Universal Harmony*) seems to be fictitious text. Why is Zhuangzi giving careful references to imaginary books?

Now, when water is not deep it lacks the strength to bear a big boat. Pour a cup of water into a hollow on the ground and a twig floats there like a boat, but if you set the cup down there it will sink to rest on the ground – the water is shallow so the boat’s too big. Just so, when air is not deep it lacks the strength to bear up great wings, and thus the Peng must soar upwards until, at ninety thousand *li*, the wind beneath is deep enough to bear it. Only then, bearing on its back the azure sky and free of all obstacles before it, and it can at last set its course toward the south.

The style of speculation in this passage is very unusual in ancient China. How would you characterize the thought processes we see here?

The cicada and the dove laugh at the Peng, saying, “When we take off with all our might we may reach the limb of an elm or a *fang* tree, or sometimes we’ll short and land back on the ground. What’s the point of soaring up ninety thousand *li* to fly south!” If you’re just hiking out as far as the green wilds beyond the fields, you can carry food for your three meals and return in the evening with a full stomach. If you’re going a hundred *li*, you’ll need a night’s worth of grinding to prepare your

grain. If you're going a thousand *li*, you'll be storing up provisions three months in advance. What do these two creatures understand?

Do you recall animals talking in the *Analects*, or in any of the other works we have read? What sort of world are we inhabiting here in the *Zhuangzi*?

Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long-lived. How can we know this is so? The morning mushroom can understand nothing of the alternation of night and day; the summer cicada can understand nothing of the progress of the seasons. Such are the short-lived. South of Chu one finds a lizard called the Dimspirit which counts five hundred years as one spring and five hundred years as one autumn. In high antiquity there grew a great rose that counted eight thousand years as one spring and eight thousand years as one autumn. Such are the long-lived – yet today Pengzu is the best known exemplar of longevity, whom crowds of men wish to equal. How pitiful!

Pengzu was a well-known legendary person whose name in folk tradition is comparable to Methuselah's in the West. Cults dedicated to the arts of longevity sprang up during the late Warring States era, and the *Zhuangzi* ridicules them here and at other points in the text.

The Questions of Tang to Ji records this as well. Tang questioned Ji saying, "Is there a limit to height or depth or to the four directions?"

The Questions of Tang to Ji (like the *Riddles of Qi*) seems to be an authoritative text invented by Zhuangzi, purporting to record conversations involving the Shang Dynasty founder Tang. Passages very close to the text here are found in the "Questions of Tang" chapter of the Daoist text *Liezi*, but that book is generally taken to be derivative of the *Zhuangzi*. In any event, the *Zhuangzi* here seems to be providing a second version of the opening tale of his book, perhaps parodying scholarly pedantry by documenting in duplicate the facticity of a fantasy.

Ji replied, "Beyond the limits of the limitless lies a further limitlessness. In the bald and barren north there is a dark sea. This is the Pool of Heaven. There is a fish there that is thousands of *li* wide – none has ever discovered its length. Its name is Kun. A bird lives there; its name is Peng. Its back is like Mount Tai and its wings are like clouds hung from the sky. It spirals upward ninety thousand *li*, stirring the wind into a gale. Breaking through the clouds and bearing on its back the azure sky, and it can at last set its course toward the south. Breaking through the clouds and mist, bearing on its back the azure sky, it sets its course for the south and heads for the dark sea of the south."

The quail laughs at it saying, "Just where does he think he's going? I bound with a leap and fly up – perhaps twenty feet, never higher – but then I come down to flap around among the bushes and brambles. That's the epitome of flying, yes indeed! Now, where does he think he's going?"

Such is the difference between big and small.

A man who knows enough to fill some office, or whose conduct is the standard in some village, or whose talents match the taste of some lord whose domain he is called upon to manage, sees himself as the measure precisely like the quail. How heartily Song Rongzi would laugh at such a one! Song Rongzi could not be persuaded by the whole world's approval nor deterred by the whole world's objection. To him, the line between the internal and external was set, and the distinction between noble and shameful conduct was simply clear as could be. Nothing in the world could stir anxiety within him. And yet there were levels he did not reach.

Song Rongzi is a name associated with a Warring States thinker who may have been a Mohist, but it is unclear whether this is supposed to be the same man. Does he resemble a Mohist here?

Now Liezi, he mounted the wind as his chariot and drove it with skill for fifteen days before returning. No matter of fortune could stir anxiety within him. But still, although he escaped the trouble of walking, he was still dependent on something.

Liezi appears several times in the *Zhuangzi*, but the portraits of him do not seem consistent. His name was given to a text that draws heavily from the *Zhuangzi*, as mentioned above.

He who mounts the balance of Heaven and Earth, rides on the changes of the six *qi*, and wander the inexhaustible – what would such a man be dependent on? Thus it is said: the Perfect Person lacks all self; the Spirit-like Person lacks all merit; the Sage lacks all fame.

In this passage, the term *qi* denotes vapors or forces that flow through the world. One traditional commentary identifies the six *qi* as *yin* and *yang*, wind and rain, darkness and light; another claims they are Heaven, Earth, and the four seasons. The exact formula cannot be determined and is, in any event, less interesting than the fact that the term *qi* may equally denote essential forces of the cosmos and of the body.

Yao and Xu You

Yao ceded the empire to Xu You. “A small torch burning on after the sun is out finds making the day brighter a difficult task indeed. A man who keeps on irrigating fields after the seasonal rains have come finds making the crops richer tedious indeed. If you, sir, once took the throne, thereupon would the world be in order. Yet I like an imposter continue in charge, despite seeing my own inadequacy. I beg to turn the world over to you.”

Xu You said, “You rule the world and the world is already well ruled. Would I want to replace you for reputation's sake? Reputation is merely the guest of reality – would I want to play the guest? When a wren builds its nest, although the woods may be deep it uses no more than one branch. When a mole goes to drink though it goes to a river it fills its belly and drinks no more. Go home and let the matter drop, my lord! I have no use for the world. Though the cook may not manage his job well, the sacrificial priest doesn't leap over the altar wine and meats to take his place.”

The final phrases suggest that quite apart from Yao's adequacy as a ruler, we are to understand Xu You as attending to things much weightier than merely ruling the world. We know nothing of Xu You, but the Emperor Yao we have met before many times as a great hero of Confucianism. Who is the hero of this tale? What sort of values do Xu You and Yao each represent?

The Immortal on the Mountaintop

Jian Wu questioned Lian Shu saying, "I've been talking to Jie Yu, and he speaks nothing but tall tales that go on and on without making sense or coming to a point. I found it most alarming – his nonsense stretched on endless as the Milky Way, veering every which way, completely at odds with human commonsense!"

Jie Yu is the "Carriage Greeter" whom we met in the *Analects* passage quoted earlier in this section. There is little reason to think he is an historical figure; how is it that the same fictional character turns up in both texts? The others here seem to be fictional as well.

"Why, what did he say?" asked Lian Shu.

"He says that far way on Guyi Mountain there dwells a spirit-like man with skin like icy snow, lovely and chaste as a virgin. He eats no grain, but sucks the wind and drinks the dew. He mounts the *qi* of the clouds and wanders beyond the four seas riding a flying dragon. By concentrating his spirit he protects things from illness and damage, and ripens the fall harvest. So I refuse to believe the crazy things he says."

Lian Shu replied, "Just so. They say a blind man just can't take in beautiful patterns, nor a deaf man the music of bell and drum. And it's not only the physical body that suffers from blindness and deafness – understanding may as well. That perfectly characterizes a man such as you! But a man such as he, with virtue such as his, can roll the world of things into one. Though all in the world seek a way out of its chaos, what business is it of his that he should wear himself down with responsibility for the world? Nothing can harm such a man. Though flood waters rise to the sky, he will not drown. Though a great drought melt metal and stone and scorch the soil and the mountains, he will not be burned. From the mere dirt and dust his body sheds you could mold a Yao or a Shun! Why should he agree to take on responsibility for the world?"

Huizi and Zhuangzi

According to legend and to many passages in this text, Zhuangzi's closest friend was a man named Huizi. Huizi was a famous man of fourth century B.C. China. His name was Hui Shi, and he was a logician – one of the few in Chinese history – who seems to have held Mohist beliefs. The brilliance of Hui Shi's logical powers is frequently mentioned, but of his writings, only a few fragmentary paradoxes survive (very much resembling the paradoxes

of the Greek thinker Zeno). In the *Zhuangzi*, he is recognizably the same clever logician, but Zhuangzi always seems to make him appear ridiculous. It is interesting to ask whether these stories, in which Zhuangzi himself appears by name, could have been written by Zhuangzi.

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, “I have a huge tree of the type people call an ailanthus. The main trunk is gnarled and knotted from the root up, you can’t align it with a plumb line, and the branches are all so twisted and bent that no compass or square can mark them. Even if it were growing by the roadside no passing carpenter would think of using it. Now, your words are just as big and useless, so everyone spurns them too!”

Zhuangzi said, “Have you ever observed the wildcat? It crouches concealed and waits for its prey to wander in range – then it springs left or right, heedless of heights and chasms. And yet wildcats spring our traps and die in our nets. Or take the yak, big as a cloud hung from the sky – it’s skilled at being huge, but it can’t even catch a rat. Now you have this big tree but its uselessness is a trouble to you. Why don’t you plant it in the village of Nothing-at-All or the plain of Broad-Void and amble beside it doing nothing at all, or wander free and easy lying asleep beneath it? No ax will ever cut short its life, nothing will ever harm it. If there’s no use for it, what hardship could ever befall it?”

Most of the tales in the *Zhuangzi* are parables; that is, they are stories about small events or ideas with much greater implications. This discussion with Huizi is particularly famous for the final phrases, the implications of which are very important to Daoism, and resonate in the tale of Crookback Shu which appears later on below.

From Chapter 2: “Treatise on Making Things Equal”

The second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* begins and ends with famous and relatively straightforward anecdotes, but the long central sections are the most philosophically challenging in all of Chinese literature and have attracted and puzzled very learned thinkers of all cultures. We will look at the two easier passages first.

The Pipes of Earth and Heaven

Ziqi of South Wall sat leaning on his armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing – sprawled in a daze, as though he’d lost his own double. Yan Cheng Ziyou stood in attendance. “What is this?” he said. “Can you make a body seem like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes? The man leaning on the armrest now is not the one who leaned on it before!”

Ziqi said, “You do well to ask such a question! It’s that I have lost myself, do you understand? You hear the piping of men, but you haven’t heard the piping of earth. Or if you’ve heard the piping of earth, you haven’t heard the piping of Heaven!”

Ziyou said, “May I venture to ask what you mean?”

Ziqi said, “The Great Clod belches out *qi* and it is called by the name of wind. Nothing happens before it has arisen, but once it does, the myriad hollows set up a furious cry. Don’t you hear their drawn out wail? From the mountain forest precipice, huge trees a hundred spans round, with hollows like noses, like mouths, like ears, like jugs, like cups, like mortars, like gullies, like pools, roar and whistle, screech and hiss, cry and wail, moan and howl, those in the lead calling out *wooooo*, those behind calling out *ooooh!* In a gentle breeze they sing in faint harmony, but in a full gale the chorus is huge. Once the fierce wind has passed on, then all the hollows are empty again. Haven’t you seen them all waving and swaying?”

Ziyou said, “By the piping of the earth, then, you must mean the sound of these hollows, and by the piping of man the sound of flutes. May I ask about the piping of Heaven?”

Ziqi said, “Blowing on the myriad things in a different way, so that each can be itself – each takes what is natural to each, but who sets them to their cry?”

The Butterfly Dream

Once Zhuang Zhou* dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly fluttering about, simply happy and doing as it pleased. He knew no Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and surprisingly, he was Zhou. But he didn’t know if he was Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhou. Between Zhou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! Such we call “the transformation of things.”

Turning From Words to Find the Dao

The following sections of Zhuangzi’s essay “On Making Things Equal” are hard to understand in English as well as ancient Chinese. They are the core of the logic of the *Zhuangzi*, a logic by means of which Zhuangzi tries to destroy our certainty in all our normal assertions – in fact, he is actually attacking the entire process of verbal speech that makes assertions about the world.

Zhuangzi, much like Laozi, believed that the universe was an undifferentiated whole, and that our perception of its myriad distinct categories of things was an illusion. He saw this illusion as the product of language and the use of language to make claims about what was true and what was false. Only if we free ourselves from the verbal habits that train us to think “this” is different from “that” and “myself” is different from “another” will we be able to see clearly, without the distorting lens of our verbal training. What we will see will be the Dao.

Zhuangzi’s path to the Dao is something he calls “ordinary practice.” What that phrase means has been much disputed, but it may be that it is linked in some way to the tale of Cook Ding, which follows this section. The portions translated here are selections from a much longer and very convoluted section of the text.

*Zhou was Zhuangzi’s name.

Pronounced sayings are not just puffs of wind – sayings consist of things really said. But what their words refer to has not been fixed. Do they really say anything? Have they never said anything? We think our speech is different from the chirping of baby birds, but is there a real distinction, or is there none?

How does a Dao come to be obscured such that it is subject to judgments of “authentic” or “inauthentic?” How do spoken words come to be obscured such that they are subject to judgments of “true” or “false?” How can a Dao be walked and not really exist? How can words exist and be “unallowable?”

It is that some Daos become obscured in minor perfections, and words become obscured in flowery speech. . . .

The word Dao may refer to a transcendent force or be used to refer to a teaching. Here, Zhuangzi is speaking of teachings, which he views as a combination of an art of some sort and a set of spoken claims which celebrate it. He wonders how an art can become “inauthentic,” and concludes that it is when it becomes entangled in flowery claims about its value it loses its original power.

Things cannot have perfection or imperfection – all things are in the final analysis comprehended as one. Only the person of full attainment knows how to comprehend them as one. He affirms no claims about what is so. His affirmation is lodged in ordinary practice. Ordinary practice means use; use is comprehension; to comprehend is to grasp – once you grasp it, you’re nearly there! Your reliance on verbal assertions ends, and when it ends and you do not even know it is so – that is called Dao!

Zhuangzi attacks the notion that things can somehow be “lacking” – can in some sense exist only in contrast to an idea of perfection which is “not there.” Words, when they are used to judge things, make the “not there” dominate over what actually is, whereas for Zhuangzi, all notion of distinction and comparison is illusory in the universe, which he views as One. The path to direct intimacy with the universe as it truly is – the Dao – lies in ordinary practice, not verbal activity.

The knowledge of the ancients reached the limit. What was the limit? There were those who believed that no thing had yet begun to be. The limit! Exhausted! Nothing to add! The next believed there was something, but there had not yet begun to be boundaries. The next believed there were boundaries, but there had not yet begun to be any “this” or “that” which could be affirmed or denied to be so. It is in the patterns of affirmation and denial that the Dao becomes imperfect. And the source of this imperfection is what increases our attachments. But after all, is there perfection and imperfection or isn’t there?

Well, let us say that there is perfection and imperfection. This would be like the master lute player Zhao Wen playing the lute. Let us say that there is truly neither perfection nor imperfection. This would be like the master lute player Zhao not playing the lute.

That is to say, when Zhao Wen actually played, his performance was subject to judgments in dualistic categories like good and bad. When he did not play, his skill was whole and also not subject to distortion through the lens of verbal categories.

We know nothing of the tale of Zhao Wen apart from the hints provided in this passage. Music master Kuang, whom we meet below, was a real master musician. Hui Shi we have met above.

Zhao Wen playing the lute, music master Kuang beating the time, Hui Shi leaning on the *wutong* tree: the knowledge of these three men was close to perfection. It flourished in them and they bore their knowledge to the end of their days. Only, different from others in their love of their knowledge, from love of their knowledge came a wish to enlighten others.

But these men tried to enlighten others by using that which could not be the means of enlightenment. Hui Shi ended with the darkness of logical disputations, and in the case of Zhao Wen, in the end his own son was left with nothing but the strings of his lute.

What improper “means of enlightenment” do you suppose that these three men used, in Zhuangzi’s view?

So it seems that these masters achieved no perfection after all. Why, if what they achieved was perfection, then even I have perfection. Still, if such as these can’t be said to have achieved perfection, then neither have I nor has anyone!

Thus it is that the Sage sees by the glimmer of chaos and doubt. He does not affirm of anything, “This is so!” His affirmation is lodged in ordinary practice.

This is to view things in the light.

From Chapter 3: “The Pivot of Nurturing Life”

The Tale of Cook Ding

Cook Ding was carving an ox carcass for Lord Wenhui. With each touch of his hand, heave of his shoulder, step of his feet, thrust of his knee – whop! whish! – he wielded his knife with a whoosh, and every move was in rhythm. It was as though he were performing the Dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping to the beat of the Constant Source music.

“Ah, marvelous!” said Lord Wenhui. “Surely this is the acme of skill!”

Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, “What your servant loves, my lord, is the Dao, and that is a step beyond skill.

“At the beginning, when I first began carving up oxen, all I could see was the whole carcass. After three years I could no longer see the carcass whole, and now I meet it with my spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding cease and spirit moves as it will. I follow the natural form: slicing the major joints I guide the knife through the big hollows, and by conforming to the inherent contours, no vessels or tendons or tangles of sinews – much less the big bones – block my blade in the least.

“A good cook changes his knife once a year, but this is mere slicing. An ordinary cook changes his knife once a month, because he hacks. I’ve been using this knife now for nineteen years; it has carved thousands of oxen, yet the blade is as sharp as one fresh off the grindstone. You see, there are gaps between these joints, but the blade edge has no thickness. If a knife with no thickness moves into a gap, then it’s wide as need be and the blade wanders freely with plenty of leeway. That’s why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is as sharp as one fresh off the grindstone.

“But nevertheless, whenever a tangled knot lies ahead, I spot the challenge and on the alert I focus my sight and slow down my hand – then I flick the blade with the slightest of moves, and before you know it the carcass has fallen apart like earth crumbling to the ground. I stand with knife raised and face all four directions in turn, prancing in place with complete satisfaction. Then I wipe off the knife and put it away.”

“How fine!” said Lord Wenhui. “Listening to the words of Cook Ding, I have learned how to nurture life!”

The tale of Cook Ding is in some ways the central tale of the Zhuangzi. It belongs to a set of stories that are sometimes referred to as the “knack passages” of the text. In these tales, individuals penetrate to a state of some sort of unity with the Dao by means of the performance of some thoroughly mastered skill, which they have acquired through long practice of an art (which may be called a Dao, as in “the Dao of archery,” and so forth). The passages celebrate the power of spontaneously performed skill mastery to provide communion with the spontaneous processes of Nature.

From Chapter 4: “In the World of Man”

“In the World of Man” includes Zhuangzi’s strategies for surviving in the tumultuous world of Warring states society. The chapter includes two major tales in which Confucius serves as Zhuangzi’s spokesman. In the following passage, Confucius’s idea of “timeliness” (‘When the Dao prevails in the world, appear; when it does not, hide’) becomes a theme through which Zhuangzi improvises new and interesting motifs. Remember, Zhuangzi’s Confucius (as well as his Yan Hui) often bears little resemblance to the person we know from the *Analects*, and the author of this text assumes that we understand that the following conversation occurred only in his imagination.

Confucius Instructs Yan Hui

Yan Hui went to see Confucius and asked for permission to travel.

Confucius asked him, “Where are you going?”

“To the state of Wey.”

“What will you do there?”

“I have heard that the lord of Wey is in the prime of youth and his behavior is impetuous. He is quick to send his armies off to war and fails to see his faults. He regards it as a light matter that his people should die; corpses fill the marshlands like dried reeds and there is nothing his people can do. I have heard it from you, Master: ‘Depart the well ordered state and go to the state in disarray. The gate of the doctor is filled with the ill.’ I wish to put into practice the teachings I have learned, and so, perhaps effect some healing in Wey?”

Note that Zhuangzi here turns the Confucian doctrine of timeliness on its head, and attributes to Confucius a type of Mohist voluntarism.

“Ach!” said Confucius. “You’re just going to get yourself executed. What you don’t want in a Dao is some assortment of teachings. An assortment is just a profusion of notions, and if you follow a profusion of notions you’ll lose control of them. When you lose control you’ll be governed by anxiety, and once that happens you’re beyond help. In the old days the Perfect Person cultivated the way within himself before he tried to cultivate it in others. When you haven’t yet settled what’s within you yourself, what leisure have you to concern yourself with the conduct of a tyrant?”

“Do you know what staggers virtue and what intellect comes from? Virtue is staggered by fame and intellect arises from strife. People crush one another with fame and wisdom is a weapon of struggle. These are two tools of ill omen, they are not tools for success. Though your virtue may be deep and your good faith unshakable, you’ve yet to grasp the nature of men’s *qi*. You are known as a man who does not contend with others, but you’ve yet to grasp the nature of men’s minds. If you appear before a tyrant stubbornly peddling the standards of *ren* and righteousness, you’ll simply be using his faults to show off your own superiority. Such a person is called a disaster to others, and others will surely bring disaster to him in return. It seems to me you’re heading this way.

“And then again, if it actually turns out that he is one who can be pleased by worthy men such as you and who detests the unworthy, then what need is there for you to seek to change him?”

“You had best not undertake to remonstrate at all. You see, ruling lords seize the advantage they have over men to attack any lapse in argument and prevail. Your sight will become dazzled, the

blood will drain from your face, you'll begin to babble in your defense, your bearing will become more and more submissive, and then you'll find yourself agreeing with him. This is like fighting fire with fire or pouring water on a flood; it is called 'adding to excess,' and once you start to give in to it, there will be no stopping. On the other hand, if you were to put yourself in danger by repeating the earnest advice that he refuses to accept, such a tyrant would simply have you cut down in front of his eyes.

"In times past, Jie, the king of the Xia, put Guan Longfeng to death and the Shang king Zhòu put Prince Bi Gan to death. Both Guan Longfeng and Prince Bi Gan cultivated in themselves the ability to be humble in bringing comfort to the people below them, while challenging the rulers above them. Their rulers trapped them by exploiting the very virtues they had cultivated – it was all because those men valued their reputations. Again, in times past Emperor Yao attacked Cong, Zhi, and Xu'ao, and Emperor Yu attacked Youhu. In the territories of these chiefs their cities were left in ruins, their people slaughtered, and they themselves were punished with death. For these men, the cause was their ceaseless warfare and insatiable search for gain. These are examples of both men who sought good reputation and men who sought gain – are you the only one who hasn't heard about them? Even sages can't overcome the pursuit of reputation and gain, much less a person like you!

"However, you must have some plan in mind. Why don't you tell me what it is?"

Yan Hui said, "If I remain formal and unperturbed, steadfast and focused, will that work?"

"What!" said Confucius. "How could that work? This is a man whose power fills his bearing, and because his temper is completely unpredictable, no one ventures to cross him. So you will seek to anticipate his responses and accommodate his dispositions. You'll say this is using 'virtue enough to lead him forward each day.' But that won't work – much less great virtue. He will hold to his habits and resist change. Though outwardly he may seem agreeable, inwardly he'll accept nothing. How could that work?"

"All right," said Yan Hui. "But what if I am inwardly upright, outwardly accommodating, and tie my speech to the lessons of the past?"

"Inwardly upright – such a one is a disciple of Heaven. He understands that the Son of Heaven and he are alike in being sons of Heaven. What concern would such a person have whether his requests will meet with approval or not? Though people may dismiss me as a naive child, this is merely to say that I am a disciple of Heaven.

"Outwardly compliant – such a one is a disciple of man. Kneeling to raise one's tablet of credentials, bowing with hands clasped – such are the ritual *li* of the minister. Everyone performs them, how could I fail to? If I do what other people do they certainly have no basis to criticize me. This is to be a disciple of men.

“Tying speech to the lessons of the past – this is to be a disciple of antiquity. Though my words may in effect be admonitions and reproaches, they belong to antiquity, not to me. In this way, though straightforward I cannot be faulted. That is to be a disciple of antiquity.

“If I go proceed in this manner, will that work?”

“What!” said Confucius. “How could that work? You have an excess of strategies, but no insight. Indeed, although your plans are simpleminded, you might escape blame this way, but that’s the extent of it. How could these methods actually transform him? You are still letting your own mind be your teacher!”

Yan Hui said, “I have nothing more to offer. May I ask the proper method?”

Confucius said, “You must fast! Let me tell you. Can any action be accomplished with ease if pursued by means of the mind’s intentions? If you think it is, bright Heaven will not befriend you.”

Yan Hui said, “My family is poor, and I have not drunk wine or eaten meat for several months. Doesn’t that constitute fasting?”

“That is the fasting one does before performing rites of sacrifice. It is not the fasting of the mind.”

“May I ask, what is the fasting of the mind?”

Confucius said, “Unify your will. Don’t listen with your ears, listen with your mind – don’t listen with your mind, listen with your *qi*. The ears are limited to listening; the mind is limited to sorting. But the *qi*, all empty it awaits things. The Dao gathers in emptiness – emptiness: that is the fasting of the mind.”

“Before hearing this,” said Yan Hui, “and grasping it in full, I was solidly I myself. But now that I have grasped it – why, there has never been any I at all! Is this the emptiness you mean?”

“You’ve got it!” said Confucius. “I tell you, now you may go to roam inside his coop, and you’ll never be moved by fame. If he listens, then sing; if not, be still. Have no gate, have no doorway – make oneness your home and lodge in the unavoidable. That’s as close to it as can be!”

It’s easy to walk without leaving footprints; it’s hard to walk without touching the ground. Deceit is easy when you work for men, but hard when you work for Heaven. You’ve heard of flying with wings, but you have never heard of flying without wings. You’ve heard of understanding by means of knowledge, but you have never heard of the understanding that comes from not knowing. Look into the closed room, the empty chamber where light is born. Fortune and blessings gather where there is stillness. But if you do not keep still – that is called galloping where you sit. Let your

ears and eyes communicate with what is inside and put mind and knowledge on the outside. Then even the spirits will come to dwell with you, not to speak of men. Such is change in the world of things – the pivot of Emperors Yu and Shun, the constant practice of the sages Fu Xi and Ji Qu. How much more should it be a rule for others!

Crippled Shu

Shu the Deformed – his cheeks are in the shadow of his belly, his shoulders rise above his head, his pigtail points up at the sky, his five viscera are top-wards and his thighs hug his ribs. But by sewing and washing, he gets enough to fill his mouth; by handling a winnow and sifting out the good grain, he makes enough to feed ten. When the ruler calls up the troops, he stands in the crowd and waves good-bye; when they draft workers for state projects, they pass him over because he's a chronic invalid. But when they are doling out grain to the disabled, he gets three measures and ten bundles of firewood. Those with deformed bodies are thus able to care for themselves and finish out the years Heaven gave them. And how much better to possess deformed virtue!

Zhuangzi's heroes are often hunchbacks, cripples, or criminals who have lost some limb to the jailer's axe. In a chapter called "The Sign of Virtue Complete," we encounter a series of these deformed people – why does Zhuangzi link a twisted body to full-bodied virtue?

Other collected stories from the *Zhuangzi*

The Four Friends

Master Si, Master Yu, Master Li, and Master Lai were talking together. "Who can look upon Nothing as his head, upon life as his back, upon death as his rump? Whoever knows that life and death, existence and annihilation are all a single body, I will be his friend."

The four men looked at each other and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts, and the four of them became friends.

Soon, Master Yu fell ill. Master Si went to see how he was. "How remarkable!" said Master Yu. "The Creator of Things is making me into this hooked shape. A hump has thrust up from my back, my five viscera are top-wards, my cheeks are in the shadow of my belly, my shoulders rise above my head, and my pigtail is pointing at the sky! It must be some dislocation of my yin and yang *qi*." Yet he was calm at heart and unconcerned. Crawling to the well, he looked in at his reflection. "Oh, my! The Creator's made me even more crooked!"

"Do you resent it?" asked Master Si.

"Why, no! What is there to resent? If this goes on perhaps he'll turn my left arm into a rooster and I'll keep watch over the night. Or perhaps in time he'll transform my right arm into a

crossbow pellet and I'll shoot down an owl to roast. Or perhaps he'll turn my buttocks into cartwheels and I'll ascend into the sky with my spirit as my horse! Why would I ever want a new carriage again?

"I received life because the season had come. I will lose it in the flow of time. Content with the seasons and dwelling in the flow of time, neither sorrow nor joy can get within me. In ancient times this was called 'untying the bonds.' There are those who cannot free themselves because they are bound by things. Besides, no thing can ever prevail over Heaven – that's the way it has always been. What would I have to resent?"

Then suddenly, Master Lai grew ill and lay gasping at the point of death. His wife and children had gathered round in a circle wailing when Master Li came to call. "Shoo!" he shouted. "Stand back! Don't disturb the process of change!"

Then he leaned against the doorway and spoke to Master Lai. "How marvelous is the Creator of Change! What is he going to make out of you next? Where will he send you? Will he make you into a rat's liver? Will he make you into a bug's arm?"

Master Lai said, "A child obeys his father and mother and goes wherever he's told, east or west, north or south. And the yin and yang – they are no less to a person than father and mother! Now that they have brought me to the verge of death, if I should refuse to obey them, how perverse I would be! What fault is it of theirs?"

"The Great Clod burdens me with form, labors me with life, eases me in old age, rests me in death. So if I think well of my life, for the same reason I must think well of my death. Were a skilled smith casting metal, if the metal should leap up and say, 'I insist on becoming a Moye-type sword!' the smith would regard it as most inauspicious metal indeed. Now having had the audacity to have once taken on human form, I should now say, 'I won't be anything but a man! Nothing but a man!' the Creator would surely regard me as a most inauspicious person.

"So now I think of heaven and earth as a great furnace and the Creator as a great smith. Where could he send me that would not be acceptable? My life complete, I will fall asleep, and then suddenly, I will wake up."

(from Chapter 6)

The Hunchback and the Cicadas

Confucius was on the road to Chu when, emerging from a wood, he saw a hunchback catching cicadas with a sticky pole as easily as if he were plucking them down with his hand.

"How skillful you are!" said Confucius. "Is there a Dao for this?"

“Yes, I have a Dao,” said the hunchback. “For five or six months I practiced balancing balls on top of each other on the end of my pole. Once I could balance two balls without them falling, I knew I would miss very few cicadas. Then I balanced three balls and, when they didn’t fall off, I knew I’d miss only one cicada in ten. Then I balanced five balls – once they didn’t fall off, I knew it would be easy as grabbing them with my hand. I hold my body like a twisted tree and raise my arm like a withered limb. No matter how huge heaven and earth or how numerous the myriad things, I perceive nothing but cicada wings. Never stumbling, never tilting, letting nothing else in the world of things take the place of those cicada wings – how could I fail to catch them?”

Confucius turned to his disciples and said. “His will undivided, his spirit coalesced’ – would that not describe this venerable hunchback?”

(from Chapter 19)

Although few of us have mastered this hunchback’s particular art, his description of the psychological phenomena that accompany performing a skill to perfection is not necessarily as bizarre as his chosen activity. In this and the following passages, it is worth asking whether these descriptions match up with ordinary experience.

The Ferryman

Yan Yuan said to Confucius, “I once crossed the gulf at Shangshen and ferryman handled the boat with spirit-like skill. I asked him, ‘Is handling a boat so well something a person can learn?’ and he replied, ‘Yes, indeed. Once good swimmer has acquired his ability through repeated practice, so he can swim below water like a drowned man, he may never have seen a boat before and still he’ll know how to handle it!’ I asked him about this, but he wouldn’t tell me more. May I ask you what it means?”

Confucius said, “A good swimmer has acquired his ability through repeated practice’ – that’s to say he’s forgotten the water. ‘Once he can swim below water like a drowned man, he may never have seen a boat before and still he’ll know how to handle it’ – that’s because he views water as he does dry land, and regards the capsizing of a boat as he would the overturning of a cart. The myriad things could all be capsizing and toppling right before him; it would not affect where he dwells within. Where could he go and not be at ease?”

“In archery, when you’re betting tiles on your shots, you perform with skill. When you’re betting fancy clasps, you grow cautious. When the bet is for gold, you’re a nervous wreck. Your skill is the same – but when the prize means a lot to you, you let outside considerations weigh on you. One who values what’s outside gets clumsy on the inside.”

(from Chapter 19)

The Swimmer

Confucius was touring Lüliang, where the water falls from a height of thirty fathoms and churns for forty *li* in rapids that no fish or water creature can swim. He saw a man dive into the water and,

taking him for one whom despair had driven to suicide, he ordered his disciples to line the bank and pull the man out. But after the man had swum a few hundred paces, he emerged from the water with his hair streaming down and strolled beneath the cliffs singing. Confucius rushed to question him. “I took you for a ghost, but now I see you’re a man. May I ask if you have some special Dao of staying afloat in the water?”

“No,” replied the swimmer. “I have no Dao. I began with my original endowment, grew up with my nature, and let things come to completion with fate. I go under with the whirlpools and emerge where the water spouts up, following the Dao of the water and never thinking about myself. That’s how I go my way.”

Confucius said, “What do you mean by saying that you began with your original endowment, grew up with your nature, and let things come to completion with fate?”

“I was born on the dry land and felt comfort on the dry land – that was my original endowment. I grew up with the water and felt comfort in the water – that became my nature. I’m not aware what I do but I do it – that’s fate.”

(from Chapter 19)

Zhuangzi Receives a Job Offer

Once, when Zhuangzi was fishing in the River Pu, the king of Chu sent two officials to appear before him and convey these words: “I would like to burden you with the administration of my realm.”

Zhuangzi held on his fishing pole and, without looking round, he said, “I have heard that Chu possesses a sacred turtle, dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. This turtle, now, would it prefer to be dead with its bones preserved and honored, or to be alive with its tail dragging in the mud?”

“Alive with its tail dragging in the mud,” answered the two officials.

“Then go away,” said Zhuangzi. “I mean to drag my tail in the mud!”

(from Chapter 17)

KEY NAMES AND TERMS FOR THE *ZHUANGZI*

Peng Bird	Cook Ding
Cicada-Catching Hunchback	The Four Friends
The fasting of the mind	

STUDY QUESTIONS FOR THE *ZHUANGZI*

1. *Make a list of the ways in which the Dao de jing and the Zhuangzi seem similar and the ways in which they seem to differ.*
2. *What is Zhuangzi's point about our linguistic habits and the way in which we view reality?*
3. *What do you think the Peng Bird represents? Can you think of any ways in which it might serve as a symbol for figures like Cook Ding or the Four Friends?*
4. *How is Zhuangzi anti-Confucian? Are there ways in which Zhuangzi and Confucius are in basic accord – and why does Zhuangzi use Confucius as a spokesman?*
5. *How do you understand “the fasting of the mind?” How do Confucius's prescriptions for Yan Hui resemble the behavior of other positive models in the Zhuangzi?*
6. *How do Zhuangzi's ideas relate to Warring States society?*

Sources and Further Readings

Burton Watson has produced a full translation of the *Zhuangzi* that is readable and, for the most part, reliable: *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (NY: 1968). Unfortunately, as the title suggests, the available edition uses the older Wade-Giles transcription method. A judicious selection of chapters, originally published in 1964, has been updated in a 2003 *pinyin* edition: *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*. A more daring and partial translation, much admired by scholars, is A.C. Graham's, *Chuang-tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings* (London & Boston: 1981). Graham made such advances in our understanding of the critical second chapter of the text that his translation of that chapter entirely supersedes Watson's. It set the framework that I've used for the translations from chapter 2 in these readings (a full online translation of it is available through the G380 website “[Supplements](#)” link). The translations in this reading draw on both these previous translators, as well as scholarly Chinese editions, especially those of Guo Qingfan (*Zhuangzi jishi*, which has become a standard edition, collecting a number of previous commentaries) and Chen Guying (*Zhuangzi jinzhu jinyi*).