SkyLight Illuminations

Chuang-tzu

The Tao of Perfect Happiness

Selections Annotated & Explained

The wisdom of the foundational Taoist text, with facing-page commentary that brings the text to life.

Translation & Annotation by
Livia Kohn
author of *Health and Long Life: The Chinese Way*

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Introduction

The Chuang-tzu (Zhuangzi), named after its author, is the second major text of the Taoist (Daoist) tradition. It was compiled in the third century BCE and follows in the footsteps of the best-known and oldest of all Taoist texts, the Tao-te-ching (Daode jing; Book of the Tao and Its Potency), originally, like the Chuang-tzu, known by the name of its author, Lao-tzu (Laozi), which literally means "Old Master" or "Old Child."

Both works, rendered here in my own words, still form an active part not only of the Taoist tradition but also of Chinese culture in general. Read as classics, they are a must for every schoolchild, who can tell any number of stories from the Chuang-tzu and recite long passages from the Tao-te-ching. They are also at the core of Chinese literature, the Chuang-tzu being the first work of classical fiction with its numerous parables and fictional dialogues, the Tao-te-ching written in verse closely reminiscent of ancient poetry—as documented in the *Shih-ching* (*Shijing*), or Book of Songs—and thus one of the forerunners and main inspirations for Chinese poets. Both texts are also philosophical; they form the backbone of Taoism, constituting the root of an ancient and still actively pursued wisdom tradition that not only provides a bird's-eye view of how the universe functions but is also full of practical advice on how to live the best life—valid today as much as in the old days, possibly even more so.

There are many reasons to return to these ancient texts time and again, and especially to come back to the Chuang-tzu. The pure enjoyment of the stories, the vibrant humor of the tales, the fantastic aspects of reality—they all give pleasure, release, exuberance. The intricacies of ancient Chinese culture as revealed in the text, with its complex social

hierarchies, demanding ways of interaction, extensive death rituals, and multiple layers of existence, from the creative power of "heaven" (a word indicating both the sky and the natural world at large) through gods and humans to animals and ghosts—they all spark interest, transcend present limitations, and open new ways of seeing and of being in the world. Last but not least, the complex philosophical and cosmological understanding of the universe, the vision of the individual as completely embedded in the greater flow of life, held and carried by the Way or Tao, the appreciation of the complete interconnectedness of all life, and the pervasive urging by the text to be who we are just as we are, no matter where we are—all these give power and inspiration, provide strength and determination, and encourage the will to live to the fullest.

With great admiration for and a deep delight in the text, I present the Chuang-tzu in this new reading with modern concepts and terms, hoping to bring the text not only to the minds but also to the hearts of people today. The translation reflects an understanding grown over three decades of deep involvement with Taoist studies (history, texts, concepts), spiritual practices (insight meditation, oblivion), and forms of body cultivation (diet, breathing, exercises). It is unique in that it selects passages by topic and makes ample use of the later chapters in the text, unlike previous translations that tend to follow the original order of chapters and focus especially on the first seven, called the "Inner Chapters" and certainly the oldest and best known. Without leaving them aside—and you will recognize many stories and arguments from them—this version places them in a thematic context, beginning with the core question of the text: "In this world, is there such a thing as perfect happiness?"

The answer, if you need to know now, is "certainly." But it takes work and a certain way of understanding self and reality combined with clear and persistent efforts to actualize this understanding in body and life—although, according to Chuang-tzu, these efforts are nowhere near as organized as later Taoists would propose. Over a total of fourteen chapters, the book then unravels key issues in Chuang-tzu's thought,

from visions of the universe through understandings of fate, self, death, and dreams, to ways of personal transformation with the help of various forms of conscious reprogramming and meditative practice, which then lead to the best possible way of living in the world, exemplified in several different kinds of people and social situations.

Throughout, this book transliterates Chinese with the Wade-Giles system, developed by two sinological linguists from Britain in the late nineteenth century and still the foundation of the official transliteration system in Taiwan. In mainland China, it was superseded after the beginning of the People's Republic by a system called Pinyin, which is less linguistically sophisticated but simpler to read and easier to pronounce (and much easier to type!). Thus, the word for "way" is written *tao* in the old style and *dao* in the new, causing recent scholars to speak of Daoism rather than Taoism. Chuang-tzu—pronounced "Dshuwongdse"—comes out today as Zhuangzi. Pinyin is the way you will see Chinese personal and place-names in the newspaper; thus we now write Beijing for what used to be Peking, and Mao Zedong instead of the earlier Mao Tse-tung. Whenever you see no Pinyin in parentheses after a Wade-Giles name or term, either it has appeared previously or the two transliterations are in this particular case identical.

Historical Setting: A Period of Transition

The Chuang-tzu, like all other texts of ancient Chinese thought, arose in a period of economic and cultural change that transformed life and thought not only in China but also the world over. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers called this period the "axial age" in his seminal work *The Origin and Goal of History*. The term refers to the fact that at this time in many different cultures, new thinkers and religious leaders arose who, for the first time, placed great emphasis on the individual as opposed to the community of the clan or tribe. Examples include the Buddha in India, Zoroaster in Persia, Socrates in ancient Greece, and Confucius in China. The ideas proposed by these thinkers and religious leaders had a strong

and pervasive impact on the thinking of humanity in general, contributing significantly to our thinking even today.

China at this time was undergoing tremendous economic and political changes. The arrival of iron-age technology, and with it better plowshares, wagon axles, and weapons, had caused an increase in food production and massive population growth, as well as greater mobility and wealth among the people. This in turn led to a heightened hunger for power among local lords, who began to wage wars in order to expand their lands and increase their influence, setting large infantry armies against each other. While the central king of the Chou (Zhou) dynasty (1122–221 BCE) was still officially in charge of the entire country, there were in fact many independent states in a more or less constant state of conflict. The era is thus appropriately named the Warring States period. It was a time of unrest and transition, which left many people yearning for the peace and stability of old, and ended only with the violent conquest of all other states and the establishment of the Chinese empire by the Ch'in (Qin) dynasty in 221 BCE.

Most Chinese philosophers of the Warring States, in accordance with the situation they faced, were concerned with the proper "way" or "method" (*tao*) leading to the recovery of the harmony and social manageability of an earlier, golden age. Their works tend to be characterized by a strong backward focus and feudalistic vision. Although Western scholars usually characterize them as "philosophy," these texts always placed central emphasis on the practical dimensions of their teachings, both in regard to the individual's social behavior and to his or her personal self-cultivation. In fact, at the core of most ancient Chinese thought are practices of social discipline and the transformation of individuals and communities. Followers often congregated in small, almost sectarian groups rather than in what we think of as philosophical schools.

The earliest texts of Taoism are no exception. They are expressions of a tradition that in essence focused on practical and social transformation and can therefore be best understood within the wider context of the

thought of the time. Later historians writing about the Warring States period after the fact, around 100 BCE, distinguished six major philosophical schools, each of which proposed one particular area as being most responsible for the state of social and cosmic disharmony and offered remedies accordingly: the Confucians focused on social etiquette and proper ritual; the Taoists emphasized the natural flow of things; the Mohists (named after the philosopher Mo-tzu [Mozi]) saw the solution to all problems in universal love; the Legalists thought that a set of strict laws and punishments was necessary to return order to the world; the Logicians found the key flaw in the inaccurate use of language and the resulting confusion in people's minds; and the Yin-Yang cosmologists understood social and personal harmony to depend on the cycles of the seasons, the movements of the stars, and other macrocosmic phenomena.

The Chuang-tzu, written when these schools were very much in evidence and had engaged in debates for several centuries, shows influence from all of them, in some cases supporting and integrating their views, in others strongly opposing them. In fact, the text as it has survived to the present day, abridged from its early version, contains materials above and beyond the philosophy of Chuang-tzu himself, whose thought is the main focus of this book.

The Chuang-tzu: A Text for Transformation

The Chuang-tzu takes its name from a minor government servant by the name of Chuang Chou (Zhuang Zhou, ca. 370–290 BCE). Highly erudite, he found officialdom useless and withdrew to dedicate himself to his speculations, teaching his ideas to disciples and inspiring them to write his teachings down. Early historical records mention that he was famous for his way with words. The literary mastery of the text is undisputed, and many consider it the first document of Chinese fiction.

The Chuang-tzu emerged from the same political environment as the Tao-te-ching but has a different focus in that it is more concerned with

mental attitudes and condemns active political involvement. Chuang Chou found that the ongoing arguments among the different philosophical schools were futile and would not lead to serious improvements. He concluded that "right" and "wrong" were highly volatile categories, that all viewpoints were relative, and that the mind and its perception tended to be fallacious and one-sided. As a result, he makes a strong case for the cultivation of nondual perception and a way of life that is free from constraints—mental, personal, and social. To attain perfect happiness and harmony in life, he says, you need not become a sage; it is sufficient to free your mind and flow along smoothly with the course of Tao.

This philosophy makes up the bulk of the book, which consists of thirty-three chapters and is divided into three parts: Inner (1–7), Outer (8–22), and Miscellaneous (23–33). This tripartite division was established by the main commentator of the text, Kuo Hsiang (Guo Xiang), who lived in the third century CE (d. 312). Modern scholars divide the text slightly differently and note that it represents materials of four distinct strands of early Taoist thought: the school of Chuang Chou himself—in the Inner Chapters (also considered the oldest) and in chapters 16–27 and 32 of the later parts of the book—plus the so-called primitivists (chapters 8–10), the hedonists (chapters 28–31), and the syncretists (chapters 11–15, 33).

The primitivist chapters express a worldview very similar to that of the Tao-te-ching but are more radical in their demand for simplicity and the return to an uncomplicated life. They condemn all forms of culture and governance as evil and destructive and see the ideal society in terms of small communities that eschew all cultural and technological advances and live a simple life. Their idea is to keep people in one place as much as possible, to have them maintain a simple outlook on life and inner contentment by limiting their horizons of experience.

The hedonist strand diametrically opposes this. It promotes ease and leisure, a life of no constraints and no restrictions, an attitude of giving in to desires and serving only the individual's personal happiness and satis-

faction. The underlying idea here is: "What is good for me is good for the universe." The reasoning behind it is that if the individual is part of Tao, then whatever he or she feels and wants is also part of Tao, and therefore all personal desires are expressions of the greater cosmic goodness and have to be satisfied without fail.

The syncretist sections of the Chuang-tzu, finally, demonstrate the integration of more formalized forms of cosmology and worldview into the basic understanding of Tao. Already the Tao-te-ching made a distinction between Tao as the creative, ineffable center and its manifestation in the visible world. Now the latter aspect of Tao is formulated in more technical detail and outlined in recognizable patterns. The rhythm of yin and yang is further subdivided into five phases (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) and explained in complex cosmological correlations that also take into account observations of the natural world, the movements of the stars, and the divination of the I-ching (Yijing), the Book of Changes, a well-known classic of divination.

The Philosophy: Integrating Self and Universe

Chuang Chou rejects any entity or essence beyond natural life. For him, everything exists the way it is just because it is, in perfect spontaneity or naturalness. There is no principle or agency at the origin of life. There is only the underlying current, the continuous and all-encompassing flow of Tao, no ultimate cause beyond it that makes things what they are. The universe exists by itself and of itself; it is existence just as it is. Nothing can be added to or subtracted from it; it is entirely sufficient in itself.

People, like everything else, are part of the universal flow, of the spontaneous Tao and nature. Like all other entities, they arise and pass away, always in motion and constantly changing. Like all existing things, they have their particular inborn characteristics—their genetic makeup—and the position they are born in—their social circumstances and opportunities. These two, called essential nature and destiny, determine who people are in life. They are inescapable, just as the natural characteristic of change

is in everything that is. Through them, Tao determines the particular way of being of the entire cosmos as much as of each individual.

The ideal way of being in the world, then, is to live as fully as possible in accordance with this personal Tao, the inner quality that determines the way people are. There is no point in trying to be something else. Nobody can ever comprehend what life is like for beings of a totally different size and dimension. The frog in the well has no concept of what it is like to live in an ocean. The little sparrow will never know what it is like to soar as a mighty eagle. Thus, freedom and ease in life do not come from wishing to attain one single goal that is the same for all—a high social position, advanced career, or scholarly erudition, for example—but from realizing who you are and where you stand in the world, from doing what you do best and to the fullest of your unique ability.

The problem with all this is that, despite their inborn Tao qualities, people develop consciousness and try to place themselves in relation to others and the world. They create ideals that do not match their inborn character or social standing, thus developing strife and fostering dissatisfaction. A good deal of Chuang-tzu's presentation accordingly focuses on how to overcome this consciously imposed limitation and recover perfect happiness.

One way Chuang-tzu suggests is to work with the conscious mind, to use critical awareness and analysis to realize just to what degree our perception is unreliable, how our evaluation of life and death, good and bad, desirable and undesirable depends on mental dualism and the faculty of divisive discrimination. It means realizing our tendency to split identity into many different selves by comparing ourselves with others and by making deliberate choices. There is a self that is richer than the next person, another self that is not as smart as someone else. There is a self that thinks it will live on and on, and there is yet another self that knows perfectly well that it will die. There is a division into this and that, into past and future, into mine and other. All these need to be recognized for what they are: artificial constructs that impede connection to spontaneity and happiness.

Overcoming this inherent tendency of the mind is achieved first of all through conscious questioning. How do we know that we know? How do we come to perceive that reality is what we think it is? What evidence is there that waking and dreaming are not the same thing? How do we know that life is not a great pain and death a wonderful rest? What, really, is my self?

The more we examine things from this perspective, the more we realize that there is ultimately no way of *really* knowing for sure who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. It is thus best to remain fully in the present with immediate attention and detached emotions, allowing the world to flow along through us, with us, and in us.

Beyond the conscious examination and elimination of categories, Chuang-tzu proposes several other methods to achieve perfect happiness. One is called "fasting of the mind": it activates *ch'i* (*qi*; vital energy), the subtle flowing force that connects all existence, over and above sensory perception. Another is "sitting in oblivion." This indicates a state of complete forgetfulness of self and other, high and low, life and death—the overcoming of all fears and concerns with dying and the otherworld—in a mind that is whole in itself and not concerned with classifying or evaluating the world either intellectually or emotionally.

A pervasively welcoming attitude toward all transformations, the ability to be at ease with the ongoing processes of the natural flow—often expressed with the word *t'ien* (*tian*), which means "sky" or "heaven"—this state of mind is the core of perfect happiness, the root of self-realization and a fulfilled life in the world. It is also the key characteristic of the ideal person: the sage or perfected. Such a person is free from strong feelings and opinions; at one with Tao or with the natural flow of "heaven," he or she is completely spontaneous and at ease with all that happens, living with a sense of strong immediacy that precludes thinking, evaluating, and critical mentation. The ideal way of being in the world for Chuang-tzu is, therefore, to be oblivious of conscious distinctions and evaluations, free from all liking and disliking, hope and fear, and to join heaven and earth in open-ended transformation.

A person who has reached this state can truly perfect his or her essential nature and will exhibit superior skills. The Chuang-tzu illustrates this in various cases of ordinary craftsmen who have mastered more than just their trade, such as Butcher Ting, who cuts up oxen with the same knife for years, or Woodworker Ch'ing, who makes bell-stands that seem out of this world. Other examples include a boatman who runs a ferry and a swimmer who instinctively moves with the waves. Both the boatman and the swimmer have a knack for the right way to handle themselves because they do not conceptualize their particular situations but act in the immediacy of life. Neither of them knows much consciously about his activities, but each moves naturally with his chosen element in oneness with his nature.

In all cases Tao works to the best of all in the perfection of naturalness or spontaneity. Naturalness is complete and happiness is perfect as and when the self is lost. The utter oblivion of the world in favor of a sense of flow in Tao, the ecstatic mental flight in free and easy wandering—that is ultimate realization in the Chuang-tzu, not only of Tao but also of the individual with his or her particular skills and in each particular life. Everyone, therefore, is originally happy and can live as a perfected person, whether in ordinary situations in the world or in a position of power.

Universal Patterns

1 This is the fundamental question of human existence: how to live in the world and attain a state of peace, contentment, and happiness. It has been discussed and written about innumerable times, from the ancient Greek philosophers through the Declaration of Independence to modern self-help manuals. Chuang-tzu provides his own set of answers to the question, and the entire book is really about nothing else: what constitutes happiness to begin with, how to go about attaining the ultimate state, and what life will look and feel like once it is reached. This is what this work is all about.

2 The way people of the world think of happiness is in terms of satisfying the five senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching beautiful objects and gaining pleasure from them. But this is only a very limited way of attaining happiness, a momentary, fleeting sensation that leads to potential numbness. The Chuang-tzu and the Tao-te-ching have similar teachings: "The five colors make the eyes go blind; the five tones make the ears go deaf; the five flavors make the palate numb; racing and hunting cause the mind to run mad; rare objects create harm to one's activities" (Tao-te-ching chapter 12).

The text here sets the stage for distinguishing the joys of the senses from true happiness, which is independent of them.

1 □ Perfect Happiness

In this world, is there such a thing as perfect happiness? Is it possible to live to the fullest in this body? If so, what should we do? What can we rely on? What should we avoid, what support? What is best to pursue and what had better be abandoned? What should we delight in, what detest?[1]

The things people in today's world consider most valuable are wealth, position, vigor, and a sense of being good at something. The things that make them happy are physical comfort, rich tastes, beautiful clothes, lovely colors, and great music.

On the other hand, they uniformly detest poverty, low status, early death, and crime. Their greatest suffering occurs when their bodies cannot get comfortable, their mouths cannot feed on rich tastes, their physical form cannot fit into beautiful clothes, their eyes cannot look upon lovely colors, and their ears do not have a chance to listen to great music.

When they do not get these things, they are deeply frustrated and develop tremendous anxiety. Such utter dedication to their physical body—isn't this totally stupid?[2]

(continued on page 5)

3 Key goals of ordinary people, believed to create happiness, are wealth, position, and long life. All three make great demands on the body and tend to separate people from their authentic selves, preventing them from being fully vibrant and joyful in the present moment. People not only keep thinking of the future and developing all kinds of worries and anxieties, but they also define themselves through various achievements and are not really true to themselves.

4 The speaker here, possibly Chuang Chou himself, refrains from making value judgments. This again echoes the Tao-te-ching, where Lao-tzu says, "The sage has no ordinary mind, but makes the people's mind his own. The good, I treat good with goodness; the bad, I treat with equal goodness. Thus my inherent potency is full of goodness" (chapter 49). Yet he does assert that being competent and succeeding in the world will not provide happiness.

5 Wu Tzu-hsü (Zixu) was a minister in the feudal state of Wu. He repeatedly warned the king about a possible attack from a neighboring state, making "supportive suggestions" or "loyal remonstrations." His advice was not heeded, but his persistence aroused the king's anger.

He was ordered to commit suicide in 484 BCE. On the other hand, Wu became famous for presenting his convictions selflessly and without fear. Was that success? Was he happy? Should he have rather kept his mouth shut and lived safely but ignored?

Beyond questions of personal happiness, Chuang-tzu here raises issues that go to the heart of modern politics. Should dissenters keep quiet and safe or actively criticize and propose alternatives?

To attain wealth, people submit to great suffering and make themselves sick. Then they accumulate so much stuff that they cannot even use it! However dedicated they are to their lives, it is yet entirely outside of themselves.

To attain position, people slave day and night without stopping. Even then, they keep worrying constantly whether they come across as being good at their job! However dedicated they are to their lives, it is yet entirely separate from them.

When people are born, whatever they do, frustration is born along with them. Thus, even to attain long life, people make themselves ignorant and dull. Still, they spend all their time worrying about not dying. However dedicated they are to their lives, it is yet far away from them.[3]

Valiant fighters, all these people do lots of things to be seen as good at what they do by the world around them, yet they never really manage to live to the fullest. I do not know whether they are in fact good at what they do. But even if they are, that alone is not enough for them to live to the fullest. And if they are not, well, then they may just be living vicariously through others.[4]

Thus the advice: "If you make supportive suggestions that are not adopted, just sit still and let go. Do not push and compete."

Tzu-hsü pushed with his suggestions and got himself killed. Had he not pushed, he would not have become famous. So, was he good at living or not?[5]

People these days do all sorts of things and claim these make them happy, but I don't really know if they are in fact happy or not. I see how they go after their so-called happiness, pursuing it with the determination of death and as if unable to stop in their tracks. What they call happiness does not make sense to me, but then I can't really say it's not happiness either.

(continued on page 7)

6 Here the author first spells out his alternative: a sense of being in the world that is free from deficiency and strife, a feeling of completeness wherever you are and whatever you do. Happiness is so full in itself that it does not see itself as happy, a thought echoed in later Zen literature, which notes that it is quite impossible to ever know if one is enlightened. The ultimate state is just being in itself; it cannot be conceived as a separate entity or phenomenon. Any attempt to think about it or describe it necessitates its being separate, external, not just so. Similarly, accomplishment is fully realized when there is no more need for praise, reward, and completion. You just do what you do as you do it, and that is all.

7 The term the text uses to describe this state, in adaptation of the Tao-te-ching, is "nonaction" (*wu-wei*). This means developing a strong sense of self-identity, knowing what you can and cannot do, as well as an attitude of attunement to things around yourself. The ideal state is to flow along with inner and outer impulses in ongoing harmony, without making conscious decisions or striving for accomplishments.

8 The main argument for the possibility of such a mental state of perfect happiness is the way of nature, especially "heaven and earth"—a compound phrase that signifies the cosmos at large and indicates the various natural processes of life. Heaven is associated with yang energy; it is naturally light and bright and covers the world from above. Earth is made from yin energy; it is naturally solid and heavy and supports life from below. Neither has the conscious determination to be as it is; neither makes decisions, strives for accomplishments, or works hard. They just are what they are, doing what they do. Because of that, all else functions and the myriad things—all living, organic entities—take birth, grow, decline, and pass on.

Is there in fact happiness? Is it possible in this life and world? To me it is found only in complete nonaction, something that ordinary people see as great suffering. Thus the saying: "Perfect happiness is being free from the need to be happy. Perfect accomplishment is being free from having to accomplish anything."[6]

What is right and wrong in the world is impossible to decide. However, in nonaction there is clear right and wrong. Perfect happiness and living to the fullest can only be realized in this state of nonaction.[7]

Let me explain this a bit more. Heaven rests in nonaction and is perfectly luminous. Earth rests in nonaction and is perfectly at peace. As these two merge in their respective states of nonaction, the myriad things come forth.[8]

How vast! How amazing! They seem to come from nowhere. How amazing! How vast! They have no image or symbol.

The myriad things in their great variety all grow from cosmic nonaction. Thus the saying: "Heaven and earth rest in nonaction and there is nothing that they do not do."

What, then, can a mere human being do to attain this ultimate state of nonaction?

—CHAPTER 18

9 Outlining the typical problems of ordinary people in more detail, this section describes the ways of people who are seen as successful, yet shows how they are not really the path to perfect happiness.

You commonly covet good looks, a great body, and an outgoing, alpha personality as the gate to admiration and success, the means by which you can get ahead in the world and reach the higher rungs of achievement. However, they lead to great involvement and concerns, thus preventing a focus on what is really important to you deep within.

By the same token, to get ahead in the existing social and corporate structures, you have to follow current fashions, bend with the winds of time, be subservient and compliant with whatever orders are being handed down from above. Again, you are moving further away from being true to yourself.

Then there are those various internal virtues commonly seen as signs of a great personality and positive integrity, such as wisdom, courage, and thinking of others (such as the Confucian values of benevolence and righteousness). In Chuang-tzu's view, they do nothing but add to your burdens, hindering your pursuit of long life and preventing you from finding perfect harmony and happiness in your unique life on the planet.

Trouble has eight signs; success has three needs; the body has six problem areas.

A beautiful face, great hair, tall stature, good muscle tone, vigor, style, courage, and chutzpah—when someone has these eight more than others, they bring nothing but trouble.

Following the current fashion, leaning and bending, abject and subservient—when someone acts like this more so than others, he or she will find success in the world.

Wisdom and insight lead to outside involvement; courage and enterprise lead to numerous resentments; benevolence and righteousness lead to piles of responsibility—thus these six create problems for the body.[9]

—CHAPTER 32

10 Moderation is the ideal described in antiquity as well as in Taoist texts from an early period: avoid all overindulgence in food and drink as well as in all sorts of sensual and sexual pleasures and instead observe guidelines for healthy living. The medieval *Yang-sheng-lun* (On Nourishing Life) proposes six:

1. Let go of fame and profit.
2. Limit sights and sounds.
3. Moderate material goods and wealth.
4. Lessen smells and tastes.
5. Eliminate lies and falsehood.
6. Avoid jealousy and envy.

11 Chuang-tzu here paints a terrible picture of what an excess of wealth and material goods does to people: not a moment's peace due to excessive sensory exposure to sounds and sights, constantly buffeted by passions and desires for yet more stuff, always running after the next project and greater profits, and suffocating in all their possessions and in the multiple houses and storage facilities needed to maintain them.

People who live a life of excess suffer greatly—they are sick with longing, overburdened by stuff, and constantly fearful that someone will cheat or rob them. What a terrible way to live!

Moderation brings good fortune; excess causes harm—this holds true for every being and all kinds of situations but especially in the case of wealth.[10]

Look at the wealthy: their ears are overwhelmed by the sounds of rock and pop, blues and rap; their mouths are filled with meat and wine. These rouse their intention for more of the same so they completely forget their real position in the greater scheme of things—this is confusion.

Drowning in surging energies and passions, they are like laborers lugging an uphill burden—this is suffering.

Amassing material goods, they try to find comfort; amassing power and influence, they try to find fulfillment. Resting quietly for a moment, they sink into depression; engaging themselves physically, they turn into maniacs—this is sickness.

Pursuing wealth and running after profit, they fill their houses to overflowing and do not know how to escape. Still, they lust for more and cannot resist—this is addiction.

More stuff piled up than they could ever use, grasping for more than they could ever hold, their mind is full of care and close to exhaustion, yet they still keep going after projects and things, not knowing when to stop—this is trouble.

At home suspicious of theft by deceitful servants, in town terrified of attacks by robbers and con artists, they surround themselves with alarm systems in their houses and dare not walk around by themselves outside—this is fear.

These six—confusion, suffering, sickness, addiction, trouble, and fear—are the greatest evils in the world.[11]

—CHAPTER 29

12 Look, on the other hand, at the happiness of the frog in the well. Chuang-tzu often illustrates his point with parables—typically featuring animals, mythical heroes, and sage emperors, or well-known political and philosophical figures such as Confucius. Here he describes the frog in a tiny, old, and crumbling well who is as happy as he could possibly be, having found his true calling in life and not needing anything extraneous or fancy to give him fulfillment.

13 In contrast to the frog, a small creature with a limited horizon, the turtle of the Eastern Sea is a huge beast in a vast ocean who needs a completely different habitat to find self-realization. Each is happy in its own way and would be completely at odds in the other's setting. The poor frog is flabbergasted to learn about the vastness of the sea; the poor turtle can't even get a foot into the tiny well. They cannot really understand the other's habitat and "happiness." But that is exactly the point: there is perfect happiness for each of us if we just take the trouble of looking within and finding our very own perfect habitat and way of life.

14 A *li* is a Chinese mile, about 440 meters—about a quarter mile or a bit less than half a kilometer.

15 Emperor Yü was the founder of the Hsia (Xia) dynasty (ca. 2000–1700 BCE), known as the tamer of the floods, who opened channels to allow the water to flow into the sea, which yet did not change its inherent nature despite the excess.

16 King T'ang was the founder of the Shang dynasty (1766–1122 BCE), best known for ancestor worship, oracle bone divination, and bronze vessels. The country suffered from extensive drought, and the king exposed himself to the heat to make heaven take pity and provide rain. Yet the cliffs were unaffected by the excess, resting firmly in their true so-being.

There once was a frog who lived in a crumbling well. He said to the turtle of the Eastern Sea, "I am so happy! I hop out of the well and sit on the rim. I jump into the well and rest on its broken tiles. I move around in the water, drawing my legs together and lifting my chin. I squirrel into the mud, diving until my feet are all sunk. I turn around, seeing the friendly shrimps, crabs, and tadpoles. How could I suffer in this wonderful life? More than that, I have complete command over the water in the gully and utter freedom of movement all over the crumbling well. This is perfection! Hey, Master Turtle, why don't you come over and join me and see for yourself?"[12]

The turtle of the Eastern Sea had not even put his left foot into the well when his right knee caught and got stuck.[13] He hesitated and drew back, then proceeded to tell the frog about the sea:

"A distance of a thousand *li* does not describe how big it is.[14] A height of a thousand aligned swords does not approach its depth. In the time of Emperor Yü, they had floods for nine years out of ten, yet its water did not rise.[15] Under King T'ang, there was a drought for seven years out of eight, yet its cliffs did neither extend nor shrink.[16] To be unaffected by short- or long-term changes, to be immune to increase or decrease of whatever amount—this is the great happiness of the Eastern Sea."

When the well frog heard this, he was startled and scared. Completely bewildered, he didn't know anymore who he was.

—CHAPTER 17

17 This story from chapter 17 reiterates the same idea as the dialogue between the well frog and the ocean turtle. The P'eng, a huge fish transformed into a gigantic bird, rises vastly over the ocean and moves with ease from the Northern to the Southern seas. The cicada and the little dove, on the other hand, barely make it to the nearest treetop. Each of them is unique; each is happy in its own way. Yet neither can really understand the other or could take the other's place.

Matching Confucian and other traditional Chinese thought, Chuang-tzu here sees no equality in the sense that anyone could do anything in society or is equally capable of filling certain positions. On the other hand, he champions equality in the sense that everyone has his or her own unique talents and special place in the greater scheme of things. Society should make sure that each person has an equal chance at fully developing his or her unique potential and finding a particular form of happiness—be it jumping around like the frog in the well or rising on the whirlwind like the great P'eng.

18 This paragraph puts the matter in a practical way: different journeys require different forms of provisioning, but none is better than the other. It would be wrong and harmful to take three-day provisions on a month-long trip or to carry tons of food for a short outing to the park. Yet this is exactly what people do when they strive for wealth and position and all those other goals society sets before them. They orient themselves outside and blatantly disregard their own innate abilities (essential nature) and social context (original destiny), factors that both set limits and open undreamed-of opportunities.

19 P'eng-tsu (Pengzu) lived for eight hundred years without aging. He practiced the arts of nourishing life, including breathing techniques, healing exercises, and meditations, and lived on fruits, herbs, minerals, and powdered deer antlers. Asked to serve as an official under the legendary Chou dynasty ruler King Mu, he refused but offered his sagely teachings. But that was his way—it is not for everyone. We all have to find our own unique way in the world.

In the Northern Sea lives a fish known as K'un, which is huge—I don't know how many *li*. It changes into a bird called P'eng, whose back is also big—I don't know how many *li*. When this bird stirs and rises up in flight, its wings cover the entire sky like clouds. On occasion, the sea changes its tides. Then the bird migrates to the Southern Sea, also known as the Celestial Lake.

The Universal Harmony, a book on wondrous feats, notes: "When the P'eng migrates to the Southern Sea, it strikes the water over a surface of three thousand *li*, then lifts on the whirlwind to a height of ninety thousand *li*, and comes to rest only after half a year has passed."...

A cicada and a little dove laugh at him. "We fly with effort, hoping to land on an elm or a sapanwood. Sometimes we don't even make that and fall back down before we reach it. How could anyone ever rise to ninety thousand *li* and make for the south?"[17]

If you go on a short excursion to the blue yonder, you take provisions for three meals and return just as full. If you go on a hundred-*li* journey, you need to pound grain when you stop for the night. If you travel as far as a thousand *li*, you need to carry provisions for three months.[18]

What do these two critters know? Small knowledge reaches nowhere near great knowledge; a few years' experience does not match that of many years. How do we know this? The mushroom that lives only for a morning has no idea of the phases of the moon. The cicada who lives only for a few days does not know the seasons of spring and fall. These are examples for short-lived creatures.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is a numinous creature in the southern state of Ch'u, whose spring and fall last five hundred years each. In the old days, there was the great Ch'un tree, whose spring and fall lasted eight thousand years each. The immortal P'eng-tsu, moreover, is known for his extraordinary length of life. Now lots of ordinary people try to match him. How pitiful, indeed![19]

—CHAPTER 17

1 This section raises the question why, if the universe is ultimately perfect and all beings have an ideal way of being and a perfect niche in the world that is suited uniquely to them, there is so much unhappiness and confusion. It connects the question immediately to issues of mental classification and verbal expression, the development of human consciousness and its various manifestations.

2 In Chuang-tzu's time, there were six major philosophical schools, which each proposed one particular area as being most responsible for the state of social and cosmic disharmony and offered remedies accordingly: the Confucians focused on social etiquette and proper ritual; the Taoists emphasized the natural flow of things; the Mohists (named after the philosopher Mo-tzu) saw the solution to all problems in universal love; the Legalists thought that a set of strict laws and punishments was necessary to return order to the world; the Logicians found the key flaw in the inaccurate use of language and the resulting confusion in people's minds; and the Yin-Yang cosmologists understood social and personal harmony to depend on the cycles of the seasons, the movements of the stars, and other macrocosmic phenomena.

3 To begin unraveling the different perspectives and liberate the mind from the classifications that put limitations on concepts and experience, Chuang-tzu advocates that we realize how everything in our thinking depends on categories of this and that, right and wrong, good and bad, like and dislike. We will never be truly free and genuinely happy as long as we cling to these evaluative patterns.

2 ☐ The Universe

How, then, has this state come about, that the original inherent way of being—the Tao—is now so obscure that it is classified according to true and false? How has human speech become so obscure that it is classified according to right and wrong? Is it that Tao has gone off and is no longer there? That speech is there but not really valid?[1]

Tao is obscured by partial accomplishments; speech is obscured by flowery language. Thus we now have the contentions of different philosophical schools—one saying "right" where the other says "wrong," and vice versa.[2] To decide on what is actually right and what is in fact wrong, it is best to shine an impartial light on things.

All things have a "this" and a "that." Looking at them only from the perspective of "this," we can't really see them for what they are, and only by knowing them as they really are can we understand them. Realize: all "this" arises from "that," and all "that" follows "this." "This" and "that" are interdependent and co-originating: as one arises, the other ends, and as one ends, the other arises; as one is acceptable, the other becomes unacceptable, and as one is unacceptable, the other becomes acceptable. Thus, "this" and "that" are intimately connected, and "right" and "wrong" depend on each other.[3]

—CHAPTER 2

4 In more cosmic terms, the beginning of the problem rests with the fundamental human constitution of having sensory faculties and relating to the world through them. This is expressed most vividly in the creation myth concerning Hun-tun, which in Cantonese is pronounced "wonton" and is still popular in the soup of this name. Described as a formless sack or unshaped bulk of energy, the figure here is the ruler of the center.

5 Although he is without sensory faculties, Hun-tun is generous and kind, hosting his neighbors with enthusiasm. To repay his kindness, they try to make him more like other creatures and drill sensory openings into him—as a result of which Hun-tun dies. He is, as Norman Girardot says in *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism*, "bored to death."

The point of the story, then, is that the state of inherent wholeness, of the oneness with Tao we are originally born with, is destroyed bit by bit the more we use the senses to relate to the world. On their basis we develop likes and dislikes and start to use our conscious mind to separate ourselves from reality, evaluating sensory data in terms of good and bad, high and low, advantageous and detrimental, and so on.

The point of the Chuang-tzu's program of return to perfect happiness—and the goal of all Taoist mysticism and practice over the ages—is the recovery of this state of original chaos, of oneness with Tao, of wholeness within.

The ruler over the Southern Sea was Shu [Tight]. The ruler over the Northern Sea was Hu [Abrupt]. The ruler over the center was Hun-tun (Hundun) [Chaos].[4]

On occasion Shu and Hu would meet in the realm of Hun-tun, who received them with great hospitality. The two then started to plan how they could possibly pay back Hun-tun's kindness.

They said, "All people have seven orifices so they can see, hear, eat, and breathe. He alone has none of them. Let us try boring him some."

So they bored a hole every day, and on the seventh day Hun-tun died.[5]

—CHAPTER 7

6 One way of understanding how sensory evaluation works is in terms of classical Chinese cosmology, which sees the origin and development of the universe in terms of the two complementary forces yin and yang. Originally geographical terms that indicated the sunny and shady sides of a hill, they acquired a series of associations: bright and dark, light and heavy, strong and weak, above and below, heaven and earth, ruler and subject, male and female, and so on.

They arose at the time of creation, after unformed chaos gave rise to cosmic oneness, which in turn separated into the two fundamental energies: yang as the active, moving, and outgoing force, and yin as the restorative, calming, and inward-moving tendency. They spiraled away from each other, lighter yang rising up to form the sky or heaven and heavier yin sinking down to form the land or earth. From there they continued to intermingle and gave rise to all beings, who continue to be constituted by yin and yang parts.

The two forces closely depend on each other; one cannot be present without the other, as is aptly shown in the classic yin-yang diagram, which clearly shows the balance and interlocking nature of yin and yang, the fluidity of their interchange.

Still, while we can observe their patterns, we can never quite understand why they work in this manner and how they come about.

In a state of high yin, all is cold and severe; in a state of high yang, all is turbulent and agitated. Coldness and severity come from heaven; turbulence and agitation issue from earth. When both intermingle and join, all things come forth.

You may try to see some order in all this, but you will never be able to see its ultimate form. Growth and decay, fullness and emptiness, darkness and light, solar and lunar phases—they all are new every day, yet you will never be able to see how they work exactly.

Life has a point from which it springs; death has a point to which it returns. Beginning and end succeed each other without obvious turning points, and no one knows what possible limits they may have. If it is not an ongoing process like this, then who runs this whole shebang?[6]

—CHAPTER 21

7 A way of looking at conscious, critical evaluation of the world is in terms of intellectual speculation. Any theory, any logical argument, when taken far enough, will be just speculation. There is ultimately no way of really knowing what in fact exists or is being said. As the commentator Kuo Hsiang explains:

> What existed before there were beings? If I say yin and yang were first, then that means yin and yang are beings, too. What, then, was before them? I may say nature was first. But nature is only the natural way of beings. I may say perfect Tao was first. But perfect Tao is perfect nonbeing. Since it is nonbeing, how can it be before anything else? So, what existed before there were beings? There must always be another thing being without end.

He comes to the conclusion that "beings are what they are by nature; they are not caused by anything else," reaching a state of pure acceptance (like Hun-tun) that both precedes and goes beyond classifications.

8 Chuang-tzu takes it one step further and introduces a paradox: something known to be tiny (a tip of a hair) is described as big, while something known as big (Mount T'ai) is classified as tiny. He shows here that all evaluations in terms of size or longevity or anything else are mere conventions with no solid reality to them.

9 Ultimately, all beings and all existence are one, but speech and consciousness create distinctions. They do not stop with one distinction, either, but immediately move into innumerable divisions and classifications, getting further and further away from ultimate reality.

There is a beginning. There was a beginning before that beginning. There was a beginning before that beginning before there was the beginning.

There is existence. There was nonexistence before that. There was existence before the beginning of that nonexistence. There was nonexistence before the existence before nonexistence.

So, if now there suddenly is nonexistence, how do we know whether it is in fact existence or actually nonexistence?

Now I have just said something, but how do I not know if I have in fact said something or if I haven't really said anything?[7]

In the world there is nothing greater than the tip of a hair, and the great Mount T'ai is tiny. There is none longer lived than a dying infant, and the immortal P'eng-tsu had a short life.[8]

Heaven, earth, and I came along together, and the myriad things and I are one. Since we are all one, how can I ever talk about them? Since I am talking about them, how can there be no talk?

Myself and my talking make two; talking and the object make three. Moving on from here, even the best mathematician cannot count them all—how much less can ordinary people?[9]

So, coming from nonexistence and moving to existence, we get to three. Coming from existence and moving to more existence, we get to how many? There is no point going anywhere without understanding the interdependence of "this" and "that."

—CHAPTER 2

10 A later chapter takes up this tendency of classification, using the same basic imagery (a tiny hair versus a great landscape), and expresses it in a fictional dialogue of two divinities—the local River God and the expansive Lord of the Northern Sea.

11 You should realize four things about reality to remedy your inherent tendency toward classification: there is no limitation to existence and even minute things can be very significant; there is no stopping of time and thus no point in feeling sorry about the past or trying to hang on to the present; there is no control over what happens in life, and all emotions are just so much wasted energy; and there is no great universal reason for being on the planet, so that all interpretations and reactions to life and death are ultimately futile.

In other words, develop a conscious perspective that releases evaluations even of momentous things, such as life and death, combined with a change in emotions to a more accepting attitude. This will help you attain inner peace and open the way to true happiness.

12 Another important part of this is to see things from a larger perspective: whatever we know is nowhere near the total amount of knowledge on the planet; compared to the course of history or, even worse, the millions of years of galactic unfolding, our life span is but a tiny moment. We can be content with what we have and what we can do—trying to reach out far beyond will only lead to frustration.

The River God said, "Now, is it all right if I think of heaven and earth as big, and the point of a hair as small?"[10]

The Lord of the Northern Sea replied, "No. When it comes to things, measure is without limit; time is without end; allotment is without constancy; and beginning and end are without cause.

"For this reason, if you observe all that is near and far with great understanding, you see something small yet do not think it insignificant, find something big yet do not think it important. This is how you realize that the measure of all things is without limit.

"If you objectively witness all that is old and new, you look at the past yet do not feel regret, touch the present yet do not stretch to reach it. This is how you realize that time is without end.

"If you examine all that is full and empty, you succeed in something yet do not feel great joy, fail in something yet do not get frustrated. This is how you realize that allotment is without constancy.

"If you shed a bright light on all that is coming and going, you come to life yet do not celebrate, face death yet do not find it disastrous. This is how you realize that beginning and end are without cause.[11]

"Whatever people know is nowhere near the amount they don't know; the time they spend on the planet is nowhere near the time they are not around. Trying to pursue the ultimately large with the totally tiny only leads to error and confusion—this way you never find self-realization![12]

"Seen from this perspective, how can you know that the point of a hair is sufficient to determine what is small or that heaven and earth give you any indication of what is big?"

—CHAPTER 17

13 How, then, did people come to even try to move beyond their sphere? As an explanation, the Chuang-tzu outlines four stages that saw the development of culture and the establishment of classificatory consciousness. Kuo Hsiang explains them as follows:

1. Chaos Complete: This is the state of complete oblivion of heaven and earth, of total abandonment of the myriad beings. Outside never examining time and space, inside never conscious of the body. Thus people are boundless and free from all fetters, they go along with beings and are in full accordance with all.

2. Beings: Even though oblivion is no longer complete now and beings are recognized as existing, there is still the oblivion of distinctions between this and that.

3. Distinctions: At this stage, there is a distinction between this and that for the first time. However, there are no evaluations in terms of right and wrong.

4. Right and Wrong: If [the distinction between] right and wrong were not there, Tao would still be complete. With the destruction of Tao, emotions begin to be partial and love develops. As long as you cannot forget one-sided love and free yourself from egotism, there is no way you can ever find original oneness in yourself or with others.

However, Chuang-tzu concludes the presentation by asking if any of this is actually real or whether the entire vision of purity, development, and decline is not yet another make-believe construct of the human mind. The core idea, whether expressed in stages or not, is the need to step back from all classifications.

People of old had perfect knowledge. How was it "perfect"? They thought in a way that matched the stage before things existed. Their knowledge was perfect and exhaustive; nothing could possibly be added to it.

Next, they saw things as existing, yet they did not yet make any distinctions among them.

Then a stage came when people made distinctions among things, but they had as yet no sense of right and wrong.

When right and wrong began to appear in people's minds, the Tao was destroyed. The destruction of the Tao, then, meant the beginning of personal preference and one-sided love.

Yet, is there really something we can call destruction and accomplishment? Or are there ultimately none of these?[13]

—CHAPTER 2

14 The development of consciousness comes with concrete changes in lifestyle and culture. In the very earliest phases of human development, what we would call the Paleolithic, people were hunter-gatherers and lived in trees or caves, trying to stay away from the vast numbers of roaming predators. They had little sense of being different from other creatures, and their consciousness was tribal and undifferentiated.

In the next stage of development, humans learned to harness the power of fire. They could hunt animals and cook their meat; they could also gather firewood and burn it. At this point they had awareness of the changing seasons and started to plan ahead for the cold times to come—losing a bit of their original "oblivion" while gaining comfort and security.

15 From here culture developed with various key feats. Agriculture, what we would call the Neolithic Revolution, allowed people to control their food supply and establish matrilineal clans, but they still lived in small communities, and there was enough to go around. Then scarcity appeared and there were the first wars, notably nomadic groups raiding settled cities, as is well known from the Near East and India. After that, more complex institutions evolved, with extensive bureaucracies and governmental control—to the point of injustice and misery that have characterized most of history.

The Chinese express this development in terms of "culture heroes": the Divine Farmer who developed agriculture; the Yellow Emperor, who fought the first war, created infrastructure, and established markets; the Confucian epitomes Yao and Shun, who organized the government; and the founders of the first dynasties, who came to the throne by forcefully removing previous rulers. For the Chuang-tzu, they didn't do too well, since so-called civilization is nothing more than an organized structure of bullying and exploitation.

I have heard that in the most ancient of times birds and beasts were numerous while human beings were few. So the people all built nests in trees to avoid them. During the day they gathered acorns and chestnuts; at night they climbed back up to the top of the trees. For this reason they are called the people of the nesting clan.

Following this, in high antiquity, people knew nothing about clothes and garments. In the summertime they would collect great piles of firewood, which they would then burn in the winter to keep warm. For this reason they are called the people who knew how to live.[14]

In the age of the Divine Farmer, the people slept in peace at night and got up to proceed with calm. They knew their mothers but not their fathers, and they lived side by side with the elk and the deer. They tilled the soil to eat, wove fabrics to dress themselves, and in their hearts and minds were utterly free from ideas of doing each other harm. This is the epitome of perfect potency.

However, the Yellow Emperor could not reach this level. He fought the battle of Cho-lu (Zhuolu) against the Wormy Rebel, and the blood flowed for a hundred *li*. Then Yao and Shun arose and established innumerable offices. King T'ang removed his overlord; King Wu killed the old ruler. Ever since, the strong have been bullying the weak, the many have been exploiting the few. From T'ang and Wu onwards, those in power have been a band of criminals and nothing more.[15]

—CHAPTER 29

16 Compared to the plight of humanity in "civilized" societies, animals are closer to original Chaos and have a much better life: they don't mind a thing as long as they are in an environment that supports their basic needs. They maintain an internal constancy of mind and heart that is not touched by emotions nor affected by mental classifications.

17 This is the goal: realizing ultimate oneness not just by conscious understanding but in the core of your very being; getting to a point where the body is just part of the greater life on earth; feeling at a deep level that life and death are part of the same continuum and make no more difference than the changes of day and night. Then there are no more disturbances to inner peace and stability, and you can live in perfect happiness.

Grass-eaters do not mind changing pastures; river creatures do not worry about changing waters. They can make small changes without ever losing their great constancy; joy and anger, sadness and delight do not enter into their breasts.[16]

Now, in that they all live in the world, the myriad things are one. Realizing that they are ultimately all part of overarching oneness, their four limbs and hundred body parts are just so much dust and dirt to them, and all life and death, all beginning and end, are just like the succession of day and night: none of it can disturb them.[17] How much less will they be bothered by the gain and loss, disaster and good fortune of ordinary life?

—CHAPTER 21

1 How, then, do we go about getting to this ideal state? The first step is to realize that the entire universe, and thus also our own body and mind, our life and death, are nothing but vital energy (*ch'i*). In ancient sources associated with mist, fog, and moving clouds, the word consists of an image of someone eating and grain in a pot. *Ch'i* is thus the quality that nourishes, warms, and transforms as well as anything perceptible but intangible: atmosphere, smoke, aroma, vapor, a sense of intuition, foreboding, or even ghosts.

There is only one *ch'i*, just as there is only one Tao. But it appears on different levels, most importantly primordial *ch'i*, which we receive from heaven through our parents, and postnatal *ch'i*, which we get from the environment through breath, food, and interaction with others. All existence is nothing but *ch'i*, which flows continuously in a rhythm of yin and yang and should be smooth, even, and ever changing.

2 On the other hand, any excess or deficiency in the flow, in the inherent transformation pattern, is a form of disturbance that manifests as disease. Seeing things as good and bad, spiritual and putrid, and whining about them, then, is a basic form of imbalance that keeps you from realizing your true nature and causes not only discontent but also disease.

3 The countermeasure is to use the concept of *ch'i* to realize the fundamental oneness of all existence and stop seeing yourself as separate. This, then, will also allow you to see death as part of the continuous flow of existence.

3 □ Life and Death

Life is the follower of death, and death is the beginning of life—who knows their inherent structure?

Human life is nothing but an assemblance of vital energy. When it comes together, we come to life; when it scatters, we die.[1] Since life and death thus closely follow each other, why whine about either?

In this most essential aspect, the myriad things are one. They consider life as beautiful because it is spiritual and marvelous; they think of death as nasty because it is smelly and putrid.

However, the smelly and putrid change again and become the spiritual and marvelous; the spiritual and marvelous change once more and turn smelly and putrid.[2]

Thus the saying: "The entire world is but one vital energy." Based on this, all sages value oneness.[3]

—CHAPTER 22

4 Another way to counteract the tendency to "whine" about death is to ask whether we really know what happens after we die. Or, as the Chuang-tzu says in chapter 2, "How do we know that loving life is not a delusion? That hating death is not being like someone who has lost his way and cannot find his home?"

The skull story is a case in point. It was highly unusual to find human remains by the roadside in traditional China, where people had to be buried with all the proper rites to make sure they arrived safely in the otherworld and could receive appropriate offerings and not bother the living for sustenance or attention. The reasons the Chuang-tzu lists here are all possible causes for not dying properly, in the arms of the person's kin—different ways of being cast out, which, according to classical belief, also means a particularly nasty and unsettled existence in the otherworld.

5 Despite his outcast status, the skull asserts that life after death is great fun and a form of perfect happiness—the kind of happiness we pursue all our life (harmony, equality, prosperity)—and means the end of toil without the loss of identity or the ability to feel. It is not a fall into some deep abyss; it is not a shadow existence; it is not a form of punishment or deprivation. On the contrary, it is like coming back to "our true home," the way we really should be, calm and peaceful, equitable and relaxed, a state to be aspired to even during life—and most certainly not feared.

Chuang-tzu once went to the state of Ch'u. On the road he found a hollow skull, bleached out but still clearly retaining a skull shape. He tapped it with his horsewhip and started talking to it:

"Did you end up here because you were so greedy for life that you lost your mind? Perhaps you betrayed your country and suffered capital punishment or exposure in the wilderness? Did you die all alone because you behaved unethically, disgracing your parents, wife, and children? Did you freeze or starve to death on the road? Or did you just die a natural death at the end of your allotted time?"[4]

Having voiced his speculations, Chuang-tzu moved the skull to the roadside, used it for a pillow, and went to sleep. In the middle of the night, the skull appeared to him in a dream. It started talking:

"You were finding causes there quite like the great disputer! Yet look at what you said: it's all about stuff of interest only to the living. In death, none of this is relevant. Would you like to hear about the joys of being dead?"

"Yes, indeed, very much so."

"In death," the skull explained, "there is no ruler above, no subject below. Nor is there any seasonal or other change. Equitably, we take heaven and earth for our spring and autumn. Even if you were a king facing south on his throne, you wouldn't have it any better."

Chuang-tzu did not believe him. "Let's see," he said. "Suppose I got the Ruler of Destiny to bring you back to life and give you a healthy body with bones and flesh, sinews and skin, plus return you to your father and mother, wife and children, and all your local friends, wouldn't you want that?"

Hearing this, the skull gazed at him deeply, knitted its brow, and replied, "You must be kidding! Why in the world would I give up the happiness of a king facing south and again subject myself to the toils of human life?"[5]

—CHAPTER 18

6 In concrete reality, this advanced attitude toward death finds expression in the behavior of mourners. In traditional China, immediate relatives (spouses, children) had to mourn for a full three years—rough clothes, few baths, plain food, no work, and certainly no entertainment—and at the funeral show their grief vividly by wearing sackcloth and ashes, exhibiting disheveled hair and appearance, and wailing and crying loudly. There are even professional mourners who can be hired to enhance the atmosphere of sadness and grief, to make sure that everyone knows how harsh the break of social continuity is for the family.

Chuang-tzu does none of these things. On the contrary, he sits in a most indecent position, like a wild man or shaman, plays an instrument, and sings happy songs.

7 The reason he gives is yet another reflection on the nature of death: it is merely a phase of change or transformation in the greater course of life, a return to the original state of "undifferentiated chaos" from which we all came. As the Tao-te-ching says:

> *What we call Tao is undifferentiated chaos.*
> *Chaotic! Yet within it are forms.*
> *Undifferentiated! Yet within it are things.*
> *Wondrously obscure! Yet within it is* ch'i .
> *Truly real: it is the perfection of all.* (chapter 21)

Why weep if all we do in dying is return home? Why mourn for someone who has just returned to a state that is perfect and from which he was never really separate?

8 This teaching has had a lasting effect in later Taoism, which frowns on wailing and crying in front of a corpse. As described in my *Monastic Life in Medieval Daoism*, the sounds of sadness will tie the leaving souls to the earth and show a massive lack of understanding of the ongoing process of change.

Chuang-tzu's wife died. Hui-tzu (Huizi) went to express his condolences and found him sitting on the ground with legs spread wide, beating a drum, and singing happily.[6]

Hui-tzu was scandalized. "She lived with you, she raised your children, she grew old with you. Now she is dead, and you're not even crying! Instead you beat this drum and sing! Isn't that rather extreme?"

Chuang said, "Not really. Right after her death, I was totally bereft and deeply affected. But then I thought about her beginnings and realized that she hadn't been alive then either. Before she was born, she had no bodily form. Before she had a bodily form, she had not even a breath of vital energy.

"Intermingling in undifferentiated chaos, change happened and there was vital energy. Another change happened and there was bodily form. Then another change occurred and—presto!—there she was: alive. Now there has been yet another change, and she is dead.[7]

"These changes proceed one after the next, just like the four seasons move from spring to fall, from winter to summer. See, now the person lies there, sleeping in the great chamber of the universe. If I went and mourned her by wailing and weeping, I figured I'd just show that I had no understanding of the underlying patterns of destiny. So I stopped."[8]

—CHAPTER 18

9 Continuing to explore how best to relate to death, the Chuang-tzu tells the story of four old men who have realized a more appropriate attitude. They want to be friends with anyone who no longer thinks of his body as a separate, integrated entity but instead feels that it is the same as the universe: head, spine, and buttocks *are* in fact life and death.

10 With an understanding like this, even an extreme disease cannot disturb your inner equilibrium but only gives rise to a sense of marvel and amazement. Just look—what strange changes are happening in the world! Even with his body bent completely out of shape, different outgrowths rising from its parts, and hardly able to breathe anymore, Mr. Car is calm and relaxed.

11 Even more, he is able to see the wonder of it all and speculate what other amazing changes there might be. If part of him became a rooster, he could crow to announce daylight; if another part became a bow, he could shoot his supper; and if he became a horse and chariot, he could ride around.

This rather extreme speculation on the possibilities of bodily change, the interconnectedness of different species and human artifacts, brings home the same point again: all we are is just one aspect of the greater flow of existence, which manifests itself in constant change that is completely beyond our control and about which we can do nothing. Why not make the best of things in the different circumstances and enjoy them for what they are without trying to improve or enhance them?