Musings of a Chinese Mystic

Lionel Giles

Published by the Library of Alexandria

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EDITORIAL NOTE

THE object of the Editors of this series is a very definite one. They desire above all things that, in their humble way, these books shall be the ambassadors of good-will and understanding between East and West—the old world of Thought and the new of Action. In this endeavour, and in their own sphere, they are but followers of the highest example in the land. They are confident that a deeper knowledge of the great ideals and lofty philosophy of Oriental thought may help to a revival of that true spirit of Charity which neither despises nor fears the nation of another creed and colour.

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INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH Chinese history can show no authentic contemporary record prior to the Chou dynasty, some eleven hundred years before Christ, there is no doubt that a high pitch of civilisation was attained at a much earlier period. Thus Lao Tzu was in no sense the first humanising instructor of a semi-barbaric race. On the contrary, his was a reactionary influence, for the cry he raised was directed against the multiplication of laws and restrictions, the growth of luxury, and the other evils which attend rapid material progress. That his lifetime should have coincided with a remarkable extension of the very principles he combated with such energy is one of the ironies of fate. Before he was in his grave another great man had arisen who laid unexampled stress on the minute regulation of ceremonies and ritual, and succeeded in investing the rules of outward conduct with an importance they had never hitherto possessed.

If Lao Tzu then had revolted against the growing artificiality of life in his day, a return to nature must have seemed doubly imperative to his disciple Chuang Tzu who flourished more than a couple of centuries later, when the bugbear of civilisation had steadily advanced. With chagrin he saw that Lao Tzu's teaching had never obtained any firm hold on the masses, still less on the rulers of China, whereas the star of Confucius was unmistakably in the ascendant. Within his own recollection the propagation of Confucian ethics had received a powerful impetus from Mencius, the second of China's orthodox sages. Now Chuang Tzu was imbued to the core with the principles of pure Taoism, as handed down by Lao He might more fitly be dubbed "the Tao-saturated man" than Spinoza "the God-intoxicated."

Tao in its various phases pervaded his inmost being and was reflected in all his thought. He was therefore eminently qualified to revive his Master's ringing protest against the materialistic tendencies of the time.

Chuang Tzu's worldly position was not high. We learn from Ssu-ma Ch'ien that he held a petty official post in a small provincial town. But his literary and philosophical talent must soon have brought him into repute, for we find him in frequent contact with the leading scholars of the age, against whom he is said to have defended his tenets with success. It does not appear, however, that he gained promotion in the public service, which is doubtless to be attributed to his own lack of ambition and shrinking from an active career, as we have his personal account of a deputation which vainly tried to induce him to accept the post of Prime Minister in the Ch'u State. Official routine must have proved in the highest degree distasteful to this finely tempered poetic spirit, as it has to many a chafing genius since. Bold in fancy yet retiring by disposition, prone to melancholy yet full of eager enthusiasm, a natural sceptic yet inspired with boundless belief in his doctrine, he was a man full of contradictions, but none the less fitted to make a breach in the cast-iron traditions of Confucianism, if not to draw others after him in the same track. Of his mental development there remains no record. His convictions, as they stand revealed in his great philosophical work, are already mature, if somewhat lacking in consistency; he comes before the public as a keen adherent of the school of Lao Tzu giving eloquent and impassioned utterance to the ideas which had germinated in the brain of his Master. Chuang indeed, supplies the prime deficiency of Lao Tzu; he has the gift of language which enables him to clothe in rich apparel the great thoughts that had hitherto found their only expression in bare disconnected sayings. These scraps of concise wisdom, which are gathered together in the patchwork treatise known as the Tao Te Ching, seem to have formed the kernel of his doctrine, and he proceeded to develop them in a hundred

different directions. It would be unjust, however, to infer from this that there is nothing in Chuang Tzu which cannot be traced back to the older sage, or that he was incapable of original thought of distinct and independent value. On the contrary, his mental grasp of elusive metaphysical problems was hardly if at all inferior to that of Lao Tzu himself, and certainly never equalled by any subsequent Chinese thinker. His writings also have that stimulating suggestiveness which stamps the product of all great minds. After reading and re-reading Chuang one feels there are latent depths still unplumbed. Moreover, he gives free rein to his own particular fancies and predilections. There are sides of Lao teaching at which he hardly glances, or which he passes over entirely, while in other directions he allows his brilliant imagination to carry him far out of sight of his fountain-head. If the analogy be not too heavily pressed, we may say that he was to the Founder of Taoism what St. Paul was to the Founder of Christianity.

As with Lao Tao forms the centre and pivot of Chuang Tzu's whole system; and this imparts real unity to his work, which in other respects appears undeniably straggling and illcompacted. But Tao as conceived by Chuang Tzu is not quite the same thing as the Tao of which Lao Tzu spoke with such wondering awe. The difference will be better understood after a brief sketch of the gradual development in the meaning of the word. The first meaning of Tao is "road" or "way," and in very early times it was used by a figure of speech for the "way" or method of doing a thing. Thus it came to denote a rule of right conduct, moral action, or the principle underlying it. There also grew up in common speech a natural antithesis between the Way of Heaven (T'ien Tao) and the Way of man, the former expression signifying the highest standard of wisdom and moral excellence, as opposed to the blind groping after truth here below. Finally the "T'ien" was dropped, and Tao then stood alone for the great unseen principle of Good dominating and permeating the Universe. The transition is

visible in Lao Tzu, who was probably the first to employ the term in its transcendental sense, but who also retains the older expression T'ien Tao. In one of his sayings T'ien Tao is practically equivalent to Tao the First Cause, and must therefore be translated not the Way but the Tao of Heaven. This brings us to the next stage, of which Chuang Tzu is the representative. In his writings Tao never seems to mean "way." But he introduces a new element of perplexity by speaking of T'ien and Tao as though they were two co-existent yet perfectly distinct cosmic principles. He also uses the combination T'ien Tao, and it is here that the clue to the difficulty must be sought. The Tao of Heaven is evidently an attribute rather than a thing in itself, and it is T'ien which has now become the First Cause. It is a less impersonal conception, however, than Lao Tzu's transcendental Tao, and in fact closely approximates to our own term "God." [*1] What, then, is Chuang Tzu's Tao? Though by no means always clear and consistent on the subject, he seems to regard it as the "Virtue" or manifestation of the divine First Principle. It is what he somewhere calls "the happiness of God,"—which to the Taoist of course means a state of profound and passionless tranquillity, a "sacred everlasting calm." Now Lao Tzu speaks of Tao as having existed before Heaven and Earth: "Heaven," he says, "takes its law from Tao; but the law of Tao is its own spontaneity." With him, therefore, Tao is the antecedent of T'ien, being what modern philosophers term the Unconditioned or the Absolute. As to his T'ien, the ambiguity which lurks therein makes it doubtful whether he had any definite conception of it at all. He simply appears to have accepted the already existing Chinese cosmogony, oblivious or careless of its incompatibility with his own novel conception of Tao. Chuang Tzu to some extent removes this ambiguity by reverting to the older usage. He deposes Tao from its premier position as the Absolute, and puts T'ien in its place. Tao becomes a mystic moral principle not unlike Lao Tzu's Te, or "Virtue," and the latter term when used at all has lost most of its technical significance. Thus broadly stated, some

such explanation will prove helpful to the reader, though he may still be baffled by a passage like the following: “A man looks upon God [*1] as upon his father, and loves Him in like measure. Shall he, then, not love that which is greater than God?” The truth is that neither consistency of thought nor exact terminology can be looked for in Chinese philosophy as a whole, and least of all, perhaps, in such an abstract system as that of early Taoism .

Leaving this somewhat barren discussion as to the relative position of Tao and T’ien, we now come to what was undoubtedly Chuang greatest achievement in the region of pure thought. As in so many other cases, the germ is provided by Lao Tzu who has the saying “The recognition of beauty as such implies the idea of ugliness, and the recognition of good implies the idea of evil.” Following up this hint, Chuang Tzu is led to insist on the ultimate relativity of all human perceptions. Even space and time are relative. Sense-knowledge is gained by looking at things from only one point of view, and is therefore utterly illusory and untrustworthy. Hence, it appears that the most fundamental distinctions of our thought are unreal and crumble away when exposed to the “light of Nature.” Contraries no longer stand in sharp antagonism, but are in some sense actually identical with each other, because there is a real and all-embracing Unity behind them. There is nothing which is not objective, nothing which is not subjective; which is as much as to say, that subjective is also objective, and objective also subjective. When he pauses here to ask whether it be possible to say that subjective and objective really exist at all, he seems to be touching the fringe of scepticism pure and simple. But the point is not pressed; he is an idealist at heart, and will not seriously question the existence of a permanent Reality underlying the flow of phenomena. True wisdom then consists in withdrawing from one’s own individual standpoint and entering into “subjective relation with all things.” He who can achieve this will “reject all distinctions of this and that,”

because he is able to descry an ultimate Unity in which they are merged, a mysterious One which “blends, transcends them all.”

Still keeping Lao Tzu in sight, our author draws further curious inferences from this doctrine of relativity. Virtue implies vice, and therefore will indirectly be productive of it. In any case, to aim at being virtuous is only an ignorant and one-sided way of regarding the principles of the universe. Rather let us transcend the artificial distinctions of right and wrong, and take Tao itself as our model, keeping our minds in a state of perfect balance, absolutely passive and quiescent, making no effort in any direction. The ideal then is something which is neither good nor bad, pleasure nor pain, wisdom nor folly; it simply consists in following nature, or taking the line of least resistance. The attainment of this state, and the spiritual blessings accruing therefrom, constitute the main theme of Chuang Tzu’s discourse. His whole duty of man is thus summed up and put into a nutshell; “Resolve your mental energy into abstraction, your physical energy into inaction. Allow yourself to fall in with the natural order of phenomena, without admitting the element of self.”

This elimination of self is in truth the substitution of the ampler atmosphere of Tao for one’s own narrow individuality. But Tao is not only inert and unchanging, it is also profoundly unconscious—a strange attribute, which at once fixes a gulf between it and our idea of a personal God. And accordingly, since Tao is the grand model for mankind, Chuang Tzu would have us strive to attain so far as may be to a like unconsciousness. But absolute and unbroken unconsciousness during this life being an impossibility, he advocates, not universal suicide, which would plainly violate the order of nature, but a state of mental abstraction which shall involve at least a total absence of self-consciousness. In order to explain his thought more clearly, he gives a number of vivid illustrations from life, such as the

parable of Prince Hui's cook, who devoted himself to Tao and worked with his mind and not with his eye. [*1] He shows that the highest pitch of manual dexterity is attained only by those whose art has become their second nature, who have grown so familiar with their work that all their movements seem to come instinctively and of themselves, who, in other words, have reached the stage at which they are really "unconscious" of any effort. This application of Tao in the humble sphere of the handicraftsman serves to point the way towards the higher regions of abstract contemplation, where it will find its fullest scope. The same idea is carried into the domain of ethics. As we have seen, Chuang Tzu would have men neither moral nor immoral, but simply non-moral. And to this end every taint of self-consciousness must be purged away, the mind must be freed from its own criteria, and all one's trust must be placed in natural intuition. Any attempt to impose fixed standards of morality on the peoples of the earth is to be condemned, because it leaves no room for that spontaneous and unforced accord with nature which is the very salt of human action. Thus, were it feasible, Chuang Tzu would transport mankind back into the golden age which existed before the distinction between right and wrong arose. When the artificial barrier between contraries was set up, the world had already, in his eyes, lost its primitive goodness. For the mere fact of being able to call one's conduct good implies a lapse into the uncertain sea of relativity, and consequent deviation from the heavenly pattern. Herein lies the explanation of the paradox, on which he is constantly harping, that wisdom, charity, duty to one's neighbour and so on, are opposed to Tao.

It is small wonder that China has hesitated to adopt a system which logically leads to such extreme conclusions. Nevertheless, we must not too hastily write Chuang Tzu off as an unpractical dreamer. Remote though his speculations seem from the world of reality, they rest on a substratum of truth. In order to set forth his views with more startling

effect, he certainly laid undue stress on the mystical side of Lao Tzu's philosophy, to the exclusion of much that was better worth handling. That he himself, however, was not altogether blind to the untenability of an extreme position may be gathered from a remark which he casually lets fall: "While there should be no action, there should be also no inaction." This is a pregnant saying, which shows how Chuang Tzu may have modified his stubborn attitude to meet the necessities of actual life. What he means is that any hard-and-fast, predetermined line of conduct is to be avoided, abstinence from action just as much as action itself. . The great thing is that nothing be done of set purpose when it seems to violate the natural order of events. On the other hand, if a certain course of action presents itself as the most obvious and natural to adopt, it would not be in accordance with Tao to shrink from it. This is known as the doctrine of inaction, but it would be more correctly named the doctrine of spontaneity.

There is another noteworthy element in Chuang Tzu's system which does much to smooth away the difficulty of reconciling theory and practice. This is what he calls the doctrine of non-angularity and self-adaptation to externals. It is really a corollary to the grand principle of getting outside one's personality—a process which extends the mental horizon and creates sympathy with the minds of others. Some such wholesome corrective was necessary to prevent the Taoist code from drifting into mere quixotry. Here again Lao Tzu may have supplied the seed which was to ripen in the pages of his disciple. "What the world reverences cannot be treated with disrespect," is the dictum of the older sage. But Chuang Tzu went beyond this negative precept. He saw well enough that unless a man is prepared to run his head against a stone wall, he must, in the modern cant phrase, adjust himself to his environment. Without abating a jot of his inmost convictions, he must "swim with the tide, so as not to offend others." Outwardly he may adapt himself, if inwardly he keeps up to his own

standard. There must be no raging and tearing propaganda, but infinite patience and tact. Gentle moral suasion and personal example are the only methods that Chuang Tzu will countenance; and even with these he urges caution: “If you are always offending others by your superiority, you will probably come to grief.” Above all, he abhors the clumsy stupidity which would go on forcing its stock remedies down the people’s throat irrespective of place or season. Thus even Confucius is blamed for trying to revive the dead ashes of the past and “make the customs of Chou succeed in Lu.” This, he says, is like “pushing a boat on land, great trouble and no result, except certain injury to oneself.” There must be no blind and rigid adherence to custom and tradition, no unreasoning worship of antiquity. “Dress up a monkey in the robes of Chou Kung, [*1] and it will not be happy until they are torn to shreds. And the difference between past and present,” he adds bitterly, “is much the same as the difference between Chou Kung and a monkey.” The rebuke conveyed in these remarks is not wholly unmerited. Chuang Tzu, while hardly yielding to Confucius himself in his ardent admiration of the olden time, never fell into the mistake of supposing that the world can stand still, though he feared it might sometimes go backward. He believed that to be the wisest statecraft, which could take account of changed conditions and suit its measures to the age. Plainly the inactivity he preached, hard though it be to fathom and harder still to compass, was something very different from stagnation. It was a lesson China needed; well for her in these latter days if she had taken it more to heart!

The comparative neglect of Chuang Tzu among the literati of the Middle Kingdom is no doubt chiefly due to his cavalier treatment of Confucius, of which we have just had a sample. Most of the writers who mention him speak of his hostile attitude towards the head of the orthodox school. As a matter of fact, this hostility has been a little exaggerated. For one thing, Chuang Tzu’s attitude is by no means consistent; the tone adopted towards Confucius passes

Chinese literature, a recurrent strain of pervasive melancholy, a mournful brooding over “the doubtful doom of humankind.” Take, for instance, these few lines picturing the mental faculties in their inevitable decline: “Then, as under autumn and winter’s blight, comes gradual decay; a passing away, like the flow of water, never to return. Finally, the block, when all is choked up like an old drain,—the failing mind which shall not see light again.” Just as the form of Chuang Tzu’s work hovers on the borderland of poetry and prose, so the content is poetic rather than strictly philosophic, by reason of the lightness and grace with which he skims over subjects bristling with difficulty. Lucidity and precision of thought are sometimes sacrificed to imagination and beauty of style. He seldom attempts passages of sustained reasoning, but prefers to rely on flashes of literary inspiration. He is said to have shone in his verbal conflicts with Hui Tzu, but the specimens of his dialectic that have been preserved are, perhaps, more subtle than convincing. The episode of the minnows under the bridge [*1] only proves that in arguing with a sophist he could himself descend to sophistry naked and unabashed.

A noteworthy feature of Chuang Tzu’s method is the wealth of illustration which he lavishes upon his favourite topics. In a hundred various ways he contrives to point the moral which is never far from his thoughts. Realising as fully as Herbert Spencer after him, the necessity of constant iteration in order to force alien conceptions on unwilling minds, he returns again and again to the cardinal points of his system, and skilfully arrays his arguments in an endless stream of episode and anecdote. These anecdotes are usually thrown into the form of dialogue—not the compact and closely-reasoned dialogue of Plato, but detached conversations between real or imaginary persons, sometimes easy in tone, sometimes declamatory, and here and there rising to fine heights of rhetoric. It may be objected to this method that it hinders the proper development of thought by destroying its continuity, and is therefore more suited to a merely popular

work than to that of a really original thinker; on the other side it can only be urged that it lends dramatic colouring and relieves the tedium inseparable from a long philosophical treatise. The objection, on the whole, has much force, and yet it is equally true that the alternative method would have robbed Chuang Tzu's work of more than half its charm; its immortality is after all due less to the matter, much of which to modern notions is somewhat crude, than to the exquisite form. And certainly, as a means of fixing a principle in the mind, a single anecdote told by Chuang Tzu is worth reams of dry disquisition.

Though the difficulty of his text and the abstruseness of his theme have been a bar to very wide-spread popularity, Chuang Tzu has never lost favour with the select band of scholars. From time to time, when Taoism happened to be in fashion, he also enjoyed considerable vogue at Court. His book, like the Tao Te Ching, formed the subject of lectures and examinations, and several Emperors are said to have studied and written upon it. In 713 A.D., it was specially decreed that those members of the public service should be singled out for promotion who were able to understand Chuang Tzu. That he was always considered a hard nut to crack is sufficiently shown by the flood of commentaries and other works devoted to his elucidation. Nevertheless, we are told as usual of a marvellous boy—one of the infant prodigies in whom Chinese annals are so rich—who at twelve years of age understood the meaning of both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. The philosopher's works, in Kuo Hsiang's standard edition, were printed for the first time in the year 1005 A.D., and the reigning Emperor presented each of his Ministers with a copy.

Until we come to Lin Hsi-chung at the beginning of the present dynasty, native criticism cannot be said to have thrown any very dazzling light on our author. An early writer, who may possibly have seen him in the flesh, complains that "he hides himself in the clouds and has no

knowledge of men." Another pronounces him "reckless, one who submitted to no law." From a third we learn that "in his desire to free himself from the trammels of objective existences, he lost himself in the quicksands of metaphysics." Sometimes he is damned with the faintest of praise: "In his teachings propriety plays no part, neither are they founded on eternal principles; nevertheless, they wear the semblance of wisdom and have their good points." On the other hand, rabid Confucianists insisted that "his book was expressly intended to cast a slur on their Master, in order to make people accept his own heterodox teaching; and, consequently, nothing would satisfy them but that his writings should be burnt and his disciples cut off. As to the rights and wrongs of his system, they were not even worth discussing."

From kindred poetic souls he has obtained more generous recognition. The great Po Chu-i, of the Tang dynasty, with whom he appears to have been a special favourite, was inspired by the perusal of his works to write three short poems, one of which contains the following stanzas [*1]:

PEACEFUL OLD AGE

Chuang Tzu said: "Tao gives me this toil in manhood, this repose in old age, this rest in death."

Swiftly and soon the golden sun goes down,

The blue sky wells afar into the night;

Tao is the changeful world's environment,

Happy are they that in its laws delight.

Tao gives me toil—youth's passion to achieve,

And leisure in life's autumn and decay: