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To Katie:
always

FOREWORD

"A second book of the Tao? There's no such thing! What did you do—pull it out of your hat?"

Well, yes, if *hat* is defined as the treasury of recorded wisdom that is our common birthright. In that treasury, there is nothing more precious than the wisdom of the ancient Chinese.

The selections in this book have been adapted from two Chinese anthologies that were probably compiled between 300 and 100 BCE: the Chuang-tzu, parts of which were written by the eponymous sage, Master Chuang (c. 369-c. 286 BCE), and the Chung Yung ("The Central Harmony"), which was ascribed to Confucius' grandson, Tzu-ssu (c. 483-c. 402 BCE). I have anthologized these anthologies, picking from them the freshest, clearest, most profound passages. Facing each chapter there is a brief commentary, which is meant to clarify the text or to complement it. I have written these in the spirit of Chuang-tzu, for whom nothing, thank goodness, was sacred.

The first book of the Tao (written by the perhaps legendary Lao-tzu) is the Tao Te Ching, that marvel of lucidity and grace, the classic manual on the art of living. What I wanted to create here was a left to its right, a yang to its yin, a companion volume and anti-manual. The Chuang-tzu had the perfect material for that: deep, subtle, with an audacity that can make your hair stand on end. If Lao-tzu is a smile, Chuang-tzu is a belly-laugh. He's the clown of the Absolute, the apotheosis of incredulity, Coyote among the bodhisattvas. And the Chung Yung provided a psychological and moral acuity of comparable depth.

Readers who are familiar with the Tao Te Ching but don't yet know the Chuang-tzu or the Chung Yung—or who, having dipped into them, were discouraged by their unevenness—are in for a treat. Naturally, since all three texts tell of the Tao that can't be told, there are passages in *The Second Book of the Tao* that overlap with the Tao Te Ching. But even these passages may strike you as revelations, as if some explorer had discovered a trove of unknown Lao-tzu scrolls buried in a desert cave. And there is much that will be entirely new: meditations on dreams, death,

language, the I and the other, doing and not-doing, the origin of the universe, the absolute relativity of things.

In addition to these descriptions, we meet a cast of vivid characters, most of them humble artisans or servants, who show us what it means to be in harmony with the way things are: the monkey trainer who turns on a dime in his hilarious, compassionate diplomacy; Ting, Prince Wen-hui's cook, whose one-pointedness elevates butchering to the level of the performing arts and beyond; Pien the wheelwright, willing to risk his life to teach a ferocious nobleman that what is most valuable can't be taught; Ch'ing the woodworker, whose bell stand is so beautiful that people think a god must have made it; and Chi Hsing-tzu, trainer of champion gamecocks and virtuoso of patience. We also meet philosophers and fools: Lieh-tzu, who has an intimate chat with a skull; Hui-tzu, the epitome of logic and propriety, Chuang-tzu's friend and rival, straight man and foil; the ludicrous Marquis of Lu, who shows that the Golden Rule can be mere projected egotism; and Master Yu, who, even when afflicted with a grotesque deformity, never loses his cheerful-ness and sense of gratitude. Finally there is Chuang-tzu himself. We meet him in a few delectable stories and dialogues, as he wakes up (maybe) from the dream of a butterfly, refuses the post of prime minister, celebrates the death of his beloved wife, or discusses the usefulness of the useless and the happiness of fish.

Chuang-tzu has been called a mystical anarchist, and it's true that his words sometimes have a contrarian flavor that seems to put them at odds with Lao-tzu's concern for enlightened government. Given the least semblance of control, Chuang-tzu offers a whole world of irreverence and subversion. But if you look more closely, you'll see that he is neither a mystic nor an anarchist. He's simply someone who doesn't linger in any mental construct about reality, someone who lives as effortless action and peace of heart, because he has freed himself from his own beliefs. What he subverts is conventional thinking, with its hierarchies of judgment, its *for*s and *against*s, *better*s and *worse*s, *inside*s and *outside*s, and its delusion that life is random, unfair, and somehow not good enough. Learn how to govern your own mind, Chuang-tzu says, and the universe will govern itself. In this he is in wholehearted agreement with Lao-tzu and with the meticulous Tzu-ssu, for whom attention to the innermost self is the direct path to a just society.

One of the qualities I most treasure in Chuang-tzu is his sense of the spontaneous, the uncapturable. This makes it easy to follow in his footsteps. Since there are no footsteps, all you can follow is what he himself followed: the Tao. He had confidence that in being true to his own insight he was being true to his teacher Lao-tzu. There was nothing to say and no way to say it, yet it had to be said. As a Zen poet-descendant of his wrote more than a thousand years later,

> The moon floats above the pine trees
> as you sit on the veranda in the cool evening air.
> Your fingertips move lightly along the flute.
> The melody is so lovely that it makes the listeners weep.
> But wisdom's flute has no holes
> and its ancient clear music is beyond emotion.
> Don't even try to play it
> unless you can make the great sound of Lao-tzu.

What could be more useless than a flute with no holes? Yet, if you understand, you put it to your lips and the ancient clear music happens by itself. Had Chuang-tzu believed that there was anything to live up to, he would have been too intimidated even to try. There was nothing to live up to. There was only a passion for the genuine, a fascination with words, and a constant awareness that the ancient Masters are alive and well in the mind that doesn't know a thing.

ABOUT THE ADAPTATION

The texts on the left-hand pages of this book are not translations; they are adaptations, sometimes very free ones. Since I don't know Chinese, I have been entirely indebted to the work of three generations of scholars and translators. For the Chuang-tzu, Burton Watson's translation was the most helpful for my purposes, but I also studied the complete translations by Victor H. Mair, Martin Palmer, and Richard Wilhelm, the partial ones by A. C. Graham, Sam Hamill and J. P. Seaton, and David Hinton, and Thomas Merton's free version. For the Chung Yung, I have used the translations by Ku Hungming, Andrew Plaks, and Ezra Pound.

"Chuang-tzu is not only a remarkable philosopher," Octavio Paz said, "but also a great poet." Though the Chuang-tzu and the Chung Yung are written in prose, forty-nine of my chapters are in verse, because it quickly became apparent that verse would allow me to write a more lyrical and epigrammatic English. I have been particularly free with these chapters, and have sometimes expanded, contracted, paraphrased, improvised, changed images, changed meanings, so that I could create a music in English that seemed genuine to my inner ear. With thirteen of the prose chapters I have been closer to the original text, though even with them my sentences occasionally wandered off in their own directions. (Two prose chapters—27 and 31—are free variations on the original themes by Chuang-tzu.) In the Notes on the Adaptation, I have appended a number of more literally translated passages for comparison.

As with my version of the Tao Te Ching, the chapters that describe the M aster alternate between "she" and "he." In Chinese, the personal pronoun is gender-neutral; in English we have to choose. Since we are all, potentially, the M aster—since the M aster is, essentially, us—it seemed absurd and disrespectful to present the reader with a male archetype.

My original intention was to create a book of eighty-one chapters, like the Tao Te Ching. But after much searching and sifting, I couldn't find eighty-one passages of the highest quality. So instead of 81 (9^2 or 3^4) I settled on 64 (8^2 or 4^3) chapters.

In this way, the number wasn't altogether arbitrary; and while 81 has a particular elegance to it, so does 64. Besides its arcane mathematical properties, it is the number of hexagrams in the I Ching, the number of squares on a chessboard, the number of sexual positions in the Kama Sutra, and the only two-digit number ever to star in a Beatles song.

1

What is bestowed on us at birth
is called human nature.
The fulfillment of human nature
is called the Tao.
The cultivation of the Tao
is the deepest form of learning.

The Tao is the way things are,
which you can't depart from
even for one instant.
If you could depart from it,
it wouldn't be the Tao.
Therefore the Master
looks into her own heart
and respects what is unseen and unheard.

Nothing is more manifest than the hidden;
nothing is more obvious than the unseen.
Therefore the Master
pays attention to what is happening
within her innermost self.

We think that we know what human nature is, but what if our most cherished assumptions are wrong? What if all suffering is the result of confused thoughts? That would change our paradigm a bit.

We're born into the open, into the vast mind empty of meaning. Beyond thought, beyond things, reality just is. Human nature doesn't need to be fulfilled, nor do we need to cultivate what is already perfect. Once we recognize this, we return to the origin of all things. There is never a movement toward or away. We

remain where we have always been, but now we know it, as if for the first time.

Departing from the Tao can happen only in the mind; it's an illusion that becomes our reality. Though we actually live in what is, we think ourselves into what isn't. Though every apparent detour *is* the path, we get lost in our imagined wanderings. That's why, if we're interested in freedom, there is nothing sweeter than to cultivate, cultivate: to get down, with trowel and hoe, into the thought-rich soil of the mind.

It's all about paying attention to what is happening within our innermost self, until the unseen, the unquestioned, is as obvious as the seen. When the mind is free of its thoughts, it becomes its own fulfillment.

2

Before sorrow, anger,
longing, or fear have arisen,
you are in the center.
When these emotions appear
and you know how to see through them,
you are in harmony.
That center is the root of the universe;
that harmony is the Tao,
which reaches out to all things.

Once you find the center
and achieve harmony,
heaven and earth take their proper places
and all things are fully nourished.

This chapter is about saving the world. You save the world when you save yourself. (There's no one else you *can* save.) Returning to the center is thus an act of infinite kindness.

There's nothing wrong with sorrow, anger, longing, or fear; a painful emotion is just a signal that you've left the center. When you are at peace, everything is at peace. What seemed like cacophony becomes the music of the spheres: a suite for unaccompanied mind.

Living in harmony with the way things are, the mind finds its center everywhere, its circumference nowhere. The part becomes the whole; what is becomes what should be. Heaven takes its proper, its *only* place: on earth.

4

> When we exhaust our minds by clinging to a particular side of reality without realizing the underlying oneness, it's called "three in the morning." What does that mean?
>
> A monkey trainer, handing out acorns, said, "Each of you will get three in the morning and four in the afternoon." The monkeys were outraged.
>
> So he said, "All right, then: you'll get four in the morning and three in the afternoon." The monkeys were delighted.
>
> Nothing essential had changed, yet one statement produced anger, and the other, joy. The trainer simply knew how to adapt to reality, and he lost nothing by it.
>
> Thus the Master uses his skill to harmonize with both sides, and rests in the Tao, which makes all things equal. This is called "walking on two paths at once."

The whole human condition is present in this tricky little tale, which would be sad if it weren't so ridiculous. Although from the standpoint of the monkeys it's about the power of righteous indignation, from the standpoint of the monkey trainer, behind the scenes, it's about skillful management. You have to admire his one-two punch; he's both bad cop and good cop. But what is the trainer training the monkeys in, anyway? Discernment? If so, he's being made a monkey of.

Whenever we cling to a particular side of reality, it's we who are the monkeys, losing ourselves in outrage or partial delight. If we look more carefully, though, we can see that reality has only one side, like a Möbius strip. Stars or raindrops, acorns or ashes, apparent blessings, apparent disasters—when the mind is clear, each is an occasion for rejoicing. That's what discernment is about.

Once our mind-monkeys are fully trained, it's all good. In the mathematics of mental peace, three equals four, one equals zero. Adapting to reality means recognizing that nothing underlies or overlays it. The Master can travel on two paths at once, like a photon, because his mind is free. He's subatomic and

supererogatory. He knows that all ways are the Way and that ultimately he is neither coming nor going.

5

The ancient Masters saw deeply.
How deep was their insight?
They realized that nothing exists.
This is perfect understanding.

Those at the next stage
thought that things existed
but saw no boundaries between them.

Next came those who saw boundaries
but didn't judge things as good or bad.

When judgments arose,
understanding was damaged;
when understanding was damaged,
preferences became ingrained.

But is there really such a thing
as damage or wholeness?
The Master understands
that there is nothing to understand.

The ancient Masters saw deeply indeed. They realized that since nothing lasts longer than the untraceable instant, nothing ultimately exists. They also realized that "nothing" is something, and that the opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth. Nothing exists. Something exists. "All Cretans are liars," said the Cretan. It's better to keep your mouth shut.

Still, these old fellows were on to something. If nothing exists as we know it, if

time and space are intellectual categories, there's nothing we can actually grasp, to arrange or disarrange. This leaves us free. It leaves us at play in the cosmic theater of the mind. All the world's a stage, and we are the non-actors. Can life be as simple as that?

It went downhill from there, to the next stage, then the next. Boundaries! Preferences!! Attachments!!! And before we knew it, our days filled up with screaming babies, mortgage payments, nasty messages in the mailbox.

Damage and wholeness are in the eyes of the beholder, of course. If you're a child, there's nothing more fun than going downhill. A tragedy is a comedy misunderstood. Once you realize what you are, there's nothing left but gratitude and laughter.