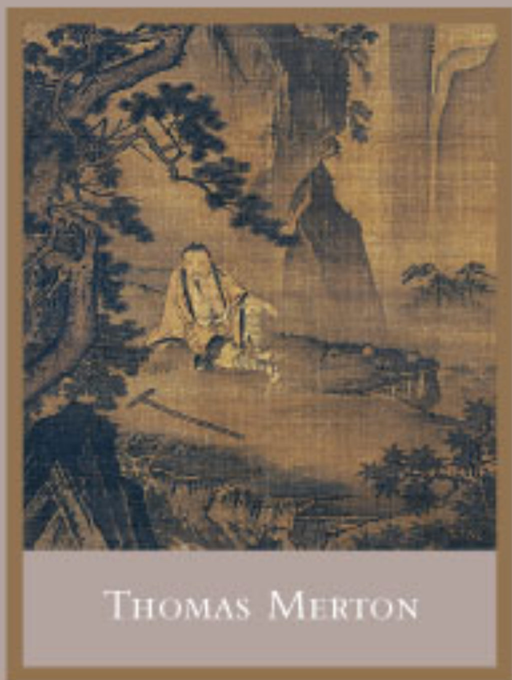
THE WAY OF CHUANG TZU



THOMAS MERTON

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THE WAY OF CHUANG TZU

Thomas Merton

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A NOTE TO THE READER

The rather special nature of this book calls for some explanation. The texts from Chuang Tzu assembled here are the result of five years of reading, study, annotation, and meditation. The notes have in time acquired a shape of their own and have become, as it were, "imitations" of Chuang Tzu, or rather, free interpretative readings of characteristic passages which appeal especially to me. These "readings" of my own grew out of a comparison of four of the best translations of Chuang Tzu into western languages, two English, one French, and one German. In reading these translations I found very notable differences, and soon realized that all who have translated Chuang Tzu have had to do a great deal of guessing. Their guesses reflect not only their degree of Chinese scholarship, but also their own grasp of the mysterious "way" described by a Master writing in Asia nearly twenty-five hundred years ago. Since I know only a few Chinese characters, I obviously am not a translator. These "readings" are then not attempts at faithful reproduction but ventures in personal and spiritual interpretation. Inevitably, *any* rendering of Chuang Tzu is bound to be very personal.

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Though, from the point of view of scholarship, I am not even a dwarf sitting on the shoulders of these giants, and though not all my renderings can even qualify as "poetry," I believe that a certain type of reader will enjoy my intuitive approach to a thinker who is subtle, funny, provocative, and not easy to get at. I believe this not on blind faith, but because those who have seen the material in manuscript have given evidence of liking it and have encouraged me to make a book out of it. Thus, though I do not think that this book calls for blame, if someone wants to be unpleasant about it, he can blame me and my friends, and especially Dr. John Wu, who is my chief abettor and accomplice, and has been of great help in many ways. We are in this together. And I might as well add that I have enjoyed writing this book more than any other I can remember. So I declare myself obdurately impenitent. My dealings with Chuang Tzu have been most rewarding.

John has a theory that in "some former life" I was a Chinese monk. I do not know about that, and of course I hasten to assure everyone that I do not believe in reincarnation (and neither does he). But I have been a Christian monk for nearly twenty-five years, and inevitably one comes in time to see life from a viewpoint that has been common to solitaries and recluses in all ages and in all cultures. One may dispute the thesis that all monasticism, Christian or non-Christian, is essentially one. I believe that Chris-

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tian monasticism has obvious characteristics of its own. Nevertheless, there is a monastic outlook which is common to all those who have elected to question the value of a life submitted entirely to arbitrary secular presuppositions, dictated by social convention, and dedicated to the pursuit of temporal satisfactions which are perhaps only a mirage. Whatever may be the value of "life in the world" there have been, in all cultures, men who have claimed to find something they vastly prefer in solitude.

St. Augustine once made a rather strong statement (which he later qualified), saying "That which is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients and never did not exist from the beginning of the human race until Christ came in the flesh" (*De Vera Religione*, 10). It would certainly be an exaggeration to call Chuang Tzu a "Christian" and it is not my intention to waste time in speculation as to what possible rudiments of theology might be discovered in his mysterious statements about Tao.

This book is not intended to prove anything or to convince anyone of anything that he does not want to hear about in the first place. In other words, it is not a new apologetic subtlety (or indeed a work of jesuitical sleight of hand) in which Christian rabbits will suddenly appear by magic out of a Taoist hat.

I simply like Chuang Tzu because he is what he is and I feel no need to justify this liking to myself or to anyone else. He is far too great to need any apologies

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from me. If St. Augustine could read Plotinus, if St. Thomas could read Aristotle and Averroës (both of them certainly a long way further from Christianity than Chuang Tzu ever was!), and if Teilhard de Chardin could make copious use of Marx and Engels in his synthesis, I think I may be pardoned for consorting with a Chinese recluse who shared the climate and peace of my own kind of solitude, and who is my own kind of person.

His philosophical temper is, I believe, profoundly original and sane. It can of course be misunderstood. But it is basically simple and direct. It seeks, as does all the greatest philosophical thought, to go immediately to the heart of things.

Chuang Tzu is not concerned with words and formulas about reality, but with the direct existential grasp of reality in itself. Such a grasp is necessarily obscure and does not lend itself to abstract analysis. It can be presented in a parable, a fable, or a funny story about a conversation between two philosophers. Not all the stories are necessarily by Chuang Tzu himself. Indeed, some are about him. The Chuang Tzu book is a compilation in which some chapters are almost certainly by the Master himself, but many others, especially the later ones, are by his disciples. The whole Chuang Tzu book is an anthology of the thought, the humor, the gossip, and the irony that were current in Taoist circles in the best period, the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. But the whole

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teaching, the "way" contained in these anecdotes, poems, and meditations, is characteristic of a certain mentality found everywhere in the world, a certain taste for simplicity, for humility, self-effacement, silence, and in general a refusal to take seriously the aggressivity, the ambition, the push, and the self-importance which one must display in order to get along in society. This other is a "way" that prefers not to get anywhere in the world, or even in the field of some supposedly spiritual attainment. The book of the Bible which most obviously resembles the Taoist classics is Ecclesiastes. But at the same time there is much in the teaching of the Gospels on simplicity, childlikeness, and humility, which responds to the deepest aspirations of the Chuang Tzu book and the Tao Teh Ching. John Wu has pointed this out in a remarkable essay on St. Therese of Lisieux and Taoism, presently to be republished in a book together with his study of Chuang Tzu. Now Ecclesiastes is a book of earth, and the Gospel ethic is an ethic of revelation made on earth of a God Incarnate. The "Little Way" of Therese of Lisieux is an explicit renunciation of all exalted and disincarnate spiritualities that divide man against himself, putting one half in the realm of angels and the other in an earthly hell. For Chuang Tzu, as for the Gospel, to lose one's life is to save it, and to seek to save it for one's own sake is to lose it. There is an affirmation of the world that is nothing but ruin and loss. There is a renunciation of the world

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that finds and saves man in his own home, which is God's world. In any event, the "way" of Chuang Tzu is mysterious because it is so simple that it can get along without being a way at all. Least of all it is a "way out." Chuang Tzu would have agreed with St. John of the Cross, that you enter upon this kind of way when you leave all ways and, in some sense, get lost.

ABBEY OF GETHSEMANI
Pentecost, 1965

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A Study of Chuang Tzu

THE CLASSIC PERIOD of Chinese philosophy covers about three hundred years, from 550 to 250 B.C. Chuang Tzu, the greatest of the Taoist writers whose historical existence can be verified (we cannot be sure of Lao Tzu), flourished toward the end of this period, and indeed the last chapter of the Chuang Tzu book (Chap. 33) is a witty and informative history of Chinese philosophy up to his time—the first document of its kind, at least in the Orient.

The humor, the sophistication, the literary genius, and philosophical insight of Chuang Tzu are evident to anyone who samples his work. But before one can begin to understand even a little of his subtlety, one must situate him in his cultural and historical context. That is to say that one must see him against the background of the Confucianism which he did not hesitate to ridicule, along with all the other sedate and accepted schools of Chinese thought, from that of Mo Ti to that of Chuang's contemporary, friend, and constant opponent, the logician Hui Tzu. One must also see him in relation to what followed him, because it would be a great mistake to confuse the Taoism of Chuang Tzu with the popular, degenerate

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amalgam of superstition, alchemy, magic, and health-culture which Taoism later became.

The true inheritors of the thought and spirit of Chuang Tzu are the Chinese Zen Buddhists of the T'ang period (7th to 10th centuries A.D.). But Chuang Tzu continued to exert an influence on all cultured Chinese thought, since he never ceased to be recognized as one of the great writers and thinkers of the classical period. The subtle, sophisticated, mystical Taoism of Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu has left a permanent mark on all Chinese culture and on the Chinese character itself. There have never been lacking authorities like Daisetz T. Suzuki, the Japanese Zen scholar, who declare Chuang Tzu to be the very greatest of the Chinese philosophers. There is no question that the kind of thought and culture represented by Chuang Tzu was what transformed highly speculative Indian Buddhism into the humorous, iconoclastic, and totally practical kind of Buddhism that was to flourish in China and in Japan in the various schools of Zen. Zen throws light on Chuang Tzu, and Chuang Tzu throws light on Zen.

However, let us be on our guard. This reference to Zen, which naturally suggests itself at a time when Zen is still somewhat popular in the western world, may be a clue, but it may also be a misleading cliché. There are quite a few western readers who have in one way or another heard about Zen and even tasted a little of it with the tip of the tongue. But tasting is

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one thing and swallowing is another, especially when, having only tasted, one proceeds to identify the thing tasted with something else which it seems to resemble.

The fashion of Zen in certain western circles fits into the rather confused pattern of spiritual revolution and renewal. It represents a certain understandable dissatisfaction with conventional spiritual patterns and with ethical and religious formalism. It is a symptom of western man's desperate need to recover spontaneity and depth in a world which his technological skill has made rigid, artificial, and spiritually void. But in its association with the need to recover authentic sense experience, western Zen has become identified with a spirit of improvisation and experimentation—with a sort of moral anarchy that forgets how much tough discipline and what severe traditional mores are presupposed by the Zen of China and Japan. So also with Chuang Tzu. He might easily be read today as one preaching a gospel of license and uncontrol. Chuang Tzu himself would be the first to say that you cannot tell people to do whatever they want when they don't even know what they want in the first place! Then also, we must realize that while there is a certain skeptical and down-to-earth quality in Chuang Tzu's critique of Confucianism, Chuang's philosophy is essentially religious and mystical. It belongs in the context of a society in which every aspect of life was seen in relation to the sacred.

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There is not much danger of confusing Chuang Tzu with Confucius or Mencius, but there is perhaps more difficulty in distinguishing him at first sight from the sophists and hedonists of his own time. For example, Yang Chu resembles Chuang Tzu in his praise of reclusion and his contempt for politics. He bases a philosophy of evasion, which is frankly egotistical, on the principle that the bigger and more valuable the tree is, the more likely it is to fall victim to the hurricane or to the lumberman's axe.

The avoidance of political responsibility was, therefore, essential to Yang's idea of personal happiness, and he carried this to such an extent that Mencius said of him, "Though he might have benefited the whole world by plucking out a single hair, he would not have done it." However, even in Yang Chu's hedonism we can find elements which remind us of our own modern concern with the person: for instance the idea that the life and integrity of the person remain of greater value than any object or any function to which the person may be called to devote himself, at the risk of alienation. But a personalism that has nothing to offer but evasion will not be a genuine personalism at all, since it destroys the relationships without which the person cannot truly develop. After all, the idea that one can seriously cultivate his own personal freedom merely by discarding inhibitions and obligations, to live in

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self-centered spontaneity, results in the complete decay of the true self and of its capacity for freedom.

Personalism and individualism must not be confused. Personalism gives priority to the *person* and not the individual self. To give priority to the person means respecting the unique and inalienable value of the *other* person, as well as one's own, for a respect that is centered only on one's individual self to the exclusion of others proves itself to be fraudulent.

The classic *Ju* philosophy of Confucius and his followers can be called a traditional personalism built on the basic social relationships and obligations that are essential to a humane life and that, when carried out as they should be, develop the human potentialities of each person in his relation to others. In fulfilling the commands of nature as manifested by tradition, which are essentially commands of love, man develops his own inner potential for love, understanding, reverence, and wisdom. He becomes a "Superior Man" or a "Noble Minded Man," fully in harmony with heaven, earth, his sovereign, his parents and children, and his fellow men, by his obedience to *Tao*.

The character of the "Superior Man" or "Noble Minded Man" according to *Ju* philosophy is constructed around a four-sided mandala of basic virtues. The first of these is compassionate and devoted love, charged with deep empathy and sincerity,

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that enables one to identify with the troubles and joys of others as if they were one's own. This compassion is called *Jen*, and is sometimes translated "human heartedness." The second of the basic virtues is that sense of justice, responsibility, duty, obligation to others, which is called *Yi*. It must be observed that Ju philosophy insists that both Jen and Yi are completely disinterested. The mark of the "Noble Minded Man" is that he does not do things simply because they are pleasing or profitable to himself, but because they flow from an unconditional moral imperative. They are things that he sees to be right and good in themselves. Hence, anyone who is guided by the profit motive, even though it be for the profit of the society to which he belongs, is not capable of living a genuinely moral life. Even when his acts do not conflict with the moral law, they remain amoral because they are motivated by the desire of profit and not the love of the good.

The other two basic virtues of Ju are necessary to complete this picture of wholeness and humaneness. *Li* is something more than exterior and ritual correctness: it is the ability to make use of ritual forms to give full outward expression to the love and obligation by which one is bound to others. *Li* is the acting out of veneration and love, not only for parents, for one's sovereign, for one's people, but also for "Heaven-and-earth." It is a liturgical contemplation of the religious and metaphysical structure of the person, the family,

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society, and the cosmos itself. The ancient Chinese liturgists "made observations of all the movements under the sky, directing their attention to the interpenetrations which take place in them, this with a view to putting into effect right rituals." [1]

One's individual self should be lost in the "ritual disposition" in which one emerges as a higher "liturgical self," animated by the compassion and respect which have traditionally informed the deepest responses of one's family and people in the presence of "Heaven," *Tien*. One learns by *Li* to take one's place gratefully in the cosmos and in history. Finally there is "wisdom," *Chih*, that embraces all the other virtues in a mature and religious understanding which orients them to their living fulfillment. This perfect understanding of the "way of Heaven" finally enables a man of maturity and long experience to follow all the inmost desires of his heart without disobeying Heaven. It is St. Augustine's "Love and do what you will!" But Confucius did not claim to have reached this point until he was seventy. In any case, the man who has attained Chih, or wisdom, has learned spontaneous inner obedience to Heaven, and is no longer governed merely by external standards. But a long and arduous discipline by external standards remains absolutely necessary.

These sound and humane ideals, admirable in themselves, were socially implemented by a structure of duties, rites, and observances that would

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seem to us extraordinarily complex and artificial. And when we find Chuang Tzu making fun of the Confucian practice of Li (for example the rites of mourning), we must not interpret him in the light of our own extremely casual mores, empty of symbolic feeling and insensitive to the persuasion of ceremony.

We must remember that we ourselves are living in a society which is almost unimaginably different from the Middle Kingdom in 300 B.C. We might perhaps find analogies for our own way of life in Imperial Rome, if not Carthage, Nineveh, or Babylon. Though the China of the fourth century was not without its barbarities, it was probably more refined, more complex, and more humane than these cities that the Apocalypse of John portrayed as typical of worldly brutality, greed, and power. The climate of Chinese thought was certainly affected by the fact that the Ju ideal was taken seriously and was already to some extent built in, by education and liturgy, to the structure of Chinese society. (We must not however imagine, anachronistically, that in the time of Chuang Tzu the Chinese governing class was systematically educated en masse according to Confucian principles, as happened later.)

If Chuang Tzu reacted against the Ju doctrine, it was not in the name of something lower—the animal spontaneity of the individual who does not want to be bothered with a lot of tiresome duties—but in the name of something altogether higher. This is the

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most important fact to remember when we westerners confront the seeming antinomianism of Chuang Tzu or of the Zen Masters.

Chuang Tzu was not demanding less than Jen and Yi, but more. His chief complaint of Ju was that it did not go far enough. It produced well-behaved and virtuous officials, indeed cultured men. But it nevertheless limited and imprisoned them within fixed external norms and consequently made it impossible for them to act really freely and creatively in response to the ever new demands of unforeseen situations.

Ju philosophy also appealed to Tao, as did Chuang Tzu. In fact all Chinese philosophy and culture tend to be "Taoist" in a broad sense, since the idea of Tao is, in one form or other, central to traditional Chinese thinking. Confucius could speak of "my Tao." He could demand that the disciple "set his heart on the Tao." He could declare that "If a man hears the Tao in the morning and dies in the evening, his life has not been wasted." And he could add that if a man reaches the age of forty or fifty without ever "hearing the Tao," there is "nothing worthy of respect in him." Yet Chuang Tzu believed that the Tao on which Confucius set his heart was not the "great Tao" that is invisible and incomprehensible. It was a lesser reflection of Tao as it manifests itself in human life. It was the traditional wisdom handed down by the ancients, the guide to practical life, the way of virtue.

In the first chapter of the *Tao Teh Ching*, Lao Tzu

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distinguished between the Eternal Tao "that can not be named," which is the nameless and unknowable source of all being, and the Tao "that can be named," which is the "Mother of all things." Confucius may have had access to the manifest aspects of the Tao "that can be named," but the basis of all Chuang Tzu's critique of Ju philosophy is that it never comes near to the Tao "that can not be named," and indeed takes no account of it. Until relatively late works like the Doctrine of the Mean which are influenced by Taoism, Confucius refused to concern himself with a Tao higher than that of man precisely because it was "unknowable" and beyond the reach of rational discourse. Chuang Tzu held that only when one was in contact with the mysterious Tao which is beyond all existent things, which cannot be conveyed either by words or by silence, and which is apprehended only in a state which is neither speech nor silence (*xxv. II.*) could one really understand how to live. To live merely according to the "Tao of man" was to go astray. The Tao of Ju philosophy is, in the words of Confucius, "threading together into one the desires of the self and the desires of the other." This can therefore be called an "ethical Tao" or the "Tao of man," the manifestation in act of a principle of love and justice. It is identifiable with the Golden Rule—treating others as one would wish to be treated oneself. But it is not the "Tao of Heaven." In fact, as Confucianism developed, it continued to divide and

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subdivide the idea of Tao until it became simply a term indicating an abstract universal principle in the realm of ethics. Thus we hear of the "tao of fatherhood," the "tao of sonship," the "tao of wifeliness" and the "tao of ministership." Nevertheless, when Confucian thought was deeply influenced by Taoism, these various human taos could and did become fingers pointing to the invisible and divine Tao. This is clear for instance in the *Tao of Painting*: "Throughout the course of Chinese painting the common purpose has been to reaffirm the traditional (human) *tao* and to transmit the ideas, principles and methods that have been tested and developed by the masters of each period as the means of expressing the harmony of the *Tao*."[2]

Chuang Tzu drily observed that the pursuit of the ethical Tao became illusory if one sought for others what was good for oneself without really knowing what was good for oneself. He takes up this question of the good in the meditation that I have called "Perfect Joy." First of all he denies that happiness can be found by hedonism or utilitarianism (the "profit motive" of Mo Ti). The life of riches, ambition, pleasure, is in reality an intolerable servitude in which one "lives for what is always out of reach," thirsting "for survival in the future" and "incapable of living in the present." The Ju philosopher would have no difficulty in agreeing that the motive of profit or pleasure is unworthy of a true man. But then Chuang

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Tzu immediately turns against Ju, and criticizes the heroic and self-sacrificing public servant, the "Superior Man" of virtue formed in the school of Confucius. His analysis of the ambiguities of such a life may perhaps seem subtle to us, living as we do in such a different moral climate. Chuang Tzu's concern with the problem that the very goodness of the good and the nobility of the great may contain the hidden seed of ruin is analogous to the concern that Sophocles or Aeschylus felt a little earlier, in the west. Chuang Tzu comes up with a different answer in which there is less of religious mystery. To put it simply, the hero of virtue and duty ultimately lands himself in the same ambiguities as the hedonist and the utilitarian. Why? Because he aims at achieving "the good" as object. He engages in a self-conscious and deliberate campaign to "do his duty" in the belief that this is right and therefore productive of happiness. He sees "happiness" and "the good" as "something to be attained," and thus he places them outside himself in the world of objects. In so doing, he becomes involved in a division from which there is no escape: between the present, in which he is not yet in possession of what he seeks, and the future in which he thinks he will have what he desires: between the wrong and the evil, the absence of what he seeks, and the good that he hopes to make present by his efforts to eliminate the evils; between his own idea of right and wrong, and the contrary idea of right

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and wrong held by some other philosophical school. And so on.

Chuang Tzu does not allow himself to get engaged in this division by "taking sides." On the contrary, he feels that the trouble is not merely with the *means* the Ju philosopher chooses to attain his ends, but with the ends themselves. He believes that the whole concept of "happiness" and "unhappiness" is ambiguous from the start, since it is situated in the world of objects. This is no less true of more refined concepts like virtue, justice, and so on. In fact, it is especially true of "good and evil," or "right and wrong." From the moment they are treated as "objects to be attained," these values lead to delusion and alienation. Therefore Chuang Tzu agrees with the paradox of Lao Tzu, "When all the world recognizes good as good, it becomes evil," because it becomes something that one does not have and which one must constantly be pursuing until, in effect, it becomes unattainable.

The more one seeks "the good" outside oneself as something to be acquired, the more one is faced with the necessity of discussing, studying, understanding, analyzing the nature of the good. The more, therefore, one becomes involved in abstractions and in the confusion of divergent opinions. The more "the good" is objectively analyzed, the more it is treated as something to be attained by special virtuous techniques, the less real it becomes. As it becomes less real, it

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recedes further into the distance of abstraction, futurity, unattainability. The more, therefore, one concentrates on the means to be used to attain it. And as the end becomes more remote and more difficult, the means become more elaborate and complex, until finally the mere study of the means becomes so demanding that all one's effort must be concentrated on this, and the end is forgotten. Hence the nobility of the Ju scholar becomes, in reality, a devotion to the systematic uselessness of practicing means which lead nowhere. This is, in fact, nothing but organized despair: "the good" that is preached and exacted by the moralist thus finally becomes an evil, and all the more so since the hopeless pursuit of it distracts one from the real good which one already possesses and which one now despises or ignores.

The way of Tao is to begin with the simple good with which one is endowed by the very fact of existence. Instead of self-conscious cultivation of this good (which vanishes when we look at it and becomes intangible when we try to grasp it), we grow quietly in the humility of a simple, ordinary life, and this way is analogous (at least psychologically) to the Christian "life of faith." It is more a matter of *believing* the good than of seeing it as the fruit of one's effort.

The secret of the way proposed by Chuang Tzu is therefore not the accumulation of virtue and merit taught by Ju, but *wu wei*, the non-doing, or non-action, which is not intent upon results and is not

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concerned with consciously laid plans or deliberately organized endeavors: "My greatest happiness consists precisely in doing nothing whatever that is calculated to obtain happiness . . . Perfect joy is to be without joy . . . if you ask 'what ought to be done' and 'what ought not to be done' on earth to produce happiness, I answer that these questions do not have [a fixed and predetermined] answer" to suit every case. If one is in harmony with Tao—the cosmic Tao, "Great Tao"—the answer will make itself clear when the time comes to act, for then one will act not according to the human and self-conscious mode of deliberation, but according to the divine and spontaneous mode of wu wei, which is the mode of action of Tao itself, and is therefore the source of all good.

The other way, the way of conscious striving, even though it may claim to be a way of virtue, is fundamentally a way of self-aggrandizement, and it is consequently bound to come into conflict with Tao. Hence it is self-destructive, for "what is against Tao will cease to be."[3] This explains why the Tao Teh Ching, criticizing Ju philosophy, says that the highest virtue is non-virtuous and "therefore it has virtue." But "low virtue never frees itself from virtuousness, therefore it has no virtue."[4] Chuang Tzu is not against virtue (why should he be?), but he sees that mere virtuousness is without meaning and without deep effect either in the life of the individual or in society.

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Once this is clear, we see that Chuang Tzu's ironic statements about "righteousness" and "ceremonies" are made not in the name of lawless hedonism and antinomianism, but in the name of that genuine virtue which is "beyond virtuousness."

Once this is clear, one can reasonably see a certain analogy between Chuang Tzu and St. Paul. The analogy must certainly not be pushed too far. Chuang Tzu lacks the profoundly theological mysticism of St. Paul. But his teaching about the spiritual liberty of wu wei and the relation of virtue to the indwelling Tao is analogous to Paul's teaching on faith and grace, contrasted with the "works of the Old Law." The relation of the Chuang Tzu book to the Analects of Confucius is not unlike that of the Epistles to the Galatians and Romans to the Torah.

For Chuang Tzu, the truly great man is therefore not the man who has, by a lifetime of study and practice, accumulated a great fund of virtue and merit, but the man in whom "Tao acts without impediment," the "man of Tao." Several of the texts in this present book describe the "man of Tao." Others tell us what he is not. One of the most instructive, in this respect, is the long and delightful story of the anxiety-ridden, perfectionistic disciple of Keng Sang Chu, who is sent to Lao Tzu to learn the "elements." He is told that "if you persist in trying to attain what is never attained . . . in reasoning about what cannot be understood, you will be destroyed." On the other

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hand, if he can only "know when to stop," be content to wait, listen, and give up his own useless strivings, "this melts the ice." Then he will begin to grow without watching himself grow, and without any appetite for self-improvement.

Chuang Tzu, surrounded by ambitious and supposedly "practical men," reflected that these "operators" knew the value of the "useful," but not the greater value of the "useless." As John Wu has put it:

> To Chuang Tzu the world must have looked like a terrible tragedy written by a great comedian. He saw scheming politicians falling into pits they had dug for others. He saw predatory states swallowing weaker states, only to be swallowed in their turn by stronger ones. Thus the much vaunted utility of the useful talents proved not only useless but self-destructive.[5]

The "man of Tao" will prefer obscurity and solitude. He will not seek public office, even though he may recognize that the Tao which "inwardly forms the sage, outwardly forms the King." In "The Turtle," Chuang Tzu delivers a curt and definite refusal to those who come to tempt him away from his fishing on the river bank in order to give him a job in the capital. He has an even more blunt response when his friend Hui Tzu suspects him of plotting to supplant him in his official job (cf. "Owl and Phoenix").

On the other hand, Chuang Tzu is not merely a

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professional recluse. The "man of Tao" does not make the mistake of giving up self-conscious virtuousness in order to immerse himself in an even more self-conscious contemplative recollection. One cannot call Chuang Tzu a "contemplative" in the sense of one who adopts a systematic program of spiritual self-purification in order to attain to certain definite interior experiences, or even merely to "cultivate the interior life." Chuang Tzu would condemn this just as roundly as the "cultivation" of anything else on an artificial basis. All deliberate, systematic, and reflexive "self-cultivation," whether active or contemplative, personalistic or politically committed, cuts one off from the mysterious but indispensible contact with Tao, the hidden "Mother" of all life and truth. One of the things that causes the young disciple of Keng Sang Chu to be so utterly frustrated is precisely that he shuts himself up in a cell and tries to cultivate qualities which he thinks desirable and get rid of others which he dislikes.

A contemplative and interior life which would simply make the subject more aware of himself and permit him to become obsessed with his own interior progress would, for Chuang Tzu, be no less an illusion than the active life of the "benevolent" man who would try by his own efforts to impose his idea of the good on those who might oppose this idea—and thus in his eyes, become "enemies of the good." The true

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tranquillity sought by the "man of Tao" is *Ying ning*, tranquillity in the action of non-action, in other words, a tranquillity which transcends the division between activity and contemplation by entering into union with the nameless and invisible Tao.

Chuang Tzu insists everywhere that this means abandoning the "need to win" (see "The Fighting Cock"). In "Monkey Mountain," he shows the peril of cleverness and virtuosity, and repeats one of his familiar themes that we might summarize as: No one is so wrong as the man who knows all the answers. Like Lao Tzu, Master Chuang preaches an essential humility: not the humility of virtuousness and conscious self-abasement, which in the end is never entirely free from the unctuousness of Uriah Heep, but the basic, one might say, "ontological," or "cosmic" humility of the man who fully realizes his own nothingness and becomes totally forgetful of himself, "like a dry tree stump . . . like dead ashes."

One may call this humility "cosmic," not only because it is rooted in the true nature of things, but also because it is full of life and awareness, responding with boundless vitality and joy to all living beings. It manifests itself everywhere by a Franciscan simplicity and connaturality with all living creatures. Half the "characters" who are brought before us to speak the mind of Chuang Tzu are animals—birds, fishes, frogs, and so on. Chuang Tzu's Taoism is nostalgic

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for the primordial climate of paradise in which there was no differentiation, in which man was utterly simple, unaware of himself, living at peace with himself, with Tao, and with all other creatures. But for Chuang this paradise is not something that has been irrevocably lost by sin and cannot be regained except by redemption. It is still ours, but we do not know it, since the effect of life in society is to complicate and confuse our existence, making us forget who we really are by causing us to become obsessed with what we are not. It is this self-awareness, which we try to increase and perfect by all sorts of methods and practices, that is really a forgetfulness of our true roots in the "unknown Tao" and our solidarity in the "uncarved block" in which there are as yet no distinctions.

Chuang Tzu's paradoxical teaching that "you never find happiness until you stop looking for it" must not, therefore, be negatively interpreted. He is not preaching a retreat from a full, active, human existence into inertia and quietism. He is, in fact, saying that happiness can be found, but only by non-seeking and non-action. It can be found, but not as the result of a program or of a system. A program or a system has this disadvantage: it tends to situate happiness in one kind of action only and to seek it only there. But the happiness and freedom which Chuang Tzu saw in Tao is to be found *everywhere* (since Tao is everywhere), and until one can learn to act with such freedom from care that all action is "perfect joy because

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without joy," one cannot really be happy in anything. As Fung Yu Lan sums it up in his *Spirit of Chinese Philosophy* (p. 77), the sage will "accompany everything and welcome everything, everything being in the course of being constructed and in the course of being destroyed. Hence he cannot but obtain joy in freedom, and his joy is unconditional."

The true character of wu wei is not mere inactivity but *perfect action*—because it is act without activity. In other words, it is action not carried out independently of Heaven and earth and in conflict with the dynamism of the whole, but in perfect harmony with the whole. It is not mere passivity, but it is action that seems both effortless and spontaneous because performed "rightly," in perfect accordance with our nature and with our place in the scheme of things. It is completely free because there is in it no force and no violence. It is not "conditioned" or "limited" by our own individual needs and desires, or even by our own theories and ideas.

It is precisely this *unconditional* character of wu wei that differentiates Chuang Tzu from other great philosophers who constructed systems by which their activity was necessarily conditioned. The abstract theory of "universal love" preached by Mo Ti was shrewdly seen by Chuang Tzu to be false precisely because of the inhumanity of its consequences. In theory, Mo Ti held that all men should be loved with an equal love, that the individual should

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find his own greatest good in loving the common good of all, that universal love was rewarded by the tranquillity, peace, and good order of all, and the happiness of the individual. But this "universal love" will be found upon examination (like most other utopian projects) to make such severe demands upon human nature that it cannot be realized, and indeed, even if it could be realized it would in fact cramp and distort man, eventually ruining both him and his society. Not because love is not good and natural to man, but because a system constructed on a theoretical and abstract principle of love ignores certain fundamental and mysterious realities, of which we cannot be fully conscious, and the price we pay for this inattention is that our "love" in fact becomes hate.

Hence, the society of "universal love" planned by Mo Ti was drab, joyless, and grim since all spontaneity was regarded with suspicion. The humane and ordered satisfactions of the Confucian life of friendship, ritual, music, and so on, were all banned by Mo Ti. It is important to remember that in this case, Chuang Tzu defends "music" and "rites" though in other places he laughs at exaggerated love of them. "Mo Ti," he said, "would have no singing in life, no mourning in death . . . Notwithstanding men will sing, he condemns singing. Men will mourn, and still he condemns mourning, men will express joy, and still he condemns it—is this truly in accord with

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man's nature? In life toil, in death stinginess: his way is one of hard heartedness!"[6]

From such a passage as this we can see that Chuang Tzu's own irony about elaborate funerals is to be seen in the right light. The amusing and of course entirely fictitious description of "Lao Tzu's Wake" gives Chuang an opportunity to criticize not mourning as such, or even piety toward one's master, but the artificial attachments formed by a cult of the master as Master. The "tao of discipleship" is for Chuang Tzu a figment of the imagination, and it can in no way substitute for the "Great Tao," in which all relationships find their proper order and expression.

That Chuang Tzu should be able to take one side of a question in one place, and the other side in another context, warns us that in reality he is beyond mere partisan dispute. Though he is a social critic, his criticism is never bitter or harsh. Irony and parable are his chief instruments, and the whole climate of his work is one of tolerant impartiality which avoids preaching and recognizes the uselessness of dogmatizing about obscure ideas that even the philosophers were not prepared to understand. Though he did not follow other men in their follies, he did not judge them severely—he knew that he had follies of his own, and had the good sense to accept the fact and enjoy it. In fact he saw that one basic characteristic of the sage is that he recognizes

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himself to be *as other men are*. He does not set himself apart from others and above them. And yet there is a difference; he differs "*in his heart*" from other men, since he is centered on Tao and not on himself. But "he does not know in what way he is different." He is also aware of his relatedness to others, his union with them, but he does not "understand" this either. He merely lives it.[7]

The key to Chuang Tzu's thought is the complementarity of opposites, and this can be seen only when one grasps the central "pivot" of Tao which passes squarely through both "Yes" and "No," "I" and "Not-I." Life is a continual development. All beings are in a state of flux. Chuang Tzu would have agreed with Herakleitos. What is impossible today may suddenly become possible tomorrow. What is good and pleasant today may, tomorrow, become evil and odious. What seems right from one point of view may, when seen from a different aspect, manifest itself as completely wrong.

What, then, should the wise man do? Should he simply remain indifferent and treat right and wrong, good and bad, as if they were all the same? Chuang Tzu would be the first to deny that they were the same. But in so doing, he would refuse to grasp one or the other and cling to it as to an absolute. When a limited and conditioned view of "good" is erected to the level of an absolute, it immediately becomes an

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evil, because it excludes certain complementary elements which are required if it is to be fully good. To cling to one partial view, one limited and conditioned opinion, and to treat this as the ultimate answer to all questions is simply to "obscure the Tao" and make oneself obdurate in error.

He who grasps the central pivot of Tao, is able to watch "Yes" and "No" pursue their alternating course around the circumference. He retains his perspective and clarity of judgment, so that he knows that "Yes" is "Yes" in the light of the "No" which stands over against it. He understands that happiness, when pushed to an extreme, becomes calamity. That beauty, when overdone, becomes ugliness. Clouds become rain and vapor ascends again to become clouds. To insist that the cloud should never turn to rain is to resist the dynamism of Tao.

These ideas are applied by Chuang Tzu to the work of the artist and craftsman as well as to the teacher of philosophy. In "The Woodcarver," we see that the accomplished craftsman does not simply proceed according to certain fixed rules and external standards. To do so is, of course, perfectly all right for the mediocre artisan. But the superior work of art proceeds from a hidden and spiritual principle which, in fasting, detachment, forgetfulness of results, and abandonment of all hope of profit, discovers precisely the tree that is waiting to have this

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particular work carved from it. In such a case, the artist works as though passively, and it is Tao that works in and through him. This is a favorite theme of Chuang Tzu, and we find it often repeated. The "right way" of making things is beyond self-conscious reflection, for "when the shoe fits, the foot is forgotten."

In the teaching of philosophy, Chuang Tzu is not in favor of putting on tight shoes that make the disciple intensely conscious of the fact that he has feet—because they torment him! For that very reason Chuang is critical not only of Confucians who are too attached to method and system, but also of Taoists who try to impart knowledge of the unnameable Tao when it cannot be imparted, and when the hearer is not even ready to receive the first elements of instruction about it. "Symphony for a Sea Bird" is to be read in this light. It does not apply merely to the deadening of spontaneity by an artificial insistence on Ju philosophy, but also to a wrong-headed and badly timed zeal in the communication of Tao. In fact, Tao cannot be communicated. Yet it communicates itself in its own way. When the right moment arrives, even one who seems incapable of any instruction whatever will become mysteriously aware of Tao.[8]

Meanwhile, though he consistently disagreed with his friend the dialectician, Hui Tzu, and though his

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disciples, who were not without "the need to win" always represented Chuang as beating Hui in debate, Chuang Tzu actually used many of Hui Tzu's metaphysical ideas. He realized that, by the principle of complementarity, his own thought was not complete merely in itself, without the "opposition" of Hui Tzu.

One of the most famous of all Chuang Tzu's "principles" is that called "three in the morning," from the story of the monkeys whose keeper planned to give them three measures of chestnuts in the morning and four in the evening but, when they complained, changed his plan and gave them four in the morning and three in the evening. What does the story mean? Simply that the monkeys were foolish and that the keeper cynically outsmarted them? Quite the contrary. The point is rather that the keeper had enough sense to recognize that the monkeys had irrational reasons of their own for wanting four measures of chestnuts in the morning, and did not stubbornly insist on his original arrangement. He was not totally indifferent, and yet he saw that an accidental difference did not affect the substance of his arrangement. Nor did he waste time demanding that the monkeys try to be "more reasonable" about it when monkeys are not expected to be reasonable in the first place. It is when we insist most firmly on everyone else being "reasonable" that we become, ourselves, unreasonable. Chuang Tzu, firmly centered on Tao, could see

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these things in perspective. His teaching follows the principle of "three in the morning," and it is at home on two levels: that of the divine and invisible Tao that has no name, and that of ordinary, simple, everyday existence.

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Readings from Chuang Tzu

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The Useless Tree

HUI TZU said to Chuang:
I have a big tree,
The kind they call a "stinktree."
The trunk is so distorted,
So full of knots,
No one can get a straight plank
Out of it. The branches are so crooked
You cannot cut them up
In any way that makes sense.

There it stands beside the road.
No carpenter will even look at it.

Such is your teaching—
Big and useless.

Chuang Tzu replied:
Have you ever watched the wildcat
Crouching, watching his prey—
This way it leaps, and that way,
High and low, and at last
Lands in the trap.

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But have you seen the yak?
Great as a thundercloud
He stands in his might.

Big? Sure,
He can't catch mice!

So for your big tree. No use?
Then plant it in the wasteland
In emptiness.
Walk idly around,
Rest under its shadow;
No axe or bill prepares its end.
No one will ever cut it down.

Useless? You should worry!

[1. 7.]

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A Hat Salesman and a Capable Ruler

A man of Sung did business
In silk ceremonial hats.
He traveled with a load of hats
To the wild men of the South.
The wild men had shaved heads,
Tattooed bodies.
What did they want
With silk
Ceremonial hats?

Yao had wisely governed
All China.
He had brought the entire world
To a state of rest.
After that, he went to visit
The four Perfect Ones
In the distant mountains
Of Ku Shih.
When he came back

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