

Apologies

If a man steps on a stranger's foot
In the marketplace,
He makes a polite apology
And offers an explanation:
"This place is so crowded."

If an elder brother
Steps on his younger brother's foot
He says, "Sorry."
And that is that.

If a parent steps on his child's foot
Nothing is said at all.

The greatest politeness
Is free from all formality.
Perfect conduct is free of concern.
Perfect wisdom is unplanned.
Perfect love is without demonstrations.
Perfect sincerity offers no guarantee.

The Empty Boat

Who can free himself of achievement and fame
Then descend and be lost
Amidst the masses of men?

He will flow like Tao, unseen...
He will go about like life itself,
With no name and no home.

Simple is he, without.
To all appearances he is a fool.
His steps leave no trace.

He has no power.
He achieves nothing.
He has no reputation.

Since he judges no one,
No one judges him.

Such is the perfect man.
His boat is empty.

Means and ends

The purpose of a fishtrap
Is to catch fish,

And when the fish are caught
The trap is forgotten.

The purpose of words
is to convey ideas.
When the ideas are grasped
The words are forgotten.

Where can I find a man
Who has forgotten words?
He is the one I would like to talk to.

The Useless

Hui Tzu said to Chuang Tzu:
“All your teaching is centered on what has no use.”

Chuang Tzu replied:
“If you have no appreciation for what has no use,
you cannot begin to talk about what can be used.

“The earth for example, is broad and vast,
But of all this expanse a man uses only a few inches
Upon which he happens to be standing at the time.

“Now suppose you suddenly take away
all that he actually is not using,
so that all around his feet a gulf yawns,
and he stands in the void
with nowhere solid except under each foot,
how long will he be able to use what he is using?”

Hui Tzu said:
“It would cease to serve any purpose.”

Chuang Tzu concluded:
“This shows the absolute necessity
of what is supposed to have no use.”

Three in the Morning

What is this three in the morning?

It is about a monkey trainer
Who went to his monkeys and told them:
“As regards your chestnuts,
you are going to have three measures in the morning,
and for in the afternoon.”

On hearing this all the monkeys became angry.
So the keeper said:
“All right then,

I will change it
 To four measures in the morning
 and three in the afternoon.”
 The animals were satisfied with this arrangement.

The two arrangements were the same –
 The number of chestnuts did not change,
 But in one case the monkeys were displeased,
 and in the other case they were satisfied.

The keeper was willing
 To change his personal arrangement
 In order to meet objective conditions.
 He lost nothing by it.

The truly wise man,
 Considers both sides of the question
 Without partiality,
 Sees them both in the light of Tao.
 This is called following two courses at once

The Owl and the Phoenix

Hui Tzu was prime minister of Liang
 He had what he believed to be inside information
 That Chuang Tzu coveted his post,
 And was plotting to supplant him.

When Chuang Tzu came to visit Liang,
 The prime minister send out police to arrest him,
 But although they searched for three days and nights,
 They could not find him.
 Meanwhile Chuang Tzu presented himself
 to Hui Tzu of his own accord, and said:

“Have you heard about the bird
 that lives in the south –
 the phoenix that never grows old?

“This undying phoenix rises out of the south sea
 and flies to the sea of the north;
 never alighting except on certain sacred trees.
 He will touch no food
 but the most exquisite rare fruit,
 And he drinks only from the clearest springs.

“Once an owl
 chewing an already half decayed rat
 saw the phoenix fly over.

“Looking up he screeched with alarm
 and clutched the dead rat to himself

in fear and dismay.

“Prime minister,
why are you so frantic,
clinging to your ministry
and screeching at me in dismay?”

The need to win

When an archer is shooting for fun
He has all his skill.

If he shoots for a brass buckle
He is already nervous.

If he shoots for a prize of gold
He goes blind

Or sees two targets –
He is out of his mind.

His skill has not changed,
But the prize divides him.

He cares
He thinks more of winning
Than of shooting –
And the need to win
Drains him of power.

Three Friends

There were three friends, discussing life.
One said: “Can men live together and know nothing of it,
Work together and produce nothing?
Can they fly around in space and forget to exist,
World without end?”

The three friends looked at each other
And burst out laughing.
They had no explanation,
Thus they were better friends than before.

Then one friend died.
Confucius sent a disciple
To help the other two chant his obsequies.

The disciple found that one friend had composed a song,
While the other played the lute.

They sang:
“Hey, Sung Hu, where’d you go?”

Hey, Sung Hu, wher'd you go?
You have gone where you really were,
And we are here – damn it, we are here!”

Then the disciple of Confucius
Burst in on them and exclaimed:
“May I enquire where you found this
in the rubrics for obsequies,
this frivolous caroling
in the presence of the departed?”

The two friends looked at each other
And laughed:
“Poor fellow,
he does not know the new liturgy!”

Chuang Tzu's funeral

When Chuang Tzu was about to die,
His disciples began planning a grand funeral.

But Chuang Tzu said:
“I shall have heaven and earth for my coffin,
the sun and moon will be jade symbols
hanging by my side;
planets and constellations
will shine as jewels all around me,
and all beings will be present
as mourners at the wake.
What more is needed?
Everything is amply taken care of.”

But the disciples said:
“We fear that the crows and kites
will eat our Master.”

Chuang Tzu replied:
Well, above the ground I shall be eaten
by crows and kites,
And below the ground by ants and worms.
In either case I shall be eaten –
So why are you favoring the birds?”

The Man of Tao

The man of Tao acts without impediment,
He harms no other being by his actions,
Yet he does not know himself
to be kind and gentle.

He does not struggle to make money
And he does not make a virtue of poverty.

He goes without relying on others,
And does not pride himself
on walking alone.

The man of Tao remains unknown.
Perfect virtue produces nothing.
No Self is True Self.
And the greatest man is nobody.

When the shoe fits

Chu'i the draftsman
could draw more perfect circles
freehand than with a compass

His fingers brought forth
spontaneous forms from nowhere
His mind was meanwhile free and
without concern with what he was doing

No application was needed
his mind was perfectly simple
and knew no obstacle

So, when the shoe fits,
the foot is forgotten
when the belt fits, the belly is forgotten
and when the heart is right,
for and against are forgotten

No drives, no compulsions,
no needs, no attractions
then your affairs are under control
you are a free man

Easy is right

Begin right and you are easy
continue easy and you are right
The right way to go easy
is to forget
the right way
and forget that
the going is easy

The Tower of the Spirit

The Spirit
has an impregnable tower
which no danger can disturb
as long as the tower is guarded
by the invisible Protector

who acts unconsciously
and whose actions go astray
when they become deliberate
reflexive and intentional.

The unconscious
and entire sincerity of Tao
are disturbed by any effort
at self-conscious demonstration.
All such demonstrations are lies.
When one displays himself
in this ambiguous way
the world storms in
and imprisons him.
He is no longer protected
by the sincerity of Tao.

Each new act is a new failure.
If his acts are done in public,
in broad daylight,
he will be punished by men.
If they are done in private and in secret,
he will be punished by spirits.

Let each one understand the meaning of sincerity
and guard against display.

He will be at peace
with men and spirits
and will act rightly, unseen,
in his own solitude,
in the tower of his spirit.

Flight from the Shadow

There was a man
who was so disturbed
by the sight of his own shadow
and so displeased
with his own footsteps,
that he determined to get rid of both.

The method he hit upon was
to run away from them.
So he got up and ran.

But everytime he put his foot down
there was another step,
while his shadow kept up with him
without the slightest difficulty.

He attributed his failure

to the fact
that he was not running fast enough.
So he ran faster and faster,
without stopping,
until he finally dropped dead.

He failed to realize
that if he merely stepped into the shade,
his shadow would vanish,
and if he sat down and stayed still,
there would be no more footsteps.

Fighting Cock

Chi Hsing Tzu was a trainer of
fighting cocks for King Hsuan.
He was training a fine bird.
The king kept asking
if the bird was ready for combat.

“Not yet”, said the trainer.
“He is full of fire.
He is ready to pick a fight
with every other bird.
He is vain and confident
of his own strength.”

After ten days he answered again,
“Not yet. He flares up
when he hears another bird crow.”

After ten more days,
“Not yet. He still gets that angry look
and ruffles his feathers.”

Again ten days.
The trainer said,
“Now he is nearly ready.
When another bird crows,
his eyes don’t even flicker.
He stands immobile like a block of wood.
He is a mature fighter.
Other birds will take one look at him and run.”

Monkey Mountain

The Prince of Wu took a boat
to Monkey Mountain.
As soon as the monkeys saw him
they all fled in panic and hid in the treetops.

One monkey, however, remained, completely unconcerned,

swinging from branch to branch -
an extraordinary display.

The prince shot an arrow at the monkey,
but the monkey dexterously
caught the arrow in midflight.

At this the prince ordered his attendants
to make a concerted attack.
In an instant the monkey was shot
full of arrows and fell dead.

Then the prince turned to his companion Yen Pu'i,
"You see what happened?
This animal advertised his cleverness.
He trusted his own skill.
He thought no one could touch him.
Remember that!
Do not rely on distinction and talent
when you deal with men!"

When they returned home,
Yen Pu'i became a disciple of a sage
to get rid of everything that made him outstanding.
He renounced every pleasure.
He learned to hide every distinction.

Soon no one in the kingdom
knew what to make of him.
Thus they held him in awe.

Autumn floods

Chuang Tzu told the story
of the autumn floods:

The autumn floods had come.
Thousands of wild torrents
poured furiously into the
Yellow River.
It surged and flooded its banks until,
looking across,
you could not tell an ox from a horse
on the other side.

Then the River God laughed,
delighted to think
that all the beauty in the world
had fallen into his keeping.

So downhill he swung,
until he came to the ocean.

There he looked out over the waves
towards the empty horizon in the east,
and his face fell.

Gazing out at the far horizon,
he came to his senses
and murmured to the Ocean God:
“Well, proverb is right:
‘He who has got himself a
hundred ideas,
he thinks he knows more than anybody else.’
Such a one am I.
Only now do I see
what they mean by expanse!”

The Ocean God replied,
“Can you talk about the sea to a frog in a well?
Can you talk about ice to a dragonfly?
And can you talk about the Way of life
to a doctor of philosophy?”

The Turtle

Chuang Tzu with his bamboo pole
was fishing in the Pu river

The prince of Chu sent two vice-chancellors
with a formal document:
We hereby appoint you prime minister

Chuang Tzu held his bamboo pole still.
Watching the Pu river, he said:
“I am told there is a sacred tortoise offered
and canonized three thousand years ago,
venerated by the prince, wrapped in silk,
in a precious shrine on an altar
in the temple.
What do you think?
Is it better to give up one’s life
and leave a sacred shell
as an object of cult
in a cloud of incense
for three thousand years,
or to live as a plain turtle
dragging its tail in the mud?”

“For the turtle”, said the vice-chancellor,
“better to live and drag its tail in the mud!”

“Go home!”, said Chuang Tzu.
“Leave me here
to drag my tail in the mud.”

Duke Hwan and the Wheelwright

Duke Hwan of Khi, first in his dynasty,
sat under his canopy reading his philosophy.
And Phien the wheelwright was out in the yard
making a wheel.

Phien laid aside hammer and chisel,
climbed the steps
and said to duke Hwan,
“May I ask you, Lord,
what is this you are reading?”

Said the duke: “The experts, the authorities.”
Phien asked: “Alive or dead?”
The duke said: “Dead, a long time.”
“Then,” said the wheelwright,
“you are only reading the dirt they left behind.”

The duke replied, “What do you know about it?
You are only a wheelwright.
You had better give me a good explanation
or else you must die.”

The wheelwright said,
“Let us look at the affair from my point of view.
When I make wheels, if I go easy they fall apart,
and if I am too rough they don't fit.
But if I am neither too easy nor too violent
they come out right,
and the work is what I want it to be.

“You cannot put this in words,
you just have to know how it is.
I cannot even tell my own son exactly how it is done,
and my own son cannot learn it from me.
Se here I am, seventy years old, still making wheels!

The men of old took all they really knew
with them to the grave.
And so, Lord, what you are reading there
is only the dirt they left behind them.”

Man is born in Tao

Fishes are born in water,
man is born in Tao.

If fishes, born in water,
seek the deep shadow of pond and pool,
all their needs are satisfied.

If man, born in Tao,
sinks into the deep shadow of non-action,
to forget aggression and concern,
he lacks nothing,
and his life is secure.

Wholeness

How does the true man of Tao
Walk through walls without obstruction
And stand in fire without being burnt?

Not because of cunning or daring,
Not because he has learned –
But because he has unlearned.

His nature sinks to his root in the one.
His vitality, his power,
Hide in secret Tao.

When he is all one,
There is no flaw in him
By which a wedge can enter.

So a drunken man who falls out of a wagon
Is bruised, but not destroyed,
His bones are like the bones of other men,
But his fall is different.
His spirit is entire.
He is not aware of getting into the wagon,
Or falling out of it.
Life and death are nothing to him.
He knows no alarm,
He meets obstacles without thought,
without care,
And takes them without knowing they are there.

If there is such sincerity in wine,
How much more in Tao?
The wise man is hidden in Tao,
Nothing can touch him.