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# Daoist Tales of Artists and Artisans

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# Daoist Tales of Artists and Artisans

*An Instructional Module*

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Daoist Tales of Artists and Artisans:  
An Instructional Module

Preparatory Reading and Film:

Huston Smith, “Taoism,” in *The World’s Great Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*, 196-220 (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

“Taoism: A Question of Balance,” *The Long Search*,” Video Series # 11 (BBC, 1977).

Rationale: Smith’s chapter provides a lucid introduction to key concepts of philosophical Taoism and offers a sampling of illustrative tales by Chuang Tzu. The film “Taoism: A Question of Balance” explores Taoism within a cultural context, showing how this indigenous Chinese philosophy informs Confucianism, Buddhism, and religious Taoism on the island of Taiwan.

**MODULE OVERVIEW**

<b>DAOIST STORIES</b> <i>of artists and artisans</i>	<i>And their</i> <b>THEMES</b>	<i>As seen in</i> <b>COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE</b>
“ <b>Duke Huan and the wheelwright</b> ” (The story of wheelwright P’ien)	Knowledge that is beyond saying in words	Dao de jing Ch.1, 2, 43, and 56 Bhagavad Gita Ch. 2:45-53
“ <b>The secret of caring for life</b> ” (The story of cook Ting cutting up an ox)	Intuition  Spontaneous living versus a mechanized “life”	Henri Bergson, <i>An Introduction to Metaphysics</i>  Simone Weil, “Factory Work”
“ <b>Mastering life</b> ” (The story of woodworker Ch’ing) and “ <b>Changing along with things</b> ” (The story of artisan Ch’ui)	Mind control and freedom from attachment	Epictetus, <i>The Enchiridion</i> : Saying V  Spinoza, <i>Ethics</i>  Bhagavad Gita: Ch. 2:60-65
“ <b>Catching cicadas</b> ” (The story of the “fellow with the crooked back” who catches insects)	Singleness of purpose	Bhagavad Gita: Ch. 12:13-19  Kierkegaard: <i>Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing</i>
“ <b>Equalizing the give and pull</b> ” (The story of Chan Ho, the fisherman)	Actionless action (non-contention)	A. C. Graham: Preface to “The Yellow Emperor,” in the <i>Book of Lieh Tzu</i>

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## “Duke Huan and the wheelwright”

*Comparative Perspective—Readings that highlight parallels and contrasts.*

Theme: Unsayable Knowledge: *The sages...disseminate teachings that go beyond what can be said (Dao de jing).*

Dao de jing: Chapter 1

Way-making (dao) that can be put into words is not really way-making,  
And naming that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming.

The nameless is the fetal beginnings of everything that is happening,  
While that which is named is their mother.  
Thus, to be really objectless in one's desires is how one observes the mysteries  
of all things,  
While really having desires is how one observes their boundaries.

These two—the nameless and what is named—emerge from the same source  
yet are referred to differently.  
Together they are called obscure.  
The obscurest of the obscure,  
They are the swinging gateway of the manifold mysteries.

Dao de jing: Chapter 2

As soon as everyone in the world knows that the beautiful are beautiful,  
There is already ugliness.  
As soon as everyone knows the able,  
There is ineptness.

Determinancy and indeterminancy give rise to each other,  
Difficult and easy complement each other,  
Long and short set each other off,  
High and low complete each other,  
Refined notes and raw sounds harmonize with each other,  
And before and after lend sequence to each other—  
This is really how it all works.

It is for this reason that sages keep to service that does not entail coercion  
And disseminate teachings that go beyond what can be said.

In all that happens,  
The sages develop things but do not initiate them,  
They act on behalf of things but do not lay any claim to them,  
They see things through to fruition but do not take credit for them.  
It is only because they do not take credit for them that things do not take their leave.

Dao de jing: Chapter 43

The softest things in the world ride roughshod over the hardest things.

Only the least substantial thing can penetrate the seamless.

This is how we know that doing things noncoercively (*wuwei*) is beneficial.

Rare are those in the world who reach an understanding of the benefits of teachings that go beyond what can be said, and of doing things noncoercively.

Dao de jing: Chapter 56: line 1

Those who really understand it do not talk about it,

And those who really talk about it do not understand it.

*Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation: Making This Life Significant.* Translated by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003).

Theme: Unsayable Knowledge: *For the discerning priest, all of sacred lore has no more value than a well when water flows everywhere (The Gita).*

The Bhagavad Gita: Chapter 2: 45-53

Arjuna, the realm of sacred lore is nature -- beyond its triad of qualities, dualities, and mundane rewards, be forever lucid, alive to your self. For the discerning priest, all of sacred lore has no more value than a well when water flows everywhere. Be intent on action, not on the fruits of action; avoid attraction to the fruits and attachment to inaction! Perform actions, firm in discipline, relinquishing attachment; be impartial to failure and success —this equanimity is called discipline. Arjuna, action is far inferior to the discipline of understanding—pitiful are men drawn by fruits of action. Disciplined by understanding, one abandons both good and evil deeds; so arm yourself for discipline—discipline is skill in actions. Wise men disciplined by understanding relinquish fruit born of action; freed from these bonds of rebirth, they reach a place beyond decay. When your understanding passes beyond the swamp of delusion, you will be indifferent to all that is heard in sacred lore. When your understanding turns from sacred lore to stand fixed, immovable in contemplation, then you will reach discipline.

*The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War.* Translated by Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Bantam Books, 1986)

**A Writing Assignment:** For Pien the wheelwright, mastery in using a mallet and chisel has long been second nature to him. So natural is his skill that it appears to flow automatically from him.

1. List as many skills as you can think of that are second nature to you. Put down whatever things you can do competently, without anxiety or self-consciousness: tying your shoes; riding a bike, driving a car; signing your signature; making scrambled eggs...

2. Now examine your list. You probably see skills that became second nature to you only after much practice. Select a skill that took time--weeks, months, or years--for you to master. Describe in detail the stages you went through in developing that skill. What were your thoughts and feelings while learning it? How long were you “in training” before the skill became second nature?

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## “The secret of caring for life”

*Comparative Perspective—Readings that highlight parallels and contrasts.*

Theme: Intuition: *Intuition is a kind of intellectual sympathy... (Bergson).*

Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*

--Intuition is a kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one *places oneself within an object* in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible (7).

--For we do not obtain an intuition from reality—that is, an intellectual sympathy with the most intimate part of it—unless we have won its confidence by a long fellowship with its superficial manifestations (91).

--Here the single aim of the philosopher should be to promote a certain effort [toward intuition], which in most people is usually fettered by habits of mind more useful to life (16).

Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1912).

Theme: Spontaneous living versus mechanization: *...lightening moments of thought, of immobility and equilibrium (Weil).*

Simone Weil, “Factory Work”

--The succession of their movements is not designated in factory work parlance by the word “rhythm,” but by “cadence.” Any series of movements that participates of the beautiful and is accomplished with no loss of dignity, implies moments of pause, as short-lived as lightning flashes, but that are the very stuff of rhythm and give the beholder, even across extremes of rapidity, the impression of leisureliness.

--It comes natural to a man, and it befits him, to pause on having finished something, if only for an instant, in order to contemplate his handiwork, as God did in Genesis.

Simone Weil, “Factory Work,” in *The Simone Weil Reader* (Rhode Island: Moyer Bell, 1985).

A Writing Assignment: Cook Ding is dazzling to watch. One reason he is so impressive is that he makes his work look effortless. Most of us know someone like him--someone who in his or her own artistic domain makes challenging or complex work look easy. Tell about such a person that you know.

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## “Mastering life” and “Changing along with things”

*Comparative Perspective—Readings that highlight parallels and contrasts.*

Theme: Mind control and detachment: *[The person] of inner strength whose senses experience objects without attraction and hatred, in self-control, finds serenity (The Gita).*

The Bhagavad Gita: Ch. 2:60-65 Even when a man of wisdom tries to control them, Arjuna, the bewildering senses attack his mind with violence. Controlling them all, with discipline he should focus on me; when his senses are under control, his insight is sure. Brooding about sensuous objects makes attachment to them grow; from attachment desire arises, from desire anger is born. From anger comes confusion; from confusion memory lapses; from broken memory understanding is lost; from loss of understanding, he is ruined. But a man of inner strength whose senses experience objects without attraction and hatred, in self-control, finds serenity. In serenity, all his sorrows dissolve; his reason becomes serene, his understanding sure.

Theme: Mind control and detachment: *Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things (Epictetus).*

*The Enchiridion* of Epictetus: Saying V: Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things. Thus death is nothing terrible, else it would have appeared so to Socrates. But the terror consists in our notion of death, that it is terrible. When, therefore, we are hindered or disturbed, or grieved, let us never impute it to others, but to ourselves—that is, to our own views. It is the action of an instructed person to reproach others for his own misfortunes; of one entering upon instruction, to reproach himself; and one perfectly instructed, to reproach neither others or himself.

Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*. Translated by Thomas W. Higginson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955).

Theme: Mind control and detachment: *Artisan Ch’ui... didn’t let his mind get in the way (Chuang Tzu).*

Spinoza’s *Ethics*: Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions:

Human infirmity in moderating and checking the emotions I name bondage: for, when a man is a prey to his emotions, he is not his own master, but lies at the mercy of fortune: so much so,

that he is often compelled, while seeing that which is better for him, to follow that which is worse.

Spinoza's *Ethics*: Of the Power of the Understanding, or of Human Freedom

I have thus completed all I wished to set forth touching the mind's power over the emotions and the mind's freedom. Whence it appears, how potent is the wise man, and how much he surpasses the ignorant man, who is driven only by his lusts. For the ignorant man is not only distracted in various ways by external causes without ever gaining the true acquiescence of his spirit, but moreover lives, as it were unwitting of himself, and of God, and of things, and as soon as he ceases to suffer, ceases also to be.

Whereas the wise man, in so far as he is regarded as such, is scarcely at all disturbed in spirit, but, being conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, by a certain eternal necessity, never ceases to be, but always possesses true acquiescence of his spirit.

If the way which I have pointed out as leading to this result seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered. Needs must it be hard, since it is so seldom found. How would it be possible, if salvation were ready to our hand, and could without great labour be found, that it should be by almost all men neglected? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.

Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*. Translated by R.H.M Elwes  
(<http://frank.mtsu.edu/~rbombard/RB/Spinoza/ethica-front.html>)

A Writing Assignment: The story of woodworker Ch'ing can be read as illustrating the idea that preparation is sometimes of greater value than action. Ch'ing downplays his artistry in creating his marvelous bellstand. He says, "I am only a craftsman—how would I have any art?" Rather, he chooses to call attention to the mental and physical regimen he follows before beginning a woodworking project. Once he is spiritually ready, his wonderful creations flow forth as an inevitable byproduct of his preparation.

Here is another story in which preparation takes priority over action. Written by Liu Tsung-yuan in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, it tells of Camel Kuo, the gardener.

*Whatever name Camel Kuo may have had to begin with is not known. But he was a hunchback and walked in his bumpy way with his face to the ground, very like a camel, and so that was what the country folk called him. When Camel Kuo heard them he said, "Excellent. Just the right name for me." --And he forthwith discarded his real name and himself adopted "Camel" also.*

*He lived at Feng-lo, to the west of Ch'ang-an. Camel was a grower of trees by profession; and all the great and wealthy residents of Ch'ang-an who planted trees for their enjoyment or lived off the sale of their fruit would compete for the favour of his services. It was a matter of observation that when Camel Kuo had planted a tree, even though it was uprooted from elsewhere, there was never a one but lived, and grew strong and glossy, and fruited early and abundantly. Other growers, however they spied on him and tried to imitate his methods, never could achieve his success.*

*Once, when questioned on the point, Camel replied: "I cannot make a tree live for ever or*

*flourish. What I can do is comply with the nature of the tree so that it takes the way of its kind. When a tree is planted its roots should have room to breathe, its base should be firmed, the soil it is in should be old and the fence around it should be close. When you have it this way, then you must neither disturb or worry about it, but go away and not come back. If you care for it like this when you plant it, and neglect it like this after you have planted it, then its nature will be fulfilled and it will take the way of its kind. And so all I do is avoid harming its growth--I have no power to make it grow; I avoid hindering the fruiting--I have no power to bring it forward or make it more abundant.*

*"With other growers it is not the same. They coil up the roots and use fresh soil. They firm the base either too much or not enough. Of if they manage to avoid these faults, then they dote too fondly and worry too anxiously. They inspect the tree every morning and cosset it every night; they cannot walk away from it without turning back for another look. The worst of them will even scrape off the bark to see if it is still living, or shake the roots to test whether they are holding fast. And with all this the tree gets further every day from what a tree should be. This is not mothering but smothering, not affection but affliction. This is why they cannot rival my results: what other skill can I claim?"*

Narrate a personal experience that shows a connection between your preparation (or your lack of preparation!) for an event and the outcome of that event.

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## **“Catching cicadas”**

*Comparative Perspective—Readings that highlight parallels and contrasts.*

Theme: Singleness of purpose: *This understanding is unique in its inner core of resolve (The Gita: Ch. 2: 41).*

The Bhagavad Gita: Ch. 12:13-19

One who bears hate for no creature is friendly, compassionate, unselfish, free of individuality, patient, the same in suffering and joy. Content always, disciplined, self-controlled, firm in his resolve, his mind and understanding dedicated to me, devoted to me, he is dear to me. The world does not flee from him, nor does he flee from the world; free of delight, rage, fear, and disgust, he is dear to me. Disinterested, pure, skilled, indifferent, untroubled, relinquishing all involvements, devoted to me, he is dear to me. He does not rejoice or hate, grieve or feel desire; relinquishing fortune and misfortune, the man of devotion is dear to me. Impartial to foe and friend, honor and contempt, cold and heat, joy and suffering, he is free from attachment. Neutral to blame and praise, silent, content with his fate, unsheltered, firm in thought, the man of devotion is dear to me.

Theme: Singleness of purpose: *It was allowable, it was proper, it was duty, it was a precious duty, it was the highest happiness of all for the needlewoman to do everything in order to accomplish what was hers to do... (Kierkegaard).*

Soren Kierkegaard: Purity of the Heart is to Will One Thing, Preface—

When a woman makes an altar cloth, so far as she is able, she makes every flower as lovely as the graceful flowers of the field, as far as she is able, every star as sparkling as the glistening stars of the night. She withholds nothing, but uses the most precious things she possesses. She sells off every other claim upon her life that she may purchase the most uninterrupted and favorable time of the day and night for her one and only, for her beloved work. But when the cloth is finished and put to its sacred use: then she is deeply distressed if someone should make the mistake of looking at her art, instead of at the meaning of the cloth; or make the mistake of looking at a defect, instead of at the meaning of the cloth. For she could not work the sacred meaning into the cloth itself, nor could she sew it on the cloth as though it were one more ornament. This meaning really lies in the beholder and in the beholder's understanding, if he, in the endless distance of the separation, above himself and above his own self, has completely forgotten the needlewoman and what was hers to do. It was allowable, it was proper, it was duty, it was a precious duty, it was the highest happiness of all for the needlewoman to do everything in order to accomplish what was hers to do; but it was a trespass against God, an insulting misunderstanding of the poor needle-woman, when someone looked wrongly and saw what was only there, not to attract attention to itself, but rather so that its omission would not distract by drawing attention to itself.

Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. Translated by Douglas Van Steere (New York: Harper, 1948).

A Writing Assignment: Listen to how the catcher of cicadas reproaches Confucius: “What do you think you know about it? Sweep away those principles of yours before you talk about it again.” And here is the wheelwright bluntly telling the Duke not to waste his time reading the words of the sages: “What you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old.” Both workmen put little stock in words and ideas. What they know, they have learned from hands-on practice and trial-and-error experience. But are they right to be so dismissive of words, concepts and principles? Is direct experience the only true and trustworthy teacher? Explain.

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## Equalizing the give and pull”

Comparative Perspective—Readings that highlight parallels and contrasts.

Theme: Actionless action: *Possession of the Way is thus a capacity for dealing effortlessly with external things (Graham).*

A. C. Graham, Preface to “The Yellow Emperor,” in *The Book of Lieh Tzu: A Classic of Tao*

This chapter is concerned with the Taoist principle of action. Faced with an obstacle, the unenlightened man begins to think about possible benefit or injury, and ponder alternative courses of action. But this thinking does him harm instead of good. A gambler plays better for tiles than for money, because he does not bother to think; a good swimmer learns to handle a boat quickly, because he does not care if it turns over; a drunken man falling from a cart escapes with his life because, being unconscious, he does not stiffen himself before collision. It is especially dangerous to be conscious of oneself. A woman aware that she is beautiful ceases to be beautiful; teachers aware of their own merit soon degenerate.

Boatmen, swimmers and insect-catchers do not think what to do next and are not conscious of themselves; their minds are totally concentrated on the object, to which they react without intermediate thought. One whose mind is a pure mirror of his situation, unaware of himself and therefore making no distinction between advantage and danger, will act with absolute assurance, and nothing will stand in his way. ‘The man who is in harmony is absolutely the same as other things, and no thing succeeds in wounding or obstructing him. To pass through metal and stone, and tread through water and fire, are all possible.’ Not that such powers are his goal; even when he gets them, he may not want to put on such a vulgar performance. Confucius himself ‘is one who, though able to do it, is able not to do it’.

Outside things can obstruct and injure us only if we are assertive instead of adaptable. To take a simile from the *Tao-te-ching*, we must be like water making its way through cracks. If we do not try to impose our will, but adjust ourselves to the object, we shall find the Way round or through it. The softer a substance is, the narrower the crack through which it can pass; the absolutely soft ‘comes out of nothingness and finds its way where there is no crack’. Wang Pi (226-249), commenting on this passage, writes:

‘The air (ch’i) finds its way in everywhere, water passes through everything.’

‘The tenuous, non-existent, soft and weak goes through everything; nothingness cannot be confined, the softest thing cannot be snapped.’

*Possession of the Way is thus a capacity for dealing effortlessly with external things.* Its theoretical limit is absolute power, or rather absolute liberty; for the whole point is that, instead

of controlling things, the sage ceases to be obstructed by them. Lieh-tzu riding the winds is an image, not of mastery, but of free, unimpeded movement.

*The Book of Lieh Tzu: A Classic of Tao.* Translated by A. C. Graham (New York: Columbia, 1990).

A Writing Assignment: Once he heard the story of the archer P'u-chu-tzu, Chan Ho discovered the approach he needed to become a master fisherman. He says, "I profited by that story." Tell of a story that you have profited by in your life. It might be a family story that taught you how to conduct yourself with other people. It might be a cautionary tale that helps you avoid someone else's sad fate. It might be a sacred story that better attunes you to receiving divine guidance.

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A Reading in Preparation for the Final Evaluative Writing Assignment:

William G. Kirkwood, "Parables as Metaphors and Examples," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71 (1985): 422-440.

Rationale: Kirkwood defines a parable as "any short narrative told primarily in order to instruct, guide or influence listeners instead of entertain." His analysis of parables that act both as metaphors *and* examples is especially useful for a deeper appreciation of the Daoist tales in this collection.

Final Evaluative Writing Assignment: Compose your own Daoist-styled teaching tale that illustrates an aspect of any theme suggested by the stories in this collection. In designing your story, consider using this familiar Daoist story progression: a protagonist is shown performing some extraordinary--even, fantastic--skill; one or more observers marvel at the skill; the protagonist offers an explanation that explains the role of Dao (the Way) in his achievement; and, finally, the observer(s) responds with an approving exclamation, such as that of Lord Wen Hui: "I have listened to the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life!"

I encourage you to set your Daoist tale in the 21st Century. I look forward to reading stories of marvelous men and women who are hang gliders, bike messengers and scratch artists, who are snowboarders and skateboarders, even computer geeks who are wizards of the keyboard. Central to your story, of course, is a protagonist whose artistry is informed and fueled by Dao.

