Daoist Tales of Artists and Artisans

Duke Huan and the wheelwright (excerpted from Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings)

Duke Huan was in his hall reading a book. The wheelwright P'ien, who was in the yard below chiseling a wheel, laid down his mallet and chisel, stepped up into the hall, and said to Duke Huan, "This book Your Grace is reading—may I venture to ask whose words are in it?"

"The words of the sages," said the duke.

"Are the sages still alive?"

"Dead long ago," said the duke.

"In that case, what you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old!"

"Since when does a wheelwright have permission to comment on the books I read?" said Duke Huan. "If you have some explanation, well and good. If not it's your life!"

Wheelwright P'ien said, "I look at it from the point of view of my own work. When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are too gentle, the chisel slides and won't take hold. But if they're too hard, it bites in and won't budge. Not too gentle, not too hard—you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You can't put it into words, and yet there's a knack to it somehow. I can't teach it to my son, and he can't learn it from me. So I've gone along for seventy years and at my age I'm still chiseling wheels. When the men of old died, they took with them the things that couldn't be handed down. So what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old."

The secret of caring for life (excerpted from Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings)

Cook Ting was cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-hui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee—zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music.

"Ah, this is marvelous!" said Lord Wen-hui. "Imagine skill reaching such heights!"

Cook Ting laid down his knife and replied, "What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I

could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

"A good cook changes his knife once a year—because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month—because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room—more than enough for the blade to play about it. That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.

"However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until--flop!--the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away."

"Excellent! said Lord Wen-hui. "I have heard the words of Cook Ting and learned how to care for life!"

Mastering life (excerpted from Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings)

Woodworker Ch'ing carved a piece of wood and made a bell stand, and when it was finished, everyone who saw it marveled, for it seemed to be the work of gods or spirits. When the marquis of Lu saw it, he asked, "What art is it you have?"

Ch'ing replied, "I am only a craftsman—how would I have any art? There is one thing, however. When I am going to make a bell stand, I never let it wear out my energy. I always fast in order to still my mind. When I have fasted for three days, I no longer have any thought of congratulations or rewards, of titles or stipends. When I have fasted for five days, I no longer have any thought of praise or blame, of skill or clumsiness. And when I have fasted for seven days, I am so still that I forget I have four limbs and a form and a body. By that time, the ruler and his court no longer exist for me. My skill is concentrated and all outside distractions fade away.

After that, I go into the mountain forest and examine the Heavenly nature of the trees. If I find one of superlative form, and I can see a bell stand there, I put my hand to the job of carving; if not, I let it go. This way I am simply matching up "Heaven" with "Heaven." That's probably the reason that people wonder if the results were not made by spirits."

Changing along with things (excerpted from Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings)

Artisan Ch'ui could draw as true as a compass or a T square because his fingers changed along with things and he didn't let his mind get in the way. Therefore his Spirit Tower [the mind] remained unified and unobstructed.

Catching cicadas (excerpted from The Book of Lieh Tzu)

Confucius went on a journey to Ch'u. Coming out of a forest, he saw a man with a crooked back catching cicadas with a rod and line, as easily as though he were picking them up off the ground.

"What skill!" Confucius said. "Is it because you have the Way?"

"I have the Way. When the season comes round in the fifth and sixth months, I balance balls on top of each other. If I can balance two without dropping them, I shall not miss many cicadas; if I can balance three, I shall miss one in ten; if I can balance five, it will be like picking them off the ground. I hold my body like a wood-chopper hacking at a root, I hold my arm as steady as a branch on a withered tree; out of all the myriad things in the vastness of heaven and earth, I am conscious only of the wings of a cicada. I never turn about or fidget; I would not take the whole world in exchange for the wings of a cicada. How can I fail to catch it?"

Confucius turned around and said to his disciples:

"'*Set your will on one aim, and be equal to the gods.*' Doesn't that saying fit this fellow with a crooked back?"

"You are one of those people with big sleeves," said the man. "What do you think you know about it? Sweep away those principles of yours before you talk about it again."

Equalizing the give and pull (excerpted from The Book of Lieh Tzu)

Equalizing the give and pull is the ultimate principle of dealing with the world. The same applies to the things within it. "*Equalizing. Let a hair hang so that the give and pull are equal. Pull too hard, give too easily, and the hair will snap, because the give and pull are not equal. If they were kept equal, nothing that snaps would snap.*" Men doubt this, but there have been those who knew that it is so.

Chan Ho made a fishing line from a single thread of silk out of the cocoon, a hook from a beard of wheat, a rod from one of the pygmy bamboos of Ch'u, and baited it with a split grain of rice. He hooked a fish big enough to fill a cart, in the middle of a swift current in waters seven hundred feet deep. The line did not snap, the hook did not straighten out, the rod did not bend, because he let out and drew in the line following the pull and give of the water. The King of Ch'u marveled when he heard of it, and summoned him to ask him the reason. Chan Ho told him:

"I heard my late father speak of P'u-chu-tzu's archery with a line attached to the arrow. Using a weak bow and thin line, and shaking the line so that it rode with the winds, he transfixed both of a pair of black cranes on the edge of a dark cloud—because his attention was concentrated and the movement of his hand equalized the give and the pull. I profited by this story, and took it as my model when I learned to fish. It took me five years to learn all that there is to learn about the Way. When I overlook the river holding my rod, there are no distracting thoughts in my mind. I contemplate nothing but the fish. When I cast the line and sink the hook, my hand does not pull too hard nor give too easily, so that nothing can disturb it. When the fish see the bait on my hook, it is like sinking dust or gathered foam, and they swallow it without suspecting. This is how I am able to use weak things to control strong ones, light things to bring in heavy ones. If Your Majesty is really able to rule his state in the same way, he can turn the Empire within the span of his hand; what can give you trouble?"

"Good!" said the King of Ch'u.