

WANDERING ON THE WAY

EARLY TAOIST TALES AND PARABLES
OF CHUANG TZU

Translated with an Introduction
and Commentary by
Victor H. Mair



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For Susan Rebecca and Heidi Lynné,
two women of strength;

And for Joseph Richard,
the wandering Van-Man.

Master Hui said to Master Chuang, "The King of Wei presented me with the seeds of a large gourd. I planted them and they grew to bear a fruit that could hold five bushels. I filled the gourd with

liquid but its walls were not strong enough for me to pick it up. I split the gourd into ladles but their curvature was so slight they wouldn't hold anything. Although the gourd was admittedly of huge capacity, I smashed it to bits because it was useless."

"Sir," said Master Chuang, "it's you who were obtuse about utilizing its bigness. There was a man of Sung who was good at making an ointment for chapped hands. For generations, the family occupation had been to wash silk floss. A stranger who heard about the ointment offered him a hundred pieces of gold for the formula. The man of Sung gathered his clan together and said to them, 'We have been washing silk floss for generations and have earned no more than a few pieces of gold. Now we'll make a hundred pieces of gold in one morning if we sell the technique. Please let me give it to the stranger.' After the stranger obtained the formula, he persuaded the King of Ngwa of its usefulness. Viet embarked on hostilities against Ngwa, so the King of Ngwa appointed the stranger to the command of his fleet. That winter, he fought a naval battle with the forces of Viet and totally defeated them [because his sailors' hands didn't get chapped]. The king set aside a portion of land and enfeoffed him there.

"The ability to prevent chapped hands was the same, but one person gained a fief with it while the other couldn't even free himself from washing floss. This is because the uses to which the ointment was put were different. Now you, sir, had a five-bushel gourd. Why didn't you think of tying it on your waist as a big buoy so that you could go floating on the lakes and rivers instead of worrying that it couldn't hold anything because of its shallow curvature? This shows, sir, that you still have brambles for brains!"

Master Hui said to Master Chuang, "I have a big tree people call Stinky Quassia. Its great trunk is so gnarled and knotted that it cannot be measured with an inked line. Its small branches are so twisted and turned that neither compass nor L-square can be applied to them. It stands next to the road, but carpenters pay

no attention to it. Now, sir, your words are just like my tree—big, useless, and heeded by no one."

"Sir," said Master Chuang, "are you the only one who hasn't observed a wild cat or a weasel? Crouching down, it lies in wait for its prey. It leaps about east and west, avoiding neither high nor low, until it gets caught in a snare or dies in a net. Then there is the yak, big as the clouds suspended in the sky. It's big, all right, but it can't catch mice. Now you, sir, have a big tree and are bothered by its uselessness. Why don't you plant it in Never-never Land with its wide, open spaces? There you can roam in nonaction by its side and sleep carefreely beneath it. Your Stinky Quassia's life will not be cut short by axes, nor will anything else harm it. Being useless, how could it ever come to grief?"

14

Once upon a time Chuang Chou dreamed that he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting about happily enjoying himself. He didn't know that he was Chou. Suddenly he awoke and was palpably Chou. He did not know whether he was Chou who had dreamed of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming that he was Chou. Now, there must be a difference between Chou and the butterfly. This is called the transformation of things.

3

ESSENTIALS FOR
NURTURING LIFE

2

A cook was cutting up an ox for Lord Wenhui.

Wherever

His hand touched,
His shoulder leaned,
His foot stepped,
His knee nudged,

the flesh would fall away with a swishing sound. Each slice of the cleaver was right in tune, zip zap! He danced in rhythm to "The Mulberry Grove," moved in concert with the strains of "The Managing Chief."

"Ah, wonderful!" said Lord Wenhui, "that skill can attain such heights!"

The cook put down his cleaver and responded, "What your servant loves is the Way, which goes beyond mere skill. When I first began to cut oxen, what I saw was nothing but whole oxen. After three years, I no longer saw whole oxen. Today, I meet the ox with my spirit rather than looking at it with my eyes. My sense organs stop functioning and my spirit moves as it pleases. In accord with the natural grain, I slice at the great crevices, lead the blade through the great cavities. Following its inherent structure, I never encounter the slightest obstacle even where the veins and arteries come together or where the ligaments and tendons join, much less from obvious big bones. A good cook changes his cleaver once a year because he chops. An ordinary cook changes his cleaver once a month because he hacks. Now

I've been using my cleaver for nineteen years and have cut up thousands of oxen with it, but the blade is still as fresh as though it had just come from the grindstone. Between the joints there are spaces, but the edge of the blade has no thickness. Since I am inserting something without any thickness into an empty space, there will certainly be lots of room for the blade to play around in. That's why the blade is still as fresh as though it had just come from the grindstone. Nonetheless, whenever I come to a complicated spot and see that it will be difficult to handle, I cautiously restrain myself, focus my vision, and slow my motion. With an imperceptible movement of the cleaver, plop! and the flesh is already separated, like a clump of earth collapsing to the ground. I stand there holding the cleaver in my hand, look all around me with complacent satisfaction, then I wipe off the cleaver and store it away."

"Wonderful!" said Lord Wenhui. "From hearing the words of the cook, I have learned how to nourish life."

Sir Motley of Southunc made an excursion to the Hillock of Shang. There he saw an unusual tree so big that a thousand four-horse chariots could be shaded by its leaves.

"Goodness! What tree is this?" asked Sir Motley. "It must have unusual timber." Looking upward at the smaller branches, however, he saw that they were all twisted and unfit to be beams.

Looking downward at the massive trunk, he saw that it was so gnarled as to be unfit for making coffins. If you lick one of its leaves, your mouth will develop ulcerous sores. If you smell its foliage, you fall into a drunken delirium that lasts for three days.

"This tree is truly worthless," said Sir Motley, "and that is why it has grown so large. Ah! The spiritual man is also worthless like this."

9

"I'm making progress," said Yen Hui.

"What do you mean?" asked Confucius.

"I have forgotten rites and music."

"Not bad, but you still haven't got it."

Yen Hui saw Confucius again on another day and said, "I'm making progress."

"What do you mean?"

"I have forgotten humaneness and righteousness."

"Not bad, but you still haven't got it."

Yen Hui saw Confucius again on another day and said, "I'm making progress."

"What do you mean?"

"I sit and forget."

"What do you mean, 'sit and forget'?" Confucius asked with surprise.

"I slough off my limbs and trunk," said Yen Hui, "dim my intelligence, depart from my form, leave knowledge behind, and become identical with the Transformational Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by 'sit and forget.' "

"If you are identical," said Confucius, "then you have no preferences. If you are transformed, then you have no more constants. It's you who is really the worthy one! Please permit me to follow after you."

7

The emperor of the Southern Sea was Lickety, the emperor of the Northern Sea was Split, and the emperor of the Center was Wonton. Lickety and Split often met each other in the land of Wonton, and Wonton treated them very well. Wanting to repay Wonton's kindness, Lickety and Split said, "All people have seven holes for seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing. Wonton alone lacks them. Let's try boring some holes for him." So every day they bored one hole, and on the seventh day Wonton died.