

3.1.3 To pursue the limitless

With the limited,

This is but danger.

To seek knowledge that has no limits with a nature [*xing*] that has limits—how could anyone ever manage not to bring trouble on himself doing this!

3.1.4 To be in such a state and yet keep on trying to know,

This is nothing but danger!

Already in trouble because of knowledge, yet one knows not to stop but brings ever more knowledge to bear in order to rescue himself from his predicament. This is how one injures life through attempting to nurture it, for this truly means great danger.

3.1.5 In doing “good” don’t come within reach of fame.

In doing “evil” don’t come within reach of punishment.

Forget about “good” and “evil” and stay the middle course [*juzhong*]. Allow everything spontaneous action [*ziwei*] and, keeping it all to yourself, become one with what is perfectly appropriate. Therefore, punishment and fame will stay far from you, while you fully realize principle [*quanli*] in your own person.

3.1.6 Follow the governor tract,² making it your main path.

Follow the middle path and make it your norm [*chang*].

3.1.7 You can thereby protect your person,

keep life whole, care for your parents,

One cares for parents in order to please them.

3.1.8 and live out your natural span of years.

If one can attain the middle way and arcanelly travel [*mingdu*] on it, nothing will prove impossible. The nurturing of life means not to try to exceed one’s allotted capacity [*fen*], for it is nothing more nor less than to realize fully principle [*quanli*] and live out one’s natural span of years.

3.2.1 Cook Ding³ was cutting up an ox for Lord Wenhui [King Hui of Liang]⁴ in such a way that with:

Each stroke of the hand,

Each thrust of the shoulder,

Each stamp of the foot,

Each jab of the knee,

3.2.2 Matched a sharp sound of rending, as he played his knife, swishing in and out, always in perfect tune, right in step for the Mulberry Grove Dance and in perfect rhythm with the Jingshou Melody.

That is, he exercises his skill with the greatest of ease and never fails to make absolutely the right cut. Since he has perfectly grasped the principle involved, not only is he in perfect harmony with the principle of the ox, he also keeps in perfect rhythm with it.

3.3 Lord Wenhui said, “Wow! Terrific! How could skill ever go so far as this?”

3.4.1 Cook Ding put his knife down and replied, “What I am good at is the Dao, for I have advanced beyond skill.

He simply lodged the principles of the Dao in his skill, so what he was good at was not the skill itself.

3.4.2 When I first began to cut up oxen, what I saw was nothing but the whole ox as such,

He could not yet see the interstices in its natural configuration.

3.4.3 but, after three years, I no longer saw the whole ox as such.

He only saw the interstices in its natural configuration.

3.4.4 And now, I encounter it with my spirit [*shen*] and don’t see it with my eyes.

He arcanely fuses with its principle/natural configuration.

3.4.5 When sense and knowledge stop, the divine is ready to act.

As the senses which govern scrutiny quit working, he loosens his mind and accords with principle/natural configuration.

3.4.6 In accord with the natural principle [configuration] [*tianli*],

He does not cut arbitrarily.

3.4.7 I strike at the gaps.

These are the places of juncture, which he follows to strike at the ox and so cause it to come apart.

3.4.8 Following the large openings,

These are the empty places where the joints come apart, which he accordingly follows to cause it to sever.

3.4.9 I abide where inherent certainty leads me.

The knife is not applied rashly.

3.4.10 It never happens that my plying encounters the joints,

Such is the marvelousness of his technique that he always plies the knife edge in emptiness and never lets it come up against the slightest obstacle.

3.4.11 So how much the less likely am I to encounter a big bone!

Gu [big bone] here means to encounter a big bone, which would defeat the knife edge.

3.4.12 A good cook has to change his knife once a year, this because he cuts through [the meat].

He fails to hit the interstices in the natural configuration.

3.4.13 The ordinary cook has to change his knife once a month, this because he hacks.

He hits bones and so breaks the knife.

3.4.14 Now, my knife has lasted nineteen years, and the oxen I have cut up number in the thousands, yet the edge of my knife is as if it had just left the whetstone.

Xing is a whetstone.

3.4.15 The joints have spaces in them, but the knife edge has no thickness. To insert what has no thickness into what has a space means that it will be so spacious that there will be more than enough room to ply the knife. This is why even after nineteen years my knife edge is as if it had just left the whetstone. However, whenever I come to a grouping, I note that it presents difficulties,

Where things intersect and come together is a “grouping.”

3.4.16 fearfully take warning, my look stopped,

He no longer applies his eyes to anything else.

3.4.17 my action slowed,

He slows down his hand.

3.4.18 I just have to move my knife the slightest amount, and, with a sharp rending sound, it’s already come apart,

Since he gets it just right, he has to use very little effort.

3.4.19 as if it had been dirt clumped into earth.

The natural configuration comes apart yet there’s no trace of the knife, as if it had been clumped earth.

3.4.20 Raising my knife and standing there, as a result I look all around and linger awhile filled with satisfaction because of what I have done.

This indicates one self-fulfilled with all his sense of preeminence and feeling of pleasure.

3.4.21 I set my knife right and put it away.”

He wipes his knife clean and places it in its sheath.

3.5 Lord Wenhui then said, “Excellent! I have heard Cook Ding’s words and learned how to nurture life from them.”

Since one can do such nurturing with the knife, he realized that life too can so be nurtured.

3.6.1 When Gongwen Xuan saw the Commander of the Right [Youshi], he was startled to say: “What kind of man are you? How is it that you have one foot [*jie*]? ”

Jie is a term for having one foot cut off.

3.6.2 Was it Heaven’s doing or was it man’s?”

If it is something that knowing can do nothing about, it would be Heaven’s doing, but if it is the result of going contrary to what one knows, it would be man’s doing.

3.6.3 He replied, “It was Heaven’s doing, not man’s. It was the way that Heaven begot me that caused me to be one-footed [*du*].

To have one foot cut off is called *du*. With all the intelligence he had, he still was incapable of preserving both feet, which means that it was something that his intelligence could not help. If, based on the intelligence he possessed, the Commander of the Right felt he had to seek to keep both his feet, his mind