

Zhuangzi Excerpts for INLC Hike

Translated by Brook Ziporyn in “Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings” (2020)

Perspective:

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, “The King of Wei gave me the seed of a great gourd. I planted it, and when it matured it weighed over a hundred pounds. I filled it with liquid, but it was not firm enough to lift. I cut it in half to make a dipper, but it was too wide to scoop into anything. It was big and all, but because it was so useless I finally just smashed it to pieces.”

Zhuangzi said, “You are certainly stupid when it comes to using big things. There was once a man of Song who was skilled at making a balm to keep the hands from chapping. For generations his family has used it to make a living washing silk through the winter. A customer heard about it and asked to buy the recipe for a hundred pieces of gold. The family got together and consulted, saying, ‘We’ve been washing silk for generations and have never earned more than a few pieces of gold; now in one morning we can sell the technique for a hundred. Let’s do it.’ The customer took the balm and presented it to the king of Wu. When Yue started a war with him, the king made the man a general who led his soldiers through a winter battle with the men of Yue, and beat them big. The man was then enfeoffed as a feudal lord. The power to keep the hands from chapping was one and the same, but one man used it to get an enfeoffment and another couldn’t even use it to avoid washing silk all winter. The difference is all in how the thing is used. You, on the other hand, had a gourd of over a hundred pounds. How is it that you never thought of making it into an enormous vessel for yourself and floating through the lakes and rivers in it? Instead, you worried that it was too wide to scoop into anything, which I guess

means the mind of our greatly esteemed master here is all clogged up, occupied with its bushes and branches!”

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, “I have a huge tree that people call the Stinktree. The trunk is swollen and gnarled, impossible to align with any level or ruler. The branches are twisted and bent, impossible to align any T-square or carpenter’s arc. Even if it were growing right on the road, a carpenter would not give it so much as a second glance. And your words are similarly big but useless, which is why they are rejected by everyone who hears them.”

Zhuangzi said, “Haven’t you ever seen the wildcats and weasels? They crouch low to await any straggling prey, then pounce east or west in an elegantly arcing leap, high or low without hesitation. But this is exactly what lands them in a trap, and they end up dying in the net. But take a yak: it is big like the clouds draped across the heavens. What it’s good at is just being big – and of course it cannot catch so much as a single mouse. You, on the other hand, have this big tree and worry that it’s useless. How you could loaf and wander, doing a whole lot of nothing there at its side! How far-flung and unfettered you’d be, dozing there beneath it! It will never be cut down by ax or saw. Nothing will harm it. Since it has nothing for which it can be used, what could entrap or afflict it?” (Ziporyn, pp 7-8).

Subjectivity:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt [that] he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming [that] he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Now surely Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities, as two quite different

beings! And just this is what is meant when we speak of transformation of *any* one being into another – of the transformation of things (Ziporyn, p 21).

Knack:

The cook was carving up an ox for King Hui of Liang. Wherever his hand smacked it, wherever his shoulder leaned into it, wherever his foot braced it, wherever his knee pressed it, the thwacking tomes of flesh falling from bone would echo, the knife would whiz through with its resonant thwing, each stroke ringing out the perfect note, attuned to the Dance of the Mulberry Grove or the Jingshou Chorus of the ancient sage-kings.

The king said, “Ah! It is wonderful that skill can reach such heights!”

The cook put down his knife and said, “What I love is the Course, going beyond mere skill. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I saw for three years was oxen, and yet still I was unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter it with the imponderable spirit in me rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. For when the faculties of officiating understanding come to rest, imponderable spiritlike impulses begin to stir, relying on the unwrought perforations. Striking into the enormous gaps, they are guided through those huge hallows, going along in accord with what is already there and how it already is. So my knife has never had to cut through the knotted nodes where the warp hits the weave, much less the gnarled joints of bone. A good cook changes his blade once a year: he slices. An ordinary cook changes his blade once a month: he hacks. I have been using this same blade for nineteen years, cutting up thousand of oxen, and yet it is as sharp as the day it came off the whetstone. For the joints have spaces within them, and the very edge of the blade has no thickness at all. When what has no thickness enters into an empty space, it is vast and open, with more than enough room for the play of the blade.

This is why my knife is still as sharp as if it had just come off the whetstone, even after nineteen years.”

“Nonetheless, whenever I come to a clustered tangle, realizing that it is difficult to *do* anything about it, I instead restrain myself as if terrified, until my seeing comes to a complete halt. My activity slows, and the blade moves ever so slightly. The whoosh! All at once I find the ox already dismembered at my feet like clumps of soil scattered on the ground. I retract the blade and stand there gazing at it all around me, both disoriented and satisfied by it all. Then I wipe off the blade and put it away.”

The king said, “Wonderful! From hearing the cook’s words I have learned how to nourish life!” (Ziporyn, pp 29-27).