

## Chapter Eight

# Butcher Ding

### *A Meditation in Flow*

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Butcher Ding was butchering an ox for Lord Wen Hui. His hands danced as his shoulders lunged with the step of his feet while his knees bent. With a hiss and a thud, the brandished blade never missed the rhythm as it sliced, now in time with “The Mulberry Grove” dance, now as if an orchestra were playing “The Managing Chief” symphony.

“Oh my, this is excellent, that a person’s skill can attain such heights!” Lord Wen Hui said.

Setting aside his blade, Butcher Ding replied, “What your servant cares about is the course of action (*dao* 道), which goes beyond mere skill. When I first began to butcher oxen, I saw nothing but the whole ox wherever I looked. After three years, I stopped seeing the whole ox. Nowadays, I am in touch through my daemonic 神 insight, and I do not look with my eyes. With the senses I know where to stop; with the daemonic I desire to run its course. I rely on Nature’s Patterns (*tian li* 天理), cutting along the main seams; I let myself be guided by the cavities, going by what is inherently so. A vein or artery, a ligament or tendon the blade never touches, not to mention bone. A good butcher changes his blade once a year because he hacks. A common butcher changes it once a month because he smashes. Now I have had this cleaver for nineteen years, and have butchered several thousand oxen, and the blade’s edge is as sharp as though it was fresh from the grindstone. Each joint has an opening, and the blade’s edge has no thickness. When you insert what has no thickness where there is an opening, then what more could you ask; of course, there is ample room to move the edge about. That’s why after nineteen years my blade’s edge is as sharp as though it were fresh from the grindstone.

“However, whenever I come to something intricate, I see where it will be hard to handle and cautiously prepare myself, my gaze settles on it, action slows down for it, you scarcely see the flick of the blade—and with one stroke the tangle is unravelled, as a clod of earth crumbles to the ground. I raise my

blade; assess my work until I'm fully satisfied. I clean the blade and put it away."

Lord Wen Hui said, "Excellent! By listening to Butcher Ding's words, I have learned from them the means to nurture life (*yangsheng* 養生)."<sup>1</sup>

## 1. THE EXPERIENCE OF FLOW

The *Zhuangzi*'s influence cannot be overstated. Its impact on Chinese Chan (Japanese Zen) Buddhism has been documented (Wu, *Golden Age*, 23–29). The *Zhuangzi*'s images of naturalism and spontaneity influenced Chinese poetry, music, and painting, especially landscape painting. It also influenced the martial arts with the idea of imitating the natural movements of animals and natural phenomena. Zen and the art of archery and Zen swordplay are early examples of achieving selfless flow activities in the *Zhuangzi* style. Zhu Xi proposed that the narrative of Butcher Ding carving up an ox with his stages of progression over the first three years and then nineteen years of practice was an example of the importance of gradual self-cultivation or gradual enlightenment over the sudden approach, which was popular at that time and is still popular today (Ching, *Religious Thought*, 156). Frank Lloyd Wright and Abraham Maslow are among the many that were influenced by the *Zhuangzi* (Thompson, "Fallingwater," 2017; Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 208).

In this chapter, I argue that the performance stories in the *Zhuangzi*, and the Butcher Ding story, emphasise an activity meditation practice that places the performer in a mindfulness flow zone, leading to graceful, efficacious, selfless, spontaneous, and free action. These stories are metaphors showing the reader how to attain a meditative state of focused awareness while acting freely in a flow experience. From my perspective, these metaphors are not about developing practical or technical skills per se. My argument challenges a strict instrumental reading. Although instrumental reasoning can easily lead one to focus on the pragmatic outcomes depicted in these stories (see Eno, "Cook Ding's Dao"; Callahan, "Cook Ding's Life"; and Robins, "Beyond Skill"), the proposed pragmatic outcomes are merely a kind of collateral result of effortless, free actions in the flow experience. The metaphors of Butcher Ding, the Lüliang rapids swimmer, the Wheelwright Bian, the Woodcarver Qing, the cicada catcher, the naked artist, and so on are used to show the reader a way to engage in free and graceful action in the flow experience. *Zhuangzi* is not concerned about developing labour skills. He criticises such skills, seen above when the butcher claims to have "left skill behind" (進乎技矣) (Graham, *Chuang-tzu*, 63), and chapter 5 notes that "skill is a peddler" (工為商) (Watson, *Complete Works*, 75). For *Zhuangzi*, specialists who deploy instrumental reasoning are "trying too hard and want too much," and the "teaching dialogues do not seem to convey practical

techniques any more than a moral code or philosophical system" (Defoort, "Instruction Dialogues," 475).

Although it may be easy to interpret these performance narratives instrumentally, I propose that they are used as metaphors to show the reader a way to act freely in an effortless (*wuwei* 無為), natural, and spontaneous (*ziran* 自然) flow experience. Attaining freedom of action in the flow experience could be a pragmatic outcome itself, but that would be a different kind of "practical goal" from a skill per se.

The teaching pedagogy depicted in these performance metaphors is a form of non-instruction in which learning still occurs (Defoort, "Instruction Dialogues," 474–77). Victor Turner describes these kinds of performances as being in the liminoid *communitas* zone (Turner, *From Ritual*). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi gives a detailed analysis of what he calls the experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*). Sports psychologists developed his flow idea and have identified the meditative or mindfulness state of awareness that accompanies being in the flow.<sup>2</sup> Neurophysiologists have analyzed the conditions of effortless action and effortless concentration (Bruya, *Effortless Attention*). Eliot Deutsch employed the terms "grace" and "acting freely" to describe these kinds of performances (Deutsch, *Personhood and Creative Being*). Thus, I think of them as graceful, free actions in the flow performance.

Christopher Kirby reframes the *Zhuangzi* as advocating a kind of naturalistic moral expertise (Kirby, "Naturalism and Moral Expertise," 14). Carine Defoort lists possible interpretations of what kind of philosophy *Zhuangzi* is doing to include being "a primitivist, relativist, individualist, hedonist, pessimist, nihilist, fatalist, naturalist, mystical negativist, transcendentalist, evolutionist, pre-Zen Buddhist, cynic, sceptic, contemplative, metaphysician, idealist or materialist, and so forth," which she then dissolves in her essay (Defoort, "Instruction Dialogues," 462). Eric Nelson breaks down the artificial distinctions of philosophy, scepticism, religion, mysticism, health, and so on when interpreters try to mislabel the *Zhuangzi* as merely representing one of these options (Nelson, "Questioning Dao"). For example, Buddhism is based on a health-care or "medical cure" model to alleviate suffering (*dukkha*), and the teachings are presented in a religious-philosophical "way of life" manner because too much metaphysical, theoretical, or philosophical "thinking" can obstruct the practice of mindfulness or meditation and the insights needed for liberation from such suffering. The *Zhuangzi*, and Daoism in general, have similar concerns of offering "ways of life" that are based on a "medical cure" model in a religious-philosophical manner. Among the reasons Buddhists deployed Daoist terminology to translate their concepts was the medical cure approach shared by the two teachings.

The two most popular academic interpretations of the *Zhuangzi*, namely scepticism and mysticism, are only part of the focus for nurturing life. The *Zhuangzi* recognises the limits of language, which cannot adequately de-

scribe our experience of the world (*tian di* 天地), or the unsummed totality (*dao* 道), the experience of acting freely in the flow zone of selfless, spontaneous performance, or the panenhenic experience of being united with the continuous transformation of things “by entering the silent oneness of the sky” (乃入於寥天一) or the “Great Pervade” (大通) (Zhuangzi, *Concordance*, 18/6/82 and 19/6/93). The *Zhuangzi* contains a kind of linguistic scepticism, but this approach is used to avoid offering another teaching based on the questionable veracity of propositional knowledge. Zhuangzi is not a sceptic per se; rather, he employs a form of linguistic scepticism as a method to liberate the reader from the limitations of language. He deploys a limited methodological linguistic scepticism and still uses language, especially metaphors, poetry, humour, anecdotes, and narrative, as “goblet words” (*zhiyan* 卮言) to show how to gain an experience of losing the ego or self in a flow performance or in the panenhenic experience of oneness. He is trying to give the reader the experience itself or at least an insight into the experience; he is not concerned about the accuracy of the linguistic denotations or their truth value. If there is a philosophy in the *Zhuangzi*, it is profoundly holistic and not easily characterised (Kirby, “Naturalism and Moral Expertise,” 14).

In the context of the philosophy of religion and the history of religions, mysticism refers to the experience of unity or oneness with an ultimate reality as it is variously understood in different teachings. R. C. Zaehner differentiated three general types of the mystical experience, namely, (1) total and complete oneness in the (Hindu) Brahmanic teachings; (2) limited or partial oneness in the monotheistic teachings where the creator/created dichotomy will not allow for complete unity; and (3) experiencing oneness with an aspect or force of nature or the entire natural world, that is, nature mysticism or the panenhenic experience of unity with nature (Zaehner, *Mysticism*). The type of nature mystical experience in Daoism and the *Zhuangzi* promotes active participation in the world, not merging with a philosophical absolute or otherworldly transcendent experience.<sup>3</sup> Even the practice of sitting in oblivion (*zuowang* 坐忘) is used to awaken a person to participation in the natural processes and transformations of life. Zhuangzi withdraws from imposed ritual norms, embracing active participation in living life with engaged enjoyment. If by “mysticism” we mean that the *Zhuangzi* attempts to describe the experience of an active or lived unity with an aspect of nature or the unsummed totality or *dao* (道), then that will be adequate for my purposes in this chapter.

Chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi* is concerned with avoiding stress to live well, linguistic scepticism, and unity with nature—“the myriad things and I are one” (Graham, *Chuang-tzu*, 56). The text is also concerned with overcoming death anxiety and being able to live out one’s natural life span, which entails physical and psychological health. Chapter 3 of the *Zhuangzi* is especially concerned with the health-care issue of mastering the means to nurture life.

Chow Tse-tung argues that the title and theme of chapter 3 is derived from *The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine, the Huangdi neijing* (黄帝内经).<sup>4</sup> Graham proposed that Zhuangzi was likely following Yang Zhu’s idea “that the life and health of the body are more important than worldly possession” (Graham, *Chuang-tzu*, 117).

To claim, as Watson does, that the *Zhuangzi* is advocating a complete break with all social norms or conventional values would be an exaggeration (Watson, *Complete Works*, 17). The opening passage of the chapter “The Master of Nurturing Life” (*Yangsheng zhu* 養生主) clearly describes the expected outcomes of practising Zhuangzi’s way of life and worldview.

Our lives are limited, but knowledge has no limit. If we use what is limited to pursue what has no limit, there is danger that the flow will cease. When the flow ceases, the one who still tries to use knowledge will be in danger for certain!

Good doer, stay away from fame (*ming*).

Wrongdoer, stay away from punishments (*xing*).

Tracing the central controlling meridians (*du* 督), making them your standard (*jing*)

can protect your body (*sheng*),

keep life whole (*sheng*),

nurture your parents (*jin*), and

live out your years (*nian*).<sup>5</sup>

Graham has hit the mark in his translation by noting that “there is danger that the flow will cease.” The flow here is primarily the flow of life energy (*qi* 氣), which is connected to the flow experience when a person acts freely, which is described in the Butcher Ding metaphor in the next passage of the chapter. Victor Mair’s translation of the second to the last line is “nurture your inmost viscera,” translating *jin* (親) as the “inmost viscera,” has merit, fitting well with the medical model being advanced here (Mair, *Wandering*, 26). However, his translation assumes that nurturing parents is only a Confucian value. This overlooks the common ground shared by both Daoist and Ruists; it also goes against most of the commentarial precedent that interpret *jin* to refer to “immediate family or parents.”

The above opening passage to chapter 3 outlines some basic norms that are found in ancient pre-Qin, state of Song, and many other cultures. It especially mentions the norms of taking care of our parents and being able to complete our natural life span. I intentionally refer to our parents and our lives because Zhuangzi is not advocating an impersonal or abstract philosophy; rather, he proposes a way of living that requires a person’s unique and actual engagement—“so that each particular can be itself” (而使其自己也) (Zhuangzi, *Concordance*, 3/2/9). Zhuangzi accepts that there are some basic

natural norms, such as nurturing your life and caring for family members, that we want to and naturally should follow.

Some might think that Daoists are always hermits, but this is not the case. Liezi and Zhuangzi were married with families, and many of the Daoist characters in the stories have good friends who attend funerals, even though they break the social norms at the funeral.<sup>6</sup> Zhuangzi acknowledges that imposed social and ritual norms promote unhealthy expectations and psychological and physical stress that tend to make life uncomfortable and shorter. He is sceptical and critical about the value of those imposed norms, especially court and social ritual norms, but not the natural norms such as a healthy life and family. He is sceptical and critical about the veracity of statements, but he is willing to use metaphor and narrative to provide instruction on what can be learned but not taught directly—a teaching on non-teaching. The mystical panhenhenic experience is an important goal but not the only one. People must live well enough to sustain their own lives and those of family members to flourish and have panhenhenic and other experiences as well.

Zhuangzi and his namesake text do advocate several values that point a way towards a this-worldly and life-affirmative optimism by engaging the world and life with joy (Kohn, *Zhuangzi*, 11–22). The various characters in the text are exemplar role models, especially those who “suffer” some physical deformity either from birth or punishment-amputation. Those role models are depicted as being at one with their own radical transmutions and the transformations of the myriad things of the world in the recognition that change is the natural constant course of things. This “go with the flow” or “go with the creative-transformative process” (造物者) approach to living promotes a healthy attitude of releasing oneself from the anxiety of living up to ritual norms or other socially imposed expectations, and even from death anxiety. This radical worldly optimism is articulated in the expression “make it be spring with everything.”<sup>7</sup>

Butcher Ding’s free-flow performance “shows how” even a somewhat difficult task of manual labour can be an opportunity to engage the world and our performance in it with joy. That is an enjoyment forged in forgetting excessive self-consciousness by merging with an activity in the present moment. Joy is derived from meditative mindfulness in action. To be able to perform daily tasks requiring a high level of proficiency in challenging situations accompanied by mindful concentration, creativity, selfless awareness, and satisfaction, and the ability to transform what might appear to be mundane, repetitive tasks into challenging, creative, aesthetic performances are key points of the flow experience at work or on the job, so to speak (Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 143–63).

It is interesting how Zhuangzi’s healing religio-philosophy seems to anticipate the findings of developmental psychology. Taylor and Marienau review and compare three constructive-developmental models, showing how

mature people can multi-frame and hold on to contradictions without confusion, are independent, and construct knowledge and values based on the context or situation. These self-actualising values fit well with what Zhuangzi is doing, trying to lead the reader to a new and improved or more balanced way of living as an adult (Taylor and Marienau, *Facilitating Learning*, 273–83).

In this manner we can agree with Zhuangzi that language is limited; we make things so by saying they are so, based on the consensual, social construction of linguistic meaning. Social expectations have imposed rituals, economic requirements, norms, and mores on us that create unnatural, unhealthy, and stressful outcomes. We can reframe our mindset and transform those unnatural expectations, replacing them with this-worldly optimism derived from engaged enjoyment. In a sense, Zhuangzi is a master teacher of transformative learning and the use of disorientating dilemmas. Jack Mezirow uses the term “disorientating dilemmas” in his groundbreaking work on transformative learning to describe an unexpected situation that forces a person to think differently about something taken for granted up to that point in life (Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions and Learning as Transformation*). Zhuangzi’s philosophy, in a sense, provides the reader with several disorientating dilemmas by focusing on the stories and metaphors, like “goblet words” (*zhiyan 卮言*), that break down our preconceived ideas and put us in touch with the processes or transformations in nature, in society, and especially within our own persons. Defoot’s study of Zhuangzi’s “teaching of non-teaching” fits well with Mezirow’s transformative learning and disorientating dilemmas. Her analysis of the anti-teaching is instructive in the conventional sense in trying to explain the unconventional anti-teaching style.

The second aspect of anti-teaching shows, moreover, that this Zhuangzian attitude cannot be consciously adopted for the sake of being an inspiring teacher. Teaching [in the conventional sense] concerns to a large extent a transmission of knowledge, insights, and skills, but the *Zhuangzi* stories remind us of the fact that it should also contain a measure of not teaching, letting go, undoing, liberating or undermining . . . while Zhuangzi’s masters . . . do have some intentions, namely, to notice the force and value of their energetic underflow, and to let it proceed without obstruction. Their training lies in removing obstacles, including those of fixed norms, elegant theories, clear judgments, good intentions and efficient techniques. All such certainties ultimately impede the formless force that, powerfully but beyond our apprehension, flows within us. (Defoot, “Instruction Dialogues,” 476)

Zhuangzi’s meditation practices are designed to teach the reader to empty the heart-mind and experience the flow within us. The practice of passive (sitting, reclining, or standing) or active (swimming, carving wood, or butcher-

ing an ox) meditation opens up the practitioner to a different experience of the world. This is a world founded on a direct experience that is not mediated by linguistic or other social trappings. Hence the position of no-ordinary position can be achieved by focusing on the meaning of the experience, rather than the meaning of the words used to express the experience—see the end of *Zhuangzi*, chapter 26: “Where can I find a man who has forgotten words, so I may have a word with him” (Watson, *Complete Works*, 302). This kind of self-emptying meaning also fits with the “goblet words” further developed below. If we can agree that we need to find people who have forgotten the meaning or precise denotation to establish a word’s referential meaning so that we may converse with them using metaphor, poetry, or anecdote, we might then overcome our limited, constructed, linguistic categories and expressions to use language differently and thereby express the unique, graceful, free action in the flow performance and other spontaneous, natural performance experiences. In this case, I claim that the text has philosophical, religious, and health content derived from both passive (*zuowang* 坐忘) sitting in oblivion mediation and active (the flow performance activities) meditative practices that lead people to an experience of being one with the performance in particular, and with the unsummed totality of *dao* or *tian-di*—the natural world—in general.

## 2. THE PASSAGE

Concerning Butcher Ding cutting up an ox, some translators and interpreters want to place emphasis on the use of the term *shen* (神), the spirit or the daemonic, as a type of “supernatural efficacy” (Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, 7) or as spiritual or daemonic forces that can “possess a person and therefore they help bring to a person the highest possible spiritual fulfillment” (Yearley, “Zhuangzi’s Understanding of Skillfulness,” 154). These kinds of interpretations seem to assume a type of dualism of spirit and body that is not present in the *Zhuangzi*. The alleged separation of spirit and body does not fit with what is being described. What Ding means by “with the daemonic I desire to run its course” is not supernatural possession or supernatural efficacy but the attainment of the selfless, autotelic flow experience of acting freely and gracefully. The flow experience is often described as having an almost “magical” quality to it (Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 54). If these interpreters proposed that it is “as if” a supernatural or magical force were at work or “as if” a person were possessed, then it would be a closer fit to what is really going on in the description. In Zhuangzi’s terms, when people empty themselves of themselves, as in the practice of sitting in oblivion or fasting the heart-mind, they embody the *dao* as void, generating spontaneous, creative acts. In cutting lose (*jie* 解) from imposed social norms and awakening

(*jue* 覺) to the natural course of transformation, people flow or wander free and easy (*you* 遊) in “the silent oneness of nature” or “pervade and unify” (*tongweiyi* 通為一) their actions and everything else in the world. This is how Zhuangzi describes acting and living freely in the flow experience.

## 3. FREE ACTIONS IN FLOW

Ancient agriculturalists and modern vegetarians might propose that the ox working in the fields better facilitates the cosmic flow than to serve as an example of optimal performance on the bloody chopping block. For Daoists, however, death is part of the natural transformations and optimal performances can be illustrated in activities in what might be considered less than optimal conditions such as a butchering or catching bugs. In this sense the butcher metaphor is instructive.

The butcher’s performance describes an artful or aesthetic expression of what *Deutsch* refers to as free and graceful action (*Deutsch*, *Personhood and Creative Being*). Turner’s description of being in the *communitas* zone (Turner, *From Ritual*) and Csikszentmihalyi’s flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*) all fit nicely to explain what is being described in this story. The story is a metaphor for attaining states of spontaneous, natural action in which the performer loses excessive self-awareness to achieve a state of unity with the performance-action. Turner noted six points of comparison between his social concept of *communitas* and Csikszentmihalyi’s individual flow experience (Turner, *From Ritual*). Allow me to tie into the discussion *Deutsch*’s concept of free and graceful action.

Turner’s first two elements of flow correlate with *Deutsch*’s notion of skilfulness; they are (1) a merging of action and awareness that is made possible by (2) a centering of attention.<sup>8</sup> Because much of the performance is presented as efficacious action, it has the appearance of being a mere habit or a form of instinctual “ritualization” that an anthropologist may study. The behavioural event is only a necessary condition for acting freely. If we stop our investigation at the level of apparent behaviour, then there are no truly free acts, only behavioural events. Lord Wen Hui perceives Ding’s actions to reflect a consummate behavioural event. The butcher denies the surface skills, leading the reader to a deeper experience. After three years of training, the butcher was able to merge awareness and action and see beyond the whole ox. The training taught the butcher to concentrate and unify his thought and action. Spontaneous actions are causally efficacious such that they free human actions from being mere behavioural events. “The actor must be a master of the conditions of his action and not as with behavioural events, their victim,” and this spontaneity “is grounded in the deepest structures of one’s being and is . . . a non-egoistic expression of one’s spiritual

potentiality" (Deutsch, *Personhood*, 117). It is interesting to note the similarity of expression between Deutsch's use of "spiritual potentiality" and "spiritual domain" and Butcher Ding's use of the "daemonic or spiritual" (神) apprehension of the ox (Deutsch, *Personhood*, 118).

This description correlates with the next two elements of the flow experience, namely, (3) loss of ego and (4) control of one's actions and control of the immediate environment. Turner emphasises this point in the following comment about the performer: "He may not know this at the time of 'flow' but reflecting on it he may realise that his skills were matched to the demands made on him by ritual, art, or sport" (Turner, *From Ritual*, 57). This spontaneity is expressed symbolically in rituals of creation or renewal through the reenactment of cosmic creativity, and it can be seen in rites of passage where the initiate in the liminality of betwixt and between is free to act without constraint of social status or taboo (Turner, "Betwixt and Between" and "Social Drama and Ritual"). The performance itself requires spontaneity as part and parcel of its efficaciousness. The performance of the actions provides a context in which there is an overwhelming emphasis placed on the proper performance of the acts themselves. This care for the appropriate performance of the action is a recognition of the "natural grace," "inherent order," "natural rhythm," or way of performing the action in its most fitting manner (Deutsch, *Personhood*, 117). All performances require an appropriate course of action (*dao* 道), which has a spiritual or daemonic (*shen* 神) quality to it for him. Ding is dancing his butcher performance in a trance-like, egoless state while being in complete control of his actions and the ox.

Although a vegetarian would object to the killing of the ox, the metaphor "works" in that optimal performances with natural grace can occur in challenging situations. By discussing and clarifying "natural grace" in terms of artistic creativity, two points become clear. These acts have an "autochthonous ordering of elements under a controlling sense of rightness which results in the achievement of what, when the work is successful, appears to be inevitable" (Deutsch, *Personhood*, 118). Butcher Ding's dance-like performance exhibits this natural grace while acting freely, as cuts of meat fall to the ground. This concept of "autochthonous ordering" clears up a problem concerning the meaning of "rules" in the flow model. The last two elements of flow are (5) non-contradictory demands for action and clear unambiguous feedback for a person's actions. This element requires the actor to believe or at least suspend disbelief in the *rules* that govern a culturally designed game, art, or ritual. When the butcher confronts an intricate spot, he briefly returns to use his senses, his gaze settles on it, and his action slows down; then, suddenly with a flick of the blade, the ox falls apart like dry dirt. Finally, (6) flow is autotelic, an end in itself; it has no goal or reward outside of itself (Turner, *From Ritual*, 57–58). The Butcher finally assesses his work, is satis-

fied, and cleans and sheaths the blade. Turner proposes that what he calls *communitas* "has something of a 'flow' quality, but it may arise, and often does arise spontaneously and unanticipated—it does not need rules to trigger it off" (Turner, *From Ritual*, 58). Here the concept of "autochthonous order" captures both the meaning of "rule" in the flow experience and the spontaneity of *communitas*. Turner notes that the flow experience is individual, whereas *communitas* is a social group experience. I propose that the individual and social dichotomy fuse in Zhuangzi's non-dual or correlative logic. Just as Lord Wen Hui can learn from the butcher, the readers of the performance metaphors can identify with the characters in the stories and gain insight into the optimal flow experience being depicted such that the self-other dichotomy dissolves. Self-other, individual-society, person-world are linguistic conventions that are overcome or released in the flow experience.

For Deutsch, free actions, like works of art, "involve a timing that is right for them" (Deutsch, *Personhood*, 118). The timely performance of free action reflects a person's achievement of personhood. "It (a properly timed free action) will thus be obedient to what is called for by the situation and it will reflect wholly the rhythm of the actor's own achieved persona" (ibid.). In addition to the loving care and concern that is needed to embody natural grace, a kind of "wonderment" is also required. This wonder is not an absent-minded gaping at the world; "rather it is a kind of joyful harmony. Wonder involves . . . an awareness of belonging to a spiritual domain of being; it involves a sense of shared participation" (ibid.). Barrett uses the flow experience to analyze different cultural understandings of spirituality in the *Zhuangzi*'s performance stories (Barrett, "*Wuwei* and Flow," 685–91). Wonderment as a "joyous accompaniment" dissolves Turner's distinction between flow as individual experience and *communitas* as group experience because within the context of acting freely, the person, the group, and the environment are all harmoniously interpenetrating, such that even the observing audience achieves personhood by vicariously participating in the flow activity—for example, in the manner that the observer, Prince Wen Hui, realises how Ding's flow performance can be used to nurture life in the above narrative. Finally, the actor achieves and experiences a *power* in action through efficaciousness, spontaneity, and wonder-filled action (Deutsch, *Personhood*, 119). This effortless power is promoted by performances that elicit the flow experience. The degree to which people achieve effortless power in their performance displays their achievement of personhood. The more contrived people's actions are, the less authentic and sincere they appear to be.



#### 4. GOBLET WORD METAPHORS: FLOW IS FUNDAMENTALLY DISCURSIVE

As noted above, Zhuangzi's linguistic scepticism does not have him retreating into silence, at least not immediately. Zhuangzi is willing to deploy language as a teaching tool, without concern for precise referential meaning or veracity. Zhuangzi's discourse itself is a form of flow. Kim-Chong Chong appeals to the story of Butcher Ding as a metaphor for finding a free-flowing, non-rigid, or spontaneous dance-like performance that cannot be reduced to a set of rules (Chong, *Zhuangzi's Critique*, 59). As we saw above, the autochthonous character of the performance displaces the notion of rule-governed behaviour. Embracing the radical transformation of things, Zhuangzi can counter the Confucian world view of a fixed moral character to *tian* (天) or nature with an alternative world view of the rapid transformation of ephemeral things, constantly changing, coming into and going out of existence. Zhuangzi's use of metaphor evokes a sense of the unity of all things (Chong, *Zhuangzi's Critique*, 45, 63–64). That sense of unity or that which “pervades and unifies (*tongweiyi* 通為一)” is also found in the flow experiences of Butcher Ding and the other performance stories in the *Zhuangzi*.

In what sense are the mores of ritual action contrived or unnatural? The apparent dichotomy between artificial or constructed experiences formed by culture and society versus natural or authentic experiences is itself a distinction that needs to be ameliorated by Zhuangzi. In the opening passage of the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 6, Dazongshi (大宗師), the Great Venerable Master, proposes that there must be a sublimely transforming person (*zhenren* 真人) before there can be sublimely transforming knowledge (*zhenzhi* 真知) by focusing on the *zhenren's* equanimity of experience, that is, not feeling wet in water or hot in fire and not feeling anxiety in daily life or in sleep-dreams. In this sense the dichotomy between the artificial and the natural dissolves for the self-actualising person. Everything that comes from nature is natural, even the human, and everything thought of by human beings is contrived by them, so let it be.

Human knowledge is based on human bodily experiences. Neurophysiology can help philosophers better understand the brain's organic operations and its use of metaphor to learn (Taylor and Marienau, *Facilitating Learning*, 51–55). Zhuangzi's use of metaphor consciously or unconsciously hits the mark in how the brain learns. We can see in it an enlightened master-teacher's pedagogy to awaken the reader to a new perspective on life, to different ways of nurturing and caring for our short life spans that can be made even shorter by stress, dis-ease, and other forms of illness. Zhuangzi's metaphors help us identify with these types of acting freely in flow experiences, leading us towards them. In this sense, the Butcher Ding story is a metaphorical example of a self-actualising person who exhibits sublimely transforming

“knowledge” or “know-how” that is performed for others to see. Either literally or metaphorically we see the butcher's flow experience. There is a medical or health-care aspect to Zhuangzi's religious-philosophical teachings, and this is especially the case in the Yangsheng Zhu chapter.<sup>9</sup> The term *jie* (解) is commonly used in ancient medical texts, such as in the *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, the *Huangdi neijing* (黃帝內經), to mean “to cure,” “to cut loose” the patient from the affliction, and in the butcher story, *jie* (解) is a metaphor for cutting oneself loose from the restrictions of socially constructed norms. The free-flowing movements of Butcher Ding are grounded in the concrete reality of being in the natural flow zone, acting freely and spontaneously like the natural flow of *qi* (氣) energy within us. It is also a general metaphor for how one can live and nurture one's life in a natural manner that is focused, mindful, and free of anxiety or any imposed sense of strain, even while working in a dirty, bloody butcher shop.

Rur-bin Yang argues that Zhuangzi's performances bring about a state of “synesthesia” commonly found in religious and artistic experience.<sup>10</sup> Yang's use of synesthesia fits well with the flow experiences of graceful free actions. Yearley's description of these kinds of “performances” achieving a state of “intra-worldly mysticism” that “differs from most Western and many South Asian forms of mysticism” hits the mark, and he accurately describes the mental mindset as “effortless concentration, lack of fatigue, quick passage of time, and a disinterest in doing anything other than what is now being done” (Yearley, “Zhuangzi's Understanding of Skillfulness,” 160, 168). The flow of optimal, effortless action is expressed in the mysterious (*shen* 神) glow and dexterity of the cultivated person. The flow of *qi* energy is hylozoistic. If someone thinks that the psychological experience of being in the free-flow zone is distinct from a panentheic nature mysticism experience, then I propose that this is because our artificial focus depicts the psychological experience as being different from the religious or mystical experience. “Synesthesia” provides a bridge between the religious and the aesthetic experience. From my perspective, being in the flow zone is strongly similar if not essentially the same as the nature mysticism experience of engaging in the “pervading unity” with some aspect of nature or the unsummed totality of cosmic transformations.

There is no discernible difference between being at one with the free, graceful, flow-zone performance and being at one with some other aspect of nature. It is the experience that matters, not the limitations of our description or the limits of language in general. This is what Zhuangzi is trying to show us, namely that we need to forget the words after we have grasped the meaning. Chong makes a similar point, saying, “Zhuangzi warns against being attached to absolute distinctions and having fixed conceptions” (Chong, *Zhuangzi's Critique*, 82). Moreover, the sublimely transforming person can harmonise the natural and the human by maintaining a calm attitude,

a still, reflective, and empty heart-mind as exemplified by Butcher Ding (ibid.).

In this sense the Butcher Ding story is “empty” and leaves us with nothing more than a picture of, or a pointer towards, the free-flow-zone performance. It is a metaphor for the “just do it” attitude that is free, easy, natural, spontaneous activity, such as rambling (*you 遊*), body surfing in the rapids, catching bugs, carving wood, painting, or butchering. The function of the metaphor of Zhuangzi’s goblet words (*zhiyan 卮言*) is to empty the words, the story, and the mindful reader of attachment to artificial constructs, especially true and false or right and wrong (*shi fei 是非*). The *Zhuangzi* uses language not to make claims or to state propositions that can or should be tested for their veracity; Zhuangzi uses words in “a spontaneous and non-judgmental nature that resists being pinned down to any position” (Chong, *Zhuangzi’s Critique*, 108).

The non-judgemental mindset of being able to hold a position of no ordinary position is further developed by Zhuangzi in two ways. First, the “natural heart-mind” (what Zen refers to as the “everyday mind”), *chang xin* (常心) or constant mind, as opposed to the preconceived socialised heart-mind, *cheng xin* (成心), operates like a mirror or calm water, reflecting without storing what is present. Second, the metaphorical function of the goblet words is itself empty and free flowing. The *Zhuangzi* uses both approaches to present a position of no ordinary position. Shuen-fu Lin proposes that “*Zhi yan*, then, is speech that is natural, unpremeditated, free from preconceived values, always responding to the changing situations in the flow of discourse, and always returning the mind to its original state of emptiness as soon as a speech act is completed.”<sup>11</sup>

The flow experience is fundamentally discursive. Lin shows us that the Butcher Ding story and the other performance stories in general are in a sense “empty.” They are especially devoid of any theory of truth per se. Hans-Georg Moeller comes to a similar conclusion by using Wittgenstein’s own admission that his approach to writing philosophy is based on discourse as “criss-crossing” flow; that is, Wittgenstein’s writing became a carefree meandering (*you 遊*) rather than systematic theory (Moeller, “Rambling without Destination”). In a similar fashion, the performance stories lead the reader to engage in a free-flow activity, first, vicariously in reading the story, and then to engage the world in our daily lives with the ability to ramble freely, beyond effort in mindful concentration. Such is the outcome of Zhuangzi’s bimodal, non-dual, correlative thinking coupled with passive and active meditation.

The free-flow-zone experience and other forms of meditation depicted in the *Zhuangzi* offer ways to get beyond the limitations of one’s perspective by merging with the Great Pervade, the ongoing process of transformation. Getting beyond the limitation of one’s own perspective opens new horizons for

experiencing oneself and the world differently. This kind of personal transformation puts the practitioner in touch with a wider perspective and a different way of experiencing the world and its creatures. “This cognition is the culmination of an apophatic practice” (Roth, *Original Tao*, 154). Daoist meditation practices continued to develop after the *Zhuangzi*, with inner alchemy and other forms of mediation.<sup>12</sup> The narrative of Butcher Ding is best understood as a metaphorical guide to enter the free-flow zone ourselves.

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#### NOTES

1. Adapted by the author from the following translations: Zhuangzi, *Concordance*, 3/7–8/2–12; Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 63–64; Mair, *Wandering*, 26–27; Hamill and Seaton, *Essential Chuang Tzu*, 19–20; Graziani, “Princes Awake in Kitchens,” 63.
2. Kaufman, Glass, and Arukoff, “Evaluation of Mindful Sport”; Martinez and Scott, “Trail and Ultra-Running.”
3. Jochim, “Say No to No Self,” 62; Yearley, “Zhuangzi’s Understanding of Skillfulness,” 160.
4. Cited in Chong, *Zhuangzi’s Critique*, 7. Chow, “Original Meaning of Yangsheng zhu.”
5. Zhuangzi, *Concordance*, 7/3/1–2; modifying Watson, *Complete Works*, 50; Graham, *Chuang-tzu*, 62; Mair, *Wandering*, 25–26; Hamill and Seaton, *Essential Chuang Tzu*, 19.
6. See *Zhuangzi*, chapter 6, for example.
7. Watson, *Complete Works*, 19, 74; Chong, *Zhuangzi’s Critique*, 128.
8. Turner, *From Ritual*, 56, and see Barrett, “*Wuwei* and Flow,” 692.
9. Graziani, “Princes Awake in Kitchens,” 63–65; Velleman, “Way of the Wanton,” 187–88; Nelson, “Questioning Dao,” 12; Kohn, *Science and the Dao*.
10. Yang, “From ‘Merging the Body,’” 97; Chong, *Zhuangzi’s Critique*, 80.
11. Lin, “Language of the Inner Chapters,” 65; Chong, *Zhuangzi’s Critique*, 109.
12. Kohn, *Healing Exercises*, “Forget or Not Forget,” *Science and the Dao*; Eskildsen, *Daoism, Meditation*.

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## Introduction

Karyn Lai and Wai Wai Chiu

The *Zhuangzi* occupies an important place in Chinese intellectual history not least because it interrogates a model of life lived in conformity with conventional pursuits and practices. It offers stories that depict the elegant and even daemonic performances of skill masters who undertake ordinary activities such as swimming, woodcarving, and cicada-catching. These wonderful displays of skill communicate the masters' absorption in their respective activities, their mental acuity and physical agility, and the brilliance of their performances.

The chapters in this volume delve into the *Zhuangzi*'s intriguing views on skill, including especially those expressed in its fascinating stories of craftsmanship. These wonderfully imaginative stories operate at a range of levels and are often referred to as the "skill stories". The craftsmen include a butcher, a wheel maker, a cicada catcher, a ferryman, a trainer of fighting cocks, a swimmer, a bell stand maker, a scribe, and a forger of buckles. The text presents enthralling accounts of their practice, often executed with spellbinding fluency, and sometimes with awe-inspiring outcomes such as swimming in treacherous cascades and butchering without hacking, or in producing beautiful items such as bell stands. Distinctively, the *Zhuangzi* highlights the responsiveness of these craftsmen to the world within which they live and act. And yet, at other times, such as in the story of the fighting cocks and the scribe, it seems that the moral of the stories is to not respond or, at least, not in conventional ways.

What messages are these stories attempting to convey? The aim of this volume is to explore these multifaceted stories and accounts of skill in the text and to unpack them sensitively, in consideration of the text's intellectual context and its intended effect on readers. This text dates from the fourth century BCE. It is named after its putative author, *Zhuangzi*,<sup>1</sup> and has been