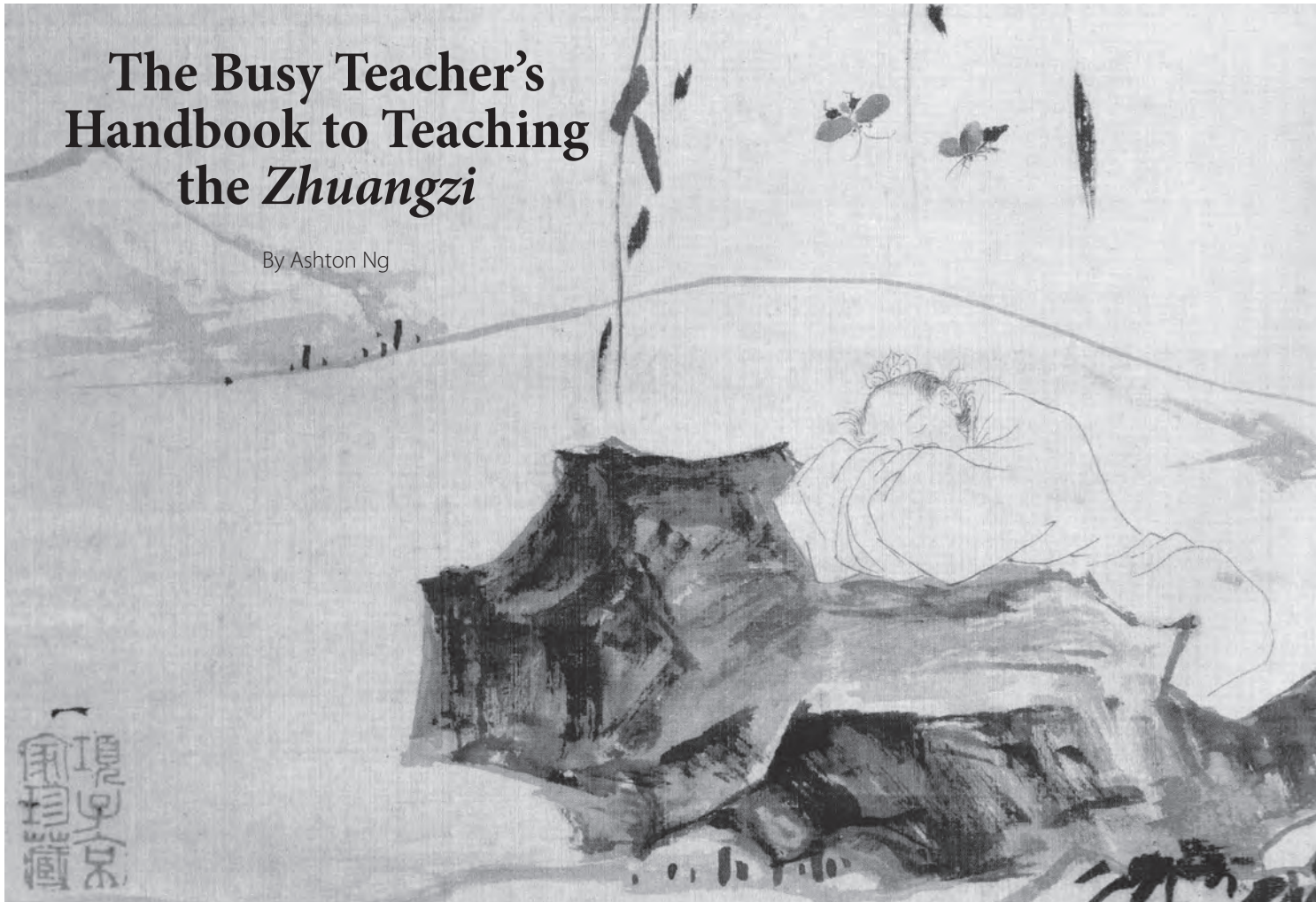


Editor's Note: Bracketed entries within *Zhuangzi* passages are the author's additional comments.

## The Busy Teacher's Handbook to Teaching the *Zhuangzi*

By Ashton Ng



*Zhuangzi Dreaming of a Butterfly*. Mid-sixteenth century, ink on silk. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/yd43k87o>.

The *Zhuangzi* ranks amongst the greatest Chinese literary masterpieces. Written in China's Warring States period (475–221 BCE), its vivid allegories have profoundly influenced the most preeminent of Chinese thinkers for over two millennia. In this essay, I present a sample of the *Zhuangzi*'s key ideas on life and death, language and knowledge, and time and the universe that will interest the twenty-first century student. I will also provide the classical allegories behind these learning points so that teachers can facilitate lively discussions on *Zhuangzi* excerpts.

### All Things Are Impermanent

The *Zhuangzi* likens the world to a grand smelting pot. All things have only a brief life span. When our life span is up, we reenter to be mixed with other things, forming yet more new things, and the cycle continues. One can only appear momentarily from the grand smelting pot, enjoy one's fleeting existence, and then is heard no more.

Two thousand years after the *Zhuangzi*, modern science found that the matter that constitutes our bodies actually did exist long before we were born and will continue to exist after we are gone, only in different forms. Remarkably, the *Zhuangzi*'s worldview does not violate the first law of thermodynamics: in a closed system (such as the universe), the total amount of energy in existence is always the same, but the form it takes is continuously changing.<sup>1</sup> As Carl Sagan (1934–1996), the great science popularizer, said: "The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood,

the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of star stuff."<sup>2</sup> Put another way, "If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe."<sup>3</sup>

The metaphor of the grand smelting pot also encourages us to accept our *natural condition*: we can exist only in the forms that we are given. An ordinary bird ought not insist that it will transform into a phoenix, while an ordinary piece of metal ought not insist that it be made into a precious sword. Likewise, a person ought not insist that he or she be crafted into certain *constructed* ideals, violating our *natural condition*:

### The *Zhuangzi* (excerpted from chapter 6)

Suppose a Great Smelter were casting metal.

If the metal leaps into the air, and says, "I must become Moye [the fabled sword]!" the Great Smelter would surely regard it as inauspicious metal.

If, once [the Great Smelter] forges a human form, and it says, "I must become a human! I must become a human!" the creative forces of the world would surely regard it as an inauspicious person.

Now, once we regard heaven and earth as a great smelting pot, and the creative forces a Great Smelter, where would we be unable to go [since things transform in infinite ways]?

We are born from a quiet sleep, and we die to a calm awakening.<sup>4</sup>

In this excerpt, the *Zhuangzi* pokes fun at artificially constructed notions of what one must do in order to be “human.” The *Zhuangzi* was written in an age of intellectual flourishing, during which numerous thinkers promulgated their own ideals of human behavior. Of these thinkers, Confucius (Kongzi, 551–479 BCE) and his associates advocated the cultivation of virtues such as benevolence and righteousness, so that one may eventually become a *junzi*, or “ideal gentleman.” To these thinkers, virtues are the “very little” that differs humans from beasts, and yet “the common folk discard these, (whereas) the ideal gentleman preserves these.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, merely having a human form does not make one human. As argued by Mencius (Mengzi, 372–289 BCE), the great follower of Confucius, “To lack commiseration, that would be inhuman; to lack shame, that would be inhuman; to lack humility, that would be inhuman; and to lack the notions of right and wrong, that would be inhuman.”<sup>6</sup>

The *Zhuangzi* pokes fun at Confucius’ and Mencius’ constructed notions of becoming “human,” parodying them as “inauspicious” persons yelling, “I must become a human! I must become a human!” In the *Zhuangzi*’s worldview, being human is a natural condition, not a man-made ideal. The more we pursue manufactured ideals, the more we become blinded to our true sources of happiness.

In a twenty-first-century context, the *Zhuangzi* encourages us to ponder: What manufactured ideals are we forcing ourselves to attain? Why do we strive for such ideals? Do these ideals bring us lasting happiness? To what extent do you accept the physical form that you are given at birth? What do you find difficult to accept about yourself? Lastly, how would you wish to spend your brief existence in the world?

### What Is True Happiness?

What is wrong for ordinary metal to desire becoming crafted into a precious sword? The *Zhuangzi* points out that imposing artificial ideals on our natural selves often results in harm. It cites the story of an ancient Chinese ruler who, encountering a sea bird, escorted it to the most sacred temple, entertained it by performing the most hallowed music, and fed it with a feast of the best meats and wine. But the bird, looking depressed and sorrowful, did not touch so much as a slice of food or a cup of wine, and it died in three days.<sup>7</sup>

What nourishes a person will not nourish a bird. To be truly happy, a bird does not need man-made luxuries but, in the *Zhuangzi*’s words, to “roost in the deep forest, play among the banks and islands, float on the rivers and lakes, eat mudfish and minnows, follow the rest of the flock in flight and rest, and live in any way it chooses.”<sup>8</sup>

The problem is that man-made luxuries may not bring true happiness even to humans. The *Zhuangzi* discusses the irony of chasing artificial ideals—which are believed to bring happiness—but receiving suffering instead:

#### The *Zhuangzi* (excerpted from chapter 18)

*This is what the world honors: wealth, eminence, longevity, and a good reputation.*

*This is what the world rejoices in: a life of comfort, rich food, fine clothes, beautiful sights, and sweet sounds.*

*This is what it looks down on: poverty, lowliness, dying early, and a bad reputation.*

*This is what it finds bitter: a life without comfort, a mouth without rich food, a body without fine clothes, eyes without beautiful sights, and ears without sweet sounds.*

*People who can’t get these things fret a great deal and are afraid—this is a stupid way to treat the body.*

*People who are rich wear themselves out rushing around on business, piling up more wealth than they could ever use—this is a superficial way to treat the body.*

## *The Zhuangzi was written in an age of intellectual flourishing, during which numerous thinkers promulgated their own ideals of human behavior.*

*People who are eminent spend night and day scheming and wondering whether they are doing right—this is a shoddy way to treat the body.*

*Man lives his life in company with worry. Those with longevity live until they are dull and doddering, worrying for a long time instead of dying; such bitterness! This is a callous way to treat the body.<sup>9</sup>*

This passage points out a tragedy found not just two millennia ago, but also in the twenty-first century: individuals spending the bulk of their brief existence fretting over riches, fame, and other man-made ideals, while believing that they are striving for happiness. Or, as William Shakespeare described, “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing.”<sup>10</sup>

What, then, is true happiness? Whatever it is, the *Zhuangzi* expresses skepticism that happiness lies in the things to which people “all make a mad dash for, racing around as though they couldn’t stop.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps true happiness lies in accepting our *natural state* and thoroughly enjoying the fact of even being *alive*—for we only have an hour onstage before we are heard no more. When one fully accepts life as it naturally is—including the fact that life will inevitably end—one is at peace, even in the face of death.

### Should We Fear Death?

All things exist only briefly in their current forms before returning to the smelting pot to be remodeled into new forms. Thus, death is necessary for future life. In a forest, for example, the remains of animals and plants fertilize the earth, thereby becoming nutrients for other lifeforms and allowing life to perpetuate.

When read in context, the *Zhuangzi*’s metaphor of the grand smelting pot reminds us that there is no need to fear death. The metaphor of the grand smelting pot comes immediately after the following excerpt:

#### The *Zhuangzi* (excerpted from chapter 6)

*Soon, Zilai fell ill, and he lay gasping at the point of death, while his wife and children surrounded him and wept.*

*Zili went to visit him and said to them:*

*“Hush! Get out of the way! Do not fear transformation!”*

*[Flippantly] leaning against the door, he said to the dying Zilai:*

*“Great indeed are the creative forces of the world!*

*What shall they make you into?*

*Where shall they take you?*

*Will you become the liver of a rat?*

*Will you become the arm of an insect?”*

The *Zhuangzi*’s concept of *hua* (transformation) refers to the mysterious process of things becoming remodeled into new forms. This results in the impermanence of all things. Zilai’s family members see death as an eternal farewell and thus weep over their father’s imminent end. Zili, however, sees death as the beginning of infinite forms of new life. He speaks to his dying friend in the most casual manner, unceremoniously leaning against the door instead of standing or sitting properly.

Zilai, too, does not fear his own imminent death, fully accepting it as a part of life:



*The Zhuangzi astutely captures a truth  
of all living things—we struggle to  
comprehend things that are too  
far beyond our brief existence.*

**The Zhuangzi (excerpted from chapter 6)**

Zilai said, “The relationship between a child and his parents is as such: whenever the parents tell their child to go east, west, south, or north, the child obeys as soon as he is commanded. The relationship between humans and nature’s laws is no less. Now that nature’s laws have brought me to the brink of death, if I do not obey, then it is I who is resisting; what fault have they? The great laws of nature burdens me with a physical form, belabors me with life, lightens my burden with old age, and rests me with death. Thus, the reasons why I think well of life are those that lead me to think well of death.”

Death is an inseparable part of our natural condition. Resisting death is as obstinate an action as defying one’s parents, which Chinese culture stigmatizes. It is myopic to single out death as an extraordinary occurrence and to weep over it. Death is, in fact, inextricable from life.

**The Zhuangzi (excerpted from chapter 6)**

Zisi, Ziyu, Zili, and Zilai were all four talking together, saying: “He who can see non-existence as the ‘head,’ life as the ‘spine,’ and death as the ‘tailbone’; he who sees that life and death, existence and annihilation are parts of a singular body; I shall be friends with him!” The four men looked at one another and laughed, with none in disagreement; they eventually became friends.

Before we were born, we resided in the state of “non-existence,” waiting to be transformed into some form of existence. Instead of myopically focusing on one’s life span, the *Zhuangzi* encourages us to take a step back and see one’s non-existence, life, and death as a seamless continuity. It is humans who artificially divide one thing into three disparate parts.

When Zhuangzi (c. 369–286 BCE) himself—traditionally regarded as the *Zhuangzi*’s author—faced the death of his wife, he sat “with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing.<sup>12</sup> When criticized, he said:

**The Zhuangzi (excerpted from chapter 18)**

When she first died, how could I alone have no sorrow?  
I looked back to her beginning and the time before she had life. Not only the time before she had life, but before she had a physical form. Not only the time before she had a physical form, but before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery, a change took place and she had a spirit. Her spirit changed and she had a physical form. Her physical form changed and she had life. Now, another change took place and she is dead. This progression is like that of the four seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter.<sup>13</sup>

Do you fear death? Death terrifies many because it means the utter termination of all that one knows. The *Zhuangzi* encourages readers to look

beyond the candle of life and ponder what the candle was before it was lit, and what it will become after its flame has been extinguished.

**Can Language Convey All Forms of Knowledge?**

No textbook on tennis can teach you to play like Roger Federer. No degree in politics can teach you to govern America like President Abraham Lincoln. No fighting manual can teach you to fight like Bruce Lee. Much that we know can only be *experienced*, but not conveyed:

**The Zhuangzi (excerpted from chapter 13)**

Lord Huan was reading a book in the hall.  
Wheelwright Bian was chiseling a wheel before the hall. He laid down his mallet and chisel, ascended the hall, and asked, “I venture to ask Your Lordship whose words you are reading?”  
The lord said, “The words of the sages.”  
“Are those sages alive?” Bian said.  
The lord said, “They are dead.”  
“Then what you, my lord, are reading are merely the rubbish of the ancients!”  
Lord Huan said, “I am reading; how should a wheelwright be in any position to comment? If you have an explanation, very well; if not, you shall die.”  
Wheelwright Bian said, “I, your servant, look at it from the perspective of my occupation. In chiseling a wheel, if my actions are slow, the wheel will be slippery and fragile; if my actions are quick, the wheel will be uneven and not fit. To be neither too slow nor too fast; this is acquired through one’s hands and experienced through one’s heart. One’s mouth cannot articulate it. There is a knack in it. I cannot teach the knack to my son, nor can my son receive it from me. Hence, I am seventy but still making wheels in my old age. The ancients, as well as that which was impossible for them to convey, are dead and gone. This being so, then what you, my lord, are reading is but the rubbish of the ancients!”

This being so, then isn’t the *Zhuangzi* itself also the “rubbish of the ancients”? Intriguingly, the *Zhuangzi* uses language to convey the point that language cannot convey all knowledge. The *Zhuangzi*’s point is that language is only a tool for obtaining partial knowledge, and is not knowledge itself. Just as fish traps and rabbit snares can be discarded once their prey is caught, words can be forgotten once their meaning is obtained. In chapter 26, the *Zhuangzi* asks, “Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?<sup>14</sup>

**Is There Knowledge beyond Human Comprehension?**

Zhuangzi did not know the true age of either the universe or the earth, but that did not stop him from imagining a grand timescale of a million years.

**The Zhuangzi (excerpted from chapter 1)**

Those with minuscule knowledge cannot comprehend those with immense knowledge.  
Those with a minuscule life span cannot comprehend those with an immense life span.  
How can this be known?  
The *zhaojun* [“morning mushroom,” which lives for a few hours in the early morning and dies at dawn] cannot comprehend the changing of the days.  
The *huigu* [a cicada which lives only for a season] cannot comprehend the changing of the years. These are examples of minuscule life spans.

*In the south of Chu [a southern Chinese state] there lives a tree named Mingling, to which a thousand years are like one year to a human.*

*In distant antiquity, there lived a tree named Dachun, to which sixteen thousand years are like one year to a human. These are instances of immense life spans.*

*Yet Pengzu [a mythical man reputed to have lived for 800 years] remains famous to this day for his long life.*

*The people regard him as the yardstick [for longevity].*

*Is this not tragic!*

The *Zhuangzi* astutely captures a truth of all living things—we struggle to comprehend things that are too far beyond our brief existence. The *Zhuangzi* muses that the *zhaojun*, which lives only for a few hours in the early morning before sunrise, cannot truly comprehend the concept of two days. Likewise, human beings, who rarely live past a century, cannot truly grasp the immensity of millennia. There is much beyond human comprehension, just as human civilization is beyond the comprehension of termites. Are humanity's most colossal problems truly consequential in the grand scheme of things?

#### Are We in the Real World?

##### The *Zhuangzi* (excerpted from chapter 2)

*In the past, Zhuang Zhou dreamt that he was a butterfly: a lively and happy butterfly flying about, it did not know that it was Zhuang Zhou.*

*Suddenly he awoke, and he was alarmed to realize that he was Zhuang Zhou.*

*Did Zhuang Zhou dream that he was a butterfly, or did a butterfly dream that it was Zhuang Zhou?*

A mysterious quality of dreams is that we often do not realize that we are in one. It is only when we awaken that we learn that we were deceived by a hyperrealistic simulation. How, then, do we know that life itself is not a hyperrealistic dream?

If we cannot answer this most fundamental of questions, what can we confidently know about anything else? Through the lifelike imagery of a fluttering butterfly, the *Zhuangzi* reminds us that even the most convincing truths may turn out to be lies. Our greatest efforts to impose boundaries—such as those between truth and falsehood, big and small, old and young, and others—may turn out to be entirely futile.

On a sidenote: in recent years, the belief that we live in a digital simulation—termed the “simulation theory”—is indeed espoused by some of the twenty-first century’s most preeminent figures. In 2016, visionary and entrepreneur Elon Musk publicly advanced the following argument: In forty years, our games have advanced from Pong—“two rectangles and a dot”—to “photorealistic, 3-D simulations with millions of people playing simultaneously, and it’s getting better every year.” Assuming even a tiny rate of improvement, “games will become indistinguishable from reality,” and there will likely be billions of computers on which such games can be played. Musk concludes, “It would seem to follow that the odds that we’re in base reality is one in billions. Tell me what’s wrong with that argument?”<sup>15</sup>

Writing on the simulation theory, physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson concurred in 2018: “I wish I could summon a strong argument against it, but I can find none.”<sup>16</sup> Remarkably, the *Zhuangzi* mused about this very difficulty of knowing whether we live in the real world, but without the knowledge of computers or virtual reality. In a twenty-first-century context, the *Zhuangzi*’s allegory of the butterfly in a dream reminds us to challenge our most deeply cherished convictions. What do we most certainly know to be true? Why do we think these are true? What if they are not true?

#### Is the Sky Truly Blue?

##### The *Zhuangzi* (excerpted from chapter 1)

*The sky appears azure, but is that its true color?*

*Or is it because it is so far away that the peng [a gigantic, mythical bird that flies infinitely high into the sky] has no means by which to see its end?*

*When the peng looks down, then the earth also appears azure, for the same reason.*

With modern airplanes, we can fly into the clouds and test the *Zhuangzi*’s speculation. True enough, when viewed from an airplane, the sky continues to appear blue. Given sufficient altitude, the Earth, too, appears blue even if the land and sea are not exactly blue. Modern science explains that the cloudless sky appears blue, because air molecules scatter blue light from the sun more than they scatter red light. The *Zhuangzi* displays an astonishing form of literary imagination that does not contradict the scientific findings from two millennia later.

In our modern context, the *Zhuangzi* challenges us to consider the *perspective* from which we cast judgments. Consider this: in football (soccer) if a referee gives a red card to your opponent, that certainly seems like a good call—but not if the red card goes to you. Are our judgments true, or are we merely speaking from our *positions*? Which of our judgments are influenced by our limited perspectives?

#### Is the Universe Finite?

##### The *Zhuangzi* (excerpted from chapter 1)

*King Tang asks [his adviser] Ji:*

*“Do the six directions [north, south, east, west, upward and downward] meet an end?”*

*Ji says: “Outside the boundaries of the infinite universe, lies still more infinite space.”*

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The *Zhuangzi* asks a question that is profound even in the modern age: does the physical universe extend infinitely outward? In 1925, American astronomer Edwin Hubble (1889–1953) observed that the further away a galaxy is from us, the greater its speed. This became known as Hubble’s law and implies that the universe is expanding.<sup>17</sup> However, it remains inconclusive if the universe is expanding infinitely, because the universe is almost certainly bigger than what we can observe.<sup>18</sup> Like modern intellectuals, the *Zhuangzi* confronts questions beyond its time. We, too, ought to have the courage to ponder about the most difficult questions, even if the answers may only arrive in future millennia.

### Conclusion

In summary, the *Zhuangzi* has marveled Chinese thinkers with its grand views of life and death, language and knowledge, and time and the universe. The *Zhuangzi* explores these profound themes through vivid, accessible allegories and anecdotes, which can be used by teachers to guide their students in pursuing intellectual inquiry. It is for this reason that I have written a guide to a sample of the *Zhuangzi*’s key ideas and classic excerpts.

Other key themes from the *Zhuangzi* include: Can a human ever empathize with an animal? Is morality relative or absolute? How large was China relative to the world? How much do we know compared to what we do not know? How important is harmony? Is the sense of self an illusion? And many more questions, which have intrigued the greatest thinkers of Chinese antiquity and continue to provoke Chinese minds today. ■

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

An excellent English translation of the *Zhuangzi* has been composed by Burton Watson in his *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). A shorter translation of selected chapters has also been done by the same translator in *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

In China, a comic book version of the *Zhuangzi*—illustrated by the prominent cartoonist C. C. Tsai—is a very popular educational resource. This resource has been translated into English and is titled *Zhuangzi: The Way of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

Lastly, an accessible overview of philosophical Daoism can be found at the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://www.iep.utm.edu/daoism/>).


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