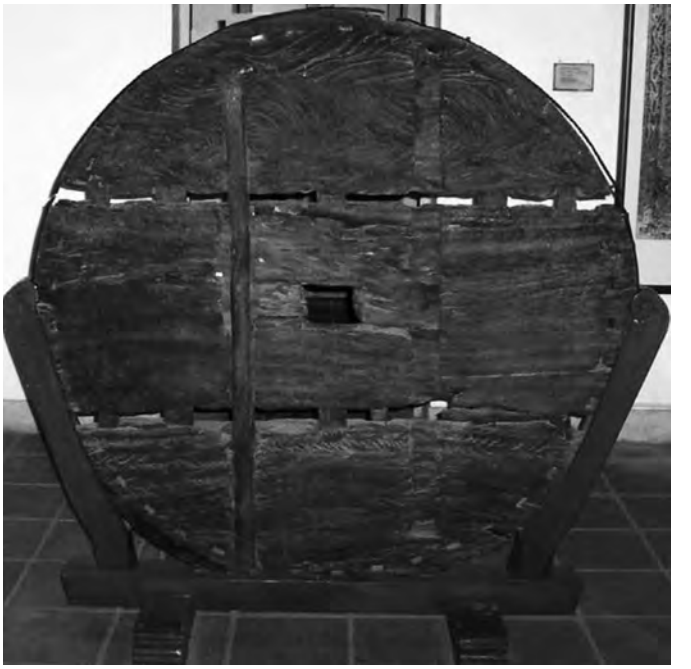
The Wheelwright and the Butcher

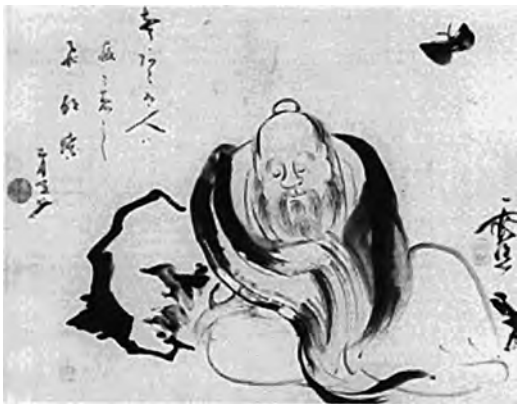
Master Zhuang's Recipe for Mindful Living

By Charles B. Jones

Some years ago, I was taking a stroll through a museum in the town of Tainan, the old capital of the island of Taiwan. In one room, I came across a large cart wheel carved out of solid wood (see photo). It was about five feet in diameter and consisted of three separate pieces joined together. Most people probably would not have been overly excited to see such a mundane artifact, but I was immediately struck by this wheel because it answered a question that had long rattled at the back of my mind: Did people ever really carve wagon wheels in this way, as Master Zhuang (*Zhuang Zi*) had described the character of the wheelwright doing in his book?



Wooden cart wheel in Tainan Museum. Photo: Charles B. Jones.



Master Zhuang. Source: http://www.iep.utm.edu/zhuangzi/.

This mattered to me as a teacher of East Asian religions. I have long lectured on Master Zhuang's text, and it always seemed to me that the stories he told of humble artisans such as wheelwrights, butchers, and makers of belt buckles confronting aristocrats and intellectuals provided the climax of a long and detailed argument regarding the best way to live. Instead of the Confucian emphasis on learning and ritual as the main ingredients of a worthwhile life, Master Zhuang presented images of skills honed and practiced over a lifetime as a counterpoint.

Here is one such story. The dialogue between Duke Huan and the wheelwright Bian comes from chapter thirteen, "The Way of Heaven (*tiandao*)" of the book of *Master Zhuang*, and I present Angus Graham's translation:

> Duke Huan was reading a book at the top of the hall, wheelwright Bian was chipping a wheel at the bottom of the hall. He put aside his mallet and chisel and went up to ask Duke Huan:
>
> *May I ask what words my lord is reading?*
>
> *The words of a sage.*
>
> *Is the sage alive?*
>
> *He's dead.*
>
> *In that case what my lord is reading is the dregs of the men of old, isn't it?*
>
> *What business is it of a wheelwright to criticize what I read? If you can explain yourself, well and good. If not, you die.*
>
> *Speaking for myself, I see it in terms of my own work. If I chip at a wheel too slowly, the chisel slides and does not grip; if too fast, it jams and catches in the wood. Not too slow, not too fast; I feel it in the hand and respond from the heart, the mouth cannot put it into words, there is a knack in it somewhere which I cannot convey to my son and which my son cannot learn from me. That is how through my seventy years I have grown old chipping at wheels. The men of old and their untransmittable message are dead. Then what my lord is reading is the dregs of the men of old, isn't it?*[1]

There are two actors here, and each has something to tell us, according to Master Zhuang. Let's begin with Duke Huan. He is on his throne, reading a book he describes as containing "the words of a sage." Throughout much of the text of Master Zhuang, Confucius and his followers come in

for a good bit of ribbing, and Master Zhuang clearly believed that the Confucian project of educating men in order to make them responsible moral agents and fit for government was misguided. It would be reasonable to assume, then, that the reader is meant to understand that the duke is reading a Confucian text in order to learn the way to live and to govern.

Not only that, but there is good reason to think that Master Zhuang had been active in political and intellectual affairs prior to his retreat from that world into his rustic hut. He was sought after as a court official and probably witnessed the debates that happened in the Jixia Academy, a place where the government of the state of Qi gathered the best and the brightest to debate their ideas. Master Zhuang had, therefore, seen both the study of classic texts and formal debate used as ways to determine the best way to live, and he came away convinced that verbal discourse simply could not do the trick. Why not?

Not, as one might suspect, because he was a mystic who denied the power of words to communicate anything useful. Far from it. He once commented, "Saying is not blowing breath, saying says something." The problem was that his peers tried to use words as a means of making final, non-arbitrary determinations, and this is where they get into trouble. Master Zhuang concludes this quotation by stating, ". . . the only trouble is that what it says is never fixed."[2] He knew that the meanings of words were arbitrary and subjective, and so formal debate, which required that words have fixed and precise meanings, was doomed from the start. Take a word like "beauty," for instance. People may have an idea of what constitutes feminine beauty and might agree that the legendary Mao Qiang and Lady Li were indeed lovely; but deer, fish, and birds regard them as decidedly unattractive and possibly dangerous and get away from them as soon as they approach. So are they beautiful, or aren't they? It depends on who is defining "beauty."

Words and, by extension, books may be good at imparting information, but they do so at the expense of carving reality into static categories and abstracting them from the world of lived experience onto the page. As the wheelwright says, the sages may have been writing down wisdom gained from their own lives and experiences, but once on the page, those lives and experiences die and lose their immediacy. The best Duke Huan can hope to gain from reading their words is knowledge of the text itself. Master Zhuang does not believe he will gain the wisdom necessary to live or rule well.

What of the wheelwright? We may note a few obvious points in his speech that contrast directly with the duke's bookish habits. The wheelwright learns by doing, not by reading. Unlike the sages who try to communicate their knowledge to future generations, the wheelwright denies that he can teach his skill, even to his son. Based on these two observations, the wheelwright seems to be implying that the duke would be better off putting the book down and engaging directly in the activities of ruling and living.

Perhaps this is lesson enough, but as one reads Master Zhuang's text, one becomes aware of the richness of his parables. His examples are not idly chosen, and a closer examination usually reveals new details that help flesh out his teaching about the good life. There are elements to the story of the wheelwright that I might never have noticed had I not worked as a carpenter myself for a while and had to learn to handle a mallet and chisel.

Notice that the wheelwright is not just a carpenter making different things from wood. He makes *wheels*, and that matters. While the wheelwright only mentions the challenge of not hitting the chisel too softly or too forcibly, I can tell you that the matter is far more complicated than that. Carving a solid wooden wheel entails chipping a circular edge from material with a straight grain. This means that the angle of the grain to the circumference is different at all points around the edge. The wheelwright needs to consider every aspect of every stroke of the chisel. At what angle should he hold the chisel? How hard should he strike it? If he hits too hard straight into the grain, he risks shearing off a large chunk of wood and ruining the whole project. If he hits straight down across the grain, he will only make a small and useless dent in the wood.

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Is it possible to write a book on the carving of wheels? Maybe, but its utility would be very limited. Try to imagine a book on carving wagon wheels so thorough that, having read it, you could pick up your chisel and mallet and turn out a perfect wheel the first time. This seems about as feasible as writing a book on playing the piano that will enable the reader to play Chopin right away. The reason should be clear: Carving wheels (and playing the piano) are not matters of knowledge but of skill. One acquires skills through practice, not reading. The only way the wheelwright learned his trade was by doing it, no doubt flubbing his first few attempts before he got it right.

The fact that the angle of the grain to the circumference is never the same in any two points seems to indicate another important facet of Master Zhuang's teaching: that no two moments in one's life are ever so identical that the same rule will do for both. Just as every point along the edge requires a unique combination of angle and force, so every moment of one's life presents one with situations that one must assess and manage in unique ways. Books can only present rules to be mechanically applied in every situation, but here Master Zhuang seems to be telling the reader that such rules, duly studied and memorized, will not do for every situation. One can never stop paying attention to the situation at hand in the present moment and adjusting one's approach according to its own unique parameters.

Seen in this light, then, it becomes evident that the wheelwright is not just telling the duke to put the book down and engage with life directly. As Master Zhuang's mouthpiece, he is calling into question the entire project of reading books as a way of learning how to deal with one's life. He is saying that life is a skill, and the only way to master that skill is to practice it by living and learning by experience to make the myriad minor adjustments one must employ in every moment and every situation.

But there is more to Master Zhuang's message than that, and to gain further understanding, we must turn to another story of an ordinary artisan practicing his ordinary skill in an extraordinary manner. Let us hear the longer and more complex story of the butcher Cook Ding.

> *Cook Ding was carving an ox for Lord Wen-hui. As his hand slapped, shoulder lunged, foot stamped, knee crooked, with a hiss! With a thud! The brandished blade as it slicked never missed the rhythm, now in time with the Mulberry Forest dance, now with an orchestra playing the Jing-shou.*
>
> *Oh, excellent! said Lord Wen-hui. That skill should attain such heights!*
>
> *What your servant cares about is the Way, I have left skill behind me. When I first began to carve oxen, I saw nothing but oxen wherever I looked. Three years more and I never saw an ox as a whole. Nowadays, I am in touch through the daemonic in me and do not*

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look with the eye. With the senses I know where to stop, the daemonic I desire to run its course. I rely on Heaven's structuring, cleave along the main seams, let myself be guided by the main cavities, go by what is inherently so. A ligament or tendon I never touch, not to mention solid bone. A good cook changes his chopper once a year, because he hacks. A common cook changes it once a month, because he smashes. Now I have had this chopper for nineteen years, and have taken apart several thousand oxen, but the edge is as though it were fresh from the grindstone. At that joint there is an interval, and the chopper's edge has no thickness; if you insert what has no thickness where there is an interval, then, what more could you ask, of course there is ample room to move the edge about. That's why after nineteen years the edge of my chopper is 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 chopper—and at one stroke the tangle has been unraveled, as a clod crumbles to the ground. I stand chopper in hand, look proudly round at everyone, dawdle to enjoy the triumph until I am quite satisfied, then clean the chopper and put it away.

Excellent! said Lord Wen-hui. Listening to the words of Cook Ding, I have learned from them how to nurture life.[3]

Several of the themes sounded in the story of the wheelwright and Duke Huan appear again here: attention to the present moment, the acquisition of skill by long years of practice, and the joy of mastery. However, the wheelwright never mentioned the edge of his chisel or told the duke how long he could work without sharpening it, but the butcher makes much of the nineteen years of work he has gotten out of his chopper without dulling its blade. What does that indicate?

I believe the chopper's blade stands for two different things. First, it seems to symbolize the present moment. As Cook Ding describes his approach to complex joints, he seems to tell the reader that he keeps his mind on the present position of the edge, not thinking of where it has been or of where it is going. Like the present moment, the edge of the knife has no dimension; it is infinitesimal or, as he puts it, has no thickness. To be aware of the position of the blade's edge at all times is to live squarely in the present moment. Second, the edge seems to stand in for the butcher (and the reader) himself. It is by navigating the knife's edge mindfully through the situation at hand that he always finds enough room to play and never strikes against a tendon, ligament, or bone. As he describes the feeling of triumph and ease he enjoys after getting through such a difficult pass, the butcher seems to be telling us that by following this practice, he too never loses his edge or grows dull.

As in other stories of artisans scattered throughout the *Zhuang Zi*, Master Zhuang seems to be telling us this: Life is a skill, and skills are learned through practice and experience. One cannot master the art of living simply by reading books, even though they may contain the words of sages. But beyond this, the wheelwright and the butcher also appear to tell us that the mastery of any skill brings with it a sense of flow, of spontaneity, of joy in performance. Think of any skill that you might use in life: playing a musical instrument, juggling, ice-skating, or anything of this sort. At first, it is awkward, but as you master it, it becomes second nature. You learn to adapt to subtle changes and ultimately achieve a sense that the skill is flowing effortlessly through you. Master Zhuang's message is that this, and not reading books and passing examinations, is how one learns to "nurture life." ■

NOTES

1. A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981), 139–140. I have adapted the text by substituting pinyin romanization for the older Wade-Giles and Americanizing the spelling.
2. Ibid., 52.
3. Ibid., 63–64.

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