Somedays 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?

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?!

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 Con-
fucian 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 read-
ing 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 bright-
est 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. Mas-
ter Zhuang concludes this quotation by stating, “… the only trouble is that
what it says is never fixed.” He knew that the meanings of words were ar-
bbitrary 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 fem-
inine beauty and might agree that the legendary Mao Qiang and Lady Li
were indeed lovely; but deer, fish, and birds regard them as decidedly un-
attractive 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 defin-
ing “beauty.”

Words and, by extension, books may be good at imparting informa-
tion, 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 wheel-
wright learns by doing, not by reading. Unlike the sages who try to com-
municate their knowledge to future generations, the wheelwright denies
that he can teach his skill, even to his son. Based on these two observa-
tions, 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 car-
penter 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 wheel-
wright 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 mate-
rail with a straight grain. This means that the angle of the grain to the cir-
cumference 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 ru-
ing the whole project. If he hits straight down across the grain, he will
only make a small and useless dent in the wood.

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 fea-
sible 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 Mas-
ter Zhuang’s teaching: that no two moments in one’s life are ever so iden-
tical 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 sit-
uation, 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 mo-
ment 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 say-
ing 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 adjust-
ments 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 artis-
an 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 where-
ever 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
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.

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.