

## SELECTED STORIES FROM THE BOOK OF CHUANG-TZU

### (1) Duke Huan and Wheelwright Pian

Duke Huan was reading a book in the hall. Wheelwright Pian, who had been chiseling a wheel in the courtyard below, set down his tools and climbed the stairs to ask Duke Huan, “may I ask you, my Lord, what is this you are reading?”

“The words of sages,” the Duke responded. The wheelwright continued, “Are these sages alive?” “They are already dead,” came the reply. Wheelwright Pian persisted, “That means you are reading the dregs of long gone men, aren’t you?” An exasperated Duke Huan retorted, “How does a wheelwright get to have opinions on the books I read? If you can explain yourself I’ll let it pass, otherwise, it’s death for you.”

Wheelwright Pian said, “In my case I see things in terms of my own work. When I chisel at a wheel, if I go slow the chisel slides and does not stay put; if I hurry, it jams and doesn’t move properly. When it is neither too slow nor too fast I can feel it in my hand and respond to it from my heart, and the wheels come out right. My mouth cannot describe it in words. You just have to know how it is. It is something that I cannot teach to my son and my son cannot learn it from me. So I have gone on for 70 years, growing old chiseling wheels. The men of old died in possession of what they knew and took their knowledge with them to the grave. And so, my Lord, what you are reading is only their dregs that they left behind.

### (2) Cook Ting and Duke Wen-hui

Cook Ting was cutting up a cow for Duke Wen-hui. With a touch of his hand, a lunge of his shoulder, a stamp of his tool, a bend of his knee, zip, his knife slithered, never missing a beat, in time to “the dance of the mulberry forest,” or the “Jingshou Suite.” Lord Wen-hui exclaimed, “How amazing that your skill has reached such heights!”

Cook Ting put down his knife and replied, “What I love is the Way (*Tao*), which goes beyond skill. When I first butchered cows, I saw nothing but cows. After three years, I never saw a meat as a whole. At present, I deal with it through my spirit rather than looking at it with my eyes. My perception stops and my spirit runs its course. I rely on the natural patterning, striking at the big openings leading into the main cavities. By following what is inherently so, I never cut a ligament or tendon, not to mention a bone. A good cook changes his knife once a year, because he cuts. An ordinary cook changes his knife every month, because he hacks. This knife of mine is 19 years old. It has carved several thousand cows, yet its blade looks like it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces in the joints, and the blade has no thickness. So when something with no thickness enters something with space it has plenty of room to move about. This is why after 19 years it seems fresh from the grindstone.

However, when I come to something complicated, I inspect it closely to prepare myself. I keep my eyes on what I am doing and proceed deliberately, moving my knife imperceptibly. Then with a stroke it all comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling. I stand there, my knife in my hand look all around, enjoying my success. Then I clean the knife and put it away.” Lord Wen-hui said, “Excellent! By listening to Cook Ting I learn how to nurture life.”