Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 10: Zhuangzi: Concentration of Spirit and Spiritual Fasting: Woodworker Qing, Yan Hui, and Artisan Ch’ui

Two additional motifs run as a thread through the stories in Chapter 19: the concentration of spirit and the spiritual exercise of fasting. We see these twin motifs in the story of Woodworker Qing. Like the story of the archer, the anecdote of the woodworker depicts an activity characterized by intense inner concentration not distracted by thoughts of praise and blame:

Woodworker Qing carved a piece of wood and made a bell stand, and when it was finished, everyone who saw marveled, for it seemed to be the work of gods or spirits. When the marquis of Lu saw it, he asked, "What art/technique is it you have?" Qing replied, "I am only a craftsman—how would I have any art? There is one thing, however. When I am going to make a bell stand, I never let it wear out my vital energy. I always fast in order to still my mind. When I have lasted for three days, I no longer have any thought of congratulations or rewards, of titles or stipends. When I have lasted for five days, I no longer have any thought of praise or blame, of skill or clumsiness. And when I have lasted for seven days, I am so still that I forget I have four limbs and a form and body. By that time, the ruler and his court no longer exist for me. My skill is concentrated and all outside distractions fade away. After that, I go into the mountain forest and examine the Heavenly nature of the trees. If I find one of superlative form, and I can see a bell stand there, I put my hand to the job of carving; if not, I let it go. This way I am simply matching up “Heaven” with “Heaven.” That’s probably the reason that people wonder if the results were not made by spirits."

When asked if he has any art, he replies, “I am only a craftsman—how would I have any art?” This suggests that the motif of denial of an art or a way is to some extent tongue in cheek, because the person does go on to say that there is a way or an art to what he or she is accomplishing. However this does not entail developing a technique or skill of craftsmanship, but letting go of the thought of anything external, such as reward, praise or blame. The woodworker forgets that he is crafting the stand for the royal court. He forgets his body. His skill or dexterity becomes concentrated and all outside distractions fade away. He is completely focused on the activity itself, with no thought of results. ii

The goal of fasting is to link inner with outer. Woodworker Qing examines the Heavenly nature of the trees, their innate nature. He waits until he finds a wood in which he can see the completed bell
stand; if he does not, he lets it go. His innate spirit, his connection with “Heaven” finds the innate Heavenly nature of the tree. This brings to mind the words of Michelangelo, “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”\textsuperscript{iii} The carver waits until he sees a bell stand inside the wood and sets it free. He allows himself to be guided by spirit.

The carver is careful not to deplete his vital energy (\textit{qi}). Zhuangzi describes focused concentration as a building up of vital \textit{qi} energy in one’s center, like the cicada catcher, of whom Confucius says “he keeps his will (\textit{zhi}) undivided and concentrates his spirit,” or in the translation of Ziporyn, “using his will undividedly, the spiritual in him converges and solidifies.”\textsuperscript{iv} Then we can allow the \textit{qi} energy to guide rather than rational deliberation.

The motif of fasting, too, serves as a link through these stories. The carver’s fasting is physical, while Yan Hui’s is the fasting of the mind, but they are both effected for the purpose of focusing one’s energy. Fasting for five days takes away thought of praise or blame, skill or clumsiness, so the fast of the body also serves as a fast of the mind. After seven days, he is so still that he forgets his limbs and body. We recall Yan Hui’s fasting of the mind:

\begin{quote}
Make your will one! Don’t listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don’t listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition (“the heart at what tallies with the thought”) but spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.\textsuperscript{v}
\end{quote}

Brook Ziporyn explains that the phrase “the mind stops at tallies” refers to “a bamboo tally broken into two irregular parts that can subsequently be fitted together to ensure a match. The mind gets no further than what it can tally, which is what matches it, or what pieces it can match together into a preconceived notion of a coherent whole.”\textsuperscript{vi} Ziporyn thus translates: “The mind is halted at whatever verifies its preconceptions. But the vital energy is an emptiness, a waiting for the presence of beings. The Course (\textit{Dao}) alone is what gathers in this emptiness. And it is this emptiness that is the fasting of the mind.”\textsuperscript{vii}
The purpose of fasting of the mind is thus to remove preconceptions and to enter a state of waiting. A spaciousness is created so that we can be open to whatever comes.\textsuperscript{viii} One is poised, ready to follow wherever the \textit{qi} or spirit may lead. The carver, too, approaches his work in a state of waiting; he waits until he finds the wood in which he can see the completed bell stand. If he went forth with his preconception of the perfect wood, he might miss the actual signs before him, which require the more subtle promptings of spirit. Fasting of the body and fasting of the mind both have the purpose of putting us in a state in which we are empty of intention and preconception, waiting until the external object presents itself to us with clarity.\textsuperscript{ix} The carver offers another example of what Czikszentmihalyi characterizes as the flow experience—completely focused engagement, without distractions. Once he has his own spirit focused and concentrated, he goes into the mountain forest to examine the Heavenly nature of the trees. It thus seems that the state of openness or emptiness (\textit{wu}) gives rise to action that is effortless and at times described as non-action (\textit{wu-wei}).

We see another example of an artisan guided by spirit in the story of artisan Ch’ui.

Artisan Ch’ui could draw as true as a compass or a T square because his fingers changed along with things; he didn’t let his mind get in the Way. Therefore his Spirit Tower remained unified and unobstructed.\textsuperscript{x}

Here the fingers—the physical senses—are guided by the deeper mind, the Spirit Tower, or Numinous Platform, not allowing the rational mind to get in the way. The Spirit Tower thus remained unified and unobstructed. Like the cook, cicada catcher, and wood carver, the artisan can bypass the activity of his rational mind, in favor of a deeper source of intentionality, focus, and direction.

You forget your feet when the shoes are comfortable. You forget your waist when the belt is comfortable. You forget right and wrong when the mind is comfortable. There is no change in what is inside, no knowing what is outside when the adjustment to events is comfortable. You begin with what is comfortable and never experience what is uncomfortable when you know the comfort of forgetting what is comfortable.\textsuperscript{xi}
When we are comfortable in our actions, we can forget that we are acting—just as we learn to sing, dance, ride, or practice a martial art in a natural, unforced, easy way. Our warmth, our responsiveness to people, as well as our activities of skills and crafts become effective and tension free.

There are two additional passages that depict a deeper level of being that guides living beings in effortless action, which Zhuangzi calls the Heavenly Mechanism.\(^{xi}\)

The True Person of ancient times slept without dreaming and awoke without worries; he simply ate what was put before him, and his breathing was deep and profound. The True Man breathes with his heels; the multitudes breathe with their throats. Oppressed and bent; they cough up their words as though they were retching. Those with deep passions and desires are shallow when it comes to their Heavenly mechanism (tianji)\(^{xiii}\)

Thus there is a more natural way of living and breathing, in which one allows something more profound to be in control than the heart-mind.\(^{xiv}\) The multitude are not in contact with the deepest breath and the heavenly mechanism. But certain other creatures are, as in the story of the millipede. A one legged creature is astounded by the skill required to manage ten thousand little legs. The millipede thus explains how he moves: “I just put into motion my Heavenly Mechanism, but I don’t know how it works.”\(^{xv}\) This kind of non-intentional mechanism is parallel to what is identified as spirit in the account of Cook Ding cutting up an ox. Of course most of us are unaware of how we breathe or walk; we have allowed something more spontaneous and natural to take over. When we learned to ride a bicycle, we had to follow a set prescriptive path of instructions, but it then became automatic, unforced, and natural. This is the heavenly mechanism. Ivanhoe would suggest that this is an example of ordinary unselfconsciousness, which is on a continuum with religious unselfconsciousness.\(^{xvi}\)

---

\(^{i}\) Chapter 19, “Mastering Life,” tr. Watson, 126-7.

\(^{ii}\) Ellen Langer has described the importance of this approach to art and mindful living. See Langer, *On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself Through Mindful Living* and below, Chapter 11; compare also the *Bhagavad Gītā* on non-attached action (*karma yoga*), below, Chapter 5.

\(^{iii}\) Cf: “Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.”
iv Watson, 121; Ziporyn, 79.

v Watson, 54. See above, note 22.

vi Ziporyn, Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings, 26 note 4.

vii Ibid, 26-7.

viii Ivanhoe, following David Nivison, suggests that the passage is an ironic inversion of Mencius, 2A 1-2, which describes Mencius' description of his cultivation of flood-like qi. See Carr and Ivanhoe, The Sense of Antirationalism, 98; David S. Nivison, “Hsun Tzu and Chuang Tzu,” in Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed. Chinese Tests and Philosophical Contexts, 129-42. The passage goes on to suggest what may be a psychophysiological technique: “If the channels inward through eyes and ears are cleared, and you expel knowledge from the heart, the ghostly and daemonic will come to dwell in you, not to mention all that is human! This is to transform with the myriad things.” Graham interprets this in a psycho-physiological way: “when the purified fluid has become perfectly tenuous the heart will be emptied of conceptual knowledge, the channels of the senses will be cleared, and he will simply perceive and respond. Then the self dissolves, energies strange to him and higher than his own (the ‘daemonic’) enter from outside, the agent of his actions is no longer the man but Heaven working through him, yet paradoxically (and it is in hitting on this paradox that Hui convinces Confucius that he understands) in discovering a deeper self he becomes for the first time truly the agent. He no longer has deliberate goals, the ‘about to be’ at the centre of him belongs to the transforming processes of heaven and earth. Then he will have the instinct for when to speak and when to be silent, and will say the right thing as naturally as a bird sings.” Graham, 69.

Fraser echoes this approach: “Hui is to clear the channels from his sense organs so that they connect directly inward, without passing through the heart’s cognitive processing (4/32-33). This seems to be a matter of perceiving directly by means of the qi, rather than through the cognitive processing of the heart. ‘Perceiving is probably not the right word, however; the idea is more likely that when the channels through the sense organs are cleared, qi will permeate and flow through the body, allowing events outside the body to directly prompt responses. If one can fully achieve this sort of state, ‘ghosts and spirits will come to dwell, let alone humans!’ (4/33). The point is probably that by attaining the state of xu, one becomes perfectly responsive to and thus embodies the transformations of everything in one’s environment, without interference from the psychological processes typical of the realm of ‘the human.’ Fraser, “Psychological Emptiness,” 129.

On the notion of clearing out the channels of the senses so that one will simply perceive and respond, Fox suggests the image of the “dao hinge” or pivot of the Dao illustrates the process of eliminating artificial constraints so that we can be more open minded and sensitive to the actual, inevitable constraints of reality. He suggests the image of the dao hinge suggests comparison with the clearing out of a socket so that the hinge may move more freely in it. Freedom for Zhuangzi is not a total lack of constraints that would allow us to act inappropriately, but rather “what the hinge experiences when it is situated properly in the socket. It can be said to ‘move freely’ in that, within the limits of its possible motion, it experiences no obstruction or friction which might impede its motion.” Alan Fox, “Reflex and Reflexivity: Wu-wei in the Zhuangzi,” Asian Philosophy: An International Journal of the Philosophical Traditions of the East Volume 6, Issue 1, 214

ix Chris Fraser gives examples of a tennis player poised to return a serve, a soloist awaiting the conductor’s cue, a professor responding to questions during a lecture, a surgeon while performing an operation, and a chef preparing a complex dish. See Fraser, “Psychological Emptiness in te Zhuangzi,” 130; “Wandering the Way: A Eudaimonistic Approach in the Zhuangzi,” in Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy, 13.4, 541–565, at 559.
x Chapter 19, “Mastering Life,” Watson, 128.

xi Ibid.

xii While Watson translates this as Heavenly Mechanism, Ivanhoe suggests “motion” or “motivation.” See Carr and Ivanhoe, 109 note 216.


xvi Ivanhoe, “The Theme of Unselfconsciousness in the Liezi.”