Among those who affirm mystical experience in Zhuangzi, we also find variations in the type of mysticism described. Harold Roth sees here an extroversive mystical experience, in which one merges with the Great Dao, shifting from a “self-centered” perspective to a Way-centered perspective. (In other passages such as Chapter 6, he sees an introverted mysticism, in which one forgets oneself through a fasting of the mind; one thus goes out to merge with the “Great Pervader.” He thus finds in Zhuangzi a “bimodal” type of mysticism). Lee Yearley uses the language of “intraworldly mysticism.” Here one neither seeks union with a transcendent Being as in mystical Christianity, nor seeks to merge with a monistic reality, like a drop of water returning to the ocean, as in the Hindu Upanishads. Intraworldly mysticism seeks a way of being in the world. As in monistic mysticism, one may engage in a discipline of self-cultivation and come to experience reality as unified and undifferentiated. But in Yearley’s view, the goal is not so much union with an absolute as a re-orientation of one’s perception to allow for full and flexible participation in the natural world. We might fine-tune this description by noting that Zhuangzi at times does speak of the Dao as an absolute reality, although one that is not transcendent but immanently expressed throughout nature. We should note, too, that the goal of most mysticism is re-orientation, the discovery of a new way of being in the world.

Harold Roth connects this new orientation to distinction between the two modes of cognition discussed by Graham (yin shih and wei shih), which he describes as flowing cognition (literally: to affirm by following along) and fixed cognition (to affirm by forcing), which is bound to one perspective. The monkeys represent fixed cognition that is rigidly attached to one perspective. The monkey trainer demonstrates flowing cognition, which can adapt spontaneously to the situation, as water adapts to its container. He describes this form of adaptability as “an illumined (ming) awareness that exhibits an intuitive knowledge of how to act without even knowing it is acting. Zhuangzi also calls this ‘illuminating
things with the light of heaven.’ For him ‘heaven’ stands for the spontaneous and intuitive aspect of our being that is grounded in the empty Way.”iii Roth thus suggests that this form of responsiveness is not simply “not acting,” but acting without knowing one is acting, and hence—as Slingerland suggests—effortless action.

While some scholars deny that Zhuangzi believes in a unified monistic absolute, certain passages certainly suggest what Tom Michael has called a “pristine Dao;” Zhuangzi appears to operate with a myth of origins close to that of Laozi. The ancients were in touch with an original Way that had no differentiation or boundaries; they recognized no opposites such as “right and wrong.” However, “when right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured, and love became complete.”iv This is parallel to the kind of devolution we saw in Daodejing 38: “Lose Dao And De follows. Lose De and benevolence (ren) follows. Lose benevolence And righteousness (yi) follows. Lose righteousness and propriety (li) follows.” Recognizing distinctions creates preferences, regarding or valuing one thing over another. This injures the Way, privileging ren or love over simply seeing things as they are, as the Dao.

In fact, we hear many echoes of the Daodejing in the way Zhuangzi speaks about the Way. “The Great Way is not named”v just as “the Name that can be named is not the constant name,” and “I don’t know its name. Better call it Dao. Better call it great (Daodejing 1, 25). “Great discriminations are not spoken; great benevolence (ren) is not benevolent. Great Modesty is not humble. If the way is made clear, it is not the Way.”vi Again, we hear echoes of Laozi: “Great Dao rejected: Benevolence and righteousness appear; (18) ” Banish benevolence, discard righteousness: People will return to duty and compassion (19) “The Dao that can be spoken of (made clear) is not the constant Dao (1). In the pristine Golden Age Zhuangzi describes, the Way was naturally so of itself (ziran), as were virtue and benevolence. It is only when the Great Way is lost that it becomes named, valued, and striven for. The ancients were wu-wei without knowing they were wu-wei, they flowed in a natural harmony, without trying to be spontaneous or trying to achieve virtue.vii


iv Watson, 37; Kjellberg, 214; Chan, 185; cf. Michael, Pristine Dao, 87-88. Ziporyn: 14-15: “What set the Course to waning was exactly what brought the cherishing of one thing over another to fullness.”

v Watson 39; Kjellberg, 215; Chan, 186; Ziporyn, 16.

vi Watson, 39-40; Kjellberg, 215; Chan, 187. Ziporyn, 16: For when the Course is not explicit, it ceases to be the Course.

vii See Daodejing 38: A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue. A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue and that is why he is without virtue, tr. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin, 2009).