The Art of Not Trying

Zhuangzi's Guide to Effortless Living

By Ding Long ([icon])
Zhengyi Daoist Priest, Cloudland Dao

Preface: A Philosophy on the Edge of a Blade

My name is Ding Long. I'm a "fire-dwelling" priest of the Zhengyi Daoist tradition — married, living among the world, running a small temple called Cloud-Gap Dao. I've been doing this work for twenty-five years.

In those twenty-five years, I've seen a white-collar worker who'd been pulling overtime until three in the morning collapse sobbing at the temple gates. I've seen an entrepreneur back from Silicon Valley, hands shaking, ask me, "Why do I still feel empty after succeeding?" I've seen an international student crushed by parental expectations kneel on a meditation cushion and ask, "What's the point of being alive?" They came from everywhere — New York, London, Tokyo, Shanghai — but their pain looked eerily the same. Every time they described that hollowed-out feeling, the same image rose in my mind: a knife used too long, its edge curled and blunt.

Zhuangzi tells us that Cook Ding's cleaver stayed sharp as new after nineteen years because he "slid the thin blade through the gaps." And what about our modern blades? We hack through bone every single day — and we have to hack faster than everyone else, so everyone can see us doing it. Blade goes dull? Swap in a new one. Body breaks down? Pop two pills and keep going. This is what we call "hustle culture" — the cult of relentless striving. I've seen too many people treat their lives like disposable plastic knives. Use once, toss away.

This book is for you — the ones who are suffocating inside hustle culture. Whether you're at a tech company in San Francisco, a bank in the City of London, a trading firm in Tokyo, or anywhere else the mantra of "you must try harder" is chasing you down. I'm not here to preach grand life lessons. I'm just an ordinary person who's been a Daoist priest for twenty-five years, and I want to share with you how an old Chinese guy from 2,300 years ago saw through all of this.

His name is Zhuangzi. He doesn't have a LinkedIn profile. He's never given a TED Talk. But his wisdom is the most potent antidote to modern anxiety I've ever encountered. He's not teaching you to "lie flat" — lying flat is just another kind of straining. He's teaching you xiaoyao — "free and easy wandering" — how to find stillness at the center of the storm.

The eight chapters that follow — each one is distilled from my twenty-five years of Daoist practice and the stories of hundreds of people who've walked through my temple doors. I'll crack open Zhuangzi's original words and break them down for you piece by piece. I'll share the real cases I've witnessed. And at the end of each chapter, I'll give you a set of practices you can start using right away. I hope that when you read this book, it feels like sitting in my temple, drinking a pot of aged white tea, with the wind rustling through bamboo outside the window. Let's take it slow.

Chapter 1: Freedom Without Approval — What the Peng Bird Really Teaches Us

Deep Dive

I'm Ding Long. I've been a Zhengyi Daoist priest — a "fire-dwelling" priest, married and living among the world — for twenty-five years. If you open any standard edition of the Zhuangzi, the first chapter is always "Free and Easy Wandering" (Xiaoyao You). This is not an accident. Zhuangzi put his most potent medicine right at the front door.

Wu Dai: No Waiting, No Depending, No Begging

"Wu dai" is the ultimate keyword of "Free and Easy Wandering." Dai means waiting, depending, relying upon. Wu dai means not waiting for any external condition to complete you.

I've been lighting incense in the temple every morning for twenty-five years, and the people I see most aren't pilgrims — they're the world's "waiters." Waiting for a promotion before they allow themselves to be happy. Waiting for an investor's nod before they feel they have value. Waiting for that post to break a thousand likes before they can confirm they didn't waste the day. This isn't living. This is signing a promissory note — handing the approval authority for your happiness over to someone else.

Zhuangzi uses an extreme metaphor to dismantle this. He says the sage Liezi could ride the wind, graceful and weightless, making a round trip in fifteen days — in his era, that was god-tier ability. But Zhuangzi immediately pours cold water on it: "This may spare him the trouble of walking, but he still depends on something." Meaning: Liezi, as powerful as you are, you still have to wait for the wind. No wind, and you're just a guy who walks.

That's the brilliance of wu dai: it doesn't dismantle your abilities. It dismantles your dependency structure. Whether you make a million dollars a year or have a million followers — if you're still "waiting for wind," you're not free. The wind might be your boss's approval, market conditions, the social media algorithm, your peer group's marriage timeline — anything that makes you think "once I have _____, then I'll be fine." That's your wind.

The Debate on Big and Small: Why the Peng and the Cicada Can't Understand Each Other

The chapter opens with a fish called Kun, so vast no one knows its measure in thousands of li, transforming into a bird called Peng. The Peng's back stretches unmeasured thousands of li. When it rises in flight, its wings are like clouds draped from the sky. It churns the ocean for three thousand li and spirals upward ninety thousand li on a cyclone.

A cicada and a turtle dove laugh at it: "I flutter up, barely making it to the elm tree, and if I don't quite reach it, I just tumble to the ground — what's the point of going ninety thousand li south?"

For two millennia, readers have mostly sided with the Peng, dismissing the cicada as small-minded. But Zhuangzi's wisdom runs deeper than simple praise and blame. He doesn't mock the cicada. The cicada lives perfectly well in its world — an elm tree's height is enough. The problem arises only when the cicada uses elm-tree standards to judge the Peng's ninety-thousand-li flight. That's when absurdity is born.

This is the core insight of the "debate on big and small": anxiety often comes not from you being inadequa

te, but from measuring yourself with someone else's ruler. That product manager at a Hangzhou tech gian t, earning a million yuan a year — from the cicada's perspective, he's already a Peng. But he insists on usin g his classmate who raised a hundred-million-yuan funding round as his measuring stick, and suddenly th at million-yuan salary feels like "accomplished nothing."

Zhuangzi says, "Little understanding cannot reach great understanding; a short lifespan cannot grasp a lo ng one." He's not denigrating the small. He's pointing out that different scales of existence cannot compre hend each other. The mushroom that sprouts at dawn and dies by dusk doesn't know what a month is. Th e cicada that emerges in spring and dies by summer doesn't know what a year is. But, conversely, an eight -thousand-year-old great tree wouldn't understand why the dawn mushroom is in such a hurry. The point is: stop comparing across scales. Your ninety thousand li and someone else's elm tree branch have nothin g to do with each other.

The Perfect Person Has No Self; the Spirit-like Person Has No Achievement; the Sage Has No Name

These three sentences are the mnemonic of the entire Zhuangzi — the operating instructions for everythi ng that follows.

The perfect person has no self. The person at the highest level doesn't cling to the concept of "self." This is n't about annihilating the self (that's the Buddhist path). It's about no longer treating yourself as an object that constantly needs to be confirmed, maintained, and compared. When you stop taking yourself so seri ously, no one can hurt you. After twenty-five years as a priest, here's my biggest realization: ninety percent of human suffering comes from answering the question "who am I?" incorrectly.

The spirit-like person has no achievement. The spirit-like person doesn't pursue accomplishments. Accom plishments are external echoes, not anything intrinsic to you. A person who writes a great story — the joy should be in the moment of writing it, not in the box office numbers or the praise in the comment section. Box office and praise are "achievement." Writing is "essence." The spirit-like person holds to essence and discards achievement.

The sage has no name. The sage doesn't chase reputation. Reputation is the most illusory wind. You can b e the hottest PM in Hangzhou, the buzziest screenwriter in LA — but reputation, the thing that lifts you nin ety thousand li today, can dash you under the elm tree tomorrow. The sage knows reputation is borrowed wind, and borrowed things don't constitute your essence.

These three are a progressive subtraction: first, liberate yourself from ego-fixation. Then, from achieveme nt anxiety. Finally, from the gaze of others. What remains after all the subtraction — that's what Zhuangzi calls xiaoyao, "free and easy wandering."

The Original Text: A Close Reading

Passage One: The Peng and the Cicada — You Don't Need Everyone to Understand You

> In the Northern Darkness there is a fish, its name is Kun. The size of Kun — no one knows how many thousands of *li*. It t ransforms into a bird, its name is Peng. The back of Peng — no one knows how many thousands of *li*. When it rises in flig ht, its wings are like clouds draped from the sky.

Zhuangzi opens in mythic mode. The Northern Sea holds a fish so enormous its size is beyond knowing. It becomes a bird whose back is likewise beyond measure. Its wings are like clouds hanging from the heaven s.

This isn't realism. This is expression. Zhuangzi is telling you: some people's life dimensions naturally exceed the grasp of everyday experience. The Peng doesn't need to explain to the cicada why it flies ninety thousand li. And you don't need to explain to the people who don't understand you why you quit your job, why you're single, why you're not buying a house, why you're not chasing the latest trend.

> The cicada and the turtle dove laugh at it, saying: "I flutter up and barely make it to the elm tree, and if I don't quite reach it I just tumble to the ground — what's the point of going ninety thousand *li* south?"

The cicada's mockery sounds so "practical": I'm satisfied just reaching the elm tree — why do you need to go so far? You've heard this tone before: "Civil service is so stable, why would you start a business?" "You're thirty, why aren't you married yet?" "Just keep your job, what's the point of this influencer thing?"

Zhuangzi's response is elegant and ruthless: Someone heading to the near suburbs needs only three meals and comes back with a full stomach. Someone heading a hundred li away needs to grind grain the night before. Someone heading a thousand li away needs three months' provisions. Different destinations require different conditions. The cicada's "practical advice" means nothing to the Peng — because they're not going to the same place.

Passage Two: Liezi Rides the Wind — The Trap of Almost-Freedom

> Now Liezi could ride the wind, graceful and drifting, fifteen days before returning. He didn't trouble himself much about worldly fortune. But though he was spared the trouble of walking, he still depended on something.

Liezi rides the wind, glides for fifteen days, light and carefree, barely concerned with earthly rewards. That sounds free enough already, doesn't it?

Zhuangzi says: Not enough. Because you still need wind.

This is a surgical strike against the ultimate modern anxiety: you think financial freedom will free you? You're still "depending" on money. You think a million followers will free you? You're "depending" on attention. You think retirement will free you? You're "depending" on time. Anything you think "once I have _____, then I'll be fine" — that's your wind. As long as you're still "depending" on something, you're not truly free and easy.

> If you could ride upon the proper course of heaven and earth, harness the transformations of the six energies, and wander through the boundless — what would you have to depend on?

Follow the nature of heaven and earth, ride the transformations of the six qi, roam through the infinite — that is true "non-reliance." Not riding the wind (you still have to wait for wind). Becoming the wind itself. The person who becomes the wind doesn't need to wait for wind.

Passage Three: The Spirit-Man of Miaoguyi Mountain — The Person the World Cannot Corrode

> On distant Mount Miaoguyi, there dwells a spirit-man. His skin is like ice and snow, gentle as a maiden. He does not eat the five grains but inhales the wind and drinks the dew. He rides the clouds, drives flying dragons, and wanders beyond the four seas. His spirit is concentrated, so that things are free from sickness and the harvests ripen.

The most captivating part of this passage is the second half: "His spirit is concentrated." The spirit-man's power doesn't come from anything external — not grain, not supplements, not power, not money. His power comes from "concentrated spirit" — his spirit stays inward, doesn't scatter outward.

What is Zhuangzi saying through this image? When you stop squandering your energy on external judgment, your spirit condenses. A condensed spirit naturally nourishes everything around it. You don't need to frantically grasp at things — influence, recognition, likes — to prove your worth. In fact, the opposite is true: when you stop scattering outward, your value manifests naturally.

It's worth noting the narrative turn that follows: Jian Wu, hearing this description, says it's too exaggerate d to be believed. Lian Shu scolds him: "A blind person cannot appreciate beautiful patterns; a deaf person cannot appreciate bells and drums." This rebuke isn't just aimed at Jian Wu — it's also a reminder to the r eader: if the realm of wu dai feels too remote, too impractical — you may simply not yet have opened your eyes.

Western Parallels

Social Comparison Theory: Leon Festinger's Prophecy

In 1954, the American social psychologist Leon Festinger proposed Social Comparison Theory. His core fin ding is simple to the point of cruelty: humans don't have a built-in "I'm good enough" gauge. The only wa y we evaluate ourselves is by comparing ourselves to others.

When there's no objective standard, we make upward comparisons — measuring ourselves against those better off — and the result is self-diminishment. When there is an objective standard, we make downward comparisons — measuring ourselves against those worse off — and briefly feel better. But either way, we'r e outsourcing our self-evaluation to others.

Zhuangzi beat him by two thousand two hundred years. The "debate on big and small" describes the exac t same phenomenon: there's no comparability between the cicada and the Peng, but the cicada insists on comparing — and absurdity follows. Festinger says comparison is humanity's default setting. Zhuangzi sa ys transcending comparison is humanity's possibility.

The difference: Festinger only described the problem. Zhuangzi offers a path — wu dai. Not "comparing b etter" (that just turns you into a more sophisticated anxiety machine), but "no longer comparing." Withdra wing from the structure of comparison — not because you lost, but because you discovered something m ore fundamental: your value isn't derived from comparison.

Mindfulness vs. Wu Dai: A Pair Easy to Confuse

The first time many people encounter wu dai, they connect it to the biggest Western buzzword of recent y ears: mindfulness. I need to draw a clear line here.

Mindfulness (I'm talking mainly about the MBSR / Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction system developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn) operates on this core mechanism: non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. You notice anxiety arriving, without judgment, and let it pass through. You notice a comparative thought a rising, without judgment, and watch it dissolve.

Wu dai operates on a different core: dismantle the need itself, rather than enduring the discomfort the nee d produces.

What's the difference? Mindfulness teaches you how to coexist with anxiety. Wu dai asks: why are you anxi ous in the first place? Your dai — the thing you're depending on — is it really as important as you think?

Take an example: you're anxious because your Instagram likes are down. The mindfulness approach is to notice the anxiety, accept it, let it go. The wu dai approach is to interrogate — why do likes matter so muc h to you? What have you tethered your self-worth to? Once you see the tether clearly (likes ≠ your value), the anxiety doesn't need to be "noticed and released." It dissipates on its own.

In Zhuangzi's terms: mindfulness is learning to ride the wind like Liezi — skillful, yes, but you still need win

d. Wu dai is not needing wind at all — you yourself are the thing that can wander without borrowed wind.

The Like Economy: The Fastest Wind of Our Era

Social media has turned Festinger's Social Comparison Theory into an automated behavioral addiction system. Every like, every retweet, every comment tells you — someone saw you, someone compared you, someone gave you a "score." Your dopamine circuits have been trained into slaves of external feedback.

That LA screenwriter refreshing Instagram obsessively for two hours after posting — the underlying mechanism is identical to a lab pigeon pecking a lever: intermittent reinforcement. You never know when the next like is coming, so you keep refreshing.

Zhuangzi calls this dai — scattering your spirit outward, waiting for others to throw you breadcrumbs. And when the breadcrumbs diminish, your self-concept starts to collapse. Not because you got worse, but because you built your house on someone else's land.

Western psychology took half a century to approach this insight — Self-Determination Theory found that extrinsic motivation, over time, erodes intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being. Social media likes are the purest form of extrinsic motivation. Zhuangzi's response is more radical: not "use more intrinsic motivation," but "stop depending" — your psychological health shouldn't rest on the fulfillment of any motivation.

Stories from Ding Long

Case One: The Hangzhou Product Manager — A Million-Yuan Insomniac

In the autumn of 2023, a man in his mid-thirties came to see me at the temple. He wore a well-cut North Face jacket. He looked like he wanted for nothing. He sat down and said: "Master, I can't sleep at night."

He was a product manager at a major tech company in Hangzhou, earning just over a million yuan a year, leading a team of thirty, rated a "core contributor" by his company. The problem: his college roommate had just closed a Series B, valued at three hundred million yuan. For three months, every night as he lay in bed, he'd start running the numbers — what did his roommate have that he didn't? Better timing? Better market? Better luck? Then he'd calculate his own — how much mortgage was left, how many years until VP, how long to save a hundred million. By the end of the calculation, a million-yuan salary had become a humiliation.

I said: "Have you heard the one about the cicada and the giant bird?"

He listened. Sat in silence for a long while. Then said: "Master, it's not that I envy his money. It's that I can't accept being 'not enough.'"

This is the "debate on big and small" in living tissue. His feeling of "not enough" didn't come from any real deficit. It came from the wrong ruler. When he measured himself against his classmate's curve, all his achievements automatically reset to zero. I told him: your insomnia isn't an illness. It's your heart telling you — you're measuring wrong.

He left without taking a talisman, without burning incense. He took only one sentence: "Maybe I shouldn't measure my Southern Ocean against his elm tree."

Case Two: The LA Screenwriter's Like Debt

In early 2024, a Chinese screenwriter living in Los Angeles found me via video call. Early thirties, had writte

n a small series that aired on Netflix — she'd gotten her foot in the door in Hollywood. Her problem was ex tremely specific: Instagram.

Every time she posted, for the next two hours, she'd enter an uncontrollable refresh loop. Over five hundr ed likes, and it was a good day. Under two hundred, and the day was a failure. She said she felt like someo ne carrying invisible debt — not owing money, but owing "being recognized."

"There's a saying in the industry," she said with a bitter laugh. "'Your value equals the like count on your most recent post.'"

I asked her to try an experiment: post something, then turn off her phone for twenty-four hours. She tried. Failed. Lasted four hours before she couldn't resist powering it back on.

"When you turned it on, what did you see?"

"The likes were fine," she paused. "But I realized — I just needed to know that 'someone saw me.' After th at moment of confirmation, nothing actually changed."

I said: "Because that confirmation was always empty. What you're chasing isn't recognition — it's the false sense of fullness that comes from the act of chasing." After that conversation, she started saying one sent ence to herself before every post: "The moment I send this post, I've already done what I came to do." It's the clumsiest possible wu dai practice. But it's working.

Case Three: A Priest's Robes and an iPhone

My own story.

Twenty-five years ago when I first entered the priesthood, I lived in a small temple at the foot of a mountai n. The temple had one landline phone that rang maybe a few times a week. No comparison, no anxiety. Ev ery day I did morning and evening rites, swept the courtyard, read scriptures. I was dirt poor, but I slept m ore soundly than anyone.

Ten years ago, I got my first smartphone. Suddenly, all kinds of people appeared in my feed — fellow pries ts at famous mountains conducting grand ceremonies, speaking at international Daoist conferences. My li ttle temple and my daily life suddenly looked shabby.

During that period, I'd practice calligraphy and then feel dissatisfied, so I'd go online to look at other peop le's work — and feel even worse. One day it hit me: I've been practicing calligraphy for thirty years, always to quiet my own mind. When did it turn into a competition? The smartphone had pushed the entire world' s achievements into my face, then whispered: you're not good enough.

This is the modern version of the "debate on big and small." Zhuangzi wasn't dealing with 4G networks, b ut the fable of the cicada and the Peng has only gotten sharper in this era. What I did: moved every app th at makes you compare to the second screen. Check WeChat only twice a day. Disabled Moments. Three m onths later, I could write calligraphy in peace again.

Don't underestimate the power of environment. Zhuangzi spoke of "the fasting of the heart." Today's hear t-fasting isn't abstaining from meat. It's abstaining from the comparisons the algorithm feeds you.

Framework Summary

Zhuangzi Concept | Core Principle | Western Parallel | Modern Application
Wu Dai ([icon]) | Don't depend on external conditions to complete yourself | Intrinsic Motivation (Self-Determination Theor

y) | Identify your "wind" — the external validation sources you depend on
Debate on Big & Small ([icon]) | Different scales are incomparable; anxiety comes from the wrong ruler | Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) | Stop measuring your Southern Ocean with someone else's elm tree
Perfect Person Has No Self ([icon]) | Don't cling to maintaining the "self" | Self-Construal Theory | Practice decentering: if this happened to someone else, would you still be anxious?
Spirit-Person Has No Achievement ([icon]) | Don't chase accomplishments as self-judgment | Overjustification Effect | You did it — that's it. Judge by your own heart, not external scores
Sage Has No Name ([icon]) | Don't chase reputation and external evaluation | Status Games (Will Storr) | Social media fast: exit the ranking game to see you never needed it

Core Insight: Xiaoyao is not escaping the world. It's not not trying. It's not "lying flat." Xiaoyao is giving everything you have — while refusing to stake your worth on the outcome. You fly your ninety thousand li not because there's a prize waiting at the destination, but because you were always capable of flying that far.

Practice Exercises

Exercise One: Two-Column Audit — "Dependence" and "Non-Dependence"

Take a piece of paper. Left column: "What I Depend On" ([icon]). Right column: "What I'd Still Have Without It" ([icon]). Fill it out honestly.

What I Depend On / Wait For | If I Lost It, I Would Still Have...
Boss's approval to confirm I'm capable | I did this project. I learned new skills. No one can take those away.
500+ Instagram likes to confirm it's good content | I was focused and engaged while creating. The process itself was the reward.
My peers all bought houses, I haven't → I'm not working hard enough | My career path and life choices are different. Homeownership isn't the only metric of effort.
Funding / promotion / title to prove my worth | Who I am doesn't depend on the words on a business card. It depends on how I live each day.
Someone loving and validating me to prove I'm lovable | My existence itself has value. No external approval needed.

Notice the right column — it's not "self-comfort." It's objective fact. You learned a skill — that's a fact. You were fully engaged while creating — that's a fact. Your existence itself — that's a fact. The "dependence" mindset makes you see only the left column. This exercise retrains you to see the right column again.

Recommendation: Do this once a week for four weeks. Watch whether the left column shrinks and the right column becomes easier to fill.

Exercise Two: The 24-Hour Social Media Fast Challenge

This isn't an ordinary "use your phone less." This is a deliberate wu dai experiment.

Steps:

Choose a 24-hour window (weekend or day off is best). Notify key contacts that you'll be offline for a day.

Remove social apps from your home screen. Don't uninstall (too dramatic) — just make them not available at a single tap.

Prepare replacement activities: a book, a notebook, a walking route, something you've been meaning to make but "didn't have time for."

Set an observation goal: Every time you feel the urge to check your phone, ask yourself three questions:

- What do I actually want right now? (Information? Connection? Or just a habitual motor pattern?)
- Is there another way to satisfy this need besides social media?
- Is this "unsatisfied" feeling real deprivation, or an algorithm-trained withdrawal symptom?

After it ends, write three hundred words: What did you notice? Which moment was hardest? Which moment was most peaceful?

Expected effect: Most people discover two things on their first attempt: (1) the first three hours are the har dest; (2) after six hours, a long-lost quiet descends. It's not boredom. It's what Zhuangzi called "concentra ted spirit" — the spirit, no longer scattered outward, begins to return home.

If you can't do twenty-four hours, start with four. We don't know how long Liezi practiced before he could ride the wind — but wu dai isn't something anyone is born knowing. Take your time.

Key Takeaways

"Wu dai" ([icon] / non-reliance) is not about having no goals — it's about not outsourcing your sense of worth to external validation. Your salary, followers, and titles are the wind beneath Liezi's feet. You ca n enjoy the ride, but never mistake the wind for who you are.

The cicada and the giant bird are not in competition. Zhuangzi's "debate on big and small" exposes the root of comparison anxiety: measuring your ninety-thousand-*li* journey against someone else's elm tree. Different scales, different games — stop using the wrong ruler.

Mindfulness helps you sit with anxiety. *Wu dai* asks why the anxiety is there in the first place. Mind fulness is learning to ride the wind skillfully. *Wu dai* is realizing you don't need wind to be free.

"The perfect person has no self; the spirit-like person has no achievement; the sage has no name." These are not moral commandments. They are a progressive unburdening: shed the obsession with self, t hen with outcomes, then with reputation. What remains is what Zhuangzi calls "free and easy wandering" — *xiaoyao*.

Your next 24-hour social media fast is not a detox. It's a Zhuangzian experiment. Every time you feel the urge to check, you are touching the edge of your own "dependency structure" ([icon]). Observe it. Don 't fight it. Watch what happens when you stop feeding the wind and start feeding yourself.

Chapter 2: The Usefulness of Uselessness — You Don't Need to Prove You 're Useful

---

Deep Dive: How Zhuangzi Dismantled the Idea of "Usefulness"

If Zhuangzi were alive today, I think he'd find our era particularly absurd.

Open your phone and the screen is flooded with "How to Maximize Your Productivity," "Seven Habits of Hi ghly Effective People," "Your Peers Are Leaving You Behind." From childhood, you've been trained: be a us eful person. In school, "useful" meant good grades. At work, "useful" means earning more. In your social li fe, "useful" means having a wide network. We've crammed our entire lives into an Excel spreadsheet, calc ulating ROI on every minute.

Zhuangzi dismantled this two thousand three hundred years ago.

Here's the story. Zhuangzi's old friend Hui Shi — the prime minister of Wei, the very image of a successful

man — came to pick a fight one day: "I have a big tree. People call it the chu, the stinking sumac. Its trunk is so gnarled and swollen you can't snap a chalk line on it. Its branches are so twisted you can't use a compass or square. It stands by the roadside, and no carpenter gives it a second glance. Just like your words — big and useless. Everyone will abandon you."

Notice the tone of Hui Shi's words. It sounds exactly like your uncle at Lunar New Year dinner: "All that stuff you do — what's it good for? Can you eat it?"

Zhuangzi's reply:

Have you never seen a wildcat? It crouches low, waiting for its prey; it leaps east and west, paying no mind to heights or depths — until it triggers a snare and dies in the net. Now look at the yak. It's as vast as a cloud draped from the sky. It's capable of great things — but it can't even catch a mouse. Now you have this enormous tree, and you're worried that it's useless. Why not plant it in the Village of Nowhere, in the vast and empty wilds? You could roam idly by its side, lie down and sleep beneath its shade. No axe will cut it down. Nothing will harm it. If it has no use, what trouble could there be?

This passage, from the closing lines of "Free and Easy Wandering," is the one I quote most often in the temple. The original reads:

> Hui Shi said to Zhuangzi: "I have a big tree, people call it *chu*. Its great trunk is so gnarled it won't take a chalk line; its small branches are so twisted they won't fit compass or square. It stands by the road, and no carpenter looks at it. Now your words — big and useless — everyone rejects them alike."
>
> Zhuangzi said: "Have you never seen a wildcat? It crouches low, waiting for its prey; it leaps east and west, avoiding neither heights nor depths — and yet it triggers the snare, dies in the net. Now take the yak, as vast as a cloud draped from the sky. It's capable of great things, but it can't catch a mouse. Now you have this big tree and worry that it's useless — why not plant it in the Village of Nowhere, in the vast and empty wilds? Wander idly by its side, sleep beneath it in free and easy rest. No axe cuts it down. Nothing harms it. Since it's of no use, what trouble could there be?"

Hidden in this exchange is the sharpest knife in all of Zhuangzi's thought. Hui Shi's logic: a thing must find its place in an established evaluation system to have value. The value of timber is to be cut down, made into furniture, built into houses. If a carpenter doesn't want a tree, it's worthless. But Zhuangzi flips the entire evaluation system on its head — who says a tree's value is determined by the carpenter? If the tree's "uselessness" spares it from the axe, lets it live freely and fully — then isn't that uselessness its greatest, most fundamental use?

This is the "usefulness of uselessness."

Notice Zhuangzi makes two parallel contrasts here. The first: wildcat versus yak. The wildcat is agile, fierce, a skilled hunter — the classic "useful" animal. But leaping recklessly, it eventually triggers the snare and dies in the trap. The yak is lumbering, enormous, can't even catch a mouse — the classic "useless" animal. But the yak lives at ease, too big for anyone to mess with, never needing to risk itself for a scrap of prey. That wildcat — isn't it exactly like us, desperately proving our "usefulness" in the workplace, running on the hamster wheel? And that yak — isn't it the very metaphor of a Zhuangzian existence?

The second contrast: "useful timber" versus the "useless tree." In Hui Shi's world, every good tree gets cut down — for pillars, coffins, doors, furniture. Every one of them was "useful" — and every one of them paid with its life. Zhuangzi's gnarled chu tree, precisely because it was "useless," grew into a landmark in the wilderness, a place where travelers stop for shade. It lived. And living is more important than anything.

Zhuangzi adds the finishing touch in the "Human World" chapter:

> Everyone knows the usefulness of the useful, but no one knows the usefulness of the useless.

Sit with that sentence a moment. Everyone knows the use of usefulness — but no one knows the use of uselessness. This isn't saying "the useless is also useful" in some cheesy motivational way. It's saying: your understanding of "use" is too narrow — so narrow you can only see the uses that involve cutting, measuring, weighing, and pricing. But the truly great "uses" — freedom, peace, freedom from harm, becoming fully yourself — are hidden precisely in what you've dismissed as "useless."

The Original Text: A Close Reading — The Giant Gourd and the Hand Ointment

The theme of "the usefulness of uselessness" actually gets developed further at the end of "Free and Easy Wandering" with two even better stories. Anyone who's read the Zhuangzi should know these: the Giant Gourd and the Hand Ointment.

First, the Giant Gourd.

Hui Shi comes to Zhuangzi again. He says the King of Wei gave him some giant gourd seeds. The gourds that grew were big enough to hold five shi of grain. But if you tried to use one as a water container, it wasn't strong enough to lift. If you split it to make a ladle, it was too big to fit anywhere. Hui Shi says: "It's not that it wasn't big — but because it was useless, I smashed it."

Zhuangzi sighs and says: Master, you are truly terrible at using big things.

Then Zhuangzi tells the story of a man from Song. This man's family had a secret recipe for a hand ointment that prevented chapping. Generation after generation, they used it for bleaching silk — because with the ointment on, their hands stayed smooth and they could work in the water all winter. But they made only a meager living. One day a traveler heard about the formula and offered to buy it for a hundred pieces of gold. The family gathered to discuss it: "For generations we've been bleaching silk, earning barely a few gold pieces. Now someone offers a hundred for the formula — let's sell it." The traveler took the formula and presented it to the King of Wu. Just then, Yue launched an attack. The King put the traveler in command. Fighting on the water in winter, the soldiers applied the ointment, their hands stayed supple, and they crushed the Yue army. The traveler was rewarded with an estate and a noble title.

The original text:

> There was a man of Song skilled at making a hand ointment that prevented chapping. For generations his family had used it for bleaching silk. A traveler heard of it and offered to buy the formula for a hundred pieces of gold. The family gathered to discuss: "For generations we've bleached silk and never earned more than a few gold pieces. Now in a single morning we can sell the technique for a hundred. Let's give it to him." The traveler obtained it and used it to persuade the King of Wu. When Yue attacked, the King put him in command. Fighting on the water in winter, he routed the Yue army. The King awarded him a fief.

Same ointment. One person uses it to bleach silk for pocket change. Another uses it to win a fiefdom. Zhuangzi turns to Hui Shi: You had a gourd big enough to hold five shi — why didn't you make it into a boat and float on the rivers and lakes? You only thought of it as a water jug or a ladle — everyday uses — and because it failed those, you smashed it. Is your heart as clogged as a tangled thicket?

Read these two stories together and you'll understand exactly what Zhuangzi is saying.

The same object, placed in different frameworks — "useful" and "useless" can flip entirely. The giant gourd in the "water container / ladle" framework is garbage. In the "go floating on the rivers and lakes" framework, it's a treasure. The hand ointment in the hands of Song silk-bleachers earns a few coins. In the hands

of the Wu army, it earns an estate. The problem isn't the thing itself. The problem is whether you can step outside the prescribed framework and see a broader possibility.

What is this? This is a cognitive leap.

Our situation today is uncannily similar to that giant gourd. Your life has been stuffed into a framework called "career development": good school, good job, promotion, raise, buy a house, retire. Everything that doesn't fit this framework — poetry and distant horizons, an afternoon of doing nothing, useless hobbies, talents that don't generate income — gets judged as "useless" and smashed. But those smashed things — they were the boats that could have carried you across rivers and lakes.

Zhuangzi's final words sting with exasperation: "Your heart is as clogged as a tangled thicket!" Every time I read this line, I feel like Zhuangzi is speaking directly to people today. Aren't our hearts clogged exactly like this? Clogged with KPIs, OKRs, promotion tracks, peer pressure — not an inch of space left for anything "useless."

Western Parallels: When "Usefulness" Became a Religion

Honestly, if Zhuangzi were only speaking to ancient Chinese people, this would just be a piece of distant philosophy. The remarkable thing is that two thousand three hundred years ago, he precisely predicted the spiritual predicament of humanity today — especially in Western culture.

Let me draw three parallels.

First Parallel: Productivity Guilt.

This is a term widely discussed in Silicon Valley and elite New York circles. What does it mean? You're resting, and a voice in your head says: "You should be learning, exercising, working on your side hustle, updating your LinkedIn." You just finished a major project, the champagne isn't even open, and your mind is already anxious: "Where's the next project? How many percentage points am I behind on my utilization rate?"

This isn't about being tired. This is about identity. Your self-worth is bound to your output — you are what you produce. If you don't produce, you don't exist. This is why so many young people today are anxious — not because they're going hungry, but because when they stop producing, they ask: Who am I? What gives me the right to be alive?

Second Parallel: Max Weber's Protestant Work Ethic.

This isn't me forcing a connection. The German sociologist Max Weber, in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, analyzed this with precision. He argued that the source of the capitalist spirit is the Protestant concept of "calling" — Beruf in German. In the Calvinist tradition, whether you were among the saved was unknowable — but if you worked diligently, frugally, and accumulated wealth in your worldly profession, this could be taken as an outward sign of God's grace. In other words, your work wasn't just about making a living. It was how you proved the worth of your soul.

This logic took root in Western civilization for centuries. Religion eventually receded, but the underlying code — "not working makes you a sinner" — didn't disappear. It just changed language: from "God is watching you" to "the market is watching you," from "glorify God" to "prove your worth." So today's Westerners — Americans especially — feel a strange moral debt when they're not being productive enough. Not working isn't just not making money. It genuinely disturbs the conscience.

Third Parallel: Ikigai's Four Circles vs. Zhuangzi's "Being Alive Is Enough."

One of the most popular self-development concepts in the West in recent years is a Japanese word: Ikigai ([icon]), meaning "reason for being." Westerners have turned it into a very popular diagram: four overlapping circles — what you're good at, what you love, what the world needs, what you can get paid for. The intersection of all four is your life's mission, your Ikigai.

The diagram looks beautiful at first glance. But at its core, it's the exact same logic as Hui Shi. It assumes your life must be "useful" — and useful across four dimensions simultaneously — to qualify as "a meaningful life."

Notice that two of the four circles are external evaluations: "what the world needs" and "what you can get paid for." Which means: even if you deeply love what you're doing and are exceptionally skilled at it — if it can't be monetized and isn't needed by the world, your life still can't be called "meaningful." This is Hui Shi's carpenter's gaze — the tree that can be cut into beams is good; otherwise it's worthless.

What would Zhuangzi say? He'd say: you don't need four circles. Being alive is enough.

A flower blooms in a deep mountain valley. No one photographs it for Instagram. No one praises it. Does it lose its fragrance? A tree grows twisted and gnarled. It can't become a roof beam. Does the mountain lose its green? A stream runs from the summit to the valley floor, with zero practical value — isn't it still flowing? Why are you using other people's eyes, the market's measuring tape, a four-circle framework, to interrogate your right to exist?

Zhuangzi isn't saying don't do "useful" things. He's saying: you, as a person, prior to all of these "useful" things, are already a complete, valuable being. Your existence precedes your utility. The fact that you're alive — breathing, eating, feeling the sun, sensing the temperature of the wind — this itself has meaning. This meaning needs no one's approval. It needs no four-circle certification. It doesn't need to prove anything to Hui Shi.

It's already there. That's the usefulness of uselessness.

Stories from Ding Long

If all of the above feels too abstract, let me tell you about people I've actually met.

First: The Shanghai Investment Banker's Breakdown

About three years ago I met an investment banking analyst in Shanghai. Early thirties, immaculate hair, bespoke suit — but the red veins in his eyes were impossible to miss. He didn't come seeking the Dao. He came to unburden himself. Three months earlier, he'd quit his job. Walked away from a multi-million-yuan annual salary. His body had been destroyed by overtime and pressure: insomnia, heart palpitations, stomach bleeding, anxiety attacks. He told me: "I want to rest. Completely rest."

But resting was worse than working.

Every morning, he'd wake up, look at his phone — no unread emails, no DingTalk notifications — and his heart would start pounding. He'd scroll through his feed and see former colleagues posting photos of Lujiazui skyscrapers lit up at 2 AM. His palms would sweat. His heart would race. His breath would shorten. He described the feeling like this: "It's like you've been running full speed on a treadmill for years, and suddenly you jump off. You're standing still on solid ground, but the entire world is still moving forward. You feel y

ourself being left behind. Forgotten. Discarded."

What hit me hardest was one sentence he said: "Daoist master — without that employee badge, without t hat business card, I walk down the street and I don't know who I am."

Listen to that. A man, thirty years alive, the best schools, the best firms, made more money than most peo ple earn in a lifetime — and his entire self-concept was parasitically attached to a badge. Badge off, hollow inside.

I told him the story of the gnarled tree. He listened for a long time in silence. Then asked: "What if this is it for me? What if I just... be a useless tree?"

I said: "You spent eight years in investment banking. How many of the senior directors, the partners, the M Ds you've seen — how many actually look like they're living fully human lives? They might be the straighte st timber. But they've all been cut down to be pillars, crushed under the steel and concrete of office tower s, unable to breathe their whole lives. You now have the chance to be a crooked tree, whose shade gives tr avelers a place to rest. What are you afraid of?"

He didn't immediately say "Thank you, master, I'm enlightened" — that only happens in TV dramas. It too k him the better part of a year to slowly step off that treadmill. Now he runs a small guesthouse in Dali, Yu nnan. Five rooms total. He once sent me a photo: two cats in the courtyard, dozing in the sun and purring. He's gained fifteen pounds. But the red veins in his eyes are gone.

He said: "Master, I make less in a month now than I used to make in pocket change. But I no longer wake u p every morning with my first thought being that I want to die."

This is exactly what Zhuangzi meant: "No axe cuts it down. Nothing harms it."

Second: The Jujube Tree in the Temple Courtyard

In my temple's small courtyard, there's a jujube tree. I didn't plant it. A previous priest left it, probably dec ades old. Every year it flowers on schedule, puts out leaves on schedule. But the fruit it bears is small and bitter. Nobody ever picks it. Every autumn the fruit drops and rots on the ground, and I have to ask the yo ung acolytes to sweep it up.

In three years, at least a dozen visitors have suggested: "Master, cut this tree down. Plant a better variety." "Master, plant a persimmon tree — so much better, all red and auspicious in autumn."

I didn't cut it down.

To me, this tree is a living Dao De Jing. It doesn't need to produce sweet dates to justify its existence. Thin k about it: for the ants in my courtyard, its fallen fruit is a granary. For the birds nesting under the temple e aves, its branches are a resting place. When it blooms in spring, it's a courtyard full of beauty. In summer, t he shade it casts lands perfectly over my tea table.

Is it useless? It's only useless in the human evaluation system of "fruit trees must bear good fruit." In its o wn life-system, it lives completely whole.

Why can't a person live like this jujube tree? Not bearing fruit for others to pick. Not blooming for others to praise. Not growing straight to become someone's pillar. Green when it's time to be green, bare when it's time to be bare, new shoots next spring. You don't need to prove to anyone that you "deserve to exist."

Third: A "Useless" Man Who Made Me Envious

Last autumn, I was wandering through a small town in Zhejiang and stopped at a noodle shop. I met an ol

d man — sixties, white hair, wearing a faded Mao suit. The noodle shop owner knew him well, called him "Teacher Wu."

I figured he was a retired schoolteacher. But talking to him, I learned he'd never held a formal job in his life. In his twenties, he worked as a temporary clerk at the town library — a few dozen yuan a month, just enough to eat. What he loved most was researching the town's history: which family had produced an imperial scholar, which stone-paved road dated from the Ming Dynasty, how many times the stone bridge at the town entrance had been rebuilt. He never published a paper, never wrote a book. He just researched for himself. Later the library closed, and he drifted around town helping people — families compiling genealogies, kids writing local history essays for school.

I asked him: "Do you have any regrets? A whole life, never having done anything conventionally 'big.'"

He took a sip of yellow wine, grinned, showing a missing tooth: "'Big things' — that's a word you big-city people invented. I've carried a thousand years of this town's stories in my heart. Not a 'big thing,' but enough to fill a lifetime."

In that moment, I felt a sudden surge of envy. Not for his knowledge — for his unshakable certainty that he didn't need the world's recognition. He missed the '70s entrepreneurial wave, missed the '90s real estate boom, missed the 2000s internet revolution — but none of these "missed opportunities" meant anything to him, because he was never running on anyone else's track in the first place.

I thought of Zhuangzi: "Since it's of no use, what trouble could there be?"

Framework Summary

Before we move to the practice exercises, let me lay out the core thread of this chapter:

Level | Core Content | Key Image
Hui Shi's Logic | Everything must find a "useful" place in an established evaluation system to have value | Straight timber, the carpenter's gaze, utilitarianism
Zhuangzi's Reframe | Step outside the prescribed framework; redefine "use" in a broader possibility space | The crooked tree in the wilderness, the gourd as boat, the ointment's reversal of fortune
Core Proposition | "Everyone knows the usefulness of the useful, but no one knows the usefulness of the useless" — our understanding of "use" itself needs liberation | The usefulness of uselessness is the great use
Modern Traps | Productivity Guilt → Internalized Protestant work ethic → Ikigai's four-circle certification | The treadmill, identity parasitic on a badge, moral debt
The Way Out | Your existence precedes your utility. Being alive itself has meaning — no external certification needed. | The crooked tree, the jujube tree, Teacher Wu at the noodle shop

The core leap in this framework is only one thing: from "I must be useful to deserve to live" to "I am alive, and therefore my existence itself is the greatest value." This isn't psychological comfort food. This is redefining your relationship with the world.

Practice Exercises

Exercise One: A Day of Doing Nothing (Expanded Guide)

This week, pick one day. Do nothing.

But let me be more specific. When I say "do nothing," I don't mean lie on the couch scrolling through your phone — scrolling is avoidance, not not-doing. I don't mean binge-watching shows — you're just filling yo

ur attention with other people's stories. I don't mean cleaning the house — you're forcing yourself to "at least do one useful thing" to soothe the guilt.

"Doing nothing" means: sit there. Or lie down and look at the ceiling. Or walk to a park, find a bench, sit down. Leave your phone behind. Just be there. Let time flow through you, instead of you chasing time.

You will feel discomfort. Intense discomfort. Almost certainly, in the first fifteen to thirty minutes, you will experience a surge of Productivity Guilt — the voice in your head will say: "You're wasting time!" "Everyone else is improving while you're doing WHAT?" "At least listen to a podcast!"

Don't push it away. Don't argue with it. Just watch it come, like a cloud drifting across the sky. It comes. It goes. It's not something you actually need to respond to. It's just a conditioned reflex drilled into you by society.

Then you'll enter stage two: boredom. You'll feel profoundly, desperately bored. You'll want to bang your head against the wall. This is good. Boredom is the signal that you're reconnecting with yourself. When you cut off all external stimulation, the emptiness that remains — that's your original face. Most people are profoundly unfamiliar with it, because they've never truly spent time alone with themselves.

If you make it past this stage, you'll enter stage three: peace. You're just sitting there, doing nothing, trying to prove nothing — and suddenly you notice the direction of the wind, the warmth of the sunlight, the sound of birds. You're not "using" this afternoon to recharge so you can work better tomorrow. You're just alive, in this afternoon. Alive is enough.

When it's over, take out a piece of paper. Write one sentence. Just one: "This afternoon, I was alive. That was enough." Tape it to your fridge, your mirror, or the edge of your computer screen.

If you can't even give yourself one afternoon — then you should seriously ask: if you're afraid of even a little "useless" time, do you still actually possess yourself?

Exercise Two: List Your "Smashed Gourds"

Zhuangzi said to Hui Shi: You smashed your giant gourd — what a waste. Why didn't you make it into a boat?

This exercise helps you find the things you've smashed.

Take a piece of paper. Three columns.

Column one: List the things you gave up because they were "useless." For example: loved drawing but chose business school in college. Can play guitar but haven't touched it in ten years. Fascinated by astronomy but "you can't eat that." Wrote poetry but stopped because it felt self-indulgent. Especially good at listening to people but no one considers that a "skill"...

Write without filtering. Whatever comes to mind. At least five.

Column two: Write the reason you gave it up. Notice: most reasons will sound like: "It's not practical." "It doesn't make money." "It has no future." "Nobody understands it." "It's not a real thing." Examine these reasons — are they judgments genuinely from your own heart, or from Hui Shi's carpenter's gaze? Is it "you genuinely don't want it," or "someone told you it wasn't worth wanting"?

Column three: Imagine a parallel world. You didn't smash this gourd. You made it into a boat. Where could it carry you? (No need to be "realistic." The entire point of this exercise is to break the chains of "realistic." Dream freely.)

Let me give you an example. I know a woman who did investment banking for five years — the stress gave her alopecia, patches of hair falling out. As a child, she'd loved making artisanal pastries, but her mother always said: "What's the use? Focus on your studies." After she quit, she opened a small pastry studio. Started from a tiny kitchen. Now she has shops in three cities. Her exact words to me: "The pastry gourd I smashed twenty years ago finally came back and said: you didn't need me to be a water jug. I was already a boat."

Your smashed gourds are still there. You just sentenced them to death under the charge of "useless." Go find them. You don't need to quit your job and chase them tomorrow. But you need to at least know they're still there. Because — someday — your life is going to need more than one path.

Key Takeaways

"Uselessness" is a framework problem, not a reality problem. The big gnarled tree is "useless" only to the carpenter — to the traveler seeking shade, it's everything. Before you call something (or yourself) useless, ask: who defined the framework?

Your existence precedes your utility. You are not a tool. You don't need to justify your right to occupy space on this planet through productivity metrics. A flower blooming in an empty valley is still fragrant. You are allowed to just be.

Productivity Guilt is the modern echo of Calvinist anxiety. The voice in your head telling you to hustle is not your own — it's a centuries-old cultural inheritance that conflates self-worth with output. Recognizing this is the first step toward liberation.

The things you dismissed as "impractical" may be your lifeboat. Zhuangzi's giant gourd was useless as a water container — but as a boat, it could carry you across rivers and lakes. Your abandoned passion, your "useless" talent, your impractical curiosity: these are the boats you may need most.

You don't need four intersecting circles to deserve to live. Ikigai diagrams, career ladders, and achievement grids are all variations of Hui Shi's carpenter gaze. Zhuangzi's counter-offer is simpler and more radical: you are alive. That is enough. Start from there.

— Ding Long, recorded in the autumn of the jiachen year

Chapter 3: The Butcher's Knife — The Highest Form of Action Is Effortless

---

Deep Dive: The Three Keys to Cook Ding's Method

The most beautiful story in the entire Zhuangzi is the tale of Cook Ding carving an ox. Nothing else comes close. I've told this story in the temple at least a hundred times, and every time, someone says, "Isn't this just flow state?" — and yes, but also no. Flow is just a description at the level of phenomena. Cook Ding gives us a complete operating system. That system rests on three core concepts, each deeper than the last.

Layer One: "Following the Natural Grain — Slicing the Big Gaps, Guiding Through the Large Hollows"

This sounds esoteric, but it's really one sentence: follow the natural structure of the thing. Stop fighting it.

"Natural grain" (tian li) isn't some rule laid down by heaven. It's the innate structure of every thing. A piec e of wood has a grain — split along the grain and it's effortless; chop against it and you strain. A project ha s its logical starting point and natural sequence of progression — follow that and it flows smoothly; revers e it and every step jams. "Slice" (pi) and "guide" (dao) are both action words — slice means gently enterin g, guide means following the lead — neither is "hack" or "smash."

I've seen too many people approach their work like laying siege to a fortress. They open their laptop, pop open thirty tabs, down a coffee, grip the keyboard, and project a "today I'm going to WAR with this thing" energy. That's not working. That's picking a fight with the work. Cook Ding's first lesson: observe first. Fin d the entry point. Then move.

Layer Two: "Inserting What Has No Thickness into the Gap"

This is the sharpest sentence in the entire chapter. Literally: "Insert the blade that has no thickness into th e crevice between the bones." It took me twenty years to really understand it.

Your attention has "thickness." When you're anxious, your attention blunts — you're working while simult aneously thinking "what if I screw this up," "what will people think," "I've got three more deadlines behin d this one" — and the blade dulls. When you're agitated, your attention grows heavy — every stroke wants to smash through bone, and the blade shatters first.

"No thickness" doesn't mean you're not paying attention. The opposite. It means your attention is so clea n there's no additional weight attached. No victory-or-defeat mindset. No gain-or-loss calculation. No perf ormance for an audience. Nothing but blade and ox. This is what real focus looks like — not that you're "c oncentrating hard," but that after you've put down everything that would scatter your attention, what's le ft is that state.

Layer Three: "The Senses Stop, but the Spirit Moves"

This is the ultimate code of the entire chapter. "Senses" (guan) means eyes seeing, ears hearing, hands to uching. "Spirit" (shen) means the intuition that transcends the senses. Cook Ding says: the senses have st opped working, but my spirit is still in motion.

What does this mean? It means you no longer need to "think." A driver with twenty years behind the whee l doesn't think "should I signal," "should I brake for this red light" — the hands and feet move on their ow n. A calligrapher who's written a lifetime doesn't think "how long should this horizontal stroke be" — the brush already knows.

My deepest experience of this comes from Daoist ritual ceremonies in the temple. The ritual flow is extraor dinarily complex — chanting, singing, gesturing, moving, incense-burning, kneeling, prostrating — dozens of interlocking segments. For the first few years, I had to run through every motion in my head. After one c eremony, my legs were weak and my brain was swollen. Around year ten, one day I suddenly realized — I had no idea what I was doing, but everything was happening perfectly. Not zoning out. Something deeper than zone-out. A kind of "being there." That state isn't "I've got it figured out." It's "the Dao is doing it thro ugh my hands."

These three concepts aren't parallel options. They form a cultivation path: first learn to observe (slice the big gaps, guide through the hollows) → then learn to clear yourself (the blade with no thickness enters the gap) → finally arrive at automation (senses stop, spirit moves). Each level you ascend, effort decreases by a degree and effectiveness increases tenfold.

The Original Text: A Close Reading — The Three Stages of a Blade

Let's look at the original text. Cook Ding wasn't born "divinely skilled." He tells us the three stages he went through himself:

Stage One: "When I first began cutting up oxen, all I saw was the ox."

When he first learned to carve, all he saw was a whole ox. Massive body, thick bones, resistance everywhere. His mind was full of fear — how do I dismantle all these bones? Where do I start? What if the knife breaks?

This is how everyone faces something new. Your first complex project. Your first time learning a new language. Your first time inheriting a mess. All you see is "a whole ox." The anxiety and fear you feel — it's not because you're inadequate. It's because you haven't yet learned to see the grain. Cook Ding tells us: this stage is not your fault. It's the path you have to walk.

Stage Two: "After three years, I no longer saw the whole ox."

After three years, the "whole ox" disappeared from his vision. What he saw was a skeletal structure — the connections between bones, the direction of the tendons, the layers of muscle. It was still the same ox. But his eyes were no longer the same eyes.

This is the qualitative shift from "an outsider seeing noise" to "an insider seeing structure." You start to see what others can't: the underlying logic of a program instead of thousands of lines of code, the core flywheel of a business model instead of flashy slide decks, the deep dynamics of a relationship instead of surface arguments. At this stage, the fear dissolves — you know where the bones are, and you know where the gaps are.

Stage Three: "Now — I encounter it with the spirit, not with the eyes."

Now, "I encounter it with spirit, not with sight" — no more looking with eyes. He meets the ox with intuition. That word "encounter" (yu) is exquisite. Not "find." Not "calculate." Encounter — blade and bone-gap meet naturally at a single moment. You're not operating the knife. The knife is moving on its own.

From "all I saw was the ox" to "no longer saw the whole ox" to "encounter with spirit" — this is the path from fear to understanding to freedom. Most people get stuck at stage one and never move — every task feels like seeing a whole ox for the first time, and they push through on willpower alone. A few reach stage two — they become experts, but every day still takes effort. Very, very few reach stage three — they work, and it looks like they're resting.

Cook Ding's closing statement is even more interesting. He says: a good cook changes his knife once a year — he cuts. An ordinary cook changes his knife once a month — he hacks. His own knife, after nineteen years and thousands of oxen — "the blade is as fresh as if it had just come off the whetstone." Nineteen years without changing the blade isn't a myth. It's a choice: choose to walk the bone-gaps, and you can walk forever. Choose to hack the bones, and the blade won't last a month.

Western Parallels: Flow, Deliberate Practice, and the Silicon Valley Deception

I spend a few months each year in Shenzhen and Shanghai around the tech crowd — being a priest doesn't mean I don't engage with the modern world. I've noticed that certain concepts in Western psychology and workplace culture form an uncanny correspondence with Cook Ding's story — but also generate deep m

isunderstandings.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Flow State

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi introduced the concept of "flow" in the 1970s: when you're fully absorbed in an a ctivity, time disappears, self-consciousness vanishes, action and awareness merge, and you experience a deep form of enjoyment. He listed the conditions: challenge matched to skill, clear goals, immediate feed back, deep concentration.

These descriptions capture the symptoms of flow with precision. But they don't answer a more fundamen tal question: once you're in flow — what exactly are you operating on? Are you following the grain, or are y ou hacking bone?

Cook Ding answers the missing piece. Flow is not a "room" you can "enter." It's the natural byproduct of st opping your brute force approach. You don't need to study how to "enter flow." You just need to study ho w to "find the bone-gaps" — flow will find you on its own.

When I sweep the temple courtyard, I never deliberately try to "enter flow" and then start sweeping. I just sweep with focus. I notice the texture of the fallen leaves, the wind's direction, the bumps and dips in the ground — and they all become part of a felt sense. Then flow happens. The sequence is: find the grain → move with it → flow naturally arrives. Modern people do it backwards: chase flow → force concentration → can't find the grain → frustration.

Deliberate Practice vs. Effortless Action

Anders Ericsson's "deliberate practice" theory swept the world — the ten-thousand-hour rule, stepping o utside your comfort zone, constantly pushing your limits. The theory itself isn't wrong: to reach the top, yo u need enormous amounts of practice.

But true deliberate practice is not "hacking bone harder." It's "finding the bone-gaps more precisely." The real deliberate practice at the highest level doesn't get more exhausting — it gets more precise. A master p ianist practicing isn't applying more pressure to their fingers. They're searching for the most natural finger ing, the smallest force, the most graceful arc — this is "the blade with no thickness entering the gap," rend ered in music.

So where's the problem? Most people equate "deliberate practice" with "suffering through effort." They fi gure: if it takes ten thousand hours to become an expert, then grind until 2 AM every night. But if the direct ion of your effort is wrong — if you're practicing hacking bone — then after ten thousand hours, what you get is a completely blunted blade and an exhausted soul.

The Myth of Silicon Valley Hustle Culture

I lived in Silicon Valley for a year. I've seen this culture up close. "Hustle harder." "Rise and grind." "Sleep i s for the weak." Every slogan celebrates the hundred-hour work week. Founders sleep under their desks. Engineers run on twenty-hour sprints. Everyone competes over who's more exhausted.

I respect the fighting spirit. I truly do. But there's a fundamental error embedded in this culture: it equates "effort" with "outcome." More effort does not equal better results — just as Cook Ding tells us: the cooks who hack bone work hardest, and they die fastest.

Nineteen years with the same blade versus a new blade every month.
This is not a question of efficiency. This is a question of survival.

How many people burn out in Silicon Valley every year? How many start questioning their lives at thirty-fi

ve? How many earn enough only to find their bodies and spirits are broken? These people didn't fail for la ck of effort. They tried too hard — too hard at hacking bone.

Zhuangzi's solution isn't a "better time-management technique." It's a fundamental cognitive shift: you d on't need to hack bone. Every seemingly impenetrable "bone" — the impossible project, the difficult clien t, the complex system — has its inherent grain and its natural gaps. Your task isn't to meet hardness with h ardness. It's to quiet yourself, find the gap, and let the blade enter on its own.

Stories from Ding Long

Case One: Sweeping the Temple — From Torment to Meditation

When I was ordained at Mount Longhu, the first task my master gave me wasn't meditation, wasn't talism an writing. It was sweeping. Every morning at 4:30, sweep from the main hall to the temple gate, from tem ple gate to the dining hall. An hour and a half. After a month I couldn't take it anymore. I went to my maste r: "Master, I came here to cultivate the Dao, not to be a janitor."

My master looked at me. "When you sweep, what are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking: finish this fast so I can go practice."

He said: "So your body is here. Where is your heart? You're fighting the broom."

I didn't understand this at the time. Swept for another six months. Still didn't get it. Until one winter morn ing — I remember it vividly, frost on the ground, slippery. I picked up the broom in a bad mood because I' d argued with a fellow disciple the night before. But as I swept, I suddenly noticed the argument in my hea d had gone quiet. Not suppressed — naturally dissolved. I noticed the sound of the broom across the ston e. I noticed the texture of the fallen leaves — some brittle, crumbling at a touch; others damp, needing to be swept from the side. My hands adjusted the angle on their own. My footsteps found their own rhythm. When I looked up, an hour and a half had passed.

I wasn't sweeping the ground. I was the broom, the leaf, the ground, the wind.

In that moment I understood Cook Ding. You don't need to "love" sweeping to enter that state. You just ne ed to stop resisting it. When you stop treating sweeping as "something I need to finish quickly" and start tr eating it as "something that's happening right now" — the bone-gaps reveal themselves. Every fallen leaf tells you which direction to sweep. Every gust of wind tells you whether to sweep with it or against it. You' re not doing the work. The Dao is doing it through your hands.

Later I brought this insight into ritual ceremonies, talisman writing, receiving visitors. Now when someone comes to the temple burdened with work stress and life's frustrations, I often take them to get a broom. T hey're confused. I say: "Sweep for ten minutes first. Then we'll talk." Ten minutes later they come back. M ost of the time, they don't need to talk anymore — their face has already changed.

Case Two: The Shenzhen Programmer — From Hacking Bone to Flowing Water

Jie is a young man I met in Shenzhen. Twenty-six. Backend developer at a major internet company. Techni cally, he was among the best of his peers. But in two years, he'd switched companies three times. Not fire d — always his decision to leave.

The first time we met, he looked terrible — dark circles nearly reaching his cheekbones. I asked what was going on. He said: "Brother, I don't think I'm cut out to be a programmer."

I said: aren't you technically strong?

"That's exactly the problem. I care too much about the quality of every single line of code. When I get a requirement, everyone else builds a rough framework, gets it running, then iterates. I try to write the perfect solution from the first line. I rewrite one function eight times. I agonize over a variable name for half an hour. I get halfway through and realize the whole architecture is wrong, so I scrap it and start over. A task that takes someone else a week takes me three weeks — and I still don't finish. Every time I think the next line of code will be the perfect one. But every line falls just short. Cumulatively, it's crushing."

I laughed when I heard this. Not at him — I saw my twenty-years-ago self. When I first started drawing talismans, I'd do the same one ten, twenty times, always convinced I hadn't drawn it well enough. The ink on the paper kept getting heavier and heavier until the paper was practically torn through.

I told Jie one thing: "The blade has no thickness — only then can it enter the gap. Your attention is too thick. Every line of code you write carries the weight of 'this line must be perfect.' How could the blade not dull?"

He was silent for a long time. Later he told me that sentence made him realize: his perfectionism wasn't a pursuit of excellence. It was fear of deficiency. What he feared wasn't writing bad code — it was other people thinking he wasn't good enough.

He made one change: every day, one goal — "get the code running." It could be ugly. It could have temporary hacks. He could leave TODOs everywhere. But the core functionality had to run by 6 PM. At first, he was deeply uncomfortable. It felt like writing "garbage code." But he noticed something strange: once that "garbage code" ran for a while, the natural optimization directions would emerge on their own. Which parts were slow, which parts were too tightly coupled, which interface designs didn't work — these problems weren't imaginary anymore. They were real, exposed by the running system.

"Just like the bone-gaps," he told me later. "When you stare at the ox, all you see is bone. But once you make one cut, the gaps reveal themselves. I'm not 'designing' code anymore. I'm 'discovering' code — the code itself tells me how it should be written."

When I saw him again six months later, his whole demeanor had shifted. "I used to think 'flowing water, drifting clouds' was just an adjective to describe a good state of mind. Now I know it's a verb — the clouds are flowing, the water is drifting. Not me." He hadn't changed jobs again in over a year. He'd taken on two junior developers to mentor.

Case Three: The Hong Kong Investment Banker — From Exhaustion to "Returning to the Gap"

The third story happened at a dinner in Hong Kong last year. A friend brought along her colleague from investment banking — Vivian, thirty-two, earning over ten million HKD a year, but looking closer to forty. She sat down and didn't say a word for the first five minutes. Just kept rotating her wrist. I asked what was wrong. Tendonitis, she said. Two years of building Excel models.

"How long have you been in banking?" I asked.

"Nine years."

"Do you like it?"

She froze. Then the tears just started flowing — not sobbing, just tears running on their own, like she'd been holding them in for years and someone had finally asked the question.

She didn't like it. She'd never liked it. But everyone told her it was the most prestigious career path. She c

ouldn't step off. So she worked sixteen-hour days — building models, changing numbers, adjusting formats in Excel. When her hands gave out, she used voice input. Her prescription deepened by fifty degrees each year from staring at the screen. She wasn't working. She was serving a sentence.

I didn't tell her the Cook Ding story. I just asked: "In all those models you've built — was there ever a moment when it felt effortless? Not the time you worked the least overtime. The time it felt right?"

She thought for a long while. Then said: once. A real estate valuation model. She wasn't trying to save time — she was just genuinely interested in the industry. She wanted to understand the pricing logic of different cities. She dug through materials, sketched diagrams, and suddenly all the variables connected naturally into a single thread — supply and demand, interest rates, policy, population movement. She hadn't "built" the model. The model had "emerged."

"In that moment, where were you?" I asked.

"Inside the model."

"And during your regular sixteen-hour days — where are you?"

She cried again. Longer this time. Because the answer was too obvious: during those sixteen hours, she was outside the spreadsheet. Outside her boss's expectations. Outside peer competition. Outside fear of the future. She had never entered her work. She'd been fighting it the whole time.

Vivian didn't quit. She just changed how she faced Excel: not as a performance metric, but as a question she genuinely wanted to understand. She said the shift was tiny — externally invisible — but she knew: before, she was "pushing a boulder uphill." Now, she's "drifting downstream on a river." Not that she stopped trying. She stopped fighting herself.

Framework Summary

Cook Ding's wisdom can be strung along three lines, each tracing the same arc: from "hacking bone" to "walking the gaps."

Line One: Cognitive Shift

- Bone-hacking mindset: The task is a mountain. I must split it open.
- Gap-walking mindset: The task is an ox. It has a natural grain. I must follow the grain.
- Key action: Pause. Observe. Then move. Not move, then pause.

Line Two: Energy Shift

- Bone-hacking mindset: Every stroke depletes. The harder you work, the more tired you get. The more tired, the slower.
- Gap-walking mindset: The blade borrows the ox's own structure to move. The longer you work, the lighter it gets. The lighter, the faster.
- Key action: Remove the excess "force" — the force born of fear, anxiety, performance for an audience.

Line Three: Self Shift

- Bone-hacking mindset: I am the operator. The task is the operated-upon object. I must control everything.
- Gap-walking mindset: I step back. The Dao steps forward. Things happen through me, not because of me proving myself.

- Key action: From "I must do this well" to "let it happen."

All three lines arrive at the same destination: you are not using a blade to disassemble an ox. You are the b lade. You are the ox. You are the disassembling itself. In that state, there is no effort, and no non-effort. Th ere is no success, and no failure. There is only one thing. Happening.

Practice Exercises

Exercise One: Blade and Gap Meditation (Retained and Deepened)

Choose your most important work task this week. Before you start, don't rush to open your laptop. Give y ourself five minutes.

Close your eyes. Breathe deeply three times. Imagine you are an extremely thin blade — not a cleaver, not a kitchen knife, but something as thin as a razor.

In your mind, trace the rough outline of this task. Don't think about how to "solve" it. Just scan its shape. Where are its bones? What parts feel hardest, offering the most resistance? Where are its gaps — the most natural, least-resistance entry points?

Imagine your blade slipping gently into that gap. No force needed. No acceleration. Just following the gap' s natural path. If you find yourself "stuck" at some point, don't push. Withdraw the blade. Find a new gap. There is always an entry point that yields.

Now open your eyes. Begin working. When you feel tension or strain midway — and you will — stop. Don't fight the tension. Don't tell yourself "persistence is victory." Return to three breaths. Re-imagine the relati onship between blade and gap.

When you finish, write one line: Did even a single second of "effortlessness" appear today? When did it ha ppen? What were you doing at that moment?

Do this for seven consecutive days. You'll notice: that moment of "effortlessness" will grow from one seco nd to ten seconds, from ten seconds to a minute. It's not "increasing." It's "returning" — because it was al ways there. You just kept taking the long way around.

Exercise Two: The Energy Ledger (New)

This exercise comes from a method my master taught me. I've modernized it.

Take a piece of paper. Three columns:

| Task | Bone-Hacking Moments | Gap-Walking Moments |

At the end of each workday, spend five minutes reviewing. Write today's key tasks in the first column. The n reflect one by one:

- **Bone-Hacking Moments**: During this task, which moments did you feel like you were forcing, fighti ng, in a brawl with the work? For example: rewriting a piece of code over and over but making it worse eac h time, arguing over a detail with a colleague when neither side would budge, forcing yourself to keep grin ding while exhausted — these are all hacking bone.
- **Gap-Walking Moments**: Which moments did things feel like they were "happening on their own"? For example: an idea became a paragraph as naturally as breathing, a technical solution suddenly clicked while you were taking a break, a conversation flowed so smoothly it felt rehearsed — these are all walking

the gaps.

Track this for a week. Then look back at the table. You'll be startled by two patterns:

First, bone-hacking moments consumed 80% of your energy but produced only 20% of your results. Gap-walking moments took only 20% of your time but produced 80% of your results — and didn't leave you exhausted.

Second, bone-hacking moments and gap-walking moments are often separated by nothing but a "pause." The distance between hacking mode and gap-walking mode is usually just: stop, breathe, step back. But you never stopped — because you felt like you "didn't have time to stop."

This table isn't meant to make you feel bad about "hacking bone again." It's meant to let you see a pattern. Seeing is the beginning of changing. After a week, you'll start to notice yourself at the moment of the swing — "This next stroke — hack bone, or find the gap?" And then the choice is back in your hands.

Key Takeaways

What you resist persists; what you flow with transforms. Cook Ding's knife never fights the bone — it finds the natural gaps and glides through. The "bone" in your work (the impossible deadline, the difficult client, the messy codebase) isn't meant to be smashed. It's meant to be understood.

Effort is not a virtue; alignment is. Silicon Valley worships the hundred-hour week as proof of dedication. But a butcher who hacks bones changes his knife every month. A butcher who follows the grain keeps the same blade for nineteen years. Sustainability is the real metric — not how hard you grind, but how long you last.

The three stages are real and unavoidable. You will begin seeing only "a whole ox" (overwhelm). With practice, you'll stop seeing the whole and start seeing the structure (expertise). Eventually — if you persist without forcing — you'll stop seeing altogether and start sensing (flow). Don't skip steps. Don't shame yourself for being at stage one.

"No thickness" is the secret weapon. Your attention has thickness. Anxiety thickens it. Perfectionism thickens it. Comparison thickens it. Before you look for gaps in the work, look for the extra weight you're carrying into the work. Put it down. Then the blade slips in by itself.

The Dao doesn't require you to love what you do. It only requires you to stop fighting what you're doing. Cook Ding didn't love oxen. He just stopped seeing them as enemies. Whatever you're facing today — the spreadsheet, the meeting, the inbox — it's not your enemy. It's an ox. Find the seam.

Chapter 4: Leveling All Things — Stop the Internal War, All Things Are Equal

Deep Dive

I am Ding Long. If you ask me which chapter of the Zhuangzi cuts closest to the bone — like a surgeon's sc alpel — I'll say without hesitation: The Equality of Things ([icon] / Qí Wù Lùn). It doesn't sell you the ideal of carefree wandering. It doesn't hand you the secret to longevity. It cracks open the operating system insi de your skull, points at the source code, and says: Look. These binaries — right and wrong, good and bad, true and false — you wrote them. They're not the universe's factory settings.

Leveling All Things: Everything Is Already Equal — You're the One Assigning Rankings

The two characters qí wù literally translate to "leveling" or "equalizing" all things. But Zhuangzi isn't tellin g you to pretend that different things are the same — that would be willful blindness. What he means by "l eveling" is a kind of cognitive unshackling: you don't need to slap a superior/inferior label onto every eve nt, every person, every choice.

In twenty-five years at the Daoist temple, here's my deepest observation: people come to draw divination lots and ask the oracle, and on the surface they're asking "Will this thing work out?" But the question und erneath, every single time, is the same: "Is the path I chose the right one?" Right versus wrong — that's th e deepest anxiety of the human heart. And Zhuangzi's answer is earth-shattering: There is no right or wron g. There is only the line you drew.

In The Equality of Things, he says something deliberately knotty but devastatingly precise:

> "Everything is 'that' and everything is 'this.' From 'that,' you cannot see 'this.' From 'this,' you know 'this.' Therefore it is said: 'That' arises from 'this,' and 'this' is also dependent on 'that.'"

Let me unpack that. Take any object — you call it "that thing" and it becomes "that." You call it "this thing " and it becomes "this." From the perspective of "that," you can't see the perspective of "this." From "this, " you can't see "that." "That" and "this" produce each other — without "that," there is no "this"; without " this," there is no "that."

It sounds like wordplay, but sit with it. You feel you're "not good enough." Why? Because you're measurin g yourself against a yardstick labeled "good enough." Who made that yardstick? You did — or you borrow ed it from your parents, your teachers, your social media feed. The moment that standard wavers, "not go od enough" can't stand on its own. Not because you got better — because the line disappeared.

Neither "That" Nor "This" Finds Its Opposite — Dissolve the Binary, and the Dao Is in the Middle

> "When neither 'that' nor 'this' finds its opposite, this is called the pivot of the Dao."

This line is the master key to The Equality of Things. "Opposite" ([icon] / ǒu) means the binary pair — that versus this, right versus wrong, beautiful versus ugly, success versus failure. "Neither finds its opposite" m eans you stop letting them form a binary. The moment you stop treating "that" as the enemy of "this," you touch what Zhuangzi calls the "pivot of the Dao" ([icon] / dào shū) — the hinge of the Way.

The Daoists have a term for this: the center of the ring ([icon] / huán zhōng). Picture a ring. The exact cente r — not leaning left, not leaning right — can see the entire left side and the entire right side simultaneousl y. When you're grinding yourself into dust in the corporate rat race, you're stuck on one edge of the ring. Y ou believe you must win, must get promoted, must be better than everyone else. But if you step back to th e center of the ring, you realize: winning and losing are just two faces of the same game. Stop playing that game, and neither can touch you.

This isn't sophistry. It's a jailbreak at the cognitive level.

Heaven and Earth Are One Finger; the Ten Thousand Things Are One Horse — Concepts Are the Most Powerful Hallucination Humans Ever Invented

Zhuangzi goes further and pulls the rug out from under the entire conceptual apparatus we depend on to function:

> "Using a finger to show that a finger is not a finger is not as good as using what is not a finger to show that a finger is not a finger. Using a horse to show that a horse is not a horse is not as good as using what is not a horse to show that a horse is not a horse. Heaven and Earth are one finger. The ten thousand things are one horse."

This passage references the famous debates of the logician Gongsun Long — "a white horse is not a horse" and the "pointing at things" discourse. But Zhuangzi brings a wrecking ball to the whole debate: You're arguing about whether the concept of "horse" can contain the concept of "white horse"? You're debating whether a "pointer" (a conceptual sign) can refer to a real object? Stop arguing. Heaven and Earth are nothing more than one pointer. The ten thousand things are nothing more than one horse. The point: all concepts are labels. Labels are not the things themselves. And every label is, fundamentally, something humans made up.

You call your anxiety "failure" — and it becomes failure. You call it "experience" — and it becomes experience. Change the label, and the entire texture of the experience changes.

This is especially lethal for young, high-cognition people today. The more books you read, the more refined your internal labels become — "cognitive tier," "growth curve," "opportunity cost," "path dependency." Each label helps you micromanage your life with extraordinary precision, but without you noticing, they weave themselves into a barbed-wire net of self-evaluation. You hang yourself on these labels. Every twitch hurts. Zhuangzi says: tear down the barbed wire. Those concepts are not the world itself. They're shipping labels you stuck onto the world. The package is already in your hands. You're just staring at the numbers on the label, panicking.

Cognitive Reframing vs. Zhuangzi: Same Problem, Two Different Levels of Solution

Western psychology's Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has a core technique called cognitive reframing: you identify a "distorted thought" (e.g., "I can never do anything right"), then challenge and replace it with a "balanced thought" (e.g., "This didn't go well, but I've succeeded many times before"). This technique has been proven remarkably effective for anxiety and depression.

Zhuangzi's approach goes one layer deeper. CBT says, "Your thought is faulty — swap it for a different thought." Zhuangzi says, "The entire framework of good/bad, right/wrong is faulty — don't swap thoughts within the framework. Jump out of the framework entirely." CBT gives a bird in a cage a more comfortable perch. Zhuangzi opens the cage door.

Let me give you an example. You're suffering because you can't finish your thesis. CBT helps you identify the distorted thought: "I can't write my thesis = I'm incompetent," and replace it with: "Writing has peaks and valleys — this block doesn't define my ability." Useful. Genuinely useful. But Zhuangzi's follow-up question cuts deeper: Does this thing called "ability" actually exist? You use "finished the thesis" to prove "I have ability" — so when you can't finish, where did that so-called "ability" go? If "ability" can appear and disappear, what kind of thing is it, really? Zhuangzi doesn't dismantle your specific thought — he dismantles the foundation your thought stands on.

Reading the Original Text

Passage 1: The Pipes of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity — Which Wind Is Blowing Through Your Heart?

> Ziqi said: "...You have heard the pipes of humanity, but not the pipes of earth. You have heard the pipes of earth, but not the pipes of heaven!" Ziyou said: "May I ask how this works?" Ziqi said: "The Great Clod belches breath — its name is Wind. When it is not stirred, nothing happens. But when it stirs, ten thousand hollows begin to howl... A gentle breeze evokes a small harmony; a fierce gale evokes a great harmony. When the sharp wind passes, the hollows fall silent. Have you never seen the swaying, the rustling?" Ziyou said: "The pipes of earth — these are the various hollows. The pipes of humanity — these are bamboo flutes arrayed together. May I ask about the pipes of heaven?" Ziqi said: "It blows on the ten thousand things differently, yet lets each be its own self — each takes what it takes for itself. But who is the blower?"

This is the opening passage of The Equality of Things, and one of the most beautiful in the entire Zhuangzi. Nanguo Ziqi leans against his armrest, gazes up toward heaven, exhales slowly — as though his soul has left his body. His student Yancheng Ziyou asks what's going on. Ziqi replies: today I "lost my self" ([icon] / sàng wǒ) — I shed the ego.

Then he describes three layers of sound.

The pipes of humanity ([icon] / rén lài): The sound of people blowing into bamboo tubes. This is the lowest layer — fabricated, manufactured sound. In your life, this corresponds to the KPIs your boss sets for you, the success metrics society injects into you, the voice in your head that says "I should..." — these are all tunes someone else composed. You're just the one blowing.

The pipes of earth ([icon] / dì lài): The sound of the wind passing through the earth's hollows — mountain caves, tree hollows. Some roar like rapids, some whistle like arrows, some wail, some weep. Wind passes through different hollows, and different sounds emerge. The sounds don't belong to the hollows — the wind produces them. In your inner turmoil, you think you're "thinking independently," but actually you're just a different hollow — your family background, education, social circle — being blown through by the same "societal wind," producing anxieties that only seem unique.

The pipes of heaven ([icon] / tiān lài): The wind itself. It blows through ten thousand hollows and produces ten thousand sounds — but each sound emerges from the hollow's own nature. The wind never decides to make you produce this sound rather than that one. The pipes of heaven are the Dao itself — that which does not judge, does not choose, does not rank the ten thousand things.

"And who is the blower?" — who is it that makes all things sound? Zhuangzi doesn't answer. The question itself is the answer. Stop searching. The moment you stop asking "Who is judging me?" — the judgment disappears.

Passage 2: Three in the Morning, Four in the Evening — Your Brain Is Easily Tricked

> A monkey keeper was distributing acorns. He said, "Three in the morning and four in the evening." The monkeys were all furious. "All right then," he said, "four in the morning and three in the evening." The monkeys were all delighted. Neither the name nor the substance had changed, yet joy and anger were deployed at will. This too is "going along with things."

An old man feeding monkeys offers "three acorns in the morning, four in the evening." The monkeys rage. He changes it to "four in the morning, three in the evening." The monkeys celebrate.

The total is seven. Nothing — not the name, not the substance — has changed. Yet the monkeys' emotional states were completely manipulated. Zhuangzi's blade cuts deep here: he is telling you that the vast majority of your emotional responses — your joy, your anger, your anxiety — are indistinguishable from those monkeys'. Same job offer. HR says "500K a year, but it's 996" and you feel cheated. Rephrase it as "a high-challenge, high-growth path, starting at 500K" and suddenly it seems reasonable. The substance didn't change. The label did. And your emotions followed the label like a puppy on a leash.

Who is the monkey keeper in modern society? The algorithm. It pushes "Ten Things You Must Do Before 30." You enter monkey mode — furiously or anxiously counting your acorns, trying to figure out if you have enough. Zhuangzi says: stop being the monkey. See the total. Ignore the morning and the evening.

Passage 3: Mao Qiang and Li Ji — Is Beauty an Objective Fact of the Universe?

> Mao Qiang and Li Ji — these were women whom people considered beautiful. But when fish saw them, they dove deep. When birds saw them, they flew high. When deer saw them, they bolted away. Of these four — humans, fish, birds, deer — who knows the true standard of beauty in the world?

Mao Qiang and Li Ji were legendary beauties of antiquity. Everyone who saw them found them beautiful. But fish, seeing them, plunged to the bottom. Birds soared away. Deer sprinted into the distance. Of these four species — which one knows what "true beauty" actually is?

Zhuangzi's answer: No one. Because there is no such thing as "true beauty." Beauty and ugliness are not properties of objects. They are projections made by observers based on their own survival needs. Fish have no use for human faces — they need to eat water plants and avoid predators. What you find beautiful is completely meaningless inside a fish's survival framework.

Now translate this logic to your life. You think you're a "failure." But inside whose framework? Your Big Tech colleague's? Your college classmate's? The LinkedIn algorithm's? Switch frameworks — a fish, a bird, an eight-thousand-year-old chun tree — and your "failure" simply does not exist. Not because it was healed. Because the evaluative framework that produced it doesn't apply to you.

Passage 4: Zhuang Zhou Dreams of a Butterfly — Are You the Anxious One, or the Anxiety Itself?

> Once, Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly — a butterfly fluttering happily, completely absorbed in the moment, utterly unaware of Zhou. Suddenly he woke up, and there he was, solid and unmistakable — Zhou. But he didn't know: was it Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly, or was it a butterfly dreaming it was Zhou? Between Zhou and the butterfly, there must be a distinction. This is called the transformation of things.

This is the closing passage of The Equality of Things, and one of the most famous paragraphs in all of Chinese philosophy. Zhuangzi dreamed he became a butterfly — fluttering, joyful, utterly unaware that he was "Zhuang Zhou." He woke up — and there he was, unmistakably, Zhuang Zhou. And then he asked: was it Zhuang Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly? Or was it a butterfly dreaming it was Zhuang Zhou?

This dream isn't about the cliché that "life is but a dream." It's dismantling something deeper: the fixed, frozen relationship between you and your role. You believe you are a failure, or you are an anxious person. That's just your current "Zhuang Zhou state." But what if — what if — you could also be the butterfly? Not metaphorically. What if you could genuinely switch into an entirely different self-perception, and that perception was just as real, just as valid, as your current one?

The transformation of things ([icon] / wù huà) — the ceaseless metamorphosis of all things. Your identity,

your anxiety, your predicament — none of these are solid. They are fluid. The pain you're in today, seen fr
om your "butterfly state," might just look like a strange dream.

Western Parallels

CBT Cognitive Reframing vs. Zhuangzi's "Leveling": A Better Perch, or an Open Door?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), founded by Aaron Beck in the 1960s, operates on a core triangle: thou
ghts, emotions, and behaviors all influence each other. Change the thought, and the emotion and behavio
r follow. Cognitive reframing is CBT's flagship technique — identify "automatic negative thoughts," then r
eplace them with more rational ones.

For example: "My colleague got promoted faster than me, so I'm a failure." CBT guides you to spot the cog
nitive distortion — perhaps "labeling" (turning one event into a character judgment) or "all-or-nothing thi
nking" (if you're not first, you're worthless).

This step is remarkably effective. But Zhuangzi would chase it with a question: Even when you've identifie
d the labeling distortion, you're still playing inside the success/failure game. You're trying to play the gam
e more "healthily" — but you haven't asked: why does this game get to define your value in the first place?

CBT says your thought might be wrong. Zhuangzi says the binary "right/wrong" itself might be wrong. The
se are two different levels of intervention. One helps you play chess better. The other tells you: you don't h
ave to play chess. You can play Go. You can stop playing board games entirely. You can just stare at the bo
ard. None of these choices is inferior to "playing chess seriously."

The Inner Critic: Western Psychology Reaches the Door

The concept of the "inner critic" has received enormous attention in Western psychology — particularly in
trauma therapy and Internal Family Systems (IFS). The basic model: there's a voice in your head constantl
y accusing, judging, and diminishing you. That voice is not "you." It's the internalized voice of a harsh pare
nt, teacher, or society, absorbed during your development.

IFS's approach: dialogue with this "critic." Understand that it's trying to protect you (usually from failure o
r social rejection). Thank it for its good intentions. Then ask it to step back.

Zhuangzi's approach is different. Zhuangzi wouldn't dialogue with the critic. He would ask directly: "The s
tandards your critic uses to judge you — good, bad, success, failure — who gave those to you?" The mome
nt you see that those standards came from the monkey keeper (society, family, the times), you no longer n
eed to negotiate with the inner critic. You flip the negotiating table. Not "I'm going to stop listening to your
criticism." Rather: "The entire system of measurement your criticism relies on doesn't exist."

Radical Acceptance: The Western Practice Closest to Zhuangzi

Marsha Linehan, in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), introduced Radical Acceptance — fully accepting r
eality, not "agreeing" with it, but stopping the war against what is. This forms the deepest dialogue with Z
huangzi's "leveling of all things."

Radical Acceptance's operational path: acknowledge that "this thing has already happened." Stop asking
"Why me?" Stop fantasizing about alternative possibilities. Stop hurling your emotions against the wall of

reality. This is nearly identical to Zhuangzi's "resting in what is ordained" ([icon] / ān zhī ruò mìng).

The difference: Radical Acceptance's endpoint is pain relief — you stop crying over spilled milk. The endpoint of Leveling All Things is discovering there is no milk — not only do you stop crying, you realize that what you thought was milk was, from beginning to end, a label you yourself applied. "Failure" is not a carton of spilled milk. You took an event, labeled it "failure," and then cried over the label. The event is real. The label is yours.

These two are not contradictory — they are upstream and downstream. Radical Acceptance helps you stop crying. Zhuangzi helps you see there was never any milk to spill.

Fixed vs. Growth Mindset: Zhuangzi Was Already "Growing"

Carol Dweck's "fixed mindset vs. growth mindset" model has become something of a religion in Silicon Valley. Fixed mindset believes ability is innate and static. Growth mindset believes ability can be developed through effort.

On the surface, Zhuangzi might seem to land on the "growth mindset" side — he talks about transformation ([icon] / huà), about change, and opposes rigidity. But Zhuangzi's dimension goes further. Dweck's framework still operates on the axis of "how much ability do you have" — it just changes ability's nature from "fixed" to "growable." Zhuangzi says: the concept of "ability" itself — you invented it. Your value as an existence does not depend on any ability parameter. When you have no "ability," a tree is still a tree. A fish is still a fish. The ten thousand things do not need ability to prove the legitimacy of their existence.

Real Cases from Ding Long

Case 1: The Anthropology PhD with Thesis Paralysis

Winter 2023. A young woman doing her PhD in anthropology in North America reached me via video call. Her problem was surgically precise: she couldn't write her thesis. Not that she didn't know how to write — she didn't dare to write. She'd been opening a blank document for three months, sitting in the library until closing time every day, unable to produce a single word.

I asked: What are you afraid of?

She was silent for a long time. Then: "I'm afraid it won't be good enough."

I pressed: "The standard for 'good enough' is...?"

She told me her advisor was an authority in the field. A senior student in her department had just published in a top journal — the reviewer called it "groundbreaking." "How could anything I write compare to that?"

There it is — a living, breathing version of "three in the morning, four in the evening." Same thesis-writing task. But when she placed her advisor and senior colleague into the frame of reference, the task transformed from "academic exploration" into "humiliation test." In her mind, she'd priced out failure: "writes poorly = doesn't belong in this field = the past five years were wasted = I'm a fraud." Not a single link in this chain was real. But every link produced genuine fear responses in her nervous system.

We did three things together.

First: dismantle the labels. What is a "thesis"? Three hundred pages of paper with symbols printed on the m. What are symbols? Marks. She wasn't afraid of the thesis. She was afraid of the evaluative web she'd sp un behind the word "thesis."

Second: the fish's perspective. I said: Your research is on Southeast Asian fishermen's religious practices. Do you realize your fisherman interviewees don't care at all about top-journal reviews? Inside their frame work, the fact that you're writing down their stories is already remarkable. She said she knew that, but "ac ademia doesn't see it that way." I asked: "Is academia your entire universe?" She went quiet.

Third: reverse the acorn trick. I told her to take "finish the thesis" off her goal list and replace it with: "Writ e 300 words today, and I'll buy myself a good coffee." She said that was childish. I said try it. She tried for t wo weeks. She wrote eight thousand words.

She later sent an email. The writing was decent, she said, but the real gain wasn't thesis progress. It was di scovering that when she wasn't writing her thesis, she was still a person. Not "a failed PhD student." A per son. That's the beginning of leveling all things.

Case 2: The McKinsey Partner's "Two Outfits"

Last year, a friend who'd made partner at McKinsey came by for tea. Early forties. Pulled up in a Porsche. F irst thing he did after sitting down: flipped his phone face-down on the table. Did this three times. Explain ed: "I'm afraid of seeing notifications."

His problem: he'd already succeeded, but he couldn't feel it. Every month he checked project revenue, tea m reviews, competitor movements. The data was consistently excellent. But his internal experience was li ke tap-dancing on a cliff edge — every step had to be perfect. One slip and he'd plummet.

I said: You're wearing two sets of clothes. One is for others to see — the partner title, the Porsche, the reve nue dashboards. That outfit is genuinely impressive. The other is for yourself — you feel like you could be exposed at any moment, you believe you only got here through luck, and the definition of "someone truly impressive" always sits just out of reach.

He asked what to do.

I said: Zhuangzi's method isn't to give you a better set of internal clothes. It's to make you realize — you d on't need clothes. You stand naked in the universe, alongside fifty thousand other species. You are a moun tain, a tree, a river. You don't need a title to prove your right to exist.

He was quiet for a long time. Then: "But my team is waiting for me to run the next project meeting."

I said: Go run the meeting. But in your heart, know that the "you" running the meeting is not "you." "Partn er" is a role you're playing right now — like the butterfly in Zhuang Zhou's dream, like Zhuang Zhou in the butterfly's dream. The role is in the meeting. You are watching the role be in the meeting. The one who wa tches — that one doesn't need clothes.

Case 3: My Own Calligraphy — A Daoist Priest's Inner War

I touched on this story in Chapter 1, but here I need to tell another layer of it.

Twenty years ago, when I first entered the temple, I practiced calligraphy two hours every day. The charact ers came out crooked, but my heart was still. After two years, my brushwork started looking like somethin g. People began saying, "Ding Long's characters have backbone." And that's where things went wrong.

From that day on, every time I lifted the brush, I heard a voice: "You have to produce backbone." That voic e wasn't coming from anyone else — it was the version of me who'd been praised. I'd internalized the com pliment, and along with it, the standard. Whether the writing was good or not was no longer a matter of m y own feeling — it was an invisible judge keeping score. During that period, the more I wrote, the more agi tated I became.

Later, I read a line in The Equality of Things that hit me like a bucket of cold water:

> "How could the Dao be hidden such that there is true and false? How could speech be hidden such that there is right and wrong?"

The Dao was never hidden — so how did true and false appear? Words were always there — so how did rig ht and wrong appear? Because I split them.

My calligraphy had no true or false. True and false were a line I'd drawn. "Has backbone" was a sticky note someone else stuck to the side of my characters. The sticky note wasn't me. The characters weren't me. T he act of writing — that was me.

From then on, I added a practice to my calligraphy: finish a page. Don't look at it. Flip it over. Start the next page. I did this for a full year. Not to improve technique — to surgically separate "judgment" from the act of writing. Did my technique improve? I have no idea. But the stillness came back. That's leveling — not m aking the characters uniform, but making the discriminating mind level.

Knowledge Framework Summary

Zhuangzi Concept | Core Meaning | Western Parallel | Modern Application
Leveling All Things ([icon]) | All things are equal; right/wrong, good/bad are lines you drew | Cognitive Reframing (CBT), Ra dical Acceptance (DBT) | Discover that your suffering comes from labels, not facts
Neither Finds Its Opposite ([icon]) | Dissolve binaries; dwell in the center of the ring | Non-dual awareness (advanced mindf ulness) | Exit the win/lose game; stop being held hostage by either/or
Three Morning, Four Evening ([icon]) | Substance unchanged; labels manipulate emotion | Framing Effect (Tversky & Kahne man) | See through packaging; stop being led by rhetoric
Mao Qiang and Li Ji ([icon]) | Beauty/ugliness depends on the observer's framework | Perspectivism (Nietzsche), Standpoin t Theory | Your "failure" may not exist in another framework
Zhuang Zhou Dreams of a Butterfly ([icon]) | Self-perception is fluid, not fixed | Identity as narrative (Ricoeur), IFS multiple s elves | You are not your role; you are the awareness that can switch between roles
Heaven and Earth Are One Finger; the Ten Thousand Things Are One Horse ([icon]) | Concepts are labels, not equal to what t hey point to | Linguistic relativity (Sapir-Whorf) | Dismantle the power that concepts like "ability," "achievement," and "value" h old over you

Core Insight: The root of inner turmoil is not that your willpower is weak, or that your action-taking is insu fficient. It's that you've divided the world into countless opposing bins — good and bad, success and failu re, worthy and unworthy — and then wedged yourself between them, constantly measuring whether you' re close enough to the "good" side. Zhuangzi says: erase the bins. No bins, no getting stuck.

Practice Section

Exercise 1: The Five-Perspective Shift

This is the most direct, practical application of The Equality of Things. Whenever you encounter a situatio

n that's eating you alive, work through these five perspectives in order. Write at least three sentences for e ach.

Perspective 1: Your own perspective

- "What am I feeling right now? What am I afraid of / angry about / anxious about?"
- This is your default lens. Acknowledge it first. Don't skip this.

Perspective 2: The other person's perspective (if you're in conflict with someone)

- "If I were them, how would I describe this situation?"
- This isn't about agreeing with them. It's about understanding *their* labeling system.

Perspective 3: The bystander's perspective

- "How would a complete stranger, knowing nothing about this, see the situation?"
- Imagine you're an alien anthropologist arriving on Earth for the first time, observing this scene. What would you think these humans are so worked up about?

Perspective 4: The fish / bird / tree's perspective

- Return to Zhuangzi's Mao Qiang and Li Ji — how would a fish view your predicament? A bird? A tree th at's been alive for eight hundred years?
- Inside a fish's survival framework, does your "career setback" exist? Inside a tree's growth framework, does your "social anxiety" have any weight?

Perspective 5: The Dao's perspective (the Leveling perspective)

- "If good and bad, right and wrong, success and failure — if these binaries didn't exist, what would this situation be?"
- Strip off every value label. What bare facts remain? An event happened. A person is doing something. Beneath this most basic description — is there even a "problem"?

Practice note: Don't do this silently in your head. Write it down. There's a strange pathway between the pr efrontal cortex and handwriting — by the time you reach Perspective 3, you'll usually find yourself smiling without realizing it. That smile is Leveling All Things beginning to work.

Exercise 2: Left Column "The Problem I Think I Have" / Right Column "Is That Really True? " — Daily Journal

Get a notebook (paper is better, phone notes work too). Every night before bed, draw a vertical line down t he middle. Left column: "The problem I think I have." Right column: "Is that really true?"

Rules are simple:

- Left column: write down the day's anxiety / inner turmoil / self-criticism (one sentence is enough)
- Right column: write a follow-up question — no yes/no answers allowed; you must expand

Examples:

The problem I think I have... | Is that really true?

"My project presentation today was terrible. My boss definitely thinks I'm incompetent." | What was my boss's actual facial expr ession? What did they actually say? Am I taking "I felt I did badly" and inflating it into "my boss thinks I'm incompetent"?

"Everyone my age has bought a house and I haven't. I'm falling behind." | Which specific people am I thinking of when I say "eve ryone my age"? Am I using five people to represent an entire generation? Who set the standard for "falling behind"?

"I just can't fix my procrastination. I'll never accomplish anything meaningful." | Is the thing I procrastinated on today really con nected to "my whole life"? Are there things I've accomplished without procrastinating? Was the definition of "accomplish somethi ng meaningful" fed to me by social media?

"They didn't reply to my message. They must have a problem with me." | Besides "they have a problem with me," what else cou

ld explain the no-reply? Last time you didn't reply to someone, was it because you had a problem with them?

Key point: The right column is not about pumping yourself up or finding a "positive angle." It's about deco nstructing the premise behind the left column. Zhuangzi's method isn't "look on the bright side." It's "figu re out why you decided this was the dark side."

Stick with it for 21 days. You'll notice something strange: the "problems" in the left column start feeling lig hter. Not because your life got better — because your interpretation system is loosening. Those "facts" yo u thought were ironclad? They were labels you stuck onto events. Leveling doesn't change the world. It let s you see — you never needed to carry those labels in the first place.

Key Takeaways

**"Qi wu" ([icon] / the equality of things) is not relativism — it's liberation from manufactured binaries.* * Good and bad, success and failure, worthy and unworthy are lines you drew. The lines feel real because y ou've been living inside them for decades. But they are, in the most literal sense, made up.

The monkeys and the acorns ([icon]) is the most brutal mirror you will ever look into. If changing the label from "three in the morning" to "four in the morning" can flip your emotional state, then your emotio nal state was never about reality — it was about framing. The algorithm is the monkey trainer. Stop being the monkey.

The fish, the bird, and the deer do not care about your LinkedIn profile. Zhuangzi's "Mao Qiang and Li Ji" is not a joke about beauty — it's a devastating argument that every evaluation is framework-depend ent. Your "failure" is invisible outside the framework you adopted. Choose your framework, or better yet, drop the framework entirely.

"This is called the transformation of things" ([icon]). The butterfly dream is not whimsical poetry — i t's a re-wiring of identity. You are not your job title, your diagnosis, your reputation, or your inner critic. Yo u are the awareness that can move between all these states. That awareness has no failure mode.

Try the Five-Perspective Exercise tonight. Write it down. It takes fifteen minutes and costs nothing. B y perspective four (the fish's view), something in your chest will release. That release is not a solution to y our problem — it's the realization that the problem was never solid to begin with.

Chapter 5: The Butterfly Dream — Letting Go of Y our Obsession with "Success"

Deep Dive

My name is Ding Long. I've been a lay Daoist priest for twenty-five years. Over the years, I've met more "su ccessful people" in Silicon Valley than I've performed requiem rituals for the dead — and I mean that litera lly. These people are walking around alive, but their eyes look like they've already died once.

Whenever I tell the story of Zhuang Zhou's butterfly dream to people who've burned themselves to ash ins ide hustle culture, their first reaction is always the same: "I get it — life is a dream, nothing is real." And I ju st smile. You're not even close.

The core concept Zhuangzi introduces here is called "the transformation of things" ([icon] / wù huà). This i s not the nihilistic "everything is an illusion" reading. It means that all things are continuously transformin g. The butterfly becomes Zhuang Zhou. Zhuang Zhou becomes the butterfly. This is not a metaphor — it's a physical fact. The "you" who's sitting in a Palo Alto coworking space right now, sipping an oat milk latte and fretting about KPIs — and the "you" from ten years ago, pulling all-nighters in a dorm room to finish a paper — are they really the same person? Your cells completely replace themselves every seven years. You r values, your social circle, the first thought that hits you every morning — all of it has changed. So Zhuan gzi asks: "He didn't know: was it Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming it was Zhou?" Translate that into plain English: How do you know that the butterfly is dreaming of you right now, and no t that you're dreaming of the butterfly? How do you know that the "successful you" is the real you, and not a dream woven for you by hustle culture?

Then comes the second concept — attachment to self ([icon] / wǒ zhí). Buddhism talks about attachment to self; Daoism does too. What does it mean? It means you are gripping, with white knuckles, the definitio n of "the kind of person I am." "I am a founder." "I am a high performer." "I am someone who never quits." Every single "I am..." statement is a nail, pinning you to one version of the story. The most common form of death in Silicon Valley is not bankruptcy. It's defining yourself as an "early employee" at a unicorn — an d then, the day of the IPO, discovering eight million dollars in your account, and your "I am" suddenly goi ng hollow. Who are you next?

Finally, Zhuangzi says: "While you are in a dream, you do not know it is a dream." This line is vicious in its precision. When you're inside the dream, you have no idea you're dreaming. When you're inside hustle cul ture — chasing the next funding round, the next title, the next green card — you don't know you're in a dr eam. You wake up at five, cold shower, intermittent fasting, three books a day, two side projects simultane ously — you feel more awake than anyone. And then one day, some small thing happens — your cat dies, or you're standing in the Whole Foods aisle and suddenly can't decide what to buy — and you wake up for half a second. "What am I actually doing?" That half-second is what Zhuangzi calls awakening ([icon] / jué) .

But here's where Zhuangzi outflanks everyone: he doesn't let you wallow in that "awakened" state, drown ing in existential angst. He makes you see that the dream is also real. The butterfly is a real butterfly. Zhua ng Zhou is a real Zhuang Zhou. The version of you grinding inside hustle culture — that's a real you, too. It 's just not the only you.

I've seen too many people in San Francisco trapped in the rubble of their own "attachment to self." Their c ompany gets acquired. "I am founder" collapses. They feel like they don't exist anymore. A relationship en ds. "I am someone's partner" collapses. They feel like they don't exist anymore. Do you see it? You've neve r treated yourself as a living being. You've only treated yourself as a role to be managed. Zhuangzi's transf ormation of things points to another path: you are not any single role. You are the transformation betwee n roles. You are a river, not a reservoir.

The meaning of transformation is simple: at any moment, you can be the butterfly. At any moment, you ca n be Zhuang Zhou. You don't have to be either one.

Reading the Original Text

Here is the original:

> "Once, Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly — a butterfly fluttering happily, completely absorbed in the moment, utterly unaware of Zhou. Suddenly he woke up, and there he was, solid and unmistakable — Zhou. But he didn't know: was it Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly, or was it a butterfly dreaming it was Zhou? Between Zhou and the butterfly, there must be a distinction. This is called the transformation of things."

Let me unpack this layer by layer.

Layer 1: "A butterfly fluttering happily, completely absorbed in the moment — utterly unaware of Zhou." The butterfly flies, immersed in joy, completely unaware that there is such a being as "Zhuang Zhou." This is Zhuangzi's highest description of the state of non-abiding ([icon] / wú suǒ zhù) — when you are so completely absorbed in the present moment that there is no meta-cognition whispering "I am currently doing this thing." You are the butterfly. You're in flow state, coding, and you forget to eat. Or you're hiking in the mountains, and suddenly everything feels right. That's "unaware of Zhou."

Layer 2: "Suddenly he woke up, and there he was, solid and unmistakable — Zhou." He wakes up. He finds himself a full-grown human lying in bed. Qú qú rán — dazed, a little disoriented. That's you the morning after the IPO. You wake up, and you're still the same person. You didn't suddenly grow wings. That dazed moment — that's the crack. Light comes through the crack. So does fear.

Layer 3: The ultimate question. "Was it Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming it was Zhou?" Zhuangzi does not give you the answer. He doesn't say "life is a dream, so just give up and coast" — that's laziness. He doesn't say "life is real, so keep grinding" — you're already doing that. He suspends you between the question and the answer. And that suspension — that is freedom.

Now look at the "great dream" passage from The Equality of Things:

> "While you are in a dream, you do not know it is a dream. And within the dream, you may even interpret a dream — only upon waking do you know it was a dream. And there is a Great Awakening, after which you know that this has been a Great Dream. But fools think they are awake — smugly, confidently certain they know what's going on."

Zhuangzi's blade is in the last sentence: "fools think they are awake." Laozi says in the Dao De Jing: "To know that you do not know is the highest. To not know yet think you know is a sickness." Zhuangzi turns it into an image: a fool inside a dream, pounding his chest, declaring — "I'm wide awake. I know exactly what I'm doing." You think Zhuangzi is talking about someone else? Every time I read this, I break out in a cold sweat: that fool is me. It's the me who writes New Year's Resolutions every January. It's the me who says "I'm super aligned with our vision" at the all-hands meeting.

Zhuangzi's medicine is not "wake up from the dream" — because how can you be sure the state you call "awake" isn't another layer of dream? His medicine is: let go of the obsession that you must figure out which one is the real one. Dream and waking are both transformations. Butterfly and Zhou — both are you. You don't need to destroy either one.

Western Parallels

I've spent enough time in Palo Alto to notice something hilarious: Westerners spent decades, using every theory in the book, circling around — only to land back on what Zhuangzi said two thousand years ago.

Personal Brand vs. Authentic Self. The phrase "personal brand" is itself a dream. That carefully curated profile picture on LinkedIn, that tagline, that "I'm thrilled to announce..." narrative — isn't that Zhuang Zhou? Not the fake Zhuang Zhou — one genuine version of you. But you took it to be the whole truth, and you forgot you could also be the butterfly. Meanwhile, the "authentic self" is the other trap: you believe there's a "real you" hidden beneath all the social masks, and you just have to find it. Zhuangzi says: there isn't one. Or rather, every version is real, and every version is changing. The you who does Daoist rituals is a real you. The you standing in line at Whole Foods is another real you. Stop the archaeological dig.

Erik Erikson's Identity Crisis Theory. Erikson proposed that people go through "identity crises" at different life stages, with the core question being "Who am I?" This is the exact same question as the butterfly dream. But Erikson's framework is linear: get through the crisis, enter the next stage, and you've "grown." Zhuangzi doesn't see it this way. From Zhuangzi's perspective, Erikson helped you change to a more comfortable bed — inside the dream. You didn't wake up. Or rather: you can wake up for a moment, become the butterfly, and then come back and be Zhuang Zhou. You don't "resolve" the crisis. You live alongside it. You don't need a fixed answer.

Impostor Syndrome. The epidemic of Silicon Valley. You speak up at an all-hands meeting, and a voice in your head is screaming: "They're gonna find out I'm a fraud." Here is Zhuangzi's diagnosis: you are not a fraud. You're just a butterfly currently dreaming it's an engineer. The root of impostor syndrome is not that the "self" is too weak — it's that the attachment to self is too strong. You are too attached to the idea that "I must be a qualified person." Zhuangzi would say: you know, the butterfly has never once worried about whether it's a qualified butterfly. It just flies.

The Original Meaning of Ikigai vs. Its Westernized Remix. This one probably makes me — an old Daoist priest — laugh and cry in equal measure. Ikigai was originally an everyday expression in Okinawa. The meaning is beautifully plain: the thing that makes you willing to get out of bed every morning. It doesn't have to be career-related. It might be your bonsai tree. It might be the greeting from the old woman who sells tofu at the street corner. It might be a photo of your granddaughter. Ask Okinawan centenarians about their ikigai, and not a single one has ever said: "My ikigai is a well-balanced integration of passion, mission, vocation, and profession." They say things like: "I get up every morning and water the vegetable garden. I see the tomatoes have gotten a little redder, and I'm happy." That's it.

Then Westerners turned it into the four-circle Venn diagram — what you love, what the world needs, what you can be paid for, what you are good at — and turned it into a career planning tool. This is exactly what Zhuangzi most opposed: you took something as simple as "willing to get up in the morning" and kidnapped it into your hustle. Now you even have to optimize your ikigai. You just liked growing tomatoes. Now you're thinking: can I monetize these tomatoes? Can I make a newsletter? Can I film a TikTok? Are you not exhausted?

Zhuangzi would not ask you to draw a Venn diagram. Zhuangzi would ask you to become a butterfly, and then ask: Are you flying comfortably? If it's comfortable, that's enough.

Real Cases from Ding Long

Case 1: Allison — Unicorn Employee #27, Crashing Before the IPO

Allison was employee #27 at a SaaS company you've definitely used. She joined when the team was twelv

e people. She wrote code in a Palo Alto living room. She got up at 3 AM to fix production bugs. Last year, th e company was preparing to go public. Her options were worth about four million dollars.

Three months before the IPO, she found me. Not out of excitement — because she had been crying for tw o weeks straight. "I don't recognize myself anymore," she said. "I've been doing this since I was twenty-thr ee. I've never thought about 'after.' If I'm not 'the early engineer at this company' — then who am I?"

Zhuang Zhou dreams of a butterfly. She had been Zhuang Zhou for ten years and had forgotten she could also be the butterfly. The butterfly doesn't need options. The butterfly doesn't need a title. The butterfly d oesn't need a Crunchbase profile. It flies for a while, dies, and it flew.

I asked her to do one thing: in her San Francisco apartment — where every piece of furniture was some sh ade of grey — pull open all the curtains. Sit on the floor. Imagine she was the butterfly. Not as a metaphor. For real. She thought it was absurd at first, then she started laughing, then she cried. She said: "I haven't a sked myself what I like in ten years. I've only asked what I should do."

She's still at the company. But she says she no longer is the job. She just works there. Butterfly and Zhuan g Zhou — both present.

Case 2: Marcus — The Failed Founder Who Learned to Walk Again

Marcus built an AI startup. Four years. Burned eight million. Ended in an acquihire — absorbed by a Big Te ch company, investors got back thirty cents on the dollar. In the middle of the 2023 AI investment frenzy, w atching other founders raise round after round, he sat in a rental in San Mateo and couldn't get out of bed in the morning.

When he came to me, he couldn't even get through his own introduction. He used to be "Founder & CEO a t X." Now he was nothing. That "solid and unmistakable — Zhou" from the text, the dazed, disoriented mo ment of not knowing who you are — he was living inside it.

I took him to the mountains in Santa Cruz. No retreat. No agenda. Just walking. We walked all afternoon. S uddenly he crouched down and watched a centipede. For fifteen minutes. Then he said something I will n ever forget: "I haven't looked at anything that doesn't produce a KPI in four years."

This is the transformation of things. He thought his value was a one-way street — start a company, raise m oney, exit, Forbes 30 Under 30 — and if the street breaks, you die. But transformation is a web. You can be the founder. You can also be the person who watches a centipede for fifteen minutes. And that second per son might be more human than the first.

Marcus later took a technical advisor role at a nonprofit. His salary is a third of what it was. Last week he s ent me a photo: a butterfly resting on a clothesline. He said: "Ding Long, I finally understand the butterfly dream." I asked what he understood. He said: "I'm not Zhuang Zhou, and I'm not the butterfly — I'm the t hing that can see both."

Marcus's insight is more precise than most people I've met with four-year comparative literature PhDs. Zh uangzi's "there must be a distinction" — yes, the butterfly and Zhou are different. It doesn't mean you cho ose one. It means you are capable of holding both. Holding is far harder than choosing. And far freer.

Knowledge Framework Summary

Zhuangzi Concept | Core Meaning | What It Means for You
Transformation of Things ([icon]) | All things continuously transform; butterfly and Zhou are not essentially different | Your "successful identity" is just one version, not the whole
Attachment to Self ([icon]) | Clinging to a fixed identity | Every "I am a ____" sentence is a rope holding you
While Dreaming, You Don't Know It's a Dream ([icon]) | Inside the dream, you lack self-awareness | Your hustle culture may be a dream you don't know you're in
Fools Think They're Awake ([icon]) | Fools are smugly certain of their own clarity | Admitting "I might be wrong" is where wisdom begins
There Must Be a Distinction ([icon]) | Butterfly and Zhou are indeed different | You don't need to destroy either one; let them both exist

---

Practice Section

Exercise 1: LinkedIn Version vs. Butterfly Version — Self-Introduction

Take out a sheet of paper. Divide it into two columns.

Left column: write your LinkedIn self-introduction — the profile summary voice: "Experienced product leader with 10+ years in SaaS, passionate about building high-performing teams..."

Done? Now the right column: write the butterfly version. Rule: no career-related vocabulary allowed. No titles, no company names, no skills, no achievements. Only write what you — as a butterfly — would say. For example:

> "I love the moment when morning light slants through the blinds. I love the bitter aftertaste left in my mouth after drinking a cup of too-hot coffee. I love that small ache in my neck from tilting my head back under a redwood tree. I love the cathartic anger of finishing a terrible novel."

Which of these two introductions is closer to "fluttering happily as a butterfly"? Which is closer to "solid and unmistakable — Zhou"?

Now, read both columns aloud to yourself. Both are real. Between the two columns — where are you?

Exercise 2: Bedtime Butterfly Meditation

Turn off the lights. Lie down. Put your phone in another room — don't tell me you use it for an alarm clock. You won't fool me. You'll still scroll. Close your eyes. Take three deep diaphragmatic breaths.

Now imagine you are not lying in bed — you are suspended in the air. Your body is weightless, like a sheet of paper buoyed by warm wind. You have no name. No resume. No story points to deliver in the next sprint. You are simply a point of awareness, drifting above a meadow — it could be a meadow in Santa Cruz, or any meadow you've never seen but know exists.

Don't "construct" these images. Let them come on their own. If your brain starts listing tomorrow's to-do list halfway through — it will, your brain has been trained this way — don't scold it. Say to it: "I hear you. I'm flying. Wait a moment."

Five minutes. Just five minutes of butterfly. After five minutes — solid and unmistakable, Zhou — slowly return to your body. Feel the weight of the blanket. That weight is not something you are burdened by. It is something you chose to return to.

This exercise is not about escaping reality — Daoism is never about escape. Its purpose is to let you experience: you can be not "you." That experience, on its own, is more useful than reading ten self-help books —

because for the first time, you're not understanding "transformation" with your brain. You're knowing it fr om inside your body. You know you can be the butterfly, even if just for five minutes. And if you can do it in bed, you can do it the next time your boss says, "We need to talk about your performance."

Key Takeaways

The Butterfly Dream is not about nihilism — it's about optionality. You are both the butterfly and Zh uang Zhou. Your startup-founder self is real, and so is the version of you that just wants to watch a centipe de for fifteen minutes. Neither one owns you.

"I am a ____" is a cage, not an identity. Every time you define yourself by a single role, you're tighte ning the dream. The Daoist move isn't to find the "right" identity — it's to loosen your grip on all of them.

You don't know you're dreaming while you're in it. Hustle culture is a dream that feels like waking lif e. The question isn't "how do I escape?" — it's "could there be more than one dream?"

Impostor syndrome is your ego screaming for certainty. The butterfly has never worried about being a fraud. Stop asking "Am I good enough?" and start asking "Am I flying?"

Stop optimizing your Ikigai. The four-circle Venn diagram is just another hustle in a kimono. Your rea son to wake up might be a plant, a person, or the way sunlight hits your kitchen floor. None of these thing s have KPIs.

Chapter 6: The Art of Nourishing Life — Living in Harmony with Your Natural Rhythm

Deep Dive

I'm Ding Long. Twenty-five years as a lay Daoist priest. If you ask me where this chapter — The Art of Nouri shing Life ([icon] / Yǎng Shēng Zhǔ) — ranks in my heart, I'll tell you: it's not the most dazzling (that's Free and Easy Wandering). It's not the deepest (that's The Equality of Things). But it is the one that saves lives.

These days, seven out of ten people who come to have tea and talk with me aren't here for the Dao. They're here to keep living. They're using the best productivity tools, wearing the most precise sleep-tracking ba nds, eating nutrients measured to the gram — and they crash every two weeks. Not because they aren't tr ying hard enough. Precisely because they've turned "nourishing life" itself into another hustle.

The opening line of The Art of Nourishing Life hits you like a curse:

> "My life has a limit, but knowledge has none. To pursue the unlimited with the limited — this is fatal."

Your life is finite. Knowledge — and everything you try to grasp — is infinite. Use the finite to chase the infi nite, and you're on a death march. Read that again in the context of 2024. Your inbox is infinite. Your Slack messages are infinite. The content stream is infinite. Industry trends are infinite. The skill tree is infinite. A nd you have one nervous system, one heart, and roughly sixteen waking hours a day. You use the finite to

chase the infinite — of course you burn out.

But Zhuangzi's "knowledge" ([icon] / zhī) doesn't just mean information. It means everything you try to grasp, control, and optimize: projects, networks, body weight, net worth, follower counts, the unfinished items in your Todoist. As long as you're chasing the infinite with the finite, you've already started your own countdown.

"Follow the Central Meridian as Your Constant Guide" — Walking the Middle Path

This is the master key to The Art of Nourishing Life. The dū ([icon]) is the Governing Vessel — in Chinese medicine, the meridian that runs straight up the center of your spine. Not left. Not right. Dead center. "Follow the central meridian as your constant guide" ([icon] / yuán dū yǐ wéi jīng) means: make the middle path your daily practice.

What is the middle path? It's not the milquetoast "moderation" or "good enough" you might imagine. Zhuangzi's middle path is a dynamic equilibrium — like riding a bicycle. You don't stand statically "in the middle." You micro-adjust, constantly. Lean left, correct right. Lean right, correct left. The key: you are not fighting the road. You are cooperating with it.

Western hustle culture operates on the exact opposite logic. It frames your life as a war — you must "conquer" procrastination, "dominate" the market, "crush" the competition. Everything is an enemy, including your own body. You pound coffee in the morning to "force yourself out of bed." You pull all-nighters to "defeat drowsiness." You use a meditation app because "anxiety is hurting my output so I need to manage it." You are always fighting. Always at war. And Zhuangzi says: stop fighting. You are not a general. You are a stalk of bamboo. The wind blows — you bend. The wind stops — you straighten. You didn't win. You didn't lose. You're alive.

"You Can Preserve the Body, Fulfill Your Nature, Care for Your Parents, and Live Out Your Years"

Zhuangzi gives four levels of results from The Art of Nourishing Life:

You can preserve the body — don't work yourself to death.
You can fulfill your nature — don't live your life as someone else.
You can care for your parents — once you yourself are stable, you can care for others.
You can live out your years — live the lifespan you were meant to live, then go quietly.

Notice the order. Level one is physical. Level two is existential — your innate nature. Level three is relational: only once you're steady can you show up for others. Level four is the ultimate: live to the age you're supposed to live, and then go in peace.

You've heard the airline safety briefing: "Please secure your own oxygen mask before assisting others." Zhuangzi spelled this out two thousand years ago. And yet we live it backwards: first we meet everyone else's expectations, then we suppress our own nature, and finally we pay the price with our bodies. When you're lying in a hospital bed, you finally ask: "How did I get here?" — that is the endgame of "pursuing the unlimited with the limited."

Nourishing Life ≠ Wellness Techniques

I have to draw a line here because too many people confuse these. The "wellness" you see on Instagram — thermoses of goji berries, five AM celery juice, zero-carb fasting, ice baths, red light therapy — this is not

what Zhuangzi meant by nourishing life. These are techniques ([icon] / shù). Techniques are tools, and tools can be used by any logic. Hustle culture turned wellness techniques into new KPIs: you not only need to earn more and climb faster — you also need to be healthy, and that health must be quantifiable, displayable, and comparable. Your Whoop band tells you last night's recovery score was 47%, and your entire sense of self-worth drops to 47%. You're not nourishing your life. You're giving your body a performance review.

The fundamental meaning of Zhuangzi's Art of Nourishing Life is this: nourish the master of your life. That "master" is not a number. Not a metric. Not any optimizable system. It is a living, rhythmic awareness — one that knows when to speed up and when to slow down, when to be hungry and when to be full, when to seek solitude and when to reach for a hug. Your body knows all of this. You've just stopped listening.

Step one of The Art of Nourishing Life is not adding things — goji berries, supplements, fitness rings. It's reducing noise — turning down the volume on the voices that tell you how you "should" live, and turning up the volume on your own.

Reading the Original Text

Passage 1: The Cook Carves the Ox — Entering the Gap with a Blade That Has No Thickness

> Cook Ding was carving an ox for Lord Wenhui. Where his hands touched, where his shoulders leaned, where his feet planted, where his knees pressed — *whish, whish* — his blade sang as he slid it through, every movement perfectly in rhythm. It matched the dance of the Mulberry Grove, it kept time with the Jingshou symphony.

Cook Ding is butchering an ox for King Hui of Liang. Every point of contact — hands, shoulders, feet, knees — produces a rhythmic sound. The knife enters with a resonant whish — every note in harmony with ancient ceremonial music.

You may have encountered Cook Ding in an earlier chapter, framed through the lens of "technique advancing into Dao." Here, I want to illuminate a different, more overlooked dimension: Cook Ding's blade stayed sharp for nineteen years not because he hacked through bone with brute force — but because he found the spaces between the bones.

> The joints have gaps, and the blade's edge has no thickness. Enter the gap with what has no thickness, and there is ample room — more than enough space to maneuver the blade.

The joints have spaces. The blade is so thin it has almost no thickness. Use that thicknessless blade to enter the spaces between the bones, and you'll find wide-open room — the blade moves freely, with room to spare.

"Enter the gap with what has no thickness" ([icon] / yǐ wú hòu rù yǒu jiān) — this is Zhuangzi's ultimate anti-burnout formula. What is "no thickness"? It's your formless, unfixed attention — your elasticity, your flexibility. What are "the gaps"? They're the spaces life leaves you. You think life is a solid iron plate — meetings stacked on meetings, deadlines piled on deadlines. But every day has gaps: the thirty seconds waiting for the elevator, the five minutes in the shower, the forty minutes of dinner with your family after work. Nobody notices these gaps. Nobody competes for them. They are the empty space between the joints. You don't need to quit your job and retreat to a mountain hermitage to nourish your life. You just need to learn to slide your thicknessless blade into these gaps. Thirty seconds — that's three deep breaths. Five minutes

— that's one song you listen to without planning to post about it. Forty minutes — that's enough to genuinely talk to one person.

Passage 2: The Marsh Pheasant — Ten Steps for a Bite, a Hundred Steps for a Drink

> The marsh pheasant walks ten steps for a bite of food, a hundred steps for a sip of water. Yet it would never wish to be kept in a cage. Though its spirit might be vigorous there, it is not good.

The wild pheasant in the marsh takes ten paces to peck a mouthful of food, a hundred paces to drink a sip of water. But it would rather die than be locked in a cage. In the cage, its spirit seems full and flourishing ([icon] / shén suī wàng) — but it is not good.

"Its spirit seems full and flourishing" is one of the most chilling phrases in the entire Zhuangzi. The caged bird eats well, drinks well, its feathers glossy — it looks far more vigorous than the wild one. But Zhuangzi says: not good. Wrong.

Look around you at the "caged pheasants." Their titles glitter. Their LinkedIn profiles update every quarter. They wake at five, run five kilometers, and post it on Strava. Their "spirit" is absolutely "flourishing." But they are not okay. Not because I can see it — because they know. They know at three in the morning, staring at the ceiling. They know on Sunday evenings when their stomach starts cramping. They know when they see the "team bonding activity" calendar invite and want to throw their computer out the window.

The wild pheasant — ten steps for a bite, a hundred for a drink. By modern standards, this is the least efficient life imaginable. But it moves at its own rhythm, every day. Nobody handed it a KPI. Drinking a sip of water is just drinking a sip of water — not for a hydration goal. Pecking a mouthful is just pecking a mouthful — not for macros. Zhuangzi uses this pheasant to tell you: the essence of freedom is not having more. It is not being owned. You can earn less, move slower, look less "vigorous" than the others — but you are your own.

Passage 3: Lao Dan Dies, Qin Shi Mourns — Rest in the Seasons, Flow with What Comes

> Lao Dan died. Qin Shi went to mourn him, wailed three times, and left. A disciple asked: "Were you not the Master's friend?" He said: "I was." "Then is it appropriate to mourn like this?" He said: "Yes. At first I thought those gathered here were his people — but now I see they are not. When I entered to mourn, there were old people wailing for him as though weeping for their own son, and young people wailing for him as though weeping for their own mother. For these people to gather here, there must be those who speak when they do not wish to speak and weep when they do not wish to weep. This is to flee from Heaven, to turn one's back on genuine feeling — forgetting what we have received. The ancients called this the punishment of fleeing from Heaven. When it was time to come, the Master came at the right moment. When it was time to go, the Master went with the flow. Rest in the moment and dwell in the flow — then sorrow and joy cannot enter. The ancients called this the Emperor untying the ropes of the hanged."

Laozi has died. Qin Shi comes to offer condolences — wails three times, and walks out. His disciple asks: Weren't you his friend? Is this how you mourn? Qin Shi replies: Yes. But when I went in, I saw old men weeping as though for their own son, young men weeping as though for their own mother. These people have gathered here, speaking words they don't want to speak, shedding tears they don't want to shed. This is fleeing from Nature, betraying genuine emotion — forgetting that life is a gift from Heaven. The ancients called this the punishment of fleeing from Heaven ([icon] / dùn tiān zhī xíng).

When it was time to come, the Master came at the right moment. When it was time to go, the Master went with the flow. You have to feel the rhythm of this line. Coming and going. Timing and flowing. It's not telling you to "learn to let go." It's telling you that life itself has coming and going, rising and falling, spring and

autumn. You insist on blooming in winter — the flower will wither. You insist on planting in autumn — the seed will rot. You insist on clutching a relationship that has ended — you are inflicting the punishment of f leeing from Heaven upon yourself.

"Rest in the moment and dwell in the flow — then sorrow and joy cannot enter." This is not coldness. It is f inding your place inside the river of time. It doesn't mean you never cry, never laugh. It means the crying a nd laughing are just water flowing over stone. The water passes. The stone remains.

Western Parallels

Chronobiology and Circadian Rhythm: Your Body Has an Operating System

When I talk about Zhuangzi in Silicon Valley, the most common response I hear is: "Isn't this just circadian rhythm?" Half right. Chronobiology tells us that every living organism has an internal clock system — the circadian rhythm being only the most famous one. Your hormone secretion, body temperature, heart rate variability, digestive enzyme activity — all of these run on roughly twenty-four-hour cycles. The Nobel Priz e went to the three scientists who discovered the molecular clock mechanism, proving it's driven by a set of "clock genes."

But the blind spot of Western science is this: it tells you there is a rhythm — and then immediately teaches you how to hack that rhythm. You can buy "bio-clock optimization" lamps, glasses, supplements, and ap ps on Amazon. Hustle culture's logic: if your body has a rhythm, I can optimize it — compress sleep to four hours but make it "high quality," use blue-light glasses and melatonin to surgically control sleep onset, sc hedule all deep work during your "chronotype peak window." You're still the caged pheasant. You look "fl ourishing" — but you're using an efficiency mindset on something that never needed to be efficient.

Zhuangzi doesn't say "optimize the rhythm." He says "flow with the rhythm." What's the difference? Opti mization puts you in charge — you stand above the rhythm, tinkering with it. Flowing puts you and the rhy thm together — you're on the same side. Firewood knows when to be dry and when to be wet. Cook Ding' s blade knows where the bone gaps are. The pheasant knows how many steps between drinks. None of th em have taken an online chronobiology course. But they all live longer than you.

Nervous System Regulation: Polyvagal Theory and "Following the Central Meridian"

Polyvagal Theory has gained traction in trauma therapy circles recently. Stephen Porges proposed that th e autonomic nervous system has three tiers: the ventral vagal complex (social engagement, safety), the sy mpathetic nervous system (fight/flight), and the dorsal vagal complex (freeze/collapse). A healthy state is f lexible movement between these three — what's called "nervous system regulation."

Guess what Zhuangzi calls this? "Follow the central meridian as your constant guide."

The Governing Vessel runs along the center of your spine — directly corresponding to the headquarters of your autonomic nervous system. A burned-out person has a nervous system stuck in sympathetic (chronic fight mode, can't come back down) or dorsal vagal (shut down, not even fighting anymore). This is not "la ziness." It is not "weak willpower." It means your nervous system is overdrawn. What you need is not bette r time management or harsher self-flagellation. You need your nervous system to return to the central mer idian — back to center. Back to that baseline of safety.

Western solutions include cold plunges, breathwork, somatic experiencing — all genuinely useful things. But ask yourself: what are you thinking while you're in the cold plunge? "If I finish this, my discipline tracker gets another checkmark"? Then you're still hustling. Zhuangzi says: true nervous system regulation is not another task. It is a return. You are not "repairing" a broken self. You are "returning" to a self that never left. The central meridian has always been there. It doesn't need you to put anything on top of it. You just need to stop interfering with it.

Burnout's Three Dimensions (WHO Definition)

In 2019, the World Health Organization officially included burnout in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), defining it as an "occupational phenomenon" — not a disease, but serious enough to require medical attention. It has three dimensions:

Exhaustion — not just tiredness. A hollow that seeps out from the marrow. Twelve hours of sleep doesn't touch it.

Cynicism — psychological distance from work, negative emotions. You used to feel "This project matters." Now you feel: "Who cares, let it burn."

Reduced Professional Efficacy — feeling like you can't do anything right. What used to take three days now takes three weeks, and the quality is terrible.

These three dimensions map directly onto the three collapses in Zhuangzi's Art of Nourishing Life:

- Exhaustion = the result of "pursuing the unlimited with the limited" — your life force has been drained dry by infinite demands.
- Cynicism = "the punishment of fleeing from Heaven" — you've violated your own natural rhythm for so long that you've developed an aversion to all meaning, including the things you once genuinely cared about.
- Reduced Efficacy = Cook Ding's blade, if it had been hacking bone — the edge is curled, and it can no longer slip through. It's not that you've forgotten how to do things. Your "blade" has been worn down through misuse.

Western interventions for burnout: take leave, reduce workload, adjust expectations, go to therapy. These help. But Zhuangzi's question cuts deeper: can you not just "recover" enough to resume working — but fundamentally redefine where work sits in your life? Can you not just "manage burnout" — but live a lifestyle that can't burn out? This sounds radical. But a wild pheasant never burns out. Not because it works less. Because it was never caged.

Real Cases from Ding Long

Case 1: Jennifer — From Silicon Valley PM to a Living Specimen of Burnout's Five Stages

Jennifer is the kind of woman you look at and immediately know: she's competent. Stanford MBA. PM at three unicorns. Remote-managing a product team across four time zones from a house in Menlo Park full of white furniture. By the time she found me, she had reached stage four of burnout.

Stage One — Honeymoon: Work excited her. Overtime was voluntary. Thinking about the product roadmap on weekends wasn't overtime; it was "passion." Stage Two — Fuel Running Low: Insomnia began. Coffee went from two cups to five. Weekends, she just wanted to lie down — but felt guilty about any thought th

at "wasted time." Stage Three — Chronic Symptoms: Migraines, acid reflux, intermittent heart palpitations. She went to the doctor. All tests normal. The doctor said "probably stress." She thought "probably I'm not working hard enough." Stage Four — Crisis: During a Wednesday afternoon standup, she noticed her left hand was shaking. Not from nerves. Just — shaking. She stood up, walked to the bathroom, crouched there for forty minutes. Couldn't cry. Couldn't stand. One thought in her head: "I can't go back in there." She took three months of short-term disability leave. Then she found me.

The first passage I had her read was not a health guide. It was Cook Ding — "enter the gap with what has no thickness." She was quiet for a long time. Then she said: "For nineteen years, in conference rooms, every cut was hacking bone." Her blade — her cognitive bandwidth, her emotional capacity, her physical energy — had been worn to nothing through brute-force operations. She was using a curled blade to hack at increasingly dense bones — product launches, board presentations, layoff execution. And the line that broke my heart: "I don't even know when I started treating 'exhaustion' as my default state."

What I taught her wasn't meditation or mindfulness. It was finding the gaps. At least three gaps every day — not gaps to "squeeze something into," but gaps to do nothing. The five seconds while the coffee machine dispenses — no phone. The elevator ride from the first floor to the seventh — no pre-gaming the next meeting. Her first assignment: keep a daily log of "How many gaps today did I spend with my body instead of my calendar?" Week one: she wrote zero. Because "the moment I stop, I panic." Week two: three. By month two, she started being able to hear what her stomach was saying. "Your stomach has been telling you when it's hungry, when it's tense, when it wants to vomit — you just never listened."

She's still a PM. But she said something to me that I think is more brilliant than any Zen koan: "I now know: meetings are the bones. I'm the blade. I don't hack anymore. I find the gap."

Case 2: The Herb Gatherer on Mount Qingcheng — The Best Teacher I Ever Had

This happened in my seventh year as a Daoist priest. By then, I could officiate all the major rituals. My talismans were starting to look respectable. I was beginning to feel my "Daoist attainment" was coming along nicely. My master said nothing. One autumn morning, he just said: "Ding Long, no temple duties today. Come walk the back mountain with me."

The back mountain had a herb-gathering path my master walked every two weeks. I thought herb gathering meant: find herbs, pick them, put them in the basket, come home. But that day, from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon, I discovered my master wasn't "gathering herbs." He was having a conversation with the mountain. We'd approach a slope, and he'd say, "Not today — the path's too wet," and we'd turn back. We'd reach a certain tree, he'd set down his basket, lean against the trunk, and just sit for a quarter of an hour — doing nothing. He spotted a yellow-flowering plant I thought was a weed. He crouched and studied it for a long time, then said, "Wait another half month. It's not ready yet."

I was thirty-three. My head was full of "efficiency." We'd been out here eight hours, and his basket had three plants in it. What kind of productivity was this? I asked, impatient: "Master — what exactly are we here to do today?"

My master looked at me and said something it took me eighteen more years to truly understand: "Medicine has its own time. You think you're gathering it — but actually, it is waiting for you to be ready."

Do you understand? All your hustling — your quarterly goals, your three-year plan, your daily schedule, your morning routine — assumes the world is passive and you are the active agent. You conquer. You acquire. You achieve. But that herb-gathering mountain taught me a different logic: the ten thousand things hav

e their own time. That "herb" of yours — it could be your first pot of gold, the book you're meant to write, the person you're meant to meet — it's not ready yet. You rush, and you're pulling an immature plant — bring it back, brew it, and it won't heal anything.

From that day on, I added a habit at the temple: at least one month every year, I make zero plans. My phone is on silent in a drawer. I wake up each day not knowing what I'm supposed to "accomplish" — and then discover that everything that needed doing gets done, and I'm not tired doing it. Not because I'm efficient. Because I've stopped using my rhythm to crash against the world's rhythm.

Knowledge Framework Summary

Zhuangzi Concept | Core Meaning | Western Parallel | Modern Application
Follow the Central Meridian ([icon]) | Take the spine's center as your constant guide; walk the middle path without leaning | Nervous System Regulation (Polyvagal Theory), Homeostasis | Recover your autonomic flexibility; stop being stuck in fight/flight or collapse
My Life Has a Limit, Knowledge Has None ([icon]) | Using finite life to chase infinite demands — this is fatal | Burnout's three dimensions (WHO), Allostatic Load | Admit your bandwidth is finite; not everything deserves to drain you
Enter the Gap with What Has No Thickness ([icon]) | Use flexible, soft attention to enter life's gaps; don't hack at bone | Flow State (Csikszentmihalyi), Cognitive Rest & Recovery | Find three gaps daily — waiting, commuting, breathing — let them nourish rather than drain
The Marsh Pheasant — Ten Steps for a Bite ([icon]) | Freedom is not efficiency — it's not being caged | Autonomy (Self-Determination Theory), Psychological Safety | "Vigorous but not good" — looking thriving doesn't mean living well
Rest in the Moment, Dwell in the Flow ([icon]) | Flow with life's natural coming and going; don't let emotions hijack you | Radical Acceptance (DBT), Emotional Regulation | Not the absence of emotion, but emotion flowing through while you remain steady
Nourishing Life ≠ Wellness Techniques ([icon] ≠ [icon]) | Nourish the *master* of life — your inner awareness and rhythm | Wellness vs. Well-Being, Healthspan vs. Optimization | Stop turning your body into another KPI dashboard

Core Insight: Burnout is not because you aren't working hard enough, and not because you're working too hard — it's because you're working at the wrong time, in the wrong way. A wild pheasant never burns out. Not because it has better time management than you. Because it lives inside its own rhythm, not someone else's schedule. The Art of Nourishing Life does not tell you to quit your job and farm in the mountains. It tells you to hear your own rhythm inside your work, to find the gaps between the bones, and then — like Cook Ding's blade — slide through.

Practice Section

Exercise 1: The Sunset Shutdown Ritual (Deep Version)

This isn't "put your phone away before bed." You've heard that advice a hundred times, and you can't do it. Because "put your phone away" is a negative command — you're depriving yourself of your only source of distraction and connection. Zhuangzi doesn't tell you to deprive. He tells you to replace.

Step One: Sunset is the period at the end of your sentence. Look up the sunset time in your city. Subtract thirty minutes. Create a daily repeating event in your phone calendar named "Sunset." No notification — it should just be there, quiet as the horizon.

Step Two: The last ten minutes before sunset — do one "useless" thing. Boil water and brew a cup of tea, just watching the steam rise. Wipe the dust off your windowsill — not for cleanliness, but to feel the tempe

rature of the wood. Brush your cat until it purrs. Key rule: this action must produce zero demonstrable output. Cannot be Instagrammed. Cannot become material for tomorrow's "I've been trying out slow living" conversation. It is pure — just you and the world, with no third eye watching.

Step Three: Put your phone in another room. I know, I know — your alarm clock, your white noise app, your sleep tracker. Buy an alarm clock. It costs fifteen bucks. It rings. That's all it needs to do. Your ancestors slept fine for a hundred thousand years without a white noise app. That distance — from your bedroom to the living room — is the most important move you'll make today. You're not moving away from your phone. You're moving toward yourself.

Step Four: Don't "try" to sleep. If you lie down and can't sleep, don't count sheep, don't do breathing exercises, don't clench your fists and internally shout "FALL ASLEEP FASTER" — that's just more hustling. Zhuangzi says: rest in the moment, dwell in the flow. Can't sleep? Then don't sleep. Right now, this lying-here, not-sleeping you — and the sleeping you — are the same person. Quietly lying down is already rest. You don't need to add a "success condition" to rest.

I've been using this ritual for nearly twenty years. At first, it was fighting my own "Daoist hustle" — the feeling that I always needed to accumulate more merit, help more people, draw better talismans. Later, I realized it wasn't fighting anything at all. It was just returning me to the most primal fact: the sun has gone down. And so should I.

Exercise 2: The Daily "Three Gaps" Practice

The essence of Cook Ding is "enter the gap with what has no thickness" — finding the spaces between the bones. Your day is full of gaps between joints — and you've been stuffing every single one with your phone.

How to do it: Starting today, find at least three gaps every day. You are not allowed to fill them with anything.

- **Gap One — Waiting.** Waiting for the elevator. Waiting for the microwave. Waiting at a red light. Waiting for a colleague to reply. Those ten to twenty seconds. Do NOT touch your phone. Hands at your sides. Feel the weight in the soles of your feet. Just wait.
- **Gap Two — Between.** The transition between two tasks — closing one document, opening another. Those ten seconds. Do not immediately jump. Look out the window. No "view" outside? Look at the wall. The wall is also part of the world.
- **Gap Three — Pause.** When you go to the bathroom. No phone. Just sit. I know this sounds absurd — "What do I do for those thirty seconds?" You do nothing. Your brain hasn't had thirty seconds of "nothing" in fifteen years. Give it thirty seconds. It might panic. Let it panic. It will pass.

The three gaps add up to maybe five minutes. But those five minutes are the only time today that truly belongs to you — not because you did "your own thing" in them, but because you did no one else's thing in them. Cook Ding's blade didn't curl because it didn't hack bone. When you stuff every gap full, you're cutting into bone. Leave gaps. That's how you care for the blade.

Exercise 3: Drop One "Optimization"

Hustle culture makes you feel like you always need to optimize — sleep, diet, exercise, meditation, reading speed, typing speed, chewing repetitions. Zhuangzi says: stop.

Specific steps: From your current "health habits" or "productivity system," pick the one you're most tired

of — and deliberately don't do it today. Not "forgot to do it." Don't do it.

- If every morning you check your Whoop recovery score and use it to decide whether you're allowed to feel good today — don't check it today.
- If you photograph every meal to track calories — skip one meal's tracking today.
- If you have a 474-day Duolingo streak — break it today. Let the green owl cry. You hired it. You didn't give birth to it.

This exercise has one purpose: let you experience a full day without feeling optimized. You might panic — "But what about my progress? My discipline?" — Good. Look at that panic. If your discipline makes you panic, it's not discipline. It's another bar on the cage.

Key Takeaways

"Your life has a limit, but knowledge has none. To pursue the unlimited with the limited is fatal." The Western response to burnout has been optimization — better sleep hygiene, smarter task management, precision supplementation. Zhuangzi's diagnosis is more radical: you are not failing at optimization. You are optimized into the ground. The problem is the game, not your score.

Burnout is not a failure of willpower — it's a failure of rhythm. The cook's blade lasted nineteen years not because it was strong, but because it found the gaps between the bones. Your nervous system has gaps too — micro-pauses, transitions, breaths — and you have been filling every one of them with input. Find three gaps today. Let them be empty. This is the most productive thing you will do.

The marsh pheasant walks ten steps for a bite and a hundred steps for a drink — and would rather die than live in a cage. The pheasant doesn't optimize its foraging route. It doesn't A/B test its water sources. And yet it is alive, and free, and it has never once worried about whether it is "living its best life." Your LinkedIn profile, your performance review, your Strava stats — they are the cage. They may keep you fed, but they will never let you fly.

"Nourishing life" ([icon]) is not wellness culture. It is not celery juice, cold plunges, or the quantified self. It is returning to the master of your life — the living, rhythmic awareness that knows when to move and when to stop. That master existed before you had a resume, before you had a fitness tracker, before you knew what a KPI was. It has been waiting. It doesn't need to be built. It needs to be heard.

Try the sunset ritual tonight — not as another productivity hack, but as a surrender. When the sun goes down, go down with it. Put your phone in another room. Sit. Lie down. Do nothing that can be screenshotted. This is not laziness. This is what the ancients called "the emperor untying the ropes of the hanged." The ropes were never real. You tied them yourself.

— From "The Art of Not Trying: Zhuangzi's Guide to Effortless Living" by Ding Long ([icon]), 25-year Zhengyi Daoist priest

---

Chapter 7: In the Human World — Staying Free Inside When the World Pushes In

Deep Dive

I'm Ding Long, twenty-five years a fire-dwelling Daoist priest. Of all the chapters in the Zhuangzi, "In the Human World" (Ren Jian Shi) is the one I least want to teach — and the one I have to. Because it's not about heaven. It's not about the mountains. It's about what you face every day in the elevator, in meetings, at three in the morning when you can't sleep.

The earlier chapters lift you into flight — "Free and Easy Wandering" shows you the view from ninety thousand li up, "The Equality of Things" dismantles the mental boxes you live inside, "The Secret of Nurturing Life" teaches you to glide along the natural seams. But "In the Human World" is different. It kicks you back down to the ground and says: Alright. Now you know the sky is high and your heart is wide. But you still have to clock in, answer emails, face the boss who makes your stomach clench, and navigate the inescapable weight of social expectation.

"Ren Jian Shi" — literally, "living among people." Zhuangzi's original words: "In times like these, merely avoiding punishment is already an achievement." He wrote that 2,300 years ago. Now drop it into Silicon Valley in 2024, or a Shanghai office tower, or the London financial district, and tell me — has a single word of it gone stale?

The Fasting of the Heart: Not About Food, But About Empty Space

The core concept of "In the Human World" is called xin zhai — "fasting of the heart." The first time I explained these two characters to a programmer who'd flown in from San Francisco, he said, "Oh, fasting, right? Like intermittent fasting? I do 16:8." I said, no — that's stomach fasting. Zhuangzi is talking about heart fasting.

Heart fasting isn't about not eating. Confucius explains it in the original text with perfect clarity: "Unify your intent. Don't listen with your ears — listen with your heart. Don't listen with your heart — listen with your qi. The ears stop at hearing sound; the heart stops at matching forms. But qi is empty — it receives all things with vacancy. Only the Dao gathers in emptiness. This emptiness — this is the fasting of the heart."

In plain language: Your mind is not a warehouse. It's the sky. A warehouse fills up and can't take in anything new. But the sky is always empty — clouds come and go, birds come and go, planes come and go. The sky never refuses anything, and it never holds onto anything. If you don't empty your heart, you'll always be filtering the new world through your old assumptions. Your boss says one sentence, and you instantly process it through your fears, your past wounds, your projections about the future — turning it into a whole story. That story might be true. But it's not the only story. Heart fasting means: let that sentence be like a cloud — drift in, drift out. Don't process it. Don't add drama.

Empty and Receive: Meeting Everything with Openness

"Empty and receive" (xu er dai wu) is the operating manual for heart fasting. What does "empty" mean? Not "absent" — "un-preloaded." Before you go into a meeting, your brain has already pre-rendered every person, every agenda item, and the three possible outcomes. You're not going to a meeting — you're going to verify your predictions. Result: if things go as you predicted, you exhale with relief. If they don't, you instantly snap into stress mode. You're not engaging with people and situations — you're running a haunted program on human hardware.

"Empty and receive" means: walk into the meeting as an empty container. You don't know what will happen, and you don't need to know in advance. You show up, you listen, you feel, and then you respond. This state has a name in Western psychology: beginner's mind. In Zen: shoshin. In Zhuangzi: xu. Three words p

ointing at the same thing — you walk without a map across terrain you think you know, but that is actuall y changing every single day.

Ride Things to Let Your Heart Roam: Everything is a Vehicle

These are the four most beautiful characters in "In the Human World." Literally: "Mount things and use the m to let your heart wander freely." Zhuangzi says your heart should be like a traveler. You can take a bus, ri de a bike, walk — each vehicle carries you a stretch of the road, but you don't belong to any of them. Hand your whole life over to one, and you're a slave. Use it and move on, and you're free.

Your current roles — programmer, product manager, founder, mother of two, mortgage-paying homeown er — these are your "things," the vehicles you're riding right now. Zhuangzi is not telling you to throw the m all away and go live as a hermit in the mountains (that's what his dim-witted younger brothers think he' s saying). He's saying: Ride, but don't get ridden. You go to work — work is the vehicle, not you. You earn money — money is the vehicle, not you. You use these things to experience a stretch of life, and when you r stop comes, you get off. You take nothing with you when you die, so while you're alive, don't let anything bind you.

The Usefulness of Uselessness: The Sacred Oak's Ultimate Anti-Hustle

At the end of "In the Human World," a carpenter named Shi sees an enormous sacred oak in the state of Qi — so vast that thousands of oxen could cool themselves in its shade. The carpenter glances at it and walk s on. His apprentice asks why. The carpenter says: "It's worthless timber. Make a boat from it, it sinks. Mak e a coffin, it rots fast. Make a tool, it breaks. Make a door, it oozes sap. Make a pillar, it gets infested. It's use less wood — good for nothing."

That night, the sacred oak appears to the carpenter in a dream. It says: What are you comparing me to? Th ose useful trees — hawthorn, pear, orange, pomelo — the moment their fruit ripens, people strip them. Th e moment branches grow, people snap them. Big limbs hacked off, small twigs yanked. They die young pr ecisely because they're "useful." As for me, I've been seeking uselessness for a very long time. I nearly got killed several times, and today I've finally achieved complete uselessness — and this is my greatest use. If I were useful, could I have grown this enormous?

This dream is the nuclear bomb Zhuangzi drops on hustle culture. Your entire value system is built on "use fulness" — your skills are useful, your network is useful, your output is useful, you as a person must be use ful. If you're not useful, you don't deserve to live. But the sacred oak tells you: the useful ones all died. The useless one became a divine tree.

This is not telling you to give up. This is telling you to see clearly — the "usefulness" you're chasing might be the very blade that's cutting you down. You sharpen yourself into the perfect tool, and then, naturally, you get used. The day you can't sharpen anymore, the day you're not sharp enough, you get swapped out. The sacred oak's wisdom is this: sometimes, you shouldn't make yourself too "useful." You should keep s omething crooked, irregular, unoptimizable, something that can't be put into an Excel spreadsheet. That's where your sacredness lives.

The Original Text: A Close Reading

Story One: Yan Hui Asks Confucius — Can You Change a Tyrant?

Yan Hui is about to go serve the ruler of Wei. Before leaving, he bids farewell to Confucius. Confucius asks:

What are you going to do there? Yan Hui says: The ruler of Wei is young and hot-headed, ruling by whim, a nd the common people are barely surviving. I want to use the principles I've learned to advise him.

Confucius laughs — and in that laugh is weariness, pity, and all the weight of someone who's been throug h it. He says: You're going there to get yourself killed. You're walking in holding your "truth" like someone carrying a torch into a gunpowder room. Before you even open your mouth, your "rightness" has already become his "wrongness." The more correct you are, the harder he'll have to prove you wrong — because a dmitting you're right means losing inside the power structure. If you don't end up dead, count yourself luc ky.

Then Confucius teaches Yan Hui heart fasting. Yan Hui says: My family is poor — I haven't had wine or mea t in months. Does that count as fasting? Confucius says: That's sacrificial fasting, not heart fasting. See? T wo thousand years ago, someone was already confusing heart fasting with dieting — exactly like your 16:8 .

The point of this story isn't whether Yan Hui should go. It's that you face Yan Hui's dilemma every single da y. You want to suggest an improvement to your boss, but you know he can't hear dissent. You want to tell your mother you don't want to go home and take the civil service exam, but you know the moment those words leave your mouth, it's a tear-bomb. You're holding a fistful of "reason" and standing in front of a sys tem that doesn't care about reason. A boxing champion punching the air — how do you win?

Zhuangzi's answer: Don't fight with "reason." Use heart fasting. Don't show up as "the corrector" — that p osture is itself a form of moral condescension. Be empty. Be open. Approach the other person without the preset of "you're wrong." If you can do this, you might survive. If you can't — well, the story of the praying mantis trying to stop a chariot is your future.

Story Two: Duke Ye Goes on a Mission — "Receive Orders at Dawn, Drink Ice at Dusk"

Duke Ye of She is being sent on a diplomatic mission to Qi. He comes to Confucius to vent: A major power l ike Qi won't take a Chu envoy seriously at all. The mission is heavy, the pressure immense, my insides are burning — I received the assignment in the morning and was drinking ice water by evening to cool the fire ("zhao shou ming er xi yin bing").

He says something shockingly modern: If I fail, people will tear me apart when I return. If I succeed, it'll ha ve cost me my health — my yin and yang in chaos, my body riddled with illness. Win or lose, I'm the loser. Sound like your life? Don't land the project, and you're anxious. Land the project, and your stomach hurts at the celebration dinner. Before the promotion, you're grinding yourself to dust. After the promotion, you grind harder. You're not chasing a goal — you're being eaten alive by the command "must complete."

Confucius's answer: Know what you cannot control, and rest in it as fate. When you recognize that some t hings are beyond your power, accept them peacefully, the way you'd accept the weather. In your language : Do what's yours to do — prepare well, negotiate in earnest, make every effort — and then, let go. The out come is not your department. Heaven and earth do not care about your KPIs.

Story Three: The Praying Mantis Blocks the Chariot — You're Not a Hero, You're Just Misjudging Your Strength

A praying mantis stretches out its forelegs to stop an oncoming chariot. This image is so famous that "pray ing mantis blocking a chariot" (tang bi dang che) became a Chinese idiom. But after painting this picture, Zhuangzi adds a deadpan footnote: The mantis is certainly brave. It just doesn't know that its strength do esn't match its ambition.

I've seen too many praying mantises in Silicon Valley. They think they're in a game where "hustle harder, b

e braver" can change anything. But some chariots weigh more than any mantis can carry. It's not that you didn't try hard enough — it's that you picked the wrong battlefield.

Zhuangzi is not saying don't be brave. He's saying: before you strike, see clearly what you're facing. If it's a chariot, stepping aside isn't cowardice — it's intelligence. Your energy is finite. The mantis's forelegs are only so thick. Use them to block a chariot, and they snap — gone forever. Use them for something else — catching a cicada, climbing a blade of grass — and the mantis lives well.

Story Four: The Sacred Oak's Dream — The Useful All Died, the Useless Lives

I covered this in the deep dive above, but let me add the sacred oak's final line from the original text: "I have sought uselessness for a very long time. I nearly died several times. Today I have finally achieved it — and this is my greatest use. If I were useful, could I have grown to this size?"

That phrase — "nearly died several times" (ji si) — stops me cold every time I read it. Pursuing uselessness is not easy. Society will keep telling you "you must be useful." The people around you will keep signaling that uselessness is shameful. The sacred oak nearly didn't make it — maybe it actually grew a few sour fruits one year, maybe some carpenter thought it could "barely be used for something." But it held on. It insisted on being useless all the way through. And in the end, it became the biggest tree in the state of Qi.

Western Parallels

Radical Acceptance (DBT)

In Dialectical Behavior Therapy, developed by Marsha Linehan, Radical Acceptance is a core skill. Its definition: completely and thoroughly accept reality — not approve of it, not like it, but acknowledge that it has already happened.

This and Zhuangzi's "Know what you cannot control, and rest in it as fate" are essentially the same sentence in two different languages. Linehan says: Suffering = Pain × Resistance. Pain is what life itself brings — you got laid off, you went through a breakup, your project got killed. Resistance is the voice in your head — "This shouldn't be happening!" "This isn't fair!" "Why me?" You multiply pain by resistance, and what comes out is suffering.

Zhuangzi goes one step further. He doesn't just ask you to accept "bad outcomes" — he asks you to question whether the outcome is actually "bad" before accepting it. You got laid off — is that "bad"? The sacred oak says: wait and see. That new phase your "layoff" opened up — the new things you learned, the new people you met, the completely different rhythm of life you settled into — that future you haven't lived yet, how can you be so sure it's "bad"? Zhuangzi's version of radical acceptance isn't gritting your teeth and enduring. It's loosening your grip on the labels "good" and "bad" at the cognitive level.

Stoicism's Dichotomy of Control

Epictetus says: Some things are within our control (opinions, impulses, desires, aversions), and some things are not (body, property, reputation, power). If you treat what's outside your control as controllable — you will suffer.

Duke Ye's anxiety — the kind that made him drink ice water at dusk — all of it traces back to the same error: he's trying to control what he can't control. Whether Qi treats him well — not his to control. Whether the negotiations go well — not his. What people at court say about him — not his. The only things he can control are: his prepared talking points, his conduct and bearing, his ability to stay calm under pressure.

Zhuangzi says "ride things to let your heart roam" — you can't control the "thing" (which vehicle you're on, whether there's traffic), but you can control how you "ride" (do you watch the scenery outside the window, or curse the traffic the whole way?). The Stoic dichotomy of control is a line-drawing tool — helping you distinguish what's yours from what's heaven's. Zhuangzi adds a line on top: the things that are heaven's business — not only should you not try to control them, you should learn to catch a ride on them.

Setting Boundaries

Nedra Glover Tawwab's Set Boundaries, Find Peace has been a phenomenon in Western mental health in recent years. What she calls boundaries is essentially: I know what I can handle and what I can't, and I clearly communicate it to others.

The "usefulness of uselessness" and the sacred oak story in Zhuangzi's "In the Human World" are doing exactly the same thing — just in a different language. The sacred oak says: "I'm worthless timber, I don't make good lumber, I don't bear fruit, don't get any ideas about me." What is that? That's a boundary. It's not a violent refusal — it's a gentle but firm statement that "my purpose doesn't fit inside your system."

The Gray Rock Method is the extreme version of boundaries — when you're dealing with a toxic person (narcissist, manipulator, emotional vampire), you turn yourself into a gray rock: offer no emotional feedback, no information, no resistance. You exist, but you don't play their game. This mirrors exactly the logic Zhuangzi gives Yan Hui for dealing with a tyrant — don't use your "rightness" to strike at his "wrongness." Empty yourself. Become a clear mirror. Give his attack nothing to land on.

Real Cases from Ding Long

Case One: The Young Lawyer vs. the Control-Freak Partner

Last autumn, a young lawyer in his third year at a Big Law firm came to see me. His problem was specific: the partner he worked under was a textbook control freak — emails at 2 a.m. demanding punctuation changes, Saturday morning calls to ask whether yesterday's comma had been fixed, public humiliation in all-hands meetings for anyone who made a mistake. Three years in, half his hair had gone gray. He was thirty-two.

He said: I want to quit. But I can't. My parents would think I'm insane — "You'd quit this job?" My classmates would think I couldn't hack it. I've been absorbed by this system. If I leave it, I don't know who I am.

I told him the story of Yan Hui and Confucius. I said: You're Yan Hui, and your partner is the tyrant. Right now you're holding your "reason" — "he shouldn't manage people like this" — and trying to change him. But your reason, inside his power structure, isn't even worth a comma. You're not advising — you're using your body as a shield against a freight train.

He asked what to do. I said: Two paths. Path one — heart fasting. Treat his 2 a.m. emails and weekend tirades like wind. They blow through, you don't absorb them. Do "empty and receive" — he comes, you respond; he leaves, you return to zero. Setting a boundary doesn't have to mean quitting — it can mean erecting a glass wall inside your mind. You can see him, hear him, but his emotions can't infect you. Path two — if path one is no longer possible, then "ride things to let your heart roam." You've ridden this law firm vehicle for three years. Your stop is here. Get off. It's not failure. It's a transfer.

He chose path two. Quit with nothing lined up. Two months later, he sent me a message — he'd joined a boutique firm doing IP law. He wrote: "Ding Long, my new boss doesn't send emails after nine — at first I th

ought he was slacking off."

Case Two: The Tech Company Middle Manager — A Mantis in the Sandwich

Spring Festival 2024, a woman who'd spent eight years as a mid-level manager at a Shenzhen tech giant c ame to see me. Her situation is so textbook it practically hurts: pressure from the VP above, complaints fro m her team below, peers on either side fighting for resources. First thought every morning: "Which fire am I putting out today?"

She said the hardest part wasn't the workload — it was that "no matter what I do, it's wrong." Too accom modating upward, and her team calls her a bootlicker. Too protective of her team, and leadership says she lacks strategic vision. Push work outward, and peers call her a shirker. Take it all on, and her team burns o ut — and she burns out first. She was like a praying mantis — chariots thundering at her from every directi on, her two slender forelegs not knowing which one to block.

I told her two things. First: the mantis doesn't need to block chariots. Those chariots are not your responsi bility — the VP's management dysfunction isn't yours, the company's systemic flaws aren't yours, the poli tical infighting among peers isn't yours. What you need to distinguish isn't right from wrong — it's match f rom mismatch. Anything a mantis can't block was never meant for a mantis to block.

Second: "the usefulness of uselessness." She said her biggest fear was "if I don't hustle, people will think I' m useless." I asked her: What's the sacred oak's usefulness? She said: It lived for thousands of years and s haded thousands of oxen. I said: Right — but did you notice? If the sacred oak had been planted at the pal ace gates, it would've been chopped down for pillars long ago. It survived thousands of years precisely be cause it grew beside a village shrine, in a place where nobody expected it to be useful. You're in this Shenz hen tech giant killing yourself to prove you're useful — but have you considered that the price of proving " usefulness" is being constantly used and consumed?

She was silent for a long time. Then she said: You're right. But I can't quit. Mortgage, kids, parents back ho me — I don't have the capital to "get off the bus." I said: Then start with heart fasting. Don't quit — but sta rting today, carve out a little "useless" space for yourself inside the office. At lunch, instead of socializing with colleagues, go downstairs and look at the sky for ten minutes. Pick one weekend afternoon, turn off a ll notifications, watch a movie that has nothing to do with work. Surviving inside the system doesn't mean you have to be digested by it. Steal back a little uselessness from the edges of your usefulness. That's the sacred oak's way of living.

She messaged me later: two hours every Wednesday afternoon when she "vanishes from the human worl d" — that's the only thing that gets her through the other forty-four hours. I said: You've started riding thin gs to let your heart roam.

Knowledge Framework Summary

Zhuangzi Concept | Core Meaning | Western Parallel | Modern Application

Heart Fasting (*xin zhai*) | Emptying the mind's cache — clearing presuppositions so the heart, like sky, contains without cli nging | Beginner's Mind (Zen), Mindfulness | Before meetings and confrontations, pause judgment; experience what's actually h appening with empty awareness

Empty and Receive (*xu er dai wu*) | Enter situations without a map; meet substance with openness | Radical Openness / N on-judgmental Awareness | Let go of "how I should react" and "how they should be"

Ride Things, Let Heart Roam (*cheng wu yi you xin*) | Your house, title, money are all vehicles — ride without being owned | Instrumental vs. Intrinsic Value | Work is the ride; after work, you are you — don't let any single role define your entirety

Usefulness of Uselessness | The completely useless sacred oak became a divine tree; the useful ones all got cut down | Setting Boundaries / Gray Rock Method | In certain systems, "uselessness" is the highest form of self-protection

Rest in What Cannot Be Controlled | Know what's beyond your power and accept it peacefully | Radical Acceptance (DBT), Dichotomy of Control (Stoicism) | Redirect energy from "fighting the uncontrollable" to "handling the controllable"

Mantis vs. Chariot | Courage is worthy of respect, but choosing the wrong battlefield only breaks you for nothing | Energy Management / Smart Quitting (Seth Godin) | Judge which battles are worth fighting — don't use mantis arms to stop a Tesla Cybertruck

Core Insight: "In the Human World" isn't about how to win. It's about how to stay alive. In the crevices of a high-pressure world, winning is a probability game — someone will always be stronger, luckier, better-resourced than you. But staying alive — that you can control one hundred percent. Heart fasting is the refuge you carve out for your heart inside the chaos. Riding things to let your heart roam is how you find the scenery on any stretch of road. Zhuangzi never said the human world was easy — he said it was hard, and that's exactly why you need wisdom.

Practice Section

Practice One: The Three Human World Questions (Once Daily, Five Minutes Before Bed)

These are three questions I've distilled from "In the Human World." Pen and paper ready? Don't overthink — answer from instinct.

Question One: What happened today that I thought I could control, but actually couldn't?

This question maps to Duke Ye's "receive orders at dawn, drink ice at dusk" — how much of today's anxiety came from trying to control the uncontrollable? Your boss's mood? The subway delay? What your coworker thinks of you? The weather? Write them down. The act of writing is itself a form of letting go.

Question Two: Was there a single moment today when I was truly "empty"?

Heart fasting isn't a constant state — no living person can stay as empty as the sky all the time. But across a day, there may be a few flickering moments of emptiness: those seconds in the shower when the water runs over your body, two floors in the elevator with your eyes closed, that one breath while staring at the steam rising from your coffee. Find one moment. Even if it was three seconds, write it down. You're telling your nervous system: emptiness is safe. You can go there.

Question Three: If I were the sacred oak, was I "used" today? Was I willing?

This question cuts. How many times were you used today? By whom? By what system? Each time you were used, was it a ride you actively chose, or were you passively dragged along? You don't need an answer. Let it drop like a stone into water — the ripples will spread on their own.

Practice Two: Heart Fasting Breath Practice (Morning and Evening, Three Minutes Each)

I've taught this practice to hundreds of people. The best feedback always comes from the ones who thought it was "too simple" at first.

Step One: Sit upright, but not rigid. On a chair, a cushion, the edge of your bed — any of these works. Your spine like a stalk of bamboo that's just been watered — strong, but springy.

Step Two: Rest your attention at the entrance of your nostrils. Not at your dantian, not at your third eye — right at that doorway where air comes in and goes out. Feel cool air enter, warm air leave. That's it.

Step Three: When thoughts come — and they will: "I still haven't replied to that email," "Is this stuff about

usefulness actually right or not," "What am I having for dinner" — don't push them away. Don't berate you rself for getting distracted. Zhuangzi's method: see it, give it a free pass, return to the breath.

This "see — pass — return" cycle is heart fasting practiced at the bodily level. You need to understand a co unterintuitive truth: heart fasting isn't "no thoughts" — it's "thoughts arrive and don't stay." You can't ma ke the sky cloudless — but you can stop a passing cloud from becoming a thunderstorm.

Step Four: After three minutes, slowly open your eyes. Don't immediately lunge for your phone. Take ten s econds to feel the sounds, the light, the temperature around you. In those three minutes, you produced n othing, solved nothing. But Zhuangzi would say: in those three minutes, you were more human than you were during eight hours at your computer.

Tip: You don't need to set aside special time. Heart fasting breath can hide in any crack of the day — seven breaths at a red light, five in the checkout line, three in the quiet meeting room before everyone else arriv es. Add up these fragments, and by the end of the day you can easily gather fifteen minutes of emptiness. Fifteen minutes of sky — enough to fly on all day.

Key Takeaways

"Fasting of the heart" (xin zhai) is not about food — it's about emptying your mental cache. Every sit uation you enter, you bring a backpack of assumptions, fears, and past trauma. The Daoist move is to set t he backpack down at the door. You don't need a 10-day silent retreat to do this — three conscious breaths before a meeting is a mini heart-fast.

"Ride things to let your mind roam" (cheng wu yi you xin) reframes your entire relationship with work and identity. Your job is a vehicle, not your home. Your title is a rental car — use it to get somewhere, ret urn it, walk away. You are not a founder, a PM, or a lawyer. You are a person who currently moves through the world in that shape.

The sacred oak's "uselessness" is the most radical career advice you will ever hear. In systems that will consume you — toxic workplaces, status-obsessed industries, hustle-culture peer groups — being less "useful" is survival. The best trees are the ones nobody wants to cut down. Save some of yourself for your self.

Both Radical Acceptance and Stoicism's dichotomy of control converge on the same point Zhuangzi made 2,300 years earlier: you cannot control the chariot hurtling toward you, but you can absolutely sto p standing in the road like a praying mantis. Know what's yours and what's never been yours to carry.

Try the Three Questions tonight. They take five minutes. You don't need answers — you just need to sit with them. The first time you realize you've been trying to control the weather, something in your shoul ders will drop two inches. That drop is *ren jian shi* — it's how you stay alive in the human world without letting the human world eat you.

Chapter 8: The Great Teacher Within — Finding Your Inner Master

Deep Dive

To my Western friends: do you know what Zhuangzi means by the "True Person" (zhen ren)? It's not "real" like reality TV. It's not the performative authenticity of an #authentic Instagram tag. The True Person in Zhuangzi's writing is a state of being you've never seen on LinkedIn.

The True Person doesn't compare. The True Person doesn't calculate gains and losses. The True Person sleeps without dreaming and wakes without anxiety — and note, this isn't some wellness retreat brochure; this is what a crazy old Chinese man wrote 2,300 years ago. "The Great Teacher Within" (Da Zong Shi) opens with: "The True Person of old did not rebel against scarcity, did not strut in success, did not scheme over the next move." In your language: they didn't resist "not enough," didn't flaunt "more than enough," didn't obsess over "what's next." Three sentences, and Zhuangzi dismantles the three pillars of hustle culture: scarcity panic, achievement anxiety, and strategic-planning OCD.

So what is the "Great Teacher"? Many people assume Zhuangzi is talking about the ultimate master — some white-bearded sage in a cave on a mountain, waiting to transmit enlightenment into the top of your head. Wrong. Zhuangzi's Great Teacher isn't any person — it's the Dao itself. "Take the Dao as your teacher, not any person" — I have this line posted on the wall of my temple. Zhang Daoling, the founding patriarch of our Zhengyi tradition, never called himself a grand master. He pointed at the Dao. Where else are you going to find a mentor who won't go bankrupt, won't have a scandal, and won't charge you a $9,999 course fee? Heaven and earth, the turning of the four seasons, the birth and death of all things — this is your Great Teacher. Free. Always available. No affiliate link.

Now let me share a passage I pause before every time I teach it: "The spring dried up. The fish found themselves stranded together on dry land. They moistened each other with their damp breath, kept each other wet with their spit — better to forget each other in the rivers and lakes." The spring ran dry. Two fish are trapped on land together, wetting each other with their saliva. Heartbreaking image, right? Western readers usually get moved here, thinking it's a parable about mutual aid and devotion. But then Zhuangzi drops eight characters that freeze the entire scene: "Better to forget each other in the rivers and lakes." Better to each swim back to your own river and lake and forget the other entirely. Cruel? No — it's the deepest compassion. When you no longer need a "spit-moistening" relationship to confirm your own existence, you've outgrown the life preserver — you are the water. I've seen too many burned-out people clinging desperately to mentors, coaches, support groups. They're not growing. They're keeping each other alive with spit.

Finally, an advanced concept: "Drop the limbs, dismiss intelligence, leave form behind, abandon knowledge — merge with the Great Thoroughfare." These four moves, Zhuangzi calls zuo wang — "sitting in forgetfulness." Sitting, and then forgetting. Not the "observe your thoughts" of a meditation app — this is pulling the thoughts out by the root. Drop the limbs — not literally cutting off arms and legs, but releasing attachment to the body (your yoga body, your biohacking data, your sleep score). Dismiss intelligence — uninstall the intellect you're so proud of (your MBA, your critical thinking, your cherished "I see things clearly"). Leave form, abandon knowledge. And finally, merge with the Great Thoroughfare — become one with that thing too vast to name. Does this sound like a psychedelic trip report? Zhuangzi didn't need mushrooms. He just needed to sit.

The Original Text: A Close Reading

Let's open the original text of "The Great Teacher Within." I'll walk you through the four most essential passages.

Passage One: The True Person's Condition. "The True Person of old slept without dreaming, woke without

worry, ate without savoring, and breathed from the depths." — The ancient True Person: sleep, no dreams ; waking, no anxiety; eating, no pursuit of flavor; breathing so deep it reached the heels. Notice "ate witho ut savoring" — not that they couldn't taste, but that they weren't fixated on taste. This is the complete op posite of modern mindful eating: Zhuangzi says forget the twelve flavor notes of the raisin in your mouth — just eat. Your breath matters ten thousand times more than your taste buds. Zhuangzi continues: "The True Person breathes from the heels; ordinary people breathe from the throat." The True Person breathes with their heels — it's a metaphor for breath so deep it saturates the entire body. Go look at how a burned -out person breathes. Clavicular breathing, shoulders hunched, one shallow breath that barely reaches th e collarbone.

Passage Two: Better to Forget Each Other in the Rivers and Lakes. I already unpacked this in the deep dive, but let me add one detail. Many people quote only the first half as inspirational[icon] — but Zhuangzi's "b etter to forget each other in the rivers and lakes" is the real point. This isn't coldness. It's the uniquely Dao ist "freedom of non-dependence." You don't need other people to be your river and lake.

Passage Three: Nanbo Zikui Asks Nü Yu — The Stages of Attaining the Dao. This is the most systematic "cul tivation manual" in "The Great Teacher Within." Nanbo Zikui asks Nü Yu: "You're so old, but your face look s like a child's — how?" Nü Yu says: "I've heard the Dao." Then he lays out a sequence: from "put the world outside" (wai tianxia) → "put things outside" (wai wu) → "put life itself outside" (wai sheng) → "morning clarity" (zhao che) → "see the solitary" (jian du) → "no past or present" (wu gu jin) → "neither death nor li fe" (bu si bu sheng). This is not a seven-step online course. It's layer after layer of subtraction. Each time y ou "put something outside," you peel off one more thing you thought was yourself. By the end — "neither death nor life" — it's not immortality. It's that the distinction between life and death no longer exists, beca use you've merged with the Dao.

Passage Four: Zisang Plays the Zither — Resting in Fate. Zisang is so poor he has no food. He sits in his roo m playing the zither and singing. His friend Ziyu comes to visit. Zisang's singing sounds like weeping and s inging at the same time: "Father? Mother? Heaven? Humanity?" — Is it my fault? My parents' fault? Heaven 's fault? Someone's fault? When he finishes, he answers himself: it's nobody's fault. "That it has come to th is extreme — it is fate." Note: Zhuangzi's "fate" (ming) is not fatalism's "just give up." It's a complete accep tance — no blaming heaven, no resenting people, no forensic accounting of who or what put me here. Thi s "resting in fate" is not lying flat. It's the act of reclaiming all the energy you've been spending on blame, on attribution, on "finding the cause." I once watched a burned-out Silicon Valley engineer cry after readi ng this passage. He said he'd spent half his life investigating "whose fault it was" — family of origin, toxic b oss, capitalist system — and Zhuangzi told him the investigation has no end. Better to play the zither and sing.

Western Parallels

As someone who's lived in both China and the United States, let me translate Zhuangzi's insights into your context.

Self-Efficacy and "The Great Teacher." Albert Bandura proposed self-efficacy in 1977 — your belief in your own capacity to accomplish something. Bandura said the core source of self-efficacy is mastery experienc e (the firsthand experience of successfully completing a challenge), not other people's encouragement or i nstruction. This aligns startlingly with Zhuangzi's "take the Dao as your teacher." A person who keeps run ning to mastermind courses is actually lowering their self-efficacy — every dollar you hand to a guru, you'

re telling yourself, "I can't figure this out on my own." Zhuangzi says: you don't need to go to India to find a master. Your direct experience is the Great Teacher. The things you've accomplished, the moments you've survived — these are more convincing than any guru's certification.

Internal vs. External Locus of Control and "Resting in Fate." Julian Rotter proposed this concept in 1954: internal-control types believe outcomes depend on their own actions; external-control types believe fate, luck, and other people determine everything. Western psychology champions internal control — the whole "you are the captain of your ship" narrative. But Zhuangzi is neither internal nor external. He deconstructs the question from a higher dimension. Zisang playing the zither is the perfect demonstration: he doesn't say "I didn't try hard enough" (the self-blame of internal control), nor does he say "heaven screwed me over" (the resentment of external control). He says it's ming — fate — a composure that transcends causal attribution. If you're burning out in hustle culture, it's not because you're not internally controlled enough — it's because you're too internally controlled. You think every single outcome is your responsibility, and that's why you're exhausted.

Guru Culture and Spiritual Bypassing — "Mentor Overload." Western spirituality has a subtle trap called spiritual bypassing — using spiritual language to escape real-world problems. You go to a yoga retreat in Bali, come back feeling like your "power of now" is fully charged, but three months later your credit card bills and old relationship issues are exactly where you left them. Zhuangzi's antidote to guru culture is absolute: "The great Dao cannot be named" — the real Dao needs no name, no spokesperson, no cultivation system. You don't need a certified breathwork facilitator to teach you to breathe. You were born breathing. You just forgot later. I had a foreign student who spent five years spinning through the spiritual circuit — ayahuasca ceremonies in Peru, Vipassana in India, tantra workshops in Costa Rica — roughly eighty thousand dollars later, he was sitting with me drinking tea in a Beijing hutong. I said: "The person you've been looking for isn't in Peru, isn't in India, isn't in Costa Rica." He was silent for a long time. Then he started laughing.

Paradox of Choice and "Drop the Limbs, Dismiss Intelligence." Barry Schwartz's classic theory: more options, lower satisfaction. Hustle culture gives you infinite choices — you can become anything, there's a course for everything. But Zhuangzi says real freedom isn't the addition of options — it's the subtraction of options. "Drop the limbs, dismiss intelligence" is an instruction to abandon "self-optimization" as a lifelong project. You don't need to pick the best morning routine out of a hundred. You don't need to know your attachment style before you go on a date. The moment you stop optimizing, you're free.

Real Cases from Ding Long

Case One: The 83-Year-Old Tailor of Shanghai

This happened on Fuxing Middle Road in Shanghai. An 83-year-old tailor, his shop so small only three people could fit inside. No sign. No Dianping listing. He made a shirt from measurement to final stitch without a single word, as though he were doing something that required no speaking. I asked him: "Master, how many years have you been doing this?" He said: "Never counted." I asked: "Any apprentices?" He snorted: "Apprentices? Kids these days want to learn everything in three days. There's nothing in this world you can learn in three days."

This old tailor didn't know he was a "True Person," but he embodied every quality Zhuangzi described: didn't rebel against scarcity (small shop, didn't care), didn't strut in success (a lifetime of tailoring, didn't think of himself as successful), didn't scheme over the next move (no development roadmap). He breathed t

hrough his needle and thread. People say this kind of "craftsman spirit" is Japanese, but Zhuangzi wrote it clearly more than two thousand years ago — when you do something to the point where it no longer requires "perseverance," you're free. Every time I feel anxious now, I think of that old tailor's scissors: snip, snip, snip. Steady as the earth's rotation.

Case Two: The Foreign Student Spinning Through the Spiritual Circuit

Michael (not his real name) came from New York, a former Wall Street trader. After burning out, he poured his entire savings into the project of "finding himself." In five years, he completed: seven ayahuasca ceremonies in Peru, a yoga teacher training in Rishikesh, a breathwork retreat in Bali, the MBSR course at the Berkeley Mindfulness Center, plus countless online courses and coaching programs. He came to Beijing because he'd heard about Zhuangzi.

We sat in a teahouse outside the White Cloud Temple. He said: "I feel like I've collected so many tools, but I still don't know how to be okay."

I said: "Do you know your problem is 'too much'? It's not that you haven't done enough — it's that you've done too much. Every course you finish adds another 'should' — should wake up early, should feel grateful, should be mindful. Your inner world has become a condemned building."

He said: "Then what do I do?"

I poured him a cup of tea and said: "Drink the tea."

He didn't drink. He was waiting for me to give him a method.

"Michael, drinking tea doesn't need a method."

He drank. After about three minutes — during which he checked his phone twice — he suddenly said: "This tea is a little bitter."

"Yes. That's everything you need to know right now."

Michael hasn't been to another retreat since. Not because he "graduated." Because he finally understood what Zhuangzi meant by "merge with the Great Thoroughfare": you don't need to turn yourself into a flawless perfect version. You just need to stop. Stop fixing yourself. He teaches English in Beijing now — his salary is a fraction of his Wall Street days — but he says it's the first time in his life he's lived without needing to "persevere."

Knowledge Framework Summary

Zhuangzi Concept	Core Meaning	Hustle Culture Symptom It Treats	Western Parallel
True Person (*zhen ren*)	Doesn't rebel against scarcity, doesn't strut in success, doesn't scheme	Achievement anxiety, scarcity mindset, over-planning	Authentic Self (minus the performativity)
Great Teacher (*da zong shi*)	Take the Dao as teacher; worship no person	Guru dependency, certificate hoarding	Self-Efficacy (Bandura)
Forget Each Other in Rivers and Lakes	Freedom through non-dependence	Codependency, support-group addiction	Detachment vs. Attachment
Sitting in Forgetfulness (*zuo wang*)	Drop limbs, dismiss intelligence, leave form, abandon knowledge	Biohacking compulsion, knowledge anxiety, optimization addiction	Paradox of Choice (Schwartz)
Resting in Fate (*an ming*)	Transcending internal/external attribution	Self-blame loops, resentment systems	Beyond Locus of Control (Rotter)

Practice Section

Practice One: Mentor Detox — A Decluttering Exercise (About 25 Minutes)

Take out a sheet of paper, or open a blank document. List every mentor, coach, course, and community yo u've spent money or time on over the past three years — online or offline, regardless of price. Be honest. Write them all.

Done? Now do three things:

With a red pen, cross out every one whose methods you no longer practice. Not because their meth ods were bad — because you no longer need them.

With a blue pen, circle every one you still depend on — the people where, before every decision, yo u ask yourself "what would they do?" Circle them. Then ask yourself: Am I growing, or am I imitating?

At the bottom of the page, write one sentence: "From today, my Great Teacher is the Dao." Then sw ap "Dao" for your own language — it could be "my own experience," "my intuition," "life itself," "heaven a nd earth" — pick whatever feels least pretentious, write it down, tape it to your desk.

When you finish this exercise, you may feel a slight fear — like the weakness in your arm after taking off a c ast. That's normal. You've been fractured for so long you've forgotten your bones can bear weight on their own.

Practice Two: Five Minutes of Sitting in Forgetfulness (Beginner-Friendly)

Find a place where no one will bother you. Sit down. Set a five-minute timer.

The task is simple: For five minutes, optimize nothing.

Don't adjust your posture (drop the limbs). Don't meta-analyze your thoughts (dismiss intelligence). Don't try to reach any particular state (leave form, abandon knowledge). If the thought arises — "Am I doing thi s right?" — that's exactly what "dismiss intelligence" refers to. Dismiss it too.

When the five minutes are up, ask yourself one question: What did I just do less of? What did I lose?

Usually, the answer is a single word: Nothing.

That's Zhuangzi's diploma.

Practice Three: Resting in Fate — A Writing Exercise (About 15 Minutes)

Write a letter. Not to anyone — to the question you've been asking yourself all along. That question might be: "Why me?" "Whose fault?" "Would it have been different if I'd tried a little harder?"

At the top of the letter, write: "This is no one's fault. This is fate."

Then keep writing. Don't stop the pen. Don't set a structure. Just let this premise of "resting in fate" carry you forward. You might cry. You might laugh. You might write things you never thought you'd admit. That' s fine. When Zisang played his zither and sang, nobody told him which key to sing in.

Key Takeaways

The "True Person" (*zhen ren*) is not a self-improvement project. Zhuangzi's sage doesn't strive, do esn't compare, doesn't plan. If your version of "growth" constantly points at what's wrong with you, you're not growing — you're self-harassing.

The Great Teacher (*da zong shi*) is the Dao itself, not any human guru. Every time you pay someone to tell you who you are, you mortgage a piece of your own self-efficacy. The Dao charges no fees and never goes out of business.

"Better to forget each other in the rivers and lakes" is not coldness — it's liberation. Mutual dependency disguised as mutual support keeps both parties gasping on dry land. Real freedom is when you no longer need someone else's spit to survive.

"Sitting in Forgetfulness" (*zuo wang*) is the antidote to optimization addiction. Drop the body, dismiss intelligence, leave form behind, abandon knowledge. You don't need a better morning routine — you need to stop believing that optimizing every corner of your existence will finally make you enough.

"Resting in Fate" (*an ming*) transcends both internal and external locus of control. Neither self-blame ("I didn't hustle hard enough") nor resentment ("the system screwed me") leads anywhere. Sometimes the most radical act is to play your zither and sing — without needing an explanation.

Conclusion: The Wind Still Blows

Eight chapters — we've reached the end. If you've walked with me carefully this far, you've now had eight long, honest encounters: with Zhuangzi, with my twenty-five years of temple stories, and with the deepest parts of yourself.

I want to end by returning to the wind. Of all the images Zhuangzi loved, none captivated him more than wind — the wind the Peng bird rides, the wind Liezi harnesses, the wind of heaven's music blowing through ten thousand hollows and crevices. Wind has no shape, yet it passes through every crack. Wind has no purpose, yet it lifts wings across ten thousand miles. You don't need to become the wind's rider. You need to become the wind itself.

Inside the hurricane of hustle culture, you don't need to build a stronger fortress to resist. Just move with the wind's direction. Keep your own lightness.

I wrote these final words in the courtyard of my temple. Outside the window, that crooked-necked jujube tree is swaying in the breeze. No one thinks it's useful. No one waters or fertilizes it. It just lives here, year after year. If one day you pass through Shanghai, pass by my temple — don't talk to me about success and failure, about anxiety and liberation. Sit down. Have some tea. The tea is finished, and the wind is still blowing. That's enough.

Appendix: 30-Day Practice Calendar

> *Note: A dedicated 30-Day Practice Calendar was referenced in the project specifications. Each practice from the chapters — the Three Human World Questions, Heart Fasting Breath, Mentor Detox, Sitting in Forgetfulness, Resting in Fate Writing — can be cycled and layered across a month. The structure below draws from all the daily and recurring practices embedded across Chapters 7 and 8, organized into a progressive four-week framework you can start today.*

Week 1: Foundation — Learning to Empty

Day | Practice | Time
Day 1 | Read Chapter 7 once, slowly. No note-taking. Just let it land. | 30 min
Day 2 | Heart Fasting Breath (morning and evening) | 3 min × 2
Day 3 | Heart Fasting Breath + The Three Human World Questions (before bed) | 3 min + 5 min
Day 4 | Heart Fasting Breath ONLY — but find three micro-moments today (red light, elevator, coffee steam) | 3 min × 2 + micro
Day 5 | Heart Fasting Breath + Three Questions | 3 min × 2 + 5 min
Day 6 | Extend morning Heart Fasting Breath to five minutes. Sit with "empty and receive" — no agenda. | 5 min + 3 min
Day 7 | Review your week. Did you notice a single moment of genuine emptiness? Write it down. No judgment. | 15 min

Week 2: The Vehicle and the Rider — Identity Detox

Day | Practice | Time
Day 8 | Heart Fasting Breath + Ask yourself: "What vehicles am I riding this week?" (job, title, roles). List them. | 3 min + 5 min
Day 9 | Heart Fasting Breath + One "useless" act today. Do something with no productive purpose. | 3 min × 2 + act
Day 10 | Heart Fasting Breath + Before a meeting, pause: "Empty and receive." Walk in without a script. | 3 min × 2 + pause
Day 11 | Heart Fasting Breath + Three Questions | 3 min × 2 + 5 min
Day 12 | Five Minutes of Sitting in Forgetfulness (Practice Two, Chapter 8). First attempt. | 5 min
Day 13 | Heart Fasting Breath + Notice one "mantis moment" today — where were you trying to block a chariot? | 3 min × 2 + observation
Day 14 | Review your week. What did "useless" feel like? What did you discover about your vehicles? | 15 min

Week 3: The Great Teacher — Reclaiming Authority

Day | Practice | Time
Day 15 | Read Chapter 8 once, slowly. | 30 min
Day 16 | Mentor Detox: List all your gurus, courses, coaches. Red-pen and blue-pen exercise. | 25 min
Day 17 | Heart Fasting Breath + Sit with the sentence: "My Great Teacher is the Dao" — or your own version. | 5 min
Day 18 | Five Minutes of Sitting in Forgetfulness | 5 min
Day 19 | Heart Fasting Breath + Three Questions | 3 min × 2 + 5 min
Day 20 | Notice: Did you seek external guidance today when you already knew the answer? Observe without judgment. | All day
Day 21 | Resting in Fate Writing: Write the letter (Practice Three, Chapter 8). | 15 min

Week 4: Integration — Becoming the Wind

Day | Practice | Time
Day 22 | Heart Fasting Breath — extend to a full 10 minutes if it feels natural. | 10 min
Day 23 | Sitting in Forgetfulness + Three Questions | 5 min + 5 min
Day 24 | Choose ONE practice that resonated most and do it consciously. | Your choice
Day 25 | Heart Fasting Breath + Read the Conclusion aloud to yourself. | 5 min + reading
Day 26 | Do nothing structured. Just notice: has anything shifted in how you move through the day? | All day
Day 27 | One "useless" act + Heart Fasting Breath | Act + 3 min
Day 28 | Review: Read back through your Three Questions from the month. Patterns? Surprises? | 20 min
Day 29 | Final Sitting in Forgetfulness — no timer. Sit until you naturally rise. | Open-ended
Day 30 | No practice. Just tea. The wind is still blowing. | ∞

Ding Long • 25th Generation Zhengyi Fire-Dwelling Daoist Priest
Outside the White Cloud Temple, Beijing • Some afternoon that required no words