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A Meditation on Friendship

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Three men, Master Sanghu, Meng Zifan, and Master Qinzhang were talking to each other, “Who is able to be with others without being with others, be for others without being for others? Who is able to climb the skies, roam the mists, and dance in the infinite, living forgetful of each other without end?” The three men looked at each other and smiled, none opposed in his heart, and so they became friends.

—*Zhuangzi*, chapter 6

The *Zhuangzi* is one of the most lyric philosophical texts of ancient China. It is filled with rhapsodic language describing the spiritual state of those who, having abandoned social conventions to pursue a quasi-nature mysticism aimed at becoming one with the world of nature or *dao*, have attuned themselves to the flow and rhythm of *dao*. As a consequence, the term “Daoist” is apt to evoke an image of the solitary hermit, living apart from society in seclusion, shunning the company of others and their state conventions. While later traditions associated with Daoism may have perpetuated the ideal of the solitary hermit, this description has little relevance to *Zhuangzi* himself or to the Inner Chapters of the text associated with his name.¹ In fact, the *Zhuangzi* is a text full of stories of profound friendships. In all these cases, communion among friends plays as important a role as the communion forged between an individual and the natural environment.

While the *Zhuangzi* does not speak to the topic of friendship directly, many facets of its philosophy—self-realization, realization of *dao*, and even acceptance of death—are presented in the context of intercourse among friends. Thus, the experience of friendship not only provides insight into the philosophical vision of *Zhuangzi*, but the human relations expressed through friendship are integral to it. This meditation is therefore devoted to exploring the experiences of friendship as they appear in the *Zhuangzi* and how befriending an *other* stimulates personal transformation. This will hopefully enrich our understanding of the *Zhuangzi*,

and at the same time deepen our understanding of a topic largely neglected by philosophers—friendship, and by extension, ourselves in relation to others.

What are the parameters of friendship? Zhuangzi provides an answer in the form of a question: “Who is able to be with others without being with others, be for others without being for others? Who is able to climb the skies, roam the mists, and dance in the infinite, living forgetful of each other without end?” There are at least two points of philosophical significance. First, Zhuangzi provides a set of criteria as prerequisites for becoming friends, and second, he links the ability to *become friends* with the realization of *dao*, poetically described here as “climbing the skies, roaming the mists, and dancing in the infinite.” Three conditions of friendship are delineated here: *being-with*, *being-for*, and *mutually-forgetting*. The first two conditions *being-with* and *being-for*, are somewhat self-evident aspects of friendship and should not pose any problems. It is the third feature, *mutually-forgetting*, that might require further discussion.

Generally speaking, humans are the kinds of beings that thrive in the company of others. In fact, the social nature of the human animal is a basic tenet of all early Chinese philosophy and is taken for granted in the Inner Chapters of *Zhuangzi*. The experience of *being-with* friends is an intrinsically rewarding situation, full of joy, irrespective of any benefits it may bring along with it. Most of our experience is shared with others, and the bulk of our knowledge is gained from being with others: observing, imitating, and modeling them. We learn about life through others, and thereby learn also of ourselves. Moreover, the deeper a friendship, the more one is willing to do *for* a friend, without calculation of self-gain, and often at some personal expense. In such cases, *being-for* a friend comes about naturally and spontaneously. It also seems to be self-evident that a person is more likely to forget selfish interests, whether mundane or those of a higher order, while enjoying the company of a friend. Thus, in *being-with* a friend, we forget ourselves. Forgetting oneself, however, meets Zhuangzi’s third criterion of friendship only half-way. It seems that altruism is not enough for Zhuangzi. He not only requires that we forget ourselves in our concern for a friend, he also tells us that we must also forget our friend. What does this mean?

In order to address this last point, it is necessary to pause for a moment and take a look at the notions of *no-self* and *forgetting* in the *Zhuangzi*. As it turns out, forgetting is a major theme of the Inner Chapters, and is, in essence, a variation on the *no-self* theme, a thread that runs throughout the *Zhuangzi* and appears wherever discussion of spiritual achievement is found. The *Zhuangzi* states: “The utmost person is without self, the daemonic person is without merit, and the sage is without name.”² Elsewhere, the text allows that “the great person has no self.”³ These quotes reveal an emphasis on a selfless or nonegoistic frame of reference as the key to self-realization. Only one who has forgotten personal interest, success, and reputation is qualified for praise from Zhuangzi.

In a passage from chapter 6, the “Great Ancestor Teacher,” Confucius’s best student, Yanhui, describes his progress as a forgetting of self and body achieved by sitting and forgetting. When Confucius asks what he means by sitting and forgetting, Yanhui replies “I drop off my limbs, drive out perception and understanding, distance myself from my physical form, get rid of knowledge, and thereby become identical with the great thoroughfare.”⁴ In this passage, there are at least two objects of forgetting: knowledge in the form of social conventions and formulas that limit one’s vision and insight, and one’s own person, more specifically, the physical body. Moreover, *dropping off* one’s physical body is specifically linked to realization of *dao*, likened here to the great thoroughfare. This same motif is developed in the story of our three men who roam the mists and dance in the infinite. Zigong, outraged at the conduct of men who treat the bones of their bodies as outside themselves and sing in front of a corpse without any change in their demeanor, asks Confucius what kind of men they are. Confucius replies that these men who “forget their own liver and gall and leave behind their own ears and eyes” are the kind that are able to roam beyond the guidelines.⁵ In this instance too, forgetting one’s physical self is linked to going beyond the ritual guidelines, in this case, the most sacred of all—the funeral rites.

Forgetting thus functions as the technique par excellence for achieving spiritual realization and increasing awareness. Other techniques referred to include stilling the mind, and becoming empty and vacuous.⁶ What all these examples have in common is an emphasis on abandoning an egoistic point of view and letting go considerations of self-interest. Only by engaging our world from a perspective of no-self can we become one with the flow and rhythm of *dao*. If the absence of self describes the spiritual condition of a fully realized person, then forgetting is its practical application.

Like most early texts in Chinese philosophy, the *Zhuangzi* is not content to describe the so-called *objective world* or the *human condition*. Rather, it aims to transform its readers and bring them to a higher state of awareness. What makes experience shared between friends especially effective for personal transformation is that genuine concern for a friend has a propensity to take one away from personal concerns and self-interest. Transactions undertaken in the spirit of friendship are important because they open the gate to an *other*, and are one of the few things in this world that can cause a person to forget and put aside self-interest. Being the object of another’s concern is a moving experience, and one that transforms the way a person sees both other people and the world. By reaching out to the other and looking at the world with the interests of that person in mind, our cares are directed beyond the individual ego; connecting oneself with the outside world. In friendship, two (or more) become as one; a friend becomes an extension of oneself.

Developing a friendship is, in essence, a training in looking outward beyond and away from self-interest—only one step away from letting go of personal pre-

conceptions, a prerequisite for the expansion of insight. Genuine friendship is therefore a highly effective source of spiritual transformation. Mystic union with the cosmos is surely a sign of spiritual awareness in the *Zhuangzi*, but mystic union between friends is equally so; the experience of cosmic oneness is not only often linked with the experience of a group of friends who are of one mind, but can be an extension of it.

It is clear that realization of *dao* requires abandoning all thought of oneself, including the way one looks at things. This does not imply an absence of perspective, but actually points toward the attainment of multiple perspectives, a well-known theme of the *Zhuangzi*. Chapter 1 opens with the story of the giant *peng* bird's flight and continually contrasts its perspective with the restricted and "small" perspectives of the cicada, the turtle-dove, and the quail among others. Play on perspective is not employed to convince the reader that all perspectives are relativistic, but that we must enlarge our perspective in order to go beyond restricted *small* points of view and reach a more comprehensive vision. In this regard, the *Zhuangzi* repeatedly informs us that the differentiations we conceptualize are a "matter of the situation from which one is seeing."⁷ The point is to see things from as many perspectives as possible.

Awareness is not a matter of filling our heads with more analytical knowledge, nor is it a matter of book learning, but is an abandoning and letting go of ossified conceptions. This also forms one aspect of Zhuangzi's critique of rationality. Rationality is problematic to the extent that it encourages an egocentric focus. This, in turn, has the effect of narrowing perspective, and precludes the ability to entertain the focus of the other. This is why primacy is given to intuitive feeling over against rational argument. Intuitive feeling tends to be more inclusive of the totality of a situation and is more likely to respond to the particular details of the situation in a spontaneous manner, even to the point where the doer forgets the physical self. If one can forget the needs of the physical self, then calculative rationality, prompted by self-interest, will not restrict vision to a narrow focal point but allow one to look upon the totality of the field. It is not that reason is anathema to insight, but is appropriate only where it is not the slave of self-interest. Spiritual transformation is tied to seeing things in a new light, but requires that we see the world in a non-self-centered way. In other words, there is a need to enter into other perspectives.

The *Zhuangzi*, of course, uses stories, paradox, and linguistic games to entice the reader out of sedimented perspectives and into new ones. In the context of friendship, however, dialogue is a stimulating and enjoyable prod that allows one to see through the eyes of another. Zhuangzi, through his friendship with Huishi, offers us a good example. Huishi, a representative of the "School of Names," often appears in the text of the *Zhuangzi* as an intellectual adversary, and more importantly, a companion of Zhuangzi. The friendship that these two thinkers

develop is often commented upon in works on the *Zhuangzi*. However, discussion is generally limited to the intellectual influence Huishi had on the development of Zhuangzi's thought about language, logic, and rational argumentation. To be sure, when Huishi appears in the text, paradox and linguistic play is usually at issue, with Zhuangzi outdoing the master at his own game, and making a philosophical point in the process. Zhuangzi and Huishi were certainly intellectual sparring partners, yet the text itself reveals a deep and genuine friendship that goes beyond mere "professional" talk.

There is a poignant story set at the funeral of Huishi that reveals the importance of Huishi's companionship to Zhuangzi.⁸ Taking part in the funeral procession, Zhuangzi turns to the other attendants and says:

There was a man from Ying who, if plaster as thin as a fly's wing got on the end of his nose, would have carpenter Shi slice it off. Carpenter Shi, rousing the wind with his whirling hatchet, would slice it off in compliance, ridding the plaster from the nose completely and without injury, while the man from Ying stood there without losing his composure. Lord Yuan of Song heard of this, summoned Carpenter Shi and asked, "Could you try doing this for me?"

Carpenter Shi replied, "I used to be able to slice like this, however, my partner is long dead." Since the death of the master, I too am without a partner. There is no one with whom I can speak to.

Carpenter Shi is not able to perform this feat of slicing off the plaster with just anybody, but requires a partner with whom he shares an intimate level of understanding and trust. While the carpenter's physical motor-skills and handling of the hatchet obviously require extreme dexterity, success ultimately depends on the calm composure of his partner, who is literally putting his life in the hands of a friend. Success requires that the two men respond to each other in attunement, and forget any fears, concerns, or thoughts of self and other that might interrupt the flow of *dao*, and result in physical harm.

By drawing this comparison, Zhuangzi intimates that his own level of success in maneuvering with *dao* is due in large measure to his companion, Huishi. Huishi certainly helped hone and sharpen Zhuangzi's wit and skill for debate, but not in a spirit of conquest. The profundity of their friendship takes them beyond mere argumentative debate and into a mode of dialogue that engenders mutual transformation and insight. As Zhuangzi laments, companions like this are hard to come by.

Bringing the discussion back to an abstract level, genuine friendship not only involves a *being-with* and *being-for*, but more importantly, requires that one *be-with others without being-with others* and *be-for others without being-for others*. Reaching a state where self-concern is completely forgotten is not easy, if even

possible, but unless this state is reached, one is still in some degree trapped inside a self-made web of desires and fears that make vision *small*. As a result, this web is bound to influence one's bearing toward the world at large, and one's social interactions in particular. A person thus trapped is unable to avoid treating the other without some degree of design and expectations; there is no letting the other be the other. When this occurs, *being-with* someone is at bottom a matter of treating that person instrumentally to accommodate one's own *needs*. Likewise, *being-for* someone becomes a matter of *being-for* oneself; we do for others so that they do for us.

Genuine friendship must overcome these limited personal visions that impose constraints upon both parties in a friendship. Only by first letting the other be does one free oneself, and thereby attain that deeper and more genuine experience of enjoyment—an ecstatic enjoyment that does not constrain vision.

Master Hui asked Zhuangzi, "Can a man really be without emotion?"

Zhuangzi replied, "Yes."

Master Hui probed, "But a man without emotion—how can you call him a man?"

Zhuangzi responded, "*Dao* gave him a face and heaven gave him a shape. How can you not call him a man?"

Master Hui continued, "Since we call him a man, how can he be without emotion?"

Zhuangzi explained, "This is not what I mean by emotion. When I speak of being without emotion, what I am saying is that a man does not let likes and dislikes get in and harm his person."⁹

Zhuangzi is not advocating emotional suicide; he merely warns his readers of the dangers that emotional attachment can elicit. Emotions per se are not the problem, but attachment to them and the objects they are directed toward are. Enjoyment in the company of friends, albeit of a higher type, is something to be cultivated and achieved only after one has learned to forget both self and other. Learning to *be-with* and *be-for* a friend is dependent on giving up a reason for doing so, letting things take their course naturally and spontaneously. What Zhuangzi proposes is an emotive *wuwei*, an emotive *doing* which does so without being obtrusive.

This emotive *wuwei* confronts its biggest challenge when faced with death. Death appears frequently in the *Zhuangzi* and often in the context of friendship. The *Zhuangzi* is known for its frequent references to death and physical decay, yet as A. C. Graham makes clear, there is nothing morbid about its treatment.¹⁰ Rather, death is looked upon as a natural part of the process of birth, growth, decay, and transformation. Whereas Zhuangzi conceptually depersonalizes the

reality of death, he personalizes the experience of it, whether one's own or that of a friend. Unfortunately, fear of death and concern for life tend to drive one inward, and not only prevents the possibility of a calm detachment, but in fact, is prone to increase attachment. Detachment in the face of mortality, one's own or a friend's, is the surest sign that one has mastered self-centered fears.

The type of detachment depicted in the pages of the *Zhuangzi*, moreover, does not represent pessimistic resignation in the face of the inevitability of physical demise. While resignation may earn respect and admiration for the courage and resoluteness it shows, this disposition is far from the one the *Zhuangzi* is attempting to foster—reconciliation. Numerous passages can testify to this, none better than the following:

Master Yu suddenly became ill and Master Si went in to inquire. "Extraordinary, how that which creates things is turning me into this crooked thing. It hunches me and sticks out my back, my organs are on top, my chin hidden in my navel, my shoulders higher than my head, and my pigtail points towards the sky. The *yin* and *yang qi* are askew." His heart was at ease and unconcerned. He limped over to the well, and looking at his reflection, said "Ah! How that which creates things is turning me into this crooked thing."

Master Si asked "Do you hate this?" He replied, "Why should I hate death? Suppose it transforms my left arm into a rooster, I'll keep watch on the time of night. Suppose it transforms my right arm into a crossbow, I'll look for an owl to roast. . . . I obtained life because the time was right. I will lose it because this is the course things take. Be at ease with your timing and live in accord with the course things take and sorrow and joy will not force their way in."

This is no expression of resignation in the face of death, but rather, conveys a sense of wonder. There is even what, to ordinary sensibilities, seems to be a "perverse" sense of enjoyment derived by Master Yu from reflecting on the part he will play in the process of ceaseless transformations. Master Yu is not emotionally dead and can still enjoy life, more profoundly than the common lot. What sets him and his companions apart is that they have let go of attachment to the emotion that binds. He and his friends have enjoyed the time they have spent together. Not only has Master Yu let go when his time has come, but so has his friend let go of that *selfish* fear when nature takes away *my* friend. Once freed from these attachments, one is then able to experience that rhapsodic mystical-like state described by Zhuangzi as climbing the skies, roaming the mists, and dancing in the infinite—hardly a description of an emotionally dead person. In Master Yu's case, all distinction between self and other is erased, enabling him to become one body with his friends, and thus, the cosmos.

NOTES

1. Questions concerning the authorship of the *Zhuangzi* constitutes its own field of research. Without delving into this matter, it is generally accepted that a single figure, assumed to be the historical Zhuangzi, penned the first seven chapters, traditionally referred to as the “Inner Chapters.” The remaining chapters are either an assemblage of heterogeneous fragments, some probably by the author of the Inner Chapters, or products from the pen of later writers and added to the text as it was handed down. These writings sometimes depart from the thought of the Inner Chapters. While “hermits” do appear in the Inner Chapters, they surface with much greater frequency in the Outer Chapters, and as such, are less philosophically significant in the Inner Chapters.
2. Chapter 1, “Free and Easy Wandering.”
3. Chapter 17, “Autumn Floods.”
4. Chapter 6, sec. 9. The use of Confucius to expound Daoist ideas is a common feature of the *Zhuangzi*.
5. Chapter 6, sec. 6. Other well-known examples include the beginning of chapter 2 where Ziqi of South Wall “loses” himself, whose body becomes like withered wood, and mind like dead ashes. The result—he hears the pipings of Heaven.
6. In particular, see chapter 4 “The Human World,” where Confucius and Yanhui are discussing the meaning of “fasting” the mind.
7. Chapter 6, “Autumn Floods.”
8. Chapter 24, “Xu Wugui.”
9. Chapter 5, “Sign of Full Inner Power.”
10. See his *Disputers of the Tao* (La Salle, IL.: Open Court, 1989), pp. 202–4, and his partial translation of the *Zhuangzi*, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), pp. 23–24.