

逍遥游

FREE AND EASY WANDERING

ZHUANG ZI – CHAPTER 1 (300 BC)

The northern darkness has a fish. Its name is Kun. Kun is big. It is not known how many thousands of miles are there. It changes and it's a bird. Its name is Peng. Peng comes from behind. It is not known how many thousands of miles are there. Impassioned, it flies. Its wings are like clouds hanging from the sky. It follows the ocean's trade winds and migrates towards the southern darkness. The southern darkness is the reservoir of the sky.

In the old *Tales of the Strange* it says, "Peng migrates towards the southern darkness. It seizes and grabs a hold, then sways, rises up nine thousand miles, and soars six months before taking its rest. The horses out in the wilderness, the dust and the dirt, all living things arrive in the mutual gusting of this rest when it comes." The sky is a deep blue. But is that its real color? Or is it simply distance without end? It looks down just as if it's always been that way.

If the water has not yet accumulated much, it is powerless to bear up a big boat. Turn over a cup of it in a little hollow on the floor with the whole room above, and a tiny mustard seed could be the boat. But if you upright the cup, it will stick. The water is too shallow and the boat too big. As well, wind that has not yet accumulated much is powerless to bear up big wings. It is said that Peng needs nine-thousand miles of wind beneath it before it can rise up, bearing on its back the bluish sky. Therefore it cannot be that which dies young or stops short. It is always going south. It gives us the map for it.

The Cicada and the Pigeon hear of this and laugh. The Cicada says, "Every time I decide to lift off and fly away, say, to go and plunder the elm and sandalwood trees, I can only go so far before the tug of the earth begins to pull me back. How then can anybody go nine-thousand miles to the south?"

The Pigeon says, "If I was going into the center of the thicket, then I would just need a few bites of grain to keep my belly full. But if I was going out for a hundred miles, then I would need to spend the night before grinding the extra grain. And likewise, if I was going out for ten-thousand miles, then I would need to spend a few months gathering and grinding what I would need."

But what do these two tiny creatures know of it? Small knowledge does not measure up to big knowledge. Small years do not measure up to big years. How can we ever know for sure what is certain? The morning mushroom will never know the darkness or the moon. The summer cicadas and crickets will never know the spring or fall. They are too small of time. It is said that in the south of Chu there are people with a certain habit of the spirit that brings them through 500 springs and 500 falls. And of course there's the great Tree-of-Heaven, famous for its 8000 springs and 8000 falls. Even in this day and age we have venerable old Grandfather Peng, widely known for his extraordinary span of years. But still the majority of us common folk do nothing but grieve!

The Thick Soup asked the Thorntree about what he'd heard. He replied: "Nothing grows up in the north with its dark seas and sky pools. But there is a fish there, with a breadth of several thousand miles. Nobody knows how it lives but its name is Kun. There is a bird as well, whose name is Peng. Its back is as big as a mountain. Its wings hang from the sky like clouds. It seizes and grabs a hold, swaying and spiraling up like a ram's horn. It rises nine thousand miles and bears the bluish sky on its back. Duly bound for the southern darkness, it disappears into cloud breath and leaves only a hint of a trail behind it."

The Critical Quail snickers and says, "Duly bound for what? I run, skip, lift off, and pass nearly seven fathoms, gliding and soaring, before I sink down into the raspberry and wormwood bushes. In this case I fly and I arrive. And there are those who go where?"

This is how the small and the big disagree. This is why if one seeks only the knowledge of a single official, acts only for the needs of a single village, joins virtue with that of only a single ruler, or is called to duty by the cause of only a single nation, then one sees one's self much in the same way as these little birds. Master Song the Glorious would laugh out loud if he heard us talking here. He has lifted himself so far above the world, that being praised does not add to his dedication, nor does being opposed add to his difficulty. For him it is fixed, the difference between inside and out. He has dissolved the barrier between praise and disgrace. There are indeed people like this in the world, people who no longer measure and tally what happens to them, who are unaffected by what anyone else thinks. It's almost as if they cease to exist. Master Lie was also like this. He would 'ride the wind' to get around, smooth and gentle as softly flowing water. But out of every ten days, five are the opposite. And often, the moment the blessing is bestowed is the very moment that one ceases to measure and tally what is happening. Does this then excuse us from the need to get around? It seems that we all have a certain place to attend to. If indeed Master Lie could correctly mount atop heaven and earth, ride around on the six breaths of the tempest, and wander freely and unimpoorished throughout the land, then why is there still all this wickedness left here for the rest of us to attend to? The ancients used to say:

The transcendent man has no self
The spiritual man has no result
The holy man has no name

Emperor Yao once attempted to concede all under the sky to his friend Xu You, saying, "The sun and the moon always come out long before the flames of our night torches have run out. There is no trouble with the light. Even before the rainy seasons fall upon us, everything is already well moistened and irrigated. There is no problem with the fields. I need only stand up and all the world is governed. I am but a corpse. I look at myself and see only holes. I am asking you, please, take command of the world for me."

Xu You replied, "Master, you've already governed the world. Now the world is finished with being governed. If I were to replace you, I would be doing it in name alone, a name I truly would have only as a guest. Do you wish me to rule as a guest? When the wren makes her nest deep in the woods, she needs nothing more than a single branch to hold her. When the mouse is finished drinking from the river, he takes nothing more than a belly-full of water with him. Go home and rest my lord. I have no use for the handling of the world. When the kitchen-boy cannot govern the kitchen, do you ask the corpse-channeler to jump over the wine jugs and chopping blocks to replace him?"

Jian Wu once asked Lian Shu, "Have you ever heard Jie Yu speak? His words are big but they don't take up any space. They go past and don't turn back. I'm both aroused and frightened by these words of his. They're like the Milky Way without a pivot. They're big and nearing the courtyard, yet somehow untouchable and completely removed from any human sense!"

Lian Shu replies, "Well what do they say to you, these words?"

"He always talks about this certain Lady Yi from some far-off mountain who has the spirit of man itself for her dwelling. Her flesh and skin are like ice and snow, gentle and yielding as the child within. She abstains from the five grains. She eats only the wind and drinks only the morning dew. She mounts upon the breath of clouds, rides around on a flying dragon, and wanders freely over the four oceans of the beyond. When her spirit amasses, it causes the seasonal grains to ripen and all things to come into their perfection, completely free from fault and defect. It makes me crazy to think about. I just can't believe how it can be true!"

Lian Shu says, "You can believe what is true. The blind are clearly not the ones who will be reading books and treatises. For them it is ridiculous that anyone would want to talk about that. The deaf are clearly not the ones who will be hearing the music of bells and drums. For them it is ridiculous that anyone would want to talk about that. But how can it be that deafness and blindness would refer only to things that are so obvious? What about a person's knowledge? Couldn't it also have similar 'short-comings?' Yes, these words of Jie Yu do reveal the perfected woman. I also know of this one. With deep humanity and virtue, she reaches into the 10,000 things though she handles only the one! Our modern time seems always to be looking at the confusion of things. Why? Perversion and corruption seem to be the normal state of affairs for all of the world. But this one! Nothing can harm her. Though the great rains engulf the sky, she can not be drowned. Though the great drought comes and molten stones pour across the earth, though all the mountains are burning, she will not feel the heat. The dust and dirt from her chaff and husk are as good as any of the pottery or castings made by Emperors Yao and Shun. It is only with her consent that all things arise and are able to care for themselves.

The Song people are fond of collecting ceremonial caps, but what about the Yue people? What do they like to do? It turns out that the Yue people like to cut their hair and tattoo their bodies. They have no use for caps. It is said that Emperor Yao still rules over the world and all its people. He pacifies the oceans within and harmonizes our affairs. He has gone on to visit the Masters of the Four Directions and Lady Yi on her far-off mountain. He has gone north past the Fen River and the sun. His eyes are sunken in from looking so deep and long. Who will mourn for the world when he is gone?"

Master Hui said to Master Zhuang, "King Wei once gave me the seed of this giant gourd, which I then planted, and when it was finished growing, I kid you not, it was as big as a five-bushel barrel. If I tried to use it for holding water, it became too heavy to lift by myself. If I split it up to make into ladles, I couldn't find any other gourds big enough to dip them into. It's not that it wasn't magnificently large, it's just that for me it was useless, so I smashed it to bits.

Master Zhuang replied, "Good Master, you have clearly gone nuts regarding the use of the large! There once was a certain tribe of the Song who after countless generations of washing and bleaching silk for a living, had gotten quite good at making a particular remedy that prevented chapped and cracked skin, or "turtle hands" as they called it. Eventually, some passerby heard of this and asked to purchase their formula for a hundred pieces of gold.

The clan held a meeting to discuss it. They reasoned, "For countless generations of washing and bleaching silk, we have never made more than a few pieces of gold at a time. Now, in just one morning we have the chance to sell our secret for a hundred pieces of gold. Yes, let's give it to him."

The passerby acquired the formula and then brought it show the King of Wu, who happened to be having much trouble with the coastal Kingdom of Yue at that time. Sensing an advantage, the King of Wu sent the passerby with his remedy to his army down in Yue. It was winter in Yue at this time and they were fighting their battle on the water. Utilizing this remedy, the Wu gave the Yue a great defeat, and the King granted a fief of his newly acquired land to the passerby as his reward. In both the case of the Song people and the passerby, the ability to prevent "turtle hands" is the same. Yet with it one acquires a fiefdom, and the other merely remains undamaged by the washing and bleaching of silks. It is only the use of its ability that differs between them.

Now here you have for yourself a five-bushel gourd. Why not improvise a bit and make it into a great big wine jug, and go out for a little float down the river to the lake? But instead you are all upset that there are no gourds to be found big enough to dip your ladles into! It's as if the good Master has a raspberry for a mind indeed!

Master Hui then said to Master Zhuang, "I also have this big tree that folks call a 'Tree-of-Heaven.' Its trunk is so gnarled and bumpy that there is no place for a marking line. It's stubby branches are so curled and twisted that there is no place for a compass and square. It stands by the river and no carpenter even glances at it. Likewise, these words of yours are just as big and useless. That's why everybody is always turning away from them.

Master Zhuang says, "Have you ever heard of the type of weasel they call a Li? Sometimes it can be found down low, hidden and lying in wait for some prey to casually wander by, and sometimes it can be found up high, leaping back and forth from rafter to rafter. It seems impossible to catch, both high and low. But inevitably it crosses the middle, triggers some well-set trap, and is nonetheless captured and killed. Then there is the Ox they also call Li – as big as a cloud hanging from the sky. Have you heard of this? But though it is able to be so big and grand, it is equally unable to catch a simple mouse.

So here you have this big tree and are worrying about its uselessness. Why not just plant it out in the middle of nowhere and spread yourself out in its wilderness? There by its side you can hover around in non-action and then maybe go out for some free and easy wandering. When you come back, you can lie down underneath it and take a nice little rest in its shade. With no threat from the chop of the ax or anything else that might bring you harm, the place that is "no-place" can be quite useful. It can be such a peaceful place, there in the hopeful midst of the poor and the undesired.