

Master Hu and the Ninefold Abyss

from Chapter 7 of Zhuang Zi

translation by Christopher Kiely

In the old city of Zheng there was a wizard by the name of Ji Xian who was said to have the knowledge of life and death. He knew whether one would survive or perish, whether one would meet with catastrophe or windfall. He could tell who would live long and who would die young just by looking at them. He could predict it to the year, month, week, and day as if he were divine. The local people of Zheng would drop what they were doing and run whenever they saw him. But as soon as Liezi met him his heart was enthralled. He came back to tell his teacher Master Hu about it and said: "From the beginning I have always regarded the way of the masters to be the very peak. Yet here there appears to be another way that may actually surpass it."

Master Hu replied: "As to the way, I have only transmitted the outward forms to you. I haven't even let on to what's inside yet. How can you be so sure that you even know what is possible? Even if you had a barn-full of hens, without a rooster how could there be any eggs? In order for the way to be transmitted to the world there absolutely must be faith. In this case you have allowed another to see and read you. Let's try an experiment. Have the wizard come here. I have something to show."

The next day Liezi brought the wizard to see his teacher, Master Hu. After they had left, Ji Xian said to Liezi: "Aye, your master is on the brink of life and death! He will not live more than a week, I am sure of it! I saw the strangeness in him. I saw the damp ashes there."

Liezi came back sobbing, the collar of his shirt wet with tears, to tell Master Hu about it. Master Hu said: "Just then I showed him the culture of the earth: a place where no sprout has yet arisen nor been aroused. Of course it probably looked to him like my power dynamic was blocked. Have him come and try again."

The next day Ji Xian again met with Master Hu. After they had left Ji Xian said to Liezi: "How fortunate you are! Your master is glad he met me. I do believe he is healed and has come completely back to life! I can see now that his vitality was only temporarily obstructed."

Liezi came back to tell Master Hu about it. Master Hu said: "Just then I showed him the ground of the sky: a place where neither name nor deed matters and the dynamic issues ceaselessly up from the heels. Of course it probably looked to him like my dynamic was in pretty good shape. Have him come and try again."

The next day Ji Xian again met with Master Hu. After they had left Ji Xian said to Liezi: "Your master is unstable. I can sense nothing from him. Try to stabilize him if you can and I will come again later."

Liezi came back to tell Master Hu about it. Master Hu said: "Just then I showed him the great gush that never overflows. He

probably saw me balancing my qi dynamic. Examining the sea dragons is an abyss. Examining the still waters is an abyss. Examining the flowing waters is an abyss. There are nine names for the abyss. I showed him only three of them. Have him come and try again one more time.

The next day Ji Xian went to see Master Hu. This time he just stood there, looking very unsettled, when suddenly he lost possession of himself and fled. Master Hu told Liezi to chase him, and Liezi went out after him but could not catch up to him. He came back to tell Master Hu about it: "He has vanished. I could not catch him and can find no trace."

Master Hu said: "Just now I showed him the place where my ancestors have yet to emerge. I met him with emptiness and wrapped around him like a snake so that he couldn't tell who was who and what was what. He felt himself beginning to disperse into air. He felt himself flowing away in waves. That's when he fled."

After that, Liezi felt that he hadn't even really begun to learn and returned home. For three years he did not go out. He made dinner for his wife and fed his pigs as if he were feeding people. He did not get involved in his family business. That which was carved and polished went back to being simple and unadorned. He heaped up piles of solitude to keep his form settled. Even in the midst of confusion and disorder he remained sealed in unity straight through the end.