

Article

Different Routes the Same Destination: “Oneness with Dao through Skill” in the *Zhuangzi*

Fei Gai

Department of Philosophy, Yunnan University, Kunming 650500, China; gaifei2015@163.com

Abstract: In “The Great and Venerable Teacher”, the Woman Crookback points out the path from words and language to behavior and practice, to enlightenment, and lastly, to obtaining the Dao, which is congruent with the “oneness with Dao through skill” route implicitly described in the *Zhuangzi*. The essential difference between “Zhuangzi’s skill”, which is capable of reaching the realm of Dao, and ordinary skills and arts is not found in the kind or level of abilities, nor in the tools required to do the skills, but rather in the self-knowledge of the “skill”. In order to clarify the natural patterns of things and one’s spiritual nature, as well as to reach the realm of “losing and again losing” and to remove all influences on the mind, one can use “Zhuangzi’s skill”, which can help the practitioner focus on one thing. Ultimately, the spiritual nature and the natural patterns will be in harmony with one another, matching up “Heaven” with “Heaven”, and becoming one with Dao.

Keywords: Zhuangzi; skill; machine hearts; natural patterns; spiritual nature

1. Introduction

In the study of the *Zhuangzi* (*Book of Master Zhuang* 莊子), “skill (*ji* 技)” has not attracted enough attention compared to such concepts as *xiao yao* (逍遙), *qi wu* (齊物), sitting in forgetfulness (坐忘), transformation of things (物化), etc. Research on it is frequent owing to the well-known Butcher Ding story. The majority of research on the concept of “skill” in the *Zhuangzi* focuses on the philosophy of technology, aesthetics and ethics, and from the philosophy of technology’s point of view,¹ “skill” in the *Zhuangzi* is typically understood to mean technology, from which most researchers draw the conclusion that Daoism is in opposition to technology, or they misinterpret the meaning of the Dao in the *Zhuangzi*, arguing that “mastering technology by the Dao” refers to the ethical and moral restraints that regulate technological actions and applications. From an aesthetic perspective,² it is generally accepted that “skill” in the *Zhuangzi* is consistent with the spirit of the artist, and Daoist philosophy serves as the inspiration for the matching art. But even though “Zhuangzi’s skill” looks to be either skill or art on the surface, it is actually entirely distinct from both and a means of achieving enlightenment. This point is basically recognized by the academic community, as Paul J. D’Ambrosio said, “For many scholars, the constant allusions to Dao in these passages support the privileging or celebration of skills as a method, or even the method, for aligning with, experiencing, or realizing Dao” (D’Ambrosio 2020, p. 479). From an ethical perspective,³ some scholars compare the skilled artisans in the *Zhuangzi* to contemporary skill-based occupations, exploring how they help people fulfill their social roles. However, others contend that since the majority of the skill stories are found in the chapters of “The Secret of Caring for Life” and “Mastering Life”, this is a metaphor for methods of nourishing the life.⁴ Some scholars have proposed ways to grasp the “Dao” by “skill”, such as Kang Zhongqian 康中乾 (Kang 2005), who believes that the way to grasp the “Dao” is “forgetting”, and the way to achieve “forgetting” is to use “skill” as a tool; and Chen Yun 陳贇 (Chen 2016), who believes that Butcher Ding’s cutting up the ox has a supernatural quality because it is in harmony with the Dao of creation.



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Senior scholars have laid a good foundation for the research of this article, but most of the current research is fragmented and unsystematic, and although many scholars affirm the possibility of “oneness with Dao through skill” in the *Zhuangzi*, there are few detailed arguments. The main body of the article will be broken into four sections to illustrate through a philological examination of the Chinese characters that make up the fundamental concepts as well as a comparative interpretation of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. The premise of this article’s argument, “whether Dao can be obtained”, is briefly discussed in the first section, which also explains why it is possible to reach union with the Dao through skill. The second section explains how the “skill” in the *Zhuangzi* differs in essence from other arts and techniques, as well as why judgment of the same kind of skill is contradictory. The third and fourth sections explore how to achieve oneness with Dao through skill, and they discuss two processes for doing so by analyzing two criticisms of skills in the *Zhuangzi*.

2. Can Dao (道) Be Obtained (De 得)?

In order to explore the “oneness with Dao through skill” proposition in the *Zhuangzi*, we must first answer the following question: Can Dao be obtained? This question can lead to a series of questions: What is “Dao”? What specifically does “obtaining the Dao (*de dao* 得道)” mean? How to “obtain” the Dao? There are many different viewpoints among scholars on this subject, and no consensus exists. Many words in Daoist writings combine the character “Dao” with a verb, such as “obtaining the Dao”, as well as verbs like discussing (論道), listening (聞道), watching (觀道), learning (學道), following (循道), holding (執道), doing (為道), etc. On the one hand, these words are widely used in the text, which seems to take “Dao” as an object and an actual object, but on the other hand, “The Way (Dao) cannot be heard; heard, it is not the Way. The Way cannot be seen; seen, it is not the Way. The Way cannot be described; described, it is not the Way “ (*Zhuangzi* 22.8),⁵ is repeatedly mentioned in the text in contradiction, which gives “Dao” a distinctive uniqueness. The dilemma of language is also evident in Daoist philosophy, resulting in such endeavors as “if forced to give it a name” (*Laozi* 25)⁶ in the *Laozi* and “let me try putting it this way” (18.1) in the *Zhuangzi*. This article is not intended to discuss these complex issues, but this question is the theoretical basis of this article, so it is simply clarified at the beginning. At present, most scholars will not deny the legitimacy of the phrase “obtaining the Dao”, as the *Daoist Scripture on Clarity and Tranquility* (清靜經) says, “Despite being referred to as obtaining the Dao, it actually obtains nothing; it is merely said so that the audience will easily comprehend it” (Li 1988, p. 142), and the use of this phrase in this article is actually to express oneness with the Dao.

To the question “Can Dao be obtained?” a clear answer in the *Zhuangzi* is available! *Zhuangzi*⁷ said, “The Way has its reality and its signs but is without action or form. You can hand it down (*chuan* 傳), but you cannot receive (*shou* 受) it; you can get it, but you cannot see it” (6.3). The characters “*chuan*” and “*shou*” form a word in modern Chinese that means imparting, but in ancient Chinese, the two characters’ meanings varied somewhat. “*Shou*”, the Oracle Bone Inscriptions of this word mean that the upper hand indicates give, and the lower hand indicates accept. The word “*shou*” has a definition that favors transmission among physical objects. “*Chuan*”, in pre-Qin literature, is more frequently used to refer to abstract concepts like thoughts, theories, reputations, and news. This is also evident in how current Chinese words are formed. As a verb, “*chuan*” is followed by nouns that are mostly abstract things, such as *chuan da* (傳達, convey); “*shou*” is followed by nouns that are mostly concrete things, such as *shou jiang* (授獎, award a prize).

Although *Zhuangzi* asserts that it is possible to teach and obtain the Dao, it does not expand on how to transmit it or how to get it in this passage. Chen Qitian 陳啟天 explains, “Dao can be taught (*chuan*) through the mind, not through words; it can be obtained through the mind, not seen through the eyes” (Chen [1983] 2009, p. 199). Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 of the Tang Dynasty remarks, “It may be taught through language and writing. It cannot be received because it is not a tangible object. It can be obtained through

epiphany (*wu* 悟). It is invisible because it lacks shape and color" (Guo 1961, p. 247). Both of them agree that "obtaining the Dao" is through the heart-mind (*xin* 心). The radical of character "悟" is *xin*, and epiphany needs to go through the mind. Daoism tends to believe that cultivation of the Dao is cultivation of the mind. The point of disagreement between the two is whether the Dao can be taught through language.

Can the Dao be taught and learned through the senses, language, and practice? Daoists typically hold a negative outlook on these. Senses are generally regarded as the chief culprits in disturbing the mind; as Laozi said, "The five colors blind the eye, the five flavors destroy the palate, and the five notes impair the ear" (Laozi 12). As Zhuangzi said, "Thus he who is web toed in eyesight will be confused by the five colors, bewitched by patterns and designs; he who is overnice in hearing will be confused by the five notes, bewitched by the six tones" (8.1). Language and writing are generally regarded as dross, and Zhuangzi believes that "men of the world who value the Way all turn to books. But books are nothing more than words. Words have value; what is of value in words is meaning. Meaning has something it is pursuing, but the thing that it is pursuing cannot be put into words and handed down. The world values words and hands down books, but although the world values them, I do not think them worth valuing" (13.7). Zhuangzi continues to illustrate by telling the Wheelwright Bian story after this passage. Wheelwright Bian believed that the contents of the saints' book that Duke Huan 齊桓公 had read were all dross. He used his own proficiency in making wheels as an analogy, believing that it is difficult to impart true subtlety to his son through language alone and that the sages' way was also similar. And this is what Zhuangzi mentioned in "Autumn Floods": "We can use words to talk about the coarseness of things, and we can use our minds to visualize the fineness of things" (17.1). Practice is typically thought of as "*you wei* (有為)", in contrast to the core concept of Daoism, which is "*wu wei* (無為)".

Zhuangzi used strong words to disparage senses, language, and practice because these three are valued highly by most people. Zhuangzi did not fully discount the significance of these three in the process of obtaining the Dao, but he did underline numerous times that relying solely on them is insufficient and that doing so may even be harmful. Nevertheless, these three are still vital components of the process of obtaining the Dao. This is evident in the Dao's path of transmission, which Zhuangzi refers to in the chapter "The Great and Venerable Teacher":

Nanpo Zikui (南伯子葵) asked the Woman Crookback (*nü yu* 女偶), "Where did you happen to hear the Dao?" "I heard it from the son of Aided-by-Ink (*fu mo* 副墨), and Aided-by-Ink heard it from the grandson of Repeated-Recitation (*luo song* 洛誦), and the grandson of Repeated-Recitation heard it from Seeing-Brightly (*zhan ming* 瞻明), and Seeing-Brightly heard it from Whispered-Agreement (*nie xu* 聶許), and Whispered-Agreement heard it from Waiting-for-Use (*xu yi* 需役), and Waiting-for-Use heard it from Exclaimed-Wonder (*wu ou* 於謳), and Exclaimed-Wonder heard it from Dark-Obscurity (*xuan ming* 玄冥), and Dark-Obscurity heard it from Participation-in-Mystery (*san liao* 參寥), and Participation-in-Mystery heard it from Copy-the-Source (*yi shi* 疑始)!" (Zhuangzi 6.4, Watson 2013, p. 47)

The concepts listed above were all original ideas that Zhuangzi created. These ideas are presented in a very difficult and obscure way. Most critics have either ignored them or given them a different interpretation, but in this article, we will take a literalist approach and attempt to understand them as follows:

"*Fu mo*" refers to text; "*mo*" originally stood for the dark ink made of minerals that was utilized in ancient writing. Lu Xixing 陸西星 of the Ming Dynasty, whose annotated version of the *Zhuangzi* was named *Nan Hua Zhen Jing Fu Mo* (南華真經副墨), said, "*Fu mo* is words. Presumably because reasoning comes from language and words and is then comprehended by the mind" (Lu 2010, p. 100).

"*Luo song*" is the language; the radical of "*song* (誦)" is "*yan* (言, word)". The *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (說文解字 *Origin of Chinese Characters*)⁸ uses the near-synonym "*feng* (諷)" to explain

“song”. The distinction between these two characters was described by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 in his commentary on the *Zhou Li* (周禮): “Both words have the meaning of memorization, and ‘song’ prefers rhythmic reading and reciting” (Zheng and Jia 1999, p. 575).

“Zhan ming” is what is seen; the radical of “zhan (瞻)” is “mu (目, eye)”, and to stare down from a height is its original meaning. The radical of “ming (明)” is “ri (日, sun)”, and brightness is its original meaning. The majority of the commentators interpret “zhan ming” to signify attentive observation, investigation, perspicacity, and so forth.

“Nie xu” is what is heard; the radical of “nie (聶)” is “er (耳, ear)”, and the original meaning is to whisper in the ear. The radical of “xu (許)” is also “yan (言)”, and the original meaning is to listen to others. Duan Yucai 段玉裁 believes that this character can be extended to mean obedience (Duan 2013, p. 90).

“Xu yi” is what is done; the radical of “yi (役)” is “chi (彳, walk)”, the character originally meant to arm up and reach the border, but later it came to signify to drive.

“Wu ou” is intuition that is hard to put into words; “wu (於)” is the image of a crow in pictograph, *Shuo Wen Xin Zheng* (說文新證), “Crows are known for their open-mouthed weeping, therefore the ancients used this as an image. ‘Wu (於)’ is a word differentiated from ‘wu (烏, crow/black)’, and there is no difference between these two characters in the pre-Qin period” (Ji 2010, p. 315). Consequently, throughout the pre-Qin era, the character “wu (於)” was frequently used as an interjection. According to the *Shang Shu* (尚書), “Well (於)! You must take it seriously” (Kong and Kong 1999, p. 88). In *The Book of Poetry* (詩經), “Woe is me! Woe is all! Our state declines and nears its fall (於乎有哀, 國步斯頻)” (Wang and Ren 1995, pp. 1314–15). This pronunciation and usage of the character “wu (於)” largely faded after the pre-Qin era. To sing in unison is the original definition of “ou (謳)”. The distinction between “ge (歌, sing)” and “ou” is whether “ge” can be accompanied by music or not, but generally, songs are in accordance with particular movements or scores. Without any musical accompaniment, “ou” is scored by random singing without any particular movement. Although many commentators interpret “wu ou” as a ballad, this does not accurately capture its meaning. According to the interpretation of the characters, “wu ou” represents thoughts that cannot be explained rationally, while appreciation and singing are simply external representations.

“Xuan ming”, “can liao”, and “yi shi” all serve as oblique descriptions of the Dao. These words all appear in significant chapters connected to Dao in the *Laozi*. Such as “xuan (玄)”, “the obscurest of the obscure, they are the swinging gateway of the manifold mysteries (玄之又玄, 眾妙之門)” (Laozi 1). “Ming (冥)”, “Though nebulous and dark, there are seminal concentrations of qi within it (窈兮冥兮, 其中有精)” (Laozi 21). “Liao (寥)”, “silent and empty, standing alone as all that is, it does not suffer alteration (寂兮寥兮, 獨立不改)” (Laozi 25). “Shi (始)”, “the nameless (wuming) is the fetal beginnings of everything that is happening (wanwu), while that which is named is their mother (無名, 天地之始; 有名, 萬物之母)” (Laozi 1). Investigating the significance of these characters, “xuan”, which are dark, abstruse, and mysterious, stressing the subtlety of comprehension. The meaning of “ming” is dim and obscure. When the light is not clear, the character “ming” as an adjective is darker than the characters “an (暗, insufficient light)”, “hun (昏, dusk)”, and “mei (昧, dawn)”, often signifying the lack of all light; hence, this character was later used to refer to the underworld where ghosts live. The character could emphasize spatiality since darkness causes people to lose their sense of place, or it could emphasize understanding as a metaphor for the elusiveness of Dao. “San”, refers to three. In Chinese philosophy, the number three stands for a variety of concepts, including the three powers of heaven, earth, and man, the three luminaries of the sun, moon, and stars, etc. In this context, it may refer to “Way-making (Dao) gives rise to continuity, continuity gives rise to difference, difference gives rise to plurality, and plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is happening (道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生萬物)” (Laozi 42), i.e., the Dao’s process of creating all things. “Liao” emphasizes spatial implications by referring to emptiness, nothingness, bareness, and expanse. The direct translation of “Yi shi” is wondering how the world began; it refers to the Dao giving rise to heaven and earth, the beginning of everything, and

the mother of all things, but all this is non-experienced; the word doubt can only be used to describe an attitude that dares not be expressed in words. To make these concepts clear at a glance, a table is presented below (Table 1):

Table 1. Main Concepts in “The Great and Venerable Teacher”.

Chinese Character	Pinyin	Watson’s Translation	My Interpretation
副墨	<i>fu mo</i>	Aided-by-Ink	text
洛誦	<i>luo song</i>	Repeated-Recitation	language
瞻明	<i>zhan ming</i>	Seeing-Brightly	what is seen
聶許	<i>nie xu</i>	Whispered-Agreement	what is heard
需役	<i>xu yi</i>	Waiting-for-Use	what is done
於謳	<i>wu ou</i>	Exclaimed-Wonder	intuition
玄冥	<i>xuan ming</i>	Dark-Obscurity	the subtlety of the Dao
參寥	<i>san liao</i>	Participation-in-Mystery	the vastness of the Dao
疑始	<i>yi shi</i>	Copy-the-Source	the origin of all things

This passage from “The Great and Venerable Teacher” can be interpreted from two different angles. The first is to see it as a path to obtaining the Dao: Reading; becoming familiar with it; and even memorizing it; understanding the reasoning behind it; deepening one’s understanding from what is heard; feeling that one has gained something; putting the reasoning of one’s understanding into practice; and then unexpectedly understanding it during practice; comprehending the subtlety of the Dao; sensing the vastness of the Dao; and ultimately merging it with the origin of all things. The second is understood as the path of transmission of the Dao: The Dao is the source and beginning of everything; it creates time and space and gives birth to all things; it manifests in everything as “De (德, virtue/inner power)”; it manifests in people as “xing (性, spiritual nature)”, which can be understood through intuition; it manifests in things as “li (理, natural patterns)”, which can be understood by people through their actions; humans appreciate these Dao-related observations, which are then condensed into a lucid theory that is passed down by recitation⁹ and, eventually, written down and transmitted down. Although most commentators, including Lin Xiyi 林希逸, Chen Jingyuan 陳景元, Lü Huiqing 呂惠卿, Li Shengfang 李勝芳, Shi Deqing 釋德清, and Lin Zi 林自, believe that the passage refers to obtaining the Dao, the second perspective makes more sense based on the original text of “The Great and Venerable Teacher”. Son of “*Fu mo*”, grandson of “*luo song*”, “son” and “grandson” indicate a direct inheritance link. However, whether it is from the metaphysical Dao to the texts in reality or vice versa, it is not distinct but rather flowing and interwoven.

In the *Zhuangzi*, the most well-known theories of “oneness with Dao” are “sitting in forgetfulness” and “fasting of the mind (心齋)”. Whether it is “sitting” or “fasting” that brings individuals peace, both work directly on the human heart, leaving the reader perplexed and unsure where to begin. This path, “*fu mo*” to “*yi shi*”, however, makes the route to getting the Dao apparent, beginning with language and practice, which is the very path to the Dao that is metaphorized in many of the skill stories in the *Zhuangzi*. Understanding this path offers the groundwork for us to further analyze and comprehend the concept of “skill” in the *Zhuangzi*; we must also acknowledge that this is simply a foundation and that further important details need to be thoroughly researched.

3. What Is “Ji (技, Skill)” in the *Zhuangzi*?

To explore the concept of “skill” in the *Zhuangzi*, we must first define the word’s connotation. In the *Zhuangzi*, “skill” refers to all behaviors that need technical abilities, such as artisans’ skills, but also music, literature, and other arts, as well as the art of nurturing life, which has a very broad scope. Second, one must confront Zhuangzi’s conflicted views on “skill”. What kind of attitude does Zhuangzi have regarding “skill”?

On the negative side, according to “Horses’ Hoofs”, “thus, if the plain unwrought substance had not been blighted, how would there be any sacrificial goblets? If the white jade had not been shattered, how would there be any scepters and batons?... That the unwrought substance was blighted in order to fashion implements—this was the crime of the artisan” (9.1). “Destroy and cut to pieces the curve and plumb line; throw away the compass and square; shackle the fingers of Artisan Chui; and for the first time; the people of the world will possess real skill” (10.1). In “Heaven and Earth”, there is also a story in which Zi Gong (子貢) encounters an elderly man laboriously irrigating a field while holding a pitcher, so he asked him, “There is a machine for this sort of thing; in one day it can water a hundred fields, demanding very little effort and producing excellent results. It’s called a well sweep. Wouldn’t you like one?” The gardener flushed with anger and then said with a laugh, “It’s not that I don’t know about your machine—I would be ashamed to use it” (12.11). Therefore, many scholars believe that Zhuangzi’s attitude towards technology is negative, as is Laozi’s statement that “the more sharp instruments in the hands of the common people, the darker the days for the state. The more skill and expertise¹⁰ hawked among the people, the more that perverse things will proliferate” (*Laozi* 57), seems to be more proof of the Daoist’s negative view of technology.

On the positive side, there are many skill stories in the *Zhuangzi* where the protagonists’ high skills are marveled at, which is obviously a positive way of viewing them. Examples include Butcher Ding¹¹ in “The Secret of Caring for Life”, Cicada Catcher, Swimmer at Lü-liang, Woodcarver Qing, and Artisan Chui in “Mastering Life”, Buckle Maker in “Knowledge Wandered North”, and Wheelwright Bian in “The Way of Heaven”, among others.

How should we interpret this paradox in the *Zhuangzi*? Many scholars agree: “In Zhuangzi’s opinion, technology is not the technology that generates wealth. Zhuangzi denies propositional, mechanical, and industrial technical knowledge but gives high praise to physical, artistic, and manual technical knowledge” (Zhao 2010, p. 102). This viewpoint appears to have some merit, but upon closer examination, it is incorrect. Let us dissect Zhuangzi’s notion of “skill” and go over some of its main meanings.

3.1. The Skill of the Artisans

As quoted above, the main object of Zhuangzi’s critique is the skill of the artisan to throw away the compass and other artisans’ aids. The old man holding a pitcher resolutely does not use a well sweep. The well sweep is an invention that improves production efficiency and liberates productivity, and it is a representative of technique.

Artisans’ high level of technical skill is frequently described by the character “*qiao* (巧, ingenious/skillfulness)”. The characters “*ji* (技, skill)” and “*qiao*” have similar meanings and can be interpreted in relation to each other. The character “*qiao*” is typically used as an adjective, whereas the character “*ji*” is typically used as a noun and verb. The character “*qiao*” is frequently associated with artisans, as in *Mo Zi* (墨子), “Gongshu Zi (公輸子, i.e., Lu Ban魯班) himself thought his skill is the best (公輸子自以爲至巧)” (Sun 2001, p. 481). The *Zhou Li*, “right time, right place, good materials, exquisite craftsmanship 工有巧, combine these four factors to make a well-made artifact” (Zheng and Jia 1999, p. 1060). The radical of the character “*qiao*” is “*gong* (工, work/worker)”, and “*gong*” is a generic term for artisans, as in *Li Ji* (禮記), “Heaven’s son sets up the six kinds of workers: workers in earth, in metal, in stone, in wood, in animal skins and grasses or twigs. They manage how to make different articles or vessels” (Zheng and Kong 1999, p. 130). When we refer to someone by their occupation, we are emphasizing their occupation rather than their personhood. Instead, we are praising their skill and the outcomes that they produce. For a common artisan, “skillfulness” is a compliment, but from Zhuangzi’s point of view, the pursuit of “skillfulness” is going astray. As he said, “He covers heaven, bears up the earth, carves and fashions countless forms, but he doesn’t think himself skilled (*qiao*)”. (6.8) The carving technique is utilized as a metaphor for the Dao’s creation of all things, the process that can never be described as “*qiao*”.

However, the story of Woodcarver Qing (*zi qing* 梓慶) in “Mastering Life”, gave his skills a favorable review. Zi Qing, where “*qing*” stands for the artisan’s name and “*zi*” stands for the kind of work he does. As in the *Zhou Li*, “There are seven different kinds of carpenters: those who build wheels, carriages, bows and arrows, wooden handles for long weapons, dwellings, carriages, and those who build musical instruments and ceremonial items (*zi*)” (Zheng and Jia 1999, p. 1063). Therefore, Woodcarver Qing is also an artisan; what is the difference between his skills and those of ordinary craftsmen?

3.2. Art

There was no separation between skill and art in the pre-Qin period. Zhuangzi distinguished the two concepts of “*yi* (藝, art)” and “*ji* (技)”, contending that “ability (*yi*) finding trained expression: that is called skill (*ji*)” (12.1). The original meaning of the character “*yi*” was “planting skill”, and ancient China was an agricultural-based society. Later, the character “*yi*” was greatly expanded to include a wide range of abilities, so that during the pre-Qin period, the character “*yi*” had an incredibly broad range of meanings and did not merely relate to the arts. However, Zhuangzi’s “skill” is separated and explored here with the concept of modern art.

According to many scholars, Zhuangzi’s “oneness with Dao through skill” describes the realm of art. “In the past, appreciating the excellence of art was known to represent ‘oneness with Dao through skill’” (Feng 2001, p. 150), according to Feng Youlan 馮友蘭. The act of the Butcher Ding cutting up an ox, according to Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, “is the situation in which the Dao is realized in life, and it is precisely the situation in which the spirit of art is when it is presented in life” (Xu 2010, p. 60).

Butcher Ding cuts up the ox in a manner that appears to be dancing, with a great aesthetic mood, but what he demonstrates is the skill of killing livestock. The *Zhuangzi* lists a variety of abilities, but there is no art in the contemporary sense. These skills include catching cicadas, rowing a boat, swimming, making musical instruments, belt buckles, and wheels, among others. Musician Kuang (師曠), on the other hand, who is talented in music, is continually criticized in the *Zhuangzi*. Such as, “He who applies his nature to the five notes may go as far with it as Music Master Kuang, but I would not call this good hearing” (8.5), and “Men like Zeng, Shi, Yang, Mo, Musician Kuang, Artisan Chui, or Li Zhu all displayed their Virtue on the outside and thereby blinded and misled the world” (10.1).

However, when the Yellow Emperor (黃帝) performed the tune *Xian Chi* (咸池), Beimen Cheng (北門成) was “overwhelmed, speechless, couldn’t get hold of himself”. The Yellow Emperor said he played music that “begins with fear, and because of this fear, there is dread, as of a curse. Then I add the weariness, and because of the weariness, there is compliance. I end it all with confusion, and because of the confusion, there is stupidity. And because of the stupidity, there is the Way, the Way that can be lifted up and carried around wherever you go”. (14.3) The Yellow Emperor is a saint in the *Zhuangzi*. Others may even experience the Dao through his music. What distinguishes his music from that of Musician Kuang?

3.3. Life-Nourishing Techniques

The life-nourishing technique is the skill of caring for one’s body in order to live longer. In the “Catalogue of Books” of the *Book of the Han Dynasty* (漢書·藝文志), there is the “Mystic Techniques (方技略)”, which is divided into four categories, namely: medical books, prescriptions, arts of the bedchamber, and arts of the immortals. The first two belonged to medicine; arts of the bedchamber were regarded as a form of life-nourishing technique at the time, and arts of the immortals included techniques like Guiding and Pulling (導引) and Dietetic Regimen (服食), and these life-care techniques were all thought to be a type of “skill”. The art of preserving one’s health, which was popular throughout the Warring States period, is also mentioned in the *Zhuangzi*: “To pant, to puff, to hail, to sip, to spit out the old breath and draw in the new, practicing bear-hangings and bird-stretchings, longevity his only concern—such is the life favored by the scholar who practices Induction,

the man who nourishes his body, who hopes to live to be as old as Pengcu (彭祖)" (15.1). The five diverse personality forms shown in "Constrained in Will"—the life favored by the scholar in his mountain valley, the life favored by the scholar who seeks to bring the world to order, the life favored by the scholar of court and council, the life favored by the scholar of the rivers and seas, and the life favored by the scholar who practices Induction, all of whom are secular individuals, are utilized as negative contrasts to the actual enlightened individuals, even though there is no overt criticism of life-nourishing.

However, in the story of the Yellow Emperor in "Let It Be, Leave It Alone", Master Guang Cheng (廣成子) said, "I have kept myself alive for twelve hundred years, and never has my body suffered any decay" (11.3), which is precisely the performance of having accomplishments in health maintenance, so what is the difference between Master Guang Cheng's health maintenance technique and others?

3.4. "Zhuangzi's Skill"

According to the above analysis, the "skill" praised in the *Zhuangzi* has nothing to do with whether or not they are artisan's skills, arts, or life-nourishing techniques; the difference is in the person who uses the technique, not the type of technique. As Wai Wai Chiu put it, "Zhuangzi does not measure their performance by productivity or conformity to social roles. Rather, he ponders the features that drive and underlie their outer elegance and inner peace" (Chiu 2019, p. 3). So, what do these "skills" have in common? People with great skills in these stories all reject that this is "skill" but "Dao" in unison.

In the Butcher Ding story, Lord Wenhui said, "Ah, this is marvelous! Imagine skill reaching such heights!" Cook Ding replied, "What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill" (3.2). In the Cicada Catcher story, Confucius said, "What skill you have! Is there a special way to this?" "I have a way", said the hunchback (19.3). In the Woodcarver Qing story, the marquis of Lu asked, "What art is it you have?" Qing replied, "I am only a craftsman—how would I have any art? There is one (一) thing (19.10). In Daoism, "one" is frequently referred to as "Dao", such as "the heavens in realizing oneness became clear; the earth in realizing oneness became stable" (Laozi 39). In the Buckle Maker story, the grand marshal said, "What skill you have! Is there a special way (Dao) to this?" "I have a way (臣有守也)" (22.10). In Daoist literature, "*shou* (守)" generally refers to "keeping to oneness (守一)", a concept closely related to "Dao", as Wang Niansun 王念孫 said: "*Shou* is Dao. The character 'Dao' in ancient times was pronounced similarly to the character '*shou*'" (Guo 1961, p. 761). As a result, Watson translates the *shou* into the Way rather than straight into keep or hold. When we read this, we cannot help but be reminded of the discussion of "obtaining the Dao" that was mentioned at the start of this article. In that discussion, the terms "listening to the Dao" and "watching the Dao" are used on the one hand, while on the other hand, the terms "the Dao cannot be heard" and "the Dao cannot be seen" are used. This is the dilemma faced by language when attempting to describe transcendental things, leading to the expression of affirmation while denial is used. Therefore, the transcending "skill" that enables oneness with Dao is what is commended in the *Zhuangzi*. We will call this skill "Zhuangzi's skill"¹² to distinguish it from ordinary skills and arts.

4. The First Stage of Obtaining the Dao through "Zhuangzi's Skill"

What is the essential difference between "Zhuangzi's skill" and the other techniques described in the *Zhuangzi*? In the following two sections, we will explore the two stages of "oneness with Dao through skill" by examining Zhuangzi's critique of other techniques. The first step is introduced by the criticism of "Machine hearts (機心)":

4.1. First Criticism

In the story of the old man holding a pitcher we brought up earlier, the old man criticized, "I've heard my teacher say, where there are machines (機械), there are bound to be machine worries (機事); where there are machine worries, there are bound to be machine hearts (機心). With a machine heart in your breast, you've spoiled what was pure and sim-

ple (純白), and without the pure and simple, the life of the spirit knows no rest. Where the life of the spirit knows no rest, the Way will cease to buoy you up". (12.11) The critique here progresses from "machines" to "machine worries" and finally to "machine hearts", where "ji (機)" is an adjective that defines "xie (械 tool/machine)", "shi (事 matter/affair)", and "xin (心, mind/heart)". The "xie" in this story corresponds to "well sweep", and the radical of the character "xie" is "mu (木, wood)", indicating that the oldest machine is woodwork, which is consistent with the development of handicraft.

As we said previously, "qiao (巧, skillfulness)" is used to express the skillfulness of an artisan's technical talents in the *Zhuangzi*, where the word "ji (機)" is commonly believed to indicate "skillfulness". It denotes both the finished product's sophistication, the technical subtlety, and the ingenuity of the mind, which correspond to "xie", "shi", and "xin" in this section. In the general view, technology is an instrumental and purposeful activity that is appreciated both for the tools used and for the final output it produces. The character "ji (技)" in the modern Chinese word "ji shu (技术 skill/technology)" has the radical "shou (手, hand)", although in the pre-Qin period, the characters "ji (技)" and "ji (伎)" were used interchangeably. The radical "ren (人, human)" in the character "ji (伎)" implies that the character emphasizes human subjectivity in technology, whereas the radical "shou (手)" in the character "ji (技)" implies that the character emphasizes the operative, instrumental nature of technology. According to Aristotle, "The hand is not to be looked on as one organ but as many; for it is, as it were, an instrument for further instruments. This instrument, therefore—the hand of all instruments the most variously serviceable—has been given by nature to man, the animal of all animals the most capable of acquiring the most varied arts (687a2-687a23)" (Aristotle 1984, p. 95). After the pre-Qin period, this usage of the character "ji (伎)" gradually disappeared; as a result, the human being as a subject in technical activities was gradually ignored, and more attention was paid to the efficiency of the use of tools and the quality of the finished product. Just like in the story of the old man with the pitcher, Zi Gong thought that using a pitcher requires "a great deal of energy and produces very little result", and using a well sweep requires "very little effort and produces excellent results". and he said, "I have heard Confucius say that in affairs you aim for what is right, and in undertakings you aim for success. To spend little effort and achieve big results—that is the Way of the sage" (12.11). This kind of behavior and thinking to improve productivity and increase the efficiency of production is called "machine worries" and "machine hearts".

However, the "machine worries" and "machine hearts" in the *Zhuangzi* are metaphors for a wider scope and are by no means just restricted to the craftsman's skills. The character "ji (機)" originally denoted a crossbow arrow launcher, but its meaning was gradually expanded to include many kinds of machinery. According to the *Shuowen*, "The character 'ji' is the component that controls the launch (fa 發)". The character "fa" is described in the *Oracle Dictionary* as "resembling the quivering of a bowstring. Because the bowstring must quiver after firing an arrow, this is used to indicate firing" (Xu 2014, p. 1399). The "ji" in the *Zhuangzi* could be a representation of a bow and arrow being launched out—the act and the mind "moving". The heart is "moved" by external factors and desires, as Laozi noted, "not making a show of what might be desired. Will save them from becoming disgruntled" (Laozi 3).

Zhuangzi consistently stressed the significance of the heart-mind in the process of obtaining the Dao, but he paid less attention to the care of the body. Although the care of the body is also mentioned in individual chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, "So it is said, If the body is made to labor and take no rest, it will wear out; if the spiritual essence is taxed without cessation, it will grow weary, and weariness will bring exhaustion" (15.3). In "Mastering Life", "He who is good at nourishing life is like a herder of sheep—he watches for stragglers and whips them up" (19.5). However, overall, Zhuangzi thinks that taking care of the mind is more crucial than taking care of the body, so it is challenging for those who only take care of the body to obtain the Dao.

Zhuangzi's comments on obtaining the Dao are spread throughout the book, from imputed words (寓言) to repeated words (重言) and goblet words (卮言). There are both positive statements exploring how to obtain the Dao and negative remarks describing the manifestations of not having obtained the Dao. The first stage to obtaining the Dao, throughout the *Zhuangzi*, is to maintain a calm state of mind in the chaos and confusion of life and death, which is "*yin ning* (櫻寧)". To do so, you must first eliminate all mental distractions, which Laozi referred to as "one loses and again loses" (Laozi 48).

Many of Zhuangzi's fables depict the path to achieve oneness with the Dao, such as the path of "sitting in forgetfulness" mentioned in the conversation between Confucius and Yan Hui (顏回): Forget benevolence and righteousness, forget rites and music, smash up limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make oneself identical with the Great Thoroughfare (6.9). "Sitting in forgetfulness" requires "forgetting, smashing up, driving out, casting off, and doing away", all of which signify removal. Another example is the path pointed out in the conversation between Nanbo Ziqui and the Woman Crookback: put the world outside, put things outside, put life outside, achieve the brightness of dawn, see own aloneness, away with past and present, enter where there is no life and no death, Peace-in-Strife (櫻寧) (6.4). To put something outside also means to remove or lose it. The third example is the path pointed out by the conversation between the Yellow Emperor and Master Guang Cheng: The eye does not see, the ear does not hear, the mind does not know, the spirit protects the body, to the source of the Perfect Yang, to the source of the Perfect Yin, guards unity, and abides in harmony (11.3). In the first half of the path, the most important concept is "do not (*wu* 無)", as Duan Yucai 段玉裁 notes: "All things are from more to less to nothing" (Duan 2013, p. 640). Zhuangzi employed a variety of words, all of which have the meanings of subtracting, removing, forgetting, and losing. Everything that Zhuangzi can conceive of, including "the world", all "external objects", social conventions, morality, fame, knowledge, and even his own body and intellect, are among the things to be removed. According to "Free and Easy Wandering", there are three most important things to forget: "the Perfect Man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit; the Sage has no fame" (1.1). There must be a transition from "having" to "not having" before someone is considered to have got the Dao; they do not instantly have no self, no merit, or no fame. It is preferable to declare that one has got the Dao if he has no self, no merit, and no fame rather than saying that the Perfect Man has no self, the Holy Man has no merit, and the Sage has no fame.

4.2. *One Loses and Loses again until the Spirit Is Empty and Waits for All Things* (損之又損，虛而待物)

In the process of "losing and again losing", "Zhuangzi's skill" assists the practitioner in concentrating on one thing and rejecting the influence of other things on the mind.

For example, in Zhuangzi's skill stories, Butcher Ding said, "When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself" (3.2); Cicada Catcher said, "No matter how huge heaven and earth or how numerous the ten thousand things, I'm aware of nothing but cicada wings. Not wavering, not tipping, not letting any of the other ten thousand things take the place of those cicada wings" (19.3). Buckle Maker said, "From the time I was twenty, I have loved to forge buckles. I never look at other things—if it's not a buckle, I don't bother to examine it" (22.10). This is summed up by Confucius' praise for the Cicada Catcher: "He keeps his will undivided and concentrates his spirit".

We use the story of Woodcarver Qing combined with other fables to illustrate how to concentrate on one thing. Woodcarver Qing said:

When I am going to make a bell stand, I never let it wear out my energy. I always fast in order to still my mind. When I have fasted for three days, I no longer have any thought of congratulations or rewards, of titles or stipends. When I have fasted for five days, I no longer have any thought of praise or blame, of skill or clumsiness. And when I have fasted for seven days, I am so still that I forget I have four limbs and a form and body. (19.10, Watson 2013, p. 152)

First, fasting and meditation prevent the mind from being impacted by the outside world. In “Tian Zifang”, Lie Yukou (列禦寇) demonstrated archery for Bohun Wuren (伯昏無人) and shot very well on flat ground, and Bohun Wuren commented: “This is the archery of an archer, not the archery of a nonarcher!” Accordingly, they proceeded to climb a high mountain, scrambling over the steep rocks to the brink of an eight-hundred-foot chasm. Lie Yukou cowered on the ground, sweat pouring down all the way to his heels. Bohun Wuren said, “The Perfect Man may stare at the blue heavens above, dive into the Yellow Springs below, ramble to the end of the eight directions, yet his spirit and bearing undergo no change” (21.9). “Zhuangzi’s skill” is exactly this kind of “the archery of a nonarcher”, and Lie Yukou did not master it. Instead, he served as a poor comparison to the Perfect Man, who is unaffected by his surroundings.

Second, fasting for three days prevents the mind from being influenced by fortune. In the Ferryman story, Confucius said, “When you’re betting for tiles in an archery contest, you shoot with skill. When you’re betting for fancy belt buckles, you worry about your aim. And when you’re betting for real gold, you’re a nervous wreck. Your skill is the same in all three cases—but because one prize means more to you than another, you let outside considerations weigh on your mind. He who looks too hard at the outside gets clumsy on the inside” (19.4). The *Huai Nan Zi* (淮南子) also uses the story as a source for commentary, stating that “he who pursues wild beasts will not see Tarzan (Mount Tai), and yearning for external objects will obscure the light” (He 1998, p. 1178).

Third, fasting for five days prevents the mind from being influenced by fame. At this point in the story of the old man with a pitcher, Confucius and the old man are compared, with Confucius being regarded as “plucking the strings and singing sad songs all by yourself in hopes of buying fame in the world”, and the old man as a “man of true brightness and purity who can enter into simplicity, who can return to the primitive through inaction, give body to his inborn nature, and embrace his spirit” (12.11).

Finally, fasting for seven days prevents the mind from being influenced by the body. As it is said by the Cicada Catcher, “I hold my body like a stiff tree trunk and use my arm like an old dry limb”, when he captures cicadas. This is also what Laozi said: “The reason we have grave anxieties is because we are embodied persons. If we were not such persons, what anxieties would we have” (Laozi 13)? Hunger, pain, and comfort all originate in the physical body; therefore, Zhuangzi taught that “the body is like a withered tree”, entirely forgetting the body, leading to a state of quiet and immobility devoid of vitality. And controlling the body with “*shen* (神 spirit)” so that it is operating in an unconscious state is another example of forgetting the body.

When an artist dedicates themselves to their work, they are in a state of concentration similar to that of “Zhuangzi’s skill”. According to Xu Fuguan, “Zhuangzi’s pursuit of the Dao is essentially the same as the highest artistic spirit displayed by an artist” (Xu 2010, p. 32). Although they appear to be similar, they should never be confused. Art is the expression of emotion; as R. G. Collingwood said, “Nothing could be more entirely commonplace than to say he (the artist) expresses them (emotion). The idea is familiar to every artist and to everyone else who has any acquaintance with the arts” (Collingwood 1938, p. 109). And as Susanne K. Langer said, “Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling” (Langer 1953, p. 40). The practitioner of “Zhuangzi’s skill,” on the other hand, has nothing in his heart. Some may wonder how it is possible to have nothing in one’s heart: Is it not true that Butcher Ding concentrates on oxen, Cicada Catcher focuses on cicadas, and Buckle Maker focuses on buckles? There are two levels to this topic. First, Cicada Catcher, Buckle Maker, and others are not truly obtaining the Dao, as evidenced in the Buckle Maker story: “Using this method of deliberately not using other things, he was able, over the years, to get some use out of it. And how much greater would a man be if, by the same method, he reached the point where there was nothing that he did not use” (22.10)! The majority of the *Zhuangzi* is allegory, which is used to demonstrate great truths through everyday stories. Second, persons like Butcher Ding and Woodcarver Qing appear to be focused on the ox and the bell stand, but they are actually focused on their own

spiritual nature and the natural patterns, namely, “matching up ‘Heaven’ with ‘Heaven’”, which is what we shall discuss later.

The state of “*xu* (虛 vacuity/emptiness)” is attained only when all outside influences have been forgotten and removed. “*Xu*” is an important concept in Daoist philosophy; according to the *Shuowen*, “*Xu* is the large *qiu* (丘)”. The character “*qiu*” is commonly translated as hill, but according to its etymology, it has two meanings: The first one is the valley, the *Shuowen*: “*qiu* is high on all sides and low in the center”, Duan Yucai 段玉裁 notes: “*Xu* is the large valley; because it is large, it will appear to be empty. As a result, the extended meaning is emptiness” (Duan 2013, p. 390). Laozi likes to use “valley” as a metaphor for “*xu*” since the valley is empty, such as “so vast and vacant, like a mountain gorge” (*Laozi* 15), and “the highest character seems like a deep gorge” (*Laozi* 41). Therefore, the idiom “a mind as open as a valley” came to be. The second one is the cave on the top of the mountain. The oracle bone of “*qiu*” has a form similar to a cave’s entrance and exit. The majority of people in the Shang Dynasty lived in caves, and since these caverns were typically constructed in high, dry locations with high entry and exit holes, these areas of place were known as “*qiu*” (Xu 2014, p. 924). “*Qiu*” denotes the building in which a person resides, and in the *Zhuangzi*, the metaphor of a person’s residence as a mental space is frequently used, such as “brightness is born of the empty chamber (虛室生白)”, “the storehouse of spirit (靈府)”, “spirit tower (靈台)”, etc., and the terms “chamber”, “storehouse”, and “tower” all refer to buildings with specific restrictions. Laozi says, “We bore out doors and windows to make a dwelling, but the utility of the dwelling is a function of the nothingness inside it” (*Laozi* 11). Therefore, whether it is a valley or a building, the focus is on accentuating the emptiness of space, and it is because of this emptiness that various possibilities emerge. “Infinite” possibilities exist. As Guo Xiang 郭象 said, “You become one with change and are able to wander anywhere since you are unable to see your own body or recognize the outside world” (Guo 1961, p. 285). And as Lizhi 李贄 said, “To forget all is to understand all” (Niu 2010, p. 213).

The Daoist term “*xu*” does not just mean that there is nothing in the mind, but that nothing will stay in the mind, and the mind will not be captivated by anything. The *Zhuangzi* uses the term “forgetting” more frequently because “losing and again losing” is not a mechanical severance or total elimination, and forgetting does not mean non-existence. As Zhuangzi said, “You forget your feet when the shoes are comfortable. You forget your waist when the belt is comfortable. Understanding forgets right and wrong when the mind is comfortable.... You begin with what is comfortable and never experience what is uncomfortable when you know the comfort of forgetting what is comfortable” (19.12). Daoists sometimes use the metaphor of a “mirror” to describe the state of “*xu*”, for example, in “Fit for Emperors and Kings”: “The Perfect Man uses his mind like a mirror—going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing” (7.6), and in “The Way of Heaven”: “The sage’s mind in stillness is the mirror of heaven and earth, the glass of the ten thousand things” (13.1). Therefore, the process of removing externals, “losing and again losing”, is the process of “scrubbing and cleansing your profound mirror (滌除玄覽)” (*Laozi* 10), and when the mirror of the mind is cleansed, everything that was in the mirror comes and goes but does not stay there.

The first stage of “oneness with Dao through skill” is essentially the same as the description of Zhuangzi’s “fasting of the mind”: “Make your will one! Don’t listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don’t listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits for all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness (*xu*) is the fasting of the mind” (4.1). “Don’t listen with your ears” refers to not being influenced by external sensory information; “don’t listen with your mind” refers to not being influenced by inner wants, and “listen with your spirit” refers to the state of “*xu*” attained by following one’s intuition after eliminating all influences.

5. The Second Stage of Obtaining the Dao through “Zhuangzi’s Skill”

The second step of “oneness with Dao through skill” is introduced by the criticism of “the unwrought substance was blighted in order to fashion implements (殘樸以為器)”:

5.1. Second Criticism

Another point of Zhuangzi’s critique of ordinary skills is that “the unwrought substance was blighted in order to fashion implements—this was the crime of the artisan” (9.1). “*pu* (樸 simplicity/plainness)”, the *Shuowen* defines it as “unprocessed wood”, Wang Chong 王充 said, “That which has not been cut off by a sword or axe is called ‘*pu*’” (Huang 1990, p. 550). In Daoist philosophy, the opposite of “*pu*” is “*qi* (器)”, “*Qi*” is a substance that has already been processed, according to Laozi, who also remarked, “When unworked wood is split, it is made into utensils (樸散則為器)”. A close synonym for “*pu*” is “*su* (素)”. The original meaning of “*su*” is the undyed silk fabrics; Zhuangzi notes, “Whiteness (素) means there is nothing mixed in”, and according to Laozi, “Display a genuineness like raw silk (素) and embrace a simplicity like unworked wood (見素抱樸)”. Another close synonym is “baby (嬰兒)”, and Laozi mentioned the two together: “Not losing your real potency, you return to the state of the newborn babe”. “And with ample potency, you return to the state of unworked wood” (Laozi 28). Unworked wood, raw silk, and baby refer to things as they are in their original and natural state. “*Pu*” also has a close synonym, “*zhen* (真 real/true)”, which also refers to the original inherent nature. Daoists frequently use the phrase “Back to Simplicity, Return to Perfection (返璞歸真)”.

To say that “the unwrought substance was blighted in order to fashion implements” is to change something’s fundamental nature. The opening chapter of “Horses’ Hoofs” explores this topic:

The potter says, “I’m good at handling clay! To round it, I apply the compass; to square it, I apply the T square”. The carpenter says, “I’m good at handling wood! To arc it, I apply the curve; to make it straight, I apply the plumb line”. But as far as inborn nature is concerned, the clay and the wood surely have no wish to be subjected to compass and square, curve and plumb line. Yet generation after generation sings out in praise, saying, “Bo Luo (伯樂) is good at handling horses! The potter and the carpenter are good at handling clay and wood!” (9.1, Watson 2013, p. 65)

According to Zhuangzi, this is the “crime of the artisan”, since people alter objects’ nature to suit their own needs and desires. But, in this case, we must ask, did Butcher Ding butchering an ox not change the nature of matter? Is it because Butcher Ding was so skilled that the ox died painlessly, and even the ox itself was unaware of its own death, that this is why he was praised? Or are life and death part of the nature of living things? Daoism’s tradition is to appreciate life. Zhuangzi believes that the tortoise “would rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud” (17.5), and the Invocator of the Ancestors believes that the pig “would be better to eat chaff and bran and stay right there in the pen” (19.6), all of which can be seen in Zhuangzi’s emphasis on life, and thus Butcher Ding’s cutting up of the ox is actually a mutilation of the ox. Another criticism is that “if the plain unwrought substance had not been blighted, how would there be any sacrificial goblets” (9.1)? Woodcarver Qing’s bell stands, and sacrificial goblets are all made of wood; is there any difference between the two? One could argue that Woodcarver Qing carefully chose the tree in the mountain forest from which he made the bell stand since it was naturally shaped like a bell stand and was unique. The idea that the tree is the shape of the bell stand, however, is purely from a human point of view and does not follow the nature of truth. The bell stand is a product of humans, not nature. Therefore, when Zhuangzi said, “The unwrought substance was blighted in order to fashion implements”, the “unwrought substance (*pu*)” never refers to anything external but rather an allegorical metaphor for one’s own nature. This is also evident in the use of the character “*pu* (樸)”, whose basic meaning is unprocessed wood, and when we refer to the tree as “wood”, we have already denied the tree’s independence and regard it as an object that can be handled by humans.

Ordinary skills are criticized by Zhuangzi because they cause people to harm their own nature. This is not a craft-specific crime, Zhuangzi just used artisans as an example for criticizing “*you wei* (有為)”. There are two aspects to express the harm these skills cause to human nature: The first is physical injury. Whether it is craftsmanship or art, the attention is on the work, which is external to the individual who is doing it; many artisans and artists even give their lives to produce the final product, and this type of life-threatening activity is highly criticized by the Daoists. The second is mental harm, which is referred to as “machine hearts” above.

5.2. Carving and Polishing, and Returning to Plainness; Training the Spiritual Nature, and Re-Turning to De (雕琢復樸，性修反德)

The opposite of “the unwrought substance (*pu*) was blighted in order to fashion implements” is “carving and polishing are done, return to plainness (既雕既琢，復歸於樸)” (20.3). This is the core of Daoist cultivation, that is, what Laozi called “returning to the state of the newborn babe” (Laozi 28), and Zhuangzi called “going back to true form” (6.6), “reverting to the true form of their inborn nature or returning once more to the Beginning” (16.2). “Carving and polishing are done” corresponds to the stage of “losing and again losing”, and the words “carving” and “polishing” refer to the carving of jade, which also has the connotation of removal. “Returning to plainness (*pu*)”, after all the things that disturb the mind have ceased to exist, the spiritual nature is revealed, that is, “brightness (白) is born of the empty chamber”. As previously said, the “machine heart” will lead to “pure and simple are spoiled (純白不備)”, so “*bai* (白 white/brightness/simple)” is similar in meaning to “*pu*” and “*su*”, and in this context it also refers to purity of spiritual nature.

After “returning to plainness”, we enter the second stage of “training the spiritual nature and returning to De” (12.8), also known in the story of the old man with the pitcher as: “A man of true brightness and purity who can enter into simplicity, who can return to the primitive through inaction, give body to his inborn nature, and embrace his spirit”. After “returning to De”, and then “De at its highest peak is identical with the Beginning (德至同於初)” (12.8). The term “Beginning” refers to the “Dao”, which is “*yi shi*” referenced in the first section of the article. Being “one with the beginning” signifies being one with the Dao or having obtained the Dao.

Here is a brief discernment of a few relevant concepts to better explore this subject and show the path to obtaining the Dao that follows. Zheng Kai 鄭開 points out that “the concepts of what is later referred to as “*xing* (性, spiritual nature)” are equivalent to the “De (德)”, “*ming* (命)”, “*pu* (樸)”, and “*su* (素)”, “*chi zi* (赤子 infancy)”, and “*ying er* (嬰兒 babe)” of the Laozi, and “De”, “*zhen* (真)”, and “inborn nature and fate (性命之情)” of the Zhuangzi” (Zheng 2003, p. 84). “*pu*”, “*su*”, “*chi zi*”, and “*ying er*” are all used metaphorically; “*ming*” and “*zhen*” have multiple meanings in Daoism, and spiritual nature is not the most commonly used meaning. Therefore, “De”, “*xing*”, and “*li*” are the three fundamental ideas.

De is “the inner foundation for the growth of all things” (Zhang 1989, p. 154) and is the manifestation of Dao in things. *Dao De Jing* is another name for Laozi. The “De” and “Dao” sections of Laozi are both present in versions A and B that were unearthed at the Mawangdui Han Tomb (馬王堆漢墓). The Laozi frequently pair the words “De” and “Dao” together since they are the next closest concepts. According to Zheng Kai 鄭開, “When the glyphs and meanings of the characters ‘Dao’ and ‘De’ are analyzed, both have the meaning of ‘walking’ since the radical of the character ‘De’ is ‘彳’, and the character ‘Dao’ usually found in Bamboo Slips and Silk is also written as ‘one who walks’” (Zheng 2018, p. 375). The radical of the character Dao is 𢀿 (𢀿), which is made up of two parts, “彳” and “止 (toe)”. The radical of the character De is also “彳”, which means to walk in small steps, so both characters are related to walking. Another argument is that the character “德” is also written as “惇”, and the radical of “惇” is heart, which is the key to obtaining the Dao and serving as a bridge between the transcendent world and the empirical world. The *Shuowen*: “De is rising”, and unity with the Dao gives an image of rising.

Xing (性 spiritual nature), according to Zhuangzi, “The in-born nature is the substance of life” (23.9), and the characters “*xing*” and “*sheng* (生 life/birth)” share the same origin. According to most scholars, “*sheng*” in the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* refers to “*xing*”, as is the case with “*sheng*” in “The Secret of Caring for Life (養生主)”, which is typically understood as “*xing*”. The heart (心) and the life (*sheng* 生) make up the two components of the character “*xing* (性)”. The heart is an organ that only humans possess, much as “*xing*” is a concept that only humans possess, and terms like “*wu xing* (物性 nature of the substance)” are used metaphorically.

Li (理 natural patterns), the *Shuowen*: “*Li* is Jade Processing”. According to Zhu Junsheng 朱駿聲, “*li* is to dissect jade by following its texture” (Zhu 2016, p. 192). As in the *Kangxi Dictionary* (康熙字典), “the texture of substance is most apparent and dense in jade” (Zhang 2002, p. 685), hence the radical of *li* is jade. As a result, the meaning of the reason for things can be deduced from the texture of jade. As Han Fei Zi (韓非子) once remarked, “*Li* is the reason why things can be things” (Wang 1998, p. 146). Since jade is the radical of the character *li*, *li* is typically used to refer to substances.

Therefore, *De* is not only the general name of spiritual nature (*xing*) and natural patterns (*li*), but also the superior concept of these two. Awareness of *De*, or the rule of all things, is one of the most important steps toward obtaining the Dao. Laozi once said: “Returning to the propensity of things is eternal law; using eternal law is acuity (複命曰常, 知常曰明)” (Laozi 16).¹³ “Returning to the propensity of things” means “returning to plainness”, “*chang* (常)” denotes the eternal law governing the movement and change of everything, and “using eternal law” can ultimately be joined with the Dao. According to Zhuangzi, “He who understands the Way is certain to have command of basic principles” (17.1). Since the Perfect Man is someone who comprehends the principles of all things, attaining this understanding puts one closer to the Dao.

Having understood the basic concepts, let us move on to the second stage of obtaining the Dao: how can we “train the spiritual nature and return to *De*”? Woodcarver Qing remarked that he intended to “match up ‘Heaven’ with ‘Heaven’ (以天合天)”, which Wang Xianqian 王先謙 read as “use my ‘Heaven’ to meet the ‘Heaven’ of wood” (Wang 2012, p. 164), that is to say, to use my spiritual nature to match the natural patterns of matters.

A practice that can serve as a guide for the second stage of obtaining the Dao is also provided by the story of “Zhuangzi’s skill”.

First of all, it is simpler to understand the natural patterns because “Zhuangzi’s skill” calls for concentration. Those who have mastered the skill have a better grasp of natural patterns than other people. What distinguishes Butcher Ding, Woodcarver Qing, and the typical skilled individual from each other, as was previously discussed? From the perspective of “the unwrought substance was blighted in order to fashion implements”, everything they do also involves altering the thing. The other artisans primarily engage in mechanical and repetitive work, and the products they produce are basically the same, but Butcher Ding and the others adhere to the laws of nature in order to perform their skills. For example, Butcher Ding is “going along with the natural makeup and following things as they are”; Woodcarver Qing “examines the heavenly nature of the trees”; and the Swimmer at Lü-liang is “following along the way the water goes and never thinking about myself”. Therefore, Butcher Ding and the others will adjust their skills according to the various oxen, trees, and currents. Chen yun 陳贇 had this to say about Butcher Ding: “It is because his mind is simple, pure, and unadulterated, and what he sees, hears, feels, thinks, and does all centers around the cow, that he is able to experience all things and all things from the single event of cutting up the ox, which is the One that is all and all that is One, and which can only be experienced by the purest of people. This is also, in a sense, becoming one with Dao” (Chen 2016, p. 110).

Secondly, the realization of “Zhuangzi’s skill” should be “losing and again losing”, so that it is easier to clarify one’s own spiritual nature. The expert ordinary artisans may also be aware of the natural patterns, but the difference between people like Butcher Ding and the skilled ordinary artisans is that they recognize the natural patterns while also becoming

clear about their own spiritual nature in the process, ensuring that what they do does not harm themselves. Lord Wenhui praised the Butcher Ding and said, “Excellent! I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life” (3.2)! Many scholars believe that Butcher Ding’s ease in cutting up oxen indicates the spirit of nurturing life, but in fact, his knife symbolizes his spiritual nature. As Butcher Ding said, “A good cook changes his knife once a year—because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month—because he hacks. I’ve had this knife of mine for nineteen years, and I’ve cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone” (3.2). Ordinary people, since they do not comprehend the natural patterns in everything, gradually mutilate their spiritual nature and the natural laws by cutting and polishing each other. Butcher Ding’s spiritual nature and natural patterns meet and merge with the purer. “The blade as though it had just come from the grindstone”—is this not “returning to the state of the newborn babe”? “Spiritual nature” and “natural patterns” influence and promote each other and ultimately achieve “matching up ‘Heaven’ with ‘Heaven’”.

Finally, the realization of “Zhuangzi’s skill” is not by the body and heart-mind but by *shen* (神 spirit). Butcher Ding said, “Now-now I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop, and spirit moves where it wants” (3.2). At this point, they follow their inclinations, and it is no longer reason that controls their behavior, actions, and thoughts, but spirit. The oracle bone character for “*xin* (心)” resembles the outline of a human heart, which was considered by the ancients to be an organ for the formation of thoughts, ideas, feelings, etc., and the corresponding terms in the *Zhuangzi* are generally “prejudice heart (成心)” and “machine heart”. The radical of the character “*shen*” is “示”, and most characters with “示” as a radical are connected to rituals, ghosts, and gods; the oracle bone shape of “示” stands in for the earth spirit, and “*shen*” is frequently paired with “*gui* (鬼 ghost)” in the *Zhuangzi*, which signifies the deity. Zhuangzi also used *shen* to denote a spiritual realm beyond reason and emotion, which can be an intuition that is difficult to grasp or an epiphany that is inexplicable. “Since this state of consciousness and spiritual realm can be thought of and named by no one, the Daoist description of it is also vague, hinting at it with the elusive ‘*shen*’” (Zheng 2003, p. 84). According to Lee Yearley, “Skill’s distinguishing marks reflect the highest kind of spiritual state: for example, it taps into powers beyond the ordinary; generates a self-validating state; responds instantaneously to even slight shifts in circumstances; and attains as well as works from a kind of fundamental equilibrium” (Yearley 2005, p. 527). The critique in the story of the old man with the pitcher said: “With a machine heart in your breast, you’ve spoiled what was pure and simple, and without the pure and simple, the life of the spirit knows no rest. Where the life of the spirit knows no rest, the Way will cease to buoy you up” (12.11). Here, it is explained in the form of negation. If we put it in the other way, that is, if the mind is free of external objects, the pure and clear nature of the mind will be revealed, the *shen* will naturally appear, and ultimately we will obtain the Dao, which is what is referred to in the “Constrained in Will” as “The way to purity and whiteness is to guard the spirit, this alone; guard it and never lose it, and you will become one with spirit, one with its pure essence, which communicates and mingles with the Heavenly Order” (15.3).

6. Conclusions

Skill is something that everyone can learn and master through books, teachings, or even seeing and hearing. In the *Zhuangzi*, the implicit “oneness with Dao through skill” way to obtain the Dao is consistent with, but more explicit than, the traditional routes of “sitting in forgetfulness” and “fasting of the mind”. It is evident from the comparison of “Zhuangzi’s skill” with common skills, arts, and life-nourishing techniques that any skill can lead to the Dao, and even the degree of skill has no effect on this process. Although Butcher Ding, Cicada Catcher, Woodcarver Qing, Wheelwright Bian, and others mentioned in the *Zhuangzi* are all very accomplished, mastery of a skill is not a prerequisite for obtaining the Dao. There is a legend in the Buddhist scriptures about a lama, a living

Buddha, who once passed by a village and noticed the five-color auspicious light, which indicates that there is a person who has attained the Dao here. The lama came to take a look but found a poor old woman who was illiterate and could only recite a sentence from “Namo Amitabha”, who said she knew nothing about the Dharma. The lama heard the old woman’s chanting and realized that the pronunciation was incorrect. He corrected the old woman, and when she recited it correctly, the auspicious light vanished; this is because the old woman was chanting through her heart-mind, and when the heart-mind is doubtful and unsettled, it loses its effect. Although “Zhuangzi’s skill” is about obtaining the Dao through various skills, the heart-mind is always emphasized over skills. Nothing can be found in the heart-mind after “losing and losing again” and ultimately arriving at the state of “*xu* (虛)”. The heart is like a mirror right now because it sees all things, but all things are not in it. Then, matches up “Heaven” with “Heaven”, and lastly trains the spiritual essence to return to De, from De into the Dao, making oneself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. The question of how to attain Dao remains inherently unanswerable due to its ineffability, as previously elucidated. While the realm of “losing and again losing” can still be glimpsed and the realm of “training the spiritual nature and returning to De” only depends on one’s own enlightenment, it is undeniable that the path leading to “oneness with Dao through skill” can make it easier for people to find a starting point.

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Notes

- ¹ There are many scholars who hold this notion, and it is impossible to list them all. Influential works such as Lu (2001), Wang (2009) and Wang and Jin (2009).
- ² Influential works such as Li and Liu (1999) and Xu (2010). There are also many scholars who hold different opinions on this issue, for example: Chen (2017). But aesthetics are not our focus in this article.
- ³ Influential works such as Yearley (2005), Fraser (2014), Slingerland (2014) and D’Ambrosio (2020).
- ⁴ Influential works such as Perkins (2019) and Chong (2019).
- ⁵ All the Zhuangzi texts and the title of the chapter in this article are cited in Burton Watson’s translation of *The Complete works of Zhuangzi* (2013). I add (Dao) after “the Way” for prompting because he translated all of “道” into “the Way”, which I believe is not accurate enough. The division of paragraphs in each chapter in the Zhuangzi adopts Chen Guying 陳鼓應’s division (Chen [1983] 2009), and the following quotations only indicate chapters and paragraphs.
- ⁶ All the Laozi texts in this thesis are cited in Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall’s translation of *Daodejing: Making This Life Significant* (Ames and Hall 2003).
- ⁷ The term “Zhuangzi” refers only to the author(s) of the text *Zhuangzi*, and the same applies to “Laozi”.
- ⁸ *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (說文解字) will be shortened to Shuowen in the text.
- ⁹ Culture was primarily transmitted orally from antiquity to the pre-Qin period, and in order to ensure accuracy of transmission, unique tones were frequently used to facilitate memorizing.
- ¹⁰ The version of Watson uses “wisdom”, but the Chinese version uses “skill and expertise”.
- ¹¹ Although the Chinese character “*pao* 庖” is frequently translated as “cook”, its original meaning was actually “slaughter livestock”.
- ¹² Many scholars have pointed out this technique in the *Zhuangzi*, and some scholars have called it “divine skill (*shen ji* 神技)” and “great dexterity (*da qiao* 大巧)”.
- ¹³ I do not think Ames and Hall’s translation of “*chang* (常)” as common sense is very relevant, so I’ve changed it to eternal law.

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