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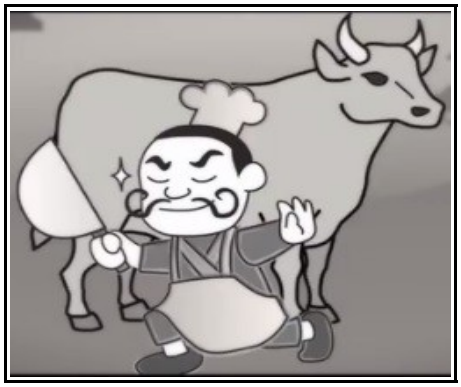
7.9 Zhuangzi's advice: skill transcendence

In this section we'll look at Zhuangzi's third piece of advice, which we describe as “skill transcendence”.

“Skill transcendence” is about developing a skill to the point where is seems easy, effortless, and you perform with a sense of tranquillity and oneness with the activity. Zhuangzi gives us a number of examples – a peerless wheelwright, a perfectionist musician, even a debator (he uses Hui Shi as an example). His most famous and detailed example, though, is that of a **butcher**.

Butcher Ding

庖丁為文惠君解牛，手之所觸，肩之所倚，足之所履，膝之所踦，砉然嚮然，奏刀騞然，莫不中音。合於《桑林》之舞，乃中《經首》之會。文惠君曰：「譆！善 哉！技蓋至此乎？」庖丁釋刀對曰：「臣之所好者道也，進乎技矣。始臣之解牛之時，所見无非牛者。三年之後，未嘗見全牛也。方今之時，臣以神遇，而不以目 視，官知止而神欲行。依乎天理，批大郤，導大窾，因其固然。技經肯綮之未嘗，而況大軱乎！良庖歲更刀，割也；族庖月更刀，折也。今臣之刀十九年矣，所解數 千牛矣，而刀刃若新發於硎。彼節者有間，而刀刃者无厚，以无厚入有間，恢恢乎其於遊刃必有餘地矣，是以十九年而刀刃若新發於硎。雖然，每至於族，吾見其難 為，怵然為戒，視為止，行為遲。動刀甚微，謋然已解，如土委地。提刀而立，為之四顧，為之躊躇滿志，善刀而藏之。」文惠君曰：「善哉！吾聞庖丁之言，得養 生焉。」(Zhuangzi, Chapter 3: 2.)



Here Zhuangzi tells the story of butcher Ding who is cutting up an ox for his lord. His hands, his shoulder, his knee, his body, everything moves in **balance** and even the sounds of his cleaver are **harmonious like a ceremonial dance.** The ox seems to be caught up in the dance as the flesh falls away.

His lord, rapt watching, sighs and says, **“Ah, amazing that skill can reach such elegance!”**

And the butcher replies, **“What I cherish is a *dào*; it transcends skill.”**

So what does it mean to “transcend skill”?

The cooks explains that when he began, he a whole ox. Then, after three years, he no longer “saw it” as a whole. Now his guides with intellect, not his eyes, shuts down senses and lets his intellect play within the wide lanes between the parts guiding the knife through crevices that are natural in it. It seems to take no skill to flow down an open path inherent in the structure of the activity. Skill seems unnecessary when **following an open path**.

The butcher goes on, “Good butchers change their knife yearly—they chop. Ordinary change theirs monthly—they hack. I've used this knife nineteen years and it's as if fresh from the grind-stone.” ...“Knives edges haves no thickness and each joint leaves empty space...there's plenty of room to play.”

Zhuangzi's insight is that such natural paths guide every activity and we can learn them. When you acquire an ability it feels like the **path** “opening for you” rather than **you pushing**. You sense a unity with the activity; you **lose yourself--**lose ego focus. The butcher expresses his **tranquillity** and **satisfaction** at the end of his task. This unity with an activity's *dào* and the satisfaction in practice transcends any skill or pursuit. Usually associated with dancers or poets, Zhuangzi credits even a lowly butcher with skill-transcendence.