7.10 Conflict in Zhuangzi's advice

So we've just discussed three pieces of advice from Zhuangzi:

#1 Stay young at heart: remain open-minded.

#2 Use conventions for the benefits of cooperation.

#3 Identify with a *dào* that transcends your life skill.

What are the limits to this advice? And do they conflict with each other in any way?

Limits to skill transcendence.

- It's very common for people to think of the story of butcher Ding **in the context of the traditional conception of Daoism as a monist mysticism** – that Ding has somehow grasped an **absolute Dao** and achieved absolute transcendence, total perfection. **But this seems to conflict with Zhuangzi's relativism and skepticism.** In the text**,** Zhuangzi is keen to emphasize the **limits** of skill, including Butcher Ding's. Ding goes on to explain that he still comes to "hard places;" the flow of activity stops; he has to focus, reflect and call on all his training. Then he gets a breakthrough, finds the path for his knife and experiences the satisfaction of excellence. Zhuangzi's repeated slogan is: **there is no skill without defect.**

- For similar reasons, t**here is no single person transcendently good at all the different life skills**. The wheelwright is is not good at training his son in his craft. We have grounds to think that butcher Ding would be good at debating, playing a zither, pottery, or any other dao of life. The **secret of caring for life** is how much depth of meaning can be pursued through all of natures *dàos.*

- **Becoming an expert at something doesn't necessarily make that activity a good thing to do.** When Zen later takes from Zhuangzi this attention to skill and focus and flow, the activities are not only those of tea ceremonies, but also activities such as the samurai beheading peasants. So a choice still has to be made about what kind of activities one will learn to do: expertise doesn't take away that necessity of choice.

Tension between skill transcendence and remaining open-minded.

- Skill transcendence doesn't seem compatible with being open to all different ways of living. **If you attempt to be jack of all trades, you are likely to be master of none.** It takes time to develop the kind of skill that allows butcher Ding to slice up his ox, and so it seems there is going to have to be a trade-off between skill transcendence and being open-minded. The whole chapter begins with the admonition "my life is limited; knowledge is unlimited."

Tension between skill transcendence and the acceptance of conventions

- **There is also a tension between developing a skill and accepting conventional ways of doing things.** If you accept the conventional way of butchering, it will be a useful and transferable skill, but you're unlikely to become the outstanding Butcher Ding. It also seems to conflict with open-minded tolerance and curiosity about other possible ways of life. Finding ways of getting along, of adhering to convention where possible, is still good advice, but it signals that we cannot completely follow all three bits of advice at once.