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7.8 Zhuangzi's advice: open-mindedness and the value of convention

Despite Zhuangzi's skepticism, he does seem to offer us some advice.

1. Remain young at heart.

Zhuangzi introduces this idea when talking about Mencius. As the heart 成 **chéng** (grows), it picks up 是 **shì** and 非 **fēi**, i.e., it gains more and more commitments to certain set ways of judging, ways of making distinctions, and so on. Then, says Zhuangzi, you go "galloping down the road, like a horse galloping on toward who knows where". And the heart gets more rigid, layered, heavier, and that's the sign of old age and eventual death.
(See Zhuangzi: Chapter 2: 3.)

So the idea is to try and stay as young at heart as you can. **Keep your mind open, keep learning**.

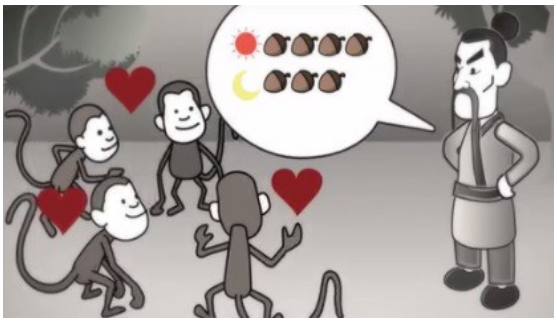
(And yet there is a paradox in this advice too. Because the reason for keeping your heart and mind open is so you can get more of those commitments, and as you do, you will necessarily be moving toward this closing off that comes with old age.)

2. Recognize the value in conventions.

This advice might seem rather surprising, especially if we think of Zhuangzi as a Daoist. But Zhuangzi does seem to approve of "doing the usual". Why? Well, doing the usual is **not always the best way** of doing things. Mozi was right about that. But the advantage of the usual is that it allows for **communication** and promotes **harmony**, and those things are **beneficial**.

Zhuangzi illustrates the value of convention with his story of the monkey keeper.

The story of the monkey keeper



The monkey keeper first proposes to the monkeys:

"Three rations in the morning; four in the evening."

And the monkeys are unhappy. "No!" they call.

So the keeper says:

"Okay, how about four rations in the morning; three in the evening?"

And the monkeys are perfectly happy.

Now, from the monkey keeper's point of view, there is no difference in what he offered the monkeys. But they are happy with the second proposal and not with the first proposal. Zhuangzi points out that the monkey keeper can, with no cost to him, go along with what makes the monkeys happy, even though he neither share's their preference nor sees things the difference they see. Zhuangzi calls this "two (linked) walkings". The idea is that we can walk together, we can **cooperate**, we can live in peace, we can live in **harmony**, **even while we have different points of view**. And that's the value of agreed, common conventions.

3. Practice skill transcendence.

This bit of advice we'll discuss in the next section.