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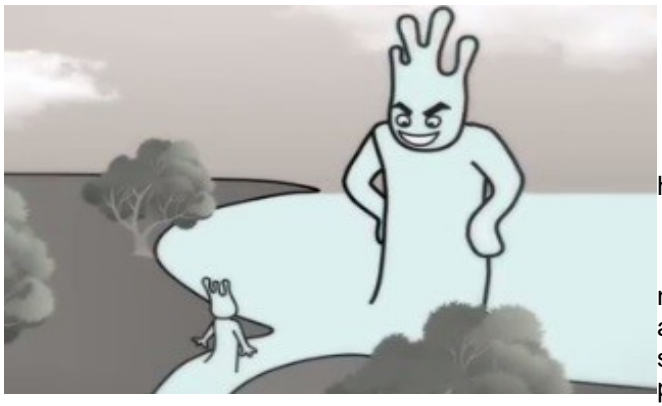
7.7 Dreams and Broadening our Perspectives

As we've seen, the notion of getting perspective is central in Zhuangzi. One of the ways we gain perspective is through sharing insights with others. We thus **continually broaden our views** and understand nature from a wider range of points of view.

The Earl of the river



One of Zhuangzi's parables is that of the **Earl of the river** who thinks of his as a huge, mighty river. Then he flows to the North Sea where he , he suddenly feels very **small and insignificant**.

So the Earl says: "I was deluded before, now having seen you, I feel like I really understand the nature of things, how things really are."

The North Sea Lord agrees: You understand better, now. **Then warns him,** "Don't assume you now have an understanding of the extent of things. The great sea dwarfs the North Sea and itself is but "a little pebble" in the cosmos." (See Zhuangzi Chapter 17.)

We, ourselves, normally judge our knowledge as better after such a broadening insight. But we are sometimes tempted to think of such a perspective change as "viewing reality as it is" rather than from a (now better) perspective. Zhuangzi also uses the metaphor of awakening from a dream to illustrate this point, not, as in Western philosophy, to undermining our knowledge of the world. Zhuangzi uses dreams as an illustration of a gestalt shift in point of view that we quickly realize and endorse as more reliable. **But Zhuangzi notices that we sometimes dream we have just awakened from and can interpret a dream within a dream. There may be still a further awakening.** We can make **progress**, but not guarantee a final absolute resting place. (See Zhuangzi: Chapter 2: 12.)

Is progress inevitable?

Zhuangzi has a couple of stories that suggest that he doesn't think even this limited, modest progress is necessarily always possible.

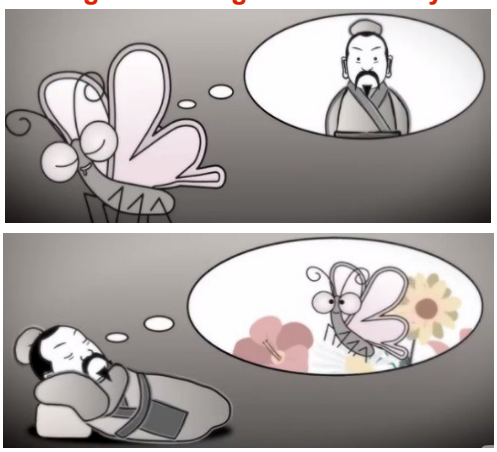
The boy who goes to Han Dan

A boy goes to a city called Han Dan, where they have a very special way of walking. He studies the walk, but he never masters the Han Dan style of walking – and he also loses his own old way of walking. So he stumbles home and **this experiment didn't turn out to be progress for him at all.**

(See Zhuangzi: Chapter 17: 10.)

So it is not necessarily the case that every time you try to learn another's point of view or way of doing things that it will work out to be beneficial for you.

Zhuangzi dreaming he's a butterfly



Zhuangzi's perhaps best known story is the butterfly dream. Zhuangzi dreams he is a happy butterfly, with feelings just as real as can be. Then suddenly he wakes up and he is Zhuangzi. And now he wonders: **Am I a butterfly dreaming I'm Zhuangzi? Or am I Zhuangzi dreaming I'm a butterfly?** Which way should we understand progress?
(See Zhuangzi: Chapter 2: 14.)