Writings of Chuang Tzu  (Somewhere in the writings of Chuang Tzu, an aged Confucius hears a description of sagehood that puzzles him: “The true sage pays no heed to mundane affairs. . . . He adheres, without questioning, to the Tao. Without speaking he can speak; and he can speak and yet say nothing. And so he roams beyond the limits of this dusty world.” Shocked, Confucius sputters, “These are wild words.” Wild they may be, but they are very likely the self-description of Chang Tzu (Zhuangzi; 370-01 B.C.E.), who lived about two hundred years after the author of the Tao Te Ching. Rambunctious, irreverent, paradoxical, and, many say, exceedingly subtle, his writings are the second most important source for philosophical Taoism. Source: Phillip Novak. The World’s Wisdom. Edison, NJ: Castle Books. 1994:164-69, originally from Herbert Giles. Chuang-Tzu: Mystic, Moralist and Social Reformer. London: Bernard Quaritch. 1989.)

a. The Unfathomable Source of Existence

If there was a beginning, then there was a time before that beginning. And a time before the time which was before the time of that beginning.

If there is existence, there must have been non-existence. And if there was a time when nothing existed, then there must have been a time before that – when even nothing did not exist. Suddenly, when nothing came into existence, could one really say whether it belonged to the category of existence or of non-existence? Even the very words I have just now uttered, – I cannot say whether they have really been uttered or not.

b. The Unfathomable Sources of Mind

Joy and anger, sorrow and happiness, caution and remorse, come upon us by turns, with ever-changing mood. They come like music from hollowness, like mushrooms from damp. Daily and nightly they alternate within us, but we cannot tell whence they spring. Can we then hope in a moment to lay our finger upon their very cause?

But for these emotions I should not be. But for me, they would have no scope. So far we can go: but we do not know what it is that brings them into play.

c. The Hidden Unity of Opposites and the Dumb Monkeys

Viewed from the standpoint of Tao, a beam and a pillar are identical. So are ugliness and beauty, greatness, wickedness, perverseness and strangeness. . . . Nothing is subject either to construction or to destruction, for these conditions are brought together into one.

Only the truly intelligent understand this principle of the identity of all things. They do not view things as apprehended by themselves, subjectively; but transfer themselves into the position of the things viewed. . . . So it is that to place oneself in subjective relation to externals, without consciousness of the objectivity – this is Tao. But to wear out one’s intellect is an obstinate adherence to the individuality of things, not recognizing the fact that all things are one – this is called Three in the Morning.
“What is Three in the Morning” asked Tze Yu.

A keeper of monkeys . . . said with regard to their rations of chestnuts that each monkey was to have three in the morning and four at night. But at this the monkeys were very angry, so the keeper said they might have four in the morning and three at night, with which arrangements they were all well pleased.

d. Relativity

The Butterfly: Once upon a time, I, Chuang Tzu, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of the following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awoke, and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man.

Can We Know the Good? If a man sleeps in a damp place, he gets lumbago and dies. But how about a eel? And living up in a tree is precarious and trying to the nerves – but how about monkeys? Of the man, the eel, and the monkey, whose habitat is the right one, absolutely? Human beings feed on flesh, deer on grass, centipedes on snakes, owls and crows on mice. Of these four, whose is the right taste, absolutely? Monkey mates with monkey, the buck with the doe, eels consort with fishes, while men admire Mao Ch’iang and Li Chi, at the sight of whom fishes plunge deep down in the water, birds high in the air, and deer hurry away. Yet who shall say which is the correct standard of beauty? In my opinion, the standard of human virtue, and of positive and negative, is so obscured that it is impossible to actually know it as such.

e. Civilization and the Violation of Instinct

Horses have hoofs to carry them frost and snow; hair, to protect them from wind and cold. They eat grass and drink water. . . . Such is the real nature of horses. Palatial dwellings are of no use to them.

One day Poh Loh appeared, saying, “I understand the management of horses.”

So he branded them, and clipped them, and pared their hoofs, and put halters on them . . . with the result that two or three in every ten died. Then he kept them hungry and thirsty, trotting them and galloping them, and grooming, and trimming . . . until more than half of them were dead. Nevertheless, every age extols Poh Loh for his skills in managing horses. . . .

The People have certain natural instincts – to weave and clothe themselves, to till and feed themselves. These are common to all humanity, and all are agreed thereon. Such instincts are called “Heaven-sent.”
And so in the days when natural instincts prevailed, men moved quietly and grazed steadily. At that time, there were no roads over mountains, not boats, nor bridges over water. . . . You could climb up and peep into the raven’s nest. For then man dwelt with birds and beasts, and all creation was one. There were no distinctions of good and bad men. Being all equally without knowledge, their virtue could not go astray. Being all equally without evil desires, they were in a state of natural integrity, the prefections of human existence.

But when sages appeared, tripping people over charity and fettering (them) with duty to one’s neighbor, doubt found its way into the world. And then with gushing over music and fussing over ceremony, the empire become divided against itself.

Horses live on dry land, eat grass and drink water. . . . Thus far only do their natural dispositions carry them. But bridled and bitted, with a plate of metal on their foreheads, they learn to cast vicious looks, to turn the head to bite, to resist, to get the bit out of the mouth or the bridle into it. And thus their natures become depraved, – the fault of Poh Loh.

In the days of Ho Hsu the people did nothing particular when at rest, and went nowhere in particular when they moved. Having food, they rejoiced; having full bellies, they strolled about. Such were the capacities of the people. But when the sages came to worry them with ceremonies and music in order to rectify the form of government, and dangled charity and duty to one’s neighbor before them in order to satisfy their hearts – then the people began to develop a taste for knowledge and to struggle one with the other in their desires for gain. This was the error of the stages.

f. Creative Letting-Be and the Quiet Mind

The repose of the sage is not what the world calls repose. His repose is the result of his mental attitude. All creation could not disturb his equilibrium: hence his repose.

When water is still, it is like a mirror, reflecting the beard and the eyebrows. . . . And if water thus derives lucidity from stillness, how much more the faculties of the mind? The mind of the sage being in repose becomes the mirror of the universe, the speculum of all creation.

Repose, tranquility, stillness, inaction – these were the levels of the universe, the ultimate perfection of Tao. Therefore wise rulers and sages rest therein.

Repose, tranquility, stillness, inaction – these were the sources of all things. Keep to this when coming forward to pacify a troubled world, and your merit shall be great and your name illustrious, and the empire united into one. In your repose you will be wise; in your movements, powerful. By inaction you will gain honor; and by confining yourself to the pure and simple, you will hinder the whole world from struggling with you for show.
g. Against the Promotion of Virtue

Confucius visited Lao Tze, and spoke of charity and duty to one’s neighbor.

Lao Tzu said, “The chaff from winnowing will blind a man’s eyes so that he cannot tell the 
points of the compass. Mosquitoes will keep a man awake all night with their biting. And just in 
the same way this talk of charity and duty to one’s neighbor drives me nearly crazy. Sir! strive to 
keep the world to its own original simplicity. And as the wind bloweth where it listeth, so let 
virtue establish itself. Wherefore such undue energy, as though searching for a fugitive with a 
big drum?”

h. The Natural Life

Chuang Tzu was fishing in the P’u when the prince of Ch’u sent two high officials to ask him to 
take charge of the administration of the Ch’u State. Chuang Tzu went on fishing, and without 
turning his head said, “I have heard that in Ch’u there is a sacred tortoise which has been dead 
now for some three thousand years. And that the prince keeps this tortoise carefully enclosed in 
a chest on the alter of his ancestral people. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its 
remains venerated, or be alive and wagging its tail in the mud?”

“It would rather be alive,” replied the two officials. . . .

“Begone!” cried Chuang Tzu. “I too will wag my tail in the mud.”