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Zhuangzi: Oblivion and Happiness

From the perspective of our time, it is difficult to guess what Zhuangzi wanted to tell us with the expression “*zuo wang* 坐忘”. Different angles of looking at the world give us pictures of different worlds. In the text “Zhuangzi: Oblivion and Happiness”, I will try to shed light on the various possibilities that the term “*zuo wang* 坐忘” offers us. In this light, the possibility opens up to understand to what extent it is the path to our happiness. At the same time, numerous philosophical questions arise: the relationship towards the body, self, *dao*, *de*, towards dream, reality, the cultivation of one’s being, wisdom, etc.

Key words: *dao* (dao道), sitting in oblivion (*zuo wang* 坐忘), sameness of things (*qiwu* 齐物), *body-self* (*shen*身), the void (*wu* 无)

Цуанг Ци: заборав и срећа

Из времена у коме ми данас живимо тешко је наслутити шта је Цуанг Ци изразом „*zuo wang* 坐忘” желео да нам каже. Различити углови гледања на свет пружају нам различите слике тих светова. У тексту „Цуанг Ци: заборав и срећа”, покушаћу да осветлим бројне могућности које нам израз „*zuo wang* 坐忘” нуди. У том светлу отвара се и могућност да разумемо у којој мери је то пут ка нашој срећи. А ту се истовремено отварају и бројна филозофска питања: однос према телу, Ја, *dao*, *de*, снустварности, култивисању сопственог бића, мудрости, итд.

Кључне речи: дао (*dao* 道), седети у забораву (*zuo wang* 坐忘), истост ствари (*qiwu* 齐物), тело-Ја (*shen*身), празно (*wu* 无)

When we think about life, we speak of moments; and when we think about eternity, we speak of a moment.

The need for harmony, balance, serenity, peace, love is something both the “animate” and “inanimate” worlds strive for. There is a belief that surrendering to the deepest urges of our inner being obliges us to embark on a journey towards understanding our own nature, and this invariably implies a readiness to elucidate, comprehend and come close to the cosmic order of things. In the China of Zhuangzi's time, it was believed that a field is thus opened up for the realization of the “primal mandate” (*tianming*, 天命) that everything be in “its place”, which, in a specific way, points to the establishment of meaning and cosmic order of things. It was almost taken for granted that every life, by its own inherent logic, is an attempt to grasp that meaning.

Generally speaking, the *body-self* (*shen*身) was seen as an energetic information system entwined in the deepest secrets of the Universe. As such, it lives, vibrates, emanates, breathes, glows, feels, smells, thinks in accord with constant changes. That is best expressed in the *Classic Book of Changes* 易经.

The *body-self* is therefore a field of processes that need to be understood and kept in some kind of order, harmony; it is a space of energies that have to be balanced. Our psychological, physical and mental development depends on this inner wisdom of the body's essential energetic form or “cosmic pattern”. It is with the realization of these energetic potentials that we get the chance to enter both the field of the *dao* and the field of the “cosmic play” or freedom (Pušić 2016, 28).

It is commonly believed that we wear ourselves out through both suffering and pleasure. Nothing that man creates can achieve the last and final victory. Why then intoxicate ourselves with philosophical, ethical, religious, metaphysical, political, ideological and similar illusions, when we can find more beautiful ones? That is why it is so important to turn to the sources, wellsprings of cosmic power. Not only can we gather power and initiate revitalization processes there, but also drink the juices of creative momentum.

That is why Zhuangzi often mentions “forgetting, oblivion” *wang* 忘, as a kind of clue, advice, guidance on how we can enter the field of the *dao*, serenity, peace, love, freedom and happiness.

If we look at the pictographic form of the character, we will see that it consists of two elements. The upper element is *wang* 亡, meaning to hide, to disappear, to die, etc., and below it is *xin* 心, meaning heart-mind, soul. What is it that we have to forget, hide, let disappear, in order to enter the *dao*, moment-eternity, freedom-love?

Before we open up the question of the contents of this “oblivion” or “forgetting”, there is something else worth noting. In ancient China, the *body-self* relied on the age-old skill of “nurturing, cultivating the life force” (*yangsheng* 养生), which included breathing; physical exercises; contemplating the world, nature and oneself; and a specific diet. Its main aim was not only to maintain vitality, but also to protect against negative influences, destructive forces, troubles of all kinds and illnesses. This intertwining of breathing, movement, consciousness, the world, nature and people, woven in a specific way by the “spiral pattern” of energy play (*qi* 气), is described by a simple image: “man and heaven are (intertwined, merged into) One” (*tianrenheyi* 天人合一). Zhuangzi will speak of the “sameness of things” *qiwu* 齐物, where the *body-self* enters a kind of magic of tale and life. And these always imply a unity with the world in which every subjective manifestation is an expression of the pulsating totality of life. That is precisely what is expressed in Zhuangzi as “all things and I are one” 万物与我为一. That kind of belonging together, of interpermeation, hides an abundance of integrations and life flow, and such sensibility can only lead to joy since, for it, what is incurable, unsolvable and inevitable does not exist as a component of the structure of being. This feeling of “omnipotence” comes from oneness with nature and the cosmos. Cosmic and natural rhythm, an incomprehensible formula of the joy and happiness of living and creation, which is an expression of magical sensibility, pulsates in us. That is the reason why Zhuangzi removes that huge, painful reality, that which is incurable and inevitable and which life hides, the misery and fate of death, from the world of nature and the cosmos and thus from humans who are permeated by them and live in accordance with them. Zhuangzi avoids surrendering to the inevitable because if he surrenders he will be faced with the impossibility of overcoming his own limits and limitations. For him, this type of choice, for after all it is always a choice, means entering the world of unfreedom and wrong choices.

As someone who dove deep into the world of the *dao*, Zhuangzi felt that we can discern our “right time” only with appropriate preparation and exercise. He, therefore, did not discuss a theoretical model but solely and exclusively action, the practice of entering the world of the *dao*. And indeed, when an inscription with various exercises for “guiding the cosmic *qi* energy” was discovered on a piece of jade probably dating from the fourth century BC, it was established that one of the exercises recorded there was also found in the manuscript attributed to Zhuangzi. That was *tugu naxin* 吐故納新 (exhale the old, stale /*qi*/, inhale the new, fresh /*qi*/). It is natural to assume that Zhuangzi practiced these exercises,

as well as a number of others that he believed are necessary on our path to the *dao*.¹

In keeping with the spirit of those times, exercises were an integral part of life for everyone who valued themselves and their world. Consequently, descriptions or codes explaining how to realize that in practice were developed. In accord with his poetic soul, Zhuangzi coined the expressions “fasting of the heart-mind” *xin zhai* 心齋 and “sit and forget” or “sitting in oblivion” *zuo wang* 坐忘, as the most important and significant for attaining the *dao*.

Looking at these instructions and advice today, from the perspective of our time, we cannot but think that these exercises are expressions of some mystical experience. Laozi also spoke about it.

Fasting,² as generally viewed, involves abstention, renunciation, giving up, perseverance, yielding, commitment and complete surrender to faith and love. It is recommended both to the body and spirit as a kind of preparation, purification for what is to come, what we care about, what we love and believe in with all our heart.

Translating the Chinese word *xin* 心 as heart-mind is the least bad solution, but this translation is far from covering all the dimensions, layers, aspects of what *xin* 心 means. Why is it impossible to translate it into another language? *Xin* 心 is not only the seat of thought, but simultaneously the seat of feeling, will, faith, fantasy, imagination, visualization, intuition, etc. We will, therefore, misunderstand some of Zhuangzi’s important thoughts if we interpret it simply as an “organ” of thinking.

In addition to being a mind and a heart, we are also a body and a soul. We are much more than what we think we are. We all set limits and boundaries to ourselves, but in fact limits and boundaries do not exist. Zhuangzi is very keen to show that we also possess a boundless, incomprehensible, mysterious, cosmic dimension. The notions with which

¹ Two very important archaeological discoveries were made at the Mawangdui site, Hunan Province, in 1973 and 1975 respectively. First, in tombs from the Han dynasty, the “*qi*-guiding chart” or *Daoyin tu* 导引图 was discovered on silk; then, in the tomb of a Han dynasty prince, a prismatic staff knob was discovered, whose sides contained an inscription about “the movement of *qi*” (*xing qi* 行气) and which was later called 行气玉佩铭. To this day, these two inscriptions remain the earliest records of Chinese medical practice and breathing techniques, i.e. of exercises belonging to the so-called “inner skills” (*neigong* 内功). Numerous analyses have shown that this was apparently a common practice in the China of the Warring States period and had a large number of followers.

² In Chinese, the word for fasting is *zhaijie* 齋戒. If we analyze its structure, it is: abstention + giving up = fasting.

we limit ourselves usually refer to what we have or do not have a right to and what we believe or do not believe is possible. When we enter the so-called altered states of consciousness, such as dreams, mystical states, visions, clairvoyance, inspiration, telepathy, etc., this qualitative change of consciousness changes our image of the world, and with it the very "reality" to which we belong.

What does the heart-mind's abstention from and giving up of its usual contents actually mean? It is first of all the "cleansing" of all deposits from the outside world that can be sources of anxiety, trouble, worry, sorrow, limitations, etc., which means that the heart-mind is introduced to "unusual contents" most frequently described as "the void" (*wu* 无). To act from such "oblivion" is in fact the deepest and most valuable aspect of practicing the *dao*; it is what Laozi called "acting from the void" (*wuwei* 无为). In a specific way, "fasting of the heart-mind" is a preparation for entering the state, exercise, experience of "sitting in oblivion".³

Every illusion, lie, fantasy or dream can maintain manifold relationships with the world, nature, people and things for a while, but in the long run it cannot provide an answer to the question: who am I? Searching for the answer to this question, Zhuangzi realized that it is necessary to change the direction of movement in such a way that the path to the so-called "reality" leads exclusively to the ability of following or obeying universal changes. It is at this point that the subject with his "great appetites" for his self has to be forgotten, put aside, and language, despite its eagerness to express and describe, has to come to a stop and retreat to its primal source – silence, in order to open the way to that which is the reason for our coming into this world – meaningfulness, love, freedom.

What will remain of me if my memories and recollections disappear? Do I always have to hold all that has passed as alive and imperishable, permanent, timeless? Even if I manage to do so, then everything that has passed has not really passed; it is alive, here and now. How can I do this without opening the abysses of time, timelessness, meaning and meaninglessness? Is that what Zhuangzi had in mind when he uttered one of his most important coded messages: "sit and forget" (*zuo wang* 坐忘)? Let us listen to his words:

Yan Hui said: "I am returning to the state of beneficiality." Zhong Ni said: "What do you mean?" He said: "I am returning to the oblivion of benevolence (love) 仁 and righteousness 义." Zhong Ni told him: "All

³ It is interesting that Bergson made a connection between oblivion and duration.

right, but that is still not it." Upon meeting Zhong Ni again, he said: "I am returning to beneficiality itself." Zhong Ni asked: "What do you mean?" He said: "I have forgotten rites 礼 and music 乐!" Zhong Ni told him: "All right, but that is still not it." Upon meeting Zhong Ni again, Yan Hui said: "I am returning to the very nature of beneficiality!" Zhong Ni asked: "What is that?" He said: "I have returned to sitting and forgetting." Zhong Ni at once asked: "What is this sitting and forgetting?" Yan Hui said: "Relaxing the limbs, discarding the brains, abandoning the form/shapes and going towards (real, true) knowledge. It is the same as 'the Great Unity' (dao). That is called 'to sit and forget.'" Zhong Ni said: "Nothing is good in the same way, everything transforms, there is no permanence in anything. And the fruits are so bitter! Then I, Qiu (Confucius), will also follow the dao and go my own way (according to your insights)."⁴ (Chen, 1983, 205–206)

The first thing that we notice is that this is a conversation between Confucius (Zhong Ni) and his disciple (Yan Hui).⁵ Some would say that this is irrelevant, that it is typical of Zhuangzian toying with historical figures, times and events. His incredible fantasy, imaginative ability, creative power in inventing non-existent worlds, plots and events is well-known. However, if we want to discern and elucidate what Zhuangzi meant when he said "sit and forget", even this seemingly insignificant detail has its place in the interpretation of this expression. Therefore, the first thing we should bear in mind is that Zhuangzi spoke about "sit and forget" in a Confucian setting. Another thing we have to pay attention to is the fact that what Zhuangzi cared most for was *freedom* and that this is our starting point in attempting to understand "sit and forget".

⁴ 颜回曰：“回益矣。”仲尼曰：“何谓也？”曰：“回忘仁义矣。”曰：“可矣，犹未也。”他日复见，曰：“回益矣。”曰：“何谓也？”曰：“回忘礼乐矣！”曰：“可矣，犹未也。”他日复见，曰：“回益矣！”曰：“何谓也？”曰：“回坐忘矣。”仲尼蹴然曰：“何谓忘？”颜回曰：“堕肢体，黜聪明，离形去知，同于大通，此谓‘坐忘’。”仲尼曰：“同则无好也，化则无常也。而果其贤乎！丘也请从而后也。”

⁵ Someone may find the following question raised by some scholars interesting: Of all the Chinese historical figures of the time, why was Zhuangzi most interested in Confucius? Those preferring easy solutions would immediately say that this is because Confucius was closest to Zhuangzi in terms of his views, thoughts and the vision of society he offered. In other words, because at some point in his life Zhuangzi was a Confucian. Such interpreters have counted that in the texts attributed to Zhuangzi the name Confucius appears 44 times. But if we consider everything that Zhuangzi said about the *dao* and the way in which he spoke of Confucian tradition, it is clear that the many appearances of Confucius's name are there for a simple reason – he was the main subject and topic of Zhuangzi's criticism.

Upon Confucius's request for a more detailed explanation of "forgetting", his disciple Yan Hui, serving as a mouthpiece for Zhuangzi, says: "Relaxing the limbs 墮肢体, discarding the brains 黜聰明, abandoning the form/shapes and going towards (real, true) knowledge 知, and this is the same in its reach as entering the Great Unity 大通", which unambiguously means entering the *dao* 道. That is the reason why the coded advice to "sit and forget", which refers to *entering or merging with the dao*, is viewed as a practice that has different aspects of manifestation. In this context, meditation is only one of the many possibilities that "sit and forget" holds. What the practice unquestionably involves is an "erotic moment" of complete merging with the *dao*, which, like making love, leads to serenity, fulfilment, ultimate contentment and happiness. It is the fullness of everything that the life force holds in itself as creation, generation, birth, emergence, genesis. On the individual level, it is the highest meaning that a human being can reach. Basically, according to the principles of the organization of the cosmos and the interweaving of *yin* and *yang*, there is practice directed towards the inner aspects of human beings (which is in its nature *yin*) and practice directed towards the external aspects of one's world (which is in its nature *yang*). Put simply, "sit and forget" can be directed towards cultivating one's body, soul and spirit, but also towards the organization of society, community and family, which, as one's environment, are unquestionably part of one's world. This experience, therefore, has at least two facets: one connected to the "nurturing, nourishing, cultivating of life energy, force, power" (this is where meditation has its place), and the other connected to one's worldview and angle of looking at things, people, society, nature and the cosmos, which directly leads to undertaking certain activities in order to change the organization of one's community or country (this can be directly linked to some concrete social actions and anarchist, revolutionary movements). Meditation has no particular importance in the latter case, where *zuo wang* is directed primarily towards clearly defined demands for social change, as was the case, for example, with the Yellow Turban Rebellion in the Han dynasty.⁶ Here *zuo* 坐 could by no means be interpreted as "sit" but rather as "stop pandering to everything

⁶ The Yellow Turban Rebellion 黄巾之乱 was led by representatives of Daoist communities in the Han dynasty. The leaders of the rebels were Zhang Jiao and his brothers Zhang Liang and Zhang Bao, who preached "the *dao* of supreme peace" (*taiping dao* 太平道), but as real social action. The uprising against the state administration of Emperor Ling lasted from 184 to 205 CE. The rebellion was brutally suppressed but it seriously weakened the Han dynasty, whose rule of China ended soon after. Because of this, Daoism remained out of favour with Chinese emperors for a long time.

that brings disquiet and trouble into our lives, that blights and ruins them” and start fighting, destroying it and creating an environment for “supreme peace” on earth. “Sit” was, therefore, interpreted in a completely different way. There is also an interpretation which notes that *The Book of Rites* (*Li Ji* 礼记) contains the sentence “大夫不坐羊，士不坐犬” and which takes *zuo* to mean: “without real needs”, i.e. “naturally”, “spontaneously”; this is in line with Zheng Xuan’s 鄭玄 (127–200 CE) commentary. Most scholars, however, share the opinion of Ling Shu 凌曙 (1775–1829) that this sentence should be translated as: “A great teacher must not kill a sheep and *sit* on its skin for no reason, and a scholar must not kill a dog and *sit* on its skin for no reason”. That is to say, the term *zuo* in the expressions 坐羊 *zuo yang* and 坐犬 *zuo quan* should be interpreted as “sit”, a verb, and not as an adjective. Of course, Chinese characters by their nature contain the possibility of different metaphorical, symbolic meanings. These specific “readings” into the character’s pictographic base testify to the special kind of polysemy inherent in its visual form (Ma 2023, 612).

On the other hand, it is indisputable that during the Warring States Period there was a belief that it is possible to “obtain the *dao*” (*dedao* 得道) and thus “become immortal” (*chengxian* 成仙). Various techniques and skills were developed for that purpose. Therefore, for those attached to such a setting, Zhuangzi’s *zuo wang* 坐忘 would, in fact, be one of these techniques, skills or practices. Speaking of the character 忘, “to forget”, Zhuangzi’s text also contains the following passage:

A fish trap is for catching fish, once we catch the fish, we *forget* about the trap 得魚忘筌;

Hunting horns are for catching rabbits, once we catch the rabbit, we *forget* about the horns 得兔而忘蹄;

Language (words) is for “catching” meaning, once we “catch” the meaning, we *forget* about language (words) 得而忘言。

How I wish I could meet someone who has *forgotten* language (words) and have a word with him!⁷ (Chen, 1983, 725).

Once we achieve the goal of our endeavours, all else becomes unimportant, irrelevant, all else is “forgotten”. In a special way, it is held as unnecessary, pointless, as something that has lost its purpose and point

⁷ 筌者所以在魚，得魚而忘筌；蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄；言者所以在意，得而忘言。吾安得夫忘言之人而與之言哉！

of existence. To become free from that means to enter the “void” which by its nature removes all obstacles on our path and leads to complete and unrestrained self-realization. In this context, “to forget” means to become free from all the negative influences of accumulated memories; from the influence of thoughts, sensory contents and emotions; and from all activities, actions and deeds which lead nowhere and are pointlessly repeated without reason or purpose. If we follow the thread of the Zhuangzian vision of the world, “to forget” is, ultimately, “to act from the void” (*wu wei* 無為).

Returning to the *dao* is transformation, and transformation has its many ways. For Zhuangzi, one of the ways of transforming into the nearness of the *dao* is to “sit and forget”. Its traditional interpretive paradigm involves a strong presence of practical contents without which we cannot speak of *merging with the dao*.

What, then, would be the aim of the practice of “sit and forget”? The most direct answer is found in the phenomena, the points of meaningfulness, around which our life gathers, and these are: the *dao*, freedom and love. What does “sit” mean in a world thus conceived? Essentially, the act itself is clear to all, “sit” means stop, cease, quit your doing and movement, stop all activity, all endeavour, all desire to move in a direction which is by its nature, in Zhuangzi’s view, unnatural and acosmic. Why? Because that kind of action is ultimately destructive, devastating and detrimental to all. It is so harmful to the individual that it breaks his otherwise unbreakable unity with nature and the world, which then leads to the disappearance of the feelings of universal oneness, wholeness, comprehensiveness, perfection, fullness, beauty, simplicity, unrepeatability, unrestrainedness, easiness, etc. With the loss of oneness or “sameness” with the world, many other feelings, such as wonder, amazement, magic, mystery, astonishment, perseverance, dedication, etc., also disappear. The first thing Zhuangzi suggests is that the way out of this destructive and self-destructive “trap” begins with the process of freeing oneself from “such a self”. This involves a specific shift in one’s identification, so that one no longer identifies with the self that nurtures one’s anxieties, insatiable appetites, unreasonable desires, selfish possessions, etc., but transposes the field of one’s identification into the sphere of the cosmic and natural, the only sphere with access to direct sources of energies, forces and powers without which no life form can exist. In other words, the more there is of the self that obscures what is natural and cosmic in one’s existence, i.e. the spontaneity of expression, the less there is of grounding in the natural and cosmic, according to the principle that “more is less” and

“less is more”. This “transcendent self”, which is the basis of the feeling of inner freedom and love, undoes and unties all knots in the heart, soul and mind. In this way, as philosophers and psychologists like to put it, the paradoxical essence of the subject is balanced and expanded beyond the boundaries of the empirical personality to the place, field, moment of boundless oneness (Zhuangzi would call it: *all things and I are ONE*). The entire practice of internal and external Daoist alchemy, which developed later, is basically an attempt to shift the individual’s identification from the empirical, socially and psychologically conditioned personality to an unconditioned, boundless merging with the *dao*. That is why Zhuangzi speaks of the “turning and transformation” of things (*wuhua* 物化), while Laozi speaks of “turning back, turning over, returning” to the sources of the *dao* (*fan*反).⁸

This ecstatic permeation is not only wise insight, acceptance of the universal laws of the play of cosmic forces, but rather a practical activity that implies looking at the world with eyes full of humour, the active manifestation of the joy of life – happiness. In this manner, everything is given freedom to be what it is, in the way it is, with a duty to make an effort to elucidate its own nature and understand what it is and how it is. Here, the coded message “sit and forget” is one of the key moments in the realization of such a vision of life. It is the state of the so-called active and complete devoidness of everything within the self that brings disquiet, agitation, fear and anxiety, everything concealing, disturbing or destructive. Thus, the self is erased in order to attain a higher identity, which by far transcends all selfish, egoistic existence. That higher identity of the self is of a special kind and can be described as the non-self.

In the same context, when Zhuangzi thinks about “fasting of the heart-mind-spirit-soul”, he also speaks of “forgetting” everything seductive, false, unacceptable, detrimental, illusory and destructive. A whole range of paradoxical and absurd situations is connected to the self thus conceived and lived. All this distances one from the *dao* and cosmic patterns. That is why forgetting such a self is essentially seen as the only way for one to regain oneself as an “authentic person” and a “person of truth” (*zhen ren* 真人), which opens up the possibility for one to express all that is one’s “unique and unrepeatable nature”. That is why it is necessary to transform oneself according to the cosmic pattern. There are no privileges of the

⁸ The movement of the *dao* is returning, the use of the *dao* is softness. Everything is born of the present, the present is born of the absent” (Pušić 2003a, 143).

“mind”, no conceptual systems that impose themselves as the only and absolute truths of the world, no egocentrism and self-sufficiency based on the illusion of one’s importance. Philosophically speaking, two moments are important: doubt, i.e. scepticism, which is not of an epistemological but existential nature; and the acceptance of *changes*, or relativity, which requires constant adaptation to the changes in the world. That is why right and wrong, truth and lie, in the usual sense of the word, cannot be taken as a regulatory measure for anything at all. This “dance” on the edge between the possible and the impossible, the real and the illusory, speech and silence, the human and the cosmic, has its own logic: take and follow things as they are, without exceeding and meaningless selfish involvement. For only if I believe in a world, if I fill it with love, if it is my happiness, does that world exist, is that world real. That according to which the world is, is the *dao*. It is the inner pulsation of one’s nature, which in Chinese is called *ziran* 自然, self-arising, spontaneous and natural becoming and being. It is a play of the transient-intransient flow of the cosmic breath, an outpouring of cosmic energy which initiates the movement of all beings and shapes. It is our “existential measure”, that which by nature belongs to us, not more and not less. It reveals us to the world, but hides us from it just as much. Authentically, unrepeatably, it points to our freedom to unite with our “existential need” to be closer to the *dao*. It cannot be a metaphysical, even less a philosophical principle; it belongs to the perspective of the practical aspects of life, as a “guide”, “clue”, “passage”, “spark”, “impetus”, “impulse”, etc. for all our behaviours and actions. For Zhuangzi, “sit” points to the necessity of stopping all worthless attempts to emphasize and attach importance to something that does not merit attention. Essentially, humour, irony and self-mockery are activities that diminish the importance of this constructed, inflated and meaningless ego which has no cosmic foundation. I do not laugh at someone else, I laugh at myself, diminishing my “value”, “imaginary greatness”, “fictive life”, “importance”, going to my smallest measure and even beyond it, almost to the unrecognizability of the self praised and exalted by the words and deeds of the deceitful world and illusory principles. Where love is no longer felt, where it is not manifested in deeds, words, images, music, movement, etc., it is illusory to speak of its existence. This is yet another aspect of the practice, skill, art of “sit and forget” – removing all kinds of illusions, deceptions, fantasies and lies.

In an attempt to understand the nature of the expression *zuo wang*, Livia Kohn offers the following descriptions in the introductory part of her well-composed and comprehensive study on the concept:

1. *Zuowang* 坐忘, "sitting in oblivion," signifies a state of deep meditative absorption and mystical oneness, during which all sensory and conscious faculties are overcome and which is the base point for attaining Dao [...] (Kohn 2010, 1).
2. One lets go of all kinds of intentional and reactive patterns and comes to rest in oneness with spirit and is ready to merge completely with Dao (Kohn 2010, 1).
3. *Zuowang* first appears in classical texts from before the Common Era, then forms the title of a key treatise on Daoist meditation in the Tang dynasty (618–907), and still serves to indicate Daoist contemplative practice today. [...] *Zuowang* [is] the heart of Daoist meditation (Kohn 2010, 1).
4. As a meditation practice, sitting in oblivion shares the same fundamental definition as other forms of meditation as a way of resting the mind within to attain healing, purification, and spiritual transcendence. In its medieval heyday when its procedures are formulated in most detail, [...] an emphasis [is placed] on breathing, a basic ethical code, a strong focus on the mind, and a communal setting for training and practice (Kohn 2010, 1).
5. *Zuowang* demands the complete abolition of all sensory perception and conscious evaluation, insisting on "immediacy" in attitude and lifestyle (Kohn 2010, 2).
6. Meditation can be defined as the inward focus of attention in a state of mind where ego-related concerns and critical evaluations are suspended in favor of perceiving a deeper, subtler, and possibly divine flow of consciousness. A method of communicating with deeper layers of the mind, it allows the subconscious to surface in memories, images, and thoughts while influencing it with quietude, openness, and suggestions. [...] (Kohn 2010, 2).
7. The practice thus sets out to transform the mind from its ordinary tendencies, which include various emotions and negative feelings, into a purer, gentler, and more positive agency. A powerful way to achieve this is by demanding a complete focus on the present moment. [...] By being in the present moment, consciousness becomes clear and lucid, and each and every aspect of perception stands out vividly while any fixed identity and any limiting sense of ego are bound to dissolve. This effect is also enhanced by an awareness of death: death, when accepted fully in the midst of living, can provide a strength, an impetus, a preciousness to life that is otherwise hard to find (Kohn 2010, 3).

8. Insight meditation usually begins with the recognition of physical sensations and subtle events in the body. It also means paying attention to reactions to outside stimuli, recognizing but not evaluating them. Often associated with notions of deeper understanding or wisdom [but without passing final judgements], it encourages the appreciation of life as flow and lets practitioners see body and self as unstable, ever-changing energetic entities (Kohn 2010, 4).
9. *Zuowang* matches the [practice which emphasizes] immediacy and, beyond its development in the *Zhuangzi* and the Daoist tradition, has been adopted also in Far Eastern Buddhism, notably in Chinese Chan, Japanese Zen, and Tibetan Dzogchen. Through its practice, adepts eliminate all sensory perception and the conscious mind as inherently dualistic and potentially misleading, avoiding the use of the sensory apparatus in attaining higher states. Practitioners thus strive to access what they call pure experience or “sitting in oblivion of everything” by letting go of all ordinary perception while strengthening intuition, the potency of the inborn, natural mind – [thus opening up space for] a pure reflection of original cosmos in human beings. Posture and body control become essential; all analytical, dualistic thinking as well as connection to deities are radically overcome (Kohn 2010, 6).
10. In other words, *zuowang* in the *Zhuangzi*, in addition to being an introverted, absorbed state of deep meditation is also extroverted [but] free from reflection and intentional action. It is a spontaneous way of living in natural simplicity that is realized by being at one with Dao, joined with Great Pervasion – it is in fact the fundamental human birth right that is lost through sensory involvement and conscious categorizations (Kohn 2010, 8).

Everything attributed to Zhuangzi as a description of mystical states or a vision of ultimate ways of existing in the world is directed towards a single goal – free and easy “wandering” and ultimate happiness. These are states that Zhuangzi attributed to sages, old masters and persons of truth.

However, clear definitions and suggestions of exact meditation procedures are nowhere to be found in his text (Kohn 2010, 8). Why is it so? One of the possible explanations, with due respect for differing opinions, is that Zhuangzi did not really care about meditation at all. At least not about meditation as presented from the Tang dynasty onwards. There are many manuscripts which contain elaborate meditation procedures collectively

called *zuo wang* 坐忘,⁹ but only a small portion of these can be directly linked to the worldview advocated by Zhuangzi. All else is a product of the times and people of later dynasties, who created and invented, wrote down and thought up these rules and procedures according to their own vision of the world, which is difficult to connect with Zhuangzi.

It is undeniable that every text can be interpreted from different perspectives and then translated accordingly into another language. That is unquestionable. But what is questionable? It is questionable to interpret *zuo wang* 坐忘 only in the context of meditation, and as “resting the mind within to attain healing, purification, and spiritual transcendence”.

As is usually the case in life, it was only much later that adepts devoted to the *dao*, having lost the ability of entering it directly, developed the image of the heart-mind-spirit-soul, which they connected to different levels of attaining the *dao* and bodily transformation, based on how they saw, felt and experienced it:

⁹ A manuscript from 829, attributed to Sima Chengzhen, contains a detailed discussion of *zuo wang*:

An essential part of this text [...] consists of a comprehensive outline of five phases leading to mental concentration and seven stages of bodily transformation to immortality. These also appear in the *Cunshen lianqi ming* 存神鍊氣銘 (Inscription on Visualizing Spirit and Refining Qi 气, DZ 834, YQ 33.12a–14b; see Lévi in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 375–76), a text closely associated with Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (581–682) of the seventh century. A yet different system of stages to the Dao appears in the *Tianyinzi* 天隱子 (Book of the Master of Heavenly Seclusion, DZ 1026; Robinet in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 303), allegedly transmitted by Wu Yun 吳筠 (d. 778) and edited by Sima Chengzhen. [...] The *Tianyinzi* has been published many times also in non-Daoist collections and is still a core work among qigong practitioners today. [...] Next, the *Wuchu jing* 五廚經 (Scripture of the Five Kitchens, DZ 763; see Verellen in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 351–52; Mollier 2000), by Yin Yin 尹愔 of the early eighth century adds an advanced cosmological dimensions to the picture. [...] Last but not least [is] Wu Yun's *Xinmu lun* 心目論 (On Mind and Eyes, DZ 1038; see Baldrian-Hussein in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 308). (Kohn 2010, 9–10).

The purpose of all these practices was “reaching a spirit-like state to communicate with divine beings and travel to the otherworld in ecstatic excursions in Highest Clarity [...] and transforming internal energies and creating an immortal embryo to ascend to the celestial realms in internal alchemy (neidan 內丹) since the Song. [...] Thus the *Sandong zhunang* 三洞珠囊 (A Bag of Pearls from the Three Caverns, DZ 1139), by Wang Xuanhe 王懸和 (fl. 683), lists many different techniques and experiences under the heading of ‘sitting in oblivion and focusing one’s thinking’ (jingsi 精思; 5.1a-2a)” (Kohn 2010, 10). There is also “Ge Xuan’s *Wuqian wen jingxu* 五千文精序 (Essential Explanation of the Text in Five Thousand Words;lost), presumably of the third century” (Kohn 2010, 10).

Heart

1. tame the heart/mind/spirit/soul and rest in the consciousness of oneness: this is how one enters calmness (*anding* 安定);
2. turn the heart/mind/spirit/soul into “ashes” and forget oneness: this is how one enters calmness attained by the dissolution of everything (*mieding* 滅定);
3. awaken the heart/mind/spirit/soul to perfect oneness with the world, nature, cosmos: this is calmness attained by becoming immersed in the cosmic dimension of reality (*taiding* 泰定).

Body and its attainments

1. Body-self 身 *shen* rises up in itself winged by cosmic powers: thus one becomes immortal 仙 *xian*;
2. Body-form 形 *xing* ascends towards the perfect spirit: thus one becomes perfect, identical with the truth of the *dao*, 真 *zhen*;
3. Body-structure 体 *ti* completely merges with the inner nature: thus one becomes a sage, 圣 *sheng*.

Following the path of the heart and body thus described, the adept attains different levels of perfection which, upon closer look, represent a kind of “awakening” from a state which, in their opinion, is unworthy of a person devoted to the *dao*. So, in the heart (mind, spirit, soul) bathed in the light of insight into the *dao*, *immortality*, awakens; in the heart (mind, spirit, soul) pervaded by the perfect, refined, subtle spirit of the divine, celestial, cosmic, *perfection* awakens; and in the heart (mind, spirit, soul) completely harmonized with the inner nature, *sageliness* awakens (Kohn 2010, 46).

The more freely one changes, the more one becomes “transformed” into *freedom*! The more lovingly one shapes oneself and surrenders, the more one becomes *love*! The more one gives oneself up to happiness, the more *happiness* belongs to one! In these processes or transformations, it is important to be soft, elastic, mobile, fluid, flexible, persistent, loyal, faithful, loving, yielding, like water, like the power flowing from the *dao*.

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