

八十四

The mountain called Zhongguo
which we had ascended
the tip of an iceberg
to be apprehended
the thousand mile journey's
first step had been taken
the runway approaching
our time to awaken



Chapter 84 – Chipping Away

Often at the beginning of a school term I will ask my students to raise their hands if they love to learn. In years past, only a few hands went up, but today some students are becoming more savvy as to what “learning” really means. Truth be told, I’ve known very few people in my life who don’t like to learn. But in schools, most learning is structured and students often pair “learning” with schedules and curriculum. A goal of mine has always been to remind students that “learning” does not necessarily mean school and that some of our most profound learning happens outside of the classroom.

Zhuāng Zǐ (莊子) told the story “Cutting up an Ox”, about a prince who happened into a butcher store one day just as the butcher split an entire ox carcass in two in one fell swoop. Mesmerized by what he had just witnessed, the Prince queried. “How did you do that?”

“Dunno.” Said the butcher. “I just go with the Dao.” He thought for a minute and continued.

“When I first saw an ox, all I saw was a giant mass. It was too massive to comprehend.”

This got me thinking. When I took my first serious steps into China, it appeared to me in much the same way. A giant mass. Where do I begin? I could liken myself to the parable of the five men, each with a missing sense, attempting to describe an elephant.

“Towards the end of my third year as a butcher, I began to notice that although I had slowed down my pace, the results were more satisfactory. I saw distinctions. Nowadays I don’t even see the ox with my eyes. My whole body and spirit participates, free to work with no plan. I wait and watch for the openings and when they appear, I guide my knife in their direction. There are no joints that require sawing through. There is no bone that needs to be chopped or hacked.”

When I stood in front of the window of the Fu Hsing Bakery on Hsin Yi Lu in Taipei all those years ago, the cleavers I held in my hand were my text book and my Chinese-English dictionary. I cut and I hacked I’m sure, but gradually found the spaces for myself. Taipei was a friendly place for Americans in the early 1970’s and slowly but surely, with a lot of help from my Chinese friends, I learned how not to saw and hack.

Instead of forcing doors open, I found new ways in. Instead of learning Chinese a chapter at a time, I began living in China. Through my studies of Tai Qi, I discovered how to slow down my movements in deliberate and measured ways and discovered that just because western medicine could not physically map the flow of qi, did not mean qi could not be mapped.

In Zhuangzi's story, the butcher told the Prince that in the beginning he sharpened his knife every day. As he became more adept at his craft, he only needed to hone the edge once a week and later one time a year. His words to the Prince, "I have used this same cleaver nineteen years. It has cut up a thousand oxen. Its edge is as keen as if newly sharpened."

The Dao had taught him to let the knife find its way. "There are spaces in the joints that can only be found by the thinness of the blade and when those spaces are found, the knife flows through them like water. When I feel the tough places coming, I slow down, I watch carefully, sometimes I almost stop. Finally, the blade finds its way, and 'thump', the part falls away."

Daoism is all about letting go of the need to control. It is about finding not only one's place but one's role in the flow of all things. Like Laozi said in the Dao De Jing. "There is nothing in the world which is softer and more yielding than water. But when it attacks things hard and resistant there is not one of them that can prevail."

In the end, the Prince acknowledged that the butcher had taught him how to live his life.

An oft quoted line from Laozi states that "A journey of a thousand li begins with a single step". A less well known line from the same chapter of the Dao De Jing says, "Heed the end no less than the beginning. And your work will not be spoiled."

