

Adapted from Chapter 30, "The Joys of Swordplay" from *Zhuangzi, The Complete Writings* as translated by Brook Ziporyn (page 250-253)

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King Wen of Zhao, in his day, had a great liking for swordplay. Throngs of swordsmen came crowding to his gate, with over three thousand of them taken on as retainers at any given time. Day and night they were made to fight before him, killing or wounding over a hundred of them each year, yet still he was so delighted that he couldn't get enough of it. After this had been going on for three years, the state was going to ruin and competing feudal lords were starting to plot invasions. The worried crown prince Kui enlisted his attendants to find a solution, saying, "Whoever can persuade the king to put an end to this swordplay business will be rewarded with a thousand pieces of gold."

An attendant said, "Zhuangzi should be able to do it!"

The prince then sent a messenger to Zhuangzi, presenting him with a thousand pieces of gold. Zhuangzi refused the gift, but personally accompanied the messenger back to meet with the prince. "What does your majesty want of me that he presents me with a thousand pieces of gold?" he asked him.

The prince said, "I have heard tell of your brilliant sagacity, Master, and thus with great care I had sent you first a thousand pieces of gold, to be followed by silks and other gifts. But since you decline to accept them, I dare speak no further."

Zhuangzi said, "I have heard that you are hoping to employ me to put an end to the king's predilections. But if I go up there and try to persuade the king in any way that displeases him, failing to fulfill your charge, I shall be punished with death. What good would the gold do me then? On the other hand, if I go up there and persuade the king in a way that suits your purposes here below, I assume I would be given anything I ask for in the whole state of Zhao."

The prince said, "Yes, that is true. But look, my father will only give an audience to swordsmen."

Zhuangzi said, "Right. But I am good with the sword myself."

The prince said, "But the swordsmen my king receives are all men with tangled hair and protruding whiskers, decked up in dangling caps and wild tassels and short-bottomed coats. Their eyes are full of rage and their words are full of threats. This is what the king likes. But you, sir, are the type who will present himself to the king dressed in the garb of a Confucian scholar. I'm afraid things will then go very badly indeed."

Zhuangzi said, "Then let me go put together a swordsman's getup for myself."

It took three days to make the outfit, after which Zhuangzi again went to see the prince, who accompanied him to request an audience with the king. The king drew his gleaming blade from its scabbard to await him. Zhuangzi sauntered at a leisurely pace through the doorway of the royal hall, and when he saw the king he did not bow. The king said, "What is it that you wish to teach me, sir, that you have had the prince prepare the way for you?"

Zhuangzi said, "I have heard that your majesty has a liking for the play of the sword, so I have come to meet with you on the strength of my swordplay."

The king said, "Tell me about how your swordplay lays down the law."

Zhuangzi said, "Even if man after man were positioned before me, spaced one every ten paces, my swordplay would not pause its activity for a thousand miles."

The king was delighted. "Then no one in the world can match it!"

Zhuangzi said, "This is a swordplay that displays false appearances to the opponent, leading him on with the lure of gain, thrusting forth only after he does, but preceding him in landing the blow. I would like to show you."

The king said, "Go get some rest back in your quarters and wait for my summons. I will arrange a match for you." The king then tested his swordsmen for seven days, and after sixty-plus were disqualified by heavy injury or death, five or six remained, whom he ordered to bring their swords to the palace. Then he summoned Zhuangzi. The king said, "Today we will test the swords of you gentlemen against one another."

Zhuangzi said, "I have long been awaiting this chance."  
95 The king said, "How long is the cane you would like to wield today?"  
Zhuangzi said, "Anything is fine with me. But I have three different swords, all of which I put at the king's disposal. Let me first describe them, if I  
100 may, and then we can put them to the test."  
The king said, "Yes, I would like to hear about your three swords."  
Zhuangzi said, "I have the sword of a Son of Heaven, the sword of a feudal lord, and the sword  
105 of a commoner."  
The king said, "What is the sword of a Son of Heaven?"  
"The Son of Heaven's sword has a point formed of the Gorge of Yan and Rockwall up  
110 north, the eastern peninsula of Qi out to Mount Dai forming its blade-edge.... It is wrapped by the surrounding wild tribes, enfolded within the four seasons, entwined by the Bo Sea, strapped in place by the enduring hills, shaped by the Five  
115 Processes\*, assessed with punishments and kindnesses, sharpened by yin and yang, held aloft by the spring and summer, pressed into action by the autumn and winter. When this sword is thrust straight forward there is nothing in front of it.  
120 When it is raised, there is nothing above it. When it is put down, there is nothing below it. When it is spun around, there is nothing on any side of it.... If this sword is used even once it puts all the feudal lords in their places and all the world yields. Such  
125 is the sword of a Son of Heaven."  
King Wen, lost in astonishment, asked, "What about the sword of a feudal lord?"  
Zhuangzi said, "The sword of a feudal lord has a point made of wise and brave men of  
130 distinction, an edge made of pure and incorruptible gentlemen, a spine made of officers worthy and good, a hilt made of officers loyal and sagacious, a scabbard made of officers heroic and valiant. When this sword is directly thrust forward,  
135 it too has nothing before it, when raised it too has nothing above it, when put down it too has nothing below it, when spun around it too has nothing on any side of it.... In between it harmonizes the interests of all the people and can  
140 thereby bring peace and security to all regions. If this sword is used even once, it is like thunder

from a flash of lightning, and all within the four borders submit as retainers, willingly obeying the ruler's command. Such is the sword of a feudal  
145 lord."  
"And how about the commoner's sword?"  
"The commoner's sword is wielded by men with tangled hair and protruding whiskers, decked up in hanging caps and wild tassels and short-bottomed coats. Their eyes are full of rage and their words are full of threats. They attack one  
150 another before you, slashing through head and neck above, slicing out liver and lung below. Such is the swordplay of commoners, no different from fighting roosters. In the flash of an instant their  
155 lives are cut down. This makes no contribution to the affairs of state. Now your majesty has the position of the Son of Heaven and yet he is fond of the sword of a commoner. To be honest, I think it  
160 is a little beneath you."  
The king then took Zhuangzi with him to the upper hall where the royal cook set forth a banquet on the table. But the king just kept walking around it, three times around and around.  
165 Zhuangzi said, "Your majesty can now sit down and settle himself. The business of the swords is over and finished." After that King Wen did not leave his palace for three months. As for the swordsmen, however, they all ended up killing  
170 themselves anyway—but now in the privacy of their own quarters.

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\*Vegetable, Fire, Soil, Mineral, Water. The easy inclusion of this category probably dates this writing to the late Warring States period or after.

**1. The character of Zhuangzi can best be described as all of the following EXCEPT**

- A A wise philosopher
- B An adroit swordsman
- C A clever wordsmith
- D An unassuming ascetic

**2. The narrative of the story can best be described as**

- A The story of the defeat of a tyrant king by a wise ascetic.
- B The story of a wizard who uses magic to lift a curse of rage cast on a troubled king.
- C The story of an immature king who loses sight of his political obligations and is reproved by a stranger.
- D The story of two warring states and the duel between their two warrior kings.

**3. As used in line 27, the word “sagacity” most nearly means**

- A discriminating
- B fatuousness
- C torpidity
- D ubiquity

**4. As used in line 33, the word “predilections” most nearly means**

- A disinclinations
- B antipathies
- C virtuosities
- D penchants

**5. What is the most likely reason for Zhuangzi not bowing in lines 61-63?**

- A Zhuangzi is a king himself and does not need to show deference to a fellow monarch.
- B Zhuangzi is too crippled to bow
- C Zhuangzi does not respect the king, since the king is not like a monarch should be
- D Zhuangzi was unaware of the social customs of the kingdom

**6. All of the following are similarities between the Sword of the Son of Heaven and the Sword of a Feudal Lord except**

- A It is made of pure and incorruptible men
- B When thrust forward, there is nothing in front of it
- C It will make people follow the wielder’s command.
- D When it is spun around it has nothing to either side of it

**7. What purpose does the statement “The commoner’s sword is wielded by men with tangled hair and protruding whiskers, decked up in hanging caps and wild tassels and short-bottomed coats” serve when it appears again in the passage at lines 147-150?**

- A To emphasize the immaturity of the king
- B To demonstrate to the king what kind of people with whom he is associating
- C To poetically present imagery that personified the Sword of the Commoner
- D To create a parallelism with the statement of the prince

**8. How many swords did Zhuangzi have?**

- A No swords
- B One sword
- C Two swords
- D Three swords

**9. When Zhuangzi says “Your majesty can now sit down and settle himself. The business of the swords is over and finished,” he most likely means**

- A That he, Zhuangzi, has won the duel and the king should simply accept his defeat with humility.
- B That the king needs to rest after a long a formidable battle with Zhuangzi, and he is inviting the king to sit and rest with him as a new friend.
- C That he, Zhuangzi, has lifted the curse on the king, who is now free to rest and return to his duties as monarch of Zhao.
- D That the king’s juvenescence has been put behind him and it is time he be a responsible king.

**10. The moral of this passage can most likely be described as**

- A Violence is never the way to happiness and peace.
- B Do not live by the sword, because one who lives by the sword will die by the sword.
- C Thoughtful words and kind actions can conquer even the most wicked evil.
- D Virtuous leadership requires thoughtfulness rather than force.