

Neither Great nor Small

By Chuang Tzu (c. 369-286 BC)

Conditions are not invariable; terms are not final. Thus, the wise man looks into space, and does not regard the small as too little, nor the great as too much; for he knows that there is no limit to dimension.

It was the time of autumn floods. Every stream poured into the river, which swelled in its turbid course. The banks receded so far from one another that it was impossible to tell a cow from a horse.

Then the Spirit of the River laughed for joy that all the beauty of the earth was gathered to himself. Down with the stream he journeyed east, until he reached the ocean. There, looking eastwards and seeing no limit to its waves, his countenance changed. And as he gazed over the expanse, he sighed and said to the Spirit of the Ocean, "A vulgar proverb says that he who has heard but part of the truth thinks no one equal to himself. And such a one am I.

"When formerly I heard people detracting from the learning of Confucius or underrating the heroism of Poh I, I did not believe. But now that I have looked upon your inexhaustibility -- alas for me had I not reached your abode, I should have been forever a laughingstock to those of comprehensive enlightenment!"

To which the Spirit of the Ocean replied, "You cannot speak of ocean to a well-frog -- the creature of a narrower sphere. You cannot speak of ice to a summer insect -- the creature of a season. You cannot speak of TAO to a pedagogue: his scope is too restricted. But now that you have emerged from your narrow sphere and have seen the great ocean, you know your own insignificance, and I can speak to you of great principles.

"There is no body of water beneath the canopy of heaven which is greater than ocean. All streams pour into it without cease, yet it does not overflow. It is constantly being drained off, yet it is never empty. Spring and autumn bring no change; floods and droughts are equally unknown. And thus it is immeasurably superior to mere rivers and brooks -- though I would not venture to boast on this account, for I get my shape from the universe, my vital power from the Yin and Yang. In the universe I am but as a small stone or a small tree on a vast mountain. And conscious thus of my own insignificance, what is there of which I can boast?

"The Four Seas -- are they not to the universe but like puddles in a marsh? The Middle Kingdom -- is it not to the surrounding ocean like a tare-seed in a granary? Of all the myriad created things, man is but one. And of all those who inhabit the land, live on the fruit of the earth, and move about in cart and boat, an individual man is but one. Is not he, as compared with all creation, but as the tip of a hair upon a horse's skin?

"The succession of the Five Rulers, the contentions of the Three Kings, the griefs of the philanthropist, the labors of the administrator, are but this and nothing more. Poh I refused the throne for fame's sake. Confucius discoursed to get a reputation for learning. This overestimation of self on their part, was it not very much your own in reference to water?"

"Very well," replied the Spirit of the River, "am I then to regard the universe as great and the tip of a hair as small?"

"Not at all," said the Spirit of the Ocean. "Dimensions are limitless; time is endless. Conditions are not invariable; terms are not final. Thus, the wise man looks into space, and does not regard the small as too little, nor the great as too much; for he knows that there is no limit to dimension. He looks back into the past, and does not grieve over what is far off, nor rejoice over what is near; for he knows that time is without end. He investigates fullness and decay, and does not rejoice if he succeeds, nor lament if he fails; for he knows that conditions are not invariable. He who clearly apprehends the scheme of existence, does not rejoice over life, nor repine at death; for he knows that terms are not final.

"What man knows is not to be compared with what he does not know. The span of his existence is not to be compared with the span of his nonexistence. With the small to strive to exhaust the great necessarily lands him in confusion, and he does not attain his object. How then should one be able to say that the tip of a hair is the *ne plus ultra* of smallness, or that the universe is the *ne plus ultra* of greatness?"

"Dialecticians of the day," replied the Spirit of the River, "all say that the infinitesimally small has no form, and that the infinitesimally [infinitely?] great is beyond all measurement. Is that so?"

"If we regard greatness as compared with that which is small," said the Spirit of the Ocean, "there is no limit to it; and if we regard smallness as compared with that which is great, it eludes our sight. The infinitesimal is a subdivision of the small; the colossal is an extension of the great. In this sense the two fall into different categories.

"Both small and great things must equally possess form. The mind cannot picture to itself a thing without form, nor conceive a form of unlimited dimensions. The greatness of anything may be a topic of discussion, or the smallness of anything may be mentally realized. But that which can be neither a topic of discussion nor be realized mentally, can be neither great nor small.

"Therefore, the truly great man, although he does not injure others, does not credit himself with charity and mercy. He seeks not gain, but does not despise his followers who do. He struggles not for wealth, but does not take credit for letting it alone. He asks help from no man, but takes no credit for his self-reliance, neither does he despise those who seek preferment through friends. He acts differently from the vulgar crowd, but takes no credit for his exceptionality; nor because others act with the majority does he despise them as hypocrites. The ranks and emoluments of the world are to him no cause for joy; its punishments and shame no cause for disgrace. He knows that positive and negative cannot be distinguished, that great and small cannot be defined.

"I have heard say, the man of TAO has no reputation; perfect virtue acquires nothing; the truly great man ignores self; -- this is the height of self-discipline."

Translated from the Chinese by Herbert A. Giles