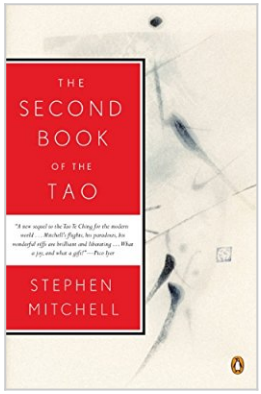

The Second Book of the Tao

By Stephen Mitchell

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Editorial Review

Review

About the Author
Stephen Mitchell was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1943, educated at Amherst, the Sorbonne, and Yale, and de-educated through intensive Zen practice. His many books include the bestselling *Tao Te Ching, The Gospel According to Jesus, Bhagavad Gita, The Book of Job, Meetings with the Archangel,* and *Gilgamesh*. Mitchell is married to Byron Katie and cowrote two of her bestselling books: *Loving What Is* and *A Thousand Names for Joy*.

The Dream of a Butterfly

Chuang-tzu dreamt that he was a butterfly, fluttering here and there, carefree, unaware of a Chuang-tzu. Then he woke up, and there he was: Chuang-tzu, beyond a doubt. But was he Chuang-tzu who had dreamt that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly now dreaming that he was Chuang-tzu? There must be some *difference between Chuang-tzu and a butterfly! This is called "the transformation of things."*

The most famous dream in human history. You may feel that, as with Zeno's paradoxes, there is something specious going on here, if only you could put your finger on it. But the more closely you examine the story, the more penetrating Chuang-tzu's question becomes. He's the anti-serpent in the garden, tempting you to take one little bite from the Tree of Life. He's Alice's Caterpillar, puffing on his hookah and asking, "Who are *you*?" In fact, with time running backward as in a Feynman diagram, Alice's Caterpillar could well have metamorphosed into Chuang-tzu's butterfly, just to prove a point.

You may be recalling that *psych?* the Greek word for "soul," can also mean "butterfly." But let's leave the Greeks out of this. Chuang-tzu is definitely Chinese, he thinks. His butterfly is not a metamorphosis, not a metaphor; it's just a butterfly. Just? How can we know what depths of joy lie hidden within that pinpoint of a brain? The whole world contained in a garden, in a single flower! All time contained in a summer's day, and life one all-embracing multiorgasmic fragrance!

And who knows what a butterfly might dream of? Of an ancient Chinese philosopher, perhaps, or of a nineteenth-century Oxford don who was enchanted by little girls. This particular butterfly woke up as Chuang-tzu—or was it Chuang-tzu who woke up as himself? "There he was again, beyond a doubt." Beyond a doubt? Ha!

Things change before our very eyes, whether our eyes are open or shut. A butterfly becomes a man, a man becomes a question mark, a question mark becomes a winged creature, carefree, doing whatever it likes. Thus identity melts away, and we are left with something more valuable: a self—a non-self—that includes it all.

Cutting Up an Ox

Prince Wen-hui's cook, Ting, was cutting up an ox. Every touch of his hand, every ripple of his shoulders, every step of his feet, every thrust of his knees, every cut of his knife, was in perfect harmony, like the dance of the Mulberry Grove, like the chords of the Lynx Head music.

"Well done!" said the prince. "How did you gain such skill?"

Putting down his knife, Ting said, "I follow the Tao, Your Highness, which goes beyond all skills. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox. After three years, I had learned to look beyond the ox. Nowadays I see with my whole being, not with my eyes. I sense the natural lines, and my knife slides through by itself, never touching a joint, much less a bone.

"A good cook changes knives once a year: he cuts. An ordinary cook changes knives once a month: he hacks. This knife of mine has lasted for nineteen years; it has cut up thousands of oxen, but its blade is as sharp as if it were new. Between the joints there are spaces, and the blade has no thickness. Having no thickness, it slips right through; there's more than enough room for it. And when I come to a difficult part, I slow down, I focus my attention, I barely move, the knife finds its way, until suddenly the flesh falls apart on its own. I stand there and let the joy of the work fill me. Then I wipe the blade clean and put it away."

"Bravo!" cried the prince. "From the words of this cook, I have learned how to live my life."

In his rules for right livelihood, the Buddha proscribed trafficking in meat (and in weapons, slaves, intoxicants, and poison). Clearly, he never imagined someone like Prince Wen-hui's cook: an artist of ox flesh, a saint of the bloody carcass. So much for rules. This just shows that nothing in life can be categorized or excluded. The whole world is our palette.

Ting, it must be said, was a man of supreme integrity, who trusted what is and needed no one's appreciation. For decades he had been putting on his one-man show for an audience of zero: no one was watching—not even he. The glorious harmony of motion and intention simply happened without him. How can we know the dancer from the dance?

In the practice of butchery, he had learned how to step aside and let his body do the thinking. He followed the Tao into a world of unadulterated sensation, an Eden of the don't-know mind. The vast universe, with its myriad chiliocosms within chiliocosms, became a single knife-blade gliding through empty space. What did it matter that his material was slaughtered oxen rather than sounds or colors or words? Nothing remained but the pure joy of the work.

And let's not forget the admirable Wen-hui. Instead of being caught up in princely pursuits like governing, hunting, or dallying with his concubines, there he was in the kitchen, taking exquisite notice of the lowly, which turned out to contain the supreme. When the student is ready, the teacher appears.

Answer to Job

Master Ssu, Master Yu, Master Li, and Master Lai were talking. "Whoever can see non-being as his head, life as his back, and death as his butt, whoever knows that existence and non-existence are one body—that's someone we can be friends with." The four men looked at one another and smiled.

Then Master Yu got sick. Master Ssu went to visit him. "How are you?" he said.

Master Yu said, "Amazing! Look at how the Creator has bent me out of shape. My back is so curved that my intestines are on top of me. My chin digs into my belly button, my shoulders arch over my head, and my neck bones point to the sky." Yet he seemed peaceful and unconcerned. Hobbling over to the well, he looked in and said, "My, my! How totally He has bent me out of shape!"

"Are you discouraged?" asked Master Ssu.

"Not at all," Master Yu said. "Why

should *I be? If things go on like this, maybe He'll change my left arm into a rooster, and I'll announce the dawn. Maybe He'll change my right arm into a crossbow, and I'll shoot a duck for dinner. Or maybe He'll change my buttocks into wheels, and with my spirit for a horse I'll climb up into myself and go for a ride. I won't ever need a wagon again!*

"I received life when the time came, and I'll give it back when the time comes. Anyone who understands the proper order of things—that everything happens at exactly the right time—will be untouched by sorrow or joy. In ancient times this was called 'original freedom.' When you argue with reality, you lose. It has always been this way. That's why I have no complaints whatsoever."

These four old Chinese sages, who have met in the intimacy of realization, are like the men whom Yeats saw carved in lapis lazuli, climbing toward a little half-way house sweetened by plum- or cherry-branch. Where are Chuang-tzu's men—in a garden? in a tea shop? The setting doesn't matter. Wherever it is, whether flowers surround them or falling leaves, I delight to imagine them seated there, knowing themselves to the core, saying only what is essential, and smiling in appreciation of the emptiness at the heart of things.

End of Act One. Act Two is the answer to Job. Perhaps twenty years have gone by, or twenty days. Master Yu is afflicted with a neuromuscular syndrome that has bent him over like a paper clip. "Afflicted"? No: presented; graced. He relates his symptoms with the aplomb of a pathologist teaching a case study, a connoisseur describing a masterpiece. No wonder he's so kind to himself. He had no preconceptions. He doesn't take the disease personally.

People think that detachment must be a cold, humorless business. But Master Yu couldn't be more witty or engaging. Will his left arm turn into a rooster, his right arm a crossbow, his buttocks the wheels of a chariot? Anything can happen, after all, in this world of perpetual transformation, and he trusts that it will all be turned to good use. His amused segue into the surreal is a portrait of the mind at ease with itself.

To conclude the dialogue, we're given a statement of what the Masters are masters of. It's as if the smiles of the four old men have been transubstantiated into words. Original freedom: the epitome of imperturbability, the gaiety of the mind that cannot be upset by anything that happens, because at last it has met itself with understanding.

The Art of Cloudlessness

Chuang-tzu and Hui-tzu were playing checkers. "You say that you're an ordinary person," Hui-tzu said. "If you're so ordinary, how can you be so happy?"

Chuang-tzu said, "I'm just like anyone else, except that I don't have feelings like anger, fear, or sadness. Since I don't suffer, 'good' and 'bad' can't affect me."

Hui-tzu said, "Can someone really not suffer?"

Chuang-tzu said, "Of course. When you understand the mind, you're no longer attached to likes and dislikes, so they can't do you any harm. You just follow reality and don't try to control. It's as simple as that."

Hui-tzu said, "But if you don't suffer at all, how can you be human?"

Chuang-tzu said, "Is happiness inhuman? Where does suffering come from? Can it exist outside the mind?"

Hui-tzu said, "But it's unnatural to be happy all the time. Anger and sadness are a part of life. We let go of them as best we can."

Chuang-tzu said, "You have an awfully strange view of the natural. The natural is the spontaneous, the free. When we're clear, anger and sadness can't arise. If you spent less time thinking and more time investigating your mind, you'd stop talking nonsense. How can you let go of what's not there to begin with?"

The ancient Chinese form of checkers was a wickedly complicated game. When the two friends played, Chuang-tzu always won, because he had more than logic at his disposal. He could not only see straight ahead; he could see around corners. This gave him a distinct advantage.

Their dialogues were a form of checkers as well. Here the subject is suffering. Hui-tzu believes that anger, fear, and sadness are a necessary part of life, that they spring up out of nowhere, inevitable, uncaused. But every painful feeling is caused by a prior thought. We can't understand the why of the thought's arising, but we can learn the how of undoing it and, with it, our suffering. Then we don't need to bother about the why.

The constant happiness that Chuang-tzu talks about may seem to be an ideal, but in fact he is the realist here. The only thing that can interrupt happiness is an untrue thought. It's like a cloud hiding the sun. When we investigate it, it dissolves. Wisdom is the art of cloudlessness.

Bearding the Lion

Duke Huan was reading a book at the upper end of the hall. Pien the wheelwright was making a wheel at the lower end. Putting down his mallet and chisel, he walked over and said, "May I be so bold as to ask what Your Grace is reading?"

"The words of the sages," said the duke.

"Are these sages still alive?"

"No, they're long dead."

"Then what you're reading is just the dregs they left behind."

"How dare you make such a comment on what I am reading!" the duke shouted. "Explain yourself, or you die!"

"Certainly, Your Grace," said the wheelwright. "Here's how I see it. When I work on a wheel, if I hit the chisel too softly, it slides and won't grip. But if I hit it too hard, it gets stuck in the wood. When the stroke is neither too soft nor too hard, I know it, my hands can feel it. There's no way I can describe this place of perfect balance. No one taught it to me, and I can't teach it to my son. I have been practicing my craft for seventy years now, and I will never be able to pass it on. When the old sages died, they took their understanding with them. That's why I said that what you're reading is just the dregs they left behind."

I don't know who *your* wheelwright is, but these ancient Chinese noblemen had some remarkable folks working for them. Take the ferocious Duke Huan. He was known far and wide for his combustible temper. Drawing a sword was as natural for him as drawing a breath. So you might think that his servants tiptoed around him with their hearts in their throats.

Not in the least. Pien didn't stand on ceremony or wait to be spoken to. He could, after all, have kept on minding his own business, but something in the duke's demeanor called him to intervene. Like a fool, he rushed in where Confucian angels feared to tread. Sometimes you just can't leave well enough alone.

The duke was trying to find the place of perfect balance by reading other people's descriptions. It can't be

done. Pien's statement felt like a slap in the face because the duke was still taking things personally. When honor—other people's opinions—is your bread and butter, an insult is a matter of life and death. Fortunately for us, Pien considered life and death to be insignificant matters.

Having uncoiled the tightrope of the duke's anger, Pien proceeded to walk it like an acrobat. This boldness was simply trust in his own experience. He was a man in his eighties, and he knew that what is most valuable can't be taught, it can only be learned.

Marvelously, the story is left open-ended. Pien may well have survived. Maybe the duke nodded in acknowledgment. Maybe he even cried out "Bravo! From the words of this wheelwright, I have learned how to live my life." But if he shouted "Off with his head!" and the sword leapt from its scabbard, Pien would have offered himself without batting an eyelash. Win some, lose some. He was a man fully dedicated to his craft and to the freedom of his perhaps unappreciative sovereign.

Inside the Kingdom of Heaven

Whatever happens or doesn't happen,
can you center yourself in reality?
Can you stop looking to others
and focus on your innermost self?
Can you return to the beginning of the world
and be like a newborn baby?
It can scream its head off all day,
yet it never becomes hoarse.
It can clench its fist for hours,
yet its fingers never get cramped.
It can stare all day without blinking,
yet its eyes never grow tired.
Free from concerns and worries,
unaware of itself,
it moves without thinking,
doesn't know why things happen,
doesn't need to know.

To act without needing a reason,
to sit still without knowing how,
to ride the current of what is—
this is the primal virtue.

People think that entering the kingdom of heaven has something to do with good and evil. But as Jesus implied, every mother's child wakes up in the kingdom of heaven. Heaven is intimacy: the world before separation. It looks exactly like earth, but without the thoughts that branch out in a thousand directions too heavy for us to bear.

Our first parents were not the good children in a morality tale. They were enchanted with each other and with themselves, Adam staring into the mirror of phenomena, Eve singing as she plaited a wreath. The tree they ate from was not called the Tree of Evil: it was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They became mere grown-ups the moment they bit into that bitter fruit. They opened their eyes and thought that they knew something. They heard the voice of guilt and punishment walking in the garden in the cool of the day. They imagined that they were naked, when all the while they were clad in all earthly abundance, and crowned with

the moon and stars.

A Political Manifesto

Are you worried about the world?
Do you think that it needs your guidance?
Don't the heavens turn by themselves?
Don't sun and moon find their places?
What masterminds all this?
What creates all the connections?
What, without any effort,
makes everything happen in its time?
Is there some hidden mechanism
that makes life be as it is?
Do things just happen to turn out
exactly the way they do?
Do clouds make the rain, or is it
rain that makes up the clouds?
What force puffs them and punctures them?
The winds rise in the north,
they blow now west, now east,
and wander across the heavens.
What, without any effort,
stirs up this unfathomable joy?

Some people have an Atlas complex: they carry the world on their shoulders. They believe that if they put the world down, it couldn't carry on by itself. Worry and fear, they think, are the motivators for right action. If they saw the world as perfect, they think, they would be complacent and passive; they would just stay at home and cultivate their own gardens.

But what if cultivating your own garden were the best way to help the world? What if your little backyard could, with the proper care, grow enough vegetables and fruits to feed a million people? What if your gardening inspired a thousand of your neighbors to do the same? —"But a backyard can't feed a million people." —Ah, my dear fellow, it's a metaphor. I'm not talking about physical food, or even, necessarily, physical people.

Worrying about the world is a dead end. When nuclear proliferation is solved, global warming pops up. When global warming is solved, overpopulation starts looming. Then there's always the burning out of the sun, and the infinite expansion or contraction of the universe, which leaves us at zero any way you slice it.

When the mind discovers what it is, we wake up from these mortal dramas as if from a dream. All possible disasters have already happened, and if a future appears, we thread it through the eye of the needle. And whether we act or don't act, voilà: miraculously, without exception, things turn out exactly the way they do.

How to Serve Your Country

As Chuang-tzu was fishing in the river P'u, two high officials arrived from the King of Ch'u and said, "Sir, the king requests that you come to the capital and serve as his prime minister."

Without turning his head, Chuang-tzu answered, "I have heard that in Ch'u there is a sacred tortoise that died three thousand years ago. The king keeps its shell in the temple, wrapped in silk and encased in a golden box.

Now if you were this tortoise, would you prefer to be venerated in such a way, or would you rather be alive again, crawling around in the mud?"

"The latter, certainly," said the officials.

Chuang-tzu said, "Give my compliments to His Majesty, and tell him that I am happy right here, crawling around in the mud."

This story features Chuang-tzu as Huckleberry Finn. All he needs for perfect contentment is a fishing pole and some bait. It's easy to decline power when you don't care what people think of you and you've unraveled the urge to control. There's nothing more delicious than having no future.

The King of Ch'u was a little slow on the uptake, because he didn't understand how useful it is to be useless. The job of prime minister was the pinnacle of success for a commoner, the worldly man's daydream. It was also a royal pain in the neck: long hours, stupefying details, dangerous boss, ungrateful public.

Having delivered the king's request, the officials waited politely. They were wise men and knew that fishing is not about catching fish. Chuang-tzu didn't bow, he didn't rise to face them; his behavior could have been considered the height of rudeness. But integrity is always beautiful to the discerning eye. His focus was on the fishing pole. He never even stopped to wonder about the consequences of a refusal.

In the end, the officials returned to Ch'u not empty-handed. What they respectfully carried back was Chuang-tzu's response, which was, in their eyes, an honor to the king. It was also an honor to the sacred tortoise, brought back to muddy life now after three thousand years.

The Effortlessness of the Master

Ch'ing the master woodworker carved a bell stand so intricately graceful that all who saw it were astonished. They thought that a god must have made it.

The Marquis of Lu asked, "How did your art achieve something of such unearthly beauty?"

"My Lord," Ch'ing said, "I'm just a simple woodworker—I don't know anything about art. But here's what I can tell you. Whenever I begin to carve a bell stand, I concentrate my mind. After three days of meditating, I no longer have any thoughts of praise or blame. After five days, I no longer have any thoughts of success or failure. After seven days, I'm not identified with a body. All my power is focused on my task; there are no distractions. At that point, I enter the mountain forest. I examine the trees until exactly the right one appears. If I can see a bell stand inside it, the real work is done, and all I have to do is get started. Thus I harmonize inner and outer. That's why people think that my work must be superhuman."

When people saw Ch'ing's bell stand, they were astonished to get a glimpse of who we are. Awe is the natural reaction to genius: a recognition, an unforeseen depth. Explanations are secondary. People thought that a god must have made the bell stand only because they imagined a limit to the human mind.

Like Duke Huan's wheelwright and Prince Wen-hui's cook, Ch'ing had learned to follow the Tao, which goes beyond all art. Without the distraction of past or future, his mind was free, moment by moment, to move toward its own delight. Concentration, he found, was not a matter of applying effort; it was a way of eliminating the unnecessary. After a while, concepts such as good and evil, success and failure, flitted off into the unreal like ghosts that have lost their mission. What remained was the silence, a deep slow-flowing river in which he stood up to his hips, attentive to every ripple and splash, knowing that there was a hidden life beneath the surface and that if only he was patient enough, it would yield itself to him in its time.

Nothing happened for days, and again nothing, and more nothing, and he was unaware of how tenuous the separation between him and the world had become.

By the time he entered the forest, he was a tree among trees. Coming upon the right one was like seeing himself in a mirror. Suddenly it was there, *he* was there, and the bell stand fully articulated within him. From that point on, he knew he would never die.

True Love

Chuang-tzu's wife died. When Hui-tzu came to offer his condolences, he found Chuang-tzu sprawled out on the ground, pounding on a tub and singing.

Hui-tzu said, "You loved her all these years, you lived with her, you brought up your children and grew old together. Now that she's gone, don't you owe her a few tears, or at least silence? But pounding on a tub and singing at the top of your lungs—that's a bit much, don't you think?"

"Not at all," Chuang-tzu said. "When she died, I mourned as anyone else would. But then I looked back to the root of her being: not just before she was born, but before she even had a body; not just before she had a body, but before she had a soul. In the midst of the unfathomable ever-changing mystery, suddenly, out of nowhere, she had a soul. Then, suddenly, she had a body. Then, suddenly, she was born.

"Now there has been another transformation, and she's dead. The same process that brought her to birth, in time brought her to death, as naturally as fall turns into winter and spring into summer. Now she is lying at peace in her vast room. I realized that if I went around wailing and pounding my chest, it would show that I didn't understand the first thing about reality. So I stopped."

Chuang-tzu's wife died at exactly the right time, as do we all. She moved on without the impediment of concern for her husband, knowing that he wouldn't feel a moment's grief for her. This made her very happy.

Now, in the period of mourning, Chuang-tzu sits sprawled out on the ground, pounding on a washtub and singing. He enjoys singing loudly, with gusto. He isn't a great drummer, but he has a certain odd rhythm of his own. The woman he loves has never left; nothing of her is missing but the body. How can a merely physical absence affect his joie de vivre?

Hui-tzu, as usual, comes onto the scene as the perfect straight man. His is the voice of shocked piety, the propriety that holds the corners of the universe in place with laundry pins. *If you don't suffer*, he thinks, *it means that you don't care*.

In his reply, Chuang-tzu is the soul of patience. It's amazing what lies come out of his mouth. He speaks as though he had waited for his wife to die in order to understand about death. That would have been to close the barn door after the horse was stolen.

Actually, his whole account of gradual discernment is a fairy tale to cushion the shock to his friend's sensibilities. This is called "skillful means"; if he bent over backward any farther, his ears would be touching his ankles. In reality, there was no mourning, no looking back, no realization, no stopping. Chuang-tzu's wife died. He loved her. He was a happy man.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Theresa Gordon:

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