



An Analysis of Zhuangzi's State of Self-Forgetting

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Abstract: “Forgetting” is an important concept in Zhuangzi’s philosophy, serving as a crucial means for Zhuangzi to attain the “Way” and engage in the “wandering”. It represents a philosophical idea that transcends individual existence. Through the process of “forgetting”, one cleanses the obscured mind, returns to the true nature of life, and aligns with the cosmos, merging with the transformations of the universe. Ultimately, this leads to the attainment of the “state of self-forgetting”, where the mind, in its emptiness and clarity, observes all things and reveals the harmonious, beautiful world of wholeness.

Keywords: Zhuangzi; forgetting; non-action; nature

1. The Connotation of “forgetting”

The philosophy of Zhuangzi is a philosophy of human life, addressing the difficulties of the present and soothing the human heart. His ideas have increasingly become a focal point in the study of life philosophy. Building on Laozi’s concept of “diminishing the Way”, Zhuangzi further develops this theme, proposing a series of aesthetic concepts such as “sitting in forgetfulness” and “heart fasting”. These aesthetic propositions are not aimed at pursuing the mysterious “Way” or the enigmatic and unpredictable “spirit”, but rather at calming the frightened heart. They are intended to soothe the soul, serve life, and function as an art of life. Through the practice of “forgetting”, Zhuangzi seeks to remove obstructions, break the shackles of the mind, escape worldly desires and distractions, restore one’s original nature, return to the inner self, and find a meaningful world.

The concept of “forgetting” appears multiple times in the Zhuangzi text. For instance, “forgetting the things, forgetting the heavens; this is called forgetting oneself. A person who forgets oneself is said to enter into heaven”; “Discard the body, discard the wisdom, leave behind form and knowledge, and become one with the great unity — this is called sitting in forgetfulness”[1]. Zhuangzi presents “forgetting” as a spiritual state, a worldview that seeks to detach from desires and notions of right and wrong, loss and gain, and enter into a state of tranquil void, reaching the state of “losing the self” and “selflessness”. He also proposes that through the practice of “sitting in forgetfulness”, one can achieve mutual nourishment of both the inner and outer worlds, ultimately attaining the highest form of unintentional joy. In *The Thought World of Zhuangzi*, it is explained that “sitting in forgetfulness” is a crucial aspect of Zhuangzi’s understanding of the “Way”. By engaging in practices such as “heart fasting” and “sitting in forgetfulness”, one can achieve a state of inner tranquility and stillness[2].

Zhuangzi introduces the concept of “forgetting” as a response to the real-life dilemmas of his time, offering “forgetting” as a method for people in distress to resolve their problems. As Zhuangzi states, “Virtue has its growth, and the body has its forgetting. If a person forgets what should be forgotten but does not forgetting what should not be forgotten, this is called sincere forgetting.” Essentially, “forgetting” is a process of clarification—through deep forgetting, one eliminates the false and retains the true, discards the coarse and preserves the refined, simplifies the complex, and abstracts out the typical, the universal, and the general[3].

One must forgetting what should be forgotten. Through forgetting, something valuable is gained. When, through the cultivation of “self-forgetting”, one gradually approaches the state of the “true person”, one truly grasps the essence of the “Way” and understands the true meaning of Zhuangzi’s aesthetics.

2. The Artistic Spiritual Realm of “forgetting”

In the “Tian Dao” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, Zhuangzi proposes the idea of “reverence through non-action” as the Way of Heaven. However, the realization of any goal requires action on the part of humans. Both the pre-Qin Daoist and Confucian founders deviated from the Way of non-action and fell into the mire of “action”, unable to extricate themselves. In this developmental process, what is the poetic realm that exists between “non-action” and “action”[4]?

Zhuangzi did not initially pursue art as his subject. He was not particularly concerned with art, but rather with the pursuit of the highest state, the “Way”. It was in this process that the spirit of art emerged. “forgetting” and “wandering” represent the complete manifestation of this artistic spirit in life. When later generations experience life through these concepts,

they too discover the artistic meaning embedded within them.

During the Warring States period, Chinese art had already reached a high level of development. According to archaeological evidence from unearthed artifacts, the art of that time shows signs of liberation from the constraints of traditional practices, with craftsmen unconsciously grasping what true art is. In the process of artistic creation, entering the realm of “non-action” from “action” can be seen as reaching the level of “craft advancing into the Way”, and also the state of “self-forgetting”. The example of

“dismember an ox as skillfully as a butcher” illustrates the concept of craftsmanship advancing into the Way—where “non-action” dissolves into “action”, and the “Way” is brought down to the level of technique. This brings about a fusion of internal aesthetic experience and external form, creating an organic unity between the two, thus achieving the integration of the Way and technique. “One who has attained the Way forgets the Way, and one who has attained skill forgets skill.” Once a person’s technique reaches the point where the mind and hands are in perfect harmony, they achieve a state of profound unity between the self and the object. This is a realm of absolute creative freedom, a state of “self-forgetting”, where art inadvertently enters the realm of the “Way”. Zhuangzi’s artistic spirit has had a profound influence on people. Many have sought to immerse themselves in Zhuangzi’s “artistic spirit” in order to embody the Way, and in doing so, they have formed an aesthetic meaning that defines their aesthetic realm. This state of aesthetic engagement reflects the ultimate state of artistic expression—one in which the artist, by aligning with the natural flow of the universe, reaches a state of true creative freedom.

Hegel once said, “The depth of the mind and soul is not unknown; rather, it depends on the artist’s deep exploration of both the external and internal worlds.” Artistic experience is an interactive process between the subject and the object, evolving from a lower to a higher state. It is a journey where the artist moves from merely experiencing things to transcending them, eventually entering the state of “forgetting both the object and the self”. In this state, the artist forgets everything, harmonizing with the ideal state of Heaven, opposing human-made concerns, and seeking to live in unity with nature and all living beings. This pursuit is aligned with “natural non-action” where the artist strives for pure expression, free from personal desires, utilitarian goals, and intentions, focusing only on the spontaneous expression of the spirit, thereby achieving an art form that is purposeless and without effort. However, this does not mean that Zhuangzi’s concept of non-action neglects artistic creation. On the contrary, within the framework of non-action, another kind of meaning is sought in the creative process. For instance, Gu Kaizhi proposes the ideas of “vitality and spirit” and “capturing the spirit in representation”; Zhang Zao speaks of “learning from nature externally, and finding the heart’s source internally”; and Guo Xi advocates for “taking the mountains and rivers as one’s own body”, each offering a set of principles for artistic creation[5]. In terms of aesthetic appreciation, Zong Bing promotes the idea of “responding to landscapes with mystery” and “clarifying the heart to taste the images”, which also requires purposeful cultivation of the self to establish an aesthetic mindset, while simultaneously pursuing an aesthetic creation and appreciation that are free from utilitarianism and intention. In poetry and painting creation, the artist achieves the state of “forgetting the self”, much like Wang Wei in his famous line: “Walking to the end of the water, I sit and watch the clouds rise”. In this state, the artist abandons the worldly distractions and the constraints of the poet’s identity, merging with the landscape. The poetic realm they create is ethereal and transcendent, perfectly illustrating the transformative power of self-forgetting to generate the ultimate artistic expression. Through this process, the artist becomes one with the natural world, allowing pure, unfiltered inspiration to flow and take shape.

3. The Aesthetic Realm of “forgetting”

If one were to ask what Zhuangzi and his school consider to be beauty, the answer would naturally be that “natural non-action” is beauty, and it is the highest form of beauty. Zhuangzi’s aesthetic view and literary thought reverence the beauty of nature and simplicity. However, this is not merely a discussion of natural beauty. For Zhuangzi, nature, Heaven, and the Way are unified as one. The famous story of “Zhuang Zhou dreaming of a butterfly” is a concentrated embodiment of Zhuangzi’s concept of transformation, where the self and the object merge into a state of self-forgetting, the boundaries between the self and the object dissolve, and the “transformation of things” occurs[6]. This represents a realm where the distinctions between the self and the object are eliminated, and where one’s consciousness can transcend the limits of worldly concerns. Zhuangzi’s philosophy seeks to lead the soul away from the turmoil of the world into tranquility, and from that tranquility, into the realm of “nothingness”. In this state of emptiness, all restraints are discarded, and ultimately, from this void, the heart is purified and the “Way” is attained. Zhuangzi advocates for returning human consciousness and actions to nature, aligning them with natural principles, and through this process, the pursuit of beauty must be grounded in nature.

How to Achieve the Aesthetic Realm of Self-forgetting? Zhuangzi says: “Heaven and Earth possess great beauty, yet do not speak of it; the four seasons have clear laws, yet do not debate them.” This is the “great beauty” of Heaven and Earth, the true nature of the world. Zhuangzi also emphasizes “extreme emptiness and profound stillness”, where “emptiness and still-

ness” reflect a natural tendency towards non-action and a return to nature. All things in the world are inherently empty and tranquil. The life of all things follows a process from “nothing” to “something” and back to “nothing”, ultimately returning to its root, which is “emptiness” and “stillness” — the essence of life itself. By observing the world from this perspective, one enters into a state of clarity and ethereality. In this way, although the “Way” is nothingness, it has a presence that exists somewhere between abstraction and concreteness, embodying the natural meaning of Zhuangzi’s philosophy of life and aesthetics.

The concepts of “sitting in forgetfulness” and “heart fasting” were introduced not only as responses to the practical dilemmas of human life, but they also carry profound aesthetic significance in Zhuangzi’s philosophy. The ultimate aim of “sitting in forgetfulness” is not merely to transcend worldly concerns, but to reach the “Way”, to merge with nature and the cosmos, and to attain a state of clarity. The link between the natural realm and human life is found in Zhuangzi’s principle of “the unity of the self and the object”. In this process, “sitting in forgetfulness” naturally leads to the state of “transformation of things”. Thus, “the heart follows the transformation of things, and the self and the object become mysteriously unified”, where the open-hearted aesthetic realm allows one to intuitively grasp the true nature of life[7]. Through “sitting in forgetfulness”, one discovers and reaches the “transformation of things”, ultimately achieving an aesthetic appreciation of beauty.

Xu Fuguan argues that Zhuangzi’s pursuit is the metaphysical “Way” of non-action, which can only be realized with a heart that is liberated and in a state of tranquility. This leads to the attainment of the “forgetting of both the self and the object”, the inevitable state that “forgetting” brings about. Zhuangzi’s aesthetic mindset of “forgetting” encourages a profound experience of the great beauty of Heaven and Earth. His deep philosophical thinking has continuously influenced Chinese aesthetic concepts and artistic creation throughout history.

4. Conclusion

In Zhuangzi’s philosophy, the concept of “forgetting” holds a crucial position, serving as an important means for individuals to return to their true nature and realize the core idea of “freedom”. In the process of transcending the mundane and pursuing freedom, one achieves an aesthetic appreciation of art, searching for its unique artistic spirit, and reaching the state of unity between the self and the object. While the concept of “forgetting” is not explicitly aimed at guiding artistic creation, Zhuangzi’s profound life philosophy imparts deep meaning to his thought, significantly influencing people’s growing emphasis on inner cultivation. This influence encourages artists, in the process of creation, to constantly search for a pure mental space and the most authentic self. The idea of “forgetting” not only impacts artistic creation but also holds profound significance for our current value pursuits and outlook on life.

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