The Sound of the Forest

Back in the third century A.D., the King Ts’ao sent his son, Prince T’ai, to the temple to study under the great master Pan Ku. Because Prince T’ai was to succeed his father as king, Pan Ku was to teach the boy the basics of being a good ruler. When the prince arrived at the temple, the master sent him alone to the Ming-Li Forest. After one year, the prince was to return to the temple to describe the sound of the forest.

When Prince T’ai returned, Pan Ku asked the boy to describe all that he could hear. "Master," replied the prince, "I could hear the cuckoos sing, the leaves rustle, the hummingbirds hum, the crickets chirp, the grass blow, the bees buzz, and the wind whisper and holler." When the prince had finished, the master told him to go back to the forest to listen to what more he could hear. The prince was puzzled by the master's request. Had he not discerned every sound already?

For days and nights on end, the young prince sat alone in the forest listening. But he heard no sounds other than those he had already heard. Then one morning, as the prince sat silently beneath the trees, he started to discern faint sounds unlike those he had ever heard before. The more acutely he listened, the clearer the sounds became. The feeling of enlightenment enveloped the boy. "These must be the sounds the master wished me to discern," he reflected.

When Prince T’ai returned to the temple, the master asked him what more he had heard. "Master," responded the prince reverently, "when I listened most closely, I could hear the unheard - the sound of flowers opening, the sound of the sun warming the earth, and the sound of the grass drinking the morning dew." The master nodded approvingly. "To hear the unheard," remarked Pan Ku, "is a necessary discipline to be a good ruler. For only when a
ruler has learned to listen closely to the people's hearts, hearing their feelings uncommunicated, pains unexpressed, and complaints not spoken of, can he hope to inspire confidence in his people, understand when something is wrong, and meet the true needs of his citizens."

**Fire and Water**

In the fourth century B.C., hidden within the state of Lu, lay the district over which Duke Chuang governed. The district, though small, had prospered exceedingly well under Chuang’s predecessor. But since Chuang's appointment to the post, its affairs had deteriorated markedly. Taken aback by the sad turn of events, Chuang set out to the Han mountain to seek the wisdom of the great master Mu-sun.

When the duke arrived at the mountain, he found the great master sitting peacefully on a small rock looking out at the adjoining valley. After the duke had explained his situation to Mu-sun, he waited with bated breath for the great master to speak. Contrary to Chuang's expectation, however, the master whispered not a word. Rather, he smiled softly and gestured to the duke to follow him.

Silently they walked until before them lay the Tan Fu River, whose end could not be seen, it was so long and broad. After meditating on the river, Mu-sun set out to build a fire. When at last it was lit and the flames were aglow, the master had Chuang sit by his side. There they sat for hours on end as the fire burned brilliantly into the night.

With the coming of dawn, when the flames no longer danced, Mu-sun pointed to the river. Then, for the first time since the duke's arrival, the great master spoke, "Now do you understand why you are unable to do as your predecessor did - to sustain the greatness of your district?" Chuang looked perplexed; he understood now no better than before. "Great master," he said, "forgive my ignorance, for the wisdom you impart I cannot comprehend."

Mu-sun then spoke for the second time. "Reflect, Chuang, on the nature of the fire as it burned before us last night. It was strong and powerful. Its flames leapt upward as they danced and cried in vainglorious pride. No strong trees nor wild beasts could have matched its mighty force. With ease it could have conquered all that lay in its path."

"In contrast, Chuang, consider the river. It starts as but a small stream in the distant mountains. Sometimes it flows slowly, sometimes quickly, but always it sails downward, taking the low ground as its course. It willingly permeates every crack in the earth and willingly embraces every crevice in the land, so humble is its nature. When we listen to the water, it can scarcely be heard. When we touch it, it can scarcely be felt, so gentle is its nature."

"Yet in the end, what is left of the once mighty fire? Only a handful of ashes. For the fire is so strong, Chuang, that it not only destroys all that lies in its path but eventually falls prey to its own strength and is consumed. It is not so with the calm and quiet river. For as it was, so it is, so it will always be: forever flowing, growing deeper, broader, ever more powerful as it journeys down to the ocean, providing sustenance to all. Reflect, Chuang," continued the master, "on what type of ruler you are. Perhaps the answer that you seek will lie there."
The Wisdom of the Mountain

In ancient China, on top of Mount Ping stood a temple where the enlightened one, Hwan, dwelled. Of his many disciples, only one is known to us, Lao-li. For more than 20 years, Lao-li studied and meditated under the great master, Hwan. Although Lao-li was one of the brightest and most determined of disciples, he had yet to reach enlightenment. The wisdom of life was not his.

Lao-li struggled with his lot for days, nights, months, even years until one morning, the sight of a falling cherry blossom spoke to his heart. "I can no longer fight my destiny," he reflected. "Like the cherry blossom, I must gracefully resign myself to my lot." From that moment forth, Lao-li determined to retreat down the mountain, giving up his hope of enlightenment.

Lao-li searched for Hwan to tell him of his decision. The master sat before a white wall, deep in meditation. Reverently, Lao-li approached him. "Enlightened one," he said. But before he could continue, the master spoke, "Tomorrow I will join you on your journey down the mountain." No more needed to be said. The great master understood.

The next morning, before their descent, the master looked out into the vastness surrounding the mountain peak. "Tell me, Lao-li," he said, "what do you see?" "Master, I see the sun beginning to wake just below the horizon, meandering hills and mountains that go on for miles, and couched in the valley below, a lake and an old town." The master listened to Lao-li's response. He smiled, and then they took the first steps of their long descent.

Hour after hour, as the sun crossed the sky, they pursued their journey, stopping only once as they approached the foot of the mountain. Again Hwan asked Lao-li to tell him what he saw. "Great wise one, in the distance I see roosters as they run around barns, cows asleep in sprouting meadows, old ones basking in the late afternoon sun, and children romping by a brook." The master, remaining silent, continued to walk until they reached the gate to the town. There the master gestured to Lao-li, and together they sat under an old tree. "What did you learn today, Lao-li?" asked the master. "Perhaps this is the last wisdom I will impart to you." Silence was Lao-li's response.

At last, after long silence, the master continued. "The road to enlightenment is like the journey down the mountain. It comes only to those who realize that what one sees at the top of the mountain is not what one sees at the bottom. Without this wisdom, we close our minds to all that we cannot view from our position. But with this wisdom, Lao-li, there comes an awakening. We recognize that alone one sees only so much - which, in truth, is not much at all. What you cannot see can be seen from a different part of the mountain."

The Wheel and the Light

Back in the third century B.C., the outbreak of fighting following the collapse of the Qin Dynasty had just ended. In its place now stood the Han Dynasty, whose emperor, Liu Bang, had consolidated China into a unified empire for the first time. To commemorate the event, Liu Bang had invited high-ranking military and political officials, poets, and teachers to a grand
celebration. Among them was Chen Cen, the master to whom Liu Bang had often gone for enlightenment during his campaign to unify China.

The celebration was in full swing. A banquet grander than any ever seen was being held. At the center table sat Liu Bang with his three heads of staff: Xiao He, who administered the logistics of unification; Han Xin, who organized and led the fighting activity; and Chang Yang, who formulated the diplomatic and political strategies. At another table sat Chen Cen and his three disciples.

While food was served, speeches given, honors presented, and entertainment performed, all looked on with pride and exhilaration - all except Chen Cen's three disciples, who sat awestruck. Only midway through the festivities did they utter their first words. "Master," they remarked, "all is grand, all is befitting, but at the heart of the celebration lies one enigma." Sensing his disciples' hesitation, the master gently encouraged them to continue.

"At the central table sits Xiao He," they proceeded. "Xiao He's knowledge of logistics cannot be refuted. Under his administration, the soldiers have always been well fed and properly armed, whatever the terrain. Next to his Han Xin. Han Xin's military tactics are beyond reproach. He understands exactly where to ambush the enemy, when to advance, and when to retreat. He has won every battle he has led. Last is Chang Yang. Chang Yang sees the dynamics of political and diplomatic relations in his palm. He knows which states to form alliances with, how to gain political favors, and how to corner heads of states into surrendering without battle. This we understand well. What we cannot comprehend is the centerpiece of the table, the emperor himself. Liu Bang cannot claim noble birth, and his knowledge of logistics, fighting, and diplomacy does not equal that of his heads of staff. How is it, then, that he is emperor?"

The master smiled and asked his disciples to imagine the wheel of a chariot. "What determines the strength of a wheel in carrying a chariot forward?" he asked. After a moment of reflection, his disciples responded, "Is it not the sturdiness of the spokes, Master?" "But then, why is it," he rejoined, "that two wheels made of identical spokes differ in strength?" After a moment, the master continued, "See beyond what is seen. Never forget that a wheel is made not only of spokes but also of the space between the spokes. Sturdy spokes poorly placed make a weak wheel. Whether their full potential is realized depends on the harmony between them. The essence of wheelmaking lies in the craftsman's ability to conceive and create the space that holds and balances the spokes within the wheel. Think now, who is the craftsman here?"

A glimmer of moonlight was visible behind the door. Silence reigned until one disciple said, "But master, how does a craftsman secure the harmony between the spokes?" "Think of sunlight," replied the master. "The sun nurtures and vitalizes the trees and flowers. It does so by giving away its light. But in the end, in which direction do they all grow?"