



## ALL IS ONE

(c. 400 to 300 BCE)

**B**y the fourth century, the economic and political transformation of China was progressing at astonishing speed. The wars continued and the princes needed to fund their expensive campaigns, so they encouraged the development of the new mercantile economy.<sup>1</sup> In the late fifth century, the Chinese had discovered how to cast iron, and with their strong iron tools were able to clear an immense amount of forest land. By the end of the fourth century, the Wei Valley, the Chengdu basin, and the central plain were under continuous cultivation. Farmers learned to use manure, to distinguish different kinds of soil, and the best times to plough, sow, or drain the land. Harvests improved, and despite the destructive warfare, there was a rapid growth in population. A new class of merchants arose, who worked closely with the princes, building foundries and developing mines. The most enterprising merchants established large trading empires and took their goods to north Korea, the steppes, and even as far as India, trading in textiles, cereals, salt, metals, hides, and leather, and employing an ever-growing number of artisans, agents, and fleets of carts and boats.

The cities were no longer simply political and religious capitals, but had become centres of trade and industry, accommodating thousands of citizens. In the feudal period, the walls of the little palace towns had measured a mere five hundred yards; now some city walls were over two miles long. In the fourth century, Linzi, the capital of Qi, was the largest city in China, with three hundred thousand inhabitants. An urban class of craftsmen and artisans, no longer tied to the royal palace, had emerged there, and the wealthy enjoyed the new luxuries and the thriving entertainment industry. The princes of Qi became patrons of the leading scholars of China, and in 357 founded the Jixia Academy beside the western gate of

Linzi, where *shi* literati lived in well-appointed apartments on generous stipends.<sup>2</sup>

Many enjoyed these changes, but others were becoming uneasily aware that their lives were very different from the ritualized existence of their forefathers. The princes of the big, successful states were no longer hedged around with ceremonial restrictions. Instead of “doing nothing,” as the royal *li* required, the rulers enthusiastically pursued their own ambitious policies and were intent on monopolizing power. In the early fourth century, the king of Wei replaced the hereditary barons and ministers with a civil service of salaried officials. The old administrative offices had been tied to the great families, but now the king could choose his own functionaries, and if they were disobedient, he could simply get rid of them. Unsatisfactory politicians were summarily exiled or executed. As other states followed the example of Wei, politics became an extremely dangerous game. The princes occasionally consulted the *shi* moralists, but paid far more attention to the merchants. Increasingly their policies reflected the shrewd pragmatism and calculation of the new commercial ethos.

The economic boom accentuated inequalities and caused massive social disruption. Peasants were regularly drafted into the army and torn away from their homes and fields; some became successful farmers, but others fell into debt and were turned off their land. The rulers purloined many of the marshes and forests where peasants had fished, hunted game, or gathered wood. Village communities were fatally damaged, and many peasants were forced to become labourers in the factories and foundries. Some aristocratic families were ruined, and the small, old-fashioned principalities were in constant danger of annihilation. A great void had opened in the lives of many people. “What is lawful, what is unlawful?” asked Ku Yuan, prince and poet of Chu. “This country is a slough of despond! Nothing is pure any longer! Informers are exalted! And wise men of gentle birth are without renown!”<sup>3</sup> He had begged his prince to consult a holy man and return to the Way, but was dismissed, banished, and in 299 committed suicide.

Others wanted nothing whatever to do with this brave new world and retired to the forests. Hermits had been opting out of city life for some time; Confucius had met some of these anchorites, who had ridiculed his attempts to reform society.<sup>4</sup> These solitaries were nothing like the renouncers of India. They simply wanted a quiet life. Some took the high moral ground, however, speaking in a “critical and disparaging” way about the current state of affairs.<sup>5</sup> Their hero was Shen Nong, the legendary sage king who had invented agriculture.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the ambitious rulers of their

own day, Shen Nong had not tried to centralize his empire but had allowed each fiefdom to remain autonomous; he had not terrorized his ministers and, apart from a regular inspection of the crops, had ruled by “doing nothing” (*wu wei*). Other hermits were content simply to live an idyllic life, hunting and fishing in the forests and marshlands,<sup>7</sup> but by the middle of the fourth century, they too had developed a philosophy, which they attributed to one Master Yang.<sup>8</sup>

Yangzi left no book, but his ideas were preserved in other texts. He issued a direct and disturbing challenge to the Confucians and Mohists. The family *li* had insisted that a person’s life was not his own. Heaven had allotted humans a fixed life span, so if you put your life in danger, you violated Heaven’s will. Now that life at court had become so dangerous, it was clearly wrong to seek political office.<sup>9</sup> Yangists, therefore, made a principled retreat from public life. They argued that Yao and Shun had not retired from government out of humility, as the Confucians believed, but because they refused to put their own or other people’s lives at risk. Yangists liked to quote the example of Tan Fu, an ancestor of the Zhou kings, who had renounced the throne rather than fight an invading army: “To send to their deaths the sons and younger brothers of those with whom I dwell is more than I could bear,” he explained in his abdication speech.<sup>10</sup>

Yangists had no time for either *ren* or “concern for everybody.” Their philosophy was “Every man for himself.”<sup>11</sup> This seemed monstrously selfish to the Confucians, who complained that if Yangzi “could benefit the empire by pulling out one hair, he would not do so.”<sup>12</sup> But Yangists insisted that it was irresponsible to get involved with other people or institutions; your prime duty was to preserve your own life and do only what came naturally.<sup>13</sup> Yangists must not meddle with their human nature, but should follow the Way that had been established by Heaven. It was wrong to refuse pleasure or submit to the artificial rituals of court life, which distorted human relationships. You could not make real contact with people if you followed the *li* instead of your feelings. Life should be spontaneous and sincere.

Many people in China were attracted by the Yangist ideal, but others found it disturbing.<sup>14</sup> They had always believed that the rituals established the Way of Heaven on earth. Were these *li* really damaging? If Yangzi was right, virtuous kings who had denied themselves pleasure for the sake of their subjects had been foolish and wrongheaded, while immoral tyrants who simply enjoyed themselves were far closer to Heaven. Were human beings basically selfish? If so, what could be done to make the world a bet-

ter place? What was the basis for morality? Was the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation perverse? And what exactly was the "human nature" that the Yangists prized so highly? These questions were discussed by the scholars of the Jixia Academy, one of whom wrote a Confucian riposte to Yangism in a mystical essay called *Inward Training* (*Xinshu Shang*) for the guidance of a ruler.

The author argued that *ren* was not a distortion of human nature but its fulfilment; indeed, the very word *ren* was synonymous with humanity. If a prince wanted to become truly "human hearted," he must discover the core of his own being. Instead of fleeing to the forest to find peace and security, he must cultivate an interior quiet by means of meditation. By learning to check his passions, still his desires, and empty his mind of distracting thoughts, the enlightened prince would find his true and authentic self. He would clarify his mental powers, his physical health would improve, and he would discover that without making any further effort, he had "naturally" become a man of *ren*. The Chinese had discovered introspection and by the fourth century had developed their own version of yoga. We know very little about these early forms of meditation, but they seem to have involved exercises of concentration and controlled breathing. In the old days, the kings had established the Way by adopting the correct physical orientation. Now, according to *Inward Training*, a prince could put the world to rights by finding his true centre within.

Chinese meditation was based on the management of *qi*, a word that is difficult to translate. *Qi* was the raw material of life, its basic energy, and its primal spirit. It animated all beings and gave everything its distinctive shape and form. The dynamic, ceaselessly active substructure of reality, *qi* was not unlike the atoms of Democritus, except that it was more mystical. Under the guidance of the Way, the ultimate controlling force, it periodically accumulated in various combinations to form a rock, a plant, or a human being. But none of these creations was permanent. Eventually the *qi* would disperse: the person or plant would die, and the rock would disintegrate. But the *qi* was still alive; it would continue to roil in the cauldron of ceaseless change, and would eventually regroup and take on a different shape. Everything in the universe, therefore, shared the same life, albeit in different degrees of intensity.

The purest and most concentrated form of *qi* was being itself, the "quintessence" (*jing*) of reality. In meditation, the contemplative learned to liberate his *qi*. By systematically removing all the desire, hatred, and restless mental activity that blocked its natural course, the contemplative enabled his *qi* to flow unimpeded through his heart, mind, and body in the

way Heaven intended. When he achieved this total alignment with the Way, he fell into a trance, and a sacred peace rose up from within; this was the *shen*, his deepest and most divine self, which was one with the quintessence (*jing*) of existence. In meditation, therefore, the enlightened prince discovered his true nature. Not only was his "heart" (*xin*), the organ of thought, perfected, but his hearing, sight, and limbs were healthier too.<sup>15</sup> He would thus be able to fulfil his allotted span of life. Because he was one with the *jing*, the "quintessence" of everything that existed, he experienced a sense of union with the whole of reality, and could exclaim: "All things are at my disposal, within myself."<sup>16</sup>

At a time when China was torn apart by terrifying wars, Chinese mystics were discovering a tranquillity within themselves that drew everything together. This desire for unification also informed the new vogue for dialectic and debate. The intense discussions between Mohists, Confucians, and Yangists had led to a fascination with the mechanics of argument. Like the Greek Sophists, the *bianzhe* ("debaters") delighted in their ability to prove both sides of an argument and undermine received ideas. Many people found them trivial and irresponsible, but the debaters saw their work as a cohesive force, which brought apparently disparate objects together and revealed an underlying unity. One of them exclaimed: "I brought together similarity and difference, discerned hardness and whiteness; what was certain and what was not, what was possible and what was not."<sup>17</sup>

The most famous of these early dialecticians was a remarkable man: Huizi (370–319) was prime minister of Wei, one of the most advanced of the warring states.<sup>18</sup> Very little of his writing has survived, but he seems to have felt a strong affinity with Mohism. The only work that has come down to us is a set of ten paradoxes that revealed the instability that he discerned at the heart of existence.<sup>19</sup> Huizi wanted to demonstrate that words were misleading because they gave things an illusory permanence and solidity. "Today I left for Yueh," he said, "and arrived yesterday." Time was entirely relative: the "yesterday" of today was the "today" of yesterday, and today's "today" would be tomorrow's "yesterday." In another paradox, he demonstrated the relativity of our spatial concepts: "I know where the centre is of the whole world: north of Yen and south of Yueh." Because Yan was in the north of China, and Yue was in the south, the "centre" should logically lie between these two extremes. But when you stepped outside a strictly Chinese perspective, it was clear that any spot could become the centre of the world, just as any point on a line could be the starting point of a circle.

The theses were really points for contemplation, designed to show that

the distinctions we imagine we see were delusions. Even life and death were aspects of each other: “*When the sun is in the centre, it is in the decline,*” said Huizi. “*That which is born is dying.*” Everything was in flux, so from the very first moment of its existence, the life of any creature had already started to decay. People used words such as “high” and “low” in an absolute sense, without realizing that an object is only “high” in comparison with something else, so “*Heaven is on the same level as Earth and the mountains are equal with the marshes.*” It was a mistake to put things into hard-and-fast categories, because everything was unique, even objects that were superficially similar: “*That which is joined is separate.*” All things were, therefore, one: Heaven and earth, life and death, superior and lowly. A politician, an activist, and a Mohist, Huizi may have wanted to suggest that all human beings had equal value, and that social fortune was also mutable.<sup>20</sup>

In the first of his theses, Huizi pointed to a reality that lay beyond anything we experienced in ordinary life. “*The greatest thing has nothing outside it and we call this the great One; the smallest thing has nothing inside it, and we call this the smallest One.*” We called an object “big” only because it was larger than something else; but actually everything was “great” because there was nothing in our world that was not bigger than something else. Yet the categories “greatest” and “smallest” existed in our minds, which showed that we had the power to imagine the absolute. Language laid bare a transcendence that was built into the structure of our thought. Huizi’s paradoxes had a spiritual and social resonance that Zeno’s did not, and his ten propositions were framed by the notions of transcendence and compassion. In the first thesis, Huizi directed our attention to the great One that had nothing beyond itself. The tenth and last thesis was Mohist: “*Love embraces all forms of life and Heaven and Earth are of One.*” Because the distinctions on which we based our likes and dislikes were delusions, we should feel equal concern for all beings. The last thesis looked back to the first, because the “great One” comprised the whole of reality: Heaven and Earth were not distinct and antithetical but one.<sup>21</sup> Everything, therefore, deserved our love and ultimate concern.

This spiritual vision helps to explain Huizi’s unlikely friendship with Zhuangzi (c. 370–311), one of the most important figures of the Chinese Axial Age.<sup>22</sup> A Yangist and a hermit, Zhuangzi seems at first sight to have little in common with the dignified prime minister of Wei. He remained an outsider all his life. He once visited the king of Wei dressed in a worn, patched gown, his shoes tied together with string, and for some years he lived in a slum, earning his living by weaving sandals. But Zhuangzi had an

ebullient, original, and brilliant mind, and never felt at a loss before the rich and powerful. He loved sparring with Huizi, and after his death complained that he no longer had anybody to talk to, but ultimately Zhuangzi felt that dialectic was too narrow. Huizi, for example, was a Mohist, but could not the Confucians also be right? If everything was relative, as Huizi suggested, why should only one philosophy be correct? In his view, the bickering and point scoring of the philosophers were pure egotism: the Way was beyond limited human notions of right and wrong, truth and falsehood.

The book attributed to Zhuangzi is actually an anthology of texts that date from the fourth to the end of the third century. Traditionally, only the first seven chapters are thought to contain Zhuangzi’s own teachings, but modern analysis has revealed that these “Inner Chapters” include later material, and that some of the other sections are closer in style to the historical Zhuangzi. The book began as a defence of private life. Zhuangzi was irritated by the Mohists and Confucians, who, he thought, were positively bursting with self-importance, pompously convinced that they had a mission to save the world. Politics could not change human nature: when kings and politicians interfered with the lives of their subjects, they invariably made matters worse. Zhuangzi believed in nongovernment. It was unnatural and perverse to force people to obey man-made laws; it was like shortening the legs of a crane, putting a halter around a horse’s neck or a string through an ox’s nose.<sup>23</sup>

When Zhuangzi first retired from public life in search of peace and security, he had been a Yangist. But one day, he realized that it was impossible for any creature to live a wholly safe and protected life.<sup>24</sup> He had trespassed into a game reserve to poach some fowl, had spotted a large magpie, and taken careful aim, fully expecting the bird to fly off in alarm. But the magpie did not even notice Zhuangzi, because it had its eye on a delicious cicada that was basking in a lovely shady spot, heedless of its personal safety. A preying mantis was flexed ready to spring on the cicada, so intent upon the chase that it too ignored the magpie, which swept down on its prey in high excitement and gobbled them both up—still oblivious of Zhuangzi and his crossbow. Zhuangzi sighed with compassion. “Ah, so it is that one thing brings disaster upon another, and then upon itself.” None of these creatures was aware of impending danger, because they were all programmed to hunt one another. Whether they willed it or not, they were involved in a chain of mutual destruction. No one could live a wholly isolated life—not even a hermit: Zhuangzi himself had been so busy taking aim at the magpie that he had not noticed the appearance on

the scene of a gamekeeper, who angrily chased him out of the park. The incident made a great impression on Zhuangzi, and for three months he was depressed. He could now see that the Yangist creed was based on an illusion: it was impossible to protect yourself in the way Yangzi taught. We were conditioned to destroy and be destroyed, to eat and be eaten. We could not escape our destiny. Until we became reconciled to the endless process of destruction and dissolution, we would have no peace.

After the incident in the park, Zhuangzi found that he looked at the world quite differently. He began to realize that everything was in flux and constantly in the process of becoming something else—yet we were always trying to freeze our thoughts and experiences and make them absolute. This was not how the Way of Heaven operated. Anything that tried to close itself off from the endless transformation of life in an attempt to become autonomous and self-contained was going against the natural rhythm of the cosmos. Once he had fully appreciated this, Zhuangzi felt an exhilarating freedom. He found that he was no longer afraid of death, because it was futile to try to preserve your life indefinitely. Death and life, joy and sorrow succeeded each other, like day and night. When he died and ceased to be “Zhuangzi,” nothing would change. He would remain what essentially he had always been: a tiny part of the endlessly mutating pageant of the universe.

Zhuangzi sometimes used shock tactics to bring this truth home to friends and disciples. When Zhuangzi’s wife died, Huizi came to pay a condolence call, and was horrified to find him sitting cross-legged, singing rowdily, and bashing a battered old tub—flagrantly violating the dignified ceremonies of the mourning period. “She was your wife! She bore your children!” protested Huizi. “The least you can do is shed a tear for her!” Zhuangzi smiled. When she first died, he had mourned his wife like everybody else. But then he cast his mind back to the time before she was born, when she had simply been part of the endlessly churning *qi*, the raw material of the universe. One day there had been a wonderful change: the *qi* had mingled together in a new way, and suddenly, there was his dear wife! Now she was dead and had simply gone through another alteration. “She is like the four seasons in the way that spring, summer, autumn and winter follow each other,” Zhuangzi reflected. She was now at peace, lying in the bosom of the *dao*, the greatest of mansions. If he wept and complained, he would be completely at odds with the Way things really were.<sup>25</sup>

Zhuangzi and his friends showed a bemused, detached delight in the change, death, and dissolution that filled so many of the other sages of the Axial Age with dismay. One day, Master Li, one of Zhuangzi’s disciples,

had visited a dying friend, and to his disgust found his wife and children sobbing at the bedside. “Out of the way! Shoo!” he cried. “Don’t pester change in the making!” Then, leaning against the door of his sick friend’s bedroom, he remarked whimsically: “It’s amazing—that Maker-of-Things! What will it make of you next? Where will it send you? Will it make you into a rat’s liver? Will it make you into a bug’s arm?” “Our parents are part of us,” the dying man replied.

East and west, north and south—wherever we go, we follow their wishes. And we obey *yin* and *yang* even more completely. They’ve brought me here to the brink of death and to resist their wishes would be such insolence.

We call our life a blessing, so our death must be a blessing too. Suppose a mighty metal-smith cast a piece of metal, which jumped up and said, “No, no—I must be one of those legendary *Moyeh swords!*” Wouldn’t the metal-smith consider it ominous metal? And suppose, having chanced upon human form, I insist, “*Human, human, and nothing but human!*” Wouldn’t the Maker-of-Change consider me an ominous person? I see Heaven and Earth as a mighty foundry and the Maker-of-Change as a mighty metal-smith—so wherever they send me, how could I ever complain? I’ll sleep soundly—and then, suddenly, I’ll wake.<sup>26</sup>

Once they had given up thinking of themselves as unique and precious individuals whose lives must be preserved at all costs, Zhuangzi and his friends found that they could observe their predicament with cheerful interest and detachment, and remain calm and content.<sup>27</sup> Once you were entirely reconciled with the Way of Heaven, you were at peace because you were attuned to reality.

What exactly was the Way? Time and again, Zhuangzi insisted that the Way was unthinkable, inexpressible, and impossible to define. It had no qualities, no form; it could be experienced but never seen. It was not a god; it had existed before Heaven and Earth, and was beyond divinity; it was more ancient than antiquity—yet it was not old. It was both being and nonbeing.<sup>28</sup> It represented all the myriad patterns, forms, and potential that made nature the way it was.<sup>29</sup> The Way mysteriously ordered the shifting transformations of the *qi*, but it existed at a point where all the distinctions that characterize our normal modes of thought cease. Any attempt to pontificate about these ineffable matters simply led to unseemly, egotistic squabbling. We had to realize that we knew nothing. If we

selected one theory and rejected another, we were distorting reality, trying to force the creative flow of life into a channel of our own making. The only valid assertion was a question that plunged us into doubt and a luminous sense of unknowing. We should not be dismayed to find that there was no such thing as certainty, because this confusion could lead us to the Way.

Egotism was the greatest obstacle to enlightenment. It was an inflated sense of self that made us identify with one opinion rather than another; ego made us quarrelsome and officious, because we wanted to change other people to suit ourselves. Zhuangzi often mischievously used the figure of Confucius to express some of his own ideas. One day, he said, Yan Hui told Confucius that he was off to reform the king of Wei, a violent, reckless, and irresponsible young man. Marvellous, Confucius remarked wryly, but Yan Hui did not fully understand himself. How could he possibly change anybody else? All he could do was lay down the law and explain a few Confucian principles. How would these external directives affect the obscure subconscious impulses that were the source of the king's cruelty? There was only one thing that Yan Hui could do. He must empty his mind, get rid of all this bustling self-importance, and find his inner core.

“Centre your attention,” Confucius began. “Stop listening with your ears and listen with your mind. Then stop listening with your mind and listen with your primal spirit [*qi*]. Hearing is limited to the ear. Mind is limited to tallying things up. But the primal spirit's empty: it's simply that which awaits things. Tao is emptiness merged and emptiness is the mind's fast.”<sup>30</sup>

Instead of using every opportunity to feed the ego, we had to starve it. Even our best intentions could be grist to the mill of our selfishness. But *qi* had no agenda; it simply allowed itself to be shaped and transformed by the Way, and so everything turned out well. If Yan Hui stopped blocking the *qi*, deflecting it from its natural course, the Way could act through him. Only then could he become a force for good in the world. By the end of the conversation, however, Yan Hui seemed to have lost all interest in the project.

Once people stopped arguing about doctrines and theories, they could acquire what Zhuangzi called the Great Knowledge. Instead of claiming that *this* could not mean *that*, they began to see that all apparent contra-

dictions formed a mysterious, numinous unity. This *coincidentia oppositorum* brought them to the hub of the wheel, the axis of the Way, “the pivot at the centre of the circle, for it can react equally to that which is and to that which is not.”<sup>31</sup> The unenlightened state was like the vision of a frog who lived in a well and could see only a little patch of sky that he mistook for the whole. After he had seen the entire reality, his perspective was changed for ever.<sup>32</sup> The Great Knowledge could never be defined; Zhuangzi would describe only its effects. It gave the sage a sensitive and intelligent responsiveness to each circumstance as it arose. He did not plan how he would act ahead of time; he did not agonize over alternative courses of action or stick to a rigid set of rules. Once he had ceased to obstruct the Way, he would acquire a spontaneity that resembled the knack of a talented craftsman.

Zhuangzi told another story about Confucius, who was travelling with his disciples through a forest and met a hunchback who was trapping cicadas with a sticky pole. To Confucius's astonishment, the hunchback never missed a single one. How did he manage it? He had clearly so perfected his powers of concentration that he had lost himself in his task, and achieved an *ekstasis*, a self-forgetfulness that brought him into perfect harmony with the Way. “Do you have the Way?” Confucius asked. “Indeed I have!” replied the hunchback. He had no idea how he did it! But he had practised for months and could now bring himself into a state in which he was wholly focused on catching cicadas: “never tiring, never leaning, never being aware of any of the vast number of living beings, except cicadas. Following this method, how could I fail?” He had left his conscious self behind and let the *qi* take over, Confucius explained to his disciples: “He keeps his will undivided and his spirit energized,” so that his hands seemed to move by themselves. Conscious deliberate planning would be distracting and counterproductive. The hunchback reminded Zhuangzi of the carpenter Bian, who explained: “When I work on a wheel, if I hit it too softly, pleasant as this is, it doesn't make for a good wheel. If I hit furiously, I get tired, and the thing doesn't work! So, not too soft, not too vigorous. I grasp it in my hand and hold it in my heart. I cannot express this by word of mouth, I just know it. I cannot teach this to my son, nor can my son learn it from me.”<sup>33</sup> In the same way, a sage who had learned not to analyse, make distinctions, and weigh alternatives had left the “ego principle” behind, did what came naturally, and became one with the deepest and most divine rhythm of the universe.

What did this feel like? Zhuangzi told his disciples about Ziqi, the

contemplative, whose friends had come upon him one day “gazing into the sky, breath shallow and face blank, as if he were lost to himself.” This had never happened before. Ziqi looked like an entirely different person. What had happened? “Do you understand such things?” asked Ziqi. “Just then I’d lost myself completely.” He had “gone” in the same way as a craftsman disappeared into his work. When we tried to hold on to ourselves, we were alienated from the “great transformation” of the Way. Because he had lost himself, Ziqi was liberated from the constraints of selfishness. He could now see more clearly than ever before. “Perhaps you’ve heard the music of humans,” he told his friends, “but you haven’t heard the music of earth. Or if you’ve heard the music of earth, you haven’t heard the music of Heaven.” When you achieved this larger vision, you heard everything singing together, and yet you could distinguish each thing separately. This was the Great Knowledge; it was “broad and unhurried,” while “small understanding is cramped and busy.”<sup>34</sup>

You could not achieve this illumination unless you abandoned all previous habits of thought. The true sage did not amass knowledge, but learned to forget one thing after another, until finally he forgot about himself and could merge joyously into the Way. Zhuangzi told yet another story about Confucius and Yan Hui.

“I’m gaining ground!” Yan Hui had announced one day.

“What do you mean?” asked Confucius.

“I’ve forgotten Humanity [*ren*] and Duty [*yi*] completely,” Yan Hui replied.

“Not bad!” admitted Confucius. “But that’s still not it.”

A few days later, Yan Hui exclaimed: “I’ve forgotten ritual and music completely.”

“That’s still not it,” said Confucius.

But finally Yan Hui surprised his master. “I’m gaining ground!” he beamed. “I sit quietly and forget.”

Confucius shifted uneasily. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I let the body fall away and the intellect fade,” said Yan Hui. “I throw out form, abandon understanding—and then move freely, blending away into the great transformation. That’s what I mean by *sit quietly and forget*.”

Confucius went pale; his disciple had surpassed him.

“If you blend away like that, you’re free of likes and dislikes,” he said. “If you’re all transformation, you’re free of permanence. So in the end, the true sage here is you! So you won’t mind if I follow you from now on, will you?”<sup>35</sup>

To “know” a thing is to distinguish it from everything else. To forget these distinctions is to become aware of undifferentiated unity, and to lose all sense of being a separate individual.

Zhuangzi’s enlightenment was different from the Buddha’s; it did not seem to have happened once and for all time. He could not walk around in a perpetual trance; there were times when he had to analyse things and make distinctions in order to function in normal life.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes he was “with Heaven,” and at other times he was “one with humanity.”<sup>37</sup> But at the heart of his life, he felt at peace with the Way, the “root” or “seed” from which all things grow and the axis around which they revolved.

Zhuangzi was not entirely happy about the Mohist ideal of “love” or “concern,” because it required people to fix their attention on individual beings that were too ephemeral for this degree of attention. But he did preach a spirituality of empathy. The sage, he believed, was essentially unselfish. “The perfect man has no self,” he explained.<sup>38</sup> He regards other people as “I.” “People cry, so he cries—he considers everything as his own being,” because he had lost all sense of himself as separate and particular.<sup>39</sup> His heart had become “empty” and simply reflected other beings in their integrity, like a mirror, without the distorting lens of ego.<sup>40</sup> A true sage did not need rules about *ren*. He spontaneously sought the good of others, without ponderously thinking of himself as concerned for other people.<sup>41</sup> Once he had the Great Knowledge, he had acquired the knack of unself-conscious benevolence.

Zhuangzi probably considered his contemporary Meng Ke (371–288), who is known in the West as Mencius, an egotistic busybody, because he was so desperately eager to take an active role in public life.<sup>42</sup> A devout Confucian, Mencius became a scholar at the Jixia Academy, but his real ambition was to serve in the government. Like Confucius, however, he had no success. He failed to win the confidence of either King Xuan of Qi or King Hui of Liang, both of whom found his ideas ludicrously impractical. But Mencius did not give up easily, and for years travelled from one state to another, trying to persuade the princes to return to the Way. He could not turn his back on the world, like Zhuangzi, but believed that he had been appointed by Heaven to save it.

Mencius saw a pattern in history. A sage king appeared every five hundred years or so, and in the intervening period people were governed by ordinary “men of renown.” Since it was over seven hundred years since the rule of the early Zhou kings, the new sage ruler was sadly overdue. Mencius was acutely aware that China had changed—in his view, for the worse. “The people have never suffered more under tyrannical govern-

ment than today," he lamented. "It must be that Heaven does not desire to bring peace to the world." But if Heaven *did* want to save the world, who else but he could do it?<sup>43</sup> As a mere commoner, he could not be a sage king, but he did believe that he been appointed Heaven's messenger to the princes. The people were crying out for good leadership. They would flock to any ruler who treated them kindly, with benevolence and justice.

When it was clear that the princes would never take him seriously, Mencius retired and wrote a book that recorded his discussions with the rulers he had tried to serve. He believed that it was impossible to govern by force. The people submitted to coercive rule because they had no choice, but if a peace-loving king came to power, they would flock to him "with admiration in their hearts" because goodness had a "transformative power."<sup>44</sup> Instead of relying on military might, he told King Hui, he should "reduce punishment and taxation, and get the people to plough deeply and weed promptly." In their spare time, able-bodied young men must learn to live by the family *li*, and become good brothers and sons. Once they had received this moral grounding, they would, as a matter of course, be loyal subjects and a source of great strength. They would "inflict defeat on the strong armour and sharp weapons" of the larger states, even if they were "armed with nothing but staves."<sup>45</sup> Why? Because all the best ministers would want to serve in the administration of a just and compassionate king; farmers would want to cultivate his lands; merchants to trade in his cities. "Anyone with a grievance against their own rulers would come and complain to your Majesty," Mencius told King Hui. "If that happens, who could stop it?"<sup>46</sup>

Confucius had believed that ritual alone could transform society, but Mencius had witnessed the economic and agricultural revolutions of the Warring States period. Instead of admiring their ritual proficiency, Mencius revered Yao and Shun as engineers, practical men of action. At the time of Yao, China had been overwhelmed by a terrible flood, and Yao—alone of all the people—"was filled with anxiety."<sup>47</sup> He cut channels for the water, so that it could flow into the sea, and the people were able to level the ground and make it habitable. Shun appointed Yu his minister of works, and for eight long years Yu had dredged the rivers, deepened their beds, and built new dikes. In all that time, he never slept a single night in his own house. He had no time to spare for agriculture, so Shun appointed Hou Chi to show the people how to cultivate grain. But once the people had full bellies, moral standards declined, and this gave Shun much disquiet. He therefore appointed Fang Xun as his education minister, to instruct the people in the *li* of human relationships.<sup>48</sup>

Mencius stressed the loving concern that the sage kings had felt for the people. In his account, the first sign of emergent sagehood in both Yao and Shun was that they worried about their people, were made anxious by their plight, and filled with concern and distress. A sage could not bear to see other people suffering. Each had "a heart sensitive to the pain of others . . . and this manifested itself in compassionate government," Mencius argued. The sage kings were not content simply to feel sorry for their subjects; they energetically and creatively translated their concern into effective action. Their good, practical government sprang from compassion (*ren*), the ability to look beyond self-interest, "the extension of one's scope of activity to include others."<sup>49</sup>

The princes of the Warring States period might not have Yao and Shun's exceptional talents, but they could and must imitate their altruism. Confucius had refused to define *ren*; Mencius gave it a clear, narrow meaning: "benevolence," the essential virtue that made it impossible for him to turn his back upon the world. He distrusted Mozi's "concern for everybody," fearing that this generalized goodwill would undermine the family bonds that were essential to society,<sup>50</sup> even though he agreed that concern could not stop at the family. He told King Xuan to begin by treating the elderly members of his own family reverently. Once he had mastered this habit of respect, he would naturally extend it to old people in other families. Finally, he would be able to treat all his subjects with benevolence, and they would then submit gladly to his rule.<sup>51</sup>

Mencius did not agree that the rules of *ren* were artificial but believed that it was natural for people to respond compassionately to suffering. He reminded King Xuan that he had recently spared the life of an ox that was being led to sacrifice. When he had seen the poor beast crossing his hall and heard its pitiful cry, he had called out to the attendant: "Spare it! I cannot bear to see it shrinking in fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution."<sup>52</sup> That had been a good impulse, but it was only the beginning. Next the king should apply this instinctive sympathy to his subjects and treat them more kindly, and finally he should extend his concern to other states. Mencius believed that human nature was basically good—that it inclined to *ren* spontaneously. Mohists believed that people could be moved only by self-interest and that goodness had to be drilled into them from outside, but Mencius argued that it was as natural for us to behave morally as it was for our bodies to develop into a mature human form. We could stunt both our physical and moral growth by bad habits, but the instinctive tendency towards goodness remained.

Every single person had four fundamental "impulses" (*tuan*) that, if

properly cultivated, would grow into the four cardinal virtues: benevolence, justice, courtesy, and the wisdom to distinguish right from wrong. They were like the first shoots that would one day grow into a plant.<sup>53</sup> These “shoots” were as natural to us as our arms and legs. Nobody was wholly without sympathy for others. If a man saw a child teetering on the brink of a well, about to fall in, he would immediately lunge forward to save it—not in order to ingratiate himself with the parents, win the admiration of his friends, or because he was irritated by the child’s cries. He would be moved by an instinctive impulse of compassion. There would be something fundamentally wrong with a person who could watch the child fall to its death without a flicker of disquiet. In the same way, somebody who had absolutely no sense of shame or who lacked any rudimentary sense of right or wrong would be a defective human being. You could stamp on these “shoots”—just as you could cripple or deform yourself—but if they were cultivated properly, they acquired a vibrant, dynamic power of their own. Once they were active, they would transform not only the person who practised them but everyone with whom he came in contact—like the potency of the king. Somebody who had successfully cultivated all four “shoots” could save the world.<sup>54</sup>

Mencius was living in the troubled period of the Warring States. He knew that the embryonic seeds of goodness were easily destroyed. Everywhere he looked, he could see examples of greed and selfishness, which, he believed, obstructed the flow of *qi* and perverted the natural tendency to goodness. The “shoots” resided naturally in the “heart,” the thinking, affective organ, but many people simply threw their hearts away. The common people had been corrupted by cruelty, hunger, and exploitation. The upper classes were so avid for luxury, pleasure, power, and fame that they had neglected the “shoots” and allowed them to shrivel and die. Only the *junzi*, the mature person, had kept his heart alive.<sup>55</sup> Most people’s hearts resembled Ox Mountain, which had once been covered in luxuriant, leafy groves, but had been stripped bare by reckless, brutal deforestation. It was hard to believe that there had ever been any trees on Ox Mountain, just as it was difficult to imagine that a bestial, selfish person had ever had any good qualities. But the potential had been there. “Given the right nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow, and deprived of it, there is nothing that will not wither away.”<sup>56</sup>

Mencius was an optimist. Even if you had lost your heart, it was always possible to find it again. *Wu wei* (“doing nothing”) was not the answer; the world needed *yu wei* (“self-effort”), which brought human beings into harmony with Heaven. The purpose of the Confucian education was to

search for the compassionate heart that had gone astray. How strange it was that people were unconcerned about this diminution of their humanity! They spent a great deal of time and energy looking for missing chickens or dogs, but did nothing to recover their own hearts.<sup>57</sup> Everybody—without exception—had the capacity to cultivate the four essential virtues and become a sage like Yao or Shun. As soon as it was found and repaired, the sympathetic heart was so constructed that it would blaze forth like a forest fire or burst into the air like a spring that had forced its way up from the depths of the earth. A sage was simply a person who had fully realized his humanity and become one with Heaven.<sup>58</sup> Most of us found compassion difficult at first; we had to nourish our innate virtue by constantly repeated acts of benevolence, reverence, justice, and equity. Each time we acted well, we strengthened the “shoots,” until the cardinal virtues became habitual. A vigorous campaign of *yu wei* would result in the creation of the “unmoved” or “steadfast” heart, which could keep unruly passions in check.

The person who persevered in this struggle for goodness would arrive at what Mencius called “floodlike *qi*” (*hao jan chi qi*)—a phrase that he coined himself and found difficult to explain. It was a special sort of *qi*, which lifted human beings to the divine:

This is a *ch’i*\* which is, in the highest degree, vast and unyielding (*hao jan*). Nourish it with integrity and place no obstacle in its path and it will fill the space between Heaven and Earth. It is a *ch’i* which unites rightness and the Way. Deprive it of these and it will collapse. It is born of accumulated rightness, and cannot be appropriated by anybody through a sporadic show of rightness.<sup>59</sup>

The practice of *ren* would bring ordinary, frail human beings into harmony with the Way. Zhuangzi had experienced something similar, but had claimed that self-consciousness could only impede the flow of the *qi*. Not so, Mencius replied; unity with the Way could be attained by disciplined, sustained moral effort.

The Golden Rule was crucial. This was the virtue that made the *junzi* truly humane, and brought the individual into a mystical relationship with the entire universe. “All the ten thousand things are there in me,” Mencius said in one of his most important instructions. “There is no greater joy for

\*In his text, Lau uses the old Wade-Giles system of transliteration of Chinese characters rather than the Pinyin system used in this book. Hence *qi* is rendered *ch’i*.

