Surgeons as Sages: Daoist Sagely Model as a Resolution to Surgeon Burnout

Christian C. Taylor

Advisor: David E. Storey

Boston College

Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Philosophy

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Abstract

One of the most critical issues facing contemporary healthcare is that which is called "doctor burnout," a term that is used within the medical field to describe the range of energetic collapses that doctors experience due ultimately to the demanding nature of their work. The issue of burnout is ultimately a question of sustainability in the profession and is preventable. This thesis seeks to address burnout specifically in the field of surgery on account of this field's proximity to patient death. Hallmark texts from the Daoist tradition, the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi,* refer to sages who possess a transcendent, far-reaching wisdom that allow them to emotionally supersede the quarrels and tribulations of life. This is precisely the ethos that this thesis seeks to investigate in order to determine the ways in which this sage wisdom can be utilized to prevent surgeon burnout. As such, the Daoist model as presented in the Zhuangzian tradition offers an effective resolution to the burnout that many surgeons face. Sages from this tradition have a highly cultivated sense of self, heightened perspective on death and meditative lifestyle that allows them to maintain their equanimity and longevity even in the face of life's greatest antagonist, death, a model which can be utilized by surgeons for the same purpose.

Table of Contents

Introduction

One of the most critical issues facing contemporary healthcare is that which is called "doctor burnout." Doctor burnout is somewhat of a colloquial term that is used within the medical field to describe the range of energetic collapses that physicians experience due ultimately to the demanding nature of their work. Taken broadly, approximately 54% of all physicians in the US experience at least one symptom of burnout, and affects physicians in all branches of medicine.[1] Classic symptoms of burnout are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished satisfaction with one's work, while yet more severe symptoms have been reported including depression, suicidal ideation and alcohol abuse. At its best, burnout manifests itself as general but pernicious fatigue. At its most extreme, burnout can force physicians to make major lifestyle adjustments to deal with the symptoms, including having to change career paths to relieve the suffering. By the time some physicians are just 40 years old, they reconsider their line of work for the sake of their own health and well-being.

Physicians are at a greater risk of burnout compared to those who work in any other profession– indicating that something intrinsic to the work of doctors in particular causes burnout.[2] While it is true that physicians typically work longer hours than those in other professions, this fact is not enough to account for the disproportionate amount of burnout they experience relative to those in other fields that work similar hours, such as in investment banking or law. There must be another factor that helps explain these high rates of burnout; a brief philosophical examination of the profession reveals that it is because doctors must grapple with death on a daily basis. Death is, whether implicitly or explicitly, treated as the main antagonist of

[1] Shanafelt TD, et. al. "Changes in Burnout and Satisfaction With Work-Life Balance in Physicians and the General US Working Population Between 2011 and 2014." *Mayo Clin Proc.* 2015 Dec;90(12):1600-13. doi: 10.1016/j.mayocp.2015.08.023. PMID: 26653297.
[2] Shanafelt TD, et. al. "Changes in Burnout and Satisfaction With Work-Life Balance in Physicians and the General US Working Population Between 2011 and 2014."

the medical profession. In an effort to preserve and prolong life in their patients, doctors resist the tide of death.

It is worth pausing to distinguish between two aspects of burnout: physical and what I have begun to term psycho-spiritual burnout. There is physical burnout, which is the result of long working hours, lack of sleep, lack of exercise and inadequate amounts of leisure time. This is an issue of time– doctors have too little time for essential self-care and rest.

The latter is psycho-spiritual burnout. Psycho-spiritual burnout is the result of proximity to and intensity of entanglement with death for an extended period of time. Often mistaken as "compassion fatigue," a similar but distinct issue found in other service-oriented professions, psycho-spiritual burnout can perhaps best be described as a certain type of spiritual "giving-out," wherein the physician simply has "nothing left to give." Witnessing patients die, feeling the loss of interpersonal relationships, battling with the apparent futility of the work, and braving gruesome diseases and injuries all contribute to psycho-spiritual burnout. With this deeper form of burnout, sustained spiritual siege causes a degradation of the emotional bulwarks of the soul, the result of which leads to the more extreme manifestations of burnout.

This is the more concerning form of burnout as well as the more difficult to resolve as it evades simple solutions such as extra leisure time. In many cases, vacation or extra time for rest do not serve as solutions for this burnout. Even after time off, upon returning, physicians find that they are unable to deal any more effectively with spiritual degradation than they were able to when they left. Psycho-spiritual burnout can run deep in any physician's life and its effects can be enormously destructive. Unfortunately, when a doctor reaches a late stage of psycho-spiritual burnout, there can be few options left to recover that do not include major lifestyle changes, such

as having to change professions. This is the form of burnout that this thesis seeks to address and ultimately resolve.

This thesis seeks to address psycho-spiritual burnout specifically in the field of surgery. Psycho-spiritual burnout is prevalent in surgery on account of the proximity and intensity of the deaths with which surgeons come in contact. A clinical research study conducted in 2017 on a cohort of general surgery residents reported a burnout rate of 69%, revealing levels of burnout significantly above the rates seen in other fields of medicine.[3] Often surgeons are thought to represent the final rampart between life and death, a certain guardian of life, whose skills are supposed to dictate whether or not a patient lives or dies. I do not wish to portray surgeons as miracle workers that deserve more or less praise than doctors in other fields. Yet it is important to note that a surgeon, through the act of surgery, perilously tangles with death. In higher risk surgical fields, such as cardiothoracic surgery or neurosurgery, higher rates of patient mortality are observed and indicate the link between witnessing death and surgeon burnout. In perhaps the most spiritually challenging cases where the patient dies while being operated upon, the surgeon is the one at the helm of the procedure, presiding over the death of the patient. In these instances, death as a philosophical concept is unavoidable. Surgeons are called to look plainly at death more than perhaps any other type of doctor. Immediately following the operating room, Intensive Care Units (ICUs) where postoperative patients are treated, are hardly friendlier places. Death is prevalent on these floors, too– the ICU often cares for the very sickest patients, those who are closest to death.

[3] Lebares CC, et. al. "Burnout and Stress Among US Surgery Residents: Psychological Distress and Resilience." *J Am Coll Surg.* 2018 Jan; 226 (1) p. 80-90. doi: 10.1016/j.jamcollsurg. 2017.10.010. PMID: 29107117.

The issue of psycho-spiritual burnout is ultimately a question of sustainability in the profession. The current way of coping with death in the profession is simply ineffective at maximizing longevity while navigating the existential implications of death.

Psycho-spiritual burnout is preventable. To do so, it requires that the doctor enter into the right type of relationship with death– one that allows the doctor to continue on despite the toil, sorrow and suffering. To cultivate this relationship with death, we must look to East Asian philosophy, namely from the Daoist tradition.

Hallmark texts from the Daoist tradition, the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi,* refer to sages who possess a transcendent, far-reaching wisdom that allows them to emotionally supersede the quarrels and tribulations of life. These sages are in harmony with the Dao, the source of their spiritual 'power.' These sages can "walk through fire and not be burned," or "venture into the storm and emerge unscathed."[4] Such sages are so cultivated that they do not forfeit their equanimity in the face of death yet rather continue to joyfully move through life despite proximity to it. This is precisely the ethos that this thesis seeks to investigate in order to determine the ways in which this sage wisdom can be utilized to prevent surgeon psycho-spiritual burnout. As such, the East Asian sagely model as presented in the Daoist traditions offer an effective resolution to the psycho-spiritual burnout that many surgeons face. Sages from these traditions have a highly cultivated sense of self, heightened perspective on death and meditative lifestyle that allows them to maintain their equanimity and longevity even in the face of life's greatest antagonist, death, a model which can be utilized by surgeons for the same purpose.

Accordingly, in Chapter 1, this thesis will first present some of the basic principles of Daoist philosophy to orient the reader towards the East Asian philosophical tradition, one that

[4] Watson, Burton, trans. *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi.* Columbia University Press. New York: 1968.

posits a fundamentally different notion of the self, nature and human existence. Given the principal differences between Eastern and Western metaphysics and ontology, setting the philosophical groundwork for the thesis is essential so that the reader might better understand the philosophy discussed in the subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 2, I will present the sagely model set forth in the extraordinary Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi,* with specific interest as to how sages cultivate a relationship with death that allows them to experience it without being emotionally disturbed. Presenting this sagely model will guide the subsequent investigation in Chapter 3 as to how modern day surgeons can assimilate this cultivated sagacious understanding into their own lives for the same purpose of preserving themselves while still dealing intimately with death.

Finally, in Chapter 3, having presented Zhuangzian sages' relationship with death, I will apply this model to contemporary surgeon lifestyle and culture in an effort to resolve psycho-spiritual burnout. This chapter will propose a number of different methods and approaches, both institutional and personal, to reform surgeon culture and accomplish surgeon sustainability.

Chapter 1

Introduction to Daoist Ontology, Metaphysics and Sage Ethos

"I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast
a fire, a burning flame.)
– Walt Whitman, *The Wound-Dresser*

I. Daoist Metaphysics and Ontology

The Dao

In order to properly orient the reader in the broader context of Daoist philosophy, I will briefly introduce the concept of the Dao (道, dào), which serves as the central principle of philosophical consideration for Daoists, both ancient and modern. The concept of the Dao, translated literally as "The Way," is presented throughout Laozi's seminal work titled *Daodejing*. Laozi, the founding thinker of the Daoist tradition, draws our attention to the ineffability of the Dao when he writes, "Imagine a nebulous thing / here before Heaven and Earth / subtle and elusive / dwelling apart and unconstrained / it could be the mother of us all / not knowing its name / I call it the Dao."[5] The Dao, according to Laozi, is the transcendental, unified, simple, primary principle of all. It is eternal, self-sustaining, self-caused and the ultimate source of being in the universe. It is often compared to a spring, or waterfall, from which the 'myriad things'[6] flow. It is the fountain of being itself, the source of being, the very ground of being. The Dao is nothing, yet still a force that can be felt. The Dao is radically transcendent in that it cannot be spoken of fully; imposing number, gender, sound, inflection or tense on the Dao is to lose true

[5] Red Pine, trans. *Daodejing.* Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2009. p. 50.
[6] In Daoist primary texts, the "myriad (or ten-thousand) things" refers to the open universe– that array of infinite, created, discrete forms that occupy this universe. Any created manifestation of nature at large, such as trees, ants, rocks, waves, buildings, humans, all belong to the 'myriad things'.

knowledge of it. Although language cannot capture the Dao, it can be felt through immediately experiencing a certain kind of transcendent oneness with the universe.

Daoist Nature of Reality

In Daoism, nature is an expression of the universal Dao and is seen as a continuous, dynamic unfolding of interconnected events. At the heart of Daoist metaphysics is the truth of change and impermanence– nothing is final, but rather flowing and ever-emergent. Known as event ontology, being is an event, and one's life can best be understood as an arc that intricately crosses with others, forming a sort of web of interconnectivity that maps our interactions, even including the most basic of encounters. As humans, we are all born into and collectively participate in this great unfolding of events– we are co-creators, at once determining and determined by others on account of our interconnectedness. There are no isolated, stand-alone events– everything flows into and out of one another. Things possess 'interbeing,' a way of describing a different kind of causality wherein things exist in a delicate mutuality and depend on one another.

Self-Cultivation

Understanding nature as the Daoists do– as an unfolding event ontology– has implications for how to live. Given the reality of impermanence, we are called to cultivate personal steadfastness, adopt a healthy stance of relativity and harmonize with the Dao to

establish an empty[7] disposition. As such, self-cultivation is a central focus of Daoist philosophy: there is great emphasis in Daoist literature on a certain 'self-making' that allows one to live beautifully amongst the change. Through harmonizing with the Dao, we can become more fully realized human beings. First, cultivating steadfastness allows one to retain equanimity even in the face of calamity. Secondly, adopting a posture of relativity enables emotional flexibility and thus allows one to navigate complex social landscapes with ease and poise. Thirdly, harmonizing with the Dao draws out one's empty disposition, a stance from which great action can emerge. When one has developed an empty disposition, one can anticipate change, smoothly and effectively deal with challenging situations and creatively participate in life in meaningful ways. Taken together, these qualities begin to outline the qualities of a Daoist sage, which will be further explicated over the course of this work. In the following pages, we will examine a number of principles in Daoism such as no-self, spontaneity, and meditation that open the door to understanding Daoist sagehood.

II. Sage Ethos

Daoist 'Self': No-Self

Given that human beings are constituents of the larger universe, the Daoist notion of nature as an unfolding and dynamic web of causal effects thus has significant implications for the corollary Daoist understanding of 'self.' In an effort to discern the true nature of 'self,' Daoist thinkers embark from the premise of the true reality of nature: that of impermanence, interconnectedness and *interdependence*. For Daoists, the term 'interdependence' refers to the ontological concept that no given form exists fully independently nor absolutely apart from the

[7] In East Asian philosophy, an 'empty' disposition refers to a sense of self that is open and receptive. Daoists seek to avoid absolute, final or unchanging views of the self. Cultivation of the emptiness will be explored further in Chapter 2.

rest, especially in regards to its origination– we exist in a web of dynamic interconnectivity in which all forms arise not by themselves, but rather as the product of a myriad of influences and factors. As such, we can readily perceive that our reality is not stagnant, absolute and unchanging, but alternatively is highly dynamic and constantly unfolding. Down to its very foundation, the bedrock of reality is the reality of change.

Given this point, the common 'fixed' sense of self is gravely misaligned with the true nature of our reality– and such a misalignment is precisely what leads us to suffer. The unaware or commonly conditioned sense of self is centered around clinging onto various identities, labels and perceived personal qualities in an effort to align ourselves with something seemingly concrete by which we can ground ourselves and establish a sense of solid, immovable "I." Consider more modern examples: we frequently align ourselves with seemingly fixed labels such as where we are from, where we go to school, what we like to do, what career we have, by our political beliefs, or by a particular moral code *as if these labels constitute who we are in some absolute and final way*. The reality of the self is that it is not absolute, nor unchanging– and so to apply labels to the self that are fixed is incongruent. We can often feel permanently bound to certain identities because we believe that they fully constitute who we are in some essential way. The reality of the self is not so: the self is not fixed, but is rather highly dynamic as well as highly interdependent upon and connected to others. The legendary Daoist sage Zhuangzi, whose philosophy will be featured later in this thesis, calls us to minimize this self-centered and stagnant view of "I" when he says: "...the Utmost Person has no definite identity, the Spiritlike Person has no particular merit, the Sage has no one name."[8] A permanent sense of self does not

[8] Ziporyn, Brook, trans. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*. Hackett Publishing Inc. Indianapolis: 2009. p. 5.

reflect the true nature of reality: a reality that is constantly changing, and one that is void of any absolute, final identity.

Spontaneity

Acting spontaneously, as well as inhabiting 'no-self,' is an essential aspect of becoming a sage. For the Daoist tradition, spontaneity is a state of being that demonstrates the highest, most authentic and complete expression of both self and the nature of our reality, and is always inextricably linked to what is considered to be good, beautiful, or virtuous. Consider, for example, a dance performed by a professional dancer. Upon watching a dancer during a performance, when it is performed excellently, the audience is struck by the elegant flow and grace with which the dancer glides about the stage. If one were to examine the inner thoughts of the dancer who is performing, if the dancer were in a state of full spontaneity, they would perhaps be surprised to find that there are none. Indeed, the dancer is not thinking; they are giving form to a nameless energy that emerges from a deep inner reservoir of selfhood and are channeling it into the form of elegant movement. To this point, Phillip Ivanhoe, renowned scholar of East Asian philosophy, more generally addresses the spirit of spontaneous movement when he says, "Actions that display this quality are often said to occur with little or no prior reflection or effort and instead are thought to be motivated by deep, standing, innate dispositions to perceive, evaluate, and respond to events and situations in certain ways."[9] Furthermore, at the very core of spontaneity we discover a unity between the dancer and the dance; the subjective and the objective; the inner and the outer. Traditionally Western dualistic ways of describing the phenomena of the performance fail to capture its full beauty, for to say that the dancer was

[9] Ivanhoe, Phillip J, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected,* New York, Oxford University Press, 2017. p. 106.

dancing is inadequate, rather, it could be more acutely articulated in non-dualistic language, such as to say that the dance was letting itself be known to the audience by expressing itself *through* the dancer. Ivanhoe articulates the path of this channeled energy through the performer, "When one acts 'spontaneously' or 'naturally,' one's actions 'flow' out of unpremeditated dispositions; one is not plagued or vexed by worries about whether or not one has chosen wisely or is doing the right thing…"[10] In its purest form, the dancer is "in the moment,' or as is commonly said, totally "in the zone." When in this mode, the dancer's body is animated by a deep natural force that consumes them in the spirit of the dance.

Non-action

Wuwei (無為) can be translated as "non-action," and in the Daoist tradition, is an important phrase that is used to help describe the mindset, attitude and disposition one needs to actualize spontaneity. In the context of our discussion we can refer to the disposition of "non-action" as one that naturally invites spontaneity to flow from the agent because it prevents intrusive, overly self-conscious thoughts from entering the mind of the spontaneous agent. Even further, one who is acting from a disposition of "non-action" is thereby also able to enter into modes of no-self or obtain the sensation of oneness with their external reality. To this point, Ivanhoe then goes on to place oneness and spontaneity back into their interrelated place in nature by saying that when one is in a spontaneous mode of being,

> Nature acts *through* one, and so rather than feeling alienated from the world or from one's own desires, actions and projects, one feels perfectly at home among them…Untutored spontaneity offers a way to avoid self-centeredness, transcend one's individual perspective by adopting a more expansive conception of oneself, and thereby to join and move in harmony with the greater patterns, processes and purposes of Nature.[11]

[10] Ivanhoe, *Oneness,* p. 109.
[11] Ibid, p. 109.

One can begin to see spontaneity's necessary connection to oneness, insofar as oneness is the sensation through which we are able to perceive the inner workings of nature. Feeling a profound sense of unity with one's surroundings, community, world and overall reality allows one to glean insight into the ever-continuous nature of reality, and when one can grasp this essence, they are better suited to enter the dynamic flow of nature, which is what I have described as being *spontaneous*. This understanding of *wu-wei* and spontaneity will be applied to the act of surgery in Chapter 3 in an effort to examine how spontaneous modes of being can be used to increase surgeon effectiveness and personal well-being.

Spontaneity's Orientation toward the Good

Indeed, for Eastern schools of thought, discussions of spontaneity more commonly pertain to how one can best live their life, especially in regards to interactions with others. For Daoists, living and going about one's life with the spontaneous spirit that the dancer was able to channel in their performance lends itself to interactions with others that are naturally compassionate, thoughtful and beautiful. Insofar as spontaneity cannot be achieved without feeling a sense of oneness with the world, and feeling one with the world gives us the capacity to extend compassion and empathy to others, then it can be said that acting from a spontaneous disposition in the spheres outside of artistic performance is inherently oriented towards virtue and care. To this point, Ivanhoe writes, "As we succeed in freeing pure knowing from the grip of self-centeredness and interfering qi, we feel a more extensive and profound sense of oneness with all things; we feel the pain and joy of others as our own."[12] Ivanhoe here highlights the idea that spontaneity is always associated with expressing what is good and beautiful because spontaneity presupposes an expanded view of the self in the agent, which in turn opens the door

[12] Ibid, p. 67.

to empathy and understanding towards others. In a spontaneous mode of being, one is highly attuned to their surroundings by virtue of the fact that their perception has been greatly widened. Thus, because one is able to inhabit larger perspectives, they are more capable of being responsive to and redirecting themselves away from the various forms in life that are considered bad, ugly or immoral. Ivanhoe expands on this point, saying,

> What we naturally and spontaneously do promotes our true best interests by helping us avoid suffering and inflicting direct harm and to track and pursue what is really good for us...Early Daoists believed that human beings in their natural state in general are much more aware of and responsive to the world around them, more prepared to ward off dangers that human beings inevitably must confront in the course of their lives.[13]

As has been shown up to this point, being spontaneous as it is understood in the East Asian tradition allows one to channel all sorts of various inner 'powers' and energies that arise organically through the agent and take form in non-coerced action. As just presented by Ivanhoe, one of the 'powers' is being more perceptive and responsive to those things in our reality that are coming towards us to inflict harm upon us. Not only are we more equipped to avoid danger and harm when we are "in the flow," but we are also able to more instinctively choose what is good for us, which is the point that Ivanhoe raises when he introduces the more Daoist notion of spontaneity: "They also believed that our spontaneous desires reliably guide us toward basic, sound and fulfilling lives and away from the unhealthy excesses and unnatural ideals that lead most people to grief; in the absence of false ideals and artificial stimulation, our natural desires tend to settle on and find contentment in modest and healthy sources of satisfaction."[14] Here, Ivanhoe rounds out our understanding of another branch of spontaneity, which is that when one has fully inhabited spontaneity, their instincts will naturally guide them to what is beautiful, virtuous and good. For Daoists, spontaneity brings about what is beautiful and good by opening

[13] Ibid, p. 108.
[14] Ibid, p. 108.

up the agent to a more expansive perception of reality. This perceptiveness in turn allows them to get in touch with the deep truths of nature, making them more responsive and attuned to reality of things, and in its highest form, provide a certain feeling of metaphysical comfort for the agent, in that they feel very at home with the constantly flowing and dynamic reality of nature. Ivanhoe details this Daoist view on the benefit of being spontaneous, "The latter [*ziran*, 自然 , 'what is so of itself'] describes the ideal for states of affairs according to which every thing or event maintains its natural, unadulterated condition… Anything that occurs in accordance with these ideals will happen 'spontaneously' and in harmony with the Way, which is the goal within the Daoist scheme of things."[15] Ivanhoe elsewhere describes the metaphysical comfort that spontaneous agents are naturally open to, "Those who engage and act in accordance with this deeper nature feel a profound sense of ease, comfort, peace and joy. They are able to see beyond and cut through the hypocrisy, posturing, and falsehoods of the everyday social world and draw freely from the uncontaminated fount of Nature."[16] In this manner, one sees that spontaneity is naturally oriented towards uncovering those things in life that are inherently beautiful, virtuous and good while also guiding us away from those entities that seek to do us harm.

Sages and Self-Cultivation

Through the Dao, a cultivated sage or 'Authentic Person' (真人, zhēnrén, literally meaning 'Perfected Person') is fully spontaneous, flexible, adaptable and equanimous, and represents the highest levels of personal development. Their sophisticated understanding of the Dao, nature, and life is embodied in the way that they move, speak and conduct themselves. The path to sagehood is one marked by personal development, a certain self-fashioning, in

[15] Ibid, p. 107.
[16] Ibid, p. 114.

accordance with the Dao. When in tune with 'The Way,' sages begin to develop powers of insight and inner strength that allow them to be preserved both physically and spiritually. In the Daoist tradition, true sages continue to learn and grow throughout the course of their lives, such that their self-cultivation is never finished. As we will see in the following section, Zhuangzian sages, instead of disappearing from the world in reclusion, intentionally entangle themselves in the toil of life in order to continue their development. It is in this way that sustained effort towards self-making is of central importance to Daoist sages. This emphasis on continued inner cultivation through meditation will be later adopted in Chapter 3 to analyze how surgeons can elect for a lifestyle that emphasizes this very sort of self-cultivation in an effort to become a contemporary sage. Having provided the prerequisite Daoist philosophical groundwork for this thesis, in the subsequent section, I will present two models of Zhuangzian sagehood so that these models might be readily applied to surgeons in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2

Ethic of the Sage: Presentation of Sagely Relationship with Death

"Give me your tone therefore O death, that I may accord with it,
Give me yourself, for I see that you belong to me now above all, and
are folded inseparably together…"
– Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

I. Introduction

In this section, I will examine the sagely model set forth in the extraordinary Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi,* with specific interest as to how sages cultivate a relationship with death that allows them to experience it without being emotionally disturbed. Presenting this sagely model will guide the subsequent investigation in Chapter 3 as to how modern day surgeons can assimilate this model into their own lives for the same purpose of preserving their equanimity while still dealing intimately with death.

A large body of secondary scholarship has been written on how Zhuangzian sages deal with death, and will be selectively explored through a presentation of Amy Olberding's and Agnė Budriūnaitė's respective works on this very topic. First, in Olberding's work, by way of explicating Zhuangzian notions of nature, sagehood, self-understanding and wisdom, we will see the ways in which sages are able to transcend the common spiritual harm brought upon by the experience of loss of a loved one. In Budriūnaitė's work, by way of examining the power of non-dual thinking, uniting oneself with the Dao, realization of emptiness, and inhabiting zero-perspective, we will observe how sages can enter a realm beyond the opposites of life and death.

II. A Refined Sagely Model: Allowing Grief in the Context of the Zhuangzi

Introduction to Olbering's Work

When we hear someone described as a 'sage,' classic notions of sagehood may come to mind– we picture someone who possesses a transcendent, far-reaching wisdom that allows them to emotionally transcend the quarrels and tribulations of life. Our familiar notion of what a sage is may incline us to think that they are, given their wisdom, impervious even to the experience of grief over death. But is this a realistic, nay accurate, understanding of sagehood? That is to say, is experiencing sorrow not a failure of any given sage, but both a prerequisite and ongoing condition of being such an enlightened figure? The *Zhuangzi,* a famous compendium on sagehood from the Daoist tradition, features stories of Zhuangzi's own experience of grieving, namely over the loss of his wife. These stories of Zhuangzi's grieving raise the question: where does the experience of grief and sorrow fit into being a sage?

This is the very question that Amy Olberding, professor of philosophy at the University of Oklahoma and author of the article titled "Sorrow and the Sage: Grief in the *Zhuangzi*," sets out to investigate. Over the course of her work, Olberding determines that experiencing sorrow is indeed a necessary part of becoming a sage on account of sorrow's role in enabling joy, a key aspect of human flourishing. Moreover, according to Olberding, those sages who disallow themselves the experience of sorrow forfeit the ability to experience a range of emotions for which sorrow is a corequisite, at once costing them a degree of responsiveness to the world. Emotionally detached sages render a model of relating to death that is incompatible with Zhuangzi's own grieving, and Olberding accordingly derives a new model of sagehood that preserves Zhuangzi's sagacity and reconciles his experience of grief. At the onset of this work, Olderding outlines the general goal of her writing: "If, as I suspect, Zhuangzi's grief is not

merely excusable, but important, we will have gained considerable insight into the emotional range sanctioned and made possible by Zhuangzi's Daoism...what can we learn from his sorrow?"[17] Olberding, by way of explicating Zhuangzian notions of Nature, sagehood, self-understanding and wisdom, ultimately concludes experiencing true sorrow allows for understanding of true joy, and such joy is a core aspect of living a full, sagely life.

Introduction to Death, Grieving and Sorrow

Interestingly, to set the stage for her article on the philosophical implications of Zhuangzi's grieving, Olberding raises an analogous example from a temporally distant philosophical culture, namely that of Seneca's bereavement of the loss of a close friend. Olberding maintains that Seneca's understanding of death, grieving and subsequent regret over having grieved, albeit briefly, bears resemblance to Zhuangzi's own grieving over the passing of his wife and thus serves well to open up the discussion at large. Olberding first notes that Seneca and Zhuangzi posit similar outlooks on the role of death in human life: "Like Seneca, Zhuangzi avers that death, far from being an evil, is a constituent in global harmony that sustains the natural world, life and death operating as a 'single strand.'[18] While Seneca and Zhuangzi's philosophies share the understanding of death as a natural part of the unfolding of the universe, the details of their views on grieving differ significantly. As Olberding does over the course of this article, when one takes time to analyze their grieving philosophically, they in fact share little in common. In the following section, Olberding departs from a preliminary introduction of Seneca's grieving to turn more fully towards an analysis of Zhuangzi's grieving in an effort to discover an outline for how sages can most appropriately grieve death.

[17] Olberding, Amy. "Sorrow and the Sage: Grief in the Zhuangzi." In *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy.* Vol. 6, 4th edition. 2007. p. 341.
[18] Olberding, "Sorrow and the Sage: Grief in the Zhuangzi," p. 340.

Grief as a Form of Nature

After presenting the various nuances of the story of Zhuangzi's grieving over his dead wife, Olberding identifies that Zhuangzi's sorrow arose as a pre-reflective impulse, as dictated by the nature of the situation in which he found himself. This view of grief as a "pre-reflective" impulse harmonizes with the discussions of spontaneous action raised elsewhere in the Daoist traditions, perhaps notably in the example from the famous *Mengzi* of how one would instinctively react to secure an infant teetering precariously on the edge of a well. According to Zhuangzian Daoism, human beings are instilled with certain innate, spontaneously-arising responses that are called forward by the nature of the situation in which we are immersed. Olberding raises for us, then, that Zhuangzi's grief does not fall outside of the sagacious call to appropriately respond to the situation at hand when she writes the following: "In his grief, then, Zhuangzi appears to answer a form of nature."[19] Zhuangzi cannot be blamed for grieving the death of his wife, for the nature of the situation called him to do as such: "Zhuangzi's grief, because it is spontaneous, natural, and quickly abandoned, occasions no regret."[20] What does warrant regret, and what Zhuangzi himself manages to avoid, is grieving simply for the sake of adhering to cultural norms, especially when this "socialized" grieving goes beyond what has been naturally prompted by the nature of the death. Grieving can remain valid in a sage's life so long as they do not allow the grieving to carry past a basic impulse. Grieving that carries into adhering to social norms is considered, in this text, a form of excessive lament that Zhuangzi does not ultimately reach due to his reflection on death shortly after his wife's passing, the conclusions from which promptly allay his sorrows.

[19] Ibid, p. 342.
[20] Ibid, p. 343.

Sagely Model for Grieving: 'Hiding in the World' and Inhabiting No-Self

With this notion of spontaneous and impulsive sorrow in mind, Olberding moves on to present a model of Daoist sages and their respective relationship to grief that appears elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*; a presentation which serves as a crucial underlying structure for understanding the rest of the article on account of the fact that these models are ultimately refuted in preference of a more refined model that Zhuangzi embodies. Olberding first presents the story of Master Li, who goes to pay a visit to his friend Master Lai, who is ill and close to death. Master Li dispels Master Lai's family members' hysterical weeping by saying, "'Shoo! Out of the way! Don't startle him while he transforms,'"[21] followed by jocularly discussing what form Master Lai may take next, wondering whether it may be "a rat's liver or a fly's leg."[22] This model of a sage demonstrates a relationship with death in which grief has no place. For Master Li, he can "tread the path of natural alterations without breaking stride."[23]

Olberding secondly draws the story of the sage named Mengsun Cai into the conversation, recalling the moment from the *Zhuangzi* where Mengsun Cai is praised by Confucius for not having shed a tear at his mother's passing, lauding the fact that "'in his inward heart he did not suffer.'"[24] According to this model, Mengsun ought to be praised because "having abandoned himself to the transformations that comprise his experience, he can, in effect, go along with the demands of social proprietary, wailing alongside with others while retaining the emotional freedom and equilibrium vouchsafed by an unclinging enjoyment of the transformation of things."[25]

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[21] Ibid, p. 344.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

Taken together, these two models depict a type of relationship with grieving that allows one to seamlessly respond to loss, as well as a relationship in which sagely equanimity is maintained without any hesitation. Although Olberding later departs from these models to argue in favor of Zhuangzi's more refined model, she recognizes the validity and profundity of the relationship with and vision of Nature these sages are able to sustain: "...Mengsun Cai and the four friends appear to accord with a distinctively non-local, globalized nature, the macrocosmic processes that govern the wider world."[26] Master Li and Mengsun Cai demonstrate a highly cultivated level of sage wisdom wherein they inhabit the perspective of the Dao in an effort to increase understanding and cultivate inner peace. The higher the perspective one can take, the less that is 'lost' to the world. This is reflective of sages' attempt to "hide the world within the world"[27] in order to transcend standard experiences of loss– death, from the point of view of the Dao, is insignificant.

Additionally, for Olberding, the sagely ability to supersede emotional hysterics is contingent upon the sage's propensity to view themselves not as a closed nor finally defined self but rather as a self that is interdependent, part of a larger unfolding of a highly dynamic universe, which calls upon the introductory philosophy laid out in Chapter 1 of this thesis. When one maintains this stance of no-self, "One cultivates a supreme flexibility, where shifts in circumstance, even as they shift local self-understanding, are anticipated with ease."[28] As we will see, Olberding does not wish to supplant this sagely ability to "hide the world within the world" and take the perspective of the Dao, but rather to refine it to allow for the legitimate experience of sorrow.

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[26] Ibid, p. 345.
[27] Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings.* p. 56.
[28] Olberding, "Sorrow and the Sage: Grief in the Zhuangzi," p. 349.

Limits of Sage Wisdom with Respect to Grieving

Having introduced a model in which sages bypass grief on account of their worldly perspective, Olberding then explicates a more comprehensive sage model that corroborates Zhuangzi's view of human flourishing as one that permits such emotionality. A potential risk for sages is that their detachment from the events of life could render them emotionally unavailable. To remove oneself completely from the trial and tribulation of life is to forfeit access to a range of challenging yet constructively meaningful emotions, the experience of which constitute an important aspect of having lived a full life. Those sages who find themselves indifferent to something like death may fall victim to a certain emotional indifference, "There is, however, something of a perverse result in such a flexibility, for what initially presents as situational adaptability may read as emotional *stasis.*"[29] Certainly the sage model should be one that emphasizes a conscious and intentional entanglement with life, rather than a falling out of it. Olberding continues to this point when she writes, "To meet all circumstances with equanimity is to strip them of their particularity, the overflight of understanding here a mechanism whereby experience becomes flattened, without contour or nuance."[30] Sages are called upon to be of this world, and to inhabit life fully– in essence, to feel the particularity in every situation. The sagely model as presented by Master Li, Lai, and Mengsun Cai, taken to its extreme, reveals a type of sage that is so equanimous that they fail to thoughtfully entangle themselves with the dynamic contours of this life, the shapes of which give life its meaning.

[29] Olberding, p. 350.
[30] Ibid.

"Finding It Good to Die"

The previous sections of Olberding's article have served in a supportive role in order for her to make her central argument, which is recapitulated presently: namely that sorrow, insofar as it enables joy, is a constructive force and therefore should be allowed for in the sagely model. Olberding succinctly defends the need for "bad" emotions in a sage's life, "That some experiences occasion sorrow makes joy possible; that some experiences occasion seriousness makes play possible."[31] At times, life calls our attention to serious moments and asks that we commune with others in them in a genuine way. We cannot ubiquitously maintain a posture of sagacity at all times, for when we do so, we lose sight of the importance of attunement to the present moment. We must allow ourselves to be seized by experience such that, informed by the experience, we can extend our wisdom to greater and greater heights. Olberding continues, "...he [Zhuangzi] acknowledges the need to retain a capacity to let experience shake and shape us, at least some sorrows are self-consciously sanctioned. They are the products of a purposeful posture in which one allows experience to injure."[32] In order to be a fully enlightened sage, death cannot always be viewed as good, but rather disvalued such that the passing of a loved one can initiate a certain existential grappling with death, the results of which are constructive.

As Olberding writes and the sagely model shows, we cannot always be 'playing': certain situations appropriately demand gravity and seriousness. Instead of being perpetually unbothered by death or emotional toil, we ought to seek wisdom, joy and replenishment in and through our grappling with death. Olberding writes to this point when she says, "Apprehension of the broader patterns of nature can only be genuinely instructive where it is held in check by the immediate, particular, and personal."[33] To remove oneself from the liveness of a particular experience,

[31] Ibid, p. 355.
[32] Ibid, p. 356.
[33] Ibid.

regardless of whether the situation is good or bad, or whether the emotions contained therein are tranquil or messy, is to miss the ethic of the sage. Olberding draws our attention to Zhuanzi's call to engaging with difficult affairs, "...Zhuangzi even suggests that there is some peril in failing to approach states of affairs as matters with a bearing on our well-being, as events in which we have a stake."[34] Given this need for intentional entanglement with the world, Olberding's refined model of a sage is presented thus: in an effort to maximize understanding, we are called to greet challenging situations in between how a modeled sage and an unenlightened human being would: not with rigid equanimity or indifference, nor without control and perspective. We must be open to a given situation's possible range of emotions, even if the emotions are ultimately unfamiliar. We cannot be averse to those experiences in which our selfhood may be challenged– as Zhuangzi would have it, we are called to walk into the fire, to venture into the storm.

Refined Sage Wisdom

In her final section, Olberding conclusively draws some final considerations to her argument. She re-emphasizes the main thesis, stating that the sagely model the Zhuangzi presents can serve as a more refined model because the permissibility of grief paves the way for genuine human flourishing. As Olberding writes on the inclusion of grief in the sagely model, "...his conclusions diverge to incorporate grief as a feature of robust well-being. Insofar as Zhuangzi's view is thereby inconsistent, it is an enriching inconsistency, "[35] and later, "Zhuangzi acknowledges the possibility of perfected wisdom; in his grief, he foregoes this possibility to affirm an enriched humanity."[36] Zhuangzi's story of grieving the passing of his wife demonstrates his broader commitment to living fully, a commitment that ought to have room in

[34] Ibid, p. 355.
[35] Ibid, p. 358.
[36] Ibid.

the model of the sage. As Olberding shows, Zhuangzi is not to be condemned for grieving– we can glean profound philosophical insight from Zhuangzi's story and learn a great deal about what it means to be a true sage.

Final Thoughts on Olberding's Work

Olberding initially presents Zhuangzi's case of grieving such that it seems incompatible with the sagely model set forth elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi.* However, through an analysis of sagehood, no-self, self-understanding, and a deliberate engagement with reality, Olberding discovers a refined model of sagehood that renders Zhuangzi's sorrow consistent with the rest of his philosophy on being a sage. Experiencing legitimate sorrow is not out of the question for Daoist sages– nay, it is rather an essential aspect of living a full, sagely life.

III. Beyond Life, Beyond Death: Empty Disposition of Zhuangzian Sages

Introduction to Budriūnaitė's Work

For most philosophers (including these Daoist sages), life, death and nature are deeply interconnected. Discussion of the relationship between life and death almost always necessitates a corollary consideration of nature, our relationships with others, our notion of human life and the nature of existence. Agnė Budriūnaitė, in her article titled "Joys of an Empty Skull: The Tension between Nature and Death in the *Zhuangzi,*" challenges the traditionally Western, oppositional relationship between life and death by explicating a non-dual understanding of death that is presented in the famous Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi.* To orient her readers, Budriūnaitė includes an epigraph that raises a passage from the *Zhuangzi* where Master Zhuang ruminates on the philosophical meaning of an empty skull– an image representing the simultaneity of life and

death. Budriūnaitė thus outlines the central theme of her article and includes her central investigative questions, "The meaning of death, the validity of sorrow, and the purpose of mourning always connect to the notion of nature, human and otherwise. The question then becomes inevitable: What is nature? How does death affect it?"[37] By introducing the Daoist principles of non-dual thinking, no-self and zero-perspective, Budriūnaitė illuminates how Daoist sages are able to transcend both life and death.

Non-Dual Understanding of Life and Death

Budriūnaitė first presents a way of thinking that is fundamental to East Asian culture, non-dual thinking, by investigating possible interpretations of Zhuang Zhou's famous butterfly dream. This presentation of non-dual thinking will later be employed to render a more deep understanding of sagely powers. Budriūnaitė begins by raising Zhuangzi's general aversion to any sort of dualistic thinking: "Zhuangzi criticizes opposite-based thinking and looks at any opposite pair of events or objects as natural phases of everlasting flux."[38] This aversion to dualistic forms appears in the analysis of the butterfly dream, wherein Zhuang Zhou awakes from a dream in which he was a butterfly and does not know which is his 'real' form: butterfly or human. Budriūnaitė's ultimate interpretation of the butterfly dream is that under non-dual thinking, Zhuang Zhou is both, and that "their separateness and opposition are conditional and only in respect of each other."[39] For Budriūnaitė, the story of the butterfly dream serves as an analogy for the nondual relationship between life and death. Typically seen as opposites in the West, life and death are no exception to the true non-dual reality of nature. Budriūnaitė states that

[37] Budriūnaitė, Agnė. "Joys of an Empty Skull: The Tension between Nature and Death in the *Zhuangzi.*" in *New Visions of the Zhuangzi,* ed. Livia Kohn. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2015. p. 23.
[38] Budriūnaitė, Agnė. "Joys of an Empty Skull: The Tension between Nature and Death in the *Zhuangzi.*" p. 25.
[39] Ibid. p. 27.

it is inaccurate to view life and death as diametrically opposed to one another, as they are rather differentiated stages of the larger whole of transformation. Budriūnaitė explicitly ties the relationship between life and death to the story of the butterfly dream when she writes, "Guo Xiang interprets the butterfly allegory as the recognition of the relationship of life and death and emphasizes the calmness of heart-and-mind with regard to both."[40] When thought of non-dually, like the butterfly and the human dreaming, life and death are not strict opposites, but rather two stages of a greater transformational process. This understanding of the conditional relationship between life and death will return later in the paper when Budriūnaitė examines how sages supersede the emotional toil wrought by death.

Sorrow and Mourning: Validity of Pre-reflective Emotions

For Budriūnaitė, adapting non-dual thinking into one's life is an essential first step toward superseding the emotional damage brought about by grieving because it allows one to take a perspective on death wherein death is not a disvalued, final state of oblivion but rather a continuation of larger transformational process. Sages embody this knowledge of the non-dual reality of nature and it allows them to maintain their equanimity: "...death is as a natural process (*ziran*) equated with transformation itself. Many sages and true men in the *Zhuangzi* show such a calm attitude toward death and sickness…"[41] As we saw in Olberding's work, this calmness, however, does not suggest that sages forgo emotions altogether. Like their unenlightened counterparts, sages do feel genuine emotion. Sages are human, too– they are not exempt from grappling with difficult emotions. As Budriūnaitė writes to this point, "Obviously, even sages have emotional aspects as part of their human nature. It would be difficult to deny the naturalness

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, p. 28.

of simple psychological attachment to relatives and friends. Accordingly, sorrow and mourning after the loss of a loved one are not alien to human nature."[42] As is demonstrated in the story of Zhuangzi's grieving over the loss of his wife, Budriūnaitė (like Olberding) locates grief's proper place to lie within the boundaries of spontaneous reaction, and takes this notion even a step further to state that excessive lament reflects a failure of non-dual thinking. For Budriūnaitė, "Attachment to emotions presupposes opposite-based thinking,"[43] and thus for Zhuangzi's case, once the non-dual relationship between life and death is remembered, his grieving stops immediately and his tears are replaced with joyful singing. Zhuangzi rightly does not cling to the emotion of sorrow, rather he gives this emotion its appropriate time as dictated by the spontaneity of the emotion, and then it is replaced with joy. This detachment from emotions brought upon by death reflects Zhuangzi's deeper understanding of the relationship between life and death wherein emotions are experienced in a real and valid way, but do not bring emotional damage to the agent.

A paradox thus emerges: sages both feel genuine emotion and sorrow, but at the same time supersede it and do not allow it to disturb their 'numinous treasury.' How can this be? To understand this paradox, we must return to the sagely knowledge of the non-dual reality of nature: there must lie a position beyond all opposites that allows for both sides of the paradox to be true. This sagely, non-dual posture reflects a disposition that lies beyond normal registration of emotion, it is "a position beyond all opposites, a true knowledge beyond knowing and unknowing and a true nature beyond all natures."[44] This sagely posture beyond all opposites demonstrates a realization of emptiness and a skillful employment of nonthinking, where emotions register with the agent but do not disturb their equanimity. For enlightened figures,

[42] Ibid, p. 29.
[43] Ibid, p. 30.
[44] Ibid.

emotions are experienced from an empty disposition– a posture beyond the opposites of 'good' and 'bad,' joy and sorrow, life and death.

Emptiness and the Paradox of Sage Immortality

In this section, Budriūnaitė raises a related paradox that stems from the aforementioned paradox of emotion– namely, the paradox of immortality, or at least longevity. According to the *Zhuangzi*, sages are subject to the changing nature of things and yet also at the same time supersede these trials, thereby preserving their lives. To expound this paradox further, Budriūnaitė begins this section by noting that sages are still human, equally subject to change in conditions, but notes their special, cultivated relationship with death: "Sages, too, live, get ill, lose bodily functions, and die. They obey the destiny of being a thing among other things. Called true men (*zhenren* 真人), they are people who have developed human nature to perfection. Death is no stranger to them."[45] How strange, then– if sages, too, are subject to the toil of life, whence comes their sagely powers of longevity? What renders a sage immortal? According to Budriūnaitė's interpretation, "Immortality in the text, then, must mean something else than life without end, since physical immortality would mean a denial of the natural order of things…"[46] Sages do not violate the laws of nature, and as Budriūnaitė points out, their immortality must somehow lie still within what nature permits. To elucidate this possibility, Budriūnaitė raises a small exchange in the *Zhuangzi* between Guangchengzi and Huangdi, where Guangchengzi reflects on his own sagacity, "'...Men may die altogether, but I alone survive.'"[47] Here, Guangchengzi is not boasting of his immortality, for he is not speaking from a position of a substantial self, nor with regard to the physical dimensions of human life. Rather, Guangzhengzi

[45] Ibid, p. 31.
[46] Ibid, p. 32.
[47] Ibid.

illuminates the power of the position of no-self, from emptiness, wherein living a human life and being immortal can be true at the same time. As Budriūnaitė writes to this point, "His statement, then, … reflects his union with emptiness and his attainment of being no-thing or nothing. Nothing is not alive and will not die but will survive, just as emptiness survives in some form in spite of being part of every thing."[48] We once again reach the ground of reality in which sages position themselves; they ground themselves in the truth of non-dualism, no-self and emptiness. Guangchengzi refers not to an immortality in the physical world, but rather speaks of the immortality found in emptiness. Sages take their refuge in emptiness, and from this refuge they belong to the world yet simultaneously transcend it. Budriūnaitė summarizes this point when she states, "Sages do not transform and present an exception from other things, but not in the sense of their inherent heavenly nature. Thus the position beyond all opposites turns out to be an empty position or non-position...Looking from this empty, inside perspective, sages transform along with all things and still, paradoxically, escape the transformation."[49] Emptiness is the position from which paradoxes are true– nothing survives, emptiness survives, and thus sages survive.

'The Nature of Transformation'

Having dealt with the paradox of immortality, Budriūnaitė shifts to more fully expound the nature of transformation from the position of emptiness. As Budriūnaitė tells us, emptiness is not a place of extinction– it is a position beyond all opposites, beyond our standard dualistic ways of thinking. As Budriūnaitė writes on transformation from the position of emptiness, "There is neither absolute extinction nor absolute origination. The existence or disappearance of a particular form is a mere fragment of the process as a whole. From this perspective, any human

[48] Ibid, p. 33.
[49] Ibid.

being does not live or die, but is changing together with the entire world."[50] Thus, transformation from this position beyond all opposites is seen as a universal self-unfolding, a certain self-determining. An empty disposition towards transformations is perhaps the source of a sage's equanimity– when nature is seen as empty, transformational toil can be transcended. As Budriūnaitė writes to this point, "The sages reply to the question of what to do in and with this ever-changing world, saying, 'Just let things evolve by themselves.'"[51] Indeed, sages are called to let the many transformations of the world unfold, and from their position of emptiness preserve their 'spirit storehouse.' As Budriūnaitė says of Zhuangzi, "He does not take a position of asserting or denying, but stays in the middle, beyond all opposites. This is a non-perspective, a zero-perspective…"[52] Employing a non-perspective to life allows sages, like Zhuangzi, to be meaningfully amidst the transformations and yet also beyond them.

Sagely Emptiness, Oneness and Zero-Perspective

In her final section, Budriūnaitė concludes with her most major point: while sages have both human nature and sagely nature, they look at things from the perspective of oneness (or in her words, 'zero-perspective') where neither nature matters. In this empty position, sages inhabit a realm beyond life and death– the source of their longevity. As sages ascend in their knowledge, they achieve higher levels of detachment and ultimately reach a critical level of understanding of "the oneness of Dao and the empty center of non-nature"[53] that allow them to obtain such sagely powers. As Budriūnaitė conclusively writes, "In the emptiness of oneness, there is no difference between sages, ordinary people, Heaven and Earth and the ten thousand things. There are no

[50] Ibid, p. 34.
[51] Ibid, p. 35.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid, p. 36.

thoughts about past and future. Life and death are no longer opposite; there is no more self."[54] The position of no-self is indeed central to developing sagely powers– the disappearance of the position of "I" allows a sage to access all positions. To end her article, Budriūnaitė summarizes the sagely power of seeing the relationship between life and death from a non-perspective, "Life lies in death and death lies in life when seen from the empty center of the transformation process. Only an empty self can realize this, one that has attachment to, or denies, neither life nor death."[55] Sages, on account of their ability to inhabit no-self and realize the true reality of emptiness, are able to sustain themselves– to transcend the distinction between life and death.

Taken together, Olberding's and Budriūnaitė's works reveal a way of life that transcendently activates the sagely powers of longevity and equanimity, a model which offers an enticing approach to life for weary surgeons. In the subsequent section, Chapter 3, I will conjoin both Olberding's and Budriūnaitė's sagely models together and apply it to contemporary surgeon workstyle in an effort to alleviate the suffering caused by death and resolve burnout.

[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid, p. 37.

Chapter 3

Application of the Daoist Sagely Model to Resolve Surgeon Burnout

"What is true meditation? It is to make everything: coughing, swallowing, waving the arms, motion, stillness, words, action, the evil and the good, prosperity and shame, gain and loss, right and wrong, into one single koan."
– Hakuin

I. Introduction

Having presented Amy Olberding and Agnė Budriūnaitė's respective works on Zhuangzian sages' relationship with death, this section will apply this sagely model to contemporary surgeon lifestyle and culture in an effort to resolve psycho-spiritual burnout. This thesis has thus far introduced the transcendently sustainable qualities of a sage, but the question naturally arises: how can we promote and cultivate these same qualities in surgeons with predominantly scientific (in other words, non-philosophical) backgrounds? The task is not an easy one: firstly, because Western medicine encourages empirical, data-driven scientific truth and restricts the legitimacy of non-dual thinking, integration of Daoist contemplative practice into surgeons' lives will likely encounter apprehension or resistance. Secondly, because of busy surgeon lifestyles, surgeons will be less likely to take up new lifestyle methods that include quiet meditation, stillness and exploration of one's interiority. Despite these barriers, I propose that through the institutional integration of contemplative practices, greater personal attunement to skillful absorption or 'flow states,' and habitual meditative practice surgeon workstyle can be transformed into work that is restorative rather than depleting.

II. Skillful Absorption

Changing Surgeon Attitude Toward Death, Work and Meditation

The broader culture of surgery is one dominated by a pervasive sense of stress and pressure, due largely in part to the demanding nature of the work and implicit competition within and amongst elite academic medical institutions. It is this sort of stressful workplace environment that sets the foundation for endemic burnout to arise as a systemic issue. The implications of strenuous workplace culture on surgeon well-being aside, however, this thesis seeks to resolve the more complex and philosophical form of burnout that is induced by a surgeon's proximity to death on a daily basis. I contend that surgeons, despite their extensive technical training, are poorly equipped to cope with the inevitable feelings of loss, grieving and futility that comes with the death of a patient within their care. I attribute this emotional unpreparedness to a lack of humanities-oriented education, particularly in philosophy, within medical training programs. I contend that in order to restore surgeon well-being to sustainable levels, levels that will allow surgeons to practice effectively and joyfully throughout the duration of their careers, a paradigmatic shift in a surgeons' relationship with death must occur in favor of an East-Asian, specifically Zhuangzian, understanding of death. The clinical research community and corollary scientific literature focused on burnout has only recently begun to more fully understand burnout and have not yet provided recourse for physicians who are currently experiencing this energetic collapse. Reviewers in an article published in *JAMA* in 2021 accurately identify but only weakly suggest that "the work ahead involves continued identification of interventions that effectively address occupational distress and enhance

professional satisfaction."[56] This nonspecific call for intervention in the broader physician culture is representative of the healthcare's current relationship with burnout: aware of its presence but at a loss for how to approach resolving the issue. Research around burnout has thus far investigated only the symptoms and local sources of burnout and have yet to propose concrete intervention programs to resolve the issue, suggesting the urgent need for resolutions. However, there is some hope to be found in that some research centers have begun to explore the possibility of implementing mindfulness interventions into physician culture, noting this particular resolutions' efficacy at achieving personal well-being. As one study on a cohort of surgery residents reports on the potential for mindfulness practice to repair emotionally damaged professionals, "...Dispositional mindfulness can be a potentially modifiable personal characteristic that confers resilience to stress, as evidenced by the association of greater dispositional mindfulness with a substantially lower risk of experiencing high stress, burnout and distress symptoms across this cohort."[57] The medical community is catching on to the power of mindfulness, albeit at a staggeringly slow pace: as reflected in the scientific literature around burnout, there seems to be a growing realization that some individuals have dispositional tendencies towards mindfulness that confers a natural advantage against the harmful effects of burnout. However, because of the inherent limits of scientific research to quantify and understand the powers found in one's subjectivity, researchers are unsure how to evaluate mindful surgeons and reappropriate their 'powers' for use in other more vulnerable individuals. As such, I conclude that the research around mindfulness as a resolution to burnout seems to be missing the essential link of these

[56] Rotenstein LS, Sinsky C, Cassel CK. "How to Measure Progress in Addressing Physician Well-being: Beyond Burnout." *JAMA*. 2021 Dec 7; 326(21):2129-2130. doi: 10.1001/jama.2021.20175. PMID: 34757427.
[57] Lebares CC, et. al. "Burnout and Stress Among US Surgery Residents: Psychological Distress and Resilience." *J Am Coll Surg.* 2018 Jan; 226 (1) p. 80-90. doi: 10.1016/j.jamcollsurg. 2017.10.010. PMID: 29107117. p. 86.

practices to their corresponding deep and rich philosophical tradition that emphasizes first and foremost exploration of one's interiority and critical subjectivity. One research group goes so far as to lament the difficulty in understanding how such resilient individuals arise, "...it is difficult to translate 'resilience' into an intervention, because, by many definitions, resilience is a phenotype or attribute derived from complex life experiences…how does one teach such things?"[58] This exasperated exclaim reveals a certain blind spot in the burnout research community's vision: although they correctly identify some individuals have natural inclinations towards sagacious resiliency and sustainability, they feel unsure at how to meaningfully implement these personal skills into a broader culture. The answer to the above question is nearer to researchers than they might think: the sage disposition can be cultivated through a commitment to Daoist philosophy, contemplative study and meditative practice.

Accordingly, this contention is supplemented with a call for the integration of holistic, humanities-oriented education, with emphasis on the integration of East Asian philosophy, contemplative practice and mindfulness into surgeon lifestyle on account of these disciplines' effectiveness in improving personal well-being and spiritual flexibility. Contemplative practice, a large umbrella term used to categorize the various methods and approaches concerned with increasing individual attentiveness, presence and wisdom, is a particularly relevant inclusion in this prospective medical education. Mention of the historically and socioculturally broad field of contemplative practice necessitates a consequent introduction to an emerging interdisciplinary field called Contemplative Studies that incorporates a unique blend of philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, meditation, and contemplative pedagogy focused on promoting critical subjectivity and character development. Louis Komjathy, leading literary expert on Contemplative Studies,

[58] Lebares, "Burnout and Stress Among US Surgery Residents: Psychological Distress and Resilience," p. 87.

writes on the general focus of this discipline, "...Contemplative Studies, with its emphasis on embodiment, interiority, locatedness, practice, subjectivity, and alternative values, represents a different model and enactment of education, not to mention being."[59] Contemplative Studies is a key addition to surgeon training because of this discipline's emphasis on knowledge manifesting not in technical ability but rather in a way of embodiment and being in the world that is elegant and fruitful (ethical 'know-how' as opposed to 'know-what'). As was seen within the Daoist sage model, reaching the level of the sages requires an embodiment of a certain knowledge gained through meditative insight. Sages demonstrate a way of being in the world that is at once elegant, effortless, efficient, joyful and self-replenishing. I recognize the impracticality of a call for a paradigmatic shift in surgeon training to primarily include philosophy and contemplative practice as the very foundation of a surgeon's approach to their work. For this reason, in the following sections, I will explore the ways in which surgeons can more personally take up a meditative approach to surgery in an effort to transform their work into a certain meditation or skillfully absorbed state to increase sustainability.

Intentional Entanglement with Life

Starting broadly, I envision that the greatest improvements in surgeon sustainability will come through a fundamental change in a surgeon's psychological approach to work that is emotionally depleting and spiritually challenging. As was explored via the explication of the Zhuangzian model in Chapter 2, sages approach the challenge of death from a non-dual position that is flexible and allows for an intentional entanglement with life. This is the very disposition that I ask surgeons to take up in their own moral grapple with human mortality and loss. Greater attunement to the non-dual nature of reality through an East Asian philosophical education

[59] Komjathy, Louis. *Introducing Contemplative Studies.* John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Hoboken: 2018. p. 40.

would be the basis of cultivating such an understanding. More concretely, incorporation of contemplative practice into the clinical environment is, at its core, about personal development such that surgeons can cultivate themselves into sages who are more spiritually prepared to indirectly experience death.

As was explicated in Chapter 1, meditation, alongside contemplative practice, is essentially about cultivating one's subjectivity and inner character. This thesis calls for surgeons to become a certain type of sagacious person, one that excels not only technically but also fashions themself in accordance with the Dao such that they are preserved against the effects of experiencing loss.

Flow States, Wuwei, Spontaneity

A crucial addition that must be made to this proposal for an emboldened surgeon training is the awareness and somewhat paradoxical pursuit of what Hungarian-American psychologist Mihalyi Csikszenmihalyi has famously called "flow states." 'Flow' is a colloquial term used in everyday contemporary life to describe experiences that are natural, effortless and spontaneous and in general are pleasurable for the individual. This notion of 'flow' in fact stems from deeply philosophical ideas that are a part of the East Asian meditative traditions, perhaps most particularly Daoism. As was explored in Chapter 1, these transcendently spontaneous states are states of being that demonstrate the highest, most authentic and complete expression of both self and the nature of our reality, and are always inextricably linked to what is considered to be good, beautiful, or virtuous– a key area of opportunity for surgeons who wish to improve their skill while simultaneously feel effortless doing so. Edward Slingerland, one of the leading experts on Daoist spontaneity and author of *Trying Not to Try*, illustrates the subtle power of spontaneity

with the following, "it refers to the dynamic, effortless and unselfconscious state of mind of a person who is optimally active and effective. People in *wu-wei* feel as if they are doing nothing, while at the same time they might be creating a brilliant work of art, smoothly negotiating a complex social situation, or even bringing the entire world into harmonious order."[60] Flow states, spontaneous modes of being, *wu-wei*– each of these related terms all point to the same transcendental state that this thesis seeks to increase awareness of in surgeon culture. I accordingly hypothesize that surgeons who are more able to access flow states will more likely find their work replenishing rather than depleting.

The aforementioned Hungarian-American psychologist and author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, writes illuminatingly on the activation of flow in surgical settings in the section titled "Work as Flow," observing "Those surgeons who enjoy their work usually practice in hospitals that allow variety and a certain amount of experimentation with the latest techniques, and that make research and teaching part of the job…they state that their greatest enthusiasm is for the intrinsic aspects of the job."[61] Surgery is a job that is ripe for the activation of flow on account of this activity's orientation towards detail, careful movement, concentration, accomplishing goals, teamwork and teaching. If surgeons who work in hospitals that encourage teaching and grant the freedom of (safe) experimentation report higher levels of satisfaction with their work, imagine the efficacy and satisfaction that would come from surgeons who work at hospitals that more formally educate their surgeons in contemplative practice to increase flow states!

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[60] Slingerland, Edward. *Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity.* Crown Publishers. New York: 2014. p. 7.
[61] Csikszenmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* Harper Perennial. New York: 2008. p. 155.

Komjathy writes more broadly how achieving these flow states demonstrates a level of self-actualization for the individual, "...one may have various 'peak experiences' and 'optimal experiences' such as 'flow.' That is, there are experiences that indicate and manifest self-actualization."[62] Through increased education and awareness around the power of flow states, surgery can readily be transformed into work that is at once renewing and rewarding, even in the face of adverse events such as patient death. For surgeons who can readily access flow states, coping with the emotional damage brought upon by interpersonal loss will come more easily. I contend that increasing awareness of flow states in clinical and operative environments will leave surgeons more prepared to process challenging emotional situations.

Changing Surgeon Lifestyle

This thesis encourages a particular ethical training regimen (as outlined above) such that the surgeons who undergo it are transformed into individuals much like the sages found in the *Zhuangzi.* Becoming a sage requires a fundamental shift in the individual's lifestyle to include regular meditation and contemplative practice to more fully embody the philosophy found in the Daoist texts. Komjathy provides a useful definition for contemplative practice that highlights the results of one's efforts: "Contemplative practice refers to the various approaches, disciplines and methods for developing attentiveness, awareness, compassion, concentration, presence, wisdom and the like. Possible connective strands or family resemblances include attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose."[63] Adoption of contemplative practice into surgeon lifestyle will almost invariably increase individual attentiveness, compassion, wisdom, concentration and mental acuity. These

[62] Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies.* p. 109.
[63] Ibid, p. 51.

qualities are essential in surgical settings and those surgeons who possess them are often the most effective, and in the context of this thesis, sustainable.

I commend the efforts of a group of researchers at the University of California, San Francisco who sought to improve and research the well-being of a cohort of surgery interns by implementing a mindfulness-based stress-resilience (MBSR) training program. This study marks by far the most explicitly East Asian intervention approach to resolving surgeon burnout and is thus an invaluable investigation into the efficacy of contemplative practice. In a number of sessions across the surgeons' training, the researchers taught both formal (body awareness, yoga and sitting meditation) as well as informal (walking meditation and transition breathing) mindfulness practice.[64] These researchers also integrated weekly discussions on articles covering topics such as perseverance, complications, honesty and death while exploring self-care and the ethos of surgery.[65] Despite the preliminary success of this cohort in response to MBSR intervention, I must, however, conjecture against the application of MBSR as a mere "tool" in a surgeons' wider skill set. This thesis seeks to re-couple contemporary meditative practices such as MBSR with its rich and essential connection to the East Asian philosophical tradition for therein lies its truly transformative power source. I contend that marketing MBSR interventions as just a 'tool' for surgeons to use is an ineffective long-term strategy to resolve burnout. Since the burnout that this thesis seeks to address arises from a deeply philosophical place within the individual experiencing burnout, meditative practice must be more fundamentally at the center of the individuals' daily life to resolve it. MBSR will not serve as a long-term resolution for surgeon burnout so long as this practice is only sought out on an "as-needed" basis: to truly

[64] Lebares CC, et. al. "Feasibility of Formal Mindfulness-Based Stress-Resilience Training Among Surgery Interns: A Randomized Clinical Trial." *JAMA Surg*. p. 3.
[65] Ibid, p. 3.

eradicate burnout, and to complete the surgeon transformation into a sage, one must assimilate the philosophy and corollary practice to the core of their being.

Changing the Operative Environment

In contemporary workplace environments, but perhaps more specifically in clinical settings, work is fast-paced, production-oriented and clouded with intradepartmental politics. This sort of workplace environment, exacerbated by the presence of death in departments with high patient mortality such as surgery leaves little opportunity for meditative spaces to naturally arise and is precisely the environment that is in need of the most integration of contemplative practice. Through implementing education oriented toward exploration of interiority and silence via contemplative practice, sagacity is possible– and ultimately offers a way of being a surgeon that is more conducive to personal and group flourishing. As Komjathy writes on the ultimate results of dedicated meditative practice, "In any case, in terms of contemplative experience, we noted above that some key conditions and qualities include attentiveness, awareness, ease, equanimity, generosity, joy, stillness and so forth."[66] Engaging regularly in meditative practice can help achieve this cultivated sense of interiority that ideally surgeons take with them as they go about their work and toil. Surgical cultures' emphasis on strictly empirical knowledge has led to a workplace environment that is particularly harsh, cold, sterile and bureaucratic. These environments foster careerism, competitiveness, intellectualism and scientism, which are not conducive to human flourishing. It is hopeful to imagine that surgeons with cultivated inner lives would be able to navigate these stifling workplace waters with ease and delicacy while preserving their 'numinous treasury' from its harshness. In conjunction with more formal philosophical and meditative training, I contend that arming surgeons with these methods of

[66] Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies,* p. 109.

thought can systematically increase surgeon steadfastness, sensitivity, understanding and efficacy– qualities not unlike the ones acquired by the sages found in the Zhuangzian tradition.

It is important to recognize that in regards to the implementation of contemplative practice into clinical environments, contemplative practice can take form in a range of activities standard to daily routine, "Members of Contemplative Studies tend to understand 'contemplative practice' in terms of a specific approach, an approach that may be applied to and expressed in almost any activity. This includes art, dance, writing, photography, research, teaching, theatre, walking and so forth."[67] We see here that activities common to a surgeon's routine such as writing, teaching and walking, with the right approach and training, can be transformed into meditative practice. This demonstrates the connection between skillful absorption and contemplative practice– entering into a flow state or *wu-wei* may very well bring about a meditative countenance, and vice versa. When it comes to engendering longevity in surgeons, being skillfully absorbed in one's work as well as having that work be meditative is crucial.

I will now attempt to defend my proposal against the claim that the daily workload of clinicians and specifically surgeons would not allow for the inclusion of meditative practice due to lack of time to engage in contemplative practice. I begin my response to this critique by expanding the definition of meditation to include practices that are not the classic meditative practice such as quiet mindfulness meditation. While a useful meditative practice, I recognize the impracticality of asking surgeons to sequester time in their schedule to engage in seated meditation. Through a range of sociocultural factors that are outside the scope of this thesis and thus will not be explored here, meditation in daily culture has come to implicitly suggest merely seated mindful meditation. It is important to think of meditation not just as Zen practice's "just-sitting," but as something that can be active. I concede that surgeons do not have time to

[67] Ibid, p. 52.

"just sit," therefore, in order for this model to be taken up, meditation must be implemented as a restorative activity that can be done *while* working! Komjathy writes on the broad range of contemplative and meditative practice, "On the most basic level, 'contemplative practice' is a more-encompassing comparative category, with some rough equivalence to 'meditation.' However, unlike 'meditation,' which sometimes implies seated postures and which is often reduced to Buddhist meditation, 'contemplative practice' functions as a larger category."[68] As is suggested in the epigraph to this chapter, meditative practice is not confined to just seated meditation but rather can be active and practiced through a whole host of activities that are conducive to increased awareness and absorption. With this expanded notion of meditation in mind, I raise a new outlook for the operative environment: what if the operating theater could be considered a place of active meditation with a focus on attentiveness and efficacy? This transformed vision of the operating theater and its implications will be explored in the following section via a more explicit elucidation of meditative practice.

III. Meditation and Contemplative Practices

Meditation and Mindfulness Practice

There are perhaps no meditative practices that have been more appropriated and repurposed in Western culture than seated mindfulness meditation. Despite its somewhat tragic commercialization and decontextualization in the West, committed meditation practitioners with an appreciation for meditation's rich historical roots offer an encouraging entry point for surgeon personal transformation. I herein prescribe for any surgeon that seeks reprieve from psycho-spiritual burnout a daily seated mindfulness routine to improve inner strength and resiliency. Mindfulness meditation's emphasis on observing one's thoughts, emotions and

[68] Ibid. p. 52.

feelings is exactly the mental groundwork required for surgeons to enter into the right relationship with death. As sages from the East Asian tradition demonstrate, one cannot simply intellectually grasp a more holistic relationship with death, rather it must be primarily embodied and taken up as a way of life itself. Entering into a more sustainable relationship with death to abate the suffering brought upon by loss requires a certain mental acuity and emotional availability, one that can be developed primarily through mindfulness meditation. Traditional Daoist meditation practice prescribed its pupils apophatic techniques focused on cultivating suppleness, pliancy, psychological order, wholeness, and flowing cognition.[69] One such technique, the famous Zhuangzian 'fasting of the mind' includes breath regulation and turning one's attention to their inner life. The goal of this technique is to phenomenologically link one's inner world with the outer world in order to protect and nurture one's 'vital spirit' (*qi*), a relevant practice potentially therapeutic for and preventative against surgeon burnout. Having previously outlined the logistical impracticality of implementing seated mindfulness meditation into surgeon workstyle, the discussion of this broad and varied meditative form will come to rest here, while finally suggesting that surgeons take up this sort of practice whenever leisure time presents itself.

Meditation as Active

It is important to recall that despite the implicit collective Western understanding of meditation as seated, quiet and still, meditation can also be active, which offers an enticing solution for surgeons who are constantly *doing:* walking, working with their hands, writing, etc. The aforementioned researchers responsible for the MBSR intervention study conducted on surgery residents acutely point out the apparent difficulty in implementing seated meditation into

[69] Roth, Harold. D. "Daoist Apophatic Meditation." In *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer.* Komjathy, Louis, ed. SUNY Press. Albany, New York: 2015. p. 101.

surgeon workflow, "...there is a seeming disconnect between surgical stoicism and indefatigability and mindfulness, which is often perceived as relaxation rather than a skill to enhance resilience. Moreover, the time pressures of surgical training make additional responsibilities and new curricula seem impossible."[70] Active meditation techniques, then, become an essential part of practically resolving surgeon burnout because these practices can be done while and through any given surgeon's daily tasks. A number of active meditative practices come to mind, namely the Alexander Technique, Authentic Movement, Feldenkrais Method and Zen Buddhist Walking, all of which can be done while moving and emphasize one's awareness of the body's movement and sensorimotor activity. Through such heightened bodily awareness, surgeons will be more readily equipped with the sagely sensibility that confers sustainable qualities.

A whole discipline within meditative practice called somatics (or in some cases kinesthetic meditation) is devoted to meditation that is active in an effort to increase awareness of the mind-body connection and identify sources of suffering or imbalance. Some techniques contained within somatics promote increased awareness of one's extremities, including the fingers and toes. This form of meditation offers an enticing possibility for emotionally fatigued surgeons, because in the context of operative settings, surgeons with increased sensitivity and ability in their fingers will likely put forth more efficient and effective surgical movements. Heightened sensation and ability in the hands also suggest that a surgeon may more likely enter into skillful absorption states, which were previously discovered to aid in resolving surgeon burnout.

[70] Lebares, "Feasibility of Formal Mindfulness-Based Stress-Resilience Training Among Surgery Interns: A Randomized Clinical Trial," p. 2.

Surgery Itself as Meditation

Having presented active forms of meditation and how these practices might be taken up into daily routine for surgeons, I will now investigate the ways in which the act of surgery itself could be utilized as a meditative practice for surgeons. I begin by presenting Komjathy's definition of the Daoist practices of Qigong and Taiji as moving meditation, "In the context of Contemplative Studies, Qigong and Taiji quan are most often presented as relaxation methods and 'moving meditation.'"[71] I now raise the idea that at its highest levels, surgery resembles Taiji and that this connection suggests a potential merger between the two activities! The act of operating on a patient features deliberate and calculated movements of the hands, much like the movements found in Taiji (and in the aforementioned somatic meditation). I propose that when surgeons reach a critical sagacity through dedication to the various meditative practices outlined here in this chapter, surgery itself could become meditation and in fact a source of renewal and replenishment for surgeons. Komjathy writes more broadly on the basis of moving meditation and illustrates a general outline for how surgery might be viewed as meditation, "While diverse, these styles of practice as a whole emphasize actual awareness of and in movement, including postural alignment and spatiality. Given the associated release and habituated holding patterns, such transformative effects might be referred to as 'en-lightenment,' as related to weight rather than vision. Such somatic and kinesthetic shifts might also provide insights into the possibility of 'deconditioning.'"[72] We thus reach perhaps the most central and radical contention of this thesis: surgeons can be meditating through their work. Through sagacious cultivation, the act of operating on a patient can be meditative such that the very activity that once was the source of great emotional harm and distress to the surgeon is now the same act that is replenishing.

[71] Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies,* p. 79.
[72] Ibid, p. 81.

Viewing surgery as a potential meditative practice represents a completion of the transformation of a surgeon into a sage because it demonstrates an application of non-dual thinking and intentional entanglement with the perils of life.

Final Formation of Surgeons Into Sages

As the *Zhuangzi* presents, one's journey toward sagehood is never fully complete: sages continue to live and toil in this world, always learning, growing and transforming. As sages increase in their wisdom, they in turn are endowed with certain transcendent powers that confer their longevity. Yet, not only are sages preserved against emotional harm, but they can also find great joy amongst it when it does occur– as Komjathy writes to this point, "Some characteristics of self-actualizing and self-actualized people include acceptance, appreciation, creativity, discernment, fulfillment, humor, independence, joyfulness, positive regard, self-reliance and sympathy."[73] Through meditation, particularly somatic meditation, sages self-actualize and in turn gain these sagely powers. This notion of critical self-cultivation recalls Zhuangzi's sagacious disposition of play and humor: when aligned both mentally and physically with the Dao, sages are at play! As was explored in Chapter 2, when Zhuangzi laughs, sings and drums after the passing of his wife, he has demonstrated the highest levels of embodied knowledge of the Dao and transformational nature of the universe. Zhuangzi is joyful despite the toil– he rises above it. When such a highly cultivated state is reached the sages' activities become like play, which is not only naturally replenishing and restorative but also creative and acutely discerning. These are the very qualities that increase a surgeon's skills as well as their well-being and serve as the ideal state for surgeons to attain. Komjathy writes conclusively on the true power of knowledge that is gained through contemplative practice and then taken into the body itself,

[73] Ibid, p. 109.

While the 'power of mind' is often emphasized in Contemplative Studies, we might consider the 'power of body': just as cognitive changes manifest in psychological changes, somatic changes manifest in cognitive changes… it is my contention that different contemplative systems and contemplative traditions become embodied in particular ways of being-in-the-world. Advanced practitioners and actualized representatives literally embody something different. There are alternative and diverse ways of *experiencing;* committed members of contemplative traditions manifest psychological and somatic qualities.[74]

Surgeons, on account of their proximity to death and frequent work with their hands, provide a unique profession into which meditative practice can be integrated. This thesis contends that through dedicated contemplative practice, surgeons take up a certain being-in-the-world that is reflected in the Zhuangzian sage model. Although a tradition that is millennia old, the Zhuangzian sage tradition contains real truth as to the ideal of human cultivation and development. The sagely powers as presented in these ancient texts are well and alive today in the twenty-first century for committed meditation practitioners, "For such adherents, some commonly recognized numinous abilities and forms of extrasensory perception include clairvoyance, clairaudience, imperviousness, multi- or trans-location and multivocality… we might also add apparently less 'extraordinary' abilities such as energetic sensitivity, soteriological insight, and spiritual intuition."[75] Sage powers are real in our time, not just reports of mystical traits from an ancient civilization. The possibility for inhabiting the zero-position, occupying a space byond all opposites, where these powers are possible, is still available today! As was explored in Chapter 2, through adopting an East-Asian philosophical disposition, the transcendent non-thinking and non-perspective states can be reached. In doing so, surgeons will be able to enter into a new, refreshing relationship with death and ultimately transcend the emotional damage brought upon by it.

[74] Ibid., p. 110.
[75] Ibid.

I will conclude this chapter and thesis by returning to ruminate on the epigraph listed at the beginning of Chapter 3. True sage wisdom is to know and embody that *everything* can be meditation– with the right approach, even the most basic of daily tasks can be transformed into activities that are thoughtful, joyful and replenishing. I return once more to Komjathy to close this point, who cites the Great Death found in Zen practice as a critical sage moment,

> This is the Great Death in which a practitioner dies to the known, transcends the limitations of separate personhood, and attains enlightenment. In fact, for Hakuin, like Zhaozhou Congshen, it involves making one's entire life, including each and every difficulty, into contemplative practice: 'What is true meditation? It is to make everything: coughing, swallowing, waving the arms, motion, stillness, words, action, the evil and the good, prosperity and shame, gain and loss, right and wrong, into a single koan' (cited in Kasulis 1981:111). It perhaps involves making death into the single great *kōan*...Everything becomes practice. From a certain perspective, perhaps everything, including challenges and difficulties, becomes viewed as 'blessings' or 'grace.'[76]

Through committed Daoist education and meditative practice, surgeons can find replenishment in and through their work. According to the great Zen master Hakuin, sages can 'die while alive, and be completely dead,' a classically paradoxical statement that can only be true from a position outside of Western dual, opposite-based thinking. This thesis contends that through personal transformation, surgeons can die to their old relationship with their work and take up a new vision for their vocation that enables joy, contentment and longevity– much like the deeply respected and admired Zhuangzian sages.

[76] Ibid, p. 115.

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