

The Lover of Swords

- *Chuang Tzu*

In the past King Wen of Chao loved swords. Specialists came to his gate, over three thousand of them, all experts in swordsmanship. They were his guests. Day and night they fought before him until the dead or wounded each year were more than a hundred. But the King never ceased to be delighted at watching them. This went on for three years, then the country began to fall apart and the other princes began to plot its overthrow.

Crown Prince Kuei was distressed by this, and he presented the situation to his followers:

'If there is anyone here who can persuade the King to put away these swordsmen, I will give him a thousand pieces of gold,' he said. His followers replied,

'Chuang Tzu can do this.'

The Crown Prince sent an ambassador with a thousand pieces of gold to Chuang Tzu. Chuang Tzu refused the gold but returned with the ambassador. He came in to see the Crown Prince and said, 'Oh Prince, what is it you wish to tell me that you send me a thousand pieces of gold?'

'I have heard, Sir, that you are an illustrious sage,' said the Crown Prince. 'The gift of a thousand pieces of gold was a gift for your attendants. However, you have refused to accept this, so what more dare I say?'

Chuang Tzu said, 'I have heard that the Crown Prince wants to use me to help the King give up his abiding passion. If in trying to do so I upset the King and fail to achieve what you hope for, then I might be executed. So what use would the gold be to me then? Or, if I could get the King to give up, and fulfil your hopes, what is

there in this whole kingdom of Chao that I could not ask for and be given?’

‘You’re right,’ said the Crown Prince. ‘However the King will only see swordsmen.’

‘That’s all right. I’m quite good with a sword,’ replied Chuang Tzu.

‘Fair enough,’ said the Crown Prince, ‘but the swordsmen the King sees are all tousle-headed with spiky beards, wearing loose caps held on with simple, rough straps and robes that are cut short behind. They look about them fiercely and talk only of their sport. The King loves all this. Now, if you go in wearing your scholar’s garb you will start off on completely the wrong foot.’

‘With your permission I will get a full swordsman’s outfit,’ said Chuang Tzu.

Within three days he had got this and returned to see the Crown Prince. The Crown Prince took him to see the King, who drew his sword and sat waiting for him. Chuang Tzu walked slowly into the hall through the main door. When he saw the King, he did not bow.

‘What instruction have you for me, that you have persuaded the Crown Prince about beforehand?’ demanded the King.

‘I have heard that the King likes swords and so I have brought my sword for the King to see.’

‘What use is your sword in combat?’

‘My sword can kill one person every ten paces, and after a thousand miles it is not faltering.’

The King was pleased and said, ‘There can be no one else like you under Heaven!’

‘A fine swordsman opens with a feint then gives ground, following up with a cut, stalling his opponent before he can react,’ replied Chuang Tzu. ‘I would like to show you my skills.’

‘Rest awhile in your rooms, Master, and await my commands,’ said the King. ‘I shall make arrangements for the contest and I will call you.’

The King spent the next seven days testing his swordsmen. More than sixty died or were severely wounded, leaving five or six who were selected and commanded to present themselves in the hall.

Then he called in Chuang Tzu and said, 'Now, this very day I shall pit you against these men to show your skills.'

'I have longed for such an opportunity,' said Chuang Tzu.

'Sir, what sort of sword will you choose, long or short?' asked the King.

'Any kind will do,' said Chuang Tzu, 'but I have three swords, any of which I could use if the King agrees. But first I would like to say something about them and then use them.'

'I would like to hear about these three swords,' said the King.

'I have the sword of the Son of Heaven, the sword of the noble Prince and the sword of the commoner,' said Chuang Tzu.

'What is this sword of the Son of Heaven?'

'The Son of Heaven's sword has as its point the Valley of Yen, and the Great Wall and Chi and Tai mountains as its blade edge. Chin and Wey are its ridge, Chou and Sung are its hilt and Han and Wei its sheath. On all four sides it is surrounded by barbarians and it is wrapped in the four seasons. The Sea of Po encompasses it and the eternal mountains of Chang are its belt. The five elements control it and it enacts what punishment and compassion dictate. It comes out in obedience to yin and yang, stands alert in spring and summer and goes into action in autumn and winter. Thrust forward, there is nothing in front of it; lift it high, and there is nothing above it; swing it low, and there is nothing below it; spin it around, there is nothing encompassing it. Raised high, it cleaves the firmaments; swung low, it severs the very veins of the Earth. Use this sword but once and all the rulers revert to obedience; all below Heaven submit. This is the sword of the Son of Heaven.'

King Wen was astonished and seemed to have forgotten everything else.

'What of the sword of the noble Prince?' he asked.

Chuang Tzu said, 'The sword of the noble Prince, its point is sagacious and courageous people; its blade is those of integrity and sincerity; its ridge is those of worth and goodness; its hilt is those who are trustworthy and wise; its sheath is of the brave and outstanding. When this sword is thrust forward, it encounters nothing; when wielded high, it has nothing above it; when swung low, it has nothing below it; when swirled about, it finds nothing

near it. Above, its guidance comes from Heaven and it proceeds with the three great lights.¹¹⁸ Below, it is inspired by the square, stable nature of the earth, proceeding with the flow of the four seasons. In the middle lands it restores harmony to the people and is in balance with the four directions. Use this sword but once and it is like hearing the crash of thunder. Within the four borders everyone obeys the laws and everyone attends to the orders of the ruler. This is the sword of the noble Prince.'

'What of the sword of the commoner?'

'The sword of the commoner is used by those who are tousle-haired with spiky beards, wearing loose caps held on by ordinary coarse cords, with their robes cut short behind. They stare about them fiercely and will only talk about their swordsmanship while fighting before the King. Raised high, it cuts through the neck; swung low, it slices into the liver and lungs. The people who use the sword of the commoner are no better than fighting cocks who at any time can have their lives curtailed. They are useless to the state. Now you, O King, have the position of the Son of Heaven but you make yourself unworthy by associating with the sword of the commoner. This is what I dare to say.'

The King brought him up into his hall where the butler presented a tray of food, while the King strode three times round the room.

'Sire, sit down and calm yourself,' said Chuang Tzu. 'Whatever there was to say about swords has been said.'

Following this, King Wen did not go out for three months and all his swordsmen killed themselves in their own rooms.

118. Sun, moon and stars.