

## CHUANG TZU: TWO RENDERINGS

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The following article by Brother John Albert examines two different commentaries on the Chinese sage Chuang Tzu: Oscar Wilde's "A Chinese Sage," which was a commentary on, in fact a review of, the first edition of Herbert A. Giles' translation from the Chinese of texts attributed to Chuang Tzu (1889) and Thomas Merton's "A Study of Chuang Tzu," which accompanied his "free interpretative readings" based in part on the second edition of Giles' work (1926). The latter, with some Merton annotations, is preserved in the Thomas Merton Studies Center. Merton did not actually "translate" Chuang Tzu (he knew no Chinese), but compared translations and rendered passages into his interpretations. It is interesting that his friend, noted Chinese scholar Dr. John C. H. Wu, preferred Merton's renderings to the literal translations from the Chinese and felt, as he read Merton's version, as though he were having "a tete-a-tete with Chuang Tzu incarnate." The following is a comparison of Giles' translation and Merton's reading of "THE USELESS TREE." Giles chose to present his translation in prose while Merton's rendering is in poetry.

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### Giles Translation

Hui Tzu said to Chuang Tzu, "Sir, I have a large tree, of a worthless kind. Its trunk is so irregular and knotty that it cannot be measured out for planks; while its branches are so twisted as to admit of no geometrical subdivision whatever. It stands by the roadside, but no carpenter will look at it. And your words, sir, are like that tree: -- big and useless, not wanted by anybody."

"Sir," rejoined Chuang Tzu, "have you never seen a wild cat, crouching down in wait for its prey? Right and left it springs from bough to bough, high and low alike, -- until perchance it gets caught in a trap or dies in a snare. On the other hand, there is the yak with its great huge body. It is big enough in all conscience, but it cannot catch mice.

"Now if you have a big tree and are at a loss what to do with it, why not plant it in the domain of non-existence, whither you might betake yourself to inaction by its side, to blissful repose beneath its shade? There it would be safe from the axe and from all other injury; for being of no use to others, itself would be free from harm."

### Merton Reading

Hui Tzu said to Chuang:  
I have a big tree,  
The kind they call a "stinktree."  
The trunk is so distorted,  
So full of knots,  
No one can get a straight plank  
Out of it. The branches are so crooked  
You cannot cut them up  
In any way that makes sense.

There it stands beside the road.  
No carpenter will even look at it.

Such is your teaching--  
Big and useless.

Chuang Tzu replied:  
Have you ever watched the wildcat  
Crouching, watching his prey--  
This way it leaps, and that way,  
High and low, and at last  
Lands in the trap.

But have you seen the yak?  
Great as a thundercloud  
He stands in his might.  
Big? Sure,  
He can't catch mice!

So for your big tree. No use?  
Then plant it in the wasteland  
In emptiness.  
Walk idly around,  
Rest under its shadow;  
No axe or bill prepares its end.  
No one will ever cut it down.

Useless? You should worry!