Zhuangzi/Chuang Tsu: Personal Freedom and Happiness

1: Overview
About 369-286 B.C. He lived his philosophy as a hermit. It is said that King Wei of the state Chu heard his name and sent a messenger to invite him to his state, promising to make a chief minister. Zhuangzi merely laughed and said to the messenger: ‘Go away, do not defile me...I prefer the enjoyment of my own free will ’ (Sima Qian: Historical Records, ch 63).

He is a contemporary of Mencius and Huishi, a famous logician at that time. His writing Zhuangzi was probably compiled by Guo Xiang, Zhuangzi’s great commentator of the 3rd century AD.

2: How to achieve relative happiness
Happiness has different levels. Free development of our nature may lead us to some relative happiness (temporary happiness). However, absolute happiness (eternal happiness) is achieved through higher understanding of the nature of things.

To be happy, we must be able to exercise our natural ability fully and freely. That ability is De/德/得, which comes directly from the Dao/道. Zhuangzi made a contrast between what is of nature and what is of man. ‘What is of nature is internal. What is of man is external...That oxen and horses should have four feet is what is of nature. That a halter should be put on a horse’s head, or a string through an ox’s nose, is what is of man’ (牛马四足，是谓天；落马首，穿牛鼻，是谓人). Nature versus Culture.

Different things have different natures. When their natures are fully and freely exercised, they feel happy. Following the course of nature is the best way of life. He said, ‘The duck’s legs are short, but if we try to lengthen them, the duck will feel pain. The crane’s legs are long, but if we try to shorten them, the crane will feel grief. Therefore we are not to amputate what is by nature long, nor to lengthen what is by nature short’ (凫胫虽短，续之则忧；鹤胫虽长，断之则悲。故性长非所断，性短非所续，无所去忧也).

3, How to achieve absolute happiness?
Zhuangzi said that we should see things from a higher point of view. He said: ‘This’ is also ‘that’. ‘That’ is also ‘this’. ‘That’ has a system of right. ‘This’ also has a system of right. Is there really a distinction between ‘this’ and ‘that’? Or is there really no distinction between ‘this’ and ‘that’? That ‘this’ and ‘that’ cease to be opposite is the very essence of Dao. Only the essence, an axis as it were, is the center of the circle responding to the endless changes. The right is an endless change. The wrong is also an endless change. Therefore it is said that there is nothing better than to use the ‘light.’ (是亦彼也，彼亦是也。彼亦一是非，此亦一是非，果且有彼是乎哉？果且无彼是乎哉？彼是莫得其偶，谓之道枢。枢始得其环中，以应无穷。是亦一无穷,
From the point of view of Dao, everything is just what it is. Zhuangzi said: ‘The possible is possible. The impossible is impossible. Dao makes things and they are what they are. What are they? They are what they are. What are they not? They are not what they are not. Everything is something and is good for something. There is nothing which is not something or is not good for something. Thus it is that there are roof-slates and pillars, ugliness and beauty, the peculiar and the extraordinary. All these by means of the Dao are united and become one.’

4, How to forget the distinctions between all things? Through an imaginary conversation between Confucius and Yanhui, Zhuangzi wrote: At this Confucius changed countenance and asked: ‘What do you mean by forgetfulness?’ To which Yanhui replied: ‘My limbs are nerveless and my intelligence is dimmed. I have abandoned my body and discarded my knowledge. Thus I become one with the Infinite. This is what I mean by sitting in forgetfulness.’

5, The equality of life and death
Zhuangzi’s wife died and Huizi went to offer his condolence. He found Zhuangzi squatting on the ground and singing, beating on an earthen bowl. He said, ‘Someone has lived with you, raised children for you and now she has aged and died. Is it not enough that you should not shed any tear? But now you sing and beat the bowl. Is this not too much? ’ ‘No,’ replied Zhuangzi. ‘When she died, how could I help being affected? But as I think the matter over, I realize that originally she had no life; and not only no life, she had no form; not only no form, she had no material force (qi). In the limbo of existence and non-existence, there was transformation and the material force was evolved. The material force was transformed to be form, form was transformed to become life, and now birth has transformed to become death. This is like the rotation of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall and winter. Now she lies asleep in the great house (the universe). For me to go about weeping and wailing would be to show my ignorance of destiny. Therefore I desist.’