

## Reading Zhuang Zi's Body as a

## Great Riddle

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In this paper I refer to a riddle found in the sixth chapter of the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* 庄子 – “The Great Ancestral Teacher” (*Da zong shi* 大宗師). I suggest that the chapter embodies a “living riddle,” a riddle that is presented in a text through subtle hints, and responded only in one’s life and practice.

By using Cora Diamond’s method of understanding great riddles, I offer a different sort of reading in the *Zhuangzi*, which is to say – a riddle like reading.

Great riddles are questions about life and death, space and time. Though there are many, I will take one example of a great riddle from the *Zhuangzi*. I believe that applying the method of riddles may help us understand better or at least in a different light Zhuang Zi’s writings.

Through an account of the usages of different characters which signify the word “body” in the text, placing special emphasis on the character *ti* 體, I attempt to closely examine the language game that Zhuang Zi plays on his readers. The understanding of the different characters used to signify the body – whether human or universal – serve me as hints for understanding the given riddle, and perhaps the text as a whole.

The paper concludes with an explanation on how using a riddle-like method of reading this ancient text brings us towards an understanding of Zhuang Zi’s attempt to speak about life as Dao 道, as a Way: While words may get us closer to expressing something about the Way, these very words also distance us from it.

However, a riddle is a special linguistic way to simultaneously express and not express that which we refer to; perhaps in this way one may say something meaning-

ful about life, about death and about the Way.

In this special philosophical chapter of the *Zhuangzi* we encounter two manifestations of a great riddle – which are presented sequentially and each followed by a similar story. Both stories help us understand the riddle, and even see the solution before our eyes.

The context of this riddle is a conversation between four friends who present an understating of the unity that encompasses all things.

子祀、子輿、子犁、子來四人相與語曰：「孰能以無為首，以生為脊，以死為尻，孰知生死存亡之一體者，吾與之友矣。」四人相視而笑，莫逆於心，遂相與為友。

*Ziji, Ziyu, Zili, and Zilai were talking. One of them said, “Who can see nothingness as his own head, life as his own spine, and death as his own behind? Who knows the single body formed by life and death, existence and nonexistence? I will be his friend! The four looked at one another and laughed, feeling complete concord, and became friends. (Ziporyn, 6: 39, p 45)*

The second story is as follows:

子桑戶、孟子反、子琴張三人相與友，曰：「孰能相與於無相與，相為於無相為？孰能登天遊霧，撓挑無極，相忘以生，無所終窮？」三人相視而笑，莫逆於心，遂相與為友。

*Zisanghu, Mengzifan, and Ziqingzhang came together in friendship, saying, “Who can be together in their very not being together, do things for one another by not doing things for one another? Who can climb up upon the heavens, roaming on the mists, twisting and turning round and round without limit, living their lives in*

*mutual forgetfulness, never coming to an end?" The three of them looked at one another and burst out laughing, feeling complete concord, and thus did they become friends. (Ziptyn 6:45, p.46)*

Both manifestations of the presented riddle aim at understanding the unity of all things, the world as a wholeness, which then enables the person to "climb up to heaven" – something which can be done quite easily – since the borders between the inner body and the outer world dissolve.

In a great riddle, we shall recognize the solution when we see it. Thus, it is not to be found in something we are looking for, but when we do arrive upon it, we immediately know it is the solution. Often, the solution we are looking for is not the one we find; moreover, we do not know in advance what it is, the solution we are

the meaning not of the human body, but of unity of all things. Unity of all things may not be what we were looking for from the very beginning, but once understood, we can see this "question" clearly as a riddle.

On one level, when we are reading this *Zhuangzi* riddle, we know what we are looking for – the unity of all things, and the constant occurrence of transformation. The fact that the four friends look at each other and laugh shows us that they know the solution; they have experienced the unity and the transformation of all things, they are true friends!

Thus, they have incorporated the Dao and are considered sages (*sheng ren* 聖人), for them the solution of the riddle is obvious.

I wish to elaborate on the concept of body in the *Zhuangzi*; hopefully this account will give us a better under-

“What we are looking for we do not know, and what we find at the end to be the solution is not what we were looking for in the first place.”

looking for. In order to know there is a solution we first need to know that we are facing a riddle.

In the riddle passage from the *Zhuangzi* I have just quoted above, in order to seek the solution, we must first understand it as riddle, which is possible from the specific language game used to create a riddle. Once determined that it is a riddle, automatically the language game has changed. We no longer seek an answer, but try to understand the riddle. Once we understand the riddle, we will then see the solution; hence the solution is in the riddle itself.

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If we stay on the linguistic level, we may think the *Zhuangzi* riddle refers solemnly to the human body. But if I now say the unity of all things is the solution to this riddle, we will understand the terms of the human body quite differently. We may see the body as analogous to the world, as all things exist in one body, which is one world. The body itself embodies the whole world, and the whole world is one body, in

standing of how to read this riddle. Given the account of the body, I then return to the method of understanding great riddles, and see from there if we are able to achieve a better understanding of the text.

In the text we come upon many different notions of the body; each one showing a different aspect of it. According to Deborah Sommer, there are four main terms that, taken together, form 209 occurrences of the term body throughout the text. (There are of course more than four terms that denote body in the text – here I follow Sommer and discuss four of them.) The two characters we encounter most are *xing* 形, literally meaning shape, form, pattern, design, and manifest (outward) appearance (98 times in the whole text), and *shen* 身, literally meaning the body, the trunk, the self, in person or I, myself (78 times).

There is one term we see only four times throughout the whole text which is *gong* 躬 which literally means: the body, the person, oneself, in person, personally, or to bend (the body). This last character is used quite frequently in the Confucian *Analects*, where it receives a meaning of "the ritualized body". An interesting term

for body we encounter (29 times, five of them in the sixth chapter of the *Zhuangzi* text) is *ti* 體, literally meaning: “the body”, “the physical body” or “the substance or essence of something”, “the thing itself distinct from its function”, “original nature”, “to embody”.

The *Zhuangzi* applies a great importance to the body, and not necessarily the human one. One may notice that the text contains a rich linguistic vocabulary for signifying the body. From this we may conclude that the many terms used are not used by coincidence, for each term has its own specific purpose used throughout different parts of the text, while each notion of the terms for body support a different idea that the text ostensibly advances.

The *Zhuangzi* presents the human form both as a corpus of flesh, organs, limbs and bones, and as a site of immolation that implies a larger wholeness – unity (*yi* 一), and a kind of fragmentation – constant transformations (*hua* 化) implying completeness.

Zhuangzi plays with the body and inverts it conceptually, displaying what should not be looked upon, making the hidden transparent, and transforming the fragments into a wholeness.

The human body therefore is encompassed within a larger common body that is a wholeness including both life and death.



Zhuang Zi

Here in this riddle, the Chinese character used for the term body is *ti* 體 which implies the meaning of a body without borders, both physical and conceptual. The term used for the “larger common body” is *tong ti* 同體, which is used for the discourse on unity of the myriad things. The *ti* body does not have discrete boundaries, but is a complex organic corpus with infinite boundaries that may be divided into many smaller increments, each of which is entirely analogous to the whole and is consubstantial with it. The part is then equivalent to the whole, just as it is in the riddle before us.

A single human *ti* body is part of a much larger corpus. Although a human being appears to have a discrete physical form (frequently described by Zhuang Zi), the human body is also organically consubstantial with the bodies of ancestors and descendants, with the bodies of all people with whom it engages and exchanges labor and food, the food commodities themselves, the resources that produced them, and even the bodies of the animals eaten by humans. Thus, the human reflects a whole and is reflected by it. Bodies of consumers and consumed overlap and are mutually embodied in an infinite range of progressions and overlaps. To participate in this range of progressions is to be embodied within it, and *ti* may also function in the verbal sense of “to embody”. The physical boundaries of any one *ti* body cannot be determined, for it is not a discrete phenomenon. Moreover, one human being might contain several *ti* bodies within it, and might participate in several larger *ti* bodies at once.

According to Nathan Sivin, in early Chinese texts, the smallest unit of the *ti* body is the human body, or the four limbs, while the largest unit is the cosmos itself. This explains how for Zhuang Zi there is no difference between the big and the small, or more precisely the difference between them is only relative. Therefore, we might conclude that the difference between the smallest unit of *ti* and the largest unit of *ti* is not a real difference. Understood in its broadest sense, the *ti* body can encompass life and death, heaven and earth.

Zhuang Zi uses the *ti* body as an entity without boundaries, but it becomes less

corporeal, more abstract and metaphorical. He favors using the term in its broadest sense to refer to completeness, limitlessness, or totality. He less often uses the term to refer to one particularized body unless his point is, as it is here, to demonstrate how that body is complete and interconnected with the larger universe.

In the case of our riddle, he refers to both of those points – the first sentence shows that the body is complete whereas the second shows how it is interconnected with the larger universe.

Sages are able to interweave themselves with their surroundings in such a manner that they become “one body” (*yiti* 一體) with them. In the passage the use of one body is *yiti*, thus we may conclude that these four friends are also sages.

common body. This account is framed as a story which comes right after the riddle of Confucius, who in this case is utilized to express Zhuang Zi’s philosophy, sending his disciple Zigong 子貢 to a funeral of one of the friends who died. In this case, unlike the former, there are three friends, not four, and we do not know about the way he died (i.e., the cause and process of his dying), only the reaction of his friends who represent Zhuang Zi’s philosophy and Zigong, (Confucius’s disciple) who represents the Confucian philosophical ideal of rituals *Li* 禮. Zigong arrives at the funeral at the time to see the body of the deceased being laid out for burial, while the deceased’s friends surround him singing. Zigong is disconcerted that the two surviving friends happily sing over their friend’s corpse, rejoicing that their dead friend has returned to his real form.

“Zhuang Zi’s understanding of the body supposes a view  
of completeness, of unity and of oneness.”

Zhuang Zi’s *ti* body is rarely if ever fragmented, mutilated, or mutated, although in this case he employs the term to describe the phenomenon of a hybrid entity in which nothingness is head, life is spine, and death is our behind.

As the “fragments” of this body are life and death itself, it can be considered a complete wholeness. Zhuang Zi also uses *ti* in a more metaphoric and less corporeal sense when he alludes to what he calls the “great body” of the ancients, who could embody heaven, earth, and the Dao. His understanding of the body supposes a view of completeness, of unity and of oneness. The *ti* body or embodiment is ultimately a steppingstone to the limitless, for Zhuang Zi aspires to embody the unfathomable and abide in vacuity. A very similar notion of the absence of boundaries is seen in the subsequent passage, where he notes a common body (*tong ti* 同體), which encompasses all things. In that passage, the discrete boundaries of the form (*xing* 形) are first inverted and eventually dispensed with as the senses are dropped and one emerges into a

Zigong returns to Confucius puzzled about the lack of ritual of these two people who consider their physical forms as something external. Confucius then realizes that Zigong cannot come to a full understanding of people who have gone beyond the boundaries between inner and outer, life and death. He says to Zigong:

*These are men who roam (you 遊) outside the lines (fang 方), I, on the other hand, do my roaming inside the lines. The twain can never meet. It was vulgar of me to send you to mourn for such a person. For the previous while, he had been chumming around as a human with Creator of Things, and now he roams in the single vital energy (qi 氣) of Heaven and Earth. Men such as these look upon life as a dangling wart or swollen pimple, and on death as its dropping off, its bursting and draining. Being such, what would they understand about which is life and which is death, what comes before and what comes after? Depending on all their diverse borrowings, they yet lodge securely in the one and only selfsame*

body (tong ti 同體). They forget all about their livers and gallbladders, cast away their eyes and ears, reversing and returning, ending and beginning, knowing no start or finish. Oblivious, they drift uncommitted beyond the dust and grime, far-flung and unfettered in the great work of doing nothing in particular. Why would they do something as stupid as practicing conventional rituals to impress the eyes and ears of the common crowd? (6:47, p 47)

The three friends have submerged in the essential commonality of the *ti* body, which contains both life and death, but Zigong, who is blind to it, sees only the surface boundaries of the *xing* 形 forms. The three friends, however, have turned their forms inside out; have understood oneness and that heaven and earth are one body.

Overall, the *Zhuangzi* uses the same terms for the human body found in other early texts, but it emphasizes particular usages while rejecting others.

He especially plays with the *xing* form, mutilating it, mutating it, and turning it inside out to liberate it from its labors and constriction, hence the wide portrayal of cripples and endless transformations of form.

Zhuang Zi offers the hope that people with the ability to see through the discrete boundaries of the form and participate in the common *ti* body of the universe will have access to limitless freedom.

Now the question that may rise is; how does this account promote our understanding of the body in the *Zhuangzi*? On the most basic level, the answer to the riddle is in the language used for the riddle, therefore, the solution to a riddle is independent of what exists or does not exist, and is not a way by which we can identify things falling in to one concept or another. We can immediately understand from the *Zhuangzi* riddle I have chose, that what is given is not a mere description of the human body – it is not a description of the *shen* 身 or *xing* 形 forms of the human body, and the solution will not be a certain concept of the body, but rather we may find a clue to the solution by the author's use of the characters *yiti* 一體 in this riddle.

Through the variables given in this riddle: "nothingness as the head, life as the spine, death as the behind", we cannot identify something which exists or does not exist, but rather achieve an understanding that this riddle is speaking of something quite greater than the variables and the objects themselves.

As opposed to the search after objects which gives us descriptions or distinctions between attributes of the given objects, we must seek after actions, actions which will turn words into a description of reality. We are requested to change apprehension and not seek after objects, but rather live life itself. The unity of all things can stand as a solution as it does in the *Zhuangzi*, just as the laughter of the three-four friends expresses their understanding not only of the riddle, but of life itself and death as an inseparable part of it. Namely they are "One Body".

We must not think of the body in the ordinary way through which we perceive the body, or even the ordinary way the body was perceived in ancient China, but we must consider how we may think of it in many different ways, in this case, how we may see the body as both life and death.



Zigong



In my opinion, Zhuang Zi's suggestion presents an ultimate solution for a great riddle – a riddle of life and death, because his solution goes beyond language and manifests in life itself.

An understanding of something illogical can be a satisfying solution to the riddle,

meaning we should now think of the body in terms of nothingness as the head, of life as the spine and of death of the behind, and therefore not only see a completely different model, but also may receive some explanation of the constant transformation of things – including those

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like the case of the Sphinx riddle: “What walks on four in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?” Where the conception of time is inconsistent with our ordinary perceptions of time, and in Zhuang Zi's riddle, where the range of the physical is inconsistent with our prior concepts of physical space. The meaning of this is not denying the existence of reality, but quite oppositely, the riddle of life enables us to understand reality in a manner that we could have never imagined. For the great riddle, what we can comprehend as existence or as non-existence is irrelevant.

Usually we associate body with borders, hence the term used in the above passages is not incidental, it is *ti* as the borderless body.

The particular language is not enough for solving the riddle, because we need to know how the solution is a solution, not just what the solution is. Even though the riddle is formulated by words and linguistic patterns used in pre Han China at the time of the composition of the text, for us to solve the riddle we must step out of those linguistic patterns and find the thing, probably an action, that will strike us as the correct solution. Therefore, a satisfying solution will not be found in language itself, but in our experience.

It is important to point out that a solution to great riddles is not necessarily found in the facts of existence, but rather provokes us to look at what exists in a different manner than what we usually do, meaning, we should look at what exists not through fixed and constant models.

This specific riddle I have shown makes us think of the body by new terms,

which occur inside the human body. The person who succeeds with this task can thus see the unity that encompasses all things, like in the case of the four friends above. The famous example of the Sphinx riddle shows that although what we are looking for is the human being, and we should indeed look at the human being for the answer, we need to look at the human being in a different manner than we normally do, not through the facts of human locomotion.

This is the way we should also look at the riddle from the *Zhuangzi*. “Nothingness as the head, of life as the spine, of death as the behind”, is not a statement trying to claim something about the human body which exists through the facts we know and its physical form and manifestations, but rather something that



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the author of the text has written in order for us to gain a different understanding of life.

In the given case of the *Zhuangzi*, when the four friends look at each other and laugh we can learn from this that they know the solution, and therefore know how to deal with this riddle. This solution is not merely a physiological explanation of the body, but life and the unity of all things, including death, is the solution. Their laughter here is merely an expression of their understanding and an acknowledgment between the four that they not only know the solution to the riddle but also have experienced it.

The Sphinx riddle and the "body-life" riddle in the *Zhuangzi* are similar but different in the same aspect, while the former refers to one day as the life of a human being; the latter refers to the body as the life of all beings. We derive from this, two different conceptions of life itself; for each riddle presents us with different metaphors of life. In the former, we say that life is time, while the latter connects us to the body as life.

For a sentence (a question or a riddle) to become a great riddle, it must indicate a language that is not completely transparent to us. Therefore, understanding Zhuang Zi's sentence as a sentence consisting of a great riddle, promotes our understanding of the text. If we were to take his words in an un-literal manner, and look beyond the words and towards life, not only will this riddle become clarified to us, but the whole text might be understood in a different, clearer light. The words themselves may be hazy but life, just like laughter, is not. While expressing something through a riddle, we simultaneously express it and do not express it, and this way of expressing becomes the best way when we cannot, or do not wish to express something directly and clearly in mere words. Exactly this way of expressing which does not express, a seeing which does not see, not only portrays the discourse in Zhuang Zi's philosophy, but also characterizes the attempt to talk about life in general. ▪

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