

*The secret of caring for life*

Cook Ting was cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-Hui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee—zip! zoop!—he slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-Shou music.

“Ah, this is marvelous!” said Lord Wen-Hui. “Imagine skill reaching such heights!”

Cook Ting laid down his knife and replied, “What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and do not look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

“A good cook changes his knife once a year—because he cuts. A mediocre

cook changes his knife once a month—because he hacks. I have had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I have cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness into such spaces. There is plenty of room—more than enough for the blade to play about. That is why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.”

“However, whenever I come to a difficult place, I size up the joint, and tell myself to watch out and be careful. I keep my eyes on what I am doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety until—flop!—the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away.”

“Excellent!” said Lord Wen-Hui. “I have heard the words of Cook Ting and learned how to care for life!”