The Tao of Pooh

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN HOFF

Benjamin Hoff grew up in a farmhouse in rural Sylvan, Oregon, which is now a suburb of Portland. As a child, he spent much of his time playing in the woods, which partially inspired his later interest in Taoism. He also spent plenty of time sick in bed, which led to his love for reading (and especially the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books). He inherited his father's interest in Asian culture and studied Asian Art at the Evergreen State College in Washington. After his graduation in 1973, he worked a series of odd jobs in fields ranging from graphic design and music to antiques restoration and investigative reporting. In his spare time, he studied T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Japanese tree pruning, and Japanese tea ceremony. He wrote *The Tao of Pooh* and his earlier book about Taoism, *The Way to Life*, on nights and weekends while working as a tree pruner in the Portland Japanese Garden. Even though it received negative reviews at first, *The Tao of Pooh* eventually became a New York Times bestseller and helped popularize Taoism in the United States. Hoff followed it up with a sequel, *The Te of Piglet*, which also became a bestseller despite receiving unfavorable reviews. He also spent years researching Opal Whiteley, an Oregon writer and naturalist whose childhood diary turned her into a celebrity in the 1920s. Hoff's book about Whiteley, *The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow*, helped build new interest in her life and legacy—as well as scrutiny into the authenticity of her writings. Hoff never became as popular as his books, which frustrated him throughout much of his life. He largely blamed his publisher and eventually got into a series of bitter, public arguments with them. In 2006, he wrote an essay called "Farewell to Authorship" and announced that he would no longer write books, and in 2018, he publicly took back the copyright for *The Tao of Pooh* from his publisher, preventing new editions from being printed.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The ancient Chinese philosophers Lao-tse and Chuang-tse founded Taoism in the fourth century B.C.E. Five hundred years later, one of their followers, Zhang Taoling, began spreading Taoist teachings around China. Taoling declared himself a Celestial Master and founded the Way of the Five Pecks of Rice, which successfully rebelled against the ruling Han dynasty and established an independent religious state. Over centuries, many Chinese philosophers, religious leaders, and rulers worked to integrate Taoism with Confucian and Buddhist ideas. Some emperors adopted a mix of these doctrines as an official state religion, while others favored Confucianism or Buddhism over Taoism (especially from the 17th through 20th centuries). However, Taoism has seen a substantial revival since the mid-20th century and especially the 1980s, both in China and in the West. Indeed, most recent Western interest in Taoism has been tied to New Age and spiritualist movements, which are often at odds with academics who study Taoism in universities. Benjamin Hoff's books have played a significant role in this controversy: many Taoists praise him for introducing the religion to a broader audience, while many scholars argue that he oversimplifies and misrepresents the religion. Some of these scholars even argue that the "Popular Western Taoism" dominant in the U.S. has essentially nothing to do with traditional Chinese Taoism. Today, Taoist practices like Tai Chi and Qigong are increasingly popular in the United States, both within immigrant communities and among the general public.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In *The Tao of Pooh*, Benjamin Hoff analyzes A.A. Milne's wildly popular children's books *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) and *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928) through the lens of Taoism. In particular, he cites the two classic Taoist texts from the 4th century B.C.E.: Lao-tse's *Tao Te Ching* and the writings of Chuang-tse. Hoff's other works include *The Way to Life* (1981), which is his own interpretation of the *Tao Te Ching*, and his sequel to *The Tao of Pooh*, *The Te of Piglet* (1992), in which he explains the concept of *Te* (inner power) and further develops his ecological critique of Western civilization. Hoff's biography of writer Opal Whiteley, *The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow* (1986), won an American Book Award in 1988. In his last book, *The House on the Point* (2002), Hoff reinterpreted the classic Hardy Boys novel *The House on the Cliff* (1927). French professor Henri Maspero is largely credited with introducing the West to Taoism with works like *Taoism and Chinese Religion* (1971). Other popular Western books on Taoism include Alan Watts's *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (1975) and Eva Wong's *Taoism: An Essential Guide* (1996). Academics like Michael Saso and Livia Kohn have also written extensively about Taoism in English. Saso's notable works include *The Gold Pavilion: Taoist Ways of Peace, Healing, and Long Life* (1995), and Kohn's include *Daoism and Chinese Culture* (2001) and the *Daoism Handbook* (2005). The *Journal of Daoist Studies* is still published yearly in the United States.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Tao of Pooh*
- **When Written:** 1981-1982
- **Where Written:** Portland, Oregon

- **When Published:** 1982
- **Literary Period:** Late 20th century New Age literature
- **Genre:** Eastern Philosophy, New Age, Humor, Self-Help
- **Setting:** The Hundred Acre Wood, Ancient China
- **Antagonist:** Rabbit, Owl, Eeyore, The Bisy Backsons
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Surprise Hit. When Hoff first published *The Tao of Pooh*, his editor told him that it was unlikely to sell very well because it was "too esoteric to appeal to the general public."

What Goes Around... Hoff did much of his writing in a house on the Oregon coast, where one of his most prized possessions was a box of fifty boomerangs.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *The Tao of Pooh*, Benjamin Hoff uses Winnie the Pooh and his familiar cast of friends from the Hundred Acre Wood to illustrate the basic principles of Taoism. While ancient Chinese religious traditions might seem totally unrelated to British children's stories, Hoff argues that Pooh Bear is actually a modern Western Taoist. He appreciates the world around him, lives in harmony with nature, and knows how to enjoy himself. He demonstrates how people can live in accord with Tao, or "the Way of the Universe." Hoff uses excerpts from the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books and imagined conversations with Pooh and his animal companions in order to illustrate how Taoist beliefs and practices can lead people down the path to wisdom, happiness, and self-improvement.

Hoff starts by telling Pooh about **The Vinegar Tasters**, a famous Chinese scroll that shows Confucius, Buddha, and Lao-tse (the founder of Taoism) tasting a vinegar that represents life. Only Lao-tse manages to enjoy the vinegar, because only Taoists truly understand and appreciate life.

In the following chapters, Hoff explains several key Taoist ideas. The first is P'u, or the Uncarved Block, which means that things are the most powerful in their simple, natural form. Pooh embodies this principle: he's as calm, authentic, and uncomplicated as can be. But his other friends aren't. For instance, Rabbit always hatches clever, complicated, ill-fated plans, while Eeyore is so busy complaining that he can't stop to enjoy himself. Similarly, Owl cares so much about unimportant abstract knowledge (like how to spell "Tuesday") that he distracts himself from the actual world. He's like all the Western scholars who try to study Taoism without really practicing it. Hoff argues that this *knowledge* is completely different from true *wisdom*, which is about understanding the inner nature of the world.

Next, Hoff uses Pooh's song "Cottleston Pie" to explain what Taoists really mean when they say that things have an inner nature. Just as Pooh sings that "a fly can't bird, but a bird can fly," people ought to respect things for what they are. Just as he sings that "a fish can't whistle and neither can I," people should recognize and accept their own personal limits. Everything and everyone in the world has its own special inner nature, but people often forget theirs and try to be someone else instead.

Then, Hoff introduces the principle of Wu Wei, which means acting without effort. To achieve Wu Wei, people should be like water, which flows smoothly and naturally around rocks, instead of trying to force its way over them. Pooh also exemplifies Wu Wei: he doesn't try too hard, but rather lets things "just sort of happen." He trusts his intuition and knows that what's meant to be will ultimately happen in the end.

The opposite of Pooh are Bisy Backsons, the "almost desperately active" people who are always trying to do something and achieve certain goals. (Their name comes from a note that Christopher Robin left on his door: "GON OUT / BACKSON / BISY / BACKSON.") Rabbit is a classic Bisy Backson: when Hoff tells him about the Uncarved Block, he starts running around the Hundred Acre Wood looking for it—even though finding it would really require him to stop and reflect. But most Bisy Backsons live like Rabbit: they chase after some "Great Reward" that the world has promised them, then become bitter and disappointed when they realize that the reward won't really make them happy. North America is full of Bisy Backsons, and it has been ever since the "Miserable Puritan[s]," "Restless Pioneer[s]," and "Lonely Cowboy[s]" started to believe that conquering and developing the land would make them happy. But Taoists know that people really have to conquer and develop *themselves* through spiritual practices. They learn to enjoy the process of getting to their goals, instead of just the achievement itself.

The next chapter is about "enjoying life and being Special." In order to succeed, people have to believe in themselves—and one of the best ways for people to believe in themselves is by meeting others who believe in them first. That's why compassion is the key to wisdom, and appreciation is the key to happiness. Best of all, these things follow the snowball effect—or, in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, the Tiddley-Pom Principle: the more compassionate and appreciative people become, the easier it gets to *stay* compassionate and appreciative.

Hoff's last main chapter is about nothing at all: he argues that people should strive to think, do, and follow *nothing* if they want to live in harmony with the way of the universe. The human mind tends to create a "Big Congested Mess" by overthinking and overanalyzing anything. In contrast, the mind is clearest and most powerful when it's empty. Therefore, people should strive to cultivate an empty mind, because this is what allows them to pay attention to the world around them and follow their instincts. The most successful Taoists embrace calm and

nothingness until they reach the highest level of enlightenment: that of "the independent, clear-minded, all-seeing Child."

In his brief concluding chapters, Hoff reiterates his thesis: if they really want to be happy, people should follow after Pooh's simplicity, intuition, and wisdom. At the very end of the book, Pooh admits that he still has no idea what Taoism is—but Hoff explains that it doesn't matter, since Pooh is already following it faithfully.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Benjamin Hoff – The author of *The Tao of Pooh* is an American Taoist who uses Winnie the Pooh to illustrate the central concepts and principles in Taoism (like Tao, P'u, and Wu Wei). Throughout the book, he dialogues with Pooh and his companions from the Hundred Acre Wood (like Piglet, Rabbit, Eeyore, and Owl) in addition to citing passages about them from A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* books.

Winnie-the-Pooh – The novel's central character is the protagonist of the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books and, according to Benjamin Hoff, a model Taoist sage. Hoff argues that Pooh Bear has the kind of mindset that Taoists strive to develop and lives the kind of life that Taoists strive to live. Pooh's tranquility, reflectiveness, and appreciation for life show that he understands Tao, or the nature of the universe, and chooses to live in harmony with it instead of fighting against it. Pooh embodies P'u (the Uncarved Block) because he is simple and clear-minded, and he illustrates Wu Wei through his effortless, instinctual actions. Because he embraces simplicity instead of cleverness and keeps his mind empty instead of filling it with ideas, Pooh becomes an unlikely hero. He helps Rabbit find his way home, saves Eeyore and Roo from falling in the stream, and teaches Piglet to believe in his own potential. For Hoff, these heroic deeds further prove that Taoist principles lead people to greater wisdom, compassion, and success. Throughout the book, Pooh frequently shows up around Hoff's writing table to chat with him. Ironically, Pooh constantly misunderstands Hoff's Taoist concepts and never really grasps them by the end of the book. But Hoff argues that it doesn't matter—Pooh naturally embodies these concepts anyway, so he's wise whether he knows it or not.

Piglet – In the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, Piglet is Pooh's best friend and frequent companion. He's kind and loving, but also shy and cowardly, in part because he's a "Very Small Animal." As a result, the other animals sometimes mistreat him—but Pooh frequently defends him and teaches him to stand up for himself. At the end of *The House at Pooh Corner*, when Owl's house blows down, Piglet is the only one small enough to squeeze out the mailbox and go get help. Pooh's encouragement convinces Piglet to believe in himself and try things that he didn't think he could do otherwise. In fact, Pooh's relationship with Piglet shows how Taoists can use compassion and care (or *Tz'u*) to help others grow and find wisdom. For Hoff, whereas Pooh represents a Taoist sage who has achieved wisdom, Piglet represents a disciple in the early stages of acquiring it.

Rabbit – In the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, Rabbit is a sociable, energetic, obsessive, and bossy animal who is always trying to organize and direct everyone else. Much like Owl, he tends to think that he's smarter than his companions, but in reality, his cleverness makes him foolish. In fact, if Pooh's defining characteristic is his simplicity, then Rabbit's is his cleverness: he's always hatching unnecessarily complex plans, and they tend to backfire. For example, when he tries to get out of the forest and go home, he keeps trying new routes and ending up exactly where he started. In a way, Rabbit is a classic Bisy Backson—he never solves any problems because he's so busy running around and looking for complicated solutions that he never sees the simple solutions that are right in front of him. In one notable scene, he runs around to ask all the other characters if they've seen the Uncarved Block—because he hasn't realized that it's a concept, not a piece of wood. Hoff uses Rabbit to show why simplicity and instinct are better tools for living a wise, happy life than cleverness and analysis.

Eeyore – In the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, Eeyore is a miserable, pessimistic donkey who spends his time wallowing around his riverbank, worrying and complaining. The other characters constantly look out for him and try to brighten his mood, but he tends to question their motives and express skepticism about their plans. As a result, he doesn't recognize or appreciate the effort they actually put into helping him. His pessimism is so extreme that it's often ridiculous and darkly humorous—for instance, he once complains that nobody cares enough about him to knock over his house. For Hoff, Eeyore shows why Taoists shouldn't have a sour mood. In other words, people can't be wise, achieve happiness, or grow as individuals unless—like Pooh—they learn to accept the world, embrace their own weaknesses, and affirm the value and beauty in life.

Owl – In the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, Owl is a scholarly old owl who lives in the Hundred Acre Wood. He thinks he's highly intelligent, and everyone seems to agree with him. But actually, Owl's abstract knowledge is pointless, and he sabotages himself by over-thinking everything. For instance, Rabbit respects Owl's spelling abilities, but Owl believes that "Tuesday" is spelled with a "Two" and comes before "*Thirdsday*." He uses complicated words like "customary procedure" (instead of "the Thing to Do"), which just confuses Pooh and his friends. He spends his free time writing about "Aardvarks and their Aberrations" and thinking about how to spell words like "Marmalade"—in fact, he's so busy thinking about this that he barely notices when his house blows down. Hoff uses Owl to argue that knowledge can actually distract people from the

path to wisdom and that scholars who study Taoism aren't as trustworthy a source as actual practicing Taoists.

Tigger – In the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, Tigger is a hyperactive, self-confident tiger who bounces around the Hundred Acre Wood on his spring-like tail. For Hoff, Tigger's bounce illustrates why people ought to understand their inner nature—when Tigger foolishly tries to travel in other ways (like flying and swimming), he gets stuck. After he unwittingly "bounces" Eeyore into the stream, Rabbit tries and fails to get rid of him.

Bisy Backson – Bisy Backsons are people who live "almost desperately active" lives pursuing their goals. Unlike Taoists, they're constantly going somewhere, doing something, and fighting for some "Great Reward." Unfortunately, Hoff argues, they only frustrate and embitter themselves in the process, because pursuing goals and overcoming obstacles doesn't lead people to true happiness. Instead, people become happy when, like Pooh, they learn to appreciate what they already have. The name "Bisy Backson" comes from Christopher Robin's note about being "Busy / Back soon."

Christopher Robin – In the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, Christopher Robin is a young boy who lives near the Hundred Acre Wood and befriends Pooh, Piglet, and the other animals. Notably, he helps rescue them when they run into trouble, and he embodies the Taoist principle that nothingness is the path to wisdom when he says that his favorite thing to do is wander around doing nothing. He was based on the author A.A. Milne's young son Christopher Robin Milne.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Roo – In the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, Roo is a young kangaroo who gets roped into the other characters' adventures. In one memorable scene, he falls into a stream, and Pooh saves him. Hoff uses this episode to illustrate the importance of compassion or care.

Confucius – Confucius was a highly influential ancient Chinese philosopher. His teachings—which are known as Confucianism—set the foundation for much of Chinese culture throughout the ages.

Lao-tse – Lao-tse was the ancient Chinese philosopher who founded Taoism. He wrote Taoism's most important text, the *Tao Te Ching*, which Hoff repeatedly cites throughout *The Tao of Pooh*. (His name is also spelled Laozi or Lao Tzu.)

Chuang-tse – Chuang-tse (also known as Zhuangzi or Zhuang Zhou) is one of the two central ancient Chinese Taoist philosophers, along with Taoism's founder Lao-tse. Hoff frequently cites parables from Chuang-tse's collected writings, which are commonly known as *The Book of Chuang-tse* or *The Zhuangzi*.

The Unbeliever – The Unbeliever is Benjamin Hoff's friend, who tells him that "the Great Masters of Wisdom" are all from the East and doesn't believe that Pooh has anything to do with Taoism.

TERMS

Tao (The Way) – *Tao*, which means "the Way of the Universe," is the central idea in Taoism. It refers to the world's natural underlying patterns, rhythms, and harmonies, which Taoists try to understand through experience rather than abstract theory.

P'u (The Uncarved Block) – P'u is the Taoist principle that things are most powerful when they're still unchanged from their simple, natural, original form. Since *P'u* literally means "uncut wood," it is often translated in English as "the Uncarved Block."

Wu Wei (The Pooh Way) – Wu Wei is the Taoist principle of acting "without meddlesome, combative, or egotistical effort." Because **Pooh** embodies it (and it rhymes), **Hoff** often calls it "The Pooh Way."

THEMES

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TAOISM, NATURE, AND HAPPINESS

In *The Tao of Pooh*, Benjamin Hoff explains the basic principles of Taoism through a source that most readers wouldn't ordinarily associate with high-minded Chinese philosophy: A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* books. According to Hoff, Pooh embodies Taoism's fundamental message—that people are happier, healthier, and wiser when they live in harmony with nature than when they struggle against it. In the modern world, most people focus on chasing after their goals and overpowering the obstacles that life throws at them. In contrast, Taoists focus on "appreciating, learning from, and working with whatever happens in everyday life." They prioritize simplicity, gratitude, and instinct over complexity, ambition, and cleverness. Hoff argues that Taoism, which he also calls "the way of Pooh," can bring people happiness, serenity, and wisdom by teaching them to follow their inner nature and respect other beings and forces in the world.

Taoism's central principle, as Hoff explains it, is that people should live in harmony with nature instead of fighting against it. Taoism is named after the principle of Tao, which Hoff defines as "the Way of the Universe." Tao represents the patterns and

rhythms of nature, which the ancient Taoist philosophers Lao-tse and Chuang-tse argue that humans must learn to follow. Therefore, Taoist teachings and practices are designed to help people understand the natural order of the world so that they can follow it. One of the most important principles in Taoism is the Uncarved Block, or P'u (which, Hoff notes, is pronounced just like "Pooh"). P'u refers to the simple, natural form of things—like a piece of wood that hasn't been carved, or human beings in a state of calm reflection. Taoists like Hoff believe that everything achieves its greatest power in this simple state. Specifically, in the state of P'u, things fulfill their natural purpose and work in harmony with everything else in the world. Accordingly, Taoists strive to achieve P'u, which can then enable them to exercise Wu Wei, or effortless action. Hoff compares Wu Wei to the way that water naturally flows around obstacles (instead of struggling to flow over them). When people act effortlessly, they follow their instincts and generously accommodate whatever they find in their path. Ultimately, through Wu Wei, people fulfill their natural purpose in the world, rather than struggling to fill roles that aren't meant for them.

Hoff uses Winnie the Pooh to illustrate how people can achieve true, sustainable happiness through Taoism. He points out that, in the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, there's a stark difference between the way Pooh lives and the way everyone else does. Rabbit anxiously runs around, trying to find treasures and solve problems, but gets lost and confused instead. Owl passes his days learning useless knowledge and practicing skills like spelling, which don't make his life any richer or more fulfilling. And worst of all, Eeyore wastes his time complaining about life itself—he views its twists and turns as personal attacks against him. In contrast to his unhappy, unwise companions, Pooh Bear wanders around the Hundred Acre Wood in a state of stress-free delight. He's compassionate, calm, and better at dealing with challenges than his more enthusiastic, strong-willed friends. This represents how Taoist sages—who dedicate themselves to quiet reflection—actually live better, more fulfilling lives than ordinary people. Although he's a bear, Pooh also embodies the P'u (or simple natural state) of human beings: he lives a life of calm reflection and exercises what Taoists call "Empty Mind." For instance, when Eeyore loses his tail, Pooh ignores Owl's complicated plan for finding it and just looks around. Pooh thinks about nothing in particular but pays attention to his environment, and he finds the tail immediately. According to Hoff, Pooh's simplemindedness shows that people should embrace their inner nature and follow the world's lead instead of trying to change it. When they do, they live more relaxed lives *and* better achieve their potential.

Pooh also embodies Wu Wei, or effortless action. Hoff argues that, rather than trying too hard to think up solutions to problems, Pooh lets things "just sort of happen." But his strategy is remarkably successful. Whereas Rabbit, Owl, and Pooh's other friends hatch complicated plans to try and solve their problems, Pooh follows his instincts. Time after time, Pooh's friends think that he isn't helping them out—but he ends up fixing their issues. For instance, when the Very Small Beetle disappears, Rabbit organizes a large search party for it, but Pooh stumbles on it by himself. Pooh's successful Wu Wei underlines the Taoist principle that people most successfully achieve their goals when they act naturally, without thinking. In fact, Pooh doesn't even think about Taoism: during their many colorful conversations, Hoff realizes that Pooh still has no idea what Taoism is. But this doesn't matter. Pooh doesn't need to read his book or learn about Taoism, because he already embodies it. He knows how to appreciate the world as it is and enjoy his life without struggling endlessly to change it.

At the beginning of his book, Hoff uses a classic painting called **The Vinegar Tasters** to illustrate how Taoism teaches people to live long, happy, peaceful lives. The painting shows Confucius, Buddha, and Lao-tse all drinking vinegar, which represents life. Confucius and Buddha clearly don't enjoy the vinegar, because both of them believe that the world is inherently evil and people should try to overcome their suffering by changing it. But Lao-tse is smiling because he believes that, even though the world may look sour at first, it's actually full of beauty and goodness—people just have to learn where to look for it. The painting's message is clear: by taking Taoist principles to heart, people can learn to enjoy and appreciate their lives.

In the Taoist tradition, self-knowledge is a fundamental part of wisdom because it is the first step towards self-acceptance. Hoff cites the concept of P'u (or the Uncarved Block) and Pooh's song "Cottleston Pie" to argue that everyone and everything has its own special inner nature. While it's impossible to capture this inner nature through words alone, Hoff argues, people can understand it by carefully reflecting on their authentic feelings and determining what makes them unique. Because Hoff argues that the key to wisdom is working in harmony with nature, he thinks that identifying and learning to follow one's own inner nature is the first step towards enlightenment. Part of understanding one's nature is understanding one's value in the broader scheme of things. Hoff cites a famous Taoist story about a stonecutter who is jealous of a merchant, then becomes the merchant. The merchant is jealous of a powerful official, so he becomes the official—but then he's jealous of the sun, so becomes the sun. Eventually, he becomes a great stone, and starts to envy the one person with the power to destroy him: the stonecutter. By failing to recognize his power and importance at the outset, the stonecutter pointlessly tries to become someone else. But when he learns about his own strengths, the stonecutter also learns to accept himself. Similarly, Hoff argues that people must understand their own weaknesses. He cites the traditional Chinese saying "one disease, long life; no disease, short life," which means that people live better when they recognize their

limitations. But if they don't try to understand their own true nature, they will never clearly see their weaknesses at all.

According to Hoff, once people know themselves, the next crucial step is for them to *accept* themselves. Self-acceptance brings people into harmony with nature and allows them to flourish and grow. First, by accepting their inner nature, people discard the stress, tension, and misery that comes with fighting to change it. When they accept themselves just the way they are, people can start accommodating and adapting to their true inner nature. For instance, Chuang-tse turned down a prestigious position at the royal palace because he knew that it wouldn't fit him: he said that he'd rather be "alive in the mud [than] dead in the palace." People create conflict when they try to fight their inner nature—instead, Hoff argues, they should embrace it. In turn, by accepting their own inner nature, people can model self-understanding and self-acceptance for others. For instance, because Pooh accepts his own inner nature, he embraces Piglet—which helps Piglet learn to accept himself. In fact, Pooh and Piglet's relationship also shows how self-acceptance can help people turn their weaknesses into strengths. Piglet initially sees his tiny size as a disadvantage, but Pooh helps Piglet realize that it's actually an advantage: when Owl's house blows down, Piglet is the only one small enough to escape. Finally, by accepting their inner nature, people can also realistically improve themselves over time. When people accept and believe in themselves, Hoff argues, they can achieve great things. For instance, after a spell of bad luck, Buckminster Fuller grew depressed and bitter. But then, he realized that he no longer had anything to lose by pursuing his dream of becoming an inventor. By accepting his own inner nature—his vocation as a scientist and inventor—Fuller motivated himself to transform his life and change the world with his inventions. This shows that people can improve and develop themselves best when they start by accepting who they truly are.

The key difference between ordinary people and Taoist masters like Pooh, Hoff argues, is that Taoists know how to follow their inner voices. But building self-knowledge requires years of careful reflection. Through this reflection, people can learn to accurately assess where they are, where they're going, and how to get there. Over time, they can learn to truly accept themselves and stop fighting things they can't change. Ultimately, while compassion and understanding are the foundation of self-acceptance, self-acceptance also makes people even more compassionate and understanding towards others. Therefore, in a classic example of the snowball effect (or what Hoff calls "The Tiddley-Pom Principle"), the wise few who truly accept themselves can help others do the same.

KNOWLEDGE VS. WISDOM

In *The Tao of Pooh*, Benjamin Hoff argues that Taoism requires understanding the world in an entirely new way—one that many of his readers probably haven't tried before. It's not enough to simply learn lots of information or know about the truth in the abstract, he argues. Instead, to truly live well, people must feel the truth and embody it through their actions. Hoff thinks that too many people pursue knowledge instead of wisdom—they try to name and define truths about the world instead of simply living them out. Whereas people gain abstract knowledge in order to impose their will on the world, Hoff argues, they gain wisdom in order to live in harmony with that world. In other words, people use knowledge to turn things *against* their true purpose, while wisdom involves using things *for* their proper purpose. Hoff encourages his readers to pursue wisdom rather than knowledge because wisdom helps people achieve the state of happiness and serenity that Taoists call enlightenment, while mere knowledge distances them from it.

According to Taoists like Hoff, knowledge and cleverness don't help people achieve true happiness, but actually bring them farther away from it. Hoff argues that "Knowledge for the sake of Knowledge" is counterproductive because it fills people's minds with abstract ideas and concepts, when living in harmony with the world requires people to have an empty mind and interact with the world based on instinct. When they focus too much on knowledge, Hoff argues, people distract themselves from the real world that's right in front of them. This prevents them from connecting with that world or achieving real happiness. In fact, much knowledge is pointless. Hoff illustrates this with a line from Pooh's song "Cottleston Pie" that goes: "why does a chicken, I don't know why." Hoff thinks that it doesn't matter *why* a chicken does what it does—rather, what matters is simply recognizing *that* a chicken naturally does what it does. Instead of trying to understand every detail, Hoff argues, people should learn to live and let live. Similarly, Hoff argues that many major philosophical questions are unimportant, because asking them just distracts people from the truth. He suggests that scholars and academics who focus on these questions care so much about knowledge that they never develop wisdom. In the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, Pooh's friend Owl embodies the absurdity and pointlessness of this kind of academic knowledge. For instance, he confuses Pooh and Piglet by using complex words like "customary procedure" instead of simpler ones, like "the Thing to Do." Just like Confucian scholars and contemporary Western academics, Owl is more interested in showing off his knowledge that using it to live a better life or improve the world. And because he uses his knowledge for the wrong purpose, Owl is often hilariously wrong—for instance, he pompously asserts that "Tuesday" is spelled "*Twosday*" because "it's the second day of the week," which means that the next day is obviously called "*Thirdsday*." He assumes the question is abstract and complicated when it's straightforward, so he overthinks it, wastes his time, and misses the truth. This represents the way scholars' pursuit of knowledge for its own sake actually leads them away from the

world's fundamental truths.

Hoff argues that wisdom is more important than knowledge because it *does* lead people towards happiness and enlightenment. Whereas knowledge means understanding certain truths about the world in the abstract, true wisdom means incorporating those truths into one's way of living in the world. Knowledge is the theory of living well, while wisdom is the practice. For instance, while academic scholars might focus on explaining why Taoist masters say that people should live simply, true Taoists just focus on living simply. Lao-tse's rule of thumb is that people who pursue knowledge focus on addition—they add new things to their lives and new information to their minds. In contrast, people who pursue wisdom focus on subtraction—they remove unnecessary things from their lives and unnecessary ideas from their minds. This illustrates the difference between knowledge about Taoism, which means learning many truths about the world, and Taoist wisdom, which means truly living out those truths. But Hoff argues that wisdom is difficult to achieve because it's impossible to fully describe it through words—people must understand it through instinct instead. This is why Taoists prefer to illustrate their principles through parables, rather than explaining them directly. This is also why Hoff doesn't overanalyze or over-explain the Pooh anecdotes he uses to illustrate his points: he wants his readers to approach Pooh's Taoism through feeling and instinct, not analysis and intellect. Finally, wisdom isn't just in the mind: it's also about the heart. Namely, wisdom requires compassion, care, or appreciation (*Tz'u*). By caring about other people, beings, and things, wise people learn to live in harmony with them. Pooh's caring relationship with Piglet illustrates this principle: his compassion helps Piglet believe in himself and makes them inseparable friends. This shows how Pooh's wisdom improves not only his own life, but also those of the people around him.

For Hoff, then, it's impossible to truly become a Taoist just by listening to others or reading books—including his own. Such an education can be a jumping-off point for people to pursue wisdom and enlightenment through individual practice, Hoff argues, but it's really just like the first step on "a thousand-mile journey." This journey's end point is enlightenment. But enlightenment doesn't mean becoming all-knowing, all-powerful, or highly developed. Rather, it means learning to declutter the mind and experience the world authentically. By pursuing wisdom over the course of a lifetime, Taoists can often reach the enlightened mindset of "the independent, clear-minded, all-seeing Child." Like Pooh, "a Bear of Little Brain," Taoist sages don't know everything about the world—in fact, their minds are usually empty, not "Stuffed-Full-of-Knowledge-and-Cleverness." But this is precisely what allows them to live serene, happy, flourishing lives.

SELF-ACCEPTANCE AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Taoists like Benjamin Hoff believe that living well depends on understanding the nature of the universe and living in harmony with it. Therefore, it's no surprise that Taoist sages first have to understand *their own* inner nature. As Pooh puts it, "How can you get very far, / If you don't know Who You Are?" In *The Tao of Pooh*, Hoff argues that people have the same inner nature whether they like it or not, and they will always be happier when they work with that inner nature than when they work against it. In fact, Hoff argues that self-understanding and self-acceptance are the most crucial steps towards wisdom because they show people how to embrace nature and give people an opportunity to honestly assess and improve themselves.

WESTERN CULTURE AND EASTERN WISDOM

Benjamin Hoff wasn't the first writer to try to popularize Taoism in the U.S., but he was one of the most popular. When he started writing in the early 1980s, consumerism had reached unprecedented levels, new technologies had started transforming the economy, and a political consensus had long since formed to protect American capitalism. But Hoff rejected these trends, which he viewed as evidence of Western culture's moral corruption. In *The Tao of Pooh*, he argues that American culture is built on a dangerous obsession with conquering, owning, and changing the world. But he believes that Eastern wisdom—in the form of Taoism—can save it. Hoff argues that Taoism can teach Westerners to start prioritizing "wisdom and contentment" over knowledge and power by showing them the beauty in the world that they have long been trying to destroy.

Hoff suggests that people in industrialized Western countries like the U.S. live unnatural lives because they pursue happiness by doing, achieving, and consuming more and more—instead of less and less. Hoff calls these people Bisy Backsons, after a note that Christopher Robin leaves on his door in the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books. (Christopher writes "BISY / BACKSON" instead of "BUSY / BACK SOON.") Because of their distorted mindset, Hoff argues, Bisy Backsons lead "almost desperately active" lives. They try to see, do, and change as much as they possibly can—and they become stressed, rootless, and miserable as a result. For example, Hoff argues that Americans care so much about efficiency that they spend all their time working to buy appliances and technologies that are supposed to save them time. Paradoxically, Bisy Backsons become miserable by endlessly pursuing things they think will make them happy. In fact, they're locked in a pointless fight against nature—including both the natural world and human nature. Because they are always trying to achieve some important goal, they never slow

down to appreciate the world or reflect on what truly makes them happy. This is a problem because, according to Taoist thinkers like Chuang-tse, people are happiest when they live lives of quiet reflection in harmony with nature. Chuang-tse tells a parable about a man who dies trying to run away from his shadow, and Hoff compares this to the way Bisy Backsons run around working, exercising, and fighting against nature. This mindset breeds unhappiness, but it's more and more common in the modern world.

Hoff blames American culture for turning people into Bisy Backsons, but he thinks that Taoism can correct it. Specifically, he argues that contemporary Western societies falsely promise people a "Great Reward" for their work. In the U.S., people often justify their hard work in the name of a bigger paycheck, better house, or some other kind of future success "around the next corner." Americans think that this kind of success will make them happy, Hoff explains, but it's not possible to "buy Happiness and Importance." Instead, Taoists know that true happiness comes from understanding the way of the universe (or Tao) and acting in harmony with it. This is within everyone's reach, if only they're willing to reevaluate their priorities. But in the modern world, few people are. However, this doesn't mean that the Bisy Backson mindset is new. In fact, it has a long history. Hoff points out how Americans have made the same mistakes as the Bisy Backson throughout U.S. history: they have tried to conquer nature and earn a profit, instead of embracing nature and earning happiness. First, "The Miserable Puritan" settled the New World, killed its inhabitants, and tried to conquer it through ill-suited agricultural techniques. (Ironically, Hoff points out, most of the Puritans died of hunger, while their Native American counterparts grew plenty of food by farming in harmony with the land.) Later, "The Restless Pioneer" and "The Lonely Cowboy" repeated this same formula: hoping to become rich and powerful, they stole others' land and manipulated it in unnatural ways. Today, the Bisy Backsons who work in downtown office buildings and run around in city parks are doing a version of the same thing: desperately trying to maximize their success by earning, owning, and influencing as much as they possibly can. To Hoff, this deeply-rooted Bisy Backson mindset is the opposite of the Taoist mindset. Bisy Backsons look for happiness by owning and controlling nature, while Taoists actually find happiness by respecting and cooperating with nature. This is why Hoff thinks Taoism can turn Bisy Backsons into enlightened sages. He believes that, as Taoists learn to respect both human nature and the natural world, they can teach others to do the same. Over time, Hoff hopes, they can reorient American culture towards the values that truly make people happy.

Hoff certainly wants to help individual people better understand and connect with the world, and the changes he proposes largely start with individuals. However, he also emphasizes that the problems with modern Western culture are collective, and he firmly believes that Taoism can be a collective solution to these problems if enough people follow it. After all, as he points out in his introduction, there are already plenty of Western Taoists out there—including Pooh Bear. The Bisy Backsons just need to know where to look.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE VINEGAR TASTERS

The painting *The Vinegar Tasters* illustrates how Taoism helps people live harmoniously with the world and shows why Hoff thinks it's the best philosophy for humans to live by.

In "The *How* of Pooh?," Hoff describes this painting, which shows the three principal ancient Chinese religious leaders—Confucius, Buddha, and Lao-tse—tasting vinegar. The vinegar represents life, and the men's facial expressions represent their attitudes toward life. Confucius looks sour because he thinks that life is basically sour: he believes that the world is imperfect and people should strive for greater perfection by performing rituals and worshipping their ancestors. And Buddha looks bitter because he thinks that life is inherently full of suffering, and people should strive to escape that suffering by cutting their physical and emotional attachments to the world.

But Lao-tse is smiling because he believes that life is perfect just the way it is. Even if people don't usually start out viewing the universe as perfect, they can learn to see its beauty and live happily within it. To do so, they have to understand its fundamental ways and patterns (or Tao). This understanding of Tao is what allows Lao-tse to enjoy the same vinegar that Confucius and Buddha find foul. Specifically, Lao-tse accepts the way the world is (or the way the vinegar tastes) instead of trying to deny, avoid, or change it (like Confucius and Buddha). In other words, while Confucianism and Buddhism teach people to struggle against the world and deny life, Taoism teaches them to work together with the world and affirms life. This is why Hoff thinks Taoism is a superior philosophy.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Egmont edition of *The Tao of Pooh and the Te of Piglet* published in 2019.

Foreword Quotes

"What's that?" the Unbeliever asked.
"Wisdom from a Western Taoist," I said.
"It sounds like something from *Winnie-the-Pooh*," he said.
"It is," I said.
"That's not about Taoism," he said.
"Oh, yes it is," I said.
"No, it's not," he said.
"What do you think it's about?" I said.
"It's about this dumpy little bear that wanders around asking silly questions, making up songs, and going through all kinds of adventures, without ever accumulating any amount of intellectual knowledge or losing his simpleminded sort of happiness. *That's* what it's about," he said.
"Same thing," I said.

Related Characters: The Unbeliever, Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Winnie-the-Pooh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In his Foreword, Benjamin Hoff recalls the conversation that motivated him to write *The Tao of Pooh*. One of his friends, whom he calls "the Unbeliever," argued that all of "the Great Masters of Wisdom" were from Asia. But Hoff disagreed: he read his friend a section of *Winnie-the-Pooh*. This passage is the rest of their conversation: Hoff insists that Pooh is "a Western Taoist," his friend disagrees, and then Hoff argues that Taoism actually teaches people to live the same way as the "dumpy little bear" from *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

This passage introduces Hoff's argument in three important ways. First, Hoff uses it to explain the premise of his book: that Pooh is a model Taoist and that the books about him are full of profound wisdom about happiness and spiritual growth, even though they're for children.

Second, Hoff uses this passage to explain the Taoist view of happiness. Specifically, he argues that Pooh is a wise Taoist precisely *because* of how he "wanders around asking silly questions" and so on, while avoiding "intellectual knowledge" and keeping "his simpleminded sort of happiness." Pooh's "silly questions" are really his way of relating directly and harmoniously with the world. In Taoism, "intellectual knowledge" is actually dangerous because it distances people from the world and leads them astray from happiness. But because he avoids this knowledge, Pooh maintains his "simpleminded sort of happiness"—the same kind that Hoff wants his readers to seek through Taoism.

Finally, Hoff comments on the importance of spreading Taoism in the West. His friend takes the conventional view that Taoism is an Eastern religion and Westerners don't know anything about it. And indeed, many readers think of Hoff's book as an attempt to bring Taoism from the East to the West. But Hoff has a different view. He thinks that Taoism has *already* been in the West for a long time, through stories like Pooh's. This is no surprise: Taoism captures important, fundamental truths about human life and happiness, so it makes sense that different cultures would find these truths independently and express them in their own unique ways. Hoff doesn't think he's *introducing* Taoism to the West—only that Westerners have long imperiled themselves by denying its truths.

The How of Pooh? Quotes

To Lao-tse (LAOdsuh), the harmony that naturally existed between heaven and earth from the very beginning could be found by anyone at any time, but not by following the rules of the Confucianists. As he stated in his *Tao Te Ching* (DAO DEH JEENG), the "Tao Virtue Book," earth was in essence a reflection of heaven, run by the same law—not by the laws of men. These laws affected not only the spinning of distant planets, but the activities of the birds in the forest and the fish in the sea. According to Lao-tse, the more man interfered with the natural balance produced and governed by the universal laws, the further away the harmony retreated into the distance. The more forcing, the more trouble.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Confucius, Lao-tse

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In his chapter "The *How* of Pooh?," Hoff introduces Taoism through the traditional painting *The Vinegar Tasters*, which shows Lao-tse, Confucius, and Buddha tasting vinegar. Each of their reactions reflects their philosophies about life and the world. In the painting, Confucius and Buddha react negatively to the vinegar, because their philosophies are based on the idea that people must reject life itself in order to seek meaning and happiness. Confucius told his followers

to worship their ancestors and the heavens, while Buddha told his followers to try and overcome the pain and suffering inherent in life through meditation and spiritual discipline. Both hoped to help their followers escape the world, which they viewed as imperfect and corrupt.

But while Confucius and Buddha thought that the world is imperfect compared to the superior laws of the heavens, Lao-tse, the founder of Taoism, thought that the world is perfect just the way it is. He believed that all people are born with the ability to live in harmony with the world, but most of them don't know how. Instead of making a dogged effort to connect with the world, Lao-tse argued, people should make as little effort as possible. He believed that by thinking, trying, and worshipping too hard, people actually distance themselves from the truth of the universe—which is already inside them. In other words, instead of forcing themselves to pray, meditate, perform rituals, and study holy texts, Taoists avoid forcing themselves to do anything at all. They try to live as freely and effortlessly as possible. This is why Pooh is a model Taoist: where all his companions in the Hundred Acre Wood try to hatch clever plans and change the world, he refuses to try too hard because he has faith in the world as it is.

> Rather than turn away from "the world of dust," Lao-tse advised others to "join the dust of the world."

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff, Lao-tse (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

This quote succinctly captures Taoism's attitude toward life: Taoists tell people to join the world rather than turn away from it. In general, Hoff argues, Buddhism, Confucianism, and most Western religions tell people to focus their worship on some greater realm beyond the physical world. In other words, these religions tell people that the truth, beauty, and value in the universe doesn't lie in the world where people actually live, but rather in an immaterial spiritual world that people will eventually reach through their religious practices. For instance, Buddhists try to escape the suffering of the world through practices like meditation, and Christians generally believe that their lives on Earth are just a precursor to an afterlife in Heaven.

But Taoists take an opposite view. Instead of painting the world as an imperfect, corrupted, or otherwise inferior version of a greater spiritual realm, they argue that the world is perfect as it is. In Taoism, there are no divine forces in the heavens—rather, the world itself *is* divine. Specifically, what's divine is Tao, which is the order of nature, or the underlying patterns and rhythms that make the world run. Instead of "turn[ing] away from 'the world of dust'" in their spiritual practices, then, Taoists focus on "join[ing] the dust of the world." For instance, where followers of other religions might read books and say prayers, Taoists focus on immersing themselves in the world and connecting with nature. This distinguishes Taoism from other religions: it worships nature and the world, not some otherworldly God or gods.

> The basic Taoism that we are concerned with here is simply a particular way of appreciating, learning from, and working with whatever happens in everyday life. From the Taoist point of view, the natural result of this harmonious way of living is happiness. You might say that happy serenity is the most noticeable characteristic of the Taoist personality, and a subtle sense of humor is apparent even in the most profound Taoist writings, such as the twenty-five-hundred-year-old *Tao Te Ching*.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Lao-tse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff explains that many different kinds of Taoism have developed since Lao-tse lived 2,500 years ago. There are academic Taoist philosophers who spend their whole careers dissecting the *Tao Te Ching*. There are ascetic Taoist monks who dedicate their lives to living out Lao-tse's teachings. And there are millions of people around the world (but mostly in China) who might not study Taoism or consider themselves Taoists but follow folk cultures that have long incorporated Taoist teachings and traditions.

However, *The Tao of Pooh* isn't about these different groups' beliefs, histories, or practices: instead, it's about the key principles that they all share. Specifically, it's about Taoism's key message of pursuing happiness by "appreciating, learning from, and working with whatever happens in everyday life." This might seem very simple—and it is—but it's also totally different from the way that most people seek happiness, especially in Western countries like the United

States (where Hoff lives). Many other religions focus on helping people achieve extraordinary wisdom or have otherworldly spiritual experiences. But Taoists don't think this can actually lead to happiness. Instead, they think that people are happiest when they learn to appreciate, accept, and even enjoy the twists and turns of their daily lives. This is why Taoism focuses on daily life. According to Lao-tse, people already have everything they need to be happy: they just have to realize it and stop looking for happiness in the wrong places.

❝ In the painting, why is Lao-tse smiling? After all, that vinegar that represents life must certainly have an unpleasant taste, as the expressions on the faces of the other two men indicate. But, through working in harmony with life's circumstances, Taoist understanding changes what others may perceive as negative into something positive. From the Taoist point of view, sourness and bitterness come from the interfering and unappreciative mind. Life itself, when understood and utilized for what it is, is sweet. That is the message of *The Vinegar Tasters*.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Lao-tse

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff returns to *The Vinegar Tasters* and summarizes its true meaning for Taoism: while Confucius and Buddha let the "unpleasant taste" of life ruin their happiness, Lao-tse does not. This is because he understands Tao, the underlying order of the universe. His wisdom lets him put tragedy, suffering, and bad luck into perspective. So while Buddhists and Confucianists view negative experiences as undesirable, Taoists know that they're just part of the broader ups and downs of life. They know that good and bad luck are in the eye of the beholder, and most importantly, they know how to love and affirm life despite all its tragedies. Even when things go wrong, then, Taoists like Lao-tse maintain their happiness and serenity.

This is why, in *The Vinegar Tasters*, Lao-tse smiles even as he tastes the vinegar. He knows that it will taste sour and bitter, and he appreciates it nevertheless. After all, he thinks it would be unreasonable to expect it to taste like anything else—if someone doesn't like the vinegar just the way it is, it's the taster's fault, not the vinegar's. Therefore, Lao-tse's perspective allows him to see that the vinegar's sourness is really just part of the sweetness of the world as a whole. As a result, he keeps appreciating and enjoying life, even when the other wise philosophers cannot.

The Tao of Who? Quotes

❝ The essence of the principle of the Uncarved Block is that things in their original simplicity contain their own natural power, power that is easily spoiled and lost when that simplicity is changed.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage from his chapter "The Tao of *Who?*," Hoff introduces the principle of the Uncarved Block, or *P'u* in Chinese. Conveniently, *P'u* sounds just like "Pooh," so it's a natural starting place to explain Taoism. *P'u* means "wood not cut," or a "tree in a thicket." In other words, it refers to a tree in its simplest natural state, in the forest where it belongs—people haven't taken it out to use it for their own purposes. Similarly, a block of wood that hasn't been carved is still in its natural state. This is the inner meaning of *P'u*: anything in its simplest, most fundamental state.

In Taoism, things are most powerful when they are in the state of *P'u* because this is what allows them to work in harmony with everything else in nature. For example, a tree belongs in the forest—and when it's there, it's occupying the natural role set out for it. In the forest, it has all its natural powers, and external forces haven't interfered with it. Therefore, *P'u* is the state that things belong in. The same principle applies to living beings, like people: when they fulfill their simple natural role, they have their rightful powers.

But when they step out of this natural role—for instance, by trying to own and manipulate the world with their intellect—beings threaten the harmony that makes their lives meaningful and gives them power in the first place. For instance, when people pull resources out of the ground to buy and sell them for profit (instead of using them in sustainable ways without disrupting the ecosystem), they threaten the natural harmony that makes it possible for them to grow, eat, and survive. In Taoism, this harmony is

what makes people happy and wise. Therefore, everyone (including humanity as a whole) ought to take on their simplest, most natural form—their *P'u*—in order to preserve it.

❝ Pooh can't describe the Uncarved Block to us in words; he just *is* it. *That's* the nature of the Uncarved Block.
"A perfect description. Thank you, Pooh."

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Winnie-the-Pooh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his chapter on the Uncarved Block, Hoff asks Pooh to explain it. After all, Pooh embodies the Uncarved Block, so readers will probably assume that he knows what it is. But he doesn't. When Hoff mentions the Uncarved Block, Pooh freaks out and says, "I didn't do it." He thinks it must have been Piglet or Rabbit who did the Uncarved Block—whatever that means.

Thus, "Pooh can't describe the Uncarved Block," even though he *is* the Uncarved Block. But Hoff thinks this fact actually helps explain the Uncarved Block itself. In a nutshell, the Uncarved Block is the principle that things are purest and most powerful in their simplest form, and Pooh embodies the Uncarved Block because he's simpleminded and doesn't let his brain get in the way of his intuition. Therefore, Pooh's inability to explain the Uncarved Block is proof of his simplemindedness—which is what makes him the Uncarved Block in the first place.

But Pooh's inability to explain the Uncarved Block also speaks to the broader role of knowledge and understanding in Taoism. As Hoff reiterates throughout the book, plenty of Taoist concepts are impossible to explain through words—people have to feel and understand them intuitively instead. In fact, it can even be dangerous to try and explain everything through words, because this can give people the misleading impression that they really do understand Taoism—when, in reality, they have merely heard about it but haven't started living out its principles. Therefore, the fact that Pooh can't explain Taoism doesn't mean he's not a Taoist. On the contrary, his understanding of Taoism goes much deeper than words, and if he explained it directly, he would dilute and misrepresent it.

Spelling Tuesday Quotes

❝ Lao-tse wrote, "The wise are not learned; the learned are not wise."

Related Characters: Lao-tse (speaker), Owl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In the chapter "Spelling Tuesday," Hoff distinguishes between wisdom—which guides people towards truth and happiness—and learning, which merely loads more information into their minds. Scholars tend to get these confused: they think they'll become wise by accumulating knowledge, but all their learning tends to confuse them and distract them from the real path to happiness. The more information they have, the less clearly they can see the truth.

For instance, in the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, Owl spends all day wondering about how to spell "Tuesday"—not only does he get it wrong, but he gets so caught up in his spelling that he doesn't even go outside and enjoy the day. Lao-tse thought that Confucian scholars did the same thing: by studying rituals, laws, and their ancestors, they distracted their minds from the basic truths of the world, which were right in front of them the whole time.

Therefore, Hoff warns his readers against putting too much weight in books (including his own). There's a big difference between being "learned" and being "wise"—and people who get them mixed up are always the first, never the second.

On Monday, when the sun is hot,
I wonder to myself a lot:
"Now is it true, or is it not,
That what is which and which is what?"

On Tuesday, when it hails and snows,
The feeling on me grows and grows
That hardly anybody knows
If those are these or these are those.

On Wednesday, when the sky is blue
And I have nothing else to do,
I sometimes wonder if it's true
That who is what and what is who.

On Thursday, when it starts to freeze,
And hoarfrost twinkles on the trees,
How very readily one sees
That these are whose—but whose are these?

On Friday...

Related Characters: Winnie-the-Pooh (speaker), Owl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42-43

Explanation and Analysis

Although he's generally a wise Taoist, Pooh does occasionally try out other ways of life. In these verses, he sings about a week when he tried to live like Owl, modern academics, or the Confucian scholars who argued with Lao-tse. Namely, he asked lots of abstract philosophical questions about the things he saw. He wanted to define whether "these are those" and figure out the truth about "who is what." He wanted to define things, fit them into categories, and figure out the relationships among those categories. Essentially, he wanted to create a complete abstract picture of the universe—just like scholars and philosophers have tried to do since the beginning of recorded history.

Unfortunately, Hoff explains, none of these questions really matter. Knowing "if those are these or these are those" doesn't change the basic truths about the universe—and those are the truths that make people happy and wise. It doesn't matter "whose are these"—what matters is that they're *there*, and they're part of the fabric of the universe. The way people define things doesn't determine what those things actually are or what role they play in the universe. And while inquiring about nature can be one way to better understand it, it's all too easy to confuse abstract knowledge about the things in the world for deeper wisdom about the nature of the world itself.

Cottleston Pie Quotes

"Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie,
A fly can't bird, but a bird can fly.
Ask me a riddle and I reply:
"Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie."

Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie,
A fish can't whistle and neither can I.
Ask me a riddle and I reply:
"Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie."

Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie,
Why does a chicken. I don't know why.
Ask me a riddle and I reply:
"Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie."

Related Characters: Winnie-the-Pooh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff uses Pooh's song "Cottleston Pie" to illustrate the key Taoist principle of inner nature. While the phrase "Cottleston Pie" is just clever, rhyming nonsense, the real meaning in the song comes from replacing "Cottleston Pie" with the words "Inner Nature." Why can a bird fly, but a fly can't bird? Because it's a bird's nature to fly around, and not a fly's nature to go birding. (That's more of a human obsession.) Why can't Pooh or a fish whistle? It's simply not their nature to do so. And why does a chicken behave the way it does? Well, it's simply because that's its nature.

Readers would be right to say that "Cottleston Pie" doesn't really explain *why* birds, flies, fish, or chickens do what they do. After all, it's possible to attribute anything's behavior to its inner nature. But this is precisely Hoff's point. It doesn't *matter* why a chicken does what it does, and it doesn't *matter* why birds can fly. Explaining all these basic truths isn't important—what really matters is recognizing and working with them. In other words, while scholars and academics confuse themselves talking about *why* the world is the way it is, Pooh knows that it's enough to simply see *that* the world is the way it is. In fact, it's often impossible to explain

inner nature, and people often waste their lives speculating about it just so that they can avoid the harder, more important work of dealing with it. Like all wise Taoists, though, Pooh knows that recognizing, accepting, and adapting to inner nature is the true key to happiness.

> *How can you get very far,*
> *If you don't know Who You Are?*
> *How can you do what you ought,*
> *If you don't know What You've Got?*
> *And if you don't know Which To Do*
> *Of all the things in front of you,*
> *Then what you'll have when you are through*
> *Is just a mess without a clue*
> *Of all the best that can come true*
> *If you know What and Which and Who.*

Related Characters: Winnie-the-Pooh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

This is Pooh's song about the importance of self-knowledge. After explaining why people will inevitably follow their inner nature, whether they like it or not, Hoff argues that people ought to *recognize* and *accept* that inner nature if they want to truly grow. In short, either people can deny their inner nature, but have no way to deal with their mistakes and shortcomings, or they can embrace their inner nature and learn how to use it to their advantage.

Pooh underlines this point in the special way that his inner nature calls him to: through song. People ought to confront problems in the way that will make them happy, but they have to know themselves in order to do so. Self-knowledge is the first step to enlightenment because people can never fulfill their rightful place in the natural order of things unless they identify and understand that place first ("How can you get very far, / If you don't know Who You Are?").

> So quite often, the easiest way to get rid of a Minus is to change it into a Plus. Sometimes you will find that characteristics you try hard to eliminate eventually come back, anyway. But if you do the right things, they will come back in the right ways. And sometimes those very tendencies that you dislike the most can show up in the right way at the right time to save your life, somehow.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff argues that self-knowledge helps people turn their weaknesses into strengths. While it can be difficult for people to imagine the value in their weaknesses at first, over time, they can learn to see them as useful or even desirable. Piglet's size is a classic example: at first, he sees being a "Very Small Animal" as a disadvantage, but later, he learns that it can be very useful in tight situations (like when he's trapped in Owl's blown-down house). Similarly, Hoff cites the philosopher Liu An's parable about a general who wins a war by sending a skilled burglar to infiltrate the enemy camp. Just as the general understands how to use the burglar's evil inner nature for good, people can learn how to turn their weaknesses into advantages by adapting to them. This is far more realistic—and much more useful—than simply denying or trying to eliminate those weaknesses.

> The Wise are Who They Are. They work with what they've got and do what they can do.
> There are things about ourselves that we need to get rid of; there are things we need to change. But at the same time, we do not need to be too desperate, too ruthless, too combative. Along the way to usefulness and happiness, many of those things will change themselves, and the others can be worked on as we go. The first thing we need to do is recognize and trust our own Inner Nature, and not lose sight of it. For within the Ugly Duckling is the Swan, inside the Bouncy Tigger is the Rescuer who knows the Way, and in each of us is something Special, and that we need to keep.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Tigger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76-77

Explanation and Analysis

While there are plenty of things people can change, there are also many they can't, and wise people figure out which of their traits falls into each category. The best way for people to do this is by recognizing and accepting their inner nature—the essential things they can't change—and then learning how to make the best of that nature. This can also

help them separate out the things they *can* change.

In fact, Hoff argues that people tend to naturally change many of these other things when they go through the process of self-acceptance. But if they pursue change too desperately, he explains here, they tend to sabotage that process. Therefore, Hoff proposes a modest but cautiously optimistic view of change: it's possible for people to improve some things about themselves, but they have to do it through self-knowledge and self-acceptance, not force or coercion. If they trust in the Taoist spiritual path, Hoff believes, people will naturally embark on this process.

The Pooh Way Quotes

❝ Literally, *Wu Wei* means "without doing, causing, or making." But practically speaking, it means without meddlesome, combative, or egotistical effort. It seems rather significant that the character *Wei* developed from the symbols for a clawing hand and a monkey, since the term *Wu Wei* means no going against the nature of things; no clever tampering; no Monkeying Around.
The efficiency of *Wu Wei* is like that of water flowing over and around the rocks in its path—not the mechanical, straight-line approach that usually ends up short-circuiting natural laws, but one that evolves from an inner sensitivity to the natural rhythm of things.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79-80

Explanation and Analysis

In addition to embracing simplicity and understanding their own inner nature, Hoff argues, wise Taoists act in a way that keeps them in harmony with the world around them. This kind of action is called *Wu Wei*, and Hoff defines it in this passage. (He also calls it "the Pooh Way" from time to time, because it's the way Pooh tends to act—plus, "Pooh Way" rhymes with "*Wu Wei*.")

Wu Wei means effortless action. It doesn't mean doing nothing at all, or yielding to everything else in the world, but rather acting with an awareness of other things, beings, and forces in the world. Water doesn't stay in place, but it manages to flow without disrupting the other things in its environment. Practically, then, *Wu Wei* means cooperating with the universe, accepting one's role as just one among the universe's many parts. It's the opposite of "Monkeying Around," or trying to bend the world to one's will. This is why Taoists often encourage people to be like water: *Wu Wei* is about smooth action, not necessarily efficient action, and respecting other things, not controlling or dominating them.

❝ When we learn to work with our own Inner Nature, and with the natural laws operating around us, we reach the level of *Wu Wei*. Then we work with the natural order of things and operate on the principle of minimal effort. Since the natural world follows that principle, it does not make mistakes. Mistakes are made or imagined by man, the creature with the overloaded Brain who separates himself from the supporting network of natural laws by interfering and trying too hard.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Wu Wei is significant because it brings people into harmony with Tao, the order of the universe—and, according to Taoists like Hoff, this harmony is what brings people true wisdom and happiness. Specifically, Taoists believe that everything (and everyone) has its own inner nature, but also forms a small part of nature itself. When things fulfill that inner nature, they are also playing their rightful role in the world. For instance, when a stream flows effortlessly through the forest, it both fulfills its own inner nature and plays its part to sustain the forest as a whole.

Therefore, action through *Wu Wei* does two things at once: it fulfills people's inner nature *and* fulfills their proper role in the universe as a whole. Because the world operates harmoniously, "on the principle of minimal effort," people act with *Wu Wei* when they expend minimal effort, too. Here, Hoff takes the opportunity to connect *Wu Wei* to his point about the mind and intellect: because complex thought is based on the principle of effort and force, it can't bring people to *Wu Wei*. In fact, this is why Hoff argues that scholars like Owl and clever planners like Rabbit tend to actually drift farther and farther away from *Wu Wei* the more they use their brains: he thinks of the brain as an unnatural tool that prevents people from identifying and fulfilling their inner nature.

It's not the Clever Mind that's responsible when things work out. It's the mind that sees what's in front of it, and follows the nature of things.
When you work with *Wu Wei*, you put the round peg in the round hole and the square peg in the square hole. No stress, no struggle. Egotistical Desire tries to force the round peg into the square hole and the square peg into the round hole. Cleverness tries to devise craftier ways of making pegs fit where they don't belong. Knowledge tries to figure out why round pegs fit round holes, but not square holes. *Wu Wei* doesn't try. It doesn't think about it. It just does it.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Rabbit, Eeyore, Winnie-the-Pooh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

When Eeyore falls into a stream, Pooh saves him by dropping a stone that splashes him out onto the riverbank. Rabbit tries to calculate when Pooh should drop it, but Pooh ignores Rabbit and follows his instincts instead. Even though Rabbit tries to take credit for Pooh's success, Pooh—and all his readers—know that Pooh was really the one to save the day.

Hoff comments that people like to attribute their successes to cleverness and hard work, like Rabbit. But really, they tend to succeed when they act as effortlessly and naturally as possible—in other words, when they act with *Wu Wei*. It's understandable why people want to celebrate their cleverness: it makes them feel powerful and unique, as though they are the only person to ever fit a square peg in a round hole. But clever people are making their own lives harder than they need to be—they invent problems that don't exist, just so they can feel good about solving them. In the long term, Hoff argues, this won't do them many favors: it would serve them better to let go of their egos and just start putting the round peg in the round hole.

Those who do things by the Pooh Way find this sort of thing happening to them all the time. It's hard to explain, except by example, but it works. Things just happen in the right way, at the right time. At least they do when you *let* them, when you work *with* circumstances instead of saying, "This isn't supposed to be happening this way," and trying hard to make it happen some other way. If you're in tune with The Way Things Work, then they work the way they need to, no matter what you may think about it at the time. Later on, you can look back and say, "Oh, now I understand. That had to happen so that *those* could happen, and those had to happen in order for *this* to happen…"

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Winnie-the-Pooh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

When he and his companions go searching for the Very Small Beetle (nicknamed "Small"), Pooh wanders around without a plan, then stumbles on Small by accident almost right away.

Hoff explains that people who act with *Wu Wei* (or in "the Pooh Way") tend to have this same uncanny kind of experience over and over. In uncertain or even perilous situations, they simply follow their intuitions and act effortlessly, and everything turns out for the best. They can't fully explain or understand what happens, but they don't need to—just like they don't need to explain the inner nature of something in order to recognize and accept it.

The basic reality is more important than the explanation, and the reality is that *Wu Wei* works. When people are acting the way they're meant to and working in harmony with the world, the world tends to give them what they need and deserve. Hoff suggests that people should trust in the universe rather than trying to probe it for answers—as he explains here, things tend to make sense later on.

Bisy Backson Quotes

There was a man who disliked seeing his footprints and his shadow. He decided to escape from them, and began to run. But as he ran along, more footprints appeared, while his shadow easily kept up with him. Thinking he was going too slowly, he ran faster and faster without stopping, until he finally collapsed from exhaustion and died.
If he had stood still, there would have been no footprints. If he had rested in the shade, his shadow would have disappeared.

Related Characters: Chuang-tse (speaker), Bisy Backson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106-107

Explanation and Analysis

This is the ancient Taoist philosopher Chuang-tse's parable about a man who doesn't understand how to get rid of his footprints and shadow. This parable allegorically represents modern people who don't understand how to be happy.

In Chuang-tse's parable, the man assumes that he can run away from his footprints and shadow, because he doesn't understand that he's actually causing them. The solution to his problem isn't activity—it's rest. Similarly, Hoff argues, people tend to assume that they can run away from their problems and achieve happiness through activity. In reality, this activity only creates more problems and makes them even more unhappy.

Therefore, many people—especially modern Westerners—live just like the man in Chuang-tse's story. Hoff calls them Bisy Backsons. They are constantly running away from the shadow of their own unhappiness and constantly surprised to realize that it's still following them, just a step or two behind. They make this mistake because they fundamentally misunderstand how happiness works: they think that achieving their goals and changing their lives through dogged effort will make them happy. But according to Taoists, the true path to happiness involves reflection, self-acceptance, and an attentive engagement with the natural world.

> Let's put it this way: if you want to be healthy, relaxed, and contented, just watch what a Bisy Backson does and then do the opposite. There's one now, pacing back and forth, jingling the loose coins in his pocket, nervously glancing at his watch. He makes you feel tired just looking at him. The chronic Backson always seems to have to be *going* somewhere, at least on a superficial, physical level. He doesn't go out for a *walk*, though; he doesn't have time.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Bisy Backson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff argues that most people in contemporary Western countries like the U.S. are "Bisy Backsons"—they try to constantly stay active, work as hard as they can, and use their time as efficiently as possible in order to achieve their goals. They think this will make them happy, but they're obviously wrong. Hoff thinks that anyone can simply take a look at the Bisy Backsons and plainly see that they're far from "healthy, relaxed, and contented."

Instead, the Bisy Backsons' rushed, on-the-go lifestyle stresses and burns them out, to the point that they don't know how to feel any other way. In many cases, like the man who wastes his time pacing nervously back and forth but doesn't think to take a relaxing walk, Bisy Backsons are more interested in *feeling* busy than actually doing worthwhile things. In fact, the Bisy Backson lifestyle is the *opposite* of what really makes people happy. But in countries like the U.S., it's practically a norm. Hoff considers this a sign that something is deeply wrong with Western cultures. He suggests that Taoist wisdom can serve as a kind of intervention to show Bisy Backsons where they've lost their way and how they can find genuine happiness by calming down and reorienting their mindset.

> Our Bisy Backson religions, sciences, and business ethics have tried their hardest to convince us that there is a Great Reward waiting for us somewhere, and that what we have to do is spend our lives working like lunatics to catch up with it. Whether it's up in the sky, behind the next molecule, or in the executive suite, it's somehow always farther along than we are—just down the road, on the other side of the world, past the moon, beyond the stars…

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Bisy Backson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff blames the all-too-popular Bisy Backson mindset on the misleading cultural belief that achievement leads to happiness. Bisy Backsons hope that, once they reach their goals, they'll finally have everything they need to be happy, and they'll simply relax and enjoy their lives. But they're wrong. If and when they achieve their goals, they don't know how to live except in the anxious pursuit of *more* goals.

But Hoff emphasizes that the individuals who believe in the

"Great Reward" aren't truly at fault for their mistakes—instead, they've learned them from their culture. In particular, the myth of the "Great Reward" is deeply embedded in Western culture—and especially the United States. Hoff shows that it's part of a cycle: powerful institutions (like "religions, sciences, and business ethics") push the Bisy Backson mindset because they benefit more when people "spend [their] lives working like lunatics." In a way, Hoff suggests, these institutions thrive on people's misery. But he views Taoism as one way to fight this power and give people their freedom back.

> "I was having an awful dream," [Pooh] said.
> "Oh?"
> "Yes. I'd found a jar of honey…," he said, rubbing his eyes.
> "What's awful about that?" I asked.
> "It kept moving," said Pooh. "They're not supposed to do that. They're supposed to sit still."
> "Yes, I know."
> "But whenever I reached for it, this jar of honey would sort of go someplace else."
> "A nightmare," I said.
> "Lots of people have dreams like that," I added reassuringly.
> "Oh," said Pooh. "About Unreachable jars of honey?"
> "About the same sort of thing," I said. "That's not unusual. The odd thing, though, is that some people live like that."
> "Why?" asked Pooh.
> "I don't know," I said. "I suppose because it gives them Something to Do."
> "It doesn't sound like much fun to me," said Pooh.
> No, it doesn't.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff, Winnie-the-Pooh (speaker), Bisy Backson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Pooh has a disturbing nightmare about a jar of honey that keeps on moving away from him and always stays just out of reach. Hoff uses this as a metaphor for the way modern Bisy Backsons live their lives. They tend to think they're just one step away from happiness, and they often assume that the next purchase, victory, or accomplishment will get them there. But as soon as they get what they want, they find something else to chase after, and the cycle restarts: they convince themselves that their new goal is the secret to happiness, and once they get it, they realize that it wasn't and start again.

Hoff asks why people don't notice this pattern and break the cycle. He decides that they stay addicted to it because they simply need "Something to Do." They're afraid of true happiness and fulfillment, he suggests, because this would leave them without any further goals to chase. This shows how far they've strayed from the inner peace that Taoists believe to be humans' natural state. And this situation further supports Hoff's argument that Western cultures have fundamentally distorted the relationship between humans and the natural world, threatening humans' happiness and the natural world's survival as a result.

> From the Miserable Puritan came the Restless Pioneer, and from him, the Lonely Cowboy, always riding off into the sunset, looking for something just down the trail. From this rootless, dissatisfied ancestry has come the Bisy Backson, who, like his forefathers, has never really felt at home, at peace, with this Friendly Land.
> […]
> The Backson thinks of progress in terms of fighting and overcoming. One of his little idiosyncrasies, you might say. Of course, real progress involves growing and developing, which involves changing inside, but that's something the inflexible Backson is unwilling to do. The urge to grow and develop, present in all forms of life, becomes perverted in the Bisy Backson's mind into a constant struggle to change everything (the Bulldozer Backson) and everyone (the Bigoted Backson) else but himself, and interfere with things he has no business interfering with, including practically every form of life on earth.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Bisy Backson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117-118

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff doesn't see the Bisy Backson as a novel 20th century mindset. Rather, at least in the United States, he views it as the culmination of centuries of history and culture. The Bisy Backson's core belief—that people should work as hard as they can to leave their mark on the world—has long been a key part of the American character. It motivated the "Miserable Puritan[s]" who invaded North America starting in the 1600s, as well as the "Restless Pioneer[s]" and

"Lonely Cowboy[s]" who pushed into the American West after them.

All these historical figures abandoned the places where they were born and spent their lives attempting to settle, conquer, and cultivate new lands. They defined their identities around power, intellect, and domination: they cared about "fighting and overcoming" external forces, not "growing and developing" their internal ones. In particular, they sought to own land and extract wealth from it. All of these missions and practices run contrary to Taoism, which argues that dominating and manipulating nature actually makes people vicious and unhappy—instead, Taoists think, people ought to respect nature and live in harmony with it.

This passage shows how deep Hoff's critique of the American lifestyle goes. He doesn't just think that Americans have made a few wrong moves over the course of their history: he thinks that the United States is founded on corrupt, anti-Taoist ideals. When he says that that this culture threatens "practically every form of life on earth," he's arguing that it destroys nature by bulldozing, strip-mining, and poisoning it. He thinks that Americans need to revolutionize their attitude towards life and the natural world not only so that they can become a happier people, but also to save the planet from ecological catastrophe.

❝ The goal has to be right for us, and it has to be beneficial, in order to ensure a beneficial process. But aside from that, it's really the process that's important. *Enjoyment* of the process is the secret that erases the myths of the Great Reward and Saving Time. Perhaps this can help to explain the everyday significance of the word *Tao*, the Way.
What could we call that moment before we begin to eat the honey? Some would call it anticipation, but we think it's more than that. We would call it awareness. It's when we become happy and realize it, if only for an instant. By Enjoying the Process, we can stretch that awareness out so that it's no longer only a moment, but covers the whole thing. Then we can have a lot of fun. Just like Pooh.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Bisy Backson, Winnie-the-Pooh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124-125

Explanation and Analysis

While Bisy Backsons assume that they will only ever become happy by *achieving* their goals, Taoists like Pooh know that true happiness comes from the *process of pursuing* goals. Moreover, they know that their ability to enjoy the process fundamentally depends on their *awareness* of what they're doing and why.

Therefore, Hoff isn't opposed to having goals—but he argues that people should value them in a different way. Chasing after a "Great Reward" is counterproductive because the reward will only exist for a short while. For instance, Pooh only gets to eat his honey once. But by learning to appreciate the pursuit of honey as much as actually eating it, Pooh "stretch[es] that awareness out" and multiplies his fun and happiness. Since people's happiness really depends on their psychological well-being, awareness is far more important than results. In other words, having more money, stuff, or status won't make people any happier, but learning to appreciate whatever they already *do* have can absolutely make a difference.

That Sort of Bear Quotes

❝ In order to take control of our lives and accomplish something of lasting value, sooner or later we need to learn to Believe. We don't need to shift our responsibilities onto the shoulders of some deified Spiritual Superman, or sit around and wait for Fate to come knocking at the door. We simply need to believe in the power that's within us, and use it. When we do that, and stop imitating others and competing against them, things begin to work for us.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Up to this point in the book, Hoff has explained why people should embrace simplicity, know their inner nature, and act with effortless *Wu Wei*. He's pointed out that this can make people wise and happy, but he hasn't explained what makes people great or makes their lives meaningful to others. This question is important because many people justify their constant, strenuous effort (and resulting unhappiness) in the name of greatness. For instance, scholars and Bisy Backsons always seem to think they're on the brink of some great breakthrough. And while many of these breakthroughs are imaginary and many more are totally useless, there certainly are great human achievements that help others live longer, happier, healthier lives. But if Taoism focuses entirely on making people peaceful, wise, and

happy, how can it explain this kind of greatness? Doesn't greatness require the exact kind of strenuous effort that Taoism rejects?

Hoff answers this question by arguing that Taoism can actually lead people to greatness. Specifically, he says that people achieve greatness once they accept their inner nature and learn to believe in themselves—and Taoism is a sure way for them to do both. In fact, while Taoism teaches people to find the greatness within them, scholars and Bisy Backsons go off in search of greatness that isn't really theirs. In many cases, they learn to believe in a "Spiritual Superman" or "wait for Fate" to deliver them greatness. According to Hoff, then, Taoism is a surer path to greatness because it teaches people to identify, appreciate, and develop their own unique talents.

❝ The two Fearless Rescues just mentioned bring us to one of the most important terms of Taoism: *Tz'u*, which can be translated as "caring" or "compassion" and which is based upon the character for *heart*. In the sixty-seventh chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao-tse named it as his "first treasure," and then wrote, "From caring comes courage." We might add that from it also comes wisdom. It's rather significant, we think, that those who have no compassion have no wisdom. Knowledge, yes; cleverness, maybe; wisdom, no. A clever mind is not a heart. Knowledge doesn't really care. Wisdom does.

Related Characters: Lao-tse, Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Christopher Robin, Roo, Piglet, Winnie-the-Pooh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139-140

Explanation and Analysis

In Taoism, wisdom isn't just about understanding Tao, the fundamental order of the universe. It's also about putting that understanding to good use. Here, Hoff argues that *Tz'u*, or compassion and care, is a critical element of wisdom. To be wise, people must see how they're linked to everything else in nature and care about the well-being of the world as a whole. That includes other people's well-being, whether they're friends, acquaintances, or strangers.

"The two Fearless Rescues" that Hoff mentions are Pooh's: he saves Roo from a stream and Piglet from a flood. In both cases, Pooh comes to the rescue because of his compassion. While his other companions were trying to save Roo, Pooh succeeded because he paid attention to his environment and found the right tool for the job: a pole to dam the river. And Piglet benefited from compassion in two different ways. Not only did Pooh find the note Piglet released in a glass bottle, but Piglet realized that it was possible to send a note in a bottle because Christopher Robin told him a fanciful story about a man trapped on a desert island who did the same. In both cases, the savior is really Taoist wisdom—or attention to the world and attunement to the way that different things, beings, and forces in it are interconnected.

❝ The principle can work negatively or positively. It can promote cynicism as easily as it can encourage hope. It can build hardened criminals or courageous heroes, stupid vandals or brilliant creators. The important thing is to make it work for yourself and for the benefit of others, or face the Ugly Consequences.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff argues that the Snowball Effect—or what Pooh calls the Tiddley-Pom Principle—is an important guideline for how people can affirm their value, believe in themselves, and find happiness. Namely, the further people move towards happiness, the easier it gets to move further. The wiser they get, the easier it becomes to gain more wisdom. But the more cynical and negative they get, the easier it is to stay cynical and negative for life. The Tiddley-Pom Principle also applies to relationships: one person's courage, positivity, or wisdom can inspire courage, positivity, and wisdom in the people around them.

The Tiddley-Pom Principle—that positivity attracts positivity and negativity attracts negativity—explains why the first step towards wisdom and enlightenment is by far the most important. With their first step, people have to choose a direction—and once they do, it's easy to keep going the same way. Hoff's point is that it's okay to start small. In fact, it's often necessary. Many people despair because they can't imagine becoming happy, wise, and stress-free—but this amounts to worrying about the destination before taking the first step. By remembering that all personal growth is a process and that well-placed steps now will make it easier to move forward in the future, people can learn to overcome their fears and take the first few steps

toward enlightenment.

> Do you want to be really happy? You can begin by being appreciative of who you are and what you've got. Do you want to be really miserable? You can begin by being discontented.

Related Characters: Lao-tse, Benjamin Hoff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff argues that appreciation is the root of happiness and discontent is the root of misery. For Taoists like Lao-tse, happiness and misery are really in the eyes of the beholder: they depend much more on the way people view things than on things themselves. People can learn to appreciate what they have in even the worst of situations—and therefore become happy—or they can stay discontented and miserable even when they have everything they could ever want.

The bad news is that people can never escape their own misery through success and achievement, but the good news is that they have the power to permanently overcome that misery by changing their mindset. This is Taoism's fundamental purpose: to teach people to appreciate who they are and what they have. By recognizing the patterns, rhythms, and interconnections in nature, people can start to appreciate its beauty and value their own unique role in it. By identifying and embracing their own inner nature, they can start to appreciate their special gifts and talents, and they can help others accept themselves, too. Through these processes, people can transform their mindsets and learn to appreciate their lives—no matter how well or poorly they're going.

Nowhere and Nothing Quotes

> What Chuang-tse, Christopher Robin, and Pooh are describing is the Great Secret, the key that unlocks the doors of wisdom, happiness, and truth. What is that magic, mysterious something? Nothing. To the Taoist, Nothing is *something*, and Something—at least the sort of thing that many consider to be important—is really nothing at all.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Winnie-the-Pooh, Christopher Robin, Chuang-tse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Paradoxically, Hoff argues, the key to "wisdom, happiness, and truth" is *nothing*. He's not saying that there is no key, and he's not proposing that people should just do whatever they want because there is no truth. Instead, he's saying that the key is to embrace nothingness itself. He thinks that people should learn to empty their minds of thoughts, distractions, and presumptions so that they can open them to the world. Christopher Robin talks about this when he says that his favorite thing to do is wander around, listening to whatever noises happen to sound and "not bothering." Similarly, Chuang-tse writes about Consciousness asking for the secret of Tao and learning from the Yellow Emperor that the secret is doing, thinking, and following nothing at all.

This is why Hoff says that "Nothing is *something*"—people can achieve a mind full of nothing, so they should seek out nothingness as though it were something. Meanwhile, he says that "Something [...] is really nothing at all" because, when people fill their minds with something, they're really just distracting themselves from the deeper truths of the universe—which they can only access by emptying their minds instead.

> An Empty sort of mind is valuable for finding pearls and tails and things because it can see what's in front of it. An Overstuffed mind is unable to. While the Clear mind listens to a bird singing, the Stuffed-Full-of-Knowledge-and-Cleverness mind wonders what *kind* of bird is singing. The more Stuffed Up it is, the less it can hear through its own ears and see through its own eyes. Knowledge and Cleverness tend to concern themselves with the wrong sorts of things, and a mind confused by Knowledge, Cleverness, and Abstract Ideas tends to go chasing off after things that don't matter, or that don't even exist, instead of seeing, appreciating, and making use of what is right in front of it.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff explains why the empty mind brings people into closer contact with the world: it helps people achieve wisdom, not knowledge. When people empty their minds, they win their attention back from their stray thoughts, and they become more receptive to whatever the world throws at them. This is how, when everyone goes looking to find Eeyore's tail, Pooh immediately finds it hidden in plain sight: he keeps his mind empty, which allows him to focus on the world in front of him rather than distracting himself with plans, ideas, and questions. The empty mind can better notice "what is right in front of it"—like a singing bird—and appreciate the world's beauty. In turn, this helps the mind's possessor better appreciate the universe and understand its underlying order (or Tao). In contrast, the "Stuffed-Full-of-Knowledge-and-Cleverness mind" doesn't much help its possessor because, kind of like the Bisy Backson, it's always too occupied to find time for peace and relaxation.

> "To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day."

Related Characters: Lao-tse (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Lao-tse succinctly captures the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge involves piling new information atop old, whereas wisdom is about distilling information down to what's essential. Knowledgeable minds hold many shallow truths about the world, while wise ones hold a few, very deep truths.

While it's possible to have both knowledge and wisdom, it's unlikely because knowledge tends to distract people from wisdom, and wisdom makes knowledge unnecessary. Knowledge distracts people from wisdom because, the more information people learn, the harder it becomes for them to cut through the noise and focus on the core, fundamental truths about the universe. These truths must be experienced and embodied, not merely known in the abstract, so people tend to forget them when they spend all day in their heads, collecting and playing with knowledge. And when people already follow the core truths of Taoist wisdom, they have little need for knowledge. Practically none of the information that scholars collect can improve their lives—even the information about Taoism.

This is why Hoff carefully and consistently distinguishes between knowledge and wisdom. It's easy to confuse one for the other—especially for readers who are encountering Taoism for the first time, or who are more interested in reading books about it than living out its principles. But Lao-tse's saying stands as a warning. Anyone who feels they are learning more and more information, rather than narrowing down to a few basic truths, has probably made a wrong turn and gone down the path to confusion rather than the one to enlightenment.

> The end of the cycle is that of the independent, clear-minded, all-seeing Child. That is the level known as wisdom. When the *Tao Te Ching* and other wise books say things like, "Return to the beginning; become a child again," that's what they're referring to. Why do the en*light*ened seem filled with light and happiness, like children? Why do they sometimes even look and talk like children? Because they are. The wise are Children Who Know.

Related Characters: Lao-tse, Benjamin Hoff (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

In Taoism, the highest stage of mental and spiritual development—true wisdom—isn't adulthood or maturity. Rather, it's a special kind of childhood. Adults tend to accumulate knowledge as they age, and this actually clouds their minds and weighs down their spirits. Children view the world with a sense of wonder, but adults explain away that wonder with an endless set of facts. Children take delight in the world and love interacting with it to see how it responds, while adults think that they have to own, manipulate, and degrade the world in order to be mature. And finally, children maintain a Pooh-like sense of playfulness that the modern, Bisy Backson world tends to suck out of adults. This is why Taoists strive to be like wise children: they believe that true happiness involves a childlike sense of joy, playfulness, and interconnection with the world.

Of course, this also helps explain why children's books like *Winnie-the-Pooh* are packed with such extraordinary wisdom. As Hoff has argued throughout the book, wisdom is people's simplest, most natural state—so it's no wonder they're often wiser as children than as adults. Unfortunately, modern societies teach people how to

overcome their wisdom with cleverness and knowledge. To get their wisdom back, Taoists have to overcome this overcoming and relearn to see the world through their natural eyes.

❝ There the Pooh books come to an end, in the Enchanted Place at the top of the Forest. We can go there at any time. It's not far away; it's not hard to find. Just take the path to Nothing, and go Nowhere until you reach it. Because the Enchanted Place is right where you are, and if you're Friendly With Bears, you can find it.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Winnie-the-Pooh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of *The House at Pooh Corner*, Pooh and his companions reach a magical corner of their forest called Galleons Lap. From this spot, they can see out over the whole world. Hoff argues that this view is a metaphor for Taoist enlightenment, which is like having a holistic view of all of nature. Therefore, the characters' journey to Galleons Lap represents them following in Pooh's footsteps and completing a spiritual journey from ignorance to wisdom.

Most of all, this scene is notable because, as Hoff points out here, Galleons Lap has been within the Hundred Acre Wood the whole time. Pooh didn't have to journey across an ocean or around the world to get to his destination: it was always within arm's reach. This represents the way that, in Taoism, everyone has the capacity to reach enlightenment, but it depends entirely on them. "The Enchanted Place" is already within people, "right where [they] are." People only need to follow the path that leads there. This requires embracing their own inner nature, becoming "Friendly With Bears" (acting in harmony with other living beings), and of course, embracing nothingness (or the empty mind).

The Now of Pooh Quotes

❝ The one chance we have to avoid certain disaster is to change our approach, and to learn to value wisdom and contentment. These are the things that are being searched for anyway, through Knowledge and Cleverness, but they do not come from Knowledge and Cleverness. They never have, and they never will. We can no longer afford to look so desperately hard for something in the wrong way and in the wrong place. If Knowledge and Cleverness are allowed to go on wrecking things, they will before much longer destroy all life on earth as we know it, and what little may temporarily survive will not be worth looking at, even if it would somehow be possible for us to do so.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Winnie-the-Pooh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

The book's last major chapter, "The Now of Pooh," is Hoff's manifesto about why Taoism will save contemporary people from their own folly—and why those people should follow in Pooh's footsteps. In this passage, Hoff summarizes the grand tension that lies at the heart of his book: the conflict between wisdom and knowledge, or contentment and cleverness. While the wise understand the world's ups and downs through intuition and experience, the knowledgeable try to make sense of the world by collecting more and more information about it. People who are content with their lives learn to find happiness in simplicity, serenity, and order, whereas those who try to be clever wrongly think that they will only be happy when they can outsmart nature and leave their own mark on the world.

As this paragraph makes all too clear, Hoff believes that knowledge and cleverness are ruining the world, and wisdom and contentment are the remedy. Specifically, he focuses on the ecological impact of Western technologies and lifestyles, which have changed the planet in irreversible ways and seriously threaten to "destroy all life on earth." Unless people stop trying to control nature and start respecting it instead, Hoff thinks, humankind's knowledge will doom it. This is why he thinks Taoism has such high stakes in the West: if people can learn to prioritize wisdom and contentment, then they can start to treat the planet better and stave off this catastrophe.

Within each of us there is an Owl, a Rabbit, an Eeyore, and a Pooh. For too long, we have chosen the way of Owl and Rabbit. Now, like Eeyore, we complain about the results. But that accomplishes nothing. If we are smart, we will choose the way of Pooh. As if from far away, it calls to us with the voice of a child's mind. It may be hard to hear at times, but it is important just the same, because without it, we will never find our way through the Forest.

Related Characters: Benjamin Hoff (speaker), Winnie-the-Pooh, Eeyore, Rabbit, Owl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Hoff summarizes how he thinks his readers should interpret the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books. Each of the characters represents a different tendency in the human mind, and everyone gets to choose which tendency to give priority. Owl is the obsessive scholar whose search for knowledge actually distracts him from the truth. Rabbit is the clever Bisy Backson who tries to achieve his way to happiness, but always gets lost and turned around on his way. And much like Buddha and Confucius in *The Vinegar Tasters*, Eeyore doesn't know how to appreciate or affirm life—he simply doesn't see its value, and he will never achieve happiness unless that changes.

In contrast, Pooh represents the solution. His wisdom, tranquility, and simpleminded happiness show that he's reached the highest form of consciousness in Taoism: that of the "all-seeing Child." Unlike Owl, he doesn't bog himself down in abstract facts and irrelevant details—he focuses on connecting to the world around him instead. Unlike Rabbit, Pooh doesn't hatch complicated plans or rush around looking for answers to his problems—instead, he acts smoothly and effortlessly because he knows that the universe will lead him through the forest on its own. Plus, he knows that, the more he ignores the path it sets out for him and the harder he tries to forge his own, the less likely he'll get to his destination. And finally, unlike Eeyore, Pooh appreciates the beauty and value in the world around him. Nobody needs to show him why the forest is extraordinary or explain to him why his friends are one-of-a-kind: he already knows because he's already plugged into his community and surroundings. He plays a special part in the forest because he gives the forest a special place in his own heart.

Backword Quotes

To know the Way,
We go the Way;
We do the Way
The way we do
The things we do.
It's all there in front of you,
But if you try too hard to see it,
You'll only become Confused.

I am me,
And you are you,
As you can see;
But when you do
The things that you can do,
You will find the Way,
And the Way will follow you.

Related Characters: Winnie-the-Pooh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of *The Tao of Pooh*, Hoff asks Pooh to explain the book in his own words. Pooh comes up with this song, which explains several important Taoist truths and also shows why Pooh is a Taoist sage in his own right.

Pooh's song starts with various comments on "the Way," or Tao, which Taoists argue that people have to know and follow if they want to become wise. This wisdom is really about "the way we do / the things we do," because wise people know how to act effortlessly, with *Wu Wei*, and respect the other beings and things around them. But understanding the Way and acting with *Wu Wei* simply depend on working with what's "there in front of you," rather than "try[ing] too hard" to understand the world through the intellect (which tends to leave people "Confused"). In the second verse of his song, Pooh points out that people have to understand and use whatever makes *them* unique—their inner nature—if they want to follow Tao. He concludes that people who act according to this inner nature will not only "find the Way," but also see "the Way [...] follow [them]." He's pointing out how, when people act in harmony with the world, they don't just respond effortlessly to the world—the world also responds effortlessly to them.

Of course, this song also speaks volumes about Pooh's personality and wisdom. Hoff argues repeatedly throughout the book that it's impossible to understand many Taoist

principles without experiencing them, which is why Taoists often prefer to present their ideas through parables and examples instead of through straightforward explanations. Pooh's song fits the bill. Even though he can't define *P'u*, *Tao*, or *Wu Wei*, Pooh captures their essence in this song. While the reader might feel that Pooh's song is just light accompaniment to Hoff's serious Taoist philosophizing, then, Hoff is actually saying the opposite. Pooh is the wise master, and Hoff is the foolish scholar. The most that Hoff can do for the reader is explain Taoist concepts that he doesn't fully embody yet, but Pooh can demonstrate those concepts because he lives them out.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

FOREWORD

Pooh asks Benjamin Hoff what he's writing, and Hoff responds that it's "The Tao of Pooh." Pooh smudges Hoff's writing and asks what it's about. Hoff pokes Pooh with a pencil and yells that it's "about how to stay happy and calm under all circumstances!" Pooh questions whether Hoff has read his own book.

Hoff introduces his book's premise: Taoism is a way "to stay happy and calm under all circumstances," and Pooh will help guide the reader through the process. Pooh points out that Hoff seems to know all about Taoism but not truly understand or practice it. Hoff uses this humorous exchange to point out that knowing *about how to be happy is very different from doing what it takes to be happy. Even if they understand Taoism's principles, readers must put them in practice if they want to improve their lives. Finally, Pooh is the opposite of Hoff: he manages to be happy without knowing much* about *happiness. He embodies Taoism's key principles without knowing the first thing about Taoism. In other words, Pooh is wise, even if he's not knowledgeable.*

One of Hoff's friends once insisted that "the Great Masters of Wisdom" were all Eastern, but Hoff disagreed. He read his friend a passage from *Winnie-the-Pooh*: Pooh says that the first thing he thinks about in the morning is breakfast, while Piglet says he always thinks about whatever exciting adventures he'll go on that day. "It's the same thing," replies Pooh. To Hoff, Pooh is a Western Taoist, but his friend disagrees. He says Pooh is just a bear who goes on pointless adventures, learns nothing, and always stays happy. "Same thing," replies Hoff.

While Hoff wants to bring Eastern wisdom to the West, he also points out that it's already there, in the form of unconventional characters like Pooh. This suggests that, on some level, Westerners already recognize the truth and appeal of Taoist principles—even if they don't yet know how to put them in practice. When Pooh comments that breakfast and great adventures are "the same thing," he means that breakfast can be a great adventure if people look at it the right way. This is evidence of his wisdom: he knows how to see the beauty and excitement in everyday life. Similarly, Hoff's comment about Pooh shows that Taoist values are quite different from the ordinary Western values that Hoff's friend seems to believe in. Hoff goes on to argue that, in Taoism, happiness really is about wandering around and experiencing life, keeping an empty mind, and remaining happy no matter what.

That conversation inspired Hoff to write this book, which uses Winnie the Pooh to explain Taoism (and vice versa). Scholars thought Hoff was crazy. But Hoff thinks he can do it. After all, Taoists say that "A thousand-mile journey starts with one step."

By explaining Taoism through Pooh, Hoff strikes back at the scholars who think that Taoism has to be a refined, academic subject. Instead, he wants to bring it down to earth and explain it in simple terms that anyone can understand. "A thousand-mile journey starts with one step" is a common saying, but Hoff's readers might not associate it with Taoism. Therefore, this saying gives readers a familiar entry point for understanding Taoism. It also emphasizes the important Taoist principle that personal growth is a lengthy path requiring lifelong effort.

THE HOW OF POOH?

Hoff tells Pooh that many people aren't familiar with Taoism, so he'll explain the basics in this chapter. The best place to start is China. Hoff and Pooh imagine themselves visiting a calligraphy shop in a Chinese city, where the shopkeeper gives them a painted scroll of **The Vinegar Tasters**. The scroll shows the reactions of three men, Confucius, Buddha, and Lao-tse, after they taste vinegar. Confucius's expression looks sour—he thought that the world is corrupt and people should live in harmony with the past, their ancestors, and the universe by following rituals. Next, Buddha has a bitter look on his face—he believed that life is full of pain and suffering, and people should transcend that suffering by detaching themselves from the world.

The Vinegar Tasters *represents the main differences between the three most important schools of ancient Chinese philosophy. This gives Hoff's readers the context they need to understand Taoism, since they likely know at least a little about Confucianism and Buddhism. Hoff emphasizes how both Confucianism and Buddhism view the world as inherently evil, so they encourage people to reject and distance themselves from the world. This is what distinguishes them from Taoism, which views the world as inherently good and teaches people to embrace it. In fact, Confucius and Buddha's expressions suggest that their philosophies don't make them—or their followers—truly happy.*

Finally, on the **Vinegar Tasters** scroll, Lao-tse is smiling. He thought that earth *is* in harmony with heaven, because it operates based on the natural laws of the universe. He argued that people *make* life sour by interfering with these natural laws. Instead, they should learn to follow Tao, or "the Way of the Universe." Lao-tse thought that, while humans can understand Tao, they can't describe it in words. Philosophers, monks, and folk worshippers all interpreted his teachings in different ways. But this book is about Taoism's basic message of "appreciating, learning from, and working with whatever happens in everyday life." Taoists learn to live with serenity and happiness, and they often have a sense of humor about life.

Lao-tse's reaction to the vinegar represents Taoism's fundamental beliefs and moral orientation toward the world. While he recognizes the same corruption and suffering that Confucius and Buddha see, his response to them is the opposite. Confucius and Buddha want people to conquer or overcome nature through their spiritual practices. In contrast, Lao-tse thinks that people should live in harmony with nature, which he views as inherently good. Specifically, this inherent goodness lies in Tao*, the natural order of the universe, and people can harmonize with nature when they recognize, understand, and follow Tao. It can be difficult to conceptualize Tao, but one good starting point is to think about the rhythms and patterns that underlie nature—for instance, how trees shed and regrow their leaves, or how animals in an ecosystem depend on one another. While these examples don't capture Tao in its entirety—and Taoists argue that language never can—they're still part of it, because they're evidence of the world's underlying order.*

Pooh asks Hoff what all of this has to do with vinegar. Hoff explains that, in the **Vinegar Tasters** painting, vinegar represents life. Lao-tse is smiling because he has learned to live in harmony with it and view it as positive instead of negative. Taoists blame sourness and bitterness on the human mind, not life itself, which is sweet. Pooh asks if it's sweet like honey and goes to the kitchen cupboard "for a little something."

To Taoists, life is like vinegar because, while it appears to be sour at first, it's possible to see its beauty. Appreciating vinegar—or life—takes lots of time and effort, but that's what Taoist teachings and practices are for. By showing Pooh's appreciation for honey, Hoff clearly compares him to Lao-tse and suggests that he's learned to appreciate the sweetness and beauty in life. In other words, he's a Taoist sage.

THE TAO OF WHO?

Pooh tells Hoff that he's learned about Taoist principles from his ancestors, like the painter "Pooh Tao-tse" and the poet "Li Pooh." (It's actually *Wu* Tao-Tse and Li *Po*.) But there *is* an important Taoist principle called P'u, which means "the Uncarved Block." Since principles like P'u are realities, not just ideas, Taoists usually prefer to illustrate them through examples rather than explain them intellectually. But P'u does need some explaining. It means that things have power in their natural, simple form—but when their simplicity gets changed, they lose their power. The two Chinese characters for "P'u" mean "'tree in a thicket' or 'wood not cut.'" This gives the concept its meaning of anything in its natural state (which is translated as "uncarved block" in English).

Taoists prefer illustrating concepts like P'u through examples to explaining them through logic because they don't want their followers to mistake understanding *a concept for* embodying *it. After all, the purpose of studying Taoism isn't merely to learn how to become happy—it's to* actually *become happy. P'u is an important concept in Taoism because it shows how individual beings and people relate to nature. Specifically, it shows that everyone and everything can fit into the natural order if it takes the proper form. Thus, just as an uncut tree in a thicket is fulfilling its proper role in nature, people can also fulfill their own proper roles in nature when they exist in their natural state. However, as Hoff will later argue, most people have strayed from this state.*

Pooh embodies P'u. At one point in the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, for example, he can't tell his left paw from his right. But this simplemindedness is his strength. In Taoism, simplicity doesn't mean stupidity: it means calmness and reflection. Pooh's simplicity—his P'u—makes him the books' hero.

Even though he's a stuffed bear, Pooh embodies the P'u, or natural state, of human beings—which is to calmly reflect on the world as they move effortlessly through it. His inability to tell left from right shows that he doesn't approach the world through abstract concepts, but rather through his body and intuition. Taoists think that abstract concepts distance people from the truth, so people should live like Pooh if they want to be happy.

In another passage, Rabbit tries to lead Pooh and Piglet home, but keeps coming back to the same sand pit. Pooh tells Rabbit that maybe he'll make it home if he goes looking for the sand pit instead. Rabbit thinks this is ridiculous, but agrees to try and disappears. With talkative Rabbit gone, Pooh leads Piglet home by listening to the sound of his honey pots calling to him. Hoff explains that Pooh's simplicity is more valuable than Rabbit's cleverness. In another passage, Pooh wishes Rabbit "a Very Happy Thursday," but Rabbit doesn't get it. Pooh remarks that Rabbit's clever brain is "why he never understands anything."

Rabbit's cleverness is the opposite of Pooh's P'u. Rabbit tries to impose his plans and ideas on the world, but he consistently fails—the world doesn't act the way he wants it to. While Rabbit tries to order the world around, Pooh listens to the world and works with it. He's highly attuned to nature: he observes it, notes patterns in it, and cooperates with it to find effortless solutions to his problems. Rabbit's confusion at Pooh's "Very Happy Thursday" remark underlines this point. While Rabbit needs an explanation in order to "understand[] anything," Pooh intuitively understands the world because he lives in his P'u, or natural state. Like a tree in a thicket, Pooh occupies the place that he ought to, according to his inner nature, and is connected to other natural beings. As a result, he can navigate the world through his intuition (like by hearing his honey pots or seeing the beauty in an ordinary Thursday).

Similarly, the donkey Eeyore can't be the books' hero because of his sour attitude: he's always complaining, so he can't be wise, happy, or successful. In one passage, he looks at his reflection in a stream and calls himself pathetic. Pooh asks, "What's the matter?" Eeyore replies that *nothing* matters. His attitude is sometimes darkly funny. In another passage, Pooh and Piglet visit Eeyore to make sure his house is okay after a storm. Eeyore responds by complaining that nobody cares about him enough to push over his house.

Kind of like Confucius or Buddha in The Vinegar Tasters, *Eeyore is angry and bitter at life: he thinks that there's something wrong with the world. As a result, he can't appreciate the beauty or value in it. He overlooks good things or paints them in a negative light, like when he views his house being saved from the storm as evidence that nobody cares about him and fails to see that Pooh and Piglet visited him precisely because they* do *care about him. This is the opposite of the Taoist mindset, which sees beauty and goodness in nature's underlying order (Tao), even in places where others do not.*

Hoff repeats that Pooh is lovable because of his *simplicity*. Since Pooh embodies the Uncarved Block, Hoff asks him to explain it. Concerned, Pooh insists that "I didn't do it." He blames Piglet, then they both blame Rabbit, who says he also hasn't seen the Uncarved Block. Pooh and Piglet admit that they don't know what the Uncarved Block is. Hoff argues that, because Pooh "just *is*" the Uncarved Block, he can't explain it in words.

Pooh can't explain the Uncarved Block—but understanding it from an intellectual perspective isn't necessary to actually embody *it. As Hoff has already argued, it's impossible to fully explain Taoist concepts like Tao and P'u—and it's also impossible to fully understand them through such explanations. Instead, truly understanding Taoist principles requires living them out, and examples can teach them even better than explanations. So Hoff pokes fun at the difficulty of understanding Taoism through explanations when he humorously shows Piglet, Rabbit, and the Taoist master Pooh fail to understand the Uncarved Block.*

Pooh embodies a fundamental Taoist secret: "Life is Fun." After all, Pooh and Piglet have plenty of fun when they check on Eeyore's house and wish Rabbit "a Very Happy Thursday." Hoff concludes that the simple state of P'u lets people enjoy the simplicity of the world and take spontaneous actions that end up working out.

Taoism makes life fun by teaching people to realize their inner nature and appreciate the beauty in everyday life and the world. When people embody P'u, or fulfill their rightful place in nature, their spontaneous actions also *tend to harmonize with the rest of nature, which is why those actions tend to work out.*

SPELLING TUESDAY

In another excerpt from the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, Pooh goes to the Hundred Acre Wood to visit Owl, who he hopes will be able to answer his questions. Owl represents the busy, distinguished Confucianist scholars who Taoists like Lao-tse and Chuang-tse thought couldn't understand the basic truths of Tao. In the West today, academics are still the main people who study Taoism. Rather than living whole, balanced lives, they spend their time thinking about abstract categories. They learn about Taoism through books, not through life. Like Confucianist scholars (and Owl), they want "Knowledge for the sake of Knowledge," instead of knowledge as a means to enlightenment.

Confucianist scholars, Western academics, and Owl all try to understand the world by describing it through words and concepts, instead of observing it and understanding it intuitively through experience. In other words, they are more interested in accumulating knowledge than achieving wisdom: they spend a lot of time talking about how *to live well, but don't actually do it. Hoff warns his readers against falling into this trap—especially because they're learning about Taoism from a book. After all, Pooh's simplemindedness shows that people don't need to know very much or read very many books in order to be wise.*

In *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Rabbit respects Owl because he knows how to spell "Tuesday." But in an imagined conversation with Hoff, Owl tells Pooh that "Tuesday" starts with "Two" because "it's the second day of the week." He thinks the next day is "*Thirdsday*." But Piglet says that it's today, and Pooh says that today is his favorite day of all. Like Owl, Hoff quips, most scholars are too busy thinking about the other days to appreciate *today*. Scholars also use big words when they don't need to. For instance, Owl confuses Pooh by saying "customary procedure," when he really just means "the Thing to Do." Sometimes, these words are designed to just make scholars look like they know everything.

Time after time, Owl's intelligence makes him less *wise, not more. First, he spells "Tuesday" wrong because he overcomplicates the problem and assumes that the days of the week have something to do with numbers. While Owl is thinking about "Thirdsday," Pooh and Piglet are actually enjoying it. Then, by using fancy words like "customary procedure," he confuses Pooh and Piglet rather than communicating to them. In both cases, Owl gets lost in his head, and this prevents him from engaging with the world around him. And according to Taoism, it's impossible for people to embody P'u or achieve happiness without engaging with the world.*

Scholars' knowledge often doesn't match up with real-world experience, which Hoff considers more valuable. "Lots of people talk to animals," Pooh points out, but "not very many *listen*." Being correct isn't enough for someone to have true wisdom. The Taoist poet Han-shan wrote that, while a scholar laughed at his poor wording and meter, he laughed at the scholar's writing, which was like "a blind man / Describing the sun." In a poem from his books, Pooh captured the scholarly mindset: he spends a whole week in nature, asking things like "if those are these or these are those" and "[if] who is what and what is who." Hoff comments that scholars are too obsessed with naming and defining things to actually interact with them or truly live life.

Pooh again points out the difference between people who try to define the world and those who truly try to understand it. Anyone who thinks they know the truth can tell animals (or other people) about it. But to listen to animals (or other people), someone has to recognize that those others actually know and embody the truth. Similarly, Han-shan's argument with the poet suggests that academics care too much about how words look, *without paying attention to whether or not they're true. It's pointless to name and define if "those are these" and "who is what," because people's definitions of things don't change the true inner nature of things. Taoists think that everything plays a special role in the natural order of things (Tao), so they pay attention to things in order to grasp their inner nature and understand their role in the natural order.*

Pooh points out that Owl has been using Hoff's pencil to write about "Aardvarks and Their Aberrations." Hoff notes that scholars tend to blame their own problems on ignorance (which is really just P'u). For instance, the wind blows Owl's house down while he was distracted trying to spell "Marmalade." But his first instinct is to blame it on Pooh. In another scene from *The House at Pooh Corner*, Eeyore spells the letter "A" with sticks and declares that he's better than Pooh and Piglet because he's capital-E "Educated." But he's surprised when Rabbit knows "A," and he bitterly kicks around his sticks because he's no longer special. Piglet tells Hoff that he knows something Rabbit doesn't—which is the subject of the next chapter.

Owl's "Aardvarks and Their Aberrations" represents the way that scholars accumulate useless knowledge in order to win status and power, instead of actually searching after the truth. Eeyore values being "Educated" for the same reason: status, not truth. He's only interested in knowing things if it makes him better than other people. For both Owl and Eeyore, knowledge takes them further from the truth about the world, not closer. So while scholars say that their problem is ignorance, Hoff suggests that it's actually the other way around: they have too much information clouding their judgment, not too little informing it.

COTTLESTON PIE

Rabbit's clever plans always fail, Hoff argues, because cleverness is based on shallow judgments that don't hold up over time. It misses the special "Inner Nature" that makes things unique. Hoff asks Pooh to explain this with the song "Cottleston Pie." Each four-line verse starts with "*Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie*," then has a unique rhyming line, and then ends, "*Ask me a riddle and I reply: / 'Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie.'*"

Clever plans are shallow and ineffective in the long term because they try to pin down the world, without accounting for how things will naturally change or deviate according to Tao. For instance, in his chapter on P'u, Hoff described Rabbit's unsuccessful plans to escape the forest. While Rabbit's clever plans could have worked in theory, they were ineffective in practice because Rabbit overlooked his own "Inner Nature"—his tendency to get confused, lost, and turned around. In contrast, truly wise people recognize and account for things' inner nature in their plans. This inner nature sets the patterns for how things will act and change over time. For instance, while Rabbit's plans to escape the forest failed, Pooh's succeeded because Pooh accounted for Rabbit's tendency to get lost and turned around.

In the first verse of "Cottleston Pie," Pooh says, "A fly can't bird, but a bird can fly." This represents the basic fact "that Things Are As They Are." Chuang-tse illustrates this principle. A man once compared Chuang-tse's teachings to a warped tree that can't be turned into lumber. But Chuang-tse replied that the warped tree's proper function wasn't to become lumber—it was to give shade.

Taoists seek to accurately perceive the world and accept it the way it is, instead of imagining or hoping it to be something else. Because the man in Chuang-tse's example thinks that trees can only be useful as lumber, he misses the reality of the tree that's right in front of him. But Chuang-tse pays attention to the specific tree's inner nature, and this is what allows him to see its natural function. Of course, Chuang-tse's example also works on another level: Chuang-tse compares the warped tree to his own Taoist teachings because Taoism asks people to engage with nature and leave it intact, rather than destroying it and using it for human ends (by turning it into products like lumber).

The same is true of people: they have to "respect [their] Inner Nature," and they end up in trouble when they try to fit in where they don't belong. For example, Chuang-tse turned down a position at the prince's palace because, like a sacred turtle the prince kept as an heirloom, he would rather be "alive in the mud [than] dead within the palace." Pooh and Owl start talking about mud, but Hoff brings the conversation back to Taoism.

Just like things, people have inner natures, and they can live in harmony with the world when they fulfill those inner natures. But they must genuinely understand and accept themselves if they want to do so. Chuang-tse's anecdote shows that he understands his inner nature. Even though the palace job would be prestigious, it would go against his nature and ruin his happiness.

In the next verse of "Cottleston Pie," Pooh sings, "A fish can't whistle and neither can I." This represents how everyone has limitations, and wise people know theirs. But foolish people try to surpass their limits. Tigger illustrates this when he tells Roo that Tiggers can fly, swim, and climb trees—but then gets stuck in a tree and has to yell to Piglet and Pooh for help. Tigger tells Hoff that he's learned his lesson and is off to go swimming.

Knowing one's inner nature and knowing one's limits are two sides of the same coin. By recognizing their limits, people can learn where their inner natures cannot help them and identify their weaknesses. Tigger clearly fails to do this: even after he escapes from the tree, he decides to go swimming, which shows that he hasn't learned his lesson. Instead of trying to swim or climb trees immediately, Hoff suggests, perhaps he ought to learn how first (or accept that these skills are beyond his natural abilities).

Similarly, in Chinese traditional medicine, there's a saying: "one disease, long life; no disease, short life." This means that people live better when they recognize their weaknesses than when they deny them. When people work *with* their weaknesses, they can turn them into strengths. (For example, Piglet escaped from Owl's ruined house because he was small enough to fit through the letterbox.)

Just like diagnosing a disease is the first step in addressing it, understanding one's weaknesses is the first step in fixing them. Unrecognized weaknesses are more likely to harm people than weaknesses that people recognize and manage. Just like Lao-tse learned to see the sweetness in the vinegar he tasted, Hoff suggests, people can learn to see the beauty and uniqueness in their weaknesses.

In the last verse of "Cottleston Pie," Pooh sings, "Why does a chicken, I don't know why." Nobody knows why a chicken acts the way it does, Hoff says, and even though scientists try to explain it, they can't. But "we don't really *need* to know." Scientists find more questions than answers, Hoff argues, and the answers philosophers come up with don't mean anything. It's more important to "recognize Inner Nature and work with Things As They Are."

Hoff reiterates that living life well is more important than understanding it perfectly. It doesn't matter if people don't understand why a chicken does what it does—its inner nature is still the same. Just like it's more important to recognize and treat a disease than to explain exactly where it came from, it's more important to recognize and harmonize with things' inner nature than to explain them. Often, they can't be explained at all. Again, this suggests that scholars are wrong to try and explain things that people don't need to know in order to live well.


To illustrate his point, Hoff recalls the scene in the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books in which Pooh and Piglet set out to catch a Heffalump (a mystical creature they've never seen). Pooh decides to dig a pit for the Heffalump to fall into and put a jar of honey inside as bait (because, Pooh explains, everyone loves honey). But Pooh ends up getting caught in his own trap! Piglet thinks he's caught the Heffalump: a Pooh-shaped creature with a jar for a head.

Catching a Heffalump represents trying to understand the un-understandable, so this scene shows what happens when people try too hard to understand the world, when they should really just "recognize Inner Nature and work with Things As They Are." Pooh wants to trap the Heffalump with honey because that's what he *likes, and he ends up falling into the pit because his inner nature leads him to the honey.*

Hoff clarifies that, in Pooh's song, "Cottleston Pie" just means "*Inner Nature*." In life, everything and everyone has a special inner nature. But people's brains, circumstances, and fellow humans sometimes lead them away from that inner nature. True self-reliance has to begin with self-understanding. Pooh explains this with a song that starts, "How can you get very far, / If you don't know Who You Are?" When people learn about themselves, Hoff explains, they tend to discover their weaknesses. But this lets them change those weaknesses into strengths or use them for good. Similarly, by understanding negative emotions, people can use those emotions for good.

After illustrating it through examples, Hoff now clearly spells out the Taoist argument about inner nature. Everyone and everything has an inner nature (including birds, flies, fish, chickens, and so on). And self-knowledge is the first step towards following one's inner nature, so Taoists must prioritize understanding and reflecting on themselves. Moreover, this also relates to Taoism's argument about harmonizing with nature and achieving happiness: everyone and everything occupies a distinct place in the structure of the universe. Therefore, when people follow their inner nature, or find their rightful place in the world, they tend to harmonize with everything else in it.


Hoff cites the philosopher Liu An's parable: during a war, a skilled burglar infiltrates the enemy camp and steals one of the opposing general's possessions each night. Frightened, the general retreats his forces. This shows how people can use insignificant or even evil skills for good. People can't eliminate their negative traits, but they *can* turn them into positives.

This parable shows how people can create harmony in the world by following their inner nature: by understanding the burglar's nature, the general turned him into a valuable member of the army. This is further evidence that people should understand their weaknesses and harness them for good, instead of ignoring or trying to eliminate them.

Hoff concludes that it's useless to try and "Unbounce yourself." This is a reference to another passage in the *Pooh* books: after Rabbit, Piglet, and Roo rescue Eeyore from the river, Eeyore claims that someone (Tigger) "BOUNCED" him into the water. To stop Tigger from bouncing again, Rabbit plans to abandon him deep in the wilderness. But Rabbit gets lost, like he always does, and then the bouncing Tigger finds him. Like Tigger finding his bounce, or the Ugly Duckling realizing he's a swan, everybody has to understand the special inner nature they have inside them. Everyone has things to change and improve, but recognizing their inner nature is the first step. As Pooh puts it, everyone is all right just the way they are.

Tigger's bouncing is part of his inner nature, so it's impossible to "unbounce" him. As usual, Rabbit's plan fails because, in his cleverness, he loses sight of his inner nature. Rabbit's nature is to get distracted and lost, and Tigger's is to bounce and find his way back to others. Again, this inner nature trumps cleverness. This underlines the chapter's central point: people should embrace inner nature (both their own and others') instead of trying to outsmart it. Moreover, by understanding the natural things they can't change, people can see more clearly what they can *change.*

THE POOH WAY

In a Taoist parable, as a stream grows up and turns into a river, it learns to flow slower and more smoothly. This represents the principle of Wu Wei, which is a lot like "the Pooh way." Wu Wei means acting "without meddlesome, combative, or egotistical effort." For instance, water naturally flows around rocks and obstacles instead of trying to take the shortest possible path to its destination.

The stream's transformation into a river is a metaphor for people's moral and spiritual growth into mature, enlightened beings. This metaphor indicates that, as people advance along the path of Tao, they should learn to live more slowly, calmly, and effortlessly. This pace and quality of action is the essence of Wu Wei (or the Pooh way). Water flowing around rocks represents harmony in the natural world because each element accommodates the other, instead of trying to displace it through "meddlesome, combative, or egotistical effort." This is why water is an important metaphor in Taoism: it represents the way that people can work in harmony with the world instead of struggling to overcome and change it.

Chuang-tse described Wu Wei with a parable about Confucius watching a man save himself from the turbulent pool under a waterfall. The man tells Confucius that he has spent his life learning to follow the water, rather than fight against it. When people are operating in Wu Wei, they work with both their own inner nature and the laws of nature, so they don't have to put in effort.

The man in the waterfall exemplifies Wu Wei because he has learned to act in harmony with the world—he follows the water rather than fighting it. Through this example, Hoff also shows how Wu Wei connects to the other principles he has explained so far in the book: Wu Wei is how people act when they are faithful to their inner nature. Each person is part of the world as a whole, so they choose to play their rightful part in that world—and harmonize with it—when they honor their own inner nature.

Pooh also does everything effortlessly. He tells Hoff that, for him, things "just sort of happen." This reminds Hoff of how Lao-tse says that Tao just lets things happen by themselves, rather than interfering with them. It's like the scene in *The House at Pooh Corner* in which Pooh, Piglet, Rabbit, and Roo find Eeyore floating down the river, waiting to be rescued. Pooh and Rabbit decide to drop stones in the water and make waves to push Eeyore to the riverbank. Rabbit tells Pooh to drop his stone, but Pooh does it when he's ready. He hits Eeyore, who disappears under the water—and then comes out on the riverbank. While Rabbit credits his cleverness with saving Eeyore, it was actually Pooh's Wu Wei.

Just like Pooh exemplifies P'u and inner nature, he also demonstrates Wu Wei. He lets things "just sort of happen" because he trusts that the ways of the universe—what Hoff calls Tao—will inevitably bring about the best outcome. Moreover, he knows that he will help this process along if he works in harmony with the world, but hamper it if he struggles against the world. So when he saves Eeyore from the river, he ignores Rabbit's clever calculations and instead follows his intuitive understanding of nature.

Hoff compares Wu Wei to just "put[ting] the round peg in the round hole," whereas ego, cleverness, and knowledge try to "mak[e] pegs fit where they don't belong." For instance, Piglet gets stuck trying to open a pickle jar, but Pooh easily pops it open by twisting it naturally. Tigger wants to take a turn, but he tries too hard and shatters the jar. This shows that acting with tension doesn't work. This tension comes from trying too hard and overthinking things. Hoff and Pooh agree that it's ironic that people think of themselves as superior to other animals, because the human mind constantly complicates things, goes in circles, and pulls people's attention out of the real world. But when people reach Wu Wei, they act effortlessly.

When people act out of ego, cleverness, and knowledge, they try to impose their own plans on nature instead of simply working with nature's plans for them. Piglet and Tigger's struggle to open the pickle jar represents this kind of overly tense, deliberate action, which is the opposite of Pooh's Wu Wei. Hoff suggests that, while humans' capacity for ego, cleverness, and knowledge makes them different from other animals, it doesn't make them superior—actually, it makes it harder *for them to fulfill their natural purpose and act in harmony with everything else.*

Hoff takes another example from the *Pooh* books: the search for the Very Small Beetle. Rabbit organizes and directs everyone but Pooh, who accidentally steps on Piglet, wonders what's going on, and then accidentally finds the beetle. In Wu Wei (the Pooh Way), things simply happen the way they're meant to. People shouldn't try to make things work any differently, even if they don't understand what's happening at the time. In retrospect, events usually all make sense.

On his missions with the other animals, Pooh isn't the cleverest or most energetic, but this is actually why *he's the most successful. He might not precisely understand the ways of the universe, but* nobody *does—at least Pooh recognizes and goes along with them, instead of trying to bend the universe to his own will through clever plans.*

Pooh and Piglet's birthday party for Eeyore is another example of how things tend to work out the way they're supposed to. Pooh plans to bring Eeyore a jar of honey as a birthday present, but on his way over to Eeyore's house, he gets hungry and eats it. So he has Owl write "A Happy Birthday" on the jar and gifts it to Eeyore instead. Meanwhile, Piglet plans to gift Eeyore a balloon, but he trips and pops it while rushing over to Eeyore's house. He apologizes and gives Eeyore the crumpled-up, popped balloon. But actually, the balloon fits right in the "Useful Pot" from Pooh. Eeyore delightedly plays with the balloon and pot.

While Pooh's honey binge and Piglet's popped balloon seem to spell disaster at first, everything ultimately works out in their favor. But Hoff suggests that this is only because they let *it—if they had struggled against fate to try and deliver Eeyore his original presents, Pooh and Piglet likely would have caused an even greater catastrophe. This shows why Taoists like Hoff argue that people should go along with the way of the universe (or Tao) even when they can't explain or understand it.*

Wu Wei is hard to see and define, like a reflex. Chuang-tse says it "flows like water, reflects like a mirror, and responds like an echo." That's exactly how Pooh acts. Pooh interrupts to ask what Hoff means—he thinks Chuang-tse's quote is a riddle but can't figure out the answer. Hoff explains that using Wu Wei means following intuition and adapting to circumstances, so that decisions just make themselves naturally. For instance, instead of deciding whom to visit, Pooh wanders around and comes to his answer naturally: Piglet. By following his instincts, Pooh lives a stress-free life.

Whereas cleverness makes decisions through analysis and examination, Wu Wei makes them through intuition. But not just any intuition will do—rather, people have to align their intuition with the flow of the universe (Tao) if they want to make good decisions. In order to do this, people first have to recognize their own inner nature and see how they fit into the broader scheme of the world. In other words, they have to be attuned to nature before they can intuitively adapt to it. Pooh does this because he embodies P'u and knows himself—but not everyone does.

Pooh asks if Chuang-tse's riddle is about a stream. Almost, Hoff says, but not quite. Hoff explains that the martial art *T'ai Chi Ch'üan* embodies Wu Wei: it involves redirecting and deflecting the opponent's force, rather than fighting against it with more force. Hoff suggests that, to answer the riddle, Pooh should just let his mind *flow*, *reflect* the answer, and *respond* naturally. Wu Wei is like hitting a floating cork, Hoff explains: it just bounces back without using any energy of its own. Pooh takes one more guess at the riddle— "a piece of cork!"

Although Pooh gets the riddle wrong, a stream does embody Wu Wei. Like T'ai Chi Ch'üan practitioners and the floating cork, a stream adapts and responds to other forces in its environment, instead of trying to impose its own force on them. It gets its power from its relationship to other things in nature, and not from inside itself. Thus Wu Wei helps people live in harmony with the universe: it allows them to work with *the things in their environment and not* against *them.*

Hoff decides to just tell Pooh the answer to Chuang-tse's riddle: "the Pooh Way." Pooh thinks it was a bad riddle, and he gives Hoff one of his own: "What's black and white and red all over?" The answer is "a sunburned penguin." Hoff comes up with one more: "What runs around all day without getting anywhere?" Pooh guesses that it's Rabbit, but Hoff won't reveal the answer until the next chapter.

Pooh and Hoff's riddles again show that Pooh doesn't need to fully understand Tao or Wu Wei in order to embody them. Pooh's guess that Rabbit is the one who "runs around all day" foreshadows how Hoff connects Rabbit to the people he calls Bisy Backsons in the next chapter.

BISY BACKSON

In *A House at Pooh Corner*, Rabbit goes to visit Christopher Robin, but he isn't home. Christopher has left a note that says, "GON OUT / BACKSON / BISY / BACKSON." Rabbit can't figure out what a Backson is, and neither can Owl. But Chuang-tse knows. He wrote about a man who tried to run away from his footprints and shadow. The man kept running faster and faster until he collapsed and died—he never realized that he could have avoided footprints and shadows by just standing in the shade.

Despite all their cleverness and scholarly knowledge, Rabbit and Owl are just as poor as Christopher Robin at spelling, and they can't figure out what his note means. (It means "Gone out / Back soon / Busy / Back soon.") Since they have knowledge (but not wisdom), they totally miss his deeper meaning, which Hoff expresses through Chuang-tse's parable. This story suggests that many people try to achieve their goals through desperate activity when they can only achieve them through calm and reflection.

Hoff explains that Bisy Backsons are everywhere: they run around in parks, scurry down sidewalks, and live an "almost desperately active" life. Many fill their lives with sports and treat exercise as work. The out-of-breath Rabbit visits Hoff and explains that he's been running around to visit Owl, Roo, and Tigger, looking for the Uncarved Block. Then he hurries off. Bisy Backsons are exhausting: they're always doing something and going somewhere. That's the opposite of what really makes people happy. In the *Pooh* books, Eeyore complains that Rabbit greets him while rushing by—Eeyore doesn't even have time to reply.

Bisy Backsons are the people who live like Chuang-tse's runner: they think that constant activity will bring them happiness, but Taoists know that happiness really comes from living a calm, reflective life. Rabbit exemplifies the Bisy Backson life because he's looking for P'u, or the Uncarved Block, as though it were a hidden treasure. But really, the Uncarved Block isn't hidden somewhere out in the world: it's inside Rabbit himself. To reach it, he has to slow down, not speed up. Ironically, then, Rabbit's frantic search for the Uncarved Block actually makes it much harder for him to find it.

Hoff quips that the Bisy Backson's sign shouldn't say "GONE OUT / BACK SOON," but rather "BACK OUT / GONE SOON." In the book, Rabbit and Pooh wonder where Christopher Robin went and what he's looking for. A reward, suggests Hoff: Bisy Backsons always think they'll get a "Great Reward" if they work hard enough.

Bisy Backsons are always going "BACK OUT" in search of their "Great Reward." But even if they get this reward, they keep living in the same way, because they can't think of any other way to live or pursue happiness. Because they're always chasing after goals, they're never fully present: they're always on the verge of disappearing—they're always going to be "GONE SOON."

Pooh is sleeping on Hoff's writing table, and he falls off. But he doesn't mind: he was having a nightmare about an unreachable jar of honey that kept moving every time he tried to grab it. Hoff points out that a lot of people's lives are like that: they're always grasping for happiness, which they think is just "around the next corner." Most of them end up bitter and unhappy. Pooh comments that these people "burn their toast a lot." Then, Rabbit visits and impatiently reports that all of Roo's blocks are "carved and painted." He decides that Eeyore must have the Uncarved Block and rushes off to find him.

Pooh's unreachable jar of honey represents the promise of the "Great Reward" that people always see "around the next corner." As soon as they achieve one reward, they immediately fixate on another one. Like a mirage in the desert, happiness moves farther away every time Bisy Backsons think they're getting closer to it. When Pooh says that these people "burn their toast a lot," he means that they lose track of the present because they're fantasizing about and chasing after some imaginary reward in the future. Again, Rabbit embodies this: as he frantically searches for the Uncarved Block, he even misses Pooh and Hoff's conversation about how frantically searching for happiness is futile.

Hoff argues that the Puritans were North America's first Bisy Backsons. They spent their lives working hard in the fields—and starving to death. The wiser native people showed them how to follow the rhythms of the Earth and just farm naturally. But Americans eventually forgot it again. By now, they've ruined the soil and their food "taste[s] like cardboard."

Hoff suggests that while Native Americans knew how to listen to nature—kind of like Taoists—the Puritans didn't. Ironically, the harder they tried to grow crops, the less successful they were, because they tried to control the Earth instead of working in harmony with it. For Hoff, this Puritan mindset—that the Earth should be manipulated and controlled to yield crops—is the foundation of modern industrial agriculture.

Hoff asks Pooh why he's not busy "doing something Important." Pooh replies that he's listening to the animals talk about how nice a day it is. That *is* important. Hoff points out that he could listen to the radio and learn about the news, but Pooh says this doesn't really tell him about the world. He's right.

Bisy Backsons constantly worry about "doing something Important," meaning something that will get them closer to their Great Reward. But Pooh knows that paying attention to nature is important, because it's what truly brings people peace and happiness. Again, Hoff thinks it's more important for people to gather immediate, sense-based knowledge about the world around them than abstract information about what's happening far away.

Hoff returns to the Europeans arriving in the New World. They couldn't appreciate its beauty, so they tried to conquer it and kill its inhabitants instead. They didn't even like singing (or bears), which astonishes Pooh. Eventually "the Miserable Puritan" became "the Restless Pioneer," "the Lonely Cowboy," and finally "the Bisy Backson." All of them are rootless, unhappy, busy trying to change and conquer the world—instead of developing themselves.

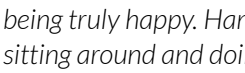
Hoff portrays the Bisy Backson mindset as deeply rooted in American history and culture. In particular, it's associated with American expansion, which is based on a view of the Earth as something to own and dominate, not something to listen to and cooperate with. Hoff views this failure to appreciate nature as a kind of original sin of American society—and he thinks that Americans have to give it up if they truly want to be happy.

Rabbit and Eeyore visit Hoff and Pooh. Eeyore explains the difference between a swamp and a bog, while Rabbit reports that Eeyore didn't have the Uncarved Block, either. Rabbit asks what it is, and Pooh says it's been *him* all along. Eeyore sarcastically notes that Rabbit is just trying to stay busy.

Rabbit, the Bisy Backson of the Hundred Acre Wood, finally runs out of options and pauses for long enough that Pooh and Hoff can explain what the Uncarved Block actually is. This represents the way Bisy Backsons only start looking for happiness in the right place—within themselves—once they've exhausted all their other options and hit rock bottom.

While Bisy Backsons worship youth, they actually destroy it through their busyness and obsession with saving time. Most countries have establishments where people go to chat, relax, and lose track of time—like teahouses in China. But Americans have hamburger stands, which hurry them up and ruin their health. The more Americans try to save time, the less time they actually have. They waste their whole lives working to save time. Unlike the Bisy Backsons, Taoists *actually* respect youth. Taoist sages famously live long lives while continuing to look and act young. For example, a man named Li Chung Yun reportedly lived to 256 by keeping to a daily Taoist practice.

Youth, happiness, and longevity are closely connected. Taoism knows how to achieve all three, and Bisy Backsons destroy all three by questing after them. They seem to view youth as an object that can be bought and possessed, not a quality of the self that can develop and deteriorate over time. Hoff criticizes hamburger stands because he thinks that being busy and efficient is incompatible with being truly happy. Hamburger stands don't give people the luxury of sitting around and doing nothing. The lack of meaningful social spaces in the U.S. suggests that the Bisy Backson mindset isn't just common there—it's actually fundamental to the nation's culture and way of life.



Similarly, in *The House at Pooh Corner*, Pooh realizes that the best thing in the world is the moment right *before* he starts eating honey. This shows that rewards aren't as valuable as the time *between* them. Trying to guess what wrapped Christmas presents are is more fun than actually playing with whatever's inside; as soon as people achieve their goals, they get bored and move on to another. The *process* of getting to goals is more important and enriching than the *achievement* of those goals. The secret to living well is enjoying the process, like Pooh does in the moment before he eats honey. This is the opposite of being a Bisy Backson.

Whereas Bisy Backsons only value the results *of action, Taoists learn to value* action itself. *Therefore, they learn to enjoy their lives without constantly waiting for some "Great Reward" to instantly deliver them happiness. For Pooh, this means that he can be happy all the time, and not only in the moments when he's eating honey. Hoff uses this example to suggest that the Taoist approach to happiness is more realistic, sustainable, and constructive than the Bisy Backson one.*

THAT SORT OF BEAR

Hoff tells Pooh about Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and Pooh says he loves the part that goes "Sing Ho! For a Bear!" But Beethoven didn't write that—Pooh realizes he's thinking about a song he made up. This chapter is about "enjoying life and being Special." In the *Pooh* books, Rabbit takes Piglet and Pooh on an adventure. Piglet and Pooh worry that they'll be useless on the adventure—but Rabbit assures them both that they're essential to it. He helps them recognize their value.

Pooh's typically humorous, lovable mistakes show exactly how he enjoys his life and why he's special. His adventure with Rabbit and Piglet shows how wise people can help others better appreciate themselves. This ties in with Hoff's argument about how people can achieve wisdom and happiness by recognizing and accepting their inner nature. Namely, Hoff suggests that people can help each other through this process of recognition and acceptance.

The Chinese story *The Stonecutter* also illustrates how people can struggle to see their own value. An ordinary stonecutter is dissatisfied with his life and envies a wealthy local merchant. The stonecutter magically becomes the merchant, but then he starts envying a powerful high official. He becomes the official, but then starts to envy the sun. He becomes the sun but envies the clouds, becomes a cloud but envies the wind, and becomes the wind but envies stones. Then, when he becomes the stone, he is bewildered to look down and see a stonecutter chiseling into him.

The stonecutter initially fails to see his own value—he views himself as powerless and envies people he sees as powerful. But his journey reveals two important lessons about how people can grow and find happiness. First, everyone *envies* someone *they view as superior to them. When they gain more wealth, power, or status, people's envy doesn't go away, and people don't necessarily become happier. Second, people often don't understand their value or importance until they see themselves through someone else's perspective.*

The mail comes, and Hoff gets an envelope for "*Mister* Pooh Bear." Even though it's a flyer for a shoe store, Pooh is honored to be called *Mister*.

Pooh's excited to be called "Mister" because this suggests that he's valuable and important just the way he is. The envelope shows how people can uplift others by recognizing their inherent value.

To live meaningful lives, Hoff argues, people should stop waiting for fate to save them and start believing in their own power. For example, the scientist Buckminster Fuller nearly committed suicide after his daughter's death and his company's bankruptcy—but then he realized he could dedicate the rest of his life to science, if he really wanted to. Similarly, before becoming an inventor, Thomas Edison was kicked out of school as a young boy and later fired from his lab assistant job for blowing up the lab. In short, "play-it-safe pessimists" don't accomplish great things because they don't believe in themselves or take risks.

Believing in one's own power is closely tied to accepting one's inner nature. Buckminster Fuller and Thomas Edison both failed when they tried to fit other people's molds for them, but succeeded when they decided to embrace their own inner natures and follow their dreams. This is the same process that Taoism proposes for its followers: by recognizing the inner nature they cannot change, then embracing it and turning it to their advantage, people can unleash their inner potential.

In the *Pooh* books, when Roo falls into the stream, all the other animals try and fail to save him. But Pooh looks around, finds a pole, and uses it to block the stream. He solved the problem by paying attention to what was around him and using it for its true purpose. Similarly, when Piglet gets stuck in a flood, he worries that he "can't do *anything*" until he remembers Christopher Robin's story about a man trapped on an island who sends a note in a bottle out to sea. Piglet does the same, and Pooh gets the note and rescues him.

Yet again, Pooh comes to the rescue because he truly listens to the world and works with what's in front of him, while everyone else tries to hatch clever plans and change everything around them. Christopher Robin's story helps Piglet overcome his self-doubt by showing him that he really does have power, whether he realizes it or not. Just as people can help others appreciate themselves by showing them their value, *they can also help others take risks and succeed by showing them their* power.


Hoff asks Owl if he has seen Pooh, and Owl says Pooh was putting something in the closet. Hoff opens the closet, which is full of shoes of all different sizes and styles. Hoff says he needs to talk to Pooh.

*After getting the "*Mister *Pooh Bear" flyer from the shoe store, Pooh seems to have gone on a shopping spree. This certainly isn't the kind of risk Hoff thinks people should take once they learn to believe in their own importance! Of course, Hoff is also pointing out how advertising preys on people's need to feel important in order to manipulate them into buying things.*


In Taoism, *Tz'u* means "compassion" or "caring." Lao-tse says it's the source of courage. Hoff adds that, without compassion, people can have knowledge and cleverness, but not true *wisdom.* Pooh once saves Roo and Piglet because of his Tz'u. On a different eventful day, Piglet and Pooh visit Owl, whose house suddenly blows down in the wind. To escape, Owl puts a piece of string through his door, and he and Pooh use it as a pulley to raise Piglet up to the letterbox. Piglet squeezes through it and goes to get Christopher Robin to rescue Owl and Pooh.

Tz'u *is what drives people to help others see their value, importance, and power. Along with Rabbit's encouragement and Christopher Robin's inspiring story, Pooh's compassion is part of how Piglet learns to believe in himself and finds the courage to escape Owl's house. Wisdom is about understanding the order of nature (Tao) and living in harmony with it, so it's no wonder that compassion is an important part of wisdom. Namely, wise people create further happiness and harmony in the world by helping others understand the same truths that have made* them *happy.*



Hoff approaches Pooh about the shoes, and Pooh admits that he bought them because the shoe salesman treated him so well and "made [him] feel Important." Pooh agrees to return the shoes, but he tells Hoff that lots of other people were also buying unnecessary things. Hoff agrees: "a lot of people try to buy Happiness and Importance," but that's not the way to actually get them. Everyone can choose to enjoy life if they want—lots of people just don't.

Hoff clearly distinguishes between true happiness and importance—which depends entirely on a person's character and mindset—and the fake happiness and importance that Pooh tries to buy. This ties into Hoff's critique of Bisy Backson culture: the Western economy tricks people with promises of happiness and importance, but it really can't give it to them.

Instead of living desperate, unhappy lives, people can become happy and free through "the Tiddley-Pom Principle." In one of his songs, Pooh sings, "*The more it snows / (Tiddley pom), / The more it goes / (Tiddley pom), / The more it goes / (Tiddley pom) / On Snowing*." The Tiddley-Pom Principle is also called the Snowball Effect: the more a snowball rolls, the bigger it gets. Positivity and negativity are both addictive: over time, people can become more and more hopeful (or more and more cynical).

The Tiddley-Pom Principle, or Snowball Effect, is one of the reasons that "a thousand-mile journey starts with one step." The further people go down the pathway to happiness and wisdom through Taoism, the easier it gets to take the next step. Becoming happy, Hoff suggests, is really about breaking negative cycles and replacing them with positive ones.

After Piglet rescues Pooh and Owl, Pooh sings a song about Piglet's bravery, and Piglet is flattered. Later, Eeyore finds Owl a new house—but he doesn't realize it's Piglet's. However, Piglet decides not to say anything. If his own house blew down, he tells Christopher Robin, he would move in with his best friend, Pooh.

Pooh's song about Piglet illustrates how the Tiddley-Pom Principle is also social: Pooh's positivity, generosity, and wisdom rubs off on Piglet, who learns to develop some of the same traits. This again shows why true wisdom is as much about helping others as achieving happiness for oneself.

Hoff argues that true happiness starts with appreciation, while misery starts with discontent. Like Lao-tse's "thousand-mile journey," virtues like "Wisdom, Happiness, and Courage" start with a single step. Similarly, Chuang-tse pointed out how one man's courage can inspire thousands of others in an army. This is why Pooh sings "ho! for Piglet, ho!" (and for himself, too). After Pooh's song, Christopher Robin explains that their party is to celebrate a special person's accomplishments. Eeyore starts giving a long victory speech—but the party is really for Pooh. Eeyore is offended, but Hoff promises to explain what makes Pooh special in the next chapter.

Just like compassion, appreciation is infectious. By pointing out that appreciation causes happiness and discontent causes misery, Hoff reiterates that these emotions are entirely in people's control. If someone has the right mindset, they can be happy in any situation, and if they have the wrong one, they can be miserable even in the best situation. Pooh clearly knows how to appreciate the good things he has in life, and Hoff thinks this is part of why Pooh lives such a happy life. However, Eeyore's speech shows how there can be a fine line between appreciation and egotism: he's not interested in celebrating the good he sees in the world, but rather in elevating himself above other people. Tellingly, he becomes discontented when it turns out that the party's not for him.

NOWHERE AND NOTHING

In one scene from the *Pooh* books, Pooh and Christopher Robin are going nowhere in particular. Christopher asks what Pooh likes doing best—it's eating—but Christopher says his favorite thing is doing nothing. He defines doing nothing as "going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering."

Christopher Robin's favorite thing is a good explanation of how wise Taoists spend their time. By doing nothing, they don't mean just sitting in place and refusing to act at all—rather, they mean living life with no particular goal, which allows them to connect with the surprising and unexpected things they encounter in their environment.

In a passage from Chuang-tse, Consciousness asks someone named Speechless Non-Doer what it can do, think, and follow to earn the wisdom of the Tao. But Speechless Non-Doer doesn't answer. Consciousness goes to ask someone named Impulsive Speech-Maker the same questions, and Impulsive Speech-Maker starts to talk but forgets what he is saying. Finally, Consciousness asks the Yellow Emperor, who says that the secret to the Tao is doing, thinking, and following *nothing*.

In Chuang-tse's parable, Speechless Non-Doer actually gives the most accurate response to Consciousness's question: his silence illustrates how people can find the Tao. But Consciousness cannot understand Speechless Non-Doer at first, because it's used to receiving clear explanations of the truth, not practical illustrations of it. Meanwhile, Impulsive Speech-Maker's confusing response shows precisely why saying and thinking too much distracts people from the Tao.

Christopher Robin, Pooh, and Chuang-tse are all talking about "the Great Secret" to happiness: *nothing*. (Taoists call it *T'ai Hsü*, or the Great Nothing.) Chuang-tse wrote that Yellow Emperor found "the dark pearl of Tao" not through Knowledge, Vision, or Eloquence, but through Empty Mind.

Hoff has argued that people's minds and thoughts distract them from nature. He has also argued that true happiness comes from harmonizing oneself with nature. By putting these two arguments together, Hoff demonstrates that people can best find happiness when they turn off their wandering minds and distracting thoughts, so that they can focus their energy on listening to and harmonizing with nature. This is why Taoists value the Great Nothing, or the Empty Mind. This doesn't mean rejecting nature or denying the world in order to embrace nothing. Instead, it means minimizing the mind's interference with the world by emptying it of stray thoughts. This is what lets people actually focus on the world that surrounds them.

Similarly, after Eeyore's tail disappeared, Owl gave Pooh complicated instructions for how to recover it, but Pooh ignored him. He went outside and noticed that Owl had a new bell-rope—it was Eeyore's tail, which fell off in the forest. Because Pooh's mind was empty, he noticed what was right in front of him. In contrast, "the Stuffed-Full-of-Knowledge-and-Cleverness mind" distracts itself and forgets what it's looking at.

This scene illustrates what it actually looks like to do nothing and have an empty mind. It isn't that Pooh literally sits around, doing nothing and refusing to think about anything. Instead, as he goes about his life, he avoids thinking about things that are distant from his immediate experience. He refuses to stuff his mind "Full-of-Knowledge-and-Cleverness" because he knows that he's happier, wiser, and more successful if he leaves his mind empty and open to the world.

Taoist paintings, good music, and the beauty of "fresh snow, clean air, [and] pure water" all depend on emptiness. But lots of people associate emptiness with loneliness, so they try to fill everything in. Actually, that's when loneliness starts—when every moment is filled and life becomes a "Big Congested Mess."

Hoff wants his readers to think differently about the concept of emptiness. Instead of thinking about it as desolation or nonexistence, they should associate it with the beauty of things in their simplest, purest, most uncomplicated form. In fact, emptiness can help people understand the P'u (simplest form) or inner nature of things.

Hirohito, the Emperor of Japan, illustrates this principle. He usually spent every day busy with meetings, events, and other royal business. But one day, when nobody showed up to a meeting, he smiled at the empty space and said it was his favorite appointment of all. Similarly, Lao-tse said that, while knowledge requires "add[ing] things every day," the secret to wisdom is "remov[ing] things every day." Chuang-tse wrote about a student who reached the Tao by forgetting everything.

The Hirohito parable shows that embracing nothingness is really about creating mental space for reflection and connection with the world. Lao-tse's quote about adding and removing things from life is another warning against confusing knowledge for wisdom. By learning more and more—even if it's about Taoism and how to be happy—people are practicing the habits that actually draw them further away from nature and their place in it.

The mind is skilled at analyzing information, but it's most powerful when it's empty—which allows it to be clear. If people try to trace their ideas back to their origins, they'll always end up coming back to *nothing*. In fact, the most original, revolutionary ideas are often the hardest to trace back because they're the closest to nothingness. This is also why people get good ideas after a calm night of sleep.

It's easy to assume that people should constantly learn and analyze information, just because they're good at it. But Taoists think that humans' greatest strength is their intuition, perception, and creativity, not their analytical skills. This is why Hoff associates creativity with nothingness: people who learn to declutter (or empty) their minds are more likely to produce genuinely great ideas and innovations.

People think that they develop more and more as they become adults, but actually, the highest level of development is "the independent, clear-minded, all-seeing Child." In Taoism, the most wise, enlightened people are happy like children because they know the Great Nothing.

While adults are usually more developed in terms of knowledge, people with the mind of "the independent, clear-minded, all-seeing Child" are supremely developed in terms of wisdom. Such people directly and unambiguously perceive key truths about the order of the universe—or Tao. And this understanding makes them supremely happy because it shows them the beauty, value, and harmony in the world.

At the end of the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, the main characters reach the enchanted grove called Galleons Lap. This represents wisdom or enlightenment. People can go there by taking "the path to Nothing." They don't have to go anywhere, because the enchanted forest is already there within them, wherever they already happen to be.

Just like Galleons Lap is already hidden away within the Hundred Acre Woods, the means to reach enlightenment are already within people's minds. In fact, it lies in humans' simplest form (or P'u), which is the form that fits their true inner nature and helps them fit into the way of the universe (or Tao). By comparing Galleons Lap to enlightenment, Hoff suggests that Winnie-the-Pooh *books are more about a spiritual journey than a material one. This journey is as much for the book's characters as for the young readers who learn life lessons from it.*

THE NOW OF POOH

Hoff asks why young people follow Pooh, "a Bear of Little Brain," on his adventures through the forest. He asks whether people should really follow their brains, or else "the voice within" them. Brains, Hoff argues, can't do what's most important in life. Cleverness separates people from the real world. In fact, humans' pursuit of knowledge and cleverness is destroying the world, and we should start prioritizing "wisdom and contentment" instead. Taoist masters follow Tao by listening to their inner voice. Everyone can follow Tao, too, if they learn to hear that voice. Everyone has "an Owl, a Rabbit, an Eeyore, and a Pooh" within them. But most people live like Owl and Rabbit—and complain like Eeyore—when they should really "choose the way of Pooh."

In this chapter, Hoff combines the principles that he has explained throughout the book into a clear, impassioned thesis statement about why Westerners should embrace Taoism. By choosing cleverness over instinct and knowledge over wisdom, he concludes, Westerners destroy the Earth, deny their own inner nature, and make themselves miserable. But they can become happier, both as individuals and as societies, if they "choose the way of Pooh"—or Taoism—over the ways of Owl, Rabbit, and Eeyore. Owl's search for knowledge distracts him from the search for wisdom. Rabbit's energetic search for happiness distracts him from the things that would actually make him happy. And Eeyore's constant search for problems with the world prevents him from truly appreciating or enjoying it. In contrast, Pooh is wise without being knowledgeable. He stays happy without trying to win a "Great Reward." And he appreciates the world just the way it is.

BACKWORD

Hoff asks Pooh what he thinks about *The Tao of Pooh*. But Pooh still doesn't know what Hoff is talking about. Hoff reminds Pooh about P'u (the Uncarved Block), Wu Wei (the Pooh Way), and so on. Pooh comes up with a song about doing what's "there in front of you," not trying too hard, understanding oneself, and finding the Way (Tao). Pooh says that's what he thinks the book is about, but Hoff says Pooh *knows* it—which is "the same thing." "So it is," Pooh replies.

While Pooh expresses his philosophy through song and Hoff explains his through Taoist terms and Chinese parables, both of them are really just saying "the same thing." Pooh never understands Hoff's abstract lessons about Taoism, but he still embodies its truths, and that's what really matters. In fact, after using the previous chapter to make an abstract intellectual argument for Taoism, Hoff uses this concluding chapter to remind his readers that wisdom trumps knowledge. Truly following Taoism requires understanding it through instinct, not through reason or intellect.

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