



# The Chronicles of Yen Tzu

## Simplifying Complexity

*'I have discovered that despite knowing that doing things of importance delivers value to me, the harsh reality is that I rarely have time to attend to them,' said a visiting merchant to Yen Tzu. 'Indeed it seems that every time I start to apply myself to such things someone or something outside of my control is determined to swamp me in minutiae.'*

*'In truth business has an inclination to value complexity over the simple elements,' replied Yen Tzu. 'It is as though we need to be doing hundreds of things to feel busy, because we have been falsely indoctrinated that being busy is what business is about, and therefore unwittingly allow ourselves to be distracted from focusing our time on what we should be doing. Let me share a tale my friend, The Sage Yang-Chu recounted to me:*

*'An Emperor travelling with his enormous entourage of courtiers and advisors, came upon a remote village he had not visited before. The custom of the province he ruled was such that people would always offer their Emperor their very best. But the villagers had nothing of value to offer, so they sent their elders to the Emperor to tell him, 'We have something precious to offer you that has been handed down by our ancestors.'*

*'Seeing nothing in their hands, the intrigued Emperor asked, 'What is it?''*

*'The spokesman for the elders stepped forward and replied, 'In the wintertime, if you sit in the sunshine you will feel very comfortable.'*

*'Bemused by their answer the Emperor began to laugh, as did the whole entourage. 'Everyone knows that, it is no secret,' he said, 'but I accept your simple yet precious gift.'*



*'Returning home, the Emperor reflected on the words of the village elders. 'Life is simple yet man makes it complex,' he said to his advisor, Yang-Chu. 'As an Emperor I can have anything I want, yet the more I have, the more complicated my life becomes. My life is more a reflection of what others expect an Emperor to be, rather than how I truly am. Their reflection has become my reality. I do what I do because I am expected to, because I am able to, yet it seems that there is little time to just live.'*

*'Often we cling fiercely to whatever false and complex structure it deems essential for security, said Yang-Chu. Indeed, we welcome complexity above anything else, as we consider greater complexity means even more challenging stimulation. Thus, there is a tendency within our personal and professional lives to complicate rather than simplify things. Despite the fact that waste thrives on complexity, most businesses engage in it, generating prodigious amounts of needless, unproductive and expensive activity. The greater the sense of importance attached to being involved with what is complex, the greater the activity and the less the productivity.'*

*'In our material-focused world, where success means having more, activity is mistaken for productivity. Consequently, activities are focused on that which brings about greater importance and complexity, because they will bring the rewards and recognition that are seen to be necessary for a person's protection.'*

*'People, for example, will always be active in seeking satisfaction in good food, fine clothes, lively music and sexual pleasure,' continued Yang-Chu. 'Many will in time realise that meeting their material needs does not create the happiness hoped for. So society becomes active in setting up reward systems that go beyond material goods.'*

*'I believe that you refer to such things as titles, social recognition, status and political, bureaucratic and organisational power,' said the Emperor, 'all wrapped up in a package called self-fulfilment.'*



*'Exactly so,' said Yang-Chu. 'Attracted by such prizes and goaded on by social pressure, people spend their lives actively chasing after these goals, feeling that they have achieved something. But the reality is that they have sacrificed a lot in their life because they can no longer productively see, hear, act, feel or think from their hearts. Everything they do is dictated by whether it leads to social gains. In the end, they've spent their lives following the demands of others, never living their own life.'*

*'Then they might just as well be living the life of a slave or prisoner.'*

*'Just so, and many unwittingly do,' replied Yang-Chu. 'The ancients understood that life is only a temporary sojourn in this world, and death is a temporary leave. In our short time here, it is better that we should listen to our voices and follow our hearts. Why follow other people's rules and lives to please others? Is it not better to be free and live your own life, enjoying whatever comes your way to the full?'*



*'It is so,' said the Emperor. 'For being imprisoned by name or title allows social conventions to lead one away from the natural order of things.'*

*'Certainly, and concern over whether one is remembered in generations ahead is a wasteful activity, as our present consciousness will not be there to see it. Rather than spend their life letting other people manipulate them just to get a name and a reputation, a person must let their life be guided by their own heart and what is important to them.'*

*'So one must live without the burdens of fame and recognition,' said the Emperor.*

*'Not at all and that is not be possible as fame and recognition does bring a burden of responsibility,' answered Yang-Chu. 'Yet a person must simply live without the self-importance that requires their necessity. For self-importance devises complexity to sustain itself and this runs against the simple and natural order of things. Thus, the more a person feels they must have, the more they feel they must protect what they have. So, unwittingly, they build a prison maze around themselves, one so complex that keys to get out of it are unnecessary.'*

*'Then how is it possible for a person to regain their freedom?' asked the Emperor.*

*'By the only means to see one's bondage for what it really is,' answered Yang-Chu. 'Simply to rise above it.'*



*'Yang-Chu's tale illustrates the power that an ego has over us. Our ego, for example, having convinced us that we are much less than we really are, forces us to measure our value by what our 'busyness' accomplishes. We have become so tied up with what we do, for example, that we view weekends, or time off, as our periodical escape. Yet the complexity of our lives is such that these escapes only lead to the exercise yard of our self-imposed prison. Could we but rise above all the complications in our lives and see that they have been created to satisfy the demands of ego, we would know the absurdity of what reassuring it continually requires of us.*

*'Do we really need the security blanket of trappings to verify our identity? Do we allow the tools and toys of our particular profession to simplify our lives, as they were intended to? Do we need the complexity of systems to ensure that our businesses run smoothly? Do we need the complexity that we create in our relationships? Must we really have the complexity we have in our lives, in order to live. Or is it simply that we have allowed ourselves to be convinced that we do? Think how much more energy we use trying to get around something, rather than just getting on with it. In doing so, we complicate the issue.*

*'Complexity is born out of a belief that things cannot be simple. Seeking to simplify the complexity of whatever stressful concern you may currently have, will initially cause your ego to ridicule you by saying, 'Ah, but that's easier said than done.' No, it isn't. Try it. Allow yourself to become aware of something being unnecessarily complex. Feel what would be the clearest and simplest solution. Again your ego will say, 'But that's too obvious to work.' Then just do it, and importantly, be aware of how easy it is. If something sounds right to you, because deep down inside it feels right to you, then do it. Act on it.*

*'If something goes against the grain, however, dismiss it. But in doing so be aware of why you are dismissing it. To dismiss something is fine, but to not know why you do so is allowing the ego to say, 'Go on; convince me.' Whatever is true does not need to be defended; it only has to be remembered. Whenever something feels right, it is because you already know it to be right. It is just that you have been reminded.*

*'Acting in this manner allows you to simplify the complexity in your life. And the best way to simplify your life is to invest your valuable time in what is important to do – and that must be to focus your attention on those tasks that in turn maximize the returning value of the time and energy you have invested. To be distracted and persuaded to be swamped in minutiae and complexity is missing the point of employing our life-force effectively. Better to invest such life-force in the smaller percentage of those things relevant to the success of your business, that bring reward for doing what you are good at; than to address the larger percentage that provide little in return and dissipate your life-force.'*