

MEDITATION II

*As rain falls through an ill thatched roof,
So anger passes through an unreflecting mind.*

the Buddha (from The Dhammapada)

In the previous chapter, it was pointed out how complex thought can be, at least if the East's view of things is accurate. So how does one present to the public insights gained through penetrating meditation? That is, how can the true spiritual teachers impart to humanity the wonder and power of what they have seen?

The intellect replies, "Just tell me! Write it down; speak to me. I'll understand." The problem is that when it comes to the subtle immensity hidden within *thought*, words are about as useful as using giant, oddly shaped blocks stacked without design to build a cistern. There is no way the blocks can fit together finely enough to hold water.

This is why Zen Buddhists say:

The moment you use a word,
you miss the mark.

Words used in an intellectual sense are simply unable to hold and represent the reality of what is there. Still, teachers throughout the ages have employed inventive ways to use words to circumvent this communication problem.

One of the more powerful approaches is through paradox. A paradox can stimulate the mind and animate the intuition in spectacular ways. From Lao Tsu:

He who pursues learning will increase every day;
He who pursues *Tao* will decrease every day.¹

Lao Tsu's words have profound wisdom within them, but the intellect grabs ahold of them, chews on them for a while, then spits them out as incomprehensible.

The problem? Wisdom is not linear and intellectual. It represents knowledge that can only be fully expressed, at least in the beginning, in contemplative meditation. Approaching it in any other way brings nothing but a furrowed brow and a shaking head.

Another approach to breaking this barrier imposed by the intellect's inability to grasp deep subtlety is through poetry. As an example, the following are two translations of the first lines of Lao Tsu's *Tao Teh Ching*. The first of the two has been included for comparison's sake; it uses a decidedly intellectual format (this translation was taken from *Tao Teh King* by A.J. Bahm--1980).

Nature can never be completely described, for such a description of Nature would have to duplicate Nature.

No name can fully express what it represents.

It is Nature itself, and not any part (or name or description) abstracted from Nature, which is the ultimate source of all that happens, all that come and goes, begins and ends, is and is not.

But to describe Nature as "the ultimate source of all" is still only a description, and such a description is not Nature itself. Yet since, in order to speak of it, we must use words, we shall have to describe it as "the ultimate source of all."

If Nature is inexpressible, he who desires to know Nature as it is in itself will not try to express it in words.

To try to express the inexpressible leads one to make distinctions which are unreal.

Although the existence of Nature and a description of that existence are two different things, yet they are also the same.

¹ The word *Tao* in this context is referring to the core of Lao Tsu's teaching: that there is a flow to life which, if accepted, allows the self to exist perfectly without effort.

For both are ways of existing. That is, a description of existence must have its own existence, which is different from the existence of that which it describes; and so again we have to recognize an existence which cannot be described.

Notice how lecture-like this translation is. It is possible to understand at least superficially what Lao Tsu meant to convey, but the intellectual nature of the translation too rigidly defines the piece--on a subtle level, it stifles one's inclination to read, then soar.

Consider now a second translation of the same section (this one is from *Way of Life according to Lao Tsu* by Bynner--1962):

Existence is beyond the power of words
To define:
Terms may be used,
But none of them are absolute.
In the beginning of heaven and earth
There were no words.
Words came out of the womb of matter:
And whether a man dispassionately
Sees to the core of life
Or passionately sees the surface,
The core and the surface are essentially the same,
Words making them seem different only to express
appearance.
If name be needed,
"Wonder" names them both;
From Wonder into wonder existence opens.

Notice how this offering draws the mind into imagery that is not concrete? Even if the ideas presented are not intellectually clear, one can *feel* that there is more underneath the surface.

Which is better? It depends upon what you want. If your mind works on a purely intellectual level, the first will probably be more appealing. But if you are more meditative, you will find that the second does more to jar the mind into insight. Why is that? Because the poetic form of the second translation better captures the spirit of Lao Tsu's message, and because within that spirit there is wisdom that the intellect cannot grasp.

The following is a selection of passages I have found interesting over the years (those I've chosen are from the Taoist writings attributed to Lao Tsu² and Chuang Tsu³ -- in fact, there are many more quotes from other sources in *Appendix I* at the end of the book). Notice that from an intellectual level, the quotes all make perfect sense (more or less). But if the East is correct, there is more.

A sound man, by not advancing himself,
stays the further ahead of himself;
By not confining himself to himself,
sustains himself outside himself;
By never being an end in himself,
endlessly becomes himself.

Lao Tsu

Once I dreamt that I was a butterfly, fluttering here and there; in all ways a butterfly. I enjoyed my freedom as a butterfly, not knowing that I was Chou. Suddenly I awoke and was surprised to be myself again. Now, how can I tell whether I am a man who dreamt that he was a butterfly, or whether I am a butterfly who dreams that he is a man?

Chuang Tsu

Those who would take over the earth
And shape it to their will
Never, I notice, succeed.
The earth is like a vessel so sacred
That at the mere approach of the profane
It is marred,
And when they reach out their fingers it is gone.
For a time in the world some make a great noise
And some are silent,

² Before leaving quite literally for parts unknown, Lao Tsu (circa 600 BC) dictated *The Tao Teh Ching* (there are various translations of this title--the best I've seen is "The Way of Life") at the request of a gatekeeper at one of the openings in the Great Wall. The quotes cited here are from Bynner's translation in *Way of Life according to Lao Tsu* (1962).

³ Chuang Tsu was a 4th century BC Taoist. This quote comes from *Creativity and Taoism* by Chang Chung Yuan (1963).

For a time in the world some are puffed fat
 And some are kept hungry,
For a time in the world some push aboard
 And some are tipped out;
At no time in the world will a man who is sane
 Over-reach himself;
 Over-spend himself;
 Over-rate himself.

Lao Tsu

How can a man's life keep its course
 If he will not let it flow?
Those who flow as life flows
 Know they need no other force:
They feel no wear, they feel no tear,
 They need no mending, they need no repair.

Lao Tsu

People, through finding something beautiful,
 Think something else unbeautiful;
Through finding one man fit, judge another unfit.
Life and death, though stemming from each other,
 Seem to conflict as stages of change;
 Difficult and easy as phases of achievement;
 Long and short as measures of contrast;
 High and Low as degrees of relation.
But since the varying tones give music to a voice
 And what *is* is the *was* of what shall be,
The sanest man sets up no deed,
 Lays down no laws,
 Takes everything that happens as it comes,
 As something to animate, not appropriate,
 To earn, not own,
 To accept naturally without self-importance:
If you never assume importance, you never lose it.

Lao Tsu

To help the self grasp the Truths buried within these and other verses, the Zen Buddhists have developed a way to temporarily free themselves from the relentless grip of the intellect. The approach uses what are called *koans*.

A koan is a seemingly nonsensical verse designed specifically to act like a mental jawbreaker. Probably the most commonly recognized koan is, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

A monk is given his koan by the Roshi of the monastery (a Roshi is like a Catholic Abbot) with instruction to meditate upon it. Attempting to grasp the koan, the aspirant may grapple for weeks with what appears from the mind's standpoint to be nonsense. Sooner or later, the intellect exhausts itself on the endeavor, giving the more subtle intuition an opportunity to creep in.

It is a very clever way of cudgeling the plodding mental processes into silence so that deeper perception can come.

The general thrust of Lao Tsu's philosophy was to allow one's life and spiritual evolution to flow naturally, just as would an enlightening meditation. With that thought, I will leave you with a story about a man whose life-experience seemed to be that very thing.

In 1820, there was a poor Sunni Moslem named Abdul Wahab Mahmoud who lived in Cairo. Although Abdul had no complaints (he had lived a long life, outliving his wife, and had many children, all grown), he did have one great hope--he very much wanted to better understand the meaning of life before he died. So when by chance he met a teacher who seemed to have great wisdom, he was delighted. The two got along well--Abdul was a very kind, thoughtful man--and the teacher ended up inviting him to attend a discussion in one of the mosques during which a number of knowledgeable individuals were to speak.

The night came and Abdul attended. But after the meeting the old gentleman went to the teacher and said, "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I haven't understood much of what was said. I just couldn't follow as the discussion jumped from one idea to another."

The two talked and as they did it became evident that the old man's mind was simply slow. He could not take one thought and relate it to another; he didn't seem to have the ability to think abstractly. Attending discussions would obviously not help.

The teacher knew that Abdul was a good man, so he talked to a friend, a sheikh of one of the nearby mosques, and contrived a situation for the old man. Within the week, the sheikh approached Abdul saying, "I have need for someone to sweep my mosque clean every day. Would you be interested in taking the job?"

The old man was overjoyed. It would mean regular food, a comfortable, secure sleeping quarter, and most important, close contact with a holy place.

The sheikh made only one condition. "When you are sweeping," he said, "I want you to concentrate on the thought that you will sweep every bit of dirt from the mosque as you work. I don't want you to do this with stress," he continued, "but I do want you to hold that thought whenever you are working."

Abdul agreed. He settled in and as he carefully did his single daily task, he did exactly what the sheikh had requested--he kept firmly in his mind the idea, "I will get out all of the dirt so that the mosque will be clean and a better place for others."

After a period of time of doing this, the old gentleman began to notice things he had not previously observed. He found, for instance, that the beautiful colors of the rugs were obscured when the rugs were dirty, and that they were much more harmonious and alive after he had swept them. Although that might seem a mundane observation, it was a revelation for him--how beautiful the rugs could be with his care.

He also began to notice things about the people who entered and used the mosque. He saw that when a basically good man entered the mosque in a state of anger or fear, he carried with him a kind of distress that muddied the tone of his presence in the same way that dirt on the mosque's rugs obscured the splendor and beauty of their colors. And as for those who were in a constant state of ugly irritation, he began to see that they left a kind of residue after them--an uncomfortableness that permeated and dirtied the very fabric of the mosque itself.

These insights came in bits and pieces. But one day, while listening to the raised voices of men arguing, his thoughts came together. In a flash, Abdul saw that dirtiness was not solely the by-product of dirt. Rather, it was intimately related to one's state of mind--that its roots were in the confusion that comes with self-preferment, narrow attitudes, and the exercise of uncontrolled emotions.

From that tiny enlightenment came others. Within a short time Abdul found that his intuition had opened, his mind had become free of its slowness, and to his surprise his understanding of life and himself had grown. By the time he died, he had gone so deeply

into understanding that he had become a teacher in his own right . . . and a very happy man in the bargain.

This story is a fine example of the somewhat unorthodox premise that the shortest distance between two points is *not* always a straight line. Who would have thought that Abdul's constant thought, "I will clean all of the dirt from the mosque," would have led to an opening up of the old man's thinking and a moving closer to his desired goal--a better understanding of life?

Yet as improbable as it may seem, that is exactly what happened. Life brought him enlightenment without a ripple, which brings us back to the words of Lao Tsu:

How can a man's life move
If he will not let it flow . . .