

The *I Ching* & Me
The Story of How this Ancient Chinese Oracle has Helped Transform My Life
By
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Today I want to introduce you to a dear friend of mine, the *I Ching*. This ancient Chinese oracle has been one of the most important acquaintances in my life, but I'm often hesitant to talk about it for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it's kind of weird, especially for someone like me who doesn't believe on a personal god, is hesitant to use the word "spiritual," and depends so much upon reason and science when formulating and validating my beliefs. Secondly, explaining what the *I Ching* is and how it works is so technical and abstract that's it's hard to follow without seeing it done. Trying to explain it in just a few minutes can be as boring as it is pointless. So, rather than going into the esoteric details about what it is and how it works, I'm going to just talk about my relationship with it, its significance in my own journey, and some of the guidance it has given me over the years.

So, to begin with, I will only tell you the *I Ching* is a 3000-year-old Chinese oracle that responds to an inquirer with one of 64 possible images called *hexagrams*. A hexagram is composed of six lines stacked on top of each other, which are either solid or broken. It may sound preposterous to suggest only 64 simple images can offer insight into any question asked, but keep in mind DNA, which has the same algorithm as the *I Ching*, also has only 64 possible codons which have been used to write the genetic code for the more than 5 billion species ever to have lived on Earth. You can say quite a lot with just 64 words. Although there are more than a million words in the English language alone, only about a 100 of them account for half of everything written. So the *I Ching* is a 64-word oracle that says a lot.

Before saying more about what it has said to me over the years, I want to say a little something about the two men who introduced us, Richard Wilhelm and Carl Jung. Wilhelm was a Christian missionary who was the first to introduce the *I Ching* to the Western world by translating it into German in 1923, less than a century ago. His version was subsequently translated into English in 1950. This ancient oracle, and the Chinese culture in general, had a profound influence on Wilhelm, who once told Jung, "It is a great satisfaction to me that I never baptized a single Chinese!"¹ Wilhelm became immersed and enamored with Chinese culture during his years in China. When Jung first met him, at the Psychology Club in Zurich in 1923, he says "he seemed completely Chinese, in outward manner as much as in his way of writing and speaking. The Oriental point of view and ancient Chinese culture had penetrated him through and through."² (Incidentally, it may interest you to know that his son, Hellmut Wilhelm, was a professor of Chinese literature and history at U-Dub from 1948 until 1971.)

¹ Jung, C.G., *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, (Jaffe, Aniela, ed.) Vintage Books, Random House, New York, NY, 1961, 1989, p.375.

² *Ibid.*, p. 375f.

Jung described Richard Wilhelm as a “truly religious spirit, with an unclouded and farsighted view of things.” He also said, “He had the gift of being able to listen without bias to the revelations of a foreign mentality, and to accomplish the miracle of empathy which enabled him to make the intellectual treasures of China accessible to Europe.”³ It is Jung who also informs us that upon Wilhelm’s completion of his translation, his teacher, Lau Nai Suan died, “as if,” Jung says, “his work were completed and he had delivered the last message of the old, dying China to Europe.”⁴ So you might imagine how troubling Jung found it upon noticing Wilhelm’s return to his European persona after a short time back in Frankfurt. After attending one of his “conventional” lectures, Jung told him, “My dear Wilhelm, please don’t take this amiss, but I have the feeling that the West is taking possession of you again, and that you are becoming unfaithful to your mission of transmitting the East to the West.”⁵

Wilhelm agreed, saying, “something here is overpowering me,”⁶ but couldn’t help himself even though Jung believed this responsible for his friend’s declining health. In fact, it was while staying in Jung’s home that Wilhelm had an attack of amoebic dysentery, which only worsened during the following months until it put him in the hospital. When Jung visited him there, Wilhelm told him that his dreams were all about the China he’d left behind. “He was groping his way back to the problem which China had set before him,” Jung said, “the answer to which had been blocked from him by the West.”⁷ Just before his friend’s death, Jung had a vision of a Chinese man in a dark blue gown bowing before him at the foot of his bed. He believed it represented the “clash between East and West,” that Wilhelm could not reconcile and that Jung also felt within himself.

My introduction to Wilhelm, obviously, came through the writings of the great psychologist, Carl Jung who had been working intensely with the *I Ching* years before Wilhelm ever translated it; although he was immensely grateful when he did because, as he said, “he knew the entire literature and could therefore fill in the gaps which had been outside my competence.”⁸ Jung ended up writing the forward to the English translation, which has been read by more English speakers than any other of his works. Intellectually, Jung seems to have believed the *I Ching*’s images solicit meaning from the unconscious mind in the same way other images can, like those found in our own dreams, or the archetypal imagery found in paintings or on Tarot cards, or seemingly meaningless and abstract ink blots. As a man of science, concerned he would be accused of believing in magic, Jung admitted he had been reluctant and embarrassed to write the forward. Even so, Jung could not help but personify the *I Ching* when speaking of it, saying what he called, “the American version” has a “living soul,”⁹ and that he asked how the *I Ching* felt about the matter, “as one questions a person whom one is about to introduce to friends,”¹⁰ and he even psychoanalyzed its response. “Had a human being made such replies,” he said, “I should, as a psychiatrist, have had to pronounce

³ Ibid., p. 375.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 376.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 374.

⁹ Wilhelm, Richard, *The I Ching*, Bollingen Series XIX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1950, 1990, p. xxiv.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. xxviii.

him of sound mind... I should not be able to discover anything delirious, idiotic, or schizophrenic... on the contrary, I should have had to congratulate this hypothetical person on the extent of his insight..."¹¹

I first heard of the *I Ching* while reading Carl Jung's collected works in my mid-twenties, and decided to give it a try. I purchased a copy of Wilhelm's translation, fashioned my own stalks out of fifty dowel rods, learned the ancient ritual of consultation, and, on January 21st, 1991, at the age of 27, I asked the oracle my first question, "How do you feel about me consulting you?" Since, in his forward, Jung had asked how it felt about being introduced to the U.S., it seems I should begin with similar respect. "WOW!" my journal exclaims, "I just finished interpreting the answer to my first inquiry. Though I'm a novice, and I'm sure there is much more that I haven't perceived, I have found the answer so clear I feel as if I have actually been directly spoken to." Again, not wishing to go into the abstract imagery or confusing matters by talking about how they are best interpreted, I, like Jung, will personify the *I Ching* by simply stating what it said to me. "Yes, I am extremely receptive to you, as receptive as is possible." It also asked me not to misuse it and to always remain reverent and respectful by not showing off, and to not even talk much about it with others, but to use it only as a source of "inner light." So I've approached it in this way ever since, as a means of gaining insight into my own issues and discovering truths about myself.

Less than a month later I asked my second question, this time about a problem that had been a great source of pain to both Peggy and I, our job situation. "Once again I feel directly spoken to," my journal says. This is so because the Oracle told me that at that point in my life I had to concentrate on seeking nourishment from within, not from without, that the pain of being in unrewarding work, both financially and emotionally, was something we had to endure in order to develop this inner strength, this ability to remain content in most any circumstance. "I feel this means," 27-year-old Todd wrote, "if our outward situation causes us to forget our deeper search, or lose sight of it, we shall not reach the nourishment of the spirit and soul. Indeed, our fragile desire to grow may be shattered if we allow our physical difficulties to overcome us."

That's not bad insight for a young man. Nevertheless, just three days later I was at it again, this time asking if I would, "have a new job within the next six months." The name of the image I receive actually means, "After Completion," and the answer I received said, "You're right where you're supposed to be now and you won't move on until you've learned what you're supposed to. So, instead of worrying about the big picture, pay attention to the details and learn from them." I don't know if I didn't actually understand what it was saying, or if I just didn't like it. In either case, I asked the Oracle to please clarify what it meant and it replied with the image of "Decrease." In other words, to be direct, as I wrote in my journal, "for now I must be content with my decreased situation of poverty and insecurity in order to prepare myself emotionally and spiritually for the prosperity that will eventually come my way."

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii.

So I tried to stop asking questions about my worldly woes and began asking its advice and insight into more lofty matters, like, "How do I worship God?" I asked this question because I'd left my Christian faith, the ministry, and, for the most part, belief in any kind of religion. It told me, "Your religion should be about learning to find calm within even as the storm rages without." It also told me not to worry about accomplishing great things, but to attempt small acts of kindness and goodness, and to work on my inner growth until I'm ready to take on more. It was kind of like Hans Solo telling Luke Skywalker, "Don't get cocky kid." As I wrote in my journal, "It seems my answer is a simple one, 'Don't make an outward show of spirituality. Seek personal growth from within. Conduct yourself properly. Live simply. Feel life.'"

Not too long afterward, honoring its request to use my time to grow inwardly, I asked, "What is my greatest weakness?" It responded by saying, as you may have already guessed, "You continue to place too much value on the external social status, causing a lack of inner worth." It then advised me, once again, to concentrate on nourishing my spiritual life so that I will eventually be the kind of person who can help nourish others. Then, a couple days later, I asked, "What is my strength?" and it told me, "You will be strong if you hold back and keep still for now."

Over the next few years I still sometimes asked about moving into more fulfilling work, and it continued to gently say, "Stay put, keep still, learn and grow." And sometimes I'd ask philosophical questions, like, "Who are you?" "I am the one who settles conflict," it told me. Other times I'd just ask if it had anything it wanted to say to me. The first time I tried this, it said, "Your external path in life will become clear and result in joy if you continue to concentrate on what matters most by developing your inner strength and greatness, and remain devoted to doing so rather than becoming distracted by other worries."

I went on to ask the *I Ching* many things, feeling like I was seeking guidance from the wise old grandfather I longed for but never had, and I could not help but feel as if I really was in touch with the spirit of a grandfather or grandmother who always responded to me with love and affection. I went to it for comfort when the first Gulf war broke out in 1991, and later to ask if I should pursue a Master's degree. But, by far, one of the most profound experiences of my life occurred on March 12th, 1991, just a couple months after I first began consulting my spirit helper.

I had been doing wounded inner-child work and realized that as a young man I really didn't have any meaningful father figures or male mentors in my life to help teach me what it means to be a man. I had been meditating on an old photograph of myself as a little boy, wondering how my own father could have been so cruel and unloving toward me. "How do I fulfill my need for a father I can love and respect and turn to in times of struggle?" I asked. The Oracle responded in a way I couldn't comprehend. "I don't understand," I asked again. But before it could reply, I broke into tears looking at the face of myself as a little boy, so precious yet so wounded, and was too beside myself to understand anything.

Just then the phone rang. So I sucked up my tears like any man would and answered, "Hello." It was my neighbor, the mother of a two-year-old, telling me he had just been bitten by a dog

and she needed me to drive them to the hospital. I rushed to her house, jumped in the van, and drove to the Children's hospital while she attended to his wound. Once in the emergency room she and Andy were rushed straight to a room and I found myself standing in the waiting room, looking around at all the wounded children. A smile spread across my face as I marveled over the synchronicity of the event. Only moments earlier I had been consulting the *I Ching* about how to care for my own wounded inner child, and now I was in a room full of wounded children helping to care for one of my own.

Fortunately, little Andy only needed a couple of stitches above his eyebrow and we were soon able to leave. Upon returning home I took a second look at the reply the *I Ching* had given me and saw the image of a young child holding a tiger by the tail, and I immediately understood what it meant. It was, in fact, a life-changing epiphany for me. Like fatherless Jesus emerging from his baptismal waters and hearing a heavenly voice say, "You are my son and I am very pleased with you," I realized that I would never have nor ever need a physical father because there is father love and mother love surrounding me all the time. Sometimes it may present itself in others, but it's always in me and all around me, expressing itself in synchronicities like the one I just described. I don't need an external father because, as the Oracle had been prompting me all along, "the wisdom and strength is within you and you can care for your wounded inner child and give yourself the love and respect and wisdom you need."

Before continuing with a couple other responses from the *I Ching* I'd like to explain the ancient Chinese belief about how it works. In one of his books about it, author Stephen Karcher explains that according to the old masters, when one first begins consulting the Oracle one acquires a *shen*, a Chinese word for, "helping spirit." This spirit feels very much like person, which is why Jung spoke of it as "a friend," and why I can't help but consider it a grandfatherly presence in my life. But then, after a while, one's Shen always stays nearby, and there isn't as much need to consult the Oracle because it makes its presence known though synchronicities one can't help but notice. This happens when one learns to get oneself out of the way, just as the *I Ching* initially kept telling me. When this happens we become open to what the masters called, Tao, the Way. "To be 'in' Tao is to feel connection, joy, compassion, creativity and liberation," Karcher says, "an ultimate religious experience."¹² Later still, "Over time," he says, "a quantum change occurs. You become the *shen* or spirit."¹³

Indeed, over the years, this ancient explanation best describes my own experience with the *I Ching* and my feelings about it. At first I simply experimented by asking a few questions and very soon felt as if I was in contact with a spirit guide. Eventually, as my experience at the children's hospital foreshadowed, I began to sense this spirit guide with me all the time, guiding me in the directions I needed to go, trusting it without much need to ask questions. And now, at age 52, beginning my initial descent back down the hill of life, I feel that, yes, this spirit guide and I are one, that it is part of me and I have become my own *Shen*. There may be more comfortable, psychological, rational ways of framing my experience, but this is the way I prefer because it best expresses what I feel.

¹² Karcher, Stephen, *Tau Chuan: The Great Treaties*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2000, p. 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*

So I don't consult the Oracle often anymore because there's not as much need for me to do so. In fact, the last entry in my official *I Ching* journal was in 2005, although I've consulted it many times since then. I even asked it what it thought about me leaving my previous church before coming here. It said, in short, "Of course you should. Why are you even asking me?"

So, that's a little about my relationship with the *I Ching*, my helping spirit, my Shen. This morning I got up and asked it, "What message do you have for those listening today?" I wasn't expecting the reply I received, the reply we've received. I anticipated, rather, the Oracle would provide us with some very general and generic lesson about how to live our lives, and, in a way, it has. But it is apparent to me the *I Ching* is addressing a very specific problem, the problem of our time, the greatest problem ever to face the world, Global Warming.¹⁴

It tells us Global Warming is rooted in our impatience, greediness, and unwillingness to live in harmony with the cycle of the seasons. The clouds gather without us and eventually provide the rain that nourishes the ground and grows our food, but we can't control the clouds and need to wait for them. This doesn't mean by waiting for our nourishment to come we are doing nothing. On the contrary, we use the time to develop inwardly, concentrating on the things that matter most, while trusting the Earth and seasons to provide our physiological needs. It is the Taoist principle of *wu wei*, doing without doing, living in harmony with nature, not demanding everything we want from her right now.

"But you already know this," the *I Ching* continues, "The problem now is only that you have stepped into the mud and gotten stuck in your ways. You want to stop what you're doing but can't seem to get out of your bad habits. But it's not too late. Get out of the mud now, do things differently, live in harmony with nature and the Earth will heal.

"Your new way must be based upon setting limitations for yourselves. It's true, water is limitless, but the lake that contains it isn't. The lake can run out of water. Just as you are bound by financial limits, and legal limits, and ethical limits, you need environmental limitations that prevent the lake from going dry before it can be replenished by the rains. Such limitations, however, need not be too strict or prevent you from enjoying life. There should be a limitation to your limitations. Life is meant to be enjoyed, which requires only the practice of balance and moderation."

In closing, I cannot say how the *I Ching* works, if I truly have a spirit guide in me and all around me, or if it is just my own unconscious finding meaning in whatever image is before me, or if there is even a difference between these two possibilities. I only know that it works for me, that it has been a source of wisdom, love, and transformation in my life and has become a major source of the wisdom, love, and transformation I give to others.

¹⁴ Hexagram #5, Hsu/Waiting (Nourishment) with moving line three, changing into #60, Chieh/Limitation.