The Modern Spiritual Condition and the Ancient Wisdom of the I Ching

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We are in a period of religious crisis, Mircea Eliade tells us. Many elements of modern life are attempts to recover the sacredness of life and nature and to recover the religious dimension of authentic and meaningful “human existence in the cosmos.” As evidence, Eliade cites the contemporary rediscovery of nature, uninhibited sexual mores, and emphasis on “living in the present.” He points to these as creative and therefore unrecognizable answers to the crisis and expressions of potentially new experiences of the sacred (Eliade 1969, preface).

Joseph Campbell states that “one of our problems today is that we are not well acquainted with the literature of the spirit” (Campbell and Moyers 1988, 3). Myths are stories that give us a perspective on what is happening to us. We have lost the function of myth in contemporary society, and there is nothing comparable to take its place. Themes that have supported human life and informed religions over the millennia are gone. Gone also are the pieces of information that gave us guidance concerning deep inner problems, mysteries, and rites of passage. Without them we are left to “work it out” ourselves (Moyers and Campbell 1989, 3f).

According to Eliade, when myth is living and functioning in a society, it supplies models of human behavior and gives meaning and value to life (Eliade 1969, 2). Myth also narrates a sacred history and explains, through the deeds of supernatural beings, how reality, the cosmos, or a portion of it, came into being (Eliade 1969, 5–6). Through his work in comparative mythology, Joseph Campbell found that there are certain timeless, universal themes from every culture but with varying cultural inflections. He also believes that mythology is what lies behind literature and the arts. Mythology likewise informs our personal lives, particularly in relation to certain life stages. Mythology imparts structure and meaning to the initiation ceremonies that move the individual from childhood to adult responsibilities, from the unmarried to the married state, for example, or into a responsible new role. Campbell maintains that the conservative call for “old-time religion” is a terrible mistake, that it would be trying to return to something vestigial that no longer serves us (Campbell and Moyers 1988, 10–12).

The I Ching or Book of Changes as it is often called in English, is an ancient Chinese manual of divination and wisdom that functions as a means of access to these transcultural, mythic patterns. It did this historically for the ancient Chinese and can do the same contemporarily for Western humanity. It also offers a paradigm of Eastern thought that has implications for the Western mind. The kind of assumptions that the I Ching makes—that physical and psychological realities have a connection at some deep level—have significance for our Western society.

Marie Louise von Franz points out that the unconscious aspect of the psyche is con-
The archaic mode of expression used in the I Ching adds to the difficulty in understanding the oracles. Blofeld states that frequently the meaning is so esoteric that the mind is baffled until intuition, careful thought, or some unforeseen experience provides sudden illumination. The obtuse language, as well as the 2500 to 3000 years, creates a vast period of time separating us from King Wen and his contemporaries, who edited the I Ching, and the disparity between Eastern and Western culture further hinders clear understanding (Blofeld, 32).

There are many varying explanations of the origins of the I Ching, although the most probable is that, like many other ancient works, it assumed its present form through a long process of evolution. According to R. L. Wing, the Book of Changes was probably a cooperative effort spanning many centuries. The oldest stratum of ideas may have been handed down from the elders of the nomadic Siberian tribes. The early authors of the I Ching observed all the cycles of life, natural and human—the tides and the stars; plant and animal life; the seasons; patterns of relationships in families and in societies, in business and in warfare; and the eternal human dramas of life, ambition, and conflict—and made a guide to the way things change. This system is not a fixed chart of the cosmos, but fluid and interconnected. These writers created a guide that offers a perspective on the eternal, universal human drama (Wing, 8).

There are also discrepancies as to the exact date of its conception. James Legge (1899) states in his translation that the basic text was prepared before 1000 B.C. in the last days of the Shang Dynasty and the early part of the Chou Dynasty. Confucius edited and wrote commentaries on it that still exist as part of some editions today. The Confucian commentaries often refer to the “superior man,” the “ching-tzu”; there is also frequent reference to the inferior man who is not “ching-tzu.” The commentary usually relates what the “superior man” would do in a situation and frequently uses politics or government as an example of the arena (Blofeld 1965, 24).
The term "superior man" in the original text was used to indicate a person striving to live his life in the best possible way (Wing 1979, 30). It is reported that Confucius wished he had fifty more years of life so that he could study the I Ching. King Wen wrote commentaries on the social and political implications of the hexagrams, making a monumental addition to the ancient hexagrams. His son, the Duke of Chou, completed his father's work by writing commentaries on each of the six lines within each of the sixty-four hexagrams. Interestingly, both Taoist and Confucian schools have claimed the I Ching as their own classic. Later, even certain Buddhists consulted, studied, and commented on it.

The core of the I Ching is a divination manual overlaid with the explanations and commentaries already mentioned. To consult the oracle, we follow a simple divination ritual of tossing coins or sorting yarrow stalks. We would approach the oracle as we would a wise spiritual mentor, bringing the concerns that we would like to see in a larger perspective. In this way the more appropriate action can be chosen. This is thought to work because a mutual resonance echoes between the currently active pattern informing the situation under question, the objects used in the divination (the coins or the yarrow stalks), and the symbolic form described by the book. Each coin toss (or sorting of the yarrow stalks) is translated into a line which is either yin (represented as broken: ——) or yang (represented as unbroken: —). The casting or meditation is done six times, giving six lines that are grouped in two sets of three lines each called trigrams.

The six lines constituting the hexagram represent the interrelationship of two fundamental forces, "yin" and "yang," two concepts that are an integral part of ancient Chinese philosophy and the Chinese spiritual perspective. The Chinese frequently looked to nature as a representation of the macrocosm and microcosm. Yin and yang refer to basic principles that are purely symbolic representations of energies of what we commonly call "maleness" and "femaleness" (Whitmont 1969, 171). Originally these words referred to the sunny and shady sides of a stream but were more generally symbolically representative of the female (passive) and male (active) principles in human beings, nature, and the macrocosm. No moral verdict was intended; neither principle is "better" or "stronger" than the other. The Chinese saw them as two equally potent, grounding principles on which all the world rests, and in their interaction they inform, constitute, and decompose all things. Their belief in this universal diad also informs the I Ching (Campbell 1972, 119).

As previously mentioned, casting the coins six times gives six lines that are either yin or yang and form two groups of three lines each, called trigrams. There is a traditional belief that the legendary sage-emperor Fu-hsi came by the idea for the trigrams from a map found on the back of a horse or dragon-horse (or, according to another source, a turtle) that emerged from the Yellow River. The map was supposedly preserved for some time but has long since perished. It was composed of a concentric configuration of lines made of dark and light dots. In Legge's opinion, the purpose of perpetuating the legend was "to impart a supernatural character to the trigrams and produce a religious veneration for them." Legge (1899, 15–17) believed that King Wen first used lines instead of circles and was supposedly the first to combine two trigrams to form a six-line figure called a hexagram, of which I have more to say later.

The trigrams had an interesting evolution from the supreme absolute as understood by the ancient Chinese. They regarded the supreme absolute as the yin and yang of the cosmos out of which all that exists is produced. They saw yang as always turning into yin and yin in the process of becoming yang, a process called enantiodromia, in which one energy or thing turns into its opposite when it has reached a zenith or nadir of development. This dynamic interplay in the cosmos creates life, and this creative energy of life manifests the cosmos. The ancient Chinese
have this to say in reference to the creative force: "From the Creative (yang) and the Receptive (yin) emerge the ten thousand things" (Wing 1979, 13). The yin and yang lines combined in four different ways to represent the seasons. A third line was added to represent humanity as the synthesis of yin and yang, heaven and earth, thereby creating the eight elemental trigrams meant to represent all the cosmic and physical conditions on earth. The trigrams and their attributes are as follows:

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  一  一  一  一
Ch'ien  Tui  Li  Chên
  heaven, sky
  water, fire, thunder
  (as in a marsh or lake)
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  一  一  一  一
Sun  K'ân  Kên  K'un
  wind, water (as hill, mountain
  in rain, the earth
  the clouds, springs, streams); the moon
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The trigrams were used in early forms of divination since they could easily be recognized and memorized. They represented, for example, family members, parts of the body, seasons, and many sets of ideas, as well as more abstract attributes, so that they constituted a very useful almanac for the ancient Chinese to use in understanding the tendencies of change. The trigrams were also used for divination in an arrangement of polar opposites (e.g., heaven across from earth, water from fire). A later arrangement according to periodicity is attributed to King Wen. Various pairings of the trigrams by Chinese scholars later led to the sixty-four hexagrams. The union of the two trigrams represents the dynamism of heaven and earth, their interaction representing cosmic forces as they affect human affairs (Wing 1979, 14–15).

Carl G. Jung wrote an illuminating preface to the English edition of Richard Wilhelm's translation. Blofeld praised Jung's introduction as a joy to read and declared that Jung "courageously dared the scorn of his fellow scientists by publicly asserting his belief in the I Ching's predictions. He even went so far as to attempt to show why they are correct" (1965, 25). Jung's concepts of acausality, synchronicity, and archetypes are essential to understanding the reliability of the I Ching.

Concerning the causal view of the world, Jung writes in Mysterium Coniunctionis (1970, 464):

> The causalism that underlies our scientific view of the world breaks everything down into individual processes which it punctiliously tries to isolate from all other parallel processes. This tendency is absolutely necessary if we are to gain reliable knowledge of the world, but philosophically it has the disadvantage of breaking up, or obscuring, the universal interrelationships of events so that a recognition of the greater relationship, i.e., of the unity of the world, becomes more and more difficult.

Jung regarded this idea as a world view that could be seen as valid, although very different from our Western perspective.

According to Marie Louise von Franz, the Jungian author of On Divination and Synchronicity, synchronistic reasoning is the classical Chinese way of thinking. The Chinese think in terms of "fields" and know innately that certain things "like" to happen together in a meaningful way. In their thinking, no differentiation has been made between "psychological" and "physical" facts. In synchronistic thinking, both inner and outer facts can occur together. Causal thinking regards time as linear and each moment as qualitatively equal to any other; in acausal, synchronistic thinking, time is viewed as a qualitative "field" in which groupings of events typically occur. Thus in a certain moment in time a complex of events made of inner (i.e.,
thoughts, dreams) and outer (i.e., physical) events constellate (1980b, 8).

Jung (1931, 85) stated in his commentary on The Secret of the Golden Flower (which Richard Wilhelm had translated from the Chinese) that the Chinese developed intuition to a very high degree. Because of this keenly developed intuition, the Chinese were able to recognize the polarity and paradox in what is alive. Whether this gave them a greater predisposition to comprehend the spiritual—specifically the cosmos and the individual’s right place in it as evidenced by the use of the I Ching as a tool—is an interesting speculation for the Western mind to ponder.

Blofeld also sheds some light on the essential difference between Eastern and Western thinking. “Asia’s thinkers,” he states, “were chiefly occupied with the search for life’s meaning (or at any rate, man’s true goal) and for ways of utilizing that knowledge for self-cultivation and self-conquest” (Blofeld 1965, 23). He felt the I Ching invaluable as an aid to understanding life’s rhythmic process with a view to bringing man back into harmony with it.

The ancient Chinese perspective—almost opposite to our Western view but possibly complementary in its introverted, intuitive way that takes into account the simultaneous reality of spirit and matter—may hold something valuable for us if we can be open to it.

In an essay on one of the hexagrams of the I Ching, Rudolph Ritsema (1976, 191) states that if the philosophical system and the cosmological as well as social and historical implications of the I Ching are left behind, what remains is a book that contains a whole web of interrelated archetypal images underlying our world. He views the I Ching as a door to the archetypal realm, its position between a dream and a mythology. Dreams, he states, reveal the individual relevance of an archetypal pattern or image, and mythology shows the archetypal patterns at work in their own world. The I Ching enables one to connect with the archetypal pattern underlying the specific situation in time. The ancient Chinese language lends a particular advantage to this in that it allows images and concepts to join in single words as well as in sentences of the I Ching.

Just what are archetypes, and why is it important to be in proper relationship to them? According to Frieda Fordham (1957) in An Introduction to Jung’s Psychology, archetypes are unconscious and can therefore only be postulated, but we can become aware of them through certain typical primordial images. We may hazard a guess that these primordial images or archetypes formed in the unconscious during the thousands of years when the human brain and human consciousness were emerging from the animal state, and are modified or altered according to the era in which they appear. They can be experienced as emotions as well. When we encounter a level of deep human experience such as birth or death, triumph over obstacles, transitional stages of life, or extreme danger, the personal level of experience taps a deeper level. These “impressive” experiences break through into an old, previously unconscious riverbed, and the experience is extremely powerful.

According to Whitmont’s interpretation of Jung, archetypes manifest in individuals as automatic or instinctive emotions and drives. The archetype appears as an experience of fundamental importance and presents itself as numinous. Its power can be either constructive or destructive, depending on the form of actualization and the attitude taken by consciousness (Whitmont 1969, 103f).

This does not mean that God is “nothing but an archetype.” Rather, the transpersonal power of archetypes that expresses itself to us subjectively through psychological experience as if it were personal guidance and confronts us with meaning in our personal lives and destinies is the transpersonal power that has been called God, and this is one of the ways we can experience Him. This may shed some light on the nature of this ancient book and how it was able to function as the core of Chinese spirituality for so many years.
Blofeld (1965, 31) quotes a Chinese friend who had written a newspaper article in which he explained:

The responses to be won from the Book of Changes are sometimes of such tremendous import that they may save us from a lifetime of folly, or even from premature death. It must be treated with the deference due to its immense antiquity and to the wealth of wisdom it contains. No living man can be worthy of equal deference, for it is not less than a divine mirror which reflects the processes of vast and never-ending cosmic change, those endless chains of actions and interaction which assemble and divide the myriad objects proceeding from and flowing into T'ai Chi—the still reality underlying the worlds of form, desire and formlessness. It has the omniscience of a Buddha. It speaks to the transient world as though from the Womb of Change itself—Change, the one constant factor amidst all the countless permutations and transformations of mental and material objects which, when the eye of wisdom is closed, appear to us as meaningless flux. That their infinite number can be mirrored in so small a compass is because they all proceed according to adamantine laws and all are facets of that spotless purity and stillness which some men call T'ai Chi or the Tao and others the Bhutathatha, the Womb of the Tathagatas (Buddhas), the Source of All.

Jung felt that man needs to find a new religious attitude, a new realization of our dependence upon superior dominants (archetypes), that he is frequently operated on and maneuvered by “archetypal forces” instead of his “free will.” “He should learn that he is not master in his own house and that he should carefully study the other side of his psychical world which seems to be the true ruler of his fate.” Jung stated that “if the archetype, which is universal, i.e., identical with itself always and anywhere, is properly dealt with in one place only, it is influenced as a whole, i.e., simultaneously and everywhere.” Paraphrasing Confucius’ commentary in the I Ching, Jung said, “The right man sitting in his house and thinking the right thought will be heard 100 miles away” (Letters 2:594).

Since the I Ching is an ancient oracle, and since the thesis of this paper is that the I Ching can address our contemporary condition with its wisdom, I asked I Ching how it would like to be presented in this paper. The divination procedure yielded hexagram number 58, “The Joyous,” one of eight hexagrams formed by doubling a single trigram, “Tui,” the image of the “smiling lake” whose attribute is joyousness (Wilhelm 1967, 223).

With each hexagram in the I Ching, the reader finds a “judgment” and a statement of the “image.” This is the judgment attached to hexagram 58:

The joyous. Success. Perseverance is favorable.

Wilhelm comments that “true joy, therefore, rests on firmness and strength within, manifesting itself outwardly as yielding and gentle” (1967, 224). In each trigram, a “strong” or yang line (i.e., unbroken) lies “within,” that is, flanked (“without”) by a “weak” or yin (broken) line. Here is the image accompanying hexagram 58:

Lakes resting one on the other:
The image of The Joyous.
Thus the superior man joins with friends For discussion and practice.

Wilhelm (1967, 224f) interprets the image in these words:

A lake evaporates upward and thus gradually dries up; but when two lakes are joined they do not dry up so readily, for one replenishes the other. It is the same in the field of knowledge. Knowledge should be a refreshing and vitalizing force. It becomes so only through stimulating intercourse with congenial friends with whom one holds discussion and practices the application of the truths of life. In this way learning becomes many-sided and takes on a cheerful lightness, whereas there is always something ponderous and one-sided about the learning of the self-taught.
The enduring wisdom of the I Ching is manifest in this answer to the question. The joy and success come through my inner enthusiasm coupled with a genuine feeling of wanting to share this information with others. Use of the present paper would do well to take the form of a discussion among friends with whom one would ponder the truths of life and their practical application.

The Western mind may agree or disagree that the I Ching is a vehicle to tap the unconscious for its guidance and perspective, and that it has as much relevance for modern Western man as for the ancient Chinese as an alternate but valid spiritual world view. But even without this perspective, the I Ching exists like a venerable old Chinese master, an example of the Chinese philosophical and religious world view, with many secrets to be explored and pondered.

Works Cited

