

CHAPTER TEN

The Book of Tea: Ethics and Morals

Occidentals, particularly Americans are more judgmental than they are observant so the Japanese philosopher Okakura is perceptive when he says:

Those who cannot feel the littleness of great things in themselves are apt to overlook the greatness of little things in others. The average westerner, in his sleek complacency, will see in the tea ceremony but another instance of the thousand-and-one oddities which constitute the quaintness and childishness of the East to him.(p.2)

A case in point is the manner occidentals grammatically

Oriental people see the littleness of greatness, whereas occidentals focus on the greatness of littleness.

describe a being human. To characterize human beings as thinking beings is to categorize and, therefore, to lose what it means to be human. So also, to characterize humans as rational animals is to lose the fullness of being human, but to judge humans to be rational is the moral occidental thing to do!

However, grammatically speaking *rational animal* is a noun, *animal* being modified by an adjective, *rational*. English grammar calls *animal* a noun and *rational* an adjective and anyone with the least knowledge of grammar realizes that a noun is more important than an adjective, even as altered by the adjectival modifier. Occidentals, however, place all the emphasis upon the adjective, *rational* while ignoring, perhaps forgetting about, even hiding the relevance of the noun *animal*. Such a view of human being might be called moral, but this view can hardly be ethical; any view which emphasized rationality over and above being human, that is, incarnating reason within and through the human body is unnatural and, so, unethical.

˘ The American *Constitution* provides the classic case in point, as described by Lederer within his 1989 edition of *The Colonial American Dictionary*. the meaning of *man*, as in “all men are created equal...” was “white, anglo saxon protestant male”. Thus, morally speaking, the average colonial male (and the females accepted it, at least publically) thought male to have such a meaning, a decidedly moral decision! Thus, the “hope” many have and do read into that statement is misplaced since the historical frustration resulting from that colonial meaning took two hundred years to work through. Women, for instance, did not

even receive the right to vote until 1930, and did not qualify to receive AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children -- or is it, Aid for Farmers with Dependent Crops, as the biggest government subsidy?) until 1 October 1972 - prior to that date only the "male headed family" qualified as an eligible recipient! Such a constitutional view of man is certainly moral, in the sense of legal, but hardly ethical - so, to belabor the point, positive law reflects a moral view of the world and human beings and, as such, opposes any and all ethical viewpoints.

If, however, we occidentals paid more attention to English grammar, we might take being animal more seriously. Then, plants

Human reason relates to being human
as a parasite relates to a host.

and animals might receive more respect within our biosphere and we, as the only rational animal parasite on earth might have more respect for our host planet. *Parasite* is a Greek word *sitos*, meaning *eating* with a prefix, *para*, meaning *along side of*, so a parasite is literally one who eats along side of the table of another, presumably a host. If such is the case, then we might be more sensitive to the fact that our human survival hangs upon our respect for our host! Without appropriate respect for a host, the parasite dies. Words and word meanings are two of those great little things about which Okakura speaks but occidentals do not understand because they concentrate upon the greatness of little things, such as being rational! Words and word meanings are two of those great little things about which Okakura speaks but occidentals do not understand because they concentrate upon the greatness of little things, such as being rational! Thus, Okakura comments:

...we used to think you the most impracticable people on the earth, for you were said to preach what you never practiced. (p.3)

Occidentals, for instance, talk a lot about conservation and environmental protection, yet, Americans as merely .06 percent of the world's population consume forty percent (40 %) of the world's natural resources! We argue repeatedly that this is our moral right, however, the fact is that such use is totally unethical because it evades responsibility.

A sad application of this parasite-host analogy, or preaching practice, seems an apt description of Okakura's comment of making the little things great things while ignoring the great things which are little. If we apply this rational animal, adjective to noun ((little thing to great thing) to the human so-called mind, or spirit and body, or matter relationship, we see clearly that the human mind depends upon

the bodily perceptions, the various senses (at least eight, perhaps more) in order to know what humans know. After all, nothing exists in human thought except some way or other it is perceived through the bodily senses.

A case in point would be Helen Keller.

The *Book of Tea* applies Okakura's perception of the "greatness of little things."

She was born unable to see, hear and speak from birth, so Ann Macy Sullivan, her teacher, used Morse Code concomitant with feeling the physical reality "tapped out" to "break" through her body and enter her mind so Helen could come to know and to understand. A "breakthrough" finally occurred when Sullivan placed Helen's hand under water and concurrently tapped out the Morse Code equivalent. Helen's first word became "wa, wa...", "wat..", "wate, wate", "water"! Helen then learned so rapidly that she wrote several books, including her autobiography, all as a result of the tactile sense of touch. However, Occidentals since the so-called enlightenment, but especially in this enlightened "scientific" era rely so heavily on reason that this parasite rationality is killing the host physical body because human thinking is out of touch with human feeling. As Camus notes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

Greek thought always took refuge behind the conception of limits. It never carried anything to extremes, neither the sacred nor reason, because it negated nothing, neither the sacred nor reason. It took everything into consideration, balancing shadow with light. Our Europe, on the other hand off in the pursuit of totality, is the child of disproportion. She negates beauty, as she negates whatever she does not glorify. And, through all her diverse ways, she glorifies but one thing, which is the future rule of reason. ("Helen's Exile", p.134)

Occidentals need to reflect upon being an animal in order to understand what it means to be rational.

The Book of Tea is nothing more or less than Okakura describing the "...greatness of little things..." These little things begin with vegetative life, a plant, indeed, one of the tiniest of plants, a tea plant; yet, even with

something smaller since this little tea plant has tiny leaves. So, Okakura begins only with a leaf, a tea leaf from that tea plant. The tea leaf mixes with water so it then becomes tea being poured into a cup as a beverage, so he calls the first section of *The Book of Tea*, "The Cup of Humanity"

But, another littleness becomes great here, the littleness of being empty. This littleness of being an empty cup permits the bigness of being full, so

inevitably Okakura describes the *yin* of being empty with the *yang* of being full in its relationship to being who we are, to being social, to being alive and to dying, to human life and death. Indeed, such is the basic difference between the **moral** and the **ethical** person, the former *relying upon group knowledge*, instead of concentrating on their lack of knowledge.

To keep the proportion of things and give place to others without losing one's own position was the secret of success in the mundane drama. We must know the whole play in order to act properly our parts; the conception of totality must never be lost in that of the individual. This Lao-tze illustrates by his favorite metaphor of the vacuum...The reality of a room, for instance, was to be found in the vacant space enclosed by the roof and walls, not in the roof and walls themselves. The usefulness of a water pitcher dwelt in the emptiness where water might be put, not in the form of the pitcher or the material of which it was made. (p. 11)

So, implies Okakura, just as the reality of a cup is found in being filled with tea, so also we find the reality of being alive in the emptiness of dying and the reality of being human in being filled with *Tao*. The occidental, Dr. Viktor Frankl, contemporary psychiatrist and author of *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959) also developed his *logotherapy*, literally, "meaning therapy" out of the awareness of being naked and empty as he reflected upon his experiences within Auschwitz and then Dachau. Those prisoners who lost their awareness of individual importance in the group degradation of treatment and imprisonment committed suicide. While those who maintained a sense of self and the meaning of individuality lived. Reflection upon one's nakedness and isolation brought the person to an awareness of the importance of emptiness and the meaning of being alive:

While we were waiting for the shower, our nakedness was brought home to us: we really had nothing now except our bare bodies - even minus hair; all we possessed, literally, was our naked existence. What else remained for us as a material link with our former lives? For me there were my glasses and my belt; the latter I had to exchange later on for a piece of bread. (pp.22-3)

This daily awareness of nakedness generated a common thought:

The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the

constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others. From personal convictions which will be mentioned later, I made myself a firm promise, on my first evening in camp, that I would not ‘run into the wire’. This was a phrase used in camp to describe the most popular method of suicide - touching the electrically charged barbed-wire fence. (p. 27)

Those “personal convictions...” were generated from love, love of self and

The essence of love is to value the distinction of being an empty fullness: to be loved and thus capable of loving.

others, primarily from being loved and so being part of a purposeful plan or whole. (Pp.58-9) Such love Frankl found within the *Old Testament* and he quotes: “Set me like a seal upon your heart, love is as strong as death”.

The intensification of inner life helped the prisoner find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation and spiritual poverty of his existence...As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before...In the last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious ‘Yes’ in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. (pp.61-4)

We understand therefore, Okakura’s first statement within *The Book of Tea*: “Tea began as a medicine and grew into a beverage”.

But, Okakura then comments:

The fifteenth century saw Japan ennoble it into a religion of asceticism - teism. Teism is a cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence. It inculcates purity and harmony, the mystery of mutual charity, the romanticism of the social order. It is essentially a worship of the imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life.

Again, the oriental openness to and imitation of nature asserts itself. The vegetative world becomes a model as *Tao* summons the human being to imitate

nature and re-acquire the order with which rationality loses contact as a result of the conceptual order it constructs and becomes comfortable with as a result of habit. Now, Okakura talks about “The Schools of Tea”, then compares “Taoism and Zennism”, and describes “The Tearoom”, finally, discussing the “Tea Masters”.

“The Tearoom” is the focus of *The Book of Tea* just as the body we live

The harder humans try, the worse they fail if they do not see that what is natural is more rational than human reason can construct.

within should be the focus of the rational animal. Were we to use our so-called “common” sense, we would reflect upon our human body in order to understand our being rational animals. Or, to be more direct, we would reflect upon us as animal, in order to understand what it means to be rational.

Comparisons presume that we understand, when in fact our comparisons frequently only project prejudice. So, what does it mean to be a rational animal? Well, the most obvious answer is that it means to live within a body, so how we live physically will affect how we think - of course, this is a two, not a one way street; each influences the other, but the balance which is healthy happiness can not be found through the knowledge of rationality alone. Nor can the balance which is healthy for human happiness, being ethical be found through the knowledge of what others think of us, being moral.

Health of body, therefore, is more important than knowledge of nuclear physics! This is why we see the Ancient Greeks including physical activities, such as wrestling, dancing, music and ballet in learning about mathematics, astronomy, rhetoric, philosophy and other “academic” subjects. The Romans, following the Greeks, coined the idiom: *mens sana in corpore sano* - a healthy mind (lives) in a healthy body.

“The Tearoom” models itself, therefore, upon the world of nature as the expression of and path to *Tao*.

The simplicity and purism of the tearoom resulted from emulation of the Zen monastery. A Zen monastery differs from those of other Buddhist sects inasmuch as it is meant only to be a dwelling place for the monks. Its chapel is not a place of worship or pilgrimage, but a college room where the students congregate for discussion and the practice of meditation. The room is bare except for a central alcove in which, behind the altar, is a statute of Bodhidharma, the founder of

the sect, or of Shakyamuni attended by Kashyapa and Ananda, the two earliest Zen patriarchs. On the altar, flowers and incense are offered up in memory of the great contributions which these sages made to Zen. We have already said that it was the ritual instituted by the Zen monks of successively drinking tea out of a bowl before the image of Bodhidharma, which laid the foundations of the tea ceremony. (p.15)

Okakura then compares “...the ways of our tea and flower masters ...” and “...the religious veneration with which they regard flowers”;

Occidental people miss the littleness of greatness because they focus on more rather than less: a dozen rather than one rose.

They do not cull at random, but carefully select each branch of spray with an eye to the artistic composition they have in mind. They would be ashamed should they chance to cut more than were absolutely necessary. It may be remarked in this connection that they always associate the leaves, if there be any, with the flower, for their object is to present the whole beauty of plant life...

When a tea master has arranged a flower to his satisfaction, he will place it on the tokonoma, the place of honor in a Japanese room. Nothing else will be placed near it which might interfere with its effect, not even a painting, unless there be some special aesthetic reason for the combination. It rests there like an enthroned prince, and the guests or disciples on entering the room will salute it with a profound bow before making their addresses to the host. (p.25)

Again, *even oriental beauty arises out of the simplicity of singleness, or individuality*. One branch, one rose arranged properly is beautiful. So also, one human being, one individual arranged properly, that is, acting ethically is beautiful. Okakura echoes Plato’s message in the *Republic*, namely, that each human being arranged virtuously within each element of his or her tri-part soul brings about a balanced human being, an ethical human being. The passionate part arranged through the virtue of temperance, the appetitive part arranged through the virtue of courage, the knowledge part arranged through the virtue of wisdom results in an internal order resulting in an over all balance called justice. This is Plato’s view of the “art of being in the world”. So, we see that Okakura’s initial comment in “Taoism and Zennism”, namely, “We have already remarked that the tea ceremony was a development of the Zen ritual” (p.9) has come full circle.

Chinese historians have always spoken of Taoism as the “art of being in the world”, for it deals with the present - ourselves. It is in us that God meets with nature, and yesterday parts from tomorrow. The present is the moving infinity, the legitimate sphere of the relative. Relativity seeks adjustment; adjustment is art. The art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings. Taoism accepts the mundane as it is and, unlike the Confucians and the Buddhists, tries to find beauty in our world of woe and worry...Shakyamuni, Confucius and Lao-tzu once stood before a jar of vinegar - the emblem of life - and each dipped in his finger to taste the brew. The matter-of-fact Confucius found it sour, the Buddha called it bitter and Lao-tzu pronounced it sweet. (p. 11)

Okakura had observed that “People are not taught to be really virtuous, but to behave properly”. Okakura ascribes this to our being “...frightfully self-conscious” - Okakura’s observation replicates that of Tolstoy in his depiction of Ivan Ilych within *The Death of Ivan Ilych*; Ivan lives for approval and advancement and dies from self-alienation. Occidentals suffer from just such a delusion because being “self-conscious” in this sense means living with an assumption that to be rational means variously to be perfect, civilized, chosen vis á vis nature, pagans, the damned! Okakura also observes...we take refuge in pride because we are afraid to tell the truth to ourselves...(so) ...the spirit of barter is everywhere...One can even buy a so-called religion, which is really but common morality sanctified with flowers and music”. (p. 11) To drink tea, to build a tea-room, to drink tea in the tea-room, to imitate nature means that humans can be rational as long as they live in the body tasting the sweet presence of *Tao* in the vinegar life gives us to taste.

Okakura captures the lesson of *The Book of Tea* by telling the Taoist tale of the *Taming of the Harp* within the section entitled *Art Appreciation*. This Taming of the Harp is the oriental story which dramatizes the difference between the ethical and the moral person. The difference is that the ethical person lives and acts in concert with nature whereas the moral person seeks to impose controls upon nature, call those controls propriety, or positive law. The lesson is bluntly stated in this sentence: when humans seek to control nature, they will accomplish nothing meaningful. Those who sought to “tame” the harp which the wizard made from the *kiri* tree failed because “the harp refused to recognize a master”.(pp. 19-20) Indeed, the harder they tried, the worse they failed. Nature not only resists but rejects outside attempts to control it.

At last came Pai Ya, the prince of harpists. With tender hand he caressed the harp as one might seek to soothe an unruly horse, and softly touched the cords. He sang of nature and the seasons, of high mountains and flowing waters, and all the memories of the tree awoke! Once more the sweet breath of spring played amidst its branches. The young cataracts, as they danced down the ravine, laughed to the budding flowers. Anon were heard the dreamy voices of summer with its myriad insects, the gentle pattering of rain, the wail of the cuckoo. Hark! A tiger roars - the valley answers again. It is autumn; in the desert night, sharp like a sword gleams the moon upon the frosted grass. Now winter reigns, and through the snow-filed air swirl flocks of swans and rattling hailstones beat upon the boughs with fierce delight. (p. 20)

The littleness of greatness is to be moral; whereas the greatness of littleness is to be ethical.
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Pai Ya respected the instrument so he sought to give the harp a voice to sing through his fingers. Then, the memory of being a *kiri* tree awakened as it returned to its natural state; its *being* harp returned to its uncarved state of *non-being* and it regained its contact with *Tao*, so the harp “sang of nature and the seasons...” The echo of Lao-tzu is clear:

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In ancient times, those who practiced *Tao* well did not seek to enlighten the people, but to make them ignorant.

People are difficult to govern because they have too much knowledge.

Therefore, he who rules the state through knowledge is a robber of the state.

He who rules a state not through knowledge is a blessing to the state.

One who knows these two things also (knows) the *standard*.

Always to know the *standard* is called profound and secret virtue.

Virtue becomes deep and far-reaching and with it all things return to their original state.

Then complete harmony will be reached.

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He who knows the male and keeps to the female becomes the ravine of the world. Being the ravine of the world, he will never depart from eternal virtue but returns to the state of infancy.

He who knows the white and yet keeps to the black becomes the model for the world.

Being the model for the world, he will never deviate from the eternal virtue but returns to the state of the non-ultimate.

He who knows glory but keeps to humility becomes the valley of the world. He will be proficient in eternal virtue and returns to the state of uncarved wood. When the uncarved wood is broken up, it is turned into concrete things, but, when the wise use it, they become the learning people. Therefore, the great ruler does not cut up.

Yet, the lesson of the *Taming of the Harp* is incomplete. Okakura observes that "...Pai Ya changed the key and sang of love" (p.20) and "the forest swayed like an ardent swain deep lost in thought". Thus, orientally speaking should one live according to nature, then the person will be able to sing of love. This love, *jen* in Cantonese, however, is limited to family, or clan, as we saw in the discussion of Confucius' *Analects*. In addition, we shall see that this love, *philos*, in the B.C. Greek sense, was limited to virtuous people, as the *Nichomocean Ethics* of Aristotle specifies and explains.

How we live telegraphs
how we will die.

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Then Pai Ya "changed" the mood and "sang of war". Then "in the harp arose the tempest of Lung Men". The "Celestial Monarch" addressed Pai Ya and asked "wherein lay the secret of his victory?"

Sire, others have failed because they sang but of themselves. I left the harp to choose its theme, and knew not truly whether the harp had been Pai Ya or Pai Ya were the harp. (p. 20)

Of course, the ultimate lesson of *The Book of Tea* finds expression within the section on the "Tea Masters". It is the lesson of death as a natural end for living according to nature.

Great as has been the influence of the tea masters in the field of art, it is as nothing compared to that which they have exerted on the conduct of life...

He only who has lived with the beautiful can die beautifully The last moments of the great tea masters were as full of exquisite refinement as had been their lives. Seeking always to be in harmony with the great rhythm of the universe, they were prepared to enter the unknown.(p. 29)

Echoes of Plato's *Apology* ring through these last pages of *The Book of Tea*. Just as Socrates, condemned by his Athenian peers was sentenced to drink hemlock, so Rikiu was condemned to die by the Emperor Hideyoshi. But, in neither case is the significant fact the condemnation to die, rather in both cases how each approached death is the central issue. Both chose to live according to nature and rejected the pressure to live according to the way other men lived. Both Socrates and Rikiu embraced ethical living and rejected that moral way of living dictated by society and ordered by its designated authorities. Rikiu invited his chief disciples to a last tea ceremony and then "...removes his tea gown and carefully folds it upon the mat...disclosing the immaculate white death robe which it had hitherto concealed". (p. 30) Rikiu peacefully drives the "shinning blade of the fatal dagger" home.