

Notes on the I Ching (a book of ancient Chinese philosophy) (and an Arrangement of Excerpts)

by Stefan Pasti

(approx. March, 2006)

A. Notes on the "I Ching"

1) "The Book of Changes—I Ching in Chinese—is unquestionably one of the most important books in the world's literature. Its origin goes back to mythical antiquity, and it has occupied the attention of the most eminent scholars of China down to the present day. Nearly all that is greatest and most significant in the three thousand years of Chinese cultural history has either taken its inspiration from this book, or has exerted an influence on the interpretation of its text. Therefore, it may safely be said that the seasoned wisdom of thousands of years has gone into the making of the I Ching. Small wonder then that both of the two branches of Chinese philosophy, Confucianism and Taoism, have their common roots here.... [Lao Tzu knew this book, and some of his profoundest aphorisms were inspired by it. Indeed, his whole thought is permeated with its teachings. Confucius too knew the Book of Changes and devoted himself to reflection upon it. (Confucius is known to have said: "If some years were added to my life, I would give 50 to the study of the I Ching, and might then escape falling into great errors.") He probably wrote down (some of the interpretive comments attributed to him), and imparted others to his pupils in oral teaching."]

(from Richard Wilhelm "Introduction" to his I Ching interpretation p.1-2) (with Confucius quote added)

2) "The Book of Changes is a co-operative effort spanning many centuries. The oldest, deepest stratum of the ideas in the book was probably handed down from the elders of the nomadic Siberian tribes... " (and merged with) "early methods of tortoise shell and ox shoulder-bone divination, whereby a red-hot poker was applied to the bone or shell and the random pattern of cracks examined by priests who deduced the meaning."

(first excerpt from R.L. Wing's introduction to his interpretation "The I Ching Workbook"; second excerpt from "Brief History" of The I Ching, at 60sfurther.com)

3) "These early authors of the I Ching observed the stars and tides, the plants and animals, and the cycles of all natural events. At the same time, they observed the patterns of relationships in families and societies, the practice of business, the craft of government, the grim art of warfare, the eternal human dramas of love, ambition, conflict, and honor. They made no attempt to create a fixed chart of the cosmos. Instead, they organically grew a guide to the way things change..."

(from R.L. Wing's introduction to his interpretation "The I Ching Workbook")

4) "... the Chinese (use) the word "Li" to describe nature as organic pattern, translated as the markings in jade, the grain in wood, and the fiber in muscle. All of it is just infinitely beautiful, flowing in all sorts of complicated patterns. There is an order to it, but you cannot put your finger on it. It simply cannot be measured or put into words or symbols.... Look at a tree, a mountain, or the foam on water when it hits the shoreline; even the stars; all amazingly beautiful, in all kinds of wild and crazy patterns. All of it has an order to it that we simply cannot measure or describe. This is "Li"—organic pattern."

(from essay "Taoism" at yakrider.com p.4)

5) “It was the conviction of the Han philosophers that when the government was in tune with the laws of Heaven prosperity resulted, while strife and famine prevailed if that was not the case. Equally important, in an agricultural society, was the attunement to the concerns of the Earth (irrigation, land usage, flood control, and so on); and so the notion of a necessary harmony between Heaven, Earth, and Man became a pivotal idea in Chinese thought.” (from “The Original I Ching Oracle” p.45)

6) There are many different interpretations on the subject of what the I Ching is, what it does, and how it does it. Here, in the context of these notes, I will offer what I believe is a commonly held view of the I Ching: that it can be very meaningful and practical to interact with it as if it was a repository-- and living expression-- of significant aspects of Chinese philosophy. Over many years, readers of the I Ching are likely to continue to experience a sense of discovery and re-discovery relating to what are the most appropriate patterns of experience in different cycles of activity. From such experience, one can learn to recognize the ‘grain’ or the ‘prevailing current’ in the kaleidoscope of every changing circumstances in one’s personal life, or in the relationships one has in family, work, community, national, and even international environments—with some reliable expectation that results will contribute to minimizing effort, conflict, and resentment, and maximizing movement in the development of ‘high virtue.’ [Example: One may align with prevailing values, merely accept them but limit involvement, or retreat and cultivate inner spiritual awareness in the background, or build towards reform in the distant future.... Depending on one’s understanding of self, and one’s interpretations of prevailing influences in community life and cultural traditions....] (this writer)

7) The 64 “hexagrams” associated with the I Ching contain commentaries and observations associated with particular patterns of experience. (Ex: Difficult Beginnings, Calculated Waiting, Adapting, Reform, Danger, Retreat, Obstacles, Temptation, Changing, Reuniting, etc.) The Chinese people who developed the I Ching discovered that reflecting on these patterns of experience was of great value in aligning themselves with the Tao. The Tao has been defined as “the only reasonable and harmonious path for the individual through the cosmos, given his nature and the nature of the cosmic forces at a given moment in time.” (me; and quote from R.L. Wing)

B. An arrangement of excerpts from two versions—R.L. Wing’s “The I Ching Workbook” and Richard Wilhelm’s “I Ching”

“The Tao is close at hand, yet people seek it afar.”

1) Stagnation and Adapting

a) “The natural order that nourishes and fosters all things is disjointed and disunited. The lines of communication are down. Because of this there is no understanding of what is needed and growth cannot continue.” (#12 Stagnation R.L. Wing)

b) “It is both useless and dangerous to expound your convictions, as by doing so you will only invite further difficulties.” (#36 Censorship R.L. Wing)

c) “The time requires utmost caution. You are without allies in a compromising situation. Adapt as best you can to the circumstances.” (#23 Deterioration R.L. Wing)

d) “It is by no means a sign of courage or strength to insist upon engaging in a hopeless struggle regardless of the circumstances.” (#7 The Army Wilhelm p.34)

e) "Adapting is knowing when to act and when to rest, when to speak and when to be silent.... By adapting to the realities around you at this time, you will align yourself with the energies necessary to continue making progress towards your goals." (#17 Adapting R.L. Wing)

f) "There is an estrangement present between elements that naturally belong together. Do not try to reunify the situation with force. Allow things to return to a state of accord naturally, as they will." (#38 Contradiction R.L. Wing)

2) Returning and Inexperience

a) "Movement is just at its beginning; therefore it must be strengthened by rest, so that it will not be dissipated by being used prematurely. This principle, i.e., of allowing energy that is renewing itself to be reinforced by rest, applies to all similar situations. The return of health after illness, the return of understanding after estrangement—everything must be treated tenderly and with care at the beginnings, so that the return may lead to a flowering."

(#24 Returning (The Turning Point) Wilhelm p.98)

b) "If you will not admit that there is something you must learn, you cannot be taught.... Look for an experienced teacher and seek his advice and counsel. Asking for help at this time is important in two ways. First, you will demonstrate to others that you are a willing and receptive pupil, thereby attracting information; and second, the process of requesting information will develop in you a useful predisposition.... If you are an advisor of others... (note) the proper attitude in such exchanges. If your pupil is not serious, is argumentative, or does not listen, do not waste your energies."

(#4 Inexperience R.L. Wing)

c) "... youth himself must be conscious of his lack of experience and must seek out the teacher. Without this modesty and this interest there is no guarantee that he has the necessary receptivity, which should express itself in respectful acceptance of the teacher. This is the reason why the teacher must wait to be sought out instead of offering himself. Only thus can instruction take place at the right time and in the right way." (#4 Youthful Folly Wilhelm p.21)

d) "When in times of difficulty a hindrance is encountered and unexpected relief is offered from a source unrelated to us, we must be careful and not take upon ourselves any obligations entailed by such help; otherwise our freedom of decision is impaired." (#3 Difficulty at the Beginning Wilhelm p.18)

e) "Be certain, however, that you are not involved in carrying out a role for which you are unsuited, or a role that has been cast upon you. This will rob your life of meaning." (#37 Family R.L. Wing)

3) Moderation and Holding Together

a) "You are now faced with a situation that can be influenced only by gradual efforts in a consistent direction... you must maintain clearly defined goals over a long period of time."

(#57 Penetrating Influence R.L. Wing)

b) "With a modest and disciplined attitude, you do not create resistance or invite challenge."

(#15 Moderation R.L. Wing)

c) "The virtue of adhering to the truth is its own reward." (#54 Subordinate R.L. Wing)

d) "If the individual acts consistently and is true to himself, he will find the way that is appropriate for him." (#1 The Creative Wilhelm p.9)

e) "Water flows to unite with water, because all parts of it are subject to the same laws."

(#8 Holding Together Wilhelm p.37)

f) "It is much easier to do the right thing when you are in good company." (#24 Returning R.L. Wing)

4) Temptation and Traveling

- a) "There are some unanswered questions concerning your values or your motives."
(#10 Conduct R.L. Wing)
- b) "A seemingly harmless yet potentially dangerous temptation has entered the picture. How could such a minor element pose a threat to an ongoing situation? How can a nonessential entity seize control and create darkness and chaos in an established environment. You need only entertain and indulge this temptation to find out." (#44 Temptation R.L. Wing)
- c) "... you may be altogether too indiscriminate in what you allow to influence you."
(#10 Conduct R.L. Wing)
- d) "You put your faith in things that cannot support you. You are unable to see your priorities, although they are obvious." (#47 Adversity R.L. Wing)
- e) "You are in danger of losing what security you have by interfering in matters which are not of your concern." (#57 Traveling R.L. Wing)
- f) "Personal relationships without defined guidelines, reasonable expectations, reciprocal considerations, and clear plans for the future are now in danger of dissolving in the chaos being generated by the current situation." (#21 Reform R.L. Wing)
- g) "In order to avoid decay, it is necessary to change a traditional and rigid structure that is affecting your life. You may feel that this is too radical an undertaking. It is true that this kind of change is fraught with danger, but if you are cautious while making the reform you will meet with success and renewed growth." (#18 Repair R.L. Wing)
- h) "Avoid areas of decadence and follow paths you know are good. In this way, you can steer clear of problems you may not even recognize as such." (#56 Traveling R.L. Wing)
- i) "This does not mean a blind attachment to arbitrary social systems, but rather adherence to foundations that support the growth of sound and smooth-working systems."
(#32 Continuing R.L. Wing)

5) Returning and Repair

- a) "You must now be aware of what to expect from relationships that do not start on the proper footing." (#24 Returning R.L. Wing)
- b) "The correct actions now are constructive rather than combative and lay the foundations for continued growth towards the goal." (#18 Repair R.L. Wing)
- c) "The sovereign is careful at the inception of things. A difference of a hundredth or a thousandth of an inch at the start results in a divergence of a thousand miles at the end."
(end of "First Discourse" "The Wisdom of Confucious" p.216)
- d) "Even innocent deviations from the traditional could end in emotional disaster."
(#34 Great Power R.L. Wing)

6) Resolution and Liberation

- a) "It is only when we have the courage to face things exactly as they are, without any sort of self deception or illusion, that a light will develop out of events, by which the path to success might be recognized." (#5 Waiting Wilhelm p.25)

- b) “When taking a stand in righteousness, be certain you harbor no internal manifestations of the difficulties you’ve resolved to overcome. You cannot fight corruption with corrupt motives, injustice with self-serving interests, or lies with hidden deception.” (#43 Resolution R.L. Wing)
- c) “If you can now locate your shortcomings and bad habits and make a serious attempt to decrease them you will be approached by friends and helpers.” (#41 Decline R.L. Wing)
- d) “You have been liberated from a significant internal problem. Whether it was an unhealthy habit, misguided pattern of behavior, or shortsighted opinion that stifled your growth, or whether it was an unrealistic obsession that consumed your energies, its passing is a permanent improvement in your character.” (#40 Liberation R.L. Wing)

7) Potential Energy and Continuing

- a) “That which has held you back has, in fact, aided in your growth. Instead of squandering your resources on premature advancements you have built up a strong reserve of Potential Energy.” (#26 Potential Energy R.L. Wing)
- b) “You can achieve you aim even though you have only modest resources. Those in authority will be moved by your sincerity despite your lack of traditional criteria.” (#46 Advancement R.L. Wing)
- c) “Continuing traditions will create a superstructure for a flowering relationship, as a trellis for a vine.” (#32 Continuing R.L. Wing)
- d) “... in a highly developed civilization... every person of good will can in some way or other succeed.” (#50 The Caldron Wilhelm p.195)
- e) “It is possible for leaders to be so magnanimous and progressive—and circumstances to be so constructive and inspiring—that even the most evil elements change for the better.” (#11 Prospering R.L. Wing)