

Journey Through Darkness

By Dr William Wilkie MB, BS, DPM Copyright © William Wilkie 2006

In China in the 6th century BC, an old man known as Lao-tse gave up his job as keeper of the imperial archives at Loyang in Honan Province and headed off on his horse towards the desert. "Sick at heart at the ways of men", his intention was to get through the border, go out into the desert and die. But the border gatekeeper persuaded him to stay long enough to write down what he knew. Lao-tse wrote 81 verses. The first verse was an introduction to the wisdom contained in the 80 verses that followed. This is the first verse:

*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery;
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations;
These two spring from the same source but differ in name.
This appears as darkness
Darkness within darkness
The gate to all mystery.*

(Lao Tsu Tao Te Ching Translated by Gia-Fu Feng & Jane English New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1972).

This mysterious message seems to have three elements in it, which we can identify by comparing them with Christian and Buddhist concepts.

The first element speaks of two God principles (The Tao that can be told and the Eternal Tao) which in essence are the same, one of which is identified through being able to be given a name, and which was the creative principle that created life on Earth.

This concept is virtually identical with the first verse of the Gospel according to St John. John was an old man when he was asked to write what he knew and remembered about Jesus of Nazareth. About 700 years after Lao-tse wrote his enigmatic introduction, St John wrote:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe.
(New King James Version)

St John's mysterious introduction, like Lao-tse's, speaks of two God principles which in essence were the same, one of which is identified as a language, and through which God created life on Earth.

The basic concepts (1) that before the world existed there were two God principles, and (2) that God created the world through language, was already an important part of Jewish literary heritage. In "The Legends of the Jews" Louis Ginzberg, presenting various ancient stories of the creation, writes:

When God resolved upon the creation of the world, He took counsel with the Torah.

And later, there is an account of God creating the world through spoken words: *When God was about to create the world by His word, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet ... stood round about God, and one after the other spake and entreated, "Create the world through me!"*

Of course, twentieth century science has confirmed that all life was indeed created on Earth through a language based on DNA.

The second element in Lao-tse's introduction to the 80 verses which follow, is:

*Ever desireless, one can see the mystery;
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations*

This would appear to be the basis of Buddhist thought. If one is without desire, one can perceive processes taking place. By contrast, a person always desiring to obtain things will tend to see the world as things.

The third element in Lao-tse's introductory first verse is:

*This appears as darkness
Darkness within darkness
The gate to all mystery.*

In his introduction to his Gospel, St John also mentions darkness, but his treatment of "the darkness" appears to be incomplete. It seems he uses darkness only to draw attention to light, so why mention it at all? John's introduction actually reads better if reference to darkness is left out:

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

I suspect John knew there was something important about darkness, but the significance of Lao-tse's concept of darkness within darkness, known through the ancient Middle East and China, had probably been corrupted and lost over time.

Darkness within darkness, the gateway to understanding

What can these ancient words "darkness within darkness" mean? I think they are referring to the act of personally embracing an inner darkness or unknowing while simultaneously acknowledging an outer darkness or unknowing.

For example, someone when asked how he intends to stop drinking and pay off his debts might reply, "I'm totally in the dark about that." And if further

questioned about his ability to discipline himself, might admit "I'm totally in the dark about who I am, where I belong, or what I can do."

Meister Eckhart was a medieval preacher, theologian and mystic, who died just before being denounced by the Pope in 1329. In Matthew Fox's book on Eckhart, Eckhart begins Sermon One (page 57) with: *When I preach, I try to speak of letting go and that human beings should become unwed from themselves and from all things. Second, I try to say that they should be conceived again in that simple good which is God.*

(Matthew Fox "Passion for Creation – The Earth-Honoring Spirituality of Meister Eckhart" Published in 2000 by Inner Traditions, Rochester ISBN 0-89281-801-8)

I think Eckhart's description of human beings becoming "unwed from themselves and from all things" is exactly what Lao-tse is referring to as darkness within darkness:..*human beings should become unwed from themselves (experience an inner darkness) and from all things (experience an outer darkness).*

Eckhart suggests that after doing this, *they should be conceived again in that simple good which is God.*

My experience in treating alcoholics is that many alcoholics who have accepted and used the Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Steps Program have experienced a spiritual awakening which has totally turned their lives around.

These people took the first of the Twelve Steps:

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.

And working through the steps, eventually succeeded in doing the twelfth step:

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

What they did was to "become unwed from themselves and from all things" (admitted they were powerless over alcohol and admitted that their lives had become unmanageable). They stayed sober through "Having had a spiritual awakening" (they had been "conceived again in that simple good which is God").

The history of Alcoholics Anonymous is associated with the history of The Oxford Groups, meetings of Christians which included open confession and the common experience that the act of surrendering to the will of God initiates a process of recovery that begins instantaneously. On the title page of the book *When a Man Listens*", Oxford Group author Cecil Rose writes: *When man listens, God Speaks, When man obeys, God works.*

(Cecil Rose "When man Listens", 74 pages. First published in 1936, was Published thru 1956 . An Oxford Group Classic.)

Here are some excerpts from Cecil Rose's book:

This initial surrender, if it is thorough and honest, is met at once from God's side. When we hand over, God takes charge, and things begin to happen. A world of strain falls from us. The business of running life is off our hands. We find that we get through more work, because it is ordered better. We meet people we were afraid of, and discover that fear has gone. A habit that always beat us seems to have lost its power. Someone we could not bear appears to us in a new light, and we love them. We come through the ordeal and know that it is not in our own strength."

Our fundamental need is for Him to be in charge. Our fundamental sin is that we have not allowed Him to be. We may have referred some of our difficulties and questions to Him. We may have accepted portions of His programme for us – selected according to taste – but we have not given Him complete command. The self-run life has been our trouble.

The fascinating experience of getting 're-made' has begun. The interest grows, because the process does not end with us. Other people notice the difference, and God begins to work in them. An area of life around us begins to change.

Readers of Lao-tse's verses, if they have accepted their inner unknowing and their outer unknowing, left behind ego and assumptions, may be better able to appreciate Lao-tse's wisdom. For example, verse 48:

*In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired.
In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.
Less and less is done
Until non-action is achieved
When nothing is done, nothing is left undone
The world is ruled by letting things take their course,
It cannot be ruled by interfering.*

It is clear that Lao-tse is describing a way of functioning that Cecil Rose is also describing in the life of a person who has handed his life over to God. "Non-action" is the same as letting go and letting God take over.

This experience of life on the other side of the darkness within the darkness is described by Eckhart in Sermon Six: page 102: (See St Paul's Letter to the Romans 13:14) *Saint Paul says 'Take Christ inside yourselves'- that is to say, grasp him interiorly. As we are emptied of ourselves, we take within us Christ, God, bliss and holiness.....This is astonishing- we strip away our egos, empty ourselves of our very selves, and then take in Christ, holiness and bliss- and we become greater than ever.*

Eckhart further develops this theme in Sermon 11: p166 *We find in the Gospel the verse: 'There was a noble man who went out into a strange land' far from himself 'and came home again richer' (Luke 19:12). Now we read in another gospel passage that Christ said: 'No one can be my disciple unless he follow me' (Luke 14:27) and has emptied himself of his ego, keeping nothing back for himself. Such a person has everything, for to have nothing is to have everything. This means to throw oneself completely under the will of God and always to put one's own will in God's, casting not even a glance at anything created. Those who thus go out from themselves will indeed be given back their true selves.*

Thus AA Twelve Steps program can be seen as a spiritual process that begins with people embracing the darkness within the darkness, leaving behind ego and going out from themselves, and finishes with people being given back their true selves.

1. *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.*
2. *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*
3. *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*
4. *Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*
5. *Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*
6. *Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.*
7. *Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.*
8. *Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.*
9. *Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.*
10. *Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.*
11. *Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*
12. *Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*