

A Dragon Guards the Pear of Enlightenment

*“A dragon must be an ugly customer to meet in a strange place in the dark.”*¹

There is a tale of debated historicity which accompanies the compilation of the *Tao Te Ching*. In short, the Old Master sage Lao Tzu had grown weary of the moral decline, and the stiff-necked and hardheartedness of the country, so he left to spend the rest of his days in solitary. In some sort of crossover where *Avatar the Last Airbender* meets *Lord of the Rings*, Lao Tzu was said to have set off for the far West on a water buffalo, not to die peacefully, (for surely to travel West means he would die peacefully), but rather to live on as the immortal sage and author of the *Tao*.

In John H. McDonald’s translation of this sacred text, he remarks a story of a time when Lao Tzu was just about to cross into the West,

When he had reached the western gate of the kingdom in the mountain pass at Hang-ku, he was recognized as a sage by Kuan Yin, the Keeper of the Pass, who asked Lao Tzu to write down his knowledge of the Tao before retiring from the world. Lao Tzu duly obliged and, according to tradition, wrote the book in one night. The next day the sage presented the book to Kuan Yin, saying, ‘This book is no different from other books in that it is a dead thing, but you can bring it to life if you put into practice what is written in it.’ With that, Lao Tzu mounted his water buffalo and departed for the West, never to be seen again.²

Lao Tzu had previously arisen to prominence during a time when Confucian ideas and sentiments of social ritual were already forming and taking hold of the dialectic. Confucius, the first philosopher to form a school of thought in ancient China, was to serve as the perfect backdrop scenery to the content of the *Tao Te Ching*—with his views on the decline of politics and ethics, hierarchical structures, and rulers called of God—counterintuitive to the nature of *Tao*. Word began traveling that this old sage Lao Tzu had wise approaches and peculiar ideas regarding the state of the world, and Confucius desired to learn his ways.

Interestingly, John McDonald’s translation includes a moment in time, considered a matter of historical record according to the Han historian Ssu-ma Ch’ien, when there indeed was a time when Confucius had travelled to meet with Lao Tzu,

¹ John Chalmers, *The Speculations on Metaphysics, Polity and Morality of the Old Philosopher Lau Tszé*, Introduction, p.xi

² McDonald, TTC., Introduction, pp.14–17

The first of these was a visit by Confucius, who asked Lao Tzu to tutor him in the traditional rites. Lao Tzu replied in words that express some of the central themes of the Tao Te Ching, saying, ‘Those you talk about have turned to dust. All that remains is their words. When a nobleman lives in good times, he goes to court in a carriage. But when times are hard, he goes where the wind blows. Some people say that a wise merchant hides his wealth and thus appears to be poor. Likewise the sage: if he has great inner virtue, he appears outwardly to be a fool. Stop being so arrogant with all your questions, your self-importance and your overbearing obsessions. None of this is the real you. That is all I have to say to you.’

When Confucius rejoined his followers, he described his meeting with Lao Tzu thus: ‘I know that birds fly, fish swim, and animals run. Creatures that run can be trapped; those that swim can be caught in nets; those that fly can be shot down. But what to do with a dragon, I do not know. It rides on the clouds and the wind. Today I met Lao Tzu, and he is like a dragon.’³

It seems that Confucius may agree with John Chalmers, then, that, “a dragon must be an ugly customer to meet in a strange place in the dark.” But what does it mean to say that a human is like that of a dragon riding on the clouds and the wind? Well, first could be to treat the dilemma as a sort of kōan. Throw it out into the liquid mind like a thought-pebble and see what comes of it.

Confucius sought after Lao Tzu in order to be tutored; his aim was to catch the traditional rites. What Confucius didn’t know beforehand was that those rites were guarded by a dragon. Confucius, knowing the ways of the fishers of men, did not know how to catch a cloud, nor the wind, so when he was met with the master creature, Lao Tzu the Dragon, his nets could not bind the boundless. What Confucius desired was a way, a method, some thing used to improve ones life. But the way in which he viewed the nature of this endeavor, believing that the traditional rites and secrets of life are things to be [t]caught, if even just by the t[ale]ail, is the very heart of his quandary. Alan Watts captured how to handle this predicament from a Zen standpoint,

How to get the better of life? Well, what makes you think you’re separate from life so that you can get the better of it? How can you beat the game? What game? Or, who will beat it? This illusion of beating the game, of finding the thing out, of catching it by the tail, is therefore dissipated by the technique of the kōan. It’s called—working on a kōan is like a mosquito biting an iron bull. It’s the nature of the mosquito to bite. It’s the nature of an iron bull to be *unbitten*. Or they say it’s like swallowing a ball of molten lead. You can’t swallow it down, you can’t cough it up; you can’t get rid of this thing. That’s the great

³ McDonald, TTC., Introduction, pp.12–14

doubt, you see? But this is an exaggerated form of what everybody is ordinarily trying to do: to beat the game.⁴

Another way to approach the question of how to handle a human dragon is to consider that nowadays dragons often get a bad wrap. For this reason I wouldn't consider handling human dragons in the nowadays-way, which would typically have you, our hero, slaying said dragon. This myopic approach inevitably leads to one's own slaying—the fatal blow having been sustained in the same instance the dragon was slain, if not, perhaps, even in the very moments before the slaying—a demonstration of the mirage of space and time.

We reside at a place in time where all the amalgamations of the historical, legendary, and mythical dragons have been synthesized into more or less one image: a four-legged, fire-breathing, winged serpent that often lives in some sort of lair guarding a vast treasure; a monstrous beast determined to deceive and destroy. This, so as to simplify the dragon into one collective image for our collectively conscious civilization. There are many things which have influenced this imagery. Principally among them would be the stories of Christianity, which borrowed from many of the stories which came before it, but influence was also given through the ideas of Carl Jung. Unfortunately for us, yet fortunately still, this has been a rather straightforward plateau, miles below the towering peaks where dragons freely surf the winds above the clouds, and miles out from any water source that isn't that mirage in the desert.

With their ferocious advantages in combat and their elusive nature it is no wonder we have come to focus on particular characteristics, but dragons are not simplistic creatures on a monolith. In some cultures they are known to bring the rains and monsoons, in others they represent night and day, in a few they even take part in creation, being the prime material—another divine form on the formless face of the philosopher's quantum stone, the amplituhedronic jewels beset atop the diadem of the universe. What most of us have come to know of the dragon is that this flying, foul, four-legged, fire-breathing serpent hellbent on thievery, kidnapping, hoarding, and all manner of hot-headed chaos and malevolent massacre, is indeed a creature meant for hero-slaying.

Carrying on the ideas of Jung and others, Dr. Jordan B. Peterson has been known to utilize the dragon as a means and metaphor for helping people overcome personally difficult and chronic circumstances, thus allowing for them to work on conquering their fears one step at a time—no matter how scaled back their personal dragon may need to be in order to get to their truly foreboding mother dragon. See, slaying the dragon is considered a godly pursuit of divine virtue. It is the quintessential heroes pursuit. For many people this monstrous serpent represents the heart of modern-day evil. It is a representation of the voice of false prophets and the damning fires of hell, it is the serpent in the garden of our minds beguiling individuals into tormented mental labyrinths where their lost time is spent eating the fruits of various anguishing ideations. It is, in many ways, the embodiment of the seven deadly sins.

Now what would happen if we were to scale this collectively unconscious dragon back to the level of personal woes and desires? Certainly not everyone is undergoing the same battle with this dragon day

⁴ Watts, *The Nature of Consciousness*

to day, nor could there reasonably be a single image for all of humanity to fight and conquer. But if we actualize this as the case, then as we come up against the tumult and strife of life we may find ourselves as confused as Confucius, unable to make neither heads nor tails of the thing. Is someone's personal dragon embedded with the same global consensus-dragon residing on the plateau of Judeo-Christian evils? Dr. Jordan Peterson begins to answer this in his lecture, *Slaying the Dragon Within Us*,

Why would a dragon hoard gold? Because a dragon represents everything you're afraid of. What's embedded in everything that you're afraid of? Absolutely everything that you need to find. Run from what you're afraid of? Run from exactly what you need to find.

It is widely believed that this terrifyingly common dragon of the unconscious must be overcome in order to bring to the surface a more natural state of the conscious experience—to improve your well-being and reduce suffering. It is said that there is a metaphorical treasure which you need to grab hold of in order to improve your life? Well, then you must find the heroes path which gets you to the lair which houses the treasure which is guarded by absolutely everything you fear. But the beast of beasts does not guard mere and measly treasure. Such frivolous behavior that would be. And so we see hidden in the structure of the fires of eternal struggle, that if you slay the dragon to get the treasure then you forgo the very knowledge of the true value of the treasure. In a sense it's like Dr. Peterson also said,

...if you're willing to turn around and stand up straight and face the darkness fully, what you discover at the darkest part is the brightest light. That is something that is so much worth discovering because there is going to be terrible darkness in your life, and it is going to make you cynical and bitter, and it could easily be that you are just not looking at it enough. Because if you look at it enough, and if you didn't shy away, and if you brought everything you had to bear on it, you'd find that there is more to you than there was to the horror.⁵

This, a darkness that *can* be faced when one *beholds* the Brightest of Lights—that five-fold fire of fused faith found only in the fullness of the Father of all that is Flourishing. For, if you slay the dragon to get to the treasure then you forgo the very knowledge of the true value of the treasure. The dragon is not the heroes adversary, and it is not meant for slaying. It is the life-giver. There is more to the horror, and if you don't shy away—slaying being the most dramatic, aggressive, and forestalling form of shying away—if you look at it face-to-No-face what you find is that, what a dragon truly does, is play clever guard to the pearl of enlightenment. Their treasure is not something to be inherited, or stolen again to be further guarded by you. No, you necessitate the very presence and full essence of the dragon in order to protect the treasure you didn't know you sought.

⁵ Peterson, "Slay Your Dragons," *Remember Truth*, YouTube, 15 Jun. 2022

To slay a dragon is to still run from your dragon, and to eschew—forsake—the true pearl, thus denying the winds of life; bringing disorder to harmony, dishonor to presence, and thus dashing the tunnel of time, and your access to the Artist of Eternity’s moiré of color and light, to pieces.

But if we needn’t slay our dragons then what should we do? Tame them? A notion that misses the point immediately. Train them? How quaint a concept! Well, much like Confucius’ confusing conundrum, in order to know what to do with a dragon, one must know what to do with the clouds and the wind. This is something that is baked in to the idea of Zen Buddhism. Alan Watts explained,

A Zen monk is called, in Japanese, *Unsui* (雲水); cloud-water man...because he drifts like a cloud—he has no attachments, you see—and he flows like water.⁶

There is a long-standing claim in the lore of meditation that the Tibetan Masters of the Himalayas were, and perhaps still are, able to levitate. They have become so *One* with the universe that they may leave their bodies; and their bodies, the confines of modern-day, yet eternal physics.

When the great Dr. D. T. Suzuki was asked, ‘What is it like to be enlightened?’ he said, ‘It’s just like ordinary everyday experience, except about two inches off the ground.’⁷

A dragon knows how to ride the clouds and the wind because it knows how to behave like them, which isn’t any different from Ping-Ting coming for fire really, nor is it any different than human behavior, habits, and changing approaches to making life significant—it has its ups and its downs. Confucius is correct that a dragon riding the clouds and the winds cannot be caught. This, then, means that the dragon riding the waves of the vast treasure in the caves of mental deceit cannot be caught either, neither indeed slain for personal betterment. One can either run from the dragon of personal discovery, or one can begin to ride the winds and join the dragon.

But how do you ride the wind? In his lecture, *Mysticism and Morality*, Watts captures perfectly how one may accomplish such a feat—such a compass of movement,

For, you see, when a person comes to himself, he comes to be one with his own feeling. And that is the only way of being in a position to control it. It is in exactly this way that the sailor always keeps the wind in his sails. Whether he wants to sail with the wind or whether he wants to sail against the wind, he always uses the wind. He never denies the wind. Well, it’s in exactly that same sense that a person has to keep going with his own feeling. Whether he wants to act as the feeling obviously suggests or act in a different way,

⁶ Watts, *The World as Just So, Part 2*

⁷ Watts, *Early Chinese Zen*

he has to keep the feeling with him because that's his own essential self. But when he attempts simply to sail against the wind, he's lost himself. He's become just a kind of empty mask which hasn't got any real life behind it. And all its protestations of love and good will are hollow.⁸

These individuals who sail against the wind, wearing an empty mask and speaking hollow themes, they remind one of the professors of religion as mentioned in Joseph Smith's popularized account of the *First Vision*,

...the Personage who addressed me said...that those professors... “draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me”...⁹

And so the dragon endures, not as an enemy to be slain, nor a beast to be tamed, but as a presence to be faced. It does not guard treasure, it guards transformation, enlightenment, awakening, being born again, ego-loss cleaving the realization there is no ego to lose, etc. The real question is never how to defeat it, but how to become through it, how to move with it as one rides the wind.

How to do so is something we may at least begin to learn from Douglas Harding, who tells us a tale of how to catch the wind and waves,

At the bottom of a lake lived the dragon who guards the pearl of enlightenment. SCIENTIST-3 dives in and goes bald-headed for the dragon, who always seems about to give in, but never does so, and on no accounts surrenders his precious jewel. SCIENTIST-1 meantime, quietly edges past the dragon and snatches the Pearl, which he then discovers to be a dragon-taming charm. For, possessed of this infinite Treasure—seeing himself as that treasure—he doesn't ignore the dragon. Quite the contrary; at last he can face the dragons endless cavortings fearlessly, objectively, no longer identifying with any part of them. Truly the dragon isn't a dragon anymore, but neither is he turned into a pussycat, overnight. Indeed his first reaction to losing his Pearl can be a great show of fury. But all this is foam and froth. The Reality of the dragon, his Source, the only ultimate Power, is the Pearl itself, namely the 1st Person singular, present tense. In plain language, my psychological problems all boil down to the problem of my Identity. They are settled only by attending to the One here, to this 1st Person who is supposed to have them. Here is the only profound analysis, the only therapy which penetrates to the Root of the trouble, the only lasting cure of my disease.¹⁰

⁸ Watts, *Mysticism and Morality*

⁹ Smith, *Joseph Smith History*, 1.18–19

¹⁰ Harding, SFP, ch.36 p.106

If the dragon is to represent everything which you fear, it must, then, by its very nature, hold the keys to absolutely everything you seek to find. What you see when you face these heroic thresholds is an unveiling of divine truths, and discovering,

. . .that the Reality behind appearances is No-thing seeing itself as no-thing. Or rather... that the Reality ‘behind’ appearances is in fact in front of them, taking them in, and is none other than himself...¹¹

The dragon, then, is a presence to approach with deference and daring. And with the final turn of this symbolic prism, its terror becomes truth, and its form is transfigured: no longer a monstrous other, but Christ Himself—the Father of Fire; veiled in flame, revealed in light. This, a reckoning that is great for some, but dreadful for others. And the pearl, radiant and white—the stone of eternity—was never a prize to be seized, but the iridule of a vision to be received through a softened heart turned crystalline. It is not necessarily something to be held, but a way to behold. It is the intelligence of light, the reflection of eternal union in the mirror of divine geometry that only reveals its form when joined in concord with the One who conducts the jeweled chrysanthemum’s of eternal becoming.

What the figure in the mirror guards is not a precious pearl for personal possession, but an invaluable transformation. Quietly, and gloriously, what it offers to those who see that which has always been plainly manifest, is the rhythm of return. As is reflected in the *Daodejing*,

Being grand, it is called passing
Passing, it is called distancing.
Distancing, it is called returning.¹²

So too, the soul, made grand through flame, passes beyond ego, distances from form, and returns in, to, and through, Light—refracted into eternal harmony, sealed in the likeness of the One who rides the winds and the waves of the Kingdoms of God, who breathes the radiant grammar and sings the syntax-driven lights of heaven.

¹¹ Harding, SFP, ch.2 p.3

¹² Ames & Hall, DDJ., ch.25 p.115