

RAYMOND M. SMULLYAN  
(1918- )

## THE TAO IS SILENT

### What is the Tao?<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. Chinese Philosophy in a Nutshell

A mathematician friend of mine recently told me of a mathematician friend of his who everyday "takes a nap." Now, I never take naps. But I often fall asleep while reading — which is very different from deliberately taking a nap! I am far more like my dogs Peekaboo, Peekatoo[,] and Trixie than like my mathematician friend once removed. These dogs never take naps; they merely fall asleep. They fall asleep wherever and whenever they choose (which, incidentally, is most of the time!). Thus these dogs are true Sages.

I think this is all that Chinese philosophy is really about; the rest is mere elaboration! If you can learn to fall asleep without taking a nap, then you too will become a Sage. But if you can't, you will find it not as easy as you might think. It takes *discipline!* But discipline in the Eastern, not Western[,] style. Eastern discipline enables you to fall asleep rather than take a nap; Western discipline has you do the reverse. Eastern discipline trains you to "allow yourself" to sleep when you are sleepy; Western discipline teaches you to *force* yourself to sleep whether you are sleepy or not. Had I been Laotse, I would have added the following maxim — which I think is the quintessence of Taoist philosophy:

The Sage falls asleep not  
Because he ought to  
Nor even because he wants to  
But because he is sleepy.

#### 2. The Tao

There is something blurred and indistinct  
Antedating Heaven and Earth.  
How Indistinct! How Blurred!  
Yet within it are forms.  
How dim! How confused!  
Quiet, though ever functioning.

It does nothing, yet through it all things are done.  
To its accomplishment it lays no credit.  
It loves and nourishes all things, but does not lord it over them.  
I do not know its name,  
I call it the Tao.

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<sup>1</sup>Selections from pages 1-49 in *The Tao Is Silent* by Raymond M. Smullyan (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1977). Copyright © 1977 by Raymond M. Smullyan. Spelling Americanized; footnotes omitted.

Thus writes Laotse some twenty-five hundred years ago. I think this is as good an introductory description of the Tao as can be desired. It raises many interesting questions: just what is the Tao? How should one define the Tao, or does the Tao elude any possible definition? If it exists, what is it like? What are its properties?

Before turning to these matters, let me tell you the story of a Zen-Master who was asked by a student, "What is the Tao?" He replied, "I will tell you after you have drunk up the waters of the West River in one gulp." The student countered, "I have already drunk up the waters of the West River in one gulp." To which the Master replied, "Then I have already answered your question."

### 3. Does the Tao Exist?

The Tao is above existence and non-existence.  
Existence is for men who use words  
But the Tao does not use words.  
It is as silent as a flower.  
Words come from the Tao — the Tao *produces* words,  
But it does not use them.

In the trial scene in Alice in Wonderland, the White Rabbit read an obscure verse which was apparently quite irrelevant to the case. The King triumphantly exclaimed "That's the most important piece of evidence we've heard yet." Alice flatly contradicted him and said, "I don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it." The King then said, "If there's no meaning in it, that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any."

I might make a similar comment about the Taoists. Since the Taoists make no claim that the Tao exists, it saves them a world of trouble in trying to prove that the Tao exists. This is really Chinese common sense at its highest!

Just compare the situation with the history of Western religious thought! Good heavens, the amount of debates, battles, bloodshed[,] and torture over the question of whether God does or does not exist! It has seemed to be even more than a life and death issue. At all costs, the Christian must convince the heathen and the atheist that God exists, in order to save his soul. At all costs, the atheist must convince the Christian that the belief in God is but a childish and primitive superstition, doing enormous harm to the cause of true social progress. And so they battle and storm and bang away at each other. Meanwhile, the Taoist Sage sits quietly by the stream, perhaps with a book of poems, a cup of wine, and some painting materials, enjoying the Tao to his heart's content, without ever worrying whether or not the Tao exists. The Sage has no need to affirm the Tao; he is far too busy enjoying it!

### 4. Yes, but Does the Tao Exist?

My, my, how persistent you are! Well now, let me say a little more about this.

The Taoist is not like the Western agnostic who grants that either God exists or he doesn't, but doesn't know which. The Western agnostic will say, "By simple Aristotelian logic, we know that either God exists or he doesn't, but we do not have confirming evidence one way or the other. Hence our only rational recourse is to suspend judgment on the matter until further evidence becomes available." Now, the Taoist sees the matter quite differently. He does not "suspend judgment" as to whether or not there is a Tao; the question of the existence or nonexistence of the Tao simply does not occur to him, or if someone presents it to him, he regards it as vague, meaningless, somehow irrelevant and sort of odd. In this respect, he is strangely like the Western logical positivist, though perhaps for different reasons. If you asked a logical positivist whether or not the Tao exists, he would declare the question "meaningless." He would first want the word "Tao" to be clearly defined. Now, if the question really has no meaning, as the positivist says, then I would be quite happy, since I can then reply, "If there's no meaning in it, that saves a world of trouble, as we needn't try to find any."

At this point, you may be a bit irritated and say, "Stop evading the issue! Does the Tao exist or doesn't it? Is it something *real* or is it a mere fantasy — a figment of the imagination?"

Well now, analogous questions on existence have been asked in other areas and are equally futile. There has been, for example, much metaphysical controversy as to the existence of so-called universals — things like *redness*,

*triangularity, beauty, goodness*, and so on. Does *redness* exist? If so, where is it, how much does it weigh, what is its shape, what is its color? (Would you say that the color redness is itself red? Hardly!) Does redness really exist at all? Some may naively say, "Of course redness exists; look at roses, lipstick, certain apples, etc." But this only means that there exist certain *things* which are red; it does not prove that there exists a certain entity called "redness." The question of the existence of such an entity has been a lively one in the history of Western philosophy. There are those called "Nominalists" who believe the answer is "No." They, of course, admit the existence of particular things which are red, but they deny the existence of any entity called "redness." They accept the word "red" as an *adjective* (since there are red things), but they deny any legitimacy to the use of the word "redness" as a noun. They would deny that the word "redness" has any actual denotation; they do not believe that "redness" is an actual name of anything. On the other hand there are those called "Realists" (sometimes "Platonists") who believe that "redness" is indeed a legitimate noun — it is the name of redness. They also believe that the word "red" can be properly used both as an adjective and as a noun. It is used as an adjective, for example, in a statement like "This apple is red;" it is used as a noun in such statements as "Red is one of the primary colors." And the realist believes that "red" is indeed a name; it is the name of the color red.

Similarly, the realist-nominalist controversy extends to other so-called "universals." The realist like Plato believes in the existence of *Beauty, Goodness, Truth*, whereas the nominalist only believes that certain works of art are beautiful, certain acts might be labeled "good" and certain propositions are appropriately labeled "true."

It might surprise some nonmathematical readers that such controversies exist even in the realm known as the foundations of mathematics. This field is erroneously believed by the layman to be settled and non-controversial. But this is far from true! The so-called mathematical realist (or classicist or "Platonist") believes in a world of non-linguistic mathematical entities such as "numbers, sets, functions, groups, topological spaces," etc., and that it is the purpose of mathematics to discover and prove various statements about these entities which are *true*. On the other hand there is the so-called mathematical "formalist" who believes all these so-called mathematical entities are but figments of the imagination; the only reality is the symbols used to express them! So the interest of the mathematical formalist appears to be purely linguistic. For him, mathematics is but the study of strings of symbols called "formal expressions" and of how they are to be manipulated according to the prescribed rules of the system under study; the expressions themselves do not express anything! And the formalist (like the nominalist) denies the existence of things like "numbers" as other than certain linguistic expressions.

We might similarly approach the problem of the existence of the Tao. There are perhaps those who would deny the use of the word "Tao" as a noun; they would refuse to believe in the existence of some "entity" called the Tao, but they would nevertheless accept as quite meaningful the adjective "Taoistic." It certainly should be obvious to all students of Chinese art and thought — even those with absolutely no metaphysical commitments of any kind — that certain works are more Taoistic than others. For example, it is generally conceded that Sung landscape painting is more Taoistic than the art of the Tang. Thus few will object to the use of the word "Taoistic" though many might object to the word "Tao."

Some of you may feel that I am still evading the issue of whether or not the Tao really exists. Actually now, do I know? "But," you might reply, "don't you even have some personal opinion on the matter?"

Suppose you actually cornered me in my study and said to me point blank: "Smullyan! Stop equivocating! Do you or do you not believe the Tao exists?" What would I answer? This would depend on whether I happened to be in a more Western or more Eastern mood at the time I was asked. If I were in a more Western mood (and abided in the duality of existence versus nonexistence), then, since I tend to be a Platonist, I would probably answer, "Yes, the Tao exists." But suppose I were in an Eastern mood? Well now, if you asked a Zen-Master whether the Tao exists, he would probably give you a good blow with his stick. Now I, being of a somewhat more mild disposition, would probably just smile at you (perhaps in a somewhat condescending fashion) and offer you a cup of tea . . .

## **6. The Tao is Formless**

### **§1. Is the Tao definable?**

Zen Buddhism might aptly be described as a combination of Chinese Taoism and Indian Buddhism with a touch of pepper and salt (particularly pepper) thrown in by the Japanese. It is questionable whether Zen Buddhism should be called a *philosophy*. As many Zen followers repeatedly emphasize, Zen is more a way of life, a set of attitudes, a certain *gestalt*, rather than a set of cognitively meaningful propositions. I believe there is much truth in this statement, but like many other

statements, it can be overly exaggerated. I do believe that Zen is primarily a "way" rather than a "doctrine," but I don't believe Zen is totally devoid of doctrine. And, it seems to me, one of the things definitely emphasized by Zen is the idea that the transcendent is to be found right in the immanent; indeed, the transcendent and the immanent are identical. This surely is most explicitly implicit in this Zen verse:

When the wild bird cries its melodies from the treetops,  
Its voice carries the message of the patriarch.  
When the mountain flowers are in bloom,  
Their full meaning comes along with their scent.

And, of course, the idea that the transcendent is right in the immanent is explicitly explicit in the well known incident of the Master who, when asked "What is the Tao?", replied "Your everyday mind."

Some may ask, "If the Tao is nothing more than one's everyday mind, why call it the Tao; why not simply call it one's everyday mind?"

This question is extremely difficult to answer logically. In the first place, I think it a mistake to interpret the statement "The Tao is your everyday mind" as "The Tao is *nothing more* than your everyday mind." I hardly think that in the statement "The Tao is your everyday mind" the word "is" is meant to equate the two concepts "Tao" and "Everyday mind." I would rather say that the Tao is your everyday mind *and more*. Indeed, in the Book of Tao [the **Tao Te Ching**] it is said that the Tao antedates heaven and earth. Now then, does your everyday mind antedate heaven and earth? Maybe it does, who knows? At any rate, I find the statement "The Tao is your everyday mind" extremely enlightening[,] provided, of course, it is not taken too literally.

But, you may continue to ask . . . , just what *is* the Tao; how should one define the Tao?

The word has been translated in many different ways; *God, Nature, The Absolute, That through which all things have come into being, The Great Void, The Path, The Way*, etc. Perhaps one of my favorite definitions is: "the reason things are as they are." Yet I must ask: do any of these definitions — delightful and suggestive as they are — really clarify our notion of the Tao? And for that matter, is it really desirable that this notion be clarified?

Some say that the word "Tao" is untranslatable; others that the Tao is indefinable. Is the first statement so surprising? Those of you who know at least one foreign language know some words which can only be approximated in English but which have no exact equivalent. Now let us consider the assertion that the word "Tao" is indefinable. This arouses great suspicions in the minds of many who pride themselves on being "critical thinkers." But is this suspicion really justified? Many will sternly and heartlessly say that unless one can define one's terms, one does not really know what one is talking about. Yes, there is indeed this strange doctrine that the inability to define what one means only signifies that one means nothing. I think we should turn at this point to the philosopher Wittgenstein who wisely said, "Don't look for the meaning; look for the use!" This may well be the key to the matter. Though I might go a step further and say that the meaning *is* the use — at least the real meaning is the use. To me, the real meaning of a term is the sum total of all the uses and all the associations one has with the term. How can these all be captured in one short definition? *Therefore I say that if you really want to find out the meaning of a word like Tao — as meant by the Taoist writers who have used it — you cannot possibly expect any shortcut like a "definition" to tell you. To understand the true meaning of the term "Tao" one must sample hundreds and thousands of cases in which the term is actually used. And this is not all. To understand the concept of Tao, one must also be thoroughly familiar with Taoist poetry and painting (as well, perhaps, as calligraphy) in which Taoistic feeling has found its most concrete and vivid embodiment. In short, to understand the meaning of "Tao" one must be thoroughly steeped in the whole philosophy and arts of Taoism.* [Emphasis added]

After you have done this, after you have sampled thousands of uses of the word "Tao," you might try your hand at being clever and framing one single definition to cover this whole multitude of cases. But even if you succeed, how utterly empty your definition will be to those who have not had your concrete experience of actually living through this philosophy!

## §2. In what sense is the Tao real?

Some might claim that the Tao can be known only by mystical experience. Just what is mystical experience? Almost everyone knows what is meant by aesthetic experience, but what about mystical experience? These may be closely related, but I would hardly say they are identical! To me, the mystical sense is as different from the aesthetic sense as either is from the sense of humor.

But what is this mystical sense, and what is a mystical experience? Is it a free-floating experience, or is it an experience of something? And if it is an experience of something, is it an experience of something real or something existing only in the imagination?

So much controversy has ranged over this strange issue! Many psychologists of mysticism have gone to all sorts of lengths to prove that mystical experience is not an experience of anything real. They characterize mystics as people who are emotionally disturbed (often schizophrenic or hysterical) who populate their fantasy world with those things they were unable to find in the real world. On the other hand, apologists for mysticism (who are usually philosophers rather than true mystics) have gone to equal lengths to try to convince us that what mystics perceive is something very real indeed. Well, who is right? Do the mystics perceive something real or not?

Well now, suppose two people, one a musician and the other extremely unmusical, are listening to a theme. The musical one admits frankly "I hear the notes, but I don't hear the melody." The musician assures the other that in addition to the individual notes, he hears something much more important — the melody! Now, just what is this "melody" that the musician hears? The notes themselves — the sound waves, that is — are heard alike by musician and non-musician and are universally acknowledged to be real in the purely physical sense. But what about the melody itself? Is it something real or does it exist only in the mind or imagination? The question is a rather strange one! I think it would be most misleading to say that it exists only in the imagination; the musician who says he hears a melody is not just imagining things. No, the melody heard is something very real indeed, though whether it should be said to exist in the mind is a much more subtle question which I cannot answer. At any rate, I don't think many will disagree when I say that melodies are real. And I think it is more in this sense of real that the Tao can be said to be real. The true Taoists (or so-called mystics of other religions, or even nontheistic mystics) directly perceive that which they call the Tao (or which others call God, Nature, the Absolute, Cosmic Consciousness) just as the musician directly perceives the melody. The musician does not need to have "faith" that there is a melody, nor does he have to accept the existence of the melody on some scriptural authority; he obviously has a direct experience of the melody itself. And once the melody is heard, it is impossible ever again to doubt it.

Just how is the Tao perceived directly? Well, how is a melody perceived directly? Through the sense of hearing? Not quite! The physical hearing process obviously plays a necessary role, but this is not the whole story. The nonmusician can have just as good auditory equipment as the musician, yet the musician experiences the melody whereas the other one does not. So what we call "hearing a melody" involves use of the word *hearing* in a more extended and subtle sense than "hearing the sounds." The point is that the melody is far more than a group of sounds; it is their sounds together with some sort of pattern or superstructure somehow imposed.

Some might say that the Tao is nothing more than the physical universe. But this would seem to miss the crucial point in much the same way as it would to say that a melody is nothing more than a group of sounds. Rather it might be said that the universe bears the same sort of relation to the Tao as the group of notes of a melody bears to the melody itself . . .

## 8. The Tao Has No Name

Now that's going a bit too far! When some Taoists say the Tao has no name, then even I — with all my Eastern philosophy — am far too Western not to register a protest. Of course the Tao has a name! Its name is obviously "The Tao." Indeed, consider the following brief dialogue:

*Easterner:* The Tao has no name.  
*Westerner:* What has no name?  
*Easterner:* The Tao.  
*Westerner:* There! You have just named it!

In the above dialogue, I have, of course, let the Westerner come off the better. Now that I have discharged my duty to Western logic and semantics, let me tell you how I really feel about the matter.

The funny thing is that if I heard the phrase "The Tao is nameless" rather than "The Tao has no name," I would have reacted differently. One might immediately ask, "But what is the logical difference between saying the Tao has no name and the Tao is nameless?" Well, logically speaking, there is no difference. But is it appropriate to approach the Tao logically? This is an interesting question, but I shan't take time out to answer it now. As I said, there is no logical difference between the two statements, but there is a considerable *psychological* difference. How do I know this? Well, the very fact that I react so differently to the two statements would surely suggest that there is *some* psychological difference between them. The first statement "The Tao has no name" immediately awakens my analytic Western bristles, and puts me in a condition where I am highly critical, whereas the statement "The Tao is nameless" tends rather to put me into a peaceful Eastern slumber. The first statement seems more precise, and in so far as it is precise, [it] is clearly wrong. The second statement suggests to me something more vague, and in so far as it is vague, it allows all sorts of pleasant and interesting interpretations. Some people are always critical of vague statements. I tend rather to be critical of precise statements; they are the only ones which can be correctly labeled "wrong." What about precise statements which are not wrong — statements which in a precise sense are "true"? How do they compare with vague statements? Well, that depends a lot on the circumstances. In some contexts a good precise statement is called for; in others, a vague statement. It really should be borne in mind that a precise statement, though it often has its place, has only one meaning, whereas a vague statement may contain a multitude of interesting and fruitful meanings.

However, I digress. It is not quite clear just what I am digressing *from*, since this whole discussion is getting fantastically vague as it is, but I have a feeling that I am digressing from something. What is this something? Oh yes, let me get back to the statement "The Tao is nameless." I find this statement highly suggestive, mysterious, poetic[,] and beautiful. But what does it mean? Well, of course, there is the possibility that it doesn't mean anything! If this be true, then it of course saves us the world of trouble of having to find a meaning for it. But it seems to me that it has all sorts of interesting meanings. Does it mean that the Tao has no name? No, I have already ruled that out. Maybe it means that there is no *appropriate* name for the Tao, that no name can do it justice. This interpretation raises several semantic difficulties. Just what on earth could be meant by a name doing justice to its designatum? Does my name "Raymond" do me justice? (Perhaps yes! My name means *wise protector*.) Does the name "Humpty Dumpty" do Humpty Dumpty justice? Yes, in this case it definitely does, for as Humpty Dumpty wisely explained, "My name means the shape I am." Now, what about the name "Tao" — does it do the Tao justice? Yes, I think it does. It does not, of course, mean the shape it is, since it has no shape, but rather it means the *way* it is. And for this purpose, the name "Tao" serves perfectly!

So! It turns out that the Tao not only has a name, but a perfect one at that! So my idea that the Tao has no "appropriate" name, I wish to reject.

But I have another idea! A much better one! An idea which is exciting and fantastic! To tell you the truth, I've been secretly planning to tell it to you all along! What is this idea? I will now tell you.

Is it completely out of the question that there may be objects in the universe which are so sensitive that the very act of naming them throws them out of existence? Now I am not suggesting that the Tao behaves like that; I hardly think the Tao goes out of existence if one so much as names it. But it might well be that the Tao is so remarkably sensitive that when named, it changes ever so slightly — it is not quite the same Tao as it was before it was named. Indeed, if we identify the Tao with the universe as a whole, this must be the case, for the act of *naming* the universe is itself an event in the universe, hence the universe is not quite the same after as before the event. A better and more poetic way of looking at it is this: They say the Tao is like a mirror. Well, the act of looking into a mirror certainly changes its state, does it not? When you look into a mirror, it reflects you; when you don't, it doesn't. Would it not be difficult indeed to look into a mirror and see it as it would be if you were not looking into it? And so it is with the Tao! When you name it, it cannot be the unnamed Tao which exists when you don't name it. And this unnamed Tao is perhaps more serene, *more truly itself*[,] than the named Tao. In this sense, the true Tao, the unnamed *Tao*[,] is nameless.

Incidentally, some Taoists have made a distinction between the nameless Tao and the Tao which can be named.

Nameless, the Tao is the source of heaven and earth.  
Named, it is the Mother of all beings.

In line with this interpretation, it might be more appropriate to refer to the true Tao as unnamable rather than nameless. It is unnamable because it changes in the very process of naming it. Suppose instead of naming the Tao we merely think about it; does that also change it? I suspect it does! Doesn't the universe change whenever we think about it? Of course it does! When one thinks about the universe, the universe contains one who is thinking about it; when no one is thinking of the universe, the universe contains no one who is thinking of it. The situation reminds me of those elves who come in the night and make shoes for the family, but if anyone ever turns on the light and sees them at work, they vanish and never come back.

So perhaps the moral of the story is that the Tao needs a certain amount of privacy and withers away under too many prying eyes and prying minds . . . .

## 10. The Tao and the Sage: They Never Argue

. . . Does the Tao ever argue? Of course not! With whom could it argue? At least, I have never heard it argue; it has never once argued with me.

How unlike the Tao, in this respect, is God! The Old Testament is full of characters arguing with God about all sorts of things! But could you, in your wildest imagination, conceive anything as preposterous as arguing with the Tao . . . ?

What about the Sage? Does he ever argue? Let us see!

**CHINESE SAGE:** Laotse said, "The good man does not argue; he who argues is not good."

**WESTERN LOGICIAN:** I disagree!

**SAGE:** You disagree with what?

**LOGICIAN:** With what you said!

**SAGE:** And what was that?

**LOGICIAN:** That the good man does not argue.

**SAGE:** Wrong!

**LOGICIAN:** What do you mean "wrong"?

**SAGE:** I never said the good man does not argue.

**LOGICIAN:** Of course you did! You distinctly said that the good man does not argue and that he who argues is not good.

**SAGE:** Nope! I merely said that Laotse said that.

**LOGICIAN:** Oh, all right! You knew what I meant.

**SAGE:** Who's being illogical now?

**LOGICIAN:** Oh, come off it! Why are you so argumentative?

**SAGE:** I am not being argumentative. I am merely being logical.

**LOGICIAN:** You are hardly being logical. I would say you are being irritatingly logical.

**SAGE:** Now, what kind of logic is that? If I am being irritatingly logical, then a fortiori [for that very reason] I am being logical.

**LOGICIAN:** Again you argue! Why are you being so argumentative? After all, as you said, the good man does not argue.

**SAGE:** I didn't say that! I said that Laotse said that.

**LOGICIAN:** And do you believe it?

**SAGE:** Do I believe what? That Laotse said that?

**LOGICIAN:** No, no! Do you believe that what Laotse said is true?

**SAGE:** Yes.

**LOGICIAN:** Oh, then you do believe that the good man does not argue.

**SAGE:** Yep!

**LOGICIAN:** So why didn't you say so?

**SAGE:** Why should I have?

**LOGICIAN:** There you go arguing again! You are so inconsistent!

**SAGE:** How so?

**LOGICIAN:** Because you admit that the good man does not argue, and you go on arguing with complete disregard of that fact.

**SAGE:** I am not being inconsistent. It just so happens that at the moment I feel more like arguing than being good.

Now let us discuss Laotse's statement. I, like the Westerner, do not agree — at least fully. There may be some truth in it, but to say the good man *never* argues strikes me as a foolish exaggeration. After all, I argue, and am I really all that no-good? Now, it may be that the good man tends to argue less, but I hardly think the good man does not argue at all.

Take my cousin Arthur, for example. He is a good man, and he argues a great deal. He is a philosopher in the true Western tradition. When he was a student, he was taking a philosophy course with Morris Cohen at C.C.N.Y. [the City College of New York]. All through the semester, he argued and argued and argued. At one point Professor Cohen said, "Now please, this is a history of philosophy course. No more argumentation! If you wish to ask questions, I will be happy to answer them, but no more argumentation!" My cousin respectfully replied, "Very well then, Professor Cohen, I wish to ask a question: How would you answer the following argument?"

Now, if Laotse had said "The Sage does not argue," I might have agreed with him even more. Sages are usually quite sagacious, and part of sagacity is the realization of the futility of argument. But how many Sages are there? Even I am not yet a Sage — I argue far too much! I would love to be a Sage, but not if I have to pay the ridiculous price of not arguing!

This brings me now to a curious question: Supposing someone really believes that the Sage does not argue and also wants to become a Sage but he also loves to argue. What should he do? Is he really more likely to become a sage by deliberately refraining from arguing? Should he *inhibit* his argumentative impulses? I hardly think this will work! Instead of becoming a "sage," he will merely become a "frustrated arguer" and will most likely end up committing suicide. On the other hand, if he freely argues all day long to his heart's content, he will one day argue himself out, have nothing more to say, and thus will have reached true sagehood . . . .

## 15. Worship of the Buddha

The fourth Gospel is the only one in which Jesus claimed — or appeared to claim — to be the incarnation of God. He said, "The Father and I are one." Did Jesus add, "The Father and you are not one"? Had he added that, the implication would have been that Jesus had some special theological status not shared by other mortals. But he did not say that. From the statement "The Father and I are one" can be derived only the fact that Jesus was *an* incarnation rather than *the* incarnation of God [emphases added]. Good heavens, many a Hindu or Vedantist will say, "Brahman and I are one," meaning that there exists only one Spirit in the universe which is me, also you, also Brahman, etc., and in so doing will certainly not be claiming the unique kind of deity believed by many Christians to be possessed by Jesus.

Some Christians prefer not to think of Jesus as an incarnation of God at all but rather as an unusually enlightened human being who was a great religious teacher and reformer. Some of them achieve this by simply denying the authenticity of the fourth Gospel. But, as I am trying to point out, the fourth Gospel can be consistently retained without entailing one's belief that of all the mortals who have lived, Jesus alone is the incarnation of God.

Now, since the fourth Gospel exists, and I don't see that it is necessary to interpret it in the unorthodox way which I have suggested, then it is not unfair for a Christian to say that there is at least some evidence that Jesus is *the* incarnation. I personally have doubts about such evidence, but it is understandable to me that others should think differently. Therefore, it makes some sense that many Christians worship Jesus as an actual deity.

But what I cannot understand is that some Buddhists worship Buddha as a deity when Buddha himself most explicitly denied being one! With Jesus it was different; in the first three gospels, he neither affirmed nor denied his deity, and in the fourth, he at least appeared to affirm it. Therefore it makes some sense that some Christians worship Jesus as a deity. But how can Buddhists do this when it goes expressly against Buddha's very words? Do people believe, perhaps, that Buddha really was a deity, but was himself ignorant of the fact? Now, this is certainly logically possible, but it seems fantastic!

It is absolutely amazing how people need to "deify" things and to bring in the occult, [the] telepathic[,] and [the] supernatural into situations where they simply don't belong. It is remarkable how many extremely intelligent people I have known — many of them outstanding scientists and mathematicians — who credit telepathic powers to magicians who do mind reading tricks. Now, I have been a professional magician and mind-reader (sic!) for many years, and here I know whereof I speak! I know the modus operandi of almost all mind-reading demonstrations, and [I] know they are nothing more than extremely clever tricks. The most remarkable thing of all is that people have sometimes sworn to me that I must be telepathic and have refused to believe me when I swore to them that I am not! I told them over and over again, "This is really a *trick!* It has a perfectly simple mechanical explanation, and any of you could do it yourself, if you knew the explanation (which professional ethics forbids me to disclose)." But they refused to believe me!

And so I think the reason some people insist on Buddha being a deity is their simple need to deify somebody or something. And so they take it out on poor Buddha!

Worse still, some people insist on deifying statues of the Buddha! Such practices the Hebrews call *idolatry*. Zen-Masters are like the Hebrews in their opposition to this — as well as their opposition to the deification of the personal Buddha. They say such things as, "If you ever meet the Buddha, kill him!" or "Every time you utter the name Buddha, wash out your mouth!"

Now, there is all the difference in the world between worshiping Buddha and worshiping him as a deity! Many worship Buddha in the same way I would worship Beethoven or Mozart, which is certainly not as a deity. Now, worship of Buddha in this sense is a very different story, and I think can have great spiritual value. I wish to tell you of four contrasting incidents about Buddha-worship.

The first, which is well known, is about a Zen-Master in a temple one cold day who needed wood for a fire. For want of any other wood around, he took a wooden statue of the Buddha, broke it into pieces and threw them into the fire. A monk entered the room at that time and was horrified with this "blasphemy." The Master smiled, and explained that he was burning nothing but wood, and that Buddha himself would surely have approved of the act. A great debate followed, and one would infer from it that the Master was the true believer and "follower of the Way" whereas the monk who objected was nothing more than an idolater.

This story is a tiny bit reminiscent of a Haiku poem of Issa:

Out from the nostrils of the Great Buddha  
Flew a pair of nesting swallows.

This poem strikes me as far more profound than the above story! It is a kind of shock to realize that the same mass of metal can be looked at in two such utterly different ways as a statue of Buddha, or as a purely physical object with enormous caverns (the nostrils) in which birds can nest. The same object has two such completely different functions! In a way, is not its function as a "bird nester" somehow more holy than the other? (Perhaps the Zen-master felt the same way about the wooden statue!) I also love the idea of a pair of birds, so beautifully innocent and free from any notions of "reverence" or "worship[,] making a nest in a statue of the Buddha. The "Buddha nature" of the statue is so delightfully irrelevant to its suitability as a bird-nester.

When I spoke before about "shock," can you not imagine what it would be like standing in the forest before such a statue, totally unaware of the nesting birds. Suddenly, without the slightest warning, you hear flapping wings, and two birds emerge! Can you not imagine obtaining Satori at such a moment?

To diverge a bit further, the above Haiku reminds me a little of the following well-known Haiku of Buson:

Upon the temple bell, asleep  
A butterfly.

Now for the second story: A Zen-Master was worshipping at a statue of the Buddha. A novice came by and asked, "Why do you worship the Buddha? I thought Zen teaches us not to. Do not some Zen-Masters spit at the Buddha?" The Master replied: "Some spit at the Buddha. I prefer to worship the Buddha."

The third story — which I like still better — goes as follows: A Zen-master was worshipping at a statue of the Buddha. A monk came by and said, "Why do you worship the Buddha?"

"I like to worship the Buddha."

"But I thought you said that one cannot obtain enlightenment by worshipping the Buddha?"

"I am not worshipping the Buddha in order to obtain enlightenment."

"Then why are you worshipping the Buddha? You must have *some* reason!"

"No reason whatsoever. I like to worship the Buddha."

"But you must be seeking something; you must have *some* end in view!"

"I do not worship the Buddha for any end."

"Then why do you worship the Buddha? What is your *purpose* in worshipping the Buddha?"

At this point, the Zen-Master gave the monk a good slap in the face!

Now at this point, it is extremely important to realize that the Master did not slap the monk for being "blasphemous" or "irreligious" or anything like that; he was simply irritated. He had no more "purpose" in slapping the Monk than he had in worshipping the Buddha. Had I been in the Master's place, I also would have felt like slapping the monk. To me, there is nothing more aggressive and hostile than to keep pestering a person as to what his "purpose" is in doing what he does! Some of the most beautiful and important acts in life are done with no purpose whatsoever — though they may serve a purpose, which is something very different! This is sometimes hard for Westerners to understand. I shall say more about this later.

Before I tell you the fourth story, I would like to say a few words on the subject of reverence and irreverence. I find it sad that so many people have to go to one extreme or the other. On the one hand are those who insist on always being solemnly reverent and who are shocked by any irreverence. On the other hand are those who delight in irreverence but are disgusted with and contemptuous of anything . . . [resembling] reverence; they dismiss it as romantic sentimental hogwash. The Taoists strike me as having found a happy mean; I have seldom known them to be either fervidly reverent or strikingly irreverent. On the other hand, Zen-Masters have a marvelous capacity for being one minute most reverent and the next as irreverent as can be and to see not the slightest conflict between these states.

I have told you three stories about worshipping the Buddha. Two of them might be characterized as showing natural reverence without any principle that one should be reverent. The other story (about burning the wooden statue) nicely synthesizes reverence and irreverence. Now I will tell you the fourth story which is delightfully irreverent — although I believe that on a deeper level it totally transcends the categories of reverence and irreverence.

A monk came to the Zen-master Ma-Tsu for enlightenment and asked: "What is the ultimate message of the Buddha?" The Master replied "I will show you. But when discussing such solemn matters, you should first make a bow to the Buddha." The monk meekly complied, and whilst in the bowing position, the Master gave him a terrific kick in the pants. This

unexpected kick sent him into a paroxysm of laughter and totally dissolved all his morbid irresolution; at that moment he obtained "immediate enlightenment." For years after he said to everyone he met, "Since I received that kick from Ma-Tsu, I haven't been able to stop laughing."

