

THE I CHING

by Kathy Brown



“Deprived of academic training in philosophy,” says Lin Yutang in his preface to *The Importance of Living*, “I am less scared to write a book about it.” I volunteered to write an article about the I Ching with a similar disregard for my lack of qualifications, drawn chiefly by my friend Meg Gibney’s testimony that use of the oracle had changed her life, saved her marriage, and taught her how to persevere and grow, rather than fight or flee, during times of hardship.

Impressed by this endorsement, I purchased the translation by Brian Browne Walker, recommended by Gibney as being one of the more readable texts on the subject, and hurried home to give it a try. Would working with the I Ching have such a positive impact on my life as well? I throw the coins to find out.

The oracle is most commonly activated by throwing three coins and summing their designated values. Coins are assigned the numerical weight of three for heads and of two for tails. After a toss, the total of their value is recorded by drawing either a solid line (-) to indicate the active yang energy of an odd number, or a broken line (--) to represent the receptive yin energy expressed in an even number. The process is repeated six times, with the lines being drawn one on top of the other, like rungs in a ladder. The first three lines constructed by this process form the bottom trigram of the hexagram; the next three form the top. Each trigram has its own symbolic meaning and the combination of the two creates one of the sixty-four hexagrams, the synthesis of the two energies that constitute the basis for a reading.

I throw the coins six times and count their values: seven, nine, nine, eight, seven, nine. Together they form the hexagram Hsiao Ch’u, Wind over Heaven, The Taming Power of the Small. The Walker text tells me that “this hexagram signifies a time when darkness has temporarily enveloped the light. The Creative power is present in the background, however, and will come forward in time. Your responsibility in this moment is to accept restraints quietly and remain content with taking small steps...” If you were expecting a yes or no answer to the question, “Will the I Ching transform my life?” you may not have the tolerance for ambiguity that is necessary for working with

this oracle.

“Sometimes the readings are so ‘right on,’ just perfect for the situations I question,” says Sheri Kling, who regularly consults the oracle for guidance. “Other times, I find myself studying the text and saying, ‘Huh?’” Even Jung, in his preface to Richard Wilhelm’s translation, the most well-known English version of the work, admits that there is about the I Ching “much that is obscure.”

In spite of the obscurity, I continue my search for the “right on” answers the I Ching is said to yield to those who are dedicated to understanding its teachings. Over a period of days, then weeks, now months, I ask question after Big Question about every aspect of my life. Most of the readings echo the sentiment of the one above. With various overtones of the positive or the negative, they caution me to move slowly, have patience regarding the cumulative power of many small virtuous actions, and to pay attention to my character rather than to what is going on around me. The I Ching most often advocates the development of the character traits of modesty, detachment, innocence, acceptance, gentleness, balance, non-judging, forgiveness and faith in the Higher Power, often referred to as the Sage or the Creative.

Janet Sanders recently consulted the I Ching for insight into why a romantic relationship had gone awry. She rolled the coins and counted: six, seven, eight to form the bottom trigram and seven, eight, six to form the top. Thunder over Water, the hexagram Hsieh, Deliverance.

According to Walker, Hsieh “signals the beginning of a deliverance from danger, tension, and difficulty...The Higher Power uses conflicts and obstacles to teach us lessons that we refuse to learn in an easier way...” What are those lessons? Not surprisingly, forgiveness, the restoration of inner balance, and a reminder “...not to try to force progress, even though the time is beneficial. If we have truly changed our attitude, we have become detached, innocent, modest, and accepting. In this state we allow progress to unfold naturally according to the will of the Sage.” Which I know by now means small step by small step.

The wisdom of the Sage is said to permeate every aspect of the I Ching. In addition to the divinatory text assigned to the

hexagram as a whole, each individual line within it contains its own particular meaning, which is to be considered only when the coins that generated it total either six or nine. When this happens, the result is referred to as a changing or moving line, meaning it has gone as far as it can go to either end of the spectrum and must now reverse its movement and move toward, or change into, its opposite aspect.

Taoist Master Alfred Huang, author of *The Complete I Ching*, encourages seekers to pay special attention to the important texts of the moving lines. However, he believes that it is too confusing to apply more than one of the often contradictory texts associated with the individual lines, so when there is more than one moving line in the hexagram, as there were in both Sanders' throw and mine, he applies only the most relevant, using a method he learned from Master Yin, a revered Chinese teacher.

When there are two moving yin or yang lines in a reading, as there were in Sanders', whose first and last coin throws resulted in a sum of six, Master Huang says to pay attention only to the lower one, in this case line one. The teaching for the first line of Hsieh says that "The obstacle is overcome. By keeping quiet and still you insure that another does not arise."

The moving lines are significant because they represent extremes in the forces of yin (all tails) or yang (all heads). Master Huang says that the essence of the I Ching "holds that when events proceed to their extremes they give birth to their opposites," and changing lines follow this metaphysical law. After the text is read for the selected moving line, all moving lines are then changed to their opposites and the new hexagram formed by the change is read. The first hexagram delivers general instructions to the seeker regarding the situation in question; the

second reveals the outcome that can be expected if the instructions are heeded.

When the first and last lines of Hsieh are changed into their opposites, the hexagram K'uei, or Opposition, is formed. K'uei cautions us to stop resisting life and preventing our progress. "Cease resisting yourself, others, life, the Sage," urges the text for this hexagram. "Let go of dark thoughts and aggressive actions. By returning to acceptance, neutrality, and devotion to the way of the Sage, you dissolve the opposition within yourself and open the way for understanding and good fortune to arrive."

It is typical of the I Ching, as it is of Jungian psychology, that requests for guidance in addressing discord with others often redirects the seeker to the need for resolving dissension within the self. Gibney freely admits that there were things about her habitual ways of reacting to conflict that were impacting her marriage in a negative way. She dedicated herself to increasing her awareness of those patterns, and making changes where she could, supported by the wisdom she gleaned from the pages of the I Ching.

"Sometimes I consulted it several times a day, asking question after question," Gibney said. "I felt I could go to it any time I wanted to hear the voice of God."

I have to agree with her that the voice of God rings in the truth that the only correct answer to any question is to act with innocence, modesty, faith, forgiveness, gentleness, and the other characteristics of integrity that the I Ching urges us to develop. Our own behaviors and attitudes are really all we have control of or power over in any case. Fortunately, that power is great enough to change the course and the experience of our lives. Indeed, it is the only thing that can. ■