

Death and Renewal

Metaphysics and Psychologies of Change

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UPR Lectures, Session 9

In this session we are going to look at the theme of death and renewal and the still point in their center in as pictured in *Change*. This is a dramatic representation of one of Richard Wilhelm's lectures given between 1926 and 1929 at the China Institute in Frankfurt. I would ask you to imagine in the following that Wilhelm himself is speaking.

In the old Chinese concept of the world, all existence is conditioned by the polar contrast of light and dark, positive and negative, yin and yang. They are the Two Powers or the Sun Tree and the Moon Tree, connected by the underworld Ghost River, the river of souls. In the metaphysical realm this appears as life and death.

Now, the old texts put this in a particular perspective. They say that finding happiness is finding a death that crowns life – your own particular death. The greatest unhappiness is a death that tears life apart instead of completing it. For the dark aspect is not only something opposed to life; its presence and shape determine the light. The meaning of life is derived to a great degree from what is outside life, that dark something we go to meet.

We tend to affirm the light as real and regard the dark half with doubt and fear. In traditional China, the concept of reality is different. Life is not as real as we take it to be and the dark, death, belongs equally to the world of appearances. Existence, real existence, lies beyond both. This is what the Great Treatise says about our situation.

Change contains the measures of Heaven and Earth.
We can use it to stay in complete alignment

with the Way of Heaven and Earth.
Change looks up to include the signs in Heaven;
it looks down to see patterns on earth.
It offers us knowledge of what is dark and obscure
and what is light and clear.

The Sage People who made Change
went to this great beginning
and returned to trace the ends of things.
Through Change they offer us the knowledge of death and birth.

Listen: The seed we see in a symbol
unites with body-energy
through the earth's power of realizing.
This is what creates the beings. A being is born from a symbol.
When the soul wanders, detaching itself and floating up,
a transformation occurs. This is what is called death.

It is through the symbols and the transformations
That we can know the spirits and the ghosts
and understand their appearances and desires.

This is life and death, the movement of the symbols or seeds. It is said that when a child utters its first cry, the two principles, united in the mother's womb, separate. During life they lead a deceptive unity in the body (*shen*), for the person, the persona or mask, is the body. The sage is one who succeeds in finding or creating harmony by "dissolving the body" through a ritual death and taking his standpoint in the middle, the void prior to phenomenal existence.

At death, the two elements separate. One, the *bo*-soul, remains with the body and goes into the tomb; the other, the *hun* or spirit-soul, begins to "wander". At this point the sage constructs a subtle body for this spirit, a body of thought and work where the *shen* or *hun* can find shelter. This is the significance of the ancestor rituals: their remembering permits the psychic element to dwell as living substance.

Death here is conceived of as a gradual disappearance, a fading into twilight and the Ghost River. For the ancestors will return after a lapse of time in the general

spiritual reservoir, sooner or later uniting once more with human bodies and human souls, as our stimuli and impulses to life.

Angry or hungry disembodied beings may manifest as what we know as ghosts, seeking to live out and fulfill their unfulfilled pains and desires. Very great humans will also manifest directly as *shen* or spirits, what we might call cultural archetypes, enduring in the cultural pantheon. They have put their being into constant circulation by being creatively and securely anchored in the complex of culture that has formed and supports them.

Now, Daoists tend to see the great importance we ascribe to death as a rather silly misunderstanding, a kind of joke. They regard death as an easy farewell. In death, it is as if the ropes of someone suspended by his feet are loosened. To achieve this standpoint, they seek to expand the experience and identification of the “I”, the ego, from the transitory to ever wider spheres. “Whoever can walk together with the sun and the moon will endure as long as they do; whoever goes beyond them lives eternally in the Way.”

For unique psychic contents or complexes accompany life and death: it is “I” who live and it is “I” who conceives of the death of my life. We humans seem to be a special species in this regard, endowed with the dubious gift of self-consciousness and therefore capable of great follies. This consciousness or “I” is a mirroring of what takes place in the brain-mind, on an incorporeal plane, and its existence is our greatest riddle.

Love of life is not an anonymous power: it is MY love of life, MY fear of its ceasing that demands a solution. And, as most religious traditions affirm, the life of the soul/body unit is of great importance in the solution. It is our only weapon in the struggle. Thus the care of the body so valued in eastern thought. We have not yet learned to die; we have not yet reached the point where we would not die sloppily, but as befits us to die. We must secure as much time as possible to reach this

stage in our life cycle. If the death that we endure is not a “proper death,” one that crowns our being, then what occurs afterwards cannot be proper.

The means for prolonging life in this tradition center on concentration of attention on the important psychic centers, activating these centers that are at rest in ordinary life, through directing the will. This is not a heroic effort, however. It is achieved through the magic power of the image. These empowered images or *xiang/symbols* attract consciousness and concentrate attention. Arranged in a definite manner, they establish relationships with the centers of the new life. Gradually and subtly, they activate psychic powers that are capable of acting on the psychic nature, bringing about what is called an internal renewal of the blood.

It is through depersonalizing or disassociation that this shaping and renewal can take place. For in states of dissociation, we are sufficiently freed to directly absorb cosmic influences. The soul concentrates its entire life in the present moment, freed of hope and fear, allowing what must disappear to disappear, allowing to approach what must approach. The heart then comes to resemble a mirror, the old water mirror of the *jian*, and reflects the things as they come and go, evoking the correct or centering reaction, not an artificial imitation, an acquired fictional goal. In the process we cultivate what one psychologist has called an *imaginal ego*, one capable of seeing itself, always, as a fiction, a collection of stories being told by the Gods.

Traditional Chinese thought conceives of life with limits set by nature or heaven, the *ming*. These are the Heavenly Years, a life expanding in time with a beginning and an end. Life itself is not predetermined, but its abundance, constancy and rhythm are given, as is the experience of death. This is neither fortunate nor unfortunate, but an accepted fact.

The problem arises when the “I” wants eternity. For the body has an underside; it has consciousness and imagines death before it dies. This is probably one of the

single most important forces in the history of humanity. We have built pyramids and political systems, waged wars and fought battles and annihilated millions of people through our aversion to being transitory.

What is to be done? The problem in the Chinese tradition is to form a new body within the temporal body. This is the idea of re-birth. The new body is a body of energy, a body of symbols. A psychic seed is formed and surrounded with physical energy. Thus a concentrated latent force develops that reaches a point where it separates from primary or transitory time. This is achieved through contemplation or Viewing/*Guan*, figure 20 in the Change, watching the signs of the new spirit as it manifests in the fields of experience after the death of the ego and its fixations.

Such a process is felt to unite thought and existence, to be effective in the world of existence, to unite the “field” and the “heart.” We are concerned here with the very practical problem of becoming independent of life while alive, not just theoretically but practically. The issue is to acquaint ourselves with the state after death while still in life. It is the theme of the Mountain/*Gen*, figure 52 in the Change, and the depersonalizing of experience it represents.

The preparation consists in creating something which, time and again, represents the experience of the infinite and to center the “I” in that state. When we reach this standpoint, we fear death no longer, but experience it as another one of the revolutions of Heaven and Earth. We see it like sleep, a physiological process common to all, easily managed if not regarded too seriously. There is no need to cross over to the other side, for, though we continue to live in this one, we are already there. The “beyond” is neither temporally nor spatially separated from the world: it is the Way, that permeates all existence and becoming.

One day the Master said:
Qian and *Kun* - are they not the two-leafed gate of Change?
Dark yin and light yang join virtues
to give the strong and the supple a form.

The fates given by Heaven and Earth
take shape through these forms.
This is how we can penetrate to the bright spirits.
The names are different, but they cover the way of all things.
What is upstream from the moment we call the Way.
What is downstream from the moment we call the vessel or tool.
The moment of transformation we call Change.

Death and renewal, change and transformation, culture and individual, humans and spirits and the great symbols that connect them, all of these are presented to us in the old Magic Mountain of the Change.

Appendix

The following is an informal selection from Jung's Letters and Lectures that give an impression of his connection with Richard Wilhelm, his feeling for the Classic of Change and his sense of the "crisis of our times."

April 1929 (CG's immense concern for Wilhelm, whose health was failing)

. . . we should impose a retreat on you somewhere on a wild rocky mountain with the pleasantest company for at least three months. Why are there no secular monasteries for people who ought to be living outside time. The world eats them up from inside if it doesn't from outside.

26 April 1929

I was somehow worried about you. Please don't be offended. You are too important to our western world. I must keep on telling you this. You mustn't merely hide away or otherwise disappear, or get ill, but wicked desires should pin you to the earth so your work can go on [re: a prospective lecture at the Nauheim Psychotherapeutic Congress] ... this will make history! Think of what it means if medical practitioners, who get at the ordinary person so brashly and in the most vulnerable spot, were to be inoculated with Chinese philosophy.... This really goes to the heart of the matter. Medicine is switching over to psychology with a vengeance and that's where the east comes in. There is nothing to be done with the theologians and philosophers because of their arrogance.

To Walter Robert Corti, 30 April 1929

... Jesus - Mani - Buddha - Lao-tse are for me the four pillars of the temple of the spirit.

25 May 1929

It is lovely to hear the word friend from you. Fate seems to have apportioned to us the role of two piers which support the bridge between East and West...

10 September 1929 from Bollingen

My commentary [on the Golden Flower] represents a European reaction to the wisdom of China... I have tried my hand at interpreting Tao. ... the extremely interesting amalgamation of Taoism with Mahayana is quite new to me .. it would be useful to have a short explanation of the concepts *tao*, *hsin* [heart-mind], *ming* [fate/mandate], *shen* [spirits], *gui* [ghosts], *hun* and *po* [types of soul] from the characters...

To Walter Robert Corti, 12 September 1929

We live in the age of the decline of Christianity, when the metaphysical premises of morality are collapsing ... the youth want to live experimentally, with no historical premises. That causes reactions in the unconscious, restlessness and longing for the fulfilment of the times (chiliasm: millenium, return and thousand year reign of Christ). When the confusion is at its height a new revelation comes, i.e., the beginning of the fourth month of world history

To Baur, January 1934

... time thus proves to be a stream of energy filled with qualities and not, as our philosophy would have it, an abstract concept or precondition of knowledge. The I Ching oracle points to this ... careful investigation of the unconscious shows that there is a peculiar coincidence with time, which is also the reason why the ancients were able to project the succession of unconsciously perceived inner contents into the outer astronomical determinants of time. This is the basis for the connection of psychic events with temporal determinants, not an indirect connection but a direct one.

To Olga Frobe-Kaptyn 29 January 1934

Psychology is a difficult and unsavory subject for the Asiatic enthusiast [Sinologists and Indologists] ... but psychology in the stricter sense is bound up with the whole practical use of the I Ching ... too much oriental knowledge takes the place of immediate experience and thus blocks the way to psychology. Still, it is understandable that people should first try all the passable ways before they can decide to set foot on the "path into the untrodden."

From Tavistock Lectures 141-44

I Ching gives the individual direct access to this whole realm, the imaginal world conceived, pieced together in Jung's mind, as a mixture of taoist, tantra, medieval, and primitive sense of animation and spirit, focused on the individual's destiny as a journey around the Self, the individuation quest.

Specialist knowledge is a terrible disadvantage. It leads you in a way too far, so you cannot explain any more.

[in talking about dreams, for example] ... I should have to quote bit after bit from Chinese and Hindu literature, medieval texts [on alchemy] and all the things you do not know. How could you?

I am a terrible novelty to a sinologist but what he has to tell us is a novelty to us. The Chinese philosophers were no fools, but they were as intelligent as we are. They were frightfully intelligent people and psychology can learn no end from old civilizations, particularly from India and China. A former President of the British Anthropological Society asked me: "Can you understand that such a highly intelligent people as the Chinese have no science?" I replied: "They have a science, but you do not understand it. It is not based on the principle of causality. The principle of causality is not the only principle; it is only relative ... the east bases its thinking and its evaluation of facts on another principle. ... The east has a word for it, but we do not understand it. The eastern word is Tao.... I use another word to designate it, but it is poor enough. I call it synchronicity... The Chinese mind experiments with that being together and coming together in the right moment, and it has an experimental method which is not known in the West but plays a large role in the East, a method of forecasting possibilities formulated in 1143 bce: the I Ching. We have not even a word for it.

From a radio talk in Munich on the publication of *Secret of the Golden Flower*, 19 January 1930

I owe my relations to China and to Richard Wilhelm simply and solely to certain psychological discoveries. In the first place it was the discovery of the collective unconscious, that is to say, the discovery of impersonal psychic processes that aroused my interest in primitive and Oriental psychology. Among these impersonal psychic processes there are quite a number which seem absolutely strange and incomprehensible and cannot be brought into connection with any of the historical symbols known to us, but for which we can find plenty of unquestionable analogies in the psychologies of the orient. Thus a whole group or layer of impersonal contents can only be understood in terms of the psychology of primitives, while others have their nearest analogy in India and China.

Years of observing such processes has convinced me that – for the present [moment/kairos] at least – the unconscious psyche of Europeans shows the distinct tendency to produce contents that have their nearest analogies in the older Chinese philosophy and the later tantric philosophy. This prompted me to submit my observations to the eminent sinologist Richard Wilhelm, who thereupon confirmed the existence of some astonishing parallels. ... our psychic situation is now being influenced by an irruption of the oriental spirit ... analogous to the psychic change that could be observed in Rome in the first century of our era ... the Chinese spirit is making itself clearly felt in the European unconscious.

From *Spiritual Problem of Modern Man*

186-194 [for the modern European] unearthing the psyche is like undertaking a full scale drainage operation. Only a great idealist like Freud could devote a lifetime to such unclean work. It was not he who caused the bad smell, but all of us – we who think ourselves so clean and decent from sheer ignorance and self deception. Thus our psychology, our acquaintance with our own souls, begins in

every respect from the most repulsive end, with those things we do not wish to see.

These movements [Theosophy – a “barbarous imitation of the east”] derive their force from the fascination of the psyche and it will express itself in these forms until we find something better.... Psychoanalysis itself and the lines of thought to which it gives rise - a development we consider specifically western – are only a beginner’s attempt compared with what is an immemorial art in the east.... The East with its superior psychic proficiency is throwing our spiritual world into confusion, fastening its hold on us from within.... It seems to be quite true that the east is at the bottom of the spiritual change we are passing through today. Only this East is not a Tibetan monastery full of mahatmas, but lies essentially within us. It is our psyche, constantly at work creating new spiritual forms and spiritual forces to help us subdue the boundless lust for prey of Aryan man... we shall perhaps come to know something of that stability which human existence acquires when the claims of the spirit become as imperative as the necessities of social life.

To me the crux of the spiritual problem today is to be found in the fascination the psyche holds for modern man. We can see in it the promise of a far-reaching spiritual change in the western world, all the more noteworthy because it is rooted in the deeper social strata and touches those irrational and –as history shows- incalculable psychic forces which transform the life of peoples and civilizations in ways that are unforeseen and unforeseeable. These are the forces, still invisible to many today, which are at the bottom of the present “psychological” interest. This fascination of the psyche is not by any means a morbid perversity; it is an attraction so strong that it does not shrink from even what it finds repellent.

What is significant in psychic life always lies below the horizon of consciousness and when we speak of the spiritual problem of modern man we are speaking of things that are barely visible, of the most intimate and fragile things, of flowers that open only in the night. In daylight everything is clear and tangible, but the night lasts as long as the day and we live in the night-time also. There are people who have bad dreams that even spoil their days for them. And for many people the day’s life is such a bad dream that they long for the night when the spirit awakes. I believe that there are nowadays a great many such people, and this is why I also maintain that the spiritual problem of modern man is much as I have presented it.