On the Concept of Freedom in the I Ching: A Deconstructionist View of Self-Cultivation

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The issue and concept of freedom touches the deepest reaches of thought regardless of culture or individual idiosyncracy. Freedom thought as a being-free is envisioned as a quality of presence. It has been thought traditionally as freedom for, or in, or from. As freedom-for, some have regarded it as a cultural achievement; as freedom-from, some profess to find it in the annihilation of desire. Others would abandon civilization and return to the woods. Some anticipate freedom-from as an apocalyptical deliverance from this vale of tears through a coming rupture in being and fantastical cosmic renewal. And freedom-in has been contemplated as realized in activity whose goal is intrinsic to itself, i.e., in an activity that is satisfied by its own exercise.

In some of the major scriptures a different concept of freedom offers itself to thought which by their own testimony has been little thought and remains so.

This essay is a meditation toward thinking that thought anew and specifically within the Chinese tradition with particular reference to the Classic of Change. Since this thought is not available, not given, except to a stage in the practice of self-examination (whether for instance in the context of self-cultivation as with the Chinese, or atma yoga with the Hindus or working out one's salvation with fear and trembling as the Christians put it) self-examination is necessary to receiving this thought of freedom, though self-examination is not sufficient to it.

A few words on the term deconstructionist which appears in the subtitle "A Deconstructionist View of Self-Cultivation": To deconstruct the thought and practice of self-cultivation is to liberate it from domination by the idea of finality. It is the case that self-cultivation is undertaken for the sake of

a finality, the realizing one's original nature which is not a private possession, but it must be undertaken without contrivance, as wei wu-weia; in short, a living without a why. Now, since action without a goal is no action, thinking uncontrived action entails distinguishing between action as intrinsically goal centered and living without a telos. Way of action, then, must be distinguished from way of life but way of life necessarily entails action. Hence there can be no deconstruction of the practice of self-cultivation by imagining uncontrived action in isolation -- whether as unforced action or a going intelligently with the flow or a successful ride upon the wave of the future. Such notions of uncontrived action do not rise above a shrewd accommodation to the felt style of linear time, present or impending. They have no part in living without a why.

II

Thus far, thought has brought us to regard self-cultivation in the two-fold of acting and living, acting as teleologically determined and living which is undominated by purpose. Clearly, the overriding sickness of our species, its self-bondage, its endemic conflict of motives, is the very clinical condition calling for self-cultivation yet self-cultivation, the way of the sage, is determined by the belonging together of two seemingly unrelated careers, one subject to causality and the other, namely, living, unspecified by any mark of causalism. Then how can they belong together and if they do belong together what delivers us from the self-misunderstanding that imagines them ever colliding on the same plane?

The roots of this meditation are embedded in the questions: what is spirit, what is spirituality, what is the way of the sage? Let us consider two spiritual styles within which to raise these questions. With respect to self-cultivation, Confucianism has always emphasized learning rather than bringing unlearning into the foreground, and philosophical Taoism has done the

opposite. Has the unlearner something to teach the learner which cannot be comprehended by the concept of process? If so, then this is the point at which the concepts of self-transformation and self-cultivation thought as processes call for a deconstruction without which there can be no reconstruction.

The first of the Confucian Classics, the Book of Change, offers a standpoint on the basis of which the relation between unlearning and learning can come clearer and a deconstruction of self-cultivation thought only as process can begin. The first hexagram, the Creative, discloses that rare thought of freedom which upon one and the same instant dis-joins the concept of self-cultivation while holding together its integrity. It will suffice to observe some highlights within lines 3, 4 and 5 of this hexagram.

III

Analects 2:4 provides a progress report. Confucius recounts his passage in learning: "At fifteen I set my heart on learning. At thirty I took my stand. At forty I had no doubts. At fifty I knew the will of Heaven. At sixty I listened to it compliantly. At seventy I could follow my heart's desire without overstepping the boundaries of what was right."

It is illuminating to compare these six stages with the six-fold structure of the I Ching's hexagram. Further, The Creative, the first hexagram of the series of sixty-four is a precise image of a progress in six stages. The hexagram comprises three digrams, i.e., three structures of two lines each; lines 1 and 2 belong to Earth, lines 3 and 4 to humankind and lines 5 and 6 to Heaven. (Perhaps this traditional three fold structuring is symbolically related to the three stages of the altar of Heaven which the Emperor climbed on making the summer and winter solstice sacrifices to the Father-Heaven or August Personage of Jade.) If we assign each digram a period of twenty-eight years this three-fold cycle totals eighty-four years. It is easy to fit Confucius' six staged progress report into this destinal time frame.

Let us examine the issue of freedom first of all by relating the career of Confucius in self-cultivation to the text of the first hexagram, The Creative, particularly in the light of the We^n Yen Commentary on the Words of the Text) for this hexagram. Within the time-frame of twenty-eight years for each digram or fourteen years for each single line, Confucius would have entered the second line by age fifteen. This line reads "Dragon appearing in the field. It furthers one to see the great man." One applies to the great man for instruction which is the posture of the Sage at age fifteen. This is in full accord with the Earth principle of receptivity.

He occupies line 3 on turning thirty and takes his stand. This is the first line of the middle digram which belongs to the human principle. This line is the point of transition between the lower half of the hexagram and the upper half. As such it marks the birthplace from the cosmically lower to the cosmically higher, i.e., from Earth to Heaven. This third line is also the point of transition between the humanly lower to the humanly higher, from the psycho-physical to the spiritually receptive. The first four of the six stages of the growth of Confucius in self-cultivation are situated at the psycho-physical level according to this paradigm. It is not until he turns sixty that he describes himself as spiritually receptive, as one ready to listen docilely to the will of Heaven. This implies that the conditions of readiness to learn, taking one's stand, having no doubts and his knowing the will of Heaven at fifty are preparations for the second birth into the spiritual sphere.

A careful study of the We^n Yen, the Commentary on the Words of the Text, on lines 3 through 5 of the first hexagram, The Creative, seems to support the pattern of progress in self-cultivation reported by Confucius. The third line describes a profound person of the highest ethical character, a person who is not prideful in high position nor anxious in a low one. Such an

individual,
having nothing to prove, can be said to be without doubts. Though his situa-
tion exposes him to peril he yet behaves as the time requires. On that ac-
count he can be said to anticipate the will of Heaven. Yet the text says
plainly that at nightfall he still remains apprehensive. We might say, he
takes his work home with him and is not yet tranquil. Can one be without
doubts and yet not be tranquil?

This third line is the turning point of the hexagram and brings with it the
crucial question: How is Heaven to be understood at this stage? It is under-
stood to be the summit of cosmic hierarchy, the causal principle under which
all processes are ordered to their beginnings, middles and ends. It is that
for the sake of whose transcendently immanent will all natural and cultural
careers rise and fall. From such a changeless principle right and wrong ac-
tion is rationally inferred. It is not surprising that at this stage of his
self-cultivation Confucius took his stand and ten years later had no doubts.
Ordinarily, one thinks that to be free of doubts is the condition for taking a
stand. Not so if, to start with, the stand is taken on a first principle and
with unflagging practice personal action is more securely anchored to that
ideality. What room is left for doubts after one has planted his feet firmly
upon such a rock? Yet, since this stage and posture cannot consummate human
nature one is left untranquil. It is from this spiritual privation and self-
bondage to metaphysical representation that the transition to line 4 is made.
The issue here is not the adequacy of metaphysical representation nor the
action and daily practices inferred from such a foundation. Rather, the ques-
tion is one of self-relation. Line 3 implies that a perfect knowledge of even
a perfect metaphysical vision is not proof against the bondage of self-mis-
understanding.

The turn from the lower trigram's uppermost line, line 3, into the upper
trigram's lowermost line, line 4, is fraught with turbulence. At

this stage
Confucius knows the will of Heaven. The line begins with the observation that
someone or something is leaping in the deep. This is an apt image for the
effort to rise qualitatively from the relative darkness of the lower trigram
into the light of the upper. Then follows the remarkable statement of the We^n
Yen that ascending and descending are without a fixed rule but that this is
altogether different (feib) from action (weic) deflected (hsiehd) (from the
Way).

Here the text explicitly distinguishes between action free from any per-
manent measure and action that misses the mark. Unlike line 3 whose stage in
self-cultivation apprehends the will of Heaven as an inflexible principle, the
present line, line 4, offers no basis for such an inference yet it recognizes
failure which it calls missing the mark. Here at line 4 Confucius is in his
fiftieth year and at this stage he says he knows the will of Heaven. He no
longer merely apprehends Heaven just as a formal principle but is aware of its
content. The We^n Yen for line 4 is remarkably rich. It makes seven brief
statements. They can be considered in the light of our analogy as effects of
having come to know the will of Heaven. They progress as follows:

1) <The Master said: Ascending and descending are without a fixed
rule. But this is altogether different from action (weic) deflected
(hsiehd) [from the Way].

2) Advancing and retreating have no constant mode. But this is al-
together different from letting down (lie) one's [human] nature.

3) The profound person (chun-tzuf) brings forward the knack (teg) for
what is fitting and sets to rights his action. His wish is to grasp the
timely. On that account he is without mistake.

4) He tests himself.

5) At this point the way of the Creative is a molting (koh).

6) The middle is not in the human person.>

Given this context, the last four sentences of the We^n Yen are difficult to translate and I suggest the following as a free translation:

7) <Therefore the territory's boundary is not a fixed one. He deliberates with utmost caution and determines it. Hence, he is without fault.>

At thirty and forty, Confucius knew that Heaven's will exists. Now, here at fifty, he meets the content of Heaven's will concretely as an address to him individually. This necessarily brings him to question himself not only as to the adequacy of his idea of Heaven but more pertinently as to the quality of his individual response to Heaven's imperative. This distinction, implied in the Commentary, points our path toward the I Ching's concept of freedom.

If in ascending and descending, advancing and retreating there is no fixed rule, no constant mode, but only the caution against losing the Way and letting down one's human nature, this throws the individual upon himself and raises the question: How do I relate to myself? Also, how is the knack for the fitting brought forward so that action is timely? Were there only the karmic lock-step sequence of events which common sense takes for granted or the uncertainty principle of modern physics, the question of self-cultivation could not arise. Self-cultivation is neither predetermined nor haphazard. It rests in the incalculable. Though it anticipates the goal of self-awakening into sageliness, it cannot of itself actualize that possibility. It cannot calculate in advance its effective steps toward self-liberation. This is succinctly expressed in the Tsa Kua, the Miscellaneous Notes attached to Hexagram 17. The text reads literally:

<Following. Without a precedent.>

Somehow action and consequence are unlinked here but without annihilating cosmic process since the sequence of hexagrams remains unbroken.

How, then, can this be understood? It must refer to that

strange instant of transformation when one level of being is dropped in favor of another. This occurs even in the biological sphere. The qualitative change from caterpillar into butterfly is an observable but incomprehensible transition. So is the instant of birth as also the instant of death. These cannot be reduced to process since, like the instant, they are not matters of duration. Consciousness is subject to the same incalculable transformation. To awaken from self-misunderstanding to understanding is instantaneous. Understanding is not an alteration in misunderstanding but a new creation. Perhaps among other things Wang Yang-ming had this in mind in saying that: "Innate knowledge is the spirit of creation. This spirit produces heaven and earth, spiritual beings, and the Lord. They all come from it. Truly nothing can be equal to this." This expression, "The spirit of creation" not only aptly reflects hexagram 1, The Creative, but must guide our inquiry from here to the conclusion of this meditation.

Within the decade from age fifty to sixty Confucius undergoes a new relation to the will of Heaven. Now, at sixty, he gives ear to Heaven's mandate compliantly. Put simply, he obeys it. Is this not the first step into genuine spiritual freedom? Surely not because he has cravenly acquiesced in a stronger will external to his own. Did he not say "He who sins against Heaven has none to whom he can pray"? (3.13) This Heaven-relation is an inward ontological quality of the human self from which one can become estranged and yet return only on pain of allowing Heaven's suasion to draw and to heal him. (Those who reduce the teaching of Confucius to the sheerly ethical cannot have thought this through deeply since it points to a possibility in self-relation. Ethics, whose sphere is actuality, cannot reach it.)

Line 4 of hexagram 1 suggests what Confucius might have gone through from age fifty to sixty. These intermediate steps are fraught with great pathos and existential ordeal. The We^n Yen continues with:

<He tests himself>

The character for `testing' (shihi) is found in only one other place in the text, hexagram 25 line 5b where one is warned against testing out a medicine for an illness not self incurred through recklessness. The illness is not to be resisted but simply observed without identifying with it. In this way one tests himself against slackness, inattention, stubborn resistance and self-pity. The Commentary then states the correlative of this self-testing:

<At this point the way of The Creative is a molting>

The character for molting (koh) has for its graph an animal's pelt subject to shedding and color change. It is the name of hexagram 49 where it means revolution and renewal. Hexagram 49's Miscellaneous Notes recall those for hexagram 17 where Following is said to be without precedent. The Notes for hexagram 49 read: <Molting. Removes precedent (or cause)>. Molting gets rid of karmic repetition in favor of a new creation. It destroys the old content of consciousness without annihilating consciousness. Molting, self-testing, entails a new creation and self-renewal.

What follows is difficult to translate because of a conceptual problem. Wilhelm/Baynes translates it as follows:

"The nine in the fourth place is too rigid and not moderate. It is not yet in the heavens above, neither is it any longer in the field below nor in the middle regions of the human."

It is easy to understand that this fourth line is not yet in the heavens above since it does not belong to the upper two lines of Heaven, namely, 5 and 6. Nor is it in the field below which belongs to the lower two lines of Earth. The chief difficulty lies in translating this fourth line as "not in the middle regions of the human" (chung pu tsai jenj). But the fourth line is in the middle regions of the human. It occupies with the third line the spatial middle of the hexagram, the place cosmically allotted to the human. Unless the text is flagrantly contradicting the cosmic structure of the hexagram, another sense of the word middle must be found. It carries

the text
forward naturally if we translate:

<The middle is not in the human person.>

This asserts that by nature the human person (jenk) does not have the middle as a private possession nor intrinsically. This is in harmony with the cosmic six-fold structure of the hexagram. Strictly speaking the two middle lines, 3 and 4, are not of the middle but from it. Their middle is Tao's, mediated to them through Heaven and Earth. This middle limits the human as person (jenk) and yet offers it its possibility for freedom. Since the human, as person, has not autonomously established its own ground it is a Tao-dependent being; further, since its existence has no settled term its becoming is an ever "wandering" through endless authentications and consummations on heeding the call of the mind of Tao.

Lest this translation, that the middle is not in the human person, seem radically at odds with the traditional Confucian emphasis on innate knowledge and the inherent ability of the human self to actualize itself, we should caution ourselves with a statement from the Ta Chuan, The Great Treatise, concerning the deeper significance of the Book of Change. Wilhelm/Baynes translates:

"In it are included the forms and the scope of everything in the heavens and on earth, so that nothing escapes it... Therefore by means of it we can penetrate the tao of day and night, and so understand it. Therefore the spirit is bound to no one place, nor the Book of Changes to any one form" (1.4.4, p. 296).

In the next chapter of the Treatise, spirit is expressly called that aspect of Tao which cannot be fathomed in terms of the two primal powers, the light and the dark (1.5.9). Thus a final why altogether escapes us. But here precisely is each individual self's spiritual task, namely, that the self abide mindful upon each instant that though a final why ever escapes it, one's own self must never try to escape from remembering this transcendent immanence, i.e.,

spirit.

In translating <The middle is not in the human person (jenk)>, I have conscientiously avoided using the word self. Not only would it throw everything into confusion but no such word appears in the Chinese sentence. Who absolutely knows himself? The heart of the matter is this: self is on the side of spirit, the incognizable, as person is on the side of phenomena. Indeed, one can say that the middle is in the human self but only as an abstraction. As an abstraction only, it is a useless notion for self-cultivation whatever it might or might not mean for philosophy. How the self undergoes the middle concretely is critical, singular, inward, a private ordeal realized in concrete freedom before freedom becomes an empty reflection. The favorite disciple of Confucius has much to teach about this. Whilst Yen Hui was present to Confucius, Confucius could make nothing of his pupil's behavior except to think that he was perhaps stupid. But on later inquiring into Yen Hui's conduct he totally reversed this opinion (2:9). Within the concept and practice of self-cultivation, this distinction -- not a division -- between self and person calls for an abiding alertness and adequate attitude since how one undergoes this distinction is critical instant by instant. This crisis scenario makes it impossible for self-cultivation to become routine habit for all that one might be happily inclined toward self-inquiry.

Surely Ch'eng Hao had in mind this distinction between self and person on observing that:

"Simply because of selfishness, man thinks in terms of his own person,
and therefore belittles principle. If he lets go this person of his and
views it the same way as he views all things, how much joy there would
be!"

Hexagram 52, Ken, Keeping Still, Mountain, observes the distinction between self and person. The Judgement reads: <Keeping Still. Keeping his back still so that he no longer seizes (huol) his person (shenm).> The graph for

huo shows a hand catching a bird. This hexagram lays out steps toward and in tranquillity available only on condition that one's person or personality is no longer misunderstood to be the self. On the strength of dying to this self-identification the last sentences of the We^n Yen for hexagram 1 line 4 open the way toward the total freedom described in line five. The last of the Commentary on the Words of the Text for line 4 reads:

<Therefore the territory's boundary is not a fixed one. He deliberates with utmost caution and determines it. Hence he is without fault.>

What would be the first caution here if not against collapsing himself into what imagination mirrors back to him in abstract reflection, namely, his person, his personality? His felt self-presence is reflected back to him in the image of his person, but, unlike the self as spirit, this person is limited, dependent, unfree and when the self grabs at it, attaches itself to it and identifies with it in other forms than the sheer linguistical "I," the self disables itself from acting through the person profoundly as is described by the Image in hexagram 47, K'un, Oppression (Exhaustion):

<The profound person pursues his aim in accordance with the goal of ming, heaven's mandate or destiny.>

If these conditions and behaviors offered by the We^n Yen for hexagram 1 line four can be regarded as plausibly related to the steps of Confucius in his own path of self-cultivation, then we have abstractly followed this journey from his knowing the will of Heaven toward his giving ear to it compliantly at 60. Abstractly is the operative word here. To have undergone concretely, viscerally these qualitative transitions as did Confucius himself is a very far cry from our own just looking on.

We come now to a moment of truth and a parting of the ways. The We^n Yen for line 5 accommodates easily the two stances of Confucius at age 60 and 70, his docile ear and his supple heart which enables him to follow his desire without overstepping the boundaries of what is right as specified by Heaven's

will. But the We^n Yen for line 5 goes further with an amazing statement. It says that when one of heavenly character precedes or leads Heaven -- a virtually unthinkable thought -- Heaven does not contradict him.

Clearly, we are now in the true sphere of spirit. The Ta Chuan says that spirit is bound to no one place nor the Book of Change to any one form (1.4.4). It calls spirit that aspect of Tao that cannot be fathomed in terms of the two primal powers, the light and the dark (1.5.9). Since dialectic cannot confine spirit, a final why altogether escapes us. But this is no embarrassment to meditative thought which notes what is repressed in the concept of self-cultivation when thought of only as process. Such thought represses spirit and the self's own dimensionless self-presence for which one has never known a beginning nor an end.

The attempt to engulf spirit within a metaphysical mayonnaise that would homogenize creation and process, generation and instantaneity is an affront to calculative thought. Meditative thought, whose sphere is spirit, does not need to help itself out with such an attempt. Calculative thought bound to causalism, process and structure is blind to spirit yet in dread that it cannot control it. The authentic, concrete thought of spiritual freedom cannot be generated out of dialectic. Do not the Classic of Change, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu come together here? Calculative thought is inherently unable to receive the intuition of concrete spiritual freedom. Surely this is why Lao Tzu says that no one under Heaven is inherently able to understand him (70), and why Chuang Tzu says that the Perfect One has no personal self and why Lao Tzu says that one who knows how to live the way of life well, will not suffer a premature death. And for what reason? Because such a one has no death spot, i.e., no spiritlessness, in him. He no longer craves experiences, nor befuddles himself with the thought that there are field trips to Reality, or that Reality is an experience. He has awakened to it that he cannot have

Reality but only be it and this releasement from his own self-presence opens
ecstatically into freedom from all experience.

Glossary

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Notes

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