

My Road to Ch'an

1. *Autobiography*

I was born in 1934 a farmer's only son in a small village in Ryh-Chaw, Shan Deng, China. I was never told by my parents that there was a wonderful light, miraculous events, or any visit by sages at my birth. In that aspect, I was born an ordinary person. When I was a young boy of twelve, I was forced to leave my family and subsequently was pushed around by the wars from the North at Tzing Tao to the South at Kuang Chou. During this long journey, I walked from Shong Tziung Palace to Gan Zhou in Jiong Hsi through various weather conditions without a normal or continuous food supply. The journey was a little hard for a boy, but not impossible since I made it.

In 1949, I was forced to be a soldier for about two years. After that, I went through many different jobs: laborer of various kinds, street vender, newspaper delivery boy, and policeman. Between the time I left my family until 1955, misfortune and suffering were like a shadow of mine. They were never far from me. I wrote a two-line verse which summarized the situation quite accurately. The verse is:

*Walking fast, I caught sufferings,
Walking slowly, sufferings caught me.*

Besides the normal work for making a living, I taught myself all the high school lessons to prepare for my college education. In 1954, I passed the entrance examination and was admitted into the Department of Civil Engineering, National Taiwan University. It is not far from reality to say that college was the beginning of my formal education.

I came to the United States in 1961 and obtained the Master's Degree of Science in the Department of Engineering Mechanics, Virginia Polytechnic Institute. After working one year as a designer with EBASCO in New York, I was admitted to the Department of Mechanical Engineering, Auburn University. I obtained my Ph.D. in 1967 and continued working in the same department until the Fall of 1989 when I retired.

Back in 1975, it was time for me to prepare for my promotion from associate professor to full professor. I had the ability and the know-how, but I would also have to play a little politics. Was it worth twisting my character to achieve something when I was uncertain of its value?

While I was pondering the answer, a more general question found its way into my mind, "What am I looking for?" In my life, wealth and power were two things which disgusted me very much. But then

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what was I trying to seek? Was there any real thing that I wanted under the title of full professor? I searched very hard and found that the answer was “no.” Hence, I got lost in a certain sense. The more fundamental question which had been rooted in my mind for a very long time suddenly came back: “Who am I?”

At the same time, while I was feeling lost, I was not only well prepared in the manipulations of my own field of mechanics, but also quite mature in the understanding of the basic principles and the fundamental spirit of science. For a reason that I can't explain, the universe is apparently divided into two main spheres: the sentient world of living beings and the insentient world of material objects. In order to explain the world around them and to protect themselves, people throughout history have formed and developed science. As far as the knowledge of science is concerned, science is objective. Most, if not all, people would agree that physical science is an expression of the true nature of the material world. At least we wish that it would be so. Some scientists have spent their entire lives attempting to determine the nature of the physical world, but how many people have even thought about the nature of human beings? Particularly, how many of us ask, “What is my own nature?” Having raised this question for myself marks a turning point in my life. I started to search for my self -- my intrinsic nature.

I cannot recall having done many good things through my life although I have always tried to do my best. I have always felt that what I have done could have been and should have been done better. In my past I have made all kinds of mistakes and transgressions, committed conceit and arrogance, shown envy and jealousy. Any unwholesome deed one can find in other people, I have committed in some way and to some degree. This confession may sound pessimistic and like self-negation, but actually that isn't. What happened in my past is like a dream. The experiences come to my mind sometimes, but I am never strongly attached to them. What happened, I cannot change. I always look forward to what I can do in the future; however, the shadow of the question “Who am I?” has been always on my mind. And the degree of doubt from this question increases monotonically with time. At this time in my life, it seems to have reached its peak. I have been determined to find a definite and sound answer to this question. And I hope that my results may help others with the same question.

2. My Question and Its Primitive Answer

When I recall my long hard journey from Shong Tziung Palace to Gan Chou, I can vividly see a boy, tired and covered with soiled clothes, walking on the road with an empty stomach. Many times, I wondered “Who is that boy?” The answer: “It is I.” Although the answer used to be loud and clear, it has diminished with time. When I am happy and excited at the time of answering the question, the answer reflects that joy and excitement, arrogance and pride. But when I am sad and depressed at the time, the answer always reflects my feelings that society was unjust to me and my slight desire to revenge

that injustice. The former expresses the strong feeling of the existence of my self, while the latter expresses the faults of others. These feelings and perceptions enclose me in a well-built cocoon which divides my world into two parts: I and others. I call this cocoon which separates me from others an ego-body.

At first, I thought that the ego-body was my own invention. But through long observation and experience in society, I have found that the idea of an ego-body is not unique at all. Almost everyone has some kind of ego-body. It is universal and has no discrimination in sex, race, nationality, and age. Based on this, I concluded that the ego-body is the product of human nature. Although I have settled on this conclusion for a long time, I have not been quite comfortable or completely satisfied with the conclusion.

3. Law of Affinity of Ego-bodies

It is found that the ego-bodies interact according to the law of affinity, just as the law of gravitation governs the motions of the celestial bodies. Between any two ego-bodies, there exists a force of affinity. If the force of affinity is positive, they attract each other. If it is negative, they repel each other. If the forces of affinity among N ego-bodies are all positive, then the N ego-bodies form a system which is called an ego-family.

Let $F(E_1 \rightarrow E_2)$ be the affinity force of an ego-body E_1 toward another one E_2 . That is E_2 attracts E_1 . Some characteristics of the affinity forces are found as follows:

- 1) The affinity force is a function of time.**
- 2) $F(E_1 \rightarrow E_2) \neq F(E_2 \rightarrow E_1)$. That is: the affinity force is not symmetric.**
- 3) $F(E_0 \rightarrow E_j) \neq F(E_0 \rightarrow E_k)$ for $j \neq k$. That is: the affinity force is not homogeneous.**
- 4) $F(E_j \rightarrow E_0) > F(E_0 \rightarrow E_j)$ for $j = 1, 2, \dots (N-1)$, then the N ego-bodies form a ego-family with E_0 as the center.**
- 5) An ego-family is stable if there exists one center, and it is unstable if there exists more than one center.**

The ego-family appears in many different names like my family, my club, my church, my race, etcetera, etcetera. To avoid misunderstanding, it must be pointed out that it is not the organization itself that makes an ego-family, but the notion of me-and-mine. The human world is a dynamic system consisting of many ego-families some of which are extinguishing while others are forming. It is much like the changing formations of the clouds on a windy day or the Milky Way in the universe. It is suggestive that our society is a prototype of the universe.

The ego-family and the ego-body are the same in nature. Without the ego-body, there is no ego-family. With the ego-body, there exists the ego-family because the major purpose of the ego-family is to strengthen the ego-body.

The human world which is viewed as a system of ego-bodies and ego-families is, in many aspects, analogous to the Newtonian structure of the universe of planets. For this reason, this model of the

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human world is called the Newtonian human world. The law of affinity between ego-bodies is comparable to the law of gravitation between planets. The Newtonian human world is not static but dynamic. Not only is the individual ego-body continuously changing with time, but new ego-families are forming while old ones are diminishing. It is like the formation and evanescence of the stars and galaxies in the sky.

With a few exceptions, I have successfully used the model of the Newtonian human world to explain many phenomena. Those exceptions have inspired me to search for further explanations.

4. Conflicts of the Ego-bodies

I have tried in many ways during my life to attain peace, tranquility, and happiness in daily living. Sometimes I have felt that happiness and tranquility were approaching me, but I have never been in the state of perfect happiness or complete tranquility. On one hand, I realize that understanding family members and friends is essential for a happy life; but on the other hand, I know that it is impossible to attain an understanding as long as I have an ego-body. In order to protect my ego-body, I have done many things which are considered proper according to society's standard of ethics. But, by acting according to a standard of ethics that is not in keeping with my principles causes a conflict, and conflict produces affliction. With such misconduct, how can I reach a state of perfect tranquility in my mind? With affliction, where is happiness?

I want happiness and tranquility, and it is reasonable to assume that everyone wants the same. There would be world peace if everyone in the world were happy and tranquil. What I want is not just my own peace but world peace. Without world peace, it is impossible for the individual to attain a complete and perfect peace, because "the part is related to the whole." The whole is happy if and only if all of its parts are happy. The part is happy if and only if the whole is happy; otherwise, it is not a part of the whole. That is: happiness (similarly for peace, tranquility and so forth) is additive. The additivity is not a strange notion but a very important and familiar property of many quantities like kinetic energy, momentum, moment of momentum, potential energy, and strain energy of a physical body. Kinetic energy of a physical body is additive because its total kinetic energy is the sum of the kinetic energies of all its parts. The effect of the additive property can be easily understood and dramatized if one views his own body as the whole. If he is unhappy because of a tumor in his stomach, he is totally unhappy.

The ego-family is formed with ego-bodies as its foundation and source. If the ego-body is not completely abolished, the ego-family will exist. As a consequence, world peace is impossible. Therefore, the solution to obtain one's perfect happiness and world peace is to destroy his ego-body.

I have thought of preaching to the world, saying, "Dear Fellows, please destroy your ego-bodies. This is the only way to solve our troubles, to obtain world peace, to have harmonious living." After the speech, I imagine myself saying, "People, either by stupidity or ignorance, cannot see the obvious

solution. The only solution!” Is this the way to crush and demolish the ego-body? It is certainly not. The only result of such a strident approach would be to further strengthen the shell of my own ego-body. Therefore, I have not taken this approach.

I have reached a state of conflict. On one hand, I accept the ego-body as an aspect of human nature which makes happiness of the whole impossible. And on the other, I recognize that the individual’s happiness is unattainable without the happiness of the whole.

5. Demolition of the Ego-bodies

Let P be a property or a statement, and ∂B be a part or element of B. Then I accept the following statement as a law:

“ is assigned to B if and only if P can be assigned to all ∂B . And P is additive.”

From this law, the solution to attain the perfect happiness and tranquility is clear in my mind. It is the demolition of the ego-bodies.

The work of the demolition consists of three steps:

- 1) Inside Clean-up: Demolish your own ego-body. This is the most difficult step because habits cause an inertia that makes you see other’s faults more clearly than your own.**
- 2) Outside Clean-up: Have no thought of the ego-bodies of others. Otherwise, the thought of their ego-bodies will give birth to a new ego-body of your own. Having accomplished the outside clean-up, you will be free from the bondage of space.**
- 3) Non-clean-up: Have no thought of the demolition when the work of the first two steps has been completed. Otherwise, the memory of the ego-bodies will give birth to a new ego-body. The non-clean-up will free you from the bondage of time.**

These three steps form one solution and cannot be separated. It is essential that you understand this. The work in the first and second steps is called merit, and the work in the third step is called virtue. Merit-virtue is one process, not two. Merit without virtue will demolish the ego-body only temporarily, at one time in one situation, but as time proceeds and situations change, a new ego-body will form again. Therefore, merit without virtue causes one’s ego-body to die and be reborn in the space-time domain. We may say that performing the merit is to escape the space bondage while performing the virtue is to escape the time bondage. But to escape the space-time bondage, the merit-virtue must be completed as one process, not two. To understand this, one must think of the purpose and the formation of the ego-body. Its purpose is existence and survival, protection and prosperity. Its formation is rooted in the principle of dualism. This is not a speculation but a proven fact. Let us examine it further.

The formation of an ego-body depends on two conditions: an internal and an external condition. The internal condition is a person’s freedom or ability to choose a cause of speech or action. Once a cause is chosen, the effect is determined by the external condition, the environment. Therefore, once the cause is completed, the cause-effect or karmic relation is a dead one just like the stress-strain relation

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of a metal bar which can be determined in a laboratory. To say that a human being has no freedom to select the cause is, of course, contrary to our experiences. Therefore, I have realized that human beings have a nature, a human nature which consists of freedom as its most essential and indispensable element.

It has been shown above that the formation of the ego-body is basically a response of human nature to environmental changes. One may think that, since the ego-body is a consequence of environmental changes, then one must have an ego-body. To think in such a way is to deny the essential element of human nature -- freedom. Without freedom the behavior of a human being differs very little from that of a piece of wood or a piece of metal bar; at most, he is a wonderful machine, a complex robot. This approach implies that the cause-effect relation is a dead one; and, hence, the essential element -- freedom -- is ruled out from human nature.

To accept the assumption that freedom is an essential part of human nature, and hence of the cause-effect relation, has two important implications:

- 1) To change the effect, one has to change the corresponding cause, not the effect itself.**
- 2) Once the cause is completed, the effect will follow in due time as an echo follows a sound.**

From this assumption, we can see that everyone has an opportunity to improve himself and thus better his future by changing the causes; and everyone needs to take responsibility for his behavior. Sometimes we may have irresponsible motives, but we don't want to have any irresponsible actions. Therefore, if we want to be responsible, we have to train our thoughts to move in a proper way, that is, to think properly. By thinking right, the right behaviors will naturally follow. But how can we learn to think properly? We must first know all the possible ways, and then have the ability to choose; this is intelligence. We gain the ability to choose by practice and many times by mistakes.

To summarize, one can use his human freedom to demolish his ego-body; this is merit. While virtue is breaking off the karmic relation or removing the attachment to environmental sources which stimulate the growth of the ego-body. Therefore, merit-virtue is one process, not two; united, not separated.

6. My Puzzle -- The Vicious Circle

At this time in my life I became awakened to the existence of my ego-body and realized that with such an ego-body, perfect happiness and complete tranquility are impossible. To attain a state of complete happiness and tranquility, I clearly and fully understood that I had to demolish my ego-body. But did I demolish my ego-body after I achieved my understanding? No, I didn't. I made some effort to weaken it. As to demolish it, I did not and could not do it. Why? Why couldn't I do what I thought I should do? I was greatly puzzled by this.

Since I knew the solution I kept cultivating myself to weaken my ego-body. At a time when my ego-body was weakened to a certain degree, I realized why I could not demolish my ego-body. The reason: I was afraid that I would have nothing left after my ego-body was demolished. I was startled by the reason. In addition, I recognized that the fear that I would have nothing left after the demolition of the ego-body showed a greed for something; but it was a reasonable and understandable “greed”. The greed for something is one of the very sources of the ego-body’s formation. Hence, the problem of finding tranquility and the solution of destroying the ego-body form a vicious circle.

The situation of the vicious circle troubled me for quite a while. It led me in three different directions:

- 1) **The ego-body is an essential characteristic of human nature and nothing can demolish it. Hence, perfect happiness and tranquility, full understanding and communication, world peace and harmonious living are simply impossible. The hope to attain such a wonderful state of mind is just a daydream, expectation without any foundation, and a false thought.**
- 2) **The ego-body is not an essential characteristic of human nature.**
- 3) **If the ego-body is an essential characteristic of human nature and one will have nothing left after its demolition, then I will sacrifice myself by willpower and break the vicious circle.**

The third way of thinking is unnatural and incompatible with my experiences and observations. Not many, hardly any, human beings are motivated by sheer sacrifice. On the other hand, many people do make sacrifices when they are motivated by the hope of gaining something else in a different form. Therefore, I will not search any further in this direction. The other two ways of thinking are based on the question: Is the ego-body an essential characteristic of human nature?

7. Is the Ego-body a Human Nature?

This question is very critical. The answer was the turning point of my life. If the ego-body is a human nature, there is nothing anyone can do to alter it. If it is not a nature, one has to find his own original nature, provided there is one. Therefore, I accept the following statement as a law:

“Man has a human nature with freedom as its essential attribute.”

This statement is not a mathematical hypothesis but a physical law. It is not a philosophical theory but a reality which can be found in our hearts. We have to observe our own conduct and thoughts to prove to ourselves that we have human nature and that we have the freedom to alter our thoughts and conduct. We not only must have the proof but also the proof must be sound and firm. It must be so firm that, if ever questioned with a sword to your neck, you would still believe and defend it.

To see or realize the human nature is difficult, but to show that the ego-body is not the most essential quality of human nature is not difficult at all. One only has to understand the meaning of the word “nature” which will be discussed in depth in the next chapter. At this time, it suffices to observe

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only one condition of nature -- nature is independent of time. In other words, nature remains the same while the environment changes. Since the ego-body is a product of or a response to the environment, it changes with the environment. Therefore, it is not a nature. This conclusion can also be obtained if one observes that the ego-body is formed by weaving together all the forces of affinity (positive and negative). The forces of affinity are functions of time. Hence, the ego-body is not a nature.

If one knows his own nature, he can live by it and respond to all environmental changes according to it. If, however, one does not know his nature, he will either want to follow the environmental changes and will be lost in the constant changes or he will want to be himself. If he wants to be himself, then the only purpose of his life is to see and realize his one and only nature. Otherwise, how can he be himself?