

SEASHORE PHILOSOPHY: A LIVING EXAMPLE OF TAOISM

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This presentation of Taoism will be placed in relation to Hermeneutic Phenomenology. It begins in San Francisco, the western edge. From here where does one go? This is it. Walk the beach to fro and back again. What does all this mean? Standing on the edge of the world wondering what all this is about with no place to go but to fro and back again.

Let us begin with the example of walking along the beach and turning toward the reflecting pond, the ocean. Along the shoreline there is no separation of knowledge from not-knowledge. It is! Back again. Now where? Chinese philosophy not only takes me beyond the opposition of separations presented by western thought but also reveals its non-separation from the outset, it is integral. It is!

On the western edge of this continent here I found myself. I found an openness beyond which I cannot see, much like the vista stretching out to touch other worlds past this side of the sea. I know there is another side another water's edge but I cannot see it. Finding myself in San Francisco, living at the Ocean Beach was much the same kind of experience. My own future faced me here, a person who reads books and articles, whose life was just as open as that seashore horizon whose edge I wander along each day.

Each morning I walk out to meet the beach, the sun rising at my back. I welcome the day as I walk back and forth on this narrow strip of California coastline and wander my thoughts along. We share this ribbon of foaming, ever-changing edge of the world. We collect together each day. Many familiar faces approach, others are unknown. We are like shells cast upon the beach for only a short time, disappearing as if swept away by the next wave, carried back into the ocean's depths. We are here for a moment, washed back into the sea of humanity.

I walk along. Some mornings are fogged mirrors, vision limited, cold winds whipping the sand around and about. Some mornings glisten in pristine clarity letting the water sparkle like jewels, tails of red fire seeming to flare atop the waves as the sun shines through its mist. The ocean moves in, moves out. This place where water, sky and earth meet is never the same. The tide comes in, the tide goes out, each returning wave pushing against the incoming swell as it is pulled back into the boundless depths and swallowed into the vastness of an unknown deep.

I walk, wonder and think. Ocean Beach friends are out again today. They approach. We talk, we laugh, we share. Then we go our own ways.

We change each other and for each other. What to do? Where to go next? My consciousness drifts out to ride with the rubber-suited surfers bobbing along like corks on top the freezing water, waiting to catch the next big one, paddling like human windmills, arms flailing in an attempt to go with the surging momentum of the incoming wave as it crests and roars beachward, carrying the delighted board-riding enthusiast for a short, wild distance. Suddenly the water upends the board into the sand and brine, crashing on the sandy beach, washing its path, stretching and reaching as far toward the dryness as it can. Momentarily, between in and out, a profound pause and silence, a motionless moment, as if undecided, then reversing its flow, rushing back against itself, pulling sand, shells, pebbles with it into the source from which it welled up and surges toward uniqueness. This motion is endless, relentless, never ending but never the same.

I turn toward this reflecting pond. There is too much to know! I know nothing. Here comes my Ocean Beach characters again, all to my senior, they constantly amaze me. Each offers a new insight. Each suggests an alternative. I have gone scenic with their views. Theirs is the way of experience. Mine is different, the conceptual, philosophical, the abstract. Each is different, sometimes not agreeable to one another but with one another. No one owns this beach to the exclusion of others no matter what the difference. Here we are ourselves. Here where water, sky and earth mingle, where separation is an ever-changing illusion. I have followed my own path and it led me here today. The next wave washes in and one finds oneself through reflection, here, I am!

Chuang Tzu breaks the paths, opens the views of knowledge and threatens all values. This is philosophy! For Chuang Tzu:

‘Nothing does it,’ ‘something makes it like this’— these are speculations born out of doubt. I look for the roots of the past, but they extend back and back without end. I search for the termination of the future, but it never stops coming at me.¹

For Chuang Tzu, “There is life, there is death, there is a coming out, there is a going back in— yet in the coming out and going back its form is never seen.”²

Coming out and going back in is to release oneself into the open-dimension of ongoingness.³ Nothingness and existence is in harmonious change and transformation. The self is an achievement of disclosing one’s own self, it is a becoming in relation to others within one’s environment. There is no dualistic subjective/objective distinction, it is each into every other.

Pierre Thévenaz, a Swiss phenomenologist, presents a view that seems harmonious with the Chinese. For Thévenaz, “immediately reflexive consciousness of self is a *constituting power* more original, a fact more primitive, than intentionality.”⁴ Instead of interpreting reflection by means of intentionality, Thévenaz interprets intentionality on the basis of the reflexive consciousness. There is then no loss of continuity.

When considering the yin-yang principle, the yin is the reflexive, the yang is the reflective. This is not a dualism. It is an explicit expressing and implicit unity. The reflexive/reflective resides in dynamic interplay. It is a blended harmony. This is a continuous flow. One without the other chopsticks cannot interplay.

Meanwhile back at the beach, experience is the ground I walk upon! There is no separation between me and my body, between my feet half buried in the sand and my head that sticks up into clouds of fog. For life out here on the edge, the bench in front of the Cliff House is the resting place for some of the Ocean Beach walkers. It is reserved by some unseen sign for the Ocean Beach regulars. For other Ocean Beach regulars the ongoing conversation goes on with one another along the walkway in each moment passing. We meet each day, we flow out to the beach, pull back into daily life. Each day is different we come together then part.

Along the ocean beach wall waves crash relentlessly against the buttressed Sutro Hill in winter where the water retreats at year’s lowest tide leaving sea life stranded on drying rocks and marooned in tidal pools. Caverns beneath the rocks appear revealing their dark mysteries inside filled by water most of the time. A rubberized man pads up beside me, barefoot and oblivious to all but the water’s mood and movements for the day. He is studying the water like a map is engraved on the inside of his eyes, plotting an unseen oceanographer’s chart. All this is done to figure out just where on this western edge to enter the surf, paddling into the waves, surfboard tied to his ankle. The force of the sea can separate them only to a certain extent, just as far as his leash. I wonder, who has whom?

It was then, that I thought an example from Chuang Tzu. Confucius was sight-seeing where the water falls some thirty fathoms and races along so swift that no fish can swim in it. He saw a man dive into the water. Thinking something was wrong, Confucius summoned his disciples to line up on the bank and pull the man out. But after a short distance the man came out and began strolling along the embankment. Confucius then asked what special way did the man stay afloat. The man said:

I have no way. I began with what I was used to, grew up with my nature, and let things come to completion with fate. I go under with the swirls and come out with the eddies, following

along the way the water goes and never thinking about myself.
That's how I can stay afloat.⁵

Seashore philosophy is looking to nature and everyday life experiences. There is no need to find anything it comes naturally. The resounding sea touches true. It is here that Chuang Tzu is so clear, so true:

Make few your needs, lessen your desires, and then you may get along even without rations. You will ford the rivers and drift out upon the sea. Gaze all you may—you cannot see its farther shore; journey on and on—you will never find where it ends. Those who came to see you off will all turn back from the shore and go home, while you move ever farther into the distance.⁶

Few needs, less desires, this I have found as giving way. Giving way, is not giving up I cannot push the ocean, it gives, it surrounds. It gives it stays. It does not run away. Yet, those who turn their back from the shore will not see. With unfathomable vastness Chuang Tzu says:

You can't discuss the ocean with a well frog—he's limited by the space he lives in...You can't discuss the Way with a cramped scholar—he's shackled by his doctrines. Now you have come out beyond your banks and borders and have seen the great sea—so you realize your own pettiness. From now on it will be possible to talk to you about the Great Principle.⁷

The naturalness of the ocean is spontaneity. There is a suddenness yet a gradualness within the flow. While you are here the ocean flows, when you are not here the ocean flows. An unbroken nearness is a long way from nearness. End and beginning is an unbroken round of non-differentiation between motion and rest, change and permanence. Rest is in the midst of motion, motion is comprising of rest. Rest is neither apart from motion nor motion apart from rest. Yin and yang co-exist. These currents are given to interpenetration. Each comes and goes, gathers and poises itself to hurtle beyond its own limits, into boundless exchange. This is an endless alternation of motion and rest, change and transformation. The resounding sea is in with the whirl, out with the swirl. In describing the sea, Chuang Tzu, says it is, "Never to alter or shift, whether for an instant or an eternity; never to advance or recede, whether the quantity of water flowing in is great or small."⁸

This is knowledge, deep, unfathomable, it ends to begin again, again and again. It is, says Chuang Tzu, "That which can be increased without showing any sign of increase; that which can be diminished without suffering any diminution."⁹ This depth, subtlety and simplicity are not

founded upon purposeful striving. It is a spontaneous natural flow.

Seashore philosophy is a continuous flow of *discovering-describing-disclosing* ongoing meaning. Foghorns call across the chasm of ocean's depths, ships answer through gusting shrouds of fog, winding their way into the safety of the bay, under the west's Golden Gate. It reminds me of us, of people moving along in life, calling out to the depths, across distances beyond, waiting for answers that may never be heard. Lighthouses entrance the rocky crevasse here and across the bay, buoys mark the shipping lanes and tugboats act like butlers who escort the visiting vessels to moor at the waterfront docks. My thoughts have drifted again, I've forgotten how long I've been walking. Ideas ramble, knocking against one another, I've forgotten myself, what a delight! This is it.

Let me, if you please, go backward and forward. This is what I have come to find as *existential hermeneutics* as I walk along Ocean Beach each morning in San Francisco. I will begin then by saying that Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Taoism emerge in the crosscurrent of interpenetration. The naturalness of the ocean is an unbroken round of motion and rest. Each wave comes and goes, gathers and poises itself to hurtle beyond its own limits, into boundless change.¹⁰ Yet, the currents co-exist. Going backward and forward, to fro and back again, is an evocative interplay in dialogue, in the ocean itself.

The philosopher's thought is already situated. Something is always presupposed. My existence here and now is a co-existence situated from the historical and social view. Other thinkers are present even if I maintain a silence about their presence. A circle, we are before I am, is philosophy reflecting upon the world which includes it.

Philosophy is hermeneutics. Interpretations of the human being, which are perspectival, cannot through-and-through, from beginning to end, unmitigatedly comprehend the sheer inexhaustible richness of its hidden meaning. There will continue to be other thinkers who proceed from different experiences. This in itself further displays the inexhaustible richness. Whether the other is in truth or with truth, so to speak, we are in dialogue. In dialogue both of us can go where neither of us alone could go.

For Martin Heidegger, hermeneutic and phenomenology are but one. Yet, in *Being and Time* hermeneutics remains in the background with phenomenology unfolding the hermeneutic. Hermeneutics is, says Heidegger, connected with phenomenology. One begins with the given and searches for expressed or unexpressed intentions. This reading of the text is saying in another way or possibly better way what the writer says. Here is where Heidegger came up against himself: can one say in a different or better way what the poet says? With Friedrich Hölderlin as the poet of

poets, how could even a poet do an interpretation!

Now, I think Heidegger did make a sound move in maintaining that phenomenology is the approach to ontology and later formulating hermeneutics in another way, otherwise we would be without *Being and Time*. Hans-Georg Gadamer has already made this move in that the effects outside the field of the text are at work. Here is where the first theme of this presentation becomes clear: *identity and variation*. No matter which thinker it is that has discussed hermeneutics, prior to even me, I cannot from beginning to end obtain the original meaning but only take it up in my own way.

In dialogue, what is taken in from the other is the *identity*, as it is given back to the other, it is transformed, becoming a *variation* of its original spokenness. One identifies what the other is saying *while* placing a given slant or variation on it, as each responds from where they live. This is what I have come to find as *dialogal hermeneutics*. People do not think the same with different languages. Without variation we would have to bid farewell to culture.

This is so basic, that I would like to say, when considering *consciousness and memory* one can see the depth of the complexity of *identity and variation*. When one looks and sees something, looks away and looks back and sees it again, it is different. There is no consciousness without memory¹¹ and no continuation without memory of the past to the present. The sounding-resounding-sea evokes the depths of *identity and variation*.

Each morning as I walk along Ocean Beach, out here where everything changes and the more it changes it stays the same, life makes sense. I open into the ocean blue depths and on the surface sparkling waterscape reflections resound the sound. The tide is in, breakers are rolling up past the last water's return. Tides come in, go out. Each time makes a difference within the continuous flow. This narrow ribbon of sand winds down to the rocky buttressed cliff where waves swelling, wear and change their faces, ceaselessly.

This morning's tide has peaked, releases and turns to the opposite. Now, it pulls everything back into the depths from where it came. Out rushing water rakes through the sand, picking up debris of all kinds. In 20 minutes the beach face has changed to a new look. I stroll further to find a pool teeming with stranded sea creatures left by the out rush, left to perish in channels of water now yards from the safety offered in its luminous brine.

In saunters, a very old man, with shoulders pointed way up high and head hung down ever so low, going this way then that coming back and

around again not going anywhere in particular. These are merely what are called, says this unhurried idler, boundless turnings.¹² This is a constant flow of change and transformation.¹³ The depth of the complexity of Hermeneutic Phenomenology is the un-covering-interpretation-of-meanings that is not immediately given. Hermeneutics is fundamental to phenomenological description and integral with philosophical phenomenology. For interpretation to begin some understanding is already-there, one's presuppositions of that which is to be interpreted. This beginning is given-to-further-meaning as the hermeneutic circle becomes wider.

Follow the Way in your journey, says Chuang Tzu and already you will be there.¹⁴ This is not to try to get away but to go to the depth of things. The idea is not to get out of the circle but to move in it. This is not circular reasoning. Hermeneutics is a relatedness backward and forward. It is a reaching into and through, for a wider understanding. The un-covering-interpretation-of-meanings is a working out of these beginnings in relation to the things themselves, to understand a theme. This is a going into, a going on and back which gives forth a present theme. It is possible to hear that which is said and that which is unsaid.

In the Introduction to *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, Burton Watson says:

Often, in the case of ancient Chinese, a different punctuation of the text or a different interpretation of the words will make sense out of what at first glance seemed nonsense.¹⁵

In this way the researcher can come to a theme expressing it, although in another way, what the subject presents, to a wider whole. The hermeneutic circle proceeds from a whole to a part then back again, language, words and language again. It is an expanding like a vise that expands with the unscrewing in which it was squeezed. It is always whole yet can spread itself over a wider surface. This is to be open to that which is beyond what was said. That which is left unsaid gives itself toward the present within the context out of which it is to be.

The theme and that which it arises out of the thematic field is co-present. Although in the context but not relevant to a particular theme is the margin, which is co-present. At the wider, is the dimensional field. A theme is that which stands forth. A theme is that which arises for the researcher, although in another way, what the subject presents, to the wider whole. This is to bring the far near. In so doing it is disclosed in a clearer way. Interpretation maintains the quality of self-evidence. This is staying-with the continuity, in going on and back from there to here, to bring it near.

Interpretation is within the context which makes something meaningful. It asks for the meaning. One begins with the given and searches for intentions which are expressed or unexpressed in the context. The researcher comes to a theme expressing it in another way, what the subject presents. A theme can only be understood from the whole and vice versa. Themes are at work within the context. That which resides outside the subject's intentions is also at work.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology goes beyond the immediately given, when considering immediacy as givenness. In this way meaning is amplified, enriching one's understanding by bringing forth further relations. Anticipations go beyond what is directly present. This is beyond mere structure and into the dynamics. It is a moving into the dynamic structure. This is phenomenology amplified. Understanding is the theme of knowledge. The question is to understand, *at this time*, the stance that is responsible for that which constitutes getting there.

Within this composition, the dynamic structure, resides the possible and the actual, the direct and indirect meaning. This is how meaning comes into being and what brings it forth. Yet, the subject is already-in an existing whole that is society. The subject is within the within, woven in. The phenomenon is within and at work accompanied by inclusion and exclusion. The subject is seen as a self-in-relation to the other and the world,¹⁶ while changing. A phenomenon brings forth the possibility of different phenomena. Here is where the second theme of this presentation becomes clear: *discovering-describing-disclosing*. This theme is beyond mere description. For Margaret Chatterjee:

The word "elucidation" used by some of the French phenomenologists indicates rather more happily what the phenomenological way of doing philosophy is like. We elucidate structures of consciousness rather than describe them.¹⁷

In dialogue, *identity and variation; discovering-describing-disclosing* are integral *hermeneutic turns*. The researcher does an intersubjective thematization of the meaning of the text. This second theme, can be displayed in a clearer way by the *hermeneutic see*. Along the seashore I find myself discovering a seashell that is before me, immediately I am describing it as I go into beyond just mere appearance of the phenomenon, I find myself disclosing the meaning of it as it is disclosing itself to me.

The sound of waves cresting and breaking in thunderous crashing sounds filled my ears. The rhythmic pounding noises followed by the sound of hissing foam from the saltwater grinding the sand were about the only things I noticed this morning as the path opened up before me step by step.

The wet chilling fog so typical of this time of year shrouded each next step in mystery. Far out to my left I could hear the incoming ship, bellowing its low toned call, warning any others on the shipping lane it was on its way into the mouth of the bay.

My thoughts were wandering like my feet on the sands beneath me and it was in the midst of this gray sheer curtain that filtered the sun I knew was above this temporary blanket over the beach. Suddenly my eyes focused quickly. What is it? I wondered. Something half hidden, an unknown obscured by continually swirling sands pushed ever more strongly toward the shore by the incoming tide. It could be any object dumped into the sea, a bottle, a small piece of wood, a rock. No, as I approach its fan-like spined calcium white colored hardness began to crystallize into the image I so often stumble upon in my daily seashore stroll.

But it is not the same. Reaching down I uncover it from its sandy vault to reveal it more fully. The shape is different, its weight and texture tell me it is not the usual shell that is left awash by the outgoing tide. No, this one is complete, whole. It is not the empty domain that once housed a sea creature but is heavy, full of its life. It is home!

This morning's find is different from the typical companion to wanderers on the sand. It is alive and has to be returned to its natural surroundings that sustain its particular environment for life. A new kind of sea-being was here today, here before I happened upon it and which has now resubmerged its shell into the waterside sands beneath the foaming relentless movement that hides it again.

This self-forgetful involvement is an immersing in the movement of showing. This is self-extending. It is opening up openness. Although Gadamer suggests that all understanding has a moment of loss of self, I who am punning not lost in I-less, sense that the Chinese, especially Chuang Tzu,¹⁸ feel that spontaneity is self-forgetful. It is an extending circle of involvement. For Watson:

In the end, the best way to approach Chuang Tzu, I believe, is not to attempt to subject his thought to rational and systematic analysis, but to read and reread his words until one has ceased to think of what he is saying and instead has developed an intuitive sense of the mind moving behind the words, and of the world in which it moves.¹⁹

Although the translation did not mention hermeneutics, to read and reread the text and cease to think of what one is saying, yet moving intuitively into the world that moves is the spontaneity of hermeneutics. In developing knowledge the hidden becomes articulated. Knowledge begins

with wonder that presupposes an already-there that guides the development of the *hermeneutic see*. The *hermeneutic see* is, from one shore to the other, given-to-further-meaning as the circle becomes wider. Although Gadamer wants to speak of concentric circles, I think, it is a dynamic structure. Each participates. Picture the ocean as a reflecting pond. If I throw a pebble into a pond there is movement. Each wave extends the shore from one to the other. This is what I have come to find as *the turn of experience*, illuminating the passage from the immediately given to the hidden meaning. Only when the axis occupies the center of a circle can things in their infinite complexities be responded to. This is, says Wing-tsit Chan, the synthesis of opposites.²⁰ Never turning back is, for Chuang Tzu, like one who tries to shout an echo into silence or to prove that form can outrun shadow.²¹ One goes back then again returns to themes and *Experiential Expressions* and transcends the immediately given, extending understanding, bringing forth further relations in the text. These two themes: 1) *identity and variation*; 2) *discovering-describing-disclosing* trade places with each other, as Chuang Tzu would say, gathering-together and scattering bring it all to completion.²²

Notes

- 1) *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 293.
- 2) *Ibid.*, pp. 256-257.
- 3) Coming and going is without end, without stop, without words. The word is not the thing itself. I cannot sit on the word chair. Abstraction of the modern word is derived by a process of distinction and separation. Whereas root metaphor is the image conveyed by the word.
- 4) Pierre Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology?: and other Essays*, trans. James M. Edie, Charles Courtney and Paul Brockelman, ed., intro. James M. Edie, preface John Wild (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), p. 131.
- 5) *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 212.
- 7) *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 239.

- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 11) Henri Bergson, *The Introduction to a New Philosophy*, trans. Sidney Littman (Boston: John W. Luce and Co., 1912), p. 53.
- 12) *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, op. cit.*, p. 181.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 14) *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- 15) *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 16) For Heidegger this is Being-with. This is what I have come to find as *Tao-with*.
- 17) Margaret Chatterjee, *The Language of Philosophy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 131. At the Colloque Gabriel Marcel, Paris, France, 28-30 Septembre 1988 à La Bibliothèque Nationale, Margaret Chatterjee communicated to me that she had Paul Ricoeur in mind when speaking of French Phenomenologists.
- 18) The turning that has no direction, that responds to things, says Chuang Tzu, is never at a loss. Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, op. cit.*, p. 160.
- 19) Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, op. cit.*, p. 7.
- 20) Wing-tsit Chan, trans., comp., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 183.
- 21) *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, op. cit.*, p. 377.
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 292. This is beyond Heidegger's gathering. For the Taoist taking no action is not doing nothing. It is doing nothing unnatural.