Chapter Seven

Desires and Emotions

You can't always get what you want.

There are amoralists who would agree with Nietzsche's remark that morality may be "responsible for man, as a species, failing to reach that peak of magnificence of which he is capable," but they might have a very different vision of what life at the peak would look like. Nietzsche hated morality because it kept the "good" (i.e., the strong) down; but it is also possible to be dissatisfied with morality because it does *not* keep them down. Morality may be the "danger of dangers" because it gives "the strong" a way to rationalize their aggression, and because it allows selfishness and cold-heartedness to wear the respectable moralist garments of rights, duties, and claims. It may be the danger of dangers because it can be used to defend war, revenge, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, lying, theft, monogamy, polygamy, and the status quo.

Moralists try to help us achieve their ideals by offering us moral reasons for doing things, and by pointing to the goodness of the things they want us to choose and the badness of the things they want us to avoid. They understand that much suffering can result from desires and emotions that are too numerous or too intense and, since they are moralists with an affinity for the concepts of good and evil, they manage to see the desires and emotions they blame for our unhappiness (or *their* unhappiness) as evil. Since many of the desires and emotions that have been frowned upon over the

centuries are natural and harmless, branding them as “evil” has itself been a great source of suffering. Even if a desire or an emotion is harmful, if we call it “evil” we will drive it underground by blaming and stigmatizing those who have it. When we see a desire as evil we will be less disposed to try to understand it in terms of its causes and effects, and more inclined to punish its owner.

In the last few decades we have learned much about desires and emotions from neuro-psychology, evolutionary theory, and other disciplines that study our brains and our behavior. Perhaps we would be wise to place a moratorium on moralizing about how evil (or good) some desires and emotions are until we have assimilated a 21st century understanding of them. In the past a depressing number of desires have been branded as evil—desires for sex (of every kind), attention, profit, control, comfort, information, autonomy, pleasure, pain, revenge, music, beer, and dancing, to mention a few. Calling on morality when we want to discourage some harmless, inconvenient, or even dangerous desire usually disguises our real motivation, and it always throws up a cloud of dust by inviting everyone to an argument that can’t be resolved.

Moralizing about emotions is equally pointless. Since we know how useful both fear and anger can be, what could it mean to say that either is evil? There may be moralists who hope that morality will help us overcome emotions they fear will destroy us, but calling anger evil is not likely to have much effect on anyone’s anger. If we really want to conquer anger, we need to understand its role in our survival as a species and in our successes and failures as individuals. We need to see it operating in our day to day interactions, but when we judge any emotion to be evil, we may be led to deny its

presence, or its strength, even to ourselves. So while moralists may "mean well" by moralizing about desires and emotions, the amoralist has no use for the claim that desires are evil and no need to call obviously harmful emotions "bad."

1. What to do about Desires and Emotions. Since our resources are finite and our desires are numberless, many desires are destined to remain unsatisfied. The result is often suffering, not from the actual lack of the item desired, but from the painful and distracting nagging of our unsatisfied desire. Emotions too can be relentless and overwhelming, so if we are smart we will look for some way to keep from being incapacitated by unlimited desires and all-consuming emotions. This is not a new thought, and history tells us that almost every possible solution has been tried. Some have embraced and defended their emotions, or set out to satisfy as many of their desires as possible. Others have struggled to eliminate, reduce, ignore, or control their desires and emotions, either all of them, or at least the ones they find unwelcome, for whatever reason.

Antisthenes, the founder of the Greek school of **Cynics**, and his disciple Diogenes characterized ordinary comfort as luxury, and rejected the conventions and values of their contemporaries. The name of the Cynics happened to be the same as the word for 'doglike', and this mirrored and reinforced the general opinion that the Cynics lived like dogs. It was said that they would eat when they were hungry, sleep when they were tired, and even have sex in public, if that is what they felt like doing. They wanted to be independent of circumstance, and it seemed to them that the way to achieve this was to reject the comforts and the conventions of society and to "follow

nature." They aimed to eliminate desires for the things most people wanted, but they seem to have had nothing against desires as such, and they do not appear to have been interested in eliminating or even calming emotions like pride, anger, or annoyance.

To find someone willing to promote the elimination of all desires we must look to India, and the gentle asceticism of Vardhamana Mahavira (599-527 B.C.). Like the Buddha, Mahavira was raised as a prince and eventually left his wife and family. After twelve years of self-denial, self-mortification, and rigid asceticism, he attained a kind of enlightenment, and then spent the rest of his life teaching others the Jain path of self-denial and *ahimsa*, which is centered around the resolve to refrain from causing harm to any living being.

Like the Cynics, the **Jains** abandoned the comforts and conventions of society (one sect was "sky clad"), but they went further and rejected even moderate and natural desires. They claimed that we can only attain the ultimate goal of absolute peace and eternal independent bliss if we can eliminate all desires, and thereby all action—and by 'all', they meant *all*. Everything we do results in karma, which leads to future rebirths and new opportunities to suffer. They saw persons as individual monads of consciousness encrusted by the karma, and they believed that we can regain our purity and win liberation only if we stop accumulating karma and somehow destroy what we have already acquired. This can be achieved, they said, but only by the complete cessation of all action. Most Jains do not even try for "sallakhana" (death by voluntary self-starvation). Legend says that Mahavira's parents achieved this, but that goal may

be more of an ideal, since freedom from much suffering can result if we keep moving in the direction of the ideal—even if we never arrive.

If some philosopher says "A," we can always find another who says "Not-A." Such is the case here. In India, the Jain ideal of extreme renunciation was countered by the advice of the **Carvakins**, atheistic materialists who thought that the soul is physical and that death is the end of consciousness. One standard summary of their system describes them as holding the following beliefs:

> There is no world other than this; there is no heaven and no hell; the realm of Siva and like religions are invented by stupid impostors of other schools of thought.
>
> The enjoyment of heaven lies in eating delicious food, keeping company of young women, using fine clothes, perfumes, garlands, sandal paste, etc.
>
> The pain of hell lies in the troubles that arise from enemies, weapons, diseases; while liberation (*moksa*) is death which is the cessation of life-breath.
>
> Chastity and other such ordinances are lain down by clever weaklings. (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 235)

It is easy to see why Carvaka was never popular—its atheism, naturalism, hedonism, and disbelief in chastity would have outraged priests, alienated devout believers, and terrified simple people committed to conventional morality and traditional religion. The Carvakins' beliefs must have included amoralism, but their preference for young women, fine clothes, perfumes, garlands, and sandal paste does not flow from their amoralism. After all, an amoralist can be an ascetic and a moralist can "justify" a preference for any of the pleasant things just enumerated.

Meanwhile in Greece, the **Cyrenaic** school was founded by Aristippus of Cyrene over a hundred years after the death of Socrates, which occurred in 399 B.C. Like the Carvakins, the Cyrenaics recommended giving in to all our desires, and especially those for the pleasure of the moment. Antisthenes, the Cynic, once remarked that he would rather go mad than feel pleasure. Aristippus replied for the Cyrenaics that we do not control pleasure by staying away from it, but by learning how to enjoy it without being carried away. That sounds reasonable, but some Cyrenaics were apparently not content to seek their pleasure in moderation, and as a result they have been characterized (perhaps by their disapproving critics) as recommending the unrestrained pursuit of all the pleasures all the time.

These extreme positions leave one with a sense of unreality. It is hard to believe that anyone ever seriously recommended giving up every desire we have, or yielding to each one as it arises. It is not even clear what would count as following these recommendations. Since most of us are not iron-willed ascetics or abandoned libertines, it makes more sense to aim at having fewer and less intense desires. As for

emotions, before trying to destroy our capacity to feel them, we should remember that most of them have earned their place in our repertoire of responses to the world. But things do change, and our emotional responses can be fatally out of date. The remedy is, as ever, to take a good look at what is really going on. If some once-useful emotion, like jealousy, fear, or anger is causing trouble for us, then we would be wise to take a careful look at the role it is playing in our life and to consider making some adjustments.

2. A Middle Way—Having fewer and/or weaker desires and emotions. Since the sages we will be consulting most often speak of working with our *desires*, we shall focus on the goal of "having fewer and milder desires," but occasionally we will take a glance at the related task of dealing with our excessive emotions. Obviously if we hope to end up with a moderate collection of desires held moderately, we will have to work toward diminishing both their strength and their number simultaneously. It is no good getting our desires down to just one, if that one is like Ahab's desire to get his whale, and it is no good having very weak desires, if we have more of them than we can even remember.

If we can agree that we *can* eliminate or modify *some* of our desires, we can turn to a set of considerations that are often brought up to convince us to reduce their number.

(1) Desires cause pain when they are not satisfied, and since no one can satisfy all the ones that arise, the more we have, the more we will leave unsatisfied, and the more pain we will feel.

(2) Even when we do succeed in satisfying some of our desires, many of them have been imposed on us by other people for *their* benefit and profit.

(3) Often we satisfy a desire only to end up dissatisfied with the result.

(4) Desires distort our perception because when we desire something we pay attention primarily, if not solely, to what seems likely to help us get it. Consequently the more desires we have, the less clearly we see the world.

For all these reasons, then, it may be in our interest to eliminate some, possibly even many, desires, if we can figure out how to do so. Perhaps Laozi was right when he said “The sage desires to have no desires,” and perhaps he was just playing with us. In another passage he is perfectly clear and straightforward: “Reduce selfishness; have few desires.”

When we speak of eliminating some desires or emotions, we are in danger oversimplifying. Desires and emotions are not discrete mental episodes of various durations that we can inventory, label, and snip off like troublesome hangnails. A desire for anything from a new toy to a new life is embedded in a cloud of emotions, and connected by chains of thoughts to countless conscious and unconscious beliefs and memories. Any change in our system of desires will usually be gradual and global, and beyond our direct control, but not entirely out of our hands.

The Epicureans. It is ironic that the word ‘epicurean’ connotes feasts, fine wine, rich sauces, and fancy plates. As we are about to see, this was not the original Epicureans’ idea of a good time. **Epicurus** (b. 341 B.C.) and his friends spent their time discussing philosophy and cultivating a life of simplicity and moderation. His secret to happiness was a distinction he made among desires.

> We must consider that of desires some are natural, others vain, and of the natural some are necessary and others merely natural; and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for very life. (Epicurus [2], 31)

Desires for food, water, and shelter are natural and necessary, but desire for sex appears to be natural and not necessary. “Sexual intercourse,” he said, “has never done a man good, and he is lucky if it has not harmed him.” (Epicurus [1], 45) Desires for wealth, power, and fame are neither natural nor necessary.

We may want to pause and rethink that point. The three desires just mentioned still don’t seem necessary, but they may be more closely related to our nature than we once thought. In any case, Epicurus wisely, and without a hint of moralism, suggested that we satisfy the necessary desires and eliminate as many of the others as we can. “In so far as you are in difficulties,” he said, “it is because you forget nature; for you create for yourself unlimited fear and desires.” (Epicurus [1], 49) He was content with bread, cheese, cheap wine, and good conversation. “All that is natural is easy to be obtained, but that which is superfluous is hard.” (Epicurus [2], 32)

The Stoics. The Cynics deliberately flouted the customs and conventions of society. They called themselves "citizens of the world," and refused to give allegiance to conventional organizations like the state. Stoicism was a socialized development of Cynicism, it was Cynicism with religion and a social conscience. Like the Cynics, the Stoics adopted the maxim "Live according to Nature." But when Cynics talked about living according to nature they were talking about sitting nude in the dirt, cohabitation without marriage, and deferring to nobody. Stoics, on the other hand, understood "Nature" to be the natural and moral laws of the universe.

Like the Epicureans, the Stoics saw that if we are able to get rid of enough of our desires we can be comfortable in most circumstances. The Roman Stoic **Epictetus** (50 - 138 A.D.) was born a slave, sent to Rome, given his freedom, and ended his days teaching philosophy. He lived in a simple house with a mat, a bed, and a lamp. His attitude about desires will not surprise us:

> Remember that desire demands the attainment of that of which you are desirous; and aversion demands the avoidance of that to which you are averse; that he who fails of the object of his desires is disappointed; and he who incurs the object of his aversion is wretched. If, then, you shun only those undesirable things which you can control, you will never incur anything which you shun; but if you shun sickness, or death, or poverty, you will run the risk of wretchedness. Remove [the habit of] aversion,

> then, from all things that are not within our power, and
> apply it to things undesirable, which are in our power.
> (Epictetus, Vol. II, 216-217)

Epictetus was a slave. **Marcus Aurelius**, another Roman Stoic, was an emperor, a sincere, modest, and gentle man who did his best to keep the Empire together and the barbarians at bay. His diary contains reflections on his feelings, expressions of his Stoicism, self-criticism, and reminders to himself. The Latin title of his book translates as "To Myself," but the title it is known by in English is *Meditations*.

Marcus acknowledged the orderly yet ceaseless change that occurs in Nature. Things come and go, but sooner or later all things pass away. While change pervades the universe, there is a pattern and a plan. He had many names for this plan (or possibly for its author)—Reason, Nature, Mind, Zeus, God, and Fire. The belief that the world resulted from a deliberate plan distinguished the Stoics from the Epicureans, who saw the universe as an accidental grouping of atoms. Marcus could easily be identified as an early proponent of the theory of intelligent design. But he separated himself from most proponents of that theory by adding that our own individual minds are minute fragments of this great Mind, and that our reason is "that portion of Zeus that is in us all." Given the vastness of the plan and the evident superiority of the mind that designed it, Marcus concluded that grumbling about how things are is foolish, even a kind of illness, and a sure sign that one is out of synch with Nature.

> For a human soul, the greatest of self-inflicted wrongs
> is to make itself . . . a kind of tumour or abscess on the

> universe; for the quarrel with circumstances is always a rebellion against Nature—and Nature includes the nature of each individual part. (50)

> Your part [recall that Marcus is talking to himself] is to be serene, to be simple. Is someone doing wrong? The wrong lies with himself. Has something befallen you? Good; then it was your portion of the universal lot, assigned to you when time began; a strand woven into your particular web, like all else that happens. (69)

Those who see the world in this way will think that dissatisfaction and discontent are out of place, and the fact that things do not go according to their plans just shows that there was something wrong with their plans. Others are not so stoical, and allow themselves to be disturbed, annoyed, or even angered when the world does not cooperate. Our almost ritualistic reaction to "bad" weather is a good example. People lament that it is too hot, or cold, or wet, or dry; but not the Stoic, who welcomes whatever Nature dishes out, and deals with it without grumbling internally or externally.

> O world, I am in tune with every note of thy great harmony. For me nothing is early, nothing late, if it be timely for thee. O Nature, all that thy seasons yield is fruit for me. (68)

Those who allow themselves to be annoyed by extreme or even inconvenient weather suffer twice—first from the weather itself, and then from their own reaction to it. Stoics prefer to suffer only once—so they welcome, or at least graciously accept, what comes and refuse to assess it as evil. Marcus' advice to himself, and it is well worth considering, is: "Silence your assessor."

> For you, evil comes not from the mind of another; nor yet from any of the phases and changes of your own bodily frame. Then whence? From that part of yourself which acts as your assessor of what is evil. Refuse its assessment, and all is well. Though the poor body, so closely neighbouring it, be gashed or burned, fester or mortify, let the voice of this assessor remain silent. (72)

The Stoics were not the only ones aware of the benefits of silencing our assessor. We can hear the same suggestion from the other side of the world in the words of the Zen Master Huihai (720 – 814), who recommended that we learn "to behold men, women and all the various sorts of appearances while remaining as free from love or aversion as if they were actually not seen at all." (Blofeld [2], 48) He urged his students not to think in terms of good and evil, and he denied that "our own nature" contains either good or evil. (Blofeld [2], 50 and 119) When he was asked "Then what should we do to be right?" he answered: "There is nothing to do and nothing which can be called right." (Blofeld [2], 119)

People criticize the Stoic (and the Buddhist) for this passive attitude of acceptance. They say that this attitude makes social reform impossible because if no one is disturbed by injustice, poverty, war, inequality, political oppression, and crime, then nothing will be done about them. The engine of reform is driven by the energy of anger. Accepting one's "portion of the universal lot" has meant accepting slavery, corruption, oppression, exploitation, illness, and early death for the majority of humans. There is some truth in this, but it is hard to know how much. Anger often gives rise to violence, which is usually met with more anger and violence, and so on, and on. We all have to accept things we would not have chosen for ourselves. Some of us deal with this better than others, and Stoics, apparently, deal with it best of all. But no actual Stoic is going to accept absolutely everything that comes along. Recall that Epictetus advised us not to waste our aversion over things that are "not within our power," but he also told us to apply it where it might make a difference. We do not have to be moralists to have desires and aversions, and we do not have to assess something as "evil" in order to want to change it.

It may have been fair to complain that Cynicism, if widely practiced, would be fatal to a society, but the Stoics replaced the Cynics' nihilism and willful self-indulgence with a sense of duty by treating Nature as purposive and by accepting and even welcoming their role in the Great Plan. Marcus Aurelius was, after all, Emperor of Rome, which is about as far from being a cynical dropout as one can get. The Stoic is just someone who accepts what has happened and who realizes that if something is really unchangeable, we might as well turn our attention elsewhere.

If we can accept the idea that Stoics might want to see some things get done, we can add that it is not clear that emotional hotheads bring about more social reform than people who work calmly and steadily toward a goal. After all, the Stoic is only recommending that we accept the actual situation without pointless emotion and useless resentment. If our perceptions are warped by anger, sadness, grumpiness, or some other distracting emotion, then the actions we take to fix things will be undermined by our false and incomplete view of what is really going on. How can that help?

Greek and Roman Techniques. The gulf between theory and practice can be wide. It is one thing to see your painful situation as part of a great plan, but that thought will not necessarily make you feel better about it. Marcus told us (told himself, that is) to consider the "rational part" of his mind to be that "particle of himself, which Zeus has given to every man for ruler and guide." (87) To agree with fate is simply to agree with that larger Reason of which our little minds are simply isolated bits. To kick and squeal against fate, to feel annoyance or resentment, is to act in weakness and ignorance. Our only freedom is the freedom to conform graciously to the plan. Again, this thought may or may not make one feel better, but the advice that it elicited from Marcus is priceless, whether one buys the intelligent design option or not.

> Is your cucumber bitter? Throw it away. Are there briars in your path? Turn aside. That is enough. Do not go on to say, 'Why were things of this sort ever brought into the world?' (132)

That is, don't waste your time asking why things happen to you because either they are part of The Plan, or else there is no plan, and no answer, and all that is left is to understand the causal sequences that lead to "things of this sort."

The Stoics and the Epicureans offered their suggestions and maxims to help people find happiness (though the word that shows up in the passage below is 'pleasure'). Epicurus was completely clear about what he meant:

> When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind. (Epicurus [2], 32)

Since he believed that much of our fear and consequent "trouble in the mind" comes from false beliefs about the supernatural, Epicurus hoped to relieve that suffering by encouraging a naturalistic understanding of the world. He insisted, for example, that the happenings attributed to ghosts were all natural occurrences.

> A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe but suspects the truth of some mythical story. So that without natural science it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed. (Epicurus [3], 36)

But Epicurus did not rely exclusively on natural science and helpful maxims. He also created the material conditions for peace (at least for himself and his friends) by dropping out of ordinary society and joining a community of like-minded people. The Stoics did not take this option, and they did not, as Epicurus did, resort to atomism to deal with their worries about an afterlife. They got some comfort from their belief that events are not accidental collections of atoms, and this served as the basis for many of the helpful sayings and slogans they brought out as circumstances put a strain on their Stoicism. Marcus did mention meditation, and he said that “nowhere can man find a quieter or more untroubled retreat than in his own soul.” But this seemed to involve little more than calming down and remembering his maxims and rules of life—“recurrence to them will then suffice to remove all vexation, and send you back without fretting to the duties to which you must return.” (63) Maybe so, but it is fairly clear that these maxims and rules, wise as they were, offered only temporary relief from his recurring vexations.

Buddhism. By the time Marcus became emperor, Buddhists had spent over 500 years developing meditation. They had learned that it takes more than recalling maxims to escape the vexation and fretting that comes when our desires are frustrated. Buddhism began when Siddhartha Gautama (560 – 480) discovered what he claimed to be the origin of suffering and the path to its elimination. His basically secular approach involved mental discipline and self-effacement, but as Buddhism migrated and evolved it took many forms, most of which were religious. Even so, Buddhists never neglect the insights announced in the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths. (1) There is far more suffering in the world than we have allowed ourselves to admit. (2) Much of this suffering is

brought about by our desires. (3) If this is so, then by cutting back on our desires we can cut back on our suffering, and (4) there is a path that leads to the "cessation of suffering." This path is not a series of steps so much as a series of reminders of what one must do if one wishes to eliminate suffering by eliminating desire. The reminders are presented as the "Noble Eightfold Path," which includes right understanding (views), right thought (intent), right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Here the amoralist will want to warn us not to assume that the word 'right' is used in a moralist way. Its use is more like the 'right' in 'right wrench' or 'right medicine'.

Right understanding refers to the understanding and acceptance of the Buddha's teaching on impermanence, causality, selflessness, and the doctrines of karma and reincarnation. **Right thought** has to do with our intentions, and brings us close to moral territory. But right thought can be understood by the amoralist (and probably was understood by the Buddha) to refer to the intentions and motives one needs if one wants to avoid suffering. The next three steps are said to deal with "moral conduct," but even so, there is no need to think that 'right action', for example, means the same as 'morally right action'. **Right action**, which includes refraining from harming other living creatures, from stealing, and from "sexual misconduct," might simply be the right action to take if one's goal is to win freedom from suffering. **Right speech** includes most of what we would expect: abstention from lying, slandering, and divisive speech, from "harsh, rude, impolite, malicious and abusive language, and from idle, useless and foolish babble and gossip." (Rahula, 47) **Right livelihood** means taking up

an occupation that does not require us to hurt others. The call for **Right effort** is an expression of the insight that hard and appropriate work brings results. **Right mindfulness** and **Right concentration** both have to do meditation and with getting clear about the way things are without being distracted by desires, emotions, and misleading concepts.

Buddhist meditation is not a solitary withdrawal into oneself, or an attempt to make contact with some supersensible realm, but a demanding discipline designed to strengthen the mind and illuminate its operation from within. There is as much reason to think that this works as there is to think that physical exercise strengthens the body. For Buddhists, meditation is the *main thing*, and many activities that do not look like meditation turn out to be meditation in disguise. Some Buddhists (and Hindus as well) chant the name of some bodhisattva or other celestial being, or repeat a short prayer as a way of calling upon that being for help, but whether the prayer reaches a god's ears or not, this practice teaches the chanter to concentrate on one thing, and that itself is a form of meditation, and is a useful and mind-strengthing exercise.

Buddhists sometimes practice meditation by watching their breathing, or by focusing on a sound or an image. Quieting the mind enough to be able to concentrate on our own breathing is a great exercise if we are interested in cleaning out our mental stable. This simple exercise can help us develop the skill, patience, and distance we need to attend to the comings and goings of our desires, emotions, thoughts, feelings, and impulses. Buddhists, Epicureans, and Stoics all understood that seeing things clearly is the key to managing our desires and emotions, but the emphasis Buddhism

placed on discipline and meditation made it more effective than the others at achieving these goals.

Desires and emotions can't be uprooted one by one and discarded like weeds. Many "unnecessary" ones are still very natural and very insistent, and even when we think we have eliminated one, we may merely have forced it underground from whence "it" will later emerge in another form. (So, in a way, they *are* like weeds, but weeds with complex and extensive underground root systems.) Buddhist monks sometimes attempted to squash their sexual desires by meditating on how gross and disgusting the human body is. They sat in cemeteries and thought about rotting corpses. This probably worked for some of them, but it involves more negative thinking than a sensible Buddhist would be likely to put up with, and there are less grisly ways to deal with youthful libidos.

The other way to deal with sexual (and other) desires is to forget about trying to eliminate them, and work on reducing their effect. Eliminating a desire is a bigger project than most of us realize, but we can start right now to diminish the influence of natural but often troublesome desires for things like sex, or dominance, or adulation. But how do we do this? The Buddhist says that this is where meditation can help. If we have learned to calm our minds and then to observe them, even a little bit, we may be able to recall, and willing to acknowledge, how foolish or unkind we have been when overcome by some strong desire for one of the three things just mentioned. If we are curious, we can try to find out where that particular desire came from, or how it became so strong; and if we are not too embarrassed, we can recall the absurd lengths to which

we eventually had to go to satisfy it. We can also imagine how much more to our liking things might have gone had we been less determined to get our way.

Karma Yoga. According to the ancient traditions of Hinduism, the last two quarters of a man's life are to be spent in seclusion, meditation, and a search for liberation. There is little doubt that detachment from public business and personal affairs, quiet meditation, and a vegetarian diet will produce a rich harvest of tranquility. But not everyone, not even every *man*, can renounce the world and move to the mountains or monasteries. 'Yoga' means *discipline* and 'karma' means *action*, so *karma yoga* is the discipline of action, designed for those who do not, will not, or cannot withdraw from the world. It is a discipline for the workers of the world

In Chapter Two of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna, a god who has come to earth to serve the warrior Arjuna as his chariot driver and mentor, reveals the secret of karma yoga that will allow a person to act without error or guilt:

> (47) On action alone be thy interest,
>
> Never on its fruits;
>
> Let not the fruits of action be thy motive,
>
> Nor be thy attachment to inaction. (Edgerton, 14)

Hinduism has always taught that everyone has a station in life, a caste that is determined by their karma and earned by deeds in former lives. Each caste was thought to have certain obligations. Arjuna was a warrior, so his duty was to fight, but the *Gita* shows him having second thoughts on the very brink of a war against his friends and close relatives. Krishna urged him, sometimes with extremely bad

arguments, to pick up his weapons and start the killing. He told Arjuna that the consequences (the fruits of action) are not really the concern of the warrior. Just as a doctor doesn't ask who the patient is, a warrior fights even if his opponent is his beloved teacher or best friend. That is karma yoga. It says, "This is your duty, so just do it." Compassion, affection, and moral considerations led Arjuna to resist Krishna's urgings for some time, but the god met and answered each of the warrior's reservations, and eventually revealed himself as an Infinite Being. That was enough to convince Arjuna to return to his role and to the battle—which, as he anticipated turned out to be a bloodbath.

Some are horrified by the idea of a dehumanized robo-warrior, but others read the *Gita* as a metaphor for inner struggle, not as a celebration of mindless violence. That is charitable, but the text has enough ambiguity and inconsistency to support almost any interpretation, even a literalist one. The only message from the *Gita* that is relevant here is that we can and do act without a concern for the consequences—the "fruits of action." Sometimes this is described as spontaneous action, sometimes as rashness, and sometimes as madness—and properly so. Nevertheless, since we do not always deliberate about future outcomes, an obvious question arises: "When we act spontaneously, with no thought of the fruits of our action, what does motivate us?" Krishna's answer was that if we abandon our will, desires, ends, purposes, and goals, then we are ready to invite Krishna himself into our lives and allow him to work through us. Some followers of Krishna say that for this to happen one need only chant his name, sing his praises, and love him. When one reaches the proper state of devotion,

Krishna takes over. If Krishna operates through you, it is impossible for you to make a mistake or to store up bad karma—even if you wipe out a city or slaughter all your cousins in a bloody battle.

If someone really does focus on Krishna and utters his name repeatedly with devotion, his or her conscious mind will be filled with that name, and there will be no room for, deliberation, calculation, worry, or regret. Desires, interests, hopes, likes, dislikes, and plans will be disengaged. They will float by, alongside other aspects of the situation—still present, but no longer the determiners of action they once were. This is the detachment described in Book Two of the *Gita*:

> (70) He unto whom all desires enter as waters into the sea, which, though ever being filled is ever motionless, attains to peace and not he who hugs his desires. (Radhakrishnan, 128)

The desires may still be there, but their influence is diluted. One is not moved by them. But this motionlessness is not a literal lack of activity because one can be "motionless" even in the midst of action. What is supposed to be motionless is the thinking self, the conscious planning mind. The ideal is to be empty of thoughts, calm, and ready to respond spontaneously, no matter how tumultuous the surroundings or horrific the results. You are, because Krishna is, beyond good and evil.

This is a philosophy for a warrior or an athlete. It is not surprising that people appeal to divine aid to explain the remarkable human ability to perform brilliantly in a crisis. But the same skills come into play in more mundane situations. As we move

through our days, our emotions and desires, though muted, will still influence our choices, but when we start taking them less seriously our spontaneous activity will still reflect what we know, but it will not be burdened by the worries and anxieties of those who cannot stop hugging them. There is a time for deliberation about means and ends and a time to let go and just act. For the Hindu, the confidence that Krishna is in charge may be what makes it possible to let go, but no religious belief is necessary for us to trust our spontaneous decisions. As we eliminate some of our mistaken beliefs, unnecessary desires, unhelpful emotions, and selfish thoughts, we will quite naturally grow to trust our snap decisions and spontaneous impulses.

This kind of trust is familiar to all who believe in possession by the Spirit or by spirits, and it can be found wherever trances and altered states of consciousness are cultivated. It is familiar to sports psychologists and to anyone who has ever found himself or herself "in the zone." It is likely that behavior that was once explained by possession by Krishna, or by some other divine or not so divine being, can be understood with the help of what we now know about the operation of the brain. Perhaps as the linguistic areas of the brain carry out some make-work task like repeating Krishna's name, the intuitive non-linguistic components gain more access to the springs of action. However it is explained, people who believe themselves doing the work of beings from higher realms often do gain in power and in powers. It is useful to be able to call on hidden external sources of strength, but it would be nice if we could summon the same kind of power from ourselves, and learn to act with compassion and

grace without attributing our moves, our strength, and our victories to some imaginary Other.

Wu-wei. There are similarities between karma yoga and what the Daoists call "*wu-wei.*" *Wu* is a word used for negation, and *wei* means activity or action, so it is not wrong to translate *wu wei* as 'non-action', but we must be careful not take the phrase literally. As one commentator on Daoism said long ago, when some people hear of *wu wei*, they think they are being told that lying down is better than walking. But the proponent of *wu wei* does not urge us to lie down, or to sit as still as a stone, or to meet all stimuli with empty-headed motionlessness. It has always been relatively clear what *wu wei* is not; but it is hard to say what it is. Some say it is acting without straining, or that it is using no more effort than needed for a task. It is true that Daoists will not apply "too much" force, but something deeper and more interesting is involved.

Joseph Needham characterized *wu wei* as refraining from "going against the grain of things, from trying to make materials perform functions for which they are unsuitable, from exerting force in human affairs when the man of insight could see that it would be doomed to failure, and that subtler methods of persuasion, or simply letting things alone to take their own course, would bring about the desired result." (68) The following verse from the Daodejing illustrates this insight:

64 What remains still is easy to hold.
What is not yet manifest is easy to plan for.
What is brittle is easy to crack.
What is minute is easy to scatter.

> Deal with things before they appear.
>
> Put things in order before disorder arises.
>
> A tree as big as a man's embrace grows from a tiny shoot.
>
> A tower of nine storeys begins with a heap of earth.
>
> The journey of a thousand *li* starts from where one stands.
>
> He who takes action fails.
>
> He who grasps things loses them.
>
> For this reason the sage takes no action and therefore
> does not fail.
>
> He grasps nothing and therefore he does not lose
> anything. (Chan 169-170)

The first part of this verse does not say to do nothing, only to "deal with things" while it is still easy to do so, and to remember that the only thing that must be accomplished is the next step. The last four lines, however, remind us that there are times when the best next step to take is no step. We just have to be sensitive enough to the way things work, to the dao of things, to see when this is.

The Daoist can be seen as giving advice that applies in every area of human activity, but especially in matters that concern the regulation of the state and one's own life. One remark, aimed at rulers says that ruling a big country is like cooking a small fish, presumably because if we keep fussing with either, it will fall apart. (60) The best rulers are said to be those no one even knows about, and the worst regulate everything and try to impose their wills on the people by force. An ideal Daoist ruler is wise and

skillful enough to step aside and allow (or perhaps nudge) the people to act on their own. This is ruling by *wu wei*.

Confucians, looking for an easy way to criticize the Daoists, focused on the most senseless interpretations of *wu wei* and on bizarre practitioners of literal inactivity. A more sensible interpretation is defended by David Loy, who identifies "non-action" (*wu wei*) as spontaneous action with no thought of the "fruits," and relates it to both karma yoga and Zen Buddhism. (Loy, 73-86) In Barbara Stoller Miller's rendition of the *Bhagavad-gita* there is a passage that, as she translates it, could easily have come straight from the *Daodejing*. Krishna is explaining karma yoga and says:

> Abandoning attachment to fruits of action, always
> content, independent,
> He does nothing at all even when he engages in
> action. (4:20)

3. Conclusion. The Daoist's appreciation of the Dao, Marcus's attempt to harmonize with Reason, the *Bhagavad Gita*'s advice to yield to Krishna, and the Christian's talk of possession by the Spirit are birds of a feather. In each case we relinquish control to Something (or Someone). In some versions, this Something, unlike the finite and confused ego, knows (indeed wrote) the Master Plan, and can make no mistakes. This is a blessing to those who worry, a path out of guilt, and an invitation to act without trying to figure out all the angles, which is, in any case, impossible. In other

versions there is no plan, but if we are alert and follow the grain, we can still let go, act spontaneously, and remain free of worry, guilt, and much pointless deliberation.

Many voices tell us to trust ourselves, and they all give us advice about how to work with ourselves to make that trust reasonable. Christianity and the religion of the Bhagavad Gita bring in a god with the ability to inhabit our bodies. Stoicism tells us that Nature is intelligent and purposive. Daoism requires no god, but explains how to align ourselves with the way of the world so that we can be "act without acting." Finally, an ordinary person, let us say an amoralist who is unscarred by dogmas and free of extreme desires and excessive emotions, needs little more than accurate information and a purified set of concepts and attitudes to find his or her way through most of life's challenges.

Our ample desires and persistent emotions make life difficult both for ourselves and those near us. Everyone with any serious suggestion about what to do about this begins with some sort of meditation, concentration, introspection, or reflection that enables us to attend to what is going on both in the world and in our own minds. If we do not start in this way, we are likely to remain trapped in a web of causes we neither understand nor acknowledge. We will be the ones who ask, in pained bafflement, "Why is this happening to me." A reasonable goal we might set for ourselves is to understand the way of things so well that we never have to ask that question. All our sages know this, and they all tell us to start our journey by learning to quiet our minds and focus our attention.

We have seen on several occasions how our decisions emerge from a matrix of conscious and unconscious influences. If we want to have any control over how things turn out we need to know what those forces are, how they work, and what we can do about them. The task of the next chapter will be to look into this matter by asking in more detail about the arising of decisions and about methods we have devised for giving ourselves and others reasons to do things.

If we want to eliminate or reduce the intensity of a desire or an emotion, we may find it necessary to learn some things and to develop some new skills. For a start, we will need to learn how to take a careful and value-free look at our desires and emotions in action. At this stage our task will not be to defend or attack them, but to see how they actually operate as we move through our day.