

## Chapter Ten

### The Ways of Harmony and Control

**But we could say: The happy life  
seems to be in some sense more  
harmonious than the unhappy.  
But in what sense?**

**Ludwig Wittgenstein**

In **Chapters One and Two** I explored the unhappy state of moral argumentation and looked at some of the ways moral philosophers have managed to back away from what Mackie called “the moral overlay.” The most extreme of these positions is moral anti-realism, the complete denial of objective moral facts and values, not baffled skepticism, and not relativism, which is always trying to change the subject. Moral anti-realism comes in two flavors, non-cognitivism and the error theory, and I have opted for the error theory because I believe that non-cognitivism is wrong about what we mean when we make moral judgments. Attempts to answer the moral anti-realist by appealing to religion and to reason were dismissed in **Chapters Three and Four**, at the end of which we were left with the error theory and a choice between moral fictionalism and moral abolitionism.

This led me to offer, in **Chapter Five**, a partial inventory of some of the things we lose if we abolish morality. We lose the idea that there really is a “right thing” to do and, with it, all the theories that promise to tell us what that is—theories like egoism, utilitarianism, and the deontologies. We also lose the ability to appeal to inherent human rights and objective values. Every one of these normative theories is based on

some important insight, but the mistake moralists make is to turn these insights into theories. We do sometimes act selfishly, but the ethical egoist turns that into an obligation or a right. Utilitarians are concerned about how our actions affect others and they value human happiness or satisfaction. Who could object to that? We can only hope that these concerns expand. But utilitarian moralists and legislators work this nice thought into elaborate and presumptuous theories of value and obligation that can be (and have been) used to coerce others into “doing the right thing” and to justify punishing them when they do not. Remember William Godwin, the bullet-biting utilitarian who was willing to defend punishing the innocent on utilitarian grounds. It is not difficult to make up an argument to support this—as long as we can get away with assuming that we have a moral obligation to do whatever maximizes happiness and that punishing the innocent will maximize happiness. I hope that what I was able to say in Chapter Five about those theories of value, obligation, and rights, was enough to make it clear why the moral abolitionist is intrigued by the prospect of getting beyond morality.

Many well-adjusted and relatively happy people would not even understand the suggestion that we abolish morality. The idea would sound crazy to them. Others might comprehend the thought, but they would still find it hard to believe that anyone who suggested it was serious. Even the less radical thought that there are no objective values or obligations alarms and angers people. As a result, moralists reject, and moral philosophers feel an obligation to refute, what they frequently refer to as “amoralism.” In **Chapter Six**, I examined some of the ways moralistically inclined philosophers reply to their own versions of the amoralist challenge. After dealing with these half-hearted

and poorly aimed objections, I ended the chapter by collecting together some considerations in support of moral abolitionism. Just as some critics of religion look forward to a post-religious society, there are reasons to look hopefully in the direction of a society that has gone beyond morality. This may not be a realistic practical goal for society as it is now; but each of us can experiment in our own lives with letting go of moral language and thinking. I predict that if we do this, we will find that it makes little or no difference to what we end up doing. We are held in place by chains that are far stronger than those that morality can forge.

Anyone who finds himself or herself in a post-moralist state of mind will still need to deal with the usual challenges of life on the planet, so if moral values and obligations are to be abolished, what, it will be asked, can be brought in to take their place? This is an interesting question because, as we have seen, it is not all that clear what their place is or was, and because we can't be sure that we need to bring in anything to take it. Perhaps morality is a fifth wheel, the 101<sup>st</sup> leg of the centipede, more a problem than a solution, the beginning of an endless argument. That is the conclusion of the moral abolitionist, indeed, my conclusion; so the goal of the final six chapters, Chapters Seven through Twelve, is to offer some considerations to show that moral plays a smaller and less important role in our decisions than we think, and then to show that moral abolitionism may actually be less a threat to our well-being and to the well-being of the world than morality itself.

In **Chapter Seven** I reviewed some non-moralistic suggestions about how to deal with desires and emotions. Some rather extreme sages promoted their complete (or

almost complete) elimination while others favored indulging them to the greatest extent possible. More sensible sages supported limiting both their number and their intensity. This involves calming our minds, rooting out as many misconceptions as we can discover, paying close attention to our actual circumstances, and then, when the need to act arises, trusting our spontaneous (but “purified”) instincts. Buddhists stressed mindfulness and attention to the causes and conditions that got us where we are. Marcus Aurelius recommended silencing our assessor of good and evil and doing our best to discern as accurately as possible what is really going on, both outside us and inside us.

Desires and emotions will always play a role in our decisions, but their influence can be regulated as we learn to adjust the many kinds of input that flow into what we called, in **Chapter Eight**, “our decider.” Since we are all driven by needs, desires, emotions, and too many other things to mention here, and since our interests often conflict, we have developed conventions, rules, and laws to regulate one another, and we have devised other overt and covert ways to control one another and to raise new and misbehaving members of our groups to an acceptable level of civility. These devices include promises of punishments and rewards by civil and divine authorities, but we are also accomplished in the use of lies, slogans, rituals, humor, visual art, music, myths, fables, fiction, and, of course, morality.

Almost all the ways we have of influencing others and understanding ourselves involve language. In **Chapter Nine** I emphasized both its importance and its power, and I offered some warnings about how easy it is to be enslaved by concepts,

metaphors, simple explanations, and other verbal tricks and bad habits. Sextus Empiricus, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the Buddha have proposed various therapies (for slightly different ailments), the most radical of which asks us to make a double Buddhist gestalt shift which first takes us out of the everyday world, and then returns us to that world but with the added realization of the “emptiness of all things.” This realization is the key to coming to understand and accept events as they occur. If we take the advice of these three “physicians” we may free ourselves from idle metaphysical curiosity, philosophical problems spawned by confusion about the use of language, and perhaps much of our needless and self-inflicted suffering.

Now in **Chapter Ten**, fortified with a better understanding of the factors that lead us around, and that allow us to lead others around, we are ready to ask which of these devices and techniques we want to exploit, and which we want to avoid, as we interact with others. Shall we try to exercise more or less control? Shall we resist the control others try to exercise over us? How manipulative, how didactic, how forceful, how truthful shall we be? We might decide that we need more control over our friends, or that the state needs more control over everyone, or that every family has to have a “head,” or that we need clear and simple rules and swift, certain, and harsh punishments for those who break them. It is entirely possible that this is what many people would say, but everyone knows that many of our efforts to increase our control are tragically counterproductive. This Daoist lesson has been learned by strict parents, domineering spouses, binge dieters, and countries trying to institute “planned economies” or to bring about “regime change” by force. Force begets force.

We can, at some risk of oversimplification, identify two strategies for confronting situations. One says “Make a plan and follow it,” and the other says “Show up and see what happens.” Depending on the circumstances, either strategy can succeed brilliantly. Moralists, who often believe that they know how things “ought to go,” seem to favor planning and control, and sometimes they resist seeking harmony because they fear that it may only be achieved by tolerating evil, or that it will cost more than they are willing to pay. So they show up with a plan.

It is true that sometimes our only sensible option is to take control, but more often than not we mistakenly think that this is so. We are fully aware of our own plan, which is likely to strike us as reasonable if not inspired, but we cannot see, and so cannot trust, the plans of others—if they even have plans. When it serves our rhetorical purpose, we exploit metaphors like: LIVING IS CONSTRUCTING A BUILDING, and we see ourselves as the architect with the plans. It then appears to us as if our task is to get everyone else to follow our “blueprint for a better life.”

The emphasis we place on morality is just one indication of our fondness for control. Not only do we want to have it *our* way, morality tells us that there is a right way, and we have learned to think that our way and the right way are identical. Since we (think we) know what is right, why wouldn't we use all the techniques there are to get people to see and do things properly? Because of this confidence (if that is the right word), most of us are already deeply committed to the way of control, so it is likely that we do not need to learn how to follow that road any further. Aristotle wisely advised us to seek the mean, and he even more wisely pointed out that to reach that mean we

have to aim past the point we would like to hit. If indeed we err on the side of control, planning, moralism, and the use of force, then if we hope to arrive at a decent blend of our active and passive tendencies, we will have to devote a little more attention to a strategy that, as the Daoist might say, accomplishes more by doing less.

We can call one of these two strategies “The Way of Control” and the other “The Way of Harmony.” Since we are already well versed in the methods of control, I will spend the larger part of this chapter exploring the way of harmony. I will discuss ways of incorporating more harmony and cooperation into our lives, and I will offer some simple exercises for anyone who wants to try this out. These directions for living harmoniously complete the answer to the question of how it is possible, pleasant, and sociable to live beyond morality.

With this done, I will turn, in **Chapters Eleven and Twelve**, to some of the questions that attract the attention of moral philosophers, moralists, and concerned amoralists. We will see how moralists looking for answers to practical questions about what they ought to do can be distracted by unanswerable philosophical questions (like “When does life begin?” or “Can pigs think?”), and ultimately left in deadlock and confusion about everything from the lunch menu to the death penalty. We will also see how the moral abolitionist, unencumbered by unjustifiable assumptions, error, and superstition, can approach traditional problems with an open mind. When we see this, we may marvel at how easily solutions that finally make sense begin to emerge.

**1. The Way of Control.** Unless we live alone on an island, what we do and say influences others in ways we will never fully understand. As we have seen, we have

accumulated an arsenal of strategies for dealing with our friends and associates, who seem never to do or be exactly what we would like them to do or be. But we have also seen the connection between desire and suffering, and it is obvious that if we want too much control over others, we and they will both suffer, no matter how benevolent our intentions. We must learn when to push and when to back off, but this is particularly difficult to get right because our desires are so strong and our impulses to control are often hidden from our own awareness.

Sometimes the harder we try to make things go our way, the further they deviate from what we want. Everyone knows this, and we would all be inclined to agree with some version of the Daoist message that we often fail for trying too hard, or for caring too much about success. On the other hand, we sometimes fail for not trying or not caring. We need a balance, a middle way, between active and passive styles of dealing with events. Those attracted to a passive style are hesitant to apply force, and prefer cooperation and compromise. Those who favor the active approach prefer to do things their way, and want others to harmonize with them. The moralist appears to be committed to an active style by the very nature of moralism. What is the point of ranking things and setting out obligations if not to influence the desires and control the actions of others? But while moralists are inherently activist, one can indulge in the most extreme forms of domination and control without the moralism. We find this in the first of three examples of “The Way of Control.”

***The Legalists.*** The Chinese philosopher Han Fei Zi (d. 233 B.C.) is known for having held that “awe-inspiring power can prohibit violence” and that “virtue and

kindness are insufficient to end disorder.” As I briefly noted in the last chapter, he urged the emperor to grasp the “two handles” of control—punishment and reward. “The severe household,” he said, “has no fierce slaves, but it is the affectionate mother who has spoiled sons.” (Chan [1], 253) What one wants to say about this is: “Well, yes and no.” The unification of China in 221 BC was accomplished by “The First Emperor of Chin” who, following Han Fei Zi’s advice, ended a civil war, established order, standardized writing and axle sizes, and smashed feudalism. This philosophy has been called Legalism because it favored many laws, strict enforcement, and clearly defined (if brutal) penalties for disobedience. But the Chin dynasty lasted only a dozen years, and when the emperor died, his heir was murdered and the members of his household were at each others’ throats. They could have all used a little virtue and kindness.

The Chin Dynasty is often mentioned as the first truly totalitarian system of rule, where every aspect of a subject’s life is in the hands of the sovereign. But the emperor’s subjects didn’t always go along with this, and they took comfort from the fact that “the mountains are high, and the emperor is far away.” Now in China, and elsewhere, the mountains have shrunk and the “the emperor” has a listening post right down the street. Technology can be used to put in place a form of totalitarianism that only a religion that boasts of an all-knowing, all powerful, and vindictive god might have hoped to institute. “Big Brother” is finding it increasingly easy to watch, but in at least some countries he is also finding it increasingly difficult to control what people say and do. If we have learned anything, it is that we need to watch the watchers and control the controllers, and to work with diligence to fend off the never-ending efforts to

overwhelm our deciders with beliefs and fears that are not in our own interest. As Wendell Phillips (another kind of abolitionist) is remembered for saying, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”

***Confucius and the Confucians.*** Confucians were less deeply involved with “the two handles” than were the Legalists, but they were still very interested in controlling the lives of the people. They wanted everyone to obey the *li*, the rules of propriety that mandated ritualistically polite behavior, and they promoted a collection of what they considered to be virtues. They understood that laws and punishment are insufficient to promote those virtues, but they thought people could be taught, and led by example, to be civil. Their methods seem non-coercive and flexible when compared with those of the Legalists. But the Confucians were as concerned as the Legalists to shape people to fit a pattern they saw as ideal.

Mencius, the second great thinker in the Confucian tradition, is known for his claim that human nature is “good,” by which he meant that if we stand back and allow people to develop naturally, they will end up with the important virtues that Confucius encouraged—often referred to by the terms ‘humanity’, ‘righteousness’, ‘propriety,’ and ‘wisdom’. He believed that everyone’s intrinsically good heart contains “seeds” of these virtues, and that these seeds only need to be nourished. This is as mild and non-coercive a form of moralism as we are likely to find, but it is still a form of moralism, and there seems to have been no doubt in Mencius’ mind that there is an objectively right and proper way to be, that virtuous behavior is both good and good for one, and that it ought to be encouraged.

**Plato.** Plato, who was neither as cold-blooded as the Legalists, nor as optimistic as Mencius, is notorious for the amount of control he wanted to give to his rulers. He devised a plan to educate a class of philosopher-kings who were wise enough to be trusted to employ “the medicine of the lie” when they judged it was needed for the good of the country. For example, in matters of marriage and child-bearing, the Rulers were called upon to “administer a large dose of that medicine we spoke of earlier.” (Plato [4], 158) Plato has Socrates prescribe a mating festival with a lottery rigged to guarantee that “there should be as many unions of the best of both sexes, and as few of the inferior, as possible.” Only the rulers are to know of this ruse; “otherwise,” he says, “our herd of Guardians [the Auxiliaries] may become rebellious.” (Plato [4], 159) Socrates adds that while both true and fictitious stories are to be used in education, “we shall begin our education with the fictitious kind.” (Plato [4], 68) Other deceptive practices occur in the testing of young Guardians, and wherever the Rulers think their use is indicated. Someone who hopes to control the behavior of others by manipulating their information is just as surely following the Way of Control as is someone who uses awe-inspiring power, psychological indoctrination, or automatic weapons. Their tools are different, but not their aim of causing others to do things they might not choose to do if they were free and informed. In his old age, Plato seems to have become even more wedded to the way of control, as is indicated in the following disturbing passage from *The Laws*:

The greatest principle of all is that nobody, whether male or female, should be without a leader. Nor should the mind of anybody be

habituated to letting him do anything at all on his own initiative; neither out of zeal, nor even playfully. But in war and in the midst of peace—to his leader he shall direct his eye and follow him faithfully. And even in the smallest matter he should stand under leadership. For example, he should get up, or move, or wash, or take his meals . . . only if he has been told to do so. In a word, he should teach his soul, by long habit, never to dream of acting independently, and to become utterly incapable of it. (Plato, quoted in Popper, 7)

**2. The Way of Harmony.** We like being in control and telling others what to do and how to do it. But others enjoy controlling things as much as we do, so when there are too many fans of control, conflict is inevitable and harmony is the last thing on everyone's mind. There is definitely a time when what seems like "enough" control is too much, but we often fail to recognize this and continue to use all the devices at our command to keep others in line. As we meet more opposition, we attempt to amplify our domination, and we almost always manage to bring ourselves down. But just as it is foolish to try for too much control, it is also a mistake to drift like a cloud. Daoists, who speak of getting things done by *wu wei*, are not talking about mindless, unstructured wandering or complete inaction. They suggest that we deal with problems while they are small, or even before they arise, and that we work in harmony with the forces already in motion. We "control without controlling."

An advocate of “The Way of Harmony” knows that there are times to take control and times to yield, and that the best way to find out which is which is to understand the way things work and to get as deep an appreciation the details of the situation as possible. When others are involved, and they usually are, appreciating a situation includes understanding how they understand it, and how they feel about it. This information might come after a process of collecting information and reflection, or it might come in a “blink,” as Gladwell puts it. However we arrive at it, it is the secret ingredient of good decisions, but it is hard to come by if we are bewitched by desires, emotions, language, prejudice, propaganda, or power, as are those who are devoted to control, unwilling to seek harmony, and quick to apply force.

The Zen teacher and scholar D. T. Suzuki illustrated one of the differences between what he understood to be Eastern and Western approaches to nature by comparing two poems—one a poem by the Seventeenth Century Japanese poet Basho, and the other a verse from the Nineteenth Century British poet Alfred Tennyson.

(Suzuki, 1-3) Basho’s poem is a 17 syllable *haiku*:

When I look carefully  
I see the nazuna blooming  
By the hedge!

Tennyson’s verse also deals with a flower:

Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies;--  
Hold you here, root and all, in my hand,

Little flower—but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is.

Basho looks, Tennyson plucks. Tennyson tries to understand, Basho experiences. Suzuki says that Basho “lets an exclamation point say everything he wishes to say.” (Suzuki, 3) Tennyson not only wants to understand the flower, he kills it in order to satisfy his epistemological lust to understand everything else, even God and man. I have just been saying that it is important to appreciate a situation and to understand as much as we can, but Tennyson’s fascination with unanswerable questions is more than a little pathological, and very hard on the flowers.

Suzuki says that Tennyson exemplifies the Western mind, which is analytical, discriminating, objective, scientific, conceptual, organizing, individualistic, power-wielding, and disposed to impose its will on others. Basho, on the other hand, represents the Eastern mind which, says Suzuki, is synthetic, nondiscriminating, subjective, non-systematic, intuitive, non-discursive, and interested in harmonious solutions to problems. While Suzuki’s generalizations are accurate about some Westerners and some Easterners, and well-illustrated by the two poems, they may mislead us. It is not East or West that determines whether people respond to flora like Basho or Tennyson, but the habits and traits they acquire as they are socialized.

***Hemispheric Specialization, Dominance, and Imperialism.*** Forty years of research on split brains has provided strong support for the hypothesis of **hemispheric**

**specialization.** This is the idea that the two hemispheres of the brain deal with “vastly different aspects of thought and action.” (“The Split Brain Revisited; The Hidden Mind,” Special Editions; *The Scientific American*, by Michael S. Gazzaniga, 1998, 2002) The left-hemisphere is said to be logical, linear, and linguistic, the home of verbalized thought. The right hemisphere is characterized as intuitive, holistic, and good at solving spatial and relational problems. When researchers believed that all the important work in the brain was done by the left hemisphere, they spoke of left hemisphere *dominance*. Since the left hemisphere usually controls the right side of the body, a physical manifestation of left-hemisphere dominance is right-handedness (and one of right-hemisphere dominance is left-handedness).

Left-hemisphere dominance may be the price we pay for our linguistic and logical abilities, and as a strategy for coping, it has advantages. But when discussions turn into arguments, and arguments into debates, when we insist on explicit definitions rather than overall clarity, when we become compulsive talkers, planners, and categorizers, left-hemisphere dominance has metamorphosed into left-hemisphere *imperialism*. When that happens, our speech centers start working overtime, and we crank out chains of reasoning as if everything depended on arriving at exactly the right conclusion. Other ways of understanding are ignored, and spontaneity is kept in check. We become narrow and rigid victims of our own rules and words.

The fact that we find the first efforts to control excessive conceptualization and verbalization in India and China should warn us against saying that the “Eastern Mind” is inherently less dependent on words and concepts than the “Western Mind. If the

Indians and Chinese had not started off with “monkey-minds” filled with randomly leaping thoughts and needless verbalizations, they would not have needed to invent yoga and meditation, or to have attacked conceptualization. The various forms of meditation developed by Hindus, Buddhists, and Daoists were designed to silence verbalization and calculation, and to smash “left hemisphere imperialism.” The difference is that sages from the East seem to have started working on this much earlier, and to have pursued it with far more intensity, than the Goths, the Romans, or even the Greeks.

***Smashing Hemispheric Imperialism.*** Daoists and Zen Buddhists favor the passive and receptive approach expressed in Basho’s poem; but we have already seen that even someone who takes this “silent” approach will supplement that wordless appreciation with a careful use of language. Note that Basho calls a nazuna a *nazuna* and a hedge a *hedge*. Zen Buddhists mistrust arguments, nebulous concepts and what they call “dead words,” but they are comfortable with words when they are used in familiar and down-to-earth ways. Because words are so important, it makes absolutely no sense to escape domination by the left hemisphere only to be taken over by the right, which is what would happen if we were to replace our over-verbalization with under-verbalization. The hours of meditation recommended by Buddhists are designed to quiet the nervous activity of *both* hemispheres. Only when we have learned to be still, to observe, to listen, and to wait, is the way cleared for us to act *and speak* spontaneously and appropriately.

Imperialism of the left hemisphere can lock us into rigid and confining social structures, and it is particularly hard on personal relationships, which require flexibility and much non-verbal understanding. But, harmful as it may be, imperialism of the left hemisphere is well-protected and deeply rooted. It is not easy to argue against arguments, or to find words to criticize language, but it can be done. If rigid concepts and simplistic explanations keep us from seeing clearly, then the remedy is to loosen up our concepts and to deepen our explanations. When we have broken the grip of left-hemisphere imperialism, we will be in a position to develop a receptive and informed mind that uses, but is not used by, language. Fortunately, there are techniques available to help us do this. Yoga, meditation, chanting, the martial arts, sports, or any art or practice that is taken up with Zen-like devotion, can help us quiet our inner verbalization, give our rational operations a fair but not dominant role, and open the way for intuitive insights and creative processing.

The same sort of attention and effort needed to oppose imperialism of the left can help with imperialism from the other side. If our decisions are strongly influenced by emotional outbursts, irrational fears, or by intuitions and impulses that scorn our hard-won linguistic knowledge, then we will suffer. The more we are able to rein in our rampant emotions and foolish impulses from the right, as well as our excessive planning and idle verbalizations from the left, the more we will appreciate the wisdom of Huihai's advice about what to do "when things happen."

When we smash imperialism of either hemisphere, we give the other hemisphere its job back, and, at the same time we free the previously imperialistic hemisphere to focus on what it does best. We are after balance. We want our hemispheres to work together—harmoniously. We must learn to restrain both the noisy verbal chatter of the left hemisphere and the uninformed intuiting and undisciplined emoting of the right. When it is time for logic we want logic, and when it is time for intuition we want intuition. If a fear is groundless, we want that to matter, but if it is the result of some correct insight, we want to be open enough to realize it. Just as the distinct images presented by our two eyes are resolved into a three-dimensional representation, something analogous happens when we harmonize our linguistic and our non-linguistic understanding into a comprehensive vision beyond, but not without, words. Hemispheric imperialists of both sorts are trying to get a clear view by closing one eye.

***Reprogramming for Harmony.*** The suggestions for living beyond morality we have so far heard, often begin with the advice to examine our situation carefully, and to bring along as few distorting preconceptions as possible. This may be done quickly, if we are skilled and perceptive, or it may be drawn out—but in either case getting clear about what has arisen, and how it has arisen, will get us off to a decent start on the path to a more harmonious, and if Wittgenstein is right, a happier, life.

Even when we are not trying to run everything, our reliance on language and concepts often leads us to overdo the emphasis on categorization and control. We conceptualize to the point of stereotype, apply our local standards, and construct a reality that is in many ways imaginary—the product of our needs, our ignorance, and

our fears. There is help for this. Most forms of meditation and concentration are designed to teach us ways out of the conceptual prisons and mazes into which we have fallen. They help us still our minds so that we can see things with fresh eyes. Gurus, yoga teachers, institutes, and workshops offer to help us find happiness (or even bliss). Self-help books offer to show us how to feel good about ourselves, to appreciate others, to accept loss, or to reduce our anger, fear, anxiety, narcissism, overeating, or smoking. Some contain excellent suggestions, many of which have been mined from Buddhist, Daoist, or Stoic sages of old. Others are relatively useless. Reading is great, and the right book can point the way, but the kind of change we are talking about will only happen when we actually take some concrete steps to bring it about.

Group therapy and dozens of styles of psychotherapies also take up the goal of helping patients overcome various problems in coping with life. In the 1950's, Albert Ellis developed what is called "Rational, Emotive, Behavior Therapy" (REBT), which, though a bit controversial, is based on the absolutely correct thought that much of our misery and trouble comes from false, irrational, and self-destructive beliefs that pollute our decision and ruin our decisions and sometimes our lives—beliefs like "If I lose her/him I won't be able to go on" or "Why did this happen to me? The universe is so unfair." Ellis helped his patients discover and combat these thoughts directly, and often fiercely. He would have agreed with Epicurus who said that "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." And he would have seconded Marcus Aurelius' advice to himself: "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.”

Even a little progress in quieting our minds and weeding out misleading concepts and false beliefs can help us get started on the road to harmony. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the god Krishna told his devotees that by worshiping him and calling on him by name they could secure his presence in their lives and his help. This offers those who believe an inducement to practice a powerful technique that produces results whether Krishna actually exists or not. Not everyone can sit in meditation for seven years, or even for twenty minutes, but anyone can repeat a name or some short verse over and over again. The surprising thing is that many immediate benefits can flow from this minimal effort. Whoever focuses on and repeats Krishna’s name (or actually any sound at all) will, at the very least, be distracted from some nagging thoughts and worries. In the process they will be practicing patience and concentration. By chanting a few words they occupy the overactive left (linguistic) hemisphere with some make-work task, and may thereby free up the right hemisphere and open the door to creativity and spontaneity.

If we do not feel comfortable chanting some mantra, appealing to some divine being to take us over, or even taking up meditation or yoga, then there are other paths that can lead to a more harmonious style of life. Anyone suffering from symptoms of hemispheric imperialism can follow a simple totally secular, and even scientifically respectable, program to achieve a more harmonious balance of their active and passive

tendencies. We sign up by admitting in clear and unequivocal words, if only to ourselves, that we are out of balance, that we think or talk too much (or, as it might happen, too little), or that we don't pay enough attention to what others are doing, saying, or feeling, or that we are too often driven by our prejudices, desires, and emotions. Change is impossible unless we are aware of what it is that we want to change.

It should be clear by now that the way to begin this attempt to have a happier and more harmonious life is to learn to "look carefully." We can't harmonize with reality if we don't know where it is, or if our version of it is distorted by defensive reactions and rigid categories. We don't have to look to the East to hear this suggestion. Actually it is just common sense, and yet it is the cornerstone of the Way of Harmony. Marcus Aurelius reminds himself to work on it in his *Meditations*:

Do away with all fancies. Cease to be passion's puppet.

Limit time to the present. Learn to recognize every experience for what it is, whether it be your own or another's. (Marcus Aurelius, 110)

Fix your thought closely on what is being said, and let your mind enter fully into what is being done, and into what is doing it. (Marcus Aurelius, 110)

Huangbo, whose advice about concepts we have been considering, offers a Buddhist

version of the same advice when he uses a vivid image to encourage us not to lose control of ourselves by allowing ourselves to go beyond our original impression:

Observe things as they are and don't pay attention to other people.

There are some people just like mad dogs barking at everything that moves, even barking when the wind stirs among the grass and leaves. (Blofeld [1], 54)

When we have learned to see the world more calmly and clearly, the next thing to do is to bring ourselves to *accept* the workings of the "great world-order by which all things are brought to pass." Suppose you have prepared for a picnic and it rains. You can either accept the storm and, without grumbling, adapt to the new situation, or you can come to think that not only your plans, but your *day*, has been spoiled. One who understands the Way of Harmony doesn't worry about spoiled plans, and rarely has a spoiled day.

So far we have only been talking about learning to comprehend and accept situations as they are. Nothing yet has been said about deciding or doing. That, as we have said, happens in private, but the preparation for our spontaneous decisions is a calm, clear and undistorted version of what is going on. Here the analogy between life and certain of the arts practiced in the East is informative. One of the best popular books about Zen Buddhism is Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*. It is no secret that the desire to do well can interfere with our performance. So can idle thoughts, worries, fears, and excessive deliberation and planning. Before students of archery were even allowed to pick up a bow they were taught to be calm and to empty their

minds—to breathe, to wait, and to pay attention. When Herrigel’s teacher finally allowed him to work with a bow, he told him that

the shot will only go smoothly when it takes the archer himself by surprise. It must be as if the bowstring suddenly cut through the thumb that held it. You mustn't open the right hand on purpose. (Herrigel, 29)

On another occasion, the Master admonished the stubborn and intellectualizing Westerner with the following words:

“The right art,” cried the Master, “is purposeless, aimless! The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede. What stands in your way is that you have a much too willful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen.” (Herrigel, 31)

With a “too willful will” we fail for trying too much, too hard, or too soon. One of the main causes of failure is a misapprehension of the situation. We may try too hard because we think success matters more than it does, or try too much because we overestimate our resources, support, or strategy. If we “look carefully” we are less likely to make these mistakes, and less likely to make inflexible or unrealistic demands on ourselves and others. If we do our part, which is to prepare our decider with unbiased and accurate information and get our desires and emotions under control, we are likely to be satisfied with the decisions that we find ourselves making.

**3. Examples and Exercises.** The best way to examine the Way of Harmony is to try it. Even someone addicted to control can learn to let go briefly, just to see how it feels. Here you will find a few easy exercises anyone can perform to experience a taste of the fruits of harmony. Most of them involve “looking carefully” and appreciating the contribution of the remainder of the universe.

**(1) Weather.** We have absolutely no control over the weather, so we might as well learn how to harmonize with it. Our first exercise, call it a warm-up exercise, is to accept the weather, whatever it is, without grumbling. For a day, or for as long as you can, stop complaining about the cold, the heat, the rain, or the snow. The point of the exercise is to try for a different and more welcoming response to inconvenient (not catastrophic!) weather, one that does not involve annoyance or anger. If we simply go about our business and treat the cold or the heat as a natural and unavoidable feature of the situation, we may suffer from the cold or the heat, but not from our reaction to it.

If we can attain a level of meteorological harmony that allows us to accept average “bad” weather without complaint, we can reinforce this new-found harmony by doing something pleasant that is made possible by the now welcome weather. If our picnic was washed out by the rain, then we can read, listen to music, walk in the rain, take a nap, go to a movie, or visit our favorite mall—thanks to the rain. Clouds really do have silver linings.

**(2) Bees and Other Dangerous Animals.** The first exercise set us the task of finding harmony with the weather, an aspect of inanimate nature. With this

second set of exercises we are turning our attention to animate nature. Consider bees. People say that if you do not threaten them they will not sting you. Maybe bees can sense or smell fear, and maybe they can't, but they can certainly sense hostility behind frantic attempts to swat them. Who is more likely to get stung, someone who lashes out at every bee that comes within swinging distance, or someone who routinely ignores normal non-hostile bee behavior? Here is the exercise: if some bee lands on your hand, just sit quietly until it has rested or wandered about a bit and then moved on. "Bon voyage, Bee!" I am not here recommending this as a policy for dealing with all or any insects; I am saying that if you can sit there and let that bee occupy your surface for a bit, you will both be the better for it. It is possible that you will sense a hint of harmony, a tad of generosity, a feeling of interspecies cooperation in your brief episode of good will to the representative of the insect world.

After achieving apiological harmony we can move on to beings more like ourselves. There is much to be said about pets, and many questions about control and harmony arise when we are speaking of companion animals. For *our* exercise, let leave out domestic favorites like dogs, cats, and other loveable animals like pandas, baby seals, whales, and dolphins, so that we can focus on more challenging cases. If you hate or fear snakes, spiders, bats, rats, or any of the other things that move on their own, take the trouble to learn more about them. Watch them as they go about their business. Throw away stereotypes and put your loathing and fear on hold. Silence your assessor. If you are bugged by bugs try to realize that there are just too many kinds of bugs in the world to hate. Since nobody could even imagine how many kinds of

bugs there are, how could someone possibly despise them all? The exercise here is to try, at least for a spell, to adopt the attitude of a fascinated child at a museum of natural history, playing with live insects and harmless snakes. Loathing is optional and it tends to dissipate with knowledge, so good luck with whatever bug or critter you chose to take a bit more seriously. As we learn more about the creatures we fear, the payoff comes when we start to admire rather than to despise them, and when our first impulse is no longer to kill them. But I am not here lobbying for animal welfare. This is no more than an exercise in harmony, not a plea to make peace with everything that lives.

**(3) Vegetables and other Disagreeable Eats.** Many people claim not to like vegetables, and the first president Bush is known to have said this: “I do not like broccoli. And I haven't liked it since I was a little kid and my mother made me eat it. And I'm President of the United States and I'm not going to eat any more broccoli.” What Bush did not understand was that distaste for this or that food is usually optional. I felt the same way about peppers, but after I decided to become less arbitrary and opinionated I gave them another chance, and I'm glad I did.

So the exercise is to come to terms with some food you think you dislike. This is not about changing your diet, or eating more healthily, it is about practicing harmony with the vegetables, or the fruits, or olives, or calamari, or anything you might have developed an arbitrary distaste for. To some carnivores, all I am saying is “give peas a chance.”

**(4) Driving a Car.** On a freeway, fast-moving cars change lanes, merge, adjust to each other, and usually stay out of accidents. When things are going smoothly the process is fascinating to observe and a delight to participate in. We can, in this potentially dangerous situation, find trust, compromise, and real rewards in striving for harmony. The exercise is to drive your car for a day (or even an hour) more harmoniously than usual. Look for opportunities to yield to pedestrians and other drivers, stop for someone who wants to pull out of a parking space, let someone in your lane. Experience the gratitude and friendly feelings of those to whom you have shown a small courtesy and then drive on, searching for another victim on which to inflict your consideration.

Once again a warning is in order. Just as it is not wise to present a swarm of enraged killer bees with Buddhist tranquility, it may be equally unwise to try this in some cities where the operative metaphor is DRIVING IS RACING rather than DRIVING IS DANCING. The point of mentioning these exercises is to suggest simple ways to sample the joy of harmony. Someone who tries them under circumstances that guarantee their failure probably doesn't want to sample harmony, which is fine with me.

**(5) Walking in a (Large) Crowd.** It is lunch time and two large crowds of people face each other from the opposite sides of Main Street, waiting for the "walk" sign. Even before the light changes, the two hoards launch themselves toward each other and then, miraculously, they merge and swerve, speed up and slow down—old, young, male, female, couples with baby carriages, shufflers, striders, even bicyclists—and, on a good day, nobody even touches anybody else. Everyone does what they

must to get to the other side with an absolute minimum of contact, and collisions are almost unheard of.

The exercise is to dive into a scene like this and notice the exquisite and often automatic adjustments the participants in this ballet make from second to second. Observe small acts of kindness and deference, and observe also those who seem not to be involved in the dance and who walk with eyes down and cell phones up. But even these defections rarely result in collisions because those who are participating usually manage to swerve out of the way at the last second. There are free riders in every walk of life.

**(6) Looking at Things from a Different Point of View.** It is one thing to *take* a point of view, and another thing to *look at things* from a point of view. To take a point of view is to adopt a point of view, to make that point of view your point of view. To look at things from a point of view is to take it temporarily and hypothetically. Even atheists can look at things from the religious point of view by imagining (or remembering) themselves as believers, and then asking how they would (or did) understand and respond to events. When we look at things from the point of view of self-interest or of some morality, we determine what the self-interested or the moral solution to a problem is. When we look at something from the point of view of our child, our partner, our neighbor, or our opponent, we try to imagine how they see that thing, how it fits into their plans and intentions, and how they feel about all that.

While there is a difference between taking a point of view and looking at things from that point of view, the easiest way to begin to appreciate a different point of view is to try to put yourself into the shoes of one who takes it. What is it like to think, for example, that animals have rights, that taxation is theft, that Governor Palen of Alaska was ready to be president? Can we even comprehend how someone might have come to think these things? What do they say to themselves when they are reflecting about the matter? We can speculate about this, and we can even inform our speculation by actually speaking with someone who holds some opinion that makes no sense to us. But remember that the point is to understand them, not to get into an argument.

The exercise, then, is to do our best to think sympathetically about someone (real or imagined) who supports a belief or policy that is radically different from our own. Let us ask ourselves this: If the most informed and eloquent representative of the other side could speak freely and at length, what points would he or she most want to get across? If you do this well, you may even develop some sympathy for that contrary opinion, and some respect for the person who holds it. And you may not, but in that case you might at least learn what you are up against when conflict arises.

**(7) Listening.** There are times when it is hard to be silent, but listening (like oratory) is a skill that can be learned. There is much to recommend listening as a habit, but for now just consider it as an exercise. Warm up by giving your full attention to a report on National Public Radio or to some podcast on your iPod. Don't drift off, start multitasking, or argue with what you hear—just listen. To do this we have to know how to be quiet, how to focus on what is happening, and how to allow our thoughts

(what we are thinking) to be controlled by someone else. We will know we have succeeded when the words coming into our ears determine the structure and the content of the experience. Don't think this is easy—being able to focus on one thing lies at the heart of all meditation.

When we can listen to a recorded voice without wandering off into our private thoughts, it is time to try our skill on real people. The advantage of our warm-up exercise is that the inclination to answer the radio or your iPod is reduced to a minimum, if not extinguished. For the advanced version of this exercise we need to apply this quiet listening when the words are coming from human speakers, and not just from buds in our ears. We cannot really listen to another person if we are busy preparing an answer to what is being said, or to what we imagine is about to be said. To listen carefully, we must achieve a kind of emptiness, we must record what is being said with a minimum of distortion. In this exercise, then, wait until someone is trying to tell us something and then, as we listen, we are to ask ourselves what exactly is being said, not what response we need to come up with when it is (finally!) our turn to talk. But the exercise is to listen carefully, not to become a conversational zombie. A skillful listener will know when to listen, when to encourage the speaker with questions, and when to talk.

**(8) Yielding and Compromising.** The Confucians have a virtue they call *rang*, which can be translated as *deference*, or *yielding precedence*. This practice is a very important ingredient of any peaceful society and it needs to be encouraged from a young age. We don't get harmony unless we can yield, for we can't expect reality, in its

animate or inanimate form, always or even often to conform to our wishes or demands. If we can encourage deference, we will cut down on pushing and shoving, cutting in line, road rage, divorce, and homicides. If everyone were just a little more polite than might be expected, things would work well enough.

Here the exercise is simple. Yield. You can start by just noticing the ways you already do this, and then try doing it more. You don't push others out of your way, or take up two seats on the bus when others are standing. You open doors, and hold them open for other pedestrians in the complicated doorway dance we all know. We all defer and yield and regularly perform acts of micro-courtesy. Start paying attention to the ways you already defer to and compromise with others. But the actual exercise involves more than unconscious microcourtesy, and requires yielding more than the right-of-way to someone. It is to give in on some non-trivial matter—perhaps about where or what to eat, or what show to see, or what music to listen to, or where to go for the weekend. Against your desire, or even your better judgment, let someone have it their way, and do this with grace, appropriate enthusiasm, and support, not with sullen and grudging cooperation. More than half the time you will be pleasantly surprised at how well things go.

**(9) Giving.** The exercise is to give something away, but this can be difficult for two reasons. First, for this exercise, what you give has to be something that you value, and something that you know the other person would be glad to have. It is too easy to give away something you no longer want. Second, you must try to give the gift without any expectation of, or desire for, reciprocity or reward. Do not treat the gift

as a bribe or as a payment in advance for loyalty or affection. If your gift is aimed at gaining the recipient's obedience, then you are practicing control, not harmony, and you must start the exercise all over from scratch. The goal is to give someone a free gift, a gift with no strings attached. If we can do this, we will have managed to get a glimpse of ourselves in a generous interaction with the motive of control out of the loop. Without the ability to let go of our concern about ourselves, harmony is difficult, if not impossible, to attain.

There are many things we might give. We can begin with physical objects, of course, but we can spice up the exercise by noting that other kinds of gifts are often more appreciated. Time, attention, help, respect, consideration—all can be seen as things that we value and things that most people would be happy to receive as gifts. (Advice, however, is usually not one of them.)

**(10) Forgiving.** Unlike much giving, forgiving does not involve a transfer of goods. Sometimes we forgive as a mere “performance.” We simply say words like “I forgive you.” This may be enough for the person seeking forgiveness, but it may also be nothing but the words. A deeper, psychological, kind of forgiveness happens when the person doing the forgiving truly lets the other person off the hook. That means that certain thoughts no longer occur and that feelings of anger, annoyance, or hurt no longer arise. The truly forgiven person is back in good graces and out of the doghouse, the former relationship can be resumed, and the person who has managed to forgive can tell the forgiven to “forget about it,” and mean it.

So, obviously, the exercise is to try both kinds of forgiveness, but particularly the second. You may not be able fully to forgive someone, but if you make the effort you can perhaps learn what it might really take for you to forgive someone who has done you wrong. You may learn that you can never forgive them, but when you do learn this, it is worth asking yourself “Why not?” Is some moral belief involved?

**(11) Saying “Joy to the World” and Meaning it.** One of the kindest and most compassionate Buddhist saints, Santadeva, offered the following meditation:

**May the fearful be without fear, and those who are oppressed with  
sorrow find joy, and those who are anxious be free from anxiety  
and at peace.**

The exercise is to say this *and really mean it*.

**4. Conclusion.** As long as society is composed of people, there will be conflicts of interest. We all have beliefs, hopes, claims, aims, and desires, and they often clash. There are many ways to deal with these conflicts, but nearly everyone admits that there is a sense in which we all start off equal. Many moralists and all amoralists would say that the poorest, dirtiest, most ordinary person in the world is worth no less than any king, queen, president, pope, or media star. This is our “moral equivalence” as rational beings, children of God, or receptacles of pleasure and pain. For the moralist this is because humans are equally valuable, but for the amoralist it is because all ideas of value have been left behind.

When we are prepared to recognize other people as moral (or amoral) equals, and willing to look at things from their point of view, which requires that we shut up and listen to what they are saying about their priorities and their lives, then hard problems become easy. When this sort of consideration is mutual, hard problems disappear.

Imagine now that you have made substantial progress along the path of harmony. Your assessor has been, if not silenced, at least quieted, your mind is steadier and calmer, you have developed an openness to the details and circumstances of situations, and a greater awareness of your own motivation. Because of these changes, you will probably get along better with others, have fewer conflicts, and less stress. You will also be likely to cause others less unhappiness, perform tasks better, and you may even have better health and a longer life. This is not to say that anyone who moves any distance in the direction of harmony will inevitably be happier. Sometimes, in difficult environments or unfortunate circumstances, the result will be unhappiness, pain, or even death. Everything is a risk. But in the majority of cases we can say, with Wittgenstein, that the harmonious life does seem happier than the unharmonious one.