

Foreword

to the *Book of Change (I Ching)*

By Lama Anagarika Govinda

Among the great books of the world the *I Ching* occupies a unique position. Not only is it among the oldest books that ever were written, but besides this it represents a conception of the world that differs widely from all other systems of thought found in the East or anywhere else in the early records of humanity, without contradicting them. The reason is that the *I Ching* is not based on a religious doctrine, a divine revelation or on tribal law and folklore, but on the observation of nature and human life, the interaction of universal laws and individual behaviour, of free will and destiny.

Instead of emphasizing the eternal, the unchanging, the immutable, as the highest aim and ideal of man, or by personifying it in the concept of a divine and eternal being, in contrast to an ephemeral and more or less unreal world of doubtful value, the *I Ching* is the only book of ancient wisdom that makes CHANGE itself the centre of observation and recognizes TIME as an essential factor in the structure of the world and in the development of the individual. Time here is not merely conceived as a negative or destructive agent, to be feared and denied, but as the very essence of life and therefore not opposed to the eternal, but rather that by which the eternal is being revealed.

The originators of the *I Ching* (which is not the work of a single author, but the accumulated wisdom of many generations, successfully applied and proved workable for a span of not less than 3000 years) accepted change as the natural order of things, the true nature of life. And they realized that it is not merely a principle of transiency and instability and a cause of suffering and unhappiness—as it appears to those who desperately cling to the idea that only the changeless is eternal and worth striving for—but that change itself gives meaning to life and contains an element of stability, an inherent law or eternal principle, which people tried to find outside the world in a realm of transcendental reality.

Thus they realized that change is not arbitrary or accidental and they discovered the laws of transformation, according to which each thing or state of existence can only change into something already inherent in its own nature (and not into something altogether different),

and the equally important laws of periodicity, according to which change follows a cyclic movement (like the heavenly bodies, the seasons, the hours of the day), representing the eternal in time, converting time quasi into a higher space-dimension, in which things or events exist simultaneously, though imperceptible to the senses. They are in a state of potentiality, as the invisible germs of future events and phenomena that have not yet stepped into actual reality.

Therefore the *I Ching* maintains that those who know the "germs" and the laws of transformation are the masters of their destiny.—But how is one to know the germs which are hidden to the senses and inaccessible to the intellect, as they are still in a state of unformed potentiality?—Here a faculty of the human mind comes into play, which modern man has neglected or almost forgotten: the mysterious forces of our depth-consciousness, our intuition, which the ancients evoked through trance-like states or in meditation, religious rituals and divine oracles, in which the individual consciousness was extinguished in favour of a greater, more universal consciousness.

In all these states of mind thoughts and sense-impressions are excluded, the depth-consciousness is freed from ephemeral desires and purposes and from the distractions of the peripheral or surface-consciousness, which generally is occupied with the limited concerns of our daily life; and thus we become aware of the germs that determine our future and are revealed in symbols, in archetypes of profound significance. These symbols may vary according to the racial, linguistic, cultural and historical background of the individual, unless they belong to those universal archetypes which are valid for all human beings, irrespective of race, culture and social conditions. The evaluation of these symbols, therefore, depends on a thorough knowledge of the meaning of symbols and a discrimination concerning their origin and applicability. In ancient times this evaluation was the function of priests and seers, and if nowadays we wish to avail ourselves of the knowledge laid down by them in books like the *I Ching*, we have first to study carefully the symbolic language employed by them and try to translate it into the psychological language of our time, a language as much conditioned by the religious tradition in which we grew up, as by the historical background of our respective civilization.

Though the *I Ching* grew out of the practice of ancient oracles, there is a second, equally important, aspect of it, which in the course of millenniums transformed the oracle-book into a philosophy of life, namely, the formulation and definition of the laws of transformation.

While the ritual action and the resulting answer of the oracle so to say pinpoint a certain situation by making conscious what was hidden in our subconscious mind, the knowledge of the laws of transformation makes it possible for us to foresee the probable course of future events, according to the direction we choose to take from the starting-point of the present situation. In this way the law itself, instead of becoming a cause of our enslavement, becomes an instrument of free will.

Thus the *I Ching* combines intuition and experience with a logical method of applying both to a given situation, which allows us to exert our reason (as a safeguard against a merely emotional approach or 'wishful thinking') and gives us the freedom as well as the responsibility of a final decision. It is this that raises the *I Ching* to the level of a spiritual science and a philosophy of life and distinguishes it from a mere system of soothsaying or fortune-telling, in which man is deprived of his free will and conceived as a play-ball of fate, going to a predetermined future, upon which he can have no influence.

While soothsaying for this reason is without moral value, the *I Ching* uses divination not for determining the future, but for raising the already present hidden tendencies of the human mind into the light of conscious awareness, in order to give the individual a glimpse of the various possibilities before him and a chance to choose the best course of action, according to circumstances. In this way the individual, instead of disregarding or opposing the acting forces and realities around and within himself, co-operates with them and makes them his partners in the creation of his future. A sailor cannot control the wind or the current of the water, but he is able to utilize their forces by skilfully co-operating with them.

How we can co-operate with the forces of destiny or the realities of our present situation, is shown in the *I Ching*, in which the laws of transformation have been defined by a method which is as ingenious as it is simple, by using only a plain and a broken line to indicate the polarity of all phenomena of life, and six positional values to show their relativity in the sequence of time and their relationship in space.

Just as the invention of the decimal system with its positional values and the introduction of the concept 'zero', was one of the most important steps in the development of mathematics, leading to the discovery of new spiritual dimensions, so the hexagrams of the *Book of Change* created a system of symbols, capable of expressing a vast variety of combinations and permutations, indicating their inherent

movements or transformations, which practically cover all situations in human life. The advantage of these symbols is that—like those of mathematics—they are independent of language and therefore universally valid. They form the stable framework or skeleton around which the living flesh of organic thought and creative vision have been growing, and in this process a symbolism of verbal concepts and similes and pictorial (visible) forms originated according to the cultural genius and the environmental conditions (landscape, flora and fauna, climate and seasons) of the Chinese people. As this symbolism is enshrined in the Chinese language and in the ideograms of the Chinese script, only a thorough knowledge of both can guarantee the correct interpretation of its intricate relationships and their deep meaning.

Nobody could be more qualified in this respect than the author of this new translation, who speaks and writes Chinese with a fluency rarely attained by Westerners, and who has the added advantage of being thoroughly acquainted with Chinese life and culture on all levels, as his autobiographical book *The Wheel of Life* (Rider, 1959) and his charming description of pre-communist Peking under the title *City of Lingering Splendour* (Hutchinson, 1961) amply demonstrate. These books are the fruit of twenty years of life and work in China. As a translator of classical texts of Chinese Ch'an literature he has made a name for himself by the translation of the sayings of one of the most famous Masters of Meditation: *The Zen Teachings of Huang Po* (Rider, 1958).

Due to his deep involvement in the spiritual life of China he was able to recognize the importance of finding the right approach for those who want to consult the *I Ching*, whether for purposes of divination or for general advice in important situations of life (and only such situations justify the use of this book). In regard to this I may quote the author's own words from a letter dealing with his *I Ching* translation: 'I have very strongly stressed the religious ritual way of approach to divination and interpretation and shown that the whole process is in some important respects equivalent to a form of yogic meditation. It is just because the *I Ching* (in Richard Wilhelm's translation) is rather widely used in the West on a level not much higher than that accorded to any cheap fortune-telling book that I felt the urge to prepare a new version so worded that those who use it will have no faith in the responses *unless they do approach both enquiry and interpretation in a truly religious manner.*'

It is, [therefore], with the greatest confidence that I recommend to all lovers of Chinese wisdom this new translation of one of the most profound books ever written in the remote past of this ancient civilization.