

IN ALL SERIOUSNESS

Deane H. Shapiro, Jr., Ph.D.  
Johanna Shapiro, Ph.D.

"You're not doing your yoga exercise properly."

We looked up with annoyance at the old Mexican gardener smiling through gold teeth at us. A gray black beard and long unkempt hair covered most of his face.

Both of us felt confident we had executed the relatively simple exercise, the cobra, with great skill. After all, we had just spent 15 months in the Orient on a quest which had taken us to Zen monasteries, Ch'an monasteries, and encounters with yoga masters.

And here, before us, on a football field in Southern California, was someone with the inconsiderateness not only to interrupt our spiritual practice, but also the audacity to criticize us.

"What's the problem?" we replied somewhat testily.

He considered us a few seconds without answering, then the gold teeth showed, and he said, "When you do yoga, you should smile--have fun. You practice too hard."

At first the Mexican gardener's admonition angered us. We felt that his chiding was misplaced. He was criticizing the wrong people! Both of us felt confident that we had avoided the pitfalls which exist when Westerners try to incorporate insights from the East.

Certainly it was easy for us to see these pitfalls and traps. As Eastern values and traditions became more and more "in vogue" in our Western culture, the frequency of these "errors" was multiplying. There was a growing spiritual hunger in the West. Unfortunately, there was also often a great spiritual naivete accompanying this hunger, and the consequent problem of misinterpretation when Westerners turned to the East.

First and foremost, we had noticed that the way of the East was being subverted to accomplish Western goals and Western ends: marketing, greater sales, productivity.

We knew, for example, that McDonald's had built a meditation room for its employees at its major plant. Initially, this struck us as a major spiritual advance. However, the McDonald meditation room is shaped like a hamburger. The goal of the room is not to encourage employees to become more sensitive to themselves, but to encourage them to meditate on more productive marketing ideas for selling hamburgers. We also had read an ad promoting "Zen" bath oil as a method for truly experiencing and being in the world, and were horrified by the exploitation of the Eastern concept of oneness. Finally we were disturbed by the slick mass marketing techniques of Transcendental Meditation. Meditation was promoted as a kind of snake oil cure-all for decreasing high blood pressure, improving study skills, improving athletic performance, and decreasing drug addiction. In all the above examples, the technique of meditation had been crassly extracted from the spiritual and philosophical context in which it had been developed in the East for the past 2,000 years.

However, we were aware that this was not the only way Eastern philosophies were misused by Westerners. All too often we saw people looking to Eastern values as an excuse or justification for behaving apathetically and passively. They interpreted Eastern acceptance as allowing them to not really care, to not become involved in social issues. These people were also radically misinterpreting the essence of Eastern values.

With this perceptive awareness and heightened consciousness, honed in the monasteries of Asia, it was hard for us to believe what was implied in the gardener's admonition--that we personally suffered from the problem of spiritual illiteracy.

#### A NEW PURITAN ETHIC

It has been seven years since we returned to America, seven years since that encounter with the gardener. As we look back, we feel much as Nietzsche must have felt when he wrote "Youth's soul turns upon itself, tears itself to pieces, takes revenge for its long self-delusion. Ten years later, one comprehends that this too was youth."

We were very young in the understanding of the liberation of the spirit and very righteous about that understanding. We had left American society as a statement of dissatisfaction and with the belief that a better alternative could be found. We felt that what had been considered assets from a material and technological viewpoint in our Western culture--aggressive competition,

rationality, goal-oriented striving, material acquisition--demanded too high a physical and emotional price. We saw the health-related problems of our parents' generation--stress, diseases, ulcers, heart attacks. We also saw the psychological and emotional problems--an inability to let go of the work ethic and experience the delicate joys of the moment: the beauty of nature, other people, of oneself and one's children. We sensed a joylessness, a lack of spiritual sensitivity and values in the lives of those trapped within our mechanistic and technological society.

Although we still believe that the values and goals of the East (eg. yielding, egolessness, centeredness, harmony with nature) are important, we are now aware that we were using Western attitudes (striving, goal-oriented) to achieve them. We were striving for spiritual accomplishment, whereas those whom we rejected strove for material accomplishment. We strove to reject status, fame worldly success, but our striving was as goal-oriented and bound up in achievement as the striving of those who pursued worldly success and possessions.

We were trapped by a new Puritan ethic--a dictatorship of what we believed the spiritual life should be. We tried to accumulate spiritual prizes and capital just as those whom we rebelled against were driven by a dictatorship of acquisition of material capital. Both involved a rigorous, disciplined striving. Both lives lacked personal freedom because they were directed by the same rigid, serious, self-important struggle for attainment.

THE COSMIC CHUCKLE

Is there a way out?

We have strongly felt the limits of the goals of our own valueless Western technological society. We have seen the difficulties when Westerners try to incorporate the superficial trappings of Eastern values and goals and subvert them to their own Western ends. We have also seen the difficulty of attempting to use Western means to pursue Eastern goals. The gardener's smile chided us that our serious striving for goals--even Eastern goals--was not the total picture. The missing element was attention to the means, attention to a certain attitude, a certain way of being in the world. We can think of this missing attitude as a kind of cosmic chuckle: a twinkling appreciation for the moment-to-moment fragility, humor and acceptance of every aspect of our existence. This attitude involves an acceptance of both the pleasure and the anguish, the success and the failure, the beautiful and the ugly. It is an attitude which, in its very essence, is at once deeply spiritual and life affirming: it involves an ability to yield and let go, an ability to maintain a perspective in the midst of tension, competition, and worldly striving, as well as in the midst of relaxation, friendly cooperation, and spiritual or worldly success. The cosmic chuckle allows us to try hard for both spiritual "goals" and worldly goals; and, at the same time, allows us to smile at our personal imperfections and to accept the imperfections of the world even as we struggle to change them. Eventually, in the Eastern view, this cosmic chuckle leads to an acceptance of all, the transcendence of the duality of good and bad, success and failure.

Rhetoric often precedes experience. Understanding grows slowly. Ten years from now Nietzsche's statement will still be applicable to our lives. Yet, at certain times, when we catch ourselves striving in the ways of the world, becoming ego-centered, angering over trivia, criticizing ourselves cruelly for imperfection, complimenting ourselves proudly for success, we are also aware of a certain internal smile. At these times, in all seriousness, we are learning not to take ourselves so seriously. And, at these times, we are also learning to be able to work hard, to enjoy the cosmic chuckle, and to not know the difference.

Deane H. Shapiro, Ph.D. is a Dean at the Pacific Graduate School of Psychology, a Clinical Instructor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University Medical School, and the author of Precision Nirvana.

Johanna Shapiro, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Family Medicine, University of California Medical School, Irvine; and is currently working on a book: Self-Management Strategies for Women.

The Shapiros meditate, do yoga, and sometimes smile.