

1995

Mastery: Or, Where Does True Wisdom Lie?

Martha Goff Stoner
University of Michigan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stoner, Martha Goff (1995) "Mastery: Or, Where Does True Wisdom Lie?," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 1 , Article 14.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl1qhg0>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol1/iss1/14>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

Mastery: Or, Where Does True Wisdom Lie?

Cover Page Footnote

Martha Goff Stoner, Ph.D., The University of Michigan, teaches meditation in her writing and literature classes. She is currently developing a book that applies Zen philosophy to pedagogy. She writes fables under the name of Pearl.

Mastery: Or, Where Does True Wisdom Lie?

Martha Goff Stoner

A story is told of a student who yearned for the wisdom of a master. Every morning the student climbed a mountain to reach her teacher who lived at the summit. When she arrived at his hut, she would ask him where she might find wisdom. Then she would stand, gazing at her teacher, waiting for his answer. Always the teacher remained silent, sitting on his cushion.

Each new day the student would climb the mountain, again hoping to receive an answer to her question. Each time she rephrased her question, believing that if she found the correct wording, the teacher would answer her. But every evening she returned home downcast.

Finally she decided this day would be her last climb. She would tell her teacher that she would visit him no more. But when she arrived at the hut, the teacher had gone. As the student turned to leave, her gaze rested upon the teacher's cushion. It occurred to her then that she might sit there, that she might see from his perspective. She walked to the opposite side of the hut and sat.

Days passed. The student forgot her home. She watched the light grow and recede. Day and night, night and day, she sat. A time came when the light and dark that she watched on the wall before her mingled and became one.

After a time, a seeker came to the hut. He had heard of the wise one who lived there. He bowed to the student sitting on the teacher's cushion, and asked, "Where does true wisdom lie?"

The student did not answer, but she knew.

Pearl

I wrote this fable in the tradition of a Zen teaching story to illuminate the nature of the journey toward wisdom. It is a West-meets-East fable. The student represents the methods typically used by the earnest seeker-of-wisdom in the traditions of the West. The teacher represents *the way* Zen philosophy teaches. Rightly experienced, the fable shows how these two ways, rather than opposing each other, create a whole. The lesson of the fable is not that West or East is better, but that in the West we tend to favor a single approach and that approach can undermine wisdom until we understand and include in our awareness insights such as those offered by Zen philosophy.

Martha Goff Stoner, Ph.D., The University of Michigan, teaches meditation in her writing and literature classes. She is currently developing a book that applies Zen philosophy to pedagogy. She writes fables under the name of Pearl.

In our Western system of formal education, we tend toward a mountain-climbing approach to wisdom. That is, we perceive the search as a journey toward a goal that is tangible, that can be held, as one might hold a crystal globe in the hand. What the East, as represented by Zen philosophy, has to offer the West is an awareness that wisdom comes not when the individual is busy climbing a mountain, aggressively focused on grasping the goal, but when the individual is quietly sitting, apparently doing nothing. In the West our training is never to sit down. We are encouraged to keep on trying, keep on climbing, eyes ever on the goal. But Zen philosophy teaches us to stop focusing on the goal, to stop climbing, to let go of trying and to sit down. Thus, in the fable, it is only when the student gives up her quest that wisdom arises.

What can it mean to suggest that by giving up, we gain? The Zen perspective on the goal-oriented search for wisdom was popularized for Westerners in the mid-1950s by the German philosopher Eugen Herrigel. In his slim volume, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Herrigel (1971) described his experience of learning archery from a Zen master. Herrigel began to notice his preoccupation with hitting the center of the target. He became aware that he was determined and *effort-full* every time he pulled the bow string. The master called Herrigel's attention to this attitude:

"The right art," cried the Master, "is 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."

"What must I do, then?" I asked thoughtfully.

"You must learn to wait properly," [the master replied.] (p. 34)

But how can we wait *properly*? What is the quality of mind or attention that Zen offers as a replacement for the attitude of ceaseless striving so familiar to the West?

Waiting properly happens when we are fully aware in the present moment. Typically, our minds are occupied with thoughts of the past or plans for the future. In thinking about the past or the future, we miss what is happening in the present moment. Yet, all we ever truly have is the present. Consider, for example, a woman driving a country road, lost in thought. She may be thinking about a particularly difficult encounter with a co-worker or family member; those thoughts may shift to thoughts about her dinner plans; next she may consider a project that she has underway. The radio has been on all the while, but she has not been aware of it; then, a particularly resonant piece of music captures her attention. Perhaps the music is Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. Now the driver feels a call, an emotional shift, as the deepening strains of the music awaken her. She begins to notice the scenery around her. She sees lush green fields and summer light touching the wheat. She becomes aware of an arch of reddening gold where the

wheat begins to ripen and merge with the sunlight. She breathes in the awe of the present moment. She forgets what came before and what will come after. She is no longer constrained by a consciousness that concerns itself with linear time. In that moment, she ceases trying to control and maneuver her life. Instead, she allows herself to flow with the journeying motion of the car and with the fields and sunlight as they envelop her. The haunting violins become the swelling wheat. She notices the mingling of worlds. In this condition of awareness, the woman's sense of herself shifts. No longer is she isolated, immersed in problems that require personal effort if they are to be solved. By losing awareness of her ego-based concerns, she experiences herself both as an individual who witnesses life around her and as a participant in a mysterious drama that is unfolding without her effort. She experiences her connection to the flow of life.

We have all experienced such moments. Such moments come to us because we have let go of the intention to make something happen—thus, the paradox suggested by the master of archery when he says, “You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen.” To wait *properly*, we must stop trying to make something happen; we must even stop waiting. We must simply *be*, with our awareness tuned to the multiplicity of life.

In the fable, the student is blocked from this state of being by her own perception—what Herrigel's master called a “too willful will.” The student *decides*. Deciding is an act of will, an exertion toward, a choosing to perceive in a certain way. The student decides that wisdom is of a certain order and that it requires a certain approach. Deciding this, she exists in a state of too willful will. Convinced of the validity of her own perception (lost in her thoughts as our driver of country roads was), the student misses what is around her. Missing what is around her, she also misses what is inside her. When she finally sits on her teacher's cushion, what is about her and what is inside her mingle—as did the wheat and the sunlight—and, thereby, wisdom emerges.

The student's too willful will is the mountain-climbing approach to wisdom. This approach reveals a habit of mind that the student should overcome. Fundamental to the student's approach is her belief that wisdom exists outside herself. The student assumes that she herself lacks wisdom and, therefore, that someone else must possess it. Her climb is the climb toward the one she believes can help her. Similarly, the student assumes that either she must find the right question in order to elicit the desired response from her teacher or she must fail in her search. Her belief in the teacher and her focus on the phrasing of her question reveal the student's tendency to think in an either/or fashion. Either I have wisdom or someone else does. Either my question is phrased correctly or it is phrased incorrectly. Either I must climb up the mountain or I must retreat. No room exists for a third possibility.

Because, as Rudolf Steiner (1984) put it, “consciousness determines events,” the student's decision that her world is one of opposites creates precisely such a world (p. 167). That the student inhabits a world of oppositions is evident in the alterations of light and dark, in the climbing up and the retreating downward, in the hope in the morning and in the despair at night. The student is female; the teacher is male. She sits on one side of the hut; he sits on the other. They face each other.

Such duality is familiar in the Western tradition. We need look no further than the Judaeo-Christian *Genesis* to discover its presence. As Joseph Campbell (1991) stated, "The trouble that began [in Eden] was the discovery of duality. That was the Fall" (p. 29). When Adam and Eve tasted the apple, they opened the door to a world of polar opposites. They became aware of male and female, of inside Eden and outside Eden, of good and evil. Their discovery ejected them from paradise. In paradise, humanity knew the union of opposites as well as such mutually exclusive states as non-differentiation and multi-differentiation at the same time. Paradise was the realm of infinite possibility. After the fall, earthly existence, by contrast, became the realm of opposition and of limitation. The pain of the fall is this separation from the paradise of familiarity with a universe in which all things are possible.

No longer one with all of creation, the human being is now an outsider—one who is not in synchrony, one who is separate. Now the individual does not recognize his or her essential kinship with that which is different. Instead, the Self says, "I am I. I am not You." Divided from all that surrounds, we begin to fear the very context in which we live. This fear wells up in us and is projected on to the forces that seem to be most unlike ourselves. Self fears Other. Opposition becomes both our perception of how the world is and terrifying at the same time.

In this context, the Other becomes essentially repellent. When a dualistic mindset divides the universe into Self and Other; inside and outside; matter and energy; presence and absence; being and not being, the tendency is to go one step further and pit these apparently opposite forces against each other. The tendency of Western tradition to assume that opposites repel is apparent as early as Plato. In the *Phaedo*, Plato (1961) quotes Socrates as saying, "Opposites themselves do not admit one another" (p. 85). This "not admitting" of the opposite in the Western tradition often means defining the poles of any two opposing things as good or evil. A thing cannot be a thing in itself. Thus, if X is good, its opposite must necessarily be bad. If day is safe, night is frightening. If white is familiar, black is threatening. If male is powerful, female is weak. If life has value, death does not. If Eden is good, outside Eden (human beings, nature, the earth) is bad. So it is, writes Plato, that "opposite forms cannot face one another's approach" (p. 85).

But isn't duality our very nature? Because our bodies exist on a material, physical plane, we are invited to inhabit a dualistic consciousness. In order to move in the physical plane, we must experience boundaries, edges, sides, differences that are visible and felt. And because our physical senses teach us night and day, dark and light, cold and warm, sour and sweet, hard and dry, we cannot simply decide not to think dualistically. As Robert Frost (1969) put it, "Nature in her inmost self divides/ To trouble man with having to take sides" (p. 92).

However, while duality is inherent in our way of perceiving, it is not the nature of the universe. Quantum physics tells us that reality both is and is not a place of division. The table on which we write appears stable, formed, finite, and static, yet we know that it is composed of energetic forces in constant motion. As Danah Zohar (1990) writes in *The Quantum Self*, the new physics suggests that "reality at the everyday level on which we commonly experience it does

indeed consist of actual things like bodies and desks and chairs, while at the quantum level there exist no actual ‘things’ but rather *myriad possibilities* for countless actualities” (p. 31). What this implies is that division—boundaries, edges, separations between things—is not the whole picture. If the world as we perceive it with our eyes is not the whole picture, what is? Wrote Einstein, “There is no place in this new kind of physics both for the field and matter, for the field is the only reality (as cited in Capek, 1961, p. 319). In the field, matter or reality becomes indeterminate. The universe seems to be in constant flux, in a process of forming and unforming. Physicist David Bohm (1957) writes:

[T]he empirical evidence available thus far shows that nothing has been discovered which has a mode of being that remains eternally defined in any given way. Rather, every element, however fundamental it may seem to be, has always been found under suitable conditions to change even in its basic qualities, and to become something else. (p. 153)

True wisdom lies in being open to this unseen, flowing realm, the terrain of relationships, the place of interplay between forms, forces, and possibilities. There is no place here for an either/or consciousness. What is required is a both/and awareness. According to quantum physics, reality can neither be said to be stillness or motion, being or force, particle or wave, but it can be said to be both.

[A]ll being at the subatomic level can be described equally well either as solid particles, like so many minute billiard balls, or as waves, like undulations of the surface of the sea. Further, quantum physics goes on to tell us that neither description is really accurate on its own, that both the wavelike and the particle-like aspects of being must be considered when trying to understand the nature of things. (Zohar, 1990, p. 25)

The teacher in the fable calls the student’s attention to the true nature of wisdom by awakening her from her tendency to believe only what she perceives with her eyes. He does so not by lecturing to her, or even, after a time, by demonstrating through his own physical presence the example of the consciousness (sitting) that he is referring her to. Instead, he simply leaves. He presents the student with absence to consider. In so doing, the teacher withdraws from his position as the student’s opposite. He draws her awareness beyond the perceptions available to her through her physical senses and invites her into that realm of consciousness that she had believed to be permanently outside herself. When the student sits in the opposite place from her accustomed way of being, she experiences transformation. That transformation is apparent in the mingling of the light and the dark on the wall.

This mingling is the essence of wisdom, a condition in which multiplicity and nonjudgment prevail. It is a form of wisdom sometimes accessed through the arts. I recently saw a painting by Whistler in which this mingling of worlds was apparent. Whistler combined gray, white, blue, brown and black to depict a cold, misty scene of beach, water and sky. On the beach but somehow also in the water

and in the sky appeared a solitary figure of a person. This person seemed to be substantial and insubstantial at the same time—a figure that drifted in and out of the mist surrounding it. Whistler's painting did not represent reality in a dichotomous fashion. That is, I did not see a blue sky, distinct ocean waves, and a sandy beach. Rather, I saw a fluidity of colors mixing with each other in such a way that no single color could be said to exist in any part of the canvas. In the middle of this fluidity, a single human form *attempted* physical reality without quite succeeding.

The student's experience of wisdom at the end of the fable is precisely such an experience of wavering between and within alternate worlds. As she sits on the teacher's cushion, she becomes quiet. Becoming quiet, she is and is one with a universal energy, an experience that has come to her because she has shifted her perspective.

The mingling of worlds that the student experiences is characteristic of Zen, a philosophy in which all forces are held simultaneously. While the student sees contradictions and is disturbed by them, the master simply exists *with* the contradictions. Thus the ancient book of Chinese wisdom, the *Tao te Ching*, tells us:

The Master stays behind; that is why she is ahead. She is detached from all things; that is why she is one with them. Because she has let go of herself, she is perfectly fulfilled. (Mitchell, 1991, p. 7)

Mastery requires letting go of fixed forms and fixed ideas. As we let go, we become fluid. Becoming fluid, we become open to experiencing life as it is, rather than trying to make it become something we think it ought to be. In Hindu the sound "Aum" represents the universe in motion, the cyclical process of birth, being, dissolution, and renewal. When the Zen aspirant chants "Aum," it is an affirmation of this process and an acknowledgment that the answers to our questions lie within and about us in every moment. Writes Joseph Campbell (1991):

Now you are inward turned. The secret to having a spiritual life as you move in the world is to hear the AUM in all things all the time. If you do, everything is transformed. You no longer have to go anywhere to find your fulfillment and achievement and the treasure that you seek. It is here. It is everywhere. (p. 125) 🏯

References

- Bohm, D. (1957). *Causality and chance in modern physics*. London: Routledge and Paul.
- Campbell, J. (1991). *A Joseph Campbell companion*. (D. Osbon, Ed.). New York: HarperCollins.
- Capek, M. (1961). *The philosophical impact of contemporary physics*. Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand.
- Frost, R. (1969). *Frost: The poet and his poetry* (D. Sohn & R. Tyre, Eds.). New York: Bantam.

Herrigel, E. (1971). *Zen in the art of archery*. New York: Vintage Books.

Plato. (1961). *The collected dialogues of Plato*. (E. Hamilton & H. Cairns, Eds.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series LXXI.

Steiner, R. (1984). *The essential Steiner: Basic writings of Rudolf Steiner*. (R. McDermott, Ed.). San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Mitchell, S. (Ed.). (1991). *Tao te ching*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Zohar, D. (1990). *The quantum self: Human nature and consciousness defined by the new physics*. New York: William Morrow.