

Divination Practices: *I Ching*—Part One

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Introduction

The *I Ching*, or “Book of Changes,” is one of the five principal texts of Confucianism and an ancient method of Chinese divination and self-knowledge. It has been practiced for three or four millennia, and to varying degrees it has impacted China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. ¹ “In China and the countries much influenced by Chinese civilization, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, the book has continued to play an influential role to the present day. In Japan until very recently, military tactics were based on the oracle, and the book was required reading for the higher ranks of Japanese officers.” ²

The *I Ching* is more than merely a method of divination; as we will see, it is also a philosophy of life linked to the concepts of Taoism. It has recently been popularized in the West by translators and prominent individuals who are also practitioners. Occult psychoanalyst Carl Jung expressed his faith in the oracle in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, and in his foreword to the English translation of the *I Ching* by Richard Wilhelm. As we will see, some modern psychologists also utilize it as an adjunct to psychotherapy, reflecting Jung’s belief that one of its functions is to draw information from the unconscious mind. Catering to the modern American desire for “instant” everything, there is even a set of *I Ching* “playing cards,” which permit more rapid “divination.”

The *I Ching* is composed of 64 hexagrams of broken and solid lines. A hexagram is determined by an elaborate method ³ of tossing 50 yarrow sticks in a particular, complex procedure, or by the simpler and allegedly less accurate method of using a toss of three coins three times. Every hexagram has a meaning described by the *I Ching*, which is to be self-interpreted using intuition and awareness of the flow and flux of cosmic energy.

Philosophy

The *I Ching* is based upon the precepts of the classical Chinese pagan religious philosophy known as Taoism, ⁴ which involves the cosmic dualism of yin and yang (complementary polarities threaded throughout life, such as male and female). The *I Ching* claims to be able to give a person an understanding of the “implications” of any given moment, and, allegedly, the best or “wisest” action to then take. Because all life is said to be governed by an “immutable” Law of Change, which is related to the yin and yang polarities, the *I Ching* is believed to sort out the “life patterns” produced by this law and the best way to respond to them. This is supposedly revealed through an intuitive interpretation of the “meaning” of 64 hexagrams, each having two groups of three lines variously arranged.

Since the cosmic order is in constant change, and since human life and destiny are irreversibly intertwined with this cosmic order, all human situations need corresponding constant revision to “harmonize” with the changes in nature. The purpose of the *I Ching* is to provide insight into the future so that people may live in harmony with the mercurial cosmic order. ⁵ Thus, the originators:

...believed that they had succeeded in analysing Change itself into sixty-four constituent processes, each subdivided into six stages and all interacting upon one another. They invented a method for relating individual affairs to the stages and

processes most closely affecting them, thus fashioning a key whereby future generations could unlock the secrets of the future and determine the surest way to live in harmony with the circumstances prevailing. For more than two thousand years, those who have learned to use it have testified to the marvellous results obtained. ⁶

As noted, the *I Ching* “Book of Changes” has 64 hexagrams; it also uses eight “trigrams,” with both solid and broken lines. The possible combinations represent the cosmic symbols illustrating the patterns of change in people, nature, society, and so on. The unbroken lines represent the yang (male) principle; the broken ones represent the yin (female) principle. “According to ancient Chinese belief; every event and thing in the universe arises from the interaction of these two principles. Differences between things results from the varying proportions in them of Yin and Yang.” ⁷ Furthermore:

Changes are viewed in terms of cycles which consist of opposite movements (e.g., expansion and contraction, rise and fall). When one pole is reached, the movement invariably reverts to the opposite pole. This principle was used to explain the ebb and flow in nature, society, and individuals. One’s basic attitude should be to accept this cosmic order and to harmonize or become part of it. Under this conception of change the opposite poles are complementary and the ideal way is to accept both the high and the low poles. ⁸

Although the serious divinatory nature of the oracle is stressed, it is often viewed like runes, as a game of entertainment. As Samuel Reifler writes in *I Ching: A New Interpretation for Modern Times*, “Like its Western counterparts, such as astrology and tarot reading, the *I Ching* is most often used as a parlor game.” ⁹ But the serious nature of the practice is indicated by the power it invokes and the need for ritual. “Facing the table and with his back to the South, the enquirer prostrates himself thrice, lights a stick of incense and—with his mind fully concentrated on the question—mentally or verbally propounds it in the form previously decided upon. While doing so, he takes the divining sticks in his right hand and passes them three times through the incense smoke by describing clockwise circles with his wrist.” ¹⁰

Since the *I Ching* is allegedly a method of self-knowledge, applications are also made to contemporary psychotherapy, especially through the Jungian concept of archetypes:

The hexagrams embody the universal patterns of situations that lie beneath the collective consciousness of man, and correspond to the archetypes of present-day thought. The different strata of explanations and commentaries are various attempts to interpret the meanings of these archetypes. Because archetypes lie in the unconscious, their interpretation generally requires the use of a symbolic and esoteric language in order to express what the ordinary language cannot. ¹¹

Jungian analyst Joseph L. Henderson, M.D., has said this about the oracle:

It embodies the kind of reasonableness we associate with modern psychological insight. As a practitioner of analytical psychology I find the wisdom of this book is not only ancient but perennial, and therefore, contemporary, and so I understand that when people use it practically to clarify their lives they are, for the most part, not indulging in wayward superstition but have found an authentic guide to a deeper knowledge of their motives. When, therefore, my patients, as they occasionally do, bring me reports of the things the *I Ching* has told them I take the communication seriously and feel honored to become at least an amateur interpreter of this old wisdom. ¹²

(to be continued)

Notes:

1. Richard Cavendish, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained: Magic Occultism and Parapsychology*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1976, pp. 122-23; John Blofeld, *I Ching*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968, p. 15.
2. Cavendish, p. 123.
3. Ibid., p. 125.
4. Blofeld, p. 38.
5. James Legge, trans, *I Ching: Book of Changes*, New York: Bantam, 1969, pp. LVIII-IX.
6. Ibid., Foreword.
7. Cavendish, p. 122.
8. Keith Crim, ed., *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1981, p. 335.
9. Samuel Reifler, *I Ching: A New Interpretation for Modern Times*, New York: Bantam, 1981, p. 1.
10. Blofeld, p. 79.
11. Crim, p. 335.
12. W. Brugh Joy, *Joy's Way: A Map for the Transformational Journey*, Los Angeles, J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1979, pp. 52-53.