

The Weekly WoKer

A. McGowan, Printer

February 3, 2008

1 Welcome to the Weekly WoKer

Welcome to Volume 7 of the Weekly WoKer, the first weekly newspaper for WoK Forums. Inside this edition you will find:

- Interview Candidates Wanted!
- A brief editorial piece offering my personal view of what has happened this week
- A Letter to the Editor
- Next week's schedule
- 'Piet's Page,' a weekly column by forums mayor Piet Hut

2 Interview Candidates Wanted!

Please inform the editor at abmcgowan@gmail.com if you would be interested in being interviewed for the WoKer.

3 Letter from the Editor

Strong activity has continued this past week in WoK Forums. Steven Tainer resumed his Saturday Talk series with a discussion of the traditional koan method and its relationship to the working hypothesis method, Marc Hoffmann gave a talk on his experience during and after retreat, Monday we continued our reading group on Remi

Brague's *The Wisdom of the World* with a discussion about learning from ancient cultures, and we continued our regularly scheduled MC working hypothesis sessions and Second Life meetings.

The central theme this week, as far as your editor can ascertain, is culture. In Saturday's discussion with Steven we talked about a method that evolved in very particular cultural contexts (namely such contexts where one historically found Ch'an/Zen) and its potential application in the modern world. On Sunday, and in the Thursday followup, Marc talked about a retreat practice that developed under certain contexts, and how it has been and can be adapted to the modern world. In our Monday reading group we talked very specifically about learning from other cultures.

If we pause for a moment and consider what associations the word culture might have, we see that it may be even more closely linked to our discussions than immediately meets the eye. The word itself derives from words meaning cultivated land, or cultivation—a term also applied to contemplative practice ('cultivating the path'). The word culture in the sense of land is also suggestive of 'ground,' or even 'world.' It is clear that our culture provides an important context for any discussion of human issues such as meaning and value.

In particular this week he have discussed certain aspects of modern culture and the implications they might have on the kind of investigation we are conducting. Sleep deprivation, stress, frantic busyness, science, and the use of media are all aspects of our modern experience that condition the way we view the world. Some of these factors, electronic media in particular, by their very nature tend to drain us of subtle-energetic qualities that may be useful in contemplative practice.

The challenge we are facing, then, is how do we find a ground for things like meaning in the modern world? There is a collision of cultures, science has steadily chipped away at many beliefs that are associated with the kinds of traditions that have historically grounded meaning for us, many of us are stressed, overworked, and sleep-deprived... what is there to be done? The challenge is formidable, to be sure, but your editor would encourage everyone to embrace this challenge, knowing full well how great it is, to see what might be done. Each age, after all, faces its own challenges, and it may be possible to leverage the demands of modern life into a form of practice that is altogether unique and beautiful.

4 Letters to the Editor

Dear Most Estimable Wokers,

It has come to the attention of this council that some among you are endeavoring to develop a means by way of the use of a working hypothesis to expose the fundamental nature of all teachings. We are deeply appreciative of this effort, and yet it has also given rise to the gravest concerns that, should this endeavor be improperly directed, the effects could be positively catastrophic at any number of scales ranging from the personal to the inter-galactic. We have therefore decided, given the utmost importance of this matter, to violate the otherwise generally inviolable self-applied prohibition against our direct intercession into human affairs in order to compose this letter to the editor.

It has come to our attention, in particular, that this method of the working hypothesis arose during a series of conversations between Messrs. Tainer and Hut. We are further informed that it was Monsieur Hut, in particular, who conceived of the notion of the application of the concept of a working hypothesis to spiritual practice, while Monsieur Tainer is chiefly responsible for the content of the resulting hypothesis, the notion of Completeness having presented itself quite forcefully in his own contemplations. While we were fully aware of the difficult questions surrounding the presentation of such a hypothesis, at the time we were understandably excited at the prospects of this endeavor, even while trepidatious at the possibility of its misapplication. Since the time of our initial excitement, however, we have grown increasingly concerned about the degeneration of the original concept, the efforts to date suffering as they have from a lack of precision that borders on the noxious.

We believe that the root of this degeneracy is the proliferation of formulations that has occurred, without a corresponding enumeration and explication of the nuances and differences between said formulations. While we are not opposed to multiple working hypotheses (we have, in the past, endorsed many different kinds and levels of koans), we are appalled at the assumed equivalence of all of the formulations without first carefully describing the differences and thoroughly investigating each candidate hypothesis.

We further believe that the condition leading to the possibility of such a proliferation is a situation Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche described as ‘Spiritual Materialism.’ We here reproduce part of his account, in order to highlight this condition and some of its dangers:

We could classify as spiritual materialism any approach... that provides us with techniques to try to associate with the good, the better, the best—or the ultimately good...

When we begin associating ourselves with the good, it makes us happy. We feel full of delight. We think, ‘At last I’ve found an answer!’ That answer is that the only thing to do is regard ourselves as free already. Then, having established the position that we are free already, we just have to let all things flow.

Then we add a further touch to reinforce our spiritual materialism: everything that we do not know or did not understand in connection with our spiritual quest we connect with descriptions in various scriptures about that which is beyond mind, beyond words, ineffable—the ineffable Self, or whatever. We associate our own lack of understanding about what is going on with us with those unspoken, inexpressible things. This way our ignorance is made into the greatest discovery of all...

The result of all this is that we end up confirming ourselves and confirming that the experience we are proclaiming is a true experience. Nobody can question it (*Crazy Wisdom*, pp. 6-9).

We at the council would encourage everyone investigating the working hypothesis to keep this fundamental error, which is closely related to the Pangloss error Monsieur Tainer described, in mind. It is of the utmost importance to the successful conduct of the working hypothesis experiment.

We further propose that everyone use the same hypothesis, or, barring that, that those working with a working hypothesis provide an explicit statement of what hypothesis with which they may be working. Otherwise the term working hypothesis becomes essentially meaningless, and refers only to whatever particular spiritual-materialistic concept of reality a given speaker may possess.

We are fully aware of the argument that the aspect of suchness to which the original hypothesis points is ineffable, and we are familiar in particular with the argument regarding a finger pointing to the moon, that different fingers may point to the same moon. But it is a gross error to prematurely equate the finger with the moon, and it is quite possible that some fingers, far from pointing at the moon, may be in fact actively involved in the picking of noses.

We wish you all the best in this most challenging endeavor, and we are working tirelessly in our respective spheres on your behalf.

Sincerely,

The Supreme Central Council on Teachings

Editor’s Comment

We are not sure who exactly this council may be, but we hope that the letters to the editor portion of the WoKer may become a forum for active discussion of

the Working Hypothesis. We are further hopeful that the once-weekly nature of this publication will lead to particularly well considered and insightful remarks. We are not sure if the council's remarks fit that description.

5 Upcoming Events

5.1 Saturday, February 2 at 5pm ET

Steven Tainer will continue his series on working hypothesis background. This time he will build on his previous discussion of the traditional koan approach to transmitting central aspects of contemplative insight, and its relationship to using the WoK working hypothesis. This will be one of the last presentations in his series, which ends in mid-February and will be replaced by a direct, experiential group exploration based on his own (very easy) variant of dream yoga.

5.2 Sunday, February 3 at 5PM ET

Prof. Davina Chan will review research on long-term as well as short-term neurophysiological effects of meditation.

5.3 Monday, January 4 at 10PM ET

Our Monday evening Reading Group will conclude its review of *Wisdom of the World*, by Remi Brague. Next week, we'll move on to another reading.

5.4 Virtual Events Schedule

Working hypothesis discussions and Second Life meetings continue; for the schedule please see: http://www.waysofknowing.net/VR_Stuff/VirtualEventsSchedule.html

5.5 Dream Yoga Begins Mid-February

A direct, experiential group exploration based on Steven Tainer's (very easy) variant of dream yoga will begin in mid-February. It is recommended that anyone who is interested in participating begin preparing by simply setting an intention to remember their dreams and jotting down a few notes in the morning.

This promises to be one of the most interesting and compelling features that WoK has ever offered—keep your eyes peeled for further updates.

6 Piet's Page

One of the wonders and dangers of Second Life is that it contains almost anything that you can encounter in Real Life as well. And this means that you can use old hobbies and interests as a nice way to further explore Second Life. In my case I quickly become a member of groups of people working with steam locomotives, playing the board game of go, and other interests. Normally I tell myself that I have no time for those pursuits, but with the excuse of researching SL I decided to play a game of go with Zarf Vantongerloo, the main spokesman for a group of go players in Second Life.

It turned out that Zarf is an alt (an alternative avatar) for Zero Linden, in Real Life Marc Lentczner, an employee of Linden Lab, the company that created and runs Second Life. And interestingly, Zero is lead engineer in Linden Lab in charge of the Architecture Working Group that is developing the protocols that will make Second Life effectively part of a larger open source project. What a small world, and what a fun way to meet someone who is at the very center of the way the various virtual worlds are evolving now, technically.

Alas, before I knew it, I spent a couple hours playing go with Zarf, and I knew that I was hooked again. Go is a wonderful game, quite different from chess in that it is less focused on deep analysis of branching possible moves than on an intuitive grasping of the 'beauty' of patterns. You could call it a pattern recognition contest. I used to play it on and off as a student, and every once in a while I get hooked again for a few months, till I decide that it simply takes too much time. It's a very seductive game, though, and I'm afraid I'll be sucked into quite a few games in the months to follow.

It was interesting to see how 'life like' it was, to sit as an avatar in seiza in front of a pretty looking traditional go board (goban) facing my opponent. I've never been tempted to play go on-line, on a web site, watching a two-dimensional board, even though there are several such sites with a large attendance. I figured that I might as well play with real people on a real board, if I was going to spend the time anyway. But like with so many activities in virtual worlds, playing go there gave me an immediate sense of presence and embedding. For a report on our game, as well as a mention of WoK Forums on the web, see Tish's latest blog entry on <http://www.ugotrade.com/>.

7 Quote of the Week

A poem by Ossian Foley, inspired by a conversation with Doug Carmichael and Piet Hut in the Garden:

Cows graze in the pasture.
Too many for too small a fence.
Make space bigger.

Make the little fence a little bigger.
Too many for too small a space.
Cows graze in the pasture.

Cows grate the fence of the pasture.
Too many for too small a fence.
Make space bigger.

Make the little fence a little bigger.
Too many for too small a space.
Cows graze in the pasture.

Cows grate the fence of the pasture.
Too many for too small a fence.
Make space bigger.

Too many for too small a fence.
Too great for too little space.
Cows graze in the pasture.
Make space bigger.