

CHAPTER 44

Deng Ming-Dao

Of all the people who expanded my notions of humility in the face of the universe's mysteries, and at the same time exemplified the essence of a compassionate human being concerned with the people around him, Deng Ming-Dao is the nonpareil. More than anyone I've known, he comes closest to what I imagine a lamed vovnik to be.

I met him in the spring of 1998. The occasion was interesting but in no way hinted at its eventual importance. At the time, I was teaching a course in Chinese literature and history with a brilliant, antic historian and friend named Sandy Lydon, who invited Deng to talk to the class about Daoism.

Sandy was a great teacher, and a wilder one in the classroom than I was. His humor was infectious and freewheeling, and he delivered his rapid-fire lectures in partial phrases and sentence fragments that the students were expected to complete on their own. He was also a prankster and played constant tricks on his students in order to make them think. In this case, he was eager to dash the students' stereotypical ideas of what a Daoist adept was like, those clichéd notions of mystery and otherworldliness that summon up images of sorcerers and wandering monks in the public's mind.

Sandy introduced Deng, who had published several books on Daoism, as having trained extensively in five ancient Chinese martial arts, which was true. However, Deng wasn't an old man with a long white beard who wore flowing silk robes with wide cuffs. He was a slim, forty-four year old who strolled to the podium in an open-collared, button-down shirt and slacks. That was Sandy's joke, but in the end the joke was on me because as the years wore on, I came to see the speaker as an emissary from another world, who stepped effortlessly between that world and ours.

Deng Ming-Dao, it turned out, was a Chinese American book designer by trade, and he didn't lecture the class. He chose a question-and-answer format and replied to the many queries put to him in a relaxed, concise English, entralling the hundred or so students



with his sagacious responses. He spoke for three hours, and almost no one in the lecture hall wanted the evening to end when the class was over at 10 PM. Certainly, George Ow, Jr. who was sitting with us, and Donna and I, were among that number.

Deng's focus was on how Daoism's ages-old philosophy and practices could work in the modern world, and the crowd left the building excited but quiet, deep in thought. Afterward, George took Sandy, Donna, Deng, and me to a Mexican restaurant for a late night snack, and I gave Deng a copy of *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems*, whose Chinese influence I thought was a suitable token of my appreciation for his visit to the class.

The next morning George hosted a breakfast at a local restaurant to introduce Deng to relatives and friends. As he had been the night before, Deng was gracious and humble and made suitable small talk. At one point, someone at the table, who was familiar with Deng's work, asked him if he was still painting, since he hadn't seen graphic work by him in several years.

"I've set aside my art for the time being," Deng answered. "Now that I have a family, I have to devote myself to providing for them. I'll come back to painting later, when my daughter's grown."

I was struck by the incongruity of this answer in relation to the Daoist ideas Deng had presented to the class the previous evening, and before I considered the possible rudeness of my words, I said, "That's a strange answer from someone who believes that the world is in constant flux and that we cannot put off our plans for a future time."

Everyone greeted these words with silence, and George seemed especially uncomfortable, an impression that was exacerbated when Deng didn't answer immediately and seemed deep in thought.

The breakfast broke up a short time later. Everyone said polite goodbyes, and I sensed that I had once more committed a social gaff. I held back until the last person took his leave, intending to apologize for my remark. But as I was about to speak, Deng turned to me and said, "You were right, of course. What you said in the restaurant is what I tell others all the time but have obviously forgotten to apply to myself in this instance." He paused, then continued. "I read some of the poems in your book last night, and I'd like to write you about them. Would you give me your address?"

I did and took my leave. Deng's words were meant to graciously heal an awkward moment, I thought, but they made me all the more aware of how untoward my remark had been and caused me to reflect on the boorishness of what I considered my Slavic directness in light of Chinese courtesy. I also realized that Deng had parried my apology before I could make it, so that in Chinese terms I saved face and, of course, wound up not apologizing. Such thinking may seem exaggerated, but it was the first of a number of instances in which I was aware of Deng's response to situations before they occurred,

instances that not only demonstrated his consideration for other people's feelings but lent him that aura of otherworldliness I mentioned before.

Three days later, I received a letter from Deng. In it he thanked me once again for my comment at breakfast, and he went on to say that when he had looked through *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems* the night of his talk, he had been surprised to find he had been using poems from the book as models for his own writing for the past twenty-five years without remembering the identity of the author. He would contemplate the poems before he started to write and ask himself, "Why can't I write something as direct as that?" He ended the letter by asking if I would be his teacher.

I was astonished. In the first place, I never expected him to send a letter, but if he did, I was planning not only to ask his forgiveness, but to request that he be *my* teacher. I replied to his letter accordingly, adding that I was more a clown than a teacher and was awed in his presence.

Several weeks later, Donna and I went to San Francisco for some reason and had lunch with Deng. His humility and courtesy were captivating, and, of all things, he seemed delighted by my sense of humor. Of course, this may have been mere politeness on his part, but I like to think he recognized from the outset that I had come to embrace the merry Daoism of Zhuangzi rather than the dour aphorisms of Laozi. More seriously, when I left the table for a moment, he expressed concern about my posture and diet to Donna, as if he was a worried friend. I was touched when she told me, and thus began one of the most treasured friendships of my life.

Deng, as I've called him from then on, is my teacher, my student, and my friend. There is no reticence or self-protective male posturing in him. He has been open and emotionally present from the beginning of our relationship and elicits complete trust from anyone who meets him. Our attachment was immediate, and from the start I have assumed that he understood me as few people have. My buffoonery and irreverent repartee didn't fool him for a moment. Like George Ow, Jr., he recognized the seriousness behind the laughter and my lifelong attempt, as unsuccessful as it was, to live with integrity, loyalty, and honor.

In the course of that first lunch, one of the several subjects he and I discussed was the mystery of his not only knowing my pieces from *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems* but his using them as models. It was the first of many mysteries that would permeate our relationship with the headiness of jasmine incense.

In fact, "mysteries" is a good word to explain many of the aspects of my dealings with Deng Ming-Dao. For all his outwardly down-to-earth, unassuming, low-key, logical ways, he gives off an aura of things not quite explainable by conventional Western definitions, an aura I termed before as otherworldliness.

One day, a year after I met him, he joined me and an inspired but easily offended poet from the Midwest for lunch in a busy San Francisco dim sum

restaurant. As usual, the poet was quiet and watchful, if not wary. But as the meal wore on, I saw his body relax, more evidence, I believe, of the instant trust Deng inspires from even the most cautious people. When Deng excused himself for a moment an hour into the meal, the poet waited until he was gone, then leaned toward me and said in an awed tone, "Who is he?" and went on to explain that he sensed something transcendent about Deng. That confirmed many things about Deng for me. I trusted the poet's instincts in such matters, since his poems are among the most spiritually elevated in American poetry. So impressed was he by Deng that a week later he sent me an email wondering if Deng would consider doing the cover illustration for his next book. That was curious. At no time had I mentioned to him that Deng was a painter. Another mystery.

Many of these "mysteries" would be explained in time, but the explanations were full of coincidences and connections that in themselves were mysterious or at least led to further questions about the limited conceptions we accept in our everyday perceptions of reality.

Daoism, of course, is fraught with mystery. One of the popular notions about Daoist adepts is that they have found the secrets of the universe, and time and again I have read about Daoist wanderers who searched for and supposedly found "the elixir of life," or who experimented with concoctions that could procure immortality. If these anecdotes can be assigned to the clichés Westerners hold about the more esoteric notions of Chinese spiritual practices, they also permeate every cranny of Chinese popular culture and address the more unexplainable aspects of existence.

Such subjects had never been broached by Mei Yi-Pao in my Chinese classes at Iowa. Although Professor Mei had translated one third of the *Daodejing* for the much admired *Columbia Sourcebook of Chinese Civilization*, he was best known for his work on the decidedly un-Daoist philosopher Mozi, where Mei showed himself to be a Western scholar, having adopted Western academic ways.

Deng Ming-Dao usually talks about his mystical beliefs only in his writings. He has had several masters whose teachings he has diligently followed. He wrote about one of them, Kwan Saihung, in an enthralling three-part biography entitled *Chronicles of Tao*. As he described them, his masters were traditionalists, strict disciplinarians who demanded unquestioning obedience as well as commitment. When I began "tutoring" him, my method was more relaxed, not necessarily because I was Western, but because my approach was informal to begin with, and because our relationship was tempered by friendship and a reciprocal student-teacher dynamic in which each of us performed one role or another depending on the circumstances.

My role as teacher crystallized a year after we met. Deng had been contemplating doing a new translation of the *Yijing*, one in which he wanted a Western audience to grasp as much of the book as an educated Chinese person might. That meant his book would not only attempt to communicate the ideas

of the *I Ching* but seek to convey the experience of reading it. Over time, he came to the conclusion that he would render his *I Ching* translation in several different sections. In one of them, he decided he would write a poem for each hexagram, based on the hexagram's images, that would evoke the essence of the hexagram's meaning. The only difficulty with this plan was that, except for the aphorisms that appeared at the beginning of each meditation in his book *365 Tao*, he had never written poetry. Would I, perhaps, teach him?

I was taken aback when he came to me with the proposal. But I had so much love and respect for Deng by then that I told him we could try. However, I insisted he get acquainted with Western poetry and suggested several books he should immediately read. That would test how serious he was about the project.

Within a week, he had procured the books and read half of them. He was full of questions about the most basic as well as the most abstruse aspects of poetry. I assigned him several exercises, which he immediately wrote and about which he asked me a number of astute questions concerning philosophical and technical matters. I answered in kind. Next he came down to Santa Cruz, and we spent six hours talking nonstop about various aspects of poetry, during which I laid out twenty or so general "rules" for writing it. After that, we followed a procedure that continued for more than two years: he would mail me his translation and explanation of a hexagram along with the poem he had written to accompany it. I would mark up the poem with corrections, suggestions, and comments that pointed out general poetic issues for which, at times, a particular poem would serve as model. Then I would fax the poem back. Next, Deng, always diligent and punctual, would call me at a prescribed time, and for two or three hours we would go over my comments and his questions in response to them.

Deng became more enthusiastic about our sessions as the project progressed. His questions were so perceptive and his comments so insightful, I couldn't help but be impressed by his intelligence and feel for poetry. But to my amazement, from the start his poetry demonstrated genuine accomplishment.

The sessions became more and more rewarding for me. I was talking about the inner workings of poetry as I had never been able to with my students or for that matter with other poets. Soon I realized that Deng was becoming the repository of everything I knew and had ever thought about concerning the art of poetry: its techniques, various approaches, attitudes toward language and communication, paradoxical ways and means, and, almost more important than all these aspects, its purpose as I saw it.

One day, at the end of an exceptionally long phone lesson filled with one paradoxical notion after another, as well as with the most intricate casuistry, I said to Deng, "You know what's happening in these sessions, don't you?"

"Yes," was all he replied, and I have no doubt he did know, and probably had known long before I recognized the answer to—and maybe even before

the formulation of—my question: Deng, through our phone calls and meetings, had become my protégé, the one who would carry on what I had been taught not only by my poetry mentors and professors, such as Dietrich Gerhard and Mei Yi-Pao, but by the voices of my ancestors whose words rippled up from my cells, those murmurings that rise from our chromosomes and direct us to be everything we are. In a word, he was carrying forward my mysticism as well as his own.

It is interesting to note at this point that Deng may have thoroughly known Chinese history and culture, but his knowledge of Western civilization was not nearly as comprehensive, despite his growing up and being educated in California. A good part of our poetry sessions, then, were taken up with my introducing him to various aspects of Western culture, which included my Russian Jewish background and many side talks about Hassidism and one or another little-known episode in Western history. At one point, I bought him the complete essays of Montaigne—one of my favorite writers—at which he marveled, observing that the book read like the writings of a Daoist master, an unorthodox conclusion I had come to years before.

While all this intellectual communication was skittering back and forth through the telephone wires, we would continue to meet every month or so, have lunch or dinner together, and talk about many subjects. Gradually, we began talking about more personal things. But that took time because Deng was generally formal and respectful of me as an older man. I may have considered us equals, but I knew I had to get past the barrier of his politeness if we were to truly become friends. His social graces were so pronounced, I often joked that he was more a Confucian than a Daoist. That light-hearted quip underscored another problem: although Deng enjoyed my jokes and irreverent horseplay, he was essentially a serious person. That, combined with his formal deportment, had to be breached, I thought, if we were to have the kind of friendship I prized but almost never found.

The breakthrough happened in an unexpected way. Deng always signed his letters and emails, “Sincerely.” To me, it was an illustration of his overall formality. In the second year of our friendship, I brought this practice up during one of our phone conversations. “My friend, why do you still end your letters with ‘Sincerely’? We’re beyond that kind of formality.”

He was quiet for a moment, then said, “What do you suggest?”

I made believe I was thinking for a moment, but I knew what I was going to say: he had written an essay in which he addressed my age and my combative nature by saying “It was time the old swordsman hung up his sword.” Now, as he waited for my suggestion, I said, “I don’t know what you’re going to do, but from now on I’m signing my letters to you ‘The Swaggering Swordsman,’ or something like that.”

He laughed and signed his next letter “The Solitary Drunkard,” and after that regularly changed the adjective with one or another descriptive word that

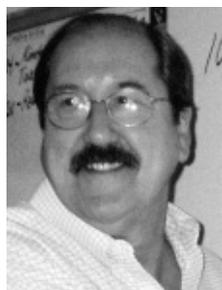
sashayed in front of the inebriated noun at the end of his letters. From that point on, our friendship, more relaxed and jocular, seemed to deepen profoundly.

My trust in Deng was so unquestioning that I asked him to be my literary executor, and he, in turn, introduced Donna and me to his family. His mother was the famous potter and author, Jade Snow Wong, whose autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, a straightforward depiction of life in a Chinese American family in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, became an instant American classic. On the occasion of a retrospective show of her ceramics, which coincided with her eightieth birthday, Deng presented her with an exquisitely designed photography book he had made of her work, as well as a Chinese banquet to which only his immediate family, his mother's closest college friend, and Donna and I were invited. When I told him how honored we were to be included with the family, he replied, "But you are family."

The mystery of how Deng knew my poems from *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems* was solved the second year of our friendship. Deng's bestselling meditation volume, *365 Tao*, had been used by an Olympic wrestler to build mental strength and concentration. When the wrestler was appointed director of the 1996 U.S. Olympic boxing team, he thought it would be a good idea to have the team read a similar book, and he commissioned Deng to put together a book of interviews of famous sports figures talking about the spiritual side of sports. The project had been put into motion before I met Deng, and by the time he told me about it, he had already interviewed a number of well-known athletes from a variety of sports, but not a single basketball player was among them. I immediately suggested he interview my friend Tom Meschery, the former All-American and NBA basketball star.

Tom Meschery

Tom was not a random choice for the interview. He had brains and an artistic turn of mind. He was a big man in all connotations of the word. Not only did he stand six foot seven, he had huge shoulders and a trim but rugged build, with a long face and a lantern jaw. He had played ten years for the Warriors (first in Philadelphia and then in San Francisco) before ending his career with the Seattle Supersonics. For a time after he retired, he had coached in the short-lived American Basketball Association and then was an assistant coach with the Portland Trailblazers, where I met him in the 1970s while I was on a reading tour of the Northwest. Although he had been one of the more aggressive players in the league, known by fans for his combative ways, off the court he was a poet and a gentle, gracious man who took pride in his Russian



Tom Meschery,
Reno, Nevada, 2000

ancestry. Even though we met only several times a year, we were close enough to consider ourselves Slavic brothers, and Tom had even suggested we take a trip to Russia together with his friend, the famous sports radio announcer Bill King, and our wives.

In the middle of his coaching career, Tom went to Iowa for two years, received an MFA in Creative Writing, and then settled with his wife, the novelist Joanne Meschery, near Lake Tahoe, where I spent several weeks each summer during the 1980s and '90s at my brother- and sister-in-law's ski lodge. That was when Tom and I spent time together. A humorous incident occurred on one of those visits that illustrates the jocular side of his character and the nature of our friendship.

Tom and I always attended one or another of the poetry readings at the Squaw Valley Writers Conference. One year, Dorianne Laux, who I knew from the Foothill Writers Conference, gave a reading at Squaw Valley. Tom liked her poetry but had never met her, and after the reading, Dorianne and her husband, the poet Joe Millar, joined Tom, Donna, and me for drinks at a nearby bar. Dorianne kept staring at Tom. Although she was hip and street-wise, she gave the impression that she had never met a professional athlete, and Tom's size and tranquil demeanor seemed to intrigue her. Possibly to her further surprise, Tom talked knowledgeably and enthusiastically about poetry and as usual was affable and relaxed, slouching comfortably in the low, upholstered bar chair.

The conversation went from topic to topic. Tom wanted to talk about poetry, but Dorianne kept asking him about his career. At one point she stated that she was surprised by his gentleness.

"Don't be fooled," I quipped. "He was one of the roughest, 'baddest' players in the game," and smiled.

Dorianne looked at Tom questioningly, but he sprawled deeper in his chair, said nothing, and answered her look with a beatific smile.

A few minutes later, Dorianne asked how Tom and I came to know each other.

"Mort played ball and was a coach" Tom said, which startled her all the more.

"I didn't know that," she said, turning toward me.

"It was a long time ago, and I was never in Tom's league," I replied. "That was when small men could play. I was a guard: directed the offense and mostly shot from the outside, although I would drive to the basket any time I got the chance—"

"Yeah," Tom cut in, "and if I had caught him underneath the basket I would have swatted him fourteen rows into the crowd with the back of my hand." And he sat back and grinned.

"There," I said in mock anger, pointing to Tom, "that's the real Tom Meschery!"

Dorianne blanched at the sudden change in the conversation, but when she saw our grins, she began to laugh, and all of us joined her.



Tom's first book, *Nothing We Lose Can Be Replaced*, came out when he was sixty years old and reads like an autobiography. Divided into three parts, it moves from memories of his upbringing as a Russian immigrant in San Francisco, through a series of anecdotes about his playing days in the NBA, and ends with his career as a high school teacher in Reno, Nevada. Here's a poem from the last section, which shows his empathy and concern for his students:

Suicide

One teacher says she saw it coming
which drives the rest of us by lunch
crazy with guilt, remembering the old
ed. movie, *Cipher In The Snow*.

So we promise ourselves, next period
We'll embrace all our students, even
the wall-eyed one who lurks in the back
drawing obscenities on his desk.

Of course we don't, returning to decorum
with the bell, to Marilyn passing notes,
Harry's runny nose, Carrie's menstrual cramps,
essays overdue, forgotten texts.

In sixth period, one girl by the window starts
to weep, but when I ask her was he her friend
she shakes her head; she never knew him,
but thinks he was her brother's best friend's cousin.

By then, her tears have started a chain reaction.
All around the room, students are crying
the way one can't help humming a certain tune,
or when frightened in the dark, whistling.



When I called Tom up about the interview with Deng, he was enthusiastic, and Deng and I met him one evening several weeks later at Bill King's house in Sausalito. We sat at the dining-room table near a large window that overlooked San Francisco Bay, a tape recorder whirring in our midst. It was one of those clear nights when the lights of San Francisco glittered like a cluster of stars in the distant darkness.

The interview included Tom, Deng, King, his wife, and me. Although I had not intended to take part in the proceedings, I thought Tom's humility was causing him to parry Deng's initial questions or evade answering them, and I found myself continually chiding him in an attempt to pin him down for definite answers, something a friend, rather than a respectful, amateur

interviewer, could do. My estimate wasn't correct. What I took to be parries and evasions were, in actuality, ideas that were different from mine. I couldn't accept Tom's answers that he had never thought out his game plan in advance nor calculated his moves while he was playing. He played, he said, completely by instinct. This statement brought into question my long-standing belief (and practice) that although sports had its instinctive element, all successful athletes were rational in most aspects of their preparation and play. Years later, Tom elaborated on the kinetic purity of his game: "I think if I had tried to be as rational [as you] I'd never have made it. I remember trying to think through moves, attempting to visualize and to plan. Those were the games I most often wound up on the bench, coach yelling at me where in the hell was my head, so I realized my mistake quickly and went back to pure instinct or maybe as Bill Sharmon put it, 'muscle memory.' Back in the locker room after a game, whenever a player asked me about something I had done, a rebound, a shot, a block, I just stared: the court on which the game had just ended was a total blank."

Toward the end of the interview, Deng asked Tom a few questions about his experiences as a coach, and Tom, pointing to me, answered, "Ask Mort; he was a coach."

Deng looked startled for a moment, then continued the interview. But afterward, as we drove back to the city, he said, "I didn't know you were a basketball coach. Where did you coach?"

"At a high school in the city, called Lick-Wilmerding."

"And what year was that?" he asked.

"I taught English and history at Lick from 1965 to 1968 and coached one year. Why?"

"Because I started as a freshman at Lick in the fall of 1968," he said, and half-turning toward me, he smiled and continued. "You were not meant to be my teacher then, but you were now."

"Come on, pal," I groaned in mock exasperation, shaking my head. "Enough of that."

But once more, as it had so many times before in my relationship with Deng, coincidence touched its toe over the border of mystery, and the sense of everyday reality, for a moment at least, seemed as tenuous as a paper kite snapping in a sunlit gale.

By the time Deng dropped me off at my car, we had figured out that he knew *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems* because one of his teachers at Lick, most probably Jack Coffey, my friend and fellow teacher there, had his students read some of them before the book came out in 1972, since I had sent Jack dozens of the poems even before they began appearing in literary journals in 1970.

As I drove back to Santa Cruz that night, I mused on my relationship with Deng and on his comment that I had not been meant to be his teacher

when he was a student at Lick. He was probably right. He had told me months before that he was a rebellious, angry teenager through his college years, particularly concerned with the racial persecution the Chinese had suffered in this country since the mid-nineteenth century. If he was serious, polite, and respectful now, he had come to this deportment in his later years. Although it's hard to imagine, he might have ignored me, or worse, been disrespectful and incurred my anger, let alone my dislike, if I had been his high school teacher. The time at Lick wasn't right for him to be my student, nor for that matter was it for me. I had a lot to learn about life and poetry then. In fact, we both had a lot of separate growing to do before we could meet in a place where we would recognize that what we were looking for existed in each other. Hadn't I said that about Donna?

I'm sure you are scoffing about this talk of mystery. But such suppositions should not be quickly dismissed. I believe that people bring their realities with them and many times enclose others within the strength of their visions. We accept this about religious and political leaders' ability to create mass hysteria. Neurotic housewives are in this category as well and draw their husbands into their frenzied worlds, in the same way that sadistic husbands intimidate their wives to become mute though not necessarily willing victims. These are examples of the power people's views of reality have over others. In the light of such mundane illustrations, mystics practicing age-old rites that summon up realities other than the tenuous one we live by in our daily lives are not to be ignored.

So, was my meeting Deng Ming-Dao in 1998 another instance of the mystery he brings with him wherever he goes? Yes, but in this case it was a mystery of time and place. Deng and I were different human beings in 1968 than we were thirty years later when Chance, Providence, or the mischievous God of Literature, Wen Chang, playing one of his insufferable but in this case wonderful jokes, brought us together.