

FALLING IN LOVE WITH WISDOM

American Philosophers Talk about Their Calling

EDITED BY

David D. Karnos

Robert G. Shoemaker

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Cybersage Does Tai Chi

MICHAEL HEIM

California State University—Long Beach

A Tai Chi teacher who consults on Virtual Reality technology for the computer industry? What kind of job is that? Does some unity tie the work together, some hidden calling?

I cannot pinpoint an exact autobiographical moment when the job(s) seemed to make sense, but I do recall two occasions when everything came together so wonderfully that I treasure them in memory as moments of illumination.

One was during a coffee break at the 1991 Washington, D.C., Virtual Reality conference I had organized. I sat down to chat with Randy Walser, director of the Cyberspace Project at Autodesk Corporation, a Fortune 500 software firm, and I asked him a question often posed by aspiring graduate and undergraduate students: “How does a person prepare for a career in Virtual Reality technology?”

Randy answered without hesitating, “Study philosophy.” He went on to explain how computer breakthroughs require a breed of people fluent in logic and epistemology, able to synthesize psychological, ethical, and historical knowledge. Randy had just finished a presentation in which he cited Mark Johnson’s *The Body in the Mind*. Computers of the future will draw the human being further into cyberspace, body and all. Not just the eyes, but the hands and feet too will move through an environment of computer-generated simulations. Philosophers are at home in virtual worlds, Randy said.

Another occasion also stands out, this one a moment when mind and body savored a wordless unity. The pre-dawn air was pale gray and the ocean breezes cool near Venice Beach in Los Angeles. Every morning for the past several months, I had opened the same rickety wooden gate to walk into the backyard of Master Tung, Tai Chi man and Taoist teacher. Quietly I took my position among ten or fifteen human figures standing like statues under the fragrant eucalyptus trees.

Feet parallel, knees relaxed, spine straight, weight sunk into the balls of the feet, arms outstretched with hands open but relaxed, eyelids nearly shut. Begin letting go of all thoughts, forgetting everything, listening only to the inhale and exhale of the breath. Sink down, letting go of muscle tension, releasing worries and desires, gradually merging the attention with the body. Every few minutes, teacher Tung makes the rounds to adjust the posture, and each time a burst of energy shoots from foot to crown of head. The attention wedded to a relaxed body generates a feeling of inner power, of expanding, radiant energy.

By the time the hour is over, the sun's patterns are flickering through the eucalyptus leaves onto the grass with an incredible but gentle brilliance. Sounds of birds and lawnmowers emerge slowly in the distance. Other students are stirring and moving about in the slow martial movements of Tai Chi Chuan. Awareness of the clock returns gradually.

Later that morning, driving on the freeway, or sitting at the computer, or lecturing in the classroom, I feel the sudden pull of body/mind unity reclaim my nervous system: unnecessarily taut muscles let go, clenched fingers release, breath comes full and supportive.

Or I catch myself in a moment of haste moving as if I were no more than a bundle of competing mental intentions, the body twisting with one limb this way and one limb that, without coordinating breath with action, and without making the most of my center of balance. The memory of Tung's garden adjusts me.

These two slices of life—cyberspace consultant and Tai Chi adept—both grew from idea seeds planted by a book that nourished me in my late teens. It was the early 1960s, just before the video screens took charge of the Truth. I was browsing in a library and quite by accident began reading Henry G. Bugbee's *The Inward Morning*.

In the journal of this American philosopher, I found surprising connections woven into a tapestry of personal reflections. Here was Heidegger's "fundamental grounding" connected with D. T. Suzuki's Zen Buddhism and Taoism. Here was H. D. Thoreau's pristine, fresh America juxtaposed with existential ruminations about the "forgetfulness of Being" in the age of technology. This heady brew, concocted by a bold and honest mind, set me on a series of journeys.

The first trip was to Freiburg, Germany, where I needed to pick up Heidegger's trail. I needed to learn how Europeans think about the reality shifts driven by technology. Much of my three years of Fulbright study remained theoretical, without the shock of recognized experience. That shock of recognition came years later when I used a laptop computer to write my first book.

In 1984, I toted a Radio Shack Model 100 notebook computer to Greece.

Sitting on the steps of the Parthenon, I put into the computer the first chapters of *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing*. Old and new flowed together as the ancient *logos* swam in electrified data. My chapters traced the course of language technologies, from chisel and pen, to printing press and computer.

By then, writing books had become my main link to the philosophy profession. I had fallen in love not with academic philosophy, nor with historical philosophers, but with the writing of philosophy. And now the computer as word processor became a seismograph for measuring ontological shifts, the changes in our awareness of what is real. The word processor created a new relationship to symbols, to language, and, by extension, to reality.

But even though my speculations on word processing found several signposts pointing to future turns in reality, my research could never have prepared me for what was coming just around the bend.

My reflections on the computer screen shattered abruptly in 1989 when I first entered Virtual Reality. Instead of sitting before a screen with keyboard or mouse, I donned a helmet and glove and felt immersed in a computer-generated environment. No longer outside the computer, I walked through the looking glass. My philosophical seismograph went crazy.

The Virtual Reality system I tested was still a primitive prototype, like arcade games and amateur flight simulators, but its implications seemed enormous. The shifts in reality awareness I had found in earlier computer use were subtle by comparison. The ontological shift to digital symbols became in VR a full-fledged, aggressive, surrogate reality.

Another book emerged from this journey into cyberspace and it treats the metaphysics of Virtual Reality. It blends a philosophy of technology with Taoist teachings and warns of the ways we can forget the body and lose our balance when we consciously build a technology to “incorporate” our bodies.

Virtual Reality installs the human body in the computer interface, but the technology can impose the same techno-stress on bodily awareness that we feel outside the virtual environment. Modern life in the West, even when glorifying “the body,” often subverts what David Levin called “the body’s recollection of Being.” The body can become just another computer peripheral.

While living much of the time with computers, I still research and teach pre-technological, non-Western ways of moving and being. This strategy operates far from the main campus of Western philosophy, which remains largely verbal and conceptual. Most Eastern sages do not separate theory from practice. As Asia continues to influence America, I think we will see growing interest in unified experience, a future challenge to the Cartesian split of mind and body—and the challenge will not be exclusively verbal.

Artists tend to catch the first waves of the future. As a frequent philosopher-in-residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada, I have counselled groups of artists who are building Virtual Reality systems. I notice that many of these artists feel a gap closing. Science no longer stands opposite to art, nor does aesthetics oppose technology. Computer algorithms and imaginative freedom are learning to get along.

As more computer science students take to Virtual Reality, the world of science too will close the Cartesian split of mind and body, techno-system and expressive movement. The beginnings exist already in pioneer thinkers like Myron Krueger, the "father of Virtual Reality."

Maybe this, then, is the unity of my job(s), the essence of the vocation? A certain kind of uncomfortable unity arises from spreading oneself over a cultural disjunct, from stretching oneself over an abysmal fissure.

Self-justifications aside, we must span the gaping Cartesian wound that makes education and culture suffer. A life in the gap indicates a certain amount of healing taking place.

Fifty years ago, the Pragmatists looked to relieve the same chronic cultural affliction. For me, like them, the impulse for fresh philosophizing is crucial. We have in our American tradition—in the New World, as Bugbee would say—some notable forerunners who, as members of the New World, tried to respond to the industrial-technological system created here in the U.S. and then exported to the rest of the world. The Greek, French, and German influences in philosophy must be balanced with American self-awareness.

In his preface to Frederick Matthias Alexander's *The Resurrection of the Body*, John Dewey wrote:

"In the present state of the world, the control we have of physical energies, heat, light, electricity, etc., without control over the use of ourselves is a perilous affair. Without control of ourselves, our use of other things is blind."

The bad news is that Dewey's theories proliferated while the Alexander Method of body alignment never went beyond a tiny cult of devotees. The transmission of Western wisdom seems inveterately verbal.

The good news is that computers are changing our attitude toward knowledge. They have already shown us graphically things that once only mathematicians could conceptualize.

The advent of Virtual Reality might switch on other modes of thought. Neither Pragmatism, with its bias toward scientific method, nor Phenomenology, with its imported vocabulary, were able to find that switch. Where Western culture had ears for Far Eastern culture, it listened only for familiar concepts. D. T. Suzuki introduced many new Buddhist-Taoist texts to the West, but his Zen came clothed in Hegelian abstractions and spoke of a

“nothingness” which echoed Sartrean existentialism. The profound background of Oriental practices went unspoken. Some Westerners learned to speak a slightly different language, but their Buddha-speak never sprang from inner body experience. Only a very few readers eventually traced the abstractions back to Yoga, Aikido, Tai Chi. Western scholarship welcomed the concepts but kept the door shut on any direct involvement with transformative disciplines.

Back in 1958, Henry Bugbee sought a switch to other modes of thought by writing a metaphysical journal based on his walks, fishing trips, and automobile rides. He sought ontological significance in the human bodily stance and motion. In *The Inward Morning* (1958), he wrote:

“It is all very well to image our proper independence as responsible beings by talking of standing on our own feet. But this image, by itself, leaves us hanging in the air. Let us not neglect to think of the ground being under our own feet; and let us not talk as if we placed the ground under our own feet. A ground which our *feet* do not *discover* is no ground.

At this point I am moved to consider the possibility that we must rethink our idea of feeling precisely in connection with our mode of being grounded. I must put the matter cautiously: It seems as if our being grounded, our discovery of ground upon which we may stand, in standing upon our own feet, is a matter of feeling. Somehow, feeling and having a footing need to be thought out together. . . .” (p. 111)

Here Bugbee connected high metaphysics with biofeedback. He dug out the concrete language underlying the abstractions, and he found there the felt earth and the élan of physical movement. Outside of a few somatic pioneers like Thomas Hanna, no one followed up on Bugbee’s language, and his remained a small voice crying in the philosophical wasteland.

Virtual Reality may soon amplify that voice. VR systems will soon demand from us, from our whole culture, a total rethinking of our idea of feeling. Biofeedback will confront us in ways we cannot evade, in ways as direct as television. We will view our bodies imaged before us on real-time monitors as we move in virtual worlds of work and play. We will not only act in virtual environments, but we will directly perceive our own biological and neurological states displayed in real-time on our virtual bodies. These cyberbodies may lead us back to Bugbee’s “imaging our proper being.” A century of metaphysics awaits us.

In the process we might discover the vestiges of our instinctual knowledge. We might find a synthesis of Eastern body wisdom and Western objective science. One fine morning, the cybersage and the Tai Chi player might wake up and greet each other in the same (virtual?) world.