

Entering the Seven Meditative Spaces of Leadership

Conversation with Master Nan Huai-Chin
Hong Kong, October 25th, 1999

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Nan Huai-Chin is a teacher and scholar famous in China but little known outside of China and Taiwan. He has written over 30 books, which have sold literally tens of millions of copies in China, mostly on the black market until recently. Few of his books have been translated and made available outside China. He is an advisor to the government as well as a noted spiritual figure. Today, it is not unusual to find whole sections of bookstores in China devoted to his works. He is noteworthy for his knowledge and attainment in all three major strands of Chinese culture: Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism. When I visited Master Nan he had just finished a new interpretation of one of the two Confucian classics, “The Great Learning.” This essay, originally written by Confucius’ grandson 2400 hundred years ago has been a mainstay of Chinese culture ever since.

C.O. Scharmer: Master Nan, I am so grateful for the opportunity to meeting with you. I came here with four questions. Should I go through all of them upfront?

Master Nan/Translator Ken: Yes. Please.

COS: The first question concerns what is going currently on in the world. We feel that we are at the incipient stage of a new time. This transition is characterized by three revolutions: the rise (1) of new technologies, (2) of new and networked social structures, and (3) of new spiritual awareness. We know a lot of the first two. We only know a little about the third development. Thus, my first question is: Do you agree that we are at the incipient stage of a new spiritual awareness and what is the nature of this underlying shift?

During the last third of the twentieth century, we have seen three different manifestations of this rising new consciousness in the Western world. These three

¹ The conversation with Master Nan took place as part of a global interview project with 25 eminent thinkers on knowledge and leadership. The project was sponsored by McKinsey & Company and the Society for Organizational Learning (formerly the MIT Center for Organizational Learning). The interviews and the summary paper are accessible as free downloads from www.dialogonleadership.org.

manifestations are known as the grassroots movements of ecology, of social change, and of spirituality. The underlying issues that these three movements dealt with where the split between man and nature (ecology), the split between center and periphery of social structures (social issue movements) and the split between matter and mind (spirituality). Although these three movements are manifestations of the same underlying deeper stream of new consciousness, they have ended up being separated from each other. I.e., each one tried to develop a solution without really embracing and including the other two aspects of the triangle. Thus, my second question is, what would it take to relink these three aspects and streams according to their common underlying source?

The third question has to do with practices. We know a little about individual practices, but what would social or collective practices for a group or a community look like? How do you bring together a group at their highest karma?

The fourth question relates to the origins of our actions. Where do our actions come from? This usually is a blind spot in our everyday experience. In working with groups, organizations, and communities, how can we relate to the true essence of those communities, groups and social beings?

Master Nan/Translator Ken: Anything you want to add? Or just start talking?

COS: My impression is I've already talked too much, so I would rather listen.

Master Nan/Translator Ken: Okay, so lie back and listen. Or have some tea. Have some tea, relax, just relax.

COS: Thank you, later.

Master Nan/Translator Ken: Later, okay. The best thing to listen to Teacher is just to relax as if you are meditating. That would be the best way to do it. Just relax, just be yourself.

COS: Okay.

Master Nan/Translator Ken: Lie back on your chair. I don't know whether you want to be in the lotus position, whatever. Now that you are in the United States, are you joining Peter Senge's work?

COS: Yes. I have worked with Peter Senge for the last five years.

Master Nan/Translator Ken: You studied in Germany before you went to the United States?

COS: Yes.

Master Nan/Translator Ken: What is your background in?

COS: Economics and Management, and a bit of Western philosophy.

Master Nan/Translator Ken: What is your basic degree in?

COS: My basic degree is in economics and business administration. My Ph.D. thesis was on the philosophical assumptions in the various schools of thought in economics and management. The main proposition was that today's conflicts among different paradigms in economics and management mirrors the philosophical fault lines between materialism and spiritualism, and realism and idealism, in philosophy.

Master Nan/Translator Ken: The root of Western civilization is in Europe not in the United States. A lot of people think the West is represented by Americans. Because, of course, America is the biggest power on earth now. But the root of the Western civilization is in Europe.

He [Master Nan; COS] says he would probably have to write a book of 200,000 words to answer the questions you have raised.

You have really high goals and high hopes. The influence may not be as significant as you might hope for.

COS: Say that again?

I. Management Is An Outdated Perspective

Master Nan/Translator Ken: The influence on society, or whatever, may not be significant as you want.

We all know that Peter Senge and his Center have talked about management. Management as a significant focal point probably started in the 40s, and using management as the center for ones study is probably now outdated. From the Eastern viewpoint, management is a new infant. Twenty years, thirty years ago it was very, very popular. Everybody's talking about management now, even in China and Asia.

Teacher [Master Nan; COS] thinks that there are limitations to just using management as a starting point if you really want to influence the world in the next century. What you are doing now at your Center at MIT can only impact on the sort of the higher level of management people, to help them to manage better. But then its impact on the whole society is actually relatively small.

II. The Blind Spot Of The 20th Century

What has been lacking in the twentieth century is a central cultural thought. There is not a single cultural thought that unifies all of these things together. There are no great philosophers or great thinkers that can develop the thinking that

unifies all these questions. They used, maybe, logic as a substitute for the underlying philosophies.

If you ask anyone what future lies ahead, nobody can really give you the answer. In the past, yes, in the East and the West, there might have been some great thinkers who could answer the question.

III. Materialism and Spirituality of Our Current Age

The current materialism still has a lot of influences. Everyone talks about how to make money, the business. That's all everybody concentrates on now, even the political leaders.

If you talk about leadership, leadership in the next two decades, it will still be money. Teacher tried to use the words, say if it is economics, not economics. Is there any other thing? No, it is basically just money that is leading. This is the culture of this generation.

But this culture, has its limitations. It can not go on forever. Now, of course, we are in the really high-speed technology age, with computers, and the internet.

But sooner or later people will get sick of this. In many places in the world, for instance in your group, they are raising the question, what is the spiritual content of human life? It will definitely go this way, spiritual. But this route will be different from the spiritual route of past, either in the East or the West. It will be a new spiritual path. It will be a combination between natural science and philosophies. It will always go back to some of these questions that have been with human beings endlessly. What is the purpose of life? What is the value of life? Why do we exist? It will always come back to these basic questions.

Even in the 40s, many European countries, including Germany and France, had a lot of movements seeking spiritual liberation. They may go to Hinayana Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism, and meditation, of course. But they haven't really gotten into the center: What is human nature, the question of human nature? Where does life come from? What is life for?

There are two great essays in Confucianism in the East. One is the *The Middle Way*...

Professor Zhao: *The Middle Way* is Teacher's new book.

IV. Seven Meditative Spaces Of Leadership

Master Nan/Translator Ken [pointing at a book on the table]: This here is the most recent book by Teacher, it's on the *Great Learning*. This is Teacher's most recent publication and gives a new interpretation of Great Learning in an essay. It is

not very long. This essay was a must-study by other scholars in ancient China. It was written about 2400 years ago by a grandson of Confucius. Every emperor respected it. It talks about management, how to be a leader. **It actually mentions seven meditative spaces. Basically if you want to become a great leader, you need to go forth into these seven meditative spaces.** You recognize the true meaning of life before you can actually become a great leader. The leader in those days would become the monarch, the emperor. If you become the emperor, then you are a senior officer of the government. Then what you should be as a senior government officer. And if you are a father, what should you do as a father? And if you are a son, what your attitude should be as a son. If you are a friend, what you should do as a friend.

Teacher gives an interpretation of his essays in his book. It breaks a lot of new ground. Like there was a certain kind of dogmatic interpretation his essays in the Ming Dynasty and in the Ching Dynasty. No scholars can go beyond those dogmatic interpretations. And there were a lot of problems in that interpretation, which partly caused the decline of the Ch'ing Dynasty.

Master Nan/Translator Professor Zhao: He said in Chinese philosophy **if you want to be a leader, you have to be a real human being.** Because a real one doesn't mean just be a common person, but a real human. The relearning starts from words. Whether you're an emperor, whether you're a leader, or whether you're just a common person. All of you should actually follow this, so that is where it starts.

It starts by saying this: The principle of great learning, or the goal of good learning, is to achieve three major goals. One is to **truly understand**, be truly enlightened to know this world. The second one is to be of help to society, to the people. To be **truly helpful**. The third goal is to be able to reach a state where everything's all around it, you know, that **higher state**. And in order to achieve this, there are like seven steps, or dimensions.

The Seven Meditative Steps, Or Dimensions Of Leadership

Those seven steps look like one step. Actually it's a long, long, long process. The first one is you have to know where to stop. Only when you know where to stop will you have a calmness and stillness. You will know when to turn and when to stop. Actually Teacher said that when we say where you're supposed to stop, we meant you should know the directions. So that's the first one. But this is already very, very hard. Because usually people don't know where to stop. They just don't know, and continue with wherever they are going.



4.

Quietness and stillness

(Figure 1: The seven meditative steps of leadership)²

The second step is only after you reach that first one, meaning that you actually stop. This then leads into the third stage, *samahdi*, or calmness. When you have entered this, then you'll be able to reach true quietness. When you reach true quietness of the mind, then you'll be in a state of grace, grace and peacefulness. When you have the grace or peacefulness, then you can truly think. When you can truly think, then you'll be able to obtain. Obtaining means achieving the goals that you're supposed to achieve. And then he says that everything has its beginning and its end.

Master Nan/Translator Ken: He just excused himself and then he'll come back to join us later.

Professor Zhao: Right, okay. And then he said that the summary of this paragraph, that everything has an end and a beginning. **If you really know when to start and when to end**, you're almost there, right? It sounds simple, but **this is really the essence of everything**. This is the beginning paragraph of this. He then goes on and talks about the ancient times. In ancient times, if you really want to have the whole world or other people in your society reach a state of true awareness then you first will have to manage your country well, or govern your country well. Now to govern your country well, you have to be able to govern your family well. It starts with the atom of the family. To govern the family well, you first of all have to cultivate yourself. Without that you cannot govern your family well. Now to cultivate yourself, you have to have the right principles for your mind. For the right principle for your mind, you have to be truly sincere to yourself.

To truly be sincere to yourself and to everyone else, true sincerity you have to be able to know. To be able to know, you have to be able to be able to study the sun, everything. So in a sense, it's actually going in backwards, right?

So you can see that for emperors who want to achieve the final goal, which is to allow everybody in the society to reach the highest goal or the highest state for human beings, you have to be able to accomplish all this. Then the next paragraph says the same thing about governing the country, self-cultivation, but in the reverse order. So

² Figure 1 is a drawing by myself (COS) after the conversation. One of Master's students, Hwei En, said, it would correctly reflect Master's thinking. Her explanations about the seven spaces helped very much to clarify my understanding.

when you do this you have to do that. **Whether you're the emperor or just a common person in society, self-cultivation is the fundamental thing that you have to do.** It's fundamental for everyone, no matter whether you're a leader or whether you're just a common person.

Ken: What I want to ask is something close to what you have been actually talking about in your own writings. The first thing of the seven is awareness or knowing. Now Teacher has a very good explanation in his book, and nobody understands him.

COS: Nobody understands --?

Ken: Because even today's scientists cannot explain the question, where does consciousness come from?

Awareness And Stop These Are Like Two Brothers And Sisters

Teacher says, for instance, without this body, do we still have a consciousness? Before we are born into this body do we have a consciousness? After we die do we still have a consciousness? And the death of the consciousness, there are so many ways. Even if we are happy, we know that we are happy. If you are feeling painful, you are not feeling right. If you are depressed, you know you are depressed. So there is always this awareness. **In Confucius the teaching is you have to really understand yourself first.** It is very close to what you have been doing research on. These seven meditative postures, stands, are so important. The first is awareness. Then the question is we have to know how to stop, because our thinking is actually — the second thing is stop, right? So awareness and stop these are like two brothers and sisters, they're so closely related to each other. We haven't been able to stop our thinking.

Buddhism, and many cultivators, including some of your fellow students, have pointed out that thinking is not like a stream of thinking. It is like a waterfall. You look at a waterfall and you just see water coming down. It's like a curtain of water. But actually everybody knows that waterfall is composed of water drops, billion and billions that form the curtains that we see in our eyes. Thinking is actually the same. Our mind runs so rapidly, and it's all composed of drops of thought. They just go on together, linking up together, linking up together. We perceive our thinking as if it is like a waterfall. But in a way, if you are able, if you are aware, and if you are able to stop, then you know that. Because thinking is just tiny molecules of thinking. It's just points and points and points of thinking. It's just related together, and then we think we have a thinking process. So it is important to understand yourself first. You have to be aware of what's going through your mind, what is in your cognitive consciousness. Then you have to be able to stop, to identify your real, real thinking.

COS: When do you know that you have to stop?

The Trick

Ken: That's the trick. As soon as you know that you're thinking, then you're actually in the second thinking already. We have to practice it. The mind has to calm down, calm down, calm down. The superficial thoughts just emerge. Then you'll be able to see more clearly the underlying thinking, and then you'll be able to see as true nature. But as soon as you are aware, you already stop, actually. That's the trick. You know that you are listening to me. As soon as you know, we stop.

For instance, you have done meditation. And in meditation, of course, we try not to have too much thinking, right? As soon as you know that you are thinking, basically has stop already, you just have to know. It just comes like this, it follows each other, in a way. You just have to, you know and then it stops. So you don't have to think of a special way to try to stop it, to stop your thinking. You don't need to do that. You only have to be able to be aware. That's the whole trick of the whole cultivation practice.

So you understand about all the questions that you're raising? It really takes practice. But the two important things are to be aware and stop.

The Example of a Famous Chinese

Professor Zhao: Maybe I'll give you an example of a person who hasn't been able to reach this high meditative state. This meditative state doesn't mean to just sit there. It means it's a state that you're in. Even while you're sitting here talking you can be in that state. It's a state that you'll be able to achieve, a cultivated state. Now a person who hasn't achieved that state will be obstructed by all the different emotions, greed, etc. That means we'll not be able to know where to stop, we'll not be able to make a right judgments. So we won't be able to do things right.

There was a very famous story that Teacher cited in his book. There was a very famous Chinese, who used to be a prime minister. Later on he quit his job. He became a very famous businessman, extremely famous. He became an investor doing business in China. When he was doing business, one of his sons was in trouble in another state in China. At that time China was still divided into other small states, right?

COS: Okay.

Professor Zhao: So his son was in trouble in another state, so he wanted to send his other son, the youngest son, to go and help to save that son. But then the elder son says, "According to the Chinese tradition, you're supposed to send me to go there to do the job. If you send the younger son that means I'm incapable, that means I'm pretty bad in a sense." So he wants to go. And his mother also says, "Well, we should get my elder son to go and do this job." This guy says, "Well, because there's so

much problem here, if you all want the elder son to go, so he has to.” He ended up sending the elder son to do this job. So the elder son went there, and then he went to see the guy who’s in charge, who was very close to the emperor on everything. He talked to him about the problem. That guy said, “Okay, no problem. I will solve the problem for you.” The eldest son’s father had given him lots of money so he could give that money to that official. He gave him the money and he left. Later on he heard that actually the emperor is going to release all the prisoners.

COS: Amnesty, right.

Professor Zhao: Right. So then the elder son thinks, “Wow, I don’t need to give the money to the guy anymore, the emperor’s going to release everyone. Why should I give the money to him?” He didn’t know that the official had convinced the emperor to release all of them. He had said, “Oh, this is the best timing to release these people. You’ll get a very good reputation and you’re going to make the country even better, etc., etc.” He didn’t know this, so he actually went there and took the money back. Then that official told the emperor, “Well, you can release everyone except this guy.” And all the other prisoners were released but this guy. He got executed. So the elder son carried the body of the brother home.

Then, of course, the mother cried, and the father didn’t really cry. He said “I knew this was going to happen.” Why? Because the elder son had been working with his father to build up the business, and he knows how hard it is to earn money. He had this in his mind, he wanted to hold onto the money. He didn’t want to give it away, in a sense. But the father knew this is the situation where you’re supposed to give the money. If he had sent the younger son this would not have been a problem. The younger son didn’t have this in his mind, in a sense he didn’t care about money. So in a sense you can see that when we have this kind of greed, or --

Ken: Attachments --

Professor Zhao: Yes, attachment will affect our ability to judge. It will affect our knowing, even. You wouldn’t even know. You don’t know where to stop. They just explained to you that a true leader, to really know what they are doing, has to have this cultivation. So that’s one example which explains why the seven step cultivation is so important. That’s why this is sort of the really the practical teaching for leadership in China. But just the knowing part, as Ken has explained to you, is extremely hard. People spend their whole lives without really knowing what that knowing is. As he said, there are so many levels. What do you mean you know? Does a baby know, right? When you die do you know?

The Two Most Important Essays in Confucianism

Ken: Like I said, the two books that Teacher mentioned, *The Great Learning* and *The Middle Way* are the most important essays in Confucianism.

COS: Are they both written by the grandson of Confucius?

Ken: One is by the grandson, one is by the great-grandchildren, the fourth generation children. They are not long at all. I am sure there will be a translation in German. And I'll e-mail a copy to you. Can you get your e-mail?

COS: Yes.

Professor Zhao: But be careful with those translations, they may not be very accurate.

Ken: This book, the first sentence, actually, it teaches you how to be a human being before you become a leader. But it has been misinterpreted. It has been misinterpreted.

COS: In what way does Teacher's interpretation differ from the older interpretation?

Master Nan's New Interpretation Of Confucius

Ken: For instance, nobody, as far as I know, for hundreds of years has been able to explain the awareness and the stop. They would interpret it in a different way. Interpret it as to know what position in a society. The emperors in those days, they would say, okay, you have to know where to stop. That means you have to know that if you are my officer, then I'm the boss, you are the officer. You have to listen to everything I say. You have to be subservient, you cannot resist authority. In a way this is a right interpretation, assuming your boss is someone who is enlightened, who really knows what's going on. But unfortunately, for thousands of years, we haven't had more than two or three of these emperors. So that was a problem.

But Teacher said no, no, no, it's not just understanding that position, that is maybe a certain part. The important part is to actually understand yourself, understand your opening process. But the emperors, in order to protect their own power, they were trying to mislead them into trying to have a certain line of thinking. That thinking would be to maintain your position in society. Don't fight authority, just be a good follower. Teacher said no, that's not the way the book should be interpreted. It should be interpreted in a different perspective. **First, before you can become a leader you have to understand yourself, you have to be sincere in your heart, you have to be unbiased.** That's where the importance of those seven training comes in. You have to be aware and you have to stop - start.

The Founding Principle of The Great Learning

Ken: Here are the three founding principles of the Great Learning. That is to really understand the whole nature, and then to be able to basically spread the words to

everyone, and to be able to stop at the ultimate virtue. Those are the three main points. And then the seven basic --

COS: Can you repeat the three main principles?

Ken: Okay. **To really understand the true nature of the universe, of the human being, our existence.** That's the first main point of it. That's the first sentence in the essay.

COS: To really understand the true nature of the universe.

Ken: Yes. **The second one is to be able to spread what you understand to all the people, to all the human beings.**

COS: To spread what you understand to all people.

Ken: Yes, to all people. And the third is to stop at the ultimate virtue, always try to be as good as you can. You never stop until you have reached the ultimate goodness.

Professor Zhao: This ultimate goodness is not, when we say good and bad we always have a good and bad, right? This ultimate virtue is like the middle, like the ultimate. **It's beyond good and bad.** That's the ultimate virtue.

COS: So, again, that's the first sentence of the Great Learning?

Professor Zhao: Yes, the first three sentences.

Ken: A symbol everybody knows—do you know any Mandarin at all?

COS: No, unfortunately, I don't. I'm not educated.

Ken: The first phrase is the path of the great learning. It is to basically really understand the nature of the universe.

COS: You know, what you are saying is, in a way, answering my second question, right? When I talked about the three issues, the ecological split, the social split, and the split between matter and mind, it's exactly addressing the three points you just mentioned. So understanding the nature of the universe is really what true ecology is all about. To overcome the split...

Professor Zhao: I think the first three phrases is a much, much higher level than what you are saying, actually. But you can say at this level of application, yes, it's related to the three things that you said. But those three achievements are so much more higher than this. But to the common understanding of human beings at this moment, you can say those three are probably right.

Ken: I could almost safely say that there are a very few human beings in history that have achieved the three goals.

Professor Zhao: Maybe four, five or ten, a dozen, that's it.

Ken: In all the human history. That's how high it is.

China on the Eve of the Millenium

COS: So what reaction do you get when you come with this to today's business leaders and children and students?

Ken: The business leaders, I really don't know. I don't think anyone can tell them, plainly speaking. Teacher said for the next decade, the next ten years, twenty years, thirty years, money will still be the driver. After a certain stage, people will know that all this striving for profit will lead society, the human being, into nowhere. You mentioned about ecological. In the last 120 years, human beings have consumed more natural resources than in the last billions of years. The problem with China is they don't have religion anymore. And they don't believe in communism anymore.

COS: So Confucianism and Buddhism and Taoism don't play any role?

Professor Zhao: I think, actually, you are right in the sense that Teacher also said that the culture is really creeping down now. But on the other hand, somehow it's in their blood, somehow all this traditional culture is actually reviving nowadays. That's partly due to Teacher's promotion in China. **If you go into Chinese book stores, you now see there thousands of books only on Chinese culture.**

COS: Really?

Professor Zhao: Yes, there are now so many new books coming out. The main reason is because the population in China is huge. No matter how bad it was during the cultural revolution under communist rule, after the reform, it began to open up. There are still people in China who are working on those issues.

So the people decide, I think the Buddhist thinking is coming back, also Christianity is going to China, and Taoist is still there. It's amazing the way Master Nan has become popular in China, it's really amazing.

COS: How would that show up?

Ken: Ten years ago if you went into China, it would be really very difficult to find his book. Master Nan never, ever talks about his books. He never goes on the TV station, to talk shows, like the authors in the states who try to publicize their books. No advertising, no commercials, no public promotion of any kind. But suddenly nowadays, you go to any major bookstore anywhere in China, you will find a whole bookshelf of all teacher's books. It is just amazing. Many years ago when I first knew Teacher, I went to China, and would go to the bookstores and ask, "I want to buy Mr. Nan's book." Who is Mr. Nan? Nobody's heard of Mr. Nan. But now you go in,

almost every bookstore has his book. They just came from nowhere suddenly. Because of the demand. The people need this. They are so empty, and they have this huge urge, huge need for this cultural feeling.

COS: Who's buying it?

Professor Zhao: Officials, everyone, every kind of people.

Ken: So many people ask Teacher to go on TV, go onto radio shows, go onto magazines, go onto newspapers. You won't find a thing at all. It is just amazing, people with newspapers will come in and see if he will give interviews. Magazines will come and ask for interviews. No interviews, no nothing. And yet a book just sells so well.

COS: I see. How many books has he written in Chinese and published?

Ken: About thirty-something, thirty-five.

Professor Zhao: Thirty-something, yeah. Now I should emphasize one thing that Teacher has been trying to emphasize to you. That first thing is truly hard. To achieve the first learning is already extremely hard.

COS: You're talking about the seven steps?

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: Yes, it's related to what you wrote down there, your full conscience. So the meaning of that, just even the first step, is already hard enough. How do you actually achieve it? Achieving them is just extremely hard.

Most of Teacher's book is about achieving things rather than talking about this framework. So many books talk about achieving these goals from very different angles, and Teacher would think that it would be good for you to learn some meditation here for this trip. That would be something that would be beneficial to yourself. Maybe we can find a time, either tonight, or now, depending whether you like it or not, to have a short meditative session.

COS: Oh, that would be wonderful.

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: So we'll talk about how we can meditate. That would actually be helpful for you.

COS: Oh, yes, that would be wonderful.

V. Meditation and Stillness

Here the first part of the conversation ends. We leave the office building where the interview took place, heading to the place where the family dinner will take place. In the cab, Professor Zhao explains to me the two main principles of all meditation

practices. The two key principles are (1) “always reach emptiness” and (2) “concentration is a middle piece.” Reaching emptiness is the goal. Concentration can help to lead to that goal. Opposed to concentration and emptiness, most people operate in one of the following two states: “dozey” or noisy. To contemplate your mind means to see into your fear and to realize that they are empty. There are five poisons that get in your way: greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt. You have to get rid of them all. Contemplating your mind means learning to see what is getting in your way. If something is good, go do it. If something is not, don’t do it. Meditation is seeing emptiness. Contemplation is directly attacking the poisons, and doing virtuous things.

Then we arrived at the family dinner site, where I first got my meditation instruction (for maybe an hour). Then we sat together. A TV was running. Master was smoking cigarettes. At the same time, a nun was chanting sanskrit meditation songs. A leading expert on classic Chinese went his last book with Master through. A Hong Kong banker arrived who later turned out to be a face reader. Then Master instructed and practiced with me the Guan-Yin- Mantra (“Om Ma Mi Bä Mi Hong”). At the same time, all sorts of people were running around, offering nice little things to eat and drink. Everybody was talking and running around, having distributed and parallel conversations. Then we gathered at the round dinner table with about a dozen participants. We had a wonderful meal and a delightful conversations about the feelings of trees, animals, and other beings. We also heard about Master Nan’s experiences when he practiced the martial arts. It was a great evening that did not stop before midnight.

Towards the end of the dinner, I continued the interview with Master Nan by wrapping up the afternoon session for the other participants of the dinner table and then concluding with a follow-up question.

VI. Illuminating the Blind Spot

COS: During our afternoon conversation, Master made two significant points. Number one, that there has been a blind spot in the West in the twentieth century, which concerns the fact that we do not have a central cultural thought, a single unifying cultural thought from which we could reconceive the whole social and living world.

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: Teacher says that this blind spot concerns both the West and the East in the 20th century.

COS: Okay, the blind spot applies to both West and East. And the way I understood this point is: This blind spot concerns our inability to see the process of coming-into-being of social reality. Usually we perceive social reality as a thing, as something that is separated from and outside of us. The blind spot means that we do not see the *process* of coming-into-being of this reality, we do not see the process through which

we bring forth social reality in the first place. And then, I understood Master Nan such that he says that in **order to illuminate this blind spot**, you have to practice the seven meditational steps of leadership. Let me stop here and ask Master Nan whether or not this is a correct reflection of what he was saying this afternoon.

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: Teacher said this understanding is right.

VII. The Origin Of Social Action: Mind And Thought

COS: If the blind spot is concerned with the process of coming-into-being of social reality, of social action, my question is, where does this stream originate? Where does this stream come from?

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: Teacher said the source is the mind and the thought. In the 20th century, there was no philosopher who was able to putting it all together and to seeing the whole picture.

COS: Okay. What then is the source from which thinking or consciousness originates?

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: Teacher said that the origin of change relates to mind and thoughts. The main question, where does that come from? And Teacher says that's all related to the cultivation of the body, the mind, and other things. That's also related to the East and the Western culture, related to philosophy and religion. It's related to where life comes from, etc., so this is really a huge question.

It's a huge question, but it's narrowed down to a small answer first. According to the medical field, people usually say their thoughts come from the brain, the physical brain. Of course, this is more on the side of the materialistic philosophies.

So these kinds of people who think that the body is like a mechanical thing -- you know, when you die, then it ceases to exist. Then everything is gone. For example, nowadays, people talk about the left brain, the right brain, the little brain, etc., or the alpha wave, the beta wave, etc., all of these are still the materialistic way of looking at it.

For thousands of years, communities have had religious teachings, politics, education, all the different thoughts, concerning those issues, as well. Do we humans really think that we are nothing but this materialistic construction? Can we really say that our thoughts really just come from a physical brain? Is that all?

VIII. Levels of Consciousness

Now the question is where does this consciousness come from? Is the consciousness within our body? We have a consciousness like thinking, a thought. It's because we are sort of reacting to what we are seeing or to what we are experiencing.

There's another kind of thinking or consciousness, another part of a consciousness, which can just think by itself. Or have thoughts on its own without like reacting to something you see or something you hear. Without the senses there would still be thoughts coming in.

Our thoughts are like a river flowing, water flow is continuous, and it keeps coming. It's very hard, there's no way to cut it or stop it. Sleeping is also a thought, it's one thought. Sleeping is the phenomenon of this habitual thought. This is the way it exhibits itself. The same is true for death. Death is also one, it's a thought, actually. So you die as a thought, is thought of this habitual thinking. Again, it's one of the phenomenon.

COS: Hmm.

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: So sleeping is a thought that is also a thought.

It's again, narrowed down to a smaller range. For example, take you as an example. When I first see you, I know that you have many thoughts going through your mind. But the thoughts are not really truly continuous. They pass one, one, one, like that. Between thoughts there are actually gaps. But most people cannot see the gaps between two thoughts. Then it's like a continuous thing, actually there are gaps between two thoughts. We think we are able to actually connect everything. Actually you are not able to really connect everything. You think you can have them altogether. So all these thoughts actually belong to the domain of the consciousness. They are related to our brain but it's not limited.

Now if you go deeper than this, go behind this even further, you still have three levels to go. Then you ultimately reach the point of talking about the mind and the matter. But again, this is very complicated stuff. Now these three layers which are even behind this, are all complicated, so we're not going to talk about them. Let's now come back again, looking at a narrower problem, let's look at the thoughts that we have now.

For example if you check content, or look at a thought that you used to have for many, many years. Let's take every five years as one stage, you probably already have quite a few stages already, right? Every five years is one stage. Then for every stage we have some thoughts, you know, many, many thoughts. But the point is that now all the thoughts have probably already been forgotten and you cannot remember any of those. They are just jumping in and jumping in and jumping, like that, you know. You couldn't really connect them. Our thoughts change every moment, every

second. We're always being cheated by our own thoughts. We say "we," the human. Actually this is a symbol representing this thing. Ultimately speaking, just the human — this one, the you, the human — this is already a question. Actually, ultimately speaking, there's no such thing as the person. It doesn't really exist. Thoughts are not a person. Your thoughts change all the time.

You see, you're able to listen to me because your thoughts are there, so you're able to listen to me. On the other hand, this thing doesn't really exist because it keeps going away. So there's really nothing there in a sense, nothing really exists.

You have asked me this question four times today already, that, as I told you earlier, is really something extremely complicated. I couldn't explain everything within one or two hours. It's related to medical science and life science, biology, etc., and it's a huge subject.

So that you can see that if there are so many different kinds of theories. Social science theories, physical science theories, etc., etc. He said all the theories are really gone now. Every time period has different theories and they're all already gone. They're useless now. You can still see some of the results of the previous period.

This is just a rough framework. Everything Teacher told you is like one chapter or another chapter, and everything he said can be a big chapter of the book. So this afternoon when you first asked this question, I said this will be like a book, you know, a 300,000 character book. We couldn't be able to explain them within a day.

Samahdi: True Calmness

Many people meditate or pray but very few people can really reach achieve a state of a true calmness, they haven't been able to empty other thoughts. Even to say, oh, I have a method, I'm able to stop my thoughts. You know what, that's actually a big thought, back of this stopping the thought. That's exactly the pre-thought. It's a big one, getting rid of the others only.

For example, in Hinayana teachings which are originally from India, they do talk about this special state. It's called the **samahdi of no thought**. So you indeed can enter that state. But that's a big thought itself.

For some people who enter that state of samahdi, the body actually will not die, will stay alive for a long, long time. In that case, all those wondering, jumpy thoughts are being stopped, that's what's happening.

This is already a very high achievement in terms of meditation cultivation. But then that's not the ultimate goal at all. Of course, you have the sixth consciousness and the ones that belong with the six. If you go beyond it, it's really hard to talk about. It's not that teacher doesn't want to talk about it, he just hasn't got the time. We talked about them within such a short period of time.

The Sixth Consciousness³

Let's now focus on this question of the thought that's related to the sixth consciousness. Exactly what is it? The sixth consciousness functions through our brain. It's like the light or this tape recorder here. The light and the recorder are not electricity, but there is the function through this. So the same thing applies to this sixth consciousness, it functions through our brain. But then where does this come from? I didn't touch that point.

Personality, as most people know, that we are able to stay awake, we are able to write, to think, etc. These are related to our sixth consciousness. These everybody agrees and knows. There's the other side of this sixth consciousness. In Western culture, first you are able to memorize things, you have dreams, etc., these are related to what we call the subconscious. Some say it's related to our sixth sense, etc. These are all the different names that people have been putting on to this phenomenon.

So that's actually where the Western have not been able to go any further, that's where they really stop. In the Orient, Oriental countries, we are able to study this much, much differently than the West. For example, you know, of course, there are some special powers related to hypnosis of the spiritual side, right? Some psychic people, some special deities, actually those all belong to the domain of this subconscious, related to that. It is our sixth consciousness which allows us to think clearly, to write things, etc., that's called the clear consciousness.

Any other questions?

COS: Well, in regard to what he said to the limited impact from the Learning Center, I just want to say that we also talked about that, and we are now working also with quite a number of non-business institutions, like with government or schools. Because we also realized that just working with business would be too narrow, but I don't want to talk about this now. My question is in order to have an impact that really addresses the core of the whole society, what would it take?

IX. In the future, one just becomes like a machine

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: That would be related to the whole educational institutions of the East and the West, the whole thing. Just to use a metaphor, okay, maybe we have sixty billion people now, right, maybe its better to cut off all their heads. But make sure they have their baby first, their new baby is not being polluted. Meaning that if you cut everyone, only the kids still stay alive, and then you can start fresh. Otherwise it's actually very, very difficult.

³ The so-called sixth consciousness refers to a level of consciousness that does not merely depend on the input of the five senses as the first five levels of consciousness do (see explanation given in the further transcript).

There's something you probably already know, that women even have more information on this than you, like with the introduction of working at computer, etc. Within three or five years' time, we're going to see major changes because they rarely use their brain anymore.

Kids, kindergarten kids, already know how to play with the computers. That means that they can't really stop thinking. You know, this thing is going to spread very, very quickly. In the future people will no longer listen to all your management thinking, whatever, they're going to listen to the computer. In the future, one just becomes like a machine. Maybe in the future people will ask the computers questions, like, should I get married now? Ask the computer. Should I get married? Should I have sex? Ask the computer, or you have time now to do it? It sure is scary, yeah.

So if you are talking about the leadership, in today's time, all those politicians who are supposed to be leading the country or the world, none of them have any real thoughts or are real thinkers. Of course, they do have a thought, which is just making money. That's the main thought they have, but nothing else, really.

So all of these are problems of the society. You guys have good hearts and you are trying to help the society, but then let me tell you that this is a tough problem. Humans are big problems themselves. But first of all, have peace of mind yourselves first, let's calm our own mind first.

Teacher, ever since he was a young kid has been worrying about the future of the human race. Now he said, "I'm 80 years old and I'm not going to worry about it." Or to put it differently, maybe we can say that humans are beyond salvation, meaning there's no way to save them anymore, in a sense. They're already in real bad shape.

You guys are still trying hard to do something for society. I want to tell you that if you're only doing it with the management, only to do it from this angle, is not enough, for sure. There's still a problem with education. Education and culture.

COS (to Zhao): I know that I have asked my question already four times. But I do not think that I've got the answer yet. So if I was to ask one more question, I would ask this question a fifth time. Do you think I should?

Professor Zhao: Go ahead.

X. On the Origin of the Self

COS: My last question concerns the nature of self. What is the nature of the self, both the self with the small s and the Self with the capital S – what is the nature of these selves and where is the source from which they originate, both individually and collectively?

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: The small self and the big Self come from the same source. The mind comes from the same thing. One origin for both of them. The whole universe is just one big Self. Religious people call it God. Philosophers call it the fundamental nature. Scientists call it energy. Buddhists call it the Atma. Chinese call it the Tao. The Arabs call it Allah. So every culture, in a sense, they know there's something there, ultimate something.

Religious people, we just personalize this. Make him like a person, like a god. Okay, so this god is this supernatural, has all these super capacities, etc. That's religion. Philosophers use logic to analyze it and try to get down to the bottom of the conclusion. The scientists want to uncover or try to find the big Self in all of this, you know, the physical research, etc. If you really look at human culture, they say it starts with religion and then people begin to have doubts about religions, and why, and then they begin to do research on them. Then you come to philosophy. And then there's still doubt about it. It's all based on reason and logic. It's too abstract, it's not real. So they want to do experiments with it, and then that's how science became to evolve, to emerge. That is the Western civilization's development. From religions, to philosophy, to natural science.

Religion, science, philosophy, they're all trying to look for this big Self, this origin of life. This big self was originally just one body, altogether in one. Let's give you a metaphor analogy.

Electricity. You can't see it, you can't touch it, right? But it's all over the place, actually, with energy. The source of energy is actually one thing. Everything from that system is one thing. It should be that the big Self, that we all have this. Part of it can come out and generate this, another part of it could come out and give you this.

So this is the large Self. Of course, when this is a small self, you are going to have many things happening there, also. Layers and layers and layers. So there's a self there. So for cultivation, learning Buddhism, the first thing you do is try to get rid of this view of the [small] self.

Once you reach the state of no self, the small self, you reach the state of the big Self. Getting rid of the small self you reach the state of the big self or the large self. Compassion, loving, etc., all of that originates from the big Self. You no longer will be selfish from that large self.

XI. The Consciousness-Only School

This is actually a whole system. If you are able to spend some time in really studying the consciousness and then go back to Germany and publish them in German? As he said, you would probably make a big name for yourself. Most people were talking materialistic or only the spiritual or the only the realistic school of thought. Well, in

this one batch of Buddhist studies, they call them the consciousness the consciousness-only school, can also become very scientific, also.

The Americans, the British, all of them have touched upon these, but haven't really gone into it. If you spend like a few years on this consciousness-only, then you'd become a big figure in the field.

You're still young. You have many years till you're 80 years old, right? You can spend like a few years, five or six years, and study this. Then you can make really something out of it. They already have some English translations of the consciousness-only school teachings, but then you have to create new words in German, put them into German. Nobody really knows it, so if you are able to publish that it will be shocking to the intellectual community.

Especially when Teacher teach this to you, he will combine them with science, and that will make it even more in touch with the reality now. This we just talk about, we're just chatting about it. It doesn't mean I'm asking you to do this. I'm not asking you to do this. I say this because it looks like you are very serious. That's why I mention this. Especially since you came all the way just to have a talk. I'll feel bad if you go home empty-handed.

COS: I'm not going empty-handed.

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: Send a fax to Ken, Ken gives it to Teacher, so we know this is from Peter, etc., this whole thing, so you are able to come here. Otherwise, it's oh, no, you cannot come. Because so many people who want to come and see Teacher, usually they cannot find Teacher. I'm too old, I don't want to do all these things.

Master Nan/Ken: This is called **Mere Consciousness School** in Buddhism. It is so translated in English.

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: Actually if Teacher would do it, he wouldn't just say, oh, this is a part of the Buddhist teaching. He would say this was Consciousness-Only teaching. Teacher would combine them with more than science. It won't be like the traditional way of doing it. It takes a long time to study this, it takes patience. It takes a special environment for this kind of thing to happen, this kind of lecture to happen.

You may want to look around in the library upstairs and see if you can find any others on mere consciousness, yeah.

Master Nan/Translator Ken: And you need to translate from English to German, once you have the English translation. There are a lot of machines that just translate automatically, and they're quite good. I think the structure of the German language is very close to the English language.

You know this guy, a famous monk. He went to India to get the Buddhism. He has written a book about this Mere Consciousness school. That has been translated into English already. That's the book that Ken mentioned a moment ago.

COS: I see. What was the title again of that book?

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: *Mere Consciousness*. It's a yellowish cover.

COS: I see.

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: It was a Chinese who translated this into English. Not many people are studying this in China. Of course if Teacher talks about this, as he said earlier, he will combine it with Mere Consciousness school teachings, combine it with like science, etc. To really uncover the secrets of this teaching, because actually, you know, I, myself, many Chinese or many Westerns already read the book but really couldn't get anything out of it, because they really couldn't understand it.

That book is only one book within the many books of the consciousness school teachings. It's this big, this thick. There's lady, like an Indian lady on the picture. It's not easy to find the book. You have to go to a special store to get it. I think the Library of Congress or the big libraries might have it. On the top, it's up here, an Indian lady's picture. And on the inside, the translator's picture, a gentleman from Hong Kong.

COS: I see. What's the relationship between the consciousness school and science?

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: Most people just take it as a good teaching, especially the people who are studying social sciences. You question about where does life come from, the origin of life, etc., all of these are contained in the consciousness school. And in that teaching, they sort of analyze all of these in great, great detail. Every aspect of the self. Teacher's going to show you what he looks like. He has to go to another place to get it now. We've come so far away from those days, Teacher, you know, he's going to show you this and that, to make sure that you know.

COS: I am happy, so he does not have to do that.

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: He wants to give you a lot.

COS: I really appreciate that, but please tell him I'm really not going empty-handed. So he doesn't have to, you know what I mean.

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: Okay.

COS: And I really mean it.

Master Nan/Professor Zhao: Okay, yes.

XII. Reflection

I had three reactions to the transcript. My first reaction after reading the transcript was disappointment. It seemed shallow and flat compared with the experience of the real conversation in Hong Kong. At the time, I felt we had a rich conversation. Maybe 5% of that experience shows up in the transcript.

At the end of our interview, I thought Master Nan hadn't really answered my questions. After rereading the text I found myself having a second reaction. I noticed, very much to my own surprise, that the conversation did, in fact, touch on all the questions I'd posed to him.

What I found was that my first question, regarding the revolutionary changes that reshaping our world (the technological, social, and consciousness-based shifts) was addressed by Master Nan in his remarks regarding the new spiritual path of the future (which will be different from the paths of the past) and that the near future will still be governed by the primacy of money.

He responded to the second question (what would it take to relink these three aspects and streams according to their common underlying source?) by pointing out that management was an insufficient starting point. He also indirectly indicated what a more profound starting point could be: those precepts outlined in the Great Learning, i.e.,

- to truly understand the nature of man and the universe (transcending the split between matter and mind)
- to truly help *all* people (overcoming the social split)
- never stop until you have reached the ultimate goodness (overcoming the core issue of ecology: to re-link what we do with what we see, think, and say).

The third question, regarding practices, Nan and his students began to respond to by a) giving me an elementary instruction in meditation, and b) in pointing out that, for Master Nan, all activities, life is meditation. "Every sound is a mantra."

He responded to the fourth question, (what is the blind spot in how we see the origins of our actions?) by pointing out what he considers the failing of the twentieth century: the absence of a central, unifying, foundational thought. He also indicated how this could be transformed: by illuminating the blind spot through entering the seven meditational spaces of leadership.

My third reaction was calmness. Suddenly I saw that the structure of the conversation, as documented in the transcript, reflects the content of Master Nan's core theory. Let me explain. The structure of the emerging whole, which is shown in the U-shape structure of the seven meditative spaces of true leadership in Figure 1, are manifested both in the structure of the interview and in the Great Learning essay.

The U-shape structure of the seven meditative spaces of leadership

Master Nan mentions seven meditative stages or steps of leadership:

1.) Awareness (of current reality), 2.) Knowing where to stop (recognizing the essential question), 3.) Calmness (samahdi), applying rigorous method to the essential question; 4.) Deep quietness and stillness, 5.) Grace of being, 6.) True thinking (looking for the essence/answer to the question), 7.) Attainment (of the desired end).

The seven meditative spaces of leadership consist of two basic movements (see Figure 1, above). The first movement could be called the “way-in,” which is to move from normal awareness to the deepest place of true stillness at the bottom of the U (stages 1-4). The second movement could be called the “return” and is about returning from the deepest point to the other levels of reality without losing the presence of the deepest point (stages 4-7).

The U-shape structure of the Encounter with Master Nan

The structure of the conversation with Master Nan embodies the structure of his theory about the seven steps in the following order:

1. Management is an insufficient starting point for our work (current awareness)
2. The blind spot of the 20th century (identifying the essential question)
3. The seven meditational steps of leadership (calmness; applying rigorous method to the question)
4. Point of Stillness: the eye of the needle (the journey from one place (office) to the second place (family dinner); Meditation, conversation and dinner)
5. Receiving a major insight (grace): The blind spot is concerned with the coming-into-being of social action, and the essence of the seven steps of meditative leadership is to illuminate that blind spot. Question: What then is the source of social action? Answer: Thought.
6. Question: What then is the origin of thinking? (Answer: the Self).
7. Question: What then is the origin of Self? And what is the true goal of

The Great Learning Essay

The seven initial paragraphs of the Great Learning essay follow the same U-shaped form: the first contains the whole structure, the following six reflect stages two through seven, with paragraphs four and five representing the turning point at the bottom of the U. The text reads as follows:

1. What the Great Learning teaches, is — to illustrate illustrious virtue; to renovate the people, and to rest in the highest excellence.

2. The point where to rest being known, the object of pursuit, is then determined, and, that being determined, a calm unperturbedness may be attained to. To that calmness there will succeed a tranquil repose. In that repose there may be careful deliberation, and that deliberation will be followed by the attainment *of the desired end*.
3. Things have their root and their branches. Affairs have their end and their beginning. To know what is first and what is last will lead near to what is taught *in the Great Learning*.
4. The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.
5. Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their States being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.
6. From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of *everything besides*.
7. It cannot be, when the root is neglected, that what should spring from it will be well ordered. It never has been the case that what was of great importance has been slightly cared for, and, at the same time, that what was of slight importance has been greatly cared for.

XIII. Bio

Nan Huai-Chin is a teacher and scholar famous in China but little known outside of China and Taiwan. He has written over 30 books, which have sold literally tens of millions of copies in China, mostly on the black market until recently. Few of his books have been translated and made available outside China. He is an advisor to the government as well as a noted spiritual figure. Today, it is not unusual to find whole sections of bookstores in China devoted to his works. He is noteworthy for his knowledge and attainment in all three major strands of Chinese culture: Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism. Master Nan just finished a new interpretation of one of the

two Confucian classics, “The Great Learning.” This essay, originally written by Confucius’ grandson 2400 hundred years ago has been a mainstay of Chinese culture ever since.