

# Divination Practices: *I Ching*—Part Two

By Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon

## Spiritism

The *I Ching*, like most forms of divination, is lauded for its uncanny ability to predict the future accurately. Consider the following comments of scholar and practitioner John Blofeld, who assigns the oracle infallibility. In his translation of the *I Ching*, he refers to its alleged ability to control the future, and he marvels over its “terrifying precision”:

**... it enables any reasonably unselfish person who is capable of fulfilling a few simple conditions both to foresee and to control the course of future events! By rightly interpreting and strictly following the *I Ching*'s interpretation of universal laws, we can make ourselves as farsighted as the lesser Gods!... It can be used to explain the present and predict the future with almost terrifying precision!... My aim in making a new translation of this work is to produce a version in the simplest possible language containing clear instructions for its use in divination, so that any English-speaking person who approaches it sincerely and intelligently can use it as an infallible means of choosing good and avoiding evil.... My version is almost wholly concentrated on the aspect of divination. <sup>1</sup>**

**... What does interest me enormously is that the *Book of Change*, when properly put to the test, responds in such a way as to remove all doubts about its value as a book of divination.... A really skilled interpreter who consults the *Book of Change* correctly will find that the answers given are never wrong! <sup>2</sup>**

Although we deny the *I Ching*'s omniscience, or that it is accurate to the degree Blofeld alleges, testimonies of accuracy can be found easily. Clearly it does work enough of the time to ensure peoples' interest. And no satisfactory, rational explanation for this process can be offered. Indeed, we cannot be dealing with some impersonal manifestation of cosmic law. Rather, it would seem we are encountering an intelligent power and source of information that knows us personally; one that can interact with us so as to arrange particular events and has a limited prevision of the future.

Blofeld confesses that when using the *I Ching*, he senses he is dealing with a personal, living being, not merely simple sticks forming symbolic hexagrams (Jung also felt as if he were dealing with a living entity <sup>3</sup>). His response to this awareness is common to that of many pagans, who know only too well the reality of a living spirit behind a sacred object or an idol. Consider Blofeld's own amazement:

**Like Jung, I have been struck by the extraordinary sensation aroused by my consultations of the book, the feeling that my question has been dealt with *exactly as by a living being* in full possession of even the unspoken facts involved in both the question and its answer. At first this sensation comes near to being terrifying and, even now, I find myself inclined to handle and transport the book rather as if it had feelings capable of being outraged by disrespectful treatment. <sup>4</sup>**

Blofeld expresses his complete bafflement at the process. Yet what matters to him, and to all who use these methods, are the results, not the explanation. Whatever the explanation for the power of *I Ching*, it must incorporate some kind of extremely powerful, living intelligence:

**As to how the book succeeds in giving answers which produce this uncanny**

effect, I do not know.... If you say that the oracle owes its effectiveness to the subconscious of the one who asks the questions, or to the unconscious (which is probably universal and therefore common to all men), or to the One Mind (in the Zen sense), or to God or a god or the gods, or to the philosopher's Absolute, I shall be inclined to agree with every one of these suggestions, for I believe that most of all of these terms are imperfect descriptions of a single unknown and unknowable but omnipotent reality.... In other words, I am entirely satisfied with the results produced by the *I Ching*; but do not presume to explain the lofty process by which they are achieved. <sup>5</sup>

Blofeld is very impressed about a living personality that must underlie the information given. He recounts his first attempt to use the oracle for divination. As he did so, he was not at all certain the text did not house, or at least bring him into contact with, a personal, living spiritual being:

**The very first time I did this, I was overawed to a degree that amounted to fright, so strong was the impression of having received an answer to my question *from a living, breathing person*. I have scarcely ever used it since without recovering something of that awe, though it soon came to be characterized by a pleasurable excitement rather than by fear. Of course I do not mean to assert that the white pages covered with black printer's ink do in fact house a living spiritual being. I have dwelt at some length on the astonishing effect they produce chiefly as a means of emphasizing how extraordinarily accurate and, so to speak, personal, are its answers in most cases. Yet, if I were asked to assert that the printed pages do not form the dwelling of a spiritual being or at least bring us into contact with one by some mysterious process, I think I should be about as hesitant as I am to assert the contrary. <sup>6</sup>**

He also says that "to obtain and interpret responses so accurate and to the point [is] to suggest almost supernatural powers." <sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, a common feature of pagan spiritism—reverence or worship to the spirits in order to secure their assistance—is also seen as indispensable for correct interpretation of the *I Ching*: "An attitude of reverence—though indispensable—is not the sole condition for correct interpretation of the *Book of Change*." <sup>8</sup> Of course, such reverence is also required in rune work, tarot interpretation, the Ouija board, and other divination methods.

The notorious occultist Aleister Crowley once commented that "other systems of divination are often manipulated by demons who delight in misleading the inquirer," and he felt that the *I Ching* was somehow above such duplicity. But he still conceded that the oracle was manipulated by personal intelligence: "The intelligences which direct it show no inclination to evade the question or to mislead the querant." <sup>9</sup> Of course, this was only Crowley's personal experience to this point and, certainly, there are many others who have been misled by the oracle. We have no reason to suspect that its duplicity is any less than in other forms of divination. After all, subjectivism is a key component in the divination of the *I Ching* as in other forms of divination. "It is a characteristic of the *I Ching* that it rarely gives a cut-and-dried answer, and the inquirer must usually think hard to apply the interpretation to his own situation." <sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, our response to all this is to ask, Why do so many practitioners have this particular animistic sense of things? Why this intuition of personal spiritual beings interacting with a book and its hexagrams? Why would truly impersonal forces "care" about our respect? The most logical explanation is because personal spiritual beings do operate through divinatory methods, and they do seek our allegiance.

## Interpretation

Like all forms of divination, the *I Ching* has the problem of interpretation. Both the text and the many commentaries written “explaining” the hexagrams contradict one another. In producing his own translation, Blofeld correctly observes of the original Chinese text:

**Its exceedingly terse style in many places justifies a number of widely varying translations; nor it is unlikely that in some passages several simultaneous meanings were deliberately implied. Moreover, the Chinese text includes hardly any pronouns at all, so that my arbitrary inclusion of them for the sake of reasonably good English puts a quite artificial limitation on the meaning.... I cannot always guarantee the accuracy of my translation. Judging from several Chinese versions of the *Book of Change* in my possession, even expert Chinese commentators have widely varying and even contradictory explanations of the more difficult passages.** <sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere Blofeld discusses two additional difficulties for proper interpretation:

**There are two insuperable obstacles to providing a reliable guide to interpreting the *I Ching's* responses. The first is that so much depends on the various circumstances leading to the enquiry and upon numerous related facts, some of which may already be present in the enquirer's mind, while others are not recognized as having any connection until either the response itself or subsequent events demonstrate their importance. An elementary example is provided by the fifth line of Hexagram 5, Chun, Difficulty. If that happens to be a moving line, the response will include the words; “Fertility cannot easily be brought about,” which will obviously have different meanings for, say, somebody longing to bear a son or daughter, a man considering whether to buy a certain piece of land, a teacher hoping to enlighten a backward child, an administrator about to take charge of a new territory, a person expecting to benefit from a particular friendship or a business man mulling over a new policy.** <sup>12</sup>

The second difficulty is to interpret the *I Ching* apart from the faculty of intuition or an altered state of consciousness:

**The second obstacle is that the *Book of Change* can seldom be accurately interpreted in accordance with a particular situation unless the faculty of intuition is allowed to play a decisive role.... I wish to warn the enquirer against mistaking his desires or expectations for intuition.... True intuition occurs only when the mind has been temporarily withdrawn from all conceptual and intellectual processes by means of Zen-like concentration, during which time our consciousness is cleansed of hopes, fears, expectations and so forth.** <sup>13</sup>

**Correct interpretation of the oracles requires a particular state of mind—here again, students of Zen possess a special advantage—in which respect based on belief is a vital factor.** <sup>14</sup>

**...As with oracles the world over, the meaning is so esoteric as to baffle the mind until intuition, careful thought or some unforeseen experience provide a sudden illumination.** <sup>15</sup>

Thus, as Ch'u Chai observes in the introduction to James Legge's translation:

**The *I Ching* is like a good poem; the number of words is limited, but the ideas it suggests are limitless.... A good reader of the *I Ching* reads “what is between the lines.” This means that those latent ideas form an essential, often a principal, part of the *I Ching*, so that in an appreciative, generally reflective approach to its material the reader himself often supplies all the “links” that are necessary to turn these “aphorisms” into a form of reasoning and arguments.** <sup>16</sup>

In other words, *I Ching* interpretation is so elastic it offers a wide range of potential personal applications. This situation makes its genuine power all the more impressive, and spiritistic manipulation all the more easy.

In conclusion, like other forms of divination, the *I Ching* works, which is precisely the problem. By leading people to regulate their lives and decisions in accordance with harmful occult principles or spiritistic powers, people are subject to forces beyond their control. Thus, divination methods are fraught with personal risks that few practitioners suspect are present.

**Notes:**

1. John Blofeld, *I Ching* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), pp. 14-16.
2. Ibid., pp. 22, 33, emphasis added.
3. Richard Cavendish, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained: Magic, Occultism and Parapsychology* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976), p. 124.
4. Blofeld, p. 25, emphasis added.
5. Ibid., pp. 25-26.
6. Ibid., pp. 26-27, emphasis added.
7. Ibid., p. 35.
8. Ibid., p. 32.
9. Cavendish, p. 124.
10. Ibid., p. 125.
11. Blofeld, pp. 17-18.
12. Ibid., p. 72.
13. Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1978), p. 73.
14. Blofeld, p. 24.
15. Ibid., pp. 32-33.
16. James Legge, trans, *I Ching: Book of Changes* (New York: Bantam, 1969), p. XXXVIII.