

MONKEY JOURNEY TO THE WEST

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“Journey to the west” is a novel written in the 16th century by the Chinese writer Wu Cheng'en. It is popularly known as “Monkey” due to Arthur Waley using that title in his abridged English language version. This article contains some of my own ponderings on the tale and is in no way authoritative.

It is known in the west mainly because of the Japanese TV adaptation that ran from 1976-1980. Since then there have been numerous TV and film versions, the latest being in 2016 when a big budget film “Monkey King 2” was released. There is also a stage musical, “Monkey: Journey to the West” created by the Chinese actor and director Chen Shi Zeng along with British musician Damon Albarn and British artist Jamie Hewlett. It remains an extremely popular tale in China and Japan and there are also video games based upon the story.

The story is based on a factual event concerning the monk Xuanzang who was concerned about the poor translations of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese, so he decided to travel to India to obtain some of the originals. He set off in 629AD and arrived a year later, spending a total of thirteen years studying, visiting sacred sites and collecting scriptures and holy relics. When he returned to China in 646 he set about translating the scriptures into Chinese. HP Blavatsky states many times that we should go to India if we want to gain true Spiritual Wisdom. This does not mean literally, but go to the Great Sages and Spiritual Writings of India. We go East but the Chinese go West!

To these events Wu Cheng'en added symbolism and fantastical adventure. The story is in fact an account of the trials of the aspirant on the path to enlightenment. The main characters are:

The monk Xuanzang, popularly known as “Tripitaka”.

Monkey or Su Wutang. The Chinese name can be loosely translated as “awakening to emptiness.”

Piggy or Zhu Bajie which means “pig of the eight prohibitions”.

Sandy or Sha Wujing which literally means “sand awakened to purity.”

There is also a minor character Yulong who was once the son of the Dragon King of the Western Sea, but after setting fire to his father's great pearl he was sentenced to death. He was rescued by Kwan Yin and changed into a white horse on which Tripitaka rides. Kwan Yin plays a big part in the story and often intercedes at difficult times. For the rest of this article I will use the English names to avoid confusion.

Monkey can be regarded as representing the “monkey mind” as he is restless and constantly flits from place to place at a whim and often acts irresponsibly, but at the same time is able to detect the presence of a danger and has great powers which show the potential of the mind. The control and flowering of the mind is Monkey's journey.

He is born from a stone egg formed from the merging of heaven and earth, the awakening of the mind principle. He then learns the art of the Tao and 72 polymorphic transformations from a Taoist master.

From the outset he is extremely mischievous and manages to upset many gods, who decide to give him a position in heaven as keeper of the horses so they can keep an eye on him. When he realises that he has been given such a lowly position he is furious and in defiance declares himself a “sage equal to heaven”, perhaps representing the false sense of ego we give to ourselves when ruled by the lower aspects of our being. The Jade Emperor sends troops from heaven to arrest him but they fail and so he decides to give Monkey the job of tending the peach orchard. Peaches in Chinese Mythology are said to confer immortality when eaten. Monkey eats one, against the rules, and when he later discovers that he has not been invited to the peach banquet, he once again flies into a rage and causes havoc in heaven. The Jade Emperor asks the Buddha to intervene and Monkey is banished to a mountain where he is trapped for 500 years.

William Blake in his poem “London” writes about our “mind-forged manacles”. The antics of our lower mind blind us to reality and we are trapped by delusion. Meanwhile the Buddha decides that Buddhism in China is deteriorating and someone must travel to India to bring back genuine scriptures.

Tripitaka is chosen for this task and on his way he comes across Monkey, whom he frees and accepts as his disciple. Despite being freed Monkey still remains unruly and so the goddess of compassion, Kwan Yin, attaches a gold ring around Monkey’s head and gives Tripitaka a ring tightening mantra. When this mantra is spoken the ring tightens and causes pain, showing that if we allow our lower minds free rein then suffering will ensue. It is Kwan Yin who helps the defenseless Tripitaka to find his three companions. HP Blavatsky tells us that Kwan Yin is esoterically the voice of our Higher Self, which if listened to, can help us through the most difficult of ordeals on our own pilgrimage to discover the Truth and bring it to life.

Along the way they next meet Pigsy, who was once an immortal, the Marshal of the Heavenly Canopy commanding 100,000 naval soldiers of the Milky Way. He drank too much during a celebration of the gods and attempted to flirt with the moon goddess Chang’e, resulting in his banishment into the mortal world. He was supposed to be reborn as a human but ends up in the womb of a sow, due to an error at the Reincarnation Wheel, which turns him into a half-man half-pig monster. This of course is only symbolic. Theosophy teaches that the reincarnating soul cannot be reborn as an animal once the human stage is reached. Pigsy represents the lustful and gluttonous elements of human nature.

On earth he poses as an ordinary human married to a village girl, but when the villagers discover his true nature he hides the girl away and as a result she wailed constantly. At this point Tripitaka and Monkey arrive, defeat Pigsy and free the girl. Pigsy then joined them on their journey.

Further on their way they come across Sandy, who was once a “Celestial Curtain Lifting General” who stood in attendance by the imperial chariot in the Hall of Miraculous Mist. He was exiled to the mortal world and made to look like a monster, because he accidentally smashed a crystal goblet belonging to the Queen Mother of the West during a Peach Banquet. Sandy lived in a river and terrorised the surrounding villages until subdued by Monkey and Pigsy. He then joined their pilgrimage.

So all three have to redeem themselves, just as we have to redeem ourselves from our fall from a “heavenly” state into the material world.

From then on the party encounter various demons and adversaries. Monkey possesses a magical staff, which is the size of a pin but is able to grow in length. He uses this weapon and other means to overcome evil. Pigsy and Sandy also have magical weapons, a rake and spade respectively. Although Monkey appears irresponsible, he is the one who protects and rescues Tripitaka during the many times he is captured. He also has the power to detect evil and can transform himself at will. Monkey has command of a cloud too, which he uses to fly through the air. Tripitaka, however, berates him for using violence because this is against Buddhist teaching. The mind, though wayward in its lowest aspects, holds the key to our 'salvation.'

Tripitaka represents our conscience, the voice of our Higher Self. Is there another way to overcome evil? In our material world it is thought that the use of violence can end violence, but in the end only love can do that. Yet at times Tripitaka, Pigsy and Sandy fail to see approaching danger and refuse to believe Monkey, who has a deeper insight into such matters. The powers of the mind are great when it is brought under control and this Monkey is achieving. Tripitaka appears rather naive at times, showing the value of experience.

This is the journey from unconscious perfection, through conscious imperfection to conscious perfection.

In Indian philosophy, Tripitaka may represent the quality of goodness (Sattva), whereas Monkey and Pigsy embody the quality of activity (Rajas) and the phlegmatic Sandy inertia (Tamas). It must be noted though, that Sandy is usually the peacemaker in disputes. These qualities or gunas, all have a positive and a negative side to them. Tamas may also be a meditative state that brings tranquility to the meditator and everything around them, a calmness in the centre of the storm. Rajas may give us the energy and drive to overcome many obstacles on our path. Sattva or goodness is achieved through the trials and frictions of life and the lessons we learn from them.

The story refers to the different limitations of our nature that prevent us from reaching enlightenment and which we have to overcome on our pilgrimage. Even goodness can be a barrier in the end, and HP Blavatsky tells us that eventually we have to get rid of 'good' karma as well as the 'bad', if we are to progress beyond the gunas as the Bhagavad Gita tells us to.

After many trials the pilgrims reach India and receive the scripture from the Buddha himself. They then return to China and Monkey and Tripitaka are awarded Buddhahood. Yulong, who once set fire to his father's great pearl and sentenced to death, is made a Naga. In mythology Nagas are serpent deities but HP Blavatsky informs us that esoterically it refers to a certain class of adepts.

Sandy becomes an Arhat "the worthy one" or "deserving divine honours". This was the name first given to the Jain, and subsequently to the Buddhist holy men, initiated into the esoteric mysteries. An Arhat is one who has entered the best and highest path, and is thus emancipated from rebirth. Arhat is sometimes spoken or written as Arhan or Rahat.

Pigsy has not quite overcome his lusts and is promoted to an altar cleanser, one who eats excess offerings at the altar! Many aspirants fail because they have some overriding vice that keeps them earthbound and until all attachment to the things of the world is overcome, they cannot move on. So they must be satisfied with what crumbs of knowledge come their way. Perhaps eating spiritual food will eventually cleanse Pigsy of his remaining faults, as drop by drop our knowledge increases!

It is easy to see that the story is rich in symbolism and I have only given a tiny peek into what some of the meanings may be. As in all such tales, we will find what we, as individuals, need in them for our own particular pilgrimage. Such stories were not written just for entertainment but include powerful archetypal images that can have profound effects on the consciousness of the reader, if that reader approaches with the right mental attitude.

The amazing durability and popularity of Monkey and other such legends is because inwardly we can identify with one or more of the characters and they resonate with us in our day to day lives. HP Blavatsky writes in her article "Signs of the Times":

"Works of fiction, the various novels and romances are called 'Fiction' in the arrangement of their characters and the adventures of their heroes and heroines – admitted. Not so, as to the facts presented... Many and strange will be the romances yet enacted; for truth is often stranger than fiction, and what is thought fiction is still more often truth".

Knowing this increases our enjoyment of such 'romances', as we come to understand that by reading them we are not just idling time away; but actually awakening to facts that can help us on our pilgrimage, as well as being introduced to certain concepts in an entertaining way.

Eventually we will transcend all attachment to conceptual views, but until then we can take great pleasure in the journey hard as it may be at times. If our motive is unselfish and if we realise that inwardly we are immortal, then whatever comes our way is transient and will pass in time.

Not only is there light at the end of the tunnel, the tunnel itself is ultimately just an illusion and there is really just "Light more Light"!