For David Schindler

and

George Allan, Rob Kellman, Costa Simos

and forty years of magnificent students

Special thanks to Elie Shupak, Myo’on Freedgood, Lewis Randa, Marc Moreau, Sol Schindler, Toni Snow, Peter Gardner, Lois Davis, Giorgio Cave, Jonathan Edwards, Coyote Chris, Christopher Schwartz, and my editor, Bob Sims.

Published and Distributed by
The Educational Publisher
Columbus, Ohio
www.EduPublisher.com
ISBN:1-934849-51-0
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Socrates would smile at me and say: “My dear friend, how deceitful a lover you are! You wish to idolize me on account of my wisdom, and then to take your place as the friend who best understands me, from whose admiring embrace I shall never be able to tear myself free – is it not true that you are a seducer?” And if I still refused to understand him, he would no doubt bring me to despair by the coldness of his irony, as he explained to me that he owed me as much as I owed him.

Soren Kierkegaard
Philosophic Fragments

The first precept of the rule is that everything that surrounds us is an unfathomable mystery.

The second precept of the rule is that we must try to unravel these mysteries, but without ever hoping to accomplish this.

The third [precept of the rule is that] a warrior, aware of the unfathomable mystery that surrounds him and aware of his duty to try to unravel it, takes his rightful place among mysteries and regards himself as one.

Consequently, for a warrior there is no end to the mystery of being, whether being means being a pebble, or an ant, or oneself. That is a warrior’s humbleness. One is equal to everything.

Carlos Castaneda
The Eagle’s Gift
I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription insists, to know myself.…
That is why … I look into myself:
Am I a beast more complicated and savage than [the hundred-headed polymorphous monster named] Typho, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in [the] divine …?

Just as I was about to cross the river, [my] divine sign came to me ….  
I thought I heard a voice. … You see, I am a seer….  
Downstream, where one crosses, … I will cross the river ….  

Socrates  
In Plato’s Phaedrus
Chapter 1  THE TAO OF SOCRATES

The Tao signifies the way of nature. It indicates harmony. Balancing opposites – yin and yang: quiescence and action – in such a way as to maintain smoothness, even in turbulence. The Tao – a Chinese word symbolizing the ultimate mystery – is called The Way. It is also called The Watercourse Way.

The Way is fluid. A Taoist sage is characterized by equipoise. A calm going with the flow, even when challenging the status quo. Accordingly, “The Tao of Socrates” suggests that his life, his speech, his death exhibit the equanimity of a person attuned to The Way.

Socrates’ life was heroic, tragic, and seemingly never off balance.
Imagine: *Zen and the Art of Socrates*.

Zen is the Japanese name for the “artless art” emerging from the marriage of Buddhism and Taoism in seventh century China.

Buddhism migrates from India to China about 60 CE. Confucians are skeptical of Buddhist metaphysics and wary of Buddhist freedom, but they are sympathetic to the Buddhist emphasis on virtue.

The Taoists are more congenial. Taoists find in Buddhism a similar philosophy of life, emphasizing meditation, equanimity, awakening, a Middle Way – reflecting Thoreau’s “simplify, simplify, simplify” and Emerson’s “self-reliance.”

Around 500 CE, the legendary Bodhidharma brings meditative Buddhism, *Dhyana*, from India to China, where it merges with Taoism, giving birth to a new school of Chinese practice: *Ch’an Buddhism*. In the early 1200s, *Ch’an* travels to Japan, where it blossoms into what the Japanese call *Zen*.

Socrates, I suggest, was a Greek Zen Master; a Taoist sage disguised as Athenian citizen in the latter half of the 5th century BC, when Athens was at her glory and simultaneously sliding into ruin.

In Mahayana Buddhist terms, Socrates, like Jesus, was a *Bodhisattva*, blending wisdom and compassion in a life of service.

The two pillars of Greek philosophy are:

1. *Gnothi Seauton* – “Know thyself”

These two virtues were achieved by Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni Buddha under the Bodhi tree in northeast India, now southern Nepal, around 550 BC.
After a princely youth, followed by six years of asceticism, Siddhartha experienced enlightenment by renouncing excess and sitting quietly after a nourishing meal. His moksha, his enlightenment experience – in Japanese, satori – transforms him into the Buddha.

“Buddha” means “awake.” The Buddha shows that self-knowledge – the enlightenment experience – is possible. He recommends a Middle Way, rooting life in equipoise.

Socrates and Siddhartha practice and teach the two pillars of Greek philosophy: “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess.” The two pillars of Greek philosophy are also the twin pillars of Buddhism: Enlightenment and The Middle Way.

This is not surprising when we note another and equally scintillating parallel. In the Mahayana tradition, the core of Buddhism is Karuna-Prajna: Compassion rooted in Wisdom.

The wisdom of the Mahayana ideal, the Bodhisattva, is manifest in his or her life of compassionate service. For a Bodhisattva, there is no difference between wisdom and compassion; indeed, compassion is the measure of wisdom. If this is also true for Socrates and Jesus, then we have a new approach to the tension between Athens and Jerusalem.

The immediate point – the bridge to that new approach – is that Karuna-Prajna translates as Love-Wisdom. In Greek, Love-Wisdom is Philos-Sophos.

The primal meaning of philosophy is not the love of wisdom, but the recognition of their identity. Wisdom is love. No distance, no difference between. Love and wisdom: two names for the same.

Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”
This is a variation on the Buddha’s First Noble Truth: “The unenlightened life is suffering.”

Now, imagine a curious Buddhist in India, about 400 BC, embarking west; sojourning in classical Athens; then returning east and, perhaps unwittingly, planting a perverse story which conquers Asia and goes like this: “No wonder Western civilization is so violent and crazy. Socrates, the father of Western philosophy, said, ‘Life is not worth living.’”

We in the West would of course be appalled, responding: “That’s not what Socrates said! He said the unexamined life is not worth living. You dummies, you chopped off the all important introductory qualifier!”

My story is, thankfully, fictitious. Tragically, it illustrates what Western missionaries did to Buddha. Returning from Asia, they planted a story in Western culture that still prevails. They said: “No wonder people in the East don’t value life. The Buddha said, ‘All life is suffering.’” This Western distortion of Buddha’s teaching would lead in time to an American soldier in Vietnam saying, “We had to destroy the village in order to save it.”

Siddhartha Gautama, also called Shakyamuni Buddha, does not say that life is suffering. He says that life is bliss, and names it nirvana. He says, “The unenlightened life is suffering.” Having identified the problem, he offers a diagnosis: The cause of suffering is ignorance manifesting as excess desire. Nirvana, bliss here now through detached engagement, is the cure. The Eight-fold Path is the bridge from samsara to nirvana – perhaps the wisest prescription ever offered by a doctor of the soul.

Socrates walked that path. Thanks largely to Plato, we can still hear Socrates’ voice, urging us to reclaim the sanity we were born with.
Chapter 2  SOCRATES THE MAN

Shortly before his execution, Socrates’ wife came to see him in prison. She shouted, “Socrates, they’re going to kill you unjustly!” He replied, “But my dear, would you rather they killed me justly?”

This story exhibits the spirit of the man. It calls to mind James Thurber on his deathbed. Asked if he had made his peace with God, Thurber said, “I didn’t know we had quarreled.”

The ghost of the Scottish skeptic, the Enlightenment’s own David Hume, smiles at the merger of Socrates and Thurber, and whispers, ‘Add Mark Twain and William James to the mix, and you’ll see the Socratic spirit in America.’ The question is: Can that spirit be revived? My ironic thesis is that the answer is yes, if we look East, to Taoism and Buddhism, for inspiration. Of course,
our first stop must be mid-fifth century BC in Classical Greece, to show the Socratic spirit emerging from the life and death of the man.

The historical Socrates provoked Athens, inspired Plato and was killed for his efforts. Who was this man? We know that he’s famous for saying something like, ‘At least I know that I don’t know.” This is Socratic ignorance. We shall encounter Socratic method, Socratic eros, and Socratic irony. His method is interrogative. His philosophic passion he calls “erotic.” His irony is both simple and complex. To work our way toward an understanding of how these traits come together to form Socratic wisdom, let us see the man in context.

Socrates was born into a lower middle class family in one of the outlying neighborhoods of Athens in 469 BC, ten years after the Greek victory against the Persian invasions. By the time Socrates was twenty, Athens was the premier polis – the dominant city-state, power, empire – in the Mediterranean.

Socrates is, in a sense, the father of Western philosophy. Like Pythagoras, Buddha, Jesus and Confucius, he left no writings. He died at the age of seventy in 399. Twelve years later, after extensive travel, his most famous student, Plato, returned to Athens and founded the first Western university, The Academy. Here, Plato wrote Socratic dialogues: colorful portraits of his enigmatic mentor.

Plato’s own most outstanding student was Aristotle. Aristotle studied at The Academy for twenty years. After Plato’s death, Aristotle founded the second great Western university on the other side of Athens: a science-based research center and natural history museum called The Lyceum.

Socratic philosophy is conversational. In the early Platonic dialogues we hear Socrates debating – on the court-house steps, at the gymnasium, strolling the streets of Athens, at a party, at his trial. We notice a squat, barefoot figure with bulging eyes, clad simply, charismatic and enchanting.
According to tradition, Socrates’ father was a stonemason and his mother was a midwife. In Plato’s dialogues we occasionally hear Socrates refer to himself as a midwife of the soul, helping others give birth to their own enlightenment quest.

Socrates served as a Hoplite soldier in the Athenian army on several campaigns. He was noted for his courage and endurance; barefoot in the snow and seemingly beyond need of food or sleep.

Later, as philosophic gadfly in Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates drinks with the best without becoming drunk. After an all night dialogue in honor of Eros, everyone else asleep, he emerges to greet the dawn, cleans himself at a public bath, and spends the rest of the day mingling with citizens and strangers – often the center of a small crowd, Pied-Piper-like.

Socrates married. He fathered three children. He received a small pension for his Hoplite service. He wife encouraged him to get a job, but he was, he said, too busy trying to find the meaning of virtue – which he *had* to do in order to unravel Apollo’s *bizarre* remark that Socrates was wise.

Unlike the Sophists, Socrates refused to accept money for his teaching; not least because he wasn’t sure virtue could be taught.

Socrates staked his life, and the soul of Athens, on the virtue of questing for virtue. “The unexamined life is not worth living,” Socrates says in Plato’s *Apology*, thus giving primacy to a life of inquiry.

The Socratic method is that of skeptic and critic; what the Hindus call *neti neti* – “not this, not that.” In Greek, the art of refutation is called *elenchus*.

Now, our closest approximation to the historical Socrates emerges in the early dialogues of Plato. These are the *Socratic* or *Elenctic Dialogues*, refutational in tone and form. Indeed, Socrates launches the second phase of his philosophic career elenctically: he seeks to *refute* the Delphic god’s declaration of Socratic wisdom. The god of Delphi is Apollo.
In the alchemy of Plato’s art, Socrates is conjured into dialogical immortality. A living spirit produced by Plato’s poetic blend of invention and recollection. Yet these early dialogues usually conclude with admission of failure. Socrates and his dialogue partners are no closer to a universal definition of piety, justice, temperance, virtue or the good. But the inquiry did bring some enlightenment. It exposed confusions and made transparent the inadequacy of assumed ideas.