

# THE TAO THAT CAN BE SPOKEN

A conversation with Ken Cohen

beaming owners, who brought out choice cakes of tea to show us. We shared three small pots of tea and a huge variety of mooncakes and mochi treats during our conversation.

**Question** Do you think that society is evolving spiritually?

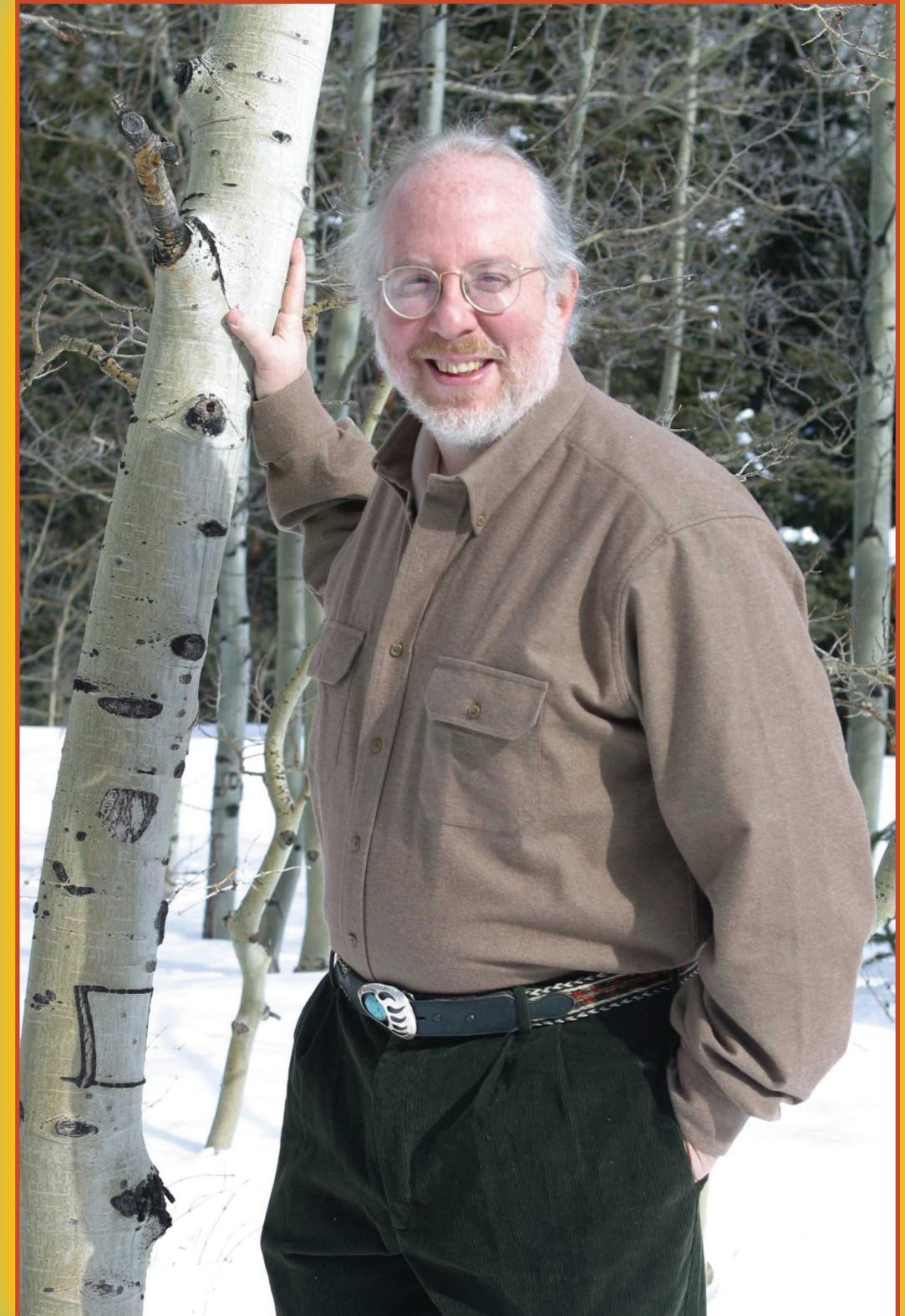
**Ken Cohen** No. I would say we are de-evolving. Our brain size is smaller than the Neanderthals'. I'm a follower of Jerry Mander, and he says in his book, *In the Absence of the Sacred*, that evolution requires interaction between people and natural environments. Since we are now interacting mostly with objects of our own creation, humankind has an incestuous relationship with itself. We have stopped the process of evolution because, again, we need the stimulation of natural environments in order to evolve. So I would say that we are de-evolving rather quickly, and the internet is accelerating that process. It's the ultimate example of the disembodied intellect, and reinforces the delusion that mind and body are separate and that people can live separately from their natural environment. To make it clearer, people talk about "virtual communities." Community consists of a group of people living in a specific geographic location. I highlight the word "geographic," to illustrate that communities are accountable to place. The internet destroys this accountability to place. It gives people the belief that they can pick up their computer and live anywhere. Basically, it becomes the ultimate rationalization for colonialism, because I think the mindset behind the internet is, "Let's rape the land where we are and move on."

**Question** Wow. Do you think that everyone who uses the internet has that mindset?

**Ken Cohen** No, but I think that human society is largely shaped by its tools. Tools are generally considered devices that accomplish a task or, more abstractly, a means towards an end. The problem

*Ken Cohen is one of my heroes. His book, Honoring the Medicine: The Essential Guide to Native American Healing, is one of the best books on healing that I've come across. In addition to his knowledge of Native American wisdom and healing, Mr. Cohen is also an initiate of Filipino oracion, has studied with Zulu shaman Ingwe, and is trained as an Igbo priest/shaman. He has studied with numerous Qigong masters and apprenticed to Dr. K.S. Wong from China's sacred mountains. He is widely renowned for his research, writing and work on Qigong. And, he's Jewish.*

*We met one morning in early November in Tucson, and I had the pleasure of introducing him to Seven Cups, a beautiful traditional tea shop. An enthusiastic tea lover, Mr. Cohen was in heaven! He recited poetry in Chinese to the*



Photograph by Cheryl Willes.

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INTERVIEWED BY YAEL GRAUER

is that, in the long view, we can't predict what that end will be. Tools are not morally neutral. Some people say, well, if people use them in the right way, they'll be fine. But the lesson of history is that if we invest too much time in our tools, the tools shape us. Just as agriculture helped to create social hierarchy, private property and greed, I would say that the internet is creating a further split between mind and body and people and place.

**Question** So what do you think people should do to stop the de-evolution process?

**Ken Cohen** Simplify. Do less. Consume less. Be willing to make sacrifices for what they feel is right. I think we're in a culture that lacks courage, and that's the main thing that's missing in the world today. People have no courage; they're just blindly following whatever anyone tells them is going to be easy and profitable. It takes some courage to say, "No. I don't need to earn 50,000 dollars; I can live quite well on 20,000." That takes a lot of courage, to say, "I'm going to deliberately do less."

**Question** How important is it that people engage in spiritual practice in regard to slowing the de-evolution process?

**Ken Cohen** Spiritual practice is essential. Prepare the spiritual fire by removing debris such as negative thinking and muscular or energetic tension. Stoke it with love, compassion, respect, and generosity. Give the fire room to grow by practicing silence. And tend the fire with your friends. We cannot and will not survive alone. These are universal values that belong not to one religion or another, but to humanity.

**Question** So you're Jewish and you practice Native American and Chinese spirituality. Do you think that sometimes it can be harmful to mix traditions, or to take what you like from some traditions?

**Ken Cohen** Well, first of all, I don't mix traditions. As an educator, I try to keep them very distinct. When I'm teaching a class in Chinese, I wouldn't want to start in French and then throw in Chinese or start in Chinese and then throw in French. I want to keep the languages distinct.

Everything you study is going to influence who you are. The only harm comes if you dig a hundred wells, and none are deep enough to strike water. Then they're all

useless. If you want to really understand something well, you have to go quite deeply into that, and not avoid the time and patience that's necessary to pursue where you feel you're called.

Sometimes, people study something because of its entertainment value—they're not really interested in it. Once it ceases to be entertaining, and they come face to face with their issues—this always happens with a healing art—then their strategy of avoiding their personal issues is to switch to something else. Then the person ends up having a sort of chop suey spirituality, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. That's like not striking water—none of them really do you much good.

So I would say, I don't mix the traditions together, even though in my own consciousness and the way that I live, they all have an influence on me. The other thing to bear in mind is that we're in a society that has a hard time with dual expertise in spiritual matters. If I were to tell a group of students that I have, say, a degree in psychology, a degree in anthropology, and that I'm a medical doctor—this is not true that I have those three degrees—they would say, "Oh, well, that person's really talented." We do have some outstanding physicians who are also anthropologists. I'm sure there are some that are also psychologists, and that would be considered a sign of talent. We feel comfortable with broad academic learning. But, if I say, "I am a practitioner of Qigong and Taoism and I trained as a traditional healer in Native American spirituality among several tribes, and I'm working with an outstanding Jewish Kabbalist, a Sephardic Jew, from Morocco," then people look at me kind of odd. Then, when they hear my favorite poet is Rumi, I become odder still. There's this strange Western notion that different forms of spirituality are mutually exclusive.

I tend to take the view that we're all planted from the same earth and the same soil. Our roots go to the same place. But from the viewpoint of the branches and leaves, that is, as the spiritual conditions have developed and been codified in modern times, they appear different. But you can trace them back to a common root, common plant, and the same sacred earth. I think that spiritual traditions recognize and respect the same basic truths.

I met one of the great Muslim sheiks, an incredible man, one of the great scholars of the Quran, and the teaching that he shared with me I could have heard from a Native American. He said, "The Quran teaches you to find the truth that Allah (God) has written in your heart." Moses is another example of this perennial wisdom. One of the teachings in Judaism is that Moses basically went on a Vision Quest. When he saw the burning bush, he heard a voice

that said, "Take off your shoes, because the ground is holy." So the rabbis asked, "What are the shoes?" The shoes are concepts and belief systems. So if you take off your shoes, the ground is holy everywhere. It's only our belief systems, including belief in God, that prevents us from realizing the holiness of the ground. So that's a very Buddhist teaching, and it's a very Native American teaching, because one of the reasons we Vision Quest is to rid ourselves of ego. That's the barrier. Ego, you could say, means "edging god out"—that's the way I define ego.

**Question** I have trouble with the idea that, in Chinese medicine, it seems like they don't really believe in God, whereas in the Native American traditions that I'm somewhat familiar with, everything is based on a belief in Creator.

**Ken Cohen** Well, I don't know that I agree. Native Americans don't "believe" in the Great Spirit, they have "experience" of a reality beyond the conventions of thought, language and culture. So it's not something to "believe" in. Sometimes people ask me if I believe in the Great Mystery, and I say, "No! Not at all. I sure hope not." If I have a belief in the Great Mystery, then I need to explore that, and get rid of it, because those are the shoes. With Taoism, there's also an acceptance of mysteries beyond knowledge. That's why the Tao Te Ching starts, "The Tao that can be spoken of is not the everywhere Tao..."

**Question** The eternal Tao...

**Ken Cohen** Yes, sometimes translated "eternal." Actually, the original character that's used in the text means "omnipresent, spread out." Later, another Chinese character, which means eternal, was substituted.

The Tao that can be spoken about is not the everywhere Tao. We cannot speak about it; we cannot know it because it includes us and we have no outside perspective. The commentator on the Upanishads, Shankara, said that just as the sword can't cut itself and the fire can't burn itself, so the subject can't be the object of its own knowledge. We don't have any outside perspective. There's no way to really talk about it. All we can do is accept that in our experience, there is a mystery that's realized through silence.

So I don't think there's really a contradiction between these different viewpoints. The fundamental Jewish prayer, called the Sh\_ma, begins with the word "Hear." Spirituality is a matter of deep listening. The prayer ends with the word Echad, Unity, a state of being in which you are merged with the wisdom and beauty of the divine. Maybe we are all waves on one ocean of being. Is the wave the same as the ocean? No, but it is also not different from it.

So I think at the heart, Judaism and the message of Taoism and Native American spirituality are the same. They're certainly very distinct in the way they are expressed, but I don't really think that you can say that the difference is in one believing in God and the other one not, because the mystic is going to find a way to get rid of beliefs no matter what tradition he or she is based in.

**Question** Do you have any closing words or advice?

**Ken Cohen** Spiritual health, it seems to me, is about flexibility and connection. The Tao that can be spoken about is not the Tao, because words are fixed, but life—the Tao—changes. How can you capture flowing water in a bucket? If we accept the reality of change, we develop a supple and free mind. We let go of expectations, preconceptions and stereotypes. Rigid divisions between people, ethnicities and religions dissolve. We create a foundation for peace. ▶

*Thanks so much to Ken Cohen for making this interview possible. Thanks also to Rena for sharing tea and mooncakes, to the staff at Seven Cups for making this visit (and every visit) so delightful, to Cameron Momeni for buying me a ticket for Ken Cohen's Qigong workshop, and to Nate Summers for introducing me to his writing in the first place.*

For more information, check out <http://www.kennethcohen.com>

[Portions of this interview appeared in a slightly different form on Yael's website, [WWW.DIRTTIME.ORG](http://WWW.DIRTTIME.ORG).]

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