The above quote is attributed to the famed Taoist Chuang Tzu. Essentially, he is turning our perceived reality on its head and asking us to reconsider our very notion of reality.

This questioning of reality mirrors the Zen inquiry into the differences between dreams and our waking state.

When analyzing dreams, we observe the following: Events within our dreams are sometimes clear and sometimes hazy; events tend not to follow linear or logical progression; events may seem controllable or may seem beyond our control; feelings in our dreams can give us pleasure or make us anxious and often change unannounced; we frequently don’t remember our dreams; even dreams that we do remember from the night before we usually forget within a few days, weeks or months.

If we now analyze our “waking state” we see the following: Events are sometimes clear and sometimes hazy; thoughts and events tend not to follow linear or logical progression; events may seem controllable or may seem beyond our control; our emotions and feelings can rapidly change back and forth from pleasure to anxiety depending on the day’s events; we often don’t remember our thoughts and actions throughout the day; even thoughts and actions that we do remember from our day we usually forget within a few days, weeks or months.

In essence, we can conclude that there is substantively little difference...
between the “dreams” we have at night and the supposed “waking state” we experience by day.

From the Zen perspective, we are perpetually “asleep” until we have a great awakening, or enlightenment. Presumably with enlightenment we are perpetually awake and gain awareness and control over our thoughts, actions, memory and awareness.

THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD

The poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* by Wallace Stevens artistically reminds us that reality doesn’t seem separable from perception. Within the poem, he offers thirteen portrayals of a blackbird. In each, the context and perspective with which we see the bird shift, giving us new mental associations and images that broaden our thinking. In the thirteenth and final section, he writes:

*It was evening all afternoon.*
*It was snowing*
*And it was going to snow.*
The blackbird sat
*In the cedar-limbs.*

These lines are very Zen-like, at first seeming nonsensical but actually making great sense from a more open perspective. Zen practitioners, Chuang Tzu, Wallace Stevens – they each remind us of the folly of narrow or limited perspectives in our lives.

What different “blackbirds” comprise your life, and how many ways do you view them? Are hardships opportunities? Is death life? Is bitter the measure of sweetness? Do crows bring bad luck or good luck?

You may have heard the expression, “What man can perceive, man can achieve.” More personally, our individual achievements are dependent on our individual perceptions.

Many Peaceful Dragon students share some common goals: Stay more relaxed, become stronger and more flexible, develop the confidence and skill to defend oneself, lose weight and gain fitness, develop a more positive and enlightened spirit.
Ask yourself whether your perception of success in these goals is narrow and limited, or broad and encompassing? How do you perceive yourself in relation to these goals: Worthy and capable, or undeserving and incapable? Is your perception accurate? How do you know?

And finally, can you change your perception of yourself and your relationships in life for the better? Of course you can. Counselors, self-help books and tapes, and several other tools are readily available to help broaden perceptions or to help turn negative perceptions into positive ones. But the greatest tool will always remain your own mind, readily developed through your practice of meditation.

**Exercise**

With practice, we can develop greater dream awareness and enjoy lucid dreams. But even more valuable, with practice we can enjoy greater “awake” awareness. Try for an entire day to really pay attention to what you are thinking, feeling and doing throughout the day, and at the end of the day replay your feelings and events. If you are even marginally successful at improving your awareness of the day’s moments, do you feel a greater sense of value of the day?”

**Assignment**

Choose two issues that are currently presenting “problems” in your life. Write down two or three (or thirteen!) different ways of perceiving those issues so that at worst you find some new and creative ways to resolve the issues, and at best you may discover that these issues aren’t really problems at all.

Send your thoughts to Master Sbarge at lessons@thepeacefuldragon.com. Please put “Lesson 21” in the subject line.

**Recommended Reading**

*The Way of Chuang Tzu*

By Thomas Merton
Father Merton has composed a series of personal versions from existing translations that depict the Taoist Chuang Tzu’s genius for perceiving the ordinary in unusual and enlightening ways. A fun read offering life-enhancing Taoist lessons in a style and flavor quite different from Lao Tzu.

Every month a book or article will be suggested by Master Sbarge. Reading about topics related to the arts you are training in will help you get the most out of your practice. Just remember that reading can never replace your practice! Each month’s recommended reading is purely optional, though Master Sbarge may on rare occasion ask that you do read a particular book.

For additional reading suggestions by Master Sbarge, go to http://www.thepeacefuldragon.com/books.shtml. For any book or other item you purchase through The Peaceful Dragon website’s link to Amazon.com, a percentage is automatically sent to The Peaceful Dragon. We appreciate your support of our school.

Note: All Peaceful Dragon students are urged to complete monthly assignments because they are important for you to fully benefit from your training.