

Facing An Ogre

By Gabriel Ryder

Most of the choices we make from day to day don't matter—and we make a lot of them. As soon as we wake up we are inundated with possibilities. We make decisions and we take them seriously. *Should I sleep-in or get up now? Do I have time to eat that piece of toast that is hardening in the toaster oven? Should I put gas in the car or take a chance? Socks or flip-flops?* These are the pressing issues we face each day with uncanny novelty. *What will it be today, navy blue or black?* Despite our sense of urgency, most of these choices just don't matter. The solutions to these apparent dilemmas are almost always determined by our social conditioning and a bit of common sense. Beneath the fluster, we are pretty much on autopilot. But some of the choices we make do matter and the ones that matter most are not always dramatic. The most critical choice I ever faced was whether or not I should bother a Chinese waiter.

I was at my favorite vegetarian restaurant: The Sunflower. I had just finished eating and I was in bad shape. By "in bad shape" I mean my mind, my body—my life. I was not living my life; I was enduring it. I went to Sunflower to feel better. I had been going there for years. I knew I could get good food and tea and forget about my problems for a while. But it wasn't working. I wasn't forgetting. I was totally in my head: wrestling my problems, trying to get a handle on things, if only mentally.

I was turning over thoughts about my weakening health: my hernia surgery and the pain that still stabbed through the damaged tissue; the sharp, arthritic aches in my foot; my recently diagnosed hypothyroidism and the side-effects from the medicine; the bizarre, inexplicable pains and symptoms that made doctors think I was nuts...

As I fiddled with a chopsticks wrapper and sipped at my cup of green tea with toasted brown rice, I noticed something. The old Chinese waiter was there. By "old" I mean he no longer worked there (I asked about him one day and found out that he had retired) and by "old" I mean he was wise. He had advice about everything, especially about matters of health. I admired him for that. His eyes were clear and bright and he was always in good spirits when I saw him. I couldn't have guessed his age. I was surprised when I later found out that he was in his sixties. His vitality and personality made him so young.

He was at another table, talking with Sunflower employees. He was busy. I wanted to talk to him, but he was busy. I wanted to ask him if he had any ideas about my health situation. I tried everything I could think of to fix my ailing, unfriendly body. I tried micro-managing my diet: no sugar, no caffeine, no soy, no this and no that. I had been

vegetarian for over four years, but decided to try eating fish—there was so much hype about the healthy benefits of fish. But it didn't matter if I monitored my eating habits, changed my sleeping patterns, filled my prescriptions, took my vitamins, or avoided stressful situations. No meditation, yoga, raw juice, or feng-shui was going to change the course of my life. The self-help books had no real answers. And I hated fish.

No, the disturbance I was experiencing in my life was a much deeper matter than diet and exercise, or positive thinking. I knew the source of my problems was spiritual. I experimented with different spiritual communities—mostly Buddhist ones—but in the end they only made me feel worse. I had been practicing Zen meditation for a couple of years; it strengthened my mind and stabilized my emotions, but did nothing for my physical health; my immune system was attacking my thyroid, like an enemy within. Zen was great, but it wasn't enough. That's why I was doubtful on that day. The Chinese waiter probably had nothing to offer. But I couldn't shake the pestering notion that he did have something to offer.



Photo by Peter Brooker

He stood up from the table, ready to leave the restaurant. My chance had come, but I wasn't sure. The heaviness I was feeling bore into me until it squeezed everything out of me. I felt empty. In that moment, I suddenly felt nothing and cared about nothing. It was weird. The choice loomed over me and I felt like a child caught in the shadow of an ogre. Do I face the ogre, or run like hell? Historically, when I faced an ogre like this one, I liked to charge right for it. So I did. I stood up and walked toward the Chinese waiter. As I walked toward him, I felt less like I was approaching an ogre and more like I was walking onto a dance floor, leaving all my inhibitions behind, and just doing whatever came naturally. The heaviness left me. I told him about my thyroid problem and asked if he had any ideas. He told me I could come by the temple for a treatment. I had no idea what he meant by "temple" or "treatment", but it was an opportunity too intriguing to pass up.

A week later, I arrived at the temple. It was not a public building. It was a modest but beautiful home, warm and colorful, with

the aroma of miso soup coming from an unseen kitchen. Young (the Chinese waiter) led me upstairs to a large room that did, in fact, look like a Buddhist temple. There were chairs and tables arranged in a way that made it feel like a classroom. At the front of this classroom was an immense altar with a very happy-looking Buddha at its center. The altar was piled with fruit, flowers, and ornaments that I did not recognize; it was vibrant; beautiful. Coming from a Zen background, I had an aversion to ornament or anything that resembled religion. But here I experienced a coziness and warmth that the austere Zen practice did not provide. Young asked me to sit at one of the tables. He asked some questions about my health and my diet. "No fish," he said. Good. I hate fish. He recommended a vegetarian diet to keep my qi (energy) strong. Easy enough. He said the temple was a Tao temple. He tried explaining the principles of Tao, but I could hardly understand a thing he was saying. I nodded and grinned, and when he felt I was sufficiently confused, he had me lie down on the floor for the "treatment." As I was lying there, he strategically placed crystals on my body; I had visions of snake oil and woo-woo nonsense. But I had to give it a chance. This guy was pretty sensible.

He left the room and I was lying there with crystals and stones making cold, little impressions on my skin. I felt pretty good. I looked around the room, trying not to disturb the crystals. There were decorations left over from a Christmas/New year's party, which was somehow comforting. The aromas of miso soup and oolong tea were lulling me into a deeper state of coziness. My body was getting heavier with relaxation. I was making quite an impression on the carpet, but careful not to disturb the crystals. I closed my eyes and relaxed a bit more.

Behind my closed eyelids, I watched swirling images and I felt like I was swirling with them. My whole body was vibrating and flowing. Gradually, the flowing sensation picked up momentum and I began to imagine myself as a stream. The length of my body extended from one end of the room to the other. I could have flowed from one end of infinity to the other, if such a thing made any sense, and in my state of mind, it did. I felt really, really good.

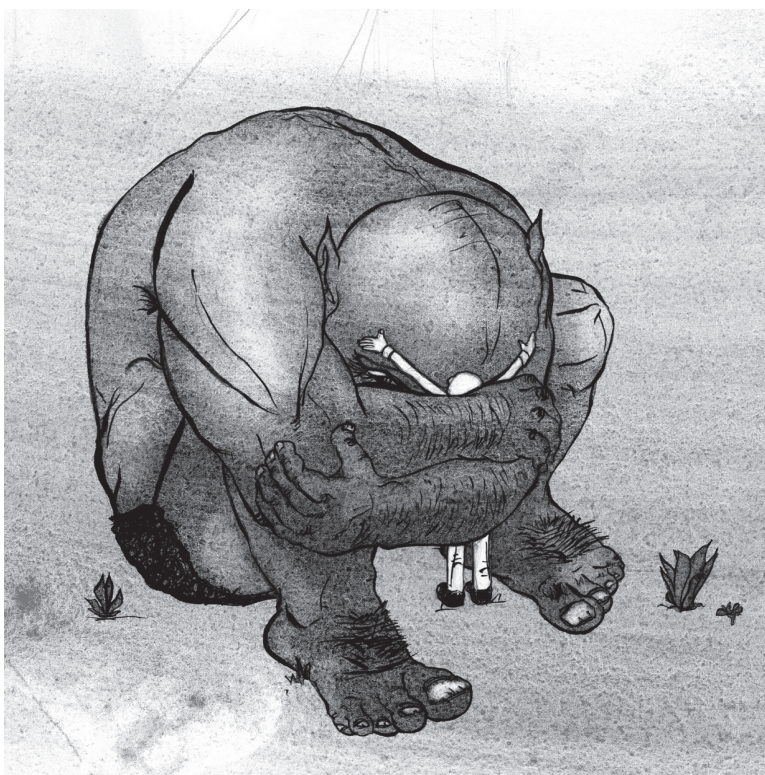
I wondered if it was all just psychosomatic—the power of suggestion—and I realized that I didn't care. I felt better than I had felt...maybe ever. And even if it was just the placebo effect, it was good enough for me—as long as it made me feel better. I did eventually learn that it wasn't the placebo effect; that it was qi (energy) healing, the foundation of Chinese medicine; but at the time, it was a mysterious and wonderful thing. It still is.

After becoming a stream and traversing infinity, I decided to get up, disturbing the crystals. They plunked onto the carpet as I worked my body into an upright position. I sat down at one of the tables and Young brought me a bowl of miso soup. As I ate the soup the granules of miso paste made swirling images in the bowl, looking familiar. I ate gladly and decided I was into this whole "treatment" thing.

I went to Young for treatments every week. During each visit he would talk to me at length about diet, health, karma, and Tao. He quickly became my mentor and confidant. He said many things I had thought, but never articulated or heard anywhere else. He said many things that were just weird and difficult to understand. He said things that I am still coming to understand now. He introduced me to Tao. After two months of treatments, my health was stable and

I was feeling ready for the next step. I didn't want treatments anymore. I wanted to learn how to take care of myself. So, Young started teaching me the Tao practice. Eventually, I helped bring together a small community of people in Virginia to practice Tao. We had Qi Gong classes, vegetarian cooking classes, and studied the Heart Sutra (the Buddhist text). My friend Aaron and I opened a home temple of our own and continued community-building. Over the past five years, I have seen lives change; extraordinary transformations.

I am now in California. I live in a home temple here as well and I teach Qi Gong. I have created a new life for myself because of a simple choice I made in a restaurant that is now three thousand miles away. It was a small thing, this choice to bother a Chinese waiter, but the impact of that choice was colossal. I can't believe it, but I did it. I charged at an ogre and it gave me a hug. □



Drawing by Eric Collins
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