

The Three Vinegar tasters

There is an old Chinese painting of three men standing around a big vat of vinegar. Each has just had a taste of that wine from long ladles which they hold in their right hands. Curiously, although each of them has just tasted the same liquid from the same vat they each have very different expressions on their faces.

The first of them has a very stern expression. It is clear that the drink has failed to measure up to his hopes. The next man along has a bitter expression on his face. Obviously, the vinegar has left a sour taste in his mouth. The third man is completely different. He has a great beaming smile across his face. The drink that he has tasted delights him.

This painting is famous for two reasons. The first is that it is very beautifully drawn and is held in high esteem for the skill of the artist. The second is for the message that the picture tells us. This picture, you see, is an allegory. It tells a story.

Those three men are not just any three men. They are three very famous men. The first is Confucius, the second is the Buddha and the third is Lao-Tsu. These three men were the founders of the three great religious and ethical systems that dominate China. And of course, their expressions in the picture are a way of presenting these three great philosophies. Each of them is drinking the vinegar, which represents life. Their expressions, their response to the vinegar, reveals what the painter thinks about their philosophy's response to life.

Confucius is the man with the stern expression. His philosophy was essentially a set of rules for living and having relationships with others. It was designed to make the messy, disorganised Earth as perfect and orderly as the heavens above us.

If all the rules were followed, they would bring us into harmony with our ancestors, with our elders and with our rulers. The government and the people would be as one and all would be well.

Confucius is given a stern expression because he is constantly let down and disappointed as this rule or that rule is broken. Similarly, if we are too inflexible in our approach to life, if we find we cannot adapt ourselves to a changing circumstance, we too will be left stern and disappointed.

Who then has the sour, bitter expression when he tastes the vinegar? Well, this must represent a man who is thought to have a sour and bitter view of life. Perhaps someone who sees life as suffering. This figure in the painting represents the Buddha, who taught that the one thing that we can be sure of in this life is that we will suffer. What the ways in which we suffer? We suffer because sometimes we don't get what we want.

We suffer because sometimes we get what we want and then lose it. We suffer because sometimes we get what we want and find out that in fact we didn't really want it or that it isn't enough. In short, we suffer. His answer? To get rid of desire. If you truly don't want anything, you cannot be tortured by its lack. But if you don't want anything and you aren't attached to anything in the world, then you have opted out of much of the richness, variety, beauty and wonder of the world. How could we truly wish to feel nothing when we see something lovely? How could we renounce all the pleasures that life can offer us? Ultimately Buddhism aims to get rid of life itself – the goal of Buddhism is not to be. To avoid rebirth. Hence the sour, bitter expression. The painter, long ago in Ancient China, decided that the Buddha did not have a positive outlook on life. Perhaps there was too much emphasis upon the negative for his taste. Perhaps we too should try to find loveliness and joy in the world as well as the awareness that there is suffering as well.

So who is our third man, with a joyful expression? Perhaps the least well known of the three, it is Lao-Tsu the founder of Taoism. Lao-Tsu is shown as joyful because his philosophy is perhaps the most cheerful of them all. Lao-Tsu believed that we all carry the way to happiness within ourselves, but that we have lost sight of it. He pointed out that animals do not suffer from the unhappiness which afflicts so many humans. He thought there was a reason for this. Animals follow their instincts; they do not struggle and fight with their inner selves. Just as a river will find the quickest and smoothest route down a hillside, so an animal will naturally do what is best for it by following its inner nature. And just as a river will go around obstacles rather than cutting through them, so Lao-Tsu thought it best to find the path of least resistance rather than try to cut a straight path to our goals.

As an example of how to live, Lao-Tsu described a man who dived over the top of a waterfall into the swirling currents and crashing waters beneath. By going with the water, and smoothly following the movements of the water rather than fighting with it, the man was able to survive easily in an environment that would have killed anyone else. So it is, says Lao-Tsu, with life.

So is this a philosophy which I would recommend to you? Do I agree with the pro-Taoist sentiments of that Chinese painter? No, I do not. I see elements of Taoism that are very attractive, particularly its simple and honest approach to life, brimful of openhearted happiness. But I want to propose something rather more interesting to you than that we should follow the path of one of the figures in the painting. Rather, I think we should aim to become like the painting itself.

Let me tell you what I mean by that. It seems to me that we should not select among the images in the painting but, like the painting, contain all the images and select the best elements of all three. There are other aspects to the painting itself which we can aspire to. The painting is respected. It is lovely to look at. It holds a deep message. And it has the three elements we need for happiness.

If we don't have rules in our life we have no anchor to hold us and direct us. Of course Confucius is right to say we need rules. But we mustn't make rules our master.

And like the Buddha, we mustn't allow desire to own things or love of money to rule us. We will never find happiness that way; only misery. But we shouldn't allow that thought to close us off from the world and its loveliness.

And the simplicity and openheartedness of Lao-Tsu is very attractive, but we need to apply ourselves and take the shortest route sometimes. And we mustn't let ourselves be blown off our course by the currents and storms of life.

So perhaps the final message of the picture of the vinegar tasters is not to follow any particular one of the three figures shown, but instead to be like the picture itself, and hold the best of all three.