

The Way of Go

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*Mountain monks sit playing go
Over the board is the bamboo's lucent shade
No one sees them through the glittering leaves
But now and then is heard the click of a stone.*

Po Chi (772-846)

Introduction and Origins of Go

Go (also known as *wei-chi* in China, *baduk* in Korea, and *i-go* in Japan) is an abstract strategy board game traditionally played on a wooden board inscribed with a nineteen by nineteen matrix. Game play begins with an empty board and players alternate turns placing black slate and white clamshell stones on the intersections of the squares where they remain stationary for the duration of the game unless captured and removed by the opponent. Although very sophisticated guiding principles of strategy have developed over time, there is no predetermined method of placement, leaving players to contribute stones to any area of the board, oftentimes choosing between many positions of equal value and strategic possibility. This is particularly evident at the beginning of the game, where all possibilities exist in a state of equilibrium. As the game progresses, the choice of moves becomes increasingly limited based upon the relative positions of existing stones as they gradually fill the board.

The object of the game is to secure territory by surrounding empty points. To accomplish this, two fundamental strategies are employed which include connecting one's own stones by placing them side by side after which they form a single unit, a technique that gives rise to the illusion of movement, and capturing the opponent's stones or groups of stones by surrounding them and occupying all of the points adjacent to the targeted group. Captured stones count negatively toward the opponent's score which is determined by the number of empty points that have been surrounded after all of the territory has been secured and the game has concluded by mutual agreement.

The precise knowledge of the origins of Go is lost to antiquity. It is known to have originated in China up to 4,000 years ago, where it has traditionally been conceived as one of the four accomplishments of the cultured Chinese aristocracy, the others being painting, calligraphy, and music. Its valued intellectual and aesthetic qualities have aptly been described by a contemporary player who stated that "The unfolding of geometrical patterns, the interaction of the basic elements of line and circle, stone and wood, and the meshing of grand-scale opposing strategies make go an artful game." Additionally, it was adopted as a salutary practice within Chan Buddhist monasteries and underwent further refinement and ceremonial perfection within the Zen culture of Japan where it was sometimes referred to as *Kido* or "The Way of Go." Along with such practices as

archery, gardening, and tea, the game of go was used by Buddhist monks as a direct and valuable support of the spiritual life.

Rene Guénon has suggested that “games were originally something quite different from the mere profane amusements that they have become today.” Like chess, Go “is certainly one of those games in which traces of the original sacredness have remained most apparent in spite of this degradation.” This thesis has been developed very fully in Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad’s admirable treatise on *The Sacred Origin of Sports and Culture*. Prince Ghazi writes concerning sports, a term which he uses in its broadest possible sense to include competitive physical recreation, physical culture, martial arts, and even mental sports such as traditional boardgames, that “in general the disciplines of history, archaeology, anthropology, and literature concur that organized sports had religious origins wherever they are found in the ancient world.”

Although, the precise origins of Go are unknown, evidence suggests that it evolved out of a method of divination practiced among the ancient shamanistic Shang culture which involved the casting of “chi pieces” or go stones, upon a plate or board inscribed with astrological and geomantic symbols. Divination as traditionally conceived and practiced is not the profane amusement of fortune-telling that we associate with it today. Rather, it was a sacred art and revealed method of communicating with the Divinity or lesser spiritual intelligences such as gods, beneficent spirits, or the spirits of the ancestors. In a fragment of an ancient text containing what is probably the oldest mythic reference to Go situated during the reign of the first of the golden-age kings, it speaks of a companion of the Yellow Emperor traveling within a mystic vision to the summit of a holy mountain to perform the sacred divinatory rite of Go.

“Mr. Chang, musician-companion of the Yellow Emperor, assumed wings and was given the name of Teacher Hun Yai. At the summit of Chuan-nan Mountain, he played go.”

Symbolic Dimensions of Go

The original divinatory practice of “casting the chi pieces” probably made its initial transition into a game in the period between 1300 and 900 BC when the shamanistic Shan culture became dominated and influenced by the rationalizing tendencies and anthropocentrism of the conquering Chou. Even after the transition into a game, however, many of the basic astrological and cosmological associations were retained and such concepts remained deeply embedded in the terminology and philosophy of the game until the twentieth century. The earliest surviving statement of the philosophy of Go was written in the first century AD by the historian Pan Ku long after the initial transition had already taken place. In his essay “The Quality of Go”, he wrote

“It has deep significance. The board has to be square, for it signifies the earth, and its right angles signify uprightiness. The pieces are yellow and black: this distinction signifies the Yin and Yang—scattered in groups all over

the board, they represent the heavenly bodies. These significances being manifest, it is up to the players themselves to make the moves, and this is connected with kingship. Following what the rules permit, both opponents are subject to them—this is the rigor of the Tao.”

This early description is important because it establishes a precedent for explicating the symbolic dimensions of the game based upon a traditional canon of interpretation. Go shares many of the symbolic dimensions that may be found within chess including a terrestrial symbolism reflected in the nature of the game, a cosmological symbolism reflected in the geometric properties of the board, and a metacosmic symbolism reflected in the colors of the stones. Unlike chess pieces, the unencumbered potentiality of the go stones does not render them susceptible to an accompanying psychological symbolism, a fact of great significance with regard to the implementation of Go as an operative support for the spiritual life.

The first dimension in which the symbolism of Go naturally unfolds concerns its explicit association with warfare. The game presents itself as the battle between two opposing armies who are struggling to gain control of an area by surrounding and securing its territory. Go strategy bears a direct correlation to traditional Chinese military strategy and many references have been made to these parallels within classical go manuals. An exemplary presentation of this subject from the contemporary period is Mao Xiaochun’s *36 Stratagems Applied to Go*. In addition to its adoption as a cultured pastime among the aristocracy and its refinement as a spiritual art by the sacerdotal caste, go also enjoyed a significant degree of popularity among the warrior classes. A go set was commonly included among the equipment of the samurai, for instance, who would play between battles. This motif figures prominently within traditional Japanese paintings that include a depiction of the game.

As early as the second world war and continuing to the present day, the study of Go has been encouraged by military officials as a means of gaining insight into the nature of military strategy within the far eastern nations. A cursory glance through Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* can yield many explicit parallels, including the following simple example, the signification of which is immediately evident to all who have assimilated the basic rules of the game.

“The Highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemies’ plans; next is to attack their alliances; next to attack their army; and lowest is to attack their fortified cities.”

Concerning the symbolism of warfare, this is identical to that of chess in that it reflects the fundamental opposition between the contending forces of good and evil wherein the angels and demons dispute the go board of the world. As Titus Burckhardt has written,

“It is here that the symbolism of black and white... takes on its full value; the white army is that of light, the black army that of darkness. In a relative domain, the battle which takes place on the [board] represents, either that of two armies each of which is fighting in the name of a particular principle, or

that of the spirit and of darkness in man; these are the two forms of the ‘holy war’; the ‘lesser holy war’ and the ‘greater holy war’, according to the saying of the Prophet Muhammad. One will see the relationship of the symbolism implied in the game... with the theme of the *Bhagavad-Gita*.”

The second dimension of the symbolism of Go to be considered is that pertaining to the board itself. As Stuart Colin stated in *Games of the Orient*, “the board has the same cosmical significance discovered to underlie all other boards upon which games are played.” Although they possess a fundamental consonance in their connotations, the particular manner in which this symbolism is expressed differs among the various games. That of Go is to be sought in its proposed origins in the practice of divination. As previously stated, many of its original associations have been preserved even in the modern game, a situation which lends it a greater dignity and contemplative quality than might otherwise have been the case if these elements had not been retained. According to William Pinckard,

“Some fundamental go terms still in common use today have an astrological meaning. In Japan, for example, the center of the board is still called *tengen*, ‘axis of heaven’, the eight specially marked key points near the perimeter are called *hoshi*, ‘stars’, the nine together making up the traditional ‘Nine Lights of Heaven’, that is, the seven stars of Ursa Major, the center of the Chinese astronomical system, and the sun and moon. In both China and Japan the four quarters of the board are named after the four directions, each correlated to one of the basic trigrams of the I Ching system. Beginning in the upper right and going clockwise, they are: Southwest (female, earth), Northwest (male, heaven), Northeast (hard, limit), and Southeast (gentle, yielding).”

Combined with Pan Ku’s indication that the square form of the board signifies earth, all of these elements together reveal the go board to possess the characteristics of a cosmological mandala. Through the progression of gameplay on the board we may bear witness to the reflection of the cosmic drama unfolding within the intermediate realm conditioned by the polarity of Heaven and Earth.

This fundamental polarity is reiterated and exemplified by the black and white colors of the stones which lead from cosmological associations to the consideration of a metacosmic symbolism. According to Guénon,

“In the most immediate sense, the juxtaposition of white and black naturally represents light and darkness, day and night, and consequently all the pairs of opposites or of complementaries... in this respect then, we have here the exact equivalent of the Far Eastern symbol of the *yin-yang*.”

Yang and Yin are essentially the primordial qualities of light and darkness that pervade all aspects of cosmic manifestation, yang corresponding to the spiritual or essential nature, and yin referring to that which causes attachment to substance. With regard to their cosmological associations, Guénon writes also that

“yang is whatever proceeds from the nature of Heaven and yin whatever proceeds from the nature of Earth... Heaven is entirely yang and Earth entirely yin, which is tantamount to saying that Essence is pure act and Substance is pure potency. However, this applies to Heaven and Earth alone, as the two poles of universal manifestation; in all manifested things there is no yang without yin and no yin without yang, for everything by nature partakes simultaneously of both Heaven and Earth.”

Inasmuch as these two primary qualities have issued from the equilibrium of the primordial Unity, contemplation of this symbolism leads beyond the cosmos to the metacosmic reality of *Tai Chi*. *Tai Chi* is the symbol of primordial equilibrium and perfection or wholeness as the first determination of the Absolute, just as Beyond-Being gives rise to Being. The ‘ten thousand things’ are brought into being by *Tai Chi* and conditioned by yin and yang by virtue of their entrance into manifestation within the realm of Heaven and Earth. Like the permutations of the two determinations from which the various trigrams and hexagrams of the *I Ching* are derived, the infinitely variable patterns of alternating black and white stones on the Go board symbolize the unfoldment of the ten thousand things from the principal unity of the Divine All-Possibility.

It is perhaps possible to consider an additional dimension of symbolism of a more speculative nature. Through the symbolic properties of the traditional physical substances of the game and their arrangement, stone or earth over wood, Go constitutes a material representation of the *I Ching* hexagram *Sheng* which is composed of the trigrams *Kun*, the Receptive (earth) and *Sun*, the Gentle (wood). It literally means Pushing Upward and pertains to the image of wood growing upward out of the earth. The *I Ching* states concerning this image, “Within the earth, wood grows: The image of Pushing Upward. Thus the superior man of devoted character heaps up small things in order to achieve something high and great.” This hexagram is associated with the effort of the will and bears the denotation of vertical ascent or transcendence. The game of Go appears to be in full accord with this message, especially in the context of its use as a support for the spiritual life. Perhaps no one has explained the content of this message better than Frithjof Schuon, whose sagacious words might very well serve as a commentary upon the text itself. He wrote,

“The noble man is one who masters himself and loves to master himself; the base man is one who does not master himself and shrinks in horror from mastering himself. The spiritual man is one who transcends himself and loves to transcend himself; the worldly man remains horizontal and hates the vertical dimension.”

Go as a Ludic Support for the Spiritual Life

As previously mentioned, Go does not possess a psychological symbolism reflected in the distinctive identity, initial position, and determined movement of the

playing pieces as does the game of chess. In the latter game, according to Titus Burckhardt,

“If the significance of the different chessmen is transposed into the spiritual domain, the king becomes the heart, or spirit, and the other pieces the various faculties of the soul. Their movements, moreover, correspond to different ways of realizing the cosmic possibilities represented by the chessboard: there is axial movement of the ‘castles’ or war chariots, the diagonal movement of the ‘bishops’ or elephants, which follow a single colour, and the complex movement of the knights. The axial movement, which ‘cuts’ through different ‘colours’, is logical and virile, while the diagonal movement corresponds to an “existential”—and therefore feminine—continuity. The jump of the knights corresponds to intuition.”

Unlike chess, the game of Go begins with an empty board and the stones are entirely homogeneous, possessing no distinctive qualities of their own, and unencumbered in their potential for placement. In principle, a stone may be played anywhere on the board and its quality is determined entirely by the judgment of the player in consideration of the relative positions of existing stones and the concomitant framework of implied threats and possibilities. As such, rather than symbolizing one of the various faculties of the soul, the go stone instead manifests the content of the soul in a direct and operative manner, revealing both the capability and interior disposition of the player at the moment of placement.

This idea is represented in the idiosyncratic philosophy of Takeo Kajiwara, a contemporary professional player of the highest rank. In his manual *The Direction of Play* he teaches that stones are instruments of power.

“Every time you place a stone on the board,” he writes, “you are exposing something of yourself. It is not just a piece of slate, shell, or plastic. You have entrusted to that stone your feelings, your individuality, your will-power, and once it is played there is no going back. Each stone carries a great responsibility on your behalf.”

Taking into consideration the fact that no game, however noble, can equal the reality of life experience, these unique properties of the game of Go allow it to provide a virtual field of operation for the cultivation of the virtues, insofar as it is possible for a game to do so. The completed game serves thereby as a testimony to the presence or absence of virtue during the moment and in the context of gameplay. It is undoubtedly this characteristic that brought about its cultivation within Buddhist culture as a ludic support of the spiritual life.

Mastery of Go is not limited to the acquisition of technical skill and strategic prowess predicated upon the memorization of common patterns. It also depends upon the ability to overcome deficiencies and weaknesses in the soul that affect one’s ability to make sound judgments and effective use of the stones. The nature of these weaknesses can literally be ascertained by reading the record of the game as is evidenced by many professional commentaries. As one contemporary player has observed,

“The board is a mirror of the mind of the player as moments pass. When a master studies the record of a game, he can tell at what point greed overtook the pupil, when he became tired, when he fell into stupidity, and when the maid came by with the tea.”

The primary vices of the Go player that must be overcome on the journey toward mastery of the game and of himself may be synthesized into a few distinct but interrelated categories including attachment, fear, impetuosity, and greed.

Within the context of the game, attachment is expressed by becoming emotionally invested in a particular stone or group of stones to the detriment of the potential advancement of other positions on the board. It may be that one wishes to futilely attempt to preserve a group that cannot be made to live or simply that one is too narrowly focused on a single area of the board thereby losing sight of the development of the game as a whole.

The expression of fear is particularly notable within the presence of a stronger player whose superior skill may cause one to become nervous, underestimate one's own abilities, and to develop a passive and defensive posture, even when one has the advantage. This may lead to the unnecessary fortification of groups, over concentration of stones, and a slow development of positions.

Impetuosity represents in some ways the opposite extreme to that of fear. It generally manifests in the presence of a weaker player and involves the expression of undue aggressiveness. It may cause one to exploit the inferior skill and ignorance of the weaker player, attacking his stones excessively and unnecessarily, while making moves that are in themselves poor, but which a weaker player may not be able to exploit. Impetuosity destroys the dignity of the player, the morale of the opponent, and the beauty and harmony of the game.

Finally, greed is perhaps the most common vice of go players. It is rooted in acquisitiveness, the continual desire to capture more stones and accumulate more territory. It arises out of a lack of consideration for the existence and right of the other player and a false sense of needing to dominate the entire board. There is a sense in which greed derives from and contributes to all of the other vices inasmuch as one may lust after that which one cannot possess (attachment), cling tenaciously onto what one already has (fear), and unduly attempt to take what is rightfully in the possession of the opponent (impetuosity).

With keen insight and wisdom, the Buddhist communities of China and Japan would certainly have recognized within this internal struggle played out upon the board, an opportunity to support the cultivation of the *paramitas* or ‘perfections’ of Mahayana Buddhism. According to a prevalent six-fold division, Schuon describes the *paramitas* as follows:

“Charity’ (*dāna*), which in a way constitutes the framework or the periphery of the Mahayana, is the first of the six *pāramitās* or virtues of the Bodhisattva; ‘Wisdom’ (*prajñā*) is the sixth and the culmination of all the *pāramitās*. The four other virtues are as it were intermediary: these are ‘abstention’ (*śīla*) ‘virility’ (*vīrya*), ‘patience’ (*kṣānti*) and ‘contemplation’ (*dhyāna*); these spiritual modes amount to so many paths, at once simultaneous and

successive, and any single one of them can determine a whole life without needing, or being able to exclude the daily practice of, the others. The first five *pāramitās* moreover are not really separated from the virtue of *prajñā*, whereof they are secondary aspects destined to contribute in their own way to the awakening of liberating Knowledge.”

Instead of expressing attachment, one may posit detachment (*shila*) by treating the stones lightly, as possibilities rather than absolutes. It frequently happens during a game that a group of stones which is incapable of surviving may later be rescued and turned toward one’s advantage. Instead of expressing fear, one may posit courage (*virya*), and with an attitude of respectful consideration, view the presence of a formidable opponent as an opportunity to correct mistakes and learn from the demonstration of superior skill. In the opposite situation instead of expressing impetuosity and exploiting a weaker player one may practice restraint and recollectedness, positing the virtue of patience (*kshanti*) and thereby serving as an exemplar of dignified and beautiful play.

As with its counterpart, greed, charity (*dana*) possesses a special significance within the game of Go. As in Mahayana Buddhism, the concept of charity or generosity in a way constitutes the ideal framework of the game for it manifests the correct attitude toward the significance of the opponent. Recognizing the necessity for the other, both may join together in the spirit of cooperative competition reflecting the dignity of kingship expressed in accordance with the rigor of the Tao as related by Pan Ku in his description of the philosophy of the game. This is a reflection of the same type of cooperative struggle described by the Quran, which admonishes us to “vie with one another in good works,” both opponents having joined forces against a common enemy, the weakness of the human soul.

The experiences of gameplay do not necessarily lend themselves directly to the cultivation and expression of the fifth and sixth *paramitas* for these pertain to the highest degrees of realization upon the spiritual path. Nevertheless, they are represented in the symbolism and essential message that the procedure of gameplay presents to those who reflect upon it. The go game commences with an empty board signifying the transcendent void or *sunyata* and the transitory and illusory nature of the cosmic drama unfolding thereon is revealed when at last the stones are cleared away and only the empty board remains.

In conclusion, we may state that for those who seek an enjoyable pastime to contribute an element of leisure to the daily rhythm of work, study, and prayer, the game of Go offers a viable alternative to indulgence in the profane distractions and amusements of the modern world.

