

Oneness Speaks

Ni'vim POV

False education is like giving a person a fish every day of his life. They become unable to muster the initiative to get food for themselves. Real education offers a person a fishing rod. It infuses a person with the curiosity and drive to take on the world's challenges.

My father does not want the former to happen to me.



Spiritual Tenet

False education conditions and limits. Real education expands our perspectives, making us seek to expand our horizons even further.



Of my many quirks, I have an unusual fear of being cloistered in the dimmed interiors of a building. I dislike being drilled with the basics of arithmetic or the elders' liturgical teachings. Instead, I prefer to seek solace in nature.

I sat cross-legged at the emerald plains before my home. Before me, I could hear the blades of grass rustling. A soothing chill swept over them. As usual, the Vi'osla were bountiful today. They swirled around the grassland with flaring bodies that illumined the surroundings. An endless shimmer of lavender and azure glowed.

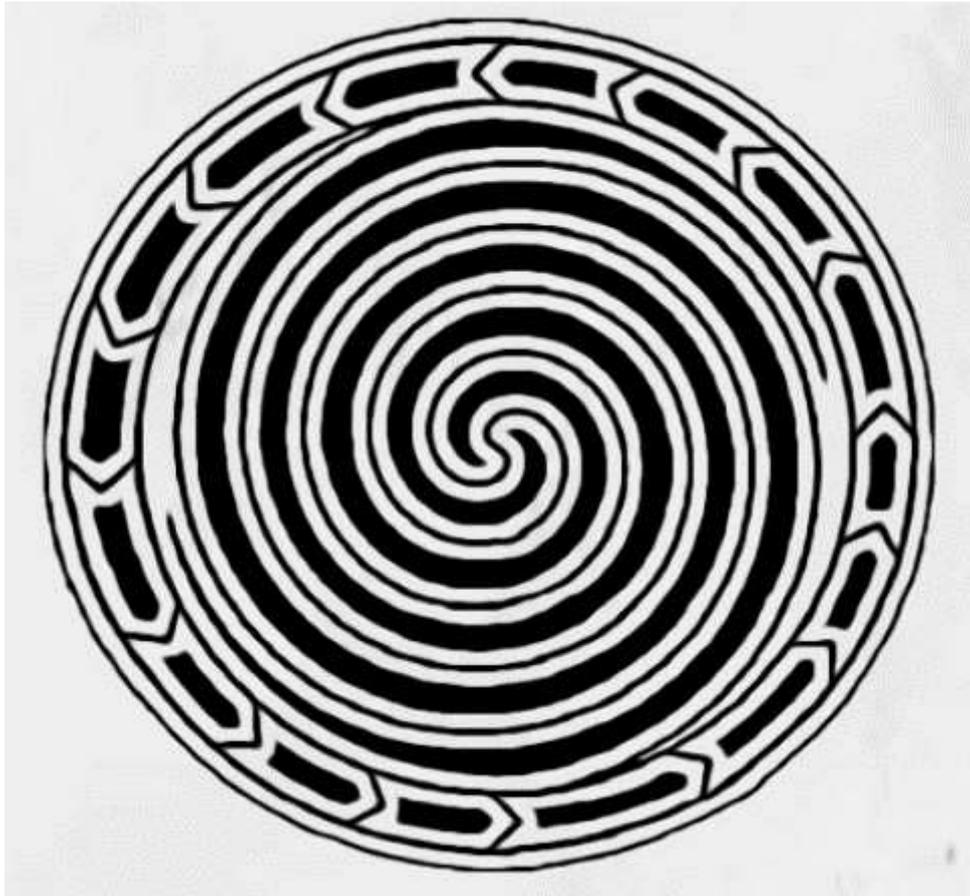
A cloak of velvet white covered the skies. However, from afar, gray, foreboding clouds loomed. There was no sign of thunder, but I knew tenebrous cloaks portended rain. I saw neither inconvenience nor ill omens from such. Instead, I welcomed the rain, for the reliefs that poured here are often mellow but cooling.

My father gazed at me, holding a vast compendium in his hands. It was golden brown, and its front cover had a zelkova tree within a ring etched upon it.



"Now, Ni'vim," said my father with a solemn glint in his eyes. "Perhaps, you may better make your choice once you've gazed upon this."

Opening it up, the front page of the book was the following symbol:



"Behold this symbol, Ni'vim. It is on the first page because of its importance."

"*The eternal reflection.* I've seen it around the village. It's a circle ... I don't fully know what it symbolizes ... I only know it represents some cycle."

"It is very philosophical. You will fully decipher what it means one day."

"Sounds arcane."

"Ni'vim, there will come a time when the youth and innocence of childhood will end. With it, you will have to assume responsibility. This happens as you transition to your coming of age at eighteen," said my father.

A trembling thought to bear responsibility, yet, at once, soothing and liberating.

"What will you have me do, father?" I said with a quaver.

"On the contrary, what will *you have you do for yourself?*"

I stared at my father with a quizzical look, only to gaze, mesmerized at the sacred symbol. Vi'la flowed from my father's palms with a chant, etching a lustrous gold on the sign. As fires blazed, a swirling miasma curled into the air, turning into a maelstrom of orange and yellow.

The eternal reflection.

"Daughter, although no one knows the exact specifics, I've always harbored a hypothesis."

"What is it?" I asked, eyes widened with suspense.

"Many excerpts have long been lost. However, for those that remain, a philologist friend of mine, Phos'koh, has looked into it. Ei'lara. *Thus Spake Oneness*. The eternal reflection. All of them *may* share a common provenance."

A common origin? Tremors shook my entire body.

With every swirl of the emblem, a truth lit ablaze the inner recesses of my mind. I stared, entranced by the symbol until drool dripped from my mouth. Every gaze was a step closer to a lacuna of pure truth whereby the division between me and the sign slowly dissolved into naught.

"They may all be related," said my father. "Remember your insights at the floating islands you told me of?"

"Could it be?"

"It could. Sha'ra's divination is almost precise regarding the generals, even if she is sparse on the specifics."

A warmth spread throughout my chest until it left my limbs rippling with tingles at the edges. Every stare was a trickle of tears from my eyes, for what could be of greater value than the gift of purpose?

The memory of my near-death experience at the floating islands flashed before me. Life is short. Life is frail.

And I shall spend it well by embracing a life purpose.

"If they are all related," I said. "Then, unraveling Ei'lara would equate to deciphering the rest."

"Correct." My father smiled and passed the tome to me. "Complete *Thus Spake Oneness* along with Ei'lara."

I shall no longer be the frog in the puddle.

Holding it with my hands, its hard edges dug into my skin as though bewitching me with its secrets.

I smiled, with every vestige of doubt cleansed from my body.

"Then I've chosen. *It shall be my goal,*" I said.

My father grinned back, and his eyes twinkled like the stars.

"Then we shall begin," he said.

"Tell me what I've to do."

"Ni'vim, the front cover of *Thus Spake Oneness* contains a zelkova. Zelkovas have special meaning to our people. To fully appreciate one major theme in the sacred teachings, you must understand what they represent."

"And what do they symbolize?"

"That's for you to find out, Ni'vim. I shall deliver several excerpts to you over several days. Then, I did like you to

reflect and decipher what this symbol means. Tell me the answer at the end of my teaching – that's your first mission in this lifelong goal."

"Sounds like a challenge."

"Things are only challenging if one deems them so. After that, it's a matter of perceiving the world through lenses of varied colors."

"How do I do that?"

"For millions of years, the Sha'reena have been subordinate to nature. We learn everything we know by emulating nature. Just look at the trees, rivers, winds, and mountains around you. They will give you the answers. Don't forget to consult others too. One grows not alone."

I gazed at the gold and shimmering zelkova etched upon the compendium. At its base were roots tunneling into the soils. Above it was a mighty and buttressed trunk spreading outward into the heavens. Its leaves glistened with pure yellow and silver, imploring me to unravel its latent truths.

"Then I shall accept it. Life merits a little challenge sometimes. I don't want to be a frog at the bottom of a well without any," I said with my right fist swung up and down as though I was hammering something. "I will decipher the zelkova symbol for you!"

"The conditions that you face differ from other children of your age. Unlike typical families, you do not have a mother or siblings. Not having experienced a mother's love predisposes a child to a lack of sympathy."

"Every day, I wish I could feel her embrace," I said while looking down at the ground.

"It's nothing to fret about. Conversely, it cultivates forbearance towards the harshness of life and greater independence. Word has it, from your mentors, that you have asked about the sacred teachings of our religion."

"Yes, yes!"

"The time has come for me to mentor you in the full verses of the scripture. The ones I have shown you before were just short poems," said Seg'niu. He presented the compendium to me. Its exteriors were heavily dusted into a deep beige.

The biblical tome's contents could not be imbibed lightly or with expediency. It reined in at hundreds of pages. The book was formidable in scope and length. This was a feature that intimidates both novices and the initiated alike. Tomes are a rarity in the blue lands. After all, the movable type has not yet been invented here, unlike in other kingdoms.

All works of literature are passed down orally. Sometimes, this was through the lithograph gotten from foreigners. They saturated books with ink to print each page. Since our people do not possess such a means, we often asked outsiders to do it for us. This is, however, very expensive. Therefore, the compendium is of great value and sacredness.

"This bible contains all that our civilization has accomplished. They contain knowledge in deciphering the fragmented teachings of the Tsa'mara. It took many centuries. It took the efforts of hundreds of archivists. The result is the compendium before you," my father said.

"It's very thick! There must be so much knowledge in there!" Hands placed on my head, the staggering volume struck awe and fear into me.

"It contains every wisdom conferred upon us. Despite its scope, it is incomplete. There remain many chapters that are missing. Some chapters comprise only fragmented excerpts. Perhaps someday, people will complete it."

"I shall."

"I know you are keen to get its contents." He smiled, voice hastening to the rhythm of delight. "You can only get its excerpts from the Tsa'mara. However, not all these minarets are safe to peruse. There are those where creatures of an eldritch origin guard them. Some contain labyrinths. Some possess traps, ready to smite the sinful and curious alike."

"Sounds like a challenge. I did love that!" I clapped my hands together.

"Not so fast! Should you intend to venture into the monoliths, dangers beyond the mortal plane may lurk. Secrets confided only to those accursed to bear its miseries may fall upon your shoulders. Regardless, I am here to mentor you about the contents of *Thus Spake Oneness*."

"Oneness – that is the dominant theme that I've heard of many times."

"Behold verse 2-1. The excerpt on this page provides a discourse on fate," said my father as he faced the pages at me.

On Fatq

Ka'lee'sha stood at the edge of an escarpment. She looked down from the isthmus into the shores that roared with currents. Before her stood the symbol of the *Eternal Reflection*. It was blazing with vibrant pink, with billows of fiery red exuding from its core.

From afar, it looked like a wheel, with flaming spokes within.

Once she returned to her village, her chieftain asked her to adorn a garment. He said, "Wear this, Ka'lee'sha, for on it is a holy prescription conferred upon you by heaven."

"What is it that is so important that I must wear it?" she said.

"On your clothing, we've etched several inscriptions. It states here:

*I'm crass in mind and lacking in aptitude.
And I'm sloven, lazy, and prone to putting off
work.*

Remember, the symbols do not lie. You must adorn this garment for your life."

In the following year, Ka'lee'sha was once more given another apparel. She wore it, and on it wrote:

*I'm prone to a cycle of destructive habits.
Whenever I'm in trouble, I would inebriate myself
with wine and inhale the smoke from charred
tobacco.*

Another year passed, and during which, she had succumbed to the vicious rhythm and cycle that presided over most people.

Then, one day, the chieftain made her adorn a final garment, which stated:

I do not have any free will.

The cycle is complete. It was forged from the greatest illusion that is common to all.

Unsettled, she sought the guidance of a sage. Over many anfractuious paths, she would take until she reached the gleaming and snowy crests of a mountain. Ka'lee'sha continued until she, at last, met the sage.

"Please, great one," she said. "Tell me of how I may aspire to greatness once more? I never think I have the gumption or wits to become anything more than a scribe. Perhaps it has all been fated."

To this, the sage replied, "My friend, fate only exists for those who believe that it does. If a lazy person does not work, he or she will likely face

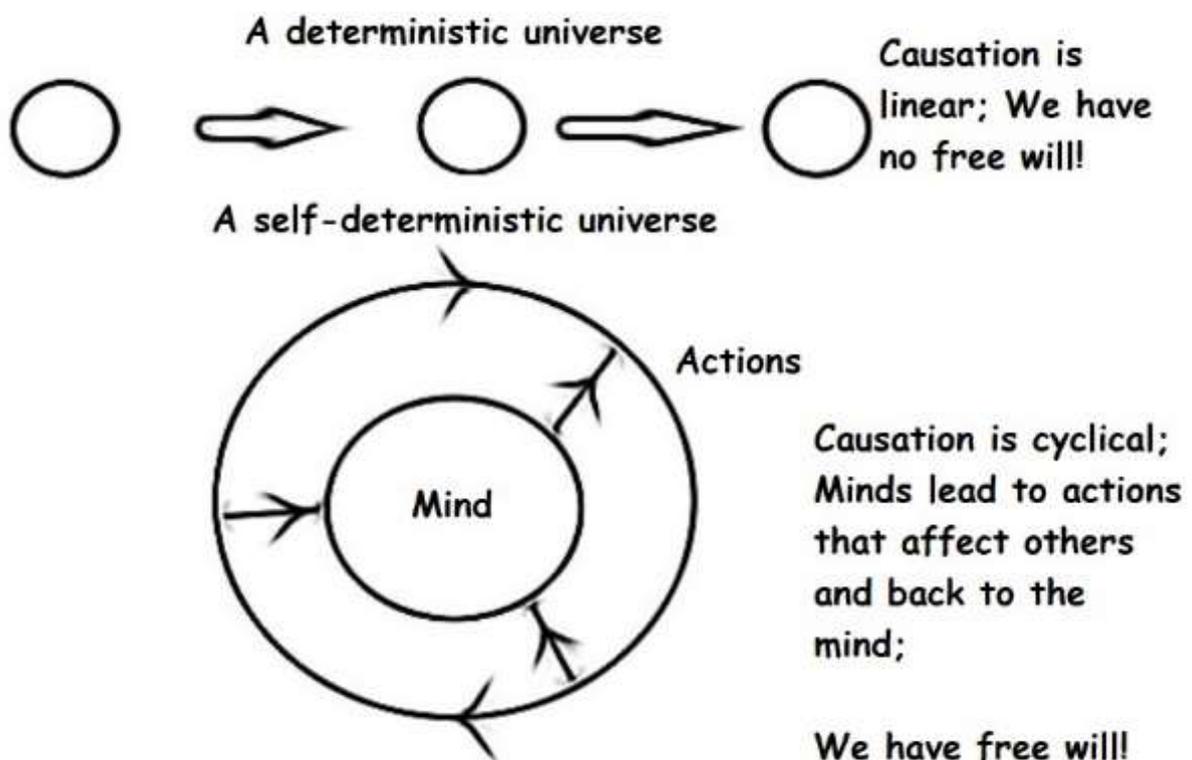
financial hurdles. However, if a man believes himself unfree, he will submit to the throes of fate.

"You are what you decide to be. Fate is only an excuse for those seeking to free themselves from the burden of freedom."

Ka'lee'sha returned home to the headlands where she first saw the *Eternal Reflection*. She cast away the garments laid upon her and tossed them into the seas, which gobbled them up.

Freedom never felt so good.

The universe is one. Therefore, it continuously self-transcends. Consciousness molds the cosmos through intelligent activity, leading to actions that shape the former. This process repeats eternally, making the universe free:



Ultimately, all is choice.



Inspirational Quotes

"It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul."
- William Ernest Henley, Echoes of Life and Death;

"Captain?"
"Yeah?"
"Do you think it was destiny that brought us together?"
He squinted and, after a thoughtful moment, shook his head.
"No. I'm pretty sure it was Cinder."
- Marissa Meyer, Cress



"There are strange allusions to sources that I have never heard of," I said.

"That I know neither. The teachings were from a provenance, possibly not of this world. It matters not what its source was; only its contents matter."

My father presented me with a golden plate. On it were many lines, curves, and dots merged into some riddle I could not unravel. Silver lacquered its surface, and it gleamed under the sunshine.

"What are all these dots and lines?" I asked.

"Only an astronomer would know. Cla'rim told me that these lines mark the relationship between a source with respect to stars. Well, at least that's her theory."

"To where then?" I frowned at my father, tilting my head.

"No one knows."

A vacuum of sheer silence loomed before me, deeper and wider than any ravine. My father showed me a scroll that unfurled to display the following image:



A sphere of glistening silver wreathed its surface, glowing like gold dust from a mine.

"An unusual thing," I said.

"The source of some place. How large is it, I don't know. The teachings came from there."

"Regardless, what does the article mean?"

"I will interpret this for you once for now. Do not be habituated that this falls upon the shoulders of others."

"Years of having lived under our educational system might have done that already." I grinned with sarcasm.

"Ha! There's still room for you to change! Anyway, scholars have given much thought to this excerpt. They aver that a purely material universe is choiceless. Choice is a function of consciousness. But when sentience forms a confluence with the material world, it interacts with the latter. Sentience employs its cognitive resources to presage the future. It chooses. It then transforms choices into action. This changes the cosmos. They then suffer the repercussions of such, and vice versa."

"So, consciousness and matter are intertwined?"

"Yes. What happens in one affects the other. Consciousness affects matter. Matter affects consciousness. After all, we are inseparable from the whole. Ontologically, we are free. But we are not if we deny ourselves of volition or if we act as though we are over-conditioned by society or biology. We are unfree if we cannot extricate ourselves from the illusion of Su'riyo, which the teachings refer to as 'Maya.'"



Spiritual Tenet

You cannot separate consciousness from reality. It is an integral part of the cosmos that participates and co-creates. As such, we are destined to be free to influence the universe.



"This is all too much for me to handle." I expelled a puff of air from my mouth.

"Just know this, that freedom is a choice. You are ultimately responsible for your actions upon yourself and the cosmos. Now, Ni'vim. Knowledge is best assimilated when it has been slowly chewed and digested. Dwell upon this and think through them deeply for now."

Free will. That is so fascinating!

I turned briefly towards the skies in deep thought.

The psychology of man is a nebulous subject. Perhaps man had been mistaken in resolving the great problem of free will. As my father often quipped, that volition is not a phenomenon to be studied. Its complexity mandates that only an infinite intelligence could unravel it.

"But who are these people cited in the teachings?" I asked.

"No one knows. Perhaps, they were people who existed in antiquity. They may be from the age of prosperity that precedes all recorded history."

"If we do not know their origins, how can we make sense of these teachings?"

"Any teaching is like a tool. It means nothing without an adept user. However, in the hands of a proficient master, one may achieve anything."

My father left me to my own devices, free to permit my juvenescent mind to contemplate the intricacies of the prose.



Spiritual Tenet

One should not live life by merely existing or observing. Rather, one has to engage in the flow of life.



The twin suns set in the azimuth that loomed beyond. It cast a shade of orange over the lands. There was much hypnotic enchantment. A warm sensation wrapped itself around me. It felt like the embrace of a mother I never had.

I grabbed a gourd of replenishing waters, imbibing the victuals within while enjoying every moment.

Perhaps, the meaning of life lies not in its observation but in its participation. I calmly watched a knot of youthful frogs. Their once undeveloped limbs had recently reached maturation, and they pranced with felicity. The circle of life began again.

The suns once more dissolved into the eternal void. I held a single stick in my hand. With it, I etched the markings of a circle on the sandy soil. The diagram looked like an ouroboros. It signifies the unending process of creation and destruction that undergirds all things.

The symbol of the circle conveys a universal process within all things. The circle is well-known in the mythology of my people. At the most fundamental, it implies reiteration. At the most profound, self-causation.

"The circular nature of life and death," I mumbled. "Perhaps the frogs and tadpoles here relate to something more. A zelkova is a life form by itself. It begins with a mere seed. Next, it becomes a bud, and then sprouts shoots that sprawl upward. Then, its roots tunnel beneath the ground, absorbing water and nutrients until it grows into a mighty tree. Then, it perishes at the end of days, decaying to humus. A new zelkova then spawns above it, completing the cycle."

Could it be? Maybe a zelkova represents free will. It is a curse to be an immortal, my elders said. They said that should one live forever, one would be burdened with eventual boredom as one overcomes all challenges. Sometimes, only by being reborn can one view the world from a fresh perspective. And only then can one be free to relish upon the gift of novelty once more.

I stared at a zelkova before me. Its leaves rustled as winds blew towards it. As its branches wobbled, they whispered the language of pure silence to me. It was a verse of pure emptiness. The message conveyed only the meaning of sheer eternity sprawling before me. Eternity – it is a curse or blessing, my elders said. After all, it is a responsibility that not many have the means to shoulder.

The next day arrived.

A class of dry arithmetic ensued.

"Eukinos," said Yao, "is one of the most well-known mathematicians." She etched a sharp pen into a large wax tablet, carving many verses. "The five basic laws of geometry. No one knows how to derive the fifth postulate, however."

Boring details.

My eyelids shut, and I dozed into a slumber where reality and dreams had blended into a surreal fusion.

Then, I felt a loud thud on my shoulder, and my body shuddered.

"Ni'vim! Please!" said Yao.

A flurry of chatters turned into waves of laughter in the hut that formed our classroom.

"Her head is in the clouds as usual!" said a voice.

"Always in another of her inner journeys!"

Shut it.

The class ended after many dreary hours, and it was recess.

I held the sacred tome my father had given me in my hands. Then, I stood before the students, reading them aloud. My words wove into many parables that attracted my classmates' gaze. However, beneath their gazes were mumbled words and half-smiles.

"The ancient teachings will allow us all to overcome the world's problems," I said. "Hear me, for they shall be the braziers of hope that will extinguish all suffering."

Chuckles echoed in the background.

Many eyes turned away, and the students immersed themselves in their chatters with each other. Some left the classroom, no doubt seeking a breath of fresh air.

Why aren't they listening to my sermons?

Then, Yao walked toward me and folded her arm peremptorily. She shook her head, half-grinned, then spoke to me.

"Ni'vim. Those teachings. Aren't they *Thus Spake Oneness*?"

"Yes. My father is mentoring me those. We started recently."

"And yet, you are preaching already?"

"There are many important moral and spiritual lessons in here. They will be useful for the world."

"Do you understand them?"

"Yes. My father taught me." I tilted my head and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh." Yao stared at me and exhaled a deep breath. "Ni'vim, come here."

We went outside to gaze at a zelkova, now withered from age. Its branches had whorled upward. Creases aligned its bark, and some of its branches had fallen off. We heard its crisp as the winds shook it.

"Describe what you see," she said.

"Why ... it's a zelkova tree? The one on the front cover of the sacred teachings."

"Tell me how it works."

"What do you mean? It draws water from the roots and soaks in the world's light. At least, that's according to the Yertians. That simian race. What do they call it again? Science? Biology?"

"Ni'vim, know as much as you like about the zelkova, but you are not the zelkova. Neither are you experienced."

"I don't understand." I frowned at her. "Huh?"

"How can you preach something you have never experienced? It's hypocritical, isn't it? Experience is the essence of reality, not knowledge."

"How then can I be qualified?"

"You must walk the road of life first. You're far behind the rest."

Yao then clapped her hands and asked other students to rally around her. The older students of my age had left, leaving only younger ones from other wigwams. Dozens appeared, with their faces still fresh with inexperience. Their eyes sparkled with zeal and curiosity.

"Everyone," Yao said. "This is a zelkova. Zelkovas carry many meanings in our culture. That's why many clothes we wear carry this symbol. But you all may not wear it until you have become adults."

"Why not?" asked U'ra, a Sha'reeni girl.

"Adulthood symbolizes a heightened perspective of all things. We call it wisdom. But we do not merely adorn such. We *grow into* it. We cannot pretend to have it."

Yao then turned to me.

"You see, Ni'vim. Why was everyone willing to listen to me? It's my experience." She then pointed at my chest. "You need to earn it, not flaunt it."

I bowed my head and gazed at the zelkova on the ancient teachings' tome.

"Then I shall earn it one day!" I said.

"You shall. But there's no rush. Life's not a race."