

Northern Wisdom

The Havamal, Tao of the North

Eoghan Ódinsson

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Introduction

For nearly thirty years I've been on a personal journey of discovery. As young men do, I started searching for some additional meaning to my existence, that extra layer upon which many believe the best of life is to be found.

What began as an exploration into the realm of the physical, matured into a discovery of the spiritual.

As a boy I was exposed to eastern philosophy through my fascination with the martial arts. Movies starring Bruce Lee, or those classic Samurai films by legendary director Akira Kurosawa, were a powerful enticement for me to sample the eastern arts.

I began with a study of Shotokan Karate, which is a traditional and rugged style. Karate roughly translated in Japanese means “art of the empty hand”, and was originally cultivated by Buddhist Monks as an unarmed form of self-defense; later it was adopted by the disarmed peasantry of Japan, which is echoed in the weapons used in

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many forms of Karate such as the Kama (a sickle), Tonfa (used for beating the chaff from the grain) etc.

I was fortunate to have a teacher, or “Sensei”, to use the Japanese term, who had lived and trained in Japan. Through his teaching I was able to get a sense of the sternness, and gravitas of the Japanese culture, which I quite appreciated.

My Sensei always taught restraint, and that Karate was to be used for self-defense only. I still remember being taught the “first rule of self-defense” - run!

My class also cross-trained in other arts, via guest lecturers, in Bo-Jutsu, Iaido and more. I studied with him for a few years before moving on to other pursuits and getting busy with life in general.

After getting married, I decided once again to continue my martial arts training, this time choosing Ju-Jitsu, which is the ancient art of unarmed combat used by the Samurai, and is the foundation for modern sport Judo. It’s quite a vicious art, in that it’s designed to incapacitate and relies on many joint locks, throws and other lethal strikes. When a Samurai lost his sword, he wasn’t worried about lawsuits and jail-time, this was about survival on the battlefield - practicality and pragmatism ruled the day.

A couple of years passed and I switched jobs and there happened to be a Shito-Ryu Karate school around the corner from my office, at which I spent the next several years learning. Shito-Ryu is a form of Karate from the Okinawan Islands (off the southwest coast of Japan). My training at this dojo (place of the way, or school) wasn’t much focused on the spiritual aspects, but more on the physical - and it sure was physical! My Black Belt test was conducted over three weekends, each day with something like 6 hours of testing - thousands of push-ups, sit-ups, katas, and drills, followed up by sparring sessions till we wanted to drop; six grueling days of testing. It was a crucible. I finished better for it, knowing that I could will my body to do things I previously thought unimaginable, so in that sense

there was a spiritual component, a tempering of the will, and a glimpse into the possible.

In parallel with my physical training, I was also exploring the culture and spiritual offerings of the Far East, starting with Zen Buddhism, a natural compliment to my martial arts training, and then back to general Buddhism. For my part, I felt that Buddhism was a noble and peaceful pursuit, but perhaps too peaceful for what I knew was a world ready to take advantage of that sentiment. Zen seemed to rationalize the violent pursuits of the Samurai and peaceful nature of Buddhism with cryptic puzzles, but my unworldly mind couldn't decipher much of what may have been hidden there.

It was at this point in my life that my career as a consultant in the software industry, and teacher at the University of Aberdeen, had me traveling the world. I spent time wandering the highlands of Scotland where my ancestors had fared, fierce warriors who were known as "The Children of the Mist" - Clan McGregor in Scotland (my mother's people). I also spent time at some of the great historic sites in England and Europe, such as Stonehenge and Sutton-Hoo.

These were places of great power and I truly felt humbled walking the land where my ancestors had lived and died for maybe 10,000 years. My family came to Canada only three generations ago, and is relatively new to North America; my history and family spirit lies deeply rooted in North Western Europe.

As my mother's people were descended from the Highlanders, My father's people were of Viking stock that came to England via the Norman invasion in 1066. The Normans were "Northmen" (Vikings) who "settled" in North Western France; in actuality they were given a large tract of land so they would stop raiding the rest of France.

I was delighted when I started receiving work that sent me to the Far East, and worked in places like India, and Singapore. India is truly an amazing land. There I visited Kanchipuram - nicknamed "*The*

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Golden City of 1,000 Temples". I meditated in Hindu temples, rode elephants, ate with my hands, and immersed myself in the land and culture that spawned the Bhagavad-Gita.

"In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad-Gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seems puny and trivial."

~ Henry David Thoreau

Hinduism is the most ancient religion and spiritual path in the world, and interestingly, there are many parallels with the Hindu gods and those of the Northern Europeans in Heathen times; Indra and Thor are said to possibly stem from the same Proto-Indo-European deity. Many historians and anthropologists believe our common ancestors migrated from the plains of Eastern Russia and the Ural Mountains, with some folk settling as far south as Northern India, and others continuing on to settle further west in Europe.

No quest for wisdom would be complete without a little Machiavelli, whose very name has given birth to an almost derogatory term, "Machiavellian", which we mean to be synonymous with ruthlessness, cunning, and guile. Niccolò Machiavelli's book *"The Prince"* is really quite practical. For example, if you plan to take over someone's kingdom, he admonishes that you eliminate all the heirs so that nobody comes for revenge later on; sensible, certainly, yet brutal. It occurred to me that playing that kind of "game" those are the rules you need to follow, if you hope to win; certainly not my kind of game, but it's helpful to know how to play.

My search for wisdom and spirituality continued and lead me to what I consider one of the great books on practical living - *The Havamal*. The Havamal is actually a poem, mythologically attributed to Odin, chief of the Norse gods, and written down in Iceland around the 13th century. The Havamal is part of a compilation of

poems collectively known as the “*Eddas*” which include much of the material on which our knowledge of the old Heathen gods are based.

The Havamal is a mixture of practical tips for lovers, warfare, advice when travelling and a few magic spells thrown in as well. It’s an incredible treasure trove and sampling of our forefather’s wisdom.

Like “*The Prince*”, it contains much practical advice in the face of perilous conditions, but unlike Zen, is not couched in riddles; there are some stories that rely on the old Norse concept of Kennings, which assumes you have knowledge of the myths and old ways and uses phrases from them in the place of a single word. For example “Whale Road” means the Sea, “Otter’s Bath” might refer to a river. Kennings embellish and beautify the messages, not obfuscate them.

Now that we’ve traced my path up to the Havamal, I would like to hand the reigns over to someone who can give you the best introduction to the Havamal and its significance in Northern culture - Patrick Lafcadio Hearn.

Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), a man also known by the Japanese name *Koizumi Yakumo*, was an international writer, known best for his books about Japan, especially his collections of Japanese legends and ghost stories, such as *Kwaidan*. In the United States, Hearn is also known for his writings about the city of New Orleans based on his 10-year stay in that city. In 1890 he moved to Japan and later began teaching English Literature at the Tokyo Imperial University. He wrote an essay on the Havamal in order to teach his Japanese students something of the European and English way of being.

I discovered his essay when researching my first book *Northern Love*, and it’s one of my favorite pieces of literature, right up with *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau.



"The Stranger at the Door" (1908) by W. G. Collingwood.

OLD NORTHERN ETHICS FOR LIFE

[Note: This Essay was written circa 1900 by Patrick Lafcadio Hearn, for his Japanese students at the Tokyo Imperial University]

Most of the "Havamal" is a collection of ethical teaching. All that has been preserved by it has been published and translated by Professors Vigfusson and Powell. It is very old—perhaps the oldest Northern literature that we have. I am going to attempt a short lecture upon it, because it is very closely related to the subject of Northern character, and will help us, perhaps better than almost anything else, to understand how the ancestors of the English felt and thought before they became Christians. Nor is this all. I venture to say that the character of the modern English people

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still retains much more of the quality indicated by the "Havamal" than of the quality implied by Christianity.

The old Northern gods are not dead; they rule a very great part of the world today.

The proverbial philosophy of a people helps us to understand more about them than any other kind of literature. And this sort of literature is certainly among the oldest. It represents only the result of human experience in society, the wisdom that men get by contact with each other, the results of familiarity with right and wrong. By studying the proverbs of a people, you can always make a very good guess as to whether you could live comfortably among them or not.

Froude, in one of his sketches of travel in Norway, made the excellent observation that if -we could suddenly go back to the time of the terrible sea-kings, if we could revisit to-day the homes of the old Northern pirates, and find them exactly as they were one thousand or fifteen hundred years ago, we should find them very much like the modern Englishmen—big, simple, silent men, concealing a great deal of shrewdness under an aspect of simplicity. The teachings of the "Havamal" give great force to this supposition. The book must have been known in some form to the early English—or at least the verses composing it (it is all written in verse) ; and as I have already said, the morals of the old English, as well as their character, differed very little from those of the men of the still further North, with whom they mingled and intermarried freely, both before and after the Danish conquest, when for one moment England and Sweden were one kingdom.

Of course you must remember that Northern society was a very terrible thing in some ways. Every man carried his life in his hands; every farmer kept sword and spear at his side even in his own fields; and every man expected to die fighting. In fact, among the men of the more savage North—the men of Norway in especial—it was considered a great disgrace to die of sickness, to die on one's bed.

That was not to die like a man. Men would go out and get themselves killed, when they felt old age or sickness coming on. But these facts must not blind us to the other fact that there was even in that society a great force of moral cohesion, and sound principles of morality. If there had not been, it could not have existed; much less could the people who lived under it have become the masters of a great part of the world, which they are at the present day. There was, in spite of all that fierceness, much kindness and good nature among them; there were rules of conduct such as no man could find fault with—rules which still govern English society to some extent. And there was opportunity enough for social amusement, social enjoyment, and the winning of public esteem by a noble life.

Still, even in the "Havamal," one is occasionally startled by teachings, which show the darker side of Northern life, a life of perpetual vendetta. As in old Japan, no man could live under the same heaven with the murderer of his brother or father; vengeance was a duty even in the case of a friend. On the subject of enemies the "Havamal" gives not a little curious advice:

A man should never step a foot beyond his weapons; for he can never tell where, on his path without, he may need his spear.

A man, before he goes into a house, should look to and espy all the doorways (so that he can find his way out quickly again), for he can never know where foes may be sitting in another man's house.

Does not this remind us of the Japanese proverb that everybody has three enemies outside of his own door? But the meaning of the "Havamal" teaching is much more sinister. And when the man goes into the house, he is still told to be extremely watchful—to keep his ears and eyes open so that he may not be taken by surprise:

The wary guest keeps watchful silence; he listens with his ears and peers about with his eyes; thus does every wise man look about him.

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One would think that men must have had very strong nerves to take comfort under such circumstances, but the poet tells us that the man who can enjoy nothing must be both a coward and a fool. Although a man was to keep watch to protect his life, that was not a reason why he should be afraid of losing it. There were but three things of which a man should be particularly afraid. The first was drink—because drink often caused a man to lose control of his temper; the second was another man's wife—repeatedly the reader is warned never to make love to another man's wife; and the third was thieves—men who would pretend friendship for the purpose of killing and stealing. The man who could keep constant watch over himself and his surroundings was, of course, likely to have the longest life.

Now in all countries there is a great deal of ethical teaching, and always has been, on the subject of speech. The "Havamal" is full of teaching on this subject—the necessity of silence, the danger and the folly of reckless talk. You all know the Japanese proverb that "the mouth is the front gate of all misfortune." The Norse poet puts the same truth into a grimmer shape: "The tongue works death to the head." Here are a number of sayings on this subject:

He that is never silent talks much folly; a glib tongue, unless it be bridled, will often talk a man into trouble.

Do not speak three angry words with a worse man; for often the better man falls by the worse man's sword.

Smile thou in the face of the man thou trustest not, and speak against thy mind.

This is of course a teaching of cunning; but it is the teaching, however immoral, that rules in English society to-day. In the old Norse, however, there were many reasons for having a quarrel whenever possible—reasons which must have existed also in feudal Japan. A man might not care about losing his own life; but he had to

be careful not to stir up a feud that might go on for a hundred years. Although there was a great deal of killing, killing always remained a serious matter, because for every killing there had to be a vengeance. It is true that the law exonerated the man who killed another, if he paid a certain blood-price; murder was not legally considered an unpardonable crime. But the family of the dead man would very seldom be satisfied with a payment; they would want blood for blood. Accordingly men had to be very cautious about quarreling, however brave they might personally be.

But all this caution about silence and about watchfulness did not mean that a man should be unable to speak to the purpose when speech was required. "A wise man," says the "Havamal," "should be able both to ask and to answer." There is a proverb which you know, to the effect that you cannot shut the door upon another man's mouth. So says the Norse poet:

"The sons of men can keep silence about nothing that passes among men; therefore a man should be able to take his own part, prudently and strongly."

Says the "Havamal":

"A fool thinks he knows everything if he sits snug in his little corner; but he is at a loss for words if the people put to him a question."

Elsewhere it is said:

"Arch dunce is he who can speak nought, for that is the mark of a fool." And the sum of all this teaching about the tongue is that men should never speak without good reason, and then should speak to the point strongly and wisely.

On the subject of fools there is a great deal in the "Havamal"; but you must understand always by the word fool, in the Northern sense, a man of weak character who knows not what to do in time of difficulty. That was a fool among those men, and a dangerous fool;

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for in such a state of society mistakes in act or in speech might reach to terrible consequences. See these little observations about fools:

Open-handed, bold-hearted men live most happily, they never feel care; but a fool troubles himself about everything. The niggard pines for gifts.

A fool is awake all night, worrying about everything; when the morning comes he is worn out, and all his troubles are just the same as before.

A fool thinks that all who smile upon him are his friends, not knowing, when he is with wise men, who there may be plotting against him.

If a fool gets a drink, all his mind is immediately displayed.

But it was not considered right for a man not to drink, although drink was a dangerous thing. On the contrary, not to drink would have been thought a mark of cowardice and of incapacity for self-control. A man was expected even to get drunk if necessary, and to keep his tongue and his temper no matter how much he drank. The strong character would only become more cautious and more silent under the influence of drink; the weak man would immediately show his weakness. I am told the curious fact that in the English army at the present day officers are expected to act very much after the teaching of the old Norse poet; a man is expected to be able on occasion to drink a considerable amount of wine or spirits without showing the effects of it, either in his conduct or in his speech. "Drink thy share of mead; speak fair or not at all"—that was the old text, and a very sensible one in its way.

Laughter was also condemned, if indulged in without very good cause. "The miserable man whose mind is warped laughs at everything, not knowing what he ought to know, that he himself has no lack of faults." I need scarcely tell you that the English are still a very serious people, not disposed to laugh nearly so much as are the

men of the more sympathetic Latin races. You will remember perhaps Lord Chesterfield's saying that since he became a man no man had ever seen him laugh. I remember about twenty years ago that there was published by some Englishman a very learned and very interesting little book, called "The Philosophy of Laughter," in which it was gravely asserted that all laughter was foolish. I must acknowledge, however, that no book ever made me laugh more than the volume in question. The great virtue of the men of the North, according to the "Havamal," was indeed the virtue which has given to the English race its present great position among nations,—the simplest of all virtues, common sense. But common sense means much more than the words might imply to the Japanese students, or to any one unfamiliar with English idioms. Common sense, or mother-wit, means natural intelligence, as opposed to, and independent of, cultivated or educated intelligence. It means inherited knowledge; and inherited knowledge may take even the form of genius. It means foresight. It means intuitive knowledge of other people's character. It means cunning as well as broad comprehension. And the modern Englishman, in all times and in all countries, trusts especially to this faculty, which is very largely developed in the race to which he belongs. No Englishman believes in working from book learning. He suspects all theories, philosophical or other. He suspects everything new, and dislikes it, unless he can be compelled by the force of circumstances to see that this new thing has advantages over the old. Race-experience is what he invariably depends upon, whenever he can, whether in India, in Egypt, or in Australia. His statesmen do not consult historical precedents in order to decide what to do: they first learn the facts as they are; then they depend upon their own common sense, not at all upon their university learning or upon philosophical theories. And in the case of the English nation, it must be acknowledged that this instinctive method has been eminently successful. When the "Havamal" speaks of

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wisdom it means mother-wit, and nothing else; indeed, there was no reading or writing to speak of in those times:

No man can carry better baggage on his journey than wisdom.

There is no better friend than great common sense.

But the wise man should not show himself to be wise without occasion. He should remember that the majority of men are not wise, and he should be careful not to show his superiority over them unnecessarily. Neither should he despise men who do not happen to be as wise as himself:

No man is so good but there is a flaw in him, nor so bad as to be good for nothing.

Middling wise should every man be; never overwise. Those who know many things rarely lead the happiest life.

Middling wise should every man be; never overwise. No man should know his fate beforehand; so shall he live freest from care.

Middling wise should every man be, never too wise. A wise man's heart is seldom glad, if its owner be a true sage.

This is the ancient wisdom also of Solomon: "He that increases wisdom increases sorrow." But how very true as worldly wisdom these little Northern sentences are. That a man who knows a little of many things, and no one thing perfectly, is the happiest man—this certainly is even more true to-day than it was a thousand years ago. Spencer has well observed that the man who can influence his generation, is never the man greatly in advance of his time, but only the man who is very slightly better than his fellows. The man who is very superior is likely to be ignored or disliked. Mediocrity can not help disliking superiority; and as the old Northern sage declared, "the average of men is but moiety." Moiety does not mean necessarily mediocrity, but also that which is below mediocrity. What we call in

England to-day, as Matthew Arnold called it, the Philistine element, continues to prove in our own time, to almost every superior man, the danger of being too wise.

Interesting in another way, and altogether more agreeable, are the old sayings about friendship: "Know this, if thou hast a trusty friend, go and see him often; because a road which is seldom trod gets choked with brambles and high grass."

Be not thou the first to break off from thy friend. Sorrow will eat thy heart if thou lackest the friend to open thy heart to.

Anything is better than to be false; he is no friend who only speaks to please.

Which means, of course, that a true friend is not afraid to find fault with his friend's course; indeed, that is his solemn duty. But these teachings about friendship are accompanied with many cautions; for one must be very careful in the making of friends. The ancient Greeks had a terrible proverb:

"Treat your friend as if he should become some day your enemy; and treat your enemy as if he might some day become your friend."

This proverb seems to me to indicate a certain amount of doubt in human nature. We do not find this doubt in the Norse teaching, but on the contrary, some very excellent advice. The first thing to remember is that friendship is sacred: "He that opens his heart to another mixes blood with him." Therefore one should be very careful either about forming or about breaking a friendship.

A man should be a friend to his friend's friend. But no man should be a friend of his friend's foe, nor of his foe's friend.

A man should be a friend with his friend, and pay back gift with gift; give back laughter for laughter (to his enemies), and lesing for lies.

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Give and give back makes the longest friend. Give not overmuch at one time. Gift always looks for return.

The poet also tells us how trifling gifts are quite sufficient to make friends and to keep them, if wisely given. A costly gift may seem like a bribe; a little gift is only the sign of kindly feeling. And as a mere matter of justice, a costly gift may be unkind, for it puts the friend under an obligation which he may not be rich enough to repay. Repeatedly we are told also that too much should not be expected of friendship. The value of a friend is his affection, his sympathy; but favours that cost must always be returned.

I never met a man so open-hearted and free with his food, but that boon was boon to him—nor so generous as not to look for return if he had a chance.

Emerson says almost precisely the same thing in his essay on friendship—showing how little human wisdom has changed in all the centuries. Here is another good bit of advice concerning visits:

It is far away to an ill friend, even though he live on one's road; but to a good friend there is a short cut, even though he live far out.

Go on, be not a guest ever in the same house. The welcome becomes wearisome if he sits too long at another's table.

This means that we must not impose on our friends; but there is a further caution on the subject of eating at a friend's house. You must not go to your friend's house hungry, when you can help it.

A man should take his meal betimes, before he goes to his neighbour—or he will sit and seem hungered like one starving, and have no power to talk.

That is the main point to remember in dining at another's house, that you are not there only for your own pleasure, but for that of other people. You are expected to talk; and you cannot talk if you are

very hungry. At this very day a gentleman makes it the rule to do the same thing. Accordingly we see that these rough men of the North must have had a good deal of social refinement—refinement not of dress or of speech, but of feeling. Still, says the poet, one's own home is the best, though it be but a cottage. "A man is a man in his own house."

Now we come to some sentences teaching caution, which are noteworthy in a certain way:

Tell one man thy secret, but not two. What three men know, all the world knows.

Never let a bad man know thy mishaps; for from a bad man thou shalt never get reward for thy sincerity.

I shall presently give you some modern examples in regard to the advice concerning bad men. Another thing to be cautious about is praise. If you have to be careful about blame, you must be very cautious also about praise.

Praise the day at even-tide; a woman at her burying; a sword when it has been tried; a maid when she is married; ice when you have crossed over it; ale when it is drunk.

If there is anything noteworthy in English character to-day it is the exemplification of this very kind of teaching. This is essentially Northern. The last people from whom praise can be expected, even for what is worthy of all praise, are the English. A new friendship, a new ideal, a reform, a noble action, a wonderful poet, an exquisite painting—any of these things will be admired and praised by every other people in Europe long before you can get Englishmen to praise. The Englishman all this time is studying, considering, trying to find fault. Why should he try to find fault? So that he will not make any mistakes at a later day. He has inherited the terrible caution of his ancestors in regard to mistakes. It must be granted that his caution

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has saved him from a number of very serious mistakes that other nations have made. It must also be acknowledged that he exercises a fair amount of moderation in the opposite direction—this modern Englishman; he has learned caution of another kind, which his ancestors taught him. "Power," says the "Havamal," "should be used with moderation; for whoever finds himself among valiant men will discover that no man is peerless." And this is a very important thing for the strong man to know—that however strong, he can not be the strongest; his match will be found when occasion demands it. Not only Scandinavian but English rulers have often discovered this fact to their cost. Another matter to be very anxious about is public opinion.

Chattels die; kinsmen pass away; one dies oneself; but I know something that never dies—the name of the man, for good or bad.

Do not think that this means anything religious. It means only that the reputation of a man goes to influence the good or ill fortune of his descendants. It is something to be proud of, to be the son of a good man; it helps to success in life. On the other hand, to have had a father of ill reputation is a very serious obstacle to success of any kind in countries where the influence of heredity is strongly recognized.

I have nearly exhausted the examples of this Northern wisdom which I selected for you; but there are two subjects which remain to be considered. One is the law of conduct in regard to misfortune; and the other is the rule of conduct in regard to women. A man was expected to keep up a brave heart under any circumstances. These old Northmen seldom committed suicide; and I must tell you that all the talk about Christianity having checked the practice of suicide to some extent, cannot be fairly accepted as truth. In modern England to-day the suicides average nearly three thousand a year; but making allowances for extraordinary circumstances, it is certain that the Northern races consider suicide in an entirely different way from

what the Latin races do. There was very little suicide among the men of the North, because every man considered it his duty to get killed, not to kill himself; and to kill himself would have seemed cowardly, as implying fear of being killed by others. In modern ethical training, quite apart from religious considerations, a man is taught that suicide is only excusable in case of shame, or under such exceptional circumstances as have occurred in the history of the Indian mutiny. At all events, we have the feeling still strongly manifested in England that suicide is not quite manly; and this is certainly due much more to ancestral habits of thinking, which date back to pagan days, than to Christian doctrine. As I have said, the pagan English would not commit suicide to escape mere pain. But the Northern people knew how to die to escape shame. There is an awful story in Roman history about the wives and daughters of the conquered German tribes, thousands in number, asking to be promised that their virtue should be respected, and all killing themselves when the Roman general refused the request. No Southern people of Europe in that time would have shown such heroism upon such a matter. Leaving honour aside, however, the old book tells us that a man should never despair.

Fire, the sight of the sun, good health, and a blameless life,—these are the goodliest things in this world.

Yet a man is not utterly wretched, though he have bad health, or be maimed.

The halt may ride a horse; the handless may drive a herd; the deaf can fight and do well; better be blind than buried. A corpse is good for naught.

On the subject of women there is not very much in the book beyond the usual caution in regard to wicked women; but there is this little observation:

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Never blame a woman for what is all man's weakness. Hues charming and fair may move the wise and not the dullard. Mighty love turns the son of men from wise to fool.

This is shrewd, and it contains a very remarkable bit of esthetic truth, that it requires a wise man to see certain kinds of beauty, which a stupid man could never be made to understand. And, leaving aside the subject of love, what very good advice it is never to laugh at a person for what can be considered a common failure. In the same way an intelligent man should learn to be patient with the unintelligent, as the same poem elsewhere insists.

Now what is the general result of this little study, the general impression that it leaves upon the mind? Certainly we feel that the life reflected in these sentences was a life in which caution was above all things necessary—caution in thought and speech and act, never ceasing, by night or day, during the whole of a man's life. Caution implies moderation. Moderation inevitably develops a certain habit of justice—a justice that might not extend outside of the race, but a justice that would be exercised between man and man of the same blood. Very much of English character and of English history is explained by the life that the "Havamal" portrays. Very much that is good; also very much that is bad—not bad in one sense, so far as the future of the race is concerned, but in a social way certainly not good. The judgment of the Englishman by all other European peoples is that he is the most suspicious, the most reserved, the most unreceptive, the most unfriendly, the coldest hearted, and the most domineering of all Western peoples. Ask a Frenchman, an Italian, a German, a Spaniard, even an American, what he thinks about Englishmen; and every one of them will tell you the very same thing. This is precisely what the character of men would become who had lived for thousands of years in the conditions of Northern society. But you would find upon the other hand that nearly all nations would speak highly of certain other English qualities—energy, courage,

honour, justice (between themselves). They would say that although no man is so difficult to make friends with, the friendship of an

Englishman once gained is more strong and true than any other. And as the battle of life still continues, and must continue for thousands of years to come, it must be acknowledged that the English character is especially well fitted for the struggle. Its reserves, its cautions, its doubts, its suspicions, its brutality—these have been for it in the past, and are still in the present, the best social armour and panoply of war. It is not a lovable nor an amiable character; it is not even kindly. The Englishman of the best type is much more inclined to be just than he is to be kind, for kindness is an emotional impulse, and the Englishman is on his guard against every kind of emotional impulse. But with all this, the character is a grand one, and its success has been the best proof of its value.

Now you will have observed in the reading of this ancient code of social morals that, while none of the teaching is religious, some of it is absolutely immoral from any religious standpoint. No great religion permits us to speak what is not true, and to smile in the face of an enemy while pretending to be his friend. No religion teaches that we should "pay back lies for lies." Neither does a religion tell us that we should expect a return for every kindness done; that we should regard friendship as being actuated by selfish motives; that we should never praise when praise seems to be deserved. In fact, when Sir Walter Scott long ago made a partial translation of the "Havamal," he thought himself obliged to leave out a number of sentences, which seemed to him highly immoral, and to apologize for others. He thought that they would shock English readers too much.

We are not quite so squeamish to-day; and a thinker of our own time would scarcely deny that English society is very largely governed at this moment by the same kind of rules that Sir Walter Scott thought to be so bad. But here we need not condemn English society in particular. All European society has been for hundreds of years

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conducting itself upon very much the same principles; for the reason that human social experience has been the same in all Western countries. I should say that the only difference between English society and other societies is that the hardness of character is very much greater. Let us go back even to the most Christian times of Western societies in the most Christian country of Europe, and observe whether the social code was then and there so very different from the social code of the old "Havamal." Mr. Spencer observes in his "Ethics" that, so far as the conduct of life is concerned, religion is almost nothing and practice is everything. We find this wonderfully exemplified in a most remarkable book of social precepts written in the seventeenth century, in Spain, under the title of the "Oraculo Manual." It was composed by a Spanish priest, named Baltasar Gracian, who was born in the year 1601 and died in 1658; and it has been translated into nearly all languages. The best English translation, published by Macmillan, is called "The Art of Worldly Wisdom." It is even more admired to-day than in the seventeenth century; and what it teaches as to social conduct holds as good to-day of modern society as it did of society two hundred years ago. It is one of the most unpleasant and yet interesting books ever published—unpleasant because of the malicious cunning which it often displays—interesting because of the frightful perspicacity of the author. The man who wrote that book understood the hearts of men, especially the bad side. He was a gentleman of high rank before he became a priest, and his instinctive shrewdness must have been hereditary. Religion, this man would have said, teaches the best possible morals; but the world is not governed by religion altogether, and to mix with it, we must act according to its dictates.

These dictates remind us in many ways of the cautions and the cunning of the "Havamal." The first thing enjoined upon a man both by the Norse writer and by the Spanish author is the art of silence. Probably this has been the result of social experience in all countries. "Cautious silence is the holy of holies of worldly wisdom," says

Gracian. And he gives many elaborate reasons for this statement, not the least of which is the following: "If you do not declare yourself immediately, you arouse expectation, especially when the importance of your position makes you the object of general attention. Mix a little mystery with everything, and the very mystery arouses veneration." A little further on he gives us exactly the same advice as did the "Havamal" writer, in regard to being frank with enemies. "Do not," he says, "show your wounded finger, for everything will knock up against it; nor complain about it, for malice always aims where weakness can be injured. . . . Never disclose the source of mortification or of joy, if you wish the one to cease, the other to endure." About secrets the Spaniard is quite as cautious as the Norseman. He says, "Especially dangerous are secrets entrusted to friends. He that communicates his secret to another makes himself that other man's slave." But after a great many such cautions in regard to silence and secrecy, he tells us also that we must learn how to fight with the world. You remember the advice of the "Havamal" on this subject, how it condemns as a fool the man who can not answer a reproach. The Spaniard is, however, much more malicious in his suggestions. He tells us that we must "learn to know every man's thumbscrew." I suppose you know that a thumbscrew was an instrument of torture used in old times to force confessions from criminals. This advice means nothing less than that we should learn how to be able to hurt other men's feelings, or to flatter other men's weaknesses. "First guess every man's ruling passion, appeal to it by a word, set it in motion by temptation, and you will infallibly give checkmate to his freedom of will." The term "give checkmate" is taken from the game of chess, and must here be understood as meaning to overcome, to conquer. A kindred piece of advice is "keep a store of sarcasms, and know how to use them." Indeed he tells us that this is the point of greatest tact in human intercourse. "Struck by the slightest word of this kind, many fall away from the closest intimacy with superiors or inferiors, which intimacy could not be in

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the slightest shaken by a whole conspiracy of popular insinuation or private malevolence." In other words, you can more quickly destroy a man's friendship by one word of sarcasm than by any amount of intrigue. Does not this read very much like sheer wickedness? Certainly it does; but the author would have told you that you must fight the wicked with their own weapons. In the "Havamal" you will not find anything quite so openly wicked as that; but we must suppose that the Norsemen knew the secret, though they might not have put it into words. As for the social teaching, you will find it very subtly expressed even in the modern English novels of George Meredith, who, by the way, has written a poem in praise of sarcasm and ridicule. But let us now see what the Spanish author has to tell us about friendship and unselfishness.

The shrewd man knows that others when they seek him do not seek "him," but "their advantage in him and by him." That is to say, a shrewd man does not believe in disinterested friendship. This is much worse than anything in the "Havamal." And it is diabolically elaborated. What are we to say about such teaching as the following: "A wise man would rather see men needing him than thanking him. To keep them on the threshold of hope is diplomatic; to trust to their gratitude is boorish; hope has a good memory, gratitude a bad one"? There is much more of this kind; but after the assurance that only a boorish person (that is to say, an ignorant and vulgar man) can believe in gratitude, the author's opinion of human nature needs no further elucidation. The old Norseman would have been shocked at such a statement. But he might have approved the following: "When you hear anything favourable, keep a tight rein upon your credulity; if unfavourable, give it the spur." That is to say, when you hear anything good about another man, do not be ready to believe it; but if you hear anything bad about him, believe as much of it as you can.

I notice also many other points of resemblance between the Northern and the Spanish teaching in regard to caution. The "Havamal" says that you must not pick a quarrel with a worse man

than yourself; "because the better man often falls by the worse man's sword." The Spanish priest gives a still shrewder reason for the same policy. "Never contend," he says, "with a man who has nothing to lose; for thereby you enter into an unequal conflict. The other enters without anxiety; having lost everything, including shame, he has no further loss to fear." I think that this is an immoral teaching, though a very prudent one; but I need scarcely to tell you that it is still a principle in modern society not to contend with a man who has no reputation to lose. I think it is immoral, because it is purely selfish, and because a good man ought not to be afraid to denounce a wrong because of making enemies. Another point, however, on which the "Havamal" and the priest agree, is more commendable and interesting. "We do not think much of a man who never contradicts us; that is no sign he loves us, but rather a sign that he loves himself. Original and out-of-the-way views are signs of superior ability."

I should not like you to suppose, however, that the whole of the book from which I have been quoting is of the same character as the quotations. There is excellent advice in it; and much kindly teaching on the subject of generous acts. It is a book both good and bad, and never stupid. The same man who tells you that friendship is seldom unselfish, also declares that life would be a desert without friends, and that there is no magic like a good turn—that is, a kind act. He teaches the importance of getting good will by honest means, although he advises us also to learn how to injure. I am sure that nobody could read the book without benefit. And I may close these quotations from it with the following paragraph, which is the very best bit of counsel that could be given to a literary student:

Be slow and sure. Quickly done can be quickly undone. To last an eternity requires an eternity of preparation. Only excellence counts. Profound intelligence is the only foundation for immortality. Worth much costs much. The precious metals are the heaviest.

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But so far as the question of human conduct is concerned, the book of Gracian is no more of a religious book than is the "Havamal" of the heathen North. You would find, were such a book published to-day and brought up to the present time by any shrewd writer, that Western morality has not improved in the least since the time before Christianity was established, so far as the rules of society go. Society is not, and can not be, religious, because it is a state of continual warfare. Every person in it has to fight, and the battle is not less cruel now because it is not fought with swords. Indeed, I should think that the time when every man carried his sword in society was a time when men were quite as kindly and much more honest than they are now.

The object of this little lecture was to show you that the principles of the ancient Norse are really the principles ruling English society to-day; but I think you will be able to take from it a still larger meaning. It is that not only one form of society, but all forms of society, represent the warfare of man and man. That is why thinkers, poets, philosophers, in all ages, have tried to find solitude, to keep out of the contest, to devote themselves only to study of the beautiful and the true. But the prizes of life are not to be obtained in solitude, although the prizes of thought can only there be won. After all, whatever we may think about the cruelty and treachery of the social world, it does great things in the end. It quickens judgment, deepens intelligence, enforces the acquisition of self-control, creates forms of mental and moral strength that cannot fail to be sometimes of vast importance to mankind. But if you should ask me whether it increases human happiness, I should certainly say "no." The "Havamal" said the same thing:

The truly wise man cannot be happy.

Patrick Lafcadio Hearn

A Modernized Havamal

The Following is the Havamal in slightly more modern language. The "Old Verse" presented on each page is Henry Adam Bellows' translation. I've also add some "Keywords" which are just a handy guide when studying the Havamal.

Where necessary I've included notes to help the reader understand the decisions we made when modernizing a particular verse, word or phrase. If you see something you believe needs to be changed, please e-mail me at havamal@eoghanodinsson.com and I'll be sure to include any required changes in the next version.

The Havamal is comprised of distinct sections aimed at educating the reader on different topics.

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Professor D.L. Ashliman, retired from the University of Pittsburgh, still maintains a page¹ on the web that has Olive Bray's translation of the Havamal organized by eight categories.

I've followed his example but renamed the categories slightly and moved a few of the verses into different categories to align more closely with the other translations of the Havamal:

1. Wisdom for Wanderers, Advice to Guests (verses 1-67)
2. Maxims for Men (verses 68-89 & 103)
3. Lessons for Lovers (verses 90-95)
4. Odin's Love Quests (verses 96-102, 104-110)
5. Odin's Quest for the Mead of Poetry (verses 111-137)
6. The Counseling of the Stray-Singer (verses 138-136)
7. Odin's Quest for the Runes (verses 137-145)
8. The Song of Spells (verses 146-165)

¹ <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/havamal.html>

**Wisdom for
Wanderers,
Advice to Guests**

Modernized Verse 1

Before passing through any door,
Observe carefully,
and consider what may be ahead.
Always be mindful of your surroundings,
Be vigilant in unfamiliar places.
You can never be sure where a foe,
Or other danger resides.

Keywords:

Vigilance, Awareness, Caution

OLD VERSE 1

Withín the gates, ere a man shall go,
Full warily let him watch,
Full long let him look about him;
For little he knows, where a foe may lurk,
And sit in the seats withín.

Modernized Verse 2

Hail to the Host!
A guest has arrived.
Are you prepared,
to give him a place to rest?
A weary traveler may be impatient,
for warmth and kindness.

Keywords:

Hospitality, Promptness

OLD VERSE 2

Hail to the giver! A guest has come:
Where shall the stranger sit?
Swift shall he be who, with swords shall try
The proof of his might to make.

Modernized Verse 3

A traveler or guest,
seeking your hospitality,
may be cold and weary.
Who knows what hardships,
on his journey he endured?

Keywords:

Concern, Compassion

OLD VERSE 3

Fire he needs, who with frozen knees
Has come from the cold without;
Food and clothes, must the farer have,
The man from the mountains come.

Modernized Verse 4

A guest may need drink and food,
perhaps fresh clothing,
and kind words.

Make your guest comfortable,
ensure he knows he is welcome
to come again.

Keywords:

Graciousness, Welcoming

OLD VERSE 4

Water and towels, and welcoming speech
Should he find who comes, to the feast:
If renown he would get, and again be greeted,
Wisely and well must he act.

Modernized Verse 5

If you plan to travel,
have your wits about you.
Pay attention,
the unwise should stay at home.
You will be considered a fool and mocked,
if you can't speak intelligently with other men.

Keywords:

Alertness, General Knowledge, Worldliness

OLD VERSE 5

Wits must he have, who wanders wide,
But all is easy at home;
At the witless man, the wise shall wink
When among such men he sits.

Modernized Verse 6

Let a man not be boastful about his wisdom,
but watchful instead.

The wise and silent rarely get into trouble,
when in the company of others.

A more trustworthy friend,
a man cannot have, than understanding.

Keywords:

Wisdom, Caution, Understanding

OLD VERSE 6

A man shall not boast, of his keenness of mind,
But keep it close in his breast:
To the silent and wise, does ill come seldom
When he goes as guest to a house:
For a faster friend one never finds
Than wisdom tried and true.

Modernized Verse 7

The cautious guest,
who goes to a gathering with strangers,
keeps his eyes and ears open,
and his mouth closed.
Much wisdom can be gained,
from quiet observation.

Keywords:

Alertness, Quiet Observation

OLD VERSE 7

The knowing guest, who goes to the feast,
In silent attention sits;
With his ears he hears, with his eyes he watches,
Thus wary are wise men all.

Modernized Verse 8

It's a fortunate man,
who is well respected by others,
for the deeds he has done himself.
It's more difficult if you rely on others,
to help make your good reputation.

Keywords:

Accomplishment, Self-Reliance

OLD VERSE 8

Happy the one, who wins for himself
Favor and praises fair;
Less safe by far, is the wisdom found
That is hid in another's heart.

Modernized Verse 9

It's good to be well respected while you live,
and to be able to think for yourself.
Men often give each other bad advice.

Keywords:

Respect, Independent Thinking, Bad Advice

OLD VERSE 9

Happy the man, who has while he lives
Wisdom and praise as well,
For evil counsel, a man full oft
Has from another's heart.

Modernized Verse 10

There is nothing better,
that a man may possess,
than a little common sense.
It's better than being rich,
especially in strange places and new situations.
This is the poor man's real wealth.

Keywords:

New Situations, Common Sense, True Wealth

OLD VERSE 10

A better burden, may no man bear
For wanderings wide than wisdom;
It is better than wealth, on unknown ways,
And in grief a refuge it gives.

Modernized Verse 11

There is nothing better
that a man may possess,
than a little common sense.
Whether you are traveling,
or encumbered by too much alcohol,
good sense is the best tool you have to keep you safe.

Keywords:

Travel, Drunkenness, Common Sense, Best Tool

OLD VERSE 11

A better burden may no man bear,
For wanderings wide than wisdom;
Worse food for the journey he brings not afield
Than an over-drinking of ale.

Modernized Verse 12

Too much alcohol is not a good thing,
although some may tell you otherwise
The more you drink,
the less you know.

Keywords:

Alcohol, Moderation, Self-Control

OLD VERSE 12

Less good there lies, than most believe,
In ale for mortal men;
For the more he drinks the less does man,
Of his mind the mastery hold.

Modernized Verse 13

Forgetfulness hovers like a heron²,
where you drink too much.
It robs a man of his mind and good sense.
One night at Gunnlöð's³ place,
this happened to me.

Keywords:

Drunkenness, Forgetfulness

OLD VERSE 13

Over beer the bird of forgetfulness broods,
And steals the minds of men;
With the heron's feathers fettered I lay
And in Gunnloth's house was held.

² The Heron symbolizes a quiet persistence, it stands for hours never moving. The lesson here is that when you drink too much, you have a fog over your mind that hovers persistently like a Heron.

³ Gunnlöð is daughter of the giant Suttungr, who set her to guard the mead of poetry. Gunnlöð was seduced by Odin, who according to the Prose Edda bargained three nights of sex for three sips of the mead and then tricked her, stealing all of it.

Modernized Verse 14

I became far too drunk,
at the wise Fjalar's gathering.
The best party is one where
you drink in moderation
and keep your wits.

Keywords:

Alcohol, Moderation, Accountability

OLD VERSE 14

Drunk I was, I was dead-drunk,
When with Fjalar wise I was: '
Tis the best of drinking
if back one brings his wisdom with him home.