There is a familiar saying that "only the good die young." Perhaps nobody proves this more than the English poet, John Keats, who, born in 1795, died at the tender age of 25. Despite his brief stay on Earth, however, Keats was no stranger to profound loss, beginning with the death of a brother who died in infancy. When he was only 10-years-old, his father, a livery hand, was thrown from a horse and killed. Just four years later his mother died of tuberculosis. After another four years one of his beloved brothers died of the same illness. And just two years later, this young surgeon turned budding poet, after ending an engagement with the love of his life, would himself succumb to the unforgiving illness that had already taken his mother and brother.

It’s obvious this young man experienced a lifetime of tragedy and sorrow, albeit crammed into just a quarter century. Nevertheless, despite such turmoil and the fact that his life was cut so short, he proved capable of accomplishing a great deal, and, to this day, is considered one of Romanticism’s most important literary figures, and one of the greatest poets of the English language. This point is all the more remarkable when we consider Keats didn’t discover his love for poetry until the very last few years of his life.

That he has emerged at all, let alone so successfully as a literary giant, despite his humble beginnings, his personal tragedy, and his all-too-brief life is extraordinary. But it must leave us wondering what more he might have accomplished had he not met such an early demise. Perhaps, as a poet, he might have come to rival Shakespeare himself. But as one with a more philosophical interest, I wonder most, had his thoughts the opportunity to mature, if he would have expounded on the unusual phrase he once coined in a letter to his brother, “Negative Capability.”

These two words are an odd juxtaposition given that they seems to cancel each other out, making the phrase seem more like eastern mysticism than English wisdom. As in some of those peculiar Taoist sayings, “Act without doing, work without effort,” the term Negative Capability presents us with a logical paradox. What could he have possibly meant by this, Negative Capability? Negativity seems almost the opposite of capability, given that capability suggests something can be positively accomplished. Negativity is a minus sign, and capability a plus sign, and the two, together, would seem to cancel each other out. Perhaps this is what Keats was simply getting at, that negativity is no ability at all; that it amounts to nothing. Or, maybe he meant the ability to remain capable, to remain positive, in the midst of trouble. Certainly this ability to accomplish extraordinary things in the face of great difficulties proved true of him.

But Keats himself suggested something much deeper and more profound than even this in the letter he wrote to his brother on October 27, 1818. “Negative Capability,” he explained, “that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts,
without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Keats used these words in reference to writing poetry, citing Shakespeare, whom he greatly admired, as an example of someone with Negative Capability. So it seems Keats was specifically referring to the ability to empty one’s mind of the prejudice that comes with foregone conclusions and certainty. Yet he seems to go further still, by implying not only that we must let go of our established ideas and beliefs—our paradigms and presuppositions—we must move into a state opposite of thought, into anti-thought, if you will. Just as in mathematics it’s possible to calculate on the negative side of zero, we can also function in the negative side of thought, that place from which the mystics get their name, mystery. Negative Capability is not merely the power to dwell comfortably in mystery, but the need, for mystery! It is what water means to a fish, soil to a tree, and sunlight to a seed. Without this Negative Capability, without mystery, the fish would die, the tree could not stand, and seed can never open. Negative Capability is life.

Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkn'd ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon

In this sense, Keats’ Negative Capability becomes reminiscent of the Buddhist notion of no mind. The idea is that we must empty ourselves of all thought if we are to experience reality as it really is, as a whole, rather than as broken up in pieces and parts by the ego’s fragmented consciousness. The ego, because it can only focus on one miniscule aspect of reality at a time, too often identifies with its own ideas and thoughts, which it has arrived at through a process of division and decision, that is, by separating and cutting its ideas from the whole. That’s what human consciousness is, a very limited kind of awareness that it can never grasp the whole. Yet, when it comes to the ego, which sees only the part and, in its obsession, forgets all about the world beyond its limited understanding, that partial view of reality becomes, for it, total reality, and a partial truth, becomes the whole truth. When this happens, and egos become convinced that they have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, they clash with other egos focused on other parts of the whole, who are often equally obsessed and convinced that their version of reality is the whole of reality. This kind of obsessive certainty, the need to be right is, little doubt, the root of war and injustice.

So this no mind, which Buddhism attempts to accomplish through meditation, is really an effort to counter the ego’s narrow view of reality by letting go of our obsessive ideas so that we can broaden our minds, that is, our awareness of truth and reality. For as soon as we obsess about our thoughts, creating mind-structures like definitions and categories—black and white, good and bad, gay and straight, Republican and Democrat, human and animal, enemy and friend, citizen and foreigner, soldier and terrorist—we commit ourselves to an incomplete grasp of reality that often leads to aggression and

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1 Excerpt from, *A Thing of Beauty (Endymion)*, John Keats
Negative Capability

suffering, because we are not brave enough to live with the anxiety of not knowing what tomorrow will bring, of not being able to control the future, even at the expense of others. This is why the Kabbalah says, “Every definition of God is heresy; definition is spiritual idolatry,” and why Hinduism teaches, “Truth is one, sages call it by different names.” To separate, or, at least, to obsess about our mind categories and definitions, leads, at best, to error, and, at worst, to violence and injustice. Every time we invent a category or concept we invent its opposite and we are compelled to now make a decision between the opposites we ourselves have created. We are stuck with a right choice and a wrong choice. As the Tao te Ching explains, “When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly. When people see some things as good, other things become bad.”

Indeed, as the oldest of Zen poems puts it;

The perfect Way is without difficulty,  
Save that it avoids picking and choosing.  
Only when you stop liking and disliking  
Will all be clearly understood.  
A split hair’s difference,  
And heaven and earth are set apart!  
If you want to get the plain truth,  
Be not concerned with right and wrong.  
The conflict between right and wrong  
Is the sickness of the mind.

In his book, The Tao of Physics, physicist Fritjof Capra says similarly, “The experience of Zen is thus the experience of satori, and since this experience, ultimately, transcends all categories of thought, Zen is not interested in any abstraction or conceptualization. It has no special doctrine or philosophy, no formal creeds or dogmas, and it asserts that this freedom from all fixed beliefs makes it truly spiritual.” All of this, as you can now tell, is reminiscent of what Keats meant by Negative Capability, “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

Hence, when he wrote a poem he attempted to become his subject by abandoning his own beliefs and prejudices, that is, his own ego, those fragments of truth and reality he identified so closely with he could easily mistake them for the whole of meaning. By abandoning these obsessive prejudices, his poetry was free to flow up from the depths of his soul, the source of all poetry, rather than merely falling down from his own head. The first few lines of Keats’ Ode on a Grecian Urn is a good example:

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2 Fox, Matthew, One River, Many Wells, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000, p.18.
5 Capra, Fritjof, The Tao of Physics, Shambhala, Boston, MA, 2000, p. 122.
Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Notice how he begins this poem with a series of questions about the images on the urn, rather than with an explanation of those images. Keats has abandoned thought and allowed himself to enter into mystery. Thus the urn he romanticizes becomes the perfect metaphor of Negative Capability. In a sense, to know the images on the outside of the urn, Keats must step into the mystery within the urn. Inside there is nothing but emptiness—no thought, no division, no decision. This brings us to quite a literal understanding of the term, Negative Capability. “Capability” comes from the Latin word *capabilitis*, which means “able to hold.” So when we speak of being capable, the emphasis is not on ability, but on the specific ability to become a container, to become the urn. The root is the same as in the words *capacity* and *capacious*, indicating capability has as much to do with space as it does ability.

So we may better understand what is meant by Negative Capability if we translate it as Negative Space, or, perhaps better put, as an open space, an open heart and mind. This gets very close to Einstein’s notion that reality is a field of energy. Particles, which make up matter, are really just localized condensations of the Unified Field, of energy. So, all that really exists is the field, the space, the ability to hold. As Einstein put it, "We may therefore regard matter as being constituted by the regions of space in which the field is extremely intense… There is no place in this new kind of physics both for the field and matter, for the field is the only reality.”

This seems to be precisely what Keats was getting at. As a poet, he realized he had to let go of all his concepts about the Universe if he was going to know the Universe, if he was going to release the particle to know the field, the particular to know the whole. He had to empty himself of himself in order to become one with his subject. He did this by entering Negative Space, that is, through his *ability* to enter Negative Space. “Heard melodies are sweet,” he sang;

…but those unheard

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6 Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*
7 Capra, ibid., p. 211.
Negative Capability

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.  

So, yes, it is unfortunate Keats died before he could mature along with his very
mature notion of Negative Capability. Who knows what he may have had to say about it
if he’d had more of an opportunity to let it develop? Although, this is, perhaps, itself part
of its definition—incomplete and ill-defined. How can we have a fully developed
concept about something that reminds us to rid ourselves of our concepts? It seems, if
you will, poetic justice, that Keats should leave us guessing and figuring it out for
ourselves. Furthermore, because it remains undefined, mysterious, it provides us the
freedom to play with the notion, and to apply it to all areas of our lives, beyond the realm
of poetry, if, in the end, there is anything beyond poetry.

One of the best examples I’ve heard of Negative Capability came from an old
friend of mine who was an inventor. He reminded me that Thomas Edison, inventor of
the light bulb, tried 900 filaments before he finally got the right one. The point my friend
was making is that the mark of a good inventor is the ability to live with failure, to press
on, even when things aren’t going our way. If Edison used 899 filaments that failed, and
one that worked, then he was certainly more of a failure than a success. Many of us
would probably have given up after less than a few tries because we don’t like to fail, and
risk obsessing about our failures to the point we begin to see ourselves as failures.
Imagine how disappointed Edison must have been as attempt after attempt he failed.
Why did he continue? Because, he was a professional failure! As my friend put it, "It is
the failures who make the best inventors."

We might also say, Thomas Edison had, what the Buddhist call, Beginner’s Mind.
This is the idea that we must enter into things fresh, as if for the first time every time,
"without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." It’s obvious Edison had to keep a
fresh approach each and every time he attempted to create a working light bulb.
Otherwise he would have been overcome by his sense of failure. So, it seems, Beginner’s
Mind is part of the definition of Negative Capability, as is the ability to live with failure,
to exist in a negative space.

But most importantly, I think, Negative Capability is vital to how we relate to the
world and to those around us. If we can learn to approach others with this sense of awe
and humility, surrendering to mystery, surrendering our certainties, then the world would
be a much more peaceful place, and we would be much more content within it. We would
respect each other, rather than ending up in endless conflicts over our differences. We
would give up our neurotic need to be right and live comfortably with our failure,
knowing our mistakes might well lead us to something new and exciting, rather than the
old worn out patterns of the tried and tested. Negative Capability is a call to failure, a call
to uncertainty, a call to question, a call to mystery, and to the peace of mind and the
peace with others that naturally follow.

8 Keats, Ode on a Grecian Urn
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."\(^9^\)

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\(^9^\) Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*