

**COMMITTEE VI**

Eastern Approaches to Knowledge and  
Values: With an Emphasis on "Qi"

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**THE MECHANISTIC CLOCK AND THE DANCING SHIVA  
(RECONCILING EASTERN AND WESTERN APPROACHES TO KNOWLEDGE)**

by

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## THE MECHANISTIC CLOCK AND THE DANCING SHIVA

(Reconciling Eastern and Western Approaches to Knowledge)

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### Plato - Knowledge as Enlightenment

Knowledge for Plato was in a sense sacred. But also an instrument. But not an ordinary one: it was an instrument of self-enlightenment. In this capacity knowledge was tremendously important -- as the vehicle that enables us to overcome the coarseness of our body, the limitation of our senses which dim the vision of the soul. The soul is entrapped by the body. The acquisition of knowledge is a slow and painful process of stripping away the unnecessary accretions that muffle the soul. Knowledge is recollection: remembering what the soul once knew.

Let us put Plato's perspective in our terms. The basic human project (we shall call it the first Western project) is

to reach enlightenment and the unity with the Godhead.

When we look at the legacy of Plato, and actually of most ancient Greek philosophies, we see a clear parallelism with Buddhism. In both the Eastern and Western traditions of the time we see an enormous importance attached to the mind. In Buddhism, especially, the role of the mind, of right thinking, and of right assumptions is particularly emphasized. But this element is also luminously clear in the Hindu tradition, especially in the Upanishads.

Here are some quotes from the Dhammapada, a basic Buddhist text, the main part of which is attributed to the Buddha:

What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.(1)

For he whose mind is well trained in the ways that lead to light . . . enjoys the immortal NIRVANA. (89)

Invisible and subtle is the mind, and it flies after fancies wherever it likes; but let the wise man guard well his mind, for a mind well guarded is a source of great joy. (36)

Hidden in the mystery of consciousness, the mind, incorporeal, flies alone far away. Those who set their mind in harmony become free from the bonds of death. (37)

In a similar vein speak the Upanishads -- the basic inspiration for the Hindu ways of thought and life:

. . . the mind is the organ of thought. It is because of the light of the Spirit that the human mind can see, and can think, and enjoy this world. (the Chandogya Upanishad 8.7-12)

Mind is indeed the source of bondage and also the source of liberation. (the Maitri Upanishad 6.24)

Let us therefore keep the mind pure, for what a man thinks that he becomes; this is a mystery of Eternity. (the Maitri Upanishad 6.24)

### St. Augustine and Baruch Spinoza

St. Augustine (354-430) is a corner stone of Christian faith and Christian philosophy; one of the chief architects of the Christian world view. For

Augustine, knowledge is very important as well. To possess right knowledge is to be in the right state of being. Put otherwise: one's being is determined by the nature and quality of the knowledge one beholds. For one's knowledge is a form of prayer that leads us to God. You cannot behave badly if you truly possess the right kind of knowledge. If you misbehave and commit foul or criminal acts, then it means you really don't possess right knowledge; you don't understand; it is your ignorance not your knowledge that inspires you and pushes you to foul deeds.

It is important to realize that for Augustine knowledge is intimately connected with life. Right knowledge means right life (or right livelihood, as the Buddhists would say). This is of course a version of the Platonic position. There is, at this stage of European history, no divorce of knowledge from life. The conviction is still held that to possess a superior knowledge leads us to a superior life.

This conviction is still upheld by Boruch Spinoza (1632-1677). He died young, slowly suffocated by the glass powder which he inhaled while working as a glass grinder. Now Spinoza already lives in the age of rising empiricism. He himself insists that virtue is its own reward and that the right cultivation of the intellect is a precondition to a good life. Wise life is good life. Ignorance and stupidity are the causes of various calamities, and of misery and human suffering.

I have thus completed all I wished to set forth touching the mind's power over the emotions and the mind's freedom. Whence it appears, how potent is the wise man, and how much he surpasses the ignorant man, who is driven only by his lusts. For the ignorant man is not only distracted in various ways by external causes without ever gaining the true acquiescence of his spirit, but moreover lives, as it were unwitting of himself, and of God, and of things, and as soon as he ceases to suffer ceases also to be.

Whereas the wise man, in so far as he is regarded as such, is scarcely at all disturbed in spirit, but, being conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, by a certain eternal necessity, never ceases to be, but always possesses true acquiescence of his spirit.

If the way which I have pointed out as leading to this result seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered. (Spinoza, Ethics, Part V, prop. XLII)

But the tide of time is moving from the idea of knowledge as enlightenment. Spinoza is an exception. The dominant cast of the Western mind has changed. The Western project has changed. It is best exemplified by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and his new conception of knowledge, according to which knowledge is power: power to extricate secrets from nature, power to subdue nature to our wishes, demands and whims, power to make nature serve the ends of humankind.

### The Second Western Project

We can see that a new project has evolved in the West. What are the characteristics of the second Western project?

To put the universe on a plate and cut it with an analytical knife; then to see what the various slices look like.

The analytical knowledge acquired in this manner becomes a tool to harness and exploit nature. This is the first or the intellectual aspect of this second Western project.

There is also the ideological or religious aspect -- secularism. Secularism is a new religion of Western man. It is a religion in disguise. Secularism proclaims that we don't need any religion, any God to bring us salvation. We don't need any salvation. We want fulfillment here on earth. The idea of fulfillment on earth, however, becomes a new form of salvation. We can find fulfillment and happiness on earth through our own effort. We can create a paradise on earth.

The paradise on earth becomes a new theology, a new religion.

This is also a challenge to traditional God. Secularism assumes that we, humans, are as powerful as God. In this scheme human reason and human knowledge are elevated to extraordinary heights. Through knowledge, which is power, we shall harness nature and create a paradise on earth.

Thus we see how the Western project has evolved: from the idea of knowledge as the instrument of enlightenment and self-perfectibility -- the result of which is the liberation of the soul and the realization of God within, to the idea of knowledge as power, in order to harness the earth so that we can find fulfillment here and now in material terms.

Let us notice that the ends of human life of the first Western project are compatible with most Eastern traditions.

Buddhism insists on the right cultivation of the mind in order to reach enlightenment and then liberation.

Hinduism insists on Moksha which itself is a process of liberation, of merging the Atman with the Brahman.

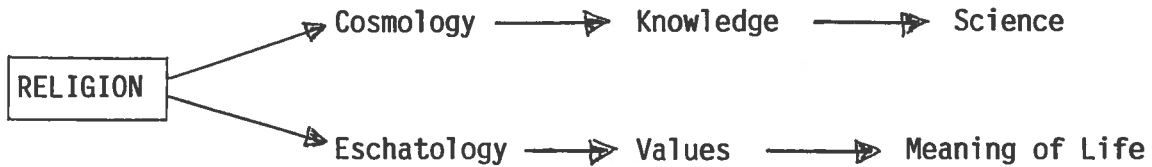
Taoism insists on following the right Tao, which leads away from illusions and on to the path of serenity and wisdom.

Zen insists on sitting still until enlightenment arrives.

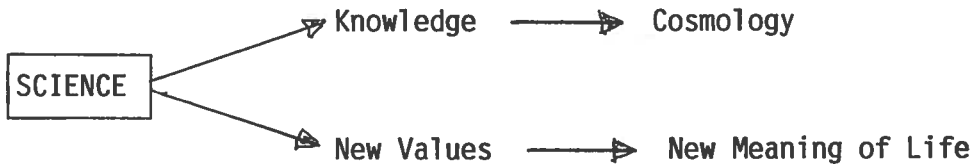
This is not so with the second Western project which radically separates itself from the major spiritual traditions.

### Science as Universal Philosophy. Physics as Cosmology

The second Western project emphasizes the importance of the exploration of the external world. It also emphasizes the pragmatic aspects of knowledge, namely that knowledge is generated for the sake of the manipulation of the external world. In the first project religion is the source of it all. From religion other things follow.



With the second project it is Science that is in the center, or rather at the beginning. From Science all other things follow.



In earlier times Cosmology (usually inspired by religion) defined the nature of knowledge. Now Cosmology is defined by Science and indeed a branch of it, with all the corresponding limitations. We must notice at the same time that by engaging in Cosmology in our days physicists and astrophysicists have enormously enlarged the field of their inquiry. The astrophysicists have in fact become metaphysicians.

The second Western project, or the secular project, is viewed as important for a variety of reasons. It claims that:

- i. There is at the corner a universal salvation for all -- the rich and the poor;
- ii. There are no mysteries, Science will explain all;
- iii. We can know the world; it is ours for the taking;
- iv. Western rationality or scientific rationality is universal. Other cultures must submit to it;
- v. Human progress can be universal, if all people apply the tools of Western science and technology, and the canons of Western rationality.

Within the second Western project knowledge and science have been elevated

to a religious position. The pre-eminence of science and scientific world view is assured by their perpetuation through educational institutions of the West, which have been very powerful indeed, both in intellectual terms and in religious terms. Western institutions of learning have been able to sway the minds of people of all other cultures. After having received higher education in the West they invariably become a part of the scientific/rational priesthood and in consequence they perpetuate the ideology of science and of the Western project.

Such is the general pattern. With notable exceptions. The Hindu mind seems to have been more resilient than the minds of people from other cultures. It seems that the tradition of the Upanishads and the great learning of the Vedas have inspired and guided the Hindu mind and enabled it to see through the limitations of Western assumptions: (i. - v.).

#### The End of Triumphant Secularism

After three centuries of pursuing the scientific-secular project, the Western mind is now reassessing its entire strategy and the ends which have motivated it. The assumptions so dear to the Western mentality (i. - v.), under closer scrutiny, do not appear so universal and indubitably valid as it was once surmised. In fact, they appear to be Western dogmas -- dazzling but limited, powerful but dangerous.

It is now increasingly recognized that instead of bringing fulfillment to all people of the earth, we have created, through Western ideology, a rather nightmarish pseudo-rational reality: with nuclear threat, violence, terrorism and fragmentation in full abundance. Fragmentation and splintering of the world, and of our psyche, is the key to our understanding of the present Western malaise. The present Western mind is confused. The confused mind is a dangerous one. It is prone to do all kinds of rash, irrational and stupid things.



How much this confused mind is the product of too narrow rationality and the overall fragmentation is a very good question indeed.

### The Third Western Project

There is no doubt that the Western mind is now searching for wholeness, for integration, for values that sustain life, for God within -- for the god of sicence has failed us.

We are slowly abandoning the pretension of the universality of our Western rationality, of our dream of making everybody a success in material terms. We realize more and more that what we took to be indubitable truths (assumptions i. v.) are but dogmas. This is accompanied by our awareness of the collapse of the Newtonian model of the world as universal and eternal, by our awareness that the New Physics is opening for us far-reaching and often staggeringly novel vistas.

These realizations occur within the context of an intense, though often concealed, search for spiritual values, for the meaning of life which goes beyond the material gratification. The Western mind is now prepared to eat its humble pie (though still reluctantly) and learn from others and not only teach others.

The third Western project is not yet clearly defined. Some of its emerging features are:

First, it is a holistic project emphasizing the unity of all things -- as contrasted with their atomistic separation.

Secondly, it is a spiritually inclined project without necessarily invoking any institutional religion or even the notion of God.

Thirdly, it is a project that emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things. If we take the clue from ecology as the science of interconnecting causes which keep habitats and environments in balance, then we can say that the new project is ecologically oriented.

Now some of these attributes of the new Western project are the ones which

the East has never ceased to hold. Hence we see new grounds for reconciliation.

Yet the fundamental question still remains: how do we accomplish the reconciliation between the East and the West? Or better still -- the synthesis between the East and the West? This is a problem which has preoccupied many great minds in the 20th Century.

The urgency of meeting the East and learning from it came in the late 1960's and early 1970's when the West, rather desperately, started to plunge into all kinds of mysticisms, some of which have been inspiring and sustaining, many of which have been skin deep, ornamental rather than sustaining. The strategy of the borrowing from the East has been haphazard, to say the least. The usual approach has been, and still is, to plunge into any given system of thought or school or tradition, get hold of some of its concepts or practices, and then adopt them (often superficially) to Western ways.

Now the consequences of our borrowing from the East should not be underestimated. The Western mind has been changing, and sometimes in a profound way. The large scale of our borrowings simply indicates that the West has been searching, trying, relentlessly seeking to overcome its stuckness.

#### Comparing the Two Approaches to Knowledge

If a real synthesis between the East and the West is ever to occur, it must start from a clear realization of what separates us in deeper conceptual terms. Let us look at the two respective conceptual skeletons, the Western and the Eastern, with the full foreknowledge that in comparing one system with the other, we grossly oversimplify each.<sup>1</sup>

<u>THE WEST</u>	<u>THE EAST</u>
The exploration of the external world	The exploration of the internal self
Objective knowledge	Knowledge of the self
Validated by 'objective', repeatable experiments	Validated through one's working on oneself
Evidence related to the repeatability of physical facts and theories	Evidence related to the recognition that we, as individuals, while working on our individual selves, arrive at intersubjective agreement concerning the theories of the self. In this sense, the theories acquire universal validity
The world constructed out of the physical events	The world seen as a mirror of the individual self. Cosmic laws are reflected in the self. To know thyself is the key to universal knowledge

Perhaps the key problem, on which hinges the solution to other problems is: how to reconcile objective evidence with subjective evidence. Better still: how to demonstrate that 'subjective' evidence and 'objective' evidence interlock, complement each other, represent partial but complementary approaches to ultimate truth. If this is accomplished, then we shall be able to show that:

I. the Buddha mind and the objective mind are aspects of the same universal/human/cosmic mind.

II. That the objective mind is one extreme articulation of Buddha mind, and that the Buddha mind can also be seen as objective -- that is when we grant the context (and the assumptions) within which the Buddha mind can manifest itself.

III. That the split between the East and the West represents different propensities of the same human mind which can articulate itself, and the world around itself -- once in this way, once in that way; and that each articulation is part of the unfolding of the evolutionary process.

IV. That with the rise of the New Physics -- when its metaphysical and eithical consequences are clearly spelt out -- we have at least the rudiments of the matrix for reconciliation, of the West and of the East, on a deeper conceptual level, and beyond superficial borrowings. The matrix of the New Physics informs us quite unequivocally that:

- a. Objective evidence as such does not exist for in every bit of the 'objective' evidence a part of our psyche is built;
- b. that we are allowed to see ourselves as part of the cosmos not merely in the physical sense but also as Atman participating in the Brahman;
- c. that we are allowed to see the entire cosmos as interconnected; moreover, as one magic dance of Shiva.

V. That when all these new metaphysical insights are absorbed and digested, we shall live in a different universe because we would have created a new universe.

### NOTES

It may be claimed that there is no one Eastern system of knowledge but several of them. This may be granted. Equally, we may claim that there isn't one system of Western knowledge but several of them. This may be granted too. The point is not to dissect the minutiae of the various systems but to achieve a panoramic view which would enable us to make general and significant comparisons.