



Trans-rational Aspects of Asian Philosophies

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1. Introduction

- ¶1. Taking into consideration the difference between the ways of practising philosophy in Asia and thinking about it in Europe, this essay will try to show one of the main contents of Asian philosophical schools, i.e. the liberating dimension. Whereas in the European Judeo-Christian tradition soteriology has been understood mainly as the doctrine of liberation through Jesus Christ,^[1] Chinese philosophical tradition instructs us about different aspects of the term itself and its implication in everyday life.
- ¶2. The importance of the cultivation of self-awareness and the use of methodical meditation in understanding the essence of the human condition, and the incorporation of these techniques into solving problems in society through different religious and philosophical streams, is one of the main characteristics of Asian philosophies. Two particular motivations or pressures are always present when solving problems and regulating relationships within social groups: firstly, external specific material demands; secondly, subjective motivations from within. In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, which stressed the soteriological quest in its minutest detail, the distinction between lijie^[2] (understanding according to reason or rational thinking) and wujie (understanding according to one's mind, signifying a self-realisation of one's nature and/or one's mind) has been done.

- ¶3. This distinction will help us when analysing Buddhism, as well as the two autochthonous Chinese philosophical traditions, Confucianism and Daoism and their distinct ways of cultivation of personality, which at a certain level might also bring the practitioner to the level of liberation of oneself from oneself. Patañjali's system of spiritual development will serve as an illustration for one of the oldest manuals for the spiritual cleansing on the path to liberation.

2. Cultivation of personality

- ¶4. Our aim is to look into some important Asian philosophical texts that are centred towards the cultivation of personality or self-awareness as a way of soteriology.^[3] The texts were written down in the time when in Europe most of such movements have not yet been established. Whereas European philosophy was mainly concerned with the conditions of liberation, various schools of Asian philosophy were developing the very means of attaining this goal. The notion of soteriology first appeared in European history and literature around 1770. For Tucker it meant a plan for the restoration and perfection of human nature. Paradoxically the plan itself in its deeper meaning has never been realised in Europe. In the European philosophical heritage we find nothing to correspond with the original idea. It is important, however to recognise elements and insights of Tucker's idea in Asian philosophical texts.
- ¶5. This essay will consider the following:

One should both accept and assimilate human impermanence and perhaps adopt meditative practice in addition to the commonly accepted logical discursive method. The following might be milestones on the path of salvation as it was practised in Asian philosophical traditions:

1. The process begins with the establishment and strengthening of moral and ethical principles, be it the simple acceptance of Confucius' ideal of junze, "the superior man" or the obligatory introductory levels of Patanjali's system, yama and niyama, or any other preparatory steps from other Asian philosophical systems. This should not be understood only on a purely rational level of knowledge, but the insights should also be allowed to permeate the mind-body.
2. The self-purification may consist also of ascetic phases. Many written accounts of the life of the Buddha and various other mystics tell us of such purifying phases. On a certain level of spiritual development such special interventions are transcended and therefore no longer necessary.
3. At a certain point one transcends the frame offered by a logical discursive perception of reality that traps one not only into certain notions and words but also a certain lifestyle and social relations. Ideally one comes to the insight that the Truth is beyond words: "As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken

of is not the constant Way” (Dao de jing 1).[4]

4. Spiritual development continues through various subsequent phases, like the rungs of a ladder. One such ladder is Patanjali’s system which leads to samadhi, complete liberation, and its uniqueness. These conditions should be seen as interdependent and interwoven. The importance of impermanence is correlated with the effectiveness of meditation: the good effects of meditation bring along also the acceptance of one’s own impermanence, not only on the rational level, but also on the trans-rational, deeper levels of consciousness. The condition for any advancement in the liberation process, however, is a thorough self-purification, which makes possible the access to the most subtle levels of mind-body-soul.

3. The initial cleansing processes: The Way of Confucius

- ¶6. Self-cultivation is the central aim of Confucius’ philosophy. Self-cultivation and self-transformation lead to the state of moral consciousness and social integrity.[5] The character of the superior man is shaped by the three main Confucian virtues ren (benevolence, humanity), li (proper conduct, ritual) and yi (sincerity). The 45th chapter of the 14th book of the Analects describes the superior man as follows:

Tsze-lû asked what constituted the superior man. The Master said, ‘The cultivation of himself in reverential carefulness.’ ‘And is this all?’ said Tsze-lû. ‘He cultivates himself so as to give rest to others,’ was the reply. ‘And is this all?’ again asked Tsze-lû. The Master said, ‘He cultivates himself as to give rest to all the people. He cultivates himself so as to give rest to all the people:-even Yao and Shun were still solicitous about this.’[6]

- ¶7. The above chapter shows that Confucius understood the process of self-cultivation as related to the process of becoming a superior man (junzi). From the soteriological aspect it is the awakening of that special attention which leads to the concentration and focus on that realm of the human state of mind which gradually enriches also one’s spirituality. In this context Confucius’ rather practical philosophy is taken as a turning-point to something new, reverent. It represents also the initial cleansing process, which helps to focus the scope of interest on the new attention which will help eliminate the whirlpool of everyday life, in which we are caught.

The Master said, ‘Without recognising the ordinance of Heaven, it is impossible to be a superior man.’ ‘Without an acquaintance with the rules of Propriety, it is impossible for the character to be established.’ ‘Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men.’[7]

- ¶8. One can only proceed in the way to freedom with proper manners and self-cultivation in accordance with one's place and destiny (ming) in certain social practice, which, if perpetuated, becomes the habit and pattern of behaviour. Confucius' credo was that: "The wise are joyful; the virtuous are long-lived."[\[8\]](#) As for his own life, it is said, that he practised what he thought and, as he described his life-process, his attitudes also brought him into the state of liberation and bliss.

The Master said, 'At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning, at thirty, I stood firm, at forty, I had no doubts, at fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven, at sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth, at seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right.'[\[9\]](#)

4. The Daoists

- ¶9. Among Chinese philosophical schools, the Daoist is the one which is known for the importance of paradoxes, which are supposed to bring the adept to a higher level of understanding and experiencing reality. The abundance of metaphors, stories and paradoxes does not talk about the insufficiency of logical apparatus which would painfully bring one to the Truth, but rather indicates that in the case of the Daoists a distinctly different philosophical path has been formed and practised.
- ¶10. As for the different understanding of what Truth might be, the following discourse from the Zhuang Zi might be illustrative:

By 'the Truth' I mean purity and sincerity in their highest degree. He who lacks purity and sincerity cannot move others. /.../ When a man has the Truth within himself, his spirit may move among external things. That is why the Truth is to be prized![\[10\]](#)

- ¶11. Such an understanding of the Truth also requires different tools for achieving it. The 10th Chapter of the Dao de jing is instructive for the way of cultivation and meditation, as well as the aspect of wu-wei and the dimensions of the possible liberation present in the Daoist texts.

In nourishing the soul and embracing the One—can you do it without letting them leave?

In concentrating your breath and making it soft—can you (make it like that of) a child?

In cultivating and cleaning your profound mirror—can you do it so that it has no blemish?

In loving the people and giving life to the state—can you do it without using

knowledge? /.../

Give birth to them and nourish them.

Give birth to them but don't try to own them;

Help them to grow but don't rule them.

This is called Profound Virtue.[\[11\]](#)

- ¶12. The above statement and Zhuang Zi's advice to practice the method of self-cultivation by sitting and forgetting, forgetting one's self or fastening one's spirit, bring us close to the classical system of Patanjali described in his Yoga sutras. The experience of kaivalya (aleness, the long-sought liberation)[\[12\]](#) is obtained. Such is the state described in Zhuang Zi as: The Perfect man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit; the Sage has no fame.[\[13\]](#)
- ¶13. As for the liberation project of Chinese Daoist philosophers, as well as representatives of some other philosophical schools, their main concern was focused around the question of where is the Dao, which besides theoretical reflections included also a certain way of leading one's own life. It meant a certain dedication and renunciation of one's own ego. The chief concern of Chinese philosophers therefore was not the question of what is the truth but rather, in the case of Daoists, the cultivation of egolessness which might bring one into the harmony with the Dao where the birthplace of freedom is. This however is not the freedom as the absence of distress and repression. It represents the highest degree of ethical commitment so characteristic of the True Man.

without delight; he went back in without a fuss. He came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all. He didn't forget where he began; he didn't try to find out where he would end. He received something and The True Man of ancient times knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged took pleasure in it; he forgot about it and handed it back again. This is what I call not using the mind to repel the Way, not using man to help out Heaven. This is what I call the True Man.[\[14\]](#)

5. Buddhism

- ¶14. For the discussion of soteriology, Buddhism and its notion of freedom is the most instructive among the Asian philosophical orientations. When discussing the notion of freedom in the European and Asian philosophical contexts it is important to try and see both of them in contrastive perspective since the comparative method widely used in approaches to various Asian philosophical traditions is distinctly a “Western” one and does not assure either neutrality or objectivity which are both supposed to be two main characteristics of Western science. As a result, we discover a distinctly asymmetrical approach in the so-called dialogue between “East” and “West” in the field of philosophy. We have to acknowledge the civilisational bias and make clear the interests and priorities disguised in the so-called dialogue.^[15] The main question should be who is dominating the dialogue, and in which language the dialogue is carried out. Not only are the so-called Asian members of the global philosophical undertaking carrying out the dialogue in English, but even the concept of the Other is the result of the Western ontological preoccupation, something which is non-existent in Asia. We shall try to show how in Buddhism the concept of the Other and its quest for freedom can never be a relevant philosophical preoccupation since it is only the reason, or a consequence of an illusion about an apparent set of differences. There is no ego, and the fact that the Buddhist philosophers did not elaborate on the Other does not mean an insufficiency, but is rather a relevant philosophical choice which any philosophy which claims to be global should respect. Even a dialogue itself and the politics of discourse are exclusively Western undertakings which are part of the constitutive arrogance of the Western cultural identity and play in Buddhism a distinctly different role, namely they should help both parties in their way to liberation. Universalism in the field of philosophy can therefore be seen as an act of domination carried out in the manner of the domineering subject cultivated in the European philosophical tradition. The position of the acting subject was a dominant point in the history of European philosophy and should therefore be questioned on account of its tendency to domination.
- ¶15. One of the main philosophical themes in Buddhist philosophy is the inseparable unity between philosophical insight and meditation which is also one of the vital conditions for a successful soteriological project. Philosophy is therefore developed not only on an intellectual level but also on the physical level, since the truth is not only the way of thinking about the world but rather the way of existing in the world. Discovering the truth is an activity beyond the pure intellect, being a psycho-physical awareness in which all instances of knowledge are simultaneously practical and theoretical. In consideration of the Buddhist way of achieving freedom, two aspects should be observed: firstly freedom as a state without external limitations and constraints; and, secondly the practice of an individual without internal limitations and constraints. The latter aspect was central to the Buddhist tradition which elaborated on the desire and will of an individual and the various ways of achieving freedom. As a result, it was not focused on external limitations of the individual’s freedom. The ways of achieving freedom in European philosophical and political traditions have determined also the methods of liberation of its subjects. Since freedom was understood as an

absence of limitations and constraints, the Way to freedom focused on the elimination of external obstacles and on ensuring a protected space in which each individual could act according to his/her wishes and needs.

- ¶16. The Buddhist understanding of emptiness and the absence of ego developed in the Buddha's main doctrine of the absence of any permanent ego in all sentient beings. It is based on the experience of language and thought which is not based only on the logically-discursive function of language which is supposed to express the absolute truth. The Mahayana Buddhist canon advocates the theory about two levels of truth: relative truth and absolute truth. On the level of relative truth we distinguish various objects as separated entities of individual forms. The understanding of the absolute truth however demands the cultivation of higher states of consciousness which one can achieve by using specific practices. This higher level of truth recognises objects and events as identical in their nature and connected in a certain whole, although recognised as separate entities. The knowledge and cultivation of both levels of truth are possible only with intellectual and logical undertakings which should also necessarily include more direct intuitive experiences. These include also mystical experiences, which in Buddhism are not understood as something opposed to reflexive thought. The majority of techniques engendering such experiences include conceptual thought which is only apparently incompatible with ineffable absolute truth to which the philosopher is aiming. Real knowledge therefore cannot be achieved on the basis of theoretical thinking, but rather by using the unity of body-mind which does not presuppose any kind of analytical distinction between the mental and somatic.[\[16\]](#)
- ¶17. For the Buddhist philosopher, body becomes the supreme cognitive instrument[\[17\]](#) which eventually leads him/her to the right way of seeing. Knowledge without a personal experience remains something superfluous on which a true philosophy cannot be built. Any knowledge which the philosopher might possess should be rooted in experience, which is seeing. This large emphasis on "seeing" in Buddhism is based on Buddha's notion of the interrelatedness of knowledge (jnana) and seeing (pasya). Seeing is a certain experience which perceives phenomena and things in the state of suchness (tathata), with the interrelatedness of everything. All knowledge has therefore its basis and is rooted in the right seeing of reality, to which Buddhist philosophy leads oneself. Reason and rationality is not understood as something superior, or something which should dominate other dimensions of the human being. Since it is aiming at the understanding of everything that is understandable, Buddhist philosophy disputes that position in which only certain fragments of Being— those things and phenomena understood by knowledge alone—could give the image of the entire Being. This philosophy therefore can never be an undertaking based on the pure intellect.

- ¶18. In the main, the history of European philosophy has perceived the Ego as something permanent, unchangeable, and autonomous, unlike that for the human personality. In early Buddhism the notion of non-ego (anatman) was developed (as opposed to ego [atman]), in which an eternal and unchangeable essence, independent of anything else, exists. The absence of ego, therefore, means the negation of the absolute reality and any kind of permanent, unchangeable substance. It means also that people do not possess any centre or core, although we do have various mental functions. Here we see a complete negation, the absence of ego, but still the presence of mental, cognitive functions, carried out by the mind, which as such is originally unclear and therefore unable to grasp the truth. Therefore in Buddhism various mind-cleansing techniques are practised, which should free the mind from what Zhuang Zi would label as “illusionary dust of the world.” The cleaning techniques are supposed to be able to help the person in clarifying, and cleaning the unclear mental states. The theories of the absence of ego or egolessness do not imply the absence of the mind, but rather the cleaning and clarifying of it.
- ¶19. In Buddhism, birth and death are understood as the first and the last of the four sufferings (birth, ageing, illness and death) which are common to all sentient beings which are able to experience suffering. This is also the central problem of human existence in Buddhism, which is just a part of raising-vanishing process, which we share with all living beings. The way to freedom, in which the strong soteriological mission of Buddhism is to be perceived, should begin with the liberation from the raising-vanishing process, shared with all living beings. It means also the liberation from birth and death in the cycle of transmigration which is carried out in the unlimitedness of time and space and is based on the dehomocentric, non-anthropomorphic position in understanding the basic human problem and the liberation from it. Buddhism does not nurture the illusion of any kind of domineering position of humans in regard to other sentient beings. The transcendence of human limitations in Buddhism is the way of acknowledging birth and death in the context of the much wider spectrum of the raising-vanishing process which is common to all sentient beings. Freedom is here achieved by acknowledgement of one’s real position in the universe and the liberation from any kind of illusions of a special mission or distinguished position for humans in the world. It includes also the true understanding of birth and death and their meanings. The courageous confrontation with death, and its real acceptance, is the basis of the liberation from birth and death. Liberation means the achievement of the process of Thinking which is beyond conceptual thinking. The acknowledgement of one’s own ego leads to the forgetting of it, which enables the recognition of the absolute ego. The Buddha’s nature which is present in every individual is to be discovered only through the recognition or acknowledgement of one’s own ego in connection with everything which exists. This, however, is to grasp the absolute ego. Egoless behaviour, therefore, in Buddhist philosophy and practice, is the necessary condition for one’s liberation and achievement of freedom.

- ¶20. Self-cultivation techniques and various practices lead to the absence of ego as the basis for the absence of thought; not thought as such, but rather the egotistical attachment to the ego. It means the liberation from the Selfhood or any need for the big Other. This absence of thought, achieved by the practice of sitting meditation, is possible if the individual becomes a pure corporal subject and if one is concentrated on the activity itself which is carried out through the body. The absence of self implies also the overcoming of the distinctions between the ego and all the rest of the world, which allows the possibility for the presentation of reality. The unity of body-mind is achieved through the practice which is not bodily technique, but rather brings us beyond any duality. The proof of the freedom is the achievement of a level on which the entire world is without any illusionary dust, the dust produced by the objects of the ego.

5. Patanjali

- ¶21. Patanjali's system, in which the author collected the knowledge about the yogic tradition in India, is presented in his Yoga Sutras in which his brilliance as an author and practitioner of Yoga is manifested. The basis of the text is a demanding ethical codex which is the introductory step in the mind-transforming way which might bring the practitioner to his/her deepest being and at the same time enables one to liberate oneself from various limitations and conditionings. The system itself is one of the finest examples of coexistence of the rationality and trans-rationality developed on meditative and contemplative ways. The philosophy and practice which emerged from it encompasses various aspects of experiencing the reality. The first two steps of Patañjali's ladder of spiritual purification, yama and niyama represent the necessary ethical preparation for the following steps which lead to the final samadhi, concentration and the state which transcends the consciousness. The main question is to what extent one understands and practices these ethical demands; either in a permissive way or in an obsessive demanding one, which can make life in the usual human community almost impossible. Various authors mention that the practice of ahimsa (non-injury) is possible even in its most demanding aspect, since it is based on the spirit of non-injury, abandonment of the evil tendencies such as malice, hatred etc.

Since killing of living beings is unavoidable in the course of one's life, some people wonder how it can be possible to practice non-injury. This doubt arises out of ignorance of the principle of the practice of non-injury. The commentator has said that enjoyment of material objects is not possible without hurting others (vide II.15). Therefore in order to live, hurting living beings is inevitable. Knowing that, the Yogins practice Yoga to avoid being born again.[\[18\]](#)

Although such strict yogic discipline is not expected from all philosophers, it is not possible to be a genuine and good Asian philosopher without testing and practising one's own philosophy in daily life.

6. Conclusion

- ¶22. The negation of the ontological doctrine of the ego in Buddhism is one of the aspects of liberation in the vast tradition of Asian philosophies. The way of achieving liberation in Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist and Indian philosophical traditions discussed above can teach us of the illusion of the often supposed superiority of philosophical speculation as understood in the Judeo-Christian-Greek heritage. The techniques and practices mentioned in the text, are directed to the development and transformation of the mind and personality aiming at the achievement of wisdom (prajna). Unlike European philosophy, which has in its history sought even mathematical models of philosophical thinking, various Asian philosophical schools have not put the demands of mathematical proofs in their philosophy. Instead of a rigid intellectual and logical approach, they have employed direct intuitive experience, which is without doubt much richer than rationalisations based on a discipline of analysis and separation. The one-dimensionality of rationality is put into question and can therefore not be used as the sole tool for the “analysis” or “comparison” of these traditions under investigation with those of the Euro-American stream of thought. The soteriological project of the traditions discussed becomes evident, since knowing necessarily interconnects with becoming. This can lead to a certain challenge to the philosophical schools based on the Judeo-Christian-Greek tradition, which have separated the fields of ontology and epistemology, which have in the traditions discussed been cultivated together, inseparably. The metaphysics of subject and the ontological reductions so well established in modern European philosophical history can prove to be unsuitable for the approaches used in Asian philosophies and therefore also call for the re-examination of the foundations of rationality. The questions of reality and ego encroach upon the realm of the ineffable, which remains the source of the great creativity in any philosophical tradition and its way into liberation.

END NOTES

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