Chapter 7

JOURNEY TO THE EAST

EASTERN PANTHEISTIC MONISM

And all the voices, all the goals,
all the yearnings, all the sorrows,
all the pleasures, all the good and evil,
all of them together was the world. . . .
The great song with thousand voices
consisted of one word: OM—perfection.

Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*

In the course of Western thought eventually we reach an impasse. Naturalism leads to nihilism, and nihilism is hard to transcend on the terms that the Western world, permeated by naturalism, wishes to accept. Atheistic existentialism, as we have seen, is one attempt, but it has some rather serious problems. Theism is an option, but for a naturalist it is uninviting. How can one accept the existence of an infinite-personal, transcendent God? For over a century that question has posed a serious barrier. Many people today would rather stick with their naturalism, for it still seems to be a decided improvement on the fabulous religion it rejected. Moreover, modern Christendom, with its hypocritical churches and its lack of compassion, is a poor testimony to the viability of theism. No, it is thought, that way will not do.

Perhaps we should look again at naturalism. Where did we go wrong? Well, for one thing we discover that by following reason our naturalism

leads to nihilism. But we need not necessarily abandon our naturalism; we can simply say reason is not to be trusted. Existentialism went partway down this route; perhaps we should now go all the way. Second, since we in the West tend to quarrel over "doctrines," ideas and so forth, let us call a moratorium not only on quarreling but on distinguishing intellectually at all. Perhaps any "useful" doctrine should be considered true. Third, if all our activism to produce change by manipulating the system of the universe produces pollution and our efforts at social betterment go unrewarded, why not abandon our activism? Let's stop doing and raise our quality of life by simply being. Finally, if Western quarrels turn into armed conflicts, why not retreat completely? Let go and let happen: can that be any worse than what we have now? Has, perhaps, the East a better way?

On a sociological level, we can trace the interest in the East to the rejection of middle-class values by the young generation of the 1960s. First, Western technology (that is, reason in its practical application) made possible modern warfare. The Vietnam War (young Americans had not personally experienced earlier conflicts) is a result of reason. So let us abandon reason. Second, Western economics has led to gross inequity and economic oppression of masses of people. So let us reject the presuppositions from which such a system developed. Third, Western religion has seemed largely to support those in control of technology and the economic system. So let us not fall into that trap.

The swing to Eastern thought since the 1960s is, therefore, primarily a retreat from Western thought. The West ends in a maze of contradictions, acts of intellectual suicide and a specter of nihilism that haunts the dark edges of all our thought. Is there not another way?

Indeed, there is—a very different way. With its antirationalism, its syncretism, its quietism, till recently its lack of technology, its uncomplicated lifestyle, and most significantly, its exotic and radically different religious framework, the East is extremely attractive. Moreover, the East has an even longer tradition than the West. Sitting, as it were, next door to us for centuries have been modes of conceiving and viewing the world that are poles apart from ours. Maybe the East, that quiet land of meditating gurus and simple life, has the answer to our longing for meaning and significance.

For over a century Eastern thought has been flowing west. The Hindu

and Buddhist scriptures have been translated and now circulate in inexpensive paperback editions. As early as 1893 at the first Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda began introducing the teachings of his own Indian guru, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. D. T. Suzuki from Japan poured Zen into Western publications. And Alan Watts from the West imbibed Zen and returned to teach his fellow West-

> Tibetan Buddhism has attracted devotees in the West. Its teachers offer insights into suffering and methods for cultivating mental equanimity and compassion. It appeals to Westerners' utilitarian pursuit of self-betterment because it seems, at first anyway, to set aside the necessity of faith and to ask the inquirer only to try its methods and see the results. It says that one can become a Buddha, an "awakened" one, by one's own efforts. Its goal is enlightenment about a truth beyond the limits of contingent reality. It is as dubious about objective reality as certain currents of Western philosophy have become. It proclaims impermanence and emptiness, and so fits our experience of upheaval. It questions the reality of the "self." Nowadays the West does too, and often conceives the Gospel as a manual not for the personal development of holiness, but for the impersonal engineering of social justice.
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> **JOHN B. BUESCHER,** "Everything Is on Fire: Tibetan Buddhism Inside Out"

erners. By the 1960s Eastern studies had filtered down to the undergraduate level. Indian gurus have been crossing and recrossing the United States and Europe for several decades. In the last couple decades the Tibetan Dalai Lama with his quiet, sensitive demeanor and his quest for a peaceful solution to our international conflicts has made a mark as well. Knowledge of the East is now easy to obtain, and more and more its view of reality is becoming a live option in the West.[1]

[1]The present account of the recent swing to Eastern thought is painfully superficial. For more detail see the following: R. C. Zaehner, *Zen, Drugs and Mysticism* (New York: Vintage, 1974). A more expansive and scholarly examination is found in the essays collected in Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark P. Leone, eds., *Religious Movements in Contemporary America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974). Stephen Neill in *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984) surveys and evaluates several religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. A Christian critique of the Western trend toward the East is found in Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994), pp. 195-234. In

BASIC EASTERN PANTHEISTIC MONISM

The East is, of course, as rich and as hard to label and categorize as the West, as will be obvious to anyone who simply scans the table of contents of a study such as Surendranath Dasgupta's five-volume *History of Indian Philosophy.*[2] The following description is limited to the Eastern worldview most popular in the West: pantheistic monism. This is the root worldview that underlies the Hindu Advaita Vedanta system of Shankara, the Transcendental Meditation of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and much of the Upanishads. There are especially the views so beautifully captured by the German writer Hermann Hesse in his *Siddhartha,* a novel that became popular with college students in the 1970s and thus served as a transmitter of a generic pantheistic monism. Buddhism, which developed from Hinduism, shares many of its features but differs with it at a key point: the nature of ultimate reality.

Pantheistic monism is distinguished from other related Eastern worldviews by its monism, the notion that only one impersonal element constitutes reality. Hare Krishna does not fit in this worldview, for while it shares many of the characteristics of Eastern pantheistic monism, it declares that reality is ultimately personal (and thus shares a similarity to theism totally absent in Advaita Vedanta).

Hopefully these cryptic remarks will become clearer as we proceed. But before we do, we need to address two difficulties in doing worldview analysis. First, we must realize that the eight worldview questions imply a set of categories that do not neatly fit the categories (or lack of them)

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chap. 11 of *Miracles* (London: Fontana, 1960), pp. 85-98, C. S. Lewis argues that even in the West pantheism is humankind's natural religion, and his critique of this form of pantheism is helpful. See also Ernest Becker's highly critical analysis of Zen Buddhism from the standpoint of modern psychoanalysis and psychotherapy theory in *Zen: A Rational Critique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).

[2]Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy,* 5 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922-1969). For texts of Eastern philosophy and religion see Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds., *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957); Wing-tsit Chan, ed., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963); and Lucien Stryk, ed., *World of the Buddha* (New York: Grove, 1968). For general studies of Eastern religions, philosopher Keith Yandell recommends Stuart Hackett, *Oriental Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979); David L. Johnson, *A Reasoned Look at Asian Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985); Julius Lipner, *The Face of Truth* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Eric Lott, *God and the Universe in the Vedantic Theology of Ramanuja* (Madras: Ramanuja Research Society, 1976); and Lott, *Vedantic Approaches to God* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

that characterize Eastern thought.[3] The East does not readily accept the distinctions we so readily assume between God and the cosmos (his creation); human beings and the rest of the cosmos; good and evil and illusion and reality. We may use these terms, but we must be aware of their somewhat different meanings.

Second, we must be aware of the vast differences among religious and cultural embodiments of Eastern pantheism. Worldview analysis is neither a description nor an analysis of religions. For that, readers

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Buddhism includes an enormous range of diversity in belief and practice. Learning that someone is a Buddhist does not tell you about that person's beliefs. Knowing his or her geographical origin may or may not be helpful. For example, knowing that a Buddhist is from Sri Lanka, Myanmar or Thailand can be helpful because these countries are dominated by Theraveda Buddhism. On the other hand, knowing that a Buddhist is from China or Japan leaves matters completely open. Asking Buddhists from China or Japan what school of Buddhism they adhere to may not be of much help either. Many people think of the Buddhism they practice as Buddhism—plain and simple. They are not necessarily attuned to the Western practice of differentiating one specific group from all others and believing that it is right and all others are false. For them they are Buddhists, and that's all they are concerned with. And what they actually practice may have very little to do with any "official" school of Buddhism.

WINFRIED CORDUAN, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*

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should consult books on comparative religion. Win Corduan's *Neighboring Faiths* is a good place to start.[4] He focuses on the diversity of beliefs and practices among adherents to each religion (see sidebar). When we try to grasp the worldview of any given writer or individual person, we need to pay careful attention to his or her understanding of

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[3]See chapter 9, pp. 218-20 below.

[4]Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

their basic intellectual commitments. We must not conclude that, because people identify themselves as a Buddhist or Hindu, they hold any of the propositions identified here as Eastern pantheistic monism. Still, to introduce those of us with basically Western intellectual roots to the various mindsets of our Eastern counterparts, understanding these worldview notions will be helpful.

1. Worldview Questions 1, 2 and 3: *Atman is Brahman; that is, the soul of each and every human being is the Soul of the cosmos (ultimate reality).*

"Atman is Brahman," a phrase from the Hindu *Upanishads*, is the pantheistic counterpart and contrast to the opening declaration of the biblical book of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). Instead of drawing a bold line between God and his creation, however, the Hindu text declares them to be one and the same. Atman (the essence, the soul, of any person) is Brahman (the essence, the Soul of the whole cosmos). What is a human being? That is, what is at the very core of each of us? Each person is the whole shooting match. Each person is (to put it boldly but accurately in Eastern terms) God.

But we must define God in pantheistic terms. God is the one, infinite-impersonal, ultimate reality. That is, God is the cosmos. God is all that exists; nothing exists that is not God.[5] If anything that is not God appears to exist, it is *maya,* illusion, and does not truly exist. In other words, anything that exists as a separate and distinct object—this chair, not that one; this rock, not that tree; me, not you—is an illusion. It is not our separateness that gives us reality, it is our oneness, the fact that we are Brahman and Brahman is One. Yes, Brahman is *the* One.

Ultimate reality is beyond distinction; it just *is.* In fact, as we shall see in the discussion of epistemology, we cannot express in language the nature of this oneness. We can only "realize" it by becoming it, by seizing our unity, our "godhead," and resting there beyond any distinction whatsoever.

In the West we are not used to this kind of system. To distinguish is to

[5]Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) once touched his disciple Naren (who later became Swami Vivekananda and traveled to Chicago for the first Parliament of World Religions, becoming as a result a major figure in the introduction of Eastern thought to the West); he fell into a trance and saw in a flash "that everything actually *is* God, that nothing whatsoever exists but the Divine, that the entire universe is His body, and all things are His forms" (Richard Schiffman, *Sri Ramakrishna: A Prophet for a New Age* [New York: Paragon House, 1989], p. 153).

think. The laws of thought demand distinction: *A* is *A;* but *A* is not non-*A*. To know reality is to distinguish one thing from another, label it, catalog it, recognize its subtle relation to other objects in the cosmos. In the East to "know" reality is to pass beyond distinction, to "realize" the oneness of all by being one with the all. This sort of conception—insofar as it can be understood by the mind—is best expressed indirectly. *The Upanishads* abound in attempts to express the inexpressible indirectly in parables.

> "Bring me a fruit from this banyan tree."
> "Here it is, father."
> "Break it."
> "It is broken, Sir."
> "What do you see in it?"
> "Very small seeds, Sir."
> "Break one of them, my son."
> "It is broken, Sir."
> "What do you see in it?"
> "Nothing at all, Sir."
>
> Then his father spoke to him: "My son, from the very essence in the seed which you cannot see comes in truth this vast banyan tree.
>
> "Believe me, my son, an invisible and subtle essence is the spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality. That is Atman. THOU ART THAT."[6]

So the father, a guru, teaches his son, a novice, that even a novice is ultimate reality. Yet all of us, Eastern and Western alike, perceive distinctions. We do not "realize" our oneness. And that leads us to the second proposition.

2. Worldview Questions 1, 2 and 3, continued: *Some things are more one than others.*

Here we seem to be multiplying cryptic remarks and getting nowhere. But we ought not despair. Eastern "thought" is like that.

"Some things are more one than others" is another way of saying that reality is a hierarchy of appearances. Some "things," some appearances or illusions, are closer than others to being at one with the One. The ordinary Eastern hierarchy looks rather like one Westerners might construct but for a different reason. Matter pure and simple (that is, mineral) is the

[6]From the Chandogya Upanishad, in *The Upanishads,* trans. Juan Mascaró (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1965), p. 117.

least real; then vegetable life, then animal and finally humanity. But humanity too is hierarchical; some people are closer to unity than others. The Perfect Master, the Enlightened One, the guru are the human beings nearest to pure being.

Partly, consciousness seems to be the principle of hierarchy here. To "realize" oneness would seem to imply consciousness. But as we shall see, when one is one with the One, consciousness completely disappears and one merely *is* infinite-impersonal Being. Consciousness, like techniques of meditation, is just one more thing to be discarded when its usefulness is past. Still, pure matter is further from realization of its oneness than is humanity, and that is what counts.

At the furthest reaches of illusion, then, is matter. While its essence is Atman, it is not. Yet it should so *be.* We must be careful here not to attach any notion of morality to our understanding of the requirement that all things be at one with the One. Here it means simply that being itself requires unity with the One. The One is ultimate reality, and all that is not the One is not really anything. True, it is not anything of value either, but more important, it has no being at all.

So we are back to the original proposition: Some things are more one, that is, more real, than others. The next question is obvious: how does an individual, separate being get to be one with the One?

3. Worldview Questions 1, 2 and 3: *Many (if not all) roads lead to the One.*

Getting to oneness with the One is not a matter of finding the one true path. There are many paths from maya to reality. I may take one, you another, a friend a third, ad infinitum. The goal is not to be with one another on the same path but to be headed in the right direction on our own path. That is, we must be oriented correctly.

Orientation is not so much a matter of doctrine as of technique. On this the East is adamant. Ideas are not finally important. As Sri Ramakrishna said, "Do not argue about doctrines and religions. There is only one. All rivers flow to the Ocean. Flow and let others flow too!"[7]

On a doctrinal level, you and I may only occasionally agree on what is true about anything—ourselves, the external world, religion. No matter.

[7]Schiffman, *Sri Ramakrishna,* p. 214, quoting from Rolland Romain, *The Life of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1931), p. 197.

Eventually religions lead to the same end. Realizing oneness with the One is not a matter of belief but of technique, and even techniques vary.

Some gurus, such as the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, stress chanting a mantra, a seemingly meaningless Sanskrit word sometimes selected by a spiritual master and given in secret to an initiate. Others recommend meditation on a mandala, a highly structured, often fascinatingly ornate and beautiful circular image, symbol of the totality of reality. Others require endless repetition of prayers or acts of obeisance.

Almost all of these techniques, however, require quiet and solitude. They are methods of intellectually contentless meditation. One attempts to get on the vibe level with reality, to turn one's soul to the harmony of the cosmos and ultimately to the one solid, nonharmonic, nondual, Ultimate vibration—Brahman, the One. To achieve this is the Eastern monistic way of achieving salvation.

Of all the "paths," one of the most common, especially with Western practitioners, involves chanting the word *Om* or a phrase with that word in it, for example, "Om Mane Padme Hum." Both the word *Om* and the phrase are essentially untranslatable because they are intellectually contentless. Some have suggested for *Om* the following: *yes, perfection, ultimate reality, all, the eternal word.* Maharishi Mahesh Yogi says that *Om* is the "sustainer of life," "the beginning and end of all creation," "that hum, which is the first silent sound, first silent wave that starts from that silent ocean of unmanifested life."[8]

It is obvious that the word *meaning* is not used in this Eastern system in the same way it is used in theism or naturalism. We are not talking here about rational content but metaphysical union. We can truly "pronounce" *Om* and "understand" its meaning only when we are at one with the One, when "Atman is Brahman" is not an epistemological statement but an ontological realization, that is, a "becoming real."

The Mandukya Upanishad says it this way:

> OM. This eternal Word is all: what was, what is and what shall be, and what beyond is in eternity. All is OM.
>
> Brahman is all and Atman is Brahman. Atman, the Self, has four conditions.
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> The first condition is the waking life of outward-moving consciousness, enjoying the seven outer gross elements.

[8]*Meditations of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi* (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 18.

The second condition is the dreaming life of inner-moving consciousness, enjoying the seven subtle inner elements in its own light and solitude.

The third condition is the sleeping life of silent consciousness when a person has no desires and beholds no dreams. That condition of deep sleep is one of oneness, a mass of silent consciousness made of peace and enjoying peace.

This silent consciousness is all-powerful, all-knowing, the inner ruler, the source of all, the beginning and end of all beings.

The fourth condition is Atman in his own pure state: the awakened life of supreme consciousness. It is neither outer nor inner consciousness, neither semi-consciousness, nor sleeping-consciousness, neither consciousness nor unconsciousness. He is Atman, the Spirit himself, that cannot be seen or touched, that is above all distinction, beyond thought and ineffable. In the union with him is the supreme proof of his reality. He is the end of evolution and non-duality. He is peace and love.

This Atman is the eternal Word OM. Its three sounds, A, U, and M, are the first three states of consciousness, and these three states are the three sounds.

The first sound A is the first state of waking consciousness, common to all men. It is found in the words *Apti,* "attaining," and *Adimatvam,* "being first." Who knows this attains in truth all his desires, and in all things becomes first.

The second sound U is the second state of dreaming consciousness. It is found in the words *Utkarsha,* "uprising," and *Ubhayatvam,* "bothness." Who knows this raises the tradition of knowledge and attains equilibrium. In his family is never born any one who knows not Brahman.

The third sound M is the third state of sleeping consciousness. It is found in the words *Miti,* "measure," and in the root *Mi,* "to end," that gives *Apti,* "final end." Who knows this measures all with his mind and attains the final End.

The word OM as one sound is the fourth state of supreme consciousness. It is beyond the senses and is the end of evolution. It is non-duality and love. He goes with his self to the supreme Self who knows this, who knows this.[9]

I have quoted this Upanishad at length because it contains several key ideas in a relatively short passage. At the moment I am most concerned with the word *Om* and how it represents ultimate reality. To say *Om* is not to convey intellectual content. *Om* means anything and everything and there-

[9]Mascaró, *Upanishads,* pp. 83-84.

fore, being beyond distinction, can just as well be said to *mean* nothing. To say *Om* is rather to become or attempt to become what *Om* symbolizes.

4. Worldview Questions 1, 2 and 3: *To realize one's oneness with the cosmos is to pass beyond personality.*

Let us go back for a moment to the first proposition and see where it leads us when we turn our attention to human beings in this world. Atman is Brahman. Brahman is one and impersonal. Therefore, Atman is impersonal. Note the conclusion again: Human beings in their essence—their truest, fullest being—are impersonal.

This notion in pantheistic monism is at diametrical odds with theism. In theism, personality is the chief thing about God and the chief thing about people. It means an individual has complexity at the core of his or her being. Personality demands self-consciousness and self-determinacy, and these involve duality—a thinker and a thing thought. Both God and humanity in theism are complex.

In pantheism the chief thing about God is Oneness, a sheer abstract, undifferentiated, nondual unity. This puts God beyond personality. And since Atman is Brahman, human beings are beyond personality too. For any of us to "realize" our being is for us to abandon our complex personhood and enter the undifferentiated One.

Let us return for a moment to a section of the Mandukya Upanishad quoted above. Atman, it proclaims, has "four conditions": waking life, dreaming life, deep sleep and "the awakened life of pure consciousness." The progression is important; the higher state is the state most approaching total oblivion, for one goes from the activity of ordinary life in the external world to the activity of dreaming to the nonactivity, the nonconsciousness, of deep sleep and ends in a condition that in its designation sounds like the reversal of the first three, "pure consciousness."

Then we note that "pure consciousness" has nothing to do with any kind of consciousness with which we are familiar. "Pure consciousness" is, rather, sheer union with the One and not "consciousness" at all, for that demands duality—a subject to be conscious and an object for it to be conscious of. Even self-consciousness demands duality in the self. But this "pure consciousness" is not consciousness; it is pure being.

This explanation may help us understand why Eastern thought often leads to quietism and inaction. To be is not to do. Meditation is the main

route to being, and meditation—whatever the style—is a case study in quietude. A symbol of this is the Hindu guru sitting cross-legged on a lonely ledge of a Himalayan peak in rapt contemplation.

5. Worldview Question 5: *To realize one's oneness with the cosmos is to pass beyond knowledge. The principle of noncontradiction does not apply where ultimate reality is concerned.*

From the statement Atman is Brahman, it also follows that human beings in their essence are beyond knowledge. Knowledge, like personality, demands duality—a knower and a known. But the One is beyond duality; it is sheer unity. Again as the Mandukya Upanishad says, "He is Atman, the Spirit himself, . . . above all distinction, beyond thought and ineffable." In other words, to *be* is not to know.

In *Siddhartha,* perhaps the most Eastern novel ever written by a Westerner, Hesse has the illumined Siddhartha say:

> Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. . . . In every truth the opposite is equally true. For example, a truth can only be expressed and enveloped in words if it is one-sided. Everything that is thought and expressed in words is one-sided, only half the truth; it lacks totality, completeness, unity.[10]

The argument is simple. Reality is one; language requires duality, several dualities in fact (speaker and listener, subject and predicate); ergo, language cannot convey the truth about reality. Juan Mascaró explains what this means for the doctrine of God:

> When the sage of the *Upanishads* is pressed for a definition of God, he remains silent, meaning God is silence. When asked again to express God in words, he says: "Neti, neti," "Not this, not this"; but when pressed for a positive explanation he utters the sublime words: "TAT TVAM ASI," "Thou art That."[11]

Of course! We have already seen this under proposition 3. Now we see more clearly why Eastern pantheistic monism is nondoctrinal. No doctrine can be true. Perhaps some can be more useful than others in getting a subject to achieve unity with the cosmos, but that is different. In fact, a lie or a myth might even be more useful.

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[10]Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha,* trans. Hilda Rosner (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 115.
[11]Mascaró, *Upanishads,* p. 12.

But again we go astray. We are back to thinking like a Westerner. If there can be no true statement, neither can there be a lie. In other words, truth disappears as a category, and the only relevant distinction is usefulness.[12] In short, we are back to technique—the substance of much Eastern concern.

6. Worldview Questions 1, 2, 3 and 6: *To realize one's oneness with the cosmos is to pass beyond good and evil; the cosmos is perfect at every moment.*

We come to a rather touchy subject here. It is one of the softest spots in Eastern pantheism, because people refuse to deny morality. They continue to act as if some actions were right and others wrong. Moreover, the concept of karma is almost universal in Eastern thought.

Karma is the notion that one's present fate, one's pleasure or pain, one's being a king or a slave or a gnat, is the result of past action, especially in a former existence. It is, then, tied to the notion of reincarnation, which follows from the general principle that nothing that is real (that is, no soul) ever passes out of existence. It may take centuries upon centuries to find its way back to the One, but no soul will ever not be. All soul is eternal, for all soul is essentially Soul and thus forever the One.

On its way back to the One, however, it goes through whatever series of illusory forms its past action requires. Karma is the Eastern version of "you reap what you sow." But karma implies strict necessity. If you have "sinned," there is no God to cancel the debt and to forgive. Confession is of no avail. The sin must and will be worked out. Of course a person can choose his future acts; thus karma does not imply determinism or fatalism.[13]

This sounds very much like the description of a moral universe. People should do the good. If they do not, they will reap the consequences, if not in this life, in the next, perhaps even by coming back as a being lower in the hierarchy. As popularly conceived, a moral universe is what the East in fact has.

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[12]Sri Ramakrishna, who yielded to the Hindu god Kali the categories of knowledge and ignorance, purity and impurity, good and evil, confesses to the difficulty of living beyond the duality of truth and untruth. But he does so for the love of Kali (implying a duality with hate), and he tells his disciples, "I could not bring myself to give up truth" (which implies a duality with falsehoods) (quoted by Schiffman, *Sri Ramakrishna,* p. 135).

[13]In *Siddhartha,* for example, Siddhartha hurts many people as he goes on the path to unity with the One. But he never apologizes or confesses. Neither has meaning in his system.

But two things should be noted about this system. First, the basis for doing good is not so that the good will be done or so that you benefit another person. Karma demands that every soul suffer for its past "sins," so there is no value in alleviating suffering. The soul so helped will have to suffer later. So there is no agape love, giving love, nor would any such love benefit the recipient. One does good deeds in order to attain unity with the One. Doing good is first and foremost a self-helping way of life.

The world, Govinda, is not imperfect or slowly evolving along a long path to perfection. No, it is perfect at every moment; every sin already carries grace within it, all small children are potential old men, all sucklings have death within them, all dying people—eternal life. . . . Therefore, it seems to me that everything that exists is good—death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly.

Siddhartha in Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha*

Second, all actions are merely part of the whole world of illusion. The only "real" reality is ultimate reality, and that is beyond differentiation, beyond good and evil. Brahman is beyond good and evil.

Like true and false, ultimately the distinction between good and evil fades away. Everything is good (which, of course, is identical to saying, "Nothing is good" or "Everything is evil"). The thief is the saint is the thief is the saint . . .

What then shall we say about all of the evidence that people of the East act as if their actions could be considered right or wrong? First, the East has no fewer naive and inconsistent adherents than the West. Second, theists would say, human beings are human beings; they must act as if they were moral beings, for they are moral beings. Third, their moral-looking actions may be done for purely selfish reasons: who wants to return as a gnat or a stone? Of course, in a nonmoral system selfishness would not be considered immoral.

Hesse tips his hand, however, in *Siddhartha* and has his hero seemingly say with ordinary meaning that "love is the most important thing in the world."[14] And Hesse introduces value distinction when he says that it

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[14]Hesse, *Siddhartha,* p. 119.

is better to be illumined or enlightened than to be an ordinary person.[15] It would seem, therefore, that even many of the illumined have a tendency to act morally rather than to live out the implications of their own system. Perhaps this is a way of saying that some people are "better" than their conscious worldview would allow.

7. Worldview Question 4: *Death is the end of individual, personal existence, but it changes nothing essential in an individual's nature.*

I have already discussed death as it relates to karma and reincarnation. But it deserves, as in every worldview, a separate treatment. Human death signals the end of an individual embodiment of Atman; it signals as well the end of a person. But the soul, Atman, is indestructible.

But note: no human being in the sense of individual or person survives death. Atman survives, but Atman is impersonal. When Atman is reincarnated, it becomes another person. So does Hinduism teach the immortality of the soul? Yes, but not personal and individual immortality.

Of course, through Eastern eyes the personal and individual are illusory anyway. Only Atman is valuable. So death is no big deal. Nothing of value perishes; everything of value is eternal. This may help explain the remark Westerners often make about the cheapness of life in the East. Individual embodiments of life—this man, that woman, you, me—are of no value. But in essence they are all of infinite value; for in essence they are infinite.

The ramifications of this for Westerners who search the East for meaning and significance should not be ignored. For a Westerner who places value on individuality and personality—the unique value of an individual human life—Eastern pantheistic monism will prove a grave disappointment.

8. Worldview Question 7: *To realize one's oneness with the One is to pass beyond time. Time is unreal. History is cyclical.*

One of the central images in *Siddhartha* is the river. From the river Siddhartha learns more than from all the teachings of the Buddha or from all the contact with his spiritual father, Vasudeva. At the climax of the novel Siddhartha bends down and listens intently to the river:

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[15]Ibid., p. 106.

> Siddhartha tried to listen better. The picture of his father, his own picture, and the picture of his son all flowed into each other. Kamala's picture also appeared and flowed on, and the picture of Govinda and others emerged and passed on. They all became part of the river. It was the goal of all of them, yearning, desiring, suffering; and the river's voice was full of longing, full of smarting woe, full of insatiable desire. The river flowed on towards its goal. Siddhartha saw the river hasten, made up of himself and his relatives and all the people he had ever seen. All the waves and water hastened, suffering, towards goals, many goals, to the waterfall, to the sea, to the current, to the ocean and all goals were reached and each one was succeeded by another. The water changed to vapor and rose, became rain and came down again, became spring, brook and river, changed anew, flowed anew. But the yearning voice had altered. It still echoed sorrowfully, searchingly, but other voices accompanied it, voices of pleasure and sorrow, good and evil voices, laughing and lamenting voices, hundreds of voices, thousands of voices.[16]

Finally all the voices, images and faces intertwine: "And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world. . . . The great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om—perfection."[17] It is at this point that Siddhartha achieves an inner unity with the One, and "the serenity of knowledge" shines in his face.

The river in this long passage, and throughout the book, becomes an image for the cosmos. When looked at from the standpoint of a place along the bank, the river flows (time exists). But when looked at in its entirety—from spring to brook to river to ocean to vapor to rain to spring—the river does not flow (time does not exist). It is an illusion produced by one's sitting on the bank rather than seeing the river from the heavens. Time likewise is cyclical; history is what is produced by the flow of water past a point on the shore. It is illusory. History then has no meaning where reality is concerned. In fact, our task as people who would realize their godhead is to transcend history.

This should help explain why Western Christians, who place great emphasis on history, find their presentation of the historical basis of Christianity almost completely ignored in the East. To the Western mind, whether or not Jesus existed, performed miracles, healed the sick, died and rose

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[16]Ibid., p. 110.
[17]Ibid., pp. 110-11.

from the dead is important. If it happened, there must be a vital meaning to these strange, unnatural events. Perhaps there is a God after all.

To the Eastern mind, the whole argument is superfluous. Yesterday's facts are not meaningful in themselves. They do not bear on me today unless they have a here-and-now meaning; and if they have a here-and-now meaning, then their facticity as history is of no concern. The Eastern scriptures are filled with epigrams, parables, fables, stories, myths, songs, haiku, hymns, epics, but almost no history in the sense of events recorded because they took place in an unrepeatable space-time context.

To be concerned with such stuff would be to invert the whole hierarchical order. The unique is not the real; only the absolute and all-encompassing is real. If history is valuable, it will be so as myth and myth only, for myth takes us out of particularity and lifts us to essence.

One of the images of human life and the quest for unity with the One is closely tied to the images of the cycle, the wheel, the great mandala. Siddhartha says, "Whither will my path lead me? This path is stupid, it goes in spirals, perhaps in circles, but whichever way it goes, I will follow it."[18] Mascaró echoes, "The path of Truth may not be a path of parallel lines but a path that follows one circle: by going to the right and climbing the circle, or by going to the left and climbing the circle we are bound to meet at the top, although we started in apparently contradictory directions."[19]

This symbol is worked out in the novel *Siddhartha;* the paths of the Buddha, Vasudeva, Siddhartha and Govinda meet and cross several times, but all of them arrive at the same place. To change the image, Hesse shows this in the exact identity of the smiles on the face of the radiant Buddha, Vasudeva and Siddhartha.[20] All the Enlightened Ones are one in the All.

THE BUDDHIST DIFFERENCE

From the outside Buddhism may seem much like Hinduism. The worldview behind both emphasizes, for example, the singularity of primal reality. But there is a key difference nonetheless. To get a sense of what is involved more generally, note the contrast between advaita vedanta (nondualist Hinduism) and Buddhism.

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[18]Ibid., p. 78.
[19]Mascaró, *Upanishads,* p. 23.
[20]Hesse, *Siddhartha,* p. 122.

Hindu monism holds that final reality is Brahman, the One. The One has or, better, *is* Being itself—the single undifferentiated final "whatever." It makes sense to name this Brahman or to speak of the One. Like a light bulb shining photons of light farther and farther into the darkness, dispersing its photons more and more from each other, from Brahman (the One) emanates the cosmos (the many).

Buddhist monism holds that final reality is the Void.[21] Final reality is nothing that can be named or grasped. To say it is nothing is incorrect, but to say that it is something is equally incorrect. That would degrade its essence by reducing it to a thing among things. The Hindu One is still a thing among things, though it is the chief among things. The Void is not a thing at all. It is instead the origin of every thing.

This distinction leads to a different understanding of human beings too. For a Hindu, an individual person is a soul (Atman) and thus has substantial (spiritual, not material) reality because it is an emanation of Brahman (reality itself). In death an individual soul loses its bodily residence but is reincarnated in another individual—a sort of transmigration of the soul.

For a Buddhist, an individual person is a not-soul. There is no namable nature at the core of each person. In fact, each person is an aggregate of previous persons. There is not so much the transmigration of the soul as the disappearance of a person at death and the reconstitution of another person from the five aggregates or "existence factors": "body, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness."[22]

Religious practice, techniques of meditation, differ too. Hindus will commonly repeat a mantra, like *Om,* and thus induce a trance or trance-like state that is taken to be an ascent toward godhood. Buddhists may likewise repeat a mantra, but their goal is to reach a state of realizing their root in nonbeing—the nonentity of their "face before they were born," for example.[23] A Zen master may challenge a novice with koans, puzzling questions like "What is the sound of one hand?"[24] or "What is the dharma

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[21]Robert Linssen, *Zen: The Art of Life* (New York: Pyramid, 1962), pp. 142-43.

[22]Sigmund Kvaloy, "Norwegian Ecophilosophy and Ecopolitics and Their Influence from Buddhism," in *Buddhist Perspectives on the Ecocrisis,* The Wheel Publication 346/348 (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1987), p. 69.

[23]Zen master Myocho (1281-1337), "The Original Face," in *A First Zen Reader* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle, 1960), p. 21.

[24]This koan is often translated as "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" but the word *clapping* does not occur in the Japanese.

body of the Buddha [i.e., what is reality]?"[25] Or the master may direct the novice to do *zazen* ("just sit"). In any case, the attempt is made to empty the mind of all analytical thought, for ultimate reality is not only nonbeing, it is also "no-mind," that is, a *mind* that does not analyze what it is

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Kitta, the son of an elephant trainer, inquired of The Enlightened One (the Buddah) whether any of the three modes of personality—the past you, the present you and the future you—are real. The Enlightened One replied:

> Just, Kitta, as from a cow comes milk, and from the milk curds, and from the curds butter, and from the butter ghee and from the ghee junket; but when it is milk it is not called curds, or butter, or ghee, or junket; and when it is curds it is not called by any of the other names; and so on—Just so, Kitta, when any one of the three modes of personality is going on, it is not called by the name of the other. For these, Kitta, are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world. And of these a Tathâgata (one who has won the truth) makes use indeed, but is not led astray by them.*

POTTHAPADA SUTTA

*A note follows this text: "The point is, of course, that just as there is *no substratum* in the products of the cow, so there is no *ego*, no constant unity, no 'soul' (in the animistic sense of the word, as used by savages). There are a number of qualities that, when united, make up a personality—always changing. When the change has reached a certain point, it is convenient to change the designation, the name, by which the personality is known—just as in the case of the cow. But the abstract term is only a convenient *form of expression*. There never was any personality, *as a separate reality*, all the time (from *Potthapada Sutta*, [201], 51-53 <www.sacred-texts.com/bud/dob/dob-09tx.htm>).

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grasping but grasps what is only as what it *is.* The answer, therefore, to "What is the sound of one hand?" is simply "the sound of one hand."

Still, with these and other differences, the effect of both nondualist Hinduism and Buddhism is to put a person in a state where all distinc-

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[25]Isshu Miura and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Zen Koan* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1956), p. 44; D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove, 1964), pp. 59, 99-117.

tions disappear—here and there, now and then, illusion and reality, truth and falsity, good and evil. Despite the noble attempt of Buddhist masters like D. T. Suzuki to insist that Buddhism is not nihilistic, it will usually seem so to Western readers.[26]

9. Worldview Question 8: *Core commitments among individual Eastern pantheistic monists may vary widely, but one consistent commitment is, by the elimination of desire, to achieve salvation, that is, to realize one's union with the One (Hinduism) or the Void, pure consciousness (Buddhism).*

Hinduism and Buddhism both locate the problem with human beings in their separateness from the really real, the One or the Void.[27] Human beings live an illusory material existence in an illusory material world, desiring illusory goals. The result is suffering. To avoid suffering, one should eliminate this desire. There are, of course, as noted above, multiple techniques for eliminating desire. Hinduism focuses on a variety of meditation practices. Buddhism presents an eightfold path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right consciousness.

Of course, just like Christian theists who often get caught up in beliefs and practices that do not bring glory to God or witness to the presence of the kingdom of God, so Eastern pantheists often are diverted into seeking the illusory goals of wealth, fame and endless hedonistic pleasures. For the Eastern pantheist, salvation sought is not necessarily salvation gained. Unlike a Christian who receives salvation as a gift of God's grace, the pantheist is on his or her own.

EAST AND WEST: A PROBLEM IN COMMUNICATION

Cyclical history, paths that cross, doctrines that disagree, evil that is good, knowledge that is ignorance, time that is eternal, reality that is

[26]Suzuki, *Introduction,* p. 39, writes, for example, "Zen wants to rise above logic, Zen wants to find a higher affirmation where there are no antitheses. Therefore, in Zen, God is neither denied nor insisted upon; only there is in Zen no such God as has been conceived by Jewish and Christian minds." See also pp. 48-57.

[27]Charles Taylor notes the radical difference between what Buddhists and Christians count as "human flourishing." The Buddhist notion requires individuals to "detach themselves from their own flourishing, to the extinction of self," while Christians aim at "renunciation of human fulfillment to serve God" (*A Secular Age* [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007], p. 17).

unreal: all these are the shifting, paradoxical, even contradictory masks that veil the One. What can Westerners say? If they point to its irrationality, the Easterner rejects reason as a category. If they point to the disappearance of morality, the Easterner scorns the duality that is required for the distinction. If they point to the inconsistency between the Easterner's moral action and amoral theory, the Easterner says, "Well, consistency is no virtue except by reason, which I have already rejected, and furthermore I'm not yet perfect. When I am rid of this load of karma, I'll cease acting as if I were moral. In fact, I'll cease acting at all and just meditate." If the Westerner says, "But if you don't eat, you'll die," the Easterner responds, "So what? Atman is Brahman. Brahman is eternal. A death to be wished!"

It is, I think, no wonder Western missionaries have made little headway with committed Hindus and Buddhists. They don't speak the same language, for they hold almost nothing in common. It is painfully difficult to grasp the Eastern worldview even when one has some idea that it demands a mode of thought different from the West. It seems to many who would like Easterners to become Christians (and thus to become theists) that Easterners have an even more difficult time understanding that Christianity is somehow unique, that the space-time resurrection of Jesus the Christ is at the heart of the good news of God.

In both cases, it seems to me, an understanding that the East and the West operate on two very different sets of assumptions is the place to start. To begin the dialogue, at least one party must know how different their basic assumptions may turn out to be, but for true human communication, both parties must know this before the dialogue proceeds very far. Perhaps the difficulties in Eastern thought that seem so obvious to Westerners will at least begin to be recognized by Easterners. If an Easterner can see what knowledge, morality and reality are like as seen from, say, the point of view of Western theism, the attractiveness of the Western way may be obvious.

Generally, however, what the East sees of the West is more ugly than Shiva, the great god of destruction himself. Those who would communicate the beauty of truth in Christ have a tough job, for the mists of ugly Western imperialism, war, violence, greed and gluttony are thick indeed.

Where, then, does all this leave the Westerner who has gone East to

search for meaning and significance?[28] Many, of course, drop out along the way, try to take a shortcut to Nirvana through drugs, or drop out, return to their former faith or come home and take over their family's corporation,w leaving the East behind with little more than a beard left to show for it. (That gets trimmed before the first board meeting and removed before the second.) Others stay on the path for life. Still others perhaps find Nirvana and remain caught up in contemplation. But many simply die—by starvation, dysentery, skullduggery and who knows what else. Some shipwreck on the shores of Western communities and are slowly made seaworthy by friends.

For several decades, young and old have been flocking to various gurus. Bookstores are filled with books pointing East, their spines to the West, of course. Transcendental Meditation and other Eastern spiritual techniques are common, as commuters meditate on the way to work and classes are offered in business corporations.

Going East now has lost some of its attraction, for the Eastern world is becoming more and more Western in appearance and tone. Cities that once held an exotic attraction look more and more like downtown San Francisco. Western styles of dress and life are replacing those of the traditional East. Yet while the number of Westerners who are trekking East has seemed to decline in recent years, for some the East still holds promise. And so long as it seems to offer peace, personal meaning and significance, people are likely to respond. What will they receive? Not just an Eastern Band-Aid for a Western scratch but a whole new worldview and lifestyle.

[28]In "Everything Is on Fire: Tibetan Buddhism Inside Out" John B. Buescher (who was raised a Catholic, pursued Buddhism for most of his life, then returned to his Christian roots) reviews ten recent books; his reflections dramatically portray both the parallels and the eventual vast differences between Tibetan Buddhism and the Christian worldview (*Books and Culture* [January/February, 2008], pp. 40-43).