

TRADITIONAL WISDOM AND MODERN KNOWLEDGE

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Traditional wisdom and modern knowledge have profound and subtle distinctions. Before studying the parallels between them, we have to deal with the question of how we can make any effective comparison with our limited language and expressions. Traditional wisdom is based mainly on spiritual disciplines and meditation and insists on the fact that the insight cannot be communicated verbally.

Here what we need to study are the statements made by modern scientists and ancient sages about their knowledge of the world. What we have first to understand is that the knowledge or wisdom talked of by ancient Upanishadic sages, Chinese thinkers and Buddhist monks from Nalanda University and the forest caves is not the same thing as the knowledge referred to by scientists from modern universities.

It has generally been accepted that human mind is capable of two kinds of knowledge, or two types of consciousness, which have often been termed the rational and the intuitive, and have traditionally been associated with science and religion respectively. In the West the intuitive and religious type of knowledge is often devalued in favour of rational, scientific knowledge, whereas the traditional Eastern attitude is in general just the opposite. Two great thinkers about knowledge, from the West and the East, typify the two attitudes. The first, Socrates, the Greek philosopher, made the famous statement "*I know that I know nothing*", and secondly the Chinese thinker Lao Tzu said "*Not knowing that one knows is best*". The Upanishads speak about a higher and a lower knowledge and the lower knowledge is associated with various sciences and the higher knowledge with religious awareness. Buddhists talk about "*relative and absolute knowledge*" or about "*conventional truth and transcendental truth*". Chinese thinkers always emphasized the complementary nature of the rational and intuitive knowledge of *Yin* and *Yang* which formed the basis of Chinese thought. Thus two complementary philosophical traditions- Taoism and Confucianism - have developed in Ancient China to deal with the two kinds of knowledge.

Rational knowledge is derived from the experience we have of objects and events in our everyday environment. It belongs to the realm of the intellect whose function it is to discriminate, divide, compare, measure and categorise. In this way, a world of intellectual distinction is created of opposites which can only exist in relation to each other, which is why Buddhists call this type of knowledge relative or conventional. The realm of rational knowledge is the realm of science which

measures and quantifies, classifies and analyses. According to Buddhist thought the knowledge which comes direct from experience is called "*absolute knowledge*" or "*wisdom*", because it does not rely on the discriminations, abstractions and classifications of the intellect which as we have experienced are always relative and approximate. The Buddhist teaching is of the direct experience of undifferentiated, undivided, indeterminate "*suchness*" (Tathata). Complete apprehension of this suchness is not only the core of Eastern thought but is the central characteristic of all mystical experience.

The traditional Eastern thinkers repeatedly insist on the fact that ultimate reality can never be an object of reasoning or of demonstrable knowledge. It cannot be described by words because it lies beyond the realm of the senses and of the intellect from which our words and concepts are derived. The ancient *Kena Upanishad* stated:

*There the eye goes not, Speech goes not, nor the mind.
We know not, we understand not. How one would teach it.*

The Chinese thinker Lao Tzu called this reality "**the Tao**" and said "*he who speaks of the Tao does not know; he who knows does not speak*". He also said that the Tao expressible in words is not the eternal Tao; a name that can be spoken is not that of eternal Tao. The truth cannot be described in positive language, as the Buddha told us in negative words:

"There is, monks, an unborn, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded...etc."

and the Buddha said:

"That which is selfless, hard it is to see, Not easy is it to perceive the truth. But who has ended craving utterly. Has naught to cling to, he alone can see".

The main aim of the traditional Eastern wisdom is the direct experience of reality, and since this experience is naturally religious, it is inseparable from religion. Each religious tradition of the East has a unique teaching according to its own practices and experiences.

Hinduism is one of the great and ancient religions of the East. The connection between philosophy and religion is particularly strong in Hinduism. It has influenced India's intellectual, social and cultural life for many centuries. Hinduism cannot be called a philosophy, nor is it a well defined religion. It is indeed a large and complex *socio-religious* organism consisting of innumerable sects, cults and philosophical systems and involving various rituals, ceremonies and spiritual disciplines, as well as the worship of countless gods and goddesses. The spiritual source of Hinduism is based on the Vedas, a collection of ancient scriptures. The

Vedas have remained the highest religious authority for most sections of Hinduism. Any philosophical system which does not accept the authority of Vedas is considered to be unorthodox. Subsequent parts or the last part of the Veda called Upanishads elaborates their philosophical and practical contents. The Upanishads contains the essence of Hinduism's spiritual message. They have been recognised by India's great minds for the last twenty-five centuries.

*Taking as a bow the great weapon of the Upanishad,
One should put upon it an arrow sharpened by meditation.
Stretching it with a thought directed in the essence of that.
Penetrate that Imperishable as the mark, my friend."
Mundaka Upanishad*

People in India have received the teaching of Hinduism not through the Upanishads, but through a large number of popular tales collected in huge epics which represent the vast and colourful Indian Mythology. One of them is the Mahabharata which contains a favourite religious text, the Bhagavad Gita. in which the dramatic setting of the battlefield is beautifully revealed. It is the spiritual battle of human nature in search of enlightenment. Krishna, the Lord advises Arjuna: "Kill, therefore, with the Sword of Wisdom the doubt born of ignorance that lies in thy heart. Be one in self-harmony in Yoga. and arise, great warrior, arise".

Hinduism teaches that the multitude of things and events around us are but different manifestations of the same ultimate reality, called *Brahman*. *Brahman*, the ultimate reality is understood as the soul or inner essence of all things. It is infinite and beyond all concepts; it cannot be comprehended by intellect nor can it be adequately described in words. *Brahman* is beginningless, supreme, beyond what is and beyond what is not. This supreme soul is unlimited, unborn, not to be reasoned about, unthinkable. The various aspects of devine gods and goddesses are worshiped by the Hindus. However the scriptures make it clear that all these gods and goddesses are reflections of the one ultimate reality, *Brahman*. The Brihadaranya Upanishad said:

*"This that people say, worship this god! worship that god! -
one after another- this is his (Brahman's) creation indeed!
and he himself is all the gods".*

The manifestation of *Brahman* as a human soul is called Atman. Thus, Atman, the individual soul and *Brahman*, ultimate reality are one. The meditation and spiritual practices are directed towards the development of a highest wisdom through which one can identify oneself as Brahman. This experience is called "*Moksha*" or "liberation", it is the very essence of Hinduism.

Buddhism has, as Hinduism in India, been the dominant spiritual tradition for many centuries in most parts of Asia. Buddhist principles, culture, artistic life and

philosophy strongly influenced India culture and thought as well as that of most parts of Asia. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism goes back to a single founder, *Gotama*, the Buddha, who lived in India in the middle of the 6th century B.C. At that time there were many spiritual and philosophical teachers propounding their doctrines including Confucius and Lao Tzu in China, Zarathustra in Persia, and Pythagoras and Heraclitus in Greece.

The Buddha was not interested in satisfying human curiosity concerning the origin of the world. He was concerned exclusively with human situation, human suffering. His doctrine therefore was not originally one of metaphysics but one of psychotherapy. At the very beginning the Buddha pointed out the origin of human frustrations and suffering, and showed the way to overcome them.

According to the Buddha, everything is subject to change. If one understand the nature of change through one's own experience then one will understand the frustration and suffering of life. This kind of understanding is called "insight" or "Wisdom". Whatever suffering we experience in our life is because of our own craving. If one understand with direct experience that everything is impermanent, suffering (*dukkha*) and absence of eternal soul, one will be free from craving and ignorance. When the Buddha gave his first sermon at Isipatana deer park, he announced that the universe (life) is founded on suffering and established on suffering. Yes, the suffering of life no-one can deny or ignore, but we have to accept it and investigate what it really means. Buddhism, therefore, begins with the investigation of the nature of life.

The Buddha instructed' us to eradicate the cause of suffering and develop and practice the Eightfold Noble Path, the Middle Way, so that we can experience and realize the ultimate reality, Nibbana. He did not develop his doctrine into a consistent philosophical system but regarded it as a means to achieve enlightenment. He did not want the people to become involved in philosophical speculations but he wanted us to be free from human suffering, and to develop the highest wisdom. The Buddha spoke of transcendental wisdom or enlightened consciousness, by which one can experience the ultimate truth of Nibbana which is uncompounded, unborn reality, beyond all kinds of concepts and reasoning.

A few centuries after the passing away of the Buddha, Buddhism became divided into various schools, mainly into the Mahayana and Theravadin schools. Because of this, Buddhism offers its adherents a great variety of methods and teachings and philosophies. Great thinkers and philosophers appeared in India and developed the philosophy of absolute reality, using highly sophisticated dialectical methods. These philosophers demolished the metaphysical propositions of time and of ultimate reality. It cannot be grasped with concepts and ideas. This reality they named *Sunnata* "the void" or "emptiness" and *Tathata* "suchness".

The views of Mahayana Buddhism presented so far reflect its intellectual, speculative side. This is however, only one part of Buddhism. Complementary to it is the religious consciousness which involves faith, love and compassion. True enlightened wisdom is seen in Mahayana Tradition as being composed of two elements. They are Prajna which is transcendental wisdom and karuna, compassion. Accordingly the essential nature of all things is described in Buddhism not just by the abstract metaphysical terms, "*Suchness*" and "*Void*" but also by the term *Dhammakaya*, the body of being, which describes reality as it appears to the Buddhist religious consciousness. The *Dhammakaya* is similar to the *Brahman* in Hinduism. It pervades all material things in the universe and it is also reflected in the human mind as Bodhi, enlightened wisdom. It is spiritual and material at the same time. Thus, the Buddhist sages proclaim that the ultimate reality only can be experienced through transcendental wisdom not through the wisdom that we commonly use and understand.

Chinese culture and philosophy reached its early culmination around 500B.C. At that time the two side of Chinese philosophy developed into two distinct philosophical schools, Confucianism and Taoism. Confucianism was the philosophy of social organization and practical knowledge; it provided Chinese society with a system of education and with strict conventions of social etiquette. Taoism, on the other hand, was concerned primarily with the observation of nature, and the discovery of its way, or Tao. Human happiness according to the Taoist is achieved when one follows the natural order and trusts one's intuitive knowledge. Buddhism arrived in China during the first century C.E.. Within a few centuries Chinese society had accepted Buddhism, and subsequently Chinese thought and philosophical systems developed and became more profound. The Chinese mind combined Confucian scholarship with a deep understanding of Buddhism and Taoism and incorporated elements from all three traditions and their philosophical systems. Thus, Chinese thinkers developed and taught transcendent wisdom through which one can experience the ultimate nature of the universe.

In conclusion, modern knowledge is generally acquired through the process of scientific research which can be seen to proceed in three stages. The first stage consists of gathering experimental evidence about the phenomena to be explained, in the second stage the experimental facts are correlated with mathematical systems, and in the third stage a model is formulated in ordinary language which interprets the mathematical systems. This means that modern knowledge is based on objects, reasonings, classifications and definitions but traditional wisdom arises through direct experience. On the other hand traditional wisdom is based on spiritual discipline. It is universally recognized that Buddhism can claim to be the most ethical of religio - philosophical systems of the world. It is said Buddhism is ethical idealism. The Upanishad thinkers had also discovered and formulated the main principals of moral behaviour in conformity with their respective view of life. Early Hinduism had established a rigid and static morality by ritual and by its insistence on the universality of the ritual act. Hence the actual morality inculcated

did not go beyond what was practically necessary in the conduct and successful performance of the sacrifice. Thus evolved a conception of *dharma* (dhamma) originally meaning "ritualistic duty", and its ethical correlates, such as *sraddha*, the faith needed in bestowing gifts (*dakshina*) and alms (*dana*) to the priesthood who were mediators between man and his gods. The Upanishadic ethics started with compromises with ritualism, and an attempt was progressively made to conceive a higher kind of morality.

The Buddha also taught *sila*, moral conduct, *samadhi*, concentration and *panna*, wisdom. *Sila*, moral conduct, is the foundation of concentration and wisdom, without which wisdom cannot be developed. The Eastern traditional wisdom is based on morality and spiritual discipline.

May all beings be well and happy!