

# THE STAR IN THE EAST

## The language and behaviour of liberation: an eastern theme

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**I**N THE present crisis of communication between western man and his God the lines are drawn between the organized churches and the individual worshippers. While the organized churches still struggle to maintain their supremacy as the only true mediators between man and God, the individual worshipper finds that the traditional way in which he understood his own relation to God and expressed his communion with him no longer fits the evolving experience he as a man has of himself. Man, then, either rejects the outdated way of communicating or proclaims, in utter emptiness, that the One with whom communion is sought no longer exists.

This, however, is not the whole story. A legion of free-lance worshippers is roaming the globe at large in a renewed struggle to find more and more meaningful ways of worship. Some of them have gone east. This paper is an attempt to unveil some of the mysteries of the east, not so much to satisfy certain intellectual curiosity but rather as an invitation to discover through personal action that way of acting in the world which is effectively liberating and 'the result of immortality'.

### *What was the question?*

Communication and relation to God, rather than a problem of God or about God, is a problem of man and about man. In fact, this communication and relation is not one problem only but several problems together. What is Real? What is the nature of the relationship between man and the reality, or should we say Reality? What is time and eternity? What is my body and my soul? Does some part of me live after the death of the body? What is immortality? Who lives, or what lives? It is of little use to man to discard these questions as meaningless (positivists) or as unknowable (even if the answer exists (atheists), for the simple reason that man is psychologically hung up on these questions. They are the source of

his nightmares, his phobias, his neuroses, his sufferings. Man cannot discard philosophically what lives in his psychology like a gnawing tumour. Man, in this predicament, is left face to face with himself and a host of unanswered questions – at least not answered satisfactorily – unable to understand his own lonely presence and/or overcome what appears to him as a complete impasse: damned if he follows tradition, damned if he does not.

Western man, however, has been most successful in overcoming similar impasses where he has been greatest: in his scientific endeavours. It is very much part of the faith of science that if serious, dedicated and capable people work diligently on a problem for a long period of time and cannot arrive at a satisfactory answer, then they are asking the wrong question and a new *reformulation* is needed. The apparent impasse of man understanding himself within the traditional moulds which precipitated his identity crisis and his relations and communions, could be bypassed as irrelevant were he able to formulate and view himself differently.

### *The Eastern Reformulation*

Communication with God depends on how man understands the nature of his *relationship*, not only to him, but also to other 'things' or 'events'. I propose<sup>3</sup> that:

1. The nature of this *relationship* is entirely dependent upon the type of framework, or world-view, from which man decides – or is habitually compelled – to relate to other 'things' or 'events';
2. that within man's experience there are at least two very distinctive ways of 'viewing the world', which for convenience sake, I shall, at this point, name: 'the common-sense viewing' and the 'eastern viewing' of the world;
3. that man's nature is such that he *has* to use both properly, that is, to solve the problem of 'what-is-*really*-the-nature-of-things' and that in doing so he is capable of finding his own liberation.

I find that the present impasse of man in his relation to God is the product of 'the common-sense viewing' of the world which makes man prisoner of his own language – internal intentionality and external tokens – in the sense that man formulates his own relation to 'what is' as if the entities and atomic events of his language were *real* constituents of reality. What would be, in man's relation to God and in general to 'all that is', the result of this *relationship*, if we were to formulate it in an 'eastern way of viewing' the world? Let us first write down this new formulation:

If atomic entities and events, as expressed by our common-sense language, such as 'I', 'God', 'space-time', 'birth', 'death', etc., did not really exist, what would then be the relation of what exists, and how would it then be apprehended?

I think, however, that for the sake of clarity, and before I proceed to give the eastern answer to this formulation, we should make a detour and try to find within western man's experience two ways of 'viewing the world' which might correspond to what I have named the 'common-sense' and the 'eastern' way of viewing the world. I find that in the history of science western man has two clearly distinct formulations of 'reality' which correspond to our two ways of viewing the world. One is the approach of classical physics (newtonian mechanics), the other of modern physics (particle theories and field theories). Let us clarify these two approaches:

1. The approach of classical physics will correspond very closely to the common-sense approach in the following sense:
  - a. It operates on the assumption that we *should primarily* search for individual, unique, atomic entities like 'things' and 'event', and,
  - b. only *secondarily* should we see how these atomic units combine into classes of units and classes of classes of units and so forth.

The primacy of reality within this framework is the atomic individual unit, separated in the recognition from the rest of reality. This atomic individuality is considered as 'most real'.

2. The approach of modern physics corresponds to the eastern view of 'reality' in the following sense:
  - a. It operates on the assumption that we should *primarily* search for the totality; the most 'real' aspect of any entity being its participation in the larger pattern and our perception of it defies any atomicity of identification. It is only *secondarily* that classification of individual entities is possible for purposes of symbolic manipulations. In other words, to perceive anything apart from the total field is to perceive it as a sub-system, an artificially created aspect of a field of stresses, a pattern. Thus, from the modern physics view-point we cannot simply say: 'Here is an electron', but either we say, with Sir James Jeans: 'Here is an area where the field is strong', or else we revert to the view-point of classical physics and say: 'Here, on this instrument, at this place, at this time, there is this signal (that manifests the presence of an electron)'.

In this view-point the totality is the All and the Real; the parts of this totality are artificially created for purposes of linguistic

communication and conceptualization; they are artificial sub-patterns. The separation is totally false to the Reality.<sup>1</sup>

A man who views the world from the framework of 'classical physics-common-sense' cannot help but imagine himself as a unique individual, God as another, and imagine the happiness or unhappiness of immortality as a prize or a punishment (even annihilation) of events which are causally connected within space and time.

The above picture of man and God and the world changes when the second framework of the 'modern physics-eastern world' approach is used. Reality is 'here' understood as a 'whole' and a 'total activity'. To 'know' it, in the classical physics-common-sense language, has no meaning at all, for the aim now is 'to become It'.<sup>2</sup>

Modern physicists have tried to make us aware of the different consequences that the perspective would inflict on our lives:

We distinguish between living and dead matter; between moving bodies and bodies at rest. This is a primitive view-point. What seems dead, a stone or the proverbial 'door-nail', say, is actually forever in motion . . . We shall have to learn to describe things in new and better ways.<sup>3</sup>

Sir James Jeans suggests the need to consider as actually existing (according to the laws of complementarity) the totality of the efforts of man, successes or failures. In the continuum they all live in the present:

. . .the twentieth century physicist is hammering out a new philosophy for himself. Its essence is that he no longer sees nature as something entirely distinct from himself. Sometimes it is what he creates and selects or abstracts; sometimes it is what he destroys.<sup>4</sup>

It is with these clarifications in mind that I hope to make clearer the eastern view-point and that the reformulation we suggested

<sup>1</sup> For further clarification see: Bohr, N.: *Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge* (New York, 1961). Born, Max.: *The Restless Universe* (New York, 1951). Jeans, Sir James: *The New Background of Science* (Michigan, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> It is obvious that this way of viewing the world is not exclusive the East. Western mystics and serious theoretical physicists share it. The East, as I shall show further on, has the added attraction of providing us with the means to pass from one way of conceptualizing into another.

<sup>3</sup> Max Born, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Sir James Jeans, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

On language complementarity see the most interesting study of Heelan, Patrick A.: 'Quantum Logic and Classical Logic: Their respective aims'; a paper read at the Boston Colloquium for the Philosophy of Science, January, 1969; to appear in *Synthese*.

earlier may begin to make sense, or that efforts at describing the identity in the All of the great and the small, in the *Tao Te Ching*, for example, does not sound as sheer gibberish:

To look at it, it is not seen, It is named the extremely dim.  
 To listen to it, it is not heard, It is named the extremely faint.  
 To grab at it, it is not caught, It is named the extremely small.  
 These three cannot be comprehended, Thus they blend into one.  
 Its (coming) up is not light, Its (going) down is not dark,  
 Unceasing, continuous, it cannot be named, Again it turns to  
 no-shape. Therefore it is called the shape of no-shape, The sign  
 of no-thing. Therefore it is said to be illusive and evasive.<sup>1</sup>

However, the difficulties begin to pile up the moment we begin to act, for *we cannot function as human beings* without acting, linguistically and psychologically, in the old, primitive, common-sense way of relating and viewing the world and God.

It is in this new impasse that the east has most to offer to the west. The programme of action it suggests is itself a new way of living which bears in mind the new reformulation of man's relationship to 'what is'. I will sketch out the three eastern steps to liberation.

### I. *The Philosophical correction of the common-sense mind*

Sankara (a.d. 788-820), in many ways, is the philosophical meeting-point of all indian philosophy. I have chosen him to guide us in our inquiry, for to understand him is to understand not only the *Advaita Vedanta* philosophical system he sponsored but also (and hopefully) what indian (vedic, upanishadic, samkya, yoga, buddhist, etc.) philosophy is about.

Sankara's philosophy may be summarized, somewhat paradoxically, in the following manner:

- a. Reality is One, Indivisible Brahman. The world is 'false'. All atomic entities, like soul, bodies, subjects, objects, etc. are only non-differentiated Brahman (The Real).

The above statement, however, though stated positively, is negative and void in the sense *that no one knows it*. It can only be realized (*anubhava*) in an intuition. 'The goal of all inquiry is intuition (*anubhava*)...'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 14 of the *Tao Te Ching*: translation by Ellen Marie Chen in an article published under the title, 'Nothingness and the Mother Principle in Early Chinese Taoism', by the same author in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, September, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> *Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya*, I, I, 2.

By intuition is understood the state of consciousness described above as the result of the new framework, of a point of view similar to that of modern physics. This intuition (state of consciousness) is not, therefore, the scope of philosophical inquiry, but rather philosophical inquiry prepares the inquirer for that kind of 'vision'.

- b. Philosophical inquiry is about the logical multiplicity of linguistic superimpositions (*adyāsa*) between the areas of the subject and the object. That is, the subject is superimposed on the object in statements like 'This is mine', etc.; and the object is superimposed on the subject: 'I suffer', or 'I wish', etc. In other words, the boundaries which language creates for identification of subjects and objects are false. They are artificially created.

The above statement, though pronouncing negatively on all that language claims as 'real', due to the arbitrary and confusing criteria for identification, leads Sankara to make his own philosophical *positive* statement thus:

- c. Reality is non-dual (*a-dvaita*). (Notice that he does not affirm the Unity but rather denies the multiplicity. This is as far as language can go. The rest of the journey is an activity of consciousness which language cannot capture.)
- d. Where rational discourse leaves off, consciousness and its dialectical methodology take over. The goal is the realization (*anubhava*) of the non-differentiated empirical Unity (Brahman). The goal is immortality and union. The time here and now. The road, however, can only be pointed out, the walking must be one's own.

Points a) and d) of the above summary correspond to a different activity than that of philosophy. Points b) and c) concern us now. Both points Sankara summarizes in his statement *jagan mithyā* (the world is false). What does he mean? It should be clear that the world is not claimed to be a fiction of the imagination or non-existent. The world is sensed, felt, perceived. The sanskrit word *Mithyā* brings out the meaning more clearly than the translation.

*Mithyā* is a contraction of *mithūya* derived from the root *mith* which means either a) 'unite', or 'couple', b) 'meet' or 'engage' (in altercation) or c) 'alternate'. The word *mithyā* comes from the third c) sense and is used adverbially (often with respect to a person's behaviour) as meaning 'inadvertently', 'contrarily', 'improperly', or 'incorrectly'. This last sense is extended to a nominal form, translated as 'false' in the sense of 'mistaken', that is, 'taken or perceived incorrectly'.

Sankara's claim, therefore, has to do only with linguistic judg-

ment, and the criteria for those linguistic judgments which determine certain sortal concepts and the spatio-temporal boundaries of a *false* atomicity. If reality is unitary, then the plurality is claimed mistakenly on account of certain arbitrary linguistic criteria whose atomic boundaries are mistakenly taken for the real thing.

Sankara's philosophical inquiry will therefore proceed to examine the powerful *maya* of language (what Wittgenstein called the 'bewitchment of language') in order to break down the magic spell of atomic entities and the enslaving quality which such a spell has on the philosophical and psychological life of man.

Sankara starts his *Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya* by investigating into the nature of language usages thus:

It is a clear fact that the object and the subject, whose respective areas are the concepts of Thou and I, and whose natures are opposed to each other as much as light and darkness, are irreconcilable. So also their respective qualities . . .<sup>1</sup>

Yet language functions in such a way that we can only make meaningful statements by 'superimposing upon the subject the qualities of the object and vice versa . . . and this is false (*mithya*)'.

The resulting confusion is no more than this characteristic linguistic confusion by superimposing natures and attributes, 'thus mixing falsehood and truth by saying things like: 'I am this', 'This is mine', 'I am in pain'.

Not only is the individual man in this trap, but Sankara sweepingly concludes that this (that is, false superimposition) 'is the pre-supposition upon which are based all practical distinctions of practical life, the *Vedas* (in the ritualistic sense), the means of knowledge, objects of knowledge and the authority of Scripture'.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, 'the means of right knowledge cannot operate without the aspect (nature) of knower, which is of the sense of 'I' and 'mine' imposed or united with the body and senses. For by taking away the use of the senses, immediate perception does not occur, nor do other activities of knowledge. Even more, action

<sup>1</sup> Sankara's *Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya*, Introduction. The quotations from the Sanskrit here and elsewhere are my own translations.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* A western example of this 'common-sense' way of relating in prayer may be found in C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*. In letter IV, Uncle Screwtape writes:

'I have known cases where what the patient called his "God" was actually *located* - up and to the left at the corner of the bedroom ceiling, or inside of his head, or in a crucifix on the wall'.

itself would be jeopardized without this superimposition: 'Nor does anyone act without having the aspect of the self superimposed on the body'.

In the *Philosophical Investigations* (404, 405), Wittgenstein brings out this same point when he suggests that any decision on identity-making has no one factual answer, but rather depends on a great variety of criteria for determining personal (or other) identity. It is up to every language user to *decide* which criteria to use. The simple use of 'indexical' terms like 'I' or 'mine' etc., does not prescribe in any way which criterion to use. In fact it (use) presupposes none.

Re-stating the problem differently, within the common-sense view-point, or what we called classical physics, language *geometrizes* the world in terms of boundary points, lines and surfaces and is only concerned with the *relationship* of these. Within such view-point, boundaries and limits are seen as inherent in the structure of reality and are basic to our conceptual and practical or affective conclusions. A man is limited by a bag of skin, a lake by the land around it, a life by the terminal points of birth and death and a prayer the communicating bridge between a *here* and a *there*, an atomic 'I' and an atomic God. Since the atomic entities are 'false', it must be concluded that the relationship in which we establish ourselves related to those atomic entities is also false. Liberation cannot be found but in the destruction of the false atomicity and the false relationship.

## II. *The methodology of consciousness*

What is there besides language-games? Sankara would answer, 'desire': the desire of the *ahamkara*, the I-maker. It makes little difference how wrong superimposition may logically be, still psychologically we all live by action which leads to experience of pleasure and pain; and the memory of pleasure and pain evokes desire and aversion and attachment to the objects of desire and aversion. This 'round' of *samsara* (cycle) is unavoidable. Except for one fact, 'consciousness'. Consciousness is the jumping board which allows man to pass from one common-sense view of the world to that other way of viewing which is liberating and immortal.

This dialectical progression of consciousness may be described thus:

- a. There is ordinary consciousness (*jāgarita*), as the condition of possibility for anything to be (Kant). This ordinary consciousness

- manifests itself more 'scattered' at the level of the 'involuntary', 'my leg', 'my arm', 'my body', etc.
- b. There is a more 'concentrated' state of consciousness when we proceed to feelings and the realm of the voluntary: 'I am sorry', 'I like', 'I wish'. Sankara compares it to the 'sleeping state with dreams' (*svapna*), where the continuity of consciousness is established while the detachment from the objects of dreams is obvious by realizing: 'Oh, it was just a dream'.
  - c. The 'concentration' of the conscious state is even greater at the level of rational analysis, where sudden insights establish relationships among entities and relationships among these relationships. Sankara would describe it as an effort of harmony between the dichotomy subject/object, similar in some ways to deep sleep without dreams (*susupti*) where there is continuity of consciousness, yet there is a greater absence of attachment to objects. In fact there are no objects but harmony of insights.
  - d. Within the common-sense world of our experience we are also aware of rich, unifying moments of total consciousness, natural states of consciousness which we know in experiences of love, or aesthetic contemplations. Consciousness is then present in its greatest unifying synthesis, without *anyone* reflecting upon its presence. Even within our world of *samsara* there is an experience of unity without self-identification. We do know how 'it feels' to have a certain natural experience of unity in our own consciousness.

These four stages of consciousness are familiar to all of us under the common-sense conceptualization of reality under which we normally operate. Eastern philosophy would have us go further. The *turiya* state of consciousness, the *paranirvana*, the viewing of the world in the manner we have described as modern physics, the field of total unity, is not a natural state. It has to be gained by 'acquired' states of consciousness, through personal effort and total dedication.

The dynamism of consciousness, as described above, begins with individual, scattered, consciousnesses, to pass to a more universal consciousness and arrive at a non-differentiated consciousness which overcomes the separate reality of both the individual and the universal. In the meantime, the psychological attachment to the 'things' of consciousness has been falling along this dialectical road, leading to both a progressive way of structuring the universe and of acting within it.

### III. *The acquired states of consciousness through yogic exercises*

The problem still remains, however, on how to break through the

barrier of common-sense viewing and relating in the world to that other way of viewing and relating we have described as *turiya* or *paranirvana* or modern physics.

The Zen master, Yasutani Roshi, instructing his disciple on the crossing of this barrier between the two world views, said: 'Your enemy is your discursive thinking which leads you to differentiate yourself on one side of an imaginary line from what is not you on the other side of this non-existing line'. Yoga begins where discursive thought ends, and the first corrective of Yoga is to stop discursive thought, to cure and then strengthen a dynamic consciousness.

*Jnana Yoga* derives from *advaita* philosophy and its techniques may be described as a 'de-brainwashing' of our normal discursive apparatus.

The *Ashtanga Yoga* and Buddhism use a different technique. Every step of life, every instant moment is viewed attentively. Yet this viewing must be done in a detached manner, as an unconcerned witness. This idea originates in *Samkya* philosophy and is also Patanjali's *Ashtanga Yoga*. While in *Vedanta* the individual self will proclaim an experience identical with Brahman, in Buddhism the self is completely denied, it is only a moving stream of momentary experiences.

*Bhakti Yoga* stresses self-surrender, instead of self-extinction, to a personal (historical or otherwise) love. The self-surrender can be so total that it may swallow up all other attachments, loves and divisions. The Bhakti schools of the east, however, recognize the higher state of realization where even this love to a personalized God has to be surrendered for complete liberation. The *Bhagavad Gita* says it so very explicitly. Though the personalized God may help to discard other inferior attachments, no complete liberation is possible unless even the attachment to this love is surrendered.

*Karma Yoga* aims at achieving a certain mental equipoise while living an ordinary, involved life. Non-attachment to the fruits of action seems to be the aim of this yoga. The *Bhagavad Gita* states positively that a continuous state of *Samadhi* is not the goal, or that the states of consciousness pursued for themselves can be an intoxicating distraction from the real goal of life which is living and acting in the world.

### Conclusion

We stated the problem of prayer as a problem of relationship between two boundaries, man and God. By re-phrasing the problem

of this relationship in an eastern way, with the help of modern physics, we saw the two boundaries disappear into a new kind of viewing and relating. Eastern philosophy and psychology, through the methodology of consciousness, helped us realize that praying in the old way – common-sense view of the world – was no longer a part of man's present experience of himself. Prayer and relations change, therefore, according to the new experience into an activity which is both liberating, in the sense of transcending artificial boundaries, and also effective, in the sense of acting in the world as a result of a new viewing of the world. Prayer, therefore, to be effective must transcend itself into a new way of relating.

This new relationship will correspond to an experience of boundary-less reality, with no limiting points, lines or surfaces, with no termination events like birth or death, man or God, past, present and future. Once man has been able to cross the barrier of common-sense viewing and enter this new way of viewing then he has crossed it forever; man is eternal. Once this has been done (or will be done, or was done, it is all the same), even once, it can never be revoked again. This viewing is forever, immortal. The continuum only exists, consciousness then exists.

Eastern approach to reality, we have seen, is based on developing the dynamic surge of consciousness from lower to more integrated ways of experiencing. The result of this organization of the personality to its finest possible tuning is not only a detachment from the 'things' which in common-sense viewing of the world attract man, but concomitantly a development of a new way of viewing reality which 'emerges' as a result of the ascending dynamism of consciousness into total integration.

Prayer, finally, in the east is not the strengthening of the wrong common-sense atomic view of reality and the relationship in which the elements of this common-sense world are related, but rather the destruction of the border lines which mistakenly are attributed to reality in our attempts at defining (*de-finire* – mark the limits) it. It is a great human paradox that such atomic entities of our language and on which so much of our life depends, such as 'birth', 'self' and 'God' are never part of *my* own consciousness of those events or entities. What I am conscious of is always 'something else'. Others, though, seem to 'know' of *my* birth, *my* death, *my* self and *my* God. The fact is that we are the prisoners of our own common-sense trap of experiencing the world, and that too many strong forces weigh on our conscience to keep us where death is.