

Tantra and Zen Buddhism

Part 3 of 6

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Long ago Kipling said in reference to the meeting of East and West that the twain shall never meet, but in this he has been proven wrong. It would seem that fate has forced the meeting of these two parts of our human whole, and whether we like it or not, we must face the problem which arises from the meeting of these two distinct facets of our total cultural possibilities. Jung has pointed out that in this meeting there is real danger. There is the danger that either side may be led to repudiate its cultural roots and take over the cultural fruits of the other side, and I have seen evidences of this. I have met East Indians who had so far been dominated by the culture of the West that they repudiated the very flower of their own culture; and contrariwise, we see today individuals imitating—in the West—imitating modes of devotion that are indigenous to the East but quite foreign to our Western orientation. Repudiation of one's own culture is fraught with serious consequences. There is a formula repeated by Dr. Jung that is of great importance here which runs this way: the right path with the wrong man leads to wrong results.¹ There is, thus, before us a problem of grave seriousness. There is no putting off the meeting of East and West since the world is rapidly becoming one world whether we like it or not. Although I, for one, view it as an inevitable thing and fraught with the highest positive possibilities; but the dangers are real and must be faced. It is necessary, therefore, that each part should come to an understanding of the roots of the other part; but, at the same time, neither should repudiate his own indigenous roots.

The problem is different in those exceptional cases where we have ex-Orientals born into a Western race and, similarly, possibly ex-Occidentals born in an Eastern race. These may indeed facilitate in peculiar degree the meeting of the two sides since in them the cultural qualities of both sides are present in the individual nature. Indeed today there are some startling signs which might suggest that there is something like a reversal of roles with respect to both the East and West. My attention was drawn to this in connection with my reading of the report of Gopi Krishna at the time that the *Kundalini* first arose in him much to his surprise. He himself did not know in the beginning, according to his own testimony, what had happened, and he had immense difficulty finding anyone among his own people who could explain what had happened. On the other hand, in my own case I found that, from the literature at hand from Eastern sources, that the identification would have been relatively prompt. My thought then extended to something that was said in connection with the production of the four books of which Evans-Wentz was the editor. It is said in the earliest volume that was published that

¹ Carl G. Jung, commentary to *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (New York: Causeway Books, 1971), 79: "An ancient adept has said: But if the wrong man uses the right means, the right means work in the wrong way."

Dawa Kazi Samdup² was authorized by his *guru* to translate and have published for general availability a certain material that had been heretofore more or less esoteric; and the reason given for this was that in the East today there is more or less a dearth of those individuals rising out of the human mass who are interested in this line of development, and therefore the material was made available to all so that individuals anywhere—East and West—might be able to respond if they were so inclined. On the other hand, the East today is taking over in considerable measure the technology that is indigenous to the West and, in addition, the economic methods of the West. And at least in the case of Japan the technology has been so well mastered that in some respects the Japanese have excelled their Western teachers. We also see in China the adoption of an ideology which has an Western source, namely, that of Marxism, and a tendency to repudiate their own ancient teachers such as Confucius, and Lao-Tze, and also the imported teachings of the Buddhists. And on the other side, we see teachers of yoga coming to the West, both from India and from Tibet, and bringing their particular philosophies and methodologies to Western man, and we find a growing response to this among Western students. To be sure, some of it is very superficial and unwise, but, also, there are those who are deeply involved in all of this. Does this mean that we are on the edge of seeing a reversal of roles: the West abandoning its tendency towards something that is often called materialism or sheer practicality, and the East taking on this practical orientation which it so gravely needs? This is only a thought thrown out. I am only making a suggestion, and I think we do well to observe what is happening. We certainly need the spiritual orientation here in the West, and the East needs a greater amount of practicality. Living near starvation is not in any sense good, for under the conditions thus , advance in the *dharma* is hardly practical.

For the purpose of further clarification of our thesis in this tape it may well be appropriate to consider here the position presented by Northrop in *The Meeting of East and West*. I have considered this at length on other tapes and shall therefore give only an abstract of the position at this time.³ As a result of his study of the Eastern philosophies such as Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and so forth, he came to the conclusion that the emphasis in the East is upon the aesthetic component in things; and by the “aesthetic” we do not mean the narrow definition of the word as that which is beautiful, but we employ the word in the broader sense as is done by Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant, namely, as representing that whole side of our consciousness which is oriented to the sensuous component—the knowledge that comes to us through the senses. He speaks of it as an *aesthetic continuum* and the word ‘continuum’ is one that needs definite clarification. It is a term that arises in Western mathematics and stands in contrast to the conception of a manifold, which is a conception we shall have to refer to later, and to make clear the difference between the two conceptions, I will illustrate it by the mathematical usage.

If we consider the set of all positive integers, namely, 1, 2, 3, 4, and so on to infinity, that would be a manifold because it has these characteristics: that there’s a

² Wolff is referring to Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdub.

³ See the audio recordings “Mathematics, Philosophy, and Yoga,” part 5, and “General Discourse on the Subject of My Philosophy.”

definite passage from one unit to another with a gap between, and each unit is next to the preceding and following units such as 3 lies between 2 and 4, and there is no entity between these two in the set of the positive integers. On the other hand, if we consider the set consisting of the positive integers, fractions, and irrational numbers such as the square root of 2, we can take an interval between that of 0 and 1 and we'll find actually an infinity of numbers, and this is evident for the reason that between any two number entities in this set we can always find a third number. And because of that, we immediately realize that there is an infinity of numbers that follows logically. In other words, a continuum is thick at all points. Any interval has an infinity of other numbers between the two limits of the interval. It is, thus, equally dense at all points. It's tight. There are no gaps within it. There are no jumps, but, as it were, a flow. To be sure the conception of flow has been used by philosophers in another sense, as in the case of Bergson in which he viewed the flight of an arrow, for instance, as one whole which could not be subdivided. However, that conception is not akin to that of the Buddhists' conception as developed by the logical Buddhists Dignaga and Dharmakirti where the notion of point-instant sensation—each instance separate from the next—is employed and has a kinship to the mathematical notion of the continuum.

However, there is a deviation from the mathematical conception when we speak of the aesthetic continuum. It's carried over only roughly in as much as the mathematical conception belongs to the opposite of the aesthetic component, namely, the "theoretic," "logoic," or "noetic" component in things. And then in this aesthetic component, Northrop distinguishes between two phases known as the *determinate aesthetic continuum* and the *indeterminate aesthetic continuum*. The determinate aesthetic continuum consists of all of the discreet impressions which strike our consciousness through the senses. Underlying this, there is predicated the existence of an indeterminate aesthetic continuum which cannot be externally cognized.

Now, the objective in the yoga in the East, in this case, is represented as an arriving at the indeterminate aesthetic continuum conceived as underlying the determinate aesthetic continuum. A figure to present to our consciousness more clearly the distinction between the determinate and the indeterminate is afforded by the conception of the soap bubble. On the surface of a soap bubble we may see images of the objects surrounding it as reflected in it. These images have an element of discreteness about them. They can be determined and can be defined. If, now, we consider the soap bubble apart from the images that play on the surface, we have a film that is not cognizable in the ordinary sense. There's nothing determinate there. Nothing can be defined. But it is predicated that this may be realized, and that when one has realized this indeterminate aesthetic continuum, he has attained to Enlightenment.

This is one way of presenting the whole subject of Enlightenment. Now, Northrop may have made an error in an extending this conception to the whole of the East, as was pointed out by an advanced philosophic student in a letter to me, and that this may have been an important point in the history of Buddhism.⁴ He pointed out that as Buddhism went north and traveled east in Asia, it became more and more aesthetic as compared to the original statement of the Buddha himself, which made a rather strong rational appeal.

⁴ See the audio recording "Various Philosophical Considerations," part 1.

But on the other hand, early Buddhism and the Buddhism as formulated by the Brahmins who became Buddhistic does have a considerable conceptual orientation. The point made by this correspondent was that the becoming overly aesthetic on the part of Buddhism may have been the reason why the East Indians ultimately very largely repudiated this particular form of the *dharma*. And the point is, in my mind, very suggestive and may be quite pertinent. At any rate, I have found in the study of Shankara that there is a strong emphasis of that which may be called the theoretic, logic, or noetic component, and therefore it proved to be something that approached the emphasis of Western philosophy and thus served as a bridge over to the Oriental point of view. This would tend to confirm the position of my correspondent. So, the point made by Northrop, it occurred to me, may be more properly a point concerning the orientation of the Mongoloid portion of the Orient—the Mongoloid portion including the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mongolians proper, and one part of the races in Tibet. This racial group may be oriented peculiarly to the aesthetic component, and there is much to support this position. I have found in reading abstracts of Chinese philosophers, there was an absence of the kind of conceptuality we have in the West. The verbal conceptions seem to be weak sisters with respect to the experiential side of life, whereas they are often the strong emphasized side in Western philosophy from the Greeks to the present. This being so, it could well be that the Brahminical mind could not find an adequate home in the Buddhist philosophy as it became more and more aesthetic in its orientation.

Now, the East Indian, as contrasted to the Mongoloid part of the Orient, is really part and parcel of the same racial group to which we of the West belong, namely, the Indo-European race—a race which it is said arose in central Asia, and one branch of it went south into India and the other branch went west and was the progenitor of our Western races. If the distinction is one of racial emphasis rather than of geographic emphasis, there's much that is clarified here. It is easier, then, for us to bridge the gulf between ourselves and the East Indian mind than it is for us to bridge the gulf between ourselves and the Mongoloid line. There is no criticism of an entity of a race developing in its own appropriate direction here. There is simply the point that it may well be a serious mistake to try to adapt to our thinking something so alien as the Mongoloid type of thinking, and vice-versa. It may bring about untoward results. But the East Indian is philosophically closer to us.

A second point made by Northrop in his *Meeting of East and West* is that the Oriental emphasis is akin to that which we call positivism, phenomenalism, and nominalism. To get an adequate understanding of what is meant by these terms, I will refer to the definitions in Baldwin's *Dictionary* and read them into the record:

(3) The name applied by Comte to his own philosophy, and characterizing, negatively, its freedom from all speculative elements; and, affirmatively, its basis in the methods and results of the hierarchy of positive sciences; i.e. mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and sociology. It is allied to AGNOSTICISM (q.v., also UNKNOWABLE) in its denial of the possibility of knowledge of reality in itself, whether of mind, matter, force; it is allied to PHENOMENALISM (q.v.) in its denial of capacity to know either efficient or final causation, or anything except the relations of coexistence and sequence in which sensible phenomena present

themselves. It differs, however, in insisting upon (a) the possibility and the necessity of a relative synthesis or organization of the data of all of the sciences; (b) the value of science for prevision and practical control; and (c) its availability, when thus organized and applied, for moral guidance and spiritual support and consolation.

(4) The term is used more loosely to denote any philosophy which agrees with that of Comte in limiting philosophy to the data and methods of the natural sciences—opposition to the *a priori*, and to speculation by any method peculiar to metaphysics. In this sense Locke and Hume were positivists: Hume, indeed, quite explicitly so in limiting the method of philosophizing to the results of observation, and stopping whenever going further means confused and uncertain speculation about hypothetical causes.⁵

This defines a position that is very definitely opposed to the kind of thinking we find in Plato, for instance, or in the post-Kantian philosophers. There's one point I would like to note here. I would say that the strict application of the positivistic point of view of Auguste Comte would have to exclude pure mathematics. I would refer you here to the point made by Immanuel Kant in the "Introduction" to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, namely, that the destructive criticism of Hume upon the possibility of any metaphysics was equally destructive with respect to the possibility of any pure mathematics.⁶ This, I think, defines quite clearly a position that we can recognize. Now, I also find that the positivistic element in Oriental thinking is not quite the same as the positivism of the West, for the positivism of the West accepts quite definitely the practical results of empiric science.

Let us proceed now to a consideration of the other two terms, phenomenism and nominalism, before a general consideration. Phenomenism is defined as:

(1) The theory that all knowledge is limited to phenomena (things and events in time and space), and that we cannot penetrate to reality in itself.

And the second meaning:

(2) The theory that all we know is a phenomenon, that is, reality present to consciousness, either directly or reflectively; and that phenomena are all that there are to know, there being no thing-in-itself or object out of relation to consciousness.⁷

⁵ James Mark Baldwin, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, vol. 2 (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1901), 312-313.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (New York: Wiley Book Co., 1943), 12-13.

⁷ Baldwin, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, 288.

The two meanings are, in the first case, that all that we can know is the presentation to the senses in space and time, but not a denial that there may be a thing-in-itself behind this, but simply the assertion that it is essentially unknowable; and the second meaning which is that the phenomena are all that there are and that there is not any such thing as a noumenon.

Next, Nominalism; this is:

The doctrine that universals have no objective existence or validity; in its extreme form, that they are only names, (*nomina, flatus vocis*) that is, creations of language for purposes of convenient communication.⁸

From this, then, we can see very clearly that all three positions define a standpoint which is the negation of the essence of the Platonic philosophy, which maintains that the universals can be known; that they are substantive; that they are the real, the spiritual truth; and that compared to this the sensuous presentations are an inferior form of knowledge and often a more or less source of evil in the world. No positions could be more radically opposed than these two.

Now, a point that stands out in these quotations is that the positivistic, phenomenistic, and nominalistic position is also present in the West, and, indeed, in so far as this is present in the West, Northrop's thesis that the West is oriented to the theoretical component in things would not apply. Nonetheless, I think we can see that there is a bent towards the universals of Plato in Western philosophic thinking which predominates over the positivistic type of thinking. The three points, namely, positivism, phenomenism, and nominalism lead to a denial that there is a substance behind things, or that there is a law inherent behind things which can be known, and that all we have is essentially the empiric datum that we may use conceptions to represent and present, but are themselves not the reality, but the empiric datum is the reality, that all formations in theoretic forms are essentially only verbal communication and not substantive in themselves. The theoretic orientation would imply that universals are real, that the syntactical element connecting all that is, namely, the law of relationship, the mathematical element, is no less real, and in fact may be even more real, than the sensuous element.

This I think we can see is in harmony with much that the Buddha has said. We can see it in his analysis of fire, to which I have referred before, when he said that fire consists of light and heat and there is no substance behind it, and also that there is no self that constitutes the integral center of all entities. Thus, it would seem perfectly valid to say that the position is positivistic, phenomenistic, and nominalistic. There is here a vast enhancement of the validity of the sensuous impression, that somehow it is closer to reality than the conceptual development, in fact the latter being viewed as very largely no more than a verbal presentation. And this position is borne out by the logical Buddhists where they affirm that the ultimate reality, or Paramartha Sat, is simply the point-instant of sensation which gives us no recognizable objects and has no particular meaning, and the emphasis in both the yogas known as Zen and Tantra seem to place their emphasis

⁸ Baldwin, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, 180.

upon the use of the aesthetic component in things and relegate the theoretical, logic, or noetic component to a subordinate role. This, then, gives the contrast in sharp terms as between the Orient and the Western spirit that is defined, let us say, originally by Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus; and as I myself continue in the line of these three in emphasizing the predominance of the universal and of the syntactical as carrying a higher order of reality as compared to the aesthetic component, although not the ultimate reality.

A third point made by Northrop is in connection with the office of art. In the Eastern yoga, meaning Zen preeminently, art has an important place. We hear of the Zen *sadhaka*, for instance, going into a patch of bamboo for days on end until he has an experience that is often called becoming bamboo, and then he produces a painting of two-dimensional character representing the bamboo. This function, so far as I can learn, is not one that is repressed by the discipline of the Zen, but rather, apparently, encouraged; whereas, there is a strong tendency to repress the development of conceptual or philosophical thought. This I find preeminently significant.

And a second point in connection with this development of art, which seems to have been carried a good deal further in the East in connection with its religious orientation than in the West, is that the art is initially two-dimensional. There are, of course, exceptions to this, but Northrop pointed out that the exceptions, the art that has perspective, is preeminently found in that portion of the East which was covered by the invasion of Alexander the Great, and he concludes that the conception of perspective was introduced into the Orient from the Greek world by means of that invasion. I cannot take a definite position with respect to this thesis except that I find it quite suggestive, and I would like to suggest what is introduced by the third dimension or perspective in plastic art as contrasted to the two-dimensional art so characteristic of the Far East. Clearly a two-dimensional art suggests surface, in other words, the aesthetic component, for it is only the surface that is presented to the senses. The third dimension involves the introduction of a conceptual notion—the notion of depth. We find an excellent example of this in da Vinci's *Last Supper*. The effect of that picture is different from the effect of the two-dimensional Eastern pictures. If you look at the room, you'll find that the painting suggests depth, that it is developing in the third dimension. You find, too, that the picture suggests a meaning. It can very easily initiate a line of thought concerning that which followed from the Last Supper and its subsequent importance for Christian religiosity. I do not find that looking at the two-dimensional Eastern picture tends to arouse thought at all, just the wonder as to just what it might mean; and I suspect it isn't intended to mean, but to act upon one in some way other than through meaning. The third dimension, therefore, may well be an introduction into the aesthetic field of the meaningful content, that which lies behind the surface of things. This is just a thought.

Now, a fourth point made by Northrop is that in the East when there is an effort to correct the position at which the development of culture has reached, or particularly the development of religious culture, the corrective is found by returning to the earliest known sources. In the case of India, that is the Vedas. It is significant, for instance, in the philosophy of Shankara that he continues two arguments in support of any thesis he advanced, and it will run this way: this thesis is first in accord with reason and it is also in accord with the Vedas. The first argument is the argument that is important to us of the

West, for the Vedas do not have for us a primary base of reference. It sounds too much like the familiar Christian argument: this is true because it is according to the Bible—an argument that does not appeal at all to the authentically rational mind of the West. Thinking upon this, I wondered about what the primary corrective reference would be to those who are oriented to the theoretical component and it dawned upon me that this would be a reference to the final, most recent result of our scientific and philosophic thought, and then I found that Northrop had made the same statement. Thus, we would tend to correct ourselves, not by returning to the thought of Thales back about 600 in Greece, but to the most recent integration as being the most authentic statement. Right now it would seem to be that this most authentic integrative statement was Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*. This, again, leads to the thought that the Oriental tends to correct by returning to the earliest, we to the latest; the Oriental to the root, we to the fruit. But then, if we went further back beyond the Vedas and beyond other known ancient sources of thought, would we not find that before all this there was the animal, and before that, the vegetable, and still before that, the mineral? Why not return, then, to the mineral to find the ultimate root?