

Antiquity Comes Full Circle – Part I



As promised, we are now going to tell the eastern story, at least some strands of the great influence eastern philosophy and culture have had on world history. One could be forgiven for thinking the eastern story is the tale of another planet, because it bears little resemblance to that of the western world, and although this is still largely true, there is no doubt that things are changing! As the ascent of science continues to dominate world thinking/perspective, thankfully, the East still maintains its metaphysical heritage.

As discussed in “Science - the New God?” the western world largely ignored the voices of Descartes, Hume, Kant and others who encouraged an ‘inward looking habit’ - a conscience that is not seduced by the pull, the magic, and the promise of the scientific thrust. There was no such debate in the East as the great minds from long before Christ spoke almost in unison: the message was that ‘truth’, if it could be understood at all, could be best understood by exploring the inner universe and not the outer one. This largely shared concept of introspection did not mean there was no difference in opinion or a lack of diversity. To the contrary, there are vast differences in the various strands of eastern thinking. In fact, the range of thought and spiritual literature is staggering, including the Upanishads, Vedas, the Bhagawad Gita, the Analects, Tao Te Ching, the Quoran, the Doctrine of Mean, to name a few, covering all aspects of the human condition.

For those who want to delve more deeply, there is a lifetime of stimulating material largely pointing its students in one direction, that is, inwards. Whilst the West was, and probably still is, predominantly consumed with material expression, the message echoing out of the eastern continents was simple: become a disciple of ‘the way’ (Tao). Whether in Korea, Japan, China or India, the eastern intellects and hearts have been singing from the same hymn sheet. The song being sung is: “until we become disciples of life’s majesty, we are unlikely to find peace, joy and harmony”. In other words, all things are best understood by becoming a student of life; true science (knowing) comes from honouring one’s teacher. And could there be a greater teacher than life itself?

This is why the journey of enlightenment and bliss that Buddha, Lao Tzu, Patanjali, Confucius, Mahāvīra and others spoke of, required something we seemed to have lost: humility. Without humility one becomes blinded by arrogance, vanity, and conceit. Is this not an accurate reflection of where we find ourselves right now? For us, it seems clear that the ego is and has been running rampant across the planet, deceiving, and seducing us along the way. It has promised us greatness and unlimited powers; power over nature, mastery of the universe and ultimate knowledge. Yet we've failed to see that whilst the ego has kept some of its promises we are probably further away from the 'truth' about ourselves.

The moral and ethical emphasis that remains of the East, has little power in the developed world and is sadly even fading in the East too. Humility is probably seen more as a weakness than as a sign of greatness and certainly isn't the average person's preoccupation. Wouldn't we be better off if science and spirituality were not competitors but could become friends? Do they not offer unique gifts and insights? Isn't the world best understood by explaining both the inner and outer universe? Is it science or spirituality that is more important or can we have both? We think the best of both are essential, and the new infant, neurotheology (the science where science and spirituality meet), is slowly supporting that position. It's time we dared to think differently about our realities and replace ego and competition with humility and cooperation! Let us see what the eastern schools of thought have to teach us....

Mother India?

In 1921 British and Indian archaeologists discovered the ruins of an ancient city in Punjab called Harappa. It helped to clarify that India was indeed the mother of Civilization. This discovery showed that civilisation was not a product of the classical world; Greece, Rome and Ancient Egypt. In fact, long before these civilisations emerged, around 3,500 BC, there was a thriving metropolis (of up to 50,000 citizens) on the banks of the Indus River. There was, in fact, a whole series of cities along the banks of the Indus River known as the Indus cities (with a total population of around 200,000 citizens). From the archaeological and meteorological evidence, it appears that the demise of these great cities and clearly sophisticated civilizations was brought about by climate change leading to a shifting of the course of the rivers which in turn forced a massive migration. The Vedas tell us that around 1500 BC language and literature are born in the north of India, leading to a movement from the exclusively oral tradition of passing on wisdom (which in some places continues) to writing down such jewels in the new language, Sanskrit.

On February 2nd, 1786, William James, a Welsh judge, having persuaded a Brahmin priest and scholar to teach him Sanskrit (a rare departure from the secret passing on of spiritual teachings of that time) made an interesting discovery. In his lecture to the Asiatic Society, he pointed out the similarities between Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek. He was even able to find similarities with English and Welsh. His discovery helped establish a principle accepted by most linguists that these three primary languages of the time sprang from a common source. That source is said to be the 'Aryans' (which means 'the civilised'), who entered India according to the Rig Veda and what archaeological evidence is available, in 1500 BC. They brought their language and new Gods, and settled in the Valley of the Indus, also along the Indus River. They started the next civilisation, which succeeded the original Harappan civilisation.

It appears that they migrated due to climate change (so much of history seems to be shaped by climate change and natural disaster) from central Asia (Turkmenistan) into Iran and India. It also

appears that they then went on to dominate and shape the evolution of India for the next thousand years. This brings us to the time of the fifth century BC, a time that could be called the 'birth of conscience and ethics'. In India, China, Greece (Thales, Socrates, Plato), Israel (Old Testament prophets) a host of thinkers emerged: rationalists, atheists and sceptics, rebelling against what had gone before. History is keen to tell us the story of the conquerors and those who waged wars: Alexander, Napoleon, Hitler etc., but what about the peace tellers? Why do they not get the same press? Is it our nature to dramatise and catastrophise? Is peace so unattractive that history constantly prefers the drama and impact of war?

Although we have to acknowledge the part war plays, our telling of the story of humankind will largely be about the peace tellers.

Giants of the East

Just as the western world is filled with a plethora of great minds, geniuses and giants, the eastern world is more than able to match those who have been considered pivotal in shaping human thinking, understanding and perspective. Amongst the greats are some who will be familiar to many in the West, such as: Buddha (India), Confucius (China), Mohammed (Arabia), Guru Nanak (India); Patanjali (India). But there are many more whose impact has been huge who are probably not known.

Here are a few worthy of mention: Rabia al-Adawiyya (she was born in Iraq and was pivotal in the emergence of Sufism), Al-Kindi (he was born in Iraq, described as the philosopher of the Arabs), Wŏnhyo (he was born in Korea, known as the founder of Korean Buddhism), Yi T'oegye (he was born in Korea, influenced by Confucius, he sought integration between philosophical theory and practice), Shōtoku Taishi (he was born in Japan, the Crown Prince, is credited with leading Japan into political unity and cultural greatness), Hōnen (he was born in Japan and is credited for emphasising mindfulness as being the way), Mahāvira (born in India, a key character of the Jain religion), Bādarāyana (born in India, described as the 'teacher of teachers' of what are known as the sacred sciences). This is not a definitive list by any stretch of the imagination, but it begins to paint the picture of the extent to which the eastern contribution to world history has been undervalued and therefore not sufficiently celebrated. This article hopes to go some way towards giving respect to the important voices and messages of the East.

The Birth of Spirituality?

Just as when we discussed the conception of science being a difficult event to pin down, the same can definitely be said of spirituality. Probably even more so because the moment Galileo looked through the telescope in 1609 is matched at various points in history by several equally defining moments with regard to the birth of spirituality and religion, such as: the birth of Christ, Buddha reaching enlightenment, Confucius' writing of the Analects, or the great writings of the unknown Indian philosophers and teachers compiled under the title The Upanishads, some 600 years before Christ. In fact, depending on what view of history you take, a slightly or even significantly different moment might be chosen. It's worth pointing out though that Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu (who was an elder contemporary of the former, who is said by some to have taught Buddha), and the great collections of 'secret teaching' known as the Upanishads, were all unfolding their influence on the

planet around about the same time, some 400-600 years before Christ. And so that 'collective influence' might be described as the 'moment of conception' - the point at which the 'spiritual sperm' entered the 'egg of man's consciousness' and the divine enquiry begins its varied and industrious life. It's at this point we will begin our exploration.

The Sperm Meets the Egg

Confucius was born in 551 BC in the state of Lu (now Shantung Province in China). He lived in poverty and was raised just by his mother as his father died when he was only three years old. By the time he was fifteen he set his mind to becoming a scholar. However, after marriage he spent a short period as the chief of police in the department of justice, as he also had political ambitions and hoped to spread his ideas by influencing the existing social consciousness, but he soon realised this was not the way to achieve his aims. So, he resigned and devoted himself to teaching. He did, for a period, travel through China with some of his students, spreading his ideas about Ren (Pronounced jen) - human heartedness, which he believed to be the highest virtue and the ultimate goal of education, but his concepts at the time were largely rejected. However, people were impressed by Confucius' integrity, honesty and particularly by his pleasant personality and enthusiasm.

Over three thousand people came to study under him and over seventy became well-established scholars. As a consequence of his impressive personality and philosophy his disciples did, over the subsequent centuries, achieve what Confucius had tried to do, but never did in his own lifetime, namely getting his ideology nationally recognised. By the time of the 2nd century AD during the Han dynasty, his ideas had won national approval and were embraced by the culture at large. He became honoured as 'The Ultimate Sage Teacher'. Since then, his ideas have been taught not only to the traditionally educated Chinese, but also to students in other Asian countries such as Singapore, Korea, and Japan. He spent the greater part of his life editing what have come to be known as the 'Confucian Classics', including such books as: The Book of Poetry, The Book of History and the Yi Jing (I Ching) - the Book of Changes. Although he had failed in his limited pursuit to become a political figure there is no doubt his career as an educator and teacher was a tremendous success. His influence has been such that he is considered by the majority to be the most significant figure in Chinese history.

His whole philosophy centred around one concept, the 'primacy of the human heart'. Confucian philosophy revolves around Ren - human heartedness. Although there have been some scholarly disputes about its exact translation, it is clear that Confucius was talking about love. His definition of love was not that of the romantics; impulsive and instinctive. Nor was it the love of God or God's love for humanity. It was quite specific; it was a natural humanistic love, based upon spontaneous feelings which can be cultivated further through education. He saw Ren as a feeling that separated us from other forms of biological beings. Confucius did not see Ren as inborn but as a kind of moral insight resulting from an ethical education and a life experience that provides a reliable evaluation of life. For him it depended on Li (practice of right behaviour or moral habits), the attainment of knowledge and Yi (righteousness or proper character).

Only then could one develop the 'intuition' to act according to the situation. Confucius famously said, "He who does not know Li (right behaviour) cannot establish himself (attain self-realisation)". He saw knowledge and then the practice of Li as the path to human perfection. There has been some debate about the 'fixed' nature of Confucius' position suggesting he simply advocated a return

to antiquity, but the Analects (a collection of Confucius' notes and quotations) clearly show that he regarded Li as changing through time. For him, change was both inevitable and necessary and was therefore a fact. What he really argued is for a form of change that was not disruptive or violent and was therefore gradual and harmonious. This is Li but it is the adoption of Yi (which he saw as a higher governing principle) - righteousness or proper character, that ensured the application of Li in all contexts.

This application of Li would then create a peaceful world. A peaceful world is the ultimate goal of Confucianism as summed up by a passage in the book Da Xue (Ta Hsüeh: The Great Learning) which says: "When the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and when the state is in order there will be peace throughout the world. From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of their personal life as the root or foundation". So, we can see self-realisation is considered the foundation of peace and order. This concept underpins all his other beliefs and teachings, which we'll come back to later but for now, let's look at the other influences which arguably shaped the birth of spirituality.

The Upanishads' date of composition is around 600-400 years before Christ. This is the work of many unknown Indian philosophers and scholars. The word Upanishad gives us some understanding of this majestic text. The word breaks down into three parts Up (near), ni (down) and shad (to sit). The prose and poetic contents of the Upanishads are based on a 'sitting down near' or at the feet of a teacher, who in dialogue with the pupil examines the fundamental issues of existence. This personal face-to-face discussion/tuition with the wise also tells the story of the 'secret oral teaching' passed down through the generations. The Sanskrit texts that emerge from this oral wisdom tradition of many anonymous sages represent the discussions/dialogues of diverse priestly schools all united in their quest for satyāya satyam (the reality of reality).

There are thirteen works that are described as the Principal Upanishads from this period and a collection of 200 other works also called the Upanishads which came later, mostly during the medieval period. The Principal Upanishads, which serve as the broad foundation of India's philosophical thought, are also known as Vedānta. As Vedānta, the Upanishads offer a revolutionary shift of focus in ancient Hinduism. The shift caused by the Upanishads sees a turning away from the hymnology of Gods and Goddesses to an earnest search for one universal reality, that is 'constant' within the ever-changing. This is the primary focus of this text: to seek to discover the 'unchanging'. This hope is expressed in the prayer of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: "From the unreal lead me to the real, from the darkness lead me to the light, from death lead me to immortality".

The beautiful narratives of the Upanishads advise on inward journeys, deep into the self rather than on outward movement towards the world. There is an intense preoccupation with human consciousness and all that flows from the act of self-reflection. This extensive collection of poetry and prose tells us that the enlightened person realises that through self-knowledge, the knowledge of the whole universe is captured. The belief being that self-knowledge moves a person ever deeper into the Absolute. In other words, to truly 'know' truth is to 'become' truth. The Upanishadic thrust is that it is possible for every person to achieve what Christianity said, 600 years later, only Christ could achieve i.e., perfect humanity (divinity in human life).

It is worth noting that the more one explores and examines the eastern philosophies, the more one discovers many of the ethics, values and principles that underpin human understanding were first conceived in the East. For example: the teachings of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and even Christ that would influence so much of the western/European evolution, right up to the present day, are first

articulated in the East. Concepts such as: compassion, non- violence, kindness, truthfulness, charity etc. are first spoken about in China and India by Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Patanjali and the masterpiece that is the Upanishads is also part of the spiritual/moral/ethical foundation first seen in the East.

This eastern influence is not confined to our past. If, for instance, we look at just the birth and evolution of psychoanalysis, which started with Freud and now has countless modern manifestations, we can still hear the echoes of eternity dressed up as new ideas, ringing loudly in our ears. The concept of the ego, id and superego are first referred to, albeit in a different language, in the Upanishads; later references can also be found in the Bhagawad Gita. In fact, there are numerous references that can be cited in Jainism, Sufism, Islam, and Buddhism, long before the time of Freud and his contemporaries. And yet the eastern contribution seems not to have been adequately commended for such concepts and ideas. We will come back to this point later but let us continue to tell this important tale of conception...



Siddhārtha Gautama is another important character in this story. He's better known to the world as Buddha. Buddha was born in India in 563 BC. He was one of a handful of human beings who mirrored the highest human qualities throughout his life. It was his noble character, penetrating intellect, love of humanity and transcendent wisdom that led to his adoration by millions. Buddha was a philosopher; a doctor of the mind and he became a religious leader. The religion founded in his name started in India, spread all over Asia and eventually throughout the world. Its impact remains after more than 25 centuries. Buddhism is such a tolerant and gentle teaching that not a single example can be given of blood being shed in order to convert others to its ideology and principles. How unique is that, when so many wars have been waged in the name of religion.

India in Buddha's time was undergoing social transformation and the long-established Vedic religion had degenerated into mere ritualism. The rigid caste system was born with all its inequalities and disadvantages. The 'new' intellectual striving was being articulated through the Upanishads. The philosophy of the Upanishads spoke of an ultimate reality underlying the material world, an absolute power and intellect, transcendent, pure consciousness, known as Brahman. It also stated that the essence of the human being was that of a pure consciousness, this was described as Ātman. Brahman (God) and Ātman (soul) were seen as one.

However, through illusion and ignorance (maya) Atman gets associated with the body and ends up living the 'limited' life of a human being. The right and wrong actions committed by the person form his karma; good actions bearing good fruit, bad actions further imprisoning Atman. The law of karma states that one's next existence is influenced by one's last: we reap what we sow. Karma is therefore intertwined with reincarnation. This relationship is known as samsāra. The ultimate goal is to escape samsāra and achieve moksha (final freedom - liberation). There were many bright minds, young, energetic seekers, who were not satisfied with the Upanishadic philosophy. Although it was a new, refreshing departure from the Vedic ritualism, for them it did not go far enough. Buddha belonged to this group.

Buddha was born as Siddhārtha, his family name was Gautama. His father was a chieftain and king and Buddha was born a prince, and lived a life of luxury in which he was sheltered from the trials of ordinary life. In line with tradition, his father arranged his marriage to Yasodharā, who bore him a son, Rāhula. His father's attempts to shield him from the harsh realities of life as he prepared him to become a king did not succeed. On one of his rare trips outside the palace, Buddha noticed an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. He realised that the infirmities of old age, the pain of sickness and the certainty of death highlight the inevitable sufferings of life. He began to wonder if there was a way of life that could conquer suffering and lead to tranquillity. This question was to become the driving force of his life. To such an extent that he renounced his family and his kingdom and became a wandering ascetic (monk). At first, he pursued the path of yogic meditation, which enabled him to achieve elevated states of consciousness, but this was not enough for him. He went on to practise severe austerities such as prolonged fasting, suspension of breathing etc. So severe were his practices that he came close to death, but his questions had not been answered.

Finally, he resolved to take a seat under the Bodhi tree, facing east, and not to rise until he attained enlightenment. It is said that on the night of the full moon he ascended through four stages of trance and during the last few hours of that night he acquired enlightenment (Bodhi) and Gautama became the Buddha (The Enlightened One). He was now thirty-five years old. Buddha had seen the path that leads to the end of all suffering and to liberation (nirvāna). He wondered whether the world was ready for his teaching. He called his path the 'Middle Way'. This is because he rejected both asceticism and hedonism as one-sided extremes. He would spend the next 45 years (the rest of his life) teaching the 'Middle Way', a doctrine which would come to be known as Buddhism.

This period of history would be incomplete without reference to Lao Tzu. Dates about his birth and death are ambiguous and have become the stuff of legend. He was born in the 6th century before Christ and is an elder contemporary of Confucius. Although Confucius is often described as the most significant figure in Chinese history, there are those (certainly Daoists) who might argue Lao Tzu is equally worthy of that accolade. He is credited with being Buddha's teacher, an author of many books, a philosopher of amazing intellect and insight. It's worth noting that his most significant work Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching) has been the subject of much debate and there are some scholars who wonder if it is indeed his work or was in fact authored by several people. The Daoist (Taoist)

and Confucian traditions both dispute that ambiguity surrounds Lao Tzu's contribution. However, because so much legend surrounds Lao Tzu, some ambiguity still remains.

Lao Tzu grew discontent with what was happening in China and left to travel to India. It is at this point that he is said to have met Buddha. He found him sitting under the Bodhi tree. He instructed him over a period of time and is considered pivotal (by Daoists) in helping Gautama to become Buddha (The Enlightened One). There is within the Daoist tradition a book (Hua Hu Ching) that claims to partly record the teaching passed on by Lao Tzu to Buddha. However, this has been considered slanderous by some Chinese Buddhists, ever since it emerged around the 3rd or 4th century AD.

As the text Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching) rose in importance so did Lao Tzu. He eventually came to be seen by Daoists as a cosmic and divine figure. This relatively small text of 81 short chapters, a little over 5,000 Chinese characters, was to have an impact that would resonate throughout – not just the East but eventually – the world. Dao basically means: 'the way things do what they do'. It has been shortened to simply 'the way'. It has become arguably the single most important and influential text to ever come out of China. Its unique, poetic style has left it open to countless interpretations over the last 2,000 years. Some have described it as a politically subversive document, whilst others have seen it as the ultimate metaphysical transcript. On closer examination of the various interpretations, it seems that the different perspectives and points of view reveal individual prejudices and agendas rather than honour the relative innocence and beauty of the text. Lao Tzu's philosophy is a plea to return to infancy, to return to 'uncarved blocks'. Both the infant and the uncarved block are at the point where they are capable of becoming anything: unlimited possibilities await.

As we go further, we will expand on the evolution and influence of the Upanishads, Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu. All four are responsible in different ways for a revolution in thinking and ideology. They have all shaped and moulded the human story and become catalysts for religion triumphing over ritual (blind faith) and developing a new way of seeing the self within.

It's worth reflecting on what we've discovered so far. Essentially, at this point in the story, some 500-600 years before Christ, we can see a number of themes emerging, in both India and China, influenced by the great minds and works (texts) we've referred to. The primary themes are:

- Introspection – it's clear that all the substantive philosophies pointed to 'looking inward' in order to find the answers, the 'truth'. They all also believed in...
- Ethics and morality – in different yet converging ways they all saw that one's spiritual endeavour depended on 'right thinking', 'right action' and the 'right treatment' of others. In other words, one couldn't expect to thrive spiritually without a conscience. All these paths also refer to...
- Virtues – they all spoke of love, compassion, sacrifice, benevolence, and kindness to name a few. These are considered the highest attainments of life. They ask the question: what if we've worked life out and yet have no heart, no divinity and character? Where's the benefit in that? Also, they have all singled out the need for...

- Humility – for each one of these philosophies, our egos are considered to be our single biggest obstacle. Until we learn to get out of our own way, our egos will continue to deceive us and as a result encourage us to pursue the wrong things – the limited rather than the unlimited.

So, spirituality was born and offered some clarity about the way forward. However, we should not make the mistake that because there were these common denominators there was a unity of ideology. There were clear differences to be found at the time; we can point to even greater ones now, as opinion, interpretation and dogma have altered and affected some of the original concepts and philosophies. So let us look at the evolution from then until now, let's look at those differences and let's see if what divides us is greater than what unifies us.