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Two Ways of Human Understanding – Knowing and Feeling

Robert Buckenmeyer, from California, offers us a meditation on the *Tao*. He gives a clear (too clear perhaps?) picture of *yin* and *yang* which helps to depict the fragility of western (*occidental*) thought and its search for ‘Lady Wisdom’. (See also “A Philosopher’s Way – The Teacher” available as a booklet.)

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Two Ways of Human Understanding — Knowing and Feeling —

Robert Buckenmeyer—

*First, a need exists to clarify **occidental** (Western) from **oriental** (Eastern). **Occidental** comes from the Latin word **occidens**, meaning, **falling**, so **occidental** designates that geographical region where the sun falls, that is, in the west. **Oriental**, on the contrary, comes from the Latin word **oriens**, meaning **rising**, so **oriental** names that geographical region where the sun rises, that is, in the east. These are the meanings of these two words within this essay.—*

THE SUBJECT announced within the title requires a specific attitude to understand this essay, particularly for *Occidental* (or Western) audiences. Kakuzo Okakura (1862-1913), the author of *The Book of Tea* introduces us into the change necessary to attain this specific attitude:

Those who cannot feel the littleness of great things in themselves are apt to overlook the greatness of little things. The average westerner, in his sleek complacency, will see in the tea ceremony but another instance of a thousand-and-one oddities which constitute the quaintness and childishness of the East to him ...

When will the West understand, or try to understand, the East? We Asiatics are often appalled by the curious facts and fancies which have been woven concerning us. We are pictured as living on the perfume of the lotus and the mice and cockroaches. It is either impotent fanaticism or else abject voluptuousness. Indian spirituality is derided as ignorance, Chinese sobriety as stupidity, Japanese patriotism as the result of fatalism. It has been

we are less sensible to pain and wounds on account of the callousness of our nervous organization!¹

Now, if we take the standard *occidental* definition of the human being as an example, we gain insight into the meaning of this quotation. This *occidental* definition says that to live as a human being means to be a *rational animal*. Rational, though an adjective modifying a noun, stands for “greatness”, whereas animal, though the noun, stands for “littleness”. But, orientally speaking, “greatness” is “being alive” and “littleness” is being “rationally” alive. The *oriental* thinker recognizes that it is more important to “be alive” than not to be alive, or even to be alive rationally.

A classical story told about the Buddhist monk and the aspiring anglo *occidental* student is apropos. An anglo-occidental aspires to learn Buddhism and visits a Buddhist monk to request instruction. The aspiring student tells the monk of his desire to learn Buddhism and specifies the things he seeks to know. The monk asks if the student would like some tea. The student says “yes” and continues to tell the monk what he wants to learn. The monk brings the tea, commencing to pour it into the aspiring student’s cup. Suddenly, the student objects: “Stop, stop pouring; can’t you see my cup is overflowing”. “Yes,” says the Buddhist monk, “so are you. Go now. Return when you are empty”.

The lesson is that *occidental* students see the fullness or “greatness” of knowledge as the **purpose of learning**, whereas the *oriental* master requires the “littleness” of emptiness of knowing, that is, the capacity to learn as *the* condition for learning. So, learning to the *oriental* person is more a matter of attitude and biology than it is of personal effort or formal education. Humans learn only when and as they have the capacity to do so and only the right attitude will make that capacity available. A sad fact is that one’s so-called psychology frequently dictates one’s biology, or, more simply, one’s attitude controls one’s ability. Laotzu addresses learning and attitude in tone poem number 12:

The five colours cause one's eyes to be blind.
The five tones cause one's ears to be deaf.
The five flavours cause one's palate to be spoiled.
Racing and hunting cause one's mind to be mad.
Goods that are hard to get injure one's activities.
For this reason the wise person is concerned with the belly
and not the eyes.
Therefore he rejects the one but accepts the other.

In other words, when and as humans individually set goals, they *ipso facto* set limits because those goals are conceptual not real, but the conceptual, or the known, then controls the ability or the unknown. So, attitude rather than ability determines the capacity to learn and subsequently, the degree of understanding a person can achieve. If, for example, we think only five colours, five tones and five flavours exist, then, we are blind and deaf to any more or fewer. But, why is the sage, or wise person “...concerned with the belly and not the eyes”? Lao-tzu provides a clue within tone poem number 28:

He who knows the male and keeps to the female becomes the ravine of the world.

Being the ravine of the world,

He will never depart from eternal virtue,

But returns to the state of infancy.

He who knows the white (*yang*) and yet keeps to the black (*yin*) becomes
the model for the world.

Being the model for the world,

He will never deviate from eternal virtue,

But returns to the state of the non-ultimate.

He who knows glory but keeps to humility becomes the valley of the world.

He will be proficient in eternal virtue,

And returns to the state of uncarved wood.

When the uncarved wood is broken up, it is turned into concrete things.

But, when the wise person uses it, he becomes the learning official.

Therefore, the great ruler does not cut up.

Therefore, the emptiness of the ravine or the womb allows life to take root and allows the person to become pregnant with new life. So, the great ruler, even the good teacher, therefore, encourages the wholeness of emptiness rather than the specific and restrictive character of fragmented knowledge.

Now we have four elements, two sets, each paralleling the other. Schematically, we may show them in this proportional manner:

belly : : female

eyes male

Biologically speaking, however, we have ten elements, four sets emanating from one original set, as follows:

yin :: womb :: belly :: body :: female

yang penis eye mind male

Orientally speaking the two proximate principles which constitute and permeate human reality are *yin* and *yang* — *light*, *dark*, *moist* and *dry* respectively. The source of these two principles is *Mother Nature* and the source of these three is *Tao*, or *The Way*, intangible, invisible, unnameable and, consequently, unknowable as far as both the sensible and conceptual ways humans know what they know.

Biologically, these three, therefore are the co-principles of life and of being alive. Tone poem number 6 describes *Mother Nature*:

The Spirit of the Valley never dies.
It is called the Mystic Female.
The Door of the Mystic Female
Is the root of Heaven and Earth.

Continuously, continuously,
It seems to remain.
Draw upon it
And it serves you with ease.

Two observations are important so far: first, the *oriental* viewpoint is biological, centered in life, indeed, in the womb as pregnant and the belly button, as the symbol of being born. The womb and belly button thereby become symbols signifying conception as well as the nourishment of life and the birth itself – thus, *oriental* people calculate age from the moment of conception and have two birthdays. This viewpoint, however, arises from the oriental people's experience with Mother Nature's cycle of life, namely, the circular rotation of seasons from Spring to Summer to Fall to Winter and back again, year after year, age after age. Thus, the *oriental* symbol of the circle configured with the ***Yin*** and ***Yang*** arises from this biological viewpoint, originating and arising from the lush farming region south of the Yangtze River. Indeed, the ***yin***, *female* and the ***yang***, *male* themselves are symbols of the female vagina and male penis whose union result in the conception of a living being, so *oriental* people view all living beings as resulting from the union of both male and female principles and this reflects itself as the ***yin/yang*** circle a little below and underlies the *I Ching*, or *Book of Change* itself.

Secondly, the *oriental* viewpoint may be characterized as both/and, or as inclusive and, thus complementary, distinct yet inseparable, and mutually penetrating. This both/and viewpoint is also a reflection of the biological world within which humans live even in the geographic sense of east being the place where the sun rises from which light bathes the earth and of west being the place where this sun sets when darkness envelopes the earth. Then, the generation of life within nature itself also requires both male and female – apparently with the exception of phylaxora, the exclusively female louse which reproduces without any male and destroys new grape vines within the field of viticulture.

Genetically speaking any child of human parents receives twenty-three chromosomes from each parent, male and female so these ***yang*** and ***yin*** constitute a new, unique human being whose genetic makeup includes both short and long chromosomes but which results in what could be called an accidentally different male or female physiologically speaking. This occurs about the twenty-eighth day during human conception when the hypothalamus gland determines whether or not the hormone testosterone will secrete and a male offspring develop; if not, then the fetal development continues and becomes a female offspring. So, the cycle of life lives through these two chromosome sets, again

reflecting the *yin/yang* circle. This *oriental* viewpoint sees a balanced reality of living beings within which contraries are distinct, yet inseparable parts of a unified whole. These contrary parts, *yin* and *yang* are necessary in order to explain the coherence of the whole. So, *oriental* people depict reality, as they view it, with the circle within which a waving line shows the distinction of *yin* from *yang* without any separation.

This circle, as the *yin-yang* symbol, exemplifies *Mother Nature*, reality itself including the very presence of the *Tao* as the *centre* which generates this circle, as, therefore the ultimate and intangible source of life. Indeed, geometrically speaking, when one “draws” a circle with a compass, the sharp point of the compass remains stable as the outer-pencil turns drawing the circumference. So, this pictograph at once depicts the differences between shadow and light, female and male respectively, yet, shows them as inseparable yet permeating each the other, a unity of principles present in every being within the world of change. But, this simple pictograph hides a deeper penetration into the oriental view of reality. Neither “half” of this circle may exist without the other and the light “half” of the circle contains within it a smaller circle while the dark “half” contains within it a smaller light circle – just as no shadow can exist without the presence of light. The fact of the matter is that the very existence of any shadow is *ipso facto* a proof of the existence of light!

In addition, both “halves” of the circle exist because of the presence of the *centre*, or *Tao* and the uniqueness of *Tao* is that it is from the center that the circumference of the circle is drawn, so *Tao* is unmoved and unmoveable, indeed, the *stability* thanks to which the change of up to down resulting in the circumference is possible. Thus, as irOnic as this situation is to the *occidental*, the *Tao* is the stable, unmoving, unchangeable absolute reality because of which change is possible and whose proof is the fact of change itself! So, just as the existence of shadow is the proof of the presence of light, so the change which permeates nature’s seasons is witness to the unchanging presence of the absolute the oriental people call *Tao*.

Thus, the *yin* and *yang* literally permeate each other, thanks to the presence of *Tao*. In addition, the nature of a circle has two characteristics: first, the up and the down, that is, as one draws the circle from right to left, the line ascends in order to descend and vice versa. Secondly, the point where one begins is also the point where one ends; thus, the beginning point is the ending point and vice versa. So, although the circle itself is continuously in motion, the *source* and point of its continuous motion symbolized as *Tao* is its *stable centre* since the circle’s centre remains fixed while the circumference spins, as tone poem #41 describes:

When the highest type of men hear Tao, they diligently practice it.
 When the average type of men hear Tao, they half believe in it.
 When the lowest type of men hear Tao, they laugh heartily at it.
 If they did not laugh at all, it would not be Tao.
 Therefore, there is the established saying:

The Tao which is bright (yang) appears to be dark (yin).
 The Tao which goes forward appears to fall backward.
 Great virtue appears like a valley.
 Great purity appears like disgrace.
 Far-reaching virtue appears as if insufficient.
 True substance appears to be changeable.
 The great square has no corners.
 The great implement (or talent) is slow to mature.
 Great music sounds faint.
 Great form has no shape.
 Tao is hidden and nameless.
 Yet, it is Tao alone which skilfully provides for all and brings
 them to perfection.

Therefore, the very changeability of reality as evident through nature's seasons is proof of its stability, meaning that all things manifest the existence of *Tao*, the source of *Mother Nature*, *yin* and *yang* as well as the '10,000', a symbolic number for all other beings which exist! So, the very reality of change which humans perceive becomes the *profane* through which the *Tao* as *sacred* manifests its existence. The Sixth Century B.C. Greek Philosopher, Heraclitus provides the same insight as he observes (Fragment 108) 'The way up and the way down are one and the same'; (Fragment 110) 'Into the same rivers we step and do not step'; (and Fragment 2) 'We should let ourselves be guided by what is common to all. Yet, although the *Logos* is common to all, most men live as if each of them had a private intelligence of its own.'

Another tone poem, #47, illustrates a second radical difference between the *oriental* and *occidental* attitudes toward human learning:

One may know the world without going out of doors.
 One may see the *Way* of Heaven without looking through the windows.
 The further one goes, the less one knows.
 Therefore, the wise person knows without going about;
 Understands without seeing.
 And accomplishes without any action.

Oriental people can know and understand without using physical senses, specifically, the eyes, a sense so important and critical in the *occidental* search for knowledge. The reason is that the oriental person reflects within through breathing and thereby contacts the source of life, *Tao*, and reflects upon the belly button, thereby reattaching self to *Tao*.

Indeed, the primary source of knowing and understanding is *Tao* and *Tao* is accessible within, so the most important *oriental* knowledge comes from self-reflection and self-knowledge not from knowledge of other people or knowledge of the world, as occidental science claims. A corollary follows, that is the *oriental* person can also achieve more through not-acting than acting because being empty or receptive is critical to learning and understanding and is the hallmark of wisdom: “he who knows, does not speak (and) He who speaks, does not know”. (Tone poem #56)

The *occidental* viewpoint, on the contrary, is epistemological, even psychological, centered in visual perception and knowledge of these perceptions through the mind. The root of this occidental *eve looking* and, thus, *mind knowing* and the mind being described as the *eve of the soul* (*Phaedo*, 99e) seems to be in Plato and his dialogue *Cratylus* (399c-400d):

The name *anthropos*, which was once a sentence and is now a noun appears to be a case just of this sort, for which is the *a*, has been omitted and the acute on the last syllable has been changed to a grave ... ! mean to word *man* implies that other animals never examine, or consider, or *look up at* (*anathrei*) what they see, but not only *sees* (*opope*) but considers and looks up at that which he sees and hence he alone of all animals called *anthropos*, meaning *anathron ha opopen*.

Within Plato's *Phaedo* Socrates explains his desire to know with a comparison of the eye of the mind's search for Truth and the eyes of the body's search for the nature of causation. Socrates comments that upon reflection, he realized that in his physical effort to understand causation, he must be careful. Just as his physical efforts, he comments, must be mitigated in say the study of an eclipse of the sun so that he views the eclipse as reflected within the water rather than look at the eclipse directly, so he must take the same approach seeking Truth with the eye of the mind. Thus, Socrates discusses various theories about Truth in order to understand Truth, just as he used the eclipse's reflection in the water and in this way he would protect the eye of his soul from becoming blind.

So, *occidental* people define the human being as a *rational animal* and approach reality through mental conceptualization and elaborate reality's meaning through verbal definition. Therefore, the occidental viewpoint can be characterized as either/or because mental concepts and their content become the medium through which reality exists as having any meaning; so these concepts encapsulate that meaning and no other meaning is allowable than this conceptualization – but, in Camus' words, such concepts are “construction”:

Of whom and of what indeed can I say: ‘I know that!’ This heart within me I can feel and I judge that it world I can touch and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge and the rest is construction of *Sisyphus*, p. 19)

Thus, *occidental* thinkers establish meaning through the mind's understanding and,

unless and until they can conceptualize and speak that conceptualized meaning, any so-called *reality* remains meaningless. Therefore, *occidental* people come into conflict with any reality which resists or precludes conceptualization and therefore, they either deny its existence or deny its relevance. So, the invisible, the untouchable and the unknowable are viewed either as suspect or as ridiculous. Sensation and conceptualization are essential in order for occidental humans to know.

Therefore, although this *occidental* preference for the eyes and tendency to what one might call a psychological either/or attitude finds its roots within Plato, yet, this view becomes more pronounced and narrower with his follower, Plotinus – finally dominating many *occidental* philosophers within what we call the *Enlightenment* also called *The Age of Reason*, beginning with Francis Bacon in 1620 and his publication of the *Novum Organum*. The *Enlightenment* exaggerated this Greek based emphasis of rationality's dependence upon sense perception, especially the eyes because it harnessed rationality to experimentation and measured successful knowledge by its ability to be technologically implemented. The *occidental* search for Wisdom is thereby displaced by the urgency for the practical application of knowledge so the importance of selfreflection and self-knowledge is minimized or ignored in favor of the self-activity of applying knowledge whose purpose is technical creation.

Plato is the unknowing source of this occidental emphasis upon applied knowledge because Plato emphasizes the importance of knowledge over sense knowledge when he distinguishes within his *Republic* between a cave and jail. This distinction Plotinus develops within his *Enneads*, or 'Nine chapters'. Specifically within the so-called "cave scene" Plato provides a play on words, actually on vowels, exchanging an *epsilon* for an *omicron* within the word translators render as 'body', *soma*. *Soma*, with an *omicron* means *body* but *sema*, with an *epsilon* means *cave* or *prison cell*. So, *mind* (*nous*) and *reason* (*logos*) are located within the human body as within a cell, perhaps having fallen there as a result of some "fault" – referred to by many Christians as so-called original sin. Whether or not this view of the soul (*psyche*, meaning *breath*, indicating that which breathes has a principle other than matter called a soul) being in a body as punishment seems the reason Aristotle left his teacher Plato preferring "the love of truth" to a "love of friendship" – to establish his own school. Indeed, Aristotle's profoundly biological approach to philosophy indicates this to be probable.

Then, Plotinus moves human perfection in the opposite extreme of Bacon by deprecating the body and the senses to the extent that he elevates the primacy of the human mind, particularly within the *Enneads* (II. ix.1.7 and V.i.10). Therefore, Plotinus' human mind becomes the center of the human's universe of meaning, so psychology not biology becomes its medium of interpretation. Plotinus emphasises the spiritual part of the human, the soul and de-emphasises the part the senses play (and thus, the part the body plays) in the human knowing and learning processes. As a matter of fact, he interprets Plato's view of the separation of soul and body to mean that "... the soul must not incline towards thoughts concerned with sense objects, but must become alienated from the body". Porphyry, secretary to Plotinus, writes that "Plotinus ... seemed ashamed of being in the body". Moreover, Plotinus contends that "... that part which communicates life to the body (namely the soul) receives nothing from the body". Of course, the Greek word

anthropos lays a basis for this “eye” importance, since one of the possible sets of roots for *an* is the word for *eye* and for *thropos tropos*) *to turn* thus, the Greek word for human being could mean *one who turns upward to see*, thus evolving into a two legged species, thereby differentiating the human being from any other ape species.

Therefore, the *occidental* seeks what the oriental describes as “five colours”, “five tones”, “five flavours” because the occidental rests the understanding of “Truth” on verbal expression as a projection of mental conceptualisation. Occidental words, therefore, come to replace *reality* as the instruments of communication and the ability to put thoughts into words even comes to measure a person’s understanding in the occidental world – thus the importance of so-called “IQ” tests which ostensibly “measure” human intelligence. Such a search reflects a mind-driven attitude limiting human knowledge to “five”, allowing no room for more or less, notwithstanding feelings, even sense perceptions, to the contrary. Thus, *occidentals* emphasize words and their meanings, so-called conceptual knowledge, or the humanly knowable, leaving no room for any reality which is present but invisible, untouchable, unknowable and, therefore, unnameable. Such an attitude finds no tolerance for any meaning other than the meaning which either the dictionary provides, or which the human mind has defined and science has verified!

The five colours cause one’s eyes to be blind.

The five tones cause one’s ears to be deaf.

The five flavours cause one’s palate to be spoiled.

Racing and hunting cause one’s mind to be mad.

Goods that are hard to get injure one’s activities.

For this reason the sage is concerned with the belly and not the eyes.

Therefore, he rejects the one but accepts the other.

The *oriental* Lao-tzu, by contrast, advocates fewer doctrines and words, observing that “Nature says few words”. (Tone poem 23) and “As soon as there are names, know that it is time to stop” (Tone Poem #32). Indeed, the oriental ignores both *words* and *names* in favor of silence and humility and finally deprecates formal education itself, as in tone poems 19 and 56:

Banish wisdom, discard knowledge,

And the people shall profit a hundredfold;

Banish “humanity”, discard “justice”,

And the people shall recover love of their kin;

Banish cunning, discard “utility”,

And the thieves and brigands shall disappear.

As these three touch the externals and are inadequate;
The people have need of what they can depend upon:

Reveal your simple self,
Embrace your original nature,
Check your selfishness,
Curtail your desires.

He who knows does not speak.
He who speaks does not know.

Close the mouth.

Shut the doors.

Blunt the sharpness.

Untie the tangles.

Soften the light.

Become one with the dusty world.
This is called profound identification.

Therefore, it is impossible either to be intimate and close to *Tao*
or to be distant and indifferent to *Tao*.

It is impossible either to benefit *Tao* or to harm *Tao*.

It is impossible either to honour *Tao* or to disgrace *Tao*.

For this reason *Tao* is honoured by the world.

Lao-tzu sums up his view, and by analogy I apply it to the *oriental* view of reality within
tone poem number 70:

My teachings are very easy to understand and very easy to practice,
But no one can understand them and no one can practice them.

In my words there is a principle.

In the affairs of men there is a system.

Because they know not these,

They also know me not.

Since there are few that know me,

Therefore I am distinguished.

Therefore the sage wears a coarse cloth on top
And carries jade within his bosom.

The *oriental* Lao-tzu is simple to understand because the reality of nature is first and exists independently of human thinking so he *feels* rather than knows, *listens* rather than speaks. Silence facilitates learning since nature is instructive, yet non-verbal, so literacy becomes secondary to meditation. Nature speaks with few words. As a matter of fact, nature might be termed illiterate so, the book of nature is read through *feeling*, so also, the path to knowing passes through *feeling*. We conclude, therefore, that oriental people construe feeling as knowing and learning as imitating nature!

Occidental people, on the contrary, are men of system who *speak* rather than listen so *literacy* is primary, *listening* secondary. Nature becomes meaningful in so far as occidental people can understand nature through knowing and only as *occidental* people write it down in their books. So, they deem verbal instruction to be essential to learning and meditation is at best a luxury, at worst, a waste of time. Therefore, the *oriental* path of feeling is irrational and meaningful only if and when humans render it known through conceptualisation!

Thus, the oriental prefers the belly in the body whereas the *occidental* prefers the eye of the mind. *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost provides a poetic view which might characterize these two paths to learning:

Two roads diverged in a yellow
wood,
I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I
stood
And looked down one as far as
I could
To where it bent in the
undergrowth;
Then took the other,
as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better
claim,
Because it was grassy
and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing
there
Had worn them really about the
same,

And both that morning equally
lay in
leaves no step had trodden
black.
Oh, I kept the first for another
day!
Yet knowing how way leads on
to way,
I doubted if I should ever come
back.
Somewhere ages and ages
hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood,
and I —
I took the one less travelled by,
I shall be telling this with a
sigh
And that has made all the
difference.