

Chapter 10 **THE ONE TASTE UNIVERSE: ON NONDUALITY**

It is because everyone under Heaven recognises beauty as beauty that the idea of ugliness exists. Lao Tzu

Behold but One in all things; it is the second that leads you astray. Kabir

The problem is not so much that we are driven to dichotomy, but that we impose incorrect or misleading divisions by two upon the world's complexity.

Stephen Jay Gould *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle*

The French poet, Guillaume Apollinaire, wrote that Picasso, as a foremost artistic exemplar of modernity, “aggressively interrogated the universe”. Commenting on Apollinaire’s view the cultural historian, Peter Conrad, adds: “The universe has come to expect such testing inquisitions; it is regularly taken apart and pieced together in a revised form by its human inventors”.<sup>1</sup> “Interrogating the universe” might equally be the watchword of modern science. But, as it takes the universe apart - and, in doing so, collects huge quantities of information - it has struggled to put it together again in a way that makes any ultimate sense.

What characterises the modern age - and now “the information age” more than ever – is this contrast between the endless accumulation of detail about the world - along with the profusion of knowledge it brings - and its inability to give it any existential meaning. Science, for all its hypothesising, is a quantifying project. It counts things. It measures the universe, and proceeds as if on the assumption that the world, and everything in it, is finite and therefore capable of measurement. But, while to science the universe may appear finite, in the view of the perennial wisdom it is infinite and ultimately immeasurable, as are all the evolving variety of phenomena that compose it. There is no end to life’s ability to invent new forms of itself. Lao Tzu catches this famously:

Heaven and Earth and all that lies between  
Is like a bellows  
In that it is empty, but gives a supply that never fails.  
Work it and more comes out. <sup>2</sup>

Science does not know how to measure infinity before which it appears blind. It cannot compute it. It searches for original causality, looks for beginnings and endings, and classifies the infinite plurality of forms, while, in Lao Tzu's eyes, the universe has no first cause, is beginningless and endless, and gives birth to forms out of formlessness. Its ultimate nature is beyond the boundaries of space and time.

### **The Universe within**

The more God is in all things, the more he is outside them. The more He is within, the more without. Meister Eckhart

Science is also blind to a simple but profound quality inherent in the universe - that it is a unity, the uni-verse as "one song" or, as the Buddhists say, "one taste". This is not just a quality intrinsic to the seamless web of external nature evolutionary thinking tells us about, but a thread that runs through and within phenomena as well as between them. <sup>3</sup> It is a quality that defines everything-in-itself as well as its place in the universe as a whole. The drop is in the ocean but the ocean is also in the drop. We might be part of the web but the web is also in us. Blake caught this famously in his "Auguries of Innocence":

To see the world in a grain of sand,  
And Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.

To say that the universe is a unity is not to characterise it arithmetically, for while arithmetic is about quantity, “oneness” is about quality. It goes beyond number. This “One” is not one as opposed to two, for “two” comes from it. In fact all multiplicity comes from it. Again, as Lao Tzu put it:

The Tao begot one.  
One begot two.  
Two begot three  
And three begot the ten thousand things.

“The ten thousand things” is the Chinese term for infinity. The relationship between the Tao - and the One - and the infinite plurality of phenomena is the mystery which common sense – or rational thought – cannot plumb. It is the paradox by which the sun is perceived to be in a blade of grass, the moon in a dewdrop, the universe in a single atom. <sup>4</sup>

In the modern West we have lost the sense of the unity in all things and try to deal with complexity by instinctively dividing the world and the universe into twos. Hence the dualities that pervade all our thinking – inner and outer, matter and mind, heaven and earth - are the axes along which we try to make sense of life. By doing this we imagine we are “analysing” the complexity of the universe but it is an analysis that only goes so far, for, without a sense of the unity within everything, we split experience into two and either absolutise the opposites, - set good against evil, inner against outer, heaven against earth – or, unaware of the original and beautiful simplicity of the universe, make the complexity far more complicated than it needs to be – the often labyrinthine theoretical complexity of science, modernity and postmodernity.

## ***The One and the Many***

The centre is everywhere and the circumference nowhere.

Hermes Trismegistus

In the alternative to dualism the axis is not essentially between opposites – between one and another – but between *the One* and *the Many* - which are coincidental rather than opposite. It is an axis which does more justice to the complexity of the universe as an aesthetic phenomenon. There is a principle - prior to number – which, as Lao Tzu suggests, “begets” the overall unity of “*One*”, which in turn begets and embraces “*two*” which then begets “*three*”, the number which gives birth to infinite multiplicity. <sup>5</sup>

Although this view was the essence of the spirit of ancient Chinese Taoism <sup>6</sup> , of Indian Advaita Vedanta <sup>7</sup> and Mahayana Buddhism, <sup>8</sup> it is also part of the Western Neo-platonic tradition which provided inspiration for the Renaissance and for many of our writers, artists, and musicians since then. Whitehead famously described Western philosophy as “footnotes to Plato”, and while Plotinus may be thought to have written the first footnote in the second century CE, his thinking went beyond Plato’s theory of forms, particularly in his exposition of *the One* from which everything in the universe derived.

Plotinus thought the phenomenal universe – the infinitely multiple levels of mind, life, and matter – emanated from *the One* - “first existent”, or ultimate reality – and then aspired to return or revert to its source. This “One” - ultimate reality - is something we have lost sight of. To Christians it is *God*; to Hindus, *brahman* or *atman*; to the Chinese, *tao* (Heaven); to Buddhists, *bodhi*, *dharma*, *buddha*, *prajna*, which all point to *shunyata*/emptiness – Buddhists have a rich vocabulary when speaking of ultimate reality. Stephen McKenna, in the introduction to his interpretative translation of *The Enneads* of Plotinus, described the One as follows:

... it is simply “THE FIRST”. Envisaged logically, or dialectically, it is THE ONE. Morally seen it is THE GOOD; in various other uses or aspects it is

THE SIMPLE, THE ABSOLUTE, THE TRANSCENDENCE, THE INFINITE,  
THE UNCONDITIONED; it is sometimes THE FATHER.

Like the *brahman* of Indian Vedanta and the *tao* of China, the *One* of Plotinus is an elusive reality. It is said to be unnameable and unreachable by our normal physical or mental senses. Beyond words, beyond concepts, it cannot be experienced by means of the human intellect alone, or arrived at through rational logic. Thought belongs to the world of duality since the act of thinking necessarily makes a distinction between the thinker and the object of thought. It is difficult for us to recognise the “pure experience” that precedes that separation. Only in a contemplative state of mind is it possible to avoid the sense of “I” which splits us off from the world around us. Ultimate reality - the sages say - is only experienced prior to the separation of subject and object, prior to the division of what is “me” and “not-me”.

### **The eye is the flower**

For D.T. Suzuki - the writer who did more than anyone else to bring the profundity of Zen Buddhism to the attention of the Western world in the earlier twentieth century - *shunyata*/emptiness – the Buddhist ultimate reality – is unobjectifiable. If both the self and the “objective” world are empty – they have no inherent existence but are essentially interdependent entities - there is no absolute barrier between them. Subject and object are unopposed in emptiness. There is no gap between the perceiver and the perceived, just as all the other contraries we impose on experience lose their absoluteness: inside and outside are a part of each other, mind and body are a unit, heaven and earth mirror each other. Suzuki explains this, with reference to Meister Eckhart:

The eye cannot see itself. The intellect cannot dissect itself. This is true as long as things are considered “objectively”, as long as we are outside observers. But, after all, “the eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me” (Eckhart). To get the knack of this trick....open your eyes and look at the flower in front of you or the starry heavens above. It is

not the eye that sees the flower or the stars, nor is it the flower or the stars that are seen. The eye is the flower and stars; flower and stars are the eye. <sup>9</sup>

This is the primordial unity, the essence that holds the universe together, “what the universe is made of”. This is the ignorance that the intellect experiences, so often unknowingly. We cut the world into two and think that is reality. We miss the *One* which precedes the two:

Or again, if I stretch out my arm the intellect dissects this event or experience, and declares: “I move my arm, and my arm is moved”. But the truth is that there is no agent called “I” that moves the arm, nor is there an arm that is moved. My arm is “I” and “I” is my arm; the actor is the acted and the acted is the actor. There is only pure act, that is, pure experience. If one expresses this in words, though, one is bound to go off the mark. <sup>10</sup>

In Vedanta *brahman* is the transcendent reality of the cosmos, while *atman* is that same reality immanent within a human being. Shankara, the great 9<sup>th</sup> century Indian philosopher of Advaita Vedanta, famously held that “*brahman* is *atman*”, and captured the nature of both:

The *atman* is that by which the universe is pervaded but which nothing pervades; which causes all things to shine, but which all things cannot make to shine... <sup>11</sup>

*Brahman/atman* is the uncaused reality which “causes all things to shine” but remains itself beyond and unaffected by them. In other words there is something in all of us that is absolute, unconditioned, and ultimately real, and it is the same spirit which pervades the whole universe. The issue is not whether we all have it but how aware each of us is that we have it.

In the end it is a very simple quality but a simplicity that can be so hard to realise.

Ken Wilber pointed to the spirit of it in one of his more recent books, *The Eye of the Spirit*:

The sages universally maintain that absolute reality and the relative world are “not-two” (which is the meaning of “nondual”), much as a mirror and its reflections are not separate, or an ocean is at one with its many waves. So the “other world” of Spirit and “this world” of separate phenomena are deeply and profoundly “not-two”, and this nonduality is a direct and immediate realisation which occurs in certain meditative states – in other words, seen with the eye of contemplation – although it then becomes a very simple, very ordinary perception, whether you are meditating or not. Every single thing you perceive is the radiance of Spirit itself, so much so, that Spirit is not seen apart from that thing: the robin sings, and just that is it, nothing else. This becomes your constant realisation, through all changes of state, very naturally, just so. And this releases you from the basic insanity of hiding from the Real. <sup>12</sup>

### ***Tat Tvam Asi* – “You Are That”**

*Tat tvam asi* is the heart of nonduality for us. *Tat* in Sanskrit means literally “that”, which the Vedic sages often used as a substantive, standing for that which is beyond name and form and which cannot be pronounced or thought. “That” signifies the infinite Absolute, the transcendent reality. Teachers who wished to initiate their pupils into the supreme knowledge of Vedanta would simply say to them *tat tvam asi* - “you are that” –meaning that “the Absolute is in essence one with yourself”. It has often been translated as “That art thou”, using “thou” to suggest a sense of the transcendent Self as opposed to the personal self, but, as Wilber says, it can be a very ordinary perception open to every person who uses “the eye of contemplation”.

This is one of the great precepts of Vedanta and originally appeared in one of the oldest Upanishads, the *Chandogya* - “The Sacred Song”. The *Chandogya* “sings of the origin of the cosmos, the universal soul and the individual soul, and life in ‘the afterworld’”. It also contains the conversation between the sage, Uddalaka Aruni,

and his son, Shevataketu, on the unity of all things in the cosmos and the presence of the Absolute in everything, or, as Plotinus put it, the coincidence – the nonduality - of the One and the Many. In the words of Uddalaka to Shevataketu:

In the beginning was only Being,  
One without a second.  
Out of Himself he brought forth the cosmos  
And entered into everything in it.  
There is nothing that does not come from him.  
Of everything he is the inmost Self.  
He is the truth; he is the Self supreme.  
You are that, Shevatekatu; you are that. <sup>13</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places. Life and Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998. See Chapter 3 'Interrogating the Universe', p 59 -.

<sup>2</sup> In Arthur Waley, *The Way and the Power. The Tao Te Ching and its Place in Chinese Thought*, London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1977. Chapter V, p 147. Waley adds a note to this stanza as follows: 'Though ruthless (as the Realists never tired of maintaining) nature is perpetually bounteous'.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with Wordsworth's 'a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused' from 'Lines Written above Tintern Abbey', first published in 1798.

<sup>4</sup> As Dogen writes, according to the principle of 'non-separateness', each blade of grass also contains the entire earth. *One* is in all things, not just in the sun, moon, or universe:

'Know that in this way there are myriads of forms and hundreds of grasses throughout the entire earth, and yet each grass and each form is the entire earth. The study of this is the beginning of practice.'

From *Moon in a Dewdrop. Writings of Zen Master Dogen* Edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi. See Part Two, 'The Time-Being' section 4, p 77.

<sup>5</sup> "Triality" - as tripartite principle - leads beyond duality - to nonduality. Nonduality is based on a triangular - rather than a linear conception - of the nature of the universe. "*Three*", rather than "*two*", is a return to the "*One*". "*Three*" marries the universal and particular – identity and difference – more simply and more effectively than "*two*" – husband and wife conjoin to create a third, a child who "returns to the One".

<sup>6</sup> The other great sage of Taoism, Chang Tzu, wrote of 'the identity of contrasts'.



<sup>7</sup> *Advaita* is one of the three systems of thought in Vedanta and its most important representative is Shankara, the great ninth century Indian philosopher. Advaita Vedanta teaches that the manifest creation, the soul, and God are identical. *Advaita* in Sanskrit literally means 'nonduality', a state that can be ascribed to the absolute. According to the Rider Encyclopaedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion: 'It is not accessible to reason, for the ego-bound mind in the waking condition cannot step out of the duality of the subject-object relationship.'

<sup>8</sup> Nagarjuna, the contemporary in the East of Plotinus in the West, was the great dialectician, deconstructionist – 1800 years before Heidegger and Derrida – and expounder of *sunyata*, which is essential to an understanding of nonduality.

<sup>9</sup> Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki 'The Buddhist Conception of Reality' in *The Buddha Eye. An Anthology of the Kyoto School and Its Contemporaries*. Edited by Frederick Franck. Foreword by Joan Stambaugh. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004 p 91.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p 91

<sup>11</sup> This is quoted in Aldous Huxley *The Perennial Philosophy*, London: Triad Grafton Books, 1985, 1945. P 21. The quote is taken from Shankara's *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, translated and with an Introduction to Shankara's philosophy by Swami Prabhavanda and Christopher Isherwood, New York: Mentor, 1970, first published by the Vedanta Press in 1947. The *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* is a concise and ideal introduction to the mysteries and beauty of Hindu philosophy.

<sup>12</sup> Ken Wilber, 'Always Already. The Brilliant Clarity of Ever-Present Awareness' in *The Eye of Spirit. An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*'. Boston: Shambhala, 2001 p 292

<sup>13</sup> 'Song and Sacrifice: *Chandogya Upanishad*' in *The Upanishads*. Translated with a general Introduction by Eknath Easwaran, with chapter introductions and concluding essay by Michael N. Nagler. London: Penguin Arkana, 1988. P 183