

## **Eastern Philosophy and its influence on Western thought.**

What is Eastern philosophy? How is it different from Western philosophy? Can Westerners really understand Eastern philosophy, given the huge cultural and language differences between the East and West?

At the last meeting the group discussed *Lila: An Inquiry Into Morals* – in which Robert Pirsig develops his theme of Quality from his earlier book: *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Pirsig is exploring the intersection of Eastern and Western thought, attempting to blend Western philosophy with Zen Buddhism. Pirsig also includes references to American Indian (Native American) philosophy – which makes an interesting connection back to tribal cultures and Paganism (see notes from earlier meeting).

There is a view among many educated in traditional Western philosophy that tends to de-value or even disregard Eastern Philosophy as little more than religious mysticism. So, as the word *philosophy* itself means a ‘love of wisdom’ - it might be in keeping with the spirit of inquiry and curiosity to explore the differences (and similarities) between East and West more closely – and to see what, if any, influence Eastern philosophy has had on Western thinking.

### **Historical Context**

It may be useful to look first at differences between East and West socially and culturally to better understand how different philosophies may have arisen. One of the main divergences between Eastern and Western cultures is the difference between Individualism vs Collectivism: how people perceive themselves, their relationships with others, and their roles within society. These cultural orientations influence values, behaviours, and social structures.

**Individualism** (Western Cultures) focuses on the individual: prioritizing personal independence, self-expression, and individual rights. Individuals are encouraged to pursue personal ambitions and make decisions based on personal interests, even if they conflict with group preferences.

**Collectivism** (Eastern Cultures) focuses on the group/community: emphasis is on group harmony, shared responsibilities, and community well-being. Individuals are expected to prioritize the goals and needs of their family, community, or organization over personal desires.

So, what is Eastern Philosophy? One answer would be that it is a vast collection of philosophical and religious ideas that derive from the ancient cultures of India, China, Persia, Japan, Korea, Egypt, Tibet etc.

### **Some of the most prominent Eastern philosophies include:**

**Buddhism:** Founded in India by Siddhartha Gautama, aka the Buddha circa 525 BCE

**Confucianism:** A Chinese moral and religious system that originated from the sayings of Kong Fuzi (Confucius) and ancient commentaries circa 550 BCE

**Hinduism:** A religious tradition that developed in India during the first millennium BCE

**Taoism:** A Chinese system of thought based on the teachings of Laozi and one of the four major religions of China circa 570 BCE

**Shinto:** An ancient Japanese religion that has been influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism

**Zen:** A Buddhist sect that originated in China and Japan

**Vedanta:** One of the six classical systems of Indian philosophy

**Yoga:** Originated in northern India over 5,000 years ago and was mentioned in the Rig Veda, one of the ancient sacred texts

One of the chief criticisms of Eastern philosophy is that it doesn't attempt to distinguish clearly between philosophy and religion. The search for knowledge in Eastern philosophy has always been more holistic, and less scientific, in the strictly empirical sense, than Western philosophy. Against this, Western philosophy has always been more concerned with truth, logic, reason and independence. Where Western philosophy has sought absolute Truth in rationality, Eastern philosophy has sought complete Enlightenment through reflection.

### **What influence have Eastern philosophies had on Western thinkers?**

A number of Western philosophers have been influenced by Eastern philosophies, often finding inspiration in the rich traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Here are some prominent examples:

#### **1. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860)**

*Influence:* Schopenhauer was one of the first Western philosophers to engage deeply with Indian philosophy. He was particularly interested in Hinduism and Buddhism, and he often cited the Upanishads and Buddhist Sutras as profound sources of wisdom.

*Philosophy:* His notion of the "will" as a blind, irrational force bears resemblance to Eastern ideas about desire and suffering. Schopenhauer's pessimism aligns with Buddhist views on the nature of suffering and the impermanence of worldly pleasures.

## **2. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)**

*Influence:* Nietzsche's philosophy shows traces of influence from Eastern thought, particularly in his views on overcoming the ego and achieving transcendence, ideas echoed in Buddhism and Taoism.

*Philosophy:* Although Nietzsche did not directly study Eastern texts as closely as Schopenhauer did, his concept of the Übermensch (Overman) shares similarities with ideals of self-transcendence found in Eastern spiritual traditions.

## **3. Carl Jung (1875–1961)**

*Influence:* Jung was fascinated by Eastern spirituality, drawing on concepts from Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. He often referenced Eastern texts like the I Ching and had a deep interest in the symbolism and archetypes within Eastern spiritual practices.

*Philosophy:* Jung's ideas about the collective unconscious and his use of mandalas in therapy parallel Eastern ideas about the mind and self-awareness.

## **4. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)**

*Influence:* Heidegger was influenced by Zen Buddhism and Taoism, particularly in his later works. Some scholars suggest that Heidegger's notions of "Being" align with Zen's focus on being in the present moment and understanding reality beyond conventional knowledge.

*Philosophy:* Heidegger's emphasis on direct experience and the concept of Dasein (Being-there) can be seen as echoing aspects of Eastern thought on existence and consciousness.

## **5. Aldous Huxley (1894–1963)**

*Influence:* Huxley was deeply inspired by Eastern philosophy, especially in his exploration of mystical experiences. His book *The Perennial Philosophy* synthesizes wisdom from both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions.

*Philosophy:* Huxley believed in a universal spiritual truth underlying all religions and was influenced by Vedanta, Sufism, and Zen Buddhism.

## **6. Alan Watts (1915–1973)**

*Influence:* Watts was a British-American philosopher known for his work in popularizing Eastern philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism and Taoism, for Western audiences.

*Philosophy:* He argued that Eastern traditions offered alternative ways of understanding self, nature, and consciousness, challenging Western dualism and promoting interconnectedness and the dissolution of the ego.

## **7. Thomas Merton (1915–1968)**

*Influence:* Merton, a Catholic monk, was greatly influenced by Zen Buddhism and Taoism, which he saw as offering profound insights into spirituality.

*Philosophy:* Merton's works advocate for dialogue between Christianity and Eastern religions, exploring how meditation and mysticism could enhance spiritual practice across cultures.

Which brings us nicely back to **8. Robert M. Pirsig (1928–2017)** who as we have seen used the concept of "Quality" as a way to bridge the gap between Western analytical thought and Eastern holistic understanding, presenting a worldview that values both logic and intuition.

**Final word?** If there is such a thing as the 'global economy' and a 'world culture' can there be a 'world philosophy'? Is it possible to amalgamate Eastern mysticism and Western rationalism in a new philosophical synthesis?