

## Asia and Europe: Competition or Spiritual Synthesis?

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### The historical perspective

Where do the boundaries between Asia and Europe lie—not only geographically, but also in terms of history and religion? Is Christianity a European or an Asian religion? And is early Greek philosophy indeed more influenced by an exchange with Persia, India and other Mediterranean cultures during the middle of the first millennium BCE than we perhaps suspect?

When the Common Era began, trade was flourishing between the Roman Empire and India. Prior to that, during the course of Alexander the Great's conquests (from the fourth to the first centuries BCE) a Greek-Indian hybrid culture had taken root in the northwest corner of the Asian subcontinent, reaching one of its high points in Buddhist Gandhara art. China, too, had contact with the Mediterranean.

Buddhism, which had already had a mutual exchange with Greece in the areas of art and philosophy, spread to China from India beginning in the first century CE. When, however, the Nestorian Christians, fleeing persecution by the imperial Byzantine Church in the seventh century, found refuge in China, any notion of clear boundaries between the two cultures became problematic. "East" and "West" are closely intertwined in their histories, and from a historical point of view, *ex oriente lux* was always accompanied by *ex occidente lux*.

In modern times, it was the Enlightenment's adherents, cohorts of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) and Voltaire, who were fascinated by China and, subsequently, India. From reports dispatched by Jesuit missionaries associated with Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), it was known that China was home to a highly developed civilization that boasted both extensive knowledge and a cultivated way of life. Ricci, for his part, attempted to endow the Christian message with a new expressiveness by giving it a Chinese form. These intercultural endeavors surrounding Christianity's encounter with Chinese culture were terminated by the Roman Curia in the so-called Chinese Rites Controversy.

Looking over to Asia and its attitudes, the Enlightenment saw social systems and ways of life that centered on achieving harmony, thereby awakening memories of past European history: the philosophy of Pythagoras, of the Neo-Platonists and of medieval Hermetic writings, which informed the natural philosophy of the Renaissance. According to travelers and missionaries, Chinese culture did not teach that mind and matter were opposites, but rather polarities, thus avoiding the conflict, even hostility, between faith and science—a conflict well known to Christianity, as made evident in the Inquisition's condemnation of Galileo (1564–1642) and Giordano Bruno (1548–1600).

Europe was home to relentless religious strife, with each faith claiming sole proprietorship of the truth, thereby giving rise to the 30 Years' War, which, in turn, devastated Europe. In China, conversely, European observers wrote of tolerant and pragmatic public discourse marked by a sage reticence concerning the question of ultimate truth and human destiny. Could this serve as a role model for Europe's rebirth? In keeping with the spirit of science, Leibniz, seriously considered inviting emissaries of Chinese culture to Europe in order to ally enlightenment with ritual, goodwill with morality, and culture with religion.

Perceptions of India in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, were mostly negative. Indian culture was considered reclusive and lethargic, while its love of “nothingness,” its irrational myths and its representation of reality as illusion were seen as demoting religion to the level of opium (a judgment that would later be adopted by Hegel and applied by Marx to religion per se). Even if India’s traditions were seen to be replete with religious tolerance—something emphasized by Kant—Western viewers perceived this cultural light to be dimmed by superstition and priestly deception.

With Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), a new era of Indian influence on Europe began. In his philosophy of language and culture, he described how humanity’s oneness unfolds in diverse cultural forms. For Herder and adherents of early Romanticism, India offered a model for opposing the Enlightenment’s dull rationalism and for championing a more vital pantheism that also lent itself to aesthetic expression:

For those humanists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century who were influenced by Romanticism, India was a colossal contradiction. On the one hand, it boasted a glorious religious tradition, which simultaneously accommodated transrational wisdom, a meditative unity of intellect and nature, and the soul’s receptive, feminine side, which many believed the West had lost. On the other hand, it was host to a poverty-stricken, pestilent and caste-ridden present. Such clichés pervade Germans’ perceptions of India to this day.

According to Herder, “oriental man” enjoys the particular gift of experiencing God in creation’s natural order as well as in his own inner creative abilities, thereby having access to God’s immediate presence. Reading India’s religious texts (particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*), Herder finds arguments against the rationalism of the Enlightenment, and his image of India becomes the spiritual cradle for developments that will later reach their maturity during the Romantic age.

These, in turn, are closely associated with the brothers Schlegel. Friedrich Schlegel's (1772–1829) mythically spiritual, aesthetic transfiguration of India exceeds Herder's cultural theory, evolving into a razor-sharp criticism of Europe, which he finds to be mechanistic and soulless, a place where humanity has "almost become a machine." He believes to have found, in India, a lost monism, the provenance of every religion and mythology, and the abiding home of creative human enthusiasm. In his view, India is not only the motherland of all religions, it is also the source of Persian, German, Greek and Ancient Roman language and culture. To distill the quintessence of his *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (On the Language and Wisdom of India, 1808): Anyone who wants to experience true religion must look to India.

The optimism endemic to the Enlightenment's thinkers—who propagated history's progress as the victory of reason over "self-inflicted immaturity" (Kant), which derived to a considerable degree from religious mystification—is met in the Romantic age by a historical-philosophical model that asserts one pure source for all cultures, in contrast to which every subsequent historical narrative can be seen as a progressive cultural dissolution. Consequently, one must return to humanity's true origins and roots. The early Schlegel maintained that original purity was only to be found in India, although this dreamy longing gave way to sobriety as more became known about the "promised land."

Utopia thus lost its earthly representative. When Schlegel converted to Catholicism in 1808, he turned against Indian pantheism, in which he now perceived morality's decline. In the search for Europe's rejuvenation, the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Israel emerged alongside India.

Having occupied the first teaching post dedicated to India at a German university in Bonn in 1818, August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) was more discerning in his judgments. He, too, was at odds with the pragmatic, economics-oriented zeitgeist. And he,

too, offered up India as an alternative. The enthusiasm for India thus gave rise to a philological and cultural debate. Schlegel was impressed by the beauty and depth of the Sanskrit language; moreover, Indian mathematics, astronomy and poetry and the laws of the Manu all held as much meaning for him as did the “mystic” texts. He lamented the state of Indian studies at the time, accusing the British of only taking an interest in India for political gain and out of self-interest (therefore withholding research materials from French and German scholars). Conversely, he saw Germans as having a specific calling to understand Indian culture for its own sake.

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) was also deeply impressed by Indian literature. He considered the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of Hinduism’s central documents, to be “the deepest, most sublime thing the world has to offer,” and felt it expressed his own thoughts and feelings, as he wrote in 1827 to a friend. Humboldt occupied himself in particular with techniques for “deepening” the mind, as he called it, recognizing that the goal of yogic meditation was to achieve “a transformation of the human essence into the divine,” something he, too, considered a goal worth pursuing. He noted Indian philosophy’s unique willingness to equate “divine infinity” with the principle of “one object arising from another,” which contrasted with the Christian idea of creation ensuing from the void, although it was a notion that could clearly be reconciled with scientific thought.

Searching for the original sources of human experience, the India expert and religion specialist Max Müller (1823–1900) also perceived in India—and especially in the Vedas—the cradle of Western culture. Schopenhauer, Hegel, Nietzsche, Wagner—they all took a critical look at India in one form or another, particularly Buddhism (Schopenhauer) and the Upanishads, which had been translated and published by Paul Deussen. By the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the latest, European interest in India could not

be separated from India's growing political and cultural self-confidence. On the one hand, there was the history of colonization, India's rediscovery of its own culture and the exploration of its literary roots, as well as a budding national identity and an anti-colonial liberation movement. On the other hand, these elements both influenced and were influenced by a cultural reorientation and religious reawakenings in the West that went hand in hand with the longing for India, theosophy, European cultural criticism and, with the advent of World War I, the collapse of the European belief in progress. What we are talking about here is a cultural globalization that provided considerable impetus not just to the academic world, but to the political sphere as well.

As a result of the World's Fair—in the economic context, in other words—and in spiritual kinship with the Olympic movement initiated by Pierre de Coubertin (launched in Paris in 1894), the World's Parliament of Religions was organized in Chicago in 1893, an initial instance of economic-religious-athletic globalization. Through his participation, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), a Hindu monk, was able not only to generate enthusiasm for India in the West, he was also able to offer India itself a cultural self-identity that was both coherent and, by reducing the entire topic to its essential elements, concise. Through its “discovery” of Hinduism, it also offered up a complete, unified culture.

One example of this is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which Mahatma Gandhi compared to the Bible and advanced to the position of India's holy scripture—an event, however, that also resulted from the excitement caused by the text in the West after its first translation into English in 1785. C. F. Andrews, the British missionary and friend of Gandhi's, summarized the situation in 1912 by saying that although a century before it had hardly been known outside the circle of educated pandits, the *Bhagavad Gita* had become one of India's most generally read and highly venerated documents.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the fascination with East Asia had hardly died out; it had merely shifted from China to Japan, which received a romantic artistic treatment from a number of quarters—from writers such as Lafcadio Hearn to painters such as Joan Miró. The influence of this Oriental island kingdom is particularly evident in Art Nouveau. After the United States forcibly opened Japan to the West through its military presence in 1853–1854, the country experienced unparalleled economic growth, which reached its zenith in 1905 with Japan’s victory over Russia. For the first time, an Asian power had defeated a European opponent. In Japan itself as well as in the West’s analysis, the myth of the power, even the superiority, of Japanese culture was promulgated as an explanation.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writers and scientists in particular were inspired by Asia and hoped that Europe—which because of World War I had driven itself to the brink not only economically, but culturally and spiritually as well—might enjoy a revitalization thanks to this encounter. Romain Rolland, Hermann Hesse, Hermann Graf von Keyserling and Rabindranath Tagore, who had been received in Germany to much acclaim, fed the hope that India might serve as the source of a new spiritual and moral power—*ex oriente lux*. The Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who saw the demise of the traditional role of religion in Western culture in light of World War II and announced the beginning of a “nonreligious Christianity,” also took heart in the idea that India might imbue Europe with new spiritual energy.

Among the scientific community it was physicists such as Wolfgang Pauli, Werner Heisenberg and, later, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker and David Bohm, who held that the Indian and Chinese propensities for viewing the world and all of life as a natural whole with mind and matter unified into *one* principle (Sanskrit: *prana*, Chinese: *chi*) was more accurate than antiquity’s Platonic-Christian separation of the physical and nonphysical. Today,

brain scientists such as Richard Davidson, Wolf Singer, Ernst Pöppel are fascinated by Indian nondualism, especially the Buddhist notion that “all phenomena are dependently co-arising,” and the possibilities of undergoing systematic training to experience altered states of consciousness as happens during meditation.

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, professorships in Indian and Chinese studies have been created in the United States and Europe, along with centers for practicing Chinese-Japanese Zen Buddhism and Indian yoga. Often initially influenced by theosophy, these centers soon became independent. Following World War II, even Catholicism’s Jesuit and Benedictine orders became pioneers in transferring Asian forms of meditation to the Western world, which was—and is—hungry for them. The millions of books and numerous periodicals published on these subjects each year and the influence of meditation and relaxation techniques on religion, health care and even business management can hardly be ignored.

## Today

### *Health, Wellness, Ayurveda*

The health care system as we know it is used and appreciated, but it has its limits—financial, organizational and of a more fundamental sort. Today, illness is no longer seen as a measurable defect in a particular organ, rather as an event that ensues from the confluence of internal and external factors, impacting the entire person, including thoughts and feelings. Psychosomatic medicine has recognized that human beings are organisms that develop through highly complex, reciprocal, self-influencing processes, and that these processes take place in constant exchange with the environment and as reiterating patterns which arise from past experience. That means that the biographical factors which we call perception, motivation, will and memory—that is, the mental faculties or “the mind”—have a direct impact on physiological events.



In light of this, it is impossible to advance a dualism separating body and mind. Neurobiology, behavioral theory (and other theories of learning), theoretical scientific postulations, constructivist linguistics—none of these assumes a separation of body and mind, but describes the entire system instead as intricately intertwined, an exchange of information and a structural creation that arises from communication networks operating in tandem with each other and availing themselves of information—meaning patterns and intelligence—to form what we call reality. There is no such thing as matter free of the mind (meaning formless), and there is no mind that might express itself through anything except self-reference and communication in the form of physiological processes. According to such thought, mental and physiological processes do not make up two distinct worlds, but are different aspects and descriptions of one and the same reality.

For Indian and Chinese culture, such contexts have always been intuitive and a matter of practical knowledge. For them, a balanced relationship with the whole (meaning “God”) as well as communication with it has always defined the complete human being. Healing and salvation are two aspects of the same phenomenology.

This, too, is the principle underlying ayurveda, the “knowledge of life,” which is much more than a mere study of medicine. It is a systematic way of life based on an exact observation of the interconnectedness of all existence (a principle that also informs Chinese medicine). The “one life force” (Sanskrit: *prana*, Chinese: *chi*) manifests itself in diverse forms, which we perceive as mental and physical processes. Their impact is mutually dependent, since the diverse systems communicate with each other. This applies to all aspects of earthly life, thereby giving rise to an “ecological world view.”

Ayurveda distinguishes between three basic forces: the heavy, the light and the energy-laden. Reality’s mental and physical con-

ditions arise by combining them. The forces in balance represent a state of health. Conditions as they arise, including each and every disturbance, leave a “trace” in the energy matrix, which is especially discernable in the breathing and the pulse. Examining the breathing and pulse allows a diagnosis of such ethereal forms and often provides insight into developments of the material body that have yet to manifest themselves. Diagnosis thus serves prevention, making it possible to avoid an outbreak of illness by recognizing and treating it at the earliest possible stage.

Those phenomena labeled “placebo effect” that Western medicine cannot explain are thus plausibly accounted for by the ayurvedic system. In their various forms, the ayurvedic and Chinese schools are highly differentiated, yet the principle remains the same: The world is a nondual interplay of macro- and microcosmos, of that which we call variously “mind” and “matter.” In the course of the development of medical science, this knowledge has been lost to the West. Through the development of psychosomatics, yoga and the self-awareness techniques that have resulted from them, Asian healing methods gained influence—especially in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—and have now become well-established in Europe and the United States.

Asia, whose middle and upper classes turned to Western education and medicine beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of the colonial powers, experienced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a boom in ayurveda and yoga and a reawakening of traditional Chinese medicine, which had never previously existed in India and China in that form. Europeans and Americans acquired the knowledge taught in India’s yoga and ayurvedic institutes and in schools of traditional Chinese medicine, and used it to found their own centers in the West, which proved to be inordinately successful—something that had, in turn, an impact on Asia. Never before have there been as many ayurvedic clinics and yoga schools in India; in China, Korea and Japan as well, the number of schools

teaching age-old healing methods and meditation (Zen) outside of more traditional venues (monasteries) has grown, a direct result of their widespread success in the West.

### *Yoga*

Yoga in particular has made itself at home in the West, first through books, then through Indian teachers who came to the United States and Europe as healers and sages. Today, yoga centers have created their own infrastructure and work together with health insurance companies, doctors, universities and adult education programs, and no longer need the assistance of Indian organizations.

Indian anthropology has become fashionable, at least to Europe's middle classes. Sickness and death are no longer seen, as in the Middle Ages, as a punishment visited on humans for their sins or, as in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the dysfunction of individual organs that must be repaired or replaced. Instead, sickness and health are expressions of an individual's lifestyle—sickness being a symptom for disturbances in communication, in physical or mental energies, or in social exchange. Such symptoms can be influenced and realigned through holistic practices that emphasize awareness and through concentration techniques designed to train the mind. The same is true, too, for sexuality. It is neither a sin, nor an egotistical satisfaction of lustful desires, but a holistic exchange of fundamental energies. True well-being—wellness—is a spiritual experience.

According to current opinion, yoga is a complete way of life, a practice that automatically gives rise to theory (i.e., anthropology). The practice thereby facilitates knowledge of Indian philosophy and concepts such as “karma,” “dharma,” “ayurveda,” “yoga” and “samadhi,” which have already established themselves in daily use. Yoga brings together exercises that involve breathing and the body, as well as the mind. One affects the other and they are practiced in a way that not only diminishes stress, but a number

of other ailments as well, such as depression and attention-related disorders. In addition, a tendency for “positive” thinking and feeling ensues, which fosters creativity in thought and deed, on an individual level, both politically and economically.

Yoga, as it is known in the West, is much beholden to developments in India at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in particular to Sri Aurobindo’s “integral yoga,” which is hardly reclusive per se (something that was the norm in India in earlier times), but which unites “human evolution” with the mental and spiritual practices of yoga. For Westerners weary of modern life and fearful of the future, yoga seems to offer an uplifting breath of fresh air, both signaling and incorporating a shift in mentality.

### *Zen Buddhism*

On the occasion of the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, the Zen master Shaku S’en (1859–1919) and his secretary Suzuki Daisetsu (1870–1966) visited the United States from Japan. Shortly thereafter, at their suggestion, the first Zen centers in San Francisco and New York were founded. Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the knowledge and practice of Zen remained limited to a few intellectuals and artists. That changed dramatically in the 1960s, and since then. Zen has influenced significantly religion in Europe and the United States.

Yet a distinction must be made between the intellectual challenge that Zen represents in terms of its philosophy and in terms of religious practice within Christian circles, and Zen as a new religious institution that has established itself in all Western nations through the founding of monasteries, monastery-like communities and centers for lay practitioners. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Zen was primarily a phenomenon of the middle class, which in the form of the Beat/Zen generation (Alan Watts, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder) protested against a bourgeois Christian mentality and materialist American consumerism, using Zen

to express a new aestheticism. Nowadays, however, the circle of those interested in this form of Buddhism has expanded considerably in the United States and Europe, and now includes people from therapeutic occupations, scientists, business managers, lawyers and, notably, Christian nuns and monks. In addition, it has led to an intensive Buddhist-Christian dialogue at the academic level and through the actual practice of meditation.

Zen has made itself at home throughout Europe, South America and Australia, and in a number of Africa's urban centers. One well-known example is the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, born in 1926. Since the Vietnam War, he has opposed war, living in exile in France where he founded Plum Village, a novel center of mindful living that draws pilgrims from around the globe. His books now have print runs in the millions and are translated into numerous languages. Interbeing, the order he founded in 1964 in Vietnam (the Tiep Hien order, existent today in many countries, including Germany), has an inter-religious focus and promotes nonviolence, mindfulness, environmental awareness and civic engagement.

In Germany, Zen became known beyond intellectual circles through the publication of Eugen Herrigel's 1948 bestseller *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Karlfried Graf Dürckheim (1896–1988) also promoted the connection through Zen and art through his work as a teacher, therapist and author; in addition, he was also largely responsible for the growth of humanistic and transpersonal psychology in Germany. The Jesuit Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle (1898–1990), moreover, who traveled to Japan as a Christian missionary only to return to Europe as a Zen missionary still adhering to his Christian beliefs, made a significant contribution to popularizing the practice of Zen in Germany. Through his efforts and those of his fellow Jesuit Heinrich Dumoulin (1905–1995), Zen has become well-established in Germany and has become an accepted part of the religious landscape.

Zen can be seen first as a development within Chinese Buddhism, which arose from the synthesis of the two highly different Indian and Chinese cultures. Beyond that, Zen is also a mental training practice that is not bound by any language, religion or form of cultural expression, but always pursues one sole goal though ever-new modes of creativity: helping human beings, who have always had the same physical and mental potential regardless of epoch or locale, to realize their own development and grow beyond their existing boundaries. Zen is also seen as a source of creativity, as an exercise in discovering the most profound aspects of being human, aspects that are often obscured by cultural or mental rigidity.

Zen serves as an introduction to the profoundness of the mind also described as “emptiness.” Zen practitioners let their thoughts pass by without holding on to them, thereby becoming aware that thoughts are not reflections of reality but products of consciousness. Conceptual images and ideas arise when sensory impressions are brought together and processed by consciousness into recognizable patterns. They represent only a fraction of what is perceived, taking the form of concepts brought forth by consciousness itself.

The goal of Zen consists of nonattachment to thoughts, emotions and actions. This allows consciousness to free itself of prejudices (pre-judgments) and releases a burst of creativity that is often experienced as a complete newness of being. For Zen, consciousness is like an ocean of water or a current of energy unfolding itself, forming mountain-like waves (thoughts) only to flow on uninterrupted. If consciousness attaches to the “waves,” it can neither perceive itself nor discern its context. Consciousness’s awakening—enlightenment—is said to be like a sunrise: It drives out the darkness, without there being any “thing” to drive out.

The training of consciousness in the form of yoga, Zen and other practices is fundamental for humanity’s further develop-

ment. They integrate somatic, emotional and cognitive aspects, facilitating profound perception, which unites all that seems separate. Complexity no longer appears as an impenetrable intricacy, but as wholeness.

Asia is teaching the world to develop these human possibilities pedagogically and communicatively, as a way of becoming aware of humanity's far-reaching abilities to perceive and comprehend.

## **Outlook**

Mindful people are connected to everything. That is the definition of spirituality as it emanates from Asia; at the same time, however, it is also the original experience of love, which is more than just an emotion. It is the power of being itself. Love knows no "thou shalt." It is the expression of "thou art." Thou art what? An echo of the one intangible divine reality, an expression of an immediate will to live. Each being lives its life in "God" as do all other beings. Through the profound experience of Zen, this becomes immediately conscious. The result is that everything—every living thing, every human being—becomes infinitely precious. Anyone who has been touched by this all-embracing experience will greet everything with a deep "reverence for life itself."

This is the "ethical mysticism" or "mystical ethos" as Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) attempted to live it. It does not result from logical thought, but from an unassuming, vital impulse. The path of Zen leads to this lack of assumption. It looks behind every cultural and religious veneer and opens itself to experiencing the profundity of the mind and the immediate potency of being that occurs before consciousness creates a concept, thereby dividing reality.

To what extent yoga and Asian notions of living can transform European culture and Christianity is hard to predict. Cultural identities, also those to be found within a religion, are constantly developing and never static. Change processes arise from experi-

ences of interaction and exchange, and these are now being witnessed in a manner never before seen in the history of humanity.

It is conceivable that a community of believers might renounce, in the spirit of a revitalized Christianity, any demands for power—a “nonreligious Christianity,” as Bonhoeffer envisioned it, implying more a “spiritual Christianity.” This would also mean relinquishing any claim on knowing the truth, something that is happening slowly but surely through the plurality and juxtaposition of religions. Conceptions of the truth are being relativized, which in turn is prompting fears among many, not only in Europe and the United States, but in Asia as well (where the fundamentalist, cultural resistance to Western influences can be seen as compensation for these fears).

Should, however, things go beyond mere relativization and should humanity recognize that everything is not only relative but relational as well, then recognition can grow, not randomly but in a way that leads to decisive insight and insightful decisiveness—a decisiveness that is always in a position to correct itself. Such recognition dissolves fear. Zen and yoga open up consciousness, allowing an appreciation of other lifestyles, rituals, concepts and forms. That is to say, such recognition allows humanity to develop a new cultural creativity and practice inter-religious “partnerships in identity.”

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