

Chapter 26

The Primal Metaphor of the Orient

Uniting with the Infinite Silence, **Dialogue with the Infinite Communicator**, and **Ordering the Absolute Wonder** are three unique and distinguishable primal ways of approaching Final Reality. There are others. The cultures of China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and a few other places share another unique primal metaphor. I will call this region “the Orient” and name this primal metaphor **Balance within the Inclusive Community**.

When we call all of Asia “the East,” we tend to overlook the vast difference between the primal metaphor of the Oriental cultures with the primal metaphor of Sub-Asian cultures (**Uniting with the Infinite Silence**). The primal metaphor of the Orient focuses on communal life, on the yin and yang of communal interactions, on saving face within the communal whole, on communal type relations with nature and the Final Community-ness. **Uniting with the Infinite Silence** focuses on transrational concentration upon states of consciousness within the solitary individual. Sub-Asian cultures tend to structure communal life to assist that solitary quest. In spite of strong community expressions, Sub Asian persons are hermits of solitariness compared with life styles of the Orient.

The primal metaphor of Oriental cultures existed before the coming of Sub-Asian Buddhism to the Orient. Buddhism brought with it the Sub-Asian primal metaphor and affected the Orient greatly, but Oriental cultures did not give up their primal metaphor. Rather they adapted the practices of Buddhist meditation to their oriental cultures. So Buddhism in China, Japan, Tibet, etc. turned out quite different from the original Sub-Asian Buddhism. In order to explore the uniqueness of the Oriental primal metaphor, we need to examine the Confucian religious practices and especially the Taoist religious practices that preceded the arrival of Buddhism.

The religious practices of the ancient Orient focused on styling or balancing communal life in a way that fit the *WAY* that the Whole Community of Reality is balanced. For example, as I, a male human being, confront female humans, I am to style my life in a way that honors the truth that men and women share a common humanity. Similarly, humanity as a whole is part of a large community that includes nature. One cannot honor humanity without honoring nature, and one cannot honor nature without honoring humanity. We have here an inclusive perception of Reality in which all life is a polarity of *taking in* and *putting forth*. There is the *yin* of taking in and the *yang* of putting forth. Humanity can be seen as a type of yang to nature’s yin. And men can be seen as a type of yang to women’s yin. In a full honoring of the *WAY* of Reality male yang is not better than female yin. And women are not without their yang, and men are not without their yin. A rigid, hierarchical, or conflictual ordering of these relations is moderated by this yin-yang vision. Of course oriental cultures, as well as Western cultures, have managed to be quite patriarchal and nature-demeaning. But such behavior is a departure from the depth wisdom of the primal metaphor of oriental cultures.

If we contemplate this familiar icon, this may assist us to reflect further on the root metaphor of the Orient.



The darker (or often red) color is the yang, but we see a spot of yang on the yin side as well as spot of yin on the yang side. And we see yin and yang the same size and contained within a circle of wholeness that is incomplete without both complementary parts. One cannot be a yang quality in defeat of the yin quality, for the yin quality is part of the larger whole within which yang exists and within which it only exists.

The stylistic subtleness of this depth awareness is manifest in the etiquette practice known as "saving face." In order for my own honor to be saved, I need to include a saving of the honor of the other in my actions. We can also observe the power of this ancient metaphor in the secular and often anti-religious quality of Mao's communist thought. Mao's strategic thinking differed from Western communism by beginning with an appreciation of the whole situation of the society. Then he sought to see what he called the contradiction within that whole. He sought to know what two main forces were operative and which side of that polarity needed to be advanced next. We can guess that some of the unique power of Maoist thought reaches back into ancient Taoist wisdom.

In the primal metaphor of the Orient, the community of nature is present within the community of society, and the community of society is present within the community of nature. This whole drama is my being. I find my full truth only by styling my living to reflect this primal communal polarity. We can see an obvious relevance for the ecological challenge.

Taoism carries this manner of visualizing into its perception of Final Reality. The Infinite WAY, the Wholeness within which all parts cohere, is called the "*Tao*." The Tao is the WAY Reality operates. Here is part of a poem about that this Infinite WAY.

Being and non-being create each other.
Difficult and easy support each other.
Long and short define each other.
High and low depend on each other.
Before and after follow each other.¹

The following portion of a poem by Chaung Tzu indicates that the Tao is not a set of moral principles or metaphysical ideas, but a word of devotion that points to the same basic experience of Final Reality that other cultures have pointed to with Allah, Yahweh, Brahman, and so on. In all these cases Final Reality is an awesome shock or break with human beings' more ordinary sense of reality.

Tao is beyond words
And beyond things.
It is not expressed
Either in word or in silence.
Where there is no longer word or silence
Tao is apprehended.²

Such poems have to be read a few times before the truth of their transrational logic breaks through. This Oriental sense of the transrational mysteriousness of Final Reality overlaps with the sense of transrational mysteriousness emphasized in Sub-Asia's **Uniting with the Infinite Silence**. Both the Oriental and Sub-Asian primal metaphors have challenged those of us who are embedded in the Arabian and Greek primal metaphors. Transrational consciousness has not been easy to understand or accept as valid by the more rational emphasis present in the Greek primal metaphor, **Ordering the Absolute Wonder**. Similarly, Arabia's **Dialogue with the Infinite Communicator** experiences transrational Silence as alien from Arabia's hearing the Word of Majestic

¹ Michell, Stephen; *Tao te Ching: A New English Translation* (New York: 1988, Harper Perennial) page 2

² Merton, Thomas, *The Way of Chaung Tzu* (New York: 1969, New Directions) page 152

Reality and speaking back. Let us examine these comparisons more fully.

The Orient and Sub-Asia

Balance within the Inclusive Community differs from **Unity with the Infinite Silence** in this way: the Orient focuses on transrational communal balancing and Sub-Asia focuses on transrational solitary inquiry. Buddhism changed significantly when it migrated to the Orient. It turned from being a practice primarily for solitary monks and nuns into a religious practice for the whole people. In the Oriental context Buddhism became an element of the whole culture. It melded with Taoist insight and Confucian practicality. In Tibet the central authority of the entire political realm was centered in a head figure who was selected in early childhood and spent his life with monks who trained him for this job.

Nothing like this took place back in India, where Buddhism remained a solitary practice alongside various forms of Hinduism and other religious practices. In Sub-Asia, **Uniting with the Infinite Silence** prevailed as the basic mode of Buddhist practice. Indian Hinduism was influenced by Buddhism, but Hinduism remained a separate spectrum of practices. The overall culture simply accepted Buddhism as one more practice within this loose mixture of religious possibilities. Though village life everywhere is deeply communal, in Sub-Asian religious practice, the solitary person and his or her personal journey remained the emphasis.

But in China, Taoist and Confucian practices melded with Buddhist practices. Before the advent of modern communism, the typical Chinese person practiced all three religions. We can assume that Buddhism became a sort of “Yang” to the “Yin” of Taoist and Confucian practices that preceded Buddhism’s entry into China.

Similar fusions took place in other Oriental places. For example, Japanese culture melded Buddhism with its ancient Shinto heritage as well as the Taoist and Confucian qualities it had already absorbed. Zen Buddhism might be described as a Shinto, Taoist Buddhism. One of the gifts of the Oriental primal metaphor, **Balance within the Inclusive Community**, is its capacity to make all things whole in some appropriately balanced way.

The Orient and Greece

The Greek primal metaphor, **Ordering the Absolute Wonder**, shares with the Oriental metaphor an emphasis on social responsibility. For example, both Plato and Aristotle were keenly concerned with social ethics. But the Greek emphasis had to do with idealistic designs and with living from comprehended truth and principles. Balancing the inseparable parts of a whole society was not the essence of the Greek style. Aristotle’s finding a middle way between extremes is something different from yin and yang. Plato’s finding roles for all types of people in an overall ideal society is also something different from Oriental balance. Rather than an emphasis on complementary balancing, the ways of Greece and Rome tended to be highly conflictual – doing away with established errors and conquering less wise cultures. Quite early in the story of Greek culture, Alexander the Great, took Greek truth to “all the world” through military conquest. Another example of this more conflictual style is the vigorous intellectual conflicts among Christians and between Christians, Jews and Muslims. These conflicts too often took on needlessly violent forms.

The Orient also makes social changes, has conflicts, and wages wars, but a different style of conflict resolution flows from their primal metaphor. There is a hope or ideal of “saving the face” of an opponent and thereby making the opponent a workable part of the concluding whole. As we in the postmodern West have become more clear about the limits of rationally formulated truth and about the ambiguity of all decision making, we have experienced more openness to the wisdom of the Orient.

The Orient and Arabia

The Arabian primal metaphor, **Dialogue with the Infinite Communicator**, shares with the Oriental metaphor an emphasis on social responsibility and communal life. The Arabian We-Thou dialogue with Final Reality was spelled out as a People of God living in history in dialogue with the Final Actor of history. This was a strong emphasis on community, in the sense of a peoplehood, a We-response to the Whole of history. This People of God, in their better moments, saw themselves as being true to themselves in order to lead all humanity in being true to themselves. They saw themselves as formulating a realism and justice on behalf of all. This was a calling from the Final Majesty that they encountered in the events of history.

This emphasis on time and history differs from the Oriental emphasis on balanced spacial relations among the parts of a society. It is perhaps fair to say that the descendants of the Arabian metaphor have felt more congenial with the solitary mysticism of Sub-Asia than with the strange societal face-saving and peacemaking of the Orient. The artistic delicateness, the subtle teachings, the enigmatic deliberating has seemed off-putting to those who feel called to preach the searing Word to a sleeping world in order to open them to take on a new life.

Nevertheless, as postmodern Christians, Jews, and Muslims become more clear about the ambiguities of all decision making and the need for flexibility in the application of their inherited laws, mores, and principles, the Oriental style attracts them. Members of European and Arabian originated cultures can begin to see the relevance of the Orient's potential for flexibility within overarching commitments to the whole realities in which we all live. At the same time, the descendants of the Arabian primal metaphor also bring their gift of aggressive truth-telling to whatever stodginess may be present in the over-politeness of the Orient. We might view Mao as an example of embracing some of the best, as well as the worst, of the European and Arabian experience and introducing it into China.