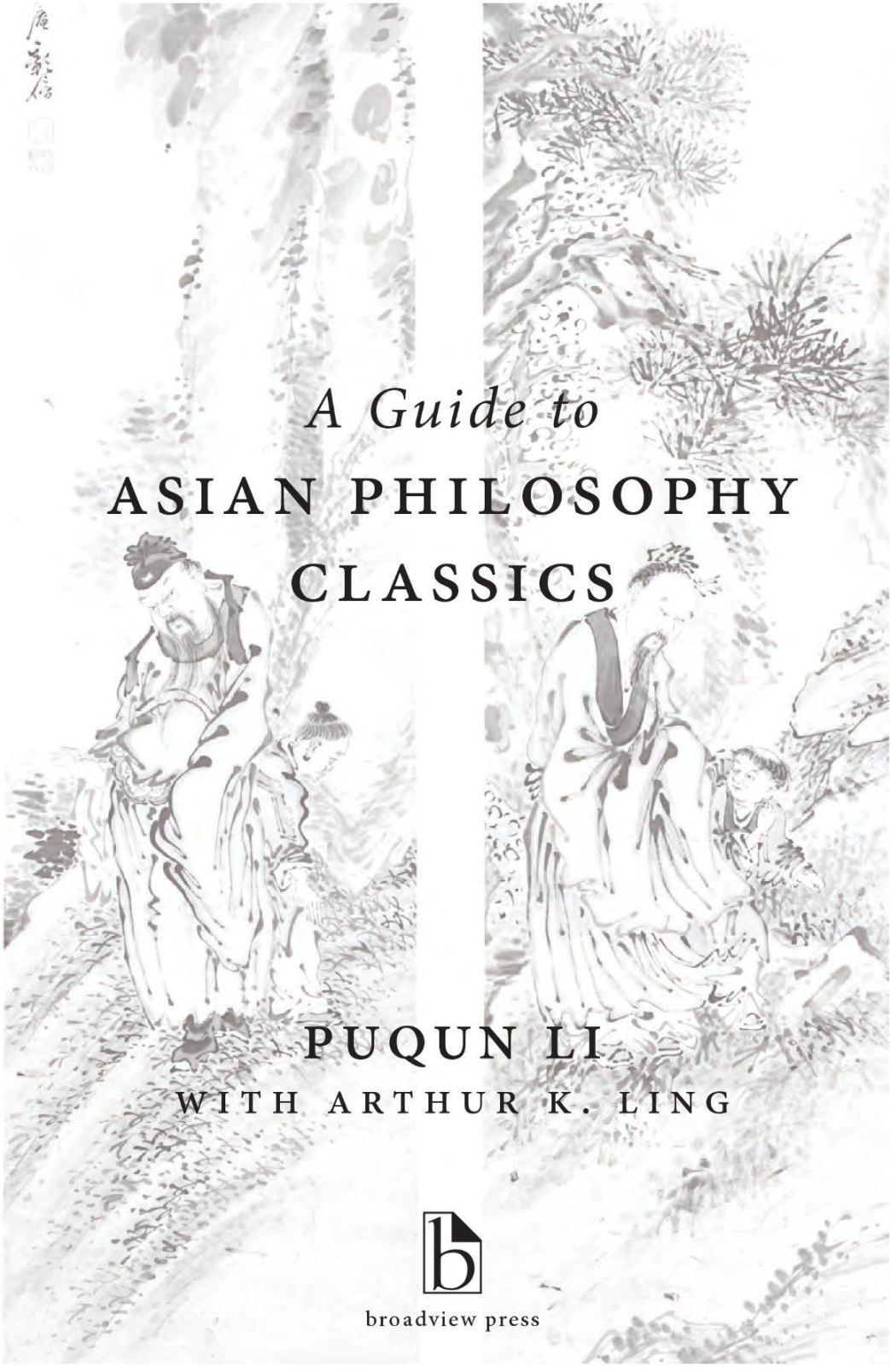
A Guide to

ASIAN PHILOSOPHY CLASSICS

PUQUN LI



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WITH ARTHUR K. LING

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PREFACE

This is not a book on the history of Asian philosophy, but a guide or companion to ten representative Asian philosophy classics—the Upanishads, the Dhammapada, the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*), the *Analects*, the *Mengzi* (*Mencius*), the *Xunzi* (*Hsun Tzu*), the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*), the *Zhuangzi* (*Chuang Tzu*), the Platform Sutra, and the *Shobogenzo*.[1] These texts are selected because they provide an entry into some major schools of Asian philosophy—Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism), and Chan/Zen.

For many English speakers whose first contact with Asian philosophy was through graphic novels, movies, or TV, the exotic wisdom of Asian philosophy can be very intriguing and fun to ponder. But, for those who have tried to delve into the primary Asian philosophy texts (in translation), the story may be very different: these are not easy fun; rather, they can produce frustration and bewilderment. Encouragement and orientation are necessary for overcoming the cultural barriers these texts present. That is precisely the purpose of this guide: to make sense of the ideas in the chosen texts, to draw local conceptual maps, and to compare and contrast ideas from the philosophical

1 Two versions of the Chinese names are given in this list and elsewhere; the reason is that there is a traditional way of romanizing these names (i.e., of rendering the Chinese sounds into the Roman alphabet) and a way that uses the "pinyin" system that is now official and generally used. I'll be using pinyin throughout, but occasionally I'll also give a traditional romanization (in parentheses), to aid readers who may have seen this version elsewhere. The one substantial departure from pinyin romanization in here is the name "Confucius," too solidly entrenched for English speakers to ignore. For a very rough guide to pronunciation of pinyin romanizations, see Appendix 4 of this book.

traditions of the East and the West—in short, to help English speaking readers get their bearings when they first approach the Asian philosophy classics.[2]

A classic is a classic. This is not merely a tautology. A classic probes into the depths of human existence and the ultimate concerns of life. It inquires into fundamental issues such as the character of the self, the reality of suffering, the mystery of life and death, the nature of right and wrong, and the path to happiness. The greatness of a classic lies in its enduring significance across space and time. While a classic emerged in a particular time and culture, it has the power to address people in diverse social locations and times. This is not to suggest that every utterance of a classic—Asian or Western—is always directly relevant to the life of contemporary readers.[3] But, on the whole, when a classic is skilfully reinterpreted, it can continue to speak afresh to each generation, often beyond its native cultural contexts. In that sense, the import of a classic is truly trans-cultural and trans-temporal. Our experience of rapid globalization has rendered Rudyard Kipling's (in)famous remark, "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," grossly obsolete, if not blatantly false. If an Indian, Chinese, Japanese, or Korean interested in philosophy should read and can comprehend Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, a French, German, American, or Canadian with a similar passion for philosophy should read and can appreciate Confucius's *Analects* and Laozi's *Daodejing*.

There is still much we can and should learn from the ancient philosophy classics—from both the West and the East. While we may know much more about science and nature than the ancient philosophers (Asian or Western), we do not necessarily understand as much as they did about the good life. It is presumptuous of us to think that we are smarter and wiser than the ancient philosophers in all respects simply because of the fact that we have grasped more scientific knowledge. Echoing the comment of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) cautioning against the development of science and technology, Alan Wallace has pointed out that "[t]he expansion of scientific knowledge has not brought about any comparable growth in ethics or value. Modern society has become more knowledgeable and powerful as a result, but it has not grown wiser or more compassionate."[4]

In some cases, the classical philosophers of the East and the West can be likened to the folks of two neighbouring villages who are digging a well in their respective villages. While they started at different places, they may eventually drink from the same fount. By analogy, an Asian philosophy classic should taste similar to a comparable Western philosophy classic—compare reading the *Analects* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

In other cases, however, ideas from one tradition may appear radically alien to people embedded in other traditions. For example, try to savour the Buddhist idea of

2 This guide aims at making sense of ideas in the Asian philosophy classics, not at offering definitive interpretations of those ideas.

3 Consider, for example, chapter 80 of the *Daodejing*, where Laozi suggests that people live in small, primitive, agrarian villages, not use boats, carts, armour, and weapons even if they have them, but return to the use of knotted cord for counting, and never travel beyond their villages.

4 B. Alan Wallace, *Contemplative Science—Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 2.

emptiness (no self-nature) or the Daoist idea of change (transformation of things) with our "taste buds" that are used to Parmenides' "Being" and Plato's "Forms." What we will probably experience is something insipid, if not downright distasteful. Fortunately, however, our "taste buds" are not fixed, nor are our minds imprisoned. This guide intends to sharpen readers' "taste buds" and open their minds so that they will be able to better taste alien ideas and better understand them.

In helping readers think through ideas in the select primary texts, this guide adopts three heuristic strategies of interpretation.

The first strategy is to situate a text in its philosophical context. A text that seems obscure at first glance can often be made more intelligible once it is appropriately contextualized as a part of a larger philosophical conversation. As we are reading a difficult text, it is often helpful to identify the author's interlocutor(s) or opponent(s). For instance, in order to understand the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna's notion of "emptiness" (no self-nature) in the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, it is helpful to see that he was responding to an interlocutor who believed that self-nature was real and substantive. In order to understand the Confucian philosopher Xunzi's thoughts, it is beneficial to read them against the backdrop of the competing ideas presented in the *Analects*, the *Mengzi*, the *Mozi*, the *Daodejing*, and the *Zhuangzi*. Understanding this background will help us appreciate Xunzi's role as a synthesizer of these diverse schools of thought and hence his unique contribution to Chinese philosophy.

The second strategy is to ascertain the internal connection of ideas in a text in order to gain an understanding of how they constitute a coherent vision. For example, this guide explores the interconnection of core ideas—*ren* (humanness), *li* (ritual), *junzi* (exemplary person), *zhong* (loyalty or conscience), *shu* (reciprocity/empathy)—in the *Analects*, so that readers can appreciate Confucius' vision on the training of *junzi* through *ren*, *li*, *zhong*, and *shu* and on how that training can contribute to the establishment of a harmonious society.

In adopting the first two strategies, I have sought to present each chapter of this volume as relatively self-contained as well as related to others. Thus readers may choose to focus on a particular chapter first, and then to relate it to other chapters both chronologically and conceptually.

The third interpretive strategy is to bring some of the ideas in the select primary texts into dialogue with Western philosophy. This conversation with Western thoughts allows readers to appreciate the currency of Asian philosophy classics. The relevance of the *Analects* to virtue ethics, the contribution of the *Mengzi* to the discussion of moral psychology, and the comparability of ideas in Dogen's *Shobogenzo* and ideas in Heidegger's *Being and Time* are but a few themes that illustrate the aliveness of the Asian philosophy classics in contemporary philosophy discussion.

Many readers of this guide may already have some familiarity with the Western philosophical tradition, and it is natural for them to compare the two traditions. In some cases, they may (understandably) read Western philosophical ideas into the Asian texts. Addressing potential problems in comparing ideas in the two traditions, I want to provide two caveats.

The first caveat is that comparison across traditions is best made on an idea-and text-specific basis, namely, between specific texts or ideas, rather than between entire traditions. Thus, the comparisons I make in this book are local rather than global. I am sceptical of the value of feeding novice students of Asian philosophies (or, for that matter, philosophy in general) with global comparative statements, which are often too general and, in some cases, vacuous. Such statements may also be misleading and mistaken. Consider, for example, this popular comparative remark: "Compared with Western philosophy, Asian philosophy is not argumentative." This remark may be both mistaken and misleading. The truth of the matter is that the Chinese classics of the *Mozi* and the *Xunzi*,[5] and especially the Indian Mahayana Buddhist masterpiece *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, are all argumentative, and in this regard comparable to Plato's dialogues.

Another example of a global comparative statement concerns the contrast between the West's quest for "truth" and the Chinese search for the "Way" or *dao*. In spite of its intuitive appeal, this simplistic dichotomy has to be cautiously qualified and properly understood. According to David Hall, first of all, Chinese philosophers such as Confucius and Laozi do care about truth, but they focus on the "pragmatic" understanding of it, or on the issue of how to realize it, whereas Western philosophers like Plato and Aristotle apparently concentrate on a representational understanding of truth. Secondly, Mozi has speculations on "truth," "falsity," and "confirmation," and so on, but he does not hold a bifurcation between things as they are and things as they are represented. Thirdly, American pragmatism understands truth in a pragmatic way that is very similar to how Confucius and Laozi understand it. And finally, even Plato's or Aristotle's search for truth itself was ultimately aimed at creating proper social order to ensure a meaningful and harmonious existence for individuals.[6] Therefore, the line between the West's quest for "truth" and the Chinese search for the "Way" is not as sharp as many would think it is.

As a rule of thumb, then, readers should make sure not to lose sight of the nuanced distinctions between apparently similar ideas across traditions, and even within a tradition. Within the Chinese tradition, for example, different philosophers draw subtle distinctions when they use the same term. While both the *Analects* and the *Daodejing* appropriate the term *dao*, they do not use it in the same way or in the same sense. Therefore, in the light of this rule, I urge those who are embarking on a journey into Asian philosophy to first focus on specific philosophers, ideas, and concrete arguments, rather than on alleged neat global patterns. I urge them to get back "to the rough ground."[7]

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5 The *Mozi* is not introduced in this guide, but some ideas in the *Mozi* will be discussed in chapter 5 of this volume in relation to corresponding ideas in the *Mengzi*.

6 See A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 3; and David L. Hall, "The Way and the Truth," in *A Companion to World Philosophies*, Eliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 214–23.

7 To borrow a phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), I, §107.

The second caveat is that comparison should be made not merely for the sake of pointing out similarities and differences between two comparable texts or ideas across traditions, but for the purpose of explicating the implications of the similarities and especially of the differences, which in turn should prompt dialogue, engagement, and fresh learning. The outcome of such comparative exercise is likely an invitation to further exploration. For example, both Aristotle and the Chinese Buddhist Hui Neng have discussed the importance of "seeing," but they differ radically in what they mean by the term. The former uses it in an epistemic sense, the latter, spiritual. An appreciation of this difference can greatly enhance our understanding of the two philosophers' respective philosophical projects (see chapter 9 on the Platform Sutra).

Finally I want to offer a word of advice on how to read Asian philosophy classics. First, do not read the Asian philosophy classics as if they were scientific treatises. My experience with beginning students of Asian philosophy is that they sometimes approach Asian philosophy texts, unconsciously or subconsciously, as if they were works of natural science. They presume that the statements found in these texts are factual claims, and they demand scientific proof for them. I believe that this way of reading is premised on a mistaken understanding of the genre of the Asian philosophy texts. These texts were not written to report scientific facts or demonstrate scientific hypotheses, but rather to offer urgent prescriptions on living that pertain to issues of life and death. Thus, I think that we should focus on the moral and social visions articulated in the texts and on their practical implications. It seems wrongheaded, for instance, to treat the notion of Buddha-nature (as found in Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, Hui Neng's Platform Sutra, and Dogen's *Shobogenzo*) as part of a scientific theory about the make-up of a human being or of any sentient being. Understood in its literary and philosophical contexts, the notion is an example of skilful means (*upaya*), the meaning of which is "metaphorical, analogical, evocative, and expressive."[8] In this understanding, the idea of Buddha-nature does not refer to some entity in the physical world, but performs the function of moral empowerment and evokes a certain moral equality in the religious practitioner. Whatever the term may refer to factually or cognitively, if it does so at all, is only of secondary importance.

To be sure, philosophers (Asian or Western) almost never deny scientific facts, but they make different interpretations of them. For example, both Zhuangzi and Socrates acknowledge that the physical body of a person is going to die or is mortal, but they differ in their *interpretation* of what mortality consists in: the former interprets it as a transformation of energy, *qi*, whereas the latter sees it as the liberation of the soul. None of the Chinese philosophers (Confucius, Laozi, and Mozi, etc.) denied the fact that ancient China at that time was in social chaos, but they proposed divergent solutions to it. Thus, what is philosophically interesting is the manner in which different philosophers make different interpretive "spins" on the same fact. In short, to demand scientific proof of a philosophical idea is to misunderstand the very nature of

8 Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 4, note 5.

philosophical statements as interpretations, suggestions, and recommendations; it is to mistake non-cognitive expressions for attempted statements of facts.

This, of course, does not mean that all philosophical statements are equally plausible and practical. The study of philosophy involves precisely the task of understanding these interpretations, suggestions, and recommendations as they are, and critically evaluating their plausibility and practicality.

Second, do not assume that an Asian philosophical term has the same meaning as its English translation suggests on the surface. While comparison and contrast, made properly, can be helpful, it is crucial not to fall into the temptation of imposing a Western philosophical paradigm on an Asian classic text. When we read in translation such familiar terms as "time," "self," "mind," "death," "emptiness," "nature," and "non-action," we should not assume that they mean the same thing as they do in Western philosophy or in common usage, for they are naturally coloured by the cultures and traditions that produced them.[9] The term "non-action" (*wuwei*) in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* does not mean "doing nothing at all." Nor does "nature" (*zi-ran*) in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* simply mean external Nature out there. Nor does "emptiness" in *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* signify "sheer nothingness" or "complete annihilation." Therefore, to avoid misreading Asian philosophical classics, we need to meet Asian philosophy terms and ideas on their own turf.

To illustrate the importance of the above advice, consider the following quotes from our select Asian philosophy classics.

Quote 1:
It moves. It moves not. / It is far, and It is near. / It is within all this, / And It is outside of all this (*Isha Upanishad*, 5).

Quote 2:
Don't get selfishly attached to anything, for trying to hold on to it will bring you pain. When you have neither likes nor dislikes, you will be free (the Dhammapada: 211).

Quote 3:
Your life has a limit but knowledge has none. If you use what is limited to pursue what has no limit, you will be in danger. If you understand this and still strive for knowledge, you will be in danger for certain! (the *Zhuangzi*, section 3: "The Secret of Caring for Life").

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9 However, I suggest that beginning students should in general trust translations of Asian classics. To play the cynical card that translation will never capture the original meanings of an ancient text can be unhealthy and tends to dampen a novice reader's interest in Asian philosophy classics, or, for that matter, in any classic that comes down to us through translation. Yet, my suggestion does not imply that all translations of an Asian classic are equivalent. Sometimes we can judge a translation by its coherency, or by whether it is likely to lead to unnecessary problems and erroneous interpretations. In this book, I address translation issues only when doing so can clarify things and can help avoid misunderstandings.

No doubt beginners will find these quotes hard to understand, bizarre, and even nonsensical. Isn't quote (1) saying that "something" is both A and NOT A—a contradiction? It appears to be saying something like "It is raining and it is not raining"— all in one breath! Who (and in what context) would say anything like that? What does "It" refer to anyway? The bewilderment here is analogous to Carnap's reaction to Heidegger's statement (in "What Is Metaphysics?") that "The Nothing nothings itself." But maybe the quote is onto something more than meets the eye, and maybe we should not read it from a strictly analytical mindset. (To understand this quote read chapter 1 on the Upanishads.)

If quote (1) seems illogical, quote (2) seems completely counterintuitive. Students in my Asian philosophy course complain that if they had neither likes nor dislikes they would be either unconscious (yet still alive, as in sleeping or as in being a vegetable) or totally dead. How can one be "free" in such a state? But the long history and the enduring influence of the Dhammapada make it unlikely that we can simply dismiss this apparently bizarre idea as nonsensical. It is necessary to suspend our initial judgment and patiently dig deeper into the text. (To understand this quote read chapter 2 on the Dhammapada.)

Doesn't quote (3) suggest that we should give up the pursuit of knowledge? Doesn't it contradict a long cherished value in the West, championed by such great thinkers as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Bacon, Galileo, Newton, and Kant?[10] Isn't quote (3) providing an excuse for intellectual laziness? On this reading of Zhuangzi, one may argue, "Look, the Chinese Daoist Zhuangzi said it is dangerous to pursue knowledge, and because my life is limited and knowledge is not, I'm not going to bother trying anymore." Before jumping to this conclusion, it is perhaps advisable to first ascertain what kind of knowledge Zhuangzi is talking about in the quote. (To understand this quote read chapter 7 on the *Zhuangzi*.)

These three examples illustrate that we should be careful not to dismiss a text too quickly simply because it appears at first glance strange, opaque, counterintuitive, or illogical. In most cases, it is precisely the strange and opaque passages that reveal the distinct or unique features of the text in question. If you have studied a foreign language, you can probably appreciate this point readily. You may have encountered sentences or expressions in a foreign language that just do not make sense to you; you may have also learned that it is these sentences and expressions that reveal the fascinating features of the language you are studying.

I have selected the three quotes above in order to highlight the challenge of interpretation. However, I am not suggesting that all sentences in the Asian philosophy classics are as puzzling as those in the quotes. Many, or perhaps most, statements in the Asian philosophy classics are straightforward, or at least no more difficult than those found in the Western philosophy classics. I don't want anyone to be intimidated.

A guide is only a guide; this volume is not at all intended to replace the primary texts. Thus, readers still have to chew on the primary texts themselves. It is true that

10 It is noteworthy that they each pursued knowledge in their distinctive ways and that what they mean by "knowledge" may not be exactly the same.

they are sometimes hard to get your teeth into, but my suggestion is simple: don't be discouraged. When a person wants to climb up a high mountain, the climbing itself is a test of the climber's seriousness, strength, courage, and patience. Similarly, the persistent pondering of a text is in itself that which trains and shapes the mind. Japanese Zen Master Dogen's idea that "practice and enlightenment are one" provides a helpful way for seeing the process of engaging the Asian texts. The practice of wrestling with the Asian philosophy classics is in itself a quest for self-understanding. Hopefully, this guide will make your wrestling a bit easier and more fruitful. Just remember, if you are reading the Asian philosophy classics, you are already a keen student and learner.[11]

11 See the *Analects* 7:8, the *Daodejing* chapter 41, the Dhammapada 164, and the story of Naciketas in the *Katha Upanishad*.

CHAPTER 1

The Upanishads

SUGGESTED PRIMARY READING

Isa, Kena, Katha, Chandogya, and Brihadaranyaka Upanishads in *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the time you have worked through this chapter, you should be able to

- Describe the ideas of *Atman* and *Brahman*
- Explain the identification of *Atman* with *Brahman* and its implications
- Describe how the karma theory works
- Describe the path from transmigration (*samsara*) to liberation (*moksha*)

KEY WORDS

Atman, *Brahman*, karma, *samsara*, *moksha*

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The following questions may seem far removed from practical, everyday concerns. But in the ancient Indian philosophical classic, the Upanishads, these questions are seen as of ultimate importance—questions that everyone has to confront in life.

1. Is life simply what meets the eye—a process of birth, living, and death? Is death the ultimate end? Am I just this physical body, which lasts only a finite period of time? Do I have a true Self beyond my physical body?
2. Are there moral laws governing human activities? Are we free in making ethical choices?
3. Why is there universal suffering? Why do people suffer sometimes for no apparent reason?
4. Is it possible to be free from suffering in this life? What should one do in order to be released from suffering?

The Upanishads not only ask these profound philosophical questions, but also provide answers to them. If we accept these answers, we could radically transform ourselves.

INTRODUCTION

Indian philosophy springs from the fountainhead of the Upanishads, which is made up of a vast number of verses collected between approximately 1000 and 500 BCE. They are the concluding sections of four earlier collections of verses called the Vedas.[1] Scholars generally agree that the Vedas first took shape when the Sanskrit-speaking Aryan people migrated to the Indus Valley in approximately 1500 BCE and began to integrate into the aboriginal civilization which had been there since around 2500 BCE.[2] The Vedas consist of hymns or incantations for pantheistic nature worship. Natural forces, such as the sun, wind, storm, rain, fire, earth, and heaven, were worshipped as powers of life. It

1 The word "*veda*" literally means "knowledge" or "wisdom." There are four Vedas: *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*; each of them contains four layers: Mantras or Samhitas (chanting hymns), Brahmanas (the authoritative explanation or elaboration of a Brahmin—a functional equivalent of a priest), Aranyakas ("forest books," hermits' reflections on the meaning of sacrificial rituals), and the Upanishads. A note on our typography: conventionally, all book titles appear in italics except for names of old major revered works of scripture (e.g., the Bible, the Qur'an). On this basis, "Vedas," "Upanishads," and "Dhammapada" will appear unitalicized (except when referring to a particular modern published edition or translation, or to a particular one of the Upanishads, e.g., *Katha Upanishad*). Rather than argue about whether the other books that I will discuss are "major revered works of scripture," I'll merely follow the usual (but not invariable) practice of italicizing their names. It's also conventional to insert the unitalicized word "the" preceding the names of these works (e.g., "the *Daodejing*").

2 Some figurines found in the Indus Valley show that gods and goddesses were worshipped. Indus Valley seals sometimes show the swastika symbol, which is also found in later Indian Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. One famous seal represents a figure in what was later called the lotus position in Yoga. All these suggest that the Indus Valley Civilization contributed to India's later religion and philosophy.

is believed that by reciting, chanting, and singing verses from the Vedas one can obtain sacred energy from the powers of life. Although there were many gods in the Vedas,[3] there was already a tendency towards a monotheistic synthesis. Belief in the existence of the gods was not argued for, but simply assumed in sacrificial practices. Thus, the Vedas are more of the genre of nature mythology than of philosophy.

The Upanishads, by contrast, consist of predominately speculative and exploratory philosophical material, rather than cultic or ritualistic texts. Strictly speaking, they are not systematic philosophical treatises, and they even appear to be self-contradictory at times. But they seek to present a series of reasoned philosophical visions and ways of life. The dominant vision is that suffering (within a seemingly endless cycle of birth and death) is pervasive, due to one's ignorance of the true Self. Fortunately, however, the seemingly endless cycle of suffering is escapable if one realizes one's true Self.

Compared to the earlier layers of the Vedas, a significant "inward turn" (from ritual to self-contemplation) can be detected in the Upanishads: "the gods recede into the background, the priests are subordinated, sacrifices are looked down upon, contemplation takes the place of worship and the acquisition of divine knowledge takes precedence over the performance of rites and ceremonies."[4] Unlike Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible, which looks to a transcendent God as the answer to the vanity of life under the sun,[5] the Upanishads urge all earnest seekers of truth to turn inward to their deep inner Self for answers to the problem of suffering.[6]

The path of inward exploration, or meditation, leads to liberation, but to ensure efficacy, the practice must be carried out under the guidance of qualified spiritual teachers—gurus. Indeed, the term "Upanishad" is derived from *upa*, near, *ni*, down, and *sad*, to sit, which altogether means a "secret doctrine" or "profound teaching" that pupils receive from their gurus.[7] While spiritual teachings are open to all, the gurus insist that in practice only keen and dedicated students are receptive to them.

The preoccupations of the Upanishads are predominately metaphysical—about ultimate release from suffering. In contrast to the Vedas, which focused on worldly goals, such as material benefits and pleasure, the Upanishads see the worldly goals as all transient. "Centenarian sons and grandsons," "cattle, elephants, gold, and horses," "wealth and long life," "lovely maidens with chariots, with lyres"—that is, all the

3 The major gods include Brahma (creator), Vishnu (sustainer), Shiva (destroyer), Indra (a deity of the thunderstorm or rain), and Agni (the god of fire). However, Lord Shiva is seen by many as the Godhead who is the creator, preserver, and the final destroyer of all things.

4 D.S. Sharma, *Hinduism through the Ages* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1973), 6. Also see Eknath Easwaran, *The Upanishads* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007), 301–02.

5 See Ecclesiastes 12:13–14.

6 See *Katha*, II.1–5, and V.8–12. Notice, however, that the sacrificial and ritualistic Vedic practice continued to exist in Hindu tradition alongside the more speculative and philosophical Upanishadic teachings.

7 There is a different interpretation of the word "Upanishad": "*upa*" means "near," "*ni*" means "perfectly," and "*sad*" means "shatter" or "destroy." Thus, "Upanishad" altogether means knowledge that shatters human miseries and sufferings (see M. Bannerjee, *Invitation to Hinduism* [New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1978], 35).

commonly cherished goals of the ancient Indian world—are simply "ephemeral."[8] So long as one is ignorant of one's true nature, these worldly attainments can at best be of secondary importance.

The Upanishadic sages inspired much of later Indian philosophies. Recurring motifs in the Indian philosophical traditions, such as the search for the true Self as deep consciousness, the pursuit of liberation (*moksha*) from transmigration—endless reincarnation (*samsara*)—and the principle of karma (deeds), are all traceable to the Upanishads. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Upanishads are the fountainhead of later Indian thought. In this regard, our study of the Upanishads will pave the way for an investigation of Indian Buddhism as found in the Dhammapada (Chapter 2 of this book) and the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (Chapter 3) and two later incarnations of Buddhist thought: Chinese Chan in the Platform Sutra (Chapter 9) and Japanese Zen in the *Shobogenzo* (Chapter 10).

Of the large number of Upanishads,[9] the following ten, called "principal Upanishads," are considered authoritative: *Isa*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Taittiriya*, *Aitareya*, *Chandogya*, and *Brihadaranyaka*. To ensure an adequate treatment of the select classics within the length of this guide, our discussion will be confined to only five of the principal Upanishads: *Isa*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Chandogya*, and *Brihadaranyaka*.[10] Occasional references to the rest of the principal Upanishads will be made when it is necessary.

DOING PHILOSOPHY
Are the Upanishads Philosophy Texts?

Response (1): The Upanishads are not philosophy texts.

Eknath Easwaran: "Yet the Upanishads are not philosophy. They do not explain or develop a line of argument. They are *darshana*, 'something seen,' and the student to whom they were taught was expected not only to listen to the words but to *realize* them: that is, to make their truths an integral part of character, conduct, and consciousness."[11]

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8 *Katha*, 1.23–26, in *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). Unless otherwise noted, further quotations from the Upanishads will be from this translation.

9 The traditional number is 108, though it may very well be more than that.

10 The literal meanings for the titles of these Upanishads are respectively "the ruler of the self" (*Isa*), "by whom and what" (*Kena*), "after death" (*Katha*), "the uprising of sacred song" (*Chandogya*), and "teachings from the great forest" (*Brihadaranyaka*). It is uncertain which individual sages authored the Upanishads—ancient Indians in general had less concern for authorship and chronology than for the content of thoughts. The truths revealed in them are believed to be universal and eternal; whoever formulated them is generally considered irrelevant.

11 *The Upanishads*, trans. Eknath Easwaran (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007), 22–23.

Response (2): The Upanishads are philosophy texts.

Joel Kupperman: "The Upanishads also are highly serious philosophy. They develop a sophisticated and (on the whole) highly consistent world picture, a metaphysics that in some respects parallels that developed much later by Baruch Spinoza in the West. As in Spinoza's case, the metaphysics generates an ethics. What the world really is like tells you what the best way is to live."[12]

Kupperman added that the Upanishads are texts of philosophy because they present "arguments, which may be explicit or implicit, [and they do not merely offer] an appeal to faith or devotion (or to reliance on the authority of the religious text) but instead an argued set of views that then is open to counterargument.[13]

Are the Upanishads philosophical texts? Are Easwaran and Kupperman in conflict in their views on the nature of the Upanishads? Is the defining characteristic of a philosophical text that of an explicit or implicit argument? Is "philosophy" rather a family resemblance concept which does not have one essential feature among its variety of uses? Can philosophy take many faces? (Similar questions will re-surface when we later explore the nature of Chan or Zen in Chapters 9 and 10 of this book.)

WHO AM I, *REALLY*?—THE SEARCH FOR *ATMAN*

French biologist Jacques Monod (1910–76) wrote, "We would like to think ourselves necessary, inevitable, ordained from all eternity. All religions, nearly all philosophies, and even a part of science testify to the unwearying, heroic effort of mankind desperately denying its own contingency."[14] Indeed, the idea that our existence may be contingent, or entirely due to chance, can be a very unsettling thought. For this reason, human beings have expended much intellectual effort to resist this notion. The Upanishads reflect precisely such a heroic effort. The Upanishadic sages assure us that while we may be mortal and contingent, and thus suffer, the "I" that is mortal is but an illusion; it is not the ultimate "I." The ultimate "I" is that which we can realize, and once we realize it, we will no longer suffer. Thus, the *Chandogya* issues the invitation, "Come! Let us search out that Self, the Self by searching out whom one obtains all worlds and

12 Joel J. Kupperman, *Classic Asian Philosophy: A Guide to the Essential Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.
13 Kupperman, 4.
14 Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, Austryn Wainhouse, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 44.

all desires!"[15] The most important among the desires is to be "liberated from the mouth of death."[16] So the essential question is "Who am I, *really*?"

The question "Who am I?" is very different from the question "Who are you?" While you may encounter the second question from time to time in everyday life, the first question rarely occurs to you, except perhaps when you are in a pensive mood. When asked "Who are you?" you generally respond by giving your name, occupation, social roles, and so on. You may even reply, "I am *this* physical body," while pointing to yourself. However, when a guru asks the question, "Who are you?" he is not after the sorts of responses you may give in an everyday conversation. He is challenging you to seriously consider the first question—"Who am I, *really*?" That is, what is the subject or the experiencing agent that makes my experience (or anyone else's) possible?

Unlike the run-of-the-mill responses to the second question, the answer to the first question does not come easily. Normally, you all have a strong sense of an enduring "I," even though you are aware that you are undergoing constant change, physically and mentally. But when you attempt to specify what you are by filling in the blank, "I am _____," you may find that the real "I" keeps eluding you. No matter what information you insert in the blank, the resultant statement is still nowhere close to capturing the experiencing agent that you know as "I." Since the filling-in-the-blank tactic merely looks at the "I" from an outsider's, or non-reflexive, perspective,[17] it paradoxically dismisses the true experiencing "I" altogether, and renders the "I" into a "he," "she," or "it."

This paradoxical dismissal of the "I" from a non-reflexive perspective is aptly illustrated in a humorous tale. Once upon a time in ancient China, a monk had been found guilty of a crime and was sentenced to a jail confinement in a remote town. He was being transported to the remote town by a slow-witted warden. Aware of his own absent-mindedness, the warden conscientiously made a list of everything he had to take care of, which reads "the verdict document, an umbrella, the wooden pillory (for the monk), the key to the pillory, the monk, and myself." Proud of being so organized this time, the warden gleefully said to himself while putting the note in his pocket, "This time I am not going to leave behind anything." Half way into their journey, they stopped at a restaurant for a short break. The cunning monk talked the warden into ordering some wine. Soon the warden drank more than he could absorb and collapsed at the table. The monk quickly lifted the warden's key and unlocked his wooden pillory. Being the prankster that he was, the monk shaved the warden's head before slipping away! When the warden came around, he immediately retrieved his note to see if anything was missing. He checked the items on the list one by one, "the verdict document, the umbrella, the wooden pillory (now around his own neck), the key to the pillory, and ... where's the monk?" Puzzled, he scratched his head. But to his horror, he felt a clean shaven head and let out a scream, "Heavens! Where is *I*?"

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15 *Chandogya*, VIII.vii.2; see VIII.xii.6 and *Brihadaranyaka*, II.iv.6.

16 *Katha*, III.15.

17 A sword cannot cut itself, and a finger cannot touch itself. We call the sword and the finger "non-reflexive."

In asking "Who am I?" the "I" is performing a reflexive action, in which the "I" is simultaneously the speaker and the addressee, or the asking-"I" and the addressee-"I" respectively. Since the asking-"I" and the addressee-"I" are one, the asking-"I" becomes eclipsed at the utterance of the question. The situation is analogous to the seeing-eye that can never be in the field of vision and thus can never see itself.[18] The precondition of seeing is a duality where the one seeing and the one seen are not the same, as remarked by one Upanishadic sage, "For where there is a duality (*dvaita*), as it were (*iva*), there one sees another.... where, verily, everything has become just one's own self ... then whereby and whom would one see?"[19] What makes the tale of the slow-witted warden humorous is his complete failure to grasp the reflexive nature of the question—that the addressee-"I" and the asking-"I" are in fact one.

The question "Who am I?" is then much more profound than it appears. Appreciating the reflexive nature of the question, as already suggested, is the first step toward getting a grip on it. Further, the question calls for a different kind of "knowing" (where the subject and the object are dissolved into one), not a "knowing" of what one is, outwardly and temporally, but a knowing of what one-in-itself is—that is, the true nature of the asking-"I" that persists through time and change, which the Upanishads call *Atman*.[20] As mentioned earlier, the Upanishads reflect a heroic effort to go beyond our contingency, that is, our outward and temporal "I."

In this regard, the philosophical quest for the true self articulated in the Upanishads is quite similar to the philosophical visions found in the West, such as Parmenides' idea of Being, Plato's theory of Forms, and Kant's notion of the "Thing-in-itself." All these philosophers of the West subscribe to a dualism of appearance versus reality. For the two ancient Greek sages, the world of appearance is characterized by change and the world of reality by permanence, or constancy. For Kant, the dualism translates into the distinction between a *phenomenon* (a thing as it appears to us) and a *noumenon* (a thing-in-itself)—that is, between that which is within the limit of ordinary human knowledge and that which transcends it.

But how do the Upanishads establish the existence of *Atman*, or the unchanging Self? In the *Brihadaranyaka*, the answer to this question is given in an array of analogies: "As there can be no water without the sea, no touch without the skin, no smell without the nose, no taste without the tongue, no form without the eye, no sound without the ear, no thought without the mind, no wisdom without the heart, no work without hands, no walking without feet, no scriptures without words, so there can be nothing without

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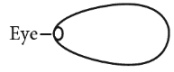
18 See Wittgenstein: "For the field of sight is not a form like this"



(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Bertrand Russell and C.K. Ogden, eds. [New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010], 5.6331).

19 *Brihadaranyaka*, II.iv.14.

20 *Atman* literally means "breath"; etymologically it may be related to the German term *atmen* meaning "breath."

the Self" (II.iv:11). This verse enumerates a series of pairs: water/sea, touch/skin, smell/nose, taste/tongue, form/eye, sound/ear, thought/mind, wisdom/heart, work/hands, walking/feet, and scriptures/words. The point is that the second element of each pair is that which gives rise to the first element, or that the existence of which is presupposed by the first element.

Is this argument compelling? Surely we may agree that "there can be no smell without the nose, no taste without the tongue" and so on, but we need not concede that "there can be nothing without the Self." Logically, it is quite possible that the alleged Self may simply be the aggregate of effects produced by the skin, the nose, the tongue, the eye, the ear, the mind, and so on. In other words, once we have listed the skin, the nose, the tongue, the eye, and so on, along with their corresponding effects, we may have already exhausted our description of our selves. There may be nothing *above or beyond* the items on the list.

DOING PHILOSOPHY

*"I" (*Atman*) or Not "I": Is There a Subject behind Consciousness?*

The idea of *Atman* in the Upanishads finds certain echoes in the West. Descartes (1596–1650) contends "*Cogito ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I am") because for him the act of doubting (a kind of thinking or consciousness) itself implies a subject that doubts.

However, by sharp contrast, Hume (1711–76) argues that actually our conception of a self is merely "a bundle of experiences." And in the same spirit with Hume's, Wittgenstein (1889–1951) questions the idea of a transcendent Self with the analogy of the eye and the field of sight: "Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be found? You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field. But really you do not see the eye. And nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye."[21]

Which view is more plausible? The Upanishads', Descartes', Hume's, or Wittgenstein's? Does the proposition "It is raining" imply that the "It" must refer to an agent/subject that is raining? Should we understand "I" (in "I think, therefore I am") in the same way as we understand the "It" (in "It is raining")? More importantly, what implications would answers to these questions have on cognition, self-identity, and meaning of life?

In *Chandogya*, one of the oldest and best-known Upanishads, the search for the true Self at one point has gone through a long list of possibilities: Name, Speech, Mind (*manas*), Conception (*samkalpa*), Thought (*citta*), Meditation (*dhyana*), Understanding

21 *Tractatus* 5.633.

(*vijnana*), Strength, Food, Water, Heat, Space, Memory, Hope, and Life (*prana*, breath).[22] The list contains physical elements as well as mental elements, but because of the briefness of the verses, the connections between these elements are rather obscure. It appears that the sages of the *Chandogya* were still groping for some ultimate element that could be regarded as the true Self.

At another place in the same text, Indra's story of progressive search for the *Atman* is elaborated on.[23] The story opens with a conversation between Prajapati, the lord of creatures, and his two disciples, Indra and Virochana, after they have been living with him for thirty-two years. Prajapati asks them why they have been with him so long. In reply, they say that they had heard of his inspiring teachings and wanted to realize the Self.

Now, taking advantage of this teachable moment, Prajapati provides further instructions on the nature of the true Self. Prajapati asks them to look at their reflections in a pan of water and tell him what they see. They reply that they have seen the Self, even the hair and the nails. Then, Prajapati asks them to get dressed up and then look at their reflections again. This time they reply that they have seen the Self, well-dressed and well adorned. Virochana, who is from among the godless, concludes from this that the true Self is the body and its desires, so he goes to the godless and begins to teach them to indulge the senses and to find pleasure in this world. Indra, who is from among the gods, begins to question this view on his way to the gods. He sees a danger in identifying the Self with the body. He reasons:

> Just as, indeed, that one [i.e., the bodily self] is well-ornamented when this body (*sarira*) is well-ornamented, well-dressed when this is well-dressed, adorned when this is adorned, even so that one is blind when this is blind, lame when this is lame, maimed when this is maimed. It perishes immediately upon the perishing of this body. I see nothing enjoyable in this.[24]

Therefore, unhappy with Prajapati's first response, Indra goes back to Prajapati for a second round of instruction. Impressed with Indra's insight behind his question, Prajapati invites him to live with him for another thirty-two years. Then he tells him that what moves about in joy in the dreaming state is the true Self. But Indra is still not satisfied with this answer. He reasons:

> In the dreaming state, it is true, the Self is not blind when the body is blind, nor lame when the body is lame, nor paralyzed when the body is paralyzed, nor slain when the body is slain. Yet in dreams the Self may appear to suffer and to be slain; it may become conscious of pain and even weep. In such knowledge I see no value.[25]

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22 *Chandogya*, VII.1, VIII.1, ff.
23 See *Chandogya*, VIII.viii–xi.
24 *Chandogya*, VIII.ix.1.
25 *Chandogya*, VIII.x.1–2 (trans. Eknath Easwaran).

consciousness where the experiencing (subject) and the experienced (object) are fused into one. It is believed to be an immortal bliss that is radically different from any common conditioned, object-directed, pleasure. In the language of the *Brihadaranyaka*, "this true Self is behind all sensing and knowing, it is an unseen Seer. He is the unseen Seer, the unheard Hearer, the unthought Thinker, the ununderstood Understander. Other than He there is no seer. Other than He there is no hearer. Other than He there is no thinker. Other than He there is no understander. He is your Self, the Inner Controller, the Immortal."[30]

In addition to the analogical argument and the *ad absurdum* argument we have explored, the notion of the true Self is also explained through allegories in the Upanishads. One such example is the allegory of the lord of the chariot found in the *Katha*. In this allegory, the body is likened to a chariot; the discriminating intellect the chariot driver; the mind the reins; the senses the horses; the selfish desires the roads; and the Self the lord of the chariot. The chariot, the chariot driver, the reins, and the horses are the interrelated components that are directly involved in the driving of the chariot. The lord of the chariot, however, is not directly involved in the driving itself, but merely issues commands to the driver and enjoys the ride. All the four components are really his instruments. The body, the intellect, the mind, and the senses are the things that make this earthly life possible, but they are subject to pleasure, pain, and sorrow. The Self, on the other hand, is undifferentiated consciousness. It is behind bodily existence, and thus beyond pleasure and sorrow, and free from the jaws of death.[31]

This structural analysis of the Self is similar to, though more sophisticated than, Plato's chariot allegory of the structure of the soul.[32] In Plato's chariot allegory there are two horses, a white one and a black one, and a charioteer. The unruly and hot-blooded black steed symbolizes one's desire or appetite; the white horse, one's spirit (animatedness); and the charioteer, one's reason. The key difference between the two allegories is that in the *Katha*, the Self is behind and beyond both physical and mental faculties (including reason), whereas with Plato it is reason that is reining in desire and spirit.

In sum, what is the Self or *Atman* according to the Upanishads? Five main points have emerged in our discussion on the nature of *Atman*:

1. *Atman* is not reduced to any particular thing or phenomenon, physical or mental.
2. *Atman* is not absolute void or nothingness either.
3. *Atman* is what makes possible the experiential self (senses and mental phenomena).
4. *Atman* is the invisible, eternal, and metaphysical agent.
5. *Atman* is a blissful, unitive state of consciousness where any duality is totally dissolved.

30 *Brihadaranyaka*, III.vii.23, also see *Brihadaranyaka*, III.viii.8, 11.

31 See *Katha*, I.iii.3–16.

32 See *Phaedrus*, sections 246a–254e.

that something both is and is not, in order to show up the inadequacy of common linguistic expressions to ascribe definitively any positive but limited qualities to the divine. Since *Brahman* is Ultimate Reality, it is not a concrete object and is thus boundless and non-objectified. Any linguistic expression that is used to describe concrete objects (call it "thing language") cannot adequately capture what Being is.

Or, perhaps we can see these apparently contradictory pairs as being both true, in different senses. Let me illustrate this point with the water cycle on earth. The water on earth "moves" in the sense that it constantly changes its forms and states. However, it "moves not" in the sense that the total amount of water on this planet remains constant over time. Thus, we can say that the water on this planet both "moves" and "moves not." By the same token, we can say that the water ("Being") on this planet is here (in a particular lake, for example) and not here (beyond this lake), it is near and far, and it is everywhere.[46]

DOING PHILOSOPHY
More Contradictory Verses

Here is another example of apparently contradictory verses from the Upanishads:

Smaller than a grain of rice, smaller than a grain of barley, smaller than a mustard seed, smaller than a grain of millet, smaller even than the kernel of a grain of millet is the Self. This is the Self dwelling in my heart, greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than all the worlds.[47]

How do you customarily respond to contradictory verses? Can you explain how they may be meaningful? Why do you think the authors of the Upanishads employ such apparently contradictory verses? Can they speak of Ultimate Reality without using such contradictory verses? Are there any other ways of approaching and understanding Ultimate Reality?

If *Brahman* is everywhere, why is it not seen, known, or realized? The Upanishads argue that this is the case because we customarily mistake specific things (appearance) for *Brahman* (Reality), and because we use dualistic thinking to understand *Brahman*—which is beyond all forms of duality. (Dualistic thinking is a mode of thought that separates the experiencing subject from what is experienced. Dualistic thinking refers to the notion that the subject can observe or think about that which is not the subject

46 If the water cycle illustration makes sense, then the Upanishads seem to subscribe to a mythic version of the law of conservation of energy—the conservation of cosmic spirit, awareness, or life power (*Brahman*).

47 *Chandogya*, III.14.3.

procreation was all from this couple.[57] In a similar vein, the seeming emptiness (non-thingness) in the seeds of the nyagrodha (banyan) tree does not mean complete void. It actually contains all the life, the source, the producing power of the tree. It is from the seed's "hidden essence" that "a whole nyagrodha tree will grow."[58] By analogy, the Self (*Brahman*), though unperceived, is the First Cause,[59] the ground of existence,[60] and the source of life for all creatures.[61]

WHAT I AM "IS" WHAT THERE IS—*ATMAN* "IS" *BRAHMAN*

In the Upanishads, the search for the true Self and the search for Ultimate Reality eventually converge, hence the most important claim of the entire Upanishads: "That Thou Art" (*Tat Tvam Asi*), or *Atman* "is" *Brahman*.[62] While we have treated *Atman* and *Brahman* as provisionally separate in the preceding sections, it is time now to see in what sense they are identical to each other.

To make sense of the identification of *Atman* with *Brahman*, it is important to first clarify the notion of identity as expressed through the different uses of the verb "is" in the formula of "A is B."[63] The following examples, though not exhaustive, illustrate the diversity of meanings carried by the verb "is":

(1) 2 plus 2 is 4 (equating).
(2) The rose is red (attributing/predicating).
(3) Mr. Li is from Beijing (indicating origin).
(4) Toronto is in Ontario (indicating location).
(5) John is Peter's brother (associating).
(6) This book is Jonathan's (possessing).
(7) A bear is an animal (classifying).
. . . .
(x) *Atman* "is" *Brahman* (?)

What is the crucial difference between the use of "is" in (x) and in the other uses on the list? It is that in cases (1) to (7), on both sides of the "is" are particular, separate things or beings, whereas in case (x), both "A" and "B" are Being itself, albeit with two

57 In *Brihadaranyaka*, I.iv.1–5.
58 *Chandogya*, VI.xii.2.
59 *Shvetashvatara*, I.2.
60 *Shvetashvatara*, I.7.
61 *Isha*, 16.
62 *Chandogya*, VI.ix.4, VI.xii.3.
63 In a negative statement of the form of "A is not B," "is not" can have different senses too. For example, the ancient Chinese logician Gong Sunlong's (c. 279–248 BCE) famous proposition "A white horse is not a horse" can mean (1) "A white horse (concept) is not identical to a horse (concept)"—as the latter clearly is wider in extension, including black horse, red horse, etc., or (2) "A white horse is not a kind of horse," which is obviously a nonsensical expression. Gong Sunlong intended to use the proposition in the first sense.

the analogy that a sense experience is to its corresponding sense organ as all of consciousness is to *Atman* (*Brihadaranyaka* II.iv.11). However, the Buddha did not accept this analogy, but taught that there is only consciousness, without an agent lurking behind it—that is, there can be action without an agent. Thus, the Buddha advises: Don't think (imagine), but experience yourself! Then you will realize that *Atman* (if taken as an external agent) does not really exist.

The Buddha's idea that there is no self but that there is moral causality would have appeared intuitively difficult or even impossible to his contemporaries. One may ask the Buddha: How can there be thought without a thinker, consciousness without a Self, and moral causality without a responsible agent? In responding to this question, the Dhammapada was compelled "to justify any moral choice in the context of a doctrine of impermanence and non-substantiality allowing no room for a permanent and eternal self and still account for man's responsibility."[18] We shall see later in this chapter whether the justification is plausible.

MIND—THE ROOT CAUSE OF SUFFERING AND THE BASIS FOR EMANCIPATION

In Greek mythology, humans differ from the gods in that only the latter enjoy immortality. This difference between humans and the gods points to our sense of dissatisfaction with life that stems from our temporal finitude. A similar theme is echoed in the myth of Adam and Eve in the Hebrew Bible, in which death (and hence mortality) was introduced to the human race as a result of their eating from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. These myths give us the impression that both the ancient Greeks and the ancient Hebrews attributed human unhappiness to human temporal finitude. However, it can be argued that, on closer inspection, both traditions merely saw temporal finitude as a derivative instead of the root cause of unhappiness. In the Greek tradition, human unhappiness stems from the *awareness* that gods enjoy immortality. In the Hebrew tradition, the root cause of human unhappiness is human's *wilful disobedience* of God.

Like these two traditions, the Dhammapada is also interested in the root cause of human suffering, which it traced to the human mind—indeed, a polluted mind. The notion of polluted mind resembles the awareness of human mortality as the root cause of suffering in the Greek tradition and the wilful disobedience against God's will in the Hebrew tradition in that all regard the mind as the root cause of suffering. However, unlike the Greek and Hebrew traditions, the Dhammapada sees suffering as stemming from a mind that is ignorant of true reality as impermanence, a mind that clings to the products of its own imagination.

The purpose of the Dhammapada, then, is to help people realize the harmfulness of mental clingings and turn from them by radically disciplining and retraining their minds. The path of mental training, according to the Dhammapada, will eventually

18 David J. Kalupahana, trans., *A Path of Righteousness: Dhammapada* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 59.

lead to the dissolution of suffering and to a happy life. This central theme of the Dhammapada is succinctly summarized in the opening verses of the work:

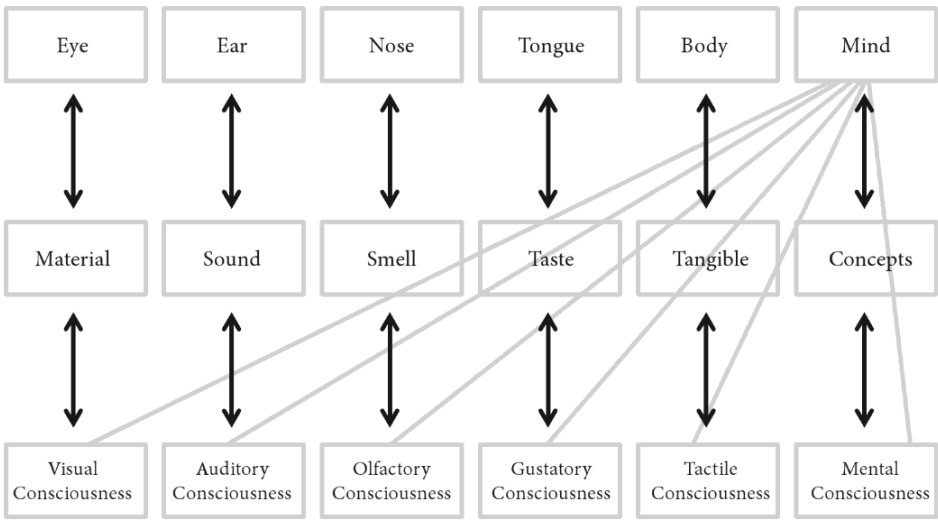
> Preceded by mind [*mano*] / are phenomena, / led by mind, / formed by mind. / If with mind polluted / one speaks or acts, / then pain follows, / as a wheel follows the draft ox's foot. (verse 1)

> Preceded by mind / are phenomena, / led by mind, formed by mind. / If with mind pure / one speaks or acts, / then ease follows, / as an ever-present shadow. (verse 2)

A few points in these two verses need clarification. (1) What is the Buddha's understanding of the mind? (2) What is a polluted mind? (3) How does one clean the polluted mind? (4) What is a pure or tamed mind? Let's tackle these questions in sequence.

1. The Buddha's Understanding of the Mind

The Buddha sees the mind (*mano*) as a faculty along with other sense faculties: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. The eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, and the body each have their respective objects: material form, sound, smell, and tangibility. And the mind has ideas and concepts as its objects. But unlike the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, and the body, each of which focuses on its own objects, the mind can intervene in the faculties of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling, and it can significantly shape the performance of these faculties.



In other words, for the Buddha, mind plays a crucial, regulatory role in shaping one's *lived* world, not only cognitively, but also emotively and conatively.[19] It is the "generative condition" and "predominant factor" regarding how we see, feel, and react to the world and to other people.[20] In short, our mind can "pollute" the other five senses, but it can also "purify" them.

For example, if my mind mistakes a rope for a snake, then I would see, feel, and react to the rope as if it were a snake. On the other hand, if my mind perceives a rope as it is, I will see, feel, and react to it in a totally different way. By the same token, if my mind takes my self to be a permanent and independent entity, I will see, feel, and react to the world in a self-centred or grasping way. On the contrary, if my mind takes my self to be interdependent upon all that is around me, then I will see, feel, and react to all that is around me in a more compassionate way. Imagine seeing people around you as members of your family, or even parts of your body. Are you likely to want to injure or harm them?

According to the Dhammapada, then, in order to live a happy life, it is absolutely essential to alter the habits of a mind that is usually unruly, easily agitated, and confused. The Dhammapada says: "Whatever a rival may do to a foe, / or a vengeful person to the one he hates, / a wrongly applied mind would do more damage to him than that. / Nothing that a mother, father, or other relative might do would do more good for him than a mind well controlled" (verses 42–43; cf. verses 103–05).

2. *The Polluted Mind*

The polluted mind is one that fails to realize that nothing is permanent in the world. This mind, failing to realize the impermanence of things, mistakes illusions and delusions for reality and then clings to them. The clinging makes the mind easily agitated, tense, and unhappy; it also leads to bad deeds and speech that cause hardship for others. This, according to the Buddha, is the working of the polluted mind—the root cause of suffering. (Suffering and the cause of suffering are the subject matters of the first and second Noble Truth, see verse 191.)

The working of the polluted mind can manifest itself in many ways in our everyday actions. One common symptom is not being willing to accept change. Suppose my car breaks down on my way to an important meeting, and I get out of my car and kick

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19 Although the Buddha emphasizes the role of mental training as a path of liberation, he does not think that the mind has the capacity to create any idea directly and willfully. As Kalupahana has noticed, "it is true that *mano* exerts an enormous influence on ideas (*dhamma*). Yet it is not true that all ideas are generated by the mind. Ideas of cognition (*vinnana*) are not mere products of the mind, even though they can be influenced by the mind. They are also conditioned by the objects of perception. Ideas of reflection, on the contrary, are the products of the mind. Hence [for the Buddha] it is the mind that is primarily responsible for metaphysical ideas such as soul, self and substance, and these latter are without objective support" (Kalupahana, trans., 157). On the other hand, the fact that our minds are conditioned and dependent upon other factors does not mean that we are completely determined, in which case moral choices would be impossible.

20 See *The Dhammapada*, John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 90, 93.

it in a fury. My action might be a form of catharsis, but from the Buddhist point of view it stems from my inability to accept that change (or impermanence) is the very nature of things; any composite thing, my car included, is subject to change and hence breakdown. In life we of course want outer conditions (my car included) to be always optimal, but they are never in our complete control. Therefore, we will often be irritated by uncontrollable conditions.

Another symptom is that we stick to our expectations and take them as a fixed criterion of judgment and thus refuse to accept anything that does not meet them. Suppose that I am behind a cautious driver, who brakes as the light turns yellow, when I am quite convinced that there would have been sufficient time for both his vehicle and mine to drive through. So, I sound my horn, screaming at the same time, "Come on, I have an important appointment and I am already late!" Again, my fit of rage might be cathartic, but it is also an expression of the polluted mind in Buddhist psychology, in that I am judging things from an ego-centred perspective, demanding that the world (particularly the driver in front of me) should cater to my interests, because "I am more important than others!" I falsely expect everything to orbit around me or my activities![21] As a popular song declares, "I believe that the world should revolve around me!" In this way, my polluted mind judges the world from my ego-centred eyes, blaming everything and everyone else except myself. The Dhammapada provides a vivid portrait of such an ego-centred person: "He berated me! He hurt me! / He beat me! He deprived me!" / "For those who hold such grudges, / hostility is not appeased" (verse 3). Such polluted minds are fault-finding: "they find fault with one who sits silently, / they find fault with one who speaks much, / they find fault with one who speaks but little. / There is no one in this world who is not faulted" (verse 227; cf. verses 252–53).

A third symptom of a polluted mind is that we fail to realize that nothing is isolated and independent and that the world is like an infinite, interconnected, multidimensional and centreless web or net in which every knot is directly and indirectly dependent upon and reflective of every other knot. An example of this interconnected view of life and the world is that my being able to write this book is dependent directly and indirectly upon countless number of conditions, including those who taught me Asian philosophy; those who trained me in Western philosophy; the opportunity I had to teach both Western and Asian philosophies; the many Asian classics that are available both in their original languages and in English translation and the great number of books on Asian classics that have been made available; the support of my family, colleagues, and the university where I teach; the fact that I live in a part of the world that is not in total chaos, etc., etc. We can even go as far as to say that, in an ultimate sense, my writing of this book is connected to the conditions of the whole world. A failure to recognize the interdependence of things may result in arrogance or self-aggrandizement, in that I may believe that my success in writing this book is due solely to *my* own effort (see verse 74).

21 Read a similar idea in the *Zhuangzi*: a "completed mind" (*chengxin*, 成心) judges things from an ego-centred point of view.

If, according to the Buddha, nothing is permanent or independent, and everything is constantly changing and always interconnected, then there should be no substantial Self. But why does an individual feel strongly that he or she has one substantial Self? The reason is that our thinking (including memory and imagination) fabricates that "feel." In the Introduction of his translation of the Dhammapada, Eknath Easwaran offers a nice explanation of how the "feel" of Self occurs. He explains: "A movie screen does not really connect one moment's image to the next, and similarly there is no substrate beneath the mind to connect thoughts. The mind *is* the thoughts, and only the speed of thinking creates the illusion that there is something continuous and substantial."[22] It is the memory of past images and the anticipation of future images that create the "feel" of a continuous "thing" running through the images.

In a similar fashion, when you are watching a 3D movie, actually only two sets of images are shown on the screen. However, through the filters of a pair of 3D glasses, one set of the images enters your left eye and the other your right eye. Your mind integrates the two sets of images so you feel objects flying off the screen towards you and creepy characters reaching out to grab you. All this magical effect is the result of mental fabrication!

By the same token, it is the memory of one's past experience and the anticipation of one's future experience that construct the "feel" of a Self. All in all, the "feel" of a Self is just a product of mental construction, normally sustained by linguistic reification of words like "I," "me," "my," and "mine."

The problem with the constructed "feel" of Self is that through a process that involves ignorance, craving, and attachment, it gives rise to suffering. For example, due to ignorance we come to believe falsely that things are permanent—which prompts us to crave things. If we can get them, we stick to them, worrying about losing them; if we cannot get them or lose them, we feel sorrow or resentment. This is how we suffer, whether we get things we want or not. In the Buddhist scholar Edward Conze's words, "we flounder alternatively in vain hopes or despairs."[23]

DOING PHILOSOPHY

Hume versus the Buddha: No-Self Similar Theories, Different Practical Implications

It is easy for those who read both Buddhism and Hume to notice their similarities regarding the idea of no-self. However, it is perhaps more important to see that in spite of their similarities, they have inspired different moral practices. As Troy Wilson Organ noted, "David Hume and Siddhartha Gautama arrived at approximately the same conclusions about the nature of the self. But after reaching this conclusion Hume lived as he did before, i.e., his

22 *The Dhammapada*, trans. Eknath Easwaran (Berkeley, CA: Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, 2007), Introduction, 82.

23 Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967), 40.

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