

INTRODUCTION

Who has never wondered: Who am I? What am I doing in this body and this world? Why are we born if we have to die? Where does the world come from? Why is there suffering and injustice in this world? Is there any final justice? These and more questions never leave us, actually. Some people spend their lives in search of an answer, but most give up because there seems to be none.

Young people are especially concerned, yet as we grow older we lack the courage to confront such questions, until we finally start waiting for and fearing death. As our lives pass by, the most important issues remain unsolved. We are so used to living with doubt and ignorance that we are no longer aware of the overwhelming questions, while the trivial ones may keep us awake at night. We stick to a world of short-term solutions, so-called realism, but remain deaf to the pleas of our very existence. The bigger the questions are, the more we leave them hanging.

During childhood we may have wondered where people come from, why they all grow old and die, and why no one ever returns. Coming of age we may have mulled over such mysteries as nature's glorious beauty and disastrous cruelty, man's angelic goodness and demonic evil, God's infinite love and the suffering of his innocent creatures. We may wonder about a higher, invisible reality, another perfect world and spiritual beings; and about the beginning of time (what came before?) and the end of space (what is behind?).

Getting older we may doubt the purpose of achieving anything, when realizing that we have to leave everyone and everything behind. What is the meaning of it all if it comes to an end? For ages and ages people have toiled and thought, fought and feasted, but for what? What happened to them, and what will happen to us? Will all our efforts, goodwill and sacrifice be in vain?

Why do our lives appear to be preset as soon as we are born, and why do we lack the power to control our life's course? Some are "born to be" intelligent and successful while others are "thrown into this world" to fail and suffer, born with the wrong genes or in the wrong place, unable to succeed no matter how hard they try. Is all inequality due to mere chance, or "the will of God," or is it our own fault?

Why is a lifetime so short – in the middle of all eternity – and so meager, confined to a few things and opportunities, while the majority of mankind cannot even enjoy the little we have? If intelligent life on this planet evolved as an accident, how could it emerge from "unpredictable particles"? How can the forces that shape life and the universe – in a dazzling display of order-in-diversity, still far beyond the grasp of science – be blind? Does man shape his destiny or does nature shape man; and who or what shapes nature?

How should I live my life? Are good and evil, right and wrong universal principles, or only conventions of changing times and different cultures? If we have a free will, why can't we control our thoughts and impulses; why do we "fail to accomplish the things I want to do and find myself doing the very things I hate?" (Saint Paul, Rom 7:15)

If life goes beyond the grave, why can't we prove it? If there is more to the universe than its physical appearance, why can't we detect it? Can we see reality as it is or only through a peephole of some space and time, confined to what perceptions and impressions tell us? What is the value of opinions and convictions, and what about the other (contradicting) views; which are true, or is there no truth? Why, then, do we stick to our own views as if we alone are right?

Is this our first and last chance, or should we "spend no time worrying what else there might be because this life is what we've got, and thereafter nothing can happen to us because there will be no us for anything to happen to" (a college professor)?

When encountering a minor setback or a major disaster, people wonder why they should suffer (and others not), and why this, our very own life, obstinately runs *its* course, beyond all human aid and scientific progress. Sooner or later we come to realize the true condition we are in, a fragile body carrying a terminal disease.

Life offers more paradoxes and conflicting emotions, from happiness and satisfaction to sorrow, from peaceful clarity to mesmerizing confusion. There are moments when "all is bright and love is everywhere," and moments when we "cannot take it anymore," with much boredom in between. From birth to death, we do not know why things happen to us, so unpredictable that we do not really know if we will still be around tomorrow.

Faced with such ignorance and helplessness we do not know how to deal with our problems, let alone how to solve them once and for all. We spend a lifetime rushing about, working hard to create certainty and secure solutions from others, from governments and laws, scientists and experts, religious advisers and other gurus. *But since they cannot solve their own problems, how could they solve ours?*

We do not have to be philosophers to sense the real questions. Just as we do not travel anywhere without knowing where we are going, how can we make a lifetime's journey without wondering? Even if we do not care to know the reason for being and for being as we are, we cannot avoid worrying about how long we will be healthy and what kind of luck is still waiting. People with power and success readily admit that their achievement was mainly a matter of luck; but where do good and bad luck come from?

We are born to wonder and to wander in search of "something" we seem to have lost. Mankind has tried everything: learning and skill, power and wealth, pleasure and renunciation, excitement and silence, ruthless war and worship of God. We have been through it all and after more than two millennia of "research and development" we are still at the beginning, still groping in the dark, *from origin to destiny*.

Human civilization is an endless variation on the same theme; the hope of solving the questions is the hidden persuasion behind all quests, be they political, social, economic, scientific, philosophical, or religious.

The Answers of Religion, Philosophy, and Science

Everyone will agree that modern civilization is the most advanced in history, but few people recognize that spiritual wisdom – in the sense of *understanding* the meaning of life and the universe – is at an all-time low. The answers to life’s questions are opinions and beliefs that widely diverge and contradict each other -- but contradictions are proof of error.

About the origin of human life many believe that a heavenly Being created the world and each one of us; others that there is nothing but the evidence of science, that it all started with a big bang and that we are accidental tourists, mutant apes. About the afterlife many believe to be going to heaven and will join their beloved ones in the presence of God -- forever after. Non-believers also *believe* that there will be nobody and nothing whatsoever, that death will be the end.

To believe that the questions are solved does not mean that we *know* the answers. Science or faith, agnosticism or trust in divine revelation, these seem to be the only options. As a renowned scientist summed up the current impasse: “God is the name people give to the reason we are here. But I think that reason is the law of physics.”¹

The problem is, obviously, that matter cannot explain itself. Physics knows nothing about “truth, goodness, and beauty” (Plato). How can intelligence, ethics, and wisdom arise from atoms? The link between biochemistry and consciousness is still a haunting problem for science. According to another scientist: “The one thing we have learned from science is that we know nothing.”²

After science has long focused on the physical world, it now finds itself before a wall (Max Planck), an insurmountable mystery, an unfathomable reality where “gravity can be such that all space collapses and time explodes.” The search for the origin of the universe has ended in “an infinite ocean of energy which has the appearance of nothingness” (John A. Wheeler). “Something unknown is doing we don’t know what” was Einstein’s comment on the Uncertainty Principle.

Religions, on the other hand, face a different unknown. They are based on faith in past “revelations” (hearsay from hearsay) about creation and salvation that cannot be proven, or have been disproven by science. They claim to have the one and only truth but they ignore, deny, fight or kill each other (from the crucifixion to terrorism).

The question is whether these two options of blind faith and blind instruments are the only sources of knowledge. Both rely on *other* sources than the human mind, which is the only seat of knowledge; as if we are incapable of functioning properly, of knowing and seeing for ourselves what life and the world are all about.

Pluralism and liberalism -- “everyone has the right to their own opinion,” “all opinions are equal” -- is the new faith that supersedes the authoritarian dogmatism of the past, but with a similar intolerance for those who disagree. Equal rights for all opinions may be a democratic achievement to avoid confrontation and conflict, but it also promotes doubt and ignorance; *as if*

1 Stephen Hawking, *Time*, Nov. 15, 2010

2 David Eagleman, author about the brain.

there is no truth, as if insight with verifiable certainty for all, *looking at one and the same reality*, would be impossible. As we have learned from science, Nature does not offer multiple choices.

The good news is that discord and conflict are unnecessary. Both supernaturalism and materialism are one-sided viewpoints that do not take into account the whole of reality. They are like *thesis* (theism) and *antithesis* (atheism) in need of a higher *synthesis* to explain it all, both matter and spirit. Since all things, beings, and worlds, belong to one and the same reality, its fundamental oneness is an incentive for dialogue, not only between different faiths but also between faith and science. Why should globalization be restricted to the economy and not also apply to human intelligence?

Religion

Religions exist because of the unsolved questions in the first place. Traditional faiths claim to have solved them, offering doctrines with explanations from the beginning (genesis) to the end (eschatology) of the world. They share the belief that the human mind lacks the capacity to know, and that there is no solution for now, that this life is only a prelude and the real thing comes after it. They are man's protest against the omnipotence of death.

Religious faith is based on another, invisible reality. It passes the ultimate responsibility onto a "higher power"; all emphasis is on God, not on man but on an Other Being in another dimension that is separate from the here and now. From that power religious representatives derive their authority, independent from worldly power. It is only through that super-reality that man can be saved, but to see that reality come true we must wait until we close our eyes.

Religions assume the deficit of human nature ("original sin"), the inferiority of man and the superiority of the divine; self is defective and the Other perfect. Life and the world originate with a Lord-creator; birth and death are His free gift and we depend on Him for our very existence: "The believer knows that this life is in the hands of God: 'You, O Lord, hold my lot' (Ps.16:5), and he accepts from God the need to die: 'This is the decree from the Lord for all flesh, and how can you reject the good pleasure of the Most High?' (Sir. 41:3-4) ... In life and death, he has to entrust himself completely to the good pleasure of the Most High, to his loving plan" (John Paul II). God's ways are mysterious, but His wisdom is unfathomable. "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, *lean not unto thine own understanding.*" (Prov. 3:5)

The founders of religions were great men of vision and purpose. Mankind owes them much respect for inspiring ethics and virtue, hope and love, and for opening up an otherwise dead-end blind alley. Without their values and principles this world would be a less humane place.

It was not the founders, however, but later followers who established what became typical of religion: blind faith, scriptures demanding unquestioning belief, churches assuming unquestionable authority. They claimed absolute trust in what could not be verified, much like a forbidden territory or military zone where we cannot trespass, under the assurance that our interests are taken care of. When we believe we do not question anymore, *but the questions remain.*

Belief that the problems are solved created, in fact, more problems. Dogmatism, to insist on the exclusive legitimacy of one's own ideology has justified discrimination, proselytism, persecution, holy wars, and (most serious) oppression and exploitation of the weak by the strong. On the secular scene, not knowing the answers has led to a host of semi-religious, authoritarian attitudes, and to myriad myths, old and new. Few advisers, religious and other, do not enjoy guiding others: "Listen to me and you are right!"

*Sages enlightened others by their enlightenment,
Nowadays people try to enlighten others by their own confusion.*³

Philosophy and Science

When religions fell short of providing evidence for their claims, philosophers went their own way. Metaphysics and ontology looked behind the door of religion, to find out about the actual nature of reality. But out of this search came monism, dualism and other 'isms'. While getting entangled in endless disputes, more contradictions arose, such as idealism and materialism, fundamentalism and agnosticism.

Confronted with these difficulties, philosophers then questioned what all assumptions were based upon; whether there was anything wrong with the questioner and whether man's thought as instrument to discover the truth was well equipped for this search, after all. Logic and epistemology had to determine whether human thought and language are capable of pronouncing truth. Only after these issues have been cleared will it be possible for philosophy to shed light on the real issues. As long as thought does not provide certainty, one can resort to faith, yet who will draw the line between faith and superstition?

After more than two millennia of speculation, philosophy is still coping with the problems of understanding and language. In other words, humanity is still looking at its tool and has not yet reached the stage of "philo-sophy" or "love of wisdom." The failure to provide certainty encouraged the empiricism of positive science. If nothing could be seen, one could at least touch.

Although science is concerned with the nature of matter and its applications, its original intention is not that different from religion and philosophy: to understand the nature of the world, to "decipher the cosmic code" and discover the source and substance of life and the universe. Yet, no matter how much science and technology have changed the face of the earth, no matter how far research reaches, from quarks to quasars, the questions grow, from dark matter to dark energy. The more modern science explores matter and space, the more questions surface and the greater the mystery grows.

The newest discoveries reflect amidst dazzling complexity an even more awe-inspiring order, from the cosmic to the biological level, of a universe that is completely self-organized and self-sustained. It displays an inexhaustible creativity and autonomy, leaving no place for an

3. Mencius, a Chinese philosopher of the fourth century BC; *Mencius* VII B 20

other/external agent who set it in motion or keeps it under control. Nature obeys no other laws than its own.

Albert Einstein said: “The more a man is imbued with the ordered regularity of all events, the firmer becomes his conviction that there is no room left by the side of this ordered regularity for causes of a different nature. For him neither the rule of human nor divine will exist as an independent cause of natural events.” Stephen Hawking asked, “If the universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place, then, for a creator?”⁴

Scientists readily admit that science knows only what our senses and instruments tell us about how nature works, revealing nothing but descriptions in terms of measurements, values, standards, principles, and formulas they constructed in the first place. “Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world... All our science, measured against reality, is primitive and childlike.”⁵

Science and technology are still at the beginning of their journey; they know how to use electricity and how to travel to the moon, but they cannot produce a leaf of grass, not even a single cell. What will science look like when the current formulas and theories are outdated, a hundred or a hundred thousand years from now? (Imagine a galaxy/planet where an alien civilization started a million years earlier.⁶)

The growing complexity of the sciences has created more, not less, uncertainty. The many learned disciplines are disconnected and cannot communicate with each other. Physics and metaphysics, cosmology and ethics, chemistry and religion, for example, cannot converse in the modern mind. All fields of knowledge have become so specialized and complex that even the most brilliant minds cannot encompass them. The fragmentation of our view of the whole has made us lose sight of the fact that all fragments are but man-made models and labels, artificial paradigms and thought constructs imposed upon *one* reality – a natural and indivisible totality that has none of these.

Modern science is based on the assumption that matter is the only reality but matter cannot explain itself. The study of phenomena registers the how of things but does not clarify their meaning. In a materialistic worldview, reality is reduced to quantity, to data that can be measured, analyzed, and stored. But no one knows *what* is actually measured, what energy (electromagnetism) is, for example. Consciousness is emptied of its essence and considered an epi-phenomenon, a secondary occurrence resulting from neuro-chemical processes in the brain (professional literature talks about the mind as “the brain”). Intelligent life on earth is a splendid but accidental occurrence of mindless matter. Behavior is the result of genes (DNA chemistry).

4. *A Brief History of Time*

5. Albert Einstein, *The Evolution of Physics*, 33

6. “Stephen Hawking hypothesizing the consequences of aliens visiting Earth: ‘I think the outcome would be much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn’t turn out very well for the Native Americans.’” *Time* magazine

Western medicine looks at physical symptoms with little or no investigation into the mental and meta-physical roots of health and disease. Such narrow sciences cannot explain the whole, self and the world, matter and spirit. “We shall not expect the natural sciences to give us direct insight into the nature of the spirit.”⁷ Since in real life *quality*, like happiness, truth, goodness, beauty, matters more than matter (quantity), it must be part of the universe too.

On the other hand, the new sciences enable us to ponder the mysteries of life and the universe in a more adequate and broader context than before. We are struck by the insignificance of our earthly existence, not only on a cosmic scale but also uncovering the limitations and conditioning of the human brain. Modern man is more aware of his smallness and transience but also of his central importance as conscious intellect. A sign of a new era ahead is that the physical sciences have pushed to the end of matter and discovered that its basis is not solid after all but void, “a nothingness with an infinite potential of energy that is everywhere”.

No longer sure of their founding principle (that the study of matter can explain everything), the sciences have suggested that the basic quality of the universe might be consciousness. Max Planck said at the beginning of the quantum revolution: “Consciousness I regard as fundamental, and matter as derivative from consciousness... everything that we regard as existing postulates consciousness.” And more recently, “Another idea of science is appearing, in which information instead of matter plays a leading role. Physicists, for centuries, have thought matter to be the basis of physical theories. Now a movement is afoot that considers information as primary and matter to be what arises from a correct understanding of information... J. A. Wheeler, the physicist who invented the terms *black hole* and *wormhole*, also believes that information is the basis of everything.”⁸

Since perception and knowledge arise in the mind, that is where we must eventually turn to, inside and not outside, in order to break through the screen of matter. But that demands a more difficult discipline, to clear the mind first – *the purpose of Buddhism*.

While modern science has revealed that nothing is fixed and stable but all is in constant flux and global, cosmic interaction (quantum physics), and that all matter in the universe is basically “empty,” void of any independent, unchanging substance, modern man has created a culture that is based on the opposite view, of unprecedented materialism (see for example modern literature calling the mind “the brain”). Science and technology have removed old boundaries and superstitions but have also created new ones, such as the *belief* that scientific knowledge is the only real knowledge, and that we have no obligation to look any further than what the senses tell us.

After the decline of the traditional faiths, science has been idealized as the new religion, also *promising* to solve the questions. Words like “scientifically unjustifiable” and “rationally inexplicable” sound like charges of superstition and heresy. But scientists know better; they realize that we are still at the beginning of knowledge, only scratching the surface, and that they receive more authority than their science can warrant. Modern man is captivated by science because it offers positive certainty. But do we have to wait for centuries, until it may discover

7. Erwin Schrödinger, *What is Life? & Other Scientific Essays*, 232

8. Paul Davies in *Mind, Life, and Universe*, ed. Lynn Margulis and Eduardo Punset, 317

the deeper layers of energy, life, and mind, in order to solve the basic questions, and develop a more intelligent civilization?

Modern trends have shown that when morality is based on divine commandments, ethics break down when religious beliefs go out of fashion. The tragedy is that when the moral dimension of life is ignored, human nature and its innate potential for truth and vision remains underdeveloped and leaves society “with nowhere to go. As we go up in terms of civilization, we go down in spiritual decay and emptiness of the soul. The vacuum and devastation of the soul is very alarming...” said Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel laureate who is credited for contributing to the collapse of the Soviet empire. “In the twentieth century, the universal tendency, not only in the West but everywhere, was to destroy any hierarchies so that everyone could act just as he or she wants without regarding any moral authority. This has already been reflected in, and has influenced, the whole of world culture, and the level of world culture has been lowered as a result.”⁹

Political democracy should not be confounded with equal rights for all opinions, for falsity as well as truth, for mean as well as noble, for uninformed as well as responsible and wise. When the ideal of liberty entails *freedom from* value and principle, duty and discipline, then it creates more slavery, not less -- on the treadmill of self-satisfaction. When emancipation means to do as one pleases and dispatch “the moral order of the universe” to the relics of history; when ethics are abolished to endorse everyone’s truths, to honor egalitarian rights and hollow creeds like political correctness, ideological equivalence, permissiveness and skepticism, then the distinctive core of being *human* – as opposed to dumb-animal – becomes less instead of more developed.

According to Pope Benedict XVI, “We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.” The result is agnosticism or primitive beliefs, or both. Umberto Eco wrote, “I frequently meet scientists who, outside their narrow discipline, are superstitious... The existing religions just aren’t big enough: we demand something more from God than the existing depictions in the Christian faith can provide... The ‘death of God’ has been accompanied by the birth of a plethora of new idols... from strange pagan cults and sects to silly, sub-Christian superstitions.”¹⁰

The irony is that, besides modern prophets like Darwin, Marx, and Freud, religion itself may be to blame for the loss of moral clarity and genuine spirituality. By submitting morality to supernatural faith, it alienated from its natural-human roots. The result is that *spirituality* – the highest function of the human mind – has gone into its deepest slumber in history.

The founding fathers of America, who established a land of democracy and opportunity for more spirit, not for less, for moral perfection, to upgrade and not downgrade or discredit virtue, would be embarrassed to see their democracy turned into a mass lobby. As Thoreau complained: “Why level downward to our dullest perception always, and praise that as common sense? The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring.”¹¹

9. *Dialogues with Solzhenitsyn*, 2006 interview

10. 2007 interview

11. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

When looking back at people like Thoreau and his mentor Emerson, it is obvious that the moral-spiritual awareness of our time has fallen way below theirs. Transcendentalists embarked on a path of spiritual self-reliance and universal wisdom that transcended both sectarian-dogmatic faith and rational-scientific materialism. Instead of following in their footsteps, believers have turned backward, back to fundamentalist assumptions. Instead of becoming more aware of, and opening up, a greater-higher-deeper reality, modern religion has shrunk into primitive forms of religion, ‘God’ as big Santa Claus and meddler in personal affairs.

George Washington declared in his inaugural address: “The foundation of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality”, and in his final address: “Can it be that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a nation with its virtue?” His generation understood what the founding principles of a *new* world-order ought to be. Like the founders of human civilization in both East and West, they knew that “the element that counts for the most is no doubt the ethical one. Confucius – founder of the most stable culture and polity known to history”¹² – was convinced that the cosmos is a moral order and that human affairs can prosper only when they are in harmony with the moral nature of the world.”¹³

The purpose of being human, to *understand* life and live accordingly, is now absent from civil culture. The highest form of learning has fallen into oblivion and is missing from our schools. The younger generation is aware of it: “The education we have received here is not only incomplete, it is entirely hollow... The spirit of intellectual thought is lost... the most important questions were not asked. Things like ethics, things that define who we are, were ignored... I urge you to re-evaluate what it means to be educated,” said the valedictorian at a high school commencement speech; “if you were there you would have seen the kids stand up and clap.”¹⁴

The younger generation faces a void. “What is good and bad, right and wrong?” is their frequent, honest question. Lacking genuine guidance and support, and learning sectarian or liberal indoctrination instead, they cope with the anxiety of a meaningless road ahead. Missing discipline and virtue, the source of energy and inspiration fails them and increasingly sinks them in depression.¹⁵ The older generation looks on helplessly, deploring the loss of ethical values that made them strong and happy. They wonder if history is not repeating itself, considering that the rise and fall of nations has always depended on the moral-spiritual *quality* of its people, not on *quantities* of any kind.

12. David Nivison and Arthur Wright

13. Frederick Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 39

14. A local newspaper

15. “In a depressing new book *Lost in Transition, The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* [by Christian Smith a.o.], a group of sociologists documents how people in their late teens and early twenties have come to view moral choices as ‘just a matter of individual taste’, and seem perplexed when asked to make judgments about behavior that earlier generations would clearly label as wrong... From blind deference to churches and authority, our society has swung to the other extreme, and now morality is purely ‘something that emerges in the privacy of your own heart’.” (David Brooks, *The New York Times*, 9/2011)

Unprecedented is modern down-to-earth-ism. From ancient to recent times “Heaven” played a dominant role in the lives of most peoples and cultures; witness the influence of the Bible and the landscape of the earth, studded with churches and temples. When awareness of Heaven preoccupied the human mind, earthly activity was subjected to its divine service and prize; modern society is driven by goods and services, lining its main streets with temples of financial service and price. When turning to religion, we easily slip into the business of supplication, making a mockery of God and Heaven, called upon to serve infantile fancies; “Let us pray, that we may win!” ... *and the others lose.*

So-called quality of life is reduced to quantity, to economic efficiency, comfort and pleasure. Modern civilization has established a world order that is based on human weakness, not greatness; on selfishness and strife (competition to eliminate the other), not virtue; on ever growing greed and need (more consumption for more production for more profit for more consumption); on a world “order” that would collapse without these constituent flaws.

Would it not be naive to be proud of a civilization that, after its most “advanced” but bloodiest century in history, proclaims Business as its highest goal, honoring in deadly earnest the motto: “We don't care, as long as we make money!” (i.e. move money from others’ pockets into one’s own). Or to borrow a gentler expression from another Chinese sage (who like the greatest minds in history had none of the conveniences we now deem indispensable):

*One knows how to gain one's ends,
but one does not know why these are one's ends.*¹⁶

The Mind Experiment

For two and a half millennia there has been a discipline that solved the questions, once and for all, but that is still largely unknown or misunderstood: the teaching of Buddha, a “perfectly enlightened one.” Arnold Toynbee observed: “The coming of Buddhism to the West may well prove to be the most important event of the twentieth century” (*A Study of History*). But the West has yet to prove the great historian right.

Buddhism is not what most people think it is. Its founder did not intend it to be a religious belief system (based on faith, revelation and scripture, and worship of God). The Buddha was a human teacher, a searcher and finder of the truth we are all looking for. *That we do not have to believe to be truly spiritual is a central message of Buddhism.*

The Buddha is not a deity, nor is he an atheist. His teaching affirms what religions have in common: the importance of morality and ethics, concern for others, self-cultivation and mindfulness, and a worldview that goes far beyond life on earth, including heaven and hell. But Buddhism also explains the differences among religions, why they disagree and what steps

¹⁶ Zhuangzi, also from the fourth century BCE; 29.82

should be taken to arrive at a common understanding, and match our age of globalization with a similar level of universal wisdom.

Buddhism shows that the human mind is fully capable of “knowing and seeing” all there is to be known and seen about life and the universe. It explains the *totality* of being, highlighting important issues that are not explained in religions, such as karma and rebirth, and an infinite range of heavens and gods, none of which are almighty, eternal, or absolute.

Its highest doctrine is called “non-duality” because the ultimate reality is “only one.” There are not two realities, one real/natural and one super-real/natural; there is only one source and substance for all creation, both matter and spirit. Enlightenment shows that *real* salvation, unconditional and *everlasting* liberation does not depend on the intervention of an Other but on *self*-realization.

Buddhism offers a common ground for believers as well as nonbelievers, an identification of God even agnostics can accept. The common ground of Buddhism is “the ground of being” we all stand upon. Unlike religions, the Buddhist path explores and develops our inside, revealing a potential of the mind that exceeds and complements Western thought.

The Buddha’s discovery is a “science of the mind,” his teaching an empirical and verifiable theory-with-praxis to know for certain what Mind, Life and the Universe are all about, in this or any other world. This “knowledge is power” and knows-how to achieve self-liberation. Its “transcendental wisdom” has been well known and documented in the East as “omniscience” and “enlightenment.”

“Buddhism is not Buddhism” said the Buddha; he was not a “Buddhist” but an exceptionally wise human being who discovered the truth and showed the way for all to realize it. Innumerable, known and unknown, are those who have followed his advice and solved the problems Western religion, philosophy, and science are still coping with.

The central message is a “Middle Way” that neither leans to the right nor the left. It offers a *secular* spirituality, a natural, rational, and verifiable method of investigation and awareness that goes beyond the common concepts of mind and life, creation and salvation. It goes so far as to guarantee actual autonomy and liberation from the world of birth-death (Samsara). All that is needed is to correct and clear the mind; this very mind has all it requires to rise above the universe of being, including gods and heavens.

Nothing else but “*understanding (budh)* just as it is” heralds a quantum leap for spirituality and for human civilization in general: not only the end of religious discord but also the beginning of unprecedented success on all fronts, including the sciences. This fundamental progress requires a spiritual revolution, however, to debunk the current myths of both religion and atheism – because neither Gods nor atoms but *the human mind is in charge*.

Mind Training

One could read books and learn for years about thermodynamics, but there is only one way to *know* what heat is: to stick out a finger and feel. When we experience something, we do not think, but as soon as we think of it the experience is gone, because we are not (in the) present anymore but “absent-minded,” away from the here and now into thoughts-about reality.

Intellectual knowledge should not be taken for knowing the truth. *Thoughts know nothing but themselves*, and yet, we have the habit of taking thoughts-about reality for reality. A collection of Zen stories is titled “Finger Pointing to the Moon Records,” referring to the common mistake of taking the finger (thoughts) that points to the moon for the moon. Having ideas, opinions and beliefs instead of directly experiencing reality is like reading a label instead of taking its medicine. Thoughts are like curtains before our window; *once removed, light shines in all of itself*.

Unbelievable as it may sound, wisdom arises when the mind experiences pure concentration. The central practice of Buddhism is therefore meditation – in a sense that is new for the West, not as “continued or extended thought, reflection, contemplation” (of something) but as focus and concentration for its own sake. It consists of the dual practice of “stopping and discerning” (*samatha-vipassana*). To stop thinking comes first because without abiding in inner silence, no clear insight can arise. The mind is like a mirror of water, yielding clear reflections only when still.

Our ordinary state of mind is “like a waterfall” (Buddha), incessantly tumbling with thoughts and images, even as we sleep. To pay real attention the whole world has to stop/disappear in order to focus on one thing (like focusing a camera on *one* point for the *whole* picture to become clear). Concentration is the pivot of spirituality as it is of all human activity: no believer can pray, no student learn, no philosopher think, no scientist discover, no artist create, and no child play without it. “*You need only to develop concentration, because the one who is concentrated sees things conform to reality*” (Buddha).

Buddhist meditation is therefore a neutral discipline that assumes or believes nothing. Although its “resting and stopping” is effortless, doing *nothing* is most difficult. It is a most refreshing and rejuvenating exercise, to energize the mind *and the body* (the first remedy when sick is to rest). Like charging a battery, meditation fills the brain with fresh energy and amplifies our mind power. At an advanced stage it not only generates profound peace, amazing clarity, and spiritual joy but also unprecedented physical bliss and ecstasy. For beginners it enhances vital energy, and for adepts it heals and prolongs life.

“Scientists [found] that meditation not only reduces stress but also reshapes the brain,”¹⁷ according to a newsletter of the Harvard Medical School. “Modern science is investigating the ancient practice of meditation, and uncovering strong evidence of ... better mental and physical health. Over the past three decades, researchers ... have published more than 1,000 peer-reviewed articles on meditation. Their work suggests that regular practice of meditation is linked to – among other things – significant relief from a variety of stress-related physical and mental

problems, a stronger immune system, longer life, increased energy, and positive changes in brain function.”¹⁸

As all spiritual traditions know, “grace” and higher consciousness go hand in hand with daily practice. Insight and vision, inspiration and wisdom decline when concentration power declines, and concentration declines when moral discipline declines. *These three, conduct, concentration, and wisdom* rely on each other like the three legs of a tripod; there is no insight and wisdom without concentration, and no concentration power without correct conduct and great merit from virtue. Socrates, for example, the founding father of Western philosophy and science, had an incredible concentration power; he was not only “the wisest” but also “the most virtuous man of his time.” There can be no higher, spiritual perception when the basic requirements of human conduct are neglected.

Buddhist adepts can sit in meditation for days without moving. They initially experience a state of mind and body that is characterized by “lightness and ease.” Pure energy, light and bliss enable them to practice in optimal comfort for as long as they wish. Just as every other proficiency, spiritual cultivation is learned step by step, based on [1] *exercise*, [2] *method*, and [3] *time*. “An ancient Zen master said that meditation is like learning archery; only after long practice do you hit the bull’s-eye. Enlightenment is experienced instantaneously, but meditation work must be done over a long time, like a bird that when first hatched is naked and scrawny, but then grows feathers as it is nourished, until it can fly high and far.”¹⁹

For spiritual realization to be genuine and provide *certitude beyond the grave*, a tangible mind and body transformation is the foundation. In this new, “unthinkable” meditative state of mind, called *samadhi*, our physical energy circuitry is purified and opened up to flow through and fill all cells of the body. Stable and undistracted concentration is not yet enlightenment, as is often assumed, but the final pre-requisite for enlightenment, which is the activation of the original-fundamental awareness-luminosity of the mind’s substance -- shining eternally.

The reason why “the coming of Buddhism to the West” has not yet made a real impact is that the conditions – conduct and practice – are still lacking. Modern people are under the influence of a heavier karma burden, while enlightenment is just too incredible to be believed, and too hard to be realized and assimilated by any culture in a short time.

In China, for example, it took several centuries of ethical conduct, inspired by Confucianism, and meditative energy cultivation, inspired by Daoism, before Buddhism was seriously put into practice -- for another half millennium -- and produced *the highest spiritual culture in history*, the “Golden Age of Chan/Zen.” The Chinese Zen masters established an age of *enlightenment* during the Tang dynasty, when the West was still in its dark ages. Its motto is most obvious but still beyond the grasp of modern civilization: “*There is only one reality, or it is not real; there is only one truth, or it is not true.*”

18 “Meditation—The Relaxation Remedy,” in *Mind, Mood and Memory*, July 2006 newsletter published by the Massachusetts General Hospital and the Harvard Medical School

19 Chan Master Yuan Wu (1063-1135) in Thomas Cleary, *Zen Essence*, (Boston: 1989), 35.

Western religion, on the other hand, has considered it unorthodox for spirituality to involve the body (see the Vatican's pronouncements on yoga, for example), believing that the soul cannot see God unless it leaves the body. "No one organism can possibly yield to its owner the whole body of truth" believed also William James, one of America's greatest thinkers. This is true for a normal organism, without meditative wisdom capacity. But as can be learned from mystics or God-seers, the highest achievers of religion, they experienced not only spiritual ecstasy but also physical rapture and mind-body transformation. That is why they described their experience in terms of erotic love and spiritual marriage (e.g. the Biblical "Song of Songs"). In the East, the vital connection between body and mind has been thoroughly explored and developed into a sound spiritual science.

Spirituality for the New Millennium

Wisdom and Knowledge shall be the Stability of thy Times
Isaiah 33.6

(inscription on the entrance of the Rockefeller Center in New York). The prophet seems to have foreseen the instability of our times, where a lack of wisdom and knowledge is increasingly creating division and conflict. Terrorism "in the name of God" is nothing new, by the way. The highest Buddhist culture developed in India but disappeared altogether in the 11th century after Muslim armies invaded Nalanda (Harvard of that time), killed the monks, burned the libraries, and destroyed the monasteries. The remarkable fact is that the prophet did not recommend faith and worship of God, but spoke more like a Buddhist sage.

Besides its many benefits, meditation is not the goal of Buddhism. As the name suggests, "buddhism" is all about understanding, insight and wisdom. Buddhist knowledge aims above all at "liberation" and "enlightenment" – at realizing what no other discipline, philosophy, science or religion has achieved. None of all other spiritual methods of cultivation reaches the ultimate truth or is able to deliver what they promise: eternal salvation. Buddhist "wisdom and knowledge" is, in fact, nothing "buddhist" but the discovery and application of the highest science, of the know-how of self-salvation, of transcending the universe of birth and death, including the highest levels of gods and heavens. No matter where we are reborn in Samsara, rebirth also means re-death; there is no escape from the eternal cycle, except *transcendental wisdom*. Religions may *believe* that heaven is eternal, but they do not really *know*.

Religious beliefs are therefore less important than is commonly assumed; they only reveal half of the truth. When adhered to as absolute and ultimate, they are temporary mental fixations that may turn into mental disorders of self-deceit and other-deceit.

No brain function, no "firm belief" can reveal the whole, certain, infallible truth about reality. Beliefs are assumptions and opinions that are subjective and conditioned. Because they are brainwaves that do not "clearly understand" (*budh*), they do not last beyond a lifetime and may even turn into their opposites – defending and condemning what they condemned and defended before.

Ideological contradictions become problematic when beliefs are considered absolutely right and others wrong. As William James wrote, “The theorizing mind tends always to the oversimplification of its materials. This is the root of all that absolutism and one-sided dogmatism by which both philosophy and religion have been infested.”²⁰

Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus are, in fact, correct to believe in different gods and heavens, because there are many. But agnostics are also entitled not to believe in any, as long as they value the importance of moral conduct. Since there are many, no god deserves to receive absolute trust and worship for being the Supreme Creator of life and the world. Gods are themselves created by the “one and only life force in the universe”: the power of self-created *karma*, the result of a very virtuous human life in the past.

That force is not a different one for science and religion. It is the same one that applies to all being in the universe, and to the universe itself: its one Law and Order is the rule of cause and effect. Whosoever and whatsoever exists has reasons to be, and to be exactly that in just so much space-time-form. The Source of Creation is the only Un-created, eternal, infinite Substance of Being, and therefore *empty* of being. All createdness is relative, transient, caused and conditioned, other-dependent or non-self. There is only one independent and autonomous Self (non-duality). Any second or “other” would limit and eliminate its nature of being absolute (ending where the other begins, etc.). The Substance of all existence is not among existence; it does not “exist.”

Divine persons, on the other hand, exist and are therefore somewhere (not omnipresent), for some time (not eternal), in some form (not infinite). There is only one Source of Creation, only one Infinite to produce *interminable* being, in response to causes and conditions. “Creation” is the work of exact Reason, never producing something out of Order, something that defies logic and has no reason to be, and to be exactly what it is. The basic law of *all* existence (not just science) is causality; our little lives are not the big exception in the great universe.

That basic law and order is called *karma* in Buddhism. Its working has been recognized by the brightest minds throughout history, albeit not under this name. Karma is proof that life makes sense. It is the working of the infallible intelligence behind creation. It explains the range and quality (from happy to suffering, intelligent to dumb, etc.) of all sentient, physical, mental and spiritual life experiences in the universe, from heaven to hell.

The reason why “wisdom and knowledge” can provide stability in our times -- of growing confusion and conflict -- is that they focus on *understanding* things as *they* are. Wisdom and Knowledge start with recognizing the universal fact of impermanence/change and causality.

Process, evolution, connection and causation are not limited to what science has discovered so far but apply to the whole of reality. Religions are right to believe in the importance of good and evil and its consequences, resulting in heaven and hell, but wrong to assume that these states of being are eternal (Chapters 3, 4, and 7).

20 *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 26

The Buddhist message is a simple human agenda: “avoid evil, do more good, and purify the mind.” The goal of meditation is mental purification, to clear the mind and seeing clearly, to reach a “complete and perfect understanding (*budh*)” of what life and the universe are all about. Buddhism shows the way to realize the truth about reality but also the power to transform this messy, mortal life into the “purity, bliss, autonomy, and eternity” of Nirvana.

There is no karma without intention, without a free mind behind it. When the mind is in agreement with the meaning of life and the Substance of Nature, there is nothing that cannot be achieved, known and done. The highest task for humanity is therefore not religion or science but mental development -- *correction* of the mind (Chapters 5-6). Only when the mind is purified does it arrive at an inner silence where the true nature of self and the world can be clearly seen.

The Buddha was a human being like all of us. Upon enlightenment, his first reaction was amazement, not about his own realization but about the fact that every human being has the same potential (Chapter 2). His “middle way” cuts through the errors of both right and left (believing that God created us and the world, and believing that He is a delusion and we the work of evolution). It offers an “intelligent design” but not in the sense of religious faith or the Deistic belief of the Founding Fathers. No life-and-death is “created out of nothing” but the consequence of what came before it, of the choices we have made in former lives.

That means that we may have been to heaven and hell already. Human and celestial persons and environments are not created by God or by physics; they are the result of the *quality*, the wholesome or unwholesome application of the mind. This power of self-determination is the force of creation that also brought the gods to what and where they are – because of their great excellence in a previous human life.

The main difference between religion and Buddhism is self-responsibility. We do not suffer against our will because of God’s will or because the Intelligence of the universe got it wrong, but because of our own wrongness. Only correct use of the life-force produces excellence on earth and splendid life in heaven; only self-created karma is responsible for good and bad luck, for success as well as failure.

Believers are confronted with the reality of evil and suffering, while non-believers see nothing but fluke and chance. The Law and Order of existence, called Karma, solves the battle between those who think that character comes from nature and those who think that nurturing is the key -- because present nature is the result of former nurture.

“All the evil in the world issues from man’s inability to sit quietly by himself for a while” (Blaise Pascal). What is the use of cleaning up the outside if we do not purify the inside? The damage done by *greed* on the environment is obvious, and so are the ravages and setbacks caused by *hatred*. Less obvious, however, is the third of “the three poisons,” *delusion*. The “first cause” of the human birth-death predicament is ignorance, ignoring truth and knowledge.

The “mind experiment” is a method-with-proof to disclose and dissolve what stands in the way of self-realization, to become a real human being and exercise “transcendental wisdom.” As medieval Christian mystics have realized, religious blind faith should not stand in the way of realizing that “

All things are too narrow for me; I am so wide: I behold an uncreated in eternity.”²¹ When beholding the Uncreated source of creation, all ignorance and suffering is transcended, and our real identity is revealed: “*When you are in what is not time, not space, not form, not motion and not thought, and see what you perceive when nothing is perceived, then you see the original Mind.*”²²

The road to enlightenment is long and arduous because non-enlightenment is a hard and complex fact, built up during former lives “without visible beginning” (Buddha). There is no sudden awakening without gradual practice, but also no *correct* cultivation that does not develop toward it. Spiritual cultivation is a step-by-step rectification of wrongness; enlightenment is the outcome of exact attainments and specific fulfillments along the way (Chapter 6).

Without correct insight and worldview (Chapter 3), mere faith and devotion are insufficient. Without moral discipline and merit from goodness and self-sacrifice, meditation is sterile. Without pure concentration power, transcendental wisdom is out of the question. Without realizing “no-self” -- as the Christian mystics also knew (Chapter 8) -- there is no unconditional and universal compassion. When one of the legs – moral conduct, meditation/concentration, insight/wisdom -- is missing, the spiritual tripod wobbles and so-called enlightenment is a farce.

“The one prudence in life is concentration; the one evil is dissipation,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson²³ (once called “the wisest American”²⁴). Pure/empty concentration induces awareness of “truth, goodness, and beauty” and restores the moral-spiritual dimension that is at the origin of Western civilization but is in danger of being lost in our time. It enables religion to regain its charisma and joy, and “*experience something of God.*” Eventually it will clear away the veils, hung throughout the ages, which tempt us ever again to reduce the Absolute to relatives, the Uncreated to our creations.

The difficulty of enlightenment lies in our complexity (the “ten bonds”; Chapter 6). For the nonbeliever, Buddhism offers an exit out of a dead-end worldview, without contradicting science and philosophy. It directly shows the way toward the one reality that constitutes both matter and spirit, to reveal the Light that shines in this and every world, and in every one of us. For the believer, Buddhism provides a rational, experiential basis for dialogue, a common ground for *worldwide* (not just interfaith) ecumenism.

After all, to solve the questions is what every person seeks. Not the paths we choose but the climb matters, not the maps we study but the mountain is real. To act in earnest we have to surrender our quiet stroll for a serious climb, as all realized ones did before us.

21 Hadewijch, a Flemish woman mystic of the 13th century; poem XXI

22 Zen saying

23 “Power” in *Emerson, Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 982

24 Philip Russell