

Royal Institute of Philosophy

The Epistemology of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism

Author(s): Gi-Ming Shien

Source: *Philosophy*, Vol. 28, No. 106 (Jul., 1953), pp. 260-264

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of [Royal Institute of Philosophy](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3748102>

Accessed: 04-04-2015 00:09 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cambridge University Press and Royal Institute of Philosophy are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophy*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF BUDDHISM, TAOISM AND CONFUCIANISM

The ultimate teachings of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism are in essence completely similar. It is said: "The more you know, the less you really know; and the less you know, the more you really know."

What is the reason for this? "The more you know" pertains to a knowledge merely discursive and rational. "The more you do not know" pertains to divine knowing of the pure intellect. Because profane knowledge comes from the outside, there is a distinction between the knower and the thing outside the knower. So you have the separate entity that knows, and the thing or object known. When this distinction exists, what is known is only the appearance of things, the gross corporeal modality, while nothing is known of our true self or inner being. Therefore, the more you know of appearances the less you know of reality. For example: water for the human being is different from water for the fish; for fish the water is his true atmosphere. Night is a time of darkness for man, but, for an owl, it is his day. Filth is rejected by humans, but is home for the insects. Therefore, since the needs and environments of every particular being vary, each point of view is relative to the particular creature; all knowledge received from sense impressions is approximate and relative, and has little to do with the true reality.

Should a cosmological explanation be given by the fish, the owl or insects, we should laugh at them. However, for the owl, the moon is his sun, for the fish, the water is his atmosphere; and for the insect filth is his delicious food and fine home. We laugh at them because they are ignorant of the true nature of things, and we realize that the more they think they know, the less they actually know. It is the same for human beings; for we, too, gain our perceptions as other animals do, through external appearances. The animals can thus laugh at us in our ignorance.

Knowledge known from the outside is of appearance, and is not of reality. Therefore, the more we know, the less we really know. But in what way can we know reality? We must know our true or Inner Self; the principle of our birth and becoming which we share with all things in the universe. Therefore, if we know our own True Self, and our gross physical self, then we shall know all things. The scientists work day and night in measuring the quantity and quality of things. But these things all exist very near to us—as close even as breathing. We can find them directly in the organism and in the cells of our own self.

The Chinese philosopher said, "it is wonderful that men can use their eyes, their ears, and their thoughts, to see, to hear, and to think of things outside of themselves. Why cannot they use their ears, their eyes, and their thoughts, to hear, to see, and to think inside themselves?—for there is much circulating and moving within, since there are many parts such as lungs, liver, heart, and intestines, etc. We should use our mind for understanding our own self, for the source of all hearing, seeing, and thinking, etc., lies within. Alas, man can see and hear that which is outside of him, yet that which is inside, and so very near, few men know. If we could know the principle within, then we should know our True Self, and thus all things."

What is this reality, and how may we come to an awareness of it? First, we must know the one principle of all things—when knower, knowing, and known

DISCUSSIONS

become one. True knowledge is by identification, consequently, there is no duality. True knowing is therefore identical with what is known, we then have not rational knowledge but pure intelligence. This pure intelligence does not know appearances, but rather knows the essence of things.

An important question might be asked. Why do men think that knowing, knower and known are different? Why cannot we be aware of our True Self, and thus know the essence of all things? The answer, according to Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism is that we are bound to illusions by appearances, by physical objects. Therefore, if we can liberate ourselves from becoming, from that which is unreal, we shall then know the reality of all things.

For solving this problem of obtaining true knowledge, we find in Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism three different systems or ways, but each path leads to the same goal, which is freedom from appearance, and awareness of true reality.

The method of Buddhism is by contemplation and observance or discrimination. Contemplation means to empty oneself of all irrelevant thoughts, so that the pure reason may emerge, and we may keep it pure. Water, if there is no wind, is clear. If dirty water is allowed to stand, the dirt will settle, and the water will become clear.

Observance or discrimination means that we must continually be aware of the unreality of the material world, until finally we see that all things are unstable and but a flux: then the pure intelligence is complete. There are many types of discrimination in accordance with the different natures of men. For example, if a man is trying to free himself from indulgence with a lovely girl, he would at first imagine in his mind a beautiful girl, and then in his mind imagine her deprived of her skin, after which the blood would flow in a red and terrible colour. There remains little of beauty now. He would further in his mind cut open her abdomen, and there find the intestines, stomach, etc., full of digested food and filth. Further, we might picture that the girl is dead, and imagine her state after one or two years. There is no more flesh now, but only many white bones. Can you love her bones? Therefore, to "resolve" the girl from the beginning to the end, we find that all is emptiness, appearance, illusion. This is called the "white bone observance," and if this observance is followed every day, sensualism will naturally disappear.

Again, if someone indulges in worldly property, he might follow the "observance of emptiness," and find that all his property is really illusory, and will pass away. There are many kinds of such observances.

A most important observance is the "not I observance," which means that there is no more myself, but only a temporary *mixture*, or fictitious self. In the teaching of Buddhism, all evils come from the idea of "I." If we have the idea of "I," there is a wall that separates us from reality and the integral One. According to the teaching of Buddhism, all the world of knowledge is based upon the idea of separation, and the notion of separateness is duality, and this is the source of all evils.

In order to free ourselves from this idea of selfhood, at first we must know that the human being is but a temporal fictitious mixture. In fact, there is no such thing as an "I," for the "I" or self is not a stable or immutable being.

Why is this? According to Buddhism, the structure of man consists of four parts: Earth, the solid principle; water, the fluid principle; fire, the principle of heat; and wind, the breath principle. These principles determine the material world; they are the "four greatnesses" according to Buddhism; they are the foundation of the world of Nature and man, although they must not be confused with corporeality itself, for they are principles. They are also called the four great germs or essences, not corporeal, but potentialities. Man

PHILOSOPHY

has eight senses or consciousnesses, all connected with mind. These are the senses of hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touch; the sixth consciousness is equal to mind, and the seventh consciousness is a transition between the sixth and eighth consciousness, the eighth consciousness (or the king consciousness) being the source of all the senses or consciousnesses. Such is the structure of man.

Now, if we have the idea of "I," we try to discriminate and find out who this "I" is—what particular part represents the "I." If we suppose it to be the solid part, this is obviously a part of the whole body, and since it is a part, it cannot be the "I." Or if we suppose it to be the other parts—fluid or heat or breath, this is also impossible. And, further, we must know that we cannot even possess the same quality of the solid, the liquid, or the breath elements in the same or at a given time. Why is this? Every one knows that man is a being that has a birth and death, which he shares with all material organisms in the universe. We also know that every one passes through different stages, from the baby to boy, to young man, to old age, to decay and to death. This means that the material elements of our flesh change, are ever in a state of flux. These changes do not come suddenly, but continuously, so that the body is changing every minute, every second. It is undergoing a perpetual process of decay and growth. This changing we can perceive in breathing. You cannot possess the air in the breathing at a given moment, for, in the inhalation and expiration, the air is constantly changing, and when you try to grasp the breath, it has already gone far away. Similarly, with all the other parts (the liquid, the fire, and the solid), you cannot possess them at a given moment. All is flux, all is illusory, all is like a dream. Who are you? With which part can you know yourself? Discriminating in this vein, you lose all sense of self.

Again, you might imagine that even if we cannot find ourselves through our material parts, we could find ourselves in consciousness, that is to say, in the mind. Because there is some thing known, and some thing is known by a knower, we might say that the knower is the true self. If you think that this is true, you would discriminate again. Who is the consciousness? Who is the knower? You could not find it, for if you suppose the sense of seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting is the true self, that is wrong, for the activities of the five senses are limited by their separate perceptions. They are different from each other. They cannot form a complete whole. Then, we might suppose that the sixth consciousness is the true self, for it can receive all senses of smelling, seeing, hearing, etc. This is also wrong. For since the activity of the sixth consciousness is limited to comprehending and perceiving things, it also is temporal.

In spite of the fact that the seventh consciousness is eternal, it is likewise incorrect to suppose that it is the true self. According to the Buddha, the relation between the sixth and seventh level of consciousness is like that of a light to a candle, the light representing the perceiving and discerning power of the sixth consciousness; while the root and source of light is the candle, the seventh consciousness. The candle, however, is light in potential; so, also, is the seventh consciousness (the perceiving and discerning power is potential only); it is unconscious, and has no knowledge of itself.

We may suppose that the eighth consciousness (or the king consciousness) which comprehends and summarizes all consciousness and remembers and possesses all things must be our true self. But according to the teaching of Buddha, this is not the case. To illustrate: one sees the water of the ocean; the foams and waves arising from it are of different forms and sizes, and show only the appearance of water. But we cannot identify them with the essence of the water. The essence (or nature) of the water is its calmness and tran-

DISCUSSIONS

quillity; it is neither identical with its manifestation (waves, foams), nor is it completely different from them. Rather, it possesses a nature of neutrality. Thus, the eighth consciousness, which is the source of all consciousness, possesses and remembers all things, but in itself is neither consciousness (of self), nor unconsciousness (of self), but it is of the "nature of neutrality." Therefore, we cannot find out who we are from the eighth consciousness.¹

And in addition, the idea or sense of consciousness is as much in flux as is the breathing which was described above. When you make up your mind to possess your idea and to find your self, it is impossible that a conception should be immutable, for thousands of ideas are in a constant state of flux and interchange, like a series of pictures continually moving. You cannot possess any idea in your mind at a given moment. Therefore, any idea you have in your mind is not your real self.

Discrimination is thus necessary in order to free us from the bond of self. When we find that there is no immutable self, we enter into the unified intellect, and if we participate in this super-rational intellect, we then become identical with every object in its manifestation. Thus, we find our own true self.

In summing up the teaching of Buddhism: the suppressing of desire is not an end in itself, but is a way to lead us to reality. Our nature is ignorant of reality. But the Buddha knows the reality, and returns to this world to teach us to see the reality ourselves, very much as the men of Plato's cave, after seeing the light, return to the cave to teach those in darkness. The first step then is to learn to discriminate between appearances—to find a door into reality. The second step is to enter into this reality, and to grow in awareness of it. The third step is to attain perfect realization of the supreme identity.

Although there are many very valuable and important philosophical theories in Buddhism, Buddhism is not propounded for the sake of knowledge or to establish a philosophical system; but, on the contrary, Buddha wants to reduce the appearance to the reality, in order to lead man to observe and discriminate, and to enter into reality. These teachings belong to Mahayana Buddhism, and it wants us to enter into the world in order to help all human beings to become Buddha. So, at first, Buddha recognizes the world; second, he discriminates the world; third, he discovers the illusory character of the world; fourth, he points out the unreality of the world; and fifth, he advises all human beings to leave the appearance and enter into reality. So the teaching of Mahayana Buddhism is reasonable, while the teaching of Hinayana Buddhism is just the opposite. Thus Hinayana Buddhism gives us more meditation teachings, in order to get one's self-salvation, and does not instruct us to return again to this world to teach reality to mankind.

The way of the Taoists is to follow certain breathing exercises, in order to control the circulation of the blood which finally influences the organism of the body, so that our pure reason is liberated from the flesh. There are three stages or exercises in Taoism: (1) the biological exercise, to control the physical organization; (2) the psychological exercise, to control the mind; (3) spiritual exercise, which is the last stage and is the great liberation of the spirit or soul. We can see that the Taoist methods are more scientific and naturalistic, because the Taoist is very familiar with the biological structure of our physical organization; consequently, most of the Chinese medical doctrines came from the Taoist school.

The method of Confucianism is based upon ethics, Confucius' chief teaching

¹ There is no equivalent terminology for the seventh and eighth consciousness in Western philosophy. I want to apologise for these terms, which seem unclear to the Western mind.

PHILOSOPHY

is piety in everything, and the practice of the pure reason in everything. Here "piety" does not mean wordly piety, but is the starting point of the pure reason. You must control and preserve your pure reason every minute. The method of piety is non-self-indulgence, for if you are not self-indulgent, then pure reason opens to you. Our strength, therefore, lies in restraining our desires. Piety does not come from the outside, but is the very nature of pure reason.

To practise the extension of the pure reason in everything is to start with ethical love for parents; then to go to brothers and sisters; then to friends; then to all men, and then even to all animals, trees and grass, until you eventually embrace the whole universe. Thus the illusory "many" becomes "One."

The teaching of Confucianism, on the one hand, is directed to consciousness itself, which is pure reason. Feed it and it flourishes. Buddhism and Taoism, on the other hand, teach the killing of the desires of the flesh. But although these are different methods, the end is the same. For the one, when we destroy desire, the pure reason appears; for the other, when there is pure reason, there is no desire. They therefore have the same end.

GI-MING SHIEN.