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CAN WESTERN PHILOSOPHERS UNDERSTAND ASIAN PHILOSOPHIES?

The Challenge and Opportunity of States-of-Consciousness Research

Interest in Asian cultures and philosophies continues to grow and increasing numbers of Western philosophers are now studying them. Among these Asian philosophies, a number—such as Yoga, Vedanta, Buddhism and Taoism—are clearly mystical in nature. These schools were molded by individuals who were obviously first-rank intellectuals but were also first-rank yogis or contemplatives. That is, in addition to intellectual training they had gone through a rigorous ethical, psychophysical and spiritual discipline designed to prepare them to grasp the special knowledge that is the goal of these traditions.

Almost invariably these philosophers claim that their philosophies are of a different order from mundane ones. As Edward Conze notes "nearly all Indian, as distinct from European scientific thought, treats the experiences of Yoga as the chief raw material for philosophical reflection."¹ They therefore claim that intellectual analysis by itself is insufficient to grasp the deepest profundities of realization and that intuition is essential. Moreover they claim that these traditions are fully comprehensible only to those who have undergone a preliminary discipline like their own.

¹E. Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 17.

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This message was first delivered to the West some 2,300 years ago when Alexander the Great arrived in the Indus Valley. Seeking out some Indian philosophers Alexander's generals found "fifteen stark naked chaps sitting motionless on a sun-baked stretch of rock so hot that no one could step on it without shoes." The Greeks were informed in no uncertain manner that they were most unlikely candidates for philosophy and that any candidate—"did he come from God himself—should first be naked and have learned to sit peacefully on broiling rock."²

Although sitting naked on broiling rocks is not a common prerequisite, the preliminary disciplines demanded by most of the great Asian mystical philosophies are still sufficiently daunting to grey the hair of most Western philosophers. For example, the 15th-century text known as the *Vedantasara*, "the essence of the doctrines of the Vedanta"³ responds with an eye-opening list of requirements to its own question, "who is competent, and consequently entitled, to study the Vedanta in order to realize the truth?". Only two of the requirements on this list, textual study and intellectual discrimination, are on the list of most Western academics. However the *Vedantasara* also specifies the additional prerequisites of faith, renunciation, calm, a turning of attention away from the outer world towards the inner, cessation of sensory perception, endurance, and continuous concentration. Equally imposing disciplines are found in other traditions and the practices appear to be of four main types: a rigorous discipline of ethics, emotional transformation, attentional training and cultivation of wisdom.⁴

Not surprisingly the typical reactions of Western academics to these demands have been disbelief or disregard. Some have laughed, perhaps embarrassedly, while others have pointed out that these demands would require years, perhaps decades, of preliminary work and only a handful of people would probably be successful. They have then gone right on with their purely intellectual analyses.

This reaction is completely understandable. After all, it's a bit insulting to be told that one isn't adequate even to begin training in, let alone understand, another's school of philosophy. In addition, the demands seem elitist and esoteric and quite contrary to Western beliefs that philosophy "is supposed to be open to the approach and accredited investigation of every intellectual who can meet the general requirements of a) a basic education, and b) some specialized intellectual training to enable him to keep up with the argument. . . . In modern times, a high school education

²J. Campbell, *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology* (New York: Penguin, 1962), p. 277.

³Nikhilananda, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1931).

⁴R. Walsh, "Two Classical Asian Psychologies and their Implications for Western Psychotherapists," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* (1988): 543-560.

and four years of college are supposed to open an access to the sanctum sanctorum of ultimate Truth."⁵

But in addition to their elitism, these disciplines appear overly demanding for additional reasons. After all, the requested prerequisites appear to have little face value and some, such as faith, even seem antithetical to the unbiased pursuit of truth. In addition, while Spinoza, Hume and James may have been fine human beings there is little evidence that highly ethical, loving people have been significantly more successful Western philosophers than less pleasant ones.

Then again, Western philosophy usually assumes that conceptual analysis in and of itself is the royal road to philosophical understanding. This analysis is meant to lead to rational, verbal and publishable products; non-rational, nonverbal intuitions are not the coin of the Western philosophical realm. Tenure and promotion committees are hardly likely to look kindly on such intuitions or on those who argue that they can't be expected to publish anything this decade because they are preparing themselves by doing Yoga.

So Western philosophers have almost completely ignored these Asian caveats. The question arises, therefore, has anything been lost? After all, much work has been done, much literature been produced and some ancient systems have even been reconstructed in contemporary philosophical terms, e.g. Advaita Vedanta.⁶ Likewise some Western philosophers, none of whom would probably claim to be enlightened, have assisted with the rebirth and relegitimization of Chinese philosophies in their home country.

Clearly, much has been gained by Western philosophers' pursuing purely intellectual analyses of Asian traditions. But this still leaves the question of whether anything has been lost. Recent research on states of consciousness suggests that, disturbingly, the answer may be yes. Even more disturbing is that what may have been lost may be the most profound aspects of these traditions. Indeed, my central claim is that recent states-of-consciousness research may pose a major challenge to, and demand a radical reappraisal of, our approaches to the study of mystical Asian philosophies. Let us therefore examine the relevant research on states of consciousness.

1

After a long gap since William James, consciousness is again becoming a respectable topic for research in Western psychology. One of the major areas of this new interest is in non-ordinary (altered or alternate) states

⁵H. Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. J. Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 47.

⁶E. Deutsch, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: East West Center Press, 1969).

of consciousness. The range of alternate states under investigation has expanded from dreams and alcohol intoxication to encompass lucid dreams, hypnosis, psychedelics, meditation, yoga, peak and mystical experiences. This expanding range reflects a growing appreciation of William James' much quoted statement that:

our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question,—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.⁷

These forms of consciousness, or states of consciousness as we would now call them, are distinct experiential-functional patterns of psychological activity. Charles Tart describes a discrete state of consciousness as "a unique, dynamic pattern or configuration of psychological structures."⁸ Different states are associated with different tendencies and patterns of experience and function. Experience and function may vary within states and in some cases it may be appropriate to talk of continua rather than discrete states, e.g., the continuum between drowsiness through normal alertness to hyperarousal. However in other cases, even though experience and function may vary, discrete states may be clearly identified and differentiated, e.g., alcoholic intoxication and sleeping dream states. A state is called altered or alternate if it varies significantly from some baseline state, most commonly from the ordinary waking state and is "a qualitative alteration in the overall pattern of mental functioning, such that the experiencer feels his consciousness is radically different from the way it functions ordinarily".⁹

One of the characteristics of specific states of consciousness is that they may display what is known as "state specificity." What this means is that certain capacities such as learning, memory and understanding that occur in one state of consciousness may be specific or tied to that state and show limited transfer to and accessibility in other states.

The best studied of these specific capacities have been learning and memory. State-specific learning has been observed in both animals and

⁷W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1902/1958), p. 298.

⁸C. Tart, *States of Consciousness* (El Cerrito, CA: Psychological Process, 1983a, Originally published in 1975), p. 5 and p. 208.

⁹*Ibid.*

humans under a wide range of conditions. For example, both animals and humans tend to learn and remember more poorly when under the influence of depressant drugs such as barbiturates. However, if something is learned during mild barbiturate intoxication it is subsequently easier to recall when once again under the influence of barbiturates than when sober.¹⁰ This occurs even though learning and memory skills usually function better in the sober state. In other words the memories acquired in the drug state display state specificity and show only limited transfer to the nondrug state. State-specificity may be the basis for the old folklore that if you lose something when drunk, you're more likely to remember where it is when you are again drunk. Even the relatively mild alterations in states of consciousness induced by different emotions may be sufficient to produce state-specific learning since material learned in a particular emotional state is best recalled when again experiencing that same emotion.¹¹

These findings raise the question of just how many other capacities may show state specificity. For example, may certain types of understanding and insight occur in specific states of consciousness yet be relatively inaccessible or unmeaningful in the ordinary state? This has certainly been demonstrated for decades in hypnotic states and there is also considerable anecdotal evidence for their occurrence in other types of altered state.¹² In his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James described a number of insights gained under nitrous oxide or ether anesthesia that seemed extremely important at the time to those having them but somehow could not be fully comprehended in the ordinary state. Subjects who have experienced altered states induced by other means, e.g. meditation or marijuana, report similar experiences, though experimental support remains minimal. James himself felt that the insights he gained under nitrous oxide were philosophically valuable. "Looking back on my own experiences," he said, "they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity." Compare the third Zen Patriarch's advice to "Be serene in the oneness of things" since "dualities come from ignorant inference."¹³ In any event, these experiences left a lasting mark on James and appear to have made him more receptive to Hegel.

¹⁰D. A. Overton, "Discriminative Control of Behavior by Drug States," in *Stimulus Properties of Drugs*, eds. T. Thompson and R. Pickens (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971).

¹¹G. H. Bower and E. R. Hilgard, *Theories of Learning*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1981).

¹²C. Tart, *States of Consciousness* (El Cerrito, CA: Psychological Process, 1983a. Originally published 1975), p. 5 and p. 208.

¹³Sengstan, *Verses on the Faith Mind*, trans. R. Clark (Sharon Springs: Zen Center, 1976).

There are also many anecdotal reports of state-specific communication but as yet this has not been adequately tested experimentally. The concept of *state-specific communication* implies that insights or understandings gained in a specific state of consciousness, e.g., a meditative state, may not be fully communicable to someone else who is not in that state, especially if the other person has had no prior experience of that state. James provided a possible example of state specific communication when he attempted to describe his insights gained under nitrous oxide. While he attributed metaphysical significance to these insights he also acknowledged that his attempts to communicate his experience resulted in only "a dark saying, I know, when thus expressed in terms of common logic, but I cannot wholly escape from its authority."¹⁴

Other examples could be given from drug and meditative experiences. Experienced marijuana smokers, for example, claim that they can understand someone else who is intoxicated even though they themselves are not. This could be interpreted as an example of a partial transfer of state-specific knowledge to the ordinary state of consciousness.¹⁵ Meditators often feel that their experiences and insights cannot be fully appreciated or understood by those who have not also entered the corresponding states of consciousness. Indeed the Buddha went so far as to forbid nuns and monks to discuss higher meditative experiences with lay people because he felt that such communications would result in misunderstandings and confusion. Likewise in most traditions meditators and yogis are held to be capable of assessing other peoples' experiences and insights only if the assessors have themselves attained the corresponding meditative states and stages.

In summary, both ancient ideas and recent research suggest that there exists a wide range of states of consciousness and that there may exist state specific constraints on the extent to which memory, insights, understanding, and communication can be extended to other states. Considerable research will be necessary before we can be clear how just precise and powerful these state-specific limitations are. However, even now they may hold powerful implications for our understanding and study of Asian mystical philosophies, and indeed, for Western mysticism as well.

2.

What then is the relevance of these findings concerning state specificity to mystical Asian philosophies? Simply this: these Asian philosophers have sought, described, argued and trained for, and have spoken from, altered states of consciousness induced by the techniques they employ.

¹⁴W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1902/1958), p. 298.

¹⁵C. Tart, *States of Consciousness* (El Cerrito, CA: Psychological Process, 1983a, originally published 1975), p. 5 and p. 208.

Indeed, the mystical Asian philosophies describe and eulogize not just one state but whole families of altered states. These include highly concentrated states such as the yogic samadhis or Buddhist jhanas: witness consciousness states in which equanimity is so strong that stimuli have little or no effect on the observer; and states where extremely refined inner stimuli become the objects of attention—e.g., the faint inner sounds of shabd yoga or the subtle pseudonirvanic bliss of Buddhist vipassana meditation.¹⁶⁻¹⁷ Then too there are unitive states such as in some Zen satoris in which the sense of separation between self and world dissolves;¹⁸ there are states in which all objects or phenomena disappear, as in the Buddhist nirvana or Vedantic nirvikalpa samadhi; and states—bhava samadhi, for example—in which all phenomena are perceived as expressions or modifications of consciousness.¹⁹

The range of states of consciousness that Asian philosophies aim for and describe is broad indeed. A full training program may take a student through a specific sequence of these states, as do the Buddhist vipassana meditation "stages of insight" and the yogic stages of samadhi.

In addition to these ancient claims recent research also supports the idea that Asian practices induce specific states of consciousness. This research includes phenomenological reports by Western researchers of their own experience,^{20-21, 22-23} quantitative analyses of meditators' subjective reports, studies showing significant electroencephalograph changes,²⁴ and changes in the nature and speed of perceptual processing.²⁵⁻²⁶

Asian philosophies have long claimed that certain skills may be enhanced in specific states of consciousness. Such skills include evoking increased calm, equanimity, concentration, and psychosomatic control,

¹⁶J. Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1983).

¹⁷D. Goleman, *The Meditative Mind* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1988).

¹⁸P. Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Boston: Beacon, 1965).

¹⁹Free John, *The Dawn Horse Testament* (Clearlake, CA: Dawn Horse Press, 1985).

²⁰D. Shapiro, *Meditation: Self Regulation Strategy and Altered State of Consciousness* (New York: Aldine, 1980).

²¹C. Tart, "States of Consciousness and State Specific Sciences," *Science* 176 (1972): 1203-1210.

²²R. Walsh, "Initial Meditative Experience: Part I," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 9 (1977): 151-192.

²³R. Walsh, "Initial Meditative Experience: Part II," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 10 (1978): 1-28.

²⁴D. Brown, "The Transformation of Consciousness in Meditation." A paper presented at *The Greater Self*, a conference sponsored by the Noetics Institute and held in Washington, D.C. in 1987.

²⁵D. Brown and J. Engler, "The Stages of Mindfulness Meditation: A Validation Study, Part II. Discussion," in *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, eds. K. Wilber, J. Engler and D. Brown (Boston, MA: New Science Library/Shambhala, 1986), pp. 191-218.

²⁶D. Shapiro and R. Walsh, eds., *Meditation: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Aldine, 1984).

greater perceptual and introspective sensitivity and acuity, and stronger emotions of love, joy and compassion. Experimental research evidence is available to support the claims for greater calm, psychophysiological control of somatic processes, and perceptual sensitivity, speed and acuity.²⁷⁻²⁸⁻²⁹ It is interesting to note that a recent study also supports the venerable yogic claim for enhanced longevity. A group of geriatric (average age of 81) nursing home patients taught transcendental meditation were all still alive three years later whereas approximately a third of the controls had died.³⁰⁻³¹

A particularly important form of skill is the ability to attain state-specific knowledge, understanding and insights. Asian meditators and mystical philosophers have long claimed that they obtain state-specific knowledge that is at least partly unavailable to untrained subjects. They claim that the trained mind which has developed "the keenness, subtlety and quickness of cognitive response required for such delicate mental microscopy"³² is able to perceive the workings of mind and the nature of reality with penetrating subtlety and acuity far beyond the capacity of most of us. Thus it is said that only the trained mind capable of entering the appropriate states of consciousness can comprehend transcendental wisdom (*jnana* or *prajna*). Specific Buddhist examples of this wisdom include an understanding of the constituents and processes of mind (*Abhidharma*), the three marks of existence: change, unsatisfactoriness, and egolessness (*anicca, dukkha, and anatta*) and the emptiness of all phenomena (*sunyata*).

Two lines of recent research support these Asian claims for enhanced introspective skills and state-specific knowledge. The first is that a number of Western mental health professionals have provided phenomenological reports of their own initial meditative experiences that support the idea of state specific knowledge.³³⁻³⁴⁻³⁵ The second line of research is the find-

²⁷D. Brown, "The Transformation of Consciousness in Meditation," A paper presented at *The Greater Self*, a conference sponsored by the Noetics Institute and held in Washington, D.C. in 1987.

²⁸D. Brown and J. Engler, "The States of Mindfulness Meditation: A Validation Study, Part II. Discussion," in *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, eds. K. Wilber, J. Engler and D. Brown (Boston, MA: New Science Library/Shambhala, 1986), pp. 191-218.

²⁹D. Brown, M. Forte and M. Dysart, "Differences in Visual Sensitivity among Mindfulness Meditators and Non-meditators," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 58 (1984): 727-733.

³⁰C. Alexander, et al, "Transcendental Meditation, Mindfulness, and Longevity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (in press).

³¹E. Langer, "Minding Matters: The Consequences of Mindlessness/Mindfulness," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. L. Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1988).

³²Nyanaponika Thera, *Abhidharma Studies* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1976), p. 7.

³³R. Walsh, "Initial Meditative Experience: Part I," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 9 (1977): 151-192.

ing of enhanced perceptual speed, sensitivity and acuity in meditators.³⁴ Advanced Buddhist practitioners proved capable of perceiving stimuli that were significantly more subtle and brief than those detected by non-practitioners. Part of this enhancement of perceptual processing speed and subtlety was found only when practitioners were doing an intensive meditation retreat and presumably experiencing the various altered states that occur during such practice. However, part of the enhancement remained when practitioners were not in retreat and not doing intensive practice. In the latter case an altered state had resulted in an enduring altered trait.

These experimental findings support the phenomenological reports of meditators. They claim that during intensive practice they enter altered states in which their perceptual and introspective sensitivity and speed are sufficiently increased to allow them unprecedented insight into, and understanding of, the nature and workings of mind. After they leave the intensive retreat practice these states and capacities tend to diminish though the insights and understanding they afforded may remain. Further evidence for a residual enhancement of perception comes from findings that meditators may display more accurate empathy than non-meditators.³⁵

One particular type of state-specific knowledge and its effects seems particularly important to an understanding of Asian mystical philosophical claims that may seem incomprehensible or even illogical and impossible from our usual perspective. This is the type of state-specific knowledge that causes a reevaluation of knowledge previously obtained in other states, including the ordinary one. This reevaluation process is described by the Sanskrit term *Badha* which means contradiction and which Eliot Deutsch³⁶ translates as subratiating.

Asian philosophers claim that in certain alternate states traditional knowledge, and even logic may be subratiated. That is, our usual knowledge, understanding and logic are recognized as state-specific and limited, and are consequently accorded less scope and validity than the knowledge which subratiated them. However, it is important to recognize that the subratiating knowledge, understanding and logic to which the mystical philosopher accords greater than usual validity may appear quite incomprehensible or illogical to one who has not entered a requisite state of consciousness.

³⁴D. Brown and J. Engler, "The Stages of Mindfulness Meditation: A Validation Study, Part II. Discussion," in *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, eds K. Wilber, J. Engler and D. Brown (Boston, MA: New Science Library/Shambhala, 1986), pp. 191-218.

³⁵D. Shapiro and R. Walsh, eds., *Beyond Health and Normality: Explorations of Exceptional Psychological Wellbeing* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1983).

³⁶K. Wilber, *Eye to Eye* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1983).

It is also important to note that for Asian philosophies the deepest types of insight and understanding are not primarily intellectual in nature. There is almost universal agreement among the Asian mystical philosophies that the deepest subrational insights, the deepest understandings that constitute the transcendental wisdom of *jñāna* or *prajña*, are intuitive in nature and usually inaccessible to the discursive intellect. "Not by reasoning is this apprehension attainable" (Katha Upanishad 1, 2, 4) "Words return along with the mind not attaining it" (Taittiriya Upanishad 2, 9, 1). Indeed, according to the third Zen patriarch, "to seek mind with the discriminating mind is the greatest of all mistakes."³⁷ From this perspective all purely conceptual knowledge is regarded as inherently dualistic and fundamentally illusory whereas the knowledge sought by the Asian disciplines is held to be beyond dualities, categories, words and concepts; hence nondual, transverbal, and transrational.³⁸

3

Western philosophy is a primarily conceptual enterprise that seeks the deepest type of understanding through intellectual analysis and logic. The Asian mystical philosophies, however, say that the deepest types of understanding are inaccessible to the intellect. They therefore tend to use the intellect, not as the primary means for revealing these deepest understandings, but to point towards and describe (within the limits imposed by concepts) a previously recognized nonconceptual understanding and the disciplines that can lead others to this same understanding.

This is not to deny that intellectual analysis and logic can be valuable adjuncts in the search for the deepest types of understanding. Indeed, they are probably used to varying extents in all authentic mystical traditions and particularly in *jñāna-yoga*, the yoga of knowledge and discernment. However even *jñāna yoga* "is not a merely logico-analytic or speculative inquiry"³⁹ but includes various components of meditative *raja yoga* and the final understanding remains beyond words and concepts.

This orientation is clearly embodied in the Indian terms that are often translated as philosophy and philosopher. The term *darsana* refers both to a school of philosophy, especially "a thought system acquired by intuitive experience and sustained by logical argument" and to "a spiritual perception, a whole view revealed to the soul sense."⁴⁰ This *darsana* is regarded by Indian philosophy as "a distinguishing mark of a true philosopher." From the Indian perspective, then, philosophy and profound in-

³⁷Sengstan, *Verses on the Faith Mind*, trans. R. Clark (Sharon Springs: Zen Center, 1976).

³⁸K. Wilber, *Eye to Eye* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1983).

³⁹R. Puligandla, *Jñāna-Yoga—The Way of Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), p. xii.

⁴⁰Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy, Vol. I* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), pp. 43–44.

tuitive vision are almost synonymous. This view is reinforced by a term commonly translated as philosopher, namely *Paramartha-vid*, meaning he who knows (*vid*), the paramount object or fundamental reality (*Paramartha*).

Contemporary research, then, suggests that there may be multiple states of consciousness and that capacities in these states may exhibit state specificity. Asian mystical philosophies and disciplines aim for, describe, and philosophize from, the perspective of multiple states of consciousness and claim that these states provide insights, understandings, intuitions, logics and philosophical views less obtainable and sometimes incomprehensible in our usual state. In short, the Asian mystical systems are multistate philosophies and significant parts of their knowledge are state-specific.

The idea of state-specific disciplines is not new and state-specific psychologies, technologies and sciences have been suggested. Daniel Goleman⁴¹ infers that the Buddhist Abhidharma is a state-specific psychology originally conceived in, and only fully comprehensible and testable in, the highly refined states of consciousness engendered by advanced meditation. Likewise Charles Tart⁴² has suggested that mystical religions may also be regarded as transpersonal psychologies or state-specific technologies designed to induce transcendent states.

Tart went further and suggests the development of state-specific sciences. These he proposed as disciplines in which participant experimenters or yogi-scientists would learn techniques for inducing altered states, then attempt to observe their experiences in these states as objectively as possible and compare their reports with others. Applying the term *science* to purely introspective observations is using the term broadly but perhaps legitimately: as Hilary Putnam⁴³ observed, "I don't believe there is really an agreement in our culture as to what is 'science' and what isn't."

The responses to Tart's proposal for the development of state-specific sciences have been dramatic. Both Ernest Hilgard⁴⁴ and Gordon Globus⁴⁵ responded with strong critiques. Globus immediately sent a critical letter to *Science*, which had published Tart's paper. However, in what must be one of the most dramatic turn-arounds in scientific history, he then happened to reread Tart's paper while in an altered state of consciousness. To quote Globus' own words,

⁴¹D. Goleman, *The Meditative Mind* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1988).

⁴²C. Tart, ed., *Transpersonal Psychologies* (El Cerrito, CA: Psychological Processes, 1983b, originally published in 1976).

⁴³H. Putnam, "The Philosophy of Science," in *Men of Ideas*, ed. B. Magee (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 233.

⁴⁴E. Hilgard, "Consciousness in Contemporary Psychology," *Annual Review of Psychology* 31 (1980): 1-26.

⁴⁵G. Globus, "Different Views from Different States," in *Beyond Ego: Transpersonal Dimensions in Psychology*, eds. R. Walsh and F. Vaughan (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1980), pp. 213-215.

to my great amazement—his proposal that a science specific to a given ASC may be independent of sciences specific to other ASC's now seems quite correct. I therefore immediately drafted this letter while in the ASC. . . . I am struck, then by the extraordinary paradox that Tart's proposal for state specific sciences seems absurd to me in an ordinary state but quite correct in terms of my "incorrigible experience" while in an ASC.

Equally remarkable, and just as amusing, is the fact that when he returned to his ordinary state of consciousness Globus again found himself disagreeing with Tart and added to his letter the following:

Again in an ordinary state, I would argue in favor of one science for all states of consciousness and trust that there is an explanation for my experience that while in an ASC, the ASC seemed clearly incomprehensible to an ordinary state. It seems obvious to me that I can remember what happened in the ASC, but I can't remember it in the way I experienced at the time, i.e., the memory is not veridical. There seems no way to retrieve the experience in the ASC without entering again the ASC which supports Tart's thesis [of the importance of developing state specific sciences].⁴⁶

So whether or not we in the West can develop state-specific sciences in the future, it seems that Asian philosophers may have accessed state-dependent knowledge and created both state-specific and multi-state philosophies centuries ago.

4

If these Asian philosophies are indeed multi-state systems and contain state-specific understandings, it follows that those of us who are not adequately trained will be unable to comprehend them fully. By adequate training I mean the traditional disciplines, or faithful variations thereon, of ethics, emotional transformation, attention and cultivation of wisdom, designed to train the mind so that it can voluntarily enter the altered states that are the goals and source of these philosophies. Such is certainly the claim of the people who practice these Asian traditions.

Without practice, without contemplation, a merely intellectual, theoretical, and philosophical approach to Buddhism is quite inadequate. . . . Mystical insights . . . cannot be judged by unenlightened people from the worm's eye view of book learning, and a little book knowledge does not really entitle anyone to pass judgement on mystical experiences.⁴⁷

From this perspective, without contemplative training we are incapable of entering the necessary altered states and consequently we lack "adaequatio":

⁴⁶G. Globus, "Different Views from Different States," in *Beyond Ego: Transpersonal Dimensions in Psychology*, eds. R. Walsh and F. Baughan (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1980), pp. 213-215.

⁴⁷B. Vimalo, "Awakening to the Truth," *Visaka Puja* (Thailand: Ann. Public Buddhist Assoc., 1975), p. 70 and p. 73.

If we do not have the requisite organ or instrument, or fail to use it, we are not *adequate* to this particular part or facet of the world with the result that as far as we are concerned, it simply does not exist. This is the Great Truth of "adaequatio."⁴⁸

If state-specific knowledge, logic and communication do in fact limit our ability to fully comprehend the profundities of Asian philosophies, then what exactly is it that is lost to us and how are we likely to respond to our truncated vision of them? These are particularly important questions since state-specific knowledge may appear incomprehensible or even nonsensical to anyone without experience of that state.

One common response is simply to assume that these Asian philosophies are nonsensical products of primitive thinking and to dismiss them from serious consideration accordingly. Such has traditionally been the most common Western response to Asian philosophies, psychologies and religions. In such cases the entire wisdom of the traditions is lost to us.

But there may be another type of response in which the loss is more insidious. This is the loss that may occur when Western intellectuals, including highly intelligent and well intended philosophers, approach Asian philosophies without the requisite yogic-contemplative training. What may then be lost are the more subtle, profound, state-specific depths of these philosophies. "Their true meaning," said William Stace, "can only be understood if we have in our possession a knowledge of the profoundest depths of the mystical consciousness."⁴⁹ Purely intellectual inquirers will not recognize that they are overlooking more profound depths of meaning.

What are being lost are the higher "grades of significance." An illustration based on one given by Tyrrell,⁵⁰ who coined the term, may unpack its meaning. Let us imagine the different responses and grades of significance that the same object may elicit. To an animal a book may be an oddly shaped black and white object and of course the animal is right, the book is a black and white object. To a person from an illiterate tribe the book may be an oddly shaped soft flexible object with strange markings on it. Again this is correct, although the response is at a higher level of significance than the animal's response. A Western child may immediately recognize the object as a book while, a Western adult may recognize it as a particular type of book—one that makes incomprehensible, even ridiculous, claims about the nature of reality. Finally, to a physicist it may be a profound text on quantum physics.

What is important to recognize is this: all the observers were correct in their characterization of the book, but all of them except the physicist

⁴⁸E. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 61 and pp. 42-43.

⁴⁹W. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960), p. 168.

⁵⁰G. Tyrrell, *Grades of Significance* (New York: Rider, 1947), p. 61.

were unaware how much more meaningful, more significant the object was than they could recognize. The book was a black and white object, it was a soft, flexible object with squiggly markings, it was a book. And, most important, to the nonphysicist Western adult, it was a book whose contents seemed incomprehensible, even ridiculous. What this example so nicely demonstrates is that when we are incapable of comprehending higher grades of significance we can come away from an observation with the mistaken feeling that we have understood the object as fully as possible. As E. F. Schumacher points out:

Facts do not carry labels indicating the appropriate level at which they *ought to be considered*. Nor does the choice of an inadequate level lead the intelligence into factual error or logical contradiction. All levels of significance up to the adequate level, i.e., up to the level of meaning in the example of the book are equally factual, equally logical, equally objective, but not equally real. . . . When the level of the knower is not adequate to the level (or the grade of significance) of the object of knowledge, the result is not factual error but something much more serious: an inadequate and impoverished view of reality.³¹

A central thesis of this paper might be stated as follows. Research on altered states of consciousness supports the millennia-old Asian claim that, without appropriate prior contemplative-yogic training philosophers may not be adequate to the higher grades of significance embodied in Asian mystical philosophies and may be unaware that these higher grades of significance are being overlooked.

In a way this caveat is similar to one uttered by Western philosophers themselves to the first Western students and translators of Asian philosophies. Long before Western philosophers took these Asian systems seriously philologists were studying, translating and commenting on them. When philosophers did begin to investigate them they recognized that the philologists' lack of philosophical sophistication had left them vulnerable to missing and misunderstanding certain philosophical subtleties. The implication of state-specificity is that just as these philologists without philosophical training were not fully adequate to certain philosophical subtleties of the Asian traditions, so also philosophers without contemplative training may also not be fully adequate to certain subtleties and higher grades of significance of these traditions.

Three other lines of evidence may offer further support for my theses. These include the reports of Westerners doing Asian practices, the parallel arguments of Ken Wilber, and the effects of psychedelics.

During the last decade I have met a number of Western philosophers and psychologists who have taken up meditation and/or yoga. They consistently report that meditation experiences have deepened their concep-

³¹E. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 61 and pp. 42-43.

tual understanding of the traditions and the few reports that have been published appear to support these claims.⁵²⁻⁵³⁻⁵⁴ The recently formed meditation and philosophy group of the American Philosophical Association appears to be largely composed of members who have observed a similar impact of meditation on themselves.

Ken Wilber has presented a sophisticated argument for the necessity of contemplative practices in order to understand mystical traditions of either East or West. Wilber's thinking is too rich to summarize adequately here. Suffice it to say that he argues that the intuitive insight sought by mystical traditions represents a distinct epistemological mode that must be cultivated before these traditions can be understood and their validity can be assessed. Wilber's argument appears to parallel and complement the one offered here.⁵⁵

A third, and highly contentious line of support concerns the effects of psychedelic experiences. The question of whether drug-induced mystical experiences are genuine and whether some of them are identical to or even similar to those encountered and described in Asian philosophies has been hotly debated.⁵⁶⁻⁵⁷⁻⁵⁸ For our purposes it is enough to note that some drug-induced experiences bear striking resemblances to mystical experiences⁵⁹⁻⁶⁰⁻⁶¹ and that after such experiences, subjects may report greater appreciation and understanding of Asian philosophies and may be drawn to undertake yogic meditative practices.⁶²⁻⁶³⁻⁶⁴ Unfortunately it is difficult to have a rational discussion about psychedelics since the topic is highly charged for most people and the media have distributed gross

⁵²R. Walsh, "Initial Meditative Experience: Part I," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 9 (1977): 151-192.

⁵³R. Walsh, "Initial Meditative Experience: Part II," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 10 (1978): 1-28.

⁵⁴K. Wilber, "Odyssey," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 22:1, (1982): 57-90.

⁵⁵K. Wilber, *Eye to Eye* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1983).

⁵⁶H. Smith, "Do Drugs have Religious Import?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), pp. 517-530.

⁵⁷W. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960), p. 168.

⁵⁸R. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (New York: Oxford Press, 1961).

⁵⁹S. Grof, *The Adventure of Self Discovery* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).

⁶⁰H. Smith, "Do Drugs have Religious Import?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), pp. 517-530.

⁶¹L. Grinspoon and J. Bakalar, *Psychedelic Reflections* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986).

⁶²S. Grof, *Realms of the Human Consciousness: Observations from LSD Research* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976).

⁶³F. Vaughan, "Perception and Knowledge: Reflections on Psychological and Spiritual Learning in the Psychedelic Experience," in *Psychedelic Reflections*, eds. L. Grinspoon and J. Bakalar (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986), pp. 108-114.

⁶⁴R. Walsh, "Psychedelics and Psychological Well-Being," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 139 (1982): 1525-1526.

misinformation.⁶⁵ Suffice it to say here that reports from psychedelic research appears to be consistent with the claims of this paper.

5

Several important implications arise from comparing Western philosophy and Asian mystical philosophies from a perspective of states of consciousness. The first of these comparisons involves the number of states of consciousness that the respective philosophies describe and from which their practitioners philosophize. The key difference is of course that mainstream Western philosophy is predominantly a unistate enterprise where Asian philosophies are multistate enterprises.

It is important to note that 20th-century mainstream Western philosophy is *predominately*, though not exclusively, a unistate enterprise because there are of course notable instances of significant understandings gained in alternate states. William James' sympathetic insights, gained under nitrous oxide, into an Hegelian-like synthesis of opposites, have already been noted. These apparently left their mark since James' original antipathy to the Hegelian system apparently mellowed subsequently.

Dramatic historical examples that have reverberated through Western philosophy for a millenium or more include the philosophy of Plotinus and Anselm's ontological argument. Anselm reports that this argument came to him in a dream.⁶⁶ I am doubly indebted to James Cutsinger for pointing this out to me when this paper was first presented to the Revisioning Philosophy group. For when he did, Huston Smith exclaimed that he had once dreamed Anselm's proof and that in the dream, and only in the dream, it made perfect sense to him. We might, perhaps, have here a case of state-specific understanding, although against this is the fact that Anselm claimed that the argument also held in the waking state. Of course partial cross-state understanding can certainly occur, so Anselm's claim does not rule out the possibility of state-specific understanding. Of course it goes without saying that the fact that an argument appears to make sense (in any state) does not necessarily establish its validity. In any event, it is clear that some alternate states of consciousness, namely dreams, have certainly been a source of inspiration and creativity in both Western and Eastern philosophy (e.g., Anselm, Descartes and Tibetan dream yoga), as well as in diverse fields such as literature (Robert Louis Stevenson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge), painting (William Blake), music (Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner), psychology (Freud and Jung) and science (Kekule's discovery of the molecular structure of benzene and Loewis' Nobel prize-winning experiment on nerve conduction).⁶⁷

⁶⁵T. Reidlinger and J. Reidlinger, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Media Hype Considered in the Light of the MDMA Controversy," *Psychedelic Monographs and Essays* 4 (1988).

⁶⁶St. Anselm's 'prosligion,' with 'a reply on behalf of a fool' by Gaunilo and 'the author's reply to Guanilo,' trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Oxford, 1965).

⁶⁷S. La Berge, *Lucid Dreaming* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1985).

A similar multistate-unistate comparison emerges when we consider the number of dimensions of personality or being that Asian or Western philosophies train. Western philosophy takes itself to be primarily unidimensional training of the intellect alone whereas the Asian philosophies employ multidimensional training and regard intellectual cultivation as only one aspect of a fuller essential discipline.

From this perspective Western philosophy might be regarded as predominantly a state-specific philosophy whose observations, concepts, investigations, descriptions and logics may be specific to, and at least partly limited to, the usual waking state. In other words, Western philosophy may not be fully adequate to, descriptive of, or veridical for certain other states of consciousness and their possible world views and philosophies.

Because they are multistate and unistate systems respectively, the Asian philosophies may be inherently broader and more encompassing than Western ones. This is by no means to deny the obvious fact that Western philosophy has examined and conceptualized certain areas of our usual state experience in vastly greater detail and depth than have Asian systems. It is simply to say that there appear to exist other important states of consciousness that Western philosophy has not addressed but which certain Asian traditions have accorded great importance and have examined in detail.

A useful simile here may be the comparison between Newtonian and Einsteinian models in physics. The Newtonian model applies to macroscopic objects moving at relatively low velocities compared to the speed of light. When it is applied within these conditions it is highly accurate and valuable yet when applied to high-velocity objects it is no longer valid. The Einsteinian model, on the other hand, encompasses both low and high speeds and from this broader perspective the Newtonian model and its limitations are all perfectly logical and understandable (applying Einsteinian and not Newtonian logic, of course). However the reverse is definitely untrue, for the Einsteinian is not comprehensible within a Newtonian framework. Furthermore from a Newtonian framework reports of incongruous findings such as the constancy of the speed of light and objects increasing in mass at high speed are incomprehensible, illogical and suspect. In technical terms, the Newtonian model is a limiting case of the Einsteinian model.

In terms of set theory the Newtonian model might be seen as a subset nested within the larger Einsteinian set. The properties of the subset are readily comprehensible from the perspective of the set but the reverse is necessarily untrue. The general principle is that to try to examine the larger model or set from the perspective of the smaller is inappropriate and necessarily productive of false conclusions.

The implications for the comparison and assessment of Asian mystical philosophies are now apparent. From a multiple states of consciousness model traditional Western systems can be seen as relativistically useful

models provided that, because of the limitations imposed by state dependency, they are not applied inappropriately to the phenomena of altered states outside their scope. However, from the Western unistate perspective the Asian multistate models may appear illogical, incomprehensible and nonsensical.

6

Given that Western philosophy is essentially a unistate discipline, what then are some of the further implications for Western philosophy of multiple states of consciousness and state-specificity? First, there is the obvious question of whether we have any reason to assume that philosophical knowledge can be best or even adequately sought in only one state of consciousness, especially now that we have nonwestern traditions, and some Western philosophers, claiming that other states may even be superior.

Another implication concerns the possible necessity of reevaluating the philosophy of mysticism. This paper has focused exclusively on Asian mystical philosophies since these have been worked out in greater detail and some of their practitioners appear to have had more ready access to mystical states than most of their Western counterparts.⁶⁸ However the general argument that has been advanced towards the Asian systems can obviously also be applied to Western mysticism which may well have been partly misinterpreted, pathologized and prematurely dismissed by many philosophers. It would clearly seem important to reevaluate mysticism in the light of state specificity.

Then there is the very large question of whether any of the many contemporary *impasses that bedevil Western philosophy might yield to multistate perspectives and investigations*. For example, Western philosophers are increasingly recognizing, and being frustrated by, the limitations of the intellect. Since these limitations have been recognized for millenia by Asian mystical philosophers, it might be valuable to see if these traditions can throw any light on this conundrum.

In the light of recent research on states of consciousness and state specificity, it is clear that claims that contemplative practice may be an essential preliminary for understanding Asian mystical philosophies now have significant experimental and conceptual support. Without such practice we may lose access to the most profound aspects and highest grades of significance of these traditions, yet not recognize that we have lost them. Clearly we and Western philosophy are faced with an enormous challenge.

But we are also faced with an enormous opportunity. Asian philosophies, teachers and techniques are now available to us in the West as in no previous time in history. To the extent we use them, say Asian philosophies, to that extent will our understanding of these traditions deepen.

⁶⁸W. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960), p. 168.

and our own wisdom grow. And what these traditions claim to offer in their depths is remarkable indeed: awakening, enlightenment, liberation, moksha, sat-chit-ananda, limitless consciousness-being-bliss. Are these claims true? The Asian philosophies' answer remains the same as it has been for millennia: "to see if this be true, look within your own mind. The ultimate testing ground and goal lie within you and are you. The only tool you require is your own trained awareness." As is said in Zen, you can do the practice and become rich or you can read about it and become the rich people's bookkeeper. We in the West may have been primarily bookkeepers but the Asian mystical philosophies invite us to become rich.

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perspectives, but I would also wish to affirm those who have valued and upheld the central Western tradition, for I believe that this tradition, from Socrates and Augustine to Descartes and Freud and beyond, should be seen as a necessary and noble part of a great dialectic, and not just rejected as an imperialist-chauvinist plot. Each perspective, masculine and feminine, is here both affirmed and yet also transcended, recognized as part of a larger whole; for each polarity requires the other for its fulfillment. And their synthesis leads to something fundamentally new: it brings an unexpected opening to a larger reality which cannot be grasped before it arrives, because this new reality is itself a creative act.

But why has the pervasive masculinity of the Western intellectual and-spiritual tradition suddenly become so apparent to us today, while it remained so invisible to almost every previous generation? I believe this is so because, as Hegel suggested, a civilization cannot become conscious of itself, cannot recognize its own significance, until it is so mature that it is approaching its own death.

Today we are experiencing something that looks very much like the death of modern man, indeed that looks very much like the death of Western man. Perhaps the end of "man" himself is at hand. But man is not a goal; man is something that must be overcome—and fulfilled, in the embrace of the feminine.