GLIMPSES OF 'NON-IDENTITY' IN THE HISTORY OF 'EASTERN THOUGHT'

by

Aat Dekker

'Science' in our days (1981) tells us that 'reality' can be best modelled as a complex of processes, of which in particular 'life'-processes show an irreversible character. Of course, as an opinion this is nothing new. In connection with the limitations and insufficiencies of Aristotelianism Korzybski remarked:

> One is amazed to find that 'everything has already been said', and that, to a large extent, these important, separated statements were inoperative.[1]

In the history of our 'Western' culture, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, dated about 500 B.C., figures as an early formulator of such statements. Apparently, the notions of Heraclitus play only a minor formative role in the development of Western 'philosophy' compared with the impact of the system of Aristotle. The structural influence of the Aristotelian system left little room for Heraclitus' view of an ever changing world "completely devoid of anything static"[2]: "Panta Rhei" — everything flows, and consequently "happiness is attainable only by the use of Reason to comprehend that nothing is absolute and that everything is relative."[3]

Yet, Heraclitus was, like his contemporaries, not free of identifying different levels of abstracting implied by the then unrealized 'primitive' structure of their language-orientation; "Fire is the first principle,"[4] he maintained. Further, "Reason (Logos) is the order of Ultimate Reality," and "Logos is revealed by speech."[5]

Aristotle subsequently systematized the modes of speaking of his day by formulating the 'Laws of Reasoning', or 'logic'. Starting with the "Law of Identity: Whatever is, is,"[6] (or 'A=A'), he built a system and taught many pupils, thereby providing the Western world with a framework for 'proper thinking' that still conditions many humans into worrying "upon delusional questions, forced upon them by the pernicious 'is' of identity, such as 'What is life?'", etc.[7] Korzybski of course goes on repeating that "the 'is' of identity forces us into semantic disturbances of wrong evaluation." He counteracted this tendency with a sweeping "Whatever one might say something 'is', it is not!"

Identification of symbol and referent appears as a common aspect of primitive cultures,[8] although their symbol systems may differ in structure. The 'is' of identity characterizes the structure of the so-called Indo-European language group, which comprises among others Greek, French, German, English, and Sanskrit.

Somewhere in the second millennium B.C., it is inferred, the ancestors of this language family started moving westward from Central Asia in the direction of Europe, and southward. A Sanskrit-like speaking branch of this family settled in and around the Indus Valley in Northern India and began to dominate the local culture with their worldview. This resulted in a religious-social system, nowadays generally referred to as 'Hinduism', an orientation that still influences a great deal of daily life circumstances in India.

Structurally, Indian society is commonly described as a system of castes. A group of families forms a caste which may vary in size from a few hundred people to several millions. Membership in a caste is by birth and is unalterable.

More than 2000 distinct units called castes are recognized. They are arranged hierarchically according to the prestige of their traditional occupations and the extent to which they observe the prescriptions of the ancient (Sanskrit) teachings called the Vedas ('Knowing') and Upanishads ('Worshipful Approaches'). And, according to the 'Rigveda', this classification represents an ordering of 'divine' origin.[9]

The top of the hierarchy is formed by those who observe strict rules and lead a life of the greatest purity. Thus they are nearest to the gods. The members of this caste, the 'Brahmins' (the priests), are considered as the highest representatives of human beings. It is their duty to receive gifts, to perform rituals and to explain the ancient words of 'wisdom'.

The purpose of that 'wisdom' is to "offer truth as a magic weapon to obtain practical ends, the highest of these being salvation."[10]

One's position in this life is seen as the result of deeds in former lives. This process has no beginning and can go on in an endless cycle of death and rebirth. Liberation from this eternal round of becoming constitutes 'moksha' or 'salvation'. But this seems, as 'Ultimate Goal', so difficult to attain that most Hindus just hope to gain a better next life.

The means to work out 'salvation' comprise a diversity of practices, reflecting the many caste distinctions. They have in common "the underlying belief in one immutable, ultimate, indescribable Reality known as Brahman".[11] In this orientation (and terminology!) one's eternal Self ('Atman') is the individual aspect of that Supreme Reality, only temporarily imprisoned in finite bodies. Salvation consists of eventually uniting ('Yoga') one's Self with the Brahman. The union is possible because they only seem to be apart. Seen through the veils of illusion they are one and the same Pure Being.

The Sanskrit formula 'Tat tvam asi' ('That art thou') is used to express

the fundamental 'identity' of the 'Self' and 'Brahman':

> When Svetaketu, at his father's bidding, had brought a ripe fruit
> from the banyan tree, his father said to him,
> "Split the fruit in two, dear son."
> "Here you are. I have split it in two."
> "What do you find there?"
> "Innumerable tiny seeds."
> "Then take one of the seeds and split it."
> "I have split the seed."
> "And what do you find there?"
> "Why, nothing, nothing at all."
> "Ah, dear son, but this great tree cannot possibly come from
> nothing. Even if you cannot see with your eyes that subtle some-
> thing in the seed which produces this mighty form, it is present
> nonetheless. That is the power, that is the spirit unseen, which
> pervades everywhere and is all things. Have faith! That is the
> spirit which lies at the root of all existence, and that also art
> thou, O Svetaketu."[12]

It seems that already in the 6th century B.C. this rather closed system
of orientation led in India to a way of life that was "dominated by a highly
developed ritualism under control of the hereditary Brahmin priesthood."[13]
Not surprisingly, this did not satisfy everyone.

A traditionally accepted way 'out' was taken by people who, after fulfil-
ling their caste obligations, cut off their social ties and went into the
forests to search for 'Truth'. But few of those 'forest thinkers' ever
returned with 'new' answers to the traditional questions.

Around 500 B.C. however, a 'sage' called Siddartha Gautama began to point
out a fundamentally different view. He came forth with teachings built on the
denial of the existence of a personal or universal 'entity' as an enduring
'Self', 'Soul' or 'Ego' ('Atman') amidst or beyond the changing phenomenal
world.

Gautama discovered the delusional character of the classical conventions,
and a possible 'de-conditioning'. This seems to have brought about a liberat-
ing and enlightening experience in him and many of his followers - he subse-
quently became known as 'Enlightened One' or Buddha.

After the death of Gautama 'Buddhism' developed into different schools,
each focusing on some particular aspects of his teaching. A fundamental role
in all interpretations of 'the' words of the Buddha is played by the 'Non-self'
doctrine. A scholarly member of the Buddhist order of monks maintains:

> According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of Self is an
> imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and
> ... produces harmful thoughts of 'me' and 'mine', selfish desire,
> craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and
> other defilements, impurities and problems.[14]

This attitude suggests (at least to me) a beginning awareness of the inherently misleading character of primitive 'thought'. As a result a differentiation is made between two kinds of 'truth':

> When we use such expressions in our daily life as 'I', 'you', 'being', 'individual', etc., ... we speak a truth conforming to the conventions of the world. But the ultimate truth is that there is no 'I' or 'being' in reality.

Thus from the Buddhist standpoint:

> it is as wrong to hold the opinion 'I have no Self' (which is the annihilationist theory) as to hold the opinion 'I have [a] Self' (which is the eternalist theory), because both are fetters, both arising out of the false idea 'I AM',

or, as we might say in general semantics, conditioned through the structure of primitive language. In Buddhist terminology 'I' or 'being' refers only to

> a combination of physical and mental aggregates which are working together interdependently in a flux of momentary change within the law of cause and effect, and there is nothing permanent, everlasting, unchanging and eternal in the whole of existence.[15]

Elsewhere the Buddhist author comments on this view with non-Aristotelian flavour: "Here A is not A."[16]

Clinging in ignorance to the false 'idea' of 'Self' is seen as a major factor causing all kinds of selfish 'thirst', from the desire for 'existence' to the desire for 'non-existence'. From this craving arise tendencies which condition the basically unsatisfactory character of 'all' (i.e., conventional 'Hindu') 'existence'. The false 'idea' of 'Self' keeps 'one' suffering on the vicious circle of 'death' and 'rebirth'.

Buddhist teachings proclaim primarily the 'Noble Truth' of the cessation of all suffering. Buddha pointed a 'simple' way out: Liberation from the endless round of death and rebirth is possible in this very life by getting rid of all false (i.e., conventional) views and extinction (in Sanskrit 'nirvana') of all selfish craving. Thus 'nirvana' denotes in Buddhist terminology the realization of the cessation of suffering.

As means to realize the end of suffering Buddha designated the 'Noble Eightfold Path'. It describes eight aspects of the Buddhist way of life: "right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration," and: "it gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment, to nirvana."[17]

Gautama emphasized that mere faith in his 'Noble Truths' does not bring 'nirvana' closer. He warned his followers: "You yourselves should do the

work, Buddhas only point the way."[18] Also he compared his teaching to a raft, which is for crossing over and not for getting hold of.

Later developments of Buddhist 'thought' can be found in the Prajna Paramita ('Perfection of Wisdom') literature, formulated about seven to ten centuries after Gautama's death but nevertheless claiming authority as words spoken by Buddha. Some sections of these texts accentuate the necessity of abandoning the misleading conventional 'concepts' in order to end 'suffering', e.g. when pointing to "the realization of Noble Wisdom, which is ... devoid of all predicates such as existence and non-existence."[19] The 'Diamond Sutra' in particular, "is the Scripture that is hard and sharp like a diamond that will cut away all arbitrary conceptions and bring one to the other shore of enlightenment."[20]

This scripture describes Buddha repeatedly stressing the point that his sayings should be taken as <u>figures of speech only</u>, and not as a definite thing.

Obviously, speaking of a 'path leading to enlightenment, to nirvana' easily leads to misunderstanding such as identifying 'nirvana' as something to attain to. It seems to me that this tendency was recognized and countered by later Buddhist 'thinkers'. The 'Diamond Sutra' relates that Buddha declared:

I obtained not the least thing from unexcelled, complete awakening, and for this very reason it is called 'unexcelled, complete awakening'.[21]

In general, however, possibly inevitably in an environment not free from 'identification', the term 'nirvana' was and is assumed to refer to some 'heavenly state', the destination of a long, long journey. Hence 'Buddhism' is commonly seen in a religious appearance.

'Buddhism' gradually became known in <u>China</u> from about 100 A.D. Among the educated elite "this early Buddhism was generally regarded as a sect of religious Taoism."[22] The society in which this view arose was largely dominated by 'Confucian thinking': 'ultimate reality'. 'Tao' (or the 'Way') was seen as "an all encompassing system of relationships in which man, human institutions, events, and natural phenomena all interacted in an orderly, predictable way".[23]

Traditionally Chinese 'philosophers' concentrated their efforts in particular on formulating the rules of 'the good society', in harmony with 'Tao'. Adherents of the far less influential 'Taoism', on the other hand, <u>denied</u> that 'conventional thinking' could ever produce an adequate representation of 'the nature of Tao'. This 'negative' attitude can also be found in the classic Taoist text called Tao Te Ching, the Scripture concerning Tao and its functioning. The first five characters of this treatise offer something like: "The Tao which can be spoken is not eternal Tao,"[24] and this is followed by 81 verses of poetry in which this 'way of seeing' is expounded.

Basically, the _functioning_ of Tao is seen pictured by the Chinese character 'tzu-jan', translated as 'spontaneity' or 'naturalness'. This action is termed 'wu-wei' ('non-action'), because in contrast to conventionally understood action, it does not aim to work out some objective: Tao is not pursuing any purpose, and therefore is not meeting difficulties. Consequently, to search for the 'Tao ' is to deviate from 'it'. The concluding line of the Tao Te Ching possibly reads: "The perfect Sage follows Tao by practicing non-action."

Buddhist teachings slowly intermingled with the Chinese 'philosophical' traditions. Five centuries of domestication led to the rise of a typical 'Chinese Buddhism' represented by the teachings of the so-called 'Ch'an Masters'.

The term _Ch'an_ represents the Chinese pronunciation of the Sanskrit word 'dhyana', just as the word 'Zen' represents the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word 'Ch'an' - but Ch'an-Buddhism should never be confused with Zen, "the interesting Japanese religion which the Japanese, in seven or eight centuries, have made of Ch'an."[25] 'Dhyana' is often loosely translated as 'meditation', but as a technical term in Chinese Buddhism it refers to "a vivid state of consciousness, free from all 'abiding' or mentation of any kind; though no single word covers it in our languages, the nearest comes '_awareness_'."[26]

The Ch'an school flourished in China during the T'ang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) and was carried by the most rigorous teachers of the Buddhist tradition. To convey _verbally_ the Buddhist way of 'liberation', those Masters often borrowed terms from Taoism, but in addition to their lecturing they used frequently _non-verbal_ techniques like hitting, kicking, etc.

The main concern of the Ch'an Masters was to teach, by directly pointing, '_Immediate_ Awakening', brought about by the elimination of _all_ 'conceptual thought'. The 'gradual awakening' of other schools was refuted with the argument that 'Tao' is not something that can be divided in parts, so there is nothing that renders itself for partial understanding:

> If you students of the Way do not rid yourselves of conceptual thought in a flash, even though you strive for aeon after aeon, you will never accomplish it. ... When, in a single flash, you attain to full realization, you will only be realizing the Buddha-Nature which has been with you all the time; and by all the foregoing stages you will have added to it nothing at all.[27]

Another Master composed the following dialogue:

> Q: What method must we practice in order to attain deliverance?

> A: It can be attained only through a sudden Illumination.

> Q: What is a sudden Illumination?

A: Sudden means ridding yourselves of deluded thoughts instantan-
eously. Illumination means the realization that Illumination
is not something to be attained.[28]

The recorded sayings of the Ch'an Masters describe how they tried again and
again to show the delusional character of questions that arise in a conven-
tional orientation:

Q: What is the Way and how must it be followed?

A: What sort of thing do you suppose the Way to be, that you should
wish to follow it?[29]

The 'movement' initiated by Gautama and carried by his non-self doctrine seems
to culminate in the teachings of Ch'an Masters who de-bunked and de-buddha'd
'Buddhism':

'The mind is the Buddha', — this is the medicine for sick people.
'No mind, no Buddha', — this is to cure people who are sick because
of the medicine.[30]

The main points of the Ch'an teachers may be summarized as follows:

- There is nothing much in the Buddhist teaching.

- In the last resort nothing is gained.

- Meditation can not make a Buddha.

- In carrying water and chopping wood: therein lies the wonderful Tao.

In my opinion Ch'an suggests a way of experiencing-evaluating 'life' from
conventional 'conceptual thought', and as a 'philosophy' of this 'silence'
Ch'an has nothing more to say (although its reverberations became later
formalized as Japanese Zen).

Korzybski, however, proceeded where Ch'an stopped. Starting from the
denial of 'identity' ("whatever we may say an object 'is', it is not") he
designated the structural character of all human 'knowledge': "As words are
not the objects which they represent, structure and structure alone becomes
the only link which connects our verbal processes with the empirical data."[31]

We see then that the shortcomings of the 'primitive' language-orientation
lie in its structure, and this of course opens the possibility of formulating
'conventions' in a language with a more satisfactory structure. In this view
conventions, and 'knowledge' in general, have (indeed!) no absolute character
but function as formulational and adaptable means for progress in understanding,
individual-and-social.

Korzybski used the term 'time-binding' to refer to this uniquely human
process. And as a 20th century formulation of 'the dynamics of human life',

Korzybski's <u>general theory of time-binding</u> points the way to sanity on individual <u>and</u> social levels.

Structurally, the characteristic accumulating effect of time-binding reflects the way our nervous systems function: as a <u>process of abstracting</u>, producing abstractions of many <u>different</u> levels, non-verbal and verbal. And since we can produce abstractions from abstractions, this process is in principle <u>not</u> limited at some 'high' level but can produce ever higher abstractions.

Evaluating, <u>conscious of abstracting</u>, results in <u>human</u> sanity. The acquisition of consciousness of abstracting is facilitated by <u>training in non-identity</u>, and in particular, <u>differentiating</u> between verbal levels of abstraction and the un-speakable object levels, by 'simply' practicing 'silence on the object levels'. This 'silence' "appears as the first, the simplest, most obvious and most effective psychophysiological 'reality-factor' in eliminating the delusional identifications."[32]

Noteworthy in this context is Korzybski's comment that the <u>difference</u> between verbal levels and the un-speakable object levels "being inexpressible by words, cannot be expressed by words. We must have other means to indicate this difference. We must show with our hand, by pointing our finger to the object, and by being silent outwardly as well as inwardly."[33]

Taking the structural shortcomings of their language into account, I find in the way Ch'an teachings point to the 'silence' of 'all conceptual thought' a remarkable resemblance to the above mentioned aspects of 'time-binding'. As such the Ch'an Buddhist tradition may illustrate an important feature of the training in non-identity.

But, whereas the practice of 'silence' operates in the time-binding orientation as a first step in developing consciousness of abstracting, it marks the end (admittedly of 'self' imposed 'suffering') in a primitive language-orientation, without offering a perspective for progress on social levels.

The limiting structure of the primitive outlook seems most glaringly present in finalisms like 'Ultimate Truth is inexpressible'. Most interpreters of Ch'an Buddhism, unaware of the structural issues, hold such a statement to represent one of its main points; in my opinion thereby creating an objectionable mystifying picture of Ch'an. The use of such renderings in order to convey the principles of Ch'an Buddhism clarifies nothing but the confining structure of the interpreter's language-orientation.

REFERENCES

1. Korzybski, Alfred. <u>Science</u> <u>and</u> <u>Sanity</u>: <u>An</u> <u>Introduction</u> <u>to</u> <u>Non-Aristotelian</u> <u>Systems</u> <u>and</u> <u>General</u> <u>Semantics</u>. 1933. Lakeville, CT: InternationalNon-Aristotelian Library Publishing Co., 4th Edition, 1958, p. 408.

2. Sahakian, William S. <u>Realms</u> <u>of</u> <u>Philosophy</u>. Cambridge, MA, 1965, p. 304.

3. <u>Encyclopedia</u> <u>Americana</u>. 1965. N.Y., see 'India'.

4. Sahakian, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 305.

5. Reiser, Oliver L. <u>The</u> <u>Integration</u> <u>of</u> <u>Human</u> <u>Knowledge</u>. Boston, 1958, p. 98.

6. Korzybski, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 404.

7. Ibid., p. 408.

8. Reiser, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 97.

9. Glasenapp, Helmut von. <u>Die</u> <u>Fünf</u> <u>Weltreligionen</u>. Düsseldorf, Köln, 1963. See 'Brahmanismus'.

10. <u>Encyclopedia</u> <u>Americana</u>, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>.

11. Ross, Nancy Wilson. <u>Hinduism</u>, <u>Buddhism</u>, <u>Zen</u>. London, 1973, p. 19.

12. Ibid., p. 11. (From 'Chandogya Upanishad'.)

13. <u>Encyclopedia</u> <u>Americana</u>, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>.

14. Rahula, Walpola. <u>What</u> <u>the</u> <u>Buddha</u> <u>Taught</u>. New York, 1974, p. 51.

15. Ibid., p. 66.

16. Ibid., p. 25.

17. Ibid., p. 92. ('The First Sermon of the Buddha'.)

18. Ibid., p. 133. ('The Dhammapada'.)

19. Goddard, Dwight (Ed.). <u>A</u> <u>Buddhist</u> <u>Bible</u>. Boston, 1970, p. 279. ('The Lankavatara Sutra'.)

20. Ibid., p. 107. ('The Diamond Sutra'.)

21. Watts, Alan, W. <u>The</u> <u>Way</u> <u>of</u> <u>Zen</u>. London: Pelican Books, 1962, p. 65. (From 'The Diamond Sutra'.)

22. Wright, Arthur F. Buddhism in Chinese History. Stanford, CA, 1959, p. 33.

23. Ibid., p. 11.

24. Watts, op. cit., p. 35. (From 'Tao Te Ching'.)

25. Wei Wu Wei. The Tenth Man. Hong Kong, 1971, p. 226.

26. Wei Wu Wei. Ask the Awakened. London, 1963, p. xviii.

27. Blofeld, John (trans.). The Zen Teaching of Huang Po. New York, 1958, pp. 33-35.

28. Blofeld, John (trans.). The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai. London, 1969, p. 43.

29. Blofeld, 1958, op. cit., p. 52.

30. Blyth, R. H. Zen and Zen Classics. Compiled by Frederick Franck. New York, 1978, p. 96.

31. Korzybski, op. cit., p. 59.

32. Ibid., p. 477.

33. Ibid., p. 416.

There is a tremendous difference between 'thinking' in verbal terms, and 'contemplating', inwardly silent, on non-verbal levels, and then searching for the proper structure of language to fit the supposedly discovered structure of the silent processes that modern science tries to find. If we 'think' verbally, we act as biased observers and project onto the silent levels the structure of the language we use, and so remain in our rut of old orientations, making keen, unbiased, observations and creative work well-nigh impossible. In contrast, when we 'think' without words, or in pictures (which involve structure and therefore relations), we may discover new aspects and relations on silent levels, and so may produce important theoretical results in the general search for a similarity of structure between the two levels, silent and verbal. Practically all important advances are made that way.

Alfred Korzybski, "What I Believe," in Manhood of Humanity, 2nd Edition, pp. xlviii-xlix.

BIOGRAPHY

A native of The Netherlands (he lives in s-Gravenhage), Aat Dekker is among the younger group of general semantics scholar-practitioners. He attended his first Institute seminar-workshop in 1975, having already read widely and deeply in general semantics. He has since attended several other seminars, both summer and week-end and, (what's a mere ocean?) frequently attends general semantics conferences in New York.

Dekker has written a Dutch introduction to general semantics and is working on a translation of Science andSanity. In Holland he is able to confer with Dr. P.H. Esser, editor of Methodology and Science, who was appointed an Honorary Trustee of the Institute by Korzybski in 1940.

His contributions to general semantics meetings, and, consequently, to the literature are on the rise. On October 25, 1979, he participated in a panel during the Centennial Conference on General Semantics. The panel was titled "General Semantics and the Shaping of the Future." Aat's remarks appear in GSB 47, pp. 132-133. Long a student of Eastern formulating, he is particularly qualified to point up similarities and differences between some of those formulations and general semantics. His observations are a welcome addition to this issue.

Aat works as a computer specialist in The Netherlands; thus his contribution to the April 17, 1982 Roundtable on Applications of General Semantics to Professional and Personal Life (to be held in New York), "Uses of General Semantics in Clarifying Data-Processing Procedures." We look forward to publishing that paper in a later issue of theBulletin.

Not knowing that the English use cast-off clothing where an American says second-hand clothing, a traveler in England was astonished to see this sign over a shop: "The Owners, having Cast off Clothing of Every Description, Invite Personal Inspection." (A.W.R.)