

THE ABSOLUTE OR SELF

'There was something formless and perfect before the universe was born. It is serene. Empty. Solitary. Unchanging. Infinite. Eternally present. It is the mother of the universe. For lack of a better name, I will call it the Tao.'

Lao Tzu

Science and the Absolute

Since time immemorial human beings have wondered about the nature of existence and the source and origin of the universe. This "Great Question" has been approached through formal scientific, philosophical and religious disciplines, the creative work of poets, writers and artists, and the musings of ordinary people.

A sense of awe and mystery is at the heart of these attempts to understand the "why and how" of existence and the meaning of life itself. The philosopher Martin Heidegger speaks of "the wonder of the miracle of existence and the irreducible fact that we and the world *are*." Philosopher and physicist Gustav Fechner: "Among all the mysteries of existence, the greatest mystery is that there is existence at all." And Aldous Huxley eloquently captures the profound depth and intellectual challenge of this inquiry in his writings: "The world *is*; it is irresistibly present: how do we account for its existence? Working backwards through evolution, we arrive at the notion of an original 'something': but what lies behind that primordial presence? A blank, an emptiness; the *absence* of 'nothing.' We can only refer to it in the negative."

In his *The Seven Mysteries of Life*, visionary author Guy Murchie contemplates the mystery of "why we are here and just what the world is about":

When you ponder the difficult question of whether the universe is bounded or unbounded, whether anything exists beyond the horizon of knowledge (the range where galaxies recede faster than light), you might as well in the same moment admit that the factor of mystery is enormous. Such a horizon of mystery also derives naturally from the fact that the most profound truths are the least definable and describable, largely because there is almost nothing to compare them to and, practically speaking, they are beyond the scope of language. What, after all, should be expected of a mind so limited it can visualize and accept neither an end to space, with absolutely nothing (not even emptiness) beyond it, nor space without end, with everything in all worlds inside it? Or even if somehow one could abandon both finitude and infinitude, what (if anything) would remain? Here we find ourselves at the edge of a field called mysticism that has had an immense if unfathomable influence on mankind for hundreds of millennia. (1)

The Absolute has been conceptualized in a number of ways:

- The ultimate ground of being
- The timeless source of creation
- The origin and support of all that is
- The foundation of the One and the many
- The all-pervading absolute Being that animates the physical cosmos
- The primordial impulse that created the universe out of pure emptiness
- The unchanging, eternal, immutable background from which all existence arises
- The silent, inexpressible, transcendental Spirit underlying the phenomenal world

The concept of an Absolute as the fundamental principle underlying the universe perceptible to our senses appears in both philosophical and scientific thought. Rodney Collin, a student of Russian philosopher and thinker P.D. Ouspensky, explores the possibilities of such an Absolute:

Philosophically, we can suppose an Absolute. Such an Absolute would include all possible dimensions of both of time and space. That is to say: It would include not only the whole universe which man can perceive or imagine, but all other such universes which may lie beyond the power of his perception. It would include not only the present moment of all such universes, but also their past and their future, whatever past and future may mean on their scale. It would include not only everything actualized in all the past, present and future of all universes, but also everything that potentially could be actualized in them. It would include not only all possibilities for all existing universes, but also all potential universes, even though they do not exist, nor ever have. (2)

In his cosmological teachings G.I. Gurdjieff based the existence of an Absolute on scientific, logical and philosophical principles:

From an astronomical point of view, it is quite possible to presume a multitude of worlds existing at enormous distances from one another in the space of 'all worlds.' Further, passing to philosophical conclusions, we may say that 'all worlds' must form some, for us, incomprehensible and unknown *Whole* or *One*. This *Whole*, or *One*, or *All*, which may be called the 'Absolute,' or the 'Independent' because, including everything within itself, it is not dependent upon anything, is 'world' for 'all worlds.' Logically it is quite possible to think of a state of things where *All* forms one single *Whole*. Such a *Whole* will certainly be the Absolute, which means the Independent, because it, that is, the *All*, is infinite and indivisible. The Absolute, that is, the state of things when the *All* constitutes one *Whole*, is, as it were, the primordial state of things, out of which, by division and differentiation, arises the diversity of the phenomena observed by us. (3)

Eastern teachings recognize that the primary reality lying beyond the immediate, perceptual world is essentially immeasurable and cannot be described or understood through formal logic and reason. Physicist David Bohm notes that Eastern and Western philosophies approach the issue of the immeasurable from fundamentally different perspectives:

If one considers this question carefully, one can see that in a certain sense the East was right to see the immeasurable as the primary reality. For measure is an insight created by man. A reality that is beyond man and prior to him cannot depend on such insight. Indeed, the attempt to suppose that measure exists prior to man and independently of him leads to the 'objectification' of man's insight, so that it becomes rigidified and unable to change, eventually bringing about fragmentation and general confusion. One may speculate that perhaps in ancient times, the men who were wise enough to see that the immeasurable is the primary reality were also wise enough to see that measure is insight into a secondary but nonetheless necessary aspect of reality. Thus they may have agreed with the Greeks that insight into measure is capable of helping to bring about order and harmony in our lives, while at the same time, seeing perhaps more deeply, that it cannot be what is most fundamental in this regard. (4)

Bohm argues that we need a fresh, more comprehensive approach based on unity and wholeness in order to understand the ineffable nature of the primary reality: "There are no direct and positive things that man can do to get in touch with the immeasurable, for this must be immensely beyond anything that man can grasp with his mind or accomplish with his hands or his instruments. What man *can* do is to give his full attention and creative energies to bring clarity and order into the totality of the field of measure."

Fragmentation originates in essence in the fixing of the insights forming our overall self-worldview, which follows on our generally mechanical, habitual modes of thought about these matters. Because the primary reality goes beyond anything that can be contained in such fixed forms of measure, these insights must eventually cease to be adequate, and will thus give rise to various forms of unclarity or confusion. However, when the whole field of measure is open to original insight, without any fixed limits or barriers, then our overall worldview will cease to be rigid, and the whole field of measure will come into harmony, as fragmentation within it comes to an end. But original and creative insight within the whole field of measure *is* the action of the immeasurable. For when such insight occurs, the source cannot be within ideas already contained in the field of measure but rather has to be in the immeasurable, which contains the essential formative cause of all that happens in the field of measure. The measurable and the immeasurable are then in harmony and indeed one sees that they are but different ways of considering the one and undivided whole. When such harmony prevails, man can then not only have insight into the meaning of wholeness but, what is much more significant, he can realize the truth of this insight in every aspect of his life. (5)

The revolutionary advances heralded by relativity theory and quantum physics in the 20th century focused attention on the idea of a fundamental principle underlying the phenomenal world. English physicist Sir James Jeans: "The material world constitutes the whole world of appearance, but not the whole world of reality; we may think of it as forming only a cross-section of the world of reality."

Quantum physics is based on the whole rather than a description of the parts and how they work together. According to this perspective the Absolute is the basis of all realities. In its non-manifest form, it is potential, intelligent energy (with the latent capability of self-organization and evolution) and when manifest it becomes the foundation of physical matter and apparent individual objects and processes. "The non-manifest generates and really governs what is manifest. The manifest is really within the non-manifest, much like the cloud within the air. The cloud is a form within the whole."

A concept very similar to the Absolute emerged previously, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A number of physicists posited the existence of the *ether* (a hypothetical substance proposed in the wave theory of light as being the medium of propagation of electromagnetic waves). The primary reason for the existence of the ether was to give light something to travel through. "The ether as super-fluid is consistent with relativity and quantum theory. It is the support of all light, in it all bodies exist, it is attached to none, it is ever-present beyond the limitations of time and space."

The theory of the ether was that the entire universe lies in and is permeated by an invisible, tasteless, odorless substance that has no properties at all and exists simply because it has to exist so light waves can have something to propagate in. For light to travel as waves, according to the theory, something has to be waving. That something was the ether. The theory of the ether was the last attempt to explain the universe by explaining *something* . . . The ether is everywhere and in everything. We live and perform our experiments in a sea of ether. To the ether, the hardest substance is as porous as a sponge to water. There are no doors to the ether. Although we move in the ether sea, the ether sea does not move. It is absolutely, unequivocally not moving. (6)

Some scientists, such as Itzhak Bentov, have described the Absolute as a state of "infinite rest and pure potentiality," which holds inexhaustible variations of expression:

There are two things that can be said about the Void, or, as it is also called, the Absolute: it is *pure consciousness* and at the same time it contains all there is in *potential*, that is, nonmanifest or nontangible form. It is infinite creative energy in a potential or resting nonvibratory state. In order for matter to appear, and later for forms to appear, a vibratory motion has to be introduced into the Absolute. (7)

Bentov distinguishes two fundamental components of reality: “an immutable reference line or background and a dynamic vibrating aspect of the same thing. Substance and movement thus emerge from the primary order of the universe, the Absolute. In order for creation to unfold, there must be a disintegration or separation from the primal totality, a process similar to the division of a cell.” He elaborates:

Matter, being made of quanta of energy, is the vibrating, changing component of pure consciousness. The Absolute is fixed, eternal, and invisible, while the relative is the visible, manifest and *changing aspect*. The latter may be coarse or fine, short-lived or long-lived, but it is always based on the Absolute . . . Both mind and matter are made of the same basic stuff. The difference between them is that we may look at the solid matter as being made up of larger, slower waves or ripples, which implies that it possesses less energy of the Absolute and that mind is made up of much finer ripples, which implies that it possesses more of this energy. Both of them are manifest only because they are changing, and this change can be measured against the basic sea of the Absolute, which makes up both the ripples and the background. (8)

David Bohm has proposed a model of the universe which expresses the principle of the Absolute in terms of an *implicate* order which is the fundamental ground from which the *explicate* order is derived. The non-manifest implicate order is a state of infinite interconnectedness, reflecting the unity of all that is. The manifest or explicate order is only relatively real and not self-contained and permanent, as it emerges from another, more primary order of reality. “What appears to be a stable, tangible, visible world is an illusion. It is dynamic and kaleidoscopic – not really ‘there.’ What we normally see is the explicit, or unfolded order of things, rather like watching a movie. But there is an underlying order (the implicate or enfolded) that is the source to this second-generation reality.”

What we perceive through the senses as empty space is actually the plenum, which is the ground for the existence of everything, including ourselves. The things that appear to our senses are derivative forms and their true meaning can be seen only when we consider the plenum, in which they are generated and sustained, and into which they must ultimately vanish. This plenum is, however, no longer to be conceived through the idea of a simple material medium, such as an ether, which would be regarded as existing and moving only in a three-dimensional space. Rather, one is to begin with the *holomovement*, in which there is an immense ‘sea’ of energy. This sea is to be understood in terms of a multidimensional implicate order, while the entire universe of matter as we generally observe it is to be treated as a comparatively small pattern of excitation. This excitation pattern is relatively autonomous and gives rise to approximately recurrent, stable and separable projections into a three-dimensional explicate order of manifestation, which is more or less equivalent to that of space as we commonly experience it. (9)

Mystical Experience and the Absolute

Throughout history, human beings have wondered about the ultimate questions: Why do I exist and how did the universe come to be? Through deep mystical experiences it is possible to have a direct, non-verbal experiential understanding of the nature of reality which lies beyond the realm of the rational mind. "According to mystics, the fundamental reality underlying appearances is not accessible to the ordinary senses. It cannot be described in terms derived from the ordinary world, but it is accessible to mystical intuition." The Indian master Sri Anirvan describes this mystical perception:

It is not possible to approach the 'why' of the first cause since there is no logical answer to it, but the question remains as to 'how' did the first movement that ever existed occur. This penetrates into the heart of the process of creation and the cosmic Laws. In deep meditative states when the mind is quiet and empty a certain sensation of existing is manifested, which is very similar to the life hidden in a seed, a life of full power without any apparent movement. Even if this sensation of existing were perceived for only a fraction of a second, it would nevertheless suffice to know what took place at the instant when the 'immobile' became the 'mobile.' Or as expressed in more usual terms, to know what took place at the instant of the first spontaneous vibration between the 'immobile' and the 'mobile.' He who truly goes through the experience of 'non-being' in a state of deep meditation feels suddenly filled by such a surge of life that, for that very reason, the question of the 'why' of things no longer exists for him. This surge of life is the imperative descent of non-being to being. It is at the same time an all-pervading sensation and a recognizable flavor. It is a certitude that wipes out every question. (10)

Mystics have uniformly stated that when the 'veils of ignorance' are removed it is possible to directly perceive the inexpressible nature of pure, undifferentiated reality or *that which is*. "According to mystics from around the world, each moment of enlightenment reveals that everything – all the apparent separate parts of the universe – are manifestations of the same whole. There is only *one* reality, and it is whole and unified. It is One."

The phenomenal world can only be fully understood in relation to the ultimate source from which they are derived. "All the objects of consciousness form the universe. What is beyond both, supporting both, is the supreme state, a state of utter stillness and silence. It is unreachable by words or mind. You may call it God or Supreme Reality, but these are names given by the mind. It is the nameless, effortless and free state, beyond being and not being."

The phenomenal only has meaning when it refers to the Ultimate, because then it becomes sacred. When an object refers to the Ultimate it loses its objectivity. On the phenomenal level an object refers to another object, but this does not give it its full meaning. The phenomenal is wet with the noumenal, that is why the phenomenal gives the forefeeling of the Ultimate. (11)

The mystical experience as reported throughout the ages is congruent with the latest theories of scientific cosmology, which posit an original 'singularity' or Void whose latent creative power is emptied and manifested as the phenomenal world we perceive with our senses – the many separate and individual existences originating from the Void. This Unity eternally exists as the substratum supporting the whole gradient of phenomenal manifestation: "There is thus an incessant multiplication of the inexhaustible One and unification of the indefinitely Many. Such are the beginnings and endings of worlds and of individual beings, expanding from a point without position or dimensions and a now without time or duration."

Both modern science and mystical teachings recognize the existence of an all-encompassing Unity from which the primary dualism of subject and object appears: "Following this dualism there arises a departure from the Void. The universe of things extended in space and time ultimately results from the primordial distinction between subject and object – the dividing of the real world into one state which sees and one state which is seen."

Forms and objects seem to appear from nowhere and then disappear into nowhere. Yet underlying the continual flux of phenomenal existence there is the timeless, pure Void in which the polarity between subject and object is harmonized and resolved in unity and oneness. In the words of Sri Anirvan:

From whichever end we look, the substratum is eternal – eternal in its timelessness; and the flux is also eternal – eternal in its beating time to the dance of the Immobile. And covering both, Existence permeates All. On this limitless canvas of the formless Vast, which is mentally incomprehensible and yet seizable by a luminous intuition, shimmering forms are delineated with conceptual contours that rise, intermingle, and pass away into other forms. The Many are there; yet they subsist not by their own right but by the sanction of the One whose self-figurations they are. Apparently there is a clash, a concussion when form grapples with form in the incessant flux of things to maintain their distinctive individualities, which ultimately derive their *raison d'être* from the One comprising all. (12)

From the perspective of the enlightened mind cause and effect are seen as mental, abstract categories and not actual fundamental properties of the universe. In the words of Advaita Vedanta master Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj: "When the past and future are seen in the timeless *now*, as parts of a common pattern, the idea of cause-effect loses its validity and creative freedom takes its place."

Like everything mental, the so-called law of causation contradicts itself. No thing in existence has a particular cause, the entire universe contributes to the existence of even the smallest thing; nothing could be as it is without the universe being what it is. When the source and ground of everything is the only cause of all that is, to speak of causality as a universal law is wrong. The universe is not bound by its content, because its potentialities are infinite; besides, it is a manifestation, or

expression of a principle fundamentally and totally free . . . For everything there are innumerable causal factors. But the source of all that is, is the Infinite Possibility, the Supreme Reality, which is in you and which throws its power and light and love on every experience. But, this source is not a cause and no cause is a source. Because of that, I say everything is uncaused. You may try to trace how a thing happens, but you cannot find out why a thing *is* as it is. A thing is as it is, because the universe is as it is. (13)

An inner preparation and purification is a prerequisite for the attainment of mystical states of consciousness which reveal the ultimate nature of existence. Aldous Huxley: "The ground in which the multifarious and time-bound mind is rooted is a simple, timeless awareness. By making ourselves pure in heart we can discover and be identified with this simple, ever-present awareness."

The divine Ground of all existence is a spiritual Absolute, ineffable in terms of discursive thought, but (in certain circumstances) susceptible of being directly experienced and realized by the human being. This absolute is the God-without-form of Hindu and Christian mystical phraseology. The last end of man, the ultimate reason for human existence, is unitary knowledge of the divine Ground – the knowledge that can come only to those who are prepared to "die to self" and so make room, as it were, for God. (14)

The Absolute, as the ineffable, infinite Reality, cannot be directly described in rational terms, but may be alluded to through non-verbal, metaphorical means such as myths, fables, legends, teaching stories and poetry. "Myth is one form of the analogical approach to the Absolute, and represents the clothing of the Infinite in positive, metaphorical and finite terms. Since of Reality nothing can be predicated, mythology is a potent analogy: Myth embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words."

Philosopher and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy argues that the direct perception of the "grandeur of the Absolute" is the province of not only mystics and enlightened beings, but also many great artists, poets and philosophers:

The doctrine of the universal presence of reality is that of the immanence of the Absolute. It is inconsistent with a view of the world as absolute *maya*, or utterly unreal, but it implies that through the false world of everyday experience may be seen by those of penetrating vision (artists, lovers and philosophers) glimpses of the real substrate. This world is the formless as we perceive it, the unknowable as we know it. Precisely as love is reality experienced by the lover, and truth is reality as reality is experienced by the philosopher, so beauty is reality as experienced by the artist: and these are three phases of the Absolute. But it is only through the objective work of art that the artist is able to communicate his experience, and for this purpose any theme proper to himself will serve, since the Absolute is manifested equally in the little and the great, animate and inanimate,

good and evil. The World of Beauty, like the Absolute, cannot be known objectively. We can no more achieve Beauty than we can find Release by turning our backs on the world: we cannot find our way by a mere denial of things, but only in learning to see those things as they really are, infinite or beautiful. Thus we return to the earth. The two worlds, of spirit and matter, *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, are one: and this is as clear to the artist as it is to the lover or the philosopher. (15)

Spiritual Traditions and the Absolute

At the heart of the world's spiritual and metaphysical traditions is a sense of the sacred and holy, from which, quite naturally, arise feelings of awe and reverence for the great mystery of creation and questions about the meaning of existence and our place in the grand scheme of things. The evolutionary process is described in many spiritual traditions as a descent from a primal Unity into the world of physical manifestation, followed by an eventual return to the original Source. Professor of philosophy Jacob Needleman: "Spiritual teachings speak of the movement of the descent of the Spirit into the manifest material world (creation, incarnation), and the movement of ascent and return (spiritualization) to the Source that is Spirit, Being itself."

Many creation accounts are preoccupied with the question of what relation can exist between a changing world of finite forms and its eternal, infinite source; between the manifest and the unmanifest, or in modern terms, between matter and energy. Just as, without an effect, a cause must remain imperceptible, so according to various traditions creation is the vehicle of divine manifestation: a way of bringing God 'down to earth.' A Sufi saying runs: 'I was a hidden treasure and desired to be known: therefore I created the universe in order to be known.' The teachings of Kabbalah posit an infinite, unmanifest source called the *Ein-Sof* which transcends the finite, physical universe. The object of Kabbalistic mysticism is to bring about the 'turning point' which will reverse the trajectory of creation and at length restore all things to their unity in God . . . The coming-to-life of any creation involves the transition from a potential and universal state to one which is actual and particular. According to Plato's *Timaeus*, 'the world has been framed in the likeness of that which is apprehended by reason and mind and is unchangeable, and must therefore of necessity be a copy of something.' The Iroquois believed that everything on earth had an 'elder bother' in the sky-realm. In many African myths the first human beings were lowered to Earth from the sky. (16)

The concept of a timeless, all-encompassing Absolute has been expressed in a wide variety of synonymous spiritual, metaphysical and philosophical terms: Great Spirit, Godhead, Allah, Brahman, Tao, Dharmakaya, Sunyata, Self, Void, Source, Oneness, All and Everything, Supreme Reality, Eternal Being.

Sufis assert that ultimate Reality, the source and origin of the perceptible, secondary world of phenomena, is immeasurable and timeless, beyond space and time, birth and death. From this perspective, the physical universe is only part of a greater Whole: "The world of our experience is neither wholly real nor wholly unreal: it is provisional, relative, an allegory from which true Reality may be inferred – an intricately written page, in which perceptive spirits can decipher the handiwork of the pure and living God."

The manifested world, Sufism teaches, is a reflection of a higher-dimensional, all-embracing Reality: "*The created is the indication of the Creator*" and "*Mind is not derived from matter; matter is from Mind.*" Life itself is said to be of divine origin and seeks to return to the greater reality which gave birth to it: "*Everything seeks to return to its Origin.*"

The ordinary person imagines that that which he more instantly perceives, like material objects and thoughts, must logically be what is more real. But the Sufi says that so-called concrete things are not experienced but inferred. You infer fire from smoke, and smoke may appear to be real, but its underlying reality is the fire. When this habit of assuming that instantly perceptible things are more important than more subtle ones goes, the latter becomes perceptible. Sufi study is devoted to this task. It is for this reason that the great Sheikh Abdul-Karim Jili says: "Truth, Reality [*al-Haqq*] is felt, perceived; the world is inferred [*ma-qulun*]" As long as one regards what are in fact secondary things (including one's secondary, conditioned self) as primary, the subtler but more real primary element – Reality and the Essence of the individual – will not be perceived. (17)

Human perceptual faculties are limited, much like an electronic instrument that can only receive certain frequencies or wavelengths, thereby excluding other ranges or possibilities. Beyond the world perceived by our ordinary senses lies the vastness of the Eternal Whole, in which all secondary appearances and divisions dissolve and harmonize. Sufis believe that the evolutionary goal of human life is to ascend the 'great chain of being' and reunite with the source of All. "To attach oneself to these secondary things inhibits progress towards perception of the Absolute. Yet an understanding and employment of the possible role of the secondary things makes possible the progress toward the Absolute – the relative is the bridge to the Real."

According to Taoism there is an ultimate Reality, or *Tao*, which is the ineffable source and inexhaustible potentiality of the myriad possibilities of phenomenal expression. It underlies and unifies the multiple objects, processes and events we observe in the universe:

They called this reality the *Tao*, which originally meant 'the Way.' It is the way, or process, of the universe, the order of nature . . . In its original cosmic sense, the *Tao* is the ultimate, undefinable reality and as such it is the equivalent of the Hindu *Brahman* and the Buddhist *Dharmakaya*. It differs from these Indian concepts, however, by its intrinsically dynamic quality which, in the Chinese view, is the essence of the universe. The *Tao* is the cosmic process in which all things are involved; the world is seen as a continuous flow and change. (18)

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao-tzu describes the essence of the *Tao*: “The *Tao* is the Great Mother: empty yet inexhaustible, it gives birth to infinite worlds.” Echoing this timeless truth, classical Taoist master Chuang Tzu points to the “universal immanence of the transcendental spiritual Ground of all existence” in his *The Way of Chuang Tzu*:

Do not ask whether the Principle is in this or in that; it is in all beings. It is on this account that we apply to it the epithets of supreme, universal, total . . . It has ordained that all things should be limited, but is Itself unlimited, infinite. As to what pertains to manifestation, the Principle causes the succession of its phases, but is not this succession. It is the author of causes and effects, but is not the causes and effects. It is the author of condensations and dissipations (birth and death, change of state), but is not itself condensations and dissipations. All proceeds from It and is under its influence. It is in all things, but it is not identical with beings, for it is neither differentiated nor limited. (19)

In traditional Buddhist teachings, the term *sunyata* refers to emptiness, the Void, silence, unborn potentiality. “Everything is generated out of nothingness, mystery.” A similar concept of ‘negative existence’ has parallels in other spiritual traditions: the *neti-neti* (‘not this, not that’) of Advaita Vedanta and the *pleroma* of Gnosticism. It is stressed that *sunyata* only points to an experiential reality which can never be accurately described in words: “Emptiness is a name for something that cannot be designated, because it does not exist relative to other things. Emptiness means that which has no permanent form and can thus manifest in any form.” *Sunyata* is conceived not as mere emptiness or nothingness, but as the timeless matrix of all dynamic phenomena – the underlying principle of reality which does not change:

The power or force or energy of the universe animates all existences. It cannot be named, for to name it is to limit it and it is beyond all categories and limitations. But if we must give the nameless a name, we may provisionally call it True- or Essential-nature. “It” also relates to the flow of cause and effect, that is, the generation and disintegration of phenomena according to causes and conditions. Simply put, all phenomena are transformations of True- or Essential-nature. In other words, everything by its very nature is subject to the process of infinite transformation – this is its True-nature. Now, you may ask, what is True-nature grounded in? *Sunyata*, a Sanskrit word that is usually translated as “the Void,” or “no-thing-ness.” This *sunyata*, though, is not mere emptiness or a negative cipher. It is alive, dynamic, devoid of mass, beyond individuality or personality – the womb of all phenomena. (20)

Sometimes analogies are employed to illuminate the meaning of *sunyata* as it is expressed, for example, by the phrase ‘*Form is only emptiness and emptiness only form*’ drawn from the Heart Sutra. Zen Buddhist teacher Philip Kapleau provides an apt analogy with the example of a craftsman working with silver to make an image of the Buddha: “When your silver is molten and flowing it has the possibility of actualizing itself into any object – that is emptiness, nothingness. Then you pour the molten metal into the mold and it hardens – that’s form. Then

you melt down the figure, and the silver returns to pure formlessness. In essence, then, this emptiness is no different from the form." Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki uses another analogy to show how the Absolute (emptiness) interpenetrates the phenomenal world (form):

Each wave is part of the ocean, but the ocean cannot exist apart from the waves. The waves are not the ocean, but we cannot speak of the ocean apart from the waves, nor of the waves apart from the ocean. Conceptually they are distinct, but in actuality the waves are the ocean and the ocean is the waves. The ocean of non-distinction expresses itself in the waves of distinction, and distinction is possible only in the ocean of non-distinction. In a similar way, the doctrine of interpenetration upholds the individual's actuality, and at the same time acknowledges the realm of the Absolute. (21)

The phenomenal world constitutes the observable, measurable features of reality. As such, they are empty of inherent and independent existence, as they depend on the infinite creative potential of *sunyata*, the formless underlying Reality which causes them to appear:

Buddhism says that it is owing to Voidness that things can exist and, because of the very fact that things do exist, they must be Void. It emphasizes that Voidness and existence are complementary to each other and not in opposition to each other; they include and embrace, rather than exclude or negate each other. When ordinary sentient beings see an object, they see only its existent aspect, not its void aspect. But an enlightened being sees both aspects at the same time . . . Therefore, Voidness, as understood in Buddhism, is not something negative, nor does it mean absence or extinction. *Voidness is simply a term denoting the non-substantial and nonself nature of beings, and a pointer indicating the state of absolute nonattachment and freedom.* (22)

Buddhism teaches that our essential human nature is pure awareness which reflects the mirror-like emptiness of *sunyata*: "Enlightenment brings the realization that the substratum of all existence is a Voidness out of which all things ceaselessly arise and into which they endlessly return. This emptiness is positive and alive and is in fact not other than the vividness of a sunset or the harmonies of a great symphony."

In Hinduism *Brahman* describes the eternal, unchanging, omnipotent Self, the transcendent Source of all existence which underlies the fluid, ever-changing world of phenomena. "The Self is the only Reality. It is always here and now and eternally the same. It is also in everyone's direct experience for everyone knows that they exist, that they are."

The basis of all Hinduism is the idea that the multitude of things and events around us are but different manifestations of the same ultimate reality. This reality, called *Brahman*, is the unifying concept which gives Hinduism its essentially monistic character in spite of the worship of numerous gods and goddesses. *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, is understood as the 'soul,' or inner

essence, of all things. It is infinite and beyond all concepts; it cannot be comprehended by the intellect, nor can it be adequately described in words: '*Brahman* is beginningless, supreme, beyond what is and beyond what is not, unlimited and unborn.' (23)

The Absolute or Self is an indivisible unity, beyond the senses and mind: In the words of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj: "In reality only the Supreme or Ultimate *is*. When you understand that names and shapes are only hollow shells without any content whatsoever, and what is real is nameless and formless, pure energy of life and light of consciousness, you will be at peace – immersed in the deep silence of reality."

Q: How is the Absolute experienced?

A: It is not an object to be recognized and stored up in memory. It is in the present and in feeling rather than mind. It is in the quality, in the value; being the source of everything, it is in everything. It gives birth to consciousness. The objective universe is in constant movement, projecting and dissolving innumerable forms. Whenever a form is infused with life, consciousness appears by reflection of awareness in matter.

Q: How is the Supreme affected?

A: What can affect it and how? The source is not affected by the vagaries of the river nor is the metal – by the shape of the jewellery. Is the light affected by the picture on the screen? The Supreme makes everything possible, that is all. (24)

Several analogies have been employed to describe the nature of the Self. The great Indian sage Ramana Maharshi likened the Self to a mirror which reflects each object objectively and impartially. Like the Self, the mirror is independent and unaffected by the nature of the images appearing on it. In another metaphor he suggested visualizing a white sheet of paper with words written on it: "We see only the script (phenomenal world), but not the paper (Self) on which the script is written. The paper is there whether the script on it is there or not." When a film is projected onto a screen a similar analogy emerges:

Take the instance of moving pictures on the screen in the cinema show. What is there in front of you before the film begins? Merely the screen. On that screen you see the entire show, and for all appearances the pictures are real. But go and try to take hold of them. What do you take hold of? Merely the screen on which the pictures appeared so real. After the film, when the pictures disappear, what remains? The screen again! So with the Self. That alone exists; the pictures come and go . . . With the pictures the Self is in its manifest form; without the pictures It remains in the unmanifest form. (25)

In the teachings of Advaita Vedanta the Self represents the unity of subject and object as one unified and indivisible whole. "The Self is neither the knowing subject nor the known object, but their common base."

The Self isn't something distant so that attaining it requires crossing this distance. It's not something the intellect is capable or incapable of illuminating. Just as one could never unite with his shadow by running after it, so there is nothing to "do" to attain the Self . . . Men see the infinite phenomena of the world reflected in the mirror of the Self, but have no idea of the real nature of this Self. The whole world is formed by pursuit of knowledge on the one side and by objects of knowledge on the other. But between these two, absolute consciousness, Self-hood, remains self-revealed and self-subsistent. That is why no instrument is required to know it. Consciousness is beyond doubt, one can't even imagine its non-existence. It is limited neither by time nor space, for time and space are the first things to be reflected in its mirror. It is your essence and whosoever realizes this truth in all its breadth becomes creator of the universe. (26)

The eternal Self is the only true, abiding reality. It is directly experienced by every human being through their own sense of presence and being, illuminated by the light of consciousness and awareness. The one infinite, timeless Whole becomes aware of Itself as 'I am,' 'I exist.'

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj expresses this timeless truth : "That which dwells in us and is conscious of our individual existence transcends it. Our true nature, the Self, is beyond all experience, beyond birth and death," and "All the objects of consciousness form the universe. What is beyond both, supporting both, is the Supreme State or Self, a state of utter stillness and timeless silence, unreachable by words or mind."

Primary is the infinite expanse of consciousness, the eternal possibility, the vast immeasurable potential of all that was, is, and will be. When you look at anything, it is the ultimate you see, but you imagine that you see a cloud or a tree. Learn to look without imagination, to listen without distortion: that is all. Stop attributing names and shapes to the essentially nameless and formless, realize that every mode of perception is subjective, that what is seen or heard, touched or smelt, felt or thought, expected or imagined, is in the mind and not in reality, and you will experience peace and freedom from fear. Even the sense of 'I am' is composed of the pure light and the sense of being. The 'I' is there even without the 'am.' So is the pure light there whether you say 'I' or not. Become aware of that pure light and you will never lose it. The presence in being, the awareness in consciousness, the interest in every experience – that is not describable, yet perfectly accessible, for there is nothing else. (27)

Meditations

The infinite universe lies beyond this world.

Rumi

Reality is timeless and limitless, beyond existence and non-existence. Reality is that which *is*. It is as it is.

Ramana Maharshi

This divine ground is a unified stillness immoveable in itself. Yet from this immobility all things are moved and receive life.

Meister Eckhart

Before manifestation can take place there must be *something* which has manifested itself: that is the Absolute.

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

The Supreme is the Eternal, the All-Embracing, the Immobile, the Immutable, the Unmanifest beyond all thought and yet capable of being realized as *This*.

Bhagavad Gita

The universe is an everlasting succession of events, but its ground is the timeless *now* of the divine Spirit.

Aldous Huxley

The frontiers of the Ultimate are not guarded by rules or measures. When the mind is integrated in the essence of unity, all activity has its source in silence.

Seng-Ts'an

There is a mysterious power that looks after all that is. That power is God, Life, Self, whatever name you give it. It is the foundation, the ultimate support of all that is, just like gold is the basis for all gold jewellery.

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

The only permanent thing is Reality; and *that* is the Self. *I-Am* is the abiding and fundamental reality.

Ramana Maharshi

Behold the One in all things; it is the second that leads you astray.

Kabir

When the Ten Thousand things are viewed in their oneness, we return to the Origin and remain where we have always been.

Sen T'sen

See all things, not in process of becoming, but in Being, and see themselves in the other. Each being contains in itself the whole intelligible world. Therefore All is everywhere. Each is All, and All is each.

Plotinus

The source of what we perceive both of the so-called external world and ourselves, our so-called inner processes, lies in the non-manifest. And the non-manifest itself lies in something immensely beyond that.

David Bohm

When appearances and names are put away and all discrimination ceases, that which remains is the true and essential nature of essence, the universal, undifferentiated 'Suchness' of the only Reality.

Lankavatra Sutra

Whatever is, *is*. It is the pure Existence, appearing as the hidden, mysterious Unmanifest which creates from its inexhaustible store of energy this unending panorama of phenomena and watches over them in its inscrutable mystery, permeating them with its essence of timeless Being.

Sri Anirvan

If the sleeve moves, it is because the hand moved. But if the hand moves, the sleeve does not necessarily move. Therefore, if you look at the cause and do not know the ultimate Source you may imagine that the "sleeve" is something that has a life of its own.

Rumi

The nature of the one Reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfill certain conditions making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit.

Aldous Huxley

Bubbles appear and disappear on the surface of the stream. But the essence, the stream, never changes.

Zen saying

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