

Some Considerations About The Genesis of Chan and Zen

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Part One

This series of lessons was intended to be entitled *The history of Buddhism*. But this is a somewhat of a misnomer. Buddhism as such does not exist. It exists through its incarnations in the various cultures in which it gained a foothold in the course of its 25 centuries of life. So, here we will not focus on aspects of the doctrines developed in one or the other of these incarnations. Instead, we will study the raw material, the clay, as it were, formed by Indian Buddhism and then moulded to take life again in China and in all of Eastern Asia. Therefore, we will zero-in on Confucius' thought and, if time allows, on Daoism, the philosophico-religious school with eminent mystic tendencies.

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I would like to focus on one aspect of Confucius' thought well summarized in the sentence: *to put things in order is to follow order*. Chinese culture is the most ancient culture still surviving. The writing system still in use today was born, in part, in the second millennium BC. For sake of comparison with the oldest cultures in the West, I would like to remind you that the Greek alphabet is no older than the ninth century BC, the Latin no older than the seventh and the current Hebrew alphabet than the third century BC.

At the beginning of the first millennium BC, in Central China we find ideograms that express concepts such as *nature* or *essence* of life and reality, *path* or *way* of the universe and of the individual, *ethical value*, or the meaning of actions; *norm*, both in the sense of the foundation of the law and in that of the way to live; *Heaven* (capital letters) where the divine resides or, better, that *is* the divine; *spirit* or *life-breath*, which mean life's dynamic energy. This sophisticated cultural construction had been waiting for a thinker who let his mind wander through all these concepts, symbols and constructs, who practiced devotedly the teachings that derive from them, and then, on all this, built a global and articulated philosophy.

Such a philosophy had to be held together by the glue of life itself, not by words alone. Only then could statements -that seem contradictory and vague or simple if not frivolous digressions,- appear consistent and harmonic. Such a man showed up in the sixth century BC. His name was Kong Qiu of the state of Lu, and his nickname was Kongfuzi, 孔夫子 – or “master Kong”. Today, he is known by the name of Confucius, thanks to the Jesuit missionaries that gave his name a latin tone

in the sixteenth century.

In her “Histoire de la pensée Chinoise”, Anne Cheng, said that his life : *«has moulded the Chinese men for more than two thousand years [...] for the first time an ethical conception of man in his integrity and universality has been put forth»*, a conception that has become the moral compass for one third of the Earth’s population for the past 25 centuries.

In addition, Confucius has left the imprint of his thought in such a vast intellectual milieu that anyone who wishes to do cultural work in his geographical sphere of influence must come to terms with him. Let’s not forget that his thought contributes in an essential way to the *forma mentis* not only of China, but also of Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and, perhaps less so, Cambodia.

Anne Cheng says : *«This cultural phenomenon has become an integral part of the destiny of the whole Chinese culture [...] that has lasted for over two thousand five hundred years and survives to this day»*. It is not possible to provide an accurate synthesis of the thought of this man, who is a contemporary of Buddha Śākyamuni’s. His one is not like a closed philosophical system. Also, the mental process which he employs is not the one which we are acquainted with in the West: a linear and tendentially systemic process, made up of hypotheses, theses and conclusions that eventually prove or disprove the original hypothesis.

The best way to describe graphically the way Confucius and other classical Chinese thinkers –thinks is the spiral: his thought does not end with the exposition of a conceptual object or the closure of an argument, but keeps digging through what seem to be digressions. His thought may appear vague, even disorganized at times, but he never loses sight of his North -- the daily “doing” – Also, never does he let go on the firm conviction that sustains and motivates all his thinking: the belief that man is infinitely perfectible.

Confucius believes that his task and that of every true thinker – is to teach. In Confucius’ *Analecta* we find: *«The Master said: -- I do not dare claiming that I have attained ren [true humanity], and even less supreme wisdom. All I can say is that I strive towards them with all my soul, and never tire to teach-»*¹.

The will to teach, understood as an ethical imperative, is a constant concern in those cultures even today. In the most unlikely situations one is bound to meet a person who takes upon himself the role of master and teacher, particularly towards a Westerner. Even more, he is so certain of his role that if you should reject the teachings he so obstinately proffers, you will be regarded as a stubborn failure or a fool.

Not only. Often those who refuse -though at different levels and with different severity – will be ostracized. If I do not want to know “how to do” things which of course is actually how the

¹ *The Analects*, VII, 33.

group does things – I am automatically calling myself out of that group because that particular way of doing things is an essential condition of membership. In addition, I show I lack the critical capacity of a Confucian man: the capacity to learn.

Among its members, a strongly ritualized society may generate the conviction that the way of doing things which they have learnt through the process of transmission between teacher and student is valuable in itself, a treasure of such entity that it becomes a duty to pass it over and a fortune to receive it. Naturally, this process starts automatically when people are in a fixed and stable relationship, like son and father, or mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

In this case, the disciple cannot even countenance the possibility of refusing the subjection ², *brotherly submission* –as Confucius says – which is implicit in his position as “a role-bound learner”, and the same process manifests itself almost identically whenever one or more elders accept to instruct him at his implicit or explicit request: in a monastery, in a shop, in a factory, in school, but also in sport and even in playing. Ideally, this itinerary never ends in fact, the cult of the dead is part of this process. It starts again with new generations, when the disciple becomes himself “an elder” or a mother in law, or a father.

The existence of more or less self-conscious forms of initiation and of tests that need to be passed to move up to a higher level strengthens the sacredness of these actions and of their content. As a result those who go through this process are naturally inclined to develop the conviction that they “have something to teach”. It needs not be said that this conviction, for a Buddhist, is a big burden.

Next, let’s look at *ren* 仁, or (*true*) *humanity* more closely. In *Analecta* XV, 23 we read: «*Is there perhaps a word that a man could put into practice his whole life? The Master said: Is it not to consider others equal to oneself? Do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself*» and then: «*Full humanity [ren (仁)] is to love all others*»³, and further: «*Yan Hui asked what is ren. The Master replied: -To overcome our own self and turn to the rites; this is ren. [...]-. Yan Hui asked: -Could you teach me how?- The Master said: -Do not see and do not listen to what is against the rites and do not say and do not do what is against the rites-»*⁴.

Let’s look first very closely at the ideogram 仁, transliterated *ren* in Chinese and *jin* in Japanese, which is translated as “(full, true) humanity”. The ideogram comprises the radical 人 (to be human, to be a man) and the sign 二 (two). Therefore it contains the idea that man is such, fully, only in relation to the others. One must recall that the primary relationship is that between father and son, and that all other relations derive from this. As a result, the realization of *ren* is the full

²“Fraternal submission” in *Analects* I, 2.

³*Analects*, XII, 22.

⁴*Analects*, XII, 1.

realization of this relationship.

These are very refined norms. The so-called “golden rule”, one of the pillars of Christian ethics, which is “younger” by four/five centuries than these words of Confucius, is the positive version of Confucius’ reciprocity: in Matthew 7, 12: «*Therefore, all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the Law and the Prophets.*»⁵.

The importance of the “relation”, in particular, of the fundamental relation between father and son is evident in the sign 子, *zi*, (*ko* in Japanese) which means both “teacher” and “son/child”. Only if you know how to be a son can you be a master. And, going a bit further: only if you know you are a disciple can you be a master; and, to make this clear: if you know you are still a disciple **now**, not if you “have been” a son/disciple. This means that the way of being a master is just to learn how to be a disciple. This is a very deep teaching, shared with other religions, Christianity and Buddhism as well.

It is necessary to keep very clear in mind that ethics for Confucius is human, this-worldly. Its purpose is improve the way we relate to each other in this life, this is what it means to be full men, and to realize 仁, *ren*. When Confucius speaks of “love for the others” as the sense of *ren*, he means “full respect for the rule and the rite”, doing what is demanded by the rule in that precise moment even if it is tiresome and unpleasant: love implies sacrificing one’s own spontaneity. It has no relation with either human feelings nor with religious principles like “God is love” or “*ahimsā*” -this latter understood as the moral law derived from impermanence and as the manifestation of “Buddha nature”.

“Kindness” and “benevolence” are important for Confucius, they undoubtedly exercise a profound influence on those who practice them, but do not spring from a milieu we would call religious: they are norms of behavior called for if we wish to establish harmonic relations, even in an aesthetic sense. Confucius’ thought is non-theist, non-metaphysical, non transcendental and non idealistic. It cannot be understood as a religion *stricto sensu*, even if it gets very close to being one.

The conviction that human nature is infinitely perfectible opens the way to a path (*dao*) towards perfection another name for it is *the path towards sanctity* –which has nothing to do with the divine. For Confucius, the sphere of the sacred is not tied to cult o worship. He doesn’t act to obey a divinity or for fear of her. Sacredness is keeping absolute faith with the *path* which is walked through here on earth.

The sentence «*do not observe and do not listen to what is against the rites; do not say and do not do what is against the rites*» must be applied literally in every single act: for Confucius in

⁵Mt 7, 12. <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%207%20;&version=48;>

fact, this is the meaning of “way”.

The intrinsic quality of the “human nature” which allows it to keep bettering itself is the same that prevents one from defining it: how can one imagine a *thing* that can keep changing all eternity long? Which is its “true form”? In fact, Confucius does not bother defining “human nature”. He confines himself to saying that : «*Human nature is the noblest among those created by Heaven and Earth* »⁶ where “noble” means “efficient” and not “good”.

His way of thinking derives from his own experience and his feelings, purged from egoism and particularism and solidly based on values developed and implicitly shared in the Zhou era. Above all, Confucius represents a particular Chinese *forma mentis*. As a result, paradoxically one can say that Confucianism precedes the birth of Confucius.

The consciousness of this “*implicitly shared set of values*” is fundamental to penetrate his words and to understand the milieu in which he acted. Despite being the first Chinese thinker who speaks under his own name -- that is without hiding himself under anonymity -- Confucius does not wish to invent anything. On the contrary, he takes great care not to turn aside from the ancient ways, which, in his view, are the fruit of wisdom consolidated through the centuries. In fact, in his *Analects* (VII, 1.) he states : «I transmit but do not innovate»⁷.

It is not clear whether he believed that a golden age had really existed when noble mindedness, culture and harmony were the norm, or whether instead he took advantage of the belief in this age to press on his point because as Arthur Graham says «*nothing inspires searching more than believing that the truth had been known days past and can be held again once more* »⁸.

In any case, that statement is the expression of a colossal national pride. It is the awareness of belonging to a culture which has achieved the highest levels of wisdom that can be attained by man and cannot be improved upon in any way.

Also, when he describes the ideal government, he is actually thinking of a non-government, one where citizens are consciously virtuous and the role of the emperor is simply to instil stability and security. For him, the ideal sovereign is the mythical Shun, traditionally placed at the beginning of the third millennium before Christ, who is the last of the equally mythical Five Emperors. Shun is so rooted in the “good” authority which he embodies, and which is so widely and implicitly shared that the *Analecta* have this to say of him: «*There was nothing for him to do but to hold himself in a respectful posture and to face due south. Nothing else*»⁹. This means that the moral

⁶*Filial Piety*, V, IX.

⁷*The Analects*, VII, 1. <http://afpc.asso.fr/wengu/wg/wengu.php?l=Lunyu&no=151>

⁸Cfr. A. Graham, *Disputers of the Dao. Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*.

⁹*The Analects*, XV, 4. <http://afpc.asso.fr/wengu/wg/wengu.php?l=Lunyu&no=396>

authority is the highest, so much that it does not need to exercise coercion -the need to oblige people to do what they do not want being in itself a sign of decadence -. It is important to underline that Confucianism, autocratic as it might have been, embraced a sort of utopian/moral hope.

Confucius' ethics is "total". It is neither a religion, nor a philosophy nor indeed a political doctrine, but is founded on and applicable to all three. This is clearly visible, even today, in persons who are deeply committed to those cultures : this commitment precedes any other philosophical, ideological or religious commitment.

Confucius, like the daoists, believed that man lives in a world in perpetual transformation, and that this transformation is inspired and governed by a single law both in the macro and in the microcosm. Man cannot influence this pattern, but he can train himself to adhere to it, and, in doing so, he becomes a *true* human being. In the *Doctrine of the mean*, (I, I) he says: «*What Heaven has conferred is called the Nature; an accordance with this nature is called the Path of duty; the regulation of this path is called Instruction.*»¹⁰. The moral climate in which Confucianism – including its legal wing– developed is well expressed in this “regulation of the path” that is “establishing the rules”.

The human being is infinitely perfectible, and learning is a vital, joy inducing experience. What is essential is not abstract knowledge, the content of a thought, but its concrete implications. These implications are lived in the daily life, which comprises also the past – the learning time – and the future – the transmission of what has been learnt. In this line of thought we can distinguish “knowing something”, which is knowing a specific intellectual object, which has no utility for Confucius, from “knowing how” which springs from, and expresses itself in, the experience of every day.

It is implicit in this philosophical point of view that true learning is realized only by the body in a precise relation of cause and effect. In the *Zhuangzi* (XIII), one of the two basic texts of Daoism, we read: «*Duke Huan was reading a book at the upper end of his courtyard while Bian, a wheelmaker, was carving a wheel down below. Setting aside his hammer and chisel, he went up to Duke Huan and asked: "May I ask, Your Highness, what words you're reading?" The Duke replied: "The words of a sage." "Is the sage alive?" The Duke replied: "No, he died a while ago." "If that's so, then what your majesty is reading is the rotten leftovers of those from ancient times." Duke Huan said: "I, a ruler, am reading this book, and yet you, a mere wheelmaker, feels comfortable giving your opinion about what I'm reading? If you can provide a good explanation for this then I'll accept it. Otherwise, you'll be put to death." Bian the wheelmaker replied: "I'm just a servant, so I look at*

10 *The doctrine of the mean*, I, I. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/conf3.htm>

things from the perspective of my own work. When I'm carving a wheel, if I work too slowly then I'd be enjoying myself but the wheel wouldn't be sturdy. If I work too quickly then I'm just damaging myself and the spoke won't fit. I had to learn not to move too slowly nor too quickly, with a hands-on approach and respond to what's in my heart. You can't really express it with words, as a particular skill seems to exist when you simply open up to it. [...] The people in ancient times also have something they can't pass on after they've died. That being so, then what your majesty is reading is the rotten leftovers of those from ancient times.»¹¹.

This is a profound and fundamental contribution of the East: also the *things* concerning the use of the soul are learnt through the body and not by memorizing some abstract concept. During its long inculturation period, Buddhism diverged decidedly from Confucianism precisely by keeping fully aware of this: that the practice towards awakening, realized by the body, as it should be – because this is the right way – is an end in itself. It is already the very marrow of attainment. The awakening, the end of the line, is *in* the journey, *in* the practice. It is not in the achievement of a certain state or in reaching a certain aim.

This awareness contributed to keep Buddhist practice different from all others, which instead became techniques employed to achieve something different from practice itself, for instance esoteric knowledge, special powers, skills, levels of consciousness, and, above all, mastery of ritual or harmonic behavior.

¹¹Zhuangzi, XIII <http://www.daosisopen.com/ZZ13.html>

Part two

For Confucius, the true relation among “the Mandate of Heaven” and its visible manifestation is action and action alone. Even the intellect is valued in terms of its efficacy, or virtue 德, *de*¹² in Chinese, and what is important is its contribution to choosing the action that manifests the cosmic order in human affairs. Only the thought that is related to action is not redundant. Only this thought does not die out when fixing itself upon an object. Only this thought is in harmony with the flow of life and is effective.

Of course, action comprises non action too, 無為, *wu wei* in Chinese and *mu i* in Japanese. This is evident in Confucius’ image of the perfect government, which is so complete in itself that it acts by not acting. Not acting is active. It chooses, but it chooses to go along with reality. In fact, the expression 為無為, *wei wu wei* means “carry out the not-doing”, the industrious idleness which will be explicitly taken as the basis of virtuous action later on by Zhuangzi e Laozi.

Evidently, embracing this principle, Confucius rejects theosis and metaphysics, because they are based on the assumption that thought is not useless and meaningless even if it is separate from action, assumption which Confucius rejects. Thinking stops where its relation with action ends. This leaves a huge empty space, which Western philosophy instead tends to fill completely.

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While a part of his followers were very pessimistic in regard to human nature, Confucius himself thought that human nature is neither good nor bad. What characterizes it, is its pliancy. Laziness and negligence in the cultivation of virtue allow man’s proclivity towards vulgar passions and chaos to take the upper hand and end up conditioning human nature¹³.

If instead man goes along the path of virtue, virtue grows and vice shrinks. Since reality is not static but keeps changing, this process is within the realm of possibility, but for this to happen, it is important to keep studying and educating oneself. This is why it is essential for man to educate and transform himself through the respect for norms and rites. As says Xunzi, a Confucian scholar of the IV century BC., *«through the practice of deference and modesty towards superiors one advances in the same direction indicated by culture and law and sustains an orderly state»*. Order here refers to order which emanates from Heaven and which, through the Mandate of Heaven radiates outward till the furthest corners of the world. The visible structure of this natural order

¹²It is the same ideogram which appears in the title *Daodejing*, 道德經.

¹³The vigor of the bipolar equilibrium is always there. If I go along with virtue, virtue grows at the expense of the opposite and viceversa.

-and the fact that this order is considered “natural” gives it an enormous strength- is the kinship system. This system is the paradigm of the social and cosmic orders. It is structured around the basic hierarchy of superior/inferior exemplified by the relation between ancestors and descendants and embodied in the dichotomies father/son, ruler/ruled, elder brother/junior brother husband/wife, friend/friend, elder/younger, master/disciple and on and on *ad infinitum*.

In his *Filial Piety* (V, 9) we read: «*Of all (creatures with their different) natures produced by Heaven and Earth, man is the noblest. Of all the actions of man there is none greater than filial piety. In filial piety there is nothing greater than the reverential awe of one's father. In the reverential awe shown to one's father there is nothing greater than the making him the correlate of Heaven. [...] The relation and duties between father and son (thus belonging to) the Heaven-conferred nature (contain in them the principle of) righteousness between ruler and subject.*»¹⁴ And here we have an all-embracing hierarchy that spans nature and human society.

It is essential to be fully aware of the absolute value that Confucius attributes to the natural order reflected in the kinship relations. In fact, the single most important goal in life for every human being, derives from this principle whatever the circumstances, including the practice of deference, or submission.

In the *Analects*, which is the most complete recording of the teachings attributed to Confucius, we find the following statement: «*The Governor of She said to Confucius, 'In our village we have an example of a straight person. When the father stole a sheep, the son gave evidence against him.'* Confucius answered, *'In our village those who are straight are quite different. Fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. In such behaviour is straightness (直, zhi) to be found as a matter of course.* »¹⁵.

It would be unjustified to read in these words some sympathy for a mafia-style- ethics, in which justice is subordinate to the “family”. In fact, since it consists essentially in realizing the cosmic order, and this manifests itself in the kinship system, justice can be “unjust” and at the same time abide by the basic, “just” principle according to which reinforcing the ties between father and son is of greater value than an abstract apportioning of right and wrong.

This is not about defending one’s own interests, nor about protecting the *robba*, our family’s possession “cosa nostra”, as a mafia would do. It is about recognizing that the natural order takes priority and that, as a result, the tie father/son comes first. And, according to Confucius, it would come first even if that would imply harming individuals, the family or the property, the *robba*.

This culture is modular. It can be adapted to all circumstances, it is simple to understand, it

¹⁴*Filial Piety* V, 9, <http://www.chinapage.com/confucius/xiaoqing-be.html>

¹⁵*Analecta* XIII, 18. <http://afpc.asso.fr/wengu/wg/wengu.php?l=Lunyu&no=335>

can be perceived intuitively by all human beings, and therefore, unsurprisingly, it has been able to provide a moral compass for over twenty-five centuries of history.

This archetypal relation of superior/inferior provides a key to understanding the natural world, once it is observed through this prism. In addition, even less educated people grasp it easily in the context of family and individual life.

It can survive cultural change and technological and ideological innovations unharmed and, to some extent, it can even survive unscathed the acquisition of new religions. As a matter of fact, if this basic model superior/inferior cannot be reconciled with a new religion, it will be this, the religion, that will have to bend, to become sinized, so to say, in order to abide by the established order.

In China all churches – and, today, that includes the official Catholic Church – are part of this system. It would be mistaken to think that this is so only because the state wants to keep tab on religion. Things are simpler. State and religion, civil and religious culture, family organization and social organization are integral part of the whole, they must therefore obey the same “order”.

The vertical hierarchical order, starting from the top down with the king, is a fact of life, it is not negotiable. As a father is “superior” to his sons, each ruler is superior to the people he rules, etc, etc. There is no field where this does not apply because there is no field exempt from having to follow the order of nature. The principle of authority on which order is based exists even within an association of equals and is determined by age: an elder brother is above the younger one, an elder cobbler is superior to the young cobbler, in the office and in the factory, in school and among friends, everywhere, always.

The two ideograms 先生, transliterated into *xiānsheng* in China and read like *sensei* in Japanese, which in China (and in Japan) identify the teacher, the instructor, the expert or the learned, literally mean “生, born, 先, before”: i.e. elder. It is possible to educate oneself to respect this natural order through training and through the practice of the true ethic nobility which is the fruit of the respect for the rule. It would not be possible to do so in the name of an abstract ethics.

According to Confucius’ assumption that theory exists only insofar as it guides life, our virtue is made concrete by the respect for the rules, which, in turn, requires renouncing our individual preferences. This self education therefore is not about learning a concept or a content, but about actively renouncing our own will and yielding to established norms.

When individual citizens make this renunciation, social conflict is automatically eliminated. In fact, this abdication of personal opinions and interests in favor of the Heavenly Order embodied in a chain that starts from the emperor -- a synecdoche of the established authority -- trickles down

along all branches. The value or the virtue of a person is determined – socially and individually – by his capacity to give up on his personal desire and follow the norm.

For a Buddhist instead, norms are useful because they are a kind of practice: “the practice of the norm”, that means living on the bases of “letting go”. The goal is not to deprive a person of his will and his preferences and to reshape him on the basis of rules and rituals. The point is making it easy for him to live on the basis of “letting go”, or moment by moment zazen. For Buddhism norms are tasks that have to be performed in the course of the day without any natural hierarchy to enforce.

Rules are produced by men. They are not handed down from Heaven. Confucianism identifies this “letting go” or “not grasping”--or renouncing to act according to our own will – with the realization of the ritual form because it considers this the only or, at least, the most valid form. By not standing up as an autonomous and unique subject, and by assuming instead a “standard” form, I am *de facto* realizing the natural order. As a result, this order rests on the disappearance of the claim to individuality in all types of relation. This is, at the same time, the strength and the weakness of the Far East: its capacity to create homogeneous cohesive and successful societies is enormous.

But individual pulsions, because they are condemned as dissonant and a source of chaos, have to be denied.

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A direct corollary of Confucius’ thinking is the need for man to educate himself or be educated into virtue. In the IV-III century BC, Xunzi, a Confucian scholar, expressed this with brutal harshness. He said that human nature is instinctively drawn to evil, to struggle, violence and disorder. This is why human nature -according Xunzi- must be «*straightened up by force, like a twisted log, sharpened like a blunt blade*». He teaches that «*man must be forged again and cast in the mould of the laws*». This is the philosophy that sustains the ancient Chinese art of *penzai*, 盆栽, which literally means “to cultivate” or “to force into a tray”, better known in its Japanese translation as *bonsai*, which consists in delicately raping nature for tens – and sometimes – hundreds of years till it assumes the desired form.

Starting from this extreme form of Confucianism, Han Fei, a disciple of Xunzi, founded legism, or legalism. Born as a school of thought in the domain of political philosophy, despite promoting an amoral point of view it penetrated deep into all the Far Eastern ethics thanks to the faultless contiguity of separate disciplines in classical times.

Han Fei is convinced that «*morals are simply a product [of education], completely foreign to human nature*»: morals are a goal that must be conquered. Conquering them requires intervening pitilessly on the inclinations of the human beings that are naturally lax. Morality, order and harmony become *de facto* synonyms.

This philosophy has strictly a political relevance and therefore can be understood only in the context of the historical circumstances of the time. It does not try to explain the world or the meaning of existence. However, it claims that morality does not have a religious foundation. It renounces, in other words, moral values of spiritual origin.

This view very clearly distinguished and distinguishes even now the cultures that have grown in the Hebrew, Christian, Islamic, Western cultural environment from those that are related to the branches of the Confucian tree. For legism, for Confucius, and even for *Laozi* 's daoism, ethics and morality are valued for their effectiveness/*virtus*, 德, *de* in Chinese; they are tools employed towards a specific result, this result being, in Confucian terms, order in social relations and in the state whose order derive from it.

While, for daoism the end result is stillness, and the serena and light “live and let live” of the *status quo*, which averts the disorder that the headstrong willfulness of men would breed.

Legism or nomocracy, from *nomos* “rule or law” and *kratos* “power”, this radical tendency of Confucianism in the social sphere makes sense if one assumes that the highest authority, the emperor, fulfills the Mandate of Heaven if its laws and its norms that set standards for all are enforced by the ruler.

Also, the belief of scholars of the legist conviction that human nature is malleabile *ad libitum*, is based on Confucius' assumption that man's interiority can be de-structured and rebuilt according to the norm and can be moulded from the outside according to established standards.

In this context, “norm” and “standard” are two of the possible translations of the sign 法, *fa*, (*hō* in Japanese) which a few centuries later will be used to translate the sanscrit *dharma* thereby assigning a clear normative dimension to this term.

This grievous, pitiless and annihilating construct implies undoing and renouncing one's own psychic and emotional nature. Only then will their *fusion*, (between alchemy and steelwork) be possible, followed up by the recomposition engineered by training and education. A new being will be born. To some extent he will be somewhat artificial, but he will also be well aware, detached and very clever. China's economic miracle and the success of the Chinese living abroad are to a good extent due to the extreme effectiveness and efficiency of their culture: a modular way of thinking, optimizing in terms of time and resources and applicable in almost every situation.

In classical Confucianism, a similar result is achieved by meticulously observing the ritual behavior. This observance remodels the smelt material moulding it in the ceremonial beauty and in the ritual pleasure, where man's natural desires are allowed to express themselves channeled in a controlled positive environment. When the transformation produced by education and by the ritual behavior is complete, we reach the point where we naturally desire what is right to do. This aim is hard to reach, but it can be reached. In addition, it provides a solution to one of man's toughest problems: dissatisfaction. Other than a very smart representation of a life journey, it is therefore the proposal of a purpose in life that stands on its own.

In all evidence, it is an ethics that lives in the confine of predetermined forms. For the legists, these forms have been invented by man; for Confucius they derive from the "order of things". In any case, they have the aim to control, through education, human nature, which, if left on its own, would generate vulgar desires and passions and would therefore generate personal and social disorder.

This process of reconstruction of the truly human man, or *ren* 仁 (*jin* in Japanese) is critical particularly for what concerns the sphere of feelings and emotions. In his *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (Columbia university press) Hans-George Moeller writes: «*The whole Confucian project could be described as a plan based on the cultivation of emotions [...] The social and emotional life of human being is literally "rooted" in the experience of childhood and education. If a child does not learn very early how to adequately elaborate emotions and behave, his biological, psychological and social foundations will be weak. [...] In the course of his life, the process of emotional training never ends. The function of the ritual – which is the set of rules that define the adequate behavior – is to supply society with pervasive ceremonial structures which must be heeded not only during official celebrations, but in almost all daily circumstances as well. In addition to allowing men to behave in the appropriate manner, the proper ritual allows at the same time to achieve an even greater goal: to feel the appropriate emotions*».

As we will see shortly, daoism is intransigent towards emotions because they are the breeding ground for desire, and therefore of disorder and suffering.

This point, the management of human emotions, marks profoundly the Indian culture from the Chinese, and also the Buddhism that grows west of the Himalaya from that which develops in China. In the Indian Buddhist tradition, the critical decision, based on *dhyāna* to let go of any thing that arises is not a technique to annul emotions. In the rarefied air of emptiness, they too run their course quickly and disappear like all other subtle, mental or emotional aggregate. In the Vajrayāna Buddhism, which developed in Tibet, the force/energy of emotions is turned into a positive polarity

and channeled to strengthen the practice.

It was inevitable that an integral component of Chinese Buddhism in its formative stages should come to be the capacity to live only few, selected and structured emotions. This of course was seen as a contribution to a greater lucidity and efficiency, but is as well harmful to the openness of the heart needed to practice Buddha's compassion, love or *agape*.

Milarepa says: «*Repel all that selfishness makes to appear good and that instead harms all creatures. On the contrary, commit what seems to be a sin, but benefit all creatures, because this a religious action*». It needs a kind of passion to act in this way.

The capacity to feel empathy, which is necessary for practice com-*passion* (that is: with passion) according to Indian Buddhism has nothing to do with slush or sentimentality. Compassion makes use of man's emotional channels but does not agitate or discompose him. Sentimentality is a sort of disease -- widespread in the Mediterranean cultures -- of the compassionate soul. "Compassion", or *karuṇā*, as it is designated in Indian Buddhism, is the openness of the heart to the impermanence and suffering we all share in the course of our earthly existence. It is an attention identical to that of the Samaritan in Lucas' gospel.

If Buddhism is an active witness to the life that leads to the cessation of pain, it would have never been able to exist without this type of compassion or openness. Śākyamuni's message and witness becomes alive *in reply* to the world's suffering.

Even beyond the likely repugnance of Western liberal cultures towards a culture that forcefully educates children to feel only appropriate emotions, it is interesting to note that it is not only the state's repression that keeps order; even more, order is the result of the stereotyped cultivation of sentiments. To become a rebel one must first free oneself from the obligation of filial piety and submission to all kinds of authority: the father, the elder brother, the sovereign, the elder, i.e. the metaphors of the established order drummed into the soul by manipulating emotions since early childhood. This liberation is painful and very difficult to achieve.

In the *Analects* (I, 2), we find this sentence: «*Yu Tzu said, 'It is rare for a man whose character is such that he is good as a son and obedient as a young man to have the inclination to transgress against his superiors; it is unheard of for one who has no such inclination to be inclined to start a rebellion. ->*».

It is often said that Han Fei and the legists assumed that human nature is "naturally" inclined to evil, but this is a simplification. It is necessary to clarify this point further. In fact, legism does not deal with ethics. It does not pass a judgement on man. In his *Disputers of the Tao. Philosophical argument in Ancient China*: Arthur Graham writes «*The legists do not think in genetic but in*

sociological terms. The *Guanzi*¹⁶, recognized that punishment was rendered unnecessary in the ancient past by the abundance of resources, states explicitly that: «The problem is not human nature, but indigence»¹⁷. The recourse to “sticks and carrots” – which is called the method of the two handles – is not born out by the conviction that man naturally tends towards evil, but is a stratagem employed to keep order by matching scarce resources with ever growing desires. In a sense, this is an extreme form of *realpolitik*. The legist proposal on how to rule, in all its forms, is apparently simple as Arthur Graham writes: «Let the king compare man’s actions with the text of the norm (*fa*, 法) and let him react by apportioning the rewards and the punishment set by this norm».

No pity is called for, because it would be understood as a deviation from the norm. It must be recalled that legists consider kindness and benevolence two cardinal virtues according to Confucius – “the adoptive mothers of transgression”.

Should education be unable to modify the soul from inside, so as to engender automatic respect for the norms, this respect is imposed from the outside: the true form and the criterion to which one must conform is the law. Like the compass and the set square are the unifying principles of form and measure, the law, *fa*, 法, becomes the cast that makes men similar to each other.

This is also the reason why legism is considered subversive by the Confucians and revolutionary by the XIX century supporters of Chinese socialism. For Confucius the law, the standard exists already, it is “Heaven’s Order” which enjoins a son to refrain from denouncing his father, even if he is aware of his guilt and encourages him on the contrary, to protect the father because, insodoing, he contributes to maintaining Order, and to furthering the prosperity of the family and of the kingdom.

The Chinese socialism instead, valued legism for the opposite reason; because it called on everybody, including the aristocracy, to respect the law. Justice is impersonal, and therefore heeds neither tradition nor social status anathema for Confucius, who was a dyed (dàied)-in-the-wool conservative. This conservatism of Confucius, that goes under the name of “taking ancient ways as the standard” or “conforming to convention” is well described – as a premise to its refutation -- in this sentence of the *Shangzi*, *The book [of the Lord] of Shang*: «A norm must not be modified unless the benefits of modifying it are 100 times bigger, a tool must not be changed unless the gains are 10 times bigger»¹⁸.

¹⁶The *Guanzi*, 管子 (*Kanshi* in Japanese), “[Writings] of Master Guan”, is an anthology of philosophical texts traditionally attributed to Guan Zhong, VII century BC. Some of the *Guanzi* chapters are a clear anticipation of legism. Other chapters are drawn from confucian and daoist doctrines. The earliest version is dated 26 BC and was drafted from sources of the IV century BC. Currently the *Guanzi* is thought to be a collection of sayings of members of the Jixia Academy, see *infra*, cap. 4 note 4.

¹⁷*Guanzi* 35 (2,45).

¹⁸商君書, *Shangzi* (*Shōkunsho* or *Shōkunshi* in Jap.) I, 16 ss. The *Shangzi*, perhaps written in the IV century BC, is one of the basic texts of legism. It contains strong criticism of some of the fundamental values of classic

In the language of today's political science we could say that Confucianism is a form of aristocratic despotism, while legism is an egalitarian totalitarianism. In neither case can we find a trace of what we call democracy, a political system which is based on the principle of "individual rights". All this, is irreconcilable with a form of monism which applied to collective institutions, inevitably leads to standardization.

In other words, the statement or recognition of the unity of the cosmos leads to the inference that this unity applies to human matters as well and that the best way to maintain or enforce this unity is by standardizing emotions and behavior. These are indeed the ideological foundations of the single thought – la pensée unique.

confucianism. For instance, it criticizes "rituals" and "music", which are the cornerstone of Confucius etiquette, because they are "symptoms of profligacy and wantonness" and defines kindness and benevolence "adoptive mothers of transgression" (*Shangzi* II, 5) while, for Confucius, they were commendable norms of behavior.

Part three

The story continues...

If we pay close attention to the role, the meaning and the importance of the “law” in the Confucian culture, it is easier to understand the reasons why the ideogram 法¹⁹ called *fa* -that represents “the law”, “the norm”, “the standard” or “the measure”- was chosen in the second or third century as the translation of the whole variety of meanings expressed by the word *dharma*, in Sanskrit.

The choice of this word has had a deep and lasting influence on the way Buddhism has been understood in the Far East, beginning with its very name that was *buddha-dharma*²⁰, and became Buddha’s law, 佛法, *fofa*²¹ in Chinese and *buppō* in Japanese. By the way, this is still the name under which Buddhism goes in the Far East, together with 佛道, *fodao*, the Buddha way, *butsudō* in Japanese, that is instead clearly inspired by Daoism.

On the new form which Buddhism takes up when resettling in China, the influence of Daoism and of the cultural strand known as legism, is clearly evident from the very start. It transpires from the signs, from the “reorganization of the names” that determine the semantic domain of the “thing” as well as its existence in reality.

What we are talking about here is a complete fusion of the Indian and Chinese elements. The new face of Buddhism is constituted precisely by this being, at the same time, “Buddha way” and “Buddha norm” by its constant swaying to and fro between these two poles, one soft and without categorical imperatives; the other severe, watchful and meticulous in the respect of the doctrine and of the form: a bipolar, always changing face, as is the whole Chinese universe.

The renunciation to the ego which is an integral component of the Confucian doctrine, and, in particular of its nomocratic or legalistic wing, is very close to the spiritual purification proposed by the “Buddhism of *discipline*” (*vinaya* in Sanskrit), which is hastily defined *hinayāna* in contrast to the *mahāyāna* or transcendental Buddhism.

But this methodological similarity hides a profound diversity in intention and in purpose:

¹⁹It would be desirable to conduct a specific study on the meaning and the history of the sign 法, which is constituted by the stylized form of the root 水, “water”, and the root 去, “flow away”.

²⁰More precisely: *buddha-dhamma*, in *pāli*, it is the name by which Indian Buddhism designated itself. The Italian term “buddhismo”, and later “buddismo”, comes from “Buddhism”, a word invented like “Hinduism” in the XIX century by the English: «Buddhism was “discovered” in the West during the first half of the nineteenth century. It was at that time that the term 'Buddha', ('Buddoo', 'Bouddha', 'Boudhou', etc.) began to gain currency in the English -and French-speaking worlds», cfr. P. C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (GB) 1988 e 2007, 7.

²¹*Buppō* in Japanese. The character 佛 in Japanese is often simplified into 仏.

the social or cosmic order for the Confucianists, and intimate freedom for the Buddhists. However, due partly to this similarity, which for souls immersed in a strictly controlled environment tends to become *de facto* an identity, the nomocratic mentality is widely present from the very early days, in the formation of all schools of Chinese Buddhism and, through them, of the whole Far East.

One of the clearest example of the importance of the nomocratic point of view is the current organization of the *senmon sōdō*, the preparation schools for the Zen clergy in Japan, for which the highest achievement is often (not always but often) the capacity to adapt one's own behavior and personality to the established *standard*.

Despite the long string of ingenious and unique personalities that appeared during this period, after Confucius it took almost six centuries before a truly different point of view could arise.

This conceptual construct was not born in relation to Confucius' thought or practice, and was therefore capable of conversing as an independent entity with Confucius's doctrine and with the two souls of daoism, the mystical and the philosophical schools.

It was Buddhism that provided this possibility of dialogue. Starting from that date, the organic insertion of Buddhism into this context has undoubtedly had an impact on the culture and the religiosity of the Chinese people. So much so that Buddhism, with Confucianism and Daoism became the "third leg of the tripod", which contains wisdom.

However, from the very start the backbone of the philosophical outlook of that part of the world not only in China but, to some extent also in Vietnam and Cambodia, and, above all in Korea and Japan -- is constituted by Confucius's teaching, with the legist and daoist postscripts that keep intersecting and struggling with each other at its two wings.

In general, I would say that Buddhism has come to complete, and to supply new elements to, the overall picture, but almost without changing what was there on the ground. On the contrary, it enmeshed these elements in such a way as to create a new form of Buddhism, one that, being Chinese, was prepared to converse and to interact with its surroundings.

This kind of Buddhism cannot be exported. To work and be effective, it needs certain elements specific to the culture in which it developed. It cannot do without them: they have become organic parts of its body. This blend is identifiable over a wide domain and goes deep. One can no longer distinguish what is "essential" from what is "marginal", or, in other words, what constitutes the core of Buddhist religion from the Chinese cultural raw material into which this religion has integrated itself. The only way one could export it is to export it as a block, the painting with the frame that contains it.

The problem is that to accept it one must undergo a very profound cultural and socio-

anthropological transformation. One would have to become Chinese or Japanese, Vietnamese, Koreans, etc. to become Buddhist. This is extremely difficult and, I would add, not desirable.

For centuries Christianity has tried to colonize the Amerindian, Australian and African cultures by forcing Western ways on them, if necessary, using violence. The intention was to make them suitable to receive Christ's gospel, who seemed to be able to speak only the words of the culture where it originated. The same is for Buddhism. In its spreading first to the easternmost shores of Asia, and in its coming to port now in the West, the Buddhist religion and the Chinese culture are overlapping to the point of being identical. They speak one and the same language.

Japan is a special case. Confucianism penetrated it earlier and then again at the same time as Buddhism. Instead, the space occupied in China by Daoism is in part at least, occupied by *Shintō*. In Japan, the tripod can be said to comprise Confucianism, Shintoism and Buddhism. It must be underlined, however, that from the very earliest years of its history, that is from the IV-V century AD, or the beginning of the Yamato dynasty, China's influence on Japan has been so pervasive that Shintoism and Daoism have been the closest syncretic partners. In addition, the type of Buddhism that went to Japan, from Korea first, and directly from China afterwards, is already made up with Chinese ingredients and therefore is related to Confucianism and Daoism. Even then, most intellectuals and clergy in Japan believe very strongly that the transmission of Buddhism, and, in particular, of Zen Buddhism –which many Japanese regard as a national treasure– consists in the transmission of Japanese culture as well. The overlapping and blending of culture and religious thought is such that the fear of some non-Japanese that the diffusion of Buddhism is an attempt at spiritual colonisation is sometimes justified.

The complexity of this cultural and religious mosaic should warn us against believing which, unfortunately, sometimes occur – not only that sino-japanese Buddhism is THE Buddhism, but even more that learning Zen Buddhism is tantamount to learning aspects of the sino-japanese culture.

The fact that container and content cannot be told apart does not mean that they are the same thing. We must be able to reconstruct what we learn in the Chinese, Vietnamese and Japanese cultures and languages through the vital elements of our own Western nature, pretty much like a tree does when it transforms into fruits the nourishment absorbed through its roots.

Let us now briefly look at some elements of the very early Chinese thought that seem to be secondary, but are non the less useful if one wants to complete this brief overview of its branch-like complexity. In addition, having left a very deep imprint in the Chinese thought years and centuries later, these elements too have come to create a partnership with the Buddhism arising from India, and have therefore contributed to the formation of Chinese Buddhism as well and must therefore be

mentioned.

The first scholar to come onto the scene soon after Confucius some historians regard him even as a contemporary of his— with a point of view quite different from Confucius' is Mozi²², or Master Mo (Bokushi in Japanese; the ideograms of his name are that of *sumi*, coal and *shi*, master).

In the vast panorama of Chinese thought, Mozi's importance consist in the fact that his is the only attempt made over the course of more than three millennia, to introduce a sort of theist ethics. Heaven is personified. It possess the capacity to think and to ordain. Above all, he has eyes, to peer into man's heart. As a result, "Heaven's will" replaced "Heaven's decree or mandate".

Who fails to do duty towards men must worry about Heaven as well, and not only about men. This is perhaps the biggest contrast between Confucianists and the followers of Mozi. Infact, Confucius widened the limits of conscience to include the perception of the overriding Order and therefore, implicitly recognized the existence of a transcendent power that order.

However, in the end he places the limits of human action within a domain that remains entirely human. Mozi, instead introduces an extra-human sphere of relationships: the relation with Heaven. However, even Mozi was concerned with the political question -that concerned Confucius and the legists as well-, and that have held a high value for the Chinese people and their neighbors all throughout their history: how to keep order and social peace.

The reason for Mozi's imperative to do good and love one's neighbors is "Heaven's will". In his own words, (*Mozi* 26): « *Now, what does Heaven desire and what does it abominate? Heaven desires righteousness and abominates unrighteousness. [...] Thereupon the will of Heaven proclaimed: "All those whom I love these love also, and all those whom I benefit these benefit also. Their love to men is all-embracing and their benefit to men is most substantial".* »²³.

Mozi tries to impose the observance of the general interest in harmony with human nature, which Mozi regarded as fundamentally good --by crediting Heaven with a will to retribute human action, somewhat extravagantly with the help of a whole hell of demons and spirits who are there to punish the wicked.

For Mozi, however, the right behavior does not mean obedience to the order, as it is for Confucius, who identifies the source of salvation, morality and security with harmony and order. For Mozi, everything derives from an act of obedience to the will of Heaven.

In sum, Mozi tries to move the personal moral imperative from the sphere of duty towards men, which, if not carried out, produces a sense of shame a sense that was and is the aristocratic

²²墨子, lived in the first period of the so- called "Warring states era", 450?-221 a.C. His thought was rather popular for a few centuries, until Qin Shi Huang Di, the First Emperor, ordered all the Moist text burnt. During the Han, the decline of Moism was total. Confucianism was fully rehabilitated.

²³ *Mozi* 26, <http://chinese.dsturgeon.net/text.pl?node=570&if=en>

sentiment of Confucian ethics –to that of obedience to Heaven, non compliance (conplàians) to which is punished with feelings of guilt.

This is a shift away from repentance for having failed to fulfill one's duties and therefore having disappointed oneself and the others, to sin, or failure, towards Heaven, a failure which calls for punishment against those who have committed it.

If one were to judge from the evidence of the current moral culture of the Far East, this attempt has failed, in spite of the fact that it has had a large following during almost three centuries. In fact, in the Far East nowadays, the term required to translate "guilt feeling" is often absent from the dictionaries, while instead, suicide is still widely practiced to make amends for failing to the emperor, or to the current substitute, and down the line to one's own boss, family or group. Even today the common, normal sense of sin is that of *shame*, so much so that of which the others are not aware, or, what the others have not seen and do not know is not a sin.

Endo Shusaku a Japanese Christian writer said during an interview: *«If the others do not see us and do not know it, we are innocent without sin [...]. For us, sin is shame, the shame that our sins have been discovered».*

Moving the moral imperative from the duty -which arises from the relation between superior and inferior - to the obedience to the will or the inclination of Heaven, shook very profoundly all the philosophical justifications of the hierarchical relations and the very concept of value.

The diffusion and legitimation of his thought the social emancipation of the classes that had been hitherto excluded from power for generations, particularly the craftsmen and all those who had skills and could claim some sort of concrete and visible reward for themselves. The value of the work of those that possess mastery of a craft or of a profession will consolidate the sense of transmission of that knowledge through a sacred behavior, based on the master/disciple mechanism and on cohabitation and common experience, quite apart, therefore, from theories and words.

Centuries later, Buddhism will adopt this system, both as a technique and as a philosophy. In Chinese Buddhism, the greatest value is given to lineage, the sacred family of the master, who, through an unbroken sequence of masters beginning with Buddha, transmits the supreme awakening, called "enlightenment" exactly as it is, without any change.

The fact that this unbroken sequence has no historical validation is unimportant. This is what it wants to be in terms of myth and therefore symbolically is, Chinese Buddhism. Mozi's school underwent a very steep decline in the third century BC, during the so called Warring States Period²⁴, when the king of Qin ²⁵, Qin Shi Huang Di, unified under his scepter the six kingdoms into which

²⁴From 450? to 221 BC., or until the coming to power of the First Emperor, who pacified and unified the whole of China for the first time under one ruler.

²⁵Pronunciation: *cin*. Qin Shi Huang Di, ruled over the whole of China from 221 to 207 BC. The name

China was divided ²⁶ and awarded himself on the title of First Emperor. The *coup de grace* to the “goody-goody” thought of “Master Mo” was struck by Li Si, Qin’s powerful prime minister. Li Si, (a disciple of Xunzi and a rival of Han Fei²⁷, who is regarded as the first to develop the philosophical foundations of “legism”) in order to strengthen social control decided to encourage uniformity in thinking and acting, and, to that end, convinced Qin to order the destruction of all books except those of the legist school, manuals and technical and scientific texts. As a result, he helped establishing in the whole of China a legist point of view point of view that, combined with earlier and later cultural elements is still dominant even today in all of the Far East.

The book burning was accompanied by a massacre still recalled for its brutality: the 460 most eminent intellectuals, thinkers and scholars of the capital were buried alive. Qin’s and Li Si’s effort to unify the country politically, territorially and militarily became also a gigantic standardization project, that ended up in a rather successful attempt to establish a “single thought”.

Every aspect of society was affected: the units of measurement, the currency, the gauge of the carts, the width of the roads, how to write ideograms²⁸, the rituals and even the way to express emotions. The Qin - Li Si couple has left an ineffaceable mark on the destiny of billions of people. While it is not surprising that they may have conceived and tried to implement a plan of this magnitude, it is rather surprising that they have largely succeeded. After the era of Confucius, and Mozi who contested aristocratic fatalism and hereditary power –around the fourth century BC there appeared a new tendency, sustained by several hermits who renounced social and political engagement which, for different reasons, both Confucius and Mozi regarded as the scholars’ main responsibility.

Among these hermits - devoted to quietist disengagement from social obligations, committed to healthy living and to their unique life choice-, we find Yang Zhu²⁹ who can be defined as an hedonist epicurean. This sentence of his is memorable: *«If each one of us refrained from hurting even a hair, if everyone gave up trying to do good, the world would rule itself very well».*

“China” with all probability derives from Qin, motherland of the First Emperor, which was extended to cover all the lands he had conquered.

²⁶In addition to Qin: Zhao, Han, Wei, Yan, e Chu.

²⁷Historians regard he as the first to propound the theory of “legism”.

²⁸The graphic form of the characters can be classified on a chronological scales as follows: the writing of seals, that goes back to the 9^o century BC.; the writing of the scribes, that goes back to the Qin dynasty; the regular handwriting, attributed to the Eastern Han and still in use. The writings of seals is of two types, the big and the small seal. The former is earlier and irregular. It goes back to the IX century BC and is a direct descendent of the arcaic characters. The latter – the small seal – is a standardization and an improvement on the former. It was promoted by Li Si, the Qin’s minister. The style of the scribes, that was introduced during the Qin’s reign, is a simplification of this latter style, done on the basis of firm conventions. After Qin, it will replace the style of the seals. The regular style appears under the Han, in the III century AD, and improved and rationalized the style of the scribes. It is still in use.

²⁹楊朱, 370?-319? a.C.

Mencius³⁰, and orthodox Confucianist and a contemporary to Yang Zhu, has left a synthetic description of this scholar: «*Yang Zhu's principle was "each man for himself". If he could have saved the world sacrificing but a hair, he would have not done it*»³¹. The image of the hermit unconcerned with the world, "having no concern" in the true sense of this word, begins to take hold in that period and foreshadows Daoism.

This, however, while seemingly similar, was much deeper and articulate in its philosophy than the simple withdrawal from the world for personal benefit, as seems to have been what Yang Zhu had in mind. In any event, it is important to recall that the "mixed chapters" of the *Zhuangzi*, from the 23rd to the 33rd, contain traces of Yang Zhu's thought.

³⁰孟子, 370?-289? BC. He is best known under his name of Mencius. In *pinyin* his name is now transliterated into Mengzi.

³¹*Menzi*, VII A 26 [202].

Part four

The morning three

Both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi*, which are the key texts of Daoism, besides the *Laozi*, contain an instructive tale³²: «A monkey breeder tells his monkeys how many chestnuts they will get a day: three the morning and four in the evening!! -. On hearing this, the monkeys started shouting and complaining aloud. So the breeder said: mornings four and evenings three-. At this the monkeys cooled off, satisfied.»

This parable, which is a classic example of the daoist art of “how to win and rule yieldingly” called 柔道, *rou dao* in Chinese and *judō* in Japanese, serves to introduce the second topic in our series of lectures: the Daoist world. Daoism is an integral part of Chinese thought. It plays such a critical role in the inculturation of Chinese Buddhism, that it even lends its most important ideogram, 道 read *dao* in Chinese and *dō* in Japanese, to the new name of Buddhism, the name that it still sports in the various languages of the Far East: 佛道, *fodao* in Chinese, *butsudō* in Japanese.

Parenthetically, I would like to recall that the other name under which Buddhism is known in the Far East, which is 佛法, *fofa* in Chinese and *buppō* in Japanese, is clearly a bequest of legism, the school of thought which has been discussed in the earlier lectures.

In fact this name results from the union of the ideogram 佛, read *fo* in Chinese and *butsu* in Japanese that means “buddha” and the ideogram 法, read *fa* in Chinese and *hō* in Japanese, which is the usual translation for *dharma* but is also the ideogram which refers to the law, the norm.

The fact that one of the names under which Buddhism is known in the East is drawn from Daoism and the other from legism is very significant for what it tells of how Buddhism was inculturated in China.

But let's proceed with our story. After Confucius, between the fourth and third century BC, the ancient Chinese culture received two critical boosts, from *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi*. Beware, though that, while a person by the name of *Zhuangzi* did exist, scholars now consider *Laozi* to refer to the mythical author of a collection of sapiential sayings³³. These two personalities were active in what is called the era of the Hundred Schools of thought³⁴, a period that lasted in total around 500 years, and that, despite the deadly conflicts that plagued it, produced a very creative culture.

Both *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi* are contemporary of the intellectual circle known by the name of

32 This parable is told both in the *Zhuangzi* II and in the *Liezi* XXXIII.

33 In the course of these lectures, I will follow the tradition and assume that *Laozi* actually lived.

34From 720 to 221 BC., it is known as the golden age of Chinese philosophy, in spite of the fact that the two periods which are traditionally thought to constitute it, Spring-Autumn (722-481) and the Warring States Era, (450?-221), saw endless wars and bloody massacres.

Jixia Academy ³⁵. This Academy was founded around 375 Bc, during the so-called Warring States Period, in Linzi, capital city of the Qi state. It was one of the most important intellectual centres of ancient China. It attracted thousands of scholars and lived for about 140 years, in the period called of the Hundred Schools of Thought. It is here that Daoism was born and it is here that the logical foundations of legism were laid. In fact, one of the works that best represents the Chinese thought, *Guanzi*, saw the light in the Jixia Academy. In this book, particularly in chapter 49, called *Neiye*, 內業, *Inner Enterprise* or *Inner Training* we find the earliest references to the technique of daoist meditation: «*Stay still and you can maintain the One and discard the myriad disturbances. You will see profit and not be enticed by it, you will see harm and not be frightened by it. With quiet magnanimity, you will be fully human, in solitude you delight in your own person. This is called [being] the qi-cloud (雲氣), your thoughts floats in it like the clouds in the sky.* »

This quote makes clear how the roots of Daoism are interwoven with those of *Chan*: one of the best known descriptions of the most intimate religious experience in *Chan* is by Shitou Xiqian³⁶ (in Japanese Sekitō Kisen) whose disciples and lineage formed the *Caodong/Sōtō* school --which reads: «*The wide sky does not hinder the white clouds floating*».

Zhuangzi and Laozi are often referred to in the same breath, as if they were part of the same cultural, philosophical and religious movement, but it is not so. Particularly insofar as the life style is concerned, the differences between them are rather important. From the philosophical point of view, these two ancestors of the main daoist schools ³⁷, adhere to a movement whose central defining concept is the *unknowable*, the *undifferentiated*, called *wu* 无 (無) the “*not there*”³⁸ or *wuming* 无名 the “nameless” or “no name”, which, if one judges from the way it is protected from human efforts at describing it, can be considered to belong to the sphere of transcendence. Here I use the term “transcendence” in its most literal connotation, “the highest”, without contaminating it with references to God or the otherworld.

³⁵稷下, founded around 375 BC during the Warring States Era in the city of Linzi, the capital of the Qi state, the Academy was one of the most influential intellectual centers in Ancient China. It attracted thousands of scholars and lasted for 140 years, during the period called of the Hundred Schools. It is the crucible which formed both the school later known under the name of daoism, and the logical bases of legism.

³⁶石頭希遷, 700-790, in Japanese Sekitō Kisen, may be author of the *Can Tong Qi*, 參同契, *Understanding the one and the many* (title that can also be translated into: *The Harmony of Difference and Equality*). In Japanese *Sandōkai*, one of the first works of Chan Chinese Buddhism.

³⁷“Daoist (or taoist) school” s, *daojia* 道家, is a later classification, attributed by the historian Sima Tan (? - 110 a.C. circa) in the II sec. BC.

³⁸Also written 無, *nothing, nihil*. Particularly in the *Laozi* it is used as a synonym for 空, “empty”, which is also transliterated as *wu*. When this overlapping of nothing and emptiness, which makes sense in daoism because of the dimension of metaphysical topos possessed by the *latent*, was transferred to Buddhism, it generated (and still generates) many misunderstandings. In Buddhism “nothing” has the same meaning as “not being” in Parmenides, it countenances no argument. Instead, “emptiness” is a concept. In particular, “emptiness” is not associated to creative dimension of reality, but it refers to the absence of permanent individual foundation in all things and in all living beings. In Buddhism to say “emptiness” is the same as saying “impermanent”.

At a personal level, both Zhuangzi and Laozi suggest listening and paying attention to the mute melody of the *Dao*. To be heard, this melody needs “non action” and this, in turn, makes the deafening noise of the thousand *dao* quiet down. Letting himself be carried by this stream, man can dissolve into the great universal Way, source and terminus of everything and every being, unthinkable and unnamable being: «*If you try and paste eyes, nose and mouth on it, it dies*» says the *Zhuangzi*. To attain it, one must consent to drop everything that limits him and defines him as a human being.

This process, as it is described in the first and in the thirtyfourth chapter of the *Laozi*, goes through the realization of freedom from desires. The attainment of this freedom, according to Zhuangzi is reached through the practice of “sitting in oblivion”³⁹ (*zuowang* in Chinese and *zabō* in Japanese) which can be translated also as “sitting in forgetting” and which leads to becoming “dry sticks and cold ash”⁴⁰.

For Laozi instead, renouncing desires is rather a function of the “art of living contented”, as we find in *Laozi* 33 and 46 and above all, of “knowing how to stop” as we find in *Laozi* 32 and 44. The art of “knowing how to stop” appears also in the *Zhuangzi* II, where this expression, in the form of “*knowing how to stop without knowing why it is so*” has deeper implications. Anyway, both set the goal of achieving a state beyond desiring and rejecting in which we realize detachment, particularly detachment from emotions.

While in Confucianism emotions must be filtered, negative emotions must be eliminated and the positive emotions manifested in the “right” way thanks to education, Daoism places great stress on the waning away of all kinds of emotional reactions. In other words, in order to avoid suffering as a result of fate’s whims, one needs to extinguish the emotional underlayer which breeds emotions, and reach a state in which all emotions, both joy and suffering, vanish.

In this way of thinking, contrary to Confucius’, the Way is not artificially built on rules, rituals and behavioral ethics, but it is, *ziran*, 自然, *shizen* in Japanese, “as it is for itself”⁴¹ in English the nature of the whole universe, exactly as it is, which I can become part of, when I do not interfere.

The true difference between Confucianism and Daoism, if one can indeed join a motley of viewpoints into these two categories only, is in the attempt that only Daoism makes, of becoming a transcendental religion⁴². Even in Confucianism there is a sense of transcendence. Heaven is without

39坐忘, *Zhuangzi*, VI.

40Cfr. *Zhuangzi*, II.

41Cfr. *Zhuangzi*, V e *Daodejig*, 25. Often *ziran* is translated as “nature” or “spontaneity”: «What I mean by not having passions is man not harming himself internally with love or hate and man following his spontaneity (自然) without wanting to prolong his life» cfr. *Zhuangzi*, V.

42 Even in Confucianism there is a sense of transcendence. Heaven is without question beyond the reach of man and

question beyond the reach of man and beyond human comprehension. However, in Confucianism, transcendence is not treated, feverishly pursued and sought after in order to dissolve oneself in it, as it is for Daoism. For Confucius, the transcendent is like an external power, a destiny *ex machina* which can be neither modified nor attained.

Daoism instead understands that it is possible to step beyond the human conditions and plunge into the “mysterious”, the “latent”, *an area* located beyond what can be said, and next to the source from which life gushes out, and to which life returns, heading towards death because death is, in fact, homecoming. This is not another world beyond this world. It is present in living as an essential simplification in *ziran*, or “like this, on its own, according to nature”. As we find in *Daodejing*, 25: «*the Way takes as a model natural spontaneity (as it is) (自然, ziran)*».

By definition Daoism is amoral. There is no choosing between good and evil and between wrong and right. The only choice there is, is based on entrusting oneself to the free flow of *Dao*: «*Heaven and earth are inhuman. They treat the ten thousand being as straw dogs* » reads the Vth chapter of the *Laozi*. The attention is placed on the individual alone, who is the true hero of the journey towards salvation. Even when – and this is typical and frequent in the *Daodejing*- the talk is about the “sovereign”, this is also a synecdoche for all men: each one of us is a sovereign of oneself, and he is capable of realizing the highest virtues, the “sovereign” virtues.

Instead Confucius does not explore the Principle as a form of transcendence. He observes it in its endless metamorphosis and points men towards a journey between knowledge and practice that consists in framing individual actions within this whole flow, but keeping very clearly *on this side* of reality, in the visible world, teaching the ruled and the rulers how to carry out every step of the *way*. The direction which Confucius points to is relevant mainly for men’s behavior . It could be thought of as an ethics based on a human morality. Also, contrary to the Daoists, he perceives the individual only as the member of a group.

As we have already said, the etymological or functional meaning of the ideogram 仁, *ren*, (read *jin* in Japanese) which we usually translate as “true humanity” is “relation”, because it comprise the stylized form of 人 a radical which means “human being” and 二, the radical that means “two”.

Another difference between these two schools consists in the way they look at emotions deeply rooted in the human soul; Confucianism adheres to a conception of ethics based on self-sacrifice, where this is understood as the sacrifice of the self to the functioning whole, and to the maintenance of harmony and peace among men.

beyond human comprehension. However, in Confucianism, transcendence is not treated, feverishly pursued and sought after in order to dissolve oneself in it, as it is for Daoism. For Confucius, the transcendent is like an external power, a destiny *ex machina* which can be neither modified nor attained.

On the contrary, Daoism, particularly in the line of thought exposed in the Zhuangzi, is oriented in the opposite direction. It rejects social conformism and points to the individual path towards freedom. Laozi, in turn, practices a middle way. He recommends the highest refinement in how to rule oneself and society, while, at the same time, magnifying inner freedom.

Part Five

The stories before history

It is a matter of record that *Daoism*, -- seen both as a profound sapiential school and as a cultural construct -- contributed very significantly to the formation of basic elements in the culture of the Far East and therefore has had a very important and legitimate role in the formation of the Chinese Buddhist schools. Its contribution is deeper than Confucius', which is not only but essentially limited to form and rituals.

Looking now specifically at the *Chan* school, one could say that it was born from a Daoist Chinese father and a Buddhist Indian mother -- to be sure from the mature *mahāyāna* Buddhism of the Madhyamaka e Vijñānavāda schools. This is one of the reasons why it is legitimate to say that Chinese Buddhism is a "new Buddhism". It bears the name with which we define the religious movement born in India two thousand five hundreds years ago, but its new form is richer than and a bit different from -- the original.

Buddhism is also a social phenomenon. In this sense, we can say that Buddhism is produced by Buddhists. This is not irrelevant. What is interesting here, in the case of Chinese Buddhism is that it emerged and developed in the context of a debate that took place only among Chinese, in China, and -- what is particularly crucial -- in Chinese. This means that the additional leg of the path started by Śākyamuni was subject to a particularly complex inculturation. Placing this debate that lasted centuries -- entirely within the Chinese spiritual and intellectual sphere is critical if we want to decodify and understand the development of the whole Far Eastern Buddhism.

When all is said and done, this is the produce of a soil that, much as it has been planted with seeds imported from abroad, maintains all the native properties of the land. Chinese Buddhism is not only a new inculturation of the old Buddhism. It is a permanent presence in the new.

The emphasis on liberation that is typical of Buddhism accompanies Daoism without modifying it. One provides the clarity of the body practice, with the confidence of thousands of years of experience, together with a vast literature that spans from the canons of monastic orders to and the apotheosis of intentional language, as is the case with the *Lotus Sutra*. The other contributes the apophatic metaphysics, and the suggestive language of the *Zhuangzi* which forces us --like it does the *Lotus Sutra* -- to step into the void if we are really keen to understand, instead of making it up as we move along.

Also, Daoism brings along the awareness of the "dark" side of reality, unimaginable and unspeakable, and the experience, that special sort of freedom from suffering through the mind

thanks to an achievement understood as the final one, that has been translated as “enlightenment” into the Western languages.

This is the final point, the highest point proposed by Chinese Buddhism. For this reason it is the most foreign to the very logical Indian Buddhism, for which nothing lasts, not even salvation; no mental state can save me, salvation must be conquered every instant. While recognizing its peculiarity, almost nobody now challenges the inclusion of Chinese *Chan* into the world of “Buddhism”. All this, once it will have been fully understood and evaluated, will have to influence the strategic choices of modern Western Buddhism. The reality, in Buddhist terms, of the enrichment and renewal brought about by the so called “Chinese Buddhism” that was once discussed, but is now accepted without question, leads me to believe that heading West Buddhism will breed a new form of itself.

The sapiential culture of this part of the world will replace and compensate for those elements that have been added on in the past and are being added on as we speak. For instance, I can envision a new and legitimate European Buddhism; new and legitimate as Chinese Buddhism has been. This will be made possible by going back to the source, and will inevitably imply replacing a good part of China’s gifts to Buddhism with those of Europe, of the West.

But let’s go ahead with our story...

A process that began two thousand years ago and led to the amalgamation of speculative wisdom with mystical undertones and refined body practices ⁴³ allowed Daoism to develop to the point where it could match Indian Buddhism in the gestation and birth of the *Chan* school, the most interesting product of the Far Eastern religious culture. It has been an issue for research for quite some time how a whole strand of the ancient Chinese culture may have reached such a high level of religious relevance, but the answer is not there yet. A hypothesis has been proposed by the Italian scholar Giovanni Semerano. He suggested that the wisdom developed in the Middle East and spread throughout Ionia by the Accadians and the Sumers invaders may have been transmitted to India and China too.

Let’s recall that Ionia is the westernmost edge of Anatolia, thus named in honor of the Ionians, the first of the three Hellenic peoples who invaded ancient Greece from the East in the II millennium BC. Semerano highlights important similarities among certain Chinese and European words --particularly Greek of Akkadian origin--. The most significant of these similarities is about

⁴³In reality, the written sources on the daoist practices are very detailed on what can lengthen life (diet, respiration, sexual practices, philosophy) but are vague or skimpy on how to carry through the spiritual transformation that will lead to realize the “perfect or immortal man”.

the word *tao*⁴⁴ which is associated to the Akkadian *tehûm*, or *tahûm* (“to approach”, “to get closer” and “successive approximation”). These similarities encourage Semerano to unveil (or, as someone would have it, to build) an interesting and daring bridge between Parmenides’ *being-all-thought* and the *Daodejing*, and between the principle, *arkén*, and the unlimited/infinite, *ápeiron* of Anaximander⁴⁵ and the bases of Daoist cosmology⁴⁶.

Semerano is not the only scholar to have identified cross references and similarities between China and Ancient Greece. They are quite often mentioned also by Moeller, that says: «*The similarities between Daoism and the theories of the Greek pre-socratic are many*». But he says also: «*In the ancient Chinese thought, the term Qi refers to something that can be assimilated to a universal or cosmic «medium»- All that exists is to some extent formed by Qi. However, this is not in accordance to the pre-Socratic atomistic or elementary theories of nature, because it is not made up of smaller particles or by one or more basic “substances”. In nature Qi is neither material nor immaterial. A distinction such as this, that would have been fundamental in ancient Greece – particularly for Plato – does not even appear in the Laozi*»⁴⁷.

The chicken and the egg

To understand many of the events that have taken place in China after the arrival of Buddhism, it would be interesting to address a wider question, one that is still without answers even today: are the daoist gnosis and practice outcomes of an autonomous process or did they originally spring from other sapiential domains? This inquiry is particularly exciting. Think that “the same things” are dealt in a similar vein in China and Greece and almost: Anaximander, Xenophanes and Parmenides lived between the V and IV century, the raw material employed to develop the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* were elaborated between the V and the IV centuries, perhaps even earlier⁴⁸.

At least insofar as Buddhism is concerned, India is late. The *Dhammapada* and the

44Semerano uses the old Wade-Giles transliteration and therefore writes *tao*, *Lao-tzu*, *Tao teh ching* ecc.

45Anaximander, c. 610-546, the author of the most ancient lines in Greek philosophy that have reached us probably the first in the West to have explored the principle of *arkén*, and the boundless/infinite, *ápeiron*.

46«The Anaximander’s fragment is the most ancient philosophical text in Greek, and has been transmitted to us by a neoplatonic philosopher of the VI century. In a fragmentary context, Simplicius writes: “Anaximander [...] said origin [...] (*arkén*) of the beings, the *ápeiron* and in those elements from which the beings are originated, they are destined by fate (*to kreón*). to find their dissolution. Because they pay the ones to the others (*allélois*) the just punishment (*díken*) for their evil deeds (*adikías*) in the order of time (*katà tèn tou krónou táxin*)”, *Simpl. phys.* 24,13 = Anaximan. B 1 D-K», cfr. G. Semerano, *L’infinito: un equivoco millenario. Le antiche civiltà del Vicino Oriente e le origini del pensiero greco*, 34.

47Cfr. H. G. Moeller, *The Philosophy of the «Daodejing»*, Columbia University Press, 2006.

48«In all probability, the *Laozi* that we have known for the past two millennia is the result of a long and painful process of elaboration and synthesis that began in the IV, perhaps in the V century BC and was carried out by generations of scholars steeped into the “Dao techniques” that we do not fully grasp yet.», cfr. M. Scarpari, *Introduzione a: Laozi, genesi del Daodejing*, a c. di A. Andreini, Einaudi 2004, XXXIX.

*Suttanipāta*⁴⁹ were put down in writing around the III century BC, and, therefore, one can entertain the hypothesis that they existed through oral transmission at least between the end of the V century and the beginning of the IV. But the texts that were closer to, and had a stronger interaction with, China's religious philosophy are of a later age: the *Lotus Sutra* is known starting around the I century AD, while Nāgārjuna and the texts of the *prajñāpāramitā* appear on stage at least a century later.

Lionello Lanciotti, one of the greatest Italian orientologists of the 20th century, delved into this issue, and wrote: «According to recent interpretations of Zhuangzi's biography, written by Sima Qian, our scholar was born in the small feudal state of Song⁵⁰, where the ruling dynasty, the Zhou, had exiled the descendants of the earlier Shang dynasty so that they could continue to perform their ancestral rituals. In the Chinese philosophical literature that was composed before the beginning of the Common Era, the inhabitants of Song are often made fun of and mocked as if they were idiotic morons [...] This attitude was a reflex of the condemnation of a culture different from the dominant Confucianism, certainly a more ancient one, probably shamanic in origin, and therefore shunned by Confucian rationalists. Now that we know that Daoism derived in part from the shamanic pan-Asiatic substratum we are not surprised by the similarities between some daoist practice and the yoga, without for this reason assuming that there have been direct reciprocal influences. »⁵¹.

Anne Cheng arrives at largely identical conclusions when she quotes from a work by Isabelle Robinet: « In her *Histoire du taoïsme*⁵² Isabelle Robinet, draws a comparison between the Zhuangzi and the traditional Songs of Chu (in Chinese: Chuci), a collection of poems that have come to us in an edition of the III-II century and that have been composed in the context of the shamanic culture of South China»⁵³.

In all events, even if an explanation if one exists –has not come up yet, it is a fact of life that Daoism and Buddhism spread out over largely overlapping areas.

* * *

There are good reasons to believe that the convergence of these two sapiential streams of thought, Daoism and the already refined Buddhism of the *Madyamaka* and *Yogācāra* schools, has been so intense as to generate a new awareness. If the realization of Knowledge is managed, lived

49The two most important *sutta* of early buddhism.

50Now Shangqiu, in the Henan province.

51Cfr. L. Lanciotti, *Introduzione*, a: *Chuang Tzu*, a c. di F. Tommasini, UTET 1987, VIII.

52Cfr. I. Robinet, *Histoire du taoïsme*, Le Cerf, 1991. (Cfr. I. Robinet, *Storia del taoismo, dalle origini al quattordicesimo secolo*, Ubaldini, Roma 1993, 37.)

53A. Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Seuil 2002. (Cfr. A. Cheng, *Storia del pensiero cinese*, cit., I 103 nota 7.)

and tasted at the highest possible levels by two different traditions, it is clear that this wisdom cannot be claimed as a monopoly by either. Neither tradition could claim to be leading, or deeper.

Proceeding down this line of reasoning, it is interesting to recall what Thomas Merton wrote on page 14 of the *“Zen and the birds of appetite”*: *«Zen is [...] a trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-formed conscience. In a certain sense, therefore, it is “nothing”, but it can show through this or that religious and non religious system, like the light shows through a glass [...] In other words, to interpret zen as a purely and only zen-Buddhism is tantamount to betraying it».*

In the chapter *Butsudō* of the *Shōbōgenzō* written in the thirteenth century, recalling an explicit precept received by Tiantong Rujing⁵⁴ -- and quoted per extenso in another work of his called *Hōkyōki*⁵⁵ -- Dōgen develops a thesis very similar to Merton's. With a view to keeping zen free from any stereotyped cliché, whatever this might be, Buddhist or Daoist, he wrote: *«Transmitted from the Western Heavens to the Eastern Earth [i.e., from India to China], [this tradition spans] 18,000 li; transmitted from [Śākyamuni's] lifetime to the present, [it continues] over two thousand years. A group that has not studied this principle rashly and mistakenly says [the following]. The treasury of the eye of the true dharma, the wondrous mind of nirvana, correctly transmitted by the buddhas and ancestors, they rashly call the "Zen school." They call the ancestral masters "Zen ancestors"; they call the students "Zen masters" or "Zen preceptors"; or they call themselves "lines of the Zen houses." These are all but "branches and leaves" that have taken a biased view as the "root." When, throughout the Western Heavens and Eastern Earth, from ancient times till the present, there has not been the term "Zen school," rashly to call oneself [by this term] is to be a demon who would destroy the way of the buddha, an unbidden enemy of the buddhas and ancestors.»⁵⁶.*

Later on, in the same chapter, here is the explanation: *«When Bodhidharma first went to Wei from Liang, he proceeded to the foot of Mt. Song, where he stopped at Shaolin. There he just sat facing a wall. This was not the practice of dhyāna [i.e., zen, “meditation”], but after a while others, unable to fathom what he was doing, held that Bodhidharma practiced dhyāna. This dhyāna is but one among various practices; how could it suffice to exhaust [the practice of] the holy ones? Nevertheless, people of the time took it in this way; the historians followed this and recorded him*

⁵⁴天童如淨, 1162-1228, Tendō Nyojō in Japanese, Dōgen's spiritual father.

⁵⁵The words containing Rujing's teachings on this issue are recorded by Dōgen in a booklet that he wrote in Chinese. This booklet was found by Ejō after Dōgen's death and forgotten until 1750 when it was published for the first time with the title chosen by Ejō- *Hōkyōki*, or: *Chronicles of the Baoqing era*. The Chinese Baoqing era, from the name of the emperor (ruled 1225-1227), that belonged to the dynasty of the Southern Song (1127-1279), is the one when Dōgen lived with Rujing, in a monastery on the mount Tiantong.

⁵⁶*Shōbōgenzō Butsudō*:

with those that practiced *dhyāna*, thus making him a confederate of the partisans of “dead wood and cold ashes.” Be that as it may, the holy ones do not stop at *dhyāna*, and yet they do not oppose *dhyāna*. It is like “change,” which is beyond *yin* and *yang* and yet does not oppose *yin* and *yang* ⁵⁷».

Apparently Dōgen says again what he had said before. In reality, he paints a picture that begins as an iconographic tale and reaches the very heart of things. One watches the mythical Bodhidharma arrive at a place in the mountains, the Small Grove Temple, where he sits with his face towards the wall. Silent, he sits still for a very a long time. Some people, curious about why he sits there doing nothing, instead of imitating him and understanding through their own experience why he was doing what he was doing, started making wild guesses and these guesses eventually became common knowledge and have been recorded as facts by historians.

These historians, not content with plastering the label *dhyāna*, 禪, “chan/zen” over this “timeless religious act” glued another label attributing the practice of “simply sitting” to the daoist tradition of “sitting in oblivion” ⁵⁸ the sitting that turns body and your soul into “dry wood and dead ashes” ⁵⁹. The two sentences at the end of Dōgen’s quotation are a small masterpiece of engineering in the field of the intentional language. Since all phenomena can be understood through the interaction of *yin* and *yang*, “a change that does not belong to the sphere of action of *yin* and *yang*” is unthinkable, is “beyond reason” to use the words of the *Lotus Sutra*.

Equally unthinkable is the practice that goes beyond the *dhyāna/zen*, where there is nothing else to practice. There is no beyond it. Nonetheless - Dōgen says -- incorrect as it might be to accept unquestioningly the stereotype of the *dhyāna/Zen* made up by the historians «...the Great have never refused ... *zen/dhyāna*» so much so that *dhyāna/chan/zen* will become the name of the new school.

In the same way, there is no “opposition” with the *yin* and the *yang*, global symbols of the Chinese culture, even when they cannot explain or represent what is behind them.

Dōgen is saying: it is true; even if it coincides with neither “sitting in in oblivion” or “*dhyāna*”, both are there in the background, at a respectful distance: both the practice *dhyāna/zen* and the wisdom of Chinese tradition, which is here represented by the practice that consists in freeing oneself of the body as if it were “dry wood” and freeing oneself of the heart/mind as if it were “cold ashes”. This picture is completed by the fact that the term “zazen”, “*zuochan*” in Chinese is formed by the ideograms 坐, *zuo* in Chinese and *za* in Japanese, and 禪, *chan* in Chinese and *zen* in Japanese.

The first ideogram comes from the expression *zuowang/zabō*, 坐忘 of the *Zhuangzi*, “sitting

⁵⁷*Ibid*. It is a quote that Dōgen took from the Linjian lu, *Anecdotes from the Groves [of Chan]* by Juefan Huihong, Shimen in Japanese.

⁵⁸*Zuowang*, 坐忘; *zabō* in Japanese, *Zhuangzi* VI.

⁵⁹*Zhuangzi* II, 1.

in oblivion”, letting body and mind become like “dry branches and dead ashes”. The second ideogram 禪, is the Chinese transliteration of the sanscrit term *dhyāna*, the Buddhist practice *par excellence*. The very word *zazen/zuochan/坐禪* is the perfect of these two traditions.

Parenthetically, although the Chinese ideogram 禪 “chan” was chosen to signify “*dhyāna*” because it sounded like it and not because of its meaning⁶⁰, it is perhaps worth recalling that the sign 禪 chan/zen comprises, on the left, the root 示 read *shi/ji*, which means “to signify, to point to, to show”, and, on the right the sign 單, pronounced *dan* in Chinese and *tan* in Japanese, which means “only, single, simple, unique”. Therefore, if we join the meanings of these two roots, we could say that the name of 禪 chan/zen contains the overall meaning of “aiming at the maximum of simplicity” or “heading for the one”.

⁶⁰In Chinese, the ideogram 禪 means “flattened out alter” or “to abdicate”. It has nothing to do with the meaning of the Sanscrit word. It was chosen because of its sound, nor for its meaning. In Japanese, instead, 禪 has only the meaning of “zen [buddhism]”.

Part Six

Even in the apprenticeship of things of the spirit, some degree of imitation is inevitable. Learning is a mix of imitation and creation. Suffice it to think of *zazen*. We imitate a physical, mental and spiritual position that has been handed down to us for two thousand five hundred years.

However, since each of us lives intimately a life always new and always different from that of the others, even this imitation is realized in the context of a creative process. From theory alone, nobody is certain that the process he is undertaking is the one that should be undertaken.

We know we are on the right path if the sights we see while we move ahead with our lives correspond to the descriptions of those that have already been through it, because they have walked before us long the same path. In this case the problem is to understand which part of the template we should imitate, because we cannot see it. One of the most common errors common because it seems to provide a shortcut –is to claim that we know very well the sights on which, in reality, we have not yet set our eyes, that we had been there many times, while, instead, we have only heard about them second hand, by books for instance.

In addition, out of dullness or of fascination for exotism and novelty, or, again, to appear we are “in”, sometimes we imitate a cultural or linguistic form. This is what is happening very often in the West. As a result we enter a world that we will find it difficult to abandon: a world where competition is fierce, where we are expected to attain forms of behavior that are ideal and therefore unattainable, oppressed by teachers who see it their task to highlight the mistakes that mark us out, poor beginner from *them*, the *successful enlightened*, simply because they do not have to confront the same difficulties as we do. Also, if we make this experience in a monastery and we have good teachers and good models to follow, we learn relatively easily how to manage, direct, and represent rituals and ceremonies in the usual manner, codified centuries ago.

But more difficult it is to learn the internal and external behavior that comes from the “left unsaid” or the implicit content of a mature and articulate culture that is different from ours.

This is a doctrine imparted in a high handed but alluring manner by someone whom we have the misfortune it must be said – to follow. Therefore, if our teachers, raised in and by a certain culture, fail to realize that they are first of all unique and inimitable human beings, and only in a second instance social animals, and are convinced that every expression of theirs, from their most intimate behavior to the social clichés, are in themselves the universal way in which Buddhism must

be lived and transmitted, then we will be involved in a liturgical or cultural play, or in the imitation of a “style” fashioned by someone, while we are convinced to study and practice *Buddhadharma*.

This will be imitation and not re-creation, and it will lack the only “thing” that matters: the exercise of intimate freedom according to Buddha’s teachings. Even when this process at the beginning might produce a great satisfaction as a result of the success attained, which can be perceived and verified along the scales internal to this model, over the long run we will feel defrauded, marginalized, dominated and colonized.

We know since the very beginning that attaining a certain intimate and external behavior refined as it might be, and however many sacrifices we may have made to achieve it, does not provide a solution to our discomfort. And when we no longer can be blinded to this realization by mirroring ourselves in our petty and conceited successes, the sky seems to fall upon us.

Anne Cheng adds: «*From whatever angle you may want to look at it – kinship system, religious practice, political organization – the thought of ancient China is characterized by a very strong taste for order, or, more exactly, for the process of putting in order, which is lifted to the rank of supreme good*»⁶¹. Also: «*The famous expression from Analects “subdue your own self and return to property”*»⁶² *points to the need for a self-denying discipline aimed to tame man’s tendency to egocentrism and to internalize the humanity of one’s relationship with the others through rituals* »⁶³.

I strongly advise anyone who plans to study Buddhism as it is taught by Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Japanese masters, or by Western masters who have been raised and trained by the above, to meditate in depth the meaning of these two latest quotes .

For Confucius and for almost all who for two thousand five hundred years have been raised in his culture, sacrificing one’s self, one’s own individuality and uniqueness to the ceremonial and ritual behavior constructed around the superior/inferior system of hierarchy, is the guiding principle because it complies with the *li*, 理, *ri* or *kotowari* in Japanese, that is “principle, the natural order of things”⁶⁴. This entity, this *li* goes so deeply as to be in fact, the natural, spontaneous behavior, indeed the only valid behavior for the vast majority of people in the Far East.

On this issue, so writes Anne Cheng: «*The ritual spirit is not a grid that overlays the universe from the outside. It represents the intimate structure of the universe, the structure that we*

61A. Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Seuil 2002. (Cfr. A. Cheng, *Storia del pensiero cinese*, cit., I 39).

62Cfr. Confucio, *Dialoghi XII*, 1. Analects, James Legge’s translation:

<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/c/confucius/c748a/>

63Cfr. A. Cheng, *Storia del pensiero cinese*, cit., I 58.

64Originally, this sign would have pointed to the natural vein of jade: «The Chinese thought is steeped in the spirit of stones: this tests the resistance of jade and employs all his skills only to take advantage of the direction of the strata of the raw material to dug out the form that it had been hiding. », Cfr. L. Vandermeersch, *La Voie Royale*, Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient, Paris 1980, II 285.

must rediscover and bring out again». At the same time, the evocative power of Daoism pervades all thoughts on the “last things” and reassures men. We come from Nature and we will return to it⁶⁵.

As we read in the sixteenth chapter of the *Laozi*, Nature is alive, neutral, impersonal, present everywhere, welcoming and serene. In Daodejin XVI, we find: « *All things alike go through their processes of activity, and (then) we see them return (to their original state). .. This returning to their root is what we call the state of stillness* »⁶⁶

All this has been said in so many contexts and without any credible alternatives for so long that it has sedimented, so to say, in the most intimate layer of the conscience of men and women of the Far East. So much so that ritual behavior (with the implicit corollary of attachment to *those* rituals and therefore to *that* tradition) and trust in “nature” are the true religions of the Far East.

By true religion I mean something more solid and deeper than joining an established religion, like Buddhism or Christianity, even if it is done in all freedom. Very often, these religions become superstructural. They can prosper only in a soil that inevitably determines their direction and their quality ⁶⁷. «*For me Catholicism is the Western suit I wear over my Japanese kimono*» stated the Catholic Japanese writer Endo Shusaku⁶⁸.

The *kimono*⁶⁹ is the traditional Japanese dress, and here represents the “Japaneseness” ⁷⁰, *nihonshugi*, or “Japanism”. Here Shosaku wanted to say that he was Japanese in a deeper sense than he was Christian. It is clear for all to see how this on purpose stratified definition, represents the sense of our discourse in a fittingly complex manner. Matsumoto Shirō, a professor of Buddhism at the Komazawa Daigaku, the most important Buddhist university in Japan writes: «*As for my personal relationship with Japan , I can only say that I consider love of Japan a form of self love. I experience Japan as an extension of my own mind and body [...]. Still, the teaching of the Buddha is absolute, which leaves me no other choice than to conclude: a Buddhist must not love Japan*»⁷¹.

These words conclude professor Matsumoto’s famous essay entitled, *Buddhism and the Kami: against Japanism*⁷² dealing with *japaneseness* or 日本主義 *nihonshugi*, in which he implicitly recognizes that this sense of national identity is so strong that one must uproot it

⁶⁵For instance see *Daodejing* XVI and *Zhuangzi* XXII.

⁶⁶*Daodejing* XVI, in: James Legge’s translation of the Tao Teh King, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/216/216-h/216-h.htm>

⁶⁷Cfr. *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: the storm over critical Buddhism*, J. Hubbard & P. L. Swanson, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu 1997, 356.

⁶⁸In: D. Trotta, *Il racconto di un’anima*, introductive essay: Shundō Aoyama, *La voce del fiume*, Ed. San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1994, 70. For the quality of his thought and for his capacity to “read” both the East and the West, I have already quoted (cfr. *supra*, capp. I e II) the words of Endo Shusaku.

⁶⁹着物, literally “thing/mono” and “wear/ki”.

⁷⁰日本主義, *nihonshugi*, “Japanism” or “Nipponism”.

⁷¹Cfr. *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: the storm over critical Buddhism*, a c. di J. Hubbard & P. L. Swanson, cit., 373.

⁷²*Buddhism and the Kami: against Japanism*, in: S. Matsumoto, *Pratītyasamutpada and Emptiness: critiques of the doctrine of tathāgata-garbha*, Daizō Shuppan, Tokyo 1989, 99.

completely to be able to truly realize Buddha's teaching.

These words are in the same essay: «*Montesquieu is reported to have said that "I am of necessity a human being, but it is by accident that I happen to be a Frenchman". I find this flippant in comparison with Mishima⁷³'s assertion that being Japanese was "his destiny", or with what Uchimura Kanzō⁷⁴ wrote in his diary: "I have a desire to someday cease being a Christian and become a pure Japanese". Such words have a religious ring in them.*»⁷⁵.

Here the value attached by the Japanese to this deep sense of belonging is remarkable. For Mishima it is the truest meaning (*the true destiny*) of his humanity and for Uchimura, in spite of the fact that he is one of the best known personalities of heterodox Christianity in Japan, the Japanese roots are richer than his Christian roots.

All the above in good part explains why everybody thinks it is perfectly natural in the Far East that every school of Buddhism should be active almost entirely in the performance of funerals and of the many ceremonies for the commemoration of the dead, while instead none is expected to provide guidance to the living or an explanation of the reasons for human existence. The higher spiritual questions are already replied to "upstream". This explains also what people raised in a Catholic country find completely absurd: that in Japan is normal to celebrate baptism or "the presentation of the newborn" to the *Shintō* temple, marriage in a Catholic church and the funerals in a Buddhist temple instead. The search for a religious "service" has the aim to satisfy a deep need for ceremony, and therefore leads to identify, case by case, those who are, or are perceived to be: better, more refined, compassionate, solemn, fastidious or attentive to the beauty of the rituals and to the harmony of the ceremonies in the various situations.

Religion can be multifaceted because it has an instrumental value, while religiosity which is the primary bond with our *nature*, is not undermined even by multiple religious affiliations.

* *

Apparently, the scheme on which the Confucian doctrine is based is very simple. Heaven and Earth possess a special *status* which, by approximation, we could call *ideal*, which is why they are Heaven and Earth in capital letters as well. Even in their ideal dimension, they constitute an

⁷³Pen name of Hiraoka Kimitake, 1925–1970, Japanese writer and playwright. Moravia called him «a nostalgic nationalist, a decadent conservative». He committed traditional suicide (*seppuku*), after occupying the Ministry of Defense with his small personal army, to protest its policies.

⁷⁴Uchimura Kanzō: Tokyo 1861-1930, scholar, writer, journalist and pacifist. He founded a Christian movement still alive, Mukyōkai, "without church" which supported a Christianity without clergy and church, because this would be an obstacle against the profession of the true Christian faith. Cfr. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uchimura_Kanzo

⁷⁵ Cfr. *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: the storm over critical Buddhism*, a c. di J. Hubbard & P. L. Swanson, cit., 372.

unbreakable whole, in which the High and the Low are clearly identifiable.

In the world of men, this *natural order* manifests itself ritually in the relation ancestor/descendent and concretely in the relation father/son. The sequence with which generations follow one another is the relation that determines the individual's position in the world and, in particular, in society. To fit in this scheme, piety is the basis for the realization of the 仁 *ren*, the “true humanity”, *jin* in Japanese, where, for filial piety one must understand obedience and deference. The relation father/son is the basis on which the political world and its scheme ruler/ruled and all other kinship and social relation are founded as well: elder/younger brother, husband/wife, older/younger-friend and senior/junior co-worker.

The relations within the monastery are no exception to this rule, and are organized around the hierarchy abbot/monks and elder/junior monk. Since it mirrors the cosmic Order, this system, which always forms a hierarchy, comes first, precedes the application of any religion and culture.

Even Western techniques and culture can be easily adopted and absorbed because or until – they do not affect this substratum. Buddhism too, seeping into that substratum, could not avoid coming out modified, often⁷⁶ very significantly.

At a very deep level, there is a *point* where Buddhism and Confucianism cross path, and it is easy, at that point, to mistake the way. As is known, the aspect of Buddhism we can define *gnosis* is based on the awareness of the transience and emptiness of all phenomena, or the perception of the absence of independent life of every entity. For Buddhism, practice, both that done living every moment the complexity of life, and its concentrated form, which is *zazen*, consists in living this awareness concretely. That implies neither grasping nor holding any being or any phenomenon and allowing all beings and all phenomena do their thing in emptiness until they disappear. This is the origin of the attitude called “not grasping” during *zazen* and of the non attachment to worldly things in daily life, which – (please pay attention !) is also the gift of oneself. It is also well known that for Confucius, the human being exists only as a “relation”⁷⁷. He exists only in the network of relations. He is not a “self” separate and autonomous, but one of the infinite intersections of the Great Net, the cosmos. As a consequence, the realization of *ren* (*jin* in Japanese) implies renouncing one's own individuality, egoism and uniqueness. This renunciation is achieved essentially by ritualizing all forms of behavior.

For Confucius, every human relation indeed all relations –must be lived according to the ritual, the conventions: living as a human being means to behave according to the rituals. This is the

⁷⁶The greatness of the élites of the Chinese, and, more seldom, of the Japanese Zen schools, consisted essentially in their ability to disregard this state of affairs.

⁷⁷As already said, “relation” is the meaning implicit in *ren*, 仁, “true humanity”.

meaning of the following sentence: « *The Master said- Subdue your own self and return to property, this is ren-*». This is the synthesis of Confucian ethics. Ritual behavior marks men apart from animals, the from the barbarians, once again, the high from the low.

Legism radicalizes this position. In the writings produced in the Jixia Academy (called *Shokuka* in J.) one of which is the *Guanzi* we find this: «*Do away with the individual self (私, si, watakushi in Japanese, also said “small self”) for the public good (公, gong in C., kō in J., also “big self”)*»⁷⁸. The “big self” replaces the “small self” so that the established order in the nation and in society can hold sway. Similarly in the every day's life of Buddhist monasteries, often a very serious misunderstanding occurs. The rules are no longer a practice of transience. They no longer encourage the monks to freely settle in the middle position, and to learn that the emptiness of self constitutes a “fullness” ineffable and priceless in its absolute freedom and novelty.

Instead, monastic rules, the ritual, the ceremony and the liturgy become objective values, they constitute the “true way of doing things”. In many Japanese monasteries this attitude is pushed to its limits. Moulding man along the rules, achieving mastery in the performance of the rituals and of the complex ceremonies and in the formal behavior is regarded as the religious outcome which monks must strive to attain, the very purpose of Buddhism.

The realization of *bodhi*, awakening is mistaken for the realization of *yi/gi*, 義⁷⁹, or “rightness”, “justice”, but also “loyalty”, “devotion” and “norm”. In Buddhism, to realize *bodhi*, one must understand very clearly how, and then never give up. In Confucian “Buddhism” what matters is a right relationship with persons and things. This means that, instead of practicing abstention from the forms and things of the world and letting the spirit breathe freely, one practices renunciation to the creative abundance of the world in order to refashion it and to put it out again in a predetermined form. In this way, spiritual freedom is lost forever, because it is neither practiced nor valued, but bartered for mastery in behavior. The behavior rituals, rigidly based on the superior/inferior mechanism affect the whole of society.

This, and the ritualization of gestures, imply that every person must perform some sort of “dance” with the others, and this has a very pleasant, harmonious aesthetic in addition to practical – value. For Confucius, this harmony and the pleasure that it generates is what justify ritualism, the production of personal wellbeing for men, wellbeing that arises from behaving in harmony with the Order of Heaven. Often this complex, heterogeneous and articulate mixture of form and content is

⁷⁸Joyce C.H. Liu, *The Norm vs. the Altered State: a Biologicalized Phobic Structure*; Pólemos, Stásis: An International Symposium, Graduate Institute for Social Research and Cultural Studies Chiao Tung University, cfr: http://chst.nctu.edu.tw/war/speakers_subject.htm

⁷⁹In turn, the sign 義 is composed by two complex roots, on top 羊 below 我. 羊 means “sheep”, 我 means “ego”.

taken for Buddhism. If they want to avoid becoming, perhaps after years of efforts, experts in oriental liturgies or *virtuosi* in how to apply the Confucian social etiquette, Buddhist apprentices must remember that one thing is to learn a religion, and quite another to learn the form of one of its inculturations.

The point is that we must learn how to make our spirit, and from this follow naturally the ways in which our mind and our body work. The religious spirit determines the behavior, not the other way round, otherwise it makes no sense to speak of religious practice. For this to happen, it is essential to practice with the body, “to be body”, and to leave conceptualization aside. There is no notion to be learnt. At the same time we must strive to follow up on this, to make very sure that we lead a virtuous life, otherwise the practice with the body will only be a gymnastics. Finally, we must nurture a clear awareness of our impermanence and of the transience of all things and of all beings.

Then, to find someone else who is already able to keep a religious spirit alive in himself is almost as essential. If under very special circumstances this latter condition may not be indispensable,⁸⁰ it is nonetheless certain that we will never learn what soul it is that we must imitate, create and generate if we tag along someone who is unaware of this spirit and tries to encourage us to adopt forms of behavior practiced since centuries in his culture.

For him, this may be the way in which his spirit expresses itself on the path that frees from pain, but for us it is only a pantomime. Once the acting is over, all that remains is its uselessness.

Please, do not misunderstand my words, I am not saying that a Chinese, a Korean, a Japanese or a Vietnamese can not be a good Buddhist teacher, or that he must teach in a special way. A Chinese, a Korean, a Japanese, a Vietnamese can and must teach precisely in his own way. The problem is on **our** side. If our teachers are able to show and teach us how their soul lives *Buddha-dharma*, we must live and express it through our own cultural form: like a new fruit nurtured by an old root.

Even if religions always live or manifest themselves also as cultural forms, no cultural form can be smuggled as it were a religion, or as it were the only medium through which a religion could live.

Mauricio Yūshin Marassi
Translated into English by Carlo Geneletti

⁸⁰«If you meet a caring friend, a well meaning and virtuous companion, go along with him, happy and aware, even if you have to overcome many obstacles. If you do not meet a caring friend, a well meaning and virtuous companion then, as a king that renounces the kingdom just conquered, walk ahead lonely as a rhinoceros», *Suttanipāta* 45-46.