EASTERN PHILOSOPHY AND HOLISTIC EDUCATION

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Perennial Philosophy as a Foundation for Holistic Education

Holistic education has been concerned with providing a comprehensive worldview upon which the undertaking of education can be built, rather than just providing practical approaches. As the founding editor of Holistic Education Review, Ron Miller (1991) states that conventional education in an industrial-age culture has been based on a materialistic worldview, a reductionist attitude, an economic orientation, and the divisions between groups of people. By contrast, he regards a holistic worldview as promoting a reverence for life, an ecological perspective, a spiritual view of human beings, and a global perspective (pp. 1–3).

In his important work, The Holistic Curriculum, John Miller (2007) adopts “perennial philosophy” as a foundation of holistic education. “The ‘perennial philosophy’ (Huxley, 1968) provides the philosophic underpinnings of the holistic curriculum. The perennial philosophy holds that all life is connected in an interdependent universe. Stated differently, we experience relatedness through a fundamental ground of being” (p. 16). In this way, the perennial philosophy offers a valuable worldview to overcome fragmentary approaches in conventional education.

Authors in perennial philosophy have integrated the essential teachings of world wisdom traditions. According to Aldous Huxley (1968), who contributed to the expansion of this philosophy with his book, Perennial Philosophy, the perennial philosophy (philosophia perennis) explores “a divine Reality” or “the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being” (p. 1) to realize the eternal Self that is “identical with, or at least akin to, the divine Ground” (pp. 7–8). He writes, “The last end of man, the ultimate reason for human existence, is unitive knowledge of the divine Ground” (p. 29). It is important to note that Huxley (1975) in his last years developed a pioneering concept of holistic education called “nonverbal humanities” by introducing ideas of perennial philosophy (see Nakagawa, 2002).

Anna Lemkow (1990) states principles of perennial philosophy as follows: “the oneness and unity of all life; the all-pervasiveness of ultimate Reality or the Absolute; the multi-dimensionality or hierarchical character of existence” (p. 23). First of all, the ultimate reality is transcendent and immanent. “It is postulated that the Absolute transcends all apparent separateness; it is indescribable, ineffable and unknowable. Though it lies beyond all thought, it is not remote, but resides within the human heart, 'closer than hands and feet’” (pp. 23–24). The ultimate reality is boundless and beyond any description, yet simultaneously pervading and manifesting itself in everything.
Lemkow also emphasizes the multidimensionality as well as the nondual oneness of reality. “Thus
the universe must be a unity. But it is also multi-dimensional, and so organized that each dimension
or level of being produces the next, less inclusive level, from the most unitive to the most particular”
(p. 38). The principle that the universe is a multidimensional manifestation of the ultimate reality
is correspondingly reflected in the human being. A human is a microcosm of the macrocosm (“as
above, so below”), and so he or she is, in fact, a multidimensional existence. Lemkow states, “Just
as the universe is composed of a hierarchy of levels of being, so is man. Man is essentially one with
the universe” (p. 36). Regarding this aspect, Huxley (1968) refers to three levels of body, psyche,
and spirit:

\[ \text{[M]} \text{an is a kind of trinity composed of body, psyche and spirit. Selfiness or personality is a prod-
uct of the first two elements. The third element . . . is akin to, or even identical with, the divine}
\]
\[ \text{Spirit that is the Ground of all being.} \]

\( (p. \ 48) \)

Huston Smith (1976) describes a cosmology commonly accepted through ages that includes four
levels of reality: the terrestrial plane, the intermediate plane, the celestial plane, and the “Infinite.”
Correspondingly, the levels of selfhood include body, mind, soul, and spirit. Compared to Huxley’s
model, the dimension of soul is added. The soul is defined as follows:

\[ \text{The soul is the final locus of our individuality. . . . [I]t lies deeper than mind. If we equate mind}
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\[ \text{with the stream of consciousness, the soul is the source of this stream; it is also its witness while}
\]
\[ \text{never itself appearing within the stream as a datum to be observed. It underlies, in fact, not only}
\]
\[ \text{the flux of mind but all the changes through which an individual passes.} \]

\( (p. \ 74) \)

While the soul is the inner self that observes and witnesses the body–mind, spirit is one with the
Infinite as ultimate reality. “If soul is the element in man that relates to God, Spirit is the element
that is identical with Him. . . . Spirit is the Atman that is Brahman, the aspect of man that is the
Buddha–nature . . .” (p. 87).

Ken Wilber (1997) also regards the perennial philosophy as a multidimensional theory: “Central
to the perennial philosophy is the notion of the Great Chain of Being. The idea itself is fairly simple.
Reality, according to the perennial philosophy, is not one-dimensional” (p. 39). Wilber often
describes five dimensions: matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit. Similar to Smith’s view, he consid-
ers soul to be “the highest level of individual growth” as well as “the final barrier, the final knot,
to complete enlightenment or supreme identity” (p. 47). The soul is “transcendental witness” that
“stands back from everything it witnesses” (p. 47). Eventually, the soul turns into spirit. The spirit
is pure awareness that is always universally present. Since pure awareness has no object to be wit-
nessed, it becomes “nondual awareness” and turns out to be one with everything. Wilber writes,
“Once we push through the witness position, then the soul or witness itself dissolves and there is
only the play of nondual awareness, awareness that does not look at objects but is completely one
with all objects” (p. 47). Everything arises in this nondual awareness, and so it is a manifestation
of the spirit.

Izutsu’s Reconstruction of Eastern Philosophy

Toshihiko Izutsu, a Japanese scholar of Eastern philosophy, explored core features across diverse
trends of Eastern thought such as Vedanta, Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, I-Ching, and Sufism in
his attempt to reconstruct Eastern philosophy as postmodernist thought. What he brought about is a view of perennial philosophy based on Eastern perspectives (Izutsu, 2008a,b; see Nakagawa, 2008, 2010). Izutsu (1984) found that Eastern perspectives are identical in describing reality in terms of multidimensionality: “Existence or Reality as ‘experienced’ on supra-sensible levels reveals itself as of a multistratified structure” (p. 479).

For example, in Tao Te Ching, Lao-tzǔ (2001, translated by Izutsu) suggests such dimensions as the Way or Non-Being (the Nameless), One, Being (Heaven and Earth), and the ten thousand things. Tao Te Ching symbolically draws out the evolution of the universe: “The Way begets one. One begets two. Two begets three. And three begets the ten thousand things” (p. 108). As Izutsu (1984) explains, “From the Way as the metaphysical Absolute . . . there emerges the One. The One is . . . the metaphysical Unity of all things . . . . From this Unity there emerges ‘two,’ that is, the cosmic duality of Heaven and Earth” (pp. 400–401). Heaven and Earth imply yang (the active force) and yin (the passive force). Then, interaction between these two forces gives rise to the third “vital force of harmony,” and the combination of them yields the ten thousand things.

According to Izutsu, a multistratified structure generally involves three major levels from the surface level through intermediate realms to the metaphysical depths of reality. Distinctions among things on the surface reality are produced by the “semantic articulation” of the mind (Izutsu, 2008b, p. 124). For Lao-tzǔ (2001), “The Named is the mother of ten thousand things” (p. 28). The middle realm contains symbolic and archetypical images that emerge into myths, cosmologies, celestial figures, sacred words, and other symbolic forms. To denote this dimension, Izutsu favors the concept of mundus imaginalis (Corbin, 1995), or an imaginative world of symbolic images. The mundus imaginalis is revealed only through the supra-sensory perception of the soul. Then, even symbolic articulation dissolves away, and the deepest dimension of reality is disclosed, which Izutsu (2008b) referred to as “the zero point” of consciousness and Being (p. 147). Eastern ways of contemplation in general aim at realizing the zero point.

Furthermore, Izutsu (2008b) emphasizes that once one attains the zero point the person must return to the surface reality. The zero point is a turning point from seeking to returning in the whole process of contemplation. In the returning path, each finite existence comes to reveal “the Unarticulated” (p. 149). This is the true ultimate reality viewed from Eastern perspectives. Izutsu (1984) writes, “The only ‘reality’ (in the true sense of the term) is the Absolute revealing itself as it really is in the sensible forms which are nothing but the loci of its self-manifestation” (p. 480). In this regard, Eastern philosophy is an attempt to reconstruct the entire world fundamentally by deconstructing it to the zero point. In doing so, a boundless immensity is being embodied in each existence.

**Five Dimensions of Reality**

Eastern philosophy contributes to holistic education particularly by incorporating such ideas as the zero point and its manifestation into the surface reality. Introducing these ideas into the discussion of holistic education, I have developed the concept of *five dimensions of reality* as a worldview of holistic education (Nakagawa, 2000). The five dimensions of reality include:

- **Objective reality**: the phenomenal world of separate things;
- **Social reality**: the semantic articulation of the objective reality;
- **Cosmic reality**: the interconnection in nature and the universe;
- **Infinite reality**: the deepest dimension or the zero point;
- **Universal reality**: the nondual wholeness of all dimensions.
Objective reality is the phenomenal world composed of separate things arising in our ordinary perception. Since we are identified with this reality, we tend to take it as the only reality that exists. With such conditioning, we not only perceive things as objective entities separate from us but also ourselves as separate egos. However, objective reality comes into being through the “semantic articulation” of the mind to differentiate an immediate experience of “what is” into separate things. In this sense, objective reality consists of meanings that are semantically articulated. This semantic foundation is called social reality, because the semantic articulation of meanings is generated and maintained through our communicative actions.

Eastern thinkers fully recognized the mind’s function to create distinctions among things; however, they concluded that this function is the primary cause of our delusive perception and false attachment. For example, the central thinker of Mahayana Buddhism, Nāgārjuna (1995), refers to “mental fabrication” (prapañca). In the Middle Stanzas, he states, “Action and misery come from conceptual thought. This comes from mental fabrication” (p. 48). The Awakening of Faith, a treatise on Mahayana philosophy attributed to Asvaghosha (1967), maintains that “the deluded mind” gives rise to the phenomenal distinctions of things: “Since all things are, without exception, developed from the mind and produced under the condition of deluded thoughts, all differentiations are no other than the differentiations of one’s mind itself” (p. 48). In a similar way, Advaita Vedanta holds that “ignorance” (avidyā) produces phenomenal differences among things. Ignorance means “superimposition,” a function of the mind that imposes partial qualities upon absolute reality.

Cosmic reality is an all-embracing dimension of nature and the universe in which everything is interconnected to everything else. Faced with today’s ecological crisis, holistic education has strongly introduced this dimension into the framework of education. Cosmic reality is not only comprehended by conceptual knowledge of ecology but also by direct connection with nature and the universe through contemplative awareness. Stated differently, the cosmic reality is experienced by the soul that goes beyond the differentiations of the mind.

Even a cosmic reality turns into infinite reality, or the zero point of reality. This dimension has been diversely called nirvana, sunyata (emptiness), and wu (nothingness) in Buddhism, turiya (the fourth state of consciousness) and nirguna Brahman (formless absolute) in Vedanta, tao (the way) in Taoism, and li (principle) in Neo-Confucianism. These concepts are describing something infinite beyond qualifications. Following Smith (1976), this is the dimension of the “Infinite” or the spirit. The fullest awakening to the infinite reality is called moksha (liberation) in Hinduism, bodhi (awakening) in Buddhism, satori (enlightenment) in Japanese Zen, and fana in Sufism.

Advaita Vedanta regards the infinite reality as pure awareness. For example, the legendary sage, Ashtavakra, states that the nature of reality is “pure awareness” (Byrom, 1990). Shankara (1978), the greatest philosopher of Advaita, remarks, “The Atman is the witness, infinite consciousness, revealer of all things but distinct from all” (p. 69). Sri Ramana Maharshi (1985), a modern Indian sage, says:

You are awareness. Awareness is another name for you. Since you are awareness there is no need to attain or cultivate it. All that you have to do is to give up being aware of other things, that is of the not-Self. If one gives up being aware of them then pure awareness alone remains, and that is the Self.

(pp. 11–12)

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj (1982) makes the same point: “Awareness is primordial; it is the original state, beginningless, endless, uncaused, unsupported, without parts, without change” (p. 29).

Ch’an Buddhism is a way of awakening to one’s true nature on this level. For example, Huang Po (1958) calls it the “One Mind” (h’sin): “All the Buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but the One Mind, beside which nothing exists. This Mind, which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible” (p. 29). The One Mind is ever-present as the deepest ground of our being.
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It is important to recognize that Eastern thought does not see the infinite reality as the final phase. As Izutsu made it clear, there is a turning point in contemplation from the end of seeking to the returning path, for the infinite reality is not seen as a transcendental realm distanced from the ordinary world. Here, we come to experience this world as something identical with the infinite reality. The whole world is fundamentally transformed in a way that the infinite manifests itself through the finite world. This transformed reality is called universal reality, where all dimensions are unified in a nondual manner. In this way, the twofold movement of seeking and returning marks a dynamic character in the Eastern way of contemplation to restore the nondual wholeness of multidimensional reality.

Shankara (1978) states, “This universe is an effect of Brahman. It can never be anything else but Brahman. Apart from Brahman, it does not exist” (p. 70). Brahman appearing in the universe is called saguna Brahman. S. Radhakrishnan (1994) explains this as follows:

Supra-cosmic transcendence and cosmic universality are both real phases of the one Supreme. In the former aspect the Spirit is in no way dependent on the cosmic manifold; in the latter the Spirit functions as the principle of the cosmic manifold. The supra-cosmic silence and the cosmic integration are both real. The two, nirguna and saguna Brahman, Absolute and God, are not different.

(p. 64)

Nāgārjuna (1995) identifies nirvana with samsara (cyclic existence): “There is not the slightest difference / Between nirvāṇa and cyclic existence” (p. 75). Likewise, Huxley (1968) writes, “For the fully enlightened, totally liberated person, samsara and nirvana, time and eternity, the phenomenal and the Real, are essentially one” (p. 342). Seng-Ts’an (1993), the third patriarch of Ch’an, claims in his On Trust in the Mind: “Being—this is nonbeing, nonbeing—this is being. Any view at variance with this must not be held!” (p. 152). Mahayana philosophy maintains that the formless emptiness (sunyata) is one with the forms of the world.

Mahayana Buddhism uses the concept of tathatā (suchness) to imply the universal reality. According to D. T. Suzuki (1996), “Tathatā is the viewing of things as they are: it is an affirmation through and through. I see a tree, and I state that it is a tree” (p. 263). Absolute affirmation of suchness arises in the realization of emptiness; that is, an ordinary being is opened up to boundless depths and turns out into a wondrous being that manifests the infinite as it is. Suzuki continues to say:

If śūnyatā denies or rejects everything, tathatā accepts and upholds everything; the two concepts may be considered as opposing each other, but it is the Buddhist idea that they are not contradictory. . . . In truth, tathatā is śūnyatā, and śūnyatā is tathatā; things are tathatā because of their being śūnyatā.

(p. 264)

The Flower Ornament Scripture, the principal sutra of the Hua-yen school in Mahayana Buddhism, also conveys the universal reality, using the concept of “interpenetration” as follows: “One world system enters all, / And all completely enter one; / Their substances and characteristics remain as before, no different: / Incomparable, immeasurable, they all pervade everywhere” (Cleary, 1993, p. 215). Since everything is fundamentally empty and transparent, everything mutually interpenetrates everything else. Hua-yen philosophy calls this the dharmadhatu of shih-shih, or the realm of unobstructed interpenetration of all things.

Furthermore, the universal reality is a place where all-embracing compassion (karunā) flows out from clear wisdom (prajñā) that penetrates into emptiness and interpenetration of reality. Centered in emptiness, the agent of action no longer exists, and the action becomes what Lao-tzǔ (2001) calls “non-action” (wu-wei): “If one pursues the Way, (knowledge) decreases day by day. Decreasing, and
ever more decreasing, one finally reaches the state of non-action. Once one has reached the state of non-action, nothing is left undone” (p. 117). Similarly, Ramana Maharshi (1985) states:

As the activities of the wise man exist only in the eyes of others and not in his own, although he may be accomplishing immense tasks, he really does nothing. . . . For he knows the truth that all activities take place in his mere presence and that he does nothing. Hence he will remain as the silent witness of all the activities taking place.

(p. 137)

The selfless action is really a compassionate action, because a fundamental unity is realized without intervention of the personal ego.

At last, the Zen Master Dōgen (1995) provides us with an important formulation to think on holistic education:

To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.

(p. 70)

In forgetting the self, the self becomes selfless, dissolving into the interpenetration of myriad things. The primary aim of this cultivation is to empty the self toward the infinite reality. Then, the selfless self emerges on the universal reality with “no trace of realization” (see Nakagawa, 2014).

Within a framework outlined above, a definition of holistic education would be given as an attempt to explore and realize multiple dimensions in our existence. Even if the last two dimensions of infinite and universal realities appear to have little to do with education, these ideas become essential, seen from Eastern perspectives. Therefore, holistic education must involve such concepts as awakening and enlightenment, following the suggestion of Robert Thurman (1998) who celebrates an “enlightenment-oriented education system” (p. 119) in his analysis of the work of the Buddha. Thurman writes, “Education is the major tool of truth-conquest. . . . It promotes enlightenment as the flowering of the individual’s own awareness, sensibility, and powers, and thereby develops a strong society” (p. 126).

Admittedly, an idea such as “enlightenment-oriented education” looks too lofty to be applied to everyday practice of education; however, as Lex Hixon (1989) points out, “Enlightenment is not a magical transcendence of the human condition but the full flowering of humanity. . . . Some taste of this Enlightenment which consciously touches the Ultimate is possible for each of us” (p. xi). Education needs to be much more concerned with enlightenment as a latent potentiality within our nature.

The Way of Awareness

Eastern wisdom traditions developed numerous approaches to contemplation for realizing enlightenment. Holistic education has been a foremost endeavor to integrate contemplation into education, considering it to be a basic practice of education. The way of enhancing awareness has been one of the most simple and elementary practices from ancient times. According to Charles Tart (1994), “To oversimplify, I can summarize the essence of the higher spiritual paths simply by saying, Be openly aware of everything, all the time. As a result of this constant and deepening mindfulness, everything else will follow” (pp. 25–26). Awareness is to notice what is really taking place at every moment without interpretation or judgment of the mind.
The Buddha values awareness or mindfulness (sati) as an essential path of liberating us from *samsara* to attain *nirvana*. In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha says, “The path to the Deathless is awareness; / Unawareness, the path of death” (Carter & Palihawadana, 2000, p. 6). In addition, describing the path of mindfulness in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha states, “That is why we said that this path . . . is the most wonderful path, which helps beings realize purification, transcend grief and sorrow, destroy pain and anxiety, travel the right path, and realize nirvana” (Nhat Hanh, 1990, p. 23). In his last novel, *Island*, Huxley (1972) writes, “Everybody’s job—enlightenment. Which means, here and now, the preliminary job of practising all the yogas of increased awareness” (p. 236). The practice of awareness is for him “the only genuine yoga, the only spiritual exercise worth practising” (p. 40). Thus, all of them suggest that what is important is to establish “awareness” as such (see Nakagawa, 2008, 2009).

The practice of enhancing awareness has twofold implications because awareness has an intermediate position between the body–mind and pure awareness. On the one hand, since our surface consciousness is, at most times, occupied by the body–mind process, awareness serves as a way of dis-identification with the body–mind by witnessing what is going on in the body–mind. This brings about various benefits and improvements in the body–mind conditions. Jiddu Krishnamurti (1954) comments on this:

> When you are passively aware, you will see that out of that passivity . . . the problem has quite a different significance; which means there is no longer identification with the problem and therefore there is no judgement and hence the problem begins to reveal its content. If you are able to do that constantly, continuously, then every problem can be solved fundamentally, not superficially.

(pp. 96–97)

On the other hand, awareness reveals pure awareness as the supreme identity of our existence. The continual practice of awareness may lead to the point where the observing self dissolves itself into pure awareness, and everything emerges in nondual awareness. Wilber (1997) writes:

> When I rest in the pure and simple Witness, I will even begin to notice that the Witness itself is not a separate thing or entity, set apart from what it witnesses. All things arise within the Witness, so much so that the Witness itself disappears into all things.

(p. 292)

Nisargadatta Maharaj (1982) describes the state of pure and nondual awareness as follows: “I saw that in the ocean of pure awareness, on the surface of the universal consciousness, the numberless waves of the phenomenal worlds arise and subside beginninglessly and endlessly. As consciousness, they are all me” (p. 30). Since awareness no longer identifies exclusively with anything, as Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan (1980) explain, “the me/not me dichotomy is transcended and such persons experience themselves as being both nothing and everything. They are both pure awareness (no thing) and the entire universe (every thing)” (pp. 58–59).

Holistic education needs to provide an enlarged picture of the education of awareness from the elementary to the highest levels. It is important to remember that Huxley (1978) suggested such a vision when he wrote on the Alexander Technique, a re-education technique of the use of the body–mind. He combined this technique with the mystic’s technique of increasing awareness to build “a totally new type of education.”

Be that as it may, the fact remains that Alexander’s technique for the conscious mastery of the primary control is now available, and that it can be combined in the most fruitful way with the technique of the mystics for transcending personality through increasing awareness of ultimate
reality. It is now possible to conceive of a totally new type of education affecting the entire range of human activity, from physiological, through the intellectual, moral, and practical, to the spiritual—an education which, by teaching them the proper use of the self, would preserve children and adults from most of the diseases and evil habits that now afflict them; an education whose training in inhibition and conscious control would provide men and women with the psychophysical means for behaving rationally and morally; an education which in its upper reaches, would make possible the experience of ultimate reality.

(p. 152; this article originally appeared in The Saturday Review of Literature, Oct. 25, 1941)

The somatic approach, such as the Alexander Technique, cultivates elementary awareness on the physical plane by paying attention to immediate experiences of the bodily movements and senses, and it becomes a basis for further development of awareness. Moreover, awareness gives insight and understanding into the nature of the mind. Then, enhancing awareness may culminate in an awakening to ultimate reality. Holistic education acknowledges that awareness is, indeed, extremely relevant to the multiple dimensions of our existence.

References


