Perennial Issues

by Ajahn Thanissaro

Toward the end of World War II, Aldous Huxley published an anthology, *The Perennial Philosophy*, proposing that there is a common core of truths to all the world's great religions. These truths clustered around three basic principles: that the Self is by nature divine, that this nature is identical with the divine Ground of Being, and that the ideal life is one spent in the quest to realize this non-dual truth.

In the years since Huxley published his anthology, the idea of a perennial philosophy has exerted wide influence. In particular, it has opened the minds of many Westerners to the idea that religions of the East, such as Buddhism, have something valuable to offer, and that the preference of one religion over another could be simply a matter of personal taste. People with a positive relationship to the Judeo-Christian tradition could adopt Buddhist teachings and practices without conflict; those with a negative relationship to the Judeo-Christian tradition could find spiritual nurture in Buddhism, free from the faith demands of the synagogue or the church. In this way, the idea of a perennial philosophy has eased the way of many Westerners into Buddhist thought and practice. And to this day, the principles of the perennial philosophy—as outlined by Huxley and the host of perennial philosophers who have followed in his wake—have provided an underpinning for how Buddhism is taught in the West. When Rumi is quoted in a Dhamma talk, the perennial philosophy is speaking.

But even though the idea of a perennial philosophy has provided an opening to the Dhamma, the question arises: Is it reliable? Has it distorted the Dhamma in the process? A good way to answer these questions is to take a closer look at the tenets of perennial philosophy, to see how they stand up to scrutiny on their own strengths, at the same time comparing them with what the Buddha taught.

Perennial philosophers base their thinking on two claims. The first is a fact-claim: all the great religious traditions of the world share a common core of beliefs. The second is a value-claim: the commonality of these beliefs is proof that they are true.

The idea of such a perennial philosophy is attractive. It suggests a way of arriving at religious truths that are universal and objective, rather than culturally conditioned. It offers a plot of common ground where different religions, instead of fighting over their differences, can live in harmony and peace. In fact, some perennial philosophers maintain that the objectivity of perennial philosophy makes it so scientifically respectable that it can provide the framework by which all human knowledge—spiritual and scientific—can be brought together in an overarching theory that allots to each body of knowledge its proper function and place.

However, there are problems with both of the claims on which perennial philosophy is

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based—problems that undermine the validity of the perennial philosophers' project and deflect their attention from more important issues that any quest for spiritual objectivity should address.

The problems with the fact-claim derive from the methodology used for establishing the common core of the great traditions. The central question tackled by the perennial philosophy, we are told, is that of our true identity—"What is my true self?"—and the answer to that question is that our true self is identical with Being as a whole. We are all One, and our common identity extends to the ground and source of all things. To arrive at this answer, though, the perennial philosophers have had to discount many of the teachings—found in most of the world's major religions—that posit a separate identity for each person, and a creator of the universe separate from its creation.

To get around this difficulty, perennial philosophers have tried to limit the range of what they mean by a "great religious tradition." They draw the line around this concept in one of two ways. The first is to draw a distinction, inherited from the Romantics, between conventional religious doctrines and the insights of direct religious or mystical experience. Mystical experience is the direct apprehension of inner truths. Conventional doctrines are the corruption of those truths, formulated by people of a lower level of religious inspiration, influenced by social, cultural, or political factors. Thus perennial philosophers claim that they are justified in ignoring conventional doctrines and drawing their raw data only from reports of mystical experience, for these are closest to the truths of direct experience.

The problem here is that many accounts of direct religious experiences do not support the tenets of perennial philosophy. The Buddha's Awakening is a case in point. That Awakening obviously qualifies as a direct religious experience, and yet the descriptions of it found in the earliest records, the Pali canon, contain nothing to support the perennial philosophy's answer to the question of personal identity. They don't even address the question. In fact, there are passages in the Pali canon where the Buddha denounces questions of identity and being—"Who am I? What am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?" (MN 2)—as inappropriate entanglements blocking the path to Awakening.

Perennial philosophers have used two tactics to get around this difficulty. One is to cite the Pali texts but to re-interpret them. The teaching on not-self, they say, is simply an indirect way of approaching the basic tenet of perennial philosophy: if one abandons one's identification with the aggregates of the small self, one awakens to one's identity with the larger self, the Oneness of the All. Even though the Awakening account makes no mention of a larger self or of any feelings of oneness, the perennial philosophers assume by extrapolation from accounts in other traditions that they must have been present in the Buddha's experience, and that either he neglected to mention them or his followers dropped them from their records. The problem here is that the Pali canon assigns feelings of oneness and non-duality to mundane levels of concentration, and not to the transcendent (AN 10:29). It also lumps views of an infinite self with views of a finite self as equally untenable (DN 15). In fact, MN 22 singles out the idea of an eternal self, at one with the cosmos, as "utterly and completely the teaching of a fool." And even though the Pali canon admits that its description of the Buddha's Awakening is incomplete (SN 56:31), there is no reason to believe that the unexpressed essence of his Awakening would be expressed in a tenet that he explicitly said to abandon.

This difficulty has led to a second tactic for dealing with the problem of the Pali canon: to dismiss it entirely in favor of Mahāyāna texts that fit better with the tenets of perennial philosophy. Rather than treating Theravāda Buddhism as a complete tradition with its own integrity, perennial philosophers adopt the Mahāyāna polemical stance that Theravāda is simply an incomplete—Huxley called it "primitive"—fragment of a tradition that finds its explicit completion only in the Mahāyāna itself.

The perennial philosophers' reasons for adopting this stance relate to the second way in which they delimit the meaning of "great religious tradition": the implicit value-claim that non-dualism is superior to dualism or pluralism. The superiority of non-dualism, they say, is both conceptual and ethical. Conceptually it is more inclusive, encompassing a larger view. The erasing of distinctions is superior to the creation of distinctions. Ethically, non-dualism leads to acts of kindness and compassion: when people sense their essential oneness, they are more likely to treat one another with the same care they would treat themselves. Thus the great religious traditions must, by definition, be non-dualistic.

Both the conceptual and the ethical arguments for non-dualism, however, are open to question. Conceptually, there is no proof that a non-dual view is necessarily more encompassing that a dual or pluralistic view. A person who has had a direct experience of duality may have touched something that lies outside the oneness comprehended by the non-dualist. The Pali interpretation of *nibbāna* is an example: *nibbāna* lies outside the oneness of *jhāna*, and even the Allness of the All—the entire range of the six senses (including the mind) and their objects (SN 35:23; MN 49). It neither includes them nor acts as their ground or source (MN 1). At the same time, there are many areas of life in which distinctions are clearly superior to a lack of distinctions. When you need brain surgery, you want a doctor who is clear about the distinction between skillful and unskillful methods. A person who sees distinctions may be detecting subtle differences that a non-dualist simply hasn't noticed.

Ethically, the superiority of non-dualism is even harder to prove. To begin with, the notion of ethical superiority is in and of itself a dualistic position: if compassion is better than cruelty, there has to be a distinction between the two. Secondly, there is the problem of theodicy, the explanation for the source of evil in a just universe. If all things come from One Source, where does evil come from? One common non-dualist answer is that it comes from ignorance of our essential oneness, but that simply drives the question back another step: where does ignorance come from, if not from the One Source? How can the One Source be ignorant of itself? Is it incompetent? Is it playing an inhumane hide-and-seek game?

This issue of theodicy has been argued repeatedly over the ages in every tradition that posits a single source for the cosmos, and the non-dualist answers eventually come down to three: evil is either illusory or necessary or both. But if you can say that evil is illusory, it's a sign that you've never been victimized by evil. If you say that it's necessary, then what incentive is there for people not to do it? Those who want to do evil can simply say that they're performing a necessary function in the world. This point is

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illustrated by the Indian legend of the murderer who met a philosophical non-dualist on the road and challenged him to give one reason, consistent with his philosophy, for why he shouldn't allow himself to be stabbed. The non-dualist was unable to do so, and so met his death.

Thus it's apparent that the fact-claim of perennial philosophy—that it is giving voice to the essential message of all the world's great religious traditions—depends on a very restricted definition of "all." The great religious traditions are by definition those who agree with its principles. Those who don't are lesser traditions and so may be discounted. This means that the perennial philosophers' comments about "all great religions" are not simple observations about a range of phenomena whose boundaries are already widely accepted. Instead, they're an attempt to define those boundaries—and a very exclusionary one at that. There's no way that such a restricted vision of the world's religious traditions could provide a rallying point that would unite them in peace and harmony. It simply adds one more divisive voice to the clamor.

However, even if the fact-claim of a perennial philosophy were better based, there would still be reason to question its value-claim: that consensus is proof of truth. Even if the great traditions did share a common core of beliefs, that would be no guarantee of their validity. No reputable body of knowledge has ever viewed simple consensus as proof of a proposition's truth. The history of science is littered with truths that were once universally accepted and now no longer are. It's also studded with stories of ideas that were originally rejected because they bucked the consensus but later were established as true. This shows that consensus is not proof. It's valid only if it follows on proof. And the standards for proof are to be sought in the story of how one truth overthrows another. Invariably, as we read through history, we find that this happens because the new truth is better in one of two ways: either in terms of the method used to arrive at it or in terms of its uses, the beneficial actions it inspires. Galileo's ideas on matter and acceleration were accepted over Aristotle's because they were based on better experiments. Newton's, and not Aristotle's, are still used by NASA because they have been found more useful in getting rockets to Mars.

This historical fact suggests that truth-claims are established, not by consensus, but by human activity: the actions that lead to the discovery of truths and those that result from their acceptance. And if ever there were an issue that a scientific inquiry into religion should address, this is it: How should the relation between truth and activity best be understood, and how should it be applied to greatest advantage? If this issue is not addressed, how can we know what to do to find truths, or what to do with them once they're found?

So far, however, perennial philosophers have had nothing to say on this topic. In fact, they repeatedly state that the question of which methods—or non-methods—the great religions have used to arrive at their consensus is immaterial. All that matters is that they agree. But what if all those methods were questionable? And what if their consensus creates more problems than it solves? As we have already noted, the non-dualistic stance proposed by the perennial philosophers, if carefully questioned,

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has trouble speaking to the reality of evil or providing an incentive against doing it. Thus they fail both tests for verifying truths: they are non-committal on the issue of what actions are needed to discover spiritual truths, and they propose a truth that unwittingly opens the door to evil actions that would result from accepting their claims.

So, given the weaknesses in the fact-claims and value-claims on which perennial philosophy is based, does that mean that the quest for objective spiritual truths is doomed to failure? Not necessarily. It simply means that the perennial philosophers have been asking the wrong questions and using a faulty methodology to answer them. A more fruitful line of inquiry would be to focus on the spiritual implications of the question raised above: How should the relation between truth and activity best be understood, and how should it be applied to greatest advantage? This question lies at the basis of the scientific method, so any scientific account of religion would have to begin here. This study could start by searching the religious traditions of the world, not for their fact-statements, but for their statements on what actions are needed to verify facts. These truth/action claims could then be compared and put to the test.

And this is an area where the Pali canon has a great deal to say. Its descriptions of the Buddha's Awakening—focusing on karma, causality, and the four noble truths—directly address the question of how truth and activity are related. The Buddha's realizations concerning karma and causality focus on the way beliefs and actions influence one another. His insights into the four noble truths focus on the way karma and causality can best be put to use to bring an end to suffering. His Awakening provided answers to the questions of (1) what action is, (2) what the highest happiness is that action can produce, (3) what beliefs lead to the most skillful actions, and (4) what actions can provide an adequate test for those beliefs.

Furthermore, the Pali canon contains explicit instructions on how the Buddha's teachings are to be tested by others. His famous instructions to the Kalamas (AN 3:65), that they should know for themselves, are accompanied by detailed standards—unfortunately, considerably less famous—on what procedures any valid "knowing for oneself" should entail.

So in this case, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These dhammas [teachings, mental qualities, actions] are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these dhammas are criticized by the wise; these dhammas, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering'—then you should abandon them…

Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These dhammas are skillful; these dhammas are blameless; these dhammas are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to well-being & to happiness'—then you should enter & remain in them.

The canon also provides precise instructions for how to judge the results of one's actions, and how to learn from one's mistakes.

Whenever you want to do a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I want to do—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on

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reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then any bodily action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction… it would be a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any bodily action of that sort is fit for you to do.

While you are doing a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I am doing—is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both… you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not… you may continue with it.

Having done a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I have done—did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it… you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction… it was a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities.

Similarly with verbal actions and mental actions, except that the last paragraph on mental actions states:

Having done a mental action, you should reflect on it: 'This mental action I have done—did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both… then you should feel distressed, ashamed, & disgusted with it. Feeling distressed, ashamed, & disgusted with it, you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction… it was a skillful mental action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities. (MN 61)

Whether the canon's instructions for testing religious teachings are adequate and convincing may be subject to debate. But they provide a clear starting point for exploring the issue of what to do with fact-claims and value-claims—the first issue that any objective inquiry into spiritual truths should address.

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