Reading Resources

Rational and intuitive knowledge

In this extract from *The Tao of Physics*, the physicist and philosopher Fritjof Capra discusses the difference between Western and Eastern ideas about the nature of knowledge.

Throughout history, it has been recognized that the human mind is capable of two kinds of knowledge, or two modes of consciousness, which have often been termed the rational and the intuitive, and have traditionally been associated with science and religion, respectively. In the West, the intuitive, religious type of knowledge is often devalued in favour of rational, scientific knowledge, whereas the traditional Eastern attitude is in general just the opposite. The following statements about knowledge by two great minds of the West and the East typify the two positions. Socrates in Greece made the famous statement 'I know that I know nothing', and Lao Tzu in China said, 'Not knowing that one knows is best.' In the East, the values attributed to the two kinds of knowledge are often already apparent from the names given to them. The *Upanishads*, for example, speak about a higher and a lower knowledge and associate the lower knowledge with various sciences, the higher with religious awareness. Buddhists talk about 'relative' and 'absolute' knowledge, or about 'conditional truth' and 'transcendental truth'. Chinese philosophy, on the other hand, has always emphasized the complementary nature of the intuitive and the rational and has represented them by the archetypal pair *yin* and *yang* which form the basis of Chinese thought. Accordingly, two complementary philosophical traditions – Taoism and Confucianism – have developed in ancient China to deal with the two kinds of knowledge.

Rational knowledge is derived from the experience we have with objects and events in our everyday environment. It belongs to the realm of the intellect whose function it is to discriminate, divide, compare, measure and categorize. In this way, a world of intellectual distinctions is created; of opposites which can only exist in relation to each other, which is why Buddhists call this type of knowledge 'relative'.

Abstraction is a crucial feature of this knowledge, because in order to compare and to classify the immense variety of shapes, structures and phenomena around us we cannot take all their features into account, but have to select a few significant ones. Thus we construct an intellectual map of reality in which things are reduced to their general outlines. Rational knowledge is thus a system of abstract concepts and symbols, characterized by the linear, sequential structure which is typical of our thinking and speaking. In most languages this linear structure is made explicit by the use of alphabets which serve to communicate experience and thought in long lines of letters.

The natural world, on the other hand, is one of infinite varieties and

complexities, a multidimensional world which contains no straight lines or completely regular shapes, where things do not happen in sequences, but all together; a world where – as modern physics tells us – even empty space is curved. It is clear that our abstract system of conceptual thinking can never describe or understand this reality completely. In thinking about the world we are faced with the same kind of problem as the cartographer who tries to cover the curved face of the Earth with a sequence of plane maps. We can only expect an approximate representation of reality from such a procedure, and all rational knowledge is therefore necessarily limited.

The realm of rational knowledge is, of course, the realm of science which measures and quantifies, classifies and analyses. The limitations of any knowledge obtained by these methods have become increasingly apparent in modern science, and in particular in modern physics which has taught us, in the words of Werner Heisenberg, 'that every word or concept, clear as it may seem to be, has only a limited range of applicability.'

For most of us it is very difficult to be constantly aware of the limitations and of the relativity of conceptual knowledge. Because our representation of reality is so much easier to grasp than reality itself, we tend to confuse the two and to take our concepts and symbols for reality. It is one of the main aims of Eastern mysticism to rid us of this confusion. Zen Buddhists say that a finger is needed to point at the moon, but that we should not trouble ourselves with the finger once the moon is recognized; the Taoist sage Chuang Tzu wrote:

> 'Fishing baskets are employed to catch fish; but when the fish are got, the men forget the baskets; snares are employed to catch hares; but when the hares are got, men forget the snares. Words are employed to convey ideas; but when the ideas are grasped, men forget the words.'

In the West, the semanticist Alfred Korzybski made exactly the same point with his powerful slogan, 'The map is not the territory.'

What the Eastern mystics are concerned with is a direct experience of reality which transcends not only intellectual thinking but also sensory perception. In the words of the *Upanishads*,

> 'What is soundless, touchless, formless, imperishable,
> Likewise tasteless, constant, odourless,
> Without beginning, without end, higher than the great stable –
> By discerning That, one is liberated from the mouth of death.'

Knowledge which comes from such an experience is called 'absolute knowledge' by Buddhists because it does not rely on the discriminations, abstractions and classifications of the intellect which, as we have seen, are always relative and approximate. It is, so we are told by Buddhists, the direct experience of undifferentiated, undivided, indeterminate 'suchness'. Complete apprehension of this suchness is not only the core of Eastern mysticism, but is the central characteristic of all mystical experience.

The Eastern mystics repeatedly insist on the fact that the ultimate reality can never be an object of reasoning or of demonstrable knowledge. It can never be adequately described in words, because it lies beyond the realm of the senses and of the intellect from which our words and concepts are derived.