Other Books by James W. Sire

How to Read Slowly
Scripture Twisting
Beginning with God
Meeting Jesus
In the course of Western thought eventually we reach an impasse. Naturalism leads to nihilism, and nihilism is hard to transcend on the terms that the Western world—permeated by naturalism—wishes to accept. Atheistic existentialism, as we have seen, is one attempt, but it has some rather serious problems. Theism is an option, but for a naturalist it is uninviting. How can one accept the existence of an infinite-personal, transcendent God? For over a century that question has posed a serious barrier. Many people today would rather stick with their naturalism, for it still seems to be a decided improvement on the fabulous religion it rejected. Moreover, modern Christendom, with its hypocritical churches and its lack of compassion, is a poor testimony to the viability of theism. No, that way will not do.

Perhaps we should look again at naturalism. Where did we go wrong? Well, for one thing we discover that by following reason our
naturalism leads to nihilism. But we need not necessarily abandon our naturalism; we can simply say reason is not to be trusted. Existentialism went part way down this route; perhaps we should now go all the way. Second, since we in the West tend to quarrel over "doctrines," ideas, and so forth, let us call a moratorium not only on quarreling but on distinguishing intellectually at all. Perhaps any "useful" doctrine should be considered true. Third, if all our activism to produce change by manipulating the system of the universe produces pollution and our efforts at social betterment go unrewarded, why not abandon our activism? Let's stop doing and raise our quality of life by simply being. Finally, if Western quarrels turn into armed conflicts, why not retreat completely? Let go and let happen: Can that be any worse than what we have now? Has, perhaps, the East a better way?

On a more sociological level, we can trace the interest in the East to the rejection of middle-class values by the young generation in the 1960s. First, Western technology (that is, reason in its practical application) made possible modern warfare. The Vietnam War (the youth were not personally aware of earlier conflicts) is a result of reason. So let us abandon reason. Second, Western economics has led to gross inequity and economic oppression of masses of people. So let us reject the presuppositions from which such a system developed. Third, Western religion has seemed largely to support those in control of technology and the economic system. So let us not fall into that trap.

The swing to Eastern thought is, therefore, primarily a retreat from Western thought. The West ends in a maze of contradictions, acts of intellectual suicide and a specter of nihilism that haunts the dark edges of all our thought. Is there not another way?

Indeed, there is—a very different way. With its anti-rationalism, its syncretism, its quietism, its lack of technology, its uncomplicated lifestyle and its radically different religious framework, the East is extremely attractive. Moreover, the East has an even longer tradition than the West. Sitting, as it were, next door to us for centuries have been modes of conceiving and viewing the world that are poles apart from ours. Maybe the East, that quiet land of meditating gurus and simple life, has the answer to our longing for meaning and significance.

For over a century Eastern thought has been flowing west. The Hindu and Buddhist scriptures have been translated and now circulate in inexpensive paperback editions. D. T. Suzuki from the East has poured Eastern lore into Western publications. Alan Watts from the West has imbibed Zen and returned to teach his fellow Westerners. I wonder too just how many Western-minded young readers of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* have gone on to *Franny and Zooey* and then to a deeper interest in Zen. In any case, in the 1960s Eastern studies filtered down to the undergraduate level. Indian gurus have been crossing and recrossing the United States and Europe for more than two decades. Knowledge of the East is now easy to obtain, and more and more its view of reality is becoming a live option in the West.¹

**Basic Eastern Pantheistic Monism**

The East is, of course, as rich and as hard to label and categorize as the West, as will be obvious to anyone who simply scans the table of contents of a study such as Surendranath Dasgupta's five-volume *History of Indian Philosophy.*¹ In what follows I am limiting the description to the Eastern world view most popular in the West: pantheistic monism. This is the root world view which underlies the Hindu Advaita Vedanta system of Shankara, the Transcendental Meditation of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, much of the Upanishads, some Buddhist writings (notably those in the Zen tradition) and the views so beautifully captured by Hermann Hesse in his novel *Siddhartha.*

Pantheistic monism is distinguished from other related Eastern world views by its monism (the notion that only one impersonal element constitutes reality). Hare Krishna does not fit in this world view,
for while it shares many of the characteristics of Eastern pantheistic monism, it has one major difference. It declares that reality is ultimately personal (and thus shares a relationship to theism totally absent in Advaita Vedanta).

Hopefully, these cryptic remarks will become clearer as we proceed. But first we must be even more cryptic.

1. **Atman is Brahman; that is, the soul of each and every human being is the Soul of the cosmos.**

   Atman (the essence, the soul, of any person) is Brahman (the essence, the Soul of the whole cosmos). What is a human being? That is, what is at the very core of each of us? Each person is the whole shooting match. Each person is (to put it boldly but accurately in Eastern terms) God.

   But we must define God in pantheistic terms. God is the one, infinite-impersonal, ultimate reality. That is, God is the cosmos. God is all that exists; nothing exists that is not God. If anything that is not God appears to exist, it is māyā, illusion, and does not truly exist. In other words, anything that exists as a separate and distinct object—this chair, not that one; this rock, not that tree; me, not you—is an illusion. It is not our separateness that gives us reality, it is our oneness—the fact that we are Brahman and Brahman is One. Yes, Brahman is the One.

   Ultimate reality is beyond distinction; it is. In fact, as we shall see when we discuss epistemology, we cannot express in language the nature of this oneness. We can only “realize” it by becoming it, by seizing our unity, our “godhead,” and resting there beyond any distinction whatsoever.

   In the West we are not used to this kind of system. To think is to distinguish. The laws of thought demand distinction: A is A; but A is not non-A. To know reality is to distinguish one thing from another, label it, catalog it, recognize its subtle relation to other objects in the cosmos. In the East to “know” reality is to pass beyond distinction, to

“realize” the oneness of all by being one with the all. This sort of conception—insofar as it can be understood by the mind—is best expressed indirectly. The Upanishads abound in attempts to express the inexpressible indirectly in parables.

“Bring me a fruit from this banyan tree.”

“Here it is, father.”

“Break it.”

“It is broken, Sir.”

“What do you see in it?”

“Very small seeds, Sir.”

“Break one of them, my son.”

“It is broken, Sir.”

“What do you see in it?”

“Nothing at all, Sir.”

Then his father spoke to him: “My son, from the very essence in the seed which you cannot see comes in truth this vast banyan tree.

“Believe me, my son, an invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality. That is Atman. THOU ART THAT.”

So the father, a guru, teaches his son, a novice, that even a novice is ultimate reality. Yet all of us—Eastern and Western alike—perceive distinctions. We do not “realize” our oneness. And that leads us to the second proposition.

2. **Some things are more one than others.**

Here we seem to be multiplying cryptic remarks and getting nowhere. But we ought not despair. Eastern “thought” is like that.

Some things are more one than others is another way of saying that reality is a hierarchy of appearances. Some “things,” some appearances or illusions, are closer than others to being at one with the One. The ordinary Eastern hierarchy looks rather like one Westerners might construct but for a different reason. Matter pure and simple (that is, mineral) is the least real; then vegetable, then animal and
finally human life. But humanity too is hierarchical; some people are
closer to unity than others. The Perfect Master, the Buddha, the guru
are the human beings nearest to pure being.

Partly, consciousness seems to be the principle of hierarchy here.
To “realize” oneness would seem to imply consciousness. But, as we
shall see, when one is one with the One, consciousness completely
disappears and one merely is infinite-impersonal Being. Conscious-
ness, like techniques of meditation, is just one more thing to be dis-
carded when its usefulness is past. Still, pure matter is further from
realization of its oneness than is humanity, and that is what counts.

At the furthest reaches of illusion, then, is matter. While its essence
is Atman, it is not. Yet it should so be. We must be careful here not
to attach any notion of “morality” to our understanding of the re-
quirement that all things be at one with the One. Here it means
simply that being itself requires unity with the One. The One is ul-
timate reality and all that is not the One is not really anything. True,
it is not anything of value either, but, more importantly, it has no
being at all.

So we are back to the original proposition: Some things are more
one, that is, more real, than others. The next question is obvious: How
does an individual, separate being get to be one with the One?

3. Many (if not all) roads lead to the One.

Getting to oneness with the One is not a matter of finding the one
true path. There are many paths from maya to reality. I may take one,
you another, a friend a third, ad infinitum. The problem is not to be
with one another on the same path but to be headed in the right
direction on our own path. That is, we must be oriented correctly.

Orientation is not so much a matter of doctrine as of technique. On
this the East is adamant. Ideas are not important.6 You and I may only
occasionally agree on what is true about anything—ourselves, the
external world, religion. No matter. Realizing oneness with the One
is not a matter of belief but of technique, and even techniques vary.

Some gurus, such as the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, stress chanting
a mantra—a seemingly meaningless Sanskrit word sometimes selected
by one’s own spiritual master and given in secret to an initiate. Others
recommend meditation on a mandala—a highly structured, often fas-
cinatingly ornate and beautiful circular image, symbol of the totality
of reality. Others encourage contemplation of Zen koans or haiku
poems until the self leaps to satori, the sudden experience of enlight-
enment, of unity with the One. Others require endless repetition of
prayers or acts of obeisance.

Almost all of these techniques, however, require quiet and solitude.
They are methods of intellectually contentless meditation. One at-
ttempts to get on the vibe level with reality, to turn one’s soul to the
harmony of the cosmos and ultimately to the one solid, nonharmonic,
nondual, Ultimate vibration—Brahman, the One.

Of all the “paths” one of the most common involves chanting the
word Om or a phrase with that word in it, for example, “Om Mane
Padme Hum.” Both the word Om and the larger phrase are essentially
untranslatable because they are intellectually contentless. Some have
suggested for Om the following: yes, perfection, ultimate reality, all, the
everal word. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi says that Om is the “sustainer
of life,” “the beginning and end of all creation,” “that hum, which is the
first silent sound, first silent wave that starts from that silent ocean of
unmanifested life.” Christmas Humphreys comments that Om is “the
first syllable of the Tibetan formula Om Mane Padme Hum, the outer
meaning of which is merely ‘Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus,’ and its
inward meaning is the meaning of the Universe.”

Obviously, the word meaning is not used in this Eastern system in
the same way it is used in theism or naturalism. We are not talking
here about rational content but metaphysical union. We can only truly
“pronounce” Om and “understand” its meaning when we are at one
with the One, when Atman is Brahman is not a statement but a real-
ization.
The Mandukya Upanishad says it this way:
OM. This eternal Word is all: what was, what is and what shall be, and what beyond is in eternity. All is OM.

Brahman is all and Atman is Brahman. Atman, the Self, has four conditions.
The first condition is the waking life of outward-moving consciousness, enjoying the seven outer gross elements.
The second condition is the dreaming life of inner-moving consciousness, enjoying the seven subtle inner elements in its own light and solitude.
The third condition is the sleeping life of silent consciousness when a person has no desires and beholds no dreams. That condition of deep sleep is one of oneness, a mass of silent consciousness made of peace and enjoying peace.

This silent consciousness is all-powerful, all-knowing, the inner ruler, the source of all, the beginning and end of all beings.
The fourth condition is Atman in his own pure state: the awakened life of supreme consciousness. It is neither outer nor inner consciousness, neither semi-consciousness, nor sleeping-consciousness, neither consciousness nor unconsciousness. He is Atman, the Spirit himself, that cannot be seen or touched, that is above all distinction, beyond thought and ineffable. In the union with him is the supreme proof of his reality. He is the end of evolution and non-duality. He is peace and love.

This Atman is the eternal Word OM. Its three sounds, A, U, and M, are the first three states of consciousness, and these three states are the three sounds.
The first sound A is the first state of waking consciousness, common to all men. It is found in the words Apti, “attaining,” and Adimatvam, “being first.” Who knows this attains in truth all his desires, and in all things becomes first.
The second sound U is the second state of dreaming consciousness. It is found in the words Utkarsha, “uprising,” and Ubhayatvam, “bothisness.” Who knows this raises the tradition of knowledge and attains equilibrium. In his family is never born any one who knows not Brahman.
The third sound M is the third state of sleeping consciousness.
It is found in the words Miti, “measure,” and in the root Mi, “to end,” that gives Apti, “final end.” Who knows this measures all with his mind and attains the final End.
The word OM as one sound is the fourth state of supreme consciousness. It is beyond the senses and is the end of evolution. It is non-duality and love. He goes with his self to the supreme Self who knows this, who knows this.

I have quoted this Upanishad in its entirety because it contains several key ideas in a relatively short passage. At the moment I am most concerned with the word Om and how it represents ultimate reality. To say Om is not to convey intellectual content. Om means anything and everything; and therefore, being beyond distinction, can just as well be said to mean nothing. To say Om is rather to become or attempt to become what Om symbolizes.

4. To realize one’s oneness with the cosmos is to pass beyond personality.
Let us go back for a moment to the first proposition and see where it leads us when we turn our attention to human beings in this world. Atman is Brahman. Brahman is one and impersonal. Therefore, Atman is impersonal. Note the conclusion again: Human beings in their truest, fullest being are impersonal.

This notion in pantheistic monism is at diametrical odds with theism. In theism, personality is the chief thing about God and the chief thing about people. It means an individual has complexity at the essence of his or her being. Personality demands self-consciousness and self-determinacy, and these involve duality—a thinker and a thing thought. Both God and humanity in theism are complex.

In pantheism the chief thing about God is his Oneness, his sheer
abstract, undifferentiated, nondual unity. This puts God beyond personality. And since Atman is Brahman, human beings are beyond personality too. For any of us to "realize" our being is for us to enter the undifferentiated One.

Let us return for a moment to a section of the Mandukya Upanishad quoted above. Atman, it proclaims, has "four conditions": waking life, dreaming life, deep sleep and "the awakened life of pure consciousness." The progression is important; the higher state is the state most approaching total oblivion, for one goes from the activity of ordinary life in the external world to the activity of dreaming to the nonactivity, the nonconsciousness, of deep sleep and ends in a condition which in its designation sounds like the reversal of the first three—"pure consciousness."

Then we note that "pure consciousness" has nothing to do with any kind of consciousness with which we are familiar. "Pure consciousness" is, rather, sheer union with the One and not "consciousness" at all, for that demands duality—a subject to be conscious and an object for it to be conscious of. Even self-consciousness demands duality in the self. But this "pure consciousness" is not consciousness; it is pure being.

This explanation may help us understand why Eastern thought so often leads to quietism and inaction. To be is not to do. Meditation is the main route to being, and meditation—whatever the style—is a case study in quietude. The picture of the enigmatically smiling Buddha sitting under the Bo tree in rapt contemplation, unseeing, unhearing, unheeding—this now becomes understandable. The Buddha has entered the One; he is the Enlightened One. He is at rest.

5. To realize one's oneness with the cosmos is to pass beyond knowledge. The principle of noncontradiction does not apply where ultimate reality is concerned.

From the statement Atman is Brahman, it also follows that human beings in their essence are beyond knowledge. Knowledge, like personality, demands duality—a knower and a known. But the One is beyond duality; it is sheer unity. Again as the Mandukya Upanishad says, "He is Atman, the Spirit himself . . . above all distinction, beyond thought and ineffable." In other words, to be is not to know.

In *Siddhartha*, which is perhaps the most Eastern novel ever written by a Westerner, Hermann Hesse has the illumined Siddhartha put it this way:

Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom . . . In every truth the opposite is equally true. For example, a truth can only be expressed and enveloped in words if it is one-sided. Everything that is thought and expressed in words is one-sided, only half the truth; it lacks totality, completeness, unity. The argument is simple. Reality is one; language requires duality, several dualities in fact (speaker and listener; subject and predicate); ergo, language cannot convey the truth about reality. Juan Mascaró explains what this means for the doctrine of God:

When the sage of the *Upanishads* is pressed for a definition of God, he remains silent, meaning God is silence. When asked again to express God in words, he says: "Neti, neti," "Not this, not this"; but when pressed for a positive explanation he utters the sublime words: "TAT TVAM ASI," "Thou art That." Of course! We have already seen this under proposition 3. Now we see more clearly why Eastern pantheistic monism is nondogmatic. No doctrine can be true. Perhaps some can be more useful than others in getting a subject to achieve unity with the cosmos, but that is different. In fact, a lie might even be more useful.

But again we go astray. We are back to thinking like a Westerner. If there can be no true statement, neither can there be a lie. Commenting on the esoteric symbolism of the Tantric strand in Hinduism, Alex Comfort says, "Both ancient and modern Hindu explanations differ, and all of them are orthodox." In other words, truth disappears as a category, and the only relevant distinction is usefulness.
short, we are back to technique—the substance of much Eastern concern.

6. To realize one's oneness with the cosmos is to pass beyond good and evil; the cosmos is perfect at every moment.

We come to a rather touchy subject here. It is one of the softest spots in Eastern pantheism because people refuse to deny morality. They continue to act as if some actions were right and others wrong. Moreover, the concept of karma is almost universal in Eastern thought.

Karma is the notion that one's present fate, one's pleasure or pain, one's being a king or a slave or a gnat, is the result of past action, especially in a former existence. It is, then, tied to the notion of reincarnation which follows from the general principle that nothing that is real (that is, no soul) ever passes out of existence. It may take centuries upon centuries to find its way back to the One, but a soul will never not be. All soul is eternal, for all soul is essentially Soul and thus forever the One.

On its way back to the One, however, it goes through whatever series of illusory forms its past action requires. Karma is the Eastern version of "you reap what you sow." But karma implies strict necessity. If you have "sinned," there is no God to cancel the debt and to forgive. Confession is of no avail. The sin must be worked out and will be worked out. Of course, a person can choose his future acts, and thus karma does not imply determinism or fatalism.12

This sounds very much like the description of a moral universe. People should do the good. If they do not, they will reap the consequences, if not in this life, in the next, perhaps even by coming back as a being lower in the hierarchy. As popularly conceived, a moral universe is what the East in fact has.

But two things should be noted about this system. First, the basis for doing good is not so that the good will be done or so that you benefit another person. Karma demands that every soul suffer for its past "sins," so there is no value in alleviating suffering. The soul will have to suffer later. So there is no agape-love, giving-love, nor would any such love benefit the recipient. One does good deeds in order to attain unity with the One. Doing good is first and foremost a self-helping way of life.

Second, all actions are merely part of the whole world of illusion. The only "real" reality is ultimate reality, and that is beyond differentiation, beyond good and evil. Brahman is beyond good and evil. Thus Siddhartha eloquently says,

The world, Govinda, is not imperfect or slowly evolving along a long path to perfection. No, it is perfect at every moment; every sin already carries grace within it, all small children are potential old men, all sucklings have death within them, all dying people—eternal life. . . . Therefore, it seems to me that everything that exists is good—death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly.13

So, like true and false, ultimately the category of good and evil fades away. Everything is good (which, of course, is identical to saying, "Nothing is good" or "Everything is evil"). The thief is the saint is the thief is the saint . . .

What then shall we say about all of the evidence that people of the East act as if their actions could be considered right or wrong? First, the East has no fewer naive and inconsistent adherents than the West. Second, theists would say, human beings are human beings; they must act as if they were moral beings, for they are moral beings. Third, their moral-looking actions may be done for purely selfish reasons: Who wants to return as a gnat or a stone? Of course, in a nonmoral system selfishness would not be considered immoral.

Hermann Hesse tips his hand, however, in Siddhartha and has his hero seemingly say with ordinary meaning that "love is the most important thing in the world."14 And Hesse and Christmas Humphreys both introduce value distinction when they say that it is better to
be illuminated or Enlightened than to be an ordinary person. It would seem, therefore, that even many of the illuminated have a tendency to act morally rather than to live out the implications of their own system. Perhaps this is a way of saying that some people are "better" than their conscious world view would allow.

7. Death is the end of individual, personal existence, but it changes nothing essential in an individual’s nature.

We have already discussed death as it relates to karma and reincarnation. But it deserves, as in every world view, a separate treatment. Human death signals the end of an individual embodiment of Atman; it signals as well the end of a person. But the soul, Atman, is indestructible.

When naturalists say that they do not expect to survive their death in any sense whatsoever, they do not mean that the atoms that compose their bodies will pass out of existence when they die. What will pass out of existence is their highly complex and unique configuration. And consistent naturalists are willing to say that when that goes, they go. Something would go on—their atoms—but they would not.

The East, strangely, would go along with this conclusion. No human being in the sense of individual or person survives death. Atman survives, but Atman is impersonal. When Atman is reincarnated, it becomes another person. So, does pantheistic monism teach the immortality of the soul? Yes, but it also echoes naturalism in its rejection of personal and individual immortality.

Of course, through Eastern eyes the personal and individual are illusionary anyway. Only Atman is valuable. So death is no big deal. Nothing of value perishes; everything of value is eternal. This may help explain the remark Westerners often make about the cheapness of life in the East. Individual embodiments of life—this man, that woman, you, me—are of no value. But in essence they are all of infinite value; for in essence they are infinite.

The ramifications of this for Westerners who search the East for meaning and significance should not be ignored. For a Westerner who places value on individuality and personality—the unique value of an individual human life—Eastern pantheistic monism will prove a grave disappointment.

8. To realize one’s oneness with the One is to pass beyond time. Time is unreal. History is cyclical.

One of the central images in Siddhartha is the river. From the river Siddhartha learns more than from all the teachings of the Buddha or from all the contact with his spiritual father, Vasudeva. At the climax of the novel Siddhartha bends down and listens intently to the river:

Siddhartha tried to listen better. The picture of his father, his own picture, and the picture of his son all flowed into each other. Kamala’s picture also appeared and flowed on, and the picture of Govinda and others emerged and passed on. They all became part of the river. It was the goal of all of them, yearning, desiring, suffering; and the river’s voice was full of longing, full of smarting woe, full of insatiable desire. The river flowed on towards its goal. Siddhartha saw the river hasten, made up of himself and his relatives and all the people he had ever seen. All the waves and water hastened, suffering, towards goals, many goals, to the waterfall, to the sea, to the current, to the ocean and all goals were reached and each one was succeeded by another. The water changed to vapor and rose, became rain and came down again, became spring, brook and river, changed anew, flowed anew. But the yearning voice had altered. It still echoed sorrowfully, searchingly, but other voices accompanied it, voices of pleasure and sorrow, good and evil voices, laughing and lamenting voices, hundreds of voices, thousands of voices.

Finally all the voices, and images, and faces intertwined: "And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world. . . . The great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om—perfection."
It is at this point that Siddhartha achieves an inner unity with the One, and "the serenity of knowledge" shines in his face.

The river in this long passage—and throughout the book—becomes an image for the cosmos. When looked at from the standpoint of a place along the bank, the river flows (time exists). But when looked at in its entirety—from spring to brook to river to ocean to vapor to rain to spring—the river does not flow (time does not exist). It is an illusion produced by sitting on the bank rather than seeing the river from the heavens. Time likewise is cyclical; history is what is produced by the flow of the water past a point on the shore. It is illusory. History then has no meaning where reality is concerned. In fact our task as people who would realize their godhead is to transcend history.

This should help explain why Western Christians who place so much emphasis on history find their presentation of the historical basis of Christianity almost completely ignored in the East. To the Western mind, whether or not Jesus existed, performed miracles, healed the sick, died and rose from the dead is important. If it happened, there must be a vital meaning to these strange, unnatural events. Perhaps there is a God after all.

To the Eastern mind, the whole argument is superfluous. Yesterday's facts are not meaningful in themselves. They do not bear on me today unless they have a here-and-now meaning; and if they have a here-and-now meaning, then their facticity as history is of no concern. The Eastern scriptures are filled with epigrams, parables, fables, stories, myths, songs, haiku, hymns, epics—but almost no history in the sense of events recorded because they took place in an unrepeatable space-time context.

To be concerned with such stuff would be to invert the whole hierarchical order. The unique is not the real; only the absolute and all-encompassing is real. If history is valuable, it will be so as myth and myth only, for myth takes us out of particularity and lifts us to essence.

One of the images of human life and the quest for unity with the One is closely tied to the images of the cycle, or the wheel, or the great mandala. Siddhartha says, "Whither will my path lead me? This path is stupid, it goes in spirals, perhaps in circles, but whichever way it goes, I will follow it." And Juan Mascaró echoes, "The path of Truth may not be a path of parallel lines but a path that follows one circle: by going to the right and climbing the circle, or by going to the left and climbing the circle we are bound to meet at the top, although we started in apparently contradictory directions."*

This symbol is worked out in the novel Siddhartha; the paths of the Buddha, Vasudeva, Siddhartha and Govinda meet and cross several times, but all of them arrive at the same place. To change the image, Hesse shows this in the exact identity of the smiles on the face of the radiant Buddha, Vasudeva, Siddhartha.** All the Enlightened Ones are one in the All.

East and West: A Problem in Communication

Cyclical history, paths that cross, doctrines that disagree, evil that is good, knowledge that is ignorance, time that is eternal, reality that is unreal: All these are the shifting, paradoxical—even contradictory—masks that veil the One. What can Westerners say? If they point to its irrationality, the Easterner rejects reason as a category. If they point to the disappearance of morality, the Easterner scorns the duality that is required for the distinction. If they point to the inconsistency between the Easterner's moral action and amoral theory, the Easterner says, "Well, consistency is no virtue except by reason, which I have already rejected, and furthermore I'm not yet perfect. When I am rid of this load of karma, I'll cease acting as if I were moral. In fact, I'll cease acting at all and just meditate." If the Westerner says, "But if you don't eat, you'll die," the Easterner responds, "So what? Aman is Brahma. Brahma is eternal. A death to be wished!"

It is, I think, no wonder Western missionaries have made so little
headway with committed Hindus and Buddhists. They don’t speak the same language, for they hold almost nothing in common. It is painfully difficult to grasp the Eastern world view even when one has some idea that it demands a mode of thought different from the West. It seems to many who would like Easterners to become Christians (and thus to become theists) that Easterners have an even more difficult time understanding that Christianity is somehow unique, that the space-time resurrection of Jesus the Christ is at the heart of the good news of God.

In both cases, it seems to me, an understanding that the East and the West operate on two very different sets of assumptions is the place to start. To begin the dialog, at least one party must know how different their basic assumptions may turn out to be, but for true human communication, both parties must know this before the dialog proceeds very far. Perhaps the difficulties in Eastern thought that seem so obvious to Westerners will at least begin to be recognized by Easterners. If an Easterner can see what knowledge, morality and reality are like as seen from, say, the point of view of Western theism, the attractiveness of the Western way may be obvious.

Generally, however, what the East sees of the West is more ugly than Shiva, the great god of destruction himself. Those who would communicate the beauty of truth in Christ have a tough job, for the mists of ugly Western imperialism, war, violence, greed and gluttony are thick indeed.

Where, then, does all this leave the Westerner who has gone East to search for meaning and significance? Many, of course, drop out along the way, try to take a shortcut to Nirvana through drugs, or cop out, come home and take over their father’s corporation, re-entering the West and leaving the East behind with little more than a beard left to show for it. (That gets trimmed before the first board meeting and removed before the second.) Others stay on the path for life. Still others perhaps find Nirvana and remain caught up in contemplation.

But many simply die—by starvation, dysentery, skullduggery and who knows what else. Some shipwreck on the shores of Western communities and are slowly made seaworthy by friends.

For a couple of decades, young and old have been flocking to various gurus. Bookstores are filled with books pointing East, their spines to the West, of course. One even offers advice on “how to choose a guru.” Transcendental Meditation and other Eastern spiritual techniques are common, as commuters meditate on the way to work and classes are offered in business corporations.

So Westerners are still trekking East. And so long as the East holds out promise—promise of peace, of meaning, of significance—people are likely to respond. What will they receive? Not just an Eastern Band-Aid for a Western scratch but a whole new world view and lifestyle.