

ASIAN ETHNIC VALUES AND THE GLOBAL IN DUALITY OF EMPITINESS

By Katja Serber

The ancient balance-philosophy of the East is an image of an ideal ethnic-global duality¹

The ethnic and the global can be seen as two sides to the same story, which can be compared to the Buddhist concepts of *prajna* and *vijnana*, that cannot exist without each other even though they are contradictions. The ethnic is like *prajna* and the global like *vijnana*. In Sanskrit *prajna* means wisdom, life and intuition and *vijnana* means reason and discursive understanding. But according to Buddhist philosophy *vijnana* stagnates without *prajna*. Since *prajna* is a self-creative activity, *prajna* is not directed by *vijnana*, because it contains greater knowledge about truth, than that obtainable by perceiving and rational thought. Therefore *vijnana* cannot function at its full capacity, without being deeply rooted in *prajna*.

"The world was not created so many millions and millions of years ago, but it is being created every moment, and it is *prajna*'s work. Reality is not a corpse to be dissected with the surgical knife of *vijnana*. ..."²

As a living creature human beings have received *vijnana*, which as described above is an analysing aptitude. That *prajna* is arranged under the *vijnana* without being directed by this, means that the human being by virtue of this analysing aptitude together with the right attitude and training, can gain insight into *prajna*, and through that train the mind to for example conscious good thoughts and actions. So *prajna* and *vijnana* in simultaneous contact, is the absolute.

Emptiness/babylonism as world identity

In his project at Ground Zero the architect Daniel Libeskind (b.1946) has worked with a simultaneous architecture. Furthermore, in his published model

¹ This part is based on T. D. Suzuki's "Studies in Zen" 1955, s.85-129.

² Suzuki 1955, s.101.

of the project he worked with a Babylonian theme, which for example can be seen by the use of *The Hanging Gardens*. Babel is Hebrew for Babylonia, together with the city of Babylon, and means confusing or depraved city. An entirely understandable notion when considering the diversity of which Babylonia must have consisted. The ancient Babylonia empire as a whole had very flexible borders pertaining to which cultures, nations and areas were a part of it and it was very open in the case of for example immigration or more nomadic affiliations, as the Babylonia was an international trade centre, where for instance merchants from the Arabian golf and the cities of the Indus culture were present. The individual human, who has been living or staying in Babylonia for an extended period, must inevitably have become influenced by the urbanism of the empire. I do not think that *the confusion* of the Babylonian is the innermost nature of humans. Instead I will call the innermost nature of humans a *place* or use the Buddhist concept of *emptiness*. But the *place/emptiness* concept is not as far from the Babylonian identity, as one would immediately assume for these concepts contain the same kind of diversity as the Babylonian identity consists of. In a *place/emptiness*-state the diversity/confusion has taken a quantum leap and has become a *unity in the diversity*. For the individual being this means that when this process happens, a neutralization of the distance between the person and its surroundings takes place, which indicates that the person is floating in one with the diversity, but now with insight and clarity, because at one and the same time it does not amalgamate with this diversity. When a Buddhist has found this “imaginary place”, the Buddhist in reality feels at home in any place, which not only results in the Buddhist gaining a greater understanding of others, but also that the Buddhist feels connected with the foreign. The Buddhist approach to the Babylonian urbanity sees this as a substance, which the human, in nature, can identify itself with. The Buddhist learns to have insight and clarity into the paradox of confusion, because the Buddhist religion acknowledged an ideology that could sway the thoughts away from “the desire of infinity” and into the room of emptiness, which opens up for a more ethic-religious ideology rather than sheer religiousness. The modern Christian person on the other hand cannot find peace, but constantly strive to find new ways, in which to solve the paradox of infinity. I see it as if Libeskind with his project on Ground Zero tries to break down this anaesthetic of Christianity by, in his themes and architecture, pointing away from eschatological time, and back to the Babylonian *and the Asian* simultaneous time.

The world as a neutral state of interface

After September 11th the (western) world is left with mixed feelings of confusion, incapability and emptiness yet at the same time with a renewed and earnest will to define and create a space, where the diversified world can exist. When the Americans, with Libeskind’s project, compare themselves to Babylonians they do after all display an attitude of no longer being self-

sufficient, because Babylonia was not so inward looking an empire as for example the Egyptian one. At Ground Zero, Libeskind worked with the simultaneous expression, but in a more reminiscing and communicating way (among other things by using different cultural buildings at the site), which makes the expression a continuation of the futuristic. The concept *interface* can be used in conjunction with this expression. By perceiving the world as a place of interface, it becomes possible to preserve the individual cultures in their unique shapes, while at the same time being able to communicate *in different ways* with other cultures of the world. This means that in the world-space of interface penetrations between different places of existence, forms of communication and times can take place. The concept of times has two different meanings, as the philosophical understanding of time; the simultaneous and the eschatological and as the different historical times. This becomes especially relevant in a problematic of global interfacing, where for instance different historical times exist at the same time, because several nations have preserved their cultural and intellectual values and forms of life that has existed through millennia. I think, it is important, that we today are very attentive of the fact that these differences do not necessarily have to coalesce, but rather that, comparative to the concepts of Buddhist philosophy, a form of unity *in* the diversity occurs.

Neutral interface art

The philosopher Mario Perniola (b.1941) in his short text "The art as neutral mutant"³ guesses at the function of art. In this text Perniola writes that the neutral mutant is the little or no difference, which is made by movements and displacements in proportion to the original. Art is in that way a transforming and communicating activity of the already existing stuff in space, which contain reminisces, information etc. of both material and immaterial stuff of the past. The neutral artistic field has two kinds of intentions. One is, as Perniola writes, to create an open space that can operate within or with every imaginable category, which can yield some brand new possibilities and ideas that would otherwise not have been basis and room for. The other is to go compliantly into and softening up different rigid fields, such as religious and ethical disagreements, through which the underlying politically controlling ideas can be propagated. I believe that when thinking the global-aesthetic it is important to include a notion of some overriding simple forms, which at the same are on a very high spiritual level, to communicate about on a global scale. If we are able to perceive and think in such universal forms, it is through this, that we have the possibility to meet and reach a deeper understanding of each other. Art traditionally demands cultural insight, but it still has an advantage as it has the possibility to manifest itself in an immediately available visual imagery, that runs verbal discourses. The painter Kazimir Malevich's

³ "L'arte come mutante neutro"; text published in the catalogue for the biennale of Venice 1993.

(1878-95) black circle- and square formed paintings can be used as an illustration of this theory. These are two paintings with a white background on which is painted a black circle and a black square respectively. I perceive these paintings as having a universal substance. In these paintings it is possible to focus on the complementary insoluble paradox in the impossible union of the circle and the square, which can symbolise the Buddhist simultaneous and Christian eschatological ideologies respectively. However, this is in a sense only the outer forms of the paintings. The immaterial stuff, which the white and black colours symbolize, contains the universal complementary essence. Malevich wrote that suprematism, the ism he created and defined himself, is a mixture of the energies of reason and intuition in a sort of eternal battle of complementarities, which effects a destruction of the brain, but in a positive way, as this fight destroys the cages in the brain and rearranges it, so that it becomes a perfect human entirety. This is again comparable to Buddhist philosophy's concept of duality of emptiness.

A circle summary

This paper has, in relation to the theme of the seminar, mainly been about the concepts of duality, babylonism, interface and neutrality. The pivotal point has been Buddhist philosophy, but this is only due to my lack of knowledge of other Asian philosophies. It has been my intention to show that some more recent western philosophies bears similarity to ancient ethnic philosophies of Asia. During my travels in Asia I have found that the Buddhist, in almost every way, has a profound respect for and cares immensely for his/her surroundings. This respect and care must be a result of the Buddhist philosophy and practise in neutral presence, and shows the depth and the strength of its substance. This does not mean that "the fruit of Buddhism" does not exist outside Asia, but I think that the Asian ethnic culture, also in this way, really has something to give and teach the global individual. And like a fruit of the ancient Asian philosophy, Perniola defines a neutral field in which Mankind can meet globally and from where art has special capabilities to operate by virtue of its unique possibilities to communicate across the more conventional category-building, and transform these into another space. What this space exactly consists of is still undefined, but perhaps it is through the ethnic Asian wisdom that this substance or part of it will appear. Wrapping up I will move the focus away from the black colour of the circle and the square in Malevich's paintings towards the paintings' white colour of the background. Because according to chromatology, complementary colours becomes the colour white and Malevich writes somewhere else that the infinite white colour gives the beam of vision the possibility to move infinitely, which makes me think of light and the messaging activity contained within the idea of art as neutral mutant *and* in the ancient Asian philosophy of duality of emptiness.