To My Daughter
Christy Koller

And in Memory of My Son
John Thomas Koller
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What are the main ideas that have shaped Asian cultures? What are the fundamental values that have guided the lives of Asian peoples over the millennia? How have the great thinkers of Asia thought about these ideas and values? This book is intended to help answer these questions, enabling us to understand the principal philosophies of the great Asian traditions.

Basic human ideas and values derive from answers to fundamental questions about existence and human life. People everywhere, whether Asian or Western, seek to answer the same basic questions: Who am I? What is real? How do we come to know something? How should we relate to others? What is the right thing to do? What is good? However, these questions arise in different contexts and assume different forms for people living at different times and in different places, and the answers given vary accordingly. But these questions, sometimes arising out of wonder, and sometimes arising out of human suffering and the efforts to improve the conditions of human existence, are questions that every reflective person seeks to answer. It is these questions and their answers that provide the fundamental ideas and values that guide the development of whole cultures as well as the lives of individual persons.

By studying the great philosophical traditions of Asia it is possible for us to understand these traditions’ carefully considered answers to these questions, answers that are supported by profound insights and good reasons. Because these answers have guided the thought and action of the peoples of Asia over the centuries, they provide the basic clues to the guiding ideas and values of Asian societies today. And in today’s world, where the very future of humankind...
depends upon understanding and cooperation among people with diverse values and ideas, it is imperative that these values and ideas be understood.

As each of us tries to creatively develop our own personal philosophy we can benefit enormously from an understanding of the different ways that the basic questions of life have been answered by the great thinkers in the Asian traditions.

The fifth edition has been reorganized into two equal parts on South Asia and East Asia, and there are new chapters on Korean thought, and Chinese Buddhism; there is more on Mahayana, Confucian, Daoist, and Japanese thought; the end-of-chapter readings are updated; Chinese terms are now in the more widely used Pinyin form; and the glossary has been expanded.

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INTRODUCTION

PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

Philosophical questions arise out of reflection on experience. Experiencing sorrow and grief, we ask, What is suffering? Experiencing pleasure and joy, we ask, What is happiness? Reflecting on the difference between waking experience and dreaming experience, we ask, What is real? Reflecting on mistaken claims to know something, we ask, What is knowledge? Reflecting on our experience of hurting others by our actions and on our own suffering caused by the actions of others, we ask, What are the right and wrong ways of action? And reflecting on our own struggles to achieve personal identity and give meaning to our life, we ask, Who am I? These questions, the fundamental questions of philosophy, are important because philosophers everywhere understand that the unexamined life is not worth living, and that philosophical reflection will show how life should be lived. They are also important because their answers, as incorporated in basic human practices, ultimately determine the value and meaning of life.

Asian philosophy, for the most part, unlike much modern Western philosophy, has not sharply separated thought from practice and has tended to see the conceptual and the spiritual as closely related. Asian philosophical thought, like Western, is self-critical, is concerned with conceptual analysis, and emphasizes good arguments. But Asian philosophy also tends to emphasize insight into and understanding of reality and its importance as a guide to life. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, for example, are all ways of practice as well as philosophies or ways of thought. Their philosophical dimensions have grown out of reflections on practice. At the same
time, philosophical presuppositions and reflections have given rise to and
guided these ways of practice. This intimate interrelatedness of philosophy and
practice is one of the reasons why philosophy has been held in high esteem
throughout Asia and why it is seen as relevant and important to everyday life.

Because Asian philosophical traditions are different in important
ways, the Western reader should attempt to consider them in their own
contexts and in terms of their own merits. Often they do not fit neatly into
modern Western intellectual categories, which tend to divorce thought from
practice and philosophy from religion. Indeed, one of the main challenges
to understanding Asian thought is see where it is like and where it is unlike
Western thought.

SOUTH ASIAN PHILOSOPHIES

India is famous for the high regard it accords the seeker of wisdom and for
its reverence and respect for wise persons. Three thousand years ago, the
sages of India were pondering the questions, What is the Self? and What is
the nature of ultimate reality? Pursuing these two questions, they came to
the realization, twenty-five hundred years ago, that the innermost Self is one
with the ultimate reality. The immediate practical problem arising from this
discovery was that of how one could come to know and to realize this inner
Self and thereby become one with the very essence of the universe. The
theoretical problems raised by this discovery centered on the difficulty of
relating the multiplicity and diversity of experienced reality with the sages’
insight into the unity of all existence and the difficulty in ascertaining how
knowledge of such an ultimate reality could be achieved. Reflection on these
issues led to questions about the basis of morality, the nature and function
of society, the means of valid knowledge, the principles of logic, the nature of
the self, and the means of self-realization.

As Indian thinkers reflected on these fundamental questions, they often
disagreed with each other. Their differing insights and understandings led to
the establishment of a variety of philosophical traditions, many of them contin-
uining to this day. Although the Vedanta tradition is in agreement with the sages
who declared innermost Self and ultimate reality identical, other traditions
reject this vision of reality. Some traditions, like Nyaya and Vaisheshika, are
frankly pluralistic, while others, like Sankhya and Yoga, are dualistic. The Jain
and Buddhist traditions, though they disagreed with each in significant ways,
both rejected the authority of the Vedas, and the existence of God, while
emphasizing the importance of yogic discipline. The Carvakans, sometimes
called Lokayatas, were materialists, denying the existence of God, soul, and any
kind of life after death.

Despite this diversity of philosophical views, there has been widespread
agreement that the self-discipline of yoga is needed to achieve the total
integration of life and to attain life’s highest goals. According to the Bhagavad
Gita, an extremely influential Hindu text, this discipline is available to all
persons when it is channeled through the activities of worship and devotion, the
activities of work, and the activities of knowledge and concentration. From
a Hindu perspective, these paths of self-discipline are simply the philosophical wisdom of the ages being put into practice by the people.

There has also been widespread agreement concerning the importance of living morally, fulfilling one’s moral duties, especially the duty to avoid hurting other living beings. At least part of the reason why living a moral life is so important is the widespread agreement that all human actions are governed by the principle of *karma*, which says, roughly, that because every action inevitably produces its effects, therefore it is our actions that make us the kinds of persons we become. To become good we must engage in morally good actions. Performing bad actions will make us into bad persons. Jainism, a tradition more than three thousand years old, epitomizes the importance of conjoining the ways of virtuous living and yogic meditation in order to overcome human suffering.

According to Buddhism, a tradition that originated in India twenty-five hundred years ago, the basic problem of life is that of overcoming suffering. The essential teachings of the Buddha revolve around questions being asked by many thinkers of his time, namely, What is suffering? On what conditions does it depend? How can these conditions be eliminated? What path should one follow to eliminate suffering?

These questions led to inquiries into the nature of the self that suffers and the causes of suffering, giving rise to philosophical views of self and reality. The problems of justifying the claims made about the nature of the self and the nature of reality led, in turn, to theories of logic and knowledge. The problem of how to overcome suffering led to the development of understanding about morality and mental discipline and a new understanding of consciousness. Thus, the eminently practical problems of finding ways to overcome suffering provoked the reflections that constitute Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu philosophical traditions.

**EAST ASIAN PHILOSOPHIES**

The three enduring philosophical traditions of East Asia are Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism, which began with the teachings of Confucius in the sixth century BCE, incorporated important features of competing traditions, such as Legalism, Moism, the School of Names, and Yin Yang thought, as it developed. Daoism, with its emphasis on nature and spontaneity, began at about the same time and provided a counterbalance to Confucian thought. It also provided much of the philosophical framework and vocabulary necessary for Buddhism to take hold in China, where it become the third great philosophical tradition fifteen hundred years ago.

Before the development of Chinese Buddhism, philosophical thought was concerned primarily with the ways of moral, social, and political life or with understanding the ways of nature. The central problems of Chinese philosophy are reflected in the Confucian question, How can human beings and human society achieve their fullest possible development? and in the Daoist question, How can humans achieve harmony with nature? Some two thousand years ago, Confucianism became the official ideology of China, with Confucian writings
constituting the core curriculum of the imperial university system and the basis of the civil service exams. Knowing Confucian thought was an indispensable requirement for government service, making Confucianism the basis for social and political life.

As philosophy developed in China, there was an increasing tendency to see human nature in terms of natural processes. To the extent that this identification took place, the problem of achieving harmony with nature was the problem of being in harmony with oneself. In turn, being in harmony with oneself was regarded as the necessary basis for achieving a harmony with other persons. Being in harmony with oneself, in harmony with humanity, and in harmony with Heaven and Earth is the highest good in Chinese philosophy. Because human nature is seen as essentially moral, the dominant concern of Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophy has been moral. The Confucian questions, How can I be good? and What is the basis of goodness? are basic questions throughout the history of East Asian philosophy, as is the Daoist question, How can I achieve harmony with the Dao?

The development of Chinese Buddhism in the fourth and fifth centuries CE fostered an interest in metaphysical questions about the nature of the self and reality and in the relationship of knowledge to liberation, causing Confucian and Daoist thought to become involved with these issues. At the same time, Confucian concerns with fostering the way of humanity and social harmony and Daoist concerns with the workings of nature allowed Buddhism to develop in new ways in East Asia.

INTERACTIONS AND SHARED CONCERNS

Although Buddhism was the main vehicle of interaction between Indian thought and the thought of East and Southeast Asia, it turned out that the influence was largely one way, from India to the rest of Asia, with India experiencing little influence from the rest of Asia. The most notable external influences on Indian thought came from the Greeks, who came to India with Alexander the Great, and from the Muslims, who came to India between the eighth and eleventh centuries and who came to rule India from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

There are many differences among the philosophies of South and East Asia, but they all share the practical concern of how to live better. There is shared agreement that the development of moral virtue is an important ingredient of a successful way of life, and that the well-being of the individual cannot be separated from the well-being of the family and the larger social community. They also agree that to follow the way to a better life we must have a deep understanding of ourselves and the world.

Because it is concerned with the fundamental thought and practices of the Asian peoples, philosophy has been of primary importance in Asian cultures. Therefore, in order to understand the life and the attitudes of the peoples of Asia, it is necessary to understand their philosophies. And in order to understand their philosophies, it is necessary to look at the traditions in which these philosophies developed and through which they continue to nourish the cultures of Asia.
SOUTH ASIAN CENTERS OF HINDUISM, BUDDHISM, & JAINISM