

Dialogue between Vito Victor And Narayana Moorthy On Eastern Philosophy

Vito:

Eastern Philosophy has been one of my lifelong interests. Indeed, after several years of academic studies, I dropped out of university life 25 years ago and traveled to India. As a pilgrim "on the path" I gained much of value – and some disillusionment.

Imagine my delight when, in my new "incarnation" as a computer science instructor, I found an Eastern philosopher on our faculty at MPC! Dr. Narayana Moorthy not only knows his subject as an expert, but lives it, weaving twisted fabrics of paradox with the dexterity of a native, and practicing his own brand of detachment. He has much to offer us, not only in the form of fragrant curries – for Dr. Moorthy is an accomplished cook - but in food for thought, or for non-thought.

My intention in what follows is to review some of the basic premises of the mainstream classical philosophy of the East. Then I will outline some of my reservations. I offer the critique in the hopes of stimulating my dear colleague to an eloquent rebuttal.

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Eastern Philosophies, despite their rich diversity, present a standard argument. First, human life is described as replete with suffering and conflict. Then the cause of all the grief is identified. The culprit is usually named "desire," "ego" or "thought." Whatever it is that makes human beings develop preferences – likes and dislikes, desires and aversions - is at fault, for without these our suffering would vanish, and we would be at peace.

So a program is announced to eliminate all desire, dissolve

the ego, or stop the thinking process. And this is the point at which the various traditions branch into colorful variety, for there are a great many techniques to attain the fabled state of "enlightenment" — physical exercises, programs of self deprivation, chants, visualizations, and meditations.

These "yogas," developed over thousands of years, contain some practices with very real effects, which we in the Western tradition are just beginning to explore. For example, athletes are now spending many hours carefully visualizing what they hope to achieve, while their fans chant powerful mantras ("we rock rock you..") to raise psychic energy.

But however valid some of the psychological technology might be, it was all developed to attain a goal which sounds, at first, like pure nonsense. For how could a human being stop thinking, or stop having desires? He or she would have to be dead!

Strangely, Asians have always believed that they had examples of such living "dead people" in front of them. Saints still walk the dusty roads of India, for example, bony people clad in rags, reputed to be "beyond" the material world. Some of them are beautiful people, full of kindness and strange humor. One of them told me: "when I have food I am not happy; when I have no food, I am not sad." As far as I could tell, it seemed to be true; but this man also had fits of irritability, and I was reassured: he was, after all, human.

But "gurus" still manage to convince large segments of the population that they are in fact, devoid of desire, pure and empty of mind, totally unflappable, and immune to all the botherations of existence. And many Westerners still fall under their spell, and assiduously practice disciplines which, they believe, will bring loss of ego, cessation of desire, and guaranteed peace.

My aim is not to criticize any of the psycho-spiritual technology derived from Eastern culture. Indeed, I feel that many of these disciplines are of genuine value, and I practice some of them. Nor do I want to cast doubt upon the existence of enlightened beings, or upon the status, of any particular guru. I know that there are some very special people out there, and some strangely effective practices.

What I do intend is to throw some doubt upon the project of attaining some state of terminal contentment. Is this goal really coherent? And to the extent that it is, is it a goal that we would really want to adopt?

First, I will claim that this goal of desirelessness is contrary to the very nature of life. Humans are animals; we've evolved through a series of simpler forms. But even the simplest organisms exhibit desire and aversion in the form of approach and avoidance behavior. One-celled animals "like" certain solvents in a liquid medium and recoil from others. Dogs are trainable because they are "reinforced" by certain stimuli and not by others. People are no different. The idea that a starving or physically ill human being is suffering because of some redundant desires is almost obscene. Starving people need to be fed, diseased people need medical care, not enlightenments. Can we really tell the mother of a starving child that what she needs is to give up her desires?

Eastern philosophers, often reply by exempting the "simple" drives for food, warmth, health, etc. from their critique. These are not what cause the problem. Instead, we should target desires that are really somehow concepts, ideas. Jealous husbands, workaholic businessmen, terrorists do not suffer from simple physical needs, but from the ideas they have created and chained themselves to. Hence the goal becomes to eliminate such kinds of "thought" or "ego."

But I will claim, secondly, that such concept formations are the source of all of our greatest joys as well. It would be a strangely 'flat' life if we got rid of all of our ideas. The joy of attaining a long worked-for goal would be gone. No defeats, but no victories, either, no bad news, but equally, no celebrations.

Only because I care - because I am "attached" - do I rejoice when my son does well. Only because I have formed a "concept" can I plan a ski vacation, or root for the New York Mets. Developing a career depends upon formulating and investing Oneself in a long-range goal, with attendant hopes, and dreams and, of course, possible disappointments. It is hard to describe what a life without such concepts would be like. Living without "ideas" and "attachments" is an ideal just as illusory as

that of living without simple needs.

The Eastern ideal seems, in this light, to be a sort of ultimate "playing it safe". Just consider one of the greatest joys in life - that of loving and being loved. It is based on mental and social constructs. There's nothing "purely physical" in it. Adopting such "concepts" is a great risk - one is vulnerable to "heart-break" (another concept!) - but I would not want to living any other way.

The Eastern goal of emotional invulnerability seems no more inviting than a general anesthetic.

I conclude that it is hard to describe the Eastern ideal of desirelessness in logically coherent terms. But to the extent that I understand it at all, it is not attractive to me. How can this ideal attract any reasonably vital person for long, once it is examined? It is the promise - impossible to reach, anyway - of a huge metaphysical tranquilizer. I would not want to reach this goal; I prefer to live as intensely as I can, vulnerable to the bitter as well as to the sweet.

I've intimated that there is a real difference between East and West, in philosophical outlook anyway. It's a difference that's no longer geographical, though many residents of Asia are now Western in outlook, while many residents of California seem infected by the quietism and passivity encouraged by Eastern thought. "Just go with the flow!"

Moorty:

EASTERN PHILOSOPHY

Reply to Vito's Comments

Let me first clear up some misconceptions about Eastern Philosophy and say what it does not advocate: First of all it does not propose a life without desires, if by desire we mean wanting or not wanting to have or do things in the world. These desires are necessary for the very conduct of life. But Eastern Philosophy does advocate a life free from seeking "happiness" or fulfillment" which we hope will result if we strive for particular goals, with the assumption that such a "happiness" somehow lies outside of us. If we free ourselves from this striving, we will still conduct all the activities of life necessary for living, and much more efficiently, since the energy that is wasted through worry, conflict, day-dreaming etc. is saved for actual (and not vicarious) living. And when there is nothing to be done, this sort of life provides us plenty of time where we do nothing but remain still and enjoy our being. Second, Eastern Philosophy does not advocate being insulated" from pain. It is not the purpose of Eastern Philosophy to somehow make us invulnerable. In fact it intends to make us much more vulnerable to the changes of life. Yet since we are free from "Psychological needs" we become so flexible and pliable that we are free to move on to other things and situations and meet the demands of the new situations fully without carrying over our emotional reactions from the previous situation.

Nor does Eastern Philosophy prevent us from feeling and expressing emotions such as anger or affection. No, it is not part of Eastern Philosophy that we should never become angry or annoyed at something. That would in fact humanly speaking be equivalent to being dead, just as much as living without desires would be. If someone is bothering me or irritating me, it is natural that I react with anger (and if the situation demands I may even react violently!) But then I make no excuses, nor do I make a policy of being angry at this person each time I see him; nor do I plan a long course of revenge. I adjust my responses to the demands of each situation. I don't live situations through my past experiences, but I use my past experiences by adapting them to the new situations.

Third, Eastern Philosophy does not prevent the enjoyment of anything, including conceptual structures. In fact, given the complex conceptual structures of the present day living^ it would • be absurd even to suggest that it is possible to live without them. What kind of life would I possibly have if I obeyed no traffic rules, ate no foods from the supermarket, or had no transactions of money? Extend the idea to the enjoyment of literature, music or art, or using complex intelligence to solve problems of mathematics or science or architecture, if that is the life in which one finds oneself. But this must not be confused with the sort of enjoyment which we think we have in fantasizing and daydreaming or striving for happiness.

Fourth, Eastern Philosophy does not prevent us from either having or enjoying relationships, and having families: our biological urges alone force us to have familial relationships. And as long as we exist in societies we are related to other people. If we are free from our fixations, if our relationships are not based on mutual psychological dependencies and exploitations, they are in fact a lot more meaningful than they normally are. For instance, if I raise my son without any pre-conceptions about what he has to become, or without trying to mould him into some pattern, then I can enjoy his growth as well as be able to help him by being a friend and a guide.

Fifth, Eastern Philosophy does not necessarily reduce our living to that of bare animal existence. In this complex civilization in which we live we have to make some kind of decent career such that our life activity is not harmful to the society around us and yet does not create a separation between our life and our work. To live this way may require me to go to school and get some kind of training; and, depending on my aptitudes, I may pick any of a variety of careers that are suitable. I may have to experiment with several careers to see where I would be reasonably successful and possibly change my life work as my situation demands. But I know I will eventually end up with something that will be suitable. Notice, however, this search for a career is not based on some sort of ambition of what I think I have to be or become, nor do I feel inadequate and unfulfilled if I don't become successful at a particular career and am forced to change it to something else.

Eastern Philosophy helps us to use all our gifts, including abstract intelligence, i.e., our ability to think, to the fullest extent and efficiency for the purposes of solving problems but

not for the purpose of building our ego or self.

Eastern Philosophy presents a way of living that is different from the common life of people both in the West and in the East. I shall present here some of its basic tenets and try to show that, although the way of living offered by Eastern Philosophy is unusual, there is nothing incoherent about it.

It is natural on the part of man to become fixated in the experiences he has enjoyed in the past and try to repeat them by manipulating the world around him. We formulate our desires and goals on the basis of these experiences. The fixations define much of our identity and form the basis of our desire for continual or eventual happiness and fulfillment.

Some of these desires are in fact satisfied and some are not, depending on our effort and luck. When they are satisfied we cherish our achievement for a moment, feel elated, are proud of ourselves and so on. Then soon other desires or goals present themselves to our mind, and we go on to seek their satisfaction. When they are not satisfied we work harder, try to remove the obstacles on our way, or substitute other desires, and so on. Thus our entire lives are consumed with striving.

Part of the problem with such achievements and the resultant pleasures is that they wear out. This brings about a consciousness of ourselves. We become conscious of our boredom with ourselves or what we have, and this in turn triggers a seeking for something else which we expect will provide us with new pleasures or happiness.

There is also the tendency to become absorbed in the contemplation of future pleasures or memories of past ones. This provides its own pleasure. Much of our conscious mental life thus is spent not only in striving after goals, or planning for them but also in deriving vicarious satisfaction by fantasizing and day-dreaming about them. However, this does not provide true satisfaction and soon we return to the real world and resume striving for our goals.

This is not the whole story of our lives: we also have many annoyances, conflicts, frustrations, dissatisfactions, boredoms, fears and feelings like those of inadequacy, and loneliness, which are the "negative" side of our desires. For these negatives exist only when there are obstacles on the way to satisfying our

desires. The negative feelings are derived from our unreflected attachments.

Once we are used to this kind of living, our life becomes as though we are living for the sake of happiness, constantly striving for what is pleasurable, which we learned from our past experience, or avoiding the painful.

All this seems very natural and essential to living; but if we compare ourselves to animals we already notice a vast difference: they too move toward or away from things (based on their natural drives for food, sex, shelter or security). These movements we can call desire or aversion, for they are purposive movements. But we cannot say that an animal is striving for happiness or fulfilling itself or that it knows how" to deliberately manipulate its environment. Nor can we say that its identity, happiness or fulfillment depend on the satisfaction of its desires. Nor do animals spend much of their time fantasizing and day-dreaming or being afraid of this abstract thing called "death." I am not saying we should be like animals. But what is this urge to fulfill oneself or strive for one's happiness? Apart from satisfying our animal urges, why should we strive for anything more? How does this need arise in us?

Eastern Philosophy attempts to answer this Question by saying that we have somehow become alienated from life. This urge for happiness is the reflection of an attempt on the part of man to reunite with life. In his consciousness itself there somehow is a division such that man feels separated from the world around him, from other men and even from himself, his body and his life. It is this human condition which no one is free from that Eastern Philosophy calls suffering.

Ordinarily we are not aware of this alienation or division in consciousness. In rare moments, when things don't go well for us, when we are weary of 'traveling', when life seems to have lost its meaning for us, when we are lonely or don't know what to do with ourselves, we have intimations of this alienation, and we try to escape it normally through various means such as activity, further striving, religion, achievement and what not. Our attempts may or may not succeed. But even when they do, it does not mean that we have permanently become free from our alienation. Some of us take it as inevitable and don't bother to seek a fundamental solution to it. Eastern Philosophy does.

How does this alienation or division in ourselves come about? Thought by its very nature creates this feeling by splitting itself up into the subject and the object. Whenever we think about anything we stand apart from the object of which we are conscious. We then repeatedly attempt to bridge this gap between the subject and the object through the [process of](#) desire. What is thought? On the one hand it is the function of our intelligence by means of which we deliberately name, recognize, classify, predicate, and draw consequences from "given information. On the other hand thought also creates the self and divides it from what it thinks about. We identify ourselves with the many things we have experienced in our past as pleasant or painful. It's only in reflection that we are aware of ourselves as a self looking at the world. When the reflection occurs at more abstract levels we can have a grand notion of the ego or the self which travels in time, progressing endlessly, fulfilling its destiny. Once the division between the self and the [world or](#)" the thinker and the object of thought is created, our entire life is consumed with attempting to bridge this gap by striving to achieve the many goals with which we are identified. If we separate the [intelligent](#) functioning of thought from the self or ego-creating function, and not have the latter, then we would have thought as a mere tool.

If thought did not involve the thinker, if it were merely a machine-like operation (like that of a computer) there would be no feeling of separation, and no need even for the search for happiness. We would be content like animals to live in the world, satisfying our biological needs, using our [intelligence](#) to solve actual biological or social problems of existence and pass away. Thought creates the thinker, and the need for '[knowledge](#)' knowledge being an attempt on our part to '[appropriate](#)' the world, thereby bridging the gap between ourselves and it.

Thought also makes a similar attempt to bridge the chasm between the self and the [world](#) by creating '[God](#)' and trying to merge with It (as in religious experience). It little knows that the Great [Unknown](#) (or God) is created by itself and thus is bound to remain as long as we are a victim to its self-creating function. The very [knowledge](#), for instance of one's happiness creates a further need for happiness by making us other than the state of happiness and seeking its continuance or furtherance. Of course, for the man involved in the seeking, nothing is more real than the [goal](#) one is seeking, and he cannot, for the moment, see himself happy

any other way.

In Eastern Philosophy this feeling of separation of self and the world is called suffering. The seeking of particular pleasures and the avoidance of particular pains are a mere consequence of this alienation. Pleasures and pains go hand in hand; we cannot have one without the other. But neither of them is truly **satisfactory** or we wouldn't be in this state of constant mental traveling.

Eastern Philosophy does not take a particularly dim view of existence and ignore the 'positive' or joyful aspects of life. It does eschew notions of pleasure or happiness which have built into them assumptions and premises which cannot in principle be satisfied as long as thought keeps dividing man's consciousness as the self and the world. Suffering is built into the very process of striving, the traveling itself, with the assumption that our happiness will somehow result from attaining our goals. Although we can have moments of happiness, the awareness that we are happy is enough to make us strive for it again **thinking** that it is something outside of us.

Eastern Philosophy's Solution: The essential solution Eastern Philosophy offers to the problem of suffering (or fundamental alienation in our terms) is to realize first that 1) life and its functions do not depend on any identifications or fixations that **we** indulge in and demand life to conform to (in fact we only bring more headaches for ourselves that way); 2) that as **long** we are fixated on the notion of striving for happiness and avoiding pain our life is bound to be more painful; 3) the **only** way to meet life is not through our fixed ideas, but on its own terms, which are constantly changing; and finally 4) this flexibility involves letting go of all our fixed ideas about living, that means all our ideas about the things which we think life **ought** to be or ought not to be. This may involve abandoning even the very **i**dea that we must somehow "survive." For the best way to survive is not to be so "hung up" on the idea of surviving. Self-knowledge and meditation help us achieve this end, for we **ought to** know what the fixations are before we can let them go.

Meditation: Meditation is a process of letting go of our fixations, attachments, involvements and "hang-ups". How does meditation achieve this? Many things go on under the name of meditation, but I **will** mention **what** I think is essential to all meditation here. In meditation the point is to somehow create a

separation between yourself and your thoughts (particularly those involving your fixations). The idea is that if there is a clear separation between yourself and your fixation at all levels without any further involvement with it, the fixation will lose its energy and drop away. The different meditation techniques do this in different ways, (a) by asking you to concentrate on your breathing, (so you are not busy thinking about things, but watching), or on an innocuous object such as your big toe or your navel, or concentrate on some **Mantram**, or visualize something, or repeat a prayer to God, or look at the motivations of "your thoughts and actions dispassionately, or concentrate on nothing. You become aware passively of your fixations and let them be, without interfering with them, or participating in them. You have of course to be totally open to them and be non-judgmental about them. You cannot say to yourself, "I like these particular items in myself and I don't like the others." You cannot specialize. You let everything be what it is and you make no expectations or requirements concerning the outcome of meditation. You cannot use it as a self-improvement method. You accept whatever happens. There is no goal to meditation. 'You don't go anywhere. There is nothing to do and nowhere to go. Just be and be aware.

Meditation is bound to bounce back on us by creating further conflict, if we, by being carried away by some success, deliberately use it as a method to create a certain kind of effect, for then we are involved again in some fixed notion that is bound to vitiate what we observe. But when one becomes free from all his or her fixations effortlessly (you can't tell when it happens, it might or it might not—you have to accept whatever happens) then it is possible for one to be reunited with life and become free fundamentally from the problem of alienation. This makes sense, for if alienation is caused by our fixations, we should become free from it by separating ourselves from them. Meditation is a process of undoing the structure of the self. In meditation one 'dies' to everything so as one may live fully, meet the ever-changing challenges of life with full vitality, and keep moving from one thing to another without having any time to look back, to accumulate, rejoice or regret. The purpose of meditation is not to insulate us from the changes of life. Just the contrary: through meditation we become so flexible, sensitive and vulnerable that we can move along with the movement of life itself, so we are actually living and moving and not stagnated and fixated in some ideas, ideals, or desires.

Vito:
Eastern Philosophy – Second Round

Our debate, Moorti, certainly illustrates the differences between East and West. With my straightforward logic I advance, like a typical Western pugilist, hoping to provoke a direct confrontation. You, the Tai-Chi master, sidestep gracefully, and I land on a heap on the floor. When I recover, and try to meet the elusive opponent, I find that you have shifted the terms of the encounter ... my blows land on empty air. I cannot find you....

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So far it's gone like this: I offered a schematic outline of something that I called "Eastern Philosophy", and some objections to it. Moorti responded that I had knocked down a straw man, that Eastern thought does not resemble my caricature, and provided a tantalizing sketch of the "real thing". According to Moorti, for example, Eastern Philosophy does not advocate a life without desires or conceptual thinking. Yet this is certainly what the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and oral teachings that I had encountered had led me to believe.

Our problem is surely that there is no such thing as "Eastern Philosophy." I used the term for convenience, to connote a general outlook, but my use of it was as presumptuous as it would be to generalize about "what Western Philosophy says." There is a rich variety on both sides of the Great Divide. We had better decide WHOSE "Eastern Philosophy" we are talking about.

I am going to assume, in what follows, that we are talking about Moorti's own views. For what he has done is to provide us with some glimpses of an attitude and a perspective that needs to be explored further, and worked out in greater detail. While he has undoubtedly derived some of his views from his cultural heritage, he has worked creatively, on this material to arrive at his own synthesis.

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While rejecting my description of Eastern doctrine, Moorti rephrases it. The substitutions he makes are obviously meant to be significant. He would accept "desiring", for example, but reject "striving", particularly for "happiness". He would encourage emotional vulnerability, but inveighs against bearing grudges and in general against "fixations". It is fine to use rational thinking, but apparently only when "necessary" or to solve practical problems, and definitely not to "build up ego". Long range planning, e.g., for a career, is acceptable, but not when in the service of "ambition." While my reading of Eastern thinking seemed to put all normal human life "off limits", Moorti's allows a stripped-down, cleaned-up version.

Without denying the importance of Moorti's emendations, it is essential to note

that the structure of his argument does follow what I have described as the classical Eastern pattern. Human life is criticized as in general unsatisfying. Then the solution is found in the REMOVAL of ... something, some typical human tendency. Moorti's candidate for culprit is thought, which, besides its useful functions, "creates the self and divides it from what it thinks about". This produces "alienation". This noxious side effect of thought produces our miseries, and removing it is seen as our main task.

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It will be useful to dwell a bit longer on what I have called this "classical Eastern pattern." The first assumption is that human life is not satisfying to humans, that there is a general "problem." This "suffering" is taken to affect everyone; the philosophy is not offered as a therapy for especially troubled souls, but for the normal, the average. And this is reflected in the second assumption - that the "cure" must consist in the REMOVAL of some human tendency that is part of us all - not a vice or a special addiction, but a "standard feature" of our equipment. Moorti's revision apparently shares this assumption with every other Eastern thinker I have read.

Can we question these assumptions? A "world view" such as this creates a whole cultural "atmosphere" in which we breathe and move. It is always instructive to deny what is thus "given", at least experimentally. I can envisage a philosophy which bases itself, with conviction, on the opposite assumptions: that human life is a blessing, overflowing with redundant and intricate satisfactions for all; that the way to make the most of it is to utilize every human faculty fully, since all of them were given to us for good reasons. While an Eastern philosopher would focus on the fact that pleasures don't last, that some people never seem to have enough, his counterpart would point out that the world, quite unnecessarily, presents itself to us in color, rather than in black and white; that man has woven every animal appetite into an art, food into exquisite curries, clothing into delicate fabrics, thought into chess and the calculus and the sonnet, sex into the dance of courtship and the deep web of marriage.

How would these two philosophers resolve their dispute? Is it rationally soluble? Would they be reduced to denouncing each other as self-deceiving, as evading reality? What is the cognitive status of such assumptions? Can any of them be defended? How? If a philosopher questions and wonders, and demands evidence whenever possible, then here is a place to begin, in the assumptions underlying whole cultural patterns. It is certainly easy to believe that man is in trouble. Discontent is, surely, rampant, and a species that spends such major energies on lethal weaponry simply demands radical surgery. Suppose we accept the Eastern presuppositions, then. What we have is a philosophy that sets itself a practical goal, and makes a startling promise: not that life can be improved gradually or in increments, not that "symptomatic relief of minor irritations" is available, but that the One source of our One Problem can be eradicated.

Moorti's means to this end is meditation, or a certain form of meditative practice.

So it is baffling to hear him simultaneously deny that meditation is a means to an end at all. Is the doctor telling us that the pill to remove the headache will work only if we do not take it to remove the headache? Whom then am I hoping to deceive if I pretend to meditate “for its own sake?” Moorti certainly does not seem to be describing a technique that is so easy and enjoyable that it would be pursued without any hope of results. I can make sense of the Eastern framework only in a straightforward context of means and ends: Buddha, at any rate, taught suffering and the Way (the means) to remove it. But if we interpret the teaching as a “Way,” one wonders how Eastern thinkers evade the demands for evidence – testimonials, statistics – that any Western scientist would face upon making such claims for a technique of therapy or for a pill!

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Moorti’s pages include many useful examples which hint at the kind of human functioning that his teaching would encourage. A value system emerges from the illustrations. I will try to separate some strands of the weaving:

1. He lauds “living in the present” as opposed to living “through past experiences,” in particular trying to repeat these.
2. He extols “actual” living as opposed to daydreaming, fantasizing, remembering the past or anticipating the future.
3. He seems to favor living on the simplest possible level – taking care of “biological” needs, solving “real” problems, etc. For example: “Apart from satisfying our animal urges, why should we strive for anything more?”
4. Something called “striving for happiness” is singled out as particularly symptomatic of our suffering.

The words “spontaneity” and “flexibility” summarize much of what Moorti seems to encourage in these pages. The word “fixation” summarizes what he objects to. Moorti’s ideal is an attractive one; it happens to reflect many of my own preferences. It is important, thought, to realize that it IS an idea, a complex of value judgments, and an ideal which Moorti has without a doubt formulated on the basis of his own past experiences. But he says elsewhere that all such ideals must be given up! Moreover, all of the components are subject to dispute on several counts.

First, one wonders to what extent all of them are simply “matters of taste”. If I find the present notably dull, and derive much satisfaction from memories of the past or fantasies: if I enjoy solving speculative problems (for example, in philosophy!) much more than “real” ones: if “simple” living does not interest me at all, and I delight in the complications of technology, romantic entanglements or gambling on the stock market: then how will Moorti convince me of my mistakes? Is it that “living in the present” (for example) is simply in itself “better” than reminiscing (why?) or is it that I will not end

my means-ends framework, we need to know whether the lifestyle advocated is a MEANS to enlightenment or whether it is SYMPTOMATIC of an enlightened state already attained. And Moorti doesn't make this clear.

Secondly, one wonders to what extent Moorti is asking us to do without human functions that are necessary for survival. For example, another name for "living through the past" might be "learning from experience." We try a certain behavior, find that it leads to pain, and thenceforward eschew it; or we find that we like the consequences and try to repeat the sequence as often as possible. Are these not the very building blocks of maturation? Spontaneity is fine, but nobody with consistently impulsive behavior would last long in this world. It seems clear that we MUST "live through the past" to a great extent. On the other hand, thee ARE useless "fixations" of the type Moorti decries. But it is not easy to say where the line is to be drawn; certainly no simple prescription to "live in the present" will suffice.

Finally, let us suppose that a person following Moorti's prescriptions could survive. Would he be able to partake of the essential "human" satisfactions at all? Moorti's ideal of near-animal "simplicity" appears to ignore the fact that what makes us human is our ability to elaborate: to weave complex structures out of our basic needs. It is a long way from an animal's feeding to the ceremony of a formal dinner, for example; a long way from a mating cry to a poem by John Donne, or from "natural" running and jumping to a ballet performance. Moreover, many of these tapestries use the stuff of "daydreaming" and night dreaming. How much of human life is taken up in the creation and experiencing of "stories"! Is any of this "necessary" or "practical"? Would you choose to be an animal – however content – rather than to participate in this creative process? Is it not infinitely preferable to be even a "suffering" human?

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The center of Moorti's paper is devoted to a discussion of "thought". Since this is his diagnosis of our predicament, it is essential. Moorti characterizes our "suffering" as a feeling of "alienation" or "separation". He says:

How does this alienation or division in ourselves come about? Thought by its very nature creates this feeling by splitting itself up into the subject and the object. Whenever we think about anything we stand apart from the object of which we are conscious. We then repeatedly try to bridge this gap between the subject and the object through the process of desire.

Moorti goes on to call this the "creation of the self." According to him, rational thought as mechanical computation is harmless and even useful; it is the separation of ourselves from the object of our thought that creates consciousness of self and causes our distress.

I find Moorti's language very hard to understand here. His use of the word "Thought" (with a capital T) has a flavor of reification or even animism (thought splits

itself up – like an amoeba? – thought then tries to bridge the gap – in itself?). It is hard to know what we are really talking about when we talk like this. What is the “splitting” that Thought performs “by its very nature”? Thinking involves the manipulation of a system of symbols or a “representation” of the world, and of course, in that sense, the thinker is “separated” from the world: the symbols are not identical with the reality symbolized. When I think about something, I “stand apart” from that object, for what I manipulate is not the object itself but a representation of it. For example, in planning a journey, I do not manipulate real buses and airplanes. This is not “alienation”, surely; in fact, it’s essential to the “computer” aspect of thought.

However, Moorti in the same sentence ends by mentioning that we stand apart “from the object of which we are CONSCIOUS”. Is he suggesting that PERCEPTION itself is vitiated by thought? If I see a chair, is it only thought that “separates” me from the object? Surely the chair and I are separate in reality, and I feel no desire to bridge this gap at all. What would be the alternative? If I meditated enough, would I then BE what I perceive? Would I BE the chair? INSTEAD of being Vito? AS WELL as being Vito? All of this seems absurd. Moorti may be relying on some specialized philosophical doctrines of which I am ignorant, but if he is, then he needs to do more work on this section to make it at all comprehensible to a layman.

.....

There are certainly special difficulties in elucidating Eastern thought. It should be clear that Moorti and I are debating this philosophy because we share a feeling that there is much that is true and important in it. He has taken on this difficult task of developing a coherent statement; criticizing is easy in comparison. I feel that it is time for me to try to state what I am searching for in this tradition.

Western civilization often appears to be obsessed with acquisition and achievement. Yet when we observe the lives around us, we come to the conclusion that neither possessions nor accomplishments seem to bring joy to people. (We see too many wealthy or famous people who are obviously miserable.) Success in living seems to arise rather from some “inner” qualities. Some people have a great capacity for enjoyment, which enables them to make the most out of even meager material goods. Others seem to possess a buoyant spirit, and can delight in their struggles even when their accomplishments are relatively small. We occasionally observe a contrast between the insecure rich and people who “feel wealthy” and are generous even though poor.

Pleasures are transient for all, but there are folk who are able to flow gracefully through the changes in circumstances, and others who grow stiff with panic or bitter with resentment when their attachments are threatened. Looking hard at all this, we begin to feel that our priorities are all wrong. What we should be striving for is whatever it is that makes a person see the glass as half full, rather than half empty. People seem to be happy when they have a “good attitude” of some kind. But we know very little about such “spiritual” powers. And we naturally look to the East for guidance. After all, we vaguely

feel that “over there” the right kind of priorities have been cultivated for ages.

And then there is impermanence and death. One cannot live consciously without feeling that everything is slipping away; after all, it is! But our Western culture seems to deny this central fact of existence. Aging is taboo; we use cosmetics to “look younger”, put old people into nursing homes so that we will not have to regard them, and are trained to ignore death entirely. When some of us examine our lifestyle and try to discover what went wrong, we see that this great lie at the heart of it. The question is, what to do about it? How would one live without lying to oneself about these things? And here again we look to the East for guidance. After all, it was Buddha who spoke incessantly of sickness, aging and death, and who based his teaching on impermanence; and then we read of the Hindu yogis who meditate on corpses and all the rest. Surely there is wisdom in the East.

These are the glimpses that we have. Yet when we examine the Eastern teachings, we find much that we cannot accept, and we wonder: is there a coherent way of distilling these insights? Do they produce a systematic worldview, or a set of clear recommendations for action? Or is it, perhaps, the case that no one really knows what to do about any of these things?

I am still wondering.

Moorty:

REPLY TO VITO'S COMMENTS

Round 2

1. Whose Eastern Philosophy? I must admit that many of the ideas I presented in my first reply to Vito are not part of any traditional teaching in Eastern Philosophy exactly as it was taught. However, they are an attempt to make sense out of the teachings of traditional Eastern Philosophies such as Buddha is, using some insights I have gained not only from contemporary Eastern Philosophers such as J. Krishnamurti but also some Western Philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre. For example, the Buddha did not distinguish physical pain from psychological pain. His analysis of suffering comes loaded with many metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical assumptions such as that somehow the illusion Of the ego lasts over many lifetimes and is the cause of our being born here. These assumptions we in the twentieth century may be hesitant or reluctant to accept, although they may in fact be true. But this does not mean that the Buddha's basic intuitions are not useful or true. What he said at his time was adequate and true to his audience. He might not have distinguished between desire as mere approaching and desire as the psychological phenomenon of striving for things or goals to fill a gap or lack in oneself. Since we now have more complicated questions we have to make the necessary distinctions to make sense to ourselves of what the Buddha has said. My elaborations do not invalidate what the Buddha has said. They would only qualify his intuitions to suit our idiom.

The point to my mind is not as much whose Eastern Philosophy it is that I am presenting, out rather if we can make sense out of the basic intuitions of Eastern Philosophy either in the terms presented here or in some other term, if these are not quite adequate. So, for the sake of our discussion, let us suppose that it is my understanding of Eastern Philosophy that we are talking about.

2. Purpose of the Debate: In my mind the purpose of this debate, if that is the word we should use for it, is not to prove the "value-system" or "worldview" of Eastern Philosophy, as much as to help us understand some of the basic intuitions of Eastern Philosophy. Indeed, if the former be the purpose of the debate,

it is destined to fail before it even started: value—systems are arbitrary in some sense or other. At least they are conventional: people can pick and choose them as they please. There can be no proof for their validity, just the same as there can be no proof for judgments of the sort Vito seems to believe to be true, namely, that "spending major energies on lethal weaponry simply demands radical surgery:" that there is something "wrong" in "being obsessed with acquisition and achievement," or that "happiness" or "joy" are anything valuable in themselves. The aim of Eastern Philosophy is not to persuade us about a value system by showing its superiority over another value system and somehow try to win us over to it. If anything it is to make us free from all values, particularly values that are man-made. I will try to explain below what I mean by this statement. This does not mean that "being free from values" is itself another value that Eastern Philosophy has somehow to prove to us.

When I try to understand Eastern Philosophy I see it not as much a value system I am somehow adopting, but a solution to some of my problems, whether my personal problems or problems concerning my living in this world, in societies, and among people. When things are going reasonably well, when we are not struck with any deep suffering, then it looks like life is fine, that we should be optimistic, and that a little suffering only "adds spice to life." Anyone who is asking to look into the sources of how our problems are created may look like a pessimist with a gloomy outlook on life, seeing only the "empty half of the glass." But for the person who is engulfed in his suffering these remarks have no appeal. In fact, if a person for example, is bent on committing suicide because he found life too unbearable, lectures about how life is fundamentally good would only find a deaf ear.

It is not even that we are pitting one way of looking at life against another, debating whether or not life is fundamentally painful. Everyone, including Vito, has problems. Some people are satisfied with stopgap solutions to their problems, as long as they have hope that things will be all right in the future. Eastern Philosophy is asking us to find out now or what in human nature causes these problems. And of course its solution calls for some sort of transformation of human nature. It sees the problems as being caused by attachments to particular values and acquisitions, and says that the true solution to the problems consists in letting go of these attachments, it says that

happiness or meaning in life does not, and does not have to, depend on any of these values. It does not present a positive value system we should strive for in place of the old value system we are asked to give up. That would not make much sense. If problems arise out of attachment to any particular values, out of our insistence that we have to have these or some other values, it would be foolish to replace one value system with another.

Take death for example. Eastern Philosophy says that our fear of death (not the fact of death itself, of which we know nothing, and which as far as we ourselves are concerned is not even a problem) is a necessary consequence of the fact that we are attached to the many things we identify ourselves with. These include our achievements, acquisitions, our bodies, our experiences, our projects and hopes, and indeed our very lives. As long as we are attached to them, we will fear death. If we are seriously bothered by the fear of death, we will perform a look into the total structure of that fear and let all those attachments go.

For a person who is consumed by such a problem, being free from the fear of death is not some attractive value he has to be persuaded by and strive to achieve. If the person is not bothered by the problem, no one can convince him that he must become free from that problem. If, on the other hand, he is consumed by it, then no external proof is necessary. He would not ask why he should "trade" what he has for this new value of becoming free from the fear of death. He sees no choice except to become free from it. And the learning about having to let go of attachments is not an inquiry in which we are first theoretically "convinced" of something and then try to translate that conviction into practice. It is rather a learning we give ourselves by looking into the structure of our own psyche. The looking gives us insights into how our attachments give rise to our problems. The urgency of the matter is such that with each insight we not only gain an understanding of the sources of our problem but also become free from them. We not only know our solutions, we live them.

3. Means and Ends: Eastern Philosophy offers a fundamental solution to our problems. It does not matter whether we call such a solution meditation or something else. Vito somehow understands from my description that "meditation isn't a means to

anything and **doesn't** get you anywhere." If this is what I was saying, it surely **wouldn't** make much sense. On the other hand, what I was saying (which Vito could still object to) is that when you meditate you **couldn't** be doing it with the expectation of any result, or, in other words, Chat meditation should not be **practiced as a means to an end**. But this is not the same thing as saying that meditation **does not** in fact yield **any** result. The relationship or attitude you have to your meditation is as important as the meditation itself. The attitude with which you meditate affects the outcome of meditation. Although being bothered by a problem is how you became interested in meditation or self-knowledge, if your attitude is one of achieving results, changing or improving yourself, I think meditation will not free you from your problem. I will provide below what I think to be extensive reasons for saying so, with a couple of examples. But this does not mean that if you do meditate with the right attitude you won't become free from your problems.

When Eastern Philosophy offers meditation as a solution to human problems, it is only a solution to the extent that Eastern Philosophy offers a diagnosis to human problems and points out that the solution is not external to the problem, but lies within the structure of the problem itself, we are in some sense the problem and we are also the seeker of the solution of the problem. If you "undo" the problem, the problem disappears. There is no "positive" result that will appear after the problem is solved. And the 'undoing' has to be done without creating a further problem, if the solution is to be complete. The freedom from the problem is not a "value" that has to be sold in the market place for a price. The result is not a result one can display in showcases. Once you are free from your problem, you may live differently, you just don't have your problem. That's So, psychological problems are not quite like headaches, and what applies to headaches does not necessarily apply to the former.

Take, for example, the problem of fear of death. Eastern Philosophy tells us that we can only become free from the fear by becoming aware of and letting go in our meditation of all the attachments which we are afraid of losing when we are afraid of death. It looks like giving up these attachments is to invite death. In fact, the best solution to the fear of death is to invite death, and not to fight the fear of death. If we turn the fighting of the fear into a goal we are bound to intensify it.

When we meditate we are not guaranteed anything, not even the "freedom from the fear of death". But still we have no choice except to give up the strongholds of our lives. We do not have a goal to "work for". There is no distinction here between "means" and "ends". To be free from attachments is in fact "to die" to them. We become free from the fear of death by actually "dying" to the many things we are identified with. From outside, to an observer, and to ourselves later, it may appear as if we have become free from the fear of death. But "freedom from the fear" cannot itself be made into another value that we now become attached to and strive for. Being bothered by the fear is the reason perhaps why we had started in the process of looking into ourselves. But by making freedom from the fear a value and being attached to it we create a further conflict between having to have it and its possibly not occurring^ which now becomes another version of the fear of death.

So, from outside, taking the external or objective point of view, it looks like there must be a distinction between means and ends; and there is. You work with yourself. And as a consequence there is freedom from death. But internally, meditation is to accept deaths dying to all the sundry things, with nothing to expect in return. If you expect it, if you accept death in order to achieve an "end", then you are caught in the same endless cycle of "becoming..." By "becoming" I mean the constant process of striving to become other man what we in fact are. It is this becoming that consumes most of our conscious Lives. Such becoming only enhances suffering, does not diminish it.

To take another example: I constantly feel inferior in comparison with others. Upon examination of this feeling I find that I have the urge to feel wormy in comparison to others or to feel superior to them, or to be like them in performance, achievement or appearance. And I "find" myself as not being as good as others; so I feel inferior. What do I do? The problem starts by my being fascinated by someone else's appearance or performance and my feeling the lack of their admirable quality. I try to become like them. And I don't always succeed. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't, I keep finding myself to be inferior and compensate for that feeling by striving for superiority, trying to achieve more or perform better. But the feeling of inferiority keeps recurring, because there are always other people around me in comparison with whom I stand inferior.

As long as I try to improve myself hoping to feel superior to others, I keep confirming myself in my feeling of inferiority. So, when I realize this circular pattern I quit that approach: I quit trying to compensate for my feeling of inferiority.

I now would rather look for the reasons why I feel inferior, hoping that by this approach I can free myself from this feeling. I discover that the feeling arises because of the comparisons I constantly make between myself and others, and the reason why I make the comparisons is because I have a need to feel worthy, to prove myself in relation to others. Suppose now I vow to stop making the comparisons. What are the chances of my success? Practically nil, for I will be unable to stop making comparisons, because my need feel worthy is still there! I am still trying to measure up to a standard of non-inferiority. Suppose now I wish to become free from my need to feel worthy. If I attempt this with a desire to become free from my inferiority, when this need for worthiness (which is the source of my feeling of inferiority in the first place; is still operating, no matter what I do. I still want to prove myself, this time as being able to rise above the need of self-worth. This desire to change myself is bound to generate the problem once again in another context. Hence, I will not be successful. On the other hand, if I can let myself be "inferior", accept that state without having to change it, then I can come to terms with it. Then I can effortlessly become free from the need to prove myself, without having to take any direct action at all. Thus subjectively speaking, the logic of means and ends must go, if the understanding of the problem, and therefore the freedom from it, is to be complete.

The objective, in the above example, is to become free from the feeling of inferiority. But on further analysis it turns out that the real problem is my expectation To stand well in comparison to others. Now my new objective is to become free from this expectation. How do I become free from it? Only by dropping it and being able to stand alone, without having to be anyone or anything. That is the end and that is the means. I start by being free from the expectation and that's where I end up. There is no gap between the two. Objectively, you may find yourself having accomplished this end only momentarily, or to a degree. But from my point of view either I am "here", i.e. "in" the expectation, or "there," i.e. free from the expectation. At any given moment, there is nothing between the two stages. If I am free I already am free, and if I am not free, there is nothing

I can do to "become" free. In order to "become" free I must start_ "being" free. And there is no "how" to it. Being free from the expectation is the end and it is also the means.

Similarly, if becoming free from alienation or sufferings is my objective, I become free from by dropping the very process of psychological striving or desiring that creates the alienation. I cannot make the dropping of it into another goal. I just drop it and there is now "how" to it. Being free from the process of striving or seeking is the end and it is also the means.

Such "letting go" is not an action in the ordinary sense of the term. Ordinarily speaking, in order for an action to be meaningful there must be a reason for undertaking it. And there must be a purpose we must have in view which we intend to accomplish by doing that action. We constantly measure our achievements by comparing them against this goal or purpose we have. But if we see that whatever we identify ourselves with and strive for as a value must bring forth a sense of alienation in us and engulf us in our "becoming", we will also see that there is no way of becoming free from alienation by making the freedom from alienation into a goal and being attached to it. We become free from our alienation by dropping our attachments. Therefore, it is an "undoing"- something rather than doing it.

Subjectively speaking, I do not let go for the sake of something else, including becoming free from my alienation. Of course, there is a reason why I am "letting go of my attachments"-because I see they lead me to suffering. But if I turn this reason into a motive, a result I seek, then I am back in the circle of becoming. When I indeed achieve a measurable result, such as being free from the fear of death, I may not even know that I have become free from it. I just won't have that as a problem. If I do, I still look and see what else I am holding on to, and let go of that as well. My consciousness of myself arose only as a consequence of my fear. When my fear is gone, there is no need for any consciousness of myself, even the consciousness that I am free. I need my self-consciousness only if I wish to be guaranteed of the outcome, but then there are no guarantees in life. In fact, my problems arise primarily because I require that life conform to a certain value scale I have, and I seek my security through the value system.

Of course. it is hard to understand how one can do anything

without having a result to aim for, let alone actually do it. But Just because it is difficult to put it into practice does not Mean that the idea is incoherent, In fact: true meditation does not begin until we do put it into practice. Until then we keep striving for results, trying to improve ourselves., trying to "get somewhere." We keep putting forth effort in order to change ourselves into a better state. But true medication is "effortlessness." It does not attempt to replace one "state of mind" with another "state" (this time the states of freedom from alienation or from the fear of death). These again are not to be understood as "states." Notice, the Buddha never gave a single positive description of Nirvana'

4. Self and the Other: In the above example death is what is other than us. We feel separate from it. It frightens us. Or we are afraid of it. We want to be free from it. This is what Eastern Philosophy calls duality which constitutes the essential core of suffering. There is also duality in desire. In the case of things we strive for or desire we want to bridge the distance between us and what we desire. But we do not think of bridging the gap between ourselves and death, because death is something we consider as painful. We wish to widen the gap.

Eastern Philosophy 's solution to the problem of the fear of death (or any other psychological problem) is not to resist, but to be one with it 'or as Vito puts it with our "representation" of it). Medication is to become aware of and drop all those attachments whose loss we fear when we are afraid of death; so death itself is not frightening any more. We can therefore invite it with open arms. We solve the problem by actually psychologically dying. Then death is not something separate from us. Physically (or objectively or externally) speaking we cannot be one with death (or with a chair, to use Vito s example). Then we are really dead' And I have no desire to be united with a chair any more than Vito has. But in our attachment to our newly bought chair we are in some sense identified with our chair such that when someone hurts it or we lose it we feel hurt or lost ourselves, just as when a basic belief of ours is attacked we feel we are attacked. So in meditation (or self-knowledge or whatever it is we do) we become detached to all these things we identify with, so the feeling of separation from the world may go.

5. Thought: Vito finds my use of the word 'thought'

objectionable. He thinks I am reifying it. When I say that thought splits itself up into the self and the object, it is just a way saying that the self, psychologically speaking, has no existence outside of thinking (or reflecting, if you please). Our normal assumption in living is that we, psychologically speaking, are an entity that stands apart from our thoughts, feelings, experiences, body, and whatever else we think about. We feel we are the thinker. We feel that we think thoughts, or have thoughts of this or that feel, have experiences, possess our body, continue in time, have potentialities, gradually actualize them in course of time, and progress in time toward some destiny or goal, and so on. Yet when we examine ourselves we find no such self. What we find is "some thing that is thought", "some thing that is felt," and we exist only in relation to it as it were as "the subject pole" of it, as "one that thinks" and "one that feels" etc.

Or, if we consider the objects which I think as "representations" (to use Vito's term) of the things of the world, then we stand apart from the representations in our consciousness. However, outside of these objects we have no content of our own. Only there is another thought after this one which may become aware of the point of view from which the previous object was regarded. I may look upon it as attractive or repulsive, but then again I am only aware of myself as one who is attracted to the object. Although from an external point of view it is only the representation I am manipulating, from my point of view I do not make the distinction between it and the object or which if is the representation.

I discussed the alienation that results from this separation above. Death, for example, or my inferiority etc. are not merely objects (or representations), but are things that I am resistant to. Similarly, that woman out there that I am attracted to is not just a woman I think of (or a representation of her) but someone I feel a longing for, someone without whom I feel incomplete, inadequate, etc. This is quite different from using thought as a function of manipulating symbols or representations. The computer does not have a consciousness, for one thing, and does not feel separate from anything, for another. It neither feels a longing or nor a threat by another object or computer. These are purely human phenomena. The computer mimics (with great efficiency) only the computing aspect of our thought. But there is a lot more to the function of thought; and that is what

I am pointing to as what creates the notion (or sense) of the self when we think of things or people.

6. Living through the Past: Vito seems to realize on the one hand the distinction between living through the past and being controlled by it, and learning from the past and thus using it; he also seems to realize that at least some of this living through the past is a 'useless fixation.' On the other hand, he sees at least some of it cannot be avoided and is part of the process of "maturation." If we totally live in the present he is afraid we would become impulsive. Going on to his final objection (on page 4) he thinks that if we live this way, we deprive ourselves of some of the "essentially" human satisfactions, for example, the satisfactions that result from what he calls "elaboration."

First, I do not see how learning from past experience and not repeating the mistakes of our past requires that we live through our past. I remember my not watching the traffic lights yesterday and involving myself or another in a car accident. I learn from this and when I drive today I am more alert and watch the traffic signs (including lights) more carefully. But that is quite different from my having to relive my accident of yesterday and either punish myself for my neglect or feel guilty, or build up a fear of driving on city streets or highways and freeze whenever I have to drive.

Nor do I see how not living through our past, or as Vito puts it, living in the present would make us impulsive. Such a conclusion would follow only if being free from past implies that we cannot use our learning from the past as and when a situation demands it. But I don't make any such assumption.

Second, I am not sure we give up any ability to elaborate. For instance, I could be doing all this philosophical elaboration just because that is what is called for in this situation without having to live in a fantasy of having some kind of "intellectual judo" with an opponent in which I repeatedly beat him to pulp! I don't see using one's imagination to elaborate anything as being the same as or equivalent to having to live in a fantasy world deriving vicarious satisfaction. In order to imagine a situation I may have to temporarily put myself in the situation for a moment. But I do not do it to derive some pleasure from it. I do it in order to draw out consequences from the given situation,

information etc., using imagination as a sort of thinking device. I think if we make the proper distinctions we can see that we are not losing anything real except a vicarious satisfaction.

If we insist on the vicarious satisfactions, we must insist on the problems, the conflicts etc. which go with them. If we are satisfied with patching up the problems, they can perhaps be solved piecemeal, temporarily, on the surface. And we may even get the feeling that we are progressing toward some kind of perfection. No one can prove that we must not be satisfied with such solutions. But if we are not, then Eastern Philosophy is offering a diagnosis and a fundamental solution to our problems.

Objectively speaking it may take millennia for mankind to evolve to a point where it radically revises its ways of living. But in principle the solution is possible. No one is saying that this is the only solution to all our problems. This is the solution for psychological problems and social or political problems which have psychological roots. For example, I cannot see a fundamental solution to a racial conflict such as that between the Jews and the Arabs as long as the Jew retains the identity of a Jew (psychologically) and sees the Arab as an Arab. This is true in my view no matter how many peace treaties they make with each other (it is doubtful that they will even come to that point, given the Arab's unwillingness, stemming from his identity, not to grant the Jew even his right to live, and the Jew's perception of the Arab as an arch enemy).

Finally, when I ask the question., "Apart from satisfying our animal urges, why should we strive for anything at all" I am not necessarily presenting a certain value (in the sense of a concept to be striven for, or as policy for living); the intent of the question is to ask for a rationale for this incessant search for fulfillment or happiness. The function of the question is purely to question our natural tendencies which we so take for granted, and not to present an alternative value system to the one we normally accept and live by.

VITO:

About "round 2"

English: since your round 2 is a rough draft, there are, naturally, a fair number of run-on sentences and repeated clauses that need to be cleaned up. The first five lines are a good example of what I mean, in which the words "tradition", "eastern" and "philosophy" are repeated three or four times. In general, I find that your writing increases in power as your sentences get shorter!

Style: I find pages two and three somewhat rambling and unfocused, as though you were working yourself into the topic and hadn't quite yet decided what to say. My personal feeling is that some of this material could be cut. For example, I had no idea where the stuff about philosophy and household chores fit!

Now to content:

A general remark: I sense a flavor of "ad hominem" argumentation in several places and I feel that it weakens your argument. What I mean is that you talk about "Vito" and speculate or criticize this person for "being entrenched in a value system" or being "unwilling to give up certain things" or being "satisfied" with a life that contains suffering and so on. It is almost as if the writer you are responding to is a recalcitrant patient and you are a psychiatrist who is chiding the patient for "resistance"!

I think we should avoid this kind of talk. After all, the "Vito" whose arguments you are considering is unknown to our readers. Presumably he is human, and hence has values, fixations, hang-ups, all the rest. For all the reader knows, "Vito" may be a fervent Marxist, an ascetic, a drug addict, who cares? The point is, surely, to respond to the simple questions this supposed person is posing: i.e. what is this Eastern Philosophy anyway and can I make sense out of it? Let's avoid hypotheses about our private lives!

A specific example of projection or misunderstanding was "death" - you seemed to misread my remarks as posing a problem about "fear" of death. This is a valid problem for some people, but it wasn't what I was talking about. The question I was posing was this: how does one live with conscious acceptance of death? What would it be like to live without ignoring (looking away

from) that basic fact of impermanence?!

To specifics: some points made in my second paper were:

1. Your description of Eastern philosophy included some value judgments, e.g. in favor of "living in the present", simplicity, "real" as opposed to "vicarious" experience, and so on. I saw problems here for you, in that a) you elsewhere say that all "value systems" or "policies" are to be given up; b) you don't support THESE values by argument; c) it's not clear whether these are MEANS to "enlightenment" (I use this word only as a convenience) or SYMPTOMS of enlightenment already attained.

I don't find an understandable response to this in your round 2 and I DO think this is Important: it's not just trying to score "debating points". Inconsistency here would make your whole presentation very hard to follow. You can't declare yourself against all value systems and then recommend one. And certainly it's not that "Vito" prefers living in the past, etc. I was just postulating some opposed values in order to ask: how would you defend the recommendations you make?

2. Another main point was about means and ends. I'm not attached to these terms, by the way. But IF Eastern philosophy is about finding a fundamental solution to some human problems, then it is a method of some sort and can be evaluated by its results. To use my crude analogy again, if it's a pill to get rid of all these human headaches, then you owe us some evidence that it works - and saying that you don't want to "sell wares in the marketplace" won't get you out of it!

What makes your presentation REALLY hard to understand - much harder, I think, than Theravada Buddhism, which I was familiar with - is your insistence that meditation isn't a means to anything and doesn't get you anywhere. If I get lost here, and tangled up, I am SURE that the average reader will have even more difficulties. After all, as you yourself keep saying, we are not playing logical games here but dealing with a matter of great importance to people; many people really do desperately want some solution to their problems. To offer them this and then pull the rug out from under them by saying that the method won't get them anywhere and that they are making a great mistake by expecting results is just going to baffle them, isn't it?

3. Much of the rest of your paper is focused on "dying to" our attachments and values, giving up attachments, and so on. You say doing this requires serious motivation: the patient must really want a fundamental solution, and really be willing to sacrifice these attachments: but I think this scarcely needs defense. Whether life is a total mess or only a partial one might be debatable, but certainly there is more than enough suffering in the world, and there will always be enormous demand for a way out.

But here the whole debate goes back to Round 1. We are once again talking about giving up ALL values, ALL "strongholds" etc and to me it reads like a verbally changed version of giving up desire, giving up thought, and so on. So the questions I asked about this sort of thing in Round 1 again need to be answered. Desires, preferences, valuations, whatever you want to call them, seem to be absolutely integral to human life. It's not only "difficult" to give them up. They are part of our conception of a "person". And of course, if we COULD empty the whole bath, we would be throwing out the baby with the bathwater; without valuations, all the fun would go too. Anyway, please refer to my Round 1 for those arguments.

Where to go from here: I don't know. I'm very interested in pursuing this, both because I think we're producing some interesting writing and because I'm really vitally interested in getting my own thinking about this stuff straightened out. But we want to avoid going in circles and repeating the same arguments because they haven't been responded to.

I've got an idea for a new approach to Round 3 - perhaps in the form of a story, despite the ban on fantasy! - but I'll wait for your final version of Round 2 before starting on it...

P.S: The dialogue ended here rather abruptly.