Seeing and Seeing

Sehdev Kumar

Three Eyes of the Soul

The thirteenth century Italian Scholastic philosopher, St. Bonaventure - the great Doctor Seraphicus of the Church, is a favorite philosopher of Western mystics. In both Dante's Paradiso and Raphael's "Disputa" he appears as the equal of St. Aquinas. Amongst his many contributions to metaphysics and theology, St. Bonaventure formulated three modes by which humans attain knowledge. He called them "three eyes": the eye of flesh, by which we perceive the external world of space, time and objects; the eye of reason, by which the knowledge of philosophy, logic and the mind itself is attained; and the eye of contemplation, which reveals the knowledge of transcendent realities.

In his book Breviloquium, Book II, St. Bonaventure elaborates how all knowledge is a form of illumination. He talks of lumen exterius and lumen inferius, the exterior and inferior illumination, which lights the eye and makes the sense objects known to us. Then, there is lumen interius, which lights the eye of reason and gives us knowledge of philosophical truths. And above all - as though enunciating a "divine hierarchy", he says there is lumen superius, the light of transcendant Being, which illumines the eye of contemplation and reveals the truth of all things, "truth which is unto liberation."

All three worlds; the external, internal and the transcendental; St. Bonaventure maintained, revealed the presence of the Divine. In the external world, he said, we find a vestigium or "vestige of God" which the eye of flesh perceives. In ourselves, in our psyches, in the "threefold activity of the soul" (memory, reason and will), we find an imago of God, revealed by the mental eye. And ultimately, through the eye of contemplation, lighted by the lumen superius, we find the whole transcendent realm itself, beyond sense and reason - the Divine Ultimate.

St. Bonaventure was, in many ways, carrying forward the ideas - and the words and metaphors in which they were expressed - that were already in the air for a hundred years or more. Hugh of St. Victorine in the twelfth century, in his mystical writings, had already distinguished between cogitatio, meditatio, and contemplatio. Cogitatio, or simple empirical cognition, is a seeking of the facts of the material world using the eye of the flesh. Meditatio is a seeking for the truths within the psyche itself (the imago of God) using the mind's eye. Contemplatio is the knowledge whereby the psyche or soul is united instantly with Godhead in transcendent insight (revealed by the eye of contemplation).

The specific expressions - eye of flesh, mind and contemplation – are Christian, but, in fact, similar ideas can be found in every major school of traditional philosophy, psychology and religion. The "three eyes" of a human being correspond to the three major realms of being described by the perennial philosophy, which are the gross (flesh and material), the subtle (mental and anemic), and the causal (transcendent and contemplative).

Philosophy of Illumination

The idea of divine illumination in the mind occurs in both philosophical and religious contexts through out the ages and across geographical boundaries. Often it forms one of the links between the two types of thought, and sometimes it bears strictly religious overtones even in its more philosophical applications. This is one of the characteristic features of the theory of illumination in the thought of Plato, where it played, in its long history, a major part. Plato spoke readily of the sudden flash of understanding or insight in the mind as a flood of light. Plato was undoubtedly the father of the philosophical tradition to which the analogy of light is fundamental.

In his Republic, Plato employed the analogy of light and vision to describe the process of understanding or knowledge in general (Books V - VIII). The mind's knowledge of the world of intelligible reality, of the forms or ideas, was held to be analogous to the awareness of material objects accessible to the eye's vision when illuminated by the light of the sun. In Republic 507f, Plato developed a detailed correspondence between physical and intellectual sight, according to which the mind corresponds to the eye and the form to the physical object seen; an "intellectual light" emanating from the supreme form, the Good, and pervasive of the whole intelligible world as well as the mind, corresponds to the sun. Understanding, in this analogy, depends on the intellectual illumination of the eye and its objects.

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the philosophy of Illumination was widely diffused and incorporated into Jewish and Christian thought. In the Hellenized Judaic milieu of Alexandria, the divine wisdom was sometimes spoken of in terms of light, as for instance, the author of the book of Wisdom, who referred to it as "an effulgence of eternal light," which he interpreted as an image of God's goodness (7,26). Over the centuries, a long and rich future was prepared for the theory of illumination within the body of the Christian thought.

In the works of St. Augustine of Hippo, the theory of illumination is found in its most highly developed form. Like Plato, Augustine thought of understanding as analogous to seeing. Understanding, or intellectual insight, was therefore, he held, conditional on illumination, just as physical sight was; only here the light was the intelligible light that emanated from the Divine mind and in illuminating the human mind endowed it with understanding. The scope of illumination was further extended in the work of the pseudo-Dionysius. His favorite designation for God, the absolutely transcendent One, was in terms of light. God is the intelligible light beyond all light and the inexhaustibly rich source of brightness that extends to all intelligence. His illuminating activity gathers and reunites all that it touches; it perfects creatures endowed with reason and understanding by uniting them with the one all-pervading light (De Divinus Nomnibus, IV, 6).

In a more special sense, illumination is the second of three phases - namely purification, illumination, and perfection - of man's return to the One. In this more specialized sense the church's sacramental system and the grades in the ecclesiastical hierarchy concerned with its administration are agencies of divine illumination. Illumination is the intermediate stage of approach to God, between initial purification and final perfection (De Eccsiastica Hierrarchia, V,

1,3). In the work of the pseudo-Dionysius, the theory of illumination was merged with an inclusive conception of the spiritual life formulated in the language of light and illumination.

In the thirteenth century, the rise of Christian Aristotelianism provided the first serious alternative theory of knowledge. In this there was no place for the intervention of divine illumination as an essential constituent of knowledge. Knowledge was accounted for entirely in terms of mental activity and its objects, and no reference to God was necessary to explain it. Nevertheless, the lumen intellectuale of the mind was held to be a participation in the lumen divinum of the divine mind, since God was present everywhere, in the mind no less than in other things.

Despite this new theory of knowledge, light and illumination have continued to be the most pervasive metaphors and concepts in mystical literature to this day.

Seeing and Seers

The Divine Ultimate, the “truth which is unto liberation”, transcendent realm, and alike, are still abstract and abstruse concepts, worthy of philosophical discourse or a theological argument. However, "seeing" - whatever its nature - has a certain fleshiness to it. “I see the light that sees the light... O my Lord, it is miraculous,” cries the man in ecstasy as he glimpses the Ultimate. “Simple people imagine”, Mister Eckhart wrote in the thirteenth century, "that they should see God as if He stood there and they here... The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me... The knower and the known are one ... God and I are one in knowledge."

In India, seeing and the yearning to be a seer-like, is the central motif in all Hindu worship. The Sanskrit term used is "*Darsan*", which means both attaining a glimpse of the Lord and being glimpsed by Him. The "sacred perception" - the slow opening of the third eye - is the ability truly to see the divine image; it is a gift bestowed on the devotee by God, just as the great warrior Arjuna in the battlefield is given the eyes to see the Virat Rupa - "the Cosmic Self" of Krishna in the theophany so eloquently described in the Bhagavad Gita, 11.8.

Jan Gonda, in his detailed monograph Eye and Gaze in the Veda, has enumerated the many ways in which the powerful gaze of the gods was imagined and expressed even in a time before actual images of the gods were crafted. The eyes of Surya or Varuna are powerful and all seeing. Siva and Ganesha are often depicted with a third vertical eye, set in the center of the forehead. Brahma, inheriting the name of "Thousand Eyes" from Indra, is sometimes depicted with eyes all over his body. In the later Hindu tradition, when divine images began to be made, the eyes were the final part of the anthromorphic image to be carved or set in place. Even after the breath of life (*prana*) was established in the image, came the ceremony in which the eyes were ritually opened with a golden needle or with a final stroke of the paintbrush. This is still the common practice in the consecration of the images, and today shiny oversized enamel eyes may be set in the eye sockets of the image during the rite.

In a Hindu temple when devotees stand on tiptoe and crane their necks to see the image of Krishna, or Kali, or Hanuman, they wish not only to "see," but also to be seen. The gaze of the

huge eyes of the image meets that of the worshiper, and that exchange of vision lies at the heart of the Hindu worship.

Art historian Stella Kramrisch describes how seeing is a kind of touching in the Hindu context:

> *Seeing, according to Indian notions, is a going forth of the sight towards the object. Sight touches it and acquires its form. Touch is the ultimate connection by which the visible yields to being grasped.*

Not only is seeing a form of "touching," it is a form of knowing. According to Brahmanas, "The eye is the truth (*satyam*)." In Vedic India, the "seers" were called *rsis* - men of insight and vision. In their hymns, collected in the Rig Veda, "to see" often means a "mystical, supernatural beholding," or "visionary experiencing." Later on, the term *darsana* was used to describe the systems of philosophy, which developed in the Indian philosophy. However, it has been argued that it is misleading to think of these as "systems" or "schools" of philosophical thought. Rather, they are "points of view" which represent the varied phases of the truth viewed from different angles of vision.

We notice a certain universality in the use of light, seeing and illumination as metaphors for a kind of spiritual "enlightenment." "There may be," Goethe said, "a difference between seeing and seeing; so that the eyes of the spirit have to work in perpetual connection with those of the body." And Carlos Casteneda, in his book *A Separate Reality*, expresses the same process of "seeing" through the eyes of Don Juan:

> *"Once you learn, you can see every single thing in the world in a different way."*
>
> *"Then, don Juan, you don't see the world in the usual way any more."*
>
> *"I see both ways. When I want to look at the world I see it the way you do.*
>
> *Then when I want to see it, I look at it the way I know and I perceive it in a different way."*
>
> *"But ... what's the advantage of learning to see?"*
>
> *"You can tell thing apart. You can see them for what they really are."*

The Awakened Eye

The great Gautama, after his enlightenment, declared himself "Buddha": he was now "awake." Time and again, the mystical tradition refers to this new experience as a form of waking up from a long and deep slumber. "If the doors of perception were cleansed," wrote William Blake, "everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks in his cavern."

Kabir, the great poet-sage of fifteenth century India, sang in this state:

O Kabir

In a dream

God and His creation

Seem all

So fragmented

But ah, in the light

Of the day,

One sees the unity

Of all things!

This new awakened state has been described by the sages as being of supreme bliss. For centuries this state has also been the spring of spiritual poetry and the utterances of great wisdom. In this state, for instance, the nineteenth century sage Sri Ramakrishna, as the priest of the Kali temple in Calcutta, did things that intrigued and offended the other worshippers. He was once seen to feed a cat with sacramental food that was to be offered to the Divine Mother. But the Master was seeing everything full of Consciousness, as the embodiment of the spirit. The idol was consciousness, the altar was consciousness, the doorsill, the marble floor, he himself - all consciousness. "I clearly perceived that Divine Mother Herself had become everything - even the cat." In this exalted state, when he intended to offer the Mother a flower, he found his own hand coming towards his own head and placing the flower there.

For the *sadhak* - the spiritual aspirant - this awakening reveals a new reality, The Reality, which is not causally related to the phenomenological reality. His knowledge of this Reality is a knowledge apart and his experience wholly other. Behind the "veil of illusion" - the Maya, below the surfaces, underneath the masks, there must be another universe accessible only through the "eye of the spirit," the Inner Eye. When this eye is opened, the great sages say, what one sees is the unity of man and God. Whatever the land, whatever the age, the Awakened Eye discovers the oneness of all creation, the presence of One Element that permeates everywhere:

I...me...mine

What illusions

The mind creates!

O Master

These fragments

Are all part of you;

In offering them back

To you

Nothing do I lose

Except myself!

"The drop is submerged into the ocean," says Kabir, "And the Ocean is submerged in the drop. So who can tell what is what!" In this state of oneness, the Hindu mystics tell us, all distinctions between the seeker and the sought, between man and God, the animate and the inanimate, the matter and the spirit, and the sacred and the profane are obliterated. In this undifferentiated unity, there are no more I and thou, or the bride and the groom, the lover and the beloved, the subject and the object; they are all one. There is a new presence of an ever-evolving, eternally still, "ever-distinct , yet ever united," integrated, whole, the One:

I am

Like a pitcher of clay

Floating in the river,

Water inside, water outside;

Now suddenly

With the touch of the guru

The pitcher is broken!

Inside

Outside

O friends, It's all One!

According to an Indian legend, the swan - the *hans* - is endowed with a special gift of separating the milk from water, and thus discerning the real from the unreal. And though in

appearances a *hans* is not very different from a *bagula*, a crane, when the waves of the ocean strike against the shore, it is said that the swan dives in to search for the pearls while the crane is content looking for the fish. In the history of Hindu mysticism, a spiritual seeker is a *hans* in search of the pearls, always sifting the real from the illusory. In spite of many differences on the surface, the search and knowledge of such a seeker are remarkably similar in different lands and traditions. A mystic's language is not of a philosopher, but of a poet. It is invariably laced with metaphors and fables. It has images rather than formulations. It makes allusions; it arrives at no conclusions. Asked about his experience of oneness, the *samadhi*, Sri Ramakrishna replied:

> *I feel like a fish released from a bowl into the water of the Ganga... In samadhi, I lose outer consciousness completely, but God generally keeps a little trace of the ego in me for enjoyment of the divine communion. Enjoyment is possible only when "I" and "thou" remain. Again, sometimes God effaces even that trace of "I". But what remains when God completely effaces the ego cannot be described in words. I get into that state now and then. A salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean, but before it had gone far into the water, it dissolved. It became entirely one with the water and the ocean. Then who was to come back and tell the ocean's depth? I have come to the final realization that God is the Whole and I am a part of Him, that God is the Master and I am His servant. Furthermore, sometimes I feel that He is I and I am He.*

Jalaludin Rumi, the 12th century Sufi mystic, expresses this sense of the union with the One in an allegory:

> *Someone knocked at the door of the Beloved and a voice from within enquired: "Who is there?" He answered, "It is I." And the voice said, "This house will not hold me and thee." So the door remained closed. Then the¸ lover sped away into wilderness and fasted and prayed into the solicitude. And after a year he returned and knocked again at the door and the voice again demanded: "Who is there?" And the lover said, "It is thou." The door was opened.*

Parallel to this is the experience of Kabir, Mira, Dadu and Paltu in the Indian mystical tradition. "The path of love is much too narrow. Two cannot walk here, only one," says Kabir. "The palace of love," says Dadu, "has no room for two."

Though scholars have tried to distinguish between the mysticism of various religious traditions, there are nevertheless certain abiding metaphors and images that are seen and heard in the mystical utterances across the ages and across the cultural and religious traditions. The utterances of Kabir, Rumi, Eckhart and Ramakrishna express an experience, which speaks of God and the seeker as one. Such assertions have always had, as is well known, a certain aura of heresy about them. Not only do they sound supremely bloated in their claim, they disturb our sense of the omnipotence of God that most cultures have come to associate with the idea of Creator and the Almighty. Defending those who claim to be one with God not as arrogant but as infinitely humble, Rumi wrote:

> *Take the famous utterance, "I am God." Some men reckon it as a great pretension; but "I am God" is in fact is a statement of great humility. The man who says "I am the servant*

of God" asserts that the two exist, one himself and the other God. But he who says "I am God" has naughted himself and cast himself to the winds. He says "I am God": that, "I am not, He is all, nothing has existence but God, I am pure non-entity, I am nothing!" In this the humility is greater.

In the same vein, Kabir sings:

I am in all, and all are in me,

There is none else but I!

I reside in the whole universe.

Birth and death are part of my play!

Without a form, without a contour,

I myself called myself Kabir,

I revealed myself

As myself!

Once the veil of illusion has been removed, and once the face of the One has been illuminated by the light of the soul, what one sees has been variously described by the mystics as The Father, The Mother, The Lover, The Bride, The Bridegroom, The Radiant One, The Holy Child, The Ground of Our Being. Perhaps even these expressions are only a feeble attempt. What they all say is "unnameable." "On this plane of reality," as 14th century Flemish mystic Rysbroeck observed, "we can speak no more of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but only of One Being," who is, in the words of Kabir, "beyond both the limited and the limitless... The Pure Being."

O men!

O Brothers!

Why don't you see

That the Creator

Manifests Himself

In all His Creation,

And the entire creation

Is the embodiment

Of the Creator?

From one Light

All has come to be!

What is good?

What is bad?

These are mere

Phantoms of you

Own mind!

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About the Author:

Dr. Sehdev Kumar is Professor Emeritus at the University of Waterloo, Canada. Author of The Vision of Kabir and The Lotus in the Stone, he was awarded a prize by Templeton Foundation for lecturing on Science and Religion.
