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Similarities between Prehispanic Wisdom in Mesoamerica and the Philosophies of Asia

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I. Introduction

It is probable that in ancient times, even before Columbus could see the light of the New World, there was contact between the civilizations of all five continents. There are fantastic legends about the Vikings who crossed Greenland towards Newfoundland, and Polynesians in Easter Island, Chile. There is also a theory that the Olmec civilization came from the African Nile, although archaeologist Ann Cyphers rejects such speculation. Professor Paul Shao of Iowa State University has implied that perhaps certain Chinese expeditions could have arrived in Mesoamerica, given the artistic analogies in jade and obsidian carvings (Shao, 1976). Additionally, the smiling faces of the Totonacs, with their horizontal eyes, scarcely leave any doubt that some Orientals may have been ancestors of the Mexican peoples (FIGURE 1).

It is beyond my reach to demonstrate that there were indeed historical contacts between the Chinese and the ancient Mexicans. However, it is verifiable that the pre-Hispanic cultures did elaborate thoughtful insights about the being and its existential becoming that keep equivalents with the schools of thought in Asia. In this essay my purpose is to highlight some metaphysical similarities between the Asian and Mesoamerican worlds. Possibly a former correspondent for *The New York Times* in Mexico was right when he expounded as a revelation that "[Mexico] has the only political system that must be understood in a pre-Hispanic context; and its inhabitants alone are still more Oriental than Western." (Riding, 1984)



Figure 1: Totonac statuette with oriental eyes

II. Mesoamerica

Mesoamerica is a term conceived by anthropologist Paul Kirchhoff. It includes the cultural region of the American continent that goes from the southern half of Mexico down to Costa Rica. The great Olmec, Mayan, Toltec and Aztec civilizations developed there as we can see on the map.

Miguel León-Portilla, a renowned historian, wondered if there was any kind of philosophical

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knowledge among the Nahuas, the name given to the settlers of Central Mexico from where the Aztecs arose. The Nahuas considered themselves the heirs of a history that began with the Olmecs (1500 B.C. to 500 A.D.), went through the civilizations of the Mexican plains in the classical period (Teotihuacans and Toltecs), and ended with the Aztecs in Tenochtitlan, the original name of Mexico City. His response was supportive. Yes, we can infer ideas of the philosophical order from the Nahua poetry and the legacy inscribed in the ancient *codices*. The art historian Justino Fernández had already found in the monolith of the goddess Coatlicue, the representation of a cosmos in which the created is a result of an eternal struggle between two opposite forces. Likewise, Laurette Séjourné referred to the *Quetzalcoatlian doctrine*, an allusion to the cult of a mythical being called Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who came from nowhere, preached among mortals, and returned to the infinity of the universe in the form of the star of the morning (Venus). (Séjourné, 1957)



Recovered from https://www.lifeder.com/caracteristicas-de-mesoamerica/

Map 1: Mesoamerica

III. The Tao of Nahui-Ollin

For this portion of the essay, there are at least two relevant ideas that I would like to present: First, the notion that everything in the pre-Hispanic time and space was comprehended under eternal mutation, in a perennial and constant movement called *ollin* by the Aztecs. Secondly, the pre-Hispanics believed that such drive followed a cyclical chain, equivalent to the circle of Dharma in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition. Everything moves, the whole Universe keeps moving by the contraposition of two opposite forces as in the yin and yang of the Chinese *I-Ching*, the Book of Changes.

The Aztec Calendar is somehow the monument that best encompasses the abstract conception of cyclical movement in the Universe; the Chinese used to call this conception Tao, the totality, a "whole in a hole" (Capra, F., 1976, p.125). In its center, we find the sun with its dynamics: the *Nahui-Ollin*. Four directions of the universe depart from this center toward the four cardinal points (FIGURE 2). It also represents the meeting point between heaven and Earth that the Nahuas (People of the Sun) felt compelled to preserve through offerings of human hearts. The so-called "Fifth Sun," according to this mythology, would correspond to the current era that has been preceded by four previous ones: those of water, earth, fire, and air. The Nahui-Ollin will surely perish with time, as observed by previous epochs.

The ideas of cyclical movement and permanent change are included in both the I-Ching and the accumulated wisdom of the native peoples of Mesoamerica. This analogy is a topic that Korean professor Joung Kwon Tae has previously explored. Joung asserts that the thoughts contained in the I-Ching transcend to the greatest exponents of contemporary Mexican literature, such as Octavio Paz. However, renowned sinologist Flora Botton Beja discards such influence: "[Paz's] successes in his remarks on Chinese thought are due more to intuition than to scholarship," says she (Botton, F., 2011, p.270). León-Portilla refers to this accumulation of wisdom among the pre-Hispanics as *toltequidad* or Toltec insight (León-Portilla, 1980, p.207).

The combinations of female and male, receptive energy and creative energy, yin and yang in the I-Ching, give rise to eight trigrams that correspond to the

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mutations of the Universe. When the sky overflows on Earth in the form of rain, the water emerges. When the sky gives way to the burning sun, fire arises. When the Earth predominates, the wind blows and food sprouts, and when all are in perfect harmony the mountain appears and the lake quiets down. From the I-Ching we can derive teachings applicable to meditation, fortunetelling, time scheduling, and medication. Each element determines a cardinal point, and surprisingly, its use and symbols correspond to those traced in the Aztec Calendar.



Figure 2: Nahui Ollin in the Aztec Calendar

IV. Toltec Zen

The pre-Hispanic view assumed the existence of a world above, an underworld, and in between, the terrestrial world. It was up to humans to act as regulators or harmonizers of the universe. The world above included heaven with its sun, moon, and constellations. The Mayas and Olmecs studied the sky so meticulously, that contemporary scientists still recognize their contributions to astronomical knowledge. The underworld (Mictlan), on the other hand, mostly captured the attention of the Aztecs, the last of the Nahua tribes that arrived at the Mesoamerican plateau. Hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and droughts were expressions of divine anger that could only be appeased with blood, preferably human blood. It was up to the priests (tlamacaxtles) to interpret the signals transmitted by the divinities and to obtain solutions.

In Teotihuacán, northeast of Mexico City, the Pyramid of the Sun stands majestic, and a few meters away, the Pyramid of the Moon (MAP 2). The Avenue of the Dead (Miccaotli) connects these two figures. There is also a large temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, the serpent with feathers. Tlaloc, the divinity of rain, accompanies each feathered serpent. There are also vestiges of shrines for Ehecatl, the wind; Huehueteotl, the fire, and Tlaltecuhtli, the earth. In the Teotihuacan worldview, there was a world above and an underworld, and the sun, moon, water, earth, and fire, were all parts of an indivisible unit.

The Toltecs, who settled a few kilometers from Teotihuacan (although years after the Teotihuacan decline occurred in the year A.D. 630), took up the concept of totality and developed a holistic philosophy that, as previously stated, thoroughly matches the vision contained in the Chinese I-Ching. Such was the admiration that the Aztecs professed toward this civilization, that a *toltecayotl* was a sage. A mythical figure named Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl transmitted the Toltec wisdom in the 10th Century; the *Matritense Codex* collected his teachings: "God is one," he said, "Quetzalcoatl is his name. Ask for nothing, only snakes and butterflies you will offer" (Séjourné, pp.43-59). Six centuries later, Catholic missionaries decided to replace the concept of totality with Christian deism.

The aforementioned professor Joung appoints that the ancient Chinese wrote the I-Ching in pursuit of essentially the same purpose as the Mesoamericans: to harmonize the relationship between heaven, earth, and men. For the Aztec people, Ometeotl was the God of duality, equivalent to the Chinese Tao. Ometeotl was the universal support that contained everything; only he was able to stand by himself (León-Portilla, 2017, p.142). He was composed of feminine energy called Omecíhuatl (yin) and masculine energy called Ometecuhtli (yang). One could not be understood without the other, as we can not understand night without day, nor above without below, nor woman without man (Joung, pp.56-59).

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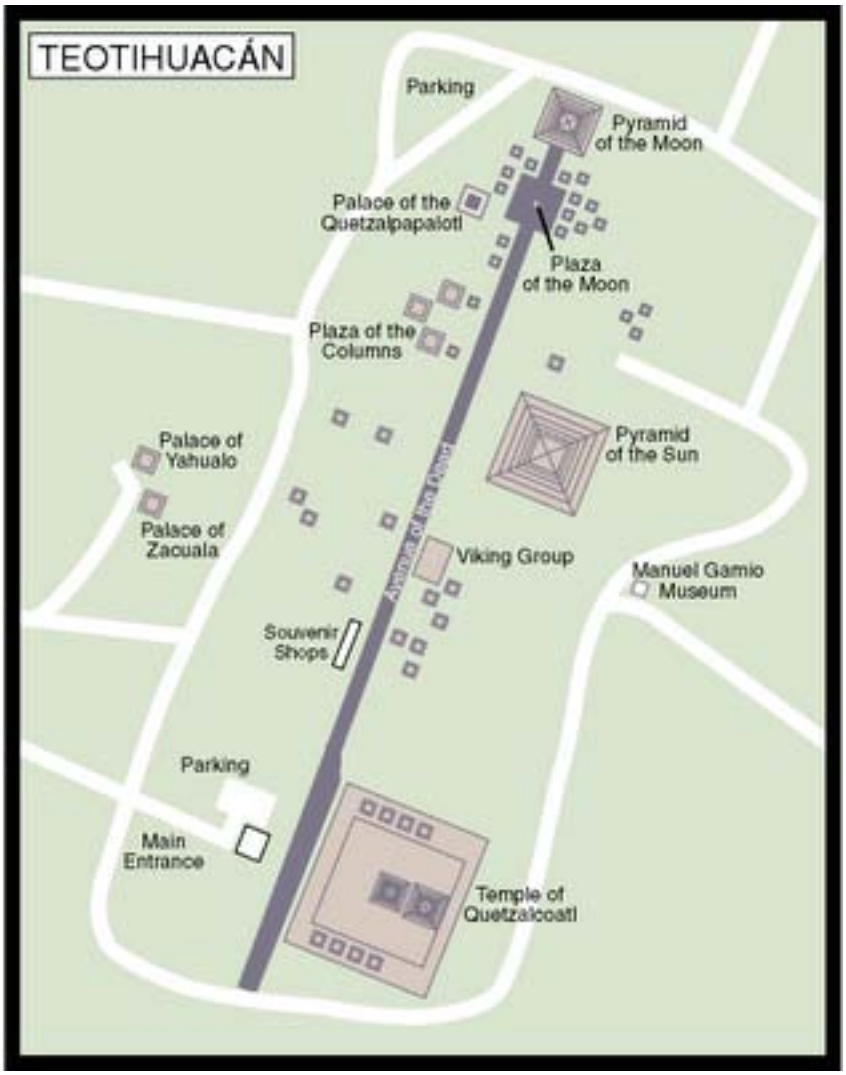

Source: Textbook. Universidad Interamericana para el Desarrollo

Map 2: Temples of Teotihuacan

The representation of movement out of two opposite forces that complement each other can also be seen in the symbolization of Quetzalcoatl, a fusion of a serpent (land animal) with a bird (animal of the air). FIGURE 3 shows this dialectical order in an effigy found in the Temple of Kukulkan (the name that Mayans gave to Quetzalcoatl) in Chichen Itza. Additionally, the mythical eagle that devours a serpent perched on a prickly pear cactus, a distinctive symbol of the Mexican nation, is also a transfiguration of the dialectical order that governs the universe. In the state of Oaxaca, the site of the Mixtec and Zapotec civilizations, one can appreciate the concept of unity of two opposites through a chain of endless frets in which one generates two, and two generates three. That is how the inhabitants of Mitla and Monte Alban represented the infinite motion of nature (FIGURE 4). The Aztecs used to call this phenomenon *ollin-yolitztli*.

Now, if the notion of universal unity (one) was already prodigious in itself, the Mayans conceived yet another concept of profound meaning: Zero, the graphic representation of nothingness (FIGURE 5). Like other peoples, the Mayans believed in the world above, the underworld, and the harmonization of the two in one. They were extraordinary sky watchers who developed a 365-day calendar and a numerical system that allowed them to calculate almost everything, so to achieve the symbolization of nonexistence, emptiness, nothingness, the absolute with its infinity, denotes an astonishing capacity for abstraction.

The Mayan zero is equivalent to the sunyata of Hindus and Buddhists in the Indian cultural tradition. In the Genesis of the Popol Vuh, we can find the Mayan equivalence with the sunyata in the following assertion: “All was in suspense, all calm, in silence; all motionless, still, and the expanse of the sky was empty” (Popol Vuh, 1954, p.3). This excerpt means that the universal totality is such an overwhelming concept that it is only captured either by way of spiritual awakening or by intuitive perception, not necessarily through reasoning. All

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evidence suggests that this state of mind that Buddhists describe as "enlightenment" (*Erleuchtung* in German; *satori* in Japanese) was already a widespread practice among the Mayans, Toltecs, and Nahuas; if not, how else could we interpret the poetry of the enlightened king Nezahualcoyotl?



Figure 3: Quetzalcoatl as two opposites that converge



Figure 4: Endless frets featuring the movement of Nature in Mitla



Figure 5: The Mayan Zero

The Mictlan formed a threshold of non-beings whose skeletons continued to be. The safeguarding of human remains is the origin of the cult of death that Mexicans continue to celebrate even today. It can be fascinating to see our dead as non-beings that continue to be, despite it may sound horrifying for the Western understanding. Before life crumbles and sinks into nothingness, it shapes and returns immutable, says Octavio Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. "We will no longer change but to disappear. Our death illuminates our life" (Paz, O., 1985, p.59).

How can a non-being continue to be? We can place such paradox within what French philosopher Jacques Derrida defined as *indecidibilité* (the sphere of the impossible to decide). Simply put, before being conceived, we were all zero; that is, nothing. We live our lives as one, and when we die, we return to zero; the Mayan zero represented the fullness that we achieve with death. Even though our skull is physical, our being is still there, *being*.

Next, I will refer to Japanese Zen and its analogies with the Aztec perception of impermanence.

V. Eckhart, Zen an the *Tlamacaxtle*

In the early sixth century, a legendary Persian-born Buddhist monk named Da Mo (Daruma in Japanese) entered China and settled in a cave located in the remote central mountains of the Middle Empire. This was the site that Da Mo chose to propagate his doctrine. His strange figure and unique way of preaching, based on silent meditation, caught the attention of the Taoist monks of a Shaolin monastery nearby. Da Mo's Buddhism thus merged with Taoism, and became a strand that the Chinese came to call *Chan*.

Chan Buddhism preserved Buddhist principles such as the circle of Dharma, detachment from the material, cultivation of silence, and, of course, sunyata nothingness. From the Tao, the Chan incorporated concepts such as naturalness, spontaneity, vital energy based on the dialectics of yin and yang, and relativism. Both currents shared meditation as a formula of awakening to enlightenment; however, the great revelation of Chan Buddhism consisted of the preaching

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of illumination as a mental state accessible to everybody at all earthly times.

In the year 607, corresponding to the heyday of Teotihuacan, the Japanese prince Shōtoku, renowned as wise and visionary, dispatched a special mission to China to bring back the most outstanding teachings of the culture; thus, Chan Buddhism came into Japan. By mixing with the local Shintō beliefs –especially with the aesthetic values of Shintō- Japanese Zen was shaped; more than a religious cult, Zen Buddhism became a way of daily living for all Japanese people.



Figure 6: Da Mo or Daruma

a) Instants: just a little here

One of the most notable exponents of Japanese Zen was Master Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253). Dōgen's philosophy contains notoriously current aspects; I will focus on two that bear similarities with the essence of pre-Hispanic thought: firstly, the Dogenian concept of instant (瞬間/shunkan), which fascinated German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche as well as Keiji Nishitani, a member of the Kyoto philosophical school; and secondly, the notion that all material things are transient.

Each instant, said Dōgen, constitutes in itself an existence. There is not a single existence for each being, but as many instants as there can be throughout a life (Heisig, et al., 2016, pp.168-174). Furthermore, we share certain existential moments with the group of beings whose lives throb at this very same time. Since these instants are fleeting, ethereal and ungraspable, the best thing is to take our minds off everything that happened or may happen and to focus on what is happening right now. This instant is a unique and unrepeatable timeless moment, something that the Nahua king Nezahualcoyotl (1429–1472) also suggested through the following poem:

I Nezahualcoyotl ask it:
Do we live with roots in the ground?
Not forever on earth:
just a little here.
Even if it's jade, it breaks.
Even if it's gold, it breaks.
Even if it's the plumage of a quetzal, it tears.
Not forever on earth:
just a little here.

We live. We exist. Not forever on earth because we are fragile and transient beings; we are "just a little here." This same idea has prevailed in Japanese Zen by teaching that everything vanishes. The concept of *mono no aware* (translated as "the pathos of things," or the "sensitivity towards ephemera") induces us to not only appreciate the impermanence of all that surrounds us, but also to appreciate the feeling of inner joy toward the beauty and finitude of things. The evanescence of cherry blossoms (sakura) is an example. Cherries bloom, and their splendor last for just few days, after which they succumb without remedy. *Mono no aware* is perhaps one of the most beautiful concepts of Japanese aesthetics, very close to the "just a little here" in the native language of Nezahualcoyotl.

b) Nothing as the non-being

Dōgen passed away in 1253. Seven years later, Eckhart of Hochheim was born, a German Dominican monk who graduated with a Bachelor in Theology from the University of Paris. Within the framework of his Christian faith, Eckhart preached a doctrine that bore striking similarities to the thinking of the old Zen master. Like Dōgen, Eckhart also used to transmit his teachings through paradoxes (kōans for Japanese Zen Buddhists). He offered sermons about the "ethics of being" as the best way to access God, and referred to the intertextuality of the Gospels and to deconstruction as a method to interpret the parables of Jesus Christ. He additionally stated that since God is a pure being, God is, to make it short, an absolute *nothing* (Colledge and McGinn, 1981).

From his faith, Master Eckhart addressed the same dilemma as the Aztec priests Tlamacaxque when they debated the non-being with the Franciscan friars. The Tlamacaxque used to derive their ideas from the teachings transmitted by Quetzalcoatl; Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590) recorded the dialogue between Aztec priests and Catholic friars. Sahagún says that the indigenous priests considered themselves heirs of the doctrine transmitted by the enlightened figure of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, who preached social harmony and contemplation as standards of perfection between the years of 923 and 947 (León-Portilla, 2002).

The thoughts of Eckhart did not escape the virulence of the Inquisition, nor did the Tlamacaxques escape denigration by the Catholic Church. Like Dōgen, the German theologian gained interest among beatniks and the European existentialists of the 1950s and 60s. Erich Fromm considered him "a scholarly theologian and the greatest representative and deepest and most radical thinker of German mysticism" (Fromm, 1976). Shizuteru Ueda, a disciple of Nishitani, held that his ideas about soul detachment and oneness with God (the God-nothing) constituted an eminently Zen thought

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(Ueda, 2004, pp.51-134). Eckhart died in 1328, only three years after the establishing of the majestic City of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.

c) Pure experience

Dr. Agustín Jacinto, a Purepecha Indian who teaches at El Colegio de Michoacan, discovered through Master Eckhart the main reason to enter the ecclesial seminary during his adolescence; from there, Jacinto jumped into the embracement of Zen philosophy. In his book *Zen and Personality*, he states that although the proclamation of John the Evangelist that "God is love" seemed powerful enough for him, more powerful became Eckhart's inverted equation: "Love is God". "Love and the structuring of personality occur within the framework of pure experience", says he, "where we see the strong influence of Zen Buddhism in the writings of the philosopher Nishida Kitaro" (Jacinto, 1984, p.12).

In short, pure experience refers to that instant of illumination in which the subject realizes that he exists and discovers "a deeper self within himself." It is necessary to eradicate the substantive form of being and admit that one originates from nothing, in order to understand this idea. When the self becomes aware of its insignificance, *nothing* becomes the humble being that detaches itself from earthly bonds and becomes one with Nature; is this not the same deduction of the pre-Hispanic sages regarding death? Jacinto added his ancestral indigenous legacy to the concept of pure experience, stating that "we must forget ourselves and become one with Heaven and Earth." Once that stage is reached, "everything becomes present (and) everything becomes a pure experience" (Ibid, p.21). In other words, everything becomes fullness as in the Toltec wisdom.

VI. Conclusion

Principles so profound and so fascinating like those that filled Mesoamerican civilizations, regrettably suffered the contempt (or even worse, the suppression) by the Catholic clergy that joined the Conquest of Mexico. For the sake of saving the souls of the indigenous peoples, they destroyed much of their wisdom. Despite this, the codices and stories such as those collected by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, contain elements to infer that there was certainly a philosophical heritage profound enough so as to be considered universal.

The cyclical movement in nature, the substantial void based on the non-being that still *is* (different from the hollow and insubstantial void of some human brains); the opposition of complementary forces that form a unity, and the intensity of being "just a little here." These are only some of the concepts that were deeply rooted in Mesoamerica as well as in Asia. We can argue that those philosophies can be found in other cultures too, such as the Greek and the Egyptian; however, I concentrated on showing that, at least from a metaphysical point of view, the beliefs of the ancient Mexicans did have similarities with the Chinese I-Ching and Japanese Zen Buddhism.

We already saw that during the Middle Ages in Europe, a theologian as phenomenal as Master Eckhart was thrown into the well of contempt for daring to think like Master Dōgen and the Mayans who developed the concept of zero. Curiously enough, the Jesuits led by Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in China did assimilate the most outstanding currents of Tao and Confucianism. In contrast, the Franciscan friars who spoke with the Tlamacaxtle priests wrongly took the non-being of the underworld as an invocation of the demon.

Fortunately, scholars such as Miguel León Portilla, Ángel María Garibay, Jacques Soustelle, Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, Eduardo Matos and Laurette Séjourné, among others, dedicated efforts to the rescue and interpretation of the texts of the ancient Mexicans, highlighting that their content goes a long way beyond the worldliness that is usually thought of when we refer to the pre-Hispanic indigenous peoples.

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