

On Being in One's Right Mind

by

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 16, No. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn, 1984).

© World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

Repentance

*Metanoia*¹ usually rendered by “repentance,” is literally “change of mind,” or intellectual metamorphosis. Plato does not use the word, but certainly knows the thing: for example, in *Republic* 514f., the values of those who have seen the light are completely transformed, and, in *Laws* 803c–804a, we are told that those who have realized their true relation to, and actual dependence on, God will be “thinking (διανοέομαι) otherwise than they do now,” and that “it behoves our fosterlings to be of that same (new) way of thinking”; cf. St. Augustine’s *reformamini in novitate mentis* (*Confessions* XIII.13). Further, Plato distinguishes “understanding” (συνιέναι) from “learning” (μανθάνειν) as knowledge from relative ignorance (*Euthydemus* 278a); and the *Shepherd of Hermas* is certainly not misinterpreting the real meaning of μετάνοια when he says that “Repentance is a great understanding” (τό μετανοήσαι...σύνεσις ἐστὶν μεγάλη), and in fact, a transformation from the state of the fool (ἄφρων) to that of one possessed of intellect (νοῦς, *Mand.* IV.2.1, 2). In the same way Hermes, (*Lib.* I. 18) opposes μετάνοια to ἄγνοια, this “ignorance” being, in *Lib.* XIII.7b, the first of the “irrational torments of matter,” just as in the Buddhist *nidāna* series it is the primary source of all evils.²

It is, indeed, unfortunate that our word “repentance” translates μεταμέλεια rather than μετάνοια (*metanoia*); for the latter word imports far more than the merely moral meaning of regret for past error. The man who has really been “converted,” i.e., turned round (τρέπω, στρέφω), will have no time to spend in punishing himself, and if he does impose hardships on himself it will not be by way of penance, but (1) as a discipline like that of an athlete in training and (2) in imitation of the divine poverty. On this level of reference there can be no room for remembrance of or sorrow for past errors, to which the words, “Let the dead bury their dead,” are properly applicable, the “dead” being the “old man” who is now no more for those who can say

¹ Cf. Hans Pohlmann, *Die Metanoia als Zentralbegriff der christlichen Frömmigkeit* (Leipzig, 1938); also Fr. Zucker, *Syneidesis—Conscientia* (Jena, 1928).

² See references in PTS. *Pali Dictionary*, s.v. *paticca-samuppāda*.

with St. Paul, *vivo autem, jam non ego*.³ “Such an one, verily, the thought does not torment, Why have I not done the right? Why have I done wrong?” (*Taittirīya Upanishad* II.9.1). How, indeed, should one who has ceased to be anyone either recall or regret what “he” had done when he *was* someone? It is only when and if he returns from the unitive state to “himself” that he can again remember or regret.

τὸ μετανοῆσαι = τὸ συνιέναι is, then, to come to an understanding “with.” We stress the word “with,” because in order to grasp the problems involved it is essential to remember, what can easily be overlooked, that all words containing the prepositions co- or con-, *cum*, σύν, *sam-*, and all such terms as “self-control,” “self-government,” and “self-possession” (= com-posure), imply a relation between *two* things (cf. Plato, *Republic* 431a, b, 436b), which two are, in the last analysis, respectively human and divine. For example, “When thou are rid of thy self, then art thou Self-controlled (*dīnes selbes gewaltic* = ἐγγρατῆς ἑαυτοῦ = *svarājan*), and Self-controlled are Self-possessed (*dīnes selbes eigen*), and Self-possessed, possessed of God (*ist got dīn eigen*) and all that He has ever made” (Meister Eckhart, Pfeiffer, p. 598).⁴ All this will apply to σύνεσις, σύνουσία, and σύννοια, to the verbs σύνειμι and σύνιμι, to “be together with” and “come together with,” to Sanskrit *sam-ādhi*, “syn-thesis” or “com-posure” and the verbs *sambhū*, *sampad*, *samgam*, *sami*, etc., all implying congress and unification, a “becoming one” (*eko bhū*) in the erotic no less than in other senses. cf. τελέω, to be perfected, to marry, or to die.

In other words, the “great understanding” is a kind of synthesis and agreement (Skr. *samdhi*, *samādhi*, *samjñāna*), by which our internal conflict is resolved, or as the Sanskrit texts also express it, in which “all the knots of the heart are loosed.” If we ask, an agreement of what with what? the answer will be evident: unanimity (ὁμόνοια)⁵ of the worse and better, human and divine parts of us, as to which should rule (Plato, *Republic* 432); assimilation of the knower with the to-be-known (τῷ κατανοουμένῳ τὸ κατανοοῦν ἐξομοίωσις), in accordance with the archetypal nature, and coming to be in this likeness” (Plato, *Timaeus* 90d, cf. *Bhagavad Gītā* XIII. 12–18, *jñeyam...anādimatparam brahma...*), “which likeness begins now again to be formed in us” (St. Augustine, *De spir. et lit.* 37); *con-scientia* with our “divine part,” when the two parts of the mortal soul have been calmed and the third part of the soul is so moved that we are “of one mind with our real Self” (σύεννοιαν αὐτός αὐτῷ ἀφικόμενος), thus obtaining the true knowledge in the stead of our opinion (*Republic* 571, 572). In Indian terms this is also the

³ Editor’s note: This Latin quote is from the Bible, Galatians 2:20. It is translated “I live, yet not I” and is followed by the phrase “but Christ liveth in me.”

⁴ To bring out the meaning we distinguish “self” from “Self,” as is commonly done in translation from Sanskrit to distinguish the mortal from its immortal Self; these two “selves” corresponding to Plato’s mortal and immortal “soul,” and to St. Paul’s “soul” and “spirit,” the former being that “soul” that we must “hate” if we would be Christ’s disciples.

⁵ “Ἄ γὰρ ὁ θεὸς διδάσκει, ... αὐτῷ γίγνεται ὁμονοεῖν,” Xenophon, *Oec*, XVII.3. For we then participate in his πρόνοια = Skr. *prajñāna*, Providence or Prescience.

marital agreement, or unanimity of the elemental self (*bhūtātman*, *śarīra ātman*) with the prescient solar *Spirit* (*prajñātman*, *aśarīra ātman*) in a union transcending the consciousness of a within or a without (BU. IV.3.21); in other words, the fusion of the Outer King with the Inner Sage, the *Regnum* with the *Sacerdotium*.

Metanoia is, then, a transformation of one's whole being; from human thinking to divine understanding. A transformation of our being, for as Parmenides said, "To be and to know are one and the same" (Diels, *Fr.* 18:5), and "We come to be of just such stuff as that on which the mind is set" (*Maitri Upanishad*, VI.34:3). To repent is to become another and a new man. That this was St. Paul's understanding is clear from Ephesians 4:23, "Be ye renewed in the spirit of your mind" (ἀνανεοῦσθαι δὲ τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ νοῦς ὑμῶν).

On the "Two Minds"

God is "not a man that he should repent" (1 Sam. 15:29, cf. Ps. 110:4, and Ezek. 24:14). *Metanoia* is a "change of mind" differing only in its larger implication from the change of mind that has taken place when we repent of any intention. When we do this, it is because we feel ourselves to be now "better advised" and so able to act "advisedly," or as Plato would express it, (κατὰ λόγον). Whose advice are we taking? Who gives counsel when we "take counsel with ourselves"? On this point Socrates had no doubt, for he says, "When I was about to cross the stream, the daimonian sign that usually comes to me was given—it always holds me back from what I want to do—and I thought I heard a voice from it which forbade..." (*Phaedrus*, 242b).⁶ Or, as Plato also says, "there is a something in the soul that bids men drink and a something that forbids, something other than that which bids," what draws us on being the passions and diseases, and that which holds us back the voice of Reason (*Republic* 439). Everyone has had experience of this.

We hardly need to say that Plato speaks of the Leader (ἡγεμών) within us by many names, such as vocal Reason (λόγος), Mind (νοῦς), Genius (δαίμων), and most divine (θειότατος) and best or ruling (κράτιστος) and eternal (ἀειγενής) part of us, nor to be reminded that this Immortal Soul "is our real Self" (*Laws* 959a) and that it is for "us" to be Its servant (ὑπηρέτης), *Laws* 645a, *Timaeus* 70d, etc.); how otherwise, indeed, should "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? This immanent divinity is likewise Philo's "Soul of the soul" (ψυχή ψυχῆς), Hermes' "Good Genius" (ὁ ἀγαθὸς δαίμων), and the "Shepherd" of Hermas. It is the Scholastic "Synteresis," Meister Eckhart's "*Funklein*," and however attenuated, our own "Conscience"; but not by any means *our* "reason," or Bergson's "intuition." It is the Spirit that Scripture, as St. Paul points out, so sharply distinguishes from the soul, and his *jam non ego, sed Christus in me* (Heb. 4:12 and Gal. 2:20). It is the "Self of the self, called the 'Immortal Leader'" (*ātmano 'tmā*

⁶ It is rather strange that in one context Socrates supposes that "the daimonian sign has come to few or none before me" (*Rep.* 496c) but this is contradicted elsewhere, notably in *Timaeus* 90d and *Phaedo* 107d and cf. *Odyssey* III.26.

netāmrtākhyah, *Maitri Up.* VI. 7), the “Inner Controller” (*antaryāmin*, *Brhadāranyaka Up.* III. 7.1, etc), “Self (or Spirit) and King of all beings,” or “of all that is in motion or at rest” (*Brhadāranyaka Up.* I. 4.16, II. 1.2; *Rgveda* I. 115.1, etc), the immanent Genius (*yaksa*) of *Atharva Veda* X. 8.43 and *Jaiminīya Upanishad Br.* IV. 24, and the impassible “immortal, incorporeal Self” of *Chandogyā Up.* VIII. 12. 1, the “That” of the famous dictum “That art thou.”⁷ And, just as for Plato, so in the Vedic books this deathless impassible Inner Man and very Self “dwells together with” the human, mortal, passible self in the “house” or “city” of the body for so long as “we” are alive. It is this (Holy) “Ghost” that we “give up” when we die; and the poignant question arises, “In whom, when I go forth, shall I be going forth?” (*Praśna Up.* VI. 3), the answer, according to which we shall be “saved” or “lost” depending upon whether before the end we have know “Who we are” (*Jaiminīya Upanishad Br.* IV. 19.4, 5; *Brhadāranyaka Up.* IV. 4.14; *Bhagavad Gītā* IV. 40, etc).

We still make use of such expressions as to be “double minded,” “strong or weak minded,” “in two minds” (about a purpose) and “not to know one’s own mind”; we also “make up our minds,”⁸ and only when this has been done do we really know what we are really “minded to do.” We use these expressions (like so many other inherited phrases) without a full consciousness of their meaning, just as we speak of “self-government” or “self-control” without realizing that “the same thing will never do or suffer opposite things in the same context and in relation to the same thing and at the same time. So that if we ever find these contradictions in the functions of the mind we shall know that it was not the same thing functioning” (*Republic*, 436b, cf. 431 a, b; and *Parmenides* 138b).⁹ Actually, all these expressions derive their meaning from the age-old doctrine of the duality of human nature,¹⁰ stated in terms of a duality or bivalence of mind (νοῦς, Skr. *manas*). It is this doctrine which Professor Goodenough seems to find so

⁷ This implies a con-sent of the two wills involved.

⁸ That “We (I) have the mind of Christ” (I Cor. 2:16) is but another way of saying the same thing, and it will be seen that the new mind and the new man are one, or in other words that to know one’s real mind is the same as to know or love one’s real Self (φιλήσας δὲ σεαυτὸν νοῦν ἔξεις, *Hermes, Lib.* IV. 6b), the Self of all beings. To have that Mind is to be “blest with a good genius” (εὐδαίμων), but sole dependence on our own unstable mind is to be “cursed with a bad genius (χαχοδαίμων), *Philo*, I. 37, 38. Our “free will” does not consist in doing what we like (i.e., what we must, by a “natural” compulsion) but in a choice of guides, a choice between the good and evil Genii, “the good Daimon” and the Evil, whose name is Legion.

⁹ *Philo* I. 94 seems to contradict, but is at fault; for it is not the same man who “rubs himself” and is also rubbed; it is, say, a finger that rubs and a leg that is rubbed, and these are not the same man but two parts of the same man. Subjectively, it may be the better part that wills to rub, and the worse that needs rubbing; or the worse part that wants to be titillated and the better part that yields.

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic*, 604 b, etc; II Cor. 4:16; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, II. 11 25.4; Upanishads, *passim*.

strange in Philo:¹¹ and yet, without it, the notion of repentance would be unintelligible. To know one's own mind is the same as to "know oneself" or "love oneself" in the superior sense of Aristotle (*Nich. Eth.* IX. 8), Hermes (*Lib.* IV. 6b), St. Thomas Aquinas (*Sum. Theol.*, II-II; 26.4), and the Upanishads (BU. II. 4, etc.). Philo says that "There are two minds, that of all (beings),¹² and the individual mind: he that flees from his own mind flees for refuge to the mind of all in common." The one is ungenerated and immortal, the other generated and mortal (I. 93). The soul being "dead" when it is entombed in the passions and vices (I. 65, and as for St. Paul) he points out that "That which dies is not the ruling part of us, but the subject laity, and for so long as the latter will not repent (μέχρις ἂν μετανοία χρησάμενον) and acknowledge its perversion (τροπή), so long will it be held by death" (I:80). The individual mind is the same thing as our "sensibility" (I. 131);¹³ "the easy-going man sinks down into his own incoherent mind" (I. 94, cf. *Bhagavad Gītā* II. 67 and VI. 34),¹⁴ i.e., "estimative knowledge" in terms of "hunger and thirst."

It amounts to the same thing to deny the name of "mind" to the estimative faculties of the sensitive soul, governed by its wants. Thus in Hermes, *Lib.* I.22, it is asked, "Have not all men mind?" and answered, "Mind comes only to those that are devout and good and pure" (καθαρός = *śuddha*). In Platonic terms, the soul is mindless (άνους) at birth and may still be unconscious (άνόητος) at death (*Timaeus*, 44c); the unchanging Mind that is contrasted with opinion subject to persuasion is to be found only in the Gods and a small number of men (*Timaeus* 51e). If, however, we intend by "mind" merely the human instrument of discursive thought, then to participate in the divine manner of knowing will be, humanly speaking, to be "out of one's mind"; so, of the Prophet through whom God speaks, Plato says that "his mind is not in him" (*Ion*, 534), a state of "mania" that must not be confused with insanity (*Phaedrus*, 244, 265): "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (I Cor. 3:19).

We have now seen that the notion of a "change of mind" presupposes that there are two in us: two natures, the one humanly opinionated and the other divinely scientific; to be distinguished either as individual from universal mind, or as sensibility from mind, and as non-

¹¹ E.R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light*, pp. 382-86.

¹² The plural ὅλων cannot mean "the universe," and ought not to be rendered thus, as it is by Colson and Whitaker in the Loeb Library edition. The "mind of all in common" (σμπάντων) is that of the "Self of all beings" in Plato, *Phaedo* 83b: "Philosophy exhorts the soul to trow in nothing but her Self, that she may know her Self itself, the very Self of all beings" (αὐτὸ τῶν ὄντων = Skr. *sarvabhūtānām ātmā*). Xenophon remarks that "When the God is our teacher, we all come to think alike" (ὁμονοεῖν, *Occ.* XVII. 3). It is when we "think for ourselves," knowing only too well what we think, that we disagree.

¹³ "The carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7).

¹⁴ We ought then to "pour out as a libation the blood of the soul and sacrifice our whole mind to God" (Philo, I. 76). Eckhart says "the mind must be demented of itself"; that implies by no means the modern anti-intellectualism (in favor of instinctive behavior) but Plato's "divine madness," for "The men whom He dements He uses as His servants... it is God himself who speaks through them" (*Ion* 534).

mind from mind or as mind from “madness”; the former terms corresponding to the empirical ego, and the latter to our real Self, the object of the injunction “Know thyself.” We shall conclude by briefly noticing the equivalents of these formulations in the Indian sources.

The formulation in terms of two minds is explicit in Manu I. 14: “From himself the Self-existent drew forth the mind, whose nature is the real and the unreal” (*sadasad-ātmakam*);¹⁵ the mind, that is, with which one thinks “both good and evil” (*punyam ca...pāpam ca*, *Jaiminīya Upanishad Br. I. 60.1*) and which is, therefore, a means “either of bondage or liberation” (*Maitri Up. VI. 34.11*). “The mind is said to be twofold, pure and impure (*śuddhāśuddham*): impure, by connection with desire, pure by separation from desire.¹⁶ ...Indescribable his bliss who abides in the Self, his mind’s defilement washed away by Self-composure”¹⁷ (*samādhi-nirdhauta-malasya niveśitasya ātmani*, *Maitri Up. VI. 34.6, 9*).

The distinction of Mind from sensibility (νοῦς from αἴσθησις) is analogous to that of *Manas* (Skr. “mind” or “intellect”—ED), from *Vāc* (Skr. the “Voice” or “Speech”—ED), the power or faculty of expression. Mind becomes a name or hypostasis of God,¹⁸ than whom there is no other intelligizer (*nānyad ato’stimantr*, *Brhadāranyaka Up. III. 8.11*). *Manas* is the sacerdotal principle that knows and wills, *Vāc* the power of action without whom nothing would be effected. It is her function to “imitate” (*anukr*) him¹⁹ and to act as his follower and messenger, “for she is by far the lesser and he the superior” (*Taittirīya Samhitā II. 5; Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa I. 4.4.7 and 5.11*). But though Victory depends upon her co-operation, she may be reluctant to fulfill her office (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa I. 4.4.12; Taittirīya Samhitā II. 5.11*, etc); she is easily seduced from her allegiance to Mind and Truth to the service of what she likes to think, and then merely babbles (*ŚB III. 2.4.11*, etc., cf. Philo, I. 94).

In the Indian texts we also meet with the notion of a meliorative dementation as noted above. For when “mind” is thought of only as part of the psychic organism, then to be “mindless” and “unconscious” is the superior, and conscious mental operation the inferior condition. Thus, “When the mind has been immolated in its own source for the love of Truth,

¹⁵ *Sat* and *asat* are primarily being, reality, truth and their contraries. In the Supreme Identity (*tad ekam*), without otherness (*advaitam*), these are no longer contraries; but considered apart, where *ens et bonum convertuntur*, *asat* as “non-being” is “evil” by the same token that English “naught-y” is “bad.”

¹⁶ As in Hermes, X.16, νοῦς, καθαρὸς...των ἐνδυμάτων. The “purification” enjoined (*cittam...śodhayet*, *Maitri Up. VI. 34.3*) is precisely the Platonic Katharsis, “a separation of the ‘soul’ from the ‘body,’ as far as that is possible,” the kind of “death” that is practiced by philosophers (*Phaedo* 67 C-E, cf. *Sophist* 227 D); for Plato, purification and liberation are coincidental (*Phaedo* 82) just as in the *Maitri Up. VI. 34.11* the mind detached from sensible objects (*nirvisayam*) is liberation (*moksa*).

¹⁷ *Samādhi* (literally synthesis, composure) is the consummation of *yoga*, and what is meant by Plato when he exhorts the soul to “collect and concentrate itself in its Self” (αὐτὴν δὲ εἰς αὐτήν, *Phaedo* 83A).

¹⁸ *Taittirīya Samhitā II. 5.11.5, VI. 6.10.1; Śatapatha Br. X. 5.2.1; Brhadāranyaka Up. v. 5.6*, etc.

¹⁹ Cf. Hermes, *Lib. XII. 1.13A.*, ὁ οὖν λόγος ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ νοῦ, καὶ ὁ νοῦς τοῦ θεοῦ.

then the false controls of actions done when it was deluded by sensibilia likewise pass away” (*Maitri Up.*, VI. 34.1, 2); “None whose mind has not been immolated can attain to Him” (*Katha Up.* II. 24); viz., the Person, who being devoid of all limiting attributes is necessarily “mindless,” though the source of mind (*Mundaka Up.* II. 1.2, 3). God does not think and does not know in our imperfect way of knowing in terms of subject and object; we may say that he thinks, but there is no second thing other than himself of which he might think (*Brhadāranyaka Up.* IV. 3.28, etc.).²⁰ In this sense, then, it is said that “when one attains to the state of dementation (*amanībhāva*), that is the last step” (*Maitri Up.* VI. 34.7), and we recognize the like doctrine in St. Thomas Aquinas, *cum vero intellectus jam ad formam veritatis pertingit, non cogitat, sed perfecte veritatem contemplatur* (*Sum. Theol.* I .34.1, ad 2). We must only be careful not to confuse this superior mindlessness of the supra-rational and super-conscious with the mindlessness of the Titans who are still irrational and subconscious, just as we distinguish the non-being of the divine super-essentiality from the non-being of what has not yet come into being or could not be.

To resume: in the first part of this article our intention was to show that what “repentance” really means is a “change of mind,” and the birth of a “new man” who, so far from being overwhelmed by the weight of past errors, is no longer the man who committed them; and in the second part, to outline the doctrine of the duality of mind on which the possibility of a “change of mind” depends, and to demonstrate its universality; to point out, in other words, that the notion and necessity of a *metanoia* are inseparably bound up with the formulation of the *Philosophia Perennis* wherever we find them.

²⁰ Cf. Witelō, *Intelligentia semper intelligit... (sed) se ipsam cognoscendo non cognoscit alia* (*Liber de intelligentiis* XXIV, XXVII), the Commentary adding (*id est*) *perceptionem non intelligit, sicut anima*. (Editor’s note: The sense of this quote is that the intelligence can comprehend everything, but it can only understand itself through looking within its own [spiritual] nature, not through external objects.)