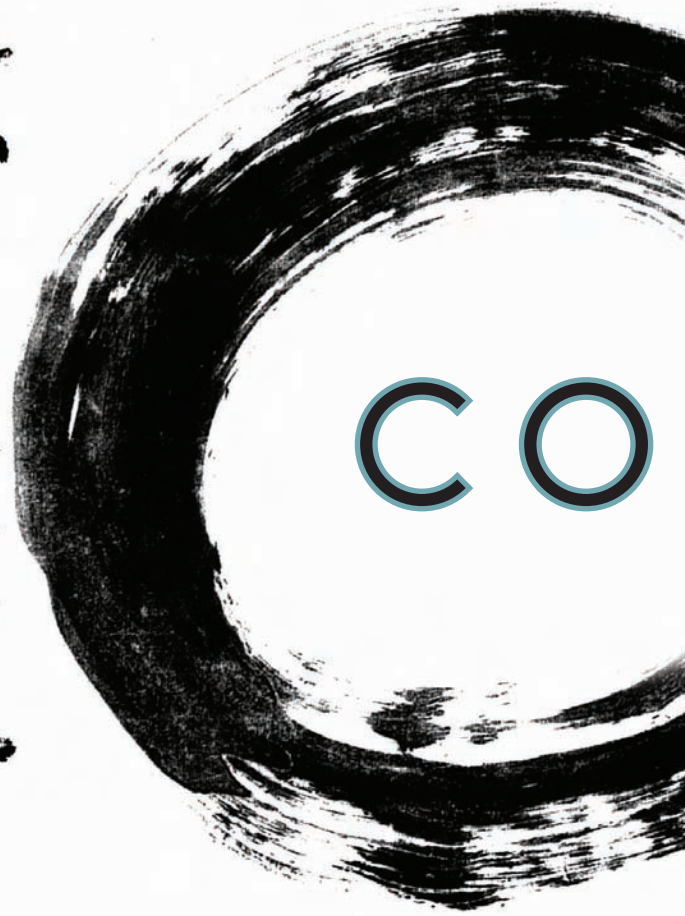




## Transformation

# EVOLVING



by **Kaisa Puhakka**

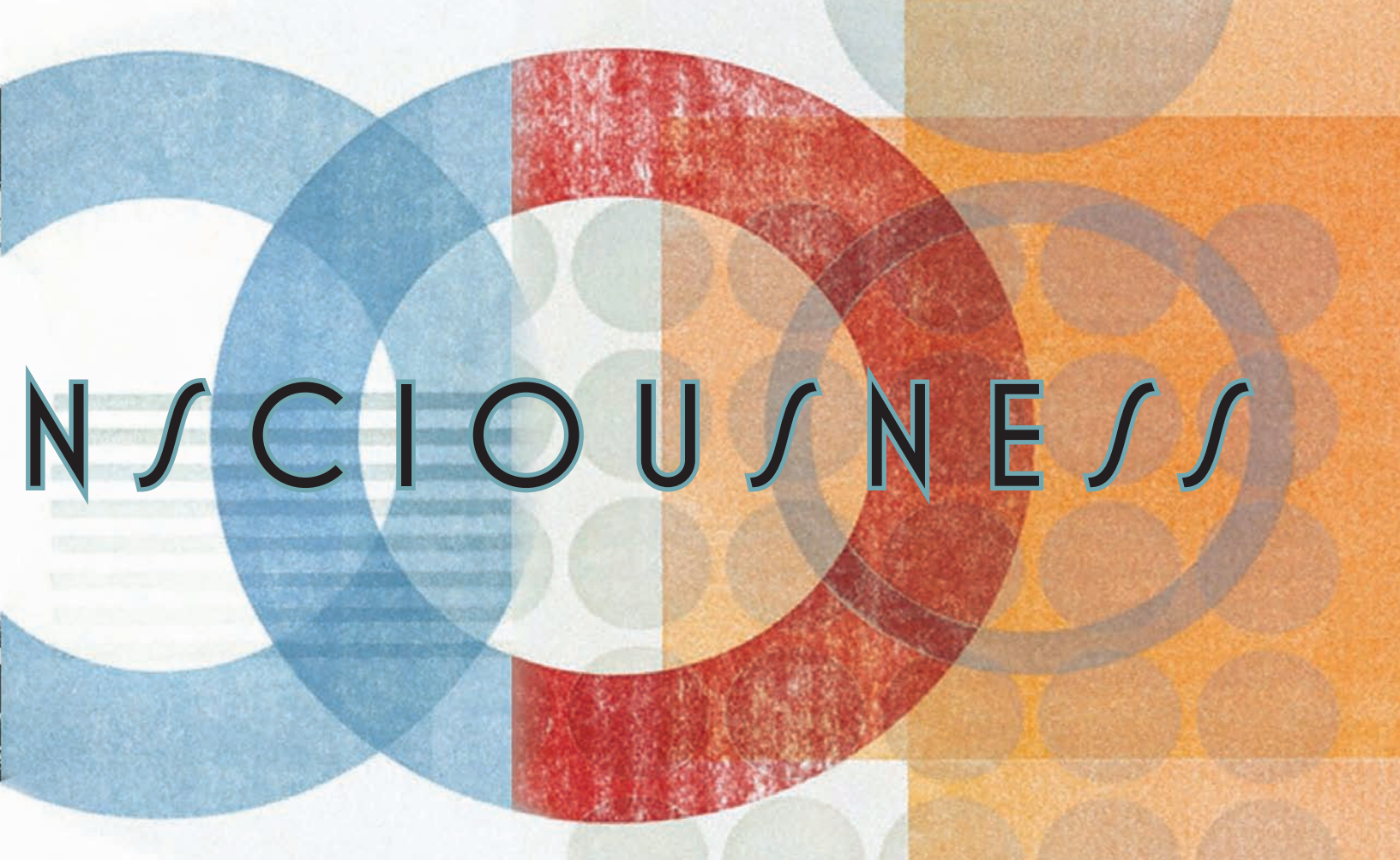
*Enso calligraphy by Torei Enji (1721–1792)*

**I**N RECENT DECADES, TWO TRENDS IN collective consciousness have emerged in the United States and elsewhere, leading toward different and opposing positions. One position urgently calls us back to faith and tradition, to reaffirm the authority—religious or otherwise—that clearly tells us right from wrong and true from false, with no confusing grey area in between. The other position questions or even discards faith in unambiguous truths said to be objective when handed down by authority or tradition. It instead acknowledges multiple perspectives on values and truth and welcomes diversity in cultural, religious, and political beliefs. The evolutionary potential of human consciousness, however, lies in its capacity to shift beyond *all* positions and beliefs.

We usually think of evolution as a linear process that moves in a particular direction through stages—sometimes complex stages with spirals and recursive loops but still moving toward higher or more advanced stages. In contrast to such a view, I consider evolution to be an altogether creative and spontaneous movement—so creative that it does not even have a predetermined shape or direction, at least not from the limited vantage points from which we humans view it.

Settling into positions and shifting out of them are both intrinsic to our consciousness. When the need to understand is satisfied by an authority we can believe in or by evidence or argument, the mind settles into a position. But our positions can unravel, either suddenly in a spontaneous *aha!* moment or gradually by painstaking, honest inquiry. Settling and shifting represent opposing tendencies, one inclining toward stasis while the other frees us up for movement. Neither is “good” or “bad”; they each have their value in sustaining human life as we know it. Settling into positions provides anchors for comfort and security. Without such settling, the structures of civilization and culture wouldn’t exist. At the same time, settling freezes positions and makes the capacity to shift more difficult—especially problematic when a certain kind of shift may be needed. Spontaneous evolutionary movement loosens these frozen positions and allows for shifting to take place.

With the enormous challenges facing our planet today, it seems imperative that we align ourselves with such an evolutionary force. That means less settling. Detachment isn’t the answer, though. It’s easy to get lost in a proliferation of alternative positions on just about any issue and



# CONSCIOUSNESS

react by wanting to detach from them all. But this too is a kind of settling—in this case, into a position of “no position.” Is it possible to simply be present with and open to what is there without the protective shield that positions create?

I believe that such presence is possible and may well be what the movement of evolution calls for at this time in our history. But what would entice us to shed our positions and the security they promise? Being truly present is like being naked, and positions are like clothing that provides comfort, security, and, most of all, a sense of identity. If we could see this clothing as unraveling and ephemeral, though, we might not take it so seriously.

## **Nagarjuna’s Dialectic**

Nagarjuna, a second-century Buddhist sage, demonstrated through a dialectical analysis how any and all positions are unstable and internally contradictory, and spontaneously unravel. His approach is much like that of postmodern deconstructionists, with one crucial difference. Deconstructionists show how every belief or position can be deconstructed into its linguistic and cultural presuppositions, which in turn can be deconstructed into further linguistic and cultural

presuppositions, and so on endlessly. From this, they conclude that we are forever caught up in a network of mutually dependent presuppositions or perspectives and that freedom from beliefs and positions is therefore impossible. By contrast, Nagarjuna’s aim is liberation from beliefs and positions and the suffering that comes from one’s attachment to them. His approach points a way out of the postmodern predicament by showing that all beliefs and perspectives are empty—devoid of essential meaning. In so doing, he demonstrates how all positions, when inquired into deeply enough, imply their opposites and thus are ultimately self-contradictory.

For example, theism and atheism involve opposing beliefs that are mutually dependent. The claim that God does not exist implicitly affirms the possibility that the opposite is true—God exists. (Without such a possibility, there is no point in making the claim.) But, of course, affirming the belief that God exists implicitly affirms the possibility of *its* opposite, atheism. In a similar way, all beliefs and positions, when affirmed as absolute truths, imply the presence of their own contradictions and thus leave one without a reliable

means to coherently affirm anything! Liberation from the clutches of positions, therefore, should be guaranteed and speedy.

Alas, logic is not enough for liberation to occur. Awareness is needed to bring light to the shadows in our minds where the opposites of what we affirm lurk—threatening to cast doubts on our certainties. The challenge for awareness is that the modern psyche is complex and multilayered. The play of unconscious and conscious keeps the

## NAGARJUNA'S AIM IS LIBERATION FROM BELIEFS AND POSITIONS AND THE POINTS A WAY OUT OF THE POSTMODERN PREDICAMENT BY SHOWING THAT

layers and compartments separate and makes it possible to hold contradictory positions unperturbed. Whenever we affirm a belief, for example, we tend to negate its contrary by banishing it from awareness. The force of the banishment can vary from drastic repression, where the rejected position becomes absolutely inconceivable, to momentary suppression, where the rejected position is set aside but still available for reconsideration and a possible return to awareness.

### Three Modes of Consciousness

The power and relevance of Nagarjuna's teaching comes to life for our time when it is expanded to include this complex psychological dimension. And the focus is not on beliefs or positions but on how we relate to them, which involves modes of consciousness.

At any given time, we embody one of three such modes of consciousness. In the first mode, awareness is captured by whatever belief is held in the moment; there is no awareness of other perspectives. Thinking is dominated by either/or logic, and beliefs and positions are held as absolutely true or absolutely false. This mode is evident in the first of the two major trends at play in our collective consciousness—toward rigidity and stasis. Let's refer to this mode as *absolute belief*.

In recent decades, there has been a shift to a wider and more inclusive mode of consciousness, evident in the other major trend in our contemporary collective consciousness—toward both/and thinking, which says that truths are relative to one's perspective and recognizes that multiple perspectives exist. In this mode,

awareness is not wholly captured by any one belief but is distracted by the diversity of possibilities and remains mostly absorbed in reflection and imagination. Let's call this mode *relative knowing*.

A third mode is presented in the movement of Nagarjuna's dialectic, though no popular trend is associated with it. It doesn't identify with any perspective and neither affirms nor denies beliefs. Rather, it speaks to those moments when awareness is neither divided into subject and object nor attached to anything but instead embraces and pervades everything, seeing not just things but also our views and perspectives of those things. In this mode, perspectives (including one's own) become transparent to awareness: How they shape beliefs is seen in the moment they arise. While the mode of relative knowing accepts beliefs and positions as possessing limited truth, this third mode sees them as illusions altogether, creations of the mind that are neither true nor false by any standard other than their own. We might call this *clear awareness*. Its freedom and spaciousness are unobstructed by acceptance or rejection, as the following quote from Long-Chen Pa, a famous Tibetan sage, conveys:



## SUFFERING THAT COMES FROM ONE'S ATTACHMENT TO THEM. HIS APPROACH ALL BELIEFS AND PERSPECTIVES ARE EMPTY—DEVOID OF ESSENTIAL MEANING.

*Since everything is but an apparition  
Perfect in being what it is,  
Having nothing to do with good or bad,  
Acceptance or rejection,  
One may well burst out into laughter.*

Clear awareness beyond the limitation of perspectives is possible for all of us. Some have tasted it, yet to many it feels unfamiliar and hence suspect. Modern-day constructivism and deconstructive analysis have trained our minds to be skeptical of the notion that one can function or know anything at all without a perspective. This conditioning tends to solidify the mode of relative knowing into a position known as *relativism*.

### **Samsara: The Endless Cycling**

Relativism affirms the inevitability of multiple perspectives or positions as an absolute truth. The paradox of such an affirmation notwithstanding, relativism is widely embraced by academic and other educated folks today. But like all positions, it is unstable because of its internal contradictions and will give way to its opposite in the ongoing cycling of beliefs and positions.

We can see this happening in the many facets of contemporary life where relativism is prominent. It is evident, for example, in the widely repeated mantra in academia, politics, and the media that “every issue has two sides.” The implication is that, somehow, both sides are true, or at least deserve equal consideration. For example, in the mainstream media, the going formula not only for debating issues but also for reporting factual information is to have two talking heads present opposite

views. Never mind if the weight of scientific evidence or logical analysis favors one view; the formula dictates that both views be presented as equivalent. And who decides what counts as evidence or logical analysis? It is all a matter of perspective!

Such positional conflicts occur in our individual lives as well. We hold on to beliefs and insights about ourselves and others just as absolutely and rigidly and reject the opposite just as vehemently as a fundamentalist defends his faith or her ideology. Let's say you are caught in a conflict between an ideal you strive for (for example, “I should be more generous and loving toward my husband/wife”) and how you take yourself to actually be (“I am petty, jealous, insecure, selfish”). The tension and confusion, both internal and external, are hard to bear and will likely give way to a quick affirmation of one side or the other or some synthesized version of both. But sooner or later, this too succumbs to its opposite, generating an endless cycle of self-rumination or doubt. The belief not chosen, whether buried in the unconscious or uncomfortably hovering just below your awareness, ultimately acts out and affects your relationship or intrudes into your awareness and torments you there.

With relativism, postmodern neutrality has replaced presumed objectivity, and that neutrality has come to mean that it's up to you. But the criteria by which you choose your truths are also ultimately up to you—if you believe in free will. From here, it's a short step to realizing that whatever you decide has no meaning or significance beyond the fact that you so decide. We can thus see how relativism, when taken far enough, deprives all

perspectives of significance and can deteriorate into a nihilistic anything-goes-and-nothing-matters attitude. And then the despair and cynicism of nihilism can give way to absolutism, which eventually gives way to . . . And this is how the wheel of samsara spins round. Nagarjuna's dialectic exposes the dynamic that keeps the wheel turning.

### Shifting Out of Positions

In the big picture, our positions and beliefs are but creative expressions of the ongoing evolution of consciousness. Seeing them as such can be like awakening from a spell; there is no longer a need to affirm or negate a belief as if it were absolutely true or false. Such awakenings can shift us out of the need to take a position right in the midst of everyday life.

Consider again the above example of tension and confusion when faced with conflicting beliefs about yourself. If you can recall such a moment in your own life, you will appreciate how *unsettling* it was—and how desperately you wanted out of it. What happens if instead of running from the confusion, you stay with it without the pressure to choose? You then embrace both sides of the conflict and the emotions attached to each without favoring either or contorting yourself into a position that affirms both as “somehow” true. Now the light of awareness shines upon both sides of the conflict without affirming or rejecting either. You might stop in your tracks with a smile on your face, followed by a spontaneous *aha!*

I am describing a moment of insight, which gives us a glimpse of clear awareness. Insights typically follow an impasse of some sort. When we muster the courage or stamina or whatever it takes to remain present in the face of a conflict or impasse, we are embodying the mode of relative knowing. And when we embody this mode fully, it naturally and spontaneously opens up to clear awareness. Most important is the moment when the insight happens—not what we might say about it afterward.

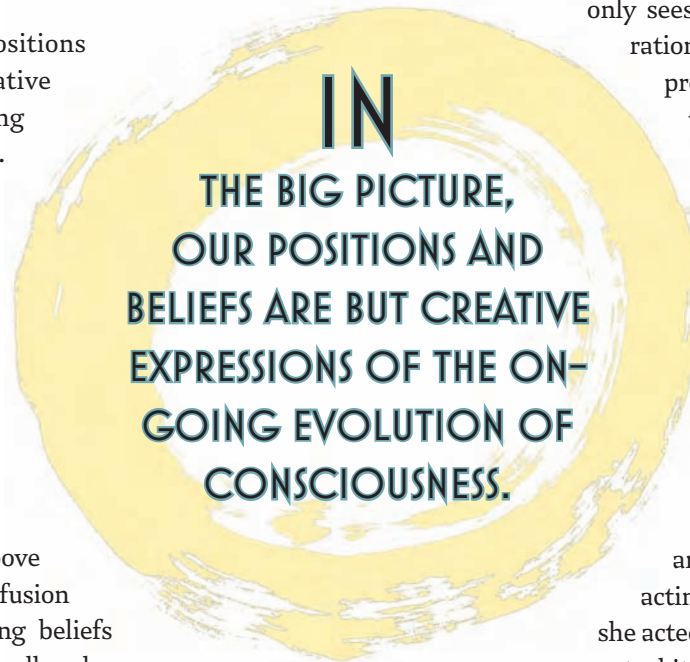
For that person in that moment, there is literally “nothing there”—no perspectives and nothing that can be identified or described through a perspective. But out of that “nothing,” *something* emerges that is absolutely fresh and creative.

A psychotherapy client recently told me that her marriage of six years was in a downward spiral. Her husband was complaining that she is supercritical and only sees faults in him. Although she rationalized that her husband was provoking her, she also admitted that more and more often, “something takes over me” in the dynamic between them. Some time later while we explored her relationship with her mother, she stopped in her tracks, stared vacantly for a second or two, and then whispered in shock, “Wow! For all these years, I’ve been my mother and didn’t know it! I’ve been acting toward my husband just like she acted toward my dad.” We held the moment a bit longer, as a new way of being arose from the spacious openness that lingered.

Moments of insight, when we *see* something in a way we have never seen it before, are familiar to most of us. They can come in all sorts of situations—when washing dishes, for example, or walking in the park. Alas, they usually don’t last. Soon enough a new position congeals in an effort to capture or integrate the meaning of that insight, and one settles back into an updated identity or way of being. But no matter how long or short their duration, these moments of openness testify to the vibrancy and power of the evolutionary movement within our consciousness.

### From Positions to Wisdom and Love

Is it really possible to operate with such openness in the world? Is it possible, contrary to the popular postmodern dictum, to be without perspective? Instances of insight tell us that it is. But can those openings stretch longer than a passing moment? Can the transformative power of such openness deepen? And most importantly, can such openness be there at the level of shared discourse and action?



It seems that in our time, consciousness pivots on a fulcrum. On one side is relativism and the endless juggling of diverse perspectives that can paralyze action. On the other side is the possibility of action that springs directly from seeing what is there in the moment and what is needed. But a spacious awareness is required for this to occur, and that is like a free fall. Who would choose to have the ground under their positions pulled away? Understandably, the fear of such free fall has us clinging to positions or surrendering to relativism or drifting toward nihilism and from there to absolutism—around and around the wheel we go.


The teachings of various traditions tell us that it takes a great deal of wisdom and love to make the shift to clear awareness. Love and wisdom work synergistically and are ultimately not separate. The word *love* conjures up emotions of warmth and caring, perhaps also desire. Yet in certain dire circumstances, people sometimes set aside their fears and extend themselves, perhaps at great risk, to save a stranger's life. At such times, we are moved by what feels like a larger dimension of love made manifest, with a courage that embraces and transcends self-concerns. Such courage is necessary for being fully present to our inner conflicts as well. Indeed, what inspires or helps us to be present to what we most fear or loathe if not a courageous love? Being present in this way allows one to see clearly what is there. Such clear seeing is wisdom. The more clearly and deeply we see what is there, the more present we are to it. In this way, love and wisdom work together. Wisdom tells you what you need to do; love impels you to action.

Where do we get this kind of love and wisdom? They are not the sorts of things one can “get,” much less manufacture through regimes of spiritual self-improvement—which is not to say that spiritual practice, especially when engaged in a way that discourages preoccupation with the self, cannot facilitate attunement to love and wisdom. The good news is that we don't need to try to capture or produce them. Love and wisdom are right here, all around us, in abundant supply, inherent in the evolutionary process of which we—including our perspectives and positions—are a part. Remember a time when you saw something familiar, perhaps a flower or a bird or a dented Coke can, as if for the very first time, and you got absorbed in that magic and totally forgot yourself? Any genuine inquiry involves giving oneself completely to the object

of inquiry, which means forgetting oneself. Forgetting oneself and fully embracing what is there is love. Discerning with clarity and precision what is there is wisdom. Both are present when attention is complete and undivided. The best of scientific inquiry involves such attention, and we are all capable of it. Right action spontaneously arises from undivided attention, as our most creative scientists and artists can testify.

## A Collective Shift

There will always be perspectives. They are needed for building systems of accumulated knowledge and their applications. But when there is wisdom and love, we can do more than build systems and choose or synthesize among perspectives; we can move through them to creative action that responds appropriately to whatever circumstances the world presents.

Appropos of the shifting consciousness of our time, the recent U.S. presidential election is seen by many as historic not only because an African American was elected to be the president of this country but also because of the widespread feeling that he may help usher in something new and desperately needed in our collective consciousness. On the campaign trail, Obama frustrated many pundits and politicians by refusing to articulate his campaign promise of hope in terms of “positions.” Yet people responded, not to programs and platforms but to the anticipation of action appropriate to the challenges before us. Of course, this hope may be fueled by projection and wishful thinking, and in the end it may also be overwhelmed by the size of those very same challenges. Ephemeral, tainted, and transient as it may be, however, this massive mobilization hints at a shifting in our collective consciousness that is a matter not of settling into another position or ideology but of opening up to life and its unfolding challenges and opportunities. 



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