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Concepts of the Self and the Individual in Japanese and Western Cultures

A Transpersonal Study (II)

Noriko Kawanaka

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(Ⅱ)

3. Wilber's Concept of Self Based on His Life Cycle Theory

This section briefly introduces Wilber's concept of the self, which is based on his life cycle theory. Wilber (1977, 1979), who is thought to be one of the most influential theorists in transpersonal psychology, proposed a life cycle theory that consists of three levels of consciousness; pre-personal, personal, and trans-personal. He suggested people experience these three levels of consciousness according to where they are in their process of psychological development.

In the first level of consciousness, the *pre-personal* level, the ego and the unconscious are not yet fully differentiated; instead, they are united as one. I would like to point out that the embracing maternal principle in Jung's terms dominates the pre-personal level of consciousness.
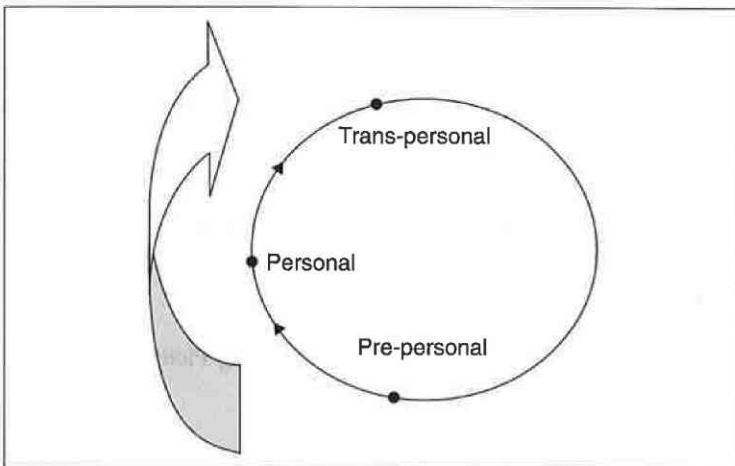

Figure 1. Wilber's concept of self: Three levels of consciousness.

In the second level of consciousness, the *personal* level, the ego is differentiated from the unconscious. Specifically, the dividing paternal principle (again in Jung's terms) enables the ego to differentiate from the unconscious. Individualism-oriented cultures have tended to focus on development from the pre-personal level to the personal level of consciousness because the personal level of the self is exemplified by the achievement of individualism. I intend to illustrate these processes in the next section by applying Erich Nuemann's theory.

In addition, as Nishihira (1997) suggests, traditional human developmental psychology has focused on the progression from the pre-personal level to the personal level of consciousness as the task to be achieved on the way from infancy to adulthood.

In the third level of consciousness, the *trans-personal* level, consciousness transcends the personal level of the self. It goes beyond one's own identity to experience an identity without a boundary between self and others. This level of consciousness, as mentioned in section 1, is the subject of transpersonal psychology.

The next section illustrates how Wilber's three levels of consciousness correspond with Neumann's mythological stages in the evolution of consciousness.

4. Erich Neumann and Development from the *Uroborus* to the *Great Mother* to the *Hero Myth*

This section presents Erich Neumann's theory of the self and equates it to Wilber's life cycle theory. Specifically, it relates Neumann's concepts of the *uroboros*, the *Great Mother*, and the *hero myth* to Ken Wilber's pre-personal and personal levels of consciousness. This comparison allows Wilber's theory of the self to be represented in the form of imagery, as archetypal stages in the development of conscious-

ness in mythologies.

Neumann is regarded as one of Jung's most creative students and a practitioner of analytical psychology in his own right. His theory is of importance because he considered mythologies and their pictorial forms to be a manifestation of cultural unconsciousness (Neumann, 1949). Specifically, he stated that the creative beginning of individuality is the peculiar achievement of Western people. In this sense, his theory is suitable for evaluating the concepts of the self and the individual from a Western perspective.

In *The Origin and History of Consciousness* (1949), Neumann noted that in the course of ontogenic development, individual ego consciousness must go through the same archetypal stages which determined the evolution of consciousness in the life of humanity. Therefore, according to Neumann (1949), the individual must follow the path that humanity trod before him or her, leaving traces of his or her journey in the archetypal sequence of mythological images. Neumann's archetypal sequence of mythological images includes the three levels of consciousness called the *uroboros*, the *Great Mother*, and the *hero myth*.

The Uroboros and the Pre-Personal Level of Consciousness

The primary developmental stage of consciousness in Wilber's life cycle theory, the pre-personal level of consciousness, appears to correspond to Neumann's primordial stage of consciousness which is symbolically represented by the *uroboros*, a tail-eating serpent (1949). Neumann stated that, "The beginning can be laid hold of in two 'places:' it can be conceived in the life of mankind as the earliest dawn of human history, and in the life of the individual as the earliest dawn of childhood" (1949, p. 6).

The *uroboros* appears as a self-contained circle without a beginning

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Figure 2. The *uroboros*.

or an end (Figure 2, from Neumann, 1949, p. 437). It symbolizes the condition of the human mind: It is both a man and a woman who swallows him or herself and produces him or herself. It is both active and passive. It is both up and down. The symbol of the *uroboros* is found throughout the world in various countries and cultures, including ancient Babylon and ancient Egypt. Drawings in the sand by Native Americans (particularly Navaho tribes) also contain the symbol of the *uroboros*.

The *uroboros* is the state of mind in which polar opposites, including masculine and feminine, are united. It is also the state of the mind found in the pre-history or infantile stage of personal development. Moreover, even an adult can experience this state of the mind during dreaming in which the ego and consciousness are dissolved into unconsciousness as one. This is the condition before dualism, before the differentiation between subject and object. It is the condition in which everything is embraced in the chaos of unconsciousness; that is, it is the

state of *participation mystique*.

Since time and space come into existence with the emerging of consciousness at the close of the *uroboros* stage, instead of time, there exists only eternity, and instead of space, there exists only infinity at the stage of the *uroboros*.

The Great Mother and the Level of Consciousness Between the Pre-Personal and the Personal

In the process between the pre-personal and the personal level of consciousness, the ego begins to emerge from the chaotic ocean of unconsciousness. According to Neumann (1949), the ego perceives unconsciousness as *mother*. Neumann (1949) pointed out that there are two conflicting desires for the emerging ego. One desire is to remain unconscious, being embraced by the unconscious as mother and soundly sleeping in unity with mother. Another desire is to obtain independence from unconsciousness as mother. The ego experiences these conflicting desires as intense conflict.

When a particular culture experiences this stage of mind, the culture symbolizes the relationship between the ego and unconsciousness in various ways. For instance, the desire to be in comfortable unity with unconsciousness as mother is symbolically represented by the positive image of the *Great Mother*, as we see in the image of Mother Matuta, who embraces her child (Figure 3, Neumann, 1949, p. 66).

This figure portrays the infantile stage of the ego, which is so small and helpless, being warmly embraced by the *Great Mother*. It represents the positive side of the *Great Mother*, who is nurturing, embracing and protecting.

Figure 4. Rangda.

Figure 3. Mother Matuta
(Etruria, 5th Century B.C.).

However, the ego, which is attempting to obtain independence from unconsciousness, also experiences unconsciousness as a fearful, terrible, and devouring mother who intends to swallow the ego, thus bringing it back to the chaotic state of the *uroboros* before dualism and differentiation. This negative and destructive side of unconsciousness is seen in the image of Rangda (Figure 4, Neumann, 1949, p. 466).

This figure portrays the negative side of the *Great Mother*, who swallows and eats children—small and helpless egos—and brings them back into the chaos of unconsciousness.

Thus, the emerging ego, after experiencing conflicting desires about unconsciousness, may proceed to the next stage of development of consciousness, the remarkable stage called individuality.

The Hero Myth and the Personal Level of Consciousness

At the personal level of consciousness, true individuality is born. According to Neumann (1949), individuality is the unique achievement of Western culture, and this developmental stage of consciousness can be found in the mythologies called the *hero myth*.

Neumann (1949) stressed that this is a remarkable stage for the ego in that the ego becomes the center of consciousness after slaying the terrible and devouring aspect of unconsciousness, or the *Great Mother*, which attempts to swallow the ego. At this stage, the ego is able to differentiate from unconsciousness and a clear boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness is established.

Neumann (1949) asserted that when a culture reaches the stage of differentiation between consciousness and unconsciousness, the *hero myth* is produced. He pointed out that there are three major themes in the *hero myth*; the slaying of the terrible mother or dragon, the acquisition of a treasure, and the marriage of the hero to a captive woman.

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Figure 5. Perseus slaying Gorgon as the negative mother.

The hero represents the ego, which has grown strong enough to be able to confront the figure of the negative, destructive mother.

This mother is attempting to swallow the hero and bring him back into chaotic unity with unconsciousness. Typically, the negative, destructive mother is represented as a dragon, which the hero must confront and conquer in order to obtain independence from unconsciousness. For example, Neumann introduced the image of Perseus slaying Gorgon as the negative mother (Figure 5, Neumann, 1949, p. 143). This image is from Attic, 6 B. C., and it is noteworthy that the image includes figures of snakes, the symbol of the *uroboros*, at the head of Gorgon, as the *Great Mother*.

The ego, after surviving the dangerous confrontation with the *Great Mother* and triumphing, becomes the center of consciousness, as sym-

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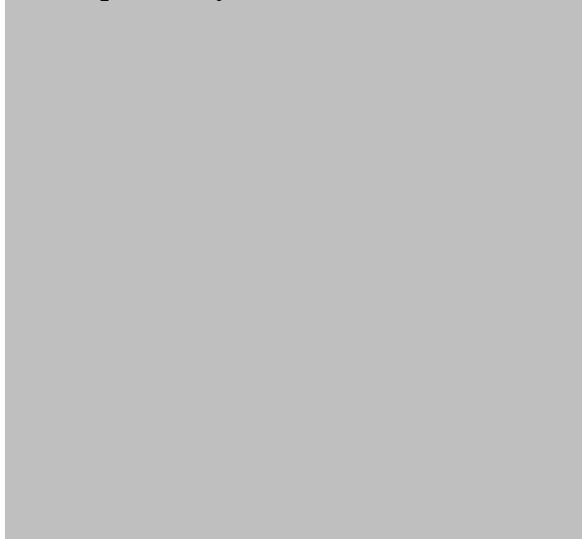
Figure 6. Perseus and Andromeda.

bolized by the hero, who successfully acquires the treasure and/or the captive woman. This is shown in the theme of marriage. In many cases, the hero's bride has been held captive by dragons, which are symbols of unconsciousness. The hero releases her from the dragons, and they become able to marry as two individuals. The significance of the marriage is the union of opposites, which were once divided by dualism. The typical imagery representing the birth of the hero is seen in the images of Perseus and Andromeda (Figure 6, Neumann, 1949, p. 144).

With the birth of the hero and his slaying of the dragons, the conscious mind is successfully separated from unconsciousness, and a clear boundary between unconsciousness and consciousness is established. In this way, the ego (symbolized by the hero) has achieved individuality or the personal level of the self. The transition between the *uroboros* and the birth of the hero corresponds to the path between the pre-personal and personal levels of the self in Wilber's life cycle theory. Both refer to the evolution from the state of mind before dualism (i. e., *participa-*
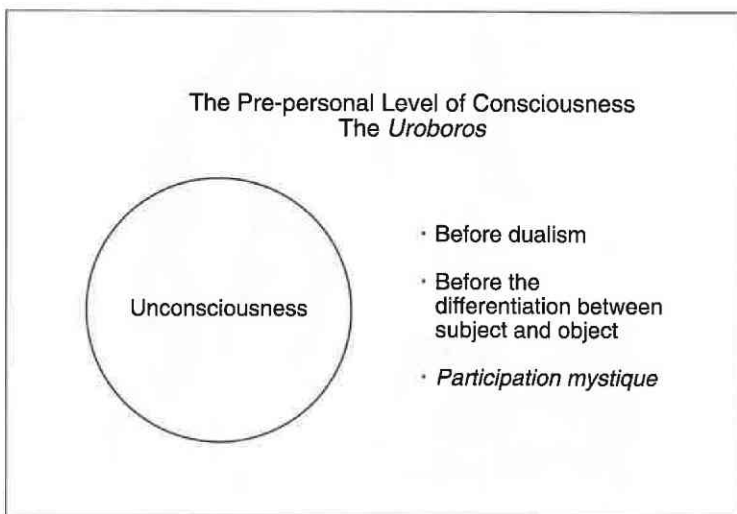

The Pre-personal Level of Consciousness
The *Uroboros*

Unconsciousness

· Before dualism

· Before the differentiation between subject and object

· *Participation mystique*

Figure 7-1. The pre-personal level of consciousness: The *uroboros*.

tion mystique) to the state of mind of the individual. This transition is illustrated in the figures below. (Fig. 7-1, 7-2, and 7-3).
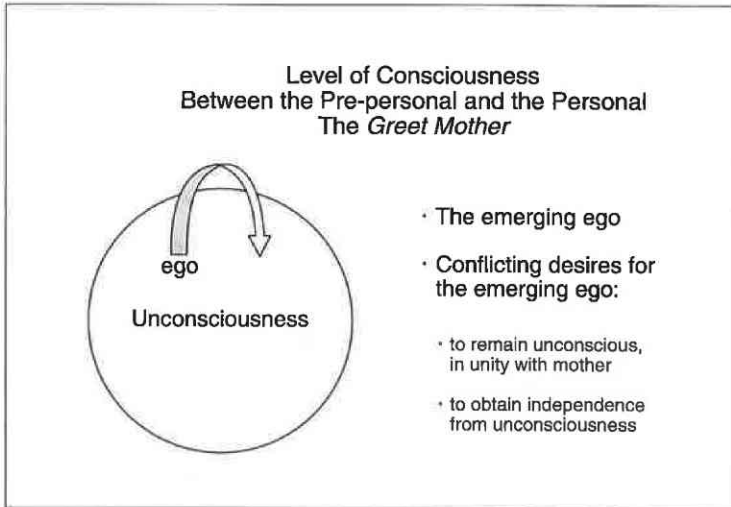

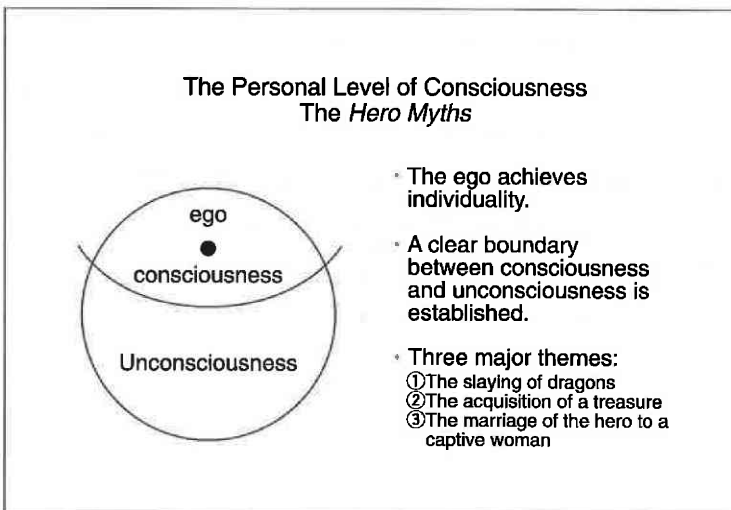Figure 7-2. Level of consciousness between the pre-personal and the personal: The *Great Mother.*

Figure 7-3. The personal level of consciousness: The *hero myth.*

5. The Self Concept in Japan and the West and Differences in the Notion of Boundaries

The previous section focused on the achievement of individualism from a Western perspective as illustrated by the Western *hero myth*. This section introduces findings on the concept of the self and the individual from a Japanese perspective, specifically Japanese Jungian psychology, and it evaluates cross-cultural differences. Kawai (1982 a) was the first Japanese Jungian psychologist to study Japanese mythologies and folk tales and relate them to Neumann's theory of myths. He asserted that the Japanese concept of the self and the individual is completely different from those of Western people, as illustrated by Neumann's book entitled, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (1949). Specifically, Neumann's theory is based on a linear concept of time in terms of the developmental process of human consciousness.

According to Kawai (1982 a), if we adopt Neumann's theory, in which the process of identity construction occurs in a linear temporal sequence, we come to believe that the Japanese concept of the self is still in the stage of the *uroboros*. However, if we adopt a true Japanese perspective, we are likely to arrive at a different conclusion. Kawai (1982 a) suggested that the Japanese concept of the self represented in Japanese mythologies and folk tales is remarkably different from the concept we have seen in the Western *hero myth*.

According to Kawai, the most remarkable difference is that the marriage theme so common in the Western *hero myth* barely exists in Japanese mythologies and folk tales. If it does exist, the ending is rarely happy. For example, in one of the most popular folk tales, *Take-tori-Monogatari*, a female protagonist travels to the Moon after refusing numerous marriage proposals. Thus, a marriage never occurs in this story. It is noteworthy that she is born within a bamboo, instead of be-

ing given birth to by human parents. Her supernatural character is emphasized in the story, and she is never *acquired* by any man, unlike the captive virgin in the Western *hero myth*.

In another popular tale, *Turu-No-Ongaeshi*, a woman asks to marry a man who once helped her when she was a wounded crane. She attempts to return his kindness by becoming his wife and by giving him beautiful and expensive clothes that she has woven. The man becomes rich thanks to her efforts. In the end, although she asks him not to peek into her room when she is weaving at night, he is tempted to do so. One day, when he finally peeks into her room, he finds her as her original crane figure. She leaves him after being discovered for who she really is.

In *Turu-No-Ongaeshi*, the marriage takes place, but the husband is human and the wife is a crane. The Western *hero myth* infrequently includes human/animal marriages. Although in the West there are stories of marriages between a frog or a beast and a female human being, those animals were originally male human beings who were transfigured into animals. Thus, in Japanese stories, marriage as a goal is rarely a theme. For instance, in both *Taketori-Monogatari*, and *Turu-No-Ongaeshi*, the stories do not end happily because the females disappear.

Based on his evaluation of these and other Japanese folk stories, Kawai (1982 a) pointed out that the marriage theme as a goal is extremely rare in Japanese mythologies and folk tales, unlike the goal-oriented stories in the West. Most Western *hero myths* are goal-oriented stories whose heroes strive to attain individuality and acquire the captive princess and treasure. They are typically characterized by a marriage and a fight. Conversely, most Japanese myths and folk stories, according to Kawai, are process-oriented tales in which the protagonist is receptive to his or her fate.

I shall introduce another contribution from Japanese mythological studies, that is, *Susanoo-ron (A Study on Susanoo)* (1983), co-authored by the above mentioned Kawai, a mythologist Yoshida, and a philosopher Yuasa. In this study, Yoshida suggested that in *Susanoo*, there are apparent similarities with themes in Western mythologies.

Susanoo extraordinarily includes a marriage theme similar to that which appears in the Western *hero myth*. In this story, a male protagonist named *Susanoo* marries a princess after slaying a great snake. He is rewarded by receiving a sword as a treasure. In the Western *hero myth*, the hero typically attains his individuality and independence from maternal unconsciousness before he slays the dragon and marries the virgin. However, in *Susanoo*, the male protagonist continually refuses to become independent from the maternal world. Instead, he attaches to maternal figures, including his sister.

Yoshida in Kawai, Yoshida, and Yuasa (1983) referred to this *baitogogo* tendency (the anthropological term for a person who attaches him or herself to the maternal world), and he concluded that *Susanoo*'s action was a *baitogogo* tendency despite the co-existence of the theme in Western *hero myths*. In other words, unlike Western *hero myths*, *Susanoo* is not goal-oriented, although the story includes a fight and a marriage. His attachment to the maternal world is so strong that the concept of the developmental self and the individual is very different from that of the West.

Kawai (1982 a) suggested that the Western concept of the self is based on the dividing paternal principle (i. e. dualistic, analytical thinking) while the Japanese concept of the self is based on anti-dualism supported by the concept of flexible boundaries.

For instance, the Japanese concept of the self is characterized by the interpenetrative, ambiguous boundary between consciousness and

unconsciousness that is free from dualistic division. This multiple, holistic consciousness allows the existence of multiple egos, unlike Western consciousness.

In Hall's theory on intercultural communication (1976), he categorized Japanese culture as highly contextualized, that is, relationships with others are more highly valued than individuality. Hamaguchi, a well-known Japanese sociologist (1982), agreed with Hall when he stated that the Japanese concept of the self is heavily influenced by relationships with others and that interpersonal relationships are revered instead of individuality. These theories suggest the existence of a multiple, holistic, and dynamic sense of the self in Japanese culture.

Kawai (1982 a) also posited that Japanese consciousness is so strongly related to unconsciousness that in Japanese stories the boundaries between reality and fantasy are co-mingled and ambiguous. According to Kawai (1982 a), this blurring of boundaries is in striking contrast to the clear boundaries between reality (as the conscious world) and fantasy (as the unconscious world) that appear in Western stories, such as Peter Pan and his adventures in Never Never Land.

Moreover, Kawai (1982 a) noticed that while the Western self observed in the *hero myth* is acquired as the result of a fight (typically, the slaying of dragons), the Japanese self is acquired by receptiveness without any fight or struggle. Thus, Kawai (1982 a) concluded that the Japanese definition of consciousness is similar to the development that occurs between conception and birth. He referred to this form of consciousness as feminine, while he regarded the self concept represented in the Western *hero myth* as a masculine form of consciousness. This relates to Neumann's (1949) suggestion that the Western definition of the self is symbolized by a masculine figure, a hero.
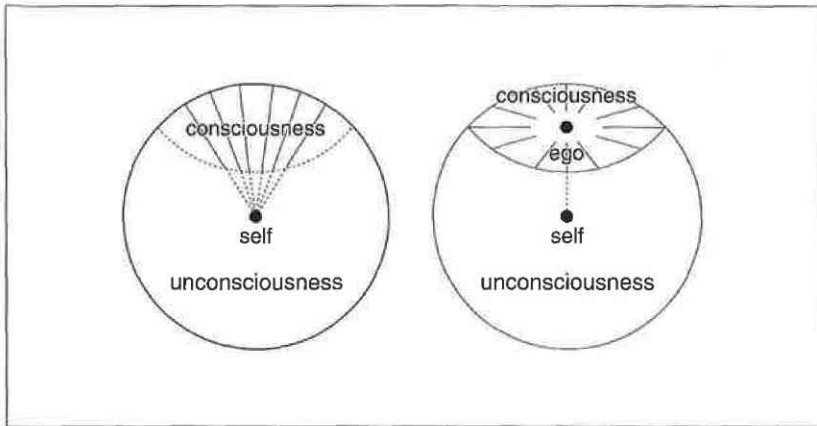
Figure 8. The Japanese mind (left) and the Western Mind (right).

Based on the concept of a feminine form of consciousness in Japan and a masculine form of consciousness in the West, Kawai (1982 b) suggested two models of consciousness (Figure 8). One model shows the Western mind with the ego in the center of consciousness and a clear division between consciousness and unconsciousness. Based on this model, the challenge for the Western ego is to retrieve the connection with the self located in unconsciousness.

The other model shows the Japanese mind, which does not have a clear boundary between unconsciousness and consciousness. In this model, consciousness is not firmly integrated by the ego. Instead, the Japanese mind as a whole is more perceptive of the existence of the self within the unconscious. In other words, with an ambiguous boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness, the Japanese mind is characterized by its holistic orientation.

With Kawai's models of the Japanese and Western minds and his definitions of consciousness and unconsciousness as background information, it is possible to discuss communication within the various cultures.
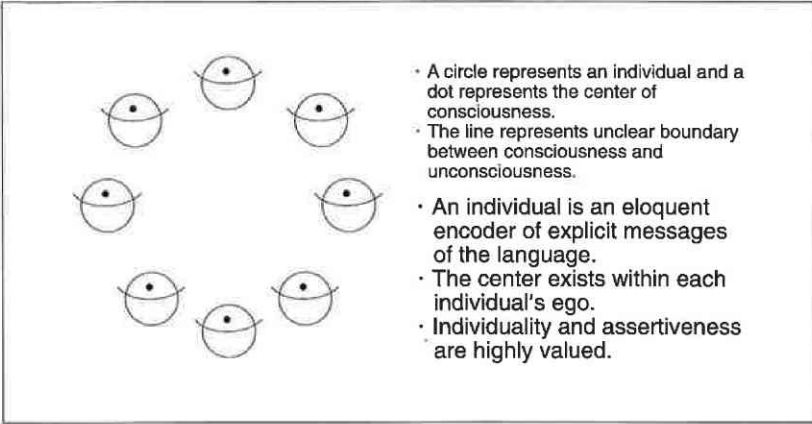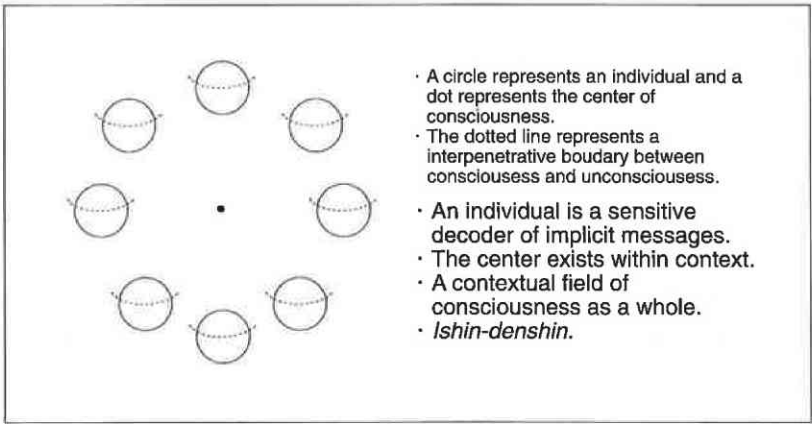
Figure 9. The Western model of Communication.

Figure 10. The Japanese Model Communication.

In Western culture (Figure 9), when two individuals communicate with each other, the centers of consciousness exist within each individual's ego. Thus, each individual is an eloquent encoder of the explicit messages of the language. This is a culture in which assertiveness and individuality are highly valued.

Conversely, in Japanese culture (Figure 10), when individuals communicate with each other, the centers of consciousness exist within

context, not within each individual's ego. Thus, the boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness is not explicit. Instead, each individual's consciousness is dissolved into a united one to the extent that they form a contextual field of consciousness as a whole. This is explained by the Japanese term *Ishin-denshin*, which means to communicate by heart, without any verbal words. In a culture, such as Japan, with this definition of communication, the individual is expected to be sensitively decoding implicit messages rather than claiming individuality.

These differences in communication style can be explained by cross-cultural differences in the notion of boundaries. For instance, a culture that has a dualistic, explicit notion of boundaries, such as the West, values the acquisition of a strong sense of ego and independence from maternal unconsciousness. The goal of the individual in this culture is to differentiate consciousness from unconsciousness and the self from others. This is the same process of differentiation we observed in the Western *hero myth*, in which the ego is separated from unconsciousness as the *Great Mother*. In other words, the notion of boundaries based on dualism enables human consciousness to establish a sense of individuality.

On the other hand, a culture that has a trans-dualistic, interpenetrative notion of boundaries, such as Japan, values unity with maternal unconsciousness or the *Great Mother*. This type of culture strives for a more holistic form of consciousness and considers separation from maternal unconsciousness to be taboo.

As previously mentioned, Western culture is characterized by the Western *hero myth* with their goal orientation, linear notion of development, and focus on the achievement of individuality, and Japanese culture is characterized by Japanese myths and folk stories with their focus
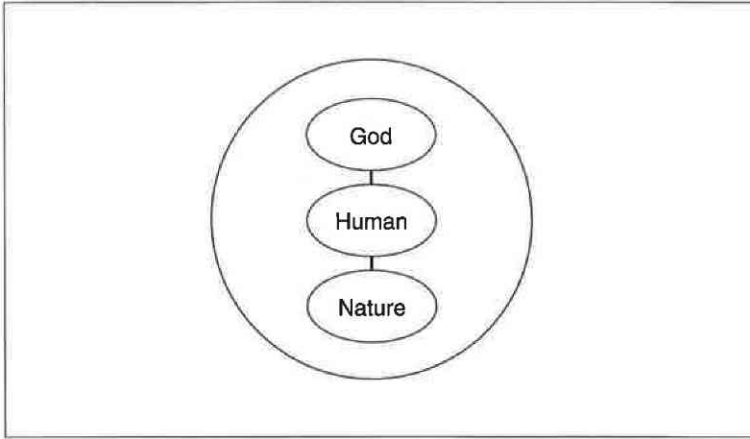
Figure 11. The Western world view based on strict hierarchy.

on process-oriented, receptive states of consciousness.

Cross-cultural differences in the notion of boundaries can explain the differences in the world views of these cultures. For example, according to Furuta (1990, p. 5), Western cultures with their firm, explicit, and dualistic boundaries are characterized by a world view based on a strict hierarchy between God (the only one God as *Father*), human beings, and nature. God created human beings, and human beings dominate nature (Figure 11).

In these cultures, marriage between animals and human beings never happens in myths and folk tales. As mentioned earlier, while there are stories of marriage between a male beast or frog and a female human being, the beast or frog was originally a human being who was transfigured into an animal.

On the other hand, in a culture with an interpenetrative, trans-dualistic notion of boundaries, like Japan, there is no strict hierarchy between Gods/Goddesses/Buddha, human beings, and nature (Furuta, 1990, p. 5). The boundaries between these three are so flexible and in-
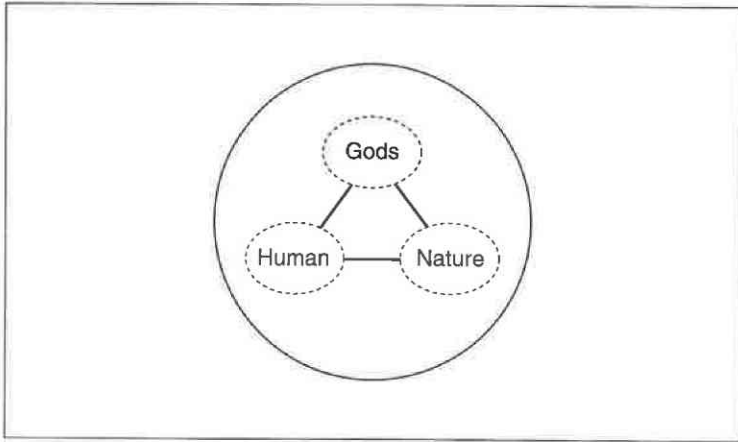
Figure 12. The Japanese world view.

terpenetrative that the Gods/Goddesses/Buddha, human beings, and nature can communicate freely with each other (Figure12). In this culture, marriage between animals, which belong to nature, and human beings happens frequently in myths and folk tales.

Japanese architecture is also a good example of the trans-dualistic, interpenetrative notion of boundaries. Japanese *shoji* and *fusuma* (paper doors) represent flexible, interpenetrative boundaries in which the inside and outside are not fully divided. They allow human beings to always remain open to the influence of nature, including sunlight and air.

Thus, if we pay attention to the cross-cultural differences in the notion of boundaries, we can conclude that Japanese culture has a different mode of consciousness from that of the West. Western culture values the progression from the pre-personal to the personal level of consciousness or the achievement of individuality, whereas Japanese culture focuses on process-oriented, multiple, holistic and receptive states of consciousness.

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