

13.4 Revisiting key insights about ‘lifecycle wisdom’ from humanity’s ‘axial age’

- Excerpt from Cameron Richards’ *‘Optimal lifelong learning from experience, reflection, and ‘inner wisdom’: The four stages of the human lifecycle revisited* (2026).

The Axial Age (800 BCE-200 BCE) brought with it an apparent change in human nature. Individual consciousness appears to have become richer. A new reflective self-awareness seems to have emerged, in which people began to see themselves as objective, distinct entities and to consider their own motives, feelings, thoughts and to more carefully plan their acts.

- John Mayer (15 June, 2009), *Why did people change in the Axial Age?*

In this book we have linked two key related ideas about the development or attainment of ‘human wisdom’. One is that various related models and traditions of both practical and transcendental ‘wisdom’ are transformatively grounded in the collective community and cultural ‘pools’ of human experience. These are also modes of lifelong learning that are potentially deep or optimal and not just mere impressions that remain superficial or ad hoc. The other is that all such projections are ultimately informed by the common innate stages and universal insights of the human lifecycle lived so diversely by every individual. As indicated earlier, many societies traditionally applied to the four main stages of both individual and collective versions of the human lifecycle such universal metaphors as the ‘four seasons’¹. As also indicated earlier, this might further be represented in terms of an interplay of inter-related external and internal axes of the ever-present ‘here and now’ of lived experience engages with both prior knowledge and future hopes and possibilities (see Fig 48 below)

It was the German philosopher Karl Jaspers who influentially noted that the foundations of emergent modern civilization over the last two thousand plus years (roughly 800-200 BCE) were formed out of the earlier ‘axial age’ emergence of a new form of human consciousness across many different cultures (and also ‘empires of antiquity’) in different locations from Europe to the Middle East and on to India and China, etc. Jaspers observed that beneath the various intellectual schools and cultural traditions associated with or inspired by such figures as the Buddha, Zarathustra, Confucious, and Socrates (and various related ‘schools’ of thought, philosophies, and even religions) there was indeed some emergent ‘new reflective self-awareness’ in the human consciousness generally that could be recognized as an apparently common development if in different local or regional forms and at different stages.

Jaspers’ analysis especially focused on the emergent appreciation in the Axial age of the ‘the golden rule’ of a universal ethics (i.e. ‘don’t do to others what you don’t want done to you’). Yet he also recognized that all the significant civilizations and empires at this time had their own variations of this in terms of both the implications of the golden rule for changing notions of ‘the meaning of life’ for the human individual and both transcendental and everyday common interpretations of their various social and cultural contexts.

There were several key aspects of how Jaspers further identified that the Axial Age had shifted the general focus of humanity from localized, myth-based tribal societies to the beginning of what many see as the emergence of great and/or modern civilizations (and some

¹ Many also had some equivalent to ‘the four metal ages’ (gold, silver, bronze, and iron) depicted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* – proceeding from an early ‘golden age’ of purity and peace up to some contemporary ‘iron age’ of greed, hardship and moral corruption.

more selectively ‘the West’)². He particularly focused on the emergence of rational thought, the ‘rise of the individual’, and the ‘shift to transcendence’ in terms of universal values that included a related focus on personal accountability. But as others have noted, the ‘Axial’ metaphor also relevantly depicted related general global human transitions from rural to urban societies, from custom to formalized legal systems, and related kinds of market-based economies built also on diverse trades and specializations of human activity. Especially relevant (as we have outlined in our related other 2026 book *Words, Ideas and Optimal Knowledge-Building*) is the related general transition from the basic ‘oracy’ (or dialogue-based communications) of tribal societies to the writing (and later print) based literacies that someone like Socrates’ paradoxically resisted. He did so because of the links of writing to the ‘loss of memory’, the rise of bureaucratic rationalism, and the historical restraints on human thought imposed by technological as well as ‘rationalist’ determinisms (e.g. Ong, 1982).

Whilst some religious (including Christian) adaptations of Jasper’s model faced criticism for that very reason, few have disputed that it is a concept that has remained useful as a basis for discussing or thinking about both historical and geographical developments in the social and/or cultural ‘thresholds of scale’ linked to emergent levels of complexity. This has been so as the kind of ‘traditional wisdom’ of tribal societies (especially those associated with ‘hunter-gather subsistence societies’, as we have discussed in earlier chapters here) continues to provide a background reference point to the later and/or modern emergence of ‘high civilizations’ (with their magnificent ‘technological progress’, their grand cities, and their often impressive cultural and social elites of different kinds). In other words, the ‘axial age’ has been especially useful as a model of not just the transition between ‘*tradition*’ and emergent ‘*modernity*’ but (as we have suggested in this book) the ongoing tension between distinct ‘collectivist versus individualistic’ values, perspectives, and societies or cultures.

It may be terribly ironic for so many people around the world living in an uncertain, fragmented, and generally demoralized world of rampant progress for its own sake. But this has included not just a related tension between rural or wilderness domains of ‘ecological sustainability’ versus ‘urban human life linked to accelerating modes of technological and economic progress. It has further included the related emergent tension in the ongoing 21st Century between the constructive possibilities of ‘*cultural globalization*’ and the rather ultimately destructive imperatives of ‘*economic globalization*’. Whether linked to an Axial age model or not, the *tradition vs. modernity opposition* in human thought is a distinction too often treated in an arbitrary oppositional way. As we have suggested in earlier sections of this book, when this is re-framed as complementary and dialogical ‘*global knowledge convergence*’ (rather than as an inevitably fixed and arbitrary opposition) then we might better appreciate the related notion of a lifecycle model of optimal human learning and knowledge-building.

Some (e.g. Leonard Swidler, 2010) have suggested, that out of the chaos of early 21st Century imperatives of technology-based ‘economic globalization’, a ‘*new second Axial Age*’ (or ‘turning point’ in human and global developments) may be stirring or even emerging (see below). In any case, in the meantime we can at least re-visit the still relevant advice of some of the most insightful Axial Age thinkers and schools who explored often similar and related notions of universal human wisdom – wisdom still relevant today perhaps. There are two models in particular that are perhaps most exemplary in different ways of how such Axial Age wisdom remains relevant today at the level of common everyday life (as well as at the deepest

2 A similar account was suggested by philosopher Eric Voegelin’s account of a general transition from ‘societal to individual values’ in his book *The Great Leap of Being*.

and most sophisticated levels of human thought and inquiry - and ‘lifecycle learning’). One of these is the general perspective on life of ‘Stoicism’.³ As we discuss below this was a model, a school, and a perspective that was originally inspired by the views and example of Socrates.

The other is the convergent model of ‘the secret of the golden flower’ written up in late 17th Century China. As well as being exemplary of many other models of ‘inner wisdom’, this model is arguably the most powerful as well as convergent wisdom of not just ‘Taoist inner alchemy’ ideas and practices derived from such Axial Age Taoist sages as those known as ‘Lao-Tse’ and ‘The Yellow Emperor’ (etc.) - but also the related and convergent insights of ‘Chan Buddhism’ (adapting the essential insight and wisdom also of Indian traditions as well as the distinct if overlapping Confucian tradition in historical Chinese society and culture).⁴

13.4.1 The peerless advice of ‘Stoicism’ for developing human lifecycle resilience in times of crisis, confusion, and uncertainty

Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what’s left and live it properly
– attributed to the Roman Stoic-Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE)

What you love is nothing of your own: it has been given to you for the present
- Attributed to the Greco-Roman Stoic philosopher Epictetus (c50-135 CE)

The influence of Socrates in the emergence of various later Greek and Roman schools of stoicism is reflected in the regular advice of Epictetus to his students - to ask themselves ‘*What would Socrates do?*’ Like the ‘Cynic’ Crates who also influenced him, the recognized founder of ‘the first of related schools of Stoicism’ Zeno of Citium freely acknowledged the seminal influence of Socrates on the basic tenets of Stoicism. This included not just Socrates’ teaching about ‘virtue’ (i.e. external things like wealth, fame and health are ephemeral and often beyond our control, so that only ‘virtue’ really matters), but the personal example of his equanimity as well as uncompromising integrity when ‘put on trial’ to face a death he could have avoided. We have earlier referred in this book several times to Viktor Frankl’s key insight about the meaning of human life – that the only freedom anyone ever really has is to be able to choose how to internally respond to even the worst and most hopeless external situations. This might be recognized as an exemplary Stoic perspective similar to Epictetus’s key insight that “*we are disturbed not by what happens to us, but by our thoughts about what happens.*”

The original Greek Stoicism was from the start developed as a philosophical system of ideas (including related insights about logic, physics and ethics) by Zeno and Chrysippus. Yet others such as Cleanthes as well as ‘the later Roman Stoics’ (especially Seneca, Aurelius, and Epictetus) tended to emphasize Stoicism as a basic perspective on life that could be viewed both in simple every day ways as well as more sophisticated philosophical terms. As a ‘way of

3 The wisdom of Stoicism has apparently been having a ‘massive global resurgence’ (as several commentators have put it) linked to its enduring or rather ‘re-discovered relevance’ for helping individuals to deal with the stress, anxiety, and uncertainty of life in ‘liquid modernity’ with its related information and technological overloads. An online search confirms a raft of popular authors and not just books but online sites or platforms (such as Holiday’s ‘the daily Stoic’) are catering for this need.

4 As authoritative translator Thomas Cleary outlines, this text is a simple yet powerful distillation of the often complex as well as diverse Taoist inner alchemy’ knowledge and practices linked up to the related ‘golden flower’ meditational insights of Chan Buddhist especially.

life' Stoicism was and is particularly associated with developing personal resilience (and 'living virtuously') by focusing on moderating our reactions to events we might not be able to control or change. It is Marcus Aurelius' *meditations* which have perhaps been most influential (and still today) as a practical psychological as well as ethical guide to dealing with life's general uncertainties and common or everyday personal challenges or crises. *The Meditations* emphasize the importance of remaining 'focused' in life and avoiding distractions whilst consistently striving to be 'a good person'.

A key focus of Seneca's letter to his friend Lucillus deal with strong real-life emotions such as anger, grief, and the fear of death. Such themes are not only further addressed in his other surviving essays (such as *On Anger* and *Consolations*) but typically were so from his own experience of the wisdom of remaining calm and even serene in the face of the vicissitudes of life (such as how his own experience of 'exile' tempered the three 'consolation' reflections). As he pointed out in his 'consolation letter' to his friend Marcia concerning her unrelenting grief about the loss of a son: "*What madness this is, to punish oneself because one is unfortunate, and not to lessen, but to increase one's ills!*". And of course, Seneca is particularly remembered by how, like the Stoic inspiration Socrates centuries earlier, he faced his own ordered death (by Nero) with calm acceptance by all reports. Like Aurelius and other Stoics like Epictetus, Seneca's writing thus also expresses the wisdom of avoiding 'destructive passions' or strong emotions that can overpower.

Seneca's advice about living an eternally meaningful life is not inconsistent with that of Aurelius who recommended efforts to live a virtuous life around the four cardinal Stoic virtues (regular everyday practices of 'wisdom, courage, justice and temperance'). However, it offers a fuller and perhaps more proactive account of what might also be referred to as an 'optimal lifelong living as well as learning' prescription to the particular challenge of navigating the limitations and contradictions of the passing of time in a particular lifetime. Like Viktor Frankl's insights about the life meaning of our everyday here and now choices, Seneca's insights avoid the charge of some that Stoicism can remain 'a passive fatalism'. For our present purposes in this book then (and in this section here specifically), perhaps the most useful Stoic tract then is Seneca's essay *On the Shortness of Life* – with related quotes below taken from the authoritative translation of this work by C.D.N. Costa.

On the face of it, Seneca's essay on lived time would seem to reinforce the common complaint that their lives are ruined by a lack of time to achieve what they want or 'would have done'. Yet, on the contrary, Seneca was instead proposing several related themes about 'lifelong living'. A key one is that this should not be counted in term of actual years lived: "*You must not think a man has lived long because he has white hair and wrinkles: he has not lived long, just existed long*". According to Seneca the problem of a perceived shortness of life has rather to do with both inaccurate perceptions and the non-productive use of time available: "*It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested.*" A related problem is that people get caught up in the linked traps of ambition and 'busyness' which result in 'the squandering of time' in terms of the ultimately non-productive or illusory as well as stressful, anxiety-laden pursuit of wealth, status, and material possessions: "*So it is inevitable that life will be not just very short but very miserable for those who acquire by great toil what they must keep by greater toil.*" And then there is the related problem that many are scared to live also because they are scared to die: "*He who fears death will never do anything worthy of a living man.*"

As Seneca further points out, many people ‘waste’ their lives (or rather the time lived) through procrastination about the things that really count: “*People are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be stingy.*” Interspersed with such related observations, Stoic recommendations about living a virtuous and tranquil life that is also focused on courageously or productively living in the present instead of forgetting the past and dreading the future; “*Life is very short and anxious for those who forget the past, neglect the present, and fear the future.*” Seneca of course is in the flow of this discussion pointing out that many people also remain selectively preoccupied with either chasing the illusions of the future or complaining about those of the past: “*I imagine many people could have achieved wisdom if they had not imagined they had already achieved it.*” The paradox of human wisdom is that it is not just achieved through an accumulation of experience. Transmuting experience into wisdom requires humility and insight as well as relevant reflections: “*learning how to live takes a whole life, and, which may surprise you more, it takes a whole life to learn how to die.*”

We have touched earlier in this book on a not un-related or dissimilar (in some respects) Buddhist model of the four stages of enlightenment and corresponding aspects of wisdom – typically beginning with ‘equanimity’ before eventually culminating in a stage of personal enlightenment as some process of deep and ultimate self-understanding. We thus described in Chapter 3 the exemplary aspects of ‘human wisdom’ represented in similar ways across different cultures which correspond to the deep learning and knowledge building outcomes of the key lifecycle crises (*foundational patience, emergent knowledge, a refined capacity for discrimination, and ultimate self-understanding*). This process appears to similarly inform Seneca’s notion of ‘learning to live’ (and also to ‘die’) as a life-long process and cycle.

There is also a correlation between this process and the four aspects of the Stoic commitment to achieve a life with a culminating sense of ‘virtue’: *moderation, courage, justice* and wisdom understood as self-reflective ‘*prudence*’ (i.e. the four Stoic virtues). These are typically identified as part of the model of Stoic ethics. But as a lifelong process along the lines of Seneca’s essay on ‘the shortness of life’ they also reflect an emerging or developing process of achieving an ‘inner peace’ resilient to all external distractions (or learning rather how ‘to live’ most effectively from a Stoic perspective) and avoiding the impulse for excess. To the extent they also correspond to related models of four levels and types of developing ‘wisdom’, we might also refer to the four Stoic virtues as the four aspects of ‘Stoic inner wisdom’ relevant to any age or society (and perhaps especially in the 21st Century) in which life may seem unduly chaotic, anxiety-ridden, and stressful. This is as well as distractive of the things that really count to live a personally meaningful life and practice optimal lifelong living and learning.

13.4.2 The exemplary implications of the Chinese ‘secret of the golden flower’ (and related) tradition(s)

The essential practice of the golden flower requires, no apparatus, no philosophical or religious dogma, no special paraphernalia or ritual... ‘The Secret of the Golden Flower’ is remarkable for the sharpness of focus on a very direct method for self-realization accessible to ordinary lay people.

- Cleary’s (1991) introduction to his own translation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*

In the initial chapters of this book, we referred to the exemplary ‘lifecycle learning model’ of how Carl Jung referred to the four lifelong stages of ‘the individuation process’ – the innate process of every individual to potentially integrate their conscious and unconscious minds to achieve authenticity and a sense of culminating wholeness. This is a process of developing self-knowledge which potentially also involves what Jung called the ‘wise old man’ archetype of ‘deep innate human wisdom’. When Jung came across his friend Richard Wilhelm’s German translation of the classic Chinese text *The Secret of the Golden Flower* in the 1920s it had such a profound effect on him that he later told of how this work had inspired him to have a new and better understanding of ‘the human unconscious’. Indeed, he provided additional commentary in the English translation of this work by Baynes putting on record that it had profoundly influenced him. This was despite how Thomas Cleary recently produced a much more accurate translation with the added comment that Wilhelm’s ‘mistakes’ from a limited understanding of Taoist knowledge had confused Jung somewhat.⁵

So, what exactly is the actual ‘secret of the Golden Flower’ and how should the related text be approached as arguably the most profound or least exemplary of all the Chinese Taoist ‘inner alchemy’ guides and similarly all Chan Buddhist meditation guides (simultaneously)? Before addressing the first question, we might get some background context about the second one. Legend has it that this was produced by the legendary Taoists immortal the fabled Lu Yan (aka Lu Dongbin) in the early 9th Century CE. While it represents ancient teachings, *The Secret of the Golden Flower* as a written text was actually produced as a group effort begun in 1688 by some of the followers of the Taoist school of a Xu Xun. In this way it became a key text of the Longman (or Dragon Gate) sect of the Northern School of what in Chinese traditions is known as ‘complete reality Taoism’. This was so then in terms of a general Taoist ‘inner alchemy’ adaptation of an earlier Chan Buddhist meditation model of ‘the secret of the golden flower’. So, whilst it is not actually that well-known in modern China (perhaps more widely known in the West through the Wilhelm translation which was a revelation to Jung and others), the text is a unique condensation and exemplification of many traditional Taoist sources blended with additional Buddhist and even Confucian filters. In fact, it is so ‘accessibly universal’ in many respects (yet obscure in others) that Wilhelm believed it might have been originally written up by Nestorian Christians more than a thousand years ago.

Yet above all else, *the Secret of the Golden Flower* exemplifies a convergence and distillation of especially the various Taoist practices and texts from the time of Lao Tse and Chuang Tse in the Axial Age. This can best be appreciated by not only reading the insightful commentary by Thomas Cleary to his 1991 authoritative translation of this text – but also the related translations of his 1991 companion text *Vitality, Energy, Spirit: A Taoist sourcebook* (as well his related translations of key works of the Chinese cultural tradition over thousands of years). As Cleary outlines in that companion text, the ‘secret of the golden flower’ represents a core revelation of the deepest and most convergent insights of the Taoist model that every human life involves ‘three treasures’ that must be guarded yet promoted to ensure meaningful as well healthy optimal lifelong living by any and every individual.⁶

5 As Cleary (1991, p. 5) put it, “‘*the Secret of the Golden Flower*’ is indeed a powerful treatise on the awakening of the hidden potential of a universal human being, and it is in reality an even better and more useful book than Wilhelm, Jung or Baynes thought it to be”.

6 We recommend Daniel Reid’s (1993) *Guarding the Three Treasures: The Chinese way of health as an excellent, accessible, and practical English introduction to Taoist practices and knowledge organized around ‘the three treasures’ principle*.

This is illustrated by how all the diverse and varied Taoist practices and knowledges (i.e. that typically also inform various ‘traditional Chinese medicine’ and ‘traditional Chinese knowledge systems’) on closer inspection represent in some way distinct practices or knowledge about the three treasures of body, mind, and spirit linked to corresponding natural domains of *vitality (or essence)*, *energy*, and *spirit*. For instance, the key concept of ‘Qi’ linked to the breath integrates the three treasures to the extent it also refers to the essential, energetic and also spiritual forces in nature (including the human body, mind, and spirit) – exemplified by the concept of ‘meridian’ energies promoted and harness in Chinese medicine, the martial arts, and related ‘feng shui’ practices of harmonizing human habitats with natural environments. Also, within *The Secret of the Golden Flower* reference is likewise made to the interpenetrating forces of yin and yang linked to the various corresponding ‘water’ and ‘fire’ domains of both deep knowledge and human consciousness that converge whenever ‘the golden flower’ is realized.

As Cleary effectively outlines through his connection of ‘the secret’ to ‘the three treasures’, the Chinese ideal of ‘*sagehood wisdom*’ represents the deepest spiritual attainment possible grounded in and not separated from the vitality and energy practices or activities of every-day life and external as well as human nature. As in similar Western esoteric traditions of ‘inner alchemy’ (especially those part of ‘the hermetic tradition’), related models of ‘Taoist internal alchemy’ (or ‘*neidan*’) are thus typically framed in terms of cosmology and medical theory as well as related practices of the ‘the often overlapping meditative and health exercise arts’ (e.g. as especially exemplified by the practice of Tai Chi Chuan and related Chi Gung practices).

The foundation text of Taoism is of course the *Tao Te Ching* attributed to the fabled Lao Tse. Condensing earlier insights, the key message of this text is that the key to both effective everyday ‘lifelong living’ and also the wisdom of ‘advanced sagehood’ is the sense of wholeness and inner tranquility to be found by living in harmony with ‘nature’ and the universe itself. Some of the key quotes attributed to Lao Tse in this work thus resemble those of Seneca: *"If you are depressed you are living in the past. If you are anxious you are living in the future. If you are at peace you are living in the present."* Likewise Lao Tse elsewhere advises that *"Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power."* Some of Lao Tse key quotes from the *Tao Te Ching* correspond to Seneca’s particular advice on ‘the shortness of life: *"Loss is not as bad as wanting more."* And also *"If you realize that all things change, there is nothing you will try to hold on to. If you are not afraid of dying, there is nothing you cannot achieve."* Some Lao Tse quotes even correspond to the ‘stoic’ advice of Socrates: *"The wise man is one who knows what he does not know."* And also *"To attain knowledge, add things everyday. To attain wisdom, remove things every day*

In his related commentary Cleary emphasizes that before the ‘secret of the golden flower’ can be released, recognized, and/or harnessed within the core spiritual domain of a human individual, the vital or essential and energetic domains first need to be balanced and ‘calmed down’. At this point, a key prerequisite is the attainment of ‘*quietude*’ (or what the Taoists call ‘*living midnight*’ and the Buddhists the primeval ‘*emptiness*’): *"When you want to enter quietude, first tune and concentrate body and mind, so that they are free and peaceful. Let go of all objects, so that nothing what-so-ever hangs on your mind, and the celestial mind takes its rightful place in this center."* Appropriate or sufficient ‘quietude’ is required to help address how *"beginners suffer from two kinds of problems: oblivion and distraction. There is*

a device to get rid of them, which is simply to rest the mind on the breath". The meditational technique of 'resting the mind on the breath' is aimed at not just calming the mind but stopping random thoughts: "Once the mind stirs, then there is energy. Energy is basically an emanation of mind. Our thoughts are very rapid". Thus, a pivotal preparatory stage involves 'tuning the breath' as part of the related processes of 'restoring or preserving as well as unifying energy and spirit': "Whenever you sit, you should quiet the mind and unify your energy. How is the mind quieted? The mechanism is in the breathing, but the mind alone knows you are breathing out and in; do not let the ears hear."

As Cleary commented in the introduction to his translation: The text "describes a natural way to mental freedom... The golden flower symbolises the quintessence of the paths of Buddhism and Taoism. Gold stands for light, the light of the mind itself, the flower represents the blossoming, or opening up, of the light of the mind. Thus, the expression is emblematic of the basic awakening of the real self and its potential." In other words, the 'secret' might best be understood as an optimal process to achieve the full flowering of 'the light of human consciousness' as a version of "the light of universal essence" (Ch. X). As the earlier Wilhelm translation had at least recognized, the text refers to a process that has been linked by its Taoist authors to refer to not just an essential 'elixir of life' (resembling the kind of 'elixir' potions consumed to promote health) but 'the golden pill' (or 'xiandanin') or 'sacred lamp' that might confer a symbolic 'immortality'. The related way then of an 'intercourse of water and fire' (Ch. XI) represents a key inner alchemy symbolism of various Taoist health practices and related medical prescriptions.

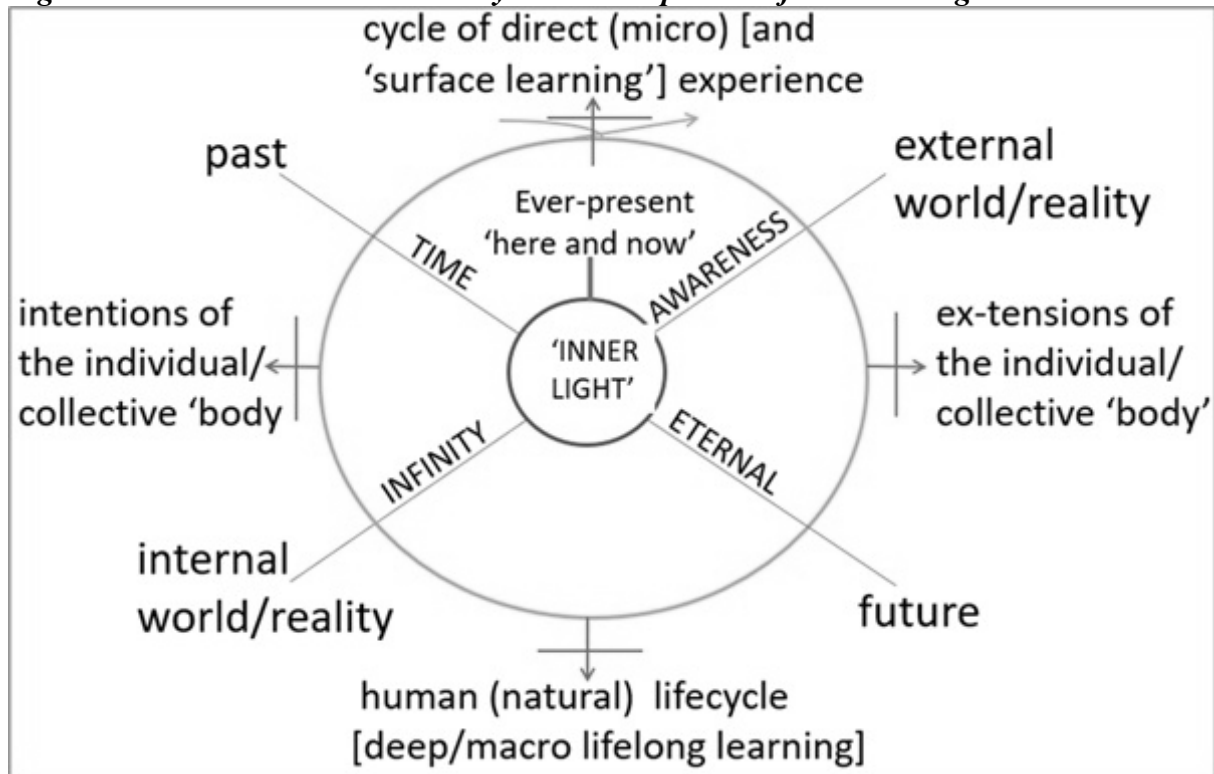
The core 'secret' referred to in the text therefore has to do with the related process and pivotal aim or objective of 'turning the light around'. On a practical level this involves a related process of withdrawing one's attention from the external world and turning it inward (i.e. of 'reversing' the process of attention of awareness). In this way also, a related process of 'reversing the energy' (whilst also avoiding 'wasteful leakages') might also then be further achieved in Taoist terms – convergent with the Chan Buddhist notion of achieving a state of "numinous awareness". At this point it becomes possible to 'stop' and 'see' a numinous 'inner light' – which might further be 'turned around' to light up or illuminate life both in the here and now and also over time as part of future lifelong living and learning.

In both the Taoist and Chan Buddhist traditions, the common aim then is to fundamentally nurture one's 'original mind' (and/or universal spirit) by conserving, refining and 're-directing back its source' one's biological, mental and spiritual 'energies' as well as 'vitality' or essence. Going further, Cleary asserts that the underlying 'secret of secrets' pertaining to the metaphor of 'the golden flower' has to do with the related process or outcome of 'bathing' the three treasures – in addition to the related functions of 'cleaning the mind and washing the thoughts' that of 'bathing' should be understood as the developed ability to 'unmind in all situations' (Ch. IX, 46).

To the extent that the process of turning the light around can be understood as a cycle then, it becomes possible at both the micro and macro level to refer to spontaneous pivotal 'turning points'. This often involves either temporarily or on a more ongoing basis the 'letting go' of future hopes, past expectations, and related distracting thoughts that obstruct the ability to focus on or adequately appreciate the present moment. Either way, the related notion of a 'turning point' generally represents the reversal from being externally preoccupied (with 'the eyes') to rather being internally focused and grounded or 'centered'. Above all else, it involves an act of 'reclaiming the original mind [host] from habitual thoughts [the 'guest' mind]'.

The Golden Flower concept of ‘turning the light around’ is a version of a powerful metaphor that directly or indirectly has informed all the major religious faiths/or and diverse spiritual philosophies in cultures all around the world – but especially those that were promoted or developed in or out of the Axial Age. For instance, just as Jesus is referred to on occasions as ‘the light of the world’ in the New Testament (e.g. in *John 8:12* and *1:4-9*), ‘God’ is likewise referred to as ‘*the light of the heavens and the earth*’ in the Islamic verse *Ayat an-Nur* (*Quran 24:35*). And as well as for Muslims and Christians alike, in most Asian well as Middle Eastern traditions the lighting of lamps or candles within sacred settings is an essential practice reflecting how light is universally appreciated by people everywhere as a symbol of that which is sacred or divine in human experience – that is, a symbol of wisdom and truth hidden in the shadows; purity and goodness to be found in the obscurity of ignorance and darkness; hope and guidance aspired to in times of confusion, chaos, and suffering; and a related principle of universal vitality likewise discoverable in ‘empty times and places’. The concept of a related ‘inner light’ is often an esoteric further filter of many spiritual practices around the world across different cultures - involving visualization techniques, different kinds of meditation or concentration, and related practices such as prayer and the use of particular ‘mantras’.

Fig 47. Cross-cultural ‘inner alchemy’ models in pursuit of ‘the inner light’ wisdom



In such ways the ‘golden flower model’ has also particular resonances in the Middle East and in ‘the West’ with *gnostic*, *neoplatonist*, *hermetic* and other related traditions that informed diverse religious and also intellectual as well as spiritual and esoteric traditions of mysticism and magic up to the modern day as well as in antiquity. The Gnostics emerged in the Greco-Roman world as an apparent counterpoint to the Stoics (one which was adapted by Christian and other traditions) with their particular emphasis on the ‘*divine spark*’ within every

individual. This is generally believed to have spiritual origins and reflect ‘inner knowledge’ potentially recognizable or attainable as a process of personal revelation (part of an eternal struggle between light and darkness similar to that projected within the Persian Zoroastrian tradition). And although derived from and selectively similar to the Gnostics, the neoplatonist tradition (again influenced somewhat by Socrates via his student Plato) founded by Plotinus in the third Century CE had a similar view in some respects of the individual ‘going within’ either transcendently or transformatively to avoid or transcend ‘earthly illusions’.

The Taoist practices of ‘inner alchemy’ also represented in ‘the secret of the golden flower’ represented a metaphorical and spiritual counterpoint to ‘external alchemy practices’ that promoted new technologies and related discoveries whilst attempting to transmute various substances into gold and silver or at least ambitious elixir potions for health or other purposes. This was likewise the case in the corresponding traditions of the Middle East and the West derived from ancient Egypt in terms of similar esoteric vs. exoteric (and also philosophical vs. technical) applications of ‘the hermetic arts’ - especially those that framed ‘alchemy’ as a core practice and knowledge of the hermetic tradition. This was when early scientists like Paracelsus began to revolutionize medicine by shifting from herbal treatments to chemical experimentation and metallurgy.⁷

The hermetic tradition that also later influenced the emergence of modern science through the knowledge and practices of alchemy was, like with the corresponding Chinese model, essentially a guide to transforming and/or refining the human soul. As the Jungian study of this tradition pointed out (Jung, 1963), the ‘*Corpus Hermeticum*’ describes a four staged process of spiritual and psychological progression: *Nigredo* (a stage of darkness, chaos and decay), *Albedo* (the purification phase ‘washing away’ impurities to help clarity of mind and spiritual awakening); *Citrinitas* (the dawning of the solar light – achievement of higher knowledge) and *Rubedo* (the re-integration of body, mind, and spirit in terms of a symbolic rebirth and the temporary vs. ongoing achievement of ‘ultimate wholeness’). Just as an elaborate symbolism of ‘the inner light’ is alternately a metaphor of both ‘inner alchemy’ and of spiritual contemplation within the Golden Flower model (and related ‘Eastern traditions’), so too then also within corresponding Middle Eastern and Western traditions as well. A related symbol within gnostic hermetic and alchemical traditions (adapted from ancient Egyptian iconography) is the *Ouroborus*. Also applicable to our model of the human (and universal) ‘lifecycle’, this is a symbol of both ‘eternal renewal’ - and the immortal lifecycle of ‘death and rebirth’ - typically represented as a snake biting its own tail.

13.4.3 Inner wisdom ‘through the cracks’ of human lifecycle experience and learning

⁷ For those not aware or who have forgotten, key figures in the emergence of modern science like Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, and Johannes Kepler were all deeply inspired and influenced by hermetic concepts. Indeed Francis Yates (1964) influentially argued that in the Renaissance (after the *Corpus Hermeticum* was translated and brought to Florence in 1460) this tradition gave humanity the confidence (or arrogance) to ‘master nature’ and develop modern experimental science. It was thus especially the hermetic art of alchemy (including both internal and external variations) which paved the way for not only modern chemistry, physics, and medicine, but also modern individualistic credos of intellectual discovery and worldly enterprise. Alchemy was one of seven original hermetic arts (alongside *astrology*, *theurgy*, *tarot/divination*, *Qabalah*, and *herbalist talismany*) – and the seven hermetic principles (*mentalism*, *correspondence*, *vibration*, *polarity*, *rhythm*, *cause and effect*, *gender*).

The turn toward dialogue is, in my judgment, the most fundamental, the most radical and utterly transformative of the key elements of the newly emerging paradigm... one of the central constituents of the Second Axial Age. However, that shift from monologue to dialogue constitutes such a radical reversal in human consciousness, is so utterly new in the history of humankind from the beginning, that it must be designated as literally revolutionary - that is, it turns everything absolutely around. [Sidler's emphasis]

- Lawrence Swidler (2011), Towards a universal declaration of a global ethic

The crack is where the light gets out

- Zen Buddhist proverb

As mentioned above, the developed ability to ‘*unmind in all situations*’ is also referred to in Cleary’s translation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* as the achievement of a pivotal ‘*turning point*’ in the individual human consciousness and lifelong living. Viktor Frankl’s notion that an existential breakthrough about the innate ‘meaning of life’ is most typical of later stages in the human lifecycle (especially the mid-life crisis) - but can be achieved or be spontaneously experienced at any age. So too ‘the golden flower’ might also be understood as a related function of both refined knowledge and experience on one hand and, on the other, an optimized personal transformation that can potentially be achieved at any time through effective meditational and/or ‘inner alchemy’ practices of some kind. We have described earlier how the human lifecycle might best be understood as a ‘*double trajectory of both overlapping or aligned external and internal cycles of experience*’. This is a process naturally ‘reversed’ in mid-life, but which can also be spontaneously or optimally inverted at any stage in human lifelong living.

The influential concept ‘axial age’ promoted by Jaspers and widely if diversely accepted by many as a way of talking about a global and historical ‘transition’ from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ societies has not been the only ‘cycles model’ of human history or development. For instance, Spengler’s similarly influential work *The Decline of the West* employed the four seasons metaphor to describe the ‘organic’ emergence and projected decline of western civilization (but not other particular traditions of civilization) in the modern age.⁸ In the Axial Age itself some traditions embraced a similar model of a four mythical ages proceeding from an early paradisaical ‘golden age’ through to a contemporary projection of decline, corruption, and widespread misery. The Greco-Roman cyclical projections of gold, silver, bronze and iron ages (e.g. in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*) corresponding to the Indian cyclical model of four *Yugas* (*Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali Yuga*) as well as others such as in early Norse mythology. And esoteric version such as the astrological projection of ages (similar to the large cycles of human emergence in the Mayan and Aztec calendars) were adapted by the poet W.B. Yeats within an additional if related model to his ‘*four ages of man*’ poem (see Ch.1) - the conception of history as a series of alternately grand and small ‘gyre cycles’. This was outlined in his other poem ‘*the second coming*’ (ostensively about ‘the

⁸ *Spring (birth/mysticism)*: the childhood of a civilization characterized by myth, rural life, and primitive religions; *Summer (conscious awakening)*: the youth of a culture linked to the rise of towns, specialized artistic production, and the transition from myth to reason; *Autumn (maturity/intellect)*: the peak of Western civilization in the era of big nation-based cities, global commerce and scientific-technology knowledge; *Winter (decline)*: move from constructive thought to the priority of technical engineering, massive global cities, mass consumerism.

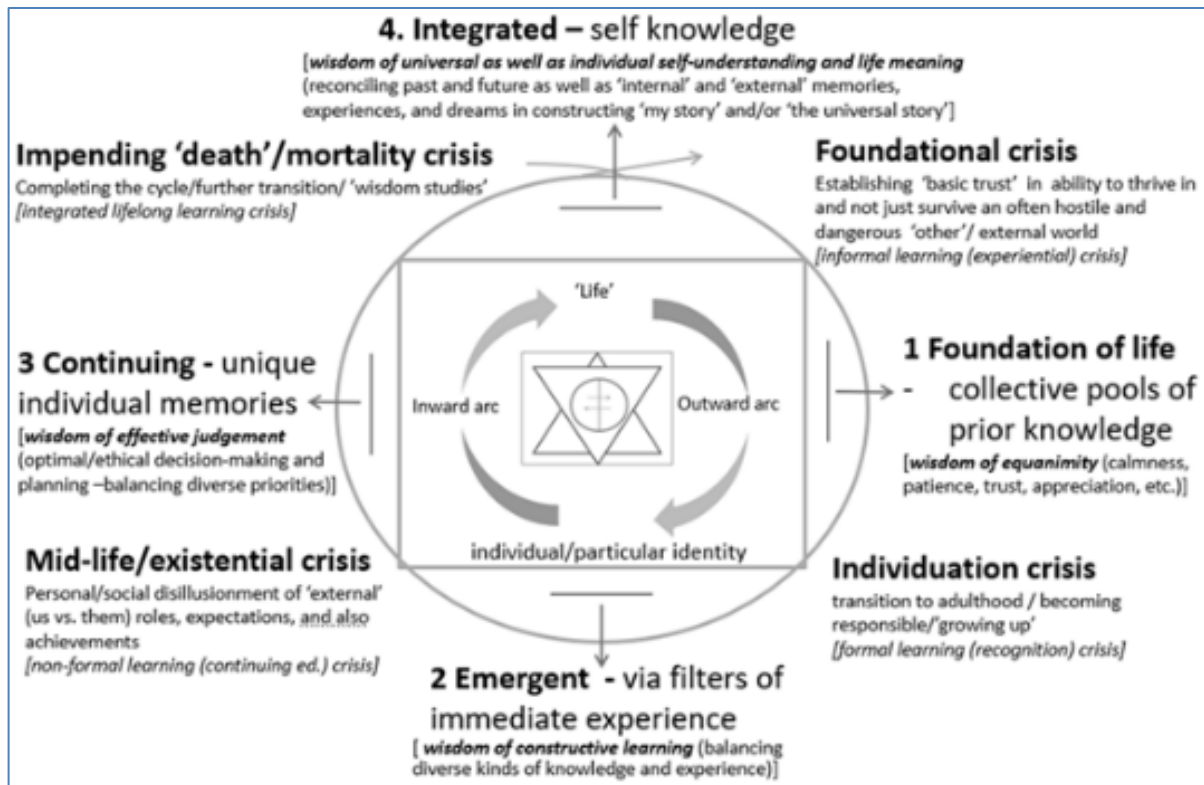
second coming of Christ', but really more about going beyond the possible impending 'collapse' of modern and/or western civilization similar to Spengler's projection).

Beyond his projection that this generally represented a 'pivotal turning point' in human development and world history, Jaspers left open or did not really explore any further the key related question of how 20th Century modernity and globalization might represent a culmination of that earlier turning point – or the possible transition to some new cycle such as the constructive possibilities of cultural globalization and/or related suggestions of 'global knowledge convergence'. This is especially so given myriad projections of a world in confusion, crisis, and uncertainty in terms of economic and technological globalization imperatives that ostensibly undermine and even obliterate: (a) the very notion of an original axial age, and (b) any kind of related interpretative narrative about the 'human condition' in the 'liquid modernity' of the early 21st Century (or its possible ongoing meaning or purposes) – including the possibility or relevance of the very concept of 'human inner wisdom'.

It is in that context such projections as Swidler's quote listed above at least 'open up' for discussion or thought the implicit question ignored by Jaspers. Swidler's suggestion that he can discern amongst the widespread chaos and despair of the present human condition '*key elements of a newly emerging paradigm*' is not just courageous but hopeful and promising. This is especially so when he discerns the possible recovery of a universal '*global ethic*' as some kind of recovery of the very dialogical framework of human development that arguably preceded the 'monological' imperatives of emerging modernity (Swidler & Cobb, 1990).

As we indicated in our own related framework of a recovered humanistic knowledge paradigm (see also our companion work, Richards 2026a), a particularly useful way of defending and/or advancing such an emergent 'dialogical' model in the 21st Century is the implicit projection of the cultural theorist and philosopher Walter Ong (e.g. 1982). Amongst related ideas, Ong held that within the various negative aspects of globalization in the digital age (which he usefully linked to the concept of an emerging 'secondary orality'), there were promising vestiges of the kind of 'dialogical thought' (and related 'optimal knowledge-building' as well as 'deep learning' models) derived from the 'primary orality' (and related ideas) of earlier social and cultural traditions. As Ong acknowledged (and perhaps should be no surprise), this possibility (and related model of 'inner human wisdom') was especially exemplified in the ideas and personal life example of none other than Socrates.

Fig 48. Inner wisdom 'through the cracks' of human lifecycle learning experience



To put this another way – one which allows us to link up the discussion above about ‘inner light’ and related axial age (and other) traditions of ‘inner wisdom’ – this might all be better understood in terms of a related Zen Buddhist proverb. This alludes to how the key aspects, processes and achievements or attainments of ‘human wisdom’ are ever-present ‘*through the cracks*’ of human lifecycle living, learning, and related individual and collective stages of development as well as immediate experience.⁹ As Figure 48 outlines in terms of one more adaption of the initial ‘four lifecycle ages’ outlined in the first chapter of this book, the typical four levels and stages of ‘inner wisdom’ can be projected as both an ever-present possibility at every stage of life – and also an overall mid-life axial ‘turning point’ in the interplay of both internal and external lifelong trajectories of human experience. In other word, it might alternately depict both the ‘here and now’ and also the extended lifelong cycles of a human individual life or any other ‘natural system lifecycle’. Again, this is a metaphor or model applicable also to particular communities, cultures, and civilizations as well as the overall human condition across the various developments of ‘human history’.

⁹ A notion and phrase possibly inspired by the 15th Century Japanese art of repairing broken pottery (*Kintsugi*). Rather than hide the cracks, the method illuminates them.