





**Wilfried Nelles**

# **The World We Live In**

**Consciousness**

**and the Path of the Soul**

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For my granddaughter,  
Ava

## PREFACE

**February 1979**

I am lying on the warm beach sand of Kho Samui, a small unknown island in the south of Thailand. My wife and I had arrived this morning. It's my first real long-distance trip. We had spent a few days in Bangkok with a university friend of mine with whom I'd occasionally chat in the library, who had recently taken up a position leading the Southeast Asian bureau of the German Development Service. A mutual friend and now staff member in the research project I lead at the University of Bonn had recently visited him and returned raving to me about Thailand, rekindling the mysterious magic of Southeast Asia that had captivated me since my youth. As a gift from Germany, I had brought him some salami and schwarzbrötchen, a typical German pumpernickel-style bread. In return, he took us along on his first business trip to various German development projects in southern Thailand. Koh Samui was the last station. He is on his way back, and we have decided to stay an extra week here.

Here I was finally living my South Sea dream life. Tall palms and tropical trees, their wide crowns serving shade, warm sand and sea, and a few bamboo huts scattered along the beach. And the bare minimum of tourist comforts and amenities. A pickup truck that can drive us over sand roads to and from the port, a small kitchen counter, water, a gas stove, and a »fridge« filled with ice blocks that were shipped over from the mainland by ferry every day. A few wooden tables and chairs under a palm leaf roof that functioned as a restaurant serving simple but good food and, yes, beer that cost more than our dinner, a toilet with a water bucket and a ladle to wash and an open-air shower behind the hut, and only for a short time every night a little light powered by electricity from the generator. Otherwise, silence.

A giant moon rises from the sea. It's full moon. I look up at the natural palm leaf roof hovering over me as my body melts into the earth. After dinner, I had puffed on a joint. Everyone here, both the handful of tourists and the locals,

smokes weed. I am not a smoker, and the couple of times in my twenties I had dragged a few puffs on a joint left me so unimpressed that I never felt the need for more. But here, in this place, it felt right. And besides, I didn't want to be left out. As my body sinks deeper into the earth and I begin to feel completely at one with it, I hear the gentle and constant waves of the quiet sea gently sloshing over the sand shore, lending rhythm to the silence. Slosh – – – slosh – – – slosh. Very gently, very slowly. That's when, suddenly, it all becomes crystal clear to me. This is it. This is everything. This is the world. This is life, slosh – – – slosh – – – slosh. For millions and millions of years, day in and day out: slosh – – – slosh – – – slosh.

For a few moments, I am one with it all. My mind is completely still, only awareness remains. Nothing but peace, deepest peace. Then gradually, the thinking returns: »...and within this eternal movement, amidst this perpetual sloshing, one fish eats the other;; one is born, struggles, and dies.« I see that this is all part of life, that the deep sense of peace I feel is no contradiction. I begin to sense my body again, though I cannot tell where it ends and the ground beneath it or the air above it begins. And suddenly from deep within my belly a loud laugh erupts. I see myself in Germany in my research project, see how we argue and squabble in internal discussions and at conferences, see how we are all taking everything so seriously, how we believe we must change the world or at least shape it, and I cannot stop laughing. »Doctor Wilfried Nelles, Political Scientist«, I burst out. My wife, sitting twenty meters behind me in front of our hut walks over and asks what's wrong. »Everything's okay,« I reply, »I was just seeing reality.«

Everything's okay and yet nothing is as it was before. Many decades later, I would listen to Leonard Cohen's song Anthem and often quote (and sometimes sing) it in my courses: »There is a crack in ev'rything / that's how the light gets in.« That night, a crack split through my life and a small light came through that is still shining to this day. The crack, it seemed to me, happened because I had found myself outside of my regular environment in a completely different world. After being immersed in this strange and new external space (a tropical island) and internal one (due to the marijuana), I was able to step back and take a good look at my life. Three years later, my research project,

and with it my deep desire to change the world and make it a better place, was over. And I suspected that my work in science and academia would not last much longer either. In the years that followed, the crack became wider, and the light became brighter. My spiritual search, the seeking within my inner life, began at first on a personal level, and then later professionally.

#### **40 Years Later, October 2019**

Again, I am sitting by the water in Thailand, this time on a wooden jungle raft on the River Kwai, not far from the border with Myanmar. After three weeks of giving a series of workshops in China, I am relaxing here in a very beautiful 4-star jungle resort, with bungalows tucked in between the tropical forest trees. There is nothing here but the river and the lush jungle, giant caves filled with bats, a Mon village (the Mon are today a small ethnic minority but, alongside the Khmer, are the oldest inhabitants of Thailand), and the Hellfire Pass where the British fought in the war against the Japanese, made famous by the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* with Alec Guinness. Tourists from all over the world come and go every day, transported in longtail boats to the hotel, where they stay 1-2 nights, go on a tour, and then leave. Apart from that, only silence.

The water flows gently downstream. I look at its travelling ripples and think. Everything flows down the river, and has been doing so for millions of years, everything changes, and everything remains. One day like the other. Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* comes to my mind, as he sits by the river with Vasudeva, his friend the old ferryman, listening, completely absorbed in the flowing of the river when he suddenly sees his own life and all the forms of life – birth, love, hate, struggle, seeking, and dying. And in the tranquil sound of flowing water realizes: »All the voices, all the goals, all the longing, all the suffering, all the pleasure, all the good and evil, all of this together was the world. All of this together was the river of events, the music of life.«<sup>1</sup> I see this eternal flowing and think in nature everything is equal, and everything is indifferent to everything that is happening.

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<sup>1</sup> Hesse, H. (1998). *Siddhartha*. P. 157, Dover Publications.

On the opposite riverbank rises a vertical, almost 200-meter-high karst limestone cliff, large caves puncturing its facade and 100-meter-high trees bore their roots on small ledges into its porous rock. Here, a horde of monkeys begins to hunt through the treetops. They do this every day when the sun disappears behind the mountains, just as at dusk, at six o'clock sharp, the crickets begin their deafening concert, only to stop an hour later when everything disappears into complete darkness. They have been doing so for millions of years, day in, day out. Everything, and everyone, is in motion, but no one is ›doing‹ anything; everything is moving and being moved according to the laws of nature. And in the midst of it all, human beings run around thinking their lives (and even their thoughts) are important, that they must understand and grasp everything, and then have it all under control.

# **I. HUMANS, THE WORLD, AND CONSCIOUSNESS**



## **My World and Your World**

We all live in a different world, and each one of us in their own. And yet, none of these worlds is the reality. We argue and squabble over right and wrong, about what we should do and what we must never do, about what the ›truth‹ is. And we do this because we all see life and the world differently and simply assume that our view is the right one. If you were to place four people in the same room, each facing one of its four walls, they will each see a different room. Their experience of the room is shaped by their position in it, and thus differs from all the others in the room. Where one sees a wall from the front, the other sees the same wall from the side or not at all if they are sitting with their back to it. The room feels different depending on the corner one is sitting in it. And though no view is wrong, none is complete.

We all each see from a different perspective, from a different position, and each one of us only sees what we can see from that point of view. The term ›view‹ is very accurate here, as in the point from which you view. In most cases, and especially when it comes to things that are important to us, we regard this view for more than just our view. We regard it as the right one, if not the reality or the truth. If you are humble and know, or at least are willing to admit, that your view depends on your point of view, your position, and looking from that specific preceptive, you would not place your view above those of others. On the contrary, you would accept the views of others and incorporate them into your own so as to expand your view of the world and yourself.

To see what this means for your view of the world and the people around you, here is a small test. If you have siblings, ask each one to describe your parents. What is (was) your mother like? Your father? What were their strengths and weaknesses? What was their relationship with each other like? How did they treat the children? And so on. You will soon see that each child has different parents, and each one has a different family, even though it is in fact the same family. And yet, in most cases, each one of you will insist that their version of the story, their view, is the right one, that their assessment of their parents is correct, and that their childhood was exactly how they perceive it.



You can do the same thing with your life partner or with colleagues from work or with friends. You will find that everyone sees the other person differently. This applies not only to the general picture that one forms of others, but also to the description of factual events, that is, things and processes that are seemingly objective. They all have two sides – The factual reality and the image that appears in the eyes of the observer.

I have known my wife for over fifty years, and for 45 years of those years we have lived together. Even when we talk about events that we both experienced together, our experiences and stories often diverge considerably from each other, sometimes to the contrary. And this is all the more evident when we are describing or assessing other people. In the meantime, we manage not to argue about it, and instead accept each other's perspective as their view of the issue<sup>2</sup>, which is very gratifying and enriching. But this was not always the case. For many years we constantly argued – and at times quite intensely, especially if there was a third person present. Feeling misunderstood, each of us then withdrew into our own worlds. Only love could bridge our differences, but the non-understanding remained. Our worlds are not and will never be exactly the same. For someone like myself who harbors a deep longing for a truth<sup>3</sup> we can all agree on, this was a particularly hard pill to swallow.

And this does not just happen between different people, it also takes place within us. Our world (our view of the world and ourselves) is constantly changing, and this change is for the most part gradual and hardly perceptible, though at times it can be quite sudden and violent. The way I saw my parents as a child was very different from the way I saw them at twenty, and even more different than the picture I had of them at sixty. Today I also have a very different view of the world, including the factual world, as well as very

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<sup>2</sup> Accepting the view of the other does not exclude the fact that we inwardly hold on to our own view as the correct one. Tolerance can certainly take place alongside ignorance and arrogance. Real acceptance is only achieved when we acknowledge the other's truth as being just as true as our own.

<sup>3</sup> Theoretically, Jürgen Habermas formulated this dream in his theory of domination-free discourse (*herrschaftsfreier Diskurs*). According to Habermas, when people talk and listen to each other reasonably and without wanting to dominate the other, this will result in an insight that all those involved in the discourse perceive as the truth. In my early thirties, I was leading a research project in which this theory determined our work. When I realized, however, that I had practically failed to reach a consensus from the different points of view in our team, I suffered a severe physical breakdown. As a result, I realized that my worldview, with its belief in reason, was broken. However, this belief has lingered on quietly beneath the surface for quite a long time. Though they may shatter quite suddenly, our deepest dreams and longings seem to die very slowly.

different ideas of what is good and important and right. And I also have a different picture of myself, of who I am, what I can do, and what I want. If you were to paint these images or photograph them or project them as a film, you would get to see completely different worlds. I believed different things, thought different things were right or good or wrong or evil or beautiful or ugly or important or indispensable or indifferent or possible or impossible or true. The way I see the people around me or how I view time and its events is constantly changing, not only because the world is constantly changing, but also because I am constantly changing. The same is true of my self-image.

None of these images is false per se, but none is ›right‹ in an objective sense either. They are both false and ›right‹. A child cannot have any view of the world other than that of a child, and that makes its view ›right‹ for a child. But this view is also limited and if you hold on to it your life long, you remain mentally a child. For example, it is important for a child to have someone care for it. So, when this is the case, life is good for the child and when this is not the case, it is bad and even terrible for it to be abandoned and left to care and fend for itself. For an adult, it is quite the opposite. If an adult holds on tightly to the need to be cared for, the adult remains emotionally and mentally a child. That means, what is right for a child is in no way right or appropriate for an adult or even a teenager. Teenagers view themselves and the world through the lens of adolescence, as that is what adolescence demands of them to leave their parental home (to free themselves from their rules and restrictions) and to find their own place in life. And this is what determines their perspective and thereby their view of the world, their feelings, and their judgment over what is right and what is wrong. An adult that starts a family and must care for children will yet again be in another position and develop a new perspective. With each of these life stages, we enter a different world. We can find agreement by acknowledging and accepting each other's perspectives and not declare them as false. In the case of the life stages of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, however, unlike the previously mentioned example of the room, it's a matter of growth and development. Every new stage encompasses more and is higher and wider than the one before it. When it comes to real growth, the higher (and later) stages of life include and encompass the previous ones, that means adolescence encompasses and

includes childhood, and adulthood encompasses and includes both. Every life stage emerges from the one before it. It is thus both a wider and higher development – but only if the previous one is integrated and not rejected.

The child view of the world, the world of fairy tales and sorcerers, of belonging to parents and a family (in general, to something greater that carries, protects, and cares for us), etc., is perfectly right for a child and therefore ›true‹ for it. That is why it should not be denied to children, in an attempt to teach them openness, or taking personal responsibility or freedom to make choices and decisions. In adolescence, this world shatters into a thousand shards and that is the way it has to be. If you truly want to become an adult, you have to gather these shards and piece them together to see what new image will emerge. It will completely differ from the one you dreamed of as a teenager.

You become an adult when you absorb and include your childhood and adolescence within you, exactly as they were – without judgment or even the desire to change it or want it to be different. With every step we take into the world – from birth, puberty, adulthood, the several stages of aging until death – our world not only changes but it also becomes wider and bigger. If we follow this in consciousness, our mind also expands and becomes larger and more comprehensive. This also means that an older person can understand a younger person, but a younger person cannot understand an older person, because the younger person has not yet had the experiences or, to use the same image, has not yet entered that world. From this, we can derive important insights both for the relationship between the generations and, above all, for the inner growth of every human being, which I will present in this book.

The existence of different worldviews or images of the world is something that affects not only individuals, but also entire cultures, and it does so in two ways. First, cultures – and thus the people who belong to them – differ in manifold ways. The Chinese, for example, think in images because their writing is based on pictographic characters. Abstract thinking is foreign to them and not as easily accessible as it is to Europeans. And because they learn to write not by combining 26 meaningless characters, but by copying and understanding several thousand characters, each of which represents a

holistic image, they do not consider the act of copying a bad thing. Also, the way they think is based on the deep philosophy of yin and yang, which are understood as complementary polarities and not as opposites, so they (like the Japanese and Koreans) do not think ideologically, unlike Westerners who think in mutually exclusive opposites, black and white, or either-or states. In China and Japan, everything is simultaneously both sides. This also strongly determines their image of progress and their way of dealing with the past. In a similar way, each culture forms its own world that determines people's respective views on life, so that we can say we live in different worlds. Even with the best of intentions, this makes mutual understanding very difficult, and is possible only to the extent that one accepts the respective worldview as being equally valid as one's own.

I only mention this for the sake of completeness, but it is not the focus of my interest here. I am more concerned with the second difference between cultures, namely that of the different levels of development. Because similar to childhood, adolescence and adulthood in the individual human being, the consciousness of mankind as a whole develops in stages that follow each other and which are higher and more comprehensive than the one before it. The world view of a European is different from that of an Arab's, not only because of their different religious backgrounds, but also because Europe (and with it Christianity) has undergone a development that Muslim countries (and others as well) have yet to experience. This is true for the entire issue of globalization. Here modernity and tradition collide and have to be brought into a new balance. However, we are experiencing the same thing that I have already indicated for the individual level. The West believes and insists that its perspective on the world, in particular its path of modernization and its interpretation of modernity, is the right one. And this is why it will fail. Beyond all economic and political differences (such as democracy and human rights) and power struggles, this belief lies at the core of the major conflicts with China (which is self-confident and strong enough not to allow the Western perspective to be imposed upon it). The conflicts in the Middle East, on the other hand, are more about the struggle between modernity and tradition/religion. Immigrants will also have to realize that they cannot find refuge in a world that they inwardly reject.