

SPECIAL THEME (2):
CROSS-TRADITION ENGAGEMENT ON PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE
AND WORLDVIEW: PERSPECTIVES FROM AFRICAN, ASIAN, ISLAMIC,
LATIN-AMERICAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

ON TYPES OF CERTAINTY:
FROM BUDDHISM TO ISLAM AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT: *Studies the threefold hierarchy of certainty, from its origins in Mahāyāna Buddhism, through Islam, to 17th century China. This tripartite scheme may be traced back to the ancient Buddhist scheme of the threefold wisdom as systematized by Vasubandhu of Gandhāra in the 4th-5th centuries CE. Following the advent of Islam in the 8th century, it was combined with Qur'anic notions of certainty (al-yaqīn). Initially taken up by early Islamic mystics such as Sahl al-Tustarī and al-Ḥākim al-Tirmiḏī (late 9th-early 10th centuries), the notion of yaqīn was gradually systematized into the three-level hierarchy of “knowledge or science of certainty” (‘ilm al-yaqīn), “essence” (literally “eye”) of certainty (‘ayn al-yaqīn), and “truth or reality of certainty” (ḥaqq al-yaqīn), a hierarchy that bears a distinct resemblance to the Buddhist threefold path of wisdom as discussed by Marc-Henri Deroche. Half a millennium later, this threefold hierarchy of levels of certainty, remotely inspired by Buddhism and integrated into the philosophical Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī and his Persian disciple Jāmī, this complex of ideas may have resurfaced in 17th century China.*

Keywords: *certainty, meditation, contemplative studies, Islam, Sufism, Buddhism, Vasubandhu, Gandhāra, Ibn Sīnā*

1. INTRODUCTION

As Goethe was aware, the moth or butterfly who, in her desire for the light of a candle, finally hurls herself into the flame, is a well-known *topos* in Islamic spiritual-

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philosophical literature.¹ Farīduddīn ‘Attār of Nishapur in Khurasan (c. 1145-1220), for instance², speaks of the moth or butterfly who “gladly surrenders her life to the glow of the fire” (‘Attār, 725H 6-7, quoted by Ritter 1955, 421). Perhaps the best-known form of the story is transmitted in ‘Attār’s *Conference of the birds* (‘Attār 1863 66-67; Ritter 1955, 587). One night, moths gather in an assembly to talk about the object of their longing, the candle flame. Under the guidance of their president, they decide to send one of their number to bring back information about the flame. The first scout flies to the vicinity of the castle where the candle is burning, sees only its reflection in the window, and returns to describe it as best she can. Yet the president of the assembly is unimpressed, claiming the first scout learned nothing about the flame’s true essence. A second scout is therefore dispatched, and arrives as far as the glow of the candle’s flame, touching it with her wings, but her report still does not satisfy the president. Finally, a third moth flies back to the castle and hurls herself directly into the flame, which entirely consumes her. The president, observing these events from afar, finally approves, saying: “she alone really knows what the candle flame is like.”

Henry Corbin (1971-1972, 2.191), the great French specialist in Iranian spiritual thought, explains this parable with reference to the doctrine of three levels of certainty (Arabic *yaqīn*). According to this model, there is

- (i) Theoretical or abstract, rational certainty, literally, “the knowledge or science of certainty” (*ilm al-yaqīn*). In the parable of the moths, this corresponds, for instance, to knowing that the candle’s flame exists or having heard what fire is.
- (ii) Eye-witness certainty, literally, “the eye or essence of certainty” (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*). This would correspond to seeing the candle’s flame with one’s own eyes. Finally, says Corbin, there is
- (iii) personally realized certainty, literally, “the truth or reality of certainty” (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*), which corresponds to being consumed by the flame, or to oneself becoming the flame.

In what follows, we will follow the traces of this threefold hierarchy of certainty, from what I will suggest were its possible origins in Mahāyāna Buddhism, through Islam, and as far as 17th century China.

2. CERTAINTY IN EARLY MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

2.1 VASUBANDHU ON THE THREEFOLD WISDOM

One of the most influential early Buddhist authors was Vasubandhu, born sometime in the 4th-5th century CE in Gandhāra, the area corresponding to what is now northern

¹ See J. W. von Goethe, “Sacred Longing”: “And finally, eager for the light/O butterfly, you are burned!” (“und zuletzt, des Lichts begierig/Bist du Schmetterling verbrannt” (Goethe 1990, 94).

² As Ritter points out (1955, 587-588) ‘Attār’s source for this parable was the *Kitāb al-Ṭawāsīn* of the mystic Abū ‘I-Muġīth al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj of Basra (executed in 952), whose first mystical teacher was a figure who will be important for us later: Sahl al-Tustarī (Massignon 1955, 322). There is thus a clear Khurasanian affiliation from Ḥallāj to ‘Attār (Massignon 1947).

Pakistan and Afghanistan. Since the time of Alexander the Great and his successors (4th century CE), this area had been strongly influenced by Greek culture. The magnificent Gandhāra artistic style, in which some of the earliest likenesses of the Buddha were created, shows clear Greek influence (Dietz 2007; Rienjang & Stewart 2019). Less well known are the literary and philosophical influences that reached Afghanistan from Greece in the Hellenistic period. In Bactriana, north of Gandhāra, the town of Ai Khanoum, founded about 300 BCE, was an important center of Greek culture until its destruction in 145 BCE. In the 1960s, a papyrus was found here, dating from 300-250 CE, which contained an extremely technical debate on the nature of the Platonic Forms, more specifically on the question of the participation of sensible things in the intelligible Forms, and of the Forms among themselves (Hadot & Rapin 1987; Hoffmann 2016). Some scholars believe this papyrus may contain fragments of a lost dialogue by Aristotle, either the *Sophist* (Hoffmann 2016, dubitatively), or the *On Philosophy* (Auffret 2019). The town also boasted an inscription containing the Sayings of the Seven Sages, which may have been brought from Delphi to Ai Khanoum by Aristotle's student Clearchus of Solis. Although some of this Greek cultural and intellectual influence may have faded by the time of Vasubandhu, it was probably still at least one element in the rich mixture of cultures of Gandhāra (Solomon 2018, Ch. 1), which, by his time, will also have included Manichaeans and representatives of various other Gnostic sects. In any case, we cannot discount the presence of echoes of Greek thought in the environment in which Vasubandhu was born and raised.

In Vasubandhu's "Treasury of the Higher Doctrine" (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*), written in Sanskrit, one reads the following passage (Vasubandhu 1923-1931, vol. 4, pp. 142–143)³:

He who wishes to see the truths must first of all maintain morality (*śīla*). Then he reads the teachings (*śruta*) in which the vision of truths consists, or else he listens to their meaning. Having learned (*śrutvā*), he thinks with exactitude. Having thought, he gives himself over to the practice of concentrated meditation (*samādhibhāvanā*). With the wisdom (*prajñā*) born from teaching (*śrutamayī*) as support, the wisdom born of thought (*cintāmayī*) is born; with this as support, the wisdom born of meditation (*bhāvanāmayī*) is born.

This text, subsequently translated into Chinese and Tibetan, and extensively commented upon, was a main source for posterity of the ancient Buddhist doctrine (Deroche 2019, 282) of the three steps or stages in the development of wisdom:

1. wisdom born from reading or listening (*śrutamayī*),
2. wisdom born from thinking (*cintāmayī*)⁴, and
3. wisdom born from meditation⁵, practice or cultivation (*bhāvanāmayī*).

³ For the interpretation of this passage, cf. Deroche 2021, Adam 2005, 83f.; Nichols 2005, 4ff, Fiordalis 2018, 270f.

⁴ For Adam 2006, 89, *cintāmayī prajñā* refers to "non-experiential processes of ordinary reasoning".

⁵ In translating *bhāvanā* by "meditation", I am following Adam 2006. The term has a broader meaning than this, often referring to other types of cultivation, practice, or bringing into existence

As Deroche has pointed out, the progressive transition from one of these stages to another corresponds to an evolution from tradition to reason, and then from reason to experience. From another perspective, it represents the transition from information to reflexive knowledge, to embodied practice, with all three stages linked together by the crucial element of mindfulness (Deroche 2021, 20-23). For instance, one begins by reading or hearing (*śrutamayī*) the teachings of the Buddha, thus learning the traditional teachings of one's school. At the following stage, one uses one's own powers of reason (*cintāmayī*) to critically examine what one has heard, trying to determine how the traditional teachings can apply to one's life here and now. This stage can involve updating the traditional teachings, removing those elements of doctrine that may have become less relevant over time, and focusing on what those elements may mean to us today⁶. By ruminating and reflecting on these teachings in this way, one digests them, as it were, assimilating them and transforming them into one's second nature⁷. On a personal level, this stage corresponds to a shift from reactive, impulsive thinking based on our unexamined prejudices to a pause during which, instead of reacting automatically to external stimuli, we wait to make sure that we have an adequately objective grasp of the true nature and context of our representations (Deroche 2021, 22)⁸. Finally, in the third stage, one puts what one has learned in the previous two stages into practice. As 20th century Western thinkers such as Pierre Hadot and Henry Corbin have emphasized, when it comes to living a philosophical life or embarking on a path of spiritual progress, it is not enough to merely identify, by means of reason, how one should live (Deroche 2019, 284 n. 18). After discerning the true, correct, or appropriate way to live, one must also motivate oneself to follow and implement the ethical and spiritual guidelines that have been set forth by tradition and critically scrutinized by reason. As Hadot has shown, this is the aim of spiritual exercises in ancient philosophy (Hadot 1995, 2002), and as Deroche points out, it is also a key purpose of the "wisdom according to cultivation or meditation" in Buddhist thought.

Yet *bhāvanāmayī prajñā*, the third stage of the Buddhist threefold path of wisdom, contains not only an ethical but also a cognitive aspect. As Martin Adam explains (2006), the wisdom derived from meditation or contemplation (*bhāvanā*) guides the process for experientially realizing the conclusions regarding ultimate reality that have been reached through the wisdom of thinking. According to Nichols (2005, 2), "the wisdom which arises in meditation culminates in the direct apprehension of things as they are (*yathābhūtam*) beyond discursive thought in an advanced state of meditative concentration (*samādhi*)". The relation between the Sanskrit words *bhāvanā*, which I have been translating as "meditation" or "meditative", and *bhūta*, which I translate as

(Deroche 2019, 284; Gethin 1998, 174), such as the watering of plants; in this sense it would be roughly equivalent to the Greek ὑφίστημι.

⁶ On Pierre Hadot's congruent view that "ancient traditions can be re-actualized only if they are reduced to their most profound significance, detached from antiquated elements", cf. Deroche 2019, 287.

⁷ For similar metaphors of assimilation of philosophical doctrines as digestion in Epictetus, see Tremblay 2019.

⁸ For parallels in Marcus Aurelius, see Hadot 1998, 108-127.

“reality,” would have been immediately obvious to a native speaker: both derive from the same verbal root √bhū (Adam 2006, 84)⁹. The “wisdom born from meditation” (*bhāvanāmayī prajñā*) could be interpreted as an experiential wisdom¹⁰, in which, according to other meanings of the Sanskrit root √bhū, one “realizes”, by “meditating on”, the conclusions one has previously reached by means of thinking or reflection. Thus, on this interpretation, the difference between stages 2 (*cintāmayī prajñā*) and 3 (*bhāvanāmayī prajñā*) of the threefold path of wisdom amounts to the difference between a wisdom that consists in thinking or reasoning conceptually about something, on the one hand, and, on the other, a wisdom that is “conceived as having a ‘direct’ character” and “an experiential process of discerning reality, one that occurs in a concentrated state (*samādhi*)”¹¹. Thus, “wisdom born of thinking” and “wisdom born of meditation” can be contrasted as, first “thinking through” what one has studied, and then “actually ‘going through’ or concentratedly ‘experiencing’ the reality of what one has already thought through” (Adam 2006, 84-5)¹².

2.2 VASUBANDHU ON THE THREE LEVELS OF CERTAINTY

Vasubandhu (1923-1931, 4.142–143) goes on to associate each of these three levels of wisdom born from listening, thinking, and meditation respectively, with a specific kind of certainty:

One must explain: wisdom acquired from learning (*śrutamayī*) is a certainty (*niścaya*) that proceeds from the mode of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) called “word of a qualified person” (*āptavacana*); wisdom acquired from thinking (*prajñā cintāmayī*) is the certainty born from a rational examination (*yukyinidhyāna*); *bhāvanāmayī* wisdom is a wisdom born from meditation. Thus, the characters of the three wisdoms are established in an irreproachable way.

Vasubandhu thus establishes a three-level hierarchy of certainty, each level corresponding to one of the three sources of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*) according to Buddhist epistemology.

⁹ Another derivative of this same root is *anubhāva*, which Adam translates as “experience”; cf. Williams 1872, 37, s.v. *anubhāva*, who cites among the term’s many meanings “experience, knowledge derived from personal observation or experiment”.

¹⁰ Compare Arabic *ma’rifā*, often translated as “experiential knowledge”. See Nguyen 2014: “The concept of *ma’rifā*, ‘gnosis’ or ‘experiential knowledge’, is a key tenet of Sufism and was typically positioned as the culminating point of the spiritual path”.

¹¹ Cf. Buswell-Lopez 2014, 113, which defines *bhāvanāmayīprajñā* as “an understanding of reality at the level of ŚAMATHA—profound concentration coupled with tranquility.”

¹² As Deroche points out (2021, 25), at the stage of *bhāvanā*/contemplative meditation, mindfulness enables and ensures a shift of focus from conception to perception, and from the mediation of representations to the immediate “presencing” of experience. The wisdom born from cultivation, he adds, leads to direct perception (*yogi-pratyakṣa*) as a bridge between conceptual ascertainment and non-conceptual insight.

Table 1: Types of certainty in Buddhism (after Deroche 2019, 282; 2021, 21f.)

Type of certainty	Source/instrument of valid knowledge	Type of teachers
based on reliability of scriptures and teachers	scriptures (<i>āgama</i>); received tradition	traditionalists
based on rational examination	inference (<i>anumāna</i>); logical reasoning	rationalists and speculators
based on meditative practice	direct perception (<i>pratyakṣa</i>)	experimentalists who directly know the <i>dharma</i> for themselves

From the outset, note the priority accorded in this scheme of thought to direct perception, obtained by means of meditative or contemplative practice. This feature seems reminiscent of certain passages of the lesser-known works of Ibn Sīnā, in which he expressed reservations about the adequacy of Aristotelian rational thought (see Chase 2022, 34-6). In these works, we find the great Islamic philosopher and doctor doubting whether reason, in the form of Aristotelian syllogistic reasoning, can really grasp and explain all aspects of experience. Instead, he writes, some domains of human experience, including sexual and intellectual pleasure, but above all the experience of the Divine Light and Beauty, i.e., the nature of God, are inaccessible to syllogistic or rational thought (Arabic *qiyās*): one can only know such domains of experience through taste (*dawq*) and first-person witnessing (*mushāhada*). One example Avicenna gives is that of the sweetness of a cake: in a sense, one “knows” that the cake is sweet – just as, one presumes, ‘Aṭṭār’s moths “knew” that the candle flame was hot and bright –, even if one has never tasted a cake, because one has heard or read (compare Sanskrit *śrutamayī*) that cakes are sweet. This, however, is an inferior and inadequate kind of knowledge of the cake’s sweetness. As Ibn Sīnā affirms (Ibn Sīnā, 1955, 56.8ff), one cannot really *know* that the cake is sweet until one tastes it, and this is an instance of first-person witnessing (Arabic *mushāhada*, compare the Sanskrit *pratyakṣa*):

as when a person who has not tasted something sweet (*al-ḥulw*) and agrees that it is pleasant (*ladīd*) by a kind of reasoning (*bi-ḍarb min al-qiyās*) or by testimony (*al-shahāda*): he will not acquire the proper character of pleasure (*ḥāṣṣa al-iltiḍād*) unless by tasting it (...) All sensible and intellectual matters have aspects (*aḥwāl*) that can be known through reason (*bi-l-qiyās*) and characteristics of states that are known [only] by experience (*bi-l-tajriba*). Just as neither flavor (*al-ṭa‘m*) nor the ultimate nature of sensory pleasures can be captured by reason – for at most, reason can apprehend the affirmation of their [existence] (*ūbātaḥā*), devoid of specific details, – so in the case of intellectual pleasure and the ultimate aspects of the witnessing (*al-mushāhada*) of supreme beauty, reason can only inform you that they are superior in splendor. As for their specific characteristic (*ḥāṣṣiyatuhā*), however, it can only be known through direct appreciation (*mubāshara*), to which not everyone is guided.

Here, Ibn Sīnā distinguishes between two main types of knowledge. First, there is a kind of second-hand rational knowledge by which one “knows” that a cake is sweet, either through reason (*bi-ḍarb min al-qiyās*) or by testimony (*al-shahāda*), i.e., because one has read or heard others affirm that cakes are sweet. Second, there is a kind of knowledge which Ibn Sīnā characterizes as “direct witnessing” (*mushāhada*). Importantly, in this passage and others like it, Ibn Sīnā emphasizes that this first mode of knowledge, consisting of second-hand reports and reason, which seem to correspond rather closely to the first two types of Buddhist wisdom discussed above, “wisdom born from reading or listening” and “wisdom born from thinking”, are, in some circumstances, inferior to the cognitive mode which Ibn Sīnā describes as experience (*tajriba*), direct appreciation (*mubāshara*), or, especially, witnessing (*al-mushāhada*). In some domains of human experience, which include sensory impressions, sexual and intellectual pleasure, and, crucially, experience and knowledge of the Divine, second-hand, reported knowledge and reason cannot grasp the essence of the phenomena in question, but can only conclude *that* they exist. The true nature of phenomena pertaining to these domains can only be grasped by direct experience or “witnessing”, the closest analogy to which seems to be the faculty of taste (Arabic *al-dawq*)¹³.

As a working hypothesis, then, one may propose suggest the following equivalences, which the rest of this paper will be dedicated to fleshing out (Table 2):

Table 2: Modes of certainty in Buddhism and in Ibn Sīnā

Buddhism		Ibn Sīnā	
Type of certainty	Source/instrument of knowledge	Source/instrument of knowledge	
based on reliability of scriptures and teachers	scriptures (<i>āgama</i>)	testimony (<i>al-shahāda</i>)	
based on rational examination	inference (<i>anumāna</i>)	reason (<i>al-qiyās</i>)	
based on meditative practice	direct perception (<i>pratyakṣa</i>)	experience (<i>tajriba</i>), direct appreciation (<i>mubāshara</i>), witnessing (<i>mushāhada</i>).	

¹³ Cf. Khalil 2021: “In his famous autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (“The deliverance from error”), al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) argued that only the Ṣūfīs possessed true certainty [*al-yaqīn* – MC] (or a certainty worthy of its name) and that this was the fruit of direct, experiential knowledge or “tasting” (*dhawq*). Their state, he felt, was unlike that of (...) the Peripatetic philosophers whose epistemology was confined to a process of ratiocinative cognition”.

3. CERTAINTY (AL-YAQĪN) IN ISLAM

There were at least two main kinds of certitude in Islam, both denoted by the Arabic noun *al-yaqīn*. One, which I will not go into here (see Black 2006; 2013), was in use among Islamic philosophers known as the *falāsifa*, who were strongly influenced by Greek, and especially Aristotelian philosophy. Here, *yaqīn* denoted the certitude provided by the conclusion of an Aristotelian demonstrative syllogism.

The other main type of certainty had its origin in the Qur'ān. The Holy Book features several passages in which at least three types of expression containing the word *yaqīn* are used: the knowledge or science of certainty (*'ilm al-yaqīn*, Qur'ān 102:5), the eye or essence of certainty (*'ayn al-yaqīn*, Qur'ān 102:7), and the truth or reality of certainty (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn* Qur'ān 56:95: 69:51). These scattered allusions were to be systematized by later commentators into a canonical three-level system of certitude. We can observe the beginnings of this systematization in two early figures, both pioneers in Islamic mysticism: Sahl al-Tustarī, born in Shustar in Khuzestan in western Iran, and al-Ḥākim al-Tirmidī, who came from the area of ancient Bactria, later known as Khurasan.

3.1 SAHL AL-TUSTARĪ (C. 818-896 CE)

For Tustarī (Böwering 1995; al-Tustarī 2011), in his Commentary (*tafsīr*) on the Qur'ān, certainty (*yaqīn*) derives directly from God, according to the wholeness of the servant's heart. As Akhtar (2017) has shown, Tustarī's doctrine of *yaqīn* serves as the element that ties together two main features of his esoteric hermeneutics: a distinction between surface or external and inner meanings (*ẓāhir-bāṭin*) of scripture, and the importance of the invocation (*dīkr*) of the Holy Names of God as a supererogatory ritual intended to facilitate the worshipper's two-way communication with God (Akhtar 2017, 42-3). *Yaqīn*, for Tustarī, is a "state of epistemological certainty... that facilitates the mystical perception (*baṣar*) of the Oneness of God" (Akhtar 2017, 39).

Commenting on Qur'ān 2:260, in which Abraham asks God to show him how He gives life to the dead, Tustarī (2011, 2:42, translation Akhtar 2017, 46 modified) remarks that Abraham

...was merely asking for an increase in certainty (*ziyāda yaqīn*) (...) thus he asked for an unveiling (*kashf*) of that which impedes seeing [God's works] with his own eyes, so that he would increase his certainty in God's agency, and well as increase his awareness of God's creative power.

Here, as Akhtar points out (2017, 44-5; 48), the "increase in certainty" that Abraham requested corresponds to the bestowal of "moments of inspiration" (*ḥaṭarāt*) on the heart, filling it with knowledge of the realm of the unseen (*al-ġayb*). These moments of inspiration also enable the perception of the subtle element (*laṭīfa*) within the aspirant herself, which Tustarī calls the "secret" (*sirr*). Commenting on Qur'ān 2:40, Tustarī states (al-Tustarī 2011, 18-19) that when the heart no longer fears anything but

God, and comes to be in a state of awe (*rahba*), then the light of certainty (*nūr al-yaqīn*) is unveiled, granting the servant stability, tranquillity, and confident repose. Yet the servant achieves an even higher, deeper level of certainty when “The light of certainty (*nūr al-yaqīn*) unveils the knowledge of the eye/essence of certainty (*‘ilm ‘ayn al-yaqīn*), and this is the attainment (*wuṣūl*) of God¹⁴.”

Elsewhere in his *Tafsīr*, Tustarī emphasizes that “trust in God (*al-tīqa bi-llāh*) is the direct witnessing (*mushāhada*) of certitude (*yaqīn*) and of the essence of certainty (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*)”, and he interprets Qur’ān 2:20 as referring, on the one hand, to “the place of the light of certitude (*nūr al-yaqīn*) of the vision of the heart”, but also, at the same time, to “the gnosis or experiential knowledge (*ma’rifa*) of the totality of the heart” (Böwering 1980, 208, citing Tustarī, 2011, 12). For Tustarī, the level of certainty human beings attain during their life on earth¹⁵ plays a key role in their eschatological fate: on the Day of Resurrection, they will be weighed according to the light of certainty they possess, and the greater the degree of certainty a person has, the more the divine Scales will weigh in her favor (Böwering 1980, 208-210).

In the context of this contribution, what is most notable here is Tustarī’s emphasis on direct witnessing (*mushāhada*): as we have seen, this is the term Ibn Sīnā sometimes uses to denote the faculty of direct apprehension which alone is capable of grasping the essence of some kinds of sensory experience, and the nature of the Divine itself. For Tustarī, the object of this direct witnessing is both certainty (*yaqīn*) and the essence of certainty (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*). In general, it seems that Tustarī, who, like al-Ḥākim al-Tirmidī, was writing at an early stage in the development of Islamic mysticism, is operating with basically a two-tiered model of certainty, in which the light of certainty (*nūr al-yaqīn*), envisaged as a primordial, innate, subtle luminous nature granted by God¹⁶, enables the realization of the eye or essence of certainty (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*). When intensified and consolidated by a combination of human effort, in the form of ascetic spiritual exercises, and the grace of divine illumination, this light of certainty can

¹⁴ Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, al-Baqara, 2:40; cf. Böwering 1980, 208. Presumably to avoid accusations of heresy, Tustarī is quick to add that this “attainment of God” is not an indwelling (*ḥulūl*), a conjoining (*jam*), or a conjunction (*ittiṣāl*) with God, but comes from the true realization of God’s oneness. On “attainment” (*wuṣūl*), which Akhtar (2017, 44) describes as “a special kind of witnessing, characterized by the non-sensory beholding of God’s Oneness through the “eye of certainty”, and considers equivalent to gnosis (*ma’rifa*) and union (*ittiṣāl*), cf. Ibn Sīnā 1955, 52, 3; 56, 162; 57; Ibn Sīnā 1892, 204). In the notes to her translation of the latter work (Ibn Sīnā 1951, 496), Goichon argues, in a proto-Gutasian way, against Gardet (who translates the term by “union mystique”), for a deflationary, non-mystical meaning of the term as denoting the mere “cessation of movement”. For the meaning of this notion in Sufism, cf. Sviri 2021, 155, who speaks of “at the point of arrival (*wuṣūl*) – beyond time, change and relativities – from which all things are perceived as one”.

¹⁵ According to Tustarī, King David was prevented from acquiring *yaqīn*; Jesus acquired enough to walk on the water, but not the perfect degree that would have enable him to walk on the air as well, while the Prophet Muḥammad was granted the fullest degree of *yaqīn*, as is shown by the fact that he indeed was able to walk on the air, during his Nocturnal Journey.

¹⁶ Compare the Buddhist conception of the “Buddha-nature” of “embryo of a buddha” inherent in every human being; on which cf. Deroche 2021, 26-27.

achieve a level of intensity at which, as in the case of Muḥammad, it enables the seeker to “encounter his Lord and behold Him in contemplative witnessing”¹⁷ (Böwering 1980, 209).

It may have been later Islamic mystics who subsequently introduced the third, highest level of certainty, *ḥaqq al-yaqīn*, on the basis of Qur’anic passages such as 56:95 and 69:51¹⁸. Already in Tustarī, however, we find a threefold division, if not of the types of certainty, then at least of the stages that precede it along the mystic path, as when he declares (Tustarī 2011, 303): “Certainty (*al-yaqīn*) begins with unveiling (*mukāshafa*), then [comes] visual beholding (*mu’āyana*) and witnessing (*mushāhada*)”. All these doctrines of Tustarī are likely to have influenced subsequent Islamic mystics, from Ibn Massara and Ibn Barrajān to the “philosophical Sufism” (Rustom 2016) of Ibn Arabī and Suhrawardī (Akhtar 2017, 40; 48).

3.2 AL-ḤĀKIM AL-TIRMIDHĪ (C. 825-910 CE)

For al-Tirmidhī (Radtke 1980, Gobillot 2018, Sviri 2020), as for the slightly older Sahl al-Tustarī, experiential knowledge (Arabic *ma’rifa*, roughly corresponding to the Greek *gnōsis*), when combined and brought to perfection by illumination from God, can lead to a state of certitude (*yaqīn*). On the one hand, such certainty concerns the inevitability of one’s death, but it also entails faith in God’s protection and providence. Like the *ḥaṭarāt* of Tustarī, and the analogous “flashes” (*lawāmi*) and “openings” or “revelations” (*fuṭūḥāt*) of later philosophical Sufism (Akhtar 2017, 45), such illumination can strike a person like a bolt of lightning, and, as for Tustarī, can result in a state of seeing the effects of God’s actions, in this world and the next, right before one’s eyes (Ar. *mu’āyana*). However, again as in Sahl al-Tustarī, the achievement of certainty presupposes not only divine grace, but also human preparation to receive and make oneself worthy of that grace, through the purification of the heart by means of ascetic exercises, guided by the fear of God (*taqwā*), interpreted as ridding oneself of all that is not God.

Tirmidhī distinguishes three groups of people (Radtke 1980, 245), according to their ability to actualize their inborn knowledge of God (*ma’rifa*), which God himself has implanted in them from all eternity. Lowest on the scale is the simple faith that characterizes the masses, but also the theologians and experts in religious law, who remain bound to sense-knowledge and the ego, making them susceptible to influences from their inferior nature. The aspirant must not ignore such knowledge, since it serves to guide his external behavior, but it is far from adequate. Next on the scale comes the group of the wise or the sages (*ḥukamā*). This group is able to actualize their innate inborn light to a greater degree than the masses, but their fixation on the ego still prevents them from realizing it completely. Finally, there is a third group, whom

¹⁷ Böwering, 1980, 209

¹⁸ Nevertheless, even at the early stage in the development of the doctrine as found in Tustarī, the expression “eye of certainty” may already suggest “a degree of certainty that is as direct and immediate as seeing with the eyes” (Tustarī 2011, xlix n. 209).

Tirmidhī calls the knowers of God (*al-‘ulamā’ bi-llāh*). Unaffected by impressions coming from the outside world, undistracted by their ego – they have become egoless, since God has taken the place of their ego – they possess what the two preceding groups lacked: certitude (*yaqīn*). At this stage, the heart can see the essence of things, leading to a full transformation in which the seeker’s negative qualities are replaced by positive ones¹⁹. As result, seekers who have reached this third and highest stage of certainty receive inspirations and insight into the secrets of the cosmos, and are able to perform miracles. They are henceforth Friends of God (*awliyā’ Allāh*), and occupy the second rank in the universal hierarchy, preceded only by the Prophets. Tirmidī may have considered himself to be at the highest level of these Friends of Gods, attributing to himself the title of “Seal of Friendship” (*ḥatm al-wilāya*).

3.3 LATER ISLAMIC DEVELOPMENTS: THE THREEFOLD HIERARCHY OF LEVELS OF *YAQĪN*

It did not take long for mystically inclined commentators on the Qur’ān to systematize the scattered passages in which the notion of *yaqīn* in mentioned, and, in the wake of such earlier pioneers as Tustarī and al-Tirmidī, to develop the three-fold hierarchy of certitude which we glimpsed at the beginning of this article:

1. the knowledge or science of certainty (*‘ilm al-yaqīn*)
2. the eye or essence of certainty (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*),
3. the truth or reality of certainty (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*)

This threefold hierarchy was often combined with the Sufī doctrine of “states” (*ḥāl*, plural *aḥwāl*) and “stations” (*maqām*, plural *maqāmāt*) of spiritual progress along the Sufī path (*ṭarīq*) to God (Atif 2022).²⁰ We find discussions of this division of types of certainty in several popular medieval Sufī manuals, such as the *Letter on the Knowledge of Sufism* (*Risāla al-Qushayriyya fī-‘ilm al-taṣawwuf*) by Abū-l-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Hawazin al-Qushayrī (d. 1072). In his chapter on certainty (*al-yaqīn*), Qushayrī evokes several definitions given by previous Sufī masters. As we saw, Sahl al-Tustarī is quoted as situating certainty within a succession of stages, beginning with unveiling (*mukāshafa*), followed by certainty, then direct vision (*mu‘āyana*), followed by direct witnessing (*mushāhada*) (Al-Qushayrī 2007, 193). For the Baghdad Sufī al-Nūrī (d. 907), certainty is simply identified with first-person witnessing (*al-yaqīn al-mushāhada*) (Al-Qushayrī 2007, 195). Another Baghdad Sufī, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ (c. 849-922), declared that “To the extent that they depart from themselves, they arrive at certainty”

¹⁹ Cf. Sviri 2020, 93: desire of the self (*nafs*) becomes desire for God; fear becomes fear of God; anger becomes anger for the sake of God; lust becomes longing for God; idolatry becomes unity; and forgetfulness becomes resolute determination.

²⁰ Although the distinction between the two is not always consistently observed, usually it is said that a state is passively received, while a station is achieved by the soul’s efforts. Stations, which usually precede states, continue to remain available: reaching a new station does not imply the destruction of the previous one. In contrast, a state is instantaneous: when the heart is possessed by a state, such possession is total. The order in which the various states and stations are enumerated vary widely, not only from author to author, but even between different works by the same author.

(Al-Qushayrī 2007, 194), thus underlining the importance of freeing ourselves from obsession and domination by the ego. For the Balḥian mystic Abū Bakr al-Warrāq, sometimes said to have been a disciple of al-Ḥākim al-Tirmidī²¹, certainty is that by which one knows God, while the intellect keeps one away from Him (Qushayrī 2007, 195-196). Al-Warrāq is also credited with a threefold definition of certitude that prefigures later developments. Certainty, he claims, can be (i) information (*yaqīn ḥabar*), (ii) signs or indications (*yaqīn dalāla*), or direct witnessing (*yaqīn mushāhada*). Here, types (i) and (iii) seem particularly reminiscent of the first and last varieties of the threefold Buddhist wisdom (by learning and by meditative practice /direct experience respectively).

Elsewhere, Qushayrī (Qushayrī, 2007, 107) gives an in-depth account of the three kinds of certainty. Here we read that knowledge of certainty (*ilm al-yaqīn*) is conditional on demonstration (*burhān*) and belongs to the “masters of intellects” (*arbāb al-‘uqūl*): thus, it is the domain of rational, theoretical thought. The eye or essence of certainty (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*) comes from the determination of clear evidence (*bi-ḥukmi al-bayān*) and pertains to the masters of the branches of knowledge (*aṣḥāb al-‘ulūm*): thus, it would seem be reserved for scholars, but who now rely to some extent – recall the second of ‘Aṭṭār’s three moths, who went so far as to brush the candle’s flame with her wing – on experiential evidence. Finally, the truth or reality of certainty (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*) comes with eye-witnessing (*bi-na‘t al-‘iyān*), and is reserved for the masters of experiential knowledge (*aṣḥāb al-ma‘ārif*).

This account of the threefold hierarchy of certainty in Islam is fleshed out by a contemporary of Qushayrī who wrote in Persian, ‘Alī b. ‘Uṭmān al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī (1009-1077) of Ghaznī in what is now Afghanistan (Strothmann 2014), in a way that exhibits what may be the clearest parallels with the Buddhist threefold path of wisdom. For Hujwīrī (al-Hujwīrī 1988, 432), the knowledge or science of certainty (*ilm al-yaqīn*) corresponds to the knowledge and practice of religious rituals *in hoc mundo*. It is the degree of the theologians (*ulamā*) and of the common people, and is obtained by spiritual struggle (*mujāhada*); it can be said to be vulgar. The eye or essence of certainty (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*) corresponds to knowledge of the state of dying and of the time of departure from this world. It is the station of the Gnostics (*‘arifān*), because of their readiness for death, and is acquired by intimate familiarity (*mu‘ānasa*); it can be said to be elect or élite (*ḥāṣṣ*). Finally, the truth of certainty (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*) is the point at which lovers are annihilated, because they reject all created things. It is obtained by contemplation or first-person witnessing (*mushāhada*), and is reserved for the élite of the élite (*ḥāṣṣ al-ḥāṣṣ*)²².

²¹ So Gobillot (2018); but Radtke (1986, 563) finds this unlikely; for him, both Tirmidī and Abū Warrāq are likely to have been students of Aḥmad b. Ḥiḍrōya (d. 854-5): see Radtke 1986, 544.

²² Compare the account by the Khurasan-born Sufi Ḥwāja ‘Abdallāh al-Anṣārī (1006-1089) (Angha 2019; Tabbara 2018, 193-194), in his Arabic work *Manāzil al-sā‘irīn* (Stations of the wayfarers; Anṣārī, 1962, 89 (French translation); 53-54 (Arabic text)): Stage 1 of certainty (*ilm al-yaqīn*) proceeds by argumentation, and consists in knowing that whose existence is linked to God. At stage 2 (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*), one dispenses with argumentation, and one replaces second-hand information (*ḥabr*) by direct vision (*i‘yān*). Finally, Stage 3 (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*) is the shining of the dawn of

According to Hujwirī, then, we have the following scheme as compared to that of Qushayrī (Table 3)

Table 3: The three stages of certainty in Qushayrī and al-Hujwirī:

	<i>‘ilm al-yaqīn</i>	<i>‘ayn al-yaqīn</i>	<i>ḥaqq al-yaqīn</i>
al-Qushayrī	depends on (Aristotelian) demonstration, domain of “masters of intellects”	depends on evidence; domain of masters of the branches of knowledge	depends on eye-witnessing; domain of masters of experiential knowledge
al-Hujwirī	depends on spiritual struggle, domain of theologians and the common people	depends on intimate familiarity; domain of the gnostics/the élite	depends on contemplation or witnessing (<i>mushāhada</i>); domain of the élite of the élite

There are, of course, differences between these accounts. What they have in common is their basic hierarchical structure. The knowledge of certainty (*‘ilm al-yaqīn*) is the lowest level: it corresponds to certainty achieved through rational proofs or argumentation, and one may surmise that it corresponds to the level of certainty achieved by practitioners of the *Kalām* (rational Islamic theology) and/or of the *falsafa* (Greek-inspired philosophy). Thus, the kind of certainty which, for philosophers influenced by Aristotelian thought, represented the highest level of certainty, now finds itself demoted to the lowest level, suitable only for the vulgar. Level 2, the essence or “eye” of certainty (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*), is slightly higher in value and corresponds to increased learning, but now with the added element of some degree of experiential knowledge. Finally, for both Qushayrī and Hujwirī, the truth or reality of certainty (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*) is the highest level, reserved for the elite of the elite (H) or the masters of Gnosis (Q), and consists in a knowledge that is intuitive (H) and corresponds to contemplation or eye-witnessing (*mushāhada*).

4. CONCLUSION:

FROM HELLENISTIC BACTRIA TO 17TH CENTURY CHINA?

In mid-17th century, the Chinese Muslim Wang Tai-Yü (Murata 2012), who went by the name of “Old Man of the Real Hui”, wrote a work which he entitled *The Great Learning of the Pure and Real*. Here, Wang Tai-Yü attempted the formidable task of making Islamic doctrines – more specifically, those inspired by the philosophical Sufi

unveiling (*kashf*), deliverance from the effort demanded by certainty, followed by annihilation (*fanā’*) in the truth of certainty.

tradition of Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240) and his Persian follower Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (1414-1492) – comprehensible to a Chinese audience. He did so by engaging in at least two different kinds of translation: linguistic, from Arabic to Chinese, and cultural or conceptual, by rendering Islamic philosophical-religious doctrines into the terms of Neo-Confucianism. For example, in a section of this work entitled “Recognition with seeing”, we read the following:

If you have an astonished awaking, such that you turn your intention and return to your heart, this is the beginning of the discrimination between the newborn and the Original Being and the dear division between the Lord and the servant, none of this depending on your own self. This is “attaining one from two” (...) Even though the subtle clarity is manifest, unity in union has not yet been reached. This stage is called *i-t’i-ha-te* [ittihād] (which means “self-one”). When you arrive at this station, you will begin to reach the movement and quietude of activity.

At first glance, this text appears deeply mysterious. All that seems clear is that we have a process of awakening that begins with a kind of introspection or turning within. This introspection then leads to a discrimination and division between two entities that are hard to identify; but somehow this discernment, discrimination and division ends up in an achievement of oneness. Yet this is still an incomplete union, indicating the beginning of a state of rest or quietude in activity. Note that this state is designated by a Chinese transliteration of the Arabic word *ittihād*, meaning “unity or unification” with God, a state which, like *ittiṣāl* (“contact”), remained subject to suspicions of heresy throughout the history of Islam²³.

This text would remain completely enigmatic if not for the luminous exposition by Sachiko Murata (2000, 76), who proposes the following parallels (Table 4):

Table 4: Levels of certainty in Islam and in Wang Tai-Yü

Chinese terminology	Arabic equivalent	Explanation by S. Murata
1. recognition with knowledge/knowing one	<i>‘ilm al-yaqīn</i> (knowledge or science of certainty)	<i>tawḥīd</i> [= unification]/ practicing one: achieved through knowing the universe
2. recognition with seeing/seeing one	<i>‘ayn al-yaqīn</i> (eye or essence of certainty)	<i>ittihād</i> [= oneness]/self-one; achieved through knowing one’s self
3. recognition with continuity/unmixed one	<i>ḥaqq al-yaqīn</i> (truth of certainty)	<i>wahḍa</i> [= unity] achieving unity through the One itself

²³ Avicenna accused an unidentified group of “Porphyrians” of promulgating the doctrine of intellectual *ittihād*, or noetic union with God. See Chase 2021b. On orthodox suspicions with regard to both *ittiṣāl* and *ittihād*, see Akhtar 2017, 51 n. 30.

If Murata is correct, our Chinese author's scheme would be based on the underlying tripartite scheme of degrees of certainty which we have studied here, in which one begins with the "knowledge or science of certainly" (*'ilm al-yaqīn*), then progresses to the "essence" (literally "eye") of certainty (*'ayn al-yaqīn*), and finally ends up with the "truth of certainty" (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*).

This tripartite scheme, I have argued, may be traced back to the ancient Buddhist scheme of the threefold wisdom as systematized by Vasubandhu of Gandhāra in the 4th-5th centuries CE. From there, it may have been combined, after the advent of Islam in the 8th century, with Qur'anic notions of certainty (*al-yaqīn*). Initially taken up by early Islamic mystics such as Sahl al-Tustarī and al-Ḥākim al-Tirmidī (late 9th-early 10th centuries), the notion of *yaqīn* was gradually systematized into the three-level hierarchy of "knowledge or science of certainly" (*'ilm al-yaqīn*), "essence" (literally "eye") of certainty (*'ayn al-yaqīn*), and "truth or reality of certainty" (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*), a hierarchy that bears a distinct resemblance to the Buddhist threefold path of wisdom as discussed by Marc-Henri Deroche. Half a millennium later, this threefold hierarchy of levels of certainty, remotely inspired by Buddhism and integrated into the philosophical Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī and his Persian disciple Jāmī, this schema, may have resurfaced in 17th century China.

Needless to say, all these hypotheses require much further research to elevate them from a lower to a higher level of, if not certainty, then at least plausibility. What all these schemes we have studied have in common is that they describe a gradual process of progress that is both cognitive and transformational of one's mode of being. From the viewpoint of the basic cognitive relation between subject and object, one begins by focusing on the objective aspect, studying what other people have said and written: this, as Deroche points out, corresponds to the philological study of ancient texts, which Pierre Hadot considered the necessary starting point for attempts to understand and then live a philosophy as a way of life. Then, at a second stage, one turns to the second, subjective level, looking inward and asking, with critical rational judgment, what ancient philosophical doctrines can mean to the reader herself in her contemporary life. Finally, the third, final, meditative/contemplative stage may be interpreted as a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the objective and the subjective poles of experience, leading to the ultimate transcending of the distinction between subject and object in a "peak" or "mystical" experience in which one sees reality as it really is in itself, or, more modestly, and as suggested by some of the founders of quantum mechanics (Chase 2021a, 8 n. 1), to the realization of the ultimately fluctuating, more or less arbitrary nature of the distinction between these two poles.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A preliminary version of this paper was presented as a colloquium to the Research Group "Experience in the Premodern Sciences of Soul & Body ca. 800–1650" at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin: warm thanks to all participants and especially to the Group Leader, Dr. Katja Krause. Additional thanks to Dr. Marc-

Henri Deroche (Graduate School of Advanced Integrated Studies in Human Survivability, University of Kyoto), and to Fateme Minayi (Tehran) for stimulating and perspicuous comments on earlier drafts.

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