

# ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

Emerging from Cultures and Religions  
of the ASEAN Region

*Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*

[www.kas.de](http://www.kas.de)

*Assumption University of Thailand*

[www.au.edu](http://www.au.edu)

*Graduate School of Philosophy & Religion*

[www.philo-religion.au.edu](http://www.philo-religion.au.edu)

*Guna Chakra Research Center*

[www.gcrc.au.edu](http://www.gcrc.au.edu)

# ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES



**Emerging from Cultures and Religions  
of the ASEAN Region**

Edited by  
Roman Meinhold

# ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

Emerging from Cultures and Religions  
of the ASEAN Region

*Editor:*

Roman Meinhold

*English Language Editors:*

David Willem van Ofwegen;

John Thomas Giordano;

Wanida Nanthavanij

© Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. &  
Guna Chakra Research Center,  
Graduate School of Philosophy & Religion,  
Assumption University, Bangkok, 2015

This book is not for sale. It is meant for free distribution and educational reference only. Its creation was generously funded by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), and academically supported by Assumption University of Thailand (AU). The views expressed in the book are those of the authors and may not necessarily reflect the views of KAS and AU.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

75/2 Sukhumvit Soi 61 Klongtan, Wattana Bangkok 10110 Thailand

Phone +66 (0)2 714-12 07/8 | +66 (0)2 714-13 06

Fax +66 (0)2 714-13 07

Email: Office.Thailand@kas.de

First published in 2015 by

Guna Chakra Research Center,

Graduate School of Philosophy & Religion,

Assumption University

592/3 Ram Khamhaeng 24 Road,

Hua Mak Campus, Bangkok 10240 Thailand

Phone +66 (0)2 3004543-62 Ext.1325

Email: philo\_religion@au.edu - philo.religion.abac@gmail.com

Photographs on pages: 2, 68, 90 © Gerald Schuster

Typesetter: Jonathan L. Catalano – joncatalano.wordpress.com

Printed in Thailand by: P. Press Co., Ltd. 2015

ISBN 978-616-7695-23-5

**A Dedication to His Majesty the King  
of Thailand in tribute to His Translation  
“The Story of Pra Mahajanaka”**

*Glen Chatelier*

In Thailand’s annals of history a Heroic King holds sway  
Over a Kingdom, Suvarnabhumi, as it was known in days of yore  
Protector of the land, champion of the people’s lives everyday  
A philosopher King, who from his wisdom and experience’s store  
Has advocated sufficiency as a way of life and economy, in times  
When the earth’s resources and environment are in confusion and disarray  
Moderation, ethics and morality He counsels for life’s uncertain climes  
He leads by example – His actions fulfill what His words say  
In keeping with His promise of justice and fairness in ruling over all  
Generosity, alms giving, patience and impartiality He employs in His sway  
His Virtue, morality, straightforwardness and courtesy, dispel the pall  
Of selfishness and greed. Acts of self-restraint and non-anger He displays,  
Worthy of deepest reverence, His subjects for His health and life intercede  
In anthems raised for Him, wise King whose graces none else can precede.





Preface ..... VII

Introduction ..... IX

## **Part I: Environmental Values Emerging from Buddhism and Islam**

1: The Metaphysics of Buddhist Environmental Ethics .....3

*Somparn Promta*

2: Buddhist Soteriological Aims and Their Contribution  
to Environmental Well-Being .....31

*Anthony Le Duc*

3: A Muslim Perspective on Environmental Issues  
Currently Emerging in Indonesia .....55

*Aan Rukmana*

## **Part II: Environmental Ethics Implied in Community Values**

4: Ecology through Ubuntu .....69

*Mogobe Ramose*

5: *Katapatan sa Kalikasan: On Being True to the Environment* .....77

*Remmon E. Barbaza*

## **Part III: Ecological Values Embedded in Tribal Culture and Myth**

6: Earth's the Limit: The Sense of Finiteness  
among the Hill Tribes of Northeast India .....91

*Siby K. George*

7: The Ecological Implications of the Story of Mahajanaka .....123

*Glen Vivian Gerard Chatelier*

## **Appendix**

Conference Summary .....131

*Wang Fei & Timmy Grimberg*

Contributors.....137





# Preface

---

*Michael Winzer*

With more than 600 million people and a GDP of around 2.4 trillion USD which has grown more than 5% annually in the past years, ASEAN is economically and politically one of the most important regions for global environmental protection strategies. Today, it is one of the most dynamic regions of the world, with some countries experiencing a deep economic and social transformation. Aside from the growing political and economic importance, recent natural catastrophes in the region have increased concerns and responsibilities related to environmental protection and climate change. Now is therefore the best moment to reconsider environmental values that can serve as guidelines for ASEAN's transformation.

The region has a very rich biodiversity and historically strong values about protecting and saving the environment as a natural basis of life. For traditional and economic reasons, many people, especially farmers, still live very close to nature and directly depend on it for their survival. From a religious and ethical perspective, nature is seen as a sacred place that should be respected and protected. In this context, the aim of the international conference "*Environmental Values Emerging from Cultures & Religions of the ASEAN Region*", which took place on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2014, was to recall these cultural, religious and philosophical/ethical values in the ASEAN region. The purpose of the conference was not only to discuss environmental values on an academic level, but also to open this discussion to other parts of society. The findings of the conference are published in this anthology. With the publication, I hope we can make existing values accessible for a wider public. I also hope these findings become a useful source for action and strategy in order to save our planet and the future of our children, contribute to the current political discussion on this issue and give support to a value-based environmental policy.

To make the project possible, many distinguished academics from different ASEAN countries have worked together with the Graduate School of Philosophy & Religion at Assumption University of Thailand. I would like to thank the Graduate School of Philosophy and Religion for our longstanding cooperation and the successful completion of this project, and thank all the distinguished speakers of our joint conference for their insightful presentations and valuable contributions to this anthology. I would like to give special thanks to Asst. Prof. Dr. Roman Meinhold, whose work and expertise have been invaluable.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has been active in Thailand for more than 34 years, with the primary goal of promoting democratic structures, pluralism and the rule of law based on values. Therefore, our foundation cooperates closely with local partners in the pursuit of a common vision for human development, societal progress and political and social stability. We are committed to our vision of a more free and prosperous development that can be a source of inspiration for future activities.

# Introduction

---

Roman Meinhold

Increasing awareness regarding environmental values can lead to changes in consumer behavior and governmental policy. This book aims to discuss, reevaluate and disseminate environmental values emerging in the ASEAN region in current interdisciplinary discourses and in traditional contexts of religions, cultures and philosophy. The anthology focuses on cultural, religious/spiritual and philosophical/ethical values related to sustainable, intergenerational, caretaking, organic, and holistic approaches to nature that are currently (and had been traditionally) emerging in the ASEAN region and beyond. The book brings together most of the papers presented at the conference on *Environmental Values Emerging from Cultures & Religions of the ASEAN Region*, which was held on 18th September 2014 in Bangkok. This conference was jointly organized by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Bangkok, the Guna Chakra Research Center at the Graduate School of Philosophy & Religion of Assumption University in Thailand. Two additional papers have been included in order to complement the presented papers and complete the scope of the anthology.

*Environmental Ethics* as a relatively young academic discipline has its origins in the 1960s and 1970s, with publications such as Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (1949), Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1963), Lynn White's *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis* (1967), Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) and Arne Naess' *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement* (1973). Environmental Ethics then became one important branch of applied ethics courses at universities. Meanwhile, the concern for environmental issues spread into other domains of the humanities. Still, the academic domain name 'Environmental Philosophy' is used less frequently than 'Environmental Ethics'. Nowadays, many universities around the world offer inter- and multidisciplinary programs in Environmental Studies which also consist of courses that deal with topics in the

domains of Environmental Thought and Environmental Spirituality. These new domains are increasingly drawing attention in academic and public discourse. In these discourses, narrations and practices of cultures and religions are 'rediscovered' in an attempt to find environmental implications. This anthology is a contribution to the academic and public discourse on environmental values that currently emerge in the domains of environmental thought and environmental spirituality in the ASEAN region and beyond.

The approaches presented in this volume have been grouped in three parts. The first part concerns environmental values that are implied in and developed from Buddhism and Islam. The second considers how environmental ethics can be derived from the reality of social coherence and community values. Part three investigates ecological values that are developed from cultural manifestations and narrations.

The Thai Buddhist philosopher Somparn Promta grounds Buddhist Environmental Ethics in Buddhist Metaphysics. In his paper on *The Metaphysics of Buddhist Environmental Ethics* he suggests that a larger all-encompassing entity (such as the universe) is of higher ontological significance than a smaller entity that is embedded in this larger entity. *"The day the world disappears from the universe, man can no longer exist, while the universe still remains."* This corresponds to an epistemic parallel. *"The logic used by the Buddha says that the lower thing might have limited potential to understand the higher. Compared with the universe, man is lower—at least in two senses; we come later and we do not create ourselves."* Nevertheless, according to Buddhist understanding, every 'member' of the universe (men, animals, plants, natural resources) needs to be *"counted equally"*. Man thus has no moral authority to claim ownership of parts of nature. Thus a genuinely Buddhist perspective considers natural entities as *"members of the universe"* very serious.

This metaphysical foundation of Buddhist environmental ethics utilizes the same logic as Ecological Economics (not to be confused with Environmental Economics). According to Ecological Economics, political and economic directives must be based on the fact that the

economy is a subsystem of the ecosystem.<sup>1</sup> Especially when reading Somparn's references to Charles Darwin and the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins<sup>2</sup>, some readers might be reminded of Douglas Adams' novel *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* in which an alien race (the Vogons) demolish planet earth in order to create space for a hyper-express-route through the galaxy. Ontologically speaking, the earth is embedded in the universe, but from a Vogon perspective the earth is just blocking the way for their hyper-express-route through the galaxy. The "blue-green planet", hosting a species obsessed with money, is useless trash. But, as "member of the universe", planet earth needed to be considered at least on the same level as Vogons' concerns for logistics (not only from a Buddhist ontological perspective). The pun of Adams' first pages of the novel is that humans usually act exactly as self-centered as Vogons, e.g. by clearing forests to build roads and cities.

Many strands of environmental ethics revolve around the discussion regarding intrinsic and instrumental value of living beings and ecosystems. In *Buddhist Soteriological Aims and Their Contribution to Environmental Well-Being* the Vietnamese-American Catholic Priest, missionary and religious studies scholar Anthony Le Duc emphasizes the difficulties in ascribing intrinsic value in nature from a Buddhist perspective due to the Buddhist denial of an intrinsic self. Le Duc rather points out the significance of "*Buddhist virtues that have important ramifications for environmental sustainability and well-being*". The Buddhist contribution to environmental well-being, sustainability and wholesome natural relationships is closely tied to the aim of achieving spiritual progress, since the genuine soteriological aim and ultimate value of Theravada Buddhism is liberation from *samsāric* life which is impossible without steering "*away from greed, hatred and delusion which characterize an unwholesome life*". In his

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Meinhold, Roman (2011) Ecological Economics. In: Encyclopedia of Environmental Issues, Revised Edition. Salem Press/EBSCO, Ipswich, Mass. and Hackensack, New Jersey, p 406-7

<sup>2</sup> In his book *The God Delusion* (2006) Richard Dawkins frequently referred to Douglas Adams, who was also an environmental activist.

dissertation Le Duc diagnoses that such unwholesome lifestyles and greed are responsible for environmental degradation.<sup>3</sup> He emphasizes that Theravada Buddhist environmental spirituality consists of developmental and relational dimensions. The relational dimension emphasizes the importance of wholesome human-nature-relationships, and the developmental dimension emphasizes the interconnection between the promotion of well-being for others and their own spiritual progress and ultimate happiness.

The Indonesian Muslim philosopher and educator Aan Rukmana develops *A Muslim Perspective on Environmental Issues Currently Emerging in Indonesia*. Matter, plants, animals, and men are manifestations of the sacred, a result of ‘intelligent design’ (*taskhir*). Science should not be reductionist, but rather address all four levels of existence. Both science and spirituality guide men in preserving nature, according to Muslim understanding, a responsibility derived from the human status as a “*representative of God (khalifah) on earth*”. Also, Rukmana’s Muslim perspective emphasizes (like Buddhist Metaphysics and Ecological Economics) that man is a subsystem of the ecosystem, and that the ecosystem is a subsystem of the universe. “*If we fail to preserve this big cosmos, man as a small cosmos (alam shaghîr) will also be destroyed. To preserve nature is to use reason and follow the logical consequences of our actions on our environment.*” Similar to the Buddhist perspectives - Rukmana diagnoses the environmental crisis as a result of greed,<sup>4</sup> but has great hopes and trust in a new generation of Indonesians who – with the help of education – will be able to tackle intergenerational ecological concerns in Indonesia.

---

<sup>3</sup> Le Duc, Anthony (2015) *Theravada Buddhist Environmental Spirituality: Relational and Developmental Dimensions in Promoting Environmental Well-Being*. (Submitted 2015 to GSPR, AU for defense).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Apichai Puntasen: *Buddhist Economics and Ecology: A Lesson for the Future of the ASEAN Community*. In: Meinhold, Roman (ed.) (2014) *ECOLOGICAL, SOCIAL & ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY - Perspectives for Thailand and ASEAN*. Guna Chakra Research Center. Assumption University & Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation. Bangkok. ISBN 978-616-7695-18-1

In *Ecology through Ubuntu* the African philosopher Mogobe Ramose emphasizes the metaphysical and ontological fact of the wholeness of the world. The relation among organisms and natural entities is signified by harmony and balance within wholeness, which again implies a process character of reality – what is underlying all reality is the principle of motion. Ramose derives the obligation to care for and about the environment from *Ubuntu* philosophy. According to this traditional African social-philosophical understanding the individual and the community are complementary. “*To care for one another, therefore, implies caring for physical nature as well. Without such care, the interdependence between human beings and physical nature would be undermined. Moreover, human beings are indeed part and parcel of physical nature even though they might be a privileged part at that.*” Our obligation to restore a “*respectful and polite*” attitude toward others and our natural environment necessarily needs to be derived from the (metaphysical, ontological) understanding of the wholeness of the world and the social reality of interconnectedness.

The word *ubuntu* shapes “*ideas, culture, and politics*” in South Africa, the word *katapatan* does the same in the Filipino context. The Filipino philosopher Remmon E. Barbaza in his paper entitled *Katapatan sa Kalikasan: On Being True to the Environment* utilizes the notion of *katapatan* as a “*possible model of [...] a mutually sustaining and mutually respectful relationship*” not only in social, but also in environmental contexts. We should take *katapatan* as a model for our relation to the natural environment, but this will make a radical reorientation of our relationship with nature necessary.

The Indian philosopher Siby K. George in his paper *Earth's the Limit: The Sense of Finiteness among the Hill Tribes of Northeast India* explores the “*tribal sensibility of limit and balance*” of Zomia tribes “*with regard to human exploitation of the earth, understanding of knowledge, understanding the possibilities of the self and of the nature of things.*” The “*traditional animistic ethos of the tribes*” makes an important contribution to current environmental thought. In particular “*the sense of limit or finiteness*” is a sensibility and a value that is an antidote for the intensive exploitation of natural resources – the “*limitless instrumentalization of nature*”. Besides the loss of the

sensibility of limit, we also lose our sensibility of interconnectedness. The hope to reclaim this sense of interconnectedness emerges evidently in this paper as in the previous papers of this volume. “*The northeast Indian tribal and the Zomias in general are ‘the bearers of a possible and alternative world’.*”

The paper *The Ecological Implications of the Story of Mahajanaka* by the Thailand based Indian academic, poet and Consultant for The Pontifical Council for Culture, Glen Vivian Gerard Chatelier, closes the circle of the papers by bringing the attention back to the Thai Buddhist context from which the first two chapters took off. Chatelier’s paper interprets the translation of *The Pra Mahajanaka* by H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej as an ecologically and environmentally relevant contribution to currently emerging environmental Buddhist thought. He infers that the “*attitude of regeneration is the Buddhistic principle of sufficiency through moderation in human action, self immunity through spiritual re-armament and the stifling of greed*”.

Many of the papers in this book – as in the previous anthology<sup>5</sup> - diagnose greed, or in Sibys’ terminology: the lost sense of limit, as one of the root causes of environmental degradation. Almost all papers make us aware of two ontological facts; the embeddedness of human existence and social-economic activities within a greater entity on the one hand, and on the other hand, the relationality, interconnectedness, and interdependence of organisms and the rest of nature.

Spirituality in diverse belief systems and cultural contexts can make people aware of the value of nature and the vulnerability of eco-systems. More intensive environmental education is needed to help raise environmental awareness in the ASEAN region. Publications and conferences on environmental issues, environmental thought, and environmental spirituality serve this aim. However, discussing environmental issues is still not sufficient; every

---

<sup>5</sup> Meinhold, Roman (ed.) (2014) *Ecological, Social & Economic Sustainability - Perspectives for Thailand and ASEAN*. Guna Chakra Research Center. Assumption University & Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation. Bangkok.



individual must contribute to fostering environmental well-being in daily life. Moderation in lifestyles is essential, since over-consumption threatens the well-being of people and ecosystems.<sup>6</sup>

This anthology and the conference would not have been possible without the generous support from Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), Bangkok, and the encouragement from Assumption University of Thailand (AU). I therefore would like to thank the decision makers and supporters from both institutions, as well as the conference presenters and the authors of this anthology for their valuable contributions. In particular I would like to thank Michael Winzer, Resident Representative of KAS, 'Kiad' Sarinya Tankaew, Project Assistant of KAS, Warayuth Sriwarakuel, Dean, Graduate School of Philosophy & Religion (GSPR) AU, Glen Vivian Gerard Chatelier, Director of the Office of International Affairs, AU, Arjan Wanida Nanthawanij, Guna Chakra Research Center (GCRC) at GSPR, Jonathan L. Catalano, GSPR, David van Ofwegen, GCRC, John Giordano, GSPR, Khun 'Poo' Pakarin Verapotpat, GSPR, and Gerald Schuster (Humboldt University, Berlin) for their invaluable support in all matters related to the conference and this anthology.

In order to make a further contribution to the promotion of the discourse on environmental thought and environmental spirituality in the ASEAN region, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Assumption University are jointly organizing a conference on the theme *Energy & Intergenerational Ethics - Perspectives in and for the ASEAN Region*, 24th September 2015.

---

<sup>6</sup> Meinhold, Roman (2011) Overconsumption. In: Encyclopedia of Environmental Issues, Revised Edition. Salem Press/EBSCO, Ipswich, Mass. and Hackensack, New Jersey, p 944-5

## References

- Adams, Douglas (1979) *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. London: Pan Books
- Carson, Rachel (1962) *Silent Spring*. New York: First Marine Books
- Dawkins, Richard (2006) *The God Delusion*. New York: Bantam
- Ehrlich, Paul R. (1968) *The Population Bomb*. New York: Buccaneer
- Le Duc, Anthony (2015) *Theravada Buddhist Environmental Spirituality: Relational and Developmental Dimensions in Promoting Environmental Well-Being*. Bangkok: PhD Dissertation, submitted for defense to Graduate School of Philosophy & Religion, Assumption University in the academic term 2015/1.
- Leopold, Aldo (1949) *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*. Oxford: OUP
- Meinhold, Roman (ed.) (2014) *Ecological, Social & Economic Sustainability - Perspectives for Thailand and ASEAN*. Bangkok: Guna Chakra Research Center. Assumption University & Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation.
- Meinhold, Roman (2011) *Ecological Economics*. In: *Encyclopedia of Environmental Issues, Revised Edition*. New Jersey: Salem Press/EBSCO, Ipswich, Mass. and Hackensack, p. 406-7
- Meinhold, Roman (2011) *Overconsumption*. In: *Encyclopedia of Environmental Issues, Revised Edition*. New Jersey: Salem Press/EBSCO, Ipswich, Mass. and Hackensack, p. 944-5
- Naess, Arne (1973) *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement*. *Inquiry* 16, pp. 95-100
- Puntasen, Apichai: *Buddhist Economics and Ecology: A Lesson for the Future of the ASEAN Community*. In: Meinhold, Roman (ed.) (2014) *Ecological, Social & Economic Sustainability - Perspectives for Thailand and ASEAN*. Bangkok: Guna Chakra Research Center. Assumption University & Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation.
- White, Lynn Townsend (1967) *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*. *Science* 155 (3767). pp. 1203–1207

**Part I**

**Environmental Values Emerging from  
Buddhism and Islam**

---

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES



Emerging from Cultures and Religions  
of the ASEAN Region

*Part 1: Environmental Values Emerging from Buddhism and Islam*



---

*Bangkok* –photo by Gerald Schuster

1:

## The Metaphysics of Buddhist Environmental Ethics

---

*Somparn Promta*

### **Abstract**

I consider 'metaphysics' in two senses: the strong and the weak senses. The Buddha seems to reject being involved in the discussion of metaphysical problems. I think the metaphysics that the Buddha rejects is the one of the strong sense. This kind of metaphysics is mainly characterized by the firm belief in things which can not be completely verified by sense experience of a normal person—for example, personal God; and it is hard or not possible to relate such a thing to empirical phenomena in the world. However, the Buddha believes in the natural norm of the universe. The Buddha's teachings such as 'Co-dependent Origination' are taught by him to state that behind the order of things in the world, there exists 'something' playing the role as the unseen provider of the norm of the universe. I call this kind of metaphysics as the one belonging to the weak sense. The best way to understand what I call the metaphysics of the weak sense is to compare it with the seemingly metaphysical concepts like 'Natural Selection' of Charles Darwin. In this paper, the details of Buddhist metaphysics will be explored and linked to the environmental ethics of Buddhism. To understand deeply why Buddhism has such a kind of environmental insight and ethics, the understanding of the metaphysics of Buddhism is essential.

## Two Kinds of Metaphysics

In its traditional sense, metaphysics means a religious or philosophical claim about the things which are beyond the sense perception of man. Metaphysics has played an important role in the history of human thought for the reason that the natural universe that appears to human perception does not show everything. It shows only some things, and most of them are inclined to prompt the question: why do they appear like that? We know from science that the moon orbits our planet, and our planet orbits the sun. These are phenomena appearing to our eyes. The question is why things in the universe are as they are, and not otherwise. From what we can observe, this kind of question seems impossible to answer. That is why we need metaphysics.

As it is not my intention to explore metaphysics here, a thought that I would like to suggest that will be used to understand what I shall discuss is: 'for me, there are two main kinds of metaphysics, and Buddhist metaphysics belongs to one of them'.

The first kind of metaphysics is the one which states at least two main things. First, the universe is created by some absolute power. Second, such a power plays the role of the center of the universe. We can say that the center of the universe according to this kind of metaphysics plays the role of both moral giver and law giver of the universe. The metaphysics of Aristotle, in my opinion, belongs to this category. The universe in Aristotle's metaphysics is explained in his theory of "causes". He says there are four causes. One among the four causes plays the role of actor. Look at a chair. The chair is made from wood. Wood is a cause in the sense that without it the chair can never be created. Besides the wood and related material, there must be something or someone who uses the material and tools in making the chair. This is a cause: the actor. Without this cause the chair can never be produced.

We see that the actor is the center of the causes in the sense that other causes are used by it. Aquinas utilized the concept of causes in Aristotle's metaphysics to argue that there must be a God; otherwise the universe can never be produced. The argument of Aquinas, in a

sense, is very simple and clear. Things that we have seen around us are made from something and there must be a thing playing the role of the creator. We have two cars. They are made from diverse materials such as iron. The first one is made by a robot, and the second one by a human. The robot or the human in this example is the center of the car-making system in the sense that other causes are used or commanded by the center. This kind of metaphysics we would call the centralist theory.

The centralist metaphysics and science can be compatible with the work of some scientists like Isaac Newton. At the end of his great book, *Principia*, Newton says a lot about God. For him, after the exploration of the universe, we have to question something. The universe in the view of Newton can be compared to the performance of a symphony—each instrument has its role as a part of the whole. Without the conductor, such a performance would be chaotic. The more beautiful the performance, the more impressive the talent of the conductor. The whole universe according to Newton is well arranged. This is why he talks about God at the end of his book. He just does an ordinary thing—like the man, after showing how great the musical performance is, says, ‘Let me talk about our great conductor.’

The other type of metaphysics differs in that it does not claim anything as the center of the universe. I would like to use the theory of natural selection by Darwin as an example of the metaphysical theory of this type. According to Darwin, things in the world are subject to change. As the result of natural change, the varieties of species occur. Some variation is not good for the species, which later causes it to become extinct. Natural selection is the natural machinery that functions mainly as the universal chooser of species. Man, animal, and plant exist not because they will. No one in the world can do that. The whole world is a web of conditions, where individual life has no power to choose. Certainly, man can choose some small things, e.g. what to eat the next morning. Big things like how long to live and when to die are totally determined by the complicated conditions inside the web. Natural selection is not used by Darwin as a single powerful entity like God. For his theory, there is no such a thing in the world. The concept ‘natural selection’ is used to refer to

the total conditions—certainly we can never know all of them—that finally act as the universal chooser to choose or not choose such a species as suitable for existence.

I put the theory of natural selection under the category of metaphysics, not science, for the reason that it cannot be tested by sense experience. To use the words of Karl Popper, the theory is not falsifiable. But that is not the problem. For me, in some situations metaphysical ideas are more useful than scientific ones. Science is too narrow to help us see the major truths of the universe.

The Buddha believes that the universe is a wide field of beings. This field has no center. There is no idea of God taught in the Buddha's doctrines concerning the universe—as it is not possible if 'God' means the highest powerful entity to play the role of creator and commander of the rest of the universe. The Buddha does not argue against God, but against the idea which states that there is something playing the role of the center of the universe. The metaphysical theory which does not think that there is something to play the role of the creator and the regulator of the universe we could call the *non-centralist* theory. Buddhism holds this view of metaphysics. For the Buddha, there could be a God; this is not impossible. But if there would be a God, God would have to be counted as a condition just as all other conditions in the universe.

The difference between the centralist and non-centralist theories lies in that for the centralist theory, among the possible causes of the universe, there must be some cause playing the role of the center for the reason that other causes are used by it. The Buddha does not accept this argument. In making a chair, we need a carpenter, tools and material. The first one, a carpenter, uses the tools and the material such as wood in making a chair. The Buddha accepts this as a fact. But to say that the carpenter is the most important is something that the Buddha does not accept. Certainly, in the ethical dimension, there has to be something playing the role of the moral agent. A man kills another man, using a gun. The gun is used by the killer. The gun is not the killer because it does not kill by itself. It is used. So, the user must be the killer, not the used object. The concept of moral agent in Buddhism is based on a specific viewpoint: in ethics, we need moral



responsibility. Among the causes that lead to the death of a man, there has to be something playing the role of a moral agent. From the Buddhist perspective, a moral agent must have free will. We know that free will requires a mind which is free. So, the gun has no free will because it does not have a mind. The hand, as well, has no free will as it has no mind in itself and it is used by the mind. So, the mind of the man is to be held responsible for the evil of killing. Religions of the world share this belief. A man who kills another must be responsible for what he has done in terms of morality. This is why religions teach that there are hell and heaven to be found after we die. When we die, our bodies do not go with us to the new world. What goes to the next world is only the agent—the thing that has free will and has done both good and evil.

In short, Buddhism accepts the belief that there must be some cause playing the role of the actor. But, it is to be understood that the acceptance is given under the category of ethics only. In metaphysics, Buddhism does not accept this analysis of causes. To understand the position of Buddhism concerning the roles of things inside the web of the universe, I think, a division between man and the universe is needed. Man is not the creator of the universe. The universe comes before man. We have a reason to believe that the universe has long existed before man appeared in the universe. Even the appearance of man can be questioned: why we are created to see the universe and by whom, or what thing. The Buddha is of the opinion that the origin of the universe is not the point, but the origin of man is. The logic used by the Buddha says that the lower thing might have limited potential to understand the higher. Compared with the universe, man is lower—at least in two senses; we come later and we do not create ourselves.

Metaphysics in the view of Buddha is man's attempt to understand the higher, while ethics is concerned with an attempt, by man as well, to understand himself. In this sense, ethics is more easily made possible. In metaphysics, the Buddha thinks that man should be counted equally as a member of the universe, just as other members, such as animals, plants, and other kinds of natural resources. In having this idea, certainly the Buddha has his unique

reason. Let me give a simple metaphor. There is a house we do not know by whom it was built. The owner of the house is invisible. A man comes and lives in the house. Some days later, a mouse comes and lives with the man. One day after that, a tree appears, growing at a corner of the ground inside the area of the house. As nothing among these things is the owner of the house, the man has no *moral* authority to claim that he only has the right to live in the house. Even though it could be possible that the man, after coming and living in the house, is the person who is most responsible for taking care of the house, this can never be the moral ground to claim that the man has more right to the house than the mouse or the tree. From a Darwinian perspective, man does not have a higher role than other living organisms in the protection of the world. But, if the world would be completely destroyed some day in the future, Darwinists would still have to admit that it is man who did it.

Centralist metaphysics is usually used as the ground of centralist ethics, and then centralist environmental ethics. The idea of Aristotle concerning the four causes is later used by the Catholic theologians such as Thomas Aquinas to state that among natural things created by God man is the highest, and due to that position man has the moral right to govern the natural world. I do not argue against centralist metaphysics as something bad or false in itself. The point I need to suggest is that this metaphysical position differs from the one used by the Buddha, which we have called the non-centralist metaphysics. I understand that if we start from the acceptance that there is God as the creator of natural world and God has created man to possess the highest wisdom and more moral right than any living organisms in the world, we would have to accept a centralist environmental ethics. The Buddha does not start from God. So, his ethical thought is inevitably based on the logical and intellectual analysis of natural world. The analogy of the house where a man, a mouse, and a tree live, I believe, is totally based on the Buddha's logical thought. It is clear and powerful, like other logical thoughts in the world.

Actually, the belief in God does not necessarily lead to centralist ethics, even though such a belief could be seen to naturally form

centralist metaphysics. Hinduism shares a belief in God with Christianity. But the Hindu God does not create the world to be personal property of man alone. Certainly, the Hindu God acts as the father of the natural world, differently from the Christian God, but when the Hindu God plans to create the world, He thinks man and animals should be His sons equally. The Hindu metaphysics, I believe, belongs to the centralist tradition, in the sense that there is God to play the role as the center of the universe. However, in terms of degree, the Hindu God seems to let the universe go along its *path* freely. He is not a cosmic dictator. He creates the universe and then the laws that regulate the universe. In short, the Hindu God rules the world by law, not by His ambiguity. The law that is first given by the Hindu God at the moment He creates the universe works silently. I would like to say that if we take away the concept of God from Hinduism, what remains looks very much like Buddhism. In this sense, Hindu metaphysics and ethics could be non-centralist.

### **From Metaphysics to Ethics**

To be more precise: ethics can be free from metaphysics. By this I mean an ethical thinker can base his ethical thought on anything which is not metaphysics. To show an example of an ethical theory of this kind, I would like to talk briefly about an ancient Indian ethical theory named the *Carvaka*.

*Carvaka* is a philosophical movement found at the time of Buddha. One of the leading thinkers of this movement, Ajita Kesakambala, is well known in Buddhist texts as the thinker who violently argues against religion. In the texts on Indian philosophy, they like to put Carvaka under the category of materialism. Ajita says man is composed of four material substances: earth, water, fire and wind. There is no soul as something separate from the body. For him, a soul as such does not exist. Consciousness, as found in the life of man, animals and plants, stems from the proper combination of the four elements. The rejection of the soul by Ajita is based on his empiricist standpoint. The soul cannot be observed, therefore it is nonsense to talk about it. We see that his rejection of the soul is

epistemological—like that of modern positivists in Western philosophy.

Ajita purposefully rejects religious metaphysics. He thinks an important part of religion is its ethical thought. In India, philosophy and religion are hard to separate. Indian religion is normally based on some kind of metaphysics. As we know, metaphysics comes from reason that wants to understand why the physical world behaves like it does. In this sense, it seems impossible to have a metaphysical thought without reason. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism are all Indian religions, and all of them have different metaphysical foundations. Each metaphysical theory of these religions is given along with the explanation why they have such an idea. Within this context, Indian religion and philosophy (according to the Western tradition) are closely connected. More importantly, as philosophy (again, in Western tradition) does not necessarily lead to real practice in life, Indian philosophy seems to fill this gap if we accept that the value of anything should be considered partly from its connection to the real life—not just a game of thought. So, we can say that the Indian metaphysics generally found in Indian religions serves humankind through its ethical component. Indian metaphysical thought is not the end in itself, but a means to some kind of practice that makes people's life better.

Ajita does not think that we need metaphysics to create an ethical theory. Certainly, he needs an ethical theory that serves human life, and he thinks that in order to have such an ethical theory, people should be free from the influence of metaphysics-based ethics generally found at that time. In short, the ethical thought of Ajita is totally based on human reason, instead of a belief in metaphysical things like God, nirvana, and so on. For him, when a man does a good thing—for example, he donates his money to poor people, he should do it from his inner feeling. The donation of money on the ground of religious belief such as 'this is good because it pleases God' or 'it will lead me to Nirvana' is not really good as it does not stem from the real feeling of man.

Ajita's critique is of importance. I think Buddhists or believers of other faiths should listen to the voice of this thinker. However, I think

the Buddha has his reason to base his ethical thought on some metaphysical principles. To understand Buddhist ethics more deeply, we need to understand this reason of the Buddha.

Firstly, I would like to begin with what the Buddha thinks about the status of man. We have to start from this. As we have seen in the previous section, the Buddha distinguishes between metaphysics and ethics, as they relate to man. Metaphysics is needed, because our sense perception is limited. We know that we have two things to be used when we need to 'know.' The first is sense perception, and the second is reason. Sense perception is the basis of scientific knowledge, while reason is the ground of logical and mathematical knowledge. Science and logic are not sufficient. We see things in the universe such as stars, galaxies, and so on. Science just observes them, while logic and mathematics are not interested in the real things. Specifically, we have science only as knowledge which tries to talk about the truth of the physical world. Science alone is based on what nature gives to man—which can be called the nature of human beings. We know that our nature is not complete. Only, within the context of time, we have a very short life, and the whole humankind lives on a planet called earth which has a limited lifespan as well. It is not possible for finite beings to know the whole truth of the universe. The day the world disappears from the universe, man can no longer exist, while the universe still remains. This is an example of our natural limitations. Science uses human perception as the basis of knowledge. That is OK as far as we do not need to know much. Unfortunately, it is in our nature to feel frustrated when we think there must be so many things beyond our sense perception.

The deep nature of man as said above is something that the Buddha himself has seriously explored. Some people become his disciples for the reason that the master might know some mysterious truths of the universe which they do not know—for example, when the universe was created and by whom. The Buddha refuses to answer these questions and gives them the explanation why he will never answer this kind of question. He says, "Knowing these things or not is totally not related to the practice for the cessation of

suffering in life." This shows that the ethical theory of Buddha does not require any metaphysical knowledge.

The question is: is there a kind of metaphysical knowledge adopted by the Buddha? I think the point does not concern any metaphysical knowledge, since the knowledge mentioned is not useful for the reduction or cessation of suffering. So, if knowledge is useful in terms of the cessation of suffering, the Buddha has no reason to reject it, even though it may be metaphysical knowledge.

I would like to distinguish between two kinds of metaphysical knowledge. The first one I would like to call the suffering-related metaphysical truth; and the second one the metaphysical truth without such property. Actually, there could be two kinds of empirical and logical knowledge with regard to their involvement in the cessation of suffering. Mathematical truth like ' $2+2=4$ ' is not related to human suffering. In the same way, empirical knowledge like 'there is a galaxy one thousand light years from our world' might not be related to human suffering either. Note that both of them are not metaphysical. The points I would like to suggest are that (1) there could be some empirical and logical knowledge which is useful to understand suffering and the way to eliminate it; (2) there could be some empirical and logical knowledge which is not useful; (3) there could be some metaphysical knowledge which is useful in terms of the understanding of suffering and the way to overcome it; and (4) there could be metaphysical knowledge without such a property. The metaphysical questions rejected by the Buddha belong to '4'.

Some empirical knowledge speaks about events, but some of it speaks about the hidden relation between things that compose the event. In this sense, the latter is more profound than the former. In the same way, at the border of sense perception, we feel there must be something unknown. In modern science, scientists solve this problem, which in my view is not the problem of the world but of man himself, by creating a 'theory.' In the philosophy of science, a theory is scientific knowledge which is partly or totally composed of a statement which refers to unobservable entities. In my opinion, the words used in scientific theories such as 'natural selection' or 'particles' or 'the big bang' could be called metaphysical for the

reason that we can never know what are the things that these concepts refer to.

The Buddha does not think that we should base our knowledge only on what can be observed. This is not enough. However, sense experience still plays an important role in the Buddha's teaching as the final point to claim whether such knowledge is involved in human suffering or not. Even though 'natural selection' cannot be directly observed (like we can observe the stars in the night sky), the concept remains useful as it provides a deep understanding of the natural world. That is, the merit of the theory of natural selection lies in that it is related to what we see around us.

The Buddha's metaphysical knowledge plays a similar role as that of the theory of natural selection, for example, the theory of Four Noble Truths. I consider this teaching of the Buddha as partially metaphysical, for the reason that some statements that compose the theory refer to something that cannot be observed by sense experience. The first statement of the theory says that (1) birth, old age, sickness, and death is suffering; (2) the state in which a man needs something but he cannot get it, or he does not need that thing but he is forced to have it, or he already has something but such a thing is going to disappear—all of this is suffering; (3) 'the body and the mind' of which the person believed 'it is me and mine' is the root of suffering. The first two statements, in my view, report facts. These are empirical facts. But the last statement gives us the analysis which can be used to understand the first two. The last statement does not report facts, but explains why there are natural events found in the first two statements. I would like to call the last statement given by the Buddha himself a theory or a metaphysical explanation of the empirical events.

The noble truth of suffering begins with the facts that our biological existence has some properties. These properties are summed up by the word 'suffering.' First of all, we are born. To be born into the world can be considered just as a simple fact or as a complicated philosophical phenomenon. Albert Camus says "The question why we live and do not commit suicide is at the heart of philosophical inquiry." We see that Camus takes birth very seriously.

Certainly, his idea about the human existence must come from what he has seen, which is beyond the fact that we are born into this world like raindrops from the sky when right conditions are met. To have biological existence is to inevitably accept that old age, sickness, and death are necessary friends of birth. It is not possible to have birth without these friends. These facts of life can be considered from various levels—from just a fact to a somewhat boring truth. Camus also thinks that at times these facts of life are just boring phenomena.

Even for ordinary people who do not think seriously like Camus, birth, old age, sickness, and death can be seen as suffering. The nature of man makes us dislike old age, sickness, and death. Medical research might follow this deep instinct of mankind. But, finally, we know, we would certainly be defeated. No one in the world can escape from them. The second statement suggests that a man's life has a nature that can be illustrated through the words of Bentham; "man is created as a slave of two masters: pain and pleasure." The Buddha just points to the things that we all know. When a man needs something and he can get it, we call this happiness. On the contrary, if he cannot get it, we call this suffering. We hate being unsatisfied and love being satisfied. The state in which our life meets the satisfying conditions we call happiness, and the state of life in which our needs are not satisfied we call pain. Everybody knows this. So, the second statement by the Buddha, like the first one, talks about a fact of life.

I do not consider truths and facts as the same. Facts appear to our sense perception, but truths do not. Truths will be disclosed to the mind, or understanding. In short, we perceive a fact, and understand a truth. Facts are normally presented in the form of objects or events. A man sees a dog (object); what he sees is fact. A dog is running (event); what appears to his eyes is a fact as well.

Truths are normally given in the form of abstract relations between things in the world. After seeing a dog running, a man understands that the dog is beaten by a man. He understands further that man and animals love their life and do not want to die. This understanding possibly leads to a moral emotion in the mind of the man. He thinks, "Why does man treat animals like that? – Very sad to



see that." What happens in the mind of the man I would call truth. Certainly, this truth cannot occur without a fact.

The last statement by the Buddha is concerned with truth. He points out that man is born with the potential to suffer from old age, sickness, and death. This can be counted as bodily suffering. Besides this bodily suffering, man is also born with the potential to suffer from a state of life in which his needs are either not satisfied or he is losing his satisfied needs. This can be called a mental suffering. Both bodily and mental suffering seem to appear to us as a pure fact. This understanding is not correct. Behind these two sufferings there exists a truth. The truth says that life itself is not the problem. Life is subject to old age, sickness, and death. These states alone are not suffering if there is no feeling of me being old, sick, or coming close to death. Without the feeling of 'me' these states are just purely physical, having no meaning at all—as there is no place where suffering would play its role. For the Buddha, suffering needs its home—like fish need water. The home of suffering is the sense of 'me' and 'mine.' In the same way, if there is no sense of person, we would never suffer from not having needed things or getting hated ones.

For those who do not like the word 'metaphysics,' it might be acceptable to replace it with the word 'theory.'—Just as we call the metaphysics of Charles Darwin concerning natural selection a theory. For me, the word is just a word. Its meanings are of higher importance. In his ethical doctrine, the Buddha not only includes some facts of life, but he also adds two more things based on these facts.

First, he points out that what we normally understand as facts are not really pure facts. He usually says the human mind is naturally created to possess a sense of 'me' and 'mine.' We would call them the *egoist instincts*. The role of the egoist instincts is to read and interpret the world in such a way that everything that happens next will serve the existence and well-being of 'me.' Human life is silently directed by these egoist instincts. When the 'me' is satisfied, a feeling of pleasure occurs. On the contrary, a feeling of pain can be experienced/felt. The state of life directed by egoist instincts is called 'suffering'. This is the real meaning of suffering. Thus, we have three

notions that are of importance in this context: pain, pleasure, and suffering. Suffering is the word used by the Buddha to describe a life which is directed by egoist instincts, which sometimes results in pain, and sometimes in pleasure.

The second thing usually done by the Buddha, after pointing the first, is to deeply analyze the conditions that cause the problem. The analysis has to be done on the ground of some metaphysical ideas, or theory. This is why I insist that Buddhist ethics needs metaphysics. Ajita has his own ethical theory, but I think his theory is not as deep as the Buddha's teachings. Goodness can also be found in the ethical theory of Ajita, I believe so, but it is goodness which is based on social conventions created by man in the community. A good man is one who respects the law. In terms of sociality, I have nothing to argue against this. However, human life does not have only a social dimension; man is naturally *universal* although we live in particular communities we are all human. In the teaching of Buddha, individuality is deeper than sociality. So, social goodness does not guarantee the absence of personal suffering.

We need a kind of goodness which is relevant to the reduction or cessation of personal suffering. This is why the Buddha bases his ethical doctrines on some metaphysical principles. In the next sections, the major metaphysical ideas used by the Buddha as foundations of his ethical theory will be explored.

### **Cosmic Wisdom**

There are two different theories concerning the nature of the universe. The first one states that the universe has been created with definite purpose. The second one does not think that the universe has a purpose. Sometimes, the theory of the first kind has been linked to theistic thought. That is not necessary. According to some theistic religions, God created the universe with some purposes in His mind and what happens in the universe is caused by God to achieve those purposes. Thomas Aquinas seems to hold this kind of theory. Hinduism also teaches that the universe is created by God, but the Hindu God seems to have no definite purpose in His mind. When the

Hindu God created the universe, He did two things. First, creating things by collecting material substances which exist independently from Him (this material substance is called *Prakriti* in Sanskrit). Second, setting up natural law to deal with the created things. The universe in Hindu philosophy is highly complicated and God does not need to regulate it. This is not possible! So, the best way chosen by God is to let the whole universe run along the cosmic law that he has set up. In modern science, scientists, such as Albert Einstein, believe that the universe acts in such a way that things in the universe have a path to follow. This belief is the same as what is adopted by Hindu philosophy. Both of them share the view that the universe might not have a purpose—as that is not possible when the universe is under such highly complicated conditions.

To understand Aquinas' idea concerning God's purpose in creating the universe, we should start from his analysis of the *four causes* given by Aristotle and the application of the concept of the four causes in his theological work concerning God's creation of the universe. We will consider only the cause named the *final cause*. According to Aristotle, a tree produces fruits. There is a final cause of the fruit, and who determines this is not the tree itself but the one who creates the tree. We see that some fruits, such as mango and apple, are the food of man and animals. Can we say that the creator created the tree to bear fruits to be food for man and animals? The answer is no. The final cause is defined by Aristotle as the potentiality inside the thing which has evolved into actuality. In a mango fruit, there is the potential to grow as a mango tree. So, the final cause of the mango tree is the state in which it has produced another mango tree.

Look at an artist. He paints a picture. What is the final cause of the production of the painting? Money? No. Even though it could be possible that the artist has painted for money, the money is not counted as the final cause. The final cause of painting is to have the painting. In the same way, the final cause of a farmer planting rice is to have rice. We define the final cause of painting or planting rice from the potential inside the work.

Aquinas makes at least two arguments when discussing what the final cause of a thing is. First, to state that things in the universe are created by God and God alone knows what the final cause hidden in a thing is. Second, man might think this is the final cause, or the purpose of the creation of the thing by God, in such a thing. The understanding of man could be either correct or not. It is human wisdom that helps man understand the final causes of things. The 'balance and harmony of the universe' has been set up by God, through placing the proper final cause in everything. If man understands correctly, his understanding would be of use to himself and the world. On the other hand, his misunderstanding would cause a problem both to himself and the world. However, as man can never violate the balance and harmony of the universe, finally it is man alone to suffer from his own misunderstanding of the final causes of things.

Personally, I appreciate the profound thought of Aquinas. Actually, I think there is some shared belief concerning the purpose of the universe among Aquinas, Hinduism, and Buddhism. At the beginning of this section, I spoke as if Hinduism does not think that God has created the universe with some purpose. I do not think there is a God in any religion doing a thing like this. The concept of God has some associations, and one among them is that God has wisdom and responsibility. Even though God cannot be seen through our eyes, we can 'see' God from what He has done, which is the whole universe. Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism believe in the order of the universe. The difference just lies in that while Christianity and Hinduism say that the order comes from God, Buddhism says it is natural in the sense that we do not need a creator to explain this order. Suppose we are not interested in the source of order, and interested only in the order itself. These three religions, I think, adopt the idea that the universe has been arranged in a balanced and harmonious manner, and this indicates that the universe has a purpose to exist.

Actually, those who do not believe that the universe has some purpose may not believe in any religion, e.g. the Darwinian biologist

Richard Dawkins.<sup>i</sup> I do not think that Darwin talks about the problem of whether or not the world was created with a purpose. However, I think I have seen some implications in his theory. The working of natural selection in my opinion is for nothing but the balance of the world. There cannot be a natural state in which things in nature are allowed to do as they need to do. Natural selection acts as the invisible holy hand to keep the world always in the state of balance. There is no power on earth to challenge this invisible hand.

Dawkins interprets Darwin's theory in his own way. In his book, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design*, Dawkins tries to argue against the thought of William Paley who says that the world has been created by God, according to design. We know that Paley's idea mainly comes from Aquinas, and we know further that Aquinas believes in a final cause of the universe. So, the argument by Dawkins is in its deepest level against the belief in a final cause.

Between the two sides, Buddhism is more inclined toward a shared belief with Christianity and Hinduism than the one of scientists like Dawkins. However, some perspectives of Dawkins could be detected in Buddha's arguments when he has to explain the nature of the universe. Creationists and the evolutionists are sometimes extremists in the sense that they do not listen to each other. The stance of Buddhism concerning the creation of the universe and its nature belongs to its well-known position, called the 'middle-way' position. The Buddha teaches his disciples to listen to others who hold different beliefs as much as possible. In doing so, Buddhists would find that others also have some good ideas that should not be rejected just because they have been labeled as non-Buddhist theories.

Before going into the detail of the Buddhist theory concerning the nature of the universe, I think we should clarify a certain concept, as it plays an important role in our discussion.

I am talking about the concept of *final cause*. I think, to understand the concept more easily we should use the word

---

<sup>i</sup> Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Bantam, 2006.

'purpose' instead. Consider the following example: An artist paints pictures. He thinks he loves art and he happily decides to spend his life as an artist. When he paints, he feels happy. For him, the purpose of the artist's life is to create a work of art. Certainly, he may sell some of his paintings to earn a living, but money is not the purpose of spending his life as an artist. A businessman thinks differently. For him, money is the only purpose in doing business. When he earns a lot of money, he feels happy. These two people do not have the same belief, and if we ask them 'what do you think the purpose of your life is', the first man would say 'art' and the second man 'money'. How to judge which one of them is correct?

For Aristotle, the purpose of a thing is its *potential* which turns to be an *actual* state.—Just as the purpose of a chicken in laying eggs is not to be human food but to produce another chicken. We need to question why Aristotle uses the potentiality in a thing to determine its purpose. For me, if we could find an answer that might help us understand Aristotle more deeply, then that answer could be used to solve the above question concerning what should be counted as the real purpose of the lifestyles of the painter and the businessman in the examples above.

Imagine the universe which contains so many things. Things are created differently. The varieties of things in the world suggest that having many things is better than having few things. In each different thing, there exists a potentiality. For example, we have three kinds of trees: orange, mango, and banana. We know that having a lot of fruits is better than having a few. The benefit found in having many things is not judged from a perspective of man; but from the whole world. Certainly, man prefers many fruits to few fruits. The concept of 'freedom' created by man in the history of humankind is basically based on the chance to have a lot of things, otherwise freedom is not possible. What I want to say here is: the variety of things in the world suggests that this world has been created to serve as the place where the members of natural world would have as much freedom as possible. Man is a member of the natural world. We like the world which has so many kinds of fruits. Why do we like that? We like that because this kind of world serves our freedom better than the one

which has few fruits. Animals are members of this world as well. Animals, like us, need a world which has a variety of food. Even though they do not say why they like it, we can understand that a world full of consumable things makes them feel more free and happy, more than a world with limited consumable things. In short, the world has so many different things. According to theistic religion, this shows us the wisdom and kindness of God. In Darwinism, natural selection is the invisible hand choosing the varieties as it knows this is the best. In Buddhism, the Buddha says nature is wise; and from the wisdom of nature things are inclined to be many rather than few, because that is a good thing.

What we have considered above is concerned with the varieties of natural things only. There are so many things besides this that we can consider to understand the hidden truths behind created things in the universe. Let's turn back to the point of variety again. Allow me to use three kinds of fruits again. Mangoes, oranges, and bananas have their own unique characteristics. In Aristotle's philosophy, the mango tree has the potentiality to produce another mango tree. It is the same with oranges and bananas. God or nature gives them the mission to keep their own characteristics. From the biological point of view, we know that all living organisms in the world have their own genetic characteristics. Why does a banana tree have to produce banana fruits, and not oranges or mangoes? The answer is so clear. The biological order found in any living organism is needed to keep the varieties of things. As long as the three kinds of fruits keep their own self-identity, we would have at least three kinds of fruit in the world. This is why the knowledge of the final cause is of importance in the view of Aristotle. This knowledge will provide man with the truth concerning the ultimate nature of things. Some modern scientific work like genetic modification might be better understood in the light of knowledge concerning the final cause.—For example, if we think of an attempt to modify the genes of man, animals, or plants in some way, this seriously changes the final cause in them; we have to unconditionally stop!

Buddhism believes in natural law. Some Buddhist texts, developed after the death of Buddha, state that there are five kinds of

natural law in Buddhist teaching. They are: physical law—the law dealing with non-living objects; biological law—the law dealing with living organisms; law of mind—dealing with the mind of things that have a mind; the law of action—dealing with the moral action of things that can be a moral agent; and grand law—dealing with the balance and harmony of the universe as a whole. From a Buddhist perspective, what we have considered above concerning the purpose given by nature in natural things can be best considered through the last law. The law of nature in the view of Buddha is intelligent in the sense that it usually works wisely. For example, when we break a bone—say at our hand; the biological law that regulates our body has its way to solve the problem. We do not need to cure it. We just put the hand in a device to keep the hand still; gradually the bone will cure itself.

It seems that Buddhism and Aristotle share a belief in the final cause. A great Buddhist thinker of Thailand, Payutto Bhikkhu, always says that the teaching of Buddha concerning the relationship between cause and effect is one of the important things Buddhists should know. He says: when a farmer plants rice, the direct effect resulting from that cause - planting rice - is having rice. Some farmers think that the effect to be found from their work is money. This is not correct. Misunderstanding in anything has the potential to cause suffering. Note that this thought of Payutto Bhikkhu is very similar to that of Aristotle. I think Payutto Bhikkhu does not invent a new thought but follows the thought of Buddha.

Suffering in the teaching of Buddha essentially stems from ignorance—the state of not having correct knowledge. The universe has its way, but many times man does not understand that, and because of this, suffering usually occurs. The biological law in Buddhist teaching determines that the planting of rice is the cause, and having rice is the effect. Man should learn to accept this truth. The changing of rice into money is a thing created by man, and not by natural law. Anything created by man has a high potential to fail, compared with what is created by nature. So, the farmer should know: (1) when he plants rice properly, he will certainly have rice; (2) when he sells his rice in the market, there is nothing guaranteeing



that he will get a fair price. Certainly, the Buddha accepts that economic problems should be solved by the government, but the understanding of the difference between natural law and human law helps much in reducing the suffering that stems from human law. In short, the law of nature is more perfect than human law. Economic life which does not depend much on human law is more stable than one basically depending on the human law. Sufficiency economy, taught by the Thai king, is one that tries to depend on natural law more than the human law. That is: farmers should plant for self-consumption first, and sell only what is left. This is a more stable economic system, compared with the planting of rice to be sold in the market alone.

Even though the belief in the purpose of the created things in the universe in the opinion of Aquinas, Aristotle, and Buddhism seems to be useful, there is a tough question to be answered by those who agree with the belief in natural purpose. The question is very simple: how do we know this is the purpose of having this thing in the universe? Something I think might not cause the problem—for example, having the sun. The sun is clearly created to be the source of energy for our world. The earth is created to be the ground for setting up our home, doing agricultural work, and so on.

The problem seems to lie in a thing that man has been involved with so much. For example, fish in the sea—how to see what is the purpose of nature in creating them? For man, fish are food. But for nature fish are for what? This question is not easy to answer. Some Darwinian thinkers such as Dawkins hold that there is no purpose in natural things. For this reason, they do not see what to be called natural purposes in these things.

I would like to give some ideas. First, the natural purpose of a thing can be more than one. Nature creates man to live on food, and our food can be only two things: plants and animals. So, to say that the final cause in a mango fruit is not being the food of man might not be true. If nature needs a mango fruit to produce another mango tree only, why does nature create it to be edible for man and animals? In my view, the final cause in a mango fruit could be at least twofold: producing another mango tree and being food for man and animals.

The problem of having one thing with two or more properties at the same time may cause problems, if two or more properties conflict with each other; what is to be chosen as the first priority? I am not sure about the answer. However, my inner feeling suggests that the final answer should depend on what is of most importance for the universe as a whole. For nature, the final cause of a mango fruit is to produce another mango tree; but for man, it is our food. The world is bigger than man. So, when these two things conflict with each other, the bigger has to be chosen. I think my answer is reasonable. If we have the last potato in the world, what to be done with it between eating and planting? The answer is very clear. Note that the answer follows the need of nature, rather than man. Normally, what serves the need of nature, such as planting the last potato instead of eating it, might serve the need of man after that—we have potatoes to eat when the last one has grown and produced more potatoes.

Another great Thai Buddhist thinker, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, believes that the universe has its spirit. The word ‘spirit’ here is used to mean at least two things. First, it means the general tendency of the whole universe to go a particular way. For Buddhadasa, if natural selection has the tendency to choose the fittest species, this could be counted as the spirit of nature. Second, this general tendency of the natural world should be used as a moral lesson for man to answer the question of how to live in the world. The spirit of the universe in this second meaning is a moral guideline for human beings, while in the first meaning it is a metaphysical state of things.

Buddhadasa claims that the spirit of the natural world, as it expresses itself through the behavior of natural things around us, is collectivist, not individualist. Between collectivist and individualist creatures in the world, the former has more potential to survive. For example, we have two kinds of trees, A and B. Fruits of A are edible for man and animals, but B are not. In terms of the potential to survive, it is clear that A is of higher importance. The fruits of B fall from the mother tree and grow under the shadow of the mother only. But fruits of A could be carried by birds (in their stomachs) hundreds of miles away and grow in new lands. A and B differ in that A behaves as a collectivist, while B behaves as an individualist.

In the beginning of this chapter, we talked about the final cause in natural things and its role in keeping the variety of the natural world. Buddhism believes in a state of things which is called '*aniccata*' in Pali. This term is usually translated as 'impermanence.' I would like to call it 'Buddhist impermanence' to distinguish it from the same concept possibly found in other philosophical schools. Briefly, the Buddhist grand natural law (*dhammathiti*), which we have referred to previously, states that there is some grand path of the universe for things to follow alike. For example, everything has its life span. Nothing can exist forever. This is the result of the path chosen by the grand natural law. Man, animals, plants, mountains, oceans, stars, galaxies, and so on are different, but all of them have to follow the grand path which some day leads to the end. During the process of following the grand path, each thing has its own unique way of changing. Some change belongs to the grand path, but some does not. Man and animals are subject to sickness, old age, and death alike. This is change according to the grand law. Some change in man, animals, and plants may result in new properties. In Darwin's theory, they call it 'variation'. For example, it could be possible that one day a son of slave parents is born highly intelligent. This boy later becomes the leader of the nation and abolishes the law that allows slavery throughout the country. Variation that is useful will be 'chosen' by natural selection. According to the Buddhist theory of impermanence (*aniccata*), things in nature are all subject to unpredictable change, as found in the case of the slave boy. Certainly, some Buddhist texts claim that there must be an explanation for every change, including the one happening to the slave boy. I do not need to discuss this point. A thing I want to say is: things in nature have two ways to go in terms of change. One, to follow the grand path (*dhammathiti*). Two, to follow the small path (*aniccata*). The grand path can be predicted, but the small path cannot.

Why does the universe need these two types of change? The answer is: to keep things balanced and just. In terms of biology, there might be some biological explanation for the case of the slave boy. In short, we think that the very complicated combination of genes and related conditions make it possible for an organism with lower

properties of intelligence, strength, and so on to have an offspring that possesses higher qualities. Buddhism calls variation like this an event that stems from the law of impermanence. Note that offspring with better qualities has to follow the grand path as well—they have to die someday, for example.

From the history of mankind, we have learned that offsprings of great figures are not necessarily great like their parents. The children of Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, or even the Buddha are not great as their fathers. There is a reason behind this. It is not a reason from man, but from nature.

To use the words of Buddhadasa, I would like to say that the spirit of the universe cannot accept imbalance and injustice to be permanently found among things. This is the great law, called '*dhammathiti*' or '*dhammniyama*' in Pali. According to the collectivist spirit of the universe, all living things in the world should learn to love each other rather than to hate. But they do not, for some unknown reason. This is the cause of competition to survive among men, animals, and plants. Actually, the collectivist spirit of the universe would never allow anything to become extinct. But, it is the unknown change in things, which is allowed by the theory of small change as said above, that causes such unhappy phenomenon. Some people question "If God loves me, why does He create me to kill animals and plants and eat them? This is a tragedy." This question can be raised in Buddhist context as well. If the universe has a collectivist spirit, why does it allow things in nature to kill and use others as their food?

To understand the universe for answering the above question, we need to know some necessity that the universe itself seems unable to avoid. There are two kinds of things in the universe: living and non-living entities. For religion, living things have something that cannot be found in non-living things. It is a property called 'life'. Life in some Indian religions is not a property of matter, but of the soul—a thing that naturally exists in the universe along with matter from the unknown beginning of the universe. But in science, they like to believe that life and mind stem from evolution. We will not discuss this subject. What we shall consider is: when a life appears in the

world, it needs supporting conditions such as air, water, and food. We assume that air and water are non-living entities that do not have consciousness. The use of non-living entities to support life lead to no moral questions because moral questions relate to conscious entities only.

Man eats plants and animals, and we call these things food. We cannot eat things other than this. In the same way, some animals eat plants and animals, like man, while some animals eat either plants or animals alone. The food of plants is water and nutrients in the ground. From what we have said above, we can conclude that a stone does not eat; a plant eats non-living things; some animals eat plants only; some animals eat animals only; some animals eat both; and when plants and animals are dead, their bodies will turn to be food of the lowest living things—plants. Biologists believe that relations between natural beings in terms of food is a phenomenon stemming from evolution. In some Indian philosophical schools such as Jainism and some schools of Hinduism, the concept of evolution has been adopted. The difference just lies in that the evolution of things in natural world according to these Indian philosophies needs both matter and an immaterial entity, which is sometimes called ‘soul’ (*atman*) and sometimes ‘self’ (*jiva*.) Buddhism does not say much about evolution, but some Buddhist texts seem to accept the concept of evolution which is widely adopted in Indian tradition.

The process of evolution which finally turns man and animals into eaters of other life is something unpredictable in the Buddhist perspective as it is caused by the small path of nature, and not the grand one. It could be possible that one time in the very distant past, there were animals which were not ‘other-life eaters’, just like plants. However, the very complicated surrounding conditions of the world made them unfit for survival. They are completely extinct from the world, and all surviving animals are eaters of other life as seen now. The change of conditions that made some species extinct and some survive is not determined by the grand path. The grand path just acts as the controller of the natural world in the grand scale, and everything it does is for two things alone: balance and justice.

Some people wonder “Is it fair to eat animals as they share the same important nature with us? —for example, they love their life and do not need to die like us.” In my view, this is the greatest moral dilemma in our life.

To answer the above question is never easy. In my view, this kind of question includes the question raised in the history of philosophy of religion long time ago: if there is a God and if God is wise and loves everything He creates, why did He create bad things such as sickness and death? Every concept that is created by man seems to face a certain kind of dilemma. The concept of God is no exception. On the one hand, theologians have to claim that God as the highest moral and intellectual being is the most perfect entity in the universe. Everything created by God has to be perfect too. On the other hand, this claim conflicts with some facts that we have seen in the world. There are some bad things such as sickness. A man who is dying of cancer may need to know “why did God create cancer?” and “what is the utility of this thing to man?” It seems that no one among the great theologians of the world could clear this doubt.

Buddhism does not teach that God is the creator of the universe, but that the universe naturally exists, and has a law to follow. Previously, we considered the main two laws adopted in Buddhist texts: the grand and the small laws. Birth, old age, sickness, and death are determined by the grand law. The role of the grand law is to keep the world in balance and just. Death is necessary to make the world shareable by endless lives who used to live in the past, are living in the present, and will live in the future. No one can live in the world forever. This empirical fact is determined by logical necessity which states that:

- (1) The world should be an open place for anybody.
- (2) As an open place, no one can stay permanently because that will prevent others from sharing the world.
- (3) Birth is a ticket for living in this world. This ticket will expire someday.
- (4) Death is the expiration of the ticket.

- (5) Sickness and old age are messages from nature to warn that your ticket will expire soon. So, please be prepared for what is about to happen.

Buddhism believes in natural balance and justice, and such a belief does not come from emptiness, but from the above logical necessity of the world which determines empirical facts to be seen in the world. God does not create cancer—the Buddha would say. Cancer has to be inevitably found when there is a proper combination of conditions. The Buddhist small law of change says that under the very complicated conditions of the world, anything can happen, and man can never predict it.

In the future, the evolution of things in the world, including man, might cause new things to appear. The old forms of life will become extinct if natural selection considers them no longer suitable to exist. The new forms of life will replace the old ones. - This is eternal truth.

However, looking from the grand perspective, the whole universe will always be balanced and just. The universe is a theater of existences. There is a permanent law of balance and justice which applies to everything coming into the theater. The Buddha says we can enjoy living and have a peaceful life as much as permitted by nature, and then we will leave the theater so that others may come in.

## Bibliography

- Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. Gramercy, 1995.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man*. Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design*, Norton, 1987
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Bantam 2006.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Third Edition. The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Newton, Isaac. *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. University of California Press, 1999.
- Promta, Somparn. *An Essay Concerning Buddhist Ethics*. Chulalongkorn University Press. 2008.
- Promta, Somparn. *Classical Indian Philosophy*. Chulalongkorn University Press, 2011.
- Wilson, Edward O. *On Human Nature*. Harvard University Press, 1979.



# 2:

## **Buddhist Soteriological Aims and Their Contribution to Environmental Well-Being<sup>1</sup>**

---

*Anthony Le Duc*

### **Abstract**

In the face of modern day environmental problems, various religious systems are turned to for inspiration to support environmental conservation. Buddhism is often employed as a resource since it is perceived as an environment-friendly religion that provides an alternative to strongly anthropocentric views and attitudes that perceive the value of nature in merely instrumental terms, and thus would justify wanton exploitation of natural resources to benefit the needs of human beings. The secular environmental ethic notion of intrinsic value in nature is often applied to Buddhism in which Buddhist textual sources are examined for evidence to support the assumption that if nature is seen to possess intrinsic value, or at least positive value, it follows that nature has rights that must be respected by human beings. This paper sets out to review the application of the intrinsic-value-in-nature concept to Theravada Buddhism, and argues that such a task is problematic in this case because Buddhism with its doctrine of not-self is incompatible with the project of ascribing intrinsic value to nature. Rather, in Buddhism, the ultimate value is

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is an expanded version of the paper delivered at the international conference on *Environmental Values Emerging from Cultures and Religion*, 18 September 2014 in Bangkok, Thailand.

liberation from *samsāric* life. This paper argues that the soteriological aims of Theravada Buddhism prescribe a lifestyle that steers away from greed, hatred and delusion which characterize an unwholesome life. As one goes about eliminating unwholesome states from one's life, one needs to develop various virtues that would contribute to spiritual progress and achievement of personal salvation. Many of the virtues aimed at achieving liberation from *samsāra* can be framed in context of environmental concerns to reflect their connection to environmental well-being. Thus, promoting environmental well-being can be seen as part and parcel of the overall Buddhist agenda to achieve spiritual progress, personal well-being, and ultimately, nirvanic bliss.

## Introduction

In the age of increasing awareness of the escalating ecological destruction occurring in the world, religion continues to be a source of inspiration for discovering and retrieving valuable ideas to build a practical and cohesive environmental ethic. Undoubtedly, world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism are enthusiastically turned to for inspiration and directions, partially because it is believed, as Hans Küng pointed out, absoluteness and universality of ethical obligation finds its purpose and reason in religious belief. Unconditional obligation cannot be derived from abstract ideas of "humanity" if there is no religion to enforce them (53). The Thai monk professor Phra Dharmakosajarn affirms, "If we employ our lives correctly, environment problems could be solved through our religion teachings" (23). He also adds that if religious adherents make an effort to understand more deeply their religious heritage, it would positively affect their behavior towards living things and the environment (41). Many environmental advocates who believe that religions can serve as a beneficial resource hail Buddhism as an "environmentally friendly" religion, a claim that is not without ground. However, in regards to Theravada or early Buddhism, which is the predominant ambit in mainland Southeast Asia, one must outline an approach that is authentic to the nature of the religion rather than being imposed upon by notions from secular

environmentalism that may not cohere with essential Buddhist beliefs.

### **The Intrinsic Value Debate in Secular Environmental Ethics**

Religious environmental ethics often take their cues from secular environmental ethics, especially in regards to the issue of value in nature, where the question of whether or not nature has intrinsic value is a bone of contention. It is thus important to briefly review what exactly is meant by intrinsic value. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines the word “intrinsic” as “belonging to the essential nature of a thing” while the word value is defined as “relative worth, utility, or importance”. Taken together, “intrinsic value” can be said to be the value or the worth that belongs to the essential nature or constitution of a thing. Intrinsic value is distinguished from instrumental value in which something is valued by a particular subject as a means only. However, John O’Neill has pointed out that the term “intrinsic value” has been used in at least three different basic senses in various literatures (131-142). The first sense is that an object has intrinsic value when it is an end in itself. Arne Naess, the founder of *deep ecology* argues that “The well-being of non-human life on Earth has value in itself. This value is independent of any instrumental usefulness for limited human purposes” (quoted in O’Neill 131).

The second sense refers to the “intrinsic properties” belonging to a natural entity that is constitutive of its flourishing. Paul W. Taylor posits a “biocentric ethic” that all living individual organisms possess intrinsic value because they are teleological centers of life. Through their adaptive mechanisms and biological functions, they indicate themselves to have goals of living, flourishing, and propagating themselves. Organisms indicate themselves to be self-valuing, goal-seeking individuals independent of any human valuation of them. Thus by recognizing that non-human organisms have “inherent worth,” it is sufficient to devise prescriptive or prohibitive norms that prevent human interference in the development and flourishing of these life forms (74-84).

The third sense is not so much an axiological claim as a metaethical position in that here intrinsic value is identified as an “objective value,” meaning a natural entity is itself a source and *locus* of value independent of human valuation. The epistemological stance here is taken against the subjectivist value theory which argues for a conscious valuer that confers value onto objects. Holmes Roston III argues that each organism has a telos or a “valued state.” By virtue of its DNA-programmed activities, it seeks to attain certain states while avoiding others. Because the telos is a valued state, Roston III reasons, the fulfillment of the telos involves the realization of value. This value is what he refers to as “natural value.” However, there is also a “systemic value” in which entities in nature either possess their own telos or have a role of producing or supporting the teleological processes of life in a “projective nature.” According to Roston III, the existence of this value is “objective” and not “subjective” because it does not depend on the presence of any minds (143-153).

J. Baird Callicott disagrees with Roston III that value can be objective. Callicott maintains that value is foremost a verb and only becomes a noun derivatively. The act of valuing, thus requires an intentional act of a subject who ascribes value on an object. According to Callicott, “Subjects think, perceive, desire, and value. The intentions, the targets, of a subject's valuing are valuable, just as the intentions of a subject's desiring are desirable. If there were no desiring subjects, nothing would be desirable. If there were no valuing subjects, nothing would be valuable” (298). Callicott maintains that intentionally conscious beings value things in two ways: intrinsically and instrumentally. As human beings we value ourselves intrinsically as well as instrumentally. We can also ascribe the same values to other entities around us. However, when it comes to intrinsic value, human beings are only willing to ascribe intrinsic value to something with good reasons (259). The effort of Callicott, therefore, is to come up with the reasons sufficient enough for human beings to value entities in nature intrinsically.

In environmental ethics, the search for intrinsic value in nature is important because the act of ascribing intrinsic value to discovering intrinsic value in nature is fundamental to giving a moral status to

aspects of nature or to nature as a whole (Afeissa 531). For many environmental philosophers to hold an environmental ethic is to hold that non-human nature has intrinsic value in one sense or another. Thus, the notion of intrinsic value is the *sine qua non* of nonanthropocentric environmental ethic (Nunez 105). The task of environmental ethics today is to do two things. First, it must prove that natural entities possess intrinsic value of particular degrees based on reasonable criteria. Second, it accords moral obligations and responsibility to human beings in how they ought to treat nature in view of the existence of such intrinsic value (Afeissa 529).

The intrinsic value debate among environmental philosophers, however, does not simply revolve around how and in what degrees intrinsic value ought to be ascribed to non-human nature. Neopragmatists such as Bryan Norton take an antifoundationalist stance and deny that these metaethical issues need to be settled or even can be settled before actions are taken on behalf of the ecology. Norton feels that the time and energy spent on disputing whether nature has intrinsic or instrumental value or whether the intrinsic values are objective or subjective are done at the cost of coming up with timely solutions to counter environmental destruction. For Norton, a long and wide anthropocentrism “converges” on the same practical applications as the non-anthropocentrists. Thus, time and energy is better spent on refining environmental policies rather than debating theoretical matters (187-204). However, non-anthropocentrists like Callicott strongly disagree with Norton, and thus the debate continues despite it not being able to obtain any satisfactory consensus. For secular environmental ethics then, the quest for intrinsic value in nature remains a foundational issue for achieving ecological well-being.

### **Buddhism and the Value of Nature**

Based on the above discussion, one can see that the question of what kind of value should be ascribed to nature is a central issue in modern environmental ethics. Despite the lack of consensus, the question is of such great significance that it is not surprising that this

matter gets transferred to religion when these systems are examined for resources to support an environmental ethic. For example, in Christianity, some scholars claim that nature has intrinsic value because all creation was proclaimed to be good by God after it was created.<sup>2</sup> With respect to Buddhism, while the perspectives may be described as spanning a continuum, we can fundamentally group them into opposing camps, one which affirms that Buddhism places positive value on nature while the other denies this to be the case. Lambert Schmithausen falls into the latter group when he observes:

In the canonical texts of Early Buddhism, all mundane existence is regarded as unsatisfactory, either because suffering prevails, or because existence is inevitably impermanent... Nature cannot but be ultimately unsatisfactory, for it too is marked by pain and death, or at least by impermanence... Therefore, the only goal worth striving for is Nirvāṇa, which [is] entirely beyond mundane existence. (12)

Ultimate value, says Schmithausen, is placed on attainment of salvation and not on the preservation of nature. The critics generally hold the view that Buddhist soteriology, which recognizes the goal of attaining liberation as the ultimate good, entails placing negative value on nature. Ian Harris charges contemporary Buddhists as having assented to secular environmental concerns without having real basis in central Buddhist teachings (110). Harris holds one of the more extreme positions in asserting that early Buddhism cannot accommodate an environmental ethic with its view toward nature and its soteriological outlook. After examining carefully the Buddhist attitudes toward animals and plants from the early canon, Harris concludes that any value placed on them were instrumental and not much concern for their preservation was displayed.

---

<sup>2</sup> A discussion on intrinsic value in nature from a Christian perspective can be seen in the work of Jame Schaeffer (2009). *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts*. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press.

Other scholars are less ready to deny that Buddhism does not accord any value to nature; however, few are willing to go so far as to claim that nature in Buddhism has intrinsic value. John J. Holder, for example, points out that in Buddhism, nature can objectively be seen to have profound value because nature helps facilitate a person's spiritual progress (116). For Holder, nature has positive value when it is used pragmatically within a Buddhist framework that promotes a spiritual path that entails living in the natural world (122). Even Daniel H. Henning, who advocates an intimate connection between Buddhism and Deep Ecology admits that it is not possible to ascribe intrinsic value to nature in the Buddhist outlook (16). To be sure countless writers have pointed to evidence that support the value of nature, seen in the fact that the Buddha was said to be born, achieved enlightenment, and died under various types of trees, lived and taught in natural environments, and often taught his disciples using examples from nature. However, these facts do not necessarily mean that nature has intrinsic value in the manner of secular environmental ethics. Thus, in Buddhism, there is far from a consensus as to what kind of value nature has, if any at all. However, as I will show in the following paragraphs, expending energy on this matter may prove to be futile in view of Buddhist doctrines, and the effort to employ Buddhism as a resource to advance an environmental ethic may be better served by looking into other avenues within the tradition itself.

### **The Buddhist Concept of Self**

There is one point that underlies the intrinsic-value-in-nature debate, and that value, whether objective or subjective, presupposes a container or holder of value. This holder of value, whether conscious or unconscious, sentient or insentient, is called a self or the essence of a thing. While in Western philosophy, the notion of a substantiated entity is normative, to apply the same categories to Eastern philosophy, in particular Buddhism, becomes problematic. Buddhism's doctrine of not-self is precisely what makes our entire discussion on whether nature has or does not have intrinsic value futile because this doctrine negates any idea of a fixed, static entity, in effect, a holder of value. The doctrine of not-self, moreover, makes it

not possible to speak of whether the value in nature is positive or negative because no final view is taken on this matter as well.

Buddhism's threefold doctrine of *aniccā-dukka-anattā* known as the Three Marks of Existence together deny the concept of self (*attā*). *Aniccā* or impermanence serves as the first characteristic from which the other two characteristics are derived. It asserts that everything is in a state of flux, and the impression that things being permanent are simply an illusion (Hawkins 42). Thus, this mark of existence denies what is normally perceived to be "real" in the phenomenal world in Western thinking. *Dukkha*, translated as mental or physical pain or suffering, constitutes the second mark of existence and is directly related to the first. According to the Buddha's teaching, all things that are impermanent are one way or another unsatisfactory and to place one's trust and dependence on impermanent things is doomed to failure. Suffering, thus, represents the unsatisfactoriness that comes from the dislocations in one's life when one undergoes the trauma of birth and fear of death, the experience of sickness and old age, the discomfort in being tied to what one dislikes and separated from what one loves. *Dukkha*, then is the result of *tanhā*, often translated as desire. However, there are good desires and there are bad desires. *Tanhā* represents the selfish desires for private fulfillment that throws us out of a state of freedom and causes us to experience increasing pain and suffering (Smith 102). *Dukkha* is not limited to painful experience but even to pleasurable experiences because even such experiences are impermanent and thus liable to suffering (Nyanatiloka 110).

While *aniccā* and *dukka* are intimately connected with the Buddhist negation of self, it is in the third mark of existence that this negation is directly stated, the doctrine of *anattā*. This unique invention that makes up the central Buddhist teaching declares that there is no self existing real ego-entity, soul or any other permanent substance either within the bodily and mental phenomena of existence or outside of them. The *anattā* doctrine must be taken seriously by those attempting to investigate Buddhism for resources of environmental ethics because this is the one doctrine upon which all Buddhist philosophy is built, and is uniquely a Buddhist teaching



not found in other religions. An accurate understanding of Buddhism rests on the understanding that reality is comprised of mere continually self-consuming process of arising and passing bodily and mental phenomena, and that there is no separate ego-entity within or without this process. C. H. S. Ward warns, "We must try to overcome the difficulty of thinking of 'will' without a 'willer'; of 'deed' without a 'doer'; of 'suffering' without a 'sufferer'; in a word, of life being carried on without personal agents" (Quoted in Love 304).

Thus, in Buddhism, life is but a composite of the five aggregates (*khandha*) divided into two parts (mental and physical). The four aggregates of feeling, perception, dispositions and consciousness comprise the mental part while the form is the physical part of the individual. The Buddha teaches that all these aggregates are characterized by impermanence, suffering, and changeableness. Human existence, as we observe it, is comprised merely of processes: the mental and physical phenomena which has been going on since time immemorial and will continue for unthinkably long periods of time. The fact that these five aggregates are present and "co-operate" in these processes does not mean a presence of any self-dependent real ego-entity or personality (Nyanatiloka 160). Every configuration of aggregates is a momentary force or entity separate from the next. An often employed analogy to drive the point of not-self home is the image of a cart that is essentially an aggregate of all its parts, the wheels, the axle, the pole, the cart-body, and so forth placed in a certain relationship to one another. However, the cart as a static and permanent entity is a mere illusion (Vis.M.XVIII). The famous Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa explained the existence of beings as follows:

In the ultimate sense the life-moment of living beings is extremely short, being only as much as the occurrence of a single conscious moment. Just as a chariot wheel, when it is rolling, rolls [that is, touches the ground] only on one point of [the circumference of] its tire, and, when it is at rest, rests only on one point, so too, the life of living beings lasts only for a single conscious moment. When that consciousness has ceased, the being is said to have ceased, according as it is said: "In a

past conscious moment he did live, not he does live, not he will live. In a future conscious moment not he did live, not he does live, he will live. In the present conscious moment not he did live, he does live, not he will live." (Vis.M.VIII)

The five aggregates, the Buddha teaches, are not under control of anybody. It is improper to consider these *khandhas* as "this is mine" or "this is I" or "this is my self" (Varanasi 14). The processes observed are the result of Dependent Origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), a theory that attempts to show that all phenomena are conditionally related to one another. The teaching which is found in countless sutras is stated in an abstract formula as follows:

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.

When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases. (S.II.21.)

*Paṭiccasamuppāda* also known as "the wheel of life" or "the wheel of becoming" is a chain of twelve links (*nīdanas*). These links are both cause and effect. Every link constitutes itself as cause for the subsequently resulting effect, and as resulting effect for the preceding cause (Varanasi 14). In light of this theory, any questions that attempt to prove the existence of a self such as "Who is the cause of suffering?", "Who suffers?", "Who is the owner of this body?" are all considered in Buddhism to be improper questions. The only question that can be asked is "Which cause is responsible for that result?".

The theory of Dependent Origination, thus, posits that all things exist in a continuum of interdependence and inter-relatedness, characterized by an unceasing process of growth and decline as a result of various determinants. This ever changing and continuing process indicates that things cannot have an intrinsic entity. The Thai scholar monk Phra Prayudh Payutto explicates this idea in the negative form as follows:

If things had any intrinsic entity they would have to possess some stability; if they could be stable, even for a moment, they

could not be truly inter-related; if they were not inter-related they could not be formed into a continuum; if there were no continuum of cause and effect, the workings of nature would be impossible; and if there were some real intrinsic self within that continuum there could be no true inter-dependent cause and effect process. The continuum of cause and effect which enables all things to exist as they do can only operate because such things are transient, ephemeral, constantly arising and ceasing and having no intrinsic entity of their own. (15)

Thus, according to Payutto, the principle of Dependent Origination serves to show that in the various events in nature, all the properties of impermanence, suffering, and not-self are seen, all of which reinforce the Buddhist denial of the existence of any real substance which could be duly called "self." It must be noted, however, that Buddhism does not necessarily deny the empirical individual because in the canon, the Buddha often uses the term "*attā*" in order to speak of himself or of others. This usage by the Buddha only connotes a conventional expression and not meant to be interpreted as a permanent substance. To know oneself, to understand one's body, and to understand the nature of the five aggregates is what is meant by the Buddha's statements and does not refer to a permanent self (Varanasi 16).

The Buddhist negation of an intrinsic self thus presents a problem for the attempt to apply secular environmental ethic notions of intrinsic value in nature to Buddhism. Fundamentally, the environmental ethic project aims to designate intrinsic value to various entities in nature, by which human beings would then be morally obligated to respect nature. However, having value implies that there is a holder of value, which means that there must be a real self. The Buddhist negation of a real self characterized by its three marks of existence, impermanence, suffering, and particularly not-self makes it difficult for it to accommodate this secular ethical notion. If we take Buddhist philosophy to its ultimate conclusion, then when it comes to nature and human beings, given enough time, all the entities in nature, the cosmos, and in particular human beings, will change and eventually cease to be because all things are

ultimately impermanent. In effect, while an important goal of secular environmental ethic is to come to a consensus on the intrinsic value of nature that would be the basis for environmental conservation, Buddhism does not have the same outlook. In fact, Buddhism does not come to any conclusion at all about the value of nature, whether positive or negative. Buddhism sets its sight on the ultimate goal of liberation, in which a thing ceases to be. Therefore, in order for Buddhism to serve as a practical resource for promoting environmental well-being, there needs to be a different approach that must arise from within the Buddhist tradition itself, not asking it to compromise its basic doctrines for the sake of contemporary Western philosophical thought.

### **Buddhist Soteriology and Virtues**

Interestingly, it is this ultimate value of liberation from *samsāric* life that holds the key to how Buddhism can most effectively contribute to promoting environmental well-being. The reason this is so is because one's soteriological goals have a direct impact on how one conducts one's life and enters into relationship with fellow human beings and the natural world around oneself. In the attempt to achieve spiritual progress, the Buddhist has to practice and perfect certain virtues that aim at promoting personal well-being, and in the process contributes to the well-being of others, both sentient as well as non-sentient. As Holder argues, the path leading to human fulfillment does not have to necessarily exclude doing things that benefit non-human existence.

It is a false dichotomy, according to early Buddhism, to say that a genuine environmental ethic must develop values that are for nature's own sake, rather than for the sake of human beings—that an environmental ethic must give nature an intrinsic, ultimate, *value over against*<sup>3</sup> human interests or values. The only thing resembling an ultimate value in early Buddhism is the elimination of the suffering of sentient creatures—and this includes human beings. (126)

---

<sup>3</sup> Author's own emphasis.

Indeed, in the *Sedaka Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha teaches his disciples that “Protecting oneself...one protects others; protecting others, one protects oneself” (S 5:19). The former is done through cultivation of mindfulness, whereas the latter is accomplished with various virtues such as patience, loving kindness and sympathy. Accordingly, the Suttas in *Āṅguttara Nikāya* teach that there are four types of people: those who act on behalf of oneself but not others, those who act on behalf of others but not oneself, those who act neither on behalf of oneself nor of others, and those who act both on behalf of oneself and on behalf of others. Of these four, the last type of person is considered to be “the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest of these four” (A 4:95). Thus, Buddhism indeed would support a person leading a lifestyle that not only benefits his goals for personal salvation, but at the same time serves the needs of the environment.

The virtues that are relevant to our discussion include, *inter alia*, loving kindness, compassion, gentleness, moderation, and gratitude. While one may very well refer to these virtues in non-environmental contexts when it comes to how a Buddhist is to conduct her/his life, a simple reorientation of these virtues makes them entirely relevant to environmental concerns. As Damien Keown writes:

One only needs to read the *Dhammapada* to see that the Buddhist ideal of human perfection is defined in terms of the virtues exercised by an individual who treats all beings with kindness and compassion, lives honestly and righteously, controls his sensual desires, speaks the truth and lives a sober upright life, diligently fulfilling his duties, such as service to parents, to his immediate family and to those recluses and Brahmins who depend on the laity for their maintenance.... A Buddhist ecology, then, coincides with these teachings and simply calls for the orientation of traditional virtues towards a new set of problems concerned with the environment. (109-110)

The environmental problem of the present day, early Buddhists would agree, has its roots in human moral psychology. They stem from human greed and delusions that lead to wanton exploitation of

natural resources and other acts of violence done to the environment. As Pragati Sahni contends:

In all likelihood the environmental crisis to the early Buddhists is the manifestation of a psychological crisis because most physical actions and outward behavior are shaped by what is going on in the mind. As long as the mind is influenced by the three unwholesome principles of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha* or greed, hatred and delusion the human race will be stricken by environmental and other forms of exploitation, as well as selfish actions, greedy consumer cultures, dissatisfaction and other attitudes that can be looked upon as vices. (165)

These perversions are effectively counteracted with virtues that lead to promoting human well-being, and in the process environmental well-being. Thus, with the goal of orientating normative Buddhist virtues to the environmental crisis, we now examine more closely the list of virtues that have been mentioned above.

### **Loving Kindness and Compassion**

Loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*) are two of the four sublime abodes (*brahma-vihāra*) along with sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Loving kindness is the wish that all sentient beings, without exception, be happy while compassion is the genuine desire to alleviate the sufferings of others which one is able to feel. The text that one often encounters when discussing about loving kindness is from the Suttras which states:

I dwell pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second quarter, the third quarter, and the fourth quarter. Thus above, below, across, and everywhere, and to all as to myself, I dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without enmity, without ill will. (A, 3:63)

Along with loving kindness, the person who exhibits compassion towards others and has their well-being in mind ultimately makes

progress in his own spiritual state. For each of these as well as the other sublime virtues, the Buddha exhorted the monks to assiduously train themselves so that they are able to carry out these virtues beyond their immediate neighbors, extending to the entire world (Sahni 120).

As one can see, loving kindness and compassion when practiced diligently by the Buddhist person has direct implications on the environment. As Simon P. James points out, someone who is truly compassionate extends his compassion to human as well as non-human beings. If he is only compassionate towards human beings, then he would not be considered a truly compassionate person. Thus, a person's dealings with non-human sentient beings, i.e. animals would reflect his level of virtuousness (457). One may ask the question, if loving kindness and compassion are only extended to human beings and non-human sentient beings, then what good is that when it comes to plants and other non-sentient entities? Certainly, a person would hardly be considered compassionate if he went about destroying rainforests which served as the habitat for countless animal creatures big and small. In the same manner, a person would hardly be considered to be suffusing the world with loving kindness if he chose to fill the air and rivers with dangerous chemicals that harm living things. Thus, the implication for loving kindness and compassion in the context of the environment is that it must respond to all dimensions of life that ultimately holds ramifications for different aspects of the ecology. Buddhism indeed encourages people to be kind and compassionate in a thoroughgoing manner and not just on a selective basis.

### Gentleness

We come to the second virtue that promotes human flourishing and would likewise have the same effect on the environment. This virtue is gentleness, which can be seen as the positive derivative of the non-violence (*ahimsā*) precept in Buddhism. With respect to this First Precept in Buddhism, all actions which intentionally harm other sentient beings are considered morally wrong. In the *Dhammapada*

one is reminded that just as a person recoils at the thought of pain and treasures his own life, so do other sentient beings. Thus, suffering should not be inflicted on others (D 129-130). Buddhism not only urges people to be gentle in their daily dealings with other people and animals, but it also encourages people to avoid means of livelihood that brings about intentional harm to others. Thus, making a living by trading weapons, trading human beings, trading flesh, trading spirits and trading poison ought to be avoided, according to the Buddha (A 5:177). In addition, earning a living as pig and sheep butchers, hunters, thieves and murderers resulted in terrible consequences to the individual that no water ablution can eliminate (*Therīgāthā* 242-3).

While the non-violence virtue directly speaks about how one treats fellow human beings and animals, it would be peculiar if a person acted with great respect towards all sentient beings, but made a complete turn-about when it came to plants which in Buddhism is considered to be non-sentient or at best, border-line sentient beings.<sup>4</sup> One would expect that those who display gentleness towards people and animals would also extend this demeanor towards plants and even non-living things like a historic boulder or a cave. When gentleness permeates a person's veins, it is displayed in his actions which affect all the things around him. Environmental well-being then greatly depends on a human community that knows how to refrain from doing violence to its members and to others. By acting with gentleness towards others, environmentally negative events such as the extinction of animal species due to excessive hunting or the loss of plant species due to destruction of forests can be prevented.

---

<sup>4</sup> See discussions on the sentience of plants in Schmithausen, Lambert. *Plants in Early Buddhism and the Far Eastern Idea of the Buddha-Nature of Grasses and Trees*. Lumbini International Research Institute, 2009. Also Findly, E. B.. "Borderline Beings: Plant Possibilities in Early Buddhism." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 122.2 (2002): 252-263.



## Moderation

A third virtue in Buddhism that I would like to present here is moderation, which is the antidote for the greed that is detrimental to one's quest for liberation. There is a plethora of texts in the Buddhist canon that exhorts the individual to exercise self-discipline and restraint in behavior, resisting temptation and indulgence in the senses. The *Aggañña Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (DIII, 80-98) tells a fanciful tale of the beginning of the world where as (pre-) human beings went through moral degeneration, filling their hearts with greed, hatred, and envy, human lives became less and less joyful.<sup>5</sup> In the beginning, the beings were luminous and weightless creatures floating about space in pure delight. However, as time passed, on earth, there appeared a sweet and savory substance that piqued the curiosity and interest of the beings. They not only ate the substance, but due to greed seeping in, they ate it voraciously which led to its eventual depletion. In the meanwhile, due to endlessly feeding on the earth substance, the weightless beings eventually would not only become coarse individuals with a particular shape, but also lose their radiance. The story then goes on to tell how the natural world and human society continue to evolve in unwholesome manners as a result of the depraved actions of humanity. This tale clearly shows that there is a causal connection between human virtuousness and the state of the natural world. The lack of moderation, thus, can be seen to be a cause for great detrimental effects not only to the surrounding environment, but also to the state of one's own spiritual well-being. While Buddhism does not advocate abject poverty, the Buddha indeed taught that dependence on material things was a hindrance towards spiritual progress. Monks were asked to have as their possessions not more than a robe and a bowl, enough food for a day, simple lodgings and medicine. On the other hand, such things as gold and silver, high beds, garlands and other luxury items were to be

---

<sup>5</sup> Although the original intention of the Buddha in telling this story to the Brahmins is to critique the caste system as falsely deemed to be divinely ordained, the story obviously has valuable implications for human-nature relationship as well.

avoided. For the Buddha, a life that led to true happiness was not one controlled by sense desires, but rather by simplicity and having morality as a guide.

One can immediately see how simple living advocated by Buddhism would have profound effect on environmental well-being. Maintaining moderation in one's life results in less pressure on natural resources, thus positively affect sustainability. I believe it does not take much to convince us here that the less demands we make on nature, the more successful we will be in maintaining sustainability. The late Thai monk Buddhadasa would remark that climate change and other imbalances in nature being experienced at this time is a result of an internal human moral degeneration that affects the external dimension of the world.<sup>6</sup> Thus, by setting limits on our lifestyle, focusing on what we truly need rather than what we like or what we want, the possibility for spiritual progress becomes more real, and the natural world also benefits from our exercise of restraint.

## Gratitude

A final virtue that I will mention here is that of gratitude. Many scholars in both secular and religious environmental ethics highlight gratitude towards nature as a key characteristic that contributes to promoting environmental sustainability and well-being. Buddhist scholars point to the doctrine of *kataññukatavedi* in which one is conscious of the favor that one receives and has the mind to reciprocate such favor. With respect to nature, gratefulness entails being aware of the benefits that one receives from nature and thus has the intention to reciprocate by protecting nature and its resources. The Phra Dharmakosajarn points to the Buddha as the embodiment of gratitude. After the Buddha achieved Enlightenment, he traveled to his homeland to pay gratitude to his father as well as to the surrounding environment. In addition, the Buddha was very grateful to the Bodhi tree under which he sat to meditate seven days before achieving his ultimate goal of Enlightenment (16). Nature was indeed

---

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.thaibuddhism.net/Bud\\_Ecology.htm](http://www.thaibuddhism.net/Bud_Ecology.htm)

appreciated by the Buddha who not only gained Enlightenment under a tree, but also mostly built monasteries and taught in forest settings. The tradition of monks living in the forest was encouraged by the Buddha and continues until this day. In Thailand, many forest monasteries were built in the Sukhothai period during the reign of King Lithai. Forest monasteries continue to hold great importance in the life of Thai Buddhism today. According to Phra Dharmakosajarn, to follow the Buddha means to follow in his footsteps by not only carrying out such rules imposed on monks such as not cutting down trees, not spitting on trees or in waterways, but also to promote environmental well-being by cultivating forests and protecting watersheds (18).

Another Thai monk, Phra Prayudh Payutto, also highlights the virtue of gratitude as essential to promoting environmental well-being. As a starting point for his discussion on gratitude, Phra Prayudh quotes the passage from the *Khuddaka Nikāya* which states, “A person who sits or sleeps in the shade of a tree should not cut off a tree branch. One who injures such a friend is evil.” He exhorts people to see nature as something that they are in intimate relationships with not only by virtue of mutual benefits that each brings to the other, but also because both are bound together in the natural process of birth, old age, suffering, and death. Recognition of mutual friendship is an internal disposition that subsequently is demonstrated in concrete actions of cooperation and solidarity rather than destructive ones. He writes, “Since we must be bound to the same natural law we are friends who share in suffering and joy of one another. Since we are friends who share in both suffering and joy of one another we should help and support one another rather than persecute one another” (*Thai 21*).<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> My own translation of the original Thai text.

## **Conclusion**

From this cursory and unsystematic list of Buddhist virtues that have important ramifications for environmental sustainability and well-being, we see that while early Buddhism may not have directly addressed the issue of the environment, this does not mean that Buddhism does not have the resources for us to draw upon in order to promote environmental well-being. In this paper, I have tried to argue that it is not possible to apply certain concepts from Western philosophy and secular environmental ethics to Buddhism. In particular, the notion of intrinsic value in nature, which is a fundamental issue in secular environmental ethics, cannot find support in Buddhism because of the Buddhist denial of an intrinsic self with its Three Marks of Existence. Buddhism does not make any conclusions about the value of natural entities but sets its sight on the ultimate value—the cessation of suffering and liberation. Thus, the Buddhist contribution to promoting environmental well-being rests not in how it perceives nature but in how it encourages its adherents to conduct their lives so as to achieve spiritual progress. To this end, I have tried to show that acting on behalf of oneself cannot be separated from acting on behalf of others. Therefore, actions that promote the well-being of the environment are intimately connected to actions aimed at achieving one's own spiritual progress. When a person is able to display loving kindness and compassion towards others, exercise gentleness towards sentient and non-sentient beings, exercise self-control over his desires for material possessions and a lifestyle that brings about depletion of natural resources, and demonstrate gratitude towards others for favors received, he achieves a higher spiritual state in his own life, accumulates greater merit, and has a better chance for a rebirth in a happier realm than the present one. By reforming one's internal disposition, the results will be displayed in outward actions that opt for the well-being of nature, such as choosing to use energy produced by alternative and sustainable technologies rather than the traditional methods that are detrimental to the environment. It must be stated that the Buddhist virtues that have implications for environmental well-being are not

limited to those mentioned above. One may list many other ones that are relevant to Buddhist spirituality and are correlated to the concern of the environment. However, the greatest concern for our present time is not whether Buddhism has the resources that help with the ecology, but how these resources are made use of and applied in the life of the Buddhist adherents and those who are interested in Buddhist spirituality so that through their religious convictions, they become contributors in the effort to promote environmental well-being and sustainability.

### ABBREVIATIONS

**A** *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

**S** *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

**D** *Dīgha Nikaya*

**Vis.M.** *Visuddhimagga*

**Dp** *Dhammapada*

### REFERENCES

- Afeissa, Hicham-Stéphane. "Intrinsic and Instrumental Value" In *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, edited by J. Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman, 528-531. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008. Print.
- Callicott, J. Baird. *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1999. Print.
- Cooper, David Edward, and Simon P. James. *Buddhism, Virtue And Environment*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Pub Co, 2005. Print.
- Harris, Ian. "How Environmentalist Is Buddhism?" *Religion* 21 (1991): 101–114. doi:10.1016/0048-721X(91)90058-X
- Hawkins, Bradley K. *Buddhism*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999. Print.
- Henning, Daniel H. *Buddhism and Deep Ecology*. AuthorHouse, 2002. Print.
- Holder, John J. "A Suffering (but Not Irreparable) Nature: Environmental Ethics from the Perspective of Early Buddhism." *Contemporary Buddhism* 8, no.2 (2007), 113–130. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14639940701636091>

- Holmes III, Rolston. "Value in Nature and the Nature of Value" In *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, edited by Andrew Light and Rolston Holmes III, 143-153. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002. Print.
- James, Simon P. "Against Holism: Rethinking Buddhist Environmental Ethics." *Environmental Values* 16.4 (2007): 447-461. doi:10.3197/096327107X243231
- Keown, Damien. "Buddhism and Ecology: A Virtue Ethics Approach." *Contemporary Buddhism* 8.2 (2007), 97-112. doi:10.1080/14639940701636083
- Küng, Hans. *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*. Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004. Print.
- Love, Thomas T. "Theravāda Buddhism: Ethical Theory and Practice." *Journal of Bible and Religion* 33.4 (1965): 303-313. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1459491>
- Norton, Bryan. *Toward Unity among Environmentalists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. Print.
- Nunez, Theodore W. "Rolston, Lonergan, and the Intrinsic Value of Nature." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 27.1 (1999): 105-128. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40018217>
- Nyanatiloka. *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997. Print.
- O'Neill, John. "The Varieties of Intrinsic Value" In *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, edited by Andrew Light and Rolston Holmes III, 131-142. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002. Print.
- Phra Dharmakosajarn. *Dharma and Environmental Preservation*. Bangkok, Thailand: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Press, 2011. Print.
- Payutto, Prayudh. *Dependent Origination: The Buddhist Law of Conditionality*. Bangkok, Thailand: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1994. Print.
- *Thai People and Forest (Thai)*. Bangkok: Kromwichakan, 2010. Print.
- Sahni, Pragati. *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Schmithausen, Lambert. "Buddhism and Nature" The lecture delivered on the occasion of the EXPO 1990 – an enlarged version with notes. Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist studies, 1991.

- Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009. Print.
- Singh, Arvind Kumar. "Buddhism and Deep Ecology: An Appraisal". In the proceedings of an International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak on the theme "Buddhist Virtues in Socio Economic Development" UNDV Conference Volume published by ICUNDV & Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Thailand, held from May 12-14, 2011: 413-427, 2011. Print.
- Swearer, Donald K. . "An Assessment of Buddhist Eco-Philosophy." *Harvard Theological Review* 99.2 (2006): 123–137. Print.
- Taylor, Paul W.. "The Ethics of Respect for Nature" In *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology* , edited by Andrew Light and Rolston Holmes III, 74-84. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002. Print.
- Varanasi, Lalji 'Shravak'. "Buddha's Rejection of the Brahmanical Notion of Atman." *Communication & Cognition*, 32.1-2 (1999): 9-20. Print.

## Pali Canon

- Bodhi, Bhikkhu (trans.). *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*. 2nd edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003. Print.
- Bodhi, Bhikkhu (trans.). *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Complete Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya*. annotated edition edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012. Print.
- Bhikkhu Nanamoli (trans.). *Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga (The Classic Manual of Buddhist Doctrine and Meditation)*. Fourth edition. Buddhist Publication Society, 2010. Print.
- Oldenberg, H. and Pischel, R. (trans). *Therīgāthā*. London: PTS, 1966.
- Sangharakshita (trans.). *Dhammapada: The Way of Truth*. Tra edition. Windhorse Publications Ltd, 2013. Print.
- Walshe, Maurice (trans.). *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya*. Second edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995. Print.





# 3:

## A Muslim Perspective on Environmental Issues Currently Emerging in Indonesia

---

*Aan Rukmana*

### Introduction

In Islam, there are two ways to gain true knowledge; one is by reasoning (*hikmah*) and another is through revelation (*kitâb*). Through reason man becomes an historical subject (*khalifah*) and co-partner of the Creator. He becomes a free creature who is responsible for himself, for preserving his own humanity. As a result of this freedom, all men have the duty to be active and creative in their journey through life. Besides this free use of reason, there is also revelation through which the Absolute Truth descends from heaven, to guide them from the ignorance towards enlightenment, from profane existence towards *paradiso's* purity.

Al-Qur'ân's emphasis on the development of reason is reflected in its use of active verbs such as *ya'qilûn* (they are thinking), *yatafakkarrûn* (they are meditating), *yatadabbarûn* (they are contemplating), etc. There are also other expressions supporting the use of rationality such as *ulu al-bâb* (people who possess deep thought), *ulu al-abshâr* (people who possess deep sight), *ulu al-nuhâ* (people who possess visionary thought).

The text of the al-Qur'ân suggests the possibility for man to develop his reason as freely as possible. From the al-Qur'ân's point of view, reason is the universal wisdom of man. Reason is not limited to

a particular religion but is a common wisdom residing in man. Since reason has ability to discover the truth, it will eventually converge with the saving truth from Allah.

While knowledge allows us to take steps towards the transcendent God, it can also be oriented back to track our footsteps. This is the knowledge of creation. By virtue of his knowledge, man has a duty to preserve nature. The universe is a big cosmos (*alam kabîr*) which should be maintained. If we fail to preserve this big cosmos, man as a small cosmos (*alam shaghîr*) will also be destroyed. To preserve nature is to use reason and follow the logical consequences of our actions on our environment.

### The Meaning of Nature

Nature has a special meaning for Muslims. It is not merely an object perceived by the senses but also a bridge to divine beauty. Thus nature encompasses both the perceived object by the senses, by reason, and by the heart. Hence, for a Muslim, nature is an external sign of God through which one can derive guidance for life and behaviour, besides the internal discovery of God within.

Do they not observe the earth, how much of every good kind  
We cause to grow therein? (QS. Al-Syu'ara [26] : 7)

Through sensory perception, a Muslim is able to advance the natural sciences. Moreover, al-Qur'an emphasizes sensory perception as a tool to gain knowledge of the outside world. In addition, al-Qur'an also emphasizes that the sensing of every single phenomenon of nature is related directly to understanding the signs of God. In other words, the object is comprehended not as a neutral object but as the reflection of His signs.

And He has subjected to you the night and the day, the sun and the moon; and the stars are subjected by His Command. Surely, in this are proofs for people who understand. (QS. Al-Nahl [16]: 12).

And of everything We have created pairs, that you may remember (the Grace of Allah). (QS. Al-Dzariyat [51]: 49).

Even though observation and experiment are needed to gather information from the external world, they alone are not sufficient. If we only rely upon sensory perception, we would not be able to interpret the physical world. In fact, man has no differences with another kind of animals in as much it is related to the sensory perception. The only difference between man and animal is man's ability to understand and interpret phenomena, and this ability comes from his rational faculty which has the power to interpret signs perceived by the senses.<sup>1</sup>

If someone thinks that the processes in the universe had happened by itself without any role of God – or consider this as the ultimate cause of the existence – he definitely denies God. He is not aware that the universe is a sign pointing to something beyond without which the universe would not exist. The universe along with its wealth and order accessible to reason should be seen by Man a sign of God.

### **Levels of The Universe**

In Islam, the universe has many levels, beginning with the very basic which are material world, plants, animals, man and ascending towards divine existence. This accords with the explanation by E.F. Schumacher (d. 1977), in his book entitled *A Guide for the Perplexed*,<sup>2</sup>:

---

<sup>1</sup> Mehdi Golshani, *Melacak Jejak Tuhan dalam Sains*, terj. Ahsin Muhammad. Bandung: Mizan, 2004, pp. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Schumacher, E.F., *Keluar Dari Kemelut*. Terj. Mochtar Pabotinggi. Jakarta: LP3ES, 1988.

## 1. Matter

Inorganic matter is the lowest level of existence in the universe. It is the first source for the development of science because it is the easiest to be observed and guide us to universal patterns. Through this initial perception of matter, such sciences as physics and chemistry develop.

When Muslim scientists want to observe the material world, they try to see matter as it is, without any subjective values imposed, since this would contaminate the purity of the research. The attempt to observe matter as objectively as possible is recognized as the “scientific method”. Through this method, all material-objects are understood through accepted procedures that rely on experiment and test validity.

This material level is asserted as the lowest for it consists of non-living things lacking any consciousness. Hence, the instruments and methods that can be used to study it can be based solely on sense perception without the need for other kinds of method.

From a religious perspective, the material world is the lowest level of existence. But that does not mean that it is devalued. The existence of the world would be impossible without matter.

## 2. Plants

The second level after matter is plants. At this level, there is another element which elevates matter to a higher level. Hence, there is an “ontological change” which could be described as elevating a non-living thing to a living-thing. This element is “life” which does not exist in the lower level.

Sciences addressing life are different than ones dealing with mere matter. We can understand the universal patterns of material world by our sensory perception. But the same thing does apply to this higher level since it requires different methods and instruments that enable us to comprehend the world of plants. This instrument is none other than our “inner sight” or “the eye of the heart”. Therefore, it is not sufficient for us to use only a sensory approach to understand an

entity like a plant because they also require “affection” to allow us to better comprehend them.

### **3. Animal**

The third level is the animal. There is an element present in this level which does not exist at the two lower levels, which is “consciousness”.

This element of consciousness enables animals to feel and possess awareness. As an object of science, animals can not be understood only through the senses but also by the enlightened inner eye of man. By this understanding, we cannot treat animals as a mere object of research – cruelly experimenting upon them, as has been done by many of modern-materialist researchers. Thus, animals can not be the object of study if they are not treated with affection.

### **4. Man<sup>3</sup>**

The highest level is man. He is both the subject and also the object of scientific research. He is the source of science itself. The level of man is higher than the level of animals. What makes man different is that he has not only “consciousness” but also “consciousness of consciousness itself”. In other words, man is aware of his own consciousness which gives him a responsibility for existence below him. From consciousness, responsibility springs.

It is not enough to only study man in empirical way since he is a creature with consciousness and also possessing awareness of his own consciousness. A mere empirical approach would only degrade him to a lower level, that of the material world. Since man is a creature with elements of matter, life, consciousness and awareness, consequently the methods and instruments must be more than one kind considering that man is a complicated being.

---

<sup>3</sup> I prefer “man” instead of “human”. I should assert here that this is not due to gender bias.

Psychology is a science whose function is to understand man in a deeper sense. This science discusses man's soul or inner being. Modern reductive psychologists have gone astray in treating man as a mere being. They degrade him to the level of plants, as a creature possessing life without true consciousness. Obviously, this is a dangerous scientific distortion. Traditional Islamic psychologists instead always relate man to the Absolute through the belief that "consciousness" in man is a mysterious dimension that can only be understood by "faith".

The four levels of existence above are manifestation of the Sacred. Matter, plants, animals and man are signs expressing the sacred. The universe is the *hierophany* of God. It is not merely a material entity, but encompasses various spiritual levels.

Science should address the universe with all four of these levels. If science only focuses on one dimension, the physical dimension for instance, the wisdom or "*sapientia*" which is the purpose of science can never be reached. Scientists should understand this problem to guard against extreme reductionism. In the Islamic tradition, there are good examples of the development of science, which is attentive to all of these levels.

### **A Vicegerent : Duty of God**

Man has a duty to preserve nature. This responsibility derives from his status as a representative of God (*khalifah*) on earth. Nature, and all within it, are provided for man. To perform his duty as a *khalifah* on earth, man is equipped with knowledge. But since scientific equipment alone can not provide direction, man also needs divine guidance as a "spiritual safety net"

Al-Qur'an asserts that Allah creates all things on earth for man:

He it is Who created for you all that is on earth. Then He *Istawa* (rose over) towards the heaven and made them seven heavens and He is the All-Knower of everything. (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 29).

It follows that man possesses the full authority to explore nature for his own interest. But this authority is abused when man is greedy and motivated only by personal gain.<sup>4</sup> The variety of natural disasters such as flooding, erosion and deforestation, are the results of man's own greed. According to his special function in the cosmos, man is supposed to execute his role as faithfully as possible to preserve nature for the benefit of all human beings in the world.

Al-Qur'an uses the word "*sakhkhara*" which means "to bend" or "to make something lower" in regard to man's role on earth as follows:

See you not (O men) that Allah has subjected for you whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth, and has completed and perfected His Graces upon you, (both) apparent (i.e Islamic Monotheism, and the lawful pleasures of this world, including health, good looks, etc.) and hidden [i.e. One's Faith in Allah (of Islamic Monotheism) knowledge, wisdom, guidance for doing righteous deeds, and also the pleasures and delights of the Hereafter in Paradise, etc.]? Yet of mankind is he who disputes about Allah without knowledge or guidance or a Book giving light! (QS. Luqman [31]: 20).

We can conclude that there is a concept of "intelligent design" (*taskhir*) relating nature and man in al-Qur'an. According to this "design," man is the peak of God's creation. Rationality here needs to be connected to God since God is the intelligent designer of the cosmos. As the highest creature, man must look rationally upwards toward God, as well as rationally downwards, on God's creation. From this point onwards, the prohibition of "*syirk*" or "idolatry" can be understood – the act of considering something other than Allah as

---

<sup>4</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Tema Pokok al-Qur'an*, terj. Anas Mahyudin, Bandung: Pustaka, 1996, pp. 95

divine. Secular science sins by praising nature in itself. This is considered the gravest sin.<sup>5</sup>

Verily, Allah forgives not that partners should be set up with him in worship, but He forgives except that (anything else) to whom He pleases, and whoever sets up partners with Allah in worship, he has indeed invented a tremendous sin. (QS. Al-Nisa [4] : 48).

This *syirk* can be seen from man's one-sided devotion toward nature as power in itself. By *syirk*, man degrades his own position in the cosmos.

Another consequence of *syirk*, that nature conceals itself from man's sight. Patterns and processes of nature are no longer rationally observed with reference to al-Qur'an, and are now seen as something mysterious. Nature becomes what Rudolph Otto calls a "*mysterium, tremendum, fascinans*". Such views on nature also promote magical beliefs. For instance, in response to this, the Prophet Muhammad explained that eclipse is not caused by death or birth of somebody but is a sign of God.

In other words, man is not supposed to interpret natural phenomena in magical or mythological ways, or in secular scientific ways, rather he ought to see them in a rational way where both destiny (*taqdir*) and natural law are joined by the intelligent design of God

In this way, the concept of this intelligent design (*taskhir*) is closely related to the concept of the oneness of God (*tauhid*).

### The Indonesian Experience

Turning now to the Indonesian experience, Indonesia is a large nation with the fourth largest population on earth, around 237.6 million people (BPS, 2010). The population professes different beliefs: Islam (88.8%), Protestant Christianity (5.7%), Catholic (3.0%), Hinduism

<sup>5</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *Cita-Cita Politik Islam Era Reformasi*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999, pp. 265.



(1.7%), Confucianism (0.1%) and others (0.1%).<sup>6</sup> With this enormous population of various beliefs, harmony has a very important role for the life of the citizens. Conversely, conflicts between religions tend to lead to the destruction of society.

Besides the large population, Indonesia has thousand of islands. There are about 17.506 islands from Sabang in the west, to Merauke in the east, of which 6.000 are uninhabited. Indonesia has 300 ethnic groups, each possessing their own distinct culture, language and “life experience”. These indigenous cultures are also influenced by Indian, Arab, Chinese, and European cultures. This can be seen in Indonesian art, from Javanese and Balinese traditional dance to traditional *Wayang* puppet theater that was influenced by Hinduism. Some other forms of art such as *Ratêb Meuseukat dan Seudati* dance from Aceh, art of Malay poetry (*pantun* and *gurindam*) are influenced by the Islamic tradition.

These thousands of differences did not impede the development of Indonesia as a nation. “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” (unity in diversity) became the motto in Indonesia’s independence in 1945. Herewith, the founding fathers of the nation built the basis of the nation.

Indonesia is a rich nation with abundant natural resources as follows:

1. The Republic of Indonesia is a nation with the largest number of islands on earth consisting of 17.504 islands, including 9.634 unnamed islands and 6.000 islands without inhabitants.
2. Indonesia has 3 of the 6 largest islands on earth, including Borneo (the third largest island on earth with width of 539.460 km<sup>2</sup>), Sumatra island (473.606 km<sup>2</sup>) and Papua (421.981 km<sup>2</sup>).

---

<sup>6</sup> Data Source of Religion Year 2008, Ministry of Religious Affairs, The Republic of Indonesia ([www.kemenag.go.id](http://www.kemenag.go.id)) with compositions as follow: Islam 192.932.919 (88, 8 %), Christianity 12.395.753 (5,7 %), Catholic 6.563.199 (3,0 %), Hinduism 3.698.282 (1,7 %), Buddhism 1.306.248 (0,6 %), Confucianism 205.808 (0,1 %) and others 243.931 (0,1 %).

3. Indonesia is the largest maritime nation on earth with sea area of around 93.000 km<sup>2</sup> and a shoreline of 81.000 km<sup>2</sup> (almost 25% of the globe's shoreline).
4. Indonesia is the most ethnically diverse country in the world. There are more than 740 ethnic groups; for instance, there are 270 in Papua alone. There are 67 languages and 583 dialects spoken.
5. Indonesia is the biggest producer of liquid natural gas (LNG) in the world (20% of world production) and also the second biggest producer of lead.
6. Indonesia possesses the largest extent of coral reefs in the world (18% of the world's ) besides the number of shark species in the world (150 species).
7. Indonesia ranks first in the production of cloves and nutmeg, it ranks second in the production of natural rubber, and palm oil.
8. Indonesia is the biggest producer of plywood contributing to around 80% of the world production.
9. Indonesia has the biggest biodiversity of orchids in the world numbering around 6.000 species ranging from the largest one (*Grammatophyllum Speciosum*) to the smallest leafless variety (*Taeniophyllum*) including the rare black orchid that grows only in Papua.
10. Indonesia has the largest extent of mangrove forest in the world. This plant is useful for resisting land erosion by the sea.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.kaskus.co.id/thread/51b57f6a48ba542658000005/10-kelebihan-alam-indonesia>, downloaded on January, 2015.

Unfortunately, citizens have not yet developed the consciousness to preserve the diversity of plants and animals. The richness of the natural environment is not in balance with the local wisdom. Thus Indonesia's natural diversity, while a blessing for the nation, is increasingly being destroyed by flooding, erosion and deforestation.

### **Education as a Solution**

Fortunately there is a growing awareness that schools need to teach their students to be more active in preserving nature and the environment. Some traditional Islamic boarding schools have initiated a similar attempt such as the *Pondok Pesantren al-Amanah, Cililin* in Bandung city. This *pesantren* uses three approaches in conserving the environment, especially in local communities. *First*, by interdisciplinary studies. This approach enables them to relate between Islamic studies and natural conservation. *Second*, by cooperating with society with a focus on dialogue. For instance, people can come to the *pesantren* and propose any kind of plants that they want to cultivate. *Third*, by holding workshops in general, and instructing people in techniques for managing and conserving the environment.<sup>8</sup>

There are also high-profile people like Pondok Pesantren Al-Amanah in Bandung or Sekolah Kebun Tumbuh in Sawangan who act as role models in order to raise the citizen's awareness of the importance of conserving the environment. But the educational process should always begin with children. Students should be provided with basic understanding of the importance of conserving nature. This model of character education will hopefully lead towards the birth of new generation of Indonesians who are conscious of their responsibility to preserve nature for the sake of future generations.

---

<sup>8</sup> Fachruddin M Mangunjaya et al. *Menanam Sebelum Kiamat*, Jakarta: Buku Obor, 2007, pp. 222.

## References

- Mehdi Golshani, *Melacak Jejak Tuhan dalam Sains*, terj. Ahsin Muhammad. Bandung: Mizan, 2004.
- Schumacher, E.F., *Keluar Dari Kemelut*. Terj. Mochtar Pabotinggi. Jakarta: LP3ES, 1988.
- Fazlur Rahman, *Tema Pokok al-Qur'an*, terj. Anas Mahyudin, Bandung: Pustaka, 1996.
- Nurcholish Madjid, *Cita-Cita Politik Islam Era Reformasi*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999.
- Fachruddin M Mangunjaya et al. *Menanam Sebelum Kiamat*, Jakarta: Buku Obor, 2007.

## Internet Sources

- Source of Religion Year 2008, Ministry of Religious Affairs, The Republic of Indonesia ([www.kemenag.go.id](http://www.kemenag.go.id))
- <http://www.kaskus.co.id/thread/51b57f6a48ba54265800>Data0005/10-kelebihan-alam-indonesia>, downloaded on 20 December, 2014.

## Part II

# Environmental Ethics Implied in Community Values

---

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES



Emerging from Cultures and Religions  
of the ASEAN Region

*Part II: Environmental Ethics Implied in Community Values*



---

*Laos* –photo by Gerald Schuster

# 4:

## Ecology through Ubuntu

---

*Mogobe Ramose*

The concept of *botho/hunhu/ubuntu* in indigenous African languages is not readily translatable into humanism, especially if the latter is understood as a specific trend in the evolution of Western philosophy. *Humanness* is a better rendition of the concept than humanism. The former suggests both a condition of being and the state of becoming, of openness or ceaseless unfolding. It is thus opposed to any **-ism**, including humanism, for this tends to suggest a condition of finality, a closedness or a kind of absolute either incapable of or resistant to any further movement. But motion being the principle of change, it follows that resistance to it is tantamount to resistance to change. This basic difference between humanness and humanism speaks to two different perceptions of and perspectives on reality or being. Humanness regards being or the universe as a complex wholeness involving the multi-layered and incessant interaction of all entities. This condition of permanent, multi-directional movement of entities is not by definition chaos. On the contrary, it is both the source and the manifestation of the intrinsic order of the universe. Herein lies the ecosophical dimension of the indigenous African concept of *botho/hunhu/ubuntu*.

"The serious threat that arises from this situation as regards the attainment of a genuinely comprehensive humanism in the age of science is plain to see. For if people are divided on the religious issue, they will never cooperate to build a truly encompassing humanistic doctrine. They will rather fight against each other in the name of contrasting humanisms and man, as a whole, will be the loser."

CANTORE, E.

*Motho ke motho ka batho* is a Sotho proverb found in almost all the indigenous languages of Africa. It means that to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them. Accordingly, it is *botho* understood as being human (humanness/humanity) and a humane (respectful and polite) attitude towards other human beings which constitute the core or central meaning of the aphorism; *motho ke motho ka batho*. Neither the single individual nor the community can define and pursue their respective purposes without recognising their mutual foundedness; their complementarity. Wholeness is the regulative principle here since what is asserted is that the single individual is incomplete without the other. It is *botho* understood as being humane, respectful and polite towards other human beings which constitutes the core or central meaning of the aphorism; *motho ke motho ka batho*.<sup>1</sup>

The principle of wholeness applies also to the relation between human beings and physical or objective nature. To care for one another, therefore, implies caring for physical nature as well. Without such care, the interdependence between human beings and physical nature would be undermined. Moreover, human beings are indeed part and parcel of physical nature even though they might be a privileged part at that. Accordingly, caring for one another is the fulfilment of the natural duty to care for physical nature as well. It is thus the constant strife to strike and then maintain a balance between

---

<sup>1</sup> ZVOBGO, E.J.M., "A Third World View", in KOMMERS, D.P. and LOESCHER, G.D. (ed.), *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy*, University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame 1979. p. 93-94.



human beings and physical nature. The concept of harmony in African thought is comprehensive in the sense that it conceives of balance in terms of the totality of the relations that can be maintained between human beings amongst themselves as well as between human beings and physical nature. On this reasoning, the quest for harmony is then the striving to maintain a comprehensive but specific relational condition among organisms and entities. It is the balance and harmony within wholeness.

Wholeness speaks to the process character of reality or being. It speaks to the primary observation of both philosophy and the natural sciences, namely, that underlying all reality is the principle of motion. Without motion, being as enfoldment cannot unfold.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, we prefer the term wholeness because as experience, wholeness cannot yield easily to absolutism and dogmatism in order to establish its authority. However, the same cannot be said about wholeness as a concept, that is, as the giving expression of the experience of wholeness through language.<sup>3</sup> At this level, there is a great risk that wholeness could also become absolutist and dogmatic in order to establish its authority. This risk, if succumbed to, leads easily to the false idea that the speaker declaring a particular experience does so standing at the centre of the universe. But it is a mistake to consider that the "self" (ego) is the centre of the universe. Nor can it be validly claimed that the universe has a centre. Thus the search for the truth about the universe must begin from the realisation that placing the "self" at the centre of the universe is already to obstruct the path to truth. To place the "self" at the centre of the universe is to stand at the very edge of the precipice of authoritarian absolutism and dogmatism. Yielding to authoritarian absolutism and dogmatism is the failure to overcome the famous "four adjustments" and thus to live according to archaic fixations. We are referring, of course, to the

---

<sup>2</sup> BOHM, D., Wholeness and the Implicate Order, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London 1980. p. 11

<sup>3</sup> BROEKMAN, J.M., Wholeness and the Principle of Expressibility, Unpublished paper delivered at the first Jacobsen philosophy conference, in the University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe 1989.

"four cosmological views, which have successively assigned a different place to man in relation to cosmic space. The first view was, ..., the instinctive one. Man felt that he was at the centre of the universe, and all planets and stars revolved around his own earth. The second view, brought about by the Copernican hypothesis, consisted in removing the earth from the centre and replacing it through the sun. Then, the sun itself was removed from its central position. This took place when astronomy proved that the solar system is actually relegated to a corner of the Milky Way - ... Finally came the most shocking revelation. Not only is man no longer at the centre of the universe, but the universe itself appears to have no centre at all."<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible to have something **outside of** or **beyond** being. Here we are confronted with a logical and an ontological (existential) impossibility since it is necessary for any entity **to be**, first of all, before it can claim to exist outside of being. However, it is evident that such a claim cannot be upheld precisely because it is made at the time and in the context where the claimant is already *a participant in being*. Being is therefore the fundamental only oneness that there is. In this sense being is the original simplicity; an insuperable indivisibility. Yet, in its incessant unfolding owing to the principle of motion, this insuperable indivisibility is capable of assuming a plurality and diversity of forms which manifest its character. Accordingly, motion is the principal characteristic of being; it is the essence of life. In this sense, life is a universal wholeness. We speak here of a wholeness rather than **a whole** in order to underline and preserve the ontological primacy of the principle of motion on the one hand, and, to stress its ubiquity, on the other. Indeed, motion cannot be divided into anything other than motion.

A similar insight is more than apparent in African philosophy. The insight is couched in religious terms although it is not necessarily and exclusively a religious position as far as African philosophy is concerned.

---

<sup>4</sup> CANTORE, E., *Scientific Man, The Humanistic Significance of Science*, ISH Publications: New York 1977. p. 403

"The altar gives something to a man, and a part of what he has received he passes on to others, ... A small part of the sacrifice is for oneself, but the rest is for others. The forces released enter into the man, pass through him and out again, and so it is for all... As each man gives all the rest, so he also receives from all. A perpetual exchange goes on between men, an unceasing movement of invisible currents. And this must be so if the universal order is to endure. The Word is for everyone in this world; it must come and go and be interchanged, for it is good to give and to receive the forces of life.<sup>5</sup>

Three crucial insights of African philosophy become apparent from the above citation. First is the insight that motion is the principle of being. Motion is the universal indivisible principle on account of which a multiplicity and a pluriformity of organisms come into being and pass away. The human organism is included in this unfolding process of evolution. Through autopoietic activity the human being is constantly interacting with its environment, with nature in pursuit of "self-preservation". However, the pursuit of "self-preservation" is simultaneously a direct or indirect, immediate or mediated, propinquitous or remote preservation of the universe as a wholeness. In this process the human being everywhere and at all times gains new insights into nature and also makes new discoveries. As a result old forms of life-style might be totally abandoned or modified. The systematic - sometimes sudden - total abandonment or modification, refinement, purification of old forms of life-style on the basis of new insights and discoveries is the hallmark of the concepts of culture and civilization. There is never a final immutable whole but only enduring and transient wholes always governed by the principle of motion responsible for change. Because of this, the various wholes are, properly, aspects of the universe as a wholeness. That is to say, a perpetual process of generation, death and regeneration; of the construction of an intrinsic order from the ruins of apparent destruction and chaos. This is precisely the reason why it is proposed

---

<sup>5</sup> GRIAULE, M., *Conversations with Ogotommeli*, International African Institute: Oxford University Press: Oxford 1965. p. 218

here to translate *botho* into *humanness* rather than human-ism. The former suggests both a condition of being and the state of becoming, of openness to ceaseless unfolding whereas the latter suggests a condition of finality, a closedness, or a kind of absolute either incapable of or resistant to any further change arising from the principle of motion. *Botho* is in tune with the rheomodic<sup>6</sup> character of the universe as a wholeness. One may remark, though parenthetically, that the somewhat condescending attitude to "African time" reveals a failure to grasp that philosophically, there is, from an African point of view, a difference between "living time" and "living in time".<sup>7</sup>

Second is the insight that the dignity and importance of the individual human being can best be understood in terms of relations with other human beings as well as relations with physical nature. In this sense, human dignity is crucial and decisive, but by no means absolute. Human dignity and its decisive importance in African philosophy is at times expressed by the saying, *feta kgomo o tshware motho*. This means that if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being then one should choose to preserve the life of another human being. Mutual care for one another as human beings precedes concern for the accumulation and safeguarding of wealth as though such a concern were an end in itself. There is a link between the above insight and its correlative, namely, that no single human being nor any other entity is the centre of the universe. The universe is understood as the unceasing unfoldment of interaction and interdependence between and among all that there is. Such interaction and interdependence manifests differences in kind and degree in specific situations.

---

<sup>6</sup> BOHM, D., *Wholeness and the implicate order*, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London 1980. p. 30-32

<sup>7</sup> MORE, P., "John Mbiti on African time", in Orita, *Ibadan Journal of Religious studies*, XVIII/1 June 1986. p. 5-15  
KRISHNAMURTI, J. and BOHM, D., *The ending of time*, Victor Gollancz Ltd.: London 1988. p. 30-48

Third is the insight of mutual care and sharing, not only between and among human beings but also between the latter and physical nature. Underlying this and the preceding insights is the idea that looking at the universe from the de-centred self's point of view is the most realistic orientation to life as a wholeness.<sup>8</sup>

The reductionist, fragmentative and empiricistic rationality continues to make great advances in the sphere of technology. In the process the advances have resulted in serious disturbances to the ecology thereby disrupting the precarious balance between the human being and its environment. The loss of this balance constitutes a violation of *botho*. It is also an indication of the need to restore *botho* in the sphere of the relations between human beings and physical nature. This is the ecosophical dimension of the proverb; *moth ke motho ka batho*. Religion can no longer be regarded as a safe haven for *botho*: it is no longer a reliable means by which to pursue the rehabilitation as well as the restoration of *botho*. Religion appears to have lost its appeal because in this our positivistic, calculative and scientific age even the Christian God is trapped in the veneration of the dollar on the altar of a deep-rooted materialistic culture. The human being as *motho* - a being that is of value in itself - has now lost its value except insofar as it can be used as a means.

The loss of *botho* is purported to be compensated for by the somewhat disconsolate comfort and "easy life" brought about by technological advancement. Technological advancement continues to reaffirm the need to restore *botho* because more than ever before, humanity is faced with the threat of catastrophic ecological disaster. This is exemplified by the widespread air pollution, global warming, the destruction of the ozone layer and the ever constant threat of nuclear omnicide. *Botho* can make a significant contribution to the quest for universal peace now threatened by nuclear war, however remote such a war may seem. As it is well-known, apart from reducing our planet into a radioactive rabble through nuclear war,

---

<sup>8</sup> RAMOSE, M.B., "The concept of life as a wholeness", in SCHADEL, E. and VOIGT, U., (ed.) *Sein-Erkennen-Handeln, Schriften zur Triadik und Ontodynamik*, Band 7, Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main 1994. p. 67-74

any nuclear accident would still have far-reaching ecological consequences. The threat of nuclear war also represents a watershed in thought about war and peace because it underlines the fundamental irrationality of resorting to nuclear and thus simultaneously enjoins not only the would-be nuclear belligerents but the whole of human kind to seek peace. The threat of nuclear omnicide is a theoretical (conceptual) and practical challenge to humanity to re-examine theories of war and peace in order to build a solid foundation for the construction of peaceful relations among human kind. Theoretically, the threat may be construed as a specific challenge to the theory of the just war.<sup>9</sup> At the level of practice, the threat calls into question the principle of sovereign statehood as the basis of international politics. The specificity of the challenge here is that the principle of state sovereignty is, in practice, oriented to the self,<sup>10</sup> it is nurtured and feeds upon the culture of the SELF. As such, it is more of an obstruction than an opening to peace for it subordinates the interests of the wholeness to its own. In our contemporary world knit together by ties of interdependence, the quest for peace is the best rational option. Once again this rational option is a call for the restoration of *botho*. In these circumstances, the indigenous African people's philosophical aphorisms of *motho ke motho ka batho* and *feta kgomo o tshware motho* can make a significant contribution to world peace by leading the way to the restoration of *botho*; the first essential step to peace with oneself as well as world communal peace.

---

<sup>9</sup> RAMOSE, M.B., *The Legalistic Character of Power in International Relations*, unpublished Doctoral dissertation presented to the Catholic University of Leuven (K.U.L) Belgium 1983. p. 93-125.

<sup>10</sup> RAMOSE, M.B., "Hobbes and the philosophy of international relations", in *QUEST*, Volume V, No. 1 June 1991. p. 27.

# 5:

## *Katapatan sa Kalikasan:* On Being True to the Environment

---

*Remmon E. Barbaza*

### **Abstract**

The undeniably vulnerable human condition in the face of climate change and its often devastating effects invites us to reflect upon how we human beings might stand in relation to the environment in a way that prevents mutual destruction. Proceeding from the Heideggerian insight that it is language, above all, that tells us the nature of things, this paper proposes to inquire into how the Filipino primordial experience of *katapatan* (honesty, fidelity, etc.), which is often taken within the context of interpersonal relationships, might also be extended to the relationship between human beings and the environment. Expressions in ordinary language, such as “nature fights back,” or the call to “listen to nature,” seems to indicate an awareness that nature, or the (natural) environment, is not just a passive entity, but, in many instances, can be said to be acting directly in response to human activities (e.g., excessive anthropogenic carbon emission). *Katapatan* offers one possible model of such a mutually sustaining and mutually respectful relationship. Its root word *tapat* (adj., “true,” “loyal,” “faithful,” “fair”; adv. prep., “in front,” “across”, etc.) and its cognates, for instance *tapatan* (v.t., “to offer something fair in exchange for something or as a sign of gratitude”), *tapatin* (v.t., “to confide”)—to name only a few—all point to a

mutually sustaining and respectful relationship, one that, when applied to humans and the environment, might yet offer a path that will lead, not to annihilation, but to the flourishing of both.

## I. Language and the Nature of Things

South Africa expresses a fundamental value by way of the word *ubuntu*. This word is known to have been derived from the saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means: “a human being is a human being through other human beings.” Thus, the word *ubuntu*, expresses the value of the community, and how the individual acquires its identity as a human being by way of the community. It can be said then that, in a certain sense, *ubuntu*, as a fundamental value, is one of the foundations of the new republic that is South Africa, so much so that it had often become the topic of the speeches of many of its famous people, notably Nelson Mandela (“the voice of Africa”), or of essays, or even films, such as Nathan Rissman’s 2008 documentary, *I Am Because We Are*.

The importance of the word *ubuntu* in the life of South Africa as a whole shows how language is not simply an instrument or a tool that can be simply used, invented, or manipulated according to the whims of human beings. The fact that the origin of language remains, and in all likelihood will remain, a mystery, as well as the fact of our experience of words that can either hurt or uplift us, in a way that a tool cannot do, shows the insufficiency of the merely anthropological and instrumental interpretation of language.<sup>1</sup> Language is neither simply a tool nor instrument, nor does it simply belong to the realm of human activities. Rather, as we saw in the example of the place of the word *ubuntu* in the life of South Africa, it is language that shapes the ideas, culture, and politics of a people.

If we are open and ready to see this nature of language as one that transcends its instrumental and anthropological character, then

---

<sup>1</sup> Noam Chomsky, “Problems and Mysteries in the Study of Human Language,” in *Language in Focus: Foundations, Methods and Systems. Essays in Memory of Yehoshua Bar-Hillel*, ed. A. Kasher (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), 281-358.



perhaps we can also begin to listen to our own language and be open to the possibility of discovering a wealth of meaning and value. From this perspective I would now want to discuss the Filipino word *katapatan*, commonly translated as truth, honesty or fidelity, and show how it might help us understand being true to our environment. I have chosen this word with the intent of finding a possible source of value, and in so doing perhaps see a basis of hope in the face of overwhelming environmental problems that each year only seems to get even more serious.

As if environmental crises in themselves are not overwhelming enough, we are also beset by social and political problems, such as massive corruption that often involves government officials. Because many of these problems have been with us for several generations, it is very easy for one to fall into cynicism and simply give up hope. One resorts to survival and fatalistic mode, and simply says, "We can't get out of this rut. This is just how things are and will always be. There is no point in hoping for change towards the good. Just attend to your own personal concerns." We need to struggle against this cynicism and this sort of fatalism, because in the end, the flourishing of the individual depends on general social conditions. The better the social conditions, the better it is for individuals to tend to their own concerns and make possible their own flourishing. We all know how many individual aspirations are frustrated by the failure of social institutions. It is thus precisely to the interest of the individual self, of every member of society, to struggle against social ills or rectify what needs rectification in the public sphere and to let the good prevail in our shared collective existence.

If we are to compare the moral condition to the air we all breathe, or the same land on which our life depends, or the same spring from which we all draw water, it is not difficult to see that we cannot destroy or damage any of these as if each of us as individuals will not be affected in the end. The air is our air, for all of us. The land is our land, for all of us. Water is our water, for all of us. In the same way, the good we want to preserve and let reign is the good for all of us.

If, for instance, we want to clean up and revive a heavily polluted river, like the Pasig River in Manila, and bring it back to life, we

cannot do it if we cleaned only one part of the river, while the rest of it continues to be subjected to wanton pollution and mindless neglect. Obviously, the revival of a heavily polluted river must be carried out in view not just of the river as a whole, but also in terms of its interconnectedness with both its source and estuary. We need to ascertain that the source of its water is also free from pollution. We thus need to go back to the sources.

The same thing can be said with the good. We need to go back to the sources of the good. As with other cultures, the Filipino culture has its own source of the good, one that is indigenous to it. This cultural source of the good can be found, most and first of all, in language, on the condition that we do not understand language simply as an instrument that people use to communicate. Language itself is a source, a well of meanings, and as that source has a power of its own. If it did not have a power of its own, it would not have been possible for us to experience words that either hurt or uplift. Language itself can found a new world of meanings. Or it can also awaken us to what has been already there, lying before us.

Indeed humans can only make use of language to the extent that language stands and has a power of its own. Heidegger's famous claim that it is not humans who speak, but it is language that speaks, may strike one as whimsical and inordinately mysterious in its formulation, but it is founded on a truth whose bearing on our very human existence has yet to be understood and realized more fully, and upon which everything is at stake:

It is language that tells us about the nature of a thing, provided that we respect language's own nature. In the meantime, to be sure, there rages round the earth an unbridled yet clever talking, writing, and broadcasting of spoken words. Man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains to be the master of man. Perhaps it is before all else man's subversion of *this* relation of dominance that drives his nature into alienation. That we retain a concern for care in speaking is all to the good, but it is of no help to us as long as language still serves us even then only as a means of expression. Among all the appeals that we human beings, on

our part, can help to be voiced, language is the highest and everywhere the first.<sup>2</sup>

## II. *Katapatan*: Its Root and Cognates

Within the context of our moral crisis, we can go back to the source of the meaning of the Filipino word *katapatan*, which I believe is an important and rich wellspring of the meaning of the good. We need not look far in order to see this wellspring. As in other essential words, we can find this rich source of meaning in the spontaneous and everyday use of the word *tapat* and its cognates. Let us then see—let us listen to—how this word and its cognates are used in different contexts and with different meanings. We can start listening to its meaning in the more concrete and physical sense, see its deeper meaning, and later discover the excellence and goodness that is originally Filipino.

The most basic and concrete meaning of *tapat* is “in front.” One can say, *nasa tapat lamang ng bahay ko ang panaderia*, “the bakery is right across from my house.” It is not only the case that the bakery is near my house—it is right across from my house, almost fronting it. I need not go far, or make a turn, in order to get my bread, as the bakery is right across from where I live. This then is the first and most concrete meaning of the word *tapat*—to be in front, to be near.

Now if someone buys an item from the market, and she wants to get a discount, she will ask the vendor, *Tapat na ba ito?* (Is this your last price?) or *Wala bang tawad?* (Can’t you give me a discount?) And when the vendor holds her ground, she will say, *Naku, tapat na ho talaga!* “Oh, that is really the last price!” The meaning of *tapat* in this case is fair price. Thus, the second meaning of *tapat* has to do with the setting of the price of commodities in a way that is just right, neither excessive nor deficient, and thus none of the parties involved in the exchange—neither the seller nor the buyer—is unduly taken advantage of. The price is fair and just.

---

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 146.

There is also a usage of *tapat* that is within the context of personal relationships. *Tapat na kaibigan* means “faithful or loyal friend.” A friend who is faithful and loyal is one her/his friend can rely on, especially in times of need or desperation. We find the same meaning in the following other examples: *tapat na asawa*, “faithful spouse,” *tapat na manggagawa*, “loyal worker,” *tapat na amo*, “loyal boss or landlord,” *tapat na kliyente*, “loyal client.” Such meaning of *tapat* can be used not only within the context of personal relations, but also in relation to one’s chosen career or vocation. A policeman can be said to be *tapat sa kanyang serbisyo*, which means that he carries out his duties faithfully and honestly. He is a policeman who can always be relied upon. Thus, the third meaning of *tapat* has to do with one’s loyalty, fidelity, and reliability. One who is *tapat* is he or she who is always there especially in times of need.

The word *tapat* can also be used to mean “at par,” “equal,” “commensurate,” or “matching,” whether in terms of quantity or quality. One can tell a big schoolboy who is bullying his smaller classmate, *Humanap ka ng katapat mo!* (“Find your match!”) In the same way, the trainer of the boxing legend, Manny Pacquiao, can say that his ward has no *katapat*, that is, no equal, since he beat almost everyone in the ring. A popular Filipino beer brand used to have this commercial pitch, *ang beer na walang katapat!* (“The beer that has no equal!”) Thus, the fourth meaning of the word *tapat* is to be equal, whether in quality or quantity, or both.

The word *tapat* can also have its verbal cognate, which can mean to tell the truth or to confide in someone. A young man may confide (*magtapat*) his feelings to a woman he loves, which means he is opening up to her. On the other hand, someone who did something wrong or committed a crime may be asked to own up or admit (*magtapat*) his wrongdoing, which means to tell the truth about his misdeed. Thus the fifth meaning of *tapat* has to do with the opening up of one’s inner self, or the laying something out in the open, in the light of truth.

*Tapat* has another meaning that has to do with the return of favor, or the payment of something one owes another. Within the context of the Filipino culture, this belongs to the experience and practice of

*utang na loob* (literally, a debt owed from one's inmost self). Thus, if someone has done me a huge favor, or accorded me a great act of kindness, which perhaps saved me from a desperate situation, or simply helped me go through a difficult situation, I would feel a certain indebtedness towards that person. Given this situation, I can say, *Wala akong maitatapat sa kagandahang-loob na ipinakita mo sa akin* ("I cannot possibly repay you for the kindness you have shown me"). Or, I can be moved to say, *Gagawin ko ang lahat ng aking makakaya upang matapatan ko ang kabutihang ginawa mo sa akin* ("I will do everything within my power to do something in return for the act of kindness you have done for me"). I can also ask, *Ano kaya ang maitatapat ko sa kabutihang ginawa niya para sa akin?* ("What can I possibly do in return for the good that he has done for me?").

Thus, the sixth and last meaning of *tapat* that we are considering here has to do with recognizing one's indebtedness towards another who has done an act of kindness or generosity towards him by doing something in return. This meaning of *tapat* is connected to another meaning we saw above, that of being equal or commensurate (the fourth meaning we considered). When we wish to do something in return for the favor we received or the act of kindness someone did for us, we choose to do something that is commensurate with the original act.

Let us now summarize the different meanings of *tapat* that we have considered here:

1. *Tapat* (adj.) as being near or in front ("katapat").
2. *Tapat* (adj.) as fair price ("tapat na presyo").
3. *Tapat* (adj.) as being always there for someone, as being reliable, assuring one that he will never be abandoned ("matapat").
4. *Tapat* (adj.) as equal or commensurate ("katapat").
5. *Tapat* (verb) as to confide to another or to tell the truth ("magtapat").
6. *Tapat* (verb) as to recognize one's indebtedness to another by doing something commensurate in return ("itapat").

We have seen the different meanings of the word *tapat*. *Katapatan*, often translated in English as honesty or fidelity, is thus a word with

a wealth of meanings and possesses the possibility of being a source of goodness if we are to listen to its essential saying and if we are to allow it to be a guiding post and standard of our being and becoming human, a source of goodness that can be said to be indigenous to the Filipino.

While there are different meanings of *tapat*, we can see the relation of these to each other, in such a way that the wealth of the meaning of *katapatan* will be made manifest as an ethical principle, as a measure of our being human and the way we relate with our fellow human beings. Let us now consider more closely what the six meanings of *tapat* that we saw above can tell us, especially in our search for a possible indigenous ethics.

First of all, *katapatan* is attained by standing near each other. We saw how *tapat* means being right in front of someone or something. When one has done something wrong or harmful to his friend, for example, it would be hard for him to stand close to his friend, and to look at him in the eye. This means that the erring individual cannot bear to stand right in front of the friend he wronged. He cannot stand face-to-face with his friend, he cannot bear looking into his friend's eyes. He would rather avoid his friend, and be far from him, or be out of his sight.

We also know about illicit or illegal activities that are hidden in many ways, like negotiations that are struck "under the table." Such negotiations that are struck under the table show that illicit activities cannot be done in broad daylight, in a face-to-face situation, in a transparent dealing with fellow human beings.

Thus, *katapatan* is the same as standing near someone with whom we are involved one way or another, or whose interests we are concerned about, a concern that belongs to a relationship that is face-to-face and transparent. By contrast, the lack of *katapatan* begins with one's distancing from one's friends or fellow human beings, which often leads to remaining hidden or in the dark.

If, for example, we want to bridge the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor, we need to begin with the desire to be truly near one's fellow human beings. This requires the resolve to

leave one's cave, as it were, and the will to reach out to others. This also means the will to tear down whatever it is that serves as a wall that separates us from each other. The tearing down of walls goes hand in hand with the building of bridges. Thus, our aspirations towards justice and development for the majority, if not everyone, can only be realized from a fundamental stance of nearness towards one another.

### **III. Towards A Radical Reorientation of Our Relationship with Nature**

We have seen how our relationship with fellow human beings can be radically and fundamentally reoriented if we proceeded from the stance of *katapatan*. Such a relationship is characterized not only by the assumption of equality, but also by the will to be near one another—that is to say, to be neighbor (whose original meaning speaks of dwelling near)—in a mutual dependence, reliance and support.<sup>3</sup> Thus it also implies truth, honesty, transparency, trust, and fidelity.

Now, our relationship with nature that is based on *katapatan* can also shape the way we stand in relation with nature. For one, we can no longer proceed from the command to “go out and subdue the earth.” Subjugation already consigns the other to an inferior position. A relationship with nature that is *tapat* proceeds from the assumption that human beings are neither superior nor inferior to nature. Rather, it assumes that we as human beings are to work with nature as

---

<sup>3</sup> The insight into our being human, namely, as a “dwelling near . . .,” or as “being familiar with . . .,” is something that Heidegger already points to in his earliest major work, *Being and Time*, which came out in the original German in 1927. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 51: “‘*Ich bin*’ (I am) means I dwell, I stay near ... the world as something familiar in such and such a way. Being\* as the infinitive of ‘I am’: that is, understood as an existential, means to dwell near ... , to be familiar with .... *Being-in* is thus the formal existential expression of the being of *Da-sein* which has the essential constitution of being-in-the-world.”

equals, from which flows a relationship of mutual dependence, reliance and support. Human beings rely on nature for the basic necessities of life—food, water, air—but they are also capable of taking care of nature such that they allow it to flourish and bear much fruit.

Human beings cannot simply take from the earth without, as it were, giving anything in return. That is no fair exchange. If human beings pay below the *tapat na presyo* (fair price), say, by cutting down 100 trees but planting only 10, then it is not a fair exchange, and we will be shortchanging the earth. In the end, such an unfair relationship cannot sustain itself, and both human beings and the earth will be harmed, as we all know so well now, albeit belatedly.

Furthermore, knowing that the benefits that we human beings gain from nature—the fruits of the earth—are a result of hundreds or thousands of years of development, we will then strive to give back something commensurate. Concretely, what we give, in terms of our labor, care, and preparation, will also have to account the hundreds or thousands of years to come. When we do so, not only are we giving back to the earth something that is commensurate with what it gives us, but we are also ensuring that future human generations will continue to benefit from the fruits of the earth. We know, for example, that a coral reef takes some 10,000 years to grow from larvae. A reckless human activity can destroy in one day what nature took 10,000 years to grow. That is obviously no fair exchange, certainly not a relationship characterized by *katapatan*.

How many years did it take nature to store fossil fuel deep in bowels of the earth? (And we can be sure there is a reason that nature, as it were, decided to keep it there, instead of letting it flow on the surface of the earth like rivers.) And so when we extract oil from the earth in a wanton and reckless manner, completely oblivious of its provenance and purpose, for such a short-term human gain as fast transportation, then are we entering into a fair and just and honest relationship with the earth? Are we relating with the earth in *katapatan*? Are we being true to the environment?

Such considerations of our relationship with nature, guided by the call to *katapatan*, now allow us to hear an invitation to reorient our



fundamental stance towards nature, from one that is one-sided and destructive, to one that is mutually respectful, honest and life-enhancing. The technical and scientific calculations about how we are to “manage” the environment are thus questionable insofar as the basis of the relationship is fundamentally managerial and calculative. But we don’t manage our equals, we don’t manage our friends. Rather, we relate with them in a way that is open, honest, and mutually enhancing. In any case, such technical and scientific calculations have their place and necessity in our relationship with our environment, but they come only later. They must proceed from a fundamental stance of *katapatan*.

Our foregoing reflections on *katapatan* hopefully have given us the realization that one’s own language is a wellspring of insights into the specific and original ways of being human, as well as an enduring source of guideposts that remind us about how we can become true to ourselves as well as to our natural and human environment. In an age of unprecedented production, circulation, and consumption of words through various technological means, we are perhaps being invited to sit still and listen to our own language and, for once, let it speak to us.

## **Bibliography**

- Barbaza, Remmon E. “Tapat Na Ba? Tapat Ka Ba? Tungo sa Etika ng Katapatan.” In *Agenda for Hope: Preserving and Transforming Philippine Identity and Culture*. Edited by Paulynn Sicam and Remmon E. Barbaza, 35-45. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009.
- Chomsky, Noam. “Problems and Mysteries in the Study of Human Language.” In *Language in Focus: Foundations, Methods and Systems. Essays in Memory of Yehoshua Bar-Hillel*. Edited by A. Kasher, 281-358. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976.
- Heidegger, Martin. “Building Dwelling Thinking.” In *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter, 145-161. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.



## Part III

# Ecological Values Embedded in Tribal Culture and Myth

---

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES



Emerging from Cultures and Religions  
of the ASEAN Region

*Part III: Ecological Values Embedded in Tribal Culture and Myth*



# 6:

## **Earth's the Limit: The Sense of Finiteness among the Hill Tribes of Northeast India**

---

*Siby K. George*

### **Abstract**

The hill tribes of northeast India share a historically locatable cultural-linguistic heritage with the upland regions of southeast Asia, according to James Scott's Zomia hypothesis. The traditional animistic ethos of the tribes, and possibly of the Zomias in general, has an important contribution to make to contemporary ecological thinking. Through the lens of Heidegger and Ricoeur, 'tribe' can be thought of as the metaphor and bearer of a possible world, which is conspicuously absent to modern sensibilities, but nonetheless found wanting. The authentic antidote to what Heidegger calls revelation of the earth as 'the object of the attack' in the modern epoch is the tribal sensibility of limit and balance with regard to human exploitation of the earth, understanding of knowledge, understanding the possibilities of the self and of the nature of things. At the same time, this reconstruction/deconstruction of tribal sensibilities vis-à-vis modern self-assertions cannot be a pure repetition or return to the tribal past; rather, from the point of view of the contemporary ecological predicament, tribe and the tribal sense of finiteness is envisaged as a possible emancipative site for saving the modern from self-destruction. For morality is first and foremost a sensibility of

restraining the self's freedoms in the face of all that is other, before it is reduced to norms and laws.

Our country is poor and it does not pay for its administration. Therefore, if it is continued to be placed under Reformed Scheme, we are afraid that new and heavy taxes will have to be imposed on us, and when we cannot pay, then all lands will have to be sold and in the long run we shall have no share in the land of our birth and life will not be worth living then.

—from Naga Memorandum to Simon Commission (1929)<sup>1</sup>

Earth itself can show itself now only as the object of the attack arranged in the willing of man as absolute objectifying. Because it is willed out of the essence of being, nature appears everywhere as the object of technology... [This means] the battle to exploit the earth without limit as the domain of raw materials, and to employ "human resources" soberly and without illusion in the service of the absolute empowering of the will to power...

—Martin Heidegger, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'" (1943)<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Tribality and Civilizability

The hills of northeast India are inhabited by about two-hundred Tibeto-Burman language speaking tribal communities, with the single exception of an Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer) language speaking tribe (the Khasis of Meghalaya state). According to James Scott's explosive 2009 proposition, these highlanders and the hilly landmass

---

<sup>1</sup> S. K. Sharma and Usha Sharma, eds., *Documents on North-East India: An Exhaustive Survey, Vol. 9, Nagaland*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2006, p. 34. The Simon Commission was set up for suggesting constitutional reforms for British India.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'" (1943), trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. In *Off the Beaten Track*, eds. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (pp. 157-199). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 191.

'stretching from Vietnam in the east to India's northeast in the west' are called Zomia (roughly 'highlanders/highlands'). This region of southeast Asia "comprises about one hundred million minority people, spanning over nine nation-states, or rather the peripheries of these states, as Zomia indicates hill areas above the altitude of three hundred meters."<sup>3</sup> Scott controversially describes them as fugitives from the state-making project of the valleys,<sup>4</sup> and their supposed primitivism, derived from 'pastoralism, foraging, shifting cultivation, and segmentary lineage systems,' as a kind of 'self-barbarianization' adopted to evade state. If Scott is right, the stigmatization and ethnicization of the Zomias performed by civilizational discourses of the British, Chinese and Indian empires and states are tactics employed to incorporate them into the politics of modernization, for tribalism begins "exactly where taxes and sovereignty end."<sup>5</sup> It is, however, doubtful, whether the quintessential Zomia can be fitted into the grid of eliding the state. What is nevertheless to be acknowledged is the plausibility of certain contingent cultural-historical elements that connect the Zomias and the fact that there are

---

<sup>3</sup> Bengt G. Karlsson, "Evading the State: Ethnicity in Northeast India through the Lens of James Scott." *Asian Ethnology* 72:2 (2013, pp. 321–331), p. 322. The name 'Mizo' (Mi=highland; Zo=people), one of the northeast Indian groups of tribes, also means 'Zo-mi' as Scott recognizes (James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 16). Scott's use of the term 'Zomia' is borrowed from: Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20:6 (2002), pp. 647-668.

<sup>4</sup> The state-evasion hypothesis is contested by some. See: Victor Lieberman, "A Zone of Refuge in Southeast Asia?: Reconceptualizing Interior Spaces." *Journal of Global History* 5:2 (2010), pp. 333-346; Jelle J. P. Wouters, "Keeping the Hill Tribes at Bay: A Critique from India's Northeast of James C. Scott's Paradigm of State Evasion." *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 39 (2012), pp. 41-65.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p. xi.

“Zomia sensibilities, attachments, and aspirations that cannot be reduced to a negation or the single logic of grid avoidance.”<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I want to look at one such Zomia sensibility with respect to the folklores, anecdotes and experiences from the northeast Indian tribes, reminiscing about twenty years of living in that region. I shall call this sensibility ‘the sense of limit or finiteness’, which has tremendous ecological import for this age when the earth has become ‘object of the attack’ in the words of Heidegger that I have quoted in the second epigraph to this chapter. I shall refer to Heidegger throughout this chapter as a kind of anchoring theoretical lens. The tribal, then, is not the one who elides the state –at least for the purposes of this chapter– but the one who has a sensibility for the limits of the earth, and as the first epigraph to this chapter says, she/he is someone intimately connected to the land and finds her/his life ‘not worth living’ when that connection is unrecognizably disrupted.

The term ‘tribe/tribal’ is problematic on many counts. According to Scott’s geopolitical analysis “state formation creates, in its wake, a barbarian frontier of ‘tribal peoples’ to which it is the pole of comparison and, at the same time, the antidote.”<sup>7</sup> Scott sometimes speaks of Zomias as actively ‘tribalizing’ themselves for the sake of escaping the state and, as it were, mocking the state-makers;<sup>8</sup> at other times he maintains that they are “seen by their lowland neighbors as impoverished, backward, tribal populations that lacked the talent for civilization” for gradually having “adapted to a hilly environment and... developed a social structure and subsistence routines to avoid incorporation.”<sup>9</sup> Jaganath Pathy points out that the term ‘tribe’ “originated with the rise of European colonialism and racist ideology... [S]everal tribes were once considered nations, peoples, and kingdoms by the very colonizers who wanted to establish

---

<sup>6</sup> Karlsson, “Evading the State,” p. 329.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.



commercial and diplomatic relations with them."<sup>10</sup> Pathy adds that postcolonial states continued with the term without paying attention to its disparaging political, economic and historical connotations.

The term 'tribe/tribal' has, nevertheless, acquired a certain political potential for the peoples denoted by the term themselves. Dipesh Chakrabarty remarks that although the term 'tribal or indigenous people' "speaks of a very particular history of European colonization in the last five hundred years," its lack of a strong and particular historical reference can prove helpful for people who were outside the colonial administration in some way for 'self-definition'.<sup>11</sup> Tiplut Nongbri brushes aside the debate regarding differentiating the terms 'tribal' and 'indigenous people'. According to her, what unites tribal and indigenous people vis-à-vis other population groups is their "common experience of exploitation, discrimination and powerlessness." State policies of assimilation, she argues, "destroyed their cultures and decimated their population to a tiny minority" and "lop-sided and techno-centric pattern of development ensured their continued subordination."<sup>12</sup> Chakrabarty makes a pitch for 'politics unlimited' whereby "the poor and the oppressed, in pursuit of their rights, have to adopt every means at hand in order to fight the system that puts them down,"<sup>13</sup> and he sees the tendency to self-define themselves as tribal and indigenous as a proper part of the struggle.

## 2. 'Tribe' as Metaphor of a Possible World

I want to suggest that there is another important and positive side to the use of the term 'tribal'. I have suggested elsewhere that in moral

---

<sup>10</sup> Jaganath Pathy, "Tribe, Religion, and Nation in the Context of the Indian State." In *Tribal Communities and Social Change*, ed. Pariyaram Mathew Chacko, pp. 30-45. New Delhi: Sage, 2005, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Politics Unlimited: The Global *Adivasi* and Debates about the Political." In *Indigeneity in India*, eds. Bengt T. Karlsson and T. B. Subba, pp. 235-245. London: Routledge, 2006, p. 238.

<sup>12</sup> Tiplut Nongbri, "Tribe, Caste and the Indigenous Challenge in India." In *Indigeneity in India* (pp. 75-96), p. 88.

<sup>13</sup> Chakrabarty, "Politics Unlimited," p. 242.

philosophy's important task of revolutionizing ethics at critical historical junctures, what is helpful is not so much parading logically transparent rational arguments without reference to context, history and the non-rational aspects of humanity, but that moral philosophy can more usefully be about reigniting the dying embers of moral sensibilities through deconstructive critique, phenomenological illumination and hermeneutical unconcealing. In this task, the term 'tribal' can act as the site of our increasing loss of 'interconnectedness sensibility' in connection with the environmental crisis. "The tribal is the moral site of the interconnectedness sensibility," I proposed, without the modern dichotomies and with a deep sense of connection to nature "in the awareness that the human being was its integral part rather than its lord."<sup>14</sup> In this exercise, 'the tribal' is a romantic and, to that extent, a mythical category. Inasmuch as it is a mythical placeholder, it is truer than fact, reality and literality; it is "the bearer of a possible and alternative world, as Paul Ricoeur holds. As myth, the truth of it is immortal and always points to a possible way of living our lives."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Siby K. George, "The Interconnectedness Sensibility: Tribal Ethos and Environmental Ethics." In *Beyond Humanism: Philosophical Essays on Environmental Ethics*, ed. Saji Varghese, pp. 127-165. New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 2014, p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144. My reference to Paul Ricoeur is from: Paul Ricoeur and Richard Kearney, "Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds." *The Crane Bag* 2:1/2 (1978), pp. 112-118. While undertaking a similar exercise of reconstructing the understanding of nature of the native American tribes, J. Baird Callicott notes that "[r]econstructing the traditional Indian attitude toward nature is... to some extent a speculative matter" (J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 179; see chapter 10: Traditional American Indian and Western European Attitudes Toward Nature: An Overview, pp. 177-202). He acknowledges 'the difficulties and limitations' of the exercise but contends that the inquiry itself is not 'utterly hopeless' (p. 179). As far as the interconnectedness sensibility is concerned, Callicott emphasizes that the native Americans believed that "one spirit has divided itself and enlivened all things with a consciousness that is essentially the same" (p. 190). Callicott suggests John Neihardt's

This being the case, I venture to concretely draw on the traditional sense of limit, finiteness and balance among the hill tribes of northeast India, fully aware that with modernization, state-formation and Christianization, the tribal people are themselves far removed from their erstwhile sensibilities. Whether this state of affairs is good or bad is today a thoroughly political question. Archana Prasad points out that the Elwin-inspired, Nehru-approved ecologically romantic picture of tribal India is insufficiently critical and is being used by the Hindu right for its theory of the golden age of perfection followed by the fall, but is, at the same time, unable to arrest the rampant liberalization of tribal economies.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Ramachandra Guha repudiates the narrative of the tribal as the ecologically romantic native dwelling in close proximity with the ecosystem. According to him, no community is intrinsically desirous of such a life, and so responsible politics should empower “ecological refugees and ecosystem people, strengthening their ability to govern their lives and gain from the transformation of nature to artifact.”<sup>17</sup>

But empowering the tribes to transform nature into artifact is itself a very thorny question when we consider how the global market and the nation states *within them* operate. Dwelling on the question of uranium mining in Domiasiat in West Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya, Bengt Karlsson also takes an emancipatory approach like Guha's, pledging solidarity with “people who ‘eat of the land’,

---

1932 classic, *Black Elk Speaks*, as an authentic resource for such a reconstruction (see: John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, The Premier Edition. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008). For the view that the nostalgic reconstruction attempts necessarily frame indigenous philosophy in Eurocentric cultural terms with problematic political consequences, see: Paul Nadasdy, “Transcending the Debate over the Ecologically Noble Indian: Indigenous Peoples and Environmentalism.” *Ethnohistory* 52:2 (2005), pp. 291-331.

<sup>16</sup> See: Archana Prasad, *Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of Anti-Modern Tribal Identity*. Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *How much should a Person Consume? Thinking through the Environment*. Ranikhet, India: Permanent Black, 2006, p. 244.

those who seldom reap any of the profits made from capitalist extraction but commonly are left to face the environmental consequences or who lose their lands and livelihoods in the process.”<sup>18</sup> Karlsson is, however, fully aware that community control of resources is problematic in Meghalaya because “capital and state restructuring of the hill societies has rendered communities relatively powerless to control the local resource base”<sup>19</sup> and “[r]eligious idioms as a basis for traditional forms of protection and management were not able to hold against the prospect of profitable resource extraction.”<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The Sense of a Sensibility

I do not think that tribes of northeast India can be ‘protected’ from the currents of modernity. This does not seem to be a possible option today, even if some members of the tribes themselves were to demand it. A mega-cultural process like modernization does not work in terms of letting those that it affects to choose whether or not to be affected by its leveling uniformity. As Charles Taylor observes, modernity is today a “largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have.”<sup>21</sup> Modernity is like an anthill that we realize it is there only when it is already there. It enters seductively and surreptitiously and when we realize it is there, what is considered traditional is significantly transformed or erased. According to Heidegger, the demand on human beings to look at reality as resourceful material for production has claimed “all the inhabitants of the earth in a uniform manner without the inhabitants of the non-European continents explicitly knowing this or even being able or wanting to know of the origin of

---

<sup>18</sup> Bengt G. Karlsson, *Unruly Hills: A Political Ecology of India's Northeast*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2011, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginary*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004, p. 25.

this determination of Being.”<sup>22</sup> Both the ‘busy developers’ and the subjects of development, he observes, are drawn into fervently participating in the understanding of all reality as resourceful material for production. Heidegger thinks that the planetary spread of Western metaphysics is set to complete itself before a truly different understanding of Being can emerge.

If we ponder over the ineluctable manner in which this understanding of reality is proving to be acceptable all over, it is difficult to imagine how the tribal people of northeast India would remain out of its all-conquering reach. Modernity is finding willing participants everywhere, and northeast India is no exception. If the reductive understanding of reality is central to modernity, so also is egalitarian sensibility. The two seem to go together, feeding on each other. <sup>23</sup> Postdevelopment thinkers resignedly suggest that “[d]elinking the desire for equity from economic growth and relinking it to community- and culture-based notions of well-being will be the cornerstone of the post-development age.”<sup>24</sup>

But if modernization is an ineluctable process, why are we thinking at all about alternative imaginations? Such imaginations exist in the margins of every dominant frame, even if that frame were to be planetary as the frame of modernity is. They sometimes exist as the very face of resistance but most often as the strange ‘other’ side of the dominant narrative. The tribal sense of limit and balance must be seen in this light — a marginal and possibly disappearing sensibility, which can be understood in a new light, given the contemporary predicament of the technological devastation of the earth, through the

---

<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Time and Being” (1962), trans. Joan Stambaugh. In *On Time and Being*, pp. 1-24. New York: Harper & Row, 1972, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> This is why Heidegger points out that the essence of the modern idea of justice, which is at the centre of “the completion of modern age,” is stamped with “the struggle for mastery over the earth,” which “determines all human transactions in this age, explicitly or not” (Martin Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Word ‘God is Dead,’” p. 185).

<sup>24</sup> Wolfgang Sachs, “Preface to the New Edition.” In *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs, pp. vi-xiv. London: Zed Books, 2010, p. xii.

destructive/deconstructive approach towards the currently dominant frame and the hermeneutical/unconcealing approach towards the marginal or lost sensibility.

It is sometimes argued that the tribal sense of limit was a mere adventitious adjustment to a context of scarcity rather than a rationally designed ethical strategy of conservation. Religious beliefs and taboos, generations of accumulated experience, and learning through trial and error led to the actual attainment of ecological balance rather than any rationally constructed ecological ethics.<sup>25</sup> However, in such assessments what is missed is the notion of 'moral sensibility' that cultural groups develop over many generations. I consider the rationalistic approach to ethics as insufficient as I have argued elsewhere

...that though ethics should be formulated in a normative format, the moral sensibility itself is not a 'rule'. Rather morality is a sensibility that arises from the limits posed on the self's freedom in its confrontation with otherness as such, human and non-human. The moral sensibility is groomed and reinforced by cultural developments that happen in close affinity with the natural as well as human environment. In other words, our moral development does have a context and history, and so, moral norms are neither universal nor absolute, even though we should never cease dialoguing with moralities of all contexts and histories to broaden and further radicalize our moral horizon. This view, therefore, has an unsettling bearing on the universalistic, all-conquering, absolutist strain of thought in modern moral theory (of which the contemporary attempts in environmental ethics to produce arguments for the intrinsic value of nature is a reflection) that attempts to formulate a

---

<sup>25</sup> See: Ernest S. Baruch Jr., "Rationality and Resource Use among Hunters: Some Eskimo Examples." In *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*, eds. Michael Eugene Harkin and David Rich Lewis, pp. 123-152. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.

single, universal moral norm under the assumption that there is a single moral reasoning.<sup>26</sup>

The sense of limit that I explore in this chapter is a sensibility rather than a rational rule that people came to agree upon after careful rational deliberations and philosophical considerations. Rather, the sense of limit is a sensibility that one is an integral part of nature, wedded to its materiality, aligned with its rhythm, open to its meanings, entangled with it within one's self-understanding, and limited by the possibilities it sets for each being in terms of its uniqueness as that being. Limit is also the horizon for a being's authentic possibilities.

#### **4. The Reverse: Limitless Instrumentalization of Nature**

A significant aspect of the modern technological culture is that we are globally moving from societies where technical artifacts were exceptions to a technological world-society where natural things are rarities. This has been a mammoth social-political-cultural-economic change.<sup>27</sup> James Scott asserts that the Zomia-theory has little sense in the postwar era because "the power of the state to deploy distance-demolishing technologies —railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraph, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology— so changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states" that the "need for the natural resources of the 'tribal zone' and the desire to ensure the security and productivity of the periphery has led, everywhere, to strategies of 'engulfment'."<sup>28</sup> The extremely extended and glorified sense of the term 'use' (according to which advantageous purposes of humanity are beyond question and any plausible 'means' could be deployed to achieve that end —in other words, instrumental or means-end rationality) is the

---

<sup>26</sup> George, "The Interconnectedness Sensibility," pp. 136-37.

<sup>27</sup> See: Keld Nielsen, "Western Technology", in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Technology*, ed. Jan Kyrre Berg Olsen, Stig Andur Pedersen and Vincent F. Hendricks, pp. 23-27. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p. xii.

impetus behind the planetary technological society. Hence, Heidegger observes that technological domination and mastery over the earth “not only sets up all beings as producibles in the process of production, but it also delivers the products of production through the market... that is not only a global market spanning the earth but that also, as the will to will, markets in the essence of being and so brings all beings into the business of calculation.”<sup>29</sup> The society that unprecedentedly glorifies instrumental rationality is technological, capitalistic and planetary. At the same time, transforming nature into artifacts or technological comportment is not peripheral to being human. We are technological beings from the start. Heidegger remarks that “the unexperienced essence of technology had already threatened our ancestors and their things.”<sup>30</sup> The understanding of Being as resourceful material for production in the modern technological society is an extreme transformation of our basic technological comportment.

When we consider the technological paradoxes of planetary modernity, the general tribal sense of limit, applied to their technological will and outlook, is revealing. The American environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott makes insightful observations in this regard. He asks whether cultural attitudes and values wholly determine human action. That is, can we say that nature-friendly cultural attitudes fully translate into nature-preserving actions and instrumental attitudes fully translate into nature-destroying actions? Of course, an unqualified ‘yes’ for an answer to this question is deplorably deterministic and cannot be true to being human. However, thinking like a hermeneutic philosopher, Callicott ponders over human ontology: our historical-cultural experiences form the background of the possibilities and limitations of our actions towards nature. The values of our background are positively or negatively appropriated by our interpretive projections, which translate into actions. He asserts that technologically

---

<sup>29</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Why Poets?” (1946). In *Off the Beaten Track* (pp. 200-241), p. 219.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.



modifying and consuming nature is a basic part of being human. His conclusion is:

Representations of the order of nature and the proper relationship of people to that order may have either a tampering, restraining effect on manipulative and exploitative tendencies or they may have an accelerating, exacerbating effect. They also give form and direction to these inherently human drives and provide different cultures with their distinctive styles of doing things.<sup>31</sup>

However, what Callicott paints as 'representation' is in fact an inarticulate background understanding — an 'imaginary' in the words of Taylor and an 'understanding of Being' in the words of Heidegger— which, as Heidegger claims, "determines entities as entities" and is "that on the basis of which... entities are already understood."<sup>32</sup> We have "grown up both into and in a traditional way of interpreting"<sup>33</sup> ourselves and our actions in terms of this background understanding, whether we follow values prescribed by it or flout them. Callicott thinks that the modern-Western cultural background, underpinned by Hellenism and Hebraism, accelerates "the inherent human disposition to consume and modify surroundings," whereas, in his judgment, the native American cultural background implied "an acute sensitivity to the complex factors influencing the life cycles of living beings" and "behavioral restraints... to limit exploitation and therefore, incidentally, to achieve sustained yield."<sup>34</sup> Callicott suggests that native Americans were neither ecologists nor conservationists in the modern sense; rather, for them, nature was person.

The Indian intellectual Ashis Nandy argues that the techno-developmental drive of modernity can enter into every culture and

---

<sup>31</sup> Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, p. 192.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962, pp. 25-26.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, pp. 192-93.

strengthen itself there rather than destroying it fully. He thinks that it 'taps some of the basic human motives and aspirations', which are rather universal in nature, but Western-modernity forgets that these motives "were the ones that some of the major civilizations of the world had carefully kept under check."<sup>35</sup> A sense of balance and limit with which humans dwelt on the earth suddenly seems to be disappearing in a span of about four centuries.

I shall now attempt an exposition of the various dimensions of the sense of limit among the tribal communities of northeast India.<sup>36</sup> This exposition calls for further research to judge whether it has ontic resonances among the Zomia communities as such spread over a vast tract of upland southeast Asia. The claim is not that these are exclusive traits of Zomia communities or of tribes in general. The claim, rather, is about the significance of such a sensibility in these times of limitless, wanton consumption patterns, and the germaneness attached to the fact that these communities are the most recent and probably still living exemplars of that sensibility. The discussion has any relevance only for those who value morality first and foremost as a sensibility, which can then be normatively formulated, or, as Levinas argues, can be "betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it."<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Ashis Nandy, "Culture, Voice and Development: A Primer for the Unsuspecting," *Thesis Eleven* 39:1 (1994: pp. 1-18), pp. 13-14.

<sup>36</sup> Whenever I refer to the Northeast tribes in general, it is to be remembered that there is great internal diversity among them. However, it seems to me that several aspects of the sense of limit and finiteness that I am outlining in this chapter can be found across their understandings of nature, albeit in differing formulations. At the same time, a great deal more research is required to establish and finely distinguish these sensibilities among the various tribes.

<sup>37</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (1974). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, p. 7.

## 5. How Much Shall I Have of the Earth?

An important question relating to our comportments towards nature as free-willed beings is how much shall we have of the earth that sustains us and life as such. While the techno-modern consumerist culture, needless to say, comes down to mean unlimited exploitation of the earth, the tribal cultures have had an intuitive understanding of the limit of the earth. As with the native Americans, probably the most studied of the world's tribes, with the northeast Indian tribes too, the sense of limit was expressed manifestly in their hunting habits. The hunting ritual of addressing the hunted animal as sister/brother and saying to it that it was being killed only to feed oneself and "not for fun or greed" and calling upon "the animal spirits for permission to kill for food" was common among many of these tribes.<sup>38</sup> Animals moving desperately towards a pools in deep forest to quench their thirst could not be killed until they quenched themselves. These pools are called *tajei duikhun* by Zeliangrong Nagas, who also prohibited hunters from destroying all members of an animal family during a hunt. Like the native American tribes, they believed that before spearing the animal, the hunter should know the animal properly, even its gender.<sup>39</sup> In the case of domestic animals that were to be slaughtered, slaughterers spoke to the animal about the need to kill it so that curse may not befall them. The animal is killed in a single blow so that it may be spared unwanted suffering. The Zeliangrong Nagas believed that if the animal's curse befalls the slaughterer, she/he would not prosper in life. Grace Darling reports that the customary practice of harvesting fruits from a tree among Zeliangrong Nagas would be to leave something for others, and animals, birds and insects. A similar habit was prevalent among them regarding the felling of trees. Felling more than necessary or in large quantity and leaving felled trees to rot were forbidden.

---

<sup>38</sup> Grace Darling, "Environmental Ethics of Zeliangrong Naga Tribe." In *Nature, Culture and Philosophy: Indigenous Ecologies of North East India*, ed. Saji Varghese, pp. 158-185. New Delhi: Lakshi Publishers, 2014, p. 166.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

The tribes of northeast India had elaborate social practices of comporting reverentially towards forests and surrounding vegetation, despite the fact that they traditionally practised shifting or slash-and-burn cultivation (*Jhum* in local parlance).<sup>40</sup> The Zeliangrong Nagas forbade their tribespeople from destroying sacred plants, trees, grasses and herbs. Damaging thick forest, high cliffs, huge rocks, rivers and huge trees that shelter countless birds and insects was considered to be inviting the displeasure of the spirits. Each individual family was to have a small family garden of trees called *Ram-bou*, which had to be duly replaced after felling for use as firewood for the family hearth. Each village used to be having a well-kept recreational tree garden called *Rangon* with stony benches and artistically arranged trees.<sup>41</sup>

These traits of 'reverential ecology'<sup>42</sup> are found in a most fascinating way among the Khasis of Meghalaya state. The northeast Indian tribes were animists, who understood all reality as ensouled. In the animistic vision, argues Sujata Miri, "God and nature are necessarily bound together" as would be for the Spinozist; however, this becomes "proof of the primitiveness of the tribes of the region"<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> *Jhum* cultivation is often considered an ecological nightmare and a major cause of deforestation in the thickly forested hills of northeast India. However, it is doubtful whether this is a demonstrable scientific opinion. Modernization, development and state-building can be considered as leading to deforestation more intensively. Nongbri refers to ecologist P. S. Ramakrishna and remarks that "in the hilly terrain shifting cultivation is a better form of land use than sedentary agriculture... among many tribes in the region shifting cultivation is often accompanied by a scientific and ecologically sound system of conservation, little known to the outside world" (Tiplut Nongbri, "Forest Policy in North-East India." *Indian Anthropologist* 29:2 [1999, pp. 1-36], p. 30.).

<sup>41</sup> Darling, "Environmental Ethics of Zeliangrong Naga Tribe," pp. 173-75.

<sup>42</sup> I borrow here the term of the environmentalist Satish Kumar (see <http://www.resurgence.org/satish-kumar/>). See also: Satish Kumar, "Development and Religion: Cultivating a Sense of the Sacred." *Development* 46:4 (2003), pp. 15-21.

<sup>43</sup> Sujata Miri, *Communalism in Assam: A Civilizational Approach*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1993, p. 55.

for those entrenched in the modern sacred-secular binary. Dwelling on the environmental ethics of the Khasis Savitri Nongsiej dubs contemporary environmentalism as “an attempt to impose some restrictions and limitations on the freedom of human action towards nature.”<sup>44</sup> She thinks that this imposed ethic was a tradition among the Khasis which practically meant ‘restricted utilization’ of natural resources. She attributes traditional success in maintaining ecological balance to the careful and respectful tribal attitude towards nature, which was said to be given to humans as gift. The traditional Khasis had an elaborate division of forest land. These were: (i) *Law Kyntang* or sacred groves, which were richly bio-diverse and thickly forested hills, maintained for religious rituals; (ii) *Law Raid* or forest reserves of a group of villages managed by a council for the purpose of using its resources judiciously; (iii) *Law Adong* or restricted forest areas, which were reserved to meet dire community needs for forest resources and protected from converting into any other type of land use; (iv) *Law Shnong* or village groves, which were the common property of a village for its non-commercial use and was located within its boundary; (v) *Law Kur* or clan forest land, which was maintained and shared by the clan for its non-commercial uses, and, (vi) *Law Ri-Kynti* or forested land owned by individuals for their commercial and other uses.<sup>45</sup> Nongsiej argues that a habitual system of unplanned conservation of forest land had emerged out of such a traditional logic.

The Khasis believed that the sacred groves were guarded by the spirits called *Ki Ryngkew ki Basa*. They believed in the interconnectedness between nature, humans and God. For them, “the supreme purpose in life is to adhere to an order that maintains its earth oriented balance.”<sup>46</sup> This balance was to be maintained not as an attempt to be rational or consciously ethical but to achieve

---

<sup>44</sup> Savitri Nongsiej, “Environmental Ethics: A Khasi Perspective.” In *Nature, Culture and Philosophy*, (pp. 186-193), p. 187.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190-91.

<sup>46</sup> Iahunlin Khyriem, “Understanding Environmental Ethics in the Khasi Context.” In *Nature, Culture and Philosophy*, (pp. 208-218), p. 213.

relatedness and connection with the whole. This interconnection is called order or *Ka Hok*, which is also the moral order or righteousness.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, these and similar habits of the northeast Indian tribes are changing with modernity, sometimes unrecognizably. Our moral and cultural sensibilities, as I have argued above, are responses we sensitively develop as our collective historical memories and experiences, accumulated over a sufficiently long period of time. These sensibilities are to be understood not as rationally developed frameworks in a modern-Western sense. However, even modern ethics and what is apparently non-ethical and merely instrumental behavior are also supported by such moral sensibilities, developed pre-consciously through historical processes, as Charles Taylor admirably demonstrates.<sup>48</sup> Moral sensibilities are defeasible, fragile,

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. The idea of *Ka Hok* has deep resonance with the Indic idea of *dharma*. The cosmic vision here does not centre on the human being as the measure of all things. Humans, their moral and social laws, and all manifest beings are thought to be expressing the highest law of reality, which is 'orderly coursing' (*ṛta*). "The coursing of the highest reality is the fundamental norm, and the norm or rule of function (*dharma*) for individual beings is given by their very being to the extent that they participate in the central reality. It is not something added later to direct existent beings. The *dharma* of a being is given by its very being through its participation in the central and ultimate reality of which it is a manifestation; it is not something added on to the being" (John M. Koller, "Dharma: An Expression of Universal Order." *Philosophy East and West* 22:2 [1972, pp. 131-144], p. 133). While the Upaniṣadic idea that all beings are expressions of an absolute, unchangeable reality might be foreign to the Khasis, the idea of the inner connectedness of all beings may not be. For them, reality is fragile and changing, and yet an interrelated finite whole.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor attempts to retrieve the hidden moral/ spiritual horizon of Western modernity, which is thought to be mired in instrumental rationality and its technological extremes. According to Taylor, such a view "reads out of the picture... the possibility that Western modernity might be powered by its own positive visions of the good, that is, by one constellation of such visions among available others, rather than by the only viable set left after the old myths and legends have been exploded" (Charles Taylor, "Two

corruptible human responses that can altogether be obliterated with the type of cultural forces that modernity sets free. With new systems and practices, our sensibilities, moral or not, also change. Our sensibilities are not rational pictures held in separation from the currents and material contexts of our lives but are affective responses to them. As Heidegger argues, with new understandings of reality or Being, human sensibilities also change.<sup>49</sup>

## 6. How Much Do I Know?

The traditional tribal *logos* clearly travels a different road from that of the modern. Since the earth is that which feeds and sustains, beings of the earth can, in principle, exploit, pillage and ravage the earth. Since the earth replenishes its bounty, it is even difficult for beings to know how much to take of it. Beings with greater exploitative capacities, not with greater needs, more greatly ravage the earth. Technological

---

Theories of Modernity." *The Hastings Center Report* 25:2 [1995: pp. 24-33], p. 26).

<sup>49</sup> Heidegger's insightful example is what Nietzsche calls 'the death of God' in the Western cultural horizon. He writes: "Whether the god lives or remains dead is not decided by the religiosity of men and even less by the theological aspirations of philosophy and natural science. Whether or not God is God comes disclosingly to pass from out of and within the constellation of Being" (Martin Heidegger, "The Turning", trans. William Lovitt. In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, pp. 36-49. New York: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 49). For Heidegger, *logos* is itself dependent on the understanding of reality. Hence, it would be rather ethnocentric to argue that the understanding of reason of the northeast Indian tribes was akin to the Greek *Metis* or cunning intelligence just because their manner of thinking was not directly comparable to modern instrumental rationality and philosophical reasoning. To conclude from such a premise that their cultural life was mired completely in the vicious cycle of instability and trickery, and to point causally to this as basis to argue that "philosophical reason has not yet found a foothold in the unstable tribal culture of the North-East" is further problematic (see: Binod Kumar Agawala, "Tribal Reason as *Metis*: A Study of Folk Tales from Khasi, Mizo and Naga Traditions." In *Nature, Culture and Philosophy*, [pp. 1-73], p. 68).

modernity, says Heidegger, is world's desolate night because it withholds the healthy whole (das Heile) and empties the world of the whole that heals (heil-los). The healthy whole is the understanding of Being that heals inasmuch as it was not disproportionately destructive as technological modernity is, and makes the holy (das Heilige) hidden and concealed.<sup>50</sup> We can understand the 'holy' in Heidegger's sense as this very sensibility for limit, balance and contingency, which allows beings to flourish in opposition to their extinction, destruction and wanton exploitation by way of technological machination. The sense of the holy and of limit, therefore, also means lack of full human knowledge, which is disparagingly dubbed primitiveness or tribality.<sup>51</sup>

Heidegger explains that the understanding of Being does not mean the sum of all familiar beings. He adds that when "beings are not very familiar to humans and are scarcely and only roughly known by science" the understanding of Being sways more essentially because boundless familiarity with beings in the modern context means "nothing is any longer able to withstand the business of knowing, since technical mastery over things bears itself without

---

<sup>50</sup> Heidegger, "Why Poets?", p. 221.

<sup>51</sup> Arne Naess's deep ecology recognizes that the complexity of the ecosystem "makes for a keen, steady perception of the profound *human ignorance* of biospherical relationships and therefore of the effect of disturbances" (Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement: A Summary." *Inquiry* 16:1 [1973, pp. 95-100], p. 97). However, I do not think that the tribal sense of limit is straightforwardly comparable with deep ecology, although Naess's interactions with the Sherpas of Nepal and his appreciation of their notion of the sacred mountain influenced his formulation of deep ecology as a philosophical standpoint. The northeast Indian tribes do not share the deep ecological practice of proactive wilderness conservation and spiritual attainment of the ecological self. Indeed, their very idea of the sacred groves and their reverential attitude to forests is a humanly mediated sphere of the holy. For my view that Heidegger's ecological insights are not deep ecological, see: Siby K. George, *Heidegger and Development in the Global South*. New Delhi: Springer, 2015, pp. 227-229.



limit.”<sup>52</sup> In the business of knowing in a fully controllable and comprehensible fashion, ‘the openness of beings gets flattened out’ and the Being of beings is ‘simply forgotten’. The modern desire to know without limit can be seen in the institutionalization of development as a discipline, which showcased “[a]n unprecedented will to know everything about the Third World” and gave certain forms of knowledge about non-western regions the status of truth and power.<sup>53</sup> But, understanding the fragility and limit of ‘knowing’ beings means engaging the holy, which Heidegger says, is “the law which ordains its measure in a different way than does human law...”<sup>54</sup> In the contemporary world, Heidegger holds, wherever the possibility of the event of the free manifestation of beings or letting beings be still occurs, where ‘what is unlike abides as unlike’ rather than leveled off as uniform commodities, there is the celebration of the holy or the festival.

The sense of limit of knowing among the hill tribes of northeast India is their sensibility that knowledge is neither a powerful tool to control and conquer nature nor the absolute rational picture of its hidden laws. As oral traditions, tribal knowledge was not written down and frozen, not rationally constructed as science. But it “evolved into a comprehensive and integrated network of indigenous knowledge-system, incorporating art with reality, history with imagination and the ideal with the practical.”<sup>55</sup> This knowledge should certainly strike modern sensibilities as fantastical, as when the British officer, J. P. Mills, explains the Ao Naga theory of rain: “At the mouth of the Brahmaputra, where the world ends, there is said to be

---

<sup>52</sup> Martin Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth (1930),” trans. John Sallis. In *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, pp. 136–154. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 147.

<sup>53</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 45.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Remembrance” (1943), trans. Keith Hoeller. In *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, pp. 101-173. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000, p. 128.

<sup>55</sup> Temsula Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*. Baroda, India: Bhasha Publications, 1999, p. 174.

a huge rock... which drinks up all the water which flows down the river, and throws it up into the sky, from whence it falls as rain again."<sup>56</sup> At the same time, indigenous knowledge created a meaningful world for tribal people. Mills notes that the Chang Nagas hailed with joy the appearance of the Milky Way in its zenith "as marking the end of the rains and the beginning of the cold weather, at their Pwang festival."<sup>57</sup> Heidegger points out that it is on the basis of such knowledge that we understand things in their thingliness before they are interpreted as objects of science. Before the meteorological understanding of the wind as a flow of air in a definite geographical direction, the wind is, for example, understood as the south wind "by the farmer as a sign of rain" and only in this understanding "is the south wind discovered in its Being."<sup>58</sup>

Often the bounds of such knowledge are definitively acknowledged by the tribes as when an educated Ao Naga tried to historically explain the migration of the tribe to their present habitat, flouting the Ao origin myth, he was fined and forbidden to speak.<sup>59</sup> In a recent discussion on this anecdote, an Ao Naga elder explained insistently: "I insist, once a resolution to say that the Ao ancestors emerged out of the six stones has been made and accepted by all, our history has to be based on this alone. If we go beyond that, we can never come to a conclusion."<sup>60</sup> This sense of certainty, which looks unfounded for moderns, demonstrated to traditional Ao Nagas the bounds of their knowledge. After the poststructural-postmodern break, we must say that nothing absolute separates modern knowledge as founded and tribal knowledge as unfounded. In fact, such forms of knowledge (their herbal-natural methods of cure, for

---

<sup>56</sup> J. P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*. Kohima: Directorate of Art and Culture, Government of Nagaland, 2003, pp. 303-4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302, n.2.

<sup>58</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 111-12.

<sup>59</sup> Sujata Miri and Karilemla, *Ao Naga World View: A Dialogue*. New Delhi: ICPR & D. K. Printworld, 2015, p. 30, and Temsula Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, p. 179.

<sup>60</sup> Miri and Karilemla, *Ao Naga World-view*, p. 31.

example), which were real and useful for the tribes till recently, offer possibilities of their new, modern forms of return.<sup>61</sup>

## 7. How Am I Bounded?

Another important dimension of the sense of limit is a finite understanding of the self. The self, understood as the finitely projected possibility of being 'I myself', in terms of a history, location and context, made sensible out of that possibility of being, is at once limited by its historical context of possibilities and what Heidegger calls 'the unnoticeable law of the earth', "which preserves the earth in the sufficiency of the emerging and perishing of all things in the allotted sphere of the possible which everything follows, and yet nothing knows." Trees and animals never overstep their possibilities, but humans do. With modernity, the animal drive of the will and the supposedly human drive of reason are merged into the technological will, which "drives the earth beyond the developed sphere of its possibility into... the impossible."<sup>62</sup>

In the tribal sensibility, the limit of the sense of self is recognized in at least three ways: (i) in acknowledging the power of the elements upon the human, (ii) in living according to the rhythm of nature, and (iii) in the communal sense of self. Firstly, tribal self-understanding is not based upon Cartesian self-certainty and subject-object dichotomy. As Charles Taylor points out, the pre-Axial (tribal?) imagination of the self, affected by the elemental spiritual and moral forces was one in which "the boundary between the self and these forces was somewhat porous."<sup>63</sup> Western modernity's Cartesian attempt was to

---

<sup>61</sup> In this vein, certain meaningful possibilities of return to the ancient Western cultural classics are sometimes explored. See: Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*. New York: Free Press, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics" (1936-46), trans Joan Stambaugh. In *The End of Philosophy*, pp. 84-110. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 109.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Taylor, "Recovering the Sacred," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 54:2 (2011, 113-125), p. 113.

sever the impingement of these forces upon the self, which Max Weber called 'disenchantment'. Mills writes that the Ao Naga religion was about propitiating the spirits who, when not appeased "are ever ready to blight his crops and bring illness upon him and his."<sup>64</sup> Although Mills stated that this did not make the average Ao Naga gloomier than the average Christian or more afraid to face the end, he also stated that tribal religion is not moral but is merely enchantment with the spirits. However, one can also understand the tribal religious phenomenon positively as a belief in the interconnected continuum of nature, humans and the supernatural. This is the way Mrinal Miri attempts a richly imaginative reconstruction of the notion of the tribe as

... a group of people which is strongly community oriented, its social structure simple (unlike the highly bureaucratized modern society), its hierarchy broken by naturalness and spontaneity of all interpersonal relationships; a community which believes in an abiding continuity between nature, earth, man, and what we call the supernatural, instead of in the divisive distinctions between these that modern man makes; a community which is also free from numerous stress and anxiety-producing distortions of natural biological life that modern man is subject to.<sup>65</sup>

Sujata Miri considers evaluating the primitiveness of religions on the basis of the 'enchantment phenomenon' as absurd. She considers tribal religion as stamped with the idea that "Man and Nature share a common life, which incidentally includes a common moral framework."<sup>66</sup> The ecological import of this idea of religion is obvious, just as what is supposed to be the advantage of severing the continuity between nature and humans in modernity is evidently destructive. From such an imagination, the Ao Naga folklore

---

<sup>64</sup> Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, p. 215.

<sup>65</sup> Mrinal Miri, *Identity and the Moral Life*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 66.

<sup>66</sup> Miri, *Communalism in Assam*, p. 55.

constructs the origin of the rich Ao musical tradition, for instance, to the spontaneous song of a maiden, Matsüngchetla, in the first Ao village, Chungliyimti. She is said to have burst into a song responding to the musical movements of the foliage of a mighty tree upon the bank of a stream.<sup>67</sup> The Ao Nagas also believed that certain members of their community were endowed with a tiger-soul and thus with special powers to cure ailments, wizardly powers, powers to mend broken bones, to foretell events, and powers to avenge wrongs done to them.<sup>68</sup>

Secondly, tribal life is also a life lived according to the rhythm of nature and its seasons. In this, the tribal sees the extension of her/his self into the nature-divinity-human continuum. Most festivities follow the Jhum cycles. Speaking about the Borok tribes of Tripura state, Mohan Debbarma points out that an important aspect of the Borok's emphasis on the earth is her/his sense of place and homeland, which is a form of intimacy with the earth. "Each person's self is metaphorically fused with a sense of place and country. One never leaves the place of birth. The land is sacred, not only because it provides the people their livelihood but because it has been given to them by their ancestors."<sup>69</sup> This sense of connection to the land is true

---

<sup>67</sup> Karilemla, "Ecological Crisis and the Tribal Worldview: A Heideggerian Review." In *Beyond Humanism*, (pp. 78-103), p. 94.

<sup>68</sup> Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>69</sup> Mohan Debbarma, "Environmental Philosophy in the Borok Community of Tripura: A Sacred Association between Man and Nature." In *Nature, Culture and Philosophy*, (pp. 219-240), p. 237. To modernity's subject-object dualism, this relationship to the land does not make sense. In the well-known oration of Chief Seattle, this difference is clearly mentioned in the following words: "We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on... His fathers' graves and his children's birthright are forgotten. He treats his mother, the earth, and his brother, the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert."

of the traditional Mizos, Kukis, Nagas, Khasis, Garos and other tribes of northeast India. As the epigraphic quote to this chapter says, having no share in the land of their ancestors would mean 'life will not be worth living' any more.<sup>70</sup> In speaking of the danger of the techno-modern sense of uprootedness, Heidegger notes that "everything essential and everything great originated from the fact that man had a home and was rooted in a tradition."<sup>71</sup>

Thirdly, the sense of self of the tribal is entangled in her/his sense of community. Personal identity is inextricably intertwined with the identity of the tribe, and more specifically, the village. And yet, the customs of the northeast Indian tribes in general were egalitarian and democratic, despite occasional questionable practices. Mills writes that the Ao Naga woman's position was "no whit inferior to that of a man."<sup>72</sup> Regarding the traditional Ao Naga village councils, Verrier

Quoting these words and mentioning the controversy over the speech's historicity, the anthropologist Maybury-Lewis writes that "these moving words convey an environmental and spiritual ethic that most tribal people share" (David Maybury-Lewis, "On the Importance of Being Tribal: Tribal Wisdom." In *The Environment in Anthropology: A Reader in Ecology, Culture, and Sustainable Living*, eds. Nora Haenn and Richard R. Wilk, pp. 390-399. New York: New York University Press, 2006, p. 396).

<sup>70</sup> For the Zeliangrong Naga's attachment to the land, see: Darling, "Environmental Ethics of Zeliangrong Naga Tribe," pp. 176-178.

<sup>71</sup> Martin Heidegger, "'Only a God can Save Us': *Der Spiegel's* interview with Martin Heidegger" (1966), trans. Maria P. Alter and John D. Caputo. In *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin, pp. 91-116. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 106. While the sense of home and tradition emphasized here is 'ethos', Heidegger confessed that his work was spiritually related to "the Black Forest and its people" and the "centuries-long and irreplaceable rootedness in the Alemannian-Swabian soil" (Martin Heidegger, "Why do I stay in the provinces?" (1934), trans. Thomas Sheehan. In *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. Thomas Sheehan, pp. 27-30. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010, p. 28). For the relationship between Being and place in Heidegger's thought, see: Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, p. 211.

Elwin observes that each Ao village is “a small republic and each man is as good as his neighbour, indeed it would be hard to find anywhere else more thoroughly democratic communities.”<sup>73</sup> Jhum cultivation, hunting and fishing were social events. About the fishing expeditions of the Zeliangrong Nagas, Darling writes that an equal share of fish was guaranteed for each, even for child-fishers.<sup>74</sup> The tribes considered it shameful of an individual to use things that belonged to the community like trees from the commonly owned forest-land.<sup>75</sup> The village for the tribal is the site of her/his existence and the web of connections that define her/his identity as a person. Unlike the individual of modern liberal democracies, it was natural for the tribal to accept the ontological truth and ontic reality that her/his individual identity was defined in relation to the others of her/his village.<sup>76</sup> Probably the modern loss of self-limitation by the community is most traumatizing for the tribes as a tribal elder from Arunachal Pradesh confesses: “People have stopped doing things for the common good. Nowadays, the first thing that they want to know is what is in it for themselves.”<sup>77</sup> Once the dialogical nature of identity is not ontically acknowledged, the tribal ceases to be one. However, this sense of community, as I have been emphasizing, is always a reflection of the balance that the tribal wants to achieve in everything. Regarding the Khasis, Sujata Miri writes: “Anything out of harmony or maladjusted, either physically or mentally in the individual, the society or the world in general is regarded as a failure in the pursuit of the Niam Khasi” (traditional Khasi religion).<sup>78</sup> She adds that this

---

<sup>73</sup> Verrier Elwin, *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 324.

<sup>74</sup> Darling, “Environmental Ethics of Zeliangrong Naga Tribe,” p. 179.

<sup>75</sup> Miri and Karilemla, *Ao Naga World View*, p. 145.

<sup>76</sup> Temsula Ao, “Human Resource Management in Ao Society.” In *Rationality and Tribal Thought*, ed. Sujata Miri, pp. 181-188. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2004, p. 187.

<sup>77</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*, Revised Edition. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011, p. xiv.

<sup>78</sup> Sujata Miri, *Khasi World View: A Conceptual Exploration*. Chandigarh, India: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1988, p. 2.

sense of harmony and balance applies not only to social life but also to “all life including Nature in the maintenance of its health and well-being.”

Indeed, the self is never an unlimited interior realm, insulated from the outside, but is Being-in-the-world. ‘I myself’ solely as ‘I myself’ is meaningless; the ‘I’ is always already a transcendence towards the world of meaning. In this sense, the tribal self is a continuous transcendence towards the nature-divinities-others continuum.

## 8. How Are Things Bounded?

The last tribal sense of limit that I want to refer to is the limit to commodification. When we look at tribal societies anywhere in the world, the question ‘how did primitive barterers, who based their economic activities on the principles of reciprocity and redistribution, become utility-maximizing modern economic agents?’ appears interesting. According to Karl Polanyi’s well-known economic history of 1944, an unprecedented change occurred with the great transformation of the English society into a technological market society. It was a transformation of “the natural and human substance of society into commodities” that are unlimited, and which “must disjoint man’s relationships and threaten his natural habitat with annihilation.”<sup>79</sup> Heidegger’s philosophical analysis of the self-asserting modern subject as the one who objectifies all beings names that subject as the merchant, who lives “within the vibration of money.”<sup>80</sup> Rampant commodification of every aspect of the ultramodern society has in fact forced such societies to seek decommodification of their essential services.<sup>81</sup>

Commodification in this sense was extremely limited in the tribal societies of northeast India. Neither were all things commodifiable,

---

<sup>79</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944). Boston, MA: Beacon, 2001, p. 44.

<sup>80</sup> Heidegger, “Why Poets?”, p. 235.

<sup>81</sup> See: John Vail, “Decommodification and Egalitarian Political Economy.” *Politics and Society* 38:3 (2010): 310-346.



nor were commodities fetishes. This limit meant a rather generous attitude towards wealth without plunging into idleness and indolence, and an attitude towards generous disbursement of accumulated wealth as a way of acquiring social status. While discussing the common village funds of the Ao Nagas, Mills remarks that he always wondered how an Ao village “ever managed to assess and collect its funds,” but adds that they managed it “somehow, and with very little quarreling.”<sup>82</sup> M. Daniel speaks of the traditional Mao Nagas as not prone to considering nature economically or capitalistically but as ‘the sustaining agent’.<sup>83</sup> However, their traditional subsistence economy never gave the industrious northeast Indian tribal people any room to relax. Mills remarks that the Ao Nagas knew nothing of modern boredom, which for them “was a complaint confined to civilized man,” and never felt the lack of ‘something to do.’<sup>84</sup>

However, as in all societies, there were some who were more industrious and fortunate than others. The Ao Nagas, as most other northeast Indian tribal people, considered wealth and fortune a gift of fate (*tiya*).<sup>85</sup> And because it was a gift of fate, it was to be spent generously. This was achieved through what is known as the Feasts of Merit, and “among the Nagas such feasts are arranged in a sequence and a man may proceed to the higher and more lavish grades of feast only after he has completed the series of preliminary and minor celebrations.”<sup>86</sup> According to the Naga scholar Charles Chasie, the Feasts of Merit are undertaken “in order to gain honour

---

<sup>82</sup> Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, p. 186.

<sup>83</sup> M. Daniel, “Environmental Philosophy in Mao Tribal Society: A True Harmony between Nature and Man.” In *Nature, Culture and Philosophy*, (pp. 152-157), p. 153.

<sup>84</sup> Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, p. 160.

<sup>85</sup> Miri and Karilemla, *Ao Naga World View*, p. 60.

<sup>86</sup> Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, “Comparisons between the Mountain Peoples of the Philippines and Some Tribes of North-East India.” *The Geographical Journal* 137:3 (1971, 339-348), p. 342. Von Fürer-Haimendorf finds several points of comparison between the Ifugaos of Luzon in Philippines and the Nagas and the Apatanis of Northeast India.

now and credits in the here-after... Thus it helped promote the notion of wealth for a purpose and accepted as a blessing. The rich did not look down on the poor and the poor did not hate the rich but tried to emulate them."<sup>87</sup> That nature's gift is not there for commodification was straightforwardly clear in the organization of the social life of many of the tribes of northeast India. Juxtaposed against this, current environmentalism and the discourse of sustainable development cannot culturally ward off the nemesis of absolute commodification that permeates global capitalism.<sup>88</sup>

### 9. Conclusion: For Whom the Bell Tolls?

In conclusion, it must be stated that the Zomias of northeast India are no more Zomias in the ecological sense painted above because, as Scott acknowledges, postwar techno-capitalistic states have made the concept of Zomia itself irrelevant. Zomia aspirations have completely transformed in the past few decades and northeast India has become a volatile zone of nationalistic aspirations, resistances to dominant nation-formation processes and eco-political contestations.<sup>89</sup> Bengt Karlsson sums up these transitions with reference to the story of how the sacred trees of the Shillong Peak (*Lum Shyllong*) were razed. *Lum Shyllong* is one of the most sacred places of the Khasis — the highest peak of the Khasi Hills, the place of origin of the nine streams, a forbidden and flourishing sacred grove. Today it is a barren hillock, stripped bare of its sacred grove. Karlsson was told by a traditional village elder that the stripping of the *Lum Shyllong* happened due to

---

<sup>87</sup> Charles Chasie, "Nagaland in Transition." *India International Centre Quarterly* 32:2/3 (2005, 253-264), p. 254.

<sup>88</sup> See: Escobar, *Encountering Development*, pp. 192-211.

<sup>89</sup> For a philosophical portrayal of the current socio-political situation of Northeast India, see: Prasenjit Biswas and Chandan Suklabaidya, *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis*. New Delhi: Sage, 2008. The authors see the current political turmoil as mimicking the perspective of the Other, the nation-states that the Northeast Indian tribal communities historically elided, and the reduction of "self-identity to an artifact of Othering" (p. 285).

“British intrusion and the new ways it brought with it —not least of which were Christianity and modern forms of governance— leading to the present predicament with social animosity, militancy, human greed, and ecological crises.”<sup>90</sup> The revival of the traditional Khasi culture, he interjects, was the only way out of the current tangle.

Yet, any sense of pure repetition, return or revival is impossible because the whole background understanding which nourished the erstwhile culture is completely obliterated. Environmentalism can only self-deceive itself by thinking that anti-development sentiments in upland northeast India have “a close alignment with a deeper mistrust of modernity and a closer, purer relationship with the environment.”<sup>91</sup> These eco-cultural embers seem to have somewhat extinguished. Today the politics of ethnicity, development and control over resources rules the northeast Indian hills. The new sensibility of equality and justice, which means equitable availability of the modern amenities of life, has caught up, and there is nothing in the logic of modernity that should disallow the tribal people their rights as modern citizens.

Nonetheless, the tribal sense of limit is the authentic antidote to the modernist devastation of the earth and technologization of the human. Neither the romanticization of the tribal past in its purity nor that of the modern in its entirety is going to prove helpful. However, the desecration and destruction of tribal sensibilities by the modern onslaught is defeatist, for ‘the tribal’ is a possible emancipative site for saving the modern from self-destruction. At the end of his reflections on the importance of being tribal, Maybury-Lewis quotes John Donne’s famous line: ‘never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee’. Maybury-Lewis’s recommendation for re-imbibing the tribal sensibility is possibly the only way to know that earth’s the limit: “to re-energize civil society, the space between the state and the individual where those habits of the heart that socialize

---

<sup>90</sup> Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*, p. 6.

<sup>91</sup> Duncan McDuie-Ra, “Anti-development or Identity Crisis? Misreading Civil Society in Meghalaya, India.” *Asian Ethnicity* 8:1 (2007, pp. 43-59), p. 57.

the individual and humanize the state flourish.”<sup>92</sup> Hence, from the point of view of contemporary ecological predicament, the northeast Indian tribal and the Zomias in general are ‘the bearers of a possible and alternative world’, an authentic metaphor, of “non-authoritarian, non-oppressive, non-hierarchical societies in which free, playful heterogeneous people live in small, bioregionally oriented, democratic, ecologically sound communities.”<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Maybury-Lewis, “On the Importance of Being Tribal,” p. 399.

<sup>93</sup> Sujata Miri, *Ethics and Environment: Theory and the Adi and Khasi Practice*. New Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 2001, p. 90.

# 7:

## The Ecological Implications of the Story of Mahajanaka

---

*Glen Vivian Gerard Chatelier*

### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on the translation of The Pra Mahajanaka by H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great. The literary work is inspired by an ancient *jataka* which may have been popular in the early days of Buddhism in Thailand. The allegorical tale itself occurs to the backdrop of nature in the ancient Indian subcontinent, the ocean and the natural elements in a metaphor of regeneration of nature which is indeed a topical concern in these times of atmospheric and natural degradation in South East Asia. Mahajanaka not only retrieves his material wealth after a tryst with destiny at sea, but in his later life as King, he teaches his subjects the wisdom of regenerating mango trees, so that they will have resources for the future. The paper concludes positing that the attitude of regeneration is the Buddhistic principle of sufficiency through moderation in human action, self immunity through spiritual re-armament and the stifling of greed which of course in Buddhistic belief is the root of evil. The academic intention of the paper is to suggest that in all considerations of the natural environment and its degradation, it is also necessary to examine the religious ethos of South East Asia where Buddhism is one of the major religions.

Writing in his 2000 book, *A History of India*, the Scottish historian John Keay establishes that the Ancient Kingdoms of India, especially of the Maurya, maintained trade relations with Indic states of South East Asia while at the same time, entrenched the prevalent Buddhist faith through *jatakas* (pg 286). The *jatakas* are anecdotal tales of the life of the Buddha as he lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. and certainly remained in the oral traditions of the Buddhist faith in countries such as Thailand and Cambodia even in the phases of the Sanskritization of the eastern lands and the spread of Arayan Hinduism and Brahminism.

This paper draws upon the perspective of the British author, W.J. Wilkins who in his book "Hindu Mythology" (Sixteenth Impression 1976) avers that as a doctrine taught by the Buddha, the belief like Hinduism, originates in the theory of transmigration. Pain and pleasure are the result of Karma and no cognizance is placed on the existence or non existence of God. The highest good in existence is "to obtain entire exemption from existence." Death is not necessarily an escape from existence, but an entrance into a state of worse suffering, possibly. The four "Sublime Verities of Buddhism" consist of the system of belief that pain exists, desire is the cause of pain, pain can be ended by Nirvana and there is a path to Nirvana. The greatest effort in Buddhism is to get rid of desire. When this is accomplished, the soul is ready for Nirvana and anyone dying in this state shall not be re-born in any other form or shape. In Buddhism, *Maitri* or charity and love are the greatest universal virtues (pgs 243-244).

H.M. the King's translation of the *jataka*, The Story of Mahajanaka was inspired by a sermon of the Venerable Somdej Pra Mahaviravongs (Vin Dhammasaro) of Wat Rajpatikaram (1977). Commentators on the work see several parallels in the Story of Mahajanaka and the personal life of H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The influence that His Majesty the King's mother had on his governance principles is one such influence, the other being that just as how Mahajanaka's uncle had passed away, so too H.M. the King's brother passed away in his late teenage stage of life.

The version of His Majesty's translation is derived from the Thai text of Tipitaka (Suttantapitaka kuddakanikaya Jataka, vol.4 part 2).

An important premise to the entire story is situated in the Bhodisatava Philosophy: That the happiness of one's life is in the effort to give, though the resources and yields be small, through the sustained and generous efforts of the individual to the community.

The Royal translation under review, highlights the three virtuous deeds of King Mahajanaka. His great perseverance markedly through swimming to the shores of Suvarnabhumi bear implications within the narrative of nature. The young Mahajanaka well realizes that he has to rely on the forces of nature, not other wealth, to retrieve his legacy from Suvarnabhumi. He sails seven leagues, for seven days. The ship and the seven hundred other sailors perish in the storm at sea. Mahajanaka swims for seven days back to Jambudvipa (the ancient name of India). He perseveres in the ocean storm knowing that only determination affirms faith. After initially tempting and taunting him to test his faith, ManiMekhala rewards him for his perseverance.

The second virtuous deed involves Mahajanaka's restoration of the mango tree to its former state, after his having tasted its fruit and thus, unconsciously tempting his followers to pluck all the mangoes. While counseling them on the demerits of greed, he then leads them to re-culture the mango tree adopting a meticulous process of first culturing the seeds, secondly nursing the roots so that they grow again; thirdly culturing branches; fourthly grafting on the other tree; fifthly, bud-grafting on the other tree; sixthly, splicing the branches; and layering the branches. Also, he advises smoking the fruitless tree, so that it bears fruit and finally, culturing the cells in a container. The uprooted tree, raised to its upright position, the royal order of restoration was thus initiated (pg. 133). The ecological regeneration of nature is an act of virtue ensuring happiness and equanimity of balance between all of creation.

The third regenerative virtuous deed involves the intention to create sufficiency in mindset and in life style through the establishment of the Pudalay Mahavijjalaya, an institute of high learning for the ignorant.

“From the Viceroy down to the elephant mahouts and the horse handlers and up from the horse handlers to the Viceroy, and especially the courtiers are all ignorant. They lack not only technical knowledge but also common knowledge i.e. common sense; they do not even know what is good for them. They like mangoes, but they destroy the good mango tree.”(Pg. 144)

The Pudalay Mahavijjalaya was established to enlighten the people of Mithila. At the heart of the learning endeavor is the effort to engender in the people two sustaining values or, local wisdoms. The first, as Mahajanaka espouses, is perseverance, the second can be categorized as the philosophy of Sufficiency Prudence. In the Buddhist doctrine of faith, “sufficiency” means moderation, reasonableness, and the need of self-immunity for sufficient protection from impacts arising from internal and external changes. To achieve this, an application of knowledge with due consideration and prudence is essential. This general paradigm encompasses the following conditions: sufficiency in mind: one has to be vigorous, independent, conscientious, compromising and not selfish. Sufficiency in society: Being helpful to make communities strong, possess unity and the most important thing, is to have good knowledge. Next, sufficiency in natural resources and the environment: one has to know how to use and handle resources, be smart and careful to make the best profit. Also communities have to help support resources so that they can be sustained. Sufficiency in technology is yet another pre-requisite requirement, communities need to know how to use technology in useful ways and develop it in local ingenious ways to be useful within immediate environments. And finally, sufficiency in economy is *sine qua non* to increase income; decrease expense and support life in a sufficient way. Depending on our own individual capabilities and positions is prerequisite to resisting the temptation to turn to greed while falling prey of the foibles to evanescent economic orders.

Historically, His Majesty King Bhumibol Addulyadej The Great had the translation of The Story of Mahajanaka published in the year 1996, just before the collapse of the Thai economy in 1997 and the



resultant collapses in the Asian regional economies, which today has come to be known as the “Thom Yum Kung Crisis.” Moral and Economic philosophers realized that His Majesty, through His translation was actually counseling all Thais to adopt the philosophy of Sufficiency Economy so as to remain immune to further economic and social upheavals. The model thus configured by philosophers espousing His Majesty’s Sufficiency Economy included three components: Moderation, Reasonableness and Self-Immunity; and two conditions namely, the application of Knowledge and, Ethics, Morality and Integrity. The model is thus illustrative of living with balance, sustainability and the ability to cope with changes.

Given that we now live in the era of globalization, when impacts from materialism, multiculturalism, neo-social ills and environmental degradation challenge the very cores of existence, The Story of Mahajanaka and its regenerative ecological lessons and the allied sufficiency mindset philosophy undeniably uphold spiritual values of harmony, security and sustainability, three core Buddhist Values in a world searching for panaceas in the midst of dwindling resources and intimidating realities.

The oral traditions of the *jataka* emanating from folklores on the life of the Buddha and his subsequent reincarnations, now morph into a written translation by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great so as to remind us that ecological resources, like material and financial resources need to be preserved, the absence of which will lead to humanity’s decline.

## REFERENCES

- His Majesty King Bhumibol Addulyadej: The Story of Mahajanaka, Amarin Printing and Publishing Company Ltd., 1997
- Keay, John: A History of India, HarperCollinsPublishers London and India, 2000
- Wilkins, W.J.: Hindu Mythology, Rupa and Co., New Delhi, (Sixteenth Impression 1976)
- [www.sufficiencyeconomy.org](http://www.sufficiencyeconomy.org), 2013



# Appendix

---

## ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES



Emerging from Cultures and Religions  
of the ASEAN Region



## Conference Summary

---

Wang Fei & Timmy Grimberg

### FIRST SESSION:

Topic: **“Katapatan sa Kalikasan”: On Being True to the Environment**

Speaker: **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Remmon E. Barbaza, Acting Dean, School of Humanities, Ateneo de Manila, Philippines**

In this paper the speaker introduced the term *katapatan* (honesty, fidelity, etc.) as a Filipino primordial experience of interpersonal relationships. He suggested that this term might be extended to the relationship between human beings and nature. Arguing from the Heideggerian insight that language can tell us the nature of things, *katapatan* offers an invitation to reflect upon a relationship between human beings and nature that prevents mutual destruction. The speaker explained that *katapatan*, which is derived from the root word *tapat* (adj., true, loyal, fair, etc.) and its cognate *tapatan* (v.t., to offer something fair in exchange for something), points toward a human-nature relationship of mutual respect and dialogue. The natural environment thus ceases to be merely a passive entity with regards to human actions, but becomes an active agent that responds to human activities and which requires to be listened to. The speaker explained that to engage in mutual dialogue with nature means to move away from objectifying and controlling it, that is, to no longer see nature as something to be managed. He argued that current attempts at carbon

dioxide reduction still belong to the realm of objectification of nature, hence a one way relationship towards it. In a mutually sustaining and respectful relationship nature needs to be listened to. Art provides such a way of dialogue and helps in the realization of *katapatan*, and thus might offer a path, not towards annihilation, but flourishing of human beings and nature. It is highlighted that:

- 1) Conferences like this offer a good platform to engage in dialogue among different disciplines. They allow representatives of different disciplines to come together and listen to one another.
- 2) Education provides a way for the questioning of one own actions and the rethinking of human beings' fundamental way of life.

## **SECOND SESSION:**

**Topic: A Muslim Perspective on Environmental Issues Currently Emerging in Indonesia**

**Speaker: Ana Rukmana, MA, Head of Department, Philosophy and Religion, Paramadina University, Indonesia**

In this paper, the speaker focused on two main arguments. First, he gave an explanation of the Islamic concept of nature, in which he talked about the relationship between God-Quran-Nature. Islam recognizes that God created human beings as vicegerents on earth. God created the universe and entrusted humans beings with the task of preserving it, hence endowing human beings with a cosmic duty. God gives humans the freedom to manage the world and offers them various potentials and materials required to sustain their life until the end of days. At the same time, human beings also have a responsibility to nature in which they are responsible for the well-being of all living creatures.

Secondly, the presenter gave an example of the development of environmental awareness and conservation through Islamic teachings

in Indonesia with a positive impact on daily life. He talked about the *Sekolah Kebun Tumbuh* (Growing Garden School) which is an Islamic Boarding school (*pesantren*) in Indonesia. Since Islam has a message towards the protection and conservation of the environment, the implementation of natural conservation is in line with Islamic teachings. Thus, the exemplified school offers activities to teach children to know more about nature as well as increase their awareness of environmental protection. The school is also open for public visits and the possibility to share ideas regarding environmental conservation. Furthermore, the speaker also discovered that there is no resistance in trying to mobilize Muslims to partake in environmental conservation activities, which is largely due to the *ulemas* awareness of the severity of environmental destruction. For the future, Ana Rukmana suggested, that education is of great importance to help people better understand the implementation of nature conservation.

### **THIRD SESSION:**

- Topic: **Deep Ecology on Alternative Energy - Eastern and Western Perspectives**
- Speaker: **Dr. Charn Mayot, Director of St. Martin Center for Professional Ethics, Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand**

In this presentation, the speaker started by talking about the limited fossil fuels on the planet and implications for a rethinking of the human-nature relationship. He explained that current attempts to solve environmental issues merely deal with the symptoms of an anthropocentric worldview, that is, a human-centered approach to the world in which greed subdues nature to serve human desires and needs. Thus, he proposed 'deep ecology', a contemporary ecological and environmental philosophy which advocates the inherent worth of all living beings regardless of their instrumental value and use to

human needs, as a basis for the restructuring modern human societies.

Finally, he offered two solutions to solve contemporary environmental issues. First, renewable and alternative energy should be preferred over fossil fuels and non-renewable energy sources. Secondly, he spoke about the need to adopt a way of life that is “simple in means, rich in ends”, in which ecological awareness leads to the saving of more resources and a decrease in environmental destruction.

#### **FOURTH SESSION:**

**Topic:           The Ecological Implications of *The Pra Mahajanaka*:  
Lives of Sufficiency**

**Speaker:       Glen Vivian Gerard Chatelier, Director, The Office of  
International Affairs, Assumption University of  
Thailand**

The paper dwelled on the translation of *The Pra Mahajanaka* by H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great. The literary work is inspired by the ancient *Jataka* which may have been popular in the early days of Buddhism in Thailand. The allegorical tale itself occurs to the backdrop of nature in the ancient Indian subcontinent, the ocean and the natural elements in a metaphor of regeneration of nature which is indeed a topical concern in these times of atmospheric and natural degradation in South East Asia. Pra Mahajanaka not only retrieves his material wealth after a tryst with destiny at sea, but in his later life as King, he teaches his subjects the wisdom of regenerating mango trees, so that they will have resources for the future. The paper concluded positing that the attitude of regeneration is the Buddhist principle of sufficiency through moderation in human action, self immunity through spiritual re-armament and the stifling of greed which of course is the root of evil. The academic intention of the paper is to suggest that in all considerations of the natural environment and its degradation, it is also necessary to examine the



religious ethos of South East Asia where Buddhism is one of the major religions.

### **FINAL SESSION:**

Topic: **Buddhist Soteriological Aims and their Contribution to Environmental Well-Being**

Speaker: **Fr. Anthony Le Duc, MDiv., Society of the Divine Word (SVD)**

The speaker of this presentation argued that in the face of modern ecological problems, Buddhism is often looked at as an alternative to anthropocentric views which perceive nature in merely instrumental terms as ready for the satisfaction of human greed. It is often argued that the notion of nature as possessing intrinsic value can be applied to Buddhist thought from which follows that nature has rights that must be respected by human beings. Yet, the speaker explained that the application of the intrinsic-value-to-nature concept to Theravada Buddhism is problematic given its doctrine of not-self. Instead, the speaker wants to shift his focus to the soteriological aims of Theravada Buddhism which prescribe a lifestyle away from greed, hatred and delusion towards the development of various virtues. These virtues which contribute to personal development and spiritual progress, that is, liberation from samsara, can be applied to environmental concerns in their connection to ecological well-being. Thus, promoting environmental well-being can be seen as part of the overall aim of Buddhism with its aims of achieving personal well-being, spiritual progress and ultimately nirvanic bliss.

### **PANEL SESSION:**

In the panel session, the presenters highlighted that from their perspective the following environmental issues and values currently

emerge from cultures and religions in the ASEAN region and need to be further promoted in order to foster well-being in the region:

- 1) **Education:** a more intensive program of education is needed to raise environmental awareness in the ASEAN region.
- 2) **Renewable energy production** must be more intensively promoted. The German nuclear phase-out can be seen as a paradigm.
- 3) **Spirituality** in diverse belief systems can make people aware of the vulnerability of ecosystems and the value of nature.
- 4) **Moderation in lifestyles** is essential, since over-consumption threatens the well-being of people and ecosystems.
- 5) Discussing environmental issues is not sufficient; **every individual can practically contribute to foster environmental well-being** in everyday life.
- 6) We need to **help current and future generations to focus** on what really matters in order to promote (environmental) well-being.

# Contributors

---

## ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES



Emerging from Cultures and Religions  
of the ASEAN Region

**Barbaza, Remmon E.** is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and currently serves as Acting Dean of the School of Humanities at the Ateneo de Manila University-Loyola Schools. He earned a BA in Linguistics from the University of the Philippines-Diliman in 1988, an MA in Philosophy from the Ateneo de Manila University in 1994, and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the Hochschule für Philosophie-München in 2002, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Gerd Haeffner, S.J. His dissertation, *Heidegger and a New Possibility of Dwelling*, was published in 2003 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang). His essay, "There Where Nothing Happens: The Poetry of Space in Heidegger and Arellano," appears as a chapter in the second, expanded edition of *Heidegger and the Earth: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). He also served as the Chair of the Department of Philosophy, editor of the *Loyola Schools Review*, and associate editor of *Budhi: A Journal of Culture and Ideas*. His research interests include Heidegger, technology, language, the city, environment and translation. He is currently working on a translation of Heidegger texts into Filipino and an interdisciplinary research project on human dwelling in a disaster-prone city.

**Chatelier, Glen.** Born into a devoted Catholic family of educators in India, Mr. Chatelier received his early and tertiary level education in India. He holds a master degree in English Literature from the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, U.S.A., through a Graduate fellowship from Rotary International. Currently serving as Director of International Affairs, Mr. Glen Chatelier has lived in Thailand and taught at Assumption University for 26 years. His former position was the Chair of the Department of Business English, the Faculty of Arts at Assumption University. His Holiness the Pope appointed Mr. Chatelier as Consultor for the Pontifical Council for Culture. As a published poet in Thailand, Mr. Glen Chatelier writes in the modified sonnet form and for the past 19 years has written in celebration of special anniversaries and birthdays for Their Majesties the King and Queen of Thailand.

**George, Siby K.** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, Mumbai, India. He is author of *Heidegger and Development in the Global South* (Springer, 2015), of several research papers in journals and books, and editor (with P. G. Jung) of *Cultural Ontology of the Self in Pain* (Springer, 2015). His area of research is twentieth century Continental Philosophy. He studies development, pain, community, environment, subjectivity and such themes from a phenomenological point of view, which is not inattentive to non-Western contexts.

**Le Duc, Anthony** is a Vietnamese American missionary priest in the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). He completed his undergraduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley in the fields of Molecular and Cell Biology and Asian Studies. He went on to complete his Master of Divinity concentrating on Global Missions at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois. Presently, he is doing his doctoral studies in Religious Studies at Assumption University of Thailand, where his area of research is in Buddhism and environmental ethics. In addition to his academic research, Le Duc has accumulated eight years of experience living and working as a missionary in Thailand as well as a number of years in Vietnam, the country of his birth.

**Promta, Somparn** is a philosophy professor at the Department of Philosophy, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. His work is centered on the applications of the teachings of Buddhism to everyday life and everyday practice. He has written several books and articles on issues such as Buddhist Philosophy, Buddhism and Contemporary Problems and Buddhist Ethics.

**Ramose, Mogobe B.** obtained his PhD at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, in 1983. He stayed there as a research fellow between 1983-1986. From 1986-1990 he worked as a Senior Jacobsen Research Fellow at the University of Zimbabwe, before going back to Leuven as a research fellow at the Center for Research into the Foundations of Law at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from 1991-1993. From 1993-1996 he was a lecturer in the Philosophy of Law, at the Katholieke Universiteit Brabant, Tilburg, in the Netherlands. Having been Professor of Philosophy at the University of Venda from 1997-1998, Ramose is now Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria. His area of research is philosophy, political science and international relations. A focus of his work is ubuntu, the southern African concept in which philosophy, ontology and ethics are combined. He derives his views on reparations to be paid for crimes committed under colonialism from ubuntu conceptions of justice. In his view, the ubuntu African understanding of justice as balance and harmony demands the restoration of justice by reversing the dehumanizing consequences of colonial conquest and by eliminating racism.

**Rukmana, Aan MA**, is Lecturer of Islamic philosophy and religion at Paramadina University, Indonesia. He is the author of several Islamic books such as 1) Ibn Sina, Pemantik Pijar Peradaban Islam, 2) Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Penjaga Taman Spiritualitas Islam, 3) Islam Jalan Tengah, 4) Islam dan Perempuan di Ruang Publik, 5) Peta Filsafat Islam di Indonesia, etc. Aan finished his study from Paramadina University and his master (MA) from Islamic College for Advanced Studies. He attended a short course on comparative religion at Gregoriana University, Vatican and on Islamic Philosophy at Qum, Iran. He is very active dealing with leadership programs, such as the Islamic leadership program in Australia, the Philippines and Malaysia. He established a school of nature (the growing garden) in response to the ecological crisis issue. He can be reached at: [aanrukmana@gmail.com](mailto:aanrukmana@gmail.com)







# ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

## Emerging from Cultures and Religions of the ASEAN Region

ASEAN is economically and politically one of the most important regions for global environmental protection strategies. Today, it is one of the most dynamic regions of the world, with some countries experiencing a deep economic and social transformation. Aside from the growing political and economic importance, recent natural catastrophes in the region have increased concerns and responsibilities related to environmental protection and climate change. Now is therefore the best moment to reconsider environmental values that can serve as guidelines for ASEAN's transformation.

ISBN 978-616-7695-23-5