

5

ACTIVISM AND ASIAN WISDOM

Oneness, Interdependence, and Harmony

Lisa Kemmerer

The Earth's crust is composed of bedrock that is generally hidden under a blanket of snow and ice, soils and vegetation, or water. Hidden by these more malleable, transient layers, bedrock shapes the surface of the earth.

Similarly, human understandings are shaped by bedrock views, provided by parents, schools, churches, and the larger community, that shape who we are, how we live, and how we understand ourselves, our community, and the world around us. For example, we are likely to view humanity as basically good or fundamentally evil, to understand other living beings as part of our extended community or completely unrelated to us, and to either see the nuclear family as the center of every community or the community as the center of every nuclear family. Despite their importance, we tend to be unaware of these bedrock views.

One of the most critical and decisive determinants of bedrock views is a community's religion. Examining religious teachings and beliefs can provide a window through which to explore a diversity of worldviews—alternative ways of understanding life, our community, and our place in the natural world.

Diverse Worldviews

Environmentalists and animal advocates have often noted that European peoples and the European diaspora (EPED) tend to have an exploitative relationship toward the larger world—we dominate and destroy other creatures and the natural world with a sense of self-righteous entitlement. Indeed, the EPED worldview places humanity apart from and above the natural world and other living beings. For example, EPED only use “animals” to refer to other species, demonstrating that we do not even recognize ourselves for what we are—animals, mammals, primates. Scientists use the term “lower animals” to refer to nonhuman species, as if humans somehow levitate above alligators and porcupines—as if there really were a food

chain or a tree of life in which human beings alone are not hunted and consumed by other animals, and as if the arrival of humanity marked the end of evolution. Similarly, EPED do not tend to view humanity as part of nature; we do not recognize ourselves as part of a biotic community or part of local ecosystems. Perhaps most telling, we usually refer to the wonders of nature as “natural resources,” as if waterways and soils and forests were designed to be pantries, purifiers, and sewage systems—as if everything on this green and glorious earth were here *for* us. While misrepresentations of our place in the world may appear self-serving, they are self-destructive.

In contrast, Asian philosophies and religions, which stretch four thousand miles from the steamy southern tip of Sri Lanka to the cold north of China, include a diversity of worldviews rooted in profound visions of deep and abiding unity. Perhaps these alternative worldviews have something to offer us in a world of climate change, mass extinctions, depletion of freshwater, and rampant soil degradation.

Hindu Oneness

Thou art the dark-blue bee, thou art the green parrot with red eyes, thou art the thunder-cloud, the seasons, the seas.

(Fourth Adhyana trans. 1884)

The Hindu tradition has long upheld a philosophical vision of oneness rooted in Brahman. Brahman is perhaps best understood as “Ultimate Power,” “Great Mystery,” or “the One that lies behind all” (Zaehner 1962). Brahman, dwelling in all that exists, the life in all that lives, is a force of unity and oneness (Embree 1988; Nelson 2000, p. 67):

This Great Being: ... dwells in the heart of all creatures as their innermost Self ... His hands and feet are everywhere; his eyes and mouths are everywhere. His ears are everywhere. He pervades everything in the universe.

(*Upanishads* trans. 1948)

As the core of every living being, Brahman ensures that “[a]ll reality is ultimately one” (Brodd 2009). In the sacred *Upanishads* (c. 500 BCE), a Hindu teaches his son that a pinch of salt placed in a cup of water cannot be seen or touched, yet pervades every drop of water within the cup. Salt, he notes, is like the subtle essence that runs throughout the universe: That subtle essence comes from Brahman, cannot be perceived or touched, yet pervades the soil, palm trees, human beings, leghorn chickens, elephants, and India's endangered broad-nosed gentle lemurs (*Chandogya* 1962, pp. 104–105). As all rivers flow down to join one great sea, as all drops rise again into the atmosphere and fall once more across the Earth's landscapes, so do all beings take form and yet again dissolve. Each being is ultimately part of a much larger

whole (*Chandogya* 1962, p. 102). We readily perceive the singular—a crumbling mushroom, a windblown spruce, the independent creature that we feel ourselves to be. But when we understand the essence beneath the surface—Brahman—we understand that each apparently separate entity is part of something much greater.

All that exists holds the shared essence of Brahman—every being as well as every aspect of the natural world: “By one clod of clay all that is made of clay is known” (*Chandogya* 1962, p. 92). The fundamental unity of a universe undergirded by Brahman allows us to find and know the sacred in a yellow wagtail or mugger crocodile, in a thistle’s spiny leaf or a drop of water. The divine voice teaches, “I am not lost to one who sees me in all things and sees all things in me” (trans. Buck 1973).

This bedrock Hindu understanding of Brahman teaches that “all of nature, all of the universe, is sacred” (Kinsley 1995): “The ground is sacred. The rivers are sacred. The sky is sacred. The sun is sacred” (Subramuniaswami 1993). This Hindu vision of oneness and a sacred universe cultivates humility and respect—Hindus who understand the nature of Brahman will see “God” in all things (Subramuniaswami 1993). Much-loved Krishna teaches: When a man

sees me in all and he sees all in me, then I never leave him and he never leaves me. He who in this oneness of love, loves me in whatever he sees, wherever this man may live, in truth this man lives in me. And he is the greatest [devotee], he whose vision is ever one.

(*Bhagavad Gita* trans. 1965)

Oneness undergirds Hindu morality, ideally guiding human interactions with the larger world. Because everything that exists is one in and through Brahman, the natural world is inextricably part of Hindu moral responsibility—those who love Brahman must have “love for all creation” (*Bhagavad Gita* 1965)—men and women, hispid hare and hoolock gibbon, little muddy puddles and vast leafy forests: Hindus are called to respect the entirety of the natural world. An advanced Hindu practitioner “treats a cow, an elephant, a dog, and an outcaste” with the same high regard because *God is all*, and those who are spiritually advanced, those who are *true* devotees of the divine, see “in all creation the presence of God” (Dwivedi 2000, p. 5).

Buddhism—Co-dependence and Radical Interdependence

If one strand is disturbed, the whole web is shaken.

(Cook 1977)

Buddhism is fundamentally indebted to Hinduism. Buddhists inherited the Hindu idea of oneness from which a philosophical worldview of radical interdependence emerged as Buddhism grew, evolved, and mixed with Chinese philosophy.

Buddhist philosophy holds that we live in a world of radical inter-identification—nothing and no one is independent. Contemporary Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that everything exists in and through every other aspect of the universe: One

who looks deeply into a tangerine sees the grocer who stored and sold the fruit, the truck drivers and trucks that transported the fruit to the grocer, the pickers and fields where the fruit ripened and was collected, the sun and raincloud and soil that were essential to the fruit’s growth and maturity, and the tiny seed and sapling that grew into a tree that bore tangerines (Hanh 1992). Seed and sapling and tree, soil and sunlight and clouds, harvesters and trucks and a tangerine—all are inter-dependent. Sustenance comes to our hands via the interconnected fingers of the universe.

Buddhist interdependence does not teach that we are all “in this together,” but rather that we *are* all this, “rising and falling as one living body” (Cook 1977). Hanh asserts that the tangerine and the cloud “inter-are” (Hanh 1992). Through co-dependence, each entity is identified with all other entities. We do not—and cannot—exist independently: “We have to inter-be with every other thing” (Hanh 1992). If we understand correctly, individuality is a ruse—interbeing is Truth. If we see correctly, we might say:

I am one with the wonderful pattern of life which radiates out in all directions. ... I am the frog swimming in the pond and I am also the snake who needs the body of the frog to nourish [his or her] own body. ... I am the forest which is being cut down. I am the rivers and air which are being polluted.

(Allendorf and Byers 1998)

Everything on the planet co-exists; all things are inter-identified. We *are* the toad, we *are* the pond—we and they are one (Hanh 1992). Being is always interbeing; to be is to inter-be.

Buddhist co-dependence and interbeing foster a sense of oneness in which there is no independent action, word, thought, or individual—all things influence and are influenced by all other things. Each being and each act affects every other being and every other act. Buddhist oneness holds that the

the entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees and the Earth ... [T]he world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise.

(Swearer 2004)

This vision of a cooperative, interdependent universe informs Buddhist morality: “Not only do we have to respect the lives of human beings, but we have to respect the lives of animals, vegetables, and minerals” (Hanh 1992). A bedrock worldview of radical interdependence encourages people to think carefully about how they live—about what they buy and throw away, how and where they travel, and how they interact with dogs and mice and chickens and streams and forests and grasses. “How should I deal with Nature? We should deal with nature the way we deal with ourselves ... ! Harming nature is harming ourselves, and vice versa” (Hanh 1985, p. 41).

Traveling north, Buddhism combined with Chinese philosophy to form an intensely ecologically sensitive branch of Buddhism, Hua-yen, which accentuates

Buddhist oneness and interbeing. The Hua-yen bedrock worldview is perhaps most easily grasped by imagining an infinitely regressing mirror that encompasses the entire universe in “simultaneous *mutual identity* and *mutual intercausality*” (Cook 1977). Because mirrors reflect all, nothing is separate or independent in this “vast web of interdependencies” (Cook 1977).

In a worldview in which each individual is affected by *any* and *every* change, even the slightest change in a far-away place, we cannot live *as we now live* if a fat tick falls from the tail of a coyote on the prairies of Montana. The tick most likely feels that his or her fall from the coyote—a vital source of sustenance—is life-threatening and monumental. In contrast, the tick would likely find tsunamis in Asia to be of absolutely no consequence. Our conception that the tick’s tribulations are irrelevant, and the tick’s perception that our troubles are irrelevant, both lack grounding in truth. The whole is affected even by what seems a slight and irrelevant event; the ripple effect from each happening is unending and all-encompassing because all things are interdependent.

Buddhist co-dependence and radical interdependence form a bedrock worldview in which humans are part of a single, interrelated process of existence; we inter-are. All things are deeply, inscrutably interconnected. Actions neither begin nor end at the tips of our fingers.

Daoist Philosophy: Unity, Transformation, Harmony

The universe and I exist together, and all things and I are one.
(Zhuangzi, in Chan 1963, 186)

Daoist philosophy teaches that every part “of the entire cosmos belongs to one organic whole” interacting as “one self-generating life process” (Tu 1985): “Although the myriad things are many, their order is one” (trans. Chan 1963).

Dao is infinite, eternally changeless, nonbeing (Wu 1991). Dao, “the final source and ground of the universe” runs throughout all that exists, “both the transcendent and the immanent” (Xiaogan 2001, pp. 322–323). Each creature shares Dao; each is shaped and moved by Dao. Dao “abides in all things”—in the ant, in the weeds, in “excrement and urine” (trans. Chan 1963; Jochim 1986). In Daoist philosophy, “a little stalk or a great pillar, ... things ribald and shady or things grotesque and strange, the Way [Dao] makes them all into one” (trans. Watson, n.d.).

Transformation is central to Daoism. Individuals are neither isolated nor enduring—everything that exists is in the process of transformation in which the “chain of being is never broken” (Thompson 1996; Tu 1989, p. 70). This eternal process of transformation binds all things—agamid lizard, Chinese elm, euploea, strawberry, human, red-headed vulture, and India’s newly discovered chikilidae (legless salamander)—into a Great Unity of Being (Parkes 1989, p. 91). Transformation binds “all things into one, equalizing all things” (trans. Chan 1963). Pine needles, basalt, noses,

and feet become bits and pieces of everything else: “Now a dragon, now a snake, / You transform together with the times, / And never consent to be one thing alone” (Parkes 1989, p. 92). No particular species or individual is favored in this impersonal process of transformation; human beings are of no greater importance than a pebble, mosquito, leaf, or Endangered Bengal tiger (Tu 1989, pp. 71–73; Thompson 1996). In the Daoist worldview, humans are just “one of the myriad kinds of beings” (Wu 1991). Each bar-tailed tree creeper, thistle, and black spined toad shares equally in the Great Unity of Being (Tu 1989, p. 71).

In Daoist philosophy, every link in the web of life is critical to every other link (Ames 1989, p. 120). We form one unity with long-tailed shrikes and crested ibises (one of the most endangered birds in the world), and skinks and Chinese paddlefish (though they have recently gone extinct). The constant flux of this unified universe ties a Manchurian alder to a Chinese sturgeon and a Yoshino cherry tree to a chunk of basalt, all of which are, in turn, tied to everything else.

Harmony is also central to Daoist philosophy. The Daoist universe is ordered—harmonious—so that “alternating forces and phases” shape “rhythms of life” (Kleeman 2001, p. 67). Daoism portrays discord as shallow, like choppy waves that skim across the deep, still ocean on which they travel. Rushing waves break onto the shore and retreat back into the ocean, dispersing into the abiding unity of the sea. A yin-yang symbol portrays the Chinese sense of deeper unity. Though the yin-yang symbol is composed of contrasting black and white, the line that figuratively separates the two colors is curved. There is also a touch of black amid the white, a touch of white amid the black, symbolizing a lack of clear separation. Yin and yang may sometimes be referred to as opposites, but like right and left legs, they belong to one body, they are far more alike than different, and both are an essential part of the larger whole.

Harmony—union, integration, and synthesis—pervades the cosmos. Though we sometimes imagine ourselves to be a wild fleck of foam on the tip of a careening wave, at the end of the day we are all part of the ocean. Daoism encourages both harmony and *bugan wei tianxia xian*, “not daring to be at the forefront of the world.” We tend to get caught up in our personal lives, bulldozing along like a herd of rooting hogs, but like the mountain bamboo-partridge and the sweet smelling desert rose, we *only* exist as part of a larger whole. Disharmony only arises from the error of forgetting (or neglecting to notice) the deep unity behind the ruse of individuality. Daoism discourages a shortsighted, self-centered approach to life. It is our duty to live “for the fulfillment of the health and harmony of all living things” (Kirkland 2001, p. 296). Daoism urges us, ever mindful of our place in the Great Unity of Being, to choose a life of harmony, a life in which we blend in seamlessly as part of a larger whole.

Activism and an Interconnected Universe

Despite an EPED bedrock worldview of hierarchy and dualism, EPED activism is *rooted* in an understanding that small changes lead to much larger changes, that

one dedicated voice brings new voices, and that what we buy at the store matters to the larger universe. Environmentalists, for example, understand that neither a species nor a forest can be removed from the planet without far-reaching effects; animal advocates understand that the suffering of any one individual matters to the larger scheme of things. Nonetheless, the EPED activist's sense of oneness and interdependence seems to end here. There is a misguided tendency among EPED activists to believe that "their" cause is *the most important cause*, and many (if not most) activists have worked out a rationale as to why their cause is preeminent. Most activists speak and act as if their social justice cause were independent from and more important than all other causes—or equally problematic, in competition with other social justice causes. This hierarchical, competitive, elitist vision of activism, rooted in distinction and separation, is profoundly unhelpful—and misguided inasmuch as the Eastern worldview is correct—inasmuch as we live in an interconnected universe.

Exploring Eastern philosophy and religions can help to mitigate the EPED tendency to view social justice causes as separate and distinct. Eastern understandings can help us to see that whatever happens to an individual being (farmed animals, for example) affects the natural environment (oceans, wilderness, species, waterways, rainforests, and so on), and whatever happens to the environment affects individual animals (whether eagles, snail darters, polar bears, or humans). Asian philosophies teach that whether we advocate for earth and animals or against corporate capitalism and patriarchy is of little importance *so long as we engage in activism*.

Conclusion

Bedrock worldviews shape our understanding of life, our community, and our place in the world. Ultimately, earth and animal activism are "based on moral values, not scientific ones, on beauty, ethics, and religion, without which it cannot sustain itself" (Schaller 2011, p. 91).

Eastern philosophies and religions foster a bedrock vision of aesthetics and ethics rooted in oneness, interdependence, transformation, Unity of Being, harmony, and blending in. EPED tend to view humanity as separate and distinct from chickens and lobsters and trees, as above and rightly in control of forests and waterways and flocks of seagulls. This worldview, which appears self-serving, is ultimately self-destructive, and denies the reality of an interconnected universe, an idea that is central to Eastern worldviews.

Bedrock worldviews from Asia can help EPED citizens to re-envision the place of humanity in a universe in which we are wholly intertwined with and dependent on all that exists. When EPED activists grasp the interconnected nature of all things, they will perhaps simultaneously recognize that protecting forests and chickens, children and manatees, gays and indigenous peoples, are all necessary aspects of healing one wounded universe. This vision can reshape our relations with the natural world and connect social justice activists, offering strength in numbers and the power of unity.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What do you think are the most important concepts from Asian philosophy and religions with regard to the environment? Why are these important? What about with regard to nonhuman animals? Are they different? If so, why might this be? If not, what is it about these topics that pulls them under a single canopy?
- 2 What does the author mean when she says that Buddhists believe that their actions neither begin nor end at the tips of our fingers? In what concrete ways do the works of the first authors in this book exemplify and emphasize this point?
- 3 How are the Eastern concept of *ahimsa* and the Judeo-Christian concept of love the same and different? Which seems preferable as a moral mandate, and why?
- 4 In what ways does our collective religious background affect your community's attitudes toward and relationship with animals and the environment?

Essay Questions

- 1 Compare and contrast two specific religio-philosophical teachings from Asia with two specific Western religio-philosophical ideas.
- 2 What do you think are the two most important concepts from Asian philosophy and religions with regard to the environment? If you held these views, in what specific ways would they change your behaviors?
- 3 Offer a few concrete examples of specific religion-based teachings you received early in life (even secular ideas are often rooted in older religious ideals, like dominion), and explain how each is reflected in your daily life. In what ways does your religious background affect your attitude toward and relationship with animals and the environment?
- 4 List five environmental values that you hold dear. Of these, which is the most important? What concrete aspects of your life might be adjusted to better realize this value in your daily life?

Suggested Further Reading

- Gottlieb, Roger S. (ed.), 2003, *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature and Environment*. Routledge, New York and London.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat, 1992. *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*. Bantam, New York.
- Kemmerer, Lisa 2012. *Animals and World Religions*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Sponsel, Leslie E. 2012, *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution*. Praeger, Santa Barbara.

References

- Allendorf, F.S. and Byers, B. 1998, 'Salmon in the Net of Indra: A Buddhist View of Nature and Communities,' in *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 2, pp. 37–52.
- Ames, R.T. 1989, 'Putting the *Te* Back in Taoism,' in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, eds J.B. Callicott and R.T. Ames, University of New York Press, Albany, pp.113–44.
- Bhagavad Gita* 1965, trans. J. Mascaro, Penguin, Baltimore.
- Brodd, J. 2009, *World Religions: A Voyage of Discovery*, St. Mary's Press, Winona MN.
- Buck W. (trans) 1973, *Mahabharata*, University of California, Berkeley.
- Chan W. (ed. and trans.) 1963, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Chandogya Upanishad*, trans. FM Muller 1962, in *The Upanishads* Part I. Dover, New York.
- Cook, F.H. 1977, *Hua-yen Buddhism*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park.
- Dwivedi, O.P. 2000, 'Dharmic Ecology,' *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, CK Chapple and ME Tucker (eds), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pp. 3–22.
- Embree, A.T. (ed.) 1988, *Sources of Indian Tradition: From the Beginning to 1800*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Fourth Adhyana*, trans. M Muller 1884. Available from: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe15/sbe15103.htm> [Accessed 22 August 2010].
- Hanh, T.H. 1985, 'The Individual, Society, and Nature' in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. F Eppsteiner. Parallax, Berkeley, pp. 40–46.
- Hank, T.H. 1992, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, Bantam, New York.
- Jochim, C. 1986, *Chinese Religions*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs.
- Kinsley, D. 1995, *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs.
- Kirkland, R. 2001, 'Responsible Non-Action' in a Natural World: Perspectives from the *Neiye*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Daode Jing*' in *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*, N.J. Girardot, J. Miller and L. Xiaogan (eds), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pp. 283–304.
- Kleeman, T.F. 2001, 'Daoism and the Quest for Order' in *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*. N.J. Girardot, J. Miller and L. Xiaogan (eds), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pp. 61–70.
- Nelson, L.E., 2000, 'Reading the Bhagavadgita from an Ecological Perspective' in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, C.K. Chapple and M.E. Tucker (eds), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pp. 127–64.
- Parkes, G. 1989, 'Human/Nature in Nietzsche and Taoism' in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, J.B. Callicott and R.T. Ames (eds), University of New York Press, Albany, pp. 79–97
- Schaller, G.B. 2011, 'Politics is Killing the Big Cats,' *National Geographic*, December, pp. 89–91.
- Subramuniaswami, S.S. 1993, *Dancing with Siva: Hinduism's Contemporary Catechism*, Himalayan Academy, Concord.
- Swearer D.K. 2004, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Thompson, L.G. 1996, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction*, Wadsworth, Belmont.
- Tu, W 1985, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, State University of New York, Albany.
- Tu, W. 1989, 'The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature' in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, J.B. Callicott and R.T. Ames (eds), University of New York, Albany, pp. 67–78.
- The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal* 1948, trans. S. Prabhavananda and F. Manchester, Mentor, New York.
- Wu, Y. 1991, *The Taoist Tradition in Chinese Thought*, Ethnographics, Los Angeles.
- Xiaogan, L. 2001, 'Non-Action and the Environment Today: A Conceptual and Applied Study of Laozi's Philosophy' in *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pp. 315–40.
- Watson, B. n.d., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Available from: <http://www.terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu.html>. [Accessed 12 January 2009].
- Zaehner R.C. 1962, *Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.