Should Environmentalists Study Asian Philosophy?
By Jeffrey Grygny

What used to be called “the wisdom of the East” has seen better times. Way back in the twentieth century, one gray eminence declared that the encounter with Eastern philosophy would be the most momentous event in the history of the West. Now, while Asia has been transfigured by Euro-American technologies and political/economic practices, “The West” has yet to exhibit a reciprocal transformation, apart from a few pop-cultural tropes and poorly understood words like “karma” and “zen.” In academia, comparative philosophy has proven more perilous than it once seemed; it is no simple task to lift iron-age texts out of their historical and cultural contexts and mine them for “conceptual resources.” Nevertheless, it seems strongly intuitive that the non-dualism, aestheticism, and metaphysical interconnectedness of many Asian teachings should be a perfect remedy for the mentalities (dualistic, reductive, and instrumentalist) that have contributed to our current environmental problems; thus, the young discipline of comparative environmental philosophy was born.

Environmental Philosophy in Asian Traditions of Thought is a sequel and companion volume to the collection of essays J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames edited in 1989 entitled Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought. Both collections aim to “stimulate further development in the field,” by providing “professional and sophisticated explorations” of comparative environmental philosophy, with the firm conviction that “ideas matter.” In this latest volume, eighteen papers, published from 1991 to the present, offer a heterogeneous, sometimes contentious collage of views. While not intended for the casual reader, anyone moderately familiar with Asian philosophies can find in this book a richly textured mosaic of the ways those philosophies might contribute to environmentalism—and these essays are indeed stimulating.

The first section treats ecological thinking in India. George Alfred James, acknowledging India’s “colossal environmental damage,” reviews historical attitudes towards nature, both positive (seeing all manifest phenomena as sacred, Brahma) and negative (a tendency to treat the material world as illusory). He cites traditional rules for the care of trees and animals and interprets Mohandas Gandhi’s yoga-based virtues of non-violence, self-sufficiency, and simplicity as, if not explicitly environmentalist, wholly consonant with environmental goals. Bart Gruzalski expands on ecological themes in Gandhi’s work; both he and James quote Gandhi’s sober observation that if India should ever become industrialized like Britain, “it would strip the world bare like locusts.” Gandhi and his followers helped inspire the grassroots Chipko Movement: literal tree-huggers who successfully protected Himalayan forests from development. In a final paper on Hindu thought, Christopher Framarin applies rigorous logic to ultimately reject the metaphysics of Atman and Brahman as a support for environmentalism, but affirms “the nearly pan-Indian cardinal virtue of ahimsa” (non-harm), as a sound basis for environmental ethics.

The three essays on Indian Buddhism hold a very lively conversation with each other. Stephanie Kaza’s 1991 paper delivers a full-throated exposition of Bud-
Buddhist logic need look no further than the book’s penultimate paper by Hiroshi Abe, which forays into Nagarjuna’s famous deconstructive formulas to suggest a “law of the included middle” that reverses the abstracting effect of conceptual thought.

Five papers examine Daoist thought from distinctively different angles, giving the reader a multifaceted feeling for such terms as ziran (nature), wei-wu-wei or simply wuwei (doing without doing, or sometimes translated “effortlessness”), and of course dao and de, conventionally translated “way” and “virtue.” R.P. Peerenboom wields the contrarian broom here, problematizing the highly contested term “nature.” He deems Daoism’s much vaunted “naturalism” of little use for environmental ethics. Humans are either a part of nature or they are not: if part, how can they be otherwise; if not, what’s the point in trying to be? (One can’t avoid feeling that Peerenboom is like someone measuring a violin with calipers and announcing that there is no music in it.) In the end, he interprets “not-doing” narrowly, as pragmatically letting go of preconceptions to work creatively with situations prima facie, literally “un-principled.” Sandra Wawrytko expresses a similar idea in her paper thus: “It’s not what you think that matters—but what you unthink.”

Karyn Lai carefully draws out principles of a dao-based environmental ethic, which she sees as neither anthropocentric nor setting up a human/nature dualism. She interprets dao and de in process terms: dao is the totality of all processes and relations, and de as the unique particularity of each related entity in its own context. Wuwei, then, is “the methodology of dao, which, in respecting the integrity of individuals, allows room for their spontaneous development.” The highest value of environmental ethics, therefore, is the fullest realization of all beings, ecosystems, and persons.

Alan Fox also confronts the “paradox of wuwei”: how can one overcome effort to do without doing? He helpfully points out the “gerundical nature” of
the Chinese language, which predisposes seeing entities as events rather than as static objects: a table is “table-ing going on,” and “has” the book, rather than the book “being” on the table. Following the process interpretation of Roger Ames and David Hall, Fox envisions a universe of daos, each a part of another dao and constituted by other daos. Inevitably, some daos interfere with other daos, and humans have a marked tendency to interfere excessively: instead of building a house, we cut down a forest. “Acting without action,” consists, then, of allowing each dao its optimum potential unfolding with minimal interference. This original interpretation avoids paradox and is pragmatic: “the harder we push against the flow of the world, the harder the world will push back.”

Both Fox and Wawrytko translate te as “virtuosity,” giving it the aesthetic, performative sense of “effortless grace.” Wawrytko’s sprightly essay enacts the playful spirit of some of the ancient texts. Human trouble arises from “the cunning intellect” creating superfluous and self-centered conceptual schemes; commonsense ideas can be woefully deluded; improving on nature often leads to catastrophe. Hence, the Daoist ecologist “unthinks.” The ideal is a mind as open to experience as an infant’s. Wawrytko approvingly quotes David Abram’s description of a phenomenal experience of being “fully a part of this world . . . a potentized field of intelligence in which our actions participate.”

How does one realize such an experience? James Miller brings a provocative perspective with his fascinating discussion of Daoist body cultivation practices. Since Western anthropocentrism is founded on the body-mind dualism of the Enlightenment, the body “should be the site par excellence for environmentalism as a social movement.” Phenomenologists Gaston Bachelard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty show how imagination, emotion, and the senses vividly and non-discursively connect us to the world, from which only the illusion of a transcendent self supports us in the mistaken view that we could ever have been separate. For Daoists, as in much Asian thought, “cultivation” is a key notion: philosophy is not discourse alone, but practice and theory in concert. By working with the body, whether by elaborate internal visualizations, quiescent meditation, or Qigong moving meditation, Daoist practices “reinscribe the body” to “a psycho-somatic sensitivity to the mutual implication of the lived body and the lived world.” Without such experiences, exhortations to respect, heal, or preserve nature subtly reinforce dualism and are bound to fail.

As Buddhism moved through India throughout Southeast Asia, it sprouted schools and movements of great variety and sophistication, with concomitant cultural and artistic expressions. The final section on Japanese thought matures and recapitulates this volume’s many themes in an almost symphonic conclusion. In an elegant, magisterial paper, Steve Odin compares traditional Japanese views on nature to the land ethic and aesthetics of Aldo Leopold. Odin attributes Japan’s distinctive aesthetic to Buddhist teachings on impermanence, interdependence, emptiness, non-duality, and Buddha nature, joined with the native Shinto reverence for kami, or spiriti loci. Cultural expressions such as the tea ceremony, flower arranging, and poetry were all shugyen (“self-cultivation”) and geido (the way of art). Their aesthetic principles of close observation, sensitivity, compassion, simplicity, and gentleness arise naturally from the non-anthropocentric, relational metaphysics shared by the various Buddhist schools of Japan.

Deane Curtin’s treatment of ecological themes in the gnomic texts of Zen master Dōgen underscores the importance of recognizing “radical ordinairiness.” Buddhism has often been criticized for rejecting the
manifest world as samsara, a cycle of suffering, to be abandoned for nirvana as quickly as possible. Dōgen firmly rejected the duality of samsara and nirvana. This insight is implicit in the foundational Prajnaparamita Sutra’s formula: “form is emptiness, emptiness also is form.” The “relational self” is radically de-centered, neither at one with nor separate from the world, and it is able to practice “undivided activity in the present moment, a practice that reveals the interpenetration of all beings.” Such activity manifests in every aspect of life, however mundane: “Ordinary coarse tea and plain rice are Buddha’s thoughts—ancestor’s words.” Ecofeminism particularly resonates with this recognition of the ordinary, as it values the simple, unexceptional, care-taking actions both women’s traditional roles and the ecologist’s work involve.

Modern Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro employed William James’s notion of “pure experience” in his early work. David Edward Shaner and R. Shannon Duval trace the idea to French-American biologist Louis Agassiz’s sacral view of nature, which James absorbed while a student accompanying Agassiz on an Amazon expedition. A sense of intimacy with the environment, whether developed by biological fieldwork or contemplative self-cultivation, can only occur when one’s ego loses its privileged central position. This kind of selfless, intimate experience can be the basis for developing “a deeper and more enduring conservation ethic.”

In the introduction to this volume, Callicott and McRae express doubt that Asian philosophy can actually help us formulate environmental ethics—and with good reason. When Buddha and Lao Tzu walked, there was no environmental crisis; their aim was wisdom, not ecology. Confucian ethics, with its harmony of heaven, earth, and human, seems more promising, but in the end, we don’t need ancient religions to understand our relation to the planet’s ecosystems, nor to develop ethical principles that include relationships and well-being as well as individual rights. So why bother studying Asian thought?

In an afterword, Callicott offers three reasons: First, it gives intellectual pleasure. Second, contemporary Asian nations desperately need environmental ethics, and if they can find them in their own heritage rather than importing them, so much the better. Finally, comparative philosophy reveals intellectual assumptions and culturally engrained blind spots. A model of selfhood is clearly crucial to environmental ethics, which is ever grappling with the problems of balancing the needs of the whole with the well-being of its diverse parts. The self is an overarching theme in all these essays. And the monadic individual asserted by every major lineage of Western thought contrasts with the interconnected, relationship-formed, contextual selves of Asian thought. Callicott concludes that we can no longer pay the ecological price extracted by the Western concept of self; it is “bankrupt.”

In addition, this book suggests other reasons for environmentalists to study Asian thought. Reconfiguring the monadic self is a tall order. And we must remember that Asian “philosophy” is not made up of rarefied concepts. Rather, it is virtually always embodied, in countless practices refined over centuries of self-cultivation. James Miller’s paper on Taoist body cultivation exhorts us to put our theories on the line and train ourselves in the intimate, detailed aesthetic appreciation of the natural world. This, too, is philosophy. We don’t need more “conceptual resources”; we are already logos-heavy. What ancient thought holds out to us is a treasure house of relational thinking in praxis, along with cornucopias of potent mythos; poetic language and sensuous imagery that stir the imagination and emotions, initiate conversations, join us together, and move us to action.

Comparative philosophy may even be able to show contemporary philosophy a way out of its analytic cul-de-sac. Neil deGrasse Tyson notoriously proclaimed philosophy to be useless—and so it will be, if it keeps on trying to imitate science. When was the last time a
work of philosophy inspired a play or moved someone to song (and what social movement ever succeeded without a song?)? Evolution proceeds by bricolage, always inventing new uses for old structures, and in this global age, the rich heritage of India, China, and Japan is available to us all. We don’t have to become Buddhists or Confucians, but the images of Indra’s net, or of becoming “one body with the world,” represent human potentials too great to be neglected. We may yet see Asian thought transform the West.

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NOTES

4. For an in-depth feminist exploration of this idea, see C. Keller, From A Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1986).