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Chapter Three
Environmental Ethics

In the previous chapter, I argued that Zen is neither amoral nor immoral but can be fruitfully conceived in terms of virtue ethics. I identified two key virtues at the heart of Zen, propiha (insight) and kuraia (compersion), and I showed how these virtues develop in practices such as meditation. In this chapter, I address the charge that Zen is inherently anthropocentric by examining the implications of Zen teachings for our moral relations with the natural environment. However, since, up to now, we have been considering Zen in terms of virtue ethics, before turning to the environmental implications of Zen it will be helpful to consider the general matter of the application of virtue ethics to environmental issues.

Environmental virtue ethics and the charge of anthropocentrism

In Chapter Two, I mentioned that virtue ethics has undergone a revival in recent years. This renewed interest was largely inspired by G. E. M. Anscombe’s 1958 paper, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy.’ In that paper, Anscombe argued that the prevailing vocabulary of ‘duties’ and ‘moral obligations’ in which discussions of ethics are conventionally framed depends on a religious context within which we are considered to be subject to the law of God. But in modern secular society, she maintained, appeals to duties, moral obligations and the like, seeming, as they do, to imply such a context, cannot be upheld. In response to this situation, Anscombe recommended that we relinquish the now hopelessly confused project of modern moral philosophy and direct our attention to the philosophy of psychology, and an analysis of the ideas of action, intention, pleasure and wanting. Should our inquiry eventually bring us to an analysis of the idea of virtue, then we will have got to the point where we can begin, as it were, to have another shot at ethics, starting, once again, with its oldest and most venerable tradition, virtue ethics.1

Anscombe’s view struck a chord with those philosophers who had become dissatisfied with modern ethics, preoccupied, as it is, by discussions of ‘rights’, duties and obligations and dominated by the perennial standoff between consequentialism (especially utilitarianism) and deontology. Indeed, since its

2 Ibid. p.15.

publication, Anscombe’s general disavowal of modern ethics and her call for a return to virtue ethics has resurfaced in the work of a number of authors. Her influence is evident, for instance, in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, who in After Virtue argues that modern ethics consists of a mixed bag of ideal drawn indiscriminately from a variety of incommensurable ethical traditions – talk of rights, duties and obligations mixing with appeals to empathy, compassion and moral sensitivity. Like Anscombe, MacIntyre does not recommend that we throw up our hands in a Nietzschean rejection of morality, but that we return to Aristotle and virtue ethics.2

One might expect the message of Anscombe et al. to be welcomed by those working in environmental ethics, a field of study bedevilled by an array of intersting problems regarding the ‘rights’ of natural objects and our moral obligations to the natural world. Yet regardless of its popularity in other fields, the tradition of virtue ethics has been sorely overlooked by environmental ethicists.3 There are doubtless several reasons for this. Louke van Wensveen, one of the small but growing set of writers who have treated the subject, notes that talk of virtues and vices has a rather antiquated air about it (think of references to a ‘lady’s virtue’), and consequently less rhetorical bite than the prevailing discourse of interests and obligations. Moreover, in a subject that often considers itself a branch of applied ethics, virtue ethicists have noticeably less practical guidance to offer on specific moral dilemmas than consequentialists or deontologists. Utilitarian calls for us to curb global warming in order to reduce the suffering of sentient beings are deontological calls for us to respect the natural rights of higher mammals would seem to have clearer implications for how we ought to act than calls for us to cultivate certain character traits. What use are appeals to the virtues of humility or simplicity in deciding whether or not to build a bypass or whether to extend legal protection to a particular species of organism? (I will address these and other practical questions in Chapter Five.)

One reason for this lack of interest in virtue ethics could be environmental philosophy’s fixation with avoiding the charge of anthropocentrism. I suspect that many radical environmental thinkers – deep ecologists, for example – would see virtue ethics and its concern with the good life as perniciously human-centred, one more manifestation of the human hubris that has spawned our modern environmental crisis. To be sure, these thinkers might acknowledge that forms of environmental concern could be consorted as virtues – they might admit that an appreciation of wild nature could be a component of the good life, for instance. But for many non-anthropocentric thinkers, to think of an appreciation of nature as a component of human well-being is to value nature not for its own sake, not for its intrinsic value, say, but only in so far as it furthers human interests, i.e., the human

interest in living well. Robert Elliot is expressing this sort of scepticism regarding the application of virtue ethics to environmental issues when he writes that: "There is a distinction to be drawn between, on the one hand, ways of treating the natural environment which we regard as admirable, desirable, constitutive of ideals of human excellence, and on the other hand, valuing the natural environment for its own sake in a completely non-instrumental way. 1 To emphasize the attainment of ideal or virtuous character is, he claims, to be 'loosely concerned with the human world'. 2

I disagree. It seems to me perfectly reasonable to hold that valuing nature non-instrumentally—that is, valuing it for its own sake rather than for its usefulness—is constitutive of human excellence. Consider the example of a man who loves wild nature, someone like William Wordsworth or John Muir. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that this man's capacity to appreciate wild nature is a virtue, that it is constitutive of his well-being. Now to say that the nature-lover's capacity to appreciate wild nature is good for him in this sense is not to say that he values wild nature because it is good for him. Indeed, there is a case for saying that to value wild nature in this anthropo-centric and instrumental way would not be to appreciate it at all. John O'Neill has illustrated this point by referring to Aristotle's treatment of friendship. For Aristotle, friendship is constitutive of human well-being, which means, very roughly, that it is good for us to have friends. However, Aristotle points out that the best sort of friendship involves caring for our friends for their own sake, not for some benefit they might bring us, and not because we think our friendship with them might contribute to our personal well-being. Similarly, there is no contradiction in conceiving of the non-instrumental appreciation of nature as a virtue, in holding, that is, that valuing nature for its own sake is good for us.

So a Zen Buddhist ethic need not be thought anthropocentric simply on account of its being a virtue ethic. For it could hold that valuing nature non-instrumentally is constitutive of human well-being. We will see whether it does in fact do this in the following pages. However, it might be thought that any ethic based on Zen must be guilty of a certain degree of anthropocentrism. After all, Zen would seem to be primarily concerned with human awakening. Toshibiko Inoue, for instance, writes that 'the anthropo-centric tendency of Buddhism was greatly fortified by the rise and development of the Zen sect', 3 especially after Lin-chi, a thirteenth-century master stated that 'to put man at the very centre of Zen thought'. 4 These statements would doubtless give pause to those thinkers towards the deep green pole of the environmental spectrum, for whom an adequate environmental ethic must be free of any trace of human-centredness.

2 Ibid. p.57
5 Ibid. p.6

Environmental Ethics

So, is Zen primarily concerned with human awakening, and is it to that degree anthropocentric? In relation to this question, it is worth considering the following passage from Malcolm David Eckel in which he refers to what he calls 'the paradox of Buddhist anthropocentrism'.

The tradition is genuinely concerned with the human achievement of human goals... But the achievement of self-interest is lost in an equally fundamental way to the discernment of the self.

Indeed, he continues, 'in Buddhist culture at large the cultivation of self takes the form of a decentering of the self and a concern for a wider network of life.' 5

This concern for a wider network of life clearly involves concern for other humans—otherwise it would be hard to make sense of the centrality of other-regarding virtues such as compassion in Zen practice (it is for this reason that Buddhism is not egoistic). But does this concern extend to non-human beings, and more importantly—if it does, to which sorts of being can it be thought of as extending? Moreover, if environmental concern is indeed central to Zen, can the tradition be framed in terms of any pre-existing environmental ethic? These are questions this chapter will try to answer.

Sentient life

At first sight, it might seem that an account of it being a tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, Zen must conceive the moral community as incorporating all sentient beings. After all, we have been using the term karunya to denote, not some mundane sense of fellow-feeling, but the 'great compassion', the 'supramundane' virtue that aims at the liberation of all sentient beings. To have learned in this sense to seek to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings by leading them to Buddhahood. Admittedly, on the basis of orthodox Mahayana cosmology, animals cannot be awakened in this lifetime (they must await a human rebirth); however, the aim is to completely extinguish the suffering of others extends to all sentient beings, not just those capable of awakening in this lifetime. That is to say that the 'mood circle'—to adopt a common image from the literature—here includes not just all humans, but all sentient beings. All sentient beings are taken to have moral standing, to be morally considerable.

It might seem that the Mahayana—and by implication, Zen—can somehow come to terms with utilitarian ethics of the sort proposed by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century and developed in recent years by Peter Singer. For his part, Singer, like other utilitarians, bases his ethics on a principle of equality, according to which one should give equal weight in one's moral deliberations to the like interests of all those beings affected by one's actions. 6 The moral circle is

6 See, for example, Practical Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.21.
schools of Eastern Buddhism came to promote vegetarianism. Zen monks and nuns, in particular, tend to avoid eating meat. So, both Zen and Singer maintain that all animals have moral standing on account of their capacity to suffer, but Zen augments this by maintaining that all animals are also equal in their potential for Buddhahood. Both positions are to this extent non-antropocentric. This rejection of anthropocentricity is nicely demonstrated by the following story. Two Zen priests, Sho-shan and Tung-shan, were taking a relaxing stroll through the mountains, admiring the plum blossoms filling the valley below them, when suddenly a rabbit darted across the path in front of them. The two men stopped in surprise. ‘How agile it was!’ exclaimed Sho-shan. ‘Even such a beautiful rabbit should not be killed!’ Tung-shan, however, thought rather differently. ‘Eh, what a strange agtitude like that. How marvellous!’ Tung-shan thought. There, however, lies the difference between being a rabbit and being a human; one might say the chief difference. One interpretation of this story could be that Tung-shan was being critical of Sho-shan’s attitude to the teaching of rebirth, the possibility that the rabbit might be another form of life in the future. To Sho-shan, that idea that non-human beings might have been people’s relatives or relatives in a former life often acts as a motivation for environmental concern in Buddhism. However, regarding the story at hand, if the being had really been a great man he would not have been reborn in the form of a rabbit. In the context of Buddhist cosmology, the rebirth of a human in the form of an animal represents a step down the spiritual ladder, as it were, because as a being in the form of an animal, one is not having potential for spiritual development beyond it (in this respect Buddhism is anthropocentric). Hence, rebirth of a human as an animal must be the result of the karma generated by evil deeds in one’s human life. If a truly great man were to be reborn, he would be reborn as a human or a god rather than a rabbit. I do not think this is the point being made in the story of Tung-shan, however. It seems to me that the Zen master was rather speaking from a Mahayana standpoint, making the point that a rabbit possesses (or, perhaps, is a manifestation of) a flawless Buddha-nature just as much as a human being. In some very general respects, then, Zen seems to accord with the recent writings of ethicists such as Peter Singer. But before one jumps at the chance of seeing Singer’s writings as a theoretical articulation of the central intuitions of Zen, it must be noted that there are some important differences between the two positions. For one thing, Singer allows the possibility that someone could do the
aim to secure the liberation of all beings. Indeed, as we saw above, Eastern traditions of Mahayana were especially concerned to extend moral concern to nonhuman animals. But in some schools this approval would, I think, be qualified. For it seems likely that some Eastern traditions would view the idea of including all and only nonhuman beings in the kingdom of a positive light as a limitation of the aspirations of the Mahayana rather than as a praiseworthy extension of the moral circle. After all, as William LaFleur has shown, while in India the idea that all sentient beings were candidates for Buddhahood was seen in a positive light as an expansion of the Great Vehicle, in China it was - ironically - perceived as a restriction. Why deny the promise of Buddhahood to plants and other seemingly nonsentient beings? Perhaps they would have had similar qualms about Singer’s position. But whether they would have or not, it can be noted that Eastern Mahayana did indeed tend to work with a very broad conception of the Great Vehicle, the set of beings entitled for (or insatiable) Buddhahood being sometimes taken to include not only all animals, but also plants and even apparently non-living ‘beings’ such as mountains and rivers.

In the extension of the Great Vehicle beyond the boundaries of the animal kingdom is particularly associated with the Shingon (Ch. Chen-yen) and Tendai schools of Eastern Buddhism, both of which proved important formative influences on Zen. For Chen-yan (711-792) of the latter school, Mahayana philosophy impelled one to consider plants and even soil as destined for Buddhahood.

In the great assembly of the Lotus all are present - without divisions. Grass, trees, the soil on which these grow... Some are barely in motion while others make haste along the Path, but they will all in time reach the precious land of Nirvana... Who can really maintain that things lack independence?20

In Japan, these sorts of claims chimed with traditional conceptions of the religious significance of the natural world - Shintō ideas that natural beings were inhabited by divine spirits (kami), for instance - and the idea of the spiritual significance of nature accordingly took root and flourished on Japanese soil.21 It is evident, for instance, in the idea of the 'green, Japanese thought, of the inherent enlightenment (kongokushiki) of grasses and trees, rocks and mountains.22 On this very broad conception of the Great Vehicle, all these beings were to be thought of as having Buddha-nature. Or rather, following Dōgen, these beings were to be

18 Admittedly, a utilitarian could reply that some form of rule-utilitarianism could accommodate the importance of motivation, arguing that actions motivated by compassion are right, not because they always maximize utility, but because the role that actions to be motivated maximizes utility. But with this argument we are, I think, very far from anything resembling the Mahayana. Mahayana traditions do not load the value of compassion simply because exercising it just so happens to decrease suffering; actions motivated by compassion have non-instrumental value.

19 Note that these conclusions are in accord with the Buddhist idea that the moral worth of an action, that is the specific nature - good or bad - of the karma it generates, is a function of the choice or intention (cetas) behind it.

thought of as being Buddha-nature. As we saw in Chapter One, Dōgen, inspired no doubt by his early training in Tendai, maintained that the line in the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, 'All sentient beings without exception have the Buddha-nature,' should be read as, 'All is sentient being, all beings are (all being is) the Buddha-nature.' For Dōgen, mountains 'are the actualization of the ancient Buddha way,' and to drive this obscure point home he speaks - in terms reminiscent of the twentieth century environmental ethicist, Aldo Leopold - of considering the world from the perspective of a mountain, or of the long, slow movement of mountains through many eons of time.24 He would, I think, have been intrigued by the speed-up film in natural history television programmes of plants moving so quickly that they seem sentient, like animals. He might also have been impressed by the science of geology, and its discovery that the earth's surface is more fluid that it appears, that even mountains are born and die.

LaFleur has shown that in Japan natural entities such as plants, rocks and rivers were sometimes even conceived as being spiritually superior to humans. For while humans had to appropriate their enlightenment experientially - that is, realize their inherent nature for themselves - other natural entities were thought of as instantiating the way of the Buddha just as they were. In this sense, nature was considered to be 'in full possession of what man only still partially possesses.'25 As such, the natural world was considered to have a religious significance, or, more precisely, a 'saving power and function.' To contemplate the natural world was to follow the way of the Buddha.

This conception of the saving power of nature is also found in Zen. For Zen poets such as Bashō, there is no separation between the way of nature and the religious path. That is why a poem ostensibly about natural phenomena could be viewed as a religious verse. Consider, for example, the following poem from Daitō (1228-1338), one of the founders of the Ōtōkan school of Rinzai:

Rain draws from distant peaks, dew glistening freshly. Moonlight gleams the frost of my rivulets but the pines. How can I tell you how I am, right now? A slender brook gushes in the valley darkened by clouds.26

24 Brone the first lines of his "Mountain and Waters "Excerpt", quoted in Maas and Neale, Dharmain Rain, p. 88.
27 Ibid. p. 206.
28 Quoted in Kana and Kraft, Dharmain Rain, p. 7. For criticism of the idea that the attention to natural phenomena expressed in Japanese poetry is evidence of a genuine appreciation of nature, see Arne Kailand, Culture in Japanese Nature in Ole Brun and Arne Kailand, Asian Perception of Nature: A Critical Approach (Richmond: Curzon, 1996). Kailand argues that the natural phenomena referred to in haiku - cherry blossoms, the morning-glo, pines, the moon, etc. - 'all appear in a predictable, or conventional, way and even experts who have hardly been outside the main cities have become renowned for their sensitive praise of nature' (p.251). This is no doubt a criticism that could have been levelled at some poets, but it does not apply to men such as Bashō and Ryōkan whose love of nature is well-documented, nor does it apply to modern Zen Buddhists like Teshi Noz Hatsh and John Daido Loori, whose environmental work is an extension of their practice of Zen.
29 Although Philip Caplan notes that the references to the virtues of animals found in the writings of modern environmental thinkers such as Aldo Leopold and Henry David Thoreau take us back to Herder, 'who could speak of the arete of a hone and all Greece understood love' ("Thoreau, Leopold, and Canoe: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethic", Environmental Ethics 22 (Spring 2000), p.9) (note 39 in the German term conventionally rendered as 'virtue' or 'excellence' in English.)
30 Sea Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics, pp. 158, 162.
32 Or, one might say, the teachings symbolized by plants. The idea that beings such as plants exemplify the virtues of Buddhism is in practice often incoherent from the idea that these beings symbolize teachings that can be read by someone who is suitably attentive. Thus, the hollow stem of bamboo is said to symbolize the empty core at the heart of phenomena, or a modest flower display in a room set aside for the tea ceremony is meant to symbolize the pure, unassuming attitude of mind that the ceremony requires. See Herrigel, Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement, p.106.
twirling of the flower before the smilling Mahábháyapa. 32 At other times, the focus is on the patience or steadiness exemplified by plants. In this respect, trees, and, it seems, especially pine trees, are seen as exemplifying "imperturbability, strength and firmness of character." 33 For the Sōtō poet-monk Ryoküwan (1758-1831) they exemplified a divine dignity. 34 In other contexts, the emphasis is on the way plants are able to adapt to their environments - in a Taoist idiom, one would say to the Tao - in a way in which humans often cannot. Consider, for example, the following passage from Gustie Herringel:

The master has seen, from the example of himself and others, how fuss, haste and impatience only bring discord into his life and his surroundings. He has listened to the plants in the wind and the storm, seen how they yield, bending and swaying, how they calmly let everything pass over their heads and so remain unscathed. 35

Compare Kantsuki Sekida's beautiful story of his encounter with an old Zen priest:

[The priest] had been ill, and when I visited him he was sitting quietly at the window, backing into the sun. A few books of haiku and a notebook were beside him. He had been composing haiku. It was a calm winter day. In the course of our conversation, he pointed to a pine grove in front of the temple and said, "You know the Zen question. 'The Bodhisattva of Great Mercy [Avalokítésvara, or Kanzeon] has a thousand hands and a thousand eyes; which is the true eye?' I could not understand this for a long time. Then the other day, when I looked at the pine trees bending before the cold blasts from the mountain, I suddenly realized the meaning. You see, all the boughs, branches, twigs, and leaves simultaneously bend to the wind with tremendous vigor. I said this with a quiet but earnest gesture. I could feel his close intimacy with the pine trees. He had to convey his experience to somebody else. It was the evening glow of his life. He died a few weeks after our meeting.

Some schools of the Mahábháyana spoke of a heavenly 'Pure Land' which would provide a kind of springboard to Nirvána for those beings who were virtuous enough to be reborn there. For to be reborn in a Pure Land would be to find oneself in a spiritual paradise in which even the rustling of the leaves in the trees proclaimed the Dharma. Who could fail to attain awakening in such a place? For Zen, however, the Pure Land is not some far-off destination, which can only be reached by securing an auspicious rebirth, it is the very world in which we live. So the truth is there in Zen, but it is there also in the tall beech trees outside the

33 See Herringel, Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement, p.84.
34 Suzuki, Zen and Japanese Culture, pp.370-1.
35 Herringel, Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement, pp.22-3.
39 Even if one claims not only that these beings are 'on the way' to Buddhism, rather than actual Buddhists, one could suppose that they ought still to be viewed as sentient beings, and hence as falling within the domain of non-violence. See Steve Olari's discussion of the views of Geshe Akira in his essay 'The Japanese Concept of Nature in Relation to the Environmental Ethics and Conservation Aesthetics of Aldo Leopold' in Tucker and Williams (eds), Buddhism and Ecology, pp.10-2.
blades of grass (for they manifest Buddha-nature), carefully avoiding crushing lamps of will beneath his feet (for they too manifest Buddha-nature). This idea bears some resemblance to the exacting interpretation of ahimsa professed in Jainism, but it does not accord with the practice of Zen.42 Zen masters, although, as we shall see, respectful of nature, do not take such extreme measures to avoid impinging on the world, so it is unlikely that in claiming that beings have Buddha-nature they mean to accord them moral standing in a way that brings them within the purview of the First Precept.43 In fact, Chittu (1065-1138), a Tendai scholar, explicitly addresses this matter, maintaining that the claim that plants are endowed with Buddha-nature is made from the standpoint of ultimate truth, but that from this standpoint moral distinctions are not relevant either. It would seem to follow that the ascetism of Buddha-nature to plants (and other beings) should not affect our moral obligations towards them.44

But if this is granted, then what should one make of the following formulation of the First Precept presented by Thich Nhat Hanh: ‘Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of humans, animals, plants, and minerals?’45 Is Nhat Hanh advocating that suffering caused of earth be compared to killing animals? Is he calling for the sort of extension of the First Precept I have dismissed as being out of keeping with Zen practice? I do not think he is. As we saw in Chapter Two, non-violence, like the other precepts, is not merely an injunction against performing a certain kind of action. It also has a positive aspect, so that someone whose actions were in accord with the First Precept could be said to have developed the virtue of ahimsa. All Buddhists agree that someone who had developed this virtue would radiate kindness and compassion towards sentient beings. I would hold that such a caring, gentle attitude would also be extended to plants. This is not to say that the harming of plants should be considered to be a violation of the First Precept on a 42 Jainism is an Indian religion, older than Buddhism, which promotes as the highest spiritual goal the practice of ahimsa as a way of cleansing one’s life-force or soul (soul) of karmic accretions. It is held, moreover, that ahimsa ought to be extended to all sentient beings, which, on the Jain concept, means not only all animals but also plants and even inanimate objects such as fire and water. Hence Jains monks and nuns not only avoid killing insects, by covering their mouths and sweeping their path, but also avoid disturbing the eleventh by, say, lighting or extinguishing flames or waving into water. (See Christopher Key Chappel, ‘Jainism and Buddhism’ in Dale Jacumin, A Companion to Environmental Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p.53.) To be sure, these extreme measures are partly a result of the fact that, unlike Buddhism, Jainism sees even unintentional actions in the generating karma, so that even accidentally swallowing a fly or a stepping on a daisy is thought to produce bad karma.

43 Cf Anna Kalland, Culture in Japanese Nature’ in Richard Curren, ed, The Future of Nature, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.133. To be sure, these extreme measures are partly a result of the fact that, unlike Buddhism, Jainism sees even unintentional actions in the generating karma, so that even accidentally swallowing a fly or a stepping on a daisy is thought to produce bad karma.


45 In this connection it can be noted that the Vinaya rules for monastic life prohibit monks and nuns from intentionally injuring plants, even though plants are not officially protected under the First Precept. On the treatment of plants in the context of early Buddhist ethics, see Schmitzhausen, Buddhism and Nature, pp.6-8.


47 Holmes Rolston III also explores the possibility of basing a Zen Buddhist respect for non-sentient beings on the idea of ahimsa, although versus non-violence as a ‘compassionism’ rather than a virtue. See his essay ‘Respect for Life: Can Zen Buddhism Help in Forming an Ethical World’, in John Daido Loori, ‘The Precepts and the Environment’ in Tucker and Williams (eds), Buddhism and Ecology, pp.177-84.
not lie', serves as a condemnation of the efforts of multinational firms to pass themselves off as ecologically-concerned when they are in fact nothing of the sort (‘greenwashing’). ‘Procede clearly – do not cloud the mind’, the Fifth Grave Precept, Looei interprets as warning not to allow our judgement to be clouded by greed, while he sees the Sixth Grave Precept, ‘See the perfection – do not speak of others’ errors and faults’, as exhorting us to think of natural processes as inherently perfect, in need of no ‘management’ on our part. And so on for the other precepts. I do not think that Looei would want his teaching to be subjected to an exhaustive philosophical analysis. He would, I imagine, maintain that he is not interested in offering a defensible philosophical theory, but only in making the general point, nonetheless entirely in keeping with Zen, that our ethical concern should extend beyond the sphere of animal life to the natural environment as a whole.

Ethical holism

In bringing apparently non sentient beings such as plants, mountains and rivers within the purview of ethics, the Zen comportment towards nature is at odds with utilitarianism, and I have rejected the idea that it can be understood on the model of Singer’s position. To find an appropriate theoretical model for the Zen Buddhist attitude towards nature we will have to look elsewhere.

For one candidate, we can turn to the position of environmental ethicist J. Baird Callicott, as developed in his article ‘Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair’.

In that essay, Callicott coins the phrase ‘humane holism’ to denote those positions, like Singer’s, which accord nonhuman beings moral standing if, and only if, they are sentient. To be sure, he admits that such views represent an advance on those positions that categorically deny that any nonhuman animals have moral standing, and, in this respect, Benthem and Singer are considered to be a step up the moral ladder from libertarian anthropocentrism like Aquinas and Descartes. Yet for Callicott humane holism is ultimately an inadequate basis for an environmental ethic. The problem here, he suggests, is that whereas humane holism is inherently individualistic, a properly environmental ethic must be more holistic. Let us try to clarify what this means. To say that humane individualist positions such as Singer’s are individualistic is to say that they hold that the moral standing of beings can be determined by looking to the characteristics of those beings in themselves, irrespective of their contexts. So, on Singer’s account, a rabbit has the same moral standing, whether it is languishing in the laboratory of some pharmaceutical company or hopping about in the wild. In both cases it has the same capacity to suffer, so in both cases it has the same moral standing. According to Callicott, however, such an individualistic approach cannot do justice to the moral significance of environmental concerns, and so could not form the basis for a properly environmental ethic. An environmental ethic, he maintains, would have to take a more holistic approach in recognizing that the value of any particular being is not something that that being possesses in itself, but is instead a function of the part it plays in an environment whole, or more precisely, a reflection of the contribution it makes to that whole. So according to an ‘ethical holism’ of this sort, a field mouse, for example, possesses a special value-conferring property (sentience, for example), but because it plays a role in an environmental whole, as food for a cat, for instance, or as a fertilizer of the soil, its actions are deemed right to the extent that they further the good of the environmental whole. As Aldo Leopold, the founding father of such holistic approaches, famously put it:

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

The reference to beauty indicates that, unlike Singer, ethical holists such as Leopold preserve a place for feeling in their accounts of our moral relations with nature. Leopold’s Sand County Almanac is filled with heartfelt, evocative descriptions of natural phenomena, many of which are entirely in the spirit of Zen. Moreover, just as for Leopold ethics is tied to aesthetics, so for Zen there is no clear line between a moral concern for nature and an aesthetic appreciation of it. We saw in Chapter Two that art forms such as the tea ceremony, archery and flower arranging are partly ethical practices because the virtues inherent in them are, in part, moral virtues. And many of them — perhaps all of them — bear upon one’s moral relations with the natural world. Hence the aesthetic sensibility to the world engendered by the practice of, say, flower arranging translates into a particular ethical appreciation of the world. Setting the delicate beauty of flower arrangements, the artist comes to see the beauty inherent in all things — like a haiku poet, perhaps. And just as a sense of this beauty causes him to treat the flowers, twigs and pebbles with which he works with respect, so he gradually becomes generous in his dealings with all things. His aesthetic appreciation has naturally engendered a particular ethical comportment. Furthermore, it could be that the specific kind of aesthetic sensibility fostered by Zen is especially appropriate for environmental ethics. As we saw in Chapter One, Zen-inspired art aims at conveying the aesthetic sensibility the Japanese call-aware, ‘the sorrow-less appreciation of transient beauty’, in Steve Olson’s nice phrase. This sense of immanence is, moreover, tied to the distinctness of natural cycles (think, for example, of the seasonal rhythms (tsubo) in haiku: frogs, snails or plum blossoms for spring, butterflies for summer, the flowering bush clover for autumn, and so on). For Zen, the best depictions of the natural world convey the truth that the phenomena are not hard-edged, substantial entities — natural kinds, for instance — but events, confluences of forces, eddies in the stream of life, if you will. This dynamic picture of the natural world strikes a chord with the writings of modern environmental thinkers such as Leopold, for whom a sense of the beauty of nature.


is informed and invigorated by an understanding of the dynamism inherent in ecological relationships. For these thinkers, seeing nature as beautiful is largely a matter of appreciating the way in which natural phenomena play their part in various processes—food webs, nutrient cycles, energy flows, and the like—and of seeing how these processes fit together in a great sacramental economy of life. For the Zen poet and the sensitive ecologist alike, there is a stark beauty in the decomposition of the dead mouse and in the new growth of fungi about the spot where it fell.

There are, therefore, some similarities between the aesthetic-sum-of-the-concern for the biotic community advocated by ethical biologists such as Leopold and the concern for the environment espoused by Zen Buddhists such as T lucr Ht Hsh and John Daido Loori. Moreover, it would seem that Zen and ethical holism show a similar awareness of the natural world as a whole. In this connection, Gary Snyder has suggested that the Chinese phrase shan - shui ("Mountains and waters"), so common in Buddhist accounts of the religious significance of nature, refers, not to two particular sorts of natural entity, but to "the totality of the process of nature." 52 So maybe in saying that mountains and waters instantiate Buddhahood Zen Buddhists are not saying that individual mountains and stretches of water ought to be accorded moral standing, but are thinking more holistically.

Would it be right, then, to say that a Zen environmental ethic would be a form of ethical holism? In support of the idea that it would, one could argue that our actions towards environments' wholes ought to be governed by the positive virtue of non-violence. For, after all, whether or not environmental wholes such as ecosystems are speaking alive, they can certainly be harmed, and one might think that we ought therefore to treat them carefully, gently, non-violently. Steven C. Rockefeller is perhaps thinking along these lines when he maintains that "the most fundamental principle of environmental protection is widely recognized today to be a variation on the theme of shiinkyu, or no harming," where this concerns the prevention of environmental harms such as the elimination of endangered species. 53

In an interesting study of the views of Kikai (a Shingon master) and Dogen, Graham Parkes explores the possibilities of basing a holistic environmental ethic upon Buddhist principles. Parkes maintains that the "nature of nature can be framed as an extreme form of holism in which securing the good of the whole is deemed an overriding consideration." Thus when Dogen maintains that all beings are Buddha-nature, Parkes suggests that this is not making the implausible suggestion that all beings should be treated equally. On the contrary, 'a view of the world as...Buddha-nature would naturally lead to reverence and respectful treatment of the totality—but would not rule out destroying certain parts of it under certain circumstances.' 54 So respect for the 'organized totality' of Buddha-nature would in fact justify eradicating destructive beings such as the tubercle bacillus, just as one might contribute to the well-being of one's body by removing an abscess, so reverence for the Buddha-nature might lead one to remove these harmful beings. I am not sure whether Parkes' conception of how these processes fit together in a great sacramental economy of life, and how this conception fits together with Leopold's. Leopold has often been interpreted as presenting a version of ethical holism wherein securing the well-being of the land is held to be an overriding consideration. According to such a conception, ethical holism a thing would be right if, and only if, it is used to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. Defenders of Leopold have suggested alternative readings of the main work, however. In any case, whether or not Leopold is proposing such a position, it would seem that Parkes is presenting an extreme version of ethical holism of this sort as a reading of Dogen. On this view, the prime virtue, one might speculate, is 'respect' or 'reverence' for the organized totality of the Buddha-nature, where such respect might occasionally sanction efforts to eradicate harmful beings such as tubercle bacteria.

Is such an attitude in accord with a Zen Buddhist understanding of nature? To be sure, Zen, like Buddhism generally, is holistic. The teaching of universal emptiness means that to know the nature of any element of reality one must look to its context, its environment. Nevertheless, Zen seems to embody a concern for individual phenomena at odds with extreme holism. Let us follow Parkes in considering this matter with respect to the views of Dogen. The holistic outlook of Dogen must, I think, be understood in terms of the Huai-yen and Tendai philosophies with which Dogen would have been familiar and of which his own views are partly an expression. The worldview set out by those schools is certainly holistic in that it sees reality as a coherent whole made up of nature-based elements, and in this sense it bears a superficial resemblance to the holism developed in the writings of Leopold. But the holism espoused in Huai-yaen is subtler, and I would hold more profound than that evident in the writings of holistic environmental thinkers. Neither Huai-yan nor Dogen is supporting that each being forms a part of a totality which can be understood on analogy with an organic body. Matters are not so simple. Dogen inherits the view, propounded in both Huai-yan and Tendai philosophy, that the whole is contained within each part. That is why he can claim that an awakened man can see 'the entire world in one tiny speck of dust' or 'the entire universe...in...a tall bamboo.' So while for an extreme holistic being there is value only to exist in a totality which contributes to the well-being of the whole, for Dogen each being has a supreme worth as an embodiment of the whole. Similarly, whatever precise form it took, a Zen Buddhist environmental ethic would have to do justice to the value inherent in the details of the natural world—in the little ephemeras expressed in haiku, for example.

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52 See Gary Snyder's essay, "Grace" in Kau and Krait (ed), Dharmic Rate, pp.450-53.
53 Blue Mountains Constantly Walking" in Kau and Krait (eds), Dharmic Rain, p.129.
54 Buddhist, Global Ethics, and the Earth Charter' in Tucker and Williams (eds), Buddhist Environment and Ecology, p.117.
55 See "Voices of Mountains, Trees, and Rivers' in Tucker and Williams (eds), Buddhism and Ecology, pp.122-3.
56 Environmental Ethics 75
57 Ibid, p.122
59 For example, see J. Baird Callicott, "The Conceptual Foundations of the Earth Ethics" in Poynter ed, Environmental Ethics, p.54.
We will explore the metaphysics behind this idea in the next chapter. For the moment, it will suffice to note that this commitment to the worth of individual beings means that Dogen’s conception of the Buddha-nature cannot be understood along the lines of extreme holism. While an extreme holistic would be willing to sacrifice individual deer in order to preserve the well-being of a particular environment, Zen thinkers would be more inclined to sanction such holistic efforts at wildlife management. Loeber’s criticisms of holistic approaches to wildlife management, whether they can be justified in their own terms or not, are, I think, more in keeping with Zen thought.24

This is not to say that Zen Buddhism would never consider such holistic approaches justified, however. Consider a situation in which one is forced to choose between calling a population of deer that has grown too large or harming the biotic community of a Scottish island which is being devastated by the presence of too many deer. The Zen Buddhist could be justified in choosing to call the deer if she did so out of compassion for the deer or out of a concern not to harm the island’s ecosystem. But unlike the extreme holistic she would not suppose that the concern to preserve the well-being of the ecosystem must necessarily trump the concern not to harm the deer. The Zen approach is, as ever, more in keeping with that.

Deep ecology

In the literature on environmental ethics, sympathetic mentions of Zen Buddhism are most commonly found neither in the writings of ‘humane moralists’ like Peter Singer nor in the work of ‘ethical holists’ like Aldo Leopold, but in the writings of deep ecologists. Having so far failed to find an adequate model for Zen Buddhist environmental concerns in either humane moralism or (extreme) ethical holism I would now like to consider the possibility that it is in the writings of deep ecologists such as Arne Naess and Warwick Fox that we will find an account of environmental concern more in tune with Zen.

As we saw in Chapter One, Zen has proved popular with deep ecological thinkers. Arne Naess has acknowledged Dogen’s influence22 while Bill Devall and George Sessions refer approvingly to Zen in articulating their conception of deep ecology.23 Warwick Fox concludes his influential Toward a Transpersonal Ecology with a quotation from Dogen, arguing that Zen is based on what he calls an ‘ecologically based identification’, a profound awareness of ‘the fact that things are’, which, he maintains, has important implications for environmental philosophy.24 Both Jean Haladita and Jeremy Hayward refer to Zen teachings in articulating their respective conceptions of deep ecology.25

So what are deep ecology and Zen supposed to have in common? First, they are both considered to be connected to the general idea that right (that is, ‘ecologically’) action will not be generated through the ‘external’ pressure of moral imperatives to act for the sake of an inner sense of rightness. Second, they are both concerned with the possibility of framing both deep ecology and Zen in terms of virtue ethics. Nonetheless, it is clear that both deep ecology and Zen are generally hostile towards a particular conception of ethical life—the idea that doing right is merely a matter of conforming to ethical rules.

Moreover, a case can be made for saying that both deep ecology and Zen advocate learning to see the world in a similar way. Although the phrase ‘deep ecology’ was originally conceived as an ‘umbrella term’ to encompass a variety of philosophical responses to environmental issues, over the years it has become associated with a particular position on environmental matters and a specific conception of what it means to see the world aright. On this conception, the goal of deep ecology is to foster ‘Self-Realization’. The first thing to note about this idea is that it is based on a singularly holistic conception of the self. According to deep ecologists such as Naess, that envy we conventionally refer to as the self doesnot stop at the limits of our skin. For we find that if we want to specify who or what we are we have to refer to conditions seemingly outside us. So on this account I am not a hard-edged atomic entity ‘Simon James’; on the contrary, my identity depends on my being a member of a particular family, a resident of a particular town, a citizen of a particular nation, and so on—and ultimately, it could be said that I depend on the whole of nature. Deep ecologists maintain that we become aware of the extent of this more expansive self in so far we identify with the interests of other things. So I see someone slip and fall on the ice outside a High Street store and I automatically rush to help. I identify with their pain, spontaneously, naturally. In this sense, one might say that my self has expanded to include them. Finding the life of their village threatened by plans to develop a Go-Karting track on

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26 Quoted in Fox, Toward a Transpersonal Ecology, p.219. Fox provides a wealth of examples of other Antoninian statements from deep ecologists in pp.317-29 of that book.
27 David E. Cooper and Hunter P. James, Buddhism, Virtue and Environment (Albany, 2004).
all of nature, mountains and rivers, are seen as oneself. In this deeper realization of oneness you will feel the preciousness of each object in the universe, rejecting nothing, since things as well as people will be seen as essential aspects of yourself.23

So there would seem, on the face of it, to be striking parallels between deep ecology and Zen Buddhism on these issues. To recap: it would seem that, for both deep ecology and Zen, people cannot act in environmentally-friendly ways by the imposition of moral rules, but must first learn to see the world aright. More precisely, the idea would seem to be that one must come to identify with the world, to see oneself as the world, and to cherish and protect the world as one cherishes and protects oneself. One could say that for both deep ecology and for Zen the key virtue bearing upon our relations with the natural environment are therefore the selflessness and empathy which allow one to identify with other beings and to achieve Self-Realization.

But before we down tools, satisfied that deep ecology provides an adequate model for a Zen Buddhist environmental philosophy, there are some questions that need answering. In particular, it has not yet been made clear what Self-Realization actually involves. What does it mean to identify with nature? Here, I suggest, deep ecologists often equivocate. They sometimes speak as if Self-Realization involved somehow ‘taking the perspective of nature conceived as a whole. Naess, for example, refers sympathetically to Advaita Vedanta in articulating his position, and so encourages the idea that realizing one’s Self is to realize one’s identity with some metaphysical Absolute — Brahman, perhaps.24

With this idea, however, we would seem to be far from Zen. For these reflections suggest that the deep ecology’s account of Self-Realization presupposes a substantial self (atman), the existence of which Zen, as a form of Buddhism, cannot countenance. An argument for this conclusion could run as follows: Given that (1) Zen is a form of Buddhism, and that (2) all forms of Buddhism deny the existence of an atman, and that (3) the deep ecological idea of Self-Realization presupposes the existence of such a self, one can conclude that the idea of Self-Realization is at odds with Zen.

This argument is more difficult to appraise than its simple form might suggest. Though seemingly incontrovertible, the first premise has recently been challenged by Nortaki Hakamaya and Shintō Matsutomo. In short, their reasoning is that the idea of the Buddha-nature, so important in Zen, represents a concept of an atman (in fact, the Mahayana Madhyamikāra Sūtra expressly refers to it as such). Therefore, by the second premise of my argument, Zen is not a form of Buddhism. I do not believe this argument is sound since I do not agree that the Buddha-nature represents an atman. But I will not give my reasons for holding this view here —
venturing into this stormy debate would take us too far off course.\textsuperscript{10} I would like to note, however, that Naess has more recently qualified his references to Advaita Vedanta, and argued that his conception of Self-Realization should not be thought of as presupposing the existence of an \textit{atman}. The third premise is therefore not obviously true. Indeed, as the following passage from Jeremy Hayward indicates, perhaps the deep ecologist's idea of Self-Realization can be squared with the Buddhist teaching of not-self (\textit{anatta}):

Buddhists emphasize the obstacle that arises at each step on the way of this gradually vanishing circle of identification, namely the belief that there is a separate self at all. This obstacle is only overcome at the last stage, when the self is seen to be not separate from the space in which all that exists exists, has its being, and decays.\textsuperscript{11}

Nevertheless, whether or not either Zen or deep ecology subscribes to a notion of an \textit{atman}, if Self-Realization involves one's identifying with nature conceived as a whole, then the deep ecologist's position reduces to an extreme form of ecological holism. For if one identifies with the whole of nature, if, say, one follows Macy in thinking (and feeling) that the whole of nature is one's body, then any individual beings that have value would have value, not in themselves, but only to the extent that they contribute to the good of that whole. In that case, culling a particular species of pest to preserve the good of 'nature' (however that is specified) could be seen as analogous to cutting one's hair or one's toes in order to preserve the good of one's body. Now, to be sure, Zen is holistic, but we have already seen that this kind of extreme holistic perspective on environmental issues is out of keeping with the Zen Buddhist sense of the worth of individual beings.

But deep ecologists sometimes speak about Self-Realization in a way that implies that to realize one's Self is to identify with individual natural beings rather than to identify with nature as a whole. Thus Robert Aitken talks about becoming truly 'intimate' with a black bear (on the face of it, a perilous undertaking),\textsuperscript{12} while Kapleau writes, in the passage quoted above, of feeling the preciousness of each object.

This commitment to the worth of individual beings is especially evident in another central tenet of deep ecology, the idea that to the extent that we identify with nature it is perceived to have intrinsic value, a value 'in itself' which ought to be respected.\textsuperscript{13} To be sure, deep ecologists sometimes mean by this that environmental wholes such as the biosphere have intrinsic value.\textsuperscript{14} But at other times they seem to be saying that individual beings have this kind of value -- for instance, when they express their commitment to the intrinsic value of nature in terms of the 'equal right' of all things in the biosphere to 'live and blossom.'\textsuperscript{15} With the idea that individual beings have intrinsic value we are, I feel, moving closer to a Zen Buddhist view of things. Nevertheless, differences between deep ecology and Zen would seem to remain. Although Naess tends to operate with a broad, non-biological conception of life, so that even 'natural wholes' such as rivers and mountains can be considered to be alive, he appears to hold that Self-Realization incorporates only one's relations with living beings.\textsuperscript{16} But in maintaining this he seems to be introducing a distinction quite out of keeping with some important strands of Zen thought.\textsuperscript{17} When Dogen, for instance, maintains that we are enlightened by things, he is not only referring to living things. When he claims that all beings are Buddha-nature, he is not only referring to animals and plants, but also to waka, tiles and stones.\textsuperscript{18}

With Dogen's ideas we find ourselves on the edge of some very difficult conceptual terrain, and I do not intend to set out over it just yet. However, I would like to suggest, tentatively and provisionally, that it is in the deep ecologist's idea of the intrinsic beings of nature that we find the closest match for a Zen Buddhist view of nature. When deep ecologists maintain that all living beings have intrinsic value, they would seem to be expressing an intuition that chimes with the positive regard for nature one finds in Zen.

It will be the purpose of the next chapter to flesh out and appraise this suggestion. For the moment, I would like to conclude this chapter by noting that however this conception of intrinsic value is spelt out, it cannot mean that all things have the sort of moral standing that Jainism attributes to sentient beings, and which leads some Jain practitioners to take extreme practical measures to avoid impinging upon the world. If indeed Zen attributes intrinsic value to beings, then this cannot entail that any harm caused them is morally wrong, a violation of the First Precept, say. To say that a tomato has intrinsic value cannot be said to say that one ought not to slice it up for a salad, although it might be to say that one ought not to gratuitously crush it underfoot or wastefully toss it in the bin. In this connection, it is interesting to note that whatever deep ecology means by saying that all living things have intrinsic value (and that is a question for the next chapter), they do not

\textsuperscript{10} For a selection of essays by Hakamata, Matsumoto and others, both for and against the idea that the teaching of the Buddha-nature contravenes the andaman teaching, see Hubbard and Swanson (eds), \textit{Practicing the Dharma Tree}.

\textsuperscript{11} Curtis notes that in \textit{an unpublished paper 'the Hindu \textit{atman} is explicitly rejected by Naess in favor of a Buddhist conception of \textit{no-self}.} (A State of Mind Like Water," p.240).


\textsuperscript{14} On the connection between identification and intrinsic value, see Naess, \textit{Ecospoty T.}, p.154. Naess and Sessions maintain that a commitment to the intrinsic value of \textit{Life on Earth} is a 'Basic Principle' of deep ecology. (Devall and Sessions, \textit{Deep Ecology} p.159.)

\textsuperscript{15} See, for instance, \textit{Naess, Ecospoty T.}, p.153; Devall and Sessions, \textit{Deep Ecology}, p.160. See also Curtis, \textit{A State of Mind Like Water}, p.245, 250. Curtis notes that other places Naess seems to be edging towards the possibility of identifying with non-living things, as Dogen argues in his very interesting article 'A State of Mind Like Water'.

Chapter Four

The Intrinsic Value of Nature

The problem of the intrinsic value of nature

In Chapter Three, I compared and contrasted the Zen Buddhist view of nature with the positions of some modern environmental ethicists. Notwithstanding the general Mahayanaist concern for the welfare of all sentient beings, I rejected the suggestion that a Zen Buddhist environmental ethic would not consider as exemplary a role of passive withdrawal from the world. The fact that it would not provide a reason for thinking that whatever deep ecologists mean by saying that all living beings have intrinsic value, the central intuition to which they are giving voice would be one endorsed by Zen.

1 That is, natural beings as opposed to artefacts. The phrase ‘natural beings’ is being used here in a non-technical sense to denote those entities with which environmental thinkers are most concerned — pandas, rare orchids, eagles, and so on. One qualification is needed here, however. We will be addressing the question of the intrinsic value of individual beings rather than species. That said, readers might like to consider how the arguments developed in this chapter bear upon the intrinsic value of species. I am inclined to think that they apply