POSSIBILITY OF VIEW ON NATURE OF BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

I will investigate the possibility of "a view of nature that a human being was united with nature" characterized by oriental thoughts in this presentation.

In Buddhism, there is distinction between sentient (*sattva*) and non-sentient beings (*asattva*). This is common to Indian thought, where sentient beings transmigrate in *samsara* while non-sentient beings do not become object of transmigration. However, the distinction between the animal and the plant is delicate and subtle. Animals are clearly the object of *samsara,* while plants can also become the object of *samsara,* depending on the documents. In this sense, the plants are very close to human beings and animals.

According to the cause and effect theory of Buddhism, all sentient beings receive the result of their action, and they dwell in the world that is suitable for their action. However, the world itself does not have a result of its own action. Instead, it is assumed that the world is created by the result of actions of all beings (*sādhAraNa-karman*) that dwell in it. God did not create this world, and it was made by all beings.

I shall, thus, be comparing the view of nature and the worldview of Buddhism with those of other religions in order to consider a relationship of the humans and environment that is not in mutual opposition.

Key Words: Nature, *samsara*, sentient beings, Buddhism

In this paper I shall explore, with a focus on Indian Buddhism, the potentiality of a view of nature in which human beings are considered to be at one with nature, a view that is regarded as characteristic of Asian thought. "Nature" generally signifies all phenomena, and in the *Oxford Dictionary* it is defined as "the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including

plants, animals, and the landscape, as opposed to humans or human creations." Nature is thus regarded as something standing in opposition to, or in contrast to, human beings and, by extension, something to be conquered by human beings. How did such a view of nature arise?

I. European Views of Nature

The Greek word for "nature" is *physis,* which was translated into Latin as *natura,* and from this derive English "nature," French "nature," and German "Natur." The original meaning of all these words is "the inherent quality or essence of a person or thing."

There are various views regarding the etymology of the Greek word *physis,* but it is generally considered to derive from the verb *phyomai,* "to be produced" or "to be born." Likewise, the Latin word *natura* derives from the verb *nascor,* also meaning "to be born" or "to be produced." From this there also arose the meaning of nature as things that have been born and are sensorially experienced or of nature as representing the orderliness underpinning all things.

In ancient Greece, nature was not regarded as something dead with no possibility of self-formation, but was instead considered to be something organic possessing within itself the potential for genesis and growth. In Roman society *physis* merely changed to *natura,* and there was no conflict between human beings and nature, with human beings being regarded as a part of nature, just like other living beings.

II. The View of Nature Since the Emergence of Christianity

This state of affairs changed completely, however, in the Christian world. In medieval Christianity in particular the creator and creation were clearly differentiated, and there emerged a hierarchical order consisting of God, humankind, and nature. Both humans and nature (*natura*) were considered to have been created by the will of God. As a result, God became a transcendental entity who does not reside in nature, and humans too were no longer part of nature. Human beings and nature were both created by God, but humans were deemed to transcend and rule over nature. Consequently humans became beings standing in opposition to nature.

When viewed from the perspective of natural philosophy, this meant that God was understood as the active aspect of nature (*natura naturans*) in contrast to created nature (*natura naturata*). The former (God) represents creative or productive nature, while the latter corresponds to nature created or produced by the former.

Created nature stands apart from human beings and becomes a lifeless objective world meant to be ruled by humans. It no longer has any autonomy and exists merely as mechanistic nature. In this fashion, nature came to be understood for the first time as the objective world with which science-based civilization concerns itself. This modern scientific thought gave birth to the industrial revolution, which in turn led to revolutions in production and life-style.

At the same time, the natural order has been disregarded and nature has been unilaterally exploited because of an excessive pursuit of rationality and profit, and this has resulted in severe deforestation, pollution, and other forms of destruction of the environment. This may be described as a contradiction brought about by a view that regards nature as something standing opposed to human beings and something to be overcome by human beings, a view that has evolved in Western society since the emergence of Christianity.

III. **The Concept of "Nature" in India**

When looking for Sanskrit equivalents of the Sino-Japanese term *ziran* (*shizen*) 自然, corresponding to "nature," one may cite *svabhāva* and *prakṛti. Svabhāva* is a masculine noun deriving from the verbal root *Bhū,* meaning "to come into being," to which has been added the prefix *sva-,* meaning "own" or "self." *Prakṛti,* on the other hand, is a feminine noun deriving from the verbal root *Kṛ,* meaning "to make" or "to do," to which has been added the prefix *pra-,* meaning "fundamental" or "before," and in the form *prakṛtyā* it is frequently used adverbially in the meaning of "essentially" or "originally." In this sense, these two terms tally with the Greek *physis* and Latin *natura,* which both derive from verbs meaning "to be born" or "to be produced."

It is indeed true that *svabhāva* corresponds to the Sino-Japanese term *ziran* insofar that it signifies the essence or innate nature of something or an entity or quality that arises of its own accord without relying on anything else. Likewise, *prakṛti* also means "essence" or "innate nature," and in the Sāṃkhya school it refers to "primordial materiality," from which all phenomena evolve, and underpins its philosophical system of twenty-five principles (*pañcaviṃśati-tattvāni*).

But neither of these terms signifies the natural environment excluding human beings. This is because in Indian thought no clear-cut distinction was made between nature as that which is originally existent and nature in the sense of the external environment.

IV. Nature and the Environment in Buddhism

In Buddhism, the Sino-Japanese term *ziran* (*shizen*) and its Sanskrit equivalents do not signify the natural environment, and the terms *lokadhātu* and *bhājana-loka* are closer in meaning to "environment." *Bhājana-loka,* or "receptacle world," is a cosmic world corresponding to the so-called trichiliocosm, made up of countless smaller worlds each centred on Mount Sumeru. This constitutes the physical world in the Buddhist world view, and it includes the earth on which sentient beings live and the plants growing on this earth.

The great Indian Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu, who lived in the fourth to fifth centuries, describes in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya,* his main work, how this world (*bhājana-loka*) is produced by the dominant influence (*ādhipatya*) of the actions of sentient beings.

This great trichiliocosm is considered to evolve in the following manner. At its bottom there arises, through the dominant influence of the actions of sentient beings, a circle of wind (*vāyu-maṇḍala*) which rests on space. It is immeasurable (*asāṃkhya*) in expanse and sixteen *lakṣa yojana*s thick. It is so solid that the great Nagna cannot damage it with his *vajra.* […] Through the actions of sentient beings there falls from massed clouds upon the circle of wind rain like the shafts of a carriage, and this forms a circle of water (*jala-maṇḍala*). […] Then the water, agitated by wind that has arisen through the actions of sentient beings, becomes the golden earth in its upper part in the same way that heated milk forms a skin on top. This is called the circle of gold (*kāñcana-maṇḍala*). […] On top of the circle of gold there are nine mountains and eight oceans centred on Mount Sumeru. […] Again, through the dominant force of the collective actions of all sentient beings there arise the winds that impel the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens. (AbhK, p. 158ff.)

According to Buddhism, all living beings experience the results of their own actions and are born in worlds appropriate to their actions. But because the world is not subject to the results of its own actions, the world itself does not give rise to another world. Instead, it is produced through the collective actions (*sādhāraṇa-karman*) of large numbers of people. In other words, the world is created not by God, but by people. Therefore, it is people who must bear responsibility for the state of the world.

V. Views of Living Beings in India's Traditional Religions

In Indian Buddhism, living creatures are generally called *sattva* and all

else is referred to as *asattva. Sattva,* usually translated as "sentient being," signifies a being with mental functions and feelings and is used as a generic term for living beings, while in its narrow sense it refers to human beings. *Asattva* ("insentient"), on the other hand, refers to inorganic things that do not have mental functions, such as mountains, rivers, earth, and stones. Plants too are generally considered to be insentient. Those entities subject to transmigration and capable of enlightenment are also usually restricted to sentient beings.

In Indian Buddhism there is no evidence of any notion, such as was to emerge in later times in East Asia, that natural phenomena like plants, mountains, and rivers are sentient beings, nor did there exist the idea that insentient things such as plants can attain Buddhahood. But in the Vinaya texts prescribing the monastic code of conduct there are some noteworthy rules concerning plants.

(1) Living Beings with One Sense-Faculty

The rules set forth in the Vinaya are each preceded by an introductory story describing the circumstances that led to the introduction of the rule in question. In the case of the rule regarding fixed residence during the rainy season, the reason for its introduction is explained in the following manner.

During the time of Śākyamuni, monks continued wandering about even during the rainy season. However, this met with the disapproval of lay people on the grounds that at a time of growth for living creatures the monks were crushing and injuring plants and killing large numbers of tiny creatures. For this reason it was prescribed that monks should have a fixed residence during the three months of the rainy season.

The Pāli Vinaya refers to the plants that were being crushed as "living beings with one sense-faculty" (*ekindriya-jīva*), while in the Vinaya of the Dharmaguptaka school they are called "plants thought to have a life-force." Since plants were deemed to be "living beings with one sense-faculty," monks were to avoid harming them unnecessarily.

In the same way, making sandals with palm leaves or bamboo leaves (Vin I.189.12-15), felling trees (Vin III.155.33-156.2), and digging holes in the ground (Vin IV.32.25-28) were also said to have caused harm to "living beings with one sense-faculty." In addition, in the Vinaya of the Mahāsāghika school, burning plants is also proscribed because it hurts "animals and [plants with] one sense-faculty."

It should be mentioned that the term "living being with one sense-faculty" is somewhat unusual in a Buddhist context, and it is thought to have been influenced by Jainism.

(2) The View of Living Beings Peculiar to Jainism

The ontology of Jainism is characterized by a dualism featuring a life principle (*jīva*) and a material principle (*pudgala*). By eliminating all forms of matter by which it is held in bondage, the *jīva* is said to gain liberation. *Jīva*s are divided into two types — those who transmigrate and those who have been liberated (and have ceased transmigrating) — and those who transmigrate are further divided into those that are "moving" (*trasa*) and those that are "stationary" (*sthāvara*). Plants (*vanaspati*), along with earth and water, belong to the latter category and are considered to be subject to transmigration. In addition, animals are held to have two or more sense-faculties, while plants have one sense-faculty, that is, the sense of touch.

(3) Transmigration of Plants in Brahmanism

In the *Laws of Manu* and other texts of Brahmanism it is clearly stated that human beings may be reborn as plants.

(a) A person becomes a plant as a result of faults due to physical actions, a bird or wild animal as a result of faults due to verbal actions, and a member of one of the lowest castes as a result of faults due to mental actions. (MS 12.9)

(b) A man who violates his guru's marriage bed [enters] hundreds of times [the womb] of grasses, shrubs, vines, beasts that have fangs, and savage beasts that engage in cruel actions. (MS 12.58)

(c) Those who delight in taking that which is not given, those who approach the wives of others, and those who unlawfully kill living beings will be reborn as stationary [plants]. (YVS 3.209ff.)

It could thus be said that unmoving or stationary things — that is, plants — are included within the realm of transmigration as taught in Jainism and Brahmanism.

(4) "Plants Are Not to Be Injured"

In the Pāli Vinaya there is also a rule prohibiting injury to plants, and it is said to have been introduced as a result of the following incident.

Once, when the Buddha was residing at Ā□avī, a monk cut down a tree. This enraged the deity living in the tree, who thought of killing the

monk. But she refrained from doing so and instead went to seek the help of the Buddha, who gave her another tree in which to live and so resolved the situation.

At the time, the lay people criticized the monk for having injured a living being with one sense-faculty. Accordingly the Buddha, in view of the fact that ordinary people regarded trees as living beings (*jīvasaññin*), established the rule that destruction or injury of a plant (*bhūta-gāma*) was an offence requiring expiation (*pācittiya*).

This rule is followed by some explanatory comments in which it is stated that the plants covered by this rule are of five types, namely, those propagated from roots, stems, joints, cuttings, and seeds, and it also lists the names of actual plants falling under each category (Vin IV.33-34).

The Pāli term *bhūta-gāma,* here used in the meaning of "plant," literally means "abode of spirits." All sorts of creatures live together in a tree, ranging from insects such as gadflies, mosquitoes, and grasshoppers to birds and even spirits and deities. If one fells a tree, all these living beings will lose their abode and may even lose their life. It was for this reason that the felling of trees was criticized.

Concluding Remarks

In Indian and Buddhist thought there is the idea of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) based on compassion, and this is further underpinned by a sense of oneness with animals and plants and with all living things, as can be seen in the idea of transmigration. In traditional Buddhism, plants are insentient (*asattva*) and do not transmigrate, whereas in Jainism and Brahmanism they are considered to transmigrate and are respected as "living beings with one sense-faculty," a concept that was also adopted by Buddhism.

Furthermore, according to Buddhist philosophy as expounded in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya,* the "receptacle world" (*bhājana-loka*), representing the world of sentient beings (*sattva-loka*), arises as a result of the collective actions of sentient beings. In this sense, this is an anthropocentric philosophy, but human beings too are considered to be part of the natural environment. Thus the Asian view of nature is characterized by a view based on identity with nature and the world.

While it is unlikely that any one system can provide a fundamental solution for the problems facing contemporary civilized society, it seems to me that this Asian eco-philosophy, with its emphasis on a sense of

oneness between human beings and nature and on a close relationship between human beings and the environment, is a philosophy capable of promoting changes in individual consciousness and creating a more equitable relationship between society and people, as well as having the potential to rectify the distortions present in our civilization.