Ancient Roots of Environmental Relations in Asian Traditions: Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism

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What does it mean to be situated in a place, an environment? How might one conceptualize or reflect on emplacement? One might seek the origin story: how did we get here? What are we doing here? What obligations to the future of persons arise?

Asia offers two distinct approaches, bridged by Buddhism and more recently Yoga. This essay will look at human-earth relations from five perspectives. The first two, Hinduism and Jainism, arise from the Indian subcontinent. Two others, Confucianism and Daoism, arise from China. Buddhism and Yoga serve as a bridge between India and China, the former during antiquity and the latter in the contemporary period. Each of these five traditions differs significantly from the worldview of the prophetic monotheisms, primarily in the absence of a creator deity or singular genesis narrative.

1. Hinduism

The Hindu tradition began to take shape approximately 3500 years ago in the northwest of India. It amalgamates various forms of worship and speculation over the period of several thousand years. It absorbs social norms from the antecedent culture of the Indus Valley (ca. 3500–1500 B.C.E.) including veneration of the feminine and animals. With the emergence of the four Vedas starting around 1500 B.C.E., we see continuity and contrast with nearby Persian culture. Both the Persian *Zend Avesta* and the *Ṛg Veda* center their worship around fire. However, the Zoroastrian text emphasizes a dualistic conflict between good and evil leading to a cataclysmic future ending while the Hindu Vedas celebrate a diversity of deities within a more circular time frame. Origins and endings in the *Ṛg Veda* are indeterminate and constantly unfolding. The things of the world emerge from a state of chaos (*asat*) symbolized by the dragon Vṛtra). The heroic Indra slays the dragon, releasing the life-giving waters of the monsoon. This sacrificial action allows the world to take shape. This sacrifice culminates in periods and places of productivity and creativity (*ṛta*) before chaos once again returns.

The *Ṛg Veda* divinizes the elements of the world, referring to the earth as various goddesses, including Pṛthivī and Bhūmi, the waters as Jala or Āp, fire as Agni, and wind as Vāyu. The *Pṛithvī Sūkta* of the *Atharva Veda* celebrates these elements, proclaiming in verse 57: "We venerate Mother Earth, the sustainer and preserver of forests, vegetation, and all things that are held together firmly." Earlier in the text, verse seven lauds the presence of divine forces acting on behalf of human success: "May the Earth, this Land, protected by ever-vigilant and all-caring gods, confer upon us many delicious things, and endow us with splendor." Throughout this text, the author praises the earth, describes her beneficence, celebrates her abundance, and asks for protection.

An early notion of continuity between the microphase and the macrophase can be found in the *Puruṣa Sūkta* of the *Ṛg Veda* (X.90) which draws correlations between the body of the human person and the cosmos: the earth as the feet of the cosmic person, the sun as the eyes, the moon as the mind, the wind as the breath. Rather than attributing the things of the world to an external creator or controller, this text posits a co-creation and interpenetration of the human body and the experience of the world, a theme also found in China, as we will see below.

2. Jainism

The Jain tradition can be dated to at least 2800 years ago, arising in India's northeast quadrant. It claims that 24 great teachers promulgated the faith. Mahavira, the most recent teacher, lived at the same time as the Buddha (ca. 500 B.C.E.). Like his predecessors, he taught that the world has always been here and will always be here: no beginning, no end. Countless souls (jīva) populate the universe, individual points of conscious awareness, constantly taking shape in new bodies. Some of these bodies, such as those found in the earth and stone, water droplets, flames of fire, and gusts of wind have only one sensory access point to consciousness: touch. This is also true for bacteria and other microscopic forms of life known as *nigoda* as well as plants. Insect and animal forms add progressive senses: worms can taste, bugs can smell, flying insects can see, and high-level mammals, reptiles, and birds can hear and also think. Each soul is immortal, grappling with constant annoyances and afflictions of karma, which sticks to the soul and occludes its awareness with impulses of anger, pride, deceit, and greed. As long as these karmas persist, rebirth is inevitable in one of form realms: animal, human, heavenly, and in hell realms. The goal is to slough off all karmas and attain a liberated state, taking up residence in a space known as the Siddha Loka, far above the realms of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). The method to achieve this goal is to adhere to precepts that help expel and repel karma, starting with the vow to take up a lifestyle informed by nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*). By refraining from violent thoughts and actions, karmas dissipate, lightening the burden that obscures the luminosity of the soul.

The Jains remain distinct from Hindus in outlook and behavior. Although they take inspiration from the 24 great teachers, they do not worship them for the sake of gaining boons. They do not revere Vedic literature and refuse to participate in any sacrificial religious practices. They are strict vegetarians and choose to take up professions that do not entail killing of more than one-sensed beings. Hence, Jains are renowned for their accomplishments in the

realms of publishing, law, and commerce, including trade and manufacture of textiles and jewels.

Whereas the Hindu non-dual worldview sees the body of the universe as continuous with the human body, the Jain pluralistic worldview cherishes and respects all forms of life as possessing a consciousness essentially the same as one's own. Even a stone has life and, just as a human can feel touch through skin, so also the "skin" of a rock can feel touch and pressure and heat or cold. As we will see in the conclusion, this pre-disposes followers of the Jain faith to an inherently environmentally attuned outlook and demeanor.

3. Chinese Thought: The Pangu Origin Story

According to written accounts that first appeared nearly two thousand years ago based on much earlier lore, the world began when Pangu arose from the cosmic egg. Over the course of 800,000 years Pangu's "body transformed into the myriad things: his breath became wind and clouds, his voice became thunder, his left eye was the sun, and the right eye was the moon. His four limbs and five body parts became the four directions and five mountains. His blood became rivers and oceans, his nerves the earthly lines, his muscles the soil, his hair the stars, his skin the grass and plants, his teeth and bones the stone, and his sweat the rain."[1] China's origin story, like the Hindu origin story, contrasts with any notion of an external creative controller. The common theme of interpenetration of the microsphere with the macrosphere predisposes both traditions toward feelings of connection with the natural world. The large reflects the small, and the small mirrors the large. This underlying narrative of interconnection gave rise to two primary ways of regarding and acting within the world: Daoism, which famously advocates non-action (wu wei) and Confucianism, which requires the cultivation of human virtue to set things right. Both systems seek arriving at a state of balance.

4. Daoism

Daoism traces its origins to the sage Lao Tzu (ca. 500 B.C.E.). In a collection of poems known as the *Dao De Jing*, various images convey a teaching of non-interference, including the Great Feminine, water, the valley, the infant, and the uncarved block. The Way (Dao) forges a "metaphysical connection between the human way (*rendao*) and the heavenly way (*tiandao*) [and is] … the source of all existence"[2] Just as the story of Pangu uses bodily metaphors to indicate a continuity between body and cosmos, the Dao De Jing sees a continuity between a singular origin point and the emergence of multiplicity:

> Dao generates oneness, oneness generates twoness,
> twoness generates threeness, and threeness generates the ten thousand things.
> The ten thousand things carry yin, embrace yang,
> and blend *qi* (energy) to create harmony.[3]

[1] ROBIN R. WANG. *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 42f.
[2] Ibid., 46.
[3] HANS-GEORG MOELLER, trans., Daodejin: A Complete Translation]ntary (Chicago: Open Court, 2007), 103 as quoted in Wang.

Yin, the feminine power associated with the valley, and yang, the masculine force associated with the mountain, evoke the relationship between earth and heaven, mother and father, below and above. Rather than being in opposition to one another, Daoism seeks to establish reciprocity and cooperation between these two foundational forces, quite unlike the conflict inevitable in the Zoroastrian struggle which divides the world into forces of good and evil. Seeking a return to a state of balance, this passage from the *Dao De Jing* evokes the ideals of complementarity and non-striving:

> When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,
> there arises the recognition of ugliness.
> Being and non-being produce each other.
> Difficult and easy complete each other.
> Front and back follow each other.
> Therefore the sage manages affairs without action (*wu wei*)
> and spreads doctrines without words.
> All things arise; the sage does not turn away from them.
> The sage produces them but does not take possession of them.
> The sage acts, but does not assert ego.
> The sage accomplishes tasks but does not claim credit.[4]

The pursuit of peace and harmony in this tradition requires retreat rather than advance, a strategy that might help reduce reliance on the "ten thousand things" which, from a contemporary perspective, might be seen as uncontrolled consumerism.

5. Confucianism

Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) also sought to establish personal and societal balance but through concerted effort and adherence to hierarchies as seen in the *Great Learning*:

> Things have their roots and branches. Affairs have their end and their beginning. To know what is first and what is last will lead near to what is taught in the Great Learning. The ancients who wished illustrious virtue through the kingdom first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts.Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their stated being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.[5]

To achieve this high degree of stability through the "rectification of names," Confucian thought requires steady adherence to principles of decorum (*li*) and the cultivation of human-heartedness (*ren*). Children must be obedient to their parents, younger children obedient to older children, wives submissive to their husbands, and lesser officials respectful to their su-

[4] Adapted from WING-TSIT CHAN, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 140.
[5] JAMES LEGGE, *The Chinese Classics, vol. 1: Confucian Analects, the Great Learning and the Doctirne of the Mean* (New York, 1983, first published London: Trübner & Co. 1861), 357–59.

periors. Self-regulation holds the key to harmony, requiring careful attention and effort. Each person is expected to do her or his ow10n part in maintaining and enhancing social order.

6. Buddhism

We have explored four distinct worldviews. Hinduism and the origin story of China posit a continuity between the human person and the cosmos. Jainism teaches a radical heroic pluralistic individualism with each soul on a quest for freedom from all karma. Daoism seeks harmony through retreat. Confucianism seeks harmony through control and regulated hierarchies. In ways historical, philosophical, and geographical, Buddhism provides a pan-Asian bridge, an approach that stems from an innate sense of what Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022) calls inter-being and adapts aspects of all four strategies described: oneness, uniqueness, retreat, regulation.

Born into a royal family, Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 B.C.E.) embarked on the spiritual quest at the age of 29, leaving behind a young family, much to the dismay and disappointment of his father. For six years he studied with sages and practiced austerities. He sat under the Bodhi Tree near modern-day Bodh Gaya for an extended period, understanding and overcoming all his past experiences over the course of many lifetimes. He became detached from sense objects and calmed the passions. His thinking mind became still. He entered a state of bliss and finally became free from all opposites, entering pure awareness and equanimity. From that time forward he manifested the four great qualities of friendliness (*metta/maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekṣā/samatā*). He taught for 45 years, gathering disciples throughout India and establishing orders of monks and nuns.

For the first three hundred years after his death, the sermons of the Buddha were preserved and transmitted in an unbroken oral tradition. Eventually, they were written down in the Pali language and supplemented with additional texts. In 260 B.C.E. Aśoka, the third emperor of the Maurya dynasty of India, converted to Buddhism and proclaimed the religion throughout his empire, engraving rocks and pillars with Buddhist teachings that still can be seen through India and Nepal. By the first century C.E. Buddhist missionaries had traveled to China. Simultaneously, new Buddhist texts were being composed that de-emphasize one's personal quest for libration and urge the cultivation of compassion toward all sentient beings. Eventually, three schools of Buddhism emerged: Theravada, the Way of the Elders, found mainly in southeast Asia; Mahayana, the Great Vehicle, taught in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam; and Vajrayana or Tantra which emphasizes an amalgam of both traditions coupled with elaborate rituals, found primarily in Tibetan and in some Japanese practices.

Like the origin tales of Hinduism and China, Buddhism sees a continuity between the human person and the world. Like Jainism, Buddhism advocates the hero's journey: the quest to overcome the influence of all past karmas. Like Daoism, aspects of Buddhism call for a retreat from the hustle and bustle of worldly affairs. Like Confucianism, Buddhism requires adherence to a strict code of ethics and veneration of teachers and elders.

7. Implications for Environmental Relations

Apologies must be made for the essentialist approach taken to characterize the traditions above. An exception can be found for every assertion made about each tradition delineated above. Some schools of Hinduism revere only one form of divinity. Some Buddhists rely on the other-power of heavenly Buddhas than solely on their own striving. Throughout East Asian history, individuals have amalgamated Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist practices, sometimes valuing Confucian conformity in the active part of one's life, the Daoist retreat in retirement, and following Buddhist ceremonials at the time of death to guarantee auspicious rebirth. Nonetheless, the general contours hold true: oneness, individuality, retreat, and regulation. How might these principles inform environmental relations today?

A feeling of oneness with the cosmos evokes a sense of connectedness. By seeing a human connection and continuity with the great elements of earth, water, fire, air, and space, the individual develops a sense of worth and happiness.[6] The traditions of Asia all teach veneration of and meditation upon these elements in one or another variation, with wood and metal delineated separately in Chinese traditions. Seeing the human process as inseparable from the emergence and dissolution of things within nature cultivates a sense of involvement that can lead to resolve. If one sees the earth as one's mother and the sky as one's father, a sense of responsibility can arise.

The example of the heroic figure who overcomes all fettering karmas to obtain freedom or in the case of Mahayana Buddhism takes the Bodhisattva Vow to return to help others suggests the primary of human agency. Vows can make a difference. The individual makes all the difference, not only to oneself, but to one's family, village, society, and the world at large. Many followers of Asian traditions follow a vegetarian diet. This commitment, though encouraged by one's social location and family, ultimately underscores the power of human will (*pauruṣa*). Every accomplished being (*siddha*) serves as an example to others. As taught by Mahatma Gandhi, individual choices change societies.

The Daoist seeks to retreat from the world. By driving less, by purchasing less, by slowing down and stepping back from endless activity and acquisition, one can make space for an environmental lifestyle.

Regulations are needed, individual and societal. Virtue requires adherence to a code of conduct. Five vows find universal application throughout Asia: do no harm (*ahiṃsā*), adhere to truth (*satya*), do not steal (*asteya*), maintain dignity, particularly in regard to one's sexuality (*brahmacarya*), and minimize possessions (*aparigraha*). Confucius also taught five virtues: human-heartedness or *ren* (仁), righteousness or *yi* (义), proper behavior or *li* (理), wisdom or *zhi* (智) and filial piety or *xin* (信). All ten can be applied to the current environmental dilemma: we must not harm the earth, we must not deceive ourselves about the harm caused, we must not rob or rape the earth, we must not use the earth and sky for self-aggrandizement or selfish pleasure. We must develop a fellow-feeling toward the earth, we must behave righteously and properly, manifesting wisdom and respect. In daily life, each of these prin-

[6] Christopher Key Chapple, *Living Landscapes: Meditations on the Elements* in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Yogas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).

ciples can be translated into practices of reducing consumption for the sake of the greater good.

It is important not to valorize Asian thought systems above their European counterparts. Many similarities can be found across myriad cultural expressions. Nonetheless, exploring the keystone ideas of unity, heroism, retreat, and regulation holds universal appeal and perhaps can help individuals and communities forge new pathways friendly to the earth, the waters, the transformation of fire into energy usage, air, and sky.

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