

Nature's Web

Rethinking Our Place on Earth



Peter Marshall

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*Rethinking Our
Place on Earth*

PETER MARSHALL

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For Cai, Jack and Lucy

THE BIRTHDAY

It was my daughter's eighth birthday.
There was a dark cloud girding Snowdon,
But then there are often dark clouds girding Snowdon
In this rain-drenched land.

Friends came from afar to our cwm,
Bringing quartz crystals, jays' feathers,
Coloured shells and a hot-air balloon.
We played in the sloping field
Enclosed by stone walls and twisted oak.
The cries of infant joy echoed across the ridge,
Scattering sheep and sending the fox to his den.

In mid-afternoon the dark cloud rolled over,
Casting its shadow across the hills.
Heavy drops of crystal rain fell silently
On the heads of babies and sheep,
Glistening like dew in their curly locks.
We quenched our thirst from the swelling stream
And laughed and splashed in its cool waters.

Only later we learned by chance
That the dark cloud girding Snowdon
Had blown across Europe,
Bringing birthday greetings from Chernobyl.

Peter Marshall

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Croesor, 28 January 1992

I read the proofs of this work off the Ogooué river, Gabon, during a voyage around Africa. It was on the same river that Albert Schweitzer realized that reverence for life should form the basis of morality. The ship I was sailing on was carrying hardwood from the Equatorial rainforests to South Africa. The principle remains; the problems continue.

Peter Marshall, near the Cape of Good Hope, 16 May 1992

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PREFACE

I live in one of the most beautiful places on earth, in a small valley by the sea surrounded by mountains in Snowdonia National Park in North Wales. My dwelling is an isolated house called Garth-y-foel, which means in Welsh the 'enclosure on the hill'. It can only be reached by a rough track which winds up and down through several fields and copses and over a river which turns into a torrent after heavy rain.

At first sight, it would seem an ideal place to live for a writer, halfway between heaven and earth, part of society and yet separate from it. To the south, a reclaimed estuary stretches out towards the sea; on all other sides, rugged mountains reach to the overarching sky. The house is surrounded by small fields scratched out of the rocky ground, with clumps of twisted oak, tall beech and silver birch growing near their stone walls. From a rocky outcrop at the back of the house, Snowdon, the highest mountain in Wales and England, stands watch over the surrounding peaks. A few hikers sometimes wander by disturbing the sheep and crows, looking for a taste of the wild, free and natural.

They follow in the footsteps of earlier hikers who sought the sublime, like the Romantic poet Wordsworth. He gloried in the awesome grandeur of the mountain range, and found in Snowdon

the perfect image of a mighty Mind
Of one that feeds upon infinity,
That is exalted by an underpresence,
The sense of God, or whatsoe'ever is dim
Or vast in its own being.

Not long ago, I climbed a local mountain after the first fall of snow on the peaks. Following an old drover's track over rough pasture, I eventually came across a new barbed-wire fence. It marked the outer boundary of land recently reclaimed from the ancient bogs and moors of the uplands. The contrast between the two sides of the fence could not have been starker.

On the one side were the dull browns and greens of a great variety of sedges, rushes, grasses, mosses and lichens in uneven terrain criss-crossed by little streams and brooks. On the other stretched a flat expanse of bright green grass on heavily limed and fertilized soil. The sheep rushed off in a great white mass at my approach. The barbed-wire fence marks the battle line between nature left to itself and man's steady and inexorable encroachment.

What place does barbed wire have in nature's web? Only industrialized man, who learned how to mine coal and iron from the earth and fuse them with fire, is able to create barbed wire. It was barbed wire that destroyed the American hinterland; it continues to unfurl throughout the world, transforming the earth into the preserve of our rapacious species. Nature has evolved for all beings to enjoy, but only human beings have tried to control it and make it their own. By trying to humanize nature, they have denaturalized themselves.

I continued on my walk further up the mountainside. There were signs of earlier human workings. The tumbled stones of an ancient hut circle could just be discerned, suggesting that the climate must have been warmer several thousands of years ago for humans to live comfortably at 800 feet in these parts. The Romans had come this far north, scratching for copper and silver in an otherwise barren land. I then came across a sweeping track which ended in a jagged heap of broken slabs of slate, clawed from the subterranean depths of the mountain – a stark reminder of the demand earlier this century to shelter the bursting population of Europe. Wordsworth's 'perfect image of a mighty Mind' lay for ever blasted and scarred. Medieval thinkers likened mining in the earth to the rape of Mother Nature; it is easy to see why, with the discarded workings of the violent boring into the mountain's womb.

As I reached a watershed, I saw at the bottom of a steep precipice a dark and gloomy reservoir, its sinister waters pumped up from the lake below by electricity from the nearby nuclear power station squatting in the ancient hills. The town of Blaenau Ffestiniog lay at my feet, surrounded by grey tips of broken slate. When the architect Clough Williams-Ellis drew up the map of Snowdonia National Park, he drew a ring around Blaenau Ffestiniog, so that it would stand as an oasis of industrial ugliness in an area of 'outstanding natural beauty'. Yet many who glorify the Industrial Revolution feel more at home in the grey, drab streets of Blaenau than on the windswept mountain peaks standing firm against the Atlantic

westerlies. Tourists, disgorged by the veteran steam trains, rush headlong into the disused mines rather than turn their gaze to the heavens.

Turning my back on modern agriculture on one side and modern industry on the other, I climbed past the snowline for the ascent of Moelwyn Mawr. The first snow of the year, which lay deep and crisp, covered the tracks of summer hikers and the fissures of frost-broken rock. The place seemed utterly pure and pristine. The air was sharp and bracing. Swirls of mist passed over me, hiding the winter sun, cutting me off from all except the rolling expanse of white snow around. As I placed one foot after the other in the crisp snow, my head emptied of the chatter of the valley and the petty daily worries. I felt one with the white mountain which stood like an old man who had taken many knocks but still maintained his integrity.

But as I neared the summit, I suddenly felt strangely melancholy. However much I tried, I could not prevent the stark truth invading my mind. The snow around me was not pure and pristine; it was made from acid rain and was contaminated with radioactivity. The air was not clean; it contained an artificial excess of hydrocarbons. A man-made layer of carbon dioxide lay between me and the sun, inexorably heating up the globe. In a hundred years, there might not be any more snow falling on this mountain. Nature, in the sense of the world independent of man, has come to an end. The human species, which has sought to climb the highest mountains and to dive into the deepest seas, has so dominated nature that it has begun to transform it irredeemably.

At the top of the mountain, a few crows had left their mark in the snow. As if to confirm my gloomiest thoughts, a red fighter aeroplane roared low up the valley below, practising no doubt with dummy nuclear weapons.

Beneath its surface beauty, nature has become scarred and poisoned. God, if he ever existed, is dead, and only the faintest glimpse of Wordsworth's 'mighty Mind' can be discerned in the roar of the mountain torrents and the whistling wind of the peaks.

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INTRODUCTION

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
Percy Bysshe Shelley

This green and blue planet spinning in space is under severe stress. Like the human body the earth can take only so much damage before its health is seriously impaired. If we continue to defile the planet at the present rate, prevailing conditions of life will be threatened. *Hubris*, human pride before a fall, will be followed by *nemesis*, nature's revenge. Whatever happens, evolution will continue in some form or other but it is hardly reassuring to think that we may be recycled like the dinosaurs.

Not all is lost, however, for a new awareness of what humans are doing to the planet is burgeoning. The Green movement has helped transform the way we think and act in the world. There has been a tidal wave of 'green' books telling people how to save the planet and themselves.

The term 'green', the colour of plant life, is appropriate for the word may be applied to describe anything that is life-enhancing in the broadest sense. A 'green' person is thus someone who wishes to live harmoniously with nature; he or she is life-centred and shows respect for nature and all its forms.

Everyone understands the meaning of the sentence 'Man should respect life and nature'. But the exact meaning of man, nature and life is not always clear. Western thinkers have often opposed man to nature. Even the term 'man' is misleading as a collective noun, for humanity is made up of men and women of different social groups. Many writers on ecological matters use the term 'man' or 'we' loosely, when they should strictly speaking specify whether they mean all men or women, or some particular men or women. I realize that I too sometimes use the term 'man' as a convenient alternative to humanity or human beings, but it is not intended to have any sexist or speciesist overtones.

Again many refer to man and animals as if they were metaphysically different. While I might appear to fall into this habit on occasion, I consider man to be an animal and only differing in degree and not in kind from other animals. Although I discuss in conventional terms human rights and animals rights as if they were separate, strictly speaking human rights should be considered a branch of animal rights.

The word nature is one of the most complex words in the language, but it has developed three main areas of meaning. These are the essential quality and character of something (as in human nature, or the nature of wood); the inherent force which influences the world (as in Mother Nature); or the entire world itself. The last can be taken to include or to exclude human beings, as the phrase man and the natural world implies.

I consider humans to be an integral part of nature, although they are also the beings most capable of interfering with its processes. A central drive of Western 'man' has been to conquer 'nature', as if it were an object separate from him. Hence it has become common to distinguish between what is natural (existing without man's interference) and artificial (man-made). In this way, nature is opposed to nurture, civilization to the natural state. For many urban dwellers living permanently amongst concrete and glass, nature itself has come to mean little more than the countryside.

Nature and life are sometimes seen as the same thing, yet life is only one aspect of nature. Life in its broadest sense may be defined as a process which increases the complexity of forms by converting energy. It swims against the current of universal entropy, opposing the flow of energy to a more disordered state. But when an organism dies, it can no longer grow or maintain itself. Some obscure vital factor has left it; its body will rot. Modern science calls this vital force energy: energy is released from a dead body and will be transformed into other forms.

I consider this mysterious quality of life to be valuable in itself. Anything which strives to maintain itself, whether a bear, a tree, a lake or the earth itself, has inherent value. Even a stone, which on its own cannot be said to be alive in actively striving to maintain itself, nevertheless forms part of a system which makes up a living whole.

Ecological thinking

This book explores the nature of ecological thinking. It is concerned with the meaning of the earth and our rightful place within it. This means developing a philosophy of nature and a morality to guide our actions. It attempts to provide the wider green movement with a comprehensive vision which will enable it to lay the foundations of an organic and sustainable society.

The words 'green' and 'ecological' are often used synonymously, and the term 'ecology' has come to mean little more than the intermingling of all aspects of life in an organic whole. As a scientific term *oekologie* was first used by the German biologist Ernest Haeckel in 1866 as the study of animals and plant systems in relation to their environment. It was not until 1930 that the science assumed professional status with its particular emphasis on the interdependence of different life-forms.

Derived from the Greek words *oikos*, meaning 'house', and *logos*, meaning 'knowledge', ecology is now employed to describe all aspects of our dwelling in the Earth House Hold. By extension, the politics of ecology concerns itself with the interaction between our species and our environment. Other key words in the subject are 'ecosystem', an interdependent group of items forming a unified whole, the 'biosphere', the earth's ecosystem functioning together on a global scale, and the 'ecosphere', the part of the universe, especially the earth, where life can exist.

Ecology as a science has gone some way in providing a framework for the green movement. It has undoubtedly inspired a new understanding of humanity as one element in an intricate web of nature. It endorses the values of unity in diversity, organic growth and interdependence. It suggests that all organisms have intrinsic value in a non-hierarchical world: humans and animals are different but they are worthy of equal consideration. It presents biotic communities and the whole of nature as self-regulating organisms. Applied to society, ecological principles point in the direction of participatory democracy, cooperation and mutual aid in decentralized and self-managing communities.

Although the green movement is like a river with many tributaries and springs rising in different soils, its members share certain common assumptions and beliefs. They nearly all agree that there is little

ground in the natural world for human notions of hierarchy and domination; they consider it impossible to sustain the present rate of consumption and economic growth; and they believe in the essential harmony and beneficence of nature. Above all, they are all aware that we are an integral part of nature and that if we harm any part of it, we harm ourselves.

Green sympathizers are not necessarily religious but they often betray pantheistic or animistic feelings which express themselves in a reverence for life. They tend to adopt an aesthetic attitude to nature, appreciating its beauty and spontaneous order. They are often critical of traditional science but believe in the reality of the external world and the possibility of objective truth. They celebrate the fact that modern science seems to confirm the ancient beliefs about the cosmic dance of energy.

In their morality, members of the green movement tend to be 'ecocentric' rather than 'anthropocentric', concerned not only with human welfare but with the well-being of the earth as a whole. Involved with furthering animal rights, they would like to extend the moral community to include non-human beings and even things. They do not wish to work against the course of nature but with it, as companions rather than as lords and conquerors. They believe in the responsibility of each individual for his or her actions. Taking on board the insights of ecology, they would like society to develop in an organic direction.

Ecological thinking is unique in that it draws on science as well as philosophy and religion for inspiration. In their search for ancestors, ecological thinkers have delved into Taoism and Zen Buddhism, invoked the Greek Goddess Gaia, and looked to the old ways of American Indians for a model of a harmonious relationship with Mother Earth. Within Christianity, they emphasize the idea of human stewardship of rather than dominion over nature and find inspiration in figures like St Francis of Assisi and St Benedict. They have turned to a minority tradition in Western metaphysics, represented by such thinkers as Spinoza, Whitehead and Heidegger, who stress the organic unity of nature. But not all these varied traditions and thinkers have been fully understood or integrated into a larger philosophical whole.

Changing views of the world

Ecological thinking is rising in human minds like sap in spring. What is taking place is not merely a concern with cleaning up our environment but a fundamental shift in consciousness – as momentous as the Renaissance. In order to solve existing environmental problems, it is simply not good enough to close ageing nuclear reactors or to put filters in coal-fired stations. It is beginning to dawn on people that what is wrong is not merely our present industrial practices but industrialism itself. Consumers who have switched to environment-friendly goods are now beginning to question the nature of consumption itself. What is wrong is nothing less than the way we see and act in the world.

The assumptions behind the traditional Western world-view are that we are makers of our own destiny; that our history has been a history of progress; that whatever problems we encounter in the future, we will be able to solve them. At the same time, it assumes that humans are fundamentally different from other creatures on earth, unique in the possession of reason, speech, moral conscience and soul. Nature is considered mainly as a collection of resources to be used at will, an unlimited opportunity to exploit.

This world-view has been supported by the mainstream Judaeo-Christian tradition which depicts God as giving man dominion over nature in order to subdue it to his own ends. The rationalist tradition from Plato onwards also separated the mind from the body, the observer from the observed, and humanity from nature. The cleavage between humanity and nature was deepened by the mechanical thinking of the Scientific Revolution in the seventeenth century which tried to put nature on the rack in order to force her to reveal her secrets. The instrumental rationality and the arrogant humanism of the Enlightenment further led to the disenchantment of nature. The rise of capitalism and industrialization fundamentally altered our relationship with the natural world and encouraged the dream of achieving the ultimate conquest over nature.

This dominant world-view which fires our industrial, technocratic and man-centred civilization is however beginning to unravel. A new vision of the world is emerging which recognizes the interrelatedness of all things and beings and which presents humanity as an integral part of the organic whole. It not only develops the insights of ancient

religions and philosophies but is confirmed by modern physics and the science of ecology. It recognizes that our own welfare depends on the well-being of nature as a whole.

If we are to live in a habitable world these insights must be translated into action and form part of a democratic and sustainable society which is in harmony with nature. Such a prospect involves not only changing our ways of production, but reconsidering the whole range of our present needs and wants. It requires nothing less than a major shift in human consciousness and a new direction for Western civilization.

Although the old world-view is undoubtedly fading, a coherent ecological philosophy has not yet replaced it. The 'metaphysical reconstruction' which green activists like E. F. Schumacher and Jonathon Porritt have called for has only just begun. Few involved in the green movement are aware of the deep-rooted tradition which underpins their beliefs. While a handful of historians and philosophers have begun to sketch the outlines of a green cultural and intellectual tradition, as yet no comprehensive overview has appeared. Moreover there is a need for a philosophy of nature in which to ground our moral values and social action. Such a rigorous and radical philosophy can be the only real foundation for sound environmental ethics and effective green politics.

The aim of *Nature's Web* is to fulfil this need and to strengthen and deepen ecological thinking. It traces the emergence of the dominant world-view of Western civilization and the origins and evolution of the ideas and values which have led to the present ecological crisis. At the same time, it uncovers an alternative cultural tradition in different religions and philosophies and describes the growth of an ecological mind and sensibility. Once part of a counterculture, this now seems set on replacing the dominant one.

Nature's Web tries to be an inspiration as well as a comprehensive study. It not only offers a contribution to a new philosophy of nature, but also sketches the outlines of a sustainable and democratic society. It sets out to reaffirm the continuity between human beings and other animals and the rest of nature: we do not stand separate from or above nature, but form just another strand of its living web. The book should appeal to all those who treasure the beauty of our common dwelling in the Earth House Hold and who care about its long-term well-being.

Part I

ANCIENT ROOTS

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1

TAOISM

The Way of Nature

Horses live on dry land, eat grass and drink water. When pleased, they rub necks together. When angry, they turn round and kick up their heels at each other. Thus far only do their natural dispositions carry them. But bridled and bitted, with a plate of metal on their foreheads, they learn to cast vicious looks, to turn the head to bite, to resist, to get the bit out of the mouth or the bridle into it. And their natures become depraved.

Chuang Tzu

The first clear expression of ecological thinking appears in ancient China from about the sixth century BC. Chinese society at the time was passing through a feudal and bureaucratic phase and the empire was divided into warring states. Law was becoming codified and the followers of Confucius were calling for a rigid hierarchy in which every citizen knew his or her place. The Taoists, on the other hand, resented their meddling and believed all could live in spontaneous harmony with nature. They offered the most profound and eloquent philosophy of nature ever elaborated and the first stirrings of an ecological sensibility.

Both Taoists and Confucians believe that human nature is fundamentally good: human beings have an innate predisposition to goodness which is revealed in the instinctive reaction of anyone who sees a child fall into a well. Both claim to defend the Tao, or the Way, of the ancients. But whereas the Taoists are principally interested in nature, the Confucians are more worldly-minded and concerned with society. The Confucians celebrate traditionally 'male' virtues like duty, discipline and obedience, while the Taoists promote the 'female' values of receptivity and passivity. The former wish to dominate and regulate nature; the latter to follow and harmonize with it. The struggle between the two world-views, one authoritarian and the other libertarian, is still with us.

The only reliable source of the teachings of Confucius (551–479 BC) is the *Lun-yü* (*Analects*), a collection of brief dialogues and sayings recorded by his disciples, mostly young gentlemen preparing for government office. Confucius' *Tao* is the proper way of life for humanity. It presupposes that the hierarchical structure of the old society corresponds to a natural world order. Each person has a moral obligation by virtue of his position, whether father or son, ruler or ruled. The cardinal virtue is *jen*, usually translated as 'benevolence', although in Chinese it is a homophone for 'humanity'. It embraces the moral qualities of loyalty, reciprocity and dutifulness and celebrates the ideal of the *chün-tzu* (gentleman) who is sincere, polite, righteous and generous. Confucianism has often been called a system of morality without religion, and the master formulated the golden rule: 'What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not do to others.'

In social terms, Confucius was a utilitarian. He wanted to promote the general good, which he thought would be best achieved by a paternalistic government. He therefore urged rulers to bring about social justice by becoming moral themselves. A virtuous ruler would encourage the virtue of the ruled. Confucius felt that he failed in his aim to influence rulers but his disciple Mencius (371–289 BC), whose conversations were recorded in *Meng-tzu*, carried his message to the rulers of the warring states with some degree of success.

Although Buddhism held sway in Chinese society from the fifth century, there was a deliberate effort to revive Confucianism in the Sung period from the eleventh century onwards and it became a kind of state cult, the orthodoxy of a feudal and bureaucratic order. Its influence can still be seen at work in the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of the Chinese Communist Party.

Taoism, by contrast, never became an official cult, although it has helped shape Chinese thought as much as Buddhism and Confucianism. It had its roots in popular culture far back in Chinese history, possibly in an earlier matriarchal society, although it emerged as a remarkable combination of philosophy, religion, proto-science and magic at the beginning of the sixth century BC.

Its first principal exponent, Lao Tzu ('Old Philosopher'), is shrouded in mystery. Tradition has it that he was born c. 604 BC of a noble family in Ch'u (in modern Honan, or Henan, province). He rejected his hereditary position as a noble and became a curator of the imperial archives at Loh.

All his life he followed the path of silence – ‘The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao,’ he taught. But according to legend, when he was riding off into the desert to die in the west, he was persuaded by a gatekeeper in northwestern China to write down his teaching for posterity.

The exact date of the work attributed to Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (The Way and its Virtue), remains in dispute. Before the Second World War, scholars dated it about the fourth or even the third century BC, although since then there has been a tendency to revert to tradition and place it in the sixth century BC.¹ The *Tao Te Ching* remains the sole record of Lao Tzu’s teaching and it stands as an unrivalled literary and philosophical masterpiece. The Chinese scholar Joseph Needham, the author of the monumental *Science and Civilization in China*, has called it ‘without exception the most profound and beautiful work in the Chinese language’.² The text consists of eighty-one short chapters (5,250 words in Chinese). It is a combination of poetry and philosophical reflection. While it is sometimes obscure and paradoxical, a haunting beauty resonates throughout.

The other great Taoist text is written by Chuang Tzu (399–295 BC) and goes by the same name. More mystical than Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu relates nevertheless many entertaining anecdotes and parables. The work still follows the light of reason and has a sensuous naturalism, but it develops more clearly the concept of *te* as Tao individualized in the nature of things. The idea of self-transformation is more central, as is the need to adapt closely to the environment.

The influence of Taoism on Buddhism was great, especially in the development of Zen. It has also greatly inspired Chinese poetry and landscape painting. In the West, the Taoist view of reality as dynamic and ever-changing and the principle of unity in diversity find echoes in the philosophies of Heraclitus and Hegel. Taoism offers a path to mystical experience and philosophical enlightenment as well as a guide to right living. It provides the most fertile soil for the growth of a genuinely ecological sensibility.

Philosophy of nature

The Taoist conception of nature is based on the ancient Chinese principles of *yin* and *yang*, two opposite but complementary forces in the cosmos. Together they constitute *ch’i* (matter-energy) of

which all beings and phenomena are formed. *Yin* is the supreme feminine power, characterized by darkness, coldness and passivity and associated with the moon. *Yang* is the masculine counterpart of brightness, warmth and activity, identified with the sun. Both forces are at work within men and women as in all things, responsible for diversity within the overall unity.

Know the strength of man,
But keep a woman's care!³

In the famous Taoist symbol of a circled S, the objective (white) emanates from the subjective (black); equally the subjective results from the objective. Both are for ever interrelated and flow into each other: black contains white and vice versa. The contraries of subject and object, good and bad, beauty and ugliness, dark and light, spring from subjective individuality; from the perspective of the whole, all distinctions merge. *Yin* and *yang* originally referred to the sunless and sunny sides of a mountain.

The Tao itself cannot be defined; it is nameless and formless. Lao Tzu likens it to an empty vessel, a river flowing home to the sea, or an uncarved block. The Tao follows what is natural. It is the way in which the universe works, the order of nature which gives all things their being and sustains them:

The great Tao flows everywhere, both to the left and the right.
The ten thousand things depend on it; it holds nothing back.
It fulfills its purpose silently and makes no claim.

It nourishes the ten thousand things,
And yet is not their lord.⁴

The Tao is in all beings and things, yet it is not identical with them, neither differentiated nor limited. All proceeds from it and is under its influence.

Needham describes the Tao as a 'kind of natural curvature in time and space'. In one sense, there can be no wrong attitude to the Tao since there is no point outside it to take such an attitude.⁵ The Tao, however, is not fixed; it is a flowing and creative process. The universe in a state of flux; everything changes, nothing is constant. Energy flows continually between the negative pole of *yin* and the

positive pole of *yang*. Both being and nonbeing are aspects of Tao: 'The ten thousand things are born of being. / Being is born of not being.'⁶ To be at one with the Tao is not therefore a static condition, a motionless identification. It is a process of creative self-realization, a process of becoming in which both being and nonbeing are two enduring presences.⁷

Taoists take a holistic view of the universe, recognizing the ecological principle of unity in diversity. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, in nature as well as in society: 'A mountain is high because of its individual particles. A river is large because of its individual drops. And he is a just man who regards all parts from the point of view of the whole.'⁸

The Taoists speak of creation as the 'ten thousand things' merely as a way of expressing a large number since the outward shape of the universe is vast. The Tao folds them all into its embrace. Unity underlies all particular manifestations. The fulfilment of a part can only take place within the larger whole. 'All things spring from germs. Under many diverse forms these things are ever being reproduced. Round and round, like a wheel, no part of which is more the starting-point than any other. This is called the equilibrium of God.'⁹ The Tao is thus an interrelated process which results in natural order. Taoists refer back to a golden age which preceded hierarchy and domination, state and patriarchy, when all formed an integrated community. But they also look forward to a restored organic society.

The Chinese phrase usually translated as 'nature' is *tzu-jan*, which means literally 'of itself so'. The concept stresses the creative spontaneity of nature; indeed, *tzu-jan* may best be translated as spontaneity.¹⁰ Nature is self-sufficient and uncreated; there is no need to postulate a creator. All parts of the single organism regulate themselves spontaneously.

But the universe is not random, for it has its own organic pattern (*li*). *Li*, a concept also found in Buddhism, may best be translated as 'principle'. But *li*, the principle of principles, cannot be stated in terms of law (*tse*). The difference is beautifully expressed in the root meanings of the words; *li* referred to the markings in jade, the grain in wood or the fibre in muscle; *tse*, to the writing of the imperial laws upon sacrificial cauldrons. The laws cannot be changed; they are fixed and static. But the markings in jade are 'formless' in the sense that they create a flowing, complex pattern. Thus Huai Nan Tzu (died 122 BC)

declares: 'The Tao of Heaven operates mysteriously and secretly; it has no fixed shape; it follows no definite laws [*tse*]; it is great that you can never fathom it.'¹¹

Being in the world

The artist creates beauty by understanding the nature of his material, the grain in wood or stone, the notes of a musical instrument, the colours of the palette. The nature of the material is *li*, which is discovered not by logical analysis but by *kuan*, a kind of quiet contemplation, an open awareness without conscious concentration. The Taoist will contemplate in silence, without words. Language does not structure the world, as Wittgenstein argued; nature is prior to language which only classifies – often misleadingly – the world into beings, things and events.

The hexagram *kuan* in the *I Ching*, or *The Book of Changes*, stands for contemplation, combining 'wind, gentle, wood, penetration' with 'the earth, female, passive, receptive'.¹² The Chinese character for *kuan* shows the radical sign for 'seeing' beside a bird. It may have something to do with the ancient Chinese practice of watching the flight of birds for omens. It may also evoke the still alertness of a heron as it stands by a pool without apparently focussing on anything in particular.

The *I Ching*, written about 770 BC after the collapse of the Chou state, was an oracle used for divination which inspired both Taoism and Confucianism. The *I Ching* is much more determinist than Taoism, since it believes that the future develops in accordance with fixed laws, according to calculable numbers: if these numbers can be discovered it is possible to predict future events.

Kuan does not imply an empty mind, but rather a mind empty of its habitual thoughts and goals. It does not struggle to understand; it is simply like a mirror, which never refuses to show anything but retains nothing afterwards. It resonates to natural things without prejudice or foresight. It does not even make an effort not to make an effort, realizing the folly of struggling to sleep or forcing an orgasm. Since this involves abandoning focus, it may well explain the love of Chinese and Japanese painters for clouds and mountains, seen as if through half-closed eyes, or for water and sky where the one flows into the other.

Modern scientists could well benefit from *kuan*, contemplating

without strained attention, using 'no-knowledge' (no preconceptions) to attain knowledge. This is all the more relevant since modern physics describes the world as a dance of energy in a way which is remarkably similar to the Taoists'.¹³

The approach to nature recommended by the Taoists is one of receptivity and passivity. Where the Confucian wants to conquer and exploit nature, the Taoist tries to contemplate and understand it. One of the favourite symbols of Taoism is water, which yields but nevertheless erodes the hardest rock.

The highest good is like water.
Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive.
It flows in places men reject and so is like the Tao.

Therefore, 'Be the stream of the universe!'¹⁴ Flowing like water, finding the point of least resistance, the individual will eventually wear away the hard and unyielding. By not blocking itself, the self will reach a state of *wu-hsin* or 'egolessness'.

Taoism celebrates the low and soft, not the grand and rigid:

The valley spirit never dies;
It is the woman, primal mother.
Her gateway is the root of heaven and earth.¹⁵

Yet this attitude does not lead to an unthinking acceptance but actually encourages a scientific outlook among Taoists. By not imposing their own preconceptions, they are able to observe and understand nature and therefore flow with its energy beneficially. If the wise abandon prejudices and study nature they will be able to increase general wellbeing. The Taoist philosophy of nature restores the original sense of its seamless unity without loss of individual consciousness. It implies an approach to the universe and the immediate environment which does not interfere deeply with the natural course of things.

Taoist art, especially poetry and landscape painting, is not considered 'artificial' but spontaneous, created without strain or conscious intention. Naturalness is a kind of self-determining spontaneity. 'Communing with nature' is not therefore a form of escapism, but direct contact with reality, a state in which the observer and observed are no longer felt as separate.

The Taoists are primarily interested in nature but their conception of the universe has important corollaries for society. The individual is a microcosm of the universe, in that if left alone both spontaneously follow the Tao. As such the individual is a matrix of relationships; one can only realize oneself in relation to the whole. Realizing one's own Tao involves participating in the universal Tao and realizing the Tao of others. One should not therefore flee from oneself into the arms of others in spurious neighbourly love: 'Annihilation of the Tao in order to practice charity and duty to one's neighbour, – this is the error of the Sage.'¹⁶ If each person keeps to him- or herself, the world would escape confusion. Unlike Christians, Taoists believe that the best way to help one's neighbour is to perfect one's own life. If one improves oneself, everyone will benefit.

The Taoists hold that only when society begins to deviate from nature, morality arises:

Therefore when Tao is lost, there is goodness.
 When goodness is lost, there is kindness.
 When kindness is lost, there is justice.
 When justice is lost, there is ritual.¹⁷

A person of Tao will be good spontaneously without any judgment, without any utilitarian calculation of intentions or consequences of his actions. He will be sincere, simple, spontaneous, generous and detached. He will not force others to do things, but let them organize themselves. His virtue will be passive rather than active. The importance of inaction (*wu-wei*) is stressed time and time again in Taoist writings. It is not a form of idleness but rather a mental attitude of equilibrium and tranquil stillness which nothing can disturb:

A truly good man does nothing,
 Yet leaves nothing undone.

It is a demanding ideal:

Are you able to do nothing?
 Giving birth and nourishing,
 Bearing yet not possessing,
 Working yet not taking credit,

Leading yet not dominating,
This is the Primal Virtue.¹⁸

The person of Tao avoids competition and trying to win. Joy, anger, sorrow, happiness find no place in his heart. He uses his mind like a mirror: 'It grasps nothing: it refuses nothing. It receives but does not keep.'¹⁹

He who would follow the Tao never loses sight of the natural conditions of his existence. The more humans try to control the world, to check the natural flow, the more chaotic it will become. Coercion always hinders. Spontaneity and order are not opposites, but identical. The sage will therefore move with the natural flow of things, like an old sailor who does not tighten his muscles on a pitching boat.

But what is natural? The answer is simple: whatever exists prior to man's imposition. 'Horses and oxen,' answered the Spirit of the Ocean, 'have four feet. That is the natural. Put a halter on a horse's head, a string through a bullock's nose, – that is the artificial.'²⁰ The wise person will not interfere with nature, but let it be. He is not aggressive or assertive. He disregards externals; success and profit will have no value for him. He travels like a bird, leaving no trace behind. Above all, he is as spontaneous as a newborn child who can cry all day without becoming hoarse, who acts without knowing what it does.

Although Taoism is loath to elaborate a strict moral code, it does have certain values, notably compassion, frugality and nonassertion – 'daring not to be ahead of others'.²¹ Compassion is not merely for fellow humans, but for all creatures; it is antihumanist in the sense that it has no favourites. The universe is not human-hearted: 'Heaven and earth are ruthless.' It follows that if a person wishes to be in harmony with the universe, he or she will also not be human-hearted: 'The wise are ruthless.'²²

Man is not therefore the measure of all things: 'He who delights in man, is himself not a perfect man. His affection is not true charity,' Chuang Tzu claims.²³ Charity is the universal love of all creation, not of a particular manifestation. Taoists thus advocate a kind of ecocentric impartiality which results with identifying with the whole and which respects all beings as intrinsically valuable.²⁴

The Taoist ideal is not the nonattached and passionless one of the Buddhists or the Hindus. Nor is it quietist and defeatist. Taoists

advocate repose, but they offer a practical guide for right conduct. They teach peace and strongly oppose domination and oppression. They advocate not withdrawal from the world, but involvement in it. By following the Tao, a person's nature is not annihilated but fulfilled.

The Taoist natural philosopher is receptive and observant, not imposing his conceptual grid on nature, but aware that he is part of what he is observing. Because of their successful experimentation, the Taoists gave a considerable impetus to the development of science and medicine in ancient China.

At the same time, Taoists recognize that not all new technology is beneficial. They are fully aware that some technological innovations can be used to dominate and degrade humanity and nature. 'Destruction of the natural integrity of things, in order to produce articles of various kinds, – this is the fault of the artisan,' declared Chuang Tzu.²⁵ He related the story of an old gardener who prefers to water his patch with a pitcher from a well rather than use a well-sweep. It involves great labour with very little result. When questioned about this time-consuming practice, the gardener replies: 'Those who have cunning implements are cunning in their dealings, and those who are cunning in their dealings have cunning in their hearts . . . and those who are restless in spirit are not fit vehicles for TAO.'²⁶

Lao Tzu makes a similar point: 'A small country has fewer people. Though there are machines that can work ten to a hundred times faster than man, they are not needed.'²⁷ Taoists recognize that technological developments are not value-free, and that while they may be apparently time-saving and efficient they can create artificial desires and prevent self-realization. They are moreover unnecessary to transcend natural scarcity – a notion which developed with the building of cities dependent on the surrounding land. Nature left to itself is fecund, abundant and overflowing. Unlike humans, it takes from those who have too much and gives to those who do not have enough. It continually tries to regulate itself and reach an equilibrium.

'There is no greater sin than desire,' Lao Tzu writes.²⁸ What he condemns is the inordinate desire for wealth, power and reputation which inevitably leads to unhappiness, not the desire for truth and sex. Far from condemning sexual desire, the Taoists felt that sexuality mirrored the cosmic flow of energy between the creative forces of *yin* and *yang* and that *ch'i* or energy was increased by sexual stimulus.

Life is thus nourished and not undermined by sexuality. As in Tantric yoga, the Taoists believed that sexual love could be transformed into a spiritual exercise in which the participants become embodiments of the universe and symbolize its union.

The gentle peacefulness recommended by Taoists is not a form of defeatist submission. Certainly good results are not achieved through violence for 'force is followed by loss of strength' and 'a violent man will die a violent death'.²⁹ Giving way is often the best means to overcome:

Under heaven nothing is more soft and yielding than water.
Yet for attacking the solid and strong, nothing is better;
It has no equal. The weak can overcome the strong;
The supple can overcome the stiff.³⁰

When the Taoists advocate non-action (*wu-wei*), it is not inactivity but rather work without effort and complication. *Wu-wei* can be translated as 'non-striving' and 'non-making'. Real work should therefore go with and not against the grain of things, the flow of nature. Natural forms are not made but grow; artefacts, like houses and machines, should be shaped like sculpture. If work were approached from this perspective, it would lose its coercive aspect. Rather than being avoided as something which alienates and prevents self-realization, it would be transformed into spontaneous and meaningful play. It is useless trying to be useful; better to work for the intrinsic value of the activity itself, not for its possible consequences.

The deepest roots of the Taoist view of *wu-wei* probably lies in the nature of peasant life. Peasants by long experience refrain from activity contrary to nature and realize that in order to grow plants they must understand and cooperate with the natural processes. And just as plants grow best when allowed to follow their natures, so human beings thrive when least interfered with. The world is ruled by letting things take their course. If people followed this advice, the Taoists suggest, they would live a long life and achieve physical and mental health. Indeed, earthly longevity became one of their central goals. 'Whatever is contrary to Tao will not last long,' they teach, while he who is filled with virtue is like a newborn child.³¹ In order to prolong their lives, the Taoists resorted to yoga-like techniques and even alchemy.

Ecological society

The Taoists stress repeatedly that the causes of social conflict and natural disasters are to be found in human domination and hierarchy:

that the the conditions of life are violated, that the will of God does not triumph, that the beasts of the field are disorganized, that the birds of the air cry at night, that blight reaches the trees and the herbs, that destruction spreads among creeping things, – this, alas! is the fault of *government*.³²

To try and govern people by laws and regulations is the ultimate folly: 'To attempt to govern mankind thus, – as well try to wade through the sea, to hew a passage through a river, or make a mosquito fly away with a mountain!'³³ People should not therefore be coerced into obeying artificial laws, but be left alone to regulate themselves. The wise person knows that forceful actions will accomplish nothing, and therefore does nothing.

The social ideal of the Taoists was a form of agrarian collectivism which sought to recapture the primordial unity with nature which human beings had lost in developing an artificial civilization. They were extremely critical of the bureaucratic, warlike and commercial nature of the feudal order of their own day which the Confucians defended and enhanced. Lao Tzu specifically saw the excessive wealth of a few as causing misery:

When the court is arrayed in splendour,
The fields are full of weeds,
And the granaries are bare.

By claiming wealth and titles, the ruling elite created disaster in the land. Lao Tzu more than any other ancient thinker realized that the coercive apparatus of government was the cause and not the remedy of social disorder. It is only when 'the country is confused and in chaos, that loyal ministers appear'.³⁴ It follows that:

The more laws and restrictions there are,
The poorer people become.
The sharper men's weapons,

The more trouble in the land.
 The more ingenious and clever men are,
 The more strange things happen.
 The more rules and regulations,
 The more thieves and robbers.

Therefore the sage says:

I take no action and people are reformed.
 I enjoy peace and people become honest.
 I do nothing and the people become rich.
 I have no desires and people return to the good and simple life.³⁵

The Taoists' social background tended to be the small middle class situated between the feudal lords and the mass of peasant farmers. The *Tao Te Ching* is addressed to rulers as well as would-be sages, but it is not a Machiavellian handbook of statecraft. Lao Tzu suggests that a ruler should act with the people, not above them. The best ruler, however, dissolves his own rule: he leaves the people alone to follow their own peaceful and productive activities. He trusts their good faith and lets them get on with things. The country will then reside in peace and contentment.

Unlike the meddling and authoritarian Confucians, the Taoists had the social ideal of an anarchist society without government and state, in which people live simple and sincere lives in harmony with nature. It is a decentralized society in which goods are produced and shared with the help of appropriate technology. The inhabitants in such an ecologically sound community would be strong but with no need to show their strength; wise, but with no pretence of learning.

A small country has fewer people.
 Though there are machines that can work ten to a hundred
 times faster than man, they are not needed.
 The people take death seriously and do not travel far.
 Though they have boats and carriages, no one uses them.
 Though they have armour and weapons, no one displays them.
 Men return to the knotting of rope in place of writing.
 Their food is plain and good, their clothes fine but simple,
 their homes secure;
 They are happy in their ways.

Though they live within sight of their neighbours,
 And crowing cocks and barking dogs are heard across the
 way,
 Yet they leave each other in peace while they grow old
 and die.³⁶

Chuang Tzu makes a similar point:

They were contented with what food and raiment they could get. They lived simple and peaceful lives. Neighbouring districts were within sight, and the cocks and dogs of one could be heard in the other, yet the people grew old and died without ever interchanging visits.³⁷

He also states the fundamental proposition of libertarian thought which has reverberated through history ever since:

There has been such a thing as letting mankind alone; there has never been such a thing as governing mankind.

Letting alone springs from fear lest men's natural dispositions be perverted and their virtue left aside. But if their natural dispositions be not perverted nor their virtue laid aside, what room is there left for government?³⁸

But while pursuing their own interests, people would not forget the interests of others. It is not a sullen selfishness that is recommended. The pursuit of personal good involves a concern for the general wellbeing: the more one gives to others, the greater one's abundance. Human beings are individuals but they are also social beings, part of society, and society in turn is part of the wider environment of beings and things.

Anticipating the findings of scientific ecology, the Taoists also believed that the more individuality and diversity there is, the greater the overall harmony. The spontaneous order of society does not exclude conflict, but there is an ultimate identity of opposites and reconciliation of contradictions at the cosmic level. Thus society is described as 'an agreement of a certain number of families and individuals to abide by certain customs. Discordant elements unite to form a harmonious whole. Take away this unity and each has a separate individuality.'³⁹

The philosophy of nature and society of Taoism offers the first

and most impressive expression of libertarian ecology. Although containing elements of mysticism, the Taoists' receptive approach to nature encouraged an experimental method and a democratic attitude. They recognize the unity in the diversity of nature and the universality of change and transformation. In their ethics, they espouse self-reliance, self-realization and spontaneous behaviour, but always within the context of a larger whole of society and nature. They not only urge rulers to leave their subjects alone and oppose the bureaucratic and legalistic teaching of the Confucians, but ultimately propose as an ideal a free and cooperative society without government, which is in harmony with nature. While some more aggressive thinkers may find in Taoism a philosophy of failure or quietude, a way of getting by in troubled times by keeping one's head down, it presents in reality the profound wisdom of those who have experienced power and wealth and know their inherent destructiveness. It provides the philosophical foundations for a genuinely ecological society and a way to resolve the ancient antagonism between humanity and nature which continues to bedevil the world.

2

HINDUISM

The Way of Understanding

Man is made by his belief. As he believes, so he is.

Bhagavad-Gita

Hinduism admirably illustrates the ecological principle of unity in diversity. It has always been tolerant of and hospitable to different beliefs and practices. More like a tree than a building, Hinduism is unique among the world's major religions in having no organization or formal institutionalized controls.

There are an infinite number of paths to the Absolute. Depending on their cultural traditions, different peoples have become attached to particular figures in Hindu mythology, the gods as well as their several incarnations (avatars). But they are all manifestations from the same source. The many currents of worship in Hinduism all flow towards the wide ocean of the Absolute. Some people require images to help them fix their mind on the object of their prayers. But they recognize that ultimately there is only one God and individual deities are only particular manifestations of the Absolute. Images are ladders to be thrown away as one begins to grasp the all-pervading nature of being.

There are many schools of Hinduism but from the very beginning there was a feeling of awe and wonder at the inexhaustible mystery of life. The *Upanishads*, written some eight hundred years before Christ, reveal the doctrine of the all-pervading nature of being. They were followed by the *Bhagavad-Gita*, with its ideal of selfless work for the good of the whole and its doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-injury or non-violence). The compassionate message of Hinduism was further developed by its offshoots Jainism and Buddhism.

Unlike the Judaeo-Christian tradition, mainstream Hinduism is deeply ecological. It has never been man-centred and recognizes that the knower, known and knowledge are one. It is a religious tradition without a founder or prophet, and may be considered more

of a culture than a creed. Although it accepts a spiritual hierarchy in the chain of being and a social hierarchy in the form of a caste system, its doctrine of reincarnation does not place an unbridgeable gulf between humans and other animals. Depending on their conduct, or *karma*, men and animals can go up or down the chain of being in the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) until they achieve release (*moksha*) when the wheel of existence comes to an end.

Far from separating human beings from the rest of creation, Hinduism sees them as integral parts of an organic whole. All beings and things are the creation of the Supreme and therefore united and connected. The Sanskrit phrase *Tat twam asi* is known by all Hindus: 'Thou art that.' It was therefore possible for the smiling Indian yogi to tell the British soldier who bayoneted him in the stomach: 'I am thou.'

The whole of nature is seen as vibrating with life: trees, rocks and waterfalls become shrines; mountains and forests symbolize the power of nature. While spiritually advanced yogis seek desolate regions or wildernesses in order to discover ultimate reality, the broad masses travel to rivers, which are seen as the source and support of spiritual life – the symbol of life without end. The respect for animals expresses itself in the universal reverence for the cow, which is allowed to wander through town and country as it pleases. Even the small minority who still sacrifice animals do so because they consider them sacred and they offer them to the gods as a great gift.

Like the Greeks, modern Hindus, Buddhists and Jains speak of a golden age in the past – an 'age of truth' when humans knew neither illness nor want and lived peaceful, simple and virtuous lives. Then human greed developed and people began to accumulate private property. This was the original downfall of humanity, for it led to the introduction of disease, poverty and hunger into the world. Things have since grown progressively worse until the present dark (*kali*) age which will end in a universal deluge. The scenario fits in well with the more pessimistic ecological forecasts.

But that is not the end of it. After the total destruction of all life by the flood, the earth will emerge afresh and a new golden age begin. The ecological analogy breaks down here for Hindus think in cyclical rather than linear terms – the cycle of rise and fall will continue for ever. There is of course no historical evidence of an earlier golden age, and the stages of the myth are remarkably similar

to the seasonal life of an Indian village, which ends and begins with monsoon floods.¹

The creation of the Vedas

The earliest known civilization in India is the Indus Valley Civilization, an urban culture based on a matriarchal society which was already quite advanced by 2500 BC. Excavations in the early twentieth century unearthed many figurines that suggest that these early people worshipped a mother goddess, symbol of creativity and the flow of life. Each village seems to have had its own goddess. There are also figures of a male god, shown in the position of a yogi in a state of contemplation. He is often surrounded by animals and may possibly be the original form of the later Hindu god of creation, Shiva, 'Lord of the Animals'. *Lingam* and *yoni* symbols, representing male and female sexual organs, have also been found, and show the central importance given to fertility. There are traces of tree, serpent and other animal worship.

It was probably from this matriarchal society that the worship of the mother goddess (Devi) as well as the mother image of spiritual power (Sakti) emerged.² The universal reverence for the cow in Hindu culture was also probably an offshoot of the ancient cult of the mother goddess. The cow remains in India the living symbol of Mother Earth and of the abundance she bestows on humanity. Feeding the cow is an act of worship; even its urine is seen as sacred and used in purification rituals.

The Indus Valley Civilization declined in the middle of the second millennium, possibly owing to the invasion of people known as Aryans, who spoke a language from which Sanskrit is derived. Their religion, presented in the *Vedas*, appears polytheistic like those of the Greeks and Celts, and their pantheon recalls the gods of the *Odyssey*. They worshipped in the open air. Where pre-Aryan worshippers gathered principally around water, the Aryans performed ceremonies around fire.

The *Vedas* and the religion they represent form the bedrock of Hinduism and Hindu civilization. They are collections of prayers and hymns meant for incantation in an ancient form of Sanskrit. They were written some time between 2500 BC and 1500 BC. Their main heroes are the gods, most of whom represent forces of nature, such as the sun, the moon, sky, storm, wind, rain, dawn, fire and water.

Worshippers would try to influence them by putting grain, butter, spices, goats and even horses into the flames of a sacrificial fire.

The most popular Vedic god seems to have been Indra, god of rain and thunder (and later of heaven), a warrior who overcomes powers of evil and brings the world into being. Agni, the personification of sacrificial fire, is also prominent. As in all early religions, the spiritual and physical realms are not separated. The marriage of the divine parents, Heaven and Earth, symbolizes the indissoluble links between the two. 'May Heaven and Earth protect us from fearful evil' goes the refrain in a hymn to them both.

Deeply spiritual, the *Vedas* are also life-affirming and have an earthy naturalism. There is a sense of awesome mystery in the universe which escapes human understanding. The account of genesis given in the 'Hymn to Creation' relates that in the beginning there was the 'One' which 'breathed windless' in dark, undiscriminated chaos. Thereafter rose Desire, the 'earliest seed' produced by thought. But since the gods were born after the creation of the world, 'Then who can know from whence it has arisen?'³ This scepticism later led not only to doubt about the possibility of knowing the ultimate source of things, but to agnostic ridicule of the gods.

At the same time, the *Rigveda* ('Songs of Knowledge') reveal an intimate bond between the believer and his or her environment, a sense of kinship with the spirit that dwells in all things. As the hymns to the night, forest and dawn demonstrate, a profound spiritual meaning was combined with a great sensitivity to and appreciation of the beauties of the natural world. This is particularly true in the beautiful hymn to Earth:

You bear truly, Earth,
The burden of the mountains' weight;
With might, O One of many streams,
You awaken the potent one, the soil.

With flowers of speech our songs of praise
Resound to you, far-spreading one,
Who send forth the swelling cloud,
O bright one, like propelling speed;

Who, steadfast, hold with thy might,
The forest-trees upon the ground,
When, from the lightnings of thy cloud,
The rain-floods of the sky pour down.⁴

Although the hymns show a sense of awe in face of the mysterious universe, there is little trace of the fear found in Celtic and Christian tales. Humans live in a world which is portrayed as essentially friendly if its ways are respected.

This sense of wonder and awe at life on our planet comes through in the 'Hymn to Goddess Earth' in the *Atharvaveda*, a collection of magical formulae which form part of the *Vedas* written more than three thousand years ago:

Thy snowy mountain heights, and thy forests, O earth, shall be kind to us! The brown, the black, the red, the multi-coloured, the firm earth, that is protected by Indra, I have settled upon, not suppressed, slain, not wounded . . .

Rock, stone, dust is this earth; this earth is supported, held together. To this golden-breasted earth I have rendered reverence.

The earth, upon whom the forest-sprung trees ever stand firm, the all-nourishing, compact earth, do we invoke.⁵

While the import of the hymn is to implore the earth, 'mistress of that which was and shall be', to prepare a 'broad domain' for humanity, the attitude is one of reverence, completely at odds with the conquering spirit of Genesis in the Old Testament. The moral principles which emerge from the *Vedas* are predominantly ascetic, and love and kindness to all, both the human and the nonhuman, is the prevailing tone.

Despite the overall sense of unity in the world of the *Vedas*, there are some distinctions. One of its least attractive legacies is the caste system. In an anthropomorphic symbol, the concrete universe was created out of Purusha, the 'primal man', and from his body arose the different castes: his mouth gave rise to the priestly caste of Brahmins, the Aryan elite, his two arms the *kshatriyas*, the warriors, his thighs the *vaisya*, the traders and peasants, and at his feet are the *shudras*, the workers and serfs, doubtless made up of the darker-skinned indigenous people conquered by the Aryans. Moving from society to nature, the moon is said to have been born from his spirit, the sun from his eye, the middle sky from his navel, the heavens from his head, and the earth from his feet.⁶ The analogy however emphasizes the link between man and the universe, the microcosm and the macrocosm.

On occasion, the *Vedas* appear dualistic or atomistic, but this is

misleading. Throughout the *Vedas* there is a strong sense that one supreme being is being worshipped in different aspects. Indeed, the idea of a single being is made explicit: 'He is one, [though] wise men call Him by many names.'⁷ This unity in diversity also comes through in the central notion of *rita*; that is, of a spontaneous order that is reflected in each part of the creation and pervades the whole. It represents the unity or rightness which underlies the ordered universe. Virtue is thus in conformity with the cosmic order, and enjoins an orderly and consistent life.

In the sixth century BC the movements of Jainism and Buddhism reacted against Hindu civilization's priestly ritual and sacrifices. Both rejected the caste system and taught a new way of release and salvation. They also placed the doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-injury) at the centre of their ethics and preached reverence for all life. Although the Jain and Buddhist movements had a great influence on Hinduism, turning the majority of Hindus into vegetarians, their beliefs were considered unorthodox by many later Hindu teachers.

The forest wisdom of the Upanishads

Orthodox Hindu teaching draws on writings that emerged in the sixth century BC, the *Upanishads*. Their name comes from the Sanskrit words for 'near' and 'sit', evoking the position of learners gathered around their teachers, or gurus. Unlike the *Vedas*, with their songs to particular forces of nature, the *Upanishads* focus on the ground of being which is prior to all existence. Like modern ecology, they teach the apparent paradox of a transcendent yet immanent unity underlying the diversity of the world:

By the Lord [Isa] enveloped must this all be –
 Whatever moving thing there is in the moving world.
 With this renounced, thou mayest enjoy.
 Covet not the wealth of anyone at all . . .
 Now, he who on all beings
 Looks as just in the Self
 And on the Self as in all beings –
 He does not shrink away from Him.⁸

The *Upanishads* do not separate man from the creation or its creatures. We find the same analogy between man and the universe, the

microcosm and the macrocosm, as in the *Vedas*. In the *Upanishad* known as the 'Great-Forest Book', it is written that 'in the beginning this world was Self [atman] alone in the form of a Person [*Purusha*].'⁹ But the primal man finds no pleasure in being alone, so he divides himself into male and female and the two halves copulate. Wondering how 'he' can embrace her after producing her from himself, 'she' decides to hide. In the process, she transforms herself into various kinds of animal and the couple then procreate the different species. The creation myth vividly shows the presence of the male and female principles throughout the universe, and the continuity between humanity and the rest of the creation. By stressing the close correspondence between the human body and the universe, humanity is portrayed as an integral part of a gigantic organism.

Central to the *Upanishads* are the notions of atman, the self, and Brahman, the all-pervading Absolute or Universal Self. The two are one and the same; the Absolute manifests itself in every individual self.

The exact meaning of Brahman is obscure and opaque; it is described in the *Upanishads* as:

Hidden in all beings, all-pervading, the self within all beings, watching over all works, dwelling in all beings, the witness, the perceiver, the only one, free from all qualities. He is the one ruler of many who do not act; he makes the one seed manifold.¹⁰

Brahman manifests itself in every being. Through the cycle of rebirths man approaches his final end, identity of his self (atman, the ground of his self, not his individual personality) with the Universal Self (Brahman). The realization of the Brahman pervading all being frees us from the chains of illusion and enables us to recognize reality as the dwelling of pure being (*sat*), pure consciousness (*cit*), and pure delight (*ananda*). The latter is joyful release from the sufferings imposed by our ego through ignorance. Once unity with Brahman has been realized, all rituals become superfluous, death loses its sting, and the mind becomes calm, contented and free. It is incompatible with hatred, greed and injury. This belief is at the core of mainstream Hindu thought.

Where as Vedic India studied knowledge of the natural world, the forest civilization of the *Upanishads* sought to discover the principles which give unity to the world. They asked not only the question

'Who am I?' but 'Who is the knower?' They attempted to find the answer by meditation, a process of pure concentration which trains the mind to focus without wandering until it is absorbed in the object of contemplation. It does not create dullness or emptiness but a state of inner wakefulness.

While Brahman and atman are one, the world is not pure illusion. External objects are not just forms of personal consciousness. The world may be a manifestation of Brahman, but it still exists in a fashion. The Hindu philosopher Samkara uses the analogy of a rope and a snake to explain this apparent paradox. The rope may appear to be a snake until it is properly examined. The world may be likened to the snake and Brahman to the rope. The precise relationship between the world and Brahman is called *maya*. The relationship between Brahman and the world is not reversible. There would be no world without Brahman, but Brahman can exist without the world.¹¹

There is a marvellous anecdote about a Greek philosopher who came across some '*brahmanes*' lying naked on a rock in the midday sun of the Deccan. Knowing their reputation as wise men, he approached them and enquired whether they would discuss the nature of the universe with him. 'Of course,' they said, 'as soon as you get your clothes off and get down on this rock.'¹² The anecdote expresses a profound truth. Like modern physicists, the sages of the *Upanishads* recognize that it is impossible to know anything objectively; no entity really exists objectively as a separate item. The only way to know something is to identify with it.

The Hindu tradition has highlighted three key utterances in the *Upanishads*: 'The Self is Brahman', 'Consciousness is Brahman', and 'I am Brahman'. They form the ground of the Hindu belief that all is one. What links all phenomena together is energy, or *prana*. It is similar to the Chinese concept of *ch'i*. It supports life, sustains evolution and reveals itself in the mind as thoughts and desires. The *Upanishads* build around the notion of *prana* a seamless theory of life which covers everything from morality to health:

The Self [within the body] asked himself, 'What is that makes
Me go if it goes and stay if it stays?'
So he created *prana*, and from it
Desire; and from desire he made space, air,
Fire, water, the earth, the senses, the mind

And food; from food came strength, austerity,
 The scriptures, sacrifice, and all the worlds;
 And everything was given name and form.¹³

Prana links up the subjective to the objective, the animate to the inanimate. In its external form it is the sun, radiant energy; in its internal form it is consciousness. *Prana* supports both the external and the inner world.

The central insight of modern ecology – unity in diversity – is also central to the *Upanishads*. The unknown authors revel in the sheer diversity of life on earth:

He is this boy, he is that girl, he is
 This man, he is that woman, and he is
 This old man, too, tottering on his staff.
 His face is seen everywhere.

He is the blue bird, he is the green bird
 With red eyes; he is the thundercloud,
 And he is the seasons and the seas.
 He has no beginning, he has no end
 He is the source from which the worlds evolve.¹⁴

This forest vision of life is tempered by a profound awareness of the unity at the heart of being. The creation of the manifold world comes from the unitary self; the many come from the one. This is made clear in the cosmic-egg theory of creation given in *Chandogya Upanishad*:

In the beginning this world was merely non-being. It was existent. It developed. It turned into an egg. It lay for the period of a year. It was split asunder. One of the two eggshell-parts became silver, one gold.

That which was of silver is this earth. That which was of gold is the sky. What was the outer membrane is the mountains. What was the inner membrane is cloud and mist. What were the veins are rivers. What was the fluid within is the ocean.¹⁵

There is an overall unity not only in space but in time. This is expressed in the mystic symbolism of the syllable *Om* which is pronounced during meditation:

Om! – This syllable is this whole world.

Its further explanation is: –

The past, the present, the future – everything is just the word *Om*.¹⁶

Om is also heard by the one who meditates as the voice of the world.

Once a person realizes that he or she is not separate from the rest of the creation, there is no longer any ground to feel threatened or alien in the world:

Those who see all creatures in themselves
And themselves in all creatures know no fear.
Those who see all creatures in themselves
And themselves in all creatures know no grief.
How can the multiplicity of life
Delude the one who sees its unity?¹⁷

Explicit in the Upanishadic teaching of unity is the notion of *ahimsa* or non-injury. To harm other things or beings is to harm oneself. The central ethics of Hinduism is therefore *ahimsa paramo dharma*: ‘There is no higher conduct than non-violence.’¹⁸

To realize the self-in-the-Self, to unite atman and Brahman, to become enlightened, does not involve deprivation. Renouncing the material ways of the world, particularly wealth, power and fame, brings freedom and joy. Indeed, the *Upanishads* claim that the knower of Brahman has a shining face, feels healthy and even smells good. The inner personal freedom of *swaraj* involves channelling passions, not negating them; directing thoughts, not suppressing them. ‘Only those who find out Who they are and what they want find freedom, here and in all the worlds.’¹⁹

For many Hindus the natural world has importance only as the manifestation of the Absolute. The whole sensuous drama of life on earth is like a theatrical performance; once its message is understood, it becomes superfluous. ‘As a dancer stops dancing after displaying herself on stage, so Nature stops, after having shown herself to Mind.’²⁰

Bhagavad-Gita and the good of the whole

The great epic of *Bhagavad-Gita* (composed around 500 BC) focuses on how humans should act in the world. The three principal ways of reaching God also become clearer, through *inana* (knowledge or meditation), *karma* (action) and *bhakti* (devotion). All three are equally valid, and some argue that it is necessary to work in the three areas for salvation.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* takes the form of a conversation between Arjuna, a great warrior, and his charioteer, Krishna, just as they are about to enter battle. The whole narrative is symbolic, with Krishna as the incarnation of Brahman, and the approaching battle representing spiritual and moral struggle. Its central themes of Love, Light and Life emerge from an ecological vision of God in all things and all things in God: 'God dwells in the heart of all beings.'²¹

Right conduct, or *dharma*, is more important than belief to Hindu culture. The *Bhagavad-Gita* proclaims the ideals of selfless work, detachment, honesty and love: 'Let the wise man work unselfishly for the good of all the world.'²² The moral community is not as in the Judaeo-Christian tradition restricted to human beings; in the words of Krishna, the virtuous man is 'the man who has a good will for all [born beings], who is friendly and has compassion; who has no thoughts of a "I" or "Mine", whose peace is the same in pleasures and sorrows, and who is forgiving'.²³

Hindu sects

While the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* form the foundation of Hindu metaphysics and ethics, there are many sects in the Indian sub-continent reflecting a great combination of different religious influences and communities. In later Hindu mythology, the most common gods are the triad Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. They represent three aspects of the Absolute – the creator, preserver and destroyer, the last being necessary for further creation. Traces of earlier beliefs remain. Some Hindus worship a river, a mountain or particular trees and animals. Others take a particular deity as the object of their worship, like Ganesh ('Lord of the Folk'), who is half human and half elephant. The cult of Kali, the folk goddess, is still widespread. It probably derives from the mother goddess found in the Indus Valley

Civilization, for she emerges as a mother-force of the universe. She can be merciful and all-suffering, but also ruthless and devouring. It is under the latter aspect that the notorious thuggee worship her.

Various non-Vedic cults have developed over the centuries within Hinduism, with varying degrees of awareness of the self-in-atman and of respect for nonhuman life. The Natha cult, for example, worships Shiva as the lord of the animals. Like the yogis, the Natha followers claim to find all the religious mysteries in the human body. They see the solar and lunar currents within the nervous system, and claim that by uniting them it is possible to open the psychic centres of the body known as *chakras*. They acknowledge the equilibrium of Shiva and Sakti, the male and female deities, as two different aspects of the divine force.

An offshoot of these beliefs is Tantrism, according to which sexual energy is part of cosmic energy, and sexual activity expresses spiritual forces at work in the universe. Making love is not making love to an individual but uniting male and female principles operating throughout the universe. A woman should not love a particular man, but the Absolute made manifest in him and vice versa. The path of Tantra involves the gradual uncoiling of the *kundalini*, or the spiritual current in humanity. As it uncoils and rises upwards, it frees a series of *chakras* in the body culminating in *sahasrara* – a thousand-petalled lotus in the mind or the crown of the head. Like the Buddhists and the Jains, the Tantric practitioners reject the caste system and rigid social hierarchy, and, as might be expected, women play an important role in the sect.

One of the most intriguing sects to have emerged in recent times are the Bauls of Bengal, a movement which grew out of the ruins of Buddhism and Tantrism in the region. *Baul* means madcap and probably comes from the Sanskrit word *vayu* for wind. Certainly they consider themselves as free as the wind and wish to leave no trace behind them. As Narahari Baul puts it in a song:

That is why, brother, I became a madcap Baul.
 No master I obey, nor injunctions, canons, or custom.
 Man-made distinctions have no hold on me now.
 I rejoice in the gladness of the love that wells out of my
 own being.

In love is no separation, but a meeting of hearts forever.
 So I rejoice in song and I dance with each and all.
 That is why, brother, I became a madcap Baul.²⁴

The song expresses some of the central beliefs of the Bauls. They are uncompromising free spirits, seeking freedom from all outward constraints. They accept no divisions of society, such as class or caste. They will have nothing to do with special deities or temples. 'What need we of other temples,' they ask, 'when one body is the temple where our Spirit has its abode?' They refuse to wear the traditional ochre-coloured clothes of Indian hermits and monks. They do not go on pilgrimage and consider every moment sacred. They are not celibate and claim that earthly love helps them to feel divine love. Not surprisingly, this has earned them a notorious reputation in more orthodox quarters.

They place great stress on independent thinking and prefer the spoken to the written word. All the scriptures they need are written within the heart for all to read. Like William Blake, they will not accept another person's system but create for themselves: 'Brave men rejoice in their own creation. Only cowards are content with glorifying their forefathers because they do not know how to create for themselves.' They tend to express themselves in direct and moving songs.

Although they learn from teachers or gurus, they only have them as stepping stones to their personal development. Indeed, they sometimes deny in their poetry that human gurus exist and use the term metaphorically to refer to whatever makes them think and understand: 'Every wrench at your heartstrings that makes the tears flow is your *guru*.' In order to remind themselves that they can learn from everything around them, they even call their guru *sunya*, literally meaning 'nothing' or 'emptiness'.²⁵

They disregard the history of their sect but this does not mean they are not interested in the passing of time. On the contrary, they seek harmony between past, present and future in order to appreciate the continuity of life. They also try to achieve harmony between material and spiritual needs. Like all Hindu religious sects, however, the Baul have as their ultimate aim the realization of the self as part of the universal whole. To be completely free is to die to the life of the world, even when one is in it.

The movement draws support from the lowest social strata of the

Hindu and Muslim communities but embraces householders as well as wanderers and vagrants. Their ideal is to be *sahaj* (simple or natural); they follow the *sahaj* way and leave no trace behind them: 'Do the boats that sail over the flooded river leave any mark? It is only the boatmen of the muddy track, urged on by their petty needs, that leave a long furrow behind.'²⁶

Vedanta and the self-in-the-self

While many different sects form part of religious practice, Hindu religious thought has also developed into half a dozen systems of philosophy. As in Western philosophy, a variety of cosmologies stand side by side, ranging from monism and dualism to pantheism. The most influential and holistic school of thought is the Vedanta, which derives from the *Upanishads* and focuses on the concept of Brahman. Its most celebrated exponent was Samkara, who lived in south India in the eighteenth century AD and who elaborated the theory of *maya*. The word comes from the Sanskrit root *ma-* (*matr-*), meaning to measure. *Maya* thus means the world-as-measured, divided up into things and events. As such, it is an illusion.

While one school in Vedanta tolerates a degree of dualism, Samkara and his school were strictly non-dualistic, preaching the doctrine of *advaita* (literally, 'not two'). The basis of their teaching is the ontological identity of the self and the Absolute: all entities are identical with each other through their common origin in Brahman, the substratum of all phenomena.

In terms of Western philosophy, the Vedantists make no distinction between the mental and the physical, rejecting the dualism of mind and matter as unreal: 'All sense-objects, including our body, exist solely as notions, in other words, that they exist only when thought of.'²⁷

The greatest exponent of *advaita vedanta* (non-duality) in the twentieth century has been the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi. He taught that 'the One Self, the Sole Reality, alone exists eternally' and that the 'world owes its appearance to the mind alone'.²⁸ The supreme method of attainment is to destroy the ego and be as the Self. This can only be achieved through a long process of self-knowledge; to know anything else is simply a form of ignorance. Using a modern analogy, he declared: 'Brahman or the Self is like a cinema screen and the world like the pictures on it. You can see the picture only

so long as there is a screen. But when the observer himself becomes the screen only the Self remains.'²⁹

The Jains: they would not hurt a fly

At the time that the *Upanishads* were being written, around 800 BC, there were several other currents developing in India which were reacting against the earlier Vedic religion. The Vedic ideal of a pleasant life in heaven was challenged by movements who believed in renunciation and selfless work here on earth. Chief among these were the Jains and the Buddhists. Both opposed the caste system, and sought to escape the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) through right faith, right knowledge and right conduct.

The leading exponent of Jainism was Vardhamma, known to his followers as Mahavira (the Great Hero). He lived in the sixth century BC. Like his younger contemporary, the historical Buddha, he came from a wealthy family but left it to wander in search of salvation. He achieved this at forty-two, becoming a conqueror (*jina*) of his passions and emotions. As a result, his soul was released from the consequences of its actions (*karma*) and its imprisonment in matter.

Jainism is an austere sect that aims at passionless detachment, which is to be obtained solely by self-effort and without the help of any god. Its adherents believe that *karma* consists of fine particles of matter: bad deeds hold down the soul while good ones lighten it. Full salvation is possible if a devotee decides to starve himself to death – a view which appealed to the German philosopher Schopenhauer.

Unlike the monistic teaching of the *Upanishads* which affirms the One as ultimate reality, Jains believe in the plurality of beings: each soul is an entity in its own right. There is an infinite number of animate and inanimate substances which exist independent of our perception. The world continually goes through cycles of growth and decline without beginning and without end; at present, we are in descent. Jainism is fundamentally atheistic, rejecting the notion of a creator or of providence operating in the world. It is also pessimistic in believing that human beings can only rely on themselves to achieve salvation.

The Jains believe in a ladder of Being which they grade according to the five senses: at the lowest level of touch, there are the four elements and vegetables; at the second level of the two senses of touch and taste, there are creatures like worms and shells; at the third level of