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REFLECTIONS ON ECOLOGICAL THEMES IN HINDUISM¹

The Hindu tradition is sometimes stereotyped as world-denying, a religion that teaches renunciation of the world and disdain for worldly pleasure. The lone, withdrawn, meditating yogi is often seen as typical of Hindu spirituality. Two ideas in particular seem to emphasize the tendency toward world-denial in Hinduism: *māya* and *prakriti*. *Māya* is the idea of superimposing on reality our own biases, notions, and ego-centered convictions. *Māya* is the human tendency to perceive reality in warped fashion. As such, *māya* is often translated as illusion and extended to mean that reality as normally perceived by human beings is illusory. The principal point here, though, is not that reality itself is illusory but that the way it is perceived is grounded in self-delusion.

Prakriti is often translated as nature and refers to material existence or matter, although it also includes such non-material things as ego-consciousness and sense-perception. In many Hindu texts the goal of the religious quest is to control or tame *prakriti*, indeed, to reverse the normal rhythms of *prakriti* in order to free one's spiritual nature. This dualism tends to denigrate the material world and reinforce the quest to achieve spiritual illumination by renouncing the world and undertaking fierce meditation which aims at re-orienting the senses so that they are no longer oriented to the outward world.

While it is true, then, that we find in the Hindu tradition strong emphases on taming, overcoming, transcending or escaping from the material world, and to some extent the natural world itself, there are many themes in the Hindu tradition that express a positive attitude toward the natural world and particularly toward the land occupied by Hindus, namely the Indian sub-continent.

1. The following paper is based on a lecture I prepared for an undergraduate class at McMaster University in a course on Religion and Ecology in March, 1991.

Deification of Natural Forces and Objects (Agni)

There are many examples in the Hindu tradition of natural forces and objects being deified, or having a sacred character. This is seen in the earliest Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, and is clearly seen till this day in living Hinduism. Throughout the history of Hinduism, and in virtually every genre of religious text, we find the assumption that the natural world is pervaded by powers toward whom reverence is appropriate. In many Hindu scriptures, it is clear that the world is perceived as being alive with forces, powers, spirits, and deities that express themselves through what we would call natural phenomena.

In some cases this tendency to find in natural phenomena sacred presences expresses itself in complex philosophical and ritual systems that provide a comprehensive vision of ultimate reality. Such is the case, for example, with the Vedic hymns dedicated to the deity Agni and the ritual complex dedicated to establishing and maintaining rapport with Agni.²

At the most obvious level, Agni refers to fire. Indeed, the name Agni in Sanskrit means fire. In the Vedas, however, Agni is understood to be a powerful deity and a cosmic principal that pervades the creation. There are at least four differing aspects to Agni in the Vedic hymns that suggest a comprehensive religious vision based on fire and its differing manifestations.

1. In some hymns Agni is described as a powerful, dynamic, fiery potential that exists in the primordial waters that precede creation. Agni is the latent force that eventually impells creation to proceed. In this sense, Agni is understood to be the fundamental creative energy that "heats" the waters of chaos. This heating up of the waters produces creation, or enables creation to proceed. Agni is thus identified with a kind of first cause in the creation of the world. In this mode, Agni is more a cosmic force than an individual, divine personality or deity.

2. Agni is also described in many hymns as a force of energy that pervades the entire creation. Two of his most common names

2. For an overview of the theology of Agni in the Vedas see: Stella Kramrisch, "The Tribal Structure of Creation in the Rg Veda," *History of Religions*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Summer, 1962) and Vol. 2, No. 2 (Winter, 1963).

in the Vedas attest to this aspect of Agni: *Jātavedas*, the knower of creatures; and *Vaiśvānara*, the all-pervader. As the knower of all creatures, Agni is said to be present with or in every living thing, and in this sense to "know" every living thing. Agni's presence among all creatures is often identified with the digestive fires within creatures that consumes food and transforms that food into life. In this aspect, Agni is clearly identified closely and intimately with the life force that pervades reality. In this sense too Agni is understood to be the principal in the world that allows, encourages and carries out growth itself.

In his role as the all-pervader, Agni is also said to exist in the three cosmic zones of Vedic cosmology: the upper world, the realm of the earth, and the underworld. Indeed, the assumption is that Agni is existence itself. Wherever there is being, there too is Agni, the principle of life and growth.

3. Agni is also referred to as, or associated with, the sacrificial fire which formed a central part of Vedic ritual. Vedic ritual centered on sacrifices of various plants and animals which were offered into the sacrificial fire as burnt offerings. Agni, as the sacrificial fire, was thus fed by these offerings and transmitted them to the other deities. In the Vedic vision of things, human beings were required to offer gifts to the deities to strengthen them so that they (the deities) might be enabled to continue their functions as energizers and orderers of the world. Ritual offerings were understood to be part of an on-going creative cycle by which the latent power of the world was maintained and regulated. Agni, as the sacrificial fire, was an essential part of this process. It was Agni that provided the link between humans and deities and who transformed the offerings of humans into acceptable or useful energy for the gods. In this aspect, Agni played both the role of mediator between humans and gods, and the role of transformer, transforming the offerings into energy acceptable to the gods. The overall logic of the sacrificial system, according to which humans "feed" the divine powers that create and sustain the world, bears a close similarity to the actual way in which Vedic people understood the life process itself. Life, they realized, feeds on life and this continual feeding requires the digestive fire which transforms organic matter into life energy. In both systems, in somewhat differing modes, Agni is central.

4. Finally, Agni is often referred to in the Vedas as a destructive and purifying agent. Agni, as is obvious, in the form of fire burns things up. This burning of things, however, is usually understood in a positive rather than a negative way. Cremation, for instance, is usually understood as a process of purification in which a body is rid of impurities, both physical and karmic, and transformed into a spiritual being fit for its journey to and existence in the land of the ancestors. Fiery destruction, that is, is often understood to involve transformative change from one state of being to another.

A close reading of the Vedas, then, suggests that Agni, the principle of fire and heat, formed the basis of a sophisticated and comprehensive vision of reality that involved human beings in a continuous ritual relationship with the natural world. For Vedic people, what we would call the natural world, was pervaded by forces that were considered sacred and due reverence. The references to Agni are just one example of this tendency.

The Universe/World as Organic

In a more general sense, there is a tendency in Hinduism to regard all of reality, all of nature, all of the universe, as in some basic sense sacred. This is seen in the tendency to regard reality, or the universe, as a being of some kind.

a. *Puruṣa and the creation of the world:*

In the Vedas there is a story that tells of the creation of the world from the sacrifice of a giant being, *Puruṣa*. There we read that in the beginning, the gods assembled and sacrificed *Puruṣa* from whose body they fashioned the world. "From his feet came this earth; from his torso the mid-region of the sky, extending as far up as the blue extends; and from his head came the heavens above the sky . . . from his eye came the sun; from his mind, the moon; from his mouth, the gods Indra and Agni; and from his breath, the winds."³ The universe so perceived is an interconnected whole in which each part is dependent upon every other

3. Diana L. Eck, "Ganga: The Goddess in Hindu Sacred Geography," in John Hawley and Donna Wulff, eds., *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (Berkeley: Religious Studies Series, 1982), p. 169.

part. "The completed universe is imaged as a living organism, a vast ecosystem, in which each part is inextricably related to the life of the whole."⁴

b. *Hiranyagarbha (the golden egg)*:

The Vedas also speak of the universe being created from a golden embryo or golden egg, *Hiranyagarbha*. This cosmic egg "... contained within it all the vast and particular life of this cosmos. When it had incubated for a long time, it split open; the top half became heaven; the bottom, earth; and the space between, the mid-region of the sky. The outer membrane became the mountains; the inner membrane, the clouds and mists; the veins of the egg, the rivers; the interior waters, the oceans. Every atom of the universe came from the life of that embryo."⁵ As in the case of the cosmic giant, so here; the universe is understood to be a unified, living being in which all is interconnected and pervaded by the same vitality. In later Hinduism, there arises the idea of a great deity whose principal cosmic function is to create universes. The name of this deity is *Brahmā*, and the name given to the universes he creates is *brahmāṇḍa* (lit. Brahma-egg).

c. *The Lotus* :

Another very common Hindu image of the universe is the lotus. In a well-known medieval Hindu myth, the universe is created when the Lord of the Universe, *Viṣṇu* sleeps upon the cosmic waters. During his sleep, a huge lotus grows from his navel. When the lotus blooms, the deity *Brahmā* emerges from its center and proceeds to create the countless universes (or Brahma-eggs). The image of the world as a lotus conveys, as do the other organic images cited above, the intuition that all of reality is a living whole that is vibrant, changing, dynamic, and charged with immense energy. Such a perception has little or no room for a view of reality that perceives a radical difference between (living) and inanimate (non-living) matter or forms. The universe does not consist, in this view, in dead matter which passively awaits human perception, development and manipulation. The universe, of which human beings are a part (a small part) is vibrant, organic, ever-changing, and often willful.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 169-70.

Sacred Geography: India as a Holy Place

Another theme that we might consider ecological, or that we might consider tending toward supporting an ecological spirituality, in Hinduism is the idea of the sacrality of the land. This theme is expressed in a variety of ways and in a variety of stories, myths or legends.

1. *Prthivi*: Throughout Hindu scriptures, the earth is referred to, as a great female deity. Her name is *Prthivi* in early texts, while she has a variety of names in the later tradition. In descriptions of *Prthivi* it is clear that the texts have the actual earth in mind when they refer to *Prthivi*. She is described, for example, as stable, unmoving, dependable, patient, and so on, all characteristics of the earth itself in Hinduism. The idea, then, is that the very earth upon which human beings dwell is a great goddess, a being who bears and nourishes all creatures. In many stories that feature this Earth Goddess she is described as being offended by immoral, unethical, or criminal activities. That is, proper human conduct is tied directly to the well-being of the earth itself in these texts. While the idea of polluting the earth does not seem to arise in these texts, there is the idea that human beings must act in ethically suitable ways or risk the wrath and/or discomfiture of the earth itself. That is, there is the idea of reciprocity between humans and the earth. The earth bears and feeds human beings, but in return they are responsible for behaving in ways that are inoffensive to the earth.

2. *Bhārat-mā* (Mother India): A related idea in Hinduism is the theme of *Bhārat-mā* or Mother India. Here the Indian subcontinent is deified and perceived of as a mother who protects and nourishes her children. In a famous temple of *Bhārat-mā* in Benares, a holy city of North India, the image of the goddess is a relief map of India instead of the more typical anthropomorphic image found in most temples. Although the cult of *Bhārat-mā* has been primarily a political movement, particularly strong during the Indian independence movement, the idea has ecological implications. In return for protection and nourishment, Indians are taught to respect the country in which they are raised with reverence. Industrial and agricultural pollution and mistreatment of the land through logging, have recently been associated with disrespect for *Bhārat-mā* by some Indian environmental groups.

3. *Śakta-pithas*: A story that is common in many medieval Hindu texts concerns the identification of various places throughout the Indian

sup-continent with a goddess named Sati. In the story the goddess commits suicide and then her corpse is dismembered and distributed throughout India. All over India, shrines and temples sacred to various goddesses are identified with certain parts of Sati's body. In this way, the entire Indian landscape is concretely associated with the physical body of a goddess. The goddesses' body sacralizes the land upon which people live and as such the land is given reverence and respect.

4. *Sacred Rivers:* Among the most sacred geographical features of the Indian landscape are certain rivers. One of the most common words for a sacred site is *tirtha* which means both a place on a riverbank and a crossing point on a river. Throughout India, rivers are revered as sacred and the banks of rivers are dotted with shrines. The most sacred river of all is the Ganges which flows out of the foothills of the Himalayas and meanders across the northern plains to the Bay of Bengal. According to Hindu mythology, this river, which is revered as a great Goddess in riverine form, originates in heaven. It flows down to earth and provides a great source of nourishment and purification for the human inhabitants of North India. Throughout India Ganges water is used in rituals and is considered one of the most sacred, pure substances that can be offered to other deities. To bathe in the Ganges is to have one's physical and spiritual impurities washed away and to come into direct contact with a sacred being who stretches from earth to heaven. In the case of the Ganges, and countless other rivers that are regarded as sacred, we have vivid evidence of the tendency in Hinduism to perceive the sacred in the landscape itself. The land is not so much the place where gods and heroes performed mighty deeds (although this theme is also seen in Hinduism) as it is a place having its own, intrinsic sacredness. For many Hindus, the land in which they live vibrates with sacred power and as such one's attitude toward the land is often the attitude of a worshipper or pilgrim. To relate to the land necessitates, in the Hindu view, ritual gestures that convey awe, gratitude and respect.

Village Deities

At the village level in Hinduism, religion is often dominated by a local deity, usually a goddess, who is closely associated with or identified with a specific village. While it is common to speak of such deities

as belonging to a village, or being the goddess of a given place, it is probably more accurate from the villagers own point of view to speak of the village, town or locale, as belonging to the goddess. That is, in their perception of things, the goddess (or deity) precedes the village. She created it. In both a spiritual and physical sense the goddess is understood to be at the center of the village. At the physical center of many villages will be found a "navel stone" representing the goddess which suggests that the village is understood as a physical extension of her body. In other cases, the goddess will be represented by a head placed directly on the ground. This suggests that her body is the village and the villagers might be understood as living within or upon the body of the village goddess.

The village goddess is typically referred to as "mother." Such names as Periyapalayattamman, which means "the mother (amman) of the village Periyapalaya" are common. If Hamilton were to have such a deity her name might be Hamilton-amman. The goddess of Dundas would be Dundas-amman, and so on.⁶ The important point here for our purposes is the strong tendency in Hinduism to perceive the local landscape, the local village, as sacred and holy. It is the nourishing and sustaining aspect of the land and the locale that is emphasized in the tendency to refer to the local deity as "mother." In this perception, village inhabitants are the children of the local goddess and as such they honour, adore and revere her for giving them life, health, well-being and habitation.

While village deities often play the role of guardians, protecting villagers from outside invaders, disease, and so on, in which role they do not seem to suggest any obvious ecological themes, the centrality of the village deity does suggest to us again the importance for human beings of establishing an intense, religious relationship with the local landscape, or village-scape. The centrality of the village deity suggests that for village Hindus one's identity is, to a great extent, defined by where one lives instead of what one does (one's caste or occupation). To a great extent, the centrality of village deities suggests that for Hindus one's identity flows out of the landscape, imbuing one with a distinctive identity that is defined by one's locale.

6. Hamilton is the location of McMaster University where I teach, and Dundas is a small nearby town.

Periodic rituals, that involve all members of the village, are aimed at refreshing, honouring, and invigorating the village deity and reveal that villagers understand themselves to stand in a reciprocal relationship with the local land represented by the local goddess. If it is true that the land creates, nourishes, and gives identity to village dwellers, it is also true that they, children of the local mother goddess, owe respect toward her which is given in terms of sacrifices and festivals.

Self-Realization

Throughout the long history of Hinduism there has been a strong tendency to affirm that the human organism is intrinsically, essentially, and intensely related to the wider world, indeed, that the human organism and the wider world are in some sense identical. This tendency in Hindu thought seeks to call into question the clear, clean and sharp distinction we make between subjective and objective reality, a distinction that has been central in Western scientific, critical thinking. The Hindu monistic style of thinking has, I think, interesting ecological implications. Before reflecting on these, though, let's look in some detail at a few examples of Hindu monistic thought and meditative practice.

The Human Body as a Microcosm of the Universe

Tantric yoga is an aspect of Hinduism that became quite popular in the medieval period. It is of interest to us because in Tantric yoga we find a highly developed form of subtle geography according to which the body is described as a miniature replica of the universe. The assertion in Tantric yoga that the body contains the entire universe in distilled or miniature form is a way of stating an ancient theme in Hinduism, namely that the spiritual quest, spiritual fulfillment, religious maturity, and so on, are to be found in the process of self exploration, self awareness, self-knowledge, etc. Truth is within, not without. The religious journey is primarily an inward, not an outward, process. In the acquiring of self-knowledge, is the acquisition also of knowledge of the All.

According to the mystical or subtle geography of Tāntric yoga, then, the body is the distilled essence of the larger universe. The backbone, for example, is said to represent Mt. Meru which in Hindu cosmology is the *axis mundi*, or the central pole that connects all the

different regions of the physical world. Mt. Meru is the cosmic conduit along which, or by means of which, the differing aspects of reality communicate with each other: heaven, earth and the underworld are connected by it. Similarly, the backbone of a human being connects the differing dimensions, aspects, or modes of being a human being. The backbone, for example, connects the passionate, sexual, lustful dimension with the cerebral.

The body, according to Tāntric yoga, also contains seven *cakras* or dynamic centers that are strung out along the central axis of the backbone. These *cakras* are usually represented by lotuses having differing numbers of petals and colours, along with differing presiding deities (the deities of the universe are also contained in the human body). These energy centers do not correspond to actual physiological parts of the body, but seem, rather, to connote different psycho-physical experiences or planes that are discovered in meditation. The point to note for our purposes is, though, that in Tantra there is a very careful attempt to map reality in its completeness in terms of the body, or the potentials contained by the body-mind. All is within, is a dictum of Tantra and points to a central aspect of Hindu mysticism.

Breath control, or *prāṇāyāma*, is also important in Tantric yoga, indeed, in yoga generally, and is understood to correspond to cosmic rhythms. In some cases the adept is trained to compare his or her breathing to the cosmic winds that are associated with the creation and destruction of the universes. That is, the act of breathing is understood to correspond to cosmic processes. Exhaling, the universes are spun into being; inhaling, they are withdrawn and destroyed.

The awakening, enlivening and rising of an inherent life energy within the tantric meditator, the *kuṇḍalī* power, sometimes depicted as a serpent, also has cosmic aspects. The upward movement of the *kuṇḍalī* through the *cakras* along the central axis of the backbone, which is the aim of Tāntric yoga, represents an evolution of the mind, spirit and psyche from lower to higher consciousness which might be compared to the evolution from lower to higher life-forms. The process of liberation, awakening, or liberation (as the goal is called) recapitulates the evolution of being and consciousness on a universal scale.

In Tāntric yoga, then, there is a careful, conscious attempt to relate the human organism to the wider world, to affirm that in essence and

in specific detail the human organism corresponds to the structure and nature of the cosmos at large, to affirm that the human organism is thus intimately and intensely related to the wider universe.

Monism (advaita): Atman and Brahman

There is a strong bias toward monism in Hindu philosophy, and Hindu monistic philosophy, in many ways, may be seen as the systematic and logical expression of some of the ideas we have been looking at so far. In the Upaniṣads, which are philosophic discourses and part of ancient Vedic literature, there is a preoccupation with discovering or realizing the fundamental basis of reality. In these discourses teachers and students alike ask probing questions concerning that which underlies or presupposes everything. The consensus in these texts is that a living, unified, pervasive reality that is characterized by being and consciousness underlies, overarches, and infuses everything. The name that is given to this ultimate principle is *brahman*. Without *brahman*, nothing would exist. In some sense, we could say that Brahman is *being itself*, although in its most intense form *brahman* is also conscious and blissful. There is nothing beyond *brahman*. Even the gods, according to these texts, are simply manifestations of *brahman*.

The *Upaniṣads* are also very much concerned with the nature of human beings. Many discourses probe the essence of being human and seek to discover what it is that represents human beings at their deepest level. Most of these texts agree that human beings possess a spiritual essence or Self which is named *ātman*. This spiritual dimension, or soul as we could call it, underlies our very existence and we would not exist without it. While belief in a soul is very widespread in the world's religions, what is of interest to us here is the fact that in the Upaniṣads this soul, the *ātman*, is declared to be identical with *brahman*. That is, according to the Upaniṣads, each individual is, at the deepest and most essential level one with *brahman*.

This philosophic vision has two important implications that might be considered to bear on ecological issues.

1. The monistic position (or vision) undercuts the urge to view everything from the point of ego-centered individuality. In our own culture, "self-realization" is usually equated with life-long ego-gratification in which one manipulates and dominates the environment for selfish,

egotistical ends. The spiritual process whereby one discovers (or uncovers) one's essence as *ātman* and realizes one's identity with *brahman* is exactly the opposite process. One discovers one's true identity, which is one with brahman and with all beings, by denying one's false identity as a limited, ego-centered, individual being. In grasping one's wider, universal identity one must peel away and discard one's limited, false identity. The process might be understood as a maturation process in which one moves from a selfish to a self-less understanding of things. Or one might call it a process whereby one enlarges one's view of Self to include a wider and wider vision of things. In the un-enlightened state, in which one remains ego-centered, one remains isolated from the wider world and often opposed to it, trying to bend it to one's limited vision of things. The notion of oneself as *atman-brahman*, on the other hand, puts one in touch with the wider world of beings and being generally by affirming one's identity with that world.

2. The monistic vision fosters a sense of union or communion with all being and all beings. It fosters a feeling of kinship with other people and other species of being as well. It fosters a feeling of sympathetic identity with others which puts a potential curb on the desire to oppress, manipulate or dominate other beings. Gandhi put it this way: "I believe in *advaita* (non-duality), I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives. Therefore I believed that if one man gains spirituality, the whole world gains with him and, if one fails, the whole world fails to that extent."⁷ In short, it has been argued that a monistic vision of reality encourages people to embrace rather than conquer or control the world, that care for the environment "flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves."⁸

Throughout the Hindu philosophical tradition one finds hymns of triumph, assertions of realization, that testify to the perception that all is one, that the notion of individuality has been totally overwhelmed by the feeling and knowledge of ultimate oneness with all of reality. Here are a few examples:

7. Cited in Arne Naess, "Self Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," in John Seed, Joanna Macy, et. al., *Thinking Like a Mountain* (New Society Publishers: Philadelphia and Santa Cruz, 1988), p. 25.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-30.

From me everything is born; on me everything is supported; into me everything is again dissolved. I am this Brahman, One-without-a-second."⁹

I am smaller than the minutest atom, likewise greater than the greatest. I am the whole, the diversified-multicolored-lovely-strange universe. I am the Ancient One. I am . . . the Lord. I am the Being-of-Gold (*hiraṇmaya*: the golden germ out of which the universe unfolds). I am the very state of divine beatitude.¹⁰

Without hands or feet am I; of inconceivable power am I; without eyes I see; without ears I hear; I know all with all-pervading wisdom. By nature detached from all am I, and there is none who knows me. Pure spiritual essence as I, forever.¹¹

I am not born; how can there be either birth or death for me? I am not the vital air; how can there be either hunger or thirst for me? I am not the mind, the organ of thought and feeling; how can there be either, sorrow or delusion for me? I am not the doer; how can there be either bondage or release for me? Neither hatred and aversion nor passionate clinging have I; neither cupidity nor delusion. I am possessed of neither egotism nor self-infatuation . . . I am Siva, whose being is spirituality and bliss. I am Siva, the ever peaceful, perfect being.¹²

Such hymns might be taken as evidence of spiritual megalomania, delusions of grandeur. However, in the context of Hindu philosophical thought, particularly in the context of the monistic vision of reality, it is clear that they represent redefinitions of "I" and "me". They represent an overcoming of ego-centered notions of who one really is. They represent a letting go of ego-centricity, ego-gratification, and limited perception based in the conviction of isolated individuality. They represent a mystic intuition that in essence all being is grounded in an all-pervasive power of which a particular individual is fleeting expression.

9. Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (World Publishing Co., Cleveland), p. 447.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 462-3.

Non-violence and Reincarnation

Two other very central ideas in Hinduism reinforce and complement the non-dual vision expressed in advaita philosophy. These are the ideas of reincarnation and non-violence (*ahimsā*).

a. Reincarnation (*samsāra*): an underlying assumption of Hindu (and Indian) thought is that an individual passes through countless lives which span immense cosmic cycles. This endless sojourning is called *samsāra* (which literally means "flowing together") and in most texts it includes all species of being within its parameters. That is, reincarnation, or flowing together, takes place not just within a particular species, but moves from species to species in many cases. In one's cosmic sojourn, then, one may exist many times as a plant or animal, as a deity, spirit or celestial nymph. One's incarnation as a particular human being is understood to be just one brief scene in an endless drama that is, for all practical purposes, beginningless and endless. From the cosmic point of view one is extremely old, having existed countless times in the past. The future, on the other hand, stretches into immensity as one contemplates the many lives one will lead in the time ahead. Reincarnation (*samsāra*) underlines the idea that all life is held in a mutually related web, that all lives are somehow connected, and that in terms of time any given individual will experience every aspect of the web of life.

Two basic principles seem to govern the law of reincarnation. First, there is a general tendency for life to evolve into higher forms. In the non-human animal and plant realms life naturally becomes more complex with the passage of time. Second, in the human realm, and in the realms of the spirits and gods, the law of *karma* determines the particular features of each reincarnation. *Karma* is the moral law of cause and effect according to which one reaps what one sows. In the overall cosmic view of things, the great web of life remains more or less stable, because as lower forms naturally rise in the chain of being, higher forms descend to very low forms because of bad *karma*. Only very few higher forms succeed in leaving the web when they achieve full enlightenment.

The idea of reincarnation, like the advaita vision of non-duality, tends to undercut the importance of individuality and an ego-centered

way of understanding reality. The particular biography we happen to be leading is not really "us", it is only a very, very small part of a much larger picture that encompasses all of life. While Hinduism views reality hierarchically, and ranks species according to complexity, the idea of reincarnation is a caution against the arrogance of treating lower species with cruelty and carelessness. In a sense, these lower forms are related to you and you to them in the cosmic perspective which teaches that you too, at one time, dwelled in such form, and may do so again, while they may be in a superior position over you in the future. That is, reincarnation tends to relativize one's notion of a chain of being in which higher forms dominate lower forms. All human beings are really potential ants, while ants are potential human beings.

b. Non-Violence (*ahimsa*); a high premium is placed on non-violence in Hindu teachings. Although some social groups, or castes, such as the *kshatriyas* (warriors) are encouraged to resort to violence in certain circumstances, in general, non-violence is an ethical tendency that is encouraged on the part of all people. Non-violence is not limited to how one treats other people. It also applies to the treatment of other life forms. In general, one is supposed to act in such a way that one inflicts the minimum amount of violence on one's environment. Non-violence emphasizes the community of all beings that is taught in the advaita, non-dual vision of reality. Essentially and intrinsically all beings are related, and to do violence to another is, in some sense, to do violence to oneself. In some radical forms of Indian religion such as Jainism, monks and nuns wear cloth masks to cover their mouths to prevent inhaling (and thus destroying) minute forms of life. They also, in some cases, sweep the path before them to prevent treading on insects or other small creatures inadvertently.

Among high castes vegetarianism is observed. Again, the aim is to keep to a minimum the amount of violence one performs in the course of daily life. To restrict one's diet to vegetables minimizes the amount of violence one inflicts on sentient creatures (a presupposition of vegetarianism is that higher life forms suffer more when injured and killed than do lower life forms). While the rationale for vegetarianism is primarily ethical (or religious) in Hinduism (and in Jainism and Buddhism as well), it is easy to relate this rationale to ecological concerns. To feed off the life forms at the top of the food chain is extremely inefficient in terms of nutritional ecology, and can quickly result in the exhausting of the fertility of the

land. Meat-eating, in other words, by large numbers of human beings occupying a limited terrain, puts a great deal more stress on the land than the consumption of vegetables and grains, and as such is considerably less violent to the eco-structure.

One of the best known advocates of strict non-violence was Gandhi. In both politics and diet he insisted upon observing non-violence which, he believed, was an end in itself and enabled one to glimpse the truth of things. In his ashrams (retreats, communities) he let animals have their way, including snakes and scorpions and noxious bugs, prohibiting the use of poisons against them. He respected the rights of all creatures to fulfill their lives. He believed that all beings had the right to live and blossom in their own fashion and that human beings had no right to interfere with them. In this assertion, Gandhi was implicitly criticizing the tendency toward anthropocentrism whereby everything and every being is understood only from a human perspective and relative to human needs, ambitions, and taste. For Gandhi self-restraint in the treatment of all life forms was the superior path to self-assertion.

The Sacred Cow

Hindu reverence for cows in many ways expresses the centrality of non-violence in Hinduism. Respect for, worship of, reverence for the cow is taken as symbolic of reverence and respect for all forms of life. To some critics of traditional Hinduism, cow worship is cited as benighted, a superstitious practice that results in considerable violence to millions of starving people who might be nourished if Hindus slaughtered their cows, many of which, the critics argue, are useless for anything else. Cow worship, the critics argue, "lowers the efficiency of agriculture because the useless animals contribute neither milk nor meat while competing for croplands and foodstuff with useful animals and hungry human beings."¹³ Critics cringe at the sight of cows wandering the streets of major cities, defecating on the sidewalks, wandering into gardens to graze, and generally making a nuisance of themselves. Critics also cringe at such institutions as cow hospitals and retirement homes where sick and old beasts are nursed back to health or fed at public expense. In all, the practice seems at best quaint and at

13. Marvin Harris, *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture* (Vintage Books: New York, 1978), p. 7.

worst a superstitious practice that creates a great deal of harm, especially to the poor and hungry.

The worship of cows, however, makes a good deal of economic and ecological sense, besides being a symbol of reverence for all life. While it is true that many Indian cows give little or no milk, they are widely used as draft animals and provide just the right amount of power for small farms which dominate the Indian economy. Cows also forage, for the most part, consuming food that is otherwise useless to humans. From their dung, furthermore, is obtained fuel which is widely used (and preferred) for cooking. They are, in this respect, extremely efficient fuel-making machines. "Basically, the cattle convert items of little direct human value into products of immediate utility."¹⁴ In defence of the Hindu reverence for the cow which forbids killing it in many places, one writer says this:

The higher standard of living enjoyed by the industrial nations is not the result of greater productive efficiency, but of an enormously expanded increase in the amount of energy available per person. In 1970 the United States used up the energy equivalent of twelve tons of coal per inhabitant, while the corresponding figure for India was one-fifth ton per inhabitant. The way this energy was expended involved far more energy being wasted per person in the United States than in India. Automobiles and airplanes are faster than oxcarts, but they do not use energy more efficiently. In fact, more calories go up in useless heat and smoke during a single day of traffic jams in the United States than is wasted by all the cows of India during an entire year. The comparison is even less favourable when we consider the fact that the stalled vehicles are burning up irreplaceable reserves of petroleum that it took the earth tens of millions of years to accumulate. If you want to see a real sacred cow, go out and look at the family car.¹⁵

14. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.