

EARTH, MY MOTHER! THOU ART THE SACRED VESSEL!

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1. Introduction

It is more than evident that our environment is in crisis. *The Hindu Survey of the Environment 2008* states that despite several Governmental and non-Governmental organizations' efforts, waste management and pollution control remain a big challenge and their solutions are met with little success in India:

Electronic trash and biomedical refuse are ever increasing, resulting in infections and other hazards. The climatic change and the growing earth warming is a researched fact due to higher carbon emissions from human activity. Harnessing the power of the sun like in Solar Energy is becoming revolutionary in lighting the billions of life. Wetlands and water banks, which provide many services to local communities, are under threat and evidences indicate that solutions to protect coastal ecosystems are far from satisfactory. Needless to say that sustainable transport future may land us in undertaking fewer, shorter trips, greater use of public transport, number of walking and cycle trips. Problems abound on the issue of Genetically Modified crops, its health and other risk factors, conservation of forest and wild life, extinction of rare species, etc.¹

Environmental issues are not isolated from other disciplines of knowledge and life. "It is impossible," says Des Jardins, "to find an important environmental issue that does not cross boundaries between the sciences,

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¹N. Ram, *The Hindu Survey of the Environment*, Chennai: Kasturi & Sons, 2008.

economics, public policy, law, medicine, engineering, and so forth.”² In a similar vein, it seems to me impossible to pick up issues, whether environmental, political, economic or public life, that do not cross boundaries between them and religion. In other words, true humanity and true religion are inter-relational and interdependent and full humanity is the goal of all religions.

The contemporary ecological crisis could be seen as a result basically of a spiritual and attitudinal crisis, which call for fresh thinking and solutions based not merely on scientific approaches but along with spiritual and epistemological principles. We need to see things in a broader perspective when we view on reality and life. Sciences inform humanity of the reality around for human care and consumption. But they may not directly talk about greed and selfishness, thoughts and feelings about how humanity has to respond to the same reality for its endurance and preservation. There needs to be a balance between what science could tell us on reality and how human spirit, self, and mind could act on them. While the scientific approaches help humanity in identifying, generating, and multiplying resources for human living (and vice versa), the human mind should be directed by the principles of conscience guided by religion and ethics. We need to fathom a cosmic perspective that respects and values the great web of life which includes nature. Pertinent in this context is the June 1992 Statement³ issued by the Brahmakumaris World Spiritual University at Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, that there will be no end to the pollution of Nature until humanity puts an end to the pollution of its own mind. The present chaos has naturally driven the human mind to become aware of itself. This awareness is the first and a good sign of reconciliation with the world around, especially Nature. This happy self-introspection hopes eventually to lead humanity to rectify what had gone wrong in the world-mind system and to remove the pollution of the mind, which the Brahmakumaris point out.

It is my belief that humanity has the will and power to divert from its suicidal path, provided it becomes religiously and morally sensitive,

²J. R. Des Jardins, *Environmental Ethics*, Belmont: Wadsworth, 1993, 5.

³“When We Change, the World Changes,” *Statement to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, Brahmakumaris World Spiritual University, June 1992. <http://www.bkun.org/papers/earth12.html>; Also see “Consciousness and Climate: Confluence of Two Living Systems,” *Statement for the United Nations Climate Change Conference*, December 7-18, 2009, Copenhagen, Denmark. <http://www.bkun.org/papers/cop15_statement.pdf>

listening to the primordial Words recorded in the scriptures and acting on them. Bhikhu Parekh⁴ considers religion as society’s conscience and the guardian of its moral values. Its main objective is to have a watch on the general quality of individual and collective life. And whenever and wherever there is a disturbing trend to this quality, it has to alert the conscience of citizens and bring them to their ideals and values. Religions have a special capacity to inspire, alert, criticize, and agitate for the well-being of people. If religion fails in this duty, it betrays both itself and the community. The Jain declaration on Nature has summed up its ecological philosophy in the well-known ancient Jain aphorism *parasparopagraho jivanam* (All life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence). It has contemporary significance and a perspective to practice. It binds together all aspects of nature in a physical as well as a metaphysical relationship. “Life is viewed as a gift,” says Dr. Singhvi “of togetherness, accommodation and assistance in a universe with independent constituents.”⁵

My teaching experience reveals that unfolding religious resources on issues of life, and in this case, ecology and environment, inspire and instruct students in their fuller understanding about life in its mysterious, spiritual and temporal aspects. The following pages with religious citations⁶ give us an understanding about reality, the birth of creation and the different forms of life, their dependence and inter-relatedness, etc. Discussions about the ideals and values that could be drawn from such inspiration could motivate us in the task of (re)building humanity and nurturing harmony between God, Nature, and Humanity.

⁴Bhikhu Parekh, “The Voice of Religion in Political Discourse,” *Religion, Politics, and Peace*, ed. Rouner Leroy S., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999, 80-81.

⁵L. M. Singhvi, *The Jain Declaration on Nature*, 2, Institute of Jainology, London, 1990. For the full text, see <<http://www.jainology.org/publications/jain-declaration-on-nature/>>

⁶The religious texts quoted in this article are cited in two collections, the bibliography of which mention original authors and translators of these texts: Vincent Sekhar, *Religions, Ecology, and Environment: Sacred Texts That Shape Perspectives*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2012; and Wilson Andrew, ed., *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993. See also <http://www.unification.net/ws/>

2. “In the Beginning!” The Great Mystery

To start with, the sacred texts talk about the Great Mystery said in many words like The Word, The Truth, The Wisdom, etc., even before the Order of Creation, understood sometimes as impersonal Laws that govern the universe. The Quran says that God created the heavens and the earth with Truth (16.3) and *Atharva Veda* asserts that the whole world was brought forth from the bosom of the sacred Word and God abides in his own Laws (4.1.3). By truth the earth is sustained and the gods stand by the Order (*Rta*) (*Rig Veda* 10.85.1). Christianity reveals that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God (John 1:1-4). “I pay homage to the perfection of Wisdom and it is she who sets the whole Wheel of Law into motion,” says Buddhism (*Astahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra* or Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines 7.1). The Sikh *Adi Granth* says that by Divine Law all beings are created and all forms and the Law is inexpressible (Japuji 2).

This Great Mystery in the form of the Eternal Truth or the Wisdom envelops the whole of universe and nature. The mystery could be the eternal and Supreme Being or Purusha or the different forms of Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, or Prakriti – the manifest and the hidden reality of the entire cosmos. The sacred texts reveal that this mystery is both formless and with form, transcendent and yet immanent, attributed and unattributed. It dwells in every form of creation, enveloping them in its bosom. The *Rig Veda*’s Purusha Sukta describes the Supreme Being (Purusha) as thousand-headed, thousand eyed, thousand footed; and, pervading the earth on all sides, Purusha existed beyond the ten directions. The Supreme Being, indeed, was all these, what has been and what would be, and the Lord of immortality as well as of mortal creatures (10.90.1-4). Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* mentions that he is the source of all material and immaterial world, and all of these are strung on him like pearls on a string:

My material world is eight-fold, divided into earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, the faculty of meditation, and self-awareness. This is the lower nature. My higher nature is different. It is the very life that sustains the world. Do not forget that this is the source of all existence. I am the genesis and the end of the entire world. There is nothing higher than I am, O Conqueror of Wealth! The world is strung on me like pearls on a string (7.4-7).

3. The One Hidden in the Many

While Abrahamic religions make a distinction between the creator and creation, Indian religio-philosophical and mystical traditions affirm a theory of pantheism that identifies the whole of creation with its creator, to mean that the entire creation already existed in the Absolute and sprang out from the Absolute. The earliest Rig Vedic Hymn of Creation mentions that “there was neither non-existence nor existence then. There was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond...That One breathed, windless, by its own impulse... The life force that was covered with emptiness, that One arose through the power of heat” (*Nasadiyasukta* 10.129). Vishnu Purana acknowledges that the whole universe is the diffused energy of the supreme Brahman just as light is diffused from a fire which is confined to a spot. The entire universe is woven and interwoven: from him is the world, and the world is in him; and he is the whole universe (1.22).

There are many passages from the Upanishads in this regard. For example, *Svetasvatara Upanishad* says that He is the one God, 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 qualities (6.11). *Mundaka Upanishad* uses the imagery of the spider, the plant, and the hair of the body: As the web issues out of the spider and is withdrawn, as plants sprout from the earth, as hair grows from the body, even so, the sages say, this universe springs from the deathless Self, the source of life. The deathless Self meditated upon Himself and projected the universe as evolutionary energy. From this energy developed life, mind, the elements, and the world of karma, which is enchained by cause and effect. The deathless Self sees all, knows all. From him springs Brahma, who embodies the process of evolution into name and form by which the One appears to be many (1.1.7-9).

Indian mystical philosophy is filled with pantheistic ideas:

Thou art the sun, Thou art the air, Thou art the moon, Thou art the starry firmament, Thou art Brahman Supreme; Thou art the waters – thou, the Creator of all! Thou art woman, thou art man, Thou art the youth, thou art the maiden, Thou art the old man tottering with his staff; Thou facest everywhere. Thou art the dark butterfly, Thou art the green parrot with red eyes, Thou art the thunder cloud, the seasons, the seas. Without beginning art Thou, beyond time and space. Thou art He from whom sprang the three worlds (*Svetasvatara Upanishad* 4.2-4).

Several Hindu creation stories describe the entire cosmos, both living and non-living, as a product of the ardent tapas (fiery penance) of the Eternal One (*Prasna Upanishad* 1.4-5). So much so, the *Adi Granth* of the Sikhs questions its seekers, “Why do you go to the forest in search of God? He lives in all and is yet ever distinct; He abides with you, too, as fragrance dwells in a flower, and reflection in a mirror; So does God dwell inside everything; Seek Him, therefore, in your heart” (*Adi Granth*, Dhanasri). Shintoism is pantheistic and teaches the omnipresence of the Divinity in everything: Even in a single leaf of a tree, or a tender blade of grass, the awe-inspiring Deity manifests Itself (Shinto, *Urabe-no-Kanekuni*).

4. The Five Abiding Elements

This cosmos, enveloped by the Divine Mystery, is the repository of five great elements (*pancabhutani*), seen as one whole, integral and autonomous. They are maintained by *Rta*, the natural Law or Order. Though material in nature and character, they are means to transcendence and spiritual experience. These are known as *Vasus* because in them are stored the treasures of life (*Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 3.9.2-3). Human beings need to respect their autonomy, see themselves as part of the whole cosmos along with these elements of the Earth, the Waters, the Wind, the Fire, and the Space. There need not be a dualistic conception of man and matter. Human beings are partners of these five elements, one integral whole, twined and inter-twined.

The Waters, being the primeval element, is the origin with divine, healing and purifying energy. Hence used items and even dead bodies are thrown into the waters of rivers. Jaina sutra refers to this body as a boat and the soul as the sailor. *Samsara* is the ocean which is crossed by the great sages (*Uttaradhyayana Sutra* 23.73). In India, *samsara sagara* is known as the oceans that bind life to this earth. River current in Buddhist symbolism is craving and going against the stream is renunciation (*Itivuttaka* 114-15). Dhammapada describes the arduousness of this task:

Few are there among men who go across (the river/ocean) to the further shore; the rest of mankind only run about on the bank. But those who act rightly according to the teaching, as has been well taught, will cross over to the other shore, for the realm of passions is so difficult to cross (85-86).

And yet, all human beings need to cross over it in order to achieve liberation. Crossing the river or sea is symbolic of this liberation.

In Hindu Vedic tradition, the *Earth* is Mother, the womb of everything. It combines with the Sky for procreation and furtherance of life. *Atharva Veda*'s lengthy 12th chapter is an excellent Hymn of Nature, describing its multifarious elements like slopes and plains, plants and herbs, waters and rivers, soil and food, and other hoards of treasure and wealth, suggesting its limitlessness and richness, profundity and depth. She is said to be *dharani*, the bearer of everything good and bad, light and heavy, small and big, instilling fragrance, protecting the indwellers with nourishing strength. Deep are the sentiments exhausted in the hymn. The hymn concludes with ardent prayers for wealth, protection, and other blessings. There are many implications. Firstly, human beings cannot take the Earth lightly, cannot be tramped under foot. Mother Earth is sacred, neither can it be harmed nor can it be disrespected. Secondly, she is the object of reverence, and even worship. But the conflict between the humans and the Earth continues because of humans' selfishness, imbalance of attitude, and lack of discipline.

The *Winds* are generally referred to as the Breath of God. God blows this breath into the nostrils to breathe divinity in them. As the Winds blow where they will, they also represent the life of freedom: “Breathe, O Wind, your healing breezes. Blow away evil. You are the medicine of this whole world, the Messenger of the Gods!” (*Rig Veda* 10.137.3)

The *Fire* is an important deity in the Vedic ritualistic religion, symbolizing warmth and love, not merely physical but with spiritual and divine content. The ancient *Rig Veda* opens with the hymn to the Fire: “I magnify the Lord, the divine, the Priest, minister of the sacrifice, the offerer, supreme giver of treasure. Worthy is the Lord to be praised by living as by ancient seers. He makes present for us the gods” (1.1). The Fire dwells in every home, in the hearth, in the sky, in the cosmos, dispelling darkness and generating life. This god consumes everything that is being offered to it, purifies like gold, and offers immortality to its devotees. There is a well-known prayer-cum-blessing in the *Rig Veda* accorded for the spirit of warmth and unity:

Gather together, converse together! Your minds be of one accord, just as in harmony the gods of old took their ritual shares of oblation! United be your counsel, united your assembly, united your spirit and thoughts! A single plan do I lay before you; a single oblation do I offer! United your resolve, united your hearts, may your spirits be at one, that you may long together dwell in unity and concord! (10.191)

The Fire in any form is also venerated in Zoroastrianism. The Fire temple is the place of worship for the Zoroastrians. Both Fire and Water are the agents of ritual purity. Their scriptures state that for one, “who sacrifices unto Fire with fuel in one’s hand...is given happiness” (*Yasna* 62.1).

The *Space*, representing the bodiless state of Brahman and Atman, is considered divine with inner and outer extension. The Space is everything. To the question asked by Gargi, a well-known female sage in *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (3.8), ‘which is beyond the heaven, which is below the earth, which is between heaven and earth, which is called past, present, and future – in what is it interwoven? In what is its warp and woof?’ the renowned sage Yajnavalkya replies in one word, ‘the Space’. When Gargi asks further ‘But in what is space interwoven? In what is its warp and woof?’ the sage replies that the knowers of Brahman declare it to be ‘the Imperishable.’ There was no further discussion. Such has been the link between the Space and the Imperishable! This is also the space where god dwells in communion with the humans.

In Buddhist Mahayana tradition, this sacred space is known as the Pure Land (*Sukhavati*), which is rich and prosperous, comfortable, fertile, delightful (*Sukhavativyuha Sutra* of Buddhism 15). And in other traditions, it is called the Heavens, the highest regions with ‘no delusion’ but with ‘full of light’ (*Uttaradhyayana Sutra* of Jainism 5.26-28), the dwelling place of gods as well as the atmans. And hence if the humans had injured space, earth, or heaven or offended mother or father, there is the prayer for forgiveness from Agni, fire of the house, asking the god to absolve them and guide them safely to the world of goodness: “May Earth our mother, Boundlessness our origin, and Space our brother save us from damnation! May Father Heaven make peace for us with our fathers!” (*Atharva Veda* 6.120).

5. Human Being: The *Best of Creation*

Sacred texts affirm that human beings are the best among all creation. According to Genesis, “God created the human being in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (1:27). That means that human being, according to the Book of Genesis, resembled God; they are created “little less than a God.” We know life in different varieties: the vegetative, the animal, the human, and other lower and higher spirits. Religions generally place human beings at the top. Eastern religions, particularly Hinduism, would point out to human person as “*Aham Brahmasmi*” (I am Brahman, the Ultimate). Among many

reasons, only human beings have the tenacity and power to achieve the supreme goal of life, namely, Moksa, Nirvana, Heaven, and so on. We have instances to show that human beings who reached such lofty ideals in their own lifetime (*Jivan Mukta*) were revered even by the spirits, devas and asuras: “The wise ones who are intent on meditation, who delight in the peace of renunciation, such mindful, perfect Buddhas even the gods hold most dear” (*Dhammapada* 181). Such *Jivan Muktas* had extraordinary self-control and discipline, great wisdom, and high standard of moral life. They surpassed even gods. *Jivanmuktas* are indeed human beings endowed with the capacity of being liberated while still living. They are at the higher end of the spectrum in terms of liberation. Ordinary people had recourse to them for strength of faith, particularly in times of troubles and hardships. They were spiritual benefactors who could even cast away evil spirits. The Zoroastrian scripture *Yasna* identifies such personages as the holy one through righteousness, who hold in their spirit the force which heals existence, who are beneficent unto all (44.2). The Mucalinda story in Buddhist *Udana* text is another evidence to show that even harmful creatures, like snake in this story, do obeisance to such people, protect them from heat, cold, touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, or creeping things annoying them in their absorption (*Udana* 10).

The strong belief in Karma in Indian religio-philosophical traditions suggests that even ordinary human beings could elevate themselves, become advanced in spiritual discipline to achieve the final goal of life. Jainism is a religion of self-help because of the victory (*Jina*) one could achieve in one’s life-time. *Uttaradhyayana Sutra* of Jainism mentions that the universe is peopled by manifold creatures born in different families and castes for having done various actions; sometimes in the world of the gods or in hells ... all in accordance with their actions. Sometimes they become soldiers, or outcastes and untouchables, or worms or moths... Thus, living beings of sinful actions, who are born again and again in ever-recurring births, are not disgusted with the round of rebirth, but they are like warriors, never tired of the battle of life. Bewildered through the influence of their actions, distressed and suffering pains, they undergo misery in non-human births. But by the cessation of karma, perchance, living beings will reach in due time a pure state and be born as human beings (3.1-7).

6. Partnership or Dominion?

Contemporary environmental scene reveals an unfortunate situation resulting from human attitude and behaviour. Humans have forgotten that

they are part of the whole cosmos. They arrogate to consider themselves superior to all other beings. It is true that humans have the capacity to know, to judge, to choose, to govern, and attain the zenith they want to. But this position, entitled with freedom and choice, can be misunderstood to mean domineering over and subjugating other forms of life. Genesis 1.28 is often quoted to express similar relationship between human beings and the natural world: “And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” (Genesis 1:28). And there is a similar passage in the Qur’an: “Do you not see that God has subjected to your use all things in the heavens and on earth, and has made His bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, both seen and unseen?” (31:20). God has made everything subject to the humans. But in the present environment-friendly era, such passages are interpreted to stress the responsible character and behaviour of human beings, in whose hands and protection the whole of the natural world is entrusted with. It is now for the human beings to be awakened to God’s gift in their hands, which should not be desecrated.

There are, however, other Semitic passages that suggest a spirit of partnership between humans and nature: “The whole world was created only for the sake of the righteous man. He weighs as much as the whole world. The whole world was created only to be united to him,” says the Judaic Talmud (Shabbat 30b). Islam uses the word *vicegerents* for humans and it is interpreted as co-worker, to say, that humans are to work with God in His continued act of creation, sustenance, and protection of whatever surrounds them. While there is a need to reinterpret some of the Semitic passages according to the signs of time, Eastern religions, particularly Hinduism, brings out the eco-friendly spirit implied in the all-embracing phrase *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, One Family (of God) with Nature.

7. Nature Is Sacred, Respect It

Human beings are to be conscious that they are part of the whole beautiful and sacred creation. They have to see the whole as inter-connected and inter-dependent web of Life! “This earth is a garden, The Lord its gardener, cherishing all, none neglected,” says the *Adi Granth* of the Sikhs (*Mahj Ashtpadi* 1). Islam treats the diverse life forms as different nations “like yourselves” and suggests what is implied in the Golden Rule “treat them as you wish to be treated.” And the Qur’an says: “all of these need to be mustered unto their Lord” (*Qur’an* 6.38).

The Jaina Tirthankaras have been further forceful in this regard. One cannot put non-human beings aside, uncared for, just because they lack consciousness like the humans. Acharanga Sutra is emphatic about this:

Just as the consciousness of a man born without any sense organs (i.e., one who is blind, deaf, dumb, crippled, etc. from birth) is not manifest, likewise the consciousness of beings of earth-body (e.g., atoms, minerals) is also not manifest. Nevertheless such a man experiences pain when struck or cut by a weapon, and so also do the beings of earth-body. Likewise for water-beings ... fire-beings ... plants ... animals ... air beings: their consciousness and experiences of pain are (actual though) not manifest” (1.28-161).

Tao subscribes to this idea in a humorous passage: “A horse or a cow has four feet. That is Nature. Put a halter around the horse’s head and put a string through the cow’s nose, that is man. Therefore it is said, “Do not let man destroy Nature. Do not let cleverness destroy destiny (the natural order)” (Chuang Tzu 17).

8. Non-Violence: An Ecological Ethics

Why should the humans be bothered about the natural world so much? Is there an ethic that supports their attention on other forms of life? Religious resources are ample to show the value of love and non-violence in a broken human and natural world. There is a common understanding among religions highlighting the many virtues like Ahimsa or positive love, connected to life-preservation. They motivate human life and human acts. They mould human temperaments, emotions, form their habits, fathom fresh relationships.... in order to preserve life and the environment. The oft-quoted Metta Sutta of Buddhism ‘let all-embracing thoughts for all that lives be thine’ (Khuddaka Patha) and the Jain ‘Have benevolence towards all living beings’ (*Tattvarthasutra* 7.11) and the Mahabharata, a Hindu classical text written in the context of war, presents for the mode of human living an ethics of “total harmlessness towards all creatures” but also takes into account the bare necessities of life-situation to make it more practical. It says that “(in case of actual necessity) upon a minimum of such harm, is the highest morality.” (*Shantiparva* 262.5-6) Though said to be a Book of (Kurukshestra) War, *Mahabharata* points out to the futility of war in several conversations. Yudhisthira, the eldest son of King Pandu and Queen Kunti and the leader of the Pandavas says:

Neither of the two sides are seen anywhere to be victorious; not are both sides seen to be defeated. What is seen, though, is the

destruction of their prosperity alike. War always is deceitful and wicked. In killing another, who is not himself killed also? And to the one killed in war, victory or defeat are just the same. I believe that death is no worse than defeat. But the victorious suffer as well. (*Udyogaparva* 72.52-54)

On another occasion, Gandhari advises her son Duryodhana: “There is no good in war, dear son, nor any holding together in the foundations of life. Where can there be in war any happiness? Nor is there any certainty of victory in every war. Therefore, do not put in it your thoughts and expectations” (*Udyogaparva* 129.40). We can sum up Mahabharata in the following passage:

Ahimsa is the highest dharma; ahimsa is the highest form of self-control; Ahimsa is the highest offering; ahimsa is the highest austerity. Ahimsa is the highest Yajna; Ahimsa is the best fruition; Ahimsa is the best friend; and Ahimsa is the greatest happiness. Not all the sacrificial rituals, nor all the giving as charity, Nor all the bathing in the holy waters together, will be equal to non-violence (*Anusashanaparva* 116.28-30).

The Jains consider the doctrine of non-violence a common sense practice based on principle of mutuality or reciprocity. Acharanga Sutra, the earliest Jain text, describes this principle of mutuality: “Just as suffering is painful to you, in the same way it is painful, disquieting, and terrifying to all animals, living beings, organisms, and sentient beings” (*Acharangasutra* 4.25-26). The Jains in a special way consider non-violence to be the quintessence of wisdom and the “legitimate conclusion from the principle of reciprocity” (*Sutrakrtanga* 1.11.10-16). ‘Life is dear to all’ is the famous dictum in both Jainism and Buddhism, and to the Jains, non-violence is meta-religion (*Ahimsa paramodharmaha, Naladiyar* 14-15).

It follows therefore naturally that for many religions of Indian origin meat-eating implies injury to living beings (*Laws of Manu* 5.48). In Surangama Sutra, Buddha speaks in a similar tone:

If one is trying to practice meditation and is still eating meat, he would be like a man closing his ears and shouting loudly and then asserting that he heard nothing... How can a bhikshu, who hopes to become a deliverer of others, himself be living on the flesh of other sentient beings? Pure and earnest bhikshus will never wear clothing made of silk, nor wear boots made of leather for it involves the taking of life. Neither will they indulge in eating milk or cheese

because thereby they are depriving the young animals of that which is rightfully belongs to them.

Tao goes to the extent of freeing captive animals: “Buy captive animals and give them freedom. How commendable is abstinence that dispenses with the butcher!” (Tract of the Quiet Way)

There are texts that suggest protection of trees and plants from destruction. There is an instruction in Deuteronomy 20.19 that no axe can wield the trees even during war and besiege of a city. Similarly, the Buddhist Paccittiya 11 says that the destruction of vegetable growth is an offense requiring expiation. Humans need to realize this. Reconciliation and expiation need not wait until Nature itself takes the painful course of disastrous events such as Tsunami, Global Warming, etc.

Let me conclude this section with an apt Buddhist parable from Anguttara Nikaya: Rajah Koravya had a king banyan tree called Steadfast, and the shade of its widespread branches was cool and lovely. Its shelter broadened to twelve leagues. None guarded its fruit, and none hurt another for its fruit. Now there came a man who ate his fill of fruit, broke down a branch, and went his way. Thought the spirit dwelling in that tree, “How amazing, how astonishing it is, that a man should be so evil as to break off a branch of the tree, after eating his fill. Suppose the tree were to bear no more fruit.” And the tree bore no more fruit (iii.368).

9. Conclusion: Treading the Sacred Path of Deep Ecology

The sacred sources cited above shows a significant interaction between the living and the non-living from ancient times and spoken by ancient seers. They were inspirational and a constant reminder of the humanity’s overriding faith in the unlimited natural resources. Careful readers could see the rich resources in contrast to the grim reflection on our egoistic, accumulative, and competitive tendencies that jeopardize human relationship among themselves and with the earth and its diverse forms of life.

The texts challenge us to develop a sense of responsibility, an attitude of peace, gratitude, and tuning with the nature. They propose new ways of seeing and living, pointing to a necessary change in attitude and appropriate conducts. And that was our immediate concern to nature and other forms of life, which is often seen as a grade lower than the humans, and hence could be exploited without limits. We can go along with Padmasiri De Silva to acknowledge a fact that the natural world is more

often used and abused for our own gratification, and for other scientific reasons, forgetting that “nature has intrinsic value.”⁷

Those who had attained the spiritual heights were those who had developed in their personal lives such attitudes as loving kindness to all forms of life, least hurt even to the minute of creatures, vegetarian ways of living, restraining from unwholesome speech or action, etc. We should think together with the monk Thich Nhat Hanh:

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others to kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.⁸

I believe that our own rich resources and our sacred wells take us to a Deep Ecology,⁹ which characterizes a holistic, non-anthropocentric approach to life and environment.

Padmasiri de Silva enumerates the eight-point deep ecology platform: (1) The flourishing of human and non-human life on earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life-forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes. (2) Richness and diversity of life-forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on earth. (3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs. (4) Present human interference with non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening. (5) The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease. (6) Significant change of life conditions for the better require changes in policies. These affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. (7) The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality rather than adhering to a high standard of living. (8) Those who subscribe to the above points have an obligation, directly or indirectly, to participate in attempts to implement necessary changes.

⁷Padmasiri de Silva, *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism*, London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1998, 17.

⁸Hanh, Thich Nhat, *For a Future to Be Possible: Buddhist Ethics for Everyday Life*, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993, 13.

⁹De Silva, *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism*, 128-129.