

Humanity and Nature

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Introduction

Since early civilization, men have been contemplating their relationship with Nature. Such relationship originates from fear, and worship of Nature. As men gain knowledge and strength, it becomes mastery and annihilation. We rise from the status of a subordinate, to a conqueror, exploiting natural resources to satisfy desires. Then aberrant signs appear, cautioning with avarice and indulgence it comes energy crisis, pollution, and expediting climate change. It is time to break the illusion of our materialistic lives and rethink our relationship with Nature.

I. Emptiness

“All phenomena bear the mark of emptiness.” (*The Other Shore*) Since we inter-are, we are empty of a separate self.

Thich Nhat Hanh describes a tangerine party he holds. (*Heart of Understanding* 52–53) As one pays attention to a tangerine, senses and observes it, it becomes real: without a cloud, there is no rain; without a sun, there is no sunshine; without rain, sunshine and other natural ingredients like soil, trees cannot grow; the tangerine in palm cannot possibly exist.

Secret of inter-being reveals as small a tangerine may seem, it contains a cloud, sunshine, soil and millions of things. They encompass presence of each other.

From a conceptual perspective, we think about the tangerine. Our mind is in it. We are in it. The many forms of a tangerine dwell in myriad places, forming a boundless net connecting everything in cosmos, including “us”. One can contemplate the entire cosmos from just one tangerine.

Bond between men and Nature, in particular, is likened by Thich Nhat Hanh to the umbilical cord between a child and a mother. (25) The link is manifested both tangibly and intangibly: like we need air for survival; and through meditation, breathing in and out, we are aware of our being alive and grateful for gifts of Nature. If we are attentive, tie between Nature and us turns real, just like the tangerine in our palm.

Zhuangzi shares similar faith in emptiness, achievable through “fasting of mind”, when one has an empty spirit, waiting on all things. (53) Abandoning concept of self, claims of possession, and desires to earn fortune and name, one embraces his most authentic nature. He then wanders, thinks, and plays around freely. We, no longer prioritize ourselves, our desires and detriments, commence to behold nature of the bond between Nature and us with clarity, realizing that “ten thousand things are one with me” (38)—Nature and us inter-are.

Due to inter-being, it would be incredibly difficult for men to thrive with a withered Mother Nature, who supplements us with invaluable nutriments and support. As we develop a more penetrating understanding about such relationship, we find it easier to respond to Nature’s call, the “Piping of Heaven”, (32) and cherish the precious bond.

II. Let Things Be

Piping of Heaven displays as “[b]lowing on the ten thousand things

in a different way, so that each can be itself". (32) It means let Nature of things abide by their authentic nature.

Men's acts may distort nature. In aquariums, dolphins and killer whales are trained for men's entertainment. We impose our preferences and judgments on them. Their instincts are displaced with conditioned feats, liberal souls by subjugation. If Zhuangzi were to sit among audience of these shows, he would probably shout out, "Let whales be whales, dolphins be dolphins! Free them!" Only with empathy and compassion are we able to understand our wants are no more valuable than Nature.

We need penetrating, fluid understanding to fully comprehend relationship between Nature and us. Huizi asked Zhuangzi, "You're not a fish—how do you know what fish enjoy?" (111) How do we know dolphins and whales are not enjoying captivity? To understand, we penetrate, enter deeply, and be one with them. (*Heart of Understanding* 11) In their perspective, we do not just see statistics like how many commit suicide, get mad, but also anxiety in small space, craving for traversing in vast blue waters, being neglected, and separation from parents and clans since young conducting to depression and unease.

Some argue animals do not feel pain. It is, however, scientifically proven the opposite. Military dogs, housed-alone birds, and chimpanzees used in laboratory tests, being illegally traded, or orphaned develop post-traumatic stress disorder. (Dasgupta, "Many Animals") There is also no record of wild killer whales' aggression against men. (Hogenboom, "Why Killer Whales") Yet, some killer whales in captivity, like Tilikum, suffered from stress and attacked even caretakers. (Hogenboom, "Why Killer Whales") These animals feel tremendous pain in having natural traits and liberty surrendered. Just because they cannot recount pain in men's languages does not grant us any rights to override theirs. Our assumed superiority to other life that only we feel or love is a bubble.

When asked by Kui how it managed to move, millipede replied, “Now all I do is put in motion the heavenly mechanism in me”. (*Zhuangzi* 106) Following natural course of things, the Way, is easy. Millipede does not even know why it works. Recognizing essence of “returning to the True”, (106) we see abhorrent foolishness in manipulating these fascinating, unique creatures of Nature for our misbegotten preferences. They should by nature be free and return to where they truly belong, the Ocean.

III. Penetrating Understanding

Ages of total ignorance may be past. Yet our understanding about Nature is little. Thich Nhat Hanh quoted, “To say you don’t know is the beginning of knowing”. (24) Instead of giving up exploration of knowledge, we try to be one with Nature, preventing biased perception, preformed judgment from hindering us from attaining Perfect Understanding.

Discovery of Higgs boson, a missing piece of Standard Model which explains constituents of matter, is a recent triumph for the scientific field. (“The Standard Model”) Nevertheless, questions still arise like how Standard Model is compatible with dark matter and how many more Higgs bosons exist. (Jarlett, “In Theory”) *Zhuangzi* said, “understanding that rests in what it does not understand is the finest”. (40) Although a full answer has not been reached, these inquisitive attempts are enlightening—to scientists passionate about discovering unknowns, governments and societies that embrace a more educated and informed crowd, etc. As Nature’s beauty plants seeds of curiosity and dreams to seeking truth, we work hard to solve at least some of its myths, driving us closer to Perfect Understanding and happiness.

Limitation of perspective obstructs Perfect Understanding. It is

comparable to outlook of a frog in a well being constrained by well wall, effecting a limitation of sight. (108–109) Since the frog never tries to jump out of the well, it cannot see things beyond the wall.

Similarly, our comfort zones, like our old ways of living, constrain our perspective. As in Hong Kong, most of us are used to consumerist culture and lavish lifestyle. We rely on imports heavily, like over 90% of our food is imported from around the world. (Centre for Food Safety) Factories moved to Mainland. We stop observing factories' black smokes overclouding cities' sky, dirt water contaminated by sewage flooded farmlands. These are consequences of manufacturing excessive plastic, clothes, etc., a result of our extravagance and imprudence. If we see with clarity like Avalokita, we recognize problems we now face like energy crisis and pollution are influenced by our past and present misdeeds and unbridled desires.

Men's lust for smart phones, for example, happens to be the dismay of our Planet. In Baotou of Inner Mongolia, mining and treatment of rare-earth minerals, the raw materials of manufacturing electronic gadgets create a far-stretching, radioactive, toxic lake of chemical waste. (Maughan, "The Dystopian Lake") Gadgets we attribute to making our life better, rare-earth we chant for bringing China huge economic success, turn out to jeopardize health of factories workers, pollute land and water.

Thich Nhat Hanh warns, "[n]o one among us has clean hands". (33) Just like misery of young prostitutes in Manila is perpetuated by our apathy, inaction, our indifference extends suffering of Mother Earth. Not just Chinese government who set environmental regulation loose, not just rare-earth businessmen behind the polluting factories, not just entrepreneur and companies that design and market smartphones, we as consumers who queue up to buy the latest generation of smartphones create demand and

allow perpetual degradation of health of workers, their offspring, and local ecosystem. Our improvident behavior adds to breadth and depth of landfills and the dystopian Mongolian lake.

Nevertheless, Thich Nhat Hanh advised, “[i]f you take sides, you are trying to eliminate half of reality, which is impossible”. (36) We need penetrating understanding to truly know what has gone wrong.

If we go to Northern China, we see poverty, underdeveloped infrastructure, and maybe corruption. China is not just Shanghai or Beijing. A large part of her is undernourished, bleeding. Rapid urbanization and climate change adversely affect quality of water and soil, making it harsher for nomads and farmer grazing and harvesting in pastures, highlands and farmlands. Migrant workers from these rural places leave children to seek jobs in cities, impoverished, and deprived by employers. (Wong, Chang and He) Despite these difficulties and sacrifice of family life, they leave because their villages are too poor and they need to support medical fees, school fees, etc. of their parents and children. (Bristow, “Poor Rural Villages”) If Beijing stops rare-earth mining all at once, large number of unemployed workers and their families starve.

Non-duality enables us to analyze situation better. With more understanding, there is less tension but more kindness. There is a fine art of balancing the need to sustain employment and environmental conservation—for instance, impose tighter environmental regulation on mining factories; fund scientists and experts to research on improving technologies like sewage treatment and heavy metals extraction to maximize work safety and minimize impacts on environment; strengthen check on officials to effectively combat corruption and allow better observance and implementation of environmental rules. Collective efforts and cooperation between different stakeholders are needed. Even we as end-users have to

consider own genuine need during shopping. It is not usually within one man's capacity to make great miracles but many may accumulate enough momentum for changes and move the mountain.

IV. Impermanence

Men's closest encounter with Nature may be our inevitable death, the manifestation of impermanence of life. Yet, men's apprehension of death manifests Thich Nhat Hanh's warning, that rigid knowledge blocks understanding. (*Heart of Understanding* 8) Ostensibly, our body rests with dust and soil, eventually becoming dust itself. It engenders an impression that we are "reduced" to a soulless object, apparently without much value. There is a perceived distinction between "this life" and "that end", just as Zhuangzi proposes knowledge and preferences lead to discrimination between "this" or "that". (101–103) It depicts our fallacious vanity for being superior to Nature so we loathe the idea of losing our pre-eminence and prestige.

Things are, however, "neither produced nor destroyed" (*Heart of Understanding* 1) pursuant to Heart Sutra. Ordinary knowledge leads us to apprehend death as a "reduction". We cling so much to the idea of "self". Zhuangzi proposes, the hinge of the Way is when "this" or "that" "no longer find opposites". (35) If we enter deeply to understand, we realize we are just some organic molecules in the first place, and dust is a continuation, our second life, we will not worry. Zhuangzi similarly advances fearing death is like "a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back". (42) We continue to exist, just in other forms. All living creatures have to embrace intimacy with Nature, realizing the naturalistic portion in us, that we are a part of Nature and Nature forms a part of us.

Impermanence means changes. Because of changes, there are climate change, pollution, and shortages of natural resources. Nevertheless, Thich Nhat Hanh wants us to see it more optimistically. Life and growth are impossible without impermanence. (*Heart of Understanding* 17) Permanence mean a static state. New things can never be created. Only with impermanence, new life may be born, babies may grow and mature, and species may thrive, decay, and reinvigorate.

Climate change disturbs original ecological balance, destroys habitats of species, melts ice and raises sea levels, potentially flooding low-lying regions and displacing millions of people. (Carrington, “Climate Change”). It may well be said to be a “bad” change but simultaneously it reminds us to cherish resources we have and lead a greener life. By employing positive efforts and changes in attitude, we may slow down its pace or even combat some of its effects like more endangered animals may be saved by stopping man-led deforestation. Because of impermanence, things are possible to change for the better.

We need the gift of non-fear from Heart Sutra to make changes in the way we perceive relationship between Nature and us, our attitudes, and behavior. Thich Nhat Hanh believes it let us to make peace with ourselves and the world, transcending fear and duality. (*Heart of Understanding* 51) It commences with ourselves. When we are meditating, we remain mindful of ourselves, world and the present moment. We bring mindfulness, serenity and smiles to people through everyday contacts. Life affects life. With compassion and empathy in our hearts we have courage to act kindly towards one another and all living species in Nature. If more of us are eager to love Nature, protect species, reduce wastes, and return to simple living, we may press business and government to care more about the environment, and legislature to pass greener policies.

Conclusion

Stars are rare at night in the city. Sometimes if we are lucky, the sky is clear and there may be one, or two blinking at us. Although we cannot tell if these are satellites or real stars, the sight is startling. They are visitors several light-years away, gigantic and vibrantly blazing. We, on the contrary, occupy a very small position in this Universe. We are as modest as the tangerine may be, but still blessed to adore and connect with the astounding beauty of Nature so freely and casually.

By appreciating the mechanism of inter-being and practicing penetrating understanding, human can find the key to eradicate bias and behold our relationship with Nature with clarity. Holding the tangerine in hand, we feel its fragility and yet it is so full of life and vigor, presenting us the crucial courage to engage more empathy and compassion with Nature, and make the best out of impermanence.

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Teacher's comment:

In quiet composure, Tsui articulates a vision of the human condition that is dependent on the well-being of nature, a topic urgent to the times. The essay offers a fair and comprehensive analysis of ancient wisdom and lets it bear upon multiple aspects of the contemporary world—from research in the sciences to climate change, and everyday consumerist culture. Her reflection on these complex perplexities results in the discovery of what is known as much as what is yet known. For being at once an analysis of the plight of humanity and a self-investigation, Tsui's work is a good example of the meaning of intellectual inquiry. (Yeung Yang)

