Darius L. Swann*

Mantras, Mudras and Mandalas: Asian Challenges To American Values

Oh, East is East, and West is West,
and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently
at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West,
Border nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
though they come from the ends of the earth![1]

I. Introduction

Some of us are apt to recall more easily the first lines of Kipling's poem than the last two. For that imperious Englishman assumes a place of privilege for the West, and the presupposed meeting of East and West occurs within the framework of values established by Western civilization.

As a matter of fact, East and West are meeting, increasingly, and the imperial flow of the West eastward, beginning in the fifteenth century, has been steadily reversed in the twentieth. To an ever greater extent East is meeting West on Western soil. The *mantras*, *mudras* and *mandalas* to which I refer in my title are the outward signs of the Western fascination with Eastern symbols. Since Americans are predisposed to-

*Darius L. Swann is professor of Missiology and Religions of the World, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

[1]Rudyard Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. Alice Mary Smyth (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 294.

ward novelty, we might discount these as fads which like other new things will pass away. They are themselves, however, only symbolic signposts of a more significant development. I shall not, therefore, spend a lot of time discussing them, but I should at least say something about what they mean and how they come to stand in the title of this paper.

A. Eastern Symbols: Mantra, Mudra, Mandala

In the great Hindu tradition a *mantra* is a sound, with or without intelligible meaning, whose very utterance has the power to produce good or ill effects upon the utterer or the hearer. The sound sets up vibrations which have a benevolent or malevolent effect on the object. (So "good vibrations" or "bad vibes" have become a part of our language.) There is a *mantra* for every important occasion in the life of a Hindu person –conception, birth, naming, first eating of solid food, initiation, marriage. There are other *mantras* of more general use, like those which Krsna worshippers chant at airports and on the streets of urban metropolitan areas. "Hare Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna, Krsna Hare; Hare Ram, Hare Ram, Ram, Ram Hare!" The repetition of the very name of the deity insures a gracious effect upon the believer.

The *mudra* is a physical symbol, expressed with the hands. It is used both in ritual sacrifice as the priest makes offerings to the gods, and it has found its way into the language of the classical dances of India. It is a highly complex sign language of hand configurations and gestures evoking specific meanings and a whole penumbra of associations.

The *mandala* is a geometric pattern used in eso-

teric branches of Buddhism and Hinduism. The diagram is in the shape of a circle–for that is what the word *mandala* means–and through the complex arrangement of symbols and signs within its borders can be read the mysteries of life and the universe.

All of these outward symbols of Eastern metaphysics can be observed in urban centers of the United States where many new groups and communities have gathered in the practices of Eastern cultic rites. For some, they appeal to the sense of the novel. Indeed for a while it was quite trendy to take on Eastern garb, burn incense, and sprinkle our conversation with Asian terms like *karma*, *nirvana*, etc. Indian gurus and other wise men from the East found in the nineteen sixties and the seventies ready disciples among alienated youth, novelty seekers and bored celebrities of American society. There was Guru Maharajji, the teenage messiah, who attracted, among others, a member of the Chicago Seven. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, of the beatific smile, won many to his Transcendental Meditation movement and counted among his disciples at one time the Beatles and Mia Farrow. From Japan came a Buddhist sect, Nicheren Shoshu, aggressively promoting the benefits of chanting *"Namu Myoho Renge Kyo"* ("Hail to the Lotus Sutra of the Marvelous Law.")

So these three signs or symbols, *mantras*, *mudras*, and *mandalas*, are important because they symbolize ways of relating to reality which offer a direct challenge or an alternative to the spirit and thrust of highly technological Western society. All of the movements mentioned above may be characterized as extra-logical, extra-rational means of experiencing and conveying truth and reality. They provide a means of

direct perception which short-circuits rationality and offers immediacy of experience. While their appeal may seem to be only to those who seek the novel and the trendy, their appearance and persistence point to a phenomenon of some importance.

B. Significance of These Symbols

It is their significance rather than the signs themselves that I want to address. At a time when the interest in cults is evidence of a fresh questing on the part of many people in our society, some emphases and directions in Asian life and outlook, though less accessible than the visual and aural trappings of Eastern cultic practices, offer alternatives or correctives to certain values which dominate Western life and shape our living together. Very simply, I would like to discuss three things:

1. Stillness as an alternative to activism, as a mode of life;
2. Human beings as a part of nature rather than its lords; and
3. Renunciation as an antidote to acquisitiveness.

First of all, let me say that it is not my intention to assert any of the cliches which usually surround this subject; namely, that the West is analytical, the East mystical and intuitive; the West is material, the East spiritual. These are all partial truths. I do mean to assert that we are now close enough to the East and close enough to being a truly plural society that we may consciously choose to adopt some approaches which are in one way or another woven into the fabric of certain Asian societies.

Let me make one other disclaimer: we cannot generalize about Asia and Asian values, although the title of this paper might seem to imply that. Asian cultures are very distinct and different. I have selected out of various national and cultural traditions, particular ideas and practices which suggest some common or similar assessments of human nature, destiny and relationships.

II. Activism and Stillness

A. The Theatre

In discussing activism and stillness I begin by using the theatre as an example. Americans are an active people; there is little in our tradition, with the exception of the Quaker meetings and Catholic monasticism, which directs us to quietness and contemplation as a mode of life. The Puritan heritage placed a premium on work which was certainly necessary in a frontier society. However, as industrialization, urbanization and technology advanced, work ceased to be necessary, in the same proportion, to keep us all decently fed, clothed and housed. Nevertheless, work remains a sign of respectability, and where real work becomes less necessary, busyness takes its place. We are infinitely creative in making work where none appears necessary. We measure our worth by our output, and the value of our output by our income. Nothing except the paltry figure strikes us as strange when Happy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* described one of his superior as "fifty-two thousand dollars coming through the door."[2] (Fifty-two thousand

[2]Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Viking Press, 1958), 24.

dollars is not much money today, but it was an impressive amount in 1949 when Miller first published the play.)

Our preoccupation with product keeps us striving for efficiency–ways to do things more easily, more quickly, with less effort. Having accomplished that, however, we have few satisfying uses for the leisure that efficiency makes possible.

For our society, activism is a sign of leadership, ability, and ultimate worth. We do not set much store by stillness, quietness and contemplation. Vocal and verbal activity is read as a sign of intelligence and sometimes wisdom. We are, therefore, awash with the printed word, books that should not have been written, and the constant sound of authors huckstering their works on TV and radio. But back to the theatre. When in 1858 the *Edinburgh Review* critiqued a new translation of *Shakuntala*, that gem of classical Sanskrit dramatic literature, written by Kalidasa, offered a first reaction which is not surprising. He wrote:

> His drama is no drama of intense reality, where a lifetime is condensed into an hour–where the spectator sits, as a temporary Providence, to watch the passing characters as they move, each one with his inmost bosom open, and all the machinery of his passions laid bare. Rather it is a languid land, where we wander from dream to dream, and all is cast in an attitude of still life and repose, as if labor were not man's portion, and life itself but a trance.[3]

We must assume that the critic, like most Western students of theatre, before and since, accepted

[3]"The Hindu Drama, A Review of Monier Monier-Williams' Translation of *Sakoontala*," *The Edinburgh Review* 108 (1858): 24.

Aristotle's dictum that drama is *the imitation of an action.*[4] By accepting that as fact we also accept that the meaning of life is in that action. Asian cultures, in various ways, keep suggesting that drama is the imitation of a situation and the contemplation of that situation; and that the impact and quality of the experience of contemplating it is the goal or essence of drama. This of course, points us toward stillness and away from action.

It has been pointed out more than once that the distinguishing characteristic of Greek drama is conflict, of Sanskrit drama, peace and stillness.[5] To speak of the imitation of an action and imitation of a situation may not appear to be very different things. The Greek playwrights do indeed often begin from a situation, but it is a situation already pregnant with dynamic forces, a situation which is already or latently imbalanced and, therefore, charged with possibilities of action and conflict. The situation or circumstances referred to in the dramaturgy of the Indian theorist, Bharata, suggests stability and rest. It is not that the situation cannot change; it can and does, but the concern of the play is not so much with the process of change as with the moments of stillness and equilibrium which may be sensed, savored, and reflected upon. To put it another way, in the alteration between movement and rest, action and situation, the Indian dra-

[4]Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, trans., corrected and ed. Milton C. Nahm (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1948), 8-10.

[5]See the preface by G.L. Anderson to Kalidasa's, *Shakutala and Other Writings*, trans. by Arthur W. Ryder (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1959), xxvi-xxvii; also Henry W. Wells, *The Classical Drama of India* (Bombay: Asian Publishing House, 1963), 48-51; and Balwant Gargi, *Theatre in India* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1962), 18-19.

matist gives weight to the moments of rest. It is precisely because it is situation and circumstances which define the life of the play that the Edinburgh reviewer saw *Shakutala* "cast in an attitude of still life and repose."[6]

The Greeks, savoring action and conflict, begin their plays late in the story. On the other hand, the Indian concentration on situation encourages a loose, meandering plot in what might be described as epic in style. The plays often encompass great leaps of time and space. *Shakutala*, in contrast with Sophocles' *Oedipus, the King*, begins early in the story. The story itself is both simple and complex. King Dushyanta, with his companions, is hunting deer in the forest when they come upon a hermitage (ashrama). There the King discovers a beautiful, innocent maiden, Shakutala, the foster daughter of the hermit. He falls in love with her and she with him. Shakutala's foster father being absent from the hermitage, they consummate their love in a sexual union which we would term common law marriage. That was one of eight recognized forms of marriage in the India of the period represented. This form of marriage, usually allowed to warriors and the lower orders of society, was looked upon with varying degrees of disfavor by the pious.[7] Soon after, the King receives a message, calling him back to the palace, and he goes, promising Shakuntala to send for her shortly. In token of his good faith he gives his signet ring. After some time, Shakuntala is discovered to be pregnant, and, near the time of her delivery, her foster father

[6]"Hindu Drama," Translation of *Sakoontala*, 24.

[7]A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 168.

sends her to her husband.[8] On the way, Shakutala, preoccupied with her thoughts, fails to give due respect to a holy man whom they meet. He places a curse on her, predicting that the one about whom she was thinking will forget her. Subsequently, unknown to her, the maiden loses the King's signet ring in a pool of water as she takes a drink. When she arrives at the palace, the King, through the agency of the holy man's curse, does not remember her. Lacking the signet ring which would have restored the King's memory, Shakutala is rejected and she leaves in bitter disappointment. She is carried away into the heavens by her heavenly goddess-protector. Some days later, Dushyanta's police haul before him a fisherman who has been found with the King's signet ring. He declares that he found it inside a fish. As soon as the King sees the ring, his memory is restored and he goes to search for Shakutala. Years later he finds her and her twin sons in the heavenly realm, and they are reunited and experience a love that is not mature.[9]

We witness on the stage the first meeting of Dushyanta and the heroine *Shakuntala*, their falling in love, their love making, and the giving of the promise to send for the wife married in an unorthodox but accepted fashion. One suspects that Sophocles would have eliminated the first four acts and would begin with Act V where the King would have been informed that a strange woman, apparently pregnant, accompanied by hermits and claiming to be his wife, was standing outside the palace gates. This would indeed have made for a tighter plot and a more suspenseful

[8]This would be in accord with Indian custom.

[9]Kalidasa, 1-94.

action, but it would have missed the tenderness of the couple's love-making, the pathos of their leave taking and would not have allowed us to linger over the sentiment (rasa) of love and be suffused by it.

B. Indian Stillness

The Indian predisposition toward stillness has found its way into the thought of one of the West's most celebrated modern poets. T. S. Eliot, who must have absorbed a good deal of Hindu philosophy during his days at Harvard, is drawn to this stillness in his earlier writings. It comes out in unlikely places, such as his play *Murder in the Cathedral*, of all places, which is based on the story of King Henry II who appointed Thomas a'Beckett (1118-1170) archbishop. Thomas proves to be more obedient to the Church than to his king. When the Archbishop returns to England to a hostile king and apprehensive public, after seven years of self-imposed exile in France, he says of the women of Canterbury who gather to greet him and who feel in their bones the impending doom:

> They know and do not know what it is to act or suffer.
> They know and do not know that acting is suffering
> And suffering is action. Neither does the actor suffer
> Nor patient act.
> But both are fixed in an eternal action, and eternal patience to which all must consent that it may be willed and which all must suffer that they may will it,
> That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is

the action
And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and
still
Be forever still.[10]

Eliot's "still" point corresponds to several things in the Hindu tradition. The first of these is yoga. Many Americans have become initiated into forms of physical yoga. The postures and breathing exercises are, however, only a part of the eightfold stages in the practice of yoga. It is worth noting that the first two stages are moral preparation, consisting of vows of abstention and positive observances, and precede all the others. The physical activity, yogic postures and breathing exercises, is part of the process of stopping the wandering of the mind and the withdrawing of consciousness from all external objects and focusing it inward until it comes to one-pointedness, to stillness. Here all activity, all the restless flickering of the mind ceases and the self achieves freedom.[11] The *Bhagavad Gita* says "when one's properly controlled mind becomes steadfast within the Self alone and when one becomes free from all desires, then he is said to have accomplished yoga."[12] The metaphor traditionally used in respect of the yogi who has succeeded in the practice of yoga makes the point abundantly clear: "A lamp in a windless place that flickers not."[13]

---

[10]T. S. Eliot, "Murder in the Cathedral" in *Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952),182.

[11]*Yoga Sutra*" in *A Sourcebook of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 454-455.

[12]*Bhagavad Gita*, 2:53.

[13]Ainslei T. Embree, ed. *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. I, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 295.

This stillness, this one-pointedness becomes the means by which the yogi attains amazing powers over his own physical being. In everyday life in India, meditation, sitting in stillness, drawing one's attention from outward objects and centering one's thoughts within, are common practices for many people.

C. Hindu Silence

Another part of the Hindu tradition is verbal stillness–silence. The closer one comes to truth and reality the more silent one grows. Just as physical activity lapses, so does the verbal. Once when I was visiting Govardhan, that place where a Lord Krsna is reputed to have lifted up the mountain to give shelter to the villagers who were fleeing from the wrath of the god Indra, I met an old man. He was obviously revered by the people of the village for they pressed close to touch his feet. To them, one of the marks of his genuine holiness was that he had not for two years uttered a word! Eliot asks: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"[14]

It is customary for Indian wise men to retire to the forest and live in the simplest fashion. Western "wise men" are forced into endless chatter. They must write, and having written, appear on talk shows. They not only write books, they promote them. In India wise men fall silent, meditate, contemplate. In *Shakuntala* the chaste modest girl has been brought up in the forest hermitage (ashrama), the foster daughter of a holy hermit. The peacefulness, the simplicity and the openness

[14]T. S. Eliot, "Choruses from the Rock," in *Complete Poems and Plays*, 91.

of ashrama life stands in stark contrasts to King Dushyanta's palace life, full of intrigue and rivalry. From reading the play we are left without doubt which life is superior. In silence and apartness, the inner self is renewed.

D. Chinese "No Action"

But India is not alone in the denial of action as the expression of the destiny of the human creature. There is convergence in other major Asian cultures in placing a premium on stillness. The Taoists in China also discount the kind of aggressive, purposive action which we in the West associate with leadership or even competence. This is expressed in the doctrine of *wu-wei*, "no action."

These words from the *Tao te Ching*, the scripture of Taoism, clearly enunciate this concept:

> The weakest things in the world subjugate the strongest. There are no men who persevere uninterruptedly (in the culture of the Tao). I know from this that in inaction there is advantage. There are few in the world who attain to teaching without words, or to the advantage that results from inaction.[15]

The key concept, *wu*, which literally means non-existence, is not nothingness, but pure being which transcends forms and names, "and precisely because it is absolute and complete, can accomplish nothing."[16] Because many American young people in the sixties

---

[15]S. E. Frost, ed, *Sacred Writings of the World's Great Religions* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1972), 84.

[16]William Theodore DeBary, Wing-tsit Chan, and Burton Watson, comps. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 240.

responded to the Taoist non-action concept, it was sometimes characterized as the "drop-out" philosophy. To consider it so is a misreading of its meaning. To take no action does not mean folding one's arms and closing one's mouth. One is not required to withdraw and become a hermit. Rather, letting things act by themselves, they will be content with their own nature and destiny. Taking no action really means taking no unnatural, aggressive action, nothing that is not in harmony with one's true self.

The Taoist "no action" gave a certain quality to traditional Chinese life. It made for a style of life characterized by non-competitiveness, a non-assertiveness that marks the people of China, even today, with a special grace.

In the *Tao Te Ching* it is written: "Now there are three things which I regard as precious, which I grasp and prize. The first is compassion; the second is frugality; the third is not venturing to take precedence of others, modesty."[17]

When I went to China to teach many years ago, I found Chinese students not only delightful but diligent and polite. Teachers were held in special regard. I still have in my mind's eye the student who would greet me as I came sailing down the street on my bicycle by freezing in his tracks and bowing from the waist. Initially, though, I was puzzled by students' behavior in the classroom. "Why doesn't anyone volunteer to answer when I ask a question in the class? "You see, sir, no one wants to appear to think that he knows more than others . . ." That non-assertiveness, that understatement, that modesty has remained to me one of

[17]*Tao Te Ching*, v. 67.

the most attractive qualities of the Chinese; I must admit, however, that it does not always work to one's advantage. Anyone who follows athletic teams of any level will be aware of a phenomenon which has arisen in the last decade or so. "We're number one." It is the exact opposite of the Taoist point of view.

The Taoists place a special emphasis on the complementariness of nature and this thinking tends to color all of life. They see the feminine and masculine principles in nature working together in a harmony rather than in opposition. Yang is masculine, active, warm, dry, bright, procreative, positive, the south side of a hill, The northside of a river, fire.[18]

Yin is the feminine principle in nature, fertile, breeding, dark, cold, wet, mysterious, secret, seen in shadows, quiescent things, the north side of a hill, the south bank of a river.[19]

What is significant is that the Taoists seem to lean to the feminine, for the most prevalent symbol for the Tao is water. Many times in the *Tao Te Ching*, the Tao is compared to water: it is the symbol of all the seemingly weak yielding things in nature which overcome the apparently strong. Water, soft and yielding, wears away ostensively unyielding stone.[20]

From this notion of "no action" it follows that the Taoist would not understand Sir Edmund Hillary, who, when asked why he went to the trouble of climbing Mount Everest, replied, "It was there." The Chinese would rather contemplate than climb the mountain. Li Po, a Chinese poet of the Tang Dynasty, writes:

---

[18]Laurence G. Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989), 165.

[19]Ibid.

[20]*Tao Te Ching*, vv. 20, 79a, 186, 187.

All the Birds had flown away
One Cloud its aimless circle ran
Unwearied gazing on each other
It and Ching-t'ing Shan.[21]

That same regard for stillness, inaction colored Ch'an Buddhism which was transmitted to Japan as Zen Buddhism, and this spirit of Zen permeates much of Japan's life, including the arts. The Zen masters of the Soto school taught the practice of *zazen*, sitting in meditation; they created gardens not of flowers, but sand, stones, moss, rocks, and streams, as centers for meditations; they introduced the ritual of the tea ceremony, and found in every common experience a basis for meditation. They cut off discursive logic with *koans*, questions (riddles) which could not be answered by the application of reason. (What is the sound of one clapping?)

The Zen influence extended to the stage, especially the No theatre. In this theatre, sparse of scenery and controlled in movement and gesture, there are many moments of stillness. The greatest performer and theorist of the No stage, Zeami, who lived in the fourteenth century said: "Dancing, singing, movements and different types of miming are all acts performed by the body. Moments of 'no action' occur in between." These moments of "no action" are the most enjoyable, he said, "due to the underlying spiritual strength of the actor which unremittingly holds the attention."[22]

[21]W. J. B. Fletcher, trans., *Gems of Chinese Verse* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1935), 31.

[22]Ryusaku Tsunoda, William Theodore DeBary, and Donald Keene, comps. *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, vol. I, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 286-290.

In one of his writings, Zeami describes the nine stages of the actor's art. He uses metaphors, reminding one of Zen riddles to be grasped intuitively and artistically, to indicate the levels of an actors' skill; like the *koans* they will not yield to rational exercises.[23]

1. The flower (hana) of the miraculous 'At midnight in Silla the sun is bright.'

2. The flower (hana) of supreme profundity 'Snow covers the thousand mountains–why does one lovely peak remain unwhitened?'

3. The flower (hana) of stillness 'Snow piled in a silver bowl.'[24]

The same stillness, no-action principle is also seen in the acting on the Kabuki stage when at a climactic moment the actor rolls his head, crosses his eyes, and freezes in a statuesque pose called a *mie*. That is the moment of strength, of maximum impact.[25]

In all the stillness we have talked about, there is concentration, the gathering of power, the centering of the self. The result of this stillness, meditation, contemplation, quietness is, in an unselfconscious way, the accessioning of power so that the vital forces are gathered, integrated and intensified, while in the active life they are often diffused. Westerners know that, of course, but seldom act upon it.

---

[23]Ibid., 286-287.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Earl Ernst, *The Kabuki Theatre* (New York: Grove Press, 1956), 178-179.

III. Nature: Lords or Partners

There is another concern which relates at several interesting points with the preceding. It has to do with the way we human beings relate to the world of nature. There is in several strands of Asian thought a distinctly different view of Nature than that which undergirds our life. It is true that in the past decade or two, beginning somewhere about the time of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, there has been a steadily growing concern in the U.S.A. about our natural environment. That concern has been forced upon us by the pollution of our streams; the contamination of our water ways by chemicals and wastes; the dumping of toxic waste substances that have endangered the health of our communities; the depletion of natural resources, including water, at an alarming rate; the widespread use of pesticides which in some cases have proven hazardous to human life as well.

Yes, we are more aware than we used to be of the natural environment. Yet our terminology, e.g., environmentalists, betrays a mind-set which is still quite far from that which evolved out of Taoist philosophy, Zen understanding, or even Jain-Hindu-Buddhist concerns in India. Nature remains an *environs* for human beings. The Western attitude toward Nature has been based primarily upon the Judaic view expressed in Genesis, that is, that human beings are created the lords of the earth. Specifically, human beings are to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it. They are to rule over the animal life of the sea, air and the land (Gen. 1:28-30). Environmentalists today do not basically disagree with this view; they simply call for the exercising of that lordship with proper caution and care.

When we turn to Asia, however, we are philosophically on different ground. Although vast differences separate Hindus and Jains of India, Chinese Taoists, and Japanese Zen Buddhists in their views of nature, certain attitudes place them together and in opposition to the prevailing Western view.

A. Hindu-Jain View

In the Hindu-Jain view, life is considered sacred because there is an unbroken chain of souls or selves. The smallest creature possesses a soul just as a human being does. That soul or self through countless rebirths will move up the chain until it attains perfection or release. So there is concern for every creature, even the snake.[26]

The Jains go beyond the Hindus in this concern for life. So intent are Jain monks on not destroying life that they wear masks to prevent the inhalation of tiny creatures; they carry small brooms to brush the path before them so that tiny creatures may not be crushed and they avoid agriculture altogether because tilling the soil would cause injury to living things in the soil.[27] Barred by conviction from agriculture, they turned to non-violent things like banking. Ironically, because of having to pursue non-life-injuring occupations, they became one of the wealthiest communities in India.

B. Zen Buddhist View

The Zen Buddhist, along with some other Mahayana Buddhist sects, holds the idea of the abso-

[26]Compare the treatment of the serpent in Genesis 3:1-15.

[27]Paul Thomas, *Hindu Religion, Customs and Manners*, 3rd ed. (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1956), 55-56.

lute significance of the natural world and everyday life. Their answer to the question, "What is absolute existence?" was either "It is the cypress tree in the garden," or "It is three pounds of hemp." Their attitude may also be detected in this poem by Su Teng-po: "The sound of the stream is the teaching of sermon of the Buddha, and the color of the mountain is the pure and True Body [Dharmakaya] of the Buddha."[28] So when the Zen practitioners sit in meditation, they contemplate nature, gardens of sand, water, stones and moss. Their meditation, unlike Yoga, is not intended to separate sense from exterior objects, but to submerge self in the great sea of being.

The poetry of the No theatre is full of pictures from nature which reflect the Buddhist consciousness of the transience of life: fading flowers in autumn, cherry blossoms falling in the wind; the mournful cry of birds by the sea shore.[29]

C. Chinese View

In China the interaction of man with nature is most clearly seen in certain landscape paintings. Under Taoist influence "the harmony of the human spirit and the spirit of nature became the ultimate goal of Chinese art."[30] These paintings offer us visual perspectives of tremendous depths. In the distance the mountain peaks seem to float in the mist which fills the val-

[28]Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern People: India, China, Tibet, Japan*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (Honolulu: East West Center Press, 1964), 279.

[29]*Japanese Noh Drama*, 3 vols. (Tokyo: The Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai, 1960). See *Momijigari*, vol. II, 146; *Yuya*, vol. II, 36,50,57; *Tadanori*, vol. II, 28.

[30]*Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. I, 252.

ley, and in the forefront along the bank of the stream, or in a boat, or perhaps by a hut, on the bank of the river, is seen the tiny figure of a human being. The human creature is portrayed as a small part of the great natural scene, not the lord of it.

That view of nature is valuable, not only from a utilitarian point of view, but as a point of beginning to come again to ourselves. The Chinese artist, Tsung Ping, in an introduction to landscape painting, wrote:

> And so I live in leisure and nourish my vital power: I drain clean the wine-cup, play the lute, lay down the picture of scenery, face it in silence. And while seated, travel beyond the borders of the land, never leaving the realm where nature exerts her influence, and alone responding to the call of the wilderness. Here the cliffs and peaks seem to rise to soaring heights, and groves in the midst of the clouds are dense and extend to the vanishing point. Sages and virtuous men of far antiquity come together in my thoughts. What else need I do? I gratify my spirit, that is all. What is there that is more important than gratifying the spirit.[31]

The effect of the Chinese-Japanese view is to move us toward the acceptance of the reality of the natural world and to find in closeness to and appreciation of nature a way of centering life upon that which provides a pathway to the real, a pathway to our true selves.

The effect of the Hindu-Jain view is to move us toward a spirit of non-violence, non-injury to any creature. While this may seem insignificant, we should remember that the principle of *ahinsa*, non-injury, was one blade of Mahatma Gandhi's two-edged sword to liberate India from British rule and from the oppres-

[31]Ibid., 254.

sion of Western thought. The cultivation of such an attitude toward all living things is a sensitizing and humanizing influence upon the whole of life, for it extends to and includes the non-violation of persons. By the awareness and concern for nature and ourselves we are prepared for a better relation to the world the Creator has given us and with other men and women.

IV. Acquisition Or Renunciation

A. Poverty: East

A third area in which Asian thought and practice offers help to the West is in the problem of the acquisitive nature of our society. India, which usually conjures up images of poverty, is a rich country. Out of richness, not poverty, has come the idea of renunciation which lies at the heart of the Hindu-Jain-Buddhist approach to the world. Renunciation which is always in the consciousness of the adherents of these faiths is the opposite of the acquisitiveness which is the natural accompaniment of an activity-oriented, competitive society. The nature of our American economy lures us into unnecessary and sometimes conspicuous consumption. The media hucksters create in us desires for things we never knew we wanted. For those who can afford what is offered there is a not-so-subtle distancing from poverty which makes it not just an unaccustomed state but a repelling one.

In India those who renounce the world go to live in the woods. Hajime Nakamura has written:

> The main current of the Indian civilization has not been in the cities but in the woods. For nearly every Indian religious thinker seeks to live in the

> bosom of nature and there to have direct communion with the Absolute. India did not develop a city representing its entire civilization. The ancient Greeks had the center of their civilization in Athens, the ancient Romans in Rome, and the modern Europeans in London, Paris and Berlin. But in India there was or is no city corresponding to these cities in the West. It is true that the cities of Pataliputra and Kanyakubja once flourished, but the prosperity of these cities was of short duration. There are no cities prospering throughout the whole history of India to represent the civilization.[32]

Living in the depth of the forest, and meditating in the dawn to the sound of the birds, the holy man concentrates his whole being on the quest for truth. The renunciation experience means foregoing eventually all attachments even the attachment to one's own ego. This non-attachment, this non-ego-defending is a precondition for the liberation of the spirit.

B. Poverty: West

In American we are abandoning our cities, and our civilization is represented by a thousand more or less similar shopping centers scattered through suburban mazes. Perhaps we are in a position to appropriate more from India than we can imagine. The other side of renunciation is poverty. Poverty has never been a stranger to the American scene, but recently it has become a bad word, an ugly and repellent condition. Over the last several years I have watched with deep concern the refusal of residents of this country to allow public housing for low and moderate income per-

[32]Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern People*, 163.

sons to be built near their neighborhoods. Their reasons, however stated, translate into a concern for the lowering of the monetary value of their own property. My concern is as much for the affluent as for the poor in this case, for I worry about what this means in terms of the impoverishment of the spirit of our society.

Can we become acquainted again with poverty? Poverty is not an ugly word in India though for "the beautiful people" it may have an ugly face. In traditional Hindu society, those who are poor by their own choice do not have an ugly image but an honorable one. Beggars there are many. But begging in the American context has never been honorable. To Hindu holy men and to Jain and Buddhist monks poverty is a necessary condition of their search for truth. Begging humbles the pride and prevents attachment. The truth is that life and existence are contingent and the mendicant so experiences it day by day. Poverty is a way of forcing us to come to the core of ourselves and our situation.

V. Conclusion

My comments are not meant to suggest that we should adopt a totally alien way of life. We are not to abandon our jobs and go off to live in the woods. Perhaps we can recognize that the traditions and values to which I have pointed do address some of the root causes of the malaise and excesses of our present society. The ability to communicate worldwide and the openness of our society to plural values are necessary preconditions to the appropriation of those that seem good to us. I suspect that this must begin with American higher education. Kenneth Keniston, writing about

pressures on college students that have led to drug abuse, refers to what he calls "cognitive professionalism," the pressure to do well academically in order to qualify for the next academic hurdle.

> And while such intellectual and cognitive talents are highly rewarded, colleges increasingly frown upon emotional, affective, non-intellectual and passionate forms of expression. What is rewarded is the ability to delay, postpone and defer gratification in the interest of higher education tomorrow.
>
> In contrast to these cognitive demands, there are few countervailing pressures to become more feeling, morally responsible, courageous, artistically perceptive, emotionally balanced or interpersonally subtle human beings.[33]

He also says that contemporary students suffer from "stimulus flooding and psychological numbing." In a modern technological society the individual is so deluged with external sensory, intellectual, and emotional stimuli that she/he gradually becomes numb, unable to respond fully to them. This lowered responsiveness is manifested in a seeming inability to make contact with experiences of other people, a "feeling of inner deadness and outer flatness . . . our activities are merely going through the motions, our experiences lack vividness, three dimensionality and intensity."[34]

I need not speak of the dehumanization with which a technological society threatens segments of life reduced to punch holes in the computer card, identification by number rather than name or face, the

[33]Jacob Needleman, ed. *Religion for a New Generation* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1973), 26.

[34]Ibid., 290.

modular character of our work or functions, disembodied voices thanking you for shopping at K-Mart or riding Greyhound or flying Delta. There is a desperate need to know that we do indeed exist as real persons. The things I have tried to pluck out of Asian cultures and traditions resonate to just that need.

In our frenetic, half-considered life, slowing down, being quiet, meditating, gazing at the mountains, abjuring hyperactivity can only improve the quality of our lives. Simply surviving, simply prospering materially are not the sufficient goals for us as individuals. Centering, becoming acquainted with ourselves, gratifying the spirit are significant goals in our journey to humanness.

Nature can certainly help us. Since we have abandoned our cities, perhaps we can draw closer to nature. Perhaps the natural world can become a real home.

Can we abjure our acquisitive, competitive style, our struggles to "get ahead"? Of what? Of whom? Can we accept with dignity the place where we are as the place of truth where life is to be dealt with in integrity? Erich Kahler reassures us that we need not sacrifice our real individuality.

> In other words: to have individuality is not so much to have a mind of one's own, as to have one's own mind. A person can live utterly for God, for another, for his work. He can forget himself completely in his devotion or preoccupation and still be a shining example of individuality, provided that what he lives for is his personal relation to God, his personal love, his personal work–a work that

bears his features, that reflects the meaning and content of his own life.[35]

[35]Erich Kahler, *Man the Measure: A New Approach to History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1943), 610.