

EXPERIENCING THE DIVINE IN NATURE

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Introduction

The natural world includes trees, animals, humans, all flora and fauna, the elements of earth, water, wind, and fire. The mystery of the birth, death, and power of these elements, that we will refer to as Nature, captivates the human spirit. Its wonders never cease to amaze us. Its mysteries take millennia to uncover if ever. Humans, in our need to understand and define things, have forever sought out ways to explain Nature's endless joys and horrors.

Engaging with Nature creates a sense of gratitude, awe, humility, terror, as well as a feeling of self-transcendence, recognizing that the world is so much bigger than ourselves. Some people that choose to live a spiritual life experience the divine in Nature; they connect Nature to their spiritual lives in a wide variety of ways, perhaps even choosing to live this way to help uncover some of the mysteries of Nature. Some seek an inner focus, while others may interpret Nature in an evil way, seeing temptations or punishments in the power of Nature. Each struggle with not only how they experience Nature, but how to articulate those experiences.

Allan Hodder calls attention to an attitude he describes as *mindful naturalism*, "a sense of oneself as so deeply immersed within the rhythms of the natural world that any notion of human identity separate from that larger reality becomes impossible to conceive" (Hodder, as quoted in Christie, 2016, p.230). This would be a way to categorize the sense of spirituality one feels when engaging with Nature.

Organized religions as well as others who define themselves as spiritual but not religious try to explain the wonders of Nature, and perhaps just as often the cruelty, indifference, and complexity, by using creation myths and nature mysticism. The phrase “spiritual but not religious” is heard more and more. In fact, an article from the Pew Research Center “Modeling the Future of Religion in America” states that, “at its current rate somewhere between 34% and 52% of the US population by 2070 will identify as such. It shows that, while there is an increasing divide, a pulling away from organized religion, there is still a need for many forms of religion and religious tradition” (Kramer, Hackett, Beverage, 2022, p.7).

Writing about nature mysticism, Douglas Christie does feel, that “there is also evidence for the increased presence and influence of spirituality and spiritual practice within religious traditions, something that can sometimes contribute significantly to the renewal of those traditions, including the responsibility communities of faith have for the natural world” (Christie, 2016, p.231). Even though a greater divide exists between people who belong to organized religion, and those who don’t but identify as spiritual, most people are still searching for a connection to a greater source than themselves.

This thesis will explore through the lens of religious pluralism how different religions frame the spiritual divine in Nature as well as their beliefs in how our Earth and humans were created and came to be. For me it’s a personal exploration and for this reason I will include a fair amount of personal introspection. I started exploring these questions while on long walks engaging

with Nature, after the personal tragedy of losing a loved one. The impact that this engagement had made me start thinking of Nature as divine. For me Nature is everything that I physically experience. As such, throughout this thesis the word Nature will be used with a “N” to illustrate the reverence in which I hold the word.

A Personal Perspective

For some, Nature evokes in us complete awe. The beauty in the creatures that we coexist with; the unyielding force of the elements, be it wind, water, or fire, capture our senses. From grand vistas to the great plains to snowcapped mountains, many find peace in Nature. For some, engaging with Nature on any level is a spiritual experience. This is the case for me.

On a typical Saturday morning you can find me on a long bike ride along the Two Rivers Trail in Easton, PA. My ride typically lasts approximately two hours. The majority of which is spent along the river. During this ride, I encounter a plethora of wildlife as well as flora and fauna. To my children’s dismay, I enjoy telling them about all the different types of birds that I see along my trip, whether it be a majestic eagle, yellow finch, or the occasional turkey. In the summer, spring, and fall dozens of turtles are sunning themselves on logs that protrude out of the water in the canal. I pass three waterfalls on the thirty-mile journey, one of which is so strong after a heavy night’s rain it sprays my face with mist as I pedal past. The state of the corn fields reminds me of the time of year. In late Fall and early Spring, the field is hard turf, crowded with sheared brown stalks. During the summer, the green stalks will sway in the summer breeze and can be so tall that

they obstruct my view of the remnant stone cottage, which sits in the center of the field reminding me of its inhabitants from a long gone-by era. I ride in silence, no headphones, podcasts, or music- my cell phone long forgotten in the glove box of my car that has been left miles behind. This is my “church” and I have the pleasure of meeting other members of my “congregation” along my route. I pass other cyclists who offer a friendly wave, people walking dogs, couples holding hands, an individual doing Tai-chi next to one of the waterfalls previously mentioned. All offer a friendly “good morning.” I have come to the realization that many are experiencing Nature in the same way that I am. Like the way that some feel spirituality in church, we the members of the “Two Rivers Trail congregation” are being affected by Nature. I mention this personal experience to relate how mindfulness, presence, and spirituality can be impacted by Nature. At some moments there is a stillness that overcomes you, creating moments of meditation, concentrating on hearing, and feeling your breath filling your lungs, and on Nature’s energy and life filling your body. At other moments, a sense of acute presence comes, and I notice a slight breeze moving the pine needles ever so slightly in the gentle breeze. By noticing all the life surrounding you, you realize that you are part of something so much larger than yourself.

This deep personal connection I feel when engaging with Nature is what prompted this thesis. If Nature has such a profound impact on me, it must affect others in the same way. It led me to question, if this is a spiritual experience for me, how do other religions help their adherents interpret their experience with Nature as well. In *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold reminds us to “think

like a mountain” (as cited in Christie, 2016, p.229). It is a challenge to take seriously the life of the world and an even deeper challenge: “allowing ourselves to become so identified with the life of the world that we can no longer stand aloof from it or behave as if what befalls it does not concern us” (Christie, 2017, p.235). Or as Thomas Berry would urge us “to recognize the sacredness of all living beings” (as cited in Christie, 2016, p.270). So, from this deep personal connection, I share with Nature, I need to ask myself, “What is my responsibility to this connection?”, “How much of a responsibility do I have to it?”, “Should I just be concerned about myself, or do I need to try and influence others in our shared responsibility for Nature?”

Overview of the Thesis

The layout of this paper will look at the tenets of a variety of different religions as well as some of the science that connects humans with Nature. To have a better understanding of each religion, each chapter will include a creation story for that tradition; it will also include some artwork, poems, eschatological understanding, and some of the basic core tenets of that religion. The goal will be to briefly explore how each tradition understands their view of Nature and how their sacred scriptures have interpreted their experience with Nature, creating scenarios for this life and the next. But since each of these traditions are vast, with many streams of interpretation and practices, these chapters will just begin to scratch the surface.

By providing a brief overview of the core tenets of each religion, I believe we will be able to make a connection or at the very least see why Nature is

important to some groups of people and may explain how those people interpret their origins and connection with Nature. We will explore how the traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism view Nature. I will also spend some time speaking about Indigenous people since the Earth and Nature are held in such high regard. There are a wide range of Indigenous peoples throughout the globe, this thesis will only explore a few of them, Indigenous people of Africa, since this was my first introduction to Indigenous people from a course that I attended at Drew, Australian Indigenous peoples from a recent personal experience and some Indigenous peoples of North America since it is a little closer to home for me. Hopefully this will resonate with others to understand their experiences.

I was raised Roman Catholic, my family was all in, my mother taught Sunday school for over twenty years and my brother, and I served as altar boys in church. However, over the years of studying and reading about Eastern religions these practices have increased my curiosities. I no longer practice Catholicism, but I need to recognize the influence that being raised in an Abrahamic tradition has had on my life. My life rests upon the foundation of this faith, so much so that both of my children attended Catholic school, K-12, I still acknowledge to this day the benefit of having faith taught to us at a young age to provide a starting point for our lives.

Philosophical Contributions

Spirituality is a way to connect, “this” and “that.” “This” is the “why” or the “choice:” it asks the question, “Where do these abilities or structures of Nature

come from?” It can be considered a reflection. Spirituality is born from the “that,” the thoughts that come from reflection (Kim, 2017).

Philosophy has always held a special place in my heart, especially Stoic philosophy. I believe you can see some parallel connection between Stoic philosophy and Eastern philosophy, some similarities include non-attachment to material things, the pursuit of knowledge, tradition, and virtue, just to name a few. Also, as I mentioned above, many people consider themselves to be “spiritual and not religious,” and even though much of philosophy is opposed to the idea of spirituality I do believe it has a place here. If you alter the definition of religion to encompass the idea that it is also a religious person’s philosophy, it may help some readers to be more open to the idea of studying and exploring multiple religions rather than the one that they have been indoctrinated to. Perhaps by leaning away from traditional institutional religions, that we could also refer to as indigenous traditions and approach it from philosophical thought, it may help make a better connection for those readers.

Some philosophers study phenomenology. The article, “Phenomenology”, featured in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines the discipline of phenomenology as “the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. The study of phenomena, appearance of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience” (Smith, 2018, p.1). Using phenomenology to study different religions helps us to understand how different people connect to their spiritual lives.

Philosophy is a search for answers by asking in depth questions, it is a love of wisdom. In *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre Hadot expands upon this definition by reminding us that the exercise of philosophy “was not only intellectual but could also be spiritual. Its goal was nothing less than an art of living, and so spiritual exercises were exercises in learning to live the philosophical life” (Hadot, 1997, p.21). To live a philosopher’s life, a life of wisdom is so appealing to me.

Some would compare this to a hamster wheel, the wheel starts to turn by asking the question, “Why, what kind of choices do I have, where do these abilities originate?” Phenomenology will not use reductionism, which the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states, “encompasses a set of ontological, epistemological, and methodological claims about the relations between different scientific domains” (Smith, 2018, p.1). It requires us to open our minds and ask questions.

This turns to metaphysics, which the article, “Metaphysics,” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states is “is a branch of philosophy that deals with the first-place principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space” (van Inwagen, 2023, p.1). For our purposes, we will explore what shapes how people relate to their interaction with Nature, in their attempts to explain how they came to be and what their identity is in a world that feels so much bigger than themselves. Perhaps identifying this cause as something spiritual. The wheel turns full circle back to spirituality, a belief that there is something bigger than me, something divine.

In the same way that being raised Roman Catholic shaped the way that I interact with the world, the culture, and traditions that other people experienced while being raised with a specific religion, culture or family value system, molds who they have become. Douglas Christie asks, “In what sense do questions of religion and spirituality come into play in helping us think about our relationship with the natural world” (Christie, 2016, p.230)? He goes on to say, “the potential role of religious traditions to shape and guide our response to the environmental crisis is clear” (Christie, 2016, p.230). I hope to show the connections that for some their religious foundation has motivated them toward environmental action.

When studying different religions, it is very important to keep an open mind. Eboo Patel reminds us how society and the world has changed in his book on *Interfaith Leadership*. He notes that *pluralization*, “meaning the frequent and intense interaction between people with different identities, has become standard operating procedure” (Patel, 2016, p.41). Think about how many different people you interact with in a day, not just in person, but online, and by phone.

Douglas Allen discusses the strategy of *bracketing* or putting all your previous knowledge or assumptions of other religions and philosophies aside. In his chapter on “Phenomenology of Religion” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. He mentions: “*Epoche*, the Greek term literally means, ‘abstention’ or ‘suspension of judgments’ is only by bracketing the uncritically accepted natural world, by suspending beliefs and judgements, that the phenomenologist can become aware of the phenomena of immediate experience and can gain insight into their essential structures” (2005, p.184). Bracketing

means one must suspend the “facts” that you think you know, the rumors, or stereotypes and bias, about a religious tradition to help understand the essential principles, even though those principles can vary greatly for each religion.

Another idea to consider while studying how religion and nature are connected is eidetic vision, it is “the intuition of essences, often described as eidetic reduction, related to the Greek term *eidos*, which Husserl adopted from Platonic meaning to designate universal essences” (Allen, 2005, p.190). For our purpose here, it is the essence of any religious phenomenon, depending upon the person’s viewpoint or context. The goal is to try and understand the appearance of things or the meaning things have in our experience.

In the article, “Phenomenological Reduction and Yogi Meditation,” author R. Puligandla (1970) acknowledges the above stages of bracketing and eidetic vision in phenomenology and adds a third termed “transcendental reductionism.” He says of consciousness that, “Consciousness is always the consciousness of something (or other). That is, every act of consciousness has an object, or one may say equivalently that every act of consciousness intends something. It’s the point where the transcendental can be seen and described” (Puligandla,1970, p.20). We should also understand the definition of reductionism, which is trying to understand something by turning it into something else. The problem of reductionism mentioned above creates this problem, a trend to understand all human complex issues by reducing them to a simplified theory or idea.

One final definition that I believe is important in keeping an open mind while studying religion is the difference between *a priori* and *a posteriori*. As

explained in the article, “A Priori Justification and Knowledge,” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “*a priori* justification is a certain kind of justification often contrasted with empirical, or *a posteriori*, justification. In contrast, “a posteriori justification requires more than merely understanding a proposition” (Russel, 2020, p.2). When studying religion through a comparative lens, I think it is more important to focus on the institutional beliefs rather than the individual having to prove or provide proof why what they believe is true, since there are a wide range of worldviews and practices that influence how an individual might interpret their individual experience.

In Jack Kornfield’s book, *A Path with Heart*, I think he summarized the right attitude to have when studying different religions:

“When we are faced with a variety of spiritual teachings and practices, we must keep a genuine sense of inquiry. What is the effect of these teachings and practices on myself and others? In his last words, the Buddha said we must be a lamp unto ourselves” (2009, p. 157).

He reminds us that to make any kind of spiritual practice come alive, we must discover in ourselves our own way to become conscious, to live a life of spirit, noting that when we are faced with a variety of spiritual teachings and practice, we must keep a genuine sense of inquiry. “What is the effect of this teaching and practice on myself and others? How does this work? What is my relationship to it? Am I getting caught, frightened, lost in confusion? Am I being led to greater kindness and greater understanding, to greater peace or freedom” (2009 p.158)?

A good example of this comes from the parable of the six blind monks and the elephant. A group of blind monks who have never come across an elephant before try to explain what it is by each touching a different part of its body. Then each monk describes and defines what it is by their limited experience of touching it. In some versions they even come to blows over their disagreements of what it

is. You can see in the painting below the blind monks trying to identify the elephant from examining its individual parts. The elephant looks just as frustrated as the people examining it.



Itcho Hanabusa, *Blind monks examining an elephant*, 1888.

The moral of the story is that we tend to always say we are right based on our own finite experience. Interestingly, author Idries Shah, used this parable in his book, *The Elephant in the Dark* to refer to the long interaction between Christianity and Islam. Shah uses a Sufi perspective to show that Christianity and Islam stem from one origin (1974, p. 1-3).

In my opinion there are two lessons that come from this parable. Each blind person is partially correct, but only partially, as from the perspective of the elephant they are all wrong. Like studying religion, each religion is complex, multi-layered, and is valued by its adherents, but one should avoid saying that one is more virtuous than the other. And from the perspective of the elephant, each is wrong because a part cannot understand the whole.

A range of perspectives is needed to understand the whole. We need to study all religions to understand them all. In the case of this thesis, we will be exploring some Eastern religions as well as some Indigenous peoples, acknowledging that there are many other religions and Indigenous peoples that will not be discussed here. It is very difficult to understand all the variations within any one tradition, or what it means to practice that religion from the point of view of an adherent/believer.

This is the reason why I chose to format the thesis in this manner, after a summary of the basic core tenants a creation story to explore how someone may be trying to understand the mystery of Nature based on those core beliefs and then art, either in painting or poetry for the emotional connection between a person's faith and Nature. By viewing each religion and its basic beliefs and practices we may be able to understand how a possible foundation has been formed to impact their interactions with Nature.

Chapter 1: Hinduism

According to an article, “Religion and Science” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Hinduism is the world’s third largest religion, though the term “Hinduism” is an awkward catch-all phrase that denotes diverse religious and philosophical traditions that emerged on the Indian subcontinent between 500 BCE and 300 CE” (DeCruz, 2022, p.1). Perhaps the author is considering the term Hinduism as a “catch all phrase,” because Hinduism encompasses a wide range of beliefs, practices, and traditions that have evolved over thousands of years and includes numerous sects, philosophical schools, and deities.

Hindu referred to those who lived in the valley of the Indus River. There were a wide range of religious traditions that British and Indian nationalists lumped together as an “ism” to see the range as the equivalent to a world religion. To understand Hinduism is to understand that Atman, or self, equals Brahman, or soul.

Atman is “self.” It is you as an individual self, you are independent. It means that you need to satisfy your own desires and take what you need to flourish, not in a self-serving way, but to achieve self-realization. Love yourself, love what you are. Atman could be considered your consciousness, and your true essence. This includes everything about you, your personality, love for what you are even with your mistakes and flaws. Atman is your unchanging core self, who you were and who you will be, not just in this life but through the process of birth and death. Contemporary Hindu philosophers say that Atman is your consciousness. “Even the smallest particle has consciousness when it realizes it is being observed it disappears” (Atmanspacher, 2020, p. 6).

Author Keya Maitra suggests, in an article, “Consciousness and Attention in the Bhagavad Gita,” that consciousness is a central topic in Hindu philosophy. This is because, “this philosophy understands reality in terms of brahman and atman, typically translated as the self, and consciousness is conceived as the essential marker of self” (Maitra, 2022, p. 1). The author is trying to make a point that the *Bhagavad Gita*, an ancient Hindu text that will be discussed later in this text, addresses the concept of *atman*, in relation to self-realization and one’s duty in life. I remember when I read the *Bhagavad Gita* for the first time, one of the interesting things that struck me was when Krishna reminds Arjuna to “be a warrior” because it is his duty, even though it conflicts with his morals; this is who he is, a warrior, and even if he dies the *atman* will still exist.

The Sanatana Dharma is another name for Hinduism for some Hindu philosophers (Prothero, 2011, p.135). In this case, the word *dharma*, means religion or religious duties. Sanatana refers to the eternal, or everlasting nature of the Dharma. The name *Sanatana Dharma*, can mean, the “Eternal Religion, emphasizing the belief that the religion was based on eternal truths” (Bhaskarananda, 2002, p.2). Sanatana has no end because there is no beginning, it is a continuous circle. According to *The Essentials of Hinduism*, “dharma plays a very important role in Hindu ethics. Because while dharma usually means religion, it also means moral and ethical duty. One definition of dharma says, Whatever sustains is dharma” (Bhaskarananda, 2002, p.98).

Karma comes from this, dharma is your duty, responsibility and moral obligation and karma is the consequences of the choices that you make and actions that you take when performing these duties and obligations. Just like with Nature, winter, spring, summer, and fall, there is a cause and effect. The actions that happen in Nature, whether

they are naturally occurring or are caused by humans, these actions will have an impact on the outcome that happens in Nature, because there is an interconnectedness between humans and the environment. The notion of karma is an important belief in Hinduism. It comes from the Sanskrit term meaning action. The interpretation means, “action, but often refers to corresponding reactions, or to the accumulated stock of such reactions. So, when Hindus talk about good karma and bad karma, they are referring to the stored reactions that gradually produce and reveal the soul’s unique destiny” (Das, 2012, p.72).

One of the main characteristics of *Santana Dharma* is the Divine. It is one but has many faces. Hence one might ask whether Hinduism is monotheistic or polytheistic. David Bassinger, in an article, “Religious Diversity,” states, “While Hinduism typically recognizes many gods and goddesses, it is not polytheistic. Those varieties of Hinduism that count these many deities as aspects of a single God can be considered monotheistic. Other strands of Hinduism are henotheistic, worshiping one deity but recognizing many others” (Basinger, 2020, p.2). Some parts of Hinduism view many deities as one aspect of a single God, while others see this as one God with the acknowledgement of many other deities. This highlights the diversity within Hinduism and shows how different perspectives can coexist.

The five core concepts of Hinduism come from the philosophy of the *Upanishads* (this text will be discussed in greater detail below), spiritual texts that offer insight into the nature of existence and provide guidance for an individual: 1) Brahman- the core energy that contains everything. 2) Atman- the self-energy of the human. Here there is no dark, only shining because Atman was Brahman essentially. There is no darkness or

negativity within the true nature of the self. Atman is the self-energy of every human; it is a divine essence. 3) Samsara- often known as the wheel of suffering and is linked to reincarnation. It is the process of birth, life, death, and rebirth that adherents seek to be released from. 4) Karma- action and the consequences of those actions. 5) *Moksha*- liberation, deliverance, or release from the cycle of samsara. There are two ways out of *Samsara*. The first way out is *Samkhya*; it is dualistic and assumes two realities, namely, *Purusha* the self, and *Prakriti* the material universe. The second way is *Advaita Vedanta*, the monistic or illusion that life is real, when only Brahman is real (Kim, 2017). If our experiences, emotions, and achievements are all an illusion, what is the point of chasing “the shiny penny?” Is it necessary for us to need the next new gadget, the biggest and the best flat screen tv, or relentlessly view filtered images on social media? Or is it more important to maintain a sense of equanimity and presence.

Hindus use yoga to connect with Brahman. *Yuj* is the Sanskrit word that means, “union, to unite or to connect.” It is the origin word for yoga. There are four types of yoga associated with Hinduism. The first is *raja*, it is a meditation of the mind typically practiced with open eyes and senses. Second, *jnana* is more rational, and is an educational path of studying scripture. The third is *karma* active and is the type of yoga associated with action, it is a collection of persons deeds and acts, but deeds that are performed selflessly, as *seva*. And finally, *bhakti* is more emotional, this type of yoga focuses on the person’s emotions, it helps someone express their feelings in different ways. Many are familiar with Karma and Bhakti yoga mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita, which is a Hindu scripture (Fisher, 2003, p.59-62). Yoga is used as a meditation to calm the mind. I once had a professor, Dr. Heon Kim, who compared the mind to a drunk monkey that had been

bitten by a scorpion. You calm the mind during yoga to realize we, humans, are part of Brahmin.

Within the four types of yoga are the eight limbs of yoga. *Yama* is the moral code, a person's morality that states no harm to others, nonviolence. *Niyama*, religious conduct and religious observance, *Asana* is physical practice, the more you can keep the difficult position, the more you forget the drunk monkey. *Prana Yama* is breath control, concentrating to follow your breath, *Pratyahara* is sense control, *Dharana* and *Dhyana* could be the most important characteristics of Hindu meditation since it is a "one pointedness," its intention is to cultivate a state of uninterrupted concentration, to go beyond the limits of your ego. *Dhyana* is the means to realize that Atman equals Brahman, and *Samadhi*, which is taking one object for your meditation. This could be a chant or fixating on one object (Bhaskarananda, 2002, p.122-124). Yoga is a spiritual practice in Hinduism that at times tries to unite the self with all aspects of the divine including Nature. Perhaps by connecting to this divine presence some people could notice the interconnectedness they have with the environment, especially while practicing yoga in Nature.

The most popular chant in yoga is Om or Aum: A is the creation of sound, U is maintenance, M is the destroyer, thus this chant encapsulates a full cycle of life. Everything goes through this practice of creation, maintenance, and death. According to the Upanishads OM is the highest Brahman. The Upanishads are a group of hymns and chants for use in sacrificial rituals. They stem from Vedic literature. "*Veda*" means knowledge. Vedic literature refers to a specific body of texts of India origin. There are

four main Vedas, “classified as *shruti*, revealed knowledge. These formed the basis for hundreds of elaborations, designated as *smriti*, remembered knowledge (Das, 2012, p.23).

According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, a much later source of Hindu scripture, just saying this word brings you toward Brahman. The key teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* include duty, responsibility, self-realization, paths to liberation and detachment and equanimity (Das, 2012, p.68-72).

Each one of the symbols of AUM are signified by deities, A is connected to Brahma the creator, the U is Vishnu the preserver, and M is Shiva the destroyer. All three together are called Trimurti, “three forms.” Brahma is rarely worshiped. Vishnu and Shiva are most widely regarded as Supreme. “They are often called the Hindu Trinity, but it does not resemble the tripartite Godhead in Christianity” (Das, 2012, p.120). These three deities take joint responsibility for the world. For our purposes it is important to point out that these deities are sometimes known as the “incarnations of the three qualities of nature.” “Brahman is deemed responsible for creation, Vishnu for sustenance, and Shiva for destruction” (Das, 2012, p. 120). Looking at these three deities in their relationship to nature, Brahma is responsible for all life in Nature, Vishnu maintains the balance-perhaps needed now more than ever, and Shiva, the destruction that is a necessary part of creation and renewal. All three signify the divine in Nature.

Creation stories, sometimes called myths, show how certain cultures and religions interpreted natural events and how they get integrated into that culture or community. In his book, *Alpha the Myths of Creation*, Charles Long states, “there is a widespread notion that creation myths are a prescientific attempt to explain the world; we must further admit that creation myths do perform an explanatory role in the life and society that believes in

them (Long, 1963, p. 16). While many will call these myths, some people believe there are truths in these stories. “It has long seemed to me that people are always asking four basic questions: who started it? Are we going to make it? Where are we going to put it? Who’s going to clean it up? Myths are not only the earliest ways of answering these questions, but they also evoke the endless depths of people’s thought and imagination” (Watts, as cited by Long, 1963, p. xi). Watts is pointing out the fundamental questions that creation and apocalyptic myth answer, how things came to be created, how they are sustained, and how they are destroyed, echoing the three phases of AUM.

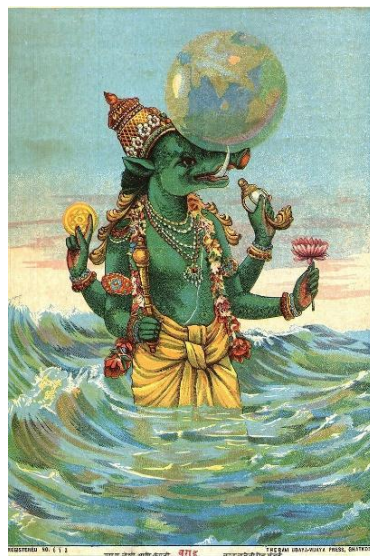
Most religions have several different creation stories, and it is an interesting topic to explore how each religion or philosophy views the beginning of their world. One of the fascinating creation stories in Hinduism, that connects to Nature’s mystery in the ocean depths, water, and the creatures of the Earth, is the creation myth from Vishnu Purana, as told here from Charles Long’s book, *Alpha: The Myths of Creation*.

Maitreya asks, “Tell me mighty sage, how in the commencement of the present Kalpa, Narayana, who is Brahma, created all existing things.” Parasara replies, “At the close of the past Kalpa, the divine Brahma endowed with the quality of goodness, awoke from his night’s sleep, and beheld the universe void. The waters are called Nara because they were the offspring of the supreme spirit. He, the lord, concluding that within the waters lay the earth, and being desirous to raise it up, created another form for that purpose, and, as, in preceding Kalpas, he has assumed the shape of a fish or a tortoise, so, in this, he took the figure of a boar. He adopted this form for the preservation of the whole earth, and universal soul, and plunged into the ocean. He then rose, the mighty supporter of the world, being hymned by the earth, emitted a low murmuring sound, like the chanting of the Sama Veda, and the mighty boar, whose eyes were like the lotus, and whose body, vast as the Mila Mountain, was of the dark color of the lotus leaves, uplifted upon his ample tusks the earth from the lowest regions. As he reared his head, the water shed from his brow purified the great sages. Through the indentations made by his hoofs, the water rushed into the lower worlds with a thunderous noise. Trembling he rose, supporting the earth and dripping with moisture. Then the sages praised the stern eyed upholder of the earth.” It goes on to say how he then leveled the earth, dividing it into portions, by mountains or continents, in like

manner to the four spheres, earth, sky, heaven and the sphere of sages (Long, 1963, p. 201-202).

The story highlights the divine nature of Brahma as creator of all things, the boar uplifting the earth signifying the interconnectedness between the divine and Nature, as well as the power of awe of nature, and the divine presence within Nature.

The story is beautifully illustrated in this painting of the mighty boar rising out of the depths of the ocean with the world suspended on his sturdy tusks.



Raja Ravi Varma, *Varaha holds the earth as a globe*

From this story and image, you can formulate how someone of the Hindu faith is trying to understand the world and energy of Nature around them. It helps people to understand that the Earth and soil are essential to survival, the power of water and evoke a sense of awe and wonder for the mountains and sky. Elizabeth McAnally reminds us of how sacred water is considered by Hindus in *Loving Water Across Religions*: “the Yamuna River is believed to be the liquid embodiment of the goddess Yamuna, the divine mother who nourishes her children with life-giving water. She purifies the sins of those who bathe in the waters helping to liberate them from death” (2019, p.83).

Just as people question how the Earth and life began, they also wonder what comes after this life. Will we still be part of this Earth or will our energy, our soul travel to another existence is one way of framing the question? Other concerns are will we be rewarded or punished for our actions in this life? Each religion or philosophy has different ideas on this subject, and the Hindu version will be spoken about here. Jerry Walls describes this in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*.

“Kalki is an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu. He will be in one of the four periods of the endless cycle of existence. He will rejuvenate existence by ending the darkest and destructive period and ushering in Satya Yuga, or the Yuga of Truth when humanity is governed by the gods and every manifestation or work is at its purest ideal and humanity will allow intrinsic goodness to rule supreme. Kalki will do this while riding a white horse and handling a fiery sword. Contemporary Hindu eschatology believes that Vishnu will reincarnate to Shiva who will dissolve and regenerate the universe” (Walls, 2010, p. 178).

Hindu people, the same as everyone else, acknowledge that there is evil in the world. The fiery sword could represent divine power since Kalki is the avatar of Vishnu, a positive force in this case to bring about the end of darkness and a time of regeneration. It’s interesting to see that at the end of this story, the ideal world will be run in a way that is the purest form of goodness. Most people long for good (what that means is debatable, as some long for power or wealth, and define attaining these statuses as good). It is also notable to mention that one of the core tenets of Hindu beliefs, regeneration, has a place as well. In this story, Shiva is regenerating the entire universe, by Kalki ending the “destructive period,” this could signify the continuous cycle of reincarnation, where people are born, die and then are reborn.

As in most faiths, religious beliefs can be expressed in artistic paths of art, song, and poetry, as in this poem by the Indian Hindu sage Ramana Maharshi. It relates to the

above-mentioned beliefs of Hinduism's concept of self, an interconnectedness with all of creation.

“The Self is Known to Everyone”

The Self is known to everyone but not clearly
 You always exist.
 The Be-ing is the Self. ‘I am’ is the name of God.
 Of all definitions of God,
 none is indeed so well put as the biblical statement
 “I am that I am’ in *Exodus*.
 There are other statements,
 such as *Brahmaivaham*, *Aham Brahmasmi* and *Soham*.
 But none is so direct as the name Jehovah=I am.
 The Absolute Being is what is-It is the Self.
 It is God. Knowing the Self, God is known.
 In fact God is none other than the Self
 -Ramana Maharshi

If you can acknowledge the divine is present in yourself, I think you can consider that its presence is in everything in Nature.

Of course, there are many other aspects of the Hindu religion, but let’s use these core tenants: Brahman, Dharma and Karma as well as the philosophy that Hinduism is diverse allowing for different interpretations and individual beliefs, creation story, and understanding to provide a link to Hindu understanding of Nature, which we defined in the introduction as the natural world of trees, animals, humans, all flora and fauna, the elements of earth, water, wind, and fire, the mystery of the birth, death, and power of these elements.

Many Hindus feel a connection to Nature at its very core. Gopal Patel and Mat McDermott help us to understand this through the concept of *rta*, “that there is a highly evolved, purposeful order to the cosmic ecosystem we inhabit. The worldview engendered by *rta* is holistic, with all of us making up this order being interconnected as

a natural system” (Patel, McDermott, 2016, p. 41). All must contribute to the cycle of life. Hindus who feel a connection to Nature ask their followers to see God in every object including the air and water. The Bhagavad Gita states, “I pervade the Universe. All objects in the Universe rest on me as pearls on the thread of a garland” Hindus believe that there is soul in all plants and animals. “They see all beings as connected like a link in a chain, if a link in the chain is broken, the ecological balance gets disturbed” (Patel, McDermott, 2016, p.41).

Some Hindus like Gopal Patel have been inspired by their faith, he explains this in an article, “Hindu Worldviews and the Religious-Environmental Movement.”

“Hindu environmental action starts with an understanding of the concept of *rta*: It suggests that we should contemplate the manifestation and organization of nature before we do something that may influence it. As humans, we are not separate from nature. We cannot cause permanent harm to nature without some degree also harming ourselves” (Patel, 2016, p. 1).

In Hinduism taking care of the environment is important because it is believed that there is an interconnectedness between us and the environment around us. If we take action that might affect Nature, we should think about how this might upset the order of the natural world. By harming Nature, ultimately, we harm ourselves.

Most Hindus see the Earth as mother. The Earth provides food and shelter. If we do not take care of her, she will not be able to take care of us. The “Hindu Faith Statement on the Environment” talks about how Hindu beliefs regarding agriculture could provide understanding on how to approach farming through acknowledging how, “fertilizer contributes to hurting the Earth, not allowing earthworms and bacteria to maintain the fertility of the soil by using chemicals and insecticides. These destroy plants

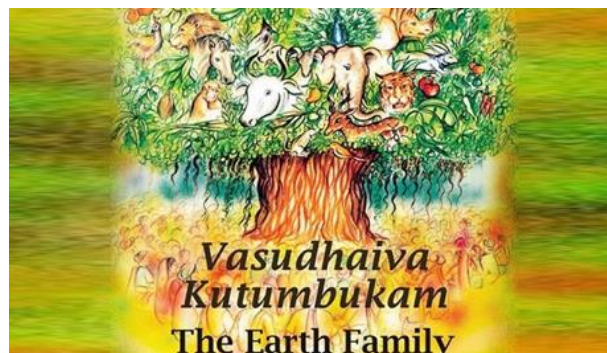
and forests, when humans do this, it helps deplete oxygen and increase carbon dioxide into the atmosphere” (Teertha, 2003).

This philosophy has not only inspired individuals; it has also inspired organizations, these organizations, and these organizations are having a worldwide impact. The organization Navdanya, “the gift of the nine seeds” is grounded in Hindu principles and upheld by science, as stated in the Parliament of World Religions (PWR) book, *Faith for the Earth*. The organization promotes “nonviolent agriculture in harmony with nature and our fellow beings. The organization supports seed preservation, soil health, and food sovereignty and opposes the commodification of nature including genetic patenting” (United Nations Environment Program and Parliament of the World’s Religions, 2020, p. 44-45).

Their website navdanya.org has their mission statement as: “Conserving diversity and reclaiming commons.”

“Navdanya is an Earth centric, women centric and farmer led movement for the protection of biological and cultural diversity. We live and practice the philosophy of Earth Democracy as an Earth Family (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam) with no separation between nature and humans and no hierarchies between species, culture, gender, race and faiths....this gift of “dana” of Navdanya(nine seeds) is the ultimate gift-it is a gift of life, of heritage and continuity that we bring to you through more than three decades of service to Earth and humanity.”

This is a picture from their website, from which you can get a sense of their mission statement.



The painting illustrates how we are all connected. When we farm, the Earth supports our lives through its nourishment of the livestock, crops, and ultimately ourselves, it is a cycle.

If there is no beginning and life is a continuous cycle, then isn't it imperative to make sure that we care for the Earth and Nature. Hinduism teaches that all living beings are interconnected, taking care of the Earth and Nature would be viewed to acknowledge this. Reincarnation is linked to karma, that states that every action has a consequence, if we impact the environment in a negative way this will ultimately have a negative impact on our rebirth. This cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is known as *samsara*. Viewing Nature and the Earth through the lens of the Upanishads could we consider Nature as Brahman? Containing everything, a shining source of energy that connects us all. Embracing the fact that we are part of Brahmin. Hinduism sees deities as manifestations of Brahman, many times with specific aspects of Nature. The Hindu eschatology states that Shiva will regenerate the universe, there is a part of me that feels our life's energy will cycle back into the universe and live on, becoming a part of Nature.

Chapter 2: Buddhism

The Buddha's teachings spoke about suffering. Changing and unstable climate conditions, rising air and water temperatures due to global warming, agricultural practices that insist on using pesticides and chemicals that destroy the soil, and islands of trash the size of Texas pollute our oceans; all these things point to the simple fact that the Earth itself is suffering. Many other religions and philosophies offer salvation by some kind of Divine intervention. Buddhism however places the onus on the individual, it is your responsibility to end one's suffering, and I think that it is our responsibility to end the Earth's suffering as well.

The core concepts of Buddhism are *Atman*, everything changes, *No Atman*, *no Brahman*. In, *Living Religions Eastern Traditions*, these concepts are described as, "atman is the subtle self or soul that can be discovered by turning away from worldly things and looking inward. This unseen all-pervading reality is what is known as Brahman" (Fisher, 2003, p.48). Some contemporary philosophers view this as your consciousness. I think that Brahman could be viewed as all of Nature including the universe, and atman is everything in Nature. This is a human centric view, because it is our responsibility to all things that exist in Nature to care for and maintain a balanced relationship with. Who we become can motivate us into action. If we can relieve this suffering from ourselves and the Earth, we can expect to attain peace.

Details of the Buddha's life are limited. Many of his teachings had not been organized until hundreds of years after his death. Most believe that he was born around 563 BCE, and his name was Siddhartha. He was born into great wealth; his family gave him everything he could want to entice him to follow in his father's footsteps. Despite his

family's efforts Siddhartha continued to recognize that no matter what he had it was not permanent, it was only temporary, and death was all around. Realizing this, he left his family, including his wife and child, and became a wandering ascetic, someone who gives up all their possessions and looks for teachers and leaders of philosophy. He traveled for many years trying various techniques and studying with many teachers. Until finally he began contemplating the nature of suffering on his own. "Through these practices he experienced Supreme Enlightenment, by realizing the cause of all suffering and the means to end it. This allowed him to become an enlightened being, a Buddha" (Fisher, 2003, p.103-105).

In the Buddha's very first sermon he taught the "Four Noble Truths," which all later teachings revolved around. Fisher describes the first Noble Truth as: "1. Life inevitably involves suffering, imperfect and unsatisfactory. 2. Suffering originates in our desires. 3. Suffering will cease if all desires cease. 4. There is a way to realize this state: The Noble Eight-Fold Path (Fisher, 2003, p.110). When you are released from suffering and find peace this is known as nirvana. These four noble truths provide guidance for individuals seeking to understand the nature of existence and work toward alleviating suffering in themselves and others. Perhaps if people looked at the connection between themselves and Nature, more compassion could be felt to help relieve the suffering of the earth.

The Eight-Fold Path is a guide for some people to follow to guide their actions and behaviors. It is a way to promote personal development to achieve enlightenment. The Eight-Fold Path includes: 1. Right Understanding 2. Right Intention or Thought 3. Right Speech 4. Right Action 5. Right Livelihood 6. Right Effort 7. Right Mindfulness 8.

Right Concentration (Fisher, 2003, p.112-114). As with the Four Noble Truths mentioned above, perhaps by practicing the steps of the Eight-Fold Path, it may help some people realize the interconnectedness they have with Nature. This is a path towards reaching nirvana. When you are released from suffering and find peace this is known as nirvana.

The word nirvana refers to, “extinguishing a flame due to lack of fuel.” Nirvana is the extinction of aging and dying. In *Living Religions Eastern Traditions*, it is explained as, “the only way to end the cycle in which desire feeds the wheel of suffering is to end all cravings and lead a passion-free existence that has no karmic consequences. It is no change, no suffering, no desire, Anatman” (Fisher, 2003, p.116). This would mean that for an individual to stop their own suffering, the suffering they are creating for themselves by having strong desires, in some cases trying to “keep up with the Joneses,” they need to stop those desires altogether. If you can achieve this, you will be able to stop the suffering of the constant cycle of birth and death.

The Buddha could not talk about nirvana because even if he described it, he realized that everyone has different perspectives, it would be different for everyone. However, there are two types of Nirvana. “Nirvana without remainder” or “complete nirvana” and “Nirvana with remainder” or “nirvana with a trace,” this is what Siddhartha did when he became an “enlightened being” and came back to teach. Some compare this to Jesus, but say Jesus bought a boat and the Buddha taught people how to swim (Fisher, 2003, p.115).

One of the most interesting concepts of Buddhism is the Wheel of Samsara or reincarnation and change. “There are multiple levels of the wheel, each with its own

plane of existence. In Buddhism, one level of being sets another into motion, every event depends on the cause. This is the process of *karma* or our acts of will” (Fisher, 2003, p.114). These acts will depend on which plane we get reborn on, based on our past karma. The wheel spins round and round, this is the cycle of *samsara*, the repeated experience of suffering, death, and rebirth.

Yama is the ghost of death who holds the wheel. There are six worlds that hold Buddha Nature, that is, “direct intuition of cosmic unity, or the void,” within the wheel. Gods, Asura/Demons-evil, Hungry ghosts, Hell, Animals, and Humans. Desires fuel the wheel. The three animals within the wheel are the pig, symbolizing greed and attachment, the snake, symbolic of hate and envy, and the rooster that represents ignorance and delusion. These are the things that make us suffer, and that keep us from realizing enlightenment (Fisher, 2003, p. 114).

Branches of Buddhism

Buddhism has several major branches, with two primary divisions. Theravada Buddhism, also known as the “Way of the Elders,” is one of the earliest and most conservative branches. And Mahayana Buddhism, also known as the “Greater Vehicle,” because it is felt that they have a bigger raft that can accommodate more people, it tends to be a broader form. Zen Buddhism is a school of Mahayana Buddhism that emphasizes direct experience and meditation. Vajrayana Buddhism is the most advanced esoteric path, that is supposed to speed up the path to enlightenment. It teaches respect for all beings. The Vajrayana branch of Buddhism is more “religious.” Vajrayana uses rituals, ceremonies and symbolic practices that resemble religious rituals found in other faiths.

Just because it has the perception of being more “religious” doesn’t mean it lacks any of the aspects of other branches of Buddhism (Fisher, 2003, p.118-130).

Mahayana Buddhism is a way of practicing Buddhism that can focus on compassion and helping others, realizing that everything is connected. Most of the people who practice Mahayana Buddhism emphasize a distinction between monastics and common people. It is a more liberal approach meant to include everyone, practitioners of this branch of Buddhism aim not only to become enlightened themselves but also to guide others in that journey (Fisher, 2003, p. 125).

One of the more perplexing concepts of Mahayana Buddhism is the concept of, *sunyata*, it means an “emptiness or void,” an undifferentiated state. This term is discussed in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, “one of the oldest sutras in Mahayana Buddhism that celebrate the liberating experience of emptiness and are foundational texts for most Mahayana” (Fisher, 2003, p. 128). Around the second or third century the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna elaborated on this sutra, stating that, “all earthly things arise and pass away, as a process of events dependent on other events, and having no independent origin and no eternal reality” (Fisher, 2003, p. 128). This concept would challenge a conventional view of reality, and the nature of existence. It offers a way to change your perspective and end suffering.

Out of the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures comes the Heart Sutra. The Heart Sutra is used ceremonially throughout East Asia, it is the idea of the emptiness of all things. Professor David Chappell sees this as, “unparalleled in religious history, the insight into the impermanence of all things, and their connectedness, gives Mahayana a self-critical profundity and an inclusive acceptance of diversity, which provides balance

in the midst of movement, and peace in the midst of compassion” (Chappel, as cited in Fisher, 2003, p.129). So, nothing is fixed and everything changes, but everything is connected. This would offer a way for practitioners to become self-aware while engaging with the world and perhaps Nature as well.

In the first chapter I discussed the importance of understanding the creation stories of a religion or philosophy because these myths help us understand how certain cultures first saw the world. For this chapter, however, it is not as clear, because most of Buddhism doesn't place emphasis on creation.

In the Theravada branch of Buddhism, there is a large collection of ancient scriptures, a group of these scriptures are called the *Pali Canon*, also known as the *Tipitaka*. I think it is important to mention these scriptures because they had been collected immediately after the Buddha's death by a council of five hundred elders who had studied directly with him. “The Digha Nikaya section of the Pitaka, which is the first of three divisions of the Tipitaka, is an ancient canon also referred to as the three baskets, from the practice of storing palm leaf manuscripts in wicker baskets” (Fisher, 2003, p. 118).

In the *Encyclopedia of Creation Myth*, authors David and Margaret Leeming remind us of a story in which the Buddha speaks of the end of the world and the creation of a new one. The vision contains familiar nature elements, while speaking of primeval waters.

“Everything will be covered in water and darkness. For a long time, there will be no sun, moon, stars or seasons, and there will be no creatures, no humans. After a still longer time, earth will form on the waters, as skin forms on hot milk. Then some greedy being from a former birth will forsake the heavenly radiance of the Buddha soul-life for the life of the body and take pleasure in the earth's sweetness. Then others will follow, and they will eventually become more body

than radiant Buddha soul. As their light fades, the sun, moon, and stars will appear” (1994, p. 35).

The Four Noble Truths taught us that in life there is suffering and our desire for more help creates this suffering, and as mentioned above, this suffering comes from our desires. This “greedy being” created his own suffering by forsaking the radiance of the Buddha to take pleasure. Because of these actions others followed and created more suffering for themselves. These actions helped create their/our world but at what cost? I mentioned in the opening of this chapter how the Earth is suffering through climate change and the environmental impact that humans are having on the planet. We are creating our own suffering by ravaging the sweetness of the Earth.

This story stands in contrast to the attitude toward the earth manifest in a famous scene in the Buddha’s life. This is one of my favorite stories and there is also an art piece that symbolizes a connection to the Earth within Buddhism: “Buddha Calling the Earth to Witness.” This piece signifies when the Buddha attained enlightenment. At first, he began a period of reflection, sitting in deep meditation under the Bodhi Tree (enlightenment) at Bodhgaya, he first recalled all his previous lives, and then had a realization of the wheel of deaths and rebirths. Finally, he recognizes the cause for suffering and the means for ending it. In the image below, the Buddha holds his right hand downward, touching the earth. Fisher explains the image: “in the earth-touching gesture with which he calls the earth goddess to affirm that he is entitled to attain enlightenment following his triumph over Mara, the destroyer. Some stories say when the Buddha reached down and touched the earth and asked, are you, my witness? the Earth roared back, I am your witness” (Fisher, 2003, p.107).



Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Buddha Calling the Earth to Witness*

Mara, the destroyer, was trying to influence and shake the Buddha from attaining enlightenment; he wanted the Buddha to keep these insights to himself. The Buddha called the Earth to witness that he now knew himself and was compassionately determined to set the wheel of teaching in motion and that he had never lost his self-discipline (Fisher, 2003, p.107).

The connection to the Earth and the feeling it brings to our hearts inspires not just sculpture but poetry as well. Ryokan was a Zen poet who lived from 1758-1831. He wrote many poems about nature. “Zen Buddhism traveled from India and China to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam around 50CE, and it absorbed elements of Daoism along the way. In the fifth century, Bodhidharma, a successor to the Buddha, traveled to a monastery in Northern China. While there he became the first founder of Ch’an Buddhism, the yogic stage of meditation. This way then found its way to Japan and became known as Zen” (Fisher, 2003, p. 134).

Zen Buddhism is less “religious,” it is only deemed so due to its lack of more ritual oriented religious practices, taking a more direct and experiential approach.

Adherents practice a “zazen” sitting meditation where a practitioner could follow the breath, or contemplate koans, a question that boggles the mind, such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” “Zen Buddhism claims to preserve the essence of Buddhism while dismissing scriptures, Buddha and *Bodhisattva*’s (beings dedicated to attaining enlightenment), instead opting to experience direct cosmic unity by practicing *zazen*, a sitting meditation that is meant to obtain absolute freedom and not allow any thought to be caused by external objects” (Fisher 2003 pp.134).

This poem by Ryokan was about how he is not separate from the natural world, reflecting the meditation practice of zazen in Zen Buddhism is meant to make someone be able to be tranquil in times when others would be excited, saddened or upset. It is meant for us to practice patience.

No bird above these wild hills.
 Garden leaves fall one by one.
 Desolate autumn winds.
 A man alone in thin black robes.
 Ryokan (1758-1831)

Ryokan is present in noticing there are no birds in the sky, present in witnessing a leaf fall, present in the wind against his face, and little to keep him warm- he is alone with just his breath, observing without reacting.

I can relate to this one-pointedness of mind. When I am alone in Nature, I feel most present. For me, I experience a kind of presence when a gentle breeze brushes past a pine tree and I see the pine needles gently sway, my mind is clear.

Perhaps one of the most important pieces of art for me personally are the Zen ox-herding paintings and poems. These are symbolic paintings meant to help with the path to enlightenment through the story of an ox herder and his lost ox, his true self. The

paintings represent an ongoing process of clearing our mind. In the first paintings the ox is black and stubborn, this is meant to signify our clouded mind.



Gyokusei Jikihara Sensei, *Ox Herding*

Throughout the series of paintings, the ox becomes lighter in color and eventually white and manageable. The final painting portrays the ox herder entering the marketplace with a smile on his face or sometimes playing an instrument. The ox herder has realized enlightenment and is liberated from ignorance and full of compassion. The paintings are meant to show the ongoing process of Zen training (Kopp, 2018, p.11-16).

Even though Buddhists do not have many creation stories, they do have examples of eschatology. Jan Nattier in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* reminds us that “to speak of Buddhist eschatology may be a bit of a misnomer,” since Buddhism speaks of a beginningless samsara or a cycle of birth and death” (as cited in Walls, 2008, p.151).

Nattier states:

“There are three sources of cosmic destruction: dissolution by fire, by water, and by wind. Buddhist sources hold that destruction is never complete. Instead, a few of the upper heavenly realms are spared. No matter if the Earth is destroyed by fire, wind, or water there are still heavens known as the pure abodes that will remain. It is in these surviving heavens that those living beings who have not attained nirvana will be reborn to the next period of manifestation of the world” (as cited in Walls, 2008, p.154).

Nature always finds a way, even though we as humans are having a negative effect on the environment, perhaps some of our resources will remain. But even if this is the case, it is still our responsibility to take care of the Earth not only for ourselves but for those who come after us, who knows, if the wheel does in fact continue to turn, it could be you again.

Contemporary Buddhist Attitudes toward Nature

One contemporary (recently deceased) Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh has greatly influenced the development of Buddhist attitudes toward nature. One of the founders of “socially engaged” Buddhism, Hanh used nature to teach his followers. For instance, in *The Heart Sutra: The Fullness of Emptiness* he makes direct correlations to Nature using the dynamic imagery of Nature to express his points. I found it to be very impactful. He mentions a time when he was sitting in a park absorbed in contemplation looking at a leaf on a tree. He has a discussion with this leaf and discovers that the leaf is the mother of the tree, in contrast to how we usually think of the tree as the mother of the leaf. As he explains, “there is a complete relationship between the tree and the leaf, the sap the roots take up is only water and minerals, not good enough to nourish the tree so the tree distributes that sap to the leaves. The tree takes help from the sun through the leaves; therefore, the leaves are also the mother of the tree.” The leaf goes on to say that “this leaf is only a form, a small part of what it is. That it was inside the tree before it was a leaf, when it falls off the tree it will go into the soil and help nourish the tree.” In part, this communicates that there is no death, no end, but instead a cycle of becoming. Isn’t this the case for us all? Perhaps that is why so much emotion is felt when engaging

Nature, because we realize we are Nature. Thich Nhat Hahn also noted that he sees wisdom in the Heart Sutra. “You must see life. You should not say, life of the leaf, but life in the leaf, and life in the tree. My life is just Life, and you can see me in the tree” (Hahn, 2022, p.11).

Hanh is also known for his articulation of what he, and his followers, called the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings for the Order of Interbeing. Many of these relate to incorporating Buddhist thinking into ecology some examples are:

- “1. Openness- I am determined to learn the art of mindful living by touching the wonderful, refreshing and healing elements that are inside and around me, and by nourishing seeds of joy, peace, love and understanding in myself, thus facilitating the work of transformation, and healing my consciousness.
2. Non-attachment to Views- We are committed to learning and practicing nonattachment to views and being open to others experiences and insights to benefit from the collective wisdom.
5. Compassionate, Healthy Living- Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, we are determined not to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying nor to take as the aim of our life fame, power, wealth, or sensual pleasure, which can bring much suffering and despair.
10. Protecting the Sangha- A spiritual community should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation.
11. Right Livelihood- Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to the environment and society, I am committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature.
12. Reverence for Life- Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict, we are determined to cultivate nonviolence, compassion, and the insight of interbeing in our daily lives and promote peace education, mindful meditation, and reconciliation within families, communities, ethnic and religious groups, nations and in the world.
13. Generosity- Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing and oppression, I am committed to cultivating loving kindness and learning new ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals” (Hanh, 2020, p.29-84).

These modern-day thoughts on Buddhism clearly complete the argument that Buddhism sees humans as connected to nature at their very core, but there are millions of Buddhists who do not make this connection so clearly. Even so, what does it mean to be a

modern-day Buddhist that faces the challenges of protecting the environment, protecting the sangha (a community of monks)?

In her book, *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement*, Susan M. Darlington describes how Thai Buddhist monks wrap orange clerical robes around trees to protect the forests. “Ordaining” a tree is a “provocative ritual that has become the symbol of a small but influential monastic movement aimed at reversing environmental degradation.” In *Faith and the Earth*, we learn that this movement began in the 1990’s using Buddhist symbols and local villagers. Many of the trees have a sign that reads, “To destroy the forest is to destroy life,” which reflects the wisdom that Thich Nhat Hanh was trying to convey (United Nations Environment Programme and Parliament of the World’s Religions, 2020, p. 29).

Darlington describes the motivation of the monks:

“The monks see the destruction of the forest, pollution of the air and water, and other environmental problems as ultimately caused by people acting through evils, motivated by economic gain and the material benefits of development, industrialization, and consumerism. As monks they believe it is their duty to act against these evils” (Darlington, 2012, p. 23).

These monks are examples of engaged Buddhism, these actions are not just contemplative, but active responses to the suffering of the trees, and hence whole communities. Some people oppose this practice stating that, “the monks challenge what people consider sacred, by the monks placing the trees on the same level it goes against the sacred and social hierarchy, and even mainstream monks accuse environmental monks of going beyond appropriate boundaries” (Darlington, 2012, p.23).

But there are other types of Buddhism that would just view deforestation as one more example of suffering, and remind their followers that all is impermanent, and to not

be attached to trees. These are very different attitudes. The main goal of Buddhist practice is to reach freedom from suffering by seeing the world as it is and abandoning the distorted projections that our thoughts and emotions create. In the article, “Ethics in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism,” the author, Charles Goodman reminds us that Buddhism, “upholds lofty and demanding ethical values,” (2021, p.1). The Pali canon mentioned above reminds us of the importance of refraining from harm to any living being, promoting a compassionate and ethical way of life. These monks are only trying to follow the teachings of the Buddha.

Critics of “eco-Buddhists” say that they are changing the doctrines of a millennia of Buddhist teachings to make it fit into current environmental challenges. Ian Harris speaks to this, finding the difficulty in comparing the word “nature” in different languages. Harris feels there is no consistent philosophical orientation toward environmental ethics in Buddhism” (Harris, as cited in Kaza, 2003, p. 197). But to this argument, Christopher Ives, in his article, “Buddhism A mixed Dharmic bag: Debates about Buddhism and ecology,” makes a point to show that biblical theologians have been doing this for centuries, “selectively looking in the Bible for passages that support the constructive argument they are making” (2016, p.49).

Stephanie Kaza (2003) explains the principles of being an “ecosattava” or a Buddhist environmental activist in the article “To Save All Beings. Buddhist Environmental Activism.” Kaza reminds us of the canonical story of the Buddha’s enlightenment, “the culminating insight that comes from the last hours of his long night of deep meditation when the Buddha perceived his previous lives, recognized the cycle of birth and death for all beings and understood how karma worked” (Kaza, 2003, p.197).

Each one of these things made the Buddha realize the single truth of mutual causality or dependent organization. “According to this law, all of Nature arises from a complex set of causes and conditions, each set unique to the specific situation” (Kaza, 2003, p.197).

Kaza contends that we are all part of these natural systems.

Elizabeth McNally recognizes this interdependence when it pertains to water. In her book, *Loving Water Across Religions*, she looks to the traditional image of a *bodhisattva*, a person who vows to attain enlightenment so they may benefit others and help liberate them from suffering. Bodhisattvas are, “insightful beings who can inspire wisdom in others and apply wisdom to every situation” (McAnally, 2019, p.112). By thinking of water as a teacher it could form a closer bond, we would see water as a source of wisdom and treat it with better care. She states, “recognizing that water is a substance that flows throughout the world and provides life-giving sustenance for all sentient beings can facilitate a deep understanding and vivid experience of interdependence and can better comprehend the way we interact with water affects and reflects all life” (McAnally, 2019, p.112).

In an article, “Buddhism, Bodhisattvas, and the Wisdom of Water,” author Elizabeth McNally introduces another contemporary Buddhist, Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje, leader of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, who is seen as a leader of environmental conservation, and has raised environmental concerns through multiple conferences and the formation of a Buddhist environmental network, the Association for the Protection of the Natural Environment. He summarizes his vision as: “Protect the earth, Live simply, Act with compassion. Our future depends on it.” His organization Khoryug, is a network of Buddhist monasteries that centers on practically

applying the values and compassion and interdependence towards the earth and all beings who dwell there (McAnally, 2018, p.202-203).

Conclusion

Buddhism has been practiced for over 2500 years. Part of the reason it survives today is its ability to adapt to our real-world situations, in our case, environmental concerns. The core concepts of Buddhism, such as *atman* and *no atman* can be discovered by turning inward. Buddhism places responsibility on an individual to end their suffering, perhaps it is also our responsibility to take care of the Earth's suffering as well. Brahman could represent Nature and *atman* could be everything within it. We can start to see this viewpoint in a wide range of how some contemporary Buddhists practice today. For many Buddhists, the ambitious ethical values put a major importance on the critical relationship between people and nature, our interdependence with nature. These values permeate the lives of contemporary Buddhists into a care and concern for the environment and Nature in today's modern world. By acknowledging our interconnectedness with Nature perhaps this can create a more compassionate relationship that includes a responsibility to our environment.

Chapter 3: Confucianism

While Hinduism and Buddhism were taking root on the Indian subcontinent, Confucianism and Daoism had been developing in East Asia. Both Confucianism and Daoism mainly grew in China and then spread to Japan and Korea. “Even though Confucianism and Daoism seem opposite to each other, they do complement each other and coexist with value systems in a way that may envelope both streams of thought and actions in East Asian societies” (Fisher, 2003, p.171).

Confucianism is a philosophy articulated in ancient China by Master Kong, or Kongzi. Westerners refer to him as Confucius. He would be compared to Socrates in the Western world. He lived during 551 BCE-479 BCE, a time when ancient China was divided into 100 kingdoms, and every day there was war. It was known as the “warring states period” (Fisher, 2003, p.187).

When he was 23 years old, Confucius’ mother passed, and he followed the tradition of filial piety towards one’s parents, which he revived from the ancient *Book of Rites*, and waited at her tomb for three years. During this time, he developed ways to honor one’s parents. *Jen* and *Li*, human and respect are at the core of his philosophy, because *jen* encourages compassion and love for parents and *li* is the action that reflects this care and respect. “Confucius described the rare person who is utterly devoted to *jen*, as one who is not motivated by personal profit but by what is moral, is concerned with self-improvement rather than public recognition, mindful of parents, and regards human nature as basically good” (Fisher, 2003, p. 189).

The Chinese character for *jen* is a combination of “two” and “person,” conveying the idea of a relationship (Fisher, 2003, p.189). The “T” represents a human being, a human centric worldview, and the two bars to the left represent a social centric concept.



So, the two sticks say, for me to stand I need others to hold me up. All three equal the social self, a holistic worldview (Lee, 2017). *Jen* relates to *Li*, both and always happen before either/or. Fisher explains, “involves right conduct in terms of the five basic relationships essential for a stable society: kindness in the father and filial piety in the son, gentility in the older brother and respect in the younger, righteous behavior in the husband and obedience in the wife, humane consideration in the older friend and deference in the younger friend, and benevolence in rulers and loyalty in subjects” (Fisher, 2003, p.190).

Each social identity possesses a personal inner sense of *Jen*, which pertains to its social self. This develops through its interactions, or *Li*. John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker speak to this concept in *Ecology and Religion*. They explain that for Confucians, “The human is viewed as a microcosm in relation to the macrocosm of the universe. The need to consciously connect the patterns of Nature with the rhythms of human society is very ancient in Confucian culture” (Grim and Tucker, 2014, p. 121). Because we are connected with Nature it is important to remember to align the needs of Nature with those of humans, by recognizing this it is possible to see our connection to the divine through Nature.

Stephen Prothero feels that “Confucianism may have carried more weight than any other religion and feels that Confucius was one of the five most influential people in recorded history and the *Analects*, a collection of Confucius’s works and deeds, is one of the world’s most influential books” (2011, p. 101). The *Analects* is not a book in terms of what most Westerners would describe as a book. Instead, it is a collection of records of what Confucius had said or his deeds that had been remembered most likely by his students after his death.

These thoughts and quotes of Confucius had been in conversation and written down so the meaning could be extracted. In the introduction of *Confucius Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, translated by Edward Slingerland, he states, “Modern textual critics have argued convincingly that the text consists of different chronological strata, assembled by an editor or series of editors” (2003, p.xiii). Some examples of these insights include:

2.4 The Master said, “At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning; at thirty, I took my place in society, at forty, I became free of doubts; at fifty, I understood Heaven's Mandate; at sixty, my ear was attuned; at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety.” (For me this speaks to personal growth.)

4.1 The Master said, “To live in the neighborhood of the Good is fine. If one does not choose to dwell among those who are Good, how will one obtain wisdom?” (One must be careful when choosing your environment and your community.)

11.12 Zilu asked about serving ghosts and spirits. The Master said, “You are not yet able to serve people-how could you be able to serve ghost and spirits?” “May I inquire about death?” “You do not yet understand life-how could you possibly understand death” (Confucius, Slingerland [Translator], 2003)?

In these passages we can see how Confucius expressed profound “humanism.” If we look at these passages through the lens of how humans interact with the environment, I think a connection could be made to Confucianism and Nature. We need to learn constant and never-ending improvement about how our interaction with nature affects

others. If we live in “the neighborhood of Good,” a neighborhood where we are mindful of how our actions will impact the environment and in turn our fellow human beings, then we are learning to serve others.

About one hundred years after Confucius’s death, two thinkers, Mencius and Xunzi, emerged to continue the conversations of Confucius, Stephen Prothero describes Mencius as an “an idealist and Xunzi a realist” (2010, p.119). Mencius (c. 390-305 BCE) lived during a time when Chinese society was even more chaotic than in Confucius’ time. Mencius tried to use his wisdom to educate the rulers of his time but was ineffective. His primary focus was on the virtue of *yi*, or righteous conduct. One of the popular examples Mencius gave was about the instinct of a person to save a child that is sitting on the edge of a well about to fall in. Mencius felt our desire to save that child was innate, our humanity was within us. Regarding government, he said, “When a commiserating government is conducted from a commiserating heart, one can rule the whole empire as if one were turning it in one’s palm” (Fisher, 2003, p.190). Mencius felt the righteous duty of the rulers was to govern by the principle of humanity and the good of the people.

Xunzi opposed this point of view. He thought that people must hold their own. “He felt that human beings are wicked, grasping, hungry and egotistical” (Prothero, 2011, p.119). He countered Mencius by making statements such as, “Heaven does not suspend the winter because men dislike the cold” (Fisher, 2003, p.191). The only way to constrain these tendencies was legally enforcing the rules of *li* and *yi*. Where Mencius spoke of nurture and growth, Xunzi used harder metaphors like shaping metal with a hammer (Prothero, 2011, p.120).

Confucianism is a humanistic philosophy, showing a strong interest and concern for human welfare, values, and ethics. Kong Zi held the importance of family, rites, and traditions as the utmost importance. Confucianism believes in the goodness of human nature. This is the idea that humans can improve on their own through education, and their own conduct. By doing this they not only help themselves but their communities as well, Confucian thought focuses on virtue and morals (Fisher, 2003, p.186).

Confucianism has been known to place emphasis on divine sages as well as emperors of times past. Confucius wrote the *Analects* to provide order among the chaos that surrounded him. A creation story that doesn't necessarily coincide with Confucianism but could have corollaries is the story of Pangu. It is first mentioned in the book of Chinese myths written by Xu Zheng in the Three Kingdoms period (CE 220-265.) It has been a Chinese tradition for a very long time, and Confucianism was deeply shaped by Chinese culture and tradition, thus I feel it does relate to our topic.

“At the beginning there was nothing in the universe except formless chaos, the beginning, and the whole. Then Pangu, the primitive giant, awoke from the chaos. He separated the Earth and Sky with his ax, the world Pangu created. To keep the earth and the sky separated, our giant stood between them and pushed up the sky. So, we have the earth, the sky and humans. After Pangu died, his breath became the wind, the mist and the clouds. His blood became the rivers, land and lakes, and his eyes turned into the sun and moon” (University of Edinburgh, 2003).



An illustration of Pan Gu from the *Sancai Tuhui*

This story responds to the questions of who created the world with answers such as Pangu's breath becoming the wind and the clouds, his blood becoming rivers, land, and lakes. It also forms a connection to the Earth and Nature. Even though Confucians put more emphasis on humans rather than gods you can still see the connection between humans and the cosmos.

Confucius felt that all people are entitled to an education and raising their station in life, equality for all human beings. There is controversy behind this statement. Confucianism was a hierarchical system, with greater importance being placed on men and women being placed in a subservient position. "Some critics of Confucianism argue that Confucianism is not appropriate as a model for modern times because its ethics seriously undermine individual autonomy and self-respect and is incompatible with human rights and civil liberties since it does not respect the autonomy of the individual"

(Chan, 2013, p.113). From a feminist perspective, Confucianism is often seen as being unfair since it places emphasis on family piety. Since women have often been linked to nature in many systems of thought, and thus not seen as civilized, this could have repercussions for how women are viewed.

In her work, *A Feminist Appropriation of Confucianism*, author Li-Hsiang Rosenlee feels that “affirming the virtue of *ren* as the highest achievement of personhood, Confucian feminism affirms a practical ethic without the need for metaphysical grounding” (Rosenlee, 2023, p. 10). By focusing on *ren*, you can address the need for clear moral guidelines in human interactions. There is an importance in all human relationships that connect with Nature and our environment.

Confucius felt it was the ruler’s responsibility to instill these values in the citizens. If all human beings are equal and have a right to education then not only is the ruler responsible for education, but they are also responsible for crimes committed on account of a lack of economic stability, meaning the government should be punished for the crimes committed when the government fails to offer necessary goods to its people. According to Mencius, if a ruler fails to deliver the service he owes to the people, he should be removed, and even subject to capital punishment (Zhao, 2016, p.85).

Kim Sungmoon, author of *Confucian Democracy in East Asia*, sees “East Asian societies’ democracy, and possibly the world's democracy, being more politically effective and culturally relevant if it were rooted in and operated on the Confucian habits and mores” (2014, p. 4). This model can lead to a culture that is able to flourish rather than be oppressed. By treating others inhumanly, we sacrifice our own humanity.

Tu Wei-Ming is Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy and Chairman of the Committee on the Study of Religion at Harvard University. He has discussed a contemporary view of Confucian thought in *Confucian Thought Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, commenting on the prevalent view that Confucianism is a form of social ethics: “Confucians do maintain that one becomes fully human through continuous interaction with other human beings and that one’s dignity as a person depends as much on communal participation as on one’s own sense of self-respect” (Tu, 1985, p.55). When we learn to be human in this way it opens us up to our community and the environment around us. Tu Wei-Ming reminds us of when we learn to be human in this way, “it is a way to be sensitive to a network of relationships, forming one body with Heaven, Earth and a multitude of other things.” Confucian communitarianism considers family, neighborhood, kinship, clan, state, and world (Tu, 1985, p.176).

While attending Drew I was introduced to a book, *All under Heaven the Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, by the author Tingyang Zhao. In the forward of the book, Odd Arne Westad explains that “*tianxia* is a Chinese term that literally means All under Heaven. In ancient Chinese political philosophy and political theory, it came to signify the realm of humans as opposed to the possible realms of spirits, immortals, or gods (Westad, 2021, p.xvii).

Zhao (2021) uses the core concepts of Confucianism to look at the possibilities of Confucianism as a potential replacement for the way government is run. This train of thought could be equally useful in terms of how humans interact with the environment and Nature. Using the core concepts of Confucianism to take care of the Earth through the lens of Confucianism. The five principal relationships for a more orderly society

could add a sixth, the relationship between humans and the environment, the gentility of Nature and the respect of the human.

For example, Zhao (2021), defines the *tianxia* system as an “internalized world system” and as such it is totally different from a “dominating world system of imperialism.” Zhao (2021) cites Immanuel Wallerstein's understanding of world-systems: “A world-systems life is made up of the conflicting forces which hold it together by tension and tear it apart as each group seeks eternally to remold it to its advantage (Wallerstein, as cited in Zhao, 2021, p.115). “By way of contrast, the *tianxia* system attempts to construct world sovereignty using political power latent in the world to realize mutual benefits that can serve the actual interest of the world. More precisely, the *tianxia* system’s aim is to minimize conflict in the world and to optimize cooperation” (Zhao, 2021, p. 115). Zhao sees the *tianxia* system to create global unity based on shared power and mutual benefits. I see this to not only include the government but also ecological concerns.

It’s not just the government that can be impacted by Confucian thought. In fact, in many countries the government’s rules, regulations and laws have an environmental impact. John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker discuss this in *Ecology and Religion*. They ask the question of China, “Because you are living in one of the most polluted countries on the planet, how do you find environmental values and ethics based on their own cultural traditions that are applicable to China” (Grim and Tucker, 2014, p.109)? Like the ideas of *jen* and *li*, Confucian ecology sees interconnected circles with humans at its core. This can create a balance with Nature that leads to personal growth (Grim and Tucker, 2014, p. 114).

Confucianism is a philosophy of ancient rights and traditions. We can see how connections to the environment and nature have been formed through the respected traditions that have been practiced through millennia, as well as instituting these rites in modern day society through expansion of these ideas in government, environmental issues, and practices. But how do we incorporate these traditions into our modern lives? Yong Huang sees a way to do this through the concept of *ren*. Reminding us that, “*ren* is most often translated as humanity or humaneness, this is the virtue that characterizes a human being as a human being” (Huang, 2016, p.52). Yong quotes a line from Cheng Hao’s essay, *On Humanity*, in which Hao states, “The first thing all learners need to understand is humanity. A person’s humanity is completely one body with all things” (Hao, as cited in Huang, 2016, p.53). In this view there is no difference between yourself and the outside world. If you are struggling perhaps, it is a lack of your own personal development.

Wang Yangming expands upon Mencius' theory of all persons being innately good, adding to Mencius' example of the child about to fall into a well. “Not only will a person have a heart for the child that is about to fall into a well but also for a bird, land animal, blade of grass, tree branch breaking or any aspect of Nature that is in danger. Because a person’s *ren* makes him or her be in one body with the same” (as cited in Yong, 2017, p.53).

Conclusion

Confucianism developed alongside Hinduism and Buddhism. Despite their differences they do complement each other. Confucianism is a philosophy filled with strict guidelines and traditions meant to be followed to the letter. These teachings revolve

around the right conduct with societal relationships that are needed for stability.

Confucianism focuses on human welfare, ethics, and virtues. I see the value of it for a religious environmental ethic, being taught to form a closer connection to Nature.

Confucius taught the importance of learning— not learning to get ahead at a job or for financial gain—but learning for the sake of learning. Education is the key to growth, by learning how we interact with our environment and how our *ren* can help the “ten thousand things” that surround us daily it can help improve our relationship with that environment as well as the humans all around us. Confucius developed these rules of propriety because at the time there was war and destruction all around him. Looking through a different lens, that war and destruction is still around us, it just comes in the form of raging forest fires, large swaths of trash floating in our oceans, climate change, pesticides and extinction of species that are connected to us.

Chapter 4: Daoism

We have explored Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism in the previous chapters. This chapter will look at some of the distinct aspects of Daoism. Daoism may be one of those religions not well known in the West, but its symbols and rituals are widespread, such as the *Tao De Ching*, ying and yang, and Tai Chi, discussed below. Stephen Prothero states, “Daoism is the least known in the West of Asia’s great religions or philosophies. However, in some cases it is the most widespread. Daoism is not only popular in China, where it stands alongside Confucianism and Buddhism but also across East and Southeast Asia” (2011, p.281).

To understand Daoism, you need to understand the concept of *Wu-wei*. It could be considered as the natural flow of things. *Wu-wei* could be seen as the “ecological self” but the traditional understanding is, “no intentional or invasive action contrary to the natural flow of things” (Fisher, 2003, p.178). It is so much more than “non-action,” as it is often translated, or how-to live-in nature. If Buddhists are focused on meditation, and Confucians are concerned about ethics then Daoists are more focused on science, seeking to understand things about the natural world through observation.

Thomas Cleary describes the *Tao* as “one of the most basic and comprehensive symbols in the Chinese language. It could mean a path, a way, a principle, a method, a doctrine, a system of order, and it may also mean the matrix, structure, and reality of the universe itself” (Cleary, 1993, p.1). There are two classic Chinese books describing the essential philosophy and practice of the Tao: *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang-tzu* (Cleary, 1993, p.2).

There are thousands of written versions of the *Tao Te Ching*, many with different interpretations. The *Tao Te Ching*, “The Classic of the Way and the Power,” is second only to the bible in the number of Western translations (Dyer, 2007, xi). “The *Tao Te Ching* is believed to have been dictated by Lao-tzu to a border guard. The border guard recognized Lao-tzu as a sage and asked him to leave behind a record of his wisdom before he left society to live in the mountains (Fisher, 2003, p.175). The *Tao Te Ching* contains teachings about living in harmony with the natural world. Some people believe these teachings are a collection from numerous sages. Either way, it has a message that is still relevant in today’s world (Fisher, 2003, p. 175).

The other central text, the *Chuang-tzu*, was written by a sage named Chuang-tzu (c.365-290 BCE) who was a minor government official but left government life to live a hermit’s life of freedom and solitude. Unlike Lao-tzu, whose philosophy was meant to address leadership positions in government, Chuang-tzu felt the best way to live in a disorderly, ridiculous civilization was to become detached from it. Stephen Prothero describes this in *God is Not One*, “The first chapter of *Chuang-tzu* is called Free and Easy Wandering. It is about a sage who could ride upon the wind wherever he pleased, drifting marvelously. Another sage who rides on the clouds, drives a flying dragon, and wanders the four seas. The purpose of the text seems to indicate that having no way or direction may take you to the Way itself” (2010, p. 280). This reminds me of a statement that my daughter says when she is stressed, “It is what it can be.”

In the Daoist “Genesis,” in a time before the universe, there was *Huntun* (Chaos), and out of chaos came the Dao, out of the Dao comes *Yin-Yang*, everything comes out of *Yin-Yang* (Kim, 2017).

“*Wu-wei* is a Daoist paradox, it signifies non-action, or taking no intentional or invasive action contrary to the natural flow of things. *Wu-wei* is spontaneous, a creative activity proceeding from the Dao, action without ego assertion, letting the Dao take its course. The result of *wu-wei* is non-interference” (Fisher, 2003, p. 178). Joseph Needham, a biochemist, and sinologist translates *wu-wei* as, “refraining from activity contrary to nature” (as cited in Capra, 2010, p.117). I also like Stephen Prothero’s interpretation that *wu-wei* is, “submitting with equanimity to what is rather than resisting it in the name of what ought to be” (Prothero, 2011, p. 295). So, if you refrain from going against Nature you will be in harmony with the Dao and your actions will be successful.

Yin-Yang are opposite, and yet they are independent and complementary. Part of *yin* is in *yang* and part of *yang* is in *yin*, so they do not follow the pattern of a/not a which is a common western dualism that defines each item as lacking the other. *Yin* is a downward seeking force, energy flows from top to bottom, it is dark, passive, and feminine. *Yang* is an upward seeking force, energy flows from bottom to top, it is bright, active, and masculine. “In ancient Chinese tradition, the universe arises from the interplay of *yin* and *yang*. They are modes of energy commonly represented as interlocking shapes, with dominance continually shifting between the dark, receptive *yin* mode and the bright, assertive *yang* mode” (Fisher, 2003, p.174). *Fengshui* is the geomancy, the art of science to build architecture according to Nature, according to *yin-yang* (Kim, 2017)

Yin and *Yang* have also been used in examples of creation:

In the beginning there was chaos, from which light became the sky and darkness formed the earth. *Yin* and *Yang* are contained in light and darkness, and everything is made of these principles. When *yang* and *yin* became one and the five elements separated humankind was born. As the first man watched the

patterns of the sun, moon and stars, a gold being came down and stood before him. The Gold One taught the man, now named the Old Yellow one, how to stay alive and read the sky. He explained the beginning of things to the Old Yellow One. He explained how the life force that flows through us was created by earth and heaven. He explained how the sun and moon trade light, how this act causes the passing of time. He said the sky and earth together produced man and that the *yang* principle gave, and the *yin* principle received. The Gold One told Old Yellow One about a great stone in the earth's center and about the poles that support the earth. He told how the waters of the earth surround it the way the flesh of fruit surrounds the seed (Lemming, 1994, p.49).

As this creation story illustrates, Daoism is very much concerned about the human connection to nature. I like the reference to the patterns of the sun, moon, and stars standing before man and the connection of the same life force that is in the Earth is in us.

Yin and *Yang* are two aspects of the long existing belief that has existed in China called *ch'i*. "*Ch'i* is the belief that in addition to ancestors, spirits, and Heaven, the cosmos is a manifestation of an impersonal self-generating energy" (Fisher, 2003, p.173). It is *ch'i* that animates the world, connecting humans to the rest of the natural world. By understanding that there is an interconnectedness between humans and Nature, perhaps more humans could see the connection between the divine and Nature as well. This is key to understanding why Daoism has such ecological potential.

Many verses of the *Tao Te Ching* can be taken separately as sources of wisdom. The fifteenth verse of the *Tao Te Ching* is one that I seem to personally reflect on often. The warriors are in step with the natural flow of the world around them. Many of their qualities are compared to aspects that can be found in Nature. It has been interpreted as follows:

Skilled Warriors of Old

Skilled warriors of old were subtle,
mysteriously powerful,
so deep they were unknowable,

I will try to describe them.
 Their wariness was as that of one crossing a river in winter,
 their caution was as that of ice melting point.
 Simple as uncarved wood, open as the valleys,
 they were inscrutable as murky water.
 Who can, in turbidity,
 use the gradual clarification of stillness?
 Who can, long at rest,
 use the gradual enlivening of movement?
 Those who preserve this Way do not want fullness.
 Just because of not wanting fullness,
 it is possible to use the full and not make anew.
 (Lao-tzu, Cleary[translator], 1991, p.17).

Many boil this verse down to, “Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?” Many people’s lives are chaotic and constantly moving at a very rapid pace. We all have a hundred things to do at one time, completing these tasks like a checklist, but are we completing these tasks in good order or are we just completing them to say that they have been done. I vividly remember being on a beautiful vacation sitting overlooking the Gulf of Mexico, and rather than enjoying this moment, letting my mud settle, I was calculating how to go on my next vacation. This verse is a reminder that we need to stay relaxed but observant, peaceful but aware, we must be willing to remain unmoving and let the waters become clear. Perhaps if more people did this, they would both appreciate the natural world on which they depend, and they would notice what is happening to it.

Daoism’s teachings and philosophy about harmony with the natural world lends itself to ecological concerns. Just as in other Chinese traditions of thought, human beings are seen as belonging to a community of all living beings. In the edited volume, *That All May Flourish Comparative Religious Environmental Ethics*, David Cooper explains,

“The Daoist is less likely to be found in the ranks of eco warriors, fighting against some global injustice, than among those-like responsible gardeners, farmers, and foresters-who care for the local places and creatures with which they are intimate, and their lives entwined” (2018, p.88). Cooper cites a text, the *Taiping jing* (Scripture of Great Peace), in which a sage king says, “people should assist Heaven to produce living things and assist Earth by giving nourishment to form proper shapes” (2018, p.88). Life needs to be in harmony with the Way, not only with other human beings but with natural environments and creatures.

In an article, “Consumption,” author Laura Hartman makes the statement that, “the concept of *wu-wei* can function as a political principle, leading toward alignment rather than action against natural processes” (2016, p. 322). She is trying to make the point that we could use Daoism to teach about a balance for economic systems. If people shifted their beliefs in capitalism to focus more on our environment greater happiness could be achieved than with money (Hartman, 2016, p.322).

David Cooper compares the Daoist happiness with, “that of the Greeks notion of *eudaimonia*, or flourishing” (2018, p.77). He feels that there is a connection between *eudaimonia* and the conception of human life. “Aristotle held that *eudaimonia* is “living and doing well” (2018, p.77). Cooper describes a painting by a Daoist artist named Qian Gu, that depicts a famous gathering held in 353 C.E., at the Orchid Pavilion in Shanyin.



Qian Gu, *Orchid Pavilion in Shanyin* (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Cooper points out that, “the painting beautifully communicates the perception of the Daoist calligrapher who organized the gathering, that human lives, if they are to go well and flourish, should be led in intimate proximity to nature” (2018, p.77). I like the idea that our lives are improved by engaging with Nature, that for us to flourish we need to make sure we are close to the natural world. Too many people these days spend time on devices when Nature is happening all around them.

Mary Evelyn Tucker sees relevance in the *Tao Te Ching* stating that it contains cosmology and ethics that can provide contemporary discussions on ecology. In an article, “Ecological Themes in Taoism and Confucianism,” Mary Evelyn Tucker sees the Dao placing a “distinct emphasis on valuing nature for its own sake, not for utilitarian needs” (Tucker, 2003, p. 220). Nature can be seen as valuable and necessary for life and needs to be respected. You shouldn’t try to control Nature for your own gain, you need to appreciate it (Tucker, 2003, p.220). Part of this statement makes me think about our reliance on coal and fossil fuels around the globe, in that we are creating such a negative impact on the environment and for ourselves by continually using these types of products instead of spending more money for research on how to generate the same kind of energy

from solar, wind and water, working with the environment rather than against it, as well as implementing the technology that already exists (and not subsidizing fossil fuel consumption).

In *Ecology and Religion*, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim reiterate these views, “seeing Daoism as an anthropocosmic, relating to humankind and the cosmos, worldview, having a religious cosmology of a continuity of being” (Grim, Tucker, 2014, p.23). Grim and Tucker, “stress the dynamic movements of nature through the seasons and agricultural cycles. The philosophy of *ch’i*, is a material force that provides a basis for appreciating the profound interconnection of matter and spirit” (2014, p. 23). On a more personal note, I do feel closer to those agricultural cycles, going to a local farmers’ market, eating what is in season, speaking with the farmers who are growing the food I eat, getting an understanding of how the food is grown that my family and I will consume. It is an interconnection between those farmers, the food, the eaters, and the Earth.

How do we become more attentive to the Way, and be in harmony with nature, especially when society puts so much pressure on attaining the new “shiny penny?” I believe that we need to change our mindset on how we feel or care about what people think. If you can be in flow with the Way, you are not concerned about what your neighbor thinks about your new car. Newsflash, they don’t care anyway.

In “A Declaration of the Chinese Daoist Association on Global Ecology” by Zhang Jiyu, the author blames part of the ecological crisis issues we now face, such as industrial and technological expansion, on humans “thinking that we can treat nature as subservient to our willful desires” (Zhang, 2001, p.364). This type of thinking has given

humankind an inflated image of itself. Zhang reminds us that, “in Daoism each of the myriad of things contains the polarity of *yin* and *yang*. Life depends on the mutual harmony of the *yin-yang* polarity. This also means that the continuous development of world civilization depends on the harmonious relationship of all things” (2001, p.366). People need to stop thinking that Nature is something they should be able to control. Our lives and the life of the planet rely on a positive relationship for both.

Conclusion

Daoism is possibly the best philosophy we have discussed so far in relation to environmental concerns. It speaks of being one with Nature as well as other human beings and urges us to flow with the relationship we have with the Earth. Daoism helps create a cultural awareness of our environment by helping us recognize that we are all connected to the Way. Through the core concepts of *yin* and *yang*, we can see how our actions in terms of greed and consumerism negatively affect the environment. Some people exploit our natural resources, create pollution, and have a negative impact on the environment that will only hurt future generations. Daoism can help us understand that there is a need to respect Nature and realize that our actions have an impact on the environment. By understanding *wu-wei*, refraining from activity that is contrary to Nature, we help ourselves find happiness and flourish with Nature.

Chapter 5: Indigenous People

Up until now we have been discussing specific religions and philosophies. We now turn our attention to the traditions of Indigenous peoples since I believe they illustrate a connection to Nature most directly due to their continued interaction with Nature, relying on the planet and all of Nature's resources for survival as well as keeping a continued tradition. While Indigenous people are not an organized religion, their beliefs around the world often have a similar emphasis on a connection, respect, and honor of nature itself.

John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker define *indigenous* as, "people who are native to a place. Used in political and social understandings for people located in a place before colonial settlements in which military and economic power set them aside or marginalized them, hence First Nations" (Grim and Tucker, 2014, p. 180). In a separate article, "Indigenous Lifeways and Ecology," John Grim expands upon the above definition, stating that, "the term *Indigenous* is a generalized reference to the thousands of small-scale societies who have distinct languages, kinship systems, mythologies, ancestral memories, and homelands. These different societies comprise more than 500 million people throughout the planet today" (Grimm, 2019, p. 1). The indigenous peoples we will discuss in this chapter are from Africa, Australia, and North America.

In a class I attended at Drew I learned that the people and cultures of Africa view the Earth as Mother Earth. In *Faith for the Earth: A Call for Action*, Queen Boakyewa Yiadom I states, "no matter the level of a person's education or status, the Earth pervades every aspect of his or her life, from seedlings to harvest, through the rites of passage-birth, puberty, marriage, death, and hereafter" (2020, p.18). According to Queen

Boakyewa Yiadom I of the Akan in Ghana: “All over Africa, Earth is regarded as the female spirit. Asase Yaa, the great female spirit of the Earth” (2020, p.18). She goes on to explain that the Earth means so much to the people of Africa and the people hold it in such high regard, that “whenever someone’s word is in doubt, he is asked to touch his lips to the soil to become credible” (2020, p.18). Indigenous peoples of Africa are expected to take care of her, nurse, cherish and love her; “The aim of the African Indigenous people’s is to promote harmony between humans, the spirit world, society, and the environment. They believe that Earth is God’s gift, and is a vibrant life force” (2020, p.18). Just imagine the positive impact on our environment around the world if others appreciated the earth in this way. If most people could see our natural environment as a living entity and recognize how important the earth is to us, perhaps a deeper responsibility could develop, and greater care would be given.

Roughly 80% of people in Africa are either Christian or Muslim, and about 20% are still follow traditional beliefs. However, these statistics really do not give an accurate snapshot of the situation, because a lot of traditional beliefs are embedded into the culture and society. This impacts the practices of African Christians and Muslims, on how they would celebrate important life events and perform religious activities (Olupona, 2021, p. 2).

These rituals and worldviews, “include both nature spirits, things that would be seen in nature such as mountains, the sun, trees, or natural forces such as wind and rain and human spirits, including spirits of ancestors who have passed away” (Olupona, 2021, p. 4). The creation stories widely differ and are handed down over generations to make sense of current life. They offer a way for some to live their life and pass on traditions

and morals. Since many Africans view the world in a way that spirits can move between our world and the next, many of the stories offer thoughts on life and death (Olupona, 2021, p. 4-6, p.13-15).

However more and more modern Africans are moving away from these traditions, and as they lean away from some of their traditional values and lean into more Western views this helps put an even greater strain on the economy and well-being of the environment. In the past ownership of land was seen as more social ownership. There was a strong bond that was felt to the land, believing that it came from something greater than themselves. “This means that land would have been owned by a family, clan, or kinship group. The most important thing about the ownership of land was that it was a communal property belonging to both the living and the dead” (Omari, 2003, p.98). There is a greater spiritual connection to the land, recognizing the interconnectedness between themselves, their ancestors, and the land itself.

According to the *UN 2014 Urbanization Prospects Report*, Africa is one of the continents with the largest rural population. This is important to note because rural populations are more susceptible to extreme weather variations due to an underdeveloped infrastructure. One of the things that strikes me, and many others, as unjust is the fact that although Africa is one of the continents least responsible for climate change, it is one of the continents most affected. The impact on Africa’s environment also contributes negatively to their economic stability that is attributed to limited access to capital, infrastructure, and technology (Mugambi, 2016, p. 110-111).

The impact of this Western thinking of a money economy has altered Africans’ relationship with the land. Some now view the land as a natural resource that can be

exploited and used for profit. Western thinking, focusing on the power and well-being from an individual perspective rather than the community, is hurting what has been a group decision process and distorting the balance. The author of “Traditional African Land Ethics,” C.K. Omari, sees this “mismanagement of the environment and the imbalance in the ecological systems brought about by modern economic and value systems leading to an environmental bankruptcy in Africa” (2003, p.100).

So, what is to be done? Perhaps one place the peoples of Africa could look to is Australia. Even though Africa has dozens of countries and governments, the government of Australia recently has set an example. Previously, the Australian government has had a horrendous history in the way that it has treated its Indigenous cultures. However, not that long ago the Australian Parliament had a constitutional convention that brought together 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island leaders. The majority resolved, in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* which established a “First Nations Voice” in the Australian constitution and Makarrata commission to supervise a process of agreement making and truth telling between Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their connection to the land.

Author Ambelin Kwaymullina reminds us of what the land means to the Aboriginal people in her article, “Seeing the Light: Aboriginal Law, Learning and Sustainable Living in Country”:

For Aboriginal peoples, Country is much more than a place. Rock, tree, river, hill, animal, human-all formed from the same substance by the ancestors who continue to live in land, water, and sky. Country is filled with relations speaking language and following Law, no matter whether the shape of that relation is human, rock, crow, wattle. Country is loved, needed, and cared for, and country loves, needs, and cares for her people in turn. Country is family, culture, identity, Country is self (Kwaymullina, 2005, p.19).

Since we are all formed from the same substance, we are all connected. A connection to ancestors like indigenous people of Africa, and a realization that it is everyone's responsibility to take care of Country are valuable lessons to be retrieved. Recently I had the amazing opportunity to travel to Australia. I was grateful to hear the Acknowledgement of Country almost everywhere we traveled: "I begin today by acknowledging the people, Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today." One of the highlights of the trip was getting to hear local Indigenous people tell their version of local creation stories as well as their history, it really showed me how close the bond to the land was for the Indigenous peoples of Australia. Below are some excerpts from reflections of the experience previously written:

The two cultural presentations I had the privilege of attending moved me in a way I was not anticipating while providing me with an interpersonal perspective on Australian Aboriginal history, specifically in the Quandamooka country. Patrick, his family, and Alisha touched upon the cultural significance of aboriginal Australians' relationship with animals and Earth, the indigenous way of life, and ancestral recollections of the Stolen Generation.

In a presentation on aboriginal cultures, Patrick and his family explained the vast tradition of aboriginal culture by teaching the audience that at one time over 750- 800 different languages had been spoken. They also provided context for their relationship with animals and the land by explaining how they received knowledge from animals. For example, they learned from the Wedge-Tailed Sea Eagle to never hunt the first fish in a

school because it is the “knowledge fish.” The lesson was that if the Knowledge Fish was killed first, it would cause the rest of the school to go away, thus the Wedge Tailed Sea Eagle targets the fish in the middle.

In another presentation, Alisha shared similar stories of the Quandamooka peoples’ relationship to wildlife and how her ancestors knew it was time to start migrating to the other side of Minjerribiah when an influx of caterpillars would appear. Not destroying or disturbing the land, even in the smallest of ways, illustrated the immense respect they had for the land.

Hearing of the ancestral recollections of the Stolen Generation provoked an emotional reaction within me and others in the audience. Patrick’s wife expressed to us that she is the first generation in the Urandangi tribe to be free. Like indigenous peoples in North America, her ancestors all fell victim to the brutal treatment inflicted by the British. They were taken from their families, stripped of their indigenous identities and rights, and discarded as a population in whole. The language, Waluwarra, spoken by her family’s tribe is the last name she gave to her children in honor of her ancestors. Alisha shared her ancestral ties to the Stolen Generation as well. Her grandmother was taken and sent to be a servant on a cattle farm. She expressed that her grandmother never told her story as being a slave, but rather took pride in working to provide for her family. Alisha felt like her perspective on this situation helped to lessen the generational trauma and thus her family was able to move forward. I not only respect but admire the way in which both Patrick’s and Alisha’s family continue to teach future generations of their culture and hold the spoken storytelling practice at the core of their modernized lives.

These stories and histories provided by the Indigenous people of Australia certainly moved me, just as the striking environment of the continent itself. Never have I felt a more dramatic connection to nature than when I was walking the coastline of Lady Elliot Island or traversing the easternmost point of Cape Byron with my daughter.

As Americans we too have a checkered history with our Indigenous population. There has been a deliberate disruption of treaties that had been agreed to that instituted a cultural genocide of Native Americans. The impacts of colonialism included forcing Native Peoples from their ancestral land, and like Australia, taking children and sending them to boarding schools, forbidding them to speak their language, and depriving them of learning their culture. This meant they had not been able to practice and implement their ecological and spiritual values and honor their treaties with creation (Nelson, 2016, p.142). The New York Times reported as recently as 2021, on the discovery of over 200 unmarked graves at a school that was the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia (Austin, 2022).

In *The Gospel of the Red Man, an Indian Bible*, Ernest Thompson Seton, reported in 1936 that there are hundreds of different tribes across the continent with all variants of culture, each with very different details of established thought. Seton viewed the indigenous people of North America as having a completely different mindset from Western thought. While we view the world as, “How much property can I acquire for myself?” The Indigenous people of North America are fundamentally spiritual and ask, “How much service have I rendered for my people?” Native Americans respected the land by not being wasteful with resources and taking only what was necessary. And like African indigenous peoples, the tribe alone controls tribal interests (Seton, 2018 (1936),

p.10-17). This could be too much of a generalized statement for today's Native American people, and many Native American communities face internal conflict when it comes to things like mineral rights and pipelines across property lines. There are cultural and spiritual differences on how each views the land, and there are economic considerations. Some community members may see this as a way to generate income in order to improve living conditions, choosing short term gain over the impact on future generations.

Just as in African and Australian indigenous culture, myths helped maintain the relationship with all of creation. Melissa Nelson of the Anishinaabeg nation, sees these myths accomplishing two major messages in her article, "Native ecologies and cosmovision renew treaties with the earth and fuel indigenous movements" (Nelson, 2016, p.139). First, she argues that there are two messages in these stories: "if people do not listen to this advice, if they do not cooperate, express gratitude for the gifts of life, and get along sharing together, then the Creator will alter the world and start fresh again" (2016, p.139). And second, "it takes interspecies cooperation to survive and thrive on Earth, we must all do it together, plant, animal, bird, fish, and human" (2016, p.139).

Possibly one of my favorite creation stories is one that is common to many Native American peoples. In "Braiding Sweetgrass," Robin Wall Kimmerer tells the story of "Sky Woman Falling." I share it here in its entirety rather than just a summary and explanation:

She fell like a maple seed pirouetting on an autumn breeze. A column of light streamed from a hole in the Sky world, marking her path where only darkness had been before. It took her a long time to fall. In fear, or maybe hope, she clutched a bundle tightly in her hand. Hurling downward, she saw only dark water below. But in that emptiness there were many eyes gazing up at the sudden shaft of light. They saw there a small object, a mere dust mote in the beam. As it grew closer, they could see that it was a woman arms outstretched, long black hair billowing behind as she spiraled towards them. The geese nodded at one another and rose

together from the water in a wave of goose music. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath her to break her fall. Far from the only home she had ever known, she caught her breath in the warm embrace of soft feathers as they gently carried her downward. And so, it began. The geese could not hold the woman above the water for much longer, so they called a council to decide what to do. Resting on their wings she saw them all gather: loons, otters, swans, beavers, fish of all kinds. A great turtle floated in their midst and offered his back for her to rest upon. Gratefully, she stepped from the goose wings onto the dome of his shell. The others understood that she needed land for her home and discussed how they might serve her need. The deep divers among them had heard of mud at the bottom of the water and agreed to go find some. Loon dove first but the distance was too far and after a long while surfaced with nothing to show for his efforts. One by one the other animals offered to help - otter, beaver, sturgeon- but the depth of the darkness and the pressures were too great for even the strongest of swimmers. They returned gasping for air with their heads ringing. Some did not return at all. Soon only a little muskrat was left, the weakest diver of all. He volunteered to go while the others looked on doubtfully. His small legs flailed as he worked his way downward and he was gone a very long time. They waited and waited and waited for him to return, fearing the worst for their relative and before long a stream of bubbles rose with the small limp body of the muskrat. He had given his life to aid this helpless human. But then the others noticed that his paw was tightly clenched and, when they opened it there was a small handful of mud. Turtle said, "Here, put it on my back and I will hold it." Sky woman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals, she stood in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on turtles back until the whole earth was made. Not by Sky woman alone but from the alchemy of all the animal's gifts coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home. Like any good guest Sky woman had not come empty handed. The bundle was still clutched in her hand. When she toppled from the hole in the Sky world, she had reached out to grab onto the tree of life that grew there. In her grasp were branches- fruit and seeds of all kinds of plants. These she scattered onto the new ground and carefully tended each one until the world turned from brown to green. Sunlight streamed through the hole in the Sky world allowing the seeds to flourish. Wild grasses, flowers, trees, and medicines spread everywhere. And now that the animals, too, had plenty to eat, many came to live with her on Turtle Island (Kimmerer, 2013, p.3-5).

The power of the story of the Sky woman falling is captured in Bruce King's painting entitled *Flight*.



I love this painting, the brightness of the colors and the images of all creatures working together, even sacrificing their life, to bring the Sky woman safely into our world and help create a place that we can all live in.

Our government needs to recognize the importance of sacred spaces to the Native American people, and the same is true of the governments who control the land of other indigenous peoples. While I feel this is probably too little, too late, the Associated Press has recently reported that this year President Joe Biden has stated that he plans to designate an area considered sacred by Native Americans in Southern Nevada as a new national monument. President Biden said, “When it comes to Spirit Mountain and the surrounding ridges and canyons, I’m committed to protecting this sacred place that is central to the creation story of so many tribes.” The site, to be designated Avi Kwa Ame (Ah-VEE’ kwa-meh) National Monument, would encompass a rugged and dry triangular-shaped area roughly from Arizona and the Colorado River to California and the Mojave National Preserve.

Much more needs to be done to make amends to the injustice that the Native American people have endured, not just to the people but to their land as well. The Idle No More movement that started in Canada in December 2012 is one of the largest mass, indigenous grassroots movements in the world. It has a clear simple vision, “Idle No More calls on all people to join in a peaceful revolution to honor Indigenous sovereignty, and to protect land, and water” (Nelson, 2016, p.142). The people of the Idle No More movement want huge changes in power and independence. “Climate Justice is just as important to the indigenous people of North America as it is to the people of Africa and Australia. The changes in climate, air, land, and ocean temperatures, migrating species, and shifts in atmospheric weather patterns create drought and flooding. These only add to the disadvantages that colonialism has already created, as well as greater economic disparity” (Nelson, 2016, p.143).

All three indigenous cultures share the same respect for Nature, no matter if it’s called Mother Earth, Asase Yaa, Country or the land. Each use myth to instill values that have been passed down for generations and each see the importance of the respect and responsibility for preserving this land, and all who live on it, so that all may flourish, what the Native Americans, Anishinaabeg, call *mino-bimaadaziwin*, living the good life. The issues mentioned above, economic disparity, climate justice and inequality need to be a continued discussion not only for wrongs made in the past but for the future as well.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Up until this point we have been discussing many Eastern religions as well as Indigenous cultures. But what about those individuals who are not religious, those individuals who lean heavier on philosophy and science. It would be nice to think that with all the powerful forces in the world right now, capitalism, xenophobia, and nationalism just to name a few, that people could use rational thought to be respectful to each other and help each other as well as the planet through our common interests. Philosophy and science can help us achieve a worldview that gives significance to our connection with Nature.

Some find “religion” in science, and some scientists try to use reason, experiment, math, and physics to try and either disprove or prove the existence of the Divine, either by pointing out the facts of evolution, using the Big Bang theory to show a natural way the earth was created rather than by divine presence, using neuroscience to state that consciousness is just brain activity or even biology to disprove free will as just needs of our microbiome.

However, some scientists have used science to make a connection to the Divine and Nature. In fact, psychologists have a name for physical activity that happens in Nature, they call it “green exercise.” In Kelly McGonigal’s book *The Joy of Movement* the author states that “Within the first five minutes of any physical activity in nature, people report major shifts in mood and outlook” (2019, p.155). Some people can notice big changes in their mood and how they are viewing things, changing their perspective. Even if some people are just thinking about a time they had spent in Nature they can feel that they are connected to something bigger than themselves (McGonigal, 2019, p.155).

Personally, whenever my life seems to be a little chaotic, I know that if I go for a walk, it will not only help me clear my head, but it will also help slow down the constant chatter and ruminating that seems to take over in times of stress, it helps me to put things in perspective. In my perspective, Life is a series of stories that you tell yourself, these stories can create suffering or help you achieve your goals. We can create suffering for ourselves if we let our mind wander, having arguments in our head that have never happened, convincing ourselves of this person's deception or that other person's faults. I once heard a story about Pope John XXIII who said, "It often happens that I awake at night and begin to think about a serious problem and decide I must tell the Pope about it. Then I wake up completely and remember that I am the Pope." I use these walks as a kind of meditation, a mindfulness practice. I used to think that to do this it had to be a hike at a remote location or by a body of water. Lately I have come to realize that it doesn't need to be this, Nature is taking place right outside of my front door.

Science is proving that these interactions with Nature are affecting your brain, mindfulness can have a healing effect. Being in Nature can provide comfort. "When you are absorbed in natural surroundings, the senses are heightened and inner chatter quiets. This shift can be a tremendous relief for people who struggle with anxiety, depression, and rumination" (McGonigal, 2019, p.162). Being outside can have strong psychological benefits.

I experience this daily, how many arguments or conversations have I played back in my mind that have never even happened. My mind is a scary place to be. However, when I am engaging with Nature, I think my mind gets overstimulated in a different way. I am lucky that I live in a more rural area, so even if I walk out my front door I am

surrounded almost immediately by large oak and pine trees that drape across the roads. Birds surround my house, and probably one of my favorite ways to practice presence is to watch the birds in my yard, even though my kids hate it when I point out the different species. It's not uncommon for white tail deer to come across my path, and in fact I had a large black bear on my front lawn just the other night. By surrounding myself with the beauty of Nature, it becomes a mindfulness practice unto itself, and helps stop the relentless chatter in my head, for me it really is a spiritual experience.

In her book, *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and our Quest for an Inspired Life*, Dr. Lisa Miller argues that humans are universally equipped with a capacity for spirituality, and that our brains are able to function better if we recognize this. Dr. Miller explains that there are different types of awareness, *achieving awareness* and *awakened awareness*. "*Achieving awareness* is the perception that our purpose is to organize and control our lives. How can I get and keep what I want" (Miller, 2021, p. 163)? This is a difficult way to live your life, always striving, and climbing the ladder to success, until you get to the top of the ladder and realize it was on the wrong wall. "*Awakened awareness* uses different parts of your brain to see more. You ask, what is life showing me now? Awakened awareness helps you feel more connected to others, and helps you understand relationships giving your life greater purpose and meaning" (Miller, 2021, p.165).

Until recently this is somewhat how I lived my own life. "Keeping up with the Joneses" is exhausting. It wasn't until my father passed away at a very young age that I realized that there really is a lot more to life than collecting stuff, including money. The same can be said for how we treat the Earth, consumerism drives people to want more,

forgetting about the implications of their wants and desires, sacrificing the Earth's natural resources for personal gain. We need to help people awaken to the awareness in themselves, to see how their decisions affect the whole.

Dr. Miller also explains that this awakened awareness can happen when spending time in nature. Dr. Miller details a study that investigated how the environment influences human well-being. The study found that a fifty-minute walk in Nature has measurable advantages. It can reduce anxiety and negative feelings while keeping positive feelings intact and improving memory (Miller, 2021, p.177).

For me this starts to explain the transformation that I had in my life after my father's passing. My father enjoyed walking and hiking; he had this fantastic walking stick that my mother had given him as a gift. I asked my mother if I could have it and started to walk. At first, I would take short walks in the woods, mainly reflecting on the relationship between my father and me. But as time went on and the pain of his passing diminished, I noticed that I was walking in the woods more for myself and the clarity that was obtained from those walks engaging with Nature, and possibly even feeling his presence there at times.

I had taken a few classes with Dr. Robert Corrington at Drew University. Dr. Corrington's work contributes to philosophical and theological inquiry through a perspective called *ecstatic naturalism*. His biography on the Drew University's website explains that "ecstatic naturalism's perspective affirms that nature is the genus of which histories are species." It goes on to say, "it shares an idea with pantheism that nature is all that there is, that the divine therefore must be in and out of nature, that all relational

connections are finite and thus do not connect the self with everything, and that, no matter what, nature always gets the last vote” (Corrington, 2023).

A philosopher I was introduced to in Dr. Corrington’s class was Karl Jasper. Jasper was a German-Swiss philosopher who had a strong influence on modern theology. According to Dr. Corrington, Jasper had deep roots in nature. The following is a quote from Jasper regarding nature: “In universal life, nature is the ecstasy of becoming. Nature is time, and yet not true time, because nothing is settled in that ceaseless devouring and giving birth” (as quoted in Corrington, 2017, p.149).

Another scholar that Dr. Corrington introduced me to was Ursula Goodenough. Goodenough is a retired professor of biology at Washington University in St. Louis. In 2002, Goodenough was a member of a five-scientist team invited by the Mind and Life Institute to discuss cellular biology. The Mind and Life Institute was founded in 1991, established for the field of contemplative sciences into various fields of study. It funds research projects, academic conferences, and dialogs with the Dali Lama (Goodenough, 2023).

Goodenough, in her book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, states that her goal is to, “present an accessible account of our scientific understanding of Nature and then suggest ways that this account can call forth appealing and abiding religious response-an approach called religious naturalism” (Goodenough, 1998, p.xvii). For many of the previous chapters we discussed how religion played an important role in how others viewed Nature, and in those religious traditions I found resonances of how, for me, Nature is a “religious” experience. Goodenough discusses a line of reasoning called the *anthropic principle*, “the laws of physics are perfect for the emergence of chemistry, and

chemistry is perfect for the emergence of life, that it all must have been Designed so as to yield life in general and human life in particular” (p. 29). Goodenough makes the statement that, “the anthropic principle leaves her theologically unsatisfied” (p.29).

Others argue that it is near impossible for the probability of life to be possible, without some kind of Divine intervention. They refer to this number as “the God number” as it had to be the result of a higher intelligence or divinely inspired design. At a base level there is some kind of goal directedness. For me this is Nature and the energy that Nature creates. It makes more sense to me that if it was a God that was all knowing and all seeing, there would be less pain and suffering for all sentient beings as well as the Earth itself. It makes more sense to me that this energy that is found in all of Nature is perhaps some form of intelligence but has less structure and linear intention.

In the fields of philosophy and the sciences, many have struggled with the question of the Divine, the question of consciousness and its existence. Those philosophers and scientists refer to consciousness as “the hard problem” or the challenge of explaining how the brain produces consciousness. Philip Goff, a modern philosopher, argues that this is a philosophical problem rather than a scientific one. He states, “We should ultimately not be interested in the view we would like to be true, but in the view that is most likely to be true” (Goff, 2022, p.9). Goff doesn’t feel that the problem of consciousness can be solved by science but that it can help work out what kind of brain activity goes along with which kind of conscious experience. The data collected could help create a theory of ultimate reality (Goff, 2022, p.11).

Most people would understand consciousness as a subjective experience. Philip Goff is a panpsychist who would say that matter arises out of consciousness. Goff defines

consciousness as “what it’s like to be you. It’s the sights, sounds, and tactile experiences that you feel now. Consciousness could be the source of our deep emotions, subtle thoughts, and sensory experiences” (Roll, 2023, Episode #740). Goff goes on to use Darwin’s evolution by natural selection as an example of how complex organisms emerge without design. “This is how you get the physical universe out of more fundamental facts of consciousness, you can do this because physics is mathematical, so if consciousness gives you the right mathematical structures, it makes sense” (Goff, 2022, p.116).

To me, there are certain connections between panpsychism, Buddhism and Hinduism. Philip Goff points out the fact that, “there are certain philosophers who believe that we should take the word of expert meditators as experts” (Roll, 2023, Episode #740). In science you trust the experts, so why wouldn’t we trust the experts in meditation. There is no necessary connection between panpsychism and anything spiritual, but perhaps panpsychism is more closely related to the views on meditation in Buddhism and Hinduism.

The different traditions that have been investigated in the preceding chapters all seem to have something about transcending the self, a deep oneness and connection to Nature. Different people interpret that in different ways. Buddhism says the self doesn’t exist, Hindus say it does exist but it’s identical with the divine mind, and indigenous cultures connect to it every day.

This connectivity to Nature and consciousness is pervasive in everything. On some level there is a consciousness that is part of that connectivity. Goff says, “you can’t help but think of nature as a unified consciousness, it is possible that this broader

consciousness is driving our behaviors and decisions” (Roll, 2023, Episode#740). That resonates with me, to think of all beings as connected with Nature, we are all in this together. Especially when we face existential threats like the health of the planet, the future of humanity, and climate change. It does put you in a more compassionate mindset of cooperation, an interconnectivity with everything, it means we are interdependent on each other, linked in ways that many haven’t fully contemplated previously.

In the chapter on Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hahn had been reminded of his connection to Nature as he sat looking at the leaves of a tree, a similar connection to what Goff mentions above, that can be seen within Nature as well. Peter Wohlleben noticed this connection within Nature stemming from his lifelong work as a forester in Germany, noting that trees have a series of complex root systems that help each other, they can communicate and share resources, even taking care of younger trees. Imagine if we as humans helped each other in the same way (Wohlleben, 2016, p.3-8). If you tilt that lens slightly and view anything in Nature, trees, animals, the ocean, as parts of a conscious organism, then Nature has a moral status. Thus, deforestation, forest fires, climate change, and the condition of our oceans would be viewed as the destruction of conscious organisms, and then that takes on a whole new moral meaning.

Perhaps that’s what we need to do, not just think about our own sphere but expand that circle to include not just other human beings but all aspects of Nature and the environment. Take a hard look at how we see ourselves not only to others but to the environment and Nature that surrounds us. Deep down I do think we recognize our interconnectedness, each individual experiences Nature in a multitude of ways, some come in the form of religion, other’s philosophy, and others still science, and some fear it

that they try to avoid it. No matter what religion or philosophy you choose to believe in, Nature has most likely played a part in shaping that worldview, as humans are nature, and cannot be viewed alone. I believe when you are engaging with nature you are closer to the source, whatever that looks like for you. For me, the source is the energy that surrounds us all, that is in all things. The trees, leaves, water, and animals are all part of me, and I am a part of them, that is why we feel such a deep connection when engaging with Nature.

I believe that Nature is the energy, the consciousness that is in all things. Some Buddhists would call it *Vijnana*, some Hindus, *Chaitanya*, other religions, sacred spirit, or soul. The way you experience this consciousness or energy can be expressed through whatever religion or philosophy you are exposed to from your geographic location, socio-economic status, and family traditions, or the traditions that you have chosen. We have seen this by examining the tenets of each religion, some of their creation stories, and eschatology, as well as how each uses their doctrine to help promote environmentalism, noting the importance of taking care of the planet, engaging with Nature within ceremonies and rituals, and even influencing art in poetry, painting, and sculpture. As humans we recognize the energy provided by Nature in all things. When we engage with Nature, many feel closer to that universal energy source.

I also believe that it is our responsibility to respect and honor this energy, and that together with all religions and people on the planet. It is a mutual responsibility. We need to see ourselves in relation to others, embedded in natural systems on which we depend, and as mentioned in the introduction of this paper we need to do it by setting aside our

differences and focusing on our commonalities. We must understand how we see ourselves in relation to others.

Some people feel superior to others for one reason or another, this could not only reflect a person's attitude toward another human being but how they view their relationship with Nature as well. In her book *Boundless Heart*, Christina Feldman speaks about positional "selfing." She describes it, "as a way that we see ourselves in a relationship with others" (Feldman, 2017, p.92). She also believes that "it has the power to make us believe if we are destined for liberation and what others are not" (Feldman, 2017, p. 92). It is for this reason that I ask the question as to what kind of religious philosophy helps to lay a person's foundation, and is there a more supportive religion for those in public service, or the protection of the environment and the planet?

Philosophers as well as some different religions in the previous chapter make a point to mention how important continuing to learn is for the benefit of its citizens. We need to study many cultures and religions to promote a free and just society. I believe that teaching values, morals, customs, and traditions is a crucial way for citizens to make thoughtful choices, not just for their fellow humans but for the environment as well. In my opinion this means that more environmental education is necessary.

We can explore this, and work towards acknowledging the possibility of teaching the importance of the experiences we have in Nature and being able to encourage this type of education. Spiritual experiences, experience of transcendence, and Nature experiences do not need to be seen as either/or, a matter of whether you believe, or you don't. You can choose to just work with the possibility, a middle way option to engage with them, a slight nod to the wonder of that experience.

One of the philosophies that should be touched upon briefly is what it means to be a dualist philosopher. Dualism often compares things like mind and body or good and evil. “In the philosophy of the mind, dualism is the theory that the mental and the physical-or mind body or mind and brain-are, in some sense, radically different kinds of things” (Robinson, 2023, p.1). David Chamas, contemporary dualist philosopher, and who is pro science, was asked “Are you religious?” He replied, “Only in the sense that the universe is cool.” The universe is cool, wonderful, and terrifying all at the same time” (Roll, 2023, Episode # 740).

A common type of dualism is mind-body dualism, it’s an idea that thoughts, feelings, and consciousness are not the same as the brain and body. However, this creates a problem about understanding how the mind and body are connected and has created many different philosophical views, with many ways to solve this problem. In short, the mind-body problem exists because the mind and consciousness are so different from anything physical, that there is limited agreement on how they fit together (Robinson, 2023, p.2).

When Philip Goff was asked on the Rich Roll Podcast, “Assuming consciousness exists at the fundamental level of matter and reality, what is your sense of what that tells us of the nature of human consciousness at death” (Roll, 2023, Episode #740). Goff replied, “The individual, the sense of individuation in the sea of consciousness gets absorbed by the greater ocean of consciousness and somehow gets recapitulated or assimilated into the consciousness of everything” (Roll, 2023, Episode#740). This makes me think about our connection to Nature in a much deeper way. The idea that the

connection I feel with Nature is even more interconnected. It leaves open the possibility that when I die, my consciousness or energy inside becomes a part of something bigger.

In the chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism, we can see the idea of an interconnectedness and we explored how these traditions try to struggle to get back to a form of that unconditioned consciousness. In Hinduism, the concept of Brahman signifies the ultimate reality that pervades everything. And in Buddhism the understanding of impermanence aligns with the idea that all sentient beings are connected through our shared existence. Perhaps at death everyone gets enlightened, the shell that is the body that you have been cruising around in for 70, 80, 90 years just peels off and you just get absorbed into that unconditioned consciousness, that energy that is at the core of all of Nature. I really hope that is the case, it would make me feel that there is a higher purpose to our existence, and a deeper connection and responsibility to Nature.

This responsibility can be seen in how Confucianism seems to be more focused on ethics and our harmony with Nature. And how Daoism has a belief in the natural order of things. The concept of *wu wei* or effortless action, is a lesson on how we can be connected to Nature as a source of energy and consciousness by making sure our actions follow a natural flow.

When it comes to spirituality it is nice to think that life does in fact have a purpose. I like how Philip Goff stated it, “Live in hope that a greater purpose is unfolding. Hopefully this keeps your ego in check, lets it motivate you, stops it from thinking about your narrow self-interests, giving you a sense of deep meaning and purpose. A connectivity amongst our fellow organisms” (Roll, 2023, Episode #740). This means that we are all connected to each other, and by believing that we are connected to

our fellow organisms, everything that falls under the umbrella of Nature can and should become our purpose.

When you think of consciousness pervading everything, my query is, is that God? Or could you not perceive that as some form of God? The philosopher Baruch Spinoza stated, “Every substance is necessarily infinite. There cannot be more than one substance having the same attribute, existence belongs to the nature of substance. It must therefore exist either as finite or infinite. But it cannot exist as finite, for it would have to be limited to another substance of the same nature, and that substance also would have to exist. And so there would exist two substances of the same attribute, which is absurd. Therefore, it exists as infinite” (Spinoza, Shirley [Translator], 1992, p.34).

This substance in the proper sense has eternal existence, infinitude. Spinoza’s God, the universe itself, Nature, contains an energy that comprises the nature of consciousness. A universe wide mind, and everything else is just aspects of that, does that need to be called God? Can we refer to it as Nature? If everything is infinite then that would mean that the idea of our connected consciousness, our energy inside of us is interconnected to the divine through Nature and will return to that source at the time of our death, we are part of the endless cycle of Nature.

I believe that most human beings can recognize the energy within Nature, that in engaging with Nature, no matter what you call it—energy, consciousness, spirit, or soul—it’s the connection felt to the Divine infinite source. The Indigenous peoples discussed above have shown that deep connection to Nature and the spiritual connection brought into so much of their culture and community, most acknowledging the sacredness of the environment. Over millennia this feeling has been expressed through creation stories, religions, and philosophies. No matter how you interpret it, you experience it. Through these experiences some humans have emerged to acknowledge this infinite source.

Proof of that energy/soul/consciousness/spirit inside me comes when I lie next to my wife and feel that energy in my chest reaching for her, even after thirty years, my soul still longs to be closer to hers. Is it just that life source's recognition of another longing to join or is it from a previous time when both energies occupied the same space? These are different possible religious perspectives that I have explored. I feel it in my chest, when I place my hand over my heart during a loving kindness meditation, thinking about my children. I feel that energy, that light traveling through me and towards them as I recite, "May you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be loved, may you know peace." I have also witnessed that energy, that consciousness leaving someone's body, as I attempted CPR on my father while he lay on the snow-covered ground of his driveway, feeling the energy dissipate the moment he passed. When you have the experience of someone dying in front of you, it makes the serious case that we are so much more than skin and bone, the source, the energy, the consciousness that animates us leaves and just a shell remains. Our body is part of Nature and is a vessel that helps to engage with Nature, what's inside us is eternal. It is important to recognize the interconnectedness that both our body and consciousness share with Nature.

Jivan Das, a monk, coach and author reminds us that, "we are the infinite universe, the infinitude of time and space. Everything is in creation or de-creation, everything is growing or dying, and it is all made from the same thing. We are part of this creation matrix. Experience yourself as the infinite and the eternal. We are part of that. We are the movement of the stars, the stillness, and the vastness of space" (Das, 2020, *Piercing Illusion in the Now*). Das is saying that our consciousness or energy returns to Nature after death, we are interconnected with everything in the universe. The traditions

and religions above have helped form my own spiritual and philosophical beliefs by helping me recognize the interconnectedness and consciousness shared between most humans and Nature.

I choose to believe that my energy/soul/consciousness/spirit feels a connection to that source when in Nature, and that connection brings me serenity, and adoration to the present moment. And I think it will eventually return to that infinite source. I have tried to highlight in the religions and philosophies that have been discussed how, for me, they seem to believe the same thing, just express it in their own fashion. On a cold winter's night, I feel the vastness inside of myself, peering up into the clear, crisp night sky. Picturing the universe all around me, the movement of the planets and stars inside me. The emptiness of space reminds me that there is no end to the space inside of me, I am part of infinitude. An infinite fullness, the oneness of existence, the purity of creation, and the perfection that Nature is, that which I am made of.

As I previously stated, most Saturdays I spend on my bike experiencing Nature with other people. I did not mention; however, that multiple times during the week you can find me walking, and most of those times I am walking on the McDade Trail that travels along the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River. I make sure I leave early in the morning. My goal, if possible, is to be alone on the trail. Like before, my cell phone and headphones have been left behind in my car. It wouldn't matter anyway because one of my favorite things about this section of the trail is that there is no cell phone service. I escape. Walking along, the gravel crunches against my feet. In the winter, my labored breath exhales in a plume of smoke and the cold air burns my lungs slightly. The river rushes by to my right. Bald eagles soar above me searching the river for fish.

Occasionally a lumbering black bear startles me in the distance, and in the autumn, the once tall green corn stalks are now brown and brittle, a perfect hiding place for the colorful pheasant that I sometimes have the privilege of catching a glimpse of. It's at these times that I realize that I am in fact not alone at all. The animals that I encounter, the corn and the soil it comes from, the water that briskly flows down the river are also experiencing Nature. Perhaps in a different way than me due to my consciousness, but we are all part of Nature. We are experiencing the Divine through Nature; for me, like so many in various religious traditions, Nature is the Divine.

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