

Thoughts on Man and Nature in Japan: A Personal Statement

Wilbur M. FRIDELL

Not long ago I reread some of the works of Elizabeth Vining, that remarkable lady who burst into prominence in the postwar years as tutor to Akihito, Crown Prince of Japan. I have appreciated all the books of Mrs. Vining to come my way, for she brings to her writing not only skill but also a rare and enriching humaneness. My favorites among her writings, however, are those in which she describes her years in Japan: *Windows for the Crown Prince*, *Return to Japan*, and those parts of her autobiography *Quiet pilgrimage* in which she records her Japan experiences.

Here was a cultured American Quaker invited by the Japanese Emperor and his advisors to come to their land to help mold the mind and character of the Crown Prince, the future emperor. Mrs. Vining met this storybook challenge with such poise and sensitivity that she soon won the admiration and trust of the Japanese people. Moreover, though she would never claim to be a scholar of "things Japanese," she shows through her writings an insight into Japanese life and dynamics that I find helpful and stimulating.

While reading Mrs. Vining's autobiography, I came to a section in which she discusses differences between Japanese and Western attitudes toward the natural environment. She speaks of the Japanese appreciation for all that is natural, then follows with this sentence:

- - - One lives to a rhythm not of one's own making (Vining 1970, p. 369).

My immediate and instinctive response was, "How true! How well said!"

All of us need a sense of rhythm and order in our frantic, scat-

tered lives. But how do we come by such order? Do we sit down and fashion fundamental rhythms for ourselves, individual patterns that we ourselves create? No, what we do is to seek a rhythm "not of our own making." This rhythm is not something we piece together, but something built into the nature of things, something we discover. What we are looking for is the very rhythm of the universe, the rhythm of nature.

Both human and extra-human creatures have lived by the rhythm of nature from time immemorial. Only in relatively recent times, as a result of having "conquered" nature, have we lost this basic sense of environmental orientation—and to our great detriment. Mechanical conveniences have made life easier in many ways. But at a deeper level, such things as autos and air conditioners have separated us from the natural world: cars from the land, air conditioners from the weather itself. Little by little we have lost our intimate ties with nature. The result is a basic sense of disorientation that has cast a malaise over our minds. What we need is a renewal of vital connections with the physical world. And perhaps it is not too much to hope that in restoring those connections, we may regain something of our lost sense of belonging to the universe.

Wise men of every culture have made it their business to understand the rhythms of nature so that their lives and societies might be modeled on its patterns.

I will never forget my visit to Machu Picchu high in the rugged Andes mountains of Peru. Here, on a mountain peak rising breathtakingly into the air, stands an impressive fortress built of huge blocks of stone, all beautifully fashioned and set into place without mortar. Altogether, the fortress includes the remains of some two hundred rooms or buildings. At the very top, in the most sacred spot, is the temple area, from the center of which rises a single upright stone. It appears that this stone served as a kind of sun dial, evidence of a sun-worshipping cult in which Inca life was regulated by the daily and seasonal cycles

of the sun.

This sort of example could be found, no doubt, in every society of every time and place. There is a basic wisdom—indeed, a basic necessity—that compels us to seek out the natural patterns of the universe and model our lives on them.

Universe-modeling finds explicit illustration in what might be called the East Asian principle of the “micro-macrocosmic correspondence.” According to this principle, nature or the macrocosm is the “large world,” and we humans comprise the microcosm or “small world.” The idea is that we should so order our lives that they will be in harmony with the larger world of the cosmos. Here again it is a matter of living according to a rhythm not our own, a rhythm larger than ourselves, the very rhythm of nature itself.

Patterning life on cosmic models is an idea that finds beautiful expression in the Chinese Taoist classic, the *Tao teh ching*:

Man follows the ways of the Earth,
The Earth follows the ways of Heaven,
Heaven follows the ways of Tao,
Tao follows its own ways (Wu 1961, p. 35).

Note how the imagery moves upward through the “cosmic triad” of man, earth, and heaven, each element following the larger one above. Finally, all is modeled on Tao (the universal reality, cosmic or ultimate nature), and Tao sets its own course.

All well and good. But, you may ask, how can East Asians be held up as examples of living in harmony with nature when we know through the news media that the Japanese, at any rate, are some of the world’s worst polluters? We know, for example, that in recent years certain Japanese rivers have been filled with dead fish, that police directing traffic in downtown Tokyo have had to wear gasmasks as protection against auto fumes, that there have been tragic cases of industrial poisoning in fac-

tory towns. How, you may ask, is this in any way different from similar Western cases?

I hasten to say that I am quite aware of these facts. I am not one of those Western breast-beaters who believe that we of the West are the unregenerate exploiters and that all would be well if we only had an "Eastern answer" to the environmental problem. The Japanese have industrialized with tremendous intensity during the last century, especially the last decades, and they have done it in a small, crowded land. The result is obvious: some of the worst pollution problems in the world.

In face of this fact I can only affirm my belief that the Japanese people will deal with the environmental problem with the same adaptability and energy that have characterized them at every critical point in their remarkable history. The Japanese are a disciplined people with a powerful sense of ethnic identity, and when they set themselves an overriding national purpose, they have shown that they can close ranks and move together for effective action. Evidence suggests that the environmental issue may quite possibly provide the occasion for just such a national effort.

Whatever may or may not develop along these lines in Japan, this much is certain: there is much that we of the West can learn from East Asian tradition as we come to grips with our own pollution problems. For deeply embedded in the mainstream of East Asian life and consciousness are certain fundamental themes that might be called environmental principles. One such principle is that of the "micro-macrocosmic correspondence" to which reference has already been made. According to this principle, it is up to us to discover and live in harmony with that larger cosmic order where Mrs. Vining locates the "rhythm not of our own making."

Especially since the publication of *Limits to growth* (Meadows 1974), it has become painfully clear that unless we learn to follow nature's patterns and live within her resources, we as a human race are headed for terrible destruction. Exponential popula-

tion growth, together with the rapid exhaustion of food and energy supplies, constitute a kind of environmental time bomb. If it does not explode within our lifetime, it promises to devastate the world of our children's children.

I remember vividly that day when, just a few years ago it seems, we all thrilled to the luminous beauty of Planet Earth as seen from the first color pictures taken from the moon. From the perspective of outer space, earth seemed somehow small, delicate, vulnerable, and very precious.

Long centuries before man ever dreamed of traveling to the moon, something of the same feeling was captured in another verse from that cherished Taoist classic, the *Tao teh ching*:

The world is a sacred vessel, which must not be tampered with or grabbed after.

To tamper with it is to spoil it, and to grasp it is to lose it (Wu 1961, p. 41).

REFERENCES

- MEADOWS, Donella H. et al.
1974 *The limits to growth: A report for the Club of Rome project on the predicament of mankind*, 2nd ed. New York: Universe Books, Inc.
- VINING, Elizabeth Gray
1970 *Quiet pilgrimage*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.
- WU, John C.H., transl.
1961 *Lao Tzu/Tao teh ching*. New York: St. John's University Press.