



Rooted in this very earth

By Dhivan

An unintended consequence of the viral pandemic is that, rather than walking to my office at the university, I walk for exercise each day in the local woods. And I am not alone: lots of us seem to be taking the unexpected opportunity to find pleasure in springtime woodland. As I've been walking in the woods, I've been thinking more about Buddhist environmental ethics (see also *Mettā for Plants* -

<https://dhivanthomasjones.wordpress.com/2019/12/23/metta-for-plants/>). It's often thought that Buddhism is eco-friendly because of its ethical principle of non-violence and because of the doctrine of interconnectedness. Well, yes, it would greatly help the environment if people were to stop eating animals. But what about interconnectedness?

Scholars have pointed out that saying that everything is interconnected doesn't necessarily help formulate an ethics, as it could mean that pollution is connected with smiling and meditation is connected with open-cast mining, somehow or other. It's all one. But for environmental ethics we need conceptions of value and judgements about what to do.^[i] Nevertheless, it seems to me that there is surely some significance in the *experience* of being inseparable from nature and the earth for changing how we live. But what exactly is the experience? Is it of interconnectedness?

Walking in the woods, I find myself attending more to my footsteps and less to my thoughts. The feel of the earth, especially the mulch of humus, all those layers of old leaves, is more enjoyable than mental preoccupation. I am inside the world of birdsong. The chiffchaffs started two weeks ago, and now the blackcaps are singing too. I pass two men sitting on a bench, and we all turn to listen to a woodpecker hammering. I want to say to them, *Dendrocopos major*, though I don't.



I walk on, and realise that I am saying the names of flowers to myself. Look – *celandine*, and *campion*, and *wood anemone*. These old names root my tongue in generations of speakers of our shared language, fellow wanderers in spring woods. And I realise that the feeling of connectedness with nature is not something vague and mystical, but quite precise – it consists in my attention, now, to this living being with this specific name – *sycamore*. I remember reading, in Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, how ‘sycamore’ was her favourite word. It’s not my favourite, but I have had a different, more appreciative, relationship with that tree since I read that book. I am more enamoured of *hornbeam*, its scaley bark plated, like a rhinoceros, like an ent.



A true appreciation of nature is mediated by words, or else it remains silent. But that is not to deny the complete indifference of nature itself to our language. Rather, our words, these ancient labels of consensus reality, are the acts of homage that we pay to what we recognise as other beings. The concept signified by *oak* is in my mind and in our culture but has an open edge bordering the wordless. It's when we abide in that boundary, that liminal zone of leaf litter and lichens, that we touch on the vast, pulsing mystery of life. This happens *through* words and concepts, not without them. And where I find something living that don't know the name of, some fungus on an old relic of oak, it remains alien, its being beyond me.



Abiding in that borderland, the word 'interconnected' shows up a laughable anthropocentrism. I may be dependent on nature for my life, but in no way whatever is life dependent on me. This beech, this bluebell, this bumble bee, does not need me. We humans are the new species here, a mere few hundred thousands years old. None of the other species in this woodland need us. Should *Homo sapiens* disappear, through virus or war, life would continue without faltering. Preoccupied with my own thinking and wanting, I might think that I am important to the unfolding of things. Seduced by the beauty of woodland, I realise that I am the least of the things passing through.

In this humility, what am I? Not separate and alone, not a mere mind; but a body that is the child of, and dependent on, the earth. But not *one* with nature either, but something more complex, beyond words. Like a tree, which is rooted in the earth, so that where earth ends and tree begins is anybody's guess, and no-one knows; yet a tree still stands in its own

presence, and endures. Likewise, I am something that thinks, on its own; yet the million-fold roots of a human being interweave with indescribable sensitive complexity into earth, into life, into the cosmos. I look at the swelling trunk of an oak where it plunges and emerges on the edge of its world. I feel into the inconceivability of its connection. An inchoate bliss arises and I relax into the collar of moss.



The supposed environmental relevance of interconnectedness is especially clearly critiqued in Lambert Schmithausen (1997), 'The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics', *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 4, pp.1–74, and Charles Ives (2009), 'In Search of a Green Dharma: Philosophical Issues in Buddhist Environmental Ethics', in John Powers & Charles Prebish (eds.), *Destroying Māra Forever: Buddhist Ethics Essays in Honour of Damian Keown*, Ithaca NY: Snow Lion, pp.165–85.

<https://dhivanthomasjones.wordpress.com/2020/04/11/rooted-in-this-very-earth/>