

Zen Buddhism and the Intrinsic Value of Nature

Simon P. James

University of Durham, UK

Part I

It is a perennial theme in the literature on environmental ethics that the exploitation of the environment is the result of a blindness to (or perhaps a refusal to recognize) the intrinsic value of natural beings.¹ The general story here is that Western traditions of thought have tended to accord natural beings value only to the extent that they prove useful to humans, that they have tended to see nature as only instrumentally valuable. By contrast, it is said that a new, environmentally friendly understanding of the world would value nature 'for its own sake', would conceive natural beings as having intrinsic value. In the light of such an understanding, the oak tree, for instance, would be seen not merely as a source of timber or shade or as a decoration for the front lawn, but as valuable 'in itself', as having an intrinsic value that ought to be respected (see further, O'Neill 1993, chapter 2).

Another theme in the literature on environmental ethics is the idea that Buddhism is a distinctly 'green' or environmentally friendly religion. Various reasons are provided for this view. Some writers draw attention to the fact that Buddhism does not hold that humans are elevated above the rest of the natural world by virtue of their possession of a soul, and argue that because of this the religion is not infected by the 'anthropocentrism' or human-centredness that marks, say, Christian approaches to nature. Other writers argue that Buddhism recognizes humankind's dependence on nature and so could not endorse the dominative or exploitative attitude towards nature allegedly fostered by Genesis. Still other writers point to the central virtues of non-violence and loving-kindness towards animals in Buddhist traditions. I could continue here, but it is not my purpose in this paper to provide a comprehensive account of the reasons why Buddhism has been considered an environmentally friendly religion (see further, Tucker and Williams 1997). It will suffice to note that it often has been so considered.

Part II

These, then, are two very general themes in the literature on environmental ethics. However, it is not clear that they can be reconciled. On the face of it, there would seem to be a problem in squaring a commitment to the intrinsic value of natural beings with a Buddhist conception of nature. Malcolm David Eckel is recognizing that there may be a problem here when he complains that

the idea of *intrinsic* value ‘seems to suggest precisely the substantial, permanent identity that the ideas of no-self and interdependent co-origination are meant to undermine’ (1997, 343). Steven C. Rockefeller is making a similar point when he claims that ‘the concept of intrinsic value suggests the existence of some fixed essence or permanent self in things, which is contrary to the Buddhist doctrines of dependent co-arising, impermanence, emptiness and no-self’ (1997, 320; see also Schmithausen 1991, 14, 53–62; Eckel 1997, 328ff).

The early sections of this paper appraise the criticisms of Eckel and Rockefeller as they apply to one Buddhist tradition in particular, Zen. But before turning to this task, it will be necessary to clarify *why* exactly writers such as Eckel and Rockefeller believe the idea of intrinsic value jars with Buddhist thought. To do this, it will be necessary to explain something of the philosophical basis of Zen.

Part III

In referring to the philosophical basis of Zen, I do not mean to say that the practitioners of the religion claim to subscribe to a particular philosophy. On the contrary, Zen Buddhists refuse to be tied to any particular philosophical position but stress that their teaching is a practical method for spiritual development, which can in fact be hindered by the desire to understand the world philosophically. Nevertheless, the practice of Zen rests on a conceptual base, a base formed, principally, of various philosophical concepts drawn from Buddhist philosophy in general. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on one of these supporting concepts, the teaching of emptiness (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*) as it was developed in the Madhyamaka tradition of Buddhism.

Briefly put, the emptiness teaching states that all things lack an inherent nature, that all things are, as it were, ‘empty’ of self-existence. The claim here is not that nothing exists at all, but only that nothing exists as a substance; that is, as wholly independent of its relations to other things. For Madhyamaka Buddhism, any particular thing depends for its existence on conditioning factors, upon its ‘internal’ constituents and upon its ‘external’ environment, for instance. In its teaching of emptiness, Madhyamaka therefore rejects the idea, propounded by Buddhist schools such as the Vaibhāsika Abhidharma, that all phenomenal things are constructed out of self-existent, simple elements, for it holds that on analysis even these units would reveal themselves to be empty of self-existence. Madhyamaka also rejects the idea that emptiness represents some sort of metaphysical absolute that grounds the existence of things in the world, for any absolute thus postulated would, it contends, also be empty of self-existence, and hence not an ‘absolute’ at all. For Madhyamaka, and also for Zen, absolutely *all* things are empty, ‘emptiness’ included.

Now if this is construed as a philosophical claim, then it is clearly a very bold one. However, the purpose of this paper is not to justify or defend the Madhyamaka teaching of emptiness. I only want to note that Zen implicitly endorses the teaching. (Which is not to say that Zen does not also embody other understandings of emptiness. References to emptiness can mean different things

in different Buddhist traditions, and Zen, for its part, was not solely the product of the Madhyamaka.) My task will be to suggest one way how, given this commitment to the emptiness of all things, Zen can provide a philosophical account of the intrinsic value of beings. And, at first sight at least, this would seem to present quite a challenge. For even on the basis of this very cursory sketch, it would seem that the emptiness teaching could not be reconciled with the existence of any *intrinsic* properties. An argument for this could run as follows. For Madhyamaka, and hence for Zen, whatever properties one identifies as constituting the putative essence of a thing will, in the final analysis, reveal themselves to be empty of self-existence. That is to say, they will reveal themselves to be functions of the thing's context; that is, as relational. According to the emptiness teaching, then, all properties are relational, and hence no intrinsic values can exist. And if this is the case, then no being could have a value 'in itself'. Individual organisms certainly could not, but neither could environmental wholes, for any whole thus identified (a particular species, for instance, or an ecosystem, or even the biosphere itself) would have to be considered as empty of self-existence, and hence as devoid of intrinsic properties.

Part IV

As they apply to Madhyamaka Buddhism, then, the reservations of Eckel and Rockefeller would seem to be justified. By virtue of its commitment to universal emptiness, Madhyamaka would not seem to be able to countenance the notion of the intrinsic value of anything. And this would seem to hold for Zen Buddhism too, incorporating, as it does, the teaching of emptiness.

But this conclusion is too hasty and need not be accepted. It would seem that even if one grants that the emptiness teaching entails that all properties are relational, this would not preclude the possibility of developing a conception of intrinsic value consonant both with the use of that idea in environmental ethics and with Zen.

In order to see why the reservations of Eckel and Rockefeller are not justified, it is essential to note that the phrase 'intrinsic value' can be understood in several distinct ways. It seems likely that Eckel and Rockefeller are taking intrinsic value to mean non-relational value in G. E. Moore's sense, the value a thing has independently of its relations to anything else. And it would indeed seem to be difficult to justify the existence of that sort of value in the context of a commitment to emptiness, for, as we have just seen, in the context of such a commitment, all properties are conceived as being relational. Yet although this meaning would seem to be suggested by the word 'intrinsic', it is clear that many, perhaps most, environmental thinkers do not understand intrinsic value in this way. As Karen Green has argued, environmental values are generally not non-relational (1996, 35). To demonstrate this, she points out that one cannot refer to the value of an organism in abstraction from its environment, and to illustrate the absurdity of attempting to do this she gives the example of trying to assess the value, in the abstract, of the cane toad. In Australia, cane toads,

are (apparently) everywhere, eating everything up and causing the extinction of other species. Down under, the cane toad has a 'positive disvalue' (ibid.). But Green asks us to imagine a situation in which the cane toad is the sole predator on some other organism that has an even more disruptive effect on the environment—a particularly ravenous species of beetle, for instance. In such a situation, the cane toad would have a very high value. The point here is that the value of the cane toad, or indeed of any organism, is relational; that is, a function of the habitat in which the organism lives.

So environmental thinkers, in calling for us to recognize environmental values, are not generally conceiving these values as non-relational. Moreover, as we shall see, this holds true even when they refer to the intrinsic value of beings. But how, then, do they understand the phrase 'intrinsic value'? It would seem that when environmentalists maintain that a particular being ought to be valued for what it is 'in itself', they are generally making the point that it should not be considered valuable only to the extent that it proves useful. In other words, rather than conceiving intrinsic value as non-relational value, most environmental thinkers seem to think of it as some kind of non-instrumental value, the value that a being has as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. But before we rest content with this definition of intrinsic value, it must be noted that a being can have instrumental value, not only to the extent that it furthers some specifically human end, but also in so far as it promotes some end seemingly unrelated to human interests. The seal cub, for instance, could be instrumentally valuable not only because its fur and meat can be sold, but also because it might contribute to the good of the various environmental wholes of which it is a part. It might have a role in sustaining local polar bears, for instance, or in limiting the population of certain fish species. Environmental thinkers keen to promote the intrinsic value of nature are generally not lamenting the instrumental value of beings in this second sense, however. They are rather complaining that things are seen as having only instrumental value in relation to specifically *human* ends. So it would be more precise to say that environmental thinkers generally understand intrinsic value to mean the value that a being has independently of its instrumental value as a resource for humans. (That said, some environmental thinkers place further restrictions on what they mean by the intrinsic value of beings. For instance, environmental philosophers such as Holmes Rolston III argue that intrinsically valuable beings are not only non-instrumentally valuable (in the sense given earlier), but also objectively valuable (see, for example, Rolston 1997). For our purposes, it will suffice to note that whatever *else* they mean by the phrase 'intrinsic value', environmental philosophers generally mean some kind of non-instrumental value, as that term has been defined above). The important point to note here is that there is no reason why intrinsic value, understood in this sense as non-instrumental value, need be non-relational (see further, Kagan 1998, 280–3; Smith 1998, 548). In the earlier example, the cane toad in the habitat in which it is the sole predator on some particularly destructive beetle has a non-instrumental value, which would be evident to informed and concerned parties. (Admittedly, the toad could be said to have an instrumental value in that it

contributes to the good of the environmental wholes of which it is part. But we can assume that it would not have instrumental value in the rather narrower sense in which we are using that term; that is, we can imagine that it would not have value as a resource for humans.) However, as we saw, since the non-instrumental value of the toad is a function of the habitat in which the organism lives, it is clearly relational. The upshot of this is that if environmental thinkers are not understanding intrinsic value as non-relational, then there would not seem to be a problem with reconciling a commitment to the intrinsic value of individual beings with the teaching of emptiness. Or less confusingly: intrinsic value, as understood by most environmental thinkers, can be relational; and as relational its existence can be reconciled with the emptiness teaching. Eckel and Rockefeller's criticisms are therefore not justified: so far we have not been presented with a reason for dismissing an idea of the intrinsic value of individual beings based on Zen.

Part V

We have already examined Steven Rockefeller's reservations concerning the possibility of developing a conception of intrinsic value consonant with Buddhist thought. It is worth noting that the passage quoted earlier continues as follows:

In seeking a solution to this problem [i.e., the problem of developing a Buddhist conception of intrinsic value], it is important to emphasize that Buddhist philosophy and ethics do not have a quarrel with the practical meaning or bearing of the concept of intrinsic value. The relevant point is that any being with intrinsic value is worthy of respect and care. (Rockefeller 1997, 320)

Rockefeller is surely right about this. In fact, one reason why Buddhism has been considered environmentally friendly is because it seems to respect the non-instrumental value of natural beings. And this is particularly true of Zen Buddhism. The appreciation of nature has a central place in Zen, partly because of its incorporation of Taoist and (in Japan) Shintō ideas on the spiritual significance of the natural world. Whereas Indian Buddhism showed a certain (but by no means invariable) tendency to see nature as a realm to be transcended, East Asian traditions of Buddhism such as Zen tend to use examples of natural phenomena to symbolize transcendence itself (Eckel 1997, 339). In particular, there is a tendency among Zen Buddhists to see ultimate truths in the details, in the 'little things' in nature. Thus, in contrast to Western depictions of the sublime—crashing waterfalls, raging storms, and the like—Zen poetry and paintings tend to focus on far less lofty phenomena: a berry dropping from a branch in a dark forest, a frog trembling on a banana leaf, a raven perched on a dry branch—things of this sort.

Environmental philosophers have, for their part, been particularly attracted to the writings of the medieval Japanese Zen thinker, Dōgen Zenji. Arne Naess, for instance, the founder of the very influential notion of deep ecology, cites

him as a major inspiration (Curtin 1996, 241), and a host of other environmental thinkers refer to Dōgen's thought in their work (for example, Fox 1990, 268; Curtin 1994; Parkes, 1997). In relation to our present purpose of developing a Zen-inspired conception of intrinsic value, I would like to draw attention to Peter Harvey's claim, in his recent book on Buddhist ethics, that for Dōgen 'Each aspect of nature has an intrinsic value as part of ultimate reality, and to let go of oneself in full awareness of the sound of the rain or the cry of a monkey is to fathom this in a moment of non-dual awareness' (2000, 177). Harvey's claim seems right, intuitively. The picture of nature conveyed in Dōgen's writings is strikingly beautiful: it is of a world in which any particular thing is accorded a supreme significance as an embodiment of the universe as a whole, such that a man with right perception can see 'the entire world in one tiny speck of dust', or 'the entire universe ... in ... a tall bamboo' (Dōgen 1976, 15, 89). But what philosophical warrant have these claims? Are we to think that the world is *really* present in a speck of dust? Would a sceptic be justified in blithely dismissing these sorts of claim as 'merely' poetic? If he would, then they could hardly be used as the basis for a *philosophical* account of the intrinsic value of individual beings.

I do not think Dōgen's thoughts ought to be dismissed as 'merely' poetic, and in the following pages I will try to develop a philosophical justification for his account of the 'intrinsic value' of beings. But before doing this, I would like to formulate, and then try to refute, what I consider to be a more powerful objection to a Zen-inspired conception of intrinsic value. In order to formulate this objection, it will be necessary to consider, once again, the teaching of emptiness.

Part VI

On the face of it, one might suppose that the teaching of emptiness entails the absolute non-existence of things. One might hold that to say that all things are empty is to say that they do not exist at all. This interpretation of the emptiness teaching forms the basis for a criticism that, time and again, has been levelled at Madhyamaka Buddhism, by both non-Buddhists and Buddhists from other traditions. For instance, Buddhists from the Vaibhāsika Abhidharma tradition maintained that to deny the self-existence of certain atomic constituents of reality would be to affirm that all things are constructed but to deny the existence of any basic elements out of which things could be so constructed. And this position, they maintained, could only amount to the absurd conclusion that nothing exists at all.

The standard reply to this charge of 'nihilism' is to point out that in saying that all things are empty, Madhyamaka philosophers are not saying that they lack existence altogether, but only that they lack *self*-existence. On this reading, then, the conception of emptiness does not entail nihilism, the non-existence of all things, but rather affirms the interconnectedness of all things, the fact that all things depend for their existence on their conditions, upon other things, for instance. In this case, the teaching of emptiness, far from negating the existence

of things, actually entails their (dependent) existence. For, on this account, to be real is to share in the mutual dependency of all that exists. If something were non-empty and utterly independent it could not enter into the holistic network that constitutes reality (see Inada 1970, 148). As Wittgenstein might have said, such a non-empty being would be like a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it. Just as such a wheel would not be part of the mechanism, so such a being could not be part of reality (cf. Wittgenstein 1958, remark 271).

But this response is unconvincing. The Mādhyamika cannot avoid the charge of nihilism so easily. In order to see why the standard Madhyamaka response is inadequate, it will be helpful to interpret the teaching of emptiness in terms of the distinction between external and internal relations.

Let me explain how I will be understanding this distinction. If a thing is externally related to another thing, then the relation is not considered to be essential to the thing's nature. For instance, my coffee mug is now on my desk. But it would remain the same mug if it were on the floor or on my chest of drawers. In these respects (i.e., in terms of spatial relations), the mug is said to be externally related to the desk. If, by contrast, a thing is internally related to another thing, then the relation is considered to be essential to its nature. So the chord A minor is internally related to the chord A major, since A minor is only A minor because it *differs* by one note from A major. Or one could say that the number one is internally related to the number two, since, in order for any number to be identical to one, it must be *less than* two.²

In claiming that all things are empty of self-existence, Madhyamaka Buddhism must be committed to the idea that all things are only internally related. For, according to the teaching of emptiness, no things enjoy that degree of independence that would allow us to speak of them as being externally related to other things. On the contrary, whatever one might identify as constituting the putative essence of a thing would, in the final analysis, reveal itself to be dependent upon its relations with other things. Yet the standard Madhyamaka response to the charge of nihilism seems to rely on the notion that things are externally related to one another. Now if indeed things were externally related to one another, then one would be justified in claiming that, even though distinct thing *X* is not *self-existent*, it exists to the extent that it is related to other things, and one could imagine the thing sitting at the nexus of a web of relations, or something of this sort. But this reply will not work if one considers, as one must if one is to remain true to Madhyamaka thought, that all things are only internally related, since the claim that all things are only internally related makes it difficult to speak of things at all.

This requires explanation. Consider two objects, *X* and *Y*, and an internal relation between them, *r*. Since *X* is internally related to *Y*, the relation *r* must be essential to its nature. So in speaking of *X* we are in fact implicitly referring to the relation *r* as well. But *r*, of course, cannot be specified in the absence of *Y*—it is, after all, a relation between *X* and *Y*. So in speaking of the essential nature of *X* we are in fact implicitly referring not only to the relation *r*, but to *Y* as well. Hence *X* cannot be thought of as an independent entity—it is what

it is only because of its relation to *Y* (see Hylton 1990, 54–5). And this process can be continued. If all things are internally related, then *Y* will, in turn, be internally related to another object *Z* by another relation, call it *r'*, so that in referring to *Y* we are implicitly referring both to *r'* and to *Z*. So in speaking of the essential nature of *X*, we are implicitly referring not only to *Y*, but to *Z* as well. And so on. If the commitment to the internal relatedness of things is thoroughgoing, this process can be continued indefinitely. And if the process can be continued in this way, then one is led to the conclusion that any particular thing is in reality not a distinct entity related in various ways to other entities, but some sort of whole, one encompassing all those entities that it at first appeared to be distinct from and related to.

This conclusion would not be out of place in an account of the metaphysics of F. H. Bradley, the most influential of the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century group of philosophers known as the British Idealists. Like Madhyamaka (or rather, as per my interpretation of Madhyamaka), Bradley maintained that the idea of an external relation could not be upheld. But if the idea of an external relation could not be countenanced, the proposition that all relations must be internal led to surprising results. For Bradley came to realize that to say that two or more things are internally related is to deny that those things enjoy the degree of independence that would justify references to their being related to one another. So, for Bradley, to say that two or more things are internally related to one another is to say that they are abstractions from a non-relational whole. As Peter Hylton puts it in his excellent account of Bradley's philosophy: 'By their internality, internal relations make it manifest that they are destined to be transcended in a higher unity in which the separateness of the relata, and thus the relational nature of the whole, has disappeared' (Hylton 1990, 55). So in Bradley's metaphysics, the things that apparently surround us are relegated to the status of mere appearances. The coffee mug, the desk, the pack of chewing gum, and so on: these are not things related to each other and to me in various ways. They are unreal, abstractions from a non-relational whole (see, for instance, Bradley 1930, chapter VIII; 1914, 238–40). Notwithstanding Bradley's claim that this non-relational unity somehow 'is' its appearances, this would seem to amount to the idea that no things exist at all (Bradley 1930, 431–2). It was this seemingly preposterous conclusion that so offended G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, and which inspired the two of them to try to develop an account of the world more in tune with common sense. One could imagine that Moore and Russell would have been similarly offended by the interpretation of the emptiness teaching here being discussed. For in the light of these reflections on the internal relatedness of things, one might be led to think (*might* be led to think) that to understand emptiness—that is, to experience it—must be to experience no things at all. One might suppose that to experience emptiness would be to experience the disappearance or, better, the dissolution of things. Fixing one's attention on a thing, one would, presumably, find one's gaze drawn to the other things to which that thing is (internally) related, then further to the various things to which these things are (internally) related, and so on, *ad infinitum*. One would, presumably, find the thing dissolving into its

conditions like a drop of water in a pool (cf. Hegel 1892, sections 92–3; Abe 1989, 161). This would not mean merely that things would become indistinct, that, so to speak, their edges would blur. For even fuzzy-edged things can still be externally related to one another, and external relations cannot obtain in this state. On the contrary, it would seem (*seem*) that the dissolution of things would culminate in an experience of an undifferentiated field, a world in which, as Toshihiko Izutsu puts it, things have lost their ‘essential limitations’ and ‘being no longer obstructed by their own ontological limits ... flow into one another, reflecting each other and being reflected by each other in the limitlessly vast field of Nothingness’ (Izutsu 1982, 31).

On this ‘nihilistic’ reading, those elements of experience we in our spiritual ignorance call ‘things’ would be considered to be no more than projections imposed by our minds on an undifferentiated substrate. The phenomenal world would be like a show, a phantasm, a dream, as indeed it is described in some Buddhist texts.³ To perceive emptiness would be to, as it were, to see through these illusory things to the undifferentiated, non-relational field that constitutes the true nature of reality.

This nihilistic reading of the emptiness teaching can provide the basis for a more powerful objection to a Zen-inspired conception of intrinsic value. For it seems to undermine not only the non-relational value of things, but also the non-instrumental value of things, since even this latter conception demands that we are able to identify some relatively discrete entities that could be said to be instrumentally valuable. But if no things exist, then no things can have even non-instrumental value.

Part VII

Yet this nihilistic interpretation of the emptiness teaching is hard to square with many of the accounts of awakening one finds in the literature of Zen. Consider, for instance, the following famous account of enlightenment from the Zen master Ch’ing-yuan (J. Seigen, d.740):

Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said, ‘Mountains are mountains, waters are waters.’ After I got an insight into the truth of Zen ... I said, ‘Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters.’ But now, having attained the abode of the final rest [that is, enlightenment], I say, ‘Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters’. (quoted in Abe 1989, 4; annotation added)

On this account, the experience of the dissolution of things would seem to be at most a precursor to enlightenment, rather than enlightenment itself. Enlightenment, although preceded by a state in which things apparently dissolve into an undifferentiated background, would seem to involve the perception of distinct things. Consider also the accounts of enlightened experience provided by Zen thinkers such as Dōgen. In these descriptions, the thing is not portrayed as dissolving into its context; on the contrary, as we saw, Dōgen maintains that the awakened observer sees the thing as somehow ‘containing’ the world.

Indeed, in general, Zen seems to hold that to experience emptiness is not to experience the dissolution of things into a non-relational whole, but to see a world carved up into distinct things. The enlightened man or woman is said to perceive things as they 'really are', in their 'suchness' or 'thusness' (*tathatā*).

But how can the existence of distinct things be reconciled with the teaching of emptiness? To try and answer this question, let us return to the issue of what, on a nihilistic reading, the experience of emptiness might be thought to involve. I have already suggested, tentatively and provisionally, that it might involve the 'dissolution' of things. But their dissolution into what? Into a non-relational field, I suggested. But what could it mean to experience such a field? For one thing, the field could not be thought of as being limited, as having boundaries, since limitation implies a relation with something it is not. This field, however, cannot be related to anything else, since on this account it represents the non-relational whole from which all things and relations are abstractions. So on this nihilistic interpretation, to experience emptiness would not be to experience a determinate being, but to experience a *limitless* undifferentiated field, a state of no-thing-ness, if you will, in which even fuzzy-edged, insubstantial things cannot exist.

But, as we saw, to experience emptiness cannot be to experience nothing (no things) at all, so this cannot be the way Zen understands the emptiness teaching. We must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. Indeed, I think it could be argued that to think of emptiness as an undifferentiated field would be to treat it as if it were unconditioned, as if it were something self-existent. But Zen holds true to its roots in Madhyamaka Buddhism in maintaining that emptiness cannot be, so to speak, 'pinned down' as a self-existent state of pure no-thing-ness any more than it can be thought of as some sort of God-like 'pure being'; the function of the teaching is rather to draw attention to the conditioned nature of all things, emptiness included. With this in mind, one might be led to suppose that to think of emptiness as entailing the dissolution of all things into an undifferentiated field would not be to have understood emptiness at all, but to have posited the existence of some kind of *Brahman*-like Absolute in its place. To do this would be to have become attached to emptiness, fixated by the void, and to have therefore fallen short of the thoroughgoing non-attachment that would mark a genuine appreciation of *śūnyatā*.

By contrast, Mādhyamikas and Zen Buddhists stress that emptiness is *itself* empty of self-existence, which is to say that it is conditioned by what it is not (see, for instance, Abe 1989, 128–9; cf. Takuan, quoted in Ryōen 1999, 294). So if on our nihilistic reading emptiness reveals itself as the absence of things, it must disclose itself as conditioned by the presence of things. Hence for Zen Buddhism, as for Madhyamaka, to truly experience emptiness is not to experience a limitless undifferentiated field, a state of no-thing-ness, but to experience *things*. Things must be there in awakened experience, albeit revealed in a higher spiritual register. They must disclose themselves in the context of an experience of emptiness.

Part VIII

The following passage from Thich Nhat Hanh provides some insight into how things might reveal themselves in awakening:

When we look at a chair, we see the wood, but we fail to observe the tree, the forest, the carpenter, or our own mind. When we meditate on it, we can see the entire universe in all its interwoven and interdependent relations in the chair. The presence of the wood reveals the presence of the tree. The presence of the leaf reveals the presence of the sun. The presence of the apple blossoms reveals the presence of the apple. Meditators can see the one in many, and the many in the one (1992, 90).

In this passage, Nhat Hanh would seem to be making a pronouncement, fairly standard in the Zen literature, on the mutual dependence of things, the fact that all things are empty of self-existence and depend, in various ways, upon conditioning factors. I feel, however, that his point is subtler than it might at first appear. For one thing, in trying to conceive the meditative experience here being described, it would be a mistake to think of the chair as indicating the presence of various things outside itself. The idea that it does that rests on a conception of these various things as distinct objects externally related to the chair. Yet as we saw earlier it is precisely this conception of things as externally related to one another that the emptiness teaching undermines. For this reason, Nhat Hanh maintains that the wood, tree, leaf, sun, and so on, disclose themselves *in* the chair (cf. Nhat Hanh 2000, 91).

This idea, strange though it is, is entirely consonant with our earlier reading of emptiness in terms of the internal relatedness of things. Earlier, we had entertained the possibility that the emptiness teaching could foster an experience of the dissolution of things. We had imagined that one's attention would be drawn from the thing to its conditions, and to the conditions of these conditions, and so on, until, at the limit, one would be left with an experience of a pure undifferentiated field. But, as the quotation from Nhat Hanh shows, the experience of emptiness could be pictured in another way. In appreciating the emptiness of the thing, Nhat Hanh's meditator does not find it dissolving into its conditions. On the contrary, he finds these conditions somehow present within the thing: the meditator sees the tree, forest, sun, and so on, *in* the chair. And this conclusion is entirely in keeping with the general idea, articulated in the Hua-yen and T'ien-t'ai schools, that each putative part of reality contains the whole. Just as in the famous metaphor of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* any particular jewel in Indra's Net reflects all the others, so here Nhat Hanh's chair contains all things (cf. Whitehead 1925, 96).

But, again, it is easy to misunderstand the point being made here. It would, I suggest, be an error to think of the thing as somehow containing a collection of discrete objects. In the light of a commitment to the internal relatedness of all things, such a conception cannot be upheld. To be sure, in a certain kind of meditation, one might initially see the chair as 'containing' more and more relatively distinct things—wood, tree, leaf, sun, and so on. One might imagine

the thing gathering these things into itself like a whirlwind gathering debris or a plug gathering dishwater. But then, as one's meditation deepens, the commitment to emptiness must ensure that these things blur and fuse until, eventually, the thing is seen, as it were, to contain the non-relational whole of emptiness. One might imagine the thing gathering more and more of its conditions into itself until it finally draws its entire context into itself; that is, emptiness (or, more precisely, emptiness as conditioned by form). The thing, one might say, has 'gathered' emptiness into itself. Alternatively, one could describe the same phenomenon by saying that emptiness has 'emptied' itself into form, into the chair. (An analogy may be helpful here: consider the way the Mona Lisa 'draws' a crowd of visitors; think of the crowd 'congregating' around the painting.)

This idea is not perhaps as odd as it might at first appear. For, after all, we do sometimes speak of individual things as intimating or 'gathering' their contexts. Think, for instance, of the way in which a particular motif embodies the entire theme of a symphony. Or consider the phenomena James Joyce once called 'epiphanies', those moments when a trivial and seemingly arbitrary event—the clink of a teaspoon against a saucer, a snatch of conversation overheard in the market—can encapsulate an entire story. In cases such as these, it does not seem absurd to say that the part in a sense 'contains' the whole. And we do sometimes speak of physical things such as chairs in this way too. For the trained observer, the relic of an ancient civilization brings with it an entire world: the shivering frontier patrol on Hadrian's Wall is there for the archaeologist in the muddy legionnaire's helmet. Consider also the phenomenon of nostalgia—the crumbling exercise book, recovered from some dusty corner of the attic, gathering a schoolyard world of warm milk and Wednesday mornings after double mathematics. Or consider the significance of the souvenir or the memento. And it is not only past worlds that can be gathered in this way. For there is another phenomenon, rarer but more interesting than nostalgia, when a thing, perhaps even a small, seemingly trivial thing, suddenly takes on a special significance and, as it were, condenses one's world. Phenomena of this sort play a central role in Heidegger's later writings on the nature of things. His idea is that a thing, even an ordinary, everyday thing, when attended to in an appropriately attentive way, can 'gather' the phenomenological dimensions of a rich, spiritually satisfying world. Thus he writes that an item as seemingly innocuous as a jug can gather the brooding presence of the natural world ('the dark slumber of the earth'), the slow turning of the seasons, the community in which one lives, and even the deep longing of men and women for some relation to the divine (see Heidegger 1971).

Perhaps Nhat Hanh is referring to a similar phenomenon. But even if he is not it has become clear that our earlier picture of emptiness as involving the 'dissolution' of things needs to be complemented by another picture wherein a thing is seen, as it were, to gather its conditions into itself. The first picture I called an experience of dissolution; this second I will call an experience of 'condensation' since I mean it to describe the phenomenon in which reality

'condenses' into particular things. It is tempting to interpret the following passage from the 'Sayings of Daikaku' in terms of this experience:

Realisation makes every place a temple; the absolute endows all beings with the true eye. When you come to grasp it, you find it was before your eyes. If you can see clear what is before your very eyes, it is what fills the ten directions; when you see what fills the ten directions, you find it is only what is before your eyes. (Quoted in Leggett 1978, 61)

The charge of nihilism cannot, therefore, be sustained: there is no reason why the experience of emptiness must entail the 'dissolution' of things. On the contrary, there are grounds for thinking that someone who experiences *sūnyatā* sees things as 'condensations' of reality, as foci wherein the world is, so to speak, 'gathered'.

Part IX

So far, I have argued that two objections to the idea of a Zen Buddhist conception of intrinsic value cannot be upheld. However, I have not provided any compelling reasons for thinking that Zen does indeed subscribe to such a conception. In order to determine whether a Zen Buddhist view of nature does in fact involve anything resembling a conception of the intrinsic value of things, it will be necessary to consider the idea of condensation in more detail.

There is, I think, a danger that the idea of condensation might seem very grand. In seeing all reality condensed into the thing before him, one might imagine the Zen master as (a caricature of) a yogi, his body sitting cross-legged in some Eastern bazaar, his mind ranging over the fiery surface of Alpha Centauri, his consciousness reaching out far beyond our galaxy. This image resonates with the hyperbolic descriptions of enlightenment provided in some Indian Mahāyāna *Sūtras*. But it is altogether too grandiose to be true to the spirit of Zen, a tradition that, with typical Chinese pragmatism, has generally played down the significance of astonishing yogic feats of this sort. I do not, therefore, want to claim that Zen masters such as Dōgen, in speaking of seeing the world in a speck of dust, are claiming some kind of cosmic omniscience of this sort (cf. Shaner 2001, 173).

How, then, ought we to understand references to condensation? For my part, I do not think they should be thought of as philosophical propositions that can be assessed as true or false in their own terms. Instead, I would suggest that they be viewed as tools, as 'skilful means' designed to undercut a particular kind of philosophical delusion; namely, the idea that things are reflections or expressions of some antecedent reality. So, on this account, to say that the thing is a condensation of reality is not to propound some grand metaphysical theory, but only to reject the idea that there is anything 'behind' or 'beyond' the thing. It is to deny that the thing is an imperfect copy of a template set in a transcendent realm of Forms, for instance, or a condensation of a limitless field of Emptiness, or a worldly being imbued with a divine presence. And once

these delusions are set to one side, then one is left with the thing at hand—the thing in its ‘thusness’.

In this sense, Zen advocates a return to the things themselves (to paraphrase Husserl’s rallying call), the development of a kind of attentiveness to phenomena that is purged, so far as is possible, of all distractions, metaphysical or otherwise. It is this attentiveness that one finds expressed in *haiku*, for instance, or in the carefully orchestrated movements of the tea ceremony or, more generally, in the call to be mindful at all moments and so not to let oneself be distracted from the matter at hand. It seems to me that in this careful attention to phenomena we have something close to the virtue modern environmental thinkers call an appreciation of the intrinsic value of things. But I will postpone discussion of that matter for another time (see James 2004). My purpose in this paper has only been to show that certain objections to a Zen Buddhist conception of the intrinsic value of things cannot be sustained.

Notes

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- 1 That is, natural beings (things, entities) as opposed to artefacts. The phrase ‘natural beings’ is being used here in a non-technical sense to denote those entities with which environmental thinkers are most concerned—pandas, rare orchids, ospreys, and so on.
- 2 Note that I am following the British Idealists’ use of the term ‘internal relation’ rather than that of David Lewis (see Lewis 1999, 129; especially n. 16). I would like to thank Jonathan Lowe for pointing this distinction out to me.
- 3 For example, *The Diamond Sutra*, section 32 (Price and Mou-lam 1969, 74). See also Burton 2001, 179–80. I will not argue the point here, but it seems to me that this conclusion would not be warranted. For to say that all things exist in dependence on mind is not to say that mind is the only condition for their existence. Things could depend for their existence upon both mental and non-mental factors. (Similarly, to say that a thing does not exist as a mind-independent entity is not necessarily to say that it is a nothing more than a fiction.) Burton also suggests alternatives to an ‘idealist’ reading of the emptiness teaching.

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