MY TURN
Category : December 1989
Published by Anonymous on Dec. 01, 1989

MY TURN

Ahimsa; An Environmental Ethic

Chapple, Christopher The world, faced with a broad ecological crisis, finds itself searching out tools which can bring about resolution of complex problems. Conceptual resources available from the traditions of the East, worked out long ago, provide possible models for coping with this pressing contemporary dilemma.

From the earliest period of historical Jainism and Buddhism and from the time of post-Vedic Hinduism onward there has been a persistent concern in the history of Indian civilization for protecting life. The practice of nonviolence stems from a world view that challenges Western presuppositions regarding life and has spawned a thorough-going respect for humans, animals, plants and even the elements.

For the ancient thinkers of India, life is seen as eternally existent: for the Buddhists and Jains, there is no creator God, only a continuation of what has been: time is beginningless. Furthermore, life, referred to as prana or jiva, is only apparently hierarchical. Each life state is interrelated and interchangeable.

Given that all life forms are part of the same continuum, the consequences of one's actions require a great deal of consideration. The law of karma states that as you have done to others, so will be done to you, succinctly expressed by the Buddha, "If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, evils follow him even as the wheel follows the foot of the ox which draws the cart." The performance of action in light of nonviolence requires, regardless of tradition, that the performer of any activity see the implications of his or her act and also reside in the vision that another person is, in a fundamental sense, not different from oneself. Within the context of the Indian quest for liberation, nonviolence provides an important step toward the direct perception of the sacredness of all life.

The question may be posed, "How can these ideas, archaic and bound by tradition and culture, be applied to so contemporary a problem as environmental ethics?" The Buddha and others in classical India addressed the issue of existential suffering and its resolution through spiritual liberation. This may seem lofty and irrelevant to the grim reality of environmental ravage. But the spiritual traditions of India also present to us an earth whose many creatures are literally to be regarded as our mother and father.

In the Euro-American context, the environment must be spared because ultimately man himself is threatened. From Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism we receive another message. The earth, the water, the sun, the air and space have always been sacred, not because they serve the needs of human beings, but because humans cannot exist without them; humans are composed of the elements. Furthermore, the life of humans is the same life that is found in similar combinations of elements, whether insect, animal or fish. For some urban Americans, the loss of trees and lakes due to acid rain may be regarded with indifference. To an Indian traditionally trained, such a loss is a loss of that which composes oneself.

If the world can look to India's tradition and ethical conscience in its quest to meet the environmental crisis, a tradition and conscience rooted in nonviolence and respect for all forms of life, success in achieving and maintaining a balance between life needs and the needs of the earth can be met.