

Comments on the article by Jeidong Ryu

“An encounter between critical Buddhism and Asian naturalism: Can Asian naturalism be a tool in overcoming social discrimination?”

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Vuokko JARVA¹

The author builds the article around two focal problems of today: reification or objectification of nature and other human beings. The problem of reification has been discussed especially by a German follower of the critical Frankfurt School, Axel Honneth, in several books and articles. Originally it means treating other people only as objects, which allows oppressing and discriminating against them. Honneth carefully argues that the concept can be extended to human beings' relation with nature, too. Then it would mean treating nature only as a natural resource, an object of exploitation.

The opposite of reification is recognition, which has several levels. Most basic is identification of others, which then can deepen into acknowledgment, and finally into deep emotional recognition. Identification is a basic precondition in, for example, distinguishing some people or groups as subjects, and acknowledgment means guaranteeing their rights, and proper treatment as members of human communities. Emotional recognition is based on human beings' ability to sympathize and empathize, which Adam Smith already held to be self-evident.

'Social inclusion' versus 'social exclusion' have been employed as operative concepts to describe the processes by which the reification of other human beings is realized in societies. Social exclusion can result in modes of exploitation, oppression, discrimination, violence, or even annihilation. If the extensive concepts of reification and recognition are employed, human relationships to nature also could be discussed in terms of exclusion-inclusion by human beings, as below in the Latin American *buen vivir* mode of thinking.

Jeidong discusses these issues by comparing three Asian based schools of thought: traditional Asian Naturalism, ethically-emphasized Asian Naturalism, and Critical Buddhism. The predominant mode of Western thinking today is, he says, materialist naturalism based on the Platonic dualistic division of reality to the material and spiritual spheres (natural and supranatural), and denies the spiritual. This rationalistic approach is destructive, and causes natural disasters and social discrimination.

The common basis of various schools of Asian Naturalism is that reality is one integral whole in which the material and spiritual form a harmonic unity, according to the traditional school. Representatives of critical Buddhism consider that traditional Asian Naturalism favors social stratification and discrimination against or oppression of parts of the population. The ethically oriented school of Asian Naturalism

¹ University of Helsinki, FINLAND.

emphasizes ‘dharma’, which has multiple meanings, from ‘living right’ to ‘right legislation’ and structural righteousness.

As a general conclusion, Jeidong holds out the optimistic view that Asian Naturalism can enable remedies to both the exploitation of nature and discrimination against human beings by changing attitudes away from reification and objectification toward a more balanced approach. He considers that the reification of ‘others’ (including all beings external to the evaluator) also results in reification of oneself:

“Reification of objects causes the reification of subjects. As objects are alienated from their own nature, subjects as observers of them are also alienated from their own nature. Asian naturalism might reintegrate the reified objects and subjects to their own transcendent nature.” [Jeidong 2016, p. 314]

Western thinkers often get lost in the very rich and multifaceted Eastern modes of thinking. One reason is that Eastern thinkers use language in a different way than in the West; Jeidong refers to this as well. The Asian sources typically use very abstract concepts like ‘nirvana’ or ‘atman’ or even ‘dharma’, which cannot easily be translated into Western expressions and thinking. The traditional way to teach these concepts to Asian people has been with pictorial and symbolic language, which can express character in fable (as in rich tradition of fables about Buddha, which remind me of the ancient Greek fables of Aesop), or with natural and familial symbolic characters (as in the *I Ching*, the Chinese Book of Changes).

I would like to suggest comparing the concept of dharma to the recent Latin American concept of *buen vivir* (living well), in which the indigenous beliefs and ways of understanding the world are translated into understandable modern language and thinking.

The *buen vivir* model has been discussed in Latin America for about fifteen years now. It emphasizes human dependency on nature and social community. The concept does already appear in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador, but it has not achieved significant emphasis in their large scale politics. On the grassroots level, however, it is an important citizen movement.

Buen vivir means literally ‘living well’, and often the prefix *con-* is added; *convivir* emphasizes the communality of living. It is not a coherent ideology, but a kind of umbrella concept that comprehends multiple – sometimes even conflicting – directions of thought. Catherine Walsh [2010, p. 16] considers the key elements of a serviceable framework to be: equity, democracy, participation, protection of biodiversity and natural resources, and respect for ethnic-cultural diversity. As a mode of thought it is close to views on sustainable development, on consumption downshifting, and on transferring from capitalistic to collective, reciprocal and complementary modes of production. One of the most remarkable characteristics of *buen vivir* thinking is considering nature as a subject, and including it in the community.

Uruguayan environmentalist Eduardo Gudynas [2011, pp.15-16] gives five characterizations of *buen vivir*:

- Decolonizing knowledge, which means respect for and dialogue among various modes of knowledge and worldviews,
- Rejecting the rationality of manipulation and objectification of both nature and other human beings,
- Creation of encounters, dialogues and interactions among different ways of knowing,
- Replacing the Western view of nature as an external object to be manipulated with the concept of Nature as an integral part of the community,
- Extending the concept of community to include not only human beings, but other beings as well, material or spiritual.

Pure rationalistic materialism is not enough; *buen vivir* gives space to human emotions and feelings, too.

Buen vivir schools of thought appear to be close to Asian Naturalism in acknowledging the unity of reality as an integral whole. Jeidong refers to Hee-Sung Keel's view that Asian Naturalism holds an organic view of the world, and we must develop "the ethics of threefold reverence: reverence toward Heaven, all human beings, and all beings, animate and inanimate." [Hee-Sung Keel 2012] *Buen vivir* schools also give concrete guidelines for ethical behavior both on individual and collective levels. I wonder whether it would be useful to enrich the ethical concept of 'dharma' with the characterizations of *buen vivir*, which can be understood even by people unfamiliar with the finesses of difficult Asian traditions?

If the Neo-Aristotelism is taken seriously, I am afraid that no single tradition of knowledge can give relevant solutions to the problems of current reification of other humans and nature. Dialogue between various traditions is needed. Even the blunt Western materialist naturalism has developed tools for understanding and defining important analytical concepts; nor is it a uniformly dominant ideology, but consists of critical scientific countercultures as well.

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