Creating Cultures of Ecological Sustainability

Notes for a lecture given at graduate conference on Asian Studies given at Arizona State University

October 17, 2009.

1. Prefatory Remarks
Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at your conference. I find it instructive that graduate students in Asian studies should identify the topic of sustainability as a key focus. It’s instructive because very few of you have probably ever taken a course entitled “sustainability in Asian studies” yet it is a theme that rightly unites scholars of Asia who are concerned not simply about scholarship for the sake of scholarship but as a practical and ethical response to the field. It demonstrates a sense of responsibility and engagement with the world that I think stands in the very best traditions of academic work, and is something that I encourage all of you to pursue as best you may in your academic careers. All too often graduate school seems to focus on establishing distinctions from the “ordinary world:” we learn the languages of classical civilizations, mastering the abstruse vocabularies of fashionable French theorists, getting yourself published in journals that no one ever reads, and learning to sneer contemptuously at your undergrad friends who went into business and are now earning six figures. In a way this is hardly surprising given that our higher education system inherited the values of medieval monks who cherished being recondite as much as erudite.

But those of us who study Asia have an insight into the world that many of our fellow citizens do not. We know, the world it is changing. We know that the 21st century will be once again be an Asian century, a century of Shanghai or Seoul or Bangalore or Jakarta. But all of us who study Asia also know that the while the forces of urbanization, modernization, technology, and globalization produce seismic shifts in society, they do not, to the absolute horror of social scientists and policy-makers, reproduce the values of modern secular western culture. Religion thrives in Asia. Tradition thrives in Asia, all the while reinventing itself, and in the process rewriting the discourse of modernity, from
multiple perspectives, and from beyond the horizon of the hegemony of the West. It is a magnificent and deeply seductive transformation to behold, but also one that produces a whole range of anxieties and responsibilities for those of us who claim to study Asia. In particular Asia’s economic and educational development brings with it the prospect of an expanding ecological footprint of some 3 billion people. The rise of Asia itself raises an important question for everyone: how are all going to live together on this planet? It seems perfectly clear to me that we in the west are not going to be the ones who solve the question of sustainability. It is the countries of south and east Asia who are going to do so, simply because they have no other choice. And when they do so, because they must, it will be we who learn from them and not the other way round.

2. **What is a Culture of Sustainability, and why do we need one?**

We need to learn from Asia because the environmental movement in the West has by and large been a disaster. Despite the phenomenal growth in scientific understanding about ecology, environment, global heating, all the data suggests that we are exceeding even the worst predictions of scientists ten years ago. If one were to assess the carbon emissions of environmentalists, politicians and academics flying round the world to discuss sustainability, one might even say that the sustainability movement has been a step in the wrong direction. Why is this the case? Why has sustainability not become embedded in contemporary society in the face of overwhelming scientific and economic evidence in its favour.

The reason for this is that if the movement for sustainability has largely focussed on three instruments: technological development, policy changes and legislation. Technological development can help us generate energy more efficiently and with less impact on the environment. Government policies can favour green industries. Legislation can be enacted to make polluters pay.

But as Pan Yue, China’s vice minister of environmental protection made clear to me in an interview last year, legislation is only effective when there is universal consent as to its validity. Strict environmental laws are useless if all they do is give polluters an
incentive to move to another jurisdiction, or if prosecutors have little interest in pursuing these cases.

To back up technological, policy and legal reform, it is necessary to create a culture of ecological sustainability. Such a culture denotes the narrative framework, the ritual habits to inculcate in people -- to culture people -- in the feelings that provide the social and psychological justification for ecologically responsible decisions. Without such feelings, sustainability is simply an empty word, a concept that is easy to discuss but impossible to implement.

With the right cultural and psychological justifications, sustainability moves from the arena of discourse to the arena of practice. When sustainability is embedded culturally and psychologically, it unconsciously shapes the habits of thinking and the patterns of behaviour in ways that people barely notice. In short it comes to define their way of life, their civic values, and their sense of identity.

Sustainability, I believe, is at its heart a cultural and psychological transformation because it involves a different way of imagining oneself in the world. It involves

(1) Imagining oneself to be implicated in a ecosystem and not as an autonomous individual.

(2) Imagining oneself to occupy a duration in time that extends deep into the grave and far into the future

(3) Imagining oneself to be a world that extends deeply in space and time beyond one’s own body

Sustainability, you see, requires people to broaden the context in which they make decisions. It involves their feeling beyond the narrow context of one’s immediate place in the world so as to consider one’s actions extending far and wide across the world. It involves feeling beyond the narrow context of one’s immediate time so as to consider one’s actions extending deep into the future. It involves feeling beyond the narrow
context of one’s body so as to consider one’s very being as extending widely into the world.

This is very hard for an important psychological reason and an important cultural reason. They psychological reason is that our intuitive psychological apprehension of the world is that it is a thing outside us, that it is apart from us, not a part of us. That is our default, intuition generated in the deep basement of our psychic apparatus. We intuitively perceive the world to be outside of us, separated from us by the skin. Deleuze’s appreciation of the skin as the deepest organ is highly counterintuitive. The cultural reason is that the culture of modernity builds upon and reinforced this intuitive perception to create a complex civilization founded upon normative dualisms in which the thinking self is divorced from the material world.

The sciences of evolution and ecology teach us that this default intuition and its normative culture are false. That our thinking selves are the product of 15 billion years of cosmic evolution. That our bodies are permeated by the worlds they inhabit and impact upon it in powerful and destructive ways.

The movement for ecological sustainability depends on embedding the holistic picture that has emerged in the new sciences into the operative norms of our culture. This requires transgressing the conventional norms of modern culture and, what is harder, the intuitive psychology whereby we perceive the world as a space outside our bodies. Sustainability depends for its success on these cultural and psychological transgressions.

Today I’d like to suggest ways in which religious traditions can help us to imagine how it is possible to transgress the normative culture of modernity and the intuitive dualism of self and other. In so doing they point the way to fostering a culture of sustainability.

In so doing I am implicitly arguing that environmentalists have not been nearly radical enough in advocating for the harmony of human beings with each other and with the biological matrix. So long as environmentalists urge people to respect, heal, or value nature as an object beyond the hermetically-sealed walls of our bodies, they unconsciously reinforce the default dualisms that posits an absolute separation between
human beings and their lived environments. What is necessary therefore is to rewrite
the discourse of ecological sustainability so as no longer to perpetuate the false
reification of nature as a thing outside our bodies..

The movement for ecological sustainability depends, therefore, on a deeper
transformation in the way that people feel and perceive their place in the world.
Sustainability at its deepest level is an aesthetic transformation, changing the way
human beings sense, feel and cognize their location in space and time.

Before moving to explain this aesthetic revolution, I’d like to focus on a familiar example
of the type of symbolic transgression that I think religions are capable of, and that is the
tree ordination movement in northern Thailand.

3. symbolic transformation
In June 1990 Phrakru Pitak, a Buddhist monk in northern Thailand, despaired of the
extensive deforestation which had devastated local culture and society. Logging
companies, both legal and illegal, had cut down much of the traditional forest and, to
make matters worse, local farmers were also clear-cutting swathes of land to plant
maize, a non-indigenous cash crop. The result was significant soil erosion that
necessitated even more clear-cutting for agricultural land (Darlington 1998), putting
local farming on a downward spiral that resulted in high rates of emigration to the cities
and the inexorable impoverishment of the local area. The solution that Phrakru Pitak hit
upon was to begin “ordaining” trees, that is, wrapping them in the saffron cloth of a
Buddhist monk, and ritually investing them with the status of an ordained Buddhist. The
result was that local people were now forced to consider the trees not simply as
obstacles to growing maize, or as potential lumber profits, but as having an even higher
sacred value. Nailed to the tree was a sign saying “To destroy the forest is to destroy
life.” Referring to a more recent ordination project in northern Thailand, village headman
Suay Sisom described the importance of the ordinations as follows:

A tree wrapped by a robe represents a monk; if someone dares to cut it off, the demerit
would equal that of killing a monk, and finally the destruction of the tree would lead to
the end of his or her own life. … Since the trees have been ordained, no one has cut them
or made charcoal in the forest. (Liu Jun 2006)
To cut down one of these ordained trees would clearly invoke a whole complex of moral, cultural and religious meaning, and entail a very high degree of karmic demerit, not to say social shame. In July 1991, Phrakru Pitak conducted a second ordination, this time of a forest surrounding ten neighbouring villages, and thus began a movement that has attracted widespread international attention.

Of course, religion alone did not create the transition to a more ecologically sustainable economy in these areas of rural Thailand; the series of ritual actions involved in ordaining the tree was only part of an intensive educational effort. But, as Susan Darlington writes (1998), the ordinations lay at the symbolic heart of the movement:

The tree ordination was the symbolic center of Phrakhru Pitak's conservation program. The discussions with the villagers leading up to the ordination and the conservation activities organized by them afterward were all motivated by the emotional and spiritual commitment created by the ceremony. Throughout the ceremony, Buddhist symbols were used to stress the religious connection to conservation, the villagers’ interdependence with the forest, and the moral basis of the project.

It is worth considering carefully the role played by religion in this complex of culture, ecology and economy. First of all, rarely do commentators mention any kind of underlying Buddhist theology, scriptures or doctrines. In contrast to academic essays on Buddhism and ecology, which focus on the doctrine of dependent co-origination or the relation between samsara and nirvana, the focus of this story is the ritual of ordaining the tree, and the symbol of the saffron cloth. It was not the sermons and teachings of the monks that motivated the people to act, but rather the people’s participation in the ritual ordination and their respect for the symbols of the Buddhist tradition. These ritual practices and objects functioned at a symbolic level to forge a practical connection between the worldview and concepts of the Buddhist religion on the one hand, and the living ecological context of the local community on the other hand.

Secondly, ordaining the tree was at its heart a transgressive act. Specifically, it transgressed the default psychological notion that trees belong to a different category of being from monks. By ordaining the tree, the ordinary people were forced to consider that selfhood, status, dignity, worth, belonged not simply to human beings, but to the nonhuman world. This act, not the teachings, not the scriptures, not the doctrines or the theologies, demonstrates that ritual nondiscursive communication has the power to
transform the way people cognize their engagement with the world and practically act within it.

I would further like to note that this action could theoretically have taken place within any religious tradition, provided that the master of the rituals is sufficiently skilled in manipulating the symbol system. But since we are focussed today on Asia, it's worth while considering briefly the subversive possibilities already present within the Buddhist tradition. The most important of these is the deference that is according to all sentient beings. The very idea of sentience being attached to the rest of the animal world--and maybe even to trees--transgresses the default psychology and cultural value of humanism: that only humans truly think and feel.

So this story demonstrates how religious rituals confuse, modify, disturb and transgress the normative ways in which humans engage with their lived environments. It’s possible, I believe, that enlightened ritualists could manipulate the masses into sustainability. Indeed religious ritualists manipulate the masses into all kinds of crazy beliefs all the time. Indeed if billions of people across the world regularly engage in personal conversations with invisible beings living in the sky, is it so hard to believe that people could learn to invest their planetary home with comparable worth?

4. psychological transformation

This leads me now to my second major example of transgression, and that is the psychological element.

Before thinking about Asia, I’d like to point to the work of the french philosopher Merleau Ponty who really revolutionized phenomenology by focussing in the the body not simply as the container for experience but as the generative matrix of those experiences. Indeed, it is not simply that the body functionally generates an “experience” of an external “world” but rather that the body provides the spatial location that is necessary for the perception of a phenomenological world. Without a body there could be no experience of the world as it is given to us, and without a world there could be no body. He writes:
My body is not an object, but a means, an organization. In perception I organize with my body an association with the world. With my body and through my body, I inhabit the world. The body is the field in which perceptions localize themselves. (1965: 261; quoted in Jung 2007: 241).

The emphasis here on the carnal unity of the body and the world is particularly significant for ecological discourse. Of particular note is the famous statement that the body as “flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term ‘element,’ in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an element of Being” (VI 139–140; quoted in Jung 2007: 242–243). Merleau-Ponty regards the body akin to Bachelard’s elements, that is to say, as the fundamental building block of our lived experience of the world.

In The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty develops his understanding of perception with the notion of reversibility, that when perception is understood as being constituted in the flesh, then to perceive the world is also to be perceived by the world: one cannot touch without being touched; one cannot see without simultaneously presenting oneself to be seen by the world. In contrast to Descartes’s cogito, we can say tango et tangor (I touch and I am touched). Whatever we touch, perceive and even think, we do so from within a world, not from outside it.

This approach to phenomenology has been instrumental in generating what has been termed the “enactive approach” of embodied cognitive science (see Varela et al. 1997). According to Colombetti and Thompson (2007: 46), this “dynamical systems approach has challenged the idea that cognition is the manipulation of abstract representations according to syntactic rules, and has proposed instead that cognition emerges from the coupled interactions of the brain, body, and environment.”

This approach is currently challenging the dominant tradition of cognitive science that draws on Cartesian understandings of the mind/body dualism. Colombetti and Thompson summarize this field as follows:
In summary, according to the enactive approach, the human mind is embodied in our entire organism and embedded in the world, and hence is not reducible to structures inside the head. Meaning and experience are created by, or enacted through, the continuous reciprocal interaction of the brain, the body, and the world. (Colombetti and Thompson 2007: 56).

But Merleau-Ponty’s work has been significant not simply for rethinking the process of embodied cognition, but also on the other side of the coin, for thinking about the lived world that is generated through the process of cognition. Indeed his work has been instrumental for a new line of ecological phenomenology which seeks to explore the value of phenomenology for contributing to a holistic, ecological, systemic view of the relationship between the body and the world. One of chief protagonists of this movement is David Abram. In an early essay, published in 1988, Abram first alludes to the ecological possibilities of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. He writes:

> His work suggests a rigorous way to approach and to speak of the myriad ecosystems without positing our immediate selves outside of them. Unlike the language of information processing and cybernetics, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the flesh provides a way to describe and disclose the living fields of integration from our experienced place within them. The convergence of Merleau-Ponty’s aims with those of a genuine philosophical ecology cannot be too greatly stressed. (1988: 119)

Despite the work that has been undertaken in Western philosophy to recuperate the body as the foundation for the human experience of the world, such work remains remarkably abstract given that its focus is on the body. Two criticisms are readily apparent. The first is that made by the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman who criticizes Merleau-Ponty for emphasizing the way in which somatic perception operates spontaneously. Most of us most of the time do not need to think about or reflect upon how precisely we are constructing our bodily experiences of the lived world. The great marvel of perception is that we do not have to consciously think about how to navigate a crowded party without bumping into a waiter carrying a trayful of cocktails: we just do it. But Shusterman wants more than simply being able to be successful in ordinary pursuits. He advocates what he calls “somaesthetics” that is
training the body’s perceptual engagement with the world so as to achieve greater pragmatic benefits. He writes:

While I share Merleau-Ponty’s appreciation of our inexplicit, unreflective somatic perception, I think we should also recognize that it is often painfully inaccurate and dysfunctional. I may think I am keeping my head down when swinging a golf club, though an observer will easily see I do not. Disciplines of somatic education deploy exercises of representational awareness to treat such problems of misperception and misuse of our bodies in the spontaneous and habitual behavior that Merleau-Ponty identifies as primal and celebrates as miraculously flawless in normal performance. (Shusterman 2009: 139)

The problem, as Shusterman sees it, is that if perception is somatic, then it can and should be trained somatically so as to create pragmatically better representations of our place in the world. I wholeheartedly share Shusterman’s pragmatism with regards to somaesthetics. Let us indeed train our bodily perceptions so as to produce representations of the world that deliver pragmatic benefits. But I also think that Richard Shusterman has been living in Florida too long if he thinks that the pragmatic goal should be an improved golf swing or tennis serve. Why stop there? Why not work on the overcoming the false reification of self and world so as to arrive at a perception of the self within the world and not outside of it. In short why not use somaesthetic disciplines—the training of the habits of bodily perceptions—so as to bring about an ecological sensitivity rather than a lower golf handicap?

I mentioned earlier that two major criticisms have emerged of Merleau-Ponty’s abstract discussion of the phenomenology of the body. The first was Shusterman’s criticism that Merleau-Ponty emphasized the spontaneous nature of perception and neglected to consider the way perception and experiences can be shaped through somatic disciplines. The second criticism focuses on Merleau-Ponty’s reluctance to speak about the depth of the inner body. While his philosophy makes it perfectly clear that perception depends upon a depth of field for experience, he does not consider that this depth, or experience of dimensionality, can also be applied to the perception of the inner body (Sarukkai 2002). The Indian philosopher Sundar Sarukkai commented on this in a 2002
essay published in *Philosophy East & West*. Discussing Merleau-Ponty and his interpreters he writes:

But nowhere in these discussions do we find any detailed attempt to explicate the idea of the ‘inner’ body. The lack of such a discussion suggests that these writers view the body as a homogeneous entity, because of which there is little possibility of articulating a phenomenology of the inner body. I believe that the most important reason for this continued ambiguity regarding the notion of inner with respect to the body is to be found in the absence of a tradition of lived experience of the inner body in the West, one that could have been used by Merleau-Ponty in a manner similar to the case histories of Schneider.¹ In contrast, the phenomenological experiences of yoga strongly suggest the possibility of a lived experience of the inner body. (2002: 462)

Before discussing yoga, Sarukkai gives the example of eating in order to argue for the phenomenological experience of dimensionality or depth within the inner body. He writes:

The body experience of eating is equivalent to the phenomenological experience of dimensionality and thus is intertwined with the notion of ‘inside.’ The process of eating is never visible to us. Further actions related to eating, such as mashing the food, swallowing, and so on, are all events in the ‘dark side’ of the body. We can never ‘see’ ourselves eating, but we experience it all the time. We experience swallowing the food; we experience its passage through the food pipe into the region of the stomach. These experiences all constitute an experience of dimensionality, an expression of the ‘inside’ of the body. We are usually unaware of these processes except in times of pain and distress of the inner body. But practices like yoga allow us a continuous, conscious grasp of the inner body. (2002: 466).

I find Sarukkai’s approach instructive in that it opens up a new dimension to the question of embodied experience, one that embodied traditions such as Yoga, Tantra or Daoist body cultivation can function as interlocutors, and not mere as data to be studied. In the second half of this talk I want to focus on the depiction of the inner body that emerges in Daoist body cultivation, and to suggest that this depiction can be

¹ Schneider suffered head injuries and consequently many mental disorders. Merleau-Ponty used his case notes as evidence to refute empiricist and intellectualist theories of perception (Sarukkai 2002: 476)
instructive not simply for Shusterman’s project of understanding somaesthetic disciplines, but also for Abram’s project of eco-phenomenology.

3. Somatic Disciplines
The argument, put briefly, is that the traditions body cultivation can be understood as non-discursive somatic disciplines that inscribe the body within the world and the world within the body. Such somatic disciplines can overcome the experience of the world as other, and can provide the aesthetic or sensory foundation for ecologically responsible patterns of behaviour. In short, the visual and sensual experience of the body inside the world and the world inside the body can constitute the proper aesthetic grounds for a culture of ecological sustainability.

We know this because the Daoist tradition developed an extraordinary repertoire of physical cultivation practices that focus, like Yoga, upon the inner body.

I am not arguing here that such somatic practices were undertaken for purposes that could be considered remotely akin to today’s environmentalism. What I am saying is that Daoist tradition exhibits a range of practices that depend upon what we can anachronistically refer to as an ecological sense of self, a sense of the body and its environing context being inextricably embedded in each other. Such practices are of interest to the project of creating a culture of ecological sustainability because they suggest that non-discursive modes of somatic discipline can bring about an experiential awareness of the body in the world and the world in the body.

The Daoist tradition contains various famous images of the body as a landscape, the most widely known of which is the 内經圖 or Diagram of the Internal Pathways, a late nineteenth-century stone stele housed at the White Cloud Monastery in Beijing. The stele depicts the human body as a landscape of streams, mountains, stars, human figures and deities. Broadly speaking these represent the energetic pathways, the meridians of qi which flow through the body, and also specific energy points within the body. As Louis Komjathy writes (2008: 82–83):

The Neijing tu is an illustration not only of the meridians of qi running through the body, but also of the Daoist body as terrestrial and cosmological landscape and
as the dwelling-place of inner luminosities or effulgences. From a Daoist perspective, the human body corresponds to, embodies, various “external” presences—mountains, altars, colors, rivers, constellations, temples, spirits, forests, and so forth. The Neijing tu maps the landscape which is the human self … The Neijing tu may be understood as the “Internal Landscape Map.”

In his analysis of the Neijing tu, Komjathy is clear that its purpose is to depict the internal landscape of the body as revealed through the traditions of body cultivation practiced within the 龍門 Dragon Gate lineage of the Way of Complete Perfection 全真道, the major sect of monastic Daoism that exists in present-day China. The map in fact draws on a long tradition of representing the “internal” body using images from the “external” world. Such imagery is at its heart transgressive of the intuitive psychology which is based on strict categories of inside and outside. As we saw earlier, the Daoist tradition has an interest in breaking this default conception of the way the body is related to the world, and in positing a psychosomatic unity of the “internal body” and the “external world.”

It is my contention that the transgressive emphasis on the unity of inner and outer experience can be used as the basis for developing an aesthetic sensitivity to environmental concerns.

Consider for instance, the problem of moral proximity, that moral reasoning does not easily extend to situations that are beyond the perceptual horizon of the moral agent. For instance, it is easier to kill an enemy soldier by pressing a button on a computer and launching a missile across the world than it is to walk up to someone and strangle them to death. Similarly it is easy to be offended by someone dumping litter on the street in your home town than by the environmental and social effects of waste being transported across the world to be dumped into landfills or picked over by child labourers in desperate poverty. Equally, it is difficult for some people to be concerned by the rapid extinction of species in distant places. The issue here is that because of the limits to our senses, and the limited range of our aesthetic powers, we are unable to formulate the necessary moral vigour to bring about a change in behaviour. What we put beyond the
horizon of our perception, we condemn to aesthetic and moral irrelevance. Or, as we say at home, what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.

If we are serious about cultivating an environmental ethic that can pay attention to the globalized nature of environmental issues, then we also need a method of cultivating the aesthetic sensitivity to ecological devastation that seems to be beyond the horizon of our ordinary experience. Paradoxically, the Daoist tradition seems to work on expanding the horizon of experience not by encouraging people to travel across the world or by “expanding their minds” but by developing disciplines for experiencing the depth of the lived world within the depth of the living body. This is an extremely valuable insight for developing an eco-aesthetic sensitivity. I am not suggesting that this is what Daoists have historically done, but I am suggesting that this is what the tradition is capable of.

4. Qi Cultivation
The Neo-Confucian tradition of course pursued such insights with a great deal of philosophical force, focussed on understanding the relationship between vital force (qi) and principle (li) in shaping the dynamics of the cosmos. While I have a great deal of respect for the metaphysical speculations of Confucian philosophy, I would contend that eco-aesthetic sensitivity is generated in the realm of practice rather than theory. I would like to conclude by giving one example of how this can take place. This example is found in an autoethnographic study written by a former student of mine of the effects of practicing moving meditation, or a type of Daoist Qigong under the instruction of a Daoist master in China (Nixon 2002). In his account of this practice, Nixon compares the experience of practicing Qigong with accounts of how those suffering from chronic illnesses can develop an internal dialogue with their own bodies. He writes:

Kathy Charmaz (1991) describes the manner in which those suffering from chronic illness tend to develop a dialectic self, comprised of the physical self and the monitoring self. By going through the ordeal of illness, people develop a heightened sense of awareness of their own bodies, and can thus respond to their body’s needs. This monitoring self, once created, usually remains after the illness has subsided. Regarding her ill body, Sara Shaw explained, “I got to know
it; I got to understand it . . . I got to respect it . . . [I got to know] how my body was doing, how my body was feeling" (Charmaz 1991: 70-72). In the case of illness, the process of sensitive self-monitoring typically requires a level of self-objectification or personification; “dialogue” with one’s sick kidney, for example, may demonstrate this type of “split”.

Nixon goes on to use this as a comparison for explaining how the practice of qigong affected his own perceptual sensitivity:

During my research, it seemed that qigong also cultivated sensitivity and awareness, but in a way that did not objectify and thereby bifurcate experience along an inward/outward fracture. That is, the awareness generated through the practice of qigong does not stop at the skin, but rather “knows” the body as whole and part of its environment. (390)

Nixon seems to be suggesting, therefore, that even basic Qi movement practices can have the effect of reshaping the mode of awareness of our bodies within their lived environments. He concludes that this practice may even be considered an alternative epistemology, one that complements normative approaches that privilege discursive knowing over practical knowing. Nixon’s interest in this approach is similar to my own, that is to say, attempting to assess the extent to which somatic disciplines can not merely improve your golf swing, but contribute to your ecological sensitivity. According to Nixon:

Substituting or complementing normative epistemic approaches with those less privileged may facilitate different, if not more comprehensive, environmental understandings. It appears that qigong, by breaking the discursive mediation and bifurcation of reality and improving present, perceptive depth, sensitizes the practitioner to the emerging context within which they are increasingly undifferentiated, and thus allows them to engage with it “harmoniously”. (395)

In Nixon’s experience, therefore, Qigong led to an increased sensitivity to the emerging context of his lived world, and overcame the conventional bifurcation of reality into subject and object. It did so by improving “perceptive depth,” which we may interpret as reshaping the mode of bodily perception and engagement with the lived environment.
This sense of the unity of the body with the emergent phenomena of the world is termed “pervasion” 通 in the Daoist tradition.

5. Pervasion 通 and Eco-Aesthetics

Pervasion may be understood as the somatic experience of the mutual constitution of the lived body and its lived environment. This concept appears in the Zhuangzi in the concept of “becoming identical with the Great Thoroughfare” or Great Pervasiveness 同於大通. This experience is thematized in the Daoist with the metaphor of “translucence,” with depictions of the inner landscape of the body, and through the experience of qi as the psychophysical stuff that constitutes together the vitality of the lived body and the lived world. While Confucian philosophy reflected deeply on the harmonious unity of nature and humanity 天人合一, it was the Daoist tradition that sought to enact such a unity through non-discursive somatic practices.

If the approach of embodied cognition is correct, then it would seem that the unity of the lived world and the lived body is predicated on the body as the system that enacts experience. The problem faced by environmentalists, however, is that this process of cognition takes place unconsciously so that our minds generate a perception of a world that is external to our bodies and a perception of our bodies as an invisible interior, fundamentally disconnected from the world that envelops them. Though embodied cognitive science and embodied religious traditions may perceive that this dualism is constructed as part of the process of cognition and not intrinsic to the reality of things, this does not accord with the ordinary experience of ordinary people. Only theoreticians in laboratories, philosophers in libraries, and monks in monasteries come close to understanding the ways that our bodies enact the world that we experience.

Overcoming this fundamental dualism of self and other, body and world, is simply counterintuitive to conventional perceptions. And yet it is necessary for generating an aesthetic awareness that can be the foundation for ecologically-responsible action.

I would like to close by repeating the point that I made earlier: So long as environmentalists urge others to respect, heal, or value nature as an object beyond the hermetically-sealed walls of their bodies, they subtly and unconsciously reinforce the
absolute separation of the self from the world. Such an approach to environmentalism is doomed to failure. Embodied meditation traditions and the transgressive ritual traditions could play an important role in teaching people how to overcome this dualism, and how to create alternative experiences of the world not as external to body, but within the body. The Daoist experience of pervasion is predicated on the possibility of the world flooding into the body and the body flooding into the world. Such transgressive experiences may serve to break down the ordinary perception of a world disconnected from the body of the individual. In their place such experiences could generate an ecological aesthetic, a psychosomatic sensitivity to the mutual implication of the lived body and the lived world. Such a sensitivity could serve as a much-needed complement to discursive modes of environmental action, such as earth charters, policies, ethics and legislation. In my understanding of the world’s religions, it is the traditions of South and East Asia that have developed such practices to the highest degree. My research over the next few years will be to focus on understanding in more detail how and why transgressive rituals and meditations can help imagine and enact sustainability. And I invite all of you to join with me as much as this intersects with your own research in developing this field. I hope it will become an important contribution to Asian Studies, and an important contribution to sustainability.

Thank you.

6. References


Carey, Seamus. “Cultivating Ethos through the Body.” Human Studies 23.1: 23–42


