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**ABSTRACT**

*Environmental Ethics in Whitehead's Ecological Vision of Nature, Japanese Shizengaku  
& Green Buddhism*

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This paper examines A. N. Whitehead's organic process cosmology in relation to Green Buddhism and Japanese *shizengaku* (nature-study) on overlapping topics including environmental ethics, ecology, sustainability, and philosophy of nature. Here I introduce the Japanese *shizengaku* of Imanishi Kinji, which is influenced by the modern Zen philosophy of Nishida Kitarô, as well as the modern environmental sciences. First it is argued that an ecological vision of nature supporting, public policies of conservation, sustainability, ecology and environmental ethics, itself requires a worldview abandoning the fallacy of vacuous actuality whereby nature is devoid of values, for an axiological view of nature as an interrelated continuum of value qualities. However, most advocates of Deep Ecology and Green Buddhism emphasize biospheric equality of intrinsic values, while rejecting any hierarchy of values in the society of nature. By this view it is argued that all sentient beings in the interrelated web of life have equal moral standing and equal intrinsic value. Yet for Whitehead, as for Imanishi and certain scholars of Japanese Buddhism, the biotic society of nature is ranked into a hierarchy of degrees of values, including aesthetic, moral, and spiritual values. The Whiteheadian argument presented here is that in the society of living nature, there is not only a horizontal axis of interrelatedness and biospheric equality, but also a vertical axis establishing a hierarchy of expanded awareness, compassion and aesthetic value.

**Environmental Ethics in Whitehead's Ecological Vision of Nature,  
Japanese *Shizengaku* & *Green Buddhism***

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**Environmental Ethics in Whitehead's Ecological Vision of Nature, Japanese *Shizengaku* & Green  
Buddhism**

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*Introduction*

This is an examination of Alfred North Whitehead's organic process cosmology in relation to the traditional Japanese Green Buddhism and the modern *Shizengaku* (Nature-study) of Imanishi Kinji on the overlapping topics of environmental ethics, ecology, conservation, sustainability, and philosophy of nature. I would argue that a deeply ecological view of nature supporting, public policies of conservation, sustainability, ecology, and environmental ethics, itself requires a worldview abandoning the fallacy of vacuous actuality, whereby things are material substances devoid of life, experience and value, for a panpsychist view of living nature as a society of occasions of experience realizing some degree of intrinsic value as beauty or pervasive aesthetic quality. The main problematic taken up in this essay, is whether a deep ecology in both its Western and Green Buddhist variants requires an doctrine of biospheric egalitarianism, as argued by most deep ecologists, or whether it entails a hierarchy of intrinsic values, as held by Whiteheadians? The Whiteheadian position adopted here, is that while all events in the interconnected web of life have moral standing and biospheric equality as sentient occasions of experience that enjoy attainment of life, experience, and beauty, at the same time, they are developmentally organized into a hierarchy of degrees of values—including aesthetic, moral, cognitive, and spiritual values.

*Whitehead's Eco-Philosophy of Nature*

A. N. Whitehead's organismic process cosmology sets for a profoundly ecological vision of nature as a dynamic continuum of interconnected occasions, each of which both contains and pervades the entire continuum as a microcosm of the macrocosm. Whitehead abandons the fallacy of vacuous actuality for a panpsychist view in which all events are occasions of experience that arise by prehending or feeling every other event in the continuum of nature and unifying them into a novel occasion with a realization of some degree of aesthetic value quality. Although Whitehead's ecological vision of nature recognizes intrinsic value of each occasion of experience by virtue of its attainment of aesthetic value quality for itself, for others and for the whole community of living nature, as well as for the dipolar God-in-process, it also recognizes a *hierarchy of values* arising in the developmental aspect of nature as a process of creative, emergent and holistic evolution striving to attain greater wholeness through occasions which include yet transcend lower occasions of experience.

In a chapter from *Whitehead's Radically Different Postmodern Philosophy*, titled "Whitehead's Deeply Ecological Worldview: Egalitarianism without Irrelevance" (2007, 70-85), David Ray Griffin argues

for the importance of hierarchy in Whitehead's philosophy of nature. "Deep ecologists" argue for the biosphere as a whole. "Animal liberationists" are opposed to deep ecologists in that they instead focus on animals and thus individuals, rather than on the biosphere of holistic eco-systems. Arguing how Whitehead's view synthesizes these two standpoints, Griffin writes:

In speaking of Whitehead's worldview as deeply ecological, I mean, in the first place, that his position supports deep ecology in the first two senses: deep ecology-b, as well as deep ecology-na. ...Whitehead's position also implies that the animal liberationist position, in presupposing that the higher animals are worthy of special concern, is rooted in a sound intuition. A synthesis of deep ecological and animal liberationist positions is thereby achieved. (2007, 71)

Although Whitehead's view accepts deep ecology-na or non-anthropocentric environmental philosophy, as well as deep ecology-b or biocentric deep ecology that values the whole biosphere, it rejects what Griffin terms deep ecology-e or egalitarian deep ecology (2007, 71).

For some deep ecologists ... To be a truly deep ecologist, say some followers of Arne Naess (who coined the term 'deep ecology'), one must affirm "biospherical (or biological) egalitarianism," rejecting any type of *hierarchy of value* according to which some beings have more intrinsic value than others, We can call this "deep ecology-e" (egalitarian deep ecology). (2007, 71; italics added)

It is because of this rejection of egalitarian deep ecology in favor of a hierarchy of degrees of intrinsic value in the biosphere of life forms that some deep ecologists oppose the Whiteheadian worldview.

Along with such philosopher-scientists as Leibniz, Peirce, James, Hartshorne, E. Laszlo, and others, Whitehead sets forth a *panpsychism*, or as Griffin prefers, a "panexperientialism." Moreover, it is what Charles Hartshorne terms "panexperientialism with organizational duality," because there are two basic ways to organize individuals: "compound individuals" like humans, and "aggregational organizations" having no experience or spontaneity, such as sticks, stones and mountains (2007, 76). Griffin clarifies how for Whitehead, actual occasions are organized into enduring individuals such as electrons, molecules, and selves, thus forming a "society" of occasions, or as it were, temporally ordered societies of actual occasions of experience. "This doctrine makes social relations fundamental while making 'enduring substances' derivative. What appears to be an independent substance, such as a proton, is in reality a pattern of social relations..." (2007, 77). The key point here is that while for Whiteheadian panexperientialism, all self-creative occasions of experience are alive as organisms spontaneously responding to their environment, experience is enjoyed only by individual occasions, and compound individuals such humans that are temporally ordered societies of occasions of experience, but not by aggregational organizations like sticks and stones.

Deep ecologists generally hold to biospheric egalitarianism in the web of life, and thus reject any kind of hierarchy as oppressive, totalitarian and patriarchal. To repeat Griffin's words: "To be a truly deep

ecologist, say some followers of Arne Naess ... one must affirm 'biospherical (or biological) egalitarianism,' rejecting any type of *hierarchy of value* according to which some beings have more intrinsic value than others" (2007, 71). However, Griffin then goes on to persuasively argue that from a Whiteheadian perspective, there is a hierarchy of values in nature.

Animal liberationists and humanitarians ... focus primarily upon intrinsic value and therefore primarily upon individuals. Given this focus, animal liberationists rightly see that, among the nonhuman forms of the higher animals, especially mammals, have the greatest capacity for intrinsic value, and thereby the greatest capacity to suffer and to have their potentials for self-realization thwarted. (2007, 84)

Here Griffin points out that for Whitehead, as for animal liberationism and humanitarianism, there is an emphasis on intrinsic value of individuals, with a recognition that some life forms have more intrinsic value than others. This is a recognition of an evolutionary, developmental, and hierarchical structure of intrinsic values in nature. He maintains that this hierarchy of values involves acknowledging that higher level organisms have both a greater capacity to suffer and also a greater degree of self-realization.

#### *Hierarchy of Nature in Whitehead & Green Buddhism*

Many scholars who approach deep ecology from the Zen Buddhist perspective, have emphasized the "equality" of all interrelated events in the holistic biosphere of nature, while strongly rejecting all *hierarchy*. It is further held that all sentient beings have equal moral standing in that they have the capacity to suffer. Moreover, this equality of events in nature is in part based on the view propounded by the *Mahâparinirvâna Sûtra*, whereby all sentient beings have (or are) Buddha-nature, and thus have equal potential for Buddhahood (see James: 2004, 62). Indeed, the view that all sentient beings have (or are) Buddha-nature or Original Enlightenment and consequently have equal potential for Buddhahood, including mountains, rivers, grasses, stones and trees, is a Buddhist variant of the doctrine of panpsychism, or panexperientialism, as held by Whiteheadians. However, I would argue that Zen Buddhism and its extension into Green Buddhism is also consistent with the Whiteheadian ecological vision of nature as an interrelated society of living occasions having an evolutionary, developmental, and hierarchical structure.

In his essay "Green Buddhism and the Hierarchy of Compassion," Alan Sponberg criticizes Green Buddhism for its exclusive focus on the horizontal axis of interrelatedness and biospheric egalitarianism to the neglect of the vertical axis of a developmental hierarchy of compassion. Sponberg writes:

This is a model of what I would call a "hierarchy of compassion." As one ascends the vertical, developmental axis ... the circle of one's interrelatedness increases ... In the hierarchy of compassion, vertical progress is a matter of reaching out, actively and consciously, to affirm an ever widening circle of expressed interrelatedness. (1997, 366)

In his book *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*, S. P. James approaches the view of Sponberg when he emphasizes how it is through Zen meditation practice that one gradually enlarges the circle of moral compassion or sympathy as an awareness of interrelationships between dharmas in nature: "the intimacy—one could say the compassion, the 'feeling with'—one develops for oneself through the practice of *zazen* spills over into one's feelings for others. Having become more sensitive to the workings of one's own mind, one becomes more sympathetic to the feelings and thoughts of others" (2004, 52). This principle of "compassion" (*J. jihi*) or sympathy is itself at the core of the Buddhist moral worldview, including not only interhuman ethics, but also environmental ethics which involve human relations to nature, including land, plants and animals in the whole biospheric community of sentient beings. (2004, 52).

Likewise, compassion, concern, or sympathy is a cornerstone of Whitehead's organismic process cosmology. According to Whitehead, perception in the primordial mode of causal efficacy involves prehension or feeling of feeling, otherwise understood as an act of sympathetic concernedness. Whitehead asserts that the object-into-subject pattern of causal transmission is the "concern" structured of immediate experience" The occasion as subject has a 'concern' for the object. And the 'concern' at once places the object as a component in the experience of the subject (AI 176). Whitehead continues, "Concernedness is of the essence of perception" (AI 180). This moral sense of causal perception whereby living organisms have a vague awareness of social relations to the surrounding environment is called perception in the primordial mode of causal efficacy in terms of "sympathy" or feeling of feeling (PR 162). Thus, compassion is a moral value intrinsic to living occasions of experience arising through perception in the primordial mode of causal efficacy, or sympathy, concern and feeling. Compassion, deriving from the Latin verb root *compassio* meaning "to feel with," is itself built into the structure of occasions of experience as organisms arising through a primitive feeling, sympathy or concern for other occasions in the surrounding environment of living nature. However, for Whitehead, as for Sponberg, one can argue that there as the horizontal axis of awareness of interrelatedness expands in ever-widening circle, there is also a vertical axis functioning as an ascending hierarchy of compassion, concern, feeling, or sympathy. It can be concluded that for Whitehead, as for Green Buddhism, moral compassion or sympathy is not merely an abstract ethical principle, but requires a shift in perception that directly sees the interconnectedness of events in nature, whereby occasion has value for itself, others and the whole.

#### *Japanese Shizengaku*

Thus far scholars of Japanese thought have examined the field of environmental ethics in general and deep ecology in particular from the standpoint Zen and its extension into so-called "Green Buddhism." However, in this paper I would like to briefly introduce the Japanese notion of *shizengaku* or "nature-study" as a more adequate term. Japanese Shizengaku was developed by Imanishi Kinji in his pioneering work

*Seibutsu no sekai* (The World of Living Things, 1941), now translated in English as *A Japanese View of Nature: The World of Living Things* (2002). Imanishi's Shizengaku is based on scientific research in the environmental sciences, including biology, biological evolution, ecology, botany, entomology, primatology, and zoology, along with social sciences such as anthropology, and sociology. Furthermore, Imanishi's Shizengaku analyzes nature from the standpoint of the east-west Zen Buddhist framework developed by Nishida Kitarô (1870-1945) and the Kyoto school of modern Japanese philosophy. (Imanishi: 2002, xxxiv-xxxvii). There are so many parallels between Imanishi's Shizengaku and Whitehead's organismic process vision of living nature that a much longer treatment is needed to do the topic full justice. To begin with, Imanishi was especially influenced by Nishida Kitarô's chapter on "Nature" from *An Inquiry into the Good*, (*J. Zen no kenkyû*, 1911), which analyzes the continuum of living nature with a Zenlike interpretation of William James' radically empirical notion of "pure experience" (*J. junsui keiken*) devoid of subject-object dualism (Imanishi: 2002, xxxvi).. For Imanishi, as for the modern Zen philosophy of Nishida, the Jamesian standpoint of pure experience beyond subject-object dualism indicates that there is an undivided continuity between subject and object, organism and environment, or the individual and nature (2002, xxxv). Throughout his work, Imanishi describes nature as a society of events in a single holistic system, whereby each event is an organism interacting with its environment, a part related to the whole as components of one large holistic ecosystem (2002, 61).

For Imanishi, as for both the Japanese Buddhist doctrine of *mujô* or impermanence, and Whitehead's process thought, nature is a dynamic temporal process of change, perishing, becoming, and evolution (2002: 16, 17, 24). Again, for Imanishi, as for Whitehead's process cosmology, all events in nature are creative, or self-creative (2002: 17, 24, 73). As already indicated, Imanishi, like Whitehead, embraces a *panpsychic* or "panexperiential" view of living nature, stating: "there is nothing without life and wherever things exist there is always life" (2002, 20). Imanishi, like Whitehead, views nature as a society or community of socially related creative organisms interacting with their environments, so that each part is related to the whole biosphere of the natural continuum. (2002, xlii).

In addition to stressing the interrelatedness of all events as a society of living things in the biotic community of nature, Imanishi, like Whiteheadians, also underscores the complex developmental, evolutionary, and hierarchical structure of all societies in nature. After arguing that all living things in nature exist in biotic communities or societies, he argues "the society of living things carry to the end the characteristics of a *hierarchical society*" (2002 69). Speaking of every kind of living individual as existing in a complex society, Imanishi writes that "their society could only become a ranked society" (2002 70). Imanishi, like Whiteheadians such as Griffin, emphasizes both the interrelatedness and hierarchy of societies in nature. Imanishi thus speaks of "the division into hierarchical, interrelated classes in the society" (2002

71). He describes how the history of biological evolution discloses the importance of hierarchy in the societies of living nature, whereby the societies of nature have been hierarchically ranked and dominated by a ruling class at every stage of development, including the vertebrate community, the reptilian community, the mammalian community, the human community, and so forth (2002 69-71). In a key statement about how the evolutionary, developmental and hierarchical structure of biotic communities in living nature result in a hierarchy of values, Imanishi writes:

In the process of evolution living things expand their own environment, or extend the world to which they can react and live. The extension of the environment means in short, the expansion of the world that they recognize, which in turn means the enrichment and intensification of their integrity. (2002 29)

Imanishi's term for intrinsic value of events in nature is "integrity." In the above citation, as elsewhere throughout the text, Imanishi argues that in the process of creative evolution, living things increasing expand their recognition of larger, wider and more holistic environments in nature, thereby to further enrich and intensify their integrity, or intrinsic value.

#### *Conclusion*

Now it can be seen how both Whiteheadian deep ecology and traditional Japanese Buddhism as well as the modern Shizengaku of Imanishi Kinji might converge on a central point usually rejected by both most all Deep Ecologists and Green Buddhists alike: namely, that the societies of occasions of experience in the biotic community of nature are characterized not only by interrelatedness and equality of sentient dharmas, but also by a developmental hierarchy of degrees of intrinsic values arising in the emergent, holistic, creative process of evolution, including aesthetic, moral and cognitive as well as spiritual values. For in addition to the horizontal axis of interrelatedness and biospheric egalitarianism, there is also a vertical axis establishing a hierarchy of expanded awareness, compassion, and aesthetic value.

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