



Man and Nature: To Prot – Japanese Traditions and

A CROSS the history of mankind and of different cultural traditions, it is possible to discern two distinct approaches to nature. The first is to see it as something good that embodies the unblemished beauty of our environment. In many languages, the word for “natural” implies “innocent and good.” When based on this view, modern economic development is considered one of the causes of pollution and the neglect of nature. Miyazaki Hayao, a well-known animated film director, often depicts utopian nature juxtaposed with the industrialized world.

There is a second contrasting view of seeing nature as something irrational. Cosmic determinism or even mysticism in nature belong to this view. Here, nature is conceived as a set of natural forces that in many cases threatens human existence.

Since these two views of nature seem to contradict each other, we must somehow find a way to integrate them if we are to realize the true coexistence of mankind and nature.

One point that we need to consider is the concept of the “protection” of nature. In modern societies, people often emphasize the importance of conserving nature. However, we must be aware of the pitfalls of this approach. In the concept of the “protection”

of nature by mankind, there exists an assumption that humans are rational beings, and can and should protect nature as an agent which is detached from nature and thus can control it. Here, man and nature are separate.

This concept, however natural or logical it may appear to us, leaves much to be desired from the standpoint of global ecology. Take, for example, the recent Southeast Asian tsunami disaster. It is easy for us to emphasize the importance of developing early warning systems with computer technology or of building embankments along the coastlines. When viewed in long term, however, we need to consider the problem of ecological balance. People who live in villages that historically been struck by tsunamis have long-standing – almost innate – knowledge that enables them to escape from even the worst disasters. Fleeing from the coastline is in fact the most effective way of protecting human lives from the ravages of tsunami waves. Such an escape approach may seem ridiculous in the contemporary context, but seen from the global ecological balance, we should recall the “human” factors that have exacerbated the disaster.

Apart from two above described different views of nature, there



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Their Modern Implications –

By Ogoura Kazuo

are other “cultural” differences in dealing with nature. One of the most interesting examples can be found in the Japanese tradition.

The aesthetic appreciation of nature embedded in the Japanese tradition is, in a sense, a kind of aesthetic control of nature, that is the creation of an artificial or aesthetic nature adapting to human fondness, as seen in various cultural forms such as gardens, paintings or poetry. This aspect of the Japanese tradition may be highlighted by making a comparison between Japanese and Korean gardens. At the famous Japanese garden of Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto, the arrangement of plants, rocks and water is artistically contrived and calculated so as to convey to the viewer the look and even the smell of aesthetic fascination. On the other hand, Piwon, the famous “secret garden” within the Changdeokgung Palace in Seoul, gives the viewer the impression of being in the midst of a natural forest untouched by human hands. Some Japanese tourists are even asked while walking in Piwon, “so where is the famous garden?”

Another example of different approaches to nature can be seen

in the attitude of some countries that have refused to participate in the Kyoto Protocol. Many people in those countries love nature and are strongly aware of the importance of protecting our world from pollution. But their disinclination seems to indicate that their enthusiasm to preserve nature – to protect the blue sea and the clean air – does not necessarily lend itself to the more proactive approach needed to prevent global warming. In other words, in the modern industrial democratic world, sometimes the very groups of people who are enthusiastic about environmental protection are not willing to lend themselves to the more dynamic approach, which are from a long-term perspective, necessary to secure a more stable ecological balance for the Earth.

As we consider the most important approach to nature, we may have to ask ourselves whether our long-term traditions and their modern implications provide moral support for the future of human activities within the ecological systems, and whether they help to make peaceful, comfortable, and, at the same time, dynamic systems for all those living on our planet.

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Ogoura Kazuo is the president of the Japan Foundation.