# Zen Reflections on the Dharma of Plants

## by Jason M. Wirth

Our awareness of the value and power of plants is ascendant. To pick three recent examples: the astounding and well-deserved success of the Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* with its indigenous evocation of the many gifts of the plant world and the reciprocity that they engender; the work of the Canadian scientist Suzanne Simard (*Finding the Mother Tree: Uncovering the Wisdom and Intelligence of the Forest*) on the mother tree and the cooperative network among trees; and the recent work of the German forester Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*, and its debunking of the canard that trees are solitary, dumb, and insentient.

I confess great admiration for the wisdom of these and related works and celebrate the rediscovery of the communal and cooperative nature of plant intelligence. Although these are new versions of ancient insights, such work can stop the dominant culture in its self-referential tracks, showing it once again that humans are not the measure of all things, and that the non-human world is not simply at its disposal and available to appropriate as it pleases. In this essay, I develop some Buddhist reflections on the reemergence of our awareness of plant intelligence, concentrating first on its *value* and then on its *communal embedding* (in the Buddhist sense of

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*pratītyasamutpāda*, or dependent co-origination). These reflections are gratefully indebted to works like the ones cited above, but they also seek to emphasize and articulate their implications for the Dharma.

## The Value of Being Like a Tree

Despite its international success, Wohlleben's articulation of the secret life of trees also received strong blowback from some in the scientific community who objected to its reliance on anthropomorphic language. For example, Sharon Elizabeth Kingsland in her 2018 review in the *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* objected that Wohlleben's description of living forests, as opposed to tree farms, parks, and other engineered tree plantations,

> slips into language that is strongly anthropomorphic and teleological. Not only are trees like us in having an emotional and social life, but they seem capable of planning ahead to promote the optimum environment to guarantee their longevity. Trees do not just interact accidentally, but form "friendships" in natural forests, whereas in planted forests trees behave like "loners" that "suffer from their isolation." (Kingsland, 3)

I think that such objections stem in part from the lack of a literary or poetic sensibility among some members of the scientific community. Moreover, the force of such anthropomorphic language, even if it is a poetic attempt to discuss findings whose implications we are still striving to appreciate fully and articulate, lies in its capacity to dethrone human exceptionalism. It belongs to a long and welcome arc in scientific thinking, including the Copernican disillusioning of an earth-centric universe and the Darwinian demotion of the human to the contingencies of evolution. It challenges the self-serving assumption that even Plato and Aristotle took for granted, namely, that plant life is below even the lowliest of

the animals. The idea that humans are at the apex of a great chain of being still informs popular assumptions about the value of the plant world as close to the bottom of this chain. However, these new works on communal plant intelligence threaten to topple the human from a self-appointed pedestal once again.

Buddhist practice, with its relentless usurpation of the ego, should welcome this new decentering. The human world and the animal world and the plant world are not links in a descending hierarchical chain. There are, however, limits to demonstrating the proximity of plant intelligence to human intelligence. To say that plants and animals are *like* us—not different and therefore inferior—risks anthropomorphism not only in the sense that Kingsland fears. It also begins with taking for granted the basic fact of our self-appointed intrinsic value, that is, the assumption that our own species, simply because it is our own, is consequently the measure and source of the value of other species. In his famous 1975 book, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals*, Peter Singer, borrowing the term from Richard Ryder, called this *speciesism*. We can eat and/or abuse other animals because they do not belong to our species and, therefore, are less valuable than us. Animals that can be domesticated receive partial ethical consideration because of their proximity and adaptability to the norms of human life. Although Singer and many others make a laudable case for the virtues of a plant-based diet, this is sometimes done in part by assuming that what makes plants an ethical food source is that they are less like humans than animals. This is not to dismiss or criticize such a diet. There are many strong ecological arguments for a plant-based diet, and the Zen tradition largely advocates such a diet as part of its practice. Rather, as we shall see in more detail below, this is simply to draw attention to the limits of making the case for a plant-based diet by measuring the value of plants in relation to their dissimilarities to us (e.g., the idea that they do not feel pain like we and other animals do, so consequently deserve less ethical consideration).

How do we articulate the world of plant intelligence if we do not assume that the human being is the arbiter of value? This question is critical to Zen practice, given its reliance on the Great Death of the ego, which had tacitly assumed that it is the standpoint from which all things are appreciated. For example, Dōgen, following his Chinese teacher Rujing, taught that practice is *shinjin datsuraku*, the sloughing off of the mind and body. When the ego is no longer the point of view on the world, the world is appreciated with the "true Dharma eye." From the original egotistical perspective, the closer things are to the human, the more they have intrinsic value (just like us), and the farther away they are (plants, rocks), the more they can be consigned to instrumental value (for us). Humans have intelligence, and therefore we respect dolphins and whales because their intelligence resembles ours. If it turns out that plants are socially intelligent, then the circle of intrinsic value can be enlarged to include them.

Dōgen's practice contests this view. In the *Genjōkōan*, Dōgen remarks that when we view the shore from a ship, we assume that the shore is moving because we do not see that our own ship is moving. The unseen ship is the ego. In Zen practice we strive to undo the tacitly operating standpoint of the ship, to see the world not from our opinions and attachments, but from its suchness. This means abandoning the standpoint of the ego. If we go to things, that is delusion, but if things come to us, that is awakening, as Dōgen counsels in the same fascicle. This means that if we begin with the ego and judge the world in accordance with its interests, we are subject to *avidya*, the delusional demotion of the world to our interests and attachments. If we let the world come to us, that is, if we no longer approach it from the standpoint of the ego, the suchness of the world, things just as they are rather than as we want them to be, emerges.

If the simile at hand—the idea that plants are like us or more like us than we thought —obscures part of what it simultaneously reveals regarding the nature and value of plants, we can explore a more challenging simile found in the

*Milindapañha (Menander's Questions)*. The latter, written somewhere between the first century BCE and the second century CE, is an imaginary dialogue in which the Buddhist sage Nāgasena converts the Greco-Bactrian emperor Menander the Great to the Dharma. ("Milinda" is the Pali name for Menander.) This long text ends with a whole book devoted to similes, including three concerning a tree (book seven, chapter six). Rather than revealing that trees are like us and so deserve our respect, we are counseled to be more like a tree. Nāgasena first tells Menander to emulate its flowers and fruits by bearing the flowers and fruits of emancipation and toiling like a *śramaṇa* (a renunciant) for others. He then tells Menander that just as the tree casts soothing shade on anyone who comes underneath it, the emperor should take care of each and every person in his charge. The final simile is the most radical and challenging. Nāgasena says, "Just as the tree makes no kind of distinction in the shadow it affords . . . make no distinctions between all humans, but nourish an equal love to those who rob, or hurt, or bear enmity to one, and to those who are like oneself."[1]

The great Kyoto School Zen philosopher Keiji Nishitani discerned this impersonal aspect of arboreal compassion (equal love for your own and your enemies) in the Christian notion of *agápē* (unconditional love), citing the fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel where God the Father "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." Nishitani remarks that in the Buddha Dharma this is called "non-differentiating love beyond enmity and friendship" (Nishitani, 58). Such love is no longer measured in relation to the costs and benefits of the ego. "There is no selfishness in its shining. This lack of selfishness is what is meant by non-ego, or emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The perfection of God has this point in common with the Great Compassionate Heart of Buddhism" (Nishitani, 60).

[1] 409-410 in the T. W. Rhys David's translation, slightly modified.

Nishitani is aware, however, of the limits of this analogy with *agápē* since Mathew's passage speaks on the impersonal love of God for all *humans*. The Zen version of *agápē* strives for the impersonal love of all things, for the great earth with nothing left out. In the *Lotus Sutra*, when the Dharma rain falls equally on all, it falls on *everything*, not just on everyone. Dōgen, for example, carefully extirpated the root of our relentless self-regard, which limits love to the circle of all humans, or perhaps more generously to the circle of sentience. For Dōgen, humanity and sentience are attachments. Starting with one of his earliest fascicles, *Bendōwa* (1231), written shortly after his return from China, he sometimes alluded to the great Tang Dynasty National Teacher Nanyang Huizhong (Jpn. Nan'yō Echū), who claimed that, "Grasses and trees, fences and walls demonstrate and exalt the dharma for the sake of living beings, both ordinary and sage; in turn, living beings, both ordinary and sage, express and unfold it for the sake of grasses and trees, fences and walls" (Dōgen, 6-7). Sentience, that is, being like us, is not a requisite for Buddha Nature. His fascicle *Mujō Seppō* ("Non-Sentient Beings Express the Dharma") is dedicated to breaking through the duality of sentience and non-sentience, in which sentience connotes importance to the Dharma, and non-sentience, irrelevance.

To be like a tree is therefore to forget the self and take the standpoint not of *my* love for all things, but rather of the egoless affirmation of the Buddha Nature of all beings, sentient and non-sentient alike. Moreover, such loving affirmation is not abstract. It is quite the opposite: each thing in its singularity is loved within the immense field of its emergence. Articulating it this way, I should also add a note of caution. Speaking of the field as immense emphasizes the ultimate interconnectedness of the whole universe. This is true, but it can sound rather abstract. Although NASA hypothesizes that there are about a hundred billion planets in the Milky Way alone, there is only one planet on which we have evolved and which sustains us. Moreover, throughout most of its history,

the earth would not have supported human life. Furthermore, although we live *now* during this increasingly imperiled ecological era (the Holocene or perhaps the Anthropocene), we do not live generally on the earth, but rather in specific bioregions. The nonduality of the immense and the local does not annihilate the spatial and temporal singularities of the latter. Zen practice is also to become present to the here and now, both ultimately and locally. Or as Gary Snyder sings it at the conclusion of his *Turtle Island* poem "For the Children":

> To climb these coming crests
> one word to you, to
> you and your children
>
> *stay together*
> *learn the flowers*
> *go light.*

## Communal Intelligence beyond Sentience and Non-Sentience

The *Avataṃsaka* or *Flower Garland Sutra* famously articulates *pratītyasamutpāda* or dependent co-origination with the image of Indra's net in which each node is singularly itself, but also interwoven and sharing its being with all other nodes. Or as Nishitani eloquently articulated it, each being is the master of itself yet the servant of all others. The "intelligence" at work and play in the plant world also serves as a gateway to this intuition. As we are learning, intelligence is not found in each atomistic plant, but rather in the interactive community of the plant world. Each plant is empty of itself and empty of individually owned intelligence, that is, each plant has both its being and its intelligence in relationship to the beings who share its being and intelligence.

This is not only a Buddhist intuition. In his *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and*

*Indigenous Futures*, Indigenous philosopher Brian Burkhart shows that similar Indigenous approaches offer a line of escape from the anthropocentric impasse of the duality of intrinsic value and instrumental value. By grounding dignity and intrinsic value in the speciesism of the absolute value of a human being, the best we can do is distribute value to other human-like forms of life. Perhaps we can grant dignity to our pets, and to highly intelligent animals, or to the newly discovered intelligence and sociality of the plant world, by appreciating their resemblances to features that we esteem in ourselves. Yet no matter how far we extend the web of dignity, we quickly encounter problems. As we saw above, even a vegan must eat and so the plant world, unlike the animal world, is condemned to instrumental value. With this view, I do not consume animals because I am an animal, and hence, I extend my dignity to them, but plants become mere instruments for my nourishment. What about cancer cells and deadly viruses, which are also forms of life? What are we to make of Chief Seattle's claim that everything is sacred? For example, how are rocks sacred when it is difficult to imagine them as anything other than objects at our disposal?

Burkhart uses the trickster stories of Iktomi, the comically self-infatuated spider, to flush out the Iktomi inclination in us all, that is, our tacitly operating and ultimately foolish self-importance. Unlike the foibles of the egotistical Iktomi, however, the Spider Grandmother stories display the weave of all things, the "deep but precarious interconnection of all things" (Burkhart, 193). The sacrality and values of all things is found neither in their intrinsic or instrumental value, but rather by virtue of belonging to the web of which all things are a part, but which has no center. From the standpoint of the web, value derives from our kinship with all things.

In this way, connectedness endows value but the amount of value that a thing has is not determined by its place on the web. For this to be the case, there would have to be a center: something that determines, perhaps through the folly of its own self-importance, the value of the other beings on the

web. Self-importance also requires delocality, that is, alienation from the here and now with which we share our being. In contrast, plants flourish in their relationship with other plants and the myriad other beings (soil, mycelia, water, air, insects, etc.) with whom they share their being. The dominant tradition imagined that trees and plants were radically atomistic, solitary trajectories of life. Kimmerer, Simard, and Wohlleben all demonstrate that this is a human delusion. Plants live in relationship to other plants—they *are* their local communities—and if an individual plant were to rise up out of its local and interdependent community like Iktomi and declare its self-importance, it would suffer and perish. It is the folly of Iktomi to take himself so seriously that he imagines that he is the center of the world. From a Zen perspective, the Iktomi in us all should strive to avoid being like Wohlleben's trees who "suffer from their isolation."

The idea of the web without a center can also help us appreciate Dōgen's critique of sentience as too caught up in making ourselves the measure of value for all other things (sentient beings are the beings most like us, unlike rocks, tiles, and walls). In Dōgen's *Sansuikyō* (*Mountains and Waters Sutra*) we learn that the blue mountains are constantly walking but that we are not the measure of walking. All beings interact as the great earth, just as it is, without an inch of soil left out, but with no extra fog added.

In his fascicle on *The Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance* (*Bodaisatta Shi Shōhō*), Dōgen discusses the *pāramitā* of giving, defining it not in terms of largesse but rather as "nongreed" and not coveting. In a striking example that aligns with our present discussion, he tells us that to "leave flowers to the wind, to leave birds to the season, are also acts of giving" (Dōgen, 474). Greed is the Iktomi within us all, but the emancipation from its toxin is an appreciation of the world without the constant desire to appropriate it. Similarly, in the Daoist classic the *Zhuangzi*, we learn that the sage is happy to leave the gold in the mountains and the pearls in the sea. The sage is not driven to own everything, maximize profits, and

imagine that living to the fullest means consuming as much as one can. That is the realm of the hungry ghosts and, arguably, the mind-set of the global order today.

Extending dignity to the plant world is like extending rights to our own species and to other species and ecosystems: it is welcome, but it is superficial and does not own up to the root disorder and madness in our world. Why do we treat other humans and non-human animals so poorly that we need rights? Moreover, were we to look at ourselves with greater awakening, we would not only see that we are local nodes in the great fabric of place-based nets of being. We would also see our own truncation from this net, a loneliness that is not imposed from without, as it was for Wohlleben's plantation trees, but by our own self-centeredness. In taking ourselves to be the supreme measure of intrinsic worth or value, we alienate ourselves from the systems that sustain us. But the communal nature of plant intelligence, and of ecological intelligence more broadly, offers us an enormous opportunity. This intelligence does not gain value in reference to our overweening self-esteem. It is rather an invitation to the deeper, ecological meaning of Sangha: the treasure of community with the buddha lands of our shared being.

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