

# AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN CRITICAL BUDDHISM AND ASIAN NATURALISM: CAN ASIAN NATURALISM BE A TOOL IN OVERCOMING SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION?

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**ABSTRACT.** *Can their support of Asian naturalism be justified without any reserve? Some scholars of critical Buddhism movement, including Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiro, caution the danger of blindly supporting Asian Naturalism. Critical Buddhism movement began in Japan around the middle of 1980s, criticizing the social discrimination against oppressed people in Japan, and ascribing the cause of such discrimination to the idea of ‘a holistic harmony’ in Japan. According to Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiro, a pernicious effect of the “naturalism” is that its affirmation that things “as they are” already are “as they should be” eliminates the need to think critically about either self or society. This effect is said to have led to the blind support of established oppressors without any concern about the oppressed. In upholding the cause of Asian naturalism, it should be noted that the partial lack of logical and critical use of language in Asian culture in comparison with European culture in some periods might be due to the somewhat uncritical support of the spirit of harmony. In short, while it might be necessary to support the cause of Asian naturalism in order to overcome the ecological-environmental crisis, the possible limits of Asian naturalism should be critically examined.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Critical Buddhism, Asian Naturalism, Social Discrimination, Hee-Sung Keel, Matsumoto Shiro, Hakamaya Noriaki*

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## Introduction

Recently, Asian naturalism began to be regarded as noteworthy for its relative values in comparison with the Western conceptions of naturalism and supernaturalism. In the West, since Plato's dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural, the conflicts between the upholders of naturalism and supernaturalism had been continued with the relative supremacy of supernaturalism perhaps partially due to the popularity of Christianity coupled with the ideas of Plato until the prevalence of naturalism possibly due to the rapid development of natural science in the modern period. Natural science, by precluding the possibility of the intervention of supernatural powers in the functioning of the material universe, prompted its own attitude to be applied even to the realm of human society in the universe.

In such a process, the metaphysical values, which had accompanied the supernatural thinking in the ideas of Christianity and Platonic philosophy, also began to be regarded as groundless. In short, the dichotomy between value and fact, leading to the debunking of the beliefs in the values allegedly grounded upon supernatural ideas, might be regarded as the inevitable result of the defeat of supernaturalism in the modern period.

Such a situation, however, brought forth the existential crisis of western intellectuals in that their continued pursuits of the meaning of life on earth according to supernatural values became meaningless. In addition, the dazzling success of natural science was not accomplished without pernicious side effects. Especially, the environmental problems due to the ecological crisis, mainly explained as the result of the imprudent and harsh exploitation of nature under the banner of scientific progress, made it clear that the development of science and technology without any check could become disastrous, as seen in the examples of environmental destruction, including the recent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster and even the massacre by the dropping of atomic bombs during the Second World War.

From that crisis, many intellectuals have looked toward Asia for other possibilities of finding the meaning of life on earth, which resulted in the possible rehabilitation of the Asian traditional ideas that had been disregarded as futile and valueless due to their failure in coping with the domineering challenge of the West in the early modern period.

As for Asian naturalism, Hee-Sung Keel states that it "goes beyond the traditional Western antithesis of naturalism and supernaturalism." This trait of Asian naturalism, developed partially due to the lack of such a dichotomy of the Platonic thoughts in Asian thoughts, in addition to its own peculiar focus on the innate qualities of our being, is regarded as noteworthy in that it enables us to treat nature not as an object to be utilized or researched for the purpose of satisfying human interests but as an object to be taken care of or to be understood more deeply by us. In Asian naturalism, nature is not regarded as dead, inert, or valueless, even without human implications. In itself, nature has its own right to exist, independently from human concerns, with its own positive values according to its own paradigm. In this regard, Hee-Sung Keel adds that Asian naturalism ("an old vision") must be rehabilitated "for a new world," for "the ecological-environmental crisis of our age

cannot be overcome without a fundamental change in our attitude toward nature.”

Modern civilization could have exploited nature from the perspective that nature has values only according to human needs, without any importance in its own regard. In addition, western modern naturalism, devoid of supernatural values, following the model of the mechanical composition and movement of the universe, has also enforced the interpretation of human identity merely as a functioning organic identity. Without any higher values, modern human beings have been driven to pursue only superficial and material values, without any reverent attitudes toward comrade human beings as well as toward other beings in the universe.

They have had to face themselves as lonely beings without any feeling of being connected to other human beings or other beings in the universe that might have values only in the dimension of being useful for them, otherwise useless and even becoming only hindrances to their own interests, which are defined only in the dimension of materialism and survivalism, in addition to the affluence of only material properties.

According to Hee-Sung Keel [Hee-Sung Keel, 2012], Asian “naturalism is a pan-Asian view of the world and way of life.” As a pan-Asian way of life, in addition to its being a view of the world, Asian naturalism sheds more light on the possibility of enhancing the quality of modern human life.

Asian naturalism is also asserted by Professor Hyakudai Sakamoto, a Japanese outstanding bioethicist. According to Sakamoto, “Fundamental naturalism is pervasive in all Asian thought. The essence of the Asian ethos is ... ‘a holistic harmony’ in contrast to the modern European inclination to dualistic individualism.” His emphasis on the “holistic harmony” against “dualistic individualism” reveals his focus on the lack of holism and harmony in the modern European thinking in that its individualism is problematic in the disintegration of the whole and the cacophony as one of its pernicious effects, leading into the genesis of a world full of struggles and oppressions.

### **1. Asian Naturalism against Social Discrimination?**

Can their support of Asian naturalism be justified without any reserve? Some scholars of critical Buddhism movement, including Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiro, caution the danger of blindly supporting Asian Naturalism, pinpointing it ironically as one of the main causes for social discrimination in Asia. Although the concern of the upholders of Asian naturalism is mainly in Asian naturalism from the perspective of "ecological-environmental crisis of our age," its implications in relation with social discrimination should not be disregarded.

The provocative challenge of critical Buddhism movement, although it might be regarded as a reactionary gesture from the modernists, complicates the situation, since the problem of social discrimination in Japan and other Asian countries is becoming more and more serious with the development of their industries according to the surging tide of neoliberalism, although the problem has been rather prominent in Asia from ancient times. While social discrimination might be explained to have been aggravated due to the supernatural or natural tendencies in the West, it might be

explained to have been aggravated due to the peculiar version of naturalism in the East or Asia.

Here, the difference between modern Western naturalism and Asian naturalism might be disputed. While some upholders of Asian naturalism, including Hee-Sung Keel and Hyakudai Sakamoto, might hope to assert that, unlike the former, the latter is innocent in the problem of social discrimination, the proponents of critical Buddhism movement probably asserts that there is no real difference between the two standpoints, rather the possibility of mutual support being revealed in the history of Asia. Conversely, the proponents of Asian naturalism might be criticized to have deepened social discrimination by sanctifying the order of nature without critically distancing themselves from it.

## **2. Critical Buddhism against Social Discrimination in “Asian Naturalism”**

Critical Buddhism movement began in Japan around the middle of 1980s, criticizing the social discrimination against oppressed people in Japan through the critique of prevalent ideas in Japanese Buddhism.

In this sense, then, perhaps the most obvious factor in stimulating the critical look at Buddhist ideas within the Soto Zen school was the shock of the so-called “Machida Incident” that stems from the 1979 World Conference on Religion and Peace. Machida Muneo, then president of the Buddhist Federation of Japan and secretary general of the Soto Zen sect, denied that any form of social discrimination existed in Japan. He subsequently recanted (in 1984) and the Soto sect admitted its long history of perpetuating social discrimination and established numerous committees to study and rectify the situation. Still, many of those involved began to look at the issue more deeply, wondering if there was any systemic reason why such practices could continue unquestioned for so much of Soto history. Although to some these sorts of things might seem like a tempest in a Zen teabowl, it was not so then, nor is it now, either within the Soto sect or among the outcast groups in Japan. Hence Hakamaya’s paper, “Thoughts on the Ideological Background of Social Discrimination” (included in this volume), was written within a committee appointed to study the problem, was presented not to an academic conference but at the Buraku Liberation Center in Osaka, and was subsequently appended to the official report submitted to the Director of Religious Affairs for the Soto sect. [Jamie Hubbard 1997: ix-x]

Japan, although sometimes regarded as the most economically successful country in Asia, has maintained its traditional identity rather unchallenged, unlike other Asian countries, partially due to its success in modernizing its industries successfully and transforming itself into one of the colonialist empires in early modern period, which might perhaps have conversely aggravated the problem of social discrimination unlike in other Asian countries. Some Asian countries, including China and Korea, have somewhat succeeded in severing themselves from the shackles of their own ancient traditions, perhaps ironically due to their failure in



modernizing themselves and its ensuing cataclysmic turns of social upheaval that allowed the revolutionary change of their social structure.

In some aspects, Japan, however, under the pressure of traditional ideas, could not have the opportunity to transform itself into a properly modern democratic nation, in spite of the exceptional American rule for a few years after the Second World War. In this regard, Japan, as the most successful inheritor of Asian traditional ideas in Asia, could have maintained its ancient feudal class system sneakily, which is explained to have been supported by Asian naturalism according to the proponents of critical Buddhism movement. Therefore, in the most prominent way, they could not overcome the pernicious effects of Asian naturalism in Japan unlike in other Asian countries.

Especially, the idea of original enlightenment (本覺) in the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* (大乘起信論, Dasheng qixin lun) has become the main target of their critique, in their observation that this idea has actually aggravated social discrimination in spite of its alleged promotion of social harmony.

Entirely consonant with the demand for a Buddhism that is engaged in critical thinking is the social criticism of much of Hakamaya and Matsumoto's work. Clearly moving from the descriptive to the prescriptive, they are not at all reticent about using their notion of Buddhist truth as a yardstick by which to critique the ideological origins of cultural constructs that masquerade as Buddhism in Japan. Indigenous Japanese ideas and their Buddhist connotations have been singled out as contributing to social injustice, gender inequality, racism, institutional discrimination, imperialism, political repression, and environmental destruction. In particular, the doctrines of original enlightenment (*hongaku*) and harmony (*wa*), the Kyoto school of philosophy, and the current fascination with theories of Japanese uniqueness are attacked as examples of such ideologies of discrimination and social injustice that pose as the highest reaches of Buddhist philosophy. [Jamie Hubbard 1997: viii]

They have further traced the cause of such discrimination even back to the idea of 'a holistic harmony' (和) that has been inherited from the time of the Prince Shōtoku (聖德太子) in Japan

Hakamaya argues that Prince Shōtoku's constitution and the almost millennium-and-a-half tradition of harmony (*wa*) that it fostered are in fact an ideology of conformity entirely in keeping with the topical strategy of absorbing difference rather than allowing it; as the Japanese saying has it, "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down."<sup>57</sup> In the realm of international politics this became the "Fantasy Orient" of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. Similarly, the current discourse of *Nihonjinron* is both facilitated and constituted by an inclusivist topos of ethnic superiority structurally identical to that deployed to mobilize the Japanese "spirit" for the war. [Jamie Hubbard 1997: 99]

They have even traced it back to the ideas of harmony in Confucianism and Daoism and even back to the idea of Atman in Hinduism. According to Hakamaya's argument, "Buddhism does not teach 'oneness with nature' but rejects the atman-like idea of an all-encompassing 'nature' (*shizen*); a Buddhist must escape from 'nature' while yet protecting 'nature' from destruction by becoming the 'masters and possessors of nature' (*maitres et possesseurs de la nature*).” Hakamaya mentions D. T. Suzuki in the following way:

D. T. Suzuki never tired of praising the “Eastern” view of nature, and he certainly played a large role in implanting this mistaken view not only abroad but also in Japan. However, since Suzuki was a “Zen person” and not a Buddhist, perhaps we should not complain that he was always praising “nature.” The real tragedy would be if Buddhists followed his example. [Paul L. Swanson 1997: 20]

In short, their critique is focused upon Asian naturalism in general. Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiro, the two main proponents of critical Buddhism movement, while being criticized as being excessively critical to the traditional ideas of their own country or civilization, have also been praised as outstandingly courageous scholars who have clarified especially the essential causes of Japanese thought and culture that have been sometimes criticized to have been somewhat notorious for its adherence to the spirit of collective harmony, sacrificing individual originality and conscience, especially during its colonialist expansion during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (for example, Abe's attitude to the problem of women in Asian areas colonized by Japan forced into prostitution for the Japanese army during the Second World War).

### 3. A Possible Pernicious Effect of the “Naturalism”

While admitting that the concrete application of their criticism should be made cautiously because contextual appraisal is necessary in each concrete historical situation, Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiro have asserted that a pernicious effect of the “Asian naturalism” lies in that, through its affirmation that things “as they are” (自然) already are “as they should be,” the need to think critically about either their own self or society is eliminated.

For example, the idea that Buddhism is beyond ethics is lent support by the rhetoric of Zen spokesmen such as D. T. Suzuki and Nishida Kitaro, who focus on the immediacy of direct experience beyond the reach of historical contingency. The problem, of course, is that Zen Buddhists and their institutions are very much mediated by historical contingencies, and many would say that the same is true of their immediate, pure experience. As Robert Sharf notes, the transcendent experience of “reality as it is” also serves to excuse the less-than-transcendent historical reality: “This apologetic discourse,” he writes, “effectively exonerates religion from crimes committed in its name; the ‘spiritual essence’ of a tradition remains forever untainted by

the shortcomings of church or clergy.” According to Hakamaya the result is that the affirmation of “reality as it is” combines with the denial of historical contingency to “excuse just about any situation in any time or place without any need for critical reflection.” [Jamie Hubbard 1997: 100]

According to them, this effect is explained to have led to the blind support of established oppressors without any concern about the oppressed, justifying social discrimination as following the order of nature. Such a problem of harmony according to critical Buddhism is succinctly explained in relation with the idea of *hongaku* (本覺, original awakening) by Paul L. Swanson as follows.

Coeval with the ideal of *wa* (和, harmony) is the religious ethos of *hongaku shisō* (本覺思想). Both support an attitude of uncritical tolerance, which Hakamaya compares to mixing *miso* and *kuso* (brown bean paste and dung - “curds and turds,” if one is to preserve the play on words). Both support a superficial syncretism that ignores differences of right and wrong or good and bad, and thus ironically works to maintain discrimination and injustice and the whims of those in positions of power and authority. [Paul L. Swanson 1997: 17]

In this explanation of Paul L. Swanson, harmony as one of the essential ideas of Asian naturalism is criticized as causing confusion so that it makes futile the efforts to discern right and wrong. In Asian naturalism, the established order of a society is regarded as natural and worthy of respect. Anyone who questions the established order is blamed and even persecuted by the privileged in the order.

The Anti-Buddhist Character of *Wa* and the Antiviolent Character of Buddhism” (1990) opens with a lengthy quote from Nishitani Keiji on the increasing interest in religion in Japan, the cooperation between state and religion, and why this is a good thing for the country. Except for the dated style, one gets the impression that the quote was written quite recently, given the fact that Japan is now experiencing another *shūkyō būmu*. The perspective shifts, however, when one realizes that the quote was written in 1941 as Japan was feverishly engaged in a world war, religious persecution, and domestic repression. Hakamaya uses this quote as a springboard to argue that the idea of *wa* (“harmony”) is promoted as a positive ideal in Japan, but in reality it is a repressive principle wielded by the powerful to maintain the status quo and social order, and to restrict criticism. For Hakamaya, the *wa* promoted since the time of Prince Shotoku and his famous 17-Article Constitution is not a Buddhist virtue. *Wa* is an enemy of Buddhism and an enemy of true peace. Buddhists should not give in to a compromising and mushy “tolerance” that uncritically accepts all things as “equal. [Paul L. Swanson 1997: 17]

The oppressed are discouraged and persuaded to obey and endure the order.

Anyone who argues with his or her own rational criteria is rebuked as not awakened to the mysterious way of cosmos. Silence is forced to the oppressed. According to Hakamaya's argument, "the *wa* ethos led people in prewar Japan uncritically to sacrifice themselves to the war effort and maintain silence."

#### 4. On the Lack of Logical and Critical Use of Language in Asian culture

Although their criticism might be too harsh, I think, we should be cautious in upholding the cause of Asian naturalism, admitting that the partial lack of logical and critical use of language in Asian culture in comparison with European culture in some periods might be due to the somewhat uncritical support of the spirit of harmony.

The favorable yet stereotyped description of Japanese Buddhism, and Japanese religion in general, shows a stress on harmony with nature and a "harmonious" society; absolute immanence; an uncritical acceptance of phenomena as they are; the interdependence or identity of kami and Buddhas; love of peace; an affirming and positive attitude toward life in this world; and so on. On the negative side, Japanese religiosity is said to show a lack of socio-ethical concern; an unquestioning support for the status quo; a weak idea of justice and social injustice, thus leaving people easy prey to political propaganda and social pressures to conform; an irresponsible "hands-off" disposition that contributes to pollution, reckless use of natural resources, littering, and destruction of public property, as well as a disregard for the interest of anyone outside of one's own "group"; and an absence of foundations for making ethical judgments between right and wrong, good and bad, correct and incorrect. [Paul L. Swanson 1997: 28]

This might be complicated by the argument against rationality in that rational articulation may be blamed to have been conducive to the violence of the ruling class toward the oppressed. Rationality is regarded by some to have been used as a pretext for the privileged class's exploiting and disregarding of the oppressed people. The problem regarding this opposition between the upholders and critics of rationality might be unsolvable since it is the matter of faith. Those who have faith in rationality argues that any problem in the universe can be solved by rational approach. According to them, there is nothing that can resist rational approach.

#### 5. A Possible Affirmation of the Buddhist Conception of Nature from a Moral Perspective

Wilfred Cantwell Smith is noteworthy for his affirmation of Buddhism as a theistic tradition in that Buddhism can be viewed as a tradition that recognizes the fundamental nature of cosmos as morally good, uniquely redefining the concept of theistic as affirming moral values. His following mention on dharma is noteworthy as an exemplary affirmation of Buddhism from such a perspective.

Though Nirvana was a distant reality, indescribable, not profitable of discussion, yet the Buddha saw and preached another absolute reality



immediately available to every man. This is the moral law. The Buddha taught that in the universal flux, one thing is firm. In the chaos of events, one pattern is permanent. In the ebb and flow of human life, one form is absolute, is supreme, is reliable, is effective for salvation. Ideas come and go; religious institutions rise and fall; the gods themselves have their histories; men's and women's goals are frustrated, and anyway are themselves historical; all human strivings, whether to construct something on earth, or through piety or asceticism to try to escape from or to dominate earthly ambitions, are doomed sooner or later to pass away. Yet through it all one thing is certain, stable, firm, enduring - and is always immediately to hand. That is dharma: the truth about right living. [Wilfred Cantwell Smith 1998: 26]

In that Cantwell Smith chooses not nirvana but dharma, he might be more easily connected to critical Buddhist movement. According to him, “Nirvana was a distant reality, indescribable, not profitable of discussion.” Cantwell Smith also notices the weakness of nirvana as a “distant reality, indescribable, not profitable of discussion,” which reveals its negative appraisal of language. Therefore, he focuses upon another reality of dharma that is more accessible to ordinary human beings. Here, his choice is not exclusive unlike Matsumoto Shiro or Hakamaya Noriaki. Although he is not so belligerent like them, his soft preference might be regarded as more desirable since anyone can agree with him without any feeling of being coerced to do so.

Cantwell Smith’s choice might be regarded as an easy path. But we should focus upon his emphasis upon the aspect of moral law of dharma that is immediately available to every man, which might be compared positively to the practical dimension of critical Buddhism. Critical Buddhism argues for the normative nature of Buddhist studies. For Cantwell Smith, this moral law is not just an ordinary moral law but a transcendent law that survives the universal flux of cosmos.

Although transcendent, this moral law is, as mentioned above, immediately available to every man. In this context, right living is viewed as more important than all other “human strivings, whether to construct something on earth, or through piety or asceticism to try to escape from or to dominate earthly ambitions.” According to his view of Buddhism, men's and women's goals are frustrated, and anyway are themselves historical. In spite of such frustrations, right living is “reliable, is effective for salvation.” What makes right living reliable, then? The law of causality is tightly connected with right living here. We should focus upon moral causality rather than upon general or scientific causality here.

### **Conclusion: Asian Naturalism against Social Discrimination**

In fact, the movement of Cheondogyo or the Eastern Learning in Korea, as cited in the support of Asian naturalism in Keel's article, arose against social discrimination under the harsh rule of Joseon dynasty in 19<sup>th</sup> century [Carl F. Young, 2014]. This fact brightens the positive potentiality of Asian Naturalism. Although it was crushed mercilessly by Japanese imperial army, which adds to the complexity of Asian ideas in actual applications, this movement was clearly directed toward ideally egalitarian community.

After all, we need to support the cause of Asian naturalism in order to overcome the ecological-environmental crisis of our age. The meaninglessness of nature as itself is no more tolerable. Nature as only objective entity even makes us human beings become reified as clarified in the caution of Wilfred Cantwell Smith [Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 1997]. 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.

But we should be cautious and careful to be aware of the possible negative effects of Asian naturalism, attempting to develop the idea by our dialogue with other critical thoughts, including the ideas of critical Buddhism, especially with the proper use of language against social discrimination. Any attempt to suffocate the free and critical pursuits of truth should be resisted. Anyone should be encouraged to participate in the pursuits of truth without fear of being punished or persecuted by the established order. As Aung San Suu Kyi mentioned [Aung San Suu Kyi, 2010], fear is one of the greatest enemies in the pursuit and realization of truth.

Finally, there might be some objections against the arguments of Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiro in that they lack academic neutrality and in that their view of Buddhism recognizes only Dharma so that it lacks the essence of true religion, in addition to their minor status in Japan. Their arguments, however, might still provoke a serious reflection about academic neutrality that is accused by them as having contributed to social discrimination in addition to their critique of nirvana as an essential component of Buddhism that is also reappraised by Wilfred Cantwell Smith as a “distant reality” in comparison with the concept of Dharma. There might be still some other vindication of Asian naturalism in that it denies discrimination in addition to the possibility of more positive interpretation of Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, and Nishida. Although the actual improvement of the existing social discrimination in Japan and other Asian countries is necessary prior to the vindication, the proponents of Asian naturalism should first of all strive to reinterpret their own traditional philosophy anew to promote not a nominal but the actual removal of social discrimination.

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