

A LETTER TO ED ABBEY

Gary Snyder

Dear Ed,

You know, the reason that we never had further correspondence (I guess) was not—as you suggest in the book—because of any comments about Buddhism, but just because it didn't happen. So it does happen that I write you now, though again, curiously enough, on the point of Buddhism. George Sessions forwarded me some of the questions from the letter you wrote him 22:VIII:82 suggesting I might want to deal with them, and I might as well.

The bad rap that has been put on India and Far Eastern cultures, by half-baked historical information, is hard to undo. It's a matter, I suppose, of getting out of Utah or Arizona grooves, as much as us on the coast getting out of "California" grooves. What I have to address first is your statement that these are the "most miserable, most abused, most man-centered cultures on earth." I don't know where you got that notion. India, of course, is a totally different culture, and essentially an occidental culture, as against the Far East. The Himalayas, the drainages of the Irrawaddy, the Sutlej and the impenetrable mountains of Yunnan separate the Far East from India. Also there are the little matters of total racial difference and total linguistic family difference. India has been, it's true, a nation with considerable problems for the last few centuries. Many of these problems were brought about by the deliberate policies of England, who for some decades dumped textiles in India until the local weaving industry collapsed and then sold Manchester goods at an elevated price to a captive consumer audience. There are studies on how Europe impoverished the rest of the world. Just because they are by

Marxists, I wouldn't necessarily slight them. Like Mexico by the Spaniards, India was encouraged in many ways to give up its local sustainability. You might know that opium was developed by British industry as a crop in Nepal in the low lying areas, and then to guarantee that there was a market for it, Britain shoved opium down the throats of the Chinese population. This was called the "opium war." China, your purgatory, has not yet forgotten the injustice and indignity of having drug addiction forced on it by the west.

But to go on: India has an average population density of about 40 to 60 persons to the square mile, as I recall, which is about that of Hungary or Czechoslovakia. It is not particularly densely populated—especially compared to Belgium, or Java. It had up through the Gupta period one of the most affluent civilizations on earth—a lot of it went down through a combination of goats and deforestation. The goats, of course, eat the reproduction. Soil erosion, deforestation, sheep and goats, as economic devices of agrarian societies are not the invention of Hinduism or Buddhism. From the Neolithic onward, these are domesticates that have been part of agrarian economies everywhere. I dare say you are aware of the fact that Greece and much of Italy once were covered by pine and oak forests, with fine pastures and springs, and the present chaparral brush of most of the Mediterranean in no way represents the plant communities of early historic times. This also was deforestation and goats. We could just as well attribute the deterioration of early civilized environments, then, to democratic Athenian orators, as we could to these sick oriental religions.

The great early Indian king Ashoka was one of the few world leaders, to my knowledge, who actually went so much against the grain of the dynamics of agrarian states as to have carved on rock instructions about not taking the life of animals, and of compassion for non-human beings. The "rock edicts of Ashoka."

Even with the problems that India has had, though, and still has, it strikes me that it's remarkable how hard the villagers try to keep their patience and keep in tune with wild nature. Articles on attacks on villagers by tigers in the Nepal Terai remark on how many months or years it will be that village people tolerate occasional death of one of their members on account of some

elderly, ailing tiger, before they finally go to the government hunter for help. Situations where an American or probably European population would immediately form a posse with five hundred .300 rifles and jeeps are totally different. In my own travels in India, as well as studies, I was deeply impressed by the interpenetration of bird and animal species with the agricultural areas. The environmental disruptions of India are probably little worse than those of, say, Italy, Sicily, or much of Greece. The mountains at the headwaters of the Adriatic were once covered with marvelous forests; they disappeared to keep supplying the Roman fleet.

China is much the same case: though forests and soils have suffered greatly in the lower watersheds of the Yangtse and the Yellow, western Chinese mountains and the mountains of northern Siberia are still well-forested. As with India, China was for a spell one of the most splendidly civilized and wealthiest countries on earth. Their cultural high point was probably the 13th century; when they were on the edge of great literacy, inexpensive editions of encyclopedias of all kinds of learning were available to the public, sophisticated instruments such as letters of credit were making the economy seem virtually modern, and a number of Buddhist and philosophical schools enjoyed great debate with each other. The century of violent Mongol rule helped bring an end to all that.

As for Japan, if you have been there, I suspect it has been only to Tokyo and the strip down to Osaka. It is certainly technologically busy, but it is also a culture which still knows how to relax, play, and enjoy great conviviality. Every time I visit Japan, I am struck by how gracefully they deal with their crowdedness, and how well they are able to enjoy life in inexpensive ways. The back-country from the major cities is astonishingly green and natural. Agriculture runs out the shoestring valleys, but climb any Japanese hill and you look out upon mile upon mile of forested mountains. When I was living in Kyoto, the newspaper reported much sighting of bears only twelve miles north of town. A city of three million. The last bear became extinct in England in the thirteenth century. Japan, a country of much larger population and about the same size as England, still has bear, wildcat, foxes, little mountain goats called kamo, deer, monkeys, and a host of

other animals from their original days, still not too far off in the woods. The northern island of Hokkaido—which has again an average population of about 60 people per square mile, the same as Czechoslovakia—has an estimated population of 3,000 giant brown bears (relatives of the grizzly and the kodiak). Not to mention a huge deer population. The reluctance of Japanese people to go on punitive expeditions against marauding wild pigs, etc., again is a striking contrast to the ways of westerners.

I have tried to describe a little what I think the actual conditions in these countries are. Certainly, human numbers and human greed have done little worse here than they have in other parts of the world: if anything is to blame, it is the nature of that type of social organization we call “civilization” itself—kingship, ruling elites, and the accumulation of wealth. Buddhism (which incidentally does not teach that everything is “illusion” but teaches that the way people see through their self-centered personal interest rosy glasses of subjectivity is “delusive”—and teaches people to see the world “as it is” which is the “real world” rather than the “illusory world” of subjective opinion) has not had a great deal of influence on the civilizations it co-existed with, it’s true. Such teachings are never terribly successful on a large scale in any civilization, because they truly run against the grain. Philosophically, early Buddhism is closer to pre-Socratic Greek philosophy than anything else probably. Still, though Buddhism did not make so wonderful an impact, its truth and validity remains and I am grateful for the fact that it tempered medieval north India, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Mongolia, Burma and Thailand, in its attitudes at least toward taking life to the extent that people in those realms still are tender-hearted toward birds, animals and trees. There have probably been other worthwhile by-products of the Buddhist presence in the Far East—architecture and art, cooking, manners, poetry and drama, a few little touches. You see, I look on the usefulness of Buddhism as in some ways just beginning now: though its very survival up till now is a marvel. Inside the Zen tradition there has been kept alive a person-to-person mode of actual body- and mind-training (in the matter of purging one’s self of subjectivity) that is extraordinary, in the face of normal history. I won’t argue any further as to what I think the virtues of Buddhism might be for the future—a

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non-anthropocentric species-wide compassion has value of its own.

I don't know what American Zen Buddhist types you have seen. There are all sorts, but if you were to take one example—the San Francisco Zen Center—and its impact on the community, you'd notice that it works in the world with good baking (the bakery); good cooking (the “Greens” restaurant); good sewing (the stitchery); good manners, good donation of good volunteer labor to good projects, a little good art, much good humor, some peace activism via the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and lots of people who are doing no harm at the very least.

Thinking back on what I've just written, in response to your notions about Asia, I swear it's like you had exactly the same view of Buddhism and China as my Texas Methodist aunt. Stereotypes die hard.

But onward: To comradeship, and the work that must be done. I think a grand mix of environmental religions is just fine, if it does no harm, and I welcome neo-shamanists, mother-goddess worshipers, neo-pagans, and whatever else to the scene if that helps them get the energy to go to work against industrial civilization. Even Marxists! (I forgot to say: I really can't accept China as quite the purgatory you describe it. It was pretty bad through the Cultural Revolution, but they seem to be doing quite well now, with no self-deception—a billion people, and they know they are just barely scrabbling by, trying to make it work. I met with eight writers from the People's Republic three weeks ago in L.A., and was struck by their honesty, humility and sense of the enormity of the task of sheer survival ahead of them. They are serious about birth control.)

So, let's get together under the general name of Deep Ecology and roust out the troops. I loved the *Monkey Wrench Gang*, me and my boy laughed all the way through it. So in the letter I wrote Dave Foreman I was not knocking the *Monkey Wrench Gang* as literature, or theater, or device, but as you know, questioning how we want to handle, seriously, the point of possible violence in the movement. I stand by what I said there—we need warriors, not rhetoricians. And anybody who is truly intent on radical action, doesn't go shooting their mouth off about it, like some of those guys do. But I love their energy and consider myself essentially in

the same boat. I hope you consider me in your boat as I consider you in my boat, and hope we can walk some ridge or canyon together somewhere sometime; if you are coming to California let me know and we'll get together up here at my place and get George up here too—

Fraternally,
Gary