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Reflection on Water Sutra

The following is an excerpt from Dōgen's Mountains and water sutra as translated by Arnold Kotler and Kazuaki Tanahashi:

All beings do not see mountains and waters in the same way. Some beings see water as a jeweled ornament, but they do not regard jeweled ornaments as water...Some beings see water as wondrous blossoms, but they do not use blossoms as water. Hungry ghosts see water as raging fire or pus and blood. Dragons see water as a palace or pavilion. Some beings see water as the seven treasures or a wish-granting jewel. Some beings see water as a forest or a wall. Some see it as the dharma nature of pure liberation, the true human body, or as the form of body and essence of mind. Human beings see water as water. Water is seen as dead or alive depending on causes and conditions. Thus the views of all beings are not the same. You should question this matter now. Are there many ways to see one thing or is it a mistake to see many forms as one thing?...When we think about the meaning of this it seems that there is water for various beings but no original water – there is no water in common to all types of beings. But water for these various kinds of beings does not depend on mind or body, does not arise from actions, does not depend on self or other. Water's freedom depends only on water...water as earth, water, fire, wind and space realizes itself.

The word “realize” means both to understand and to actualize. Here it is used in the sense of actualization. This view of water is more than can ever possibly be said by words. It is beyond the realm of human thinking; it is the sudden appearing, on its own terms, of that which cannot be said. But what does it mean to understand water on its own terms?

In one sense, we will not know what this means until after we have already glimpsed it. Therefore, how can we choose the actions that will lead to this actualization if we cannot know which path will lead there until we've already been there?

Holmes Rolston III developed an environmental ethic which centered on the prompt to “follow nature.” However, this turned out to be problematic, because as we observe nature we see many different directives depending on “causes and conditions.” So in what sense are we to follow nature?

These three questions alone are enough to occupy a thoughtful person for an entire lifetime. But these questions are immovably important in the context of the King County WaterReuse water recycling program.

This program is designed to mimic the water cycle, yet it is also designed around the needs of humans. In order to approach water on its own terms, we have approached it not from without, and not from within, but rather from a place that negates the dualism of the internal/external distinction. We can travel inside our own perception to glimpse ourselves on our own terms, and then expound these perceptions by finding their reflection in the perceptions of our neighbors. Do not forget that it is water that makes reflection possible.

We have freed water. This freedom consists in the fact that water no longer has to be what it is, because it is always becoming what it is. This is the meaning of the wild. This is the continuous practice of water. We have freed water, and in doing so we have freed ourselves.