

Rice planting: Hirono Ground, 13th July 1999.

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As a Westerner, planting rice was a rewarding experience for me as rice is not the staple in my country and is grown nowhere in the British Isles. Rice is grown in Spain, but the climate of Northern Europe is not suitable for rice. In the British Isles we see fields of potatoes or barley, or hillsides of grazing sheep, but rice paddies still have an exotic appeal for me. However at home I feel in Japan, the sight of rice terraces always reminds me that I have left my native shores. As a city dweller, planting rice provided a much-needed reminder that food comes from the earth, not the supermarket. Although I grew up in a farming community I have spent the last 17 years living mainly in London and Kobe. I have become separated from the earth and the cycle of the seasons. In London and Kobe we feel asphalt and concrete below our feet, not grass or soil. In their experience of food-getting, urban dwellers have little more real grasp of the source of their food than the city children we hear about in Manchester and Glasgow who think milk comes from Sainsbury's.

The key word above is separation. Modern living separates us from the world. To more fully understand our place in the world we must reconnect with the world. The experience of rice planting was a reconnecting experience. It was an educational experience that showed the crucial role of fieldwork, of project work in environmental education.

We planted rice as a group and it was important to solve problems as a group, for instance in aligning the rows of rice using string, in exactly the same way as marking out stitches of potatoes. We learnt first to dissolve the clods of soil clinging to the rice plants from the growing cells. Then it was time to plant the rice, the paddy having been prepared a week earlier with the required depth of water. Not having boots I opted to work barefoot. This at least ensured a more direct reconnection with the earth. The rice was to be planted in bundles of 5 or 6 rice plants. I think we experienced something of the tenacity of the plants, as we sometimes seemed to be planting them in only a half-inch of soil, sometimes we seemed to be planting only in the water itself. I imagine that the plants send down their roots very quickly and I can understand how a storm soon after planting can destroy a crop.

The experience was primarily a bodily experience. There was the feel of the slimy earth under the water oozing between toes as we were sucked gradually downwards, the feel of the water on the hands, the smells of the rice paddy, the texture of the plants themselves, the pull of city dwellers back muscles unused to this kind of work and the feel of the rather humid July air against bare skin and clothes, damp with sweat and water. Fortunately for me there was no burning sun on this cloudy day. At the same time of course was the presence of the living things of the countryside. Trees and grass and weeds, insects and birds and of course the tiny frogs that inhabit the paddies.

Sights, sounds, smells and textures. All we had to do was to shut out the clatter of the city mind and just experience and feel these qualities. My 5-year-old son, Adrian, was particularly interested in the frogs. He was absorbed in the rice planting, I think he was the most connected of all of us.

This rice plating was one of several field projects we have been involved in at Konan University's Hirono Ground. They offer a vital aspect of environmental education. We have environmental ethics seminars and they are the theory. The fieldwork is the practice. Theory is how we understand the world rationally. Theory is the work of the intellectual mind, it is for utilitarian purposes. But as a product of the intellectual mind, theory is necessarily abstracted from the world of direct experience, for instance in terms of mathematical abstraction. Another way of knowing the world is pre-intellectual, or prior to rational understanding. This more direct way of knowing the world is intuitive and it is also a bodily experience.

What we have above are two modes of consciousness, the intellectual and the intuitive modes of consciousness. In the intellectual mode of consciousness we are separated from the world, and indeed from our body. We become the subject, 'in here', and our physical body and the world become object 'out there'. But in the intuitive mode of consciousness there is no separation of mind, body or world. We are identified with the world. This mode of consciousness is prior to the intellect's division of the world of experience. The person experiences himself or herself to be wholly bound up with the world. This has been called 'ecological consciousness'.

If this experience is nurtured and can become a regular practice then we will become changed as persons. We will develop a sense of oneness and foster a feeling of shared identity with our living environment and other beings and this will foster an attitude of care and respect towards our living environment and other beings.

In terms of environmental ethics we foster an environmental consciousness that addresses the question "what sort of person ought I to be?" This suggests an ethics of care that is the precondition of other value systems, such as the normative, rational, ethical theories of utilitarianism, rights theory or contract theory, that address the question "what ought I to do?"

Environmental education must address the questions "what kind of people ought we to be?" and "what ought we to do?" and therefore environmental ethics must be part of environmental education. Then, acting from this ethical platform we must learn how best to carry out our activities in the world. This can only be achieved in a sustainable way by maximizing our knowledge of the natural world. We can say that our activities in the world will be sustainable in proportion to our level of knowledge of the world. We must develop not just theoretical, classroom knowledge, but also practical, hands-on knowledge.