# Pursuing contentment and liberation in the Forest of Arden: Hindu and Buddhist resonances in *As You Like It**

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ABSTRACT

This essay approaches Shakespeare's *As You Like It* through the ancient wisdom traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Focusing on a number of influential classic Indian texts, this study considers how distinctive features of Eastern spirituality resonate with Shakespeare's depiction of the Forest of Arden as a refuge where contentment can be fostered and liberation pursued as life's ultimate goal. Shakespeare's pastoral comedy dramatizes how virtues that lead to liberation are facilitated within the eco-religious space of Arden where the threefold Hindu concept of world forest is embodied. Such an ecumenical approach invites readers to contemplate what wisdom traditions beyond the Abrahamic religions can contribute to Shakespeare's religious afterlives.

KEYWORDS: *As You Like It*, Buddhism, contentment, Hinduism, liberation, refuge, Shakespeare.

**Persiguiendo el contento y la liberación en el bosque de Arden: resonancias hindúes y budistas en *As You Like It*****

RESUMEN: Este artículo aborda la obra *As You Like It*, de Shakespeare, a través de las tradiciones de sabiduría antigua del hinduismo y el budismo. Centrándose en una serie de influyentes textos clásicos indios, este estudio considera cómo las características distintivas de la espiritualidad oriental resuenan en

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la descripción que hace Shakespeare del bosque de Arden como un refugio donde alimentar el contento y perseguir la liberación como fin último de la vida. La comedia pastoral de Shakespeare dramatiza cómo el espacio ecoreligioso de Arden, donde se encarna el triple concepto hindú del bosque mundial, es conducente a las virtudes que llevan a la liberación. Este acercamiento ecuménico invita a los lectores a contemplar lo que las tradiciones de sabiduría más allá de las religiones abrahámicas pueden contribuir a la posteridad de Shakespeare en clave religiosa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *As You Like It*, budismo, contento, hinduismo, liberación, refugio, Shakespeare.

que Shakespeare faz da Floresta de Arden como um refúgio no qual se pode fomentar o contentamento e procurar a libertação como objetivo último da vida. A comédia pastoril de Shakespeare dramatiza a forma como as virtudes que conduzem à libertação são facilitadas no espaço eco-religioso de Arden, onde se corporiza o conceito hindu tríplice de floresta do mundo. Esta abordagem ecuménica convida os leitores a contemplar as tradições de sabedoria que, para lá das religiões abraâmicas, podem contribuir para as sobrevidas religiosas de Shakespeare.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *As You Like It*, Budismo, contentamento, Hinduísmo, libertação, refúgio, Shakespeare.

> Now go we in content,
> To liberty, and not to banishment. (*As You Like It*, 1.3.131–132)[1]

> When beings and the world are filled with evil,
> transform adversity into the path of liberation.[2]

One of the remarkable characteristics of *As You Like It* is its optimism. Shakespeare's pastoral comedy presents the natural world as an eco-religious space of reimagined communal bonds, spiritual transformation, and open inquiry into questions that matter profoundly—how to live well, how to love genuinely, and how to cultivate a mind free of suffering. The Forest of Arden is capacious, offering refuge and blessings for travelers, holy men, and exiles. In leaving behind the sociopolitical world of court and household, the exiles in Arden are freed from the entanglements of destructive relationships, afflictive passions, and political pressures. Celia's exuberant lines quoted above serve as the play's keynote, expressing

[1] All quotations from *As You Like It* are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Greenblatt, et al. (1997).

[2] This aphorism is one of fifty-nine distillations of Buddhist wisdom (known as *lojong* or "mind training" in Tibetan Buddhism) originating from the Indian scholar-monk Atisa Dipankara Srijnana (982–1054 CE). See Kyabgon (2007, 82–119).

the mind's capacity to transform adversity and to imagine liberty within reach, not only as a geographic and physical possibility, but as a spiritual and natural end. The word *content* in Shakespeare's age meant not only satisfaction, pleasure, and delight, but a condition and frame of mind, a capacity, space, and extent of something.[3] These sensate, cognitive aspects of contentment point to the mind's capacity and readiness for the pursuit of liberty and spiritual fullness. Indeed, *As You Like It* treats contentment and liberation as endowments of the mind in harmonious relationship with itself, others, and nature. With this view, Shakespeare reveals an ecumenism that reaches back to ancient wisdom literatures,[4] particularly from Hindu and Buddhist traditions,[5] which emphasize the spiritual jewels of mind training and the goal of liberation as an enlightened state attained through knowing and seeing "good in everything" (2.1.17).

In the spirit of "sapiential pluralism" (Lupton 2022, 568), this essay brings to light surprising resonances between Shakespeare's comedy and archetypal tropes, motifs, and views central to Indian wisdom traditions. The retreat to Arden gains spiritual purpose when seen as a ritual movement away from the urban world conditioned by hatred, greed, and envy to a natural place where conditions are favorable for the realization of contentment and liberation. This pattern resembles the renunciant's path taken by Indian sages and spiritual aspirants since antiquity. For millennia, wandering sadhus, rishis, and yogis have meditated in mountain caves in the Himalayas and gathered in forest ashrams (religious communities) along the banks of the Ganges River. Celia's "[n]ow go we in content" echoes the literal and figurative "going forth" of liberation seekers, celebrated most famously in the archetypal story of Siddhartha Gautama (sixth or fifth century BCE), who left his royal family's palace and a life of supreme comfort in

[3] *OED*, "content," n. 1.II, and n. 2; also "contented," adj. 2, "willing, ready."

[4] For ecumenical readings of Shakespeare, see, for example, Lupton (2022) and the scholarly essays in Langis and Lupton (forthcoming), which explore Shakespeare's plays in the context of global wisdom literatures. While Lupton views *As You Like It*'s ecumenism as inclusive of Catholic sensibilities, Hebraism, and Pythagorean cosmopolitanism (2022, 569), this essay uncovers the comedy's resonances with dominant religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent.

[5] A number of scholars have published foundational studies on Buddhism and Shakespeare: Knight (1980), Howe (1994), Sterne (2007), Freinkel (2011), Langis (2022, 2023), and Shufran (2022).

search of an end to suffering. Under the bodhi tree, he finally achieved enlightenment and became the Buddha ("Awakened One"). Going forth became a trope in Indian religious scriptures, reflecting a stage in life in which one renounced worldly attachments—social status, family, lands, and ties—and sought refuge in the natural world, a guru's wisdom, and a spiritual community. The Great Forest Upanisad (*Brhadaranyaka*),[6] to cite another example, opens with the sage Yajnavalkya announcing to his wife that he must "go forth from the worldly life" to pursue Self-Realization (Easwaran 2007b, 99). Some renunciants would return home to reclaim their former lives after gaining spiritual realization, as Duke Senior, Orlando, and Rosalind intend to do in Shakespeare's play, while others remained apart from society in forests, caves, and simple dwellings, as Jaques, Oliver, and Celia will do.

Seen in this light, Arden functions as outer and inner sanctuary, recalling the ancient Hindu view of forest (*vana*) as refuge and threefold world: *srivana*, a protected agrarian area for cultivation and communal wealth; *tapovana*, a penetrable forest space conducive for the ascetic practices and contemplation of monks and sages; and *mahavana*, the great natural forest which shelters all species in biodiversity and ecological interdependence (Prime 1992, 10; Prasad 2018, 5–6). In most Indian languages, a synonym for vana is *aranya*, meaning "no war," indicating that the forest is a place where violence is forbidden (Prasad 2018, 6). In ancient India, Kiran Prasad explains, "forests symbolized the culture of asceticism, sacrifice and self-restraint. While pursuing economic goals in the cities, the people were encouraged to pursue spiritual values and peace by retiring periodically to forests" (2018, 6). Some Shakespeare scholars regard Arden in a similar vein: as a place of "sacred refuge and spiritual illumination" (Duncan 2013, 121) far from worldly business; as a welcoming abode where "new possibilities for communal flourishing" can be found, free from social strictures and predetermined hierarchies (Degenhardt 2023, 342); and as a hospitable home "for grace received through mindful attention to ancient traditions and the environing world" (Lupton 2022, 579). Like the wisdom seekers in Hindu and Buddhist forest ashrams

[6] Unless otherwise noted, all Indian terms appear in Sanskrit. Ancient Hindu scriptures known as the Vedas and Upanisads (c. 1500–c. 200 BCE) contain devotional texts, wisdom teachings, and philosophical interpretations of rituals.

and caves, *As You Like It*'s characters leave "public haunt" (2.1.15) and worldly enterprise for the "forest world" where they pursue contentment and liberation from afflictive passions and attachments. Resonant with the natural world, their spiritual paths tap into a font of "relational virtues," as Julia Lupton observes, "including hospitality, kindness, gentleness, and care" (2022, 583). Above all, Lupton argues, magnanimity ("greatness of soul") is "the disposition affirmed by the play as a whole" (2022, 584). An Indian approach to magnanimity might translate "animus" as "mind," "Self," or "heart," inviting consideration of how greatness is already present in the mind and heart as a natural aspect of *buddha-nature* ("awakened mind") or *atman* ("true self"). In Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, magnanimity is the nectar of immeasurable compassion and generosity that sweetens the taste of life's ultimate state, liberation.

In Indian wisdom traditions, the last stage of the spiritual path (*vanaprastha asrama*) leads directly to the forest, where aspirants seek peace (*santi*) and liberation (*moksa*). Similar to *nirvana*, moksa is freedom from the suffering of conditioned life in *samsara* ("wandering through"), meaning the endlessly repeating cycle of birth and death, perpetuated by the afflictive passions of ego-clinging. The Buddha famously diagnosed the human condition as *dukkha* (pain, suffering, discontentedness) and prescribed the noble eightfold path as the cure.[7] His teachings in the *Dhammapada* (Pali, *The Path of Dharma*) illuminate the mind's capacity to apply the healing balm of virtues such as equanimity, patience, and wisdom: "They are wise whose thoughts are steady and minds serene, unaffected by good and bad. They are awake and free from fear" (Easwaran 2007a, 3:39). Later Indian sages integrated the Buddha's teachings on liberation with ancient Vedic and non-dual Hindu scriptures. In the influential syncretic text the *Yoga Vasistha* (attributed to Maharishi Valmiki, c. sixth–fourteenth CE), for example, the revered wisdom teacher Vasistha vividly imagines the path to moksa through the metaphor of the four gatekeepers whom the spiritual seeker must befriend in order to pass

[7] The Buddha's first teaching, known as the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* (Pali, *The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dharma*), presents the four noble truths: the truths of dukkha, its causes, its cessation, and the path to the cessation of suffering through the practice of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. The Buddha's discourses were preserved in the Pali Canon in five *Nikayas* ("collections").

from painful worldly attachments to a state of inner freedom (1993, 2:11). The gatekeepers are noble qualities as familiar to Hindus and Buddhists as they are to inhabitants of Shakespeare's Arden: peace, tranquility and mental self-control (*santi*), contentment (*santosa*), the spirit of inquiry (*vichara*), and virtuous company (*satsanga*).

This essay explores similarities between ancient Indian wisdom and Shakespeare's *As You Like It* by first considering how the unsociable urban world appears as samsara, an unreliable refuge teeming with the egoic passions and discontented aggressions of its human occupants. It then turns to Arden's forest world where sociable communities thrive based on shared virtues, contentedness, and the pursuit of liberation. The essay concludes by affirming the play's vision of spiritual optimism, which is expressed in the final scene through a gracious staging of "at-oneness" pervading social, natural, and contemplative communities.

## *Samsara*: Unreliable Refuge

> O, what a world is this, when what is comely
> Envenoms him that bears it! (*As You Like It*, 2.3.14–15)

*As You Like It* vividly depicts the dangers of the sociopolitical world of the French court and domestic household, which are environments conditioned by afflictive passions, violence, and discontent. The lives and livelihoods of the urban world's inhabitants rest on the shifting ground of constant threat and abrupt change. Buddhists and Hindus would recognize this conditioned world as samsara, an "unreliable refuge" governed by egoic poisons which cause perpetual suffering (Kongtrül 2006, 39–40). Life is not as any human in this world would like it; neither the fortunate nor the unfortunate are happy and flourishing. Envy, power-hunger, and hatred are the poisons motivating Duke Frederick, who has seized the dukedom from his older brother whom he sent into exile. The play's first scene stages fraternal conflict in a wealthy household where the elder brother, Oliver, filled with malice and envy, deprives the younger, Orlando, of a dignified place. Murderousness and disinheritance sever their bond and cause the old family servant, Adam, to lament, "This is no place, this house is but a butchery. | Abhor it, fear it, do not enter it"

(2.3.28–29). The world as unreliable refuge is captured vividly in the figure of the inhospitable house of violence, where Orlando is kept "rustically" (1.1.6), treated as an animal raised for "growth" (1.1.12) and slaughter. Adam perceives the confusion and moral perversity bred in this household where the older brother refuses care for the younger and envies his virtues: "Your virtues, gentle master," he observes, "[a]re sanctified and holy traitors to you. | O, what a world is this, when what is comely | Envenoms him that bears it!" (2.3.12–15). The venom originates in Oliver, who confesses ignorance of how he became ill with malice: "I hope I shall see an end of him [Orlando], for my soul—yet I know not why—hates nothing more than he" (1.1.139–41). Orlando and Adam choose to seek refuge in the forest where, at least at the outset, further hardships await: homelessness, hunger, and uncertainty.

Not only Orlando and Adam, but all of the play's characters find themselves mired in the fundamental problematic of human existence—existential suffering. Reading against "an untroubled pastoral-poetic tradition," Paul Kottman follows W. H. Auden's view that "exile to the forest of Arden is a suffering" (2009, 24), emphasizing the play's investment in tragic conditions not only in the urban world, but in Arden, as well. The protagonists suffer worldly losses which drive them into exile and force them to set up "a makeshift refugee camp" (2009, 23). What they face, Kottman argues, is the dissolution of an "inherited or bequeathable world"; they are made "*bereft* of such a world, of social and kinship ties, of institutions and principled duties" (2009, 26). Disinheritance from a recognizable sociopolitical world leads to an existence in Arden marked by "loss of collective investment" in the future (2009, 36) and lack of meaning in human interactions. Kottman's tragic sense of existential conditions haunting Arden is disquieting and in some sense true, but we might consider what other kinds of ontological, perceptual, relational, and spiritual experiences habitation in the forest affords. Ancient Indian wisdom sheds light on the forest world as a beneficent ecological space in which the human aspiration to grow spiritually happens through transforming adversity into a path of liberation. The forest invites humans to experience contentment within and beyond bereavement, and to poise the mind with equanimity in the face of tyranny, lost or renounced inheritance, and uncertain conditions. Following traditional patterns of going forth from society, forest-dwellers leave

institutional ties and worldly networks behind in order to foster growth in wisdom.

There is no doubt that the Forest of Arden offers refuge from "the foul body of th'infected world" (2.7.60). If court and household are "bodies" of infection, relational systems that fail to sustain human flourishing and virtue, the forest exists as an alternative agrarian, spiritual, and ecological world, where humans can see each other in kindness and kinship as "co-mates and brothers in exile" (2.1.1). This phrase reflects Duke Senior's approach to the forest community as egalitarian and reliably hospitable to spiritual growth and social harmony. The lords and gentlemen who followed him into the forest have found their worldly inheritance unreliable, a lost refuge; they now find refuge, at least temporarily, in the natural world of the forest where relational virtues are cultivated and reciprocated. Virtue has not served them at court or in urban life, a point emphasized by the violence with which Duke Senior, Rosalind, and Orlando have been treated. When Le Beau tells Orlando of Frederick's sudden "displeasure" and "malice" toward Rosalind for her "virtues" and the "pity" people feel for her (1.2.245–49), his parting words express hope for a "better world": "Hereafter, in a better world than this, | I shall desire more love and knowledge of you" (1.2.251–52). All of the exiles in Arden seek "more love and knowledge" outside of the "infected world" of court and urban household. A "better world" is one in which virtues are efficacious, the play contends, facilitated by ancient spiritualities, symbolisms, and harmony with nature, rather than modern secular values of competition and material satisfaction.

For all of the exiles, there comes the realization that since externals in the conditioned world are impermanent, if one lets them go as an end, or source of happiness, then contentment can follow. Shakespeare's inquiry into contentment, thus, surpasses Virgilian pastoralism, which tends to render contentment as a passive and self-satisfied state. Rather, Shakespeare shades this virtue with nuances resonant with ancient Indian wisdom, which views contentment as a mental disposition that emerges through contemplative inquiry and dialectic with samsaric realities. Celia's high-spirited lines, the couplet ending the first act, emphasize contentment as an active quality and the notion of content as a harboring container of virtue and resilience that can be cultivated even in the midst of adversity. As

Jane Hwang Degenhardt emphasizes, "Celia's ability to perceive exile as a means to 'liberty' establishes a paradigm of seeing otherwise—and often optimistically—that runs throughout the play" (2023, 341). Her words become a prologue to Duke Senior's visionary speech of the tranquil mind, which vividly realizes the mind's potential for perceptual transformation and optimism. Celia and Duke Senior both face contingencies in their disinherited existence outside the palace gates; they have suffered a father's and brother's vicious actions and political machinations, but they nonetheless cultivate an inner capacity for santosa, or contented acceptance of reality, that actively changes the way they see and contend with conditioned existence. Such an awakened attitude of mind, as Buddhists would call it, informs their capacity to form bonds—to keep wise company—that benefits mutual spiritual growth.

## *Satsanga*: Wise Company in the Forest

> Satsanga (company of the wise, holy and enlightened persons) is [a] gate-keeper to liberation. Satsanga enlarges one's intelligence, destroys one's ignorance and one's psychological distress. Whatever be the cost, however difficult it may be, whatever obstacles may stand in its way, satsanga should never be neglected. For, satsanga alone is one's light on the path of life. Satsanga is indeed superior to all other forms of religious practice like charity, austerity, pilgrimage and the performance of religious rites. (*Vasistha's Yoga* 1993, 2:16)

> Welcome. Set down your venerable burden [.] (*As You Like It*, 2.7.166)

Arden encompasses a number of communities—agrarian, exiled, and religious. While there are landowners, shepherds, and goatherds native to the woodlands, Duke Senior's company has become a forest-dwelling *satsanga*. This Sanskrit term from Indian spiritual traditions refers to wise company on the spiritual path, or the community of fellow truth-seekers (*sat* means "true"). As the sage Vasistha says, satsanga has the capacity to "enlarge[] one's intelligence," dispel ignorance and mental distress, and show the path to enlightenment. Equally, as the Buddha taught, "[t]he company of the wise is joyful, like reunion with one's family. Therefore, live among the wise, who are understanding, patient, responsible, and noble" (Easwaran 2007a, 15:207–8). Early in the play, the court wrestler, Charles, reported the rumor he heard

about gentlemen seeking the company of the banished duke in the forest: "They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day, and fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world" (1.1.101–3). This romanticized account, which began with a reference to Robin Hood, ignores the reality of the situation, which is that "[m]en of great worth" have renounced security and worldly accommodations to "resort[] to this forest" (5.4.144). The meanings of *resort* found in the *OED* cast a distinctive light on the motivations of the men: to seek aid or assistance; to seek the company of a person; of good or bad fortune, an inheritance; a return to oneself; to cast one's mind back; to retreat. Collectively, these definitions reveal how the Duke offers a refuge from "the envious court" (2.1.4) and an alternative inheritance to the worldly kinds these men were acquainted with in their urban roles and abodes. Lupton uses the felicitous terms "sapiential community" and Donald Wehrs's "ecosociability" to characterize the Duke's satsanga (2022, 568) in which he "minster[s]" to all "[u]nder the shade of […] boughs" (2.7.125, 109). It is not difficult to imagine him sitting beneath the broad canopy of a tree, ancient Indian symbol of patience and tolerance (Prime 1992, 9), with his loyal followers gathered before him, presenting a stage image not so different from textual and iconographic representations of Indian sages and their disciples.[8] Wisdom and dispassion give the Duke the capacity to respond to the spiritual and practical needs of those who have "gone forth" and turned away from worldly striving and attachments.

Duke Senior's words, the first spoken in Arden, welcome his satsanga and the play's audience, staking a claim for the virtues of life in the forest's "better world." The "unmistakably homiletic" tone of his speech and his sense of the divine speaking through nature (Watterson 1991, 119) reflect not only Mosaic and New Testament ideas, but core virtues of Eastern spirituality and Vedic scriptures: santi, santosa, the sacredness of nature, and the interdependence of human, natural, and divine spheres. For Hindus, the forest is an image of the world inclusive of all of creation; in terms of religious pursuit, the forest is "the home of the sages" (Prime 1992, 12). Seen in this light, and after "long custom" (2.1.2) in the forest, the Duke, we might perceive,

[8] Act 2, scene 5 indicates the presence of a tree onstage. Not only does Amiens sing "Under the greenwood tree," but he directs the lords to prepare a meal, saying "The Duke will drink under this tree" (26).

has undergone spiritual conversion and now has the capacity to feel "what I am," as he says (2.1.11), and to find benefit in adversity; he has trained his mind, as it were, to remain poised in contentment. His verse has an aphoristic quality similar to the Buddhist lojong slogan on transforming adversity into enlightenment, which was cited at the opening of this essay:

> Sweet are the uses of adversity
> Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
> Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
> And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
> Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in everything. (2.1.12–17)

Speaking for the satsanga, Amiens acknowledges the relationship between happiness/well-being and the mind's capacity to "translate" adversity into good: "I would not change it. Happy is your grace | That can translate the stubbornness of fortune | Into so quiet and so sweet a style" (2.1.18–20). The qualities of mind reflected in the Duke's "sweet […] style" (santi, santosa) are recognized as well in Stoic, Epicurean, and Christian traditions as foundations of wisdom. Tapping the power of sovereign goodness, the Duke actively transforms the external into the internal, the harshness and fickleness of worldly experience into a calm disposition and language. He experiences their exiled life in the forest as "more sweet | Than that of painted pomp" (2.1.2–3), which is to say, more naturally agreeable than the court's artificial, vainglorious ceremonies. Sweetness evokes an Epicurean pleasure, which pervades the hardships of exile, making them not simply bearable, but blissful. With a mind at peace, Hindu scriptures affirm, "this very world becomes an abode of bliss" (*Vasistha's Yoga* 1993, 2:12).

There is an almost magical sense of the "sweet […] uses of adversity" conveyed in the Duke's image of the "precious jewel" in the forehead of the "ugly and venomous toad." That jewel is the legendary toadstone, which was thought to contain an antidote to poison, including the toad's own venom.[9] The Duke's allusion to the

[9] The earliest known reference to the toadstone is in Pliny the Elder's first-century *Natural History*. Renaissance sources include Edward Fenton (1569), Thomas Lupton (1576), Thomas Nicols (1652), and Edward Topsell (1658). In his investigation into the

alchemical toadstone emphasizes the medicinal quality within the mind itself to transmute the perceptual experience of suffering into compassion and other positive attitudes. In the Indian yogic tradition, the forehead is the site of the "third eye," or *ajna chakra*, known as a subtle realm of insight, wisdom, and truth.[10] Jewels signify spiritual illumination in Buddhism. Thus, the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are called the Three Jewels of refuge, and virtuous qualities such as the awakened heart-mind (*bodhicitta*) and altruism are called jewels in traditional scriptures. The Duke's awareness of the poisons that obscure and sicken the mind is evident from his recent conflict with his brother and expulsion from society. His optimism is not born of delusion or denial. Rather, he has cultivated the jewel in his mind, a tranquil self-control and awakened attitude, which affords him a sublime view of "good in everything." The sage Vasistha's words shed light on the Duke's mental fortitude as a "remedy" for all ills.

> When the mind is at peace, pure, tranquil, free from delusion or hallucination, untangled and free from cravings, it does not long for anything nor does it reject anything. This is self-control or conquest of mind [santi]—one of the four gate-keepers to liberation […]. All that is good and auspicious flows from self-control. All evil is dispelled by self-control. (1993, 2:13)

Santi, Vasistha proclaims, is "the best remedy for all physical and mental ills" (1993, 2:13)

While the Duke's wisdom reflects an advanced stage on the spiritual path, Jaques's melancholy reflects an earlier stage—or perhaps an alternate branch in the path—where the uses of adversity are bitter, rather than sweet. Yet in the non-dual aspect of ancient wisdoms, Duke Senior and Jaques are complementary parts of the same coin of spiritual aspiration. The first description of Jaques places him beneath a tree, just as we found the Duke, though Jaques is alone

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rich folklore of fossils, paleontologist Paul D. Taylor observes that the "shiny button-like teeth of the Mesozoic fish *Lepidotu*s are sometimes referred to as toadstones and were once believed to have formed within the heads of toads. The notion of toads' heads containing jewels is ancient. […] At some stage during the evolution of the toadstone myth, fossil *Lepidotes* teeth became associated with this particular legend. Like tonguestones, toadstones were considered to have medicinal value as antidotes to poison" (1998, 143).

[10] The concept of subtle bodily and spiritual energies, known as the *chakras* ("wheels"), arose in ancient traditions of Hinduism and appeared in the Vedas and yogic texts.

in melancholic repose: "he lay along | Under an oak, whose antic root peeps out | Upon the brook that brawls along this wood" (2.1.30–32). Considered a sacred tree in ancient and early modern cultures, the oak characterizes the recumbent Jaques as a spiritual renunciant living in sympathy with the forest world and its animal inhabitants.[11] Yet his retreat to nature fails to bring contentment; in this instance he is lamenting the "misery" (2.1.51) of a wounded stag to whom he can give no aid. While Touchstone, the court fool, offers an easy dictum with his "travellers must be content" (2.4.13–14), such a stance is elusive, even unacceptable, for Jaques. He is disillusioned with samsara, a necessary realization on the spiritual path, yet entangled in a self-perpetuated suffering that drives him to rail against the "infected world" (2.7.60) rather than let it go. Jaques's discontent and existential anguish alienate him from spiritual companions, yet, most poignantly, he feels the suffering and impermanence of all sentient beings and wishes that the human community would "patiently receive [his] medicine" (2.7.61).

With his insight into samsaric conditions, Jaques is as much a wisdom teacher as Duke Senior, yet he contrasts radically with the Duke in his skillful means, or *upaya*, as Buddhists call it. While the Duke's "sweet" style exudes a pleasurable equanimity and tranquility, producing a circle of "contented followers" (5.2.13), Jaques's bitter mode of expression betrays moral disgust for egoic pretensions, hypocrisies, and corruptions. His first "teaching" (reported through two lords) involves the wounded deer whom he weeps for and uses as an object lesson to moralize on the exiled court's "usurp[ation]" of the animals' "native dwelling place" (2.1.27, 63). Jaques "most invectively […] pierceth through | The body of the country, city, court, | Yea, and of this our life" (2.1.58–60) with the accusation of usurpation and tyranny over deer killed for venison. This ethical and empathetic appeal strikes home, as the Duke himself expresses vexation about having to kill the "native burghers of this desert city" (2.1.23). Jaques's critical perspective exposes the less than

[11] Todd Borlik (forthcoming) argues that Shakespeare's audiences would have perceived Jaques in light of the wandering Greek sage Pythagoras, "a prominent figure in the Renaissance revival of wisdom literature" whose philosophy bridged Eastern and Western thought and exemplified ecological virtues such as vegetarianism, non-harming (*ahisma*), and cosmic harmony.

perfect reality of the human position in the forest—the Duke's men choose to take life in order to sustain life, which violates the ancient wisdom principle of *ahisma*.

The occasion for Jaques's second teaching arises after his encounter with Touchstone. Jaques arrives in the midst of Duke Senior's satsanga, amused and inspired by the Fool's dull wit. "O that I were a fool!" he exclaims, seeing in himself a greater capacity than the professional fool to be "deep-contemplative" and to act as a true touchstone of virtue (2.7.31, 42). "I must have liberty," he cries, "Give me leave | To speak my mind, and I will through and through | Cleanse the foul body of th'infected world" (2.7.47, 58–60). The exuberant mockery in Jaques's speech to the satsanga conveys an undercurrent of good will, a desire to serve the samsaric world in showing vice its face. Duke Senior undoubtedly recognizes Jaques's intent and the truth of what he wishes to expose, yet like a Buddhist master taking aim at his student's ego, he charges Jaques to look first to his own infection, a carnal libertinism and harmful liberty that lies in the way of spiritual advancement.

The lively exchange between Duke Senior and Jaques halts suddenly when Orlando, sword drawn, appears in the midst of the satsanga, desperately in need of food, "pity," and "gentleness" (2.7.116, 117). Orlando's experience of the forest as "desert inaccessible" (2.7.109) has been shaped largely by necessity, that is, his desire to care for the aged Adam, whose condition has deteriorated rapidly. The Duke responds to Orlando's "distress" with compassion and hospitality—"Sit down and feed. Welcome to our table" (2.7.91, 104). Orlando is struck by the Duke's "gentleness," his natural kindness, which recalls "better days" of spiritual communion and wise company (2.7.112). The Duke, too, has cherished such memories of "holy bell," "good man's feasts," "sacred pity," and "gentleness" (2.7.120–23).[12] Better days might seem lost to Arden's exiles, yet, in truth, the Duke's forest table has preserved the spiritual essence of the old rituals and virtues. The forest satsanga has established a renewed sense of hospitality, kindness, and fellowship, the "better world" Le Beau expressly wished

[12] Through the lens of Erasmian humanism, Lupton (2022) envisions "Duke Senior and Orlando build[ing] an Erasmian church in the forest through the liturgical repetitions of their speech, countering […] the iconoclasm of Reformation with a renewed potential for grace received through mindful attention to ancient traditions" (578–79).

for back at the corrupt court. With the Duke's welcome, Orlando softens and reveals an innate maternal disposition in harmony with the natural world: "like a doe," he says, "I will go to find my faun | To give him food" (2.7.127–28). The Duke's generous hospitality and magnanimity give Orlando the means to alleviate Adam's suffering—indeed, to save his life.

The plight of Orlando and Adam inspires the Duke to pause for a moment to reflect on the pervasiveness of suffering. Through the ancient topos of *theatrum mundi*, he expresses a capacious empathy:

> Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy.
> This wide and universal theatre
> Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
> Wherein we play in. (2.7.135–38)

The Duke's view subtly reflects the interdependence of all "scenes" in which no being is "all alone unhappy." Compassion would seem to arise naturally from this wise realization. Yet not all members of the Duke's audience respond in such a way. Listening attentively, Jaques picks up immediately as if on cue with the word "play" and plunges into his own elaboration of the life-as-theater topos. He recounts the "seven ages of man" as a samsaric round of existence in which humans have slavish parts to play within their "woeful pageants." In casting humans as "merely players" mindlessly "play[ing] many parts" (2.7.139, 141), Jaques illustrates each age with a stark, unpleasant caricature, which culminates in the age of senility, indignity, and total loss. Notably, Jaques mentions neither women with their life-giving and nurturing functions nor sages with their wisdom. The fifth age is that of the big-bellied, corrupt justice whose sagacity boils down to "wise saws and modern instances" and the sixth age belongs to "the lean and slippered pantaloon," a commedia dell'arte caricature of age (2.7.155, 157). Jaques's bitter reduction of life to actors' stock parts cannot help but suggest how lacking in multi-dimensionality these reified, static portrayals are. Indeed, at just the moment when Jaques envisions the human life cycle dwindling to "mere oblivion" (2.7.164), a robust Orlando enters the stage with Adam on his back, the two characters appearing as if to burst from the seams of Jaques's ill-fitting costumes. The youthful Orlando's loving-kindness and compassion do not belong to the parodic romantic lover who sighs and writes a "woeful ballad | To

his mistress's eyebrow" (2.7.147–48), and old Adam appears as a loving, cared-for elder. Duke Senior, quite unlike the Justice of the fifth age, embodies genuine wisdom and responds with hospitality and care to the needs of his guests.

Surely, though, Jaques's investigative, critical mind seeks precisely the opposite of what he has satirized. Not only does he seek a life beyond subservient bondage to conditioned roles, but secretly, too, he yearns for liberation beyond his self-appointed role of detached cynical observer. Vasistha's teaching on vichara, the inquiring mind, can help us see how Jaques "protects [himself] from the calamities that befall the unthinking fool […]. They in whom the spirit of enquiry is ever awake illumine the world, enlighten all who come in contact with them, dispel the ghosts created by an ignorant mind, and realise the falsity of sense-pleasures and their objects" (1993, 2:14). This inquiring spirit "is the greatest wisdom," Vasistha proclaims (1993, 2:16). Having befriended that gatekeeper to liberation, Jaques is in search of knowledge that will bring contentment. His refusal at the end of the play to join the circle of lovers emblematizes his position as traveler and solitary seeker; he is desirous of staying in the forest to seek an alternative to the sixth and seventh ages he caricatured. Jaques's underlying intent to liberate others from the moral infections and mental suffering of samsara has marked him all along as a spiritual aspirant. Indeed, he realizes that his melancholy is a kind of poison "compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects," which has infected him with "rumination" that "wraps [him] in most humorous sadness" (4.1.15–16, 17–18). Such discontent, as the play demonstrates, has its antidote. The conversions of Frederick and Oliver reveal that the mind is changeable and full of potential and that Jaques's desire to purify the world of its foulness is not without merit. What he lacks is a catalyst, touchstone, or inner fire that will enable spiritual growth through his own purification.

Duke Senior has known all along what Jaques has been unable to perceive. So, too, have Celia and Rosalind, Orlando and the native forest-dweller Corin. They are aware of the "precious jewel in [the toad's] head" (2.1.14), of their innate capacity for positive mind states, such as optimism; they practice virtue, rather than rail against the unvirtuous. To choose the attitude of liberty, a free mind even "content with mine harm," as Corin can claim (3.2.66), is to show courage,

fortitude, and great mental control. Formerly a royal power in charge of a dukedom, Duke Senior now resides in a cave, patient and content, much as the sage Vasistha did above the Ganges in the Himalayas, and as many wandering yogis and wisdom-seekers have in ancient and modern times. The "cave of the heart" (*guha*) is an Upanisadic motif linking literal and figurative abodes where the supreme Self "drinks sweet and bitter | Neither liking this nor disliking that" (*Katha Upanasad* 3:1, see Easwaran 2007b). Celia's greatness of mind lies in a non-dual sense of loving-kindness: "Thou and I are one," she says to Rosalind (1.3.91). Willing to sacrifice her inheritance and royal social position for love of her cousin, she has found the precious jewel in adversity, and it is made of a constellation of virtues.

Most importantly, the spiritual vision of *As You Like It* extends to all humans, including Oliver and Frederick, showing how buddha-nature or atman are endowments of the mind. While suffering and poisonous passions are conditioned, as Hindus and Buddhists would say, liberation is an unconditioned state of well-being arising directly out of one's nature. By act four, Oliver's mental condition of suffering and the consequences of keeping bad company are made manifest when he finds himself "wretched" in a "desert place" (4.3.105, 140). Misfortune strikes suddenly when Duke Frederick seizes Oliver's property and banishes him from home until he is able to return Orlando to court. Oliver goes forth into the forest as his brother had, yet blindly, ignorant of who he is and what he truly seeks. In time he becomes "a wretched, ragged old man, o'ergrown with hair" (4.3.105). He tells the wondrous story to Rosalind and Celia of what happened to him while he lay asleep "[u]nder an old oak, whose boughs were mossed with age | And high top bald with dry antiquity" (4.3.103–5). Recalling earlier scenes with Jaques and the Duke, Oliver's position beneath an old tree serves as an emblem of his proximity to the seat of ancient wisdom. While he is unconscious, a snake has wreathed himself about Oliver's neck, preparing to enter his mouth. This image is reminiscent of Vasistha's motif of the "deadly serpent known as ignorant life," which "gives rise to interminable suffering" (1993, 2:12). Manifesting as a threatening snake, this ignorance (*avidya*) is warded off by an encounter with Orlando. However, a lioness lies in wait to attack Oliver, and when Orlando sees her in the vicinity of his sleeping brother, he feels momentarily moved to abandon him

to a terrible fate. Yet the jewels of bodhicitta and loving-kindness shine more brightly than the instinct to revenge—"kindness, nobler ever than revenge, | And nature, stronger than his just occasion, | Made him give battle to the lioness" (4.3.127–29). Like his defeat of the court wrestler, Orlando's triumph over the lioness is wondrous. In wrestling a predator, Orlando symbolically conquers afflictions that attack the morally undisciplined mind, both his brother's and his own. His kind response to the suffering of his enemy brother is *dharmic* (a law of nature) and magnanimous, resonating with the Buddha's words in the *Dhammapada*: "'He was angry with me, he attacked me, he defeated | me, he robbed me'—those who do not dwell on | such thoughts will surely become free from hatred. || For hatred can never put an end to hatred; | love alone can. This is an unalterable law" (Easwaran 2007a, 1:4–5).

Oliver's worldly losses and lonely decline in the forest lead to disillusionment with samsara. A softening of heart and change of mind become the next steps towards liberation. In his exclamation, "From miserable slumber I awaked" (4.3.131), the allegorical dimension of spiritual awakening is unmistakable, and at its root lies Orlando's act of loving-kindness. What Oliver experiences when his brother saves his life is the liberating effect of Orlando's virtue, his buddha-nature, which causes the spontaneous arising of his own innate goodness. He becomes aware of his former ill-will and envy as "unnatural"—"For well I know he was unnatural" (4.3.123), he acknowledges to Rosalind and Celia. With the grammar of conversion, he attests to the visceral sweetness of moral change: "'Twas I but 'tis not I. I do not shame | To tell you what I was, since my conversion | So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am" (4.3.134–36). Far from the "butchery" household of his own making, the welcoming abode of the forest world is where Oliver finds a reliable refuge. Given the causes and conditions of the forest, kindness and kinship are given a space in which their natural expression can arise and be efficacious.

## "True contents": Spiritual at-onement in the forest

> Then is there mirth in heaven
> When earthly things made even
> Atone together […].

> Peace, ho, I bar confusion.
> 'Tis I must make conclusion
> Of these most strange events […].
> If truth holds true contents.
> (*As You Like It,* 5.4.97–99, 114–16, 119)

The inhabitants of Arden ultimately seek the sweetness of "true contents." Celia's words, "now go we in content | To liberty, and not to banishment" (1.3.131–32), sound a high note of optimism for Arden as a refuge where the causes and conditions of liberation can be found for Rosalind and herself. Arden, as it turns out, facilitates spiritual growth and conversion for all who aspire to that height of human potential. The Duke's satsanga is revealed onstage immediately following Celia's words, displaying how her faith is not misplaced and finds a touchstone in a hospitable forest community dedicated to the virtues of the good life. But there is more wise company to be found in Arden, which becomes evident late in the comedy when atonement and conversion mark the paths of those who have neglected spiritual matters and failed to practice communal virtues. This proves true not only for Oliver. When Duke Frederick enters the forest with an army, intending fratricidal violence, he violates the ancient reverence for the forest as a place of peace (aranya). An encounter with "an old religious man" on "the skirts of this wild wood" (5.4.149, 148), however, changes his intention and his moral disposition. The presence of a religious man in a forest resonates with the Hindu vision of forest as tapovana, an area, as Ranchor Prime explains, "specifically set aside as a place for the practice of religion. Why should a forest be required for religion?" Prime asks, and elucidates by observing how *tapas* "means penance" (1992, 12), which ancient Vedic wisdom emphasized as necessary for spiritual purification and growth.

> The life of a *rishi*, a holy person, is meant to be one of self-control and penance, through diet, simple living, renunciation of belongings and meditation. The rishi must live in a place which is apart from the bustle and passion of worldly life, a place pervaded with the presence of God […]. If one wished to meet with such advanced souls one had to go to the forest where their *ashrams*, or hermitages, could be found. (1992, 12)

Now "apart from the bustle and passion of worldly life," Frederick pauses to question a holy man, whose answers to life's great questions,

one must imagine, inspire his conversion "[b]oth from his enterprise and from the world" (5.4.151). Shakespeare reveals the profound and spiritually beneficial effects of the forest environment with religious inhabitants who have the power to move the heart of even a morally hardened worldly ruler. Frederick's conversion is surely a sign of the human potential to reorient or conclude life's journey as a going forth in the religious sense to seek liberation from samsara.

Duke Frederick's striking conversion "from the world" is not lost on Jaques, who has "thrown into neglect" (5.4.171) his own worldly affairs to travel an ancient wisdom path, though he has yet to savor its fruit. Jaques's libertinism has been an obstacle and satirical melancholy a bitter physic on the spiritual path. Tapas is what he lacks, both in its penitential aspect but also in its creative fire of austerity and ardent, single-focused, self-transcending energy. He questions Jaques de Boyes, who had told the conversion story, and, when the truth of it is confirmed, he makes a decision: "To him will I. Out of these convertites | there is much matter to be heard and learned" (5.4.173–74). He desires the "matter" of wisdom and has hope in the instruction of converts and holy men. He will seek a "nook […] monastic" (3.2.376) in Duke Senior's "abandoned cave" (5.4.185) and stay in the tapovana. In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*Undertaking the Path to Awakening*), the learned Indian monk Śāntideva wrote of the intense spiritual yearning experienced by those who desire to become enlightened. One must "renounce the world," he counseled, and "follow the solitary life, which is delightful and free from strife, leading to the auspicious and calming all distractions" (1995, 8:2, 38).[13] He described how those who seek liberation make their home "at the foot of a tree, or in caves," to "dwell in vast regions owned by none, in their natural state" (1995, 8:27, 28). The convert's experience offers the promise of an antidote to Jaques's suffering and a liberating nectar that will turn his bitter words to sweet medicine. As Todd Borlik writes, "one must imagine Jaques happy. Or to use the more nuanced word the play prefers, 'content'" (forthcoming, n.p.). Already, in the play's final moments, Jaques speaks more freely and magnanimously and, in his leave-taking, gives blessings to others, including Duke Senior.

[13] Śāntideva (c. 685–763 CE) was a Buddhist scholar and monk associated with the monastic university of Nalanda in North India, where he composed the *Bodhicaryāvatāra.* This influential text is considered a great work of world spirituality.

The "[l]ast scene of all, | That ends this [wondrous], eventful history" (2.7.162–63) is a gorgeous celebratory one, archaic, festive, pastoral, and ecumenical all at once. Shakespeare's stage becomes a gracious srivana, the forest space of groves and orchards reserved for festivals and feasts, where the audience witnesses the beautiful, harmonious ends of virtue expressed through matrimony and monasticism (Prasad 2018, 6; Lupton 2022, 569–70). The appearance of Hymen brings a god to Earth to make good the fulfillment of spiritual aspirations in the human community. The comedy's vision of life is, finally, religious in its ancient sense of at-oneness (atonement, union in harmony) and in the Eastern sense of Ultimate Reality and transcendence of suffering. Hymen's words deepen this sense of atonement and sacredness in the forest world. Hymen "from heaven brought [Rosalind]" (5.4.101), unveiling how divine love permeates the human sphere. The spiritual atmosphere harmonizes and lightens into what Hindus might perceive as *lila*, or divine "play," a theological expression of God's "free and joyous creativity" in the world which inspires "a spirit of religious wonder" (Hein 1995, 13, 15). As a departure from Duke Senior's and Jaques's visions of *theatrum mundi*, this moment in *As You Like It* resonates with Hindu devotional practices in which the world is regarded as a divine stage with human actors playing transcendent roles in at-onement with the gods.

The Anglo-Norman and Latin roots of *religion,* as indicated in the *OED*, reveal the nature of what is being staged in this final scene: reverence and awe of the gods; performance of a religious rite; respect for what is sacred; a monastic community. The loving bonds of couples in marriages overseen by a god, the Duke's universal love, the conversion of Frederick to a "religious life" and Oliver to loving-kindness and virtue, Jaques's yearning for spiritual knowledge and the monastic life—all human aspirations unite harmoniously in shared optimism. Like spiritual seekers who dwelt in forest ashrams, the tapovana of the Upanisad sages, the parks and forest groves of the Buddha and other Indian wisdom teachers, Shakespeare's characters have gone forth in both geographic and spiritual senses. The Hindu concept of the whole world as forest, resonant with the ancient Greek idea of Earth as breathing organism, biosphere, and soul, reveals how Arden functions as an eco-religious green space of human and natural prosperity. Duke Senior, Rosalind, and Orlando will return to the urban world, resume lives as householders and rulers; their

capacity to transform harsh realities into tranquility and contentment and their predisposition to patience and loving-kindness bode well for a sustained sense of the entwinement of human, natural, and sacred realms, of the "forest world" as image of the entire world. Jaques, Frederick, Oliver, Celia, and Touchstone will remain in Arden, where we can imagine their continued pursuit of contentment in contemplative and agrarian communities.

## Epilogue

Viewing *As You Like It* through the glass of Indian wisdom traditions offers readers and audiences today a fresh encounter with Shakespeare that acknowledges his ecumenical spirit and global presence. Ancient Eastern spiritual tropes and motifs commonly found in religious literature lend new life and rich value to Shakespeare's comedy, rendering it a drama of spiritual aspiration and at-onement. The archetypal patterns of going forth, taking refuge, and befriending spiritual gatekeepers map onto the characters' journeys and experiences in morally productive ways. The Hindu and Buddhist metaphors of forest, tree, cave, and jewel illuminate spiritual locales and attitudes that have a surprising affinity with Shakespeare's store of motifs. The ancient Indian image of world as forest, which for today's audiences bespeaks ecological preservation and cultivation rather than harmful destruction and depletion of natural resources, in *As You Like It* appears as a capacious refuge where harmony, wisdom, and virtue can be cultivated. Within the forest, the symbolically rich tree, rooted deeply in the earth and branching over the spiritual community, integrates human, natural, and spiritual realms. The repeated image of wisdom-seekers under trees in Shakespeare's play recalls the Indian spiritual tradition of forest-dwelling. The cave, too, is an ancient abode for sages where peace and tranquil self-reflection dissolve the ego's attachments. With the mention of the Duke's mysterious cave, unseen yet invoked as a site of contemplative conversation, the audience has a sense of inner sanctuaries within the forest. Finally, the jewel as a motif of virtue's medicinal quality pictured by the Duke in the ugly toad's head figures how humans find positive inner resources to transmute and overcome negative passions and discontent. Ancient Indian wisdom not only illuminates Shakespeare's sublime comedic vision of love, contentment, and

liberation, but, strikingly, it offers to our contemporary world in crisis an understanding of how Shakespeare imagined with great optimism the virtuous qualities and spiritual reserves we humans and humanists need now more than ever to survive and flourish as a species in fellowship with each other, nature, and the cosmos.

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