

The Buddhist Conception of an Ecological Self

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Traditional Buddhist sources have little to say about Nature in the often abstract and romanticized sense in which we use the word today, and still less to say about ecology understood in contemporary scientific terms. Why then is there so much interest in Buddhism among environmental ethicists and activists? And why so much concern for environmentalism among contemporary Buddhists both Asian and Western? In the latter half of the twentieth century the problem of environmental degradation has become increasingly the focus of both philosophers and theologians, many of whom see in this particular manifestation of human delusion a crisis more ethical and spiritual than technological.¹ As we in the West re-examine our own religious and philosophical traditions, seeking both an etiology and a solution to the current predicament, it is hardly surprising that many have sought to mine the traditions of Asia to see what alternative perspectives they might offer.² Buddhism has provided this quest with a particularly rich, if sometimes ambivalent vein of reflections and values, expressing a fundamental attitude of compassion and non-injury, yet also a seemingly anthropocentric perspective in its valorization of human consciousness as a necessary requisite for the universal goal of enlightenment.³ Clearly Buddhism offers a different approach to the environmental problem, and we – Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike – have only begun to fully appreciate what this tradition can add to current efforts to transform our attitudes towards the world in which we live.

[168] Previous expositions of the place of nature and environmental concern within Buddhism have most often sought to compile appropriate passages from the canonical literature and to document environmentally sensitive practices and institutions within the tradition, both historical and contemporary. Some have further sought to extrapolate from these sources a Buddhist environmental ethic.⁴ My approach here will be different. Rather than to reiterate the now readily available data on traditional Buddhist attitudes towards nature, what I shall undertake in this chapter is an examination of how a cluster of key assumptions shape Buddhist perceptions of nature and ecology at the most fundamental level. I shall argue, moreover, that both the role and the outcome of these axiomatic assumptions in shaping Buddhist attitudes is particularly easy to overlook precisely because they are assumptions radically contrary to those we take for granted in the West.

While recognizing that the traditional sources do report a number of distinctly Buddhist attitudes that bear on the topics of nature and ecology, I feel these attitudes can only be properly understood when they are considered within the context of Buddhist notions of the self and its relation to the rest of existence. We shall see that these basic notions in Buddhism differ significantly from our own Western presuppositions regarding the self and that this difference has significant implications for how Buddhists will approach the topics of nature and ecology. This difference of assumptions is so basic in fact, that the respective presuppositions on both sides of the cultural divide tend to remain virtually invisible to the other, precisely because they remain largely unconscious. For Westerners seeking to understand traditional Buddhist attitudes towards nature, and also for contemporary Asian Buddhists seeking to articulate a Dharmic perspective in inter-faith discussions of environmental ethics, it is thus crucial to appreciate more fully just how differently the two cultural traditions have constructed their respective notions of the self and its relation to the world.⁵

THE BUDDHIST CONCEPTION OF THE SELF

Western thought and Western ethical theories in particular have tended to begin with some notion of the person as an autonomous, rational individual. The first thing to note about the Buddhist conception of ethical agency is that [169] it posits a notion of the self that is both dynamic and developmental. Taken together these key features of Buddhist thought present a radically different notion of the ethical self, one that challenges Western assumptions of both rationality and autonomy. Buddhist ethics and soteriology do indeed require a significant integrity or coherence of personal identity, yet that identity or individuality of the self is seen as a dynamic karmic continuity rather than as an essential ontological substantiality – as an ongoing *process* rather than an underlying *thing*. And this dynamic nature of the self is seen, moreover, as significantly teleological or developmental, in that it includes the potential for (and perhaps even inevitability of) change directed towards a distinct transformative goal, one with both soteriological and ethical dimensions.⁶ The Buddha was much more concerned to characterize the nature of the self in terms of its end or purpose than in terms of its original cause, seeing the latter question as one of those “unanswerable” (*avyākṛta*) questions that are not conducive to the task at hand, namely the realization of one’s potential for enlightenment and the elimination of suffering. Both these features of the Buddhist conception of the self, the dynamic and the developmental, have significant implications for the relationship of that self to the rest of existence including nature and the environment. But before considering these implications, we must first explore more carefully how Buddhists have traditionally framed their understanding of the self.

Perhaps the single most distinctive and radical of the Buddha’s teachings was the notion of the non-substantiality of the self, the doctrine referred to in the Pali scriptures is *anattā* (Sanskrit: *anātman*) and usually rendered in English as the view of “no-self” or “non-self”.⁷ As an corollary of the principle of conditionality (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and as one of the three marks of samsaric existence (along with impermanence and unsatisfactoriness), the doctrine of the nonsubstantiality of the self lies at the very of heart of the Dharma. With the emergence of modern scientific notions of change and indeterminacy it is easy to loose sight of just how radical this idea would have seemed in the Buddha’s day. The notion of an essential, enduring, and immutable “self” (*ātman* or *jīva*) lying at the core of personal identity was one of the central themes of the diverse Upanishadic speculations characteristic of the Age of the Wanderers into which the Buddha was born.⁸ While other thinkers of this period also [170] challenged the notion of an essential or substantial self, the Buddha’s rejection of an *ātman* was unique in that, unlike the skeptics and materialists of his day, he simultaneously maintained a notion of ethical or karmic continuity, one that persisted not just throughout the life of the individual, but over multiple lifetimes as well. Indeed the Buddha went so far as to assert that his notion of “no-self” was actually necessary to sustain any theory of ethical continuity and efficacy over time. But how then was this continuity to be secured? How could actions performed in the past effect consequences at some point in the future?

Those among the Buddha’s contemporaries who accepted the continuity of karmic efficacy over time felt that it would be quite impossible without a substantial and immutable essence or *ātman* to which the karmic accretions could accrue. If there was no *ātman*, they reasoned, there was nothing that would hold together the series of lives (or even moments within a life for that matter). There would be literally nothing to be “reincarnated”, nothing that could carry the karmic impurities from one embodiment to the next. The coherence or integrity of personal identity over time would, they argued, fall apart just as a necklace of pearls would scatter across the floor if one removed the string (i.e., the *ātman*) that linked together all the separate parts. And not only was any

theory of ethical justice, of karmic reward and retribution, at stake – without a secure basis for karma, the whole soteric enterprise would be meaningless as well. For the future liberative outcome of one's present spiritual practice would not be secure. Nothing would guarantee that the positive benefits of spiritual practice performed today would accrue to the *same* individual later, within the same or subsequent lifetimes.

Among the various new soteriologies emerging during the Age of the Wanderers, the necessity of some *ātman*-like essence or soul was a virtually ubiquitous assumption. Yet the Buddha asserted that the supposition of such a notion of essential self-hood was as false as it was unnecessary. He did indeed recognize the necessity of securing the integrity of karmic efficacy, but he felt that positing an essential *ātman* was too high a price to ensure the continuity of the self, a price not only unwarranted, but even detrimental to attaining the soteric goal as he understood it. The liberation he had realized was, in his view, so utterly transformative, that it could only be obstructed by [171] clinging to any view of a “self”, especially one that posited a core or essence that was not subject to change – and hence not subject to transformation. The integrity of personal identity and of ethical efficacy, required not some substantial permanence, he asserted, but only the continuity of the karmic conditioning itself. Herein lies the crux of the Buddhist conception of the self, and we can understand the Buddhist notion of how the self is related to its environment only if we fully appreciate the implications of this conception of the self.

What then constitutes “personal identity”, if not some essential self or *ātman*? In the Buddhist view, the self is nothing more or less than the dynamic aggregation of a bundle of interrelated causal processes. This aggregation was variously analyzed, most simply into its basic psycho-physiological polarity (*nāma-rūpa*), and that in turn was further analyzed into the five parallel processes of physiological form (*rūpa*), karmic formations (*saṃskāra*), cognition (*saṃjñā*), feeling (*vedanā*) and discriminative perception (*viññāna*). Later Buddhists in the Abhidharmic tradition carried the analysis still further, eventually recognizing 75, 85 or even 101 principal components of the process conventionally designated as “the self”. It is important to stress that the point of this analytic Abhidharmic enterprise was much more soteric or therapeutic than descriptive. It was *systematic* but not scientific, in that its primary objective was to deconstruct all clinging to any false essentialist conception of the self, and not to exhaustively catalog all possible elements of existence. The transformative spiritual value of the analysis was seen to lie, in other words, not in the resulting products of the analysis but rather in the analytic process itself, in its salutary effect on the human tendency to cling to a substantial rather than dynamic notion of personal identity.

Of the various constituent processes making up the self, the karmic “formations” or predispositions are of the greatest ethical interest. These were identified the latent or unconscious tendencies (*bīja* or *vāsanā*) laid down as patterns of habituation through the performance of action (*karman*), actions not just of the body, but of speech and mind as well. Arising thus from previous activity, this karmic conditioning in turn shapes future actions, and these conditioning forces or energy patterns are not only multiple but of varying direction and intensity. We are, in this view, quite literally the (ever changing) [172] sum of our habits. Or we might imagine the self as an extremely complex vector problem, the sort of mathematical exercise where one must identify both the direction and the velocity of different forces operating on an object in order to determine its trajectory from that point forward. In the Buddhist conception of the self, the particular ethical tendency or force of each of the currents of karmic conditioning is playing itself out, influencing and being influenced by each of the others. The self is thus a complicated and ongoing interactive process, the immediate configuration of which determines the overall trajectory of the being, a trajectory that is constantly being altered as each moment brings a new equation of interacting

conditionings – some newly created through current activity, others carrying over as the continuing influence of previous actions. But does this conception of the self allow any degree of choice or creativity? Obviously one's response in any given situation must be strongly shaped, indeed determined, by those very patterns of habituation that are the sum of one's identity. Where is there opportunity for any new input, for any new departure seeking to break out the well-worn ruts of previous habituation?

Prior to reaching the goal of enlightenment, the range of possibilities available to a given individual in any given moment *is* significantly restricted or determined—this is precisely point of the Buddhist conception of liberation. Enlightenment is not just *freedom from* suffering; it is *freedom to* act in a creative, compassionate manner, unlimited by the constraints of prior delusion in the form of conditioned reactivity linked to a false and overly self-referential conception of personal identity. But just as the rejection of the *ātman* threatened to undermine karmic efficacy, this non-substantial and dynamic conception of the self seems to allow no opportunity for transformation once the karmic patterns have been established. Once the ruts are set, how is one to break out? Here we encounter another axiomatic assumption of Buddhism, one so fundamental and unquestioned that it is made explicit only in response to later criticism from outside the tradition. The potential for enlightenment is seen as itself part of the karmic conditioning of all beings. Within the *saṃskāras* that constitute one's identity are also certain tendencies conducive of liberation and enlightenment, not just those that tend towards perpetuating the bondage of greed, hatred and delusion. Indeed among these [173] ethically and soterically positive conditionings is the possibility of volitional choice itself (*cetanā*), a karmic formation that emerges in all beings quite naturally once sentience or consciousness is sufficiently developed to sustain that particular degree of self-conscious awareness. These positive conditionings or “wholesome roots” (*kusalāni mūlāni*) as they were known in the early tradition are subsequently referred to in the Mahayana as one's Buddha Nature or as the “embryo” of enlightenment (*tathāgata-garbha*). We can thus see that the Buddhist understanding of basic human nature is thus profoundly optimistic, even as it stresses just how deeply rooted the inclinations of ignorance and craving tend to be. While a volutaristic effort is indeed necessary before the potential for enlightenment is actually realized, beings have *by nature* both the impetus and the latent “roots” that will eventual yield the flower of liberation.⁹

While these latent positive tendencies do constitute the *potential* for enlightenment, and while they are considered part of the karmically conditioned endowment of all beings, they must nonetheless be actively cultivated. They must become fully developed before the enlightenment will actually be realized. And this process of cultivation and development is itself part of the on-going process of conditioning and re-conditioning that constitutes the “individual”. In the last section of this chapter we shall look at some various formulations of the *praxis* the early Buddhists advocated for realizing the goal of enlightenment or liberation. For now it will suffice to point out that this *praxis* is perhaps best understood as a process of cultivating those specific karmic patterns that manifest as a particular set of virtues both cognitive and affective, areteic qualities such as wisdom and compassion associated with the enactment of enlightened awareness.

Buddhist soteriology thus manifests many features of an Aristotelian virtue ethic, but with one significant difference.¹⁰ Since the basic nature of the self is dynamic rather than substantially fixed or given, the *telos* towards which the Buddhist develops, indeed the *logos* which he or she eventually realizes is something that must be cultivated or developed. And this process of development extends beyond one's immediate existence as a human self. Unlike the substantialist notion of personal identity deriving from both the Judeo-Christian and Greek roots of Western thought, the Buddhist self is seeking to [174] realize a set of virtues that are not understood as

innately given human qualities. They are qualities potential in our very sentience, yet they are neither *given* nor *human*. They are “trans-human” potentialities and in actualizing them one must go beyond the very “[h]umanness” of one’s sense of identity. Human beings are thus “half-baked beings” as it were, beings who have made significant progress in cultivating and refining their basic sentience into progressively higher degrees of awareness, yet beings that have some way to go nonetheless. Through this *praxis* of cultivating the perfections of the enlightened being, the *arhat* or *buddha*, the human Buddhist is moving well beyond what it is simply to be human, just as he or she began that process well short of what it is to be human. There is a clear ontological continuity from human to buddha, indeed from banana slug to buddha – certainly no discontinuity of the degree that distinguishes the Creator from the created. It is in this sense buddhahood is seen as “trans-human”, as a manner of being that takes one well beyond the status of “human being”.¹¹

We must now explore yet another closely related assumption, the notion that the potential for enlightenment is characteristic not just of humans, but of all sentient beings, the view that the eighth-century Buddhist poet Shantideva expresses with the poignant assertion that:

Even those who are were gnats, mosquitoes, wasps, and worms, have reached the highest Awakening, hard to reach, through the strength of their exertion.¹²

This assertion of a cosmic “principle of self-transcendence” as the contemporary Buddhist philosopher Sangharakshita has termed it is one that might well be challenged, to be sure, yet it is one that has remained axiomatic throughout the history of Buddhism.¹³ Once we see that Buddhahood is the teleological goal, not just of human existence, but of all sentient existence, we begin to see that the “human self” must be viewed in a much broader perspective. Not only must it be seen as dynamic and developmental; it is by its very nature a being – or rather a *becoming* – that is thus fundamentally trans-human. And it is only when seen in this broader context that the radical difference between Buddhist and Western views of the self begins to fully emerge. [175]

THE COSMOLOGICAL CONTEXT

While it was necessary to begin with the Buddhist conception of personal or individual identity, we must now consider the broader cosmological stage upon which the drama of the dynamic and developmental self is played out, for it is this context that brings out the trans-human nature of the self that lies at the heart of this tradition. As part of the emerging Shramanic culture of the Age of the Wanders, the early Buddhists accepted the notion of a samsaric cycle of repeated death and rebirth, with the particular form of life one experiences in a given lifetime determined by one’s actions. Buddhism stressed in particular two significant extentions of this view: the emphasis on intention in determining the ethical or karmic significance of actions, which we considered above, and the assertion that the ultimate goal of life lay outside the samsaric cycle entirely, which we take up now.

The Buddhists agreed with other contemporary teachings in seeing life as a kind cosmic “snakes and ladders” game in which one could, through one’s actions, move both up and down a hierarchy of interrelated samsaric life-forms. In its Buddhist presentation this taxonomy of possible forms of life is basically sixfold, although a rich variety of sub-species are recognized as well.¹⁴ One may, in this view, exist as a being suffering the torments of a hellish existence, or as a being of unquenchable craving, as an animal, as a human, as a titan or jealous, warring god, or as a blissful god, one of the “shining ones”. Whereas the Buddha’s contemporaries within the Brahmanic tradition tended to see existence as an immortal god or deva as the pinnacle of existence, the goal of

all religious observance, the Buddha differed, seeing this divine existence as still subject to the same limitations as all forms of conditioned samsaric life, even though it was more pleasant and long-lasting. The gods were thus not seen as immortal, as no longer subject to the delusion and suffering of samsaric existence. Only the realization of nirvana or enlightenment would permanently free one from bondage of ignorance and craving. All of life then was seen as an on-going quest to improve one's lot within samsaric existence, to the point at which one had sufficient insight into the nature of existence to break out of the cycle altogether to become not a god, but a liberated one, either an arhat or a buddha.

[176] Quite explicit in the Buddhist conception of the taxonomy of life-forms is the notion of a qualitative hierarchy of "interpermeable" life-forms. We must be careful not to misunderstand this classification as a taxonomy of essentially different biological species. What the different life-forms specify is better understood as different points along a continuous line charting the complexification of awareness, awareness expressing itself in different forms of life according to its relative development. Contrary to the taxonomic principles of biological science, the number of different forms is, in this case, a somewhat arbitrary, if pragmatic, division of what is in fact seen as an essentially unbroken continuum. One might even say that ultimately there are thus as many different "life-forms" or "species" as there are individual karmic streams, since each individual "stream" of karmic conditioning does differ in some way. But each of these karmic streams also shares a significant number of features and tendencies with beings of similar conditioning from the past, and in this sense it was appropriate to specify the six broad divisions recognized by the tradition.

What differentiates the various life-forms in this classification is not their absolute biological difference, but rather their relative capacity for sentience, and that capacity develops as the individual being succeeds in moving up the ladder of existence. Sentience here is understood quite basically as the ability to experience suffering and conversely the potential eventually to manifest enlightened consciousness, these two being seen as simply different degrees of the same capacity. Over the course of multiple lifetimes beings thus could, and inevitably would, make their way repeatedly up and down this continuum of life-forms, gaining their next rebirth at a level corresponding to the specific configuration of the karmic conditionings they had assembled—not just in their most recent existence, but in prior existences as well. It is thus not at all inaccurate to describe this system as a Buddhist theory of evolution, as long as we are careful to not to overlook how it differs significantly from the currently prevailing views of biological evolution in the West.¹⁵ While Buddhism recognizes a hierarchy of biological complexification at the level of species, its evolutionary interests focus ultimately on the individual, that is to say on the separate karmic life streams that make their way up the ladder of sentience to reach the point where enlightenment and liberation from the cycle become possible. This process is not only teleological (though not theistic) in a way [177] that most evolutionary biologists would reject, it locates the significant development in awareness or consciousness rather than in biological structure, although the latter are seen as evolutionary expressions of the developing consciousness.¹⁶

THE BUDDHIST SELF IN NATURE

We have considered the philosophical and cosmological aspects of the Buddhist sense of self, seeing that individual identity is perceived as a dynamic and developmental stream of karmic conditioning persisting over multiple lifetimes during which the individual may have existed not only as a human but as other life-forms as well. Before we can appreciate the implications of this

view with respect to environmental ethics and practice, we need to consider at least briefly the manner in which it differs from our own cultural assumptions regarding the self and personal identity. Western culture is woven of an extremely complex mixture of different and often conflicting strands, some Middle Eastern in origin, others Hellenic, some traditional and religious, other contemporary and scientific. Viewed with Buddhist eyes, however, one significant and consistent feature of the Western conception of the self stands out. Indeed it is one we should recognize as one of the few features common to both the traditional Judeo-Christian worldview and that of the modern science. Although both sides of this fundamental cultural divide in the West would frame their respective conceptions of it in quite different and even antagonistic terms, there is indeed one crucial point on which they are in basic agreement, a point so basic to Western culture, in fact, that it is virtually invisible to us until highlighted against the backdrop of a radically different set of assumptions of the sort we have considered above.

In the West, whether seen in religious or scientific terms, what most constitutes the nature of the self is its very specificity, usually understood as a species-specificity. We are what we are – humans, wolves, banana slugs or mosquitos – and that we shall remain for the whole of our existence, whether that be for all of eternity in the religious view, or simply until we die according to the scientific perspective. It may seem overly simplistic to point out such a basic fact, yet precisely because this view of the nature of the self is so axiomatic we fail to see how much it shapes the attitudes we have towards [178] each other, towards our fellow beings, and towards our environment. Hence the importance of clearly identifying the striking contrast in the Buddhist conception of the personal identity and continuity – not just so that we understand Buddhism more accurately, but also because we may, in the process, come to a more accurate understanding of our own cultural roots as well.

My thesis regarding Buddhist attitudes towards nature and the environment is based on the premise that our relationships with other beings, especially those of other species, are significantly shaped by the understanding of personal identity that we bring to those relationships. With a conception of personal identity that is fundamentally trans-human, Buddhists have traditionally shaped the problem of inter-species relationships in quite different terms, and as a result we should expect traditional Buddhist environmental ethics to look quite different from its counterpart in the West. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the Western side of this comparison, one brief example of a central theme in Western environmental ethics will help us see the contrast more clearly. Consider the place of “rights” in contemporary discussions of environmental ethics. One major strand of contemporary environmental philosophy seeks to secure moral consideration for other species and eventually for eco-systems as a whole through the extension of the concept of individual rights. Problems arise for this effort because the notion of rights has been historically linked with notions of human responsibility and duty, capacities which other species are not seen to share. One solution is to assert the notion of a “right” to moral consideration tied not to the capacity for an anthropocentric concept of responsibility, but rather to a notion of “intrinsic value”, an attribute shared by all beings regardless of their species. Both these notions of rights and values, along with their concomitant problems, arise from the same distinctly Western notion of a permanently fixed sense of selfhood, one in which autonomous selves are seen to possess rights and values that must be secured and even protected from the self-interests of other autonomous individuals, whether within one’s own species or across the species line. And even if the rights of others (individuals or species) are successfully and convincingly negotiated, the question remains of how to change established behavior patterns that are in conflict with the newly defined rights. And this problem of changing existing behavioral conditioning is all [179] the more intractable if that

conditioning itself is tied to the axiomatic assumption of a fixed (and species-specific) self seeking to preserve its own rights. Any ecological perspective grounded in this set of assumptions will result in an adversarial compromise at best, one that will have to be enforced at every point that it runs contrary to the perceived self-interests of the dominant individual.

The traditional Buddhist approach to recognizing moral consideration for other individuals will necessarily proceed quite differently, whether that consideration is extended to other humans or to other species.¹⁷ Rather than reifying the prevailing sense of an autonomous self-interested individual with its complement of rights, Buddhism seeks to transform the very way which the individual conceives of himself. Traditionally, Buddhist “environmental ethics” has thus been less a matter identifying and securing rights. Rather it has been much more a matter of undertaking a practice of affirming and eventually realizing the trans-human potential for enlightenment. Based as it is in cultivating an ever deeper insight into the trans-species mutuality of sentience and hence potential for enlightenment, Buddhist practice can only express itself as a compassionate, environmental sustaining altruism. Shantideva expresses this eloquently:

Just as the body, with its many parts from division into hands and other limbs, should be protected as a single entity, so too should this entire world which is divided [into parts], yet not divided in its nature to suffer and be happy. . . .

I should dispel the suffering of others because it is suffering like my own suffering. I should help others too because of their nature as beings, which is like my own being.¹⁸

To do otherwise, he aptly concludes, would be like refusing to use one’s hand to remove the thorn in one’s foot, because the pain of the foot is not the pain of the hand.

TRADITIONAL BUDDHIST PRAXIS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

It has become commonplace to assert that Buddhism locates the individual in profound inter-relationship with the rest of sentient existence, and ultimately [180] with all of the ecosphere. Most frequently this is argued rather vaguely as an extension of the first Buddhist ethical precept of non-injury or, in a philosophically more sophisticated manner, as an implication of the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness understood as a variety of non-dualism that entails compassionate activity towards all other beings (and the environment that sustains them). This understanding of the emptiness doctrine asserts that, if all things are seen as empty of intrinsic existence, then all things must be seen as interrelated, and the only possible course of action becomes one that seeks to compassionately sustain all of existence.¹⁹ What is often not adequately noted is the fact that this Mahayana notion of inter-relatedness is simply the logical development of the basic Buddhist principle of conditionality, the same principle that underlies the non-substantiality of the self and the interrelatedness of the different life-forms as depicted in Buddhist cosmology. While it is quite appropriate to note the extent to which the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness is useful for bringing out the compassionate dimension of both the practice and the goal of Buddhism, it is important to note simultaneously the extent to which this Mahayana position is continuous with the basic Buddhist doctrines illustrated in the “cosmic snakes and ladders game” of the samsaric cycle of existence.

Failing to acknowledge this continuity results in a lop-sided view of Buddhism, one that obscures the developmental dimension of the tradition. If contemporary Buddhists seek only to affirm inter-relatedness as a traditional expression of the contemporary ecological perspective, then the real contribution that Buddhism might make to cross-cultural and inter-faith discussions of

environmental ethics will be lost.²⁰ Turning to Buddhism simply as a traditional sanction for an already scientifically established ecological perspective on our problems adds little to what we already have. What is needed is not another affirmation of ecology but rather an actual method for developing an ecological sensibility and then expressing that sensibility in practice. This Buddhism offers, but only to the extent that we recognize that the Buddhist affirmation of interrelatedness is deeply embedded in a comprehensive developmental path or virtue tradition, one that seeks nothing less than the radical transformation of the typically human conception of self and self-interest.

[181] What then is this praxis by which Buddhists have sought to express their conception of the self-in-relation to the rest of existence? Having noted the fundamentally different concept of a substantial self with which Western traditions have approached the problem of environmental degradation, we should note before continuing that the Buddhists were quite aware of how commonly human action arises from such a substantialist notion of self and personal identity. From the Buddhist perspective, we are dealing not just with a cultural difference, but more deeply with the nature of human delusion itself. Substantialist notions of the self are not simply a cultural option as it were, but a distinctive stage in the development of awareness itself, a stage still well short of the enlightened and compassionate ethical sensibility that Buddhism sees as the goal. While substantialist views of the self are seen thus to be characteristic of all human culture, they represent in the Buddhist view the very problem itself, the obstacle that obstructs a life of liberated, compassionate activity. The Buddha diagnosed the human predicament as suffering arising from a such views of the self, self-views born of ignorance and expressed as insatiable craving. That being the diagnosis, the therapy he advocated involved nothing short of a fundamental reconceptualization of the self, one effected by the cultivation of a variety of virtues that cumulatively would overcome the conditioning of the false self-view at the deepest levels of one's being. It is important to note, moreover, that the problem of an overly fixed self-view was seen as both cognitive and affective, as a malfunction of both reason and emotion, a delusion that could be addressed only through a systematic program of transforming or developing both heart and mind. The actual course of this Buddhist practice was variously mapped by the Buddha himself and further elaborated by generations of subsequent Buddhist teachers. The formulation of the course of practice best known in the West is perhaps the eightfold path, but there are other, equally venerable formulations that illustrate even better the objectives of our present inquiry. We shall consider here the threefold training and the seven factors of enlightenment, both central teachings particularly stressed by the Buddha during the final months before his death.

The Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta of the *Dīgha Nikāya* relates the Buddha's travels during the final months of his life, a time when he appears to have [182] been particularly concerned to summarize all of his various teachings in terms of a concise and systematic practice. As he traveled from town to town visiting communities of his followers for the last time the most frequently recurring theme of his discourses was the threefold course of training consisting in the cultivation of ethical conduct (*sīla*) meditation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). This concise formulation of Buddhist praxis is especially useful for our purposes because it clearly stresses the developmental nature of the path. While not sequential in the sense that the first is left behind once the second is undertaken, with it in turn yielding to the next, these three components of the path are presented as logically augmentative in that each builds on the foundation of the previous. Thus one might well cultivate all three components from the outset of one's practice, the developmental point being that it is only when ethical conduct is firmly established that meditation becomes truly effective, and only through the integrative effect of meditation that the truly transformative power of wisdom becomes possible.

We can see this basic threefold practice elaborated in somewhat more detail in another prominent teaching of the Buddha's last days, the doctrine of the seven factors of enlightenment: mindfulness (*sati*), discrimination of principles (*dhamma-vicaya*), energy in pursuit of the good (*virīya*), rapture (*pīti*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Here we are clearly dealing with the successive cultivation of a set of areteic virtues, specific qualities requisite to the mode of existence no longer constrained by an overly self-referential notion of personal identity. A passage in the *Samyutta Nikāya* that treats these seven in greater detail makes clear the developmental nature of the sequence: "When a monk, thus remaining secluded, recollects and reasons about the doctrine, he initiates the mindfulness factor of enlightenment, which he then develops and perfects. Remaining thus mindful, he discriminates, reflects on and investigates with understanding that doctrine, thus initiating the discrimination of principles factor of enlightenment, which he then develops and perfects. . . ."; and so on until each of the seven is perfected.²¹ It is worth also drawing attention to the fact that there is significant emphasis in this list on the process of cognitive and affective refinement in that the fourth through seventh factors are also specific faculties central to the theory of Buddhist meditation.²² And this point becomes even [183] more evident if we take up the still further elaborated version of the path found in the *Samyutta Nikāya* passage that presents a progressive twelvefold path to enlightenment as an alternative to the reiterative twelvefold cycle of samsaric existence.²³

So far we have considered basic Buddhist doctrines common to all schools of Buddhism, and this has been intentional because I wanted to demonstrate that there is a characteristically Buddhist approach to trans-human ethical consideration that is part of the core tradition. Yet another source used quite prominently in teaching Buddhist morality in all traditional Buddhist cultures is the collection of *Jātaka* tales, popular fables that recount the earlier lives of the Buddha when he was training as a *bodhisattva* or buddha-to-be. A central theme of these widely read stories is the list of key virtues perfected by the Buddha during the course of his training, a theme that subsequently became a central pillar of the Buddhist revitalization movement known as the Mahayana. Overlapping in part with the factors of enlightenment we considered above, the *Jātaka* list of bodhisattva virtues included generosity, ethical conduct, renunciation, wisdom, energy or enthusiasm (in pursuit of the good), patience or forbearance, truthfulness, resolution, and loving-kindness. And perfections of the *Jātakas* overlap substantially, in turn, with the six or ten perfections comprising the bodhisattva ideal in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is particularly important to stress this continuity in the tradition here, because accounts of the Buddhist perspective on environmental concerns often stress only the Mahāyāna notion of the interrelatedness of all things, without indicating the extent to which this view is derived from the earlier aspects of basic Buddhism we have considered so far.

We must see specifically that the Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness and hence the inter-relatedness of all things is practically transformative only to the extent that it constitutes the wisdom component of the traditional Buddhist teaching of the threefold training considered above. And we must remember that a crucial point of that teaching was that one could not expect to penetrate very deeply (or transformatively) into the wisdom phase of the path without first making significant headway with the disciplines of ethical conduct and meditation. This should help us see that environmentally sensitive practice in Buddhism is hardly a matter of simply affirming faith and belief in the ultimate [184] interrelatedness of all things and then waiting hopefully for that truth to manifest itself. Without undertaking the discipline of the threefold training, without seeking to cultivate of the perfections or the virtues enumerated above, one is missing the point of Buddhist

practice. And to do that is to miss what Buddhism has most to offer us in our present environmental predicament.

BUDDHIST PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

In considering what a contemporary, environmentally sensitive practice of traditional Buddhism might involve, we must first acknowledge that it will offer no simple solutions, that it will in fact ultimately require nothing short of total self-transformation. The only true solution to the problem, in a Buddhist analysis, will be neither technological nor legal. It must be soteriological. It must involve the evolution of a significant number of us human beings to a higher level of awareness, to a higher ethical sensibility. This is not to say that efforts – both technological and legal – to safeguard the environment are pointless, only that they are at best a stop-gap measure, and not the ultimate solution.

On hearing this, one might be led to despair, thinking that this is far too much to ask. Surely there must be some more immediate solution – otherwise the environment and all of us therein are most certainly doomed. But this would not be a Buddhist response. It is a response arising from an overly fixed conception of human nature, a response that fails to recognize just how optimistic Buddhism is about the potential we have to evolve into a higher ethical sensibility. It is true that this will happen only as a result of concerted practice and discipline, but the whole of the Buddhist tradition consists precisely in a sustained effort to devise effective methods for undertaking this transformation. The task is immense, in the Buddhist perspective, but so are our resources, the tradition would point out – if only we muster the resolve, the energy in pursuit of the good, patience, the loving kindness, the concentration, and the wisdom to bring those substantial resources to bear.

To conclude this chapter let us explore a single example of how each component of the threefold training might be undertaken by a contemporary [184] environmentally sensitive Buddhist – Asian or Western, monastic or lay. Beginning with ethical conduct it is easy to see that the traditional list of five precepts offers many opportunities for cultivating a heightened ethical sensibility of the sort that will eventually express itself in a transformative (as opposed to simply intellectual) experience of inter-relatedness and its correlative of compassion. Consider voluntary simplicity as an expression of the first precept of non-injury for example. And to focus our inquiry even more we can take just one instance of voluntary simplicity: eating lower on the food chain. This Buddhist practice of voluntary simplicity in eating should not be confused with the Hindu practice of vegetarianism which is more a matter of cultivating ritual purity rather than a practice of non-injury. The Buddhist principle of non-injury recognizes that all samsaric life feeds off of life. Existing (for the present) as a human life-form one cannot avoid the necessity of causing some harm in the sustaining of one's own life. What one can do is to minimize the damage by eating as low on the food chain as possible. The Buddha did specifically allow his monks to eat even meat where necessary, either because they were accepting the generosity of others or because they were ill and required extra nutrition. The point thus was clearly to practice causing as little harm as possible, both because that directly benefited other beings, but also because it was part of cultivating a set of virtues which would eventually be radically transformative, which would in turn have an even greater benefit for all beings. Given the variety of nutritive food sources readily available today, especially in the West, restricting one's diet to vegetable sources is an eminently beneficial practice, in terms of both Buddhism and environmentalism.

The second component of the threefold training is the cultivation of greater cognitive and affective concentration or integration, through the practice of meditation. This is the phase of the path in which the Buddha felt humans could begin to develop well beyond the normal human tendencies toward greed, hatred and delusion. The discipline of meditation must necessarily be initially undertaken in a sheltered, isolated environment free from the usual distractions, yet the goal is to cultivate a greater facility of mind and positive emotion that eventually permeates all aspects of one's life. Buddhist meditation is not done for the experience during the meditation session itself, but rather for [186] the transformative effect it has cumulatively. Of the many and various techniques of meditative practice in Buddhism, Western readers are most likely to have encountered some form of mindfulness practice. While this is indeed a foundational practice for virtually all schools of Buddhism, many also follow the oldest scriptural sources in giving equal prominence to the practice of cultivating the four "immeasurables" – the positive emotions of loving kindness, sympathetic joy, compassion and equanimity. Taking the first of these as our example for this aspect of the path, our contemporary, ecologically minded Buddhist, would undertake a systematic daily practice of generating the emotion of loving kindness (*mettā*, Skt: *maitrī*), first towards him or herself, then towards someone who is "near and dear", next towards a "neutral person" and then towards an enemy, and finally after consolidating those varieties of *mettā*, the practitioner would extend this attitude of care and kindness outward in radiating circles to encompass all beings, near and far, seen and unseen. Again the immediate benefits of such a practice to the environment are not difficult to imagine, but we must remember that the ultimate Buddhist goal of this practice is the even more radical transformation of the underlying self-concept that feeds the tendencies towards greed, hatred and delusion.

There are many interesting variations on this basic *mettā* practice. In one, inspired by the same Shantideva we encountered above, the practitioner reflects imaginatively on the thought that all other beings have been, at some point in the virtually infinite past of Buddhist cosmology, one's own mother. Recognizing the care extended by each of those beings at that time, one undertakes to relate to them in like manner now. This type of practice, sometimes called "analytic meditation" leads us to the last phase of the threefold training, the cultivation of wisdom itself. Here we find practices that employ the previously cultivated positive mental and emotional facility to discern ever more deeply the actual nature of reality. In the early tradition these practices sought to penetrate the depths of the four noble truths and the three marks of conditioned existence taught by the Buddha, while in the latter Mahāyāna tradition the focus was even more specifically on gaining transformative insight into the emptiness or the interrelatedness of all things. Returning to our contemporary practitioner, we might feel that this type of discipline would remain too abstract to be of any immediate environmental benefit, but that [187] would be to overlook the fact that the foundation of this discipline lies in practices of the sort we have considered in the two previous examples. Insight into the ultimate nature of reality can arise only from a deeply integrated attitude of caring and concern cultivated towards all beings. And the culmination of all of this threefold training is the wisdom of a buddha, a wisdom that according to the tradition can express itself only as compassionate activity unbounded by any remaining self-referential craving.

Perhaps this is also why Buddhism has seen no need to develop a special and separate position on nature and ecology. And indeed we might be well justified in concluding that in fact Buddhism *has* no particular environmental ethic at all. By the same token, however, we would have to conclude also that Buddhism *is* an environmental ethic, in that it cannot be put into practice without completely transforming one's every response to nature and the environment.

ABBREVIATIONS

- S *Samyutta Nikāya*, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1884-98; rpt.) Trans. by C.A.F. Rhys Davids and F.L. Woodward as *Kindred Sayings* (London: Pali Text Society, 1917-30; rpt.)
 A *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1885-1900; rpt.) Trans. by F.L. Woodward and Hare as *Gradual Sayings* (London: Pali Text Society, 1932-36; rpt.)

NOTES

- ¹ See *The Liberation of Life: from the Cell to the Community*, by Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr. (Denton, Tex.: Environmental Ethics Books, 1990).
- ² J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (eds), *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought : Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).
- ³ Lambert Schmithausen, who has done the most thorough study of attitudes towards nature in Buddhist sources, is especially good at documenting the apparent ambivalence in certain texts; see his *Buddhism and Nature*, (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1991) and *The Problem of the Sentience of Plants in Earliest Buddhism* (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1991).
- ⁴ See for example the various contributions in *Dharma Gaia: a Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1990).
- ⁵ The interpretations I express in this article are based, as much as possible, on the “Basic Buddhism” of the early canonical scriptures generally accepted, at least in theory, throughout the tradition. With regard to the nature of the continuity of the self, however, these sources were developed substantially and often differently by the various later schools of Buddhist thought. Where different interpretations are [188] possible, I have chosen to follow the classical Yogācāra teachings of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu as recorded and developed in the later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna phases of the tradition, the school of thought within Buddhism that most systematically elaborated earlier views on the concept of the self and the nature of personal continuity.
- ⁶ The “soteriological dimension” of the goal lies in the fact that Buddhist nirvāṇa constitutes a liberation or an awakening; whereas the “ethical dimension” of the goal refers to the fact that this liberation will necessarily express itself as compassionate activity.
- ⁷ See Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism*, (Cambridge & New York : Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- ⁸ On the Age of the Wanderers see *The Buddha* by Michael Carrithers (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.)
- ⁹ One might well argue that this optimism is less explicit, even less developed in the early canonical literature, some passages of which suggest, for example, that only ignorance (*avidyā*) and craving (*taṇhā*) are beginningless by nature.
- ¹⁰ Damien Keown explores the parallels between the ethics of the Buddha and Aristotle in *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), esp. ch. 8.
- ¹¹ The Buddha makes it quite clear that he is not to be considered a human being (or any other samsaric life-form) in his encounter with the Brahmin Doṇa recorded at A 2.37f.
- ¹² *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 2:18, trans. by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 68.
- ¹³ See “The Bodhisattva: Evolution and Self-Transcendence” Sangharakshita (1983), republished in *The Priceless Jewel*, (Glasgow: Windhorse Publications, 1993).

¹⁴ Sometimes only five different life-forms are enumerated, with the devas and the titans counted together, which supports my point below that these categories are not essentially exclusive.

¹⁵ The link between Buddhist and Western conceptions of evolution is the theme of a forthcoming study entitled *The Evolving Mind* (Glasgow: Windhorse, 1996) by the Cambridge-trained Western Buddhist Robin Cooper (Dharmachari Ratnaprabha). [189]

¹⁶ The term “teleological” is actually ambiguous; I use it here to refer to a liberation that is not pre-determined in the sense of being certain to happen at a particular time and place, but is the natural state towards which the process of all life tends.

¹⁷ One implication of this point is that the efforts, fashionable in some contemporary Buddhist circles, to “locate” a basis or rationale for “rights” within Buddhism are not only superfluous but wrong-headed. In the attempt to make Buddhism more acceptable, by making it more Western, contemporary Buddhists run the risk of obscuring what Buddhism might best contribute to the discussion: a radically different conception of the self-in-relation to the environment and a praxis based on that notion of the self.

¹⁸ *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 2: 91–9, p. 96; for the sake of clarity I have slightly modified the translation of Crosby and Skilton (see note 9 above).

¹⁹ For an especially accessible example of this approach see *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sutra* by Thich Nhat Hanh, (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988).

²⁰ In “Green Buddhism and the Hierarchy of Compassion”, *Western Buddhist Review*, Vol.1 (Dec. 1994) I have explored the tendency among some contemporary Buddhists to reduce Buddhism to an overly one-dimensional teaching of egalitarian inter-relatedness out of a reluctance to acknowledge the developmental and spiritually hierarchical dimension of the tradition.

²¹ S v.67–8.

²² Cf. the “factors of meditative absorption” (*jhānāṅga*) discussed in Buddhaghosa’s meditation manual the *Visuddhimagga*, section IV; (*Path of Purification*, trans. by Ñāṇamoli Thera, Colombo: Semage, 1956).

²³ S 2:29.

transcribed from online version by Dhivan 17 June 2020 with minor corrections