

Green Buddhism and the Hierarchy of Compassion

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BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON NATURE and the environment have a long and complex history, and it is thus not surprising that one finds within this rich and varied tradition much that resonates with contemporary concerns regarding nature and the place of humanity within it. While Buddhists of the past had little reason to formulate an environmental ethic per se, there is much within traditional Buddhist ethics that does indeed speak to the ethical aspects of the environmental crisis confronting us today, a fact that has been well noted and at least partially explored both by non-Buddhist environmental ethicists and by a growing number of contemporary Buddhists themselves, advocates of what is frequently referred to as ‘Green Buddhism’.¹ My approach in the present article seeks to bridge these two camps, and I shall thus be writing here both as a practising Buddhist and as an environmental ethicist, one with academic training in philosophy and in the history of Buddhism. I shall undertake a critique of certain features of Green Buddhism in this article, and it is important for the reader to realise that I do so from within the circle of this vital movement of contemporary Buddhism, seeking to identify the ‘near-enemy’ (*āsanna-paccathika*) within, which, as Buddhaghosa commented in the fifth century, is often more dangerous than the ‘distant-enemy’ (*dūra-paccathika*) that remains more obviously (and safely) outside the fold.

The ‘near enemy’ I have in mind in this case is the view that Green Buddhism is fundamentally incompatible with, and hence necessarily opposed to, hierarchy in any and all forms. There are good reasons why such a view appears quite plausible and attractive at first, though we must recognise that these reasons stem more from our own cultural history than from anything [134] within Buddhism itself. While it is certainly true that Buddhism advocated, in its early forms at least, a radically decentralised institutional structure, this should not be misconstrued in the light of our current Western concerns to mean that the spiritual ideal in Buddhism was seen as non-hierarchical and egalitarian. The Buddha was indeed radical in that he recognised that all beings – not just human beings – have access to the liberation he proclaimed, but this does not mean that he felt that all beings were equal in the sense there is no significant difference between species or individuals. To the extent that we fail to acknowledge this important sense in which Buddhism is non-egalitarian, we not only seriously misrepresent the tradition, we also risk disavowing an aspect of the Dharma that is sorely lacking in contemporary Western thought. Thus in this article I shall seek to show first that the rejection of all forms of hierarchy is fundamentally un-Buddhist and further, that such a view threatens, however unintentionally, to obscure and even reject a fundamental feature of Buddhism that may turn out to be crucial to the agenda of Green Buddhism.

To understand my argument we must reflect on the history of our current Western aversion to hierarchy in any form, and we must also clarify what place hierarchical structures do have in traditional Buddhism. If we find that hierarchy in some sense does have a place in Buddhism, then we shall have to ask whether it is the same kind of hierarchy that we are so anxious to banish from our own cultural history. I realise that discussion of ‘hierarchy’ in any form will arouse very strong feelings among many Western Buddhists and environmentalists, yet I have intentionally chosen to use this provocative ‘h-word’ for reasons that will become clear below. It is to those who find this word inherently objectionable that this article is respectfully dedicated. I truly share your concerns, and I ask only that you hear me out, bracketing for the moment whatever affront my thesis may initially elicit. Much of what Buddhism has to offer the West may, I fear, be lost, if we fail to see

the quite specific sense in which Buddhism is, and must be, 'hierarchical'. By considering this apparently discordant assertion, we will, I submit, learn something quite important about Buddhism and also something about the cultural roots of a distinctly Western and modern form of 'aversion' (*pratigha*).

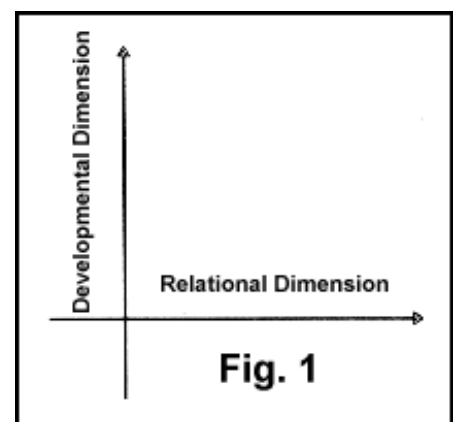
THE TWO DIMENSIONS OF BASIC BUDDHISM

OUR FIRST TASK then shall be to consider whether there is any aspect of traditional Buddhism that might warrant being called 'hierarchical'. While it is imperative that one remember the diversity within the different cultural expressions and traditions of Buddhism, it is nonetheless possible to identify a set of basic Buddhist teachings that remain at the core of the later variations. I am thinking of the basic doctrines of conditionality or dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), karma, the middle path, impermanence, and non-substantiality (*anātman*), among others. One quite useful approach I have found for getting a more comprehensive understanding of 'Basic Buddhism' in this sense is to recognise, running throughout Buddhist history, two fundamental aspects of the tradition: a developmental dimension and a relational dimension. While we shall see that each of these two dimensions is clearly distinct, we must also recognise that each complements the other in a way that is crucial to the integrity of the tradition.

Let us first consider these dimensions separately. When we speak of the developmental dimension or aspect of Buddhism, we are focusing on the transformational intent of the tradition, on the Buddha-Dharma as a practical means of spiritual growth and development. Buddhism, in all of its forms, sees the spiritual life as the transformation of delusion and suffering into Enlightenment and liberation. Even the so-called 'non-dual' forms of Buddhism – Zen and Dzog-chen, for example – acknowledge an experiential distinction between delusion and Enlightenment, and certainly neither would trivialise the existential reality of suffering.² The second crucial aspect of basic Buddhism – what I have called the relational dimension of the tradition – comes to the fore, by contrast, whenever we note the distinctly Buddhist conception of the interrelatedness of all things. And 'things' here may be taken to encompass not just all sentient beings but every aspect of the ecosystems in which they participate, ultimately the ecosphere in its totality.³

Looking at Buddhism historically, we will quickly note that these two dimensions are rarely given equal stress in any given expression of the tradition. My argument here rests only on the assertion that both will always be present to some degree—that indeed there is a necessary complementarity between the two – even when one appears more prominent than the other. The [136] fact that one dimension or the other will, within the context of a particular form of Buddhism, frequently receive relatively more or less emphasis thus raises no problem, since the basic complementarity is not thereby negated. Indeed by noting in different schools of Buddhism the relative difference in emphasis given to the developmental or the relational dimensions, we have one useful way of charting the complex and fascinating permutations that the basic Dharma manifested as the tradition made its way through the various cultural encounters of its 2,500-year history.

To clarify the variable relationship between these two dimensions of basic Buddhism, we might think of the two axes of a graph, with the vertical axis indicating the developmental dimension of the tradition and the horizontal axis indicating the relational dimension (see Fig. 1). We have then a useful



heuristic tool we can use to explore the rich elaboration of different Buddhist schools and teachings, plotting each in reference to the others by noting the relative degree of emphasis given to the developmental and relational dimensions respectively. While this approach is helpful in highlighting and understanding the diversity within Buddhism, the tool I am suggesting here will also help us recognise how the differences revealed indicate not so much a fundamental divergence among the forms of Buddhism but rather differences in approach and emphasis, ‘expedient means’ (*upāya*) that reflect the ability of the tradition to adapt to the needs and dispositions of different historical and cultural settings. One could, no doubt, even write a history of Buddhism by charting the various permutations of emphasis revealed by this simple x-y graph, but that would go well beyond the task at hand.

For our present purposes a few basic generalisations should suffice, both to illustrate the basic distinction between ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ or ‘developmental’ and ‘relational’ within the tradition and also to demonstrate [137] the usefulness of this interpretative approach. Considering the two major divisions that arose within the history of Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism (often called ‘Hīnayāna’) on the one hand and the Mahāyāna (including later the developments of Vajrayāna, Zen, etc.) on the other, we could, for example, note that the former places relatively more emphasis on the developmental dimension, while in the latter the relational aspect often comes more to the fore. Similarly it would not be too rash to observe that, on the whole, the South Asian Indo-Tibetan forms of Buddhism tend to plot out higher on the developmental (i.e. the vertical axis), whereas East Asian forms on the whole tend to move further out on the horizontal or relational axis. As with all such generalisations, the exceptions are often all the more significant and more interesting than the instances that conform. And even more importantly, we must remember that what we are noting here is simply a matter of the relative degree of emphasis given each of these aspects, which does not assume any mutual exclusion between the two. Instances of a totally one-dimensional form of Buddhism would in fact be very difficult to find in the historical record, so much so that we would be justified in asking whether such a case was still legitimately Buddhism even if it referred to itself as such.

Working at this level of generalisation and abstraction is unlikely to remain satisfying for very long however. Now that we have the basic distinction between the two dimensions of Buddhism in mind, let us turn to consider more specifically where we can locate these two general aspects within actual Buddhist teachings. This will help us to see just how deeply embedded in basic Buddhism these two dimensions are, and it will also reveal more clearly their mutual complementarity. The developmental dimension of Buddhism is perhaps most readily evident in the very conception of the Dharma as a path (*mārga*), whether presented in the elaborate sequence of steps the Buddha describes in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya or in the perhaps more familiar early doctrines of the ‘three-fold teaching’ (morality-meditation-wisdom) and the ‘eight-fold path’. Here we can see the spiritual life advocated by the Buddha presented clearly in terms of a transformational soteriology, one that begins in a problematic state which is ultimately overcome, typically through the systematic cultivation of [138] a variously detailed progression of positive mental and spiritual states or attainments. In this sense Buddhism offers an interesting parallel to the ‘virtue tradition’ of early and medieval Western thought.

We could explore many other expressions of this same vertical or developmental dimension of early Buddhism, looking for example at the four levels of meditative absorption (*dhyāna*), the five spiritual faculties (*indriya*), the seven limbs of Enlightenment (*bodhyaṅga*), the stages of Arhathood, or the path of the twelve ‘positive’ causes and conditions (*nidāna*) taught by the Buddha in the Saṃyutta Nikāya.⁴ but all of these are examples of the developmental dimension seen in

terms of different aspects of the development of the individual practitioner. We will understand better how deeply this vertical axis runs, however, if we recognise in addition a more systemic level at which this dimension is also evident. Basic Buddhist cosmology provides the best illustrations of this second form of the developmental dimension. Consider for example the vertical array of the ‘three world-levels’ (*triloka*), which is further elaborated into a hierarchical taxonomy of six (or sometimes five) life-forms (*gati*): the gods, titans, humans, animals, *pretas*, and hell-beings. Not only does the spiritual life or path pursued by the individual have a crucial vertical dimension, but this verticality is built into the very structure of the Buddhist conception of the cosmos itself.

Many of the instances of the developmental dimension of Buddhism that I have cited so far originated in and are often given more prominence in the early Buddhism of the Elders (*Theras*), which is consistent with the generalisation I noted above regarding a relative difference of emphasis on the developmental and the relational between the two main divisions of Buddhism. I have also stressed however that these two dimensions are not mutually exclusive, and this will become more clear if we look also at instances of this verticality in the Mahāyāna tradition. First of all we must remember that all of the doctrines discussed so far retain their place (if not necessarily the same degree of emphasis) within the Mahāyāna. The vertical dimension is never simply discarded: even when the Zen and Pure Land schools explore the dangers of taking ‘developmental’ language in any overly literalistic way, they still maintain the crucial – and essentially vertical – distinction between the experience of Enlightenment and the perpetuation of suffering. The Mahāyāna thus [139] retains the verticality of the earlier tradition, but its recognition of this dimension is hardly limited to a residual carry-over of themes from the earlier tradition.

Many doctrines considered distinctly Mahāyāna reflect the same vertical perspective of a developmental path. One sees this in the Bodhisattva ideal, which actually extends the older conception of the path in a spiritually significant way by stressing the importance of an altruistic motivation. The doctrines of the ten Bodhisattva stages (*bhūmi*) and the six (or ten) Bodhisattva virtues or perfections (*pāramitā*) are central Mahāyāna themes, both of which figure importantly in the Yogācāra elaboration of the spiritual map into a path of vision (*darśana-mārga*) followed by a path of cultivation or transformation (*bhāvana-mārga*). For all of its exploration of the relational axis, Mahāyāna thus remains just as fundamentally developmental, and this is true even of Zen where ‘sudden Enlightenment’ is expected to require a period – often quite a long period – of especially intensive practice.⁵

Turning next to the relational aspect, the horizontal axis of our grid, it will no doubt be teachings associated with the Mahāyāna that first come to mind. Ethically this dimension is obvious in the trans-personal and altruistic focus of the Bodhisattva ideal, and, ontologically, in the notions of interrelatedness derived from the emptiness doctrine (*śūnyavāda*) richly elaborated in the Perfection of Wisdom literature, the Avatamsaka, and other key Mahāyāna sutras. One key feature of the Mahāyāna was its insistence that the Buddha’s Enlightenment was not so much a combination of wisdom and compassion as the realisation of a wisdom that must be compassion, by virtue of its insight into the fundamental interrelatedness of all existence. The very nature of the Buddha’s Enlightenment was thus seen to be inter-relational, something that could only exist in the context of compassionate, altruistic activity. But again we must be careful not to assume that recognition of this relational dimension of the Buddha’s Enlightenment was a purely Mahāyāna innovation.

First of all the roots of the Bodhisattva ideal are well represented in the earlier tradition of the Elders. And the early teachings on impermanence and *anātman* were already sufficient to establish a basic insight into the ultimate non-substantiality of any putative dichotomy of self-

interest vs. other-[140]interest.⁶ Even more revealing is the fact that the pre-Mahāyāna roots of the relational dimension are implicit in some of the very developmental teachings we have already considered above. An indispensable relational aspect is literally built right into even the most seemingly hierarchical doctrines of the early tradition. While the vertically arrayed taxonomy of life-forms recognised by all schools of Buddhism asserts an explicit hierarchy of levels of consciousness – adding still a higher level reached with the attainment of Buddhahood – the hierarchy here is nonetheless quite different from what we, as products of Western culture, might expect or fear. In Buddhism the point of these vertical distinctions is not to establish a hierarchy of privilege and subjugation. Quite the contrary. The hierarchy here is neither absolute nor does it justify the dominion or domination of one class of beings over another. In fact, as we shall see more clearly below, the vertical distinction here is a matter of compassion, rather than of control.

In the religions of Abraham (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) God is intrinsically superior to humankind, as is the creator to his creation. Similarly humankind, which alone was created in God's image, is intrinsically and (unalterably) superior to the animals and all the rest of creation as well. The Buddhist taxonomy of life forms (including Buddhahood) presents a crucial contrast. It too is thoroughly and incontrovertibly hierarchical in structure, yet in a fundamentally different way. All of the levels in the Buddhist 'chain of being' are both dynamic and interpermeable. A given life form moves up, and often down, in this deadly serious cosmic game of 'chutes and ladders'. The different levels in the Buddhist cosmology, while indicating spiritually significant differences in awareness and consciousness, do not entail the theocentric and anthropocentric perspective and privilege so familiar in our own cultural tradition. They represent rather the range of progressively greater degrees of awareness and ethical sensibility available to all life forms. We might say that this is an ethically dynamic array of possibilities rather than an ontologically static hierarchy of privilege and status.

This is a crucial distinction, and one that is very easy for us to overlook, especially those of us who are the most disenchanted with and critical of the Western notions of ontological hierarchy. Indeed there is an objection that [141] invariably arises at this point in the minds of many contemporary Buddhists. How and why is the vertical, developmental dimension so complementary – and thus so necessary – if, as Buddhism asserts, all of existence is already by its very nature inherently interrelated? If everything is already the way it needs to be, what possible need is there for something to be done? If we have the relational dimension of the Dharma, what need is there for development, for doing? – especially since it is precisely 'human doing' that has brought about the environmental crisis we now face. The anger and frustration that give rise to these questions, expressed often with a palpable tone of indignation, are feelings we have all no doubt shared at sometime or another, and our tendency to feel this impatience is understandable. Yet these questions reflect a grave misunderstanding of the Buddhist teaching of interrelatedness and of Enlightenment as a developmental process. We should note especially the tone of righteous indignation in which these questions are often expressed, moreover, for it betrays, I fear, the ultimate despair of an ethical scepticism, even cynicism, that is fundamentally at odds with the basically positive conception of human potential that characterises the Dharma. In the West we have come to fear that the presence of any vertical, developmental perspective is antithetical to our newly gained recognition of horizontal relatedness. Thus we miss the point that for Buddhism neither is possible without the other. The developmental and the relational are not only complementary, they are inseparably interrelated. This last point is central to the concerns I expressed above that those of us most attracted to Green Buddhism may also be the most prone to

seriously misunderstand Buddhism in our very effort to see it as part of the solution to the environmental question.

GREEN BUDDHISM AND THE LOSS OF THE VERTICAL DIMENSION

I HAE ARGUED that the developmental and the relational are inextricably linked in Buddhist ethics. Yet I have also suggested that contemporary Buddhists are strongly inclined to ignore or even deny that this could be true. We need to consider more closely how this peculiar circumstance has come about. What I wish to demonstrate is that for all its laudable articulation of the environmental ethical themes within the Buddhist tradition, Green Bud-[142]dhism at present also shows a subtle tendency that threatens to significantly distort the assimilation of the Dharma into the West, a tendency to reduce Buddhism to a one-dimensional teaching of simple interrelatedness. And the dangers of this tendency are all the more ironic and all the more insidious, I would further argue, because it is a tendency that arises out of our own cultural conditioning. It is a problem we are bringing to Buddhism, rather than one inherent in the tradition. As such it is a tendency that may well subvert the very potential Buddhism does have to contribute to the more environmentally ethical perspective we are currently struggling so hard to realise.

Hence my concern: we may, in our efforts to adopt Buddhism as an alternative to the worst in our own culture, end up divesting Buddhism of one of its most essential aspects. In doing so we may coincidentally and quite unwittingly denude Western Buddhism of the very aspect of Buddhism that we need to confront the magnitude of the present environmental crisis. But why, we may well ask, would contemporary Buddhism, especially Green Buddhism, develop this tendency to disavow or even deny a crucial element of traditional Buddhism? Part of the answer to this question lies no doubt in the historical fact that the forms of Buddhism that initially attracted the widest popularity in the West, and especially in North America, were forms in which we see a relatively greater emphasis on the horizontal, relational dimension of the tradition, forms in which one might initially overlook the importance of the developmental aspect. This is most obvious in the Western appropriation of Zen, for example, especially in its most popularised forms, those based on the writings of D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts. It is, however, no historical accident that it was these particular forms of Buddhism that initially prevailed in much of the West, and consequently I see this as simply another symptom of a deeper circumstance, one that has more to do with our own cultural history than with that of Asian Buddhism. What I am suggesting is that the Western cultural sensibility driving the critique of our own history of environmental practice is also significantly shaping how we see Buddhism, even influencing which forms of Buddhism strike us as the most attractive. This same Western sensibility, moreover, is also driving us towards a significantly distorted view of Buddhism, one [143] which in its fear of hierarchy leads us to imagine the solution of our problems in a 'Buddhism' free of any vertical or hierarchial structure.

The key to my argument lies in the degree to which many of us within the circle of Green Buddhism are extremely uncomfortable, even mortified, by any aspect of Buddhism that is in any sense hierarchical, so much so that some of us feel the need to redefine Buddhism, to purge it of anything that even vaguely resembles the Western forms of environmentally callous elitism and privilege we seek so desperately to flee. The motivation here is understandable and, in part, even commendable, yet its excesses are nonetheless deluded and the outcome may well be disastrous – for Western Buddhism certainly, and perhaps even for Western environmental ethics more broadly. How has this come about? We have identified in our own cultural history an unquestionable tendency towards attitudes of exploitation and domination of nature, and we have rightly associated those attitudes with cultural institutions of hierarchy and privilege. The unwitting and often quite

unconscious mistake we make, however, comes when we assume that all forms of hierarchy are the same. We assume that any and every manifestation of hierarchy leads inevitably to the dead-end of domination and exploitation, and so we have even banished that now dreaded ‘h-word’ from all forms of polite conversation. And, as Western Buddhists, we reassure ourselves that any apparently hierarchical element in our cherished Buddhism must be a mistake, perhaps the later corruption of some monastic elitists. Or perhaps we see it simply as an historical anomaly, one that can and indeed should be quickly swept under the carpet. But is this unconsidered assumption that all forms of hierarchy lead to attitudes of domination and exploitation actually true? And even if it appears to be true within the (limited) context of our own cultural history, can we simply assume that it is true in other cultural traditions as well? Is this not actually the height of cultural arrogance? And are we not overlooking the very difference between Western and Buddhist traditions that I noted when discussing the fundamental ‘permeability’ Buddhist hierarchical thinking has in the context of the six *samsāric* life-forms? I would answer affirmatively to all of the above, and I would submit that our fear of any vertical dimension to the spiritual life has become so strong, that we are literally [144] terrified of being confronted by the fact that Buddhism is integrally hierarchical.

Consider the following passage written by Gary Snyder, one of the most influential and respected Green Buddhists, someone who has influenced much of my own appreciation for the ‘Green’ implications of Buddhism. Feeling the need to distinguish a Buddhist sense of spiritual ‘training’ from what he sees as a more artificial notion of spiritual cultivation, Snyder observes that:

The word *cultivation*, harking to etymologies of *till* and *wheel about*, generally implies a movement away from natural process. In agriculture it is a matter of ‘arresting succession, establishing monoculture’. Applied on the spiritual plane this has meant austerities, obedience to religious authority, long bookish scholarship, or in some traditions a dualistic devotionalism (sharply distinguishing ‘creature’ and ‘creator’) and an overriding image of divinity being ‘centralised,’ a distant and singular point of perfection to aim at. The efforts entailed in such a spiritual practice are sometimes a sort of war against nature – placing the human over the animal and the spiritual over the human. The most sophisticated modern variety of hierarchical spirituality is the work of Father Teilhard de Chardin, who claims a special evolutionary spiritual destiny for humanity under the name of higher consciousness. Some of the most extreme of these Spiritual Darwinists would willingly leave the rest of earth-bound animal and plant life behind to enter an off-the-planet-realm transcending biology.⁷

While this may be an effective and appropriate critique of certain Western religious attitudes, it is so heavy handed in its blanket condemnation of any notion of verticality, of any notion of the development and evolution of consciousness, that it rejects, however unintentionally, most of Buddhism as well. Snyder, in this passage at least, implies that all notions of the evolution of consciousness lead inevitably to the rejection of nature and the ‘natural’ by an oppressive hierarchy of ‘Spiritual Darwinists’. But what is the developmental dimension of Buddhism if not a teaching of the evolutionary transformation of consciousness? The very definition of Buddhahood asserts [145] the developmental realisation of a higher ethical sensibility expressed as compassion for all of existence.

I readily share Snyder’s concern to avoid any world-denying dualism that sets spirit off against nature. My concern is that his solution is too drastic. His cure may be as bad as the disease, in that it compels the Western Buddhist to renounce not just the worst of Western religion, but also

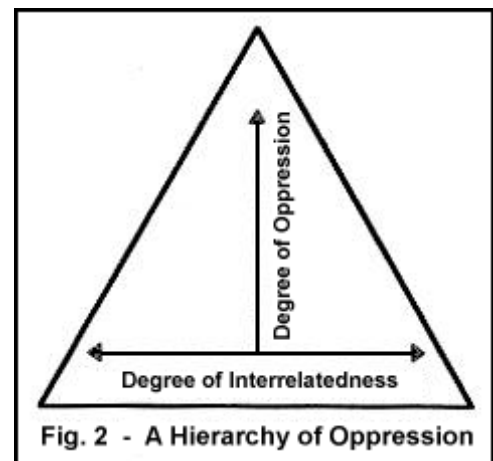
the best of Buddhism, even as Snyder advocates the latter as one of the few established alternatives to the former available to us. What is it that is being overlooked here? I suggest that Western Buddhists can resolve this problem within our own cultural history only to the extent that we openly acknowledge and affirm the way in which the developmental aspect of Buddhism is hierarchical, while simultaneously continuing to criticise the specific hierarchical forms that have clearly misshaped Western attitudes towards nature and the environment.

It is thus central to my argument to establish that there is, in fact, a crucial difference that distinguishes the Buddhist conception of verticality or hierarchy from those forms of hierarchy that have dominated Western cultural history. Only once that difference is clear will I be able to argue my central thesis that we need to actively endorse this Buddhist notion of developmental verticality precisely for the sake of better environmental ethics, just as we strive to abandon the most familiar Western notions of hierarchy for the very same reason. The difference is not immediately obvious, however, and even the reader who is sufficiently sympathetic to consider that there might be a difference is no doubt wondering why I would choose, even insist, on contaminating whatever I have to say by using this dreaded 'h-word' when I could just as easily have conformed to the prevailing cultural taboo and surreptitiously slipped in some more innocuous synonym for 'hierarchy' when speaking of the vertical dimension of Buddhism. While it is true I could thereby avoid the risk of being dismissed as hopelessly atavistic even before I get to make my case for the difference, there is a reason why I have chosen not to do this, one which I hope will soon become clear.

The first task, however, is to distinguish the two fundamentally different forms of hierarchy. Thinking, for the moment, not just historically but more theoretically in terms of a Weberian 'ideal typology,' I am suggesting that [146] there are two forms of human practice that are sufficiently related one to the other to fall under the same general designation of 'hierarchy,' even though their respective outcomes are nonetheless diametrically opposite.

THE HIERARCHY OF OPPRESSION

TO ILLUSTRATE the two types of hierarchy we can imagine each form encompassing again both a developmental and a relational dimension of human experience, each of which we can plot on an x-y graph similar to the one we considered above. It is important to note the difference in what we are graphing now however. Before, in Fig. 1, we were noting the relative emphasis given to the developmental versus the relational dimension of the Dharma in different forms of Buddhism, whereas now we shall be using the same axes to explore a rather different issue. In the next two figures we shall be plotting the relative balance between the developmental and relational dimensions of our existence in each of two different models of hierarchy. In each of these two figures, the further away from the centre point we move horizontally (in either direction) the greater is the degree of interrelatedness. And the further we move up the vertical axis, the greater the degree of developmental progress. We shall see, however, that what constitutes vertical movement differs drastically in each of the two cases, and it is that difference that makes all the difference.



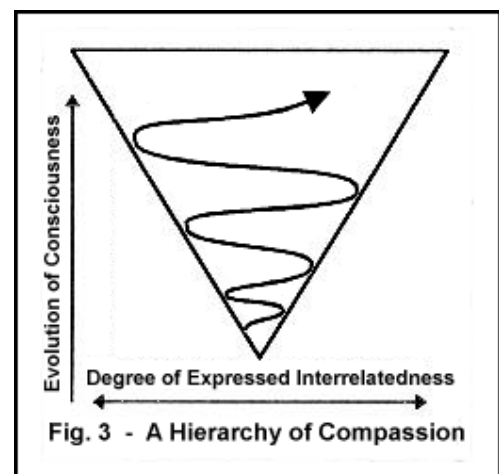
The first type of hierarchy or hierarchical structure we can designate a 'hierarchy of oppression'. We can understand its distinctive mechanisms by [147] imagining superimposed on our x-y axes a triangle or a cone rising from a wide base to a single point at the apex (see Fig. 2). Imagine now that, as we move up the vertical axis, each horizontal section of the cone corresponding to the present vertical location represents a circle of interrelatedness. By 'interrelatedness' here I mean not just any sense of relationship, but specifically an understanding of the sense in which all beings share a communality of interests. The nature of a 'hierarchy of oppression' is such that as one advances vertically, one's 'circle of interrelatedness' becomes increasingly smaller. This is so because one advances in a hierarchy of oppression by exercising one's control over and domination of all those below. And as a result of one's vertical progress, one necessarily becomes less and less aware of one's interrelatedness with them.

From the Buddhist perspective, of course, one's actual interrelatedness remains constant and absolute. So what in fact changes as one moves upward in Fig. 2 is not how interrelated one actually is, but rather the extent to which one realises and expresses that interrelatedness in one's actions. In other words, 'progress' in a hierarchy of oppression requires that one actively deny and suppress any recognition of relatedness to those that one seeks to dominate. As one claws one's way to the top of the pyramid, submissively accepting subjugation from those above in return for the privilege and right to dominate those below, the extent of one's expressed interrelatedness, as plotted on the horizontal axis, becomes increasingly more narrow and circumscribed. For one cannot successfully dominate what is below except to the extent that one actively rejects any fundamental communality of interest and needs.

In the hierarchy of oppression one moves upward only by gaining power over others, and to safeguard one's power and security one must seek ultimately to control all of existence, however unrealistic and deluded that aspiration inevitably turns out to be. And one is able to sustain this aspiration, moreover, only to the extent that one actively suppresses and denies any sense of meaningful connection to all that is below. Reaching the apex of the cone in Fig. 1 would thus represent, in the terms of this model, the ultimate 'success' to which one could aspire, but that ultimate 'success' would of course be a state of total alienation – alienation not just from others, but from one-[148]self as well – because one can 'succeed' only by rejecting one's actual nature of interrelatedness. If the folly of this approach to life is not schematically clear from the diagram, one need only reflect on the course of human history, especially (though not exclusively!) the history of the modern West.

THE HIERARCHY OF COMPASSION

IMAGINE NOW the same image turned upside down, stood literally on its head as in Fig. 3. Here we find the apex point at the bottom, and we see that the cone broadens as it rises. This is a model of what I would call a 'hierarchy of compassion'. Note the fundamental difference. As one ascends the vertical, developmental axis in this case, something quite different happens, something that is precisely the inverse of the previous case. As one moves upwards the circle of one's interrelatedness (or rather of one's expressed interrelatedness) increases. In fact, the only way one can move up is by actively realising and acting on the fundamental interrelatedness of all existence. But the



line of vertical ascent needs to be plotted somewhat differently in this case, because vertical movement now is not the simple, linear upward assertion of control over gradually more and more of the rest of existence. In the hierarchy of compassion vertical progress is a matter of 'reaching out,' actively and consciously to affirm an ever widening circle of expressed interrelatedness. Such an ever broadening circle plotted as a developmental line becomes the spiral path illustrated in Fig. 3. [149]

Unlike the previous case, moreover, progress along this spiral path confers no increasing privilege over those who are below on the path. Quite the contrary, it entails an ever increasing sense of responsibility. This profoundly ethical sense of responsibility for an ever greater circle of realised relatedness is what is expressed by the Buddhist term *karuṇā* – compassion or 'wisdom in action'. Perhaps now it is beginning to become clear why I am so concerned about attempts to formulate Western Buddhism in any way that does not fully appreciate the vital complementarity of both the developmental and the relational dimensions of the tradition. Buddhism does offer an ethic that might be capable of transforming our current deluded environmental practice, but the developmental dimension of the tradition is crucial to that ethic, because the Buddhist virtue of compassion is something one can cultivate only through progressing up the spiral path of the hierarchy of compassion. Before looking at this last assertion more closely, however, we must first consider a question I raised in the introduction to this article.

The two models I have just presented each have a vertical dimension, yet I have argued that there is a crucial difference. Why, if these two forms of 'progress' or individual development are so different, do I feel so strongly that both models should be called 'hierarchies,' especially since that word sounds so objectionable to many modern ears? My point is to stress the close, yet decisively different relation between the two, and that crucial point would be missed if we were to suggest that these two ways of living one's life are completely unrelated. Relating to others and to the environment as a whole in accord with the hierarchy of compassion is not just better than climbing the hierarchy of oppression: it is its very antithesis. To the extent that we do one, the other is literally impossible – and this is what is lost if we fail to stress the inherent relationship between the two. Hence the importance given in traditional Buddhism to the notion of 'going forth'. One can advance on the spiral path of compassion only to the extent that one has effectively gone forth from pursuing the rewards of the hierarchy of oppression. Unlike some 'new age' thinking, Buddhism does not suggest that we can have it all. On the contrary, it asserts that progress up the hierarchy of compassion becomes possible only to the extent that we 'go forth' from the aspiration to have it all. For 'having' in this sense is an expression of control and is possible only [150] within the context of the hierarchy of oppression. Without seeing how the two hierarchies are related, one might still imagine that somehow elements of both might be possible to pursue simultaneously.

There is another reason to stress their relationship as well. Both the forms of hierarchy share a crucial feature in that both are about power. Or perhaps we should say the one is about power, and the other is about empowerment, the transformative power of compassion.⁸ The first offers the power to control all, while the second cultivates the empowerment to transform oneself in order to truly benefit all life (including ourselves). It is this empowerment that we cannot afford to jettison in our desperate efforts to flee from the oppressive legacy of our past and present.

REAFFIRMING THE DEVELOPMENTAL DIMENSION OF TRADITIONAL BUDDHISM

IF THE THEORY and the structure of the Buddhist hierarchy of compassion are now clear, one might well still wonder what this would look like in actual practice. This is the point at which the danger of overlooking the vertical, developmental aspect of Buddhism becomes most evident, for it is in

the context of its developmental dimension that the tradition provides quite concrete suggestions as to how to put the insight of interrelatedness into actual practice. Without its developmental dimension all that Buddhism has to offer contemporary environmental ethics is the metaphysical assertion that all things are interrelated. Lost is the fact that Buddhism offers also a systematic and comprehensive set of techniques by which one can actually realise that relatedness in practice.

I have already surveyed the doctrinal roots of the developmental aspect of the tradition, but the question we are currently addressing requires that we now focus on this aspect of the teaching as an actual path of practice. Consistently favouring pragmatism over metaphysical speculation, the Buddha would point out that the only way we can realise what a hierarchy of compassion would look like in practice is by actually doing the practice of Dharma, and this of course involves much more than just being more environmentally correct or sensitive, important as that may well be. Buddhism is [151] saying, quite literally, that we cannot expect to act in an environmentally more ethical manner until we cultivate a much broader ability to act with compassion and wisdom. How we are to do that is the subject of a vast body of traditional teachings and techniques, but it is frequently summarised under the rubric of the ‘threefold learning’ (*trīśīkṣā*): the systematic cultivation of morality, meditation, and insight into the actual nature of existence. Each of these three is widely explored by the various schools of Buddhism, and a full exposition of what is entailed goes well beyond the space available here. For our present purposes it will suffice to note simply how these three elements of Buddhist practice are related to one another, and what implications this has for a contemporary environmental ethics based on Buddhist principles.

This threefold formulation of the Buddhist path is presented as clearly sequential in that each step builds on the previous one. The three phases of the path do overlap however, so the point is not that one cannot begin meditation before completing the practice of morality, for example. The point rather is that one cannot expect to make progress in one phase except on the basis of substantial progress in the previous phase. In other words effective insight into the actual nature of existence requires real progress in the cultivation of higher states of awareness through meditative practice. And that, in turn, is possible only on the basis of a practice of the ethical precepts and a cultivation of the primary virtues. This may seem a simple point, but it has significant implications when we ask what a Buddhist environmental ethic would be like.

Buddhism is saying that we can expect to act in accord with the basic interrelatedness of all existence only once we have cultivated a significantly different state of awareness. Simply attempting to change specific environmentally detrimental behaviours will not work. Efforts to change our environmental behaviour may well be part of the ethical practice that creates the necessary foundation for experiencing states of higher meditative awareness and ultimately for realising transformative insight, but these efforts will be effective only to the extent that they are undertaken as part of the whole three-step program. The Buddhist solution to the environmental crisis is thus nothing short of the basic Buddhist goal of Enlightenment. That may seem [152] like an unimaginably distant and lofty goal, and indeed it does involve a fundamental and total transformation of what we are – nothing less. At the same time Buddhists need not feel overly daunted by the immensity of this undertaking, for Enlightenment is, in one sense at least, simply (if not easily) a matter of becoming more fully human in that this radical transformation is the potential of all humans, indeed of all beings. The solution to the problem is thus imminently possible, although that potential can only be actualised on the basis of both a clear vision of the goal and a well defined path to reach it, coupled with an sustained effort to pursue that path to its completion.

A Buddhist environmental ethic is hence a ‘virtue ethic,’ one that asks not just which specific actions are necessary to preserve the environment, but more deeply what are the virtues

(i.e. the precepts and perfections) we must cultivate in order to be able to actually act in such a way.⁹ The relational dimension of Buddhism is necessary to secure an ecologically sound vision of the goal, but the developmental dimension of the tradition is every bit as necessary in that it provides the path that will enable us to actually reach that goal. But is there truly a danger that Western Buddhists might overlook the central place of basic Buddhist ethics in formulating a new, 'green' Buddhism? Not consciously, I suspect, but perhaps quite unintentionally as part of the effort to discard our own cultural legacy of hierarchies of oppression.

Consider the following comment made by yet another prominent and respected Green Buddhist. In *The Greening of the Self* Joanna Macy discusses the notion of 'self-realisation' that lies at the heart of Arnie Naess's Buddhist-inspired sense of deep ecology, proclaiming it the foundation of what will become a new, environmentally benign conception of the self.¹⁰ Citing his view that the process of self-realisation, properly understood, involves leaving behind 'notions of altruism and moral duty,' Macy succumbs to a very dangerous, if seductive sentiment. Naess seeks to make a quite specific, if nonetheless ambiguous point when he argues that the ethic of 'self-realisation' he envisions will not require that one act for the sake of others out of a sense of self-abnegating 'duty'. He takes 'altruism' here very literally to mean something done 'for others' in contrast to one's own self-interest. 'Altruism' in this sense will become unnecessary, he asserts, when one reaches the point at which one's 'self-interest' and the interest of others [153] naturally converges. What he fails to clarify is that some form of ethical (and Buddhists would add meditative) practice is still necessary in order to reach that point, and the danger of this ambiguity is borne out in Macy's extension of his argument.

Naess's basic point may be sound enough, as far as it goes. We need an expanded sense of self, one in which acting on behalf of others and the ecosphere is ultimately acting in terms of 'enlightened self-interest' and not out of some sense of moral obligation, or duty, or even the rights of others perceived as separate from our own interests.¹¹ Macy concurs, but falling prey to the implicit ambiguity she is led seriously astray. Please note this important point. She insists that 'virtue is not required for the greening of the self or the emergence of the ecological self' (her italics).¹² In this formulation there is no ambiguity, and we are surely on ethical quicksand. She is clearly speaking not of the eventual goal but of the path itself, of the practice by which she feels the ecological self will 'emerge'. Apparently thinking that the rejection of an ethic of duty entails rejecting all moral judgement and discernment – all effort to cultivate virtue – she arrives at the conclusion that ethical discipline and development have no place in the 'new Buddhism' she envisions. If one simply has 'self-realisation' as one's goal, no further ethical effort is required. No practice is necessary, only an opening to what she concedes is something very close to the Christian concept of 'grace'. Let us hope that what she says, in this instance at least, is not actually what she intends, for this would surely be a case of throwing out one crucial aspect of Buddhism in the very act of professing another.

CONCLUSION

WE HAVE EXPLORED how some Green Buddhists, uncomfortable with any notion of hierarchy or developmental verticality, are moving, intentionally or not, towards a kind of uni-dimensional Buddhism, one in which the inverted cone of the hierarchy of compassion is simply collapsed into a single flat circle of relatedness. In doing this they very aptly stress the relevance of the horizontal, relational dimension of Buddhism to environmental ethics, but they overlook or even deny the equally vital vertical dimension, that aspect [154] of the Dharma that sees Enlightenment as a process involving the evolution of consciousness. This development of consciousness in Buddhism

is expressed practically as an ever greater sense of responsibility to act compassionately for the benefit of all forms of life; hence its relevance to any discussion of Buddhist-inspired environmental ethics. Failing to distinguish between the two types of hierarchy outlined above, and obsessed with the need to dump out the dirty bath-water of Western hierarchies of oppression, some Green Buddhists fail to note that they are also discarding the ‘baby’ of all potential for development – of the potential for meaningful growth towards a greater expressed sense of interrelatedness, towards a greater sense of environmental ethics in the most profound sense of the term.

There are thus two reasons why reaffirming the vertical dimension of Buddhism is so important. First because it is central to the integrity of the tradition. And second because it is precisely that part of the tradition that has something useful to add to contemporary environmental ethics. But this latter point may seem less than clear, even if one is prepared to concede the former. Could we not do as well or even better with just the circle of ultimate interrelatedness, even if it does seem a bit flat or one-dimensional? Is the loss of the vertical dimension not a relatively small price to pay at this particular moment in history, in order to thoroughly secure the long-neglected horizontal axis of relationship? Why, after all, should Buddhism need to assert, as it does, that we all too often perfidious human beings are somehow a ‘higher form of consciousness’ than the loyal and faithful dog, for example, or even than a banana slug for that matter? The slug, at least, is content to mind his own business.

Given the dire situation of the environment, and given the human role in bringing about that crisis, the position suggested by these last few questions is indeed attractive, beguilingly so. Nonetheless I do see this newly emerging, uni-dimensionally horizontal form of Green Buddhism to be fundamentally flawed, flawed not just in that it misrepresents the actual nature of the Buddhist tradition, but even more seriously flawed in that it abdicates, however unwittingly and unintentionally, both the ethical responsibility and the ethical potential that might actually be just what we need to solve the predicament we find ourselves in. If we deny the vertical dimension of the [155] Dharma, we are denying the possibility of developing precisely the higher ethical sensibility that we are currently so manifestly lacking. And in denying that potential, we consign ourselves to wait helplessly, watching as the forces of human greed, hatred and delusion proceed to destroy the ecosphere, watching either in disempowered rage and despair, or perhaps in hope that some higher being will step in to save us from our sins.

Without an explicit recognition of the vertical challenge fundamental to Buddhist practice, the developmental quest for Enlightenment with its concomitant increase in ethical sensibility is lost in favour of a view suggesting that there is really nothing we need do – indeed nothing we can do beyond trusting in providence. This is not a Buddhist environmental ethic. What Buddhism offers is in fact quite a different message. And it is not just a message that the Dharma offers, it is a method. Herein lies the crucial difference. If we adopt only the relational teaching of the Buddha, then insight into the interrelatedness of all existence becomes simply an article of faith, something in which one is ardently to believe. The implicit message, one well embedded in our own cultural history, is that if one just believes in the right revelation faithfully enough, then all will turn out just fine – through the agency of some benign higher power. Stripped of the old theocentric ‘God-talk’, this updated gospel of grace may seem both comfortable and familiar, but this must not obscure the fact that it is not the Buddhadharmā. For Buddhism, the relational dimension of existence is not an article of faith, it is a reality to be experienced directly through the active cultivation of higher states of consciousness. Simply to affirm the interrelatedness of all things, whether as an article of faith or as an intellectual inference, has in the Buddhist perspective no transformative power. It is only through undertaking the ethical and meditative practice charted in the developmental dimension of

the tradition that one's actual behaviour begins to change to conform with the insight of interrelatedness.

Western ecology has given us an adequate model for understanding the ethical implications of how all things are interrelated. It is nice that Buddhism confirms that insight, but we gain little from Buddhism if that is all we see in the tradition. And we gain even less if we feel that by simply affirming this view interrelatedness will, of itself, be sufficient to bring about [156] the necessary changes in our ethical practice. Thus the real value of Buddhism for us today lies not so much in its clear articulation of interrelatedness as in its other crucial dimension, in its conception of the ethical life as a path of practice coupled with its practical techniques for actually cultivating compassionate activity. The tendency in Green Buddhism to focus exclusively on the horizontal circle of interrelatedness thus endangers the very part of the tradition that we are most sorely lacking. What Green Buddhism needs to explore more thoroughly is the Buddhist principle that meaningful change in our environmental practice can come about only as part of a more comprehensive program of developing higher states of meditative awareness along with the increased ethical sensibility which this evolution of consciousness entails. Otherwise, it seems, we are simply spinning our wheels.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, *Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. by Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown (London: Cassell, 1992); *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. by Allan Hunt Badiner (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990), *Practice of the Wild* by Gary Snyder (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, ed. by J.B. Callicott and R.T. Ames (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1989), and 'Dōgen, Deep Ecology, and the Ecological Self' by Deane Curtin (*Environmental Ethics*, 16. 2, Summer, 1994, pp.195–213).

² Actually, to suggest that there are "non-dual" forms of Buddhism in contrast to "dualistic" forms is a misnomer. All forms of Buddhism are non-dualistic in that Enlightenment is understood ultimately to transcend all ontological duality. Similarly all Buddhist schools unavoidably adopt, in some form or another, an "operational dualism" reflected in the very distinction between delusion and Enlightenment. There is a significant difference of emphasis in the way different schools speak of Enlightenment and its relation to the state of suffering, but it is likely that this reflects more a difference of practical approach than of substantial ontological divergence. The difference between the gradualists and subitists within the tradition is thus best seen, in my view, as largely rhetorical, though part of the point, of course, is precisely that we often become trapped within the language we use.

³ The history of Buddhist views on whether plants and non-animate things have ethical standing is quite complex; see Lambert Schmithausen's *The Problem of Sentience of Plants in Earliest Buddhism* (Tokyo: Int. Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1991) and also William LaFleur's 'Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature, Parts I and II,' (*History of Religions*, 13: 2 & 3, pp.93–128 and 227–248).

⁴ SN XII, 3, §23.

⁵ This is true at least of historical Zen, even if not of some of the modern-day versions of ‘Zen’ promulgated in the west.

⁶ There is a logical and historical line linking the early doctrines of dependent co-arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), impermanence (*anitya*), and the non-substantiality of the self (*anātman*) with the later Mahāyāna notions of emptiness and interrelatedness, but tracing those links adequately would require more space than is available here.

⁷ *Practice of the Wild*, p.91.

⁸ My distinction between the hierarchy of oppression and the hierarchy of compassion is inspired in part by a similar distinction between the “power mode” and the “love mode” suggested by the Ven. Sangharakshita in ‘Mind – Reactive and Creative’ (*The Middle Way*, Aug., 1971). In Sangharakshita’s distinction, however, the positive sense of empowerment (i.e., spiritual or ethical power) that I wish to stress here is not as evident.

⁹ Cf. Geoffrey B. Frasz, “environmental virtue ethics: a new direction for environmental ethics,” (*Environmental Ethics* 15.3, pp.259–74).

¹⁰ *Dharma Gaia*, pp.53–63.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.62.

¹² Śāntideva provides a traditional Buddhist parallel to Naess’s notion of “enlightened self-interest” (*ibid.*) when he points out that the hand helps the foot (by removing a thorn) even though the pain of the foot is not a pain of the hand; see the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 8: 91–99.