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Resources for Buddhist Environmental Ethics

Christopher Ives

Abstract

In recent decades Buddhists have been turning their attention to environmental problems. To date, however, no one has formulated a systematic Buddhist environmental ethic, and critics have highlighted a number of weak points in Buddhist arguments thus far about environmental issues. Nevertheless, Buddhism does provide resources for constructing an environmental ethic. This essay takes stock of what appear to be the most significant of those resources, including the Buddhist anthropology, the tradition's virtue ethic, elements in Buddhist epistemologies, doctrines that make it possible to determine the relative value of things, the Four Noble Truths as an analytical framework, and bases for action if not activism.

In recent decades Buddhists have been turning their attention to environmental problems. This nascent "Green Buddhism" has found expression in activism and several edited volumes and monographs.¹ To date, however, no one has formulated a systematic Buddhist environmental ethic, and critics have highlighted a number of weak points in Buddhist

¹ See Tucker and Williams; Kaza; Kaza and Kraft; Hunt-Badiner *Dharma Gaia* and *Mindfulness in the Marketplace*; Batchelor and Brown; James, and Cooper and James.

arguments about environmental issues.² Some of the arguments have faltered in interpreting *pratītya-samutpāda* as a doctrine of “interdependence” that implies that all things support and nurture us, that we each need to take responsibility for everything that happens in the world, or that we are equally responsible for whatever happens; in claiming that identifying with or “becoming one” with something leads necessarily and immediately to valuing it and caring for it; in arguing for the intrinsic value and rights of things without clarifying a legitimate Buddhist basis for doing so; in viewing things as equal and thereby undermining the ability to determine the relative value and exact moral standing of things; in asserting that nature is sacred without articulating what, exactly, sacredness might mean in a Buddhist world view; and in failing to take into account historical Buddhist terms for and views of “nature”³ and thereby overlooking how the Buddhist tradition historically has not embraced a particularly ecological view of the natural world.⁴

Despite these and other weak points that writers have pointed out, Buddhism⁵ does provide resources for constructing an environmental ethic. This essay will take stock of what appear to be the most significant of those resources.

For the sake of this essay, we can conceive of environmental ethics in a broad sense that includes both the formal intellectual practice

² See Ives “In Search of a Green Dharma,” Schmithausen, and Harris.

³ To keep things simple in this essay, I am not going to explore the exact definition and denotation of “nature.” In broad strokes, I am using the term to refer to the organic and inorganic processes happening spontaneously in and around us.

⁴ See Ives “In Search of Green Dharma” for a discussion of these issues.

⁵ Though it is more accurate to refer to Buddhisms in the plural, for heuristic purposes I am referring to Buddhism in the singular here, in large part because I am offering a broad survey of resources across Buddhism rather than focusing on one strand or formulating an environmental ethic from within one strand of the tradition.

that takes place in the field of Environmental Ethics and this or that “environmental ethic” in the sense of a set of beliefs, values, and guidelines that informs a person’s attempt to live in an ecological manner.

More often than not, a systematic environmental ethic offers views of or makes claims about a number of topics:

- the nature of human beings (an anthropology);
- the nature of reality overall (a metaphysics);
- how we should view reality (an epistemology);
- non-human parts of reality (other animals, plants, inanimate objects, larger wholes like species or ecosystems);
- the respective value (and types of value) of humans and the non-human parts of reality;
- the respective value of individuals and wholes (and reflections on possible tensions between valuing individuals and valuing wholes);
- principles and guidelines (values, maxims, modes of moral analysis, etc.) for making decisions and engaging in actions (or activism);
- possible virtues humans should embody (that are ecologically positive);
- an ecologically optimal state of affairs (a telos, whether in a local community, ecosystem, bioregion, country, or broader area);
- the way to attain that goal or at least get things moving in that direction.

Environmental ethics in the less formal sense—sets of beliefs, values, and guidelines that get put into practice in attempts to live in an ecological manner—also brings into the discussion such topics as the contours of an ecological way of living and the respects in which that way of living may be more fulfilling than other ways of living, whether individually or in a community.

One of the most significant contributions that Buddhism can make to environmental ethics is the view of humans—the anthropology—that it articulates in its core teachings. Writers conversant with Buddhism have highlighted problems with the dominant modern conception of the human person. William Ophuls writes,

The modern worldview says that man is fundamentally a selfish hedonist. Concerned only with the satisfaction of his own desires, he rationally pursues fame, profit, and position—which inevitably puts him in conflict with others. Since this is so, realism requires us to found our political and social institutions on the fact of human selfishness. (370)

Peter Timmerman notes that the reigning economic paradigm “suggests that human beings are fundamentally self-interested creatures with an infinite capacity to consume, and that our deepest desires are expressed in the things that we buy” (366). Or as Simon James has put it,

One could argue . . . that capitalism takes selfishness to be a fact of human nature rather than a problem to be solved; that it encourages excessive consumption, rather than regarding greed as a vice; that it tranquilizes its citizens through the media and through an education system that upholds the value of instrumental rationality to the detriment of training in character. (125)

Bringing Buddhism to bear on this portrayal of humans, Ophuls also writes, “The principal crime, in Buddhist eyes, is that we take selfishness and hedonism to be social facts—instead of the primordial problems that human beings are placed upon the earth to solve” (371). Joanna Macy agrees:

It is a delusion that the self is so separate and fragile that we must delineate and defend its boundaries, that it is so small and so needy that we must endlessly acquire and endlessly consume, and that it is so aloof that as individuals, corporations, nation-states, or species, we can be immune to what we do to other beings. (57)

Central to the Buddhist path is the critique of this delusion. As Timmerman notes, “Buddhism is well placed to analyze, assess, and perhaps dismantle . . . the Romanticized individual self” (367), what Sulak Sivaraksa refers to as the “autonomous individual self” (135).

Like other religious traditions, Buddhism aims its anthropological criticism at human selfishness, especially our desire⁶ or greed, in the sense of craving things that we do not “possess” and clinging to things we do “possess.” Together with ill-will and ignorance, greed in this sense is one of the “three poisons.” The psychological analysis of these “poisons” and other mental states that cause suffering offers a basis for critiques of worldviews and patterns of behavior—especially as seen in “advanced” societies—that are ecologically destructive. And as David Loy has pointed out, these poisons can become institutionalized in the collective ego or “wego” (48). Greed gets inflamed by and inscribed into

⁶ Jack Turner writes, “Any spiritual tradition worthy of its name teaches the diminishment of desire, and it is desire in all its forms—simple greed, avarice, hoarding, the will to power, the will to truth, the rush of population growth, the craving for control—that fuels the destruction of our once-fair planet” (xvi).

consumerism and economic competition. Ill-will or hatred at the macro level takes the form of aggressive if not imperialist domestic and foreign policies that protect economic interests. Ignorance, historically construed as false views and obliviousness to the impermanence of things, gets institutionalized in such ideologies as consumerism and economism. We can define consumerism as the belief—or, in Buddhist terms, the false view—that the ability to purchase certain things and the possession of those things will make a person happy, and the actions based on that belief, including certain consumer behaviors and the ascription of high status to those who possess wealth or desired consumer goods. In economism, as outlined by theologian John B. Cobb, Jr., the economy becomes the organizing principle of society, all values get subordinated to economic values, "the national good is measured by economic growth" (*Sustaining* 28), and citizens come to believe that "our well-being is a function of total production or consumption" (*Sustaining* 28). With the "subordinating [of] all other interests to the goal of economic growth" (*Sustaining* 114), the pursuit of an ever-growing GDP takes precedence over justice and sustainability.

Buddhists can also apply the doctrine of ignorance to the climate crisis. Ignorance operates in such forms as (1) a lack of knowledge about the climate crisis; (2) incorrect understanding of the problem, perhaps due to disinformation as disseminated, for example, by the American Petroleum Institute and other organs of the fossil-fuel industry; (3) ignorance or denial of the magnitude of the problem and our responsibility for it, an ignoring that is supported by self-distraction, psychic numbing, or losing a firm handle on the difference between reality and illusion⁷ or actual nature and simulated nature; (4) ideas that justify the continuation of our destructive lifestyle and economic system or justify our doing nothing, such as the notion that Christ is coming again soon and global

⁷ See Hedges.

problems are part of the divinely ordained process outlined in the Book of Revelation, or the idea that a technological fix driven by market forces will solve our problems; and (5) psychological disconnection from nature (from actual nature, not shows on the Nature Channel).

In their anthropology, then, Buddhists usually agree that the ordinary human is filled with desire, but they do not see this as an unavoidable, naturally given situation that people should indulge and economies should serve.

In terms of the positive dimension of its anthropology, what Buddhism offers as an alternative to egocentric humans is a vision of flourishing that carries ecological import. That is to say, the Buddhist path in most of its concrete forms can shift us from, in Stephanie Kaza's terms, a consumer identity to an "ecological identity" (*Hooked!* 3), from egocentricity to ecocentricity.

For most versions of Buddhism, overcoming entanglement in detrimental states of mind and attaining a non-material flourishing—as Thai Buddhist Sulak Sivaraksa puts it, moving in the direction of "more being" rather than "more having"—centers on restraining oneself from performing external actions based on deleterious mental states while internally purifying the mind of those states by cultivating the "wholesome" mental states that are the opposites: in the case of the three poisons, generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom. In this respect, Buddhism offers a virtue ethic.

From a Buddhist perspective, to begin the internal shift from desire to generosity, we should focus on need, not greed, which entails a sorting of needs and wants. In actual practice it is through acts of giving—whether alms to monks or one's time, energy, and talents to serve others—that one cultivates the virtue of generosity (*dāna*). This virtue connects to such other Buddhist virtues as non-attachment (*anupādā*)

and non-acquisitiveness or non-covetousness (*anabhijjhā*). Along these lines Buddhist texts are replete with calls for simplicity⁸ and frugality, with monastic guidelines restricting monks to a few essential possessions and directing them to reject luxury in the form of such things as self-adornment, extravagant beds, entertainment, and gold and silver.

The virtue of restraint plays a crucial role here. In the precepts, one restrains oneself from an array of actions, such as indulging in the above luxuries and taking that which has not been given. Padmasiri de Silva writes,

A simple way of life no longer satisfies most people; they demand that a wide range of goods and services be available at all times. Buddhism calls for a modest concept of living: simplicity, frugality, and an emphasis on what is essential—in short, a basic ethic of restraint.(15)

This simple lifestyle also draws on the Buddhist virtue of contentment (*santutṭhi*) with what one has, as exemplified by the forest-dwelling monk who “has abandoned worldly desires and is content with little” (Schmithausen 18). The *Dhammapāda* refers to contentment as the “highest wealth” (Carter 208), and the *Samyutta Nikāya* sings the praises of the monk who is content with his robes, any kind of alms food, any kind of lodging, and any kind of medicine (Bodhi 662). Pibob Udomitipong tells us that this virtue has been rejected by the Thai government:

. . . the government prohibited Thai monks in Thailand from preaching *santutṭhi*, the teaching of austerity or contentment with what one has. . . . The reasoning behind this decree was that the government believed that the

⁸ A stance that brings Buddhism close to what writers like Duane Elgin have argued for in terms of “voluntary simplicity.” See Elgin, Shi, Andrews, and Shur.

teaching of *santutthi* was opposed to the ideals of economic growth, and hence opposed to development. (191)

As part of a cluster of virtues opposing ill-will, loving-kindness (P. *mettā*) and non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) provide useful resources in Buddhist environmental ethics as well. E. F. Schumacher writes, “The keynote of Buddhist economics . . . is simplicity and non-violence” (57). Rita Gross writes that Buddhism has always had “the practical recognition that non-harming is an ideal toward which we strive and that the practice is minimizing the harm inflicted on other beings in order to survive” (57). This ideal pertains to economic activity too, as seen in the *Sigālovāda Sutta* guideline that, as Lily De Silva puts it, “a householder should accumulate wealth as a bee collects pollen” (96).

Damien Keown and Simon James have argued that the virtue ethic of Buddhism is the most promising Buddhist resource for environmental ethics. Lifting up such Buddhist virtues as the four *brahma-vihāras*,⁹ non-greed (*arāga*), modesty (*hiri*), mindfulness (*sati*), skillful means (*upāya-kauśalya*), generosity, contentment, non-covetousness, and non-harming, Keown argues, “A Buddhist ecology . . . simply calls for the orientation of traditional virtues towards a new set of problems concerned with the environment” (110).

Simon James claims “that certain character traits—primarily insight, compassion, non-violence, selflessness, and mindfulness—are environmental virtues” (128). In terms of the virtue of “insight into the nature of things,” James asserts that “as one internalizes the teachings of emptiness, etc., and so develops the virtue of insight, one also learns to feel and act in ways appropriate to that vision of the world. Hence insight comes as part of a ‘package deal,’ bound up with virtues such as

⁹ Loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

compassion, non-violence, selflessness and mindfulness” (128). He continues,

Thus to be compassionate is to feel compassion for all sentient beings, human and non-human, and to act so as to alleviate their suffering. To be non-violent is to treat all beings with respect and not as merely instrumentally valuable. To be selfless is not to be self-abnegating, but to be non-attached to oneself, and to therefore be free of the desire to greedily consume as many natural resources as possible. (128)

And in terms of mindfulness, “To be mindful is to have made one’s actions one’s own, not to be carried through life by the inertia of habit, and to be aware of the consequences of one’s actions, environmental or otherwise” (128).

With its “path of purification” and virtue ethic Buddhism provides a way of rethinking “rich.” That is to say, it offers an alternative vision of fulfillment, of a happiness that is not centered on material possessions but on awakening or *nirvāṇa*, achieved by uprooting the poisons that cause destruction of healthy communities and ecosystems. Buddhist monk Phra Phaisan Visalo has written that the lifestyle of the Buddhist monastic community in Thailand sends to the laity “messages” that “point to the true value of life, indicating that development of inwardness is much more important than wealth and power, that the life of tranquility and material simplicity is more rewarding and fulfilling” (Sponsel 52).¹⁰

As indicated by James’s claims about insight, Buddhist epistemologies furnish additional resources for Buddhist environmental ethics.

¹⁰ Renowned Buddhists Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu and Phra Prayudh Payutto have set forth outlines of a fulfilling, ecologically sustainable way of life. See Swearer.

Many Buddhists have lifted up meditation and certain meditative states as having ecological import. Martin Pitt claims that

Meditation is at the heart of a true ecological awareness. It is a powerful tool for taking us beyond our obsession with the foreground and into appreciation of the wide scale of space and time. Loosening our chains to fixed objects, meditation cultivates nonconceptual awareness of context—profoundly ecological, and giving rise to vision on a global scale. (104)

Through meditation and other Buddhist practices, the culturally conditioned sense of the self, according to Joanna Macy, gets “replaced by wider constructs of identity and self-interest—by what you might call the ecological self or the eco-self, co-extensive with other beings and the life of our planet. It is what I will call ‘the greening of the self’” (53). In this we may hear echoes of Aldo Leopold’s “thinking like a mountain,” and such an expansion of the “self” is central to the standpoint of Arne Naess, founder of Deep Ecology, about which Stephanie Kaza writes, “Naess maintained that the most convincing environmental ethics rest on experiential insights of relationship with other life-forms that expand one’s own sense of self” (*Mindfully* 88). Or as Thich Nhat Hanh writes,

If you are a mountain climber or someone who enjoys the countryside, or the green forest, you know that the forests are our lungs outside of our bodies. . . . We should be able to be our true self. That means we should be able to be the river, we should be able to be the forest That is the non-dualistic way of seeing. (68-69)

This appreciation of non-dual modes of experience—whatever they might entail—is one reason green Buddhists lean heavily on Dōgen (1200-1253), who wrote about an emptying or forgetting of oneself that

made it possible to be filled or “confirmed” by the “ten-thousand things.”

Simply put, Buddhism in many of its forms offers both a purification of the self—replacing psychologically detrimental “poisons” with virtuous mental states that conduce to liberation from suffering—and an expansion of the self.¹¹ Along these lines we find numerous strands of Buddhism conceiving of wisdom (P. *paññā*, Skt. *prajñā*)—basically, the virtue cultivated as the opposite of the poison of ignorance—as an insight into dependent arising (Skt. *pratītya-samutpāda*, P. *paṭicca-samuppāda*) and the fact that we arise through conditioning by other “things” and now exist interconnected with those things in—and *as*—an ever-changing process.

These claims about non-duality and insight into dependent arising often lead to arguments that we are metaphysically “one with nature” and hence it is in our self-interest to preserve and protect the natural world. As Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, “Harming nature is harming ourselves, and vice versa” (68-69). Most Buddhists argue on the basis of these claims that they hence readily identify with nature and with others, feel their suffering more, and feel a greater sense of responsibility, not just in the moral or legal sense of being accountable for our actions but in the sense of an impetus (or an obligation) to care for someone or something, as in the claim, “Parents are responsible for the well-being of their children.” From this perspective we encounter claims that Buddhist insight leads us naturally and inevitably to give greater thought to the possible impacts of our actions on the world around us and, by extension, to act in less harmful ways.

¹¹ Technically, the expansion of awareness is part of the response to the poison of ignorance, and hence, strictly speaking, it falls under the rubric of purification.

This does not mean, of course, that people readily discern their metaphysical or ontological embeddedness in natural processes or recognize the effects of their actions, for at present most people seem psychologically estranged from nature. In response to this condition, Jeremy Hayward argues that healing the world requires a “profound re-education aimed at inspiring a deep sense of the interconnectedness of all life” and cultivating “the compassion needed to restore wholesomeness” (65). But what form would such a massive re-education take? And how much time would it require? In the interim before such a global change of consciousness, what else is needed? What about action in the short run to reduce, for example, greenhouse gas emissions?

When green Buddhists engage in discourse about “identifying” with the world around them or recognizing “interdependence,” they must be careful in their rhetoric of identification and interdependence not to lose sight of the fact that some parts of the world with which one can identify and some of the things that condition us are not to be celebrated.¹² That is to say, we can become one with a nuclear reactor as it melts down; and we are in no way dependent on the leaking radioactivity, though we are certainly conditioned (affected) by it.

To help Buddhists make distinctions between the sets of conditions they may identify with or “become one” with and thereby clarify which states of affairs are desirable (such as diverse and flourishing ecosystems) and which are undesirable (such as the areas around the Chernobyl and Fukushima reactors), Buddhist ethicists can turn to the Four Noble Truths, especially when they are reinterpreted in social, political, and economic terms. This doctrine provides an analytical framework for thinking about how humanity has gotten stuck in an ecological morass as a form of suffering and delineating ways of getting ourselves out of

¹² For this reason I prefer rendering *pratitya-samutpāda* as dependent arising or interrelational arising.

this mess.¹³ In a sense, the overall Buddhist commitment to alleviating the suffering of all sentient beings points beyond the virtue ethic of Buddhism to a consequentialist commitment to acting in ways that result in a net decrease in suffering of the greatest number of sentient beings and perhaps even to an implied deontological stance that we have a duty to alleviate suffering.

Although becoming virtuous, expanding one's self-identification, discerning dependent arising, and taking the alleviation of suffering as one's touchstone provide resources for a Buddhist environmental ethic, more is needed. As ethicists point out, a virtue ethic does not provide a ready way of making decisions, and to expect a majority of humans to cultivate virtuous characters and thereby rectify their environmentally destructive actions seems utopian at best. Simply put, regardless of the degree to which she has purified her mind and thereby cultivated virtues, as a Buddhist works to alleviate suffering in this interrelational world she is going to have to make decisions. And these decisions necessitate valuation—of humans, other entities, states of affairs, and certain wholes. That is to say, a viable Buddhist environmental ethic must delve into the debates of Environmental Ethics concerning the instrumental value and intrinsic value of things, the interests if not rights of those things, as well as the value of those individual things relative to the value of the wholes (societies, species, ecosystems) of which they are part.

Many environmental ethicists attribute intrinsic value to non-human animals and in this way grant them moral standing ("considera-

¹³ See Ives, "Deploying the Dharma," 34-38. Although *dukkha* encompasses such forms of suffering as physical pain, Buddhists have engaged in social welfare activities, and the Buddha purportedly said that if his audience were hungry they could not grasp his exposition of the *Dharma* (see Jenkins), Buddhists have usually focused on suffering in the narrow sense of existential anguish and have not to any significant degree factored social and economic conditions into their analysis of suffering and the path to liberation from it.

bility”). Green Buddhists usually follow suit. In his argument for Buddhist vegetarianism, Zen teacher Philip Kapleau writes of the “innate dignity and wholeness (holiness) of animals and their basic kinship with man” (6), and though he does not elaborate on what this dignity and wholeness/holiness might entail, his evaluation of animals finds support in the *Jātaka Tales*, in which animals “are accorded value in their own right, and not deprecated wholesale [as other Buddhist texts do] as miserable and ill-mannered or evil creatures” (Schmithausen 21). But with its doctrines of no-soul and emptiness, Buddhism seems ill-equipped to ascribe intrinsic value to things. Steven Rockefeller has written that “the concept of intrinsic value suggests the existence of some fixed essence or permanent self in things, which is contrary to the Buddhist doctrines of dependent co-arising, impermanence, emptiness, and no-self”(320). Or as David Eckel puts it, intrinsic value “seems to suggest precisely the substantial, permanent identity that the ideas of no-self and interdependent co-origination are meant to undermine” (343).

A Buddhist might argue here that the doctrine of Buddha-nature provides a basis for ascribing intrinsic value. Although this may be a viable basis in some strands of Buddhism, it would not serve as a pan-Buddhist basis, for its connotation is not fixed (with, for example, some seeing it as an innate awakening and others seeing it as an innate ability to awaken) and Indian Buddhists limited its denotation to sentient animals whereas some East Asia Buddhists have extended it to plants and even to rocks and mountains (Schmithausen 22-24).

A better basis for ascribing intrinsic value may be sentience. Buddhist traditions generally construe sentience as the capacity to feel suffering, which Pāli sources categorize as the suffering of physical pain, suffering due to mental dispositions, and suffering experienced when

things change.¹⁴ The *Samyutta Nikāya* views sentience as “feeling, perception, volition, contact, attention” (Bodhi 535). With these features, sentience spans from simple sensation and physical pain at the lower end up to the complex consciousness and existential anguish we see in humans. We can add here that sentience also takes the form of certain mental states that are valued by Buddhists of various persuasions: the array of wholesome mental states discussed earlier, the four *brahma-vihāras*, the seven factors of enlightenment,¹⁵ the six perfections,¹⁶ and so forth. Encompassing all of these features, sentience readily offers itself as a Buddhist basis for attributing value to certain things, at least as objects of “compassionate regard” if not intrinsic value.

Taking sentience as the basis for intrinsic value is not, however, without complications, many of which have been pointed out in criticisms of Peter Singer’s utilitarian standpoint:¹⁷ painless slaughtering, natural predation that entails pain, ethical concern getting directed at animals in pain on factory farms rather than animals in the wild who may not be feeling pain but are on the verge of extinction, and a focus on sentient individuals at the expense of attention to the larger ecosystem, which those individuals may actually be harming.

If despite these issues Buddhists still posit sentience as a basis for intrinsic value, they must address the issue of the *relative* intrinsic value of things. In terms of sentience that takes the form of the three main

¹⁴ The historical Buddha reportedly said, “There are, friend, these three kinds of suffering: the suffering due to pain, the suffering due to formations, and the suffering due to change” (Bodhi 1299). John Makransky terms these three types of *dukkha* “obvious suffering,” “the suffering of ego-conditioning,” and “the suffering of transience” (161-63).

¹⁵ Mindfulness, investigation of the Dharma, vigor, joyousness, serenity, concentration, and equanimity.

¹⁶ Generosity, moral discipline, patience, exertion, meditative absorption, and wisdom.

¹⁷ See Singer, “All Animals are Equal.”

types of suffering, humans experience all three and can be aware that they do so, which brings in an additional degree of anguish presumably not felt by other animals. This provides a basis for deploying what we can term a “calculus of suffering” (Ives, *Zen* 138) as we weigh decisions affecting sentient beings. Further, as traditional Buddhism argues, rebirth as a human with this sort of awareness places us in a valuable and fortunate position relative to attaining liberation, a stance reflected by interpretations of the doctrine of the six levels of samsaric rebirth.¹⁸ According to Peter Harvey,

In the lower realms, there is much suffering and little freedom of action. In the heavenly realms, life is blissful in comparison with human life, but this tends to make the gods complacent, particularly those in the highest heavens, so they may also think that they are eternal, without need of liberation. The human realm is a middle realm, in which there is enough suffering to motivate humans to seek to transcend it by spiritual development, and enough freedom to be able to act on this aspiration. It is thus the most favorable realm for spiritual development (30).

Moreover, as mentioned above, human sentience may take such positively valued forms as wholesome mental states, the six perfections, and so forth.

Because such types of sentience are not present—or are much less present—in other animals, Buddhists can argue that humans have more intrinsic value. And in this way they can conceive of animals along a spectrum in relation to the degree of suffering they can experience,

¹⁸ Denizens of hell, hungry beasts, animals, human beings, warrior titans (*aśura*), and gods (*deva*).

the complexity of their sentience, and the degree to which they have the sorts of mental states that Buddhism values. This provides a foundation for making decisions that affect both humans and other animals (as well as non-sentient entities) and can help Buddhists steer a middle way between a staunch anthropocentrism that would take only human interests into account and a radical biocentrism that would see all animals, including humans, as equal. On this basis a Buddhist can make distinctions between the bacteria flourishing in his yoghurt, the mosquito landing on his arm, the dog sleeping at his feet, and the infant sitting in his lap.

Though the attribution of greater intrinsic value to humans might make some environmentalists nervous, I would argue that this stance is not an example of “speciesism” or anthropocentrism in a pernicious sense. As John Cobb writes, “More positive value is lost and more suffering is inflicted in killing a whale [or a person] than in destroying some plankton. Of course, this is a human judgment, but that does not make it anthropocentric in the way we should avoid” (“Protestant” 224).

Even though this stance may not constitute a form of detrimental anthropocentrism, we must address another problem: individualism. Many ethicists claim that a viable environmental ethic must consider the value or disvalue of individuals for the whole of which they are a part, whether their species, local ecosystem, or bioregion. “Holists” will additionally argue that our focus should expand beyond the value of individuals for larger wholes to the value of the wholes themselves.

The value of individuals for wholes has been termed relational or ecological value. Simon James notes that the type of value that environmentalist want to ascribe certain non-human entities is not “the value a thing has independently of its relations to anything else” (86), but rather a value that is “relational, that is, a function of the habitat in which the organism lives” (87), with the value deriving from the contribution the

entity makes to “the good of the various environmental wholes of which it is part” (87).

In light of this type of value we can conceive of value as falling along a spectrum. At one end is narrow instrumental value, tapped when for their own interests humans or other animals use things in a way that substantially changes or harms them, as when a timber company cuts down a tree and turns it into two-by-fours or a cougar kills a deer and turns it into dinner for its cubs. Next, instrumental value can be tapped in a less impactful way when we use other entities without significantly changing them.¹⁹ We see this when leave-no-trace backpackers access the aesthetic and symbolic value of the backcountry, or when surfers and dolphins enjoy the recreational value of a breaking wave. Moving further along the spectrum we transition from instrumental value to the relational or ecological value of individuals, as seen in plants that fix nitrogen or predators that help maintain the overall harmony or balance of an ecosystem. And then we come to intrinsic value, whether of humans or of non-human sentient beings.

Taking into account all of these types of value makes it possible to expand the foundation of Buddhist ethics beyond sentience and to recognize what sorts of value are most important for *environmental* ethics as opposed to, for example, *social* ethics centered on humans and their rights. That is to say, we can recognize that although people may suffer more and have more complex and valuable sentience than bacteria or trees and hence possess more intrinsic value, bacteria and trees play a

¹⁹ Kant is cognizant of this sort of instrumental value when he sets forth the second formulation of the categorical imperative, “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but also at the same time as an end,” which in part amounts in inter-human affairs to the need to secure another person’s consent before using them in certain ways.

more important role in most ecosystems and hence have more ecological value than humans do.

By taking all of this into account, Buddhist ethicists can strike a balance in their ethic between the interests of people and the interests of non-human components of the environment. As David Griffin writes,

Deep ecologists and land ethicists have been focusing primarily on ecological value. Given that focus, they rightly see that those species at the base of the ecological pyramid—such as the worms, the trees, the bacteria, the plankton—are vital. If these thinkers focus exclusively on ecological value, they may see concern for the liberation of humans and other mammals from suffering as diversionary or worse. (203)

Along these lines, green Buddhists can learn from those who think in terms of eco-justice,²⁰ balancing the interests of people, especially the poor, with the need for better environmental regulation or the preservation of wilderness areas.

Though we have just sketched a Buddhist typology of the value of individual entities inclusive of their ecological value, we still must address the value of *wholes*, such as species, ecosystems, or the biosphere. Reflecting on this can help green Buddhists engage the debate between animal liberationists and deep ecologists around issues like culling, with the former committed to protecting individuals (with their sentience and possible suffering) and the latter focused on wholes, even if the protection of those wholes causes suffering for certain individuals (which in the past has led some to level charges of “environmental fascism” (Regan 362)).

²⁰ Not that justice is a core construct in Buddhism, an issue I will touch upon later in this article.

In certain respects Buddhist traditions do attend to wholes. Simon James writes that “it would seem that Zen and ethical holism show a similar awareness of the natural world as a whole” (74)²¹ and that “[t]he teaching of universal emptiness means that to know the nature of any element of reality one must look to its context, its environment” (75). Recent interpretations of *pratītya-samutpāda*, including Thich Nhat Hanh’s notion of “interbeing,” display a holistic bent. Many green Buddhists celebrate Indra’s net as described in the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. In its actual forms, however, the Buddhist view of larger wholes has been ambivalent at best. Early Buddhists saw the matrix of dependent arising as a trap, as the realm of samsara, from which they sought escape in the direction of nirvana. Wild nature, although valued in what Lambert Schmithausen has called the “hermit tradition,” has generally been viewed as a place of danger, in part because of the untamed animals, spirits, and demons that dwell there. And in East Asian Buddhism, wild areas have not been valued in themselves as having some sort of intrinsic value; rather, the main value attributed to them is their religious value for humans as a good place to pursue meditative practice, far from the “dusty” realm of towns and cities with all of their temptations and conflict.

Nevertheless, some recent Buddhist thinkers have echoed holistic thinkers like Aldo Leopold, who writes in *A Sand County Almanac*, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (262). In an essay on Buddhist ecology, David Barnhill argues that

When we think of something as Other, then we *devalue* it: any value it may have is instrumental. But if nature is considered a community we are part of, then its value is

²¹ James also writes, “Zen seems to embody a concern for individual phenomena at odds with extreme holism” (75).

intrinsic: both the individual beings and the system as a whole have their own integrity. (188)

When thinking on the basis of the schema of Buddhist valuation sketched above, it seems hard to attribute intrinsic value to “the system as a whole,” for the system is lacking in sentience. But this would not prevent us from considering ways of attributing intrinsic value to another whole: a species with sentience. But, given that a species does not have sentience—all sentience resides in the individuals comprising the species—it seems a stretch to construe the species per se as having intrinsic value.

Perhaps the most authentically Buddhist approach that can be taken to wholes is simply to claim that such wholes as healthy ecosystems²² and species (at least those that are not overpopulating and harming an ecosystem and its other inhabitants) have ecological value and benefit humans and other sentient beings. Although a healthy ecosystem necessarily includes the pain that occurs in predation and natural disasters, in general it supports more liberation and entails less suffering than a polluted or severely disrupted system. (Buddhists can also make a case for protecting overall biodiversity insofar as it may lead to cures for diseases and, for most people, greater aesthetic and symbolic value.) As John Cobb remarks, “For the most part, in the natural world the realization of intrinsic value by individuals and the flourishing of the system are highly correlated” (*Deep* 122). That being said, a Buddhist could argue in theory that a damaged ecosystem can make people more aware of suffering and more willing to let go of attachments, even to the physical world, similar to how early Buddhist texts call on monks to further their spiritual progress by meditating in cemeteries, and although this might

²² Of course, ecosystems are not static or devoid of chaos, which, as many contemporary ecologists point out, raises questions about talk of the health, harmony, or balance of an ecosystem.

not serve ecological ends it might serve the attainment of *nirvāṇa* or awakening, the *summum bonum* of Buddhism.

To the extent Buddhist ethicists might consider the ways in which wholes have value or “integrity,” they can better articulate which wholes deserve to be valued. The whole right now, with nuclear contamination and high levels of greenhouse gases? The kind of whole that existed before the Industrial Revolution? Or some future, unprecedented whole? This is an issue especially for Zen Buddhists, who, by thinking of awakening in part as “according” or “becoming one” with whatever actuality they encounter, run the risk of valorizing actuality—the whole they encounter—and subverting any inclination to transform it into something better. In other words, haunting Buddhist celebrations of wholes is the naturalistic fallacy, as seen when celebrations of the whole undermines the ability to make the sort of distinctions that are necessary and unavoidable in environmental ethics, such as the distinction between a negative “is” (such as a toxic river) and a positive “ought” (the clean river that can result from clean-up efforts).

One other resource Buddhists might be able to tap in their formulations of environmental ethics is beauty. As Zen Buddhists—and nature writers around the world—have claimed, natural beauty can lift us out of our narrow selves and fill us with awe and wonder, even if we do not experience the enlightenment experience that Dōgen referred to as being “confirmed by the ten-thousand things.” Simon James notes that for “Zen there is no clear line between a moral concern for nature and an aesthetic appreciation of it” (73). In his treatment of Leopold’s notion of “integrity, stability, and beauty,” David Barnhill states that “our moral love and respect for nature is based on an aesthetic appreciation of the beauty and value of the land” (92). Or as Theravāda ethicist Padmasiri de Silva has written, it is the “aesthetic dimension that reinforces our move toward conservation” (15). At the same time, some Buddhists have

warned against getting enraptured by natural beauty, for it, too, can become an object of attachment.

As we have seen thus far, Buddhism offers a vision of a virtuous character and epistemology that have ecological ramifications, and Buddhists can secure a properly Buddhist basis for sorting types of value relevant to making decisions, can reinterpret the Four Noble Truths as a framework for analysis and advocacy, and may even be able to tap aesthetic dimension of the tradition. Yet in taking stock of resources for a Buddhist environmental ethic, especially the Buddhist virtue ethic, we may, like most critics of virtue ethics, wonder what Buddhism offers to motivate and guide action in the short run to ameliorate environmental problems. Given the scale of those problems at present, and the fact that the challenge facing us is not simply the world view, attitudes, and behavioral patterns of consumers but also structural issues concerning the power and interests of corporations and other players in political economies, sustained, broad-based action (a global movement?) to bring about structural change seems necessary. What might Buddhism offer in this regard, in the arena of social action rather than personal transformation, ecological values, and special modes of experience and analysis?

The first issue we need to address in this regard is the impetus toward social action in Buddhism. Some have claimed that an awakening to emptiness, inclusive of an overcoming of the epistemological separation or duality between self and others, leads naturally, immediately, and inevitably to a compassionate concern for others (especially when coupled with the ostensible realization that there is no liberation for oneself apart from the liberation of others). I have argued elsewhere that if indeed Buddhists historically have acted compassionately to help others function along the lines of the bodhisattva ideal, such action may have been prompted less by meditative epistemologies than by cues

from the conceptual, liturgical, and iconographic milieu in which Buddhists operate.²³

But regardless of the source of the impetus to act, what sort of social action has the tradition generated over the centuries? For the past 2500 years in Asia, Buddhist institutions have, with few exceptions, existed in a symbiotic relationship with the most powerful political institutions and actors (rulers, merchants, military leaders) in their societies and hence have lacked the critical distance that is necessary for fostering what we might call a prophetic voice. Moreover, with a resultant accommodation of the status quo and deterministic reads on the doctrine of karma, many Buddhists have not thought in terms of social justice, at least in terms of distributive justice and human rights (though allowing for retributive justice). Granted, Buddhists have engaged in a range of charitable activities, but one is hard pressed to find cases of such social concern expanding to efforts to bring about structural change that would eliminate the causes of the problems from which the recipients of charity suffer, the various kinds of “injustice” that humans suffer from in Asia and beyond.

Moreover, Buddhists have generally been adverse to the kind of confrontation and conflict that activists and revolutionaries have accepted as unavoidable. Again, Buddhist institutions have usually accommodated the status quo. With the exception of such rare cases as Buddhist monks protesting the Vietnam War, Buddhism has no tradition of the kind of civil disobedience that activists like Bill McKibben are starting to call for as we confront the power of the fossil fuel industry and their friends in Congress and try to foster an effective and substantial response to the climate crisis. At the same time, although Buddhists lift up *ahimsā* in the first precept and in numerous other ways, they have

²³ See my “What’s Compassion Got to Do with It?”

generally accepted violence by their governments (state violence, if you will) and in many cases justified it with arguments about the role of the king or the government as the protector of the *Dharma* and the legitimacy of violence to protect the *Dharma*.

Buddhism does, however, have much to offer about the goals of social action. With its vision of human flourishing, and with the visions of society that Buddhādāsa, the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Sarvodaya Movement, and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship have advanced, Buddhism provides a wealth of resources for thinking about what might be entailed in an optimal society, inclusive of its non-human members.

What remains to be seen, however, is whether Buddhist organizations or Buddhism in general can mobilize adherents to work actively and effectively to create green political economies that can be advocated on a legitimate Buddhist basis as conducive to greater liberation from suffering, rather than seeing the economic, political, and natural arena of human existence as a trap, or arguing that the proper focus of Buddhism is helping people awaken and, because people can awaken in any circumstances, energy should not be expended on trying to change political and economic conditions.

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