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## The Lorax Wears Saffron: Toward a Buddhist Environmentalism

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# The Lorax Wears Saffron: Toward a Buddhist Environmentalism

Seth Devere Clippard<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article<sup>2</sup> argues for the reorientation of eco-Buddhist discourse from a focus on establishing textual justifications of what Buddhist environmental ethics says towards a discourse in which Buddhist rhetoric and environmental practice are intimately linked through specific communal encounters. The article first identifies and assesses two different strategies used by advocates of Buddhist environmentalism in Thailand, one being textual and the other practical. Then, after laying out the deficiencies of the textual strategy, the article argues that the practical strategy offers a more meaningful basis for a discourse of Buddhist environmental concern—one that accounts for the differences in Buddhist communities but does not discount the importance of key Buddhist concepts. This article will suggest that a rhetorical interpretation of environmental practices offers the most effective means of articulating the ethical foundations of religious environmentalism.

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What does it mean to ordain a tree? Would the Buddha have imagined recycling to be a practice of *mettā*? These kinds of questions are the product of the growing attention devoted to the intersection of Buddhism and ecology. For almost two decades, scholars have been examining this intersection of Buddhism and the environment—is it legitimate? How can it be articulated? Is it traditionally Buddhist? Is it a new form of Buddhism?

The field of Buddhism and ecology has grown gradually since the first anthology of Buddhist environmental writing, *Dharma Gaia*, appeared in 1990. Much of the scholarly work has addressed the ontological strands of Buddhist thought in an attempt to demonstrate that Buddhism is an “environmentally-friendly” tradition. Some of this work has simply focused on descriptions of Buddhist texts as “ecological,” although other approaches have been more sophisticated, taking into consideration the cultural contexts of the Buddhism under examination. Not every scholar believes that Buddhism contains a *sui generis* environmental ethic and some have critiqued work on Buddhist environmentalism for twisting the tradition beyond recognition. Because the environmental crisis as it is currently perceived is a contemporary, or at least modern, phenomenon, the resources that scholars draw upon and the very way in which they define the tradition precedes and conditions (if not determines) their environmental reading of the tradition. Pragati Sahni describes the situation very well: “It is believed predominantly that nearly all Buddhist teachings in their application to the environment remain unclear and ambiguous. Thus, scholars at both ends of the spectrum have legitimate reason to trust their own interpretation and doubt others” (2).

## Approaches

A variety of different approaches have been taken in addressing the issues pertinent to Buddhism and the environment. Many of these approaches attempt to resolve environmental philosophy and ethics debates by applying Buddhist terms and doctrines. For example, Buddhist thinkers such as Joanna Macy and Deane Curtin have used Buddhist perspectives to argue against anthropocentric worldviews. Other Buddhist scholars seek to construct a uniquely Buddhist environmental ethic—an ethic that both justifies Buddhist concern for the environment and further argues that environmentalism is integral to or inherent in Buddhist practice. Examples of this approach run the gamut of renowned Buddhists from the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh to Zen roshis John Daido Looi and Robert Aitken.

Nonetheless, a handful of dominant concepts can be isolated from the growing corpus of research on the topic—concepts such as *paticca-samuppāda*, *mettā*, and *anattā*. Most of the essays optimistic about the possibility of a Buddhist environmental ethic proceed from one or more of these concepts, correlating them to similar ideas in ecology. They then marshal a set of excerpts from the canon as evidence that even the earliest periods of Buddhist literature (*Jātakas*, *Theragāthā*, *Aggañña Sutta*) have an ecological sense. Finally, they assert that Buddhists must be mindful of their impact on the earth and live in a way that reduces suffering for all beings. I have simplified what are often more nuanced arguments, but each of these steps tends to find a place in most articles on the subject.

In response to the growing body of literature on Buddhism and the environment, Ian Harris and Donald Swearer each have proposed typologies of eco-Buddhism. Swearer's typology, building upon Harris's, identifies five different eco-Buddhist positions: eco-apologist, eco-critic, eco-constructivist, eco-ethicist, and eco-contextualist:

The first position [eco-apologist] holds that Buddhist environmentalism extends naturally from the Buddhist worldview; the second [eco-critic] that the Buddhist worldview does not harmonize with an environmental ethic. The third position [eco-constructivist] maintains that one can construct a Buddhist environmental ethic, though not coterminous with a Buddhist worldview, from Buddhist texts and doctrinal tenets; the fourth [eco-ethicist], that one should evaluate a viable Buddhist environmental ethic in terms of Buddhist ethics rather than inferred from the Buddhist worldview. The fifth position [eco-contextualist] holds that the most effective Buddhist environmental ethic takes its definition in terms of particular contexts and situations. (“Assessment” 125)

The latter three positions are more recent responses to the critiques offered by the “eco-critics.” Ian Harris denies that the positions favorable to Buddhist environmentalism reflect an authentically Buddhist position. According to Harris, most articulations of “Buddhist environmentalism”<sup>3</sup> either appeal to values and concepts that are no different from other more general environmental philosophies, or they so greatly distort the meaning of the Buddhist concepts and text appealed to that they render them “un-Buddhist.”<sup>4</sup>

With this critique in mind, I will approach the question of how to analyze Buddhist responses to the environment from a different methodological tack. Rather than focusing on how to interpret Buddhist

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this article I will refer to ecology and environmentalism interchangeably. There are differences, but I do not think they are germane to the argument I am making. Additionally, the terms “eco-Buddhism” and “Buddhist environmentalism” refer to the same idea.

<sup>4</sup> See Harris 1997; 2003.

concepts and texts in the light of contemporary ecological philosophy, I will look at a specific Buddhist culture, that of Thai Buddhism, and ask how Thai Buddhist discourse and practice influence and intersect with the “discourse of environmental concern.”<sup>5</sup> This approach reflects Willis Jenkins’s suggestion that “religious ethics might let the contest [disagreements regarding how to approach environmental ethics] shape an initial inquiry by asking how various religious strategies frame and address environmental issues” (“After” 295). He further argues that scholars should first identify the strategies used by religious communities to address environmental problems, strategies that produce “new ethical capacities” and make “environmental issues” meaningful to religious experience (303). “Recognizing the problem-driven character of religious environmentalisms,” as Jenkins suggests, offers a context for homing in on the ways in which religious leaders can link religious concepts and beliefs with an environmental worldview capable of directing action. Anna Peterson addresses this gap between theory and practice by stating that “Environmental ethicists need to abandon the idealist assumption of a simple and unidirectional relationship between ideas and practice, in which practice is always derivative or secondary to ideas and which believes that if we get the ideas right, then the practices will follow” (57).

I identify two distinct strategies through which Thai Buddhists have responded to environmental concerns, the first rooted in theory, mostly based on an interpretation of Buddhist texts and concepts (a combination of the eco-apologist, eco-constructivist, and to some degree the eco-ethicist types) and the second rooted in practice, which has been

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<sup>5</sup>I borrow this term from Harris 1997. Julia Corbett discusses the term “environmental concern” in her book *Communicating Nature: How We Create and Understand Environmental Messages* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2006). Her analysis suggests that we can understand the term to refer to how and the degree to which pro-environmental attitudes, thoughts, behaviors, and intentions are expressed (60-65).

based in activist and ritual responses to environmental crises (the eco-contextualist type). The first I will refer to as the textual strategy, the second, the practical strategy. Both strategies attempt to make environmental concern meaningful in a Buddhist context and find expression in a Thai Buddhist eco-discourse. The strategies share some similar discursive elements but also have fundamental differences. The practical strategy is most creatively exemplified by the popular but controversial ritual of “ordaining” trees.<sup>6</sup> It has been duly noted that because only humans can be ordained as monks, tree ordination is symbolic. I will argue that the mixture of symbolism, rhetoric, and activism coming together in the ritual of ordination makes the emergent discourse more effective in establishing a meaningful Buddhist environmental ethic. Finally, I will suggest that the eco-contextualist approach exemplified by the practical strategy offers the more effective model for developing a Thai Buddhist discourse of environmental concern, which then can enable the articulation of a corresponding environmental ethic.

### **The Textual Strategy**

The textual strategy is itself discursive, by which I mean that for scholars and advocates of this medium, the first step of Buddhist environmentalism is the articulation of a Thai eco-Buddhist discourse. The textual strategy is the product of scholars (monks and laity) who are familiar with Western forms of ecological discourse. These scholars, relying on an interpretation of key Buddhist concepts and texts in a way that implies a connection to an environmental discourse, have created a Thai eco-Buddhist discourse that resembles the approach Peterson

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<sup>6</sup> Swearer (2006, 136) lists tree ordination as an example of eco-contextualist discourse. Other examples include the protests at Doi Suthep in 1986 and the architecture of the Ciji headquarters in Hualien, Taiwan.



critiques above. That is, by placing Buddhist terms within the discourse of environmental concern and forging the link between Buddhist thought and environmental theory, Buddhists have taken a proactive approach towards addressing environmental issues. Below I will explore some of the terms and concepts that make up part of this strategy. Then I will lay out some of the critiques that have addressed this form of eco-Buddhist discourse.

The term *paṭicca-samuppāda* is often translated as “dependent origination,” but in eco-Buddhist discourse we find the translation “interdependence” as well. The reason for choosing the latter is not difficult to discern. Perhaps the most commonly accepted notion of ecology is the study of how entities (individuals, groups, and systems) in the natural world are interrelated. The term “interdependence” (and sometimes “holism”) is often used to reflect this understanding. Because “dependent origination” does not have the same ecological ring as “interdependence,” it is clear that the latter, with its obvious sense that things are related, would be a more effective, meaningful translation with reference to environmentalism.

Sulak Sivaraksa, for instance, uses the term “interdependent,” claiming that the “concept of interdependent co-arising is the crux of Buddhist understanding. Nothing is formed in isolation and, like the jeweled net of Indra, each individual reflects every other infinitely” (71). The image of the “jeweled net of Indra” is a classic image for dependent origination and has been used to connect Buddhism with the “web of life” image found in Western ecological discourse.<sup>7</sup> Sivaraksa goes on to argue that anthropocentric language is a cause for environmental damage, and the concept of dependent origination reorients human understanding towards a more environmentally beneficial worldview: “Environmentalism, as advocated by the government, is a farce and

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<sup>7</sup> See Ingram 1997.

needs to be replaced by a new understanding of the mutually dependent relationship between all forms of nature” (75). He also offers some instances of a life reflecting this “new understanding,” such as “Every time a tree is planted, every time a child swims in a river, every time we look upon each other with eyes of compassionate understanding, our commitment to interdependence is restored” (78).

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh also draws on this sense of interdependence, using it to describe the proper human/non-human relationship. She says, “A man is a part of nature and cannot live as an individual or collectively as a nation, if he violates the laws of nature and shows disregard for it. We must learn to respect nature and see it holistically” (*Conservation* 12). This understanding of the environmental crisis—that humans act as if they are separate from the world—resonates with much nonanthropocentric environmental ethics in Europe and North America. That is, human failure to acknowledge non-human beings as morally considerable allows them to pursue courses of action harmful to other species and whole ecosystems.

However, other Buddhist thinkers believe that such uses of the doctrine of dependent origination are misplaced. Andrew Olendzki has remarked that:

the more interconnected we become, the more bound in the net of conditioned phenomena we may find ourselves. I think the Buddha was pointing a way out of all this, but it is not through getting further connected. It has more to do with getting less connected, less entangled, and less attached. (qtd. in McMahan 181-182)

Olendzki questions the joy that some Buddhist thinkers such as Joanna Macy seem to find in this conditioned, “saṃsāric” world. From a Theravādin perspective, this joy would certainly not be easily justified, if

at all. *Samsāra* is something to be transcended rather than celebrated. Although I think that Olendzki's observation is accurate, it does not fully account for how dependent origination is applied in eco-discourse. The goal may certainly be to become unconditioned, but the uses of dependent origination in the context of eco-Buddhist discourse emphasize how to live in the world while we (individually) are still within the realm of *samsāra*. It is from this perspective that the eco-Buddhist use of the concept should be understood.

*Mettā* or loving-kindness is another concept commonly used as the basis of a Buddhist environmental ethic. According to Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "The very core of Buddhism evolves around compassion, encouraging a better respect for and tolerance of every human being and living thing sharing the planet" (Nash 8). Although Kabilsingh uses the word compassion here, she frequently switches between "compassion" and "loving-kindness." I do not think she is intending to distinguish *mettā* from *karuna*, but is referring generally to what is normally understood as *mettā*.

*Mettā* is often connected to the concept of *ahiṃsā*, the doctrine of non-harm. Because one is enjoined to not harm other living beings,<sup>8</sup> developing loving-kindness towards them is one way to establish a relationship with them that precludes actions that may cause harm. In other words, if *ahiṃsā* is the goal, *mettā* is the method. This construction is also central to the precepts and the Eightfold Path. All five of the precepts are directed towards avoiding doing harm to others, whether that harm is verbal, bodily, or psychological. The directives on the Eightfold Path concerning ethics (*sīla*) are likewise intended to limit the harm one might do. Right speech, right action, and right livelihood

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the debate regarding whether only living beings are the subject of *ahiṃsa* or if all things be included (rivers, forests, etc.) is far from settled.

provide guidelines for living that are intended to diminish the harm done to other beings in the course of daily life.

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu offers a vision of the human-nature relationship based on his own interpretation and arrangement of Buddhist concepts. He takes *Dhamma* to mean “nature,” setting up the condition that destruction of the environment is equivalent to destroying *Dhamma*: “By cutting down the forests, we are cutting ourselves off from *Dhamma*” (Santikaro 160; see also Swearer “Hermeneutics” 25). Buddhadāsa makes clear that *Dhamma* refers both to nature in the sense of a natural law, a fundamental truth of the world, and to nature in the sense of the natural world. In the first sense, *Dhamma* as the “Law of Nature” is the teaching of dependent origination (Santikaro 161). In the second sense, *Dhamma* is nature as the physical world, of which humans are an inextricable part, and which is expressed by the term *Dhammajati*—“that which is born out of the natural order” (Santikaro 159). This equation of *Dhamma* with the natural world perhaps evolved out of his connection to the forest tradition. Regardless of the derivation, we are encouraged to view nature as a source of Buddhist teachings. “Indeed, the lessons nature teaches us lead to a new birth beyond the suffering (*dukkha*) that results from attachment to self” (cited in Swearer “Hermeneutics” 25). In response to environmental damage, Buddhadāsa advocates an ethic of care (Thai, *anurak*; Pali, *anurakkhā*), but this sense of care is based on non-attachment to self, an empathy with all other things that “necessarily implies the ontological realization of interdependent co-arising” (“Hermeneutics” 26-27). It is difficult to isolate a single term as the most basic in Buddhadāsa’s teachings on the connection between Buddhism and the environment. He links dependent origination, suffering, care, *Dhamma*, and nature together in an interrelated system that strikes at the heart of the Buddhist project of overcoming suffering with wisdom. Just how this

system would be carried out in practice, however, is left somewhat ambiguous.

Phra Payutto has also spoken about the dangers of environmental damage and the need to change our understanding of ourselves and nature in order to be able to act in ways that minimize or arrest this damage. According to Donald Swearer, the difference between Payutto and Buddhādāsa can be described by comparing Buddhādāsa's "spiritual biocentrism based on an identification of nature and *Dhamma*," with Payutto's textual strategy in which "teachings are more systematic in nature and more consistently grounded in Pali texts and Theravāda historical traditions" ("Hermeneutics" 30-31). Swearer goes on to note that Payutto "finds within the Buddhist worldview of mutual cooperation an alternative to Western dualism and materialism, which he holds responsible for many forms of global exploitation" (36-37). Payutto investigates the roots of the environmental crisis, finding that aversion (*doṣa dosa?*) and greed (*lobha*) have led to a global consumerist lifestyle, the consequence of which is pollution, poverty, and other social problems ("Buddhist Solutions" 170-171). These two qualities are basic to the Buddhist interpretation of suffering (*dukkha*). Therefore, the problem of the environment is in essence the Buddhist problem of suffering. Consequently, Payutto offers a solution that is the basic Buddhist response to the problem of suffering—the Eightfold Path.

Payutto states that "environmental problems must be addressed on three levels," which are "behavior," "the mind," and "understanding" (*Towards* 91). These three levels correspond to the three parts of the eight-fold path—*sīla* (behavior), *samādhi* (the mind), and *paññā* (understanding). From this example we see the degree to which Payutto, although responding to a contemporary social and ethical problem, returns to the very foundation of Buddhism to craft a response.

The textual strategy not only employs specific concepts but looks to certain texts as well. One popular body of texts for exploring the intersection of Buddhism and ecology is the *Jātakas*, the stories of the past lives of the Buddha. There are several ways these have been used in eco-Buddhist discourse: to show that animals are morally considerable, to argue for the inherent ecological concern for the natural world by the Buddha, and to connect human ethics with the lives of animals. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh sees the *Jātakas* as teaching that we ought to act with compassion towards the natural world. She argues that the *jātaka* tales show that, due to the working of *kamma*, humans are connected to non-human beings. Just as the Buddha in the past was a bird, a tiger, and so forth, so we, too, have been animals before; thus, harming animals is tantamount to self-harm, as well as harm of those we care for (*Conservation* 107-108). She also points out that in many stories, animals are spared from harm because they act in ethically conscious ways or because the story contains a proscriptive stance towards harming animals or other elements of nature. Some of the stories she cites are found in *suttas* such as the *Rukkha Sutta* (*Samyutta Nikāya* 48.67; *Conservation* 79).

The general thrust of the textual strategy is thus to identify what is ecological about Buddhism or which concepts and texts in Buddhism serve the purpose of constructing a discourse of environmental concern. The project attempts to offer a description of Buddhism that allows for a natural linkage with a more normative environmental ethic. The bridging of Buddhist concepts, whether ethical or cosmological, with the elements of what tends to be a non-anthropocentric/biocentric/ecocentric environmental ethic is assumed to be all that is needed to induce in Buddhists a change towards ecological consciousness. I will first present the critiques of other scholars regarding this strategy, then, after presenting the practical strategy, I will return to my own critique of the textual strategy.

## Critiques

The category of “eco-critics” illustrates that not every scholar is convinced that an environmental ethic can be derived from Buddhist thought, much less that it is in any way *inherently* ecological. Scholars such as Ian Harris, Christopher Ives, and Lambert Schmidhausen are critical of approaches that interpret Buddhism wholesale as unproblematically environmental. Ives has illustrated how when some thinkers take a rather common environmental concept like identification with nature and explain it in a Buddhist context, or the Buddhist concept *pratītya-samutpāda*, when it is translated as the equivalent of the ecological notion of interdependence, they succumb to certain “rhetorical pitfalls” (“Green Dharma” 167). For example, Ives states those who advocate using “interdependence” as the translation of *pratītya-samutpāda* tend to erroneously claim that the flourishing of beings is dependent on *all* other things. Likewise, stating that it is desirable to “become one” with nature puts one on the slippery slope of being unable to make ethical distinctions between pristine rivers and rivers of toxic sludge.<sup>9</sup> Implicit in his critique is the notion that what, as Donald Swearer might say, eco-apologists and eco-constructivists are really trying to do is find a Buddhist environmental rhetoric, a way to speak in Buddhist terms about the environment that is both meaningful and effective.

Ian Harris has offered a series of critiques of Buddhist environmentalism that questions the way terms (Buddhist and non-Buddhist) are interpreted and points out what he sees as the damaging consequences of eco-Buddhist appropriations of the tradition. For instance, the concern for the welfare of animals Harris attributes not to

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<sup>9</sup> See also Ives 2008. In the case of *pratītya-samutpāda*, Ives suggests that the concept is not unrelated to environmental thought but that the “rhetorical pitfalls” might be avoided by translating the term as “conditional arising” (“Green Dharma” 167).

Buddhism but to a larger ethic of civility: “Concern for the animal kingdom is compatible with Buddhism but does not arise naturally from its central insights into the nature of reality” (“Ecological” 178). There are other specific examples that Harris offers (the instrumental value that wild areas have, not because of some intrinsic worth, but because they aid the monastic life), but the charge that Harris levels against the eco-Buddhist approach in general is that it does not sit easily with Buddhism’s worldview. “Nirvanic ateleology”<sup>10</sup>—the absence of concern for the future of *samsāra* due to a focus on liberation from it—and the teaching of impermanence render the world “a domain devoid of substantiality” and obviate the need to justify concern for the natural world (“Ecological” 180). Moreover, the instances of ecological concern represented by the adherence to *ahiṃsā* that other scholars point to in Buddhist texts and history are interpreted by Harris just as the acknowledgement of the Buddha that it would be beneficial to the spread of the *sangha* to encourage actions that demonstrate respect for this kind of civilized behavior. I think that Harris is, for the most part, correct in questioning the authenticity of Buddhist environmentalism, both because claiming Buddhism is inherently environmental is contradicted by concepts central to the tradition and because some concepts invoked to support Buddhist environmentalism have a pre-Buddhist history. Despite his critiques, though, we should recognize that Harris is working from an essentialized interpretation of Buddhism just as much as are those he criticizes. As Harris states elsewhere, “supporters of an authentic Buddhist environmental ethic have tended toward a positive indifference to the history and complexity of the Buddhist tradition” and that “the generalization of practices from one

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<sup>10</sup> I use “ateleology” because Harris is keen to argue that Buddhism does not possess a teleology, which is why it is difficult to justify protecting entities that do not participate in the process of enlightenment. Although I find this interpretation of nirvana problematic, I think using ateleology provides a compromise between my views and Harris’s.



historical, geographical, or cultural phase of the tradition, in an attempt to justify some monolithic Buddhist position, will be largely illegitimate” (“Discourse” 378; 382). However, Harris seems susceptible to the same critique because his definition of Buddhism takes account only of early Buddhism. Nonetheless, the broader question he raises is worthy of consideration: by what criteria is a Buddhist environmental ethic to be considered “Buddhist” and not “a blend of the sort of globalized environmental discourse we might meet with in any part of today’s world” (“Discourse” 387-88)? This is the question on which critics of eco-Buddhism focus.

### **The Practical Strategy**

Beyond the textually-based discourse of environmental concern, there is another Buddhist response to environmental problems that looks to Buddhist activism as a means of articulating an effective statement of the need for conservation. Perhaps the earliest Thai environmental activist monk is Ajahn Pongsak Techathamamoo, who in the early 1980s began working with villagers to restore the surrounding forests after decades of clear-cutting (Brown; Swearer, *Buddhist* 126-128). Ajahn Pongsak’s efforts were directed at enhancing the living conditions of the villagers by encouraging and helping them to reclaim the forest for the economic stability it offered. However, because he saw the need to change the villager’s perception of the forest he contextualized the project in terms of the practice of Buddhist ethics. As we will see below, the practice-oriented approach (using “practice” broadly) supports a contextualized Buddhist eco-discourse that is particular to Thai Buddhism and is made meaningful and immediate by the simultaneous emergence of environmental activism and Buddhist rhetoric.

Perhaps the most well-known example of this practical medium in Thailand is tree ordination, a practice in which trees are “ordained” and wrapped in a saffron robe to indicate that they have the status of a monk. I argue that tree ordination should be understood not only as a strategy but as an integral rhetorical element of a strand of eco-Buddhist discourse, communicating the belief that trees are valuable and must be saved from logging and development. When trees are destroyed, suffering arises—villagers suffer from losing a source of livelihood, monks suffer from losing a place for religious practice endorsed by the tradition, and from the biocentric perspective of someone like Buddhādāsa, the trees suffer as the objects of harm. The practice of ordaining trees is informed by the basic Buddhist dialectic of suffering and *nirvāṇa* (ordination marking the beginning of a way of life intended to end suffering by the attainment of *nirvāṇa*). But unlike the instances of textual discourse which decontextualize Buddhist eco-discourse, the discursive aspect of tree ordination is meaningful because it employs Buddhist concepts to contextualize the concrete experience of the ordination ritual, making the connection between environmental concern and Buddhist practice profoundly meaningful.

The first tree ordination was performed by Phrakhru Manas Natheepitak in 1988 as a response to the droughts brought on by excessive logging that had severely affected the rivers and streams (Darlington, “Good” 172-175; see also “Rethinking” 170). He saw that the droughts had been brought on by the deforestation caused by excessive logging.<sup>11</sup> In order to bring this connection to the local people’s attention, he invented the practice of tree ordination. He explains:

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<sup>11</sup> Although it appears from the scholarship that the first tree ordinations were performed by Phrakhru Manas in response to the local people’s suffering caused by drought, deforestation in Thailand has also been identified as the cause of severe flooding. In Thailand, as in many other Asia countries (such as India, Taiwan, Indonesia, and China), logging continued unabated up until the recent decades.

If a tree is wrapped in saffron robes, no one would dare cut it down. So I thought that perhaps the idea could be used to discourage logging, and I began performing ceremonies on trees in the forest near the temple. I called the ritual “ordination” to give it more weight. The term “tree ordination” sounds weird to Thai people since an ordination is a ritual applied only to men. This weirdness has helped spread the news by word of mouth. (cited in Udomittipong 193)

Phrakhru Manas addresses several issues of interest to questions of environmental philosophy and ethics. First, he does not refer to *paṭicca-samuppāda*, *mettā*, *Dhamma*, or *Jātakas*. It seems that people would not hurt a tree wrapped in robes because even if they were not wholly convinced that the ordained tree was on par with a monk, they would not be willing to risk losing merit by harming it in some way. The saffron robes are in themselves something to be respected. Furthermore, Phrakhru Manas clearly says that the term “tree ordination” was chosen intentionally for its “weirdness.” By choosing to mimic the ordination of monks, he goes beyond just wrapping a tree in robes. The tree participates in a ritual in which normally a person undergoes a change in identity. The ordination calls to mind the path of renunciation and the goal of *nirvāṇa*. This process marks the tree off from not only other trees, but all non-ordained beings. Herein lies the efficacy of the practice. Anyone could wrap saffron robes around a tree, but only a monk can perform an ordination; and in that ordination the monk passes karmic power to the subject being ordained. To use a linguistic analogy, the monk is the signifier, the tree is the signified, and the ordination is the signification. On the one hand, the meaning of the ordination (the statement) is roughly the same regardless of the signified. On the other hand, the statement in which the tree is the signified produces a radically different effect on the listener for whom the signification

(ordination) is meaningful. The signified, having been modified by the signification, challenges the listener to adjust his/her relationship to the signified in light of the new semantic values attached to the signified. That is, the members of the Buddhist community are challenged to understand what an ordained tree means and how that affects what all trees now mean.

We can now see how tree ordination can be described as a form of environmental rhetoric. There is a definite rhetorical aspect to the practice that informs the human participants that tree ordination is not merely environmental symbolism, rhetoric in the sense of being strategic speech meant to unify a community and evoke a response.<sup>12</sup> The ordination is symbolic to the extent that both the monk and the tree are connected through the shared symbol of the robe, although a tree's status as a monk would not find support in the *Vinaya*. But it is not *merely* symbolic because the way in which the human community relates to the ordained tree is now changed, a change which would probably not occur were it not for the ordination ritual. This change can be understood by recalling Jenkins' claim that strategies (such as tree ordination) can lead to "new ethical capacities" among religious practitioners. In the case of tree ordination, the local community supportive of the ritual is engaged in a new intersubjective experience between the community and the tree. The experience is new due to the presence of a novel participant in the relationship—the ordained tree. It is meaningful, though, because the laity has experienced ordinations before and so know that the ordained individual stands in a new relationship with the laity.

Susan Darlington has written extensively on monks she terms "ecology monks," a group that she defines as "those [monks] actively

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<sup>12</sup> On this understanding of rhetoric, see the works of Kenneth Burke such as *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1961) or *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) or the now-classic essay by Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968), 1-14.

engaged in environmental and conservation activities and who respond to the suffering which environmental degradation causes,” and whose “priorities lie in action to preserve vanishing forests, watersheds, and wildlife, and to mitigate the negative consequences of their disappearance on people’s lives” (“Ordination” 2-3). Darlington identifies the practice of tree ordination as one of the ways in which these ecology monks work with local residents to develop programs of sustainable living that benefit both the environment and the livelihood of the people (“Ordination” 1). She also discusses the life and activities of another well-known ecology monk, Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun. Although Phrakhru Pitak adopted the strategy of tree ordination from Phrakhru Manas, he has employed it in different contexts. Darlington observes,

Phrakhru Pitak emphasizes basic Buddhist principles such as dependent origination and an interpretation of the Buddha’s life that highlights a close relationship with the forest. His work is significant less because it incorporates Buddhism with ecological conservation principles than because he works closely with local villagers to identify and develop ways of dealing with the problems that they face. (“Rethinking” 8)

Darlington points out that these ecology monks are more concerned with the lives of the villagers than they are with Buddhism. Phrakhru Pitak’s reference to “basic Buddhist principles” concerns the effect these concepts have on affecting the villager’s relationship with the forest. This use of Buddhist concepts is not primarily for the sake of articulating a Buddhist environmental ethic, as it is with the textual mode of discourse, because this would not address the immediate situation. Interpreting *anattā* to mean that our lack of self implies an ontological connection with the world around us does not by itself constitute a call to action, such as action to arrest deforestation or the

effects of deforestation. By ordaining trees, however, Phrakhru Pitak has been able both to direct attention to the situation of deforestation and to motivate local villagers to engage in practices and programs that work to combat this situation. Such action is a necessity, to be sure, because the logging industry wants more access to the forest and governmental policies often restrict local access to forests by establishing forest reserves, thereby denying access to villagers and monks.

The practice of tree ordination rituals has not been without controversy. Although the monks fully recognize that the ordination is only symbolic, because according to the *Vinaya* only human beings can be ordained, criticisms have come from within and without the *sangha* that such ordinations are inauthentically Buddhist (Darlington, “Good Buddha” 170; 178). Some monks have countered these criticisms by involving high-ranking members of the *sangha* and government officials in the rituals. Others have justified their practice by highlighting the positive effects it has on the communities in which it is performed. Yet another criticism has been that the rituals have become political statements. In a case Darlington documents from 1991, the ceremony involved the nailing of placards to the trees to be ordained, the last word of which, *chaat*, can be read three different ways, yielding the pronouncement: “To destroy the forest is to destroy life, one’s rebirth, or the nation” (“Ordination” 10). The political tone implied in the third reading demonstrates that the practice of tree ordination has extended beyond the local to the national level.

In referring to tree ordination as a practical strategy, I mean that it is both a *practice* (the ritual of ordination) and that it is *practical* in the sense of being pragmatic. The pragmatism<sup>13</sup> of this strategy has already

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<sup>13</sup> I am using pragmatism in a rather ordinary sense and not necessarily with reference to the philosophical school of thought. However, the philosophical current of environmental pragmatism advocated by scholars like Bryan Norton, Anthony Weston, and Andrew Light is motivated by the desire to achieve concrete results in

been seen in its ability to motivate communities to act and resist deforestation. But there is also a pragmatic element in the way in which the ritual practice is recognized as authoritative: it is advocated by a monk. Darlington observes that the villagers follow Phrakhru Pitak's instructions regarding environmental activism "because of their respect for him as a monk and their awareness of his concern for their well-being" ("Good Buddha" 9). More generally, with reference to contributions made during the *thaut phaa paa* ceremony, in which robes, money, and other objects are donated to monks, which later will be used for environmental projects, she states,

People's commitment to such projects is often stronger because of the religious connotations behind the source of the funds—they not only gain merit from the original donations at the *phaa paa* ceremony but from supporting the development project sanctioned by the monks as well. ("Good Buddha" 8)

The authority upon which the laity pledges their support to the tree ordinations is the traditional authority of the monk as the head of the community. And considering the small number of monks actually engaged in environmental activism, lay support is an absolute necessity to the success of their environmental projects. As noted above, these activities confront the activities of logging companies and sometimes complicate governmental policies. If the authority of the monks involved can be refuted or at least called into question, the stability of the communities that have been built around environmental concern could be threatened. The monks have adopted Buddhist ritual practice to attract the local villagers mainly in order to enlist their help to stop logging. In order for this strategy to remain relevant and effective, the

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environmental policymaking. In this respect the pragmatics of tree ordination comes close to secular environmental pragmatism.

effects must repeatedly be apparent. Therefore, if the people's beliefs are being reoriented towards incorporating environmentalist activism, but they cease to believe that environmental action is either necessary or beneficial, then the monks, upon whose authority such practices were predicated, will lose that authority, not only with respect to environmental issues, but perhaps throughout society as a whole. The entire project turns on the ability of the monks to maintain the effectiveness of the strategy they have chosen. The importance of rhetoric in this strategy far outstrips the role of rhetoric in the textual strategy. Therein lies one of the key differences between the two, and I will now turn to this difference.

### **Reorienting Eco-Buddhist Discourse**

The two strategies for developing an eco-Buddhist discourse outlined above are by no means mutually exclusive. In fact, it seems likely that they will need to converge in some ways in order to persist. For example, one way to mitigate the problems involved in legitimating the practical strategy through the authority of the monks alone would be to transfer that authority to the larger tradition. Engaging in community-based environmental projects would be seen as authentic Buddhist practice if the practice and its rationale were interpreted in terms of the concepts central to the textual strategy. Protecting the forests might be justified by the teachings on dependent origination (interdependence) and by the practice of *mettā* toward the forest and all the beings that are injured by deforestation. Employing ecological interpretations of Buddhist teachings strengthens the practical character of eco-Buddhist discourse. But it is necessary to maintain a tight connection between the concepts and the (ritual) practice, as otherwise a purely textual discourse risks becoming no more than a scholarly pursuit with little influence on the environmental issues facing specific communities and society in general.



By employing these ecological interpretations of Buddhist teachings to strengthen the foundations of the practical character of eco-Buddhist discourse, the endeavor to square environmental concern with Buddhist teaching becomes more consequential.

On the basis of this analysis, it seems that both strategies can support a Thai eco-Buddhist discourse, with deficiencies being resolved by supplementing the alternate strategy. Mick Smith remarks that

[t]he moral considerability of nature need not be a matter of discovering abstract criteria by which one can judge such valuations right or wrong in any absolute sense. Rather, ethical values need to be explained and justified in terms of their contexts and origins, *their production and reproduction in particular social and environmental circumstances*. (Smith, 52; emphasis mine)

Smith's insistence on the particular circumstances resembles Jenkins's suggestion to attend to the problem-driven nature of religious environmentalist responses, but Smith's comment also highlights the relevance of textual-based ethical justifications and justifications motivated by a particular historical context. Despite the relevance of both textual and historical contexts, practical strategies should serve as the foundation of the environmental ethic, because it alone demonstrates that the practice of Buddhist environmentalism is effective and beneficial for a community.

When placed in the context of eco-Buddhism as a whole, it is apparent that the Thai textual strategy is not unique in its choice of concepts. Scholars have used the concepts of *paṭicca-samuppāda* (dependent origination or interdependence in eco-Buddhism) and interpenetration of phenomena (Ch. *shishi wuai* 事事無礙), from

Huayan thought, to show that all things are interrelated.<sup>14</sup> The *Jātaka* tales have also figured prominently among works directed towards demonstrating the inherent ecological outlook of Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, the teaching of *ahiṃsā* has been regarded as generally Buddhist and the specific focus of the first precept, has been employed to argue for an ethic of care for all non-human beings, sentient or not.<sup>16</sup> Often, there is an extension from *ahiṃsā* to *mettā* or compassion (Skt. *karuṇa*).<sup>17</sup>

Further, we can note that not only is the textual strategy in Thai Buddhism similar to other textually-based eco-Buddhist discourses, it also relies on terms that are considered to be integral in the larger arena of Buddhist ethics. Of course one should in no way be surprised that there is continuity between Buddhist ethics in general and Buddhist environmental ethics in particular. But as the textual strategy is not unique in this respect, it fails to stand out as a significant voice in the general Buddhist ethics conversation. One can see the truth of this claim by looking at other works on Theravāda ethics. For example, in a fascinating article relating ethics to cosmogony, Frank Reynolds delineates four cosmogonic models—the “saṃsāric,” “rūpic,” and “dhammic” (two types)—and then discusses the ethical implications corresponding to each of these.<sup>18</sup> The “saṃsāric” model is predicated on the doctrine of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, and so, then is the normative ethics corresponding to this cosmogony. The “rūpic” model engages the vices of greed and aversion, which we saw were integral to Phra Payutto’s understanding of the relationship between Buddhism and

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<sup>14</sup> See Macy 2000; Henning 2002; Ingram 1997; Gross 2003.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapple 1997; De Silva 2000; Sahni 2008.

<sup>16</sup> See Sahni 2008; De Silva 1998.

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent treatment of the role of compassion in eco-Buddhist thought, see Sponberg 1997.

<sup>18</sup> For a summary of Reynolds’s argument, see pages 218–219.

environmental problems. The two types of “dhammic” cosmogony ground “an ethic concerned with the cultivation of virtues,” which include among others, *mettā* (Reynolds 219). Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen explore how narratives “prefigure, configure, and refigure” how individuals think about ethical situations. In the course of their discussion they use the case of the *Jātakas* to demonstrate the importance of stories in which animals are protagonists (Hallisey and Hansen 311-313). They remark that “Using animals as ethical exemplars provides a way of discussing generic moral virtues—gratitude, generosity, and loyalty—without any misleading references to specific social institutions” (313). This is very similar to at least one of the ways in which the *Jātakas* are used in eco-Buddhist discourse.<sup>19</sup>

The problem of the broad generality of the textual strategy is that it does not speak to any identifiable audience. This raises the question of how narrowly we need to focus our analysis. If we only attend to terms like “Buddhism,” “Buddhist,” and “nature,” we are unable to identify a particular problem-driven situation. We, therefore, are left with the difficulty of developing tactics for strategies that have no clear target. Malcolm David Eckel simply (but astutely) asks “is there a ‘Buddhist’ philosophy of nature?” (340). What is telling in Eckel’s question is that he puts “Buddhist” in quotation marks, calling into question the relationship of Buddhism and nature. The remainder of his article proceeds to argue for a qualified understanding of nature, one not totally divorced from the sense of the physical world, but demonstrating that nature, when viewed from the perspective of Buddhism, begins with the concept of the self. Once the Buddhist “self” has been defined, we can define nature in a more authentically Buddhist mode. But the question remains: if a “Buddhist philosophy of nature” can be

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<sup>19</sup> See also Swearer 2001 for a discussion of the role of narrative and story in the development of Buddhist environmentalism.

articulated, what function would it serve in informing a Buddhist community about how to carry out an ethically-based Buddhist environmentalist practice? I do not see these critiques as completely rejecting the possibility of developing a global eco-Buddhist ethic or philosophy, but the question they raise cannot be ignored: How do we define what is Buddhist? Based on this critique, I suggest that the more fruitful direction for the eco-Buddhist inquiry follows the contours of the eco-contextualist approach more than the eco-constructivist and aims for a practical, practicable approach.

The question of practicality does not receive sufficient attention in the field of religion and ecology, which has generally been based around two ideas: (1) that destruction to the environment requires immediate action and (2) that religion might serve as a compelling appeal to people to act in ways that will curb and hopefully ameliorate the degradation of the global environment. Thus, the interest in religion and ecology is for the most part motivated by the hope that an environmental ethic can be articulated that allows and encourages adherents of religious traditions to incorporate environmental concerns into their religious practice or worldview. The scholar plays an important role in articulating what are the elements of this ethic. But if this ethic is to have any sort of practical application, scholars need to address the way in which communities of adherents practice the tradition. Pointing out that a certain text has “ecological” tones will no longer do. Along these lines, it should be noted that instances of the textual strategy are not wholly devoid of practicality. The work of Buddhādāsa and Phra Payutto suggest how humans might behave to potentially minimize environmental damage and even live ecologically-sound lives. But these recommendations do not provide much direction in specific cases of environmental decision-making. At best, they reflect an ideal type eco-Buddhist life. Even if a Buddhist followed the prescriptions laid out by Buddhādāsa and Phra Payutto, it is not the case

that one is exhibiting environmental concern. The degree to which one's behavior might be considered environmentally-friendly is tied up, to some extent, with the degree to which that person progresses on the path. Moreover, one will be at a loss in cases in which one must decide between being ecologically correct and meeting the non-immediate needs of one's life. In addition, these guides for living proffered by Buddhādāsa and Payutto focus too narrowly on the individual. If each individual settles on her own interpretation of what an eco-Buddhist life requires, there is no assurance that any specific environmental problem will be attended to by a large enough population to make a difference. Although I am by no means condemning the practices these two thinkers advocate, I do not see how they are necessarily indicative of an environmental ethic.

A Thai eco-Buddhist discourse founded on the practical strategy is unique. It works from an altogether different foundation, one based on a ritual response to a specific context of environmental and communal concern. The contextual approach exemplified in Thai Buddhism by the practical strategy arises out of the search for immediate and effective responses to environmental problems. The focus is on practice but without a way to forge the link between the practice of environmental concern and Buddhist practice, the mere assertion of a connection is not rendered meaningful. The practice must evolve in conjunction with a specifically Buddhist rhetoric. On this point of wedding practice and theory, Buddhādāsa could also fit the eco-contextualist mold, if we consider the intention in establishing Wat Suan Mok, which Santikaro describes as an experiment in putting into practice Buddhādāsa's vision of a reformed Thai Buddhism (152-153). Buddhādāsa's choice of Chiaya as the location of Suan Mok was in part with the intent of allowing monks

to live closer to the natural world, perhaps in order to test the effects on their practice.<sup>20</sup>

I find the case of tree ordination particularly powerful in that there is a strong rhetorical element to the ritual.<sup>21</sup> When we look at the development of the practical strategy, we see that Ajahn Pongsak was motivated to remedy the villagers' situation and wanted to make environmentalism spiritually meaningful (Swearer *Buddhist World*, 127). He carried out several projects that were intended to confront environmental threats to the villagers' livelihood, but also hoped to change the overall situation. The practice of tree ordinations articulates Pongsak's efforts in a powerfully rhetorical way. Tree ordination not only forcefully articulates the connection between Buddhism and environmentalism that Pongsak promoted but performs the task that Kenneth Burke claims is central to rhetoric—it unifies a community, it provides a context for identification to take place.<sup>22</sup> As Phrakhu Manas shows in highlighting the “weirdness” of tree ordination, as a practice it is entwined with a strategic use of speech. And because the textual approach is mostly concerned with sorting out justifications—based on

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<sup>20</sup> This example shows that textual strategies and practical strategies can overlap in an individual's or group's approach. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

<sup>21</sup> There is also a rhetorical element to Buddhādāsa's teaching, in the way that he reinterprets terms like *dhamma*, and “socialism” as a strategy for affecting how his audience typically understands these concepts. However, as Santikaro makes clear in the same article, Buddhādāsa's use of the term nature is less inclined towards the natural world in an environmentalist sense, and more related to the understanding of nature as the structure of the universe. Swearer (1997) argues for a more direct connection between environmental notions of nature and Buddhādāsa's use of “nature” as an equivalent of *dhamma*.

<sup>22</sup> Kamala Tiyavanich also relates, with reference to the tree ordinations performed by Phra Prajak, how the ordinations succeeded with the villagers, but “did not stop the unfaithful” (247). As Burke notes in his discussions of identification, when a community is unified through the process of identification, there is invariably an Other constructed that stands against the community.

various texts and traditions—for claiming that a certain view of the human/nature relationship is Buddhist, it rarely addresses the disparity between theory and practice that Anna Peterson points out. And James Miller has argued for the need for “cultural justification” for sustainability. He notes,

With the right cultural framework, the right set of beliefs, values, habits and orientation, sustainability moves from the arena of discourse to the arena of practice. When sustainability is embedded culturally, it unconsciously shapes the habits of thinking and the patterns of behavior in the way that people barely notice. In short it comes to define our way of life, our civic values, and our sense of identity. (Miller)

The practical strategy, exemplified by the tactic of tree ordination, addresses “beliefs, values, habits, and orientations,” albeit somewhat indirectly. According to Mick Smith, “The vagueness and indeterminacy of many attempts by environmentalists to give voice to their concerns are not a sign of irrationality as some have claimed, but of a struggle to speak using a language that makes certain things difficult to say (and apparently even more difficult to hear) to a culture that regards this language as a neutral and transparent medium” (2001, 164). Although the symbols and context the ecology monks create by ordaining trees give their actions an undeniably Buddhist character, in order to give greater determinacy to the way their form of Buddhist eco-discourse, monks like Phrakhru Pitak seek to provide additional context for the practice by drawing on more traditional concepts.

Miller’s observation also raises the question of the nature of environmental ethics. Increasingly, scholars in environmental ethics are dissatisfied with the way in which the field seems to run over the same ground again and again. In response to what is seen as a lack of progress,

some scholars have attempted to formulate new approaches to environmental ethics that avoid the stagnating arguments of whether environmental ethics is deontological, consequentialist, or virtue-based. This issue has been addressed in discussions of Buddhist ethics as well.<sup>23</sup> Returning to Willis Jenkins, he argues, “By treating environmental strategies as adaptive discursive practices rather than deployments of a comparative code or expressions of nature-related spirituality, they can help stimulate an initiative’s strategic rationale toward further ethical production and revision” (*Ecologies* 304).

Bryan Norton, in his work *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*, argues for a pragmatist approach to environmental ethics based on the convergence theory. This suggests that despite having differences in justification for environmental action, on the level of policy, environmentalists tend to agree. Therefore, environmental action should proceed on the basis of what needs to be done, leaving philosophical differences aside. Approaching Buddhist environmentalism from this angle highlights how the practical strategies of ecology monks like Phrakhrū Manas can reorient the discourse of Buddhist environmentalism, making it a more resourceful tool for achieving the goal of working to relieve suffering within a Buddhist context.

The way in which the practical strategy fits into the larger tradition can be gradually worked out without having to first achieve consensus on the philosophical or theoretical justification of the action. Such consensus is likely to be very hard to achieve considering that “even within a single contemporary cultural tradition there is no univocal Buddhist hermeneutic” (Swearer “Hermeneutics” 36). How difficult then will it be to achieve philosophical consensus? But that is not the problem this article is seeking to solve. The question this article

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<sup>23</sup> See Hallisey 1996.



is addressing is how to best identify the foundation for developing a Buddhist environmental ethic. I hope to have shown that the type of ethic demonstrated by tree ordination may be considered such an ethic. But rather than being an environmental ethic that is arrived at through a rational query of ethical norms and premises, it is an ethic that will grow out of the context in which a specific Buddhist community is addressing specific environmental problems. The response is likely to be a mixture of Buddhist thought, practice, ritual, symbol, and discourse. Beginning with an eco-contextualist or practical approach to the problem of Buddhist environmentalism is a more effective and meaningful Buddhist environmentalism for the reason that it begins with the real suffering of real communities and offers real action in response.

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