

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 22, 2015

## Nature's No-Thingness: Holistic Eco-Buddhism and the Problem of Universal Identity

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# Nature's No-Thingness: Holistic Eco-Buddhism and the Problem of Universal Identity<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

“Holistic eco-Buddhism” has been roundly criticized for its heterodoxy and philosophical incoherence: the Buddha never claimed we should protect an “eco-self” and there are serious philosophical problems attendant on “identifying with things.” Yet this essay finds inadequate attention has been paid to East Asian sources. Metaphysical issues surrounding eco-Buddhism, i.e., problems of identity and difference, universalism and particularity, have a long history in Chinese Buddhism. In particular, I examine the notion of “merging with things”

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Rupert Gettin and Stefano Zacchetti for their careful feedback on portions of this essay, and to Eric Greene for some insightful advice during the early stages. Thanks also to Simon James, whose sage-like patience is an inspiration. All errors are my own.

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in pre-Huayan and Huayan Buddhism, suggesting these offer unexplored possibilities for a coherent holistic eco-Buddhism based on the differentiating effects of activity and functionality.

## Introduction

Recent years have seen an explosion in literature surrounding religion and the environment, partly in response to developments within religious traditions themselves.<sup>3</sup> Faced with environmental pollution, global warming, and species extinction on an unprecedented scale, religious leaders worldwide have not been found wanting in their responses. This is unsurprising given the eco-crisis' unique capacity to cut across traditions and geographical location like few issues today. Whether we like it or not the consensus seems clear: we are in the same boat together. The dilemma's universality provides a kind of ethical meta-problem, an overarching paradigm in marked contrast to the heterogeneity characterising more traditional, human-centred ethics. Indeed, though they may differ on, say, the correct response to abortion, "No religious tradition . . . is likely to react favourably to an impending global environmental catastrophe. To indicate otherwise would be an act of the grossest folly" (Harris "Getting to Grips" 182).

Amid such unanimity, the potential for Buddhism to capitalize on environmental issues through what might be called "religious green-wash" has drawn cynicism from the sidelines. As Ian Harris comments: "the Dalai Lama . . . now regularly takes the opportunity to publicise his

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<sup>3</sup> For anthologies on religion and the environment see Gottlieb (*Sacred Earth, Handbook*); for individual works see Rockefeller and Elder, Tanner and Mitchell, Gottlieb (*Greener Faith*). These offer only the smallest cross section of this large and rapidly growing field. Even a cursory Internet search yields dozens of titles dealing with religious environmentalism and "eco-" or "bio-spirituality."

environmental credentials on the international stage” (183).<sup>4</sup> Such inflammatory polemics aside, Harris alerts us to an important fact: the crisis provides unrivalled opportunities for shoring up popular support by appealing to shared values. Thus, contemporary representations of Buddhism as inherently “green” call for a critical eye.

This essay focuses on a particularly controversial articulation of Buddhist environmentalism I call “holistic eco-Buddhism”: one that draws on the Madhyamaka/Huayan doctrines of dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*) and mutual non-obstruction (無礙 *wu'ai*) for inspiration towards a “holistic” or “deep ecological” environmental ethic founded on identification with the natural world. Although this kind of Buddhist environmentalism has been roundly criticized for its heterodoxy—most vehemently by Harris, who describes it as “an uneasy partnership between Spinozism, New Age religiosity, and highly selective Buddhism” (“Discourse” 378)—this essay finds inadequate attention has been paid to specifically East Asian sources. Problems surrounding eco-Buddhism, namely, problems of identity and difference, universalism and particularity, have a long history in Chinese Buddhist thought, and were not simply introduced by contemporary Buddhists *ex nihilo*. *Pratīyasamutpāda* did not evolve from the twelve-fold chain of causation to a doctrine of universal causal interrelatedness in eco-Buddhist hands (Harris “Ecology” 124), and neither does it entail nihilism, monism, or Spinozism. The reality is more complex.

Part one outlines and critiques the phenomenon that is “holistic eco-Buddhism.” Some preliminary questions are raised and discussed. Outstanding issues then guide part two, which examines the notion of

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<sup>4</sup> This is particularly surprising given the Dalai Lama’s claim, five years previously, that he had nothing to offer towards a Buddhist environmentalism, instead shifting attention towards “development of the mind” (Eckel 162).

“merging with things” in early (pre-Huayan) Chinese Buddhism, asking why this idea took shape and how Chinese exegetes understood the ontological and soteriological relation between “identity” and “difference.” Part three tackles Huayan proper, focusing specifically on Dushun’s understanding of *shi* 事 and *li* 理, and Fazang’s “building” analogy. I end with some suggestions for a coherent holistic eco-Buddhism based on functionality and activity in Chinese thought.

### **What is Holistic Eco-Buddhism?**

“Holistic eco-Buddhism” is used here to describe a popular strand of contemporary environmentalism drawing upon traditional Buddhist doctrine and theory, particularly Madhyamaka interdependence and the Avataṃsaka/Huayan doctrine of mutual interpenetration or non-obstruction, to encourage self-identification with, and sensitivity to, the natural (non-human) world. Holistic eco-Buddhism is often quoted alongside the “deep ecology” of eco-philosopher Arne Naess, who argued for a “relational total field image” where organisms are no longer perceived as isolated but “knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations” (95). This idea supposedly chimes with the *Gaṇḍavyūha* section of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, where the Buddhist pilgrim Sudhana witnesses a web of interrelatedness spreading infinitely in all directions, a jewel at each knot, each knot representing a nexus of causal factors, containing and contained by all the others such that seeing one jewel is seeing all the jewels and vice versa. For holistic eco-Buddhists, this vision is the basis for a new approach to the natural world, one in which we are no longer excised from natural systems but deeply imbedded in them, and where the action of one is seen to affect many, such that felling an Amazonian tree is indissociable from a polar vortex in North America.

Joan Halifax epitomizes this view by claiming that “one seemingly separate being cannot be without all other beings, and is therefore not

a separate self, but part of a greater Self, an ecological Self that is alive and has awareness within its larger Self” (23). Joanna Macy goes further, claiming that simply recognizing the existence of this “eco-self” provides a comprehensive substitute for all normative ethics:

In the Dharma there are no oughts. They disappear in the realization of dependent co-arising. Instead of commandments from on high, there is the simple, profound awareness that everything is interdependent and mutually conditioning—each thought, word, and act, and all beings, too, in the vast web of life. Once there is insight into that radical interdependence, certain ways of living and behaving emerge as intrinsic to it. (Cooper 170)

Holistic eco-Buddhism is not restricted to Western scholars and commentators. Thich Nhat Hanh, founder of the Tiep Hien Order (or “Order of Interbeing”), has made interdependence the bedrock of his ethical teachings. According to him:

We classify other animals and living beings as nature, acting as if we ourselves are not part of it. Then we pose the question “How should we deal with Nature?” We should deal with nature the way we should deal with ourselves! We should not harm ourselves; we should not harm nature . . . Human beings and nature are inseparable. (41)

Whereas Macy sees interdependence doing away with prescriptions, Nhat Hanh has simply reformulated the traditional Buddhist precepts to align with a deep ecological outlook. For example, the second of his “Five Mindfulness Trainings” transforms the traditionally negative precept against “taking what is not given” into a positive injunction to “reduce the suffering of living beings on Earth and reverse the process of global warming” (Five Mindfulness Trainings Certificate). At ground level, this informs consumption regulations for his Community of Interbe-

ing, where all food is vegan, organically produced, locally sourced, and homegrown if possible, and where shower-block signs advise retreatants to use water mindfully and sparingly to “protect our planet.”<sup>5</sup> Holistic eco-Buddhism is big business: the Plum Village Summer Retreat typically attracts upwards of 1,300 people, and Nhat Hanh’s books are global best-sellers. It therefore demands to be taken seriously.

### Critique

Claims that Buddhism broadly conceived encourages identification with the natural world are deeply problematic. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes, the Buddha of the Nikāyas never encouraged any form of identification, either with an individual self or a scaled-up “World-” or “eco-self”: “The dharma . . . teaches that the essence of suffering is clinging, and that the most basic form of clinging is self-identification, *regardless of whether one’s sense of self is finite or infinite, fluid or static, unitary or not*” (Thanissaro, emphasis added). Early expositions of dependent origination share little in common with Macy’s, centering on the classical twelve-fold chain of causation beginning with ignorance (*avidyā*) and ending with birth, old age, and death (SN. ii 20; DN. 15). This schema maps the path *out* of *saṃsāra*; it does not celebrate our interconnectedness with it. *Nirvāṇa*, as understood in these early texts, is an unconditioned state of quiescent bliss *by definition* antithetical to ecological systems theory and its web of conditionality. Macy’s organismic, interdependent “web of life” is completely absent from this early stratum, and therefore Harris seems justified in accusing Macy of transforming Buddhist doctrine beyond recognition.

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<sup>5</sup> My field data, collected between July 7, 2012 and July 21, 2012 at Plum Village, Bordeaux, France.

More fundamental philosophical problems bedevil attempts at meshing dependent origination and holism with ecological systems theory. Unconvinced with usual curtailments on the implications of “emptiness,” i.e., that it only refers to *self*-existence, or *svabhāva*, Simon James argues that advocates of a Madhyamaka-derived ecologism have yet to defend themselves against the charge of nihilism. His claim rests on a distinction—usually unacknowledged by Madhyamaka theorists—between “external” and “internal” relatedness, where “external” relatedness refers to the relation between two relatively independent objects (e.g., a cup of coffee and its support, say, a desk) and “internal” relatedness to the relation between two things whose very nature is determined by that relation (e.g., two musical chords) (91). According to James, Madhyamaka forces us to accept that everything is not just externally but internally related, leading directly to a kind of nihilistic monism since the boundaries around “things” ineluctably dissolve into their converging causative factors, or what Izutsu called “a limitlessly vast field of Nothingness” (31, cited in James 93). What happens to the plurality of “things” in this quicksilver universe of unbounded interpenetrativeness? And does it make sense to speak of “things” at all?

Even if things *can* somehow maintain their particularity without dissolving into universal non-differentiation, it is unclear where toxic waste fits into a scheme of absolute interdependence. On what grounds are we to differentiate and privilege those aspects of reality we would like to see flourish against those we would not? As Harris puts it, “If all depends on all, then the black rhino depends on the hydrogen bomb, the rain forest on the waste dump” (Harris “Detraditionalization” 205). It is not surprising, following statements like Looi’s that “the life of a blade of grass, a spider web, the Brooklyn Bridge . . . are *identical* to each other in every respect” (177, emphasis in original), that Harris sees holistic theory leading to “a tendency to regard everything as equally valuable”—a conclusion which supports destroying as much as protecting the

world (Harris "Getting to Grips" 177). In short, "[holism] suffers from a certain vacuity from the moral perspective" (177).

### Counter-critique

Harris is correct to dismiss generalized claims that Buddhism as a *whole* supports a holistic environmental ethic. As he points out, such claims are inevitably false, for "Whatever classificatory scheme we choose to use, the generalisation of ideas or practices from one historical, geographical, or cultural phase of the tradition, in an attempt to justify some monolithic Buddhist position, will be largely illegitimate" ("Discourse" 381). However, it is ironic that Harris, who at one point accuses eco-Buddhists of "tending toward a positive indifference to the history and complexity of the Buddhist tradition" (378), in some ways reflects the same mistake by rooting his accusations in an "authentic core" of Buddhist teachings he finds in Pāli texts. Swearer has commented on this, pointing out that "[Harris's] position is founded on too narrow a construction of the Buddhist view of nature and animals based on a selective reading of particular texts and traditions" (39). While this is understandable in Thanissaro Bhikkhu, an ordained monk with definite Theravāda affiliations, it is less so for Harris whose scholarly objectivity should presumably ensure a broad-based approach, that is, one that acknowledges the importance of Mahāyāna traditions like Huayan on their own terms and not mere derivatives of "mainstream" Buddhism. In later Mahāyāna thought, following the bodhisattva's higher vow to intentionally delay release from *saṃsāra* and Nāgārjuna's *saṃsāra/nirvāṇa* conflation, the question of our connectedness to the world became extremely complex, going beyond any straightforward theory of "world-rejection." A classic example is found in Śāntideva's seminal *Bodhicaryāvatāra*:

In the same way as the hands and so forth  
 Are regarded as limbs of the body,  
 Likewise, why are living things  
 Not regarded as limbs of life?

Through acquaintance has the thought of “I” arisen  
 Towards this impersonal body;  
 So in a similar way, why should it not arise  
 Towards all living beings?  
 (viii.114–115, Batchelor 118)

Similarly, the *Angulimāliya Sūtra* justifies vegetarianism by reference to the karmic identity and equality of all sentient beings: since these all possess the *tathāgataqārbha*, or Buddha nature, and hence share the same true essence (*dhātu*), human and non-human meat are one and the same; eating meat is equivalent to autophagy (T 120.540ce23–26, cited in Schmithausen 191). The Chinese *Fan wang jing* 梵網經 likewise justifies vegetarianism by claiming the elements constituting other animals previously made up our own bodies (T 1484.1006b12–13, cited in Schmithausen 191).

To summarize, Huayan-inspired eco-Buddhism is today an enormously popular strand of thought, drawing supporters from a wide range of backgrounds, from Western academics to popular “eco-spiritualists,” and even major Buddhist leaders. Yet it faces at least two important challenges. To survive religious and philosophical scrutiny, it must: (1) prove itself as at least partly identifiable with the Buddhist tradition to merit the name; and (2) account for the particularity of things against their dissolution into undifferentiated “emptiness.” I have already offered some responses to point (1). I now consider further responses to points (1) and (2) by appeal to East Asian traditions.

### East Asian Buddhism: Pre-Huayan and Huayan Thought

It is widely claimed that East Asian forms of Buddhism have tended towards a reaffirmation of the phenomenal world against its denigration in older Buddhist sources, a tendency often attributed to the so-called “this-worldly orientation” of Chinese culture (see e.g., Williams *Mahāyāna* 118). However accurate this may be, such diffuse claims tend to obfuscate rather than clarify the complexities behind the Chinese adoption, interpretation, and representation of Indian Buddhism. Avoiding Weberian ideal-typical statements concerning a putative “Chinese character” more attuned to nature, this section answers two specific questions: does the idea of “identifying with phenomena” or “nature” predate Huayan in Chinese Buddhist sources? And if so, how did Chinese writers confront the problem of identity and difference outlined in the previous chapter? Early Chinese Buddhism being an extremely complex phenomenon, I restrict my study to a single writer, Sengzhao (384–414). Although Sengzhao cannot be taken to represent early Chinese Buddhism as a whole, his prominence as a Buddhist thinker makes him ideally suited to a basic analysis of the Chinese situation before Huayan. As I show, issues concerning identity and difference raised by Harris were well known to him, even if his conclusions sometimes sit uncomfortably with those of holistic eco-Buddhism.

#### *Sengzhao (384–414)*

According to Richard Robinson, Sengzhao was “the crucial figure in the transmission of Kumārajīva’s teaching in China,” not only because he prefaced some of Kumārajīva’s (334–413) most important translations, but also because he composed essays acclaimed by his contemporaries, including Kumārajīva and Huiyuan (334–416), that were transmitted generationally, and virtually canonized as constitutive of the new Three

Treatise (三論 *San lun*) thought during the sixth century. Taken together, Robinson claims his writings “constitute the largest surviving set of documents on the earliest Chinese Madhyamika thought” (Robinson 1967, 123), thus presenting a treasure trove of early Chinese *prajñā-pāramitā* doctrine.

In Sengzhao’s essay *Emptiness of the Non-Absolute* 不真空論 *Bu zhen kong lun* (T 1858.152a-153a), we find a number of extremely important ideas surrounding identity and difference, ideas which tread playfully on the line between complete identity and absolute distinctiveness. Some extracts from Robinson’s still-authoritative 1967 translation:

[The Holy Man] identifies with the self-voidness of the myriad things . . . Because he discerns the One Energy [一氣 *yi qi*] and so views the transformations, he accords with what he meets. Because there is no obstacle that he does not pass through, he can merge into the multiplicity and reach simplicity. Because he accords with what he meets, in touching things he is one [with them]. (T 1858.152a8-9, Robinson 222)

Many who feel partial to inexistence are dominated by inexistence in everything they say. Thus, “not existent” [they take to mean] “the existent is inexistent” and “not inexistent” [they take to mean] “the inexistent is also inexistent.” Now, the original sense of these texts is simply that “not existent” means “not absolutely existent” and “not inexistent” means “not absolutely inexistent.” Why must “not existent” make this existent inexistent, and “not inexistent” make that inexistent inexistent? This is nothing but inexistence-loving talk. Does it describe the temper of mind that accords with events, penetrates the

actuals, and identifies with things? (T 1858.152a19-24, Robinson 223)

The *Mahāyāna-śāstra* says, “The *dharmas* have neither the mark of existence nor the mark of inexistence.” The *Middle Treatise* says, “The *dharmas* are not existent and not in-existent.” This is the supreme, Absolute Truth [真諦 *zhen di*]. But it does not mean that one must wash out the myriad things, stop up sight and hearing and be soundless and formless like an empty valley before one realizes Absolute Truth. In fact, it is because one identifies with things, conforms and passes through, that no thing obstructs. (T 1858.152a28-b3, Robinson 224)

[I]t is not that there are no things, but that things are not absolute things. Because things are not absolute things, what can be called a thing? Thus a sutra says, “Form is empty by nature, not by destruction” in order to explain the relation between the Holy Man and things. He identifies with the self-voidness of the myriad things. He does not depend on hacking and chopping to clear his way. (T 1858.152b6-9, Robinson 224; see also T 1858.153a1-3, Robinson 227)

Given Sengzhao's erudition and recognized orthodoxy in matters of *prajñāpāramitā* doctrine, how should we interpret these passages? A potential clue is found in his qualified statement that the Holy Man identifies with the “self-voidness” of things, i.e., not the thing itself. In this case emptiness would be the single uniting principle behind all phenomena (what Sengzhao often calls the “true mark” 實相 *shixiang* of *dhar-*

mas),<sup>6</sup> and the Holy Man would share in the existence of other “things” only to the extent that he is also impermanent, lacking in intrinsic existence, and so on. However, while this interpretation is safely orthodox—Nāgārjuna would have no problem accepting that both Holy Men and other “things” are equally “empty”—it does not in itself explain how Sengzhao maintains particularity, if at all, against what Isutzu called the “limitlessly vast field of Nothingness.” Can Sengzhao respond to this?

Sengzhao is clearly aware of the common-sense impossibility of denying difference. As he writes in *Prajñā Has No Knowing* 般若無知 *Banruo wu zhi*:

[W]hen a Sūtra says, “The *dharmas* are not different,” how can it mean that one must stretch the duck’s [legs] and shorten the crane’s, level the peaks and fill up the valleys, before there are no differences? It really means that because one does not consider differences as difference, though different they are not different. (*T* 1858.154c10-12, Robinson 220)

This statement may be interpreted in at least two ways. Sengzhao could be claiming that things differ ontologically, but not epistemologically (though things are in actual fact different, one does not know them to be different, i.e., the sage ignores difference in a blinkered search for unity), or that things differ both ontologically and epistemologically, but not at the level of value judgments or preferential discrimination, a third type of difference implicit in the act of considering. The first must be ruled out immediately, for Sengzhao explicitly rejects any claim that the “Holy Man” is “blind as a traveller in the night who cannot tell black from white” (*T* 1858.154a28-29, Robinson 218). The Holy Man knows dif-

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Professor Stefano Zacchetti for this observation.

ference, but “Its knowing is identical with its not grasping” (T 1858.154b2, Robinson 218), suggesting the second option may be more accurate here. Liu agrees, claiming Sengzhao’s aim is not to eliminate difference per se (ducks’ legs are patently shorter than cranes’), but any favoritist discrimination or *attachment* linked to that difference (48–49). Difference exists but makes no impression on the holy man who wanders freely and intuitively “throughout the Five Destinies,” his *prajñā* devoid of “deluded grasping” (T 1858.154b3–5, 17, Robinson 218–219). As Liu puts it, “*prajñā* is not devoid of the function of affirming, only it affirms without becoming attached to what it affirms” (48–49).

While this explains the Holy Man’s detached, mirror-like interaction with different phenomena, it still does not explain how difference manifests in the first place. Fortunately, however, some comments on identity and difference are provided earlier in the same essay, with Sengzhao’s analysis of the relation between *prajñā* and Absolute Truth (真諦 *zhen di*):

If you speak about their function [用 *yong*], then while being the same they are different. If you speak about their state [寂 *ji*],<sup>7</sup> then while being different they are the same. Because they are the same, there are no thoughts of self and other. Because they are different, they do not fail in the process (results) of intuition. Therefore, if you specify sameness, it is sameness in difference; if you specify difference, it is difference in sameness. Thus they cannot be considered as different, and they cannot be considered as the same. (T 1858.154c2–6, Robinson 220)

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<sup>7</sup> Robinson’s choice of “state” is unusual and left unexplained. *Ji* usually carries the sense of “quiescence,” “tranquility,” or “calmness,” as elsewhere in his translation.

Two relevant points may be drawn out here. Firstly, we find the sameness of *prajñā* and Absolute Truth connected with the erosion of “thoughts of self and other,” an erosion Sengzhao (like deep ecologists) seems to consider positive. Secondly, Sengzhao sets up a dichotomy between “state” and “function,” and ascribes a differentiating role to function. When viewed under the aspect of “state” *prajñā* and Absolute Truth are the same; when viewed under the aspect of “function” they are different.

This theme may be brought out by reference to Robinson’s analysis of Sengzhao’s five polarities: “void-real” 虛實 *xu-shi*, “inexistent-existent” 無有 *wu-you*, “identity-difference” 同異 *tong-yi*, “calmness-function” 寂用 *ji-yong*, and “stillness-motion” 寂動 *ji-dong*. Focusing on the third binary, “identity-difference,” identity refers to the relation between “things” when viewed from the aspect of “essence,” and difference to the relation between “things” when viewed from the aspect of “function.” With regard to the fourth binary, “calmness-function,” calmness is the aspect in which identity is dominant and difference subordinate, while function is “the active mode of being” where difference is dominant and identity subordinate (Robinson 129). From *Nirvāṇa is Unnameable* (涅槃無名 *Niepan wu ming*): “Since [the Holy Man] is always active while being calm, [he knows that] things cannot be [taken as] identical; since he is always calm while being active, [he knows that] things cannot be [taken as] different” (T 1858.160c5-10, Liu 78).<sup>8</sup>

Motion also creates difference, whereas in stillness subject and object coalesce in unity (T 1858.154c08-10).<sup>9</sup> There is thus a direct link between function, motion, and difference on one hand, and essence,

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<sup>8</sup> I have substituted Robinson’s “calm” for Liu’s “tranquil” for consistency.

<sup>9</sup> See also Sengzhao’s claim in *Emptiness* that “inexistence can be called ‘inexistence’ if it is profoundly motionless” (T 1858.152c5-6, Robinson 225).

stillness, and identity on the other—two clusters of concepts which, in the mind of the holy sage, become one. Indeed, having established these binaries, he then collapses them in a reversion to Laozi's pre-verbal "source of all things":

Function is identical with stillness; stillness is identical with function. Function and stillness are one in essence. "They issue from the same [source], but they are named differently." There certainly is no functionless stillness that rules the function . . . How can you say that . . . activity and stillness are different? (T 1858.154c15-19, Robinson 221)

*Nirvāṇa* is ultimately beyond any distinction between function, tranquility, motion, stillness, difference, and identity; it is "quiescent," "vacant," "markless," "empty," "never-changing," and defined in terms of a return to unity ("Since its profound spirituality never becomes exhausted, it calmly 'embraces the One'") (T 1858.157c5-15, 20-27, Liu 69-71).

The identity of "function" and "tranquility" shares points in common with the mutual inherence of *shi* and *li* explored in the following section. For now, however, I will simply note Sengzhao's account of difference in terms of function, activity, and motion. Although the holy man ultimately abides in the paradoxical tranquility of action, "doing nothing yet leaving nothing undone" (T 1858.160c5-10, Liu 78), at a provisional level functionality breeds difference and in some ways accounts for existence itself. Indeed, function is precisely what saves the "Holy Mind" from inexistence: "The Holy Mind, being ethereal and markless, cannot be considered existent; being extremely vigorous in its functioning, it cannot be considered inexistent" (T 1858.153c27-28, Robinson 216).

This is strikingly similar to Nāgārjuna's own defense against accusations of nihilism in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*: while for Nāgārjuna nothing exists intrinsically, including the noble truths, the *dharma*, and the Buddha, these nevertheless perform a function—the function of enabling others to see things as they really are, in the same way that a cart or a pot, though lacking *svabhāva*, are occupied with the respective functions of carrying things or containing honey (*Vigrahavyāvartanī* xxii). Were this not the case, the Mahāyāna would not be the great vehicle; indeed, there would be no vehicle at all. In this way, and against claims that Madhyamaka entails absolute non-differentiation, Nāgārjuna is able to separate the Buddhist path from other paths, and so clear the way for an ontology of functional differentiation where things no longer differ because of what they *are* but because of what they *do*.

Even if Sengzhao's ultimate goal is to transcend difference by accepting it and wandering freely across the realms of *saṃsāra*, his account of difference itself is intelligible and reconcilable with the broad thrust of Madhyamaka. At no point does he affirm the intrinsic existence of things, yet he maintains their distinctiveness by connecting difference (and hence existence) to function and motion, i.e., to the things that things do. The “Holy Mind” exists on one side of his provisional dichotomy because it “functions vigorously.” As Nāgārjuna wrote, quoting the *Prajñāpāramitā*, “if a bodhisattva has a self, he cannot act, and if he has no self, he cannot act” (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* xviii.24 c20, Bocking 280). Bodhisattvas refrain from all positive statements concerning the self, and yet they act or function. This, precisely, is what makes them bodhisattvas. Indeed, it is what enables Nāgārjuna to use the word “bodhisattva” at all.

Having briefly outlined some pre-Huayan theories on the problem of identity and difference, I now turn to Huayan proper. As I hope to show, many of the above ideas were absorbed and reformulated in Huay-

an circles, where the question of identity and difference came to assume center stage.

*Dushun (557-640)*

Dushun, retroactively designated first patriarch of Huayan by the fourth patriarch Chengguan (738–839), is significant for establishing many core features of Huayan doctrine later developed by Fazang (643–712) and Zongmi (780–841). In particular, his *Discernment of the Realm of Reality* 法界觀門 *Fajie guan men*<sup>10</sup> is a condensation of themes central to the Huayan tradition. The work is divided into three main sections (the “Discernment of True Emptiness” 真空觀法 *zhenkong guan fa*, the “Discernment of the Mutual Non-Obstruction of Principle and Phenomena” 理事無礙觀 *li shi wu'ai guan*, and the “Discernment of Total Pervasion and Inclusion” 周遍含容觀 *zhoubian hanrong guan*) leading from emptiness to the non-obstructed interpenetration of all phenomena, the characteristic teaching of the Huayan school (Gregory 6).

As Gregory notes, the progressive elaboration of these three discernments reflects unease towards “the negative conative implications of the teaching of emptiness” (6). Though Dushun’s first discernment reveals a confident grasp of standard *sūnyavāda* theory, the next two discernments, by introducing the terms “principle” *li* 理 and “phenomena” *shi* 事, mark a major stage in the Chinese appropriation and reinterpretation of emptiness, in that the use of “principle” over “emptiness” brings us significantly closer to “a more affirmative discourse” (7). In other

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<sup>10</sup> Two versions of this text can be found in Chengguan and Zongmi’s commentary, *Huayan fajie xuan jing* 華嚴法界玄鏡 (T 1883) and *Zhu huayan fajie guan men* 注華嚴法界觀門 (T 1884). For English translations see Cleary (69–124) and Gimello (“Chih-yen” 454–510).

words, substituting *li* for *śūnyatā* (空 *kong*) opened the way for more kataphatic understandings of emptiness, as emptiness was no longer a mere absence but a fundamental principle at work within all things. Though detailed analysis of the history of *shi* and *li* in Chinese thought is beyond our present scope, it will be useful to consider briefly some of their possible meanings.

*Shi* is relatively fixed and usually translated as “phenomenon” or “phenomena.” But *li* is more ambiguous. Though sometimes rendered “noumenon” (Cleary *Entry*) or “absolute” (Cook), both terms with substantialist and idealist overtones, Gregory’s choice of “principle”—a choice also endorsed by Gimello (“Apophatic,” “Chih-yen”) and Zürcher—may be more appropriate if *li* is in fact none other than dependent origination, emptiness, or impermanence; i.e., the fact of change itself. This makes good sense in our present context, as Dushun himself explicitly ties *li* to *śūnyatā* in his definition of the “*dharmadhātu* of *li*” as “the discernment of true emptiness” (T 1883.672c21, 673a5, Jiang 461), and equates *li* with “the principle of the selflessness of things” (法無我理 *fa wu wo li*) (T 1883.679a10, Cleary *Entry* 104). Yet we should be careful of settling for any one answer. Indeed, *li*’s later shift from “emptiness” to “absolute” (Gimello “Apophatic” 128), or even the *Awakening of Faith*’s “One Mind,”<sup>11</sup> suggests there may be several overlapping definitions embedded in this complex term, all of which may be operative at once. Indeed,

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<sup>11</sup> Fazang’s claim that “all things are Absolute Mind” (*Treatise on the Five Teachings* 五教章 *Wu jiao zhang*, T 1866.485b03, Gregory 36–37) leads Williams to equate *li* with the “One Mind” (*Mahāyāna* 143); on Fazang’s debt to the *Awakening of Faith* also see Cook (29–30) and Cleary (*Entry* 152). *Contra* Williams, it should be noted Fazang’s endorsement of the *Awakening of Faith* extends only to the fourth (i.e., “Sudden”) teaching in his *panjiao* system—a teaching ultimately superseded by the fifth and final teaching of the *Huayan Sūtra*. His equation of things with “Absolute Mind” must therefore be understood ambiguously; it is not necessarily final. For further summaries of *li* and *shi* in Chinese thought see Chan (123–148); and Demiéville (28–31).

it is not impossible that Huayan writers consciously played on *li*'s polysemism to foreclose any attempt at reifying *li* into a self-existing entity, or "ground of reality."<sup>12</sup>

In the absence of a final solution, Jiang has recently advanced a radical alternative. He challenges the above by pointing out that for Dushun, *li* is based upon "the content of perception"—i.e., it is directly experienced in the *samādhi* of oceanic reflection, not inferred through logic or inspection of the phenomenal world—and therefore not reducible to a "principle" (which must, by definition, be inferred); "noumenon," on the other hand, "smacks too much of Kantianism" (Jiang 462). Looking beyond these possibilities, Jiang suggests *li* should be interpreted as "*activity itself*," and that *shi* and *li* are therefore best understood when viewed syntactically in a "*subject-verb relationship*" with *shi* as subject and *li* as verb. In this way,

the relationship between *shi* and *li* becomes a *predicative* one, not [a] *constitutive* one. The predication of *shi* by *li* leads to the conclusion that *shi* is predicated by *śūnyatā*, thus *shi* is empty in its nature . . . Accordingly, *li* should be understood as the self-negating activity of the world. Through this activity, the world is constantly regenerated.  
(466, emphasis in original)

Paradoxical as this last point may seem, it is directly supported by Chengguan's commentary: "Because there is the meaning of emptiness, therefore all things can be" (*T* 1883.678b18, Cleary *Entry* 55). Pushing the analogy further, Jiang argues even a subject-verb understanding of *shi* and *li* still fails to grasp the full implications of non-obstructed mutual interpenetration, for it presupposes a distinction between actor and

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<sup>12</sup> I am again grateful to Professor Zacchetti for this suggestion.

action, with the actor (or subject) considered primary and the action (or verb) only secondary:

[T]he world thus experienced and understood is one made up of things isolated from each other—not in the sense that there is no connection among them but that the connectedness is secondary or derivative of the being of individual objects. In other words, in the world of the subject, there are first “naked” things, and then they are somehow related to other things. A world thus conceived can only make conceptual sense without actual experiential correlates. In the actual world, there is never a moment that a subject can be separated from its verb(s). We always experience a unity of subject and verb, never a naked being. (466–477)

Jiang thus suggests shifting attention away from the subject and onto the verb, with *shi* now understood as instantiations of *li*, “the ultimate verb” (467).<sup>13</sup> *Shi* discloses *li*, an idea we may link to Dushun’s metaphorical claim that “the vacuity of the form ‘wave’ renders clearly evident the substance ‘water’” (T 1883.678c4, Gimello “Chih-yen” 493).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the equation of *shi* with waves dovetails neatly into the theory of “things” as instances of activity, for there can be no “still” waves: waves

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<sup>13</sup> See also Ziporyn (222–223) who suggests that for Huayan the verb is not only equal to the subject but ontologically prior, and that even when *li* is no longer mentioned in Dushun’s third discernment we are still dealing with interpenetrating “events” and therefore “contemplating pure *li*.”

<sup>14</sup> See also Dushun in *Cessation*: “the waves themselves show the water” (T 1867.511c7, Cleary *Entry* 58); and Fazang: “[Substance 體 *ti*] is not something produced by productive causes; rather it is something illuminated by illuminative causes” (T 1876.637b15–16, Gimello “Apophatic” 126).

are by definition active, and “things” *qua* waves are not so much static objects but rather “events,” or “happenings” embodying *li*.

Finally, though Dushun emphasizes the mutual non-obstruction of principle and phenomena, Gimello warns against taking this to entail “a kind of monism in which all plurality is swallowed up in principle” (“Chih-yen” 22). There is no sense of a de-differentiation between phenomena here. As Dushun states: “although the totality [of phenomena] is wholly principle, yet the marks of phenomena are as distinct as ever” (T 1878.653c10-11, Gimello “Chih-yen” 22). Indeed, it is precisely because things differ that they reveal *li*.

*Fazang (643-712)*

Fazang’s fame as a Huayan philosopher requires little introduction; the Huayan school is often equated with his thought alone, and subsequent philosophical developments treated as mere footnotes to his achievement. To reign in the enormity of his intellectual output, I focus on one text in particular, his *Treatise on the Divisions within the One Vehicle of Huayan* 華嚴一乘教義分齊章 *Huayan yishengjiao yi fenqi zhang* (T 1866.477a4-509a4). Space restrictions prevent a detailed overview of even this single text, and so I shall limit my study to one philosophical problem contained in the *Treatise*, and relevant to the problem of identity and difference: his well-known analogy of a building and its rafters. According to Fazang,

[T]he rafter is the building . . . [T]he tiles, planks, and so on [other parts of the building], are identical with the rafter. [These] are identical precisely because they are different. If they were not different, then since the rafter is [about] eleven feet long, the tiles would be the same. (T 1866.507c, Cook 88)

To begin unpacking this statement, it may be helpful to start by determining what it does *not* mean. It is not the case that rafters and tiles are only different conventionally and not ultimately; there is no suggestion here of a two-level approach to reality. Fazang states unequivocally that the parts of the building are identical *precisely* because they are different. If they were not different, we should have to accept that tiles are eleven feet long.

But if rafters and tiles are undeniably different, in what sense are they identical? There is only one way in which rafters and tiles can be the same: they both participate in the existence of the building; indeed, they are the building. Yet the fact they perform different functions, or activities within that building ensures their mutual distinctiveness. As Nicholaos Jones explains:

Since the building and its rafters depend on each other to be what they are (or do what they do), these rafters are inseparable from the building of which they are part . . . In this sense, the rafters and planks of the building are mutually identical with each other. Nonetheless, they remain distinct from each other because of the way in which each participates in the activity that is the building: the rafters are raftering (each in different ways) while building, and the planks are planking (each in different ways) while building. (Jones 365)

For Fazang, both structure and the activity of parts constituting that structure are crucial to their distinctiveness. It is the structure of the building and its active parts that gives it its “buildingness,” that designates rafters as rafters, and tiles as tiles. Conversely, rafters and tiles make the building a building. This explanation is crucial to any search for ontological distinctiveness, for it presupposes pluralism. Indeed, “things can participate in the same whole in different ways only if there

is more than one thing” (Jones 365), or as Cook playfully puts it: “If everything was literally a nose, I would be just one immense nose; in fact, I could not be ‘me’ for even one second” (10). Thus noses and elbows must co-exist harmoniously as part of a single whole, namely, Francis Cook’s body. For Fazang, then, pluralism is a necessary fact: it is both what makes structure possible, and the result of structure. One cannot exist without the other.

### **Implications for Buddhist Environmentalism**

In the first instance, it should be clear Huayan does not advocate “monism” or “nihilism.” For Dushun and Fazang, things differ precisely because they are identical, and are identical because they differ. These are absolute, not provisional statements. The recognition that structure exists must entail pluralism; were this not so the entire world could be one big roof tile. Moreover, the distinctiveness of “things” has been assigned not so much to a quality inherent within them, but to their respective functions, or activity, in the whole of which they are part.

The notion of “things as activity” may be applied to holistic eco-Buddhism. Just as rafters could be distinguished from tiles by pointing to their respective functions in the maintenance of the building, so pollution can now be distinguished from polar bears by pointing to its activity in the whole of which it is part, that is, our ecosystem. Polar bears do not kill sea life indiscriminately; oil spills do. Polar bears “polar bear” and pollution “pollutes.” Yet both contribute to maintaining the universe we inhabit as humans—ourselves just another element in the structure of the whole. That this whole should be made of “active things,” or rather, pure activity instantiated in specific verbal formations should not be surprising to Buddhists. An impermanent universe is, in a certain sense,

a universe of verbs—a universe where things are always “caught in the act.”

The fleeting structures, or formations of the universe are what determine the activity of their respective parts. Form—the way parts are structured—is essential, and it is inattention to the formal arrangement of these parts, I think, that leads Ian Harris to the ethical-metaphysical dead-end he perceives in holistic eco-Buddhism. Indeed, one might argue he is guilty of a fundamental essentialist error by assuming the property of toxicity somehow resides in pollution itself, rather than being a property which certain objects (e.g., plastic bottles) *enact* and take on in specific contexts (e.g., the sea, or the gut of a whale). Once we recognize that pollution only becomes pollution when it “pollutes”—i.e., disrupts, damages, or kills off particular life formations (in short, causes suffering)—then we can cut off the conditions for that pollution to exist. This does not involve cutting ourselves off from nature, but only a particular chain of causation that results in the extermination of animal and plant species. The question is *should* we cut these chains, and why?

I do not have an easy answer to this question, and I am not certain one exists. As mentioned above, we know that there are strong scriptural antecedents for the kind of naturalistic deductions holistic eco-Buddhists are prone to make. Yet there is no logical argument, so far as I can tell, for assuming that identifying with nature leads to protectionism. As James points out, just as realizing we are “one” with nature may make us better ecologists, so a hunter may feel “at one with things” by hounding down his prey and joining nature “red in tooth and claw” (459).

A perhaps disappointingly simple suggestion may come from Huayan itself. According to Chinul (1158–1210), the seminal representative of Huayan in Korea and a close friend of Fazang:

Practitioners in our time often say, “if one is able to look into one’s Buddha-nature clearly, the vow and altruistic behaviour will naturally be realized.” I, Moguja, do not think that this is the case. To see clearly one’s Buddha-nature is to realize that sentient beings and the Buddha are equal and that there is no discrimination between “me” and others. However, I worry that if one does not make the vow of compassion, s/he will stagnate in the state of calmness. The *Exposition of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra* says: “The nature of wisdom being calm, it needs to be guarded by the vow.” (*Han’guk Pulgyo chonso* 韓國佛教全書 4.755b, Park 198)

Drawing on Chinul, one could argue—*contra* Macy—that a Buddhist environmentalism must ultimately rely on pre-established, non-negotiable frameworks like the precepts and perfections, if only to inform wider metaphysical theories like interbeing. Then interbeing will still maintain its effectiveness, not as a means of collapsing the distinction between wisdom (*jñāna*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), but as a reflective tool for extending the reach of prescriptive ethics—ethics themselves founded on a compassion that is fundamental, irreducible, *a priori*.

This does not resolve the naturalistic fallacy surrounding holistic Buddhist ethics any more than it resolves the question of where compassion comes from in the first place. An argument in this direction would surely need to engage and resolve the perennial problem of reconciling Buddhist wisdom and compassion—a problem far beyond the scope of this essay. But although holistic eco-Buddhism cannot claim to have solved everything, one thing is clear: it does avoid a vapid, monistic “dissolution” into universal identity. It recognizes difference, or difference in action, and hence demands a complex awareness of the way our world *works*.

## Conclusion

Holistic exhortations to identify with the world were common in Chinese Buddhism. In the earlier stratum Sengzhao ascribed difference to function and motion, and identity to essence and stillness, yet sought to transcend both in the apophatic non-dualism of the Holy Man at one with things. Nevertheless Sengzhao's provisional account of difference dependent on function or motion is philosophically coherent and reconcilable with at least one aspect of Madhyamaka thought, namely, Nāgārjuna's recognition that entities, though empty, perform functions: pots of honey do different things from carts, as the Mahāyāna does different things from the "Hīnayāna."

The non-dualism of identity and difference later resurfaces in Dushun's mutually inhering *shi/li* dichotomy. *Li*, either as "principle" or "activity itself," depends on *shi* for its existence, just as *shi* depends on *li*: neither are abstractable from the other. Like waves on the ocean, *shi*—"activity actualized"—reveals *li*, the "ultimate verb." Likewise, Fazang presents a sophisticated account of ontological differentiation articulated through the relation of parts to wholes. Things differ due to their respective functions in the whole of which they are part. From this we may posit an ontology of differentiation where things no longer disaggregate in terms of what they are, as though "thingness" were some property inherent in the thing itself, but in terms of what they *do* within the system of which they are part.

While metaphysical models offer fascinating insights into the problem of identity and difference, they do not in themselves provide sufficient grounds for a contemporary environmental ethic. Holistic eco-Buddhists must therefore make interpretive leaps—i.e., interdependence *necessarily* entails compassion—to justify their claims. Although as I have tentatively suggested, these claims may ultimately be unnecessary if Huayan emphases on prescriptive ethics are taken seriously, much work

remains to be done if we are to understand the precise relationship between Huayan interpenetration, compassion, ethics, and nature—the roiling ocean of breathing, flailing, suffering “things.”

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