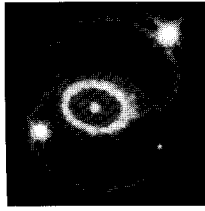


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Green Buddhism

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The new Buddhist environmentalism draws upon traditional Buddhist concepts such as non-harming, compassion, mindfulness, and interdependence.

During its 2,500-year history, Buddhism has evolved across a wide range of physical and cultural geographies. From the Theravada traditions in tropical South and Southeast Asia, to the Mahayana schools in temperate and climatically diverse China and Japan, to the Vajrayana lineages in mountainous Tibet, the Buddhist teachings have been received, modified, and elaborated in many ecological contexts. Across this history the range of Buddhist understandings about nature and human-nature relations has been based on different teachings, texts, and cultural views. These have not been consistent by any means; in fact, some views directly contradict each other.

Scholars debate whether or not Buddhist philosophies of nature led to any recognizable ecological awareness among early Buddhists. Most members of early Buddhist societies, including many monks, preferred the comforts of village life over the threats of the wild. Only forest ascetics chose the hermitage path with its immersion in wild nature. The word 'nature' itself has many different meanings in various Asian languages. Concepts and

Kaza, Stephanie. 2002. **Green Buddhism**, in *When Worlds Converge: What Science and Religion Tell Us about the Story of the Universe and Our Place in It*, eds. C.N. Matthews, M.E. Tucker, and P. Hefner, Chicago: Open Court, pp. 293-309.

attitudes toward nature vary across time and place as well. Indian Buddhist literature, for example, shows relatively little respect for wild nature, preferring tamed nature instead; Japanese Buddhism reveres the wild but engages it symbolically through highly developed art forms.

Even with these distinctions, Buddhist texts do contain many references to the natural world, both as inspiration for teachings and as source for ethical behavior. For those exploring Buddhist teachings in the context of the environmental crisis, Buddhist traditions are potential sources for philosophical and behavioral guidelines towards nature. From the earliest guidelines for forest monks to the hermitage songs of Milarepa, from the Jataka tales of compassion to Zen teachings on mountains and rivers, the inheritance is rich and diverse.

Early Buddhist Views of Nature

Buddhism developed as a major world religion in the fifth century B.C.E. in north India, where the historical Buddha lived and taught. At the time the region was undergoing some amount of ecological upheaval through growth of urban centers and political centralization. Previously uninhabited forests were cleared for agricultural expansion and town development. Wild areas that were home to rhinos, elephants, tigers, and large snakes, were seen as filled with threats but also available as marginal land. The Buddha and his followers took advantage of some of these lands but mostly adapted their teaching and retreat times to accommodate the farming seasons and to draw on local community support.

In the canonical story of the Buddha there are many references to nature, especially trees. The Buddha was born under a tree and spent many years wandering in the forests and mountains of India in pursuit of spiritual understanding. His enlightenment experience took place at the foot of a bodhi tree, and for many years after he taught in shaded groves to large gatherings of monks and lay people. According to the story, the Buddha vowed not to move from the tree until he gained some understanding of the source of human suffering.

After six days and nights of sitting in meditation, in a state of great concentration, he perceived all his previous lives in a contin-

uous cycle of birth and death, and then saw the vast universe of birth and death for all beings. From this he gained understanding of the law of cause and effect or *karma* and the universal existence of suffering due to impermanence. This was the First Noble Truth. Then he realized the driving force behind birth and death—craving or attachment to existence: the Second Noble Truth. As the Buddha came to see that all phenomena—all of nature—arise from complex sets of causes and conditions, he realized that liberation from suffering lay in this very insight—the law of mutual causality or dependent origination (in Sanskrit *praitiyasamutpada*, in Pali *paticca samuppada*). This was the Third Noble Truth: the path to release from suffering. He further laid out a prescription for practice in the Fourth Noble Truth of the Eight-fold Path. He named right livelihood, right practice, and right speech, among others, as methods for achieving release from suffering.

The Buddha's profound appreciation for the universal existence of suffering engendered a great compassionate response, expressed in the form of sharing his teachings with others. Compassion (*karuna*) and loving kindness (*metta*) for all beings arises directly from this understanding of the nature of suffering. Early Buddhism was strongly influenced by the Hindu and Jain principle of *ahimsa* or nonharming. Buddhist teachings urged monks not to harm any living thing; killing animals for food was against the monastic code. The classic Jataka Tales of India recount the many former lives of the Buddha as an animal or tree when he showed great compassion to others who were suffering. Over 500 tales have been handed down from the oral tradition, ranging from simple animal fables to fragments of heroic epics. It is said that the verses and stories were told by the Buddha himself as a way of commenting on particular life situations challenging his students. In each of the tales the Buddha-to-be sets a strong moral example of compassion for plants and animals in his many lifetimes before his rebirth as the Buddha.¹

The *Agganna Sutta* from the Pali Canon of early Buddhist teachings relates the Buddhist counterpart of a creation story in which

1. One collection is by Eitel Beswick: *Jataka Tales: Birth Stories of the Buddha* (London: Murray, 1956).

human activities clearly affect their environment. The original beings are described as self-luminous, subsisting on bliss and freely traveling through space. At that time it is said that the Earth was covered with a flavorful substance much like butter which caused the arising of greed. The more the beings ate of the butter, the more solid their bodies became. Difference of form appeared and the more beautiful ones developed conceit and looked down on the others. Self-growing rice appeared on the Earth to replace the butter and before long, people began hoarding and then stealing food. As people erred in their ways, the richness of the Earth declined. The point of the sutta is to show that environmental health is bound up with human morality.² Several other suttas also spell out the environmental impacts of greed, hate, and ignorance, showing how these three poisons produce both internal and external pollution. In contrast, the practice of generosity, compassion, and wisdom can reverse such environmental decline and produce health and purity.

The early monastic code, the Vinaya, contained a number of guidelines for caring for the environment.³ Monks were not to travel during the rainy season for fear of killing the worms and insects that come to the surface in wet weather. Similarly, monks were not to dig in the ground or drink unstrained water. Even wild animals were to be treated with kindness. Plants too were not to be injured carelessly but respected for all that they give to people. Buddhists adopted a reverential attitude toward large trees, carrying on the Indian tradition regarding *vanaspati* or 'lords of the forest'. Some of these huge trees were thought to be former Buddhas; protecting trees and preserving open lands were considered meritorious deeds. The Buddha constantly urged his followers to choose natural habitats to engage in meditation, free from the influence of everyday human activity.

2. Described in detail in P.D. Ryan, *Buddhism and the Natural World: Toward a Meaningful Myth* (Birmingham: Windhorse, 1998).

3. See, for example, Lily de Silva, 'Early Buddhist Attitudes toward Nature' in *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000).

Northern Views: The Mahayana Tradition

As Indian Buddhism developed into many strands of philosophy and practice, teachings were carried north to China. Each sect emphasized particular texts, principles, and practices, each with varying degrees of application to environmental concerns. The Hua-Yen school of Buddhism which developed in seventh-century China, placed particular emphasis on the law of interdependence or mutual causality. Ecological understanding of natural systems fits very well within the Buddhist description of interdependence.⁴ Throughout many cultural forms of Buddhism, nature is perceived as relational, each phenomenon dependent on a multitude of causes and conditions. These causes include not only physical and biological factors but also historical and cultural factors, in other words human values and forms of thought.

The Hua Yen Avatamsaka Sutra developed a teaching metaphor, the Jewel Net of Indra, to communicate the infinite complexity of the multicausal universe. This cosmic net contains a multifaceted jewel at each of its nodes, with each jewel reflecting all the others. If any of the jewels become cloudy (toxic or polluted), they reflect the others less clearly. To extend the metaphor, tugs on any of the net lines, e.g. through loss of species or habitat, affect all the other lines. Likewise, if clouded jewels are cleared up (rivers cleaned, wetlands restored), life across the net is enhanced. Because the net of interdependence includes not only the actions of all beings but also their thoughts, the intention of the actor becomes a critical factor in determining what happens. This, then, provides both a principle of explanation for the way things are, and a path for positive action.

The law of interdependence suggests a powerful corollary, sometimes noted as 'emptiness of separate self'. If all phenomena

4. See for example, Francis H. Cook, 'The Jewel Net of Indra', in J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, eds., *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 213-230; Bill Devall, 'Eco-centric Sangha', in Alan Hunt-Badiner, ed., *Dharma Gaia* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1990), pp. 155-164; Paul O. Ingram, 'Nature's Jeweled Net: Kukai's Ecological Buddhism. *The Pacific World* 6 (1990), pp. 50-64; Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: the Dharma of Natural Systems* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

are dependent on interacting causes and conditions, nothing exists by itself, autonomous and self-supporting. This Buddhist understanding and experience of self directly contradicts the traditional western sense of self as a discrete individual. Philosopher Alan Watts called this assumption of separateness the 'skin-encapsulated ego'—the very delusion that Buddhist practices seek to cut through. Interpreting the Hua Yen metaphor, modern American poet Gary Snyder suggests that the empty nature of self provides a link to "wild mind," or access to the energetic forces that determine the nature of life.⁵ These forces act outside of human influence, setting the historical, ecological, and even cosmological context for all life. T'ien-t'ai monks in eighth-century China believed in a universal Buddha nature that dwelled in all forms of life. Sentient (animal) and non-sentient (plant) beings and even the Earth itself were seen as capable of achieving enlightenment. This concept of Buddha-nature is closely related to Chinese views of *chi* or moving energy, ever changing, taking new form. Thus their views of nature reflect a dynamic sense of flow and interconnection between all beings, with Buddha-nature arising and changing constantly.

Northern or Mahayana schools also came to emphasize the path of the bodhisattva, one who vows to serve others until all the world's suffering is extinguished. Where earlier Theravada schools emphasized achieving enlightenment and leaving the world of suffering, the northern schools influenced by Confucian social codes, placed great value on service to others. Tibetan schools reinforced this vow by encouraging people to treat all sentient beings as possibly having been their mother in a former life. Bodhisattva acts of service are thus personally motivated, creating a foundation for a kind of virtue ethic. This directly applies to relations with plants and animals as well as people, encouraging environmental protection and kindness as important to enlightenment.

As Zen Buddhism became established in Japan, monastic temples were often built in mountainous or forested places. The strong tradition of haiku and other classic verse forms cultivated a sense of oneness with nature, whether insect or landform. Dogen, founder of the Soto sect of Zen, spoke of mountains and waters as

sutras themselves, the very evidence of the Dharma arising.⁶ He taught a method of direct knowing, experiencing this dharma of nature with no separation. The goal of meditation was nondualistic understanding, complete communion or transmission between two beings. Dogen showed how much of human suffering described in the First Noble Truth generates from egoistic views based in dualistic understanding. Enlightenment is then the breakthrough or liberation from these views to experience the self and myriad beings as one energetic event.

Modern Buddhist Ecological Views

Buddhist environmental teachers and writers at the turn of the century are currently emphasizing five primary arenas of practice and philosophy which support an environmental view: interdependence, compassion, mindfulness, nondualistic views, and detachment from self. At the heart of the Buddha's path is reflective inquiry into the nature of reality. Some experience interdependence in its more ecstatic forms of communion with plants and animals or sacred places. But engaging interdependence in today's environmental context also means undertaking rigorous examination of conditioned beliefs and thought patterns regarding the natural world. This may include such challenges as objectification of plants and animals, stereotyping of environmentalists, dualistic thinking of enemyism, the impacts of materialism, and environmental racism.

The law of interdependence is based on an understanding of the nature of the many relations at play in a situation. This may mean, for example, assessing who's who in an environmental conflict from a context of historical and geographical causes and conditions. Such investigation includes learning about ecological relationships under siege as well as observing the distribution of power across the human political relationships.

The practice of *ahimsa* or non-harming arises naturally from a true experience of compassion. The basic Buddhist precepts or eth-

6. See 'Mountains and Waters Sutra' in Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen* (San Francisco: North Point, 1985), pp. 97-107.

5. Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1995).

ical guidelines rely fundamentally on non-harming or reducing the suffering of others. The first precept, 'not killing', has been applied to ethical dilemmas around food, land use, pesticides, pollution, and cultural economic invasion. The second precept, 'not stealing', suggests examining the implications of global trade and corporate exploitation of resources. 'Not lying' brings up issues in advertising and consumerism. 'Not engaging in abusive relations' covers a broad realm of cruelty and disrespect for nonhuman others. Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh interprets the precept prohibiting drugs and alcohol to include the toxic addictions of television, video games, and junk magazines. Non-harming extends to all beings—not merely to those who are useful or irritating to humans. It also applies to environmental oppression of plants, animals, rivers, rocks, and mountains as well as to human oppression based on race, class, or gender discrimination. This green Buddhist teaching is congruent with many schools of ecophilosophy which respect the intrinsic value and capacity for experience of each being.

Mindfulness practice, a natural support to Buddhist environmentalism, is being taught in a range of contexts. The basic teachings of the *Satipatthana Sutta* or the mindfulness text, cultivate awareness of breath, body, feelings, and mind. Walking and sitting meditation are used to generate a sense of centered presence and alertness to where one actually is. Such mindfulness generates appreciation and respect toward the natural world, with practices related to food and eating, time and place, and personal well-being. Those practicing mindfulness are encouraged to slow down, consider their actions carefully, and make every effort not to cause suffering to others, including plants and animals.

Most political battles play out as confrontations between apparent enemies: loggers versus spotted owl defenders, housewives versus toxic polluters, birdlovers versus pesticide producers. From a Buddhist perspective, this kind of dualistic hatred destroys spiritual equanimity, thus, it is much better to work from an inclusive perspective, offering kindness to all parties involved, even while setting firm moral boundaries against harmful actions. A Buddhist orientation to nondualism can help to stabilize a volatile situation and establish new grounds for negotiation. Buddhist texts emphasize a strong relationship between intention, action, and karmic

effects of an action. If an environmental campaign is undertaken out of spite, revenge, or rage, that emotional tone will carry forth into all the ripening of the fruits of that action (and likely cause a similar reaction in response). However, if an action is grounded in understanding that the other party is also part of Indra's Jewel Net, then things unfold with less antagonism.

Perhaps the most significant teaching of the Dharma relevant to Buddhist activism is the practice of detachment from the ego-generating self. Thus, a Buddhist approach to environmental activism would be nonheroic, not motivated primarily by the need for ego identity or satisfaction. Strong intention with less orientation to the self relieves the activist from focusing so strongly on results. One does what is necessary in the situation, not bound by the need for it to reinforce one's ideas or to turn out a certain way. Small 'b' Buddhists have been able to act as bridge-builders in hostile or reactive situations by toning down the need for personal recognition. Cautioning against the self-serving ego, Buddhist teachers emphasize the power of *kalyana mittā*, or spiritual friendship—acting together in mutual support to help others practice the Dharma and take care of this world.

The Buddhist path of liberation includes the practice of physical, emotional, and mental awareness. Such practice can increase appreciation for the natural world; it can also reveal cultural assumptions about privilege, comfort, consumption, and the abuse of nature. Scholar Alan Sponberg suggests that a Buddhist environmental ethic is a virtue ethic, based fundamentally on development of consciousness and a sense of responsibility to act compassionately for the benefit of all forms of life.⁷ Through the practice of green virtue ethics, modern teachers encourage students to be environmentally accountable for all of their actions, from eating food to using a car to buying new clothes. Through following the fundamental precepts, environmentally-oriented Buddhists can practice moderation and restraint, simplifying needs and desires to reduce suffering for others.

7. Alan Sponberg, 'Green Buddhism and the Hierarchy of Compassion', in Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams, eds., *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnectedness of Dharma and Deeds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 351–376.

Recent History of Buddhism and Ecology

In the last few decades, Buddhists around the world have responded creatively to environmental problems, drawing on principles of Buddhist philosophy and practice. Forest monks in Thailand lead meditation walks around polluted areas; Tibetans collaborate with western NGOs to expose recent environmental destruction in Tibet. American Buddhists have worked on issues of consumerism, wilderness protection, and animal rights. One of the earliest voices for Buddhist environmentalism was Gary Snyder, North American Zen student and poet, who illuminated connections between Buddhist training and ecological activism. In the 1950s and 1960s, members of the Beat generation and Sixties counterculture explored these links further, certain that spiritual leadership was necessary to halt planetwide ecological destruction.

In the 1970s the environmental movement swelled, and Buddhist centers became well established in the West. Some retreat centers confronted ecological issues head on. Zen Mountain Monastery in New York faced off with the Department of Environmental Conservation over a beaver dam and forestry issues. Green Gulch Zen Center in northern California worked out water use agreements with its farming neighbors and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. At a time when vegetarianism was not such a popular choice, most Buddhist centers refrained from meat-eating, often with awareness of the associated environmental problems. Several Buddhist centers made some effort to grow their own organic food.⁸

By the 1980s Buddhist leaders were explicitly addressing the ecocrisis and incorporating ecological awareness into their teaching. In the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, His Holiness the Dalai Lama proposed making Tibet an international ecological reserve. Vietnamese peace activist and Zen monk Thich Nhat Han spoke of 'interbeing' using ecological examples. Zen teachers Robert Aitken in Hawaii and Daido Looi in New York examined

8. For a detailed study of two Buddhist centers see Stephanie Kaza, 'American Buddhist Response to the Land: Ecological Practice at Two West Coast Retreat Centers', in Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams, eds., *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnectedness of Dharma and Deeds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 219-248.

the Buddhist precepts from an environmental perspective. Joanna Macy creatively synthesized elements of Buddhism and deep ecology, challenging people to take their insights into direct action. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship, founded in 1978, gave prominence to environmental concerns on its activist agenda.

In Thailand, village priests took the initiative to perform ritual ordination of significant trees as a symbolic gesture of solidarity with threatened forests. Other monks got involved with activist efforts to question economic development and its environmental impacts. Plastic bags, toxic lakes, and nuclear reactors were targeted by Buddhist leaders as detrimental influences on people's physical and spiritual health. Similarly, in Tibet and Burma, Buddhist environmentalists drew attention to oil pipelines, hunting of endangered species, and threats to unique habitats.

In the western world, the Buddhism and Ecology theme was picked up by Buddhist publications, conferences, and retreat centers. Buddhist Peace Fellowship produced a substantial packet and poster for Earth Day 1990. The first popular anthology of Buddhism and ecology writings, *Dharma Gaia*, was published by Parallax Press that same year, following the more scholarly collection, *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*. World Wide Fund for Nature brought out a series of books on five world religions, including *Buddhism and Ecology*. Buddhist magazines such as *Tricycle*, *Shambhala Sun*, *Inquiring Mind*, *Turning Wheel*, and *Mountain Record* devoted whole issues to the question of environmental practice.

In 1990 Middlebury College in Vermont hosted a conference on Spirit and Nature where the Dalai Lama stressed his commitment to protection of the environment. At the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, when Buddhists gathered with Hindus, Muslims, pagans, Jews, Jains, and Christians from all over the world, a top agenda item was the role of religion in responding to the environmental crisis. Parallel interest in the academic community culminated in ten major conferences at Harvard University, with the intention of defining a new field of Religion and Ecology. The first of these conferences, convened by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim in 1996, focused on Buddhism and Ecology.⁹

9. The papers were published in Tucker and Williams, *Buddhism and Ecology*.

For the most part, the academic community did not address the practice of Buddhist environmentalism. This was explored by socially engaged Buddhist teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Bernie Glassman, the Dalai Lama, Sulak Sivaraksa, Christopher Titmuss, John Daido Looi, and Philip Kapleau. Joanna Macy developed a transformative model of experiential teaching designed to cultivate motivation, presence, and authenticity. Her methods were strongly based in Buddhist meditation techniques and the Buddhist law of co-dependent arising. Working with John Seed, Buddhist Australian rainforest activist, she developed a ritual 'Council of All Beings' to engage people's attention and imagination on behalf of all beings. Thousands of councils have now taken place in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Germany, Russia, and other parts of the western world.

Buddhist Environmental Activism

Examples of green Buddhism on the front lines are still relatively rare. They reflect three major types of activism which characterize environmentalism today: 1) holding actions of resistance; 2) structural analysis and alternatives; and 3) cultural transformation. Holding actions aim to stop or reduce destructive activity, buying time for more affective long-term strategies. In northern California, a small group of 'Ecosattvas' has been protesting the logging of old growth redwood groves, supported by the Humboldt County ecosangha, Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and Green Gulch Zen Center. For one demonstration, they created a large prayer flag covered with human handprints to serve as a testimony of solidarity for those participating in the resistance actions. Later, several Ecosattvas made a pilgrimage into the heart of the Headwaters Forest, carrying a Tibetan treasure vase with gifts and prayers on behalf of the redwoods.

Moved by the suffering of animals in research cages, factory farms, and export trade stores, two Zen students in the San Francisco area formed a Buddhists' animal rights group. Drawing on principles of non-harming, they educated Buddhists about the plight of monkeys, beef cattle, and endangered parrots. One of them has continued this work in Europe, focusing on the cruelty in large-scale hog farming. Addressing the dangers of nuclear waste, a

study group under Joanna Macy's leadership protested the storage of nuclear waste below ground. As an alternative they developed a vision of 'nuclear guardianship' for storage containers above ground based in Buddhist spiritual practices. In a parallel action, Zen student and artist Mayumi Oda helped to organize Plutonium-Free Future and the Rainbow Serpents to stop shipments of deadly plutonium to Japan.

The second type of activism, structural analysis and the creation of alternative visions, has also engaged modern Buddhists. In 1997 the Soka Gakkai-affiliated group, Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, held a series of workshops addressing the People's Earth Charter, an internationally-negotiated set of ethical guidelines for human-Earth relations. The Center published a booklet of Buddhist views on the Charter's principles to stimulate discussion before adoption by the United Nations. Members of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and Buddhist Peace Fellowship called the 'Think Sangha' have undertaken structural analysis of global consumerism. Collaborating between the United States and southeast Asia, they have held conferences in Thailand on 'Alternatives to Consumerism', pressing for moderation and lifestyle simplification. One of the boldest structural alternatives is the Dalai Lama's proposal that the entire province of Tibet be declared an ecological reserve.

Scholars have offered structural analyses using Buddhist principles to shed light on environmental problems. Rita Gross, Buddhist feminist scholar, laid out a Buddhist framework for considering global population issues. Stephanie Kaza has compared ecofeminist principles of activism with Buddhist philosophy, showing compatibilities between the two. Through Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Jay McDaniel has developed spiritual arguments for compassionate treatment of animals as a serious human responsibility. Sociologist Bill Devall integrated Buddhist principles into his elaboration of Arne Naess's Deep Ecology philosophy urging simplification of needs and wants. Joanna Macy draws on Buddhist philosophy and practices to analyze the paralyzing states of grief, despair, and fear that prevent people from acting on behalf of the environment.

The third type of activism, transforming culture, is barely underway and sometimes meets with resistance. Two Buddhist cen-

ters in rural northern California, Green Gulch Zen Center and Spirit Rock, already demonstrate a serious commitment to the environment through vegetarian food practices, land and water stewardship efforts, and ceremonies which include the natural world. In the Sierra foothills, Gary Snyder has been a leader in establishing the Yuba River Institute, a bioregional watershed organization working in co-operation with the Bureau of Land Management. Members have done survey work, controlled burns, and creek restoration projects engaging the local community in the process. Snyder models the level of commitment necessary to inhabit a place and build community that might eventually span generations. Zen Mountain Center in Southern California is beginning similar work, carrying out resource management practices such as thinning for fire breaks, restoring degraded forest, and limiting human access to some preserve areas. Applying Buddhist principles in an urban setting, Zen teacher Bernard Glassman has developed environmentally-oriented small businesses which employ local street people, sending products to socially responsible companies such as Ben and Jerry's.

Several Buddhist centers have developed lecture series, classes, and retreats based on environmental themes. Zen Mountain Monastery in the Catskills of New York state offers 'Mountains and Rivers' retreats based on the center's commitment to environmental conservation. These feature backpacking, canoeing, nature photography, and haiku as gateways to Buddhist insight. Ring of Bone Zendo at Kitkitdize, Gary Snyder's community, offers backpacking sesshins in the Sierra Nevada. Green Gulch Zen Center co-hosts a 'Voice of the Watershed' series with Muir Woods National Monument, with talks and walks across the landscape of the two valleys. Manzanita Village in southern California includes deep ecology practices, gardening, and nature observation as part of their mindfulness retreats.

Most of these examples represent social change agents working within Buddhist or non-Buddhist institutions to promote environmental interests. Alongside organizational initiatives, individual Buddhists are taking small steps to align their actions with their Buddhist practice. Many people, Buddhists included, are turning to vegetarianism and veganism as more compassionate choices for animals and ecosystems. Others are committing to eating only

organically grown food, in order to support pesticide-free soil and healthy farming. Thich Nhat Hanh has strongly encouraged his students to examine their consumption habits, not only around food and alcohol, but also television, music, books, and magazines. His radical stance is echoed by Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand, who insists the western standard of consumption is untenable if extended throughout the world. Some Buddhists have joined support groups for reducing credit card debt, giving up car dependence, and creating work co-operatives. For many students, environmental awareness and personal change flow naturally from a Buddhist practice commitment.

Buddhism and the Environmental Crisis

How might Buddhism and ecology affect the larger environmental movement and how might it influence western Buddhism in general? Will Buddhist environmentalism turn out to be more environmental than Buddhist? The answers to these questions must be largely speculative, since green Buddhism is just gaining a footing. It is possible that this fledgling voice will be drowned out in the brownlash against environmentalists, or in western resistance to engaged Buddhism. Environmental disasters of survival proportions may overwhelm anyone's capacity to act effectively. The synergistic combination of millennialism and economic collapse may flatten green Buddhism as well as many other constructive initiatives.

But if one takes a more hopeful view, it seems possible to imagine that green Buddhism will grow and take hold in the minds and hearts of young people who are creating the future. Perhaps someday there will be Ecosattva chapters across the world affiliated with various practice centers. Perhaps Buddhist eco-activists will be sought out for their spiritual stability and compassion in the face of extremely destructive forces. Buddhist centers might become models of ecological sustainability, showing other religious institutions ways to encourage ecological culture. More Buddhist teachers may become informed about environmental issues and raise these concerns in their teachings, calling for moderation and restraint.

That being said, Buddhism is not the only or necessarily the best path for dealing with the environmental crisis. Moral leadership

and community organizing from all religious traditions are needed to stop the downward spiral of planetary ecological devastation. Committed practitioners of nonharming can inspire others who are trying to resist destructive practices. Ecologically-articulate Buddhists can advance inter-religious dialogue to meet the challenges of global warming, overconsumption, and other systemic ills. Drawing on a Buddhist perspective, academics, policy analysts, and poets can bring fresh insights to once-intractable problems.

What happens next lies in the hands of those who are nurturing this wave of enthusiasm for green Buddhism into the next century. Religious leaders, teachers, and scholars as well as the younger generations, full of energy and passion for protecting the home they love, will determine the shape of Buddhism and ecology in the future. As the rate of environmental destruction continues to accelerate, many forms of dialogue and activism are sorely needed. Buddhism and its environmentally-supportive teachings have much to offer the assaulted world. Like other world religions, this ancient tradition is being called to transform once again and offer its wisdom teachings in yet another context.

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