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Acting with Compassion

Buddhism, Feminism, and the Environmental Crisis

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On my altar at home stands a small bronze casting of Kuan Yin (also known as Kannon or Kanzeon in Japan), who serves to bless my meditation space and daily activity. Her robes are flowing and gracious, and in her hand she holds a vase of healing water. She stands ready to receive the suffering of the world with compassion and equanimity. Above the kitchen sink I have a picture of a carved jade Kuan Yin from China. She holds a rabbit on her arm, manifesting the spirit of harmony with life and all living beings. On my desk, covering the books and papers of my current work, is a prayer cloth of the Green Tara. She sits on a lotus petal dais; her aura and soft face radiate gentle and penetrating power.

I begin with Kuan Yin because she represents a feminine gender form of a realized Bodhisattva, known to many people for thousands of years as the embodiment of compassion for all beings in the vast interdependent mutually causal web. Sometimes depicted with a thousand arms, Kuan Yin reaches out to offer a thousand tools of compassion—a shovel, a flute, a blanket, a kind word. Kuan Yin is "the Mahayana archetype of mutual support, giving life and fulfillment to the Sangha . . . of stones and clouds, of wild creatures and forests, of people . . . in the slums and prisons of our cities, not to mention our own

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families and friends" (Aitken 1986, 24–29). In the Tibetan tradition, the feminine form of the Green Tara serves as a reminder of the one who heals by her presence, serving countless beings. Her green color symbolizes the capacity to take action; her right hand forms the *mudra*, or gesture of calling forth awakening, and her left the gesture of refuge (see Blofeld 1978, Willson 1986).

As realized beings, Kuan Yin and Tara listen to *all* the cries of the world, not just those of people. This means they are also concerned with plants and animals, mountains and valleys, small creatures and large. The feminine compassionate presence has long been addressed by Buddhists of many cultures to relieve human sickness, grief, and poverty of spirit. In the current sweep of environmental destruction, it is Kanzeon and Tara who see and experience with us the pain and suffering of deserts, forests, soils, groundwater, oceans, and skies. They offer a model of radical presence in the world, of no separation between the one who suffers and the one who responds. The calls for action and healing arise spontaneously and naturally out of the cries of death and despair.

In this introductory work, I draw on the courage and inspiration of these Bodhisattvas to investigate the role of Buddhist practice and philosophy informed by feminist principles in support of work for the environment. As Buddhism and feminism gain strength and momentum in the Western world, the environmental crisis looms large on the horizon of our survival. I believe those trained in the self-discipline, analysis, and reflective processes of Buddhism and feminism have a powerful contribution to make in addressing the enormous challenges of environmental work. I encourage many more women and men to develop these tools for effective, grounded, sensitive, and nonviolent action on behalf of the earth.

I speak from my own perspective as a Buddhist, feminist, and environmentalist. I have been studying Zen Buddhism for sixteen years with Kobun Chino Roshi, practicing at Green Gulch and Jikogi Zen Centers in California, and serving as chair of the national Buddhist Peace Fellowship board. I have evolved as a feminist through my mother's example as a lawyer for the poor, through my experience of power relations in patriarchal workplaces and religious centers, and through examination of feminist discourse in theory, philosophy, and morality. I am an environmentalist by profession, with academic training in both biology and social ethics. I have been working in the field of environmental education and conservation for twenty years and currently teach Environmental Ethics at the University of Vermont in Burlington.

I begin with principles held in common by Buddhism and feminism that are relevant to the environmental crisis. I then offer examples of these principles in action, of feminist women engaged in environmental work as Buddhist practice. This exploration is an introduction to a field of integrated perspectives which is just developing. I draw primarily on American Buddhism; the paper should not be construed to be internationally inclusive.

INTRODUCTION

When Buddhism arrived in the West, it encountered curious and bright minds of both sexes, eager for teachings and spiritual practices relevant to their

lives. The search for spiritual foundation escalated in the 1960s and 1970s as sensitive men and women suffered through the paralyzing national pain of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. College students and activists scrutinized social values in depth and rejected much of the status quo parochialism that characterized American thinking. Spurred by their interest and, in the case of Tibet, cultural destruction, the most extensive wave of Buddhist teachers arrived in America from Tibet, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Burma (see Fields 1981).

At the same time, feminism was blossoming and gaining strength as a social movement. Women were waking up to the repressed and hidden cruelties of male domination in individual relationships as well as social institutions. In consciousness-raising groups across the United States, women examined issues of reproduction and health, power and sexual abuse, and outright misogyny. Feminist intellectuals took on the challenge of deconstructing gender-biased assumptions that underlay the foundations of Western language, politics, psychology, medicine, law, and philosophy. Feminist Buddhists questioned patriarchal Asian forms and inappropriate teacher-student conduct (see Boucher 1985).

Earth Day 1970 marked a watershed point in public concern for the environment. Widespread exposure to extensive environmental problems generated a wave of citizen action groups and environmental education programs. Activists pointed to the cumulative excesses of postwar industrialization and commercialization, along with skyrocketing human populations, as pressing the limits of the planet's carrying capacity. Doomsday predictions forecast large-scale environmental catastrophes long before Chernobyl, Love Canal, or the loss of the Black Forest. Antinuclear activism was a relatively new movement struggling against the enormous odds of a fearful Cold War nation.

In the two decades between Earth Day 1970 and Earth Day 1990, Buddhism, feminism, and concern for the environment in America grew and changed tremendously, reflecting a period of serious questioning of values and social structures. The maturation of understanding and insight over these two decades provides a significant setting for reviewing the role of Buddhism and feminism in relationship to the environment. While Beat poetry and fascination for Oriental culture drew curious seekers to the few Buddhist teachers of the 1960s and 1970s, twenty years later, there were over 300 Buddhist centers across the country and a dozen major Buddhist publications (see Field 1989; Morreale 1988). In this period of growth, over twenty women gained recognition as formal Buddhist teachers (see Friedman 1987). In the 1960s, feminism was a little-known word, but by 1990, feminists had established hundreds of nonprofit organizations to support women's issues, from rape hotlines to women's history weeks. Retreats and conferences for women Buddhists were regular features on Western meditation calendars.

By Earth Day 1990, the proliferation of books, graduate programs, environmental careers, and by now well-established environmental lobbying groups was an indicator of the all-encompassing scale of the ecological situation. The environmental crisis had grown beyond local, state, national, and international

capacity to handle it. Amidst the world context of North-South tension, over 1,500 women from 84 countries stood in solidarity for women's environmental needs at the 1991 Women's World Congress for a Healthy Planet. One after another presented moving testimonies of economic injustice, forest degradation, loss of soil and farms, and frustration with political systems that systematically destroyed environmental resources.[1]

I believe there is a powerful confluence of thought, practice, commitment, and community in the lives of feminist Buddhists working for the environment who have lived through this history of startling change. In these two decades, leadership and participation of women in Buddhist practice have paralleled the rise in feminist theory research and explorations in conservation biology and restoration ecology. A whole new generation of young people has been raised in families with feminist and/or Buddhist parents concerned about the environment. Feminists, Buddhist women practitioners, and environmental advocates are no longer isolated from one another.

The growth and maturation of these social and religious movements have come at a time when people are hungry for ethical response to the environmental problems they see around them. Yet most Americans lack the patience and moral reasoning skills to work through the complexities of environmental dilemmas. The discipline of Buddhist practice and the social analysis of feminism now bring a mature perspective to the endless suffering of the environment and a capacity to live with the tension of unresolved issues that will take more than several generations to correct.

ENVIRONMENTALLY RELEVANT PRINCIPLES OF BUDDHISM AND FEMINISM

The philosophical principles of Buddhism and feminism overlap and complement each other in a number of areas, mutually supporting an interdependent, systems-oriented view of the environment. There are also several areas in which one of these is underdeveloped in its traditions, practices, or teachings and is enhanced or influenced by exposure to the other. I outline here six areas of confluence, with some comments on differences that are not yet fully addressed.

Experiential Knowing

In contrast to much of Western philosophy and theology, Buddhism begins with the truth of personal experience. Experiential knowing in relationship to spiritual development is valued over textual, abstract, or other sources of knowing, which are distant from the individual (see Suzuki 1949, 267–313). The early canons of Buddha's teachings repeatedly urged the practitioner to thoroughly study his or her own experience and mental conditioning in order to break through the limitations of the falsely constructed self. The Buddha insisted his followers not take his authority as a final say on any matter, but rather sincerely investigate the teachings for themselves. Meditation practices aim to quiet and stabilize the mind so it is capable of observing thoughts, sensations, and actions

in great detail. One's own mind and experience are the places in which one learns to recognize the universal nature of suffering (the first of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism).

Experiential knowing is based on embodied mindfulness practices that develop awareness of need and greed, the suffering of pleasure and pain, and the impermanent nature of things. The content for this learning is always one's own life. One's spiritual challenge is to investigate in depth the accumulated patterns of response to physical, social, mental, and psychological stimuli in order to liberate the practitioner from the suffering of unconsciousness. By shining the light of awareness on the nature of one's own conditioned reality, one finds the freedom to act effectively and skillfully, grounded in thorough self-knowledge. This experiential knowing or study of self in body, speech, and mind lies at the heart of all traditions of Buddhist teachings. Dogen Zenji, ninth-century Japanese Zen Master, expressed this:

> To study the buddha way is to study the self.
> To study the self is to forget the self.
> To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.
> (Tanahashi 1985, 70)

Feminism is equally clear on the importance of experiential knowing as a foundation for social action and personal insight. The feminist movement in the United States, as well as in other countries, has consistently emphasized that women speak their own truths with their own voices. Feminists have encouraged women to reclaim the stories of their lives and speak what they know from direct experience. The personal is recognized as the political, for it is a genuine place of truth telling. This has meant speaking out about the painful suffering of sexual and environmental abuse, articulating the power of women's emotions, and hearing the realities of women's bodies and environmental health concerns. In feminist religious studies in Buddhist and other traditions, women struggle with the discontinuity between personal experience and patriarchal tradition, looking for new language, forms, and community that match women's religious experience (see Plaskow and Christ 1989).

Feminists have validated the important realm of subjective knowing, acknowledging the inner experience of self that places the knower in an interior as well as exterior context (Belenky et al. 1986). Subjective knowing in women has been consistently denigrated by Western patriarchal cultures as self-centered, romantic, and distorted by emotionality. The scientific inquiry method, which insists on the necessity of an objective perspective, is the extreme opposite of subjective or interior knowing. It depends completely on the assumption that the actor can be separate from the object of one's actions (see Harding 1986). This overlooks the critical discipline of subjective knowing that reveals the inner structure and conditioning of the individual mind. It is this built-in conditioning that limits accuracy and objectivity in perception. Integrated, experiential knowing, which includes both object of knowing and the knower herself, is necessary for understanding the complexities of the environmental crisis.

For many women, the experience of knowing in relation to the natural world develops the mind-body's response to other beings and to lunar and seasonal cycles, informed by kinesthetic and sensory awareness. Body rhythms and responses to the earth have long been celebrated in earth-based spiritual traditions such as the Goddess cultures, not necessarily only by women. Among Buddhist cultures, the Japanese and others have cultivated an emotional and aesthetic attitude toward the natural world that represents intimate and prereflective encounter with the environment. In the Japanese view, nature is seen as the realm of "spontaneous becoming"—a meeting ground for the dynamic unfolding of person, tree, rock, and bird (Tellenbach and Kimura 1989, 155).

The embodied knowing of child and mother can be a model for intimate relations with the earth (Levitt 1990). The child in the womb knows only mother as earth; it is surrounded by, sustained by, and conditioned by the mother as context. Likewise, the earth is body to the woman, completely informing, conditioning, and nourishing her life. This metaphor does not imply that women have preferred access to these truths (the "essentialist" position in feminist philosophy). Rather, embodied knowing for *any* person is a direct link to experience of relationship with the earth. The earth itself can be seen as Buddha's body, supporting all lives, being the Great Life.

Embodied knowing is a source of confidence for embodied spirituality and environmental political action. The Buddhist and feminist emphasis on direct experience of the environment is informed by the body as mind, rather than body and mind as separate. Through knowing based on experience, one becomes grounded in actual reality rather than in one's ideas of reality. Through this grounding, the practitioner gains a legitimate voice with which to speak personally and specifically of environmental relationships and how they are ignored, sabotaged, or otherwise denied.

Examining the Conditioned Mind

Central to Buddhist philosophy and meditation method is the practice of discriminating wisdom. This is the detailed study of how things work—both in external and internal realities and in the interaction and co-creation of the two. The purpose is to break through delusions that generate and perpetuate a sense of an independent and separately existing self. The discriminating mind can expose rationalized actions and mental-cultural-emotional habits that perceive beings as separate objects rather than as members of a web of relationships.

In the context of the environment, there are at least three prevalent patterns of thought that block relational perception (Kaza 1989). One common thought habit is *stereotyping* of animals and ecosystems by describing them in oversimplified terms. People tend to lump the few characteristics they know of an organism or plant community into a generic representative that does not accurately reflect reality. For example, the generic whale is playful, altruistic, intelligent, large, and gentle—each characteristic fitting one species or another, but not existing anywhere in this combination in a real whale. Emotional responses to plant communities also lead to undifferentiated labeling. Deserts are viewed as wastelands, and all forests are seen as cool, dark places, despite the many

differences in topography, climate, plant and animal inhabitants, and human history.

A second form of objectification is *projection*, in which the mind projects internalized ideas onto favored and unfavored elements of the environment. By reducing the reality of a forest to someone's idea of a forest, the community becomes objectified—seen as object with a convenient name and simplified description. "Cute" or "nice" animals, such as deer, rabbits, and songbirds, elicit more sympathetic responses than "mean" animals, such as coyotes, spiders, and bats (Kellert 1989). Likewise, good land is land that can be farmed or developed; bad land is what is too steep, dry, or impenetrable to be subdued.

A third prevalent thought habit is *dualistic thinking*, in which one object or idea is placed in opposition to another, often with the implication that one has power or superiority over the other. Self-other opposition forms the mental basis for anthropocentric relationships with plants and animals, as well as prejudice and racism. We-they conflicts, expressed in views of the environment as enemy, share the same mental polarizing structure as mind-body, creator-created, nature-culture dualisms (see Keen 1986). The mind separates and distances one side of the polarity from the other, rather than seeing the opposites as complementary and inclusive, each arising in the context of the other.

Feminism has exposed a particular aspect of conditioned thinking generally overlooked in Buddhism: the influence of gender identity and cultural habits of objectifying women. Many writers have described in depth the suffering that has resulted from oppressive dualistic thinking, projection, and stereotyping of women. Ecofeminist philosopher Karen Warren suggests three features of oppressive conceptual frameworks that apply both to treatment of women and the environment (Warren 1990). The first, *value-hierarchical thinking*, refers to placing value or giving preference to what is seen as being of higher status, as opposed to considering all things equally. The second, *value dualisms*, points to the typically Western pattern of viewing opposites as disjunct and exclusive, and then assigning moral superiority to one-half of the dualism, i.e., male-female, day-night, temperate-tropical, vertebrate-invertebrate.

The third feature is the *logic of domination*, the argument that justifies subordination of one opposite by the other. To uphold this logic requires considerable mental and social cooperation with oppressive cultural conditioning. One can see this logic at work in rationalizing intolerable conditions for laboratory and factory-farm animals (Kheel 1989). The same dominating, objectifying mind that uses women for sex objects also justifies the use of land for strip-mining and forests for clear-cutting. Those with international power promote development projects for less industrialized nations that contribute not only to environmental degradation, but also to the oppression and further impoverishment of women (Shiva 1988). In highly industrialized nations, women are subjected to aggressive domination by powerful market advertising that manipulates their desires for consumer products.

Both Buddhism and feminism provide critical tools for examining deeply the roots of antirelational thinking that support environmental destruction. Both insist on thorough review of all aspects of the conditioned mind that perpetuate

mental and physical patterns of domination. However, because Buddhism has been transmitted almost entirely through patriarchal cultures, its investigation of gender conditioning is underdeveloped. This weakens the Buddhist argument for ecological interdependence, because it misses the critical link between patterns of oppression of women and the environment. The feminist Buddhist position includes the connection, observing the nature of mind in women and men that sustains a separate self, capable of dominating humans and environment.

The Truth of Interrelatedness

The fundamental law in Buddhism is the Law of Dependent Co-Arising: that all events and beings are interdependent and interrelated. The universe is described as a mutually causal web of relationship, each action and individual contributing to the nature of many others (Kalupahana 1987, 26). The Pali word for this law, *Paticca-samuppada*, explains the truth in its literal meaning. *Paticca* means "grounded on or on account of"; *sam* is "together," and *uppada* means "arising." Thus the whole phrase can be translated "the being-on-account-of-arising-together." Or in the text,

> This being, that becomes;
> from the arising of this, that arises;
> this not being, that becomes not;
> from the ceasing of this, that ceases.[2]

An image for this cosmology is the Jewel Net of Indra, from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition (Cook 1989, 213–30). The multidimensional net stretches through all space and time, connecting an infinite number of jewels in the universe. Each jewel is infinitely multifaceted and reflects every other jewel in the net. There is nothing outside the Net and nothing which does not reverberate its presence throughout the web of relationships.

This law is one of the most obvious connections between Buddhism and the environment. As ecologists point out in example after example, ecological systems are connected through water, air, and soil pathways. Impacts of chemical pesticides on agricultural lands carry to adjacent wetlands; industrial carbon emissions affect global atmospheric climate patterns. Interdependence and interrelationship are central starting points for ecological research of food webs, nutrient cycles, and forest succession. Indra's Net, however, contains more than the ecological sum of biosphere, atmosphere, and lithosphere. The Buddhist principle of interdependence includes human thought, perception, and values, and their impacts on the ecological-evolutionary conversation. This critical difference is what makes it possible and necessary for people in the Net to act ethically out of regard for the other beings in the Net.

In the context of human relationship, feminist ethicist Mary Grey describes the metaphysic of connectedness as "revelatory paradigm" and "moral imperative." She suggests the ethics of care and responsibility naturally develop from a person's experience "trying to be faithful to relation or connection" (Grey

1991, 13). A number of feminist ethicists and writers point to mutuality and solidarity as key values for the feminist movement (see Farley 1986; Daly 1989). These values spring from the need for sister bonding as a source of strength in facing the internalized pain of the victim of sexism and in organizing for institutional and social change. Full mutuality or interdependence is not possible for one dominated by the absolutizing, individualist "I." Thus to experience the richness of full mutuality, one must transcend or break through the limitations of the thought habit of individualism reinforced as the dominant ideology in the Western world.

For the woman who has suffered physical, economic, psychological, or spiritual oppression, freedom from the rigidity of the fixed "I"/self and release into the web of relationships means the choice of many more nourishing options for growth and development. Because this maturation occurs in a shared context with others also suffering isolation, the feminist experience of interrelatedness is a process of mutual becoming, born out of mutual vulnerability. The joy and satisfaction of this experience may then be a foundation for "passionate caring for the entirety of the relational nexus" (Grey 1991, 13). A woman who uncovers her own capacity for mutuality can then (and often does) extend her efforts and empathy to the many other women in different cultures and places who also suffer from lack of freedom of choice.

For both Buddhism and feminism, the core truth of interrelationship or mutual becoming is central to individual liberation or freedom from false reification of an independent "I." Feminist Buddhists who understand this path of liberation can be extremely effective and compassionate participants in the struggle for environmental consciousness. Acting from deep-rooted experience in the freedom to choose options other than oppression, they can work creatively and skillfully to open up environmental conversations that have been frozen by loss of relationality.

Emotional Energy as Source of Healing

The Buddhist practice of investigating conditioned body, speech, and mind includes detailed observation of the nature of emotions. In the Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, for example, the meditator is instructed to practice awareness of pleasant, painful, and neutral feelings as they arise in the mind and body. In Thich Nhat Hanh's modern-day commentary on this Sutra, he suggests exercises for identifying and acknowledging feelings and seeing the physical, physiological, or psychological roots of particular feelings (Nhat Hanh 1990b). By becoming fully familiar with the nature of anger, grief, fear, desire, denial, or the blocking of these feelings, a practitioner gains confidence in living through the sweep of emotional responses that naturally arise from moment to moment.

The first step of healing from the suffering of difficult emotions is to recognize and fully claim the rich information and energy response of the body/mind. In the investigation and mindfulness practice itself, energy is released and becomes available for healing through attention and understanding. Rather than suppressing deep emotions, Buddhist practice can help a person develop

the capacity to consciously use this energy to relieve suffering. Much of the response to the current environmental crisis is an emotional response, filled with grief, fear, and anger at the loss and destruction of plants, animals, forests, and watersheds. The depth of response may be so overwhelming that people become immobilized and unable to act. Buddhist practices to validate and move through these waves of emotion can be extremely helpful in freeing up energy to take action on behalf of the environment (see Nhat Hanh 1990a; Macy 1983, 158–61).

Western feminists also recognize the importance of emotional response in the process of awakening to oppression. Most Western white women have been conditioned not to express anger overtly. Strong displays of empassioned emotion have been marginalized and viewed as unacceptable by the ruling patriarchy and its male model of "cool" and reserved emotions. Anger at sexual and environmental abuse qualifies as an "outlaw emotion," invalidated by those who wish to avoid hearing other experiences (Jaggar 1985). Feminists, however, are well aware that powerful social and gender conditioning can only be overthrown by a strong surge of energy and desire for change. Anger is very effective in marshaling the energy necessary to dismantle the structure that perpetrates violence against women and the environment.

If one begins with the fundamental truth of one's own experience, recognizing that perception and conception are intimately related, it becomes necessary to know how we feel in order to act morally. As feminist theologian Beverly Harrison asserts, "The failure to live deeply in 'our bodies, ourselves' destroys the possibility for moral relations between us" (Harrison 1985, 13). For Harrison, anger is a "feeling-signal that all is not well in our relation to others or the world around us" (Harrison 1985, 14). Powerful emotion is a sign of resistance to the unsatisfactory moral quality of our social and environmental relationships. This signal is the wake-up call to look more deeply into the situation at hand. Harrison argues that the power to respond is the power to create a world of moral relations. This is the work of spiritual and religious practice, the transformative work that can serve to slow environmental destruction and heal the wounded biosphere.

The combination of Buddhist mindfulness practice and feminist moral response is a powerful antidote to widespread despair and depression over the possibility of nuclear annihilation, environmental catastrophe, or out-of-control corporate greed. This practice does not remove the threats or mitigate the devastating consequences of irresponsible actions, but it does help to generate the tremendous energy needed to address the complexities of the global environmental situation (see Macy 1983). Anger, despair, or other strong emotions alone are not enough to stop environmental tragedy, because they cause polarization and defensive reactions that block communication. Environmental activists already have a history and bad name in some circles for misusing emotions in the service of battle strategy. Habitual unexamined anger can harden into ideology that further erodes opportunities for working together. By cultivating a deeper, more fully informed emotional response, one cultivates greater possibilities for healing transformation of relationships between human beings and the environment.

Relational Ethics

Buddhist ethics are grounded firmly in the truth and experience of the Law of Dependent Co-Arising. *Sila*, or guidelines for moral action, are central to Buddhist practice in all traditions. The Three Pure Precepts are vows to refrain from actions that ignore interdependence, to make an effort to act out of understanding of interrelationship, and to serve all beings in the interdepending web.[3] The five (Theravada) prescriptive precepts to not kill, not lie, not steal, not abuse sexuality or intoxicants spring from a fundamental recognition of relationship. One aims to act as respectfully and inclusively as possible toward plant, animal, and human companions.

In the Mahayana traditions, the model of enlightenment is the Bodhisattva who gains awakening in order to serve all beings. This is in contrast to the Theravadan goal of achieving liberation to be freed from the cycle of endless suffering and rebirths in a human body. Buddhist or other religious beliefs that place emphasis on Otherworldliness, or some version of escaping from the drudgery of this world, are not helpful for responding to the escalating deterioration of the environment. Forests can only be replanted here on this earth by those who live here, not those who have transcended the world. The Bodhisattva model encourages the practices of compassion for all others as a means of accomplishing a profound sense of interrelatedness. One can specifically cultivate "eco-bodhicitta" or the mind of enlightenment that serves all relations of the environment (Ross 1991).

The experience of compassion for others' suffering is what allows us to feel the connections with disturbed ecosystems and threatened species, distressing as they may be.[4] Sensitivity and moral concern for the health of human relationships can extend as well to plants, animals, forests, clouds, stones, and sacred places. Buddhist relational ethics are based on knowing that one cannot act without affecting other living beings, that it is impossible to live outside the web of interconnectedness. The beautiful Jewel Net of Indra is sustained and enhanced by the quality of moral intention and commitment to the many facets of the Net. To act from this sense of relatedness is deeply empowering, setting an ethical example for others to consider.

Compassion in Western culture, in contrast, is frequently associated with pity and powerlessness and relegated to the domain of women's nurturing (Klein 1986). In examining Western psychological values, feminist researchers have challenged the traditional stages of moral and psychological development based on male socialization, as described by Kohlberg (Kohlberg 1981). In this model, moral maturity develops through increasing allegiance to universal rules or principles of justice and individual rights. Carol Gilligan's work, in contrast, suggests that women's moral development in the West is based on maturing responsiveness to relationships and consideration of others in moral choices (Gilligan 1982). Kohlberg's male model reinforces an environmental ethic oriented to rights and justice; Gilligan's alternative model supports an environmental ethic of care and responsibility.

Relational ethics as described by both Buddhist teachings and feminist writers might also be called contextual ethics. A contextual ethic, as I use the term,

reflects both the diversity of human voices in a given place and time (Warren 1990, 139), and the specific environmental relationships in which the human dilemma is embedded (Cheney 1987). Built into this approach to ethics is the rejection of any single authoritative ethical voice or posited human nature that exists independent of historical context. Abstract individualism is seen as ungrounded and relatively unhelpful in addressing the tensions of a specific environmental conflict.

Environmental moral dilemmas occur in a web of relationships. Each situation has a unique history, based on very particular causes and conditions. A contextual ethic represents a shift from emphasis on rights, rules, and predetermined principles to a conception of ethics grounded in specific relationships. Environmental actions based entirely on rules as moral guidelines inevitably leave out some aspect of the situation that is not included in the legal framework. Rules generalize; relationships are infinite and complex. A relational ethic calls for compassion for all the relationships involved in the situation—parent-child, tree-animal, bird-human, soil-rock. Relationships are not something outside of who we are; they, in fact, *define* who we are to a large extent as moral agents in a social and historical context. As Warren argues, "Relationships of humans to the nonhuman environment are, in part, constitutive of what it is to be human" (Warren 1990, 143).

Relational morality is not simple; it is extremely difficult to make sound environmental decisions when relatively little is known about ecological relationships. The stakes are often very high when the consequences of human actions mean the loss of millions of plant and animal lives. Trade-offs in tropical environments, for example, are almost a matter of triage today. The practices of compassion and contextual reflection generate a deep appreciation of biological and cultural complexity and of the long-standing ties between humans and all other members of the biotic community. I believe this is an essential foundation for critically needed reevaluation of what we are doing on the planet and what is ethically acceptable and life-sustaining.

The Role of Community

All Buddhist traditions venerate the three Jewels—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In environmental terms, the *Buddha* can be interpreted as all beings who teach, or the teacher within, or the Buddha as environmental teacher. To see all beings as teachers means one can learn from wolf, redwood, buffalo, river, and mountain (see Dogen Zenji 1985, 97–127). To see the Buddha as teacher within means one learns from one's own experience with the environment. The Buddha as environmental teacher is the one who points to the truth of interdependence and co-dependent arising of all life forms.

Dharma is the truth of the teachings in their many forms, perceptions, and experiences. Each plant and animal, as well as human, is an embodiment of evolutionary truth, a testimony to thousands of years of living more or less successfully in conversation with the environment. Each experience of connection with members of the environmental web is a taste of the deep truth of the nature of reality as mutually causal and interdependent.

The Third Jewel, the *Sangha*, is traditionally described in Buddhist literature as the monastic community, or those who practice within a retreat setting. Rules for sangha behavior are extensive, numbering over 300 in some traditions, with specific rules for nuns, often in subordinate relationship to monks. For most American Buddhists, some of these rules are inappropriate because of cultural differences, but even more, they are not specific to lay or nonmonastic practice, which is the prevalent form of practice in the United States. Deep ecologist Bill Devall proposes the concept of "eco-sangha," in which people practice with all the members of their bioregion or watershed area and consciously identify with and include the environment as community (Devall 1990). One then sits in meditation not only with others in the human community, but also with the surrounding oaks, maples, jays, warblers, and wildflowers.

Feminist Buddhist Rita Gross suggests that sangha is the "indispensable matrix of spiritual existence" necessary for human liberation (Gross 1991, 73). She critiques the historical tendency in Buddhism to emphasize the lonely path to freedom, suggesting that too much aloneness is not a good thing, for it is not, in itself, instructive in how to get along with others. Her feminist reconceptualization of sangha rests on the values of community, nurturing, communication, and relationships, traditionally cared for by women in many cultures. With no theistic Ultimate Other in Buddhism to provide guaranteed relationship to the person experiencing isolation, there is no alternative but to provide relationship for one another. She suggests, "It is necessary to create the social, communal, and compassionate matrix of a society in which friendship and relationship are taken as categories of utmost spiritual importance" (Gross 1991, 78).

A feminist interpretation of sangha validates and deepens the key feminist political and psychological values of solidarity and mutuality. Companionship and shared activities, including dialogue on environmental ethics, are then central to spiritual development and need to be cultivated as primary virtues. Women's friendships and love for each other and the mutual growth process may be threatening and confusing to some, because they challenge traditional ethics based in individualism. I believe that the friendship-sangha model is a helpful and appropriate basis for refinding and redefining our human relationships with plants, animals, and ecological communities. It is both enjoyable and sustainable, and can serve as a significant counterpoint to the recent history of industrialized attack and plunder.

A FEW POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS

These six areas of philosophical similarity or complementarity between Buddhism and feminism offer a solid foundation for a Buddhist feminist approach to environmental issues. I believe the environmental ethics generated from such a position recommend restraint in human activities that cause destruction and loss of habitats, species, and ecosystems, with the aim of reducing suffering for many forms of life. However, for effective evaluation of these two approaches, it is necessary to keep in mind the historical traditions and limitations of each

source philosophy. There are several potential weaknesses of traditional Buddhism that may serve either to limit Buddhist involvement with the environment or, through dialogue and activity, may actually help define the evolutionary edge of American Buddhism.

Egocentrism as Central Concept

Buddhist philosophy and religious practice emphasize breaking through the limited perspective and conditioning of the small self or human ego, in order to experience the boundless interrelated nature of reality. The route to liberation assumes an overvaluation of self or ego, which distorts perception and perpetuates self-centeredness. This fundamental approach may not be as applicable for marginalized groups of people, including women. Teachings that point to the falsely constructed separate ego may be received as disconnected from the actual lived experience of oppression, or as a paternalistic strategy for pacification or assimilation.[5] For women and others experiencing social messages that continually devalue the self, the Buddhist emphasis on egolessness may only serve to further erode the not yet fully formed and validated person. Practices that suppress the ego may be misinterpreted as a denial of personhood which can be used as a method of subjugation and denigration of marginalized groups.

Feminism has taken a strong position on self-advocacy as a key principle in fighting abusive patterns of social conditioning, whether in marriage, work, or health matters. Self-advocacy is critical to women speaking up for their rights, their existence, and more humane standards of behavior. The marginalized or oppressed woman is encouraged to find her voice, her dreams, her capabilities, her inner strength. This is essential spiritual work, the challenge of distinguishing the true self from the many layers of social and gender patterns that deny the self.

This critique of Buddhism is relevant to environmental work in at least two respects. One, in the realm of ecofeminist spirituality, there may be a tendency to overemphasize the subjective experience of environment as universal, in the enthusiasm for a women's nature-based religious practice. However, this may more accurately reflect the need to simply establish the existence and validity of women's personhood, long overlooked by many religions, including Buddhism. I suggest that Buddhist feminists seeking ecological spirituality examine the teachings in depth to recognize healthy aspects of self-development as well as the blocks to egolessness.

Second, recognition of the full "personhood" or intrinsic existence of plants, animals, mountains, and rivers depends on one's capacity to fully recognize one's own personhood. For the Buddhist woman student, personhood may be displaced by the brilliant experience of boundarylessness before the self is fully developed. This then diminishes the person's capacity to deeply reflect and stand in solidarity with the full existence of any particular environmental other. Calling up the image of Indra's Net, this suggests that the reflective power of each jewel within the Net directly enhances the beauty and perception of all the other jewels. It is the quality of this reflection and existence that then guides

our choice of environmental actions; an ethic of restraint expressing respect and appreciation for the beauty of the other members of the web is not possible if one does not first fully and deeply appreciate the self.

Power Relations Analysis

The social conditions of power, status, and privilege critically affect environmental decisions, law and treaty making, and natural resource negotiation. Social aspects of Buddhist religions are riddled with power relations, as much as any other organized religion. The social glue of power roles determines the nature of attitudes and actions of those in power and those not in power. While Buddhist philosophy clearly includes the relevant tools for examining the nature of power relations and the abuse of power, this area of inquiry is not a central emphasis in American practice today. Gender power relations, in particular, are not generally addressed, most likely because Buddhist philosophy and practice forms have come through patriarchal cultures with primarily male teachers and leaders. In many schools of Buddhism, there is a strong emphasis on practice relationships with an authoritative teacher. This can be a relationship of respect, but it can also be a relationship of abuse, where power and status are used to gain sexual access to women students.[6]

Issues of power relations have been raised by American feminist Buddhists trying to correct for Asian cultural influence in the historical development of Buddhism (see Boucher 1985; Gross 1986; Karabinus 1987). This inquiry into gender conditioning is not widespread and not necessarily well-received by American Buddhist centers or teachers. By broadening the field of inquiry to areas of hidden gender assumptions, feminists challenge the status of many of the governance and religious forms transferred to America from Asian patriarchal cultures. Those who hold religious or administrative power reinforced by Western male favoritism are generally not inclined to examine the language, behavior, and psychology of gender conditioning, despite feminist research showing the powerful capacity of gender conditioning to influence all other forms of conditioning.

This weakness in Buddhist philosophy as it has arrived in the Western world could have significant detrimental effects on the evolution of a Buddhist environmental ethic. The truth of interdependence, acknowledging the intrinsic value of each member of the web, is just a starting point for investigating the nature of specific relationships. The environmental crisis is driven by the complexities of power distribution, giving preference and status to some governments, some corporate ventures, some ecosystems, some species, some cultures over others. An effective Buddhist environmental ethic is strengthened by the dimension of power analysis presented by feminist theorists. Political, economic, and personal power can serve the environment, if illuminated by awareness and social consciousness of the logic of domination. Without this awareness, the critical role of power can be overlooked by the Buddhist practitioner focusing on the beauty and miracle of interdependence.

Social Ethics and Engaged Practice

Buddhist ethics traditionally emphasize behavior guidelines and liberation for the individual, rather than structural change of social systems. The current

literature on Buddhism and social change is somewhat limited in covering the history of commitment to social issues (see Sivaraksa 1991, Jones 1989). In contrast, Christian social ethics trace their origin to the earliest stories of Jesus' suffering and compassion, developing principles of social justice as central to Christian religious practice. In some cases, Asian Buddhist cultures reinforce the acceptance of reality to the extreme of passivity. This can make it very difficult for Buddhist religious or social leaders to advocate social change.[7]

Feminism is fundamentally based in a need, desire, and strong motivation for social change. This drive for change might be seen as incompatible with Buddhism, presenting possible difficulty in merging these two approaches. The urgency and passion behind the feminist agenda may seem unmeditative to practicing Buddhists; the passive acceptance of Buddhist religious culture may seem unmotivated or apathetic to committed feminists. Yet each has something to gain from the other, particularly in developing a strong movement for environmental justice and a new code of environmental ethics.

Social environmental ethics are more than the sum of individual ethical practices regarding the environment. They are the ethics necessary for dealing with the whole systemic pattern of environmental destruction, which has a force and momentum of its own. A religious practice that only advocates individual improvement in environmental actions (such as recycling, vegetarianism, or birth control) does not go far enough in investigating the roots of socialized environmental destruction. The development of a social ethic to address the scale of environmental systemic disorder requires a motivation to work with the system as a whole and to uphold standards for the system as well as for the individual (see Fourez 1982). In this task, the commitment of feminism may be a useful catalyst for inspiring Buddhist dialogue and activity necessary to affect the environmental situation at any long-term meaningful level.

EXAMPLES OF BUDDHIST FEMINIST ENVIRONMENTAL WORK

Buddhist feminist activity on behalf of the environment is not yet very extensive, primarily because the number of people self-identified as Buddhist, feminist, and environmentalist is not large. However, examples of their environmental work are significant and are serving to inspire others around the world. These examples reflect primarily American Buddhist concern for the environment, though certainly there are women in other countries expressing their feminist and environmental concerns through Buddhist practice.

Research and Theory

Two examples of research carried out by Buddhist feminists concerned with the environment are the Perception of Nature Project undertaken by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh of Thailand and the comparative analysis of Buddhist philosophy and Western systems theory by Joanna Macy of the United States. Kabilsingh has reviewed the early Buddhist teachings of the Pali Canon to catalog specific references to the environment. Under the sponsorship of the World Wildlife Fund, a number of these teaching stories have been compiled

and distributed throughout Southeast Asia (Kabilsingh 1990; Davies 1987). Many of these early discourses cover the central points of Buddhist philosophy with specific references to refraining from harming others in the environment and specifically protecting trees, rivers, and animals of the forest.

Macy's work interprets the primary teaching of interrelationship in an environmental context, developing her ideas of "the ecological self" based on analysis of the co-arising of knower and known, body and mind, doer and deed, and self and society (May 1990, 1991b, 1991c). Her careful review of the nature of causality lays an important foundation for a Buddhist analysis of environmental power relations. She bases her definition of mutual morality in the dialectics of personal and social transformation, laying out a Buddhist construction of an environmental philosophy that is appropriate for today's interdependently created ecological crisis. This work builds on her earlier theoretical writing, in which she develops the image/essence of the Perfection of Wisdom as a feminine form, as the pregnant point of potential action, light, space, and emptiness, calling this the author of the Tathagatas (Macy 1977, 315–37). Macy's work is a major theoretical contribution to the evolution of an environmental ethic informed by Buddhist and feminist philosophy.

Environmental Activism

A second arena of Buddhist environmental activity lies in green politics and activism. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) was founded in 1978 to bring a Buddhist perspective to the peace and environmental movements and to raise issues of social concern among Buddhist practitioners. In 1990, Doug Codiga, Margaret Howe, and I initiated a BPF campaign for environmental awareness by distributing to Buddhist centers and individuals over three hundred packets of materials and posters featuring the Buddha sitting in peaceful harmony surrounded by tigers, monkeys, tropical birds, and forest vines. The packets included suggested educational activities, a bibliography of readings, chants, and prayers, and ideas for environmentalizing local Buddhist centers.

The Berkeley BPF chapter has been actively engaged in Buddhist antinuclear environmental activism at the local Concord Naval Weapons base.[8] For the past five years they have led a half-day sitting meditation on the railroad tracks, blocking the passage of weapons out from the base. The protest is nonviolent and nonaggressive; it is meant as a statement of witness and solidarity, both with other non-Buddhist activists and with those who suffer from the threat or presence of nuclear weapons in their countries. Feminist and ordained Zen priest Maylie Scott has consistently promoted these sittings, serving as an inspiration to others by the strength of her practice and commitment to social change.

Another antinuclear effort, the Nuclear Guardianship Project, protests the storage of nuclear waste underground, where problems are out of sight and difficult to manage. Joanna Macy, Charlotte Cooke, and others propose instead that waste be stored above ground, to be watched over by "nuclear guardians" in monastery-like settings (Macy 1991a). This radical solution draws on the Buddhist model of monastic life, where mindfulness is the central practice,

developing consideration and consciousness for all beings in the nuclear-affected web of life. The guiding ethic for the project reflects a deep sense of relationality with beings of the future who will inherit decaying nuclear isotopes in massive quantities.

Charlene Spretnak's work in green politics and spirituality reflect her belief that a spiritual infrastructure is essential for the successful transformation to a postmodern green society (Spretnak 1986, Capra and Spretnak 1984). Spretnak draws on her Vipassana Buddhist practice to remain grounded and centered in the middle of inevitable political tension and strategizing. She has worked to incorporate principles of feminism and nonviolence in Green Party platforms in California. For Spretnak, environmental activism is a direct expression of Buddhist practice, an embodiment of her spiritual commitment to serve all beings.

Buddhists Concerned for Animals (BCA), founded in 1981, is an example of green Buddhist politics. This group is committed to stopping cruelty to animals, especially in the use of animals for scientific experimentation (Boucher 1985, 288–93). They were instrumental in pressuring the University of California at Berkeley to improve their animal research practices. As Buddhists, they urge vegetarian eating to protest the inhumane conditions of factory-farmed animals. BCA raises issues of domination by promoting cruelty-free cosmetics that do not depend on animal testing for safety checks.

Environmental Education

Among Buddhist feminists concerned with the environment, a number of women are professional teachers or writers associated with academic institutions or spiritual retreat centers. As faculty in diverse departments or schools, they are building bridges between traditional subject areas and current environmental concerns. Buddhist feminists Lisa Faithhorn and Elizabeth Roberts teach Deep Ecology at California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) and Naropa Institute, respectively; Joanna Macy teaches systems theory, cross-cultural social activism, and spiritual practice in an environmental context at the Berkeley Graduate Theological Union, as well as CIIS. I teach environmental ethics in the Environmental Studies program at the University of Vermont. For these educators, course design and content, as well as teaching style, reflect a grounding in Buddhist practice and philosophy and a feminist perspective on power and domination. Macy has led the way in working with the blocked energy of despair, grief, fear, and anger to enable people to transform and free this energy for the healing of the world. Her teaching content and style rest solidly on a feminist analysis of power and a Buddhist practice of compassion.[9]

Another group of Buddhist feminist teachers addresses environmental issues in retreat or workshop settings, where spiritual practice is the context for environmental understanding. For example, Wendy Johnson, head gardener at Green Gulch Zen Center since 1980, teaches classes in gardening and tree planting as mindfulness practice. Green Gulch, a well-established retreat center in central coastal California, supports both a garden and an organic farm, with over twenty acres in lettuce, potatoes, squash, and other kitchen vegetables.

Wendy sees tree planting as part of a long-term plan for restoration of the once forested hillside slopes. Joan Halifax combines Buddhist mindfulness practice with modern forms of shamanism, to evoke connection with the natural world (Halifax 1990). Drawing on her background in anthropology, she leads workshops and trips to sacred sites to inspire spiritual grounding in the power of the earth itself.

Several writers also contribute to the educational literature, offering a Buddhist feminist perspective on the environment. Susan Griffin's book *Woman and Nature* is an American ecofeminist classic (Griffin 1978). Griffin's Buddhist Vipassana practice informs her poetry and creative writing, allowing her to express in detail the illusory distinction between mind and body, mind and nature. She writes as a committed feminist, pointing directly and vividly to parallel examples of oppression of nature and woman. China Galland's work on women in wilderness settings, as well as her investigation of Tara and the Black Madonna, also reflect a serious commitment to Tibetan Buddhism and the importance of women's voices in reconnecting with the environment (Galland 1990).

Some Buddhist environmental education takes place through devotional practices or ceremonies. At Green Gulch Zen Center, Wendy Johnson and I designed a Buddhist Earth Day ceremony that included a morning lecture on the environment, animal memorial service, and taking of the precepts in the presence of the central oak tree.[10] Wendy and others have also organized a number of family practice days, in which children participate in harvesting vegetables and planting trees. Earth Prayers and dedications have been collected by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, subtly and skillfully reflecting an orientation to Buddhist mindfulness and a sense of the ecological self (Roberts and Amidon 1991). Mayumi Oda, Japanese Zen student, educates by painting large banners and silk screens of earth bodhisattvas surrounded by garden vegetables. She transforms traditional male figures such as Manjusri into female forms, cutting through delusion with spirited feminine energy (Oda 1988). Her feminist art has graced several conferences on Women and Buddhism held in the San Francisco Bay area; her drawings frequently appear in United States Buddhist publications.

This is only a sampling of examples of women engaged in environmental work based in Buddhist practice and feminist awareness. Certainly there are other examples from the wider international community. In contrast to so much feminist and environmental political work, which is combative in the desperate struggle for women's rights and environmental sustainability, a Buddhist nondualist and nonviolent viewpoint can make a very valuable contribution to the healing of the world. Women who are strong in their practice and understanding of Buddhism can bring a powerful intention to the difficult and sometimes overwhelming work of taking care of one another and the place where we live.

CONCLUSION

I believe these two streams of thought and activity—Buddhism and feminism—benefit from the insights and knowledge of each other in a way that can

nourish and sustain the environment. The confluence of Buddhist and feminist thought, practice, commitment, and community in the 1990s offers a strong contribution to the healing of environmental loss and degradation. I opened this discussion in the context of the spiritual lineage of the feminine compassionate presence and the potential for healing she represents. By acknowledging Kuan Yin and Tara, I acknowledge all those who have drawn courage and inspiration from this aspect of their own Buddha natures in responding to the seemingly insurmountable suffering of the environment. Now perhaps these realized beings can be an inspiration and a source of guidance in taking care of the planet and each relationship in the complex biological and geophysical web of Indra's stunning Jewel Net.

NOTES

1. For further information on the Congress, or to obtain a copy of the Women's Action Agenda, contact Women's Environment and Development Organization, 845 Third Avenue, 15th floor, New York, N.Y. 10022.

2. From the Pali Canon, Samyutta Nikāya II. 28, 65, quoted and interpreted in Kaza (1985).

3. I wrote this version of the Three Pure Precepts for the 1990 Earth Day ceremony at Green Gulch Zen Center. Much of the text is reprinted in the *Buddhist Peace Fellowship Newsletter* (Summer 1990): 32–33.

4. Joanna Macy and John Seed have developed a ritual Council of All Beings, designed to draw out these responses. Councils have been conducted all over the world, in a wide diversity of settings. The form is described in Seed et al. (1988).

5. For an introduction to these ideas, see McCarthy 1990, with additional comments from panel member Yvonne Vowels.

6. See *Turning Wheel: Journal of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship* (Summer 1991): 22–29, with articles by Jack Kornfield and others and the formal statement of ethical guidelines by Second Generation Zen Teachers. See also Boucher 1985, 210–58.

7. This was a key topic at a social action training for Asian monks and other Buddhist activists I conducted with Paula Green in conjunction with the International Network of Engaged Buddhists meeting in Bangkok, February 1991.

8. Regular updates of Berkeley chapter activities regarding the weapons base sittings are available through the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, P.O. Box 4650, Berkeley, Calif. 94704.

9. See, for example, interviews of Joanna Macy in *Inquiring Mind* 5(2): 1–3 and Catherine Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990), 141–68.

10. Wendy Johnson's Earth Day talk, "Sitting on Our Garbage," is reprinted in the *Buddhist Peace Fellowship Newsletter* (Summer 1990), along with the text of the Earth Day ceremonies.