

Can We Keep Peace with Nature?

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FLICKERING LIGHTS, crack snap of branches flailing into the night, ice everywhere. Ten-inch icicles drip from the car. Sidewalks slicken with a solid coat of obsidian smooth ice. Gravel and salt are no use; the freezing rain covers the limp gestures of safety with yet more ice. Grass blades swell to thumb-size stubs; ice spears poke in all directions from hay bales and windblown shrubs. The trees take it the hardest—weak crowns tipping over under the load and then, CRACK! giving up to gravity. Crack! Crack! Crack! like gunfire; the sound of the ice storm is like gunfire.

In early January, 1998, northern Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, and southern Quebec went through the most significant ice storm on record for the region. Warm tropical air from the south surged unusually far north, causing an unprecedented thaw. The moisture-laden front pushed over the top of the cold arctic shield, melting the snowpack in the mountains. In the St. Lawrence and Lake Champlain valleys, as well as in New Hampshire and Maine, the warm rain fell through cold air and created chaos. For five days the stationary front encased the region in an ice fog. When the sun finally broke through, the storm had taken a major toll on the landscape. Sugarbushes, pine forests, tree plantations, urban plantings all suffered serious losses. It was the rare tree that was still intact.

The ice storm raised serious questions about keeping peace with nature. It is one thing to consider keeping peace with gentle meadows and sovereign redwood forests. It is quite another to consider peaceful relations with extensive weather events. We are perhaps capable of peaceful relations with the natural world under stable conditions, although there is much evidence to contradict this. But when these conditions deteriorate, as during a major ice storm, do we have the psychological reserves to handle such extreme stress? Watching

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Montreal struggle to return electrical power to over a million residents has been sobering. The heavy ice took down major transmission towers and countless wires snagged by collapsing trees. Crews from all over the continent worked around the clock for four weeks to clear branches and reconnect torn lines. One wonders: if events of extreme magnitude like this happen in too many places at once or too quickly in sequence, can we keep up, let alone keep *peace*? With global climate change predictions now coming true, will we be too busy scrambling to preserve our own homes and communities to be concerned about any other lives?

Many have brought their minds to bear on human-nature relations—from Thoreau to Muir, from Rachel Carson to Gary Snyder. Many have debated whether humans are separate and/or above nature or not, and if so, on what basis? Some have painstakingly documented human impact on wetlands, forests, deserts, and prairies. Only just recently have the world's major religious traditions joined the conversation about how people can live peacefully and sustainably on this overtaxed planet.

As part of that conversation, I will explore some ways in which Buddhist traditions might keep peace with nature. Buddhism has taken many cultural forms over the 2500 years since the Buddha lived. Texts and teachings from Buddhists in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, China, Tibet are all available today in English translation. These represent a great flowering of Buddhist understanding, sometimes simplified into the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana schools of thought and practice. Today Buddhist scholars and practitioners in the West are writing their own sutra commentaries and practice manuals. For my purposes here I will draw on overview materials rather than original texts, since I am primarily concerned with the emerging literature in "Buddhism and Ecology." I am less interested in looking at the contradictions between traditions and more concerned with finding useful springboards for developing a "green" Buddhism which can engage the planetary environmental crisis and generate better peacekeeping in the future. Here I will review the seeds of this possibility which are sprouting in a number of different places and traditions.

Nature, like Buddhism, can be a problematic term. I considered using the word *environment* to avoid the difficulties of *nature*, but as poet and essayist Wendell Berry points out, "no settled family or com-

munity has ever called its home place an 'environment'. . . . The real names of the environment are the names of rivers and river valleys; creeks, ridges, and mountains; towns and cities; lakes, woodlands, lanes, roads, creatures, and people."¹ So back to the problematic word *nature*.

Three aspects characterize nature in most Buddhist traditions. The first derives directly from the fundamental Buddhist law of dependent origination, *paticca-samutpada* (in Pali). According to this law, all phenomena (that is, all of nature) arise from a complex set of causes and conditions, each set unique to the specific situations of arising. Thus, the well-known simple but penetrating Pali verse:

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

Ecological understanding of natural systems fits very well within the Buddhist description of interdependence. Nature, then, is primarily relational, dependent on many causes and conditions in diverse spatial and historical arrays.

The second aspect of nature is that it is nondualistic, all-inclusive. There is nothing which is *not* of nature, horrible or benign, and humans are most definitely part of nature, not separate from it in some other world. Like most organisms, people view some aspects of nature as more useful, pleasant, or preferable than others. And, like most organisms, they do what they can to form strong relations with these aspects. But in the bigger view, all aspects and beings are in fact at play in the all-inclusive realm of nature. Sunspots, PCBs, viruses, El Niño—all are part of the interdependent web.

The third aspect is paradoxical but critical. From a Buddhist view, all phenomena of nature are impermanent; nothing is absolute. What all beings share in common is that they arise and they pass away—mountains, mayflies, snowflakes—no matter how long or how dramatic the nature of each existence, it still fades from view sooner or later. Thus in Buddhism there are no absolute gods outlasting other beings. Yet there is still the sense of continuity of being—*ch'i* in Chinese, *ki* in Japanese—awkwardly translated as "matter energy," "material force," or "vital power." *Ch'i* represents the "unfolding of

continuous creativity," not out of nothing, as in a Western Judeo-Christian view, but through ongoing transformations of what already exists.³ Nature is this vital force in full many-splendored revelation. So even though all individual phenomena are impermanent, each gives rise to others in perpetual motion, thus establishing a world in continual transformation. This contrasts sharply with the traditional Western worldview of nature as more or less static, a relatively unchanging background for human activities.

The term *peace*, like *nature*, is riddled with romantic idealization, projection, and doublespeak. Contemporary Buddhist leaders Thich Nhat Hanh and His Holiness the Dalai Lama describe peace as something you do, a spiritual practice. For Thich Nhat Hanh, "peace is every step." Each calm, mindful breath or step is a step generating peace and awareness. For the Dalai Lama, peace comes from the practice of kindness and compassion. As he says, "although it is difficult to attempt to bring about peace through internal transformation, this is the only way to achieve lasting world peace."⁴ Those following the bodhisattva way are encouraged to practice equanimity or patience, one of the six *paramitas* or practices of perfection. Peace, from a Buddhist perspective, is a state of mind which can envision and manifest peaceful relations with others. Internal and external peace are seen as mutually regenerating and cocreative.

Buddhist practice emphasizes the principle of nonharming or *ahimsa*, and this acts as a force for generating peace. Nonviolence, as this is sometimes translated, means more than the absence of violence, including violent thought. It means acting positively towards constructing peace. To quote from the opening stanzas of the Dhammapada, "For hate is not conquered by hate: hate is conquered by love. This is a law eternal."⁵ With a Buddhist perspective on nature, one aims to practice peace or loving nonharming with a wide embrace. Thus peacekeeping includes ending the violence towards plants and animals, rivers and oceans that is so widespread across the planet. Thai teacher Buddhadasa suggests that peace means being true friends to all beings and to one's self. Certainly there is no shortage of opportunities for peacemaking in this end-of-the-century escalation of the war against nature.

Does Buddhism have anything to offer to this challenging and quite serious question: can we keep peace with nature? As I have worked on this topic, I find the question haunting me like a koan—

a puzzle too penetrating to solve with simplified intellectual understanding. It calls for real world contact with the suffering of nature today: the glaring heat on the ravaged land of industrial clearcuts, the garish chemical soup of polluted waters, the sprawling megacities gagging on traffic and smog. Here in these places of life-threatening deterioration, the question becomes more real, more disturbing, more difficult to answer honestly. As a gesture towards some depth of reflection, I have organized my response according to the Buddhist tetralemma or fourfold logic used by Nagarjuna and others. First, I'll argue NO, pointing out good reasons we cannot keep peace with nature, even as Buddhists. Second, I'll argue YES, Buddhist philosophies and practices do exist that demonstrate it is possible to keep peace with nature. Then, to confirm the complexity, I will also explore the other two options: BOTH yes and no, and NEITHER yes nor no.

NO PEACE WITH NATURE

In the small but growing wave of enthusiasm for an environmental Buddhism, British scholar Ian Harris has taken on the task of critiquing the methods and claims of green Buddhist writers. He points out that there is no unified tradition of environmental thought or practice across the historically and culturally disparate Buddhisms of India, China, and Japan. Further, there are a number of different words and concepts for *nature*, some much closer than others to the already complex Western meaning of the word. Harris feels modern green Buddhist enthusiasts blur important distinctions from the diverse Buddhist lineages, thereby violating an enduring tradition of critical thinking. From his point of view, this sloppiness can only undermine the selective arguments made by naive seekers. In some cases, he suggests, Western and/or nationalistic thinking has so pervaded Eastern behavior that it is hard to find the Buddhism behind Thai or Japanese exploitation of the natural world.⁶

Certainly Buddhism is not a nature religion *per se*; it is not organized primarily around human relations with nature nor does it advocate "worshipping" the sun or moon or particular animals or plants. In fact, the examples cited in the emerging green Buddhist literature suggest a fairly limited history of environmental engagement. Where monastic temples served to protect surrounding lands, it was often for

economic or agricultural purposes. In many traditions, the isolated rural lands were seen as an aid to spiritual transformation. In Japanese Buddhist culture, it has been suggested that spiritual engagement is primarily with nature in symbolic form—for example, the highly refined Japanese tea garden or elegant flower displays. Can this kind of engagement with representational nature inspire lifestyle change or does it actually serve to cover hypocritical denial of the more pressing urgencies of pollution and population control?

Still other writers have proposed philosophical and sociopolitical critiques of Buddhism, which, at face value, would indicate little hope for peacekeeping from this quarter. Filipino Reuben Habito, a Zen priest and a former Catholic social organizer, feels that Buddhist religious teachings place too much emphasis on personal liberation and not enough on social or structural change.⁷ This can lead to a passive attitude toward the environment, except where it aids in enlightenment. Alan Sponberg believes green-leaning Buddhists have become too enamored of interdependence without equal commitment to the more challenging developmental tasks of training and transformation. In his view, eco-Buddhists might get the concept but not gain the spiritual strength to implement it.⁸ In both critiques it is apparently easier to teach and transmit the principles for individual enlightenment than to develop effective social organizing tools. Another problem lies in attributing all conditions to acts of karma. If Buddhists believe physical disability or infertility is a result of misdeeds in a former life, they may not bother to look for endocrine disruptors or pesticide residues in the local drinking water.

In Japan, the sensitive aesthetic appreciation for nature seems completely removed from the social denial of the costs and dangers of nuclear energy and the heavy logging destruction wrought by Japanese corporations in Malaysia. When Stephen Kellert administered a comparative survey of Japanese and American attitudes toward nature, he found the Japanese actually less concerned about the environment than Americans and less interested in recreational engagement with wild nature.⁹ In Thailand, activist Sulak Sivaraksa has charged that Buddhism as a state religion is too corrupt, too busy maintaining its power and influence to support eco-resistance movements such as the forest monks.¹⁰ In fact, the Thai Buddhist hierarchy has thwarted the efforts of a number of village monks to protect their local forests. Tibetans unfortunately are so busy doing all they can

to survive in exile under radically different ecological conditions that they can hardly be active environmental peacekeepers in India, let alone Tibet. Meanwhile, the ecological stability of the high Himalayan plateau is now seriously under siege by Chinese logging, agriculture, and uranium waste dumping.

How about green Buddhism in the U.S.? Here I would advance the critique that the relatively new wave of Buddhism is too preoccupied with training teachers and building centers to take on any serious environmental issues. The American habit of individualism spills over into American Buddhist centers, where members often come for personal spiritual gain rather than to support a community, let alone participate in social action. In some Zen centers vigils, protests, and even restoration projects are actually frowned on as a distraction to meditation practice.

Can Buddhists help keep peace with nature? The evidence for answering NO is real. There is no unified movement here or long tradition across cultures of actively caring for nature. There are problems in implementing Buddhist philosophy in a real world setting outside the hermitage hut of the dedicated seeker. But this is only one of four viewpoints. A number of other sources point to a hopeful YES.

YES, PEACE WITH NATURE

When Bill Devall and George Sessions published the first book on deep ecology in 1985, they included a short piece by American Zen priest Robert Aitken on "Gandhi, Dogen, and Deep Ecology."¹¹ This followed on the heels of poet Gary Snyder's earth-celebrating stanzas, filled throughout with references to Zen.¹² The 1970s and 1980s saw a virtual explosion of Buddhist literature and practice groups in America, and to many it seemed obvious that Buddhism had more to offer the ecologically concerned spiritual seeker than Christianity. Unfortunately, the legacy of Christianity in North America is not particularly positive. There are reasons for the enduring stereotype that Western religions objectify nature and assert dominion over it. For one, there is the wake of indigenous genocide following missionary contact with its soul-saving eradication of native languages, ceremonies, spiritual taboos, and region-specific cultures. For another, there is the biblical command, "Thou shalt have dominion over the land," and the

consequent earth-shaking impacts of colonization. Linear grids on the curving landscape, territorial disputes, gold, gray whales, and giant redwoods—all seen as free for the claim-staking. Third, there is the clear separation between spirit and body, between heaven and earth, promoted in Christian texts and worship. The body and the earth are seen as inferior, transitory, changeable, and unreliable—in short, to be used but not cherished, since the main goal was beyond this life. Those who turned to Buddhism for ecospirituality could be sure the new tradition did not carry at least this karmic baggage. Even if their view of Buddhism was incomplete or a romantic projection, at least it offered some breathing room for the imagination, to *hope* that peaceful relations with nature could exist in *some* spiritual tradition.

When Buddhism began to flower in America in the 1960s and 70s, it ran head on into the environmental movement. Environmentalism already carried a certain overtone of spirituality characterized by Bronisław Szerszynski as “feral” religion, where choices and rituals in everyday life come to reflect eco-spiritual perspectives. He points to monastic forms of Thoreauvian renunciation, sectarian groups of spiritually-motivated eco-warriors, and lesser degrees of involvement through churchly piety (membership) and lifestyle practices (recycling, etc.).¹³ In the same vein, Bron Taylor has described Earth First! as a new religious group united around earth-based values, world-views, rituals, and community.¹⁴ Of course there is already a long history of serious ethical reflection on environmental relations between people and nature from such great minds as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson, to name a few. For Buddhism developing in America the odds seemed loaded that it would pick up a green tinge.

Two influences support a move in this direction: philosophical congruities with environmentalism and an emerging interest in Buddhist environmental activism. A number of thoughtful teachers and scholars have drawn attention to fundamental tenets of Buddhism that support an ecological worldview. Robert Aitken in Hawaii and John Daido Loori in New York have drawn on Zen texts such as Dogen’s “Mountains and Waters” sutra, and practices such as the precepts and *paramitas*; Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has focused on interdependence and mindfulness as the way to enlightened practice. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has taken a strong stand linking Buddhism to environmental protection in Tibet and else-

where. In the United States green Buddhists-to-be have also found great inspiration in the creative writing of Gary Snyder and teacher-activist Joanna Macy.¹⁵

So what does Buddhism offer philosophically to support an ecological worldview? I would suggest that the two most accessible principles for Buddhists and non-Buddhists looking for an alternative are: 1) interdependence and 2) liberation in awareness. Interdependence affirms the relational perspectives of ecology and systems thinking. The jewel net of Indra, a metaphor for interdependence, poetically describes the complex and only partially knowable web of life with every being a multifaceted jewel in a multidimensional netted web, each reflecting all the others. Interdependence or mutual co-arising includes not only the *actions* of the many beings, but their *thoughts* as well. The intention and attitude of the actor becomes a critical part of what actually happens. Environmental ethics, paradigm shifts, ecophilosophies are then important work for the environmental activist. As Gary Snyder suggests, “it can mean every word heard is heard to its deepest echo.”¹⁶ Keeping peace with nature from a Buddhist perspective thus includes generating peacekeeping thoughts towards nature. This focus may provide the leverage point needed to turn the tide of destruction undermining life for us all.

Liberation through awakening or consciousness-raising is the method for accomplishing this turn. This affirms the persistent efforts of environmentally concerned people to educate others about the state of the earth. The practice of awareness or mindfulness fosters appreciation for nature and a reflective and peaceful attitude; it can also reveal hidden assumptions about privilege, comfort, consumption, and inadvertent abuse of nature. In a speed-crazed society focused almost entirely on economic progress, there is little time or incentive for these slower awareness practices. For those trying to resist or question the runaway pace of millennial madness, sitting down and stopping can be just the right medicine.

What other Buddhist principles are lifted up to support peaceful relations with nature? In the Mahayana tradition, much weight is placed on the Bodhisattva path, where one takes a vow to return again and again to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings—surely the environmentalist’s life work! In the Theravada tradition, the metta sutta of loving kindness is extended to all beings, wishing that they be free from harm and blessed by mental and physical well-being. Of the

Four Noble Truths, the fourth describes the Eightfold Path of liberation from suffering; among the eight spokes of action are Right Action, Right Speech, Right Livelihood. Each of these offers a locus for practicing peace with nature in a concrete way while simultaneously cultivating spiritual stability and insight. In upholding the precepts of Right Morality, one is encouraged to exercise restraint and moderation, to simplify one's needs and desires so as to reduce suffering for others. These guidelines support a Thoreauvian withdrawal from consumer addictions, a requirement for reducing the vast wakes of ecological impacts behind each product.

Central to Buddhist practice across traditions is an attitude of compassion, or open-heartedness to the suffering of others. The principle of *ahimsa* or nonharming mentioned earlier derives naturally from a true experience of compassion. When one sees oneself as part of a mutually causal web, it becomes clear that there is no such thing as a private autonomous self, independent of all others. Thus one becomes accountable for all of one's actions, since they affect others in varying degrees. Environmental ethics based on these Buddhist principles would be firm with those who spread toxics and carcinogenic chemicals throughout the food web. In American society where reason is valued over emotion and ethics are often utilitarian, the Buddhist cultivation of open-hearted response to nature is a welcome relief. *This* world now cries for our attention, not some promised land after death. In many ways, Buddhism offers a much needed antidote for the depleting projects of Western industrialism. Because the scope and scale of environmental destruction is so all-embracing and quite overwhelming, those brave enough to venture forth toward healing and peace need the stability and equilibrium of a sound spiritual practice which Buddhism may well provide.

So where are the examples of eco-Buddhist activism today? Is this territory all theory and no action? Or can we see some models of peacekeeping in action? Let me suggest three aspects which make up a whole effort: 1) holding actions of resistance, 2) creating new visions, and 3) changing cultural structures. In these examples, activists are often practicing Buddhism with a small *b*, as Sulak Sivaraksa says—that is, Buddhism that supports virtuous action in whatever context, rather than proselytizing for itself.¹⁷ Perhaps the best example of resistance comes from the “ecology monks” in Thailand. Buddhist monks in rural villages serve the local community by providing family

and religious ceremonies and opportunities for merit-making, such as planting trees. Villagers, in return, offer food to the monks on their morning alms walks. Where village forests are threatened by logging or development, some monks have taken the side of the forest. They lead the villagers in tree ordination ceremonies, in which the yellow cloth of monkhood is wrapped around a prominent tree to charge it with protecting all the others. A number of monks have also engaged in restoration and rural development projects to support village life and reduce urban migration. In some cases, the monks' work is regarded as obstructionist to Thai economic growth; more than one monk has been asked to disrobe for his environmental work. Thai forest protection efforts have inspired similar tree ceremonies in the U.S. where Zen leaders have ordained important oaks and redwoods. Some of the strongest Buddhist resistance actions in the U.S. are around protection of the Headwaters old growth redwood groves in northern California where Buddhist deep ecologist Bill Devall and others are resisting the accelerated clearcutting by Maxxam corporation.¹⁸

Green vision efforts abound. An offshoot of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, self-titled the “Think Sangha,” is undertaking a series of reflection papers on Buddhism and consumerism. The Boston Research Center for the Twenty-First Century has drawn attention to the Earth Charter people's vision by publishing a booklet of Buddhist views on the charter's proposed principles. His Holiness the Dalai Lama in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech proposed a Five-Point Peace Plan for Tibet in which the entire province (or nation-state, depending on your perspective) would be declared an ecological reserve. Rita Gross, Buddhist feminist scholar, has laid out a Buddhist framework for considering global population issues. I have recently completed a counterpart Buddhist perspective on consumption issues. In her Deep Ecology workshops, Joanna Macy draws on Buddhist principles to combat the paralyzing states of grief, despair, and fear that prevent people from acting on behalf of the environment.¹⁹

As for models of cultural change, these are still in progress and often meet with resistance in their own quarters. Two Buddhist centers in rural northern California, Green Gulch Zen Center and Spirit Rock, already demonstrate a great commitment to the environment through vegetarian dining, land and water stewardship efforts, an

organic farm and garden (at Green Gulch), and ceremonies which include the natural world. People who visit can see ecological action as part of a Buddhist way of life.²⁰ A group of young people at Green Gulch who call themselves "eco-sattvas" meet regularly to plan restoration projects which become part of the work practice.²¹ Gary Snyder, esteemed elder among eco-Buddhists, has cooperated with others in his local region to establish the Yuba River Institute. John Daido Looi's monastery in the Catskills of New York, Mount Tremper, features frequent "Mountains and Rivers" retreats based on the center's commitment to environmental conservation on the land. Applying the same principles in an urban setting, Tetsugen Bernie Glassman has developed a set of green small businesses which employ local street people, sending products to socially responsible companies such as Ben and Jerry's.

YES, all of these people seem to be saying, YES, it seems possible to bring Buddhist principles of peacekeeping to bear in situations of environmental degradation. YES, Buddhism has something to offer in creating a green vision for the future. Even if the challenges seem endless, the need is great and those who aspire to the Bodhisattva vows must respond. It is not a matter of being reasonable so much as being spiritual in effective ways. I know for me such ecological work is core to my understanding of the Buddhist vows.

Now, perhaps I should stop right here with a hopeful vision: Buddhism will lead the way and the planet will be saved. However, a fuller treatment of this difficult question is more realistic, and this requires consideration of the more likely outcome: "BOTH yes and no" will happen, and also "NEITHER yes nor no" will happen. I turn now to the remaining two positions of the Buddhist fourfold logic for this question.

BOTH YES AND NO

Both yes and no: this piece of the answer addresses human fallibility and imperfection. Despite the highest aspirations for a life of enlightened bodhisattvic action, most of us will fall short of the ideal. The ideal, in fact, is a made-up projection of what is possible; from a Buddhist perspective, this tends to ignite our yearning and take us away from the immediate reality before us. Reality, as it turns out, is

far more complex, synergistic, and unpredictable than any visionary ideal. The conversation over YES vs. NO takes up a lot of time and energy, often distracting people from directly addressing the issues.

So what does "both yes and no" look like? How does it fill out the universe of possibility only partially described by NO or YES alone? First, it is spotty, partial, incomplete. Some Buddhist centers will take up environmental practice and make it a central part of their work and meditation; some will focus on other social action projects—hospice, prison work, gay liberation; still others will struggle with internal politics and remain divided over the degree of environmental engagement. This will frustrate the front line of in-house activists, some of whom will give up and apply their efforts elsewhere. Likewise, some countries or regions will make greater progress toward environmental stability than others. In California and the Pacific Northwest where there are more Buddhists and Buddhist centers as well as a very active environmental community, green Buddhist projects may be more successful than elsewhere. Thailand's number of ecology monks may swell, while Burma monks are imprisoned for even assembling to meet. And in each situation where a group or institution has made great strides forward, the positive progress may be interrupted by a change of leadership or priorities.

Second, Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) peacekeeping with nature will be full of contradiction. There will be some morally thoughtful behavior followed by other unconscious behavior. A green Buddhist might commit to vegetarianism to reduce participation in animal suffering, but still commute an hour to work each day, thereby spewing 80 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere.²² A Buddhist center might opt to buy produce at the best price available rather than develop a local organic garden. Even the most informed green Buddhists will be stuck with some environment-degrading habits that seem unavoidable—petroleum products, computers, road salt. The response will waver between awareness and denial. Sometimes it is just too painful to consider all the facts at once.

Third, the vacillating combination of yes and no will inevitably be inadequate to the task. It will not be *fast* enough to meet the accelerating pace of global environmental deterioration. We know already, for example, that existing CFCs in the atmosphere will continue to deplete ozone even if they are entirely eliminated on the ground. The scope of efforts will also likely not be *broad* enough; there aren't

enough Buddhists or environmentalists to go around! Thus we retreat to a triage approach, first suggested by Daniel Jantzen in discussing the ecological plight of Central America. Triage means trying to save the most savable areas or species and letting the near-dead go. The only trouble with this battlefield approach is that the "dead" don't just decompose; they release toxins into the surrounding aquifers and farmlands and spread the chain of death even farther. The scale of effort required here is enormous; Lester Brown of the World Watch Institute says nothing short of a revolution in the next ten years can significantly halt the widespread assault on the environment.²³

Fourth, we can expect shifting priorities around the tension between individual and structural change efforts. In one sense, it is much easier to make personal lifestyle changes, at least in the U.S. where choice is still a major privilege. This is not necessarily an option in Tibet, Poland, or Siberia. But sweeping change can only happen at the structural level—green taxes on resource extraction, for example, or incentives for solar energy development. Buddhists may be particularly helpful in questioning consumerism, especially on the individual level where moderation and restraint are conducive to spiritual practice. Structural change will call for a different degree of community organizing—are green Buddhists willing to take on the challenge? Actually there already are a number of practicing American Buddhists in important nonprofit organizations such as Natural Resources Defense Council, Rainforest Action Network, and Center for a New American Dream. But Buddhist activists, like all activists, can burn out on pressing for structural change and overlook the personal challenges of Buddhist liberation practice. It's a quandary. For every person concerned about these issues, the tension will never be completely resolved.

Fifth, "yes and no" means working with uncertainty. There will never be any assurance that it is all going to turn out "all right," no matter how the situation stands at any moment. This is very unnerving; we all most naturally want to survive and have a safe and peaceful life. But under the current conditions, there are no guarantees. Does this mean giving up on hope? Yes, a Buddhist would say; one's efforts cannot depend on something as abstract or intangible as hope. Instead they must be grounded in the stability of one's own commitment. In the Soto Zen tradition I practice, lay ordained students vow

to practice the three pure precepts and ten grave precepts. On Earth Day 1990, several of us affiliated with Green Gulch Zen Center wrote an environmental version of these precepts to strengthen the breadth of our commitment.²⁴ Three in particular stand out, although one could develop environmental commentaries on all ten.

The first, "No Killing," challenges practitioners to confront food choices (the killing of animals for meat, for example, or the killing of soil for industrial agriculture), forestry practices (clearcutting, herbicide spraying), endangered species, air and water pollution—the list goes on. The fifth precept is traditionally phrased as "no taking drugs or alcohol"; we reframed this to "we vow to not harm self or others through poisonous thought or substance." This raises ethical questions about pesticides, nuclear radiation, and chlorination which are not easy to answer. The tenth precept, "not to defame the Three Treasures," means environmental practice is everywhere. Of the three treasures, the Buddha can be seen to include animal and plant teachers with their own evolutionary wisdom, the Dharma then encompasses the teachings of all beings as truths to learn from, and the Sangha is the wider ecological practice community. Taking care not to harm any part of these three treasures is a lifetime challenge of minimizing personal and social impact on the environment.

Thus at the heart of "Both Yes and No" can be a vow of spiritual practice commitment which holds one steady even in the face of uncertainty, fallibility, contradiction, and inadequacy. Some days of peacekeeping efforts will be filled with life-affirming progress; others, such as the day President Clinton signed the salvage logging rider, will be bleak, indeed. Accepting the complicated dimensions of "both yes and no" is an aid to deepening spiritual commitment on behalf of the planet.

NEITHER YES NOR NO

But what about this last of the four answers to our difficult koan? "Neither yes nor no" is the negative space behind all the others, the undefined realm, the source of unknown events, any of which could spur cultural change beyond our wildest imagination. Certainly, in spite of all the NO critiques, much will go forward anyway. And even

with all the YES examples and concepts, many green ideas and projects will never manifest. What are some of the things that might arise to address this set of causes and condition we now find ourselves in? Let me suggest at least four types of factors at work in the unknowable interdependent web.

Many have said it will take a major catastrophe to wake people up to the state of the environment. Break-off of the Antarctic ice shelf, widespread plankton die-off, inundation of coastal cities—these would be alarming signs of systems overload and synergistic escalation of human impact. Each of these extreme events would be “Big Wake-Up Calls,” time to pay serious attention to what’s happening; the fate of much life on earth is at stake. Extreme events can act as catalysts for mobilizing social action and cultural change. In addition to weather-related events, we might also see major famine or food supply crises or a virulent new plague. Major crop loss has also been predicted and already there is evidence of that in Africa and North Korea. Unfortunately such catastrophes generate tremendous suffering; we would wish for less extreme teachings perhaps. Yet these powerful events can generate powerful insight, illuminating the systems-level suffering throughout the interdependent web.

On the other hand, we may see inspirational leadership in unexpected places. A great religious leader such as the Dalai Lama has the capacity to inspire thousands to follow his example or vision. What if the eco-sattvas in California motivate thousands of young people to join the forest defenders out of spiritual compassion? As a teacher, I know I can’t predict which seeds of understanding will ripen when in which students. So much depends on the right fit of conditions. In 1968, when Gary Snyder first wrote “The Smokey the Bear Sutra,” could he have guessed how far his words would travel?²⁵

Perhaps hardest to imagine are world-changing structural shifts, on the order of the collapse of the Soviet Republic or the dismantling of the Berlin wall. These could, of course, have positive or negative effects on the environment. Globalization through international trade agreements is already taking a toll on indigenous cultures, endangered species, and resource-rich habitats. What if women nuns’ ordination in Thailand was approved? This would allow women to join forces with the ecology monks and double the resistance efforts. In India there has been some movement towards village-managed forests

coops, but what if local control meant local exploitation of nationally valued lands (as proposed in Utah)? A single policy change, such as San Francisco’s elimination of pesticides in favor of Integrated Pest Management, could contribute significantly to reducing human health hazards.

Of course, I can’t begin to name all the possible unknown factors, but one area to watch closely is ecospiritual activism. Will there be more rabbis leading Tu B’Shevat seders in threatened forests? Will the evangelical Christian lobby extend their sphere of influence beyond the Endangered Species Act? Will the indigenous peoples’ alliances come to bring more weight in ethical reparations to the lands? I think Buddhists could work effectively with all these groups; perhaps they will in surprising and innovative ways.

This last piece of the puzzle may actually be the most significant of the four. Keeping peace with nature means keeping open to the possibility that things could take a surprising turn—for better or for worse. Obsessing on either the best hope or the worst fear can block access to other options. Including “neither yes nor no” means practicing with “don’t-know mind,” allowing the other members of the system to contribute to the peacemaking. What if, for example, the trees and birds and fishes were represented at public hearings, as they are at North American Bioregional Congress sessions? Within this “don’t-know mind,” we can’t anticipate how people will draw on their existing skills, knowledge, and creativity to respond to the current and evolving state of the world.

Of the four positions—no, yes, both yes and no, neither yes nor no—which will prevail? How will it go? Can we keep peace with nature? The answer partially depends on the way we think about the questions. One’s care for one’s family, childhood home, professional training, religious beliefs, friends—personal and social liberation from suffering calls on *all* of these—a fierce attention, no flinching, total commitment. I myself lean toward the positive signs, but that is as much as anything because the pain of it all is almost too much to bear sometimes. I believe most people would *prefer* to find peaceful relations with nature. But still the koan haunts me—what will it actually take to accomplish this?

Here is one response from bold thinker and companion along the way, poet Gary Snyder:

For the Children

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.

The steep climb of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.

In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:

stay together
learn the flowers
*go light*²⁶

NOTES

1. Wendell Berry, "Conservation is Good Work," in *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), p. 35.
2. Quoted and discussed in my article, "Towards a Buddhist Environmental Ethic," *Buddhism at the Crossroads* (Fall 1990):22–25.
3. Tu Wei-ming, "The Continuity of Being: Chinese Views of Nature," in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 67–78.
4. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *A Policy of Kindness*, ed. Sidney Piburn (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1990), p. 57.
5. *The Dhammapadam*, trans. Juan Mascaro (London: Penguin Books, 1973).
6. Ian Harris, "Buddhism and the Discourse of Environmental Concern: Some Methodological Problems Considered," in *Buddhism and Eco-*

ogy: *The Interconnectedness of Dharma and Deeds*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 397–402.

7. Reuben L. F. Habito, "Mountains and Rivers and the Great Earth: Zen and Ecology," in Tucker and Williams, *Buddhism and Ecology*, pp. 165–76.

8. Alan Sponberg, "Green Buddhism and the Hierarchy of Compassion," in Tucker and Williams, *Buddhism and Ecology*, pp. 351–76.

9. Stephen R. Kellert, "Concepts of Nature East and West," in *Reinventing Nature: Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*, ed. Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1995), pp. 103–21.

10. Sulak Sivaraksa, "Integrating Head and Heart: Indigenous Alternatives to Modernism," in *Entering the Realm of Reality: Towards Dhammic Societies*, ed. Jonathan Watts, Alan Senauke, and Santikaro Bikkhu (Bangkok: Suksit Siam, 1997), pp. 52–87.

11. Robert Aitken, "Gandhi, Dogen, and Deep Ecology," in *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, ed. Bill Devall and George Sessions (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith Books, 1985), pp. 232–35.

12. See, for example, Gary Snyder, *Myths and Texts* (New York: New Directions, 1978; originally 1960); and *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1969).

13. Bronislaw Szerszynski, "The Varieties of Eco-Piety," *Worldviews, Environment, Culture, and Religion* 1, no. 1 (1997): 37–56.

14. Bron Taylor, "Earth First's Religious Radicalism," in *Ecological Prospects: Aesthetic, Scientific, and Religious Perspectives*, ed. Christopher Chapple (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994).

15. See Robert Aitken, *The Mind of Clover* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984); Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976); Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987); His Holiness the Dalai Lama, "The Nobel Peace Prize Lecture," and "The Ethical Approach to Environmental Protection," in Piburn, *Policy of Kindness*, pp. 15–27 and 118–28; Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990); Joanna Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: New Society Pubs., 1983); Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991).

16. Snyder, *Practice of the Wild*, p. 180.

17. Sulak Sivaraksa, "Buddhism with a Small b," in *Seeds of Peace* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1992), pp. 62–72.

18. See my interview with Bill Devall, "Belly Full of Salmon," in *Turning Wheel* (Fall 1993): 30–31.

19. See Amy Morgante, ed., *Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter* (Cambridge: Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, 1997); The

Dalai Lama, "Nobel Peace Prize Lecture"; Rita Gross, "Buddhist Resources for Issues of Population, Consumption, and the Environment," in Tucker and Williams, *Buddhism and Ecology*, pp. 291–312; Stephanie Kaza, "Overcoming the Grip of Consumerism" (prepared for the 1998 International Buddhist-Christian Studies meeting, Indianapolis, Ind.); Joanna Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: New Society Pubs., 1983).

20. Stephanie Kaza, "Buddhist Response to the Land: Ecological Practice at Two West Coast Retreat Centers," in Tucker and Williams, *Buddhism and Ecology*, pp. 219–48.

21. Eco-sattva, "Universal Chainsaw, Universal Forest," *Turning Wheel*, Winter 1998, pp. 31–33.

22. See John C. Ryan, *Over Our Heads: A Local Look at Global Climate Change* (Seattle: Northwest Environment Watch, 1997), p. 55, for how to calculate the amount of carbon dioxide produced per miles traveled.

23. Lester Brown, "Launching the Environmental Revolution," *State of the World Report 1992* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), pp. 174–90.

24. See Wendy Johnson and Stephanie Kaza, "Earth Day at Green Gulch," *Turning Wheel*, Summer 1990, pp. 30–33.

25. Gary Snyder, "The Smokey the Bear Sutra," in *A Place in Space* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 1995), pp. 25–31.

26. Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 86.