

Buddhist Wisdom and Ecological Awareness: Exploring Horizons of Praxis

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IN considering what Buddhism may have to offer to our contemporary global society facing a severe ecological crisis, a question that naturally comes up is this: “Which Buddhism?” In other words, as we look over its 2,500 year history and take a panoramic view of this spiritual/religious tradition, or perhaps better, family of traditions, we see different forms of Buddhism, in their various doctrinal positions, ritual observances, prescriptions for religious practice, ethical guidelines, and so on.

The above question brings up this underlying point: as Buddhists consider what they can contribute specifically “as Buddhists” with regard to issues facing the global family, there needs to be a particularity as to which Buddhist tradition is being referred to, so as to avoid bland statements about Buddhism “in general,” and thereby render the conversations ineffectual. In this regard, theologian Hans Küng has put forth a helpful framework for mapping out the different constellations of belief and practice within a single religious tradition, employing the notion of ‘paradigm shift.’ Scholars of Buddhism could perhaps fine-tune the details or offer alternative configurations, but Küng differentiates six paradigmatic shifts in Buddhism. These are 1) the early Buddhist paradigm of Gautama and his followers, 2) the Theravāda paradigm of the established monastic communities, 3) the Mahāyāna paradigm that branched off into the meditative (Chan/Zen), devotional (Pure Land), and action-oriented (Lotus) forms of Buddhist practice, 4) the Tantric paradigm of the Vajrayāna, 5) the ethically-oriented and socially-engaged paradigm of the twentieth century, and 6) post-modern Buddhist paradigms emerging out of the tension with values and world-views of Euro-American modernity. (Küng 2003)

Factors Against Ecological Awareness

Taking early Buddhist texts, we can ask the question: are the doctrinal contents and prescriptions for religious practice found in the Pali

scriptural accounts supportive of an ecologically viable world view and way of life? From a cursory look at the textual and historical sources, a facile answer would be, “It seems not.”

The focus of Buddhism as it arose and developed in India, and subsequently transmitted to Sri Lanka and other Asian countries, is in the liberation of the human being from the inherent dissatisfactoriness of this earthly existence. Various expositions of views of reality and prescriptions for religious practice found in Pali texts emphasize this message centered on pursuing a path of spiritual discipline, following the teachings of the Buddha, toward the attainment of nirvana. It was thus not a message conducive to, much less espousing ecological awareness or action as such.

Sentient beings caught in the cycle of birth and death, understood as the six realms of living beings in the Hindu world-view, namely hell-dwellers, hungry ghosts, fighting spirits, animals, humans, and heavenly beings, were considered as the subject of liberation. In this context, the natural world, namely, trees, mountains, rocks and rivers, was considered as the “container,” the “environment” that held sentient beings within the cycle of birth and death. Such a distinction left “the environment” outside the sphere of concern that sought liberation for those sentient beings located within that container.

The views of time and history that found their way into Buddhist texts, inherited from Hindu tradition, presented a cyclic view of arising, preservation, and destruction of the physical world, occurring over immeasurably long spans of time. With such a worldview, the destruction of life on earth is seen as a part of the inherent nature of the universal process that one simply needs to acknowledge and be resigned to, and as such would not thereby be a matter of concern.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, *Prajñāpāramitā* or Wisdom literature centered on the notion of *śūnyatā*, often translated as “Emptiness,” has a twofold fork. Properly understood as a doctrine that expounds on the interconnectedness of everything in the universe, it also lends to a reading that would regard this earthly realm and everything associated with it as “a dream, a phantom, a bubble” (*Diamond Sutra*). Such a view of the illusory nature of phenomenal existence would not support an active concern with what goes on in this earthly realm.

Another Mahāyāna development, Pure Land Buddhism, which found widespread reception in East Asia (Korea, China and Japan), conveys a doctrine centered on rebirth in the Land of Bliss (Pure Land) of the Buddha Amitabha, and prescribes a form of religious practice (chanting the sacred name of the Buddha Amida, or *Nembutsu*) aimed at

otherworldly rebirth and attainment of liberation from the woes of this earthly realm. Such a message would not find room for a concern with what happens to this earth other than to escape from it as soon as possible. In fairness, there are however interpretations of Pure Land, notably those based on the teachings of Shinran (1172–1262) that would deemphasize its otherworldly aspect, and direct the devotee’s concern to Amida’s compassion in this world, in an interpretive move that would putatively ground ecological awareness and engagement. (See Dake 2010, Barnhill 2010)

Across the different Buddhist traditions, or paradigms, to use Küng’s language above, with their different prescriptions for spiritual practice, a preoccupation with the individual’s realization of what is regarded as the ultimate goal, whether it be “liberation from suffering,” or “enlightenment,” or “nirvana,” or “rebirth in the Pure Land,” tends to overshadow any concern with “the environment.” There are many other features that could be pointed out along the same vein, leading to an impression that the track record shown by the Buddhist family of traditions vis-à-vis ecological awareness leaves much to be desired.

Features Favorable to Ecological Awareness and Engagement

In surveying the course of Buddhist developments through the centuries and across different geographical regions, there is good news: we may also find elements conducive to ecological awareness, which can be the basis for Buddhist contributions to our contemporary ecological situation. Let us cite some of these elements, already pointed out by other scholars and practitioners.

Lambert Schmithausen, for example, has noted that plants were regarded with some degree of sentience in earlier stages of Buddhism, though texts from later stages show express denials of this sentience. (Schmithausen 1991) This view of a quasi-sentience of plants has influenced positive and ecologically-sound attitudes and behavior vis-à-vis the natural world. The strategy taken by socially-engaged Theravāda monks in Thailand, of conducting ordination ceremonies for endangered trees in order to protect them from destruction, is a noted example.

The central Mahāyāna notion of *śūnyatā*, often translated as “Emptiness,” rather than being a message of nihilism and of a world-denying stance, is in fact another way of affirming the Buddhist insight into intricate interrelatedness and interconnectedness of everything in the universe. This is a recurrent theme in many works expounding on this notion. Among others, Vietnamese Buddhist Master Thich Nhat

Hanh stands out as one who has highlighted this insight for our contemporaries, and has coined the word Interbeing to convey this message.

A Mahāyāna scriptural text, the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, presents a vision of reality centered on this interconnectedness of all beings. Transmitted and further elaborated upon in China through the Hua Yen School, this vision grounds a sense of harmony and oneness with nature. This view of reality as an interconnected web can inspire and ground a Buddhist vision of an ecologically sound way of being for the Earth community that is in consonance with contemporary philosophical and scientific perspectives. (Macy 1991)

An affirmative stance is found in the Lotus Sutra's teaching that this Earthly realm (*sahā*-world), in the midst of all its woes and travails, is the very locus and field of the Buddha Shakyamuni's continuing compassionate action. This is a religious perspective that grounds concern and active engagement with worldly realities. This theme, coupled with the sutra's emphasis on the notion of the bodhisattva as the ideal Buddhist follower, encourages action toward the alleviation of suffering of fellow beings on this earth. This stance undergirds a sensitivity to the pain and suffering of our fellow sentient beings caught in the mire of ecological destruction, and can inspire an ecologically engaged way of life as well as strategic action.

There are many other features that can be culled from the various Buddhist paradigms throughout the ages to support ecological awareness and inspire an ecological way of life and strategies for action. A good number of the essays in *Buddhism and Ecology* (Tucker and Williams 1997) offer reflections along these lines, and also present excellent examples of Buddhist constructive reflection. Also in this regard, colleagues Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft have given us a valuable resource with their collection entitled *Dharma Rain* (Kaza and Kraft 2000), as well as Richard Payne in his *How Much Is Enough? Buddhism, Consumerism, and the Human Environment*. (Payne 2010)

As adherents and practitioners of the different paradigmatic models of Buddhism come to an acute awareness of the global ecological crisis, they are challenged to look into their respective traditions, and search for resources to answer the question: what does their form of Buddhist praxis have to do with an ecological awareness? Communities of Buddhist adherents and practitioners face this task of articulating for themselves and embodying a Buddhist vision and praxis that would make sense to and serve as an inspiration and guide for coming to terms with the global ecological situation.

Starting from Global *Dukkha*

An awareness of the problematic of the global ecological situation can be heightened and brought to a level of urgency as one is exposed to the suffering and pain of those whose lives are adversely affected by ecological destruction. It could be through a visit to an indigenous community, or a rural dweller's family in any part of the globe, as one witnesses how their abode, their livelihood, their culture, their very existence come under threat from forces that fall under what is called "globalization." It could be as one, or someone in one's immediate circle of family or friends, contracts an illness—cancer, a respiratory malfunction, a genetic malformation, and one is able to trace the direct or indirect causes to exposure to toxic material in the environment. Or it could be through a realization that the song of the frogs that one used to enjoy in one's childhood will be heard no more as the living conditions for these and many other species deteriorate or are destroyed. Or it could be through an open minded and open hearted reading of various materials available to anyone, such as a recent work of Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson, entitled *The Future of Life* (Wilson 2002), or the annual reports of the World Watch Institute, and so on, which in a lucid moment could dawn on an individual not as a problem "out there" but as an issue impinging upon one's very own life. *dukkha*

As the pain of sentient beings under such conditions comes home to us as our very own, the question wells up: "why is this happening?" Asking this question in earnest and pursuing it with a sense of urgency challenges one's accustomed way of life. This plunges one into a quest that is analogous to the one embarked upon by Siddhartha Gautama as he became aware of the *dukkha* (dissatisfactoriness) of our phenomenal existence.

This existential experience of *dukkha* on the ecological level is thus the dynamic ground for a Buddhist ecological theology. Here I would like merely to suggest a framework whereby such a task can be pursued. This task is a communal endeavor for those of us who have come share this experience and this awareness.

The framework I consider is the one offered by the Buddha himself, as he expounded on the nature of his awakening experience, as tradition goes, to his first followers, in a discourse entitled "Turning of the Wheel of Dharma." In this discourse he offers the therapeutic program of the Four Ennobling Truths.

To come to an acute awareness of the *dukkha* manifested in our ecological malaise is to realize the First of the Ennobling Truths. To

inquire into the cause or causes of such *dukkha* paves the way for the realization of the Second. In this regard, the Buddhist insight into the three poisons—greed, illwill, and delusion—as roots causes of the misery of human beings, can be brought to bear in sociological, economic, political, in short, multidisciplinary analyses of the causes of our global ecologic malaise. This task would call for no less than a cooperative venture involving people with different areas of expertise.

We need to be aware that these kinds of analyses are already being conducted by different groups and individuals in different parts of the world. What might a Buddhist contribution be in this communal endeavor? Briefly, perspectives that would draw upon the insights of the Buddha on our human condition, and how these would bear light on our communal, or corporate, mode of being, would be possible ways of articulating Buddhist contributions in this endeavor. (Loy 2003)

Articulating a vision of what corresponds to the Third Ennobling Truth, namely, the state of well-being sought for all of us in this Earth community, is one such way. How can we “imagine,” to echo a song by John Lennon, a world wherein all sentient beings can indeed live together on this earth in harmony and as an interconnected family? What would be the concrete features of such a “state of the world?” One may tend to dismiss such musings as an exercise in Utopia, or as belonging to the sphere of the poetic imagination, and nowhere else. Certainly not in the real world reeking with greed, illwill, and delusion on the individual, communal, national, global dimensions of our being. But a central Buddhist insight has continued to inspire seekers of an authentic way of life for two and one-half millennia, namely, the affirmation that “there is an extinction of this *dukkha*.” This is an affirmation of hope that can also inspire those us who live with this acute awareness of this *dukkha*, that is, to envision the possibility of its extinction as a concrete mode of being together on this Earth.

In this regard, it is not only Buddhists, but all people of good will, are called to articulate features of our communal dream of a sustainable and ecologically viable Earth community. Dialogue and cooperation with people of different faith traditions, and even those who have eschewed religion as a significant factor in human life, but yet seek ways of authentic living, are our allies and partners in this endeavor.

The Fourth Ennobling Truth, the eightfold path of awakening, may serve then as a possible grid for action programs involving not just individual, but also communitarian efforts, toward dismantling the structures of greed, illwill, and delusion, found in our society on the global, local, and individual levels. In this regard, the work of Asian

Buddhists such as Sulak Sivaraksa, A.T. Ariyaratne, and others, are significant landmarks us all. Mapping out concrete steps for a transformation in our values and ways of life, based on an understanding of the causes of our malaise, and grounded on a vision of an ecologically sustainable global society, especially addressed to those living in the consumeristic societies of the industrialized world of North America, Europe, and Japan, remains an ongoing task. (See Kaza 2004, Payne 2010) This is a task and a challenge in which Buddhists of different traditions in the Western hemisphere are called to participate, in a way that draws from the resources of their respective traditions.

It is the shared experience of the *dukkha* of our global ecological malaise that serves as the impetus, and the therapeutic program presented by the Buddha that serves as a framework, for taking on this task and this challenge.

In this light, the question comes back to us: what can those who find their belonging among the Buddhist family of traditions offer as a way forward?

The call for specificity in describing particular Buddhist standpoints is well taken. At the same time, a question posed by the late Professor Nagatomi Masatoshi of Harvard University during a panel discussion on Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in the early 1990's, is also of reference for us here. Given the wide variety of "ways of being Buddhist" as manifested in history and in the contemporary global scene, Prof. Nagatomi asked: What makes Buddhism, "Buddhism"? In other words, is there still something we can identify as a "family resemblance" of sorts among the different varieties, that enable us to say, "yes, that is Buddhist indeed"?

I have sought to offer a tentative response to this in a previous work, wherein I outlined the basic features of the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) in their development from early Buddhist, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna scriptural accounts. In the same work I describe the five major forms of what we know as "Buddhism" today (Theravāda, Tibetan/Vajrayāna, Pure Land, Chan/Zen, and Nichiren/Lotus) which continue to thrive and win adherents in our contemporary society, which in their own ways manifest that "family resemblance." (Habito 2005) In rough summary, it can be argued that what makes Buddhism "Buddhism," in the variety of forms it has taken throughout history, is a praxis that opens us to a Wisdom that sees "things as they really are," that is, the reality of the intricate interconnectedness of all things in this universe, which thus unfolds into a life of Compassion toward all beings.

In the remainder of this paper, I will consider forms of Buddhist praxis toward the cultivation of this Wisdom, and which grounds an ecological awareness leading to concrete engagement in this area.

Horizons of Buddhist Praxis: Outlines

In this concluding segment outlining some horizons of Buddhist praxis that may be up to the task in addressing our ecological malaise, I would emphasize that these are bare outlines, inviting further reflection and development within the various communities of practice.

The most widely known forms of Buddhism are those that involve meditative practice, whether it be Insight (Vipassana), Chan/Zen, or some form of Tibetan Buddhist meditation. A common impression of Buddhist meditative practice among those unfamiliar with it is that it is an ego-centered kind of “navel-gazing,” which would tend to isolate a practitioner from the real world. There are countless volumes one can turn to for accounts of Buddhist meditative practice that would immediately dispel this kind of impression, and confirm that meditation need not be a solipsistic form practice that turns an individual’s concern away from the world. Rather, with proper guidance it can enable an individual to go deep into one’s awareness and precisely discover one’s intimate interconnectedness with everything in the universe.

There are various ways of articulating this intimate interconnectedness with all beings, and here I will offer only one among many. Zen Master Dōgen of thirteenth century Japan, who is looked to for guidance in Zen practice by many in our own time, offers a glimpse of this world of interconnectedness, in a passage from his *Eye Treasury of True Dharma (Shōbōgenzō)*: “I came to realize clearly that Mind is no other than mountains and rivers, the great wide earth, the sun, the moon, the stars.” I have offered some perspectives on this passage of Dōgen in a previous work (Habito 1997), and here simply would like to note that the fruition of meditative practice can lead to an experiential realization of an intimate oneness with “the mountains and rivers, the great wide earth...” Such a realization can ground a vision and be a source of empowerment for an active engagement in healing the wounds of Earth, in realizing the pain of the mountains being denuded of their forests, the rivers being polluted, the Great Wide Earth writhing in pain at the ecological devastation it is undergoing on many fronts. (See also Habito 2006)

The practice of reciting the name of the Buddha Amida (*Nembutsu*), seen on one hand as a path of rebirth in the Pure Land after death in this

earthly life, may also be seen in a new perspective, in taking “Pure Land” not as an otherworldly realm, but rather as a “symbolic representation of what the world could be” as poet Gary Snyder suggests, (Barnhill 2010) or as a symbol of “interconnectivity in diversity” (Dake 2010). In this light, reciting the name of Amida, rather than being seen as a mode of escape from this earthly realm, can be a source of empowerment for engagement in action that would bring about that vision of “what the world could be” and for actualizing this “interconnectivity in diversity.”

The practice of Buddhists who follow the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, as inspired by the life and thought of Nichiren (1222–1282), is centered on the recitation of the August Title of the Lotus Sutra. In reciting this august title (*Nam-Myōhōrengekyō*), as Nichiren expounds in his writings, a practitioner is opened to an experiential vision of the “Three Thousand Worlds in a Single Thought Moment,” (*Ichinen-sanzen*) that is, a realization of the intimate interconnectedness of everything in the universe right at this very moment, in this very body. Such an experiential realization, if connected with the understanding and appreciation of the realities of global *dukkha*, can thereby possibly ground an ecological awareness and a life of commitment to ecological healing.

I have given a brief and very cursory outline of how some of the main forms of Buddhist praxis can be seen as ways of the cultivating the wisdom of interconnectedness with all beings, leading to a vision that fosters a vibrant ecological awareness. Buddhist communities committed to one or other of the forms of praxis outlined above are called to give fuller articulation of the ecological dimensions of their praxis, laying out the implications in concrete detail, and boldly bring these forth in ways that can make a difference in our contemporary global society, toward healing our wounded Earth.

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