

Donald K. Swearer  
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## BUDDHIST WISDOM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

### **Buddhism's Holistic Worldview**

Despite significant variations among the different Buddhist traditions that have evolved over its 2500 year journey throughout Asia and now in the West, Buddhists see the world as conjoined on four levels: existentially, morally, cosmologically, and ontologically. Existentially, Buddhists affirm that all sentient beings share the fundamental conditions of birth, old age, suffering, and death. The existential realization of the universality of suffering lies at the core of the Buddha's teaching. Insight into the nature of suffering, its cause, cessation, and the path to the cessation of suffering constitutes the essence of the Buddha's enlightenment experience). This quadratic teaching forms the basis of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha's first public teaching. The tradition conveys this universal truth via the story of the founder's path to Niirvana and the logic of the Four Noble Truths.

Buddhism links the existential condition of the universality of suffering with the moral virtue of compassion. That the Buddha after his enlightenment decides to share his existential insight into the cause and the path to the cessation of suffering rather than selfishly keeping this knowledge to himself, is regarded by the tradition as an act of universal compassion. Buddhist environmentalists assert that the mindful awareness of the universality of suffering produces compassionate empathy for all forms of life, particularly for all sentient species. They interpret the *Dhammapada's* ethical injunction

not to do evil but to do good as a moral principle advocating the non-violent elevation of suffering, an ideal embodied in the prayer of universal loving-kindness that concludes many Buddhist rituals: "May all beings be free from enmity; may all beings be free from injury; may all beings be free from suffering; may all beings be happy." Out of a concern for the total living environment, Buddhist environmentalists extend loving-kindness, compassion, and respect beyond people and animals to include plants and the earth itself: "We humans think we are smart, but an orchid...knows how to produce noble, symmetrical flowers, and a snail knows how to make a beautiful, well-proportioned shell. We should bow deeply before the orchid and the snail and join our palms reverently before the monarch butterfly and the magnolia tree." (Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Sun My Heart")

The concepts of *karma* and rebirth (*samsara*) integrate the existential sense of a shared common condition of all sentient life forms with the moral nature of the Buddhist cosmology. Not unlike the biological sciences, rebirth links human and animal species. Evolution maps commonalities and differences among species on the basis of physical and genetic traits. Rebirth maps them on moral grounds. Every form of sentient life participates in a karmic continuum traditionally divided into three world-levels and a hierarchical taxonomy of five or six life forms. Although this continuum constitutes a moral hierarchy, differences among life forms and individuals are relative, not absolute. Traditional Buddhism privileges humans over animals, animals over hungry ghosts, male gender over the female, monk over laity but all forms of karmically conditioned life--human, animal, divine, demonic--are related within

contingent, samsaric time: "In the long course of rebirth there is not one among living beings with form who has not been mother, father, brother, sister, son, or daughter, or some other relative. Being connected with the process of taking birth, one is kin to all wild and domestic animals, birds, and beings born from the womb " (*Lankavatara Sutra*). Nirvana, the Buddhist *summum bonum*, offers the promise of transforming karmic conditionedness into an unconditioned state of spiritual liberation, a realization potentially available to all forms of sentient life on the karmic continuum. That plants and trees or the land itself have a similar potential for spiritual liberation became an explicit doctrine in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism but may even have been part of popular Buddhist belief from earliest times--in sum, a realization that all life forms share both a common problematic and promise: "*bodhisattvas* each of these, I call the large trees." (*Lotus Sutra*).

Although the Buddhist doctrines of *karma* and rebirth link together all forms of sentient existence in a moral continuum, Buddhist ethics focus on human agency and its consequences. The inclusion of plants and animals in Buddhist schemes of salvation is important philosophically because it attributes inherent value to non-human forms of life, but humans have been the primary agents in creating the present ecological crisis and will bear the major responsibility for its solution. The myth of origins in the canon of Theravada Buddhism describes the deleterious impact of human activity on the primordial natural landscape (*Aggañña Sutta*). Unlike the Garden of Eden story in the Hebrew Bible where human agency centers on the God-human relationship, the Buddhist story of first origins describes the negative impact of humans on the earth as a

result of their selfishness and greed. In the Buddhist mythological Eden, the earth flourishes naturally but greed and desire lead to division and ownership of the land that in turn promotes violent conflict, destruction, and chaos. It is human agency in the Buddhist myth of first origins that destroys the natural order of things. Although change is inherent in nature, Buddhists believe that natural processes are directly affected by human morality (Lily de Silva, "The Hills Wherein My Soul Delights," *Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown). From the Buddhist perspective our relationship to the natural environment involves an intrinsic moral equation; hence, an environmental policy based primarily on a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis cannot solve the environmental crisis. The moral issues of greed and violence are at the heart of the matter.

The Buddha's enlightenment vision (Nirvana) incorporates the major elements of the Buddhist worldview. Tradition records that during the night of this defining experience the Blessed One first recalled his previous lives within the karmic continuum; then he perceived the fate of all sentient beings within the cosmic hierarchy; finally he fathomed the nature of suffering and the path to its cessation formulated as the Four Noble Truths and the law of interdependent co-arising (*paticca samuppada*). The Buddha's enlightenment evolved in a specific sequence: from an understanding of the *particular* (his personal karmic history), to the *general* (the karmic history of humankind), and finally to the *principle* underlying the cause and cessation of suffering. Subsequently, this principle is further generalized as a *universal law of causality*: "on the arising of this, that arises; on the cessation of this, that ceases." Buddhist

environmentalists find in the principle of causal interdependence a vision that integrates all aspects of the ecosphere--particular individuals and general species--in terms of the principle of mutual co-dependence.

The three stages of the Buddha's enlightenment experience suggests a model for moral reasoning applicable to environmental ethics that integrates general principles, collective action guides, and particular contexts. Effective schemes of distributive justice require general principles such as those embodied in the proposed United Nations Earth Charter embodied in enforceable programs contextualized in particular regions and nation-states.

In the Buddhist cosmological model individual entities are by their very nature relational, thereby undermining the autonomous self over against the "other" whether human, animal, or vegetable. Buddhist environmentalists see their worldview as a rejection of hierarchical dominance of one human over another or humans over nature, and as the basis of an ethic of empathetic compassion that respects biodiversity. In the view of the Thai monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu,

"The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise...then we can build a noble environment. If our lives are not based on this truth, then we shall perish."

In later schools of Buddhist thought the cosmological vision of interdependent causality evolved into a more substantive sense of ontological unity. Metaphorically, the image of Indra's net found in the Hua-yen tradition's *Avatamsaka Sutra* has been especially important in Buddhist ecological discussions: "Just as the nature of earth is one while beings each live separately, and the earth has no thought of oneness or difference, so is the truth of all the Buddhas." For Gary Snyder, the American poet and Zen practitioner, the Hua-yen image of the universe as a vast web of many-sided jewels each constituted by the reflections of all the other jewels in the web and each jewel being the image of the entire universe symbolizes the world as a universe of bioregional ecological communities. Buddhist environmentalists argue, furthermore, that ontological notions such as Buddha-nature or Dharma-nature (*e.g., buddhakaya, tathagatagarbha, dharmakaya, dharmadhatu*) provide a basis for unifying all existent entities in a common sacred universe, even though the tradition privileges human life vis-à-vis spiritual realization. For T'ien-t'ai monks in eighth-century China, the belief in a universal Buddha-nature blurred the distinction between sentient and non-sentient life forms and logically led to the view that plants, trees, and the earth itself could achieve enlightenment. Kukai (774-835), the founder of the Japanese Shingon school, and Dogen (1200-1253), the founder of the Soto Zen sect, described universal Buddha-nature in naturalistic terms: "If plants and trees were devoid of Buddhahood, waves would then be without humidity" (Kukai); "The sutras [*i.e., the dharma*] are the entire universe, mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, plants and trees" (Dogen). Buddhist

environmentalists cite Dogen's view as support for the preservation of species biodiversity; a view that ascribes intrinsic value to all species while at the same time affirming their shared dharmic nature.

For Buddhists the principle of interdependence authenticated by the Buddha is a universal, natural law expressed through the narrative of the Buddha's own *nirvana* and his teaching (*dharma*). Buddhist scriptures convey an understanding of this truth in metaphor, story, and discursive logic. Throughout Buddhist history poetry has also been an important literary tool for conveying the *dharma* and the truths of the interdependence of humans and nature. An early Pali Sutta extols nature's beauty: "Those rocky heights with hue of dark blue clouds/ Where lies embossed many a shining lake/Of crystal-clear, cool waters, and whose slopes/ The herds of Indra cover and bedeck/Those are the hills wherein my soul delights." (*Theragata*). East Asian traditions under the influence of Daoism best represent this tradition as in the poetry of the early ninth century Chinese Buddhist poet and layman, Han-shan: "As for me, I delight in the everyday Way/ Among mist-wrapped vines and rocky caves/ Here in the wilderness I am completely free/ With my friends, the white clouds, idling forever/ There are roads, but they do not reach the world/ Since I am mindless, who can rouse my thoughts?/ On a bed of stone I sit, alone in the night/ While the round moon climbs up Cold Mountain." These poems suggest nature's potential for inspiring the human spirit to reach beyond an instrumental, utilitarian attitude toward the environment.

### **An Ecology of Human Flourishing**

Buddhism arose in north India in the fifth century B. C. E. at a time when the region was undergoing a process of urbanization and political centralization accompanied by commercial development and the formation of artisan and merchant classes. The creation of towns and the expansion of an agrarian economy led to the clearing of forests and other tracts of uninhabited land. These changes influenced early Buddhism in several ways. Indic Buddhism was certainly not biocentric and the strong naturalistic sentiments that infused Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan appear to have been absent from early monastic Buddhism, although naturalism played a role in popular piety. Nonetheless, the natural world is central in the Buddhist conception of human flourishing perhaps, in part, because of the very transformation of the natural environment in which it was born. As we shall see, while nature as a value in and of itself may not have played a major role in the development of early Buddhist thought and practice, it was a necessary component of the tradition's articulation of an ecology of human flourishing.

Even though the picture of the Buddha seated under the tree of enlightenment traditionally has not been interpreted as a paradigm for ecological thinking, today's Buddhist environmental activists point out that the decisive events in the Buddha's life occurred in natural settings: the Buddha Gotama was born, attained enlightenment, and died under trees. The textual record, furthermore, testifies to the importance of forests, not only as an environment preferred for spiritual practices such as meditation but also as a place where laity sought instruction. Historically, in Asia and increasingly in the West, Buddhists have situated centers of practice and teaching in forests and among

mountains at some remove from the hustle and bustle of urban life. The Buddha's own example provides the original impetus for such locations: "Seeking the supreme state of sublime peace, I wandered...until...I saw a delightful stretch of land and a lovely woodland grove, and a clear flowing river with a delightful forest so I sat down thinking, 'Indeed, this is an appropriate place to strive for the ultimate realization of...Nirvana'" (*Ariyapariyesana Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya*). Lavish patronage and the traffic of pilgrims often complicated and compromised the solitude and simple life of forest monasteries, but forests, rivers, and mountains constitute an important factor in the Buddhist ecology of human flourishing. Recall, for example, the Zen description of enlightenment wherein natural phenomena such as rivers and mountains are perceived as loci of the sacred as in Dogen's "Mountains and Water Sutra." Although religious practitioners often tested their spiritual mettle in wild nature, the norm appears to be a relatively benign state of nature conducive to quiet contemplation, or by the naturalistic gardens that one finds in many Japanese Zen monasteries originally located on the outskirts of towns. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu called his forest monastery in south Thailand the Garden of Empowering Liberation observing: "The deep sense of calm that nature provides through separation from the stress that plagues us in the day-to-day world protects our heart and mind. The lessons nature teaches us lead to a new birth beyond suffering caused by our acquisitive self-preoccupation." For Buddhist environmentalists, centers like Buddhadasa's Garden of Empowering Liberation present an example of a sustainable lifestyle grounded in the values of moderation, simplicity, and non-acquisitiveness. Technology alone cannot solve the eco-crisis. More importantly, it

requires a transformation of values and of lifestyle. Buddhadasa's model of the Garden of Empowering Liberation brings an ethico-spiritual critique to the view that science and technology will be able to reconcile our economy and environment.

Buddhadasa intended the Garden of Empowering Liberation not as a retreat from the world but as a place where all forms of life--humans, animals, and plants--live as a cooperative microcosm of a larger ecosystem and as a community where humans can practice an ecological ethic. Such an ethic highlights the virtues of restraint, simplicity, loving-kindness, compassion, equanimity, patience, wisdom, nonviolence, and generosity. These virtues represent moral ideals for all members of the Buddhist community--monk, lay person, political leader, ordinary citizen, male, female. Political leaders who are mandated to maintain the peace and security of the nation, are admonished to adhere to the ideal non-violence. King Asoka, the model Buddhist ruler, is admired for his rejection of animal sacrifice and the protection of animals as well as building hospices and other public works. The Buddhist ethic of distributive justice extols the merchant who generously provides for the needy. Even ordinary Thai rice farmers traditionally left a portion of rice unharvested in their fields for the benefit of the poor and for hungry herbivores. The twin virtues of wisdom and compassion define the spiritual perfection of the *bodhisattva* praised by Śantideva, the eighth century Indian poet-monk in these words: "May I be the doctor and the medicine/ And may I be the nurse/ For all sick beings in the world/ Until everyone is healed/ May I become an inexhaustible treasure/ For those who are poor and destitute/ May I turn

into all things they could need/ And may these be placed close beside them.”

((*Bodhicaryavatara*). For contemporary engaged Buddhists, most notably the Dalai Lama, a sense of responsibility rooted in compassion lies at the very heart of an ecological ethic: "The world grows smaller and smaller, more and more interdependent...today more than ever before life must be characterized by a sense of universal responsibility, not only...human to human but also human to other forms of life" (Nancy Nash, "The Buddhist Perception of Nature Project," in *Buddhist Perspectives on the Ecocrisis*, ed. Klas Sandell).

For many Buddhist environmentalists compassion necessarily results from an understanding of all life forms as mutually interdependent. Others argue that a mere cognitive recognition of interdependence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for an ecological ethic. These critics emphasize the centrality of practice in Buddhism and the tradition's insistence on training in virtue and the threefold path to moral and spiritual excellence--morality, mindful awareness, wisdom. Among contemporary engaged Buddhists, the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, is the most insistent on the practice of mindful awareness in the development of a peaceful and sustainable world where one perceives the fundamental interconnectedness of life: "*Look deeply: I arrive in every second/ to be a bud on a spring branch/ to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile/ learning to sing in my new nest/ to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower/ to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone/ I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river/ and I am the bird which, when spring comes/ arrives in time to eat the mayfly/ I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones/ my legs as thin as bamboo*

sticks/ and I am the arms merchant/ selling deadly weapons to Uganda/ I am the 12 year-old girl, refugee on a small boat/ who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate/ and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving/ Please call me by my true names/ so I can wake up/ and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion (“Please Call Me By My True Names”).”

### **Conserving Nature: Doi Suthep Mountain in Northern Thailand**

In concluding my remarks I’ve chosen to relate my experience of a particular place in northern Thailand—Doi Suthep, a sacred mountain in the Chiang Mai valley of northern Thailand—to show that the work of culture and nature are interdependent; that this interdependence is important to the integrity of both, and that it has helped to preserve the natural environment against the pressures of tourism and economic exploitation.

From January through September, 1994, I lived at the foot of Doi Suthep mountain that overlooks Chiang Mai, the country’s second largest city, a modern bustling, increasingly crowded metropolis. Everyday I saw the mountain from my study window; observed it on the way to my office at Chiang Mai University; and frequently visited the Buddhist temple at its summit. The face of the mountain constantly changed. In the hot months of March and April the parched hillsides were often veiled in dust and smoke from seasonal burning. With the monsoon rains the mountain emerged from its brown haze with sharp, verdant clarity. At night the

temple lights twinkled brightly like stars above the horizon and during the day wispy white clouds often encircled the peak. Doi Suthep proved to be a virtual kaleidoscope of shapes and colors, sights and sounds. The many faces the mountain displayed during the months I was her neighbor became a metaphor for Doi Suthep not only as a natural phenomenon but a symbolic document into which human meanings and ideologies are read.

Rising 1050 meters above sea level, the environs of Doi Suthep were first inhabited by the Lawa, a Mon-Khmer group who lived in the area prior to the major Tai migrations into northern Thailand in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. From the time King Mengrai established Chiang Mai as his capital in 1292, the city has been the dominant power in northern Thailand. Physically the mountain has served as an orientation point for the valley's inhabitants; ecologically its watershed sustained an ever growing population and its forest cover houses an impressive diversity of flora and fauna that includes over 253 species of orchids, 320 bird and 50 mammal species, and more than 500 species of butterflies. Species of plants and animals new to Thailand and even new to the world are regularly discovered on Doi Suthep. The mountain also figures prominently in the region's rich mythology, and one of the most revered Buddhist sanctuaries in mainland Southeast Asia rests near its summit. A summer palace was built for the country's reigning monarch on Doi Pui, a neighboring peak, and both the temple-monastery, Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep, and the royal palace are within the Doi Suthep-Pui National Park that comprises 162 square kilometers.

Mountains in the Doi Suthep range loom large in the legends and myths of the area. The valley's inhabitants are protected by the guardian spirits of the Lawa, Phu Sae/Ya Sae, who reside on the mountains and who are placated and honored by an annual buffalo sacrifice. An ancient *chedi* (*cetiya*) on Doi Pui's summit is reputed to contain the remains of the Lawa chieftain, Vilangkha. According to legend, he was an unsuccessful suitor of Queen Cama who ruled the Mon city of Haripuñjaya in the ninth century, four hundred years prior to the Tai subjugation of the area led by Mengrai. The mountain takes its name from the legendary hermit sage, Vasudeva, the son of Phu Sae/Ya Sae, a major figure in northern legends and who is linked to the founding of Haripuñjaya. It was Vasudeva who arranged for Cama to come to northern Thailand from Lavapura, modern Lopburi. Devotees continue to make offerings to Vasudeva's spirit at a cave on the mountain's western slope where the ascetic is thought to have lived. Of surpassing historical and cultural significance, however, is Wat Phrathat, the Buddhist temple-monastery near Doi Suthep's summit. Here myth and legend become history. Tradition has it that the sanctuary was established in the fourteenth century to house a Buddha relic brought by the monk, Sumana Thera, from the Thai kingdom of Sukhothai to Chiang Mai at the request of its ruler, Ku'ena (1355-1385). According to the Doi Suthep chronicle, the relic miraculously divided itself. King Ku'ena enshrined half the relic at the royal Flower Garden Monastery (Wat Suan Dok) located in Chiang Mai city. The other half was placed on the back of an elephant to be enshrined wherever the animal was led by the gods, suggesting that supernatural forces determined the location of the Wat. These stories illustrate the rich Lawa, Mon, and Tai

cultural map that overlays Doi Suthep's imposing physical topography and around which their histories unfold. As a symbolic document Doi Suthep looms large in the northern Thai cultural imagination and sense of identity.

The contemporary significance of Doi Suthep as a sacred mountain and a work of culture became abundantly clear in 1986 during a controversy over the construction of an electric cable car from the base of the mountain to the monastery-temple, Wat Phrathat, at the summit. The cable car, endorsed by the Tourist Organization of Thailand, would accommodate the ever-increasing number of tourists who flock to Thailand's northern mountains. Long gone are the days when pilgrimage to Wat Phrathat was on foot, but the road to the sanctuary first construed by donated, manual labor under the inspired leadership of the charismatic monk, Khruba Siwichai, has itself become part of the mountain's legendary history. A commercial company building a cable car to promote an increasingly invasive commercial degradation of Doi Suthep was another matter, however. Environmentalists, university professors, students, and ordinary citizens united in protest. A particularly key element in its success was the role played by Buddhist monks, especially the late Bodhirangsi, the assistant ecclesiastical governor of the province of Chiang Mai, and one of the most highly respected abbots in the city. An abbreviated review of the defense of Doi Suthep in the face of the onslaught of commercial development and tourism is the following paragraph from Niranam Khorabhatham's editorial in the April 30, 1986, *Bangkok Post*, which illustrates not only the tenor of the rhetoric but the reverence for the mountain:

The manager of the proposed cable car project on Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai, states that he was 'not overlooking the sanctity of Wat Phrathut. He underestimates the northern people: The Soul of Lanna [northern Thailand] is still alive. Northerners perceive, at least in their subconscious, that Mount Suthep is like a symbolic stupa. Doi Suthep's dome-like shape is like an immense replica of the ancient Sanchi style stupa, a gift to Lanna by the Powers of Creation. Stupas are reliquaries of saints. More than that, they are a structural representation of the very essence of Buddhism. Plant and animal life are like Nature's frescoes, both beautifying and exemplifying the Law [*dharma*] not less than paintings in any man-made shrine. Although sometimes not being able to explain why rationally, the northern people want to preserve the Stupa Doi Suthep as it was given to them by Creation, as untouched as possible, as sacred.

The pressures to develop Doi Suthep for its commercial value, especially tourism, threaten the mountain's natural environment and its cultural and religious integrity. The fact that Doi Suthep is perceived by northern Thais as a sacred landscape has been a major factor in challenging the construction of a cable car up the mountain and, more importantly, the expansion of tourism and other commercial enterprises destructive to its natural habitat. The place that Doi Suthep holds in the cultural imagination of northern Thai, the reverence accorded it, and the story of Doi Suthep from its legendary origin to today make a crucial contribution to environmental ethics. Indeed, when it comes to concrete action, as in the case of the cable car project, the place

of Doi Suthep in the cultural imagination of the northern Thais and the stories associated with the mountain join past and present, giving purpose and meaning to the lives of contemporary participants in an ongoing narrative.

An environmental ethic depends on the acknowledgement that our intrinsic nature as human beings is inextricably linked to nature, and that human flourishing depends on whether, in Buddhadasa's worlds, "we can listen to the voice of trees, grass, sand, and dirt and hear the sound of the *dharma*." Our continuing existence and the continuing existence of the planet depends on living this truth.

Donald K. Swearer  
Distinguished Visiting Scholar  
Center for the Study of World Religions  
Harvard Divinity School  
Charles & Harriet Cox McDowell Emeritus Professor of Religion  
Swarthmore College



