

*Anthony Le Duc SVD**

**THERAVADA BUDDHIST ENVIRONMENTAL SPIRITUALITY:
RELATIONAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DIMENSIONS
IN PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING**

Buddhism is often seen as a religion or worldview offering an important ethical grounding for a positive approach to ecology. The author explains some fundamental convictions in Theravada Buddhism with regard to the self-understanding of the human person and its relationships to other levels of being and to nature. He presents the Buddhist analysis of the present-day environmental crisis in our world as well as the motivation for action and the tools to bring about a different attitude. There, he shows that the horizontal dimension of relations to other humans, animals and nature in general cannot be separated from a vertical dimension. Thus, he treats Theravada Buddhism in a spiritual perspective, beyond the ethical one. That shows Buddhism with its option for human action here and now, even if the permanent happiness of nibbāna remains an ultimate vision which nevertheless takes shape in today's demands for personal and social change and caring relationships.

Buddhist Worldview and the Environmental Crisis

Religious environmentalism in recent decades has gained more popularity and momentum in its effort to contribute to the multi-disciplinary environmental discourse. The various traditions of Buddhism have also been subject of investigation for teachings that may help support an environmental ethics. This is not surprising because Buddhism, as a major world religion, can serve as a valuable resource for the inquiry into how it can contribute to solving the environmental crisis through its teachings and spirituality. Ultimately, the onus of Buddhist leaders and scholars is to delve into the Buddhist tradi-

* Anthony Le Duc, SVD, is currently teaching at the National Major Seminary of Thailand and Assumption University of Thailand. His doctorate degree is in Religious Studies, in which the topic of this article is part of the dissertation. His research interest, however, is in religious environmentalism in general and he has written a number of articles in this area. In addition, he is serving as the assistant director of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication at St. John's University, Bangkok. Besides his teaching and research, he also engages extensively in migrant ministry in Thailand, both in pastoral and advocacy work.

tion in order to retrieve relevant elements to advance an environmentalism that is not only faithful to the tradition but is also applicable to the contemporary milieu. Bhikkhu Bodhi asserts that Buddhism, as any religion,

must strike a happy balance between remaining faithful to the seminal insights of its Founder and ancient masters and acquiring the skill and flexibility to formulate these insights in ways that directly link up with the pressing existential demands of [our] age. It is only too easy to veer towards one of these extremes at the expense of the other: either to adhere tenaciously to ancient formulas at the expense of present relevance, or to bend fundamental principles so freely that one drains them of their deep spiritual vitality. (1994)

The sentiment of Bhikkhu Bodhi serves as an effective critique of many of the works dealing with the environmental crisis from a Buddhist perspective, which often find over-emphasis of particular aspects of the tradition at the expense of the other, causing the religion to lose its full potential in confronting modern issues. This makes research work on Buddhist environmentalism, although admittedly abundant in quantity, still something lacking and needing further exploration.

Theravada Buddhism, the focus of this study, informs us that human existence has two distinct yet inter-related dimensions: the horizontal (relational) and the vertical (developmental) dimensions. At the same time that human beings are integrally related to other entities in the universe and having their destinies intertwined, they are also expected to strive for spiritual progress that ultimately should lead them to personal emancipation from the world of mundane existence. Therefore, a cohesive Theravada Buddhist environmental spirituality must take into account both dimensions mentioned above. The relational dimension of Buddhism provides human beings with important teachings and tools to critically assess themselves and their relationship to nature, and gain insights on how they are to perceive themselves vis-à-vis the natural world. At the same time, the vertical dimension requires that human beings continually strive for spiritual advancement, developing virtues that distinguish them from those who do not or cannot practice the *Dhamma*. When it comes to the environment, it is in this very goal of spiritual progress and liberation that human beings develop moral attitudes and behavior that are conducive to promoting personal, and consequently, environmental well-being. Therefore, environmental well-being is part and parcel of human spiritual progress and flourishing; and the hu-

man-nature relationship becomes more harmonious and positively reinforced when human beings themselves are successful in their personal spiritual endeavors.

Up to now, most of the research in the field has addressed Buddhism and the environmental crisis more or less from an ethical perspective. This is understandable because oftentimes, Buddhism is seen as a philosophical system, and examination of Buddhist ethics is a natural consequence of this perception. A second major reason for why there are not many works on Buddhist environmental spirituality is because even though environmental ethics is a relatively new field, environmental spirituality is an even newer discipline. Moreover, up until recent years, the field of spirituality was more or less associated with Christianity.¹ Thus, the term Buddhist spirituality may not readily come to mind, and even less so when it comes to Buddhist environmental spirituality. One might find the term “spirituality” applied to Buddhism to be an oxymoron because Buddhism denies the existence of a “spirit” or a “self.” However, “spirituality” in its modern academic usage does not necessarily connote the presence of a “spirit” or a “soul” as understood in Western Christianity, but can also refer to a more general state or experience of inner well-being and transformation. Zinnbauer et al. assert that “Spirituality is now commonly regarded as an individual phenomenon and identified with such things as personal transcendence, supraconscious sensitivity, and meaningfulness” (1997, 551).

Prominent Buddhists themselves have also made references to aspects of Buddhism using the language of spirituality. Bhikkhu Bodhi, for example, refers to the Buddha as a “spiritual leader” (2006). In another essay, the scholar monk characterized the five Buddhist qualities of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom as “spiritual qualities” (1998). The late Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu spoke of the human moral degeneration as a “spiritual disease” that must be cured by the *Dhamma* (1997). Although the term spirituality had its beginnings in Christianity, the fact that it has evolved in such a way as to transcend particular religious and even non-religious contexts means that Buddhism does not have to be excluded from the field of spirituality in general, or environmental spirituality in particular.² The significance of this study is its emphasis on highlighting

¹ In fact, up until the late nineteenth century, it was mostly a term used within the Roman Catholic context (Spohn, 1997, 110). Only afterward did it spread into Protestant circles and eventually make its way into other religious contexts as well as its application to non-religious contexts.

² For those who still find it uncomfortable to accept the term “Buddhist environmental spirituality” for historical reasons as well as perceived connota-

the spirituality aspect of Buddhism that reflects the important inner transformation conducive to promoting environmental well-being. It helps to ground the discussions that up to now have focused mainly on morality and ethics more deeply in the inner experience and understanding of ultimate reality that affects our relational lives with other people and the environment.

Admittedly, up to now, most of the discourse on Buddhist environmentalism has more or less approached the matter from an ethical perspective. Nonetheless, this does not mean that lurking behind all the discussions on morality and ethics, one cannot find deeper roots of Buddhist spirituality. By the same token, in establishing Buddhist spiritual foundations to promote environmental well-being, it is impossible to make a complete presentation without referring to ethics. Spirituality and ethics go hand in hand, and when brought together in a cooperative relationship, they help to make our inquiry more thorough and fruitful. This study, despite its many references to ethical actions, underscores the significance of a Buddhist environmental spirituality, which serves to ground the ethical actions and infuse into them the proper meanings.

Although the modern-day environmental crisis was neither a concern nor something conceivable during the days of the Buddha, his teachings provide a readily applicable framework for dealing with the problem. Confronted with the seemingly pessimistic situation of the human condition, the Buddha faced it head on and conceived a program that would deliver human beings out of the endless cycle of suffering and rebirth. The Four Noble Truths presented by the Buddha in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (S.V.11)³ known as the setting of the wheel of *Dhamma* into motion can be categorized into three steps: 1) Diagnosis of the perceived problem; 2) Presenting a goal or vision; and 3) Offering the path to realization of the vision.

The first two Noble Truths constitute the diagnosis part of the Buddhist pedagogy. The Buddha observed that the essence of mundane life was unsatisfactory because of the existent reality of impermanence of all things in the world. By observing the processes of birth, aging, sickness, and death, etc. as well as all the other events taking place in the world, the Buddha was able to give these realities

tions associated with the latter word in the phrase, other terms such as “Buddhist environmental awareness” or “Buddhist environmental mindfulness” may be adopted. However, there are discrepancies in meaning among these various terms and one has to make a case for why a particular one is chosen over the other.

³ See abbreviations of the referred texts at the end of the article.

a common descriptive name—suffering or unsatisfactoriness. The second truth locates the root of this unsatisfactoriness as due to the ignorance of the true nature of reality, causing one to have craving (*tanhā*) for things that do not bring about lasting happiness because they are ultimately impermanent. The Buddha listed three kinds of craving—craving for sensual pleasure, craving to become, and craving to get rid of unwanted things. Having made the diagnosis, the Buddha subsequently presented a vision of hope that is contrary to the condition of suffering that one experiences in life. That vision is stated in the third Noble Truth, which declares that human beings do not have to be enslaved to this perpetual cycle of unsatisfactoriness, that one can put an end to the suffering in one's life by achieving freedom from the various desires mentioned above. Finally, this vision of eternal bliss can be realized by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path with this threefold training of morality, concentration, and wisdom. The fourth Noble Truth, thus, is the path that leads to realization of the proposed vision.

The keyword that connects the environmental crisis to the Buddhist worldview is “crisis.” The term “crisis” itself suggests that there is a problem, a state of imbalance, disharmony, dislocatedness, and lack of peace. Thus, the Buddhist approach to the environmental crisis needs to take the same analogous course as that which pertains to the entire human condition by first making a diagnosis of the perceived problem, then present a goal or vision for the problem, as well as a practical course of action that helps to realize that vision. In applying the Buddhist framework to the environmental crisis, we are able to do the following:

- 1) Diagnosing the environmental crisis as a problem stemming from human moral and spiritual malignancies causing disharmony in the human-nature relationship, and harming both human as well as nature itself;
- 2) Presenting a vision for the human-nature relationship characterized by wholesome qualities contrary to the ones being observed;
- 3) Offering the course of action that one takes in order to realize this vision of a wholesome and healthy human-nature relationship.

One will notice this framework incorporates two extremely important dimensions in Buddhist pedagogy which, if lacking either one or the other, will render this presentation incomplete and handicapped. What lies within this framework is the implicit understanding that a Buddhist environmental spirituality must include both the

relational (horizontal) dimension of human life and the developmental (vertical) dimension of human mental and spiritual growth. The horizontal dimension refers to how we enter into and maintain relationship with others and with the environment. The vertical dimension examines what needs to take place in order for us to achieve the necessary personal progress and to avoid unhealthy relationships that are harmful to ourselves as well as to others. The value of incorporating both of these dimensions into formulating an environmental spirituality is that while the well-being of the environment is a priority, we do not lose sight of the ultimate value of liberation for human beings.

***Greed, Hatred, and Delusion: The Buddhist Diagnosis
of the Root Cause of the Environmental Crisis***

A Buddhist environmental spirituality necessarily begins with a reflection on the state of the human-nature relationship. Thai scholar monk Phra Prayudh Payutto, in a published talk entitled “Thai People and Forests,” posed a simple question to his listeners, “Is the relationship between Thai people and forests one of friendship or of enemies?” (2010, 11).⁴ Obviously, Phra Prayudh intended for his listeners to make a conscientious examination of their attitudes and behaviors in order to evaluate the quality of the relationship between human beings with not only forests alone, but nature as a whole. Phra Prayudh’s question is a pertinent one for both his Thai listeners and for all people concerned with the state of the environment. How human beings view nature and view themselves vis-à-vis nature has tremendous implications for the condition of the environment now and in the future. As humanity confronts the environmental crisis unfolding in ever more dramatic and disturbing ways, the question naturally arises, “What is the root cause of the crisis at hand?” Answers such as the overuse of non-renewable resources or materialism only express the symptoms but not the real problem because these things are simply visible manifestations of more profound issues taking place in the deeper realm of human spirituality and psychology. Unless one gets to the underlying root causes in order to accurately diagnose the problem, effective curative therapies could not be proposed. No doubt diagnosis for the environmental crisis can be made from a multitude of vantage points—scientific, sociological, political, as well as spiritual. The environmental crisis in the Buddhist frame-

⁴ This talk was originally published in the Thai language, entitled คนไทยกับป่า “Khon Thai Kap Pa.”

work, like various problems involving human society, is a reflection of an unwholesome human moral and spiritual condition that leads to destructive actions towards other human beings as well as non-human nature. The unwholesome tendencies in human beings negatively impact our relationship with nature as displayed in violent acts towards and over-exploitation of nature and its resources.

The Buddha divided the human situation into two states: wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*) (D.III.275). The root causes of these unwholesome states are greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*), while the root causes of the wholesome states are non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. All animate life is impelled by these universal forces on an individual as well as collective basis. They are the motive forces behind our thoughts, words, and deeds. Introspection tells us that the unwholesome roots, also known as the poisons, lead to actions that result in suffering for ourselves and others in ways that contradict our inner desire for happiness. In a basic sense, greed is the mental state in which someone is constantly preoccupied with a feeling of need and want because he feels there is a lack in his life; and since his appetite is insatiable, even when he obtains what he has desired, he continues to feel the desire for lasting satisfaction. Hatred, which in the Buddhist sense includes other negative emotions such as disappointment, despair, anxiety and dejection, also has internal origins representing dissatisfaction towards oneself and others. Finally, delusion can be seen in the form of ignorance (*avijjā*) that leads to confusion and lack of direction. It can also lead to false views that contribute to the development of ideological dogmatism and fanaticism. These three unwholesome roots manifest themselves in various degrees from mild to extreme. They are not independent of one another, but rather are intertwined with one another and may serve as the force to impel one another.

According to Buddhism, these three unwholesome roots or poisons are found in individual mental states. However, the negative consequences are not simply confined to the individual, but occur on the collective level as well. The root cause of the environmental crisis, then, must also be considered in this Buddhist framework that diagnoses the problem from a human ethical and spiritual outlook. As Pragati Sahni contends:

As long as the mind is influenced by the three unwholesome principles of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha* or greed, hatred and delusion, the human race will be stricken by environmental and other forms of exploitation, as well as selfish actions, greedy consumer cultures, dissatisfaction

and other attitudes that can be looked upon as vices (2007, 165).

Likewise, the late Thai monk Buddhadasa would remark that climate change and other imbalances in nature being experienced at this time are a result of an internal human moral degeneration that affects the external dimension of the world.⁵ The breakdown in the human-nature relationship is reflected in the actions and activities motivated by the three poisons that promote one-sided interests without due consideration for the well-being of others, whether fellow human beings or the natural environment. Philip Cafaro asserts that greed is detrimental to the environment because it causes businesses to breach environmental standards, promotes political corruption which undermines the democratic process, and serves as the engine that drives overconsumption (2005, 148-149).

The environment can also be harmed by hatred that human individuals and groups display when they institute aggressive policies that aim to protect selfish economic interests. A country or organization may employ imperialistic or oppressive tactics in order to acquire control or the monopoly of natural resources which they will exploit for economic gain. Hatred may be manifested in its militant forms of wrath and violence, but may also take the subtle form of apathy towards the reality and extent of the environmental issues. While militancy may be limited to notorious individuals, groups, organizations, or governments, apathy, negligence and lack of concern are prevalent in the great majority of the people. This makes all people susceptible to blame when it comes to the root cause of the environmental crisis.

Delusion, sometimes referred to as ignorance or possessing false views, is a major driving force behind the environmental crisis. Delusion takes on numerous forms in people's lives. Delusion manifests itself as a condition where people become attached to material things thinking that they will bring about lasting personal happiness, not realizing that all things are impermanent. It is also seen as the culprit behind the mistake of according higher social status to those who have greater material possessions. Delusion plagues society when it is believed that in real development, economic growth is the measure of national good, that high levels of production and consumption signify higher well-being, and the importance of unceasing GDP growth trumps sustainability (Ives 2013, 546). Delusion in the form of having

⁵ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's ideas come from a number of works that have been compiled and translated by Grant A. Olson. Olson gives his translation the title "A Notion of Buddhist Ecology." In addition to the negative effect on nature, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu asserts that internal degeneration hinders spiritual progress.

false views exists when individuals and groups do not have adequate knowledge of the problem or misunderstand the issues due to absorbing one-sided information from governmental agencies or interest groups. Ignorance can be a result of denial of the magnitude of the problem based on shorted-sighted empirical experiences that one has without considering the larger scope of the matter. Just because one experiences a colder-than-normal winter in a particular year, it does not mean that one has adequate evidence to reject the claim that global warming is in fact taking place. Delusion can result from ideological notions supporting the stance that human beings can exercise absolute domination over nature according to some sort of divine ordinance, or if all else fails, humanity can always try to find another planet to move to until things get better on earth.⁶

In short, these poisons have the effect of turning human beings into selfish people, focused on fulfilling our desires, and discounting the well-being of others, especially of nature. The human-nature relationship fueled by hatred, ignorance, and greed becomes one characterized by harm and exploitation, obviously with the environment being on the short end of the bargain. The loss of environmental vitality and equilibrium, however, leads to negative consequences for the exploiters themselves. Therefore, solving the environmental crisis is about improving our relationship with nature, and that means undergoing the necessary transformation within ourselves in order for the desired improvement to take place.

The Horizontal Dimension: Envisioning the Human-Nature Relationship in Theravada Buddhism

The application of the Buddhist teachings of the unwholesome roots to the environmental crisis demonstrates that what we call an “environmental crisis” is essentially a “human spiritual crisis” in which the remedy needs to be found first and foremost within the human person and community. The environmental crisis can be likened to a mirror which one holds up to examine one’s own reflection and discovers that one’s hair is all in tangles. The logical and effective action that one must take upon discovering this situation is not to change the mirror in the hope that the next one shows a different and more satisfactory reflection, or try in vain to fix the image behind

⁶ The Mars One initiative with the aim of transporting human beings on a one-way trip to the red planet beginning in 2026 (as announced on its official website: <http://www.mars-one.com>—retrieved on 8 May 2015) undoubtedly arose partly out of consideration for an unlivable or overloaded Earth in the future.

the mirror. Rather, one must untangle one's own hair so that the image reflected in the mirror no longer displays a mess. Fundamental Buddhist teachings can help to conceive positive models of a human-nature relationship that are both conducive to the well-being of nature as well as to the spiritual goals of the human person. These models serve to represent the vision of how human-nature relationships look when they are built upon wholesome and positive dynamics free of greed, hatred and delusion.

1. Human-nature relationship: Continuity and Solidarity in Suffering

The first model of the human-nature relationship is one characterized by “continuity and solidarity in suffering.” This model is arrived at through the examination of the Buddhist cosmogony, where it is discovered that human beings and nature constitute distinct entities existing on a cosmological continuum, and having as the basis of their continuity the experience of *dukkha*, or suffering, that is characteristic of all unenlightened sentient lives. Although Buddhist canonical literature does not provide a definitive notion of nature as an environmental concept, we can affirm that nature, as experienced in our everyday life, is a real aspect of the Buddhist totality of existence, a part of the vast, mysterious, and multi-leveled *loka* (“world”). In the Buddhist conception of the universe, human beings and other beings form separate entities, which have co-existed since beginningless time and will continue to co-exist for much longer to come. They are, in fact, part of a cosmological continuum that includes a total of six realms making up *samsāra* where the rounds of rebirth take place. In *samsāra*, sentient beings end up in one of the six realms—the god realm, the demi-god realm, the human realm, the hungry ghosts realm, the animal realm, and the hell realm.⁷ Animals belong to the realm that is less unfortunate than the hell realm, and human beings are less fortunate than the demi-gods. However, existence in none of

⁷ The concept of “rebirth” does not necessarily only apply to the transmigratory process as described above. Birth as seen in the 12-link chain of the theory of Dependent Origination, according to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, can refer to various events that take place in people's everyday life. He writes, “Becoming and Birth can happen at any time and place. They can happen many times in a day. When Feeling in reaction to Ignorance exists, a certain kind of ‘delight’ due to perplexity develops. This is Clinging; after which Existence/Birth and Birth develop. Therefore, Becoming and Birth emerge in an instant, and they happen many times in a day” (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1978). Thus the development of the ego and the selfishness associated with it is an example of birth that can take place any time. We can see from this interpretation that rebirth has the connotation of immediacy in addition to the popular way of thinking of birth as something taking place once in a lifetime.

these realms is permanent, and even if someone has an auspicious birth as a god, he will eventually be reborn into a lower realm when all of his good *kamma* has been exhausted. In reality, the six realms are essentially rough categories because in each of them, there is a wide range of states of life. These realms are also inter-penetrable because at any moment, a being can migrate to a different realm than the one in which it presently finds itself. However, few are reborn as gods and humans compared to the vast number finding their rebirth in the lower worlds or in the plane of misery (A.I.37).

The Buddhist *samsāra* presents us with a picture of all beings in the world linked together in the circle of rebirth and none of the states of life exists in isolation of the others. The human realm, though more joyful than the animal realm, is but an intermediate on the way to attaining *nibbāna*. Animals, although born in a realm characterized by much suffering and anguish, also travel on the exact same path, albeit a much longer and more strenuous one. Still, it is undeniable that being born in the human realm is preferable since it presents a greater opportunity for spiritual advancement and emancipation. Despite the qualitative differences in their lives, continuity exists between the human and the animal realms, in fact all the realms, because of the underlying component of all sentient life, *dukkha* (suffering or unsatisfactoriness).

As stated in the First Noble Truth, all sentient life is suffering. Suffering comes about because of the inherent unsatisfactoriness that comes from the impermanence of all conditioned phenomena. If one is reborn in the hell realm, one can expect intense pain and grief for eons of time until one's bad *kamma* is exhausted. Even the gods who live luxurious and carefree lives for tens of eons will eventually have to deal with suffering when their good *kamma* runs out and they must be reborn in a lower realm (A.I.267). Human lives are pervaded by anxiety because of the fear of old age, sickness, and death. Human beings also suffer from various feelings of hunger, thirst, not getting what we desire, but getting what we do not want. We have to be with people we do not like, and must be separated from people whom we love. Even happy moments constitute suffering because they cannot last. Animals face even more suffering than human beings because they are always at risk of being preyed on by other animals. Domesticated animals also suffer because they risk being exploited by their owners. Other animals are raised and cared for but destined to be slaughtered for food.

Suffering for Buddhism is not something belonging merely to the realm of subjective human psychology, but rather an objective phenomenon existing in all sentient beings. Other than those who have

achieved emancipation from *sāmsāric* life, suffering is the shared experience of all creatures having to confront the cycle of rebirth. It is this sense of realism that most characterizes how Theravada Buddhism views all existence, including nature. It is in this very reality that human beings find their connection with nature and which serves as a starting point and a catalyst for a sense of solidarity with nature and leads human beings to display care for nature. John J. Holder remarks that “[i]n early Buddhism, *dukkha* is the vital link that connects human values to a concern for the natural world. A genuine concern for the natural world derives from the fact that the remedy for *dukkha* in human experience is precisely a radical shift to a concern for the well-being of all other sentient beings” (2007, 123). The project to relieve human suffering comes to involve also relieving the suffering of all creatures through acts of mercy and compassion. As the Buddha taught, when someone acts with defilement, the suffering that results not only falls upon himself, but also affects others. On the other hand, when he acts in a manner that is free of greed, hatred, and delusion, he promotes well-being for himself and for all (A.I.157-158). As the monk Bhuddhadasa remarks, “We are mutual friends inextricably bound together in the same process of birth, old age, suffering, and death” (quoted in Swearer 1997, 28). This shared reality leads Bhuddhadasa to advocate a way of caring (*anurak*) that expresses a sense of deep empathy exuding from within ourselves in order to protect, shelter and care for the environment (Swearer 1997, 26).

To be clear, the sense of solidarity in suffering begins strictly within the circle of sentient beings because according to early Buddhism, only sentient beings can experience suffering. However, we cannot care for ourselves or other sentient beings if we fail to care for the physical environment which serves to support our livelihood. Thus, displaying solidarity for other human beings and animals necessarily entails working to promote a healthy environment for the sake of all. In the process, the forests, mountains, air, and seas that support life also become beneficiaries of human care.

2. Human-Nature Relationship: Responsibility and Accountability

When turning to Buddhism as a resource for a religiously inspired environmentalism, perhaps no teaching in Buddhism gets mentioned more than the doctrine of *paṭiccasamuppāda* which is commonly translated as Dependent Origination or Dependent Arising. Many

scholars, especially those classified as “Green Buddhists,”⁸ see this concept as especially pertinent to the issue of the ecology because of a particular interpretation that leads to the idea of interdependence of all things. This interpretive approach, it seems, easily lends itself to environmental awareness and protection because it suggests intimacy and connectedness between human beings and nature. On the other hand, a number of Buddhist scholars have also rejected this holistic understanding of Dependent Origination and do not see an environmental application of the doctrine. I propose that the doctrine of Dependent Origination can be explored for its relevance to Buddhist environmental spirituality, not only because it is one of the most important doctrines of Buddhism, but also because its content indeed contains implications for the human-nature relationship. In particular, this teaching will serve as a resource for conceiving a model of a human-nature relationship characterized by “responsibility and accountability.” This relationship when understood, appreciated, and nourished, will lead to greater harmony between human beings and the natural environment.

According to the Buddha, Dependent Origination is a naturally occurring principle that does not depend on the existence of either himself or any other enlightened Buddhist teacher in the world. The Buddha affirmed that “whether an enlightened Tathagata were to appear in this world or not, this principle would still prevail as an enduring aspect of the natural order” (S.II.25). The Buddha also emphasized that this principle is essential to the *Dhamma*, which someone must comprehend in order to say that he understands the *Dhamma*. “Whoever sees dependent origination sees the *Dhamma*,” declared the Buddha. “And whoever sees the *Dhamma* sees dependent origination” (M.I.190). Although on the surface it may seem simple, as the monk Ananda once remarked, the Buddha declared in the *Tipitaka* that this principle is much more profound than what one may initially perceive. It is a part of the *Dhamma*, said the Buddha, that is “deep, difficult to see, difficult to realize, calm and peaceful, subtle, not attainable through mere logic, refined, requiring a wise one to understand” (M.I.167).

The principle of Dependent Origination comes in two forms, long and short. The long form specifies a series of elements connected to one another in a chained progression serving to explain the causes and effects that lead to human suffering. On the other hand, the

⁸ “Green Buddhists” are also sometimes referred to as “EcoBuddhists” because they are enthusiastic supporters of the point of view that Buddhism is naturally environmentally friendly.

short form is a general formula that does not specify any elements and succinctly states:

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.

When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases (S.II.21).

Examination of the law of Dependent Origination in the long as well as the short form helps us to come to two conclusions. First, the principle serves as a law of causation applicable to both human beings as well as the entire universe. In the human situation, the law is applied on a physical-psychological level, while in nature, the law plays out as physical phenomena. Dependent Origination, moreover, is a natural law rather than an ethical law, meaning that it does not place any particular value on the entities, whether they are the causes and conditions, or the things that arise. The law simply highlights the process of how things come into existence as a result of various causes and conditions. That being said, contemplating on this natural law can lead to the realization of truths that hold moral implications for humanity and for our relationship with nature. The environmental implications appear when we see that as a universal natural law, it includes in its manifestations a connection between human actions and internal as well as external effects on oneself and others.

The Buddha on numerous occasions highlighted this connection in his sermons. For example, in the *Cakkavattasihanada Sutta* (D.III. 58-77), the Buddha said that when people behaved degenerately, filling their actions with ignorance, anger, and hatred, the result was war, famine, epidemics and other calamities. However, when people changed their hearts and their way of living, nature was restored to balance, and humanity experienced prosperity and peace. This and other examples in the canon linking the human spiritual and moral state with natural events show that the Buddha saw that the relationship between human beings and nature has to do not so much with the way human beings and nature *are* ontologically, but has more to do with how human beings and nature *act* towards one another in concrete happenings that take place in every moment.

Realization of this truth helps us to envision a human-nature relationship that is based on responsibility and accountability. Human beings, by virtue of our special status of having consciousness and being capable of achieving liberation, can affect the process of giving rise to or extinguishing suffering, and consequently, have a special role in the world. The Buddhist environmental spirituality thus arises from the understanding that the causal law is applicable within

the individual, inter-personally, and cosmologically. This understanding dispels the illusion that human beings can live in isolation of others without being subjected to the common universal causal law and that our actions, thoughts, and intentions do not have to be taken into account.

The Buddha indeed taught that actions of influential individuals gave rise to happenings in the community; and actions of humanity influenced the outcome in nature. Therefore, the awareness of all the dimensions of one's relational life is particularly important to leading a wholesome and fruitful life. In the *Sigalovada Sutta* (D.III.180), the Buddha advised a young householder in great detail on his duties to his parents, his wife, his children, his servants, his friends and associates, as well as other important figures such as teachers, ascetics and brahmans.

*The mother and father are the East,
The Teachers are the South,
Wife and Children are the West,
The friends and associates are the North.
Servants and employees are the Nadir,
The ascetics and brahmans are the Zenith;
Who is fit to lead the household life,
These six quarters he should salute.*

While there is no specific mention of his responsibility towards nature in this instance, when we consider this *sutta* along with the other examples cited above, we are able to conclude that nature could reasonably be added to the list of relationships that a conscientious individual must enter into and diligently maintain. The sense of responsibility and accountability towards promoting nature's well-being is not an optional way to consider one's relationship to nature, but serves as a measure of one's maturity and transformed self. Cooper and James assert the following about the notion of responsibility:

To be responsible is to be ready, perhaps even eager, to assume and accept one's moral responsibilities. To say that one ought to be responsible in this sense is to say that one should not simply accept, in an abstract way, that what one does is not 'fated' ... and that one must be answerable for the effects of one's intentions and actions. To be responsible is, rather, to constantly keep this fact in mind and to therefore act, so far as one is able, with a view towards the effects of one's actions (2005, 104).

Displaying responsibility and accountability to each other is a natural part of seeing each other as fellow travelers on a journey

where the final destination is liberation from suffering for all sentient creatures. The recognition of this companionship is essential in forming an internal disposition that subsequently is demonstrated in concrete actions and activities with the intention that they will bring about positive outcomes for others. Phra Prayudh Payutto writes, “Since [human beings and nature] must be bound to the same natural law we are friends who share in suffering and joy of one another. Since we are friends who share in both suffering and joy of one another we should help and support one another rather than persecute one another” (2010, 21). The principle of Dependent Origination thus presents a vision of the human community not as antagonists of nature, blindly doing things without awareness of how these actions may affect ourselves and others, but always conscious that all effects arise due to various causes and conditions. Human suffering comes from causes that take place in our very own mind. We can also be the source of conditions that lead to suffering of other human beings and of the destruction of nature. Awareness of this necessarily demands awareness of responsibility and accountability. This is an important foundation for embarking on the path that leads human beings to act more thoughtfully and virtuously so as to ensure a harmonious human-nature relationship.

3. Human-Nature Relationship: Mutual Service and Gratitude on the Journey towards Liberation

Religious environmental ethics and spirituality often take cues from secular environmental ethics, especially in regard to the issue of value in nature. Here, the question of whether or not nature has intrinsic value is of great interest to everyone. In environmental ethics, the search for intrinsic value in nature is important because the act of ascribing intrinsic value to, or as some would argue, discovering intrinsic value in, nature is fundamental to according moral status to aspects of nature or to nature as a whole (Afeissa 2008, 531). For many environmental philosophers to hold an environmental ethic is to maintain that non-human nature has intrinsic value in one sense or another. A popular approach in environmental ethics today sets out to accomplish two things. First, it must be proven that natural entities possess intrinsic value of particular degrees based on reasonable criteria. Second, moral obligations and responsibility are accorded to human beings in how they ought to treat nature in view of the existence of such intrinsic value (529).

The question of whether Buddhism recognizes intrinsic value in nature has been asked and answered in various ways by scholars such as Lambert Schmithausen, Ian Harris, and John J. Holder.

However, expending energy on this matter may prove to be futile in view of Buddhist doctrines, and the effort to employ Buddhism as a resource to advance environmentalism may be better served by looking into other avenues within the tradition itself.

When one speaks of something having intrinsic value, one presupposes the existence of a container or holder of value. This holder of value, whether conscious or unconscious, sentient or insentient, is called a self or the essence of a thing. While in Western philosophy, the notion of a substantiated entity is normative, applying the same categories to Eastern philosophy, in particular Buddhism, becomes problematic. Buddhism's doctrine of not-self is precisely what makes the entire discussion on whether nature has or does not have intrinsic value futile because this doctrine negates any idea of a fixed, static entity, in effect, any holder of value. The doctrine of not-self, moreover, makes it not possible to speak of whether the value in nature is positive or negative because no conclusive stance is taken on this matter either.

Buddhism's threefold doctrine of *aniccā-dukkha-anattā* known as the Three Marks of Existence together deny the concept of self (*attā*). *Aniccā* or impermanence serves as the first characteristic from which the other two characteristics are derived. It asserts that everything is in a state of flux, and the impression that things are permanent is simply an illusion (Hawkins 1999, 42). *Dukkha*, translated as mental or physical pain or suffering, constitutes the second mark of existence and is directly related to the first. The Buddha taught that all impermanent things are one way or another unsatisfactory and placing one's trust and dependence on impermanent things is doomed to failure. Suffering, therefore, represents the unsatisfactoriness that comes from the dislocations in one's life when one undergoes the trauma of birth and fear of death, the experience of sickness and old age, the discomfort in being tied to what one dislikes and separated from what one loves. *Dukkha* is not limited to painful experiences but includes even pleasurable experiences because even such experiences are impermanent and thus liable to cause suffering (Nyanatiloka 1997, 110).

While *aniccā* and *dukkha* are intimately connected with the Buddhist negation of self, it is in the third mark of existence that this negation is directly stated, the doctrine of *anattā*. This unique invention central to Buddhist teaching declares that there is no self-existing real ego-entity, soul or any other permanent substance either within the bodily and mental phenomena of existence or outside of them. An accurate understanding of Buddhism rests on the understanding that reality is comprised of mere a continually self-consum-

ing process of arising and passing bodily and mental phenomena, and that there is no separate ego-entity within or without this process. In Buddhism, life is but a composite of the five aggregates (*khandha*) divided into two parts (mental and physical). The four aggregates of feeling, perception, dispositions and consciousness comprise the mental part while the *rūpa* is the physical part of the individual. The Buddha teaches that all these aggregates are characterized by impermanence, suffering, and changeableness. Human existence as we observe it is comprised merely of processes of the mental and physical phenomena which have been going on since time immemorial and will continue for unthinkably long periods of time. The fact that these five aggregates are present and “co-operate” in these processes does not mean a presence of any self-dependent real ego-entity or personality (id., 160). Every configuration of aggregates is a momentary force or entity separate from the next.

The five aggregates, the Buddha teaches, are not under control of anybody. It is improper to consider these *khandhas* as “this is mine” or “this is I” or “this is my self” (Varanasi 1999, 14). Thus, questions such as “Who is the cause of suffering?”, “Who suffers?”, “Who is the owner of this body?” are all considered to be improper questions. The only question that can be asked is, “Which cause is responsible for that result?” The theory of Dependent Origination posits that all things exist in a continuum characterized by an unceasing process of growth and decline as a result of various determinants. This ever changing and continuing process indicates that things cannot have an intrinsic entity. Phra Prayudh Payutto asserts, “The continuum of cause and effect which enables all things to exist as they do can only operate because such things are transient, ephemeral, constantly arising and ceasing and having no intrinsic entity of their own” (Payutto 1994, 15). If we take Buddhist teaching to its ultimate conclusion, then when it comes to nature and human beings, given enough time, all the entities in the universe, and in particular human beings, will change and eventually cease to be because all things are ultimately impermanent. Therefore, Buddhism does not come to any conclusion at all about the value of nature, whether positive or negative. Buddhism sets its sight on the ultimate goal of liberation, in which a thing ceases to be.

At first, it seems that the Buddhist negation of intrinsic entities and the intrinsic value of these entities presents a pessimistic basic position for an environmental spirituality. How can we enter into a relationship with nature if we do not even see value in nature, or even value in ourselves? How can we try to promote well-being in nature and in ourselves if the ultimate value lies not in existence in

this world but in *nibbāna*? These questions and concerns are legitimate. However, this Buddhist outlook does not spell an end for a Buddhist environmental spirituality. On the contrary, I think it contributes to it in a very profound way.

Reflecting on the Buddhist insistence on not-self and the denial of intrinsic value in mundane entities, human or otherwise, helps us to re-orientate our attention and energy away from the legalistic debate regarding what entities possess what rights and what duties ought to be assigned to human beings, to envisioning a more harmonious relationship characterized by mutual service and gratitude. Oftentimes, we are so preoccupied with “winning” the best for ourselves while justifying why the minimum of rights and privileges ought to be accorded to others. This reflects a mentality where selfish needs and desires trump the needs of others. It is a source of ongoing conflict in all the various dimensions of human society.

The Buddhist worldview with its negation of intrinsic self and its nullification of the intrinsic-instrumental value debate opens up for us a different and creative way of perceiving ourselves as well as perceiving others. This is the source of inspiration that helps us to formulate a model of a human-nature relationship characterized by “mutual service and gratitude on the journey towards liberation.” This model, though it does not displace humanity from our rightful place in the universe, helps us to be less obsessed with ourselves and more conscious of the presence of others. It also helps us to see that our journey in *samsāra* is far from a solitary sojourn, but one alongside a great number of companions and friends.

The Buddhist rejection of ascribing intrinsic value to impermanent entities has a number of interesting implications on the human-nature relationship. Here it is important to affirm that by no means the negation of intrinsic value in natural entities is to be seen as degrading or denying human worthiness. It is also not advocating some sort of ontological equality between human beings and nature as some Buddhist environmental enthusiasts have attempted to claim.⁹ It is quite clear in Theravada Buddhism that the state of life as human beings, by virtue of having more joy and less suffering than animals as well as the ability to achieve spiritual progress and emancipation, is a much more favored one. In the Buddhist conception, however, all beings have their merit in so far as they either have the po-

⁹ An example of this perspective is stated by Ronald Y. Nakasone who claims that the doctrine of Dependent Origination “validates the importance of all beings in equal measure” (Nakasone, 2009, 49).

tential to attain emancipation or contribute to another's emancipation.

The non-recognition of intrinsic value is a strong exhortation to not delude oneself into thinking that one must be attached to an intrinsically valuable ego-self and lose sight of the ultimate good of liberation from *sāmsāric* life. By not focusing on the claims of intrinsic value, we are less likely to make demands in order to satisfy our selfish desires. Rather, we become transformed from being people who demand things to build up our ego-self to being those who put ourselves at the service of others. The Buddhist conception of interpersonal relationship as well as human-nature relationship, by insisting that we not be obsessed with our ego-self and its worth, opens up for us the possibility of seeing human beings and nature in a reciprocal and cooperative relationship in order to help one another relieve their suffering and help each other make progress in awareness and state of life.

The *Jātaka* tale of the hungry tigress illustrates very poignantly how we ought to put ourselves at the service of the other, not just for their sake but ultimately for our own sake as well. In this story, a Bodhisatta witnessed a hungry tigress about to eat her own cubs out of hunger. Moved by compassion, he offered his own life to save both mother and cub.¹⁰ This story dramatically presents us with a way of understanding ourselves in relationship to others as a relationship of placing ourselves at the service of another. However, genuine service on behalf of the other never implies any personal gain whatsoever. The Bodhisatta's action was not only kammically favorable for himself, it also prevented the tiger from carrying out a kammically unfavorable act by killing its own cub. Indeed, the Suttas in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* teach that there are four types of people: those who act on behalf of themselves but not others, those who act on behalf of others but not themselves, those who act neither on behalf of themselves nor of others, and those who act both on behalf of themselves and on behalf of others. Of these four, the last type of person is considered to be "the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest of these four" (A.IV.95).

Another tale entitled *Suvannamiga Jātaka* beautifully illustrates a relationship characterized by mutual service between human and nature that can take place. In this story, a golden stag becomes trapped in the snare of a hunter. Despite his strong efforts and the encouragement of his wife, he could not free himself. His devoted wife

¹⁰ Vyaghri Jataka, *Jatakamala*, No. 1. This tale is found online at this website: <http://ignca.nic.in/jatak025.htm>.

decides to rescue her husband by confronting the hunter when he comes to collect his catch. She offers her own life in place of her husband's life. Stunned by this tremendous act of self-sacrifice, the hunter decides to free both of them. In thankfulness for the hunter's change of heart, the stags later present the hunter with a jewel they had found in their feeding ground and implore the hunter to abstain from all killing, to establish a household, and to become involved with good works (J. 359; Chapple 1997, 135).

This story suggests the possibility of human beings and nature benefitting each other in how each is able to act in their respective capacity on behalf of self and others. The service that human beings and nature perform for one another, however, does not always have to be as dramatic as shown in the tale above. One of the services that nature does is to facilitate the human activity of meditation on the *Dhamma*. David J. Kalupahana points out that natural settings not only create fewer distractions when it comes to sense pleasures, but also "provide a natural experiential ground for realizing impermanence and dependent arising, that is, the nature of the world" (2009, 5). Indeed, the Buddha encouraged his monks to increase their virtue by resorting to "the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw" (M.I.181; I.346; I.441; III.4; III.116). We can see then that the service that human and nature do for one another is not unidirectional, but mutual and symbiotic.

The Buddhist way of valuing which does not conceive of intrinsic values in natural entities also has other benefits for an environmental spirituality. Certainly, it forswears the controversies of the intrinsic-instrumental value dichotomy that causes much debate and headache for secular environmental ethicists. In these systems, there is much disagreement regarding who or what has or does not have intrinsic value, and if it possesses intrinsic value, in what degree. And there is also controversy as to whether the intrinsic value in various entities objectively exists or has to be conferred upon them by a conscious valuer. Buddhism, suggests Phra Prayudh Payutto, introduces a way for us to value each other in a way that does not start with the question of what I can get from a particular person or thing. This kind of attitude is self-centered and risks leading down the path of exploitation of the other. Moreover, the moment that one feels that one cannot get any more from the other, one ceases to value the other. On the other hand, the way to value in which we realize and appreciate all that the other has given us, leads us to true gratitude for the gifts that we have received. This then makes the way for goodwill towards the other and the desire to protect the other from any

harm that may come their way (2010, 20). The *Khuddaka Nikāya* states: “A person who sits or sleeps in the shade of a tree should not cut off a tree branch. One who injures such a friend is evil.”

The Vertical Dimension: Human Self-Cultivation and Environmental Well-being

The models of human-nature relationship presented above hold important implications for human behavior towards nature. However, describing them alone far from ensures that human beings will actually live out these relationships in such ways as to bring about benefit to themselves as well as to the natural environment. In order to develop a practical environmental spirituality, Buddhism must also have the tools to help human beings achieve the realization of these ideals. It is not enough to describe them and hope that somehow human beings will automatically become enlightened and act accordingly. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the impetus that Buddhism provides to help human beings not only intellectually understand the various ways in which we ought to enter into a relationship with nature but have the willingness and the motivation to achieve them in our lives. The twofold Buddhist pedagogy aimed at forming a Buddhist environmental spirituality is completed by this vertical dimension, without which it remains half-baked and lies at the level of mere lip-service.

In the past, many writers attempted to advocate Buddhist environmentalism by emphasizing the relational aspect between human beings and nature, especially the concept of interdependence (an interpretation of the theory of Dependent Origination as radical interdependence in which *everything* is interconnected with *everything else*). The one-dimensional focus on the relational aspect of Buddhist spirituality has been criticized as not enough reason for one to behave in an environmentally friendly manner. One such critic is Simon P. James who asserts:

Consider a proponent of materialism, someone (let us suppose) who subscribes to the notion that everything, she included, is made of matter. Such an individual clearly believes that we are one with nature (for her, the material universe), but there is no good reason to think that she must be moved by a positive moral regard for the natural world. She might be. But she might be a terrible scourge of the environment (2007, 451).

Peter Singer lamented about the discordance between understanding and actual behavior when it comes to vegetarianism. Singer remarks:

Many people are willing to admit that the case for vegetarianism is strong. Too often, though, there is a gap between intellectual conviction and the action needed to break a lifetime habit. There is no way in which books can bridge this gap; ultimately it is up to each one of us to put our convictions into practice (1995, 177).

The single-minded focus on the relational dimension of Buddhism presents the same risk of providing a vision without offering tools and motivation for praxis. Buddhist environmental spirituality has to point out a path by means of which a wholesome human-nature relationship can be accomplished. Describing the ideal human-nature relationship alone is merely specifying the results without saying how one actually manages to get there.

On the surface, it may sound intuitive enough. Life is all about having a vision and then figuring out how to realize that vision in an effective way. Thus the “dream” always goes hand in hand with the nitty-gritty hard work and effort to achieve what we aspire for. Unfortunately, when it comes to Buddhist environmentalism, there is sometimes a tendency to merely speak of the dream but fail to mention what is needed for its realization. Sometimes, the ingredients needed to achieve the dream are even rejected altogether as in the case of Joana Macy, who claims that virtue and moral exhortation are not necessary in a universe where human beings and nature are parts of the same self (2007, 157).

This tendency is especially prominent in Western Buddhists. Alan Sponberg, himself a Buddhist, says that there is resistance on the part of Western Buddhists towards ideas that emphasize personal development as this automatically leads to notions of hierarchy and privilege. Sponberg attributes this attitude by Western Buddhists to their experience with Western dualism, which has resulted in dispositions and behaviors by human beings towards nature that are dominating and exploitative. Consequently, they try to avoid anything that may be associated with such a mentality (1997b, 361). In order to distinguish Buddhism from Western cultural thoughts and practices, Western Buddhists try to “imagine the solution of our problems in a ‘Buddhism’ free of any vertical or hierarchical structure” (361).

This, however, is quite unfortunate, for without cultivation and transformation of consciousness, Buddhism itself would not exist. After all, the purpose of every devout Buddhist is to practice self-

cultivation in order to get rid of unwholesome tendencies in himself, to purify the activities of his body and mind, and to achieve transformation of consciousness. Buddhahood, by its very definition, is the state of perfect enlightenment, in which the mind is awakened to reality and has emerged from all defilements. The historical Buddha or the “Awakened One” became the first to share his experience of enlightenment with others and teach others how to cultivate themselves in order to achieve the same experience. Thus, no matter how much one may dislike Western dualism, one cannot deny Buddhism one of its essential and fundamental aspects. It is a mistake to think that any and all forms of cultivation of consciousness will turn practitioners into “spiritual Darwinists” ready to dominate and subjugate nature according to their own whims.

Self-cultivation thus is not only fundamental to Buddhist spirituality, but also necessary in any Buddhist environmental spirituality. Rejection of cultivation is in fact rejection of the path needed to take us to the point where human beings understand ourselves, understand the nature of our relationship with the natural environment, and are equipped with the virtuous qualities to act in congruence with this understanding. Despite the presence of negative attitudes toward the developmental dimension in some Buddhist circles, we hope that this difficulty in realizing the necessity of cultivation in a Buddhist environmental spirituality is only confined to Western Buddhists who carry the psychological baggage from their own social contexts rather than something that Buddhists in other parts of the world have to deal with.

1. Theravada Buddhism Soteriology and Self-Cultivation

It is of little controversy that soteriology occupies a central position in Buddhism, as it does in many other major world religions. Soteriology is fundamentally the study of salvation in a particular religious system. Steven Collins takes soteriology as an “attempt to find a reflective, rationalized ordering of life, and death, as a conceptual and imaginative whole, and to prescribe some means of definitively... escaping suffering and death, and achieving a ‘final’ happiness” (1998, 22). Buddhism, as a soteriology, is concerned with helping human beings attain emancipation and freedom from the experience of suffering through self-cultivation and transformation. The ultimate state of liberation is the attainment of *nibbāna*, in which one is completely liberated from the wheel of rebirth and any suffering or cravings associated with mundane existence.

Even though theoretically, any human being has the potential to achieve liberation, the journey towards *nibbāna* is a long one, taking millions of lives. As Collins observes, even though everyone has access to this state of emancipation through his personal efforts, its achievement requires leading a life of permanent celibacy. In this respect, “it is not, in principle as well as in practice, for everyone—that is, not everyone all at once” (34). Thus, even though salvation is accessible to all, unlike Christians and Muslims who have only one life to achieve this goal, Buddhists can do so gradually over many lives. Because of this reality, oftentimes, individuals do not make *nibbāna* the immediate goal for their present life. *Nibbāna* is the work of the monks, and just a select few at that. The vast majority of the people seem to be content if they are reborn in a better situation than the one in which they presently find themselves. A better state of life may be characterized by a rebirth with a higher social status in this world with its many stratified levels. It would be safe to surmise that the vast majority would be extremely happy to find themselves reborn in any of the numerous heavenly realms.

The diversity of felicity mentioned here does not imply that there is a lack of seriousness of the Buddhist faithful in trying to achieve total liberation from suffering. Buddhist soteriological aims must be viewed in the context of multiple lifetimes, indeed countless ones. Thus, if one is not actively working to achieve liberation at the moment, it does not mean that one is not exerting any effort whatsoever towards this goal. In Theravada Buddhism, this aspiration to achieve liberation not in one lifetime but over multiple lifetimes has been called the gradual path. Even though Buddhism began as a religion aimed at those who wished to renounce worldly life, it eventually would have to deal with those who lived in society and their religious needs (Bond 1993, 32).

Post-canonical texts such as the *Netti*, the *Petakopadesa*, and later on the *Visuddhimagga* attempted to explain the *Dhamma* in relation to the renunciators as well as to those who wished to remain in the world, thus developing the notion of a gradual path to *nibbāna* which became the hallmark of Theravada Buddhism (29). As we can see, while Buddhist soteriology has emancipation from rebirth as the ultimate goal, this liberation does not have to be immediate, or even over a few lifetimes, but can be over a span of countless ones. What is significant here is that the common denominator in the diversity of felicity is the aspiration for advancement in state of life, may it be on earth, in one of the heavenly realms, or *nibbāna* itself. This aspiration can only be realized by various levels of training for transformation of consciousness that would positively affect one’s actions in

this life and the next. It is this training that is of interest to us as the necessary ingredient that complements the relational aspect of our Buddhist environmental spirituality.

For those who aspire to a transformed life, the prescription is none other than the Noble Eightfold Path which combines moral virtues (*sīla*) with development of concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom or insight (*pañña*). In the *Nidāna Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta*, the Buddha extolled the Noble Eightfold Path as the “ancient road travelled by the Perfectly Enlightened Ones of the past” which leads to cessation of aging and death (S.II.12). It leads to “suffering’s appeasement” (S.II.15), cessation of form, feeling, perception, consciousness, clinging (S.III.22), and cessation of *kamma* (S.IV.35). It is the raft that takes one to “the further shore, which is safe and free from danger” (S.IV.35). Of course, this further shore is none other than *nibbāna* itself.

The ultimate goal of the training is to attain wisdom in order to directly oppose ignorance which serves as the cause for human suffering. However, in the process of training to achieve wisdom in order to perceive things “as they really are,” the path first evolves through the training of the moral discipline, which serves as the foundation for training of concentration, which subsequently serves as the foundation for training of higher wisdom.

We can see from the Noble Eightfold Path that in order to achieve liberation, one has to cultivate oneself in all aspects of virtues—moral and intellectual. One cannot develop oneself in a particular aspect without also developing in the other dimensions as well. In the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Buddha is found to harshly criticize teachings that do not contain this Eightfold Path, meaning teachings that lack either the moral or the intellectual dimension of the path, because they cannot achieve the quality of perfection that the Eightfold Path provides (D.II.151). When one completes the path, one is well cultivated not only in moral discipline, but also concentration and wisdom—the three aspects are infused and ever present and active in the life of the individual.

Personal transformation is an essential aspect of Buddhist spirituality because it is only through this transformation that one progresses in the state of life, whether being reborn in a more fortunate social position, or being reborn as a god in the heavenly paradise, or even reaching spiritual perfection and attaining *nibbāna*. This desire for emancipation manifested in the continuous and painstaking work of self-cultivation brings one closer to the goal that one sets for oneself. What I would like to propose is that the cultivation of wholesome and healthy human-nature relationships takes place within the pro-

gram of self-cultivation for the sake of achieving spiritual progress towards complete emancipation, and also part and parcel of this effort.

First, cultivating a harmonious human-nature relationship is seen as one of the dynamics taking place within the program of self-cultivation in order to achieve a favorable rebirth or liberation. As I have asserted previously, cessation of suffering (*nibbāna*) serves as the vision of the Buddhist life goal, while the Noble Eightfold Path serves as the means for how to approach and finally achieve this vision. The Four Noble Truths without the Noble Eightfold Path are just idle daydreaming. The threefold training is the means for achieving spiritual progress on both a short-term as well as a long-term basis.

In our environmental spirituality, the harmonious and wholesome relationship with nature serves as the goal which we aim to achieve. Achieving this goal likewise requires us to undergo training that increases our degree of morality, concentration, and wisdom—the necessary ingredients for attaining and maintaining a healthy human-nature relationship. It is also here that we arrive at the second point in our claim: developing a harmonious human-nature relationship is part and parcel of the process of self-cultivation for the sake of personal liberation. In other words, a healthy human-nature relationship is the happy result of the effort of comprehensive and conscientious training aimed at personal liberation. The reason for this is that the wisdom and the virtues gained by the person who undergoes training are not only applicable to his relationship with other human beings but also with nature. Self-transformation is manifested clearly through his relationships with the people and things around him.

2. Human-Nature Relationship Nourished by Virtues

Self-transformation is not just an internal quality, but must also be exhibited in external aspects of one's relational and ethical life. Thus, how one enters into the relationship with nature becomes evidence of one's increased consciousness and virtues. These fruits of self-cultivation go toward building and nourishing relationships that are meaningful to one's life. Buddhist virtues such as *loving kindness*, *compassion*, and *gentleness* demonstrate profound awareness of the experience of suffering in oneself and in other beings. Awareness of the experience of suffering in others is transformed into solidarity with those who suffer when we possess a spirituality that enables us to act ethically to others with compassion, loving kindness, and gentleness. These virtues characterize and reinforce the relationship of

solidarity because solidarity cannot be built on pity and condescension.

These Buddhist virtues when exhibited towards nature testify to a spirituality in which our hearts are open to the experience taking place in nature and can be moved by the experience of suffering before us. Of course, intellectual knowledge of our own suffering and the suffering of others alone does not automatically lead us to act with virtues of solidarity. For some of us, the experience of suffering makes us into hardened and closed-off individuals. Our lives and actions are filled with bitterness and anguish. The sense of solidarity only comes about when we undergo the self-cultivation process that enables us to journey towards greater happiness and to act with goodwill towards all who are suffering. In our relationship with nature, certainly the more we train ourselves in these virtues and demonstrate them outwardly through concrete actions, the more this relationship of solidarity will be enhanced and reinforced.

A harmonious human-nature relationship must also be characterized by responsibility and accountability, particularly on the part of human beings who possess the mental capability that facilitates spiritual and intellectual development. The Buddhist natural law of Dependent Origination tells us that causality is active in the universe, and everything that comes about does so due to certain causes and conditions. This realization warns us that our actions not only have effects on other people but also on nature. A relationship of responsibility and accountability is supported by the human virtues of *moderation* and *contentment*. Moderation and contentment serve as the antidote for the greed that is detrimental to one's quest for liberation. There is a plethora of texts in the Buddhist canon that exhorts the individual to exercise self-discipline and restraint in behavior, resisting temptation and indulgence in the senses. Moderation is a virtue when it goes hand in hand with contentment (*Santutthi*). In the *Suttas*, time and time again the Buddha reminded the monks to be content with simple things and avoid desire of many things. Buddhism reminds us that the feeling of discontentment with the things that we already possess is a sign that we will most likely feel the same towards other things that we desire but have yet to possess.

Exercising moderation and having contentment with respect to the environment is ultimately a reflection of a person's sense of responsibility towards nature. It reflects our awareness of the limited natural resources available for human use. It also reflects our understanding that wanting and owning more means placing unnecessary strain on nature. And it reflects our understanding that selfish behavior becomes the condition that gives rise to harmful events taking

place in the world in accordance with the teaching of Dependent Origination. Thus, any spirituality that advocates simple living and contentment rather than constant striving for material possessions clearly reflects a sense of responsibility and is naturally beneficial towards environmental well-being. With the state of the natural environment as it is, there is a great need at this time for simplicity and contentment on the part of human society. As Donald Swearer remarks, “One chooses less so that all may flourish more” (1998, 93).

In reflecting on the model of human-nature relationship as that of mutual service and gratitude, we cannot miss the virtue of *generosity* (*cāga*) as a necessary element in making this relationship a reality. Generosity is the antidote for greed and attachment and is considered to be an essential quality of a superior person (*sappurisa*), alongside other important qualities of faith, morality, learning and wisdom (Bodhi, 1995). For Bhikkhu Bodhi, generosity as a spiritual quality is important because “the goal of the path is the destruction of greed, hate and delusion, and the cultivation of generosity directly debilitates greed and hate, while facilitating that pliancy of mind that allows for the eradication of delusion” (1995). True generosity is the underlying impetus for the practice of *dāna parami*, the perfection of giving that brings about wholesome *kamma* essential to the path of enlightenment (Jootla, 1995). Indeed, giving is an admirable act and Buddhism focuses a great deal on giving. However, the kind of giving that Buddhism is interested in is not just any act of giving, but those acts of giving that are motivated by the genuine internal disposition of generosity.

The virtue of generosity strengthens the relationship of mutual service because it responds to nature’s generosity towards human beings with our own mode of generosity. Human generosity reflects our appreciation of the Buddhist doctrine of *kataññukatavedi* in which one is conscious of the favor that one receives and is minded to reciprocate such favor. We can easily see how nature is of tremendous service to human beings, not only providing physical sustenance but also facilitating spiritual growth. There is no question that without nature, human beings cannot survive. Without the oxygen produced by plants, human beings would not be able to sustain life. The processes taking place in nature are also extremely conducive to the spiritual progress of human beings when they meditate and reflect on them. The service that nature offers to human beings is constant and unceasing. The relationship of mutual service, by the very phrase, implies a reciprocal relationship and human beings must also put themselves at the service of nature. True service requires giving, and

giving not just in a haphazard manner, but giving with a joyous and peaceful heart, giving out of true generosity.

Conclusion

As I have stated in the introduction, this study attempts to approach Theravada Buddhist environmentalism from a spirituality rather than an ethical perspective. While Buddhist environmental ethics is a very popular topic of research and discussion, there are not many works that emphasize the aspect of spirituality, at least not explicitly. I think it is important to highlight Buddhist spirituality for addressing the environmental crisis. Ultimately, ethical actions or unethical actions that are taken on behalf of or against nature are outward manifestations of an internal spiritual reality. Thus, the environmental crisis is not just a social crisis but at its root a spiritual crisis. Rectifying this situation cannot be just about coming up with scientific solutions or instituting legal measures that safeguard against environmental destruction. Rather it involves self-cultivation and spiritual transformation that translate into ethical actions on behalf of the natural environment.

The quality of our inner spirituality is most clearly manifested in our relational life—our interactions and dealings with others around us. What needs to be affirmed is that the natural environment can appropriately constitute one of the relationships in our life that we can either nourish or harm by the kind of actions that we choose to take. Unfortunately, in our life, we give great priority to our human relationships, especially with members of our immediate family, kinship or ethnic group, but completely ignore or are unaware of our relationship with nature. Thus, we do not invest any effort into improving this relationship for the better. The Theravada Buddhist worldview suggests that we must expand our circle of relationships beyond the limit of humanity to include other entities in the world.

My presentation on Theravada Buddhist environmental spirituality also suggests that Buddhism is far from an “escapist” spirituality. The aim for emancipation from mundane existence does not prevent us from caring for others in this world. On the contrary, compassion, loving kindness, and a host of other Buddhist virtues that demonstrate care for others are precisely the means that help us to achieve this ultimate goal. In this manner, Buddhist aspirations are not much different from other religions, say Catholicism. Catholic theology asserts that caring for the things and people in this very world, especially the poor and the marginalized, is indeed integral to achieving eternal salvation (Matthew 25). In non-theistic Theravada Bud-

dhism, it may even be argued that personal human action holds even more significance for one's salvation than in the theistic traditions. Buddhism presents us with an ultimate vision of no more suffering and permanent happiness in *nibbāna*.

Buddhism also teaches us to not be attached to things in this world, indeed not attached to even ourselves. But Buddhism does not advise us to be uncaring towards the things that belong to mundane existence. To be detached and to be uncaring should not be understood to be the same thing. Buddhist detachment does not in any way prevent us from exercising relationally positive actions towards other people and things. Thus, there is no reason to charge Buddhists who are engaged in social issues related to the environment or to the poor as being inauthentic in their Buddhist belief. It is a paradox in Buddhism, and perhaps in many religious systems, that only in treating those people and things immediately around us with love and care are we able to achieve the kind of bliss that transcends mundane and impermanent pleasures that leave us wanting more.

Abbreviations for Buddhist Scriptural Texts

A	Aṅguttara
D	Dīgha Nikāya
Dp	Dhammapada
J	Jātaka
M	Majjhima Nikāya
S	Samyutta Nikāya
V	Vinaya

References

- Afeissa, Hicham-Stéphane
 2008 Intrinsic and Instrumental Value, in: J. Baird Callicott and Robert Fodeman (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 528-531.
- Bhikkhu Bodhi
 1994 A Buddhist Response to Contemporary Dilemmas of Human Existence. Retrieved from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/response.html> on 10 May 2014.
- 1995 Introduction, in: Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed.), *Dāna: The Practice of Giving*. Retrieved from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel367.html> on 10 March 2015.
- 1996 Message for a Globalized World. Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter cover essay #34. Retrieved from

- http://www.vipassana.com/resources/bodhi/globalized_world.php on 2 September 2014.
- 1998 The Five Spiritual Faculties. Retrieved from http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_22.html on 15 May 2015.
- 2006 The Buddha and His Dhamma. Retrieved from <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel433.html> on 15 May 2015.
- Bond, George D.
1993 The Gradual Path as a Hermeneutical Approach to the *Dhamma*, in: Donald S. Lopez (ed.), *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, Delhi: Mortilal Banarsidass Pub., 29-46.
- Buddhadasa Bhikkhu
1978 Patikasamupadda: Practical Dependent Origination. Retrieved from http://www.dhammadata.com/Books6/Bhikkhu_Buddhadasa_Paticcasamuppada.htm on 8 October 2015.
1987 A Notion of Buddhist Ecology. Retrieved from http://www.thaibuddhism.net/Bud_Ecology.htm on 2 August 2014.
1997 The Natural Cure for Spiritual Disease: a Guide into Buddhist Science. Retrieved from <http://www.suanmokkh.org/archive/arts/ret/natcure1a.htm> on 15 May 2015.
- Cafaro, Philip
2005 Gluttony, Arrogance, Greed, and Apathy: an Exploration of Environmental Vice, in: Ronald Sandler and Philip Cafaro (eds.), *Environmental Virtue Ethics*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 135-158.
- Chapple, Christopher K.
1997 Animals and the Environment in the Buddhist Birth Stories, in: Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (eds.), *Buddhism and Ecology*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 131-148.
- Collins, Steven
1998 *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cooper, David E./James, Simon P.
2005 *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, Aldershot, England: Ashgate Pub. Co.
- Hawkins, Bradley K.
1999 *Buddhism*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Holder, John J.
2007 A Suffering (but Not Irreparable) Nature: Environmental Ethics from the Perspective of Early Buddhism: *Contemporary Buddhism*, Vol. 8(2), 113-130.
- Ives, Christopher
2013 Resources for Buddhist Environmental Ethics: *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 20, 541-571.

- James, Simon P.
2007 Against Holism: Rethinking Buddhist Environmental Ethics: *Environmental Values*, Vol.16(4), 447-461.
- Jootla, Susan E.
1995 The Practice of Giving, in: Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed.), *Dāna: The Practice of Giving*. Retrieved from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel367.html> on 10 March 2015.
- Kalupahana, David J.
2009 Buddhist Approach to the Environmental Problem, in: Padmasiri de Silva (ed.), *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis. The International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebration*, 4-6 May 2009, 1-10.
- Lalji 'Shravak'
1999 Buddha's Rejection of the Brahmanical Notion of Atman: *Communication & Cognition*, Vol. 32(1-2), 9-20.
- Macy, Joanna
2007 *World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal*, revised edition, Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Nakasone, Ronald Y.
2009 The Relative Absolute or the Virtues of a Multi-Centered Universe, in: Padmasiri de Silva (ed.), *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis. The International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebration*, 4-6 May 2009, 39-51.
- Nyanatiloka
1997 *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Payutto, Phra Prayudh
1994 *Dependent Origination: The Buddhist Law of Conditionality*, Bangkok, Thailand: Buddhadhamma Foundation.
2010 *Thai People and Forest* (คนไทยกับป่า). Bangkok: Karom-wichakan.
- Sahni, Pragati
2007 *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*, New York: Routledge.
- Singer, Peter
1995² *Animal Liberation*, London: Pimlico.
- Spohn, William C.
1997 Spirituality and Ethics: Exploring the Connections: *Theological Studies*, Vol. 58, 109-123.
- Sponberg, Alan
1997a The Buddhist Conception of the Ecological Self: *Western Buddhist Review*, Vol. 2. <http://www.westernbuddhistre->

- view.com/ vol2/ecological_self.html. Retrieved on 1 December 2014.
- 1997b Green Buddhism and the Hierarchy of Compassion, in: Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (eds.), *Buddhism and Ecology*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 351-376.
- Swearer, Ronald K.
- 1997 The Hermeneutics of Buddhist Ecology in Contemporary Thailand: Buddhadasa and Dhammapitaka, in: Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (eds.), *Buddhism and Ecology*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 21-44.
- 1998 Buddhist Virtue, Voluntary Poverty, and Extensive Benevolence: *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 26(1), 71-103.
- Zinnbauer, B. J. et al.
- 1997 Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 36(4), 549-564.

Pali Canon Texts

- Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.)
- 2003² *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- 2012 *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Complete Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikaya*, annotated edition, Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Bhikkhu Nanamoli (trans.)
- 1995 *The Middle Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Walshe, Maurice (trans.)
- 1995² *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikāya*, Boston: Wisdom Publications.

ABSTRACTS

Der Buddhismus wird oft als eine Religion oder Weltanschauung angesehen, die wichtige ethische Grundlagen für einen positiven Zugang zur Ökologie anbietet. Der Autor erklärt einige Grundüberzeugungen des Theravada-Buddhismus im Hinblick auf das Selbstverständnis des Menschen und seine Beziehungen zu anderen Seinsebenen und zur Natur. Er stellt die buddhistische Analyse der aktuellen Umweltkrise vor und zeigt die Handlungsmotivation sowie die Werkzeuge, um eine andere Haltung herzustellen. Dabei zeigt er, dass man die horizontale Dimension der Beziehungen zu anderen Menschen, Tieren und zur Natur allgemein nicht von einer vertikalen Dimension trennen kann. Damit behandelt er den Theravada-Buddhismus in seiner spirituellen Sichtweise, über das Ethische hinaus. So erweist sich der

Buddhismus mit Optionen für menschliches Handeln hier und heute auch dann, wenn das endgültige Glück des *Nirvana* eine letztgültige Vision bleibt, die allerdings in den heutigen Anforderungen für persönliche und gesellschaftliche Änderungen und fürsorgende Beziehungen bereits Gestalt annimmt.

Al budismo frecuentemente se le entiende como una religión o ideología que ofrece una importante fundamentación para un acercamiento positivo a la ecología. El autor explica algunas de las convicciones fundamentales del budismo theravada en lo que se refiere a la comprensión de la persona humana y sus relaciones con otros niveles del ser y con la naturaleza. Presenta el análisis budista de la actual crisis ecológica en nuestro mundo al igual que las motivaciones para la acción y las herramientas para permitir un cambio en la actitud humana. En este campo muestra que no se puede separar la dimensión horizontal de las relaciones con otros humanos, con los animales y la naturaleza en general, de la dimensión vertical. De esta manera presenta al budismo theravada en una perspectiva espiritual, más allá de lo ético. Esto muestra al budismo con sus opciones para la acción humana aquí y ahora aún cuando la felicidad definitiva del *nirvana* quede como una visión última, pero que se concretiza ya ahora en las exigencias actuales por un cambio personal y social y por relaciones cuidadas con los otros y el mundo.

On pense souvent que le bouddhisme est une religion ou conception du monde qui offre une base éthique importante pour une approche positive de l'écologie. L'auteur explique quelques convictions fondamentales du bouddhisme theravada en ce qui concerne l'auto-compréhension de la personne humaine et ses relations aux autres niveaux de l'être et à la nature. Il présente l'analyse bouddhiste de la crise actuelle de l'environnement dans notre monde ainsi que sa motivation pour l'action et les outils pour amener à une autre attitude. Il montre que la dimension de relation aux autres êtres humains, aux animaux et à la nature en général ne peut être séparée d'une dimension verticale. Il traite ainsi le bouddhisme theravada dans une perspective spirituelle, allant au-delà de la perspective éthique. Cette présentation du bouddhisme le montre comme orienté vers l'action humaine ici et maintenant, même si la joie permanente ou nirvana reste une vision ultime qui cependant prend forme dans l'actuel recherche de changement personnel et social et dans des relations attentionnées.