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Buddhist Soteriological Aims and Their Contribution to Environmental Well-Being[1]

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Abstract

In the face of modern day environmental problems, various religious systems are turned to for inspiration to support environmental conservation. Buddhism is often employed as a resource since it is perceived as an environment-friendly religion that provides an alternative to strongly anthropocentric views and attitudes that perceive the value of nature in merely instrumental terms, and thus would justify wanton exploitation of natural resources to benefit the needs of human beings. The secular environmental ethic notion of intrinsic value in nature is often applied to Buddhism in which Buddhist textual sources are examined for evidence to support the assumption that if nature is seen to possess intrinsic value, or at least positive value, it follows that nature has rights that must be respected by human beings. This paper sets out to review the application of the intrinsic-value-in-nature concept to Theravada Buddhism, and argues that such a task is problematic in this case because Buddhism with its doctrine of not-self is incompatible with the project of ascribing intrinsic value to nature. Rather, in Buddhism, the ultimate value is

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liberation from *saṃsāric* life. This paper argues that the soteriological aims of Theravada Buddhism prescribe a lifestyle that steers away from greed, hatred and delusion which characterize an unwholesome life. As one goes about eliminating unwholesome states from one's life, one needs to develop various virtues that would contribute to spiritual progress and achievement of personal salvation. Many of the virtues aimed at achieving liberation from *saṃsāra* can be framed in context of environmental concerns to reflect their connection to environmental well-being. Thus, promoting environmental well-being can be seen as part and parcel of the overall Buddhist agenda to achieve spiritual progress, personal well-being, and ultimately, nirvanic bliss.

Introduction

In the age of increasing awareness of the escalating ecological destruction occurring in the world, religion continues to be a source of inspiration for discovering and retrieving valuable ideas to build a practical and cohesive environmental ethic. Undoubtedly, world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism are enthusiastically turned to for inspiration and directions, partially because it is believed, as Hans Küng pointed out, absoluteness and universality of ethical obligation finds its purpose and reason in religious belief. Unconditional obligation cannot be derived from abstract ideas of "humanity" if there is no religion to enforce them (53). The Thai monk professor Phra Dharmakosajarn affirms, "If we employ our lives correctly, environment problems could be solved through our religion teachings" (23). He also adds that if religious adherents make an effort to understand more deeply their religious heritage, it would positively affect their behavior towards living things and the environment (41). Many environmental advocates who believe that religions can serve as a beneficial resource hail Buddhism as an "environmentally friendly" religion, a claim that is not without ground. However, in regards to Theravada or early Buddhism, which is the predominant ambit in mainland Southeast Asia, one must outline an approach that is authentic to the nature of the religion rather than being imposed upon by notions from secular

environmentalism that may not cohere with essential Buddhist beliefs.

The Intrinsic Value Debate in Secular Environmental Ethics

Religious environmental ethics often take their cues from secular environmental ethics, especially in regards to the issue of value in nature, where the question of whether or not nature has intrinsic value is a bone of contention. It is thus important to briefly review what exactly is meant by intrinsic value. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines the word "intrinsic" as "belonging to the essential nature of a thing" while the word value is defined as "relative worth, utility, or importance". Taken together, "intrinsic value" can be said to be the value or the worth that belongs to the essential nature or constitution of a thing. Intrinsic value is distinguished from instrumental value in which something is valued by a particular subject as a means only. However, John O'Neill has pointed out that the term "intrinsic value" has been used in at least three different basic senses in various literatures (131-142). The first sense is that an object has intrinsic value when it is an end in itself. Arne Naess, the founder of *deep ecology* argues that "The well-being of non-human life on Earth has value in itself. This value is independent of any instrumental usefulness for limited human purposes" (quoted in O'Neill 131).

The second sense refers to the "intrinsic properties" belonging to a natural entity that is constitutive of its flourishing. Paul W. Taylor posits a "biocentric ethic" that all living individual organisms possess intrinsic value because they are teleological centers of life. Through their adaptive mechanisms and biological functions, they indicate themselves to have goals of living, flourishing, and propagating themselves. Organisms indicate themselves to be self-valuing, goal-seeking individuals independent of any human valuation of them. Thus by recognizing that non-human organisms have "inherent worth," it is sufficient to devise prescriptive or prohibitive norms that prevent human interference in the development and flourishing of these life forms (74-84).

The third sense is not so much an axiological claim as a metaethical position in that here intrinsic value is identified as an "objective value," meaning a natural entity is itself a source and *locu*s of value independent of human valuation. The epistemological stance here is taken against the subjectivist value theory which argues for a conscious valuer that confers value onto objects. Holmes Roston III argues that each organism has a telos or a "valued state." By virtue of its DNA-programmed activities, it seeks to attain certain states while avoiding others. Because the telos is a valued state, Roston III reasons, the fulfillment of the telos involves the realization of value. This value is what he refers to as "natural value." However, there is also a "systemic value" in which entities in nature either possess their own telos or have a role of producing or supporting the teleological processes of life in a "projective nature." According to Roston III, the existence of this value is "objective" and not "subjective" because it does not depend on the presence of any minds (143-153).

J. Baird Callicott disagrees with Roston III that value can be objective. Callicott maintains that value is foremost a verb and only becomes a noun derivatively. The act of valuing, thus requires an intentional act of a subject who ascribes value on an object. According to Callicott, "Subjects think, perceive, desire, and value. The intentions, the targets, of a subject's valuing are valuable, just as the intentions of a subject's desiring are desirable. If there were no desiring subjects, nothing would be desirable. If there were no valuing subjects, nothing would be valuable" (298). Callicott maintains that intentionally conscious beings value things in two ways: intrinsically and instrumentally. As human beings we value ourselves intrinsically as well as instrumentally. We can also ascribe the same values to other entities around us. However, when it comes to intrinsic value, human beings are only willing to ascribe intrinsic value to something with good reasons (259). The effort of Callicott, therefore, is to come up with the reasons sufficient enough for human beings to value entities in nature intrinsically.

In environmental ethics, the search for intrinsic value in nature is important because the act of ascribing intrinsic value to discovering intrinsic value in nature is fundamental to giving a moral status to

aspects of nature or to nature as a whole (Afeissa 531). For many environmental philosophers to hold an environmental ethic is to hold that non-human nature has intrinsic value in one sense or another. Thus, the notion of intrinsic value is the *sine qua non* of nonanthropocentric environmental ethic (Nunez 105). The task of environmental ethics today is to do two things. First, it must prove that natural entities possess intrinsic value of particular degrees based on reasonable criteria. Second, it accords moral obligations and responsibility to human beings in how they ought to treat nature in view of the existence of such intrinsic value (Afeissa 529).

The intrinsic value debate among environmental philosophers, however, does not simply revolve around how and in what degrees intrinsic value ought to be ascribed to non-human nature. Neopragmatists such as Bryan Norton take an antifoundationalist stance and deny that these metaethical issues need to be settled or even can be settled before actions are taken on behalf of the ecology. Norton feels that the time and energy spent on disputing whether nature has intrinsic or instrumental value or whether the intrinsic values are objective or subjective are done at the cost of coming up with timely solutions to counter environmental destruction. For Norton, a long and wide anthropocentrism "converges" on the same practical applications as the non-anthropocentrists. Thus, time and energy is better spent on refining environmental policies rather than debating theoretical matters (187-204). However, non-anthropocentrists like Callicott strongly disagree with Norton, and thus the debate continues despite it not being able to obtain any satisfactory consensus. For secular environmental ethics then, the quest for intrinsic value in nature remains a foundational issue for achieving ecological well-being.

Buddhism and the Value of Nature

Based on the above discussion, one can see that the question of what kind of value should be ascribed to nature is a central issue in modern environmental ethics. Despite the lack of consensus, the question is of such great significance that it is not surprising that this

matter gets transferred to religion when these systems are examined for resources to support an environmental ethic. For example, in Christianity, some scholars claim that nature has intrinsic value because all creation was proclaimed to be good by God after it was created.[2] With respect to Buddhism, while the perspectives may be described as spanning a continuum, we can fundamentally group them into opposing camps, one which affirms that Buddhism places positive value on nature while the other denies this to be the case. Lambert Schmithausen falls into the latter group when he observes:

> In the canonical texts of Early Buddhism, all mundane existence is regarded as unsatisfactory, either because suffering prevails, or because existence is inevitably impermanent... Nature cannot but be ultimately unsatisfactory, for it too is marked by pain and death, or at least by impermanence... Therefore, the only goal worth striving for is Nirvāṇa, which [is] entirely beyond mundane existence. (12)

Ultimate value, says Schmithausen, is placed on attainment of salvation and not on the preservation of nature. The critics generally hold the view that Buddhist soteriology, which recognizes the goal of attaining liberation as the ultimate good, entails placing negative value on nature. Ian Harris charges contemporary Buddhists as having assented to secular environmental concerns without having real basis in central Buddhist teachings (110). Harris holds one of the more extreme positions in asserting that early Buddhism cannot accommodate an environmental ethic with its view toward nature and its soteriological outlook. After examining carefully the Buddhist attitudes toward animals and plants from the early canon, Harris concludes that any value placed on them were instrumental and not much concern for their preservation was displayed.

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[2] A discussion on intrinsic value in nature from a Christian perspective can be seen in the work of Jame Schaeffer (2009). *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts*. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press.

Other scholars are less ready to deny that Buddhism does not accord any value to nature; however, few are willing to go so far as to claim that nature in Buddhism has intrinsic value. John J. Holder, for example, points out that in Buddhism, nature can objectively be seen to have profound value because nature helps facilitate a person's spiritual progress (116). For Holder, nature has positive value when it is used pragmatically within a Buddhist framework that promotes a spiritual path that entails living in the natural world (122). Even Daniel H. Henning, who advocates an intimate connection between Buddhism and Deep Ecology admits that it is not possible to ascribe intrinsic value to nature in the Buddhist outlook (16). To be sure countless writers have pointed to evidence that support the value of nature, seen in the fact that the Buddha was said to be born, achieved enlightenment, and died under various types of trees, lived and taught in natural environments, and often taught his disciples using examples from nature. However, these facts do not necessarily mean that nature has intrinsic value in the manner of secular environmental ethics. Thus, in Buddhism, there is far from a consensus as to what kind of value nature has, if any at all. However, as I will show in the following paragraphs, 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 an environmental ethic may be better served by looking into other avenues within the tradition itself.

The Buddhist Concept of Self

There is one point that underlies the intrinsic-value-in-nature debate, and that value, whether objective or subjective, presupposes 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, to apply the same categories to Eastern philosophy, in particular Buddhism, becomes problematic. Buddhism's doctrine of not-self is precisely what makes our 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, a 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 final view is taken on this matter as well.

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 being permanent are simply an illusion (Hawkins 42). Thus, this mark of existence denies what is normally perceived to be "real" in the phenomenal world in Western thinking. *Dukkha*, translated as mental or physical pain or suffering, constitutes the second mark of existence and is directly related to the first. According to the Buddha's teaching, all things that are impermanent are one way or another unsatisfactory and to place one's trust and dependence on impermanent things is doomed to failure. Suffering, thus, 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*, then is the result of *tanhā*, often translated as desire. However, there are good desires and there are bad desires. *Tanhā* represents the selfish desires for private fulfillment that throws us out of a state of freedom and causes us to experience increasing pain and suffering (Smith 102). *Dukkha* is not limited to painful experience but even to pleasurable experiences because even such experiences are impermanent and thus liable to suffering (Nyanatiloka 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 that makes up the central 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. The *anattā* doctrine must be taken seriously by those attempting to investigate Buddhism for resources of environmental ethics because this is the one doctrine upon which all Buddhist philosophy is built, and is uniquely a Buddhist teaching

not found in other religions. An accurate understanding of Buddhism rests on the understanding that reality is comprised of mere continually self-consuming process of arising and passing bodily and mental phenomena, and that there is no separate ego-entity within or without this process. C. H. S. Ward warns, "We must try to overcome the difficulty of thinking of 'will' without a 'willer'; of 'deed' without a 'doer'; of 'suffering' without a 'sufferer'; in a word, of life being carried on without personal agents" (Quoted in Love 304).

Thus, 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 form 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: the mental and physical phenomena which has 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 (Nyanatiloka 160). Every configuration of aggregates is a momentary force or entity separate from the next. An often employed analogy to drive the point of not-self home is the image of a cart that is essentially an aggregate of all its parts, the wheels, the axle, the pole, the cart-body, and so forth placed in a certain relationship to one another. However, the cart as a static and permanent entity is a mere illusion (Vis.M.XVIII). The famous Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa explained the existence of beings as follows:

> In the ultimate sense the life-moment of living beings is extremely short, being only as much as the occurrence of a single conscious moment. Just as a chariot wheel, when it is rolling, rolls [that is, touches the ground] only on one point of [the circumference of] its tire, and, when it is at rest, rests only on one point, so too, the life of living beings lasts only for a single conscious moment. When that consciousness has ceased, the being is said to have ceased, according as it is said: "In a

> past conscious moment he did live, not he does live, not he will live. In a future conscious moment not he did live, not he does live, he will live. In the present conscious moment not he did live, he does live, not he will live." (Vis.M.VIII)

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 14). The processes observed are the result of Dependent Origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), a theory that attempts to show that all phenomena are conditionally related to one another. The teaching which is found in countless sutras is stated in an abstract formula as follows:

> 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.)

Paṭiccasamuppāda also known as "the wheel of life" or "the wheel of becoming" is a chain of twelve links *(nidanas).* These links are both cause and effect. Every link constitutes itself as cause for the subsequently resulting effect, and as resulting effect for the preceding cause (Varanasi 14). In light of this theory, any questions that attempt to prove the existence of a self such as "Who is the cause of suffering?", "Who suffers?", "Who is the owner of this body?" are all considered in Buddhism to be improper questions. The only question that can be asked is "Which cause is responsible for that result?".

The theory of Dependent Origination, thus, posits that all things exist in a continuum of interdependence and inter-relatedness, 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. The Thai scholar monk Phra Prayudh Payutto explicates this idea in the negative form as follows:

> If things had any intrinsic entity they would have to possess some stability; if they could be stable, even for a moment, they

> could not be truly inter-related; if they were not inter-related they could not be formed into a continuum; if there were no continuum of cause and effect, the workings of nature would be impossible; and if there were some real intrinsic self within that continuum there could be no true inter-dependent cause and effect process. 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. (15)

Thus, according to Payutto, the principle of Dependent Origination serves to show that in the various events in nature, all the properties of impermanence, suffering, and not-self are seen, all of which reinforce the Buddhist denial of the existence of any real substance which could be duly called "self." It must be noted, however, that Buddhism does not necessarily deny the empirical individual because in the canon, the Buddha often uses the term "*attā*" in order to speak of himself or of others. This usage by the Buddha only connotes a conventional expression and not meant to be interpreted as a permanent substance. To know oneself, to understand one's body, and to understand the nature of the five aggregates is what is meant by the Buddha's statements and does not refer to a permanent self (Varanasi 16).

The Buddhist negation of an intrinsic self thus presents a problem for the attempt to apply secular environmental ethic notions of intrinsic value in nature to Buddhism. Fundamentally, the environmental ethic project aims to designate intrinsic value to various entities in nature, by which human beings would then be morally obligated to respect nature. However, having value implies that there is a holder of value, which means that there must be a real self. The Buddhist negation of a real self characterized by its three marks of existence, impermanence, suffering, and particularly not-self makes it difficult for it to accommodate this secular ethical notion. If we take Buddhist philosophy to its ultimate conclusion, then when it comes to nature and human beings, given enough time, all the entities in nature, the cosmos, and in particular human beings, will change and eventually cease to be because all things are

ultimately impermanent. In effect, while an important goal of secular environmental ethic is to come to a consensus on the intrinsic value of nature that would be the basis for environmental conservation, Buddhism does not have the same outlook. In fact, 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. Therefore, in order for Buddhism to serve as a practical resource for promoting environmental well-being, there needs to be a different approach that must arise from within the Buddhist tradition itself, not asking it to compromise its basic doctrines for the sake of contemporary Western philosophical thought.

Buddhist Soteriology and Virtues

Interestingly, it is this ultimate value of liberation from *saṃsāric* life that holds the key to how Buddhism can most effectively contribute to promoting environmental well-being. The reason this is so is because one's soteriological goals have a direct impact on how one conducts one's life and enters into relationship with fellow human beings and the natural world around oneself. In the attempt to achieve spiritual progress, the Buddhist has to practice and perfect certain virtues that aim at promoting personal well-being, and in the process contributes to the well-being of others, both sentient as well as non-sentient. As Holder argues, the path leading to human fulfillment does not have to necessarily exclude doing things that benefit non-human existence.

> It is a false dichotomy, according to early Buddhism, to say that a genuine environmental ethic must develop values that are for nature's own sake, rather than for the sake of human beings—that an environmental ethic must give nature an intrinsic, ultimate, *value over against*[3] human interests or values. The only thing resembling an ultimate value in early Buddhism is the elimination of the suffering of sentient creatures—and this includes human beings. (126)

[3] Author's own emphasis.

Indeed, in the *Sedaka Suttra* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha teaches his disciples that "Protecting oneself…one protects others; protecting others, one protects oneself" (S 5:19). The former is done through cultivation of mindfulness, whereas the latter is accomplished with various virtues such as patience, loving kindness and sympathy. Accordingly, the Suttras in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* teach that there are four types of people: those who act on behalf of oneself but not others, those who act on behalf of others but not oneself, those who act neither on behalf of oneself nor of others, and those who act both on behalf of oneself 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 4:95). Thus, Buddhism indeed would support a person leading a lifestyle that not only benefits his goals for personal salvation, but at the same time serves the needs of the environment.

The virtues that are relevant to our discussion include, *inter alia*, loving kindness, compassion, gentleness, moderation, and gratitude. While one may very well refer to these virtues in non-environmental contexts when it comes to how a Buddhist is to conduct her/his life, a simple reorientation of these virtues makes them entirely relevant to environmental concerns. As Damien Keown writes:

> One only needs to read the *Dhammapada* to see that the Buddhist ideal of human perfection is defined in terms of the virtues exercised by an individual who treats all beings with kindness and compassion, lives honestly and righteously, controls his sensual desires, speaks the truth and lives a sober upright life, diligently fulfilling his duties, such as service to parents, to his immediate family and to those recluses and Brahmans who depend on the laity for their maintenance…. A Buddhist ecology, then, coincides with these teachings and simply calls for the orientation of traditional virtues towards a new set of problems concerned with the environment. (109-110)

The environmental problem of the present day, early Buddhists would agree, has its roots in human moral psychology. They stem from human greed and delusions that lead to wanton exploitation of

natural resources and other acts of violence done to the environment. As Pragati Sahni contends:

> In all likelihood the environmental crisis to the early Buddhists is the manifestation of a psychological crisis because most physical actions and outward behavior are shaped by what is going on in the mind. 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. (165)

These perversions are effectively counteracted with virtues that lead to promoting human well-being, and in the process environmental well-being. Thus, with the goal of orientating normative Buddhist virtues to the environmental crisis, we now examine more closely the list of virtues that have been mentioned above.

Loving Kindness and Compassion

Loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*) are two of the four sublime abodes (*brahma-vihāra*) along with sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Loving kindness is the wish that all sentient beings, without exception, be happy while compassion is the genuine desire to alleviate the sufferings of others which one is able to feel. The text that one often encounters when discussing about loving kindness is from the Suttras which states:

> I dwell pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second quarter, the third quarter, and the fourth quarter. Thus above, below, across, and everywhere, and to all as to myself, I dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without enmity, without ill will. (A, 3:63)

Along with loving kindness, the person who exhibits compassion towards others and has their well-being in mind ultimately makes

progress in his own spiritual state. For each of these as well as the other sublime virtues, the Buddha exhorted the monks to assiduously train themselves so that they are able to carry out these virtues beyond their immediate neighbors, extending to the entire world (Sahni 120).

As one can see, loving kindness and compassion when practiced diligently by the Buddhist person has direct implications on the environment. As Simon P. James points out, someone who is truly compassionate extends his compassion to human as well as non-human beings. If he is only compassionate towards human beings, then he would not be considered a truly compassionate person. Thus, a person's dealings with non-human sentient beings, i.e. animals would reflect his level of virtuousness (457). One may ask the question, if loving kindness and compassion are only extended to human beings and non-human sentient beings, then what good is that when it comes to plants and other non-sentient entities? Certainly, a person would hardly be considered compassionate if he went about destroying rainforests which served as the habitat for countless animal creatures big and small. In the same manner, a person would hardly be considered to be suffusing the world with loving kindness if he chose to fill the air and rivers with dangerous chemicals that harm living things. Thus, the implication for loving kindness and compassion in the context of the environment is that it must respond to all dimensions of life that ultimately holds ramifications for different aspects of the ecology. Buddhism indeed encourages people to be kind and compassionate in a thoroughgoing manner and not just on a selective basis.

Gentleness

We come to the second virtue that promotes human flourishing and would likewise have the same effect on the environment. This virtue is gentleness, which can be seen as the positive derivative of the non-violence (*ahimsā*) precept in Buddhism. With respect to this First Precept in Buddhism, all actions which intentionally harm other sentient beings are considered morally wrong. In the *Dhammapada*

one is reminded that just as a person recoils at the thought of pain and treasures his own life, so do other sentient beings. Thus, suffering should not be inflicted on others (D 129-130). Buddhism not only urges people to be gentle in their daily dealings with other people and animals, but it also encourages people to avoid means of livelihood that brings about intentional harm to others. Thus, making a living by trading weapons, trading human beings, trading flesh, trading spirits and trading poison ought to be avoided, according to the Buddha (A 5:177). In addition, earning a living as pig and sheep butchers, hunters, thieves and murderers resulted in terrible consequences to the individual that no water ablution can eliminate (*Therīgāthā* 242-3).

While the non-violence virtue directly speaks about how one treats fellow human beings and animals, it would be peculiar if a person acted with great respect towards all sentient beings, but made a complete turn-about when it came to plants which in Buddhism is considered to be non-sentient or at best, border-line sentient beings.[4] One would expect that those who display gentleness towards people and animals would also extend this demeanor towards plants and even non-living things like a historic boulder or a cave. When gentleness permeates a person's veins, it is displayed in his actions which affect all the things around him. Environmental well-being then greatly depends on a human community that knows how to refrain from doing violence to its members and to others. By acting with gentleness towards others, environmentally negative events such as the extinction of animal species due to excessive hunting or the loss of plant species due to destruction of forests can be prevented.

[4] See discussions on the sentience of plants in Schmithausen, Lambert. *Plants in Early Buddhism and the Far Eastern Idea of the Buddha-Nature of Grasses and Trees*. Lumbini International Research Institute, 2009. Also Findly, E. B.. "Borderline Beings: Plant Possibilities in Early Buddhism." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, *122*.2 (2002): 252–263.

Moderation

A third virtue in Buddhism that I would like to present here is moderation, which is 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. The *Aggañña Suttra* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (DIII, 80-98) tells a fanciful tale of the beginning of the world where as (pre-) human beings went through moral degeneration, filling their hearts with greed, hatred, and envy, human lives became less and less joyful.[5] In the beginning, the beings were luminous and weightless creatures floating about space in pure delight. However, as time passed, on earth, there appeared a sweet and savory substance that piqued the curiosity and interest of the beings. They not only ate the substance, but due to greed seeping in, they ate it voraciously which led to its eventual depletion. In the meanwhile, due to endlessly feeding on the earth substance, the weightless beings eventually would not only become coarse individuals with a particular shape, but also lose their radiance. The story then goes on to tell how the natural world and human society continue to evolve in unwholesome manners as a result of the depraved actions of humanity. This tale clearly shows that there is a causal connection between human virtuousness and the state of the natural world. The lack of moderation, thus, can be seen to be a cause for great detrimental effects not only to the surrounding environment, but also to the state of one's own spiritual well-being. While Buddhism does not advocate abject poverty, the Buddha indeed taught that dependence on material things was a hindrance towards spiritual progress. Monks were asked to have as their possessions not more than a robe and a bowl, enough food for a day, simple lodgings and medicine. On the other hand, such things as gold and silver, high beds, garlands and other luxury items were to be

[5] Although the original intention of the Buddha in telling this story to the Brahmins is to critique the caste system as falsely deemed to be divinely ordained, the story obviously has valuable implications for human-nature relationship as well.

avoided. For the Buddha, a life that led to true happiness was not one controlled by sense desires, but rather by simplicity and having morality as a guide.

One can immediately see how simple living advocated by Buddhism would have profound effect on environmental well-being. Maintaining moderation in one's life results in less pressure on natural resources, thus positively affect sustainability. I believe it does not take much to convince us here that the less demands we make on nature, the more successful we will be in maintaining sustainability. The late Thai monk Buddhadasa would remark that climate change and other imbalances in nature being experienced at this time is a result of an internal human moral degeneration that affects the external dimension of the world.[6] Thus, by setting limits on our lifestyle, focusing on what we truly need rather than what we like or what we want, the possibility for spiritual progress becomes more real, and the natural world also benefits from our exercise of restraint.

Gratitude

A final virtue that I will mention here is that of gratitude. Many scholars in both secular and religious environmental ethics highlight gratitude towards nature as a key characteristic that contributes to promoting environmental sustainability and well-being. Buddhist scholars point to the doctrine of *kataññukatavedi* in which one is conscious of the favor that one receives and has the mind to reciprocate such favor. With respect to nature, gratefulness entails being aware of the benefits that one receives from nature and thus has the intention to reciprocate by protecting nature and its resources. The Phra Dharmakosajarn points to the Buddha as the embodiment of gratitude. After the Buddha achieved Enlightenment, he traveled to his homeland to pay gratitude to his father as well as to the surrounding environment. In addition, the Buddha was very grateful to the Bodhi tree under which he sat to meditate seven days before achieving his ultimate goal of Enlightenment (16). Nature was indeed

[6] http://www.thaibuddhism.net/Bud_Ecology.htm

appreciated by the Buddha who not only gained Enlightenment under a tree, but also mostly built monasteries and taught in forest settings. The tradition of monks living in the forest was encouraged by the Buddha and continues until this day. In Thailand, many forest monasteries were built in the Sukhothai period during the reign of King Lithai. Forest monasteries continue to hold great importance in the life of Thai Buddhism today. According to Phra Dharmakosajarn, to follow the Buddha means to follow in his footsteps by not only carrying out such rules imposed on monks such as not cutting down trees, not spitting on trees or in waterways, but also to promote environmental well-being by cultivating forests and protecting watersheds (18).

Another Thai monk, Phra Prayudh Payutto, also highlights the virtue of gratitude as essential to promoting environmental well-being. As a starting point for his discussion on gratitude, Phra Prayudh quotes the passage from the *Khuddaka Nikāya* which 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." He exhorts people to see nature as something that they are in intimate relationships with not only by virtue of mutual benefits that each brings to the other, but also because both are bound together in the natural process of birth, old age, suffering, and death. Recognition of mutual friendship is an internal disposition that subsequently is demonstrated in concrete actions of cooperation and solidarity rather than destructive ones. He writes, "Since we 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" (*Thai* 21).[7]

[7] My own translation of the original Thai text.

Conclusion

From this cursory and unsystematic list of Buddhist virtues that have important ramifications for environmental sustainability and well-being, we see that while early Buddhism may not have directly addressed the issue of the environment, this does not mean that Buddhism does not have the resources for us to draw upon in order to promote environmental well-being. In this paper, I have tried to argue that it is not possible to apply certain concepts from Western philosophy and secular environmental ethics to Buddhism. In particular, the notion of intrinsic value in nature, which is a fundamental issue in secular environmental ethics, cannot find support in Buddhism because of the Buddhist denial of an intrinsic self with its Three Marks of Existence. Buddhism does not make any conclusions about the value of natural entities but sets its sight on the ultimate value—the cessation of suffering and liberation. Thus, the Buddhist contribution to promoting environmental well-being rests not in how it perceives nature but in how it encourages its adherents to conduct their lives so as to achieve spiritual progress. To this end, I have tried to show that acting on behalf of oneself cannot be separated from acting on behalf of others. Therefore, actions that promote the well-being of the environment are intimately connected to actions aimed at achieving one's own spiritual progress. When a person is able to display loving kindness and compassion towards others, exercise gentleness towards sentient and non-sentient beings, exercise self-control over his desires for material possessions and a lifestyle that brings about depletion of natural resources, and demonstrate gratitude towards others for favors received, he achieves a higher spiritual state in his own life, accumulates greater merit, and has a better chance for a rebirth in a happier realm than the present one. By reforming one's internal disposition, the results will be displayed in outward actions that opt for the well-being of nature, such as choosing to use energy produced by alternative and sustainable technologies rather than the traditional methods that are detrimental to the environment. It must be stated that the Buddhist virtues that have implications for environmental well-being are not

limited to those mentioned above. One may list many other ones that are relevant to Buddhist spirituality and are correlated to the concern of the environment. However, the greatest concern for our present time is not whether Buddhism has the resources that help with the ecology, but how these resources are made use of and applied in the life of the Buddhist adherents and those who are interested in Buddhist spirituality so that through their religious convictions, they become contributors in the effort to promote environmental well-being and sustainability.

ABBREVIATIONS

A *Aṅguttara Nikāya*
D *Digha Nikaya*
Dp *Dhammapada*
S *Saṃyutta Nikāya*
Vis.M. *Visuddhimaga*

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