

A Framework for Buddhist Environmentalism: The Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions

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Abstract

Resorting to Buddhism to advance a form of religious environmentalism has been done by many scholars both from inside and outside the tradition because Buddhism holds a worldview and a number of teachings often perceived as environmentally friendly. This paper contributes to this effort by proposing a framework that is faithful to the Buddhist pedagogical approach. It asserts that this approach comprises two overarching and integral dimensions—a horizontal (relational) and a vertical (developmental) dimension. In establishing Buddhist environmentalism, the horizontal dimension is employed to assess the root cause of the environmental crisis and the state of human-nature relationship. The horizontal dimension also helps to provide a corrective to the abnormalities in this relationship by proposing a vision of harmonious human-nature relationship characterized by solidarity, responsibility, accountability, service and gratitude. These relationships can be established by resorting to Buddhist cosmogony and fundamental teachings such as the Principle of Dependent Origination and the Three Characteristics of Existence. The vertical dimension constitutes the prescriptive aspect of Buddhist environmentalism, which insists that self-cultivation aimed at emancipation from mundane existence is part and parcel of the effort to promote self and environmental well-being. It asserts that human-nature relationship must be added to the total number of relationships in one's life, and it must be held in view in the process of self-cultivation so that it becomes an indicator of a person's spiritual progress. Virtues such as loving kindness, gentleness, moderation and generosity developed through the Noble Eightfold Path not only go towards promoting interpersonal relationship but also promote environmental well-being and flourishing. Consequently, this paper is critical of any Buddhist environmentalism that fails to give due attention to both dimensions, and it emphasizes that both the relational and developmental dimensions must be held in balance in order for a genuine Buddhist environmentalism to be possible.

Key words: Buddhism, Buddhist Environmentalism, Religious Environmentalism, Environmental Crisis

Introduction

Environmentalism began initially in the secular sphere where concerns were raised about human beings exploiting the natural environment in such ways that brought about rapid destruction to the ecology.¹ The issues addressed by environmental philosophers and activists would eventually gain the attention of the religious community, which realized that religion needed to wade into these matters concerning environmental sustainability and well-being along with other social issues pertaining to human welfare. The world's major religious traditions were forced to reexamine how their teachings may have unintentionally affected people's behaviors in environmentally destructive ways. More than that, religious leaders and experts were asked to delve deeply into their traditions in order to draw out salient teachings that would actively support environmental conservation and sustainability. Buddhism has been a particularly popular religious resource because many perceive its worldview as potentially conducive to constructing a form of religious environmentalism. Over the decades since religious environmentalism managed to become a serious field of inquiry, there has been no shortage of articles and books on Buddhist environmental ethics by scholars both from within and outside the tradition. This article attempts to add to this effort, not by presenting doctrines and teachings that support Buddhist environmentalism *per se*, rather by presenting a framework for a Buddhist environmentalism that takes into account the essential dimensions of the Buddhist worldview.

Although Buddhism is by no means a uniform tradition, having branched out into various sub-traditions and schools throughout Asia and beyond with diverse beliefs and practices, there is a foundational worldview that informs the way Buddhists lead their lives and relate to people and things around them. That worldview comprises two distinct yet inter-related dimensions: the horizontal (relational) and the vertical (developmental) dimensions. This two-pronged worldview asserts that 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 lead them to personal emancipation from the world of mundane existence. In fact, the ultimate goal of all sentient beings is to eventually make their final escape from the phenomenal world, the stage where the drama of life is filled with more pain and suffering than happiness. Therefore, a genuine

Buddhist environmentalism must not dismiss either of the two dimensions that make up the entire Buddhist outlook on life. This paper asserts that careful reflection on the two dimensions will reveal their pertinence to promoting environmental well-being. First, the relational dimension provides human beings with important teachings and tools to critically assess themselves and their relationship to nature, as well as gain insights on how they are to perceive themselves vis-à-vis the natural world. On the other hand, the vertical dimension emphasizes the persistent effort of each individual to strive towards spiritual advancement, developing virtues that are conducive to promoting personal as well as environmental well-being. In Buddhist environmentalism, the first dimension serves a descriptive role where a vision of healthy and wholesome human-nature relationship is presented as a goal to be aspired to, while the vertical dimension serves a prescriptive function by insisting that personal spiritual advancement and ultimate emancipation from mundane existence is integrally tied to developing and exercising virtues that promote personal well-being as well as the well-being of others, including the natural environment. The contribution that this paper intends to make to the discourse is to draw together and give proper recognition of dimensions of Buddhist environmentalism that many well-intentioned authors have neglected or even discarded in their presentation on the topic.

Horizontal Dimension in Buddhist Environmentalism

Prayudh Payutto (2010, 11), a Thai scholar monk, once posed the following question in a talk to Thai listeners on the topic of forest conservation: “Is the relationship between Thai people and forests one of friendship or of enemies?”² In focusing people’s attention on their relationship with the forests, Payutto intended to highlight an important aspect of human life that few reflect upon in our technologically inclined world. His question is pertinent not just for his Thai audience but for all humanity in the wake of ongoing environmental destruction because 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 uneven distribution of goods, from the perspective of religion, only express the symptoms but not the real problem because these things do not adequately explain more profound issues taking place in the deeper realm of human spirituality and psychology. Unless the underlying root causes of the problem are accurately understood, effective curative therapies could not be proposed. Diagnosis for the environmental crisis can be carried out from a scientific, sociological, political or spiritual approach, the result of which reflects the concerns of the particular field. The environmental crisis in the Buddhist framework, similar to various problems involving human society, reflects a serious moral and spiritual condition which manifests itself in destructive actions by human beings towards one another as well as towards non-human nature. The unwholesome tendencies in human beings negatively impact the 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 unwholesome state is characterized by negative forces of greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). Conversely, non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion make up the wholesome state. All animate life both individually and collectively are impelled by these universal forces, causing them to have thoughts, words and deeds that inflict suffering on both self and others, and contradicting with the inner desire for lasting happiness. Greed, hatred and delusion in various degrees of intensity intertwine with one another, impelling individuals and groups to actions that promote personal and social unrest and disharmony. As Pragati Sahnī (2007, 165) contended, as long as the poisons of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha* continue to govern human thoughts and actions, the human race will be stricken by environmental degradation as well as other forms of exploitation and social vices.

Consequently, the environmental crisis in the Buddhist outlook is not merely a social or political crisis, but an ethical and spiritual problem plaguing humanity. The late Thai monk Buddhadasa remarked that climate change and environmental imbalances are results of an internal human moral degeneration affecting the external dimension of the world.³ The break down in human-nature relationship is a consequence of actions and activities motivated by hatred, ignorance and greed, turning human beings into selfish people,

focused on fulfilling personal desires, and discounting the well-being of others, especially of nature. Human-nature relationship fueled by the three poisons 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, ultimately proves harmful to the exploiters themselves. Therefore, the process of addressing the environmental crisis requires human beings to improve their relationship with nature not by fixing external or superficial abnormalities but by undergoing the process of self-cultivation to root out poisons that are deleterious to self and others. The environmental crisis can be likened to a mirror in 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 ought to be taken upon discovering this condition is not to change the mirror in the hope that the next one shows a different and more satisfactory reflection, or to try in vain to fix the image behind 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 possibilities of human-nature relationship that are both conducive to the well-being of nature as well as to the spiritual goals of the human person. The vision of harmonious human-nature relationship must be built upon wholesome and positive dynamics directly opposed to greed, hatred and delusion.

Relationship of Solidarity in Suffering

What then constitutes a true vision of harmonious human-nature relationship? The first proposed relationship is one of human solidarity with nature in a world inflicted with unceasing suffering. The Buddhist cosmogony envisions human beings and nature, despite constituting distinct entities, existing on a cosmological continuum, and being linked by the common experience of *dukkha* (suffering). This linkage makes human beings never truly separate from other entities in the universe, all of which are said to have co-existed since beginningless time and will continue to do so for much longer to come in the cycle of life-after-life called *saṃsāra*. In this *saṃsāra*, all sentient beings in the cosmos play out their drama of life, and none of the states of life exists in complete isolation from one another. They share with each other the experience of suffering, albeit it is relatively more joyful to be born in the

human realm than in the animal or the hungry ghost realm. Suffering is not merely a product of subjective human psychology, but describes an objective phenomenon existing in all sentient beings. Other than those who have achieved emancipation from *sāmsāric* life, all who remain trapped in the cycle of rebirth must contend with suffering, from those facing intense pain in the lowest realm to those dwelling in the highest heavenly spheres.

Therefore, continuity between human beings and nature lies not only in the inter-penetrability between the two realms, or a shared spatial and temporal existence, but also the experience of suffering from which all are keen to escape. It is in this very reality that human beings realize their connection with nature and take as a starting point and a catalyst for a sense of solidarity with nature resulting in display of care and concern for its well-being. John J. Holder (2007, 123) noted, “In 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.” 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 one acts with defilement, the consequential suffering not only falls upon the doer, but also affects others. On the other hand, one who acts in a manner free of greed, hatred and delusion promotes well-being for self and for all (A.I.157–158). A case in point is the righteous monarch who rules in accordance with the Dhamma, who “provides righteous protection, shelter, and guard for his *khattiya* vassals, his army, brahmins and householders, the people of town and countryside, ascetics and brahmins, and the animals and birds” (A.I.109). However, it needs not take a virtuous king in order to act with compassion and loving kindness to other people or other sentient beings. As the late monk Bhuddhadasa remarked, human beings and other natural entities are “mutual friends inextricably bound together in the same process of birth, old age, suffering, and death” (Swearer 1997, 28). This awareness, claimed Bhuddhadasa, advocates a way of caring (*anurak*) that expresses a sense of deep empathy exuding from within human beings 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, human beings cannot care for themselves or other sentient beings

if they fail to care for the physical environment which serves to support their livelihood. Therefore, 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.

Relationship of Responsibility and Accountability

The vision of healthy and wholesome human-nature relationship can also be described as a relationship of responsibility and accountability, which is based upon one of Buddhism's most important doctrines, the Law of Dependent Origination. Although this principle has been interpreted in various ways by a multitude of scholars, fundamentally it asserts that all things in the universe arise or cease not on their own but dependent upon a specific set of conditions. In the human situation, the law is applied on a physical-psychological level while in nature, the law plays out on a physical level. As a natural rather than an ethical law, the principle of Dependent Origination makes judgments neither about the events nor the entities involved in those events. The law simply highlights the process of how things come into existence as a result of various causes and conditions. That being said, contemplation upon this natural law can reveal truths that hold ethical implications for human beings and their relationship with nature. The environmental implications appear when it is recognized in this universal natural law a connection between human actions and the internal and external consequences exerted upon human beings as well as the natural world. 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, what resulted were 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. The claim of causal link between human thought and action and arisen consequences can also be seen in other suttas of the *Anguttara*. In one sermon, the Buddha asserted:

When people are excited by illicit lust, overcome by unrighteous greed, afflicted by wrong Dhamma...They take up weapons and slay one another resulting in

massive human deaths; sufficient rain does not fall leading to famine and lack of grains; wild spirits are let loose harming human lives. (A.I.159–160)

The examples taken from the suttas demonstrate that the Buddha indeed saw a real relationship between human action and various phenomena arising in nature. Human-nature relationship, therefore, can be defined and determined by these actions that are part of the day-to-day life of sentient beings. This realization facilitates the envisioning of a human-nature relationship based on responsibility and accountability, where human beings, by virtue of their unique mental and spiritual ability, can affect the process of giving rise to or extinguishing suffering in the world. The human ability to recognize and foresee the multiple consequences of their actions entails an understanding that human beings cannot simply pretend to live isolated lives in which their actions, thoughts, and intentions do not have to be taken into account. The Law of Dependent Origination that governs the Buddhist cosmogony further affirms the insight that human beings and nature are companions in *samsāric* life in which both are bound together in the natural process of birth, old age, suffering, and death. Responsibility towards nature, therefore, is the task entrusted to all people no matter what their status or situation in life may be. The Buddha emphasized that actions of influential individuals gave rise to things in the community; and actions of humanity influenced the outcome in nature. Thus, everyone is expected to be aware of the people and things that make up one's relational life. In the *Sigalovada Sutta* (D.III.180), the Buddha advised a young householder in great details on his duties towards his parents, his wife, his children, his servants, his friends and associates, as well as other important figures such as teachers, ascetics and brahmins.

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.

Although there is no specific mention of the householder's duty towards nature in this instance, when the *sutta* is considered along with the other examples already cited, it is possible to conclude that nature could reasonably be added to the list of relationships to be entered into and diligently maintained with responsibility and accountability. Regarding the notion of responsibility, Cooper and James (2005, 104) remarked:

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.

Displaying responsibility and accountability in relating to others demonstrates the ability to see one another 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 displayed in concrete actions and activities that give rise to positive effects instead of negative ones. Prayudh Payutto (2010, 21) commented, "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." The principle of Dependent Origination then presents a vision of the human community not as antagonists of nature, blindly doing things without awareness of how these actions may affect human beings and others, but always conscious that all effects arise due to various causes and conditions. Putting an end to suffering, whether experienced by human beings or by natural entities, demands a sense of awareness of responsibility and accountability on the part of the human community. This is an important foundation for embarking on the path that leads human beings to act more thoughtfully and virtuously as to ensure a harmonious human-nature relationship.

Relationship of Mutual Service and Gratitude

A third characterization of a healthy and wholesome human-nature relationship is one of mutual service and gratitude, which can be established upon examining Buddhism's threefold doctrine of *aniccā-dukka-anattā*, or the Three Marks of Existence. The most significant claim that these three marks of existence collectively make is the denial of the concept of self (*attā*). This assertion, as it turns out, holds important implications for how human beings view themselves as well as the natural world. The first characteristic, *aniccā* or impermanence, claims that every existing thing in the phenomenal world is in a state of flux, and the impression that things being permanent are 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. According to the Buddha's teaching, all impermanent things are in one way or another unsatisfactory, and to place one's trust and dependence on them is doom to failure. Suffering 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* comes from having negative desires (*tanhā*) for private fulfillment that throws one out of a state of freedom and causes increasing pain and suffering (Smith 2009, 102). It is not limited to painful experiences but also seen in pleasurable ones because even such experiences are impermanent and therefore liable to suffering (Nyanatiloka 1997, 110).

Although *aniccā* and *dukka* are intimately connected with the Buddhist negation of self, it is in the third mark of existence, the doctrine of *anattā*, that this metaphysical stance is directly asserted. This central Buddhist doctrine states 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. Reality is comprised of mere continually self-consuming process of arising and passing physical and mental phenomena, and that there is no separate ego-entity within or without this process. Life as we know it is but a composite of various mental and physical aggregates (*khandha*), all of which are subjected to impermanence, suffering, and changeableness. The four aggregates of feeling, perception, dispositions and consciousness comprise the mental part while form is the physical part of the individual. 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 far into the unforeseeable future. Even though the five aggregates are present and seem to be “co-operating” in these processes, it would be a terrible mistake to conclude that there is some existing self-dependent real ego-entity or personality (Nyanatiloka 1997, 160). Every configuration of aggregates is a momentary force or entity separate from the next. An often employed analogy to illustrate this assertion 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). Because there is no static and permanent substance controlling the aggregates, it is improper to consider these *khandhas* as “this is mine” or “this is I” or “this is my self” (Varanasi 1999, 14). The processes observed are the result of Dependent Origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), which posits that all things exist in a continuum characterized by an unceasing process of growth and decline in accordance with various determinants. According to Prayudh Payutto (1994, 15), the existence of this ever changing and continuing process confirms that things perceived phenomenally as “real,” in fact, do not have any intrinsic entity. He noted, “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.”

The Buddhist negation of an “intrinsic self” leads to a Buddhist understanding of value that departs significantly from Western secular environmental ethical notions of intrinsic value in nature. Fundamentally, the aim of many environmental ethics is to either discover value in various natural entities or to designate value to them, thereby, obliging human beings to accord respect to these natural entities based on these perceived values. However, having value implies that there is a possessor 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 of impermanence, suffering, and particularly not-self makes it difficult for Buddhism to accommodate this secular ethical notion. If Buddhist teaching is fully considered, when it comes to the universe, given enough time, all the entities in it, in particular human beings, will change and eventually cease to be because all things are ultimately impermanent. In effect, although an important goal of secular environmental ethics is to arrive at a consensus

on the intrinsic value of nature that would be the basis for environmental conservation, Buddhism does not share in this priority. In fact, Buddhism does not take any stance regarding the value of nature, whether positive or negative, but sets its sight on the ultimate goal of liberation, in which a thing ceases to be.

The Buddhist negation of intrinsic entities and the intrinsic value of these entities may initially seem like a brutal blow to any prospect for Buddhist environmentalism. It appears pointless to attempt to develop relationship with nature if value is neither seen in nature nor even in human beings themselves. One asks what use is there to promote well-being in nature and in human beings if the ultimate value lies not in existence in this world but in *nibbāna*? These questions and concerns, although legitimate, do not spell an end for Buddhist environmentalism. Nonetheless, environmentalism in the Buddhist context is articulated from a different metaphysical stance. The Buddhist insistence on not-self and the denial of intrinsic value in mundane entities, human or otherwise, forces a re-orientation of 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 selfless virtues. A positive expression of this selflessness is mutual service and gratitude. Oftentimes, the debate over rights becomes a competition where each side intently tries to garner the most rights and privileges for itself while justifying why the minimum of the same ought to be accorded to others. This mentality where selfish needs and desires trump the good of others 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 the possibility of a different and more creative way for human beings to perceive themselves and the natural world around them. This is the source of inspiration to formulate a human-nature relationship characterized by mutual service and gratitude. This vision of human-nature relationship does not displace human beings from their rightful place in the universe; but encourages them to exercise empathy and gratitude towards others in the act of service. It also affirms that the journey of human beings in *saṃsāra* is far from a solitary sojourn, but one alongside a great number of companions and friends. The denial of an intrinsic self in Buddhism 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 emancipation from *samsāric* life. When the obsession over the notion of possessing an intrinsic self with inalienable rights and privileges is eliminated, the selfish demands meant to satisfy the ego self can become transformed into selfless desires for serving others. It also opens up the possibility for human beings and nature to enter into a reciprocal and cooperative relationship in order to help relieve the suffering of one another and help each other to make progress in awareness and state of life.

A relationship of mutual service naturally means that it is reciprocal, although not necessarily identical. Services rendered by nature on behalf of human beings are many. In addition to providing nourishment and air for human beings to sustain their life, one of the unique services that nature offers is facilitating the human activity of meditation on the *Dhamma*. David J. Kulupahana (2009, 5) commented that natural settings are extremely beneficial in the effort of self-cultivation because they 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.” Although the Buddha often taught in urban settings where householders resided and made their living, he often encouraged his monks to seek out natural places like mountains, caves and jungles away from the hustle bustle of the city in order to develop their virtues through meditation (M.I.181; I.346; I.441; III.4; III.116). The Buddha himself attained enlightenment in a natural setting under the Bodhi tree.

Consequently, a human-nature relationship characterized by mutuality, reciprocity and symbiosis naturally requires human beings to respond to nature’s outpouring of service with their own modes of service. Prayudh Payutto (2010, 20) suggested that Buddhism introduces a way for human beings to value nature in a way that does not begin with the question of what they can get out of nature. This kind of attitude is self-centered and risks leading down the path of exploitation of the other. Moreover, the moment that nature no longer serves human needs, it ceases to be valued. On the other hand, the way to value in which human beings realize and appreciate all that that nature has given to them leads to gratitude for the gifts received. True gratitude makes way for good-will towards nature as well as inspires the desire to promote nature’s well-being and flourishing. As it is stated in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, “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.”

Vertical Dimension in Buddhist Environmentalism

The vision of harmonious human-nature relationship articulated in the horizontal dimension of Buddhist environmentalism holds important implications for human behavior towards nature. However, espousing this vision 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 environmentalism, Buddhism must also have the tools to help human beings achieve the realization of these ideals. It is not enough to merely describe them and hope that somehow human beings will automatically become enlightened and act accordingly. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the impetus and directions that Buddhism provides to help human beings to not only intellectually understand the ideals of human-nature relationship but also have the necessary personal qualities to attain these ideals in their lives. The twofold Buddhist pedagogy aimed at establishing Buddhist environmentalism is completed by the vertical (developmental) dimension, without which it remains half-baked and lies at the level of mere lip-service.

The problem of an underdeveloped Buddhist environmentalism has been prevalent because many writers attempt to advocate Buddhist environmentalism by taking pains to illustrate the relational aspect of human-nature relationship. The Law of Dependent Origination, renamed as the principle of interdependent origination or dependent co-arising (Macy 2007), has been employed to advance a notion of universal radical interdependence in which *everything* is interconnected with *everything else*. According to advocates of this notion of radical interdependence, the realization of interconnectedness naturally leads to human respect and care for nature, as if duty somehow automatically flows from this ontological insight. Objections have been raised against such propositions by Simon P. James (2007, 451), who argued that providing a relational description alone is insufficient reason for anyone to behave in an environmentally friendly manner. James commented:

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.

Peter Singer (1995, 177) lamented about the discordance between understanding and actual behavior when it comes to vegetarianism. Singer remarked:

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.

The overemphasis on the relational dimension of Buddhism presents the risk of providing a vision without offering tools and directions for ecological action. Buddhist environmentalism must not only present the final desired results but also specify how those results may be accomplished. On the surface, it may sound intuitive enough. Life is all about having a vision and then figuring how to realize that vision in an effective way. Unfortunately, when it comes to Buddhist environmentalism, there is often a tendency to merely speak of the vision but fail to mention what is needed for its realization. Sometimes, the elements needed to achieve the vision is even rejected altogether as in the case of Joana Macy (2007, 157), who claimed that virtue and moral exhortation are not necessary in a universe where human beings and nature are parts of the same self. According to Macy, the negation of an ego-self and dependent co-arising of phenomena leads to an expanded sense of self—the ecological self. This ecological self is achieved through self-realization, in which there is a “sense of profound interconnectedness with all life” (150). In the process of self-realization, however, the role of morality and virtue can be removed from human lives because human beings have reached a point where by acting on behalf of others, they are in fact acting for their own self-interest. The emergence of the ecological self, therefore, does not need to take place through the process of ethical cultivation.

Macy is far from alone in leapfrogging from the recognition of interconnectedness, that is to be able to “see things as they are,” to environmentally beneficial behavior. This tendency is especially prominent in Western Buddhists, Gary Snyder being one of the more prominent figures. Alan Sponberg (1997, 361) observed 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 attributed this attitude by Western Buddhists to their experience with Western dualism, which has in the past resulted in dominative and exploitative dispositions and behaviors by human beings towards nature. Consequently, they try to avoid anything that may be associated with such mentality. The distaste that some Buddhists have towards Western spiritual cultivation is seen in the following observation by Gary Snyder (1990, 98):

The word *cultivation*, harking to etymologies of *till* and *wheel about*, generally implies a movement away from natural process. In agriculture it is a matter of “arresting succession, establishing monoculture.” Applied on the spiritual plane this has meant austerities, obedience to religious authority, long bookish scholarship, or in some traditions a dualistic devotionism...and an overriding image of divinity being ‘centralized,’ a distant and singular point of perfection to aim at. The efforts entailed in such a spiritual practice are sometimes a sort of war against nature—placing the human over the animal and the spiritual over the human. The most sophisticated modern variety of hierarchical spirituality is the work of Father Teilhard de Chardin, who claims a special evolutionary spiritual destiny for humanity under the name of higher consciousness. Some of the most extreme of these Spiritual Darwinists would willingly leave the rest of earth-bound animal and plant life behind to enter an off-the-planet realm transcending biology.

In order to distinguish Buddhism from Western cultural thoughts and practices, Western Buddhists attempt to address social problems by constructing a brand of Buddhism free from any hierarchical structure (Sponberg 1997, 361). The lack of attention paid to or even elimination of the developmental dimension is counterproductive not just for Buddhist environmentalism but for the entire tradition because 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 oneself, to purify the activities of the body and mind, and to achieve transformation of consciousness. The program of cultivation is often summarized as the “threefold learning” (*ti-sikkhā*) in which one undergoes training in the areas of morality, meditation, and insight.

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. Consequently, no matter how one may feel about Western dualism, there is no justification to deny Buddhism one of its essential and fundamental aspects. It is erroneous to think that any and all forms of cultivation of consciousness will cause practitioners to feel spiritually superior, ready to dominate and subjugate nature according to their own whims. Self-cultivation, correctly carried out, must promote human understanding about themselves and their relationship with nature, as well as equip them with the virtuous qualities to act in congruence with this understanding. The rejection by Macy and others of this unique soteriological method betrays what the Buddha had taught about the process of spiritual advancement and contradicts the example demonstrated by the Buddha in his own journey towards enlightenment. The critique towards those who continually uphold interconnectedness as sole basis for Buddhist environmentalism is not so much that it highlights the relational dimension, but that this limited viewpoint overlooks and even negates a truly essential part of the comprehensive Buddhist pedagogy. On the other hand, complete dismissal of this perspective is unwarranted for it can be easily demonstrated that we are only motivated to at least desire to act on behalf of others and to make sacrifices and self-improvements only when we feel a sense of connectedness with the other and that the relationship is worth the effort. Indeed, in the first part of this paper, vision of human-nature relationship was articulated in details using fundamental Buddhist teachings. It is the vision that impels us to strive towards self-cultivation and self-transformation. Unfortunately, although the spirit is willing, the body is weak; so sweat and pains are expected if there is hope for the vision to be achieved.

For those who take seriously the path of self-cultivation, 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 order to attain freedom. In the *Nidāna Sutta* of the *Samyutta*, 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, death, and volitional formations (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 Noble Eightfold Path represents the discipline (*vinaya*) aspect of the *Dhamma-Vinaya* (Doctrine-Discipline), in which the former is taken to be the Four Noble Truths. However, both aspects of the *Dhamma-Vinaya* are often referred to in an abbreviated manner as the Dhamma (Bodhi 1998, v). Continuity and unity between the Dhamma and the Vinaya is demonstrated by the fact that the last factor of the Four Noble Truths is the Noble Eightfold Path, while the first factor in the Noble Eightfold Path is the right view, or the right understanding of the Four Noble Truths. This prescription enables the Dhamma to become more than just a set of abstract propositions; it translates it into a series of ongoing disclosures about the truth of suffering and liberation witnessed in daily human experience. The eight factors are often listed as follows:

1. Right view (*Sammā ditṭhi*)
2. Right thought (*Sammā sankappa*)
3. Right speech (*Sammā vācā*)
4. Right action (*Sammā kammanta*)
5. Right living (*Sammā ājīva*)
6. Right effort (*Sammā vāyāma*)
7. Right mindfulness (*Sammā sati*)
8. Right concentration (*Sammā samādhi*)

The *Sīla* group consists of right speech, right action, and right living. The *Samadhi* group includes right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The *Pañña* group consists of right view and right thought. These three groups represent the three stages of moral training aimed at achieving higher moral discipline, higher consciousness, and higher wisdom. The ultimate goal of the training is to attain wisdom in order to directly oppose the ignorance that causes human suffering. However, in the process of training to achieve wisdom, 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. Some may wonder if wisdom is the pinnacle of the training, why then do

the two factors that constitute wisdom, namely, right view and right thought, appear first in the sequence? This is not a careless mistake on the part of the canonical editors. Even in the preliminary stages of the training, a degree of right view and right thought is necessary to kick start the process. However, wisdom will be further developed and refined once moral discipline and higher consciousness have been achieved. In fact, the three aspects of training never cease to exist along the path, but each continues to reinforce the other and in turn becomes further developed until perfection is achieved (Bodhi 1998, 13). Thus, this path of transformation, noted Damien Keown (2001, 102), “is only linear in the metaphorical sense: it does not list stages which are to be passed through and left behind so much as describe the dimensions of human good and the technique for their cultivation.” The end of this process of cultivation of moral and intellectual virtue is *nibbāna*, where perfection has been achieved. Keown emphasized that *nibbāna* is the summit of this gradual process and “not an ontological shift or soteriological quantum leap.”

Attaining enlightenment as prescribed by the Noble Eightfold Path requires both intellectual and moral progress. 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 intellectual component of the path, because they cannot achieve the quality of perfection that the Eightfold Path provides (D.II.151). A person who has completed the path 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. In the *Anguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha referred to himself as someone who did not lack any of the perfections laid out in the path:

But, Moggallāna, I am one whose behavior is purified and I claim: ‘I am one whose behavior is purified. My behavior is purified, cleansed, undefiled.’ My disciples do not cover me up with respect to my behavior, and I do not expect to be covered up by my disciples with respect to my behavior. I am one whose livelihood is purified and I claim: ‘I am one whose livelihood is purified. My livelihood is purified, cleansed, undefiled.’ ... I am one whose Dhamma teaching is purified and I claim: ‘I am one whose Dhamma teaching is purified. My Dhamma teaching is purified, cleansed, undefiled.’ ... I am one whose explanations are purified and I claim: ‘I am one whose explanations are purified. My explanations are purified, cleansed, undefiled.’ ... I am one whose

knowledge and vision are purified and I claim: 'I am one whose knowledge and vision are purified. My knowledge and vision are purified, cleansed, undefiled.'
(A.III.126)

As Buddhist self-cultivation aims to affect all dimensions of the individual's life, the relationship between human beings and nature account for one of the primary dynamics in the totality of relationships. Consequently, the goal of achieving a harmonious human-nature relationship becomes part and parcel of the process of self-cultivation because the wisdom and virtues gained by the person who undergoes training are not only applicable to his or her relationship with other human beings but also with nature. In other words, a healthy human-nature relationship is the happy result of the effort of comprehensive and conscientious training aimed at personal liberation. Self-transformation has to be clearly detectable through one's relational and ethical life—in the concrete daily happenings between oneself and others—and not simply confined to some invisible interior state. Therefore, how one behaves towards nature becomes evidence of one's ability to nourish the various relationships with the virtues acquired from the hard work of self-cultivation.

The environmental crisis characterized by exploitative and destructive human-nature relationship can be rectified when human virtues are intentionally ordered towards improving it. As a result, the relationship of solidarity in suffering can be nourished by the virtues of loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), and gentleness (*maddava*). The relationship of responsibility and accountability will be reinforced by the virtues of moderation and contentment (*sañtuṭṭhī*). The relationship of mutual service and gratitude can be realized through the virtue of generosity (*cāga*) in giving (*dāna*). The development of these virtues in Buddhism is meant to help human beings enter into healthy and wholesome relationship with each other as well as everything around them, both biotic and abiotic. It is no wonder that the Buddha exhorted the practitioner to exercise loving kindness to all creatures no matter their size, strength, distance, or whether they can be seen or not. (S.I.8). Loving kindness is to be practiced even when one is being challenged by obstacles and difficulties (M.I.123). A person is described as compassionate and gentle when she exercises these virtues not only with the people in her own family, but also with her neighbors, with strangers, with every suffering sentient being, and in fact with non-sentient entities like a mountain cave or

a flowerbed. Virtues of moderation, contentment and generosity counter the unwholesome tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion, debilitate unhealthy cravings and desires, and equip the mind and heart with empathy that recognizes the need of others. Environmental well-being and sustainability in great measure depends on the ability of human beings to exercise these virtues with the intention of eliminating behaviors that negatively impact the natural environment. The relational life nourished by these virtues can no longer be limited to the immediate family, kinship or ethnic group, but must be extended to the cosmos with everything in it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, religious environmentalism, in particular Buddhist environmentalism has the ability to present profound insights into the causes of the environmental crisis as well as employ religious teachings in order to address this crisis in ways that complement the methods proposed by experts from other disciplines. Buddhist environmentalism has its own unique framework derived from its metaphysical and epistemological outlook regarding the human situation and the cosmos. This paper proposes that Buddhism provides critical tools for assessing the state of human-nature relationship and for envisaging this relationship in its ideal form. However, Buddhist environmentalism cannot simply stop at proposing a vision but must also contain the component of praxis necessary for achieving the espoused vision. Buddhist environmentalism, consequently, must comprise a horizontal (relational) as well as a vertical (developmental) dimension in order to fully encapsulate the Buddhist approach to life and life issues. Just as the abstract formulas of the Four Noble Truths are concretized by the Noble Eightfold Path, the vision of healthy and wholesome human-nature relationship articulated by the relational dimension must be supported by the nitty-gritty work that makes up the vertical (developmental) dimension. If the process of self-cultivation as laid out in the Noble Eightfold Path sounds intimidating to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, one can take comfort in the fact that self-transformation is a very gradual process. One is not expected to achieve perfection or enlightenment over a period of a few years, or even a few lifetimes. The expectation, however, is that one engages with the path in ways

that spiritual progress may be inwardly felt and outwardly measured in actions towards others. Even small personal advancement may present great benefits for environmental well-being. In an age of great environmental urgency, and where Buddhism is still able to exert influence on the way its adherents and admirers think and act, Buddhist leaders, scholars and environmental activists must utilize Buddhist wisdom to address one of the most serious issues of the modern age.

Notes

- 1 One of the most influential voices affecting the environmental movement in its formative stage was Rachael Carson who published her book *Silent Spring* in 1962, which brought into light environmental problems caused by indiscriminate use of pesticides. The publication became impetus for great public outcry that led to the banning of the chemical DDT as well as revolutionary changes in laws concerning air, land and water.
- 2 This talk was originally published in the Thai language as “Khon Thai Kap Pa” (“คนไทยกับป่า”).
- 3 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu’s ideas come from a number of works that have been compiled and translated by Grant A. Olson. Olson gives the title of his translation “A Notion of Buddhist Ecology.” In addition to the negative effect on nature, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu asserts that internal degeneration hinders spiritual progress.

Abbreviations

A	<i>Āṅguttara</i>
D	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
M	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
PTS	<i>Pali Text Society</i>
S	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
V	<i>Vinaya</i>
Vis.M.	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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