ARTICLE

Buddhist Environmental Humanism: A Humanistic Spirituality to Promote Ecological Flourishing

Anthony Le Duc, SVD[1]

Abstract

Religious environmentalisms are often inaccurately described as 'anthropocentric,' a label that can lead to a devaluation of the potential contribution that religiously inspired environmentalisms can have towards addressing the ecological crisis. This paper argues for reframing religious environmentalism, particularly Buddhist environmentalism, as an environmental humanism. The paper argues that seeing Buddhist environmentalism from the lens of humanism will help to eliminate the negative connotations attached to anthropocentrism, especially strong anthropocentrism, which is detrimental to environmental wellbeing and flourishing. On the other hand, environmental humanism argues that when human beings undergo the self-cultivation process to transform their lives, they are in fact achieving the best version of themselves—becoming truly and authentically human—a reality that in fact contributes to promoting both human and environmental wellbeing and flourishing. Thus, acting on behalf of the environment is part and parcel of the self-cultivation process encouraged by Buddhism. In the paper, the author presents fundamental Buddhist teachings that are essential to integral human development and are relevant to environmental humanism. The paper also discusses the various Buddhist virtues that define authentic personhood as well as promote environmental protection. Finally, the paper argues that Buddhist environmental humanism is not simply an environmental ethic but an environmental spirituality.

Keywords: *Buddhist environmentalism, environmental*

[1] Anthony Le Duc, SVD holds a doctorate in Religious Studies. His published research deals primarily with the intersection between religion and various contemporary issues including the ecology, migration, and technological development. He can be reached at leducsvd.arc@gmail.com.

humanism, ecological crisis, environmental wellbeing, environmental spirituality

1. Introduction

Some years ago, I participated in an academic conference on religion and the ecology at a university in the United States. As a contribution to the event, I delivered a paper from the Buddhist perspective while other participants presented theirs from that of other religious traditions. As part of the format, each session consisted of about three papers followed by reaction from a person designated by the conference organizer. In the session that I was scheduled, our reactor, after listening to the papers from different religious perspectives, observed that while the papers provided very profound religious and spiritual insights to address the ecological crisis, these perspectives were nonetheless very '*anthropocentric*.' The comment was meant to not only highlight a common thread running throughout the various religious environmentalisms but also to draw attention to what might be perceived as a shortcoming in environmentalisms rooted in religious traditions.

In the field of environmental ethics, the term 'anthropocentric' or 'anthropocentrism' is often associated with ideologies and ways of thinking and behaving that prioritize human status, rights and desires at the detriment of non-human beings such as animals, plants and other biotic and abiotic entities. Anthropocentrism comes in various degrees from weak (benign) to strong (tyrannical), but when push comes to shove, this worldview entails that human interests ultimately come out on top and moral consideration is reserved first and foremost for human beings. This paper, however, argues that environmentalism inspired by Buddhist teachings is not anthropocentric but should be properly characterized as 'humanistic.' There is a distinct difference, in fact, almost opposite, between these two outlooks, which the paper will demonstrate. Moreover, this paper argues that Buddhist environmental humanism is an environmentalism that is both viable and beneficial to promoting environmental sustainability and flourishing to address the contemporary ecological crisis.

2. Anthropocentrism vs. Humanism

Due to the fact that religiously inspired environmentalisms are perceived as being anthropocentric to some degree, not everyone has embraced them. Some opt for building ecosophies that move away from being human-centered towards those that are 'eco/bio-centered' as to avoid the perceived difficulties present in systems of thought that focus on the human person as the locus of value and agency. While non-religious ecosophies are able to pursue this approach, religious environmentalisms, unless undergoing a radical reframing, cannot simply ignore human agency in the matter being considered. After all, religious systems are created in order to address directly the human spiritual condition with the intent to improve the human lot, both in this life and in the next. Thus, any environmentalism that emanates from religion needs to confront and embrace the role and responsibility of human beings not only as the source of environmental problems but also the instrument of resolution.

Notwithstanding that there is an ongoing debate among environmental philosophers about whether anthropocentrism is as terrible as it is made out to be, the details of this debate will not be delved into in this paper for the sake of brevity. It suffices to say that environmental philosophers such as Paul W. Taylor (biocentrism), Lawrence E. Johnson (ecocentrism), and Arne Naess (Deep Ecology) represent the various approaches to the non-anthropocentric worldview. Whereas biocentrism is concerned with the 'inherent worth' of biological individuals, ecocentrism provides moral considerability to entire systems comprising of both biotic and abiotic entities such as air, water, land, and ecosystems. Deep ecology, on the other hand, is not so much an environmental ethics as a philosophical orientation or an ideology that advocates Self-Realization to the extent that one fully identifies oneself with the world and that one's behavior and thinking naturally are in harmony with nature.

On the other side of the debate are scholars such as Tim Hayward who says that "it would also appear to be unavoidable that we should be interested in ourselves and our own kind" (1997, 51). However, anthropocentrism is only truly objectionable "when humans give

preference to interests of members of their own species over the interests of members of other species for morally arbitrary reasons" (Ibid, 52). In such a case, Hayward says what we have is actually "human chauvinism" and "speciesism," which is bad and cannot be condoned. Bryan G. Norton (1994) calls for categorizing anthropocentrism into 'weak' and 'strong.' Norton adopts the former position which provides the basis for critiquing human preference to see whether they are exploitative of nature or contrary to human ideals. For Norton, environmental protection can be achieved without having to confer intrinsic value to nature. Instead, human preferences must be carefully considered for environmental outcomes that 'converge' with the vision of those advocating nonanthropocentric ethics. In general, scholars on this side of the debate do not feel that anthropocentrism can be eliminated from any ethical system based on human perspectives because the values espoused ultimately reflect human values.

Despite this rather extensive debate, it seems that at least in terms of the public consciousness, the word 'anthropocentrism' is still largely seen as a 'dirty' word when speaking about human behavior and attitudes toward the environment. Thus, when religious environmentalisms are characterized as 'anthropocentric,' as was done by the commentator mentioned in the introduction of this paper, one cannot help but feel that this characterization is meant to be a critique. I believe that when it comes to religious environmentalism, it is not helpful to frame the discussion within this 'anthropocentrism' vs. 'nonanthropocentrism' debate because it would always be the case that religious ethical ideals, even those concerning the environment, would be 'anthropocentric' in some way. After all, religions in every instance were created by humans and for humans as the first priority. While some religious soteriologies involve non-human beings, the focus and the central concern is always human happiness and spiritual liberation. Religious environmentalism cannot depart from this fundamental worldview because the concern for the environment has to be integrally connected to the concern for human beings. The question that religious environmentalism attempts to address is essentially how promoting environmental wellbeing and flourishing can be seen as part and parcel of the human soteriological aspirations, and that one cannot successfully achieve full humanhood unless one takes into consideration the wellbeing of others—humans and nonhumans alike.

It is because of this that I believe it is misleading and unhelpful to refer to religious environmentalisms as 'anthropocentric' since this term carries too much baggage that can cause religious environmentalisms to not be understood within its own context and epistemology. It reduces environmental thinking inspired by religious thought to be merely axioms to be evaluated like other secular environmental ethics in the field. Religious environmentalisms, however, can be characterized as 'humanistic'—a notion which has found acceptance across many religious traditions and of course, in the secular sphere as well. Indeed, the term 'humanism' has been employed by numerous groups and individuals across history, religions, philosophies, cultures and worldviews. Despite the many usages of the term by various groups to suit their own metaphysical assumptions and needs, the common thread that runs through every thought system that claims to be humanistic is the emphasis on human value, integrity and agency. Both religious and secular humanisms advocate for human beings to achieve full self-realization, to become their best self, to be *truly human*. Only in being fully and truly human, can human beings achieve what is best for themselves as individuals but also what is good for others. Unsurprisingly, each thought system will have its own version of and approach towards paradigmatic personhood. While Christians look to Jesus as the model of perfect humanity, Buddhists may imitate the Gautama Buddha in their quest for perfection. Atheist humanists strive to achieve human perfection without reference to any spiritual or transcendental beings. However different their starting points may be, humanistic thought systems tend to have a positive outlook on the human potential and the individual and collective good that can be achieved when that potential is fully realized.

Religious environmental humanism, particularly, Buddhist environmental humanism, adopts this outlook on the human person. It believes that positive contribution to environmental protection can be achieved when the human person undergoes self-cultivation in order to achieve self-transformation, spiritual progress, and ultimately, emancipation from the cycle of suffering. Buddhist environmental humanism sees the role and flourishing of the environment as integrally connected to the effort of achieving human spiritual growth necessary to the quest for lasting happiness. Thus, there is a causal relationship

between the quality of the human person and the flourishing of the natural environment in the Buddhist environmental approach. The rest of the paper will demonstrate this proposition in further detail.

3. Integral Human Development in Buddhism

The term humanism has often been used to describe Buddhism. The secular humanist Paul Chiariello, for example, sees profound commonality between Buddhism and secular humanism. According to Chiariello (2014), "Buddhism and Humanism are two geographical sides of the same philosophical coin. They're twins with the same DNA, separated at birth, and brought up by different parents…. Buddhism is Eastern Humanism and Humanism is Western Buddhism." Many people have pointed out the atheistic worldview of Buddhism to draw close affinity between Buddhist humanism and secular humanism. David J. Kalupahana, for example, writes:

> The philosophy of . . . Buddhism. . . undoubtedly represents one of the most comprehensive and systematic forms of humanism. It is based on naturalistic metaphysics, with causal dependence as its central theme. Rejecting any form of transcendentalism, determinism, or fatalism, it emphasizes its ultimate faith in man and recognizes his power or potentiality in solving his problems through reliance primarily upon empirical knowledge, reason and scientific method applied with courage and vision. It believes in the freedom of man, not in a transcendental sphere, but here and now. The highest goal it offers is not other-worldly but this-worldly. (1977, 12)

While there are striking similarities between Buddhist humanism and secular humanism, there are features in Buddhism that would make secular humanists uncomfortable such as the belief in transmigration, the existence of the realms of ghosts, spirits and heavenly beings. Buddhist monks, like the historical Buddha, also believe that they can develop through meditation the ability for retrocognition—the ability to see their own past lives as well as the past lives of other people. Buddhist monks also claim that they have the capacity for clairvoyance and telepathy which enhances their ability to apprehend the Law of

Dependent Origination, or the principle of causal dependence. Moreover, in actual practice, the various offshoots of Buddhism have essentially turned the Buddha into a deity and bodhisattvas into saints, especially in the Mahayana tradition. In Southeast Asia, particularly, Thailand, Theravada Buddhism as practiced by the people is a combination of Early Buddhism, Brahmanism, and local animistic beliefs in spirits inhabiting trees, mountains, rivers, and even one's own garden.

The more convincing basis for Buddhist humanism lies not in Buddhist metaphysical assumptions—matters which the historical Buddha was not always enthusiastic about addressing—but about its outlook on the human person and on the world. The Nan Tien Institute which belongs to the Mahayana tradition points to the very existence and events in the Buddha's life as basis for what it calls "Humanistic Buddhism." It says,

> We know that the founder of Buddhism, Sakyamuni Buddha was born into this world; he cultivated his spiritual development, attained enlightenment, and shared with others in this world the profound truth he had realised. The human world was emphasised in everything he did. Why did the Buddha not achieve Buddhahood in one of the other five realms? Why did he not attain enlightenment in one of the other ten dharma worlds? Why did he, instead, attain complete enlightenment as a human? There can only be one reason; the Buddha wanted the teachings of Buddhism to be relevant to the human world. The Buddha's very life as a human being has give us all an inspiration and a model for the spiritual path and for making our own lives a spiritual practice.[2]

Humanistic Buddhism as advocated by the Nan Tien Institute tries to overcome the perception that Buddhism is removed from humanity and the world, preoccupies itself with isolation, retreat to forests, and individual happiness. Instead, "Humanistic Buddhism encompasses all of the Buddhist teachings from the time of the Buddha to the present—whether they are derived from the three traditions. The goal of Humanistic Buddhism is the bodhisattva way; to be an energetic,

[2] Nan Tien Institute, "What is Humanistic Buddhism?" https://www.nantien.org.au/en/buddhism/knowledge-buddhism/what-humanistic-buddhism.

enlightened and endearing person who strives to help all sentient beings liberate themselves...[as] well as transforming our planet into a pureland of peace and bliss."[3] In other words, Buddhist humanism holds the conviction which is well stated by Daisaku Ikeda, "The Buddha is an ordinary human being; ordinary human beings are the Buddha" (1999, 384). This is the conviction that any individual can become a buddha – a fully-realized, enlightened person imbued with the noblest qualities of humanhood.

Indeed, humanistic Buddhism does not deny that the goal is to achieve personal emancipation by becoming a 'buddha' with the small 'b.' However, this goal does not have to conflict with the interest and wellbeing of others. On the contrary, they are integrally tied to the good of others. Thus, one cannot hope to be reborn with a better human status in the next life, or being reborn in one of the various heavenly realms, or even entering *nibbāna*, escaping completely from *saṃsāra*—the cycle of birth, death and rebirth—without leading a life that demonstrates concern for others as well. The Buddhist cosmogony comprises six realms ranging in various degrees of suffering. While beings can progress from one realm to another over numerous lifetimes, it is only in the human form that individuals can achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The Buddha himself never claimed to be anything more than a human being who managed to achieve enlightenment purely by human intelligence without any assistance from the divine or transcendent. He was confident through his own experience that humans had the potentiality to attain buddhahood if they worked hard enough.

For any individual striving for spiritual progress necessarily involves the work of eliminating the spiritual poisons or unwholesome roots that cause them to experience suffering and become trapped in *saṃsāra*. As opposed to the wholesome roots (*mula*)—the fundamental conditions in the mind that determine the moral quality—the unwholesome roots include greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). These poisons exist within each person in various degrees and manifest themselves in thoughts and actions in various expressions. Greed is the mental state in which one is unceasingly plagued by an insatiable feeling of need and want in his/her life. Even after the desire

[3] Ibid.

has been fulfilled, the feeling of satisfaction does not last and the feeling of lack inevitably returns. Greed can come in many forms including the desire to hoard material things while others go without or the need to achieve a high social status through material possessions. Hatred comprises a whole range of negative emotions such as disappointment, aversion, anxiety and dejection, and feelings of dissatisfaction towards oneself and others. They can manifest themselves in subtle words to belittle another person or outright violence against individuals and groups. Hate can also be seen in one's aversion to certain persons or things. The third poison is delusion, which is integrally tied to ignorance (*avijjā*). A person afflicted with this poison suffers confusion and lack of direction in life. This condition can easily lead to adopting false views on simple matters that concern one's everyday life to more serious positions of ideological dogmatism and fanaticism. Nyanatiloka Mahathera, one of the earliest westerners in modern times to become a Bhikkhu, remarked, "For all evil things, and all evil destiny, are really rooted in greed, hate and ignorance; and of these three things ignorance or delusion *(moha, avijja)* is the chief root and the primary cause of all evil and misery in the world. If there is no more ignorance, there will be no more greed and hatred, no more rebirth, no more suffering" (Quoted by O'Brien 2018).

In order to eliminate the unwholesome roots from one's life and to replace them with the wholesome roots of wisdom (*paññā*), generosity (*dāna*), and loving kindness (*mettā*), the Buddha proposed practicing the Noble Eightfold Path. This path combines moral virtues (*sīla*) with development of concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom or insight (*paññā*). According to the Buddha, all the Buddhas of the past traveled this path towards enlightenment and liberation from the cycle of birth, aging and death (S.II.12). The eight elements are often listed as follows:

1. Right view (*Sammā diṭṭhi*)
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 three factors of right speech, right action, and right living make up the *Sīla* group while the *Samadhi* group includes right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The *Paññā* group consists of right view and right thought. The diligent training and practice of these three stages results in higher moral discipline, higher consciousness, and higher wisdom, which is the condition that directly opposes the ignorance causing human suffering. To achieve the ultimate goal of wisdom, one must go through the training of the moral discipline, which serves as the foundation for training of concentration, which in turn serves as the foundation for training of higher wisdom. While the elements are listed in a sequential order, the process of training is not linear like a ladder; rather the three aspects of training are always present along the path, with each continuing to reinforce the other and in turn becomes further developed until perfection is achieved (Bhikkhu Bodhi 1998, 13). Therefore, this path is only linear in the metaphorical sense. If the training proves to be successful, the individual is imbued with all the factors in full measure. The successful completion of this path also results in the attainment of *nibbāna*, a state where all suffering associated with mundane existence has effectively ceased. While the presentation here is simple, the effort towards this spiritual summit is extremely strenuous, painstaking and gradual. One should not hope to make a quantum leap from one state to another by any means (Keown 2001, 102). According to the Buddha, intellectual as well as moral progress as prescribed by the Noble Eightfold Path is compulsory for the attainment of enlightenment or emancipation from the cycle of rebirth. He was extremely critical of any teachings that suggested full enlightenment could be achieved through an alternative route (D.II.151).

4. Buddhist Humanistic Environmental Virtues

The fundamental assumption of Buddhist environmental humanism is that the wellbeing and flourishing of humanity is integrally tied to the wellbeing and sustainability of nature. What is seemingly an individual effort at self-cultivation is not merely to achieve selfish

aims but involves transforming all the dimensions and all of the relationships in one's life – including the relationship with the natural environment. In the face of the ecological crisis, the present context demands awareness of the human-nature relationship as constituting a part of the totality of relationships. Therefore, the virtues and wisdom gained from the process of self-cultivation prescribed by the Noble Eightfold Path must also be applied to the relationship with nature as well as with other human beings. In other words, it is not enough for Buddhist self-cultivation to only impact one's relationship with family, friends, and fellow human beings but also need to be extended to all sentient beings, and in fact, the entire cosmos itself. Fortunately, while in ancient times, the ecological crisis was not in the mind of the Buddha or his followers, the fundamental Buddhist intuition that the boundaries of human relationships were much wider than what was in one's realm of being allows for re-examining Buddhist scriptural texts and re-contextualizing them for the present circumstances.

According to the Buddhist outlook, any problem in human life whether experienced on an individual or communal basis, can be traced to the unwholesome roots of greed, hatred, and delusion. Therefore, what we categorize as a personal, social, economic, or political problem are essentially ethical and spiritual in nature. Interpersonal conflicts can often easily be traced to one person being envious of the other (hatred). Economic inequality plaguing societies is often rooted in the desire to accumulate wealth while others go hungry (greed). Interreligious conflict can often be traced to people's ignorance of the faith and teachings of another religion and even of one's own religion leading to false beliefs and assumptions (delusion). While an unwholesome root may play a more prominent role in a particular problem, in fact, all three are usually present in an intertwining manner and often fuel one another. The poison of greed can fuel hatred, which in turn fuels delusion, which in turn motivates greed in a vicious unending cycle of negativity.

The environmental crisis, therefore, must be seen within this Buddhist framework of human moral degeneration where greed leads to such actions as deforestation and the exploitation of other natural resources for economic production. The delusion of human might and grandeur inspires the belief that infinite economic growth can be

achieved without negative consequences to the wellbeing of the earth and of humanity itself. The poisons of greed and delusion lead to actions of violence such as destroying habitats of animals, polluting life supporting water sources, poaching and hunting for economic gains and pleasure, etc. Therefore, the process of addressing the environmental crisis requires human beings to rectify their relationship with nature by internally rooting out the poisons that cause harm to the environment and the entities within that environment. 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 wellbeing 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.

Buddhist self-cultivation enables the individual to possess virtues that promote, among other things, environmental flourishing. The environmental crisis characterized by exploitative and destructive human-nature relationship can be rectified when human virtues are intentionally ordered towards improving it. This section explores a number of environmentally relevant virtues in Buddhist environmental humanism.

Loving kindness *(mettā)* and compassion *(karunā)*

Human solidarity with nature in the common experience of suffering can be demonstrated by the virtues of loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*). Loving kindness and compassion 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.I.183). Similarly, in the Karaniya Mettā Sutta of the Suttanipata (S.I.8), the Buddha exhorts the practitioner to exercise *mettā* to others no matter whether they are weak or strong, big or small, seen or unseen, near or far away, etc. Monks are enjoined also to have loving kindness even in the face of challenges and difficulties (M.I.123).

Along with loving kindness, the person who exhibits compassion towards others and has their wellbeing in mind ultimately makes progress in his/her own spiritual state. The stereotypical verse cited above about loving kindness also has its equivalent for compassion in the suttas. If a person practices compassion, "relishes it, desires it, and finds satisfaction in it. If he is firm in it, focused on it, often dwells in it, and has not lost it when he dies, he is reborn in companionship with the devas of streaming radiance" (A.II.129). Compassion is exemplified by the Buddha himself who is said to be the "one person who arises in the world…out of compassion for the world" (A.I.23) and is "practicing simply out of sympathy and compassion for living beings" (A.II.177). Compassion is exhibited in multiple forms, for example by giving material goods or by teaching the Dhamma (A.I.93). Indeed, the latter form of exhibiting compassion characterizes the Buddha who desired to show the people the path to liberation.

As one can see, loving kindness and compassion when practiced diligently by the Buddhist person has direct impact on the environment. 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 2007, 120). Simon P. James points out that someone who is truly compassionate extends his/her compassion to human as well as non-human beings. If one is only compassionate towards human beings, then one would not be considered a truly compassionate person. Thus, a person's dealings with non-human sentient beings, i.e., animals would reflect on his/her level of virtuousness (2007, 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/she goes about destroying rainforests which serve 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/she chooses 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 (*maddava*)

Closely related to loving kindness and compassion is the virtue of gentleness. Gentleness 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 (Dp.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.V.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 (The.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. 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/her actions which affect all the things around him/her. Environmental wellbeing 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.

Moderation and contentment

Moderation and contentment (*saṅtuṭṭhī*) serve as the antidote for the greed that is detrimental to one's quest for liberation. There is a plethora of texts in the Buddhist canon that exhorts the individual to exercise self-discipline and restraint in behavior, resisting temptation and indulgence in the senses. The Aggañña Suttra of the Dīgha Nikāya (D.III.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. 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 claims that there is a causal connection between human virtuousness and the state of the natural world. The lack of moderation, thus, can be seen as a cause of great detrimental effects not only to the surrounding environment, but also to one's own wellbeing. While Buddhism does not advocate abject poverty, the Buddha indeed taught that over 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 avoided. For the Buddha, a life that led to true happiness was not one controlled by sense desires, but rather a life of simplicity guided by wisdom and moral virtues.

Moderation is a virtue when it goes hand in hand with contentment (*Saṅtuṭṭhī*), which Buddhism greatly advocates. In the Suttas, time and time again the Buddha reminds the monks to be content with simple things and avoid desire of many things. In the Aṅguttara, the Buddha says: "Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome qualities to arise and arisen unwholesome qualities to decline as contentment. For one who is content, unarisen wholesome qualities arise and arisen unwholesome qualities decline" (A.I.13). In the same collection of discourses, the Buddha extolled the monk who is content with whatever robe, alms food, and lodging he receives as "diligent, clearly comprehending and ever mindful, is said to be standing in an ancient, primal noble lineage" (A.II.27-29). As new robes are received, the old ones are not tossed away but made use of as coverlets. Likewise, the old coversheets are turned into floor-sheets, the old floor-sheets become foot-towels, the old foot towels are used as dusters, and old dusters become floor-spreads (V.II.291). Thus, moderation is not only seen in how one obtains new things, but also demonstrated in how old things continue to be put to good use.

Contentment is opposed to non-contentment and craving (*tanhā*). G. P. Malalasekera interprets the Buddhist notion of *tanhā* in the following manner: "Tanhā is, rather what might be called thirst, the craving of the limited, individual living creature seeking to gratify itself in its separateness and to use the external world as a means to satisfy its self-centred needs. The evil in man's life is man-made and, therefore, eradicable by man, without outside interference" (1964, 152). Craving leads to suffering, or unsatisfactoriness because one is never fulfilled by the thing that one has and continues to look for fulfillment in impermanent things, an endeavor that is ultimately done in vain. While human craving leads us to think that more material possessions and greater material wealth is desirous, Buddhism teaches us that contentment is the "greatest riches" (Dp.204) whereas destruction of all cravings means overcoming

all suffering (Dp.21).

One can immediately see how moderation and contentment advocated by Buddhism would have profound effect on human-nature relationship and environmental wellbeing. By setting limits on one's lifestyle, focusing on what one truly needs rather than what one likes or what one wants, consumerism, and subsequently commodity production, is reduced. This leads to less strain on natural resources and results in improved ecological equilibrium. Possessing moderation and contentment also means true appreciation of the thing that one already possesses and intends to use it in the most meaningful way possible. Oftentimes, people discard a perfectly good mobile phone or tablet that they have been using simply because there is a new model out on the market that supposedly will bring about more satisfaction to the consumer. This behavior reflects a notion of trying to achieve happiness through possessing things rather than the kind of happiness achieved through non-acquisition. According to Apichai Puntasen, true happiness (*sukha*) in Buddhist thinking is not based on hedonistic acquisition, but is achieved "from giving, from meditation, or from helping others to be relieved from pain" (2007, 185). It is also derived from being able to rid the mind of various defilements that prevents its liberation. Puntasen asserts that true happiness ought not to be equated with "pleasure, prosperity, gratification or even enjoyment," but must be considered in terms of "wellness, peace and tranquility" (Ibid, 186).

Buddhism affirms that the feeling of discontentment with the thing that one already possesses is a sign that one will most likely feel the same towards other things that one desires but has yet to possess. Exercising moderation and having contentment with respect to the environment is ultimately a reflection of a person's sense of responsibility towards nature. It reflects one's awareness of the limited natural resources available for human use. It also reflects one's understanding that wanting more and owning more means placing unnecessary strains on nature. And it reflects one's understanding that one's behavior becomes the condition that gives rise to certain phenomena that take place in the world in accordance with the teaching of Dependent Origination. Thus, any spirituality that advocates simple living and contentment rather than constant striving for material possessions clearly reflects a sense of responsibility and

is naturally beneficial towards environmental wellbeing. With the state of the natural environment as it is, there is a great need at this time for simplicity and contentment on the part of human beings. As Donald Swearer remarks, "One chooses less so that all may flourish more" (1998, 93).

Generosity *(cāga)* and giving *(dāna)*

Generosity is the antidote for greed and attachment and is considered to be an essential quality of a superior person (*sappurisa*), alongside other important qualities of faith, morality, learning and wisdom (Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995). According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, generosity as a spiritual quality is important because "the goal of the path is the destruction of greed, hate and delusion, and the cultivation of generosity directly debilitates greed and hate, while facilitating that pliancy of mind that allows for the eradication of delusion" (Ibid). True generosity is the underlying impetus for the practice of *dāna parami*, the perfection of giving that brings about wholesome kamma essential to the path of enlightenment (Jootla 1995). Indeed, giving is an admirable act and Buddhism focuses a great deal on giving. However, the kind of giving that Buddhism is interested in is not just any act of giving, but those acts of giving that are motivated by the genuine internal disposition of generosity. Giving is so fundamental to Buddhism that the Buddha usually preached to newcomers by beginning with the topic of giving (V.I.15,18). Giving is also listed as the first of the ten perfections (*pāramitā*), which are necessary for anyone who aspires to travel the path towards arahantship. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Buddha specified eight motivations for giving: to insult the recipient, from fear, to reciprocate, expecting a future gift in return, because giving is good, because of the sense of justice, because of gaining a good reputation, and to ornament and equip the mind (A.IV.236). Among these, the Buddha taught that the most superior reason for giving is with the intention that it will benefit the effort to attain *nibbāna.*

The object of giving may be both material and non-material things. Material things include food, clothes, and money, while non-material things would be words of encouragement, and most important of all, the Dhamma itself. The gift of the Dhamma was given first by the Buddha, then subsequently by the monks. Lay people participate in giving the gift

of Dhamma by supporting the Sangha which has the direct mission of imparting this gift to the general public with essential material things. Besides giving to the recluses and brahmins, people are also expected to give to the destitute, wayfarers, wanderers and beggars. Moreover, the gift of a good person is given out of faith, given respectfully, given in a timely manner, given unreservedly, and given without injuring himself or others (A.III.173). In all these acts of giving, the Buddha said that the giver "is joyful before giving;" "has a placid, confident mind in the act of giving;" and "is elated after giving" (A.III.336). This demeanor is to be maintained even when the act of giving involves great self-sacrifice on the part of the giver. An illustration of this perfection in giving is cited by I.B. Horner when he selected the story of the hare from the Jātaka collection (J.308). In this story, a Sakka disguised as a famished brahmin (in reality, a Bodhisattva) approached the hare asking for food. Because the hare had nothing in his house to offer the religious man, he decided to offer himself, inviting the religious to eat him, then jumping into the fire. At the moment of self-sacrifice, the story recounts, "Then offering his whole body as a free gift he sprang up, and like a royal swan, alighting on a cluster of lotuses, in an ecstasy of joy he fell on the heap of live coals" (Francis and Neil 1897, 37). Fortunately, it was only Sakka's test of the hare's virtue, and the coal was made cool so as not to do any harm to the creature. In fact, instead of feeling the burning heat from the coal, the hare felt that it was icy cold.

How does the virtue of generosity reflected in the perfection of giving promote ecological wellbeing and flourishing? As can be observed, nature is of service to human beings, not only providing physical sustenance but also facilitating spiritual growth. There is no question that without nature, human beings cannot survive. Without the oxygen produced by plants, human beings would not be able to breathe. The processes taking place in nature are also extremely conducive to the spiritual progress of human beings when they meditate and reflect on them. The service that nature offers to human beings is constant and unceasing. The relationship of mutual service, by the very phrase, implies a reciprocal relationship and human beings must also put themselves at the service of nature. True service requires giving, and giving not just in a haphazard manner, but giving with a joyous and peaceful heart, giving out of true generosity.

The virtue of generosity responds to nature's generosity towards human beings with their own mode of generosity. Human generosity reflects their appreciation of the Buddhist doctrine of *kataññukatavedi* in which one is conscious of the favor that one receives and has the mind to reciprocate such favor. This is the teaching of gratitude that we apply not only to other human beings but to any entity that acts on their behalf. 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 (2011, 16). The virtue of generosity also strengthens human-nature relationship because it is the opposite of the defilements of selfishness and attachment that are so detrimental not only to human wellbeing but also to the wellbeing of nature. It would not be too difficult to realize that much of the environmental devastation taking place is due to human attachment to material possessions and selfishly accumulating them, causing great strains on natural resources and upsetting the ecological equilibrium. The generosity that human beings display towards nature has to be in a way that is appropriate to the human status in the world, reflecting the degree of ethical and spiritual development that they have undergone. Human generosity may be displayed through reforestation projects in order to maintain suitable habitats for animals and insects. Human generosity may be demonstrated in reducing the use of chemicals that are harmful to the natural environment and the atmosphere. It may take place through financial donations to projects that promote environmental sustainability, and organizations that publicize accurate information about environmental destruction and climate change. Generosity can also take place through supporting the Sangha and particular religious leaders to give spiritual guidance on environmental issues.

5. Conclusion: Buddhist Environmental Humanism as a Spirituality

As expressed in the previous sections, Buddhist humanism is based on the conviction that humanity has the capacity to achieve personal transformation through self-cultivation. This is done primarily

through the use of human reasoning combined with hard work and discipline. The outcome of this painstaking process is not only spiritual advancement for oneself but also improved human-human and human-nature relationships. Thus, when human beings become better versions of themselves, personal, communal and environmental problems plaguing humanity get resolved. Buddhist environmental humanism therefore is simply a specific aspect of the overall Buddhist humanistic project of cultivating virtues on behalf of self and others.

What I would like to stress regarding Buddhist environmental humanism, indeed, Buddhist humanism as a whole, is that it is not simply an 'ethic' but a 'spirituality.' The late Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1997) speaks of the human moral degeneration as a 'spiritual disease' that must be cured by the Dhamma. Indeed, he remarked 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.[4] Thus, the environmental crisis is not just a social crisis but at its root a spiritual crisis. Rectifying this situation cannot be just about coming up with scientific solutions or instituting legal measures that safeguard against environmental destruction. Rather it involves self-cultivation and spiritual transformation that translate into ethical actions on behalf of the natural environment. Our inner spirituality is also manifested in our relational life—our interactions and dealings with others around us. This paper affirms that the natural environment can appropriately constitute one of the kinds of relationships in our life that we can either nourish or harm by the kind of actions that we choose to take. Unfortunately, in our life, we give great priority to our human relationships, especially with members of our immediate family, kinship or ethnic group, but completely ignore or are unaware of our relationship with nature. Thus, we do not invest any effort into improving this relationship for the better. This paper suggests that we must expand our circle of relationship beyond the limit of humanity to include other entities, especially nature.

[4] 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.

The spirituality embedded in Buddhist environmental humanism also suggests that Buddhism is far from an 'escapist' spirituality. The aim for emancipation from mundane existence does not prevent us from caring for others in this world. On the contrary, compassion, loving kindness, generosity, responsibility, moderation, and a host of other Buddhist virtues that demonstrate care for others are precisely the means that help us to achieve this ultimate goal. In this manner, Buddhist aspirations are not much different from other religions, say Catholicism. Catholic theology asserts that caring for the things and people in this very world, especially the poor and the marginalized, is indeed the way to achieve eternal life in heaven (Mathew 25). Buddhism presents us with an ultimate vision of no more suffering and permanent happiness in *nibbāna*. Buddhism also teaches us to not be attached to things in this world, indeed not attached to even ourselves. But Buddhism does not advise us to be uncaring towards the things that belong to mundane existence. To be detached and to be uncaring should not be understood to be the same thing. Buddhist detachment does not in any way prevent us from being truly human and exercising relationally positive actions towards other people and things. Thus, there is no reason to charge Buddhists who are engaged in social issues related to the environment or to the poor as being inauthentic in their Buddhist belief. Some cynical people may take issue with the notion of a "world-loving" or "world-affirming" Buddhist. However, if Buddhist humanism is understood correctly, there is nothing inherently wrong with this disposition. In fact, Buddhist humanism affirms that one cannot be authentically Buddhist without striving to be fully human, that is, being human in the noblest sense of the word, and totally imbued with the virtues that demonstrate love and compassion to a suffering world. The quote attributed to St Irenaeus of Lyons (2nd cent.), "Man fully alive is the glory of God" is often used to illustrate the essence of Christian humanism. For Buddhist humanism and its implications for environmental flourishing, we can assert that *'Human beings fully realized is the glory of the cosmos.'*

References

Bhikkhu Bodhi. "Introduction." In *Dāna: The Practice of Giving,* edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi. 1995. http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel367.html.

Bhikkhu Bodhi. *The Noble Eightfold Path: the Way to the End of Suffering.* Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1998.

Buddhadasa. "The Natural Cure for Spiritual Disease: a Guide into Buddhist Science." 1997. http://www.suanmokkh.org/archive/arts/ret/natcure1a.htm.

Chiariello, Paul. "Buddhism & Humanism: Two Sides of the same Coin, Part 1." *Applied Sentience,* May 23, 2014. https://appliedsentience.com/2014/05/23/buddhism-humanism-two-sides-of-the-same-coin-part-1/.

Francis, H.T. and R.A. Neil. *The Jataka, Vol. III.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897.

Hayward, Tim. "Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem." *Environmental Values* 6, no. 1 (1997): 49–63.

James, Simon P. "Against Holism: Rethinking Buddhist Environmental Ethics." *Environmental Values* 16, no. 4 (2007): 447–461.

Jootla, Susan E. "The Practice of Giving." In *Dāna: The Practice of Giving,* edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi. 1995. Retrieved from http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel367.html.

Kalupahana, David J. "Buddhism and Chinese Humanism." This paper was presented at a Symposium on Chinese Humanism, sponsored by the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy during a special session of the American Philosophical Association, March 25, 1977.

Keown, Damien. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

Malalasekera, G. P. "The Status of the Individual in Theravada Buddhism." *Philosophy East and West XIV*, no. 2 (1964): 145–56.

Nichiren. "The True Aspect of All Phenomena." In *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin.* Tokyo: Soka Gakkei, 1999.

Norton, Bryan. *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

O'Brien, Barbara. "The Three Poisons." *Learn Religions,* June 23, 2018. https://www.learnreligions.com/the-three-poisons-449603.

Phra Dharmakosajarn. *Dharma and Environmental Preservation*. Bangkok, Thailand: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Press, 2011.

Puntasen, Apichai. "Buddhist Economics as a New Paradigm towards Happiness." *Society and Economy* 29, no. 2 (2007): 181-200.

Sahni, Pragati. *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Swearer, Ronald K. "Buddhist Virtue, Voluntary Poverty, and Extensive Benevolence." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 26, no. 1 (1998): 71–103.

Pali Canon Texts

Bhikkhu Bodhi (Trans.). *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Second edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003.

Bhikkhu Bodhi (Trans.). *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Complete Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya*. Annotated edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012.

Bhikkhu Nanamoli (Trans.). *The Middle Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya.* Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995.

Oldenberg, H., and R. Pischel (Trans). *Therıgatha*. London: PTS, 1966.

Oldenberg, H., and R. Pischel (Eds). *Vinaya Piṭaka*. Vol. IV, PTS, 1879-1883.

Sangharakshita (Trans.). *Dhammapada: The Way of Truth*. Tra edition. Windhorse Publications Ltd, 2013.

Walshe, Maurice (Trans.). *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikāya*. Second edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995.

Windish, E. (Ed.). *Itivuttaka*. London: PTS, 1889.