

Environmentalism and Zen Buddhism

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The problem of continual degradation of the earth's environment has concerned me since childhood. I would guess that this stems from my family's frequent backpacking trips into the backwoods of Washington state. One particular trip, when I was around ten, found us about five miles into the deep forests of the Cascade mountain range. As we approached a ridge on the trail, the beautiful tree canopy abruptly stopped and we were met with a clear-cut - complete with large diesel tractors and workmen and dead stumps that continued for acres and acres. I felt betrayed and confused. I hadn't yet learned of the hypocrisy surrounding the forest service. In my young, naïve mind, these lands were safeguarded from any kind of desecration; a promise had been broken. I had not understood that having the forest service manage our public parks was like asking the cat to mind the mouse. Today, these same atrocities against our public parks and environment continue at an accelerated rate, even though we are able to recognize the negative impacts such behavior has upon human health. There seems to be no end to what the human race will do in the name of technological "progress."

At this point, the environmentally aware have two options: become overwhelmed by frustration or act in ways which can benefit the situation, even if it seems futile at times. It is easy to give up, but if

one does decide to rise to the challenge and make a difference, there needs to be an impetus for change, other than an anthropocentric one, for that way is short-sighted and flawed in that it sees the environment purely as commodity. Aldo Leopold suggests in his Sand County Almanac that what we need is a "land ethic," a new way of thinking of the environment as we do of people, and that if we do, we will start treating the land better. A good way to accomplish this is through religion, since it is from there that we acquire much of our ethics. To put it another way, "[t]he world's religions in all their complexity and variety remain one of the principal resources for symbolic ideas, spiritual inspiration, and ethical principles" (Tucker and Grim xviii). It seems as though Buddhism, and further Zen Buddhism, may offer ecology or environmentalism or conservationism (or any other "ism" in relation to the preservation of the natural world) a new perspective upon the problem of implementing a "land ethic." There are many reasons to believe this, as the following work will show. I hope to determine whether or not Zen can be considered an ecological discipline. Does it make a contribution (negative or positive) to a land ethic? And further, what does Zen think of the conservation movement? What does environmentalism think of Zen?

Before these questions can be addressed, it is first necessary to discuss the problem of Buddhism and ethics. This is a rather involved question and could be a topic for discussion in its own right. Some theorists have labeled Buddhism as amoral, and if this is so, then this paper has a neat and quick end, for if Buddhism contains no ethics, then to apply it to an ethical question would

be useless and impossible (dare I say, *unethical?*). The argument, it seems, is that not even the precepts teach a “right versus wrong;” they are open to interpretation. For example, according to Robert Aitken, the first precept, “no killing” or “not killing” does not plainly direct the Buddhist to abstain from killing anyone or thing, it simply says, “no thoughts of killing.” If interpreted irresponsibly, one could say that it is acceptable to kill, as long as one keeps one’s mind empty (*The Mind of Clover*, 5). The work of the precepts, then, is to assume some basic understanding of ethics even before one attempts to apply the precepts to human behavior. That is to say, it is quite evident to the survival of the human species that we must not kill each other. Society and its necessary laws teach us that. In any event, to keep the paper on topic, it shall be assumed that Buddhism is ethical.

The term “environmentalism” is itself a broad category that requires defining and refining for the purpose of this essay. This term has come to reflect groups as diverse as Earth Liberation Front (or E.L.F.), Greenpeace, Earthfirst!, Natural Resources Defense Council, World Wildlife Federation, Nature Conservancy, and so on. These groups represent a wide range of environmental ethics, from the extremist tactics displayed by E.L.F. (torching SUV’s) to the benign activities of the Nature Conservancy (purchasing land). While I will not delve into these organization’s individual ethics, given that that is not the subject of this paper, I would like to focus upon the category of Deep Ecology, perhaps even Spiritual Deep Ecology, which may be present in some of these groups. Deep Ecologists tend to turn their nose up at such groups

as the Nature Conservancy. According to D.H. Henning;

“[s]hallow ecology... assumes that it is possible to go on with business as usual if we do things more carefully while increasing our human populations, technology, and economies. By doing things more carefully to nature, we will not have to question ourselves, our values, or our world view in terms of controlling nature. In contrast, Deep Ecology, such as that inherent in Buddhism, assumes that we cannot continue business as usual” (*Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, 78).

Henning is suggesting that the “shallow ecology” practiced by such groups as the Nature Conservancy is not being entirely truthful because they avoid questioning themselves. They purchase parcels of undeveloped land to set aside, thinking that that will be enough to offset the poisoning of the landscape on other, sometimes adjacent, lands. Deep Ecology, then, seeks a change through self-examination, much as Zen does through meditation. According to Roger Gottlieb, however, things look a little different, “...deep ecology is capable of its own kind of fundamentalism, its own blindness to its own moral failings and the possibility of being one-sided, narrow, and dictatorial” (Gottlieb 25). A good example of a deep ecologist who displays these symptoms is Doug Thompkins, former owner of the clothing company Espirit. He lives in a remote preserve that bisects Chile and, with his wife, is trying to stop the unchecked clear-cutting that is going on there. While his intentions are good, he tends to ignore the complexities of the political, social, and religious systems in place there. Spiritual deep ecology, on the other hand, “must beware the way deep ecology can combine, however

inconsistently, or uneasily, with ‘other’ things that are not so pretty [like Nazi’s love of nature]” (Gottlieb 25). In other words, spiritual deep ecology is, or needs to be, self-critical in a way that deep ecology is not. Perhaps it is a question of extremes, or middles, similar to the middle way in Buddhism. This self-questioning and moderate nature seems to point to spiritual deep ecology as having something in common with Zen.

Just as there are varying examples of environmentalism, so are there many groups in Buddhism. Among the three main sects of Buddhism - Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana - there are different sects within Zen - Soto and Rinzai are two that come immediately to mind. Apart from sects a new term has arisen within the last twenty years or so called “Engaged Buddhism.” This Buddhist “movement” seeks to address contemporary problems with the help of Buddhism, and can be present in any of the schools or sects. It is from this perspective that I will primarily write upon, and since Engaged Buddhism is not always from a Zen perspective, there may be some investigations that take place outside of Zen, but will be kept to a minimum wherever possible.

Zen can be thought to contain many references to the environment, such as in their anecdotes and sutras as well as their literature, all which take place within the tradition. A good example is from the poetry of Dogen;

“Snow covering the red blossoms,
Unfettered by the dusty world;
Is it too cluttered even in this secluded mountain –
Who can really say?”

When a single plum blossom
opens,
Therein is held the awakening
Of the exquisite beauty of
spring” (Heine 128).

This beautifully written poem contains images of nature in almost every line, as does much of Dogen’s poetry. Images of the natural world are so intertwined that the opening of a plum blossom is used as a metaphor for the moment of enlightenment. While this is not unusual for either a religion or even poetry to perform in this way, Zen clearly holds the natural world in high reverence. This alone does not prove that Zen has an environmentalist slant. However, there are other examples that make it clear this was a possibility perhaps as far back as Shakyamuni’s time.

One of these considerations from the standpoint of Buddhism, and also within Zen, is the concept of *pratityasamutpada* – the idea that there is co-dependent or interdependent relationships throughout the world. This idea is similar to the idea of ecosystems in that there are species that rely upon one another for survival. In this way, one cannot live without or outside the system and not effect the other species that co-exist with them. This sounds environmentalist; however, Ian Harris does not see it the same way, stating that associating the two concepts “...presupposes a certain teleology and an accompanying belief in the predictability of cause/effect relations” (46). He insists that to have a Buddhist environmental ethic, one must first prove the “predictability of cause/effect relations.” I suppose this makes sense in that to have any kind of a system, there must be present some sort of chain

reaction that effects other organisms within the system. Without it, you have chaos, an absence of any order, and his paper seems to be a support of that complicated theory. It seems this would be in direct contradiction to the popular idea in ecology that supposes a delicate balance within a biosphere or ecosystem. This delicate balance could, according to this theory, be thrown out of balance easily by the extinction of just one organism. On the other hand, there is a rather new idea within environmentalism that posits the absence of any such balance and instead suggests that the “system” is in a state of constant flux – plants and animals in a vicious battle for supremacy, or at least basic survival. In this sense, the latest ecosystem theory is closer to the theory of chaos.

I find it hard to grasp most of Harris’ thesis, and am unsure that a Buddhist environmental ethic cannot exist without a teleologic slant, especially since ideas of karma are so embedded within the tradition. Harris does acknowledge, “in this manner the time-bound and soteriologically meaningful concepts of karma..., so crucial to the whole idea of Buddhist praxis are made comprehensible” (Harris 46). I don’t understand all that Harris is trying to say, but it seems to me that his denying to address further the problem of karma is a weak point in his argument. Karma, as he states, is paramount to Buddhism, but to discount cause/effect relationships within the tradition is to deny further the idea or importance of karma, since at its essence is cause/effect. If Harris does this, then it seems to me that he has stepped outside Buddhism entirely.

Kenneth Kraft in his article, “Nuclear Ecology and Engaged Buddhism” presents an interesting idea

of karma, and how it could offer a solution to modern complexities. As he puts it, “in many cases we really have no idea what the consequences of our actions will be. Technology dilutes, amplifies, or camouflages the effects of action in such complicated ways that ethical evaluation of action becomes commensurately complex” (Kraft 274). In ancient Japan or China or even India, political, social and religious systems were far less complex than they are today, therefore karma was rather easy to track. But in modern times, one cannot be sure of the ethical implications of something as simple as turning on a light switch because the power source could be a potentially damaging one, such as nuclear. He goes on to say that, “[a]t the very least, previous thinking about karma needs to be extended or adapted” (275). He offers “eco-karma” as a modern solution that would “...illuminate the ethical dimensions of actions that affect the environment...” (277). Kraft does acknowledge that this evolution of karma changes the idea from ancient Buddhist text, but is that a negative development? This new “eco-karma” could be used in conjunction with Leopold’s aforementioned “land ethic” to create a new compassion for the planet which I think is sorely lacking. If we began to consider all members of the biota as having an equal right to exist, then the “eco-karma” could be a way to implement this new way of thinking of the environment.

John Daido Looi, in his article, “The Precepts and the Environment” supports *pratityasamupada* as a means of justifying a Buddhist environmental ethic. He states, “...when one thing arises, all things arise simultaneously. And everything has a mutual causality: what happens to one thing happens to

the entire universe...all of the pieces and the whole thing at once are one thing” (177). In a sense, he negates Harris’ thesis because Looi’s version does not dwell just upon the interconnectedness of things, and therefore their cause and effect, but the idea that nothing is differentiated, that, “all things have a mutual identity” (177). This would mean that ultimately, nothing is different from one another (that everything consists of minute atomic particles) so that the reliance upon cause and effect diminishes or perhaps ends altogether; cause and effect can only be said to take place between more than one thing, therefore, what is there to cause or effect?

My own, fairly uneducated opinion (in comparison with those of the scholars afore mentioned) on *pratityasamutpada* is to accept it at face value. One thing that both these scholars tend to overlook is that, as I understand Buddhism and further, Zen, the experience is supposed to be beyond the critical or analytical mind. I think that this relates to the idea of faith, perhaps. But then one could question why study Buddhism or even Zen at all, if it is all “just” faith, then one surely cannot make logical sense of it. This is a good topic for further expansion.

So far I have been looking for ways in which Zen Buddhism displays an environmental ethic. But are there ways in which it does not? That is to say, does it display a distinctly anti-environmental attitude? Malcolm David Eckel explains that the Dalai Lama (although not of a Zen perspective) believes that the “expressed aim of Buddhism’...[is] the purification and development of the mind” (329). This would seem to suggest that the focus is not upon the outlying world and its

problems, but upon the inner-workings of the human mind. While this is not completely anti-nature, it does suggest a certain disconnectedness from the problems of it. On the other hand, if one is concentrating upon one’s own “mind,” then does that not include one’s own actions and their repercussions upon their surroundings – or environment?

Ruben Habito’s essay looks at this problem from a Zen point of view. He does mention, like the Dalai Lama, the inward focus as a deterrent, but also “the emphasis in Zen writings and teachings on ‘living in the present moment’” that “may give practitioners the misguided impression that Zen practice discourages thinking about or has nothing to do with one’s individual or the earth’s communal future” (167). According to Habito, this is a misguided interpretation of the Zen dictum. He describes this as a “one-sided emphasis.” I would have to agree with Habito in that it is extremely one-sided, and therein lies the heart of the problem: not following the “middle way.”

In the end, this entire paper displays an innate problem that is virtually impossible to escape: the western mind reading itself into a non-western tradition. As Malcolm David Eckel asks, “is the image of Buddhism as an ecologically friendly tradition simply an artifact of the Western imagination? Or is it possible that the Buddhist tradition is a complex combination of ideas and aspirations, some of which are positively disposed toward the environment and some of which are not?” (329). I tend to agree with him that there are some points that support it and others that do not, though I’m not sure that a person can deconstruct a religion, practice it, and still call it by the same name. Perhaps

there is another title that we can give it. Whatever direction the future may hold for a Buddhist environmental ethic, we need to keep in mind our own “collective cultural perception,” as Lewis Lancaster calls it. He states,

“It is not so easy to make these determinations about the Buddhist traditions, and we may run the risk of using the collective perceptions of our Western heritage as a template for defining the principles that we attribute to Buddhism. We may seek only to find expressions and practices in Buddhism that can be interpreted as supportive of ethical norms and values established in our modern and postmodern era” (4).

In writing this essay, I have inadvertently created my own “template” to read into Buddhism what I feel is somehow there. I do not feel that I have answered any of my questions, at least not to my satisfaction. However, the fact that there are others (much more learned than I) who are asking these same questions is comforting, but I’m not sure that as of yet, at least from the limited research I have done on this subject, anyone has found a solid base for a strictly Buddhist environmental ethic. Still, I remain hopeful, for in my opinion, nothing less than the future of our planet as a livable place is at stake. If we can find a way to value nature, through Buddhism or anything else, then maybe there will still be a chance for future generations to experience the true safeguarding of our wild places.

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