Buddhism and Environmental Ethics

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In our current state of global environmental crisis, pro-environment philosophy has to look wherever it can for justification in the protection of the environment. It makes sense to look to religious belief as a source of possible moral justification for the green movement, but it is also important not to make assumptions about whether these ideas are compatible (particularly in western interpretations of eastern religions). Buddhism is usually seen as an eco-friendly religion by western people on its surface, but certain basic concepts are not so explicit in this sense. Upon closer consideration, though, these conflicts are due more to the anachronism of applying western philosophical ideas to eastern ways of thought than any true incompatibility. Buddhism, particularly the forms of engaged Buddhism championed by teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh and Sulak Sivaraksa, is highly compatible with environmental activism because of doctrines like interdependent co-arising and compassion for all sentient beings.

The roots of Buddhism in Theravada or foundational Buddhism say little about the moral value of the environment, but the tradition is clearly compatible with environmentalist views. As Stephanie Kaza puts it in her piece on Buddhist environmental activists, “Though the history of Buddhist environmentalism is short, it has as its substance bright minds suggesting new ways to look at things, teachers and writers inspiring others to address the challenges, and fledgling

attempts to practice ecospiritual activism based in Buddhist principles."[1] A great deal of these environmental interpretations have sprung up among western sects of Buddhism in particular, in response to the current environmental crisis. Interpretations of the bodhisattva vow (a vow to reach enlightenment for the sake of all beings) in Mahayana Buddhism have inspired huge groups of people to take action behind leaders like Thich Nhat Hanh to protect the environment for the sake of all beings. Long-standing traditions of forest monks in Thailand (where Theravada is the primary form of Buddhism practiced), having been threatened by loggers in their homeland, have famously taken to the ordination of trees as monks (a practice which has taken up in the West as well). Additionally, the Jain and Buddhist doctrine of *ahimsa,* or no-harm, fits right in with modern environmentalism, although its application can raise debate because of different interpretations among different sects.

A stronger critique of Buddhism, from the perspective of environmental ethics, revolves around the principle of impermanence and the human focus of achieving enlightenment.

> "*Prima facie*, the Buddhist doctrines about suffering and impermanence seem to imply a world-negating outlook, one that cannot be reconciled with the drive to conserve or protect the natural world, and similarly the doctrine of emptiness and not-self suggest that there is no 'thing' in the world that can have intrinsic value."[2]

What in the natural world is there to protect, if there is no eternal world or self? This thought is especially prevalent in Foundation or Pali canon Buddhism, which is embodied today in

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[1] Stephanie Kaza. "To Save All Beings: Buddhist Environmental Activism." In *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, edited by Christopher S. Queen, (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000) 164.
[2] Collette Sciberras. "Buddhist Philosophy and the Ideals of Environmentalism." (Durham University, 2010) 7.

Theravada Buddhism alone. "[T]he teachings found in the Pali canon cannot easily be reconciled with a belief in the intrinsic value of life… all beings are seen as impermanent and insubstantial, while the ultimate spiritual goal is often viewed, in early Buddhism, as involving a deep renunciation of the world."[3] The canon can be seen as being "speciesist" because it does not explicitly give nonhuman animals moral significance; however, this is a shallow interpretation of the Pali canon.

It is true that, in foundational Buddhism, humans are the only ones who can reach enlightenment. According to this view, every being that is living is doing so because of negative karma and the cycle of rebirth; every being that was born as something other than a human (male) is so because of negative karma. It is easy for westerners to see this as a "speciesist" view, because it seems to make it very easy to write off any bad treatment of living things in the environment since they must have deserved it. However, as Sciberras argues in her dissertation "Buddhist Philosophy and the Ideals of Environmentalism", this criticism comes from the anachronism of applying a modern philosophical idea to Buddhism that does not fit in with its classical teachings. Although humans are indeed seen as being closer to enlightenment than other sentient beings, this does not mean that the lives and sufferings of other sentient beings have no value. The idea that a human incarnation is better or more useful than a rebirth as a mosquito does not in the least cancel out the idea that people should do their best to alleviate the suffering of and act with compassion toward all beings "regardless of their intelligence or any other traits… [U]ltimately, in Buddhism, nature, life, and beings cannot be said to have

[3] Ibid. 1.

either positive or negative value."[4] Contrary to the Western tendency to label things as good or bad, Buddhism focuses on the empty nature of everything. Everything is neutral.

In the classical tradition, the charge of anachronism inherent in rooting around for environmental ideas is a really important one which Sciberras brings up. She suggests that "the problem only arises if we insist on taking every teaching literally, without allowing for different contexts, perspectives, and attitudes of the early Buddhists"[5]. Buddhism is an old and dynamic philosophy; some teachings have become less relevant over time. Because of this, the same argument that people tend to have with fundamentalist Christianity is applied to the idea of strictly following the Buddhist teachings. For example, there is a valid argument against fundamentally following the teachings of the Christian Bible when that practice leads people to believe that the earth is 6,000 years old despite conclusive evidence that it is not. Knowing the age of the earth wasn't really important when the Bible was written as it is now that we seek truth in different ways, for different reasons. Similarly, the Pure Lands discussed in certain sects (basically a gilded place where one can be reborn with all the tools necessary for enlightenment) are usually described as having no animals or wild nature. Rather than representing an anti-environment outlook for Buddhism, however, this view is probably more reflective of "the preferences and values of the times and place, where things like gold and jewels were prized more highly than jungles, wild animals and so forth"[6]. Again, it is not good

[4] Ibid, 7-8.
[5] Ibid, 11-12.
[6] Ibid, 12.

practice to say that these views are incompatible with environmentalism just because consideration of the natural world was not a priority when the Pali canon was set down.

It is important to note that Buddhism is by no means a static religion. "From the Theravada traditions in tropical South and Southeast Asia, to the Mahayana Schools in… China and Japan, to the Vajrayana lineages in mountainous Tibet- Buddhist teachings have been received, modified, and elaborated in many ecological contexts"[7]. One major idea in the religion is the turning of the wheel of dharma, which in this case can be thought of as the "sense that Buddhism is undergoing a major evolutionary shift at the turn of the millennium"[8]. Despite a history of certain Buddhist nonchalance toward the environment, in these modern times people are starting to realize that what they do affects other living beings. Because of the principle of interdependent co-arising (*paticcasamuppada*), where all beings (particularly humans, who have ben gifted the faculty to make a greater impact on the world as individuals) need to help each other reach enlightenment in order to be truly compassionate in the sense of a bodhisattva, environmental activism makes sense as a new evolution in Buddhist practice.

In the concept of Mahayana Buddhism particularly, practitioners are encouraged to take the bodhisattva vow as a potential way in for. This vow to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings becomes a problem when people can't agree on a definition of sentience. Those in the animal kingdom are almost universally accepted; but plants, mushrooms, and even crystals are food for argument over the meaning of sentience (especially depending on your form of Buddhism). The principles of reincarnation in the Mahayana belief system allow the

[7] *Kaza, "To Save All Beings",* 165.
[8] Ibid. 160.

aggregate of a being to be present in any of these forms in the cycle of rebirth- coming closer, through the acquisition of merit, to a human form which is capable of reaching enlightenment. The significance of the Bodhisattva vow is that it expands the quest for enlightenment beyond an anthropocentric goal. Each person that takes the bodhisattva vow has pledged to serve every living being with compassion until each of the beings has become enlightened. This pledge is supposed to last until then exactly- eons, if necessary, and not within the course of a single human life but for every further reincarnation of the vow taker.

Another Buddhist doctrine that fits in well with modern environmental thought is that of *ahimsa.* The principle of *ahimsa*, or no-harm, comes out of the concept of interdependent co-arising present as "the first prescription of the *Noble Eightfold Path*"[9]: right view. This inclusive view is basically that there is no enduring, individual self- all beings are fundamentally connected in form and nothingness simultaneously, and all are traveling together on the path toward enlightenment. In contrast with the Abrahamic view that people should do good things because they will go to Hell or be punished by God if they don't, in Buddhism because of this concept of no self (*anatman*), nobody is separate from any other being and so we must act with total compassion toward each for the sake of everything. From this, we get *ahimsa*.

In modern Buddhist environmental ethics, a dilemma proceeding from the interpretation of a*himsa* shows up in the case of the cane toad in Australia. This highly invasive species, which threatens a number of native species and is known to transmit disease to

[9] Cathy J. Byrne, "Would a Buddhist Freeze a Cane Toad? An Exploration of the Modern Phenomenon of Environmental Buddhism and the Ethics Related to The Doctrine of Ahimsa (non-harming)" in *Contemporary Buddhism,* Vol. 7, No. 2 (November 2006) 118.

humans, has been slowly and (supposedly) painlessly frozen to death as a method of population control in recent years. The appropriate Buddhist take on this issue has been a source of much debate between different sects. On one hand, taking life is one of the acts specifically forbidden by the Buddha, the 'Five Precepts'. On the other hand, monks and bodhisattvas are expected not only to *not harm* living beings, but to *protect* them. What are we to do when protecting the survival of endangered species requires killing members of another species, particularly when humans are responsible for the introduction of the latter species? Do the ends of preserving biodiversity justify the means of killing the toads? This dilemma can be illustrated by one famous *jataka* tale (tales of the Buddha's past lives before he became enlightened) in which the Buddha is depicted as a sailor on a ship that is invaded by pirates. Instead of allowing the pirate to kill the people aboard his ship, the Buddha's previous incarnation kills the pirate. He does this not to protect his fellow sailors, but to save the pirate from all the negative karma of killing them by taking the negative karma of killing the pirate unto himself. So you can see where the argument comes from- maybe it would be better for people to take the negative karma of killing the toads upon themselves to protect the toads from being responsible for the deaths of future species. Is it more of a priority to follow the Five Precepts, or to follow the Buddha's own example? The closest thing we have to a solution, as the Dalai Lama suggests, in this case, is that "a combination of skillful means and insight"[10] must be used.

The principle of skillful means in Buddhism is the appropriate way to interpret (and, in many cases, to spread) the teachings of the Buddha (the *dharma*). This varies greatly from case

[10] Byrne, "Cane Toad", 121.

to case, which is one of the things that makes Buddhist ethics difficult- nothing is cut and dried. At least as far as the doctrine of karma is concerned, one's intent is of the utmost importance when trying to decide on the best course of action. As long as one is not taking joy in the killing of other beings and is mindful of the moral gravity of the act, one could argue for the killing of toads being appropriate in this instance rather than letting them thrive at the expense of future beings. On the other hand, biological diversity as a concept isn't necessarily supported by Buddhist teachings. These insights and interpretations are very important to all aspects of Buddhist ethics.

A recent Western interpretation of the bodhisattva vow has been incarnated in the practices of those who call themselves ecosattvas. One particular group of these Buddhist environmental activists is closely connected with the Green Gulch Zen Center in California; their major cause is to save the ancient giant redwoods from being logged unsustainably after a corporate buyout of forested land in the mid-eighties. "They wanted to know: What does it mean to engage in environmental activism from a Buddhist perspective?"[11] For an answer, the looked to current Buddhist teachers.

One modern Buddhist figure in particular has spoken out extensively in favor of environmental activism through engaged Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese monk (and expatriate) who has gone around the world teaching the dharma as a message of peace to thousands of people, including Wendy Johnson, one of the leaders of the aforementioned Green Gulch Zen Center. As Perry and Fine quote him, "We protect the Earth because we are

[11] Kaza, "To Save All Beings", 159.

motivated by compassion and respect for all things, animate and inanimate…when we realize our nature of *interbeing*, we will stop blaming and killing, because we know that we *inter-are.*"[12] The ecosattva is an engaged Buddhist activist who believes that peace in the environment is better on the path of all beings to enlightenment, because if we are killing other sentient beings we are only hurting ourselves- all of ourselves.

At its core, Buddhism is not a specifically environmentalist religion- it was founded in order to relieve suffering. However, a growing number of Buddhist leaders have taken it as a skillful means to teach the importance of environmental care as a part of the practice of compassion. The spread of Buddhism to the west has brought together different ways of thinking about that world on both sides, and as modern destruction of wildlife habitat and other important pieces of nature such as watersheds, Buddhism has come to be seen as one of the most environmentally friendly religions. These environmental justice practices are not explicitly spoken of by the Buddha, and there is still far to go for these practices to be universal within the Buddhist community, but these ecological views are definitely at least compatible with the Buddhist way of life. As the religion develops and changes, hopefully it can grow to give more people a reason to preserve the earth and all beings that live upon it so that they will not suffer.

[12] Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine. "All Buddhism is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing." In *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, edited by Christopher S. Queen, (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000) 53.