Buddhist Ecological Thought and Action in North America

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Introduction

I will discuss some of the ways that Buddhist ideas and practices have influenced environmental ethics in contemporary North America. Time will permit only a brief overview of this topic. Therefore, I wish to emphasize at the very start that my remarks will be cursory and incomplete. Today in North American there are Buddhists and Buddhist temples of every type and description. The people who go to these temples might be Asian Americans who were born into Buddhist families or they might be converts from other ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, it is not uncommon today to see Buddhists of a variety of backgrounds interacting with one another. For example, a Buddhist temple in Los Angeles might have a congregation with families of Thai and Vietnamese and Anglo backgrounds while the priests are from Burmese, Japanese, or European background. The Buddhism that they practice together will be both similar to and different from the Buddhism found in Asia. Since I cannot begin to describe all Buddhists, I will devote my time to just one key aspect of the topic of Buddhist environmental ethics in North America.

I want to focus on the idea of “nature” and especially the ways that Buddhism is identified as a religion with a special affinity to nature. Today environmental activists, Buddhist teachers, and university professors in North America (and Europe) frequently assume that one of the distinctive features of Buddhism as a religion lies in the special value it places on the natural world (e.g., Allendorf 1997; Barash 1973). The idea that Buddhism is linked to nature begins in Europe and America at a time when Buddhism itself was still unknown in the West. Its roots can be found not in Buddhist teachings themselves, but in the artistic movement called Romanticism. Despite the rapid increase in the number of Buddhists and the ever expanding amount of knowledge about Buddhism since that time, Buddhist teachers continue to repeat the ideas of Romanticism as Buddhism and, in North America, to link them to the religious ideas of Native Americans. To explain this process, my talk will consist of four parts.

First, I will discuss the ways that Buddhism and Nature were first linked together. I
will illustrate this linkage by citing two romantics, the American writer Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) and the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890). Second, I will discuss the ways that Native American religious ideas are used to link Buddhism with nature in contemporary North American Buddhism. For examples, I will cite Joan Halifax, Joanne Macy, and Gary Snyder. All three of these people have been extremely influential among Buddhist intellectuals for promoting an ecological Buddhism that draws upon a Native American religious worldview. Third, I will list some of the criticisms directed against this ecological Buddhism. In recent years a number of university professors have argued that contemporary ecological interpretations of Buddhism actually ignore or distort traditional Buddhist teachings as found either in Buddhist scriptures or in premodern Asian societies. Fourth, I will conclude by discussing how American Buddhists respond to these criticisms.

Part 1: Buddhism as a Religion of Nature

I begin by highlighting the dichotomy between the Enlightenment versus Romanticism. The Enlightenment arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as an intellectual movement which sought to liberate human knowledge from the rigid religious dogma of medieval times. It did so by celebrating the power of human reason and by directing that reason to the goals of knowledge, freedom, and happiness. European began to rely on experimental sciences and mathematics to understand the universe in terms of a few simple laws, which human beings could discover by their own powers of direct observation and correct logic. Man, as the agent of reason, thus became the measure of all things. The Enlightenment saw man’s reason as universal, abstract, cold, unemotional, objective, truthful, and of supreme value. Anything lacking this reason was devalued. Certain types of humans who were seen as lacking full reason as well as all animals, plants, and landscapes were placed on a lower plane of existence. They were to be pitied, controlled, tamed, and exploited. Their ultimate value existed only in their usefulness for human consumption. What could not be used, could be destroyed.

Romanticism arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a literary and artistic reaction against the Enlightenment’s rationalism and physical materialism. It celebrated the imagination over reason, the personal and individual over the universal, the concrete over the abstract, hot emotions over cool detachment, and the subjective over objectivity. Two main themes run through romanticism: First, romanticism is preoccupied with the individual personality, its moods and emotional states, especially the personality of the exceptional genius, hero, or artist. This exceptional genius is celebrated as someone who endures powerful passions and inner struggles to achieve creative greatness in spite of rejecting or even violating formal rules and traditions. Second romanticism calls for us to take pleasure in the natural environment, the unsophisticated, the local, the folk, and the ethnic. More important, it also imbues them with spiritual meaning, so that the romantic who gives free reign to his imagination can find in them a route to transcendent and mystical experiences.

I will begin with the dichotomy between the enlightenment and romanticism because in
the Western imagination, Asian religions — especially Buddhism — frequently serve as a bridge between Enlightenment and Romanticism. Buddhism is seen as a religion of the solitary genius — the Buddha — who seeks awakening. He finds the transcendent and mystical by contemplating the natural world. Both of these qualities are celebrated in romanticism. But, at the same time, the Buddha uses his powers of reason to discover the truth. This is the goal of the enlightenment. Thus, Buddhism unites the enlightenment and romanticism, and in so doing, it elevates both to a higher level of universal significance. It is important to note that this Western interpretation of Buddhism dates to the earliest days of Europe’s knowledge about Buddhism. Because there was so little knowledge available at that time, information about Buddhism inevitably was mixed with the views and opinions of the people who reported it.

Consider, for example, the famous American author Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). When he was active during the 1840s and 1850s, Western knowledge of the religions of India was confined almost exclusively to Hinduism. For this reason, Thoreau’s views have been labeled “pre-Buddhist” (Fields 1992, 62). Nonetheless, in spite of not knowing Buddhism, in 1839 he wrote fondly of “my Buddha” who stands in opposition to “their Christ” (Thoreau 1949). He did not reject Christianity, but used the figure of the Buddha to attack religious intolerance. Five years later, in 1844, he published an English-language translation of one chapter of the Lotus Sūtra. This was the first Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture to appear in English. Significantly the translation consisted of Chapter Five. Known in East Asia as “The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs” (Yakusūyu 薬草喻) and in English simply as “Plants” (Kern 1963, 118), Chapter Five compares the teaching of the Buddha to rain that falls everywhere and compares his audience to big, medium, and small plants. Here Thoreau found a religious teaching expressed through descriptions of trees and shrubs. Thoreau spent the next two years living alone in the wild woods next to Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. There he tried to practice the kind of contemplation of nature about which he had read in his books on Indic religion — especially in the Lotus Sūtra where it instructs one to sit in the forest to contemplate reality. His description of his time in the wilderness, published as the book Walden (1854), is one of the classics of American literature. In the final year of his life, 1862, Thoreau wrote his famous essay on “Walking.” This essay begins with this line:

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil — to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. (Thoreau 1862)

After extolling the virtues of wilderness, wild lands, and wild animals, Thoreau wrote:

What I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World. (Thoreau 1862)

In North America, at least, this statement — “Wildness is the preservation of the World” — serves as the motto of the ecology movement. It usually is interpreted to mean that “conservation” — in which humans manage natural resources — is inadequate. Even the presence of humans is not acceptable. Wilderness areas must be preserved in their pristine state,
untouched by humans. This view of wildness draws a sharp distinction between the human and nature. They are opposites. The human is artificial, civilized, tame, controlled, safe, and useful. Nature is untouched by man, primitive, wild, uncontrolled, dangerous, and inaccessible. Thoreau’s writings established in the popular imagination the idea of the wild as a source of personal mystical experience. He also helped to identify this experience with Buddhism.

Another example of the way that Romantics interpreted Buddhism as a religion of nature can be seen in the famous Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890). Between 1885 and 1890, Van Gogh painted at least thirty self-portraits. The most famous one probably is his *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889). The year before he painted the *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin* in which he portrayed himself as a Japanese Buddhist priest (Timmerman 1992, 67–70). His head is shaved. His eyes are made to look Japanese. The brush strokes around his head suggest a halo. This portrait suggests that Van Gogh saw himself as a follower of Japanese religion. In a letter to a friend, he explained what he imagined that religion to be:

If we study Japanese art, we see a man who is undoubtedly wise, philosophic, and intelligent, who spends his time doing what? In studying the distance between earth and the moon? No. In studying Bismarck’s policy? No. He studies a blade of grass. But this blade leads him to draw every plant and then the seasons, the wide aspects of the countryside, then animals, then the human figure. Isn’t it almost a true religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers? (as quoted in Timmerman 1992, 68)

Thus, for Van Gogh, Japanese religion — or, more properly, Japanese Buddhism — taught the proper way to see nature on its own terms. It teaches how to become one with nature; How to leave humanity behind. Van Gogh reached these conclusions not by visiting Buddhist lands, not by practicing under a Buddhist teacher, not by studying Buddhist scriptures. Instead, he merely viewed Japanese art, especially the art of Tokugawa-period woodblock prints. Van Gogh, just like Thoreau, sought in Buddhism a means to express the philosophical ideals of European Romanticism. As a result, both Thoreau and Van Gogh inspired subsequent generations of people in the West to see Buddhism — especially Japanese Buddhism — as a religion of Nature.

Part 2: Buddhism and American Indian Shamanism

The idea that Buddhism is a religion of Nature finds widespread expression today at numerous Buddhist community centers in North America — especially at Zen Centers. The actual practice of Buddhism as a religion of nature, though, more often than not draws upon the religions of native American Indians. They identify native American religions as “shamanism.” One Buddhist teacher, Joan Halifax (1990, 21), for example, heralds the “contemporary encounter between Buddhism and tribal wisdom, especially shamanism.” Another influential Buddhist teacher, Joanna Macy, asserts that the “shamanic personality,” which can understand and speak for other life-forms, is essential for the future survival of the human race. The famous poet Gary Snyder (1969, 90–93) describes how Buddhism allows modern people to recover the primitive wisdom once achieved by shamans.
From an East Asian perspective this emphasis on the unity of Buddhism and shamanism might seem difficult to understand. Normally we think of shamanism as a type of ritual found only in Northern Asia where special individuals enter into trance, during which they are possessed by the spirits of animals or by the ghosts of the dead. In Asia, wherever Buddhism has become established, Buddhist priests have asserted their superiority over shamans. Buddhism assumes the role of high religion, while shamanism — to the extent that it survives at all — assumes the role of a localized practice associated with a particular place or people. In modern Japan, for example, today shamanism is associated primarily with certain types of Shugendō, with the blind itako of Mount Osorezan, or with the surviving native inhabitants of Okinawa and Hokkaido. Mainstream Japanese Buddhist priests usually do not identify their own religion with shamanism.

In America it is very different. Buddhism and shamanism are seen as being closely related because both are seen as religions of nature. Both give voice to plants and animals. Joan Halifax (1990, 34), for example, says: “Buddha had his Bo Tree, deer park, and previous lifetimes as animals. Shamans have their world trees and animal transformations and familiars.” She then goes on to describe a Buddhist mandala as being functionally equivalent to an American Indian medicine wheel. Similarly, Gary Snyder (1980, 95) explains that the reason why he went to Japan and trained at a Zen monastery was because only people who are born as native Americans will be allowed to practice native American religions. Buddhist temples, in contrast, will admit anyone. Buddhism was an alternative route to discovering the ancient wisdom of shamans. Snyder wrote:

The philosopher, poet, and yogin all three have standing not too far behind them the shaman, with his or her pelt and antlers, or various other guises, and songs going back to the Pleistocene and before. The shaman speak for wild animals, the spirits of plants, the spirits of mountains, of watersheds. He or she sings for them. They sing through him. This capacity has often been achieved via special disciplines. (Snyder 1977, 12)

For Snyder, Buddhism is one of the special spiritual disciplines (shugyō) for achieving the abilities of the shaman. He asserts:

It should be remembered that whatever is or ever was in any other culture can be reconstructed from the unconscious, through meditation. (Snyder 1969, 92–93)

Here Snyder speaks of Buddhist meditation and, in particular, sitting Zen (zazen) — which supposedly enables its practitioners to discover their original mind. This original mind is the mind that was known by primitive peoples for thousand of years before the rise of human civilizations. This original mind is the source of poetic creativity and is the mind attained by shamans.

Here are some examples of religious rituals inspired by shamanism that are commonly practiced in contemporary American Zen.

The first one is “Taking Refuge in the Earth.” Buddhist throughout the world normally perform a ritual of the Threefold Refuge. In other words, they take refuge in the Three
Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha (*kie sanbō* 归依三寶). Cynthia Jurs has created a new form of this ritual in which practitioners take refuge in the earth as the embodiment of the Three Jewels: the earth as Buddha, the earth as Dharma, and the earth as Sangha. All things, all animals, and all plants are to be revered as teacher, as truth, and as community. This Threefold Refuge is chanted three times, and with each new chant one reflects ever more deeply on the processes by which the earth itself serves as our teacher, by which it provides us with the truth of reality, and how all existences — especially the living plants and animals — constitute our sangha.

Another ritual is the “Council of All Beings.” The “all beings” in this ritual refers to the Buddhist term *shujō* 衆生. Every day people at Zen Centers in America recite the verse known as the “Universal Transference of Merit” (*Fuekō* 普回向):

> May this merit extend (*gan i shi kudoku* 願以此功德)

> Universally to all (*fugyō o issai* 普及於一切),

> So that we together with all beings (*gattō shujō* 我等與衆生)

> Realize the Buddha Way (*kaigū jō butsudō* 皆共成佛道).

This verse contains the expression “all beings.” But who are these beings? To who or what do these words refer? Normally “all beings” refers only to living creatures. In Zen, though, sometimes it also includes all objects. For example, all practitioners of Zen will be familiar with the topic known as “the non-sentient preach the Dharma” (*mujō seppō* 無情說法). It plays a major role in the biography of the Chinese Zen patriarch Dongshan Liangjie 洞山良价 (Tōzan Ryōkai; 807–869). The word “non-sentient” (*mujō seppō* 無情) refers to all objects which lack the ability to think. In Zen texts common examples of the non-sentient include: grass, trees, tiles, and rubble (*sōmoku garyaku* 草木瓦礫). Normally our common-sense view of reality tells us that grass, trees, tiles, and rubble are incapable of thought and certainly cannot speak or talk. Nonetheless, in China, Korea, and Japan there exists the Buddhist teaching that the “non-sentient preach the Dharma.” Since these non-sentient objects also preach the Dharma, they can be included in the category of “all beings.”

The “Council of All Beings” ceremony uses the techniques of shamanism to connect ordinary people with all beings. There are many ways to perform this ceremony, but a typical one might proceed as follows. The ceremony will bring together ordinary people for a weekend retreat. During this retreat, they will use their powers of imagination to give voice to non-human beings. The non-human beings can be anything: animals, plants, rocks, mountains, or landforms. But no one is allowed to remain human. Only non-human voices are allowed to speak. Each person, therefore, must go on a “vision quest” to seek for a non-human identity to assume. There are many ways to enact this vision quest. They might seek inspiration by walking through a forest or mountain trail. Or they might beat a drum, chant, or dance in the traditional style of shamans or Native Americans. After everyone has discovered an alternative identity, each person makes a mask to represent that being. These activities usually fill an entire afternoon and evening. The following morning everyone first practices meditation. They
maintain silence. After breakfast, they don their masks and then gather together in a circle. Each person speaks in turn. They speak from the point of view of the non-human world. For example, they refer to humans as “the two legged ones.” After all the non-humans have spoken a closing ritual will allow everyone to remove their masks. Then the masks will be burned. At this point everyone offers a transfer of merit ($ekō$) in which they thank the non-humans for all that they give to us.

The third and last example I wish to discuss is the “Mountains and Rivers Sesshin” ($sansui sesshin$). The word $sesshin$ is a Buddhist term that usually refers to a period when Zen practitioners engage in intensive sessions of sitting Zen ($or zazen$). A well-known example in Japan consists of the $rōhatsu sesshin$ in December, which is practiced to commemorate the awakening of $Śākyamuni Buddha$. For this ceremony the Zen practitioners ($unsui$) will practice sitting Zen for seven days without stop. They might sleep only as little as two hours each day. A “Mountains and Rivers Sesshin” is similar, but it is practiced to commemorate the natural world, especially wilderness areas.

The practice of “Mountains and Rivers Sesshin” seems to have originated with Gary Snyder. Today, though, it is more often associated with the Japanese Zen teacher Dōgen 道元 ($1200–1253$). His teachings — especially the essay titled $Mountains and Rivers Sūtra$ ($Sansuikyō$) from his $True Dharma Eye Collection$ ($Shōbōgenzō$) — are frequently cited in descriptions of this practice. In this essay Dōgen quotes many Zen sayings in which mountains figure prominently. “Mountains and Rivers Sesshin” provide modern-day Zen practitioners with an opportunity to contemplate mountains not just in literary terms, but as real entities. In other words, the goal is to “think like a mountain” in the sense that this phrase was used by the naturalist Aldo Leopold (1887–1948). The $sesshin$ combines hiking and sleeping in the mountains with periods of intense sitting Zen. Typically the $sesshin$ is performed over a two or three-day period. Each day begins with one and a half hours of sitting Zen. Then the practitioners hike through the mountains to a new campsite. After eating lunch, they will practice sitting Zen again. Then, they will hike to another camp site. After eating the evening meal, they will practice sitting Zen again. They try to sit as long as possible, but eventually they will go to sleep. When they sleep, they do so on the ground in sleeping bags and tents that they have carried with them on their backs. Silence is observed throughout the entire period. The daily routine is organized just as it would be in a Zen monastery, with the head priests using bells or hand signals to inform everyone when it is time to begin the next task. Thus, the mountains themselves function as the Zen temple and the hiking functions as a form of walking meditation ($kinhin$).

These three practices — Taking Refuge in the Earth; the Council of All Beings; and the Mountains and Rivers Sesshin — provide Buddhists in North America with concrete proof that Buddhism is a religion of nature. All three of these practices provide techniques by which Buddhists can lose themselves in nature. The earth, the animals, and the plants become the vehicle for the attainment of mystical experiences. Through these experiences, people are able
to connect with the non-human world. Just as was done by the native American shaman of old, they are able to identify with and speak for the non-human spirits of the world. In this way, these rituals de-center the human. In other words, they shift the focus of Buddhism away from the individual human personality toward the natural world where humans do not exist. Buddhists in North America see this shift as an expression of the traditional Buddhist teaching of no-self (muga 無我; anātman), which denies the existence of any permanent, essential self or soul. It also expresses the traditional Buddhist teaching of mutual dependency (pratītya-samutpāda). Humans exist only as one part of a larger whole in which each one depends on the others. At the same time, though, these practices also reinforce Thoreau’s axiom that “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” It is the wild world that gives us life and that sustains our spiritual progress.

Part 3: The Critics

In recent years an increasing number of scholars of Asian cultures have begun to cast doubt on this popular image of Buddhism as a religion of nature. They suggest that the type of Buddhism that I have described — that is: the Romanticism of artists such as Henry David Thoreau or Vincent Van Gogh as well as the use of shamanistic rituals by contemporary practitioners — represent a Western misinterpretation of Buddhism. They base this conclusion on numerous arguments, which we can summarize as linguistic, doctrinal, historical, and sociological.

Linguistically, Ian Harris notes that no Buddhist term or concept corresponds to the idea of “nature” as used in Western philosophy and especially in Western ecological discourse (Harris 1997, 377–381; cf. Swearer 1997, 37–38). He examines the word “nature” in various contexts — such as metaphysics, aesthetics, Aristotelian philosophy, medieval philosophy, and modern science — to argue that ecological activists frequently use the word “nature” in a religious sense to refer to a type of pantheistic power or spirit. It is not clear how that idea could be expressed in traditional Buddhist terms. The well-known professor of Buddhist Studies, Malcolm David Eckel (1997, 328–329), illustrates this linguistic issue by recounting a story about the Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso). In the Fall of 1990 the Dalai Lama came to Middlebury College to speak on “Spirit and Nature.” From the title of this lecture, everyone in his audience assumed that the Dalai Lama would discuss ecology and environmentalism. The Dalai Lama, however, disappointed them. He said that he knew nothing about ecology or the environment. Instead, he identified “nature” as the true nature of reality, which is emptiness (śūnyatā). Then he proceeded to lecture about Buddhist practices for purifying the mind. When one purifies the mind, then one can see the true nature of reality.

Doctrinally, Professor Eckel notes that the emptiness (śūnyatā) of which the Dalai Lama spoke, negates not only human notions of self, but also our notions regarding the self of animals or self of plants or self of natural powers. Two Japanese professors of Buddhist Studies, Matsumoto Shirō 松本史朗 and Hakamaya Noriaki 染谷憲昭, also have argued that the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness necessarily precludes any notions that attach a special value to
nature or to the natural world (Swanson 1993). In addition, many scholars note that Buddhist scriptures do not celebrate the wild. Lambert Schmithausen, for example, points out that in classical Buddhist texts, the ordinary people, the townsmen, and even the Buddhist priests preferred the tame and civilized world of the village and city to the virgin forest or jungle. Buddhist scriptures describe forests as terrible and frightening, wilderness as infested with robbers, vermin, beasts of prey, and poisonous snakes, where there is neither food nor water. The natural world thus is identified with impermanence, suffering, and death. These are the problems from which Buddhists seek to escape. In contrast, the religious goals of Buddhism are identified with the tame, cultured, and civilized. We can find in Buddhist scriptures examples where nirvana is referred to as a city (jō 城; Lancaster 1997, 10). Similarly, Pure Land (jōdo 淨土) is described as a place without hills or valleys, where the trees grow in straight rows, and where there exist no dangerous wild animals. Everyone is well behaved. The only sounds are not the cries of wild animals, but of music. Thus, the ideal Buddhist world is civilized and cultivated.

Likewise, although Buddhist texts do offer prayers for the salvation of all beings, they also recognize a clear hierarchy of life. According to the rules of Buddhist discipline (bini 毘尼; vinaya), for example, human beings are superior to all other forms of life, animals who can understand human speech occupy a middle position, and dumb animals are on the bottom. For this reason, different sets of rules apply to each of these categories of living creatures. It is a much worse crime to kill a human than to kill an animal. This is not the view of the wilderness taught in North American Buddhism.

Historically, scholars have noted that Buddhist temples in Asia frequently helped exploit the environment. In Tang-dynasty China, for example, the forests of many mountains were cut down to provide wood for the construction of Buddhist monasteries (Harris 1997, 387). In medieval Japan, when new lands were brought under agricultural cultivation for the first time, frequently Buddhist priests lead the way. According to stories about the religious conversion of local gods to Buddhism (shinjin kado 神人化度), uncultivated lands were inhabited by dangerous spirits and dragons. It was dangerous for humans to enter into the wild lands because they might be killed by these fearsome spirits. Therefore, the local people would call upon the aid of a powerful Buddhist priest. The priest would travel into the mountains, confront the dangerous spirit, and convert it to Buddhism. Thereafter, the spirit would become the guardian deity of a new Buddhist temple. Once the Buddhist temple is constructed, the lands in the surrounding area can be exploited for human use. The forests could be cut down, the rivers channeled, and agriculture introduced (Bodiford 1993, 173–179). Rather than serving to preserve the natural wilderness, in both China and Japan the establishment of Buddhist temples frequently hastened its demise.

Finally, in sociological terms, many scholars question whether Buddhism has contributed to any special reverence for nature among ordinary Japanese people. They cite the research of Stephen Kellert (e.g., Eckel 1997, 133–134). In the 1980s Kellert conducted detailed
surveys of ways that ordinary people in Japan reacted to questions about animals, wilderness, conservation, and human interactions with animals and plants. The survey was conducted both in urban areas (such as Tokyo) and in rural areas (such as Toyosaka in Niigata-ken or Miyako in Iwate-ken). These surveys were followed up by detailed interviews with a selected group of informants. The design and conduct of this research was methodologically similar to research also conducted in the United States and in Germany. Kellert’s results show that Japanese have the strongest positive feelings toward animals that serve as pets for humans or toward animals that are large and exhibit some anthropomorphic associations. In this regard, they are similar to people in North America. But Japanese have much stronger negative feelings toward animals that are perceived as being wild or dirty. Therefore Japanese are much less likely than are people in North America to object on moral grounds to the killing of wild animals. Also notable is the fact that the majority of Kellert’s informants expressed the view that nature can be best appreciated within a human context, where natural elements are refined and abstracted in such a way that they can serve as symbols of harmony, order, and balance. In summarizing these findings, Kellert quotes the noted observer of modern Japan, Donald Ritchie, who said: “the Japanese attitude toward nature is essentially possessive . . . Nature is not natural . . . until the hand of man . . . has properly shaped it” (quoted by Kellert 1991, 395a).

This ethos of nature as shaped and improved by humans stands diametrically opposed to the celebration of the wild, which is advocated in North American Buddhist circles. While American ecological thought emphasizes the preservation of wild lands, untouched by human hands, Japanese concern with ecology tends to be far more oriented toward concern with the negative effects of pollution and the protection of human health. If Japan is a Buddhist nation, then the social influence of Buddhism on Japanese attitudes toward nature do not seem to agree with the popular assumptions of Buddhists in North America.

Of course, my brief summary here cannot do justice to this very complicated topic. Nonetheless, we can see the variety of issues and objections raised by the critics of Buddhist ecological thought and practice in North America. In terms of linguistics, Buddhist doctrines, Asian history, and modern Japanese social attitudes, these critics argue that the ecological orientation and practices of American Buddhists do not reflect traditional Buddhism as it has been known in Asia. The emphasis on the wild, wilderness, and wilderness which dominates ecological thinking in North America reflects the cultural heritage of the West more than it does the influence of Asian Buddhism.

Part 4: Environmental Ethics as a New Buddhism

North American Buddhists themselves seem untroubled by these attacks. They are not disturbed by the idea that their practices and interpretations might differ from the way that Buddhism has existed in pre-modern Asian societies. In fact, they celebrate this divergence from Asian models as a new development in the evolution of Buddhism that will help to adapt this Asian religion to the global social needs of the twenty-first century. One observer, Bill Devall, argues that
Buddhists in North America must develop an “eco-centric sangha.” He writes:
Buddhism wears a unique face whenever and wherever it manifests. Frequently, Buddhism
enters a culture and present the image of that culture most denied by its participants. Buddhism
in Japan revolutionized the cultural meaning of death. In the West, Buddhism presents a new
face to the environmental crisis — which is, on a deeper level, a crisis of character and cultural
integrity. (Devall 1990, 158)

In other words, Buddhism in North America must enable people in North America to reflect on the
failures and problems that exist within their own society. It uses the cultural elements that
already exist within that society to help people find new solutions.

Similarly, Gary Snyder, argues that Buddhism can be enriched by incorporating some of
the social and environmental concerns of North Americans. He critiques the social and political
passivity of the Buddhist tradition, saying:
Historically, Buddhist philosophers have failed to analyze out the degree to which ignorance and
suffering are caused or encouraged by social factors ... Although Mahayana Buddhism has grand
vision of universal salvation ... Institutional Buddhism has been conspicuously ready to accept or
ignore the inequalities and tyrannies of whatever political system it found itself under. (Snyder
1969, 90)

After discussing the ways that Buddhist teachings can contribute to the improvement of social and
political life in North America, Snyder concludes by saying:
The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual
insight into the basic self/void. We need both. (Snyder 1969, 92)
In other words, Snyder asserts that Buddhism in North America should not be limited just to
forms that already exist in Asia. By addressing Western concerns, North American Buddhists
can help create new forms of Buddhism that are valuable in their own right.

David Landis Barnhill, a recent interpreter of Snyder, argues that Buddhists in North
America are not merely introducing ecological concerns into Buddhist practice. Instead, they
are fashioning a “creative extension of both Buddhism and ecology by seeing each in terms of the
other” (Barnhill 1997, 187). They are creating a new kind of ecology which sees “nature” not
just as opposite to the human, but also as part of a large Buddhist sangha, consisting of the entire
“ecosphere of the planet.” In this new kind of sangha, humans do not dominate nature, but
cooperate with all other forms of life. As a result, ecology becomes a new type of religious
practice. And, also as a result, Buddhism is able to directly confront the larger world in which
this practice occurs. In this way, Buddhist philosophy becomes “ecologized” (Barnhill 1997,
189).

For example, the Flower Garland Sūtra (Kegon kyō 華厳経) explains the
interpenetration of each part of reality with every other part of reality by using the metaphor of
Indra’s Net (Indara mō 因陀羅網). The sūtra says that the god Indra (i.e., Śakra; Taishaku Ten
帝釋天) hangs a large net across the heavens. Each node of the net contains a jewel. The
jewels are arranged so that each single jewel reflects all other jewels. Thus, in each jewel one
can see an infinite number of other jewels. In Buddhist thought this metaphor illustrates the way that all phenomena in the world contain within themselves all other phenomena. When this metaphor is “ecologized,” it also illustrates the way that the life cycle of each form of life depends on and influences the bio-system as a whole. Therefore, the *Flower Garland Sūtra* becomes an ecological scripture. The philosophical metaphor acquires new life as a biological metaphor. When people recycle natural resources, they engage not just in an economic and industrial process but also demonstrate the religious truth of the *Flower Garland Sūtra*.

**Concluding Remarks**

Our growing awareness of the issues of pollution, environmental preservation, and global warming present humans with new challenges that are both grave and fundamental. The survival of humankind might well be at stake. In every part of the world both ordinary people and their leaders ask how their own particular religious traditions address these new challenges. Certainly all religions provide moral guidelines to teach people how to live in the world. At the same time, though, most religions emphasize that the ultimate aim of human life are not found in this world, but in some otherworldly goal. Thus, most religions — especially the major ones — traditionally have devalued this world as a source of torment and corruption. Buddhism, at least in its Asian form, is no exception to this norm. North Americans, though, like to see Buddhism as a religion of Nature. They have fashioned new forms of Buddhist ceremonies and practices to show how Buddhism can play a positive role in changing the ways that people understand their own place within the natural order. These developments represent a significant new chapter in the history of Buddhism. It is important for scholars to record this history. At the same time, it also is important for scholars and for Buddhists themselves to note the ways in which these new developments either agree or disagree with previously existing Buddhist teachings and practices. If Buddhism truly is to be a religion of Nature, then Buddhists must confront those aspects of their own tradition that devalue or reject the natural. They must base their understanding of nature on core Buddhist philosophical principles. Only then will they truly be able to enter into meaningful dialog not only with other religions in North America but also with their fellow Buddhists around the world.

**Bibliography**


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van Gogh, Vincent. 1888. Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin. Oil on canvas, 60.5 x 49.4 cm. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.

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Comment

\[1\] My main sources of information will be my own interviews with Buddhist teachers in the United States. I also will draw on three recent books: Badiner 1990; Batchelor and Brown 1992; and Tucker and Williams
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1997. Together these three books provide a comprehensive overview of the ways that Buddhist ideas and practices have influenced environmental ethics in contemporary North America.

ii My approach to the relationship between Buddhism and these movements is indebted to Timmerman 1992.

iii It appeared in the newsletter The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion (vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 391–401) under the title “The Preaching of Buddha.” The unsigned introduction begins as follows: “The following fragments are extracts from one of the religious books of the Buddhists of Nepal, entitled the ‘White Lotus of the Good Law.’” The original work, which is written in Sanskrit, makes part of the numerous collection of the Buddhist books, discovered by M. Hodgson, the English resident at the Court of Katmandou, and sent by him to the Asiatic Society of Paris. M. Barnof examined, some years since, this collection, which includes a great part of the canonical books of the Buddhists, and of which translations are found in all the nations which ar Buddhists, (the people of Thibet, China, and the Monguls.)”

It is clear from this introduction that the English version in the Dial is based on the French translation by Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852). But who translated it into English? How did that person acquire access to Burnouf’s work? These questions have prompted much much confusion and speculation. Burnouf’s complete translation of the Lotus Sutra was published in 1852, eight years after the appearance of the Dial’s English version. Rick Fields (1992, 61) states that Thoreau “had himself translated it from the French of Eugene Burnouf’s L’Introduction a l’histoire du Buddhisme indien, which had just appeared in Paris.” In fact Burnouf’s 1844 history of Buddhism in India contains no corresponding excerpt from the Lotus. Thomas Tweed (2003a note 4) cites Thomas Mueller (1977) as the first person to correctly identify the source as Burnouf’s 1843 journal article titled “Fragments des Prédications de Buddha” (note that the Dial introduction also begins with the word “fragments”). This attribution has been verified independently by Yuyama Akira (2000, 1–2 & 67). It helps to account for the odd sequence of the Dial’s translated text — in which the second half of the chapter appears before the first half — because Burnouf’s 1843 article (but not his 1852 complete translation) exhibits this same reverse order. Thus, Dial pp. 392–398 (and Burnouf 1843, 520–529) corresponds to Kern pp. 128–136 (and Burnouf 1852, 81–89) while Dial pp. 398–401 (and Burnouf 1843, 529–534) corresponds to Kern pp. 122–128 (and Burnouf 1852, 75–81).

The identity of the translator is still uncertain. For a detailed overview, see Miwa 1990. The translation appeared in the Dial as part of a series dedicated to “selection from the oldest ethical and religious writings of men, exclusive of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures” which at that time was under the editorial supervision of Thoreau. There can be no doubt that he was responsible for its selection and the introduction. Did he translate it himself? In 1885 George W. Cooke (1848–1923) attributed the translation to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804–1884; see Miwa 1990, 46). In his massive An Historical and Biographical Introduction to Accompany the Dial (2 vols., 1902), however, Cooke changed his attribution to Thoreau. He explained in his preface that he had examined the personal copies of the Dial owned by Thoreau and by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) in which each independantly had written the names of many contributors (Miwa 1990, 47–48). Samuel A. Jones (1834–1912), however, criticized Cooke and attributed the translation to Emerson (Miwa 1990, 49). Nonetheless, Cooke’s 1902 attribution to Thoreau was followed by many subsequent authorities such as Author Christy (1932, 219), Walter Harding and Michael Meyer (1980, 36). More recent scholars, however, have reverted to Cooke’s original attribution and credit Peabody: Raymond R. Borst (1982, 191), K. P. Van Anglen (1986, 159), and Tweed (2003b, 864a). As noted by Miwa, however, it is not clear why Cooke’s 1885 attribution has gained favor over his revised 1905 one.


vii The phrase “thinking like a mountain” has become a slogan for the deep ecology movement. It is the title of a short essay by Leopold in A Sound County Almanac (1996, 137–141) where he reflects thus on the time when he killed a wolf and watch the green fire of life disappear from its eyes: “I thought that few wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter’s paradise. But after seeing the green fire dire, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with me.” After subsequently observing the ecological damage caused by over-populations of deer, he concluded: “I now suspect that just as a deer heard lives in mortal fear of its worlves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer.”