

An Assessment of Buddhist Eco-Philosophy*

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As a scholar I am expected to deal with my subject matter in an objective way. If this were to mean without emotional concern, and without a personal standpoint, I have to admit failure in advance. . . . I do not hesitate to admit that in giving this lecture my aim is to contribute . . . to a change of attitude and behavior towards nature.¹

In response to the growing global environmental crisis, scholars have begun to interrogate religious traditions as a possible resource for the development of an environmental ethic. Different points of view regarding environmental ethics and religion, or what we refer to more generally as “religion and ecology,” have emerged. At one end of the spectrum, apologists see the world’s religions as a key resource in addressing the environmental crisis; at the other end, critics point to religion as redounding to the crisis. In his controversial 1967 article on Christianity and the environment, Lynn White commends Buddhism for its holistic, egalitarian worldview and its environmentally friendly style of life in contrast to the Biblical worldview and mainstream Christianity, that White sees as promoting human dominance over nature and, hence, contributing to the environmental crisis.² Challenging White’s

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¹ Lambert Schmithausen, *Buddhism and Nature* (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1991) 2.

² Lynn White, Jr. “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 15 (10 March, 1967) 1203–7. White’s essay created a storm of controversy. For example, see Elspeth Whitney, “Lynn White, Ecotheology, and History,” *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993) 151–69.

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reductive view, James Gustafson points out that Western theisms encompass at least five attitudes toward the environment—despotic, dominion over, stewardship of, subordination to, and participation in.³ “Despotism” exemplifies an idolatrous, Baconian, mechanistic, radically utilitarian stance. “Dominion over” extrapolates an attitude from Genesis 1:26, in which God grants human dominion over nature. Gustafson finds that Judaism and Christianity prefer the third attitude, “stewardship,” as a way of understanding nature. “Subordination,” the opposite end of the spectrum from despotism, approximates the attitude of Albert Schweitzer’s, “Only by serving every kind of life do I enter the service of the Creative Will whence all life emanates.” Gustafson finds that the attitude “participation in” harmonizes the most with his own theocentric perspective, in which all human beings participate in the patterns and processes of life in the world grounded in the ultimate power of the divine.⁴ Eco-theology and eco-ethics, moreover, have emerged as major genres of constructive reflection among Christian theologians and ethicists.⁵

Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism in Asia and the West have promoted White’s positive evaluation of Buddhism’s eco-friendly worldview, but recent scholarship has both nuanced and challenged what has been characterized as Buddhist “eco-apologetics.” In this essay I purpose to assess and to evaluate a selection of contributions to the field of Buddhism and ecology.⁶ Far from being inclusive of the broad range of scholarship in this area in both Asian and European languages, my analysis will highlight what I construe as five sometimes overlapping positions regarding Buddhism and the environment. I have labeled this five-fold taxonomy as follows: eco-apologists, eco-critics, eco-constructivists, eco-ethicists, and eco-contextualists.⁷ I regard these categories as suggestive rather than defini-

³ James M. Gustafson, *A Sense of the Divine: The Natural Environment from a Theocentric Perspective* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994) 77–110.

⁴ Gustafson characterizes these attitudes as “ideal types” in the Weberian sense—mental constructs for heuristic purposes and not necessarily a class into which anything fits perfectly. See also, Peter Harrison, “Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, Early Modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature,” *Journal of Religion* 79:1 (January, 1999) 86–109.

⁵ A major contribution to the field of religion and ecology has been made by the Forum on Religion and Ecology, which grew out of a series of eleven conferences that took place at the Center for the Study of World Religions. Nine conference volumes have been published including *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000). This collection of articles provides the most comprehensive overview of work by Christian theologians and ethicists in the field of Christianity and ecology. Among recent particularly noteworthy contributions to eco-theology are Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1997) and Mark I. Wallace, *Finding God in the Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, Nature* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2005).

⁶ With a few exceptions I am restricting my analysis to English language sources. I hope this brief paper will serve as a prolegomenon to a more encompassing critical study of monographs and research papers in the field of Buddhism and ecology.

⁷ My taxonomy differs from the one proposed by Ian Harris in “Causation and Telos: The Problem of Buddhist Environmental Ethics,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 1 (1994) 46–59, which he develops

tive and intend them primarily for heuristic purposes and not as Weberian ideal types. The first position holds that Buddhist environmentalism extends naturally from the Buddhist worldview; the second that the Buddhist worldview does not harmonize with an environmental ethic. The third position maintains that one can construct a Buddhist environmental ethic, though not co-terminus with the Buddhist worldview, from Buddhist texts and doctrinal tenets; the fourth, that one should evaluate a viable Buddhist environmental ethic in terms of Buddhist ethics rather than inferred from the Buddhist worldview. The fifth position holds that the most effective Buddhist environmental ethic takes its definition in terms of particular contexts and situations.

■ Eco-Apologists

The fruit of Buddhism—mindful living cultivates a view of human beings, nature, and their relationship that is fundamentally ecological. Awareness opens our perception to the interdependence and fragility of all life, and our indebtedness to countless beings, living and dead, past and present, near and far. If we have any real identity at all in Buddhism, it is the ecology itself—a massive interdependent, self-causing dynamic energy-event against a backdrop of ceaseless change.⁸

Many writings on Buddhist ecology promote the normative position that the Buddhist worldview remains inherently eco-friendly and attuned to the natural environment. Three standard English language anthologies in the field—*Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*,⁹ *Buddhism and Ecology*,¹⁰ and *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*,¹¹—explicate and justify this position using a wide ambit of texts that range from the Mahāratnakūta Sūtra to Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (Hua Yen or Flower Ornament Sutra) remains one of the most often cited classical Indian Mahayana

as follows: 1) uncritical endorsement of Buddhist environmental ethics by traditional guardians of doxic truth such as the Dalai Lama; 2) positive interpretations by Japanese and North American activist scholars focusing on identifying doctrinal bases from which an environmental ethic can be constructed (e.g. universal Buddha nature); 3) a critical, historical perspective represented by Lambert Schmithausen who attempts to devise an authentic response to the environmental crisis; 4) the rejection of the possibility of Buddhist environmental ethics on textual and historical grounds exemplified by Noriaki Hakamaya. For Lambert Schmithausen's analysis of Noriaki Hakamaya see *Buddhism and Nature* (1990) 53–62. In “Getting to Grips with Buddhist Environmentalism: A Provisional Typology,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* (1995), Ian Harris finds four types of discourses among eco-Buddhists: eco-spirituality, eco-justice, eco-traditionalism, and eco-apologists.

⁸Allan Hunt Badiner, ed. *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology* (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1990), xiv–xv.

⁹Badiner, ed. *Dharma Gaia*.

¹⁰Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown, eds. *Buddhism and Ecology* (New York, N.Y.: Cassell, 1992).

¹¹Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft, eds. *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 2000).

texts to which writers ascribe an ecological significance. One offers this important scripture and the metaphor of the Jewel Net of Indra, as evidence that Buddhism, the Hua Yen tradition in particular, views the cosmos as an infinitely repeated inter-relationship among all the members of the cosmos, which Francis Cook likens to a cosmic ecology: “Each individual is at once the cause for the whole and is caused by the whole, and what is called existence is a vast body made up of an infinity of individuals all sustaining each other and defining each other.”¹² Since the majority of sources in these anthologies come from contemporary rather than classical texts, McFarlane has identified the eco-apologist position with Engaged Buddhism.¹³

Within the Theravāda ambit, Lily de Silva reads the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* as providing a template for the interdependence of humankind and nature that links together human moral degeneration and the degradation of nature. Furthermore, she finds in the Pāli *jātakas* the lesson that an understanding of *karma* and rebirth “prepares the Buddhist to adopt a sympathetic attitude toward animals.”¹⁴ As an example of the Buddha’s disciples’ regard for natural beauty as a source of aesthetic satisfaction, De Silva quotes Mahākāshyapa’s “detached sense of appreciation” of the natural environment (*Theragāthā* vv.1070–71): “Fair uplands rain-refreshed, and resonant / With crested creatures’ cries antiphonal / Lone heights where silent Rishis oft resort / Those are the hills wherein my soul delights.”¹⁵

Eco-apologists find in the personal example of the Buddha and Buddhist monks a model of environmentally sensitive behavior. Stephanie Kaza observes, “The courage and inspiration of the Buddha and the *bodhisattvas* . . . are helpful to me in examining the spiritual dimension of the environmental crisis.”¹⁶ Eco-apologists appeal to the simple lifestyle of Buddhist monks as providing an example of how to live nonacquisitively and point out that *vinaya* rules prohibit monks from cutting down trees, from eating ten kinds of meat of wild animals, and from contaminating water. As proof of the importance of trees and forests in early Buddhism, they point out that the Buddha was born, achieved his awakening, and died under trees, and that Buddhists prize forest dwelling as an ideal environment in which to practice the religious life.

Beyond appealing to particular texts and the exemplary life of the Buddha, to *arahant* monks, and to *bodhisattvas*, eco-apologists ascribe an ecological significance to seminal Buddhist doctrines, in particular, *paṭicca samuppāda* (interdependent

¹²Francis, H. Cook, “The Jewel Net of Indra,” in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989), 215.

¹³Stewart McFarlane, “Nature and Buddha-nature: The Ecological Dimensions of East Asian Buddhism Critically Considered.” (kr.buddhism.org/zenkoan/stewart_mcfarlane.htm).

¹⁴Lily De Silva, “Early Buddhist Attitudes toward Nature,” in *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism* (ed. Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft; Boston, Mass.: Shambala Publications, 2000), 96–97.

¹⁵De Silva, 96–97, 101.

¹⁶Stephanie Kaza, “Planting Seeds of Joy,” in *Earth and Spirit* (ed. Fritz Hull; New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 1993), 137.

co-arising), *anattā* (not-self), *suññatā* (emptiness), and *tathāgatagarbha* (the womb of suchness). They make the general claim that these teachings represent a nondualistic, nonhierarchical, holistic worldview, which conjoins all sentient beings, humans and animals; some schools of Buddhist thought also include insentient nature. In the resonant prose of the late Thai monk, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, “The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, moon, and stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise . . . then we can build a noble environment.”¹⁷ Joanna Macy, borrowing from Gregory Bateson and systems theory, interprets the not-self doctrine as an encompassing “ecological self” that identifies with the wider reaches of life.¹⁸ In schematic form I have conceptualized Buddhist environmentalists as connecting sentient—and in some traditions nonsentient—entities on four levels: existential, moral, cosmological, and ontological.¹⁹ Existentially entities are conjoined through the doctrine of shared suffering (*dukkha*) which eco-apologists extend to nature; as Stephanie Kaza writes, “To see a once-whole forest clear-cut to stumps, the soil eroding, the wildlife gone, is to experience the impact of environmental suffering.”²⁰ Morally and cosmologically the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth conjoin all sentient beings in a karmic continuum traditionally divided into three world levels and five or six rebirth realms. Ontologically the concepts of *tathāgatagarbha* (womb of suchness) and universal Buddha nature (*buddhakāya*) point to a common ground of inter-being or inter-becoming.

■ Eco-Critics

I for one find it hard to deny that the overwhelming majority of the canonical materials suggests that in early Buddhism it was just a *matter of course* to strive, in the first place, for one’s own self-perfection and release.²¹

I . . . [also] find it hard to determine to what extent . . . focusing on the positive goal of ‘*Nirvana in this life*’ actually involved an evaluation of nature substantially different from that of the strand focussing on the unsatisfactoriness of existence and the world where it takes place.²²

¹⁷ Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa, *Phutasasanik Kap Kan Anurak Thamachat* [Buddhists and the Care of Nature] (Bangkok: Komol Thimthong Foundation, 1990), 35.

¹⁸ Joanna Macy, “The Greening of the Self,” in *Dharma Gaia* (ed. Allan Hunt Badiner; Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990) 53-63, at 56.

¹⁹ Donald K. Swearer, “Principles and Poetry, Places and Stories: The Resources of Buddhist Ecology,” *Daedalus* 130 (2001) 225-241, at 226.

²⁰ Kaza, “Planting Seeds of Joy,” 139.

²¹ Lambert Schmithausen, “The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4 (1997) 1-74, at 46.

²² Schmithausen, “Early Buddhist Tradition,” 42.

The critics of Buddhist eco-apologists contend that Buddhist foundational documents lack any explicit discussion of what today we would label environmental ethics for today's quintessentially modern ecological concerns.²³ While the eco-critics may sympathize with the intention behind the eco-apologists' project, they judge it a serious distortion of normative Buddhist teachings and historical traditions. Although citing misrepresentations of East Asian Buddhist traditions (e.g., Noriaka Hakamaya's attack on the concepts of Buddha nature, *tathatā* (suchness and nondualism)), they focus their critique, in particular, on what they consider a misreading of early Indian Buddhism. They argue that the soteriological focus of early Buddhism based on a negative assessment of the realm of sense experience including "nature" as fundamentally unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) and subject to change (*anicca*), does not provide the grounds for an environmental ethic. Furthermore, they charge that the tradition has a primarily anthropocentric, not biocentric, focus on spiritual liberation. At best, the nonhuman environment occupies a positive place only as the context for the pursuit of transmundane ends. Eco-apologists, in response, object to the narrowness of this criticism and contend that from the outset the way of the Buddha has remained broader than a narrowly construed quest for Nirvāṇa without regard for other sentient beings and natural surroundings.

Although I began this section on eco-critics with two quotations from Lambert Schmithausen's *Buddhism and Nature*, I agree with Ian Harris that one should evaluate Schmithausen's work on Buddhism and ecology primarily as an effort to devise an *authentic* Buddhist environmental ethic based on a critical, historical reading of Buddhist texts (in Harris's nomenclature a "neo-traditionalist" approach). In this sense, Schmithausen fits best into my taxonomy as an eco-constructivist. Even though Harris's personal sympathies reside with Schmithausen, as a critical scholar he identifies with Horiaki Hakamaya, who rejects the possibility of Buddhist environmental ethics on the grounds that the doctrinal standpoint of canonical Buddhism implies a negation of the natural realm.

For the purposes of my schematic analysis, Ian Harris will exemplify the eco-critics position. With others in this category, Harris holds that the primacy of the spiritual goal privileges humans over animals and nature. Although humans and animals have interconnected destinies, the tradition regards animals as unfortunate because they cannot grow in the *dharmma* and *vinaya* and cannot serve as monks.²⁴ The plant world fares no better. Harris summarizes the canonical view of nature as either something needing improvement or cultivation or confrontation in a therapeutic encounter.²⁵ Above all, Harris finds the dysteleological nature of Buddhist cosmology and causality incompatible with an environmental ethic. Even

²³ Ian Harris, "Buddhism and Ecology," in *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000) 113.

²⁴ Ian Harris, "How Environmentalist Is Buddhism?" *Religion* 21 (1991) 105.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

the vaunted Hua Yen vision of interpenetration has a dysteleological worldview that negates creativity, novelty, and the exercise of free will. It cannot account for purposive change, since it conceives the realm of conditioned things in symmetrical terms. Conditionality so understood implies the full equality and mutuality of interpenetrating entities.²⁶ Consequently it negates a social and eco-activist agenda, for if everything depends on everything else, then the black rhino depends on the hydrogen bomb, the rain forest on the nuclear waste dump, and so forth.²⁷

Harris characterizes attempts to find an environmental ethic in Buddhism (i.e., “ecoBuddhism”) as a modern American initiative to articulate an authentically Buddhist response to current environmental problems. This response, he writes, grew out of the American environmental movement of the 1960s dominated by educated liberal elites and interreligious environmental dialogues with a liberal socio-political agenda.²⁸ Building further on insights from Antony Giddens’s *The Consequences of Modernity*,²⁹ Harris sees Buddhist environmentalism as an expression of a type of globalization that promotes an erosion of culture-specific boundaries and a homogenization or uniformity of attitude that overrides significant differences in doctrine and practice: “It is the impact of modernity and of globalization, in particular, that has tended to encourage traditional religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism, to move to a closer intellectual and emotional harmony the more they move away from the geographical locations that have given them their specific cultural and historical forms.”³⁰ Harris finds a shared utopianism among the representatives of this collective eco-religiosity, namely, an effort to reestablish an original purity of nature, a biospheric community, a soteric this-worldly eco-activism that has become a virtual religion in and of itself.

Harris contends that supporters of a Buddhist environmental ethic, in particular, have shown indifference to the history and complexity of the Buddhist tradition and have uncritically appropriated modern, globalized discourse. In doing so they have departed from the critical spirit that has played a major role in the history of Buddhism to the modern period. Furthermore, even a cursory examination of the languages, doctrines, and historical permutations of Buddhism debunks any notion of a Buddhist environmental ethic as such, just as one can find no Buddhism as such. Nevertheless, Harris sympathizes with the aim of the eco-apologists. While seeing this position as representing a significant departure from the traditional

²⁶ John McClellan satirizes ecological non-dualism in “Nodual Ecology,” *Tricycle* (1993), 60, “In any discussion of deep Ecology—or rocks, clouds, rivers, and mountains—one should include kitchen tables, cars, computers, stuffed animals, and nuclear reactors.”

²⁷ Ian Harris, “Buddhist Environmental Ethics and Detraditionalization: The Case of EcoBuddhism,” *Religion* 25 (1995), 205.

²⁸ Ian Harris, “Getting to Grips with Buddhist Environmentalism: A Provisional Typology,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* (1995), 173.

²⁹ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990).

³⁰ Harris, “Getting to Grips,” 175.

Buddhist worldview, he acknowledges that all traditions must change in order to adapt and to flourish. Therefore, to reject eco-Buddhism as a sham, supermarket religion poses a problem from a broad, historical perspective: “Consideration of the genesis of ecoBuddhism and of its activist programme suggests that it shouldn’t be characterized as a deviation from traditional norms but that it should be seen as an example of a vigorous tradition engaged in a healthy process of reflexive apologetics.”³¹

■ Eco-Constructivists

Stating the traditional Buddhist Attitudes of not injuring (*ahimsa*), benevolence (*mettā/maitri*) and compassion (*karunā*) to entail an “ecological” behaviour is surely justified in so far as these attitudes are not limited to human beings as their object but include also other living beings, especially animals. Still, it should be clear that neither of these attitudes has, primarily, an “ecological” purport.³²

Eco-constructivists adopt a critical stance toward the formation of a Buddhist environmental ethic based on a normative commitment rather than on the tools of critical scholarship. Nevertheless, using these tools they seek to uncover ecologically positive elements in Buddhist textual and historical traditions on which to build an environmental ethic. Eco-constructivists, such as Lambert Schmithausen, contend that a viable Buddhist environmental ethic depends on one’s ascribing a positive value to nature and to natural diversity without losing the essentials of the tradition. In his analysis, the soteriological focus of early Indian Buddhism has, at best, only a “passive” ecological significance, although later forms of Mahāyāna offer more promise. He shares with eco-critics the view that early Buddhism did not ascribe any inherent value to nature or to life as such or to species or to eco-systems. The ultimate value of early Buddhism does not lie in nature or in culture. Ultimately the issue involves not the preserving, restoring, transforming or subjugating of nature but rather the liberation (*vimutti*) of all constituents of existence.³³ Even so, one can construe the soteriological orientation of early Indian Buddhism to have ecological consequences in that the person who has attained liberation, motivated by sympathy and compassion, acts on behalf of other sentient beings. These virtues, however, highlighted in the Mahāyāna *bodhisattva* ideal, serve primarily as ethical rather than ecological terms. The same holds true for the concept of interdependent co-arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*)—primarily psychological, ethical, and spiritual in nature—the knowledge of which leads to the overcoming of ignorance and desire. In Schmithausen’s view, “this analysis of the presuppositions of individual bondage and liberation could [not] without a radical reinterpretation, provide a basis for

³¹ Harris, “Getting to Grips,” 207.

³² Schmithausen, *Buddhism and Nature*, 32.

³³ Schmithausen, “Early Buddhist Tradition,” 11.

ecological ethics based on an intrinsic value of natural diversity and beauty.”³⁴ The doctrine of rebirth, which posits that animal forms may have taken on or presently take on the forms of one’s relatives, seems closer to an ecological sense of interconnectedness even though anthropocentric in its intent. In Hua Yen Buddhism, however, the principle of universal interdependence assumes more resemblance to the structural principle of scientific ecology.

Although the emphasis in Buddhist ethics lies on overcoming desire and greed, as framed in terms of spiritual practice and ascetic virtues, and does not ascribe a positive value to nature as such, Buddhist ethics do have environmental consequences and ecologically beneficial effects. The Buddhist values of non-killing, loving-kindness, sympathy, and compassion have even more pertinence to an ecological ethic. Although the principal of non-harming or non-killing (*ahimsa*) began as protection against the vengeance of injured animals in the world beyond, and one associates loving-kindness and compassion with states of consciousness attained in meditation, these virtues have ethical significance beyond one’s own spiritual benefit. To construe them as constituting an ecological ethic that promotes the protection of species or as an apologia for biodiversity distorts the historical tradition; they do not, however, come without ecological import. In a similar vein, although one should read King Asoka’s fifth pillar edict prohibiting the slaughter of animals as a critique of Brahmanical ritual practices and not as conserving species, it does minimize the killing of individual animals. Both the Buddhist eco-constructivist and the eco-critic hold that early Buddhism’s focus on the achievement of a soteriological goal problematizes an environmental reading of the tradition. An eco-constructivist such as Schmithausen, however, believes, nonetheless, that selected teachings of the tradition do have positive ecological consequences.³⁵

The distinguished Thai scholar monk, P. A. Payutto, echoes the eco-constructivist effort to derive environmentally salient lessons from texts and historical traditions without sacrificing the essentials of the tradition. He finds the potential for promoting a positive, beneficial attitude toward the environment in three moral virtues: gratitude (*kataññū*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), and happiness (*sukha*). These virtues he finds embodied in a passage from the *Khuddaka Nikāya*: “A person who sits or sleeps in the shade of a tree should not cut off a tree branch. One who injures such a friend is evil.” Payutto observes, “This maxim reminds us that the shade of a tree we enjoy is enjoyed by others as well. A tree is like a friend that we have no reason to injure. To injure a tree is like hurting a friend. Such a virtuous attitude toward nature will prevent us from destructive behavior, on the one hand, and will prompt helpful actions, on the other.”³⁶ In an even broader sense, Payutto links human happiness to the natural environment. Citing the historical example

³⁴ Schmithausen, “Early Buddhist Tradition,” 12–13.

³⁵ See, in particular, Schmithausen, *Buddhism and Nature*, 29–52.

³⁶ P. A. Payutto, *Khon Thai Kap Pa* [Thais and the Forest] (Bangkok: Association for Agriculture and Biology, 1994) 22–23.

of forest dwelling monks, he contends that throughout the history of Thailand, Buddhism has seen the forest as a teacher of mind and spirit and that living within such a natural environment engenders a greater sense of happiness and well-being.³⁷ Payutto does not derive an ecological ethic based on the inherent value of the nature from such examples taken from text and tradition but does discover teachings pertinent to what Schmithausen would characterize as an “authentic” Buddhist environmental ethic.

■ Eco-Ethicists

I encourage people worldwide, especially the ones who are . . . indoctrinated by capitalist triumphalism and consumerism, to look to the life of the Buddha—and to see him simultaneously as one who reached the pinnacle of liberation through his enlightenment, and also as a simple and humble monk. In fact, simplicity and humility enable the Buddha to achieve enlightenment.³⁸

Buddhists link the interests and concerns of religion and ecology to an ethic of moderation, the Buddhist “Middle Way” (*majjhima paṭipatā*), as promoting a less environmentally harmful lifestyle; in the words of the popular bumper sticker, “Live simply so that others many simply live!” Over thirty years ago, E. F. Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful* advocated a nonexploitative “Buddhist economics” lifestyle of simplicity, nonviolence, and moderate consumption: “The teaching of the Buddha . . . enjoins a reverent and nonviolent attitude not only to all sentient beings but also . . . to trees”.³⁹ Inspired by Schumacher’s vision, Buddhist social activists and environmentalists have become vociferous critics of the consumerist values associated with economic globalization.⁴⁰ From a philosophical perspective, however, one finds even more interesting the effort to view Buddhist environmental ethics from the perspective of virtue theory.

Recent studies of Theravāda Buddhism have proposed an analogical relationship between Buddhist ethics and the tradition of virtue ethics in the West (e.g., those of the Stoics, Epicureans, and Aristotle). Damien Keown, for example, observes formal parallels between the ideal of human perfection as taught by the Bud-

³⁷ Payutto, *Khon Tahi Kap Pa*, 33.

³⁸ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change: Engaged Buddhism in a Globalizing World* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2005) 36.

³⁹ Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1973) 56.

⁴⁰ See for example, Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change*; see also *Hooked! Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume* (ed. Stephanie Kaza; Boston, Mass.: Shambala Publications, 2005). From a Christian perspective see Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001): “We North American middle-class Christians need to live differently in order to love nature, we need to think differently . . . about . . . who we are in the scheme of things . . . The market ideology has become our way of life, almost our religion, telling us who we are (consumers) and what the goal of life is (making money).”

dha and Aristotle despite differences in social and cultural contexts,⁴¹ and James Whitehill sees the cultivation of the *paramitās* (“awakened virtue”) as the heart of Buddhist ethics.⁴² From an environmental perspective, Whitehill characterizes the *paramitās* as biocentric and ecological, based on his understanding of the relational and processional nature of the self-concept in Buddhism, but does not develop this notion in the direction of an environmental ethic. Two British scholars at the University of Durham, David E. Cooper and Simon P. James, however, have undertaken such a project on different grounds.⁴³ I shall refer to their case for the relationship between the cultivation of virtue and environmental ethics in arguing that in constructing a Buddhist environmental ethic, we give preference to the Buddhist vision of human flourishing over and above reconstructing seminal teachings from the Buddhist worldview (e.g., *paṭicca-samuppāda*, *anattā*, *suññatā*, *tathāgatagarbha*) from an ecological perspective. In general terms, moreover, I believe that the most compelling contribution to environmental discourse that the world’s religions can make globally concerns the area of what I have termed an “ecology of human flourishing” that includes the natural world in its purview of the common good.⁴⁴ I take as an example from Thai Buddhism the site called the Garden of Empowering Liberation (Wat Suan Mokkhabalārama) established by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu outside of Chaiya, south Thailand, in 1936. Wat Suan Mokkha embodies a sustainable lifestyle grounded in the values of moderation, simplicity and nonacquisitiveness. In this place all forms of life—humans, animals, and plants—live as a cooperative microcosm of a larger ecosystem.

Cooper and James challenge the dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental value made by environmental ethicists, who claim that intrinsic value constitutes the *sine qua non* of environmental ethics. In defining environmental ethics as “philosophical reflection on how human beings should relate to and act toward nonhuman life in natural environments,” they shift the focus to human agency.⁴⁵ Furthermore, by focusing on those traits and dispositions of character essential to a good and realized human life, they problematize the dichotomy in ethical theory between deontological and consequentialist ethics, namely, whether one should judge the rightness or wrongness of an action in terms of principles of obligation and duty, or whether or not they produce desirable results.⁴⁶ Buddhist environmental ethics

⁴¹ Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (New York, N.Y.: St. Martin’s Press, 1993) 193.

⁴² James Whitehill, “Buddhism and the Virtues,” in *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics* (ed. Damien Keown; Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000) 24–26.

⁴³ David E. Cooper and Simon P. James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005). For a forthcoming book on a virtues approach to environmental ethics, see Pragati Sahni, *Environmental Ethics: A Virtues Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁴⁴ Donald K. Swearer, “Principles and Poetry,” 231.

⁴⁵ Cooper and James, *Buddhism*, 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

is most properly generated by “an account of the virtues and their implications for treatment of the natural world” rather than consideration of rights or utility.⁴⁷

Buddhist eco-ethicists agree with eco-critics and eco-constructivists in rejecting ecological holists, who consider human beings and nature inseparable. Cooper and James assert that the canonical teachings of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, *anattā*, and *suññatā*, on which holists make claims of inseparability, represent “no more than a gesture at the form which explanations of natural processes would take” and that such asseverations “provide a very fragile basis on which to erect any substantial account of the empirical relationship between human beings and the rest of the living world.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, eco-apologists, who espouse the view of inseparability, do not convincingly demonstrate how ecological holism yields an enlightened environmental ethic. As Cooper and James put it, “recitation of the doctrines of conditioned co-arising and not-self is, by itself, quite incapable of showing that ‘we should not harm nature’ rather than exploit it whatever ways ‘maximize’ the ‘fitness’ of human genetic material.”⁴⁹ In contrast to an eco-critic such as Ian Harris, who attacks eco-Buddhist apologists for fabricating what he considers an inauthentic Buddhist environmentalism, the eco-ethicist holds that one can and should read a Buddhist environmental ethic as a natural extension of Buddhist virtue ethics. Such a move reflects a reconstruction of a “Buddhist environmental ethic on the basis *both* of a wider philosophy *and* explicit remarks found in the texts on environmental matters.”⁵⁰

In the tradition of Western virtue ethics, Cooper and James divide their analysis into an ethic of self- and other-regard. Self-regarding virtues consist of humility, self-mastery, and equanimity—components in the process of self-cultivation by which one attains “nirvanic felicity.”⁵¹ As elements of an environmental ethic, they examine the moral implications of these virtues for a proper way to regard and to treat animals and plants. Other-regarding virtues discussed by Cooper and James as antidotes to environmental vices include solicitude, nonviolence, and so called “responsibleness,” the latter being an antidote to overwhelming despair in the face of global environmental degradation.⁵² For the purposes of this essay, the details of how Cooper and James construct an environmental ethic from Buddhist virtue ethics have less importance than their general position. Eco-ethicists share the eco-constructivist’s respect for the integrity of the Buddhist tradition and their suspicion of eco-holism; however, they shift the focus of Buddhism and ecology from an evaluation of the ecological saliency of the Buddhist world view to a Buddhist environmental ethic firmly grounded in the received tradition of virtue

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 127.

with its strong emphasis on character transformation. Furthermore, the eco-ethicist emphasis on human flourishing underscores a positive, goal-oriented vision for the development of a sustainable lifestyle as an essential ingredient to the achievement of happiness.

■ Eco-Contextualists

Suthep mountain's dome-like shape is like an immense replica of the ancient Sanchi style stupa, a gift to Lanna by the Powers of Creation. Stupas are reliquaries of saints. More than that, they are a structural representation of the very essence of Buddhism. Plant and animal life are like Nature's frescoes, both beautifying and exemplifying the Law [*dhamma*]. . . . Although sometimes not being able to explain why rationally, the people of northern Thailand want to preserve Suthep mountain as it was given to them by Creation, as untouched as possible.⁵³

The above selection from an editorial appeared in one of Thailand's major English language newspapers as a response to the national government's decision to allow a private company to construct an electric cable car from the base to the top of the mountain that overlooks Chiang Mai. This largest city in northern Thailand represented the dominant Tai kingdom in the region prior to its integration into the modern Thai nation-state at the turn of the twentieth century. One of the most revered Buddhist temples in the country and a major pilgrimage site, Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep, sits near the summit of Mount Suthep. The mountain's legendary history incorporates the autochthonous pre-Thai (Lawa) guardian spirits, Phu Sae and Ya Sae, and the Lawa cultural traditions personified by a tribal chief, Vilaṅkha. The history also includes the protective power of a mythologized Brahmanical sage, Vasudeva; the founding of the first petty kingdom associated with the quasi-historical Mon queen, Cāmadevī; and Buddhist practices of relic veneration that are intimately connected with the authority and power of Buddhist, in this case, Thai kings. Tradition states that King Ku'ena (1355–1385) built the *stūpa* that enshrined a miraculous Buddha relic brought from the Tai kingdom of Sukhothai by the charismatic monk, Sumana Thera. In short, Mount Suthep stands as the locus of traditions that have shaped the cultural identity of the Lawa, Mon, and Thai populations that have resided in northern Thailand from before and since the founding of Chiang Mai by Mengrai in the late thirteenth century.

Suthep Mountain dominates the physical environment of the valley and the city of Chiang Mai and looms large as an icon of the cultural traditions that have defined northern Thailand for centuries. The prospect of a cable car that would convey tourists to the holy temple near its summit aroused the ire of the Chiang Mai citizenry, and Phra Bodhiramsī, the assistant ecclesiastical governor of Chiang Mai

⁵³ *Bangkok Post* 30 (April 5, 1986) 5. I have discussed this case at greater length in Swearer, "Principles and Poetry," 225–41.

Province, lent the authority of the monastic *sangha* to the anti-cable car movement. Phra Bodhiramṣī, the Bangkok Post editorial writer, and many others perceived the cable car as a profanation of a sacred site and a threat to northern Thai cultural identity. In this instance we find an example of what I have labeled a Buddhist “eco-contextualist” response to the endangerment of a natural site perceived as a sacred icon. The pressures to develop Doi Suthep for its commercial value to the tourism industry threatened the mountain’s natural environment and its spiritual integrity. The fact that northern Thais see the mountain as a sacred landscape constituted a major factor in challenging both private and government efforts to build a cable car to its summit. Obviously, Suthep mountain holds a unique place in the cultural imagination of northern Thais; this example, however, suggests a more general truth, namely, that religious-cultural narratives of place can make a crucial contribution to environmental ethics. Indeed, when it comes to inspiring concrete action to counter environmental degradation, such stories may play a more decisive role than an appeal to philosophical principles with ecological import, for stories and traditions of cultural practice have the power to touch the deepest sensibilities of personal and social identity. Ongoing narratives that connect myth and history, past and present, humans and nature, give an environmental ethic a personal, social, and cultural grounding that it otherwise lacks.⁵⁴

I could cite numerous diverse instances from other locations throughout Buddhist Asia. In her CSWR Buddhist Ecology and Environmental Studies symposium paper, “Ritual and Risk: Buddhist Environmental in Practice,” Susan M. Darlington provides several examples of “environmental monks” (*phra anurak pa*), who have developed strategies for protecting natural habitats in specific locations in Thailand. Particularly noteworthy is the practice of “ordaining trees” to protect community forests under threat of commercial development.⁵⁵ Zhiru Ng’s symposium paper, “Purifying the Mind, Sanctifying the Earth,” examines a built environment, the main hall of the Compassion Relief Movement in eastern Taiwan founded by the charismatic nun Zhengyan (1937–), as an example of the incorporation of environmental practice into architecture. This hall represents an intertwining of Buddhist and ecological ideals into a single material structure as a continuous presence in the daily lives of the movements’ monastic and lay followers.

The literature in the field of Buddhism and ecology has grown exponentially in the past decade. This brief essay has made an effort to describe its diversity in terms of a fivefold scheme of classification: eco-apologists, eco-critics, eco-constructivists, eco-ethicists, and eco-contextualists. The specific question of what constitutes an “authentic” Buddhist ecological ethic invites the more basic question of what constitutes “authentic” Buddhism. As in all historic religions, Buddhism has evolved and changed over time and place. Today if the Buddhist tradition “is

⁵⁴ Swearer, “Principles and Poetry,” 240.

⁵⁵ Susan M. Darlington, “The Ordination of a Tree: The Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand,” *Ethnology* 37 (1998) 1–15.

to remain a living tradition, it has to supply answers to new vital questions and . . . accommodate its heritage to a new situation by means of explication, re-interpretation, re-organization or even creative extension or change. One of these questions is doubtless whether or not an ecological ethics is required.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Schmithausen, “Early Buddhist Tradition,” 6.