

interpreted as an articulation of the interdependence some thinkers regard as the dominant characteristic of ecological relationships. The Huayan image of the Jewel Net of Indra, in which every node reflects every other, becomes an image of the ecological interdependence that Aldo Leopold referred to as the "land-community."³ The doctrine of a pure, original Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*), which is said to be present in all sentient beings, and in some Buddhist traditions also in nonsentient nature, is employed to argue that Buddhists recognize the intrinsic value and moral considerability of nonhuman natural beings, an important element of much contemporary environmental thought. As sentient beings are thought to transmigrate through multiple forms, including human and nonhuman animals, and because even the Buddha and various bodhisattvas appear in narratives as nonhuman animals, Buddhism is said to present us with an account of sentient life that is not, to use Peter Singer's term, "speciesist."⁴ And more broadly, the doctrine of a universal Buddha nature that pervades the universe (*buddhākāya*) is said to demonstrate that there is no "dumb matter" lacking in value anywhere in the universe. Buddhist traditions, then, are claimed to have an ecological insight into the interdependence and value of all life.

The characterization of Buddhism as an ecologically friendly tradition is also frequently justified on the basis of Buddhist psychology and moral thought. With their analysis of how desire leads to suffering, Buddhist traditions provide a robust critique of consumerism, which plays a significant role in pollution overload and resource depletion. Buddhist monastic rules often include injunctions against eating certain kinds of meat, polluting waters, and felling trees, all of which are interpreted as models of an ecologically sustainable existence. The precept against killing and the widely practiced cultivation of compassion are understood as oriented not just toward other humans but also toward other sentient beings. The Mahāyāna ideal of the bodhisattva, who vows to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings, is employed as a model that presents the aspiration to relieve the suffering that human practices inflict on nonhuman life.

Drawing on Buddhist metaphysics and ethics, many scholars, environmental activists, and Buddhist practitioners argue that Buddhism is particularly attuned to the natural world. However, not all scholars accept this interpretation. Some have insisted that Buddhism, especially in South Asia, was essentially an anthropocentric tradition devoted to the liberation of human beings from suffering.⁵ This was a liberation from the world, from nature, which, despite any misleading appearances to the contrary, was regarded as incapable of providing ultimate satisfaction. The natural world, then, was not believed

3. Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 201–226.

4. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Ecco, 2002).

5. For the most careful and sophisticated critique of ecological Buddhism, see the work of Ian Harris.

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Joanna Macy

The Ecological Self

William Edelglass

In a widely read article published in 1967, Lynn White, Jr. argued that how we conceive of nature and the place of humans in the environment will determine how we use natural resources and impact the world around us. According to White, the devaluation of nature and the pervasive anthropocentrism of Western philosophical and religious traditions were the root causes of the ecological crisis.¹ He suggested that Buddhism was more suitable to an ecologically sustainable way of life because Buddhists conceive human beings to be wholly interdependent with the more-than-human world. In the last few decades, scholars have produced more nuanced views of the ecological theories and practices of both Asian and Western religious traditions. Still, Buddhist traditions have become fertile sources for many thinkers seeking to reconceive the human-nature relationship with the hope of providing a theoretical foundation for ecologically sustainable ways of being in the world.

Some authors claim that traditional Buddhist metaphysics and ontology are inherently conducive to environmental sustainability.² Dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), a doctrine central to much Buddhist thought, is

1. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–1207.

2. See, for example, Duncan Ryūken Williams, "Bibliography on Buddhism and Ecology," in Tucker and Williams 1997, 403–425.

to possess some kind of intrinsic value, but was something to be overcome. And despite the compassion shown toward nonhuman animals, Buddhists, especially in South Asia, have often regarded animal existence as miserable and, importantly, animals were generally considered incapable of practicing the Buddha's Dharma. Moreover, critics of ecological Buddhism argue that early Buddhists had no awareness of the ecological crisis we face today; it is a mistake to project contemporary environmental sensibilities, now part of the global discourse of modernity, back on ancient Buddhist ideas and practices.

Religious traditions, however, are not static. They only survive to the extent that they are able to meet the needs of contemporary practitioners. Today, practitioners in all the major religions are exploring the resources within their own traditions for help in addressing the ecological crisis. Buddhism is no exception. The Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and other Buddhist leaders are formulating ecological interpretations of Buddhism. And Buddhist practitioners, in Asia and in the West, have developed what might be considered ecocentric Buddhist rituals. In Thailand, old-growth trees have been ordained as monks to preserve them from logging corporations. Earth-oriented prayers and practices have been created and integrated into the spiritual life of numerous Western Buddhist centers. And for many in the West, Buddhism has been a source of understanding and inspiration for environmental activism and ecologically sustainable stewardship of the land. Buddhist environmentalism has become one of the major expressions of engaged Buddhism.⁶

Joanna Macy is a Buddhist teacher, environmental activist, and scholar who is perhaps the most prominent Western advocate of ecological Buddhism. In her essay "The Ecological Self: Postmodern Ground for Right Action," Macy argues that the pain some people feel for damaged ecosystems or the suffering of other species manifests the ways the self is inextricably intertwined with the more-than-human world. This experience of interconnection is an "extension of identity," from a "separate and fragile" self that requires constant defense and acquisition to a "wider, ecological sense of self." Macy understands this shift in light of twentieth-century science, especially general systems theory, according to which subject and object, organism and environment, are not absolutely distinct but are symbiotically related within larger systems. It is in Buddhism, however, that Macy finds the ecological self articulated with distinctive "clarity and sophistication." Indeed, Buddhism "goes further than systems cybernetics, both in revealing the pathogenic character of any reifications of the self and in offering methods for transcending them." Buddhist metaphysics, psychology, and ethics, Macy argues, provide us with ways of understanding our experience of an interconnected, ecological self and of responding to the suffering around us. Buddhist teachings resonate with our own experience and contemporary science and nourish our aspirations to contribute to a more sustainable world.⁷

6. See chapter 36 here.

7. The following essay is abridged from Joanna Macy, "The Ecological Self: Postmodern Ground for Right Action," in Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre,

The Ecological Self: Postmodern Ground for Right Action

...[The] ecological sense of selfhood combines the mystical and the pragmatic. Transcending separateness and fragmentation...it generates an experience of profound interconnectedness with all life....

A variety of factors converge in our time to produce such a shift in the sense of self and self-interest. Among the most significant are (1) the psychological and spiritual pressures exerted by current dangers of mass annihilation, (2) the emergence from science of the systems view of the world, and (3) a renaissance of nondualistic forms of spirituality.

This essay explores the role of these three factors—planetary peril, systems thinking, and nondualistic religion, specifically Buddhist teachings and practice—in promoting this shift. It is written from a conviction that a larger, ecological sense of self will characterize the postmodern world, and that without it there simply may be no postmodern world.

I. Personal Response to Planetary Crisis

The shift toward a wider, ecological sense of self is in large part a function of the dangers that threaten to overwhelm us. Given accelerating environmental destruction and massive deployment of nuclear weapons, people today are aware that they live in a world that can end....

As their grief and fear for the world is allowed to be expressed without apology or argument and validated as a wholesome, life-preserving response, people break through their avoidance mechanisms, break through their sense of futility and isolation. And generally what they break through into is a larger sense of identity. It is as if the pressure of their acknowledged awareness of the suffering of our world stretches, or collapses, the culturally defined boundaries of the self.

It becomes clear, for example, that the grief and fear experienced for our world and our common future are categorically different from similar sentiments relating to one's personal welfare. This pain cannot be equated with dread of one's own individual demise. Its source lies less in concerns for personal survival than in apprehensions of collective suffering—of what looms for human life and other species and unborn generations to come. Its nature is akin to the original meaning of compassion—"suffering with." It is the distress we feel on behalf of the larger whole of which we are a part. And when it is so defined, it serves as trigger or gateway to a more encompassing sense of identity, inseparable from the web of life in which we are as intricately interconnected as cells in a larger body.

eds., *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995). We gratefully acknowledge permission to republish this work.

This shift is an appropriate, adaptive response. For the crisis that threatens our planet, be it seen in its military, ecological, or social aspects, derives from a dysfunctional and pathogenic notion of the self. It is a mistake about our place in the order of things. It is the delusion that the self is so separate and fragile that we must delineate and defend its boundaries, that it is so small and needy that we must endlessly consume, that it is so aloof that we can—as individuals, corporations, nation-states or as a species—be immune to what we do to other beings.

Such a view of the human condition is not new, nor is the felt imperative to extend self-interest to embrace the whole in any way novel to our history as a species. It has been enjoined by many a teacher and saint. What is notable in our present situation . . . is that the extension of identity can come directly, not through exhortations to nobility or altruism, but through the owning of pain. That is why the shift in the sense of the self is credible to those experiencing it. . . .

II. Cybernetics of the Self

The findings of twentieth-century science undermine the notion of a separate self, distinct from the world it observes and acts upon. As Einstein showed, the self's perceptions are shaped by its changing position in relation to other phenomena. And these phenomena are affected not only by location, but as Heisenberg demonstrated, by the very act of observation. Now contemporary systems science and systems cybernetics go yet further in challenging old assumptions about a distinct, separate, continuous self, showing that there is no logical or scientific basis for construing one part of the experienced world as "me" and the rest as "other."

As open, self-organizing systems, our very breathing, acting, and thinking arise in interaction with our shared world through the currents of matter, energy, and information that flow through us. In the web of relationships that sustain these activities, there are no clear lines demarcating a separate, continuous self. As postmodern systems theorists aver, there is no categorical "I" set over against a categorical "you" or "it."

Systems philosopher Ervin Laszlo argues,

We must do away with the subject-object distinction in analyzing experience. This does not mean that we reject the concepts of organism and environment, as handed down to us by natural science. It only means that we conceive of experience as linking organism and environment in a continuous chain of events, from which we cannot, without arbitrariness, abstract an entity called organism and another called environment.⁸

8. Ervin Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row Torchbook, 1973), 21.

The abstraction of a separate "I" is what Gregory Bateson calls the "epistemological fallacy of Occidental civilization." He asserts that the larger system of which we are a part defies any definitive localization of the self. That which decides and does can no longer be neatly identified with the isolated subjectivity of the individual or located within the confines of his or her skin. "The total self-corrective unit which processes information, or, as I say 'thinks' and 'acts' and 'decides,' is a system whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or of what is popularly called the 'self' or 'consciousness'."⁹

The false reification of the self is basic to the planetary ecological crisis in which we now find ourselves. We have imagined that the "unit of survival," as Bateson puts it, is the separate individual or the separate species. In reality, as throughout the history of evolution, it is the individual *plus* environment, the species *plus* the environment, for they are essentially symbiotic. Bateson continues:

When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise "what interests me is me, or my organization, or my species," you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that Lake Erie is part of your wider eco-mental system—and that if Lake Erie is driven insane its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience.¹⁰

Although we consist of and are sustained by the currents of information, matter, and energy that flow through us, we are accustomed to identifying ourselves with only that small arc of the flow-through that is lit, like the narrow beam of a flashlight, by our individual perceptions. But we do not *have* to so limit our self-perceptions. It is logical, Bateson contends, to conceive of mind as the entire "pattern that connects." It is as plausible to align our identity with that larger pattern and conceive of ourselves as interdependent with all beings, as it is to break off one segment of the process and build our borders there.

Systems Theory helps us see that the larger identification of which we speak does not involve an eclipse of the distinctiveness of one's individual experience. The "pattern that connects" is not an ocean of Brahman where separate drops merge and our diversities dissolve. Natural and cognitive systems self-organize and interact to create larger wholes precisely through their heterogeneity. By the same token, through the dance of deviation-amplifying feedback loops, the respective particularities of the interactive systems can increase. Integration and differentiation go hand in hand. Uniformity, by contrast, is entropic, the kiss of death. . . .

9. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 319.

10. Bateson 1972: 484.

III. The Boundless Heart of the Bodhisattva

In the resurgence of nondualistic spiritualities in our postmodern world, Buddhism in its historic coming to the West is distinctive in the clarity and sophistication it offers in understanding the dynamics of the self. In much the same way as General Systems Theory does, its ontology and epistemology undermine any categorical distinctions definitive of a self-existent identity. And it goes further than systems cybernetics, both in revealing the pathogenic character of any reifications of the self and in offering methods for transcending them.

Dependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), the core teaching of the Buddha on the nature of causality, presents a phenomenal reality so dynamic and interrelated that categorical subject-object distinctions dissolve. This is driven home in the doctrine of *anatman* or "no-self," where one's sense of identity is understood as an ephemeral product of perceptual transactions, and where the experienter is inseparable from his or her experience. The notion of an abiding individual self—whether saintly or sinful, whether it is to be protected, promoted or punished—is seen as the foundational delusion of human life. It is the motive force behind our attachments and aversions, and these in turn exacerbate it. As portrayed symbolically in the center of the Buddhist Wheel of Life, where pig, cock, and snake pursue each other endlessly, these three—greed, hatred, and delusion of ego—sustain and aggravate each other in a continuous vicious circle, or positive feedback loop.

We are not doomed to a perpetual rat-race; the vicious circle can be broken, its energies liberated to more satisfying uses by the threefold interplay of wisdom, meditative practice, and moral action. Wisdom (*prajñā*) arises, reflected and generated by the teachings about self and reality. Practice (*dhyāna*) liberates through precise attention to the elements and flow of one's existential experience—an experience which reveals no separate experience, no permanent self. And moral behavior (*sīla*), according to precepts of nonviolence, truthfulness, and generosity, helps free one from the dictates of greed, aversion, and reactions which reinforce the delusion of separate selfhood.

Far from the nihilism and escapism often attributed to Buddhism, the path it offers can bring the world into sharper focus and liberate one into lively, effective actions. What emerges, when free from the prison cell of the separate, competitive ego, is a vision of radical and sustaining interdependence. In Hua Yen Buddhism it is imaged as the Jeweled Net of Indra: a cosmic canopy where each of us—each jewel at each node of the net—reflects all the others and reflects the others reflecting back. As in the holographic view in contemporary science, each part *contains* the whole.

Each one of us who perceives that, or is capable of perceiving it, is a bodhisattva—an "awakening being"—the hero model of the Buddhist tradition. We are all bodhisattvas, able to recognize and act upon our profound interexistence with all beings. That true nature is already evident in our pain

for the world, which is a function of the *mahākaruṇā*, great compassion. And it flowers through the bodhisattva's "boundless heart" in active identification with all beings....

IV. Beyond Altruism

What Bateson called "the pattern that connects" and Buddhists image as the Jeweled Net of Indra can be construed in lay, secular terms as our deep ecology. "Deep ecology" is a term coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess to connote a basic shift in ways of seeing and valuing. It represents an apprehension of reality that he contrasts with "shallow environmentalism"—the band-aid approach applying technological fixes for short-term human goals.

The perspective of deep ecology helps us to recognize our embeddedness in nature, overcoming our alienation from the rest of creation and regaining an attitude of reverence for all life forms. It can change the way that the self is experienced through a spontaneous process of self-realization, where the self-to-be-realized extends further and further beyond the separate ego and includes more and more of the phenomenal world. In this process, notions like altruism and moral duty are left behind....

Virtue is not required for the emergence of this ecological self! This shift in identification is essential to our survival at this point in our history precisely because it serves in lieu of ethics and morality. Moralizing is ineffective; sermons seldom hinder us from pursuing our self-interest as we construe it. Hence the need to be more enlightened about what our real self-interest is. It would not occur to me, for example, to exhort you to refrain from sawing off your leg. That would not occur to me or to you, because your leg is part of you. Well, so are the trees in the Amazon Basin; they are our external lungs. We are just beginning to wake up to that, gradually discovering that the world is our body....

V. Grace and Power

The ecological self, like any notion of selfhood, is a metaphoric construct, and a dynamic one. It involves choice. Choices can be made to identify at different moments with different dimensions or aspects of our systematically interconnected existence—be they hunted whales or homeless humans or the planet it-self. In so doing, this extended self brings into play wider resources—resources, say, of courage, wisdom, endurance—like a nerve cell opening to the charge of fellow neurons in the neural net....

There is the experience then of being acted "through" and sustained "by" something greater than oneself. It is close to the religious concept of grace, but, as distinct from the traditional Western understanding of grace, it does not require belief in God or supernatural agency. One simply finds oneself empowered to act on behalf of other beings—or on behalf of the larger

whole—and the empowerment itself seems to come “through” that or those for whose sake one acts.

This phenomenon, when approached from the perspective of Systems Theory, is understandable in terms of synergy. It springs from the self-organizing nature of life. It stems from the fact that living systems evolve in complexity and intelligence through their interactions. These interactions, which can be mental or physical, and which can operate at a distance through the transmission of information, require openness and sensitivity on the part of the system in order to process the flow-through of energy and information. The interactions bring into play new responses and new possibilities. This interdependent release of fresh potential is called “synergy.” And it is like grace, because it brings an increase of power beyond one’s own capacity as a separate entity.

As we awaken, then, to our larger, ecological self, we find new powers. We find possibilities of vast efficacy, undreamed of in our squirrel cage of separate ego. Because these potentialities are interactive in nature, they are the preserve and property of no one, and they manifest only to the extent that we recognize and act upon our interexistence, our deep ecology....

[In contrast to mastery and possession, there is a joy in communion which is], I believe, a homecoming to our natural interexistence with all life forms, home to our deep ecology, home to the world as Dharmabody of the Buddha. And it brings with it the capacity to act with courage and resilience.

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Buddhist Feminist Reflections

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

The origins of Buddhist feminist awareness date to the time of the Buddha himself, around the fifth century B.C.E. The Vinaya (monastic discipline) texts record the story of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha’s stepmother and aunt, who asked to join the monastic order (Sangha).¹ After some initial reluctance, through the advocacy of his attendant monk Ānanda, the Buddha affirmed that women have the potential to achieve the fruits of the path to liberation and agreed to Mahāpajāpatī’s request. Thus began the Bhikkhūnī Sangha, the order of fully ordained Buddhist nuns. In these accounts, the Buddha’s assent was qualified by a number of specific conditions, however, which are known as the eight “weighty” rules (*garudhammas*). The Buddha is said to have predicted that the admission of women to the Sangha would precipitate the premature demise of his teachings. As history has shown, the admission of women to the Sangha did not destroy the Buddhist teachings, which have survived and continue to flourish. The Bhikkhūnī Sangha continued in India and Sri Lanka until around the eleventh century and even today, twenty-five hundred years after the Buddha, still thrives in Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Efforts are afoot to establish or revive the order in other countries around the world.

The Buddha’s affirmation that women have the potential to achieve the fruits of the path has encouraged women to study his teachings, put them

1. Jonathan S. Walters, “A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha’s Mother’s Story,” *History of Religions* 33:4 (May, 1994): 358–379.