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**AN ASSESSMENT OF BUDDHIST ECO-PHILOSOPHY**

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## 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 behaviour towards nature. (Lambert Schmidhausen, *Buddhism and Nature*, 1990, 2).

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. It is not surprising to discover that different points of view regarding environmental ethics and religion, or what is referred to more generally as "religion and ecology," have materialized. At one end of the spectrum are apologists who see the world's religions as a key resource in addressing the environmental crisis; at the other, 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 an 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 (White 1967: 1203-1207).<sup>i</sup> Challenging White's reductive view, Christian scholars point out that Western theism encompasses at least five

attitudes toward the environment--despotic, dominion over, stewardship of, subordination to, participation in (Gustafson 1994: 77-110)<sup>ii</sup>--and in the past two decades Christian theologians who have given a prominent place to eco-theology include Sallie McFague (1993, 1997) and Mark I. Wallace (2005).

White's positive evaluation of Buddhism's eco-friendly worldview has been promoted by Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism in Asia and the West; however, recent scholarship has both nuanced and challenged what has been characterized as Buddhist "eco-apologetics." My purpose in this essay is to assess and evaluate a selection of contributions to the field of Buddhism and ecology.<sup>iii</sup> Far from being inclusive of the range of scholarship in this area in both Asian and European languages, my analysis is intended to highlight what I construe as five sometimes overlapping positions regarding Buddhism and the environment. I have labeled this five-fold taxonomy: eco-apologists, eco-critics, eco-constructivists, eco-ethicists, and eco-contextualists.<sup>iv</sup> I hasten to add that these categories are intended to be suggestive rather than definitive, and that I intend them primarily for heuristic purposes. The first position holds that Buddhist environmentalism is a natural extension of the Buddhist worldview; the second that the Buddhist worldview is not compatible with an environmental ethic; the third that a Buddhist environmental ethic, while not co-terminus with the Buddhist worldview, can be constructed from Buddhist texts and doctrinal tenets; the fourth, that a viable Buddhist environmental ethic should be evaluated in terms of Buddhist ethics rather than inferred from the Buddhist

worldview; and the fifth, that the most effective Buddhist environmental ethic grows out 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 (Badiner 1990: xiv-xv).

The majority of the writings on Buddhist ecology with which I am familiar promote the normative position that the Buddhist worldview is 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*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner, (1990), *Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Martine Batchelor and Kerr Brown (1992), and *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, ed. Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft (2000)--explicate and justify this position using a wide ambit of texts that range from the Maharatnakuta Sutra to Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* (Hua Yen or Flower Ornament Sutra) is one of the most often cited classical Indian Mahayana texts to which an ecological significance is ascribed. This

important scripture and the metaphor of the Jewel Net of Indra are offered as evidence that Buddhism, in particular, the Hua Yen tradition, views the cosmos as an infinitely repeated interrelationship among all the members of the cosmos, likened by Francis Cook 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." (Cook 1989: 215). Since the majority of sources in these anthologies are contemporary rather than classical texts, the eco-apologist position has been identified with Engaged Buddhism (McFarlane: [krbuddhism.org/zen\\_koan/stewart\\_mcfarlane.htm](http://krbuddhism.org/zen_koan/stewart_mcfarlane.htm)).

Within the Theravada ambit, Lily de Silva reads the *Agganna Sutta* and the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* as providing a template for the interdependence of humankind and nature that links together human moral degeneration and the degradation of nature, and she finds in the Pali *jatakas* the lesson that an understanding of *karma* and rebirth "prepares the Buddhist to adopt a sympathetic attitude toward animals" (De Silva 2000: 96-97). As an example of the Buddha's disciples regard for natural beauty as a source of aesthetic satisfaction De Silva quotes Mahakashyapa's "detached sense of appreciation" of the natural environment (Thag. 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" (De Silva 2000:96-97, 101).

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" (Kaza 1993: 137). Eco-apologists appeal to the simple lifestyle of Buddhist monks as providing an example of how to live non-acquisitively, and point out that *vinaya* rules prohibit monks from cutting down trees, from eating ten kinds of meat of wild animals, and they are forbidden to contaminate water. As proof of the importance of trees and forests in early Buddhism it is pointed out that the Buddha was born, achieved his awakening, and died under trees, and that forest dwelling was prized as an ideal environment in which to practice the religious life.

Beyond appealing to particular texts and the exemplary life of the Buddha and *arahant* monks, eco-apologists ascribe an ecological significance to seminal Buddhist doctrines, in particular, *paticca samuppada* (interdependent co-arising), *anatta* (not-self), *sunyata* (emptiness), *tathagatagarbha* (the womb of suchness). They make the general claim that these teachings represent a non-dualistic, non-hierarchical, holistic worldview in which all sentient beings--humans and animals--and insentient nature are conjoined. In the resonant prose of the late Thai monk, Buddhadasa 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." (Buddhadasa 1990: 35). 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. (Macy 1990: 56). In schematic form I have conceptualized Buddhist environmentalists as connecting sentient--and in some traditions non-sentient-- entities on four levels: existential, moral, cosmological, and ontological (Swearer 2001: 226): existentially through the doctrine of shared suffering (*dukkha*) which eco-apologists extend to nature, "To see a once-whole forest clear-cut to stumps, the soil eroding, the wildlife gone, is to experience the impact of environmental suffering" (Kaza 1993: 139); morally and cosmologically through the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth by which all sentient beings participate in a karmic continuum traditionally divided into three world levels and five or six rebirth realms; and ontologically through such concepts as the womb of suchness and universal Buddha nature.

### **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 (Schmidhausen 1997: 46)

I...[also] find it hard to determine to what extent...focusing on the positive goal of '*Nirovana 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. (Schmidthausen 1997: 42)

The critics of Buddhist eco-apologists contend that today's ecological concerns are quintessentially modern and that, consequentially, Buddhist foundational documents lack any explicit discussion of what today we would label environmental ethics (Harris 2000: 113). While the eco-critics may sympathize with the intention behind the eco-apologists' project, they judge it to be a serious distortion of normative Buddhist teachings and historical traditions. They focus their critique on what they consider to be a misreading of early Indian Buddhism, in particular, although they cite misrepresentations of East Asian Buddhist traditions as well, e.g., Noriaka Hakamaya's attack on the concepts of Buddha-nature, *tathata* (suchness), and non-dualism. 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 is primarily anthropocentric, not biocentric, in its focus on spiritual liberation. At best, the non-human environment occupies a role as the context for the pursuit of trans-mundane ends. Eco-apologists, in response, object to the narrowness of this criticism, contending that from the outset the way of the Buddha was broader than a narrowly construed quest for Nirvana without regard for other sentient beings and natural surroundings.

Although I began this section on eco-critics with two quotations from Lambert Schmidthausen's *Buddhism and Nature*, I agree with Ian Harris that Schmidthausen's work on Buddhism and ecology should be evaluated 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, Schmidthausen fits best into my taxonomy as an eco-constructivist. Even though Harris's personal sympathies are with Schmidthausen, 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 due to the primacy of the spiritual goal humans are privileged over animals and nature. Although the destinies of humans and animals are interconnected, animals are regarded as unfortunate because they cannot grow in the *dhamma* and *vinaya* and cannot be ordained as monks (Harris 1991: 105). The plant world fares no better. Harris summarizes the canonical view of nature as being either something to be improved or cultivated or to be confronted in a therapeutic encounter (Harris 1991: 107). Above all, Harris finds the dysteleological nature of Buddhist cosmology and causality incompatible with an environmental ethic. Even the much vaunted Hua Yen vision of interpenetration is dysteleological; a

worldview that seems necessarily to negate 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.<sup>v</sup> It seems to negate a social and eco-activist agenda, for if everything is interdependent then the black rhino depends on the hydrogen bomb, the rain forest on the nuclear waste dump and so forth (Harris 1995a: 205).

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, a response that grew out of the American environmental movement of the 1960s dominated by educated liberal elites and inter-religious environmental dialogues with a liberal socio-political agenda (Harris 1995b:173). Building on insights from Antony Giddens's *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), 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" (Harris 1995b: 175). 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 been indifferent to the history and complexity of the Buddhist tradition; they have uncritically appropriated modern globalized discourse and in doing so 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 there is no Buddhism as such. Nevertheless, Harris is sympathetic with the aim of the eco-apologists. While he sees this position as representing a significant departure from the traditional Buddhist worldview he acknowledges that all traditions must change if they are to adapt and flourish. Therefore, to reject an ecoBuddhism as a sham, supermarket religion is problematic 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" (Harris 1995b: 207).

### **Eco-Constructivists**

Stating the traditional Buddhist Attitudes of not injuring (*ahimsa*), benevolence (*metta/maitri*) and compassion (*karuna*) 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. (Schmidthausen 1990: 32)

Eco-constructivists adopt a critical stance toward the formation of a Buddhist environmental ethic based on a normative commitment rather than 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 Schmidthausen contend that a viable Buddhist environmental ethic depends on ascribing a positive value to nature and to natural diversity but in such a way that the essentials of the tradition are not lost. In his analysis, the soteriological focus of early Indian Buddhism has, at best, only a "passive" ecological significance although later forms of Mahayana offer more promise. He shares with eco-critics the view that early Buddhism did not ascribe an inherent value to nature. In his view, early Buddhism does not seem to confer any value on nature, neither on life as such nor on species nor on eco-systems. The ultimate value of early Buddhism is not in nature or in culture. Ultimately the issue is not preserving, restoring, transforming or subjugating nature but only for liberation

(*vimutti*) for all constituents of existence. (Schmidthausen 1997:11). Even so, the soteriological orientation of early Indian Buddhism can be construed to have ecological consequences in that the person who has attained liberation is motivated by sympathy and compassion to act on behalf of other sentient beings. These virtues, highlighted in the Mahayana *bodhisattoa* ideal, are primarily ethical rather than ecological terms, however. The same is true for the concept of interdependent co-arising (*paticca samuppada*), the knowledge of which leads to the overcoming of ignorance and desire. It is primarily psychological, ethical, and spiritual in nature. In Schmidthausen's view, "this analysis of the presuppositions of individual bondage and liberation could [not] without a radical reinterpretation, provide a basis for ecological ethics based on an intrinsic value of natural diversity and beauty" (Schmidthausen 1997: 12-13). The doctrine of rebirth which posits that animal forms may have been or be one's relatives seems to be 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.

In terms of Buddhist ethics, although the emphasis on overcoming desire and greed is framed in terms of spiritual practice and ascetic virtues and does not ascribe a positive value to nature as such, they do have environmental consequences and are ecologically beneficial. More pertinent to an ecological ethic are the values of non-killing, loving-kindness, sympathy, and compassion.

Although the principal of *ahimsa* began as protection against the vengeance of injured animals in the world beyond, and loving-kindness and compassion are associated 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; however, they are not without ecological import. In a similar vein, although Asoka's fifth pillar edict should not be read as conserving species, it does minimize the killing of individual animals. Both the 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. However, an eco-constructivist such as Schmidhausen believes that, nonetheless, selected teachings of the tradition are not without positive ecological consequences.<sup>vi</sup>

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 (*katannu*), loving-kindness (*metta*), and happiness (*sukha*). Payutto sees an environmental lesson in the following passage from the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, "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," observing, "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" (Payutto 1994: 22-23). In an even broader sense Payutto links human happiness to the natural environment. Citing the historical example of forest dwelling monks, he contends that throughout the history of Buddhism in Thailand the forest was seen as a teacher of mind and spirit and that living within a natural environment engenders a greater sense of happiness and well-being (Payutto 1994: 33). Payutto does not derive an ecological ethic based on the inherent value of the nature from such examples taken from text and tradition but he does discover teachings pertinent to what Schmidhausen 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 (Sulak 2005: 36).

The interests and concerns of religion and ecology are closely linked to an ethic of moderation, the Buddhist "Middle Way" (*majjhima patipata*), as

promoting a less environmental harmful life style. In the words of the popular bumper sticker, "Live simply so that others may simply live!" Over forty years ago, E.F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* advocated a non-exploitative "Buddhist economics" lifestyle of simplicity, nonviolence, and moderate consumption: "The teaching of the Buddha...enjoins a reverent and non-violent attitude not only to all sentient beings but also... to trees" (Schumacher 1973: 56). Inspired by Schumacher's vision, Buddhist social activists and environmentalists have become vociferous critics of the consumerist values associated with economic globalization. Much of this literature is provocative, insightful, and inspiring.<sup>vii</sup> From a philosophical perspective, however, equally if not more interesting has been the effort to view Buddhist environmental ethics from the perspective of virtue theory.

Recent studies of Theravada Buddhism have proposed an analogical relationship between Buddhist ethics and the tradition of virtue ethics in the West, e.g. the Stoics, Epicureans, Aristotle. Damien Keown, for example, observes that despite differences in social and cultural contexts there are formal parallels between the ideal of human perfection as taught by the Buddha and Aristotle (Keown 1992: 193), and James Whitehill sees the cultivation of the *paramitas* ("awakened virtue") as the heart of Buddhist ethics (2000: 24-26). Whitehill characterizes the *paramitas* as biocentric and ecological based on what he considers to be the relational and processional nature of the self-concept in Buddhism, but he does not develop this notion in the direction of an

environmental ethic. However, such a project on different grounds has been undertaken by two British scholars at the University of Durham, David E. Cooper and Simon P. James (2005).<sup>viii</sup> It is their case for the relationship between the cultivation of virtue and environmental ethics to which I shall refer in arguing that in the construction of a Buddhist environmental ethic preference be given to the Buddhist vision of human flourishing over and above reconstructing seminal teachings from the Buddhist worldview, e.g. *paticca-samuppada*, *anatta*, *sunnata*, *tathatagarbha*, from an ecological perspective. In general terms, moreover, I am of the opinion that the most compelling contribution to environmental discourse that can be made by the world's religions is in the area of what I have termed an "ecology of human flourishing" (Swearer 2001: 231).

Cooper and James challenge the dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental value made by environmental ethicists who claim intrinsic value to be the *sine qua non* of environmental ethics. In defining environmental ethics as "philosophical reflection on how human beings should relate to and act toward non-human life in natural environments" they shift the focus to human agency (Cooper and James 2004: 3). 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 the rightness or wrongness of an action should be judged in terms of principles of obligation and duty, or whether or not they produce desirable results (*ibid*: 7). Buddhist environmental ethics, then, 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 (ibid: 108).

Eco-ethicists agree with eco-critics and eco-constructivists in rejecting ecological holists who claim that human beings and nature are inseparable. Cooper and James assert that the canonical teachings of *paticca samuppada*, *anatta*, and *sunyata* on which claims of inseparability are made are "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" (ibid., 110). Furthermore, eco-apologists who espouse the view of inseparability do not convincingly demonstrate how ecological holism yields an enlightened environmental ethic or, 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' and 'fitness' of human genetic material (ibid., 112). In contrast to an eco-critic such as Ian Harris who attacks eco-Buddhist apologists for fabricating what he considers to be an inauthentic Buddhist environmentalism, the eco-ethicist holds that a Buddhist environmental ethic can be read as a natural extension of Buddhist virtue ethics. Such a move is 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 (ibid., 118).

In the tradition of Western virtue ethics, Cooper and James divide their analysis into an ethic of self and other-regard. Self-regarding virtues are humility, self-mastery, and equanimity--components in the process of self-cultivation by which one attains "nirvanic felicity" (ibid., 118). As elements of an environmental ethic they examine the implications of these virtues for a proper way to regard and treat animals and plants as a moral resource of the cultivation of these virtues. Other-regarding virtues discussed by Cooper and James as antidotes to environmental vices are solicitude, non-violence, and 'responsibleness,' the latter being an antidote to overwhelming despair in the face of global environmental degradation (ibid., 127). For the purposes of this brief essay, the specifics of how Cooper and James construct an environmental ethic from Buddhist virtue ethics is of less importance than their general position. Eco-ethicists shares the eco-constructivist's respect for the integrity of the Buddhist tradition and suspicion of the 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 with its strong emphasis on character transformation.

### **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 (*Bangkok Post* 30, April 5, 1986, 5).<sup>ix</sup>

The above selection from an editorial that appeared in one of Thailand's major English language newspapers was 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, northern Thailand's largest city and the dominant Tai kingdom in the region prior to its integration into the modern Thai nation-state at the turn of the twentieth century. Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep, one of the most revered Buddhist temples in the country and a major pilgrimage site, sits near the summit of the mountain. The mountain's legendary history incorporates autochthonous pre-Thai (Lawa) guardian spirits, Phu Sae and Ya Sae, and Lawa cultural traditions personified by a tribal chief, Vilangkha; the protective power of a Brahmanical sage, Vasudeva; the formation of the first petty kingdom associated with the quasi-historical Mon

queen, Camadevi; and Buddhist practices of relic veneration that are intimately connected with the authority and power of Buddhist--in this case Thai--kings. Tradition has it that King Ku'ena (1355-1385) built the stupa that enshrined a miraculous Buddha relic brought from the kingdom of Sukhothai by the charismatic monk, Sumana Thera. In short, Mt. Suthep has been the locus of northern Thai cultural identity from the founding of Chiang Mai by Mengrai in the late thirteenth century to the present.

Suthep Mountain not only dominates the physical environment of the valley and the city of Chiang Mai, it is a cultural icon that represents the mixture of religio-cultural traditions that has defined northern Thailand for centuries. The prospect of a cable car that would convey an ever increasing number of tourists to the holy temple near its summit aroused the ire of the Chiang Mai citizenry. It was seen, in the eyes of the Bangkok Post editorial writer, as a profanation of a sacred site and a threat to northern Thai cultural identity. In this instance we see an example of what I have labeled an "eco-contextualist" response to the endangerment of a sacred icon at a particular place. 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 the mountain is perceived by northern Thais as a sacred landscape was a major factor in challenging both private and government efforts to build a cable car to its summit. While the place that Suthep mountain holds in the cultural imagination of northern Thais is unique, the story of the mountain from its

legendary origin until today suggests a more general truth, namely, that narratives of place can make a crucial contribution to environmental ethics. Indeed, when it comes to inspiring concrete action, such stories may be decisive, for they have the power to touch the deepest sensibilities of our personal and social identity. Ongoing narratives that connect myth and history, past and present, humans and nature give an environmental ethic a multivalent inclusiveness it otherwise lacks (Swearer 2001: 240). Many other examples of place-based Buddhist environmental ethics could be cited but I leave that to other presenters in this symposium. Among the American panelists Professors Zhiru Ng and Susan Darlington call to our attention case studies in Taiwan and Thailand respectively.

The literature in the field of Buddhism and ecology has grown exponentially in the past decade. This brief essay is an effort to describe its diversity in terms of a fivefold scheme of classification. The question of whether there is such a thing as an "authentic" Buddhist ecological ethic begs the question of what constitutes "authentic" Buddhism. As is true of all historic religions, Buddhism has evolved and changed over time and place. Today if the Buddhist tradition "...is 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..." (Schmidthausen 1997: 6).



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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup>White's essay created a storm of controversy. For example, see Elspeth Whitney, "Lynn White, Ecotheology, and History," *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993): 151-69.

<sup>ii</sup>Gustafson characterizes these attitudes as "ideal types" in the Weberian sense. 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.

<sup>iii</sup>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.

<sup>iv</sup>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.: (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 scholar/activists 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 Schmidhausen who attempts to devise an authentic (in contrast to inauthentic) 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 Schmidhausen's analysis of

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Noriaka Hakamaya see, *Buddhism and Nature* (1990): 53-62. In "Getting to Grips with Buddhist Environmentalism: A Provisional Typology," Harris finds four types of discourses among eco-Buddhists: eco-spirituality, eco-justice, eco-traditionalism, and eco-apologists

<sup>v</sup> John McClellan satirizes ecological non-dualism in "Nodual Ecology," *Tricycle* (winter, 1993), "In any discussion of deep Ecology--or rocks, clouds, rivers, and mountains--one should include kitchen tables, cars, computers, stuffed animals, and nuclear reactors (60)."

<sup>vi</sup> See, in particular, Lambert Schmidhausen, *Buddhism and Nature*, 29-52.

<sup>vii</sup> See for example, Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change: Engaged Buddhism in a Globalizing World* (Boston: Wisdom Publications), 2005; *Hooked! Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume*, ed. Stephanie Kaza (Boston: Shambala Publications), 2005. From a Christian perspective see Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2001: "...we North American middle-class Christians need to live differently in order to love nature and to live differently, 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)."

<sup>viii</sup> For a forthcoming book on a virtues approach to environmental ethics see, Pragati Sahni, *Environmental Ethics: A Virtues Approach* (London: Routledge), 2006.

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<sup>ix</sup> I have discussed this case at greater length in, Donald K. Swearer 2001: 225-241.