

Healing Ecology

WHAT CAN BUDDHISM CONTRIBUTE TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS?



THE STARVING TIGRESS, BURYATIA, 1800-1899. BUDDHIST LINEAGE, GROUND MINERAL PIGMENT ON COTTON. COLLECTION OF BURYAT HISTORICAL MUSEUM.

As a complex religious tradition, or group of traditions, Buddhism has a lot to say about the natural world. Passages in many Buddhist texts reveal sensitivity to the beauties of nature and respect for its various beings. A good example is the Jataka tales (“birth stories”) that describe the previous lives of the Buddha before he became the Buddha. In many of them he is born as an animal, and in some of the best-known tales the Buddha sacrifices himself for “lower animals,” such as offering his rabbit body to a weak tigress so that she can feed her starving cubs. Such fables challenge the duality usually assumed between humans and “nature”—as if we were not part of nature! They suggest that the welfare of every living being, no matter how insignificant it may seem to us, is spiritually important and

deserving of our concern. All beings in the Jatakas are able to feel compassion for others and act selflessly to help ease their suffering. In contrast to a Darwinian “survival of the fittest,” which is often used to justify our abuse of other species, its stories offer a vision of life in which we are all interconnected, parts of the same web of life, and therefore also inter-responsible, responsible for each other.

This compassion is not limited to the animal realm. If we can believe the traditional biographies, the Buddha was born under trees, meditated under trees, experienced his great awakening under trees, often taught under trees, and passed away under trees. Unsurprisingly, he often expressed his gratitude to trees and other plants. Some later Buddhist texts explicitly deny that plants have

sentience, but the Pali Canon is more ambiguous. In one sutra, a tree spirit appears to the Buddha in a dream, complaining that its tree had been chopped down by a monk. The next morning the Buddha prohibited sangha members from cutting down trees. Monks and nuns are still forbidden from cutting off tree limbs, picking flowers, even plucking green leaves off plants.

Yet great sensitivity to nature is hardly unique to Buddhism. So what special perspective, if any, does Buddhism offer to our understanding of the biosphere, and our relationship to it, at this critical time in history when we are doing our utmost to destroy it?

To answer that question, we have to go back to a more basic question: what is really distinctive about Buddhism? The

four noble (or “ennobling”) truths are all about *dukkha*, and the Buddha emphasized that his only concern was ending *dukkha*. To end our *dukkha*, however, we need to understand and experience *anatta*, our lack of self, which seen from the other side is also our interdependence with all other things.

There are different ways to explain *anatta*, yet fundamentally it denies our separation from other people and from the rest of the natural world. The psychosocial construction of a separate self in here is at the same time the construction of an “other” out there, that which is different from me. What is special about the Buddhist perspective is its emphasis on the *dukkha* built into this situation. Basically, the self is *dukkha*.

One way to express the problem is that the sense of self, being a construct, is always insecure, because inherently ungrounded. It can never secure itself, because there is no-thing that could be secured. The self is more like a process, or a function. The problem with processes, however, is that they are always temporal, necessarily impermanent—but we don’t want to be impermanent, something that is changing all the time. We want to be real! So we keep trying to ground

ourselves, often in ways that just make our situation worse. For Buddhism the only true solution lies in realizing our nonduality with “others” and understanding that our own well-being cannot be distinguished from their well-being.

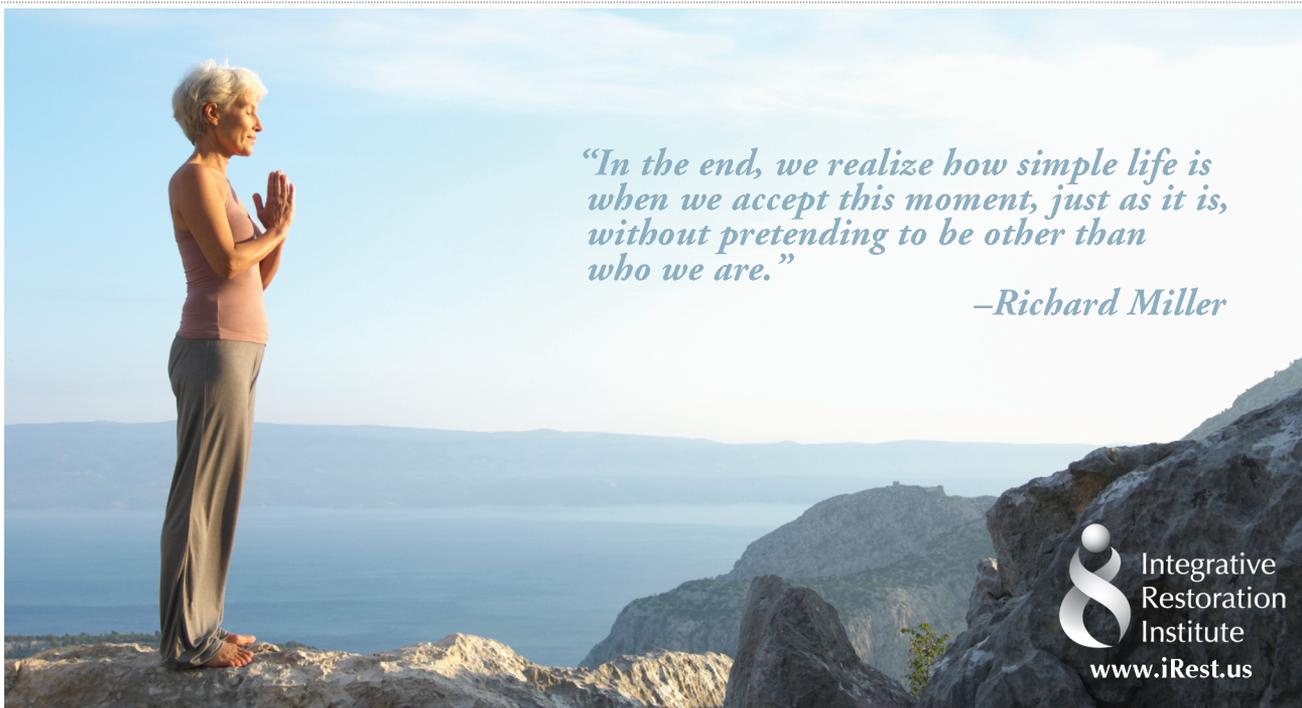
Does this basic insight about the intimate connection between sense of self and *dukkha* also apply to the sense of separation between ourselves and others? The issue here is whether “separate self = *dukkha*” also holds true for our biggest collective sense of self: the duality between us as a species, *Homo sapiens*, and the rest of the biosphere.

If this particular parallel between individual and collective selves holds, there are two important implications. First, our collective sense of separation from the natural world must also be a constant source of collective frustration for us. Secondly, our responses to that alienation, by trying to make our collective species-self more real—in this case, by attempting to secure or “self-ground” ourselves technologically and economically—are actually making things worse.

Western civilization developed out of the interaction between Judeo-Christianity and the culture of classical Greece.

Greek culture emphasized our uniqueness by distinguishing the conventions of human society (culture, technology, and so on) from the rhythms of the natural world. What is important about this distinction is the realization that whatever is social convention can be changed: we can reconstruct our own societies and attempt to determine our own collective destiny.

Today we take that insight for granted, yet it’s not something that most premodern, traditionally conservative societies would have understood. Without our sense of historical development, they have usually accepted their own social conventions as inevitable because also natural. This often served to justify social arrangements that we now view as unjust, but there is nevertheless a psychological benefit in thinking that way: such societies shared a collective sense of meaning that we have lost today. For them, the meaning of their lives was built into the cosmos and revealed by their religion, which they took for granted. For us, in contrast, the meaning of our lives and our societies has become something that we have to determine for ourselves in a universe whose meaningfulness (if any) is no longer obvious. Even



“In the end, we realize how simple life is when we accept this moment, just as it is, without pretending to be other than who we are.”

—Richard Miller

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if we choose to be religious, we today must decide between various religious possibilities, which diminishes the spiritual security that religions have traditionally provided. While we have a freedom that premodern societies did not have, we lack their kind of “social security,” which is the basic psychological comfort that comes from knowing one’s place and role in the world.

In other words, part of the rich cultural legacy that the Greeks bequeathed the West—for better and worse—is an increasing anxiety about who we are and what it means to be human. There is a basic tension between such freedom (we decide what to value and what to do) and security (being grounded in something greater, which is taking care of us), and we want both. As soon as one of them is emphasized, we want more of the other. In general, however, the modern history of the West is a story of increasing freedom at the cost of decreasing security, in the sense that loss of faith in God has left us rudderless. Thanks to ever more powerful technologies, it seems like we can accomplish almost anything we want to do—yet we don’t know what our role is. That continues to be a source of great anxiety, not only for us individually but collectively. What sort of world do we want to live in? What kind of society should we have? If we can’t depend on God to tell us, we are thrown back upon ourselves, and our lack of any grounding greater than ourselves is a profound source of suffering. This helps us to understand why our collective sense of separation from the natural world is a continual source of frustration. The stronger our alienation from nature, the greater our anxiety.

This brings us to the second implication mentioned earlier: our collective response to this collective dukkha is just making things worse. First, let’s remember how things go wrong individually. We usually respond to the delusion of a separate self by trying to make that sense

of self more *real*—which doesn’t work and can’t work, since there is no such self that can be isolated from its relationships with others. Since we don’t realize this, we tend to get caught up in vicious circles. *I never have enough money or power, I’m never famous enough, attractive enough.*

When we think about our collective response from this perspective, I think the motivation becomes clear. Lacking the security that comes from knowing one’s place and role in the cosmos, we have been trying to create our own security. Technology, in particular, is our collective attempt to control the conditions of our existence on this earth. We have been trying to remold the earth so that it is completely adapted to serve our purposes, until everything becomes subject to our will, a “resource” that we can use. Ironically, though, this hasn’t been providing the sense of security and meaning that we seek. We have become more anxious, not less. That’s because technology can be a great means, but in itself it’s a poor goal.

Sooner or later, one way or another, we will bump up against the limits of this compulsive but doomed project of endless growth. Since our increasing reliance on technology as the solution to life’s problems is itself a large part of the problem, the ecological crisis does not call for a primarily technological response. Dependence on sophisticated, ever more powerful technologies tends to aggravate our sense of separation from the natural world, whereas any successful solution must involve accepting that we are part of the natural world. That, of course, also means embracing our responsibility for the well-being of the biosphere, because its well-being ultimately cannot be distinguished from our own well-being.

The solution does not lie in “returning to nature.” We cannot return to nature, because we have never left it. That way of describing the natural world is dualistic; it dichotomizes between us and where we are located. The environment is not merely the place where we live and act, for the biosphere is the ground from which and within which we arise. The earth is not only our home, it is our mother. In fact, our relationship is even more intimate, because we can never cut the umbilical cord. The air in my lungs, like the water and food that pass through

my mouth, is part of a great system that does not stop with me but continually circulates through me. My life is a dissipative process that depends upon and contributes to that never-ending circulation. Eventually I too will be food for worms.

Any genuine solution to the ecological crisis must involve something more than technological improvements. If the root of the problem is spiritual, the solution must also have a spiritual dimension. And again, this does not mean a return to premodern religious conviction, which is impossible for us today. Buddhism shows another way, which de-emphasizes the role of dogma and ritual. The Buddhist approach is quite pragmatic. The goal of the Buddhist path is wisdom in service of personal and social transformation. When we meditate, for example, we are not transforming ourselves. We are being transformed. Quiet, focused concentration enables something else to work in us and through us, something other than one’s usual ego-self. This opens us up and liberates a deeper grounding within ourselves. Our lack of self is what enables this process; it frees us from the compulsion to secure ourselves within the world. We do not need to become more real by becoming wealthy, or famous, or powerful, or beautiful. We are able to realize our nonduality with the world because we are freed from such fixations.

Although living beings are numberless, the bodhisattva vows to save them all. He or she assumes the grandest possible role, on a path that can never come to an end. Although such a commitment is not compulsory, it follows naturally from realizing that none of those beings is separate from oneself. We discover the meaning we seek in the ongoing, long-term task of repairing the rupture between us and Mother Earth, our natural ground. That healing will transform us as much as the biosphere. ▼

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