

A metal shopping cart is shown from a low angle, extending from the bottom left towards the center of the frame. The cart is empty and set against a light blue, slightly blurred background. The lighting is soft, creating a clean and minimalist aesthetic.

## How Much Is Enough?

Buddhism, Consumerism,

and the Human Environment

Edited by Richard K. Payne

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Dedicated to the members of the International Brigades,  
volunteers from fifty-three nations, who fought for freedom  
and democracy in the Spanish Civil War.

“No pasaran!”



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**EDITOR'S PREFACE**  
**“How Much Is Enough?”**  
**Buddhism and the Human Environment**

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*Richard K. Payne*

In the twenty-first century, the Buddhist tradition exists in a social environment radically different from any previous era. The global horizon of contemporary Buddhism creates new questions, questions that the tradition had never in fact confronted previously. In the Western cultural context, two of these are the therapeutic culture and the social activist culture. While the therapeutic culture, which presumes a psychological orientation, can tend to be highly individualistic, the social activist culture has the opposite orientation. In the second half of the twentieth century, Buddhism became involved in several struggles for social justice—perhaps most memorably the opposition to the war in Vietnam, opposition that included Buddhist monks using self-immolation as a means of protest.

Closer to the end of the twentieth century, environmentalism became an increasingly important part of the social activist world, and as a consequence Buddhism also became involved in the issues of environmentalism. One of the key ideas for all forms of Buddhism is the absence of any eternal, unchanging, or permanent essence to be found either in people or in the objects of our daily experience. For many contemporary Buddhists, this notion of “no-essence” is interpreted in a more positive form to mean that the existence of each and every thing, including people, is causally interconnected. Thich Nhat Hanh has coined the term “interbeing” in an attempt to express how deep mutually interdependent existence is.

It was out of this sense of mutually interdependent existence that the international symposium on “Buddhism and the Environment” was organized by Mitsuya Dake and David Matsumoto, members of the faculties of

Ryukoku University, Kyoto, and the Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, respectively. The conference was held in the Alumni House, on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, on Sunday, September 14, 2003. Keynote speakers for the symposium were Lewis Lancaster, University of California, Berkeley (“Buddhist Strategies and Discourses: The Views of Causation and Contemporary Problems”), and Ryusei Takeda, Ryukoku University (“Where Should the True Encounter between Religion and Science Take Place?”). Panelists included Stephanie Kaza, University of Vermont; Duncan Williams, University of California, Irvine; Ryugo Matsui, Ryukoku University; Ruben Habito, Southern Methodist University; Tetsunori Koizumi, Ryukoku University; Malcolm David Eckel, Boston University; and Mitsuya Dake, Ryukoku University.

The emphasis that the symposium placed on the human environment highlights the interdependence of our human social reality with the encompassing and supporting natural world. By becoming aware of this interdependence we can see that the distinction between social and natural is itself an intellectual construct, an analytic tool for looking at things in one particular way. It is not a “natural” distinction, and we can look at things differently. Seeing the interdependence of the social and natural, we can experience more directly the karmic relations between our actions and the human environment around us, both social and natural.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

# Just How Much Is Enough?

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*Richard K. Payne*

Having grown up during the Great Depression, my parents maintained a set of values based on frugality, rather than expendability and overconsumption. From the early 1960s on, my father became increasingly concerned with organic farming, a commitment that simultaneously brought together our family background in agriculture and his own radical politics. When he visited me in Japan in the early 80s, there were two things he insisted on doing. One was to visit a leading figure of organic farming in Japan, Masanobu Fukuoka, and the other was to see the memorial at Hiroshima.

My mother shared these values, and I grew up eating homemade bread and home-canned fruit. Where my mother learned this story, I have no idea, but at an early age she told me the following tale:

Once two Zen monks were traveling from one temple to another. As they approached the temple, they discussed the question of whether it would be an appropriate place for them to pursue their practice. Passing over a bridge near the temple, they noticed a cabbage leaf floating downstream. They paused and began to reconsider whether a temple that would allow such waste could possibly be a true hall for training in the way. Just then, the temple gate opened and a monk with a long pole came rushing toward them. Startled, they watched as the monk caught the cabbage leaf, bowed to them and returned to the temple. Nodding to one another, the two monks entered the gates of the temple, confident that they had found a place where they would indeed be able to make progress on the path.

While she may have only intended to reinforce the importance of frugality, her story also laid the groundwork for my own conviction that Buddhism is a religion committed to respecting all life, not simply in some abstract sense, but concretely through individual actions.

The environment—what can Buddhism tell us about our relation to it? Frequently it seems that the environment is something distant—melting glaciers, or loss of habitat for polar bears. It can also seem abstract—average change of the oceans’ temperatures as measured over the last half century, or increasing concentration of pollutants as parts per million. Or at least, the environment is something separate from us—the natural world that we go to visit beyond the city’s edge. We need, however, to move beyond any idealized conception of nature in order to avoid having that socially constructed conception of “nature as separate from human” be the object of our concern. The idea of nature as something separate from the human, as either a material or spiritual resource for us to draw upon, maintains a dualistic separation between the human and the natural—a dualism that is itself at the very heart of our present ecological fiasco. The same is also true of the other polarity common to this discourse, that between nature and culture.

One of the things that Buddhism can tell us is that these images of the environment—distant, abstract, separate—are all mistaken conceptions of the way things are. The environment is right here around us; it is the air we breathe and the water we drink, and it is intimately interconnected with each and every one of us. The mistaken conceptions of the environment—distant, abstract, separate—are themselves based on a mistaken conception of the self. The self is not an isolated, independent, unchanging reality distinct from other people or the world around it. It is itself an ongoing process and an open system.

Perhaps as a consequence of our evolutionary history, the personal human self is motivated by a deep sense of insufficiency—the theme of this collection of essays. The Buddha’s diagnosis for our suffering, unease, and dissatisfaction is this pervasive feeling of existing in a state of insufficiency. Insufficiency (*tanha*, sometimes translated as craving) is not simply need. Needs can be fulfilled, but as long as we cling to the sense of self as a separate, independent, unchanging reality there will be a disparity between the actuality and the imagined—a disparity that is experienced as an insufficiency.

Modern consumerist society tells us that our felt insufficiency can be filled by acquiring things—the latest consumer technology, the latest automobile, the latest, most recent, best, improved, newest, rarest, most fashionable, as seen being worn/driven/eaten/drunk by some celebrity/fashion model. Consumption, whether we need the whatever or not, drives the engines of our contemporary society, which itself needs to keep us ignorant of or at least distracted from attending to our own needs. The human drive to acquire more is not only doomed to fail, but because we have gotten so clever at trying to fulfill our insufficiency, our manic drive to feel fulfilled now poses a serious threat to our environment, which is to say we are a threat to ourselves.

### GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ENVIRONMENT

It may seem obvious that environmental concerns require us to have a global perspective. But while we may think about the environment globally—climate change, for example—we also need to have a global perspective on our thinking about the environment. In other words, while we may be thinking about a global environment, our thinking may not be global, it may remain constrained by our own societal location. This collection of essays on the relation between the lived practice of Buddhism and contemporary concerns about the environment includes the work of both American and Japanese scholar-practitioners. In doing so, it broadens the perspectives available to the contemporary discussions, and in some cases challenges presumptions previously unexamined.

This collection is concerned with the question, How much is enough? The authors draw on the teachings of Buddhism as a resource for answering this question. They do so within a context that understands “the environment” as including the human, as the entirety of the human domain, both social and natural. At first glance, it might seem that “human environment” is a smaller category than nature or ecology, a kind of subset within one of those larger categories. One of the goals of this work is to point out the mistaken character of such a conception—the human environment is a broader category because it includes nature, society, and individual.

By identifying the object of concern as the human environment, the point is also being made that there is a single human environment—not an American one that is different from a Chinese or Indian or European

one. At the same time, there is not a Buddhist environment, nor a Christian environment, nor a Jewish, Muslim, or Hindu environment, but only the human environment.<sup>1</sup>

The need for working with a conception of the human environment as a single totality is demonstrated by the consequences of what might be called the American myth. Key to the American myth is the equation of prosperity and happiness. The occasional sentimental narrative of “poor but happy” aside, Americans seem to be quite cynical about the causal link that points from prosperity to happiness. But it is the second part of the national myth that makes it particularly problematic for the human environment. This is the self-image that America is a prosperous nation and that as a consequence Americans are happy. The inverse of this is, then, that if you are not happy or if you are not prosperous, there is something wrong with you individually. It is from this perspective that social action programs that relieve suffering carry with them a social stigma—consider the stigma attached to public transportation in much of the nation, a stigma so great that there is a refusal to fund it adequately since it “only helps the poor.”

The Buddhist perspective, however, is that suffering is universal. If we are aware of suffering as universal—as something affecting ourselves as much as the farmer in Bangladesh whose fields are flooded, or the inner city drug addict, or any of those “others” upon whom we can project our own suffering so as to protect ourselves from experiencing it—then the stigma of social programs intended to assist everyone can be diminished, the individualism that isolates each person, not only from others in the society, but also from the natural environment that supports and sustains us all, can be diminished. Each in its own way, the different perspectives offered by the essays gathered here contribute to creating a broader perspective on both the nature of the human environment and the ways in which Buddhism may relate us to that environment.

### CONTENTS OF THE COLLECTION

Duncan Williams’ opening contribution to this collection, “Buddhist Environmentalism in Contemporary Japan,” examines a number of programs undertaken by Japanese Buddhists to protect the environment. The opening vignette regarding an action to protect trees by the chief priest of

Gyōzenji Temple in greater Tokyo demonstrates one strategy for employing Buddhist ideas in the service of the environment, a strategy related to the doctrine of buddha nature. Asserting that plants and trees have buddha nature makes sense in the context of East Asian Buddhism where not only is the idea of buddha nature itself a well-established part of Buddhist thought, but the extension of the idea of buddha nature to plants and trees, pebbles and stones has long been part of the tradition.

Other actions discussed by Williams demonstrate the sophistication of the Japanese Buddhist community, not only in terms of the scientific aspects of environmental issues, but also in their ability to create effective volunteer campaigns and their initiative in utilizing the economic potentials of environmental actions. For contemporary Western Buddhists, the issues of the relation between social and economic privilege and environmental responsibility is raised by the work of Rev. Ōkōchi. His travels to areas of the world torn by strife and warfare—places such as Rwanda, Palestine, Cambodia—heightened his awareness of the palpable reality of suffering. The conditions that the people in these countries suffered from reminded Ōkōchi of the conditions current in medieval Japan when Hōnen, founder of the Jōdo sect to which Ōkōchi belongs, was active in establishing a form of Pure Land Buddhism.

Ōkōchi's analysis of suffering provides us with a perspective important for contemporary Western Buddhists generally, not just in relation to environmental issues. As Williams puts it, "Ōkōchi interprets suffering as existing not only on a personal level, but at a deep structural level in the modern socioeconomic system."

Our current socioeconomic system has been identified by the name "consumerism." Economically, consumerism focuses on the consumption of goods and services. The public display of such consumption for the sake of demonstrating one's social status was identified by Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) who referred to it as "conspicuous consumption."

Consumerism is the focus of the second essay, Stephanie Kaza's "How Much Is Enough?: Buddhist Perspectives on Consumerism." As Kaza makes clear in her opening, consumerism is driven by the creation of artificial needs by means of advertising. The purposeful stimulation of the Three Poisons—delusion, anger, and greed—in order to get someone to purchase an item is quite clearly contrary to Buddhist teachings. The Eightfold Path includes, for example, the ideas of right speech, right action,

and right livelihood. The pursuit of economic gain by creating an artificial need that the product being promoted promises to fulfill would certainly appear to be a breach of all three of these aspects of the Eightfold Path.

Kaza develops a Buddhist critique of consumerism by first examining the global consequences of the kinds of wasteful overconsumption that consumerism encourages. She then goes on to examine specific ways in which consumerism has been critiqued, including those developed on the basis of Western ideas, as well as newly developed ones that draw on Buddhist concepts. Kaza closes her discussion with a set of proposals of her own for moving toward liberation by the reduction—or elimination—of desire.

Several of the environmental activists discussed by Williams are members of the Pure Land traditions of Japanese Buddhism. Mitsuya Dake presents a Pure Land Buddhist perspective on environmental issues in his contribution to this collection. In an analysis that moves beyond an understanding of suffering as private, Dake challenges the standard conceptions of Buddhism prevalent in the West, which he describes as “forms of Buddhism that emphasize self-cultivation and that are usually connected with some sort of cognitive, personal, and empowering experience.” The representation of Buddhism as commonly found in the West is informed by the West’s own preconceptions about the significance and goal of religion as formed by Romanticism. Dake points out, however, that “for many Buddhists in East Asia, this image represents only part of the Buddhist belief system, which as a whole comprises more than just meditation or mental cultivation.”

The Pure Land tradition focuses its attention on the Buddha Amitābha, known in Japanese as Amida. Prior to his awakening, Amida vowed that when he became a buddha he would manifest a buddha-land that was pure, or as interpreted by some Chinese Pure Land masters, a land that purifies. Although the Sanskrit name of Amida’s buddha-land, Sukhāvātī, means “land of bliss,” it has come to be referred to as “pure land” (*jōdo*), or more typically in Buddhist English, “the Pure Land.” The significance of being a land that purifies is that in contrast to our present world, it is one in which not only is it easy to hear the teachings—the birds there sound the phrase “Buddha, Dharma, Sangha”—but also one can understand the significance of the teachings, put them into effective practice, and become awakened.

Analogies between Amida and the Pure Land, on the one hand, and the Christian God and his Heaven, on the other, have been made frequently and—as Dake discusses—quite erroneously. The Pure Land is not conceived to be an ontological absolute, but is rather identified with the state of nirvāṇa as being uncreated—a technical philosophic concept that is often, if not usually, misunderstood in the West as implying an absolute state of existence, but which actually refers to something simply not existing, in the same way that a candle flame when extinguished simply does not exist.

Dake then goes on to develop an interpretation of the Pure Land symbolism as signifying “interconnectivity and harmony in diversity.” He points out, however, that as valuable as such perspectives may be, they are not themselves solutions to our urgent environmental concerns. “In order to solve the environmental problems we face, it will be necessary to develop a connection between that method of thought and concrete norms of behavior in this modern age.” Turning to the teachings of Shinran, founder of the Shin school of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, Dake suggests that such “concrete norms of behavior” can arise out of Shinran’s view of human nature in which “despair as to the self and one’s awakening to truth and reality” are understood to be mutually identical.

Here we encounter an aspect of East Asian Buddhist teachings that is important for Western, particularly American, Buddhists to hear. Implicit in our understanding of human nature in the West is a kind of simplistic optimism about individual self-sufficiency, encouraging us to believe that “Through my own efforts, I can attain whatever I really set myself to, including awakening.” (How many of us were raised with the children’s book *The Little Engine That Could?*) The Pure Land teachings confront this idea directly, pointing out the self-contradiction in the idea that the ego can overcome the ego. This is the “despair as to the self” that Dake speaks of, and this—contrary to many Western treatments of Pure Land—places Pure Land firmly in the mainstream of Mahāyāna thought. It may be a different approach from the more familiar emphasis on the emptiness of the self found in Mahāyāna, but it is making exactly the same point, and can provide a critique of consumerist culture like that developed by Kaza in her paper. The challenge to the concept of an autonomous self here again brings us to conceptions of suffering as something that cannot be simply located in the private realm of the individual person. This

broadens the relation between Buddhism and environmental concerns to an “ecosocial” dimension.

The ecosocial perspective brought to our environmental concerns by Gary Snyder is presented by David Barnhill. Barnhill identifies three strains within Snyder’s thought that are themselves interdependent—Buddhism, ecology, and radical politics. These three themes are interwoven through Snyder’s poetry from an early period, Barnhill beginning with an examination of *Myths & Texts*, which dates from 1960. One theme that runs continuously through Snyder’s poetry from this early period is American labor history, a history that—like the histories of other disenfranchised peoples—has been “placed under erasure.”

Snyder also connects his radical social, environmental, and political ideas with the vows of Amida, the ones that created the Pure Land. The connection between the symbolic representation of what the world could be—the Pure Land—and the ideals of an environmentally motivated Buddhism that relates to broader social issues as integral to the personal/social/environmental totality is asserted by Snyder’s use of the image of the Pure Land.

Barnhill then goes on to examine the anarchist roots of Snyder’s politics. Although largely ignored—placed under erasure—in contemporary political discourse, anarchist thought has deep roots in Western political thought, dating from at least the end of the eighteenth century, and having informed social reform movements in the United States for almost the entirety of its history.

In addition to the imagery of the Pure Land, the Buddhist strains of Snyder’s environmental thought are largely drawn from Huayan ideas, such as the image of Indra’s net. This is by now a familiar image for Buddhist environmentalism, one that promotes a nondual relation between individual and whole, a “mutual interdependence,” or as Barnhill calls it, a “relational holism.”

It is then from this complex of radical politics and Buddhist cosmology that Snyder develops his critique of contemporary society’s role in environmental degradation. Snyder’s mix of environmental and social concerns makes it possible for him to see the relations between the two. How, in other words, do we take action that is simultaneously protective of the environment and of people?

Snyder's answer is, at least in part, that of bioregionalism. Places are not simply interchangeable units in an abstract Cartesian space. Rather, they form a living, integrated whole. Bioregionalism looks to the "natural divisions created by soil, climate, topography, river drainages, etc.," rather than to the relatively arbitrary divisions of political units, such as nation or state.

Bioregionalism is, however, a way of thinking that, while promoting an awareness of interdependence in a very concrete way, does not define appropriate courses of action. Just as Dake discussed in relation to Shinran's thought, it is another step to go from a vision of reality to action based on that vision. Barnhill first emphasizes the nonviolent dimension of Snyder's message of the liberatory effects of creating a new awareness. This task is partly through meditation and study of the Dharma, but also by critical reflection on the power of "key images, myths, archetypes, eschatologies, and ecstasies."

Where Snyder's suggestion focuses on control of the cognitive dimensions of the culture to recast not only ways of thinking but also actions, Shinichi Inoue gives his attention to the development of economic relations based on Buddhist principles. In contrast to an economics of exploitation, in which the dominant attitude is one of taking as much as we can from the natural world, Inoue proposes what might be called an economics of restoration, one in which the dominant attitude is one of borrowing—that is, temporary use of those resources we need before restoring them to their proper place.

Turning to more specifically economic aspects of dealing with environmental concerns, Inoue presents us with a schema developed by Mitsuru Tanaka (Kawasaki Environment Agency). Tanaka proposes a four by four matrix that charts the environmental impact of both production and consumption. Production of essential goods with only minimal environmental impact would score a 1, while producing unnecessary or frivolous goods by highly polluting means would score a 16. Absolutely essential goods, such as medical supplies, whose production involved pollution would score much better than frivolous goods, such as many "luxury" items, even if the latter were produced with little pollution. Such a scale would allow for a system of environmental taxation that takes into account both production practices and the nature of the goods produced. Inoue suggests

that such policies are “increasingly important as we begin to understand that environmental destruction carries with it an economic price that may not become evident until much later.”

Inoue examines two agricultural industries that are economically, environmentally, and culturally significant for Japan—rice and dairy farming. Consideration of the production practices involved in these two kinds of farming connects to the issues of bioregionalism discussed by Barnhill. Japanese dairy farmers, for example, use pasturage in the mountains. This is similar to the practice of another mountainous country, Switzerland, but in sharp contrast to dairy farming in the United States, which is done on open plains.

From this perspective Inoue considers the importance of Buddhist values as they relate to economics. The areas he considers are: unconstrained greed, the presumption of competition as the sole fundamental economic principle, an appropriately positive evaluation of money as an opportunity for mindfulness, and the avoidance of waste. These are the positive principles that Inoue highlights as the Buddhist contribution to an environmentally sensitive economics.

Drawing on the structure of the Eightfold Path, Tetsunori Koizumi takes a more systematic approach to developing a Buddhist environmental program. Taking as his point of reference general systems theory, Koizumi reexpresses the elements of the Eightfold Path in such a fashion as to provide us with a practical guide for action, a prescription for sustainable living. He begins by interpreting the Buddha’s teachings as being structured by a metaphysical dualism. He uses the terms “manifest world” and “latent world” for *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, respectively. This is based on what seems to be a quasi-Aristotelian interpretation in which “name and form” (Skt. *nāmarūpa*) are “projected” from the latent into the manifest world.

Koizumi then further divides the manifest world into three—biosphere, sociosphere, and psychosphere. All existing entities in all three spheres are understood by Koizumi as evidencing the quality of impermanence, and as such, they move through three phases of creation, preservation, and decay.

Having set up this philosophic background, Koizumi is then ready to examine the specifics of the Eightfold Path. His first step is to group the eight into mental or physical activities, forming two complementary sets. When viewed in terms of the Middle Path, the elements of the Eightfold

Path constitute a systemic balance, a balance of potential and kinetic energies. In this way Koizumi equates latent world, *nirvāṇa*, mental actions, and potential energy on one side, and sets them in opposition to manifest world, *samsāra*, physical actions, and kinetic energy on the other.

Viewing the injunctions of the Eightfold Path in terms of the conservation of matter and energy in the service of physical, mental, and environmental health provides a way of integrating ecology, economics, and ethics. Echoing Dake and Barnhill, Koizumi says in conclusion, “translating the Buddha’s insight into an agenda for individual action and social policy is the challenge that confronts us today.”

It is just such daily, lived expressions of the Buddha’s insight that Ikuo Nakamura discusses in his “The Debate on Taking Life and Eating Meat in the Edo-Period Jōdo Shin Tradition.” By the Edo period (1600–1868) concepts such as karma and rebirth and the six realms of existence had become integral to Japanese conceptions of the ethical relation between humans and the environment—“the indigenous Japanese view of animals and the Buddhist concept of not taking life mutually influenced each other and brought about the creation of a unique understanding of the relation between humans and animals.”

The idea of buddha nature as extending to include not only humans but also animals, and even trees and grasses—found in the modern Japanese Buddhist environmental activists discussed by Williams—has its roots in early medieval Japan. Nakamura discusses how such ideas produced in Japan a “culture of memorialization” in which religious services and memorials allowed for the expression of remorse over killing and consuming animals. The merging of Buddhist and Shintō beliefs also led to the popularity of some Shintō deities, such as Suwa, who were believed to pardon hunters for having taken the lives of their prey.

Shinran, founder of the Shin sect of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, mentioned previously, took a radical ethical stance on these issues. Rather than accepting the widely held ideas regarding purity and pollution, he asserted that we all share the same ethical status as hunters and fishermen, that is, those directly responsible for taking life. In contemporary terms we might say that Shinran saw how we are all complicit in a system of economic, ethical, social, and environmental relations.

In early modern Japan the issue of vegetarianism was closely linked with the issue of celibacy. Thus, debates about meat-eating simultaneously

involved the question of clerical marriage. The Shin view of these issues drew together three ideas. First, that the practice of austerities such as vegetarianism and celibacy conferred no special ethical status. Second, the idea that in this period of the decline of the Dharma (Jpn. *mappō*) in which we live, we are incapable of effecting our own awakening through our own individual efforts. And third, the idea that Amida had vowed that even the worst of us—such as hunters and fishermen—could be born into the Pure Land. Thus, based on a kind of “nonduality of good and evil,” meat-eating and clerical marriage came to be positively valued in the Shin sect. One expression of this is the ritual preparation and consumption of a carp at New Year’s in the Hōonji Temple. Nakamura’s examination of this practice draws attention to the confluence of indigenous Japanese conceptions of the sacrality of animals and Buddhist conceptions of karma as understood in the Shin tradition.

These ideas and practices confront us with very different conceptions of the relation between the human and the natural from those that commonly inform eco-Buddhist discussions in the West today. At the same time, our presumptions regarding what Buddhism teaches in relation to these issues are also challenged. This encourages us to think through more carefully, from a more globally Buddhist perspective, the question of appropriate Buddhist responses to our present environmental situation. In his “Is ‘Buddhist Environmentalism’ a Contradiction in Terms?” Malcolm David Eckel makes just such reconsiderations explicit.

Eckel begins by pointing out the pervasive role of Orientalist stereotypes of the West as exploiting nature and of the East as protective of nature in forming many of the presumptions about Buddhism and the environment. Calling these presumptions into question, Eckel suggests the importance of the origins of Buddhism in the yogic culture of ancient India. He also suggests other aspects of Buddhism that can serve to question the presumptions about environmental commitments. The issue of social location is intimated by a story that leads to the question of whether or not conservation is another form of attachment. When upper-middle-class American Buddhists want to protect natural environments that they themselves make use of for recreational purposes—skiing, hiking, camping, rock climbing—is this not simply another instance of concealing from ourselves our own egocentric motivations? This is just the kind of issue that Snyder raises when he points toward the importance of thinking

about the lives of lumbermen who cut down trees, as well as about the lives of spotted owls who live in those trees. To fail to think about both leads to just the kind of oppositional conflicts that have become all too familiar in recent years. These kinds of questions lead Eckel to conclude that “‘Buddhism’ and ‘environmentalism’ may not be contradictory in the strict sense of the word, but they make an uneasy combination, and each raises awkward and difficult questions about the other.”

Eckel appears confident, however, that this “uneasy combination” is not the end of the matter. Like Inoue, he turns to the idea of the Middle Path as a balance between two extremes, explaining this as a three-step process going from one extreme to its opposite, and then finally correcting back toward some midpoint between the two. In his analysis of the relation between Buddhism and the environment Eckel suggests that the naive assumption that “of course Buddhism respects the environment” comprises the first extreme. The second extreme comes as a reaction to the first when careful consideration throws the naive assumption into doubt. Eckel points out, however, that “the original problem remains: What to do about the environment, and what to do about the environment from a Buddhist point of view?”

Eckel raises a question that usually remains unasked, that of the location of awakening. Is the location of awakening Bodh Gaya? Or is it, as the highly psychologized interpretation that dominates the Western understanding of Buddhism would tell us, the mind? But mind, of course, is an abstraction, a construct. Eckel turns instead to the concrete character of embodied human existence, which is necessarily always located in some particular place. “While emptiness, in a sense, is everywhere, it is realized only in *this* moment, *this* place, and *this* body.” One can also see that this undermines the easy avoidance of realizing the way by thinking of it as something that happens someplace else. Eckel suggests that by attending to the immanence of awakening, a Buddhist sensibility regarding the environment can be developed and sustained. As others in this collection also have, Eckel closes with the image of the Pure Land as signifying the potential inherent within our own present world: “I wonder whether this could be a time for Buddhists to rediscover the utopian aspiration embedded in this concept—to purify this buddha-field and turn it into a Pure Land.”

The essay by Lambert Schmithausen reprinted here, “The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics,”<sup>2</sup> has attracted a host of

misunderstandings, often criticisms based on the idea that a close, scholarly examination of early Buddhist teachings and attitudes toward the natural world should not be done in an intellectually neutral fashion. Rather it seems the expectation of scholarship is partisan, that is, providing already interpreted representations of early Buddhism that support the idea that Buddhism is “eco-friendly.” Schmithausen has been criticized personally for being anti-ecology. If one reads the essay included here, one discovers that nothing could be further from the case. His personal commitment to both the environment and to honest, accurate intellectual inquiry is evident.

What Schmithausen’s work does contribute to the consideration of the relation between Buddhist thought and environmentalism is, first, clarity about the nature of early Buddhist thought on the issues involved. Second, his research challenges some of the characterizations of the Buddhist tradition that have become unquestioned presumptions in modern Western Buddhist thought, apparently largely as a consequence of the dominance of the Mahāyāna tradition and the consequent uncritical acceptance of Mahāyāna polemics. One small gem is embedded in a note, where he critiques the characterization of the goal of becoming awakened oneself as in some sense “selfish.”

Through a very detailed philological analysis, Schmithausen examines the question of just what the early Buddhist tradition did think about the environment. The intellectual approach that Schmithausen takes has as its intent the sincere desire to understand what the Buddhist tradition has been. Such an approach avoids a neocolonialist gesture of exploiting Buddhism as a resource for our own purposes. It is only by finding out what Buddhism actually says, rather than what we want it to say, that an intellectually honest, and therefore sustainable, eco-Buddhism can be created.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

This collection does not seek to create a single answer to the question of Buddhism and the human environment, much less a master narrative about what all Buddhists should think or how all Buddhists should act. More humbly, it simply seeks to contribute to the discussion of how Buddhist thought—the variety of ideas, of concepts that are widely shared by

Buddhists—can inform a contemporary Buddhist worldview that integrates in an authentic fashion a wider environmental awareness. Much of what has informed environmentalism in the West to date, including “deep ecology,” has been Western cosmology and religious belief.<sup>3</sup> Simply adopting that version of environmentalism into a Buddhist context—simply repackaging it as Buddhism—would introduce, as unexamined presumptions, values and beliefs that may not only be foreign to the tradition itself, but might actually subvert the critical perspective that Buddhism can provide to the global concerns with the environment. As the essays in this collection indicate, there are a variety of Buddhist concepts that can be brought to bear on environmental issues.

Impermanence is fundamental to the Buddhist perception of existence. As understood by many contemporary Buddhists, the opposite face of impermanence is interdependence—this is seen not as a logical consequence, but simply as a different way of expressing the same insight; the two are simply synonymous with one another. This provides one Buddhist approach to realizing—making immediately real for oneself—the environment as a religious issue: being impermanent, a person is not autonomously separate from his or her environment, but rather interdependent with it.

Understandings of the bodhisattva vow provide another immediate lived connection between the environment and one’s own Buddhist insight and practice. Personally, it has seemed to me that given the interdependence of all being, the bodhisattva vow—the vow to put off one’s own final awakening in order to assist all living beings to equally realize awakening—is not an ethical injunction. It is not some kind of external rule that one needs to adhere to, to force oneself to follow, a command. Rather, if we take interdependence seriously, the bodhisattva vow is instead simply a statement of fact. In other words, if we take interdependence seriously, no one obtains full and final awakening until all do. So, the bodhisattva vow is not something in addition to one’s life, it is not something external to oneself that one takes on, but rather it is a realization of one’s own actual existence as an interdependent being—and there is no other kind of existence. This is not optional.

In the essays that follow, various other Buddhist ideas are explored for their value in relation to our contemporary environmental concerns. The Buddhist voices that can be heard in these essays offer the opportunity to

think critically about both Buddhism and the environment, allowing us a chance to move beyond our preconceptions into a deeper, richer engagement with the living potential of the Buddhist tradition in today's world.

### NOTES

- 1 Such divisions, whether ethnic, political, or religious, are inherently antihumanistic, and may all-too-easily be put to the service of authoritarian or fascist regimes. See Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *Heidegger and Modernity*, trans. Franklin Philip (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 2–5.
- 2 Reprinted with the author's permission from the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4 (February 1997): 1–74. Available online at <http://www.buddhistethics.org/4/current4.html>.
- 3 See particularly Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), for a critique of deep ecology as antihumanistic.

# Buddhist Environmentalism in Contemporary Japan

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*Duncan Ryūken Williams*

## **“TO THE HONORABLE MITSUI REAL ESTATE COMPANY: PLANTS AND TREES HAVE BUDDHA NATURE”**

Riding Tokyo’s Den’entoshi Subway Line due west, one emerges from the underground section of the train line just before Futako Tamagawaen Station. Before reaching the station’s platform, one can see a large temple on the hill to the left side. During the mid-1990s, for a period of several years, one would have also noticed a series of massive signboards along the temple hillside that collectively read “Mitsui fudōsan dono, sōmoku busshō ari” (To the Honorable Mitsui Real Estate Company: Plants and Trees Have Buddha Nature).<sup>1</sup>

This prominently displayed message to one of Japan’s largest real estate conglomerates had been put up by Shunnō Watanabe, the chief priest of Gyōzenji Temple. This Jōdo sect temple had been established in the 1560s on this hilltop in Tokyo’s Setagaya Ward and in the centuries that followed became well known for its view of the plains below. The priest had launched a campaign against the construction by Mitsui Real Estate Company of a massive apartment complex right next to the temple that would not only obstruct the view from the temple, but would involve clear-cutting 130 of 180 ancient trees.

Watanabe not only rallied his temple members, but also over the course of several years organized a major petition drive (eventually collecting over twelve thousand signatures submitted to the ward office) opposing the destruction of one of Tokyo’s few remaining wooded sanctuaries. Employing the slogan, “Plants and Trees Have Buddha Nature,” the Buddhist priest appealed to the conscience of the residents in the ward

(serving as the new head of the “Seta no Kankyō Mamoru Kai,” the Association to Protect Seta’s Environment), the ward officials, and Mitsui Real Estate Company. Declaring that his group was “not anti-construction, but simply for the preservation of trees,” the campaign successfully pressured the company to build the apartment complex with minimal environmental impact.

Today, most of the ancient trees next to Gyōzenji Temple still stand and the view from the temple over the region is still panoramic. This case highlights the increasing role of Buddhist priests, temples, and lay associations in environmental activism in Japan. Historically, environmentalism and concern with consumers’ rights had been associated with local citizens’ groups and environmental organizations that came out of the left and labor movements of the 1960s and 70s.

Buddhist temples have often served as stewards for much of the natural landscape of Japan since the early medieval period. But explicitly linking Buddhist doctrine with environmental protection is relatively recent. Beginning in the late 1970s, a number of Buddhist priests, temples, and lay associations dropped their traditional resistance to what had been perceived as a leftist cause, developing new forms of Buddhist environmentalism that resonated with a more conservative worldview. For example, in the 1980s Shōei Sugawara, a forward-thinking abbot of the Sōtō Zen Senryūji Temple in Komae, proposed to his parishioners a way to make the temple more ecological.<sup>2</sup> Sugawara was appalled to learn of a major development project right next to his temple that would destroy the forest that his temple had protected for over four hundred years. With a keen sense of responsibility as the caretaker of this forest, which was partly on temple land and partly on private land, he was determined that the successive prior abbots of Senryūji Temple who had guarded the forest as a sanctuary would give him strength and guidance so that it would not be destroyed during his tenure as abbot.

During 1981–82, he was one of the leaders in a citizens’ movement to promote a vision of the town’s future development that would be more “green” (*midori no machizukuri*). The group collected the signatures of nearly 10% of the entire town’s populace (7,800 signatures) on a petition demanding a halt to the project. Their efforts won widespread support—ranging from the most left-wing activists to the most conservative town assembly members—by appealing to both the local citizens’ groups

and those concerned about preserving the traditional landscape of the Senryūji Temple. Not only was the development severely restricted, the twenty thousand hectare (approximately fifty thousand acres) forest and temple grounds were designated a nature preserve (*ryokuchi hozen chiku*) by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, which bought the section of the forest that had been privately owned. Today, this nature preserve is open to the public only once a month to minimize human impact (unlike a park designation, a nature preserve under Japanese law is much more highly regulated). Roughly one to three hundred people visit the preserve on those days to enjoy nature and educate themselves about the forest ecological system. The August open preserve day draws many more people, since it has been arranged to coincide with the temple's famous O-Segaki, "Hungry Ghost Festival."

Once environmental awareness at Senryūji was raised in the 1980 campaign, the abbot followed up with a proposal to make the temple itself more ecological. Since one of the main characteristics of a Japanese Buddhist temple is the large roof on the main hall (*hondō*) containing the primary image of worship (*honzon*), Sugawara thought if that broad space were used for solar paneling, most temples should be energy self-sufficient. He explains that even though Buddhism has traditionally advocated friendly relations between humans and nature, the modern world has disrupted this relationship. His idea for a solar "temple," using energy friendly to both nature and humans, took many years before it would be actualized. In the year 2000, his advocacy of solar temples among those in his sect culminated in a regional meeting of four hundred Sōtō Zen temples in western Tokyo. The gathering had, as its plenary speaker, Kōichi Yasuda (abbot of Eisenji Temple), who spoke on the practical steps to install solar paneling at Buddhist temples.

When Senryūji Temple finally installed the solar panels on top of the abbot's quarters, it produced more than enough energy for the electrical needs of the entire temple complex. The excess energy was sold to Tokyo Electric Power Company at its daytime peak rate, while the temple bought back energy when necessary (cloudy days and nights) at the cheaper off-peak rates. This arrangement proved to be beneficial to the environment (no pollution), the temple (cheaper energy costs), and the power company (which was in power deficit during the peak hours, which is precisely when solar energy produces the most energy). Today, the temple