

“Love it or Leave it? Buddhist Perspectives on the Natural World”  
Karin Meyers, Lansdowne Lecture, University of Victoria, October 2021



**LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT:**

BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE NATURAL WORLD

*Karin Meyers, Lansdowne Lecture, University of Victoria 10/14/21*

I'm honored to be here today to have an opportunity to talk about this subject, which feels so important at this time. Whether we are Buddhist, subscribe to some other faith, or do not identify with any particular religious tradition, many of us would agree that we are running out of time to get right with the more-than-human natural world, that something is terribly out of balance in the way that modern industrialized societies like the US and Canada have organized themselves in relation to earth systems and the other-than-human beings with whom we share the Earth, not to mention with other *human* beings, especially, indigenous peoples, the original caretakers of these lands.

Nearly every day brings news of some climate or ecological emergency happening somewhere in the world, and some days the emergency finds us at home—as in this past summer with the heat wave deaths and fires in Western Canada. Many would argue that this is not merely a social, economic, political, or technological crisis, but a spiritual crisis—a crisis that demands a *fundamental shift* in our individual and collective ways of being and relating to the earth and each other. It is also arguable that this is a shift which many historical religious traditions, including Buddhism, are not fully equipped to navigate, simply because there was not a climate or ecological crisis, at least, of *this* scale at the time of their founding.

Compared to other world religions, however, Buddhism often gets a good rap as being ecologically sensitive. From an historical perspective, this is a bit *curious*, because as we will see, when it began, Buddhism was rather ambivalent about the natural world. The perception that Buddhism is ecologically sensitive is actually the result of an *evolution* of Buddhist ideas. Today

I would like to trace some of these ideas, from early Buddhist perspectives on the natural world, through doctrinal shifts in later Indian and East Asian Buddhism which have helped pave the way for the ecologically engaged forms of Buddhism that are emerging today.

In particular, I want to focus on a tension we find in early Buddhism and running throughout most later Buddhist traditions to some extent or another. This is the tension between finding freedom from suffering in leaving the world, in turning away from it and transcending it, and finding freedom *within* the world, in loving the world in all its particularity and diversity. Hence, the title of my talk: “Love it or Leave it: Buddhist Perspectives on the Natural World.”

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When asked about what he taught, the Buddha would summarize, “I teach about suffering and the ending of suffering.” Virtually all Buddhist traditions agree that this is the essence of Buddhism, but they have had rather different ideas about *precisely how* suffering arises and, thus, how it can end.

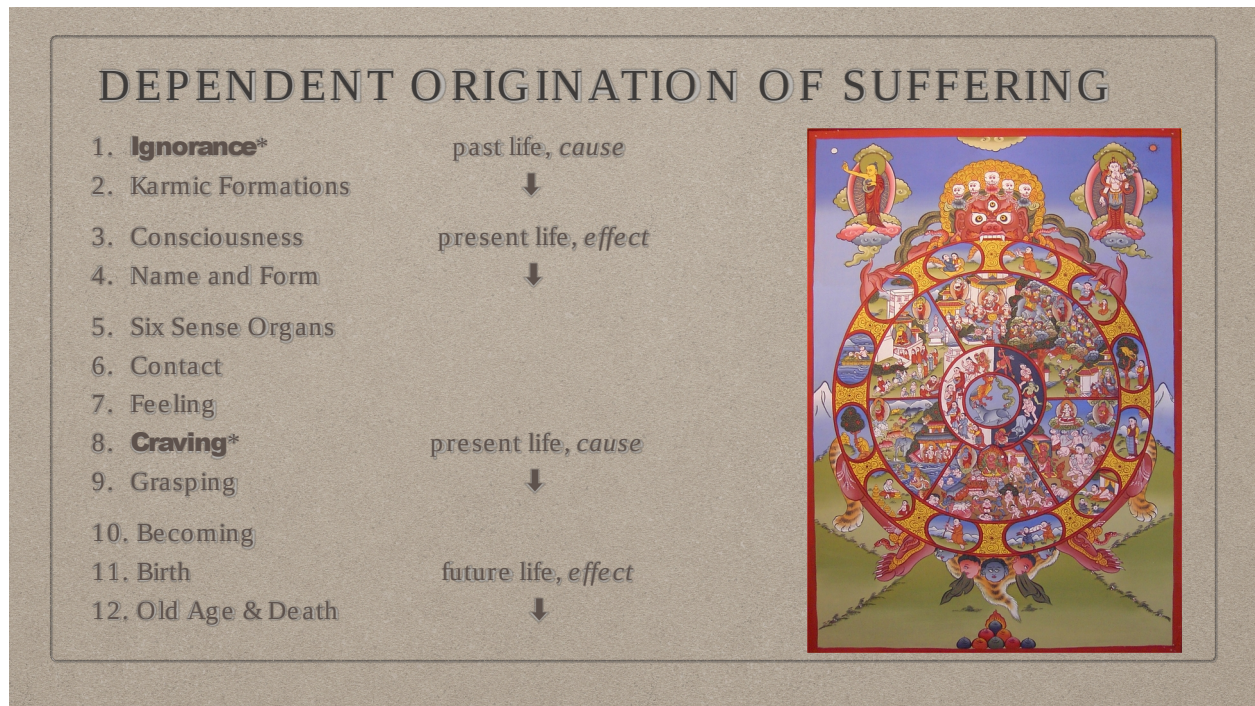
In early Buddhism, liberation from suffering is presented in terms of *transcending* the world, transcending conditioned, embodied existence, transcending the cycle of rebirth or samsara, in order to realize the unconditioned or nirvana.



Some of you may be familiar with the doctrine of dependent arising or dependent origination. This doctrine is often interpreted today in explicitly ecological terms—as offering insight into and celebrating the interconnected web of life, as the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says, to be is to *inter-be*. However, when Buddhism began, dependent origination meant something a bit different—it referred to the specific conditions that give rise to suffering in human beings. In



other words, dependent arising wasn't something to be celebrated, but something to overcome, to reverse, or transcend.



Some of you may also be familiar with this pictorial representation of dependent origination in the Wheel of Life, popular in Tibetan Buddhism. Here we have the three poisons or primary roots of suffering: greed, hatred and delusion at the hub of the wheel, then the five or six realms of rebirth, and on the outer rim, the twelve links of dependent origination, which are the salient conditions that give rise to and perpetuate suffering—all held within the jaws of the Yama, the Lord of Death. I won't go into detail regarding the picture or the twelve links, other than to say that its conception of suffering recommends sense restraint or even withdrawal of the senses from contact with sensory objects in order to interrupt the pattern in which the feeling of pleasure or pain drives craving for more of the same or for a different experience, which then feeds into grasping onto phenomena as I and mine –as *me* or belonging to *me*. This grasping then leads to rebirth and the whole mass of suffering: aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, and despair. Early Buddhists discourses call this pattern of suffering the “world.”

In sum, early Buddhism proposes the following dichotomies:

## DICHOTOMIES IN EARLY BUDDHISM



- samsara vs. nirvana
- conditioned vs. unconditioned
- embodied/enminded vs. state beyond body and mind
- dependent origination vs. reversal of dependent origination
- world vs. beyond world

All of this reinforces the basic idea that *freedom* from suffering is to be found in transcending the world.

This orientation is also clear in early Buddhist cosmogonies or stories about the creation of the world. Because they hold that everything must have a cause, a set of conditions that come together to make its arising possible, Buddhists don't talk about *absolute* beginnings, but they do speak of *relative* beginnings, of the rebirth of persons after death and the *re-creation* of the world after a cycle of destruction.

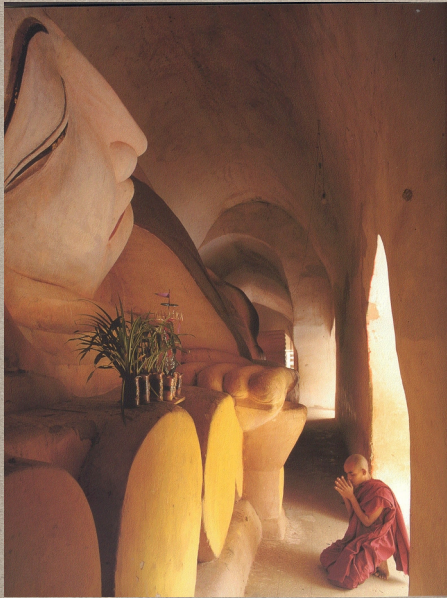


## “DISCOURSE ON BEGINNINGS”(DN 27)

- beings of light become dependent on food
- physical differentiation leads to animosity
- food deteriorates- requires cultivation
- greed and animosity lead to private property, government, social division, law and punishment



One such story, the Aggañña sutta, or "Discourse on Beginnings" from the Dīgha Nikāya, reveals a lot about Buddhist perspectives on the natural world. In it the Buddha describes how after the near total destruction of the world, in which only the quasi-physical planes of heavens remain, a physical world emerges. Heavenly beings of light are born in the newly forming world and gradually become dependent on food, and more solid, substantial and differentiated in their bodies. As their bodies become differentiated, they learn to despise each other. At first, food is abundant and just appears, but with the moral spiritual decline of these proto-human beings—owing to their animosity and greed—their food also deteriorates. Eventually, food needs to be cultivated and stored. This gives rise to private property and conflict over resources. This, in turn, requires the establishment of a government, laws, and punishment. In sum, the discourse describes a fall from a transcendent, disembodied state to an embodied social existence full of suffering and strife.



## MONASTIC PATH

- Withdrawal from society
- Restraint of senses
- Withdrawal from sensory experience
- Refined quasi-physical and non-states of meditation
- No more rebirth (cessation of suffering)

Those of you familiar with Buddhism might recognize this story as a spiritual allegory for the Buddhist monastic path. This path involves ethical discipline (such as replacing animosity and greed with kindness and generosity). It also involves removing oneself from general society, restraint of the senses, and the cultivation of disembodied, transcendent states of consciousness, thought to be conducive to the realization of nirvana, which is again, envisioned as a state beyond embodiment and rebirth.

In addition to being an allegory for the monastic path of practice, the discourse involves a critique of the Brahmanical caste system. Thus, it is natural that it should center human beings. Yet, its anthropocentrism is still rather shocking. In describing the creation of the world, it does not mention any beings other than *human* beings. There are no animals and no plants other than the vegetal matter that serves as food for human beings—and at each stage of devolution, there is only one kind of food or monoculture. If ecology is about the relation of organisms to each other in a diverse and complex environment, then this discourse is profoundly *unecological*.

Arguably, the only ecological dimension of the text is the suggestion that the moral attitudes and behavior of human beings affect the quality of their environment.



## LION'S ROAR OF THE WORLD RULER (DN 26)



This point about the effect of human to human relations on the environment is made more clearly in a closely related discourse, called the “Lion's Roar of the World Ruler.” This discourse describes a situation in which societal conditions have deteriorated due to poor political leadership. Poor rule has led to poverty and the unwise distribution of resources (*this sounds a little familiar*).

The version of the text preserved in Chinese details the effect this has on the environment at the lowest point of societal collapse. I'll just read a slightly abridged (and paraphrased) passage:

At that time one no longer hears in the world the names of ghee or honey, or any sweet delicacies. Rice seeds and seedlings turn into grass and weeds. Silk, brocade, cotton, white wool are not seen at all. Fabrics woven from coarse hair are the only kind of clothing. At that time many thorny bushes grow on this earth, and there are many mosquitoes, gadflies, flies, fleas, snakes, vipers, wasps, centipedes, and poisonous worms. Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, pearls, and what are called gems completely disappear into the earth. On the surface of the earth there appear only clay stones, sand, and gravel. .... There are many ravines, and deep gorges with rushing rivers. The earth is a wasteland and people are scarce. People go about in fear. At that time fighting and plundering will manifest, grass and sticks taken in the hand will become weapons. For seven days the people will turn to mutual harming. [Adapted from Anālayo, *Mindfully Facing Climate Change*]


During these seven days, a small group of people are hiding out in the hills. They agree not to attack each other and gradually discover the benefits of and adopt other core Buddhist moral precepts based on the principle of non-harm. Eventually society and the environment recover. This ushers in a new golden age in which the future Buddha Maitreya appears and another world

ruling monarch arises. [Interestingly, when this monarch retires, he does not pass his wealth and kingdom to his son as in the previous golden age, but gives it to the people.]

Political lessons aside, this discourse reinforces the idea that human moral attitudes and actions affect the physical conditions of the world, as well as the idea that humans are at the center of the world rather than merely part of it. Virtually all the environmental conditions mentioned are those that pertain to human comfort and enjoyment: precious materials like silk and gems are not available, and the deep gorges and rushing rivers that appear are difficult to navigate. A similar ethos is found in early Buddhist descriptions of ideal urban environments for lay people. In contrast to the austere conditions of the “Discourse on Beginnings,” these cities have abundant forms of life, but only those animals and plants that are useful or pleasing to human beings. People enjoy well planned parks and ponds with jeweled trees, songbirds, gentle slopes down to the river, an absence of dangerous wild animals, *and* trees that grow cooking pots and the like.

**REALMS OF REBIRTH**

- hell, ghost realms, animal, god and demi-god realms conceived as pre- or post-human destinies
- animals as lesser humans (stupid, lustful, violent, incapable of spiritual progress)

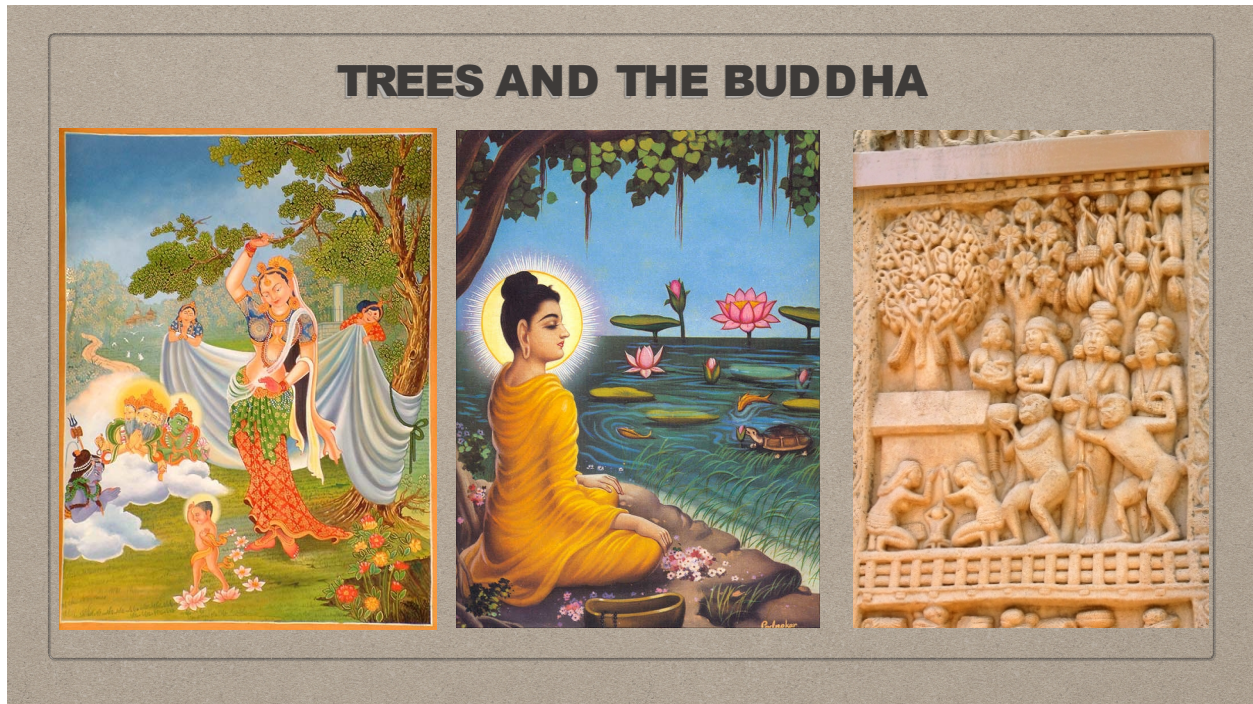


Given the anthropocentrism we find in these early Buddhist texts, it is not surprising to learn that early Buddhist schemes of rebirth also center human beings. Although there are various realms of existence, these are conceived primarily as pre- or post- human destinies (births as human-like beings in hell and in ghostly realms as well as in god and demi-god realms). Vegetal and elemental life respected by other Indic traditions is excluded. Non-human animals are included, but their realm is conceived primarily as an unfortunate post- or pre-human realm. Animals are depicted as stupid, violent, and lustful, and as incapable of making spiritual progress. They are basically more carnal, lesser humans, rather than forms of life with their own distinct characteristics and intelligences.

So far, we’ve seen that early Buddhist attitudes towards the natural world include identification of sensory experience and embodied existence as a *problem*, as well as a profound centering of



human beings and interests over the greater eco-system of beings. However, we've all seen pictures of the Buddha under a tree.



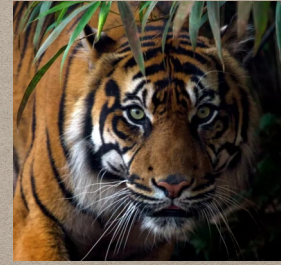
According to tradition, the Buddha was born under a tree, awakened under a tree, taught under a tree, and died under a tree. In early Buddhist art, the Buddha is even represented *as a tree*. Furthermore, the stock phrases describing the path of meditation begin with the instruction to take oneself to the foot of a tree...

In the Indian subcontinent, the shade of a tree has some practical or instrumental value, but surely all this speaks to a special connection with trees, if not to the rest of the natural world. Surely, the profound stillness and quietude of meditation under a tree would have evoked in the Buddha and his companions a sense of the aliveness and intelligence of the more-than-human-world, just as it does for many modern persons.

## PRACTICE IN THE WILD



*Monastery in forest grove,  
not too far from town*



However, if Buddha did experience such nature connection, if it was part of his teaching on dependent arising, then the texts are silent on the matter. Though the texts do speak to some benefits of practice in nature. The Buddha suggested that ideal place for a monastery is a forest grove outside of town—albeit one that is not so far away that the monks cannot receive material support from lay people or share the Dharma with them. Early Buddhist texts also suggest that the wildness, weirdness, and hardships of the wilderness help promote non-attachment. Less often they speak to the way that the beauty and harmony of nature might support meditation. Nevertheless, this suggests a greater intimacy with the more than human natural world than the "Discourse on Beginnings" or descriptions of paradises in which cooking pots grow from trees imply. However, these texts are also orientated towards *transcending* the world. Here too removal from society is preparation for withdrawal from sensory experience and embodied existence. The nature and health or intrinsic value of the more than human world would seem to be a rather secondary concern, if one at all.



## MORE THAN HUMAN BEINGS IN EARLY BUDDHIST PRACTICE

- Precept not to kill or injure living beings.
- All beings as focus of divine attitudes:
  - loving kindness
  - compassion
  - sympathetic joy
  - equanimity



Yet, the more-than-human-world does play an important role in early Buddhist practice. The first ethical precept is not to kill or injure any living living beings, suggesting that animals and maybe even plants are worthy of our moral consideration, even if they are not moral agents themselves or of lesser value than human beings—according to early Buddhist cosmology and ethics.

The value of the more-than-human-world is reinforced by Buddhist heart practices. The divine attitudes of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, explicitly include *all* living beings. Although later classical instructions for the practice focus on cultivating these attitudes in relation to different categories of human beings (benefactors, friends, neutral people, enemies), the preferred method in the early discourses is to radiate the attitude with all categories of of beings in mind. Deliberatively inclusive, the texts specify beings of different strengths and sizes, those that are seen and unseen, near and far, born and yet to be born. Some texts also specify various classes of deities, or include both *stationary* and mobile beings, that is, plants as well as animals.

In the early discourses the divine attitudes are cultivated by radiating it to all the various categories of beings in the cardinal directions, until one experiences the attitude without any obstruction or boundary, and without any preference or distinction between beings. Hence these qualities are also described as “immeasurable” or boundless. Although the focus is the transformative effect on the human cultivating these qualities, the notion that all beings are *equally* worthy of love seems to counteract the anthropocentrism we find in other early Buddhist texts, and perhaps also the impulse to transcend the world.

Given that early Buddhists saw rebirth and especially animal birth as unfortunate, it is not surprising to find animals as proper objects of compassion—but what about sympathetic joy?, the delight one feels in response to the gifts and good fortune enjoyed by others? This seems to imply a *celebration* of life. Moreover, attending to the diversity of beings and rejoicing in their

gifts and good fortune, as if they were our own, requires *opening* rather than closing our senses and finding something of value in conditioned, and embodied existence—in other beings *and* in ourselves.

Although they have fallen somewhat out of favor today (or are less central to popular programs of meditation in Asian and the West), the divine attitudes were at one point considered central to the Buddhist path: early Buddhist texts describe the divine attitudes as resulting in freedom of the heart (*ceto-vimutti*), meaning liberation from afflictive emotional states. This freedom is presented as complementary to, and even as a pre-requisite for liberation by wisdom, the liberation that comes from insight into the instability, dissatisfactoriness, and selflessness of phenomena. This suggests that liberation involves *loving* the world, even as it requires letting go of attachment to and identification with it.

Although the divine attitudes seem to recommend a different relationship with the world, early Buddhism is still oriented around a transcendent rather than immanent spirituality or conception of freedom. This orientation persists in later Buddhism to greater and lesser degrees, but there are some seismic shifts with the advent of Mahayana or Greater Vehicle Buddhism which decenter a transcendent conception of the path. Beginning around the first century BC, there are some re-conceptions of the relationship between samsara and nirvana, dependent arising, and awakening, which have critical implications for Buddhist perspectives on the natural world in East Asia, and the West. I'll discuss three of these briefly before making some comments about ecologically engaged Buddhist practice today.

## SOME MAHAYANA INNOVATIONS



- Non-duality of samsara and nirvana
- Extension of dependent origination to all phenomena (vs. focus on arising of human suffering)
- Buddha Nature = our true nature

Early Buddhism conceives of nirvana and samsara as opposed, as a transcendent unconditioned state vs. the conditioned state of suffering that is the world. In the Mahayana this relationship is reconceived such that samsara and nirvana are the same reality seen from different perspectives, from a perspective of attachment and ignorance, and hence, suffering, and from a perspective of



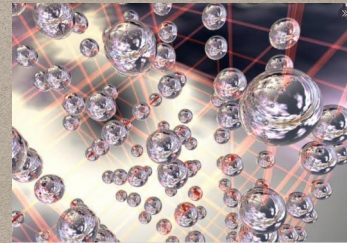
freedom. This creates a subtle shift in the locus of suffering and thus, the means to liberation from it. The path no longer requires cutting off contact with sensory experience, but focuses instead on disrupting craving by leaning on insight into the insubstantial nature of all phenomena—the fact of their impermanence and essencelessness or emptiness. According to this view, phenomena are not unreal, but they do not have the kind of solidity and stability we habitually attribute to them.

Part of the insubstantiality of phenomena is the fact that they do not exist independently, but only in relation to other phenomena. We find this idea in early Buddhism in regard to persons: we are not permanent and do not exist independently, our bodies and minds—and all that we identify with as self or belonging to self is subject to causes and conditions beyond our control. In the Mahayana this insight is extended to all phenomena, and with this, the concept of dependent origination shifts from referring primarily to the specific conditions that give rise to suffering in human beings to describing the nature of all conditioned phenomena as depending on causes and conditions, and as empty of their own intrinsic natures or essences.

Arguably, this doctrine comes to its fullest and most poetic expression in the Chinese school of Huayan Buddhism's concept of interpenetration or "relational holism." This is the idea that all phenomena are not only dependent on each other but are contained within or interpenetrate each other. The basic idea is that the whole is within the part and the part in the whole, and is often illustrated by the image of Indra's Jeweled Net.

## RELATIONAL HOLISM IN HUAYAN BUDDHISM

- The whole has a reality that cannot be reduced to a collection of parts.
- The whole is not a transcendent realm, but the phenomenal world.
- The whole is not "separable from, prior to, or more important than the parts"; each part is the whole.
- Each part is distinct, unique, essential, and valuable.
- The whole is a "single field of differentiated integration."



This is a vast net extending over the entire universe. At each node of the net is a jewel that reflects all the other jewels and the rest of the net, each jewel is unique, and is what it is only in relation to all the other jewels and the whole. This has been described as a kind of "relational holism" in which the *unity* of all phenomena coincides with their distinctiveness and *diversity*.


Although it was not traditionally interpreted in ecological terms, this relational holism has been productive for contemporary Buddhist ecological thinking.

Relational holism can also be understood as an expression of the insight that undergirds the early Buddhist heart practices—in which the unique characteristics and circumstances of all kinds of beings serves as the focus of an infinite and undivided attitude of love, compassion, joy or equanimity.

The third innovation in Indian Mahayana thinking I would like to introduce is the concept of Buddha Nature.

## BUDDHA NATURE IN SENTIENT BEINGS

- Our true nature, hidden by delusion and defilement
- Path as clearing away defilement, revealing our true nature
- Awakening within the world



This is the idea that we all have an inherent awakened, Buddha nature within us. For most of us, it is hidden, temporarily obscured by ignorance and emotional defilements. From this perspective, the process of awakening and liberation from suffering involves clearing away what is obscuring our true nature. There is no need to transcend the world in order to do this. This has profound implications for Buddhist practice. The idea of our own awakened nature as immanent in our being complements the idea that nirvana and samsara are not separate realities, but rather the same reality under the aspect of an awakened or deluded perspective. In other words, the doctrine of Buddha Nature reinforces the idea of awakening *within* the world rather than by transcending it.

While the Indian Buddhist doctrine of Buddha nature focuses on sentient beings, and especially, human beings, East Asian Buddhists extend Buddha Nature to all phenomena, especially the more-than-human natural world.



## BUDDHA NATURE IN EAST ASIA



- All phenomena (including rocks, trees, grass and tiles) have/are Buddha Nature
- Each phenomenon expresses Buddha Nature in its own distinct way
- The entire phenomenal world teaches the Dharma, but does not speak in human language
- Beings without human minds may be *more* awake

According to some versions of the doctrine, all phenomena manifest or express Buddha Nature but do so in their own distinctive ways. In doing so they teach the Dharma, and although they do not speak in human languages, their teachings can help us human beings discover our own Buddha nature. In some versions of the doctrine, so-called “insentient beings” like rocks and trees and grasses are *more* awake than us or do not need to awaken, because unlike us human beings, they express their Buddha nature without the interference of a deluded mind.

The idea that *all* phenomena express Buddha nature radically inverts the hierarchy and anthropocentrism of Indian Buddhism. It also recommends a way of practice that involves attentiveness to the more than human world in all of its distinctiveness. And like the Huayan doctrine of relational holism and the early Buddhist divine attitudes it suggests that this distinctiveness and diversity can coincide with the fact of unity or oneness.

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I would like to conclude today with some thoughts about the implications of these perspectives for an ecologically engaged Buddhism. As previously mentioned, some of these later developments of Buddhist doctrine, like the idea of dependent origination as an interconnected web of life, have become common place in contemporary ecological thinking. Buddhists as well as non-Buddhists cite the doctrine as evidence of Buddhism’s ecological credentials—or of ecology’s Buddhist credentials.

There’s much to say about that, but I’d like to focus on the Buddhist heart practices – the divine attitudes of loving kindness and so on in relation to knowledge and freedom. The contemporary philosopher, Hanne De Jaegher argues for framing loving as a basis for knowledge. I can’t do justice to her arguments or theory here, but the basic idea is that in modern Western contexts, we tend to understand knowing as a mind in relation to an object. We know objects when they

conform to our ideas and expectations. This kind of knowing lends itself to a sense of separation and even violence and domination—because it turns people, animals, plants, and land, into objects—objects that can be contained in our minds, within our concepts, categories, and ideas. They become objects that can be owned or suit our ends.

Loving is an entirely different proposition. Loving is about relationship. It is about intimacy and curiosity without the expectation of fully understanding the other, without the need to contain the other within a concept or use the other for some end of our own. Deep loving respects the distinctiveness and autonomy of the other, and it involves a willingness to be transformed by the other rather than impose our will or desire upon the other.

There is no time to fully spell it out here, but I believe this resonates with the ethos of Huayan relational holism and the conception of all phenomena as unique expressions of Buddha nature. To know in the context of these frameworks is to resist the urge of the rational, conceptual mind to erase difference, and to resist the urge to make phenomena conform to our own ideas and ends.

I also think it resonates with the early Buddhist idea of love as a kind of liberation. Why should love be liberating? and specifically, why should a kind of love that views all forms of life as equally worthy, but respects their particularity and diversity be liberating? The real answer probably cannot be put into words, however, I think we can imagine how such love might offer liberation from self concern, from the concepts about self and other that separate us from each other and the world, and that feed our grasping at I and mine—what is me and belonging to me.

Thus, while early Buddhism conceives of freedom as *leaving* the world, its doctrine of love combined with the insights into relational holism and Buddha Nature, help chart an immanent path of liberation which encourages attentiveness to the diversity of life, and which de-centers human beings without devaluing them. I think this is important, because looking at what humans (or some humans) are doing to the earth, many Buddhists and non-Buddhists conclude that perhaps humans shouldn't exist, perhaps we deserve to suffer for what we have done, perhaps the Earth would be better off without us, perhaps we should give up trying to save ourselves. These feelings are understandable, but the Buddhist doctrine of love refuses these conclusions. It suggests that we are all worthy of love, just not *more* love than the more-than-human-beings with whom we share this wondrous Earth.



## LOVING AS KNOWING AND LOVING AS FREEDOM

- Epistemology of love vs. epistemology of mind, idea, object
- Love as a form of liberation from mind and self
- An immanent path which attends to diversity and de-centers without devaluing human beings

