

A SUFFERING (BUT NOT IRREPARABLE) NATURE: ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EARLY BUDDHISM

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Introduction: challenges to an early Buddhist environmentalism

In the last quarter century, concern for the environment has evolved from the warnings sounded by a few to a globally shared awareness of environmental problems. In the wake of this trend, philosophers and those studying or practicing various religions have been seeking the ethical and spiritual resources that are required to effectively respond to the various ecological crises. From the beginning of this search for traditions that support environmental values, Buddhism has stood out as especially promising. Numerous books and articles have appeared that acclaim Buddhism's strong support for environmental ethics.¹ For many of these authors, the Buddhist tradition offers an image of humanity that is in a symbiotic or integrative relationship with the wider environment, suggesting a less exploitative approach to nature than those found in other religious traditions. Others consider the Buddhist ethical principle of 'non-hurting' (*ahimsā*) and the naturalist aesthetics of Zen Buddhism as evidence that Buddhism has an inherent environmental ethic.

In the past decade, however, Buddhist environmentalism has been called into question by a number of scholars of early Buddhism.² For example, Ian Harris and Lambert Schmithausen have argued that the central claims of those promoting 'Green Buddhism' or 'Eco-Buddhism' (as the blending of Buddhism and environmental ethics has come to be called) do not hold up to careful scholarly scrutiny, thus raising considerable skepticism about the prospects for Buddhist environmentalism.³ Most importantly, the skeptics point out that key claims of Green Buddhism do not accurately reflect the doctrines of the early Buddhist tradition as we have them recounted in the canonical sources such as the Pāli Nikāyas.⁴ Let me briefly recount some of the major reasons that have been advanced for this skepticism regarding the connection between environmental ethics and early Buddhism.

First, Green Buddhists portray Buddhism as holding a very positive (some might say 'romantic') view of the natural world. For proponents of Green Buddhism, the natural world is something of obvious value that is worth caring for and preserving. But, according to Schmithausen in his seminal essay 'The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics,' early Buddhists placed no value on nature, because the natural world was for them nothing more than a place of 'suffering, decay, death and impermanence' (1997, 11). As Schmithausen interprets early Buddhism, the natural world is fundamentally and irreparably unsatisfactory (*dukkha*). For this reason, he asserts that 'the ultimate analysis and evaluation of existence in early Buddhism does not motivate *efforts for preserving* nature, not to mention restoring it, nor efforts for transforming or *subjugating* it by means of technology' (ibid.; italics contained in original text). In opposition to Green Buddhism, Schmithausen understands the goal of early Buddhism as liberation *from* nature. No doubt, Schmithausen is right when he argues that early Buddhism does not present a rosy picture of nature. But if he is correct that the early Buddhist view of nature is fundamentally and irreparably negative, then it is indeed difficult to see how early Buddhism could offer much in the way of resources for environmental ethics.

Aside from this negative evaluation of nature, the skeptics have noticed that early Buddhism lacks (or outright rejects) certain other key elements that define contemporary environmental ethics. For example, a contemporary environmental ethic is typically based on the idea that nature has an 'intrinsic value'; that is, nature is valued 'for its own sake,' rather than having merely instrumental value to human beings.⁵ But the early Buddhist tradition is unlikely to adopt the view that the natural world has intrinsic value because the notion of intrinsic value depends on a metaphysical position that gives *independent, self-subsisting, existence* to the beings or things valued. But such a 'substantialist' metaphysics, as this position is often called, is precisely the kind of metaphysics early Buddhism ardently rejects.⁶

Furthermore, there is hardly any hint in the canonical sources that the early Buddhists had a preference for 'intact' nature or unpopulated wilderness, despite the enthusiastic accounts of Buddhist conservation by proponents of Green Buddhism in the West. The early Buddhists may have retreated to the forests and mountains for their meditative repose, but the early texts give no special place to wilderness as such.⁷ Quite the contrary, the texts seem to show that early Buddhists favored human society over wilderness as evidenced by the Buddha's itinerary and his establishment of the monastic and lay communities (the fourfold *Sangha*). Failing to find any evidence that, for early Buddhism, 'intact nature and natural diversity are accorded a positive *value*' (Schmithausen 1997, 6)—factors that some take as the *sine qua non* of an environmental ethic—the skeptics draw the conclusion that early Buddhism cannot serve as a resource for ecological ethics today.

Finally, it has been argued that trying to find solutions to our contemporary environmental crisis in early Buddhism is highly anachronistic. Surely, the early Buddhists cannot have much to say directly about contemporary environmental

problems, because most of these problems have emerged only in the past several centuries. Deforestation, water pollution, air pollution, the extinction of countless species of flora and fauna, ozone depletion, global warming (just to name a few) are ecological problems that simply did not exist in the time of the Buddha (or, if they did, they did not pose the significant threat that they do now). Indeed, it would be strange to think that the early Buddhist tradition would show concern for environmental problems that would not surface for another two millennia. So, no matter how 'green' Buddhism was in its time, one cannot expect the tradition to offer specific solutions to the environmental crises we now face. On this matter, the skeptics are certainly right to caution against the anachronism in presenting early Buddhism as a *direct response* to the environmental challenges we face today.

These obstacles, taken together, seem to indicate a serious mismatch between early Buddhism and contemporary environmental ethics. Indeed, for these reasons, the prospects look dim for drawing on early Buddhism as a resource for environmental ethics. So long as environmental ethics requires making 'intact' nature an ultimate value and early Buddhism is seen as world-denying escapism, the conclusions of the skeptics appear unavoidable. But I do not think this is the end of the story. Rather, I think the case against early Buddhist environmentalism given above is flawed both in terms of methodology and doctrine. The typical study of Buddhist environmentalism is methodologically flawed because both the skeptics and the proponents of Buddhist environmentalism start with a contemporary way of framing environmental ethics and try to match that particular approach to environmental ethics with the ancient texts, doctrines, and practices of early Buddhism. But this seems methodologically backward. It would be like looking for an ancient Buddhist system of measurement by searching for a modern unit of measurement (say, a 'meter') in the Pāli texts—finding none, one can imagine the skeptics announcing that the ancient Buddhists therefore had no system of measurement at all. Rather than start with a modern conception of environmental ethics as a criterion for whether early Buddhism has environmental resources, one should start with early Buddhism itself and see whether, in accord with its own doctrines, the tradition places a positive value on the natural world and gives human beings guidance on how to act in relation to that natural world. In terms of doctrine, I think it is wrong to see early Buddhism as a program for escape from the natural world. Using the ancient sources, one can demonstrate that the natural world has a positive value in early Buddhism.

In this essay, I will attempt to lay the groundwork for early Buddhist environmental ethics by correcting these two mistakes and thus avoiding the skeptical arguments adduced above. The first section of the essay is an exploration of the relationship between human beings and the natural world posited in the early Buddhist texts. I will argue that early Buddhism is best viewed as special type of naturalism—an 'emergentist' naturalism.⁸ Early Buddhism is a type of naturalism because it explains all phenomena, including human beings, in terms of the causal order of nature. For an early Buddhist environmental ethic, the important principle

that follows from this naturalism is the *continuity* of human beings with the natural world.

But this human–nature continuity alone is insufficient as a basis for an environmental ethic; to frame an environmental ethic, it must be coupled with the ethical principles that derive from the Buddhist focus on *dukkha* (suffering, anxiety, or unsatisfactoriness). According to the skeptics, *dukkha* is the greatest obstacle to realizing early Buddhist environmental ethics because it implies an utterly negative evaluation of nature. In the main body of the essay, I will argue that the skeptics have gotten this wrong: nature has a profound value in early Buddhism, as it is through natural means that one makes spiritual progress in early Buddhism. Early Buddhism disparages only the type of existence that is fraught with *dukkha*, not the natural world *per se*. Hence, early Buddhism is not a world-denying philosophy that recommends a program for escape from the natural world.

Dukkha is also the rationale for early Buddhist interest in protecting or preserving the natural world. What makes the natural world an essential human concern from a Buddhist point of view is the fact that the spiritual therapy for confronting *dukkha* has a ‘de-centering’ effect that identifies human concern with a concern for the suffering of all sentient beings (*sattā*, *bhūtā*). Human–nature continuity, which is the heart of Buddhist naturalism, thus has profound *ethical* implications when, in the context of eliminating *dukkha*, it serves as the basis for linking our own suffering and the suffering of other sentient beings.

In the last section of the essay, I will sketch in broad outline the general direction I think an early Buddhist environmental ethics would take. What is clear is that early Buddhist environmental ethics will have somewhat different priorities as compared with contemporary (mainstream) environmental ethics, for it will derive its moral principles directly (and indirectly) from the concern for the suffering of all sentient beings and not from a concern for the ‘intrinsic value’ of an ‘intact’ nature.

The continuity of human beings with ‘nature’: emergentist naturalism in early Buddhism

The conception of ‘nature’ (or the ‘natural world’) and its relationship to human beings are the bases for any environmental ethic. Such matters figure prominently in the skeptical arguments described above. Thus, the logical starting point for a study of early Buddhist environmentalism is an analysis of the early Buddhist conception of nature. Of course, the conception of ‘nature’ in the modern scientific sense of the word is absent in the canonical texts. But there is a broad conception of ‘nature’ or ‘natural’ in ancient Buddhism—covered by several different words in Pāli⁹—that seems to be fairly close to our non-technical usage today. Unfortunately, there are no discourses in the canonical literature that expound a detailed theory of nature as such, at least not a theory with the kind of generality one needs for articulating an environmental ethic.¹⁰ But this is not an insuperable difficulty. The Buddha gave accounts of many different types

of phenomena, so it only takes a short step of generalization to say that, for early Buddhism, all phenomena fall within the category of the 'natural.' As the early Buddhist texts explain, each phenomenon, everything that exists, is an impermanent, conditioned, changing, process that is identical with the interplay of causal factors. This is the all-important insight that served as the catalyst for the Buddha's enlightenment; namely, the doctrine of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). According to the texts, the various things or phenomena that make up the real world are dependently arisen (and, therefore, impermanent). Of course, dependent arising as it appears in the texts is used mainly to explain (and so control) the arising and cessation of *dukkha* in human experience.¹¹ The pattern for dependent arising typically involves twelve (sometimes ten) *nidānas* (causal factors) with 'this whole mass of *dukkha*' as the terminus of the causal chain. But causal principles are also used to explain many other phenomena in a naturalistic way, including such things as plants, animals, fire, and wind. Importantly, such is the limit of the 'real world,' as the Buddha defined it in the famous *Sabba Sutta* ('Discourse on the All').¹² The 'all' refers to the objects experienced through the six modes of sensory perception. This puts the 'real' squarely among the 'natural' existents rather than among the purportedly transcendent, non-empirical, and unchanging realities claimed by other traditions (notably, Brahmanism). As everything that exists is inextricably bound up in causal connections, lacks a permanent essence, and is experienced by sensory modes of perception, the horizon of reality for early Buddhism is the natural world.¹³

The main thrust of early Buddhism is to explain human personhood as a natural process emergent from other natural processes, rather than as a permanent essence or soul (e.g., the Brahmanical *ātman*). The early Buddhists demonstrated the naturalness of the human person through the well-known Buddhist doctrine of the 'five aggregates' or 'bundles' (*khandhā*).¹⁴ Human beings are composed of a body, feeling, perceptions, dispositions to action and consciousness (nothing more nor less). All of these aggregates are dependently arisen, causally emergent, and therefore *natural* processes. Human existence is thus a function of psycho-existential factors that fall within a broadly construed understanding of nature. The Buddha's aim (and the great achievement, according to Buddhists) is the explanation of *dukkha* as the result of identifiable causal processes in the natural world, without any need for transcendental realities or a supernatural self/soul (*ātman*). Even human consciousness (*viññāna*), the most obvious candidate for 'supernatural' or transcendent status, is explained in naturalistic terms in the early discourses. In the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*, for example, the six modes of human consciousness¹⁵ arise dependent on a combination of a particular sense faculty and a sensory object. Consciousness is thus not a supernatural intruder in a physical world, but a natural process that arises under certain complex conditions.

Two cautions about early Buddhist naturalism are in order. First, by referring to early Buddhism as a form of naturalism, one must be quite careful not to think of this as reductive or eliminative materialism. Reductive materialism explains all

'higher' phenomena in terms of the merely physical (consciousness is nothing but complex brain states, for example). The naturalism of early Buddhism is most definitely not reductionist in this sense. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, the Buddha rejected such materialism quite explicitly as a doctrine of annihilationism.¹⁶ In the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* alluded to above, the early Buddhists avoid reductive materialism by explaining higher sentient functions like feeling (*vedanā*) or consciousness as emergent from, but not reducible to, the bodily/material components from which they emerge. So, from the early Buddhist point of view, we must resist the temptation to equate the natural with the merely physical—and, by inference, we must resist thinking that a process that is not merely physical is non-natural. Second, the early Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising (and its implications for the causal dependence of natural phenomena) should not be confused with the theory of universal mutual causality that is championed by many of the authors in the Green Buddhist movement (see Macy 1991b). Universal mutual causality is the claim that each existing thing is interdependent with *all other* phenomena in the entire universe—a position held later by the Hua-Yen form of Buddhism in China, and often referred to as 'Indra's Net.' Schmithausen and others rightly point out that early Buddhist texts do not support this more totalistic interpretation of dependent arising (Schmithausen 1997, 13).

What this naturalistic interpretation does show is that early Buddhism posits a fundamental *continuity* between human beings and nature, because human beings *are* one among many natural events or processes. Furthermore, given the early Buddhist account of human existence, the natural world is both the object of human experience *and* the conditions by which human experience emerges. It is probably the fact that the world is the object of a person's experience that leads to the common view that the person is a spectator outside of the natural world. Thus, the key point to take from this discussion is that human beings are not separable from nature, but arise within it as highly complex natural processes. For this reason, terms such as 'world' and 'nature' denote for the Buddha more than just the external surroundings of an individual. Human beings do not so much live *in* nature, but live *by means* of a natural world, as one natural process integrated inextricably with many others.¹⁷ In other words, it is misleading to juxtapose human beings and nature (likewise, 'self' and 'other'). From one point of view, human beings are simply nature taking on a certain form.

Some scholars working on environmental ethics have stipulated that nature be defined as that which is *other than* the human part of the world, essentially bifurcating humanity and the natural world. Each is welcome to one's own stipulative definition of 'nature,' of course, but a definition of nature that juxtaposes human beings and ('external') nature introduces a discontinuity (and quite probably a difficulty) not native to early Buddhism. As I have argued above, early Buddhism emphasizes the *continuity* of the person with those things and events that comprise the 'world' or 'nature.' So starting with a human–nature dichotomy has the effect of creating an unnecessary obstacle for an environmental

ethic, because it drives a wedge between human concerns and those of the natural world. It weakens the case for relating human values to nature. Bridging that gap has always been the critical step in any proposed environmental ethic.¹⁸ This is why the first step toward developing an environmental ethic based on early Buddhism requires a proper definition of nature—one that recognizes and builds on the continuity of human beings with other parts of nature.

Of course, human beings are distinctive as regards other parts of nature, according to early Buddhism. Human existence is extra-ordinary (just not extra-natural). Most importantly, early Buddhism asserts that only humans can achieve *nibbāna*. The path that the Buddhist tradition lays out is meant as a guide for human beings alone. Despite the laudable efforts of certain *bhikkhus* in Thailand who aim to reduce deforestation by the ordination of trees, the *Vinaya* relates that only human beings can join the *Saṅgha*. Now, some may say that such doctrines make Buddhism anthropocentric, and, as such, incapable of valuing nature for its own sake. But if this fact alone makes Buddhism a form of anthropocentrism, it is surely a benign sort of anthropocentrism. That humans should seek their spiritual fulfillment by following a path laid out for humans does not exclude the possibility of valuing the non-human part of the natural world as an essential part of that path. To assume that a human good cannot *also* be a good for non-human existence is to make a kind of category mistake that begs the question against an early Buddhist environmental ethics.

The centrality of suffering (*dukkha*) in the early Buddhist tradition

Early Buddhist naturalism alone (including human–nature continuity) does not provide sufficient grounds for an environmental ethic. From the metaphysical doctrine that human beings are an emergent feature of nature, one cannot derive any moral imperatives about how humans ought to treat the natural world.¹⁹ Even though early Buddhist naturalism alone cannot give us a basis for values that respect the well-being of the natural world, I aim to show that such naturalism coupled with Buddhism's unique evaluation of (normal) sentient life achieves exactly that end.

According to early Buddhism, all (normal) sentient life is *dukkha* (suffering or unsatisfactoriness). All sentient life is pervaded by anxiety and frustration caused by selfish craving and unfulfilled desires. This is the central problematic of the early Buddhist tradition—nothing less than the Buddha's 'First Noble Truth.' Human beings, in particular, are threatened by the existential facts of old age, sickness, and death (not only as they apply to ourselves, but to our loved ones, too). Even in our 'happy' moments, life is pervaded with this unsatisfactoriness, because until one has a solution to old age, sickness and death, there will always be a nagging anxiety at the core of one's existence. Thus, normal human beings have, as it were, a *suffering nature*.

The Buddha stated categorically that it is 'for the full understanding of *dukkha* that the holy life is lived under the Exalted One.'²⁰ Thus, it is no

exaggeration to say that every aspect of Buddhism is regulated by this single goal, for as the Buddha said of himself: 'I make known only *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*.'²¹ Hence, *dukkha* is that context or theoretical lens through which all other Buddhist doctrines need to be understood. Even early Buddhist naturalism is not a foundationalist metaphysics (a 'first philosophy'), because, as a metaphysical doctrine, it is contextualized by (or in service of) the ethical/spiritual goal of Buddhism that is release from *dukkha*. Of course, such a diagnosis of the human condition is gloomy, but, thankfully, it is not the end of the story, according to early Buddhism. The *raison de etre* of Buddhism is to understand *dukkha* fully, its arising and elimination in this very life.

Were *dukkha* a function of the mind or human psychology alone, the non-human parts of the natural world would not be very important in the Buddhist tradition. But *dukkha* exists in the interface between a sentient being and the world such a being experiences.²² In everyday affairs, of course, we are accustomed to treating suffering as a purely subjective phenomenon, a mental event occurring privately in the consciousness of the sufferer. A sentient being suffers, but not the pin that pricks, nor the fire that burns. But this is not how *dukkha* is analyzed in early Buddhism. Like all experience, *dukkha* arises fundamentally as a complex relationship that has metaphysically *objective* as well as *subjective* features; it is not merely a mental event or a purely subjective phenomenon. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha declared: 'When I said: "whatever is experienced is (a case of) suffering, it was spoken in connection with the nature of constructed things to decay, waste away, fade away and cease and change."²³ *Dukkha* occurs when the very complex processes of nature are organized in such a way that they take on new qualities and that these processes are inclusive of both the faculties of a sentient being and the things that are the objects of a being's sentience. Thus, the suffering of an individual sentient being, like all sentience, is emergent from nature in the double sense that it is both subjective and objective. This explains the deliberate ambiguity in the word 'nature' in the title of this essay: humans have a natural propensity for suffering, and it can be said that the natural world itself is suffering.

The value of nature in light of suffering: a middle way

There is a tendency among some scholars of Buddhism to overstate the objectivity of *dukkha*, turning it into a Buddhist condemnation of the natural world. Schmithausen makes just such a mistake when he writes that 'in a more basic sense, the whole world (*loka*), all conditioned things (*sankhāra*), all constituents of a person as well as of the external world and even states of meditative concentration, are unsatisfactory or ill (*dukkha*), in an *objective* sense ... [thus] *dukkha* in this sense is an intrinsic, objective, "ontological" characteristic of things' (Schmithausen 1997, 44). Based on this interpretation of the objectivity of *dukkha*, Schmithausen infers that the early Buddhists held a completely negative evaluation of the natural world. He uses this interpretation of the natural

world in early Buddhism to deny that it is the psychological factors of the unenlightened being that contribute a necessary ingredient for the arising of *dukkha*. Schmithausen writes:

Therefore, [for early Buddhism] it [suffering] would *not* seem to be taught as qualifying things only on condition that a person is subject to *attachment* to them, so that for an awakened person free from attachment impermanent things (especially things of nature) would no longer be *dukkha* (and would therefore be open to *positive* evaluation in an ultimate sense). It is rather precisely because one has, once and for all, realized the intrinsic *ultimate* unsatisfactoriness of the constituents of a person as well as external things that attachment to and identification with them is entirely abandoned and cannot rise again. (Schmithausen 1997, 44)

As he sees it, early Buddhism characterizes the natural world as intrinsically bad whether or not it enters into the experience of an unenlightened sentient being. But this inference from the objectivity of *dukkha* to the utter derogation of the natural world as intrinsically bad misses the crucial qualification that natural phenomena are characterized as *dukkha* *only in the context of an experiential relationship that relates certain natural phenomena to an unenlightened being having sentience*. This, surely, was the Buddha's meaning in the previous quote from the *Samyutta Nikāya*, which opens with the clause 'whatever is experienced is (a case of) suffering.'²⁴ To say that the things of the world are suffering in and of themselves (i.e., independently or intrinsically) merely on account of their being impermanent is an unwarrantedly pessimistic interpretation of the early texts.

Furthermore, failing to take account of the experiential context misrepresents the dynamic of *dukkha* and implies that the world is an 'external' or separate realm that is distinct from the sentient being who experiences it. As we have seen above, in the study of Buddhist naturalism, the subjective and objective elements in experience are inextricably bound together as continuous processes. To interpret early Buddhism as saying that the world itself is *dukkha* outside the context of sentient experience is to impose a very un-Buddhist metaphysical dichotomy of self-other. If one wants to speak of the 'ontological character of things' in early Buddhism, one must be careful not to invoke a dualist metaphysics that the Buddha clearly rejected.

One additional question must be raised against this view: how does one make sense of the life and experience of the Buddha himself, if all natural phenomena should be considered *dukkha* merely on the basis of their impermanence? The canonical sources relate that the Buddha interacted with impermanent things all of the time. The texts present the Buddha himself as a person with a body (some discourses open with the Buddha getting dressed after finishing his bath, for example), who walked from place to place, who ate food, wore robes, and so on. And, yet, if the Buddha claims to have achieved anything, it is a victory over *dukkha*. So how could the Buddha live a spiritually fulfilled life (eliminating *dukkha*) and still interact with natural phenomena that are essentially

(‘ontologically’) *dukkha*? The only reasonable explanation is that bodily existence *per se* cannot be construed as *dukkha*, nor should impermanent things be derogated as essentially *dukkha*.

The key difference between the Buddha and unenlightened human beings is not found in the idea that the enlightened person avoids or escapes from interaction with impermanent things. Rather, it is because an enlightened person sees all things, including oneself, as what they truly are; namely, as changing, impermanent processes. To be enlightened, then, is to transform one’s psychological attitudes towards those things by eliminating the egoful grasping that leads to suffering and frustration.²⁵ This attitude is what the early Buddhists referred to as ‘nonattachment’ (*anupādā*). Such non-attachment does not reject natural (impermanent) things entirely; rather, it means non-attachment in the sense of not grasping after natural phenomena as if they were permanent, the elimination of egoful clinging to things that aims to aggrandize the self. Hence there is no good reason to infer that the impermanence of the things in the natural world requires their complete and utter rejection by the enlightened person. From the impermanence of all phenomena, it does not follow that the enlightened person has ‘realized the intrinsic *ultimate* unsatisfactoriness’ of all natural things, as Schmithausen claims (1997, 44). Rather, by realizing the impermanence of natural things, the enlightened person no longer grasps after them egofully (*as if* they and the ego were permanent). It is such grasping coupled with the impermanence of things that leads to suffering—not impermanence alone. Thus, there is a positive value to natural things when they are used pragmatically—that is, when one neither clings to them nor shuns them, motivated by selfish attachment or aversion. No doubt, there are many passages in the Pāli Canon that say quite negative things about the world and suggest that a person abandon those things. But these statements must be seen in a larger context, not only of the particular text, but also in terms of the general doctrines of the tradition. What Schmithausen proposes in terms of the ultimate negative value of the natural world, if true, would be a *reductio ad absurdum* for the Buddhist tradition.

But, according to Schmithausen, it is primarily because of this negative evaluation of nature that early Buddhism is not supportive of environmental ethics. In his view, ‘the ultimate analysis and evaluation of existence in 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 and goal of Early Buddhism, absolute and definitive freedom from suffering and decay, death and impermanence, cannot be found in nature’ (Schmithausen 1997, 11). The implication of this interpretation of the natural world is that Buddhism aims to escape from the natural world, seeking neither ‘to transform or subjugate nature, but to transcend it spiritually through detachment’ (Schmithausen 1997, 2). For this reason, Schmithausen thinks that a Buddhist would have no interest at all in preserving the natural world.

On this fundamental issue, I strongly disagree. The early Buddhist spiritual path (conceived as an antidote to *dukkha*) is a way of living in this (natural) world;

it is not an escape from it. The early Buddhist tradition teaches escape from suffering (i.e., escape from a world tainted by anxiety and distress that is labeled '*saṃsāra*'), not from the natural world. The early Buddhist spiritual path requires an evaluation of nature substantially different from that which identifies the natural world with *dukkha*. Certainly, the natural world is no Garden of Eden for the majority of unenlightened sentient beings (i.e., so long as they remain unenlightened beings). As I granted earlier, Schmithausen and Harris are surely right in saying that early Buddhism did not hold a romantic view of nature. Aside from a few passages in the *Theragāthā*, there is little evidence that the early Buddhists reveled in the beauty of the natural world. Lily De Silva's exuberant comment that 'the [Buddhist] saint appreciates nature's beauty for its own sake and derives joy unsullied by sensuous associations and self-projected ideas' (De Silva 1987, 27) is not sustainable in light of the Pāli Nikāyas taken as a whole. The Buddha did not celebrate nature as a window on the divine or as a glory that nourishes our souls and liberates our spirits, as some contemporary environmentalists do. Nature is in many ways indifferent to the well-being of humans and other creatures; sometimes nature is hostile to the interests of living beings (consider floods, earthquakes or a mass extinction due to a large meteor impacting the Earth). Humans live in a world where change is ceaseless; life is risky. Sickness, old age and death are unavoidable for all sentient beings. These are all affairs of that 'glorious' nature. Early Buddhism, in its balanced way, recognizes the precariousness of life in the natural world.

On the other hand, early Buddhists did not see the natural world as inherently bad, either—despite seeing the great dangers contained in the changing natural world. For this same natural world provides the means for the moral development (*sīla*), mental culture (*samādhi*) and insight (*paññā*) required to reach the highest goals of the Buddhist spiritual path. Although I have no intention of getting caught up in the controversies surrounding the characterizations of *nibbāna* itself, it must be said that whatever *nibbāna* is, it is achieved by natural means (moral conduct, mental culture and insight)—not by tapping into a supernatural or transcendent Reality.²⁶ Religious goals are achieved by understanding the pitfalls of our human nature and by transforming the natural factors that lead to suffering, not by escaping natural events. Therefore, nature is a double-edged sword; it is both a help and a hindrance to achieving meaning in a human life. In short, early Buddhism promotes a *middle way* as regards the valuation of the natural world.

***Dukkha*: the root of concern for the natural world**

In early Buddhism, *dukkha* is the vital link that connects human values to a concern for the natural world. A genuine concern for the natural world derives from the fact that the remedy for *dukkha* in human experience is precisely a radical shift to a concern for the well-being of all other sentient beings. As Steven Collins points out, *dukkha* links the concerns of all sentient

beings because “unsatisfactoriness” is not purely personal, but includes the experience of all beings, as a characterization of *samsāric* life as a whole, when considered in contrast to the state of *nibbāna*’ (1982, 191). In this sense, *dukkha* is a shared experience of all sentient beings (except for the very few who have achieved *nibbāna*). Such considerations appear to be the basis for the first and most important of the five precepts: to refrain from taking the life of living beings. The shared experience of *dukkha* also has implications for meditative practice, such as that recommended in the *Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta*. As Collins explains, meditation ‘must be carried out both “internally” and “externally”—that is, as the commentaries gloss, with regard to the groups of *khandhā* for both “self” and “others”’ (1982, 192). Thus meditative practice develops understanding not only of one’s own suffering, but that of all other sentient beings. Such is the ethical fruit of the metaphysics of continuity. We humans share with other sentient beings that populate the natural world a common suffering nature.

Although Buddhist spirituality is a therapy intended specifically to alleviate *human* suffering, the therapy itself extends beyond a concern for human suffering to that of all suffering creatures. This is essential to the Buddhist path, not a sidelight. In a beautiful and widely quoted passage from the *Mettā Sutta*, the Buddha recommends that a person show all sentient beings the kind of self-sacrificing love that a mother shows for her child.²⁷ This concern for the suffering of others, combined with the metaphysical continuity of human–nature interdependence, motivates a shift in human values from those that are typically ego-centric or anthropocentric to ones that de-center the self (and so take account of the well-being of other sentient beings as well as the natural environment they inhabit). De-centering the self in this way eliminates the defiled ego—the source of tainted perceptions and motivations to action. Such a psychological transformation is the essence of the Buddhist path. As the early Buddhist texts describe it, one must develop habits of action (or of ‘valuation’) through the practice of moral conduct (*sīla*). Early Buddhist virtue ethics—especially the *brahmāvihāras*, the practice of compassion, loving kindness and sympathetic joy—‘de-center’ the self by shifting a person’s values into the space where there is a positive value for both self and other; in other words, where the continuity of subject and object is fully realized.²⁸ By doing so, one’s self-interest is served by realizing and acting in the interests of other sentient beings. But this involves more than one’s relations to other human beings. Rather, it requires a transformation of one’s attitude towards the natural world (*directly* towards other sentient beings and *indirectly* to the environmental conditions that affect their well-being). This realization forms the basis for an ethics of non-injury and boundless loving-kindness for all beings—thus early Buddhism provides the key elements for a relationship with nature that encourages concern, care, and compassion. Certainly, this already represents a big step toward the development of an environmental ethic based on early Buddhist principles.

Environmental ethics from the perspective of early Buddhism

Given the early Buddhist evaluation of nature, the continuity of human beings and the natural world, and the fundamentals of Buddhist moral practice, early Buddhism surely supports a form of environmentalism, although it is very likely that an early Buddhist environmental ethic diverges from the mainstream of contemporary environmental ethics. Clearly, it has somewhat different priorities. An environmental ethic starting from early Buddhist principles requires reframing some of the central issues of environmental ethics. For example, early Buddhist environmentalism does not have much to say about the appreciation of natural beauty, nor would it treat nature as having an 'intrinsic value' (although it still requires that nature be valued and cared for).

The full treatment of an early Buddhist environmental ethic along the lines I have developed above requires a much larger space than a single essay, but I think the main outlines of such an ethic are relatively clear. So in this final section, I will sketch in broad outline six of the main points that are central to an early Buddhist environmental ethic. I should mention that, although I find myself sympathetic to the early Buddhist approach to environmentalism, it is not my purpose here to analyze the cogency of the position—that will have to be a project for another time. Suffice it to say that I believe early Buddhism offers a rather unique and philosophically interesting way of thinking about the natural world. No doubt, it has some important ideas to contribute to the current conversations on environmental ethics—especially among the scientific community where naturalism (not theism) is a common conceptual framework.

First, an environmental ethic based on early Buddhism derives its moral principles from a concern for the suffering (and well-being) of all sentient beings (rather than nature *in toto*). As we saw in the previous section of this essay, *dukkha* is the linkage that motivates human concern for the 'other'—in this case, for all of the sentient beings that inhabit the natural world. Only sentient beings experience *dukkha* and the removal or elimination of *dukkha* from the experience of all sentient beings is the moral imperative of Buddhist practice. Early Buddhism's unique approach to a concern for the natural world—via the suffering of sentient beings—may well prove to be the tradition's most important contribution to contemporary environmental ethics. In fact, some contemporary environmentalists and the late Thai monk-scholar Ven. Buddhādāsa have argued for a similar shift in the angle of valuation from humans alone to the wider environment, referring to this moral transformation as a shift from anthropocentrism to 'biocentrism' (see Buddhādāsa 1987).

Second, in an early Buddhist environmental ethics, care for the suffering of sentient beings implies care for the ecosystems in which these beings live and flourish. Understanding phenomena in terms of a wider nexus of causes or conditions has always been an emphasis of the Buddhist tradition. Thus, the wider environment (beyond sentient beings themselves) merits care and concern *indirectly*. For example, the concern for the suffering of threatened animals

is indivisible from maintenance of a sustainable habitat. As human activities are very often the direct cause of degraded habitat, human beings have a responsibility to undertake actions that improve living conditions for other animals.

Third, an early Buddhist environmentalism is not just the accidental by-product of the Buddhist path, but is essential to it. Even though many of the environmental problems we face have developed only in the last few centuries, early Buddhism applied to the current situation would help people realize that the human-made aspects of environmental degradation are the result of psychological depravations, especially, selfishness, greed, and violence. But, on the positive side, early Buddhist practice promotes a genuine concern for the natural world because this is identical with its basic moral principles. David Cooper and Simon James, for example, have argued that early Buddhism is a type of virtue ethics that incorporates environmental ethics as the essence of moral conduct (*sīla*). As they see it, the experience of the natural world is an essential resource for the cultivation of the Buddhist virtues: humility, self-mastery, equanimity (Cooper and James 2005, 90ff). From this perspective, nature is a 'locus of value' that provides an opportunity for moral development and so for the elimination of suffering that is the aim of Buddhist practice. I see this account of early Buddhist environmentalism as consistent with the approach I have developed in this essay. One might go even further and say that the value of nature increases as a person makes spiritual progress—things and events take on new, transformed meanings, and new possibilities open up. Given early Buddhism's naturalistic predilections, this is what I take *nibbāna* to mean: the elimination of suffering and the elevation of meaning in a person's life *and* the world.

Fourth, although it is true that an environmental ethic must avoid the more malicious forms of anthropocentrism—where everything of value is measured by its benefits to human beings only—this does not require that the non-human parts of nature be given an ultimate or intrinsic value in contrast to human values. Early Buddhism does not turn its back on the needs of human beings—although the hyper-anthropocentrism of most human activities makes such a point almost moot. In early Buddhist environmental ethics, humans are highly valued, but not the only locus of value. It is a false dichotomy, according to early Buddhism, to say that a genuine environmental ethic must develop values that are for nature's own sake, rather than for the sake of human beings—that an environmental ethic must give nature an intrinsic, ultimate, value *over against* human interests or values. The only thing resembling an ultimate value in early Buddhism is the elimination of the suffering of sentient creatures—and this includes human beings. Early Buddhism's positive evaluation of the non-human part of the natural world does not imply that nature would be better off if humans would disappear. A human-made garden may well create a healthier environment for sentient creatures than land left wild. But where human activities might disturb a fragile balance (and thus become detrimental to the lives of sentient beings), early Buddhism would support activities

that aim for the preservation of intact (undisturbed) nature by limiting or eliminating the human impact on such an eco-system (clear-cut logging of Amazon rainforests comes to mind). An early Buddhist environmental ethic may well also demand a more proactive approach, not only avoiding or fixing the deleterious effects of human activities, but also encouraging activities that repair ecosystems that have been degraded by non-human factors (e.g., diseases). We humans have special responsibilities, both because of the fact that our actions have unimaginable potential for harming the environment, but also because we are beings that can intelligently manage our actions and, accordingly, shape the environment in ways that enhance the flourishing of all sentient creatures.

Fifth, unlike the definitions of environmental ethics given by many, an early Buddhist environmental ethic is not defined as the preservation of intact or pristine nature. Undisturbed wilderness is not an ultimate value in early Buddhism. Preservation of animal species or whole ecosystems, as an early Buddhist value, derives from the imperatives to support the well-being of sentient beings (or, at least, to minimize their suffering). Thus, the preservation of nature in a wild, untouched state cannot be an end in itself for early Buddhism—it is, at best, an assumption that sometimes animals flourish best in a habitat that is undisturbed by human activities. But not all ecosystems are made worse for sentient creatures by human intervention. An untouched wilderness is certainly not the healthiest for humans who need to build homes and cultivate crops.

Finally, even though the beauty of nature does not have a prominent value in early Buddhism, nature may still have an aesthetic value to Buddhists for reasons that lay outside of early Buddhism *per se*. The development of naturalistic aesthetics (painting, poetry and architecture) in East Asian forms of Buddhism surely attests to this fact. One might even hope that as one moves closer to enlightenment, one can appreciate and enjoy the natural world as a realm of beauty and creative possibility, without the taint of egotful craving. Such may be the calling of our *human* nature.

NOTES

1. A sampling of prominent books focusing on Buddhist environmentalism: Badiner (1990), Batchelor and Brown (1992), Kaza and Kraft (2000), Macy (1991a), and Tucker and Williams (1997).
2. By 'early Buddhism' I mean the ideas contained in the Pāli Canon (mainly the *Vinaya* and the *Pāli Nikāyas*). All references to the Pāli Canon in this essay cite the editions published by the Pali Text Society (*Dīgha Nikāya* [T.W. Rhys Davids and J.E. Carpenter (eds), vols I–III, London: Pali Text Society, 1890–1911], *Majjhima Nikāya* [R. Chalmers, V. Trenckner, and C.A.F. Rhys Davids (eds), vols I–IV, London: Pali Text Society, 1888–1925], and *Saṃyutta Nikāya* [L. Feer (ed), vols I–V, London: Pali Text Society, 1884–1898].

3. See Harris (1994) and Schmithausen (1997, 11). In Schmithausen's essay, he articulates what I take to be the greatest philosophical challenges to a Buddhist environmental ethics. So my essay is, in part, a response to that essay.
4. Of course, the skeptics are motivated by responsible scholarship, not a lack of sympathy with the environmentalist movements. I heartily agree with the view that any appropriation of the early Buddhist tradition for environmentalist purposes must accurately reflect sound textual and historical scholarship.
5. See, for example, Callicott (1995).
6. See the *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta* at *Samyutta Nikāya* 2.16–17. In the words of later Buddhist traditions, this is the denial that existents have own-being (*svabhāva*).
7. Most references to wilderness in the canonical sources occur in parables where wilderness is represented as a place of danger. See, for example, *Dīgha Nikāya* 2.343ff.
8. This is a term I borrow from American pragmatism. Emergentist (non-reductive) naturalism is what makes early Buddhism distinctive in comparison with other religious traditions (as well as with certain later forms of Buddhism).
9. Pāli words relating to the natural world include 'nature' (*bhārol*, *pakatī*), 'natural' (*nesaggika*, *pākitika*, *akittima*), 'naturally' (*pakatiyā*, *lokanimmāna*), 'natural world' (*loka*), and 'natural phenomena' (*dhammo*).
10. See Cooper and James (2005, 110). The lack of a general theory of nature does not mean that the early Buddhists had no conception of, or were not interested in, the 'natural.' On the contrary, they were intensely interested in specific natural processes (especially, the factors of sentience that are involved in the arising and cessation of suffering). The failure to develop a 'general' theory from specific instances is not uncommon in the Pāli Nikāyas. Much of this generalizing work, for better or worse, was attempted in the commentaries.
11. Dependent arising applied to the arising of *dukkha* can be found at *Samyutta Nikāya* 2.17, *Dīgha Nikāya*, 2.55ff, *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1.261.
12. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 4.15–20.
13. Some might argue that the regular references to *devas* in the early texts indicates belief in non-natural beings, and therefore a non-natural level of reality. But, with A.K. Warder, I would argue that the *devas*, too, belong to the 'natural' world (although this implies a more inclusive or extended version of naturalism than one typically finds in the West). The *devas* portrayed in early Buddhist literature are not permanent spiritual essences apart from the causally dynamic world. See Warder (1970, 55). The karmic cycle of death and rebirth is likewise a 'natural' process in this broader sense.
14. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 3.66–68.
15. *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1.108–114. The six modes of human consciousness are: visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, olfactory consciousness, gustatory consciousness, tactile consciousness, and mental consciousness.
16. See *Dīgha Nikāya*, 1.34ff.
17. This is a paraphrase of a point made by the American pragmatist John Dewey (1938, 25).

18. An environmental ethics that accepts the human–nature dichotomy seems inevitably to get hung up on a constructive dilemma. If human values/concerns are imposed on the natural world, then the position is open to charges of anthropocentrism. If nature is to be valued ‘for its own sake,’ then somehow we have to read these values from nature itself (probably committing a naturalistic fallacy) and most human activities (like building houses or roads) would appear to be unethical.
19. Some might argue that to do so would commit the so-called ‘naturalistic fallacy’ of attempting to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is.’
20. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 4.51.
21. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 3.119.
22. Control of the mind is central to the elimination of *dukkha* because it is the crucial link in the causal chain from which *dukkha* arises. But that does not mean *dukkha* is only a mental phenomenon.
23. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 4.216. (Translation from Collins 1982, 192.) When the Buddha said that all constructed or conditioned things (*sankhāras*) are suffering, he means that what is ‘constructed’ or ‘conditioned’ by *unenlightened experience* is a form of *dukkha*. The person who is enlightened experiences the conditioned, but in such a case it does not produce *dukkha*.
24. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 4.216.
25. See *Samyutta Nikāya* 3.21ff for an example of how this idea of understanding the impermanent for what it is can be applied to the five aggregates. This leads to the abandonment of grasping after these impermanent phenomena as if they could be a person’s self. That is not the same as saying such things are inherently bad. Of course, both the characterization and treatment of *dukkha* contain no reference to a permanent ‘person’ or ‘self,’ but only refer to the complex natural processes that we *designate* as a person.
26. If this essay were a longer treatment of Buddhist environmentalism, I would argue that *nibbāna* is precisely a reorganization and transformation of natural factors—much like a painting or a symphony is a reorganization of natural factors from which radically new meanings emerge. But such a claim is a hornet’s nest of controversy, and my position in this essay does not depend on proving a particular interpretation of *nibbāna*. Furthermore, the escapist interpretation of Buddhism puts too much emphasis on enlightenment or *nibbāna* as an ‘all or nothing’ proposition—as if life has no meaning at all short of achieving full enlightenment. But the Buddha never said anything like that. The Buddha made it abundantly clear that there are very definite fruits of the virtuous life that are to be experienced in mundane (unenlightened) modes of living—the process of spiritual development, then, is largely continuous, even if enlightenment itself is portrayed as discontinuous with unenlightened living.
27. *Sutta-Nipāta*, verses 143–52.
28. Cooper and James (2005) make a similar point through their analysis of early Buddhism as a virtue ethics. They argue that the value of nature is not just a by-product of the Buddhist path, but is essential to it.

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