

ENVIRONMENT OR EARTH SANGHA: BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON OUR GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

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The question of whether Buddhism supports and fosters an active concern for our ecological well-being continues to be a theme of lively interest, especially given the heightened awareness, helped by increased media coverage, of our global ecological malaise and its deteriorating situation.

Contemporary Buddhist approaches to the ecological question were surveyed by Ian Harris, who lined up a fourfold typology based on interreligious sources, which he classifies as eco-spirituality, eco-justice, eco-traditionalism, and eco-apologetics (Harris 1995). Naming examples of these types while noting theoretical inconsistencies and deficiencies in each, he is particularly critical and rather dismissive of the fourth category, noting that works of this kind often 'adopt an inspirational tone that proceeds from an assumption, generally not supported by any textual, historical or cultural evidence, that the compatibility of Buddhism and environmental ethics is a self-evident fact' (Harris 1995, 181). Harris' expressed intent in critiquing the various approaches he has described is to 'aid in the construction of an authentic Buddhist environmental ethic' (Harris 1995, 184), to which he has since also made further contributions (Harris 1997, 2000, 2001).

Since Harris' 1995 essay, a number of published works have appeared on 'Buddhism and Environmental Ethics,' or 'Buddhism and Ecology,' giving due attention to textual, historical, cultural, philosophical, and other aspects relevant to the matter, offering both critical as well as constructive perspectives on the ecological question.¹ These more recent works have advanced the level of discourse on the theme, and have enriched our resources in an area that we could, tentatively and cautiously, refer to as 'Buddhist eco-theology.'

By way of note, the term 'Buddhist Theology' has been proposed for use in academic circles by two well-regarded scholars of Buddhism, John Makransky and Roger Jackson (Jackson and Makransky 2000). Some scholars and/or practitioners of Buddhism may object to this terminology, pointing out that the term *theos* ('god' or 'God') is inapplicable in the Buddhist context. However, taking 'theology' as an academic discipline involving 'intellectual reflection within a religious

tradition,' Jackson and Makransky describe the task of Buddhist theology as 'critical [and one could add, constructive] reflection upon Buddhist experience in the light of contemporary understanding, and critical [and constructive] reflection on contemporary understanding in the light of Buddhist experience' (2000, 19).²

This essay is presented as one small contribution toward this task. In doing so, I acknowledge my indebtedness to works of many authors who have addressed the issue in this vein, whether they would agree with the use of this term 'Buddhist eco-theology' or not.³

As another prefatory note, it goes without saying that 'Buddhism' is not at all a one-dimensional or monolithic phenomenon about which one can make generalized statements applicable to the entire tradition. As the communities of followers inspired by the life and teachings of Gautama, the Buddha grew in numbers and spread through different geographical regions and cultures, varying forms of spiritual practice and expression of doctrine developed over the course of a 2,500-year history. It would thus be more appropriate to consider Buddhist *traditions* in the plural, rather than presume to talk about a single unified or consolidated tradition. Members of the various Buddhist traditions that thrive and continue to increase in numbers of adherents in our contemporary world (including Theravāda, Vajrayāna, Pure Land, Chan/Zen, and Lotus Buddhism, to name five major traditions) may take differing or contrasting positions *as Buddhists*, based on a particular doctrinal emphasis of their specific tradition or privileged Scriptural text.⁴

With the above in mind, we come back to our question: does Buddhism support and foster active concern for and engagement with our ecological well-being on this planet? To this, my short answer would be 'Not necessarily, but yet, possibly.'

The first section of this essay describes why a negative answer seems appropriate, given the basic message and underlying cosmological framework conveyed in earlier (pre-Mahāyāna) Buddhist texts. The second section will briefly outline some themes in Mahāyāna Buddhism that may provide grounding for a positive stance for active ecological engagement, which could be developed with further critical and constructive reflection. The third section will present a sampling of positions on the ecological question from various Buddhist traditions. The fourth and final section will put forth a constructive proposal, outlining some features of a Buddhist perspective toward our ecological well-being.

Buddhist cosmology and 'the environment'

A central focus of the religious teaching and practice of the communities of followers of the Buddha since their formation, and throughout their long history, has been the liberation from the dis-ease or dis-satisfactoriness (*dukkha*) of the human condition. As such, the vital message conveyed by the early Buddhist communities, as handed to us in scriptural accounts, and as continued in subsequent historical developments, has to do with the cultivation of views,

attitudes, and practices conducive to this liberation from *dukkha*. Basic doctrinal formulations, including the Four Ennobling Truths that lay out an Eightfold Path of awakening, the Three (or Four) Marks of Dharma, the teaching on dependent co-origination, and so on, all pertain to the cultivation of those attitudes and practices that mark an awakened way of life characterized by inner peace, a state of mind that overcomes *dukkha*.

Given this character of the Buddha's message as focusing on human liberation, the question of how Buddhist teaching and practice relates to concern about or caring for 'the environment' can be relegated to a peripheral issue at best. The renowned parable of the poisoned arrow highlights this Buddhist focus on ultimate liberation, whereby all other matters, including metaphysical questions, and anything else that does not pertain to the urgent matter at hand—that is, addressing the dissatisfactory nature of the human condition—are set aside.

The Buddha's message of ultimate liberation is addressed primarily to human beings, but all the realms of living beings, conceived as bound together in a cycle of birth-and-death-and-rebirth (*samsāra*) are potentially included. Hindu cosmology, from which Buddhists inherited much of their own cosmological framework, placed human beings among five (or, in another version, six) realms of living beings subject to rebirth (*gati*; literally, 'destination').⁵ Buddhists added four levels or realms, based on stages in the Buddhist path,⁶ with the Buddha at the apex, as having attained a realm beyond the cycle of birth-and-death-and rebirth (Sadakata 1997).

Another way of classifying realms of beings in Buddhist literature is within a threefold scheme consisting of the realm of desire (*kāmadhātu*), the realm of form (*rūpadhātu*) and the realm of no-form (*arūpyadhātu*).⁷ The realm of desire consists of hell-dwellers, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, and divine beings of different kinds, and also the physical world that contains these beings (*bhājana-loka*, literally, receptacle). In the realms of form and no-form dwell those who have been freed from desire, having attained different levels of meditative trance toward ultimate liberation. A Buddha is one who has attained enlightenment, and has thereby transcended these three worlds. The ideal of the Buddhist follower, then, is that of becoming an *arhat*, or 'worthy one'—one who has attained purification from the defilements of this earthly realm, and is on the way to ultimate liberation in *nirvāṇa*.

In the above doctrinal and cosmological scheme, then, concern for 'the environment' can be set aside as a non-issue. The physical world, what is referred to as 'environment,' is merely the 'receptacle' that living beings presently inhabit, and which is left behind as one moves on in the path of purification, toward the ultimate goal; that is, the realm of the Thus-gone (*Tathā-gata*).

The value of 'the environment' is all the more diminished, from a Buddhist perspective, with the view (also inherited from the Hindu tradition) of the fourfold cycle to which the existence of the entire cosmos is subject. The universe is seen as repeating a cycle that includes the four phases of arising or creation, maintenance,

annihilation, and a return to the state of nothingness, out of which, after countless aeons, the cycle begins again. If this universe, which includes our Earth (called *Sahā* in Buddhist terminology), is ultimately going to be annihilated, there is no motivation to take any steps to preserve it from inevitable destruction. In this context, the ecological deterioration of our Earth can be taken as an indication of the oncoming stage of annihilation, seen as an inevitable order of things, and therefore not as a cause for concern calling for action to try to stem it.

In sum, Buddhist cosmology as presented in pre-Mahayana commentarial texts as Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosabhāṣya* and Buddhaghosa's *Viśuddhimagga* provides no viable ground to support a positive and caring attitude toward the environment, from a strictly and properly *Buddhist* perspective.⁸ For one, the goal of Buddhist practice is to be liberated from this realm of *samsāra*, toward the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. For another, the environment is a non-living receptacle of humans and other living beings, and will be abandoned as beings attain ultimate liberation, so why bother about it? Thirdly, the universe, in which our earth is located, is bound for dissolution in any case, so there arises no motivation to stem this inevitable process.

Mahāyāna developments: non-duality and the Bodhisattva ideal

The rise of the Mahāyāna brought features into Buddhism that could provide some grounding for reconsidering the ecological question in positive light. Here I will merely offer a rough sketch of some general themes, highlighting ample room, and need, for further study and critical and constructive reflection on particular implications of these themes.

On the negative side, we can cite the cosmological view of Pure Land Buddhism, which originated in India around the first century CE, and which became widely popular especially in East Asia in the succeeding centuries, up to present times. This Buddhist tradition places the Land of Bliss (*Sukhavatī*) or Pure Land wherein the Buddha Amitābha (or Amitāyus) reigns, as its central focus. Believed to be located somewhere 'west' of this earthly land (*Sahā*), it is where human beings can be reborn if they invoke the name of Amitābha, asking his help to carry them across at the point of death. This earth then is merely a transient place that human beings seek to be liberated from, toward a more glorious, resplendent place of purity and bliss, as a 'pre-departure area' for ultimate *nirvāṇa*.⁹ Such a religious framework would not tend to value efforts directed toward mending the Earth and addressing environmental degradation.¹⁰

On the positive side, the view of ultimate reality as formulated in *Prajñāpāramitā* or Wisdom literature, and especially as expounded in the work of Nāgārjuna and successors, cuts through the dualistic separation of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, with affirmations that Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is Form.¹¹ There is also the corollary affirmation, grounded in this understanding of Emptiness, that '*samsāra* is no other than *nirvāṇa*, *nirvāṇa* no other than *samsāra*.'¹² This non-dual

view can pave the way for a positive evaluation of earthly realities from a standpoint of Buddhist practice, and for an appreciation of this earthly realm not so much as a transient place from which living beings need to be liberated as they move toward another realm (such as *nirvāṇa*, or *Sukhavatī*), but as a place where enlightened beings, although already freed from the cycle of birth-and-death, precisely seek to be reborn, not out of karmic necessity but out of compassion and with the intention to liberate all beings from their various forms of *dukkha*. This latter represents the coming to prominence of the ideal of the *bodhisattva*, sidelining the ideal of the *arhat* of pre-Mahāyānic Buddhist traditions. In this context, the emphasis on the title of the Buddha as *Tathāgata* shifts from 'Thus gone' to (Having Thus gone, has also) 'Thus come' (*Tathā-āgata*).

A Mahāyāna Scriptural text that has come to be highly influential in different stages of Buddhist history and in different geographical regions, especially in East Asia, is the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, or Lotus Sutra. This Scriptural text depicts the Buddha as a caring Father, and all living beings in this earthly realm as his children, who are, however, trapped unwittingly in a burning house. Our caring Father (the Awakened One), in his wisdom and compassion, comes back and employs all manner of skillful means to make us aware of the danger and draw us out toward safety and freedom. This sutra, among others, provided the ground for the development of the notion of Buddha Nature, based on this view that all living beings are children of the Buddha, and thereby inherently endowed with all that it takes to be an Awakened One. This notion of Buddha Nature, expounded in the light of the keynote Mahāyāna doctrine on Emptiness by the T'ien T'ai school in China, became pivotal in further developments of Buddhist doctrine and practice especially in East Asia, specifically in grounding the teaching of 'the Buddhahood of grasses and trees' and the teaching of 'nonduality of living beings and environment', expounded in Japanese Tendai thought.¹³

In sum, Mahāyāna Buddhist perspectives—emphasizing a non-dual view of ultimate reality, presented in a number of important Scriptural texts and further expounded in various doctrinal formulations in the different schools that developed through the centuries, and also highlighting the bodhisattva ideal of remaining on or coming back to Earth out of compassion to help in liberating all beings—*may possibly* provide grounding for more positive approaches for contemporary Buddhists in grappling with the ecological question.¹⁴

Revisiting Buddhist responses to our ecological situation

'Environmental concerns' are a fairly recent feature of our human history on Earth, and, needless to say, such issues were not at all on the horizon for Buddhists, nor for anyone else in ancient and up to pre-industrial times. Thus, some may dismiss efforts seeking for support for 'environmental ethics' and related concerns in texts written before such issues were even dreamed about as misplaced efforts. But are they right to do so?

Our global ecological crisis now impinges upon us as an inescapable feature of our human condition, threatening our very survival as a species on this planet.¹⁵ This very fact serves as an impetus for us all, as fellow inhabitants of Planet Earth, to examine how we may address this situation as a global community. It is in this context that members of the various religious communities have also taken up this issue as a matter of urgent concern, to reflect and consider how their respective faith traditions can provide spiritual grounds for addressing the situation that is by now a matter of (global) life and death.

There is growing consensus that underlying the technological, political, economic, sociological, and other compounded issues that contribute to our global ecological malaise is a more pivotal set of philosophical, religious, ethical, and spiritual factors. This relates to our understanding of our very mode of being in the context of the entire biosphere. In other words, there are more and more voices who emphasize that our ecological predicament, more than being a matter of technology, is at rock bottom a religious and/or spiritual issue.¹⁶

The power of religious faith in influencing human attitudes and action is a factor that cannot be ignored as we search for ways to transform our ways of life and the structures of our societies. Thus, in the face of the ongoing and worsening ecological crisis we all face as a global community, a re-reading of Scriptural sources that in their own different ways provide authoritative sources for attitudes and action for adherents of the various religious communities throughout the world remains a crucial and ongoing task on the part of members, especially the intellectual and spiritual leaders, of those communities.

At a public symposium held at Middlebury College in 1990, wherein renowned representatives of major religious traditions offered views of how their particular tradition addresses the ecological question, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, presenting a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, affirmed that 'the expressed aim of Buddhism is the purification and development of the mind through mental training in order to attain supreme liberation' (Gyatso 1992). But in the same talk he also suggested that ecological engagement—that is, 'taking care of the Earth'—is to be understood as a matter as simple as 'taking care of our own house.'¹⁷ In presenting a Buddhist approach to the environment in this way, the Dalai Lama was basing himself on a solid and longstanding tradition described in the first section of this essay; namely, the cosmological framework that sets a demarcation line between living beings on the one hand, called to purify and develop their minds toward supreme liberation, and the environment on the other, 'the receptacle' (*bhajana-loka*) that 'houses' living beings. The Dalai Lama, however, gives it an entirely different, and a positive turn.¹⁸

In another piece entitled 'Universal Responsibility and the Environment,' His Holiness makes the point that 'although we do not believe that trees or flowers have minds, we treat them also with respect.'¹⁹ We can see how, in the heightened awareness of our global ecological crisis, 'the environment' is now a crucial feature of our mode of being in the world which Buddhists themselves can no longer

dismiss, even in affirming that the prime goal of Buddhism is 'purification and development of the mind.'²⁰

Another set of notable contemporary Buddhist responses to the ecological situation comes from Thailand, wherein ecological deterioration, related also to the country's social, cultural, political, and economic structural set-up as it plays its role in the global economy, is felt keenly, especially by the rural populace. In the effort to stem rampant logging of forests by multinational corporations in collusion with government officials, some Theravāda monks have taken the lead in environmental activities, and part of their program includes conducting ordination ceremonies for trees located in certain strategic areas, giving them sacred status, and, in doing so, protecting them from the loggers. Also here in Thailand, reformulations of Theravāda Buddhist doctrinal positions have been undertaken by such prominent monastic leaders as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (d. 1993), Phra Phrayudh Payutto (b. 1939), whose works are known in the West in English translation, as well as the lay activist, intellectual, and Nobel Prize nominee Sulak Sivaraksa, with ecological concerns in focus.²¹ In other words, living in a society wherein ecological disaster faces one right in the eye, Thai Buddhists are confronted with a situation not unlike the person in the parable of the poisoned arrow, read from a social dimension: speculative concerns give way to the immediate task of addressing the wound threatening their entire culture and society. And as they undertake this task of addressing the wound, their reading, and re-reading, of traditional Theravāda Buddhist texts in the light of this socio-ecological situation takes on new urgency.²²

Among the contemporary Buddhists taking active roles in ecological engagement are adherents of Lotus Buddhism, following the teachings of Nichiren (of thirteenth-century Japan), and as reinterpreted in Nichiren-inspired lay movements that originated and spread from Japan to other parts of the world in twentieth century.²³ A key theme of this strand of Buddhism is the task of transforming this earthly realm into Lotus Land, calling for compassionate engagement with the tasks of this world.²⁴

The followers of Pure Land Buddhism, who comprise one of the largest groups of Buddhists in the world today, are not to be left behind in manifesting active engagement with ecological issues. As noted above, the cosmology of Pure Land Buddhism, with an emphasis on rebirth in Amitābha's Land of Bliss, which tends to an attitude of downplaying this earthly realm, may not be conducive to ecological engagement. However, intellectual leaders of the tradition following Shinran's Pure Land teaching have kept abreast of contemporary discourse on ecological issues, organizing conferences and symposia and promoting research and publication in this regard.²⁵ Whether the vast majority of the adherents follow suit and incorporate this ecological concern in their religious practice and in their daily lives is another matter.

Communities of Zen practitioners, and also communities of meditative practice following Insight Meditation, present themselves as especially attuned to ecological concerns.²⁶ While meditative practice in itself, whether Zen, Insight,

Tibetan, or some other form practiced in many centers in both hemispheres, does not directly lend to ecological concern, such practice can cultivate certain attitudes of mind sensitive to ecological issues, and support ways of action that are actively concerned with and directed toward our ecological well-being.²⁷

A particular contribution Buddhists are making in the ecological movement relates to the call for a transformation of our ways of life and concomitant socio-economic structures, challenging our consumeristic habits, and calling for more simple lifestyles, grounded on Buddhist principles and characterized by mindfulness and compassion.²⁸

Summarizing the above, there are more and more significant contributions coming from Buddhists among those who have taken up the ecological challenge, examining the spiritual resources of their own particular traditions for ways of responding to our ecological malaise.

As a student of the Buddhist traditions and as a Zen practitioner, I offer, in my final section below, one modest proposal in this direction.

A Buddhist approach to ecological healing

The Buddha addresses our ailing human condition with a therapeutic approach enshrined in the keynote doctrine of the Four Ennobling Truths. This fourfold therapeutic framework, arguably influenced by Hindu Āyurvedic medicinal practices, begins with a symptomatology (descriptions of our ailing condition), continues with diagnosis (tracing the causes of the ailment), then a prognosis (a depiction of a state of well-being wherein the causes of the ailment have been extinguished), and concludes with a prescription of a series of interrelated steps (the Eightfold Path) toward healing.

The Buddha's own focus was on the individual human being coming to an awareness of *dukkha*. Taking our cue from the works of socially engaged Buddhists, we can employ this fourfold structure in considering our socio-ecological situation.²⁹

Incidentally, the word 'ecology' comes from two Greek words: *oikos*, which means 'house' or 'home'; and *logos*, which can variously mean 'discourse' or 'reason' or 'order.' A rough rendering of the term, based on etymology, could then be 'putting our own house in order.' With this in mind, we can now consider our ecological task from a Buddhist perspective.

Our starting point is the stark awareness that our Earth community is in an ailing condition, a situation that we could refer to as global *dukkha*.³⁰ What are the salient features of this condition? We could go on from here to list the many indicators of our global woundedness, beginning with the many acts of violence that humans perpetrate on one another, as individuals, or in ethnic or national or other groupings, in declared or undeclared warfare, in different regions of the world; the ever widening gap between the world's rich and those who are destitute and poor, a situation that results in the death of around 30,000 children under the age of five on a daily basis; the disruption of the ecological balance and

ongoing destruction of the natural habitat, due to many factors, which all together result in the ongoing extinction of thousands of species of living beings annually, and so on. Taking these indicators together, and projecting into our immediate future based on current trends, there are predictions to the effect that by the year 2050 (i.e., roughly less than half a century from now) our global situation will deteriorate to the point of reaching cataclysmic proportions, with the very survival of the human species in the balance.

In short, we are called first to open our eyes and take a straightforward look at our global situation, and acknowledge that our house, our own home, which is the Earth, is indeed in a terrible state, and in danger of destruction from all sides. To take an image from the Lotus Sutra (The Burning House Parable), it is like a house engulfed in flames, teetering toward destruction. And to compound this fact, many of its inhabitants have yet to take stock of the seriousness of the situation, and still go about their business oblivious of the danger confronting all of us on all fronts. What comes to mind here also is the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow, on a global scale.

A direct experience of a particular feature of global *dukkha* may occasion a rude awakening in anyone of us with an open mind and open heart. It could be through an illness, either in oneself or in a loved one—cancer, for instance, respiratory trouble, or complications surrounding birth—where the cause has been traced to exposure to some toxic material in the food we eat, the air we breathe, and so on. It could be through a realization that the songs of the frogs we used to enjoy growing up in a rural area are gradually disappearing from the scene, and realizing the impact of this simple fact. It could be through exposure to media reports or even a cursory reading of some of the accounts of our global ecological malaise that, in recent years, have been coming out in increasing numbers—in books such as E.O. Wilson's *The Future of Life* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002) or Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2006), or the annual reports of the World Watch Institute, *State of the World* series, among others.

There are putatively different possible Buddhist approaches or responses to this scenario. One is to lament the impermanence that underlies it all, and to focus on the cultivation of mindfulness in one's individual life, following the Eightfold Path and other prescriptions for a Buddhist way of life. One who takes this approach could note how these indicators of our contemporary global situation confirm that our world, this receptacle that houses all manner of species of living beings, is indeed well into the phase of destruction, and with an air of equanimity take it simply at that, and make the best out of what is given day by day. Following Buddhist prescriptions for a conscientious and mindful and compassionate way of life, one could cooperate in stemming the tide of destruction in one's limited way, living more simply, doing whatever is doable in terms of recycling, reusing things, and taking different steps in protecting 'the environment.'

A rude awakening to global *dukkha* can also be the occasion for the arising of *bodhicitta*, 'the mind of awakening grounded in compassion.' This is a spiritual

event whereby one takes on the mind of a *bodhisattva*; that is, a being-toward-awakening with a heart of compassion for all sentient beings. An icon familiar to many Buddhists, which embodies this heart and mind of compassion, is that of the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin, or Kannon; literally, 'hearer of the cries of the world.' These are the cries and groans of all manner of living beings in different situations of pain and suffering, which Kannon 'hears' as one's very own. And hearing, and experiencing as one's very own, these pains and sufferings of fellow earthlings, Kannon is moved to act with different kinds of skillful means, symbolized in her thousand arms and hands, to address the causes of these pains, toward their alleviation and healing.

Buddhist meditative practice, whether in the Zen, Insight/Vipassanā, or Tibetan tradition, can be a fertile ground for the arising and cultivation of *bodhicitta*. One in whom *bodhicitta* has arisen is able to identify with the pain and suffering of living beings on this wounded Earth.

A passage from thirteenth-century Japanese Zen Master Dōgen gives us a glimpse of the expansive horizons of *bodhicitta*, nourished by meditative practice on a regular basis:

I came to realize clearly that the Mind is no other than mountains and rivers, the great wide Earth, the Sun, the moon, the stars.³¹

This verse gives us a glimpse of the heart and mind of one for whom the Earth is no longer simply 'the environment' that is out there as a mere 'receptacle' for living beings. Rather, for one in whom this Mind of Awakening grounded in compassion has arisen, and who nourishes this in the regular practice of meditation and mindfulness, the pain of the mountains eroding and being denuded of its forests by reckless logging practices, the pain of the rivers being polluted by toxic wastes thoughtlessly dumped by humans, the pain of the land being depleted by rampant use of chemical fertilizers for short-term gain, all become one's very own pain, felt in *this very body*.³² It goes without saying that anyone who feels pain is moved to do all that one can to alleviate it, to seek the removal of its causes.

Here the second Ennobling Truth can give one who has awakened to global *dukkha* some directions for proceeding toward healing. This is about pursuing the root causes that have led to this ailing situation. Very insightful hints for this pursuit are provided by David Loy, as he names the three poisons of Greed, Ill-Will, and Culpable Ignorance, in their corporate manifestations in our consumeristic society, in the military-industrial complex, and in the media system controlled by corporate capital.³³ Overturning these three poisons in their corporate manifestations then becomes the key to healing our global woundedness. This admittedly is a colossal task that enjoins all of us in this global community to engage in, calling for Buddhists to cooperate with adherents of other religious traditions, and with all people of goodwill, toward a vision of a transformed global society.

The third Ennobling Truth is precisely about a scenario of our global well-being. Can we envision a global community wherein the violence between the Earth's inhabitants has been quelled, wherein every living being is valued for its intrinsic worth, and wherein all beings live in harmony with one another? In other words, can we envision a world wherein we, each one and all together, are able to acknowledge and celebrate our interconnectedness, as fellow inhabitants and members of one Great Earth Sangha?³⁴

This may be dismissed by some as an unrealistic ideal, a utopian vision, a dream. And perhaps it is a dream indeed. But a dream can also have a transformative significance, if we consider how 'the dream' enunciated by Dr Martin Luther King has continued to serve as an empowering vision and inspiration for several generations now who seek the transformation of American society.

The fourth Ennobling Truth can then be reformulated, in a way that lays out the concrete steps to be taken toward the realization of that dream. This reformulation can only be a truly effective one if it is pursued as a cooperative venture by all of us who care for the well-being of Earth. It begins with a Right View; that is, in this case, an acknowledgment and appropriate understanding of our global *dukkha* and its implications. This is a recognition of the Earth's woundedness on many levels, and the acceptance of the colossal challenge to engage ourselves toward its healing. The other facets of the Eightfold path can likewise be taken and reconsidered from a socio-ecological angle, to spell out concrete prescriptive steps toward the healing of our global woundedness.

Above I have outlined a structure taking up the teaching on the Four Ennobling Truths, transposed with our global socio-ecological situation in mind, as a Buddhist approach toward ecological healing. It is simply one suggestion for what can be a viable approach that Buddhists of different traditions, and people of good will from any other religious tradition or of no religious tradition for that matter, may find helpful in addressing our global situation.

Some Buddhists or scholars of Buddhism who interpret the teaching of the Awakened One along certain parameters may object and argue that I am misreading, or unduly stretching, or worse twisting, the words of the Buddha and trying to 'fit' them into our twenty-first-century situation. In response, I can only acknowledge that we of the twenty-first century cannot ignore, nor make light of, our own social location; that is, our contemporary global situation characterized by a woundedness of our Earth community on so many levels. This global *dukkha* is the context in which we who find inspiration in the teachings of an Awakened One, who lived around the fifth century before the Common Era in the northern region of the Indian subcontinent, may still turn. What we have in the various Buddhist texts and traditions are teachings and prescriptions for attitudes and action that inspired and influenced and transformed multitudes through the centuries in different geographical regions. They come down to us as they were re-read and re-interpreted by those who accepted them as meaningful and liberative for their own lives and for their respective societies in their own times.

We thus come back to our starting point, which is to highlight an ongoing task of Buddhists in this postmodern, postcolonial and globalized society, to continue engaging in critical and constructive reflection on Buddhist experience in the light of our contemporary situation, and on our contemporary situation in the light of Buddhist experience. In engaging in this task, we may be able to come forth with new ways of understanding and of living, of being and doing, toward ongoing transformation on all levels of our individual, communal, and global existence in our Earth Sangha, thus further expanding, deepening, broadening the scope of 'Buddhist experience.' I offer these reflections as one small pebble in the growing pile, with gratitude and in tribute to the many practitioners and scholars who have led the way in taking on our tasks toward healing the wounds of our Earth Sangha.

NOTES

1. Among the notables I would like to mention are Schmithausen (1997), Tucker and Williams (1998), de Silva (1998), Harvey (2000, especially ch. 4 'Attitude to and Treatment of the Natural World', pp. 150–86), Kaza and Kraft (2000), Badiner (2002), James (2004), Loy (2003), Cooper and James (2005), and Kaza (2005).
2. This is a description of the task of theology as an academic discipline in line with that given by David Tracy in his essay entitled 'Comparative Theology' (in Mircea Eliade (ed). 1988. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14, New York: MacMillan, pp. 446–55), cited in Jackson and Makransky (2000, 1–2).
3. Jackson and Makransky have themselves become more reticent in putting forward the use of this term 'Buddhist theology.' On their initiative, and supported by a growing circle of scholars, a new Group has been formed in the American Academy of Religion, called 'Critical and Constructive Reflection in Buddhism,' whose main purpose is to take up the tasks they have laid out in *Buddhist Theology* (but without using this designation). Among works that can be included in 'Buddhist Theology' are Aramaki (1992), Badiner (1990), Batchelor and Brown (1992), Habito (1997), Habito (forthcoming) Hakamaya (1990), and Macy (1991).
4. See the second part of my *Experiencing Buddhism: Ways of Wisdom and Compassion* (Habito 2005) for a descriptive account of these five major traditions in historical development and contemporary manifestation.
5. These included divine or heavenly beings endowed with long life-spans and with supra-human powers, as well as those kinds of beings who inhabit realms lower than the human: animals, fighting spirits, hungry ghosts, and hell-dwellers.
6. These include the realms of: the followers of the Buddha who listen to his word (*śrāvaka*); those who attain enlightenment as solitary ascetics (*pratyeka-buddha*); those who are almost at the point of awakening but choose to postpone their arrival in order to help other beings still entangled in the cycle of birth-and-death (*bodhisattva*); and finally, the realm of Buddha. These four are regarded as superior to the realm of the divine beings of the Hindu pantheon, who may have supra-human powers but are themselves still caught in the cycle of birth and death.

7. *Abhidharmakosabhāṣyam*, ch. 3 (L. de la Valle Poussin, English trans. by Leo Pruden, pp. 365–71).
8. Ian Harris notes that the cosmological framework presented in these two works in particular remain operative for present-day Buddhists (Harris 2001, 239; citing also Gethin 1998, 112–32).
9. Some Pure Land thinkers, however, consider entry into *Sukhavatī* as *nirvāṇa* itself.
10. The Pure Land teaching of Shinran, in thirteenth-century Japan, may not fall under this description in a clear-cut way, as it includes an affirmation of this-worldly reality based on a non-dual world-view. Again, I leave this for a future task in cooperation with Shinran's followers, who are also among those active in pursuing ecological questions in Japan and in the international scene. For example, a Research Institute based in Ryukoku University in Kyoto, Japan, a Shin Buddhist-sponsored institution, has embarked on a series of academic conferences and symposia on 'Buddhism and the Environment,' with a view to publishing the papers from these conferences, in Japanese and in English. See Richard Payne's forthcoming *Buddhism and the Environment* (provisional title, Wisdom Publications) for one collection of papers based on this series of conferences.
11. This is the key proclamation of *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras, and is found in succinct expression in the short version *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya*, or Heart Sutra.
12. Nagarjuna's *Mūlamadhyamika-kārikā*, xxv: 19–20.
13. The question concerning the sentience of plants has been a point at issue since early Buddhist times (see Schmithausen 1991b), and Japanese Buddhist thinkers, notably Annen, in the tenth century, and his followers in the Tendai tradition, in expounding what is known as 'Original Enlightenment Thought' (Tendai *Hongaku-shiso*) fully affirmed 'the Buddhahood of grasses and trees (*sōmoku-jōbutsu*)' (see Sueki 1994). Japanese Tendai Original Enlightenment texts took the language of non-duality to the extreme, affirming the identity of polar opposites such as 'Life and Death,' 'Birth-and-Death and *Nirvāṇa*,' and, relevant to us here, 'Sentient Beings and Environment.' This last mentioned set makes an affirmation that bridges the traditional demarcation between sentient beings as subject to awakening, and the environment or 'receptacle' that contains them (*eshō-funi*). This is a doctrinal stance that has been recently highlighted by followers of Lotus Buddhism to ground ecological engagement in a contemporary context—see de Silva (1998, 32) referring to this term, although misspelling it. It is also relevant to note here that the Tendai Original Enlightenment doctrine has been the subject of harsh criticism by proponents of what is known as 'Critical Buddhism'; notably Japanese scholars Noriaki Hakamaya and Shiro Matsumoto, who have pointed out heterodox strands they claim to have departed from the 'pure' Buddhism of Śākyamuni as *dhātuvāda*. On this debate, see Hubbard and Swanson (1997).
14. Some recent works on Buddhism and Ecology have noted these themes, and have also highlighted various formulations of a non-dual standpoint, such as the

Avatamsaka, or Hua Yen sutra. See the essays in Tucker and Williams (1997), and also in Kaza and Kraft (2000).

15. In a plenary address at an International Conference on Buddhist Christian Dialogue, John Cobb, Jr., a Christian theologian, addressing the question of 'Death and Dying in Buddhism and Christianity,' broadened the scope of the theme, and focused not on death for individual human beings, but on the impending death of the Earth, as a vital concern for us all, irrespective of religious belief.
16. The oft-cited 1967 essay of Lynn White makes a cogent argument to this effect, while raising relevant questions that religious thinkers and scholars continue to address to this day (White 1967).
17. The text of his talk is published in Rockefeller and Elder (1992, 109–23); see pp. 116–17 for the citations.
18. To dismiss this as an example of eco-apologetics that is 'unsupported by any textual, historical or cultural evidence,' as Harris does (1995, 181), seems to be an overbearingly unfair judgment on the simple and straightforward talk of the Dalai Lama, speaking as a Tibetan Buddhist on the ecological question.
19. See the online source for the entire essay (Gyatso 2007).
20. David Eckel also focuses on the Dalai Lama's remarks, in an excellent essay entitled 'Is there a Buddhist Philosophy of Nature?' (Eckel 1997). Eckel is more appreciative of the nuances, the solid traditional Buddhist grounding, as well as the impact and implications of the Dalai Lama's address on this occasion, in contrast to Harris' outright dismissal.
21. See the essays of Donald Swearer, and of Lee Sponsel and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel, in Tucker and Williams (1997, 21–44, 45–68).
22. Just as the members of the grassroots communities in Latin America and the Philippines, facing situations of oppression and poverty, were challenged and inspired to re-read their Christian scriptures, bringing forth what came to be known as theologies of liberation, such situations shed new light and open new horizons in hermeneutical strategies of Scriptural reading in Buddhist, and other religious communities as well.
23. The Boston Research Center, an institution supported by Soka Gakkai International, has taken the initiative of inviting Buddhists of different traditions to contribute to a volume entitled *Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter* (Boston Research Center for the 21st Century 1997).
24. See my chapter on Lotus Buddhism in *Experiencing Buddhism* (Habito 2005).
25. See note 10.
26. See the essays of Habito, Looi, Kaza, and Yamauchi, in Tucker and Williams (1997).
27. See my essay in Tucker and Williams (1997, 165–75), and also Veitch (1996, 135–52), for descriptions of possible pitfalls for meditative practitioners, as well as possible ways meditative practice can support and enhance ecological engagement. See also the excellent study by Simon James on environmental ethics from a Zen perspective (James 2004).

28. See Kaza (2005) and Badiner (2002).
29. As there are a good number of works on socially engaged Buddhism readily available, I will not list them here. Among these, however, I would like to highlight Loy's (2003) *Great Awakening*, noting especially the subtitle *Toward a Buddhist Social Theory*. In this work, building up on his previous writings, Loy offers constructive insights on how key Buddhist notions can be applied toward a better understanding of our contemporary global society, in the socio-economic, political, cultural, ecological, and other dimensions.
30. See also Habito (2006a) for a more detailed development of this point.
31. Dogen's *Shōbōgenzō*, 'This Very Mind is Buddha' fascicle. This passage triggered a deep experience of Zen awakening in Yamada Koun, a renowned Zen Master who has authorized many teachers now leading Zen communities in different parts of the world. For this account of his experience, see Kapleau (1965, 212–14).
32. *Eshō-funi*, or 'nonduality of environment and living beings,' is a doctrinal expression from the Tendai tradition that articulates this vision, which can provide grounding and empowerment for active ecological engagement. See also note 13.
33. See especially Loy (2004, 1–47, 171–98).
34. David C. Korten's *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* (2006), written by a community organizer and scholar who has lived in different parts of the world in a span of several decades, is an excellent work outlining horizons for our future, incorporating some Buddhist principles and practices conducive to the transformation of our global society 'from Empire to Earth Community.'

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