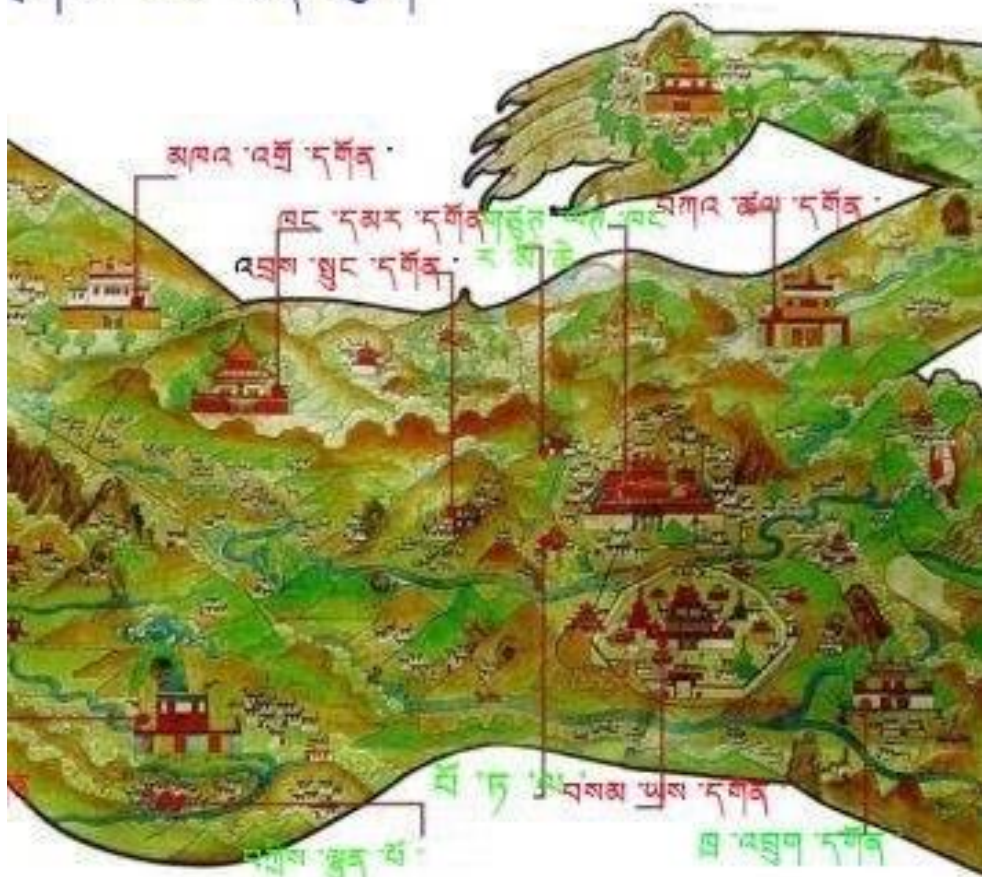


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An Introduction to Buddhist Ecology

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Prifysgol Cymru
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The Sophia Centre

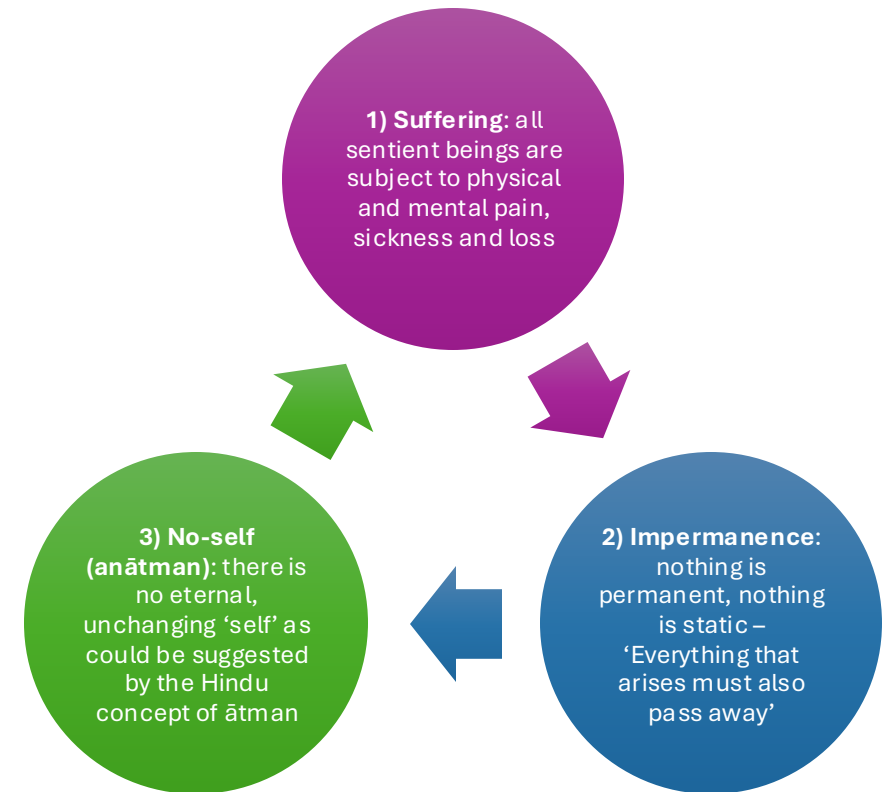
IMPLICATIONS OF INDO-TIBETAN COSMOLOGY

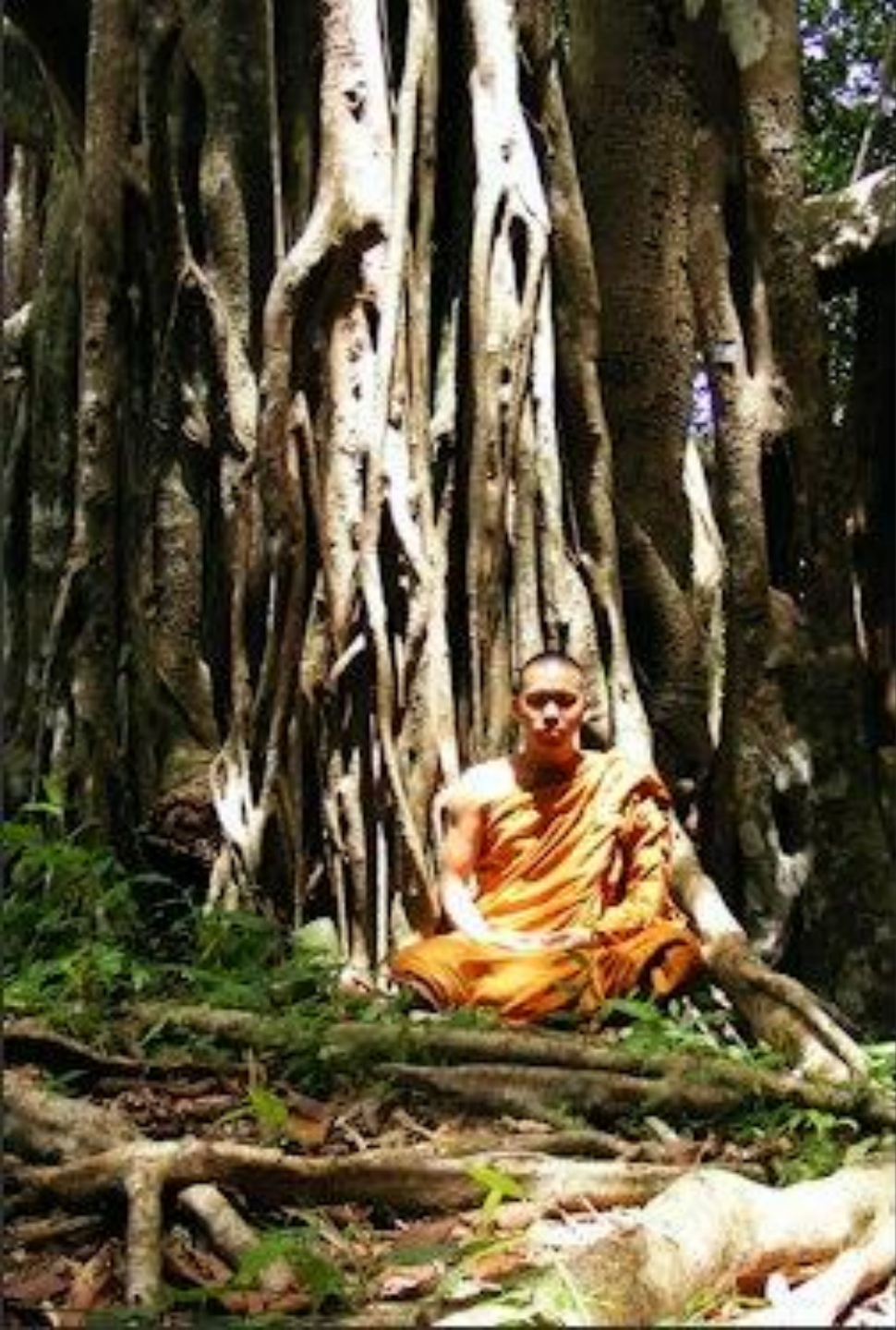
*Reincarnation entails no hierarchy of
sentience*



The Buddha taught that existence has three characteristics

The teaching should be understood in the context of Indian cosmology, in which unenlightened beings are cyclically reborn within the realms of saṃsāra. These three characteristics, therefore, apply equally to all sentient beings insofar as they are samsaric, i.e. bound to cyclical existence.





The Early Buddhist Community and the Natural World

‘The Thai Forest Tradition draws its inspiration from Pali Canon teachings contained in the Sutta and Vinaya Pitakas, where the Buddha is frequently described as dwelling in forests.[4] In the Pa-li discourses, the Buddha frequently instructs his disciples to seek out a secluded dwelling (in a forest, under the shade of a tree, mountain, glen, hillside cave, charnel ground, jungle grove, in the open, or on a heap of straw).[5] The Buddha himself achieved Awakening in a forest, under the foot of a Bodhi tree. In the Bhaya-bherava Sutta, the Buddha explained that the mental challenge he faced during his stay in the forest had aided his quest for Awakening.[6] There are many suttas in the Pali Canon where the Buddha instructs monks to practice in remote wilderness.’

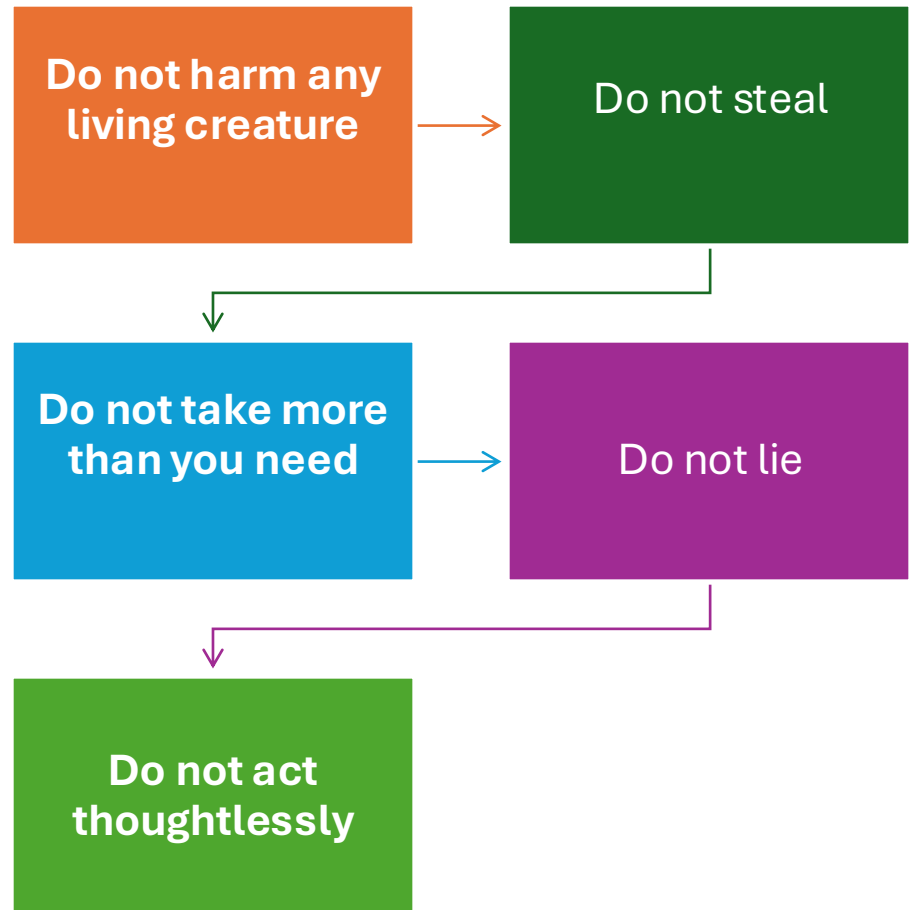
A photograph of four Buddhist monks in orange robes walking through a misty forest. They are walking from left to right, with the monk on the far right slightly ahead. The forest is dense with tall trees and a thick layer of fallen branches on the ground. The mist is thick, creating a serene and somewhat ethereal atmosphere. The monks are dressed in traditional orange robes, and their heads are shaved. The overall scene suggests a quiet, contemplative journey in nature.

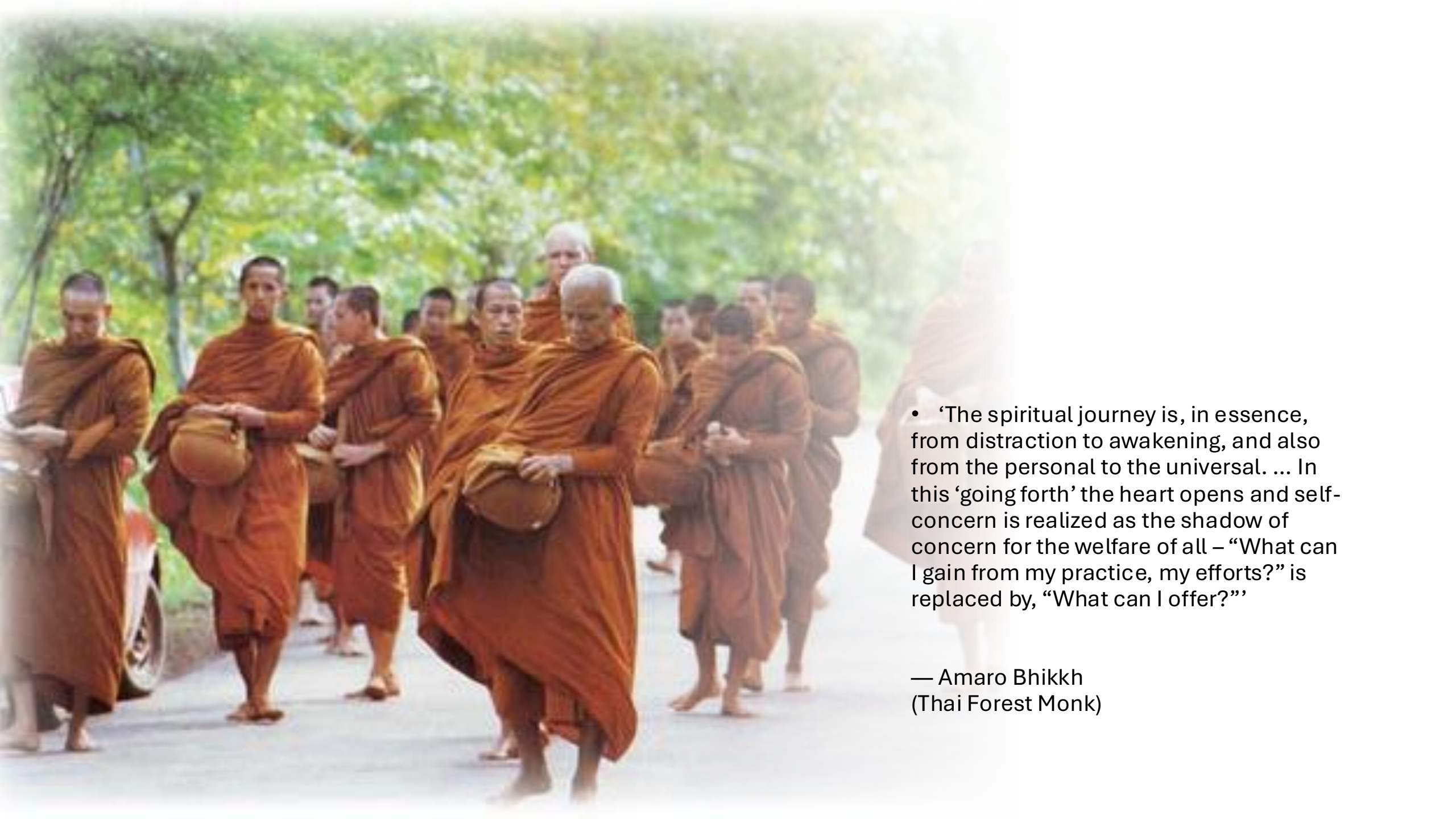
Practices of a Forest Monk

- *Sila* (morality)
- *Samadhi* (meditation)
- *Panna* (wisdom)



Five Precepts of the forest monk tradition





- ‘The spiritual journey is, in essence, from distraction to awakening, and also from the personal to the universal. ... In this ‘going forth’ the heart opens and self-concern is realized as the shadow of concern for the welfare of all – “What can I gain from my practice, my efforts?” is replaced by, “What can I offer?”’

— Amaro Bhikkh
(Thai Forest Monk)



‘The fight for the forest is a test of spiritual training - to retain peace within despite outside turbulence.’

- Pra Phrajack

Monks in Cambodia's Monks Community Forests ordaining trees in order to protect them from logging.

Credit: Chantal Elkin

<https://www.peoplenotpoaching.org/monks-community-forest>



- ‘We cannot be truly happy if beings which surround us, such as grasses, trees, and animals cannot be happy.’

Pra Phrajack
(Monks Community Forest, Cambodia)

EMERGING MAHAYANA PHILOSOPHY

- The Mahāyāna ('Greater Vehicle') emerged with the philosopher Nagarjuna 2nd Century CE
- It built upon early Abhidhamma (Skt: Abhidharma), particularly in relation to the teachings on non-self and dependent origination.
- These teachings address the core question of how things and events, including ourselves exist and what that existence means in terms of soteriology.
- They were disseminated from India to Tibet in the seventh century and have been preserved and developed in Tibetan regions since that time.
- Central to Nagarjuna's thought is an idea of personhood that finds no intrinsic existence to personhood.

BODHICITTA – THE ALTRUISTIC WISH TO ATTAIN NIRVANA FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS

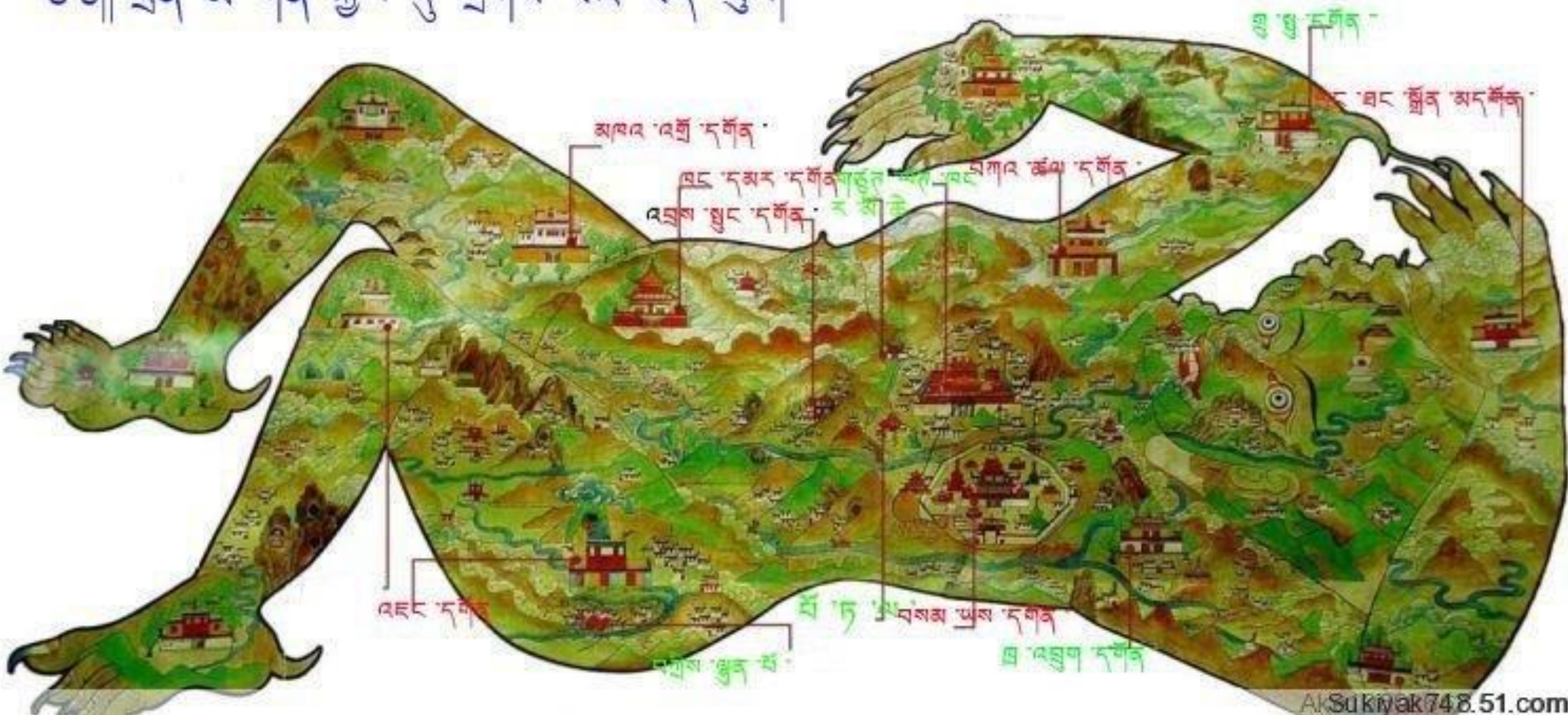
The Bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhist traditions tread a path developed from the noble 8-fold path in which they practice The six perfections (paramita) such as virtue and generosity.

In doing so, they develop Bodhicitta, which is the mind of enlightenment, understood as a mind founded on the altruistic wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of **all sentient beings**.



<http://traditionalartofnepal.com/shop/deities/avalokitesvara-thousand-arms-thangka/>

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AKSukiyak748.51.com

The renowned supine Demoness of Tibetan Lands
demoness (srin mo) supine (gan rkyal du) known/renowned/famous (grags pa) of Tibetan lands (bod yul)



Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and Indigenous Traditions

- The spread of Buddhism and its relationship with indigenous traditions – the Himalaya regions
- Padmasambhava (Skt.) and Guru Rinpoche (Tib.) – interactions with indigenous traditions on the Tibetan Plateau in the 8th century
- local spirits resisted the building of the first monastery at Samyé, which prompted the invitation to Padmasambhava, Guru Rinpoché.
- He was the first Tantric master to come from India to Tibet to assist ‘taming’ the local deities whilst building the first monastery there.

BUDDHIST ECOLOGY AS INVENTED?

‘Buddhist ecology originates in the modern West, not in Asia, as a combined outcome of Western Buddhists’ participation in the greater environmental movement and their creative interpretation of Buddhist canonical texts for the purpose of establishing a relational understanding of ecobiologically conceived lifeworlds. This argument is based on the case studies of long se, or spirit hills, in Dai villages in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, and of lha-ri, or deity mountains, in the Tibetan Plateau. Both long se and lha-ri are often discerned as a spiritual-environmental basis of Buddhist ecology. While Dai and Tibetan societies are predominantly Buddhist, the cultural customs of long se and lha-ri are pre-Buddhist. Through the comparable cases of human-spirit-land relations among the Dai and the Tibetans, this article concludes that, conceived in the West, Buddhist ecology entails a body of syncretized approaches to the relational entanglements of all life communities. These approaches find their origins mostly in the ecologically repositioned Buddhist soteriology and ethics as well as in the modern scientific environmentalist worldview.’

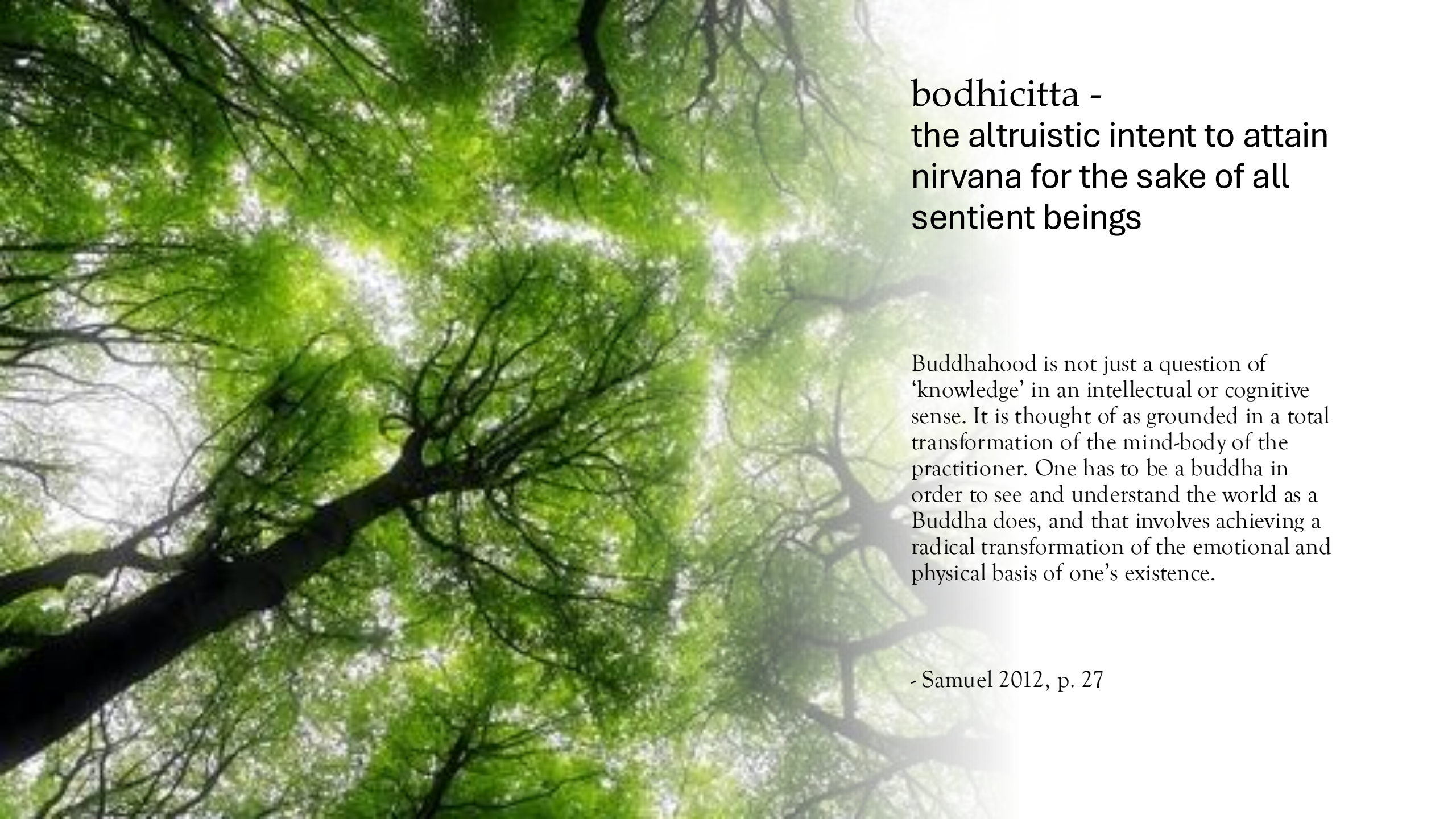
Dan Smyer Yü and Zhen Ma in *Religions* 2025, 16, 367
(<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030367>)



BUDDHIST ECOLOGY AS IMPLICIT?

Buddhism contains an implicit ecological thinking that arises from the way in which the environment was, and still is, seen by Tibetan peoples in terms of spiritual forces, local gods and goddesses of the mountains, rivers and lakes. In many ways, what I am talking about here is a specifically Tibetan form of something that is not uniquely Tibetan or Buddhist. It has analogies in many pre-modern societies, notably including the pre-modern societies of Aboriginal Australia, and one can find elements of it in the European context as well. In pre-modern Tibet, then, as in many parts of the world until recent times, nature was not felt to be an inert mass of earth, rock and vegetation. The landscape was alive, and populated by countless gods and spirits of different kinds. These were a source both of danger and threat, but also of possible assistance. This is a model of thinking and feeling about the environment that is still quite real in many parts of Tibet. Illness is frequently caused by offended local gods. Misfortune of many kinds can be set off by polluting the environment in which spirits live.

Samuel 2010



bodhicitta -
the altruistic intent to attain
nirvana for the sake of all
sentient beings

Buddhahood is not just a question of 'knowledge' in an intellectual or cognitive sense. It is thought of as grounded in a total transformation of the mind-body of the practitioner. One has to be a buddha in order to see and understand the world as a Buddha does, and that involves achieving a radical transformation of the emotional and physical basis of one's existence.

- Samuel 2012, p. 27

Some things to think about...

- What are the implications of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist cosmology for ecology?
- Does Buddhist ethics (e.g. the precepts) align with contemporary understandings of ecology? And, if so, how?
- If Buddhism is aiming, teleologically, at 'virtue and wisdom' as soteriological goal, how does that place Buddhist humanity in relationship with the natural world and/or the non-human world?
- What could be the implication of the Mahayana bodhisattva ideal for understandings of ecology?
- How does an existence that is void of intrinsic existence and dependently arising in constant flux connect or relate to other such transient existences?
- Is there a role for Buddhist knowledge, orientations and worldviews in contemporary ecological perspectives?

