

THE BUDDHIST TRADITION

# Images of Ecology

By Stephen Batchelor  
(with thanks to Peter Timmerman)



In speaking of Buddhism and ecology we could perhaps use the term "ecological awareness." It is helpful to point out that in traditional Buddhist cultures, there was never a need to create the word "ecology"; even the term "environment" is something one rarely finds in classical Buddhist languages.

And yet when we look at Buddhist cultures, we find that they live in a state of harmony with nature that for us is almost enviable. We then may ask ourselves what it is in those cultures that has allowed them to live in such a way that they have not felt drawn to exploit natural resources in the way that we have.

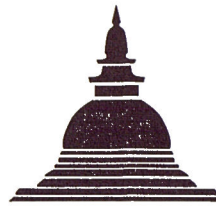
Our task in speaking of Buddhism and ecology is to unravel from within the Buddhist tradition the understanding and insights that are supportive of ecological ways of living with regard to nature. Of all the non-Western traditions, Buddhism has articulated itself in one of the most philosophically complex ways and given us a rich set of ideas, concepts, insights and traditions that we can look to for constructing an ecological vision that can speak to us in our present dilemma. This vision springs from a tradition that has quite naturally and spontaneously lived in an ecological way.

To articulate this further, I would like to look at some classical Buddhist images and interpret them in terms of how they would be meaningful for us today. I think this is part of the process of Buddhist cultures coming into Western civilization, one in which metaphors and images that had meaning in the East take on new meaning and confront the needs of our own society in the present day.

The first image is that of fire. Many of you are no doubt familiar with the early sermon of the Buddha called the Fire Sutra. Here the Buddha speaks of the world as being on fire. He says the world is burning, the body is burning, the eyes are burning, the ears are burning, and he runs through pretty much every category of experience and compares it to a state which is on fire. Those of you who have read T.S. Eliot's "Waste-land" would have come across this image: "Burning, burning, burning."

Leaving aside traditional interpretations, what does this image mean for us today? What is the sense of burning, of

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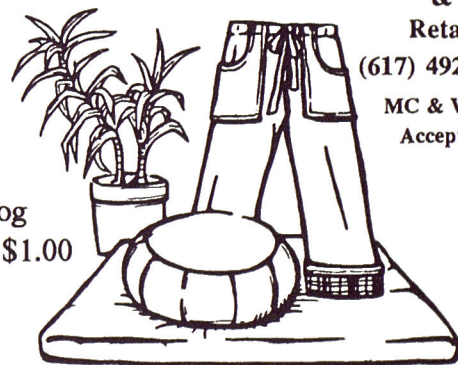


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## Buddhism and Ecology

*Continued from previous page*

being on fire for us? We may associate it with the image of the rain forests on fire. The literal burning of the environment by people in poor third world countries who are driven to burn down the forest as a form of earning a living, based on the needs of North American and European industries, the meat industry in particular.

Another image that may come to mind is that of global warming; that the earth is literally getting hotter. Yet another image is that of consumerism itself. It's interesting to note that we talk of fire as consuming its fuel. In other words, the world is burning in the sense that the world is literally consuming its own resources, consuming them at an incredible rate, converting natural resources into waste as fast as possible.

We can see consumerism as a fire that is destroying the very resources of life. So in this way we have an old image, an old metaphor, that can take on for us a new meaning in response to the kind of spiritual dilemma we face today. The environmental dilemma is not simply a question of a few mistakes made in excessive use of industrial pollutants. The ecological dilemma is, I believe, first and foremost, a spiritual dilemma.

The nature of this spiritual dilemma is also explained in another traditional Buddhist metaphor, that of poison. In Buddhism, we speak of the three poisons: confusion, greed and hatred. Traditionally these poisons have been identified as the sources of suffering. What comes up for us when we reflect on this traditional teaching? We might think of pollution, of the literal toxicity with which we are filling the environment. In this sense, the poisons of the mind that the Buddha spoke of are no longer restricted to the psychological problems in our minds, are no longer a private matter that might affect our immediate circle of friends and families, but these poisons have now spilled out into the world at large. They are no longer just psychological or spiritual poisons, but contaminate the very world in which we live. If we agree that this is a clear cause-effect relationship, we can recognize that the poison of greed within the human mind is largely responsible for the pollution and poisoning of the world.

Likewise, the poison of hatred is responsible for poisoning the world through, say, nuclear testing in different parts of the world, the testing of weapons, and the manufacture of weapons as a means whereby to fulfill our hatred of those we perceive as our enemies.

Similarly with the poison of confusion, not knowing our interconnectedness with all things, clinging to a sense of a separate ego, of the world as a separate entity with which we have no essential connection.

Such views justify a life based on greed and hatred. With the increasing population of the world and the development in technological skills, we are now able to project our greed, hatred and confusion into the world at an alarming rate. This

leads us to a crucial question about the role of Buddhism in the world today. Can we as Buddhists, given our philosophy of human life, stand back and watch the world go up in flames, working simply on our own enlightenment on mountaintops and in caves, tranquilly tolerating the destruction all around us?

Are we not obliged by the insights of our tradition to engage in the environmental issues that are prevailing in our world today? To what extent is Buddhist practice a source of responsibility to the life around us? To what extent can we remain onlookers and observers?

There is nowadays among Buddhists a growing movement which is often given the title "Engaged Buddhism." This school of thinking recognizes the need to work not just on our own clarification and cultivation of compassion, but to engage that insight and compassion with the world around us. This engagement perhaps comes out of yet another image, that of

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*Imagine a great net, at each of whose intersections is a sphere; the entire net is mirrored within each of the spheres.*

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the interconnectedness of things, in traditional Buddhist terms, "dependent co-emergence."

This concept is an extraordinarily central one in Buddhist philosophy, the idea that we are not alone, that we are not isolated, as we might sometimes feel ourselves to be, but that our very being, our very sense of individuality arises out of a network of relationships which has given rise to us. Our uniqueness is not reducible or definable in terms of some special essence, some soul-substance, some thing, some entity that is locked into us. Here I am not talking about an intellectual concept but rather a distinctive feel for how and what we are. Buddhist practice is very much about challenging this sense of egoism with the insights of emptiness or transparency and, probably most fundamentally, the idea of interconnectedness and dependent co-emergence.

And if we think about it, this image, too, is fundamentally ecological. It is a recognition that all of life, every leaf on every tree, every insect, every blade of grass, every bird does not come into being independently of anything else. Any life depends on all the other forms of life with which it coexists. We as human beings are dependent on the air we breathe; we are dependent on the water we drink, the food we eat.

Alan Watts used to speak of the "skin-encapsulated ego," a wonderful image for our Western way of thinking. We somehow think our responsibility ends at our skin, that this is me, and beyond that is a threatening and vast unknown. Buddhist practice is about breaking through this barrier of our skin-encapsulated ego. It is about discovering existentially that we are an integral part of a much greater nexus of life.

One of the most beautiful images we find in traditional Buddhism to express this interconnectedness or interdependence is that of the Jewelled Net of Indra. It's an image we find in the Avatamsaka Sutra. It's a picture, if we can imagine it, of a great net, at each of whose intersections is a sphere which is mirroring every other sphere in the net. The entire net is present within each of the spheres; we can look at any of the spheres and see the presence of all other spheres. That image is ecological in the sense that our own life is, as it were, one of these spheres at one of these intersections of the Net of Indra.

If we look into our own life, we find that we are a reflection of everything else in the world that we know. We reflect the elements: earth, water, fire, and air; our very thoughts reflect the language that has been given to us by our society; our memory reflects both our biological and cultural past. In Tibetan Buddhism, there are reflections that are designed to heighten one's awareness of one's dependency on all others.

In our modern way of life, we take so much for granted. We take for granted our food, yet in each meal we have a profound discourse on the interdependence of the whole universe. We can imagine the person who planted the orange tree, the people who cultivated the field. We can imagine the poorly paid Mexican laborers who came to harvest the crop. We can imagine the collecting points, the warehouses, the supermarkets, all of which involve numerous people who in turn are dependent on other numerous groups of people and animals. Looking at an orange, which we sometimes gobble down quite mindlessly, can give us an insight into this chain of dependent origination, this chain which constitutes the support system for our very existence.

Our conditioning and ignorance do not allow us to look beyond the sphere of our own self-interest, which closes us off to all other life which, in truth, is our own life. It is for this reason that Buddhist philosophy equates the notion of emptiness with that of interdependence.

Emptiness or non-self is not a denial of individuality; it is a denial of the false concept we have of a separate selfhood, a skin-encapsulated ego. And when we see through that, we are opened to the interdependence of all phenomena. We recognize that our being is "interbeing," it is one of interconnectedness, that it is not defined by its own separation from everything else.

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