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Julie Gregory

Queen's University - Kingston, Ontario, Sjrg1@queensu.ca

Samah Sabra

Carleton University, ssabra@connect.carleton.ca

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Engaged Buddhism and Deep Ecology **Beyond the Science/Religion Divide**

Julie Gregory & Samah Sabra

Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario & Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

5jrg1@queensu.ca • ssabra@connect.carleton.ca

Abstract: In this article, we suggest that recognition of the shared ontological premises of engaged Buddhism and deep ecology can move us beyond constructed categorical distinctions between Western science and Eastern religion. Specifically, we show how Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism and Arne Naess's deep ecology argue for expanded notions of self which disrupt distinctions between self/other, human/nonhuman, sentient/non-sentient, and social/natural. Following their lead, we hold that meditative practices, which may be thought of as methods of connecting thought and action, can provide routes toward embodying the shared insights of deep ecology and engaged Buddhism. We conclude with reflections on the implications of these insights for relations between the individual, society, and nature.

Within popular discourse (and classic sociological theorizing), science and religion are often set up as diametrical opposites: the "rationality" of the sciences often is constructed in opposition to the "irrationality" of religions—sometimes referred to as "false consciousness" (Marx and Engels 1970). Moreover, Orientalist categorizations of "Western" versus "Eastern" worldviews are often mapped onto, and reproduce, these same binaries (Said 1993, 1994). Consequently, we are left with constructed distinctions between materialist/modern/Western views of nature as a resource upon which to capitalize and mystical/pre-mod-

ern/Eastern understandings of nature as a source of spiritual fulfillment. On the one hand, we might imagine a rationalistic, ego-driven, capitalist West which (scientifically and technologically) objectifies "the natural." On the other hand, we sometimes revere the image of a mystical, simple East which is (naively but spiritually) "at one" with nature.

We offer this paper, in part, as a critique of these stereotypes and as an attempt to undo such dualistic binary thinking. More specifically, in the context of increasing concern over environmental degradation, we argue, it is important to move beyond such

Julie Gregory (first author) is currently pursuing her doctorate in Sociology at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Her interests lie in the areas of social constructionism and the sociology of knowledge, with special attention paid to the ways media construct certain phenomena—particularly school shootings—as social problems. Samah Sabra is a doctoral student in Canadian Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Her current research explores how people move from the category of "Newcomer" to that of "New Canadian," with an aim of exploring relationships between ideas about "becoming" Canadian and people's conceptualizations of home. Julie Gregory would like to thank Dr. Karen Krug of Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, for her comments on an early draft of this paper.

dichotomized categorizations of “scientific” versus “religious” views of nature. Indeed, we suggest that it is important to highlight the ways so-called scientific and religious paradigms might be understood as complementing and reinforcing one another. To this end, we examine the ways engaged Buddhist and deep ecologist activists and scholars have drawn on elements of Buddhism (often understood as an “Eastern” religion) and ecology (often understood as a “Western” science) to address issues of environmental degradation.

We begin with a brief introduction to Buddhism’s development as a religion, providing an overview of the two main strands of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana. We then review the rise of engaged Buddhist practices, paying particular attention to the writings and teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen monk living in Plum Village, France. We go on to provide readers with a general outline of the main precepts of deep ecology. This leads into a discussion of the overlaps to be read between engaged Buddhism and deep ecology. We suggest that in arguing for expanded notions of self, Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism and Arne Naess’ deep ecology offer practitioners shared ontological premises with the potential to undo a number of deeply entrenched constructed dualisms. We conclude with reflections on the implications these overlaps may have for understanding individual-society-nature relations.

INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM: EASTERN MYSTICISM?

Academics generally place the beginning of Buddhism in Northern India, at roughly 2,500 years ago. According to the story of the Buddha, Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who had led a sheltered and privileged life, left his secluded palace and came across an ill person, an aged person, a ca-

daver, and a religious renunciant.¹ Feeling a deep sense of empathy for the suffering associated with each of these sights, Prince Gautama began his quest to understand the source of such suffering. At the age of twenty-nine, the prince shaved his hair, traded his clothes with a passer-by, and renounced his luxurious lifestyle, leaving behind the palace and his wife and child. Prince Gautama then wandered the hillsides of India as an austere ascetic in search of explanations for the suffering he saw in the world.

It was only during an intense session of meditation that Siddhartha achieved *nirvana* and became the Buddha, however.² At this moment of deep reflection, under a large Bodhi tree, he travelled the eightfold path (as discussed below) and awoke to the understanding that it is only through the cessation of ignorance, caused by desire for and attachment to material goods, that suffering can be obliterated. The Buddha’s enlightenment is often associated with his recognition of the Four Noble Truths: that there is suffering; that there is a cause for suffering (attachment); that there can be an end to suffering (*nirvana*); and that the way to end suffering is the Eightfold Path. As G.P. Malalasekera (1983a: 35) explains, the noble path “consists of eight items: Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration of Mind.” What is “Right” about each element of the eightfold path is the cultivation of the “middle path”—i.e. avoiding both excessive austerity and excessive indulgence in one’s thoughts and actions.

Because the beginning of the Buddha’s

¹ “Buddha” is translated by Richard Robinson and Willard Johnson (1997: 1) as “the Awakened One.”

² “*Nirvana*” is understood as a “state of absolutely transcending all pairs of opposites, and so all conditioned reality, by the blowing out of all flames of attachment” (Ellwood and McGraw 1999: 131). Thus, to achieve *nirvana* is to achieve enlightenment.

story emphasizes the above four insights, and due to the Buddha's proclamation that "all life is suffering" (the first Noble Truth), traditional Buddhism has been described as a pessimistic worldview that stresses the inevitability of pain and suffering in this life (Callicott 1987). More than this, as a non-theistic tradition which calls for "detachment," Buddhism has been criticized as a strictly ascetic and individualistic philosophy that, as such, does not constitute a religion at all (Queen 1996). As Joanna Macy (1996: 154) points out, however, such critics "forget that what the Buddha taught was detachment from ego, not detachment from the world." Thus, although Buddhism encourages individual practitioners to seek liberation through meditation, the aims of this meditation are to cultivate a sense of morality and insight into the reality that all suffering is the effect of desire and selfish attachment to the *material* world (Barnhill 2004). This is to say that from a Buddhist perspective, deep reflection facilitates awareness that "we are burning up ourselves and our world in our intense quest to satisfy unnecessary desires" (Kinsley 1995: 87).

Although these ideas are shared by most Buddhists, discussions of Buddhism usually outline two main traditions with slightly different emphases for how best to live an enlightened existence: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is more prevalent in South and South-East Asia, while Mahayana Buddhism is most common in Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Translated into English, Theravada means "Path of the Elders" (Ellwood and McGraw 1999: 135). As can be surmised from the translation, this strand of Buddhism is closely associated with traditional Buddhism; similar to traditional Buddhist doctrines, that is to say, Theravada practice emphasizes the drive to become an *arhant*, one who has reached personal *nirvana* without directly working for the liberation of others (Thurman 1996).

Also, because this form of Buddhism is aimed most directly at the individual believer, especially members of the Buddhist *sangha* (the community of monks), it is often subject to the above critiques launched against Buddhism in general (i.e., that it is pessimistic, strictly ascetic, individualistic, etc.).³

Contrary to some allegations, however, lay Buddhists are not entirely excluded from Theravada practice. As Malalasekera (1983b: 43) explains, "while laymen could practice the teachings and enjoy many of the blessings of the religious life, the Buddha held that the path to holiness could not be fully traversed among the occupations and interests of common life." Thus, according to Theravada teachings, members of the laity are taught that the next best thing to perpetual meditation and joining the *sangha* is adherence to the five precepts: "not to take life, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, lie, or take intoxicants" (Ellwood and McGraw 1999: 140). Notwithstanding the importance of these precepts, according to strict Theravada teachings, full enlightenment is usually restricted to male monks, who may become *arhants* and achieve *nirvana* upon death. Consequently, this faction of Buddhism has also been charged with being austere, idiosyncratic, and androcentric (Gross 1993).

In contrast to traditional interpretations of Theravada Buddhism, the Mahayana tradition teaches that enlightenment is an achievable goal for all humans, in this lifetime, here and now. Mahayana Buddhists,

³ What we present here is a brief overview of the general tendencies in the ways these traditions have been interpreted. It is important to note that there have been some very active, community-based Theravada engaged Buddhist movements. For a discussion of some of these traditions, refer to Christopher Queen and Sallie King's (1996) edited volume. For a more detailed discussion of the particular strategies employed in relation to environmental activism by Theravadan monks and lay people in Thailand, refer to Nicola Tannenbaum (2000) and Susan Darlington (1998).

in other words, hold that enlightenment is accessible for men, women, laity, and members of the *sangha* alike.⁴ This division of Buddhism emerged about a century after the Buddha's death and is translated as "Great Vessel" (Ellwood and McGraw 1999: 135). Unlike Theravada, Mahayana Buddhism offers practitioners a vessel towards awakening that can travel many routes; in addition to meditation, enlightenment may be achieved through methods as diverse as "the numinous wonder of a temple that causes one to forget oneself for a moment; the quasi-hypnotic rhythm of chanting; [and] the magical concentration of evocation" (143). In other words, any gesture that brings one closer to a lost sense of individuation—i.e., to an understanding of the self as only one node along an endless cycle of being—is understood as one step closer to seeing the world as the Buddha did under the Bodhi tree.

By replacing the image of the *arhant* with the notion of the *bodhisattva*, Mahayana teachings tend to emphasize the ideals of compassion, altruism, and non-hierarchical relationality—qualities embodied by the *bodhisattva*.⁵ As Rita Gross (1993:10) explains,

In addition to significant philosophical differences with earlier Buddhism, nascent Mahayana Buddhism understood the ... Buddhist community, differently ... One of the critical developments in Mahayana thinking was the Bodhisattva path toward complete enlightenment, recommended

⁴In Japan, where Buddhism met Shinto, debates have emerged about whether nonhuman organisms are to be considered as capable of achieving enlightenment. For an elaboration of this discussion, please refer to David Kinsley (1995: 91-98).

⁵Robert Ellwood and Barbara McGraw (1999: 142) describe a bodhisattva as a person on the verge of Buddhahood who declines full liberation out of sheer compassion to help fellow beings to escape the cycle of worldly suffering.

now for all serious practitioners. Instead of striving for individual nirvana bringing release from cyclical existence, Mahayana Buddhists were encouraged to take the Bodhisattva vow to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

Following from this, not only do scholars tend to draw clear distinctions between Theravada and Mahayana teachings—distinctions epitomized by the ideal of the *arhant* and the *bodhisattva* respectively—they also note Buddhism's almost exclusive focus on sentience. It is this focus, as will become clear below, which engaged Buddhists and deep ecologists challenge.

ENGAGED BUDDHISM: MYSTICAL ECOLOGY?

Thich Nhat Hanh's training as a monk in Vietnam included the teachings of both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, the blending of which was officially formalized with the establishment of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam in 1963. In 1965, Nhat Hanh founded the Order of Interbeing, which extended Theravada understandings of the *sangha*, was "designed as a manifestation of engaged Buddhism [, and was] ... composed of laypersons as well as monks and nuns" (King 1996: 323). For Nhat Hanh, "engaged Buddhism," a term he coined, is meant to evoke and induce a form of spirituality that is socially and politically aware and active.

One year after establishing the Order of Interbeing, Nhat Hanh was exiled from Vietnam as a result of his peace activism during the Vietnam War. He went on to found Plum Village (a *sangha* in the style of the Order of Interbeing) in Southern France in 1982. He has been living there since, sharing his teachings about engaged Buddhism to an international audience at retreats,

workshops, and through his published works in several languages. Through his teachings, Nhat Hanh offers a unified, engaged Buddhism which emphasizes a particular ontological understanding of the world: that everything is connected.

This understanding of the world is reflected in the inaugural sermon given by Nhat Hanh at the spring retreat at Plum Village in 1998 during which he implored those present to reflect on reality. Beginning with traditional teachings of the Buddha, Nhat Hanh (1998: 20) argued that we need “to let go of self, person, living being and lifespan,” which form the basis of “all other ideas.” For Nhat Hanh, “letting go is a practice” which begins with letting go “of the idea that ‘I am this body’” (19). Once we realize that our forms, feelings, and perceptions are non-permanent, he said, then “we begin to see the no-self nature, then we see the interdependent nature, and once we see the interdependent nature, we see the Buddha” (14).

This process of “letting go” is premised on a worldview which understands all things as co-dependent. Nothing, according to this perspective, exists independently from anything else. In this same sermon, Nhat Hanh (1998: 15) illuminates this ontology:

We look into a flower and we see the flower is made of the sky, the clouds, the earth, space and time... We see ourselves, and we see we are made of our teacher, our father, our mother, our ancestors, our brothers, sisters, our vegetables, water, and all those things. When we see them in the light of interdependence, we see the Buddha. We see that we do not have a separate self... When we see our interdependence we see interbeing.

Given the above excerpts from his 1998 sermon, it is clear that for Nhat Hahn, to

speak of Buddhism is to speak of the connectedness of all things; it is to acknowledge that we are nothing and everything simultaneously. Moreover, according to this view, to speak of self is to speak of other and vice versa: I am myself, my teacher, father, mother, ancestors, brothers, sisters, vegetables, water, etcetera, and they are me.

Nhat Hanh’s conceptualization of interbeing permeates not only his sermons, but also much of his writings. For example, consider the first six stanzas of one of his most well-known poems, “Please Call me By My True Names” (Nhat Hanh 1996a:104-105):

*Don't say that I will depart tomorrow –
even today I am still arriving.*

*Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest, to be a
caterpillar in the heart of a flower;
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.*

*I still arrive, to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.*

*The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.*

*I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.*

*I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.*

*I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.*

Again, what is highlighted in this poem is Nhat Hanh’s belief in the interconnectedness of all things/beings mentioned: the “I”

of the poem encompasses a bud, a tiny bird, a caterpillar, a jewel, a mayfly, a frog, a grass-snake, a starving child, and an arms merchant, for example. In this sense, the I/self is not a single individuated ego; rather it reflects a “we-self” (Coward 1997).

In explaining his motivation for writing this particular poem, Nhat Hanh (1996a:104) has said, “I have many names and when you call me by any of them, I have to say, ‘Yes’.” Again, this is because according to his worldview, all things/beings are interconnected in a complex web of socio-historical and political circumstances which both produce and are produced by one another. This is why Nhat Hanh suggests that to understand our place in the world, we must begin by grasping our interbeing. For Nhat Hanh, this recognition is the necessary first step toward socially and politically engaged action which, for him, is inseparable from both personal well-being and an environmentally sound paradigm, a point taken up in our conclusion.

As Sallie B. King (1996: 342) puts it, the above poem “expresses an affirmation of a naturally compassionate Buddha nature as well as experiential identification with both victim and victimizer. In the context of an imperative to eliminate suffering, this produces Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism,” which requires “self-knowledge beyond the level of the ego personality.” For King, it is important to understand that this poem is a commentary on the place of humans in the world. King argues that in identifying with a bud or a frog, for example, Nhat Hanh emphasizes that “humans are not a special class, different in our essential nature from other forms of life” (339). It is also of note here that Nhat Hanh does not simply identify in this piece with what are often thought of as sentient beings. His identification goes beyond that of human and animal to consider his interbeing with a bud on a branch or a jewel, et cetera.

This inclusion of non-sentient beings into discussions of interbeing also is evident

in the rewriting of the five precepts (not to take life, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, lie, or take intoxicants), as expressed on the Plum Village website. Here, the first precept (not to take life) is rewritten as a mindfulness training for Nhat Hanh’s *sangha*:

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking and in my way of life. (“Five Trainings” N.d.: 4)

Note that what is being protected here is not just human life, but also “the lives of ... animals, plants and minerals.” According to this engaged Buddhist precept, then, it is not enough to refrain from physically killing; practitioners also must vow that their thoughts do not participate in the production of a worldview in which the taking of any life is condoned.

Similarly, in the rewriting of the second precept as a mindfulness training, the proscription against stealing is expanded to include awareness “of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing and oppression,” as well as a vow “to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants and minerals,” and to “prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on earth” (“Five Trainings” N.d.: 5). In both of these contexts (as in the rewriting of the other precepts), people are encouraged to become aware of suffering. Moreover, we are asked to expand this awareness beyond an anthropocentric (or even sentience-centric) realm and to ensure that our thoughts and actions accord with such an awareness.

These ideas are clearly in keeping with, and lend support to, deep ecological thinking—for which Nhat Hanh (1996c: 165), himself, explicitly advocates:

Our ecology should be a deep ecology—not only deep, but universal. There is pollution in our consciousness. Television, films, and newspapers are forms of pollution for us and our children. They sow seeds of violence and anxiety in us and pollute our consciousness, just as we destroy our environment by farming with chemicals, clear-cutting the trees, and polluting the water. We need to protect the ecology of the Earth and the ecology of the mind.

As is clear from the above examples of his teachings and writings of “mindfulness,” Nhat Hahn encourages right action through the recognition of interconnectedness, or what he refers to as “interbeing.” Moreover, despite the fact that much of Nhat Hanh’s original ideas developed within the context of a critique of the Vietnam War, his concern is not merely with the human elements of war. Indeed, the invocation of nature imagery in book titles such as *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (Nhat Hanh 1967) calls attention to the environmental impacts of the war—in particular, the use of napalm to burn forests and rice paddies comes to mind. In other words, Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism emerged with a sense of environmental and ecological concern.

INTRODUCTION TO DEEP ECOLOGY: WESTERN SCIENTISM?

The belief in the interconnectedness of all things also is central to the writings of Arne Naess (1977), the Norwegian philosopher who coined the term “deep ecology” as a way to distinguish this approach from what he understands as the disconnected and shallow methodology of more traditional ecological sciences. Naess argues that (shallow) ecology, often conceptualized as a

value-free science, is used to conceive the world as a machine to be monitored by human scientists.⁶ From a shallow perspective, he claims, “nature” is somehow separated from humans, compartmentalized, divided into categorical distinctions, and quantified. In contrast to this, deep ecology, as Naess describes it, is a way of perceiving the intrinsic value and interconnectedness of the natural world, which, for him, is inseparable from the “social” or human world. For Naess, to compartmentalize and objectify the study of ecology is to miss the interconnectedness of the parts. In this way, deep ecologists believe that the subjects of ecological study, and the implications of such research, need to be expanded.

In a manner that clearly parallels the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh (as outlined above), Naess (1977: 84) distinguishes between “the narrow self (ego) and the comprehensive Self.” Based on this distinction, he argues that when scientists study nonhuman forms of life, notions of Self must be re-conceptualized—i.e., the boundaries around the narrow/ego self and between sentience and non-sentience must be crossed. According to him, the “dependencies and interrelations which [are] brought to light, thanks to ecologists, [make] it easier for people to admit and even to cultivate their deep concern for nature” (89). Naess argues that this notion of Self “corresponds to that of the enlightened, or yogi, who sees ‘the same,’ the atman, and who is not alienated from anything” (87).⁷

Drawing out further the links he understands to exist between deep ecology and what are often understood as “Eastern” religious practices, Naess proposes meditation

⁶ It is now a fairly common academic argument that ecology, like other sciences, is not, in fact, value free. Instead, “natural sciences” are understood as encompassing a system of values which are represented as neutral, but which nevertheless reflect philosophical systems that separate and elevate “the human” (equated with “the social”) beyond “the natural” (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Latour 1987).

as an ideal means by which to expand the boundaries of identification. For him, this form of deep reflection is “a spontaneous, non-rational, but not irrational, process through which *the interest or interests of another being are reacted to as our own interest or interests*” (86, original emphasis). Thus, for Naess, the goal of meditation is to abolish constructed divisions between self/other, human/nonhuman, sentient/non-sentient, and social/natural.

Stated more systematically, Naess’s (1994) “deep ecology platform” is made up of seven precepts. The first precept is a “rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the *relational, total-field* image” (120, original emphasis). Second, is the concept of biospherical egalitarianism, which holds that although “killing, exploitation, and suppression” are unavoidable realities, the right to life of all beings is “intuitively clear” (121). Next, are the principles of diversity and symbiosis, which highlight the need to recognize both inter- and intra-species differences to appreciate fully the connectedness of all aspects of life. The fourth principle is “anticlass posture,” by which Naess means that we must recognize that although “the exploiter lives differently from the exploited... both are adversely affected in their potentialities for self-realization” (121). The fifth tenet of deep ecology is presented as expanding the “fight against *pollution and resource depletion*” (122, original emphasis). Here, Naess emphasizes the need to address these environmental issues in relation to their impacts on *all* aspects of the natural world, both living and non-liv-

ing. The sixth precept is “complexity, not complication,” (122) which again is meant to highlight the need to recognize that what makes social existence complex, as opposed to complicated, is an overall organizing system governing all relations within the eco-sphere. The final principle Naess offers is “autonomy and decentralization” (122), a premise that favours *non-hierarchical* connections between individuals and systems.

In *Ecology and Religion*, David Kinsley (1995: 188) addresses what he understands as the deep ecological argument that “the rights of the individual must be subordinate to the well-being of the whole, because the whole is prior to the individual, and without the whole no individual could exist.” For Kinsley, such deep ecological reasoning is in contrast with the (stereo)typical Western atomistic reading of the environment that prioritizes human beings and separates them not only from other beings, but also from their surroundings. Western societies are characterized by Kinsley as idealizing individuality and attributing success and merit outside of external environmental factors. According to a deep ecological understanding of life and of the environment, he says, this reasoning is faulty.

At the same time, in keeping with our discussion of divisions constructed between human/nonhuman, sentience/non-sentience, we hold that Kinsley’s (1995) way of phrasing this issue is problematic because to subordinate the rights of the individual to the rights of the whole is to relate them hierarchically. Instead, a non-hierarchical relation would suggest that our thoughts and actions must ensure that we prioritize neither the individual nor the whole. This is in keeping with the deep ecological position discussed above, which understands that without individuals the whole would also be unable to exist, insofar as deep ecologists believe that there is an intimate relationship to be uncovered between all life forms, without exception. Kinsley (1995: 190) himself notes that according to deep ecologists

⁷ The term “*atman*” is generally used in Hinduism, and is often translated to mean “soul” or “self.” In most Hindu traditions, the idea of the *atman* emphasizes that a person’s innermost soul is identical with *Brahman*, a deity who contains the entirety of the universe within himself. The idea is elaborated to mean that if one is identical with Brahman, one is identical with the universe, and thus, one has no single, individual soul or self. Where Buddhism is concerned, a similar idea is expressed negatively as “*anatman*,” or “no self.”

“any individual, human or nonhuman, animal or plant, is the end result of the entire history of its species’ interaction with the ecosystem at large.” From this reading, deep ecology is an attempt to deconstruct anthropocentric divisions between human and nonhuman, sentient and non-sentient. To return to Naess (1977: 83), to support a deep ecological platform is to assert that “equating value with value for humans reveals a racial prejudice.”

As a self-identified deep ecologist and Buddhist, Bill Devall (1994: 126) explores alternatives to dominant (North American) scientific paradigms that focus on shallow anthropocentric understandings of nature as a resource to “satisfy the material wants of citizens.” In his article, “The Deep Ecology Movement,” Devall outlines fifteen principles that are central to deep ecological perspectives, many of which are in keeping with those outlined by Naess (1994) and all of which “support radical critiques of modern society and of dominant values of this society” (Devall 1994: 135). Devall concludes his piece with the assertion that as a revolutionary environmental movement, deep ecology “seeks transformation of values and social organization” (128). More specifically, he represents the fusion of what he understands as “Eastern” philosophies (such as Buddhism) and “Western” approaches (such as ecology) as an optimal route for fostering an ecological consciousness, one which can disrupt and expand dominant, shallow, and exploitative approaches to nature.

CONVERSATIONS: SCIENTIFIC AND MYSTICAL SCIENTISM?

Based on all of the above, we argue that both Buddhism and deep ecology may be conceptualized as radical environmental and ethical critiques of anthropocentric, highly individualistic, so-called “Western” conceptualizations of the world. At the

same time, we recognize that it is important not to romanticize uncritically either Buddhist teachings or deep ecological ideals. In this context, we highlight Devall’s (1994) claim that there is a major point of divergence between Buddhism and deep ecology: in general, Buddhists—even followers of the less conservative strands of Mahayana—place undue emphasis on sentience, an emphasis which does not allow us fully to develop our capacities for deep ecological thought.⁸ Significantly, Devall does not understand this as an unbridgeable divergence; instead, he points out that “Buddhist wisdom, including the awareness that everything is related to everything else and that the mind is a vast ocean of ignorance, is echoed in the modern science of ecology” (185).

At this point, the links between Buddhist and deep ecological ontologies should be increasingly apparent. To reiterate what we have suggested up to this point: the themes of community, selflessness, non-violence, and deep empathy are central in the writing and activism of the most prominent scholars and activists of engaged Buddhism and deep ecology (Devall 1994, 1996; Macy 1994, 1996; Nhat Hanh 1967, 1996c). Moreover, the two main ecological themes of (both traditional and engaged) Buddhism are the importance of cultivating “empathy toward the suffering of others” and “empa-

⁸The debate about the place of non-sentient beings within Buddhism has had a long history, especially among Mahayana Buddhists in Japan and China. In fact, some Buddhist teachers, most notably a Japanese monk named Ryogen, have argued that there are “no better Buddhist yogis in the world than the plants and trees in [our] garden[s]: still, silent, serene beings disciplining themselves toward nirvana” (Lafleur 1990:139). Notwithstanding this claim, in most strands of Buddhism (except, perhaps, some forms of Shinto-inspired Buddhism most predominant in Japan), the human form is venerated as the only being able to attain full enlightenment. For a discussion of this ongoing debate and the relationships between nature imagery and Buddhist art, please refer to William Lafleur’s (1990) piece, “Sattva: Enlightenment for Plants and Trees.”

thetic identification" (Kinsley 1995: 85). These themes seem to correspond with what deep ecologists call "identification" and "Self" (Naess 1977), respectively. In addition, adherents of both Buddhism and deep ecology offer meditation as an ideal means toward recognition of interconnectivity. In both cases, what results is the production of an ontological understanding of the social world as, not merely inseparable from, but even synonymous with, nature.

These convergences are made explicit by Joanna Macy (1994: 297) in her article, "Toward a Healing of Self and World," where she argues that "the point of Buddhism, and I think, of Deep Ecology too, is that we do not need to be doomed to the perpetual rat-race." In the face of environmental destruction, she believes that an expanded "green self" must necessarily replace conventionally shallow understandings of the ego-self. According to Macy, this green self is the product of the combination of "the mystical with the practical and the pragmatic, transcending separateness, alienation, and fragmentation" (294). Employing Mahayana teachings of the ideals of the *bodhisattva* and interconnectedness, Macy offers meditation as an optimal route toward achieving this self. In particular, she draws on the image of the "jewelled net of Indra" to call for awareness that when we protect nature, we also protect ourselves.⁹

Similarly, and to emphasize the ways Buddhist environmental activists have en-

⁹ As David Kinsley (1995: 88) explains, Indra is a deity who wears a net of jewels, each of which reflects all of the others. This classic Mahayana image is meant to be the archetype of connectedness: each jewel in the net encompasses within it all of the other jewels. In this way, without all of the jewels in the net, no jewel can be seen as a single, individuated, self-containing entity. Consequently, when a person thinks of her/himself as one of the jewels on the net, s/he comes to understand the "self," not as an ego-based "I-self," but rather as a necessarily relational "'we-self' in which we are connected to everything and everything to us" (Coward 1997: 268).

gaged key ecological insights, Kenneth Kraft (1994) replaces the term "engaged Buddhism" with "Green Buddhism." For Kraft, there are many aspects of Buddhist practices that may be (re)imagined as environmental activism. In this vein, he quotes Dogen, a thirteenth-century Zen master, in order to ask readers to "consider whether or not there are any conceivable worlds which are not included in the present time" (3). Kraft argues that reflection on Dogen's question reminds us that our actions impact future generations, just as our current living conditions are the results of the actions of past generations.

For Kraft (1994), what are sometimes understood as individual Buddhist practices are better understood as starting points for, or methods of, cultivating deep ecological thought (and action). Just as we argued above that deep reflection/meditation is a useful way to expand and facilitate awareness of interbeing, Kraft contends that meditation is "supposed to reduce egoism, deepen appreciation of one's surroundings, foster empathy with other beings, clarify intention, prevent what is now called burn-out, and ultimately lead to a profound sense of oneness with the entire universe" (6). According to this view, when one reduces individualistic egoism and attachment to individual desires, one's priorities and actions will shift accordingly. To elaborate upon this point, Kraft gives the example of individual practices taught by Nhat Hanh in the form of *gathas*, "short poems that can prompt us to maintain awareness in daily life" (9). Following Nhat Hanh, Kraft offers various *gathas* as a means by which to cultivate mindfulness. More specifically, he explains, the recitation of *gathas* is meant to transform actions which may have previously been thoughtless, taken-for-granted parts of our daily lives into ritualized ways of practicing thoughtful actions; they become a form of praxis.

As an illustrative example, Kraft (1994) presents readers with a *gatha* Nhat Hanh en-

courages practitioners to recite either out loud or mentally when turning on a faucet: “Water flows from high in the mountains./ Water runs deep in the Earth./Miraculously, water comes to us,/and sustains all life” (10). The reminder here is that the water coming out of a faucet is not separate from the water that “runs deep in the Earth” or “flows from high in the mountains.” This is meant to serve as a point of realization that all life forms are in an interdependent relationship which is mediated through such things as water. Also present in the above *gatha* are reminders that water “sustains all life,” that we could not survive without its availability, and that as such, we are in the same position of dependency upon water as all other plant and animal life co-habiting the earth.

The significant claim here is that individual meditative practices advocated by engaged Buddhists, such as Thich Nhat Hanh, may have very real (environmental) consequences that extend beyond the individual. Indeed, they are meant as practices that expand conceptions of the self beyond individual, egotistical understandings and actions. Buddhist teachings that heighten one’s sense of interconnectedness with the world, it is argued, increase one’s intimacy with the world. Echoing Macy (1996), Kraft (1994: 17) holds that “walking in the world as if it were our lover leads inevitably to deep ecology.” The logic here is that while intimacy may imply knowledge of the world, or an understanding of one’s relationship with the world, it also comes with responsibility toward that with which one is intimate.

CONCLUSION: MOVING, NOT SITTING

So what is it about engaged Buddhism and deep ecology that is so similar that they may re-enforce and complement one another? How engaged is a form of praxis that

appears, ultimately, to be concerned with individual, human mindfulness? What do engaged Buddhists and deep ecologists posit as the relationship between the individual, the social, and the natural? To respond to these questions, let us first review the above discussion.

Buddhism is often considered an Eastern religion meant to induce liberation from suffering while ecology is often represented as a Western science premised on rational, value-free calculation. Although, based on such categorizations, these ontologies may appear incompatible, putting insights from deep ecology into conversation with Buddhist discussions of *nirvana*—as “transcending all pairs of opposites” (Ellwood and McGraw 1999: 131)—one can argue that oppositions between Eastern/Western, self/other, human/nonhuman, sentient/nonsentient, and social/natural must be included in this equation. In fact, this appears to be one of the main points of convergence between engaged Buddhism and deep ecology: to disrupt deeply entrenched dualistic thinking with an aim toward addressing imminent environmental issues. While Buddhism and ecology, as popularly conceived, may seem to be unlikely bedfellows, the relations that have been formed between the two—especially in the context of Thich Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism and Arne Naess’ deep ecology—suggest otherwise. As mentioned above, the major overlaps in the ontological insights of these activist-scholars are (a) critiques of ego-driven, environmentally unsound cultures; (b) an understanding that to overcome these cultures, we must expand our senses of self beyond our ego-selves; and (c) a belief that this extension of self is contingent upon recognition of interconnectedness.

Notwithstanding these similarities, and again as outlined above, there remains at least one major distinction between these two ontologies: the Buddhist expansion of the self often stops at all *sentient* beings. This constant reminder of sentience within Bud-

dhism—particularly within the context of discussions of reincarnation, suffering, and enlightenment—reinforces a hierarchical dualism that seems to ignore the importance of rocks and trees, for example. Thus, while engaged Buddhist (and deep ecological) discussions make room for non-sentient beings to be included in the chain of interdependence, the question remains as to whether or not non-sentient beings can achieve enlightenment.

There are ongoing scholarly debates as to whether or not Buddhist doctrines attribute special status to sentient beings, and especially to human beings. The affirmative response to this debate—that yes, undo emphasis is placed on sentience by Buddhists—is epitomized by claims that while nature imagery has a significant place in Buddhist stories, “the Buddhist tradition develops its attitudes toward nature in the context of an ‘ecology of the mind’ and aims at a ‘purified’ world with man as its steward” (Eckel 1997: 340). According to Malcolm David Eckel, “the focus [in many strands of Buddhism] is on the natural world as a locus and as a guide for the spiritual transformation of the monk himself” (337). In this sense, even when nature imagery is used, nature often is represented as a means toward an end: human liberation.

This distinction between Buddhist and ecological paradigms has remained implicit in this paper up to this point. Yet, it is at this point of divergence that we think deep ecology can offer something important to engaged Buddhist teachings, particularly those which aim at addressing environmental degradation. For example, deep ecologists may point out that sentient beings are generally understood within Buddhists traditions as those with a range of movement, vocalization, and/or relations with one another that are in keeping with human experiences. Consequently, deep ecologists, such as Aldo Leopold (1966), argue that to take sentience as the basis of our identifications remains shallowly anthropocentric. From a

deep ecological perspective, the challenge for human beings becomes to think “like [such things as] a mountain” (137) as a way to challenge our taken-for-granted authoritative and privileged positions.

It is likely within this same context that some people read Nhat Hanh as arguing that “humans are not a special class, different in our essential nature from other forms of life” (King 1996:339). At the same time, self-proclaimed engaged, or “green,” Buddhists such as Joanna Macy (1994) continue to advocate for more ecologically sound paradigms by emphasizing that when we protect nature, and all its components, we also protect *ourselves*. As we see it, this emphasis on our own protection as the ultimate end fails to get beyond an anthropocentric equation of “value with value for humans” (Naess 1977: 83; Anderson 2001). The need to redefine measures of value appears to be a more central discussion for the deep ecologists discussed above than for engaged Buddhists. From a deeply ecological perspective, in other words, anthropocentric or sentience-centred paradigms are understood as shallow in the sense that they continue to posit hierarchical relations in which the components—and particularly the sentient components—of the ecosystem are given priority over the whole.

This is not to invert stereotypical representations, suggesting instead that in “Eastern” religious traditions nature is necessarily viewed as a means to a human end or that “Western” traditions offer a more inclusive route toward addressing environmental degradation. Rather, it is to reiterate that divisions constructed between “Eastern” and “Western” worldviews are highly problematic and likely inaccurate. Indeed, as Eckel (1997: 346) argues, it is a matter of semantics whether or not using the image of nature as “the teacher when one meditates about impermanence” is exploitative and human-centric, especially given that humans cannot be separated from their natural surroundings. It is this point that is par-

ticularly highlighted when our ontological starting point is Naess's (1994: 12) first deep ecological precept (i.e., "rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the *relational, total-field* image") or Nhat Hanh's (1998: 15) engaged Buddhist notion of interbeing, which is premised on awareness that "we are made of our teacher, our father, our mother, our ancestors, our brothers, sisters, our vegetables, water, and all those things."

From our understanding, both Nhat Hanh and Naess ask readers/practitioners not only to understand the world as an interconnected entity, but also to ensure that their actions in the world reflect that ontological understanding. On the basis of this, they each offer an epistemological view: mindfulness and deep reflection are optimal routes to grasping the world as it truly is. According to this epistemological stand, meditation is both thought and action; it is how we can know things for certain. The point is that until we personally (and intuitively) come to understand the world—in terms of the interconnection of all things/beings—there can be no cessation of suffering and our ecological paradigms will remain disengaged and shallow.

The notions of interbeing and interconnectedness also can be drawn upon to provide an answer to critics who argue that Buddhist practices, such as meditation and the recitation of *gathas*, are individualistic, self-interested practices. Again, taking the lack of an individualistic ego-self as our ontological starting point, we might argue that meditation does not seclude an individualistic ego-self in deep thought. Instead, the goal of meditation is to separate the practitioner from the idea of this personal ego-self and to move her/him toward recognition of a socio-natural, ecological "we-self." Moreover, since *gathas* are intended to make us constantly mindful of our actions in the world, and to foster senses of interconnectedness, they are offered as a form of *practice* that may reflect and influence theory. Rather than passive thought processes,

meditative practices, thus, may be better understood as moving, meditative actions through which we may come to embody our thoughts. Thus, although the ultimate goal of such practices may be self-reflection, to look within oneself may be an extremely useful exercise, especially as a path toward recognizing one's complicity in environmental degradation. As Nhat Hahn (1996b:7) holds, "meditation is to be aware of what is going on—in our bodies, our feelings, our minds, and the world." For Nhat Hanh, in order to achieve world peace, we must first have inner peace; we must first be mindful of the ways in which liberation is inevitably interdependent. Again, this mindfulness is contingent on recognition that the individual cannot be separated from the social, which itself must be understood as synonymous with the natural.

This is an important point and one that, as sociologists, we were taught long ago by C. Wright Mills (1959) in his classic work, *The Sociological Imagination*. In this text, Mills describes personal troubles and social issues as inextricable and reflective of one another. Mills urges scholars from all disciplines to dismantle this distinction because, as he argues, "no study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey" (6). Mills, much like Nhat Hanh, in other words, argues that only those scholars who uncover—or can at least imagine—intersections between micro personal biographies and macro social histories can successfully produce research that is both intellectually *and* politically stimulating and active.

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