Principles And Poetry, Places And Stories: The Resources Of Buddhist Ecology

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The world’s religious and spiritual traditions are a rich source of ethical values and principles for reflecting on environmental issues. Both religious adherents and scholars who are concerned about the environmental crisis are mining religious traditions in search of new ethical resources. Religious scriptures, doctrines, and practices have been invoked to promote a holistic, nonanthropocentric, egalitarian, eco-friendly worldview respectful of nature and compassionate to all forms of life. While these kinds of resources are crucial, I propose to include in my discussion of Buddhist ecology not only particular texts, philosophical ideas, and practices that Buddhists marshal in defense of an environmental ethic, but also hermeneutical and tactical strategies that Buddhists employ as well. In adopting this approach my concern is practical: I want to ensure that the religious dimensions of global environmental issues really do have an impact on decision-making, and that these essays have real implications for public policy.¹

The contextuality of religious traditions must be kept in mind. Since there is no such thing as religion in general, the resources religionists bring to an environmental ethic may speak most powerfully to adherents of a given religious tradition or those inhabiting a specific social and cultural context. But those of us engaged in the religion and ecology movement also believe that particular traditions may embody principles and practices of more general applicability.

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225
Despite significant variations among the different traditions of Buddhism that have evolved over its 2,500-year journey throughout Asia and now to the West, Buddhists generally see the world as conjoined on four levels: existentially, morally, cosmologically, and ontologically. Existentially, Buddhists affirm that all sentient beings share the fundamental conditions of birth, suffering, old age, and death. The existential realization of the universality of suffering lies at the core of the Buddha’s teaching. Insight into the nature of suffering, its cause and cessation, and the path to the cessation of suffering constitutes the essence of the Buddha’s enlightenment experience (Mahasacakka Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya). This quadratic teaching forms the basis of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha’s first public teaching. The tradition conveys this universal truth via the story of the founder’s path to Nirvana and the logic of the Four Noble Truths, but also by other narrative strategies. In one story, the Buddha is approached by a young mother after the death of her infant child. She pleads with the Blessed One to restore the life of her child. The Buddha responds by directing the grieving mother to bring a mustard seed from a house in the village where death had never been experienced; if she finds such a seed, he will restore her child’s life. The mother returns to the Buddha, not with the mustard seed, but having realized the universality of the suffering caused by death. The poignant story of a mother’s grief over the death of her child speaks to the heart; the syllogistic logic of the Four Noble Truths speaks to the mind.

Buddhism links the existential condition of the universality of suffering with the moral virtue of compassion. That the Buddha after his enlightenment decides to share his existential insight into the cause of suffering and the path to its cessation, rather than selfishly keeping this insight to himself, is regarded by the tradition as an act of universal compassion. Buddhist environmentalists assert that the mindful awareness of the universality of suffering produces compassionate empathy for all forms of life, particularly for all sentient species. They interpret the Dhammapada’s ethical injunction not to do evil but to do good as a moral principle advocating the nonviolent alleviation of
suffering, an ideal embodied in the prayer of universal loving-kindness that concludes many Buddhist rituals: “May all beings be free from enmity; may all beings be free from injury; may all beings be free from suffering; may all beings be happy.” Out of a concern for the whole of creation, Buddhist environmentalists extend loving-kindness, compassion, and respect beyond people and animals to include plants and the earth itself: “We humans think we are smart, but an orchid... knows how to produce noble, symmetrical flowers, and a snail knows how to make a beautiful, well-proportioned shell. We should bow deeply before the orchid and the snail and join our palms reverently before the monarch butterfly and the magnolia tree.”

The concepts of karma and rebirth (samsara) integrate the existential sense of a shared common condition of all sentient life forms with the moral nature of the Buddhist cosmology. Not unlike the biological sciences, rebirth links human and animal species. Evolution maps commonalities and differences between species on the basis of physical and genetic traits; rebirth maps them on moral grounds. Every form of sentient life participates in a karmic continuum traditionally divided into three worldlevels and a hierarchical taxonomy of five or six life forms. Although this continuum constitutes a moral hierarchy, differences between life forms and individuals are relative, not absolute. Traditional Buddhism may rank humans over animals, animals over hungry ghosts, men over women, monks over the laity, but all forms of karmically conditioned life—human, animal, divine, demonic—are interrelated within contingent, samsaric time: “In the long course of rebirth there is not one among living beings with form who has not been mother, father, brother, sister, son, or daughter, or some other relative. Being connected with the process of taking birth, one is kin to all wild and domestic animals, birds, and beings born from the womb” (Lankavatara Sutra). Nirvana, the Buddhist sumnum bonum, offers the promise of transforming karmic conditionedness into an unconditioned state of spiritual liberation, an emancipation potentially available to all forms of sentient life on the karmic continuum. That plants and trees or the land itself have a similar potential for spiritual liberation became an explicit doctrine in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, but may even have
been part of popular Buddhist belief from earliest times. In sum, Buddhists believe that all life forms share both a problem and a promise: “bodhisattvas each of these, I call the large trees” (Lotus Sutra).

Although the Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth link together all forms of sentient existence in a moral continuum, Buddhist ethics focus on human agency and its consequences. The inclusion of plants and animals in Buddhist schemes of salvation is important philosophically because it attributes inherent value to nonhuman forms of life. But humans have been the primary agents in creating the present ecological crisis and will bear the major responsibility for its solution.

The myth of origins in the canon of Theravada Buddhism describes the deleterious impact of human activity on the primordial natural landscape (Agganna Sutta). Unlike the Garden of Eden story in the Hebrew Bible, where human agency centers on the God-human relationship, the Buddhist story of origin describes the negative impact of humans on the earth as a result of their selfishness and greed. In the Buddhist mythological Eden, the earth flourishes naturally. But human greed and desire lead to division and ownership of the land, and this in turn promotes violent conflict, destruction, and chaos. It is human agency in the Buddhist myth of origin that destroys the natural order of things. Although change is inherent in nature, Buddhists believe that natural processes are directly affected by human morality. From the Buddhist perspective, our relationship to the natural environment is intrinsically moral: hence, an environmental policy based primarily on a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis cannot possibly be sufficient. Moral issues like greed and violence must be at the heart of the matter.

The Buddha’s enlightenment vision incorporates the major elements of the Buddhist worldview. Tradition records that during the night of this defining experience the Blessed One first recalled his previous lives within the karmic continuum; then he perceived the fate of all sentient beings within the cosmic hierarchy; finally he fathomed the nature of suffering and formulated the path to its cessation, articulating the Four Noble Truths and the law of interdependent co-arising. The Buddha’s
awakening evolved in a specific sequence: from an understanding of the particular (his personal karmic history), to the general (the karmic history of humankind), and finally to the principle underlying the cause and cessation of suffering. Subsequently, this principle was further generalized as a universal law of causality: “on the arising of this, that arises; on the cessation of this, that ceases.” Buddhist environmentalists find in the principle of causal interdependence a vision that integrates all aspects of the ecosphere—particular individuals and general species—in terms of the principle of mutual codependence. The three stages of the Buddha’s enlightenment suggest a model for moral reasoning applicable to environmental ethics that integrates general principles, collective action guides, and particular contexts. Effective schemes of distributive justice require that general principles, such as those embodied in the proposed international Earth Charter, be realized in enforceable programs, properly tailored for particular regions and nation-states.

In the Buddhist cosmological model, individual entities are by their very nature relational. There is no autonomous self that is set against the “other,” be that other human, animal, or plant. Buddhist environmentalists reject the domination of one human over another and the human domination of nature, promoting instead an ethic of compassion that respects biodiversity. In the view of the Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, “The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise . . . then we can build a noble environment. If our lives are not based on this truth, then we shall perish.” Global warming presents a case in point. The scientific community has reached a consensus that human activity has been a major cause of the dramatic increase in the production of greenhouse gases. The long-term consequences of the resultant global warming are ominous. Yet short-term economic gain, from the production of fuel inefficient SUVs to the U.S. refusal to join with 178 other nations in support of the Kyoto Protocol, threaten the long-term future of
Donald K. Swearer

the planet. Buddhadasa sees the root of the problem in human
greed but holds the optimistic view that it is not too late to build
a noble world based on mutual respect and cooperation.

In later schools of Buddhist thought the cosmological vision
of interdependent causality evolved into a more substantive
sense of ontological unity. Metaphorically, the image of Indra’s
net found in the Hua-yen (Japanese, Kegon) tradition’s
Avatamsaka Sutra has been especially important in Buddhist
ecological discussions: “Just as the nature of earth is one while
beings each live separately, and the earth has no thought of
oneness or difference, so is the truth of all the Buddhas.” For
Gary Snyder, the Hua-yen image of the universe—as a vast
web of many-sided jewels, each constituted by the reflections of
all the other jewels in the web, and each jewel being the image
of the entire universe—evokes a world of interlinked ecological
communities.4 Buddhist environmentalists argue, furthermore,
that ontological notions such as Buddha-nature or Dharma-
nature provide a basis for unifying all existent entities in a
common sacred universe even though the tradition privileges
human life vis-à-vis spiritual realization. For T’ien-t’ai monks
in eighth-century China, the belief in a universal Buddha-nature
blurred the distinction between sentient and nonsentient life
forms, and logically led to the view that plants, trees, and the
earth itself could achieve enlightenment. Kukai (774–835), the
founder of the Japanese Shingon school, and Dogen (1200–
1253), the founder of the Soto Zen sect, described universal
Buddha-nature in naturalistic terms: “If plants and trees were
devoid of Buddhahood, waves would then be without humidity”
(Kukai); “The sutras [i.e., the dharma] are the entire universe,
mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, plants and
trees” (Dogen). Buddhist environmentalists cite Dogen’s view
as support for the preservation of species biodiversity—a view
that ascribes intrinsic value to all species while at the same time
affirming their shared dharmic nature.

For Buddhists the principle of interdependence authenticated
by the Buddha is a universal, natural law expressed through the
narrative of the Buddha’s own Nirvana and his teaching. As we
have seen, Buddhist scriptures and other texts include the herme-
neutical strategies of metaphor, story, and discursive logic to
promote and provoke an understanding of this truth. Throughout Buddhist history poetry has also been an important literary tool for conveying the truth of the interdependence of humans and nature. The *Therigatha*, an early Pali Sutta, extols nature’s beauty:

Those rocky heights with hue of dark blue clouds
Where lies embossed many a shining lake
Of crystal-clear, cool waters, and whose slopes
The herds of Indra cover and bedeck
Those are the hills wherein my soul delights.

East Asian traditions under the influence of Daoism best represent this tradition, however, as in the poetry of the early-ninth-century Chinese Buddhist poet and layman, Han-shan:

As for me, I delight in the everyday Way
Among mist-wrapped vines and rocky caves
Here in the wilderness I am completely free
With my friends, the white clouds, idling forever
There are roads, but they do not reach the world
Since I am mindless, who can rouse my thoughts?
On a bed of stone I sit, alone in the night
While the round moon climbs up Cold Mountain.

These poems see nature as a source of inspiration for the human spirit to reach beyond an instrumental attitude toward the environment.

**AN ECOLOGY OF HUMAN FLOURISHING**

Buddhism arose in north India in the fifth century B.C.E. at a time when the region was undergoing a process of urbanization and political centralization accompanied by commercial development and the formation of artisan and merchant classes. The creation of towns and the expansion of an agrarian economy led to the clearing of forests and other tracts of uninhabited land. These changes influenced early Buddhism in several ways. Indic Buddhism was certainly not biocentric, and the strong naturalistic sentiments that infused Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan appear to have been absent from early monastic Buddhism, although naturalism played a role in popular piety.
Nonetheless, the natural world was central to the Indic Buddhist conception of human flourishing—perhaps, in part, because of the urbanizing environment in which it was born. While nature as a value in and of itself may not have played a major role in the development of early Buddhist thought and practice, it was always one key component of the tradition’s account of the preconditions for human flourishing.

Even though the picture of the Buddha seated under the tree of enlightenment traditionally has not been interpreted as a paradigm for ecological thinking, today’s Buddhist environmental activists point out that the decisive events in the Buddha’s life occurred in natural settings: the Buddha Gotama was born, attained enlightenment, and died under trees. The textual record, furthermore, testifies to the importance of forests, not only as an environment preferred for spiritual practices such as meditation, but also as a place where the laity sought instruction.

Historically in Asia and today in the West, Buddhists have situated centers of practice and teaching in forests and among mountains at some remove from the hustle and bustle of urban life. The Buddha’s own example provides the original impetus for such locations: “Seeking the supreme state of sublime peace, I wandered . . . until . . . I saw a delightful stretch of land and a lovely woodland grove, and a clear flowing river with a delightful forest so I sat down thinking, ‘Indeed, this is an appropriate place to strive for the ultimate realization of . . . Nirvana’” (Ariyapariyesana Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya).

Lavish patronage and the traffic of pilgrims often complicated and compromised the solitude and simple life of forest monasteries. But forests, rivers, and mountains remain an important factor in Buddhist accounts of human flourishing. Recall, for example, the Zen description of enlightenment wherein natural phenomena such as rivers and mountains are perceived as loci of the sacred, as in Zen Master Dogen’s Mountains and Water Sutra. Although religious practitioners often tested their spiritual mettle in wild nature, most preferred an artfully organized representation of nature, such as that found in the gardens of many Japanese Zen monasteries. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu called his forest monastery in south Thailand the Garden of Empowering Liberation: “The deep sense of calm that nature
provides through separation from the stress that plagues us in the day-to-day world protects our heart and mind. The lessons nature teaches us lead to a new birth beyond suffering caused by our acquisitive self-preoccupation."  

For Buddhist environmentalists, centers like Buddhadasa’s Garden of Empowering Liberation exemplify a sustainable lifestyle grounded in the values of moderation, simplicity, and nonacquisitiveness. Technology alone cannot solve the eco-crisis; it requires a transformation of values and of lifestyle. The Summer 1996 issue of Daedalus takes its title from Jesse H. Ausubel’s lead essay, “The Liberation of the Environment.” Ausubel concludes his analysis of trajectories, strategies, and technologies that lessen pollution and conserve landscape with the ringing affirmation, “We have liberated ourselves from the environment. Now it is time to liberate the environment itself.” Buddhadasa’s model of the Garden of Empowering Liberation brings an ethico-spiritual critique to the confident vision that at long last science and technology will be able to reconcile our economy and the natural environment. There are more profoundly moral and spiritual issues at stake; without this realization debates about environmental protection will be fraught with a limited, instrumentalist myopia. 

Buddhadasa intended the Garden of Empowering Liberation not as a retreat from the world, but as a place where all forms of life—humans, animals, and plants—live as a cooperative microcosm of a larger ecosystem. The ecological ethic exemplified by the Garden of Empowering Liberation highlights the virtues of restraint, simplicity, loving-kindness, compassion, equanimity, patience, wisdom, nonviolence, and generosity. These virtues represent moral ideals for all members of the Buddhist community—monk, layperson, political leader, ordinary citizen, male, female. Political leaders committed to defending the security of the nation are admonished to adhere to the ideal of nonviolence. King Asoka, the model Buddhist ruler, is eulogized for his rejection of animal sacrifice and his protection of animals, as well as for building hospices and other public works. The Buddhist ethic of distributive justice extols the merchant who generously provides for the needy. Even ordinary Thai rice farmers traditionally left a portion of rice unhar-
vested in their fields for the benefit of the poor and for hungry herbivores.

For contemporary engaged Buddhists—most notably the Dalai Lama—a sense of responsibility rooted in compassion lies at the heart of an ecological ethic: "The world grows smaller and smaller more and more interdependent... today more than ever before life must be characterized by a sense of universal responsibility, not only... human to human but also human to other forms of life." The Dalai Lama's ecological ethic gives contemporary expression to a classical Buddhist moral sentiment phrased most eloquently by the eighth-century Indian poet-monk, Santideva:

May I be the doctor and the medicine
And may I be the nurse
For all sick beings in the world
Until everyone is healed
May I become an inexhaustible treasure
For those who are poor and destitute
May I turn into all things they could need.

For many Buddhist environmentalists, compassion necessarily results from an understanding of all life forms as mutually interdependent. Others argue that a mere cognitive recognition of interdependence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for an ecological ethic. These critics emphasize the centrality of practice in Buddhism and uphold the tradition's insistence on training in virtue and the threefold path to moral and spiritual excellence—morality, mindful awareness, wisdom. Among contemporary engaged Buddhists, the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh is the most insistent on the practice of mindful awareness in the development of a peaceful and sustainable world where one perceives the fundamental interconnectedness of life and a feeling of identification with all life forms:

Look deeply: I arrive in every second
to be a bud on a spring branch
to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile
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
The Resources of Buddhist Ecology

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river
and I am the bird which, when spring comes
arrives in time to eat the mayfly
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
I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by
a sea pirate
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing
and loving
Please call me by my true names
so I can wake up
and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door
of compassion. 7

Critics of the ethical saliency of the traditional Buddhist vision of human flourishing argue that such central philosophical concepts as not-self (anatman) and emptiness (shunyata) undermine the distinction between self and other, a distinction essential to an other-regarding ethic. What reason is there to pass laws that protect the civil rights of minorities or animal species threatened with extinction if Buddhism rejects the independent reality of individuals as an epistemological fiction? Furthermore, critics point out that the most basic concepts of Buddhism—Nirvana, suffering, rebirth, not-self, and even causality—were intended to further the goal of the individual’s spiritual quest rather than engagement with the world. They conclude, therefore, that Buddhism serves primarily a salvific or soteriological purpose, and that contemporary efforts to use the tradition for ecological aims distorts the historical and philosophical record.

A related but more sympathetic criticism from within the Buddhist environmental movement suggests that for Buddhism to be an effective force for systemic institutional change, the traditional Buddhist emphasis on individual moral and spiritual transformation must be adjusted to address forcefully the structures of oppression, exploitation, and environmental degrada-
tion. While preserving the unique Buddhist emphasis on the practice of mindful awareness and a personal lifestyle of simplicity, today's engaged Buddhist activists are also confronting head-on a host of international issues, ranging from the disposal of nuclear waste to a just and peaceful resolution of the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The most internationally visible leaders of this movement are the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, but they are joined by many others from around the globe, including Sulak Sivaraksa, A. T. Ariyaratna, Joanna Macy, and Kenneth Kraft.

Buddhist environmentalists believe that their tradition brings to the debates about the global environment an ethic of social and environmental responsibility more compatible with the language of compassion than the rhetoric of rights. Furthermore, they argue, the attempt to apply Buddhist insights to a broad ecology of human flourishing represents the tradition at its best, by elaborating a creative, dynamic response to a contemporary problem.

STORIES AND PLACES: DOI SUTHEP IN NORTHERN THAILAND

I began this essay by referring to the contextual nature of religion and the distinctive hermeneutical and tactical strategies religions can bring to the development of an environmental ethic. The texts, doctrines, and practices that inform a holistic ecological worldview and vision of human flourishing are necessarily part of this discussion; however, since religious traditions are culturally and historically situated, their relevance to specific environmental challenges demands that particular cases also be brought into the discussion. In daily life religions combine with other cultural variables to form a unified story that integrates the work of culture with nature. Environmental writers from Aldo Leopold (Sand County Almanac) to Barry Lopez (Arctic Dreams), Terry Tempest Williams (Refuge), and John Elder (Reading the Mountains of Home) tell their experiences of particular places to make a general point regarding the intrinsic value of the natural environment, a land ethic, and the interrelationship between the human story and nature. In concluding this essay, I have chosen to relate my experience of a particular
place—Doi Suthep, a sacred mountain in the Chiang Mai valley of northern Thailand—to show that the work of culture and nature are interdependent; that this interdependence is important to the integrity of both; and that it has helped to preserve the natural environment against the pressures of tourism and economic exploitation.

From January through September of 1994, I lived at the foot of Doi Suthep, a mountain that overlooks Chiang Mai, Thailand’s second largest city, a modern, bustling, increasingly crowded metropolis. Every day I saw the mountain from my study window, observed it on the way to my office at Chiang Mai University, and frequently visited the Buddhist temple at its summit. The face of the mountain constantly changed. In the hot months of March and April, the parched hillsides were often veiled in a brown haze consisting of dust and smoke from seasonal burning. After the monsoon rains, the mountain appeared with sharp, verdant clarity. At night, the temple lights twinkled brightly, while during the day wispy white clouds often encircled the peak. Doi Suthep proved to be a virtual kaleidoscope of shapes and colors, sights and sounds. The many faces the mountain displayed during the months I was her neighbor became a metaphor for Doi Suthep as a document into which human meanings and ideologies are read.

Rising 1,050 meters above sea level, the environs of Doi Suthep were first inhabited by the Lawa, a Mon-Khmer group that lived in the area prior to the major Tai migrations into northern Thailand in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. From the time King Mengrai established Chiang Mai as his capital in 1292, the city has dominated northern Thailand. Physically, the mountain has served as an orientation point for the valley’s inhabitants; ecologically, its watershed sustains an ever-growing population and its forest cover houses an impressive diversity of flora and fauna that includes over 253 species of orchids, 320 species of birds, 50 species of mammals, and more than 500 species of butterflies. New species of plants and animals are regularly discovered on Doi Suthep. Near its summit stands Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep, one of the most revered Buddhist sanctuaries in mainland Southeast Asia. A summer palace was built for the country’s reigning monarch on Doi Pui, a neighbor-
Mountains in the Doi Suthep range loom large in the legends and myths of the area. The valley’s inhabitants are protected by the guardian spirits of the Lawa, Phu Sae and Ya Sae, who reside on the mountains and who are placated and honored by an annual buffalo sacrifice. An ancient burial mound on Doi Pui’s summit is reputed to contain the remains of the Lawa chieftain, Vilangkha. According to legend, he was an unsuccessful suitor of Queen Cama, who ruled the Mon city of Haripuñjaya in the ninth century, four hundred years prior to the Tai subjugation of the area by Mengrai. The mountain takes its name from the legendary hermit sage Vasudeva, the son of Phu Sae and Ya Sae, a major figure in northern legends who is linked to the founding of Haripuñjaya. It was Vasudeva who arranged for Queen Cama to come to northern Thailand from Lavapura, modern Lopburi. Devotees continue to make offerings to Vasudeva’s spirit at a cave on the mountain’s western slope where the ascetic is thought to have lived.

Of surpassing historical and cultural significance, however, is Wat Phrathat, the Buddhist temple-monastery near Doi Suthep’s summit. Here myth and legend become history. Tradition has it that the sanctuary was established in the fourteenth century to house a Buddha relic brought by the monk Sumana Thera from the Thai kingdom of Sukhothai to Chiang Mai at the request of its ruler, Ku’ena (1355–1385). According to legend, upon its arrival the relic miraculously divided itself. King Ku’ena enshrined half of the relic at the royal Flower Garden Monastery (Wat Suan Dok) located in Chiang Mai city. The other half was placed on the back of an elephant to be enshrined wherever the animal was led by the gods, suggesting that supernatural forces determined its location on the mountain. These stories illustrate the rich Lawa, Mon, and Tai cultural map that overlays Doi Suthep’s imposing physical topography.

The contemporary social and cultural significance of Doi Suthep as a sacred mountain became clear in 1986 during a controversy over the proposed construction of an electric cable car from the base of the mountain to the temple-monastery at
The Resources of Buddhist Ecology

the summit. The cable car, endorsed by the Tourist Organization of Thailand, would accommodate the ever-increasing number of tourists who flock to Thailand’s northern mountains. Long gone are the days when pilgrimage to the summit was on foot. But the two-lane road to the sanctuary constructed under the inspired leadership of the charismatic monk Khrua Siwijai had itself become part of the mountain’s legendary history. It is one thing for a narrow road to meander up the mountain; for a commercial company to build a cable car is another matter. Environmentalists, university professors, students, and ordinary citizens united in protest. A key element of the protest to block the cable car was the role played by Buddhist monks, especially Bodhiramsi, the assistant ecclesiastical governor of the province of Chiang Mai and one of the most highly respected abbots in the city. Niranam Khorabhatham’s letter in the Bangkok Post of April 30, 1986, illustrates not only the tenor of the protestors’ rhetoric but also their reverence for the mountain:

SIR: The manager of the proposed cable car project on Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai, stated that he was “not overlooking the sanctity of Wat Phrathat” (Postbag, March 14). He underestimates the northern people: The Soul of Lanna [northern Thailand] is still alive. Northerners perceive, at least in their subconscious, that Mount Suthep is like a symbolic stupa. Doi Suthep’s dome-like shape is like an immense replica of the ancient Sanchi style stupa, a gift to Lanna by the Powers of Creation. Stupas are reliquaries of saints. More than that, they are a structural representation of the very essence of Buddhism. Plant and animal life are like Nature’s frescoes, both beautifying and exemplifying the Law [dharma] not less than paintings in any man-made shrine. Although sometimes not being able to explain why rationally, the northern people want to preserve the Stupa Doi Suthep as it was given to them by Creation, as untouched as possible, as sacred.9

PLACE, STORY, AND PRINCIPLE

The pressures to develop Doi Suthep for its commercial value to the tourism industry threaten the mountain’s natural environment and its spiritual integrity. The fact that the mountain
is perceived by northern Thais as a sacred landscape was a major factor in challenging both private and government intentions to build a cable car to its summit. While the place that Doi Suthep holds in the cultural imagination of northern Thais is unique to that particular place, the story of the mountain from its legendary origin to today suggests a more general truth, namely, that narratives of place can make a crucial contribution to environmental ethics. Indeed, when it comes to inspiring concrete action, such stories may be decisive, for they have the power to touch the deepest sensibilities of our personal and social identity. Ongoing narratives that connect myth and history, past and present, humans and nature give an environmental ethic a multivalent inclusiveness it otherwise lacks. The Doi Suthep episode, furthermore, can also be read from the perspective of the Buddhist principle of interdependence, the truth at the very core of the Buddhist worldview. It is this reading with which I bring this discussion of Buddhist ecological strategies to a close.

The stories of the Lawa chieftain Vilangkha, the ascetic Vasudeva, and the miraculous Buddha relic that was enshrined in two places tell of a symbiotic relationship between the mountain and the city. Whether one draws a relationship of dynamic tension between the two, as symbolized by Vilangkha, who was rejected by Queen Cama; a collaborative one, as illustrated by Vasudeva, the mountain ascetic who founded the first city in northern Thailand; or a relationship of substantive interconnection, as suggested by the Buddha relic enshrined in the city and on the mountain—the kingdoms of Haripunjaya and Chiang Mai derive their meaning not in isolation, but in relationship to the mountain. Mountain and muang, the Thai term for city, are inextricably bound together. Their fates are mutually interdependent. Those who fought the cable car project perceive the natural environment of the mountain as a unique locus of the sacred, essential to the identity of the muang.

In 1986, northern Thai Buddhists saw a threat to Doi Suthep as a threat to their own well-being. Donald Brown, in this issue of Daedalus, correctly suggests that ascribing an intrinsic rather than an instrumental value to nature is the cornerstone of an environmental ethic. But it is also true that an environmental
The Resources of Buddhist Ecology

Ethic depends on understanding that we as human beings are inextricably linked to nature, and that human flourishing depends on whether, as Buddhadasa has said, “we can listen to the voice of trees, grass, sand, and dirt and hear the sound of the dharma.” If, as Lee Schipper suggests in the Summer 1996 issue of Daedalus, the achievement of ten thousand years of human history is that we have again become cave dwellers but with electronic gadgets, then we will have sacrificed more than nature; we will have sacrificed our humanity.

Endnotes

1 This essay is adapted and enlarged from Donald K. Swearer, “Buddhism and Ecology: Challenge and Promise,” Earth Ethics 10 (1) (Fall 1998): 19-22. © 1998 by the Center for Respect of Life and Environment.


3 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Phutasasanik Kap Kan Anurak Thamachat (Buddhists and the Care for Nature) (Bangkok: Komol Thimthong Foundation, 1990), 35; translation by the author.


5 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Siang Takon Jak Thamachat (Shouts from Nature) (Bangkok: Sublime Life Mission, 1971), 6; translation by the author.


8 The author wishes to thank Swarthmore College, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for support of his research on sacred mountain traditions in Southeast Asia.

9 Bangkok Post, 30 April 1986, 5.