Rethinking Ecology: Framing a Zen Buddhist Eco-Praxis

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When observing the state of the natural environment, it is most certainly clear that it is being depleted and its health is declining. The well-being of the earth and its inhabitants have become subject to millennia of anthropocentric transformation across cultures. However, this may be most readily observed in the Western world. The heavy influence of the received tradition of Christianity in the lives and practices of citizens in the West, I argue, is what is to blame. Humans lay waste to the natural environment in the name of themselves, in order to promote their own selfish desires, and to increase capital.

The anthropocentric view found within the books of the Judeo-Christian *Bible* is surely where the burden lies. The propagation of science and technology in the interest of human ends was, and still is, problematic in that it too often disregards the flourishing of the natural environment. The problem is seen in the fact that vis-á-vis our current industrialized and consumer practices,

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nature cannot regenerate itself in a timely enough manner to provide sustainability for not only humans, but for the vast majority of organisms that inhabit this planet. We cannot continue to understand humans' relationships to the natural environment in this anthropocentric/capitalistic way. We must do away with the dualistic "man vs. nature" state-of-mind if we are to address of the problem of pollution and the unsustainable hoarding and consumption of nature.

I contend that it will help to look to classical traditions of Asia, namely Zen Buddhism, to cultivate a robust, cogent, and fruitful eco-praxis — beneficial not only to humankind, but also to the natural environment. One may find that upon this construction of Zen eco-praxis that humankind is not separate ontologically and axiologically to the natural environment, but it is in fact an interactive part of the natural order of the myriad things. I will attempt this construction of a Zen eco-praxis and advocate its adoption in order to benefit all sentient beings by laying out some basic concepts in Zen practice. These practices and ideas will help to produce an improved awareness in regards to environmental ethics.

Crafting a Zen (Chán) Environmental Ethic

While Christian doctrine has no conflict with the term "ecology," Zen Buddhism may. The Zen tradition would reject any and all attempts to give a determinate account of anything. Hence, it is necessary to replace the suffix '-logy' with '-praxis'. '-Praxis', for the purposes of this work, may be understood as "a set of examples for practice." With this perception in mind, an "eco-praxis" may be explained as "a set of examples for practice regarding the home (or

environment).” We find in Zen Buddhism, a very robust canon and a large amount of practices. In other words, there are contained “examples” that contribute to a way of living that promotes a flourishing, enlightened existence for all beings.

The first step to take in crafting a more eco-friendly worldview is to have a staunch rejection of dualism, anthropocentrism, and understanding nature as simply having instrumental value. We must not continue to understand a dichotomous separation between “man” and “nature”, for, if we do, there will always be the notion of one having to be more powerful than the other. This produces dualistic prioritizing, or an axiological and metaphysical disparity. The strict sense of anthropocentrism found within the earliest teachings of Christianity cannot be used to support constant stealing from the environment.

While attempting to deconstruct our current ecological worldview, it is my intention to replace it with a more viable and beneficial approach to the natural environment. The outlook of the current section is to do this via Zen Buddhism. This is not an attempt at trying to evangelize the religious aspect of Zen, but rather to only realize that it offers a cogent alternative to our current, destructive environmental ethics. Graham Parkes writes that a Zen Buddhist environmental ethic may be conducive “to a fulfilling way

of life that lets the natural environment flourish" and that by following such "there will be a chance of some progress."[1]

From the perspective of a Zen eco-praxis there is the realization of intrinsic value in the things of nature. This stands directly opposed to the thought of exclusively instrumental value of nature found within the Christian-based ecology. To say that something has intrinsic value is to say that it has a value 'in itself', and, according to Zen ethics, this value should be respected. It is to assert that "things…[have] a value over and above the various uses to which they can be put."[2] There are also other key components to consider when crafting a Zen environmental ethic. The important concepts relevant to the practice of Zen are wisdom (*prajñā*), Buddha-nature, silent meditation (Sanskrit: *dhyāna*, Chinese: *chán*, Japanese: *zen*), suchness (*tathatā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), dependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and emptiness (*sūnyatā*). It is important also to note that these ideas mentioned above are intertwined in a complex way, and are perhaps understood best when considered together. Therefore it may be necessary to mention some component when giving an explanation of another component as it relates to building this eco-praxis.

[1] Parkes, Graham. "Voices of Mountains, Trees, and Rivers." *Buddhism and Ecology*. Ed. Mary E. Tucker and Duncan R. Williams. Cambridge: Harvard University Publications, 1997. 111-28. Print., p. 124

[2] James, Simon P. *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*. Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2004. Print., p. 104

Zen, when it is translated, literally means "meditation". This form of Buddhism stresses the importance of silent meditation. This is its key feature. Bodhidharma is said to have brought the tradition to China in the 5th century CE. He is often attributed to having meditated in a cave for nine years. The point of meditation is to develop a calming of the mind – to rid oneself of scattered thoughts and to attain enlightenment (*satori*). It is through meditation without thoughts that wisdom that reveals one's Buddha-nature is found. The following verse is attributed to Bodhidharma:

> A special tradition outside the scriptures;
>
> With no dependence upon words and letters.
>
> A direct pointing into the mind;
>
> Seeing the one's own nature, and attaining Buddhahood.[3]

For the Zen practitioner, wisdom is not realized by simply studying the scriptures or through good deeds, but rather can be grasped through meditation. Wisdom is what provides penetrating insight into the nature of reality, one's own Buddha-nature. It helps to rid the delusion that hides the truth of the world. Zen can help point the way to sudden Awakening (*satori*). However, not only does this assist in coming to terms with one's own Buddha-nature, but it

[3] Mitchell, Donald William. *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*. New York [u.a.: Oxford Univ., 2002. Print., p. 201

serves as a means to displaying that all things have Buddha-nature. This includes the environment itself. Kūkai wrote that:

> Both this space and these plants and trees are the *dharmakaya*. Even though with the physical eye one might see the coarse form of plants and trees, it is with the Buddha-eye that the subtle color can be seen. Therefore, without and alteration in what is in itself, trees and plants may, unobjectionably, be referred to as having Buddha-nature.[4]

He claims that all things, including mountains, rivers, and trees have Buddha-nature. His esoteric form of Buddhism contains the idea that the "*dharmakaya* expounds the *dharma*."[5] What this means is that the reality of Buddha-nature is seen within the universe – that the *dharma*, or the Buddha's teaching, can be observed in reality. Because of this personal nature, the intrinsic value of the natural environment is also noticed. The intimacy found in nature is for enjoyment and should be revered as revealing the truth of the Buddha. Dōgen ascribed to this thinking as well. Nature is "sacred and is a source of wisdom."[6] He accepts the doctrine of not killing and therefore believes that all beings are encouraged to "blossom and flourish."[7] However, having Buddha-nature does not simply mean that things have the potential to become a Buddha, but rather

[4] LaFleur, William R. *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*. Ed. J. Baird Callicott. Albany: State University of New York, 1989. 183-209. Print., p. 186-187
[5] See Parkes, "Voices of Mountains, Trees, and Rivers.", p. 115
[6] Ibid., p. 118
[7] Ibid., p. 123

that all things are Buddhas without the realization of such. Hence, we are presented with the importance of developing wisdom through meditation.

When one has the experience of *satori,* one sees things "such as they truly are". When Awakening occurs, the practitioner no longer projects his or her own individual view on the structure of the cosmos. In the exposure to the true nature of reality, the "emptiness" of all particularities is observed. Emptiness is directly related to 'dependent co-origination' and is helpful in breaking down the traditional, dualistic view held by many people today. Within Zen there is nothing that is independent of anything else. Nothing has a substantial independence or "own-being". This is why it is referred to as 'empty' – empty of own-being. Things come into being by the relationships of everything else in the universe. The example of "Indra's Net" found in the *Flower Ornament Sutra* is helpful in understanding this:

> The *Sutra* describes a net extending infinitely in all directions, a single sparkling jewel set into each of its infinite 'eyes'. The net and the jewels have been arranged in such a way that each jewel reflects every other jewel (and its reflection in the other jewels), and so on to infinity. In this manner, the entire net finds itself reflected in each and every particular jewel.[8]

[8] See Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*., p. 14

We see with this portrait that each jewel at each cross-section of the net is being reflected in every other jewel. This is an image of *pratītyasamutpāda*. Things are composed of the relations to every other thing, and in this way, they lack their 'own-being' (*svabhāva-śūnya)*. By lacking their 'own-being', things are said to be empty (*sūnyatā*). This is important to note as the discussion moves forward, rejecting dualism, and specifically the "man v. nature" dichotomy that is seen in Christian-based ecology. Zen "enables a practitioner to overcome the dichotomy in one's consciousness between subject and object and to bridge the gap between the "I" and the whole universe."[9] For our eco-praxis we may say that Zen Buddhism places an emphasis on the "decentering of the self and moves to have a concern for the wider network of life."[10] This is juxtaposed to the thought of having an ultimate concern for the 'self', or 'man' in regards to environmental ethics. There is not a hard-lined boundary that separates one particular item of nature from other items of nature. The identity of the item can only be understood in a larger context that is the relationships between all other objects. It depends on the wholeness of nature.[11] Nothing exists entirely independent of its relationship to other things. But, when taking into consideration the doctrine of 'emptiness' along with the promotion of the intrinsic

[9] Habito, Ruben. "Mountains and Rivers and the Great Earth." *Buddhism and Ecology*.Ed. Mary E. Tucker and Duncan R. Williams. Cambridge: Harvard University Publications, 1997. 165-76. Print., p. 169
[10] Eckel, Malcolm D. "Is There a Buddhist Philosophy of Nature?" *Buddhism and Ecology*. Ed. Mary E. Tucker and Duncan R. Williams. Cambridge: Harvard University Publications, 1997. 327-50. Print., p. 342
[11] See James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics.,* p. 77

value of things in nature, one may pose the question: "If things are truly empty of own-being, then how is it that a thing can have a value in-and-of itself?"

This question may be answered by taking into consideration the fact that a unique entity is comprised of the relationships between all other entities in the universe. In this way the unique entity is, in fact a unique particularity, but it is not substantially independent of anything else. So, the particular object is composed of relationships between all other objects in the cosmos. It is impossible to refer to the value of any distinct thing without also referring to its environment.[12] In this way any one thing may be considered to be "one" with everything else. The intrinsic value comes from the unique momentary configurations of the differing relations that make up the particular entity, although it may still lack substantial discreteness or independence. Ruben Habito gives the prospective outlook:

> This way of seeing everything as [one] leads to actions that would not destroy but would protect, revere, and celebrate the mountains and rivers and the great wide earth as one's own body. It is this living sense of oneness with the mountains, river, the great wide earth lived and felt as one's

[12] Ibid., p. 86

> own body which can provide us humans with a key to the way out of our critical ecological situation.[13]

"Oneness" comes from the deep compassion felt for all beings found within Zen Buddhism. Compassion is central to this formation of an eco-friendly lifestyle. This strong sense of compassion is unique to the Mahāyāna tradition, of which Zen is a school. This compassion is seen with the Bodhisattva, who takes four vows to help other beings transcend suffering: 1) However innumerable beings are, I vow to save them, 2) However inexhaustible the passions are, I vow to extinguish them, 3) However immeasurable the *Dharmas* are, I vow to master them, 4) However incomparable the Buddha-Way is, I vow to attain it. This shows the true compassion of the Zen tradition. The *Bodhisattva* has chosen to dedicate him/herself to helping others obtain *satori*. We see here the aspect of Zen Buddhism that shows ultimate care and concern for all beings, true 'self'-lessness. In order to cultivate an environmentally-friendly way of life, one must develop this sense of compassion and respect. It must be first recognized that all things have intrinsic value, which would then lead to this. In the case of Zen Buddhism, to recognize the intrinsic value of a thing is to come to terms that that thing has no subjective or objective value, but rather to admit that everything is

[13] See Habito, "Mountains and Rivers and the Great Earth.", p. 172

presenting the thing in question. To realize this would be for one to develop reverence for the treatment of the totality of the cosmos.[14]

Conclusion

At the beginning of this piece I considered the current disastrous state of our understanding of ecology. This, I claim, stems from the texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as the popular application of technology, which only serves to further the anthropocentric understanding of the cosmos. While I still hold to this position, a critic may claim that I have composed a "straw man" fallacy in dealing with Christian ecology. That is, one may say that I have set up an account of Christian environmental ethics only to be able to easily discount it. This person may say that this is not how a Christian ecology should be understood. Rather than being thought of as anthropocentric, it should be more closely aligned with a theocentric stewardship. Certainly, this is an issue to contemplate. Lynn White points out that a viable Christian ecology was exemplified through St. Francis of Assisi. Francis tried to instill the virtue of humility in humankind. He attempted to do away with the thought that man was the "king" over nature – pushing forward the idea that all species are to praise the Creator in their own unique ways.[15]

[14] See Parkes, "Voices of Mountains, Trees, and Rivers.", p. 122
[15] White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-207. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Oct. 2013., p. 1206

However, as I previously have mentioned, this is not how the understandings of Christian ecology have been implemented. It seems that this position, no matter how noble, would be quite unpopular, as history has shown. While this may have been the original intent of the scriptures found in the *Bible,* this is not the Christian ecology that has been adopted by society. Domination has become key to considering the applied Christian environmental ethics; and it is through the domination of nature, by way of anthropocentric technologies and sciences, that is driving the world to a catastrophic end. Thus, it is important to consider the received understanding of Christian ecology, as well as an alternative paradigm.

While here I have argued for a Zen practice concerning the environment, I do not automatically assume that this is the only viable way in which to engage with nature. One does not have to convert to Buddhism in order to accept the eco-praxis advocated for in this piece. It is only a set of practices that, I believe, best helps to realize an advantageous understanding of the relationships in the cosmos. However, even if people are not willing to accept the ideas put forth by a Zen Buddhist environmental ethic, then perhaps this will at least provide the realization that humanity cannot continue on the current path of destruction that they are on. Anyone not willing to accept the Zen eco-praxis should at least attempt an evaluation of their own personal convictions with regards to the environment. Upon doing so, they may be able to reconstruct a beneficial ecology of their own.

It is my claim that, if we are to reverse the negative effects that we have had on the environment because of our previous system of understanding man's relationship to nature, we must critically analyze our mode of thought. As has been advocated, Zen Buddhism offers a 'praxis' that is environmentally sound. By implementing the practices of realizing that items in nature have intrinsic value (by way of gaining wisdom through meditation that recognizes Buddha-nature, emptiness, dependent co-origination, and compassion), we may more favorably engage with our 'home'. D.T. Suzuki offers the following concerning Zen and the environment: "Zen purposes to respect nature, to love nature, to live its own life; Zen recognizes that our nature is one with objective nature…in the sense that nature lives in us and we in nature. Zen…[makes] no attempt to utilize nature for selfish purposes."[16] It is clear that Zen offers a way of living that would contribute to a better relation among beings on the Earth. The practices of Zen funnel into a beneficial eco-praxis.

[16] Suzuki, Daisetz T. *Zen and Japanese Culture.* New York: Princeton UP, 1973. Print., p. 351-352.