

Buddhist Environmental Humanism

Doing Good for Self and Others

By

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Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
Dp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
Itv	<i>tivuttaka</i>
J	<i>Jātaka</i>
Kd	<i>Khandhaka</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
SN	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
Th	<i>Theragāthā</i>
The	<i>Therīgāthā</i>
V	<i>Vinaya</i>
Vis.M.	<i>Visuddhimaga</i>

Chapter 1

Introduction: Toward a Buddhist Environmental Humanism

*“Often what we take for a kindness is just someone
acting in their capacity as a human being.”*

– Robert Breault (Operatic Singer)

In mid-September 2024, in the northernmost district of Thailand’s northern province of Chiang Rai, a Buddhist temple, Wat Phasukkaram, became an unlikely symbol of the country’s growing vulnerability to climate change. After days of relentless rain, floodwaters surged through Mae Sai District, surrounding the temple and trapping 38 people inside, including monks, novices, and laypeople. Stranded by the fast-rising waters from the overflowing Sai River, a monk’s desperate call for help, accompanied by a video of the flooded temple grounds, spread across social media.¹

The prolonged September floods resulted in the death of dozens of people and impacted hundreds of thousands of families throughout the province. Thai scientists asserted that climate change coupled with La Niña contributed to the (un)natural disaster. The monthly rainfall in Chiang Rai in August was higher than normal by 40 percent to 50 percent. Mae Sai District experienced flooding six times in September, which was unprecedented.² It was estimated that the first wave of flooding cost Chiang Rai and neighboring provinces as much as 27 million baht (830 million USD).³ Meanwhile, Wat Tham Pha Chom Buddhist Temple, which is located on a hilltop and largely unaffected by the flood, became a temporary refuge for hundreds of residents displaced by the flood.

The events taking place in Thailand’s northern provinces is far from exceptional nowadays. In February 2024, in his message to the participants of the 9th International Conference of Tibet Support Groups in Brussels, Belgium, he highlighted the environmental concerns related to the Tibetan Plateau, in particular, the increasing human activities and rising temperatures on the plateau, which pose a significant threat to the region’s water balance.

Given that the Tibetan Plateau is a vital source of freshwater for over two billion people, the Dalai Lama emphasized that the protection of the Tibetan environment is a global concern.⁴ While the Earth has experienced natural disasters throughout its history, the current environmental crisis characterized by events like that described above is uniquely caused by human activity in the Anthropocene, a proposed geological epoch that highlights the significant impact humans have had on Earth's systems. It signifies a period where human activities have become the dominant force shaping the planet's climate, ecosystems, and geology.⁵ The concept emerged in the late 20th century, recognizing that human actions, such as industrialization, deforestation, and the burning of fossil fuels, have left a lasting mark on the Earth. This includes phenomena like climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. While the Anthropocene is not yet officially recognized as a formal geological epoch, it serves as a powerful framework for understanding the profound changes humans have brought about.

Evidence supporting the premises of the Anthropocene has been meticulously documented by a plethora of reputable scientific institutions and international organizations. This crisis presents an existential threat to the delicate ecological equilibrium that sustains life on Earth. The exigency of the situation necessitates an immediate and comprehensive response on a global scale.⁶ The most concerning facet of this crisis is its rapid acceleration. The rate of species extinction has reached an unprecedented level, with entire ecosystems teetering on the precipice of collapse. Global temperatures exhibit an alarming upward trajectory with the 2014-2023 becoming the hottest decade on record—and more records expected to be broken. This is fueled by ongoing greenhouse gas emissions from activities such as burning fossil fuels, deforestation, industrial processes, and agriculture, which trap heat in the atmosphere and accelerate climate change. These alterations are triggering a cascade of deleterious consequences, including the increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and a disruption of the intricate web of life.⁷

The ramifications of inaction are undeniably catastrophic. Climate change jeopardizes global food security while displacing populations as droughts, storms, and floods become more commonplace and intense.⁸ Unmitigated pollution by chemicals and waste products disrupts natural ecosystems and directly threatens human health.⁹ Biodiversity loss weakens the natu-

ral world's capacity to regulate climate and provide essential resources.¹⁰ These environmental issues have the potential to destabilize societies, cultures, and economies across the globe. Yuval Harari commented, "The survival of human civilization too is under threat. Because we still seem unable to build an industrial society that is also ecologically sustainable, the vaunted prosperity of the present human generation comes at a terrible cost to other sentient beings and to future human generations."¹¹

However, amidst this bleak landscape, a flicker of hope can be seen. Public awareness of the ecological crisis has increased in recent years. This growing awareness has translated into some positive developments. Political will exhibits some signs of strengthening, with nations establishing more ambitious climate targets.¹² Technological advancements are rendering renewable energy sources progressively more accessible and cost-effective.¹³ Spurred by a sense of urgency and a yearning for a sustainable future, youth movements are increasingly demanding decisive action from world leaders.¹⁴

These positive developments, however, are woefully insufficient. Transforming political pronouncements into concrete actions necessitates a paramount sense of urgency that transcends mere rhetoric. A globally coordinated effort that prioritizes ecological sustainability is imperative because as Yuval Harari pointed out, "Climate change can devastate even countries that adopt excellent environmental regulations, because it is a global rather than a national problem."¹⁵ This must translate to robust investments on a global scale in renewable energy sources, the promotion of sustainable practices in agriculture and industry, and the implementation of environmentally conscious policies at every level of governance. It also necessitates holding both corporations and governments accountable for their ecological footprint.

Religion and Ecology

The ecological crisis facing humanity demands collective efforts and transformative changes across all sectors of society.¹⁶ Confronting the reality of the Anthropocene, scholars in various fields have tried to reflect on the ramifications of this epoch from their particular perspectives. Those in the field of religion and religious environmentalism have also done the same.

Michael Norton's book *Anthropocene Religion: Rethinking Nature, Humanity and Divinity Amid Climate Catastrophe* examines the concepts of "nature" and "religion" and proposes a new understanding of religion as a material, embodied practice that is intertwined with the natural world. Norton delves into the Gaia hypothesis and explores its implications for both scientific and religious thought. By redefining religion and nature, Norton attempts to provide a philosophical framework for addressing the urgent environmental challenges of our time.¹⁷

The *Journal of Global Buddhism* in 2024 also published a special issue focused on "Buddhism in the Anthropocene," which deals with the intersection of Buddhist thought and practice with contemporary environmental concerns. Contributions in the special issue offer perspectives challenging the traditional human-centric view, emphasizing the Earth's active role in human affairs, and explore how Buddhists are responding to the climate crisis and ecological degradation, from the mindfulness practices of Sri Lankan forest monks to the environmental activism of Australian Buddhist communities.¹⁸ At the same time, there is complexity of these responses due to challenges posed by modern consumption and economic pressures on Buddhist communities. Some Buddhist practices, while aiming for environmental benefit, can inadvertently contribute to ecological harm. Despite this, it is important to examine the material and cultural dimensions of Buddhist practices and their impact on the environment as part of the exploration on how Buddhism can contribute to addressing the urgent environmental challenges of the Anthropocene.

In considering the relationship between Buddhism and the Anthropocene, Alice Millington argued that Himalayan Buddhists have long acknowledged human influence on the environment through their cosmology and practices. Himalayan folklore features deities and spirits that can influence weather and natural disasters as a response to human actions. Buddhist rituals like "chos skor" aim to appease these deities and maintain environmental balance. Millington asserted that Himalayan Buddhists have lived in an "Anthropocene" for centuries, albeit one focused on a spiritual relationship with nature rather than solely material impact.¹⁹

Critical reflection by scholars of religion such as those mentioned above as well as contribution from religion are crucial because religious systems

offer a comprehensive framework that provides meaning and purpose to human existence. Encompassing beliefs, rituals, and ethics, religious teachings shape individuals and communities within a cosmological context and connect humanity to the divine, nature, and each other, offering a path for personal growth and societal cohesion.²⁰

In reality, scholars from diverse fields and religious traditions have collaboratively developed the field of religion and ecology, which has led to the establishment of numerous academic programs, journals, and organizations that integrate scientific and religious perspectives on environmental issues. This collaboration has revealed the environmental potential within religious traditions, positioning religions as significant partners in promoting sustainable development. The dialogue between scientists and religious leaders has led to joint efforts, such as appeals for environmental preservation and participation in climate summits.²¹

Thus, religious traditions, with their profound moral teachings, ethical frameworks, and spiritual practices, have a unique and essential role to play in addressing this crisis.²² They provide moral and ethical guidelines that emphasize values such as compassion, justice, simple living, moderation, gratitude, and respect for life. These teachings inspire individuals to consider the broader implications of their actions on the environment and on the well-being of the human community in the present and future. In other words, religious teachings can contribute to the formation of an ecological conscience among religious adherents and beyond.²³

Unlike many secular disciplines, religious teachings can often impel followers to adhere to certain ethical norms, even when they seemingly conflict with personal interests.²⁴ Indeed, time and again, it has been shown that religion can provide tremendous motivation for what individuals say and do.²⁵ In a world where a significant majority of the people still adhere to a religious tradition, many scholars of religion have pointed out that religious ethics remain one of the most practical vehicles for solving the ecological crisis and other social dilemmas. This is particularly pertinent in societies where religious beliefs are deeply ingrained.²⁶ In reality, many religious traditions through their teachings, can foster a spiritual connection to nature by helping the faithful to recognize the sacredness and intrinsic value of the natural world. This connection encourages reverence for the

Earth and its ecosystems, which can lead to practices that safeguard biodiversity, clean air, water sources, and fertile soils. In this regard, religion can do what few disciplines are able to do.²⁷

In addition to providing spiritual connections, religious teachings often advocate for justice, peace, and environmental sustainability.²⁸ Many environmental challenges disproportionately affect the poor and marginalized communities who often lack the resources and political power to mitigate their impacts.²⁹ By addressing environmental issues through the perspective of social and intergenerational justice, religious institutions can amplify the voices of these communities, advocate for policies that promote environmental justice, and work toward equitable access to clean air, water, and land.³⁰

Because of the wide reach of religion, religious institutions can also serve as centers of education and awareness.³¹ They are able to teach their followers not only theological aspects of environmental care but can also integrate topics about environmental issues, ecological principles, and the importance of sustainability. They can provide platforms for dialogue, reflection, and collective action. They can help mobilize communities to participate in environmental initiatives, such as tree planting campaigns, waste reduction programs, or advocacy for renewable energy.

These efforts can be carried out within each religious community or in collaboration with groups from other faiths as a form of interreligious dialogue. In the face of global environmental challenges, interfaith collaboration has emerged as a powerful force for collective action.³² Religious leaders and communities from diverse traditions come together to share resources, best practices, and effective strategies for environmental stewardship. This type of social collaboration transcends religious boundaries, displaying solidarity and cooperation in addressing shared ecological concerns on a global scale.³³

Buddhism and the Ecological Crisis

This book explores the contributions of Theravāda Buddhism, or Early Buddhism, to addressing ecological issues. Theravāda Buddhism, prac-

ticed by the majority in Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, also appeals to many outside this region. As people seek answers to the ecological crisis, many turn to Buddhism for its teachings that promote environmental flourishing. A survey of the literature on Buddhist environmentalism reveals a whole gamut of ideas that aim to show the conduciveness of Buddhism to ecological concerns. These perspectives range from citing the Buddha as an exemplar in environmental safeguarding to highlighting various Buddhist principles and teachings as demonstrative of the relevance of Buddhism to ecological well-being.

In the person of the Buddha, writers often call attention to his life of simplicity, compassion, and mindfulness, which embodied a profound respect for the natural world. They also point out that the most significant events in the Buddha's life were closely connected with natural settings. This they say affirms his deep association with and reverence for the natural world.³⁴ According to Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha Gautama was born under a sal tree in Lumbini Garden. Therefore, from the very first moment of his life, he already had a connection with nature.³⁵ One of the most pivotal events in his life was his enlightenment, which occurred while he was meditating under the Bodhi tree in Bodhi Gaya.³⁶ This tree became a symbol of wisdom and spiritual awakening, thus often called the "tree of awakening" or "tree of enlightenment."

Throughout his life, the Buddha often delivered his teachings in natural settings such as forests, groves, and gardens, including the Deer Park in Sarnath where he gave his first sermon. He frequently retreated to forests for meditation, finding the solitude and tranquillity necessary for deep contemplation and spiritual practice. The Buddha attained *parinibbāna*, or final *nibbāna*, in a grove of sal trees in Kushinagar, spending his final moments surrounded by the tranquillity of the forest. Various stories from the Buddha's life illustrate his encounters with nature and animals. Many of these stories portray his compassion and respect for all living beings. For example, there are accounts of him intervening to save animals and advocating for the protection of forests. These events, according to Buddhism scholars, affirm the integral role that nature played in his spiritual journey and teachings. They reflect his environmental awareness and reverence for life in all its forms.

In addition to the Buddha's own life, proponents of Buddhist environmentalism assert that his teachings also contain ecologically friendly qualities. They often emphasize the principle of Dependent Origination, or *Paticcasamuppāda* to demonstrate the interdependent nature of all phenomena, meaning that all elements of the universe are interconnected. Actions affecting the natural world have ripple effects on ecosystems, climate patterns, and biodiversity. This understanding fosters a profound sense of responsibility and stewardship toward the environment, as harming nature ultimately harms ourselves as well as other beings. Recognizing the interconnectedness of life leads us to act in ways that support environmental health and sustainability.

Another fundamental principle often highlighted is compassion, or *karuṇā*, and the practice of non-harming, or *ahimsā*. Compassion is a cornerstone of Buddhist ethics, calling for kindness and empathy toward all sentient beings. The principle of non-harming guides Buddhists to avoid actions that cause suffering or harm to any living being. In the context of environmental safeguarding, the values of compassion and non-violence motivate individuals to adopt sustainable practices that minimize ecological impact. They strive to reduce pollution, conserve natural resources, and protect biodiversity. These actions are viewed as expressions of compassion toward the Earth and its inhabitants.

The concept of *kamma/karma* is also frequently cited to demonstrate Buddhism's environmental friendliness. *Kamma*, the law of cause and effect, represents the ethical dimension of Buddhist teachings. Actions rooted in greed, ignorance, or disregard for life contribute to negative *kamma*, while virtuous actions that promote well-being and harmony generate positive *kammic* results. Environmentally destructive actions, such as deforestation, pollution, and overconsumption create negative *kamma* due to their harmful impact on ecosystems as well as on future generations. Conversely, actions that are conducive to environmental sustainability, such as recycling or energy conservation are considered virtuous and generate positive *kammic* effects. This ethical framework encourages Buddhists to align their behavior with principles of ecological responsibility by striving to leave a positive imprint on the environment through mindful and ethical conduct.

Mindfulness, or *sati*, is another key aspect of Buddhism said to support environmental consciousness and stewardship. Mindfulness involves

being present and aware of our thoughts, actions, and their consequences. Applied to environmental safeguarding, mindfulness encourages us to consider the ecological impact of our choices and behaviors. By practicing mindfulness, individuals strive to live in harmony with the natural world and make choices that minimize environmental harm and promote sustainability. This includes mindful consumption habits and supporting eco-friendly practices. Mindfulness also facilitates a deeper appreciation for the web of life, motivating us to safeguard ecosystems and natural resources for the inhabitants of the world today and tomorrow.

At this point, I have no intention to affirm or refute these claims either in terms of their interpretation of Buddhist teachings or relevance to ecological concerns. I only wish to present them here in a very cursory manner to show that there is indeed deep interest in using Buddhism as a resource to support an environmentalism. I sympathize wholeheartedly with this effort since this book represents an additional endeavor in this regard.

Next, I present the approach that I will use for this book. The approach can be simply summarized in the following statements:

1. Buddhist teachings represent a form of religious or spiritual humanism that can be called Buddhist humanism.
2. Buddhist humanism in the environmental context can be called "Buddhist environmental humanism."
3. Buddhist environmental humanism comprises two interrelated dimensions—relational and developmental. The relational dimension represents the vision or the ideals of human-nature relationship, while the developmental dimension refers to the process of self-cultivation necessary to realize this vision.

Thus, this book sets out to identify and explicate on the Buddhist approach to environmental safeguarding. I will describe this approach as "Buddhist environmental humanism."

Theravāda Buddhism as a Religious Humanism

The Buddha once told his disciples the following parable:

Suppose, monks, that this great earth were totally covered with water, and a man were to toss a yoke with a single hole there. A wind from the east would push it west, a wind from the west would push it east. A wind from the north would push it south, a wind from the south would push it north. And suppose a blind sea-turtle were there. It would come to the surface once every one hundred years. Now what do you think: would that blind sea-turtle, coming to the surface once every one hundred years, stick his neck into the yoke with a single hole?

It would be a sheer coincidence, lord, that the blind sea-turtle, coming to the surface once every one hundred years, would stick his neck into the yoke with a single hole.

It's likewise a sheer coincidence that one obtains the human state. It's likewise a sheer coincidence that a Tathagata, worthy and rightly self-awakened, arises in the world. It's likewise a sheer coincidence, monks, that a doctrine and discipline expounded by a Tathagata appears in the world. Therefore, the meaning of this is astounding and amazing: it is not easy to find a being who has come to the human state.

I was curious about what the probability of this event is in mathematical terms, and decided to put the question to an AI chat model—not expecting a concrete response—but to my pleasant surprise, I received the following answer:³⁷

This scenario, often used in Buddhist texts, is a metaphor for the rarity of human rebirth. While it is symbolic and meant to illustrate an extremely improbable event, it can be treated as a probability exercise in some sense. Let's break down the key elements:

1. Size of the Earth: Assuming the Earth is covered with water, the area we're talking about is roughly 510 million square kilometers (510,000,000 km²).

2. Size of the yoke: Let's assume the size of the yoke's hole is small compared to the Earth's surface. Even if we imagine a yoke with a hole, let's assume the hole is the size of a small pond, approximately 1 square meter (which is 0.000001 km²).
3. Blind turtle's surfacing frequency: The turtle surfaces once every 100 years. Each time, it comes up randomly in a different location.

Probability Calculation:

- Surface area of the Earth = 510 million square kilometers = 510,000,000 km².
- Area of the yoke's hole = 1 square meter = 0.000001 km².
- Chance of the turtle surfacing in the exact spot of the yoke = area of yoke / surface area of the Earth = 0.000001 km² /

510,000,000 km² = 1.96×10^{-15} (about 1 in a quadrillion).

However, since the turtle comes up once every 100 years, and we don't know how many times it could come up over its lifespan, we are left with an astronomically small probability each time the turtle surfaces.

Conclusion:

The chance of the turtle's head entering the yoke with each surfacing is extraordinarily tiny—about 1 in a quadrillion. This further emphasizes the metaphorical point about the rarity and preciousness of the human condition or spiritual opportunity in Buddhist philosophy.

Not being a mathematician myself, I cannot verify the accuracy of this calculation. However, AI did indeed affirm the immense rarity and preciousness of obtaining the human state, as intended in the analogy. The Theravāda Buddhist tradition, within which this story arises, stands as a compelling example of religious humanism. What do I mean by this term "religious humanism"? Humanism is an idea with roots that go far deeper than the modern free thought ideology, which views the human experience through a lens of rationalism, secularism, and naturalism.³⁸ The contemporary,

narrower understanding of humanism is a relatively recent phenomenon and certainly not a creation of the secular humanist movement. Secular humanists have also acknowledged that the term “humanism” has been used in different ways and contexts throughout history. Traditionally, the term has often had religious connotations. Therefore, all reasonable uses of a term are valid and that it goes against the very principles of most secular humanists to be rigid or authoritarian about word meanings. No single person or group can claim exclusive rights to a word, as language is inherently dynamic and ever-changing, defying complete control by any individual or ideological faction.³⁹

The Western tradition of humanism finds its origins in the Latin word “*humanitas*,” which denotes the cultivated and sophisticated traits of humans, in contrast to the primitive and uncivilized.⁴⁰ During the Middle Ages, a humanist was someone who received an extensive education in languages and literature. After their training, they often became a scholar or educator in these areas.⁴¹ These individuals were distinguished by their moral integrity and social respectability. In other words, they epitomized the ideal of humanity.⁴² When the term entered the English language in the sixteenth century, it continued to describe people skilled in grammar and rhetoric or those dedicated to studying human matters.

While humanism in Europe originally centered on education and scholarly pursuits, it was always within a broader Christian context that assumed belief in God. It was not until the late nineteenth century that humanism saw significant transformation in outlook. Humanists began to adopt a more secular, and at times anti-religious, stance, emphasizing human rationality independent of theological frameworks. The humanist Nicolas Walter noted that this contemporary secular reinterpretation of humanism was “applied retrospectively and indeed anachronistically and unhistorically.”⁴³

Thus, humanism has been employed to refer to a whole gamut of world-views—secular and religious. Secular humanism itself is a diverse philosophy that emphasizes human reason, ethics, and justice without relying on religious dogma. Various types of secular humanism include classical humanism, which focuses on the revival of classical learning and civic virtue; scientific humanism, which prioritizes scientific inquiry and empir-

ical evidence;⁴⁴ and ethical humanism, which concerns itself with questions such as “How can we create meaningfulness in this life?”; “How should we treat each other?”; and “How can we foster a sense of shared responsibility and compassion in our communities?”⁴⁵

Civic humanism promotes active participation in public life and democratic values,⁴⁶ while naturalistic humanism sees humans as part of the natural world and emphasizes harmony with nature. Existential humanism draws from existentialist philosophy to emphasize individual freedom and meaning making. Humanist Manifesto-based humanism adheres to principles outlined in the Humanist Manifestos, focusing on reason, ethics, and social justice.⁴⁷ Cultural humanism values the enrichment of human life through arts and cultural achievements, and critical humanism examines society and culture to address social inequalities and advocate for systemic change.⁴⁸ Transhumanism overlaps the others by advocating for the use of technology to enhance human capacities, though it is not strictly a form of secular humanism.⁴⁹ Despite their differences, secular humanism in its rich varieties generally share a commitment to improving the human condition (as well as non-humans) through sound reason and ethical living.

Within the sphere of religion, there are also a variety of humanisms including Christian humanism, Confucian humanism, and Buddhist humanism. Some scholars also argue for an Islamic humanism⁵⁰ and Hindu humanism.⁵¹ Tu Weiming, a prominent Chinese scholar of Confucianism, has advocated for the concept of “spiritual humanism” to describe a Confucian approach that integrates ethical, spiritual, and communal dimensions of human life.⁵² According to Tu, Confucian humanism goes beyond secular or purely rational humanism with its attention on the cultivation of virtue, the importance of familial and social relationships, and the pursuit of harmony with Heaven and Earth. Tu’s interpretation of Confucian humanism underscores the importance of spiritual and moral cultivation of individuals. He believes this is essential for addressing contemporary global challenges and fostering a sustainable and harmonious world. Therefore, “religious humanism” is simply a humanism that is rooted and inspired by the teachings of a religious or spiritual tradition.

The more significant question for us to consider is: What is Buddhist humanism? In fact, the term humanism has often been used to describe Buddhism.

The secular humanist Paul Chiariello, for example, saw profound commonality between Buddhism and secular humanism. Chiariello contended, "Buddhism and Humanism are two geographical sides of the same philosophical coin. They're twins with the same DNA, separated at birth, and brought up by different parents." Chiariello further declared that "Buddhism is Eastern Humanism and Humanism is Western Buddhism."⁵³ Many have pointed out the nontheistic worldview of Buddhism to draw close affinity between Buddhist humanism and secular humanism. David J. Kalupahana, for example, remarked:

The philosophy of . . . Buddhism. . . undoubtedly represents one of the most comprehensive and systematic forms of humanism. It is based on naturalistic metaphysics, with causal dependence as its central theme. Rejecting any form of transcendentalism, determinism, or fatalism, it emphasizes its ultimate faith in man and recognizes his power or potentiality in solving his problems through reliance primarily upon empirical knowledge, reason and scientific method applied with courage and vision. It believes in the freedom of man, not in a transcendental sphere, but here and now. The highest goal it offers is not other-worldly but this-worldly.⁵⁴

While there are notable parallels between secular humanism and Buddhist humanism, Buddhism incorporates beliefs that may diverge from the comfort zone of secular humanists. These include doctrines such as transmigration, the existence of realms inhabited by ghosts, spirits, and celestial beings. Buddhist monks, following the tradition of the historical Buddha, assert that through meditation they can develop abilities like retrocognition, which allows them to perceive their own past lives and those of others. One only has to watch Thai drama series to see how prevalent this notion is part of the religious sensibility in this Buddhist country. Monks also claim capacities for clairvoyance and telepathy, which they believe assist in understanding profound principles such as Dependent Origination, a concept that emphasizes causal relationships in natural phenomena.⁵⁵

Additionally, the historical evolution of Buddhism in various social and cultural contexts has led to the deification of the Buddha and the veneration of bodhisattvas.⁵⁶ This is particularly prevalent in Mahayana Buddhism where bodhisattvas are revered akin to saints. In Southeast Asia, particu-

larly in countries like Thailand, Theravāda Buddhism as practiced by the populace incorporates elements of Early Buddhism, Brahmanism, and local animistic beliefs.⁵⁷ Therefore, Thai Buddhist adherents strongly espouse the belief that spirits inhabit natural elements such as trees, mountains, rivers, and domestic environments like gardens.⁵⁸ The countless spirit houses that Thai people construct on private and public properties testify to this deeply held belief. Moreover, many Thai people are just as happy to make offerings and pray in front of a shrine dedicated to the Hindu deity Ganesha as they are in front of an ancient tree.

The more convincing basis for Buddhist humanism lies not in Buddhist metaphysical assumptions—topics which the historical Buddha was not always enthusiastic about addressing—but about its outlook on the human person and their relationship with the world. The Nan Tien Institute, which belongs to the Mahayana tradition, pointed to the existence and events in the Buddha's life as basis for what it calls "Humanistic Buddhism." It asserted:

We know that the founder of Buddhism, Sakyamuni Buddha was born into this world; he cultivated his spiritual development, attained enlightenment, and shared with others in this world the profound truth he had realised. The human world was emphasised in everything he did. Why did the Buddha not achieve Buddhahood in one of the other five realms? Why did he not attain enlightenment in one of the other ten dharma worlds? Why did he, instead, attain complete enlightenment as a human? There can only be one reason; the Buddha wanted the teachings of Buddhism to be relevant to the human world. The Buddha's very life as a human being has given us all an inspiration and a model for the spiritual path and for making our own lives a spiritual practice.⁵⁹

Japanese Buddhist scholar and leader Daisaku Ikeda (1928-2023) affirmed that the Buddha "in his towering wisdom and compassion, stands as a Sagarmatha of humanism; his life was one of unsparing and incessant effort to enable humankind to enjoy peace and security."⁶⁰ Humanistic Buddhism, therefore, tries to overcome the perception that Buddhism is removed from humanity and the real world. For some, Buddhism is preoccupied with isolation, retreat to forests, and individual happiness. Conversely,

"Humanistic Buddhism encompasses all of the Buddhist teachings from the time of the Buddha to the present—whether they are derived from the three traditions. The goal of Humanistic Buddhism is the bodhisattva way; to be an energetic, enlightened and endearing person who strives to help all sentient beings liberate themselves...[as] well as transforming our planet into a pureland of peace and bliss."⁶¹ In other words, Buddhist humanism holds the conviction which is well articulated by the thirteenth century Japanese Buddhist monk, Nichiren Daishonin, "The Buddha is an ordinary human being; ordinary human beings are the Buddha."⁶² This is the belief that any individual can become a buddha—a fully realized, enlightened person imbued with the noblest qualities of humanhood.

Indeed, Buddhist humanism does not deny that the goal is to achieve personal emancipation by becoming a 'buddha'—with the small 'b.' However, this goal doesn't have to conflict with the interest and well-being of others. On the contrary, they are integrally tied to the good of others. Therefore, one cannot hope to be reborn with a better human status in the next life or being reborn in one of the various heavenly realms, or even entering *nibbāna*, escaping completely from *samsāra*—the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth—without leading a life that clearly demonstrates concern for others as well.

The Buddhist cosmogony comprises six realms ranging in various degrees of suffering. While beings can progress from one realm to another over numerous lifetimes, it is only in the human state that individuals can achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The Buddha himself never claimed to be anything more than a human being who managed to achieve enlightenment purely by human intelligence without any assistance from the divine or transcendent. He was confident through his own experience that humans had the potentiality to attain the state of buddhahood if they worked hard enough. Therefore, authentic humanity is not simply a state of existence, but the outcome of a dynamic and intentional process of continuous self-cultivation in order to "bring forth the brilliance of the Treasure Tower, existing within us at this very moment, and, with that light, to illuminate the future, thus forging the way for humanity's genuine progress and advancement."⁶³

Confronting with the seemingly pessimistic situation of the human condition, the Buddha faced it head on and conceived a program that would deliver humans out of the endless cycle of suffering and rebirth. The Four Noble Truths presented by the Buddha in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*,⁶⁴ known as the setting of the wheel of Dhamma into motion, can be categorized into three aspects: 1) Diagnosis of the perceived problem of humanity; 2) Presenting a goal or vision for human liberation; and 3) Offering the path toward realization of the proposed vision.

The first two Noble Truths constitute the diagnosis aspect of the Buddhist pedagogy. The Buddha observed that the essence of mundane life was unsatisfactory because of the existent reality of impermanence of all things in the world. By observing the processes of birth, aging, sickness, death, etc. as well as all the other events taking place in the world, the Buddha was able to give these realities a common descriptive name—suffering or unsatisfactoriness.

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.

The second Noble Truth locates the root of this unsatisfactoriness in human ignorance of the true nature of reality. This unknowing causes individuals to have craving (*tanhā*) for things that do not bring about lasting happiness because they are ultimately impermanent. The Buddha listed three kinds of craving—craving for sensual pleasure, craving to become, and craving to get rid of unwanted things.

Having made the diagnosis, the Buddha subsequently presented a vision of hope that is contrary to the condition of suffering that one experiences in life. That vision is stated in the third Noble Truth, which declares that humans do not have to be enslaved to this perpetual cycle of unsatisfactoriness. In fact, one can put an end to the suffering in one's life by achieving freedom from the various desires mentioned above.

Finally, this vision of eternal bliss can be realized by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, which comprises the threefold training of morality, concen-

tration, and wisdom. The fourth Noble Truth, therefore, is the path that leads to realization of the proposed vision, which is ultimate liberation from the toxic poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion that tether us to a cycle of pain and dissatisfaction. These spiritual poisons infect our relationships with others, blinding us to their inherent dignity and worth. When greed dominates, we become possessive and exploitative, reducing others to mere objects of our desires. When hatred rules, we lash out with verbal, emotional, mental, and physical violence, fracturing the bonds of community and sowing seeds of isolation. And when delusion takes hold, we cling to false assumptions and narrow perspectives, which yield misunderstandings and conflicts.

Thus, the basis for a Buddhist humanism can be summarized in the following key points. First, the Buddhist understanding of human life as rare and precious arises from the belief in *samsāra*, the cycle of birth and rebirth governed by *kamma*. Attaining a human birth is considered a result of virtuous actions and affords individuals the capacity for moral discernment and spiritual progress. This rarity underscores the significance of ethical living and self-cultivation in Buddhism, as practitioners strive to make the most of their human potential for the benefit of oneself and others. It must be noted that liberation can only take place in the human state. Therefore, inhabitants of the lower realm must strive to be reborn as a human in order to have a chance at emancipation from mundane existence.

Similarly, those residing in the heavenly realms must also be reborn as humans to have their go at permanent liberation. The human realm is seen as an ideal state for spiritual practice because humans possess a unique combination of intellectual capacity and moral agency. Unlike beings in other realms of existence, such as animals, ghosts, or heavenly beings, humans have the ability to understand and practice the Dhamma effectively. This capacity for comprehension and practice makes human life an invaluable opportunity for spiritual advancement.

Within the human state, individuals have the opportunity to cultivate moral virtues (*sīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) to overcome ignorance and delusion. The ethical conduct and mindfulness practices advocated in Theravāda Buddhism are particularly effective when undertaken in the human realm, where one can actively engage in

transforming one's mind and behavior. This process of cultivation leads to the purification of mind and heart, to enable deeper insight into the true nature of reality. Moreover, liberation can only be attained in the human state because it requires a level of understanding, insight, and practice that are uniquely accessible to human beings. Other realms of existence may lack the necessary conditions or opportunities for such profound spiritual realization. This is why a human birth represents such an exceptional occasion for achieving enlightenment.

In addition, at the heart of Theravāda Buddhism's humanism is the goal of self-cultivation toward becoming authentically human, *truly* human. This process involves the cultivation of ethical virtues, mindfulness, and wisdom through practices such as meditation, study of scriptures, and ethical conduct in daily life. By cultivating these qualities, individuals not only refine their moral character but also contribute positively to the common good. The aim is to be able to transcend egoistic tendencies and align one's actions with the broader principles of compassion and interconnectedness. Thus, being human—truly human—is being imbued with mindfulness and ethical integrity, which allows one to become more attuned to the suffering of others. This heightened awareness motivates practitioners to engage in loving and compassionate action on behalf of others.

From Buddhist Humanism to Buddhist Environmental Humanism

The transition from Buddhist humanism to Buddhist environmental humanism represents a contextualization of the Buddhist program of self-cultivation to contemporary ecological concerns. The Dhamma, as taught by the Buddha, aims to address universal and fundamental human experiences, and thus is applicable regardless of time, life realities, or geographical space. This ability for contextualization and adaptation is crucial for Buddhism to maintain its relevance in present day milieu. As Bhikkhu Bodhi astutely observed:

If any great religion is to acquire a new relevance it must negotiate some very delicate, very difficult balances. It must strike a happy balance between remaining faithful to the seminal insights of its

Founder and ancient masters and acquiring the skill and flexibility to formulate these insights in ways that directly link up with the pressing existential demands of old-age.⁶⁵

Humanism, a term embraced by diverse schools of thought, can be a bit of a chameleon. Although it has been used with varying metaphysical assumptions, a core thread unites these seemingly disparate groups: a deep respect for human value, integrity, potential for goodness, and agency. Whether grounded in religious or secular principles, these humanisms share a common goal—to empower individuals to flourish, to become the best versions of themselves, and to truly embody their humanity. The emphasis isn't on transforming into something alien, but on shedding the layers that obscure our true selves. As the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi aptly stated, "Realization is not the acquisition of anything new nor is it a new faculty. It is only the removal of all camouflage."⁶⁶ Imagine a lamp shrouded in dust, its light dimmed. Humanism encourages us to clear away this dust, to rediscover the brilliance within. By embracing and expressing our authentic selves, we embark on a journey of personal fulfillment, a journey that ultimately benefits not only ourselves but also the world around us.

Every philosophical system, as expected, possesses its own unique perspective on and approach toward attaining authentic personhood. Christians find inspiration in Jesus as the perfect embodiment of humanity, while Muslims aspire to emulate the Prophet Muhammad. Buddhists, too, follow the path of Gautama Buddha in their pursuit of self-realization. For atheist humanists, attaining human transformation is a personal journey without any reference to spiritual or transcendental beings.⁶⁷

However, in this book, I argue that religious and spiritual traditions, particularly Buddhism, serve a fundamental purpose: they can guide individuals toward authentic personhood. While self-realization can be pursued through various means, religious or secular, engaging with a religion offers valuable guidance and support in achieving spiritual goals that might be difficult to reach independently. Becoming a Buddhist is not about attaining fully-realized humanhood first and then joining the faith; rather, it is a means to achieve this very goal.

Despite their diverse approaches, humanistic ideologies generally share an optimistic outlook on human potential and the collective good that can be achieved through its realization. Religious environmental humanism, in particular, subscribes to this view of the human person. It posits that cultivating the self to attain authentic humanhood is crucial for positively contributing to environmental safeguarding, fostering the flourishing of both humans and nature. As the Buddha pointed out, individuals can be categorized based on their actions: those who benefit neither themselves nor others; those who benefit others but not themselves; those who benefit themselves but not others; and those who benefit both themselves and others. Among these, the last category is the most esteemed.⁶⁸ The text uses a series of superlatives, praising such individual as “the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest of these four persons.” Another series of suttas describes how a bhikkhu can practice in ways that benefit both himself and others.⁶⁹ Additionally, another sutta expands on this altruistic intention, suggesting that a person of profound wisdom considers not only their own welfare and the welfare of others, but also the welfare of both and the entire world.⁷⁰

Buddhist environmental humanism rejects the zero-sum mentality, which suggests that the advancement of one group necessarily leads to the decline of another. Instead, it recognizes the intrinsic connection between the flourishing of the environment and the quest for human authenticity as essential for achieving true happiness. This outlook posits a causal relationship between the spiritual quality of the human person and the health of the natural environment. It believes that positive contributions to environmental safeguarding can be achieved through self-cultivation, leading to self-transformation, spiritual progress, and ultimately freedom from suffering. In other words, the effort to achieve lasting personal happiness is directly linked to the well-being of the natural world.

Without self-cultivation, we are plagued by unwholesome qualities such as greed, hatred, and delusion, which harm our relationships with others and with nature. When greed takes hold, we plunder the Earth’s resources thoughtlessly, ignoring the ecological destruction we cause. Hatred blinds us to nature’s beauty, reducing it to a mere commodity for exploitation. Delusion leads us into mistakenly thinking our actions lack consequences and that the Earth will somehow sustain us regardless of our reckless

behavior. The harm we inflict on nature reverberates throughout our lives, affecting our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. In the next chapters, we will delve into the deleterious effects that the poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion exert on our personal and relational life.

Thus, in the Buddhist tradition, self-cultivation is not a self-centered and solitary endeavor but a path to relational harmony, engendering greater unity and balance in our relationships with ourselves, others, and the natural world. The fundamental outlook of Buddhist environmental humanism is that the well-being and flourishing of humanity is integrally tied to the well-being and sustainability of nature. What is seemingly an individual effort at self-cultivation is not merely to achieve selfish aims but involves transforming all the dimensions and all the relationships in our life—including the relationship with the natural world.

In the face of the ecological crisis, the present context demands awareness of the human-nature relationship as constituting a part of the totality of relationships in our lives. Therefore, the virtues and wisdom gained from the process of self-cultivation prescribed in the Buddhist pedagogy must also be applied to the relationship with nature as well as with other people. In other words, it's not enough for Buddhist self-cultivation to only impact our relationship with family, friends, and fellow humans but also need to bear upon our engagement with all sentient beings, and in fact, the entire cosmos. Admittedly, the Buddha and his followers didn't consider ecological crises in ancient times. However, their insights into the nature of the world were meant to be transcend cultural, geographical, and temporal contexts, which enables us to retrieve, reevaluate, and reconstruct Buddhist scriptural teachings for today's environmental challenges.⁷¹

Anthropocentrism and Buddhist Environmental Humanism

In the final section of this introductory chapter, I would like to address the elephant in the room. And this concerns the question: "Is Buddhist environmentalism anthropocentric?" In the field of environmental ethics, the term "anthropocentric" or "anthropocentrism" is a dirty word. Anthropocentrism is commonly linked to ideologies and perspectives that place human status, rights, and desires above all else. This often occurs at the

expense of non-human life forms, such as animals and plants, as well as other biotic and abiotic elements of the environment. Consequently, this raises an important question about whether Buddhist teachings can serve as a viable environmentalism.

The Conundrum of Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism is often cited as a primary cause of the ecological crisis. It encompasses a spectrum from “benign” to “tyrannical” in terms of degrees. Essentially, this worldview prioritizes human interests above all while reserving moral consideration primarily for humans. Since the emergence of environmental philosophy in the 1970s, debates have frequently centered on anthropocentrism, the intrinsic value of nature, and ecological perspectives.⁷² Warwick Fox noted that in the 1990s, one of the greatest preoccupations in eco-philosophical writings pertained to the debates surrounding anthropocentrism.⁷³

The term anthropocentrism itself has been around since the 1860s. It was initially used in discussions on Darwin’s theory of evolution to describe the belief that humans occupy the center of the universe.⁷⁴ The *Cambridge Online Dictionary* defines “anthropocentric” as “a belief in humans and their existence as the most important and central fact in the universe.”⁷⁵ This implies that humans hold both ontological and moral superiority over all other entities, both biotic and abiotic. Warwick Fox described anthropocentrism as “the arrogant assumption that we humans are central to the cosmic drama; that, essentially, the world is made for us.”⁷⁶ American evolutionary ecologist Eric Pianka charged, “One of the biggest enemies we face is anthropocentrism. This is that common human attitude that everything on this earth was put here for our use—to be used any way we want.”⁷⁷

This perspective leads to the ethical view that humans have the right to exploit nature as we see fit, with non-human entities valued only for their usefulness to humans. Frederic Bender characterized this mentality as “the deeply ingrained assumption that humans have the right to draw down ecospheric integrity—without concern for limits—to satisfy even the most peripheral human desires.”⁷⁸ Consequently, when human needs and desires conflict with those of non-human entities, human interests are always given priority.⁷⁹

Ecological discussions often focus on the ethical implications of anthropocentrism, but its epistemological dimension—how we know what we know—is often neglected. Simply put, anthropocentrism is seeing the world through human eyes. As the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines it, it's "interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experiences."⁸⁰ Environmental philosopher Eugene Hargrove contended that this human-centered perspective is unavoidable. According to Hargrove, we can only grasp the world through our own unique filters.⁸¹ Frederic Ferré referred to this state as "perspectival anthropocentrism"—we are fundamentally human, and our thinking reflects that reality.⁸² But this doesn't mean we cannot empathize with other living things. Even while striving to see beyond our own self-interest, our perspective is ultimately human.

Tim Hayward argued that anthropocentrism can be a helpful tool and even desirable in some contexts.⁸³ This complexity has led some thinkers to propose alternative terms. For instance, William Grey advocated for a "benign anthropocentrism" where human needs are balanced with reasonable considerations for environmental sustainability. Grey argued that anthropocentrism, when kept in check, is perfectly acceptable.⁸⁴ Similarly, Bryan Norton suggested the possibility of a "weak anthropocentrism" where humans make informed decisions based on sound science, ethical principles, and a clear understanding of our own values.⁸⁵ This contrasts with "strong anthropocentrism," which manifests itself in wanton environmental abuse for human desires.

Both Grey and Norton acknowledged the essential role of humans in decision-making while rejecting actions that constitute environmental abuse. They critiqued some nonanthropocentric approaches, such as Deep Ecology, which can neglect human concerns.⁸⁶ Hayward noted that it's important to remember that ethics are about guiding human actions, and some level of human-centeredness is inevitable. Values, by definition, come from the valuer—a human being with their own unique experiences.⁸⁷ Therefore, any effort to guide human actions will have some degree of anthropocentrism built-in.⁸⁸

Despite extensive and vigorous debate, "anthropocentrism" is often seen negatively in discussions about human behavior and environmental atti-

tudes. Consequently, when religious environmentalisms are labeled “anthropocentric,” it is often meant as a negative critique. With respect to environmental issues, no religious tradition wishes to be labeled anthropocentric. This is also true for Buddhism.

Is Buddhist Environmentalism Anthropocentric?

Regarding this question, some scholars argue that Buddhism is anthropocentric for several reasons. The first charge is Buddhism places significant emphasis on human liberation from suffering (*dukkha*) and attainment of enlightenment (*nibbāna*). The ultimate goal of Buddhist practices, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, is centered on human spiritual development and transcendence. Early Buddhism predominantly prioritizes human spiritual liberation over biocentric concerns. Nature is often seen positively only insofar as it serves as a backdrop for pursuing spiritual advancement.⁸⁹

The second charge is aimed at Buddhism’s anthropocentric cosmology and utilitarian view of nature. Traditional Buddhist cosmology often portrays the human realm as the most favorable for spiritual progress and attainment of liberation. Other realms, including animal realms and certain celestial realms, are seen as less conducive to spiritual growth. Ian Harris argued that Buddhism’s emphasis on spiritual goals prioritizes humans over animals and nature. While acknowledging the interconnected destinies of humans and animals, Buddhism traditionally views animals as unfortunate because they cannot progress in the Dhamma and Vinaya (monastic rules) nor serve as monks.⁹⁰ The plant world also receives little consideration within this framework. Harris summarized the canonical perspective on nature as either needing improvement through cultivation or as a therapeutic challenge.⁹¹

Paul Waldau also argued that Buddhist teachings exhibit anthropocentric tendencies. He pointed out that in Buddhism, human rebirth, even in its most undesirable form, is considered superior to any animal existence. Furthermore, Buddhist monastic rules (Vinaya) treat the killing of a human being as a more severe transgression than the killing of an animal. This view suggests that while Buddhism acknowledges a connection between humans and other animals, it simultaneously establishes a significant

distinction by elevating the status of humans while diminishing that of other animals.⁹²

According to the German scholar of Buddhist Studies Lambert Schmithausen, Buddhism exhibits two distinct approaches to civilization and nature. The first, which he called the pro-civilization strand, favors human development and views wild nature as potentially threatening or needing adaptation for human benefit. Schmithausen critiqued this strand as anthropocentric, attributing its perspective more to broader Indian cultural influences than to core Buddhist teachings. This viewpoint is supported in Buddhist scriptures advocating activities such as planting fruit trees and creating parks to enhance human habitats and aesthetics. This reflects a perception of natural beauty in congruence with human preferences. In contrast, the second strand, identified as the hermit strand, involves forest-dwelling monks who sought spiritual fulfillment in natural solitude and hardship. Despite the pursuit of spiritual growth in natural settings, Schmithausen noted that this approach still retains an anthropocentric focus. Forest protection primarily addresses human spiritual needs rather than emphasizing a biocentric ethic that prioritizes the well-being of nature itself.⁹³

The third charge has to do with treatment of animals. According to Schmithausen, Early Buddhism's approach to animal protection and non-harming can be viewed as anthropocentric for several reasons. Buddhism generally portrays animals as beings that experience unhappiness or suffering. Protecting animals in ecological terms might be seen as prolonging their suffering unnecessarily. Schmithausen acknowledged other arguments for animal protection within the tradition, such as the idea that humans may be reborn as animals, thereby suggesting a self-interest in their protection or caring for ancestors' interests.

Furthermore, Schmithausen critiqued the anthropocentric viewpoint for potentially justifying harm and suffering inflicted upon animals for human benefit, which contradicts Buddhism's principle of avoiding harm. He argued that Buddhism essentially opposes causing suffering and that portrayals of "unhappy animals" in Buddhist texts serve didactic purposes. These depictions illustrate the workings of *kamma* rather than making definitive statements about the nature of animals or their worthiness of protection.⁹⁴