

Buddhist Ecology

How do we fit together the different strands of the Buddhist attitude toward nature? On one hand there is the truth of interconnectedness, an attitude of respect and harmlessness; and on the other hand a goal of transcendence, to escape from the suffering of saṃsāra. Surely, we might think, one is positive and the other negative? Are they reconcilable?

Let us take the tragic yet also ultimately liberating truth of the impermanence of all things as the central view of Buddhism and look from there. First of all we can understand that it is a positive, loving view of the world that sees impermanence as a tragedy. A negative view of the world would see impermanence as a good thing, good riddance. Have we been too quick to assume that a negative view of saṃsāra is a negative view of the world?

Secondly, have we too quickly made the mistaken assumption that liberation comes about through having a negative view and trying to get away? Liberation does not come about like this at all. There is no place for negativity in the search for transcendence. The Buddha describes trying to get away like this (through 'vibhava-taṇhā') as like a dog tied to a pole trying to get away by running round and round it. This is not the way. We cannot escape through desire. Liberation comes not through trying to withdraw from this world but through examining it clearly and completely with a peaceful, open mind and penetrating it to its very core. The natural result of this will be to let go and find freedom from attachment and suffering, not somewhere else or at some time in the future but right here and now. To be capable of this the heart must not only have the wisdom to see suffering clearly but also the compassion to see suffering and stay put.

The real purpose of Buddhists withdrawing into nature is not to try to get away from it all but precisely this kind of examination. The deepest truth is to be found in our relationship to nature and to our bodies that are part of nature. The only true way out is to truly enter in, with open and compassionate eyes.

If this is our understanding and our practice there is no contradiction between our love of nature and our search for freedom. Freedom will be the essence of all things.

I offer this for your reflection.

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