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The Greening of the Dhamma: Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States and Thailand

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, the movement known as "Engaged Buddhism" has grown on a global scale. From protesting human rights violations to spending meditation retreats as homeless persons on the streets of New York, Engaged Buddhists react to modern problems by using a Buddhist framework. The Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement is a specific example of Engaged Buddhism. In the United States, Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists respond to problems such as nuclear waste and species extinction by reinterpreting traditional Buddhist doctrines and applying them to an ecological setting. Thai Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists, on the other hand, apply those doctrines to Buddhist rituals in response to the deforestation and pollution their country is experiencing. The differences between these two movements rest largely on the foundations of each group's activism. Specifically, American activists turn to reinterpretations of the doctrine whereas Thai activists turn to traditional doctrines and rituals as the sources of their environmental action. This study examines the movement in each country and then looks at the differences between the two. Finally, it argues that the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement is a lens through which to view how Buddhism is interpreted within each culture.

Introduction

The earth is facing an environmental crisis. Stories about oil spills, holes in the ozone layer, and extinction of species often appear in today's newspapers and magazines worldwide. The reasons for this crisis are many. From technological developments to economic reasons to population growth, the world's citizens must respond to the situation and find ways to protect the planet from further environmental destruction. People seek answers to the problem through the world's religious traditions. As one of the five major world religions, Buddhism is providing a foundation for environmental activism. However, this action is not uniform across cultures. Ecological activism throughout the world is determined by the environmental situation facing each country.

The United States and Thailand are two countries which are actively confronting ecological problems. The United States is dealing with long-term results of economic development such as nuclear waste, air pollution, acid rain and diminishing natural resources. Meanwhile, Thailand is currently experiencing more immediate results of development. The most prominent issue plaguing Thailand's environment is the loss of forest coverage. As forest coverage lessens, those dependent upon those forests for their livelihood are being forced to move to the cities to try to find work. In both countries, Buddhists are responding to their nation's ecological problems in particular ways.

Many works have been written about the ways in which Buddhists are responding to the environmental crisis. Most of these writings explore the motives of environmentalists who engage in their action within a Buddhist framework. At the outset, it would seem that all Buddhist environmental actions would be relatively similar, for they all draw upon the same religious tradition. This is not the case, however. The Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movements in both the United States and Thailand are very different. While each of these movements has been examined individually, no one has compared the movements and explored *why* they are different. This study seeks to do just that. Furthermore, what is significant about this work is not only that it compares two movements that have previously been studied separately, but it provides a platform for examining Buddhism within different cultural contexts. It also allows the reader to explore how one ancient religious tradition is adapting to the modern world.

In the United States, Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism is a non-cohesive movement of Buddhists who respond to several ecological problems in different ways. The main characteristic of this movement is the use of Buddhist doctrine to transmit environmentalism to practitioners and the wider society. There are several reasons for the non-cohesive nature of the movement as well as the doctrinal orientation. Because Buddhism is not a monolithic entity, there are many different kinds of Buddhism. Several Buddhist sects are found within the United States that do not necessarily have contact with those outside of their particular group. Environmental action is largely carried out by individual practitioner communities, and even then the entire community may not participate. Chapter one will look at the American Buddhist community, American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism, and a specific instance of that activism.

By contrast, Thai instances of Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism differ significantly from the American movement. In Thailand the movement is characterized by an emphasis on ritual as a means for the transmission of the environmentalist message. Rituals have historically played (and continue to play) an important role in Thai Buddhism. They bring the community together, reinforce religious values, and transmit Buddhist doctrine to the laity. The Thai movement has used the role of ritual in Buddhism to anchor its environmental action. By examining the tree ordination ceremony, chapter two will explore the ritual orientation of Thai Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism.

Chapter three will delve into the reasons behind the doctrinal-ritual distinction between the movements in the United States and in Thailand. The doctrinal orientation of Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States is a reflection of the way Victorian scholars interpreted Buddhism in the nineteenth century. These scholars focused on the Pāli Canon (a collection of Buddhist scriptures) as the source for orthodox Buddhism seeing the rituals of nineteenth-century Asian Buddhism to be a corruption of the tradition. The ritual orientation of the movement in Thailand comes out of a tradition of Buddhist rituals within that country. Buddhism for the Thai laity does not center on the Pāli Canon. Rather, it centers on the ceremonies that mark the Theravāda Buddhist* tradition. Through examining the way American activists use Buddhist doctrine to transmit environmentalism and comparing that with traditional Buddhist conceptions of those doctrines as well as Thai ritually oriented activism, one discovers that the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement serves as a useful lens for examining how "Buddhism" is conceived within the United States and Thailand.

* A glossary of Buddhist terminology is provided for important Buddhist terms used throughout the work. Words marked with an asterisk appear in the glossary.

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States

The 1970s was a period of great social change in the United States, specifically with regard to attitudes and policies toward the natural environment. Politically, a number of acts were passed to help regulate activities dealing with the United States' environmental landscape. These acts included the Clean Air Act (1970), the Clean Water Act (1972), and the Endangered Species Act (1973).[1] In the 1970s, America also experienced a growing interest in Buddhism. Since that time, the Buddhist religious tradition has spread further and taken firmer root in many American communities.

An important dimension of Buddhism in America has been Engaged Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism has sometimes been combined with environmental concerns to form "Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism" in the United States. Using deep ecology, the Gaia hypothesis, and systems theory, Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists have combined religious doctrine with scientific findings to form the core of their movement. This chapter will explore what constitutes American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism as well as a specific instance of this movement, namely its reaction to the problems of nuclear waste. Before addressing Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States, however, it is necessary to examine what constitutes Buddhism in America, for there is not simply one type of Buddhism that is present in that country.

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[1] *EnviroTools*, 2003, http://www.envirotools.org/regulations/reg_main%20page.shtml.

Buddhism in America

The presence of different kinds of Buddhisms at the same time is not unique to the United States. Buddhism is not a monolithic entity; there are many different forms of the tradition. Although several schools of Buddhism exist, and smaller sects exist within those schools, there are three main schools: Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. The Theravāda school of Buddhism is the only extant form of Nikāya Buddhism, sometimes referred to by the derogatory term *Hinayāna Buddhism*. Zen and Pure Land Buddhism are examples of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, and the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism make up the Vajrayāna*.

As the United States is home to a diversity of people and cultures, there are still *more* forms of Buddhism that do not necessarily fit neatly into one of the above categories. With this diversity comes a variety of Buddhisms present within American society. In one major city, an observer might find a Thai *wat* (temple), a Buddhist Church of America, and a Vipassana (a form of Buddhist meditation) Society. Each of these groups has different membership demographics and may focus on different aspects of Buddhism, yet each lays a legitimate claim to being Buddhist. With this in mind, how is one to define–if one can define at all—American Buddhism?

Richard Hughes Seager, author of *Buddhism in America* (1999), offers a helpful rubric for approaching this question in his article "American Buddhism in the Making." The first group is what Seager calls "old-line Asian-American ethnic groups" (2002, 107). Members of this group often tend to be Chinese or Japanese and many are descendents of nineteenth-century immigrants. The Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist Churches of America is an organization born out of this group.[2] The second group of Buddhists is referred to by Seager as "Euro-American" or "convert

[2] The Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) is the oldest form of institutional Buddhism in the United States. This is a Japanese sect of Buddhism that began in 1899 when two Japanese missionaries started the Buddhist

Buddhists" (2002, 109). He points out that "Euro-American" does not reflect the different racial and ethnic groups present in the community and that many prefer the term "convert."[3] Finally, the third group of Buddhists is what Seager calls "ethnic." However, because of this group's relatively new exposure to American life, the word "immigrant" may be more appropriate. These Buddhists have, in general, come to the United States since the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed in 1965. Members of this group come from South, Southeast, Central, and East Asia (Seager 2002, 106).

While all three groups are found in America, the convert community has played the dominant role in Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism.[4] Converts will often participate in one of several kinds of Buddhism present in the United States. However, in the context of Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism the practitioners rarely discuss the kind of Buddhism with which they are affiliated.[5] For example, Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists may identify themselves as Buddhists, but will rarely clarify the Buddhist group with which they practice. Unfortunately, this prevents us from uncovering whether American Buddhist groups work together or separately on environmental issues. Yet it does demonstrate that ecological concerns are shared among many American Buddhists, regardless of their group affiliation.

Mission of North America. The institution grew throughout the twentieth century. The name was changed to Buddhist Churches of America in 1944 after the Japanese internment experience of World War II (Seager 2002, 107-109).

[3] The issue with the use of *convert* to denote this group is that it does not take into account the children of actual converts. However, these children have not been very vocal in present Buddhism in America, nor have they been the subject of much scholarship. In light of this, the term *convert* will be used to refer to this group, with the understanding that the children of convert parents may not undergo the same conversion experience.

[4] Thus, in this chapter when the term *Buddhists* is encountered, it is in reference to the convert community unless otherwise noted.

[5] Seager points out four different communities present among convert Buddhists. Three of these communities—Zen, Tibetan, and Insight Meditation/Vipassana Societies—are similar in that all of them are meditation-based. The Zen and Tibetan Buddhist groups maintain close ties with their Asian counterparts, often having Japanese or Tibetan teachers. The Insight Meditation movement, while grounded in Theravāda vipassana practice, is presented more "as a set of awareness techniques that foster awakening and psychological healing" than as a religion. The fourth community is Sōka Gakkai International. This group is distinct from the other three for several reasons, including its focus on chanting (as opposed to silent meditation) and its more diverse racial and ethnic makeup (Seager 2002, 113).

Engaged Buddhism

Having noted that convert Buddhists make up the majority of participants in the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement in the United States, one must now address the question of what constitutes *Engaged Buddhism*, as well as whether it is truly a modern Buddhist movement or the political actions of a group of people who happen to be Buddhist. The question of how to define *Engaged Buddhism* has caused a good deal of discussion within both the practitioner and academic communities. The Zen Peacemaker Order in New York is one of several practitioner communities engaging in this discussion. To its leader, Bernard Glassman, as long as one is trying to reach enlightenment in any way, be it by protesting the actions of the local government or meditating in the morning before going to work, one is still helping the world and thus becoming an Engaged Buddhist (Queen 2000a, 104). Thomas Yarnall, author of "Engaged Buddhism: New and Improved?," argues for a much more specific definition when he says that the engagement aspect of Engaged Buddhism must actively challenge and change the institutions that are causing suffering in the world (2003, 286).

The tension between individual actions (i.e. meditation) and collective actions (i.e. protests) is one of the most pervasive problems in trying to arrive at a definition of *Engaged Buddhism*. At the same time, however, there are certain views concerning Engaged Buddhism that are somewhat agreed upon. In the introduction to his book *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, Christopher Queen points out three views about practice that most Engaged Buddhists hold. The first two, practice as nonviolence (in reference to the principle of *ahimsa*, or non-harming) and non-hierarchy (acknowledging the dignity of all beings) can easily be applied in relation to

individuals as well as groups (Queen 2000b, 7).[6] These two aspects may fit well into a definition of *Engaged Buddhism*.

Many American Engaged Buddhists support the third view of practice, a "nonheroic view," when defining *Engaged Buddhism*. For Queen, the nonheroic view means "that effective social change requires collective 'grassroots' activity, not the charismatic leadership of high profile individuals" (2000b, 7). A nonheroic view may be evident in a western context in that no major charismatic leaders have emerged from within the American movement, perhaps due to an aversion to charismatic leadership. This general dislike for individual leadership is voiced by many Engaged Buddhists in the west. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship, a western Engaged Buddhist group, argues that "it is naïve and counterproductive to think that social forces, nations, corporations, etc. can be challenged by lone individuals. This is the cowboy theory of history and it doesn't work" (J. Brown 2000, 85). While none of the charismatic leaders within the Asian Engaged Buddhist movement (the Dalai Lama or the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, for example)[7] would be likely to counter that statement, one cannot ignore the fundamental role these leaders have played in initiating and shaping social change in both Asia and the west. Thus, while charismatic leaders have played a vital role in the worldwide Engaged Buddhist movement, American Engaged Buddhists are uncomfortable with defining leaders within their own cultural context.

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[6] For many American Buddhists, the idea of hierarchy connotes the suppression of one being by another. In other words, for one to be higher on the "social ladder," someone must be beneath him or her. Thus for many Engaged Buddhists, turning away from hierarchy means that one is acknowledging all being as equal. Alan Sponberg presents an interesting discussion about American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists and their fear of hierarchy. His argument is that *all* hierarchies are not bad, and that we can turn away from a hierarchy of oppression—which involves exploitation and harm to beings—to a hierarchy of compassion. See Alan Sponberg, "Green Buddhism and the Hierarchy of Compassion," in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*.

[7] Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Zen monk who is credited with coining the term *Engaged Buddhism*. He has been extremely influential in the world of Buddhist social action, and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr. for his work protesting the Vietnam War.

Despite this seeming aversion to the importance of individuals, especially individual leaders, to Engaged Buddhism, Buddhist communities in America are hesitant to hold members personally accountable for Engaged Buddhist collective activities. For the most part, Buddhist groups in the United States are generally willing to speak of collective social action as being important but do not want to *require* their members to engage in such action. The unwillingness of many Buddhist communities in America to require their members to pursue Engaged Buddhist activities is due, in part, to the debate concerning what constitutes Engaged Buddhism.

The main issue in the debate over whether one requires members to engage in social action or not is the matter of how one decides the difference between "Engaged" Buddhists and "non-Engaged" Buddhists. Some claim that *all* Buddhism is engaged. Others would argue that engagement involves direct action in healing social problems, action that could include marching at peace protests or working at homeless shelters. This along with the wide variety of Buddhisms practiced by Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists has prevented the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement from forming a cohesive activist unit with a clear agenda.

The Zen Peacemaker Order has already encountered the problem of holding individual members accountable for collective Engaged Buddhist social activism. If simply living one's life (taking care of a family, working, meditating) is a form of engagement, the question then becomes how a collective group can ask for its members to do more. Is this group justified with asking its members to perform social service when other Buddhists do not? Within this particular order, the governing board finally decided that one must ask more from individuals and thus required members to contribute a certain number of hours to community service (Queen

2000a, 121). This community is unique in that it explicitly requires social action from its members, something that other American Buddhist communities are hesitant to do.

Although the community service requirement would prove helpful in defining *Engaged Buddhism*, the solution of the Zen Peacemaker Order has not been applied to all grassroots Buddhist organizations. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship issues *Turning Wheel*, a journal that provides a basis for Engaged Buddhist practice for many Fellowship members. According to Judith Simmer Brown, author of "Speaking Truth to Power: The Buddhist Peace Fellowship," "Through the journal [*Turning Wheel*], members are able to keep informed about violence and war from their doorsteps as well as to bring reflections on violence into their everyday lives"(2000, 82). There is no record kept of who puts those teachings into practice and who simply reads the journal, and there is no requirement that members go into the community and perform social service. The lack of personal accountability in this situation leads back to the grey area between who is and who is not an Engaged Buddhist.

While several Buddhist doctrines are being embraced by the movement as a whole, it is essential when looking at Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States to note that there is no one unified group of Buddhists formed to promote environmental concerns. With that is a lack of a clear environmentalist agenda among American Buddhists. There are both individual teachers and practitioners who place environmental concerns at the center of their practice (Kaza 2000, 160). These concerns are being articulated by different American groups through several Buddhist concepts: the *bodhisattva* vow*, the *three poisons**, asceticism*, *karma** and *samsara** and *dependent origination*/interdependency*. The hallmark of the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement in the United States is the reliance on such doctrines for the movement's foundations.

Doctrinal Foundations

The first of several doctrines used by American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists is the bodhisattva vow. This vow was developed as part of the path toward the universal goal of Buddhahood in the Mahāyāna school of Buddhism. It evolved from an original vow of attaining enlightenment as quickly as possible to one in which the practitioner delays enlightenment in order to lead all sentient beings to Buddhahood. The bodhisattva's path to enlightenment consists of practicing *pāramitā* (perfections) in order to seek awakening through cultivating wisdom and compassion for all sentient beings (Kawamura 2004, 58). Those who take up the bodhisattva path take a series of vows. The San Francisco Zen Center, one of the most visible Buddhist practice centers in the United States, has translated these vows as the following:

> Beings are numberless, I vow to save them.
> Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to end them.
> Dharmagates are boundless, I vow to enter them.
> Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it.
> ("The Four Bodhisattva Vows," 2000, 443)

Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder—both important leaders in the American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement—have taken these vows and written an ecologically oriented version:

> Sentient beings are endless; I vow to save them.
> Consuming desires are endless; I vow to stop them.
> Bio-relations are intricate; I vow to honor them.
> Nature's way is beautiful; I vow to become it.
> ("The Four Bodhisattva Vows," 2000, 443)

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists are taking these bodhisattva vows and applying them to the ecological crisis. Many interpret "sentient beings" to include animals, plants, and even waterways, thus the first vow requires the practitioner to work to save the entire earth instead of only human beings. The second vow regarding "consuming desires" is in reference to the mass consumerism criticized by American activists as a primary cause of the present environmental

situation; stopping these desires will help to save the environment. The third vow about the intricacy of biorelations is perhaps the most unique interpretation of the bodhisattva vows. Activists have used the scientific data about the earth's ecological systems and applied it to these vows. This vow, along with being the most unique of the four, is also perhaps the most environmentally oriented. Through this vow American activists are focusing on what they perceive as the human connection to the world's ecological systems, and acknowledging that connection. By engaging in activism directed towards saving endangered species, halting clear-cutting in the rainforest, or cleaning up polluted rivers, these practitioners are working to fulfill their vow to save all sentient beings (Kaza 2000, 169). The fourth of the ecologically oriented bodhisattva vows is interesting because it equates the "Buddha's Way" of the original bodhisattva vow with "Nature's Way." Practitioners who take these vows are acknowledging their place within the ecological cycle and thus becoming part of "Nature's Way."

Another Buddhist doctrine used by American Environmentalists is the "three poisons." The Buddha spoke of three poisons that all beings must conquer. These three poisons—greed, hatred, and ignorance—lie at the root of the suffering everyone experiences. Those seeking to attain enlightenment work toward ridding themselves of them.

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in the United States claim that the three poisons have become increasingly consuming in the world through uncontrolled consumerism, the destruction of the natural world, and the lack of consideration for the effects of that consumerism and destruction (S. Batchelor 2000, 33). According to activists, Buddhists must seek to eliminate the three poisons not only within themselves but from the world around them as well. They believe that the three poisons cause suffering within oneself and prevent the practitioner from reaching enlightenment as well as cause suffering in the world through environmental harm.

One example that is often cited by Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists would be the poison of greed. Many claim that this greed is evident in society's mass consumerism as well as the greed for more natural resources.

The unrestricted consumerism of many societies is, for several activists, at the core of the environmental crisis. Those Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists working against consumerism have called for a new sort of asceticism within consumer societies. This asceticism is another Buddhist doctrine embraced by the American movement. Some hearken back to the monasteries of traditional Buddhist cultures when using this doctrine within an ecological context. According to these practitioners, monks are not allowed to have many possessions and are not to engage in wastefulness or luxury. They also claim that lay people in societies where monks are viewed as ideal religious practitioners will not likely make a virtue of massive consumerism (Keown 2000, 115).[8] Similarly, American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists claim that this new asceticism should become an ideal within society and thereby turn people away from the view that to have more is to be more.

Several things characterize the new asceticism called for by American activists. Anti-consumerism is the most prominent characteristic, but with that goes practices such as recycling, changing dietary habits, and even using birth control (Lancaster 1997, 15). This asceticism calls for people to be responsible for their actions, and may call for withdrawal from using consumer goods such as cotton, computers, coffee, or cars, all of which have a large ecological impact (Kaza 2000, 168).

Karma and samsara are two more doctrines used by Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in the United States. Within a Buddhist framework, karma is the belief that all action has some kind of retribution. This action can be both physical and mental (Bronkhurst 2004, 415-6). For

[8] Whether this is true or not will be explored in chapter three.

example, stepping on an ant will have karmic consequences, but so will *intending* to step on the ant, whether or not the action occurs. Furthermore, if one were to intentionally step on an ant, that action would produce more karmic consequences than if one were to step on the ant accidentally. Samsara is the endless cycle of death and re-death which one tries to escape by attaining enlightenment. One's karma determines how one will be reborn in the next life. The Buddhist cosmology consists of several realms, and it is possible for one to be reborn as, for example, an animal, or to have been an animal in a past life.

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in the United States, while not reinterpreting the doctrines of karma and samsara within an ecological setting, use them to support the Buddhist element of their environmental action. Activists, when emphasizing these doctrines, point out that being born a human offers no rights over other life forms, as we were all other forms of life in the past and could be in the future (Gross 1997, 296-7). Through these doctrines, one comes to recognize the possibility of rebirth in the animal realm and acknowledge possible past lives in that realm. Connected to that is the idea of the endless cycle of samsara (the circle of death and re-death). Not only could one have been born as an animal in a previous lifetime, but one could also have been born into the same family as another being. The heron flying across the lake could have been one's mother or father. This helps foster compassion for those in other realms, and Buddhist Environmentalists use these doctrines to provide them the impetus to better the conditions of those in the animal realm.

With the doctrines of karma and samsara comes the Buddhist doctrine most widely employed by Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in the United States: dependent origination (*paticca samuppada*), or as it is more often referred to in an ecological context, interdependency. The doctrine of dependent origination states that nothing exists independently of previous causes

and conditions. It is often presented as a series of twelve different links, presented in an order that displays the development of samsara. These twelve links, in order, are ignorance, karmic activities, consciousness, mind and matter, six sense-doors (six senses which, when there is contact with them, sensation arises), contact, sensation, craving, attachment, becoming, birth and rebirth, and old age and death. While these twelve links each contribute to the continuation of cyclical existence, not one of them is enough to cause this development by itself. As a collection of Buddhist texts (the *Samyuttanikāya*, or *Connected Discourses*) points out, things such as water, sunlight, and soil are necessary for a sapling to grow, and without *all* of these things, nothing will happen (Boisvert 2004, 669). The causes and conditions of samsaric existence form a very intricate web, and as one action is affected by unknown numbers of causes and conditions, so one action will have an unknown number of consequences.

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists point to dependent origination to support their movement for a variety of reasons. One reason is that many scientific theories support the idea of cause and effect in terms of biorelations. Indeed, as will be discussed below, the use of these scientific theories as support for the movement is a unique characteristic of American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism. Another reason that dependent origination is embraced by American activists so much is that it is for them the starting point for two other points that are important within the movement. These are the doctrine of no-self (*anātman**) and the image of the jeweled net of Indra*.

One of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism is that of no-self, or *anātman*.[9] The main tenet of this teaching is that there is no autonomous, unchanging entity that can be called a "self." All that exists are constantly changing aggregates (*skandhas*). These aggregates are

[9] *Anātman* is considered a fundamental teaching by western Buddhists. It is not necessarily viewed as such by Asian Buddhists, however.

affected by previous causes which then interact and produce more effects. Because—like the rest of the world—humans are made up of aggregates, they are also subject to the laws of causality (Sarao 2004, 18-9). According to the doctrine of dependent origination, *all* existence is subject to the laws of causality, and human beings are no different. Suffering arises because of three cravings, one of which is the human craving for inherent existence, in this case for a permanent and unchanging self. Not only is this suffering manifested within an individual, but it plays out in the wider world.

For Buddhist Environmentalists, the environmental crisis the world faces today is caused by a problem that lies in what one activist coined a "mistaken metaphysics": there is a fundamental alienation between humans and the world (Hayward 1990, 64). This alienation has caused people to view themselves as autonomous entities whose actions do not have ramifications on all of existence. Activists are claiming that the problem is that humans do not recognize the truth that there is no autonomous self and that everything one does creates causes that have ramifications on the world. As activist and scholar Joanna Macy puts it, we have the delusion that the self is "so small and so needy that we must endlessly acquire and endlessly consume, and that it is so aloof that as individuals, corporations, nation-states, or species, we can be immune to what we do to other species" (1990, 57). For these activists, once one recognizes that one is connected to all that exists, he or she becomes interconnected with the world; he or she will then act with compassion toward the environment, because that is in turn acting with compassion toward oneself (Batchelor and Brown 1992, ix). Macy calls this a "greening of the self," in which the self now becomes something that is interconnected with all other beings (1990, 53). This connects with dependent origination in that one's self is not autonomous in

terms of the causes and conditions in the world. Rather, one is affected by those causes and conditions just as the environment is affected by them.

A Buddhist metaphor for dependent origination that is embraced by the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement is the jeweled net of Indra—a Buddhist doctrine from China that is a reworking of dependent origination. The metaphor comes from *Hua Yen* Buddhism, out of China, and is first found in the *Huayan jing*. Simply put, this is an infinitely large net that has a jewel at each node. These jewels are all illuminated and reflected by one another. This picture serves to illustrate the concept that "each phenomenon is determining every other phenomenon, while it is also in turn being determined by each and every other phenomenon. All phenomena are thus interdependent and interpenetrate without hindrance, and yet each one of them retains its distinct identity" (Poceski 2004, 346-7).

Much like the jewels at each node of Indra's net, Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in the United States are claiming that all sentient beings and indeed all ecosystems are being affected by all other beings and ecosystems. Stephanie Kaza, author of "To Save All Beings: Buddhist Environmental Activism," extends the jeweled net metaphor to an ecological context by saying:

> [I]f you tug on any one of the lines of the net—for example, through loss of species or habitat—it affects all the other lines. Or, if any of the jewels become cloudy (toxic or polluted), they reflect the others less clearly. Likewise, if clouded jewels are cleared up (rivers cleaned, wetlands restored), life across the web is enhanced. (2000, 166-7)

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists are acknowledging what they view as a fundamental connection between humans and the world, and using that connection as a basis to enhance all of the jewels in Indra's net.

The Buddhist concepts of the bodhisattva vow, the three poisons, asceticism, karma and samsara, and dependent origination are all important aspects of the Engaged Buddhist

Environmentalism movement in the United States for several possible reasons. One reason is that these doctrines transcend sectarian affiliation. As noted above, there are many different kinds of Buddhism in America and while these doctrines may be specific to a certain school of Buddhism in Asia, they are used among most Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in the United States regardless of what type of Buddhism he or she may practice. Another reason is that American Buddhism is largely free from large-scale ritual.[10] Among early scholars of Buddhism there was a decided anti-ritual sentiment which led to a focus on Buddhist doctrine, a focus that is evident still today.[11] Finally, these doctrines provide the Buddhist basis of Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism. Without embracing these Buddhist doctrines, it would simply be a secular environmental movement. However, Americans in this movement draw on the secular world for support as well in that they use scientific theory as another foundation for environmental activism.

Extra-Buddhist Doctrines

The use of extra-Buddhist scientific theory in support of Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism is a unique characteristic of the American movement. Systems theory, the Gaia hypothesis, and deep ecology are three main non-Buddhist theories that are brought in to support Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism by American activists. The first two, systems theory and the Gaia hypothesis, are scientifically based, while the third draws on these scientific theories. These extra-Buddhist theories are important to the Engaged Buddhist

[10] The term *large- scale ritual* is used here because some would make the argument that meditation, be it as an individual or in a community, is a ritual. The rituals that are largely absent among the convert community in the United States are those such as the Theravāda ordination ceremony. Chapter two explores one such ritual and its application to the ecological crisis.

[11] Chapter three will examine the issue of anti-ritualism in American Buddhism more closely. Specifically, how the American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement continues to reflect *many* of the Victorian assumptions about Buddhism, one of which was the assumption that early Buddhism was largely free from ritual.

Environmentalism movement because they are easily interpreted and closely related to the Buddhist doctrines discussed above.

Systems theory was first proposed in the 1940s by Ludwig von Bertalanffy. The essence of systems theory is that "real systems are open to, and interact with, their environments, and that they can acquire qualitatively new properties through emergence, resulting in continual evolution."[12] Systems theory, according to American Buddhist Environmentalists, plays into the Buddhist notion of *anātman*, which emphasizes that the self is constantly changing based on surrounding causes and conditions. As with the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, so also do Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists claim that systems theory allows one to realize the lack of a distinct and unchanging self, and thereby become more aware of the surrounding environment. It is important to note, however, that as Joanna Macy points out, for Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists, systems theory does not go far enough. Buddhism is central for her because it provides a means to reach the solution of blurring the distinction between oneself and the surrounding world (1990, 58). Thus have American Buddhist Environmentalists taken a secular and scientific concept and applied it to a situation by combining it with Buddhist doctrine.

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists also embrace the "Gaia hypothesis," another scientific theory. Scientist James Lovelock conceived this theory in the 1970s, hypothesizing "that the Earth is a homeostatic living organism that coordinates its vital systems to compensate for threatening environmental changes" (Badiner 1990, xvi). The importance of this theory is that the "locus of creativity" in the world is moved from the human mind to the world itself (Abram 1992, 79). With that comes the awareness that humans are part of that system. Macy posits that once one has realized this, one's consciousness will be transformed "from an

[12] "Systems Theory," *Principia Cybernetica Web*, 2004, http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/SYSTHEOR.html.

anthropocentric consumer consciousness to a biocentric Gaian consciousness" (Roberts 1992, 153). The emphasis here is on a fundamental unity between humans and the earth. Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists have combined the religious doctrines of no-self, the jeweled net of Indra and dependent origination with secular findings to form the core of their movement.

Building on the connection between humans and the earth, activists have also brought the idea of "deep ecology" into their movement. The term was first used by Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher. He used the term to distinguish between an environmentalism that sets humans apart from the world and an environmentalism that acknowledges a human connection with the earth. Environmentalism (for Naess) focuses on the "band-aid" approach, fixing a problem but not addressing the source. Deep ecology approaches environmental action by claiming that human beings are connected with the earth, and that solving ecological problems involves reevaluating how one sees oneself in relationship to the larger world (Macy 1996, 160). For many activists, this reevaluation is a kind of spiritual work that will result in an "ecological consciousness" (Deicke 1990, 165) which entails humans maintaining a responsible relationship with the environment as well as a more developed understanding of each individual's bioregion (Halifax 1990, 34). Again, dependent origination, no-self, and the jeweled net of Indra are all combined with this theory through their emphasis on the human connection with the world and the effects human actions have on the environment.

The scientific theories used by the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement draw primarily on three of the doctrines used by the American movement. Deep ecology, the Gaia hypothesis, and systems theory all focus on the human connection to the world and the fact that human actions have ramifications on the environment. One human action that some Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists are particularly concerned with is the creation of nuclear waste.

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism and Nuclear Waste

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in the United States have applied the religious and secular doctrines explored above to several ecological problems. One such problem is that of nuclear waste. The issue of what to do with the waste produced by nuclear proliferation is one plaguing societies around the world, and this movement seeks to provide a Buddhist response. Several doctrines embraced by the overall Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement have been adopted in the response to nuclear waste, namely dependent origination and karma.

Dependent origination is used most prominently within the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalist response to nuclear waste through mindfuless practice. Mindfulness practice—a meditation practice found in both Asia and the United States—draws on the silent meditation emphasis of convert Buddhism.[13] Mindfulness implies a deep awareness of one's life and one's surroundings. Kenneth Kraft, professor of Buddhist studies at Lehigh University and author of "Nuclear Ecology and Engaged Buddhism," has pointed out the complexities involved with applying mindfulness to nuclear issues. Kraft warns that mindfulness can be used to "shut out" awareness of the larger impact one's actions have on the world. He warns that this is especially true in light of the fact that nuclear waste takes about 250,000 years to become safe for handling. He suggests several methods of mindfulness in regards to nuclear waste, such as using alternative forms of energy or engaging in political activism. On a broader scale, Kraft beliefs that "[t]he society-wide vigilance required to keep radioactive materials out of the biosphere now and in the future can also be seen as a kind of collective mindfulness" (1997, 271).

[13] Again, this excludes Soka Gakkai International, a chanting-based Buddhist movement within the United States. It is perhaps the most ethnically diverse form of Buddhism in the United States. However, its focus on chanting "Nam- Myoho-Renge-Kyo" ("Hail to the wonderful dharma *Lotus Sutra*) sets it apart from the primarily silent meditation-focused Buddhisms of most American converts (Seager 1999, 70-89).

This practice relates to dependent origination because it calls on practitioners to be mindful of their connection with the larger world. Mindfulness practice originally involved becoming aware of the foundations of one's own mind and not the world outside. Being mindful in this case involves being aware of the impact one has on the environment, part of which may include the actions suggested by Kraft. This type of practice also relates to dependent origination because it focuses on the idea of causality, especially that associated with nuclear waste. Activists are asked to focus on how their actions affect both the environment and future generations.

What is interesting about these uses of mindfulness is that they do not appear on the surface to be explicitly Buddhist. Activists of all kinds call for greater political and social awareness. Yet these activists are unique because their activism is carried out in a Buddhist framework by engaging in Buddhist practice, applying it to oneself, and then carrying the fruits of that action into the surrounding world. Kraft suggests that American activists can move their mindfulness practice into the realm of karma.

Kraft calls for a kind of "eco-karma" to be applied to actions affecting the environment, an example of Buddhist doctrine being reinterpreted and applied within a specifically ecological context. With that comes a kind of collective karma that accounts for the relationship between the individual's responsibility and collective responsibility. The example he uses to illustrate this relationship provides a look at the complexities of a collective karma. To those in the future looking back, it will be accurate for them to claim that "we" created nuclear waste—"most of us take full advantage of the opportunity to live a developed-world lifestyle, thereby exporting some of the true costs of privilege to distant places or distant generations" (Kraft 1997, 273-4). The complexity arises when one takes a closer look: that "we" includes a mother who uses the

electricity available to her as well as an executive of a nuclear power plant. For Kraft, the doctrine of karma will have to be "reworked" to fit this modern application.

The Nuclear Guardianship Project under activist and Buddhist Joanna Macy is one example of a specifically Buddhist group reacting to the issue of nuclear waste. The Guardianship Project ran from 1991-1994, but really began with Macy in 1978. She joined a citizens' lawsuit regarding waste at a nearby reactor. Then, in 1988, she invited ten friends to explore the issue with her in more depth, and out of that grew the Project (Nisher and Gates 2000, 294). Macy pointed to the NIMBY ("Not In My Back Yard) syndrome common among some antinuclear activists. They try to rid themselves of the waste altogether, a nearly impossible task when faced with the fact that nuclear waste is contaminated for 250,000 years. Instead, Macy's project promoted mindfulness through guarding the waste (Nisher and Gates 2000, 296-7).

The main focus of the Guardianship Project was to set up sites known as "Guardian Sites." These would be places where the waste would be monitored, along with the surrounding environment. It also involved repairing leaks and other breakdowns that occurred. Others (those who were not nuclear engineers) would provide the support for the technicians. These sites would ideally serve as places of pilgrimage and remembering and maybe even meditation (Nisher and Gates 2000, 297-9). While the focus of the project was the idea of a "Guardian Site," the foundations were the Buddhist doctrines—such as no-self, dependent origination, and the jeweled net of Indra—employed by Macy in this ecological context. Intensive mindfulness was to be practiced at these Guardian Sites.

Along with mindfulness, Macy stressed the temporal nature of nuclear waste. Macy used the phrase "deep time" to move away from chronological time. Deep time in this sense is time

conceived on a grander scale than one would normally think, both backwards into the past and forwards into the future. She then connected this deep time with deep ecology, stating that "We not only dependently co-arise with other beings now, but with beings of the past and future as well" (Nisher and Gates 2000, 301). Thus, according to Macy, we are fundamentally connected to all beings before and after us, and nuclear waste provides an even more tangible reflection of that connection. Drawing specifically upon the doctrines of karma and dependent origination, Kraft and Macy have interpreted Buddhist doctrine and applied it in an ecological context.

Conclusion

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States is a movement that seeks to challenge and change the causes of environmental suffering in the world. Due to the focus on individual action in the Engaged Buddhism movement in America, there is no cohesive environmentalist movement with a clear agenda. However, several Buddhist doctrines provide a common thread among the many individuals seeking to enact environmental change. The Buddhist doctrines most utilized by American activists are the *bodhisattva* vow, the *three poisons*, asceticism, *karma* and *samsara* and *dependent origination*/interdependency. Using these doctrines as well as several scientific theories, American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists have worked to enact change dealing with issues such as nuclear waste.

Buddhists in traditionally Buddhist countries such as Thailand are also dealing with many environmental problems. In the Thai context, deforestation has presented a major challenge to the agrarian life of the villages. Buddhist monks in these villages have begun to respond to the problem using their own form of Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism, one that is very different from the American movement.

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in Thailand

Environmental change in Thailand began in the mid-twentieth century with a new development policy enacted by Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat after his coming to power in 1958 (Darlington 2003, 98). Since that time, Thailand has experienced incredible economic growth and industrialization. At the same time the country has also suffered incredible environmental degradation. The Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement emerged as a reaction to the environmental situation in rural Thailand. Much like the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in the United States, activists in Thailand seek to effect positive environmental change while working within a Buddhist framework. Although American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists tend to be lay people who approach the environmental situation through applying Buddhist doctrines to enact change in regards to the environment, Thai Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists tend to be monks who approach the environmental situation of their country through ritual. This chapter will explore ritually oriented Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in Thailand through an examination of the role Buddhist monks play in the movement as well as through a detailed account of the tree ordination ceremony (*buat ton mai*).

The Situation in Thailand

The environmental situation in Thailand began to change under the leadership of Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat. The development policy he promoted was based on a western economic model. Agricultural intensification and an export-oriented economy were the mainstays of the

new policy; in this case agricultural intensification involved "taming" much of Thailand's forests (Darlington 2003, 98). The official estimate is that Thailand's forest cover is now 20 per cent of what it originally was, and according to some environmental activists that is an overestimation (Udomittipong 2000, 193). Whether or not economic development in Thailand is the direct cause of this environmental degradation, the economy and the environment in Thailand are closely connected.

In Thailand, a person's livelihood (outside of the major cities) is often tied up with the local environment.[14] Having access to land and natural resources is essential to one's ability to maintain a sustainable livelihood. Through public policy, the Thai government had removed farmers from their forested lands in order to make way for economic development (Darlington 1998, 2-3). These displaced farmers, who cannot find work in the countryside or will not illegally clear forest lands, are oftentimes forced to move to the cities (K. Brown 1992, 87). There they must adjust to city life; being uneducated, they have few options for supporting their families. Many experience greater poverty, which both the government and the environmental movement have pointed to as being connected with the government's environmental policy. To the Thai government, poverty has caused environmental problems and thus further economic development will alleviate poverty and help the environment. This view has been taken up not only by the Thai government but by international organizations like the World Bank.

Environmentalists, on the other hand, have taken an opposite view: for them, the government's policies—which, they argue, have promoted the destruction of Thailand's forests—cause poverty. They point to policies that "further promote destruction of the forest through encouraging agricultural intensification and capital growth through the exploitation of

[14] Ideas of the environment in the west often focus on preserving natural areas, usually in the form of national and state parks as well as wildlife refuges.

natural resources" as examples of development policies that destroy the forest and lead to poverty (Darlington 2003, 100-101).

Activists also argue that the government's attempts at correcting the environmental situation are damaging as well. At one point in the 1980s, logging became unprofitable and the government placed a temporary ban on the industry. They began a new policy of reforestation, which on the surface seemed as if the government was addressing the ecological concerns brought up in response to previous development policies. Upon closer inspection, though, the government ended up with a reforestation plan using single-species crops of eucalyptus trees, a plant not native to Thailand. This solution would ultimately not aid rural farmers in need (K. Brown 1992, 88). There have been no major governmental developments in improving the ecological situation in Thailand, and it is in this situation that "environmental monks" have come to the fore as leaders of the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement in Thailand.

Why Buddhism? The Buddhist Sangha and the Thai Community

The means for addressing Thailand's environmental concerns are important because of the close ties between rural life and the environment. Some members of the Thai monastic community have argued that Buddhism provides that means.

Theravāda Buddhism is closely tied to Thai culture; around 95 per cent of the Thai population is Buddhist (Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel 1997, 47). One of the major components of Theravāda Buddhism is the monastic community, known as the *sangha**. Buddhists traditionally go for refuge to three jewels: the Buddha (Teacher), the Dhamma* (the teachings), and the sangha (the monastic community). The existence of the sangha as one of the three jewels speaks to its importance within the Theravāda Buddhist community.

Most monasteries in Thailand are interconnected with Thai society. Within the Theravādin Buddhist world, becoming a monk does not imply total withdrawal from society.[15] Buddhist laypeople donate to monks and monasteries in order to increase their karmic merit. These donations allow the monks to survive without having to work in the secular world. In return for the donations, monks teach and perform rituals for the laity. The monasteries keep the religion alive by transmitting teachings and performing rituals for the laity, while the laity keep the monasteries alive through donations and other forms of support. This mutually dependent relationship results in a monastery that is intimately connected with Thai society. Environmentalist monks have viewed this connection as the justification of their activism: if the source of the laity's ethical worldview is the monks in the monastery, then those same monks are one of the best means for transmitting environmental ethics to the laity.

Environmentalist Monks: Their Predecessors

Environmentalist monks of Thailand were preceded by "development monks" of the 1970s. Economic development policies of the 1960s promoted a type of development which some monks perceived to be damaging to the country. In promoting consumerism and prograss, the government even went so far as to prohibit monks from teaching the doctrine of *santutthi*, which teaches one to be content with what he or she already has. The Sangha Authority authorized this move in collusion with the government, by reasoning "that the teaching of *santutthi* was opposed to the ideals of economic growth, and hence opposed to development" (Udomittipong 2000, 191).[16]

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[15] There are some monks who go to forest monasteries where they are more isolated from the surrounding villages. However, these monks still depend upon the laity for food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Laity will flock to these "forest monks" oftentimes with the belief that the monks posses special powers.

[16] This provides an interesting contrast to a point made by American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists. American activists claim that monastic life promotes anti-materialism, however the above example of the Thai Sangha's support for the government's economic development policies suggests otherwise.

In response to the government's policies and the Sangha Authority's acceptance of those policies, some monks began to push for new development strategies. These monks would usually labor in the communities in which they lived, working with the rural people who were overlooked by the national government. Development monks had religious motivations for their social activism, despite criticism from the sangha hierarchy that they were overstepping their roles as monks.

One of the first development monks, Phra Dhammadilok, realized that those who were struggling to survive would have no energy to devote toward their religious lives; without any kind of religious life, he argued, people would not be able to overcome their suffering (Darlington 2003, 100). Their effort to relieve others' suffering served as a primary motivation for the development monks of the 1970s, and this was further carried into the movement that the environmental monks that began in the 1980s.

In the 1980s, some monks approached the issue of development, much as the development monks before them, with a new focus on the connection between Thailand's natural environment and the economy. While the development monks primarily tackled local issues, these "ecology monks" address the national issue of the government's economic agenda and its effect on the environment (Darlington 2003, 100). Although many work in their respective villages, the environmentalist monks view the problem as a national one. The projects are oftentimes local, with many monks working in their individual villages to protect forests and watersheds. Yet the monks believe that the destruction of Thailand's forests is a product of the government's development policy, affecting more than just their local village.

In 1985 the first major environmental action taken by monks occurred in Chiang Mai, at Doi Suthep Mountain. A proposal was made to build a cable car on the mountain in order to

foster economical development, mainly through tourism. Doi Suthep Mountain, in Doi Suthep-Pui National Park, is home to *Wat Pra That*. This *wat* houses a Buddhist relic and is an important site of pilgrimage for many Buddhists. Opposing the cable car were many Chiang Mai citizens, the media, social action groups, and students. The major concern about the cable car proposal was that it would require deforestation, thus harming many plant and animal species that resided on the mountain. For the general public, the debate centered on the need for environmental conservation over economic development. The monks took a more religious view of the issue, arguing that the cable car threatened the pilgrimage site and its sanctity. The sangha's district head in Chiang Mai, Phra Phothirans, argued that because one could not separate the forest and Buddhism, the trees had to be protected. While the cable car issue was not as environmentally motivated as causes taken up later by ecology monks (the cable car issue involved a threat to a pilgrimage site as much as to a forest), the case was one of the first instances in which the monks publicly demonstrated a relationship between the environment and Buddhism, and used that relationship as a means for social change. Although there is no record of the monks in this situation holding rituals to oppose the government's plan, the incident with the cable car is important because for the first time monks in Thailand were drawing explicit connections between Buddhism and the environment (Darlington 2003, 102-103).

The Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement is by no means a unified social movement within Thailand. Monks work primarily within their own communities, working with their own monasteries and villages to solve problems that face them directly. At the same time, NGO's sponsor informal gatherings five to ten times a year for ecology monks, bringing them together from all over Thailand to share their activities as well as develop new ideas (Darlington

2003, 103). However, even within the movement there is some disagreement over how certain environmental issues should be handled.

The reader should not get the impression that all or even most monks in the Thai sangha are engaged in environmental activism. The ecology monks make up a small percentage of the total population of the Thai sangha. Yet, despite their small numbers, their actions are very visible within Thai society, drawing criticism from many within the sangha hierarchy (Darlington 2003, 96).

Some sangha authorities argue that monks should not be involved with political issues, of which environmental activism is a part. In response to these criticisms, environmentalist monks argue that that are not advocating a new form of Buddhism. The ecology monks point out that their main concern is relieving people's suffering, something which has long been the concern of Buddhists; in this case, however, suffering is caused by the ecological situation. They note that it is not possible to deal with people's suffering without addressing the political issues that are causing that suffering in the first place (Darlington 1998, 11). While some monks do participate in scholarly debates concerning the doctrinal basis for Buddhist environmentalism, the priority of most ecology monks lies in action: these actions urge a re-examination of Buddhist scripture in an environmentalist light, instead of combing the Pāli Canon for textual support for environmental action (Darlington 1998, 3). The involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGO's) has also caused some contention among the government-sponsored monks. NGO involvement in the environmental movement has helped with the success of many ecology monks. The contention arises because many NGO's are openly critical of the Thai government, and this in turn makes the ecology monks appear even more out of line to the state sangha.

Buddhist environmental activism in Thailand has taken several forms, ranging from informing the local population about a gas pipeline proposal to organizing peace walks around Songkha Lake.[17] Monks carry out their environmentalism by performing rituals within the community. While rituals do have a doctrinal basis in Buddhism, it is not the doctrine that is stressed. It is the actions themselves that are being emphasized, and it is the actions that are more accessible to the laity. Before moving on to discuss the tree ordination ceremony in Thailand, it is important to understand the foundations of ritual and its functions in Theravāda Buddhist societies.

Karma and Ritual in Theravāda Buddhism

The doctrine of karma is expressed in the Thai saying "do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil (*tham dī dai dī; tham chūa dai chūa*)" (Keyes 1983, 263). Thus, the centrality of karma to Buddhist practitioners provides a foundation for action. As Charles Keyes notes in "Merit Transference in the Kammic Theory of Popular Theravāda Buddhism,"

> If one acts in ignorance—giving vent to one's passions of greed (*lobha*), lust (*rāga*), and anger (*dosa*)—one will commit immoral acts and will suffer negative consequences. If, on the other hand, one acts with awareness, suppressing the impurities (*kilesa*) of one's nature and following the desire to reduce of eliminate suffering, one will perform moral acts and experience positive consequences. (1983, 262)

In other words, immoral acts produce demerit while moral acts produce merit.

The act of merit-making (acquiring good karma) is, in most Theravādin Buddhist countries, perhaps the most important form of religious action (Keyes 1983, 267). There are

[17] Although, as noted above, Thai activists do draw on some doctrine when they argue that they are not advocating a new Buddhism, their *primary* means of transmitting environmental ethics to the laity is through ritual. This differs from the American focus on doctrine first, for Thai activists focus on action first. This will be discussed further in chapter three. For information concerning the Yadana gas pipeline or Songkha lake, see Santikaro Bhikkhu's "Dhamma Walk around Songkha Lake" and Parvel Gmuzdek's "Resisting the Yadana Gas Pipeline," in *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, 2000.

several ways to make merit.[18] The fact that both monks and laypeople can and do perform all of these merit-making deeds helps to dispel the idea that only the laity are concerned with making merit (Strong 1987, 383). Within Buddhist society, rituals—such as the ordination ritual or the donation of food to monks—provide a means of gaining merit.

Although texts serve an important function as written records of religious doctrine, Charles Keyes notes that the "relevance of texts to religious dogma in the worldview of any people cannot be assumed simply because some set of texts are recognized as belonging to a particular religious tradition" (1983, 272). Popular religion is not necessarily dependent on textual religion for the transmission of religious doctrine. It is through "the public display and communication of religious messages" that doctrine is related to practitioners (Keyes 1983, 273). A specific example of the use of ritual for religious teaching is the Buddhist ordination ritual.

In the case of this study, "the public display and communication of religious messages" is carried out in the tree ordination ritual. This ritual taps into the traditional connection between ordinations and merit-making, for there is a great amount of merit attached to Buddhist ordinations. One particular Thai text, the *Ānisong Būat*, notes that those who sponsor the ordination of their son as a novice (*samanera*) will gain benefits for four *kappa*, and those who allow sons to become *bhikkhus* will reap benefits for eight *kappa*.[19] The sponsor will also give robes and other material goods to the one being ordained, thus accruing even more merit.

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[18] The list of "ten meritorious deeds (Pāli, *dasakusalakamma*)" is made up of the following ten practices: "1. Giving (*dāna*) 2. Observing the moral precepts (*sīla*) 3. Meditation (*bhāvanā*) 4. Showing respect to one's superiors (*apacāyana*) 5. Attending to their needs (*veyyāvacca*) 6. Transferring merit (*pattidāna*) 7. Rejoicing in the merit of others (*pattānumodana*) 8. Listening to the Dharma, that is, the Buddha's teachings (*dhammasavana*) 9. Preaching the Dharma (*dhammadesanā*) 10. Having right beliefs (*ditthijjukamma*)" (Strong 1987, 383). All of these may be performed by *both* a monk and a layperson, pointing to the importance of merit-making for both groups. See John Strong, "Merit: Buddhist Concepts," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987.

[19] According to Charles Keyes, "Each *kappa* can be thought of in terms of the time it would take for a rough rock 1,000 *wa* (about 2,000 meters) to become smooth if it is wiped with a divine cloth every hundred years by the *devas* [gods]." He also notes that some sources postulate one *kappa* to be about 4,320,000,000 years (1983, 278).

According to some environmentalist monks, tree ordinations are effective in organizing community action because of the merit associated with ordinations. Not only is merit gained by the laity through donating seedlings and robes to the *sangha*, but also through protecting the forest in which the ordained tree resides. The education of the laity occurs through the merit associated with protecting the forest in that the laity must be educated about *how* to protect the forest in order to gain merit. Thus, instead of transmitting their environmental message primarily through doctrine, Thai environmentalist monks use ritual to teach the laity about protecting the forest or to affect a changed view about the environment.

Originally, the monastery was the center of village life by providing education, spiritual guidance, and community activity for the village. In the past century, the government has taken over many of these roles and now the monastery is more of a spiritual than a community center. In order to keep close contact with the lay community, some monks have begun to perform more and more rituals, such as the Buddha image consecration ritual (Darlington 1998, 4). The basic fear (to many environmentalist monks) is that Buddhism is becoming less and less relevant to Thai society, so monks are reasserting the relevance of the tradition through rituals. Not only do they preserve religious sentiments, such as notions of merit, but they reinterpret the traditional use of these rituals to make them applicable to everyday life such as through ceremonies like the tree ordination (Darlington1998, 12).

Tree Ordinations in Thailand

One visible aspect of Buddhism in Thailand is the ordination ceremony. It is customary for all Thai Buddhist males to enter the monastic order as monks (*bhikkhu)* for a short time, thus the ordination ritual plays an integral role in Thai Buddhist life. Aside from marking an

important transition in a man's life, ordination rituals bring the community together to reinforce religious and communal values.

The Traditional Ordination Ceremony

Ordination ceremonies are traditionally conducted to mark the ritual entrance of a boy or man into the sangha. The first portion of the ceremony is called *thaut phaa paa*, or the giving of forest robes. Usually the laity will donate money, robes, and other material goods to the Sangha in order to gain religious merit. These offerings are brought in during a *phaa paa* parade, in which the one being ordained is dressed as the young Prince Siddhartha and paraded through the village, with villagers following with music, singing, and dancing. The donations are then traditionally placed on a stage that has been erected for the Order (Win 1986, 29-33).[20]

The next part of the ceremony consists of the ritual acceptance of donations by the monks. In a traditional ceremony, the boy, after his head has been shaven, will ask permission to sit with the Order and will then present his robes to the monks, requesting formal ordination. The monks will accept the robe offering, and after the boy requests to have them returned and thereby initiate him, the monks return to robes and change the newly ordained into his monastic robes (Win 1986, 37-9).

Another aspect of the traditional ordination ceremony involves a water libation. A small Buddha image is placed in an alms bowl full of water, and candle wax is dropped into the water while the monks chant. The monks will follow this blessing by sprinkling the water from the bowl onto those present at the ceremony (Win 1986, 49).

[20] Due to the availability of sources, the following discussion of the traditional ordination ceremony is taken from a text concerning the Burmese ritual. Thus, there are some aspects of the ritual which would vary slightly from the Thai ceremony, but the basic structure is the same.

Tree Ordination Ritual (buat ton mai)

In Thailand, Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists have embraced the ordination ceremony both in its outward form and inner meaning through the tree ordination ceremony (*buat ton mai*). This ceremony is in response to the problems caused by deforestation in rural Thailand. The country has one of the highest rates of deforestation in Asia (aside from Nepal and possibly Borneo), with both NGO and government estimates demonstrating that forest cover in Thailand has been reduced by about 75 percent since 1913 (Darlington 1998, 2). There are several causes for this deforestation, almost all of which relate to economic issues. Commercial logging, wood for fires and charcoal, and agricultural methods are direct causes. Prior to 1980, roads were built to prevent communist insurgents from hiding in remote forest areas, and farmers moved into the newly accessible regions. Cultural views also contributed, with the forest being viewed as wild and needing to be brought into civilization (Darlington 1998, 3).

The Thai ordination ritual has been adapted by the environmental movement. The first tree ordination is credited to a monk in Phayao Province, Phrakhru Manas. The ordination discussed below was organized by Phrakhru Pitak, a monk of Nan Province. Phrakhru Pitak began preaching about environmental issues shortly after his ordination in the mid-1970s. In his sermons he focused on human responsibility for and interconnection with both social and natural environments. When he realized that his preaching was having very little effect on the villagers, he went to speak with Phrakhru Manas about the ordination ceremony. In 1990, Phrakhru Pitak sponsored his first tree ordination ceremony in his home village, with a second being performed in 1991. The particular ceremony below was performed in July 1991 in Nan Provice. Along with the villagers neighboring the forest in question, twenty monks were invited to participate in the ceremony. There were also members of the Sangha hierarchy, the government, and Wildlife

Fund Thailand present for the ceremony (Darlington 1998, 6-8). Through an examination of a traditional Buddhist ordination ceremony and the Thai tree ordination ceremony, the reader may see how Thai environmentalist monks are reinterpreting a very traditional and visible ritual as a vehicle for environmental action.

Much like in the traditional ordination ceremony, the tree ordination ceremony begins with the laity giving donations to the sangha. Recently monks have allowed the cash donations from traditional ordination ceremonies to be used for development projects such as school repairs and village credit unions. Villagers are able to receive more merit in this manner, for not only do they benefit by donating goods at the actual ceremony, but—because the source of the funds was an ordination ceremony—they also benefit from supporting the individual development projects. Phrakhru Pitak added a new aspect to this portion of the ceremony as well. Instead of donating the usual items at the tree ordination ceremony, local nurseries and wealthy patrons donated 12,000 seedlings (Darlington 1998, 8).

In the tree ordination ceremony, the *phaa paa* parade comes after the presentation of gifts (instead of before as in the traditional ceremony). The parade is quite different from those of regular ordinations. In this particular ceremony, three groups representing the sub districts of ten villages involved performed skits for those present. Two of the skits demonstrated straightforward messages by pantomiming actions such as planting trees. The third skit, however, was openly political in that it placed the blame for the forest's destruction on the government. These skits wouldn't necessarily be an innovation under ordinary circumstances, but the fact that it was part of a Buddhist ritual makes it quite unusual (Darlington 1998, 8-9). While skits aren't necessarily a part of every ordination ceremony, they present an example of how ecology monks are adapting the ordination ritual to environmental activism.

Next, Phrakhru Pitak and the highest ranking monk accepted the tree seedlings, thereby conferring merit on all of the donors and participants. Whereas in traditional ordinations a boy will present robes to the Order, in the tree ordination ceremony the villagers presented 12,000 seedlings. Many of the seedlings were then given to those at the ceremony to plant in deforested areas. Others were planted in the temple grounds. The trees given out were often fruit trees that would be beneficial and would not have to be cut down. Because these seedlings were blessed and given back to the laity by the monks who accepted them, cutting one down would be an act of demerit, and protecting them an act of merit (Darlington 1998, 9).

Between the time when normally a young man would receive his new robes and change into them, the village people in this ceremony planted some of the seedlings and then traveled to the mountains where the chosen tree—often the largest tree in the forest—was to be ordained. At the base of the tree a four-foot Buddha image was set on a concrete base. Phrakhru Pitak preached a sermon during this ritual that emphasized the connection between the Buddha and nature, one shown visibly by the statue's placement at the base of the tree (Darlington 1998, 9).[21]

At the point when a young man would be putting on his new monastic robes, the monks at the tree ordination wrapped orange robes around the base of the tree, thus sanctifying it. The robes served as symbolic reminders that cutting this tree, or even harming it, would be an act of demerit. Wrapping trees in sacred clothes is not a new innovation within Buddhism. The Buddha reached enlightenment under a Bo tree (the scientific name of which is, interestingly, *ficus religiosa*), and one may find Bo trees wrapped in cloth to acknowledge the tree's significance. What is innovative in this ceremony is the fact that the ordained tree was not

[21] While Phrakhru Pitak did not refer to it explicitly, the connection between the Buddha and nature is further emphasized in the statue's placement at the base of the tree because that is where tradition states that the Buddha attained enlightenment—seated at the base of a Bo tree.

already sacred, as Bo trees are, but was *made* sacred through the ordination ritual, symbolized by the orange robes wrapped around its base (Darlington 1998, 9-10).

There was also a water sanctification ritual that took place. At this point, a small Buddha-image was placed in a monk's alms bowl and candle wax dripped into the water while the monks were chanting. Usually the monks sprinkle this water on those present at the ceremony as a blessing (Win 1986, 49); however at this ceremony, something new occurred. Instead of sprinkling it on those present, the ten headmen from the surrounding villages drank the water in the presence of the Buddha image at the base of the tree, thereby sealing their pledge to protect the surrounding forest.

One token of this ritual left at the site of the ceremony draws quite a bit of attention from visitors. A plaque was nailed to the tree that reads "*Tham laay paa, tham laay chaat.*" This can be translated to mean "To destroy the forest is to destroy life." The word *chaat* can mean several things, among them life, rebirth, and nation. Thus the sign connects the forest with one's life, one's rebirth, and one's nation (Darlington 1998, 10-11).

The tree ordination ceremony is a point of contention within the sangha. The monks involved in these ceremonies are careful to note that they are not *actually* ordaining a tree, as ordination is reserved for humans only. The point of the ceremony, according to ecology monks, is "to [symbolically] remind people that nature should be treated as equal with humans, deserving of respect and vital for human as well as all life. The opportunity of the ordination was used to build spiritual commitment to preserving the forest and to teach in an active and creative way the value of conservation" (Darlington 1998, 9). Many conservative monks still find this difficult to accept, as they believe it is questionable in light of the *Vinaya** code (the

text containing the 227 rules that fully ordained monks must follow) which states that only humans may be ordained.[22]

Conclusion

The use of the tree ordination ritual is just one example of how monks are approaching Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in Thailand. Thailand is a country that has experienced a large amount of economic change in a relatively short amount of time, and the effects of this change have caused concern among some within the Thai sangha. The economic effects were first addressed by the development monks of the 1970s. More recently, the ecological effects of Thailand's economic development have been addressed by environmentalist monks. These monks are using rituals such as the tree ordination ritual to promote environmental activism. Their approach is significant because it reinterprets traditional Buddhist rituals in order to enact positive environmental action in a nation where the role of the monastery in everyday life has been undergoing major changes in the last century.

This ritually based environmentalism diverges from the doctrinal orientation of the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement in the United States. The next chapter will seek to establish why this movement has a doctrinal orientation in the United States, instead of the ritual orientation of the movement in Thailand.

[22] Many tree ordainers have actually disrobed, but it is hard to tell if this has been done of their own accord or because of pressures from conservative monastic leaders (Keown:118). Regardless of the disagreement, tree ordinations continue to occur.

The United States and Thailand: A Comparison

Upon closer examination it appears that the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movements in the United States and Thailand are very different, despite growing out of the same religious tradition. The movement in the United States has been very doctrinally oriented, focusing more on the philosophical aspects of the tradition for the movement's foundations. In Thailand, however, the movement has reflected the common use of ritual to transmit Buddhist doctrine, specifically through the tree ordination ceremony. The differences between the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movements in the United States and Thailand reflect larger differences between how "Buddhism" is interpreted, conceived, and transmitted within each country. What these differences demonstrate is that the American attention to a doctrinal foundation for the movement is indicative of the historical tendency for western scholars and Buddhists to interpret Buddhism as an aritualistic philosophical system.

Foundations of the Western Interpretation

It is important when trying to understand western interpretations of Buddhism to explore from where the interpretations come. Perhaps the best place to begin would be with the Pāli Canon (*tipitaka*, a collection of Buddhist scriptures) and then proceed to the western interpretations of the Canon. The term "Pāli Canon" itself is problematic, however, and by breaking down this term one will be able to understand better the traditions on which western Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism is built.

There are many kinds of Buddhist texts and there is no one exclusive canon that is in recognized in Asia. Texts in use throughout Asia include commentaries, histories, and the Pāli Canon (Keyes 1983, 272). In his article "On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon," Steven Collins points out that of all Buddhist scriptures, the Pāli Canon is the only group of texts considered by western scholars to be an exclusive list (1990, 94). This interpretation of the Canon is problematic, though, due to the nature of the words *Pāli* and *canon*. Collins describes two different ways of interpreting "canon:" 1) as equivalent to written or oral scriptures (an equivalence which does *not* connote exclusivism) or 2) as an exclusive set of texts that serve as "foundational documents" (1990, 90). He also discusses several ways of interpreting the term *Pāli*. One way is to distinguish between the wording and meaning of a text. Another way is to use the term as synonymous with the word *text* (*patha*). One may also interpret *Pāli* to be the text of a specific work. None of these interpretations connote the exclusive list of texts that the west has made the Canon out to be (Collins 1990, 91-2).

Early western scholars interpreted the Canon as a closed list of scriptures that reflected an early orthodox Buddhism that had been, as they saw it, corrupted by the rituals of contemporary Buddhism. Understanding the political motivations behind the commitment of the Pāli oral transmissions to writing and its canonization helps to dispel the idea that the Pāli Canon is equivalent to early Buddhism or that the Canon itself is a religiously constructed entity.[23] However, western Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists have continued to prefer the Canon (as well as other Buddhist texts) as primary sources for interpreting the Buddhist religious tradition instead of archaeological and vernacular texts that provide foundations for the tradition in Asia.

[23] For a discussion of the political environment surrounding the canonization of the Pāli transmissions, see Steven Collins, "On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon."

As European scholars began to translate the Buddhist texts, they encountered a tradition very different from the ones visible in nineteenth-century Asia. Victorian scholars began to hold the Pāli Canon as the ideal manifestation of Buddhism. As Victorian observers started to construct a history of the Buddha from these texts, the Buddha "was perceived as having attacked the pretensions of a Brahmanical hierarchy, the inequities of the caste system, and as having proclaimed the equality of all men" (Almond 1988, 72). The Buddha was also seen as a Luther-like figure who had reformed Hinduism of its ritualistic excesses (Almond 1988, 73-4). With this view of both Buddhism and the Buddha drawn from the Pāli Canon, Victorian scholars looked at the Buddhism around them, which had many rituals, and, in the case of Sri Lanka (where most of these scholars did their research), a caste system, and saw it as a degeneration of the Buddhism presented in the texts. It is important to note, however, that even though the Victorians focused on the Pāli Canon, there always existed other (and sometimes more reliable) sources.

In "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," Gregory Schopen points out that scholars have had two kinds of evidence available—archaeological and textual—and that they have exhibited an overwhelming preference for the textual (1991, 1). There are two interesting points about this preference. The first is the assumption that these texts were available to all Buddhists, something which has yet to be proven.[24] The second is that scholars have preferred to use these texts and have assumed they

[24] Charles Keyes makes a similar point in "Merit-Transference in the Kammic Theory of Popular Theravada Buddhism." He writes: "the evidence from monastery libraries in Laos and Thailand...reveal[s] that what constitutes the Theravadin *Dhamma* for people in these areas includes only a small portion of the total *Tipitaka*, some semi-canonical commentaries such as Buddhaghosa's *Vissudhimigga*, a large number of pseudo-*jataka* and other pseudo-canonical works, histories of shrines and other sacred histories, liturgical works, and popular commentaries. Moreover, for any particular temple-monastery in Thailand or Laos, the collection of texts available to the people in the associated community are not exactly the same as those found in another temple-monastery" (1983, 272). Thus, these early scholars were not only erroneous in their assumption that the Pāli Canon represented ideal Buddhism, but also that contemporary Asian Buddhists ever had *access* to the entire *tipitaka* in the first place.

represent Buddhism as it was practiced originally. Furthermore, they chose to use these texts even when presented with archaeological evidence that provided a much better description of early Buddhism on the ground (Schopen 1991, 1-2). As Schopen writes, according to modern scholars (in the case of this study, the Victorian Buddhist scholars) "'real' or 'correct' religion...resides in scriptural texts, in formal doctrine" (1991, 15). Victorian Buddhist scholars embraced the Pāli Canon as the example of a "pure Buddhism" and saw the contemporary Asian instances of the tradition as decayed versions of what was found in the texts. Philip Almond points out in *The British Discovery of Buddhism*:

> The Victorian creation of an ideal textual Buddhism was a key component in the rejection of Buddhism in the East. But, at the same time, this same creation enabled the appropriation and assimilation within Victorian culture of a Buddhism of sorts, grounded in the past, ideally conceived, and textually constructed. (1988, 40)

The "ideally conceived and textually constructed 'Buddhism of sorts'" that Almond writes about is manifested in the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement in the United States in two ways. The first is in the American emphasis on textually based Buddhist doctrine as the foundation for their environmentalist message. The second is in the absence of community-oriented (i.e. not involving individual meditation practices) ritual from the American movement.

The lack of ritual in Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States hearkens back to the Victorian belief that early Buddhism was largely free from ritual. This was emphasized in comparisons of Hinduism and Buddhism to Catholicism and Protestantism. Indeed, the 1874 edition of *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* proclaimed that "Buddhism was an attempt to make Brahmanism more catholic [universal], to throw off its intolerable burden of ceremonies" (Almond 1988, 74). For Victorian observers, the rituals of contemporary Buddhism were seen as just one more example of the degeneration of the tradition in Asia. Rhys Davids,

one of the first British scholars of Buddhism, portrayed "original Buddhism" as a system that was, for the most part, devoid of ritual (Hallisey 1995, 44). Part of the reason for this aritualistic portrayal lies in the fact that many of the monks Rhys Davids encountered were scholar monks who were not involved in the lives of lay people. Through scholar monks, Davids was exposed to a Buddhist world largely focused on Pāli textual studies and not on rituals.

Many American Buddhists approach Buddhism as more of a philosophical system rather than a religious system. Many early scholars also saw Buddhism as more of a philosophy than a religion. Emphasis on doctrinal and textual Buddhism among Victorian observers was a major component in that interpretation. But what was perhaps the most important factor in the classification of Buddhism in such a manner was a perceived Buddhist atheism on the part of Victorian scholars. For the Victorians, it simply was not possible for an atheistic system to qualify as a religion (Almond 1988, 94).[25]

Philip Almond suggests that two motifs, both originating in the sixteenth century, played a role in the Victorian reaction to what they perceived as Buddhist atheism. The first motif was "the notion of the innate religiousness of mankind"; in other words, all humans possessed some longing for a supreme being. The second motif was that in light of mankind's innate religiousness, "the existence of nations of atheists" was impossible (Almond 1988, 99). These two factors contributed to the Victorian assignment of Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion.

While western Buddhists do not approach Buddhism with the same Orientalist assumptions as the Victorian scholars (who viewed Asian people and culture as being inherently

[25] It should be noted here that in this case the term "atheism" refers to the lack of belief in a supreme creator deity. The Buddhist worldview consists of numerous gods (*devas*); indeed it is possible for a human to be reborn as one. What makes the Buddhist view distinct is the belief that these gods are not supreme but are also subject to the laws of karma and are still within the realm of samsara (the cycle of death and re-death).

inferior to western people and culture), they have inherited the Victorian interpretations of Buddhism as a doctrinally based aritualistic system. This stems not only from the Victorian *study* of Buddhism by scholars in Asia, but also from the *practice* of Buddhism by nineteenth-century American Buddhists. Some of the characteristics of these early American Buddhists may be seen in the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement in the United States.

In his book *The American Encounter with Buddhism*, Thomas Tweed describes several kinds of Buddhists in nineteenth-century America, two of which are especially pertinent to this study. The first group, which Tweed coins "esoteric Buddhists," was composed primarily of those interested in occultism. These Buddhists tended to focus on the Buddhism of South Asia and Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka) and upheld the scholarly assertion that the Pāli Canon was the authoritative set of texts (Tweed 1992, 54). While modern American Buddhist Environmentalists draw from more than the Pāli Canon, they nevertheless focus on texts as a primary foundation of their movement. The second group of Buddhists that Tweed discusses is the "rationalist Buddhists." For this group, ethics were at the center of any religious system. They were especially drawn to Buddhism because of its ethical system and what they perceived to be its compatibility with modern science (Tweed 1992, 68). As noted in chapter one, American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists are unique in that they combine Buddhist doctrines with scientific theories to support Buddhist ecological activism.

Many American Buddhists continue to look to texts for the source of their Buddhism, even in light of the archaeological evidence that provides a much clearer picture of how Buddhism was lived closer to the time of the founder. Most also steer away from ritual as a means for education and activism. This is not because they necessarily see ritual as a corruption

of the tradition, they simply do not use it for pedagogical reasons.[26] A juxtaposition of the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movements in the United States and Thailand demonstrates how western Buddhists continue to hold to the Victorian idea of Buddhism.

Same Ends, Different Means

When contrasting Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States and Thailand, one major difference presents itself to the observer: the doctrinal orientation of the American movement versus the ritual orientation of the Thai movement. While both movements are ultimately seeking to end the suffering caused by environmental degradation, they seek to reach that end using very different means.

The American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement uses Buddhist doctrine as the means to end suffering. As discussed in chapter one, the major doctrines used by the movement are the bodhisattva vow, the three poisons, asceticism, karma and samsara, and dependent origination. What is important for our discussion is the way these doctrines are used by the movement. American activists apply these Buddhist concepts to themselves initially (i.e. for personal transformation/enlightenment). They then apply that personal change to environmental action. They take the bodhisattva vow which, for example, involves a vow to save all sentient beings. They then use this vow as a basis for their environmentalism by saying that their action is being done to save these beings. Activists also focus on the three poisons and interpret them in an environmentalist manner. To American activists, first the poisons are eliminated within oneself by using Buddhist doctrine and then they are eliminated from the world through environmental activism. For example, some activists interpret greed as the use of more natural resources than is necessary. An instance of this would be calling for less fuel

[26] Chanting and meditation are two rituals that are emphasized within the American practitioner community. However, these rituals function more as means for achieving enlightenment and are individually focused, instead of the community rituals in Thailand that often serve a pedagogical function.

consumption through carpools, public transportation, etc. as a means for eliminating the greed for more natural resources both within oneself and within society. The new asceticism promoted by many American Buddhist Environmentalists involves making changes in personal lifestyle in order to affect a large and positive ecological impact. In regards to dependent origination, American Environmentalists seek to realize their interdependence with the surrounding environment through ideas such as biorelations. Activists focus on the interrelatedness of a specific ecological setting, realize that they are a part of that setting, and live their lives according to that realization. This may mean using less disposable paper products because of the impact of the lumber industry on the local ecology. For American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists, one first realizes he or she is connected to all that exists and *then* acts with compassion toward the environment. The progression of American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism looks somewhat like this:

Buddhist doctrine→Application of doctrine to oneself→Carry results of that action into activism→Relieve suffering

An example of the above model may serve to further clarify the progression. The starting point is a Buddhist doctrine, for example the doctrine of asceticism. From the American Buddhist Environmentalist's point of view, asceticism calls for a decreased reliance on and desire for excessive material goods. The American activist then applies that doctrine to him or herself through such practices as only owning one vehicle, or giving up a vehicle all together. Next, he or she takes the practice of asceticism to the general public and calls for a decrease in society's desire for material goods. Through this action, according to the practitioner, people will eventually spend less on unnecessary material goods (which require numerous resources to make) and thereby help relieve the suffering caused by the manufacture of these goods.

In Thailand, the foundation of Buddhist environmental action is ritual. Chapter two explored the tree ordination ritual as a specific example of this ritual orientation. Hearkening back to the development monks of the 1970s, Thai activists stress the importance of overcoming mundane suffering (such as the struggle to survive) in order to allow one to have a religious life and thus end personal suffering. For the Thai environmentalist monks, overcoming the mundane suffering caused by environmental degradation is a first and important step in this process.

The tree ordination ritual, for example, works to end environmental suffering in several ways, through saving the trees and creatures that make the forest their home as well as saving the economic suffering that arises when the forests are cut down. The ritual serves as a chance to educate the local community about Buddhist doctrine (such as karma) as well as ecological issues, especially those issues concerning the community in which the ordination takes place. The progression of Thai Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism looks like this:

Buddhist ritual→Application of ritual to environment→Carry results of the ritual into activism→Relieve suffering

The ordination ritual, along with all of the functions that the ritual plays (such as bringing the community together and transmitting Buddhist doctrine) is the starting point. The ritual is then applied to the environment, specifically to the issues surrounding deforestation and its effects on the community. The results of this ritual, specifically the karmic merit accrued from participating in the ritual, is carried into environmental action. In this case, the resulting merit from the ritual helps encourage local people to maintain the forest. Also, the local community is educated about the ecological situation through these rituals, and thus better understands the importance of maintaining the forest. Finally, through maintenance of the forest and the halting

of clear-cutting, the suffering of the local people, the forest's inhabitants, and the trees is brought closer to an end.

The above two diagrams demonstrate that the first two steps (the means) are different, while the second two steps (the ends) are the same. The American focus on doctrinal Buddhism—remnants of the Victorian appropriation of Buddhism—may be the primary reason for this difference.

American Interpretations

In the case of Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States, activists are not only relying on Buddhist doctrine as a basis for their action, they are also reinterpreting that doctrine to fit their ecological framework. Three doctrines serve to illustrate this point: asceticism, *anātman* (no self), and *karma*.

The idea of asceticism within Buddhism is a complicated one. In some versions of the Buddha's life story the Buddha engaged in extreme ascetic practices, some so extreme that he could feel his spinal cord when touching his stomach. He eventually rejected these extreme practices and called for a Middle Way between asceticism and luxury. Nevertheless, asceticism continues to be an important aspect of Buddhist practice. Asceticism in Theravāda Buddhism may also take the form of thirteen separate ascetic practices (*dhutanga*) such as wearing robes made from discarded cloth, eating once a day, living at the foot of a tree, and sleeping while sitting up (Wilson 2004, 33).

The new asceticism encouraged by some American Buddhist Environmentalists calls, on the other hand, for less consumerism on the part of the practitioner, specifically by purchasing and using fewer goods. Proponents of this action point to the practices of monks in traditional Buddhist cultures. They claim that the *Vinaya* (monastic rule) disallows personal property

among monks and nuns.[27] American Buddhists calling for this new asceticism are basing their claims on the textual ideal presented in the *Vinaya*, something reminiscent of the Victorian focus on the ideal textual Buddhism, as well as on the idea that all monks are engaged in ascetic practices, which is not necessarily the case.

The doctrine of *anātman*, or no-self, is another Buddhist concept that has been reinterpreted by American Buddhist Environmentalists. The traditional Buddhist view of this doctrine is that there is no unchanging essence that can be called a "self." Rather, the self is an ever-changing group of five aggregates (*skandhas*). This doctrine stresses that these *skandhas* are always changing, and thus humans are not independently existing *things* but *processes* affected by the laws of causality (Sarao 2004, 18).

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in the United States focus on the first part of this doctrine, namely that there is no autonomous self. Activists posit that humans fail to grasp this concept, and one of the results of that failure is the present ecological crisis. Joanna Macy calls for a "greening of the self" in which a practitioner realizes that he or she is interconnected with everything (1990, 53). This interpretation does not call for the total denial of the self; it stresses the connection of the self with the greater world, i.e. becoming absorbed into a greater whole. American Buddhist Environmentalists emphasize the connection of the self with everything around us while not addressing the part of this doctrine that deals with the person as a process.

Karma is the third example of a re-interpreted Buddhist doctrine. In the Theravāda world one of the ways karma is explained is through ideas of merit and demerit. Laypeople make merit

[27] While this injunction leads one to believe that monks—both historically and in the present—own no personal property, Gregory Schopen points out that there is archaeological evidence that early Buddhist monastics actually owned private property. Nevertheless, scholars who encountered this evidence "all assumed that the textual ideal either was or had been actually in operation, that if it said so in a text it must have been so in reality. There appears to be, however, no actual evidence that the textual ideal was ever fully or even partially implemented in actual practice; at least none has ever been cited" (Schopen 1991, 7-8).

by doing things such as giving material goods to the monastic community. Monks will, in turn, give sermons to the laity. There are three principal aims of the person making merit within the Theravādin context. The first is to get karmic rewards in this lifetime and in the next. The second aim may be enlightenment. Sometimes acts of merit are accompanied by vows to attain enlightenment, often through future rebirth during the time of the next Buddha (the Buddha Maitreya). Finally, the merit maker may want to transfer merit to family members. In all of these cases, the emphasis is on performing meritorious actions for one's (or one's family's) future benefit (Strong 1987, 384). For example, one of the reasons the Thai tree ordinations get villagers to commit to protecting the forest is the karmic merit associated with doing so.

Kenneth Kraft has called for a new kind of "eco-karma;" however, he fails to describe how merit fits into this reinterpretation. Eco-karma is meant to hold both the individual and the collective society accountable for their actions by stressing that all individuals within a society have some role in what that society is collectively doing to the environment. For example, a person who uses electricity from a nuclear power plant would accrue karma from that action, according to Kraft's scheme. He or she would not necessarily gain as much negative karma as the CEO of the nuclear power corporation, though. Kraft neglects to include some idea of merit into the idea of eco-karma. Would a person who makes the conscious decision *not* to use nuclear power gain any sort of merit from that action? This is a question that Kraft's idea of eco-karma fails to answer. Much like Kraft, Victorian writers failed to acknowledge the importance of merit to the Buddhist conception of karma. Many writers "unhesitatingly denounced it as confused, without a connected meaning, obscure, inconclusive, unintelligible, and more or less self-contradictory" (Almond 1988, 5).

Another important difference that comes up between Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States and Thailand is whether this movement is a new form of Buddhism, or whether it is a continuation of older traditions. Two groups emerge in this debate; the traditionists claim that the movement is simply a continuation of traditional Buddhism, and the modernists claim that Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism is in fact a new form of Buddhism. Many American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists are quick to point out that theirs is a new kind of Buddhism, uniquely adapted to the modern era. Thai activists often stand on the other side of the issue. Most claim that their activism does not reflect any overwhelmingly new form of the tradition, and that it is in fact continuous with traditional Buddhism. This debate is a specific example of a larger debate between two groups within the Engaged Buddhist movement.

Traditionists and Modernists

The modernist emphasis on the newness of Engaged Buddhism, while it initially seems contradictory with the focus on doctrine and text within the American context, does not conflict with that particular approach to Buddhism. Although the modernists (and thus most American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists) claim that Engaged Buddhism is new while at the same time they focus on Buddhist text and doctrine, that focus is part of the Orientalist assumptions inherent in the western approach to Buddhism. Given the evidence presented in chapters one and three as well as the American focus on the supremacy of texts in religious systems in general, one would think that a Buddhist Environmentalist would use a textual injunction against harming living beings to point to an environmental ethic within early Buddhism. This textual injunction would serve as a legitimation for the use of Buddhist doctrine to support environmental action. This, however, is not the case, as Thomas Freeman Yarnall argues in "Engaged Buddhism: New

and Improved? Made in the USA of Asian materials." Yarnall posits that there are two main kinds of Engaged Buddhists, namely the traditionists and modernists. Yarnall's distinction, while made for Engaged Buddhists in general, applies to Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in light of the aspects of Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism in the United States that have thus far been explored in this study.

Yarnall draws a line between traditionists and modernists based on where each group sees the origins of Engaged Buddhism (and in our case, Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism) to be. For the traditionists, "since the time of Shakyamuni the Buddhadharma has *always* had a more-or-less fully articulated socio-political dimension in addition to its (supposedly 'other-worldly') spiritual/soteriological dimension. Modern forms of Buddhism (Engaged Buddhism or otherwise) are essentially continuous with traditional forms" (Yarnall 2003, 286). To the traditionists, there is nothing inherently *new* about Engaged Buddhism. They claim that the Buddha and Buddhism have always been focused on social change and the relief of suffering, both spiritual and otherwise. Traditionists believe that by claiming that the Buddha was not focused on social issues, one is making the tradition out to be an "other-worldly" religion (focused on the monastic and renunciate side of the tradition) and thus ignoring the social (lay-oriented) side of the religion. Because of this group's focus on Buddhism's past, Yarnall coins this group the "traditionists" (2003, 286).

The second group that Yarnall describes, the modernists, "admits that there have been doctrines and practices with socio-political relevance *latent* in Buddhism since its inception...[and] insists that these latencies have always remained relatively untapped, that they have not been (or often *could* not have been) fully realized until Buddhism's encounter with various Western elements unique to the modern era" (2003, 287). Modernists claim that while

earlier forms of Buddhism share many features with Engaged Buddhism, enough in the movement is different from traditional forms of Buddhism to call Engaged Buddhism new. They argue that traditionists are historically reconstructive in that they "peer unwittingly through a modern lens at traditional/ancient teachings" (Yarnall 2003, 287). Because this group maintains that Engaged Buddhism is a new movement, Yarnall calls them the "modernist" groups (2003, 286-7).

Within the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement, Thai activsts tend to be traditionists whereas American activists tend to be modernist. The Thais focus on the historical social engagement of Buddhism and claim that "disengaged" or "otherwordly" Buddhism is a western misconception of the tradition. Indeed this is demonstrated in the focus of Victorian scholars on the doctrinal aspects of Buddhism and its textual origins and their claim that Buddhism was an otherworldly and anti-social system, largely focused on escaping the world. In Thailand, instead of trying to re-work doctrine (as Kraft does with the idea of "eco-karma"), activist monks apply traditional ritual—and thereby doctrine—to environmental situations. Rather than reworking ideas of merit and ordination to be "eco-merit," environmentalist monks apply the traditional idea of merit to the forest. There is also no reliance on scientific theory in Thai Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism. Sulak Sivaraksa, an influential Thai Buddhist activist, argues that many westerners become monks today for the purpose of withdrawing from society and escaping from the concerns of the secular world (Yarnall 2003, 294). This leads to the modernist—and largely western—view of Engaged Buddhism, which holds that Buddhism has been historically disengaged from the larger society. Through contact with so-called "western circumstances," such as technological development (the most common example used

by American activists being the atomic bomb), Buddhism has been transformed into this new Engaged Buddhism.

Yarnall examines the methodology of the modernist approach to Buddhism, and this methodology is very evident in the American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalist movement. Using a threefold analysis of the Orientalist approach to Buddhism, Yarnall describes the Orientalist assumptions underlying the modernist approach to engaged Buddhism:

> 1 *Recognition*: Modernists...judge the raw materials of Buddhism to be valuable...
> 2 *Appropriation*: They therefore (subtly) remove them from their cultural and historical contexts and then manufacture theories from them for modern Westerners (especially engaged Buddhists), to be used to remedy deficiencies in their own identities and socio-political circumstances...
> 3 *Distancing*: The socially-transformative power potentially *latent* in Asian Buddhism can only transform society when mediated through the Western modernists' socio-political theories, with the Western modernist serving as the intermediary between East and West, both as strategist and social activist. (2003, 307-308)

These three points are evident in the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalist movement in the United States.

Recognition

Both American and Thai Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists judge Buddhism to be valuable. The major difference lies in what parts of Buddhism each finds most valuable. The American activists tend to focus on the doctrines and texts, or the "raw materials." Thai activists believe these raw materials to be valuable, but utilize them more in the social manifestation of ritual.

Appropriation

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in America are most like their Victorian predecessors in their appropriation of Buddhism. They take the raw materials of Buddhism, like the doctrines of no-self and dependent origination, and then apply them to the western environmental context and form new theories and interpretations. Examples of this are the new interpretations of karma, no-self, and asceticism put forward by American Engaged Buddhism

Environmentalists. Another interesting manifestation of this is the extra-Buddhist theories used to support the movement. As discussed in chapter one, there are several non-religious theories that Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists in the United States use to support their movement scientifically, such as the Gaia hypothesis and Systems theory.

Distancing

This point is more difficult to locate within the American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalist context. There is no explicit mention of the west being the means by which Engaged Buddhism is to be transmitted. However, one might consider the use of scientific theory to be an example of the view that Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism *needs* the west. There's almost a sense of validation or practice and activism when American activists are able to confirm their Buddhist doctrine using science, something which does not really come up within the Thai context.

The debate between traditionists and modernists has yet to be resolved, and many writers do not even acknowledge the position of the other group. What is most interesting about the debate is the fact that modernists are, for the most part, from the west while the traditionists tend to be Asian Buddhists. This is a further reflection of how American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists are appropriating the tradition and reinterpreting the doctrines to fit an ecological framework while Asian Buddhists are applying traditional rituals and doctrines to an ecological setting.

Conclusion

Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism both in the United States and Thailand is an attempt by those concerned about the present environmental situation to engage in environmental action within a Buddhist framework. These actions can be anything from developing Nuclear Guardianship sites to ordaining trees in a Thai forest. While the movements in both the United States and Thailand ultimately have the same ends of relieving environmentally caused suffering through Buddhism, each seeks to reach those ends using very different means.

American Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists use doctrine as the means through which to convey their environmentalist message and ultimately end suffering caused by ecological destruction. There are several doctrines that these activists use frequently, such as the bodhisattva vow, dependent origination, no-self, and asceticism. These doctrines are often re-worked to fit an ecological context. The support for these doctrines is found in many Buddhist texts such as the Pāli Canon. Despite their emphasis on Buddhist texts as a source for their action, most American activists are modernists, believing that Engaged Buddhism (and specifically Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism) is a new movement.

In contrast to the American movement is the Thai form of Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism. In Thailand, Buddhist doctrines are often transmitted to the people through rituals—like the ordination of a boy or young man into the monastic community. Thai environmentalist monks have applied some rituals, like the ordination ceremony, to an

environmental situation as a means of transmitting both Buddhist doctrine and environmentalism to the laity. While these activists also point to Buddhist texts for support, they claim that Buddhism has always been concerned with social issues, and that Engaged Buddhism is nothing radically different from what Buddhism has always been. These traditionists believe that to view Engaged Buddhism as a new movement is to deny the social consciousness of traditional Buddhism.

The reasons for these differences between the American and Thai movements are many. The Victorian interpretation of Buddhism is a primary one. Engaged Buddhist Environmentalists have inherited the Victorian tradition, which becomes evident when one compares the two movements.

A particular question arises out of the comparison of the movement in each country: Would it even be possible for a ritually oriented activism to work in the United States? A more ritual-oriented movement seems as though it would bring the American community together and provide a more uniform transmission of Buddhist environmentalism. A cohesive activist community would possibly be more effective than the fragmented one that exists currently. At issue is the nature of the American Buddhist community. As noted in chapter one, there is no single type of Buddhism found in the United States. One could quite possibly argue that the United States is home to one of the greatest diversities of Buddhism in the world. With three different kinds of Buddhist practitioners (old-line, immigrant, and convert) and many kinds of practitioners within each of those groups, it would be difficult to find a common ritual in which all Buddhists could participate.

A second issue that forms is a consideration of what is actually happening in both the American and Thai instances of Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism. In the American instance,

there is no attempt to change the environment from something "profane" to something "sacred." During a Thai tree ordination, the robes that are wrapped around the trunk of the tree signify the tree's special status in the forest, and they acknowledge that the tree is now something sacred and must be protected. Americans Buddhists are reluctant to make this designation, for they believe that it relates to the idea of hierarchy.

A third issue that arises out of the above question is that of hierarchy within the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism movement. Interpersonal relationships among American Buddhists tend to emphasize horizontal (egalitarian) relations. This is most evident in the idea of a governing board of directors and elected leaders of the community, two entities which do not exist in Thailand. In "Green Buddhism and the Hierarchy of Compassion," Alan Sponberg notes that in western societies we have come to see any kind of vertical relations, or hierarchy, as a bad thing (1997, 359). Designating someone (such as monk) or something (such as a tree) as sacred implies that everything else is *not* sacred. Sponberg asserts that certain aspects of Buddhism are hierarchical, however, and that denying those aspects leads to a one-dimensional Buddhism (1997, 363). Until American Buddhists are more willing to confront this hierarchy, the likelihood of designating the environment as sacred is slim. While this study has not answered the above questions, it initiates further exploration into the matter.

It has not been the purpose of this study to imply that American Buddhism is somehow "less Buddhist" than Asian forms of the tradition or that Thai Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism is better than the American movement. The two movements are taking place in very different cultural contexts and in response to different environmental problems. By acknowledging and exploring the differences between the movements and the reasons for those differences, both scholars and practitioners of Buddhism can better understand how the tradition

is conceived within each cultural context, and what are the implications for those conceptions on the Engaged Buddhist Environmentalism Movement. Armed with that understanding, they can find ways to make the movement more effective in each country and help solve the ecological problems that are plaguing the entire world.

Glossary of Buddhist Terminology

anātman—translated as "no self." According to this doctrine, human beings are made of the five aggregates (*skandha*) which consist of the body, mental formations (emotions), volition, perceptions, and consciousness. These aggregates are always changing in accordance with the laws of causality. Thus, there is no unchanging and permanent entity called the "self" (Sarao 2004,18-20).

asceticism—Modern Buddhist asceticism consists of following certain ascetic practices (*dhutanga*). In Theravāda Buddhism, there are thirteen such practices. They include the following: "wearing patchwork robes recycled from cast-off cloth, wearing no more than three robes, going for alms, not omitting any house while going for alms, eating at one sitting, eating only from the alms bowl, refusing all further food, living in the forest, living under a tree, living in the open air, living in a cemetery, being satisfied with any humble dwelling, and sleeping in the sitting position." These practices are not mandatory for Buddhists; however, monks who follow them are held in especially high esteem (Wilson 2004, 32-4).

bodhisattva vow—This vow becomes important in Mahāyāna Buddhism. A bodhisattva is a person who strives for enlightenment and vows to bring all sentient being to enlightenment as well (Kawamura 2004, 58-9).

dependent origination—Pāli: *paticca samuppada*. This doctrine states that all existence is subject to the laws of causality. There are twelve "links" that are the driving force of the constantly changing realm of existence. These links are ignorance, karmic activities, consciousness, mind and matter, six sense-doors (six senses which, when there is contact with them, sensation arises), contact, sensation, craving, attachment, becoming, birth and rebirth, and old age and death (Boisvert 2004, 669).

Dhamma—Sanskrit: Dharma. This term has multiple meanings. In the context of this study, "Dhamma" means "the teachings of the Buddha." The dhamma can be transmitted in several ways such as Buddhist texts, sermons, and rituals.

Indra's Net— also referred to as the "Jeweled Net of Indra." This is a teaching from the *Huayan* school of Chinese Buddhism. The net serves as a metaphor for the doctrine of dependent origination (*paticca samuppada*). The image is that of a net with a jewel at each node. This net is infinitely large and holds an infinite number of jewels. Each jewel reflects all

of the other jewels in the net. This metaphor serves to demonstrate how all phenomena are determined by other phenomena while at the same time maintaining a distinct identity (Poceski 2004, 347).

karma—literally means "action." Put simply, good actions will produce good results, and bad actions will produce bad results. An important aspect of Buddhist ideas of karma is that of intention. The intention behind one's action will affect the karmic consequences. For example, intending to push one's brother will produce more powerful karmic effects than accidentally running into him.

Mahāyāna Buddhism—the "Great Vehicle." This form of Buddhism, of which Zen and Pure Land are a part, is found in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

samsara—the endless cycle of death and re-death that is plagued by suffering. There are several realms within this cycle: the realm of the gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. One is born into any one of these realms based on one's karma.

Sangha—the Buddhist community. The community consists of four groups: monks, nuns, male laity, and female laity. This term more commonly refers to the monastic community.

Theravāda Buddhism—the "tradition of the elders," sometimes referred to by the derogatory name of *Hinayāna* (meaning "lesser vehicle"). This form of Buddhism is found primarily in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

three poisons—greed, hatred, and suffering. Buddhists believe that the individual must rid him or herself of these poisons.

Vajrayāna Buddhism—a form of Buddhism found mainly in Tibet, northern India, and Nepal.

Vinaya—a group of Buddhist texts pertaining to monastic discipline. There are several different Vinayas in use within the Buddhist tradition.

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