

Towards Collective Action: A Buddhist View of *Laudato Si*

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The Papal Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si* by His Holiness Pope Francis entitled *On Care for Our Common Home* issued on May 24, 2015 has been hailed by many as a radical and groundbreaking document for the wide scope of issues that it encompasses. I myself have been a practicing Buddhist for over 25 years during which time I have been deeply involved in socially engaged Buddhism throughout Asia and the West with the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB). Before this, I graduated from Princeton University with a major degree in comparative religions and a minor in political science. I have studied in depth the social gospels of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Thich Nhat Hanh as well as the overly politicized, ethnic chauvinism of Sri Lankan Buddhist monks¹ and the tepid, politically passive stances of Japanese Buddhist priests². With this background, I was very deeply moved by seeing His Holiness not offer a simplistic portrayal of environmental issues and an admonition to be more ecologically minded. His Holiness rather has stood courageously and with great insight to link our ecological crisis with the deeply interconnected problems of our economics, politics, and culture. *Laudato Si* is not the typical religious declaration that avoids the difficult issues of power and how it is wielded in destructive ways in our world.

Buddhists have also in recent years been engaging in the problems of our global ecological crisis. Drawing on a rich history of ecological teachings—embedded in the prominent tradition of forested monasticism—Buddhists both in Asia and the West have been engaging in a variety of forms of environmental activism, such as protecting endangered forests in Southeast Asia and contributing to the Deep Ecology and Anti-nuclear movements in the West. This has led to a plethora of books on Buddhism and the environment, which go deeply into a variety of issues as *Laudato Si* does. Further, in response to the landmark publication of *Laudato Si*, Buddhists have drafted their own joint declaration on climate change and the environment.³

¹ Watts, Jonathan S. “The “Positive Disintegration” of Buddhism: Reformation and Deformation in the Sri Lankan Sangha” in Watts, Jonathan S. Ed. *Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice*. (Bangkok: International Network of Engaged Buddhists, 2014, 2nd Edition) pp. 91-132.

² Watts, Jonathan S. “Which Way to Peace? The Role of Japanese Buddhism in Anti-Nuclear Civil Protest.” In Watts, Jonathan S. Ed. *This Precious Life: Buddhist Tsunami Relief and Anti-Nuclear Activism in Post 3/11 Japan*. (Yokohama: International Buddhist Exchange Center, 2016, 2nd Edition) pp. 140-158.

³ <https://gbccc.org/buddhist-climate-change-statement-to-world-leaders-2015/>

Common Insights

From a Buddhist standpoint, and especially a socially engaged Buddhist standpoint, there are many areas of common insight and agreement with *Laudato Si*. One of the first such ones I found most striking is as follows:

Jesus lived in full harmony with creation...He was far removed from philosophies which despised the body, matter and the things of the world. Such unhealthy dualisms, nonetheless, left a mark on certain Christian thinkers in the course of history and disfigured the Gospel. (# 98)

From an outsiders view, there is the general impression in Christianity that the body is a vessel of sin and the world is to be transcended through Jesus Christ into the eternal spirit of God. While Buddhism also has its transcendental tendencies in regarding the world as a place of suffering, the human body is seen as an ideal vessel for working towards enlightenment while becoming in tune with the natural environment. We Buddhists often speak of the primacy of nature in that the Buddha was born under a tree, achieved enlightenment under a tree, and died under a tree. In this section, however, His Holiness quite clearly attempts to re-establish a transcendental-immanent balance, while critically pointing out the development of misguided understandings in Church history. I found this perspective quite unexpected and refreshing.

From this common standpoint of the earth and the self as being vehicles for our liberation, it was not surprising to find numerous references to the interdependence of all things by His Holiness:

As the Catechism teaches: “God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.”(#86)

Such interdependence is one of the cornerstones of Buddhist teaching. The conclusion of the teaching that there is no eternal fundamental soul or self-essence (*anatta/anatman*) is that the world is a continual flow of causal phenomena and that everything is absolutely mutually interpenetrating. Buddhists often say that at some point we have all been mothers, brothers, fathers, sisters, and family not only with each other but with all sentient life. Indeed, it is not only human life but all sentient life that is endowed with the potential for enlightenment called buddha-nature. This line of thought leads to the insight of a deep compassion for all sentient life, which is so intimately connected with ourselves. Such an insight by His Holiness is also apparent in *Laudato Si*:

God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement. (#89)

From a Buddhist perspective, this deep experience of collective pain and compassion provides a major impetus towards a religious life based on the eradication of greed, anger, delusion—called the Three Poisons—through a sense of sufficiency (*santuti*) and simple living. I found it remarkable that these themes are also prevalent in *Laudato Si*:

Replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing; an asceticism which “entails learning to give, and not simply to give up”.(#9)

His Holiness, however, does not stop here with the locus of the problem at the individual level, and hence a response to the problem being individual behavioral change. Marx and other social thinkers have long criticized religion for masking the deeper causes of social ills with simplistic explanations of suffering based around individual sin or delusion and their resolution in a greater devotion to faith. From the very beginning of *Laudato Si*, His Holiness shatters the image of socially myopic religion:

My predecessor Benedict XVI likewise proposed “eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth which have proved incapable of ensuring respect for the environment”. He observed that the world cannot be analyzed by isolating only one of its aspects, since “the book of nature is one and indivisible”, and includes the environment, life, sexuality, the family, social relations, and so forth. It follows that “the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence”.(#6)

Buddhism has certainly been guilty of reducing the suffering caused by structural and cultural forces as the results of individual misconduct, or what is stereotypically called “bad karma”. It is at this point that I would like to examine the potentially great influence of *Laudato Si* on Buddhist reflections on the environmental crisis.

Buddhist Pitfalls: Lack of Awareness for Social Justice

From a Buddhist standpoint, one of the most striking and outstanding aspects of *Laudato Si* is His Holiness’ very clear and articulate linking of our environmental crisis with the structural violence perpetuated in our present world system. I find his constant emphasis on social justice also very impressive:

We have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*. (#49)

Peace, justice, and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be separated and treated individually without once again falling into reductionism. (#92)

Such expressions have become mainstream now in the Catholic and larger Christian worlds. However, Buddhists have been greatly lacking in such an awareness of the problems of the larger forces of society on individuals and communities. As a Buddhist, I understand this tradition in Christianity in reference to numerous places in the Bible that speak about the distributive justice of goods and resources among communities, for example, “He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing”. *Deuteronomy 10:18*. In more modern times, we have seen this concern in the progressive thinking of Church leaders like Luigi Taparelli D’Azeglio (1793–1862), who is often credited with coining the term “social justice” and influenced Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* (*On the Condition of the Working Classes*). More fundamentally, however, I think this sense of social justice comes from the idea of an anthropomorphic God who intervenes in the lives of humans to support those in suffering (i.e. victims of social injustice) and to put forth punishment

to those who oppress (i.e. the creators of social injustice). In this way, I feel the actions of God towards His creation serve as a metaphor or role model for how humans are to act in society, attempting to fulfill His will by encouraging social justice pro-actively.

While popular forms of Buddhism may have deities, buddhas, and bodhisattvas that believers may implore for personal aid, Buddhists do not believe in such a central creator God. In general, we believe that karma—an impersonal or natural moral system of results for ethical behavior—determines one’s larger fate in life. In this way, while there is deep concern for suffering, the social order is seen as almost inherently just as the inevitable, and rather unfathomable, trajectory of multiple human karmas play out over time. In its most extreme form, Buddhists may understand suffering as deserved from some mysterious karma of a previous lifetime and that this suffering must be endured as a penance for the bad actions done in the past. This kind of understanding has been applied to explain the plight of the poor and the fortune of the rich, the misfortune of the physically disabled, and especially the inferiority of women. Numerous aspects of this understanding are erroneous, because popular Buddhism has been mixed together with other understandings of karma that come from the variety of spiritual traditions in India out of which it emerged. A few years ago, a group of colleagues and I worked on an entire volume addressing these erroneous views, how they manifest in Buddhist societies today, and how a proper understanding of karma—as intentional ethical action, not passive resignation to fate—can empower Buddhists to engage in social justice work.⁴ Indeed, over the last few decades the emergence of the socially engaged Buddhist movement has marked an increasing awareness of Buddhists towards social justice issues, such as our environmental crisis.

In this way, I would like to look briefly at a few passages in *Laudato Si* which resonate with contemporary Buddhist reflections on the environment and society.

Everything is related...Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order”. The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property. (#92-93)

This passage brings to mind the radical writings of the great Thai forest monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993). During the height of the Cold War in Indochina, Ven. Buddhadasa began speaking about “Dhammic⁵ Socialism” as a way to forge a Middle Path between the destructive and violent materialism of Communism and the equally destructive forces of Western Capitalism, which had taken over his own country. As His Holiness does in *Laudato Si*, Buddhadasa made a direct link between the harmony and sanctity of nature and a peaceful and just society:

⁴ Watts, Jonathan S. Ed. *Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice*. (Bangkok: International Network of Engaged Buddhists, 2014, 2nd Edition).

⁵ The term “dhammic” comes from the Pali “dhamma”, better known in its Sanskrit form “dharma”. It can refer both to the teachings of the Buddha and the way towards enlightenment as well as the larger natural truths of the universe.

As we sit here in this forest surrounded by nature, we feel the calming effects of the natural environment. “Socialist” thoughts and feelings arise from such a calm state—socialist in the most profound sense of the truth of Nature. Here, we are not under the influence of a violent, worldly socialism so our minds can remain undisrupted, allowing us to see and participate in the natural balance that pervades everything—earth, water, air, fire, and consciousness—the internal and external aspects of everything. Here is true socialism—the embodiment of Nature in a pure, balanced state. Here there is no deceit, no “me/mine” distinction; they simply do not exist.⁶

According to Buddhist scriptures [Aggañña Sutta, D. III, 80], our problems began when someone got the idea of stockpiling grains and other food, causing shortages for others. Once supplies began to be hoarded, problems of unequal distribution and access arose (60) ... Solving social problems is dependent on living in a socially moral way: acting in the best interests of the entire community by living according to Nature's Laws; avoiding the consumption of goods beyond our simple needs; sharing all that is not essential for us to have with others, even if we consider ourselves poor; giving generously of our wealth if we are well-to-do. This is the way we will solve our social problems.(72) ... Human beings are able to exist today because they form a society, a cooperative unit providing mutual benefits. That humans are this way is nothing but the handiwork of nature...Buddhist socialism, then, includes all living beings, not just humans.(105)⁷

As Buddhadasa points out in a later passage (106-107), Buddhism tries to express this Dhammic Socialism in the monastic community, which forbade the possession of money or private property and depends on the almsgiving and donations of the laity—a system that is emphasized most in the southern school of Theravada Buddhism and is standard in all Buddhist traditions except in Japan. Indeed, His Holiness points out this connection in *Laudato Si* as well:

We can also look to the great tradition of monasticism. Originally, it was a kind of flight from the world, an escape from the decadence of the cities. Later, Saint Benedict of Norcia proposed that his monks live in community, combining prayer and spiritual reading with manual labour (*ora et labora*). Seeing manual labour as spiritually meaningful proved revolutionary. Personal growth and sanctification came to be sought in the interplay of recollection and work. This way of experiencing work makes us more protective and respectful of the environment; it imbues our relationship to the world with a healthy sobriety. (#126)

Such manual labor by the monks themselves is especially emphasized in the Chan/Zen Buddhist tradition, where monks have grown their own food and maintained the temple through their own labors. This concept of right labor is put forth to all Buddhists in Right Livelihood, the fifth aspect of the Buddha’s fundamental teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path towards enlightenment. In this vein, both His Holiness and contemporary engaged Buddhists have used traditional teachings to critique the modern global economies exploitation of labor:

The New Zealand bishops asked what the commandment “Thou shall not kill” means when “twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive” (#95)

⁶ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. *Dhammic Socialism*. Trans. Donald K. Swearer. (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, 1986) pp. 117-18.

⁷ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. *Dhammic Socialism*. pages noted in text.

From the renowned Thai Buddhist and social critic, Sulak Sivaraksa:

Socially engaged Buddhism has to be more meaningful. Nowadays we don't need to kill, but we allow our government to kill. We allow the government to draft people to kill and then spend so much money on arms...In the second precept as well, we don't need to steal anymore, we just allow the banks to steal for us. The World Bank is the biggest organization stealing from the poor for the rich, and most of us are not aware of it. Rich people exploit poor people; rich nations exploit poor nations; and all nations are controlled by transnational corporations. This is stealing at the global level.⁸

The connections with contemporary engaged Buddhist thought and the indebtedness that modern Buddhists owe to the Catholic Church's social gospel is great. Although engaged Buddhism can be traced back to the earliest teachings of the Buddha, as seen in his socialistic understanding of community, many of its greatest contemporary Asian figures received education in the West and/or were influenced by western, Christian based concepts of social justice. A most ironic confluence of connections is in the well known Catholic teaching of the principle of subsidiarity, which His Holiness elucidates in *Laudato Si* as follows:

Let us keep in mind the principle of subsidiarity, which grants freedom to develop the capabilities present at every level of society, while also demanding a greater sense of responsibility for the common good from those who wield greater power. Today, it is the case that some economic sectors exercise more power than states themselves. But economics without politics cannot be justified, since this would make it impossible to favor other ways of handling the various aspects of the present crisis. (#196)

There are a number of Buddhists today, including myself, who became aware of this concept not through the Church but through the writings of E.F. Schumacher, who introduces the concept in terms of "Buddhist economics" from his 1973 book *Small is Beautiful*:

It is in the light of both immediate experience and long-term prospects that the study of Buddhist economics could be recommended even to those who believe that economic growth is more important than any spiritual or religious values. For it is not a question of choosing between "modern growth" and "traditional stagnation". It is a question of finding the right path of development, the Middle Way between materialist heedlessness and traditionalist immobility, in short, of finding "Right Livelihood".⁹(p.66 Harper Perennial version)

In conclusion, it is with great gratitude that His Holiness as one of the foremost religious leaders in the world has spoken so deeply and eloquently about various aspects of social justice. It is his courage and vision in *Laudato Si* that we hope will inspire other such leaders, especially those in the Buddhist world, to do the same.

⁸ Sivaraksa, Sulak. "No More Back to Business as Usual: A Socially Engaged Buddhist Approach to Making a Post 3/11 Society in Japan". In Watts, Jonathan S. Ed. *This Precious Life: Buddhist Tsunami Relief and Anti-Nuclear Activism in Post 3/11 Japan*. (Yokohama: International Buddhist Exchange Center, 2016, 2nd Edition) p. 192.

⁹ Schumacher, E.F. *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. (New York, Harper Perennial, 1989) p. 66.

Christian Pitfalls: An Anthropomorphic Male Creator God

In this second section, I would like to flip the script and look at how Buddhist teachings might augment and support certain areas of Church teaching on the matter of environmental protection. In the previous section, I noted how the concept of a loving, anthropomorphic God who actively intervenes for the wellbeing of the downtrodden has its strengths, such as a concern for social justice. From a Buddhist perspective, however, this concept appears to have some limitations in terms of a deep commitment to environmental justice.

In Chapter III, Section III of *Laudato Si*, His Holiness speaks at length on the “crisis and effects of modern anthropocentrism”:

Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism which today, under another guise, continues to stand in the way of shared understanding and of any effort to strengthen social bonds. ... An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our “dominion” over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship. (# 116)

This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. (#67)

This is a wonderful and powerful repudiation to the modernist impulses that came out of the Christian West that are responsible in many ways for the problems we are facing today. It is a direct repudiation of Descartes who derived his concept of mind-body dualism and the dominion of the mind, *cogito ergo sum*, from the immutable power of God and man’s mind as an extension of His creative power.¹⁰

While His Holiness is very right to challenge the hubris of humans to take on the vast creative power of God, there is from a Buddhist standpoint something still problematic with the metaphor of the immensely creative power of the universe in the body or form of an anthropomorphic God. This metaphor (or reality for those of the Abrahamic faiths) still perpetuates a basic dualism between the human form with its creative powers and the natural world. Certainly, His Holiness in numerous places in *Laudato Si* emphasizes the natural realm as an extension of the creative self of God and of our intimate connection to the natural realm as also creative products of God. However, from a Buddhist standpoint, the impression of a creator-creation dualism between God and His creations remains strong in certain sections of *Laudato Si*, and this notion informs His Holiness’ conclusions about our duties to work for the environment:

¹⁰ Macy, Joanna. *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) p.12.

The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality. (#75)

This is not to forget that there is an infinite distance between God and the things of this world, which do not possess his fullness. Otherwise, we would not be doing the creatures themselves any good either, for we would be failing to acknowledge their right and proper place. We would end up unduly demanding of them something which they, in their smallness, cannot give us. (#88)

There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology. When the human person is considered as simply one being among others, the product of chance or physical determinism, then “our overall sense of responsibility wanes”. A misguided anthropocentrism need not necessarily yield to “biocentrism”, for that would entail adding yet another imbalance, failing to solve present problems and adding new ones. Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued. (#118)

From a Buddhist standpoint, these are rather startling claims that: 1) we need “a Father who creates and who alone owns the world” in order to practice proper self-restraint with our human creative powers; and 2) we “cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their[our] unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued”. I understand that His Holiness is trying to find the proper balance, or as we Buddhists say Middle Way, between the destructive anthropocentrism that dominates our world now and a kind of utopian biocentrism that sees humans just passively living in harmony with nature.

A Buddhist approach, however, would go about this in a different way seeking to develop self-restraint and responsibility by appealing not to an anthropomorphic authority who lords over us but rather to a more natural inner impulse that comes forth from our total interdependence with the natural world, which is indivisible from the creative power of the whole universe. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu again offers some insights in his integrative work on environmental and society:

Nature (*dhammajati*) follows its own particular way. If we transgress its fundamental laws, we are, in effect, transgressing morality according to nature; that is, we lack morality according to the dictates of nature. As a consequence, problems arise in the body, and even more so in the mind. That is, nature establishes the mind in a particular way for it to exist in a state of normal happiness (*prakati-sukha*), in a state of balance... The value (*kha*) of morality according to nature means that nature requires people to have a particular kind of morality, a morality of balance, moderation, and sufficiency.¹¹

It is important that our conservation efforts be beneficial, correct, and genuine. This raises the question of what kind of power or authority is to be used for the sake of conservation. The power which directly forces people to do our will is one kind of authority. Yet there is also the power of creating a proper understanding of reality such that we see our duty clearly and carry it out willingly ... Dhamma is the ecology of the mind. This is how nature has arranged things, and it has always been like this, in a most natural way. The mind with Dhamma has a natural spiritual

¹¹ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. *Dhammic Socialism*. p. 128

ecology because it is fresh, beautiful, quiet, and joyful. This is most natural. That the mind is fresh means it isn't dried up or parched. Its beauty is Dhammic, not sensual or from painting colors. It is calm and peaceful because nothing disturbs it. It contains a deep spiritual solitude, so that nothing can disturb or trouble it. Its joy is cool. The only joy that lives up to its name must be cool, not the hot happiness that is so popular in the world, but a cool joyfulness. If none of the defilements like greed, anger, fear, worry, and delusion arise, there is this perfect natural ecology of the Dhammic mind...The Dhamma has arranged everything quite well already, in its natural ecology, but we don't appreciate this wonderful fact at all. Instead, we disparage nature, we look down on it, we have no respect for it. We have tried to re-do everything in our own way, according to our own ignorance, craving, and selfishness, thus ruining the natural ecology. In this we find neither the correctness nor the fitness needed to conserve the natural order of nature.¹²

When the mental Nature is well conserved, the outer material Nature will be able to conserve itself.¹³

The key point that I am trying to emphasize here is that it continues to be an up hill battle to convince people to act for the benefit of the environment using moral exhortations for self-restraint and responsibility for other life forms. This kind of approach still implies a basic disconnection between us as human agents of action and the earth as a more passive or pliable object of our action. While His Holiness rightly criticizes the problem of human hubris in anthropocentrism, from a Buddhist standpoint, an anthropomorphic God still perpetuates the metaphor of human agency acting upon an external, if not alienated, external environment.

In the Buddhist approach, outlined by Buddhadasa, humans are “not-other” from the environment and there is no metaphor for them possibly being “other”. Buddhadasa feels that the environment is a full expression of the ultimate realm of truth and thus in certain ways above or beyond the intelligence of humans, especially when we are tainted by greed, anger, and delusion. In this way, a deep immersion in the natural world leads to the non-dual insight of what Buddhadasa called the intimate interconnection between inner ecology and outer ecology.

Joanna Macy, the American Buddhist eco-philosopher and a leader of the Deep Ecology movement, notes that healing this fundamental dualism and alienation changes our notion of self or being to include all things—“self as world” and its non-dual partner “world as self”. In this way, a biocentrism based on the elimination of human agency is averted and this sense of complete interpenetration with the natural order gives rise to a deep sense of compassion—“feeling the suffering of others”.¹⁴ As Buddhadasa notes above, this results in a morality, or rather ethics, of self-restraint and responsibility that is not coerced by duty or fear of recrimination but rather by mutual love and care. Ultimately, I think His Holiness has a very similar understanding of mutual love and care, but the anthropomorphic appeal I think can be misunderstood by those of less insight than His

¹² Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. *Conserving the Inner Ecology*. Trans. Santikaro. March 1990. <http://www.theravada-dhamma.org/blog/?p=8331>

¹³ Santikaro “Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness” in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Eds. Christopher Queen and Sallie King. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996). p. 142.

¹⁴ Macy, Joanna. *World as Lover, World as Self*. (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991) p. 191.

Holiness. Of course, Buddhists themselves cannot rely on these words or concepts but must immerse themselves in natural environments in order to have that fundamental non-dual connection with nature that leads to conserving the inner and outer ecologies together.

Collective Action: Religious Based Community Action

Having looked at ways that Christian and Buddhist understandings on the ecological crisis can augment each other, in this last section I will focus on clearly the most essential issue of collective action. Indeed, His Holiness speaks directly to this need to shift from well-meaning individual actions on behalf of the environment to a major collective thrust needed to face this issue:

Nevertheless, self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation facing our world today. Isolated individuals can lose their ability and freedom to escape the utilitarian mindset, and end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness. Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds. ...The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion. (#219)

As noted in the earlier sections, Buddhism has often been seen to lack a sufficient recognition of social justice and has been stereotypically seen as a religion of reclusive monasticism focused on the individual attainment of enlightenment through meditative practice. Again, in the vein of His Holiness' exhortation above, socially engaged Buddhists have also called on collective action and sought to expand understandings of Buddhist practice as a collective one:

We need enlightenment, not just individually but collectively, to save the planet. We need to awaken ourselves. We need to practice mindfulness if we want to have a future, if we want to save ourselves and the planet. - Thich Nhat Hanh

Buddhists and Christians and those of many other faiths agree on this point. Having read through both *Laudato Si* and a number of Buddhist publications on the environmental crisis, I find there is the significant development of a critique on the exiting global order based on religious principles and also a putting forth of religiously based ecological principles. However, what I find lacking in almost all of them is much concrete action for religious communities to engage in. In *Laudato Si*, His Holiness says that, "All Christian communities have an important role to play in ecological education." (#214) He also speaks about the importance of global resolutions on protecting the environment in Chapter Five "Lines of Approach and Action". In this chapter, he further speaks of how "cooperatives are being developed to exploit renewable sources of energy which ensure local self-sufficiency and even the sale of surplus energy." (#179) What I find missing here, and in most of the Buddhist responses I read, is an emphasis on the collective power of religious communities on local and regional levels to enact lifestyle shifts that take on greater impact because they are practiced on a social level. If you consider the existence of a temple, church, mosque, or some other religious facility in the majority of communities all over the world, the power of each of them acting along the line of an ecological gospel, as His Holiness and other concerned religious leaders have articulated, would be transformative. It would also offer a significant check and balance on the destructive forces of our global economic and political order.

Fortunately, we are able to find such *individual* religious communities in the world acting in holistic ways to not only preserve the environment but to shift the entire global paradigm that has brought such destruction to both our outer and inner ecologies. An important next step is connecting these communities to share best practices and work collectively to take the movement to another level beyond the well-meaning isolated actions of a few. Social change happens when the activities of individuals develop a critical mass and morph into a powerful collective movement with new systemic advantages. The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), with which I have worked for over 25 years, is trying to develop such movements through the Interfaith Climate and Ecology (ICE) network formed in 2012. ICE works not only with Buddhists but with concerned environmental activists from all religious backgrounds in 5 key areas:

- 1) education – developing educational programs for religious communities on the basics of climate change, structural issues behind it, and ways our communities can respond
- 2) advocacy – representing religious voices and values at public events, especially at the variety of global climate change and environmental conferences and negotiations
- 3) networking – sharing ideas and best practices across traditions and regions
- 4) pilgrimage – bearing witness to environmental degradation and the peoples affected by it through religious pilgrimage
- 5) eco temple – building holistic environmental communities with religious facilities at the center

It is this last initiative on holistic eco-temples in which I am most closely involved. The Eco Temple Community Working Group was formed at the 2nd ICE international conference in Seoul, Korea in April 2015. This working group has emerged from the vision and activities of Rev. Hidehito Okochi of Japan in his efforts since the early 1990s to create a nuclear free Japan and to develop environmental awareness in his own community.¹⁵ The working group has sought to: 1) share experiences, identify needs, and begin collaboration among core members to support the development of eco-temple communities; and 2) from this shared knowledge, further develop and articulate an Eco-Temple Community Design Scheme, which can be a planning tool for our own and other eco-temple community initiatives.¹⁶ The Eco Temple Community Design is a holistic development process that involves much more than simply putting solar panels on the roofs of temples. It involves a comprehensive integration of: 1) ecological temple structure and energy system, 2) integration with surrounding environment, 3) economic sustainability, 4) engagement with community and other regional groups (civil society, business, government), and 5) development of spiritual values and teachings on environment (eco-dharma). This fledgling network has already established partnerships

¹⁵ For details of Okochi's work see his articles in: *This Precious Life: Buddhist Tsunami Relief and Anti-Nuclear Activism in Post 3/11 Japan*. (Yokohama: International Buddhist Exchange Center, 2016, 2nd Edition) & *Lotus in the Nuclear Sea: Fukushima and the Promise of Buddhism in the Nuclear Age* (Yokohama: International Buddhist Exchange Center, 2013) and on line at: <http://jneb.jp/english/japan/faithnuclear>

¹⁶ The design matrix and details of the project are on line at: <http://jneb.jp/english/activities/buddhistenergy/eco-templeproject>

with temples in China, South Korea, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, and Japan, supporting the expansion of solar facilities and the implementation of a variety of ecological construction methods.

As faith based networks, INEB and ICE see one of their key contributions to social change as the reform and revival of our spiritual traditions. Through the religious center/temple, we can contribute greatly to the critical need for education and practice in inner ecology, while connecting that to outer ecological activities (such as community mobilization on environmental issues, right livelihood, and the establishment of zero-waste, clean energy temple structures integrated into the local environment). From such a movement, religious communities can have a progressive role in and contribute to wider movements for ecological design and post-industrial societies, critical to the immediate global environmental crisis.

The Eco-Temple Community Development Project is but one, basic example of the transformative power that religious communities steeped in a sense of social justice and environmental justice can manifest. In *Laudato Si*, His Holiness Pope Francis has offered us a detailed road map in bringing together the economic, social, political, and cultural in harmony with environmental justice and well being. We have spent many words in speaking out about the global environmental crisis of today. As much as we need to continue to exercise our voices, we also need to enact collective action. Although there are many climate change cynics, I believe very few would be against their own religious community enjoying the quality of life of a center offering green spaces, refreshing architecture, and economical sustainability from low consumption and localized energy production. May we all live to experience such simple joys.

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