



1. In a widely read article published in 1967, Lynn White, Jr. argued that how we conceive of nature and the place of humans in the environment will determine how we use natural resources and impact the world around us. According to White, the devaluation of nature and the pervasive anthropocentrism of Western philosophical and religious traditions were the root causes of the ecological crisis. He suggested that Buddhism was more suitable to an ecologically sustainable way of life because Buddhists conceive human beings to be wholly interdependent with the more-than-human world. In the last few decades, scholars have produced more nuanced views of the ecological theories and practices of both Asian and Western religious traditions. Still, Buddhist traditions have become fertile sources for many thinkers seeking to reconceive the human-nature relationship with the hope of providing a theoretical foundation for ecologically sustainable ways of being in the world.
(extract edited from 'Joanna Macy: The Ecological Self' by William Edelglass in Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings OUP 2009 pp.428-436)
2. Joanna Macy (1929-) stresses the importance of pratitya-samutpada: 'that law is such that every act we make, every word we speak, every thought we think is not only affected by the other elements in the vast web of being in which all things take part, but also has results so far-reaching that we cannot see or imagine them.' Macy's reference to the 'vast web of being' builds on a metaphor from Mahayana Buddhism: Indra's Net. This is found in a commentary on the Avatamsaka Sutra attributed to Tu-Shun (557 -640 CE). It can be summarised as follows. In the heavenly abode of Indra there is a net which stretches out to infinity in all directions. At every connecting point of the net there is a highly polished jewel. Since the net is infinite so too are the number of jewels. If any single jewel is selected and examined, it will be discovered that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels. It will also be discovered that each one of the jewels which are reflected in that one jewel are also reflecting each of the other jewels. In this way the process of reflection is infinite. All things are part of Indra's net which includes all sentient life and all non-sentient life, and emphasises the point that what happens to one part of the world in which people live inevitably impacts impact on every other part. This approach is the basis for Macy's interest in ecology. Earth as a planet and all it contains in terms of flora and fauna is part of Indra's Net. From this perspective, issues such as depletion of natural resources, global warming and climate change should be things with



which a Buddhist identifies in terms of the suffering which is caused and which can be stopped.

(Edited extract from Buddhism by Nick Heap, Paula Webber-Davies and Richard Gray)

- Joanna Macy is a Buddhist teacher, environmental activist, and scholar who is perhaps the most prominent Western advocate of ecological Buddhism. In her essay "The Ecological Self: Postmodern Ground for Right Action," Macy argues that the pain some people feel for damaged ecosystems or the suffering of other species manifests the ways the self is inextricably intertwined with the more-than-human world. This experience of interconnection is an "extension of identity," from a "separate and fragile" self that requires constant defence and acquisition to a "wider, ecological sense of self." Macy understands this shift in light of twentieth-century science, especially general systems theory, according to which subject and object, organism and environment, are not absolutely distinct but are symbiotically related within larger systems. It is in Buddhism, however, that Macy finds the ecological self articulated with distinctive "clarity and sophistication." Indeed, Buddhism "goes further than systems cybernetics, both in revealing the pathogenic character of any reifications of the self and in offering methods for transcending them." Buddhist metaphysics, psychology, and ethics, Macy argues, provide us with ways of understanding our experience of an interconnected, ecological self and of responding to the suffering around us. Buddhist teachings resonate with our own experience and contemporary science and nourish our aspirations to contribute to a more sustainable world.
(Extract edited from 'Joanna Macy: The Ecological Self' by William Edelglass in Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings OUP 2009 pp.428-436)

EXAMPLE OF A FINAL SUMMARY

In 1967, Lynn White, Jr. argued that how we conceive of nature and the place of humans in the environment will determine how we use natural resources and impact the world around us. She blamed the anthropocentric focus of philosophy and religion for the devaluation of nature and the root causes of the ecological crisis. The Buddhist scholar William Edelglass argues that Buddhism is more suitable to an ecologically sustainable way of life because it views human beings to be wholly interdependent with the more-than-human world. He states that, 'Buddhist traditions have become fertile sources for many thinkers seeking to reconceive the human-nature relationship.' Joanna Macy, both a practising Buddhist and scholar of Buddhism, uses the Buddhist teaching of pratitya-samutpada to argue that 'every act we



make, every word we speak, every thought we think is not only affected by the other elements in the vast web of being in which all things take part, but also has results so far-reaching that we cannot see or imagine them.' She uses the Avatamsaka's analogy of Indra's Net for our own universe, a net containing an infinite number of jewels in which each single jewel reflected all the other jewels infinitely. In other words the ecological basis of her argument is that what happens to one part of the world in which people live inevitably impacts impact on every other part. Thus, damaged ecosystems or the suffering of other species manifests the ways the self is inextricably intertwined with the more-than-human world. She advocates shifting from a view of a 'separate and fragile' self towards a 'wider, ecological sense of self'. This is certainly in line with the symbiotically related general systems theory found in modern science. For Macy, Buddhism presents us with understanding our experience of an interconnected, ecological self and of responding to the suffering around us. Buddhist teachings resonate with our own experience and contemporary science and nourish our aspirations to contribute to a more sustainable world.

Here are more resources - this time there are four edited extracts (but two are from the same book) and it is a more specific focus on the issue of social action and human rights in relation to socially engaged Buddhism (also Theme 4F).

1. Scholars have often assumed that there could be no place for human rights in Buddhism; the very concept of "rights" seems to presuppose individualism and self-assertion, values incompatible with Buddhism. Nevertheless, contemporary Engaged Buddhists readily use "human rights" language. The conceptual world which Buddhist "human rights" language inhabits, however, differs from dominant Western concepts in important ways. (1) In practice, Buddhist human rights are usually evoked on behalf of whole communities and less often (though sometimes) on behalf of individuals; (2) Buddhist human rights language avoids a rhetoric of self-assertion and speaks instead of the protection of the weak and the compassionate care of others; (3) Buddhist ethics are fundamentally non-adversarial and do not permit the trade-off of one person's "good" with harm to another; (4) while in Buddhism a person is not an "individual" in the Western sense, she nonetheless possesses great value as one who may attain Buddhahood; (5) Buddhist understanding of interconnectedness in the modern world yields an understanding of the importance of many social and political factors that support the possibility of



spiritual liberation; (6) human “good” cannot justify harm to non-human beings or the matrix of life.

(Extract edited from ‘Human Rights in Contemporary Engaged Buddhism’ by Sallie B. King in Buddhist Theology, Curzon 2000)

2. It is simply a fact that those Buddhist leaders who have dealt most extensively with the international community (I am thinking in particular of the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh and Sulak Sivaraksa) show no hesitation whatsoever in speaking of human rights; their speeches and writings frequently draw on this language. These men are spiritual leaders first, social-political leaders second. They clearly do not find “rights” language unusable. They have voted with their tongues and pens: Buddhists can find a way to work with the notion of human rights. From a Buddhist perspective, since society and the human person are interactive, it is fundamentally wrong to conceive them as adversarial. Things that are not separate cannot be opposed. Similarly, since society and the individual are deeply interactive, the value of one cannot be finally separated from the value of the other. This being the case, it is quite futile to attempt to see either the human person or society as bearing relatively greater importance in Buddhism than the other. Both society and the individual are equally answerable to, should serve and contribute to, these values.

(Extract edited from ‘Human Rights in Contemporary Engaged Buddhism’ by Sallie B. King in Buddhist Theology, Curzon 2000)

3. There have also been modern style movements, such as the international ‘Engaged Buddhism’ promoted by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, developed initially out of an attempt to provide a modern Buddhist way for seeking reconciliation, peace and social justice in the polarised and devastating circumstances of 1960s Vietnam. Another example is Santi Asoke, a new Buddhist movement in Thailand which was required to separate itself from the established Sangha, and which has mixed communities of monastics and lay people living together. With a reformist message, it promotes a simple anti-materialistic lifestyle in line with Buddhist morality, including vegetarianism, together with socially useful work.

(Extract edited from Cathy Cantwell, Buddhism: The Basics, Routledge 2010)



4. From the perspective of social concerns, Macy argues that Buddhism has never been 'other-worldly' and cites the example of the Emperor Ashoka 'who in his devotion to Dharma built hospitals and public wells and tree-lined roads for the welfare of all beings'. Here, Macy regards the Sarvodaya movement as illustrative of what SEB can be in terms of combining the Dharma with social development. For example, the movement has adopted the four abodes of the Buddha as fundamental to its philosophy: metta (loving kindness), karuna (compassion), mudhita (joy of living from making others happy) and upekkha (equanimity). These are translated into daily behaviour and approaches to life in the village. In this way the focus can be on suffering and an end to suffering in both the psycho-spiritual plane and the socio-economic pane. Macy writes: 'you are not diluting or distorting the noble truths by applying them to conditions of physical misery or social conflict. Their truth lies in the contingent nature of suffering, however you view it. Because it has a cause, it can cease. Because it co-dependently arises, it can be overcome'.

(Edited extract from Buddhism by Nick Heap, Paula Webber-Davies and Richard Gray)