

2015

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Recommended Citation

Capper, D. S. (2015). Learning Love from a Tiger: Approaches to Nature in an American Buddhist Monastery. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 30(1), 53-69.
Available at: https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/14858

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LEARNING LOVE FROM A TIGER:

Approaches to Nature in an American Buddhist Monastery

This article appeared in Journal of Contemporary Religion 30:1 (2015): 53-69.

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ABSTRACT

In current debates regarding Buddhist approaches to the nonhuman natural world, studies describe Buddhism variously as anthropocentric, biocentric, or ecocentric. These perspectives derive for the most part from examinations of philosophical and normative aspects of the tradition without much attention to moments when embodied practice diverges from religious ideals. Responding to the need for narrative thick descriptions of lived Buddhist attitudes toward nature, I ethnographically explore a Vietnamese monastery in the United States. There I find multifaceted Buddhist approaches to nature which sometimes disclose disunity between theory and practice. Philosophically and normatively this monastery embraces ecocentrism through notions of interconnectedness, instructions for meditation, environmental lifestyles, and nonviolent ideals. In practice, however, the monastery displays a measure of anthropocentrism in terms of rhetoric which values humans more than the rest of the natural world, human-centered motivations for environmental lifestyles, and limits on nonviolence which favor human lives.

KEYWORDS

American Buddhism, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, Vietnamese Buddhism

One of the more interesting outgrowths of contemporary Buddhism involves the symbolic monastic ordinations of trees by monks in Thailand. As described by Susan Darlington, these practices arise in part from genuine concern for the suffering of animals and plants engendered by massive deforestation. But human-centered elements such as political expedience, economic exploitation, social relevance for the Buddhist *sangha*, and cultural fads also motivate the performances of these rituals (Darlington, *Ordination, Good Buddha*). Further, these ordinations are metaphoric or “rhetorical” (Clippard), not real, since Buddhist *Vinaya* rules limit membership in the monastic community to human beings only. Thus, although liturgies used in the rituals remind people “that nature should be treated as equal to humans” (Darlington, *Ordination* 9), in practice tree ordinations cannot realize this equality, as trees remain barred from a religious role reserved only for humans. These human-oriented motivations and limits provoke questions about the predominance of human-centered factors over environmental ones in what would appear superficially to be Buddhist rituals of concern for nature. In this light we must ask again, is Buddhism anthropocentric, regarding humanity as substantially more valuable than the rest of the natural world? Does Buddhism instead biocentrically ascribe value to all living beings? Or should one describe Buddhism as ecocentric because it values all elements of the natural world, even streams and stones, substantially the same as humans?¹

¹ Following Callicott (*Earth's, Non-Anthropocentric*) and Oksanen I consider strong anthropocentrism to affirm intrinsic value for humans alone while valuing nonhuman elements of the natural world only instrumentally. Weak anthropocentrism somewhat endorses intrinsic value for nonhuman natural entities but assigns substantially greater intrinsic, rather than merely instrumental, value to humans. Alternatively, biocentrism holds that living beings possess intrinsic value which is substantially similar to humans while apparently inanimate entities like streams and stones retain only instrumental value. Then again, ecocentrism accords intrinsic value substantially equivalent to that of humans to all animate and inanimate nonhuman individuals, species, entities, or ecosystems, including even lakes and rocks.

It should be noted that Cooper and James question the common metaethical distinction between inherent and instrumental value found in this essay. For Cooper and James, a virtue ethics approach helps to illuminate Buddhist attitudes toward nature. But Cooper and James never reject outright the inherent vs. instrumental value distinction, as they choose instead to overlook it to create a “parsimonious” (139) approach to Buddhist virtue ethics. Further, one may question whether they create a genuine environmental ethic or whether they simply delineate some virtues regarding Buddhist environmental friendliness.

Over the last few decades Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism have offered various answers to these questions without forming a solid consensus. In the literature a response common among Buddhists themselves is that Buddhism is ecocentric. The contemporary American Zen master John Daido Looi offers a representative argument for Buddhist ecocentrism when he claims that the Buddhist precepts “do not exclusively pertain to the human realm. They are talking about the whole universe” (Daido Looi 177). He says, “In this universe, where everything is interpenetrated, codependent, and mutually arising, nothing stands out above anything else. We are inextricably linked and nobody is in charge...Realize self and other as one. Do not elevate the self and put down nature” (181). In explicating what he means by “nature,” Daido Looi references a prior master in his Japanese Sōtō Zen lineage, Dōgen, who asserts that all beings, including nonsentient elements of the natural world, are Buddha. Dōgen portrays mountains and rivers as *sūtras*, or expressions of the Buddha, in positing an ecocentric philosophy of the self and nature which is “nondualistic, nonhierarchical, and dehomocentric” (Curtin 203).

This ecocentric interpretation of the tradition is so strong among some environmental Western Buddhists that Seager coined the phrase “eco-centric sangha” to describe them (215). But some scholars of Buddhism consider ecocentrism to be atypical of the main tenor of the tradition. Christopher Chapple submits a case in point when he tells us that such attitudes remain much more characteristic of the Jain tradition than the Buddhist tradition since usually Buddhists “do not consider the earth and water to be living” (22). Buddhism generally deems stones, water, etc., to lack consciousness and hence lack the capacity for *nirvāna*, leading to a Buddhist separation of sentient and nonsentient beings (Harvey 36). Accordingly, other commentators interpret the Buddhist tradition not in terms of ecocentrism but rather in terms of biocentrism. In

biocentric perspectives regarding Buddhism, nonhuman living beings are “none other than our very selves” (Harvey 42) because transmigration through *samsāra* creates a sense of solidarity (Harris 208-209; McDermott 270; Harvey 36) or interdependent co-origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) creates a sense of shared existence (Eckel 342). This biocentric network of life may or may not include plants, as the Pāli Buddhist canon portrays plants as borderline cases of “living, sentient beings” (Findly 252). But the fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which describes a “Dharma rain” which falls on plants and enables them to “sprout and grow” according to their own capacities (Watson 99), may be interpreted to mean that plants have Buddha-nature, and east Asian Buddhists who employ the *Lotus Sūtra* are more likely than other Buddhists to ascribe intrinsic value to plant life (Chapple 39, 64; Callicott, *Earth’s* 95).

Several anthropocentric interpretations counter these ecocentric and biocentric views. Waldau, in discussing the “speciesism” concept, portrays Buddhism as anthropocentric because the worst human birth is better than the best animal birth (133), killing a human is higher *Vinaya* offense than killing an animal (124), and “the Buddhist sense of continuity [with other animals] is counterbalanced by a much stronger tendency to separate humans from other animals through elevating humans while deprecating other animals” (134). Perhaps reflecting a common anti-Theravāda polemic, Harris indicates that while Buddhism may encourage kindness to animals, it typically does so through an attitude of *noblesse oblige* and instrumentality, as the practice seeks “the enhancement of the practitioner’s own spiritual status rather than the alleviation of the suffering of others” (213). Reciting the *Pāṭimokkha* in the presence of animals is an offense; monastics are forbidden to imitate animals; and animals generally are more “unfavorably oriented” towards liberation than humans are (Harris 208). Moreover, in a study of early

Buddhist texts Schmithausen concludes that the tradition “does not seem to confer any value on nature, neither on life as such nor on species nor on ecosystems” (Schmithausen 6).

All of these studies present us with philosophies and norms of the tradition and in so doing they provide critical dimensions of understanding. However, the available scholarly corpus largely lacks investigations which offer focused cases of Buddhist attitudes toward nature as people actually live them, such as found in Jeff Yamauchi's article on environmentalism at Zen Mountain Center. This is problematic since obviously praxis sometimes diverges from formal norms and ideals due to the messiness of everyday life yet current literary studies overlook this. Kellert, for instance, finds that Japanese cultural ideals regarding the natural world sometimes strongly diverge from lived interactions depending on time, place, and circumstance. Ambros delineates how contemporary Japanese practices regarding pet memorials rest in uneasy tension with Buddhist doctrines and the clergy who espouse them. Williams illustrates how theoretically compassionate animal release ceremonies may actually harm animals in practice. Further, Wallace describes a sometimes problematic fit when Mongolian folk practices regarding animals are integrated within a Buddhist theoretical framework. Resources for studying such divergences appear in a capable if necessarily brief survey of lived Tibetan Buddhist activities by Ivette Vargas and several pieces by Susan Darlington exploring the aforementioned ordination of trees in Thailand. But Swearer remains correct in arguing that our understanding of Buddhist attitudes toward nature needs more “religious-cultural narratives of place” which focus on specific contexts (136).

Investigation through an ethnographic case study of the Magnolia Grove Monastery in Mississippi in the United States provides such a narrative. The example of Magnolia Grove offers not only texts and teachings but also an illustration of Buddhism as it is concretely lived

and practiced. A case study method allows grounding the exploration in terms of a specific time, place, and pedigree of Buddhism, thus limiting variables and enabling a multifaceted thick description of manifestations of differing Buddhist approaches. Through this method I will suggest that philosophically and normatively Magnolia Grove resembles the ecocentric interpretations of Daido Looi and Dōgen but in praxis the lived Buddhism of Magnolia Grove manifests a measure of weak anthropocentrism. As such, this case study offers methodological caution against univocal interpretations of the Buddhist tradition.

Magnolia Grove ecocentrism

I chose Magnolia Grove as a field site for several reasons. First, to study Buddhist approaches to nonhuman nature it was helpful to examine a form of Buddhism which explicitly and clearly delineated philosophical and normative attitudes towards the natural world. Further, in this study it was helpful to examine a form of Buddhism which plainly emphasized practices which embody these philosophical and normative attitudes. Magnolia Grove, and the larger Plum Village *sangha* of which it is a part, stresses such elements as unquestionably and stridently as any other brand of Buddhism in the contemporary world. Moreover, the field site needed a relatively rustic environment in order to facilitate the full flowering of practices regarding nature by making natural experiences easily accessible. So in terms of possessing a clearly delineated Buddhist philosophy regarding approaches to nonhuman nature, clearly delineated practices which attempt to embody the theory, and a relatively unspoiled natural habitat, Magnolia Grove was an obvious choice. However, a limitation of this choice of Magnolia Grove arose from its relative de-emphasis of biocentrism as a Buddhist orientation.

But since this essay is a single case study which makes no claims about all types of Buddhism, this limitation remains unproblematic within the contours of this study.

Ethnographic data were collected from Magnolia Grove Monastery from January to October 2011. During this time I² spent a total of forty-two days in residence over twelve weekends and three more extended periods of five to seven days each. With the occasional help of monastic translators I conducted formal interviews in English with ten members of the ordained monastic community and also engaged in participant observation by attending teaching sessions, speaking informally with lay and monastic participants, and working chores.

Magnolia Grove began in the year 2000 when a group of Vietnamese immigrant families purchased a 140 acre rural Mississippi³ property with a farmhouse to use as a community center and ultimately a monastery.⁴ The property was largely undeveloped and consisted primarily of pine and oak forest. The community eventually consulted with the Vietnamese Thiền⁵ Buddhist master Thích Nhất Hạnh and he agreed to direct a new monastic community, consecrating the land for monastic use in 2005. A Caucasian American couple who were followers of Nhất Hạnh added their construction resources to help to create the physical conditions required of a monastery and retreat center. The community added a kitchen, a meditation hall, a bookstore, and various residential buildings over several years.

² I am a Caucasian American associate professor of religion at a university which is located several hours' drive from Magnolia Grove. While my research primarily is in Buddhist Studies, I am not a specialist in Vietnamese Buddhism. Moreover, I do not self-identify specifically as a practitioner of Plum Village network Buddhism.

³ Magnolia Grove lies outside of the disjointed, so-called "Buddhist Belt" which recognizes the concentration of Buddhist centers in California and the northeast. As such, Magnolia Grove is one motive force in the expanding Buddhist presence in the deep south of the United States.

⁴ Bankston and Zhou join Rutledge in offering discussions of how Vietnamese immigrants employ religion as a primary factor in forming an ethnic identity in the United States.

⁵ Thiền Buddhism arises as an indigenous transformation of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism, much like the Japanese Zen of Daido Looi and Dōgen (Nguyen). Nhất Hạnh and Magnolia Grove practitioners often refer to Thiền simply as "Zen" because of the familiarity of this word.

Then on September 27, 2009, the Vietnamese government forcibly closed the Thích Nhất Hạnh-affiliated Bát Nhã Temple in central Vietnam, leaving four hundred monks and nuns without homes (Sister Dang Nghiem 123). Fundraising campaigns in the United States and Europe resulted in the transplantation of some of these monastics to Magnolia Grove, so that by 2011 the monastery consisted of ten monks and twenty nuns, all Vietnamese by birth, in addition to roughly 100 “birthright”⁶ lay community supporters of Vietnamese descent. Over the years the monastery also attracted a community of several hundred American-born “convert”⁷ lay supporters who practice alongside the Vietnamese community members. Commitment among these convert Buddhists runs the gamut from rare, informal participation to daily monastery visits. Teachings given almost every weekend alternate between English and Vietnamese language delivery and real-time translations are always available. Because both birthright Buddhists and convert populations largely form one overall community of practice and fellowship, Magnolia Grove poorly fits the “parallel congregations” model described by Numrich. Instead Magnolia Grove better fits Padgett’s “transnational diasporic Buddhism.”

Buddhist practice at Magnolia Grove emphasizes mindfulness meditation even for birthright laity, the chanting of sacred texts, meditation through work, and several retreats a year. There is little devotional or merit-making activity outside of gifts to monastics on holidays like Tết or the end of the long monastic retreat, prostrating to the Buddha image in the meditation hall, or giving through regular membership financial support. Further, Magnolia Grove generally lacks formal celebration of *via* days for deities and saints as described by Nguyen and Barber (137), although the Buddha’s birthday is celebrated. Magnolia Grove observes American

⁶ Following Wilson, the “birthright” category here includes both Vietnamese immigrants and their U.S.-born offspring (287).

⁷ With this term I refer to “Americans (regardless of ethnicity) who are not Buddhist by birth but who take up various forms of Buddhist practice without necessarily undergoing a dramatic experience that could be characterized as a religious conversion” (Gregory 242).

holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas with decorations and special meals and, when I was there, a small group of monks and lay people informally marked the Fourth of July with fireworks.

The religious leader of the community, Thích Nhất Hạnh, was born in central Vietnam on October 11, 1926, and ordained a monk at age 17 at Từ Hiếu temple. He was an influential Buddhist leader and scholar of the Liễu Quán lineage in Vietnam during the 1950's and 1960's (Chapman 299; Hunt-Perry and Fine 37). In 1965 he founded the Tiếp Hiện Order (Order of Interbeing) as a new branch of the Lâm Tế Thiền school (King 323). As a proponent of “engaged Buddhism” who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., he was the leader of the Vietnamese Buddhist peace committee during the Vietnam War until his strident non-partisan activism against the war led to his forced exile in 1966⁸ (King 321). He re-established himself in France, where he taught at the Sorbonne and founded a monastery and retreat center called Plum Village. This Plum Village *sangha* community has grown to embrace hundreds of practice centers on every continent but Antarctica. Nhất Hạnh also is the prolific author of almost one hundred titles in many different languages. Along with the 14th Dalai Lama, he continues to be one of the most visible and influential of Buddhist leaders in the contemporary world (Chapman 332).

An “eco-apologist” as described by Swearer, Nhất Hạnh has been influenced by Western environmental thought⁹ and argues that environmental concern is inherent in the practice of Buddhism, as “every Buddhist practitioner should be a protector of the environment” (Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World* 5). Nhất Hạnh’s environmentalism, and in fact all of the practices of the

⁸ Nhất Hạnh’s social activism has been studied by numerous scholars including King, Hunt-Perry and Fine, Queen, and Chapman.

⁹ Because Nhất Hạnh has adapted his form of Buddhism in light of Western ideas, elements of “Buddhist Romanticism” as described by McMahan appear in Magnolia Grove Buddhism. One example of this is an innovative approach to walking meditation, which is described below.

Plum Village *sangha* of which Magnolia Grove is a part, revolve around the Buddhist concept of *pratītya-samutpāda*. This fundamental Buddhist notion describes all elements of the *samsāric* universe as arising from one or more interrelated causes, so that the universe manifests as a web of interconnections that render the sense of individual independence in time and space illusory. Nhất Hạnh translates the concept of *pratītya-samutpāda* with the Vietnamese phrase “*tiếp hiện*” or uniquely with the English word “interbeing.”¹⁰ Nhất Hạnh writes, “In one sheet of paper, we see everything else, the cloud, the forest, the logger. I am, therefore you are. You are, therefore I am. That is the meaning of ‘interbeing’” (*Being* 88). *Tiếp*, he further tells us, means to be “in touch,” in the sense of being in touch with ourselves in addition to “the Buddhas and the *bodhisattvas*, the enlightened people in whom full understanding and compassion are tangible and effective” (*Being* 87). Importantly for his environmental views, *tiếp* also means “to be in touch with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetable, and mineral realms” (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing* 3). “*Hiện*” refers to “the present time,” but it also means “to make real, to manifest” (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being* 88). In Nhất Hạnh’s environmental philosophy, therefore, “interbeing” implies manifesting sacred contact with a natural world ecocentrically consisting of animals, plants, and minerals.

For Nhất Hạnh the *Diamond Sutra* (*Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*), “the most ancient text on deep ecology,” offers an essential canonical expression of interbeing (Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World* 70). Along with the influential presence of the *Lotus Sūtra* (Nguyen and Barber 133), this textual choice, for which Nhất Hạnh has produced an English translation and commentary, adds ecocentric flavor to the Buddhist theory of Magnolia Grove. In Nhất Hạnh’s view, the *Diamond Sutra* teaches us that because all things inter-are, discriminating on the basis

¹⁰ There are many competing interpretations of the concept of *pratītya-samutpāda*. A substantial exploration of these interpretations would exceed the scope of this paper and here I will focus only on Nhất Hạnh’s understanding of the concept. For a fuller discussion see McMahan.

of species in terms of preferring one species to another is foolish. Nhất Hạnh's translation reads, "However many species of living beings there are...we must lead all these beings to the ultimate nirvana" (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Diamond* 4). Thus an authentic Buddhist *bodhisattva* saint will direct beings of all species, without exception, to enlightenment. Further, in Nhất Hạnh's understanding the *Diamond Sutra* asserts that because all things inter-are, animate and inanimate beings are inseparable, so that preference or discrimination even between animate and inanimate beings misses the mark. "If, Subhuti, a bodhisattva holds on to the idea that a self, a person, a living being, or a life span exists, that person is not an authentic bodhisattva" (*Diamond* 4). Eschewing biocentrism in favor of ecocentrism, Nhất Hạnh says, "Atoms and stones are consciousness itself. This is why discrimination of living beings against non-living beings should be discarded" (Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World* 73). Even water "is a good friend, a bodhisattva" (*The World* 107). To Nhất Hạnh a true Buddhist is "one who sees no demarcation between organic and non-organic, self and non-self, living beings and non-living beings" (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Diamond* 89). In other words, a Buddhist saint should be as concerned with the welfare of stones as she is with the welfare of humans or dolphins and seek to protect apparently non-living elements of the natural world.

Formal talks and practices which occur at Magnolia Grove transmit this ecocentric Buddhist philosophy. Pháp Khõng, a senior teaching monk in the community, told me that with the *Diamond Sutra* and interbeing in mind, any sense of human superiority to nature "is an illusion." Because literally "we are what we eat, we must recognize that we are animals, plants, and minerals," as without these human life is impossible. He said, "We tend to think of stones as inanimate but actually they are organisms which store and release energy." Humans participate as "equal partners in a larger system," so that thinking of people as separate from or superior to

natural beings, and acting in terms of human well-being alone, “leads to destructive outcomes.” Rather, “the most powerful compassion is that which does not discriminate” across species or existential categories. Like Nhất Hạnh, Pháp Không stresses theoretical ecocentrism rather than biocentrism or anthropocentrism.

In Magnolia Grove theory, just as humans possess Buddha-nature, so do all existent things with which humans inter-are, so practitioners are taught to regard nonhuman natural entities as essentially sacred. Đăng Nghiêm, the most senior resident teacher at Magnolia Grove, told me, “Natural beings are already in *nirvāna*. Everything has Buddha-nature, even stones.” She said that we can clearly see this inherent enlightenment in animals. In her view, animals lack human greed and craving, as most species will stop eating when full. They may store food for the winter but they never hoard more than they need, unlike humans who hoard endlessly “to fill an inner void with stuff.” Animals may not lead “reflective, intelligent spiritual lives,” but they still may be teachers to humans through their effortless spirituality.

Likewise another senior teacher, Chân Hỷ Nghiêm, said, “You must prepare your heart to accept the condition of learning from nature.” When I asked her if animals could realize the Buddhist goal of *nirvāna*, Chân Hỷ Nghiêm answered in the affirmative and offered a vivid tale to illustrate this point:

Once there was a saintly monk named Hải Đức who lived alone in a hut in the high mountains of Vietnam where he meditated in a cave. Recognizing his saintly gentleness, every day a tiger and a monkey would bring food offerings to him. One day lay people came, took teachings from Hải Đức, and built a temple at his hermitage. After some time, however, Hải Đức passed away. The tiger, which always lounged around the temple’s *stūpa* reliquary monument, became depressed, stopped eating, and eventually died, too. This tiger revealed that it knew how to love and care for others and thus showed its Buddha-nature capacity for enlightenment.

Humans need to learn how to love and could learn from this tiger, according to Chân Hỷ Nghiêm.

But it is not just animals who serve as spiritual teachers. In a public teaching session Đấng Nghiêm encouraged the recognition of human similarities with trees. Just as trees reach for sunlight and water, so people seek nutrients. Just as trees have roots which ground them, so humans have roots in parents, ancestors, cultures, bodies, foods, and educations. People even exchange gasses with trees through respiration and trees look like human lungs upside-down, so that it is appropriate for Đấng Nghiêm to think in terms of “the trees, my lungs.” And “just as trees need healthy roots, so do humans, so people must take care of their roots, making sure that they are as wholesome as possible and offering them gratitude for their positive contributions to life.” Moreover, Đấng Nghiêm teaches that Buddhists should “water the flowers” in others by extending them praise and gratitude for their beneficial qualities, thus inviting others to live more positive and wholesome lives.

Đấng Nghiêm told me that trees also teach people to accept their own mortality and imperfections. In winter, the trees seem dead, yet every spring they return to life in order to manifest summer’s bloom. Then in the autumn they let go of their leaves and again embrace quiet inactivity. Through this process no tree, no leaf, is perfect. According to Đấng Nghiêm humans live the same way: “People have life cycles of birth and death during which no one is perfect.” For Đấng Nghiêm, to get in touch with trees is to respect and value these facts, so that people may better accept their own mortality and imperfections. With such acceptance, people can face life in calmer, more peaceful ways, leading to greater happiness and less fear of death. Moreover, Đấng Nghiêm tells us that humans can better take care of the earth’s impermanence “without fear or despair” if people accept their own impermanence. Đấng Nghiêm, however,

warned that such lessons are harder to learn in the contemporary world because “our lives are so full of things which are dead or unchanging.”

In Magnolia Grove theory this learning from natural entities such as animals, trees, and stones can arise from the Buddhist practice of walking meditation. Just as *thiền tập* sitting meditation develops mindfulness, or present awareness in the moment, so in walking meditation one ambles slowly, silently, and mindfully, embodying awareness of each footstep. Magnolia Grove monastics teach that in walking meditation one should engender a deep mindful awareness of the fact that one is walking instead of walking with a distracted mind while one internally muses about work, family, etc. Such awareness, of course, includes a rich awareness of the environment of the walk.

Most of the 140 acres of rural Magnolia Grove consist of undeveloped forests and meadowlands and there exist a number of trails which lead through these wilderness surroundings, so in walking meditation one strides through idyllic sylvan scenes. Teachers at Magnolia Grove actively encourage the incorporation of bucolic experiences in walking meditation to more profoundly and selflessly realize interbeing. In instructions for walking meditation during a winter retreat, for example, monastics asked for silent attention to nature as part of the practice. Practitioners were told that winter leaves were on the ground because trees were taking care of their bodies before new growth would begin in the spring. From this, practitioners were to learn to take care of their own bodies. Additionally, teachers asked practitioners to silently contemplate a tree. A tree is rooted, grounded, unwavering, and does not get distracted from in-the-moment mindfulness. Practitioners were told to persist similarly rooted, grounded, and unwavering in meditation, whether sitting, walking, or meditating in the

midst of everyday life. Finally, practitioners were encouraged to use their experiences on the walk to realize profound interconnectedness, or interbeing, with nature.

The lessons of walking meditation may be extended in another meditation called “touching the earth,” which involves prostrations before images of the Buddha or other sacred objects. Đăng Nghiêm told me that when one touches the earth, one contacts the earth’s capacity for forgiveness, compassion, forbearance, and healing. One then may practice to integrate these qualities into oneself because, after all, humans consist of earth, Đăng Nghiêm says.

Meditation is said to work best not in isolation but integrated into an overall lifestyle. To this end, the monks and nuns of Magnolia Grove Monastery implement a number of practices designed to help one to realize interbeing with nature. To anyone staying at the monastery consuming food mindfully represents the most obvious of these practices. The vow of Nhất Hạnh’s Fifth Mindfulness Training delineates contours for mindful eating:

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming...I will contemplate interbeing and consume in a way that preserves peace, joy, and well-being in my body and consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family, my society and the earth.

Magnolia Grove Monastery, like all monasteries in the Plum Village network, is vegan. Food consists of plant products without meat or dairy and protein is provided through the copious use of nuts and soy products like tofu. Such a diet allows the community, it feels, to eat in a more environmentally-friendly way. In his remarks to UNESCO on October 7, 2006, as recounted in his “Letter from Thich Nhat Hanh,” Nhất Hạnh offered material reasons for such a diet (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Letter* 13-14). According to Nhất Hạnh, more than half of the water used in the United States is used to raise animals for food. It takes 2,500 gallons of water to create a pound of beef but only 25 gallons to produce a pound of wheat. Raising animals for food

produces more water pollution than any other industry (*Letter 14*). Nhất Hạnh further tells us that animals raised for food eat 80% of the corn crop and 95% of the oat crop and these crops could meet the caloric needs of 8.7 billion people, which is larger than the current human population (*Letter 13*). If lay people want to eat beef at home, that is acceptable to Nhất Hạnh, who nonetheless encourages them to reduce their consumption of beef by 50% to limit the load on planetary resources (*Letter 14*).

There exist spiritual reasons for following such a diet along with these environmental ones. Pháp Không tells us that since “we are what we eat,” in consuming factory-raised animals and eggs, people also ingest the anger and fear of these animals, who often experience unpleasant conditions. According to Pháp Không, anger and fear thereby become part of a person, later to realize expression as modes of environmental destruction, and if one wishes to protect humanity and the planet one must break this chain. Pháp Không views eating plants, and especially environmentally-friendly organically grown plants, as more compassionate, because plants for food suffer much less than animals used for food. Of this he said, “When we practice, we try to overcome anger and fear and in so doing try to restore our planet to equilibrium.”

Mindfulness of what one eats is important for a meaningful experience of interbeing but how one eats is important, too. At Magnolia Grove most meals provide exercises in mindful eating. At the beginning of the meal there is a recitation of the Five Contemplations:

1. This food is a gift of the earth, the sky, numerous living beings and much hard work.
2. May we eat with mindfulness and gratitude so as to be worthy to receive it.
3. May we recognize and transform our unwholesome mental formations, especially our greed, and learn to eat with moderation.
4. May we keep our compassion alive by eating in such a way that we reduce the suffering of living beings, preserve our planet, and reverse the process of global warming.
5. We accept this food so that we may nurture our brotherhood and sisterhood, strengthen our *sangha*, and nourish our ideal of serving all beings.

As one eats one meditates on these five contemplations. The meal is taken in silence to enhance the sense of meditation. One should think, “I am eating with the aim of preserving my life. The aim of my life is to study and practice to transform my afflictions and to liberate people and all other species from their suffering” (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Touching* 64). Eaters should chew their food completely before swallowing, up to thirty chews until the food becomes liquid, to enhance mindfulness of the food and the act of eating.

Magnolia Grove implements other practices with both spiritual and planet-friendly reasons in mind. Nuns and monks make their own shopping bags. To save trees the monastery supplies no paper napkins, as washed hands naturally air dry in the warm Mississippi climate. In order to conserve water monastics brush their teeth and wash their faces using the water from only one cup each. The ideal shower takes less than seven minutes. Residents wash dishes by hand using bins and then machine sanitize them, saving water over using a dishwasher, and plants receive non-soapy water from the dish washing process. Monastics compost leftover food to provide fertilizer for the monastery’s organic vegetable gardens. Nuns and monks machine wash laundry only in full loads and then line dry them. Even in the intense heat of summer monastics eschew air conditioning. What can be recycled is locally recycled. As described by D ang Nghi m, “We need to reduce consumption as a concrete act of love.” Not only does this help the planet, it also “gives us a sense of confidence and empowerment in the face of what can seem like overwhelming environmental crises.” Magnolia Grove practices environmental Buddhism so energetically that there is little sense of a superior meditator/inferior environmentalist dichotomy like that depicted at Green Gulch by Stephanie Kaza (240).

These “concrete acts of love” at Magnolia Grove include the practice of nonviolence. Interestingly, teachers at Magnolia Grove do not invoke the idea of reincarnation often so they

do not justify nonviolence with the argument of other Buddhist schools that one may have been a different organism in a previous life. Instead, due to the focus on interbeing, teachers promote nonviolence because one *is* all other beings in *this* life. The First Mindfulness Training delineates the path of nonviolence:

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking or in my way of life.

As a result acts of nonviolence commonly occur at Magnolia Grove. As a case in point, once the community met in the meditation room for a talk, during which a daddy-long-legs spider visibly came crawling across the ground into the midst of those seated on the floor. In other settings this spider may have elicited screams and then a killing swat. Instead, a monk coaxed the spider onto a piece of paper and then carried the spider outside, gently freeing it into the grass.

To form a general nonviolent lifestyle monastics use no poisons to kill kitchen bugs and no pesticides in the garden. Kitchen workers try to keep things clean so as not to invite unwanted visitors. Residents deploy chili pepper and vinegar as vermin repellants. Monks and nuns avoid noxious chemicals in everything, right down to the dish soap. They trap mice live for later release and follow the same practice with snakes, poisonous or not, whenever possible.

Chân Hỵ Nghiệm tells an interesting story in this regard. One day while on walking meditation she came face-to-face with a rattlesnake. At first she felt nervous and frightened. But she meditatively returned to mindfulness of her breath, allowing her to feel calm and centered. She says that she then spoke to the snake lovingly and eventually the serpent decided to move away, for whatever reason, thus ending their encounter without incident.

Praxis and anthropocentrism

Recognizing flowers and stones as possessors of Buddha-nature, learning from animals and trees, and preaching nonviolence toward the nonhuman natural world lend a strong ecocentric flavor to Magnolia Grove ideals. But looking more deeply into praxis uncovers a number of weak anthropocentric facets. First I consider the practices of walking meditation and prostration. Superficially the design of these practices respects nonhuman teachers as purveyors of Buddhist truths. But the instructions and conduct of the practices explicitly seek the development of human religious experience with little attention paid to religious outcomes for nonhuman elements of the natural world. That is, humans may learn how to love from tigers but the question of how tigers learn Buddhist love lingers unanswered. These practices are significantly human-centered and nonhuman natural elements appear merely instrumental to the goal of human spiritual development, similar to what Harris related in his study (213).

Likewise animals, plants, and minerals may serve as spiritual exemplars at Magnolia Grove and at times nuns and monks express a genuine appreciation for elements of the natural world. Dharma teachers, however, often rhetorically invoke natural beings not for their own sakes but rather instrumentally, and commonly stereotypically, to symbolize positive or negative human Buddhist qualities. Using trees as exemplars of positive meditational states, as mentioned above, provides one example of this. Another occurrence of many appeared when Phước Tịnh, reflecting centuries-old Buddhist traditions, portrayed problematic human minds as “more frightening than snakes or ferocious animals” or as uncontrollable as “a jumping monkey.” On these occasions natural beings remain unimportant for their own sakes but matter only because

they can be used instrumentally as symbols for human spiritual needs, just as Vargas found in her study (218).

Further, reflecting Nhất Hạnh's teaching that "human beings and nature are inseparable," Magnolia Grove engages in activities of conservation of water, paper, food, and other resources (Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World* 35). Without a doubt a beneficent other-regarding ecological sensibility within the community in part motivates these activities. As Chân Hỷ Nghiêm told me, "Trees must be protected for their own sakes." However, quite often monastics openly depict the goal of preserving the environment as important not for the welfare of nonhuman natural beings but rather for the survival of humanity. Instances of this were recounted above, such as in instructions to children. Moreover, a senior financial officer disclosed to me that there exists a financial side to the ecological concern. The monastery operates on a total budget of only \$6,000 per month, which often strains community finances. Therefore, she said, simply saving money also stimulates ecofriendly conservation and the adoption of simple lifestyles. Certainly in the face of the myriad ecological problems which plague the twenty-first century planet the conservation activities of Magnolia Grove Monastery seek to create benefit, regardless of motivation. But pure other-regarding environmental concern does not fully describe these Buddhist activities.

The tale of two stray dogs who tried to make the monastery their home also evidences anthropocentric concern. Together these dogs overturned trash bins, pilfered food, took and destroyed human property (particularly shoes left outside of the meditation hall), damaged monastery gardens with digging, and otherwise caused problems. Eventually several members of the community asked me to remove the dogs and find them a home, which I did.¹¹

¹¹ Monastics asked me specifically to remove the dogs for a couple of expressed reasons. First, I voluntarily had shown the dogs kindness by giving them flea baths and some of the monastics who were genuinely concerned about

If one is to understand this situation one must appreciate that, on one hand, the monastery was ill-prepared to feed these dogs meat protein or provide them with medical care. On the other hand, some monastics seemed afraid of the dogs and other residents plainly disapproved of the dogs' presence on monastery grounds.¹² These factors appeared as salient in the removal of the dogs as concern for canine welfare. I learned through these events that these dogs were perceived as interfering with the *raison d'être* of the monastery, which is provision of and support for human religious practice, as well as obstructing the creation of a happy home for monastics. Because the dogs conflicted with these human-centered goals, they had to leave.

Anthropocentric realities likewise constrain the practice of nonviolence. For Chân Hỷ Nghiêm, whose loving encounter with a rattlesnake was previously recounted, difficulties arise in avoiding accidentally killing small beings due to the physical conditions of life in a Buddhist monastery. As one case in point, she said she may harm small organisms while mowing the grass. In response, she claimed that cutting the grass is a meditation practice for her, as she consciously tries to mind her breath, remain present with the activity, and manifest compassion for anything lurking in the lawn. Also she offers a daily prayer for a good rebirth for any being which she might accidentally kill that day. In these ways she does what she can to protect nature with nonviolence. Nonetheless, since the mower undoubtedly still kills small organisms, the anthropocentric goal of a manicured lawn compromises a thoroughgoing nonanthropocentric practice of nonviolence.

While Chân Hỷ Nghiêm may find her practice of nonviolence unintentionally compromised, monastics sometimes make more intentional compromises, as may be seen in the

the dogs' future fate trusted me to care for them, as they told me that I am "good with animals." Monastics also expressed that I was more likely to know of a good home for the dogs than they were because of my lay status.

¹² Interestingly no one mentioned the injunction against the keeping of pets by monastics (McDermott 277), perhaps because domesticated animals of various species commonly may be found in Buddhist monasteries in Asia.

reality of fire ant control. The red imported fire ant (*solenopsis invicta*) is a nonnative invasive species found throughout the southern United States. Grass often hides fire ant mounds, making them easy to disturb, and ants aggressively swarm from disturbed mounds to deliver many stinging bites and injections of alkaloid venom. These bites are very painful, can kill small animals, and may be fatal to humans with allergies. Biological controls are unproven and expensive, leaving pesticides as the main form of fire ant control, so Magnolia Grove uses pesticides in order to control the presence of the ants in high traffic areas. Although monastics may feel regret and discomfort in using these pesticides, the fact remains that in eradicating fire ants the monastery anthropocentrically values human comfort and safety more substantially than it recognizes the intrinsic value of fire ants.

Several monastics were in fact very frank about anthropocentric limits to the practice of nonviolence. When I pressed a scenario regarding a hypothetical tiger attack on a member of the community, several monks and nuns admitted that killing the tiger would be acceptable if it meant saving a human life. However, even then, these monastics emphasized repeatedly that the fictional tiger would have to be killed “with compassion,” with as little suffering inflicted on the animal as possible.¹³

Conclusion

There exists a strong ecocentric ambience within the philosophical and doctrinal dimensions of Magnolia Grove. Based on texts such as the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra*, the concept of interbeing stresses an ecocentric human continuity with animals, plants, and minerals, so that teachings include the notion that nonhuman elements of the natural world have Buddha-nature. Practices such as learning from nature in walking meditation implement these

¹³ For a discussion of Mahāyāna compassionate killing see Tatz.

ideals and the monastery promotes environmentally-friendly virtues of humility, equanimity, solicitude, and responsibility as described by Cooper and James (2005). In these ways Magnolia Grove possesses a more inclusive understanding of human/nonhuman unity than many other forms of religion. However, these factors notwithstanding, a closer look at Magnolia Grove praxis reveals a measure of weak anthropocentric favoritism towards humans.

So is Buddhism at Magnolia Grove anthropocentric, biocentric, or ecocentric? The ethnographic evidence leaves us with an ambiguous answer but also a helpful methodological caution. Certainly the philosophical and doctrinal dimensions of Magnolia Grove display a high degree of ecocentrism, reflecting Magnolia Grove's roots in ecocentric forms of East Asian Buddhism which stress the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra*. But while Magnolia Grove practices attempt to embody this ecocentrism faithfully, material limitations of human lives lead to some anthropocentric compromises in Magnolia Grove praxis. Therefore, while this form of Buddhism is highly ecocentric in theory and practice, it would be untrue to describe it unequivocally as purely ecocentric, as in the end Magnolia Grove presents us with a mixed model where anthropocentric praxis sometimes diverges from ecocentric theory. Perhaps this result is unsurprising, given that practical anthropocentric compromises of ecocentric ideals have also been described among some Jains (Chapple 1993) and some Native American groups (Harrod 2000). It may be argued that anthropocentric practices may appear, regardless of theoretical background, when it comes to issues of human survival. This case study provides multidimensional, if slippery, nuance to common text-only, single-perspective views, as Buddhism at Magnolia Grove is both ecocentric and anthropocentric, depending on one's perspective. Although many Buddhists agree with Darwin that human sympathy for nonhuman

beings comprises a noble virtue, this sympathy faces limits in practice in one theoretically ecocentric Buddhist monastery.

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