

2016

## **Animism Among Western Buddhists**

Daniel S. Capper

*University of Southern Mississippi*, [Daniel.Capper@usm.edu](mailto:Daniel.Capper@usm.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://aquila.usm.edu/fac\\_pubs](https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs)



Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Capper, D. S. (2016). Animism Among Western Buddhists. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 17(1), 30-48.  
Available at: [https://aquila.usm.edu/fac\\_pubs/14851](https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/14851)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [aquilastaff@usm.edu](mailto:aquilastaff@usm.edu).

## ANIMISM AMONG WESTERN BUDDHISTS

This article appeared in *Contemporary Buddhism* 17:1 (2016): 30-48.

Daniel Capper, Ph.D.  
Professor of Religion  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
118 College Dr., #5015  
Hattiesburg, MS 39406 USA  
601-266-4522  
Daniel.Capper@usm.edu

### Author's Biography

Daniel Capper, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Southern Mississippi, where he teaches Buddhism and comparative religion. His many publications include the books *Learning Love from a Tiger: Religious Experiences with Nature* and *Guru Devotion and the American Buddhist Experience*.

## ANIMISM AMONG WESTERN BUDDHISTS

### ABSTRACT

Myriad instances of animist phenomena abound in the Buddhist world, but due to the outdated concepts of thinkers such as Edward Tylor, James George Frazer, and Melford Spiro, commonly scholars perceive this animism merely as the work of local religions, not as deriving from Buddhism itself. However, when one follows a number of contemporary scholars and employs a new, relational concept of animism that is based on respectful recognition of nonhuman personhoods, a different picture emerges. The works of Western Buddhists such as Stephanie Kaza, Philip Kapleau Roshi, and Gary Snyder express powerful senses of relational animism that arise specifically from Buddhist thought and practice. Recognizing the role of relational animism within Buddhism opens a new window on the dynamics of the tradition and this perspective can clarify issues such as the distribution of Buddhist (non)vegetarianism.

### KEYWORDS

animism, Buddhism, ecology, personhood, vegetarianism

### GRANTS/DISCLOSURE

This project received no grant funding from any source and generated no financial benefit of any kind for the author.

## ANIMISM AMONG WESTERN BUDDHISTS

Having quietly realized his enlightenment under a tree, the Buddha encountered the nonhuman natural world in a variety of ways, including meetings with animist spirits. Take, for example, a story from the *Vinaya* of the Pāli canon, the set of ancient texts that provides Theravāda Buddhism with its essential scriptures. It seems that in the time of the Buddha, there were some monks at Ālavī who chopped down trees to build their housing, as it was common for the Buddha's disciples to build simple forest huts. The *devatā*, or resident spirit, of one of these trees implored a monk to stop the felling, yet the monk ignored the spirit and even struck the arm of the tree spirit's son with an axe. Now angered, the *devatā* considered killing the thoughtless monk, but instead sought counsel with the Buddha. The Buddha listened to the tree spirit's story with patience and compassion, finally recommending an unoccupied tree as a new home for the deity. Unfortunately, by this time both lay people and other monks were gossiping about the damage done to the forest by the hut builders. In response, the Buddha scolded the 'foolish' tree cutting monks for diminishing the prestige of the monastic *sangha* community and issued a new monastic rule, Pācittiya 11, which forbids unreasonable destruction of plants (Horner 2014, 656-657). This illuminating story expresses animist relationships with nature that reside in the heart of the Pāli scriptures and alter the shape of Buddhism itself.

Ajaan Sumano Bhikkhu, a contemporary Theravāda Buddhist monk from the United States, tells of another encounter with nature. While meditating in a cave in Thailand, Sumano was so bothered by a hovering mosquito that he trapped it in a bottle. Over the next two days Sumano attempted to exert mind control over the mosquito, mentally influencing it to behave more like a butterfly. Sumano then released the mosquito, who wasted no time in behaving like a mosquito and seeking Sumano's blood. As he humorously describes it, this event taught Sumano that he lacks telepathic powers. But it also taught him that the mosquito had to be respected as an agent in its own right, possessing its own subjectivity, if Sumano's patience and Dhamma practice were to advance. Sumano concluded the story by teaching readers that such an extension of personhood is proper Buddhist behavior (Ajaan Sumano Bhikkhu 1999, 122). In these two stories of the Buddha and the monk Sumano, decisively separated by space and time,

both men interact with beings from the natural world that are experienced as persons, or subjects who maintain their own senses of agency.

Any visitor to a Buddhist country today almost certainly has encountered animist interactions with nature within Buddhist realities. Although some attribute this animism simply to the influences of local religions, actually things are more complex, as everywhere in the Buddhist world one may find some local religiosity thoroughly admixed with, rather than simply coexisting with, Buddhist realities. Geoffrey Samuel (1995) ably describes how indigenous traditions often work in tandem with Buddhist ones to create Tibetan religious worlds, and there are many other examples. This prompts questioning about how Buddhism may participate from its own side in creating the numerous animist phenomena found not just in Buddhist Asia, but also in the Buddhist West. As I will show, we need to explore animism in Buddhist universes more fully in order to understand the Buddhist tradition itself, since Buddhism actually retains some animist impulses of its own when animism is innovatively understood in terms of respectful relationships.

Some outmoded concepts that still appear in Buddhist studies supply another reason to look again at animism in Buddhist realms. The foundation of the concept of animism as understood by many scholars remains the work of Edward Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* of 1871. In this text Tylor described animism in terms of beliefs, especially as found in indigenous religions, in the ‘souls of individual creatures, capable of continued existence after the death or destruction of the body’ (Tylor 1871, 383), so that animals and plants possess independent, human-like souls. Not only did Tylor’s concept of animism colour the discipline of anthropology from its infancy, it also strongly affected the work of James George Frazer and his much-read *The Golden Bough*. Frazer (1922, 128) described animism as the belief that nonhuman natural beings, especially plants in his presentation, have souls like humans. With these concepts of animism, Tylor and Frazer cast long shadows across a number of disciplines throughout the twentieth century. However, the implication of Tylor and Frazer in colonialist agendas has led some recent scholars to eschew their works.

Tylor and Frazer perhaps have had less historical influence in Buddhist studies than in some other disciplines because of the perception that their soul-based notions of

animism fuse poorly with Buddhist philosophical sensibilities regarding soul concepts. Buddhist philosophy notably rejects individual separateness in space or continuity in time, meaning that Buddhists generally dismiss the idea of a soul, as the Pāli *Brahmajāla Sutta* (Walshe 1995, 83) and many other scriptures indicate. This rejection has led many scholars to argue that if animism is defined as possession of a soul, yet Buddhism denies the soul, then there can be no truly Buddhist animism. Frazer (1922, 128, 129) himself proposed this argument, providing a form of received wisdom that animism exists in the Buddhist world through the effects of local traditions, not from Buddhism itself.

Further, in his prominent study *Burmese Supernaturalism*, Melford Spiro (1967) offered another reason why Buddhism cannot host animism: the doctrine of karma. In many animist systems, animist spirits can impact human lives with boons of prosperity or blights of affliction. But, for Spiro, Buddhism teaches that our fates are controlled by the force of karma and derive from an ethic of personal responsibility, not the whims of nature spirits. Because of the disjuncture between animism and karma that Spiro perceived, he kept Buddhism and animism conceptually separate throughout his study, as many other Buddhologists have done.

As influential as they have been, the perspectives of Tylor, Frazer, and Spiro have not kept pace with current scholarship, especially that which emerges from the study of religion and nature. In recent decades scholars from a variety of fields have discarded the soul-based concept of animism and worked from scratch to produce a new, relational notion. This dramatically renovated concept of animism not only ejects troublesome colonialist records, it also allows fresh insights into how Buddhism may host animism from its own side, thus providing scholars with a vital new window through which the dynamics of the Buddhist religion may be observed.

### **A revised understanding of animism**

In his book *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, Matthew Hall, a research botanist at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, argues strongly for the intellectual and moral recognition of plants as persons, because of their ‘sensitive, purposeful, [and] volitional behavior’ (Hall 2011, 12). This idea of treating plants as persons will sound odd to some readers, given that in Western history, naturalists from Aristotle to Linnaeus

and religious voices from the Bible to Aquinas have encouraged relationships with plants that are ‘instrumental and hierarchical’ (9), resulting in an ontological dualism between humans and animals on one side and plants on the other. Further, today some people think that plants cannot entertain inner experiences because they lack brains and central nervous systems. But for mammals like humans, brains and central nervous systems remain inoperative on their own, as they merely serve as pathways for electrical discharges modulated by calcium, sodium, and potassium, these electrical discharges doing the real work of internal communication. Likewise, plants, our distant evolutionary cousins, engage in internal communication through electrical discharges modulated by calcium, sodium, and potassium, just like humans, but of course their pathways for expressing their internal electrical communications differ (Chamovitz 2012, 137-138). Given this parallelism, one can appreciate that when a plant turns its leaves to the sun, a familiar plant process, that plant engages a state that, in a human, would be taken to indicate sensory awareness, some form of cognition, and intentional movement.

Given facts such as these, Hall states that recent botanical research emphasizes the sometimes surprising abilities of plants, because ‘since the early nineteenth century, scientific evidence has steadily accrued which directly contradicts the hierarchy of nature...plants are increasingly being shown to demonstrate more sophisticated aspects of mentality such as reasoning and choice...plants and humans share a basic, ontological reality as perceptive, aware, autonomous, self-governed, and intelligent beings’ (Hall 2011, 12). Thus, for Hall, we need to relate to plants in ‘inclusive, nonhierarchical, dialogical ways’ that recognize ‘plants as subjects deserving of respect as other-than-human persons’ (13), because ‘maintaining purely instrumental relationships with plants no longer fits the evidence that we have of plant attributes, characteristics, and life histories-and the interconnectedness of life on Earth’ (13-14).

Hall’s work is just one example of a scholarly movement over the last fifteen years, embracing many otherwise disparate disciplines, which calls for the methodological recognition of nonhuman natural beings as subjects or persons in their own rights, rather than as mere backdrop for the human stage. These new paradigms respect natural beings as sources of autonomy and agency, not just as instruments for human use. For instance, it is common for many people to regard pets as people, as

members of a human family; thinkers in the natural personhood movement seek to extend this regard, without the anthropomorphism that can happen with pet keeping, more expansively across the nonhuman universe in heuristically potent ways. In this scholarly movement, anthropomorphism must be rejected in favor of genuine cross-existent respect for the lifeworlds of natural beings as they arise phenomenologically. These scholars wish to treat an elk as an elk person, not as a human person, through respect for the existential reality of an elk as an ecological subject.

*The Animal that Therefore I Am* by the philosopher Jacques Derrida (2008) typifies works within this natural personhood movement. In it Derrida describes an encounter in which his pet cat saw him naked, resulting in a feeling of shame for Derrida as he might feel before a human person. This incident inspired reflection by Derrida regarding how Western philosophy generally has ignored such moments and avoided regarding animals as persons, leading to real world outcomes such as the horrors of factory farms (25-29). Similar to Derrida, in ethology Barbara Smuts (2001, 294) writes effectively about how she failed to gain meaningful data from the baboon troop that she observed until she began regarding each member as a person, with agency and a lifeworld all its own, lending her study richness by perceiving the baboons as persons not entirely unlike human persons. Natural personhood approaches exist in religious studies as well, such as with *People Trees*, David Haberman's (2013) study of Hindu tree veneration. Haberman found that he most clearly understood the religious lives of his often modern and cosmopolitan informants when he appreciated that they regarded sacred trees as people in their own rights in healthy, rather than morbid or childish, ways. Together Hall, Derrida, Smuts, and Haberman teach that respecting the subjectivity and personhood of nonhuman beings, when done correctly and without anthropomorphism, can be good science, not juvenile sentimentality.

A subschool within the natural personhood movement informally is called 'New Animism,' as its constituent theorists turn to assorted world views to shape a novel concept of animism based on relationships between human and nonhuman persons. New Animists reject Tylor's idea that animism involves possession of a soul and instead define animism relationally. Animism, for them, means living in a community of



persons, both human and nonhuman, and extending respect for the existential agency of those persons.

Graham Harvey leads this effort in religious studies. Harvey (2006, xi) says, ‘Animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship to others.’ He insists that what is needed is not anthropomorphic projection but rather a respect for both sameness and difference through recognition of relationship with an Other. One may treat a human colleague respectfully as a person despite individual differences, and similarly one may extend respect to moss or lizards while appreciating dramatic divergences of respective lifeworlds. However, Harvey (28) helpfully informs us that this animist extension of personhood is not Edenic, saying, ‘An “all-encompassing moral community” need not be a cozy, romantic vision of peace, co-operation, and unity. Not only is enmity relational, but persons can be prey and/or predator.’

Harvey shares his concept of animism as a relationship between persons with another New Animist, the philosopher Freya Mathews. Mathews argues that the received Cartesian world view supports a dualism that muddies our perceptions of reality and hence our scholarly understanding of it. She suggests adopting instead a ‘pan-psychic’ perspective that overcomes the distorting effects of Cartesian dualism, calling for a ‘view of the universe as a conative unity, a self-realizing system that counts as a locus of subjectivity in its own right,’ so that ‘the interrogatory approach of science will be given up in favor of an altogether different approach: that of *encounter*’ (Mathews 2003, 9-10; her italics). The anthropologist Nurit Bird-David, another New Animist, argues that a relational animist perspective can serve as an epistemology to overcome dualist separations of humans and the nonhuman natural world, as ‘against “I think, therefore I am” stand “I relate, therefore I am” and “I know as I relate.”’ When we reframe our knowledge this way, Bird-David says, we ‘learn what they [nonhumans] can do in relation to what we do, how they respond to our behavior, how they act towards us, what their situational and emergent behavior (rather than their constitutive matter) is’ (Bird-David 1999, S78).

By redefining animism as respectful personhood relationships rather than possession of a soul, New Animists provide a robust path for discussing animism in the

Buddhist world. I will follow their methodological insights here, but only their methodological insights, as in this essay I do not suggest adoption of an animist ontology like Mathews does. Therefore, in this study I define animism as a form of belief and practice in which nonhuman entities are experienced by humans relationally as persons in their own rights, with respect accorded to their specific subjective agencies through linguistic, ritual, or other interactions.

Because the concept of a soul remains irrelevant to this relational notion of animism, this revised concept does not create the Buddhist discomfort engendered by Tylor's soul-based notion. In fact, animism understood relationally dovetails nicely with Buddhist portrayals of an interdependent universe. This relational understanding also responds to Spiro's rejection of Buddhist animism on karmic grounds, because Buddhism has long recognized the role of persons as emissaries through which the mechanisms of karma work. You hurt me in a previous life, so in this life I hurt you; in this life I am your karmic emissary, the person who delivers your karmic due. Likewise, with a relational understanding of animism that recognizes natural beings as karmic persons, prosperity or demise occur not through the random activities of nature spirits, as Spiro described, but rather through the actions of nonhuman animist persons as karmic emissaries. With nonhuman persons as karmic actors, instead of subverting the karmic ethic of personal responsibility, relational animist persons help to supply the system through which karma shapes the world. Indeed, a relational concept of animism highlights the Buddhist understanding that not just humans, but also nonhumans, sometimes participate in the workings of karma.

A story within the Pāli canon evinces precisely this idea of animist persons as karmic emissaries. At one time the Buddha stayed in the Jeta Grove when some merchants approached him and sought his blessing for their impending travel. The merchants took refuge in the Buddha and vowed to embrace the Five Precepts before they set out. Eventually they became lost in a pathless forest and, bewildered, ran out of supplies. Then the merchants found a tree that glistened as if wet, causing the merchants to reason that the tree must be full of water. They lopped off a branch and out streamed life-giving fluid. Wondering what else the tree might contain, they cut off another large branch and delicious foods poured out of the resulting hole. Removing a third branch

freed some delightful women and detaching a fourth resulted in the emergence of all manner of treasures. The gleeful merchants then loaded up their carts and managed to return home. Out of respect, they offered some of their boon to the Buddha, making sure to credit the spirit of the tree for their good fortune. When they finished their story, the Buddha did not accord responsibility to the tree deity and instead stressed the men's karma as the source of their prosperity: 'This treasure you have received for your moderation and because you have not given yourselves to the power of desire' (Cowell 1902, 221). Here an animist spirit offers a prosperity boon, precisely the behavior that Spiro claimed short-circuits karma, but the Buddha makes it clear that karma is working as expected and the tree spirit is merely the karmic emissary for the merchants. In this story from the Pāli canon, there is no conflict between Buddhism and animism regarding karma when animism is understood relationally.

It would seem that this relational concept of animism may be applied to any form of Buddhism, but in this essay I restrict myself to Western Buddhists. Writers too numerous to mention have noted that Western Buddhists commonly stir Western environmentalist sensibilities into their spiritual practice, and communal groups have adapted to and aided such concerns. As a result, environmentalism represents a salient thematic element of Western Buddhist thought and ritual that is so important that Richard Seager (1999, 215) described several forms of Western Buddhism as an 'eco-centric sangha.' These forms would seem ripe for producing distinctly Buddhist animisms and, in fact, Western Buddhism does not disappoint on this count. If I had more space here, I could examine many voices, such as those of Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Joanna Macy. Instead, in this essay I will focus on the work of Stephanie Kaza, Philip Kapleau Roshi, and Gary Snyder, as these three Buddhists are well-respected and influential, and therefore are representative in some measure. They each express vivid senses of relational animism in their works. And although they each blend together many elements from the cosmopolitan Western Buddhist world and thus cannot be described as *only* Zen Buddhist in influence, they all call the Zen school their home. This coincidence instructively deceives, for all three manifest relational animism in different ways despite sharing a common Zen pedigree, and in this paper's conclusion these differences will be crucial regarding divergent Buddhist attitudes toward meat eating. I turn first to the work

of Stephanie Kaza, as her book, *The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees*, may contain the single most vibrant sense of relational animism in the Western Buddhist world.

### **Stephanie Kaza**

Kaza is a Professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Vermont who has distinguished herself as a scholar and an academic leader. She also maintains a public identity as a Buddhist from the Sōtō Zen school, presenting herself in several works foremost as a Buddhist who happens to be an environmental scientist rather than the other way around, and it is on these works that I will direct my scrutiny. A leader within the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and author or editor of books such as *Mindfully Green: A Personal and Spiritual Guide to Whole Earth Thinking*, *Dharma Rain: Essays in Buddhist Environmentalism*, and *Hooked!: Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume*, Kaza combines her academic and spiritual trainings into a unique set of insights, especially regarding the importance of intimate experiences with trees.

Kaza's *The Attentive Heart* (1993) resembles the nature writings of John Muir through its jubilant flourishes regarding spiritual experiences in the natural world, genuine concern for nonhuman entities regarded as persons, and ecocentric perspectives. Like Muir, Kaza visibly decries excess human destruction of the natural world, this concern prompting her to choose the field of conservation biology. Western economic philosophies, she tells us, are unsustainable, because with an expanding human population the planet simply cannot support their central goal of never-ending growth. She says that they also are alienating, as by design they lead citizens to treat natural beings merely instrumentally, only as objects for human use. While Kaza recognizes that some human use of nonhuman nature is a matter of course, she feels that Western economic philosophies prevent humans from also experiencing natural beings in non-instrumental ways, and the resulting one-sided approach to the nonhuman world can only result, she feels, in ever-greater human devastation of our own planetary home. She shares that the social ethics of industrialized culture do not 'include any thoughtful basis for mutually respectful relationships with trees' (Kaza 1993, 4).

In response, Kaza teaches that we have a ‘moral obligation to forests and woodlands’ (Kaza 1993, 5), so one must claim a sense of natural beings as subjects, as entities with value in their own rights, if one is to act ways that are both ecologically sustainable as well as moral. Echoing the ecologist Aldo Leopold, the path forward for Kaza involves renewing our senses of relationship with the land and its inhabitants. Kaza writes, ‘The environmental movement is, as much as anything, a struggle to reclaim the land and relationship with the land for the common people’ (8). For Kaza, doing so is important for the ethical challenge that the natural world provides to our *Zeitgeist* as ‘a place of truth, generating ethical power by its very existence,’ (8) as well as for enabling opposition to environmental degradation, since ‘acknowledgement of and participation in relationships with trees, coyotes, mountains, and rivers is central to the philosophy of deep ecology’ (10).

Kaza’s own personal journey to renew her relationship with the land included a period of study at Starr King School for the Ministry. For one of her projects, she chose specifically to go to the forest in order to explore and deepen her spiritual interactions with trees. Her method for this personal experiment involved Zen *shikantaza*, or just sitting meditation. She would sit with a tree and, in Zen fashion, try to drop all of her preconceptions, projections, and so on, so that she could commune directly with the bare tree as it was. On this note it is important to emphasize that for Kaza, such practice should not be anthropomorphic. She did not wish to experience trees as humanized, as one may find in a children’s movie, but to experience trees in themselves, with as much human subjectivity stripped away from the experience as possible. She calls this method ‘the attentive heart,’ where one seeks to interact openly, respectfully, and substantially with another being. ‘The attentive heart’ is ‘the heart that feels the presence of others and the call to respond, the heart that lives in relationship with other beings’ (Kaza 1993, 158). This method occurs among humans; in her experiment Kaza included oaks, firs, and other tree persons as well.

Kaza describes her journey to the forest as a pilgrimage (Kaza 1993, 32-33). A grove of redwoods, for instance, provided her with a kind of temple to which she could make her sacred journey, and once there, she reveled in her sequoia *sangha* community, since in ‘offering homage to the trees, one cultivates ecological virtue’ (154). Although

she self-consciously focused on trees, along the pathway to her various forest shrines, Kaza interacted with many beings other than trees as persons. A glacier, sun, wind, snow, and ice were her friends at one point (237). She says, 'Each introduction to salamander and shrew is a step toward seeing the pattern of lives and movement that define the forest. To say hello to trillium and redwood sorrel is to meet the friends of the tall trees' (42). Thus Kaza maintains an essentially ecocentric approach to nonhuman nature, so that 'in an ecological sense, all beings are Buddhas with teachings to offer' (Kaza 1991, 35).

But in this experiment, she has come for conversations specifically with trees, conversations that, of course, are not formed with literal human speech. The environmental scientist Kaza retains a sense of sobriety and wishes to avoid anthropomorphism and ordinary human sentimentalism in her interactions. She admits that she does not understand 'the language of these alders' (Kaza 1993, 26), whom she describes as 'water people' (46). But this does not mean to her that she cannot wordlessly sense some form of communication. For Kaza, recognition of personhood, not verbal aptitude, is what is required. To this end she uncannily describes her perception of a madrone tree in semi-erotic language commonly reserved for humans (74). She hears, but not in an ordinary human way, the voice of redwoods calling her to friendship (39). She insists on the necessity of knowing trees by species name, for the same reason why it would be rude to intimately interact with a human and not first be 'properly introduced' (81). Redwood trees, the 'people of time' (128) or the 'yogis of the forest' (131), can serve as meditation teachers by modeling a straight back (132). And communication with a tree can occur, she found, through touch. Repeatedly and for long periods, Kaza (28) placed her hands lovingly on trees, telling us,

It is difficult to imagine the scale and complexity of activity that goes on inside a tree. I sense in my hands some charge, some energetic force at work here. Joining palms to trunk, I form a circle of energy with this tree. Listening through my hands, I meet this tree from my own experience of sunlight and stillness.

She experiences these conversations not as a dominant human with a mindless object, but as a peer within 'a co-created field of experience, generated as much by tree as by

person' (Kaza 1993, 10). As peer friends, 'trees tell stories of fire, agriculture, and commercial cultivation' (12). However, communing deeply with a tree requires a time investment, because in the practice of 'the attentive heart,' 'It takes time to see the deeply encoded patterns of destruction and transgression against trees and other nonhuman beings. It takes time to cultivate a relational sensitivity that is compassionate and not pathological. It takes time to embrace wholeheartedly the complexity of living with trees' (Kaza 1993, 164).

Kaza feels that the practice of 'the attentive heart' can lead to positive eco-friendly actions, since it can motivate one better to appreciate both environmental problems and their solutions, and we see this in Kaza's prose. Sometimes like a Druid she soars in forest ecstasy, at one point joyfully greeting a variety of birds and plants before praising, 'Such a lovely gathering of children and friends on a sweet, sunny afternoon' (Kaza 1993, 43). But, just as with human personhood relationships, friendships with trees that suffer and die can bring grief and sadness, as well as pleasure. When an elm tree encroached on the foundation of her mother's house and thus was felled, Kaza created an informal funeral ritual for the tree, much mourning its 'murder' (96). She also movingly shared her despair regarding an oak tree whom she had befriended. Called away by urban human concerns, she had left it for some time. Upon her return, she discovered that the tree had been chopped and killed. In response, 'the tree soul in me screamed with the shock of sudden loss' (124). She exclaimed, 'My friend, taken apart by a chain saw. *AAaaayyy!!* the instrument of torture cut through my own limbs' (124). She felt complicit in the death of her oak friend, as she not only had left it helpless, but also she had cut herself off from 'learning the wisdom of time in a wild context' while occupied by her life among humans (124), and thus surrendered her empathic connection with her oak colleague. In these ways Kaza modeled that 'the attentive heart' may make one more sensitive to environmental destruction but also, through positive experiences, more energetic in seeking what to Kaza is a more ethical relationship with nonhuman nature.

These experiences prompt Kaza to appreciate, despite obvious differences in outward form, her essential sameness with trees. For example, both trees and Kaza follow the same life rhythms of night and day through four seasons (Kaza 1993, 29).

Also, having intensely and lovingly practiced *shikantaza* and ‘the attentive heart’ at the base of a manzanita tree for some time, she said, ‘If I stayed here long enough, it seems like I would grow into a manzanita. Put down roots and join back to back with you, Old One [manzanita tree]. That would be fine; some part of me is tree’ (67). Through this feeling of sameness with trees, Kaza experiences trees as peers, as respected subjects in their own rights, as partners in existence rather than mere objects for human use. This attitude, to Kaza, serves as an antidote to anthropocentric world views that result in environmental devastation. Thus Kaza leaves us with vibrant personhood experiences with trees that arise from Buddhist thought and method and aid one in becoming more of an ‘eco-sattva’ (Kaza 2008, 13).

### **Philip Kapleau Roshi**

Whereas Kaza offers a beautiful example of Buddhist relational animism with plants, Philip Kapleau Roshi, Zen master and founder of the Rochester Zen Center, provides a rich instance of relational animism with animals. Born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1912, Kapleau was so accomplished as a court reporter that he served as the chief Allied reporter at the first of the Nuremburg trials. Afterwards being called to Japan for war trials there, Kapleau became interested in Japanese Zen Buddhist practice, and a return trip to Japan resulted in a thirteen year stay for Zen study. In 1965 Hakuun Yasutani Roshi ordained him and gave him permission to teach within the Sanbōkyōdan lineage, which combines elements of Sōtō and Rinzai Zen. In that same year Kapleau returned to the United States and published *The Three Pillars of Zen*, a classic in American Buddhist literature, and over the next few decades he produced several more books on the practice of Zen. He died on May 6, 2004, from Parkinson’s disease complications (Buddhanet 2016).

Kapleau’s influence continues to reverberate through the world of Western Buddhism in part because of his much-beloved book, *To Cherish All Life: A Buddhist Case for Becoming Vegetarian* (1986), in which Kapleau’s relational animism with animals, who possess ‘innate dignity and wholeness (holiness)’ (6), remains every bit as dynamic as Kaza’s tree animism. For Kapleau, humans and animals share a ‘basic



kinship' (6), given their interchangeable places within the wheel of reincarnation, as animals are reborn as humans and vice versa. Beings in human incarnations remain 'karmically' superior (6), but are not the ultimate creations (21), so that there is 'no demarcation between humans and animals' in terms of hierarchy (6). Instead, reflecting an argument from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (Suzuki 1973, 212), Kapleau teaches that humans and animals are peers, kin persons to each other (20), meaning that animals demand our respect for their subjectivities. Human and animal worlds are interrelated networks of peers since the negative outcomes of environmental destruction are shared by animal and human alike (Kapleau 1986, 7). Kapleau even encourages Buddhists to develop 'interspecies communication' with their animal kin, because humans have much to learn from them: 'Animals, we know, are gifted with senses and psychic powers far keener than our own and they can teach us much about our own animal nature...provided we respect their uniqueness and do not patronize or exploit them' (6-7). Conversely, not treating animals with an ethic of respect and care for their subjectivities due to attitudes of human superiority inevitably leads to animals' unethical treatment (23).

For Kapleau, an example of a lack of kinship respect for animals is the human habit of eating meat, since he says that one cannot positively develop relationships with non-human persons while one is eating them (Kapleau 1986, 55). Kapleau's animal animism propels a rather unyielding advocacy for a vegetarian lifestyle for Buddhists, since for him eating animal persons violates the Buddhist precept of ahimsa, or non-harm. Meat eating, in fact, is a 'war of aggression' against animals (1). Even if one does not kill the animal, eating meat by itself violates the non-harm precept because it makes one an accessory after the fact to both animal killing (19) and animal cruelty (9, 15), since Kapleau says that neither factory farms nor traditional pastoralism arise in cruelty-free ways. The relational personhood animism that motivates Kapleau's argument appears most dramatically, perhaps, when he tells us that since animals are our kin, eating their bodies amounts to an act of cannibalism (20).

But, fascinatingly, Kapleau's relational animism also brightly shines in the negative. Attempting to be culturally tolerant, Kapleau states that it is acceptable for members of some groups, such as the Eskimo, to eat meat, because they ritualize the hunt and respectfully regard their quarry as persons (54). Thus, Kapleau's essential argument

is that we should not eat animals because of their personhoods, but he adds the exception of Eskimos, who can eat animals precisely because they respect animals as persons. Either way, for the Zen master Kapleau, personhood attitudes toward nature determine ethical and spiritual dietary norms.

But it is not just animals who suffer from meat eating, Kapleau tells us, since humans suffer as well. Meat eating, the second human fall after Adam and Eve, leads to ‘terror, violence, bloodshed, the slaughter of men [*sic*], and ultimately war’ (Kapleau 1986, 1). Kapleau teaches that attitudes of cruelty and bloodshed toward animals breed similar approaches to other humans, so that meat eaters play a part in a cycle that leads inexorably to violence against humans (16-17). Moreover, eating meat means ingesting the ‘fear and terror’ (30) of the animals, these negative emotions becoming a part of one and preventing the development of a peaceful mind, providing the reason why Dōgen’s teacher in China instructed him that a vegetarian lifestyle was required for any serious advancement in meditation (35). However, Kapleau warns against adopting a vegetarian lifestyle simply for one’s own benefit, as this becomes an attachment. Instead, vegetarianism should be adopted for the sake of our animal kin (56).

It is important to note that Kapleau’s vegetarianism-motivating relational animism includes animals, but only animals, as respected persons within the nonhuman realm. The plant beings on whom Kaza focused remain invisible in Kapleau’s text outside of their presences on our dinner plates. Kapleau grants plants a ‘rudimentary’ consciousness (Kapleau 1986, 54), but implicitly denies them the ability to suffer. In a book otherwise devoted to non-harm toward nonhumans, nowhere does Kapleau substantially apply the notion of non-harm to plants or consider their value apart from serving as human food. Thus, for Kapleau, plants are not persons. In his delimited biocentric view, one may not eat animals because animals are respected persons, but one may eat plants because plants are not.

Of course, we found the botanist Matthew Hall earlier in this paper arguing precisely for a personhood recognition for plants, and Hall’s challenge to Kapleau indicates how varying relational animist perspectives can differ in texture and reach. Kaza’s intimate trees are not Kapleau’s friends, or at least not in the same way, so that when exploring relational animist perspectives, one must always pay attention to exactly

who is being experienced as a subject and why. This insight informs conversation in this paper's conclusion, where I return to the issue of Buddhist vegetarianism.

### **Gary Snyder**

Born in 1930, writer and environmental activist Gary Snyder spent his childhood on a rural farm in Oregon. Always a lover of the outdoors, in his youth Snyder mountaineered before working as both a logger and a forest ranger. After graduating from Reed College, Snyder came to San Francisco in the early 1950s. There he explored Chinese poetry, Chinese painting, and Japanese Zen as he gained language proficiency in ancient Chinese and modern Japanese at the University of California. About this time he also began publishing his poetry as a member of both the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat Generation movements. Then Snyder spent several years as a monk and English language teacher in the Japanese city of Kyoto, deepening his Rinzai Zen practice. Returning to the United States, he established a home in the Sierra Nevada foothills and his writing career spectacularly matured, with Snyder's book *Turtle Island* winning the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1975. In part because of their powerful evocations of relationships with nature, Snyder's prose and poetry remain prominent not just in Western Buddhist circles, but also within non-Buddhist American arts and environmentalist communities.

It remains no surprise that Snyder, for all his life a naturalist, bemoans the environmental damage found throughout our world. In sometimes scorching words Snyder attributes ecological woes to a variety of causes, including overpopulation (Snyder 1995, 33), the unequal distribution of wealth (60), a lack of intrinsic valuation of nature in Western cultures (209), and widespread anthropocentric attitudes of human superiority to the natural world, including within Buddhism. Like Kaza, he also indicts contemporary capitalist economic philosophies, whose ultimate goal of eternal growth remains unsustainable on a planet that does not expand in carrying capacity (60).

In response to these problems, Snyder suggests that Buddhists should develop eco-friendly attitudes in intentional, unique, and deeply personal ways, with the help of Buddhist meditation practices like *zazen*. Calling this process 'the practice of the wild,' by 'practice' Snyder means 'a deliberate, sustained, and conscious effort to be more

finely tuned to ourselves and to the way the actual existing world is' (Snyder 1990, x). This practice involves not just sitting meditation, but a whole-being, critical self-evaluation to uncover genuinely nature-friendly, deceptively nature-friendly, and not nature-friendly attitudes within oneself. One must overcome one's attachments, aversions, and delusions with regard to one's interactions with nature so that one may be open to the crucial experience, for Snyder, of profoundly experiencing elements of the natural world as respected persons with whom one relates. He asks us to 'engage in more than environmentalist virtue, political keenness, or useful and necessary activism. We must ground ourselves in the dark of our deepest selves...within the "natural nations" shaped by mountain ranges, river courses, flatlands, and wetlands' (xi). While the practice unfolds differently across individuals since there 'is a "going" but no goer, no destination' (162), for Snyder personally it includes conversing with trees and wood (114), perceiving a bear as a Buddha (Snyder 1995, 25-31), and having a cedar tree as an adviser (Snyder 1990, 127).

In his employment of the word 'wild' in 'practice of the wild,' Snyder stands several common usages on their heads. For him, the 'wild' is not a place or a thing, such as a remote forest where deer and snakes cavort. The 'wild' instead is a process, a universal flux that runs through and informs all things as the reality of impermanence that the Buddha emphasized, 'constantly going on without human intervention' (Snyder 2014, 84). "'Wild" is a name for the way that phenomena continually actualize themselves' as 'interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex' (Snyder 1995, 168). The 'wild' forms the reality through which we experience our true, undeluded selves in relationship with the many nonhuman beings, experienced as persons, who constitute the physical universe. In this light Snyder says that New York City and Tokyo are both 'natural' but not 'wild,' since their human-oriented habitats inhibit realization of our relationships with nonhuman beings and thus lack wholeness, and 'to speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness' (Snyder 1990, 12). For Snyder, order can only be found in nonhuman realms, not these cities, as they are cultural centers and therefore remain disorganized, as all human cultural and political ventures are disorganized (100). Snyder's nonhuman universe is always orderly, and human social order arises from nature (19).

Snyder's 'wild' also is the locus of the sacred, since while the ego self may arise within us as an artifact of culture, so the 'wild' arises as self-realization. In this way, for Snyder, the classic Buddhist struggle with the ego self represents both the effort toward nirvana as well as, when done correctly, the healing of our relationships with the nonhuman world. Snyder claims, 'Self-realization, even enlightenment, is another aspect of our wildness—a bonding of the wild in ourselves to the (wild) process of the universe' (Snyder 1990, xi).

With his ecocentric notion of 'the practice of the wild' as a challenge, in his environmental activism Snyder encourages direct, aware, and respectful encounters with the nonhuman world understood as a community of subjects rather than a group of objects. In this effort Snyder stresses the need for a deep, bioregional sense of place, as he writes, 'The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges' (Snyder 1990, 26). He criticizes Westerners for always being on the move and distracted from the nonhuman world, never enjoy a rich sense of where they are in terms of the animals, insects, plants, rocks, and bodies of water that provide their immediate surroundings. Without a clear sense of place in this way, including awareness of the nonhuman persons there, for Snyder humans remain alienated not just from the nonhuman world but also from the sacred 'wild' elements within themselves, since they live within a sacramental mandala yet fail to realize their proper positions and interactions within its overall design. One must reverse this process and recover a grounded sense of place, says Snyder, if one is to become more eco-friendly in outlook. Snyder teaches that realizing one's interconnections in wise and compassionate ways begins in one's back yard and cannot continue without this local support, since only with this sense of place are we truly ourselves.

Developing this awareness of place makes us truly in touch with natural rhythms through extended periods of time, so that we can see more clearly what truly may be amiss and what may be an organic process of healing with which we should not interfere. One does not need to embrace nature as sacred, just be willing to listen to nature (Snyder 1990, 103), because 'mind is fluid, nature is porous, and both biologically and culturally we are always fully part of the whole' (Snyder 1995, 81). But for this listening, one must

be fully present in the moment, or mindful in a Buddhist sense, with natural beings as relational animist persons, since, 'To see a wren in a bush, call it "wren," and go on walking is to have (self-importantly) seen nothing. To see a bird and stop, watch, feel, forget yourself for a moment, be in the bushy shadows, maybe then feel "wren"-that is to have joined in a larger moment with the world' (179). In this way, 'the practice of the wild' manifests differently across individuals not just because of divergent personal worldviews, but also because the place-focused practice is performed in varying locations. But Snyder says that 'the practice of the wild' need not be done exclusively in bucolic settings, as it should stay with one even in urban surroundings, since 'Great Brown Bear is walking with us, Salmon is swimming upstream with us, as we stroll a city street' (Snyder 1990, 101). In this way, for Snyder, maybe 'the spirits of douglas fir, redwood, cedar, liveoak, manzanita, and especially salmon will guide us past gridlock and smog to a new culture' (Snyder 2007, 96), Snyder here evidencing clear relational animism.

Interestingly, Snyder's environmentalism does not lead to a Buddhist plea for vegetarianism, as it does for so many other Buddhists. With his ecocentric focus on human and nonhuman nature as a process in which a variety of respected persons are involved, he sees no reason for ethically valuing animal persons above plant persons, as instead he values 'the total ecological health of the region' (Snyder 1995, 34). He says, 'Every boulder on a talus slope is different, no two needles on a fir tree are identical. How could one part be more central, more important, than any other?' (Snyder 1990, 164). For him, 'the very distinction "vegetarian/nonvegetarian" is too simple' (Snyder 1995, 67) because 'the First Precept goes beyond a concern just for organic life' (70). As a result, unselfconscious incidents of meat eating pepper his poetry. While he does not oppose vegetarianism and very much opposes the current factory farm system, for him the important factor remains respectful recognition of the personhood of the nonhuman Other. He feels that everything one eats is a natural person, and as long as one collects and eats food with respect, the question of the existential category of that animal, plant, or mineral person is not overly relevant (Snyder 1990, 22). In fact, Snyder invites us to enter the 'wild' reality that we are both eater and eaten within a much larger universe,

and in fact the constant dining within the human and nonhuman natural world reveals its character as a holy, sacramental reality (20).

### **Culinary conclusion**

Kaza, Kapleau, and Snyder each exhibit senses of relational animism that emerge from the wombs of their own Buddhist outlooks and practices. Kaza, for instance, uses Zen meditation and Buddhist compassion to reach out to trees, who reward her with valuable spiritual lessons. Kapleau does not want Buddhists to be vegetarian for their own benefit, but for the benefit of animals who, as kin persons, are respected and cared for in a way that is based upon Buddhist principles. Snyder asserts that green Buddhist practice develops and develops from personhood encounters, enriched with Buddhist mindfulness, with as many ants, birds, pines, and pebbles in one's location as possible. Of course, these eclectic writers create their perspectives amidst diverse influences. Nonetheless, in their expressions one may detect relationships of sincere respect for at least some nonhuman beings as persons, fitting the relational definition of animism, and these relationships emerge at least in part from Buddhist thought and practice. Therefore, for Kaza, Kapleau, and Snyder, relational animism arises somewhat as a Buddhist phenomenon, not just from admixtures from local religiosity, and with them we may speak of specifically Buddhist animism.

These examples show that a relational concept of animism permits the opening of an expansive new window on Buddhist dynamics, since relationships with nature shape and are shaped by human religiosity (Capper 2016, 13). Take, for just one example, the issue of vegetarianism mentioned previously. Understanding the distribution of Buddhist meat and non-meat dietary practices remains complex. Theravādin and Tibetan Buddhists historically have accepted the eating of meat, although sometimes they choose to abstain from meat for reasons of Buddhist piety. Conversely, Buddhists such as Kapleau who follow lineages that stem from Chinese Mahāyāna schools that emphasize the *Śūraṅgama*, *Nirvāṇa*, *Brahmajāla*, and *Lankāvatāra Sūtras* tend to be vegetarians, although meat eating among them is hardly unknown. I suggest that if we understand Buddhist vegetarianism using a relational animist tool, we gain some traction in comprehending this multifaceted situation. For example, Kapleau insists, on the grounds

of respect for animal personhood, that Buddhists not eat animals. Yet he does not extend his animism to plants or other natural entities, instead explicitly encouraging their instrumental usage. Snyder, with a more ecocentric vision, sees things differently. He wants to eat in concert with the total health of his natural surroundings rather than discriminating against plant persons in favor of animal persons. Because plants are animist people for Snyder, unlike Kapleau, his ethical calculus yields a different result, one that includes meat eating. Kaza, for her part, leaves the issue of diet open. She offers several reasons to practice vegetarianism, including pollution caused by meat farming, the cruelty of factory farms, human health challenges, and spiritual well-being (Kaza 2008, 6-8). But because she feels that the experience of the ‘the attentive heart’ is unique to each individual, Kaza says that the issue of Buddhist diet involves questions that Buddhists must confront in their own ways, from the basis of their own personhood relationships with nonhumans, while they remain as mindful as possible of their consumption patterns as part of a knotty ‘koan of consumerism’ (Kaza 2005, 139). Thus, Kapleau, Snyder, and Kaza each offer a different approach to the question of Buddhist diet based on varying perceptions of personhood relationships with the natural world, spotlighting one important role played by emergent Buddhist animism.

#### References

- Ajaan Sumano Bhikkhu. 1999. *Questions from the City, Answers from the Forest*.  
Wheaton: Quest Books.
- Bird-David, Nurit. 1999. “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and  
Relational Epistemology.’ *Current Anthropology* 40:S1, S67-S91. doi:  
10.1086/200061.
- Buddhanet. 2016. ‘Philip Kapleau Roshi.’ Buddhanet. Accessed February 27, 2016.  
<http://www.buddhanet.net/masters/kapleau.htm>.
- Capper, Daniel. 2016. *Learning Love from a Tiger: Religious Experiences with Nature*.  
Oakland: University of California Press.
- Chamovitz, Daniel. 2012. *What a Plant Knows*. New York: Scientific American.
- Cowell, E. B., ed. 1902. *The Jātaka, vol. 4*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Derrida, Jacques. 2008. *The Animal that Therefore I Am*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Frazer, James George. 1922. *The Golden Bough*. New York: Macmillan.
- Haberman, David L. 2013. *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hall, Matthew. 2011. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Harvey, Graham. 2006. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Horner, I. B., trans. 2014. *The Book of the Discipline*. Oxford: SuttaCentral.
- Kapleau, Philip. 1986. *To Cherish All Life: A Buddhist Case for Becoming Vegetarian*. Rochester: The Zen Center.
- Kaza, Stephanie. 1991. 'A Community of Attention.' *Context* 29: 32-36.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. *The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. 'Penetrating the Tangle.' In *Hooked!: Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume*, ed. Stephanie Kaza, 139-151. Boston and London: Shambhala.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. *Mindfully Green: A Personal and Spiritual Guide to Whole Earth Thinking*. Boston and London: Shambhala.
- Mathews, Freya. 2003. *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Samuel, Geoffrey. 1995. *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian.
- Seager, Richard Hughes. 1999. *Buddhism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Smuts, Barbara. 2001. 'Encounters with Animal Minds.' *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8:5-7, 293-309.
- Snyder, Gary. 1974. *Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. *The Practice of the Wild*. Berkeley: Counterpoint.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds*. Berkeley: Counterpoint.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2007. *Back on the Fire: Essays*. Emeryville: Shoemaker and Hoard.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2014. *Nobody Home: Writing, Buddhism, and Living in Places*. San Antonio: Trinity University Press.
- Spiro, Melford E. 1967. *Burmese Supernaturalism*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro, trans. 1973. *The Lankavatara Sutra: A Mahayana Text*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Tylor, Edward B. 1871. *Primitive Culture, vol. 1*. London: John Murray.
- Walshe, Maurice, trans. 1995. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.