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# The Trees, My Lungs: Self Psychology and the Natural World at an American Buddhist Center

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## THE TREES, MY LUNGS:

Self Psychology and the Natural World at an American Buddhist Center

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### ABSTRACT

This study employs ethnographic field data to trace a dialogue between the self psychological concept of the selfobject and experiences regarding the concept of “interbeing” at a Vietnamese Buddhist monastery in the United States. The dialogue develops an understanding of human experiences with the nonhuman natural world which are tensive, liminal, and nondual. From the dialogue I find that the selfobject concept, when applied to this form of Buddhism, must be inclusive enough to embrace relationships with animals, stones, and other natural forms. The dialogue further delineates a self psychological methodology for examining religions in their interactions with natural forms.

### KEYWORDS

human interactions with nature  
religion  
self psychology  
Vietnamese Buddhism

*The spirit of rivers and streams becomes wise people.* - Dōgen.<sup>1</sup>

At the entrances of many Buddhist monasteries and temples in Tibet one finds a paired set of artistic images. On one side of the doorway appears a mural image of *Atsara lang tri*, in which an Indian religious teacher leads a splendid elephant laden with gems as if to bring valuables into the monastery. The opposite side of the doorway shows a mural image of *Sogpo ta tri*,<sup>2</sup> a Mongolian using a heavy chain to lead a tiger away from the door, the tiger representing hardship and affliction. The twin images function as a joint apotropaic device for the religious building, attracting happiness and prosperity while dispelling strife and poverty.

The prevalence of these paired images in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries invites our attention to the roles of nonhuman nature in Buddhism. Natural beings and objects are pervasive in Buddhism, as real or symbolic natural forms appear in a multitude of Buddhist teachings, practices, and locations. But, while the body of literature regarding Buddhist approaches to nonhuman nature is growing, Buddhist relationships with nature remain understudied, especially in terms of on-the-ground ethnographic realities. Kellert (1995) studied real-world divergences between ideals and practice among Japanese Buddhists and Ambros (2010; 2012) explored Buddhist dimensions of Japanese pet memorial practices. Wallace (2012) examined the integration of Buddhist and folk practices regarding livestock in Mongolia and Vargas (2006) provided a brief survey of Tibetan Buddhist realities. In series of articles Susan Darlington (1998, 2007) described Buddhist tree ordination practices in Thailand and [name suppressed] (n.d.) studied ramifications for Buddhist environmental ethics at a monastery in the United States. But Donald 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 (2006,136).

There are not many studies of human interactions with nonhuman nature in psychoanalysis, either. Since the time of Freud psychoanalytic studies, including psychoanalytic studies of religion, have been so focused on human realities that they have not significantly approached the nonhuman natural realities which constantly surround us. Just as the field of anthropology is “blatantly anthropocentric” (Noske 2008, 23), psychoanalysis has retained a nearly singular focus on humans and neglected the roles of nature in our shared habitat, despite the growing body of literature which demonstrates the value of natural forms for human mental health. Initiating change, in recent years Alper (1993), Adams (1999), and Brown (2004; 2007; 2011) have produced helpful studies of human/nature interactions within the sphere of psychoanalytic self psychology. But these studies do not approach religion, leaving the scholarly cupboard largely bare in terms of psychoanalytic studies of the psychological dimensions of human/nature interactions in religion.

In this light, this essay unites ethnographic field data with literature from psychoanalysis, religious studies, and the study of human/nature interactions, and my discussion resides at the intersection of these scholarly genres. Using human/nature interactions as a mediating agent, I create a dialogue between psychoanalytic theory and empirical Buddhist realities. From the psychoanalytic side I survey the contours of the concept of the selfobject from self psychology and its culturally-flexible understanding of relationships which are experienced as tense, liminal, and nondual. From the religious studies side I ethnographically probe approaches to nature at Magnolia Grove, a Vietnamese Buddhist monastery in the United States. Thus I yoke

psychoanalysis and religious studies in terms of studying human interactions with the nonhuman natural world.

But while this essay marries psychoanalysis and religion, it remains atypical of some other efforts in the psychology of religion. Rather than following the common approach of psychoanalyzing religious figures, I deploy the concept of the selfobject as a research heuristic rather than as a clinical diagnostic tool, much as was done in studies by Browning (1987) and Schlauch (1999). I thereby unfold the concept of the selfobject in a religious environment to discover theoretical implications. Using these implications as a Gadamerian “horizon” (Gadamer 1989), in dialogue I fuse the horizon of the selfobject with the horizon of Magnolia Grove Buddhist theory and practice. This dialogue highlights the idea of tensive, liminal, nondual modes of human relationship with the nonhuman natural world. From the dialogue I find that the selfobject concept, as applied to Magnolia Grove, must be broad enough to include relationships with animals, stones, trees, and other natural forms. I also supply a psychological methodology for grounding our comprehension of religious forms which project intimate human/nature sacred relationships. I begin the dialogue in the camp of psychoanalysis.

### **The Selfobject in Self Psychology**

Starting in the 1960s psychoanalysis experienced a revolution in new theory formation as thinkers moved away from classical Freudianism by creating dramatically new forms of thought and practice. One of the most important advances in this movement was the development of psychoanalytic self psychology, established by Heinz Kohut but refined and extended by current psychoanalysts. Rather than concentrating on drives, self psychology focuses on relationships,

making self psychology much more interactive and culturally flexible than Freud's original formulations.

Self psychology revolves around the concept of the selfobject. Selfobjects constitute a foundation for the self by providing experiential frameworks for channeling strong affectivity. Kohut described selfobjects as "inner experiences of certain functions of people who, extrospection informs us, are physically separate from them" (Kohut 1991, 494). A selfobject is an experience of a relationship in which another being, object, symbol, or idea provides essential psychological functions for the self. A parent or partner cannot be a selfobject but the experience of a parent or partner can be (Wolf 1988, 52), so that rather than saying that a person is a selfobject, one should say that a person incites selfobject experiences.

Because the selfobject experience provides essential psychological functions based on a relationship, it creates powerful affectivity. For example, the ending of a very brief romantic relationship may not create strong affect because the other person did not elicit a selfobject response. But a long-term marriage which disintegrates will create strong affective repercussions because the other person inspired influential selfobject experiences. This affectivity lends the selfobject its critical power to create or inhibit self-cohesion, stability, well-being, and esteem. Since the "self-sustaining function of selfobject experiences is needed for life" (ibid, 53), human health rises or falls with the affectively intense nature of the selfobject experience. Because of its foundational character and inherent relationality, the selfobject represents the pivotal concept which makes self psychology more interactive than classical psychoanalysis.

The selfobject experience mediates between the inner world and the outer world as an indivisible part of the self. An intrapsychic experience which arises between inner reality and social reality, the selfobject remains experienced as a part of both worlds, although the

experience is reducible to neither. If we apply Victor Turner's (1969) concept of liminality to psychology, the selfobject represents a liminal psychological reality, arising "betwixt-and-between" the inner self and the outer being, object, symbol, or idea which instigates the selfobject experience. Lacking a sharp boundary between self and other, it embodies a tensive experience of a psychological space which is ambiguously neither-self-nor-not-self. As such, the selfobject experience manifests without duality and thinking in terms of the subject/object dichotomy misses the psychological point of the selfobject (Schlauch 1999, 62). Selfobject experience occurs in the intermediate psychological place between self and other, where the psyche has a place for culture and culture has a place for the psyche (Homans 1989). Cultures may define the boundaries between self and other in different ways but the selfobject will always exist in the psychological middle ground. Hence the tensive, nondual selfobject concept remains flexible for application across cultures.

From infancy to death, human psyches require selfobject experiences, although the form of these experiences changes with maturity (Wolf 1988, 53). Human figures who incite selfobject relationships for young children typically are parents, siblings, and other family members, whereas adult selfobject choices may extend beyond the family to include almost any person, object, symbol, or idea.

Reflecting three fundamental psychological needs for mirroring, idealizing, and twinship, there are three axes of psychological development and three types of selfobject. The need for mirroring represents the need to be admired, valued, and approved of for one's qualities and accomplishments. The mirroring selfobject provides the relational vitality to meet this need and leads to the establishment of worthwhile ambitions. The need to idealize involves the need to admire beings and values for their superior qualities, such as a parent worthy of emulation. One

then feels self-esteem from existing in relation to this admired other, providing for the appearance of an idealizing selfobject and the establishment of guiding principles. The need to feel valued through similarity with others is a twinship need. Gratifying this need enables one to feel part of a group through the experience of a twinship selfobject, which leads to the development of talents and skills.

Selfobject experiences may arise from many stimuli, including “religious experiences, group experiences, scientific and philosophic insights, and the like” (ibid), or a notion of God (Holliman 2002), creating a place for many forms, including sacred forms, in the experience of selfobjects. Animals also may incite selfobject experiences, as recent advances in conceptualizing the selfobject have shown. Not all animals necessarily inspire selfobject experiences but some do. For example, Alper (1993) suggests that pets, especially when they are considered part of the family, may provide vital selfobject functions of mirroring, idealizing, and affective regulation for children from households where people provide poor selfobject resources. Similarly, Adams (1999) argues that Emily Dickenson’s dog Carlo provided her with important mirroring, idealizing, and twinship selfobject resources which inspired and soothed Dickenson during the period of her greatest poetic productivity. Such animal selfobject experiences can be more powerful than those with humans (Brown 2004, 71) because animals “do not criticize, retaliate, feel overwhelmed, or reject” (Alper 1993, 259). Although Sue-Ellen Brown says that it remains uncertain whether such selfobjects can engender deep structural changes to the self or remain simply compensatory, the power of such selfobject experiences should not be doubted, as “sometimes a companion animal may be a person’s strongest link to life itself” (Brown 2004, 83). In this way the concept of the selfobject helps to explain why people may feel special bonds with certain animals. Animal selfobject experiences are

commonly of the mirroring type, but they can also be idealizing, and twinship selfobject relationships with animals are surprisingly common (Brown 2007). Of interest for the argument below, Alper (1993) states that such positive selfobject experiences can arise even with relatively nonresponsive natural forms like goldfish. As I will show, Magnolia Grove Buddhism challenges us to extend this insight to supposedly inanimate natural forms such as stones.

At this point in the dialogue I have established the relational, tensive, liminal, and deeply affective dimensions of the selfobject and shown that the selfobject concept may be applied to experiences with nonhuman natural forms such as animals. But a problem remains. Ever since Malinowski's publication of *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* in 1927, psychoanalysis has been controversial as a cross-cultural research tool, often being considered too culturally bound to the West to be worthy of broad application. However, in recent decades several scholars such as Gananath Obeyesekere, Sudhir Kakar, and Stanley Kurtz have worked to create psychoanalytic models which are less culture-bound because they allow local contexts to shape understanding of psychoanalytic theory rather than the other way around. Alan Roland helps to lead this effort, adding detail to the claim that the concept of the selfobject is culturally flexible. Based on extensive clinical experience with Japanese and Indian clients both in the United States and in Asia, Roland (1996a, 101) tells us that the concept of the selfobject does not succumb to criticisms of being culture bound, as its inherent relationality makes it in fact a "trenchant critique" of Western individualism. In Roland's words, the selfobject concept is "highly fruitful for understanding much of the subtle complexities of Asian psychology" (Roland 1996b, 463). Moreover, in this essay I am not deeply psychoanalyzing individuals but simply creating horizons of meaning for dialogue, thus minimizing cultural differences in analysis. Therefore the

selfobject concept will ground my dialogue with Buddhist religious interactions with nonhuman natural forms.

As stated previously, not all natural forms necessarily elicit selfobject experiences but some do. Magnolia Grove monastery offers some potential examples in which nonhuman natural forms function as if they were inciting selfobject experiences. I now turn to Magnolia Grove.

### **The Field Setting**

I collected ethnographic data from January to October 2011 at Magnolia Grove monastery, where I spent a total of forty-two field work days over several visits. During this time I participated in monastery activities by attending teachings, working chores, and speaking informally with lay and monastic members. I also formally interviewed members of the monastic community.

Magnolia Grove monastery started in the year 2000, when a group of local Vietnamese immigrants purchased 140 acres of largely undeveloped rural Mississippi land to be used as a community center and ultimately a monastery. The community consulted with the Vietnamese Thiền<sup>3</sup> 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 followed Thích Nhất Hạnh donated physical and organizational resources from their construction company, resulting in the erection of a meditation hall, kitchen, bookstore, office, and various residential buildings over the next few years. While the residential community was very small in the early years, the government-ordered closure of the Nhất Hạnh-affiliated Bát Nhã Temple in central Vietnam in 2009 resulted in the transplantation of a number of monks and nuns to Magnolia Grove, so that by the time of my field work there were approximately ten monks and

twenty nuns in residence, most of these monastics being new Vietnamese immigrants. About one hundred lay people of Vietnamese descent as well as an America-born “convert”<sup>24</sup> lay population of several hundred members support the monastic community. Participation in monastery activities by these lay supporters lies on a spectrum between rare, informal appearances and daily visits. Almost every weekend Buddhist teachings are offered to the joint community alternatively in English and Vietnamese language delivery and real-time translations are always available.

Buddhist practice at Magnolia Grove consists of mindfulness meditation even for lay members, meditation through work, chanting sacred texts, and several intensive retreats. Devotional activity remains minimized aside from prostrations to the central Buddha image, regular donations to the monastery, and gift-giving to monastics on holidays such as Tết. Outside of the Buddha’s birthday there is little observance of *via* days for deities and saints as portrayed by Nguyen and Barber, unlike some other forms of Vietnamese Buddhism (1998, 137). Magnolia Grove observes American holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the Fourth of July in non-religious celebrations.

### **Teaching Interbeing**

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. An influential Buddhist leader and scholar of the Liễu Quán lineage in Vietnam during the 1950's and 1960's (Chapman 2007, 299; Hunt-Perry and Fine 2000, 37), in 1965 he founded the Tiếp Hiện Order (Order of Interbeing) as a new branch of the Lâm Tế Thiền school (King 1996, 323). Nhất Hạnh was the leader of the Vietnamese Buddhist peace committee during the Vietnam War and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but his non-partisan activism against

the war led to his forced exile to France in 1966<sup>5</sup> (ibid, 321). In France he taught at the Sorbonne and founded a monastery and retreat center called Plum Village, which has grown to embrace hundreds of affiliated practice centers on every continent but Antarctica. The prolific author of almost one hundred titles in many different languages, Nhất Hạnh continues to be one of the most visible and influential of Buddhist leaders in the contemporary world (Chapman 2007, 332).

Having been influenced by Western environmental thought,<sup>6</sup> Nhất Hạnh argues that environmental concern remains inherent in the practice of Buddhism, as “every Buddhist practitioner should be a protector of the environment” (Thich Nhat Hanh 2008a, 5). Nhất Hạnh’s environmentalism, and in fact all of the practices of the Plum Village community of which Magnolia Grove is a part, revolve around the Buddhist concept of *pratītya-samutpāda*, or “dependent origination” (Williams 2008). This fundamental Buddhist notion describes all elements of the universe as arising from one or more interrelated causes. This renders a sense of individual independence in time and space illusory because the universe manifests purely as a web of interconnections. An image of *pratītya-samutpāda* commonly found in Buddhist texts describes three standing sticks which lean on each other. When one stick is removed, the others fall.

Nhất Hạnh translates the concept of *pratītya-samutpāda* with the Vietnamese phrase “*tiếp hiện*” or uniquely with the English word “interbeing.”<sup>7</sup> 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’” (1987, 88). *Tiếp*, he further tells us, means to be “in touch,” in the sense of being in touch “with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetable, and mineral realms” (Thich Nhat Hanh 1998, 3). Therefore in Nhất Hạnh’s

environmental philosophy, “interbeing” implies experiencing sacred interconnectedness with a natural world ecocentrically consisting of animals, plants, and minerals.

According to Nhất Hạnh the Buddhist *Diamond Sutra* (*Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*), “the most ancient text on deep ecology,” offers an essential canonical expression of interbeing (Thich Nhat Hanh 2008a, 70) and reliance on this text fosters an ecocentric flavor within the Buddhist theory of Magnolia Grove. For Nhất Hạnh, the *Diamond Sutra* teaches us that because all things inter-are, discriminating on the basis of species in terms of preferring one species to another is misguided. 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 1992, 4). Thus an authentic Buddhist *bodhisattva*<sup>8</sup> saint will direct beings of all species, without exception, to enlightenment. Further, for Nhất Hạnh preference or discrimination even between supposedly animate and inanimate beings misses the mark, as the *Diamond Sutra* asserts that because all things inter-are, animate and inanimate beings are inseparable: “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” (ibid, 4). 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 2008a, 73). Even water “is a good friend, a bodhisattva” (ibid, 107) and 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 1992, 89). In other words, a Magnolia Grove 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.

In blurring the boundaries between humans and the nonhuman natural world in this way through the concept of interbeing and inspiring his followers to realize deep experiences of this concept, Nhất Hạnh appears to encourage the emotionally charged experiences of selfobjects. But these apparent selfobject experiences are not just experiences of selfobject humans, as described by classical self psychology, but expansively include all natural forms, regardless of whether these forms are traditionally considered as animate or not. Moreover, despite the nonduality of human and nonhuman natural forms in interbeing, Nhất Hạnh's encouragement to experience interbeing does not completely eradicate boundaries. With Nhất Hạnh's interbeing concept, humans realize their full humanity through experience of their intrinsic interrelatedness with nonhuman nature. Thus the experience of interbeing appears to involve affective, tensive, and liminal experiences of natural forms as neither-self-nor-not-self, just as appears in the experience of the selfobject.

### **Teachings at Magnolia Grove**

Resident teachers at Magnolia Grove extend Nhất Hạnh's teachings on interbeing with nature. For instance, the senior teacher Sister Chân Hỷ Nghiêm told me in an interview that everything in the nonhuman natural world possesses Buddha-nature,<sup>9</sup> or intrinsic enlightenment, and in this way all humans inter-are with nature. Because of this she asserted, "You must prepare your heart to accept the condition of learning from nature." To illustrate this, Chân Hỷ Nghiêm pointed to trees. Trees make oxygen for humans to breathe, she said, and without trees humans would die. Therefore, to her, humans inter-are with trees, and because of this interrelation, humans may learn about compassion from trees. Trees, she stated, compassionately offer us shade and teach us to appreciate the beauty of the natural world. When she sees trees standing

solidly, she is called back to herself to solidly withstand the trials of life. Trees teach her to avoid jealousy and anger, as trees lack both of these emotional states, and the firmness of trees in a strong wind reminds her to mentally remain in the present moment. Through trees she can learn the fact of impermanence, which is a fundamental Buddhist notion, since despite their firmness trees are always changing. Chân Hỷ Nghiêm related that meditating on nature in these ways has strengthened her own spiritual practice over many years and she teaches others to meditate in the same way. When trees as religious teachers affectively influence her in this manner, they appear to incite idealizing selfobject experiences.

During Chân Hỷ Nghiêm's interview a dog who had made the monastery its home playfully stole her hat from the chair next to her. It took a few minutes for Chân Hỷ Nghiêm and me to retrieve the hat from the dog's possession. Seated again to resume the interview, Chân Hỷ Nghiêm used the event as grist for the Buddhist pedagogical mill. With a mix of humor and seriousness she expressed that the dog reminded her to return to inner peace and thereby avoid an angry response. It is notable that in this instance, Chân Hỷ Nghiêm was not just teaching doctrine. She made an effort to experience her interbeing with the dog, just as a selfobject represents an experience, so the dog appears to have prompted mirroring selfobject dynamics.

Chân Hỷ Nghiêm extended these insights in a public teaching she offered as a commentary on the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. In this teaching Chân Hỷ Nghiêm taught community members to extend four forms of gratitude: to parents; teachers; supportive friends; and "animals, plants, and minerals." The latter gratitude, she asserted, is necessary because without animals, plants, and minerals, we humans cannot live. They are part of us. She strongly encouraged members of the community to experience these gratitudes as deeply and intensely as possible as part of the Buddhist spiritual path. Of course, such intensity of experience recalls that

of the selfobject, in this case perhaps an idealizing selfobject experience of animals, plants, and minerals.

Like Chân Hỷ Nghiê, other teachers at Magnolia Grove invite recognition of interbeing with trees, as the most senior teacher, Sister Đăg Nghiê, did so as well. The main point of one of Đăg Nghiê's public teachings involved a comparison of humans with trees. She explained that just as trees reach for sunlight and water as nutrients, so we humans seek nutrients. Just as trees have roots, so do we, in this case our roots being our ancestors, parents, cultures, educations, and foods. Based on this, Đăg Nghiê motivated the Buddhists present to care for their roots, "making sure that they are as wholesome and positive as they can be." Further, she taught, we must be certain to be grateful to our roots for the positive contributions which they make in our lives. In order to extend such gratitude, she used a further botanical reference in encouraging the community to "water flowers." This practice involves grateful recognition of the positive influences of others through open and vigorous praise of them. In this way, she said, the practice of "watering flowers" generates happiness, serenity, and cooperation.

In an interview Đăg Nghiê returned to the subject of learning from trees. Trees "look like our lungs upside-down," she declared, and they enable us to breathe, so she often thinks of the phrase, "the trees, my lungs." In so doing, she said, she reflects on her interbeing with trees. But trees contain more lessons for her. In nature, she stated, no leaf is perfect. Further, after efflorescent summers, trees seem dead in winter. Reflection on these facts, she told me, helps us to accept our own imperfections, fragility, and mortality, because of our interbeing with trees. She claimed that earlier generations of people were more accepting of mortality because people were more closely connected to nature than they are in the twenty-first century. A return to a deep sense of interconnectedness with nature, she averred, helps us to approach the future with

less fear and a greater acceptance of our own impermanence. Such an experience exhibits the dynamics of a twinship selfobject.

Another senior teacher, Brother Pháp Không, likewise stressed in an interview the tensive boundaries between *Homo sapiens* and nonhuman nature in the experience of interbeing. He told me that humans often feel superior to animals and other natural forms but this is “an illusion.” Referencing the *Diamond Sutra*, he expressed that mentally discriminating on the basis of human/nonhuman or animate/inanimate is “poor use of discrimination.” He continued by saying that the experience of interbeing “eliminates discriminations based on species and helps us to see ourselves as equal partners in a larger system rather than simply acting for human well-being, which is often destructive.” “The most powerful compassion is that which does not discriminate,” Pháp Không continued, a lesson which for him must be applied to the ways that we eat. He stated, “We are vegetables and minerals” in our bodily molecular structures, leaving no sharp boundary between humans, plants, and minerals. Recognizing that “we are what we eat,” he counseled against eating meat and eggs. He claimed that factory farmed animals live in an environment of “anger and fear” and when we ingest such products, we ingest the animals’ anger and fear. In remarks reminiscent of twinship selfobject dynamics, he told me that when we deeply experience interbeing, we “overcome anger and fear and in so doing try to restore our planet to equilibrium...creating a world which is more compassionate, beneficial, and happier for all beings.”

### **Practices of Interbeing**

Magnolia Grove offers many practices whose goal is to help practitioners develop a dynamic sense of interbeing with nonhuman nature. For visitors to the monastery, the practice of

“mindful eating” represents perhaps the most obvious of these practices. Informing Pháp Không’s previous comments about compassionate eating is the vow found in Nhất Hạnh’s Fifth Mindfulness Training:

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.

Like members of all centers in the Plum Village network, Buddhists at Magnolia Grove follow a vegan diet.<sup>10</sup> Food consists of plant products without meat or dairy and protein ingestion arises 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 2008c, 13-14). According to Nhất Hạnh, more than half of the water used in the United States is used to raise animals for food. Nhất Hạnh said it takes 2,500 gallons of water to create a pound of beef but only 25 gallons to produce a pound of wheat, while raising animals for food produces more water pollution than any other industry (ibid, 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 (ibid, 13). If lay people want to eat beef at home, that is acceptable to Nhất Hạnh, who nonetheless instructs them to reduce their consumption of beef by 50% to limit the load on planetary resources (ibid, 14).

Just as one should be careful about what one consumes at Magnolia Grove, one also should be aware of how one eats, too, as most meals provide exercises in mindful eating. At the beginning of the meal Magnolia Grove Buddhists recite 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 the Five Contemplations. Silence during mealtimes enhances the meditative experience. 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 2008b, 64). Teachers instruct eaters to chew food slowly and completely, up to thirty chews until solid food becomes liquid in the mouth, so that eaters may contemplate gratitude for both the food and the source of the food. This practice fosters a deep, affective, and vivid realization of the nonduality of the eater and the nature-based eaten which appears to reflect the charged nondual experience of the mirroring selfobject.

Practices of interbeing with nature do not end with mindful eating. Đăng Nghiêm's remarks and my own investigations revealed that Magnolia Grove also engages a number of practices of mindful conservation because of interbeing with nonhuman nature. For instance, to conserve trees there are no paper napkins at the monastery. Monastics are taught to use only one mug of water to wash their faces and brush their teeth and the ideal shower is limited to seven minutes or less. Residents offer soapless water from the dish washing process to trees and flowers. They compost leftover vegetables to later fertilize the monastery's organic gardens. Even in the burning heat of a Mississippi summer, monastics eschew air conditioning. Through such acts of conservation, residents help nature and themselves, according to Đăng Nghiêm,

because they inter-are with natural forms. She explained that they also develop a sense of “confidence and empowerment in the face of what can seem like overwhelming environmental crises” by engaging in these “concrete acts of love.” Such would seem to reflect the self-esteem which may generate from a mirroring selfobject experience, in this case a selfobject experience with the nonhuman natural world broadly conceived.

As I have described, teachers at Magnolia Grove encourage Buddhists to learn spiritual lessons from nonhuman nature. Along with mindful eating and conservation, the practice of walking meditation promotes such learning. Complementing the mindfulness developed in *thiền tập* seated meditation, in walking meditation one moves slowly and silently as one remains intensely aware of each motion and footstep. Teachers emphasize that in walking meditation a Buddhist should set aside thoughts and worries while focusing instead on the act of walking with a concentrated mind. Such concentration embraces a rich awareness of the environment of the walk.

Magnolia Grove consists of 140 acres of mostly undeveloped forested countryside and nature trails are used intentionally in walking meditation to make the experience as bucolic as possible. Teachers encourage the incorporation of sylvan scenes in the psychological experience of walking meditation so that Buddhists may become as aware of their interconnections with nonhuman nature as possible. For example, in oral instructions for walking meditation one winter day, teachers invited Buddhists to pay close attention to nature during the walk. Practitioners were requested to realize their nonduality with the animals, trees, and other natural forms which were encountered. Noticing the many leaves strewn on the ground, the teacher asked practitioners to recognize that leaves were there as part of a process through which trees “take care of their bodies,” and counseled practitioners to contemplate taking care of their human

bodies in the same way. The teacher also invited Buddhists to silently ponder the reality of a tree. Practitioners were told that a tree is “rooted, grounded, unwavering,” and immune to distraction. Similarly, the teacher instructed practitioners to remain rooted, grounded, and unwavering in their practice of meditation both while walking and in everyday life. In following these lessons practitioners were explicitly taught to realize their deep interconnectedness with nonhuman nature. Of course, in teaching practitioners to care for themselves and remain undistracted like trees, the teacher appeared to inspire idealizing selfobject experiences.

Such practices must be taught to the next generation if they will be sustainable and Magnolia Grove strives for this goal. In retreats and classes specifically designed for visiting children, monks and nuns teach that humans consist of and connect to nature. Monastics frequently help children to understand how humans depend on other beings and how other beings depend on humans because, they emphasize, humanity cannot survive damage to animals, plants, and minerals.

The education of the young unfolds within the practice of walking meditation. While the children frequently excuse themselves from formal teaching events which are boring for them, they seem to delight in a nice stroll through the countryside. The children appear to do little actual meditation on these walks but the nuns and monks hope to serve as role models, enabling the children to slowly imbibe a religious appreciation for nature.

Nuns and monks educate children more directly through the practice of the Two Promises, the version of the adult Mindfulness Trainings adapted especially for young people. At youth and family retreats children learn and recite the Two Promises:

1. I vow to develop my understanding in order to live peacefully with people, animals, plants, and minerals.
2. I vow to develop my compassion in order to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals.

Monastics ask children to engage in the practice of the Two Promises during the retreat and employ that practice at home when the retreat has finished. Retreats reinforce this practice with discussion groups where youngsters may share their experiences and learn from their peers. Đăng Nghiêm told me that children offer very positive reports of their practices, as they say that during their retreats, “I learned to walk with nature (from walking meditation)” or “I learned to live without my phone and Facebook (and contact nature instead).”

Throughout such retreats children sing a song by Joe Rilley to enrich these lessons. Then at the end of the retreat, the entire community, children and adults alike, together joyfully sing this song:

I love nature; nature is cool.  
The forest is my classroom; the earth is my school.  
Trees are my teachers; animals are my friends.  
And on this school all life depends.

These elements of Magnolia Grove teachings and practices lead us appreciate that they project images of relationship with animals and other nonhuman natural forms in which boundaries between individual existences are liminal, dynamic, and fluid. Because humans experience interbeing with nonhuman natural forms, no clear line demarks human from nonhuman. Rather than sharp subject/object distinctions, human realities dissolve into those of animals, plants, water, and minerals. But relations of interbeing do not simply collapse the nonhuman natural world into the human world or vice versa. As I have described, teachers at Magnolia Grove implicitly and explicitly recognize a separation of human lives from the nonhuman natural world, albeit a liminal separation-in-relationship. Further, careful readers will have noted that practices and teachings are intended for humans alone. No one at Magnolia Grove teaches meditation to daffodils, rabbits, or other natural forms, although humans clearly

are taught this. In these ways in Magnolia Grove teachings and practices, one experiences human existence through, rather than in spite of, a deep experience of interbeing with natural forms. Therefore, just as one may see in selfobject relations, the experience of interbeing cultivated at Magnolia Grove appears betwixt-and-between human self and nonhuman natural other in a tensive, liminal, and nondual manner. The affective experience of interbeing with nonhuman nature is neither-self-nor-not-self and arises in the intermediate psychological state between human and animal, tree, stone, etc. This insight returns me to this article's interdisciplinary dialogue.

### **Dialogic Encounter**

I now engage the Gadamerian moment when the horizons of psychoanalysis and the Buddhism of Magnolia Grove become fused. I find that both models, while remaining distinct, are in agreement on several important points. With both the selfobject and the Magnolia Grove Buddhism, models depict tensive, liminal relationships with animals and other nonhuman natural forms. Natural forms are experienced as neither human nor separate from human, as instead they reside in a nondual intermediate space where the subject/object distinction blurs. Both the selfobject and Magnolia Grove Buddhism project that at least some nonhuman natural forms are experienced in a "betwixt-and-between," nondual, neither-self-nor-not-self manner. Precisely because of this betwixt-and-between position, this intermediate state may be affectively, even religiously, highly charged, resulting in special treatment for the respective natural forms. And the charged relationship makes human welfare in terms of health and illness dependent on the experience of the human/nonhuman nature interaction. In the fusion of horizons between the models, one may perceive a very different image of human/nature interactions than commonly

found both in standard psychoanalysis and in anthropocentric perspectives on religion, where typically nonhuman natural forms, especially supposedly “inanimate” ones such as stones, are perceived as purely separate from humans and largely irrelevant both for human health and religious concerns.

From this dialogue there is plenty to learn. From a psychoanalytic point of view, the selfobject as applied to Magnolia Grove Buddhism is much more inclusive than Kohut’s purely-human original concept or even those found in the current literature which solely treat selfobject relationships with animals. I have shown that the selfobject might be applicable to relationships not just with animals but also with relatively noninteractive nonhuman natural forms such as trees, water, and stones. Therefore the concept of the selfobject should be expanded because the projected Magnolia Grove selfobject is not just “animate” in the traditional sense, it also is broadly ecological. The relatively ecocentric Magnolia Grove selfobject “constitutes a sacred ecology that infuses the everyday world with a dense and complex horizon of associations” (Harrod 2000, 43). Lévi-Strauss taught us that, “Natural species are ‘good to think,’”<sup>11</sup> and Magnolia Grove Buddhism teaches psychoanalysis that flowers and stones are “good to think,” too.

Turning to the study of religion, the fusion of horizons within the dialogue provides religious studies with a psychological methodology for understanding human religious interactions with animals and other nonhuman natural forms. Both real and symbolic natural forms play numerous and multifaceted roles in all religions, yet to date scholarship regarding religion has lacked conceptual tools for understanding how these forms may be psychologically experienced. The concept of the selfobject found at Magnolia Grove provides us with such a tool because it helpfully illumines Buddhist experiences of nature which are affective, nondual, and

liminal. That is, the concept of the selfobject makes religious studies more adept at psychologically comprehending manifestations of religion which project intimate sacred interactions between humans and nonhuman natural forms.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cleary 1986, 95.

<sup>2</sup> The Wylie transliterations of these two images are *a tsa ra glang 'khrīd* and *sog po stag 'khrīd*.

<sup>3</sup> Thiền Buddhism arises as a Vietnamese indigenous transformation of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism, much like Zen in Japan (Nguyen 2008). Nhất Hạnh and Magnolia Grove practitioners often refer to Thiền simply as “Zen” because of the familiarity of this word.

<sup>4</sup> 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 2001, 242).

<sup>5</sup> Nhất Hạnh's social activism has been studied by numerous scholars including King (1996), Hunt-Perry and Fine (2000), Queen (2002), and Chapman (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Because Nhất Hạnh has adapted his form of Buddhism in light of Western ideas, elements of “Buddhist Romanticism” as described by McMahan (2008) appear in Magnolia Grove Buddhism. One example of this is the innovative approach to walking meditation which appears in this essay.

<sup>7</sup> There are many competing interpretations of the concept of *pratītya-samutpāda*. A substantial exploration of these interpretations would far 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 (2008) and Williams (2008).

<sup>8</sup> In Mahāyāna Buddhism the saintly bodhisattva compassionately works for the liberation of all beings. See Dayal (1978).

<sup>9</sup> On the concept of Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) see Williams (2008).

<sup>10</sup> On a shelf designed to allow visitors to self-serve their own snacks and tea, one may occasionally find dairy-based creamer or milk chocolate. It is unclear to me whether monastics ignore this or are unaware of the products' dairy content because of a lack of familiarity with written English or American culture.

<sup>11</sup> Lévi-Strauss 1963, 89. This is the original passage: “On comprend enfin que les espèces naturelles ne sont pas choisies parce que «bonnes à manger» mais parce que «bonnes à penser»” (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 132). Note that Lévi-Strauss uses “*espèces naturelles*,” “natural species,” not “*animaux*,” “animals.” Anthrozoologists are fond of attributing to Lévi-Strauss the phrase, “Animals are good to think,” which not only is technically incorrect but also is more difficult to apply to relatively ecocentric worldviews like that of Magnolia Grove.

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