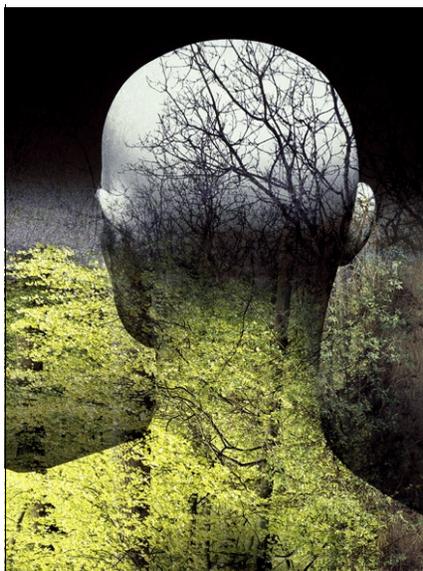


Buddhism and Environmental Ethics



Introduction

Buddhism arose in ancient India with the teachings of Siddhārtha Guatama, the former prince and then monk from the Śākya clan. He would come to be known as *Śākyamuni*, “the sage of the Śākya clan” and also simply as the *Buddha*, “the awakened one.” There are no precise dates for the life of the Buddha. He is said to have lived about 80 years and traditional scholarship had dated his lifetime from approximately 563 B.C.E to 483 B.C.E., but more recent scholars place his time of death closer to 400 B.C.E., which would make him a contemporary of Socrates. The philosophy, or teachings of the Buddha, is known as the *Dharma*. All Buddhists become Buddhists in taking the vow of the Three Refuges, which means to take refuge or find shelter or salvation in the Three Jewels of the *Buddha* (the example thus set by the life of Siddhārtha Guatama), the *Dharma* (the teachings of the Buddha), and the *Sangha* (the community of practitioners). Buddhism developed for over a thousand years in India, eventually splitting around the time of the beginning of the common era into two distinct traditions, the *Theravāda* (school of the Elders) and the *Mahāyāna* (great vehicle). As a result of the Muslim invasion of India which resulted in the destruction of the Buddhist monasteries and universities, Buddhism almost completely died out in India by the 13th century CE; but by then it had spread widely throughout Asia. Theravāda Buddhism developed in Sri Lanka and parts of Southeast Asia and Mahāyāna Buddhism spread north into Tibet, Bhutan, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Theravāda Buddhism closely follows early Indian Buddhism while Mahāyāna Buddhism developed in very different ways in the various cultures it had spread to. As there are profound differences in the philosophical traditions that developed in India and China, especially with regard to the relationship between human beings and the natural world, perhaps the most significant difference within Buddhism in considering the relevance of Buddhism for environmental ethics is that between Indian Buddhism (in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna forms) and East Asian Buddhism, especially perhaps Zen Buddhism which first developed in China after the encounter between Buddhism and Daoism.

So to begin with we must first have a sense of what is distinctively Indian in Buddhism and thus we must understand something of the Indian tradition from which Siddhārtha Guatama arose and against which his account of the experience of enlightenment constituted a radical revolution in thought. When Siddhārtha Guatama renounced the princely life he was born to, leaving behind his family, including his wife and son, in order to take up the life of a *samnyāsin* (one who has renounced the worldly life) in order to seek enlightenment, he was setting out to accomplish a goal that had long been set out in the *Upanishads*, the classic texts which frame all of orthodox Indian philosophy. All Indian philosophy is regarded as orthodox if it follows the teachings of the *Upanishads* and heterodox if it rejects these teachings. Buddhism is a heterodox Indian philosophy

for, although Gautama started out seeking the path to enlightenment as taught in the *Upanishads*, his final realization or enlightenment experience lead to a break with some of the principle teachings of the *Upanishads*.

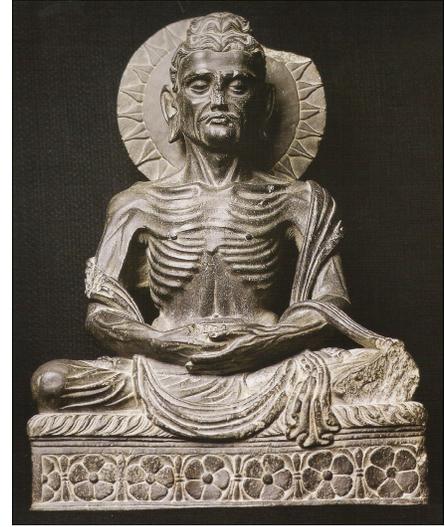
The highest goal of enlightenment taught in the *Upanishads* is conceived as *moksha*, or “liberation.” In the *Upanishads* it is assumed that all living things are continually reborn again and again in the cycle of *samsara*, the seemingly endless wheel of life, death and rebirth. The cycle of reincarnation is ruled by the law of *karma*, which holds that one’s action in life determines the next rebirth. The word “karma” is derived from a root word meaning “to act,” and the law of karma is basically that it is what one does that binds one to the wheel of *samsara*. Good actions thus propel one to a higher birth in the next life, while bad actions lead to lower rebirth. It should be obvious how this view sharply contrasts with the dualism which separates humans from animals in traditional Western culture. All animals have souls and human beings can be reborn as animals. *Moksha*, the highest goal of life, is liberation from the binding force of *karma* and thus this wheel of *samsara*. To have attained enlightenment, *moksha*, means one does not have to come back and experience rebirth, suffering and death all over again.

The central teaching of the *Upanishads* is that the goal of liberation can be achieved through a kind of awakening or realization in which it is recognized that the true self, the soul or *Atman* within each living thing, is *Brahman*, the eternal, absolute essence of everything that is. This identity of *Atman* and *Brahman* is conceived in different ways—one is either identical with, or united with, or a part of this eternal absolute essence—and these different interpretations distinguish the different schools of orthodox Indian philosophy, often referred to as the Brahmanical tradition or as the philosophy of Hinduism. In the famous phrase from the *Chandogya Upanishad*, “you are that” (*tat tvam asi*), and this means that one can point to anything that seems to be “other” than oneself—to that other person, that animal, that tree, the bird in the tree, the earth or even the whole universe itself—and say “that you are.” It is not, of course, as a separate identity that one is “one with” the forest and all its inhabitants, but rather that the true essence or soul of everything is this *Brahman*. To use a metaphor from that same *Upanishad*, each river has its separate name and identity until they flow into the sea, and there as ocean, they are all one.

This means that the true self, the *Atman*, is not this mortal being that must continually experience rebirth and death, but is rather this eternal essence. The true self is thus immortal. This teaching is what the divine Krishna, the charioteer for the prince Arjuna, tells the despondent Arjuna just before the great battle that is the background of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the classic epic story of popular Hinduism. Arjuna is counseled not to fear death because the true self never dies. When Arjuna questions Krishna about this liberation from birth and death, the cycle of *samsara*, Krishna reveals the teachings of *yoga*, the path to enlightenment. The word “yoga” is related to our word “yoke” meaning to “tie together,” and what yoga seeks to tie together is *Atman* and *Brahman*; or rather, what yoga seeks to do is bring about this realization of the identity of the soul within and the absolute essence of everything that is. What we in the West commonly think of yoga is merely a preliminary stage of physical exercises that would enable the body to sit still long enough for

extended periods of meditation to take place. The highest goal of yoga, at least for the non-devotional Vedanta teaching which purports to teach the “end of the Vedas,” or in other words, the essence of the *Upanishads*, is thus the highest stage of meditation, *samadhi*, a state of concentration in which the mind becomes absolutely still, and the soul, or *Atman*, is absorbed in *Brahman*. In *samadhi* the soul finds liberation from bonds of *karma* and the wheel of *samsara* and thus realizes its immortality.

Siddhārtha Guatama took up the quest for enlightenment and thus went through the various stages of renunciation and yoga practice. As some of the sculptures depicting an emaciated Buddha are meant to illustrate, the young monk went through various ascetic practices, including long fasting, in order to break the grip of the body’s desires and attachments which stand as obstacles to enlightenment. He took on various teachers who instructed him in the various stages of yoga practice. It was only after rejecting the two extremes of hedonism and asceticism, represented in the Buddha’s life story by his early princely life and its worldly pleasures and then his life of renunciation, that Gautama came upon what he called the “middle path” that leads to enlightenment. It was in a period of calm meditation, after he had come to the realization that extreme asceticism was not the way to liberation, that the Buddha came to his awakening. It was this experience that the Buddha put forth in his first teaching just after having come to this awakening, the teaching concerning the “Four Noble Truths.” The Buddha’s sermons were memorized and preserved in an oral tradition by the chanting of generations of monks until finally written down in the Pāli language (a derivation from the classical Sanskrit of the *Upanishads*) several hundred years later. The collection of these early Buddhist texts, the teaching of the Buddha, are thus known as *The Pāli Canon*. The first text in this collection is this first teaching, the teaching which sets in motion the wheel of the Dharma, the wheel, that is, of the Buddha’s teachings. The teaching of the Four Noble Truths may be likened to a physician’s diagnosis and treatment. The first truth concerns the sickness itself; the second is the diagnosis of the cause of the illness; the third truth states the prognosis, the truth that there is a cure; and the fourth lays out a prescription.



Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta

“Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma (Sanskrit: *Dharma*)”

Thus have I heard. The Blessed One was once living in the Deer Park at Isipatana [the Resort of Seers] near Bārānasi [Varanasi]. There he addressed the group of five bhikkhus (monks):

"Bhikkhus, these two extremes ought not to be practised by one who has gone forth from the household life. What are the two? There is devotion to the indulgence of sense-pleasures, which is low, common, the way of ordinary

people, unworthy and unprofitable; and there is devotion to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy and unprofitable.

"Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathāgata [an epithet for the Buddha, meaning the one who has "thus gone"] has realized the Middle Path: it gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna* (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*). And what is that Middle Path. . . ? It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the Middle Path realized by the Tathāgata, which gives vision, which gives knowledge, and which leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*.

"The Noble Truth of suffering (*Dukkha*) is this: Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering--in brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering.

"The Noble Truth of the origin of suffering is this: It is this thirst (*Taṇhā*) which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight now here and now there, namely, thirst for sense-pleasures; thirst for existence and becoming; and thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation).

"The Noble Truth of the Cessation (*nibbāna*) of suffering is this: It is the complete cessation (*nibbāna*) of that very thirst, giving it up, renouncing it, emancipating oneself from it, detaching oneself from it.

"The Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering is this: It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, namely right view; right thought; right speech, right action; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right concentration.

"This is the Noble Truth of Suffering (*Dukkha*): such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before. 'This suffering, as a noble truth, should be fully understood': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before. 'This suffering, as a noble truth, has been fully understood': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before.

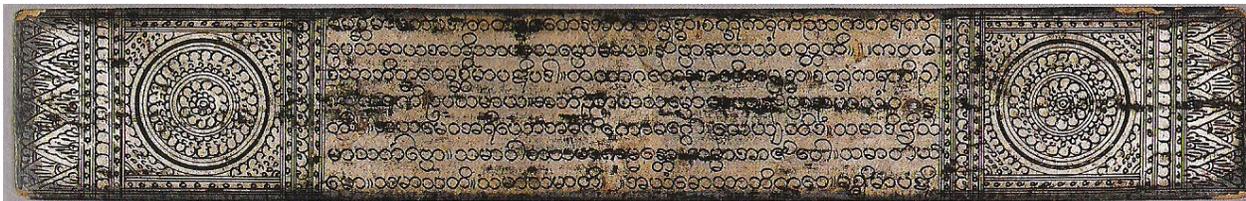
"This is the Noble Truth of the Origin of suffering': such was the vision. . . 'This Origin of suffering, as a noble truth, should be abandoned': such was the vision, . . . 'This Origin of suffering, as a noble truth, has been abandoned': such was the vision, . . . with regard to things not heard before.

"This is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering': such was the vision. . . 'This cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, should be realized': such was the vision, . . . 'This Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, has been realized': such was the vision, . . . with regard to things not heard before.

"This is the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering': such was the vision, . . . 'This Path leading to the Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, should be followed (cultivated)': such was the vision, . . . 'This Path leading to the Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, has been followed (cultivated)': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before.

"As long as my vision of true knowledge was not fully clear in these *three* aspects, in these twelve ways, regarding the Four Noble Truths, I did not claim to have realized the perfect Enlightenment that is supreme in the world with its gods, with its Maras and Brahmas, in this world with its recluses and brāhmaṇas, with its princes and men. But when my vision of true knowledge was fully clear in these three aspects, in these twelve ways, regarding the Four Noble Truths, then I claimed to have realized the perfect Enlightenment that is supreme in the world with its gods, its Maras and Brahmas, in this world with its recluses and brāhmaṇas, with its princes and men. And a vision of true knowledge arose in me thus: My heart's deliverance is unassailable. This is the last birth. Now there is no more re-becoming (rebirth).

This the Blessed One said. The group of five bhikkhus was glad, and they rejoiced at his words.¹



Manuscript of *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* in Pali. Black Burmese script on palm leaf.

What is Nirvana?

In this first discourse of the Buddha, enlightenment is described as *nirvāṇa* (Pāli: *Nibbāna*). The understanding of the Buddha's teachings, the Dharma, thus obviously critically turns upon understanding this notion of *nirvana*. How does the Buddhist notion of enlightenment, *nirvana*, compare and contrast with the idea of *moksha* in the *Upanishads*? The term "nirvana" literally means something like "being blown out" or "extinguished" as might be done with a candle flame. Much of the dispute concerning Buddhism, from its inception, concerned just what is extinguished in Buddhist *nirvana*. For the orthodox philosophers of the Buddha's time and in succeeding generations, Buddhist *nirvana* was thought to mean the cessation of all existence and thus the Buddha's teachings were taken as a pessimistic teaching. Whereas the teachings of yoga were thought to lead to the eternal bliss of immortality, the endpoint of Buddhist *nirvana* seemed to be a nihilistic nothingness. The reason for this is that some of the teachings of Buddhism, laid out in subsequent texts in *The Pāli Canon*, were direct rejections of key notions in the Brahmanical tradition.

Central Philosophical Teachings (Sanskrit, Pāli)

Pratitya-samutpada, Paticca-samuppada: dependent arising, conditioned arising; the doctrine that says that all psychological and physical phenomena constituting individual existence are interdependent and mutually condition each other.

Anatman, anatta: no-self; the doctrine that says no self exists in the sense of a permanent, eternal, integral, and independent substance within an individual existent.

Anitya, anicca: impermanence, transitoriness; the doctrine that everything that exists must pass away.

The central doctrine of Buddhism is said to be the teaching of "dependent-arising." This doctrine says that everything arises dependent upon prior conditions. There is thus nothing which never arises in the first place. This teaching thus obviously rejects the whole conception of Brahman, of an existence which never arose but always was and always will be. The rejection of this view in the central doctrine of Buddhism thus also implies the Buddhist doctrine of "impermanence" or "transitoriness" which holds that everything that exists must at some point pass away. While the Upanishadic philosophy teaches about a soul, or *Atman*, which never dies, the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* says there is no such self in the sense of a permanent, unchanging, independent entity. The Buddha's closing statement in this first teaching, that upon this enlightenment of *nirvana* there is no rebirth, seems to suggest that the primary goal in the *Upanishads* of gaining liberation from *samsara* has not been abandoned in the Buddha's teachings. Yet what remains after liberation from *samsara* has been attained? It seemed, to the orthodox mind at least, that what remains, if there is no immortal soul, would have to be nothing.

This pessimistic view of Buddhism is also evident in the initial Western interpretations of Buddhism. Schopenhauer understood the goal of *nirvana* to be extinction in this sense, and it is this view which led Nietzsche to think that Buddhism ended in a nihilistic denial of life. Nietzsche agreed with the Buddhist critique of the metaphysics that posited the existence of an unchanging, eternal existence, and he liked the psychological focus of the Buddha's teachings, but he understood the aim of *nirvana* to be the final extinction or extinguishment of all existence. It is easy to see how one could arrive at this conclusion since in *nirvana* there is no rebirth, and yet also no immortality.

Nevertheless, there is some reason to consider a different interpretation of Buddhism. Returning to the first teaching concerning the Four Noble Truths it is clear that what is extinguished in *nirvana* is not life itself or existence altogether but rather simply the cause of suffering. The Buddha's insight came in focusing upon the problem of suffering. The reason for the quest for liberation from *samsara* in the first place is the problem of suffering. The first Noble Truth, the truth of suffering (Sanskrit: *Duhkha*, Pāli: *Dukkha*) is not the pessimistic view that there is no joy in life, that life is constant suffering; it is rather the recognition that life often brings disappointment, loss, and suffering. The origins of the word "duhkha" can be traced back to mean something like "having a broken axle-hole." For people relying on chariot transportation this can lead to great frustration. It is thus rather like our situation of experiencing a car break down. Everything breaks down eventually, including our own bodies, and thus we experience suffering in life. The first Noble Truth is simply the acknowledgment of this condition. The second Noble Truth then provides a diagnosis of the cause of suffering, and here, the Buddha's insight is that the cause of our experience of suffering lies in our mind. We suffer because we develop attachments and thus cling to what inevitably must pass away. The third Noble Truth is the very optimistic conclusion that there is a cure for this condition, and that cure, *nirvana*, lies in the cessation or extinguishment of the clinging or grasping that is the underlying cause of suffering. Far from being a pessimistic denial of life, Buddhism, in this interpretation, is the view that life can be experienced differently if we only change our minds. The prescription laid out in the fourth Noble Truth merely lays out a life plan or program of action that leads to this enlightened mind. It is interesting to compare the eightfold path in Buddhism to the eight limbs of yoga taught in the Brahmanical *Yoga-Sutras*.

The Eight Methods or "Limbs" of Yoga

1. *Yama* (The 5 Restraints:)
2. *Niyama* (Observances)
3. *Āsana* (body postures)
4. *Prāṇāyāma* (skillful breathing exercises)
5. *Pratyāhāra* (control of the senses)
6. *Dhāraṇā* (concentration)
7. *Dhyāna* (meditation)
8. *Samādhi* (highest state of meditation)

The Buddhist Eightfold Path

- 1) Right View
- 2) Right Resolve
- 3) Right Speech
- 4) Right Action
- 5) Right Livelihood
- 6) Right Effort
- 7) Right Mindfulness
- 8) Right Concentration (*samādhi*)

Both of these paths or programs of belief and action lead to meditation, the final three steps in both paths are successive stages of meditation practice and both culminate in *samādhi*, though what is meant by this term is quite different in the two traditions. In the *Yoga-Sutras*, *samādhi* is a state of absolute stillness of mind, a state of concentration in which the soul is fully withdrawn from any interaction with the changing world. The goal is clearly to free the soul from its entanglement in this world. In the Brahmanical view spirit is inevitably separate from nature. In the Buddhist view, *samādhi* is that highest state of meditation where all attachment has been extinguished.

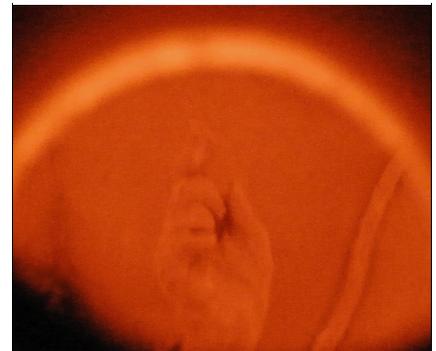
Another early Buddhist text that is important to consider in understanding the concept of *nirvana* is "The Fire Sermon." Here the Buddha is basically saying that "to live is to burn" and this is true enough for if we weren't burning we would be stone cold dead. One might say that life is one long slow burn. But the condition of most human beings still in a state of suffering is that they are burning, as the Buddha's refrain emphasizes, with the fire of lust, the fire of hate, and the fire of delusion. The big question concerning Buddhism, and I think it is not so easy to answer, is whether *nirvana* means extinguishing the fire altogether, or rather, extinguishing the cause of suffering that makes one burn with lust, hate and delusion. The typical line at the end where the Buddha says "birth is exhausted and the holy life has been lived" might seem to suggest the idea that the ultimate goal of *nirvana* is indeed to extinguish the flame of existence altogether. Yet the emphasis of the Buddha's teaching seems to be on changing one's mind and becoming "dispassionate" which would occur only after the attachment that causes suffering is extinguished. On this interpretation, the point of "The Fire Sermon" might better be understood as simply extinguishing suffering and thus changing the fuel with which one burns. On this view, the teaching is not a nihilistic denial of life but rather an affirmation that it is possible to live without suffering and thus to burn with love and compassion.

The Fire Sermon (*Ādittapariyāya-sutta*)

Thus have I heard. The Blessed One was once living at Gayaslsa in Gaya with a thousand bhikkhus. There he addressed the bhikkhus:

"Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what is the all that is burning?
"Bhikkhus, the eye is burning, visible forms are burning, visual consciousness is burning, visual impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the visual impression, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion; I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

"The ear is burning, sounds are burning, auditory consciousness is burning, auditory impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the auditory



impression, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust. . . .

"The nose is burning, odours are burning, olfactory consciousness is burning, olfactory impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the olfactory impression, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust. . . .

"The tongue is burning, flavours are burning, gustative consciousness is burning, gustative impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the gustative impression, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust. . . .

"The body is burning, tangible things are burning, tactile consciousness is burning, tactile impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the tactile sensation, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust. . . .

"The mind is burning, mental objects (ideas, etc.) are burning, mental consciousness is burning, mental impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the mental impression, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion; I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

"Bhikkhus, a learned and noble disciple, who sees (things) thus, becomes dispassionate with regard to the eye, becomes dispassionate with regard to visible forms, becomes dispassionate with regard to the visual consciousness, becomes dispassionate with regard to the visual impression, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the visual impression, with regard to that too he becomes dispassionate. He becomes dispassionate with regard to the ear, with regard to sounds. . . . He becomes dispassionate with regard to the nose. . . with regard to odours. . . . He becomes dispassionate with regard to the tongue . . . with regard to flavours. . . . He becomes dispassionate with regard to the body. . . with regard to tangible things. . . . He becomes dispassionate with regard to the mind, becomes dispassionate with regard to mental objects (ideas, etc.), becomes dispassionate with regard to mental consciousness, becomes dispassionate with regard to mental impression, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of mental impression, with regard to that too he becomes dispassionate.

"Being dispassionate, he becomes detached; through detachment he is liberated. When liberated there is knowledge that he is liberated. And he knows: Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived, what has to be done is done, there is no more left to be done on this account."

This the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were glad, and they rejoiced at his words.

While this exposition was being delivered, the minds of those thousand bhikkhus were liberated from impurities, without attachment.²

The most important thing to emphasize regarding early Buddhism and environmental ethics is the central doctrine of dependent-arising. This says that everything is tied together in an interdependent relationship. There is thus no separation between individual human beings or between human beings and the rest of nature. This teaching is emphasized perhaps even more in the development of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.

There are two key teachings emphasized in the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* that are the starting point of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. One is the exaltation of the *bodhisattva* (awakened being). In early Buddhism the *bodhisattva* was considered a stage along the path to enlightenment just prior to final *nirvana*, whereas the *arhat* was one who had attained *nirvana*. We see the elevation of the *bodhisattva* in *The Heart Sutra*, the most famous of the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*. It is a very short text, something of a summary of the whole of the vast *Prajnaparamita* literature. The opening scene places the Buddha (the Transcendent Victor) sitting with a host of monks and *bodhisattvas*. Then Shariputra,

the Buddha's favorite disciple, honored in early Buddhism as an *arhat*, is here portrayed as asking the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara about this profound perfection of wisdom (*prajnaparamita*). The point here is that the *bodhisattva* is elevated in importance even over an *arhat*. The *bodhisattva* is one who takes a vow to return again and again to this world in order to help all sentient beings, until all sentient beings have attained *nirvana*. In order to be a *bodhisattva* it would seem necessary to have already overcome the suffering that leads to the longing to escape this world of *samsara* in the first place. The *bodhisattva* is thus the being of infinite compassion who is able to return to this earthly world again and again in order to help all sentient beings. The teaching that Avalokiteshvara then goes on to explain is the central doctrine of the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* and that is the teaching of emptiness (*shunyata*). Much of the whole discourse about *Mahāyāna* Buddhism focuses on just what is meant by emptiness. In this translation from the Sanskrit text it is obvious that this teaching is really just a restatement of the central teaching of dependent-arising. At some point in the development of the early Buddhist schools a view had arisen which seemed to imply that there was something in the self that was independent. Thus, this teaching of emptiness was meant to emphasize that the self is empty of any inherent or independent existence. The Buddhist conception of the self is that it is made up of five parts or "aggregates" and *The Heart Sutra* emphasizes that all five of the constituent parts are empty of inherent existence. This teaching then just emphasizes that none of us are independent from each other or from everything else. This is the wisdom that leads to compassion which is the central theme of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. In the image below, a famous painting of a *bodhisattva* from the Ajanta caves, the lotus flower is a symbol of this wisdom and the gesture and gaze of the *bodhisattva* suggests his compassion for all sentient beings.



The Heart Sutra

Mahāprajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra *The Great Perfection of Wisdom Heart Sūtra*

Thus did I hear at one time. The Transcendent Victor was sitting on Vulture Mountain on Rājagṛha together with a great assembly of monks and a great assembly of Bodhisattvas. At that time the Transcendent Victor was absorbed in a samādhi on the enumerations of phenomena called "perception of the profound." Also at that time, the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara was contemplating the meaning of the profound perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) and he saw that those five aggregates also are empty of inherent existence. Then by the power of the Buddha, the venerable Śāriputra said this to the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, "How should a son of good lineage train who wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom?"

The Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara said this to the venerable Śāriputra: “Śāriputra, a son of good lineage or a daughter of good lineage who wished to practice the perfection of wisdom should view [things] in this way: They should correctly view those five aggregates also as empty of inherent existence. Form (*rūpa*) is emptiness (*śūnyatā*); emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness. In the same way, feeling (*vedanā*), discrimination (*saṃjñā*), compositional factors (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*) are empty. Śāriputra, in that way, all phenomena are empty, that is, without characteristic, unproduced, unceased, stainless, not stainless, undiminished, unfilled. Therefore, Śāriputra, in emptiness, there is not form, no feeling, no discrimination, no compositional factors, no consciousness, no eye, no ear, no nose, no object of touch, no phenomenon. There is no eye constituent, no mental constituent, up to and including no mental consciousness constituent. There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, up to an including no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. Similarly there are no sufferings, no origins, no cessations, no paths, no exalted wisdom, no attainment, and also no non-attainment.

Therefore, Śāriputra, because Bodhisattvas have no attainment, they depend on and abide in the perfection of wisdom; because their minds are without obstructions, they are without fear. Having completely passed beyond all error they go to the completion of nirvāṇa. All the Buddhas who abide in the three times have been fully awakened into unsurpassed, perfect, complete enlightenment through relying on the perfection of wisdom.

Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom is the mantra of great knowledge, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra equal to the unequalled, the mantra that thoroughly pacifies all suffering. Because it is not false, it should be known as the true.

The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is stated:

ॐ गते गते पारगते पारसंगते बोधि स्वाहा

oṃ gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā

gone, gone, gone beyond, gone all the way beyond—
awakening, aha!

Śāriputra, Bodhisattva, Mahāsattvas should train in the profound perfection of wisdom in that way.

Then the Transcendent Victor rose from that samādhi and said to the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, "Well done. Well done, well done, child of good lineage, it is just so. Child of good lineage, it is like that; that profound perfection of wisdom should be practiced just as you have taught it. Even the Tathāgatas admire this." The Transcendent Victor having so spoken, the venerable Śāriputra, the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, and all those surrounding and those of the world, the gods, humans, demigods, and *gandharvas* were filled with admiration and praised the words of the Transcendent Victor.³

It is this teaching of emptiness, of the interdependence of all things, which is emphasized in the essay, “The Sun My Heart,” by the contemporary Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh.

1. *Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth (Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta)*. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, second edition (New York: Grove Press, 1974).
2. *The Fire Sermon (Ādittapariyāya-sutta)*. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, second edition (New York: Grove Press, 1974).
3. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Heart Sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).