

**An Unfortunate Loss of Potential: Why Western Society Will Never Widely Accept Buddhist
Concepts of Nature Despite Their Usefulness in Promoting Sustainability**

Victoria Jay

(BIOL 510) Biology and Sustainability: Linkages to buddhist and indigenous philosophical
perspectives

May 20th, 2020

Introduction

I recently embarked on an in-depth study of the parallels between Buddhist philosophies and Biology and how to marry both to promote sustainable living. It left me as inspired as it did confused. I was inspired by the Buddhist concepts of nature, which have clear applications to promoting sustainability, yet I struggled to assimilate these philosophies into my own journey toward more sustainable living. My own struggles made me question whether Western society as a whole could ever achieve widespread acceptance of contemporary Buddhist concepts of nature to promote sustainability.

Background Information

In the global fight against climate change there has been a dramatically renewed interest in what it means to achieve sustainable living. In essence, sustainability is achieved when resources are consumed at a rate that meets our current needs without sacrificing the ability of future generations to also access sufficient resources (Nemetz 2002). While Biology has helped construct useful guidelines for sustainable living, many secular Buddhist concepts encourage a unique perception of nature, with the potential to further inform and enhance our attempts to live sustainably. For the purpose of this essay, two of these Buddhist concepts will be discussed: *not-self* and *connectedness*.

The concept of *not-self* signifies that everything is always part of a greater whole, much like this piece of paper exists only as contributions from the sun, trees, loggers, and countless other elements. Therefore, this paper does not truly exist as a separate entity, as it is solely made up of non-paper elements. (Barash 2014, p. 37-38). The concept of *not-self*, as applied to humans, manifests as a fluid gradient between ego and *not-self* where neither extreme exists in its entirety and where our individual position on this gradient is constantly in flux. The power of *not-self*, especially in relation to sustainable living, is in our awareness of our position on this gradient. Although living in the realm of complete *not-*

self is unattainable, this awareness that everything around us makes us who we are discourages unsustainable actions such as over-exploitation of resources and destruction of our natural surroundings. This is because once we realize that our existence depends on all of the non-human elements of which we are composed, a greater respect and appreciation for these elements and their importance ensues.

The second Buddhist concept, *connectedness*, is related to the concept of *not-self* as it states that “all things depend, literally, on all other things for their existence” (Barash 2014, p.91). It emphasizes our fundamental interdependence, and indicates that we are connected to, and dependent on, every other living and non-living being. Those who embrace this perception of nature understand the fundamental importance of conserving natural resources, as each of us is individually connected to and dependent on the forests that we’re cutting down, the oceans that we’re polluting and the ecosystems that we are destroying, just to name a few.

These Buddhist philosophies of nature, among others, have the potential to encourage sustainable living. Yet, Western society has shown an inability and unwillingness to assimilate these Buddhist teachings as a result of gaps in logic, prejudices, and misunderstandings. Therefore, in this essay I will argue that Western society will never achieve widespread acceptance of contemporary Buddhist concepts of nature despite their potential usefulness for promoting sustainability.

1. Western logic: an obstacle to conceptualizing Buddhist concepts of nature

The first hurdle that would prevent Western society from assimilating Buddhist concepts of nature into their society is the fundamental difference between Western and Eastern logic. Westerners have a tendency to think within categories, and to think about ideas as stark dichotomies. Buddhist concepts, on the other hand, involve boundary-less and non-dichotomous logic.

Western Categorical Thinking

In the context of understanding the Buddhist concept of *connectedness*, author of *Buddhist Biology* David Barash explains that “recognizing the existence - not to mention importance - of interconnectedness nonetheless requires constant struggle and emphasis, probably because the Western mind deals poorly with boundary-less notions” (Barash 2014, p.86). Cultural theorists define this Western tendency as “specific thinking”, which refers to our habit of analyzing ideas by removing them from their contexts and instead studying them independently (Han 2009). An explicit example of this lies in the difference between Western and traditional Eastern medicine. An American doctor once explained that if a man were to come to an emergency room with frostbite from riding his motorcycle in the winter without proper clothing, a Western doctor would treat the frostbite (Stefanov et al. 2019). In comparison, a traditional Eastern doctor would take a holistic approach and would treat the frostbite in addition to determining why the patient wasn’t wearing appropriate attire in the winter (Stefanov et al. 2019). This categorical Western approach to thinking isn’t conducive to understanding Buddhist concepts of nature. As Barash indicated in the above excerpt, understanding the Buddhist concept of *connectedness* requires boundary-less logic because the interdependence of all beings cannot be explained through strict categories within defined boundaries.

Western Dichotomous Thinking

Similarly, Western logic relies heavily on dichotomies. Barash indicates that “dichotomous thinking is especially widespread in the Western world-view, deriving, perhaps, from the Greek Platonic constructs of ideal versus real and intellect versus emotion, and the Judeo-Christian ones of God versus creation, spirit versus flesh, sin versus redemption, and human beings versus nature” (Barash 2014, p. 91). On the contrary, Buddhist thinking embraces dichotomies as whole truths, accepting that the real truth lies somewhere in between. A prime example is the gradient between ego and *not-self*, where neither extreme exists in its true form and where reality lies in a constant state of flux somewhere in between. In

this case, Westerners would have a tendency to simply either embrace or to reject the *not-self* concept, and therefore miss the value of being aware of, and existing within, the gradient in between. This example makes it clear that “Buddhism...transcends simple linear, binary distinctions”, while Western logic has roots in those exact binary distinctions (Barash 2014, p. 91).

2. Western prejudice against Buddhism

Even if Westerners were able to adapt their ways of thinking to embrace boundary-less logic and to accept dichotomies as whole truths, the Western prejudice against Buddhism would still stand in the way of Western society accepting Buddhist concepts of nature. This Western prejudice primarily lies in Westerners immediately associating secular Buddhist concepts with religious Buddhism. As a result, even when Buddhist concepts *are* used in Western society, little if any credit is typically given to the original Buddhist teachings.

The term “Buddhism” can refer to a religion, but as Barash puts it, “Buddhism is as much a philosophy as a religion” and that “for some, Buddhism isn’t a religion at all” (Barash 2014, p. 2, 5). In fact, in his book, *Buddhist Biology*, he repeatedly states that his ideas refer only to secular Buddhist concepts. He even goes out of his way to write very dismissively about the religious aspects of Buddhism, referring to them as “poppy-cock” and “hocus-pocus” (Barash 2014, p. 141, 6). Barash wouldn’t have had to go to such lengths to make his focus on secular Buddhism exceptionally clear if the negative Western association between Buddhism and religion wasn’t so strong.

To further support this idea, there are examples of Buddhist practices being adopted by Westerners without a single reference to their Buddhist origins, in fear of associating them with the prejudice against religious Buddhism. For example, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn is one of the most famous Western proponents of mindful awareness and has been named the “Godfather of modern mindfulness” (Booth 2017). He even studied directly under famous Buddhist teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh. Although he widely promotes mindfulness in North America, he has “bent over backwards to structure

it and find ways to speak about it that avoided as much as possible the risk of it being seen as Buddhist” (Booth 2017). He openly advertises that he is not a Buddhist and he intentionally harnesses “the fundamentals of mindfulness meditation as taught by the Buddha, but with the Buddhism taken out” (Booth 2017).

Ironically, the Western fear of labeling Buddhist concepts of nature as “Buddhist”, fundamentally opposes the Buddhist idea that we should accept and embrace our interconnectedness. If Westerners truly embraced our world’s interconnectedness, they would proudly give credit to the Buddhist origins of Buddhist concepts, as opposed to embracing Buddhist concepts but intentionally not labeling them as so. Therefore, the Western prejudice against Buddhism and its religious affiliations will prevent widespread Western acceptance of Buddhist concepts of nature.

3. Translation of Buddhist concepts of nature from Sanskrit to English dilutes their meaning

The third and final barrier that will prevent widespread Western acceptance of Buddhist concepts is the fact that the true meaning of Buddhist concepts is diluted when translated into English. Original Buddhist texts are written in various languages, but primarily in Sanskrit. For example, the Sanskrit term *anatman* is translated to English as *not-self*, while *pratitya-samutpada* is translated as *connectedness*.

Although these translations give English speakers a general understanding of the Buddhist concepts at hand, it is impossible for a single word translation to encapsulate the intricate meaning of the original Buddhist terms. For example, simply translating *pratitya-samutpada* as *connectedness* fails to communicate the fundamental interconnectedness and interdependence of all things, both of which form an integral part of the meaning of *pratitya-samutpada*.

Translating Buddhist concepts from Sanskrit to English also removes these key words from their contexts, further diluting their meaning. According to the 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, the meaning of all words is fundamentally context-dependent (Lazarevic 2016). In his Language-Game theory, he proposes that there is no fixed meaning for a word because its meaning lies in its use, or its

language-game, in any given text (Lazarevic 2016). Therefore, when the term *anatman* is removed from a Sanskrit text and translated into English, its context, and therefore meaning, are distorted.

Buddhist concepts of nature are multifaceted ideas, and their power in promoting sustainability lies in their intriguing complexity (recall the “*not-self*” concept being most powerful when one is aware of their position on the gradient between ego and *not-self*). If these ideas are unavoidably diluted when translated to English, and hence require lengthy explanations to communicate their true meaning, they will probably remain largely inaccessible for the majority of Westerners.

Conclusion

The Western way of conceptualizing ideas, the Western prejudice against Buddhism, and the unavoidable negative effects of translating Buddhist concepts from Sanskrit to English all strongly suggest that Western society will never achieve widespread acceptance of contemporary Buddhist concepts of nature despite their potential usefulness for promoting sustainability.

However, I believe that these Buddhist concepts of nature otherwise have so much potential in promoting Western sustainable living that there is undeniable value in attempting to achieve at least partial acceptance by Western society, even if full acceptance is unrealistic. Western acceptance of Buddhist concepts of nature to promote sustainability would require a significant change in Western culture. While there are many examples of cultures significantly changing based on interactions with other cultures, the vast majority of these changes were forced as opposed to voluntary. For example, European settlers enforced profound mass cultural change on Canadian indigenous communities. Voluntary changes in culture tend to be less significant, with one culture adopting only certain aspects of another culture (which are often relatively inconsequential). For example, India adopted the Western Hollywood entertainment culture to develop their now very popular Bollywood culture. As demonstrated in the above examples, while forcing a culture to change is more effective in achieving a significant widespread culture shift, doing so is arguably extremely immoral and unsustainable in the long-term.

Therefore, any acceptance of Buddhist concepts of nature by Western society should be voluntary.

Even small, voluntary, Western cultural changes to accept Buddhist concepts of nature will only be achieved with pragmatic strategies on how to do so. For example, to circumvent the Western prejudice against Buddhism, adhering to Dr. Kabat-Zinn's approach of promoting Buddhist concepts of nature without labeling them as Buddhist could be a productive solution. By not sounding the prejudice alarm bell with the Buddhist label, there's potential for Western society to accept these Buddhist concepts without being aware, and therefore judgmental, of their Buddhist origins. The rise in popularity of meditation in the West, without emphasis on the Buddhist origins of the practice, has demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. In addition, to lessen the negative effect of direct translation, an alternative approach to translation could be taken in which the intent of the translation is to morph the original Buddhist concept into a related Western concept instead of finding a direct translation. Although the comprehensive meaning of the original Buddhist concept may be diluted, reinterpreting the concept into a more Western context may make it more accessible and effective to a wider Western audience.

Therefore, although Western society will never achieve widespread acceptance of contemporary Buddhist concepts of nature, this isn't reason to entirely disregard their potential for promoting Western sustainable living. Instead, focus should be placed on being strategic about how these Buddhist concepts are introduced to Western society, ensuring that their acceptance is voluntary instead of forced, by avoiding the prejudice alarm bell, and by using a more integrative and less directly translated approach. I know that making these changes in how I have incorporated Buddhist concepts of nature into my life has greatly strengthened my journey to more sustainable living, and I'm hopeful that they'll be effective for others too. If so, together we can embrace the extraordinary Buddhist concepts of nature to enrich our perception of nature and fuel our desire and ability to live sustainably.

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