

GREEN BUDDHISM

In our view, environmentally engaged Buddhism—and socially engaged Buddhism in general—is just a way of living well. Although it receives some academic attention (a few sample studies are listed in our Bibliography on Buddhism), green Buddhism is not primarily a scholarly enterprise. We see it, instead, as a natural expression of the Dharma (the formal Buddhist teachings), given the conditions in which humanity now finds itself.

If you are uncertain what to make of Green Buddhism, this page should help. You can move from conventional ideas about Buddhist practice to Green Buddhism, by way of two propositions.

1. Buddhism is intended to be active, and it is more than meditation.

Many people, especially in the West, are drawn to Buddhism because they want to meditate. That is a healthy impulse—we invest so much effort in caring for our bodies, but usually very little effort in caring for our minds. And the Dharma does indeed present meditation as a crucial aspect of mental development. But it does not present meditation as sufficient in itself.

The way of life that the Buddha taught is generally understood to consist of eight components, known collectively as the Noble Eightfold Path. These components are named after the ideals embodied in them. Just to give you a sense of what the Path involves, here is a version of those names.

Perfect Vision
Perfect Emotion
Perfect Speech
Perfect Action
Perfect Livelihood
Perfect Effort
Perfect Awareness
Perfect Concentration

For an accessible discussion of the Noble Eightfold Path, see Sangharakshita, *Vision and Transformation* (Cambridge, UK: Windhorse Publications, 1990, rpt. 1995), from which this list derives. “Perfect” is the author’s rendering of Sanskrit *samyak*, frequently translated as “right.” Sangharakshita offers several other possibilities—“whole,” “integral,” “complete”—but settles on “perfect.” (p.17)

Even if you have never seen this list before, it’s probably evident that these categories must overlap or merge in various ways. The overlaps help to make the Path a coherent whole. They also have a reinforcing effect: Progress in one category facilitates progress in others. It may be less evident where meditation is to be found. One standard approach locates it in that final component, which is sometimes translated as “right meditation.” (The Sanskrit term in question is *samadhi*.) But it might be more useful to construe the three final categories as all relevant to meditation, and the final one as more or less exclusively concerned with it.

However that point is interpreted, it is clear that the Path involves far more than meditation. It should also be clear that the Path is intended to engage the entirety of one’s life—that it is concerned, not just with what one perceives or thinks, but with what one does.

2. The Buddhist Path leads to wisdom and compassion, and both of these faculties seek to comprehend life as a whole.

Buddhist practice is intended to develop two functions of the mind: Wisdom and compassion. “Wisdom” in this context is not primarily a matter of intellectual achievement, but a kind of direct awareness of things as they are. (Forgive the awkward formula—this experience is a very difficult subject to write about.) Within the human personality, wisdom and compassion are essential complements to each other; to pursue one of these qualities without the other is to risk a kind of mental deformity. The pursuit of wisdom without compassion tends towards selfishness, complacency, and reluctance to act. The pursuit of compassion without wisdom invites confusion, anxiety, and misplaced effort.

Wisdom and compassion complement each other because they share some essential qualities. Perhaps the most obvious similarity is that they are both “boundless,” in the sense that a person seriously cultivating either faculty is likely to grow increasingly unwilling to recognize any limitation of it. The notion of “a little wisdom” or “a little compassion” is likely to seem increasingly absurd.

And in Buddhist practice, wisdom and compassion are both ways of coming to terms with what the Dharma portrays as basic features of existence: That the self, as we usually conceive of it, is a kind of mirage, that all things arise and pass away, and that all life is profoundly interdependent. As our awareness of this interdependence grows stronger, our capacity for empathy grows wider and deeper.

At some point in the course of this development, the serious student of Buddhism is liable to discover that it no longer makes sense to think of one’s practice as purely a personal quest. One ceases to practice just for oneself—and that is when practice really begins. One can begin to practice for—and with—all beings. All beings become the wisdom that practice seeks and expresses. All beings are inexhaustibly marvelous just as they are, without the perceptual confusion that our own appetites and fears project upon them.

This is not some sort of utopian, Peaceable Kingdom experience. It’s not a matter of “making friends” with pathogens, invasive alien species, or other organisms that humanity, with good reason, is attempting to eradicate or control. Instead, it’s a way of experiencing people, trees, birds, fish, mosquitoes, diseases—all beings—as at once both themselves and as merging within the entire, immense fabric of life, of living and dying, of existence itself. And beyond that, it’s a way of experiencing this fabric as it is constantly weaving and reweaving itself; and beyond even that, it’s a way of seeing that there is no fabric apart from this weaving and reweaving. And beyond that too—trees are trees and mosquitoes are mosquitoes.

We have arrived at Green Buddhism. Green Buddhism is merely an effort to act on this process, in a practical and systematic way, for the benefit of all the other species with whom we share this world.

One final proposition:

Green Buddhism should not confuse gestures or symbols with practical action.

Buddhism, like other religions, has fostered the development of myriad ceremonies, great works of art, and other forms of expression that have immense spiritual value. Such spiritual expressions, Buddhist or otherwise, offer great comfort to billions of people. But the spiritual value of such things does not make them panaceas. If you have appendicitis, it may be a good idea to pray or chant, but it’s an even better idea to call a doctor, and doing so won’t diminish your spirituality.

It’s a similar situation with spiritually-motivated environmental work. Traditional forms of religious practice may be crucial to the development of one’s spiritual or environmental awareness, but when the time comes to act, it’s important to do so in a way that will really be effective. That is why, in our view, religious environmental programs should hold themselves accountable to the same standards that apply to secular programs. Green spiritual effort should produce tangible, measurable benefits. It should make sense in terms of whatever criteria—ecological, social, political—are relevant to the efforts involved.

This type of accountability is a basic feature of the Earth Sangha’s environmental programs, and it has served both our programs and our volunteers very well. Our programs benefit because regular evaluation, in one form or another, allows us to learn relatively quickly what works and what does not. Our volunteers benefit because they gain direct access to the work itself, without any interpretative baggage, beyond what is necessary for understanding field procedures. We believe that this is one of the most useful things that we can do for our colleagues in the field: We want them to experience for themselves the challenges of working with the soil and water, and the plants and animals that make up our landscapes. There is nothing added or extraneous in this way of working. And that is what makes it effective.

This is the nature of practice within the Earth Sangha. When we meditate, we just meditate; when we work in the field, we just work. That’s all. Two forms of experience, both expressions of the Path. Taken together, just a way of living well.