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COSMOLOGY

Thomas Berry, Buddhism, and the New Cosmology

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ABSTRACT Our contemporary awareness of an environmental ethic is understood to be based on representing a cosmology of the interconnection of all beings. This construct is coincident with the emerging sense of our present view of the phenomenal world and resonant with the insights of Theravada Buddhism.

THE COSMOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Cosmology orients us. It provides us a place within the universe, a home where our story can be told in such a way that it makes sense to ourselves and the people with whom we live. For millennia, the earth and water, the light, the weather, and the heavens have been accounted for in myriad tales from diverse cultures. Humans have found meaning in reading their own story against the story of the place in which they find themselves. From the local shrines arising out of archaic sensibilities to the elaborate Ptolemaic spheres and Dante-esque hells of Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the study of the cosmos begins and ends with an exploration of self.

For the past 300 years there has been a slow and steady erosion of cosmological theory. The rise of science shattered many traditional icons. The rise of consumerism and the spread of money-based economies replaced traditional paradigms of human interrelationship through community with a depersonalized sense of self rooted in acquisitiveness. The result has been an unparalleled disruption of cosmological integrity, not only on the personal, psycho-spiritual level. This disruption has shaken the integrity of the earth, water, and air because of pollution, a situation without precedent in human history. In years past, when soils became exhausted, when water became impure, when air smelled foul, humans could move on to a new habitat. With our global culture and technology, there remains no place to turn, other than to ourselves, to stop the damage already in progress.

Thomas Berry, author of *Dream of the Earth* and coauthor with Brian Swimme of *The Universe Story*, has made significant arguments for reenergizing our relationship with the earth process, using the insights of science

to heighten our spiritual sensitivity rather than to deaden it. In the tradition of Teilhard de Chardin, he advocates learning the story of the earth and reading it as a story of our own journey. He has had a broad impact throughout the Christian world as a leading voice for environmental awareness. Yet, in large part, his insights arise not from his extensive studies of biblical traditions, but from Asian and Native American religious philosophy and practice. In this article, I propose to examine Buddhist influences within Berry's thought and suggest ways in which Berry's style of environmental advocacy might benefit the Buddhist world in Asia, which, due to burgeoning (mal)development, is encountering the sorts of environmental ravage that North America and Western Europe first identified in the 1960s.

THOMAS BERRY'S INTERPRETATION OF BUDDHISM

The first great Buddhist truth specifies suffering (*dukha*) as foundational to human existence. Berry writes, "Buddhist thought originates in an unusual experience of the sorrows of time. No abiding reality is here, no lasting peace, no fit condition for human life. The first and final wisdom is to recognize the unsubstantial nature of all things. All is caught in an endless cycle of change. There is only the coming to be of things and their passing away. Birth and death implicate each other. Nowhere else has the tragic aspect of human life formed the central theme of so vast a tradition of spiritual and philosophical thought."¹ The suffering of the Buddha's time included sickness, old age, and death; the suffering of contemporary postdevelopment industrialized societies includes a burning earth, polluted waters, and foul air, as well as a discontented, overconsumptive, confused populace.

However, rather than ascribing to a nihilist interpretation of Buddhism, Berry sees Buddhism as a path of redemption and release. He points out that despite its grounding in sorrow, the "Buddhist path to salvation is a positive and highly spiritual process leading step by step to higher degrees of perfection."² One might argue that precisely because of its perception of and emphasis on suffering, Buddhism serves as an apt catalyst for self-conversion or self-transformation.

Berry identifies self-effort as the key to the process of transcendence: "At few moments in history has any tradition sought to face so directly the overwhelming obstacles that man experiences in his efforts at moral rectitude. It is precisely its awareness of this difficulty that makes the Buddhist commitment to the morally responsible deed so impressive. Everything in Buddhism begins with this searching analysis of the human situation, the difficulty yet the possibility of attaining a moral goodness leading to a liberating experience. The struggle involves teaching, understanding, and spiritual training. But if man does not attain the liberating experience he is himself responsible for his failure."³

Berry then cites Buddhaghosa, who lived nearly a thousand years after

the Buddha, who, in Berry's words "affirms his conviction that man can overcome this difficulty with the basic moral resources that are available to man. By virtue, by intellectual awareness, and by spiritual insight, man can succeed in 'untangling the tangle.'"⁴ In other words, by applying oneself diligently, the Buddhist successfully can overcome the obstacles to his or her liberation.

Berry outlines the Buddhist process of redemption as follows: "The first step in rescuing such a person from his evil situation is to awaken in him an awareness of the evil nature of his actions. This involves a sense of guilt. Then comes confession of guilt, and finally restoration to a state of goodness. Such is the pattern of reformation sought in Buddhism. This entire process of moral rectification originates in a stark confrontation with reality as it truly is."⁵

By clearly identifying the source of one's suffering and taking active steps toward purification, the Buddhist moves toward making a broken world whole. Berry cites the *Dhammapada* as indicative of the Buddhist emphasis on voluntarism: "The sixth step in the eightfold path of Buddhism is 'right effort,' *virīya*. We see this in the fervent exhortations so common in Buddhist practice: 'Keep yourself from every evil deed: establish yourself in goodness: purify your thoughts. This is the message of the enlightened ones' (*Dhammapada*, 183)."⁶ Through effort one can undo harmful actions of the past.

This abstention from evil finds a complement in the more positive statement that compassion must be cultivated. By replacing harmful or negative thoughts with thoughts of beneficence and well-being, the Buddhist actively builds an improved world, a world apart from that which perpetuates sufferings: "Another characteristic of Buddhist emotional life is an attitude of sympathy towards all living beings, a deep aversion to killing in any form, a sympathy for those who suffer, although this sympathy, this feeling of identity with the sufferings of others, is intended to be without personal emotional involvement."⁷

Berry develops this notion of compassion in *Dream of the Earth*, writing that "[i]n Buddhist tradition the term *karuna*, compassion, is a supreme cosmic power. Thus we find a pervasive intimacy and compassionate quality in the very structure of the universe and of the earth itself."⁸

Hence, we find three aspects of Buddhism articulated by Berry that would help with the development of an environmental ethic. The first involves identifying the problem: great suffering is caused by environmental ravage. The second requires restraint and restructuring: having identified the causes of pollution as arising from destructive patterns of human behavior, people need to adopt the resolve to reverse their harm and make appropriate changes. The third embraces a positive replacement of acquisitive, objectifying tendencies with compassion for other people, other life forms, and the earth itself.

This application of the karmic theory of Buddhism provides an appropriate moral platform from which an environmental ethic may be launched. Just as human processes of action result in patterning that conditions future behavior, so also processes of human production, consumption, and waste leave a legacy that affects later generations. Berry suggests that by seeing the earth from the perspective of intimacy and compassion, further degradation might be averted: "This reenchantment with the earth as a living reality is the condition for our rescue of the earth from the impending destruction that we are imposing upon it. To carry this out effectively, we must now, in a sense, reinvent the human species within the community of life species. . . . Within this context we can recognize ourselves not simply as a human community, but as genetically related to the entire community of living beings, since all species are descended from a single origin."⁹

Environmentalism requires a perception of the reality of the earth's suffering, coupled with a resolve to adhere to a program of environmental purification. Berry has developed a language for putting forth in an immediate and prophetic way the dire consequences, the dire karmic unfolding that will occur on our planet if development and consumption patterns continue unchecked in their rate of growth.

BUDDHISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

How might Berry's urgent call for heightened environmental awareness interface with the Buddhist tradition? In the context of American Buddhism, many activists and spiritual leaders have woven an environmental program into their practice of Buddhism, including Joan Halifax, Roshi John Daido Loomi, Ruben Habito, and many others. Schumacher's article "Buddhist Economics" and his subsequent books put forward Buddhism as providing an apt model for a less consumptive, environmentally friendly society. Because of its emphasis on moderation and the Middle Way, Buddhism provides a ready vehicle for Buddhists to pursue an environmental orthopraxy suitable to American life.

The greatest challenge for Buddhist environmentalism lies not in its newly adopted homes in North America and Western Europe. In these areas, Buddhism by definition is countercultural and accords well with other countercultural movements such as environmentalism. In its source of origin, however, Buddhism is part and parcel of the cultural mainstream and its leaders and institutions are, with a few notable exceptions such as China, aligned with the mainstream society, and vulnerable to the contemporary drive toward urbanization, modernization, and consumerism, all of which can be detrimental to the environment. Hence, Buddhist environmentalism in Asia can benefit from the prophetic language of Thomas Berry, who urges people to awaken from their complacency and recognize the deleterious effects of what he calls the "technological trance." Innately, Buddhism holds many

valuable tools for developing a viable, indigenous environmental ethic for Asia. However, Buddhist leaders in Asia need to recognize the urgency of the situation.

I suggest that an area of immediate concern for Buddhists interested in moving into the "ecozoic" age as an alternative to crass consumerism would involve encouraging education in the developing world regarding environmental issues. India, Thailand, Indonesia, Korea, and China, to name a few, have exploded in the last decade in terms of industrial output, and are fueling a consumer boom in imitation of American and European models. If things proceed unchecked, the already perilous levels of pollution in many of the cities of these developing areas will only increase. People need to be educated about the effects of pollution on their immediate health as well as the effects of consumerism on the human psyche, which can become trivialized and denigrated by advertising.

How can Buddhism help? What unique contributions might Buddhism make to this situation? Following the New Story proposed by Thomas Berry, Buddhist cosmology and worldview can be helpful. Buddhism emphasizes a continuity of life forms. Sentient beings take birth in different worlds or *lokas*, depending upon their past karma. This not only serves a moral function in encouraging people to avoid activities that might cause an inauspicious rebirth, but also establishes an interconnection between life forms. It can be somewhat assumed that a person once existed as a whale or a dog or some other life form, and that those life forms hold the potential for future human birth. Consequently, it might be argued from a Buddhist position that all life forms must be respected. Taken in a more cosmic sense, this interconnectedness of life forms in Buddhism can resemble the holistic view of the newly emerging Gaia theory, in which the very atmosphere of the earth itself arises from and symbiotically maintains life forms.

The doctrine of karma can be very helpful for the development of an environmental ethic. It emphasizes consequences and causality. It is not fatalistic. It does not surrender the future to the control of a god, whether transcendent, angry, or beneficent. Humans must take responsibility for their own situation. Once humans recognize the painful results of environmental degradation, they can take concrete steps to correct past errors and chart a new course.

The *Visuddhimagga*, a Pali text from the Theravada tradition, outlines a sequence of concentrations on the elements (*kasinas*). These include earth, water, fire, air, and space. By observing and cultivating meditation on each of these, it is said "the hindrances eventually become suppressed, the defilements subside, and the mind becomes concentrated"¹⁰ In addition to these benefits, it might also be the case that protracted attention toward the components of nature might help bring about a deeper appreciation of one's environment, and that this heightened sensitivity and consciousness could lead to a resolve to preserve natural areas, as has been

the case with some individual monks and Buddhist laypeople in Thailand and elsewhere.

Buddhism offers a comprehensive orthopraxy that can be readily transformed into an environmentally friendly lifestyle. Mindfulness can help one keep in mind the need to live on the earth lightly. Buddhist cultures that encourage vegetarianism can be reinterpreted as environmentally sound. The quiet and steady teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh as well as the prophetic and sometimes iconoclastic reminders of Sulak Sivaraksa and others can help advance the environmental cause.

Buddhist education programs are in the process of being developed throughout Buddhist Asia. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh in Thailand has developed a curriculum for use in schools based on traditional Buddhist stories. In Korea, Ryoo Jung Gil has established the Buddhist Academy for Ecological Awakening. In Thailand, a number of Buddhist monks have been involved with ordaining trees within the forest as monks, in an attempt to discourage loggers from harming them.

SELF AND THE COSMOLOGICAL JOURNEY

The drive toward industrialization in Asia threatens the very context in which Buddhism first developed. Berry suggests that the spiritual goals of human life have been replaced with a sweeping materialism that threatens the integrity of the planet's life systems. Yet he recognizes that this tendency arises from deep structures within human consciousness that yearn for comfort and ultimate transcendence. "The archetypal support that remains most effective in modern consciousness is the paradisaical symbol of an existence that awaits man somewhere in the indefinite future. . . . This is the modern parallel to the . . . Nirvana experience of the Buddhist world. Just as these and other salvific expectations sustain and energize man in these other traditions so this vision of paradise sustains and dynamizes technological society. This is the myth, the dream, the mystical vision at the basis of the entire scientific industrial urban-centered world of the twentieth century, although this mystical basis has not always been recognized. The foundations of the technological society are non-technological; they are interior and mystical."¹¹

Berry suggests that this myth needs to be revisited and revised in light of the pressure put upon the earth by the old quest for paradise and release, which has tended to deemphasize the importance of the material world. "The greatest need of the present is to establish a functional relation between this paradise myth and the new creation myth . . ."¹²

In the Buddhist context, this will require a redefinition of the physical world away from being seen purely as a source of pain because of repeated births (*sasāra*) toward a vision of the world that values the earth as the context through which the journey toward awakening unfolds.

The spiritual journey itself becomes challenged and transformed if its very physical context becomes endangered. Berry writes that "[t]he spiritual journey is no longer simply the interior journey of the individual or of the hero savior personality, or the journey of individual sacred communities or of the comprehensive human community, it is the journey of the earth itself through its various transformations. . . . It is also the pan-human journey of man as cosmic person. The journey of man as cosmic person is the journey of the inner psychic reality that is present within all being. . . . The elements themselves can be considered as psychic patterns."¹³

Although the notion of cosmic person is identified more closely with the Hindu and Confucian traditions, Buddhism regards the individual person as the creator of his or her own sorrow and joy. By awakening fully to one's own power, one can develop a greater appreciation for the relationship between the human mind and the earth. In a warning that seems particularly poignant as Asia continues to embrace the Western consumerist model, Berry writes that "[m]odern man must move from the outer forms to the interior substance, from external contact with a physical reality to interior subjective communion."¹⁴ The philosophy and practices of Buddhism, as noted above, hold powerful tools for effecting this shift.

CONCLUSION

Thomas Berry is one of the leading Catholic intellectuals who have taken up the cause of the environment and who have called for a revisioning of cosmology to include consciousness of human interconnectedness with all life forms. Along with Brian Swimme, he has put forth a program for re-mythologizing creation, reintroducing the physical world as a tool for human spirituality.

The approach Berry uses appeals to the core structures of human experience: human physicality, emotionality, and intellect. He has framed a program of environmental awareness that goes to the heart of human reality, exposing the relationship between human reality and earth reality. Although Berry does rely in part on the great traditions of Dante, Aquinas, Vico, Jung, and Teilhard in his configuring and refiguring of the place of the human within the context of the earth,¹⁵ his broad study of human culture has shaped key themes that occur within his work. The ideas of macrocosm and microcosm arise from the Purusa Sukta, classic texts of China, and Native American spirituality. The importance placed upon the role of the elements finds precedent in the Samkhya and Abhidharma teachings of India. As we have seen in this paper, the emphasis on human suffering and the consequent resolve to improve and transform oneself owe a great debt to the teachings of the Buddha.

Berry is a master of symbol and story. Having journeyed with many great stories of the earth's peoples, he has suggested that we need now listen

again to the story of the earth itself. Just as the Buddhists advised understanding the elements and the mind in order to transcend the trappings of karma, so also, Berry advises that in order to escape the ravage brought on the earth by overconsumption and pollution, we must listen to the earth and understand the workings of our story to revision a world that can sustain itself and allow humans to flourish, not for the purposes of pursuing creature comforts, but to be established in a state of enlightened joy and affectivity.

NOTES

1. Thomas Berry, *Five Oriental Philosophies* (Albany, N.Y.: Magi Books, 1968), p. 15.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
3. Thomas Berry, "Moral Evil and Guilt in Early Buddhism" (Riverdale, N.Y.: Riverdale Papers, n.d.), pp. 1-2.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
7. Thomas Berry, *Buddhism* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1967), p. 178.
8. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), p. 20.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
10. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, trans. Bhikkhu Nyamoli (Boulder, Co.: Shambala, 1976), IV:31, p. 130.
11. Thomas Berry, "Creative Energy" (Riverdale, N.Y.: Riverdale Papers, n.d.), pp. 8-9.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
15. John Grim, "Time, History, Historians in Thomas Berry's Vision," *Cross Currents* XXXVII, No. 2-3 (1987): 225-239.