AAR

Toward a Buddhist Environmental Ethic

Rita M. Gross

WHENEVER I THINK ABOUT issues of consumption and population, I also think about the way I lived early in my life. For eighteen years I lived without central heating, indoor plumbing, pesticides, processed foods, packaging, or neighbors who could be seen from our home. We carried water from a spring, cut our own firewood, grew much of our own food, and used an outhouse, even in sub-zero temperatures. Dragonflies, butterflies, fireflies, and many other beautiful creatures that I never see in my city lot abounded. Traffic noise was a novelty. At night one could see a million stars in the black sky.

Major environmental problems—waste disposal, having clear air and clean water—were non-existent in our lives and on our land because we were few people (a family of three) living simply. Because we were so few living in a sparsely populated rural area, we could use simple technologies and renewable resources for heat and waste management without harming the land, water, or air, even though those same technologies become extremely problematic when people live in crowded conditions. This is one of many reasons why population growth is so environmentally devastating.

Though many would evaluate such a lifestyle as unacceptably primitive and uncomfortable, in fact, it was not particularly a problem or a deprivation. Even now when I return to my cabin for meditation retreats and

Rita M. Gross is Professor of Comparative Studies in Religion at the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI 54702-4004.

writing time, I do not mind that lifestyle. Electricity for lights, the laptop computer, and a boombox that plays classical music are completely sufficient for a satisfying lifestyle with low environmental impact. Environmentally sensitive lifestyles and scaling back to live such lifestyles do not really deprive people once it becomes clear that the levels of reproduction and consumption indulged in by most people are not necessary to well-being. To me, it is very clear that an environmental paradise, as well as an environmental necessity, is a situation of few people, not crowded together, living simply.

But what does my religion of choice—Buddhism—say about this vision. In this chapter, I shall be writing as both a scholar trained in comparative studies in religion and as a practicing Buddhist. My own Buddhist affiliation is with Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism as taught the late Chogyam Trungpa, but I will write about Buddhism in very general generic terms that could accepted by most or all Buddhists.

BUDDHISM AND ECOLOGY

Currently there is some debate about whether Buddhism can support an environmental ethic or the worldview of deep ecology, and some Western scholar-observers are very skeptical of Buddhist efforts to derive an ecological ethic (e.g., see the articles by Ian Harris in *Religion* in 1991 and 1995 and in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* in 1994 and 1995). As a scholar of religion familiar with both historical and constructive methods, I find that question somewhat beside the point. Historically, we know that all living religions have gone through the major changes required to remain relevant in altered circumstances. There is no reason that the same thing cannot happen in response to the ecological crisis. And as a Buddhist feminist "theologian," I am more than familiar with the process of working within a traditional symbol system and worldview while doing major reconstructive work to eliminate certain problematic conventions (Gross 1993). The question is not what has Buddhism said about ecology and the environment, but what could Buddhism have to say about these subjects. In a time of unprecedented concern about the viability of the ecosystem within which we live and upon which we depend un-conditionally, what insights and practices might a Buddhist bring to the discussion?

At the outset, I would suggest that Buddhism has not been especially oriented to an environmental ethic historically, though East Asian forms of Buddhism seem to be more nature–oriented than South Asian Buddhisms (Callicot and Ames). In my view, other religious traditions,

including the indigenous traditions so often praised for their reverence for nature, have not historically focused on an environmental ethic either. I make this somewhat controversial statement because of a claim that I will make many times in this chapter. To qualify as an environmental ethic, ethical guidelines must discourage excessive consumption and reproduction, even if such levels of consumption and reproduction are common in the culture and seem unproblematic to many people. By itself, a rhetoric of reverence for nature is insufficient as an environmental ethic. Too often a rhetoric of reverence for nature is combined with primitive technologies that limit human ability to damage and destroy the environment, but when more sophisticated and destructive technologies are made available, they are readily adopted. Populations multiply and more environmentally dangerous technologies are embraced, even with a rhetoric of reverence for nature well in place. One need only look at East Asia in the twentieth century to see multiple examples of a rhetoric of reverence for nature combined with environmentally destructive practices. Therefore, to qualify as genuinely ecological, teachings and practices must involve the reason for making a choice against excessive reproduction and consumption rather than being the byproduct of technological limitations.

The reason why environmental concerns are now so grave is because humans have the technologies to consume and reproduce in ways that, if not moderated, seem almost certain to destroy the ecological basis for human life. Therefore, the key question is what values and practices would convince people to consume and reproduce less when they have the technological ability to consume and reproduce more. The world's religions have not previously faced this situation, which explains why ecological ethics have not been in the forefront of religious thinking in any tradition. What we must do, then, as constructive thinkers in our various traditions, is to place the inherited values and insights of our traditions in the light of the current ecological crisis to see what resources the tradition affords us and where we need to extrapolate new visions.

When I am faced with a major intellectual puzzle, I usually contemplate it using a strategy that I learned from the oral traditions of Tibetan Buddhism—three-fold logic. This strategy suggests that most sets of information can be fruitfully analyzed and organized by locating a starting point, a process of change and development, and an end product. The task of articulating a Buddhist ethical response to the environmental crisis is daunting enough that I spent many hours going back to the basics of using a traditional three-fold logic with which to think about what Buddhism might have to offer. The traditional system of three-fold logic

that offered the most insight is a system called "view, practice, and result." This particular system focuses first on the theoretical analysis appropriate to a specific issue—the view. Then, with the view well in hand, we turn to the question of what practices or spiritual disciplines will enable one to realize or internalize the view, so that it is no longer merely an intellectual theory. Finally, understanding the view and having practiced the appropriate contemplative and meditative exercises, what actions will one take when the view is fully internalized? In this chapter, I will apply the three-fold logic of view, practice, and result to Buddhist teachings as they might be relevant to the ecological crisis. I will seek to suggest what traditional Buddhist teachings are most relevant to environmental concerns, what Buddhist practices could be invoked to internalize that view in a practical way, and what results might would then be forthcoming.

My approach to developing a Buddhist environmental ethic will emphasize two things. First, I will appeal to simple pan-Buddhist teachings and practices for the most part, rather than to the doctrines of advanced Buddhist philosophy or the practices of esoteric forms of Buddhism. I do this so that Buddhists everywhere could find a Buddhist environmental ethic that is accessible and relevant. Second, I will emphasize practice over view. One of the reasons for working with the specific system of three-fold logic that I chose is because the view—the theoretical analysis—is only the beginning of the discussion. I have been somewhat disappointed with the current small body of literature on Buddhist environmental ethics because most authors have focused on view or theory and have not sufficiently discussed practices promoting environmentally sound lifestyles.

Quite frankly, regarding environmental issues, I do not believe coming up with the appropriate view is all that difficult; most people know that humans must lighten the stress they are putting on the environment if we want to survive, and all religions have at least an implicit ethic for doing so. Attention to areas of practice and action is far more lacking; both individuals and groups seem to lack the practices that mandate translating view into action. That consumption and reproduction need to be severely curtailed is rather obvious. But what will convince individuals and groups to make limiting their consumption and reproduction a top priority?

In my view Buddhism has many intellectual and spiritual resources that can easily support an environmental ethic. At the simplest level, because non-harming is so fundamental to Buddhism ethics, once one realizes that excessive consumption and reproduction are harmful, one is obliged to limit such activities. Such advice is also in accord with the most fundamental of all Buddhist guidelines—the Middle Path between extremes. This guideline is always applied to all questions, from questions

about how much effort to put into one's meditation practice, to how much luxury is appropriate, to metaphysical questions about existence and non-existence. It could perhaps be argued that these simple basics—non-harming and the Middle Way—which would automatically come to mind for any Buddhist, could be a sufficient basis for an environmental ethic that would encourage limited consumption and reproduction.

The question of whether Buddhism is compatible with deep ecology, which views all parts of the ecosystem as of equal value, is more complex. While Buddhism is not homocentric in the way that monotheistic religions are, nevertheless, most forms of Buddhism do regard human life as more desirable than any other form of life because of the spiritual potential thought to be inherent in and limited to the human condition. Only human beings can practice meditation and become enlightened. However, Buddhism does not believe that the purpose of non-human nature is to serve human needs (Gross 1995). Rather, human beings are one kind of life in an ecosystem within which all elements are affected in exactly the same way by whatever actions occur. Furthermore, in traditional Buddhist societies in which most people affirm rebirth, all sentient existence is thought to be interconnected and related by virtue of karmic ties from past lives, and rebirth in non-human realms is highly possible. These views provide some basis for environmentally and ecologically sound practices. Within these broad generalizations, how might we proceed to frame a Buddhist ethical response to issues of consumption, reproduction, and the environment?

THE VIEW ACCORDING TO BUDDHISM: INTERDEPENDENCE

When one brings the vast collection of Buddhist teachings into conversation with environmental concerns, one basic teaching stands out above all others in its relevance. That is the Buddhist teaching of interdependence, which is also one of the most basic aspects of the Buddhist worldview, a view held in common by all forms of Buddhism. This law of interdependence is said to have been discovered by the historical Buddha on the night of his enlightenment experience during the third watch of the night, just before dawn and full enlightenment, the same time period during which the Four Noble Truths were discovered. Mythically, this story indicates how basic the teaching of interdependence is to Buddhism.

Simply put, interdependence means that nothing stands alone apart from the matrix of all else. Nothing is independent, and everything is interdependent with everything else. Logically, the proof of interdependence is that nothing can exist apart from the causes and conditions that

give rise to it. But those causes and conditions are also dependent on other causes and conditions. Therefore, linear causality and isolating a single cause for an event gives way to a more web-like understanding of causality in which everything affects everything else in some way because everything is interconnected.

Given interdependence, our very identity as isolated, separate entities is called into serious question, and we are invited to forge a more inclusive and extensive identity. We do not simply stop at the borders of our skin if we are truly interdependent with our world. When we know ourselves to be fundamentally interdependent with everything else rather than being independent entities existing in our own right, our self-centered behaviors will be altered in very basic ways. Nothing that we do is irrelevant, without impact on the rest of our matrix.

The implications of this profound, thoroughgoing interdependence for ecology have already been articulated in a moving fashion by Joanna Macy, among others (Badiner; Batchelor and Brown). In fact, interdependence is to date the most commonly invoked concept in Buddhist environmental ethics. Most often it is celebrated as a view of our relationships with the world that invites and requires ecological concern and a view that is much more emotionally satisfying and realistic than the Western emphasis on the individual as the ultimately real and ultimately important entity. Western Buddhists especially seem to find immense relief in their discovery of what Harold Coward has called the "we-self." This joy is quite understandable, given the emotional burdens concomitant with modern Western individualism.

However, rather than emphasizing the lyrical beauty of interconnectedness, as others have already done very well, I wish to emphasize its more somber implications. First, given interdependence, we cannot intervene in or re-arrange the ecosystem without affecting everything to some extent. Therefore, human interference in the ecosystem cannot be a glib pursuit of "progress" and "growth," two things that many view as ideals. The effects of growth and technological progress on the whole interconnected system are much more important, and these effects are often not anticipated. For example, lowering the death rate, especially the infant mortality rate, through modern medicine seems like clear progress. But failure to see the link between the death rate and the birth rate, which sanctions the continuation of reproductive practices appropriate when the death rate is high, is an important factor in the current population explosion. Similarly, the links between certain chemicals that made consumer products more desirable, a depleted ozone layer, and growing rates of skin cancer were not anticipated. Even when some people have some awareness of the effects of human intervention into the ecosystem, stop-

ping such intervention can be difficult. Even though many are thoroughly alarmed at the global consequences of destroying the Amazon rain forest, its destruction continues because of the overwhelming power of consumerism. The reality of interdependence is sobering, as well as poetic. Each of us feels the effects of actions taken far away by people whom we do not know and whom we cannot influence directly.

If pervasive interconnectedness is an accurate view, then nothing can be delinked from anything else. Taking interdependence seriously urges us to apply "both-and" solutions rather than "either-or" arguments to knotty problems. This applies particularly to consumption and population. When discussing environmental ethics, one of the most important—but largely unrecognized—moral agendas is the need to establish the fundamental similarity of the urge to consume more and the urge to reproduce more rather than being lured into superficial arguments about whether excessive consumption or overpopulation is the major environmental problem, as so often happens in "North" versus "South" debates.

Not only are excessive consumption and excessive reproduction similar in their negative impact on the environment but also in the self-centered motivations from which they spring. The former similarity is to some degree recognized, but the similarity of self-centered motivation has been completely overlooked. This is the case even for Buddhist environmental ethics, where, given Buddhism's especially developed critic of ego, one would expect to find such insights. This literature contains many denunciations, on Buddhist grounds, of personal, corporate, and national greed concerning consumable goods and many discussions of how such greed damages the interdependent ecosystem. But there is almost no discussion of the fact that excessive population growth is at least equally devastating environmentally and would make impossible the vision articulated in many Buddhist environmental writings of the value of the ecosystem, of wilderness, and of non-human sentient beings. More important, Buddhist ecological literature includes almost no discussions of the fact that much reproductive behavior is fueled by individual or communal greed and ego and, therefore, on Buddhist grounds is just as suspect as greed for assets. Buddhist ecological literature ignores the reality that most frequently physiological reproduction occurs because patrilineages or individuals desire physical immortality, or because of the many ways in which birth control fails, not because of altruistic, non-ego-based motives (Gross 1995).

In this regard, Buddhist ecological ethics follows a tendency common in religious or moral discussions—a predisposition to regard individual greed and excessive consumption as a moral failing, while excessive

reproduction is not similarly regarded as a moral failing. In fact, reproduction is idealized and romanticized. Religions often promote large families, both through their discouragement of fertility control and their patriarchal tendency to view women primarily as reproducers, while governments implement pro-natalist tax and social policies in an overpopulated world. Thus, to keep population and consumption properly linked in religious discourse we may need to focus more on population issues. Because we can assume a moral condemnation of excessive consumption in religious ethics, such a focus will actually bring our attention to consumption and population into balance with each other.

Furthermore, if one accepts interdependence, then we must realize that many things that people regard as private individual choices, most especially choices regarding how much to consume and whether or how many children to bear, actually are not private matters because of their profound implications for all sentient beings. The "we-self," in Harold Coward's terminology has a very strong interest in individual practices regarding reproduction and consumption, and its perspective needs to be taken seriously. Very strong ethical arguments that everyone must limit his/her consumption and reproduction follow. These arguments can be made both in terms of rights—the rights of other beings not to be infringed upon by our excessive reproduction and consumption—and in terms of responsibilities—our own responsibility not to harm other beings unnecessarily through our reproduction and consumption.

In an interdependent matrix such moral obligations have little to do with "North" versus "South" or with whether people are rich or poor. Without a healthy environment there will be nothing to consume and no place to reproduce for anyone, North or South, rich or poor. Therefore, the requirement to restore and preserve a healthy interdependent ecosystem has far greater moral urgency than maintaining or increasing current levels of consumption and reproduction.

Rich countries, couples, and individuals have grave responsibilities to limit their fertility, arguably to less than zero population growth, precisely because their rich offspring have such a massive impact on the environment. The argument made by many rich people that they desire more children and have the means to support them does not obviate their children's negative environmental consequences and thus has little moral cogency in an interdependent matrix. And poor countries, couples, and individuals have the same responsibility for different reasons. Poverty has always been evaluated as spiritually useless by Buddhists; it is a serious deviation from the Middle Way and does not afford people the moderate levels of physical and emotional security needed to progress spiritually, which is the only point or purpose of human rebirth (Gross 1995). But

achieving equitable distribution of goods and overcoming poverty is immensely complicated by rapid population growth. In fact, it will probably become impossible if the earth's population is greater than its capacity to support an adequate standard of living for all. And, precisely because poverty is so spiritually useless, there can be no ethical expectation that in such circumstances consumption should fall below certain standards in order to divide consumables evenly, despite selective unwillingness to practice fertility control.

Additionally, the argument popular in some feminist and liberal circles—that population growth among the poor is not environmentally dangerous because of their low levels of consumption—is flawed. First, even though some populations are severely deprived, if their levels of consumption rise to appropriate levels, their large numbers will make an enormous environmental impact. What will the world look like when the per capita consumption of refrigerators or personal automobiles reaches the level that many deprived people aspire to? Or even when people in some of the poorest and most densely populated areas of the world have sufficient food, clean water, energy, and sanitation? Second, even now the environmental impact of deprived populations is often severe despite low levels of consumption. Forced to the margins of the economy, their subsistence activities contribute to deforestation and desertification. These environmental changes then affect global weather patterns and the productivity of distant lands.

Finally, it is important that population issues not be viewed as aimed exclusively or primarily at women or be detrimental to women. Concern with rapid population growth is concern for the whole environmental matrix, not an anti-women campaign. The effects of overpopulation are felt at least as seriously, and probably more seriously, by women than by men, in part because women's work usually becomes more difficult and time-consuming when the immediate environment is degraded due to overpopulation. It is well-known that the most effective methods of limiting rapid population growth are increased education for women and a rising standard of living. Therefore, both environmental and population policies should focus on these factors rather than denouncing women for their fertility.

THE CORE PRACTICE: BUDDHIST MEDITATIONS AND CONTEMPLATIONS ON INDIVIDUAL DESIRE IN AN INTERDEPENDENT WORLD

An ecological ethic has been defined as a value system and set of practices through which people come to appreciate the entire matrix of life

enough to limit their own consumption and reproduction for the well-being of that matrix. These limits are adopted despite technologies and economies, which, by ignoring the big picture and the long run, foster in people the illusion that having more children and consuming more material goods are unproblematic. An effective religious environmental ethic would inspire people willingly to limit reproduction and consumption. Buddhism, in my view, has some important, perhaps unique, insights to offer toward developing such an ethic.

Buddhism suggests that we look into our own desires when confronted with problems and misery, and I believe such practices are quite relevant for developing the kind of environmental ethic defined above. The Four Noble Truths, often characterized as the Buddha's verbalization of his enlightenment experience, provide the basis for developing an ethic of adopting limits for the sake of the matrix of life. Because the Four Noble Truths are so basic to Buddhism, an environmental ethic based on them is not foreign to Buddhism, even though these teachings may not have been applied to environmental ethics before. The First and Second Noble Truths foster especially fruitful contemplations relevant to ecological ethics. The First Noble Truth states that conventional lifestyles inevitably result in suffering; the Second Noble Truth states that suffering stems from desire rooted in ignorance. Translated into more ecological language, a conventional lifestyle of indulging in desired levels of consumption and reproduction results in the misery of an environmentally degraded and overpopulated planet.

The Second Noble Truth, with its emphasis on desire as the cause of suffering, is the key to a Buddhist environmental ethic. But before we can develop the implications of the Second Noble Truth for environmental ethics, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the term "desire" in this context, since that term is widely misunderstood, with the result that Buddhism is often caricatured as a pessimistic, world-denying religion. The usually-chosen English word "desire" translates the Pali *tanha* and the Sanskrit *trishna*, but the connotations of the term "desire" are not strong enough to carry the meaning of the Second Noble Truth. Most English-speaking people regard desire as inevitable and only a problem if it gets out of hand. But in Buddhist psychology *trishna* is always out of hand, inevitably out of control. Therefore, I believe more accurate connotative translations of *trishna* would be "addiction" or "compulsion," terms which more adequately convey its insatiable demands and counterproductive nature. "Grasping," "attachment," "clinging," "craving," and "fixation" are also possible, more accurate translations, and the way the term "greed" is now used when discussing some multinationals also could translate *trishna*. All of these terms suggest that the object of desire is

actually more powerful, more in control, than the desiring subject, which is precisely why *trishna* causes *duhkha*—misery.

Trishna is not about having lightly-held plans or about preferring an adequate diet to malnourishment, as many people think when they try to refute Buddhism by saying that life without attachment is impossible. *Trishna* is about the extra weight we bring to our plans and preferences when they so control us that any change throws us into uncontrollable, heedless emotional turmoil. That is how *trishna* causes *duhkha. Trishna* is also about the mistaken view that getting something—wealth or a male child, for example—will bring happiness and satisfaction. Because of this view, such goals are pursued compulsively and, therefore, suffering results. Thus, it is clear that from a Buddhist point of view, *trishna* is at the root of both excessive consumption and overpopulation. Neither would occur if people did not think that more wealth or more children would satisfy an existential itch that only is cooled by equanimity. "I want . . ." are the two words that fuel the suffering of excessive consumption and overpopulation.

Because it is so counter-intuitive in our culture to suggest that attachment is the cause of human miseries, let us perform a mental exercise I often use with my students. Buddhists, contrary to popular Western stereotypes about them, regard happiness as favorably as any other people. The First Noble Truth is not about preferring misery to happiness but about noting that conventional ways of pursuing happiness produce sorrow instead. Most people think that happiness results from getting what we crave, whereas Buddhists would say that happiness happens when *trishna* is renounced. Thus, craving and happiness are incompatible. Some reflection on one's last experience of unrelieved, intense longing will quickly confirm that it was not a pleasant experience. One endures the longing because of the pleasure that comes when cravings are satisfied. But the satisfaction is short-lived, quickly replaced by yet another longing. The satisfaction of our cravings is virtually impossible because of the insatiable, addictive nature of *trishna,* which always wants more. Since craving and happiness are incompatible, which one should be renounced?

The good news of Buddhism is that the mental attitude of grasping and fixation is not the only alternative. "I want . . ." can be replaced with simply noting what is. The enlightened alternative to *trishna* is detachment—equanimity and even-mindedness beyond the opposites of hope and fear, pleasure and pain. It is the unconditional joy that cannot be produced by the satisfaction of cravings but which arises spontaneously when we truly experience unfabricated mind. Equanimity has nothing to do with getting what we want and everything to do with developing contentment with things as they are. It is the hard-won ability to be at least

somewhat even-minded whether one gets one's heart-desire or is denied it. It is the hard-won ability to put space around every experience, to realize that nothing lasts forever without feeling cheated, and to be at least somewhat cheerful no matter what is happening. Therefore, fundamentally, *trishna* and equanimity are states of mind; they have little to do with what we have or do not have. According to Buddhism, external factors, whether they are other people or material objects, are not the source of joy or suffering; rather *attitudes* toward people and things determine which we experience. Both rich and poor can be ridden with *trishna* and both can cultivate equanimity, though extreme poverty is not especially conducive to developing equanimity. Those in poverty are often too consumed with survival to develop equanimity and enlightenment—strong arguments to work toward a small population living well, rather than a large population living in dire circumstances or the current extreme inequities between rich and poor (Gross 1995).

On the other hand, greed is normal in people who live conventional lives, which is why it seems so counter-intuitive to suggest that longings, such as those for more wealth or more children, are the cause of suffering. According to Buddhism, greed is normal in conventional people because of a pervasive and deep-seated erroneous view of the self. Craving for *more,* whether children or things, is rooted in ignorance. Ignorance of what? Classically, craving is rooted in ignorance and denial of our fundamental nature, which is the lack of a permanent individual self—*anatman.* But *anatman* is simply another name for interdependence. Because we are interdependent with everything else in the matrix of existence, we do not exist in the way we conventionally believe that we do—as self-existing, self-contained bundles of wants and needs that end with our skin, or, if we feel generous, with our immediate families. That imagined independent self that greedily consumes and reproduces itself is a fiction. It has never really existed, and so giving up on it is not a loss but a homecoming. This is the aspect of Buddhism that has been so inspiring to deep ecologists, who have claimed that Asian worldviews are more conducive to ecological vision than Western emphases on the unique, independently existing, eternal individual.

Furthermore, when Buddhists discuss *trishna* as the cause of suffering, all compulsions are equally problematic because craving is incompatible with equanimity. Therefore, on grounds other than interdependence, one cannot delink population from consumption or either from the environment. Frequently outsiders will ask whether it is not permissible to have "good" longings. The negative answer to this question is especially important in this context because it puts desire for too many things and desire for too many children on exactly the same footing. Both are equally prob-

lematic and destructive. The environmental crisis is not solved by arguing about whether overpopulation or excessive consumption is more serious but by "both-and" linkages between them.

These contemplations on individual longing in an interdependent world are rather steep, but they have many virtues in promoting a more radical way of linking consumption, reproduction, and the environment. The most important is that, while in terms of absolute truth individuals do not exist as independent entities, in terms of relative truth a profound re-orientation of consciousness to that fact, individual by individual, is necessary, if the root causes of excessive consumption and reproduction are to be overcome. While I certainly favor governmental, economic, and social programs and policies that discourage excessive consumption and reproduction, I also think that by themselves such interventions at the macro-level will be insufficient. Nor does Buddhism have a great deal to say about such policies; individual people need to realize and experience that their happiness does not require or depend on *more* of anything, and Buddhist practices have a great deal to offer in promoting such personal transformation. So long as limits, whether to consumption or fertility, are regarded as a dreary duty imposed from above and a personal loss, people will resent and try to evade them.

But if one experiences such limits not as personal loss but as normal, natural, and pleasant in an interdependent matrix, then they are not a problem. In terms of behaviors in which I personally take pride and that aid environmental viability, it is no problem to be childless, a point I often make to young people pressured by family and society to have children against their better judgement. People talk of zero-population growth or of China's one-child policy as if they were extreme, but, given the counter-productivity of recent population growth, a declining population and many childless people are more in order. So many things and people in our world need nurturing that one hardly needs to have biological offspring to find something worthy of nurturing.

It is no problem to drive a thirteen-year-old car, the second I have ever owned (I would prefer not to need one), and it is no problem to share my spacious, highly valued personal sanctuary of a hundred-plus-years-old house with others (for modest rent). I even share my cats with my housemate—and I prefer cats to most other creatures and things. I do these things not out of economic necessity, for I could easily afford a much newer car and afford not to share my home, but because they are reasonable, sane ways to tread more lightly on the environment. This combination of not regarding limits as a problem and of not cultivating exclusive personal possessiveness concerning what one values is important for long-term environmental viability. Buddhist practices certainly are helpful in

internalizing such attitudes, in converting them from externally imposed duty to self-existing environmentally friendly behaviors.

Such contemplations also protect against one of the most difficult and depressing aspects of trying to live somewhat modestly—the fear that so many people are not limiting their consumption and their fertility that one's own actions make no difference. But, if living with limits is pleasure rather than duty, joining the feeding frenzy of a society oriented to personal greed and family immortality is not tempting or appealing. My housemate wants a hot tub in the back yard; I could afford one, but I think they are wasteful, self-indulgent, and certainly not good for the environment. Recently at my cabin, a guest suggested that washing dishes without running water is too much trouble and that we should use paper plates instead. His justification—so many people are doing it that our abstinence makes no difference—is more logical, and probably more realistic, than my assumption that washing dishes is right action in this case. But the appeal of such convenience does not lure me because I already feel I should stop using paper towels in favor of cloth rags and toilet paper in favor of an Indian-style water cup. The point is not that these small efforts on my part will not make much difference to the big picture—that is not the issue or the motivation for my behaviors and I do not think about the results of my actions. Rather, Asian notions of worrying about right action rather than the outcome of those actions have been with me so long that I am content with the actions, not needing their success or failure as my motivator. The important point is that wanting to engage in more convenient, more wasteful practices does not occur, and so I am not being heroic. What Buddhism can offer to an environmental ethic are practices that help individuals value right action rather than consequences.

However, this discussion of Buddhist practice must also note that contemplative practices have been emphasized in this chapter. Most Buddhists would not regard contemplative practices as sufficient by themselves to produce the personal transformations discussed above, would say it is not possible to think ourselves into deep personal transformation. Such contemplative exercises need to be founded upon meditative disciplines in which one learns to be with the entirety of experience without acceptance or rejection, without manipulation, without praise or blame, with openness and equanimity. Such meditative exercises, part of Buddhist oral tradition, are the basis for internalizing these contemplative practices until they become second nature. In addition, they are energizing and calming at the same time, thus providing staying power and cheerfulness for the long run, rather than the burnout and bitterness so characteristic of zealots.

WALKING THE MIDDLE PATH: RESULTS OF BUDDHIST PRACTICE

A frequent complaint against religion in general and Buddhism in particular is that the profound ethical insights of the tradition have little practical impact on the world. In popular stereotypes, Buddhism in particular, with its emphasis on silent, motionless meditation practices, is accused of being other-worldly. But this widespread evaluation is, in my view, based on a serious misunderstanding of Buddhist ethics regarding social action. Buddhism generally teaches that the first moral agenda is to develop clarity and equanimity one's self, before trying to intervene in or influence society at large. Thus, Buddhism's emphasis on practices promoting individual transformation is not anti-social or other-worldly in any way but instead is aimed at avoiding the self-righteous excesses so common in religions that promote activism for all. According to Buddhist understandings of moral development, the meditative and contemplative practices discussed above result in the development of genuine compassion, said to be the only basis for a helpful program of social action.

Furthermore, stereotypes aside, the Buddhist record of personal transformation leading to social benefit is impressive. It must be remembered that Buddhism has been the dominant religion in very few societies; those societies, such as Tibet and South-east Asia, are not especially overpopulated and have not been markedly aggressive since their conversion to Buddhism. Two of the most respected and effective recent winners of the Noble Peace Prize, the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi, are Buddhists and base their social activism directly on Buddhist principles and their meditative discipline. The Dalai Lamu has publicly advocated both population regulation and environmental protection as vital to the survival and well-being of the planet. Nor are these isolated examples. Twentieth-century Buddhism has developed a global movement called Engaged Buddhism, which some see as the Buddhist equivalent of liberation theology. Nor is the historical record devoid of examples of effective personal transformation leading to Buddhist social action. A well-known example is that of Emperor Ashoka of ancient India, famous for becoming a pacifist after his conversion to Buddhism (Robinson and Johnson: 46-48). One could also cite the fact that the Tibetans, who were militarily very sophisticated and successful before their conversion to Buddhism (Stein: 62; Snellgrove: 31-32), completely lost interest in military affairs after they became Buddhists (Bell: 42; Snellgrove: 144-145). And in East Asia, though Buddhism was used to train soldiers in military discipline, it has also been credited with bringing new practices of compassion and charity to those societies (Wright: 74-76).

As already noted, thus far contemporary Buddhist ethical thought has not brought together the inter-related issues of population, consumption, and the environment. But certain conclusions regarding appropriate actions follow inevitably from understanding the view of interdependence and following the practice of replacing compulsion with equanimity. Within a finite matrix it is not possible to have both all the material goods and all the fertility that people living conventionally want. Some choices must be made. We could continue the current obscene distribution patterns, with a few people consuming most of the earth's resources and the majority of people pushing the margins of existence. If consumer goods are the ultimate concern, we could have a world in which most people have their personal automobile, though only with a significantly reduced population if breathing oxygen continues to be necessary for humans. If fertility and reproduction are the ultimate concern, we could reproduce until the entire earth is as crowded and impoverished as today's most crowded places, though I think the traditional controllers of population—violence, epidemic, and famine—would intervene well before such an apocalypse could occur. (How much less suffering is involved in limiting human population through fertility regulation rather than through war, disease, and starvation!) Or we could chart a middle course, balancing consumption and reproduction in ways that result in a world in which there are few enough people consuming moderately enough that all can be adequately cared for materially, emotionally, and spiritually. Without doubt, Buddhism, with its longstanding advocacy of a middle path that avoids extremes, would favor that latter course and lend its views and practices to supporting such action.

I will conclude this article exploring the ways in which some traditional Buddhist ethical teachings might be applied to take action regarding issues of population, consumption, and the environment, especially given the current inequities in resource distribution and rates of reproduction. I will work with Buddhist teachings that are specifically devoted to providing guidelines for compassionate action—the *paramita*-s ("transcendent virtues" in one common translation) discussed as part of the *bodhisattva* path in Mahayana Buddhism. After some proficiency in understanding interdependence and the Four Noble Truths, these teachings become relevant to the Buddhist practitioner, at least as some forms of Buddhism understand the Buddhist path of ethical development. Once one has some clarity about how counterproductive *trishna* is in an interdependent matrix, one may have some idea about how to help in a world consumed by *trishna.*

A rich literature of contemplation and commentary revolves around *paramita* practice, and I will draw upon some of this literature. I will also link my discussion of *paramita* practice with some Western ethical concepts relevant to issues of population and consumption, namely, the language of rights and responsibilities. For Western Buddhists in particular, such linkages and cross-cultural conceptual translations are important, both for our understanding of Buddhism and for making Buddhist contributions to our Western cultural milieu. That such efforts are sometimes disparagingly compared to the early period of Chinese Buddhism, when "matching concepts" between Chinese and Buddhist worldviews was practiced by many (Wright: 36-41), does not lessen the relevance and appropriateness of this method.

In this context it is helpful to focus on the first two of the six *paramita*-s, generosity and discipline. Generosity is highly valued in Buddhism as a whole. Wealth, in and of itself, is not inappropriate for a Buddhist, but wealth should be circulated to promote widespread ethical and spiritual well-being, rather than hoarded. Generosity is thus evaluated as the primary virtue of the *bodhisattva*, without which the other *paramita*-s cannot develop or will develop improperly. On the other hand, generosity by itself is meaningless and may well be counterproductive. It needs to be balanced and informed by the *paramita* immediately following generosity—discipline. (In Buddhist thought, not just the members of a list but their order on the list are important clues.) If it is not so balanced and informed, generosity may well lead to what my teacher called "idiot compassion"—giving people things that are not helpful to them because one lacks discipline and *prajna* (discriminating awareness wisdom) in being generous. Instead, he often said, the *paramita* of discipline involves uttering "the giant NO," when the situation called for it. One could even talk of the gift of the "giant NO." (It should be pointed out that, ideally *paramita* practice is based on enough understanding of interdependence—emptiness or *shunyata* in Mahayana language—that the practice is non-dualistic. Therefore, the question of giver and receiver of generosity or discipline does not arise. There is simply one spontaneous field of action.)

I suggest that it might be helpful to link this discussion of generosity and discipline to Western language about rights and responsibilities. Regarding such language, I agree with the widespread observation that it is a product of the European enlightenment and individualism, and does not fit easily into most Asian systems of thought, including Mahayana discussions of the *paramita*-s. This lack of fit is due to the fact that language of rights and responsibilities is extremely dualistic, based on

assumptions of independently existing individuals who have rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis each other. I would also argue that in much contemporary Western discourse, rights and responsibilities have become dangerously delinked from one another. Claims for multiple rights abound, but very few wish to discuss the corresponding responsibilities, which often lends a tone of childish demand to claims about rights.

Nevertheless, despite lack of a perfect fit between the *paramita*-s of generosity and discipline with Western concepts of rights and responsibilities, some comparisons may be instructive. The example of the way generosity and discipline are linked in Mahayana thought may well prove a useful model for how to link rights and responsibilities in Western discussions. One could see generosity as roughly analogous to rights and discipline as analogous to responsibility. Those in need have rights to the generosity of those with more wealth, but to merit continued generosity, they have responsibilities do be disciplined in their own lives. Likewise, those with relative wealth have a responsibility to be generous with their consumables, but they also have both a right and a responsibility to exercise discipline in giving and to avoid "idiot compassion." Because generosity and discipline so balance and inform each other, the sharp line between rights and responsibilities is diminished. Those with wealth have something beyond responsibility to share it; sharing is a spontaneous discipline beyond rights and responsibility. Likewise, discipline undercuts the question of rights and responsibilities; whatever rights one may think one has, discipline is more integral to self-esteem and well-being. When discipline is well established, responsible and generous action is spontaneous and joyful rather than onerous.

The way in which generosity and discipline balance and inform each other in this discussion suggest how to balance and link rights and responsibilities in Western discussions of population, consumption, and the environment. One frequently hears claims of rights to an adequate standard of living as well as rights to reproduce as much as an individual chooses. But corresponding discussions of the effects of unlimited exercise of these "rights" on the ecosystem or the quality of life, corresponding discussions of the need for responsibility when exercising these rights is not always heard. The net effect is that these two rights are on a collision course with each other. Rather than discussing such rights as if they could be independent of each other, it is important to realize that the more seriously we take the claim of a right to a universal minimum standard of living, the more critical universal fertility regulation becomes. Only if we don't really think it is possible to divide the world's resources equitably, can we afford to be casual about universal fertility regulations. And the more unrestricted fertility earth experiences, the more difficult it will

become ever to achieve equitable distribution. Conversely, if unregulated wasteful consumption continues unabated, inequities of wealth and poverty can only grow; then the poor, whose only resource is their children, cannot possibly do without enough of them to put minimal food on the table and to provide minimal old age care. The more that destructive patterns of growth and consumption increase, the more difficult it becomes to avoid excessive population growth. Only if it is thought that the wealthy can somehow insulate themselves from the negative environmental consequences of such growth can we afford to be casual about the need to forbid excessive and wasteful consumption. Like generosity and discipline, rights exist only in interdependence with responsibilities. Those who refuse to meet their responsibilities lose their rights, which is why involuntary fertility regulation and involuntary limits to consumption are not always inappropriate. No one's rights to their consumables or their fertility are so absolute that they include destroying or damaging the environment in which we all live.

While writing this article, I returned to my childhood home once again, noting with sadness the negative effects of more people than ever before consuming at greater levels than ever before. The spring, the outhouse, and the woods to provide firewood are still there, and all are still used. But traffic noise from long-distance eighteen-wheel trucks hauling consumables to and fro often interrupts the silence unpleasantly. My cabin is now on the first open land from town and a nearby lake, wild and unsettled in my childhood, is now surrounded by houses as crowded together as if they were in a city. Year by year increased population increases the pressure to subdivide and sell my land; before I die, higher taxes due to these population pressures may force me to sell. One can still see more stars in the black sky than in a city, but those to the north are whited out by light pollution from the nearest town. Now I comment on dragonflies, butterflies, and fireflies, because they are not as common as they once were.

To trade in this sacred, pristine environment to support more people consuming at unprecedented levels seems a poor bargain. I can see no way in which all this "more"—more people, more stuff—has improved the quality of life, except perhaps that I can now buy Chinese spices at the local grocery store! But surely we can figure out ways to increase quality without increasing quantity, and, if not, I'd rather do without Chinese spices than without the spacious, untrammeled environment. More is not better, whether it is more people or more consumables. "Growth," the god we worship is a false idol, needing to be replaced by "no growth," if not by "negative growth." "Growth" and "more" represent the unbridled reign of *trishna,* not appreciation and reverence for the interdependent matrix of

the environment in which we live and upon which we depend unconditionally. But to be consumed by *trisnha* is not human nature, not our inevitable lot or inescapable original sin. With enough meditation and contemplation of interdependence, *trishna* will give way to equanimity. Would that *trishna* give way to contentment and equanimity—speedily and in our time!

REFERENCES

Badiner, Allen Hunt 1990 — *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays on Buddhism and Ecology.* Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press:

Batchelor, Martine, and Kerry, Brown, eds. 1992 — *Buddhism and Ecology* London: Cassell.

Bell, Charles 1968 — *The Religion of Tibet* London: Oxford University Press

Callicot, J. Baird, and Roger T. Aimes 1989 — *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Gross, Rita M. 1993 — *Buddhism After Patriarcy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism* Albany: State University of New York Press.

1995 — "Buddhist Resouces for Issues of Population, Consumption, and the Environment." In *Population, Consumption and the Environment.* Ed. by Harold Coward. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Macy, Joanna 1991 — *World as Lover, World as Self* Berkeley, CA: Parallalax Press.

Robinson, Richard H., and Willard Johnson 1982 — *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*

Snellgrove, David, and Hugh Richardson 1968 — *A Cultural History of Tibet.* Boulder, CO: Prajna Press.

Stein, R.A. 1972 — *Tibetan Civilization.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Wright, Arthur E. — *Buddhism in Chinese History.* New York: Atheneum.