Mahayana Buddhism began to take root in China after the fall of the Han Dynasty (206 C.E.). After centuries of influence by Chinese thought and values, especially Daoist, new Chinese Buddhist schools developed, such as Huayan and Chan (Japanese: Kegon and Zen). These schools spread to Korea and Japan (as well as Vietnam), where other important schools and movements arose, such as the esoteric sect of Shingon in Japan. The result was forms of Buddhism that differed in substantial ways from South Asian Buddhism (even in its Mahayana forms).

The ecological significance of East Asian Buddhism is wide-ranging and profound. But that significance is also ambivalent because Buddhist doctrines, values, and practices can undercut as well as support ecological concerns. Here we will limit ourselves to a few major aspects that are important to a philosophy of nature and ecological practice: the nature and value of the phenomenal world, the self and its relationship with nature, and moral feelings and action in response to the world.

Before we do so, it is worthwhile to point to one very general trend of East Asian Buddhism: nondualism. Earlier Buddhism, especially Indian Mahayana, had nondualistic tendencies, but East Asian Buddhism tended to emphasize it and apply it more broadly and consistently. Nondualism became more a general approach applied to various doctrines rather than one particular doctrine.

Obviously, one of the aspects of greatest ecological significance is the view of the reality and value of the natural world. While it is inaccurate to describe Indian Buddhism as “world-denying,” it did not tend to cultivate a strong valorization of the phenomenal world. The Chinese tradition, on the other hand, has tended to emphasize the reality and value of the natural world, and this is true of Chinese Buddhism as well.

Huayan Buddhism developed the most comprehensive – and intellectually challenging – metaphysics, one that is particularly significant for an ecological philosophy of nature. One aspect of this significance is its view of the relationship between phenomena and absolute reality. Huayan insists that there is in actuality no difference between the absolute and phenomena. Ultimate reality is not some transcendental One but this very world, and phenomena are themselves the absolute. The Huayan master Fazang (643-712) attempted to explain this aspect of reality to the Chinese Empress Wu with his analogy of the golden lion. We can intellectually distinguish the lion shape from the gold, but in actuality there can be no such shape without the gold that is shaped. Similarly, gold always has a shape, whether it is a lion, a temple, or a blob. So too, the phenomenal world is the ever-shifting form of the absolute. Huayan thus offers a fully nondualistic view of the relationship between the absolute and phenomena.

A similar argument was made concerning the relationship between the whole of phenomena and the parts. In a conventional view, there can be a whole (let’s say a barn) separate from the parts (rafters, paneling, etc.). From this perspective, there are pieces of wood, nails, etc., and then there is a barn and
each part can be replaced and still have the “same” barn. Huayan, however, says that there is no whole separate from the particular parts. A rafter is the barn, just the same as my arm or leg is my body. Each part is the whole. If a rafter or my arm were replaced, says Huayan, we would have a new barn and I would have a different body. Nothing is relegated to the status of being “merely a part” that the whole can do without. Thus Huayan spoke of li shi wu ai: the mutual non-interference of the absolute and phenomena.

Huayan is most famous for its views of the relationships among phenomena. The Chinese term that summarizes the Huayan view is shi shi wu ai, the mutual “non-interference” among all things. The basic point is an emphasis on the unqualified interdependence and interpenetration of all things. The classic image used to represent interpenetration is Indra’s net, which is described in the Gandavyuha Sutra. In this image, the universe is considered to be a vast web of many-sided and highly polished jewels, each one acting as a multiple mirror. In one sense each jewel is a single entity. But when we look at a jewel, we see the reflections of every other jewel, each of which contains the reflections of other jewels, and so on in an endless system of mirroring. Thus in each jewel is the image of all other jewels as well as the entire net as whole. The jewels interpenetrate each other. Yet each one contains the others in its own unique way in its distinctive position, and so they are distinct.

Another way that East Asian Buddhism analyzed the world was in terms of Buddha nature. In Indian Mahayana Buddhism there developed the idea that all sentient beings have the Buddha nature. In East Asia this perspective was expanded in three principal ways. The first was to increase the range of what was included. Over time, plants were seen as having Buddha nature: the dualism between plants and animals was dropped. In the case of the Japanese Shingon master Kūkai (774-835) and Zen master Dōgen (1200-1253), even inanimate objects such as rocks and roof-tiles were included – any other view would be dualistic between biotic and abiotic phenomena.

The second development concerned the level of realization. The original view was that all beings had Buddha nature in a latent or germinal form. In East Asia the idea of “original enlightenment” developed, which meant that everyone’s Buddha nature was actually fully developed. The problem was that we do not realize this Buddha nature because it is obscured, like clouds covering the full moon. In line with such a view, the world was conceived of as fully realized, perfect just as it is. The point is not that the world satisfies our notion of the good and beautiful. This “perfection” is nondualistic: all things and conditions are of unqualified reality and value, even those that involve suffering.

The third development is the relationship between Buddha nature and beings. Traditionally things were said to possess Buddha nature, as they would other qualities. For Dōgen, such a view involved a dualism between the being and Buddha nature. Instead, all things are the Buddha nature. There is nothing that is not Buddha nature.

Such a radically positive valorization of the world was put in other terms as well. The world is seen as the very body of the Buddha. Mountains and rivers were considered a sutra (Buddhist scripture) and the birds sing the dharma (Buddhist truth). Particular regions, especially mountains, were seen as
mandalas (a symbolic representations of the cosmos). While Buddhist metaphysics are universalistic, often it is the natural world that is thought of principally as the unsullied embodiment of ultimate reality. Theoretically cities were included, but they are also sites of craving, aversion, and delusion, something not found in nature.

Two main results of such a radically nondualistic metaphysics have particular bearing on ecological philosophy. One is that the world is conceived of holistically as a net of relationships, rather than as a collection of individual things. This is not a monism in which the reality of individuals disappears but rather a relational holism in which individuals are distinct but interrelated within a whole. The second result is that this world and each individual thing in it is given unqualified reality and value. There is no transcendental world and no abstract One separate from this world of redwoods and woodpeckers. There is no independent parts that we can devalue for the sake of other parts or the whole: everything has unlimited value.

But such a radical nondualism also seems to undercut ecological concern because it apparently invalidates any type of distinctions. Is toxic waste Buddha nature the same as a redwood tree? If the rainforests are completely destroyed, wouldn’t what remained also be the body of the Buddha? This issue is too complex to respond to fully here, but it would involve the recognition that the nondualism of Buddhist metaphysics does not stand alone. There is also the Buddhist analysis of the effect of actions, involving the acute realization of suffering, along with the Mahayana tradition of combining compassion with wisdom. Similarly this metaphysics needs to be joined with the Buddhist analysis of the motive for actions, including the Buddhist critique of craving, aversion, and delusion: the distinction between enlightened and unenlightened motivations remains. The combination of nondualism, compassion, and psychological critique can form a powerful and complex basis for an ecological ethics.

In addition to metaphysics, East Asian views of consciousness and the self have substantial ecological import. The Indian Mahayana school of Yogacara spoke in terms of “consciousness only.” This does not refer to subjectivism or idealism, which would involve an acceptance of the subject-object duality and then a one-sided erasure of the objective world. Instead, there is a dissolution of the subject-object split. This perspective of nonduality between subject and object was developed more fully in China, both as a metaphysical claim about reality and a psychological ideal for the practitioner.

Metaphysically, our dichotomy between a subjective consciousness and an objective reality is false. So what is there? Because our thought patterns and language assume a split between them, even Buddhists tend to speak either in subjective or objective terms (the “One Mind” or “reality as-it-is”). It would be more accurate to say that there is only “reality-consciousness.” This is the True Self: the universe as a whole in this moment of experience.

Psychologically, the subject-object split is a delusion that leads to cravings and aversions. If we believe that there is a world separate from our self, there will be things “out there” we desire and things we fear and hate. The ideal is to attain a state of mind in which this delusion falls away and one experiences reality directly. Meditation techniques seek to cultivate “concentration and insight,” an
intense focus on the world that leads to a sense of absorption in what we experience; there is no longer any sense of an “I” separate from what is being experienced. The ideal of direct perception and the practice of concentration and insight resonated with certain practices and ideals in Daoism and Confucianism, and they greatly influenced the poets and painters of East Asia. They also have significant appeal to contemporary people seeking a way to become more intimate with nature and transcend the sense of alienation from the natural world.

Another sense of the self is at work in East Asian Buddhism. We are Buddha nature, although it is covered up by greed, hatred, and delusion. As we come to realize our inherent Buddha nature, we naturally feel compassion toward those that suffer. And that compassion naturally leads to action in response to suffering. Buddhism, especially Zen, borrowed from the notion of spontaneity (jiran and wuwei) earlier developed by the Daoist Zhuangzi (ca. 300 B.C.E.). Zhuangzi held that we have an innate disposition to respond to the world in a harmonious way, and this is only short-circuited by intention and reason. To this idea Chinese Buddhism added the concern for suffering and the feeling of compassion.

Such a complex sense of the self can form the basis of an unqualified valorization of the natural world and a context for moral emotions and action. Rainforest activist John Seed has famously said that he is not an altruist attempting to help something out there; he is the rainforest naturally responding to its own destruction. Such an idea is an authentic extrapolation of this East Asian Buddhist perspective. This clearly is not a form of conventional Western ethics, based on moral reasoning about how the individual ought to respond to the world. It is an intuitive and spontaneous ethic of identification with the world. However, an ecoBuddhist taking this approach would need to explain how such an ethic could deal with complex ecological issues in a sufficiently informed and sustained way.

On the level of feelings, the bodhisattva ideal of compassion for all beings has been a hallmark of East Asian Buddhism and is a potentially rich source for ecological ethics. However, compassion can be interpreted in various ways, including some that are not conducive to environmental concern. Compassion could be limited to spiritual suffering and not include physical pain or emotional distress, let alone social injustice or environmental degradation. It has been argued that if Buddhists focus on such “non-spiritual” suffering (e.g., hunger or homelessness), their compassion will be ineffective. Even those living in comfort are burdened with cravings and aversions, attachments and dissatisfactions. The goal, this argument holds, should be to develop Buddhist wisdom, in which case physical pain will no longer cause aversion, emotional distress will not arise, and one will not be attached to the ever-present ills of the world. To be ecologically and socially relevant, a Buddhist would need to insist that the range of compassion includes pain, deprivation, and fear.

Similarly, the issue of the range of compassion is crucial. Even if one were to feel compassion for conventional suffering, if the scope is limited the significance of compassion will be as well. Does compassion refer only to or primarily to humans, or to animals as well? What about an ecosystem such as the rainforest? Does compassion extend to the generations of beings in the future? A “holistic” Buddhist
ethics would need to insist – against the actual mainstream tradition of Buddhism – that compassion should be all-encompassing.

Another critical issue in the potential significance of East Asian Buddhism is the role of the social and structural level in one’s analysis and response. Traditionally, Buddhism has focused on the individual, both in terms of the analysis of the problem and the cultivation of the ideal. But in our age it has become evident that the cause of environmental and social problems is not limited to individual psyches; political structures and social forces stimulate and empower cravings, aversions, and delusion, and they cause great suffering for all beings. To be truly meaningful in dealing with environmental problems, the views and values noted above need to be applicable to the social and structural level. The apparently eco-friendly qualities of East Asian Buddhism have not been much of an environmental or social force in part because the religion has tended to either ignore or support harmful social structures. However, East Asian Buddhism’s emphasis on the interpenetration of all things seems to provide fertile ground for an extension of Buddhist critique and compassion to social systems, leading to a holistic and engaged Buddhism.

David Landis Barnhill, Guilford College

Further reading:


