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# KEY ELEMENTS IN BUDDHIST ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION IN A SUFFERING WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

*Religious environmental communication plays a crucial role in addressing the ecological crisis, with Buddhism—recognized for its environmental potential—offering valuable contributions through its religious and lay leaders. Despite a substantial body of literature on religious environmentalism, discussions specifically on Buddhist environmental communication remain limited or only briefly mentioned in most publications. This paper seeks to address this gap by proposing a Buddhist environmental communication approach comprised of six key elements: 1) communicating prophetically; 2) communicating from the stance of faith; 3) communicating as “people on the ground;” 4) communicating to energize; 5) communicating to criticize; and 6) communicating through exemplary actions. By synthesizing insights from Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholars, the paper advocates for these elements to be incorporated into environmental communication, enabling Buddhist leaders to more effectively challenge destructive and oppressive social and environmental*

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*systems and to foster a comprehensive ecological ethos across society.*

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## **Introduction**

In September 2024, in Thailand's northernmost province of Chiang Rai, a Buddhist temple, Wat Phasukkaram, became an unlikely symbol of the country's growing vulnerability to climate change. After days of relentless rain, floodwaters surged through Mae Sai district, surrounding the temple and trapping 38 people inside, including monks, novices, and laypeople. Stranded by the fast-rising waters from the overflowing Sai River, a monk's desperate message for help, accompanied by a video of the flooded temple grounds, spread across social media.<sup>2</sup>

The prolonged September floods resulted in the death of dozens of people and impacted hundreds of thousands of families throughout the province. Thai scientists said that climate change coupled with La Niña contributed to the (un)natural disaster. The monthly rainfall in Chiang Rai in August was higher than normal by 40 to 50 percent. Mae Sai District experienced flooding six times in September, which was unprecedented.<sup>3</sup> It was estimated that the first wave of flooding cost Chiang Rai and neighboring provinces as much as 27 million baht (830 million USD).<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Wat Tham Pha Chom Buddhist Temple, which is located on

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<sup>2</sup> Bangkok Post, "Deadly landslides, floods in storm-hit North," September 11, 2024, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2863563/deadly-landslides-floods-in-storm-hit-north>

<sup>3</sup> Tommy Walker, "Deadly Thai Floods Intensified by Climate Change, La Niña Displace 150,000 Families," VOA, September 26, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/deadly-thai-floods-intensified-by-climate-change-la-ni%C3%B1a-displace-150-000-families/7799976.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Thai PBS World's Business Desk, "The Economic Toll on Thailand From Tropical Storms May Worsen," *Thai PBS World*, September 30, 2024, <https://world.thaipbs.or.th/detail/the-economic-toll-on-thailand-from-tropical-storms-may-worsen/54914>.

a hilltop and largely unaffected by the flood, became a temporary refuge for hundreds of flood-displaced residents in Mae Sai.

The Earth has experienced natural disasters throughout its history, but the current environmental crisis characterized by events like that described above is uniquely caused by human activity in the Anthropocene, a proposed geological epoch that highlights the significant impact humans have had on Earth's systems. It signifies a period where human activities have become the dominant force shaping the planet's climate, ecosystems, and geology.<sup>5</sup> The concept emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, recognizing that human actions, such as industrialization, deforestation, and the burning of fossil fuels, have left a lasting mark on the Earth. This includes phenomena like climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. While the Anthropocene is not yet officially recognized as a formal geological epoch, it serves as a powerful framework for understanding the profound changes humans have brought about.

Evidence supporting the premises of the Anthropocene has been meticulously documented by a plethora of reputable scientific institutions and international organizations. In a report entitled "Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis," the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) declared: "It is unequivocal that human activities have heated our climate. Recent changes are rapid, intensifying, and unprecedented over centuries to thousands of years. With each additional increment of warming, these changes will become larger, resulting in long-lasting, irreversible implications, in particular for sea level rise."<sup>6</sup>

Again, in its Sixth Assessment Report in 2022, the IPCC affirmed, "Since systematic scientific assessments began in the 1970s, the influence of human activity on the warming of the climate system

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<sup>5</sup> Britannica, "Anthropocene Epoch," November 22, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/science/Anthropocene-Epoch>.

<sup>6</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis," 2021, [https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_SummaryVolume.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SummaryVolume.pdf)

has evolved from theory to established fact.”<sup>7</sup> In the United States, many prominent scientific societies have all issued statements concurring with the conclusions of the IPCC. Among them include the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the United States National Academy of Sciences, the American Chemical Society, the American Geophysical Union, the American Medical Association, and the American Meteorological Society.

The exigency of the situation, according to the IPCC, necessitates an immediate and comprehensive response on a global scale.<sup>8</sup>

The ramifications of inaction are undeniably catastrophic. Climate change jeopardizes global food security while displacing populations as droughts and floods become more commonplace and intense.<sup>9</sup> Unmitigated pollution by chemicals and waste products disrupts natural ecosystems and directly threatens human health.<sup>10</sup> Biodiversity loss weakens the natural world’s capacity to regulate climate and provide essential resources.<sup>11</sup> These issues have the potential to destabilize societies and economies across the globe.

Confronting the reality of the Anthropocene, scholars in various fields have tried to reflect on the ramifications of this epoch from their particular perspectives. Those in the field of religion and religious environmentalism have also done the same. Michael Norton’s book

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<sup>7</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Sixth Assessment Report,” 2022, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg3/>

<sup>8</sup> IPCC, “Climate Change: A Threat to Human Well-being and Health of the Planet. Taking Action Now Can Secure Our Future,” February 28, 2022, <https://www.ipcc.ch/2022/02/28/pr-wgii-ar6/>

<sup>9</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Climate Change and Food Security: Risks and Responses*, 2016, <https://www.fao.org/3/a-i5188e.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Andreas Schäffer et al., “Conflicts of Interest in the Assessment of Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 57, no. 48 (2023): 19066–19077, <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.3c04213>.

<sup>11</sup> M.G. Muluneh, “Impact of Climate Change on Biodiversity and Food Security: A Global Perspective—A Review Article,” *Agriculture & Food Security* 10, No. 36 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40066-021-00318-5>.

*Anthropocene Religion: Rethinking Nature, Humanity and Divinity Amid Climate Catastrophe* examines the concepts of “nature” and “religion” and proposes a new understanding of religion as a material, embodied practice that is intertwined with the natural world. Norton delves into the Gaia hypothesis and explores its implications for both scientific and religious thought. By redefining religion and nature, Norton attempts to provide a philosophical framework for addressing the urgent environmental challenges of our time.<sup>12</sup>

The *Journal of Global Buddhism* in 2024 also published a special issue focused on “Buddhism in the Anthropocene,” which deals with the intersection of Buddhist thought and practice with contemporary environmental concerns. Contributions in the special issue offer perspectives challenging the traditional human-centric view, emphasizing the Earth’s active role in human affairs, and explore how Buddhists are responding to the climate crisis and ecological degradation, from the mindfulness practices of Sri Lankan forest monks to the environmental activism of Australian Buddhist communities.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, there is complexity of these responses due to challenges posed by modern consumption and economic pressures on Buddhist communities. Some Buddhist practices, while aiming for environmental benefit, can inadvertently contribute to ecological harm. Despite this, it is important to examine the material and cultural dimensions of Buddhist practices and their impact on the environment as part of the exploration on how Buddhism can contribute to addressing the urgent environmental challenges of the Anthropocene.

In considering the relationship between Buddhism and the Anthropocene, Alice Millington argues that Himalayan Buddhists have long acknowledged human influence on the environment through their

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Norton, *Anthropocene Religion: Rethinking Nature, Humanity and Divinity Amid Climate Catastrophe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025).

<sup>13</sup> Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko and Jovan Maud, “Buddhism in the Anthropocene: Opening the Global to the Planetary,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 25, no. 1 (2024): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.26034/lu.jgb.2024.5734>.

cosmology and practices. Himalayan folklore features deities and spirits that can influence weather and natural disasters as a response to human actions. Buddhist rituals like “chos skor” aim to appease these deities and maintain environmental balance. The author asserts that Himalayan Buddhists have lived in an “Anthropocene” for centuries, albeit one focused on a spiritual relationship with nature rather than solely material impact.<sup>14</sup>

In the face of ecological crises posed by the Anthropocene, multidisciplinary, dialogical, and dialectical responses are imperative. One of the responses is through effective environmental communication, which represents a major concern today, especially in the face of widespread misinformation and disinformation about climate change as well as the persistence of climate change deniers all around the world.<sup>15</sup> Environmental communication is a crucial tool for raising awareness of environmental issues and fostering a deeper connection to the natural world.<sup>16</sup> Environmental communication serves a dual purpose; it functions as a pragmatic tool for problem-solving and public education on environmental issues while also shaping our perceptions of nature. By representing the natural world and its challenges, it encourages us to view aspects of nature as essential life support systems that deserve our

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<sup>14</sup> Alice Millington, “Himalayan Buddhism As Human Geological Agency: Rethinking the Novelty of ‘the Anthropocene’,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 25, no. 1 (2024): 75–92, <https://doi.org/10.26034/lu.jgb.2024.3815>.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hesley Machado Silva, “Information and Misinformation about Climate Change: Lessons from Brazil,” *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics* 22 (2022): 51–56, <https://doi.org/10.3354/esep00201>; Simon J. Piatek, Andy Haines, and Heidi J. Larson, “We Need to Tackle the Growing Threat of Mis- and Disinformation about Climate Change and Health,” *BMJ* 387 (2024): q2187, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q2187>; Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, *Responding to a Crisis of Trust Powered by Disinformation*, 2024, <https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Addressing-Rampant-Climate-Disinformation-FINAL-.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Alison Anderson, “Reflections on Environmental Communication and the Challenges of a New Research Agenda,” *Environmental Communication* 9, no. 3 (2015): 379–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2015.1044063>.

appreciation and care.<sup>17</sup>

Environmental communication displays different characteristics depending on the lens through which the communication takes place. Thus, environmental communication can be carried out by scientists who are involved in scientific research on relevant issues, by journalists who report on the latest findings, by philosophers who explore the ethical, conceptual, and practical dimensions of human interactions with the natural world, and so on. Because the ecological crisis facing humanity demands collective efforts and transformative changes across all sectors of society,<sup>18</sup> environmental communication by religious leaders have also been recognized as pivotal in contributing to addressing the crisis.<sup>19</sup> However, compared to the numerous publications on the topic of environmental communication strategies in the secular disciplines, there have been few publications that directly address environmental communication from the religious perspective. Undoubtedly, the literature on religious environmentalism is vast and spans all major traditions. Nonetheless, it remains that religious environmental communication as a topic of examination has not been explicitly highlighted in the religious environmental discourse.

This essay examines the role of Buddhist environmental communication in addressing the urgent ecological crisis, which poses a significant threat to social stability and the well-being of all beings. It focuses on the voices of both religious and lay Buddhist leaders, arguing that they must assume a prophetic role to counter environmental

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Cox, "Scale, Complexity, and Communicative Systems," *Environmental Communication* 9, no. 3 (2015): 370–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2015.1044064>.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Le Duc, "Ecological Concerns," in *Missionary Discipleship in Global Contexts*, eds. Lazar T. Stanislaus and vanThanh Nguyen (Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag, 2018), 91.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Raden Roro Ilma Kusuma Wardani, "The Role of Religion-based Communication in Environmental Revitalization and Community Empowerment in Wonosobo," *Indonesian Journal of Social Responsibility Review* 1, no. 3 (2022): 155–210, <https://doi.org/10.55831/ijsrr.v1i3.71>;

degradation and foster an ecological ethos in contemporary society.

It must be noted that this paper does not set out to argue for the relevance of Buddhism to the ecological crisis. Rather it presumes this reality and focuses on themes that Buddhist religious and lay leaders should be cognizant of in order to contribute more effectively to the effort to safeguard the environment. In particular, this paper will propose six elements of Buddhist environmental communication: 1) Communicating prophetically; 2) Communicating from the stance of faith; 3) Communicating as individuals “on the ground”; 4) Communicating to energize; 5) Communicating to criticize; and 6) Communicating through exemplary actions. These six elements are intertwining and often manifest simultaneously in the same communicative act. This paper proposes that the incorporation of these six elements into environmental communication, Buddhist religious and lay leaders will enhance their effectiveness in countering mindsets, behaviors, and systems that are socially and environmentally destructive and oppressive.

### **Need for Religious Environmental Communication**

This paper aims to bring to the forefront the topic of religious environmental communication, particularly through the Buddhist lens. The religious contribution is essential because religion offers a comprehensive framework that provides meaning and purpose to human existence. Encompassing beliefs, rituals, and ethics, religious teachings shape individuals and communities within a cosmological context and connect humanity to the divine, nature, and each other, offering a path for personal growth and societal cohesion.<sup>20</sup> In reality, scholars from various academic disciplines and religious traditions have joined forces to establish the field of religion and ecology. This interdisciplinary field has given rise to academic programs, journals, and organizations that bridge the gap between science and religion to address environmental issues. By recognizing the environmental potential inherent in religious

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<sup>20</sup> M. E. Tucker and J. A. Grim, “Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of World Religions and Ecology,” *Daedalus* 130, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.



traditions, this collaboration has positioned religions as key allies in the pursuit of sustainable development. Joint initiatives, such as appeals for environmental protection and participation in climate summits, exemplify the fruitful dialogue between scientists and religious leaders.<sup>21</sup>

Religion's involvement adds an essential ethical dimension to the environmental discourse, encouraging moral responsibility and ethical actions among followers and beyond. Time and again, we have seen that when religious leaders and institutions speak out promptly, they significantly impact global situations. For example, a study on American Catholics discovered that by publishing the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis significantly influenced American public opinion on climate change. The report found that more Americans, particularly American Catholics, are now concerned about global warming, believe it will have serious impacts, and view it as a moral, social fairness, and religious issue.<sup>22</sup>

Prominent Buddhist leaders such as the late Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama have also proven to be effective communicators regarding environmental concerns. Thich Nhat Hanh addressed ecological issues in many of his writings and talks given around the world. The same is true for the Dalai Lama, who is respected across cultural and spiritual traditions. In February 2024, in his message to the participants of the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Tibet Support Groups in Brussels, Belgium, he highlights the environmental concerns related to the Tibetan Plateau, in particular, the increasing human activities and rising temperatures on the plateau, which pose a significant threat to the region's water balance. Given that the Tibetan Plateau is a vital source of freshwater for over

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<sup>21</sup> R. F. Sadowski, "The Potential of Religion in the Promotion and Implementation of the Concept of Sustainable Development," *Paper Global Change* 24 (2017): 37–52, <https://doi.org/10.1515/igbp-2017-0004>.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Maibach, Anthony Leiserowitz, Teresa Myers, Seth Rosenthal, Geoff Feinberg, and Connie Roser-Renouf, *The Francis Effect: How Pope Francis Changed the Conversation about Global Warming* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University, and New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2015), [https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The\\_Francis\\_Effect.pdf](https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The_Francis_Effect.pdf).

two billion people, the Dalai Lama emphasizes that the protection of the Tibetan environment is a global concern.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, religious traditions, with their profound moral teachings, ethical frameworks, and spiritual practices, have a unique and essential role to play in addressing this crisis.<sup>24</sup> They provide moral and ethical guidelines that emphasize values such as compassion, justice, simple living, moderation, and respect for life. These teachings inspire individuals and communities to consider the broader implications of their actions on the environment and on the well-being of the human community in the present and future. In other words, religious teachings can contribute to the formation of an ecological ethos within the religious community and beyond.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike many secular disciplines, religious teachings can often impel followers to adhere to certain ethical norms even when they seemingly conflict with personal interests.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, time and again, it has been shown that religion can provide tremendous motivation for what individuals say and do.<sup>27</sup> In a world where the vast majority of the people still adhere to a religious tradition, many scholars of religion have pointed out that religious ethics remain one of the most practical vehicles for solving the ecological crisis and other social dilemmas. This is particularly

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<sup>23</sup> Central Tibetan Administration, “His Holiness the Dalai Lama Sends Message for the 9th International Conference of Tibet Support Groups,” February 23, 2024, <https://tibet.net/his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-sends-message-for-the-9th-international-conference-of-tibet-support-groups/>

<sup>24</sup> David Saperstein and Katherine Marshall, “Religious Roles in Environmental Protection and Addressing Climate Change,” Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, July 18, 2024, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/religious-roles-in-environmental-protection-and-addressing-climate-change>.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Le Duc, “Formation of an Ecological Conscience: A Christian Imperative,” *Verbum SVD* 64, no. 2 (2023): 199-214.

<sup>26</sup> Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 52

<sup>27</sup> Christine Schliesser, *On the Significance of Religion for the SDGs: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

true in societies where religious beliefs are deeply ingrained.<sup>28</sup> In reality, many religious traditions through their teachings, can foster a spiritual connection to nature by helping the faithful to recognize the sacredness and intrinsic value of the natural world. This connection encourages reverence for the Earth and its ecosystems, which can lead to practices that safeguard biodiversity, clean air, water sources, and fertile soils. In this regard, religion can do what few disciplines are able to do.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to spiritual connections, religious teachings often advocate for justice, peace, and environmental sustainability.<sup>30</sup> Many environmental challenges disproportionately affect marginalized communities who often lack the resources and political power to mitigate their impacts.<sup>31</sup> By addressing environmental issues through the lens of social and intergenerational justice, religious leaders can amplify the voices of these communities, advocate for policies that promote environmental justice, and work toward equitable access to clean air, water, and land.<sup>32</sup>

Because of the wide reach of religion, religious institutions can also serve as centers of education and awareness.<sup>33</sup> They are able

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<sup>28</sup> Seyyed H. Nasr, "Religion and the Environmental Crisis," in *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. W.C. Chittick (Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc., 2007), 31.

<sup>29</sup> Md. Abu Sayem, *Religion and Ecological Crisis: Christian and Muslim Perspectives from John B. Cobb and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (London: Routledge, 2023), 2.

<sup>30</sup> David R. Smock, ed., *Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion Brings Peace, Not War*, Peaceworks No. 55 (United States Institute of Peace, January 1, 2006), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2006/01/religious-contributions-peacemaking-when-religion-brings-peace-not-war>.

<sup>31</sup> Akilah Davitt, "Mapping Solutions to Fighting Environmental Injustice: Building Awareness for Marginalized Communities," *Sustainable Earth*, August 16, 2022, <https://sustainable-earth.org/environmental-injustice-marginalized-communities/>.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Le Duc, "Religious Prophetic Voice and Environmental Well-Being," October 1, 2023, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4589393>, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4589393>

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Stefan Altmeyer, "Religious Education for Ecological Sustainability: An Initial Reality Check Using the Example of Everyday Decision-Making," *Journal of Religious Education* 69 (2021): 57–74, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-020-00131-5>; Fatma Kurttekin, "Is There a Place for Environmental Education in Religious Education in

to teach their followers not only theological aspects of environmental safeguarding but can also integrate topics about environmental issues, ecological principles, and the importance of sustainability. They can provide platforms for dialogue, reflection, and collective action. They can help mobilize communities to participate in environmental initiatives, such as tree planting campaigns, waste reduction programs, or advocacy for renewable energy.

These efforts can be carried out within the religious tradition itself or in collaboration with groups from other faiths as a form of interreligious dialogue. In the face of global environmental challenges, interfaith collaboration has emerged as a powerful force for collective action.<sup>34</sup> Religious leaders and communities from diverse traditions come together to share resources, best practices, and strategies for environmental stewardship. This collaboration transcends religious boundaries, demonstrating solidarity and cooperation in addressing shared ecological concerns on both a local and global scale.

## **Buddhist Environmental Communication**

Buddhism, one of the world's oldest religions, has been widely explored for its potential to support environmental safeguarding and is often proposed as a valuable resource for addressing today's ecological crisis.<sup>35</sup>

They key concern is how environmental insights in Buddhism can be communicated to the people—both adherents and non-Buddhist—in order to promote ecological flourishing. In this section, we will examine the key elements making up Buddhist environmental communication.

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Türkiye?" *Journal of Beliefs & Values* (2024): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2024.2343596>.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony Le Duc, *Religious Self-Cultivation and Environmental Flourishing: A Humanistic Relational Approach* (Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag, 2024) 173-200.

<sup>35</sup> Donald K. Swearer, "Principles and Poetry, Places and Stories: The Resources of Buddhist Ecology," *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 232.

## 1) Communicating Prophetically

Commonly, when people hear the word “prophetic,” they think of its dictionary meaning related to predicting the future or foretelling events. However, the term can be understood in another sense. For instance, the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines prophetic as “of, relating to, or characteristic of a prophet or prophecy.” To understand this definition, one must explore what it means to be a prophet. The term “prophet” has multiple meanings. In addition to being a predictor of future events, the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary also defines a prophet as “one who utters divinely inspired revelations” and “one gifted with more than ordinary spiritual and moral insight.” These definitions together most closely reflect the sense of “prophet,” and by extension, “prophetic” that I have in mind.

In the Abrahamic faiths, prophets are viewed as divinely chosen spokespersons for God, tasked with delivering messages that encourage faithfulness, justice, and moral conduct. They call for repentance and warn of impending judgment while advocating for social justice against oppression and inequality.<sup>36</sup>

While the term “prophetic” is not usually associated with Buddhism, I argue that in Buddhism, being prophetic is closely associated with proclaiming messages that emanate from the teachings of the tradition’s founder. Because the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, achieved enlightenment through his own efforts, his teachings provide deep moral and spiritual guidance aimed at alleviating suffering and attaining liberation from mundane existence. The Buddha’s insights are considered extraordinary because they espouse to reveal the true nature of reality,

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. E. Morcov, “Divine Revelation in the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 51 (2023): 334–341; A. K. H. Solihu, “Revelation and Prophethood in the Islamic Worldview,” *Journal of Islam in Asia* 6, no. 1 (2009): 167–189, <https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v6i1.5>; J. Junaidi, L. A. Majid, and M. A. Nazr, “Relational Justice in the Prophetic Tradition: An Analysis of Selected Hadith,” *ISLĀMIYYĀT* 45, no. 2 (2023): 65–75, <https://doi.org/10.17576/islamiyyat-2023-4502-05>; M. Najmuddin, M. Amri, and A. Aderus, “Prophetic Communication: Islam as Knowledge Practice,” *Palakka: Media and Islamic Communication* 3, no. 2 (2022): 98–111.

which guide practitioners toward ethical living, mental discipline, and wisdom. It must be noted that many of the Buddha's teachings diverged from the mainstream beliefs of his time. This was particularly true with the concept of *anattā*, or non-self, which challenged the common Hindu and Brahmanical belief in a permanent, unchanging soul or self. Moreover, the Buddha's advocacy for the Middle Way toward enlightenment, rejecting both extreme asceticism and self-indulgence, was prophetic in its rejection of prevailing social and spiritual norms. In this sense, the Buddha himself exemplified the notion of being prophetic both in the manner and the substance of his teachings.

Thus, in Buddhism, individuals committed to learning and living their lives in accordance to the Dhamma can play a prophetic role through their communication by sharing insights and practices that help alleviate suffering and promote ethical living. The Buddha's principal disciples such as Mahākāśyapa and Ānanda, who had deep understanding of the Buddha's teaching indeed tried to carry on the Buddha's work through their ascetic practices and efforts at compiling and preserving the Buddha's sermons and other pronouncements.<sup>37</sup> While this is often relegated to members of the Sangha, lay practitioners and teachers who have dedicated themselves to understanding the Dhamma can offer valuable guidance to others.

In the book *Prophetic Wisdom: Engaged Buddhism's Struggle for Social Justice and Complete Liberation* (2024), Charles R. Strain asserts that Engaged Buddhism plays a prophetic role because it critically addresses systemic injustices and collective suffering, moving beyond the limitations of classical Buddhism, which often viewed social institutions as fixed and offered no pathways for social transformation. In the contemporary context, engaged Buddhists can reframe their understanding of the Dhamma to emphasize the importance of social equity and ecological justice. This perspective compels practitioners

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<sup>37</sup> S. J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); V. S. Dhammika, *The Buddha and His Disciples* (Singapore: Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, n.d.).

to transform their wisdom into strategic action with the realization that compassion alone is insufficient to combat systemic issues. Engaged Buddhism promotes a dialectic of love, power, and justice, which empower individuals to pursue nonviolent means of enacting social change.<sup>38</sup> Engaged Buddhism founder, the late Thich Nhat Hanh himself has been called a prophet because of his extraordinary ability to communicate Buddhist values and teachings to a global audience and connect them to real world issues of peace, justice, and ecological sustainability.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, the purpose of religious prophetic communication is to affirm, stimulate imagination, clarify misunderstanding, inspire action, and confront death-dealing realities.<sup>40</sup> In this way, Buddhist prophetic communicators heed the teachings of the Buddha in speaking in ways that are truthful, unifying, kind, and useful.<sup>41</sup>

## **2) Communicating from the Stance of Faith**

As a religious voice, Buddhist environmental communication is always carried out from the stance of faith. In other words, Buddhism can contribute by proclaiming its enlightened principles. Those who engage in religious communication do so with a fundamental trust in the truths they convey, seeing them as revelations or insights granted through spiritual enlightenment and moral clarity. The stance of faith implies a firm commitment to the beliefs, values, and teachings of the religious tradition. Prophetic communicators can speak from personal conviction

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<sup>38</sup> Charles R. Strain, *Prophetic Wisdom: Engaged Buddhism's Struggle for Social Justice and Complete Liberation* (New York: SUNY Press, 2024).

<sup>39</sup> Adam Bucko, "A Prophet is a Mystic in Action," Medium, February 2, 2022, <https://medium.com/center-for-spiritual-imagination/a-prophet-is-a-mystic-in-action-4ae8c625d9b6>

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Bevans, "Witness and Proclamation as Prophetic Dialogue," in *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*, ed. IJK Kodithuwakku (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), 245–55.

<sup>41</sup> Narayan Liebenson, "Speech as Skillful Means," *Insight Journal*, Spring 1997, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, <https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/article/speech-as-skillful-means/>.

and dedication to upholding and transmitting these beliefs. Speaking from a position of faith requires boldness and truthfulness in the face of social trends and tides that may hold biases against religions having a role in the public arena.<sup>42</sup> Religious communicators in some contexts also have to deal with political restrictions imposed on them by the government.<sup>43</sup>

In the context of ecological issues, environmental communication from the stance of faith carries significant implications. It suggests that calls for ecological safeguarding, justice, and sustainability are not merely pragmatic or scientific appeals but are deeply rooted in ethical imperatives derived from religious teachings. However, those teachings must be re-examined, re-interpreted, and re-contextualized to contemporary concerns. In other words, religion must balance tradition and modernity, staying true to its core teachings while adapting to contemporary needs in order to achieve its purpose, which is to liberate, not enslave, and empower individuals to attain spiritual fulfillment and contribute positively to the world.<sup>44</sup>

There are numerous aspects of the Buddhist faith that can be employed as resources for Buddhist environmental communication. Many have pointed to the Buddha's life and teachings as deeply connected to nature.<sup>45</sup> Key events in his life, such as his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree represents an instance of deep connection to nature as part of

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<sup>42</sup> Roger Finke and Kerby Goff, "Regulating Religion in the Public Arena: Lessons Learned from Global Data Collections," in *Democracy, Religion, and Commerce*, ed. K. Flake and N. B. Oman (New York: Routledge, 2022), 39-63.

<sup>43</sup> Pew Research Center, "10 Things to Know About China's Policies on Religion," October 23, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/23/10-things-to-know-about-chinas-policies-on-religion/>.

<sup>44</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, "A Buddhist Response to Contemporary Dilemmas of Human Existence," *Access to Insight*, 1994, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/response.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Bela Bhattacharya, "Buddhist Approach to the Environmental Crisis," in *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis UNDV Conference Volume* (The International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations, May 4-6, 2552/2009, Thailand), 210.



the spiritual quest.<sup>46</sup> Other events in the Buddha's life—birth, six years of asceticism, first sermon after his enlightenment, and death—were all connected with natural settings.

Besides the life of the Buddha, and all represent Buddhist concepts that can be employed in environmental communication. Dependent Origination is especially pertinent because it functions as a universal law of causation, encompassing both human life and the broader universe. In the human context, this law operates on a physical and psychological level, while in nature, it manifests purely on a physical level. When we reflect on this natural law, it becomes clear that it can lead us to truths with profound moral implications for ourselves and our relationship with nature. The environmental significance arises from recognizing that, as a universal natural law, it encompasses the connection between human actions and their effects—both internally on the individual and externally on other people and beings. The Buddha often emphasized this connection in his teachings. For instance, in the *Cakkavattasihanada Sutta* (DN 26), he explained that when people act with ignorance, anger, and hatred, the consequences are war, famine, epidemics, and other disasters. Conversely, when individuals transform their hearts and ways of living, balance is restored in nature, bringing prosperity and peace to humanity.

The claim of causal link between human thought and action and arisen consequences can also be seen in other suttas of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. In various sermons, the Buddha taught that moral corruption, starting from the leaders, spreads throughout society and disrupts the natural order, ultimately leading to natural calamities and human suffering. Thus, living in the Anthropocene means that human impact on the environment can be both positive or negative, and it is contingent upon us to be aware of the consequences of our action.

Understanding this truth allows us to reimagine the human-nature relationship as one of mutual responsibility. Humans, with our unique

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<sup>46</sup> Raghawi, "Protecting Environment through the Teachings of Buddha," *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies* 4, no. 2 (Aug-Sep 2023): 223, <https://doi.org/10.47362/EJSSS.2023.4210>.

capacity for consciousness and the potential for liberation, play a pivotal role in either perpetuating or alleviating suffering. This special status underscores our responsibility to recognize that our actions impact not only ourselves but also others, as a single action can lead to multiple effects. Our environmental outlook is thus grounded in the understanding that the causal law operates within individuals, among people, and between humanity and nature. This perspective reminds us that we do not exist in isolation but are part of a shared universal causal framework, where our actions, thoughts, and intentions have far-reaching consequences. As the marine biologist Rachel Carson aptly observed, “In nature, nothing exists alone.”<sup>47</sup> The environmental disposition that results from this interpretation of Dependent Origination is not one of nonchalance on the one end, and undue burden on the other extreme. Rather, it’s a clear-minded outlook derived from the realization that humans and nature are companions in *saṃsāric* life in which both are bound together in the natural process of birth, old age, suffering, and death. Responsibility toward nature, therefore, is the task entrusted to all people—the lay folks, the religious, as well as the civic leaders.

In today’s world, marked by an unprecedented ecological crisis, the application of moderation and contentment has become more critical than ever. Overconsumption and unsustainable lifestyles are directly responsible for environmental degradation, climate change, and biodiversity loss. According to the Global Footprint Network, humanity currently consumes the resources equivalent to 1.75 Earths annually, clearly demonstrating the unsustainable strain on the planet.<sup>48</sup> Applying the virtues of moderation and contentment to these challenges requires a fundamental rethinking of consumption and production patterns. By setting limits on our desires and focusing on what is truly necessary, we can reduce consumerism and, by extension, the need for overproduction. This shift encourages sustainable practices that conserve resources, reduce

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<sup>47</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

<sup>48</sup> Global Footprint Network, “Living Planet Report,” 2022, [https://www.footprintnetwork.org/content/uploads/2022/10/LPR\\_2022\\_Full-Report.pdf](https://www.footprintnetwork.org/content/uploads/2022/10/LPR_2022_Full-Report.pdf)

waste, and minimize our carbon footprint.

In Buddhism, the interconnectedness of all life and the imperative to alleviate suffering encompass ecological responsibilities as part of a broader ethical framework. We are reminded that life is precious to all sentient beings and flourishing is a shared aspiration by all who are journeying in this world (Dp 129-130). Thus, suffering should not be inflicted on others intentionally, mercilessly, and wantonly. The decision to ignore this injunction leads to real consequences, if not in the present life, then in a future one.

### **3) Communicating as “People on the Ground”**

Communicating as “people on the ground” means speaking in a contextually relevant manner. Effective religious communication requires more than moral exhortation; it demands genuine community commitment and contextual understanding. Contextually relevant speakers are not detached scholars but are deeply embedded in their communities, engaging in dialogue and listening to concerns, struggles, and aspirations to ensure their advocacy resonates authentically.

In Theravada Buddhist countries, monks traditionally go into towns each day to collect alms. This daily ritual, which takes place in various contexts—bustling city streets, quiet rural villages, and lively market squares—not only provides monks with sustenance but also reinforces the close connection between the monastic community and laypeople. As monks walk in their saffron robes, the act of giving fosters mindfulness and reflection among donors, transforming the exchange into a moment of shared spirituality that embodies compassion and interdependence.

Beyond the spiritual dimension, as they walk the roads, monks have the opportunity to observe the livelihoods and struggles of those they serve, particularly due to the impact of environmental degradation. Through this “on the ground” experience of witnessing the impacts of climate change, deforestation, and pollution on local landscapes and people’s livelihoods, they can incorporate these urgent issues into their meditation and sermons. As people deeply embedded in the community

and touching the ground of the earth with their bare feet, monks can also draw on local examples and cultural practices to make their messages relatable and actionable.

In Thailand, where forest monks play a crucial role in the country's cultural and spiritual fabric, their deep connection to the forest enhances their influence as teachers.<sup>49</sup> These monks dedicate their lives to meditation and living in harmony with nature, positioning them uniquely to address ecological issues relevant to their communities. Their firsthand experiences with ecological systems and environmental challenges enhance their credibility and the impact of their messages. Thus, through both their teachings and the physical setting in which they communicate, Thai forest monks can help “dispose of all self/ego arising positions” and help “lead to a state of knowledge or wisdom (*paññā*) the cutting edge of which provide axiomatic guidelines to solving numerous problems encompassing such diverse states and situations as psychological, environmental, and economic.”<sup>50</sup>

In Mongolia, the Buddhist tradition with its unique characteristics is increasingly playing a significant role in environmental safeguarding. This resurgence in environmental consciousness is rooted in the rediscovery and revitalization of ancient Buddhist teachings that emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of preserving the natural world.<sup>51</sup>

One of the key strategies employed by Mongolian Buddhists is the reclamation of traditional ecological knowledge. By reviving practices such as *ovoo* worship, which involves building cairns on sacred sites, and adhering to astrological calendars that designate specific days for

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<sup>49</sup> Dipti Visuddhangkoon, “Remaining Innovative in the Pristine Form: The Relevance of the Thai Forest Tradition to the Contemporary World.” *Journal of Buddhist Education and Research* 5, no. 1 (2019): 15–30. <https://so06.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jber/article/view/242882>.

<sup>50</sup> Dipti Visuddhangkoon, “Remaining Innovative in the Pristine Form,” 30.

<sup>51</sup> Urantsatsral Chimedsegee et al., *Mongolian Buddhists Protecting Nature: A Handbook on Faiths, Environment and Development* (Bath: The Alliance of Religions and Conservation, 2009), 23–25.

environmental protection, they are reinforcing a sense of reverence for nature. Additionally, the translation and dissemination of ancient sutras that discuss the ecological significance of sacred sites have further strengthened their commitment to environmental stewardship. Collaboration with international organizations like World Wildlife Fund and The Alliance of Religions and Conservation has been instrumental in empowering Mongolian Buddhist communities. These partnerships have facilitated the exchange of knowledge and resources, enabling monks and laypeople to develop innovative approaches to conservation. For instance, the creation of forested meditation gardens and the implementation of reforestation programs are tangible examples of how Buddhist communities are actively restoring degraded ecosystems.

As we can see, grounded in genuine community engagement, Buddhist environmental communication can catalyze profound social and environmental transformation. While climate change and other crises are global, their effects and solutions vary by context. A conscientious effort to listen, learn, and experience challenges alongside the community is imperative before making pronouncements, acknowledging the need for flexible environmental strategies tailored to specific cultural, social, and economic contexts.

#### **4) Communicating to Energize**

Buddhist religious communicators can use their voices to energize the people. In religious prophetic communication, the role of the speaker is not just to impart information but to become a transformative force that illuminates an eschatological perspective. The prophetic speaker highlights and points to the vision of the future and articulates paradigms that challenge entrenched norms. According to Walter Brueggemann, “It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order. Energizing is closely linked to hope. We are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given.”<sup>52</sup> This form of

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<sup>52</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001),

communication opposes the mindset that genuine transformation is illusory. By proclaiming transcendental promises and calling for radical shifts in attitudes and behaviors, especially towards the environment, religious communicators can inspire communities to envision and work toward transformative futures.

On a practical level, energizing religious communication involves embracing diverse perspectives and empowering marginalized voices. Engaging with scientific and technological communities through dialogue is essential. Despite environmental harms, modern technology, particularly artificial intelligence, offers solutions for sustainable resource management and conservation. Engaging with scientists enhances the credibility and effectiveness of environmental messages. Recent religious statements on climate change often cite scientific facts before laying out relevant teachings, countering misinformation and climate change denial. For instance, in a statement entitled “The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change” (2015), the signatories, which included dozens of prominent Buddhist leaders and scholars worldwide, began with the following words:

Today we live in a time of great crisis, confronted by the gravest challenge that humanity has ever faced: the ecological consequences of our own collective karma. The scientific consensus is overwhelming: human activity is triggering environmental breakdown on a planetary scale. Global warming, in particular, is happening much faster than previously predicted, most obviously at the North Pole. For hundreds of thousands of years, the Arctic Ocean has been covered by an area of sea-ice as large as Australia – but now this is melting rapidly. In 2007 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) forecast that the Arctic might be free of summer sea ice by 2100. It is now apparent that this could occur within a decade or two. Greenland’s vast ice-sheet is also melting more quickly than expected.

The rise in sea-level this century will be at least one meter – enough to flood many coastal cities and vital rice-growing areas such as the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.<sup>53</sup>

Religion also plays a significant role by highlighting Indigenous wisdom, which encourages sustainable behaviors and provides valuable ecological understanding. Collaborating with Indigenous communities can lead to practical solutions. Religion, in its prophetic capacity, can amplify the voices of Indigenous peoples globally.<sup>54</sup> In the countries of mainland Southeast Asia, where Buddhism is widespread, animistic beliefs also constitute an essential aspect of the people's spiritual sensibility. Buddhist environmental communicators in these contexts can help highlight the environmentally relevant aspects of animism to promote environmental safeguarding.

Energizing Buddhist communication involves collaborative efforts for tangible environmental actions, including advocacy, educational initiatives, conservation projects, sustainable investments, awareness campaigns, and global-local partnerships. One of the most important ways of carrying out these activities is through interreligious dialogue, which allows faith actors to find common ground and shared values, contributing to positive environmental outcomes. Fortunately, Buddhist leaders have been observed to be very willing and active in initiating and participating in interreligious dialogue efforts in order to address environmental issues as well as other global concerns.<sup>55</sup> Most importantly, Buddhist prophetic communication must adopt a “with” rather than “for”

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<sup>53</sup> “The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change,” May 14, 2015, [https://fore.yale.edu/files/buddhist\\_climate\\_change\\_statement\\_5-14-15.pdf](https://fore.yale.edu/files/buddhist_climate_change_statement_5-14-15.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> Anthony Le Duc, “Interculturality as Paradigm to Promote Social and Environmental Sustainability,” *Problemy Ekorozwoju – Problems of Sustainable Development* 19, no. 1 (2024): 148–158, <https://doi.org/10.35784/preko.5754>.

<sup>55</sup> Rachel Pang, “Buddhist Interreligious and Intrareligious Dialogue,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, February 21, 2022, DOI: 10.1093/obo/9780195393521-0274, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0274.xml>.

approach in addressing ecological issues. This means dialoguing with those most impacted by environmental degradation, especially women, children, and the poor.<sup>56</sup> These vulnerable groups must be empowered to be part of the solutions rather than having solutions imposed on them without consultation.

### 5) Communicating to Criticize

Buddhist religious environmental communicators can use their voices to speak truth to power, condemning harmful practices, challenging unjust systems, and speaking out against societal and moral decay. This communication aims to “cut through the numbness, to penetrate the self-deception.”<sup>57</sup> In this task, the religious communicator aims to bridge the gap between individual pain and communal acknowledgment, creating a space where suppressed fears, grief, and trauma can be expressed and shared within the community. This involves fostering an environment that encourages openness and collective solidarity, helping individuals navigate their emotional burdens while addressing the systemic or cultural factors that perpetuate denial and apathy. Through this role, the communicator acts as both a witness to suffering and a catalyst for healing, ensuring that the community confronts difficult truths in a way that leads to empowerment and transformation. The central message underscores the notion that death becomes evident through disconnection, seeking fulfillment through futile means, and the “ultimate consumerism” is “consuming each other.”<sup>58</sup> In addition, criticizing communication articulates a sense of unease with

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. J. Winters and L.J. Schueman, “Why Women Are Key to Solving the Climate Crisis,” *One Earth*, June 5, 2024, <https://www.oneearth.org/why-women-are-key-to-solving-the-climate-crisis/>; “What Teenagers Are Saying about Their Role in Fighting Climate Change,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/12/learning/what-teenagers-are-saying-about-their-role-in-fighting-climate-change.html#:~:text=Glen%20Ellyn%2C%20IL-,%E2%80%9CClimate%20change%20shouldn't%20be%20our%20problem%2C%20but%20that,Adults%20have%20tried.>

<sup>57</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 45.

<sup>58</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 45.



the prospect of things coming to an end, the collapse of our self-imposed constructs, the systems of inequality and oppression that perpetuate at the expense of others, and the unsettling practice of exploiting the vulnerable by “eating off the table of a hungry brother or sister.”<sup>59</sup>

Central to criticizing communication is the imperative to confront structures of authority that perpetuate injustice and inequality. Religious critics hold those in power accountable to moral standards derived from religious teachings and human rights principles. They challenge policies and practices that prioritize profit over people, exploit natural resources unsustainably, and perpetuate oppression. They denounce conditions where greed and hatred, driven by delusion, transform the world into a materialistic and conflict-ridden environment. In such a state, human dignity is devalued, and violence and suffering become pervasive.<sup>60</sup>

In the context of environmental flourishing, Buddhist environmental communication seeks to actively highlight the negative impacts of individual and collective greed, hatred, and delusion on the environment. Buddhism teaches that these spiritual poisons serve as the root causes for all the suffering in the world, and therefore, provides the hermeneutical framework through which we ought to interpret the contemporary ecological crisis. The Japanese Buddhist priest and philosopher, Nichiren, remarked, “In a country where the three poisons [of greed, anger and foolishness] prevail to such a degree, how can there be peace and stability? . . . Famine occurs as a result of greed, pestilence as a result of foolishness, and warfare as a result of anger.”<sup>61</sup>

The three unwholesome roots—greed, hatred, and delusion—when left unchecked, manifest in varying intensities, affecting both individual behavior and societal dynamics. The interdependence of these roots is profound. Greed can swiftly morph into hatred when desires are thwarted

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<sup>59</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 45.

<sup>60</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Message for a Globalized World,” *Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter*, n.d., [http://www.vipassana.com/resources/bodhi/globalized\\_world.php](http://www.vipassana.com/resources/bodhi/globalized_world.php).

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Daisaku Ikeda, *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 233.

by others or challenging situations. Delusion underpins these roots, leading us to believe that we must possess certain things or loathe certain people, causing us to cling desperately to desires and prejudices. The *Dhammapada* warns that the net of delusion is the most potent source of entanglement, trapping us in a cycle of misery and suffering: “There is no fire like passion, there is no grip like ill will, there is no net like ignorance, there is no river like craving” (Dp 251). The greatest delusion in Buddhism is the false belief in the ego, which drives us to construct, defend, and glorify our sense of self.

These poisons not only afflict individuals but also manifest on a collective or societal level. When we are controlled by these negative states of mind, we compete for power and status, leading to conflicts and violence. This collective struggle entrenches the cycle of suffering, as societies become embroiled in disputes propelled by the same greed, hatred, and delusion that plague individual minds. Hatred thrives on conflicting interests and often seeds social and political conflicts, escalating into wars and atrocities like genocides and ecocides. Leaders and institutions exploit hatred to rally people to egotistical goals or collective causes. Unfortunately, in so many places around the world, what unites individuals and groups seem to be a shared hatred for the other—immigrants, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, and so on. Contemporary society bears witness to this promotion of hate, with nationalism turning into nativism and xenophobia, religious fervor becoming radical fundamentalism, and self-protection metamorphosing into terrorism. The destructive cycle of hate spreads like a virus, infecting communities and nations alike.

Similarly, the social ramifications of greed and delusion extend far beyond the individual level. The insatiable desire to accumulate wealth is ingrained in people of all ages and backgrounds, fostered by constant advertising online and offline. Companies seeking continuous growth and profit use alluring words and captivating images to sell not just products but a lifestyle, a dream, a vision of success and happiness achievable only through material accumulation. Our frenzied consumer culture drives the globalized world bent on economic prosperity, affecting diverse societies

from secular Amsterdam to Buddhist Bangkok to Muslim Dubai.

Thai Engaged Buddhist scholar Sulak Sivaraksa argues that personal greed—characterized by an unquenchable thirst for accumulation and relentless possessiveness—manifests in society as systems like capitalism, consumerism, and unchecked resource extraction that disregard environmental boundaries. Similarly, he identifies the seeds of individual hatred as giving rise to global militarism and the infrastructure that sustains war. Sivaraksa reserves his sharpest criticism for those who perpetuate delusion, such as advertisers and mainstream media. According to Sivaraksa, many societal woes stem from their incessant promotion of unnecessary goods and harmful ideas that divert people from a fulfilling, contented life, instead leading them toward poverty, isolation, and alienation.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, “If we are serious about getting rid of greed, anger, and ignorance in ourselves,” Sivaraksa contends, “we must inquire how we actively or passively take part in perpetuating the three poisons in society as ‘structural violence.’”<sup>63</sup>

If these toxic influences are not removed from our lives, humanity will continue to experience various forms of violence and abuse, both environmental and otherwise.<sup>64</sup> In the *Sutta Nipāta* (5.2), Ajita asked the Buddha, “What is it that smothers the world? What makes the world so hard to see? What would you say pollutes the world and threatens it most?” The Buddha replied, “It is ignorance which smothers, and it is heedlessness and greed which make the world invisible. The hunger of desire pollutes the world, and the great source of fear is the pain of suffering.” Facing the ecological crisis today, these words from the Buddha are especially striking. Indeed, the Dalai Lama observes, “Destruction of nature and natural resources results from ignorance, greed, and lack of

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<sup>62</sup> Matteo Pistono, *Roar: Sulak Sivaraksa and the Path of Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2019), Kindle edn.

<sup>63</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa, *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century* (Asheville, NC: Koa Books, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> Pragati Sahni, *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A Virtues Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 165.

respect for the earth's living things. This lack of respect extends even to the earth's human descendants, the future generations who will inherit a vastly degraded planet if world peace doesn't become a reality and if destruction of the natural environment continues at the present rate."<sup>65</sup>

It is incumbent upon Buddhist environmental communicators to present a different paradigm for human development that challenges the existing one founded on the destructive tendencies of greed, hatred, and delusion. This includes the misguided belief that endless economic expansion and ever-increasing GDP are the hallmarks of a successful society. In the Buddhist statement on climate change, the signatories remark, "Instead of an economy that emphasizes profit and requires perpetual growth to avoid collapse, we need to move together towards an economy that provides a satisfactory standard of living for everyone while allowing us to develop our full (including spiritual) potential in harmony with the biosphere that sustains and nurtures all beings, including future generations."

Indeed, development can focus on either increasing the quantity of resources or improving their quality. While quantitative measures are easier to track, they don't necessarily guarantee an improvement in people's well-being.<sup>66</sup> This point is especially salient in Bangkok, the world's largest Buddhist city, where the appetite for new shopping centers and high-rise condominiums seems to find no bound. Criticizing communication also requires actively confronting individuals and entities responsible for unethical innovations detrimental to the environment. Rapid technological advancements, such as data centers and e-waste, contribute significantly to environmental degradation and health risks. It is crucial to call for digital sustainability advocating for practices that minimize the negative impacts of digital technologies and promoting mindful consumption.

Part of critical Buddhist environmental communication also

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<sup>65</sup> Dalai Lama, *My Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 80.

<sup>66</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa, *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Asheville, NC: Koa Books, 2009), 35.

includes advocating for responsible stewardship, holding corporations, policymakers, and individuals accountable for environmental harm. As the signatories of the Buddhist declaration assert, “If political leaders are unable to recognize the urgency of our global crisis, or unwilling to put the long-term good of humankind above the short-term benefit of fossil-fuel corporations, we may need to challenge them with sustained campaigns of citizen action.” This entails Buddhist leaders willing to undertake a social analysis of the environmental crisis and mobilize the adherents in order to devise initiatives that challenge entities acting against the common good.

## **6) Communicating through Exemplary Actions**

Finally, taking inspiration from the Buddha himself, Buddhist environmental communicators must convey their message not just through words but also action. In this regard, religious leaders and institutions can lead by example to foster greater environmental awareness and responsibility within their communities and beyond. These organizations play a pivotal role in environmental safeguarding by implementing sustainable practices such as reducing energy consumption, increasing recycling efforts, and using eco-friendly materials for construction and maintenance.

Gandhi’s enduring counsel, “Be the change that you wish to see in the world,” resonates deeply within the context of religious leadership. Buddhist leaders, entrusted with guiding congregations and communities, have a unique opportunity to elevate environmental consciousness by embodying sustainable practices in their personal lives. This includes displaying simplicity in lifestyle, choosing eco-friendly transportation options, and minimizing personal carbon footprints. When Buddhist leaders align their actions with their teachings on environmental stewardship, they enhance credibility and inspire others to follow suit.

Buddhist values such as compassion, non-harming, moderation, and contentment all have environmental import and can be contextualized to the ecological concerns of the contemporary world. In the context of

teaching by example, the Buddhist leadership holds a profound potential to catalyze societal transformation towards moderation and contentment, two of the most important virtues taught by the Buddha. The virtue of moderation, for example, is environmentally significant because it serves as the antidote for the greed that is detrimental to one's quest for liberation as well as ecological flourishing. There is a plethora of texts in the Buddhist canon that exhorts the individual to exercise self-discipline and restraint in behavior, resisting temptation and indulgence in the senses. The *Dhammapada* reminds individuals that this virtue is imperative for anyone seeking enlightenment (Dp 185). Moderation appears most frequently as advice regarding food consumption (DN 3.213; Nd 483; Dp 185; Pug 25; Vbh 249, 360; Dhs 1348; DhA 2.238).

Contentment is a virtue intrinsically linked to moderation. Buddhism strongly advocates for cultivating this virtue, as it “leads to great goods” (AN 8.22). In the *Dhammapada*, contentment is said to represent the ultimate wealth (Dp 2014). Contentment stands opposed to non-contentment and craving (*tanhā*). *Tanhā* is the thirst or craving of the individual for temporary personal gratification and fulfillment, often at the expense of others.<sup>67</sup> Craving leads to suffering, or unsatisfactoriness, because we are never fulfilled by what we have and continue to seek fulfillment in impermanent things—a futile endeavor. From a Buddhist perspective, the relentless pursuit of fulfilling desires is itself a form of suffering. Buddhism advocates for the cultivation of contentment and the cessation of craving as a more effective path to inner peace and fulfillment.<sup>68</sup>

In the context of environmental communication, modeling moderation and contentment by Buddhist leaders promotes mindful choices that consider both personal well-being and the health of our

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<sup>67</sup> G. P. Malalasekera, “The Status of the Individual in Theravāda Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West* 14, no. 2 (1964): 152.

<sup>68</sup> Payutto, Prayudh. *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Marketplace*. [http://pioneer.netserv.chula.ac.th/~sprapant/Buddhism/buddhist\\_econ.html#Wealth%20and%20Spiritual%20Development](http://pioneer.netserv.chula.ac.th/~sprapant/Buddhism/buddhist_econ.html#Wealth%20and%20Spiritual%20Development).

environment. As Prayudh Payutto explains, moderation is about knowing the “optimum amount,” the point where the enhancement of true well-being coincides with genuine satisfaction. This “just right” principle reflects the Middle Way and calls for intelligent consumption—a form of responsible living that addresses the necessities of life while avoiding excessive indulgence.<sup>69</sup>

Consequently, values that prioritize self-centered desires and greed do not demonstrate responsibility and are not conducive to promoting personal, social, and environmental well-being. Instead, moderation and contentment encourage a lifestyle based on appropriate desires and care for others.<sup>70</sup> This approach acknowledges that while everyone should have their basic needs for food, shelter, and healthcare met, true bliss does not stem from relentless economic development and overconsumption.<sup>71</sup>

Both moderation and contentment are antidotes to greed, craving, and clinging. Therefore, it is essential that Buddhist leaders take the lead in modeling these virtues for the lay people. As Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso wisely notes, Buddhist monastic communities and their leaders can embody a lifestyle rooted in fulfillment rather than frantic consumption.<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately, oftentimes the Buddhist faithful find themselves scandalized and outraged by stories of renowned monks

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<sup>69</sup> Payutto, Prayudh. *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Marketplace*. [http://pioneer.netserv.chula.ac.th/~sprapant/Buddhism/buddhist\\_econ.html#Wealth%20and%20Spiritual%20Development](http://pioneer.netserv.chula.ac.th/~sprapant/Buddhism/buddhist_econ.html#Wealth%20and%20Spiritual%20Development).

<sup>70</sup> Padmasiri De Silva, “Buddhism, Environment and the Human Future,” in *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis UNDV Conference Volume* (The International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations 4 - 6 May 2552/2009, Thailand), 21.

<sup>71</sup> David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* (Boston: Wisdom, 2003), 28.

<sup>72</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, “A Buddhist Perspective on Global Warming - Our Inevitable Fate?” in *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis UNDV Conference Volume* (The International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations 4 - 6 May 2552/2009, Thailand), 125.

traveling by private jet,<sup>73</sup> accepting luxury material items as donations,<sup>74</sup> and publicly displaying lavish lifestyles.<sup>75</sup> Such images starkly contrast with the ideals of the Middle Way that the Buddha espoused.

By articulating and exemplifying the virtues of moderation and contentment through both their words and actions, Buddhist leaders can inspire individuals to live in harmony with nature and embrace a simple life that honors the environment. Donald Swearer aptly encapsulates this ethos with his observation that “one chooses less so that all may flourish more.”<sup>76</sup> This sentiment captures the heart of the Buddhist approach to living sustainably and responsibly. Therefore, the message of moderation and contentment must resonate more widely, especially in the pressing context of ecological safeguarding, encouraging a collective shift towards a more harmonious existence with our planet.

Responding to the ongoing ecological crisis, Buddhist leaders across the world who added their voices to the statement declare, “In accordance with Buddhist teachings, we accept our individual and collective responsibility to do whatever we can....including (but not limited to) the personal and social responses outlined [in the statement].”

In addition to personal actions, activism by Buddhist leaders also have profound impact. This can be seen in the work of Gyalwang Drukpa, the revered spiritual leader of the Drukpa Lineage in Tibetan Buddhism and the founder of the international humanitarian organization

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<sup>73</sup> Wilawan Watcharasakwet, “Thailand: Monk who Bought Private Jet Sentenced to 114 Years,” *BenarNews*, August 9, 2018, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/monk-sentenced-08092018162519.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Khaosod English, “Controversy Erupts Over Thai Monk Accepting Donated BMW Luxury Car,” *Khaosod English*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/featured/2024/05/21/controversy-erupts-over-thai-monk-accepting-donated-bmw-luxury-car/>.

<sup>75</sup> Ryan Turner, “Bangkok Monk Faces Backlash for Flaunting Lavish Lifestyle,” *The Thaiger*, June 20, 2024, [https://thethaiger.com/news/national/bangkok-monk-faces-backlash-for-flaunting-lavish-lifestyle#google\\_vignette](https://thethaiger.com/news/national/bangkok-monk-faces-backlash-for-flaunting-lavish-lifestyle#google_vignette).

<sup>76</sup> Donald Swearer, “Buddhist Virtue, Voluntary Poverty, and Extensive Benevolence,” *The Journal of Religious* 26, no. 1 (1998): 93.



Live to Love. The Gyalwang Drukpa has shown a profound commitment to environmental conservation, particularly in the Himalayan region. Understanding the critical importance of preserving the delicate ecosystems of the Himalayas, he has taken proactive steps to lead by example and inspire positive change. One of his remarkable initiatives involves leading tree-planting campaigns aimed at reforestation and restoring degraded areas in the Himalayas. By mobilizing both monastic communities and local residents, these efforts have made significant strides in reversing deforestation and mitigating the impacts of climate change in the region. For his relentless dedication to “create compassion into action,” the Gyalwang Drukpa was honored with the prestigious Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Award from the United Nations.<sup>77</sup> His tireless efforts in environmental care have solidified him as a prominent voice in the global movement for ecological preservation and spiritual stewardship, resonating with people around the world.

Forest monks in Thailand, particularly those following the Thai Forest Tradition, serve as powerful examples of how universal kindness, compassion, and gentleness translate into environmental action. Their deep connection with nature, stemming from meditation practices in natural settings and adherence to the *Vinaya*, compels them to actively safeguard biodiverse forests. In their effort, the Thai monks engaged in various initiatives: tree planting to restore degraded areas and creating wildlife habitat, establishing sanctuaries for displaced or threatened animals, and educating local communities on sustainable resource management. Through workshops and discussions, they raised greater awareness about responsible deforestation practices, alternative income sources that minimize environmental impact, and the essential connectedness of human and ecological well-being.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> PR Newswire, “Mexico City Legislative Assembly Honours Indian Buddhist Spiritual Head - The Gyalwang Drukpa,” July 25, 2014, <https://www.prnewswire.co.uk/news-releases/mexico-city-legislative-assembly-honours-indian-buddhist-spiritual-head---the-gyalwang-drukpa-268600502.html>

<sup>78</sup> Kiley Price, “Ecology: Monks in Thailand Seek to End Environmental Suffering,”

Their impact extends beyond practical actions. Rituals like “tree ordinations” integrate Buddhist principles into the environmental movement. These rituals designate trees as sacred by wrapping them in orange robes, offering them symbolic protection. Protecting trees is seen as a form of merit-making, aligning with Buddhist beliefs of good deeds leading to a better future.<sup>79</sup> In areas facing deforestation, these “ordained trees” serve as powerful symbols of compassion, environmental care, and respect for nature.

Thai forest monks also advocated for securing community forest rights for indigenous people and farmers. This initiative challenges the control of both the government and logging/oil companies, promoting sustainable resource use and protecting vital ecosystems. However, their activism does come with challenges. Some monks have faced opposition and prosecution by the government, which indicates that there is a clash between environmental justice and powerful interests.<sup>80</sup> Despite these obstacles, forest monks continued to inspire positive change through their advocacy work calling attention to the importance of compassion, mindfulness, and ecological well-being. The experience of the Thai forest monks demonstrates that to be in solidarity with the suffering of others is no easy task. It takes tremendous strength to exercise mercy and compassion. Indeed, observing Buddhist leaders actively live out environmental values serves as a compelling motivator for faithful adherents to adopt similar practices, creating a ripple effect of positive change where individuals and communities contribute to a healthier, more sustainable world.

## Conclusion

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Pulitzer Center, 2018, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/ecology-monks-thailand-seek-end-environmental-suffering>.

<sup>79</sup> Susan M. Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013).

<sup>80</sup> Susan M. Darlington, “The Ordination of a Tree: The Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand,” *Ethnology* 37, no. 1 (1998): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3773845>.

In summary, key insights from this examination include the transformative potential of Buddhist environmental communicators to inspire collective action and challenge prevailing norms that perpetuate ecological harm. By critically engaging with environmental issues through a religious lens, Buddhist leaders and institutions can articulate compelling moral imperatives and ethical frameworks that resonate deeply with their followers and communities. This engagement not only reinforces the need for ecological safeguarding within Buddhist teachings but also empowers individuals to embrace their roles as caretakers of the Earth and fellow sentient beings.

Looking forward, the practical implications of integrating Buddhist communication into environmental discourse are profound. I propose concrete steps for Buddhist and all religious leaders, communities, and policymakers to cultivate ecological consciousness, advocate for environmental justice, and foster sustainable practices within their spheres of influence. This includes promoting environmental education, advocating for policy reforms, and mobilizing collective action towards a shared vision of a harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world.

The goal of achieving an ecological ethos in Buddhist communities and beyond demands a collaborative and inclusive approach—one that harnesses the moral authority of the Buddhist tradition to inspire profound shifts in attitudes, behaviors, and policies toward our planet. As we continue to navigate the challenges of our contemporary world, this paper lends its voice by calling on individuals, communities, institutions, and governments to heed the call of prophetic voices within Buddhism and across religious traditions. Indeed, Buddhist leaders have affirmed, “Future generations, and the other species that share the biosphere with us, have no voice to ask for our compassion, wisdom, and leadership. We must listen to their silence. We must be their voice, too, and act on their behalf.”

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