The potential of Buddhist environmentalism

In 1988, a Buddhist monk performed a tree ordination for his village in Northern Thailand to sanctify and protect the surrounding forest from logging and deforestation. Despite the ritual being symbolic (the monk did not actually ordain the tree), the act created an outcry. Thai media described him as insane and called for him to be disrobed. However, with that act he began a movement – today, thirty years after that first tree ordination, the ritual is performed across the Theravada Buddhist world (*i.e.* Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand) as part of a larger Buddhist environmental movement (Tucker and Williams, 1998; Clippard, 2011; Darlington, 2012, 2018).

The precise causes of the environmental crisis vary from place to place, but clearly stem from human actions. In Thailand, governmental promotion of export-oriented agriculture and industrialization in the late 20th century contributed to rapid environmental destruction. Multi-national corporations such as Monsanto and the Charoen Pokphand Group (CP) expanded production, increasing their agricultural plantations and cropped land. Socio-cultural elements play a role as well, particularly the rise of materialism and consumerism. Environmental impacts, which continue today, include deforestation, cycles of drought and floods, soil erosion and the loss of biodiversity, all compounded by climate change.

Why are Buddhist monks involved? On one level, the environmental crisis results from economic policies and practices, and hence the solution requires major shifts in the structure of the global economy. However, to effect such shifts requires genuine commitment to caring for the environment and the people impacted by its destruction. This moral aspect is where the monks come in (on the limits of the moral aspects of Buddhist environmentalism, see Strain [2016]).

The Buddhist environmental monks I know in Thailand are motivated by their interpretation of the Buddha's teachings, especially the goal to relieve suffering. Most Buddhists see the end to suffering in soteriological terms, as humans perfect themselves until they are no longer reborn. Environmental monks agree with this ultimate goal, but they consider suffering in this life as an obstacle to achieving it. More immediately, they aim to break the cycle of human actions that cause environmental destruction. They challenge consumerism as well as rapid economic growth as contributing to human and environmental suffering. The Buddha's teachings of compassion, simple living and interdependence are a few of those the monks interpret to promote environmental awareness and responsibility (on the debate about Buddhism and ecology, see Harris [1991] and Swearer [2006]).

Working with community organizations, farmers, academics and occasionally governmental organizations, environmental monks link science and religion to find ways to deal with this crisis. They use Buddhist rituals and teachings to build a moral commitment to practical programmes. These programmes then support people to change their behaviour: helping farmers to shift from cash-farming to integrated agriculture using non-destructive methods; reducing expansion of crop land thereby mitigating deforestation, soil erosion, drought and flooding; promoting use of renewable forest resources; creating fish and wildlife sanctuaries; protecting natural waterways; preserving native seeds.

The integration of spiritual aspects with science, and community engagement with

Susan M Darlington

About the author

Susan is professor of anthropology and Asian studies at Hampshire College in the US. Her research focuses on socially engaged Buddhism, with a particular emphasis on Buddhism, development, environmentalism and agriculture in Thailand.

Citation

Darlington SM (2019) The potential of Buddhist environmentalism. *The Ecological Citizen* **3**: 25–6.

Keywords

Religion; sustainability; worldviews

environmentalism, may not in themselves solve the problems of environmental destruction and climate change. Yet I believe these monks articulate a key element for potential success. At this point, it is worth trying everything. ■

References

Clippard S (2011) The Lorax wears saffron: Toward a Buddhist environmentalism. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* **18**: 211–48.

Darlington S (2012) *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist environmental movement*. SUNY Press, Albany, NY, USA.

Darlington S (2018) Environmental Buddhism across borders. *Journal of Global Buddhism* **19**: 77–93.

Harris I (1991) How environmentalist is Buddhism? *Religion* **21**: 101–14.

Strain C (2016) Reinventing Buddhist practices to meet the challenge of climate change. *Contemporary Buddhism* **17**: 138–56.

Swearer D (2006) An assessment of Buddhist ecophilosophy. *Harvard Theological Review* **99**: 123–37.

Tucker M and Williams D, eds (1998) *Buddhism and Ecology: The interconnection of dharma and deeds*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, USA.

Call for Artists

Stephanie Moran, Art Editor, and Salomón Bazbaz Lapidus, Art Advisor

We are inviting artists to submit artworks to *The Ecological Citizen*. We are seeking full-page spreads across 2–4 pages, single-page artworks and individual smaller drawings and images. We are looking for a range of artworks that fit with the ecocentric ethos of the Journal.

Artworks may relate to the Journal's topic areas (see www.ecologicalcitizen.net/about.html), or be images of animals and other nature including but not limited to: observational drawings, landscapes of all kinds, macro and cosmic perspectives, and animal vision.

We are also looking for artists to respond to written articles with smaller drawings; please contact the Art Editor, via the contact form linked to below, if you would be interested in making work specifically in response to submitted articles.

Artworks must be suitable to place in an online journal format, to fit onto A4 pages, and should be provided in high resolution (300 dpi) at intended size for the A4 page.

Contact us about making a submission: **www.ecologicalcitizen.net/contact.html**

Advertisement

DEEP GREEN .EARTH

https://deepgreen.earth