Reflections on Ecological Ethics and the Tibetan Earth Ritual

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LAMBERT Schmithausen poses the question of how far ecological ethics —that is, an ethics based on the conviction that humans are responsible for the preservation of intact ecosystems and biodiversity—is susceptible to integration into Buddhism.[1] Discussing early Buddhism, he notes different strands, some of which are more problematic than others in any such project. Here, I am taking up the question in relation to the Earth Ritual, looking at what it may reveal about premodern Tibetan attitudes to the environment, and how amenable these cultural orientations might be to interpretations in line with a modern ecological ethics.

While this issue is of relevance to the general scholarly exploration of discrepancies and similarities between the approaches of traditional Buddhism and of modern environmentalism, there are aspects which are particularly pertinent to the Tibetan example. We do not simply have to take into consideration modern representatives of an Asian culture, defending their traditions against Europeans,[2] or modern Western Green thinkers keen to coopt premodern cultures to legitimate their alternative visions of reality.[3] In

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[1] Schmithausen 1997: I.

[2] An example here might be D. T. Suzuki (*Zen and Japanese Culture*, [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959], p. 334), cited and discussed in Harris 1997, pp.388–389.

[3] Such as Joanna Macy, whose various works are discussed at length by Schmithausen (Schmithausen 1997: I, and footnotes 65, 73, 74, 76).

the case of Tibet, it is rather that the modern political context has forced Tibetans to begin to reinterpret their cultural heritage, and inevitably they are implicitly if not explicitly involved in a defensive debate with both the Chinese Government which has taken over their homeland and in the case of exiles, also with potential Western sympathisers to their cause.[4] The need for Tibetans to solicit international support at a time when they are aware that the continued existence of their people and culture is threatened by Chinese State political domination and processes of development and economic integration into China,[5] has tended to make Tibetans susceptible to taking up and encouraging or even developing romantic Western images of Tibet as a kind of "Shangrila."[6]

My argument is firstly that simplistic popular depictions of premodern Tibetans as "in tune" with their environment, *either* in an alternative "Green" and "New Age" sense *or* in a modern scientific environmentalist sense, are misleading,[7] and certainly, an examination of the Earth Ritual

[4] Western Green campaigners have been active on some Tibetan issues. For instance, both the German Green Party and Greenpeace USA are mentioned in a Government-in-Exile report for successfully taking up issues concerning the disposal of Western nuclear and toxic wastes in Tibet (Department of Information and International Relations 1992, p.60).

[5] However, while communication between Tibetans and their Western environmentalist supporters is crucial in the present exile exploration of Green concerns, it is important not to assume that Tibetan refugee interest in environmental issues is merely or principally a deliberate strategy to recruit Western supporters. After all, the Dalai Lama might have drawn the interest of a far more wealthy and influential group than environmentalists when he contributed to the Wall Street Journal in 1982, had he not expressed an enthusiasm for, "original Marxism" (see below, note 64).

[6] Don Lopez discusses these issues at length, although in my view he underestimates the Tibetan role in directing the images (Lopez 1998). I have discussed this elsewhere, in a forthcoming paper ("Presentations/Re-presentations of Tibetan Buddhism in the contemporary world") to be published in a collection edited by Brian Bocking. Jamyang Norbu bemoans the fact that Tibetans, especially refugees, are, "gradually succumbing to a fantasy idea of their lost country" which is similar to the Western creation of the "Shangrila stereotype." Furthermore, he at least partially blames the Government-in-Exile for this development: "The promotion of the image of pre '59 Tibet as the land of peace, harmony and spirituality is one of the main tasks of the Tibetan leadership in exile" (Norbu 1998, p.21). However, although as a scholar I cannot condone the "rewriting of Tibetan history" which Norbu points out that this agenda entails, I do not accept Norbu's belief that environmental and "universal" concerns, "have little or nothing to do with Tibet's real problems," nor that it is undesirable for Tibetans (and, of course, others) to adopt an ecological perspective in the *contemporary* context.

[7] In other words, the Tibetans do not symbolically elaborate the kind of nature worship which many "New Age" Greens expect—or demand—of so-called "traditional" cultures; nor

would not support such representations. Secondly, however, it seems to me that non-academic stereotypes may in certain respects be justified: modern Tibetans and their Western supporters who contrast premodern Tibetan thinking and practice with that of the colonial Chinese have an important point,[8] and there are aspects of approaches embodied in the Earth Ritual which could be used as a basis for the creation of a Tibetan Buddhist ecological ethics. As Ian Harris suggests in his discussion of what he terms "EcoBuddhism," it is possible that we might witness a creative adaptation of "tradition" rather than the invention of an entirely new perspective.[9] At the same time, it is not clear how profound any such process will be in the Tibetan case. In the present circumstances in which Tibetans are in a politically and economically weak position, it may be that they will defer, at least to a significant extent, to "New Age" and other Western approaches to ecological ethics, especially since the Chinese invasion has radically disrupted the continuity of "traditional" culture, and many of the younger generation of Tibetan exiles who will be most concerned with the further

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do their ideas or practices suggest awareness or consideration of the relations between different life forms within ecosystems, or of ecological sustainability. In fact, the Dalai Lama rejects any necessity to see the natural world as "sacred" or "holy," and he also explicitly recognises that Tibetans were not historically, "conservationist" (Dalai Lama 1999, p.213, 216).

[8] Furthermore, led by the Dalai Lama, many modern exiled Tibetans have developed a genuine interest in ecological politics; see, for instance, the Dalai Lama's address to the Global Forum at Rio de Janeiro (Dalai Lama 1992), and the Dalai Lama's message of endorsement to the Kyoto conference on global warming (*Tibetan Review* XXXIII: 1, January 1998). The Dalai Lama has even stated that were he to vote in a democratic election, it would be for an environmental party (Dalai Lama 1995, p.22). With the prominent exception of Jamyang Norbu (see note 6 above), most Tibetan refugees would seem to wholeheartedly support the Dalai Lama's approach to these issues. See also Palden 1994. Toni Huber has recently surveyed the emergence of Green policies in the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, which he dates from the mid 1980s. He argues that the impetus came from outside the Tibetan community but that it was the elite of Dharamsala who generated the Green Tibetan images and who continue to manipulate and disseminate them (Huber 1997, p.106). That the Government-in-Exile's position has been deeply influenced by environmentalist perspectives is beyond doubt. Indeed, the Government-in-Exile's report on the environment and development in Tibet contains an entire section (Chapter Four, "The Challenge of Sustainable Development," pp. 75–83) which essentially consists of a kind of manifesto for a future sustainable society in Tibet, drawing on Green political thinking, such as the "polluter pays" principle, references to "appropriate technology," etc. (Department of Information and International Relations 1992, p.80, 82; 81).

[9] Harris 1995, pp.199–200, 207.

development of Tibetan Buddhist ecological thinking have undergone Western style education and often have only second hand knowledge of some aspects of their own cultural heritage.

Romantic representations of Tibetan Buddhism and the Earth Ritual

At a popular level, Buddhism and other "Eastern cultures" have often been invoked as more satisfactory models for developing a "Green" perspective than "Western" Christian and "materialist" cultural values. Ian Harris has shown that such arguments rely on ignoring or playing down the often significant alternative voices within Western cultural traditions, such as the "Christian stewardship" approach, and on ignoring traditional Buddhist cosmology and being highly selective in the choice and interpretation of Buddhist textual sources.[10]

There is also the issue of the extent to which ideologies which may ostensibly be in line with ecological perspectives, in practice motivate people to actually behave in accordance with them. Roy Ellen makes the point that small-scale societies often cause less environmental damage simply because of their small scale: human impact may be minimised due to low population and they may be constrained by their dependence on a local environment which it would not be in their own interests to damage.[11] Thus, they are *unable* rather than *unwilling* to make a massive environmental impact. Toni Huber argues in a similar vein in discussing the Tibetan case: he points out that low human population density, simple material culture and infrastructure were the main reasons for the preponderance of wildlife etc. and that in practice, *in spite* of their ideology, and often in flagrant disregard of monastic authorities, Tibetans were active hunters and in other respects—such as the widespread development of mining—the historical realities of Tibetan life do not readily fit into the ecological paradise which some writers, both Western[12] and Tibetan,[13] have attempted to construct as representations of premodern Tibet.[14]

In fact, the issue of low population pressure on the environment *is* stressed

[10] Harris 1991.

[11] Ellen 1986.

[12] For instance, Vigoda 1989.

[13] For example, Atisha 1991. See also the Dalai Lama's address to the United States Congressional Human Right Caucus in Washington 1987, on his Five Point Peace Plan for Tibet (Dalai Lama 1995, pp.3–11).

[14] Huber 1991, p.67.

by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile as a principal reason for the environmental sustainability of pre-modern Tibet.[15] It is a crucial point for contemporary Tibetans to emphasise: this sustainability has been undermined not only by deliberate environmental interventions—such as logging and mineral extraction—practised by the Chinese in Tibet, but also by the population transfer of Chinese to ethnic Tibetan areas, including areas to the east of the Tibetan polity's borders in 1951.[16] At the same time, much is made of cultural and especially Buddhist reasons for the limited environmental impact.[17]

Now, even on the ideological level, the Tibetan Earth Ritual (*sa'i cho ga*) is perhaps a long way from Green romantic projections about "traditional" cultures. Earth Rituals are a standard component in the ritual cycles of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, necessary to consecrate a site and as part of the foundation practices for periodic sessions of intensive religious practice. In my study of Earth Rituals of the rNying ma bDud 'joms tradition, it is clear that the main ritual can be divided into two crucial parts.[18] The first section propitiates the Earth Goddess and her retinue, making offerings in return for receiving the gift of the earth and protection of the practice. There is a ritual re-enactment of the mythical account of the Goddess's part in witnessing the worthiness of Śākyamuni to realise Enlightenment, in which the Vajra Master stands in for the Buddha. In this ritual version, the Goddess's role and response is inevitable and her acceptance and bestowal of the earth is seen as representing a submission on her part. The second section consists of a number of activities which serve to reinforce the Vajra Master's control of the earth, using a series of forceful images of violent domination. At the same

[15] Department of Information and International Relations 1992, p.28, 31, 77. The Dalai Lama also takes up the point (Dalai Lama 1999, p.216). Here, in a more recent work than his early discussions of environmental issues, he explicitly denies that Tibetans were environmentalist in their approach. On the contrary, he argues, Tibetans had no conception of the potential problems of pollution but their "sloppy . . . habits" had little impact due to their small numbers (ibid., p.213). "Mother Earth," he suggests, "tolerated them, like a mother tolerates the bad behaviour of an only child, and as a result, Tibetans failed to learn good habits!"

[16] Department of Information and International Relations 1992, p. 4, 44–46.

[17] In the preface to the report, the minister Tashi Wangdi states, "The Buddhist ethos of Tibet's people makes them consider nature as something to be held in trust for all sentient beings" (Department of Information and International Relations 1992, p.vii). Similarly, the report's Executive Summary notes: "For Tibetans, Buddhism, marked by an abiding respect for and coexistence with all other life, permeates every aspect of human activity" (ibid., p.3). See also p. 28.

[18] Cantwell 1998.

time, there is throughout an undercurrent, stressing that the earth is integrated as the basis for the Vajrayāna maṇḍala by a meditative transformation through which its emptiness nature and natural Buddha qualities are recognised.

Now, Atisha attempts to use the example of an elaborate form of an Earth Ritual sponsored by the Tibetan Government to illustrate that Tibetan practices are in keeping with ecological principles and aims.[19] The ritual concerned appears to be of the class of "Earth fertility vase" rituals.[20] Atisha translates its name as "Earth Conservation Ritual" although the use of the word, "conservation" suggests perhaps a rather modern gloss, or at least an overemphasis on one of its objectives.[21] In the light of this study, Atisha's claim that such rituals indicate concern with ecosystem balance would seem to be problematic.[22] Earth Rituals lack any actual—or at least empirical (!)—positive environmental impact, they fail to conform to the image of an attitude engendering "harmony" with the natural world, and furthermore, their themes of subjugation and domination of the environment might suggest an anthropocentric attitude little different from those of modern developers involved in exploiting and polluting the environment for material benefits![23]

[19] Atisha 1991.

[20] Atisha has, "Sa-chue Bumpa" = *sa bcud bum pa*. A modern "*sa bcud bum pa*" project for distributing "Earth Treasure Vase(s)," to bless and empower the earth where they are placed, is commented on by Huber (Huber 1997, p.115). See also below, note 39.

[21] Ibid., p.10.

[22] Ibid., p.9. Parts of this article have been commented on by Räther, although the focus there was not on Atisha's discussion of the religious attitudes and practices (Räther 1994, pp.672–673). Almost one quarter of Atisha's piece is devoted to commenting on Government sponsored rituals, none of which could be defined as useful from an environmental science viewpoint. Indeed, some, such as the regular burning of wood with incense and the mass throwing of water in the streets to propitiate the water deities during drought, might be seen as wasteful at best, if not actually detrimental from an environmental perspective. Further space is given to discussing lay customs and taboos relating to cultivated areas, again, many of which are irrelevant from an ecological viewpoint—e.g. the necessity to be properly clothed in fields, the banning of monks and funeral processions from fields etc. It would seem, then, that Atisha is not really attempting to convince us that such practices actively engender ecological sustainability in themselves but rather that they reflect a recognition of the importance of the environment and a *concern* for ecological balance.

[23] Ian Harris makes the point that subjugation of or gaining power over nature is a general feature of tantrism (Harris 1997, p.385). However, to be fair to Atisha, since I have not studied the particular Earth Ritual he discusses, it may be that the theme of subjugation is not present in *his* example, although one wonders what alternative relationship may be expressed in

However, although the predominant themes in the Earth Ritual might not appear to be likely candidates for contributing to the creation of an ecological ethics, we must not lose sight of the fact that they do not encourage an *actual physical* disturbance of the environment, and in the modern political context, it is perfectly legitimate to contrast such Tibetan approaches with the policies and practice of the Chinese Government, which have entailed population transfer of ethnic Chinese to Tibetan areas, coupled with unsustainable farming practices and the exploitation of natural resources for short-term economic profit, resulting in serious environmental problems, including deforestation and ecological degradation of farming and pastoral lands.[24]

'Dul ba and Pure Vision as possible sources for ecological ethics

If premodern Tibet was ecologically sustainable purely, a) because it was too sparsely populated to make much environmental impact and b) because its culture, although anthropocentric, at least did not actively encourage environmental exploitation, then any attempts to build an ecological ethics on the basis of Tibetan ideology would seem to involve a complete reinterpretation of Tibetan cultural symbolism. Tibetan culture would not be the only example of such radical rethinking: Joanna Macy appears to reinvent early Buddhism (see above, note 3) to bring it into line with her own modern ecological perspective. Yet, just as Schmithausen argues that it is not altogether impossible to establish an ecological ethics on the basis of early Buddhism,[25] it seems to me that Tibetan Buddhism is also not entirely bereft of features which might serve to support such an ethics and that we can appreciate these by a more careful examination of sources such as the Earth Ritual. These features, however, do not in any simple way correspond to the kinds of elements we find in Christian, "New Age" and other Western traditions which have been highlighted as strands appropriate for contribution to an ecological ethics. On the contrary, Tibetan Buddhists have quite different potential

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the offerings to the various deities and the placement of the vases at the abodes of these local deities, which Atisha mentions (Atisha 1991, p.10).

[24] These matters are discussed in detail in Department of Information and International Relations 1992; see also Wangyal 1986; Tuting 1988; Pradash 1992; Palden 1994; "Ecological consequences of Chinese immigration" in the section on Chabcha County in Tibet Support Group UK 1995, pp.148–49; Peatfield 1995.

[25] Schmithausen 1997, VII.

sources for an ecological ethics.[26] Here, I intend to explore this point in relation to the themes of the Earth Ritual.

In considering the attitudes of early Buddhism, Schmithausen makes the useful distinction between "the ultimate evaluation of existence" and "intramundane evaluations of nature."[27] Such a distinction between the ultimate and relative, crucial as it is in Buddhism and particularly in all forms of the Mahāyāna, is similarly useful in exploring the symbolism of the Earth Ritual. The relative level of "subduing" or "taming" (*'dul ba*) and the ultimate level of "Pure Vision" (*dag snang*) both provide rather different perspectives which could be seen as in certain respects, "environmentally friendly," although they do not perhaps have an equal potential for integration into a modern ecological ethics.

The Earth Ritual fits well with a broader pattern, discussed by Charles Ramble in relation to Tibetan sacred geography, which is especially prominent in the popular *dkar chag* literature.[28] A *maṇḍala* structure may be imposed on a landscape, obliterating any geographical individuality and the autonomy of local deities, who are brought into its service. The imagery is that of the conquest of natural features by a vanquishing religion, conforming to the technical process of "subjugation" or "taming" (*'dul ba*).[29]

However, the transformations envisaged in Vajrayāna Buddhism as progressive levels of "taming" do not create an opposition between "nature" and "culture," or human and non-human, in which culture or human beings subjugate nature or the non-human. On the contrary, *'dul ba* applies at all stages; what we would call "culture" is to be subjugated as much as "nature"[30]—contemporary lamas often flippantly speak of subjugating the mod-

[26] Heinz Räther makes a similar point. As his concluding remarks on a possible Buddhist approach to ecological problems, he writes: "... there is no need for Buddhists to completely adopt the philosophical background of ecology in the strict Western scientific sense of the word" (Räther 1994, p.674). One might add that there is even less need for them to adopt non-scientific Western models concerning nature and culture.

[27] Schmithausen 1991a ; Schmithausen 1997.

[28] Ramble 1995.

[29] For discussions of the more general process of *'dul ba* in Tibetan Buddhism, see Mayer 1996, pp.97–99 and Day 1989, pp.418–431.

[30] In fact, Ian Harris quite rightly notes that finding equivalents for our term "nature" is problematic when dealing with Buddhist literature (Harris 1997, pp.378–381). In fact, it could be further argued that the very dualism between "nature" and "culture" with which we are familiar is lacking. Schmithausen also points out that the negative valuation of the world in early Buddhism does not only apply to "nature" but also to civilisation (Schmithausen 1997,

ern "gods" of science and technology—and above all, one's own mind is to be subdued. The term *'dul ba* is also the Tibetan equivalent of "*vinaya*," and thus, in certain contexts, it refers to the monk's discipline. In the Vajrayāna context, it is frequently used for the subjugation of the three poisons—attachment/greed, hatred/aversion and delusion—within one's own mind. In the Vajrayāna "Pure Vision" (*dag snang*) practice, all *outer* physical *forms* (ie. the body and the outer environment), *inner* "*speech*" or communication (which would include human "cultural" exchanges as well as other sounds), and *secret* or private *thought* (encompassing the individual psychological level, which is not socially shared) are to be transformed to manifest as Buddha body, speech and mind, which are asserted to be their own true nature.[31] The Earth Ritual makes use of human desires, including those of aggression and the desire to dominate, in order to forcefully bring about this transformation in the practitioner's experience.

In the Earth Ritual, the earth is not simply subdued; its inherent nature and its "Ratna" Buddha family qualities are to be recognised. In the following erection of the boundaries and creation of the maṇḍala, all other physical, vocal and mental forms are similarly to be integrated in the Vajrayāna vision. The stress on the necessity of dealing with and integrating "body," "speech" and "mind" into the Enlightened perspective implies an attitude very different from one which opposes the categories of "material" and "mental" or "spiritual" realities or which considers the environment as an outer "good" which can be freely used or exploited by an existentially separate humanity.

On the "relative" level, the periodic reaffirmation of the role of the Earth deities as "supports" for the maṇḍala construction serves to remind practitioners of their importance. Above all, the need to ritually subdue the earth in a violent manner reinforces a belief in the potential danger of ignoring it! This "danger" was—and still is—experienced in a very real way by many

II). While the nature/culture dichotomy appears to be largely absent in Tibetan thinking, the Dalai Lama refers to the concepts of *gnod bcud* (the "vessel" of the environment and the beings which make up its "essence"), stressing the interdependence of (as he translates them), the "container" and "contained" (Dalai Lama 1995, p.18). This duality corresponds more closely to the English distinction between the inanimate and the animate than to the nature/culture distinction—the beings within, of course, include animals.

[31] Another way of describing the process refers to the transformation of the inanimate and the animate (*gnod bcud*: see above note 30). In the Pure Vision practice, the inanimate becomes the outer structure of the maṇḍala—the principal deity's palace and everything supporting and surrounding it—while the animate becomes the deities within the maṇḍala.

Tibetans: Räther points out that a fear of the "earth masters" (*sa bdag*: the class of deities we meet in the Earth Ritual) taking revenge was an important factor in discouraging Tibetans from ecologically destructive behaviour.[32] Janet Gyatso argues that the Buddhist narratives of the suppression of the indigenous Tibetan "demoness," which emphasise the continued threat she poses at any relaxation of vigilance, have, "in the final analysis . . . sustained her vitality in the Tibetan world."[33] Much the same could be said of the Earth Goddess and her retinue. Perhaps, then, Atisha's characterisation of the rites associated with the "Earth fertility vases" is not quite as misleading as it might initially appear.

There would seem, then, to be two possible and rather different ways in which the Earth Ritual might express a perspective which could at the very least be capable of helping to generate an attitude and motivate behaviour in line with ecological sustainability, and these two ways correspond to the distinction between the "relative" and the "ultimate" understandings of the rite.

First, the ritual reaffirms the right of the Goddess and her entourage to possession of the earth, and the fact that the Vajra Master has to elaborately demonstrate his dominance, and that even he must periodically renew and reassert his position, underlines the importance of the earth deities and their destructive potential should the correct ritual procedures for "taming" the earth be neglected or the earth be used for an inappropriate purpose.[34] This kind of belief in the earth deities seems to have motivated many in premodern Tibet to act in an ecologically responsible way.

Now, Harris is rather dismissive of Buddhist writers who present certain practices—such as the non-harming of animals—as in line with ecological thinking, when the traditional motivation for those practices was focused on benefits for the individual practising them (such as merits which would translate into better rebirths etc.) rather than in terms of the benefits for the animals or other recipients.[35] Nonetheless, from an "ecological" viewpoint it makes little difference whether the practices are performed for unselfish or selfish reasons. Indeed, modern Green propaganda makes as much use of ostensibly "selfish" reasoning (such as the short-sightedness of gaining

[32] Räther 1994, pp.671–72.

[33] Gyatso 1987, p.49.

[34] The Earth Ritual legitimates the seizure of the earth for *Dharma* but not for other purposes.

[35] Harris 1991.

immediate benefits from ecologically harmful action when one is jeopardising the future health and well-being of oneself and one's children) as it does of "unselfish" reasoning (the misery of displaced peoples and animals deprived of their habitats or cruelly hunted etc.). Yet although such "traditional" Buddhist motivations might have served ecologically beneficial purposes in the historical context of premodern Asian societies, as Schmithausen argues, they might not be adequate in a modern context for the creation of an "ecological ethics" which would address the present environmental imbalances and take into account the desirability of preserving different species of animals rather than animals as individual beings.[36]

In this Tibetan case, it is *conceivable* that fear of the vengeance of earth deities *could* be integrated into an explicitly ecological ethics. Even if such a fear is primarily anthropocentric, concentrating on problems from a human perspective, it can nonetheless motivate ecological thinking and behaviour, and, as Lambert Schmithausen suggested to me, the kind of approach would fit with contemporary Green ideas about, "nature striking back."[37] Nonetheless, it would seem extremely unlikely that any modern form of Buddhist environmentalism would choose to encourage an ideology of angry earth deities taking revenge! Räther's older lay informants who did not have a modern education, tended to discuss the *sa bdag*; but the more sophisticated monks and his younger educated informants spoke more of Buddhist philosophical notions such as dependent origination.[38] Except for monastic rites such as the Earth Ritual, which are still performed at least in exile, practices

[36] Schmithausen points out that there would be some instances in which an ecological ethics would be opposed to a traditional Buddhist ethics of avoiding the taking of animal life, such as where an ecological imbalance has been generated by the artificial introduction of new species into an environment, putting indigenous species under threat, and where an ecological palliative might be to intervene to control the newly introduced species (Schmithausen 1997, IV). The Dalai Lama notes that the present ecological need for birth control to limit human population growth must now override the Buddhist monk's concern for the preservation of individual human life (Dalai Lama 1995, p.46). However, he suggests that there are good *Buddhist* grounds for supporting birth control, since it is consideration for all the world's beings which motivates the modification of the precept applying to individual human life.

[37] Personal communication, 15th September, 1998.

[38] Schmithausen, however, notes the problems with using the *pratītya-samutpāda* formula to justify an ecological ethics. He demonstrates that it was only later, especially in Chinese *Hua-yen*, that the doctrine was interpreted as implying a universal interrelatedness which might resemble an ecological structural principle, but even this would not *necessarily* entail an ecological ethics (Schmithausen 1997, III).

associated with local deities have been undermined both in Chinese occupied Tibet and in the alien environment of exile in India, and are even less significant in the new emergent forms of Tibetan Buddhism practised by non-Tibetans in East Asia and the West.

However, while it may seem unlikely that we will witness continued concern with the specifically Tibetan forms of the *sa-bdag*, reworkings of features of the Earth Ritual and related practices may take up the theme that the earth has every right to expect replenishment from humans, and that there is a reciprocal relationship such that the earth in turn will then support appropriate human activity. In the first part of the Earth Ritual, once *gtor-ma* offerings have been made to the Earth Goddess and her retinue, and the earth has been secured for the Buddhist practice, she is then offered a "Treasure Vase" (*gter gyi bum pa*), filled with various precious substances, medicinal herbs, grains and nourishing foods, and this is said to have the effect of generating "auspicious circumstances" (*bkra shis pa'i rten'brel*) which, in this monastic context, will make fruitful the ensuing religious practice. In the case described by Atisha (see above, p.111), we similarly find vases offered, but in a rather more pragmatic ritual context, it would appear that it is the earth's fertility, and thus agricultural productivity, which is ensured by the ritual offering. Tibetan lamas in the 1990s have initiated a new version of "Treasure Vase" rituals, involving the placement of the vases in numerous locations throughout the world, with little or no reference to earth deities as such, but with an explicit agenda of highlighting environmental awareness. The vases are said to help bring harmony, ecological balance, and world peace - indeed, in the English language publicity material distributed on the project which was initiated by the late Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the Tibetan words, "*gter bum*" ("Treasure Vase(s)") are glossed as, "Peace Vases" and the vases are marked underneath with the words in English, "For Universal

[39] Huber refers to a 1993 advertisement in an American newsletter for "Earth Treasure Vase(s)" (*sa-bcumd* [sic] *bum-pa*) to be internationally distributed (Huber 1997, p.115, see above, note 20). This might in fact be part of the same project as that begun by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and now overseen by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. However, despite some similarity in approach, in which the placement of vases is seen as promoting positive effects, appropriate for the present troubled times, it would appear improbable that the two projects are linked, since the advertisement seems to suggest that the vases are available on payment of a specified "donation." In the case of the "Peace Vases" project (http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/SiddsWish/peace__vase.htm), the locations have been in principle decided upon in advance (including sites in every country, important natural sites and seas,

Peace."[39] Thus, while any hint of the earth's subjugation in the wider context of "traditional" earth rituals is forgotten, one thread of Tibetan ritual practice in relation to the earth is being drawn upon in a new symbolism focused on contemporary concerns about conflict and environmental problems in the world. This thread stresses the reciprocity of human activity and the earth, in mutually enriching exchanges. While the full symbolism of the tantric imagery is retained in the creation and consecration of the vases by high status lamas, the quite separate placement of the vases may be unaccompanied by elaborate ritual, and specifically Tibetan and Buddhist aspects of the project are publicly played down in an ecumenical spirit, so as to link disparate international groups into the project.[40]

The "ultimate" level of Buddhist analysis expressed through the "Pure Vision" component of the Earth Ritual, might provide rather different grounds for Buddhist ecological ethics, possibly with rather less need for

sacred places for various religions, and sites of environmental significance, as well as places of national or political importance). The New Delhi office of Dzongsar Rinpoche's organisation, "Siddhartha's Intent," is co-ordinating international distribution, working closely with local contacts who arrange to actually place the vases. It is made clear that there is no charge for a vase or possibility of "purchasing" one. I was present at the burial of a vase in Canterbury in April 1999; all the vases are identical except that this vase had an attached label, "Canterbury, England," which had been placed on it in India.

[40] In the case of the Canterbury vase, the burial was hosted by the Anglican Church, and the Vicar of St. Martin's Church, Canterbury, led prayers for peace, reading a three hundred year old Christian prayer for peace. However, there may well be a contrast with the way the project is developing in the broad international arena and in India and Tibet itself. The lamas seem to be maintaining a tighter control over the placement of the vases in South Asia and Tibet, and one suspects that the *Tibetan* and *Buddhist* connotations are hardly likely to be minimised there. It should also be noted that although the significance of "Treasure Vases" has shifted in the specific instance of this international project, more "traditional" ways of understanding and using such vases may persist in other contexts, even when they are part of activities with very contemporary agendas. For example, in London in May 1999, the Dalai Lama and other prominent speakers addressed a large crowd in the official opening of the "Tibetan Peace Garden," linking the Tibetan struggle with international concerns for peace, harmony and understanding between different cultures. The symbolism of the Peace Garden includes Tibetan imagery in the presence of a Kālacakra maṇḍala cast in bronze, and sculptures designed and made by Western artists. A *sa bcud bum pa* was buried at the central point for the maṇḍala by Doboom Tulku in January 1999, in what appears to have been a quiet event, with Tibetan Buddhist practice to enrich the earth and the environment, attended only by some of the main people working on the project. (Tibet Foundation 1999, p.5) Previously, one hundred and eight monks in South India had recited prayers to invoke the blessings of the Buddhas into the vase (Derrick 1999, p.21).

radical reworking or reinterpretation. In this perspective, the environment is to be seen as a potential Buddha-field, or even as revealing the full manifestation of actual Buddha qualities, and Vajrayāna and Yogācāra philosophical themes of overcoming any dualism between "subject" and "object," would be coupled with the general Buddhist preoccupation with overcoming views of "self" involving attachment, aversion and delusion, and which are implicit in the exploitation of the environment for short-term human goals. Schmithausen seems to imply that the early Buddhist negative attitude towards the world could be seen as an unhelpful strand if one assumes it to be desirable to develop ecological ethics.[41] Conversely, it could be argued that the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna emphasis on the equation of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa, and especially the view that conditioned phenomena, in their true nature, are expressions of Buddha attributes, might potentially serve as a useful basis for environmental ethics. Schmithausen, however, points out that where the emphasis is on emptiness and extinction, there would seem to be no grounds for valuing entities and beings, although matters are different when the essence of the world is seen in terms of Buddhahood, and that is certainly the case in these Vajrayāna practices.[42] One problem with such an approach is that—ultimately speaking—the Buddhist view would hold that polluted environments would also express Buddha-nature, so the retention of some emphasis on "auspicious" and "conducive" action and environments, perhaps with a modified content, on a *relative* level, would be vital![43]

Finally, one might object that "Pure Vision" images would seem to favour artificial aesthetical values and to devalue natural or uncultivated environments in their own right. Harris makes such a point in discussing Yogācāra sources on the purified perception of a Buddha, who sees the world as gold

[41] He writes: "I . . . fail to see how this analysis of the presuppositions of individual bondage and liberation could, without a radical reinterpretation, provide a basis for *ecological* ethics based on an intrinsic value of natural diversity and beauty" (Schmithausen 1997, III).

[42] Schmithausen 1996, p.70ff.

[43] Again, Schmithausen similarly argues that even if the natural world partakes of Buddha-Essence and is thus established as a value, there is the problem of avoiding the same argument for the unwanted results of civilisation. He suggests that they could be seen (as in the Tathāgatagarbha current) in terms of obscuring forces, preventing the Buddha-Essence from appearing (Schmithausen 1996, pp.71–72). This is precisely the kind of thinking employed in Vajrayāna teachings on negativities obstructing realisation, and there would seem to be little difficulty in extending such teachings to the processes of environmental destruction.

and jewels etc., and also in mentioning ideal worlds such as Sukhāvatī.[44] Schmithausen distinguishes between those currents which value a hidden reality behind phenomena and those (such as in Chūjin or Saigyō) which see natural beings in their own forms as manifestations of Buddha-Essence.[45] In the case of the approach of the rNying-ma Three Inner Tantras, the Ati-yoga teachings provide the ultimate "view" illuminating the other practices, and this Ati-yoga perspective, stressing the natural perfection of all phenomena, has some similarities to these East Asian perspectives. Yet I am not entirely sure whether there would in fact be a marked difference in this respect between rNying-ma Pure Vision practices and parallel practices in other Tibetan Buddhist schools, more rooted in Mahāmudrā perspectives. I am not altogether convinced that it is crucial from the viewpoint of "ecological ethics" for natural features to be glorified for what we label their "natural" qualities. If perception is genuinely transformed or if there is a firm conviction that beings are, in their true natures, Buddha manifestations, then it is not so much that an "artificial" world is being imposed on a natural world,[46] and that the natural world is thereby devalued, as that the natural world's attributes are being re-defined and not separated from the maṇḍala vision.

Conclusion

A Tibetan Buddhist "ecological ethics" drawing on aspects of premodern culture is conceivable, but its basis would not be a "New Age" elevation of "nature" to a position in which it dominates "culture"—what Ian Harris discusses as a "reappropriation of prescientific modes of thinking" with an insistence on "an almost pantheistic power of nature."[47] Rather, it would stress the meditative transformation of nature *and* culture, engendering attitudes in keeping with the enhancement of the natural environment.

Ian Harris argues that attempts to generate a modern "ecological Buddhism" need not stem solely from modern industrial conditions nor need they be entire "reinventions" of Buddhist thinking in line with "Western"

[44] Harris 1997, p.385; 394–395.

[45] Schmithausen 1996, pp.70–71.

[46] Indeed, the textual sources frequently emphasise that the forms of the deities are natural, uncontrived or not artificial (the terms *ma bcos pa* and *gnyug ma* are frequently used). Academics may argue that the imagery is *in fact* created by humans, yet the practices are designed to engender the *experience* of an inherent, natural identity between the maṇḍala and outer appearances.

[47] Harris 1997, p.380.

assumptions about relationships between human beings and "nature."[48] On the contrary, modern Buddhist writers' explorations of the connections between "Buddhist" and "Green" philosophy and practice can rather be seen as indicating a healthy dynamism within the Buddhist tradition, which has always incorporated ideas and practices from the wider cultures it finds itself in, while maintaining its own core preoccupations. Thus, Harris sees modern ecological Buddhism as an example of a dynamic process of reflexivity within a vibrant religious tradition responding to modern circumstances, drawing mainly on resources internal to Buddhism, while integrating some exogenous elements.

It seems to me that in the writings of the Dalai Lama, the most influential Tibetan Green writer to date, we are already witnessing some dynamic cultural development in which there is not so much a discontinuity with the past, but rather a reworking and new presentation of indigenous cultural elements, together with a "domestication" of cultural packages of foreign origin[49]—in this instance, environmentalist concern. The Dalai Lama has drawn on a variety of aspects of Tibetan Buddhist culture in discussing ecological ethics. For instance, his analysis of the ecological crisis accepts the findings of environmentalists, while explaining its roots with reference to Buddhist concepts: ignorance, greed and lack of respect for living beings, i.e. the three poisons,[50] ignorance and selfish actions,[51] an attempt to "possess" (= "grasping") the earth, destroying life in the process,[52] the affliction of pain on others in the deluded pursuit of one's own happiness.[53] In his suggestions for developing appropriate responses to the problems, he refers to Buddhist virtues such as moderation,[54] and to reflections on the interdependence of the animate and inanimate. He discusses how belief in the doctrines of karma

[48] Harris 1995.

[49] I am here borrowing a metaphor which has been used in some studies of the appropriation and adaptation of foreign cultural elements: see e.g. Tobin, ed., 1992, "Introduction: Domesticating the West."

[50] Dalai Lama 1995, p.1, 33.

[51] Ibid., p.30.

[52] Ibid., p.31.

[53] Ibid., p.24.

[54] Ibid., p.18, 51; Dalai Lama 1999, pp.173–175, 219–221. Schmithausen discusses the ecological desirability of such qualities, which are, of course, found in early Buddhism, and which could be adapted to being motivated by ecological ethics (Schmithausen 1997, IV). Huber notes that the Dalai Lama's 1962 autobiography, which preceded the development of

and rebirth can be useful in generating concern about the planet and future generations and in increasing awareness of the connections between actions and their results, and thus, by implication, the consequences of environmentally damaging behaviour.[55] Even a topical speech recorded in an *Appropriate Technology for Tibetans* (*ApTibeT*) newsletter,[56] congratulating a group of refugees for planting fruit trees in their settlements, is rather reminiscent of early Buddhist attitudes of gratitude for the shade and fruits provided by trees.[57] Above all, the Dalai Lama's concept of "universal responsibility," based on love, compassion and clear awareness has new Green connotations, but essentially, he is adapting and universalising general Buddhist teachings on loving kindness and specific Mahāyāna doctrines on bodhisattva practice.[58] He speaks of generating *affection* for the earth, as our "mother," drawing on the standard Buddhist practice of developing loving kindness towards beings through reflecting that they have been our mothers.[59] Interestingly, the extension of loving kindness practice to encompass parts of the natural world which mainstream Buddhism has classified as insentient, would appear to have been a feature of this practice in the earliest Buddhist tradition in India, at least in relation to plants, if not to the earth as

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the modern Green image, links the Tibetan lack of interest in mineral extraction to limited desires for material accumulation (Huber 1997, p.107, note 9). The Government-in-Exile report asserts that contentment while limiting material needs is a deeply held Tibetan tradition (Department of Information and International Relations 1992, p.77).

[55] Dalai Lama 1995, p.16, 23. Here, the Dalai Lama is picking up a thread in "traditional" Tibetan Buddhist teachings. In a discussion of the suffering of conditioned existence, the nineteenth century lama, Patrul Rinpoche seems to almost foreshadow Green thinking on economic organisation, in noting that tea may seem enjoyable to drink, but that the enjoyment is dependent on the suffering of people and animals in producing, trading and transporting it (Patrul Rinpoche 1994, pp.79–80). Of course, the emphasis in such Buddhist teachings is that this kind of suffering is inherent to conditioned existence. To develop it in line with ecological ethics, it would be necessary to take the further step of recognising that there are differences in degree, greater suffering being attached to the production and distribution of goods with sole reference to the profit motive, while suffering can (and should) be minimised by considering the full social and ecological implications.

[56] Dalai Lama 1995, pp.20–21.

[57] Schmithausen 1991a, p.7, note 38.

[58] Dalai Lama 1995, p.13, 24. Much of the Dalai Lama's later book (Dalai Lama 1999) is devoted to universalising Buddhist teachings on karma (showing how they might be applicable even if there is no belief in rebirth) and on bodhisattva ethics, in an attempt to make such teachings relevant for the broadest possible contemporary audience.

[59] Dalai Lama 1995, p.60.

such,[60] although the earth is the one element which was, like plants, a borderline case which should, in some contexts, be treated as though it were animate.[61] The Dalai Lama stresses the need to strive to overcome ignorance and greed and to develop awareness,[62] and, as in the classic teachings on bodhisattva ethics, he asserts that acting out of perceived self-interest is counterproductive while helping others also benefits yourself, and that the attitude of "universal responsibility" constitutes, "the real source of strength, the real source of happiness."[63]

I suspect that the readiness with which many Tibetans have adopted the "Green image" illustrates that the Dalai Lama's message has sounded convincing to Tibetan as well as international English-speaking audiences, and that this indicates an intuitive appreciation that their culture, in certain respects, expresses values and attitudes which can harmonize well with a Green perspective.[64] Beyond the general ethical teachings and reflections on

[60] Schmithausen 1991b, pp.59–61, 69.

[61] Ibid., p.57.

[62] Dalai Lama 1995, p.33.

[63] Ibid., p.13.

[64] The Dalai Lama's earlier adoption of Socialism met with a less enthusiastic response from the exiled Tibetan community, largely because most Tibetans had first met "Socialism" at the hands of the "Red Chinese." Nonetheless, this illustrates that Tibetans will not necessarily simply follow what Huber refers to as the "Dharamsala elite." Furthermore, perhaps the association between Socialism and Tibetan Buddhist values would have seemed more forced to Tibetans. The issue was extensively debated in the late 1970s and early 1980s in *Tibetan Review*, partly since at this time, the Dalai Lama had made a number of public statements supporting an integration of Buddhism and Marxism, and partly since, in May 1979, the Tibetan Communist Party (in exile) was launched, with the Dalai Lama's approval (it was disbanded in March 1982 after much refugee opposition, including harassment of individual members—see *Tibetan Review*, June 1979, p.10; February-March 1982, p.5). The February 1979 issue of *Tibetan Review* reported the Dalai Lama as saying, "Buddhism and pure Marxism have many common grounds and can be combined" and that while in Tibet, he, "attempted such a combination," adding that he meant by pure Marxism, "to be free from power or national politics and only for the welfare of the working class" (p.29). A Reuter report from Paris appeared in the April 1979 issue of *Tibetan Review*, saying that the Dalai Lama had told French television that he once seriously considered joining the Chinese Communist Party and was still attracted by Marxist theory, but *authentic* Marxism, not that practised in countries claiming to be Marxist, which in fact reflect national political interests and thirst for world hegemony (p.22). Later that year, the magazine interviewed the Dalai Lama, who responded to questions about the political systems in Mongolia and United States by referring to the positive and negative aspects of both. Pressed about whether he had any definite idea about which (if either) system might be more appropriate for an independent Tibet, he stated, "I think it will have to be

cause and effect, emphasised by the Dalai Lama, there may also be approaches embodied in some "traditional" Tibetan Buddhist practices which could fit well with an ecological ethics, as I have argued in this paper. Yet given the radical break in Tibetan cultural continuity in today's circumstances, some of these elements may not survive intact. Moreover, they may not find any explicit recognition amongst the new generation of Tibetan exiles who are developing cultural syntheses in the post-modern world. Some might altogether reject the Tibetan religious heritage while others might utterly reinterpret it in order to conform to the expectations of their Western supporters, who might be likely to either favour the adoption of a

socialism . . . Tibet is a big country with a small population and very backward economically" (*Tibetan Review*, November 1979, pp. 18–19). In an article published in the Wall Street Journal, the Dalai Lama argued that since so much of Buddhist Asia was under Communist administration and many had suffered under Communist ideology, it was worth developing a dialogue between Communism and Buddhism (Dalai Lama 1982). He wrote, "original Marxism and Mahāyāna Buddhism have many basic points in common. The foremost is on the emphasis on the common good of society . . ." Buddhism, the article continues, is a science of the mind and is atheistic like Communism. Furthermore, in Buddhism, everything depends on one's own action, while in Marxist theory, everything depends on one's own labour. Since the original thrust of Communism was anti-exploitation and anti-corruption, it had (rightly) opposed corrupt religious institutions (Dalai Lama 1982, 87). While the young founders of the Tibetan Communist Party were inspired by the Dalai Lama's perspective (see K. Dhondup, July 1979, letter in *Tibetan Review*, pp. 29–30; Dhondup 1980, 10–11,14–15), the lack of exile enthusiasm for Socialism is reflected in the apparent lack of any direct references to the debate in the Tibetan language publications, *Tibetan Freedom* and *Sheja*, followed by indirect attacks when the Tibetan Communist Party was formed (commented on in a letter by Tsering D. Wangkhang, *Tibetan Review*, July 1979, p. 30). Discussion was more open in *Tibetan Review*, Jamyang Norbu perhaps being the most vocal critic both of the "tortuous . . . logic" by which "improbable parallels" between Communism and traditional Tibetan beliefs had been invented, and of the Tibetan Government's approval of Communism (Norbu 1980a & 1980b, p.16). Other voices included Karma Gelek Yuthok: "If communism has some superficial similarities with Buddhism, then it does also have many greater ultimate contradictions . . This . . . is not intended as a contradiction of the Dalai Lama's support of Marxism, but at the same time I cannot accept communism brought so near to Buddhism" (letter, *Tibetan Review*, September 1980, p. 27); and Nyentse Lhowa: "I would like to say something against those who frequently compare Buddhism with Marxism . . . A few similarities with Buddhism can also be found in Capitalism, Maoism, Hinduism, Christianity, Gandhian thoughts and many others. We cannot go on comparing Buddhism with all types of ideology and besides, it is . . . unnecessary . . . Buddhism itself is . . . complete . . ." (*Tibetan Review*, September 1980, pp. 26–27). Nyentse Lhowa published a further letter in the following issue, discussing what he considered to be the specific incompatibilities between Buddhism and communism (*Tibetan Review*, October 1980, p. 25).

purely scientific perspective or "alternative" Green views focussing on the dependence of humanity on "nature."[65]

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[65] Toni Huber sees the Green representations of Tibetan culture as an aspect of exile life which is "unprecendented and entirely a feature of the contemporary world system," having nothing to do with adaptations of culture (Huber 1997, p.103). He nonetheless suggests that this "modern, reflexive and politicised identity . . . should be viewed as an assertive expression of cultural creativity from Tibetan agents now operating successfully in a new global context" (ibid., p.114) and that the examples he gives of re-presentations of Tibetan traditions represent assertions by some modern Tibetans that, "their own 'unique' culture is a valid and even important one for the contemporary world" (ibid., p.115). This perhaps appears to be a positive conclusion but *if* Tibetans are relying *entirely* on non-Tibetan "cultural resources of modernity" (ibid., p.114) for their new Green identity, would that not rather undermine these assertions?

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