

Buddhist Environmentalism in the Digital Age

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The environmental crisis is an ongoing problem facing humanity, and may be exacerbated in the digital age in which human preoccupation with the digital environment and cyberspace might trump care and concern for the natural environment. The environmental crisis is a complex issue that requires interdisciplinary approaches to address all of its dimensions—social, economic, political, and spiritual, etc. Religions have been enlisted in this effort because they are seen as an effective force in motivating people to change attitudes and behaviors that are environmentally destructive to those that are more benign towards ecosystems. Buddhism is among the world religions whose teachings have been perceived to be environmentally friendly. This paper sets out to consider the role of Buddhism in the effort to address the environmental crisis in the digital age. It does so by: (1) describing the danger of human and nature alienation in the Asian social-cultural context, where Buddhism is most practiced and has the greatest direct and indirect influence on the life of the people; (2) outlining basic Buddhist teachings that apply to nature; and (3) proposing that Buddhism can assert itself in the digital age in order to promote greater environmental well-being.

Keywords: Buddhism, environmental crisis, digital age, digital era, technological nature

The ecological crisis is an issue that has gained attention in the last fifty years and represents one of the greatest concerns of the modern digital era. In recent years, religious traditions have been enlisted in the multidisciplinary effort to address environmental concerns because religion is seen to be one of the major influences in people's thoughts and behavior. The vast majority

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of the people in the world still adhere to some particular faith, and religious ethics prove to be one of the most effective ways to motivate people to carry out certain practices. Among the many world religions, Buddhism—both its Theravada as well as Mahayana ambits—has been repeatedly turned to as a resource because aspects of its teachings are perceived as environmentally friendly. In this paper, I will attempt to examine how Buddhism can address environmental concerns in the digital age, especially in the context where the physical and natural environments are increasingly losing grounds to cyberspace in terms of people's consciousness of and preoccupation with these spaces.

As one can see, the ushering in of the digital era some three decades ago with the introduction and eventual prolific use of the Internet and its numerous applications has led to the creation of a new entity called cyberspace. This notional environment or metaphorical space is increasingly becoming an important place where people exchange information and experience a sense of social interaction and interconnectivity. People's lives, especially the younger generation, have become greatly attached to this non-physical environment as the place where they go for engaging in online activities, relationships, and finding news, information and entertainment. One of the questions that will be asked in this paper is whether the digital age might possibly result in greater alienation of nature from the everyday life of people, in the process causing more neglect of the needs of the environment. In addition, in view of this reality, how would a religion such as Buddhism play a role in fostering human-nature relationship in ways that promote environmentally positive attitudes and behaviors on the part of human beings?

The Digital Landscape of Asia

With its vast religious, cultural, political, economic, and geographic diversity, Asia is a pluralist continent in every sense of the word. This also holds true for Asia's technological development, in particular digital technology. With nearly 1.4 billion people having access to the Internet, Asia accounts for almost half of the global Internet users.¹ Asians also spend a significant part of their day on the Internet both for work and leisure. Of the top ten Asian countries, Korea is lowest clocking in at 3.1 hrs/day while Filipinos spend over a quarter of their day online (6.3 hours). Thailand is a close second with 5.5 hrs/day, and Vietnamese follow suit with 5.2 hrs/day.

¹ <http://www.go-globe.com/blog/digital-landscape-asia/>

Social media is also extremely popular in Asia. China's massive population accounts for nearly half of all the social media users of Asia. Southeast Asian users total about 201 million, while South Asians number approximately 166 million. The top four countries in terms of time spent on social media all come from Southeast Asia, namely the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. India rounds off the top five. Asia's technologically advanced countries, such as Korea, Singapore, Japan, and Hong Kong, not only have high rate of smart phone penetration but also much higher speed of internet connection compared with the global average. For example, Internet speed in South Korea is 25.3 mbps compared to the global average of 4.5 mbps.

Buddhist Thailand is an interesting case of the impact of digital technology on society, especially the young. Out of a population of 68 million, nearly 30 million Thais are now connected to the Internet. The population born between 1977 and 1994 make up the largest percentage of users (64%). It has been estimated that this group spends 2.26 days out of the week online.² Although not necessarily the top, Thailand consistently ranks high in a number of categories relating to digital technology. For example, it ranks fourth in Asia in percentage of people who have made purchases using a smartphone (59%).³ The vast majority of Thai Internet users also use social media (82.7%).⁴ Compared to other predominantly Buddhist countries in the region, such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, Thailand is far ahead. However, as development takes place and especially with political and economic reforms being implemented in Myanmar, it is expected that this country will experience much faster technological progress in the future.

Implications for human-nature relationship in the digital era

While technological development is inevitable, it is important to reflect on the ramifications of a technology based society. One must raise the question of what is the prospect of environmental degradation in an age where people seem increasingly removed from nature while opting for more technologically based methods of managing their lives as well as keeping

² <http://messepl.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/5.-Connect.W-2015-Global-Telco-Conference-AIS.pdf>

³ <https://digitalinasia.com/tag/thailand/>

⁴ <http://messepl.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/5.-Connect.W-2015-Global-Telco-Conference-AIS.pdf>

themselves entertained. Nature or the natural environment, as used in this paper is an extremely elastic category. While there is a variety of senses depending on whether one refers to nature philosophically or scientifically, for the purpose of this essay, nature, or the natural environment, is what we have in mind when we think of places that are untouched or minimally intruded by human intervention. In this sense, it may include not only wild nature, consisting of plants and animals species, that has not been interfered by human activities, but also eco-systems that, despite human interference, still retain characteristics that may be described as natural. However, in addition to animal and plant species, we can also consider material entities such as mountains, caves, sand dunes, the atmosphere, and so on. It is also these entities that we often think of when we think of environmental degradation, exploitation, or destruction that is taking place at this time.

The relationship between human and nature in many cultures, especially in the past, is characterized by intimacy, connectedness, and symbiosis, so much so that one can even claim that nature and human beings constitute a single entity or organism (Miller, 1991). This kind of horizontal human-nature relationship of interdependency is often seen in nomadic societies where environmental sustainability is essential to such a way of life. The role of the natural environment has always been important in the cultural sensibility of the people of Asia. In Vietnam, for example, the word for country “*đất nước*” is a combination of the two words “earth and water.” Another word combination that Vietnamese people often use to refer to their sovereign nation is “*sông núi*” which means “river and mountains.” The expression is indicative of Vietnam’s geography which comprises of thousands of rivers and long mountain ranges, which make up three quarters of the country’s land area. Vietnam’s two river deltas, the Red River Delta in the north and Mekong River Delta in the south are seen as the rice baskets that feed the people. Water geographical features have always been important to the Southeast Asian way of life. In Thailand, the original saying that expressed one’s optimism for the abundance that nature brought to their life is “There is rice in the field and fish in the waters.”

Modernization or urbanization which is a technology driven process is seen to create dynamics that go against the natural affinity that human beings have towards the natural environment. George Monbiot (1995) calls this phenomenon the human “estrangement from the ecosystem” in which there is

a “gradual loss of meaningful involvement” with nature with the benefits as well as dangers that it presents. While this process of estrangement may have started as early as the beginning of the agricultural revolution and escalated during the industrial revolution, it is manifesting itself dramatically in this digital age. In this era, relationships (whether human-human or human-nature) are less and less the result of direct interaction and increasingly mediated by digital technology. In the past when infants cried, they were picked up by grandmas and aunts who would comfort them so that they would stop crying. Nowadays, when children cry, they are more likely to be given a smartphone to watch YouTube videos so that the adults can go about doing their business. Many children of Burmese and Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand are only able see their parents a few times a year because the parents have to migrate to neighboring countries to make a living. Parent-child bond, instead, is mediated by digital social network applications such as Line and Facebook.

Human-nature relationship, likewise, is affected in the digital age. In the past, children in Vietnam and the Philippines used to amuse themselves by making rifles out of banana leaf stalks and duel with one another. Now, children are more likely to get their adrenaline rush by racing cars on a tablet or a smartphone. In the past, people went to sleep and woke up basically in accordance with the natural cycle of day. However, with digital technology presenting distractions such as on-demand entertainment programs, online video games, and social networks that allow continuous connection with people all over the world, many forget the natural body rhythms for work and rest that have evolved over millions of years. One must admit that in certain cases technology has helped in promoting environmental sustainability and conservation. The development of the light bulb, for example, consumes 50 times less energy than the kerosene lamp used in many developing countries. The ability to send correspondences by email reduces the need for paper products. Nowadays, the International Anti-Poaching Foundation (IAPF) trains Green Army rangers to use surveillance technology such as thermal imaging cameras and drones to monitor animals and their habitats in order to prevent poachers from hunting endangered species. The Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology (JAMSTEC) uses sophisticated sensors to monitor the pH levels of the Pacific Ocean in order to help take preventative measures to preserve marine ecosystems.⁵ Digital technology

⁵ <http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/5-ways-tech-will-save-environment/>. Accessed November 10, 2016.

has also helped us to see and experience nature in wonderful ways, allowing us to discover details that were unavailable to the average person before. Access to information, photographs and videos of natural places all over the earth are available with a few clicks or touches on the smart phone or tablet.

Despite all the positive things that technology, especially digital technology has brought to human life and the effort to promote environmental sustainability, the question remains whether these technological developments have reduced the feeling of estrangement and drawn us back into a more intimate relationship with the natural environment. In many ways, one can argue that technology has further hindered opportunities for encounter between human beings and the natural environment. Nowadays, people can easily take a tour of any part of the world—both natural and man-made—by searching for videos on YouTube and other Internet applications. One can even take virtual tours of the majestic redwood forests in California or the awe inspiring Son Doong Cave in Vietnam. Technology has enabled us to “experience” the most extraordinary events and places in the world with just a click of a button. Such digitally mediated encounters often serve as the only mode of interaction between human and nature. After all, why spend money and time getting on a ship heading into the ocean for days on end without knowing if you’ll actually encounter a blue whale if you can see it up close and personal via YouTube? In fact, the virtual tours and the recording of natural places and events are oftentimes much more picturesque and exciting than the experience of going to the actual place. Many have been let down after having seen photos or taken a virtual tour of a particular place only to be sorely disappointed upon making the actual visit to that place. For those who do get to the place, many are more concerned with taking selfies of themselves and loading the photos onto social networks than really taking the time to engage in anything meaningful with that particular place. The natural setting becomes nothing more than an interesting background to highlight one’s own image to be broadcasted to friends and followers. Therefore, the irony of the digital age for human relationship with nature is that while it seems to help bring us closer to nature intellectually and even physically, this closeness often does not translate into emotional connection and intimacy.

Buddhist teachings and environmentalism

In response to increasing environmental degradation and the immanent environmental crisis in the digital age, Buddhism, like many world religions,

has been asked to delve into its teachings to make a contribution to solving the problem. The Buddhist understanding of nature is elastic and multi-layered. Buddhist nature has been identified as “loka” (“world”), and is comprised of physical as well as non-physical spheres of existence (De Silva 1987, 9). The late Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu refers to nature as the Dhamma itself, which is inclusive of four aspects: nature itself (*sabhavadhamma*), the law of nature (*saccadhamma*), the duty of living things in accordance with nature (*patipattidhamma*), and the results that come about as a result of these acts (*pativedhadhamma*) (Santikaro Bhikkhu 1996, 159). In this interpretation, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu has in mind something totally profound and all-encompassing, not just restricted to the physical reality, but also to the mental and spiritual dimensions of the universe. The Thai scholar monk Phra Prayudh Payutto sees nature as something that at the same time that human beings are a part of, they also enter into relationship with. In an article entitled “Buddhist Solutions for the Twenty-first Century,” he pointed out that “the perception that mankind is separate from nature, and must control, conquer or manipulate nature according to his desires” is one of the factors that lead to the ecological crisis (1994, 92). In order to address environmental degradation, Phra Prayudh exhorts human beings to look at themselves as being part of nature itself. He writes, “If we have the insight that we are part of nature, and we see that changes in nature must also have an effect on us, our actions will be constrained, clearly defined and balanced” (107). For Phra Phrayudh, despite human beings being a part of nature, there is still a sense of self-identity that allows human beings to enter into relationship with nature. In the talk entitled “Thai People and Forests,” Phra Prayudh speaks of human being as “friends of nature,” living out a mutually beneficial relationship instead of doing things that lead to oppression and destruction (2010, 20). Another Thai monk Phra Dharmakosajarn refers to human beings as protectors of nature. He writes, “Nature was for humanity to foster and develop for the necessities of living. Humanity is more like a warden or guardian to protect nature; humanity was not developed to be masters of the universe. This is the correct and positive way of thinking in Buddhism” (2011, 29). Phra Dharmakosajarn calls for recognition and living out the symbiotic relationship between human and nature stating, “The fact is clear: living beings and the proper environment cannot be separated. They must live and survive together. Living beings depend on their environment and the environment relies on living beings too” (12-13).

While there is no single unified understanding of the Buddhist notion of nature as a general category, Buddhist teachings that apply to nature in the

environmental sense are abundant. In the Buddhist tradition, nature is intimately connected to the life and livelihood of humanity. In the canonical texts, the human situation was often explained with analogies derived from observable events in nature (Sahni 2007, 68). For example, in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, it is said that just as a seed sown in a field is able to sprout due to the factors of soil, nutrients, and moisture, human life comes about due to certain causes.

*As when a seed is sown in a field
It grows depending on a pair of factors:
It requires both the soil's nutrients
And a steady supply of moisture:
Just so the aggregates and elements,
And these six bases of sensory contact,
Have come to be dependent on a cause;
With the cause's breakup they will cease. (S.I.9)*

Another example from the same *Nikāya* shows how human spiritual achievements come about as a result of processes that parallel with those in nature:

*Again and again, they sow the seed;
Again and again, the sky-god sends down rain;
Again and again, ploughmen plough the field;
Again and again, grain comes to the realm.
Again and again, the mendicants beg;
Again and again, the donors give;
When donors have given again and again,
Again and again they go to heaven. (S.I.12)*

These nature analogies serve to help the human person better understand the operational mechanisms of cause and effects in his life and the human person is subjected to a natural law that encompasses every entity in the universe. Contemplating the events that take place in nature is essential to individual spiritual cultivation. According to David J. Kulupahana, natural settings not only create fewer distractions when it comes to sense pleasures, but also “provide a natural experiential ground for realizing impermanence and dependent arising, that is, the nature of the world” (2009, 5). Indeed, the Buddha encouraged his monks to increase their virtue by resorting to “the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw” (M.I.181; I.346; I.441; III.4; III.116). Resorting to such

places and things is not always necessarily for aesthetic appreciation as some people who have a notion of a romanticized Buddhism are led to believe. The contemplation on these aspects of nature, especially on the lives of animals reveals a reality of life characterized by impermanence and suffering, the realization of which is essential for any effort at self-cultivation and self-transformation. Life led in a natural setting with its inconveniences and challenges may help the person to come to deeper understanding of the true nature of reality. For example, when monks reside in the forest, they are faced with nuisance from pests and insects that damage their abode and beddings. However, monks are reminded to contemplate on this reality as reflecting impermanence of all things and to persevere in their difficulties. At the same time, leading a forest life also leads to the danger that comes from wild animals. Monks are told to be aware of this situation, and by contemplating on the fear aroused from this danger, they can be led closer to the dhamma (Harris 1991, 106). The important role of nature in this effort is seen most clearly in the life of the Buddha himself. When associating nature with the life of the Buddha, writers will always point to the fact that the Buddha was said to be born, achieved enlightenment, and died under various types of trees, lived and taught in natural environments, and often taught his disciples using examples from nature. The Theravadin forest tradition in which monks build temples in the wilderness or in a forest setting where they live and teach, especially as seen in Thailand, is a legacy of the important role of nature since the earliest days of the religion.

Nature as a target of personal virtue

For Buddhism, evidence of one's progress in the effort of personal self-cultivation is in the virtues that he demonstrates in his relationship with others. To this extent, the state of the natural environment can function as indication of the state of human virtuousness. In his sermons, the Buddha made connections between these two realities. For example, in the *Cakkavattasihanada Sutta* (D.III.58-77), the Buddha said that when people behaved degenerately, filling their actions with ignorance, anger, and hatred, what resulted were war, famine, epidemics and other calamities. However, when people changed their hearts and their way of living, nature was restored to balance, and humanity experienced prosperity and peace.

The claim of the state of nature as manifestations reflecting human virtuousness can also be seen in other suttas of the *Anguttara*. In one sermon, the Buddha asserted:

Bhikkhus, when kings are unrighteous, the royal vassals become unrighteous. When the royal vassals are unrighteous, brahmins and householders become unrighteous. When brahmins and householders are unrighteous, the people of the towns and countryside become unrighteous. When the people of the towns and countryside are unrighteous, the sun and moon proceed off course. When the sun and moon proceed off course, the constellations and the stars proceed off course. When the constellations and the stars proceed off course, day and night proceed off course . . . the months and fortnights proceed off course . . . the seasons and years proceed off course. When the seasons and years proceed off course, the winds blow off course and at random. When the winds blow off course and at random, the deities become upset. When the deities are upset, sufficient rain does not fall. When sufficient rain does not fall, the crops ripen irregularly. When people eat crops that ripen irregularly, they become short-lived, ugly, weak, and sickly. (A.II.74)

Similarly, in another sermon of the same *Nikāya*, the Buddha warned:

When people are excited by illicit lust, overcome by unrighteous greed, afflicted by wrong Dhamma...They take up weapons and slay one another resulting in massive human deaths; sufficient rain does not fall leading to famine and lack of grains; wild spirits are let loose harming human lives. (A.I.159-160)

In Buddhism, exercising virtue towards nature is no less important than towards fellow human beings. The *Jataka* tale of the hungry tigress illustrates very poignantly how one is called to display mercy and compassion towards animals.

One day, when wandering in a forest along with his disciple Ajita, the Bodhisatta saw from the top of a hill that a tigress was lurking to kill and eat her own cubs out of hunger. Moved by compassion he thought of sacrificing his own body to feed the tigress and save the cubs. So, he sent away his disciple in search of some food for the tigress lest he might prevent him from his sacrifice. No sooner than Ajita left the site, the Bodhisatta jumped from the precipice in front of the tigress and offered his body. The noise of the fall caught the attention of the hungry tigress, who in no time scooped over him and tore him off in pieces and feasted upon them with her cubs.

When Ajita returned and did not find his *guru* in the same place, he looked around and was surprised to see that the tigress no longer looked hungry. Her cubs were also frolicking. But soon, he was shocked to detect the blood stained rags of his *guru*'s dress scattered there. So, he knew that his *guru* had offered his body to feed a hungry tigress and protected her young ones as an act of great charity. Now, he also knew why was he sent away by his *guru*.⁶

As a person trains himself in the Noble Eightfold Path and understands that the life of sentient beings is characterized by suffering, he is encouraged to practice loving kindness and compassion in his life. Loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*) are two of the four sublime abodes (*brahma-vihāra*) that all Buddhist faithful must aim to attain in his journey towards spiritual progress. A person filled with loving kindness and compassion sincerely desires that all sentient beings be freed from any suffering in their lives. Loving kindness is to be directed towards other creatures regardless of their strength, size, or proximity. It is to be wished upon others whether they are seen or unseen (S.I.8). The text that one often encounters when discussing about loving kindness is from the Suttras which states:

I dwell pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second quarter, the third quarter, and the fourth quarter. Thus above, below, across, and everywhere, and to all as to myself, I dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without enmity, without ill will. (A.I.183)

For each of these as well as the other sublime virtues, the Buddha exhorted the monks to assiduously train themselves so that they are able to carry out these virtues beyond their immediate neighbors, extending to the entire world (Sahni 120). Monks are enjoined also to have loving kindness even in the face of challenges and difficulties (M.I.123). Simon P. James points out that someone who is truly compassionate extends his compassion to human as well as non-human beings. If he is only compassionate towards human beings, then he would not be considered a truly compassionate person. Thus, a person's dealings with non-human sentient beings, i.e. animals would reflect on his level of virtuousness (2007, 457).

⁶ Vyaghri Jataka *Jatakamala* No.1. This tale is found online at this website: <http://ignca.nic.in/jatak025.htm>

Closely related to loving kindness and compassion is the virtue of gentleness. Gentleness can be seen as the positive derivative of the non-violence (*ahimsā*) precept, which is the first precept in Buddhism. In the *Dhammapada* one is reminded that just as a person recoils at the thought of pain and treasures his own life, so do other sentient beings (Dp.129-130). Thus, inflicting suffering on others is morally wrong and should not be done, may it be in our daily dealings with other people or animals or in means of livelihood that require intentional harm done to others. Buddhist teachings ask that people refrain from making a living by trading weapons, trading human beings, trading flesh, trading spirits and trading poison ought to be avoided (A.V.177). In addition, earning a living as pig and sheep butchers, hunters, thieves and murderers result in terrible consequences to the individual that no water ablution can eliminate (The.242-3). A person filled with the virtue of gentleness is expected to not just limit this positive trait to sentient beings. One would expect that those who display gentleness towards people and animals would also extend this demeanor towards plants and even non-living things like a historic boulder or a cave.

Another virtue that greatly affects the well-being of nature is generosity (*cāga*) in giving (*dāna*). According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, the spiritual quality of generosity is important because “the goal of the path is the destruction of greed, hate and delusion, and the cultivation of generosity directly debilitates greed and hate, while facilitating that pliancy of mind that allows for the eradication of delusion” (1995). True generosity is the underlying impetus for the practice of *dāna parami*, the perfection of giving that brings about wholesome *kamma* essential to the path of enlightenment (Jootla, 1995). Indeed, giving is an admirable act and Buddhism focuses a great deal on giving. However, the kind of giving that Buddhism is interested in is not just any act of giving, but those acts of giving that are motivated by the genuine internal disposition of generosity. There is no question that without nature, human beings cannot survive. Without the oxygen produced by plants, human beings would not be able to breathe. The processes taking place in nature is also extremely conducive to the spiritual progress of human beings when they meditate and reflect on them. The service that nature offers to human beings is constant and unceasing. Human generosity through acts such as planting trees and preserving forests demonstrate a sense of gratitude towards and an awareness of reciprocity in dealing with the natural environment. As the *Khuddaka Nikāya* states: “A person who sits or sleeps in the shade of a tree should not cut off a tree branch. One who injures such a friend is evil.”

Buddhist intervention in the digital age

Religion and technology has always gone hand in hand, usually with religion making use of available technology in order to promote its teachings and spread its presence to new territories. The digital age that the world now finds itself in is having profound impact on how religion presents itself and reaches out to humanity. By employing digital technology and mass media, religions are able to support their adherents in understanding and practicing their faith, but also introduce themselves to potential faith seekers in every corner of the world who can manage a broadband or 3G/4G connection. In a globalized world, religions can also impact the society with teachings that address spiritual, social, and political dimensions of human life. According to Daniel Veidlinger (2016), “Buddhism has long had an affinity for the latest technologies and has used every means at its disposal to transmit the Dharma far and wide.” Just as Buddhist monks and laypeople took to the Silk Road to spread their teachings, they are now doing the same on the information highway to communicate its truths to people of all sorts of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In the same manner that the printing press made the Bible accessible to all kinds of people, digital technology has now put the Pali Canon in multiple languages at the fingertip of anyone with Internet access. In the scholarly community, the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* established in 1994 was the first online peer reviewed journal in Religious Studies. As a religion that has always kept up with technological developments, Buddhism is in as good of a position as any not only to understand, employ, but also critique digital technology and its ramifications for human-nature relationship in this new social milieu.

What Buddhism has clearly demonstrated is that at the same time that it values technology and technological development, the role and place of nature in human life is essential to human self-cultivation and self-transformation. This human spiritual progress in turn affects the flourishing of nature. In the digital age where the human interaction with the natural environment is increasingly being facilitated through the digital environment or replaced by preoccupation with cyberspace, Buddhism needs to reflect on its basic teachings and traditions in order to promote healthy and wholesome human-nature relationship. One might argue that the digital environment with its ever changing content and shifting identities can represent just as good a means for reflection on impermanence as the forest environment. One might also argue that “technological nature” such as a virtual tour of a nature site or a

plasma “window” with a view of nature is an adequate replacement of the actual experience. If such were the case, there have not been any known studies that would demonstrate the truthfulness of these assertions. What has been shown, however, is that interaction with authentic nature can lead to improvement in one’s mental and physical health. Even minimal exposure to nature such as looking at it through a glass window has been shown to help hospitalized patients to heal faster, decrease the rate of illness of prisoners, and promote health in the workplace (Kahn et al. 2009, 37). Young children, studies have shown, are especially drawn to animals and enjoy interaction with them (Myers 2007). They also value a great deal animals, plants, natural landscapes, and rivers, etc. Children across cultures and social settings displayed some level of meaningful and moral relations with nature and were concerned about environmental degradation (38). While benefits of interaction with nature has been proven persuasively, studies that compare the benefit of technological nature with authentic nature have shown that the former brings fewer enjoyments and benefits, even if the presence of technological nature is better than having no nature at all.

One might assert that since experiencing actual nature is becoming increasingly rare due to urbanization and modernization, we have to settle for technological nature, which is better than having no nature at all. However, by accepting technological nature as the primary way to be exposed to nature in our life, we put ourselves in danger of what Daniel Pauly (1995) describes as the “shifting baseline syndrome.” Pauly describes this syndrome in relations to fisheries in which each successive generation of fisheries scientists examine the composition of stock size and species at the beginning of his/her career and takes that as the baseline upon which to evaluate changes. Because the composition changes with each successive generation, the baseline continually shifts and accommodates for the loss of stock and species. Indeed, this shifting baseline syndrome can be applied to other phenomena such as air quality, moral and ethical standards, or spiritual well-being. Accepting technological nature as a legitimate substitute for actual nature puts us in a situation of accepting a shifting baseline rather than working to retain what has been proven by religious teachings, scientific demonstration, and human experience and wisdom to be valuable and irreplaceable. Likewise, one can propose that cyberspace is as good an environment as the natural forest to meditate on the nature of reality, but chances are we will suffer from the shifting baseline syndrome mentioned above.

In this digital age, Buddhism is called to retrieve, re-evaluate, and apply its age old teachings to the new social context. As a religious tradition that knows how to make sense out of and employ technological developments, Buddhism is also asked to challenge those tendencies in technological developments that lead human beings away from spiritual progress and ultimate emancipation. Buddhist teachings on nature must be emphasized and highlighted in the new social milieu in order to counter against further alienation of the natural environment from the daily experience of people. While cyberspace and virtual reality are legitimate entities of modern human society that must be accepted, it does not serve us well when our daily life is overly consumed by these notional spaces as to lead to further separation of human beings from the natural environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this paper, I have suggested that as technological development continues to take place in Asia, the digital landscape will take shape in more apparent ways. The digital environment and the associated entity called cyberspace will in some ways distract or even draw people away from the natural environment, causing further human alienation from nature. Facing this prospect of alienation and estrangement, Buddhism can play a vital role in reminding its adherents of the importance of nature in one's spiritual development. Buddhism, as a religion that understands and knows how to use technology in propagating its teachings, can advance ideas that promote healthy and wholesome human-nature relationship to counter against negative inclinations brought about by increasing preoccupation with the digital environment at the peril of the natural environment. By actively bringing environmental issues to the forefront and emphasizing the fundamental need for a healthy human-nature relationship, Buddhism can serve as a force to prevent apathy towards environmental degradation and a catalyst for promoting environmental well-being. Buddhism can do this best in the Asian social-cultural context where a large percentage of the population is either practicing the religion or has been influenced deeply by the tradition.

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