

## A Brief History of Interdependence

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### INTRODUCTION

I have on occasion declared to colleagues in academe that my next research project will be to prove that something or other is monolithic. It brings forth the chuckle of an academic insider's joke, because possibly the most fashionable and stinging critique of a historian, sociologist, or anthropologist today is that he or she presents something—a culture, a society, a religion, a practice—as monolithic. It is the mistake *de jour*, for it is widely recognized as never before that not only are all of these things internally variegated, but also that nothing can stand on its own; all ideas, social practices, institutions, and cultural phenomena are the results of a complex multiplicity of factors that extend out into an ever-widening causal web. Current studies of natural systems, nations, economies, and cultures see them as multifaceted, interdependent processes—networks in which each part is both constituted by and constitutive of larger dynamic systems. That we live in a radically interconnected world has become a truism. Indeed, this age of internationalism and the Internet might well be called the age of *inter*: there is nothing that is not interconnected, interdependent, interwoven, interlaced, interactive, or interfacing with something else to make it what it is. Thus any religious tradition that can claim “interdependence” as a central doctrine lays claim to timely cultural resonance and considerable cultural cachet.<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising then that this term has been emerging with greater and greater frequency in contemporary Buddhist literature and acquiring increasing consonance with other modern discourses of interdependence. Sometimes used to translate the term *pratītya-samutpāda* (more precisely translated “dependent origination” or “de-

pendent co-arising”), its semantic field has now extended beyond this term to represent what many today see as *the* fundamental outlook of Buddhism—a doctrinal *sine qua non* with broad-ranging implications on personal, social, and global scales. It is not only a philosophical view of the world as a vast interconnected web of events with each phenomenon constituting and reflecting other phenomena, but also an idea with powerful ethical and political implications: if we are all part of a vast, interdependent network of being, what we do can have profound effects on others as our actions reverberate throughout this network.

As articulated in contemporary Buddhist literature, interdependence combines empirical description, world-affirming wonder, and an ethical imperative. As empirical description, it represents the world as a vast, interconnected web of internally related beings—that is, beings whose identity is inseparable from the systems of which they are a part, rather than having an *a priori* identity independent of these systems. Description of this web sometimes melds indistinguishably with descriptions of other interrelated processes like communication networks or biological systems. The contemporary Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh, has coined the term “interbeing” to capture the idea of the interdependence of all things, presenting it in an accessible and playful style:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist.... So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow.... And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper.... The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of “non-paper elements”.... As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.<sup>2</sup>

The doctrine of emptiness declares all things to lack inherent self-existence (*svabhāva*); therefore, all beings are constituted by their interactions with other beings and have no independent, enduring nature in and of themselves. Interdependence, or interbeing, applies as well to the self: “What we call self is made only of non-self elements.”<sup>3</sup> Because

things are empty of a separate self, they live in interdependence with all other things. Some authors use the hologram as a metaphor to suggest that all individual beings contain a miniature cosmos, like Nhat Hanh's sheet of paper contains the universe. Whitman's "I am large, I contain multitudes," as well as Blake's "To see a world in a grain of sand" are cited regularly in contemporary articulations of this microcosm/macrocosm relationship.

Descriptions of interdependence often convey a sense of celebration of this interwoven world, of intimacy and oneness with the great interconnected living fabric of life, and an expansion of the sense of selfhood into it. Joan Halifax cites Chinese Buddhists who declare the entire world, including "rock, sea, and flower," as sentient and presents Buddhism as a matter of connecting deeply with the living "web of creation":

A thing cannot live in isolation; rather, the condition of beingness... implies a vital and transformative interconnectedness, interdependence. And thus one seemingly separate being cannot be without all other beings, and is therefore not a separate self, but part of a greater Self, an ecological Self that is alive and has awareness within its larger Self.<sup>4</sup>

This dynamic between the separate self and the larger Self implies a particular interpretation of the Buddhist concept of no-self (*anātman*): once one realizes that one has no fixed, bounded self, one's sense of selfhood expands to include the others in the web of interdependence. According to Jeremy Hayward: "The growing into maturity of a human is experienced as an ever widening sense of self, from identification with the individual bodymind, to self as family, self as circle of friends, as nation, as race, as human race, as all living things, and perhaps finally to self as all that is."<sup>5</sup>

This idea of interdependence suggests natural alliances with some traditions and critiques of others. Often set up in opposition to the "Cartesian, mechanical, anthropocentric world view," Buddhism, with interdependence as its central feature, is said to conceive of the world as an "interrelated, intercausal universe similar to the world described in Native American wisdom...and quantum physics," according to Allan Hunt Badiner.<sup>6</sup> "Buddhism, shamanism, and deep ecology," asserts Halifax, "are based on the experience of engagement and the mystery of participation."<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary descriptions of interdependence, though, do not stop at the celebration of its wonder. They also emphasize the fragility of the interconnected network of beings: because everything depends on everything else, altering the balance of the web of life can be—and has been—catastrophic. Thus the concept entails strong ecological imperatives. The many Buddhist and Buddhist-inspired groups engaged in environmental activism routinely cite interdependence or interconnectedness as the conceptual rationale for the link between the dharma and environmentalism. Contemporary discourse on interdependence also carries ethical and political imperatives regarding social and economic justice. It recognizes that the interdependencies of the modern world are often sources of suffering. Perceiving interconnectedness may involve tracing a running shoe for sale at the local mall to global warming because of the fuel it took to ship it from China, where it in turn connects to economic injustice since it is made by women in a sweatshop making barely enough to survive, while a huge percentage of the profit from the shoe goes to corporate executives. It stresses finding root causes and seeking out hidden sources of social problems. The idea of interdependence, therefore, is an essential part of the conceptual arsenal of engaged Buddhism, the contemporary activist movement that strives to relieve suffering by addressing human rights, war, poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation. It is not then just a matter of “experiencing” the world as a part of the self but also a matter of ethical and political commitment.

Interdependence in this sense is often evoked by Americans and Europeans of eclectic spiritual orientation who freely mix Hindu, Daoist, and neo-Pagan traditions with Buddhism. It is not, however, simply a Western appropriation. While the poet and essayist Gary Snyder may be the most well-known American to offer an ecological interpretation of Buddhist interdependence, many of the most prominent Asian leaders of contemporary Buddhism—the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Daisaku Ikeda, Sulak Sivaraksa, Buddhādāsa, and others have made interdependence central to their teachings, explicitly relating it to modern social, political, and ecological realities. The famous Thai reformer Buddhādāsa (1906–1993), for example, contends that the fundamental truth of nature—and the central doctrine of the dharma—is the dependent arising of things. Seeing this “universal cooperation” of celestial bodies, the elements of the natural world, and the parts of the body leads us to care for nature and others. He insists that failing to see this

mutual dependence has unleashed rampant greed and selfishness, as well as catastrophic social and environmental ills. If we cannot see the world as a “mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise,” he states bluntly, “we’ll all perish.”<sup>8</sup>

While modern articulations of interdependence are rooted in the traditional Buddhist concept of *pratītya-samutpāda*, in the last few decades they have taken on meanings, implications, and associations unique to the present era. The contemporary Buddhist concept of interdependence, therefore, provides the historian of religion a fruitful arena for analyzing the processes of conceptual and praxiological change and adaptation to shifting global circumstances. In this article I want to show how this concept has developed from both Buddhist and non-Buddhist lineages. It is in many ways a paradigmatic example of a hybrid concept. In brief, the idea in some of its current forms is a hybrid of indigenous Buddhist concepts—dependent arising, the interpenetration of phenomena in the Huayan school, and various attitudes toward the natural world in East Asian Buddhism—co-mingled with conceptions of nature deriving from German Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, popular accounts of modern scientific thought, systems theory, and recent ecological thought.

I should mention that, although I am discussing a *concept*, it is actually much more than a disembodied idea. It is rather the most visible—and therefore most analyzable—aspect of a complex of social practices, attitudes, dispositions, and beliefs very much enmeshed in current social and political worlds. In other words, it is not monolithic! Its complexity is underlined by the fact that early classical formulations take a nearly opposite view of the significance of interdependence than do their contemporary successors. The concept of dependent origination and its implications were developed by monks and ascetics who saw the phenomenal world as a binding chain—not a web of wonderment but a web of entanglement. So our task is to show how interdependence developed from a position that took a rather dim view of worldly life to one that compels this-worldly celebration of life along with vigorous social and political engagement. Foucault said that “all history is history of the present,” which means essentially that our view of the past is deeply conditioned by the concerns, categories, and assumptions operative in the present.<sup>9</sup> In this respect this chapter is quite self-consciously a history of interdependence from the perspective of the present transformation of the concept, addressing salient ideas in clas-

sical Buddhist as well as Western texts that have been important in its modern articulation.

#### CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL BUDDHIST VIEWS OF NATURE

##### *Dependent Origination in Classical Pāli Literature*

The Buddha, as is often repeated, said that he taught only two things: suffering and the end of suffering. No doubt Buddhists and Buddhist institutions have supported efforts to relieve suffering throughout history. The moral ideal of compassion for all living beings cannot help but harmonize with the various modern efforts to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and promote economic and environmental sustainability for people and animals. The great number of Buddhists around the world active in these efforts are undoubtedly acting in accordance with the basic Buddhist principles of universal compassion and relief of suffering. But the Pāli suttas do not present temporary relief of suffering as the dharma's ultimate goal. Buddhism has always employed means of transitory reprieve from suffering, by means both natural and supernatural, but the "end of suffering" that the Buddha declared was to be permanent. The post-mortem state of *parinirvāṇa*, or nirvana without the substratum of the five *skandhas*, the aggregates of personal existence, was beyond suffering because it was beyond time and space, beyond becoming, beyond personal existence, beyond all conditioned things. It was by definition nearly unimaginable—everything that the phenomenal world of transience and rebirth was not. The end of suffering was an end not to this or that problem but ultimately a transcendence of the phenomenal world itself. No doubt the vast majority of Buddhists throughout history have been laypeople who did not aspire to such a remote goal. Even most monks, it turns out, have not considered this a realistic aspiration in this lifetime given the age of decline in which we live. The ideal, however, is at the heart of the symbolic world of Buddhism.

The Pāli suttas arose out of an ascetic milieu that viewed family, reproduction, physical pleasures, material success, and worldly life as ultimately futile, disappointing, and binding. Dependent origination denotes in early Buddhist literature the chain of causes and conditions that give rise to all phenomenal existence in the world of impermanence, birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*). Far from being celebrated as a wondrous web of interconnected life, it is repeatedly referred to as a "mass of suffering" (*dukkha*). Indeed, it is through the reversal of

this chain of interdependent causation—not an identification with it—that the Buddha is said to have become awakened. The “world” (*loka*) itself is conceived as a flow of phenomenal events dependent on contact between the senses and sense objects, consciousness and objects of consciousness. It does not exist in and of itself but arises with the intertwining of a falsely reified subject and object. The point of elucidating the relationships between the various kinds of consciousness and its objects—visual consciousness and objects of vision, auditory consciousness and sounds, etc.—is to help the monk understand how to disentangle them and thus bring about a dissolution of the phenomenal world (*Samyutta-nikāya* 12.44). This of course does not mean the literal destruction of the world, but rather the dismantling of the experienced world as it is constituted by this intertwining of consciousness and its objects based on craving, aversion, and delusion. While modern Buddhists and scholars sometimes present the chain of dependent origination as a kind of empirical theory of causality, the point was not so much to account for the arising of natural phenomena but rather for the arising of the conditions for dissatisfactory life in the cycle of rebirth. Understanding these conditions provided the possibility of undoing them and being released into the liberated state beyond all causes and conditions (see, for instance, *Dīgha-nikāya* 15). Rather than celebrating the “experience of engagement and the mystery of participation” in the interconnected “web of life,”<sup>10</sup> Pāli literature instead encourages quite the opposite: the *disengagement* from all entanglement in this web.

Many Pāli suttas attempt to foster the dissolution of the interdependent chain of causality and the world of ordinary experience to which it gives rise by emphasizing the impurity and undesirability of physical life. Sense desires are “perilous” and “bring little enjoyment, and much suffering and disappointment” (*Majjhima-nikāya* 22). The investigation of the world and worldly life bring about “disgust” (*nibbidā*) with them. In order to cultivate such disgust and counter lust, some suttas spare no detail in describing the unattractive aspects of the body: it oozes secretions from various orifices, is full of foul fluids, slimy organs, bones, and tendons; soon it will decay and become food for jackals, worms, and birds. Yet, people think it is beautiful; therefore, the monk is instructed to contemplate the body’s foulness and impermanence, thereby becoming disenchanting by it (e.g., *Āṅguttara-nikāya* 9.15, *Samyutta-nikāya* 1.11).

It is important to note in light of all this that characterizing Buddhism as a whole as “pessimistic” or “life-negating,” as did many nineteenth-century European writers, is misleading. Pāli Buddhism is in no way thoroughly world-negating: there is no shortage of representations of the Buddha giving advice on worldly matters and ascribing value to ordinary happiness within the world. The tradition develops positions on family life, work, governing, and other worldly affairs. It very early develops proximate concerns regarding ordinary life, many of which are implicitly life-affirming. But its more remote goal of achieving nirvana and transcending embodied life, beyond rebirth and temporality itself, have always formed at least the symbolic center of the tradition and the long-term (i.e., multiple-lifetime) goal of practitioners.<sup>11</sup> There is little in early Buddhist literature, therefore, that suggests the celebratory implications of the contemporary articulation of interdependence.

Early Indian Buddhist attitudes toward the natural world and wilderness also cannot account for the reverence for nature associated with interdependence today. The attitude toward the natural world and wilderness is ambivalent in the Pāli canon. Some passages suggest that the best place to practice the dharma is in quiet natural settings, and others even celebrate the beauty of the natural world. In the *Theragāthā*, for instance, Kassapa extols the joys of living and practicing in the wilderness, where “these rocky crags do please me so” (*Theragāthā* 1062–1071). Yet, while early followers of the Buddha were ascetics who left the burgeoning cities of the time for the relative solitude of the forest, there is little indication that it was primarily to appreciate the beauties of nature. In fact, some Indian Buddhist literature suggests that the forest was considered a place of fear and danger from animals, insects, and bandits.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, there is no sense in the Pāli literature that nature is sacred or that the feeling of merging with the natural world is synonymous with or even conducive to awakening.

There are, however, more general values that feed into the contemporary conception of interdependence and its ethical implications. Pāli literature emphasizes a universal moral imperative to preserve the lives and well-being of all sentient beings and to practice unselfish acts for the widest possible circle of living things, including animals and even insects. Loving-kindness (*mettā*) meditations in a number of early suttas and commentaries are designed to train the mind to cul-

tivate this compassion and loving-kindness towards all beings. This universal ethic does not depend on any idea of the dense interconnect-edness of beings such that the actions of one reverberate throughout the cosmos to affect all but rather on the moral law of karma, the high value placed on compassion, and the fact that rebirth in various orders of beings provides a continuity between humans and animals—they could be one’s own relatives and friends from the past. While this moral imperative encourages empathetic identification with all sentient beings, this does not imply expanding the subjective sense of *selfhood* to include other beings—any selfhood, limited or encompassing, is ultimately rejected in this early literature.

The early concept of dependent origination, therefore, cannot fully account for the contemporary concept of Buddhist interdependence and its implications. In some ways the early view appears, in fact, quite contrary to the contemporary one. It depicts the interdependent chain of causes and condition as binding one to a world of suffering. Although it emphasizes ethical concern for all sentient beings, it does not advocate the expansion of self-identity to include all things and beings. The ultimate goal, moreover, is not identification with the interdependent network of causality but transcendence of it.

### *Interdependence and Interpenetration in the Mahāyāna*

#### Emptiness and Dependent Origination

A number of South Asian Mahāyāna texts, however, introduced ways of thinking about dependent origination that allowed for a tilt toward a more affirmative view of the phenomenal world, and these have proven to be important sources for modern articulations of interdependence. They include the ideal of the bodhisattva who remains in samsara until all beings are saved, as well as new conceptions of the goal of the path as buddhahood within the world rather than a wholly transcendent nirvana. These are prominent themes, for example, in the highly influential *Lotus (Saddharmapuṇḍarīka)* and the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) Sutras*.

Another important source for rethinking the valuation of dependent origination is Nāgārjuna’s *Fundamentals of the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā)*, one of the most influential texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism. As is well known, the basic thrust of the text is a development of the idea that all things lack, or are empty (*śūnya*) of, inherent self-existence (*svabhāva*)—a fixed, substantial, independent, and

permanent nature. They are instead constituted by a multiplicity of causes and conditions. In asserting that both samsara and nirvana are empty of inherent self-existence, Nāgārjuna declares that there is “not the slightest difference between the two” (*Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* 25:19–20). Since all things lack inherent self-existence, any conceptual construction, including even the difference between samsara and nirvana, is merely a conventional truth (*saṃvṛtti-satya*). Nāgārjuna also identifies emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the ultimate truth of this lack of inherent self-existence of things, with dependent origination: “That which is dependent origination is emptiness. It is a convenient designation, and is itself the middle way” (*Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* 24:18). This suggests that samsara be viewed not as something inherently binding—for, lacking inherent self-existence it cannot be *inherently* anything. Rather samsara, since it is itself empty, is from the highest level of understanding just like nirvana. As a Perfection of Wisdom text puts it, all *dharmas* are “limitless” and “boundless” (*ananta* and *aparyanta*).<sup>13</sup> That is, if we “see” all of the elements of existence (*dharmas*) that constitute dependent origination correctly, we see them as empty and therefore of the nature of awakening itself. I have argued elsewhere that this reconfigures the relationship between nirvana and samsara, the unconditioned and the conditioned, presented in the Pāli literature.<sup>14</sup> Rather than attempting to attain the unconditioned (nirvana) and reject the conditioned (samsara), Nāgārjuna and the Perfection of Wisdom literature suggest that what is important is stopping the conceptual reification of any *dharma* at all, thus seeing all of them as empty. Apprehending the true empty nature of the *dharmas* that constitute dependent origination, therefore, can be the occasion for liberation, for their nature is ultimately the same as that of nirvana itself.

Seeing dependent origination, therefore, constitutes awakening. This is not a new idea: Pāli suttas claim that on the night of his awakening Śākyamuni Buddha “saw” dependent origination, beholding the causes and conditions that produce both suffering and awakening. Through this sweeping vision of all causes and conditions, he was able to enact his own liberation (*Udāna* 1.3). There is a subtle difference, however, between the emerging Mahāyāna understanding of “seeing” dependent origination and that of the Pāli traditions. The biographies of the Buddha present him as seeing dependent origination first in the specific case of the trajectory of his own karma extending back into the infinite past. He therefore apprehends all of the causes and conditions

that have brought him to the brink of awakening. This vision then expands to encompass the causes and conditions of all sentient beings and the karmic trajectories by which they have come to be what they are. This gives the Buddha a thorough understanding of the entire process of dependent origination, i.e., the factors that give rise to dissatisfaction as well as the path by which to undo those factors. The seeing of dependent origination, therefore, is not in itself liberative; again, it is not that he becomes one with the world, merging with the infinite web of existence—in fact, he is “disjoined” from the world (*Itivuttaka* 112). Seeing dependent origination, according to Pāli sources, allowed the Buddha to discern the path to ending his entanglement with dependent origination. The vision was a kind of map or instruction manual for reversing the causes and conditions for this entanglement (see, for example, *Udāna* 1.3).

It is possible to read Nāgārjuna, however, as abandoning this interpretation of “seeing dependent origination” as a map in favor of simply seeing any dharma in its emptiness as sufficient for apprehending the highest truth. Seeing the emptiness of all *dharmas* renders one liberated in this world. On this interpretation, revulsion for dependent origination is no better than clinging to it; the important thing is seeing into its true nature rather than transcending it altogether.

### The Visionary Cosmos

The reading of Nāgārjuna given above is supported by quite a few Mahāyāna sutras that re-interpret the ultimate goal of Buddhism from transcending the conditioned phenomenal world (*samsara*) to various conceptions of awakened life in the midst of the world. Subsequently tendencies emerge toward a view of this “seeing” of dependent origination as a kind of vision of the cosmos that is itself liberative, aside from any “instructive” elements showing the causes and conditions of both bondage and liberation. There are two ways of understanding this. One is the Nāgārjunian insight that all things are empty of inherent self-existence which, having freed one from the illusion of inherent self-existence, constitutes liberation itself. Another way of interpreting this “seeing” is as a kind of cosmic vision. In the more visionary genre of Mahāyāna literature, seeing the Buddha, or having a vision of the cosmos as it is seen by the Buddha, can itself constitute liberation, or at least great progress towards it.

The *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* epitomizes this visionary tradition and is also one of the most important sources for the contemporary interpretation of interdependence. Here, especially in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* section,<sup>15</sup> the idea of emptiness is transposed into visual imagery in which each individual thing and all things in the universe interpenetrate and yet retain their distinctiveness. The fact that all individual things in some sense contain or reflect all others corresponds to Nāgārjuna's "truth in the highest sense" (*paramārtha-satya*), the emptiness of inherent self-existence—everything is constituted by other things. The fact that things, despite this, maintain their individual distinctiveness corresponds to the conventional truth (*saṃvṛtti-satya*). This is symbolized in the Chinese Huayan school, which takes the *Avataṃsaka* (Ch. *Huayan*) as its main text, by the jeweled net of Indra, an immense net with multifaceted jewels at each juncture, each of which both reflects and is reflected by all of the others. This powerful image has become a standard symbol for the interdependence in our contemporary sense, and the Perfection of Wisdom literature and the *Avataṃsaka* are the sources for Thich Nhat Hanh's idea of "interbeing"—recall the illustration of how the sheet of paper contains all things.

The *Avataṃsaka* also contains numerous visionary episodes culminating in one in which the hero, Sudhana, has a vision of the entire cosmos within the body of the Buddha Mahāvairocana. This vision, in which Sudhana becomes one with Mahāvairocana, enacting in a moment all of his eons of wondrous deeds as a bodhisattva, reveals the world as a resplendent, radically interpenetrating cosmos in which the ordinary categories of time and space are collapsed. Here we have an example of a motif important to the modern articulation of interdependence: the identification of a person with a being who is the universe itself or with the underlying reality of things. Moreover the world into which Sudhana merges is not permeated with foulness and suffering but shot through with countless buddhas and bodhisattvas, some in resplendent garb, some in the guise of fishermen, children, and all manner of seemingly ordinary people, some in the pores of a buddha's skin and in the land itself. It is a transfigured world of magic and wonder, quite distant it would seem from binding chains of dependent origination in the Pāli literature. We have, therefore, three more ingredients of the contemporary conception of interdependence: the identification of the individual with the cosmos or a cosmic being; the

radical interpenetration and inter-reflectivity of all things; and a more affirmative, enchanted view of the world of phenomena.<sup>16</sup>

Whether presented as an analytic insight into the nature of all things as empty or as a visionary revelation, some South Asian Mahāyāna texts mark a rethinking of the significance of dependent origination and the phenomenal world. Seeing dependent origination in these texts entails seeing all things as empty of inherent self-existence, an act that itself constitutes awakening. This is then developed into a conception of a liberative vision of the totality and of the world as the manifestation of a cosmic reality—Vairocana, *dharmakāya*, or buddha-nature: the hidden buddhahood or buddha-potential of all things. While the ideas of the emptiness of all phenomena, liberation within the world, the interpenetration of all phenomena, and identification of the individual with a cosmic reality all provide important resources for the contemporary conception of interdependence, it is not until they are transformed in East Asia that these become associated with reverence for the natural world.

#### *Nature and Buddha-Nature in East Asia*

When Buddhists came to China, they encountered views of the natural world quite alien to those of South Asia. Chinese literature shows little of the distaste for embodiment and everyday life found in Indian ascetic traditions. By the time Buddhism was becoming established in China, there was an indigenous literature of reverence for mountains, rivers, and uncultivated forests, as well as the concept an underlying force, the Dao, that coursed through humanity and the natural world. Lewis Lancaster suggests one factor in the divergent orientations had to do with the fact that India was at the time a large forest with islands of urban centers, while China was mostly deforested with islands of mountain forest. It is not, therefore, that the Chinese had a uniformly positive valuation of uncultivated wilderness; rather, some intellectuals and sages began to appreciate the remnants of wilderness in part because it was disappearing, giving way to cities and cultivated fields.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the sages' views of nature created conditions for a revaluation of the phenomenal world within Buddhist traditions. We have mentioned that some Indic Mahāyāna traditions characterize awakening as identification with this larger reality of Buddha nature, or what is sometimes called the “womb” or “matrix” of the buddha (*tathāgata-gārbha*). In contrast to the earlier emphasis on no-self

(*anātman*), texts such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* affirm a “great self” hidden in all people. The Buddha becomes a transcendent and eternal cosmic being with which the individual is ultimately identical. In China, buddha-nature is mapped more explicitly onto the natural world, and the natural world is re-envisioned as both symbol and manifestation of this cosmic reality rather than a continuing cycle of dissatisfaction to be transcended. Some Chinese Buddhist thinkers contended that all beings, even grasses, rocks, and rivers, contained buddha-nature. Such ideas suggest a new relationship emerging within the Buddhist tradition between humanity and nature, one of mutuality and harmony rather than ambivalence and suspicion.

A number of the philosophical writings of East Asian schools of Buddhism support both a more positive view of the conditioned, dependently originated world and the idea of awakening as identification with this larger cosmos. Fazang, the most prominent thinker of the Huayan school, developed the implications of the *Avatamsaka-sūtra* in ways that essentially overturn the Pāli conception of dependent origination and the distinction between the conditioned and the unconditioned. For Fazang, since all entities interpenetrate each other, the distinction between samsara and nirvana ultimately breaks down in a more radical way than with Nāgārjuna. The universe is the body and mind of the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana, which pervades and sacralizes all things equally. There is no need to escape from the process of dependent origination, only to see it aright as the marvelous manifestation of the cosmic Buddha. As with most Chinese Buddhist thinkers, Fazang rejects the idea of transcending the realm of the conditioned and instead suggests attunement to the world and seeing it as the wonder that it is. It is not surprising that some modern ideas of Buddhist interdependence draw heavily from this school.<sup>18</sup>

The work of famous East Asian Buddhist poets, such as China’s Hanshan and Japan’s Bashō, combine in unprecedented ways Buddhist teachings with a keen appreciation of the objects and processes of the natural world. In Hanshan’s poems, Cold Mountain—his alpine home as well as the name he took for himself—is a symbol of awakening, and the abundant images of clouds, towering mountains, and wind-blown trees are all fashioned into metaphors of the path to awakening. Yet Hanshan has more than a merely metaphorical interest in nature and clearly revels in the beauty of his natural surroundings. It is no wonder that the contemporary American Buddhist poet, Gary Snyder, also a

reverent disciple of the natural world, would translate many of Hanshan's poems about freely wandering in wilderness, seeing traces of buddha-nature in the crags and streams, and spurning affluence and reputation.

In a tangle of cliffs I chose a place—  
Bird-paths, but no trails for men.  
What's beyond the yard?  
White clouds clinging to vague rocks.  
Now I've lived here—how many years—  
Again and again, spring and winter pass.  
Go tell families with silverware and cars  
“What's the use of all that noise and money?”<sup>19</sup>

The last lines are Snyder's obvious smuggling of Hanshan's spirit into the modern world, playfully rendering what is more precisely translated, “I send this message to families of wealth/An empty name will do you no good.”<sup>20</sup> The intent in both versions is clear: to sketch the contrast between civilization, with its demands for money and reputation, and the unencumbered sacredness of the wilderness. As we will see, this contrast is easily translated into nineteenth- and twentieth-century American sensibilities, and the mingling of Chinese and American versions of this opposition will be highly productive for modern Buddhism.

Buddhistic attention to the natural world continued and developed in Japan as well. Saigyō, the twelfth-century Japanese Buddhist thinker and poet, reflected on the natural world as a locus for awakening, partly in view of the fact that plants were conceived as having buddha-nature. Encounters with the vast variety of sentient and even non-sentient beings could be occasions for perceiving this hidden, sacred reality within all things.<sup>21</sup> Dōgen, the prolific thirteenth-century founder of the Sōtō school of Zen, likewise discussed the non-duality of humanity and nature in a number of his writings. In “Mountains and Rivers Sūtra,” which Snyder has interpreted in an ecological vein, Dōgen puts the matter vividly: “The mountains and rivers of this moment are the actualization of the way of the ancient Buddhas. Each, abiding in its own phenomenal expression, realizes completeness. Because mountains and waters have been active since before the eon of emptiness, they are alive at this moment. Because they have been the self since before form arose, they are liberated and realized.”<sup>22</sup>

A brief passage from Dōgen has also become a standard citation for modern Buddhist expressions of the widening sense of selfhood that encompasses all beings: “We study the self to forget the self. When you forget the self you become one with the ten thousand things.”<sup>23</sup> The verse in a stroke erases what for many Buddhists are the “Māras” of the present age: the erroneous belief in the isolated Cartesian ego, the mechanistic view of the natural world, and the disenchantment and desacralization of the world with its accompanying materialism, over-consumption, and environmental degradation. But in order for thinkers such as Dōgen to be called forth from their own time to speak to such issues, the ground had to be prepared by a variety of Western ideas and practices. The various pictures of dependent origination, samsara, and the natural world that emerge from South and East Asian canonical texts do not themselves provide sufficient material to account for the ways in which the concept of Buddhist interdependence has developed in recent decades. There exists a parallel genealogy of this concept that does not join the one we have just discussed until well into the twentieth century. It is to this lineage that we now turn.

#### WESTERN SOURCES OF BUDDHIST INTERDEPENDENCE

##### *Between Rationalism and Romanticism*

In order for the Buddhist conception of interdependence to attain the significance it has today, it had to acquire ingredients from a variety of sources and situate itself within the broad tensions between rationalist and Romantic orientations. The Western lines of influence that would feed the contemporary conception can be traced back to the eighteenth century. The modern age in Europe, going back as far the Deists, produced a number of philosophies depicting the universe as a vast “interlocking order”—to use Charles Taylor’s phrase—with beings of various natures and purposes organically connected and unified into a total system.<sup>24</sup> It is a view of a cosmos in which all the various functions and purposes of individual things work together in a harmonious order for the ultimate good of all. This view affirms the goodness of nature and asserts that human beings must act in accordance with it. We find an early articulation in Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man*, where he describes nature as an interconnected whole pervaded by one spirit:

...Look round our world; behold the chain of love  
Combining all below and all above.

See plastic Nature working to this end,  
The single atoms each to other tend,  
Attract, attracted to, the next in place,  
Form'd and impell'd its neighbour to embrace.  
See matter next, with various life endued,  
Press to one centre still, the gen'ral good;  
See dying vegetables life sustain,  
See life dissolving vegetate again.  
All forms that perish other forms supply  
(By turns we catch the vital breath, and die),  
Like bubbles on the sea of Matter borne,  
They rise, they break, and to that sea return.  
Nothing is foreign; parts relate to whole;  
One all-extending, all-preserving, soul  
Connects each being, greatest with the least;  
Made beast in aid of man, and man of beast;  
All serv'd all serving: nothing stands alone;  
The chain holds on, and where it ends unknown.<sup>25</sup>

In the Romantic tradition, the German Idealists also developed various iterations of the organic wholeness of nature and our inseparability from it, as well as conceptions of the Absolute as nature itself, endowed with subjectivity and coming to individual consciousness in human beings. They offered a picture of the relationship between humanity and nature characterized by an ego that was separated from nature and longed to return to the primordial unity with the larger whole that connects everyone and everything. According to early nineteenth-century German Idealist philosopher Friedrich W. J. Schelling, for example, objects are not independent of the subject, though the usual immersion of the ego in objects blinds the subject to their primordial intertwining. Moreover, because subject and object are not ontologically separate, human beings can come to know nature in a unified sense, not through empirical judgments but through an “inner love and familiarity of your own mind with nature’s liveliness...[and] a quiet, deep-reaching composure of the mind.”<sup>26</sup> It is through what he calls “intellectual intuition” that the subject recognizes its own ultimate identity with objects. Restoring this lost communion between the self and the world is what constitutes true happiness and overcomes the “Fall,” which is the arising of opposition and differentiation out of the primordial unity of the spirit. All human beings are ultimately one, he says, though on the empirical level they appear as many. The infinite absolute, however, is ineffable and beyond all distinctions.

English Romantics maintained that nature could be more profoundly accessed through feeling and internal impulse than the dissecting blade of rational analysis. We have seen already that this was connected to an anti-mechanistic tendency, one that critiqued the Newtonian cosmology and Cartesian dualism, as well as the exclusive epistemological reliance on instrumental reason. They insisted that the dominance of instrumental rationality, Newtonian mechanistic cosmology, and Cartesian dualism fragments the wholeness of nature, cutting humanity off from its vital force. Coleridge, for example, praises the “intuition of things which arises when we possess ourselves, as one with the whole,” while characterizing as “mere understanding” the perception that occurs when “we think of ourselves as separated beings, and place nature in antithesis to the mind, as object to subject, thing to thought, death to life.”<sup>27</sup> Coleridge suggested the metaphor of God as a poet rather than a watchmaker and the universe as a system of relationships in which each thing has its own particular life, yet is also part of the all-encompassing life: “one omnipresent Mind/Omnific. His most holy name is LOVE.”<sup>28</sup> Wordsworth’s celebrated “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” offers the quintessential articulation of the Romantic view of nature as a living force:

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime  
Of something deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man –  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.<sup>29</sup>

This sense of the wholeness of life, its organic unity and inter-relatedness, was for the Romantics also a powerful source of the sublime, a feeling awe and reverence.

All of these themes work their way into modernist articulations of Buddhism. The idea of the separate ego that finds its way back to wholeness in expanding its boundaries to identify with the vast inter-related cosmos and all its inhabitants, giving up its separate, egocentric existence is clearly a key conception in the contemporary understanding of Buddhism, especially in the West. Moreover, the sense of an animate universe, of a life-force flowing through all things offer-

ing an inner access to the spiritual essence of the whole, appears in various ways in modern and contemporary Buddhism. Clearly there are indigenous Buddhist sources for similar ideas, which I have just identified—*tathāgata-gārbha*, the identification of the individual with the cosmic Buddha, dependent origination, and the interpenetration of phenomena; however, the way they are taken up and embodied in the conception of interdependence and its implications is a hybrid process that draws upon a Western lineage extending back to the Deists and Romantics.

One of the ways in which Buddhist ideas were appropriated in a modern, Western context was to augment the Romantic critique of Enlightenment rationalism and its descendents. It is important here to identify a few key themes that Romantics and post-Romantics were struggling against in order to understand where Buddhism came into the picture. Descartes and Bacon are often identified as the starting point for the desacralized view of nature, and authors discussing Buddhist interdependence today often evoke Cartesian dualism as the quintessential orientation against which this conception contends. One of the key consequences of Descartes' re-envisioning of the self as "unextended substance" distinct from the extended substances (material things) is the view of the world as a mechanism or machine and the concomitant emergence of an attitude of disengagement toward and objectification of the "not-I." The world as a machine could not be understood as the embodiment of a meaningful order with spiritual and moral ramifications, as it was for the ancients. All meaning was now located in the mind itself and its private representations of external objects. This idea marks an important phase of the "disenchantment" of the world. Because all meaning now is "in" the mind, that which is "outside" the mind is disinvested of intrinsic meaning or value. Nature is neutralized and the mind is the exclusive locus of thought and value. This is quite different from the view of things as having meaning and value in and of themselves, in effect, ontologically residing in them.<sup>30</sup> Here the mind's primary orientation toward the world is that of instrumental control. Knowledge of the physical world is, in Descartes' words, "very useful in life," and by knowing the various principles by which nature operates "we can...employ [objects of nature] in all those uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature."<sup>31</sup> Rational understanding of nature—devel-

oping clear and distinct ideas of its many facets—is inseparable from mastering nature as a collection of objects to be used for our purposes.

To be fair, the founders of this instrumentalist orientation did not conceive of it as inviting the plundering of the natural world in hedonistic pursuit of pleasure and power, nor could they have imagined the ramifications of this conceptual neutralization of nature when later it was combined with innumerable other social and material factors that have contributed to the current ecological crisis. It is too simplistic to attribute to Cartesian dualism the tremendous causal power that some give it, drawing a nearly direct line from Descartes' *Meditations* to Chernobyl. Still we can see this orientation toward the mind and natural world as a part of—rather than the cause of—the long, complex processes that have contributed to the commodification of natural resources and the degradation of the natural world. These processes ushered in a hegemony of instrumental reason in which the things of the world are objectified in ways that would serve as the rationale for the unrestrained exploitation of natural resources.

In attempting to stem this exploitation, contemporary societies across the globe have searched for practical solutions but also for conceptual and religious resources for re-envisioning and re-spiritualizing nature. It is in part this effort that provoked late-modern Buddhists—as well as other historical religions and new religious movements—to attempt to revivify a sense of the intrinsic worth and spiritual significance to nature, to resacralize and revalorize the natural world, bridging the Cartesian split between the mind and the material.

#### *Transcendentalism and the Re-enchantment of the World*

We have seen that some elements of Asian Buddhism—particularly certain strains of East Asian traditions—had already developed rationales for the intrinsic religious value of the natural world. As with a number of important developments in Buddhist modernism, we find that the particular way this reverence for nature was taken up in the West was shaped by Transcendentalists and their kindred spirits. It is they who brought Romantic metaphysics into an American framework that provided the vocabulary for the translation of Buddhism into Western categories. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America also inaugurated new ways of valuing the natural world that would later contribute to the development of the contemporary concept of

Buddhist interdependence, especially with regard to its implications for environmental valuation and protection.

The period of the Transcendentalists saw a revolution in ways of understanding the natural. Departing from the earlier Puritan sense of nature as a place of danger, evil, testing, and purification, they offered a full-throated affirmation of the sacredness of the natural world. This affirmation was also tinged with philosophical Idealism—like their predecessors, the German Romantics, some American Transcendentalists saw the natural world not just as a part of God’s creation but as a part of God himself. This was one factor in the American articulation of the idea that undeveloped wilderness had an intrinsic, not just utilitarian, value. Sometimes connected to ideologies of American nationalism and sometimes suspicious of them, the romance of the wilderness became a prominent feature of American literature of this time. The sense of nature as a place of spiritual repose and rejuvenation, of awe and wonder became widespread.<sup>32</sup>

In his seminal work, *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson repeatedly extols the serene contemplation of landscape as not only spiritually uplifting but also noetic, offering the possibility of comprehending the “tranquil sense of unity” in the vast diversity of things. Visible nature is the outer edge of the manifestation of spirit, and the contemplation that perceives the affinities and ultimate unity in all of the greatly variegated phenomena “has access to the entire mind of the Creator....”<sup>33</sup> Such a vision of underlying connection, affiliation, and unity are possible mainly through the solitary contemplation of things away from the bustle of human activity. He famously describes the disembodied joy he experiences in the woods: “Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.”<sup>34</sup> Emerson contrasts this mode of relatively passive, unitive envisioning of things to “Empirical science,” which “is apt to cloud the sight, and by way of the very knowledge of functions and processes to bereave the student of the manly contemplation of the whole. The savant becomes unpoetic.”<sup>35</sup> While nature indeed calls to the scientist, many “patient naturalists” miss the mark by “freez[ing] their subject under the wintry light of the understanding.”<sup>36</sup>

The famous naturalist John Muir, a pivotal figure in the American conception of wilderness and its spiritual value, as well as the devel-

opment of the ethic of preservation, embodied this new perception of nature. Muir's writings brought to an apotheosis the Transcendentalist reverence for wilderness as a place of wonder and sacredness, as well as renewal and refuge from the harsh conditions of modernity. His articulation of the significance of the natural became ensconced in American consciousness and remains quite palpable today. Having studied both Emerson and Thoreau, Muir imbibed the vitalistic and holistic tendencies that they in turn had appropriated from the Romantics: nature, he declared, was "one soul" and wilderness a "unity in interrelation" that is "alive and familiar."<sup>37</sup> "When we try to pick out anything by itself," he declared, "we find it hitched to everything in the universe."<sup>38</sup> Re-tuning Christian language to the key of the earthy paradise of the mountains, forests, and lakes, Muir wrote of nature itself as an incarnation of divinity, its individual things "portions of God."<sup>39</sup> Communing with nature was a kind of earthly sacrament in which "you lose consciousness of your own separate existence: you blend with the landscape, and become part and parcel of nature"<sup>40</sup> There was a contemplative element to Muir's appreciations as well; both he and Thoreau suggested that a disciplined purification of the body and senses was necessary in order to properly access nature and allow its holiness to present itself. Muir also complemented his rapturous contemplations of nature with the development of an activist preservationist ethic, inspiring the development of the national park at Yosemite and founding the Sierra Club.<sup>41</sup> Muir fiercely criticized unrestrained commercialism as dangerous not only to the natural world but to the soul: "These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and, instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar."<sup>42</sup> Muir knew little of Buddhism, but his sensibilities have undeniably been absorbed into late twentieth-century ecological interpretations of Buddhism in the hands of its most important expositors. A number of interpreters of the contemporary view of Buddhist interdependence regularly reference his emphasis on the direct experience and reverence of the nature, as well as his biocentric view of a deeply interconnected world, his rejection of mechanistic conceptions, and his contempt for modern commercialism and materialism.

Elements of this American reverence for nature went hand-in-hand with a new valuation of solitude, especially solitude in the woods and the feelings of connection to nature that it could bring. Thoreau

is of course the paradigmatic example, though he was just the most visible of those who placed a high spiritual value on the solitary contemplations of nature. The writings of a lesser-known Transcendentalist, William Rounseville Alger, show that this emphasis on solitude and nature was a response to an increasing crowdedness of cities and the stress of modern bureaucratic and industrial work. Tapping into a wider anxiety among nineteenth-century progressives about urban life—its vice and materialism, its over-crowdedness alongside its alienation and isolation, as well as its masses of threatening immigrants—Alger saw the wilderness as a wholesome spiritual refuge. Praising solitude, he declared that society is “full of multiplicity and change, is in every way finite, wasting its force in incessant throbs; solitude, an unfaltering unity, is allied to the infinite.”<sup>43</sup> Modern society for Alger was a cauldron of narcissism, anxiety, and greed, while solitude was the antidote for the “overtaxed...weary, uneasy, and ambitious” and to a market-driven world that thrived on competition and ego-assertion.<sup>44</sup> Alger embodies a trend toward inwardness and solitude as a response to the modern anxieties of the disenchanting world, and the increasing valuation of nature and connection to wilderness was a part of this response.

The infusion of this nineteenth-century combination of disenchantment, love of solitude, and reverence for nature into the interpretation of Buddhism comes at first through the dichotomous representations of East and West in currency at the time. It is no coincidence that Alger published, in addition to *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man* (in which he lists the Buddha as an example of the solitary life), a volume entitled *The Poetry of the East*, in which he reiterates the familiar representation of the spiritual, contemplative “East” as a necessary balance to the materialist, competitive, money-driven “West.”<sup>45</sup> Here we see the familiar trope of Asia portrayed as the Other of that which is disturbing about modernity in the West. It comes to be associated with solitude, asceticism, interiority, and most important for us here, nature. “The East” is a place that is still enchanted, populated by sages who have retired to the forest in search of spiritual wisdom offered by the natural world. Thoreau in fact drew parallels between his own retreat to Walden Pond and the asceticism of the “Hindoos.”<sup>46</sup> Nature, solitude, and the East were all construed as the antithesis of emerging forms of disenchanting modernity.

The attribution of religious significance to the natural world, the emphasis on solitary contemplation of nature, and the idea that such contemplation is a remedy for the commercialized, disenchanting, competitive modern world all provided essential ingredients for the interpretation of Buddhism in the West, particularly in North America. The explicit connection made in the Transcendentalist period between nature and what many considered a universal mystical experience provided a hermeneutic context in which figures like Hanshan, Bashō, and Dōgen would later be understood. The Transcendentalist category of “Universal Religion”—which was believed to transcend the bounds of time and place and was constituted by personal experience rather than dogma, ritual, and the specificities of culture—provided a vast arena into which apologists could assimilate Buddhist ascetic, hermitic, and meditative traditions, along with the East Asian reverence for nature, to this American mode of understanding. Not only did these factors influence how Westerners understood Buddhism, they impacted the shape that Buddhism would take in the modern world, in Asia as well as the West. These influences allowed a sketch of Buddhist attitudes toward the natural world to be cross-hatched with American reverence for wilderness, as well as with the social and political concerns of the time.

#### *Interdependence, Systems Theory, and EcoBuddhism*

The Romantic-Transcendentalist line of thinking supplied a ready array of motifs with which the Buddhist concept of dependent origination, its assertions of non-dualism, its universalist ethics, and its East Asian affinities with the natural world would be hybridized and transposed into the key of modern discourse. These themes would not, however, be sufficient to produce the synthesis that has emerged in the contemporary conception of interdependence. The final elements would be the infusion of recent theoretical approaches in the social and physical sciences, along with contemporary ecological thought. The synthesis of all of these elements did not in fact take place in a systematic way until quite recently.

If there is an overarching theoretical paradigm representing this development, it is *systems theory*, a broad-ranging, multidisciplinary theoretical approach that focuses on various kinds of systems—economic, biological, physiological, psychological, and social—that form wholes having qualities different than their constituent parts. It is a

widely applicable theory that can in principle address any network of relationships in which the members act as a whole and create emergent properties that cannot be accounted for by analysis of the parts in isolation. One of the figures most influential to the contemporary Buddhist concept of interdependence is Gregory Bateson (1904–1980), who argued that the mind was in many respects similar to other kinds of living, dynamic systems like cells, rainforests, and communities. Bateson argued against seeing minds as either separate from their physiological substratum or as isolated from other minds. The basic unit, for Bateson, is not the individual entity but the system of which entities are a part. Individuals must be understood as organisms in symbiotic relationships with their environments.<sup>47</sup>

Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer, was the first to explicitly interpret Buddhist dependent origination in terms of systems theory. Drawing upon systems theory seasoned by Spinozistic and Buddhist metaphysics, Naess founded the deep ecology movement, which, in his words, rejects the “man-in-environment image in favor of the relational, total-field image” and sees “organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations.”<sup>48</sup> Deep ecology asserts a symbiotic relationship between the individual and environment in which each co-constitutes the other reciprocally. Individuals are seen as open-ended nodes in larger networks of activity rather than bounded, atomistic entities. This conception of the relationship between the self and the wider network of humans, animals, and plants also finds a deep kinship with James Lovelock’s famous Gaia hypothesis. Often cited by deep ecologists and ecologically-minded Buddhists, this hypothesis proposes that the biosphere is a self-regulating organism. Naess and Lovelock are also kin to some extent with process philosophy/theology, which began with Alfred North Whitehead and which has been an important force in the contemporary interpretation of Buddhist dependent origination and emptiness.<sup>49</sup>

Popular accounts of recent scientific theories have also made a significant contribution. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, a number of popular books attempted to draw explicit parallels between recent scientific developments and Buddhism, as well as other Asian religions. Fritjof Capra, in his 1976 best-selling *The Tao of Physics*, asserted correlations between recent findings in quantum physics and ideas of the “universal interwovenness” of self and other in Buddhism and other forms of “Eastern mysticism.” Such concep-

tions, he claimed, were similar to ideas in quantum physics of the “universe as an interconnected web of physical and mental relations whose parts are defined only through their connections to the whole.”<sup>50</sup> His later work, including a book significantly entitled *The Web of Life*, criticizes Cartesian mechanistic and “linear” thinking, associating it with a host of contemporary evils and urging that not only quantum mechanics but also complexity theory and systems theory show the way to a more integrative, holistic approach that reveals underlying connections between biological, psychological, social, and ecological systems.<sup>51</sup> A voluminous literature has followed *The Tao of Physics* in exploring the putative parallels between Buddhism and various sciences. The value of such studies for understanding Buddhism has been debated by scientists and Buddhists alike in recent decades. Whatever their limitations, though, what is important here is that they have not only imbued dependent origination with the scent of scientific theory but have also influenced the reconfiguration of the concept itself in modern scientific terms.

Joanna Macy is as important as any contemporary author in assembling all of the components we have been discussing and forging them into the contemporary conception of interdependence. Macy explicitly articulates dependent origination in terms of systems theory and deep ecology, applying it to various social and ecological problems. Seeing these problems as manifestations of the “rampant, pathological individualism” that is a dominant feature of modern life, she takes it as a matter of urgency to show that the separate, isolated self is an illusion.<sup>52</sup> She hopes that the traditional way of viewing the self as a “skin-encapsulated ego” is being replaced by “wider constructs of self-identity and self-interest—by what you might call the ecological self or eco-self, co-extensive with the other beings and the life of our planet.”<sup>53</sup> With Macy we come to the full articulation of the contemporary Buddhist-Western hybrid conception of interdependence:

Contemporary science, and systems theory in particular, goes farther in challenging old assumptions about a distinct, separate, continuous self, by showing that there is no logical or scientific basis for construing one part of the experienced world as “me” and the rest as “other.” That is so because as open, self-organizing systems, our very breathing, acting and thinking arise in interaction with our shared world through the currents of matter, energy, and information that move through us and sustain us. In the web of relationships that sus-

tain these activities there is no clear line demarcating a separate, continuous self.<sup>54</sup>

She then incorporates these claims into the doctrines of *anātman* and dependent origination:

In much the same way as systems theory does, Buddhism undermines categorical distinctions between self and other and belies the concept of a continuous, self-existing entity. It then goes farther than systems theory in showing the pathogenic character of any reifications of the self. What the Buddha woke up to under the Bodhi tree was the *paticca samuppada*, the dependent co-arising of phenomena, in which you cannot isolate a separate, continuous self.<sup>55</sup>

Dependent origination is then turned into a mandate for an active—indeed activist—life, fully engaged in the world: “Far from the nihilism and escapism that is often imputed to the Buddhist path, this liberation, this awakening puts one *into* the world with a livelier, more caring sense of social engagement.”<sup>56</sup> Such a view of the self, she asserts, “helps us recognize our imbeddedness in nature, overcomes our alienation from the rest of creation, and changes the way we can experience our self through an ever-widening process of identification” to the point where (quoting Naess) “the self [is] widened and deepened so that the protection of nature [is] felt and perceived as protection of our very selves.”<sup>57</sup>

Macy not only sees the “ego-self” as an illusory product of the modern age, she sees it in terms of a universal process illustrated by a re-telling of a narrative that might seem surprising coming from a Buddhist: the Fall of Man. In the early stages of our species, she says, human beings lived in womb-like “primal intimacy” with trees, rocks, and plants. From this came “the fall out of the Garden of Eden,” the emergence of self-consciousness, individuality, and free will, and thus began the “lonely and heroic journey of the ego.” The “distanced and observing eye” brought about science and systems of governance based on individual rights. Thus enriched, we can now “turn and recognize what we have been all along...we are our world knowing itself... We can come home again—and participate in our world in a richer, more responsible and poignantly beautiful way than before, in our infancy.”<sup>58</sup> What is important to our tracing of the historical lineages of interdependence is not so much that Macy would draw upon a story from a tradition that she has rejected but rather that this re-imagining of the Genesis narrative is straight from the Romantics. Schelling

glossed the Fall of Man as a separation from primordial unity with the Absolute into individuated self-consciousness and the spiritual journey as a higher re-integration with it. Blake offers a similar view of the Fall: man lived in perfect unity and brotherhood until the original sin, which is none other than the descent into individual selfhood, and which entails fragmentation and alienation from other people and from nature. Redemption is the resurrection of humanity out of its solitary and dissatisfied state into unity—not the return to the oneness of humankind’s infancy but a return that retains individuality while harmonizing with the whole.

Macy’s recapitulation of this narrative suggests the importance to contemporary Buddhism in the West of the Weberian dynamics of disenchantment/re-enchantment of the world, which are here reconfigured into a universalized narrative. In addition to a Rousseauian longing for return to nature, community, and innocence, the implication is that the rationalizing, market-driven, differentiating processes of disenchanted modernity are a stage—the outer boundary—in the individuation and self-consciousness of humanity. We have now reached the juncture, the narrative suggests, where this individuation has become so self-destructive and fragmenting that it is suicidal, and now we must re-integrate, turning back toward our more primal, unitive relationship with the world. This formulation of Buddhist interdependence, therefore, is framed not just within the modern narrative of disenchantment but also within the wider Romantic narrative of the emergence and transcendence of self-consciousness, which is itself a re-configuration of the biblical narrative of the Fall of Man.<sup>59</sup>

Like Romanticism, this strain of late-modern Buddhism illustrated by the contemporary articulation of interdependence gravitates toward the large-scale questions that science asks while maintaining a suspicion of “reductive,” as well as militarily or commercially driven, science. It continues the Romantics’ scientific passion for discovering the “vital powers” that animate everything, as well as their critique of instrumental reason. It resists Cartesian dualism and its associated disinvesting of the world of inherent meaning and attempts to re-sacralize the world by envisioning it as co-extensive with human consciousness or animated by a universal consciousness. But it also very much a product of the late-modern world, drawing together a bricolage of resources, ancient and modern, to address current social and ecological issues. And its solution to all of them is to re-perceive and re-embrace

the world as an interconnected web of life rather than a collection of isolated egos within a neutral environment. Thus interdependence in this iteration assumes a significance nearly opposite to that of the early Pāli account. Far from a chain of causes and effects binding beings to rebirth in a world of suffering, today's interdependence implies a sacred matrix of mutual communality and co-participation, the extended body of all beings. Moreover, this shift in meaning and valuation comes not only from re-thinking of buddhahood in the Mahāyāna and the infusion of East Asian sensibilities into Buddhism but also from some of the fundamental dynamics of modernity.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF INTERDEPENDENCE

##### *Re-envisioning Karma and Rebirth*

The implications of the contemporary articulation of interdependence can sometimes be striking. Not only does the concept take on new political and ethical significance in the modern world, it also can significantly shift the meanings of associated Buddhist doctrines. Let us look at one example of how the modern re-interpretation of interdependence has important consequences for two of the most fundamental doctrines of Buddhism, karma and rebirth.

In classical portrayals of karma, nature responds to the individual's actions to produce circumstances resulting from those actions. Disease, floods, injury—or in contrast, a narrow escape from such things—may all be interpreted as the results (*phala*) of the individual's actions (*karma*). Variations on this view that nature responds directly to human action are pervasive in ancient and medieval worlds. Broadly construed, this understanding of the dialectic between humanity and nature is not limited to the Asian example of karmic consequences but also manifests itself in countless examples in literature, for instance, earthquakes in response to tremendous events (the Buddha's awakening, Jesus' death). While we may dismiss such things today as symbolic, we would miss something important about the lived understanding of the world among many ancients if we refused to see them as part of the way many people have actually understood their lives. The idea of random chance, while perhaps not unique to the modern period, is atypical in non-modern societies. Solar eclipses, thunderstorms, illnesses, and co-incidences *meant* things on a personal or communal level that they tend not to mean to those who subscribe to a scientific worldview. They were warnings, signs, or consequences.

The classical idea of karma is more a systematic regularization of such responses of nature to human action than a “natural law.” The underlying idea is that there is a moral law intertwined with natural processes, one that shapes individuals’ circumstances in direct response to their morally significant actions. There are indeed multiple causes and conditions that bring about particular fortunate or unfortunate circumstances in an individual’s life; therefore not all experiences are the result of prior karma. Some experiences may be the result of particular physiologic conditions that were not karmic results of previous actions (*Samyutta-nikāya* 36.21). Karmic results, however, do directly shape a great deal of an individual’s life. They determine the realm of life that one will be reborn in, whether one is born into high or low social standing, and whether one is an animal, human, or other order of life. And there are more specific correspondences between particular actions and characteristics a person acquires as a result. People who harm other creatures tend to be sickly in this or future lives, while those who do not are healthy. Those who are irritable tend to be ugly, while those who are not are handsome. Jealous people tend to be weak, while those free from jealousy are strong (*Majjhima-nikāya* 35). The early understanding of dependent origination was of a piece with this doctrine of karma in that it described not so much how natural phenomena in the world arise but rather how beings come to be born and reborn in various circumstances through their own karma.

The idea that the circumstances in one’s life are primarily determined by one’s past actions is obviously more difficult to accept today. The modern view of causality supposes that any event comes about through a multiplicity of causal trajectories that cannot be understood as governed primarily by an individual’s morally significant actions. It may well be that a person’s excessive drinking causes him to crash his car, and a modern Buddhist might use the language of karma to describe this. It is more difficult, however, to make a causal connection between the excessive drinking and the individual, say, getting hit by a bus after he has been sober for fifteen years. The traditional view of karma would have no trouble making this connection, while a modern scientific view would see the causal trajectory of the bus as unrelated to that of the man—until impact. He just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. To bridge the gap between these two views, Buddhist modernists have often referred to karma in terms compatible with modern ideas of causality: she is abrasive, therefore people tend

not to like her; he eats too much meat, therefore the heart attack was his karma. The Buddhist modernist, however, would not tend to think his physical ugliness is the direct result of his past irritability.

Some modern Buddhist thinkers appear largely to have abandoned traditional views of karma and rebirth in light of the contemporary transformation of the conception of interdependence. Thich Nhat Hanh, for example, offers surprising views of moral responsibility and rebirth in relation to “interbeing.” Recall Nhat Hanh’s formula for interbeing: any X is made wholly of non-X elements. In his discussion of the *Heart Sutra*, he uses an example of a prostitute in Manila to discuss interbeing. She is young, poor, and taken advantage of by many people. As a result she feels shameful and wretched. But if she were to look at her “whole situation” she would see that she is the way she is because others—those who created her poverty, those who sold her into prostitution, those who hire her, we who ignore the problem—have all contributed to making her that way. “No one among us has clean hands. No one can claim it is not our responsibility. The girl in Manila is that way because of the way we are. Looking into the life of that young prostitute, we see the non-prostitute people.”<sup>60</sup> Now a response of compassion rather than condemnation of the prostitute would be wholly justified within traditional Buddhist ethical frameworks. Moreover, we can obviously see the empirical truth of Nhat Hanh’s contention that her situation is brought about by multiple causes and conditions that go beyond her personal responsibility. In effect, he points out the *systemic* causes of her circumstance. Clearly his intention is to employ the doctrine of interbeing to encourage society to take responsibility for the plight of the disadvantaged, not to reformulate the doctrine of karma. (Nhat Hanh is, after all, one of the founders of engaged Buddhism and one of the world’s most prominent Buddhist activists.) A more traditional Buddhist analysis, however, would eventually have to come around to ascribing ultimate responsibility to the prostitute herself, for the doctrine of karma must affirm that people’s circumstances are ultimately the results of their own past actions, even if the vehicles of bringing those circumstances about might be the unmeritorious actions of others. Through the doctrine of interbeing, moral responsibility is de-centered from the solitary individual and spread throughout the entire social system. This is an important element of engaged Buddhism, which again emphasizes systemic, not just individual, causes of suffering.

Nhat Hanh also re-envisioned other key doctrines in light of interbeing, like that of death and rebirth: “In our former lives, we were rocks, clouds, and trees.... This is not just Buddhist; it is scientific. We humans are a young species. We were plants, we were trees, and now we have become humans.... We are continually arising from Mother Earth, being nurtured by her, and then returning to her.”<sup>61</sup> This account makes no mention of rebirth in the traditional Buddhist sense, and “former lives” here assume a metaphorical meaning. In discussing the “no birth and no death” doctrine of the *Heart Sutra*, he says:

We cannot conceive of the birth of anything. There is only continuation.... Look back further and you will see that you not only exist in your father and mother, but you also exist in your grandparents and in your great grandparents.... I know in the past I have been a cloud, a river, and the air.... This is the history of life on earth. We have been gas, sunshine, water, fungi, and plants.... Nothing can be born and also nothing can die.<sup>62</sup>

Interbeing in this sense means that everything—humans, rocks, water—is dependent on non-human, non-rock, non-water elements. All of these elements combine into protean forms that then dissipate and become something else, and every being is just one of an infinite number of forms the universe takes in its endless manifestations, like waves on the water. Our true life, though, is that of the water—the living cosmos as a whole—not the waves, its transient forms. Death, therefore, is not to be feared, for all of the elements of which we are made will after our death continue to exist in other forms—trees, flowers, rocks, other people, etc. Again the “I” expands to include everything. Even though what we transform into may be dust, every dust speck reflects the whole cosmos and the cosmos is reflected in every dust speck. Here the traditional idea of the continuity of a karmically constituted life-trajectory from birth to death to rebirth is replaced by the dispersion of a being at death into the vast, inter-related cosmos to be “reborn” as any (and all) of the other forms while at the same time being one with the whole.

These ideas of the dispersion of karmic responsibility into the social system and the dispersion of the individual at death into all of the universe are significant innovations in Buddhist thought by one of the most influential contemporary Buddhists. They constitute a demythologization of karma in terms perfectly sensible to modern social analysis and a vision of “rebirth” made amenable to a scientific view of

the universe. More than just an interpolation of scientific perspectives, however, the latter also recalls nineteenth-century Romantic affinities with nature. William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878), often considered a “proto-Transcendentalist,” was a Massachusetts lawyer and poet reputed for his knowledge of science. His poem “Thanatopsis” is considered emblematic of the emerging nineteenth-century view of nature we have discussed. In it he gives a vivid portrayal of death as merging with the elements of the natural world, rejoining all who have gone before in a fusion of human, animal, plant, and rock.

Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim  
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,  
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up  
Thine individual being, shalt thou go  
To mix forever with the elements,  
To be a brother to the insensible rock  
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain  
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak  
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.

Yet not to thine eternal resting-place  
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish  
Couch more magnificent. . .

No notion of an individual afterlife is proffered, but rather a postmortem kinship with all of nature and with the living beings that have gone before. Therefore, he advises his reader:

approach thy grave  
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch  
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.<sup>63</sup>

Likewise, Nhat Hanh sees a mingling of entities in an all-encompassing life shared by all things; death, therefore, is simply the transformation of one manifestation of life into another. Again we hear echoes of Romanticism and Transcendentalism along with sketches of contemporary scientific understanding commingling with Buddhist conceptions to create new iterations of the dharma.

We should not assume that no Buddhist modernists maintain more traditional views of karma and rebirth—to the contrary, many do. Nevertheless, modernity opens a space for often radical re-interpretation to occur and for a wider continuum of hermeneutic options regarding key doctrines. Nhat Hanh’s rethinking of karma and rebirth shows how the elaboration of one concept—interdependence—can exert a mag-

netic pull on others, reconfiguring the significance of a whole cluster of ideas and practices.

### *Is It Buddhist?*

No doubt addressing issues of war and peace, environmental degradation, and the myriad social problems of our world is more urgent than the tracing of the history of an idea. Yet the intellectual historian may still ask to what extent Buddhist interdependence in its contemporary forms, with its infusion of Western ideas and practices and its sometimes radical re-interpretations of traditional doctrine, accords with those teachings found in the classic Buddhist texts. Some scholars have argued that the environmentalist strains of contemporary Buddhism with which our concept is especially associated are not ultimately compatible with traditional doctrine.<sup>64</sup> In particular, they assert that the idea of an artificially bounded ego that can, through meditation and cultivation of compassion, expand its boundaries to include a wider and wider sphere of entities, not only in its ethical scope but in its feeling of selfhood, has no precedent in traditional Buddhist sources. Of course, as we have seen, a number of Buddhist traditions offer the idea that a practitioner is to become identified with ultimate reality or with the cosmos as a whole. Some specifics about the contemporary representation of this identification, however, seem to be peculiar to the late modern conception of interdependence.

First is the idea that interdependence and this widening of the self is the ground for an ethical imperative. Buddhist ethics clearly mandate compassion for all sentient beings bound together in a chain of conditioned dependence. It is another question, however, whether dependent origination in pre-modern traditions is itself the basis for ethical behavior, particularly if the reason for ethical behavior is because the boundaries of self and other are ultimately artificial—hurting you is essentially hurting myself (and everything else), therefore I should not hurt you. In the 1968 film, *Requiem for a Faith* (Hartley Film Foundation), Huston Smith says of the Tibetan Buddhist position: “Separate selfhood is a fiction.... Our real identity is with Being as a whole, the scheme of things entire.... We become compassionate not from altruism which denies the self for the sake of others but from insight that sees and feels that one is the other.”<sup>65</sup> Donald Lopez points out in response to Smith that the eighth-century Indian Buddhist scholar Śāntideva argues that one *must* in fact deny oneself for the sake of others.<sup>66</sup> Yet we

also find in East Asian thought, particularly in Huayan and Hauyan-influenced Buddhism, passages like this one by the Korean monk Gihwa (1376–1433): “*Humaneness* implies the interpenetration of heaven and earth and the myriad things into a single body, wherein there is no gap whatsoever. If you deeply embody this principle, then there cannot be a justification for inflicting harm on even the most insignificant of creatures.”<sup>67</sup> Although there is no historical connection, it is a sentiment similar to some found in nineteenth-century American thought: “We find that we are all members of the one great body, and that no portion of the body can be harmed without all the other portions suffering thereby.” While this line would be quite at home in contemporary Zen or engaged Buddhist writings, it comes from the leftist, spiritualist, and Transcendentalist-influenced Ralph Waldo Trine’s 1897 best-seller, *In Tune with the Infinite*, who brought Emerson’s pantheistic tendencies, New Thought, Christian social gospel teachings, and a hodge-podge of eclectic spiritualities of his day to bear not only on finding inner peace but also on serving his fellow men and women (as well as non-human creatures—he was active in the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals).<sup>68</sup> His specific assertion of the rationale for ethics is clearly rooted in the Romantic-Transcendentalist cosmologies we have discussed, combined with neo-Vedāntic non-dualism. The ethical imperative of interdependence, as formulated today, likely came from a mingling of these sources with the Buddhist ideas we have discussed, and no doubt the Transcendentalist articulation of the “great body” prepared the way for the later assimilation of Huayan and Zen thought.

Second, there is debate on whether canonical texts refer to this wider identification of self and other as identification with the Earth or with the natural world per se. Mark Blum insists that there is no notion of “the expansion of self through a process of identification with the world” in traditional forms of Asian Buddhism. To the contrary, liberation is articulated in terms of a “rhetoric of nonidentification” with any form whatsoever, including those of nature. “Even Dōgen’s statements about the self and object merging are not specific to merging with nature or natural objects but with any object of attention. The point, therefore, is one about the mind rather than about mountains and rivers.”<sup>69</sup> There is room for debate here regarding interpretation of Dōgen. Certainly there is a dialectic in Zen thought between dis-identifying with constructed conceptions of things and re-identifying with a larger, all-encompassing unity, buddha-nature. Blum is right, however,

to question whether buddha-nature should be seen as the Earth or the natural world per se, despite the Chinese inclusion of grasses and rocks within the scope of buddha-nature. It is also important to note that the idea of identifying with an all-encompassing ultimate reality is simply not operative in certain forms of Indic Mahāyāna nor in any forms of Theravāda. In fact, one of its main sources is neo-Vedānta thought and Perennial philosophy, which have often been amalgamated with Buddhism in the modern period.

My point here is not to make claims about authenticity or inauthenticity but to recognize that, whatever its various components, there is something *new* in the contemporary articulation of interdependence, something emerging in response to the unique circumstances of the modern world and that attempts to answer questions that simply could not have arisen in the time of the Buddha, Nāgārjuna, or Dōgen. Let us re-ask the question then. Is the contemporary articulation of interdependence an unalloyed rendition of canonical and classical understandings? Harrison and Blum are correct in saying that they are not. It is something unique to this age—a hybrid construction that draws upon Asian and Western sources, synthesizing them into a novel conception. So one might be tempted to argue that it is “inauthentic.” But this would be to grant a static, essentialized meaning to canonical texts, to the normative interpretation of one school or another, or to a particular moment in the history of Asian forms of Buddhism. The historian of religion, *qua* historian, should not recapitulate sectarian or even canonical rhetorics of authenticity. Thus to answer the question, “Is it Buddhist?” we must look not only at texts and our historical reconstructions of their meanings but at what Buddhists *do* with the texts. The reconfiguration of traditional doctrine and practice in response to novel historical circumstances is clearly the norm in the process of the development of religions. Texts and doctrines are never static but are repeatedly re-appropriated to struggle with changing situations. Certain themes fall away into irrelevance, others emerge as salient, and both are given new meanings constituted by their dialectical relationship with changing political, economic, social, and material realities, as well as other traditions. The text, then, is not a static reference point but a dynamic process whose meanings are always being reconstituted. This dynamic process of tradition-in-change establishes what Buddhism *is* empirically.

There are limits, of course. Texts have built-in boundaries for plausible interpretation: no informed person will ever try to argue that Buddhism espouses the doctrines that everything is permanent, that there is an individual and eternal soul, or that there are no causes and effects. Moreover, if novel interpretations of interdependence were only embraced by Californian Buddhists while all other Buddhists espoused traditional views, we might see it as a peripheral development insignificant to the main thrust of Buddhism in the modern world. But when leading Buddhist figures, along with a mass of laity and sympathizers, begin to embrace a reconfigured interpretation, practice, or idea, it should alert the scholar that an important reconstruction of doctrine is underway and the possibility of a new normativity is emerging. And if the most prominent Buddhists in the world seem to be embracing a reconception of interdependence, it would seem inevitably to be—or at least to be *becoming*—Buddhist.

Simply to dismiss the environmental and ethical discourse of Buddhist interdependence as an inadequate account of history, therefore, fails to take seriously the problem of modernity as it manifests in Buddhism and, for that matter, any historical religion. Although it inevitably draws upon historical sources, the starting point of this discourse is the pressing environmental crisis of the present. Buddhist environmentalism and ethical discourse based on interdependence are, like virtually all normative religious reflection, a constructive response by practitioners to an unprecedented situation rather than a historiographical endeavor. Merely to point out the incongruities between ancient and modern cosmologies, while crucial, is no more historically important than showing how these incongruities have been bridged by the often radical reconstitution of doctrine in terms of present circumstances. The history of religions is precisely the history of such reconstitutions of doctrine and practice that are themselves reconstitutions of prior versions.

#### *Cultural Currency and Contestation*

“So it’s like another whole take on interconnectedness?” asks American Vipassana teacher Sharon Salzberg to Daniel Goleman in an interview in which he describes “mirror neurons” in the brain that attune individuals’ emotional states to those of others.<sup>70</sup> It is a question that has been asked of countless recent theories and findings in sociology, economics, quantum physics, and life sciences, all of which seem

to confirm the central insight of Buddhism—interdependence. To see this merely as confirmation though is anachronistic, for the harmony between ancient Buddhist interdependence and modern interdependencies is produced in part by the way the former has been elaborated in terms of the latter. Contemporary Buddhism has reached out to embrace multiple late-modern interdependencies, claiming them for its own and synergistically weaving its own insights into countless contemporary ideas and realities like mirror neurons tuning themselves to the emotional ambience of a crowded room. The currency that the Buddhist concept of interdependence enjoys today comes not only from its intermixing with explicitly theoretical frameworks like systems theory but also from the term's more amorphous resonance with a central fact of our time: the interconnectedness of the various natural, national, corporate, and biological entities throughout the world. The fact that in recent decades interdependence has come to stand for the Buddhist position on virtually everything (I have not found this term used in such a way before the 1960s) reflects the currency of similar concepts in contemporary discourse on so many other subjects. In the age of the web, the network, the matrix, the nexus, the system, and the complex, the thing-in-isolation seems to have become a thing of the past.

As is the case with most hybrid elements of Buddhist modernism, however, the adaptation of interdependence to the conditions of late modernity has not been a matter of unidirectional accommodation to the times. Buddhism also contributes unique elements to the discourses of modernity that may challenge or augment Western approaches to interdependence. It brings, for example, rich resources for a critique of human well-being defined in terms of fulfillment of desires through buying and consuming of products. It also offers a view of ethical responsibility toward all orders of life. Buddhists today are attempting to bring such contributions to bear on contemporary realities, and the degree to which they will have an impact on the discourses of modernity is as of yet unclear.

For all of the concept's cultural cachet, however, the late-modern interpretation of interdependence is not universally accepted in the Buddhist world and is subject to contestation even in North America where it is perhaps most widely accepted. Some contemporary Buddhists, especially from the Theravāda tradition, have critiqued the contemporary view of interdependence through appealing to more

traditional doctrines in Pāli literature. In a popular Buddhist periodical, an essay displaying impressive historical acumen by the American-born Theravāda monk, Bhikkhu Thanissaro, traces the popular ideas of “interconnectedness, wholeness, and ego-transcendence” from the German Romantics (especially Schiller and Schleiermacher) through Emerson, William James, Carl Jung, and Abraham Maslow. Many popular ideas about Buddhism, he argues, come from these figures and are quite different from some of the “original principles of the dharma.”<sup>71</sup> “Buddhist Romanticism,” he argues, masks the Buddhist teaching that “all interconnectedness is essentially unstable, and any happiness based on this instability is an invitation to suffering. True happiness has to go beyond interdependence and interconnectedness to the unconditioned.”<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Andrew Olendzki, director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies Massachusetts and editor of *Insight Journal*, cautions that “the more interconnected we become, the more bound in the net of conditioned phenomena we may find ourselves. I think the Buddha was pointing a way out of all this, but it is not through getting further connected. It has more to do with getting less connected, less entangled, and less attached.”<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, while some Asian teachers embrace the contemporary, world-affirming view of interdependence, many insist on more traditional interpretations of samsara and dependent origination. Andrew Cohen quotes contemporary Tibetan teacher Patrul Rinpoche as saying: “The world has no real essence; it’s meaningless, the whole of samsara is just meaningless. In fact, if you have complete realization of the faults of samsara, that is realization. That means you have gone beyond samsara to understanding that this world has no ultimate meaning.”<sup>74</sup> In a similar vein, Mahāsi Sayādaw, founder of the Vipassana movement, characterizes the wheel of rebirth as “dreadful”: “Every effort should therefore be made to acquaint oneself with the miserable conditions of Samsara and then to work for an escape from this incessant cycle, and for the attainment of Nirvana.”<sup>75</sup> This is clearly far from Macy’s seeing the world as “lover” and as “self.”

Such fissures in the interpretation of the meaning and significance of interdependence highlight tensions between traditional and modernist articulations of Buddhism. They also recapitulate differences between Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions—the latter being more amenable to Idealist interpretations—and between various traditions unique to geographical areas within Asia—East Asian traditions being

more affirming of positive conceptions of the natural world than Indian and Tibetan ones. Such tensions suggest that the meanings of interdependence and the valuation of the phenomenal world will continue to shift and change in the contestations and negotiations between tradition and modernity that continue to shape Buddhism today.

## NOTES

1. This article is adapted from a chapter in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and is used by permission of the publisher.
2. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñā-paramita Heart Sutra*, ed. Peter Levitt (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), 3–4.
3. Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Sun in My Heart,” in *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, ed. Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 87.
4. Joan Halifax, “The Third Body: Buddhism, Shamanism & Deep Ecology,” in *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990), 23.
5. Jeremy Hayward, “Ecology and the Experience of Sacredness,” in *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990), 65.
6. Allan Hunt Badiner ed., *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990), xvi.
7. Joan Halifax, *The Fruitful Darkness: Reconnecting with the Body of the Earth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), xxx.
8. Donald K. Swearer, “The Hermeneutics of Buddhist Ecology in Contemporary Thailand: Buddhādāsa and Dhammapiṭaka,” in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions Publications, 1997), 29.
9. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 31.
10. Halifax, *Fruitful Darkness*, xxx.
11. The interpretation I have offered of nirvana as transcendence of the phenomenal world is disputed by some who claim that nirvana is simply the overcoming of psycho-moral afflictions (*kleśas*) and attaining a state of peace and internal freedom within this world. See, for example, David J. Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992). I see this interpretation as a form of demythologization that, while a viable reinterpretation for modern practitioners, is unacceptable as a *historical* account. For a critique of Kalupahana’s general approach to interpreting Indic Buddhist texts, see David L. McMahan, “Demythologization and the Core-versus-Accretions Model of Buddhism,” *Indian International Journal of Buddhism* 10, no. 5 (2004): 63–99.
12. Lewis Lancaster, “Buddhism and Ecology: Collective Cultural Perceptions,”

in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryūken Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions Publications, 1997), 10.

13. Edward Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary* (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), 207 (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* 103).

14. David L. McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (New York and London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 25–33.

15. The *Avataṃsaka* as a whole is compilation of sutras, some of which may have been composed in Central Asia or China. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* is the last section and was composed in Sanskrit in India, circa the second century CE.

16. It is worth noting that the visionary strains of the Mahāyāna, however, cannot be interpreted as wholly world-affirming or reverential toward nature. Pure Land sutras, for instance, may at first seem to depict the possibility of a fully affirmative view of phenomenality. Like the *Avataṃsaka*, they depict the Pure Land as filled with jeweled trees, sweet-smelling golden earth and air, immaculately clear waters, and birds that sing utterances of the dharma. Ornaments and jewels are strewn everywhere. There is no death or disease, no briars or rough ground. While such descriptions clearly offer a positive view of *another* world, one in which mere residence there constitutes at least a penultimate form of liberation, they reinforce the dissatisfactoriness of the “ordinary” world. See Malcolm David Eckel, “Is There a Buddhist Philosophy of Nature?” in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryūken Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions Publications, 1997), 327–350. The idea of the Pure Land, rather than celebrating nature, improves upon it. These lavish descriptions suggest the ideal not of undisturbed nature but of a tamed and cultivated land with gardens and splendid buildings. The Pure Land is an inverse reflection of the “flaws” of nature experienced by sentient beings in “our” world and is thus largely in continuity with the earlier literature’s assessment of life in the realm of rebirth.

17. See Lancaster, “Buddhism and Ecology: Collective Cultural Perceptions.”

18. Some process philosophers and theologians drawing on the thought of Alfred North Whitehead have taken a systematic interest in Huayan thought, based on its resemblance to Whitehead’s highly nuanced cosmology of interdependence. Though not widely read outside academic circles, this comparative work has likely had an impact on the contemporary Buddhist idea of interdependence. See, for example, Steve Odin, *Process Metaphysics and Hua-yen Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

19. Gary Snyder, *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry and Translations, 1952–1998*

(Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999), 524.

20. Robert G. Henricks, *The Poetry of Han-shan: A Complete, Annotated Translation of Cold Mountain* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 22.

21. William LaFleur, "Enlightenment for Plants and Trees," in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryūken Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions Publications, 1997), 109–116.

22. Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild: Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 97.

23. Gary Snyder, "Writers and the War against Nature," *Resurgence* 239 (2006), <http://www.resurgence.org/2006/snyder239.htm>. This is a loose translation that is popular in the West, one that significantly lends itself to being interpreted as the self expanding into all things. More precise translations of the whole passage include this one:

To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things of the universe. To be enlightened by all things of the universe is to cast off the body and mind of the self as well as those of others. Even the traces of enlightenment are wiped out, and life with traceless enlightenment goes on forever and ever. (Hee-jin Kim, *Eihei Dōgen, Mystical Realist* [Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004], 125)

24. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 266–284.

25. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, ed. Maynard Mack (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), 91–92.

26. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling (I Abtheilung vols. 1–10, II Abtheilung vols. 1–4; Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–1861), 7:62.

27. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, 3 vols. (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004 [1818]), 261–262.

28. Duncan Wu, ed., *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 455.

29. William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth—The Major Works: Including the Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 131–132.

30. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 187–188.

31. René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldine and G. R. T. Ross, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 119.

32. Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
33. Catherine L. Albanese, ed., *The Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 70–71.
34. *Ibid.*, 48.
35. *Ibid.*, 71.
36. *Ibid.*, 74.
37. Quoted in Albanese, *Nature Religion*, 99.
38. John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988 [1911]), 95.
39. Albanese, *Nature Religion*, 99–100.
40. Muir, *My First Summer*, 120.
41. Albanese, *Nature Religion*, 82–87.
42. John Muir, “Hetch Hetchy Valley,” in *The Yosemite* (New York: The Century Company, 1912; republished online by the Sierra Club, 2007, [http://www.sierra-club.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://www.sierra-club.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/writings/the\\_yosemite/chapter\\_16.html](http://www.sierra-club.org/john_muir_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://www.sierra-club.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/the_yosemite/chapter_16.html)).
43. William Rounseville Alger, *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man or The Loneliness of Human Life* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2003), 170–171.
44. *Ibid.*, 168.
45. William Rounseville Alger, *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man: The Loneliness of Human Life* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1867); *Poetry of the East* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004).
46. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Quality Paperback, 1997 [1854]), 184.
47. Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Dutton, 1979).
48. Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep: Long Range Ecology Movements,” *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95.
49. See Odin and Kenneth Inada, *Buddhism and American Thinkers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).
50. Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (New York: Bantam, 1985 [1975]), 129.
51. Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (New York: Anchor, 1996).

52. Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self* (Parallax Press, 1991), 185.
53. *Ibid.*, 183.
54. *Ibid.*, 187–188.
55. *Ibid.*, 189.
56. *Ibid.*, 190.
57. *Ibid.*, 191.
58. *Ibid.*, 13–14.
59. For a discussion and critique of the ways in which the Fall of Man narrative has worked its way into modern Buddhism, see Richard Payne, “Individuation and Awakening: Romantic Narrative and the Psychological Interpretation of Buddhism,” in *Buddhism and Psychotherapy across Cultures: Essays on Theories and Practices*, ed. Mark Unno (Boston: Wisdom, 2006), 31–52.
60. Nhat Hanh, *Heart of Understanding*, 33.
61. Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Sun in My Heart,” in *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, ed. Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000), 86.
62. Nhat Hanh, *Heart of Understanding*, 21.
63. William Cullen Bryant, *Poems by William Cullen Bryant* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004), 19–22.
64. Mark L. Blum, “Baptizing Nature: Environmentalism, Buddhism, and Transcendentalism,” in *Bukkyō to Shizen* (Buddhism and Nature) (Kyoto: Research Institute of Bukkyō University, 2005); Ian Harris, “How Environmentalist Is Buddhism?” *Religion* 21 (1991): 101–114; Harris, “Buddhism and the Discourse of Environmental Concern: Some Methodological Problems,” in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryūken Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 377–402.
65. Quoted in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 263 n. 12.
66. Chap. 8 of Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is a classic exposition of altruism through empathetic identification with others: “Just as the body, which has many parts owing to its division into arms and so forth, should be protected as a whole, so should this entire world, which is differentiated and yet has the nature of the same suffering and happiness.” See Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, trans. Alan Wallace and Vesna Wallace (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1997), 100. The point here, though, seems to be that one should identify with others’ suffering as if it were one’s own. The body here is a metaphor of empathy rather than an ontological assertion of cosmic unity.

67. "The Exposition of the Correct" *Hyeonjeong non* 顯正論 by Gihwa 己和 (Hamheo Deuktong 涵虛得通), chap. 7 (*Hanguk bulgyo jeonseo* 7.219b22), trans. from the Hanmun Text by Charles Muller, <http://www.acmuller.net/jeong-gihwa/hyeonjeongnon.html#refpoint-6-33>. I am grateful to Professor Muller for informing me of this text.
68. Ralph Waldo Trine, *In Tune with the Infinite: Fullness of Peace, Power, and Plenty* (London: Thorsons, 1995), 169–170.
69. Blum, "Baptizing Nature: Environmentalism, Buddhism, and Transcendentalism," 30–31.
70. Sharon Salzberg, "I Feel Your Brain," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 62 (Winter 2006): 67.
71. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Romancing the Buddha," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 46 (Winter 2002), 109.
72. *Ibid.*, 112.
73. Andrew Olendzki, "Interconnected...Or Not?" *Insight Journal* 24 (Spring 2005): 3.
74. Andrew Cohen, "The World is Unreliable: An Interview with His Holiness Penor Rinpoche," in *What Is Enlightenment?* 18 (Fall/Winter 2000), <http://www.wie.org/j18/penor.asp>.
75. Quoted in Gil Fronsdal, "Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 171.