

Buddhist No-Self and Mindful Consumerism

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Fundamental Buddhist concepts, such as interrelatedness, karma, and desire, readily tie into an ecologically sustainable perspective. These, and other Buddhist views and ideas, if integrated into daily life choices, have great potential for rectifying and enhancing human interactions with ecosystems and the universe as a whole. This paper is written in an attempt to investigate and encourage the role of Buddhists as mindful consumers through a two-fold synthesis. It incorporates the consideration of both Buddhist philosophy and ecological sustainability issues through academic literature review while illustrating the potential for active integration among the two areas of thought through the use of creative metaphor expansion and short fictional stories, in addition to more conventional academic style. It has been the attempt of the author to apply such a format for discussion without undermining the academic integrity of the paper and it is the hope of the author that such an approach will expedite a more thorough understanding of the topic.

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Consumer, Interrelation.

I. Introduction

Beginning roughly one million years ago, members of the genus *Homo* began what we may call a “subsistence pattern remodeling,” moving them into the niche of a large predator in their ecosystems. The hunter-gatherer society was born and remained for at least another 999,900 years. Since that remodeling toward the evolution of our species occurred, humans have effectually replaced all other large predators in the ecosystems we inhabit, and, in modern times, also in those we do not inhabit. Along the way natural ecological shifts, and natural climate shifts often extreme enough to result in ice ages, killed off many of these predators as well as a great deal of humans and many other living things. These shifts tested our ability to apply our brains to innovative tool making and use as well as migration skills, but we remained hunter-gatherers, tied directly into our habitats until our next great subsistence pattern remodeling began at about the end of the Pleistocene epoch. Most significantly since the advent of agriculture about 10,000 years ago, and most completely after the industrial revolution, human beings have been continually, not only dominating, but destroying and destabilizing their ecosystems in order to support the exponential growth of their populations.

The global problems that current generations of humans are confronted with in relation to the stability of ecosystems and the sustainability of environments have been, fortunately, so well documented and publicized that most require little to no attention here except in relation to underlying causes and solutions. Readers who feel they are lacking in knowledge of these problems might try typing the word “environment” into an internet search engine, asking their local

librarian, or simply opening any politically moderate newspaper twice a week for a month. It is not the problems that require further attention, for now, but the significant responses and lack thereof.

Some root causes for the modern human destabilization of Earth's ecosystems lie in indiscriminate over-consuming production through overexploitation of natural resources, including land itself and production with toxic byproducts and/or non-recycled waste.¹ Inherently linked to such causes is a near ubiquitous problem of incomplete mergers between capitalism and traditional values. All cultures contain values which relate to the ecological crises we are faced with. Far from a bold statement, this requires little more than the fact that there is no culture that does not contain the value of self-perpetuation; without a bearable existence possible for future generations there is no possibility of such, and without an acceleration in the remodeling of the current prevailing subsistence pattern there is no possibility of a bearable existence for future generations of humans. In addition, however, sustainable values contained within worldviews of cultures often relate to value and reverence for the natural world and its diverse living and nonliving inhabitants, whether as parts of an interconnected web of life, creations of gods, spirited matter, etc. It is quite apparent that these types of core values have been, to the greatest of extents, excluded from the current economic activities of human beings, which comprise a high percentage of total activity for some 6,000,000,000 people. As the effects of such exclusions manifest in changes to our planet and its ecosystems more and more obviously and peoples' daily lives become affected, the chance to reform the economic systems on our planet so that they take into account these values is apparent. According to the vast majority of research, it is very likely the last chance to make such reforms before both our living planet and economic framework capsizes

¹ Another obvious root cause of environmental destabilization is human overpopulation itself. It remains to be seen whether the effects of the current level might be mitigated through subsistence pattern remodeling. Furthermore, though the implications for economic stability must be addressed, negative population growth, as that being predicted in South Korea at present, might also be viewed as a solution rather than a problem.

(See, for one example, Stern).

It is in light of the potential for Buddhists to aid in the restoration of sustainable values and practices for rectification of the path of human evolution that this paper is written.

II. Buddhism and Ecological Right Action

The applicability of core Buddhist ideology to the solutions for environmental degradation is remarkable. In discussing the Buddhist perspective on the environmental crisis, Ho-jin Yoon points out that “the essential teachings in Buddhism, namely, the doctrine of dependent origination, the view of desire and the doctrine of action (karma) ... are thought to serve as a clue to solve environmental problems” (Yoon). In essence, Buddhist proposed orientations of the mind leading to human enlightenment and right action, in many cases, are the very same circumstances of the mind leading to ecologically sustainable actions and non-actions.

1. Inter-relatedness

The “doctrine of dependent origination” (Skt., *pratitya-samutpada*), discussed by Yoon, is commonly referred to in the literature on Buddhism and environment and may be translated into English in various ways, including “interdependent co-origination” (Eckel). This concept involving inter-relatedness is also described as “mutual causation” (Shin). Kyoung-Joon Park refers to the idea as “the theory of dependent co-arising from the dharma-realm” and recognizes it as the “essence of Hua-yan thought” (Park). Park interprets the idea as explaining “the dharma-dhatu as environmental cause of all phenomena, everything being dependent on everything else, therefore one is in all and all are in one, all things in existence are inter-related and inter-dependent ... there is no thing which is independent or individual,

everything is connected to all.” Park goes on to discuss the metaphor of “Indra’s Net,”

Indra’s Net is a vast net hanging in Indra’s palace, and is made of strands that are joined together by jewels. When light reflects onto one of the jewels, the same light is reflected and re-reflected endlessly throughout the expanse of the net. This is a metaphor used in Hua-yan Buddhism, taken from the *Hua-yan-jing* (Flower Garland Sutra), to express the concept of mutual interpenetration.

Park subsequently discusses the concept of “ecosystem” in relation to dependent co-origination:

The theory of dependent co-arising from the dharma-realm is quite similar to what is referred to as the ‘ecosystem.’ In the ecosystem, natural phenomena co-exist within a system of the total inter-circulating and inter-relating relationship, which includes all living and non-living material, including humans. (Park)

The Buddhist precept to not kill directly or indirectly can be connected with the inter-relation and inter-dependence we see in both ecological sustainability and the idea of inter-dependent co-origination. “The idea of considering all living beings as if they were our parents is based on the theory of mutual causality. The basis of the precept to not kill is also the theory of mutual causality” (Shin). This precept may be integrated into our actions, however, at various levels, depending upon the extent to which we interpret “indirect killing.” At one level, the purchase and eating of beef can be an example of indirect killing because the cow is killed by someone in order to put its muscles in our stomachs. On another, broader level, though, we may incorporate the understanding that each beef product purchase we make drives up

the demand for more beef in the market, therefore driving up the demand for cows on the land. This leads to destruction of natural habitats (through “converting” them to pastures), such as the highly bio-diverse rainforests of South America, or at minimum replacement (killing) of native grassland species (Buschbacher). At an even broader level, we can understand that in addition to destroying biodiversity through producing demand for cattle, more cows mean more methane gas in the atmosphere, which adds to the magnitude of global warming (Johnson). In this light, buying beef indirectly kills cows and drives species to extinction, which in turn harms humans, but it increases global warming as well, which has the potential to cause rapid extinctions (linked to human existence).

It is likely that many Buddhists are unaware of the indirect consequences of their actions; as the example of eating beef illustrates, indirect killing may be a complicated action. The first of ten “serious” precepts in the *Brahma net Sutra* concerns the “felony of killing” (Shin). It does, however, mention that a disciple of the Buddha “shall not *intentionally* kill any sentient being” (as quoted in Shin). Through ignorance of indirect effects of their actions, Buddhists may not be aware that they are killing, in some instances, thousands of beings of thousands of species each year. Whether they are liable according to Mahayana scripture, depends upon how they interpret their moral responsibility not to kill indirectly and the degree to which this is integrated with inter-dependent co-origination. These interpretations and integrations may also be affected by how much they take seriously: “ignorance, the greatest taint” (*Dhammapada* 270). Thus, at least, a Mahayana Buddhist, is morally responsible, as well, to avoid ignorance, but in this Age of Information this seems largely achievable in relation to environmental and ecological problems caused by humans.

Reading a newspaper article about global warming affecting our ocean “food supply” (*Korea Times*, Dec. 8, 2006, p. 7) could lead a Buddhist to “Google” the phrase “climate change.” Having begun this

quest they would find much information on what they can do and not do to prevent the mass killing of ocean life. Eventually, they may come across “www.climatecare.org” where they would be able to calculate their CO₂ emissions for a particular airplane flight or year of driving a certain car. Realizing that taking a roundtrip flight from Seoul to Los Angeles each passenger puts as much CO₂ directly into the atmosphere as their Hyundai Avante creates in a year, they might change their plans for summer vacation. Alternatively, they might donate some money to an NGO that lobbies governments for solar energy. Essentially, those Buddhists who are, even in the slightest degree, aware of some human caused environmental destructions seem to have a moral obligation to seek information about how they contribute to such killing and what they can change or stop doing to avoid indirect killing at multiple levels. This is only further strengthened by the fundamental Buddhist ideal of active compassion.

As the common scriptural phrase goes, “He who sees interdependent co-origination, sees the Buddha” (*Majjhima-nikaya* in Eckel). Conservation ecologists and Buddhist monks work within a similar ideological framework. One difference between them, we might contend, is that the ecologist is compelled to work within the knowledge framework of their scientific field while the Buddhist is compelled to work with the knowledge framework of an historical religious institution. Two questions that surface in such a line of thought is whether the institutions of Buddhism would recognize an ecologist as enlightened and whether the field of ecology might see the next great environmental hero in a Buddhist monk. If we imagine an average East Asian and an average African forest forager from a thousand years ago magically transported to the present we might imagine them sharing in an interesting discourse with an average North American university student today, assuming that they could all speak the same language. The African forager asks the others, “What do you call someone who is interested in the inter-relatedness of all living and

non-living beings in their world, strives not to disrupt that inter-relatedness by killing, and is fundamentally concerned with realizing the truth and getting rid of harmful illusions in their society?" The East Asian might say, "a Bodhisattva." The North American could relate that, "we call that a good conservation ecologist." Of course the forager would reply that she just generally described what her people call, "a person."

2. Actions (Karma)

The notion of karma readily follows the idea of ecological sustainability as well as it does the idea of dependent co-origination. The Buddhist recognition of karma as action, effects, and reactions, is recognition that the jewels of Indra's Net, as described by Park, are not static; that they have a tendency to undergo action. This may best be understood through an expansion of the metaphor as follows. One of the jewels, for example, might shift slightly and alter the amount of light that it reflects upon the other jewels that it is directly connected to. Due to the shift a multitude of the other jewels might compensate by making their own unique shifts in turn and so restore a more balanced distribution of the light coming in. Effects of these "actions" may result in some jewels ending up with no light at all, thus becoming what we might then call "fossil jewels," absorbed into the framework, or strands, of the Net. Jewels may split, forming new jewels and new connections, thus, in various ways, affecting the various other jewels of the Net. Regardless, the expansive Net perpetually returns to equilibrium. We might find, then, that one of the newly formed jewels shifts in such a way that it no longer reflects onto any other jewels the vast majority of the light it receives. Perhaps this new jewel has a single facet which is larger than the similarly shaped facets of any other jewel. The multiple jewels in the section of the Net which reflect light onto this new jewel might then, having lost so much of the light that

used to shine back on them from this single jewel, make frantic shifts or splits, or become fossil jewels. The single jewel, through rapid dynamic positioning of its one large facet, quickly incorporates other surrounding newly formed jewels so that all the light reflected into them eventually shines into it alone. In such a way it begins to form a new tiny net connected to the enormous Net of Indra by only a few strands.

The light coming in from the great Net is lost to the new, generally non-reciprocating tiny net and fossil jewels become more frequent than splitting jewels. The single jewel, conversely, finds a situation in which it can create its own manageable light through directing its large one facet at, and so consuming, nearby fossil jewels. The tiny net begins to break away from dependence on the great Net for light. The number of its fossil jewels diminishes, however, and the tiny net does not break away completely. Finally the single jewel positions its large facet directly at the source of light, thus directly capturing it. Only then are its final actions clear. All along it was the subtle changes of hue through the infinite reflecting (filtering) of light through the multitude of jewels in Indra's Net that reflected multiple, manageable rays into each jewel. The single jewel with its one large facet facing the source of light directly nearly begins to melt. (Surely the handful of jewels connected in the new tiny net would be better off if it did melt so that they could rejoin the great net, as they are naturally inclined to do.)

Thus the single jewel could melt, vaporize, and become a cloud that temporarily dampens the light of the Net. It could split, but would likely end up with the same dilemma. The single jewel could also, however, use its one large facet to reflect light back into Indra's Net and, in so doing, receive and reflect all it needs to rectify its circumstance. Ultimately, the only other action will result in it becoming a fossil jewel itself. It is our individual and collective actions that can be said to result in karma affecting our species, i.e., the single jewel and

our environment/ecosystem, i.e., the Net, in this regard. For further demonstration of karma in relation to ecosystem and mindfulness see “Mutual Scenarios,” below.

3. Desire and Consumption

Desiring, in the Buddhist sense, as related to the Second Noble Truth, is perhaps best understood through the English words craving, lust, or greed (Hong). “Desire” in this context is said to lead to suffering, just as it binds one to the limiting mental framework of individual self. Thus, the Buddha’s suggestion to throw away desires might be taken as a suggestion to throw away desires that, not only are non-destructive, but are beneficial for the totality of inter-related beings.

Therefore, desire-cutting is not totally right, in that desire is essential human condition. Desire-repressing is not natural, because desire pretakes the human condition that has been realized. Desire-controlling is to be reserved, because some kind of desire should break out in the urgency. What matters decisively is self-enlightenment on desire which enables to confront with all kinds of problem-situation caused by desires, and the responsibility for ones own desires. Therefore, Buddhism must be no other religion than religion of responsibility ... (Hong)

It seems certain that when we discuss desire in relation to “ones desires” for ones own pleasure, comfort, individual happiness, or feelings of power, we see the desire as being produced outside the context of no-self (interdependent co-arising). Consumer choices are often the result of such desires, or it can even be said that the choice to consume (shop or purchase a service), in and of itself, can be a result of such desires (Twitchell). Contrarily, if we “desire” to reduce

our carbon emissions, for example, it stems not from a craving to fulfill one's own wishes of comfort or pleasure. Furthermore, if we desire to plant a variety of native species of plants in our family's garden, patio, or rooftop, we go further than simply being non-destructive and produce a benefit for our native ecosystem. Such desires can only be held in the consciousness of interdependence, or no-self.

Control of our senses, actions, and reactions is stressed in the *Dhammapada*, as is mindfulness. In most modern societies (as opposed to horticultural or hunter-gatherer societies), shopping seems necessary not only to fulfill desires as lusts, cravings, or greed, but to fulfill instinctual, bodily needs. While these can not be controlled, it is obvious that their outcomes can be decided mindfully. Though consumer choices are still today being ruled for the most part by price, mindful shoppers are often even spending more money to obtain products which they feel are more sustainable, i.e., products whose production/harvesting, distribution, purchase, and use do at least less damage to ecosystems or public health and welfare than their cheaper competitors (Jensen, et al.). So, in many cases, these products are already becoming more accessible and less expensive as they become more profitable and supply increases. Certified sustainable lumber and organic or natural foods are among the most common examples of such sustainable products, but with their success comes the plausibility of seeing a rapid expansion of the "sustainables" markets in all sectors of, not only production, but services as well, in the future.² Much depends on consumer choices as actions, and the degree to which consciousness of interrelatedness infiltrates the spheres of consumption, marketing, and production.

To illustrate how mindfulness of inter-relation and the condition of our planet's ecosystems may be integrated into consumer choices, we

² Problems with "eco-labeling" are amounting already (See, for example, Bray, et al.). Developing and maintaining responsible, dependable, and substantive certification programs will be paramount over the next decade to facilitate the necessary transparency and accountability of "sustainables" suppliers.

may once again use imagination in considering some scenarios that average people may find themselves in:

“Mutual Scenario 1”

The parents of a bright young girl named Hye-jin Kam are an average Buddhist married couple. They consider themselves to be compassionate people and generally they are. They care very much about the world, but especially about their daughter. They want 7-year-old Hye-jin to have the opportunity to go to a good college some day, and so they decide that in addition to a savings account, they will invest some money for this purpose. Reviewing the prospects of several mutual funds they decide to go with the one that has the highest earnings record and a modest expense ratio, a sensible choice it would seem.

Little Hye-jin grows over the years, as does the mutual fund, quite well. She ends up with high aptitude tests in her final year of high school and, thanks to her parents investment is able to go to an esteemed university. In fact, her parents needed to cash out only sixty percent of their mutual fund shares and were able to save the rest for retirement. Hye-jin takes her mothers advice to major in pre-law (she might have been an M.D. as her father wanted, but she can not stand the sight of blood). After graduating in the top of her class she gets a full scholarship for law school, completes her studies there, and passes her bar examination on the first try. Hye-jin is offered a job at a big law firm in the big city. Though the air pollution is tremendous, she decides that the money is worth it. After several years, Hye-jin has established herself as a fine lawyer, winning the bulk of her cases. Her parents are quite proud.

One day she is handed a case in which she would defend a large plastics manufacturing company on charges of unlawful and excessive

pollution of a river known as Nak-seo Kang. It just so happens that the plastics company has been in the top five holdings of her parent's mutual fund for many years. The evidence against the company is tremendous and seems to point also to the development of hundreds of cases of pancreatic cancer, as well as other diseases in the people living in a village downstream. Hye-jin notices also that there is a strong likelihood that the tidal ecosystem at the river's ocean outlet has been damaged beyond repair. She does not like the idea of defending this company, but her law firm insists that she is the only one for the job. The skilled lawyer that she is, Hye-jin manages to win the case, landing herself a large promotion at her firm.

As it turns out, though, forty-three years earlier her father's closest childhood friend, Min-ho Jeong, had become a sea fisherman on the coast near the polluted river's outlet. For many years Mr. Jeong had been fishing there and selling the fish in local villages. Over the past couple years, however, Mr. Jeong has been catching far less fish and, so, has far less income. Mr. Jeong's son, who has been living in the afflicted village by the river Nak-seo Kang, has a thyroid cancer. Hoping to find money to pay for the treatment, Mr. Jeong petitions his old friend, Hye-jin's father, to lend him a large sum of money. The Kams, being the compassionate people that they are, cash out what was left of their old mutual fund and, thus, lend him a large portion of their retirement savings with no strings attached.

Sad as it is, Mr. Jeong's son does not survive to see another year, and Mr. Jeong, nearing old age, has no one left but himself to count on for support. The fishing is no longer profitable at all. He is unable to pay back the money he owes to the Kams. Mr. Kam is not angry with his poor friend, but he now has to rely on Hye-jin to help support him and his wife in retirement. Hye-jin manages well enough, with her high income, but having heard the news of Mr. Jeong and his son near the river Nak-seo Kang, she can not help but feel ashamed and even responsible in her defense of the plastics manufacturer. In addition,

Hye-jin is beginning to notice that, having lived in the big city so long, with all the air pollution, she herself is occasionally having trouble breathing. After seeing a doctor, she learns that she is developing severe asthma, and it is recommended that she move away from the big city. She moves home to her parents' house. Luckily for her, she has put a great deal of her income over the years into a mutual fund with a high earnings record and a modest expense ratio.

“Alternate Mutual Scenario”

Now let us go back in time to when Hye-jin Kam was seven years old:

Hye-jin's parents love their daughter very much. They are no ecology experts, but they understand that many of the choices they make in life will affect the health of the environment, and so affect their daughter, her children, and everyone else's children. They have seen reports on the news recently about pollution's effect on global warming, the oceans ecosystems, and human health. They do not protest in the street the use of chemical fertilizers, nor do know what a carbon footprint is, but they do care about the state of the planet they live on and they realize that there are threats to it that are getting worse. So, when they go to invest their money for Hye-jin's college education, they decide that they want to be careful not to invest in any companies that are major polluters or are damaging the ecosystem. They find a mutual fund that is geared toward investing only in companies with a good environmental record. Its earnings record is just slightly lower and its expense ratio just a little higher than those that do not filter for environmentally destructive companies, but for the Kams the difference is worth the price.

Over the years, as Hye-jin is growing up, through middle school and high school, she asks her parents to buy things for her often. They often do, as Hye-jin gets pretty good grades and deserves a present

now and then. They often do not, as well, because they are mindful of what they buy and try very hard not to buy in excess, especially things which are not recyclable or obviously not made with any consideration for ecosystem. Once again, they are no experts, but they try, passively, to explain to Hye-jin every now and then why they do not buy certain things or buy too much. Often they just tell her that something is too expensive and not worth the price, but once in a while, when they know about it, they point out to her the environmental effects associated with what they choose not to purchase. Because of their habits, they save money, and sometimes add to the college savings as well as the environmentally screened mutual fund.

By the time Hye-jin enters her final year of high school she has heard hundreds of times, “turn the light off, don’t waste electricity, don’t you know it is not free?!” Several times she has heard the addition of, “by the way, when you do that you are making more radioactive waste at the nuclear power plant.” She thinks her parents generally bug her too much. Hye-jin wants to be a pop singer like the famous Brittany Lee, but is thinking that she should probably go to college first. Her parents have seen the mutual fund they bought into grow quite well and since they have been continually adding to it and the savings, they have quite enough to send Hye-jin to any college she wants. Hye-jin is a bright girl, always has been, so it is no surprise when she scores high on the college aptitude test. She decides to apply to some of the highest ranking universities, and though her father is urging her to go for pre-medicine and her mother pre-law, she wants to study something more interesting and figures that she might have the best chance to get in to the best schools if she chooses a less competitive major anyway. Reviewing the majors offered at the various schools she notices “environmental studies.” She had never really thought about it before, but, somehow, something about it just seems right for her.

Hye-jin finds college much more fun and interesting than high

school. Some time during her third year, she realizes that she has become quite passionate about the ideas she has come to understand in environmental studies. When she visits home her parents are surprised to find *her* now lecturing *them* about living a more environmentally sustainable life. They think it a little much that she is changing all their light bulbs, installing solar panels on their rooftop, and planting vegetables and native plants in the garden, but they put out the money for them and accept the responsibility of maintaining these things.

It is in her final year of college that Hye-jin decides that she wants to get a PhD in her field. She knows that she will not make as much money being a professor as she would if she went to work at her cousin's big apartment marketing firm (the pop singer dream has faded), but she can make enough to be comfortable and maybe have the opportunity to make a difference through research and teaching environmental studies. Seven years later Hye-jin has completed her dissertation on "Problems Associated with the Use of Arial Photographs in Watershed Management." She lands a job as an associate professor at Nak-seo University with a fair salary and good prospects for tenure.

One summer Hye-jin's father introduces her to an old friend of his who lives in her area, Min-ho Jeong, explaining that he is a fisherman and knows the rivers and ocean there well, and so would be a great resource. Secretly her father is hoping that she will fall in love with Mr. Jeong's handsome son and start a family. Hye-jin does meet the junior Mr. Jeong and spends a lot of time with him. They have many conversations about the environment and what people can do to preserve it. The hopes of Hye-jin's father are dashed when Mr. Jeong's son, inspired by the conversations with Hye-jin, decides to become a Buddhist monk and leaves for a monastery. Hye-jin feels his decision is a good one and wishes him well, knowing he will be a good spiritual teacher.

In addition to teaching, Hye-jin conducts summer research, working on projects in her local area. Doing some water quality

experiments over several years, she has been finding a strange increase in levels of hexachlorobenzene, as well as other toxic compounds, at her site on the river Nak-seo Kang. A quick investigation leads her to realize that the plastics manufacturing plant upstream is the culprit, releasing these high health-risk and ecologically damaging toxins. She reports the polluter to the supreme prosecutor's office, knowing the magnitude of the situation requires it. A suit is filed and Hye-jin is called to testify against the plastics manufacturer. Obliging the prosecution, she testifies as an expert witness and presents her findings before the court, proving beyond doubt the guilt of the company. With the plastics manufacturer found guilty, it is both fined and charged with the expensive cleanup of the Nak-seo Kang.

The dean of her academic department recognizes that her help in stopping this pollution early-on has not only protected public health for the villages on the river, but may also have saved the tidal ecosystem at its outlet from destruction. He nominates her for the Distinguished Professor of the Year appointment at Nak-seo University. The college approves her appointment and she adds the honor to her resume, helping her to secure a Fulbright Visiting Scholar Grant to study and teach in Montana the next year.

In the U.S. Hye-jin meets another visiting scholar from her country; they share many good times together. Upon returning home Hye-jin first visits her parents house to make sure the solar panels are still working and announce her engagement. She finds her father chatting with Min-ho Jeong who is apparently looking for advice on how to invest his money from the recent prosperous fishing. Mr. Kam suggests a certain mutual fund which only holds companies that are ecologically sustainable. "It has been very good to me," he adds.

III. Right Action and Right Consumer Action

In accordance with the Oslo Declaration on Sustainable

Consumption, much research is likely to become focused on cultural influences upon consumer choices (Tukker, et al.). It is the cumulative effects of individual awareness, understandings, and decisions of consumers around the world which have the greatest influence on environmental health and ecological sustainability because these consumer decisions rule the means and materials of production and service sectors around the globe. Modern production, described by Hong, among many others, is based on fulfilling and creating desires. The creating of desires, in this “desire machine,” however must take into account the consciousness and education of consumers, which is why, as the human race as a whole becomes more and more conscious of environmental and ecological problems, more and more businesses are making a lot of money producing desires for sustainable products. These can only become more profitable in the future. At present, consumers, including Buddhists have the choice to assimilate or to abstain from assimilating the products of the desire machine which are destructive for ecosystems; the goods, services, and the desires themselves. The extent to which Buddhist doctrine is incorporated into the decision-making of consumers in nations with significant Buddhist populations is critical for the realization of sustainable consumption, i.e., the next subsistence pattern remodeling.

Freeing the mind from the illusion that happiness is attainable through material possessions for the purpose of clearing the mind of suffering also facilitates reintegration of values that oppose indiscriminate over-consumption and promote sustainable consumption. It is undeniable that it is ideas and values that must be in place for ecological right action to occur: “Since the environmental crisis is the crisis of a value system, thoughts are more fundamental than technology or systems” (Yoon). Actions, though, speak louder than words, and however aware people may be of environmental problems and their causes, moral implications and solutions, sustainable lifestyle choices will likely not occur unless there are those that are satisfying themselves

with their own ecologically right actions and encouraging others with their example.

IV. Conclusion

Applying Buddhist values in the purchasing of goods and services, as well as the decision to purchase or abstain from purchasing certain goods and services could have a great impact on the likelihood of a global subsistence pattern remodeling toward ecological sustainability. Buddhists ascribe to a symbolic and theoretical framework, as well as a value system, which inherently hold the potential for rectifying the ecological wrong turns of their societies and, consequently, civilization as a whole. This so-called Age of Information facilitates the availability of information on ecological problems and solutions so thoroughly that education on the topic requires minimal effort. Buddhists need only apply their truths and values in the decisions and actions they make in life to accelerate the rectification of human ecological/economic maladaptions. This includes everyday routine decisions and actions, as well as major life choices, which together are very often made up of consumer choices.

Relating to a group of friends last week that airplane carbon emissions are immense and are driving global warming to a great extent, I got a lot of “deer in the headlights” looks in return. The eldest member of our group, Mr. Ko, replied that there is simply nothing that one can do about this fact. *No matter the consequences* of that “not being able to do much about it” notion, he was willing to make such a claim and apparently, to live his life according to his notion. The claim is by no means an unconventional one, but, most importantly, by no means a logical one. A person *can* think of several things he or she can do about such a problem in one minute. Going online or to a library one can find even more things they can do or just do-not about all such problems. Mr. Ko seemed convinced that he

has no significant role in the workings of the world. Remodeling our maladaptive subsistence pattern, he does not see as a possibility, even if he does see it as a necessity. A revolution in the way we interact with our world, in order to bring about an ecologically sustainable way of living for our future and our children's future, to him, is just not something that he sees himself involved in. I believe, in the back of his mind, however, he is simply comfortable in the idea that some other person or entity will act to bring about the necessary change. Otherwise, why would Mr. Ko have made the choice to have children?

Mr. Ko may believe that the power is unfortunately misplaced in the hands of some self-serving institutional body. It is obvious, however, that "institutional bodies" can only carry out further destruction of our world with the compliance of their constituents; if people carry out their roles as automatic purchasers of destructive commodities and services. In essence, there is no great moral or social pressure upon Mr. Ko, for now, but Mr. Ko is not a Buddhist.

After the subsistence pattern remodeling is complete, however, Mr. Ko will know his part and play it well. Human beings have already begun this remodeling, and come so far. We know what to do and we know that when we do not know what to do, the information we seek to make the right choice is, or will soon be, available on the internet, in the literature, or in the example of a fellow human being. Buddhists might just find such answers in their ancient texts as well.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(C=Chinese, S=Sanskrit)

Hua-yan-jing (C), Avataṃsaka Sūtra (S) 華嚴經

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