

Buddhism's Metaphysical Basis for Interdependence

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Buddhism's Metaphysical Basis for Interdependence

In their recent letter to the editor (*BioScience* 56: 373), John Silviu and Lynn Holtzman raise two interesting points in connection with my article "Ethics for Wildlife Conservation: Overcoming the Human–Nature Dualism" (*BioScience* 56: 144–150): First, they note that the concept of interconnectedness as asserted by Ikeda is also stressed by Aldo Leopold in the land ethic. Second, they claim that Buddhism saw this semantic whole as the "result of denial or suppression of all desires." They conclude that a Buddhist approach to environmental ethics such as Ikeda's cannot be successful, because to be effective, environmental ethics must harness the passion of the human spirit.

There is no mention in my article that Ikeda's approach to environmental ethics requires suppression of desires. Rather, this is Silviu and Holtzman's interpretation, who in fact write that "as we understand Buddhism, the goal of life is to deny individual passions to become one with self and environment" (emphasis added).

In Buddhist thought, there are two basic approaches to liberation from suffering. One view holds that earthly desires are the cause of human suffering, and thus the extinguishing of earthly desires is a prerequisite for enlightenment. In this view, earthly desires and enlightenment are two independent and opposing factors, which cannot coexist (Soka Gakkai 2002). Ikeda's philosophy belongs to the Mahayana approach, which asserts that earthly desires are inseparable from enlightenment. In this view, human desires are the driving forces for human development and action. Desire, as a source of creative energy, can be the cause for either good or evil. The Mahayana tradition proposes that the positive energy of desire can be harnessed through compassion

and altruistic behavior. Not only does Ikeda regard desire as a fundamental part of human existence, he considers attempts to eliminate desire "threats to the continued existence of life itself" (Ikeda and Wilson 1987).

It is correct that the land ethic also proposes a community of interdependent parts, as do the Gaia hypothesis and "deep ecology." But unlike these approaches, Mahayana Buddhism, with its extended theory of causation, provides a metaphysical underpinning for the notion of interdependency, which is of great value to environmental philosophy.

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