

### I. Preliminary Considerations

In writing this paper<sup>1</sup> I do not conceal that I am most concerned about what is called the “ecological crisis” or the destruction and deterioration of nature, and I readily admit that personally I sympathize with the attempts among adherents of contemporary religions to support what is often called “ecological ethics”, viz. an ethics based on the conviction that man is responsible for the preservation of nature, i.e. of intact ecosystems and bio-diversity—a conviction I do indeed share though I shall not be attempting here to prove its validity. Such a conviction seems to presuppose that intact nature and bio-diversity are regarded as a *value*, and in my opinion they ought to be regarded as a value not only from an anthropocentric point of view, i.e., because they may be indispensable (or at least useful or enjoyable) to *man* (though this is doubtless better than nothing), but rather, and primarily, for their *own* sake, in their *own* right. And what we need today, in view of the damage already done, is not just protection of nature as a kind of by-product but rather active protection and even restoration of nature based on the acceptance of the intrinsic value of natural beauty and diversity, and of the fact that other species—both animals and plants—have no less right to existence than man.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, as a scholar, and as one at that whose field is philology and history of ideas, I cannot avoid asking to what extent ecological ethics is, and has always been, an element of the religious tradition concerned, forming part of its body of teachings or doctrinal system and expressing itself in the actual behaviour of its adherents, or to what extent and in what way ecological ethics is, at least, in tune with, and susceptible of being integrated into, this tradition, i.e., in my case, *Buddhism*. Such a question may also suggest itself to thoughtful or hesitating believers, or to an attentive observer of the countries where Buddhism is dominant. For the ecological situation in some Buddhist countries is indeed far from being satisfactory. It may well be that this has come about *in spite*

of Buddhism, due to other reasons, including Western influence. But it cannot *a priori* be excluded either that Buddhism, or rather certain facets of Buddhism, may somehow be co-responsible for the situation.

In fact, among Buddhists as well as Buddhologists there seems to be considerable disagreement with regard to whether Buddhism does or does not favour an ecological ethics.<sup>3</sup> This disagreement exists also with regard to the more conservative forms of Buddhism, i.e. Theravāda and similar but now extinct schools like Sarvāstivāda, and with regard to the text corpus some redaction or other of which constitutes their respective canonical basis. It is this corpus of canonical texts, especially its, roughly speaking, pre-Abhidharmic layers, that I have in mind when speaking of the “Early Buddhist tradition”. Since Theravāda is the only living representative of this tradition, the Pāli canon will naturally be the most frequently (but not exclusively) adduced source.

Especially among Buddhist authors, both Asian and Western, many have come to adopt positions that favour an ecological interpretation of Early Buddhism, though often in a more or less anthropocentric perspective.

A prominent example for a mainly *non*-anthropocentric perspective is the American Buddhist JOANNA MACY.<sup>4</sup> According to her, the original, genuine teaching of Buddhism is a theory of universal interconnectedness, mutual conditioning, or radical interdependence of *all* phenomena, which comes close to the modern general systems theory, and, by dismantling the separate, continuous ego-self, leads to identification with and responsibility for the whole world, humans as well as all other beings. The more so since one aspect of universal interconnectedness is, for her, the relationship of all beings in terms of the modern theory of evolution,<sup>5</sup> which MACY prefers to the traditional Buddhist doctrine of rebirth, with which, she thinks, the Buddha himself, too, was not much concerned.<sup>6</sup> Nor has she any sympathy for the idea of *nirvāṇa* as an escape from the world, because this would imply a devaluation of the world and a weakening of our feeling of responsibility. Accordingly, she emphasizes that, in contrast to a certain tendency

among Theravāda Buddhists and especially Western interpreters, original Buddhism (as well as early Mahāyāna) is not escapist but world-affirming, aiming at an awakening which “puts one *into* the world with a livelier, more caring sense of social engagement”.<sup>7</sup>

Another example is the Japanese scholar NORITOSHI ARAMAKI.<sup>8</sup> As I understand him, he maintains that the Buddha, in contrast to the Jainas, said yes to bodily existence and hence to the food chain and to nature as it actually is, and that it is due to this affirmative attitude to bodily existence that *ahimsā* is considerably less strict in Buddhism than in Jainism.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, ARAMAKI, too, seems to reject the idea that in Early Buddhism *Nirvāṇa* aims (at least ultimately) at escape from this world.<sup>10</sup>

But there are also opinions to the contrary. E.g., IAN HARRIS<sup>11</sup> has tried to collect evidence, mainly from the Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya, showing that the Buddhist attitude towards nature is predominantly negative. He admits that “it is not inconceivable that historical scholarship may, in the future, reveal that early Buddhists did live in harmony with their surroundings” and that “their doctrinal position may well have contributed to this harmony”. But he stresses that this does not mean that they were “environmentalists” in the sense of a “conscious attempt to critically appraise and counteract the adverse by-products of the scientific enterprise”, and he argues that the transformation of “the traditional attitude of good natured benevolence and decorum directed towards a radically unstable natural environment ... into an ethic based on the ultimate value of nature” as advocated by some contemporary Buddhist authors means “a significant doctrinal shift”, nay, “the transformation of a ... traditional system of thought” into “liberal Christianity”.<sup>12</sup>

While HARRIS appears to argue from a Christian background, NORIAKI HAKAMAYA<sup>13</sup> emphatically rejects all kinds of ecological interpretations of Buddhism from what he claims to be *the* Buddhist point of view. For him, *true*<sup>14</sup> Buddhism *negates* nature. To be sure, for HAKAMAYA “nature” mainly means nature as the creative origin and true essence of things and beings, as the basis of the latter’s life in the sense of a substantial soul or Self,<sup>15</sup> and negating this does look much like traditional

Buddhism. But for HAKAMAYA not having a soul seems to mean, in the case of natural beings *including animals*, not to be living, sentient beings at all, at least from the metaphysical point of view. Only in the case of man, lack of a substantial soul does not imply insentience because he alone can *think*. If I understand Hakamaya correctly, he takes this to be the essential message of the twelve-membered formula of dependent origination, connecting it with the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*.<sup>16</sup> Thus, man is the master of this world.<sup>17</sup> Yet, he should not destroy it and even have compassion with animals (for according to HAKAMAYA there is no reason why a *thinking* person should be insensitive to violence), but in any case for HAKAMAYA human interests come first.<sup>18</sup>

It would thus seem that the sources for our knowledge of Early Buddhism are not sufficiently explicit and unambiguous on the issue of ecological ethics; for otherwise such a wide divergence of opinions would hardly be explainable. Actually, in former times environmental problems, if existing at all, were hardly understood as such, and at any rate did not exist in such a conspicuous form as today. Hence, we cannot expect the early texts to contain fully explicit statements with regard to this issue.<sup>19</sup> But on the other hand even in those times there must have been some attitude towards nature. Hence there may well have been some kind of spontaneous, unreflected ecological ethics, or at least evaluations and attitudes that offer a suitable basis on which it might be established today. For, today the Buddhist tradition, like any other, cannot avoid facing the problem. If it is to remain a living tradition, it has to supply answers to new vital questions,<sup>20</sup> and it may have to accommodate its heritage to the new situation by means of explication, re-interpretation, re-organization or even creative extension or change. One of these questions is doubtless whether or not an ecological ethics is required (or at least desirable), and I for one do not see how it could be answered in the affirmative unless intact nature and natural diversity are accorded a positive *value*.

From a traditional Buddhist point of view, it might, however, be argued that, to be sure, nature ought to be preserved as intact as possible,

but that from the Buddhist point of view an explicit ecological ethics, based on imparting *value* to nature, is *superfluous*, because a behaviour that keeps nature intact is the spontaneous, *automatic* outflow of the moral and *spiritual self-perfection* to be accomplished by every person individually; or that such an ethics would even be doomed to *ineffectiveness* because the present state of nature is a kind of automatic objective reflection, or collective karmic result, of the moral and spiritual state of (human) beings, and that it cannot therefore be influenced directly by ecological activism.

To the latter argument I should reply that at least in Early Buddhism the karma doctrine as well as the idea that the physical world is somehow dependent on man's moral behaviour are not meant to justify fatalism but, on the contrary, intended to encourage endeavour on the part of the individual. To be sure, what is encouraged is, in the first place, moral and spiritual endeavour, but since karma is explicitly regarded to be only one cause among others,<sup>21</sup> there is also room for direct influence on one's own as well as on the global situation. Actually, this is shown by the present, *actively and directly* man-made, destruction and pollution of nature. Hence, there is no reason why it should not be equally possible, to a certain extent at least, to counteract this destruction in an equally direct manner. That the individual by himself feels *comparatively* helpless with regard to what happens in the world at large does not mean that active environmental commitment is *absolutely* futile.

As for the first argument, I do not deny that the spiritual perfection of individuals may have an automatic ecological effect. But at least as far as Early Buddhist spirituality (as I for one understand it from the texts) is concerned, I shall try to show that what follows from it spontaneously would seem to be, above all, only a largely "passive" ecological attitude, emerging as a kind of by-product, hardly an "active" one based on positive value, perceived to inhere in intact nature and in natural diversity as such, which is, however, what is most required in the present situation. Besides, even if spiritual perfection were to culminate, auto-

matically, in ecological behaviour and action, it may not be possible any longer to wait until the spiritual perfection of a majority of people has sufficiently advanced or even reached completion. It would, of course, be so much better if people behaved and acted in such a way spontaneously, due to spiritual perfection, but will there ever be enough perfected people, and do we indeed have that much time left? As in the case of the moral commitments (like not killing living beings) which are taken up right at the beginning by both monk and lay person, it may be necessary to *motivate* as many *ordinary*, imperfect people as possible to commit themselves to ecological behaviour, and even action, *here and now*.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, in my opinion the present situation requires an ecological ethics based on according a positive value to nature intact and to natural diversity. The aim of this paper is to investigate—once more but still in an admittedly preliminary way—the Early Buddhist tradition from the point of view of the actual or possible relation of this tradition to an ecological ethics. Though this may not be my job, I have also dared to include a suggestion how and on what conditions such an ethics, if desired, could best be established in such a way that the essentials of tradition are not jeopardized. Thus, my investigation comprises three levels: 1. *description* of the pertinent Early Buddhist teachings and attitudes, 2. their *critical evaluation* from the point of view of ecological ethics, and 3. my own *constructive suggestions*.

Unfortunately, even mere description is not without problems because it involves selection or condensation and is hardly separable from *interpretation*. Actually, divergence of opinion with regard to the Early Buddhist attitude to nature or ecological ethics is partly due to fundamental disagreement with regard to the understanding and interpretation of central teachings and attitudes of Early Buddhism and to the exegesis of the pertinent texts. Such disagreement is no doubt favoured not only by the ambiguity of some texts but also by a certain complexity if not heterogeneity of the corpus of canonical texts, showing as they do different layers and strands. Thus, divergent interpretations may also result from emphasis on different strands or teachings, and may be reinforced

by declaring some to be original, authentic or true, while others are regarded as later or even as deviations. But in the absence of a commonly recognized stratification of the earlier portions of the canonical texts, what is considered original or true Buddhism is easily influenced by the interpreter's own thinking or predilection. I therefore prefer, for the present purpose—which is not concerned with the origin or development of Early Buddhism but with the attitude, to nature, of the tradition, and especially its authoritative canonical texts, as a whole<sup>23</sup>—to deal with this tradition simply as one made up of several strands, or rather spiritual and didactic levels and contexts, which, to be sure, are not entirely unrelated but ought not to be mixed up by over-systematization either, and therefore will be discussed separately, one by one.

To be sure, I too presuppose, to some extent, the validity of *my* interpretation, and understand some of these strands or contexts to be more central to Early Buddhism than others (and I must, for the time being, confine critical discussion of divergent views to a few very preliminary hints, mostly in notes). But I have at least tried my best to let my description/interpretation not be influenced by my personal concern. I understand and acknowledge that believers may feel the need for, and hence tend to create the myth of, an *identity* of their re-interpreted, re-organized or creatively extended or changed tradition with the original one, and may not like, or even strongly resent, the scholar pointing out differences. But as a historian of ideas bound to the modern historical sense I feel obliged to clearly keep these levels apart<sup>24</sup> (and even believers should perhaps not lose sight of the fact that unacknowledged historical facts may easily become a weapon in the hands of critics). I therefore ask the reader to distinguish sharply between, on the one hand, my *description* of what I understand to be *traditional* Buddhist views and, on the other, my *critical evaluation* of these views in terms of ecological ethics and, finally, my *constructive suggestions* how on this basis active ecological ethics in the modern sense might be established. The first may be found historically correct or not, the second adequate or not, the third acceptable or not, or even superfluous. But in any case these differ-

ent levels should be kept apart and judged separately.

## II. Nature in the Context of the Ultimate Evaluation of Existence

Let me, then, start with what I for one cannot but understand to be the *ultimate* evaluation of existence in Early Buddhism, ubiquitous as it is in the Sermons and closely connected with, and emphasized in, the central spiritual context of detachment and release.<sup>25</sup>

The first Noble Truth, which according to tradition<sup>26</sup> was part of the Buddha's first discourse, is well-known: Birth, old age, disease, dying,<sup>27</sup> separation from dear things or persons, etc.—all this is *dukkha* (Skt. *duḥkha*): painful, disagreeable, ill, entailing suffering. Life is connected with, or at least constantly threatened by, pain, suffering,<sup>28</sup> and is inexorably, sooner or later, ended by death.<sup>29</sup> Even the superficially pleasant<sup>30</sup> things which are the objects of desire often involve more suffering and disadvantage than pleasure.<sup>31</sup> It is only in certain states of meditative concentration that this situation can be temporarily surmounted.<sup>32</sup> But in a more basic sense, the whole world (*loka*),<sup>33</sup> all conditioned things (*sankhāra*),<sup>34</sup> all constituents of a person as well as of the external world,<sup>35</sup> and even the states of meditative concentration,<sup>36</sup> are unsatisfactory or ill (*dukkha*),<sup>37</sup> in an *objective* sense,<sup>38</sup> just on account of their being *impermanent* (*anicca*) and subject to decay (*vipariṇāmadhamma*).<sup>39</sup> As such, they are not one's Self (*attan*) nor one's own (*attaniya*, *mama*, etc.)<sup>40</sup>—because this would imply lasting and free disposal of them<sup>41</sup>—but something alien (*para*, *añña*),<sup>42</sup> and hence of no real value and concern, just like grass, pieces of wood or leaves (*tiṇa-kaṭṭha-palāsa*) in a park.<sup>43</sup>

This evaluation seems to start from *human* existence, but it is, of course, equally applicable to *animal* life. I for one do not remember any canonical text that affirms the food chain universe in the same way as Vedic and Hindu sources<sup>44</sup> sometimes do. Eating may have to be accepted as inevitable for survival,<sup>45</sup> but this does not exclude that it is at the same time detested,<sup>46</sup> and that the natural situation of killing and



eating the weaker and of the domination of the strongest is deeply abhorred, not only in society<sup>47</sup> but also in nature.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, I do not think that it is correct to derive, from the acceptance of the necessity of body and food for human existence (which is usually considered to be the only one in which liberating insight can be attained), an *ultimately positive* evaluation of nature characterized by the food chain. Even the less violent aspects of nature—vegetation, landscape and the elements—though hardly if ever viewed in terms of suffering or struggle for survival, cannot claim *ultimate* value in view of the fact that they too are ultimately ill or unsatisfactory (in an *objective* sense) just on account of their *impermanence*.<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, the ultimate analysis and evaluation of existence in Early Buddhism does not seem to confer any value on nature, neither on life as such nor on species nor on eco-systems. The ultimate value and goal of Early Buddhism, absolute and definitive freedom from suffering, decay, death and impermanence, cannot be found in nature.<sup>50</sup> But not in a civilized or artificial world either. For the goods and achievements of civilization, too, are, apart from usually benefitting only a minority, often a cause of suffering for others, especially for animals, and are, at any rate, impermanent. Even from an optimistic outlook technological progress will never succeed in abolishing suffering completely, let alone impermanence, to which even god Brahman and the luminous divine beings who abide in still higher spheres are subject.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the ultimate analysis and evaluation of existence in Early Buddhism does not motivate *efforts* for *preserving* nature, not to mention restoring it, nor efforts for transforming or *subjugating* it by means of technology. It only motivates the wish and effort to *liberate* oneself (*vimutti*) from *all* constituents of both personal existence and the world—a goal to which this analysis is itself conducive by arousing weariness (*nibbidā*) and detachment (*virāga*).<sup>52</sup> And, at least if compassionateness (*kāruṇṇatā*) and caring for others (*anukampā*) are sufficiently strong,<sup>53</sup> as in the case of the Buddha, it may motivate the person who has attained liberation (or is on his way to it) to help others to do the same,<sup>54</sup>

by teaching<sup>55</sup> or just by being a model.<sup>56</sup> It goes without saying that in view of the ultimate evaluation of existence as unsatisfactory the need to liberate oneself (or others, for that matter) from it is considerably increased by the fact that one's existence in the world is, in Early Buddhism, generally understood as perpetuating itself through a virtually endless series of rebirths (*punabbhava*) and re-deaths—either in this world or in (ultimately impermanent and hence unsatisfactory)<sup>57</sup> yonder heavens and hells—i.e., as *saṃsāra*.<sup>58</sup> Definitive release from *dukkha* does, then, not merely mean freedom from frustration, sorrow and fear arising from wrong attitudes<sup>59</sup> or even (by access to certain forms of meditative concentration) from physical pain in this life, but, above all, release from rebirth<sup>60</sup> and its implications (ageing and dying) and imponderabilities.

### III. Origination in Dependence and Ecological Ethics

In order to attain liberation, it is necessary to gain insight into, and eliminate, the forces by which one's existence in the world, more precisely: reiterated existence, rebirth, is kept going. According to the second Noble Truth, the main cause is Desire (*taṇhā, tṛṣṇā*).<sup>61</sup> Freedom from rebirth is hence attained by extinguishing Desire, especially desire for (further) existence.<sup>62</sup> According to other texts,<sup>63</sup> desire is, in its turn, ultimately rooted in Non- or Misunderstanding (*avijjā, avidyā*). Desire is hence removed through the removal of *avijjā* by means of Insight. This causal nexus is elaborated in the twelve-membered formula of Origination in Dependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda, pratītyasamutpāda*),<sup>64</sup> which is thus—similar in this regard to the karma doctrine—concerned, at least originally, with the destiny of *individual* beings<sup>65</sup> (primarily, doubtless, human beings), pointing out that the causes for rebirth as well as, for that matter, for liberation are found within each individual itself, so that it is the individual's own business to make a change or go on as before. I for one fail to see how this analysis of the presuppositions of individual bondage and liberation could, without a radical re-interpretation,

provide a basis for *ecological* ethics based on an intrinsic value of natural diversity and beauty.

To be sure, the canonical texts contain also applications of the principle of Origination in Dependence which are not expressly, or not at all, related to rebirth, as, e.g., psychological or physio-psychological explanations of how feelings<sup>66</sup> or desire<sup>67</sup> arise, or the explanation of how unwholesome behaviour like violence, quarrel and lies originate from Desire.<sup>68</sup> In some Sermons, people's moral status or morally qualified actions are regarded as influencing even the situation of the external world,<sup>69</sup> and the external world has, in its turn, certain influences on living beings.<sup>70</sup> But it is, as far as I can see, only later on (especially in Chinese Hua-yen Buddhism)<sup>71</sup> that Origination in Dependence was even developed into a principle of universal *interdependence* and *interrelatedness*. As such it seems, to be sure, to resemble the structural principle of scientific ecology (though closer scrutiny would seem to be required). But as far as I can see even such a principle does not necessarily entail an ecological ethics as I understand it.<sup>72</sup> To be sure, universal *interrelatedness* would mean that any change I (or we) bring about has influence on everything in the world including myself (or ourselves). But does this preclude that one (or mankind) might try (and to a certain extent even successfully try) to exploit the causal network for one's (or mankind's) own advantage, at the cost of others, as in modern technology? And even if universal *interdependence* and *interrelatedness* were of such a kind that this won't work, at least not in the long run, wouldn't it at best entail an anthropocentric ecological attitude—one which preserves intact eco-systems and bio-diversity only because and to the extent they are indispensable for *man's* survival, or at least for his happiness, or spiritual perfection—unless it is supplemented by attributing a positive *value* to nature as it is, in its own right?

Anyway, the idea of a *mutual* dependence, inter-connectedness or interrelatedness, *here and now*, of *all* things and beings does not seem to be expressed in the canonical texts of Early Buddhism.<sup>73</sup> They only teach that not only suffering and rebirth but all things and events, except

*Nirvāṇa*,<sup>74</sup> arise in dependence on *specific* (complexes of) causes and conditions, which in their turn have also arisen in dependence on causes and conditions, without any primary, absolute cause at the beginning. There are, to be sure, instances of explicitly stated *mutual* causality,<sup>75</sup> but they are *special* cases.<sup>76</sup> This holds still good even when, in the Abhidhamma, most of the elements of the twelve-membered formula of Origination in Dependence are stated to condition one another mutually,<sup>77</sup> for this statement is only made in the context of a drastic Abhidhammic re-interpretation of this formula as referring to one single moment of mind (*ekacittakkhaṇa*).<sup>78</sup> Even the afore-mentioned (p. 13) occasional references to the influence of human moral behaviour on the external world, which inevitably has repercussions on people, are still a far cry from universal interrelatedness. What seems to come closest to the latter is the idea that in the course of the beginningless *samsāra*, all *living* beings have already been one another's relatives.<sup>79</sup> But this idea is hardly meant to imply that there is a causal interdependence between all living beings *here and now*. It does have an *ethical* significance, but, as I shall point out later, hardly a *deliberately* ecological one.

#### IV. Early Buddhist Spirituality and Ethics in Relation to Ecological Ethics

But let us first return to the cessation of suffering and to the fact that the decisive factor for this is the elimination of Desire, or greed. Greed is no doubt one of the foremost causes of environmental destruction: especially greed for consumer goods or objects of social prestige, but also greed for sexual pleasures or propagation if it leads to an excessive growth of human population. Hence, there can be no doubt that the elimination and even diminution of greed is ecologically beneficial.

This holds good for other Buddhist virtues as well: e.g., for being content with little,<sup>80</sup> being moderate in food<sup>81</sup> and making full use of things,<sup>82</sup> as antidotes against luxury, overconsumption and wastefulness,<sup>83</sup> and for mindfulness (*sati*)<sup>84</sup> and vigilance (*appamāda*) as antidotes against

thoughtless and careless behaviour. And it holds no less good for the practice of dismantling the notions of Ego, Self and Mine, especially with regard to one's body and mental factors as well as with regard to external phenomena, which leads to detachment<sup>85</sup> and to the elimination of egoism, possessiveness and conceit.<sup>86</sup>

But it should be kept in mind that such attitudes are spiritual practices and *ascetic* virtues, especially of the monk, and, primarily at least, intended to increase his *own* spiritual perfection or purity. *De facto* they may have contributed to a sound ecology, but at least in Early Buddhism they do *not* seem to have been *motivated*, expressly and primarily, by considerations of ecological ethics in the sense of consciously preserving species and eco-systems as such. To expressly motivate them by this purpose means to adapt them to a new situation, which is legitimate but requires attributing a positive *value* to nature-as-it-is.

Likewise, renouncing sexual intercourse and propagation, as demanded of monks and nuns, may, perhaps, have had an attenuating effect on population growth but was hardly motivated by such a purpose. The same holds good for the fact that even in the case of lay followers Early Buddhism, as far as I can see, does not push for maximum propagation.

The most pertinent elements of Early Buddhist spirituality and practice in our context are doubtless the attitudes of not killing or injuring living beings (*ahiṃsā*, etc.), friendliness (*mettā*, *maitrī*) compassion (*karuṇā*) or compassionateness (*kāruṇṇā(tā)*)<sup>87</sup>, caring or sympathy (*anukampā*), and concern (*(anud)dayā*).

Non-injury (*ahiṃsā*) appears to have started, in the Brāhmaṇa period, as a way of protecting oneself from the vengeance of injured animals (and plants) in the yonder world,<sup>88</sup> and probably also from the vengeance of their congeners in this very life.<sup>89</sup>

Friendliness (*mettā*), too, has a Vedic background of self-protection, though not so much from revenge than from spontaneous aggression. For it is derived from Skt. *mitra*, which in Early Vedic sources means “alliance”, especially between different tribes.<sup>90</sup> Such an alliance

implied a peace-treaty and, usually, some form of co-operation, and could even develop into friendship, just as the ally (also *mitra*) could eventually become a veritable friend, and it is this nuance which became the primary meaning of the word in the later language. At least in later Vedic texts we can find the idea that an alliance or peace/friendship treaty could even be concluded with natural beings.<sup>91</sup> In Buddhism, emphasis is on cultivating a mental attitude of *friendliness* or even loving kindness<sup>92</sup> toward all living beings, but the idea of the protective function of alliances or peace-treaties<sup>93</sup> has remained alive even in connection with the Buddhist attitude of friendliness (*mettā*), which is in fact considered to serve the purpose of calming, or protecting oneself from, dangerous creatures.<sup>94</sup>

On the other hand, compassion (*karuṇā*), caring (*anukampā*) and concern (*(anud)dayā*) do not seem to derive from, or have the function of, self-protection;<sup>95</sup> for compassion is usually an attitude primarily directed towards *feeble*, suffering creatures, not so much towards strong and dangerous ones; and caring (*anukampā*) is an emotion one normally feels for *beloved* persons like one's children.<sup>96</sup> Significantly enough, HARRIS<sup>97</sup> does not mention compassion and caring in this context.

His treatment of friendliness (*mettā*) as a spiritual exercise also would seem to require a few corrections. He states that “there is little evidence in the canon, or its associated commentaries, to suggest that *mettā* may be extended to other beings simply as an expression of fellow-feeling”<sup>98</sup> and that Buddhaghosa even discourages meditators “from extending loving kindness to animals or other non-humans”.<sup>99</sup>

The latter assertion would seem to be based on a misunderstanding of the passage adduced<sup>100</sup> which merely discusses the question with what kind of persons one should *start* the exercise. To be sure, animals do not play a prominent role in Buddhaghosa's treatment of the matter, and it is interesting that what is dealt with in detail is rather *mettā* practised by *animals* (actually the Buddha in former existences) *towards* wicked *human beings*.<sup>101</sup> But nevertheless in the unlimited form of the exercise referring to *all* living beings<sup>102</sup> animals are, of course, included among

its objects, belonging as they do to the category of “beings in evil states of existence” (*vinipātika*).<sup>103</sup>

As for the other assertion, namely that there is little evidence in the canon and its commentaries that loving kindness may be extended to other beings simply as an expression of fellow feeling, it is counter-evidenced by *VisM* 9.10 (cp. also *ŚrBh* 427,21 ff.) where friendliness or loving kindness towards all sentient beings is based on the “Golden Rule”, i.e., on the awareness that like oneself other sentient beings, too, seek happiness but dislike pain, want to live but are afraid of death. What else is this than fellow-feeling?<sup>104</sup> And there are plenty of canonical passages arguing similarly for not killing and not injuring.<sup>105</sup> And what about Buddhaghosa<sup>106</sup> advising the meditator to consider, for the sake of arousing loving kindness, the fact that in the beginningless *samsāra* all beings have already been one’s father, mother, etc.?<sup>107</sup> Actually, in a later publication,<sup>108</sup> HARRIS himself states that this kind of interrelatedness “leads to a strong feeling of solidarity with all beings”.

To be sure, in many passages the exercise of friendliness, etc., is said to be rewarded by rebirth in heaven.<sup>109</sup> Besides, an important (and in Early Buddhism probably the most important) function of this exercise, too, is the spiritual *purification* of the meditator’s mind,<sup>110</sup> and as the first of the four Unlimited [meditations] (*appamāṇa*) *mettā* starts, as is well known, a series culminating in equanimity or imperturbability (*upekkhā*, *upekṣā*).<sup>111</sup> However, I do not think that these features contradict or annul the above-mentioned genuinely ethical aspect.<sup>112</sup> Proclaiming friendliness, etc., as a means for attaining heaven is, rather, simply another thread of the texture, another strategy for stimulating people<sup>113</sup> to practise this kind of exercise. And cultivating friendliness, etc., for the sake of purifying one’s own mind does not mean that they have no impact on the meditator’s practical behaviour.<sup>114</sup> And that the exercise of the four Unlimited meditations culminates in equanimity or imperturbability (*upekkhā*) may, to be sure, mean that *upekkhā*, which is very much akin to detachment, is the state that comes closest to liberation.<sup>115</sup> But although there seems to be a certain tension between *upekkhā* and

the other states<sup>116</sup> (and although it does not seem to be possible to dwell in different states at the same time, just as one cannot dwell in different *jhānas* simultaneously), the culminating position of *upekkhā* can hardly mean that the preceding states, or sympathy and concern, for that matter, are, at least in the end, once for all superseded by *upekkhā*. On the contrary, the example of the Buddha himself shows that even in the liberated person *upekkhā* is not considered to prevent compassionateness, friendliness, sympathy and concern for others from re-emerging.<sup>117</sup>

Yet—and in this regard I agree with HARRIS<sup>118</sup>—even in their primarily ethical form, i.e. when they are not, or at least not in the first place, cultivated for the sake of one's own advantage nor even for one's own spiritual purification but simply the expression of some kind of fellow-feeling, friendliness, compassion, sympathy and non-injury do not yet constitute ecological ethics. For they are, primarily at least, directed towards *individuals*.

To be sure, the Vedic precursor of friendliness (*mettā/maitrī*), alliance (*mitra(dheya)*), is primarily concluded with other tribes, and in the case of animals, species or classes may be regarded as corresponding to tribes. In the verses of the *Ahirājasutta* or *Khandhaparitta*,<sup>119</sup> friendship (*metta*, neuter!)<sup>120</sup> is in fact declared to exist, on the part of the monk, with what is termed *families* of snake-kings (*ahirāja-kula*)<sup>121</sup> in the prose, and with what one may call rough *classes* of animals, viz. such as have no feet, two feet, four feet and many feet.<sup>122</sup> And even in the preceding prose part of the *Sutta*, where *metta*- (adj.) qualifies “mind” (*citta*) and obviously has the usual Buddhist meaning of “friendliness” or “benevolence”, it is still extended towards these *families* of snake-kings. It is tempting to *develop* this feature into an ecological interpretation of *mettā*, i.e., into a concept of *mettā* as entailing an appreciation and protection of species *as such*.<sup>123</sup> But *historically* the transition from an alliance or a peace- or friendship contract with wild animals (or nature) to a concept of *mettā* explicitly including in its aim the protection of species *as such* is, as far as I can see, problematic. Alliances or friendship contracts with tribes, or species of animals for that matter, are hardly made because of



a positive evaluation of these tribes and species *as such* or of their *diversity*, but rather because these tribes or species are composed of virtually dangerous individuals (or, of course, because one needs allies against others). And it seems doubtful that this idea was, in the course of its transformation into the Buddhist attitude of friendliness, at any point developed in such a way as to take classes or species of animals not merely as groups of individuals but as deserving to be *valued* (or at least accorded a right of existence) *as species*.

Another interesting context to be taken into account in this connection is the Buddhist ideal of kingship. For according to the *Cakkavattisīhanādasutta*<sup>124</sup> the ideal king is expected to protect both social groups of people and “quadrupeds and birds” (*miga-pakkhī*), which in this context might well refer to the animal population as a collective unit,<sup>125</sup> or, in analogy to the social groups, even to two rough *classes* of animals. There may in fact be a possibility that social groups as well as the animal population are to be protected *as such* in order to maintain the “resources” of the kingdom; or, from a less profane point of view, to keep the cosmos in order (a notion which may lend itself to ecological re-interpretation). But this is hardly an originally Buddhist idea<sup>126</sup> but rather evokes a Vedic or Hindu background.<sup>127</sup> From a typically Buddhist ethical point of view, protection would rather refer to the totality of *individuals* constituting the social groups and the animal population.

Likewise, Aśoka’s 5th Pillar Edict stating that he in fact put various *species* of wild animals<sup>128</sup> under protection may, to be sure, suggest some kind of conservationist intention.<sup>129</sup> But similar prescriptions are found in the (definitely non-Buddhist) *Arthaśāstra*,<sup>130</sup> the classical Indian treatise on politics. They are thus not specifically Buddhist either. Rather, they seem to be inspired by the Hindu Dharma texts,<sup>131</sup> the motives of which require special investigation. This does not of course exclude that Aśoka’s prohibition of killing these species was not also, and perhaps in the first place, motivated by the *Buddhist* attitude towards animals which had first led him to recommend *unrestricted* abstention from killing animals.<sup>132</sup> But from *this* point of view it may well be that

even in the 5th Pillar Edict he aims not so much at conservation of *species* as at minimizing the killing (and injuring) of *individual* animals, by prohibiting at least unnecessary, useless and disproportionate<sup>133</sup> killing,<sup>134</sup> and by enjoining, for this purpose, complete protection of such species as were (harmless and?) not edible or, for religious or other reasons, not usually eaten nor killed for satisfying some other need.<sup>135</sup>

Thus, on the whole the Buddhist attitude of *ahiṃsā* and still more obviously that of friendliness, compassion, etc., is, albeit unrestricted (i.e. encompassing *all* living beings), yet primarily directed towards *individuals*. Hence, in the case of animals, too, non-violence, friendliness, sympathy, concern and compassion envisage the *sentient individual*, the concrete subjects of life and of sensations (especially pain),<sup>136</sup> *not species* or eco-systems, nor even individuals *as representatives* of species. The value at stake in *this* spiritual context<sup>137</sup> is the life (and happiness) of the *individual*, not the transindividual continuity of the species or of life as such, or of nature as a whole.

To be sure, in a world where eco-systems are still intact and no species threatened by extinction, not to kill or injure individuals, i.e., just letting natural beings in peace, is probably the best thing one can do from the ecological point of view; the more so since non-injury is not prescribed merely with regard to “useful” animals but with regard to *all* animals including such as are noxious or a nuisance to man;<sup>138</sup> and still more so when, as with the Jainas and, to a certain extent, even in early Buddhism<sup>139</sup>, also plants and even the elements are included. But even so the primary, conscious motivation is not an ecological one, one expressly aiming at the full preservation of species or eco-systems. The Early Buddhist concept of non-injury may admit of a gradation in terms of the intensity of suffering caused by killing or injuring different kinds of animals, or in terms of the amount of effort and aggressiveness involved on the part of the perpetrator,<sup>140</sup> but it would hardly make a difference of value between individuals belonging to ecologically detrimental, over-represented species on the one hand and such as are on the verge of extinction on the other. It would even come into conflict with

ecological considerations in cases where such considerations might favour the killing of certain animals, e.g., such as belong to species artificially introduced into another continent where they may severely disturb the balance and endanger native species.

Occasionally, however, an ecological element is in fact introduced even in the context of non-injury; e.g., when the *Vinaya* rule prohibiting monks from injuring plants is motivated by pointing out that they are the *abode* of insects and other animals;<sup>141</sup> or when even lay persons are enjoined not to pollute water inhabited by tiny animals;<sup>142</sup> or when a disciple endowed with supranormal power is dissuaded by the Buddha from turning the earth upside down because this would jeopardize or derange the animals living on her.<sup>143</sup> Such cases show that there was, albeit only sporadically, an awareness of the fact that animals may also be killed, injured or caused to suffer in an indirect way, by destroying their habitat, and that this too ought to be avoided. But even in these cases what counts is the (indirect) protection of *individual* animals, not of species.

The *de facto* ecological importance of not killing animals lies, above all, in the fact that it is the basic commitment also for *lay* Buddhists. Of course, the effect depends on how seriously such a commitment is observed. To be sure, there is always some gap between norm and reality,<sup>144</sup> even in traditional Buddhist countries, let alone countries which have been influenced by modern Western norms or ways of behaviour. But there are also aspects inherent in the Buddhist understanding of not killing and not injuring which may have contributed to the ecological problems in some Buddhist countries and ought to be clearly envisaged (and balanced).

The most important of these aspects is the tendency of Buddhism to keep life *practicable*. This tendency is in tune with the principle of the Middle Way: no licence, but no exaggerated self-mortification and squeamishness either. This allows the monks to concentrate on their *spiritual* perfection, and the lay people to observe the moral essentials and accumulate good karma without being bothered by excessive and irre-

mediable qualms. In this sense, for Buddhist *monks*, non-injury is not as strict as for Jaina monks (who are, e.g., not even allowed to drink fresh, unboiled water because it is regarded by them to be alive, whereas Buddhism has discarded this idea and the ensuing restriction).<sup>145</sup> As for *lay* people, their life is kept practicable<sup>146</sup> by confining non-injury, by and large, to *animals*, whereas plants may be utilized more or less freely,<sup>147</sup> and there is a tendency to ignore and, later on, even deny their sentience.<sup>148</sup> Even so, problems remain. E.g., peasants, when ploughing, can hardly avoid killing dew-worms, etc., and they may have serious trouble with animals destroying the harvest. Still more difficult is the situation for fishermen, hunters or butchers, especially in areas where meat or fish is an indispensable element of diet. In such cases, tensions between norm and reality are inevitable. The reaction of Early Buddhism (to be inferred from the traditional situation in Theravāda societies) seems to have been to ignore the tension or live with it (or, at best, try to compensate for it by meritorious deeds) as far as agriculture is concerned, but to avoid occupations directly and primarily based on killing animals and leave them, as far as possible, to people outside or on the margin of the Buddhist society.<sup>149</sup> In Mahāyāna (and Tantric) Buddhism, however, there is a tendency to solve the problem by providing means for annulling bad karma,<sup>150</sup> e.g. purificatory rites, or by turning to a supramundane Saviour like Amida-Buddha. To be sure, considerations of practicability are unavoidable, still more so in view of the modern knowledge about protozoa. But one ought to be aware of the danger that in order to facilitate practicability one may easily arrive at reducing inhibitions too much, to the extent of entirely undermining the commitment not to take life, including its *de facto* ecological effects.

Another problem is that (in contrast to Jainism) Buddhism, in tune with its ethics of intention and at the same time in favour of practicability, stresses avoiding *intentional* killing,<sup>151</sup> which somehow overlaps with *direct* killing.<sup>152</sup> This is an extremely important point in the context of ecological ethics since most of our contemporary pollution and destruction of nature is *unintentional* (often even unforeseen) and *indirect*. As I

have already pointed out, there is occasional awareness of the problem in the sources, but on the whole such awareness appears to have been somewhat underdeveloped. This becomes obvious also from the unrestrained way pesticides have been used in most Buddhist countries,<sup>153</sup> or from the lack of inhibition in using cars.

The issue of unintentional and indirect injuring is extremely important also in connection with the modern system of *consumption*.<sup>154</sup> The modern consumer of meat and fish, e.g., does not himself do the killing and can even be sure that the animal is not killed for him personally. Nevertheless, as a buyer he keeps the system going and is hence indirectly responsible for the killing and also for the (often much worse) tortures and ecological ravages which are often connected with the rearing of animals or with catching them (e.g. by drift-net fishing).

Anyway, we can state that there are a considerable number of elements in Buddhist spiritual and everyday practice which, if taken seriously, *de facto* contribute to the preservation of a sound natural environment. But they do not establish unimpaired nature and maximum diversity of species as a *value* in itself (and hence may not be sufficient for motivating *active* conservation or even restoration). Nor does it—as I have tried to show above—appear possible to establish such a value on the level of the *ultimate* evaluation of existence in Early Buddhism.

#### V. Intramundane Evaluations of Nature

However, the situation may change if we descend to the level of *intramundane* evaluation. For even though we have to admit that the world as a whole is ultimately ill, unsatisfactory, it obviously includes conditions of *relatively* increased or reduced suffering, and perhaps also conditions which favour or impede spiritual progress. From these points of view, it would seem possible that preference is given either to nature or to civilization. Actually, the Early Buddhist sources do suggest preference, but it varies; there are obviously different, almost contradictory strands.

One strand is unambiguously *pro-civilization*. The ecologically orientated reader may indeed be somewhat shocked when finding, in quite a few places in the Buddhist canon, a cliché describing ideal intramundane conditions in terms of a thoroughly civilized world: densely populated, one village close to the other, with 80,000 wealthy, big cities full of people.<sup>155</sup> At the same time, wild nature is often abhorred as dangerous, weird and disagreeable,<sup>156</sup> and wild animals, especially beasts of prey, as something one does not want to come into contact with.<sup>157</sup>

This view reflects the ideal of a world thoroughly adapted to *man*. It is openly hostile to wild nature and hardly offers any basis for its protection. It is rather a primarily anthropocentric strand regarding nature as something to be warded off,<sup>158</sup> manipulated<sup>159</sup> and, as the above cliché suggests, even dominated, and it may even have favoured the rather uncritical adoption of the nature-dominating modern Western civilization by some Buddhist countries.

But it is not specifically Buddhist. Rather, it seems to have been the common ideal of peasants and townspeople in early India<sup>160</sup> (and not only there)<sup>161</sup>. As such, it has been adopted by Buddhism, or perhaps rather: tolerated, and made use of in certain didactic contexts. Actually, it accords with or has been adapted to Buddhist cosmological principles in so far as the ideal situation is regarded to be connected with *moral* (not technological) progress,<sup>162</sup> whereas the breakdown of civilization and natural calamities (like drought) are considered to be caused by human immoral behaviour.<sup>163</sup>

Even passages like the verse which declares planting groves and parks, but also constructing wells and dams, to be particularly meritorious<sup>164</sup> seem to refer rather to cultivation, not to re-establishing nature. As far as the “pro-civilization strand” has an ideal of nature, it is indeed *cultivated* nature, nature shaped by *man* according to his wants and predilections: groves, gardens, well-constructed (!) ponds.<sup>165</sup> Sometimes, even the trees are imagined to consist, ideally, of precious metals and jewels.<sup>166</sup> Such an attitude need not necessarily create ecological problems, but will inevitably do so if interference with nature is too violent

or too extensive and neglects the needs and rights of our fellow-beings, as nowadays.

Yet, even in the context of this strand one may occasionally come across passages in which real nature forms part of the ideal surroundings: trees, flowers, birds, ponds and rivers with fishes and tortoises; and sometimes there is even a stress on *diversity*<sup>167</sup> or even completeness<sup>168</sup> of *species*. But even in such passages mostly those elements of nature and bio-diversity are selected which *man* finds beautiful and innocuous<sup>169</sup>. Even so, these passages would seem to have been influenced by, or participate in, another basically secular but more literary strand of evaluating nature, viz. the poetic description, and even romanticization, of natural beauty—a strand which has been much more influential in connection with what I am going to call the “hermit strand” to be dealt with below.<sup>170</sup>

There are, however, also texts (like the *Aggaññasutta*)<sup>171</sup> where the process of civilization is rather negatively evaluated and understood as the result of moral *decadence*. But this does not entail, in this strand, a positive evaluation of nature, let alone wilderness. The primeval, unspoilt state is, on the contrary, described as one of pre- or trans-natural, “ethereal” existence. It seems to fit in with this view that in other sources<sup>172</sup> a *positive* intramundane development—due to a collective progress in morality and spiritual practice—is depicted as characterized by the disappearance of *both* nature *and* civilization: first, *animals*—at least wild animals<sup>173</sup>—vanish from this earth (because after having consumed their karma they are reborn as humans). After some time, *human beings*, too, disappear, because all of them are reborn in a *luminous heaven* due to having practised suitable meditation. Finally, even plants and the whole earth vanish.

This concept gives the impression of a kind of intramundane reflection or echo of the ultimate Buddhist analysis of existence, entailing a pointed awareness of the dark aspects of civilization as well, and conceiving an ideal state, even on the *intramundane* level, as something radically transcending both nature *and* civilization.

On the other hand, there are plenty of canonical texts which show an essentially different attitude towards wild nature and would seem to constitute yet another strand, which I call the “hermit strand”.<sup>174</sup> It too is not specifically Buddhist, a similar ideal occurring also in Hindu sources.<sup>175</sup>

The hermits are monks (or, occasionally, nuns)<sup>176</sup> who, for the sake of meditation and spiritual perfection, retire from the noisy bustle and allurements of the cities and inhabited places into solitude<sup>177</sup>, and they find it, primarily, in the wilderness (*arañña*, Skt. *araṇya*), under trees,<sup>178</sup> in mountain caves or woodlands, or at least in the open air (*abbhokāsa*).<sup>179</sup>

That the reason why hermits prefer the wilderness is primarily solitude and undisturbedness, becomes clear from the fact that among the places suitable for meditation we find also empty houses and charnel grounds (*susāna*). This may even indicate that in these texts too wilderness is rather a dangerous and weird place,<sup>180</sup> and this is explicitly confirmed in some passages, e.g., by pointing out the danger of being threatened by poisonous or wild animals.<sup>181</sup> But the hermit may even render these dangers constantly threatening his life spiritually fruitful by systematically contemplating them in order to intensify his spiritual effort.<sup>182</sup> Or he tries to *overcome* his fear by appropriate meditation,<sup>183</sup> or has already succeeded in doing so.<sup>184</sup> Nor do the texts suppress the fact that life in the wilderness involves various hardships, like being pestered by gadflies and mosquitoes,<sup>185</sup> or at least foregoing the comforts of civilization and culture.<sup>186</sup> But what the hermit should learn, or has already learnt, is precisely to endure such things without becoming displeased<sup>187</sup> and to abandon all wants and desires.<sup>188</sup>

In this way, wilderness can, *in spite* of its dangers and inconveniences, be *evaluated positively*. Having become free from fear, irritation, desire and possessiveness, the hermit will be truly happy precisely in the solitude of the wilderness and may even enjoy the *beauties* of nature,<sup>189</sup> in spite of their impermanence,<sup>190</sup> and without falling a prey to the emotions or destructive patterns of behaviour they arouse in worldly people.<sup>191</sup> In a sense, the bliss of meditative absorption and spiritual re-



lease experienced by the hermit radiates to the surroundings in which it has been (or may be) attained and imparts a positive value to them.

That the wilderness is especially suitable for spiritual perfection does not of course mean that this perfection will be attained there automatically. As one text<sup>192</sup> puts it, there live, in the wilderness, also people who are anything but spiritually advanced: uneducated, foolish people, greedy people with evil desires, and madmen. Without the right spiritual attitude and effort, life in the wilderness is futile. Occasionally<sup>193</sup> the suitability of the wilderness for spiritual perfection is even restricted by stating that it holds good for *some* persons only, whilst others may attain it more easily in inhabited places or cities. And truly liberated persons are said to be not affected at all by any sensations, be it in inhabited places or in the wilderness.<sup>194</sup>

In another Sermon<sup>195</sup> the monk is recommended a kind of Middle Way: On the one hand, he is exhorted to patiently endure heat and cold, hunger and thirst, gadflies and mosquitoes, and physical pain. On the other, he is allowed to counteract them by making modest use of the basic achievements of civilization like clothes, lodging and medicine, and is even advised to avoid dangerous places and dangerous animals.

A similar inhomogeneity in the evaluation of wild nature can also be observed in connection with *nuns*: In the *Bhikkhunīsamyutta*<sup>196</sup> nuns are reported to have fearlessly retired into dark forests and attained spiritual perfection. In the *Vinaya*,<sup>197</sup> however, they are prohibited from living in the wilderness because of the danger of being raped.<sup>198</sup>

Thus, the intramundane evaluation of nature in the canon is rather ambivalent. To be sure, in those early days the wilderness was still far-spread and cultivated land limited, as one *Sūtra*<sup>199</sup> puts it. There was still enough room for hermit life. Nowadays, however, the expansionist dynamics of the pro-civilization attitude—visible already in the old sources—has almost completely succeeded in putting an end to wilderness and leaves little room for solitary, quiet life in unspoilt nature. Yet, as mentioned before it is, precisely, undisturbed, unspoilt nature—the wilderness—that is usually regarded as the most favourable environ-

ment for *spiritual* progress and *true* happiness. This seems to imply an—intramundane—*positive evaluation*, and what is positively evaluated here is not so much individual animals and plants but rather the *whole ambience*. Primarily, to be sure, as a place of solitude and silence, but, at least occasionally (as in some verses of the *Theragāthā*), also in its *beauty*, as the harmonious unity of landscape, plants and animals. This seems to coincide, to some extent, with what we call “nature” in the sense of an eco-system, along with the species of animals and plants belonging to it. If this is correct, this strand would indeed furnish a viable basis for ecological ethics including *active* protection and even restitution of ecosystems, and it seems that monks influenced by this strand have been playing an increasingly important role in the ecological movements in at least some Buddhist countries.<sup>200</sup>

To be sure, the motivation would still be a subtly anthropocentric one: to preserve and even reconstitute intact natural areas as places most suitable for *man*'s spiritual perfection. But one could add that animals, too, would profit from an increase of human spiritual perfection because it would entail a reduction of ill-treatment of them by man. Besides, nowadays even many Buddhists who are not hermits are probably inclined to expect maximum secular happiness for *all* sentient beings not from a nature-destroying civilization but from a harmonious co-existence with nature (and there is no reason why a purely intramundane evaluation belonging to the past should be kept if it runs counter to the requirements of the present).

## VI. The Status of Animals

Still, even against this attempt to establish ecological ethics on the intramundane level, one serious objection can be raised: the objection that the positive evaluation, in the “hermit strand”, of (wild/intact) nature as an ambience might seem to have, more or less, lost sight of *suffering* in nature. The more so since in many canonical texts, and mostly in those which may be characterized as rational discourse, *animals* and

existence as an animal are so *negatively* evaluated that efforts to preserve them appear highly problematic.

According to these texts, animals are, firstly, *intellectually inferior*. Though they have some capacity for thinking (*manasikāra*), they lack the faculty of insight (*prajñā*).<sup>201</sup> Hence they cannot understand the Buddhist doctrine and cannot attain liberation, unless they are, in a later existence, reborn as men, which is regarded to be possible but very rare.<sup>202</sup>

Secondly, animals are not just subject to suffering like man, but subject to *much more suffering*; their existence is considered to be *extremely* unhappy,<sup>203</sup> not only because they are exploited and tortured by man<sup>204</sup> but *also in nature itself*, where the weaker one is threatened and devoured by the stronger,<sup>205</sup> and, moreover, because at least many of them live on disgusting food or in uncomfortable places.<sup>206</sup> In contrast to rebirth as a human, rebirth as an animal is hence usually regarded as an *evil* rebirth.<sup>207</sup>

Thirdly, animals are considered to be (for the most part at least) *morally* inferior or even wicked,<sup>208</sup> because of their promiscuity including even incest,<sup>209</sup> or precisely because the stronger devours the weaker.<sup>210</sup> The latter argument is, by the way, adduced as a reason why rebirth of an animal as a human is so rare.

Such a negative evaluation of animals and animal existence is no doubt extremely unfavourable as a basis for an active *ecological* ethics. To be sure, the commitment not to take life prevents Buddhists from killing animals once they are there. But if animal existence is in fact such an unhappy state, why should we make any effort to perpetuate it? If the presence of many animals and few humans means that the world is in a bad condition,<sup>211</sup> should we not welcome the present growth of human population<sup>212</sup> and decrease of (at least wild) animals, and should we not be glad if, for some reason or other, animals were to disappear entirely from this world, just as there are none (at least no real ones) in the later Buddhist paradise Sukhāvati?<sup>213</sup> Would it not be rather cruel and selfish to preserve them for our own spiritual progress, let alone our happiness, if even by an increase of our spiritual perfection we cannot

*essentially* ameliorate their sombre situation because it is inherent to their status?

On the one hand, one could, from the traditional Buddhist point of view, rejoin that the number of beings to be born as animals cannot depend on external factors like man-made pollution or deforestation, etc., but is solely determined by the previous karma of those beings themselves. This would mean that a decrease in the total number of animals would have to be either merely apparent or somehow the result of a preceding large-scale moral and spiritual improvement, and can also in future be achieved only in this way. Hence, at least as long as such a large-scale improvement has not taken place, there may be good reason to argue that in the sense of the Golden Rule it is part of everybody's moral duty to preserve the world in an agreeable condition not only for future generations of humans but also for the beings to be reborn as animals. This would, by the way, even coincide with one's own interests since—in view of the complexity of karmic processes—few persons can exclude the possibility that either they themselves or their friends and relatives may be reborn in one of these groups, so that protection of intact eco-systems would even amount to protecting what may be one's own future abode.

On the other hand, apart from this, the idea of the extreme unhappiness of animals would, it too, seem to be a wide-spread preconception of the peasants and townsmen of those days, met with in Jainism and Hinduism as well<sup>214</sup>—a preconception which may be rooted in frequent bad treatment of domestic animals and in the civilization strand's fear of wilderness. To that strand we can probably also attribute the idea of the wickedness of (at least certain wild) animals. Both of these ideas seem to have been adopted or utilized by Buddhism for didactic purposes. Their main aim is not to make a statement on animals but to warn against the evil consequences of bad karma and to underscore the necessity of maximum moral and spiritual effort.<sup>215</sup> I suggest that in an age where establishing an ecological ethics has become imperative, they ought to be de-dogmatized by being relegated to their specific didactic contexts.

For, though animals have doubtless to suffer, the assumption that they have to suffer more than man appears unwarranted, at least as long as their natural situation is not additionally aggravated by man.

Actually, in another strand of the Buddhist tradition—in the *Jātaka* (together with its commentary) and related texts—animals are often viewed quite differently.<sup>216</sup> I admit that this view is a more popular one and not specifically Buddhist either, but it is not therefore necessarily less appropriate, and it has exercised a considerable influence on the feelings and attitudes of lay Buddhists.<sup>217</sup> As is well-known, in these texts animals are described as being both unhappy and happy, stupid and prudent, bad and good. They are even susceptible to religious admonition.<sup>218</sup> To be sure, these texts largely anthropomorphize animals. But in not regarding them as particularly unhappy and wicked creatures they seem to come closer to the truth.

The evaluation of animals in these texts shows some affinity to the hermit strand. In fact, this strand stands out quite frequently in the *Jātaka* and related texts; in a pre-Buddhist setting, to be sure, but nevertheless mostly in connection with ascetics exemplifying such virtues as the Buddhist compilers too wanted to inculcate. In some passages,<sup>219</sup> nature around the hermitage (*assama*, *āśrama*) is described as, and expressly called,<sup>220</sup> lovely and beautiful, abounding in a variety of blossoming and fruit-bearing trees spreading delicate odours and inhabited by various kinds of birds and quadrupeds, and embellished by ponds and rivers with clear water and full of lotus-flowers, fishes and other aquatic animals. The emphasis on variety of species (which are enumerated in great detail)<sup>221</sup> is conspicuous.

This kind of description of nature around the hermitage is obviously closely related to the romanticizing strand of nature description in secular poetry mentioned above (p. 25). It is current in non-Buddhist literature as well,<sup>222</sup> and in the *Jātaka* similar descriptions can also be found of the forest inhabited by animal heroes.<sup>223</sup> There can be little doubt that it too depicts nature mainly from a *human* aesthetic point of view.<sup>224</sup> Even the inclusion of fierce animals like lions, tigers, bears,

boars and crocodiles does not contradict this since they would rather appear to be envisaged— from afar, so to speak— in their majestic beauty. Hence, a positive evaluation of intact nature and bio-diversity, but tacit omission of the violence and suffering involved in nature as it actually is.

Yet, some passages show that suffering and violence in nature may not simply have been ignored. One passage,<sup>225</sup> e.g., stresses that in the forest around the hermitage there is plenty of food also for the animals (thus suggesting that in nature food is often scarce). As for violence, the idea is rather that around the hermitage there is an *exceptional* situation in that violence has been neutralized or *overcome*<sup>226</sup> by the (non-violent) spiritual power or irradiation of the hermit, especially by his practice of friendliness or loving kindness (*mettā*). Not only in the sense that by practising loving kindness the hermit protects *himself* from the aggressiveness of dangerous creatures, i.e. renders them non-aggressive towards *himself*. Rather, by his spiritual power<sup>227</sup> and irradiation of friendliness or loving kindness<sup>228</sup> the hermit affects, so to speak, the animals around him so that they abandon even their natural *mutual* enmities and to become friendly and non-aggressive even towards *one another*. Thus peace not only *with* nature but also *within* nature.<sup>229</sup>

To be sure, this is a vision of an ideal state of nature, disclosing dissatisfaction with nature as it actually is, i.e. as involving violence and suffering. But at the same time it does not regard animals as hopelessly miserable. It presupposes that *as animals* they may be happy and good, and may even advance spiritually, at least under the influence of human spiritual perfection.<sup>230</sup>

Such a view of animals would tally well with arguing for ecological ethics for the sake of maximum spiritual progress and intramundane happiness of *all* living beings, not merely of human beings. I do not know to what extent a modern Buddhist is ready to subscribe to such a view of animals; but it would anyway be sufficient to abandon the idea that animals are wicked and the idea of their irremediable, extreme unhappiness, and to admit that under natural conditions animals, though,

to be sure, not living in a paradise and by no means free from suffering, may, after all, not be so extremely unhappy, at any rate not more than an average human being.

## VII. Conclusion

My impression is that Early Buddhism, at least its primarily monastic tradition as we know it from the canonical texts, was, on the whole, impressed not so much by the—undeniable—beauty of nature as by its—equally undeniable—sombre aspects: the struggle for life, killing and being killed, devouring and being devoured, greed, suffering, and especially by the ubiquity of decay and impermanence. But the reaction is not effort towards a violent transformation or subjugation of nature but rather effort towards transcending it spiritually. On the ultimate level, Early Buddhism does not merely negate nature (as HAKAMAYA puts it) but rather all mundane existence, nature as well as civilization.

Spiritually, this entails, above all, *detachment*, including abstinence from all self-assertive violence. The world of the food chain and of struggle for survival and power is, as far as I can see, *not* appreciated by Early Buddhism, neither emotionally nor morally. Usually it is simply *avoided*, kept at a distance as much as possible: theoretically, by a tendency to restrict sentience to animals, practically, by avoiding killing, living on almsfood, and ultimately by attaining *Nirvāṇa*. Occasionally, it is said to be partially neutralized by radiating friendliness or by exceptional spiritual power. According to some (non-Theravāda) sources, violence in nature is, in individual cases, accepted but at the same time neutralized by means of self-sacrifice (as in the story of the hungry tigress,<sup>231</sup> or that of king Śibi and the dove<sup>232</sup>)<sup>233</sup>.

Thus, Early Buddhism does not, on the whole, romanticize nature. I am far from taking this to be a weak point, provided that the same sober and critical attitude is applied to civilization. Nor do I take it to mean that it is altogether impossible to establish an ecological ethics on the basis of the Early Buddhist tradition. For, apart from the fact that

many of the attitudes connected with or conducive to detachment as well as friendliness, compassion, etc., are *de facto* ecologically beneficial, it may not be impossible to establish a value-based ecological ethics in a similar way as the value-based ethics of *ahimsā*. In the latter case, individual *life* is established as an inviolable value although it is something that on the level of ultimate evaluation of existence one wants to get rid of, or at least does not strive to retain. This prevents a Buddhist from the short-circuit of misinterpreting the *ultimate* valuelessness of life as a permission to destroy life wilfully (by killing living beings, including, normally, oneself), or even to kill out of compassion (as is, however, occasionally allowed in Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism)<sup>234</sup>. Should it not be equally justified to establish—in line with the evaluation of nature in the “hermit strand”—*nature* too, on the *intramundane* level, as a value to be preserved, in spite of its *ultimate* valuelessness, in order to prevent the latter from being misinterpreted by deriving from it the permission to exploit and destroy nature relentlessly for our own short-term advantage or for any other reason? And would it not be reasonable, at least for lay persons, to supplement this abstention from damaging with circumspect active engagement for conservation and even restoration of nature, just as abstention from taking individual life is supplemented with cautious help motivated by compassion and loving kindness?

For Reference (selection):<sup>235</sup>

ARAMAKI, NORITOSHI: “Shizen-hakai kara Shizen-saisei e—Rekishi no Tenkai ni tsuite” (\*From Destruction of Nature to Revival of Nature: On a Historical Conversion), in: *Deai* 11.1/1992, 3-22.

BADINER, ALLAN HUNT (ed.): *Dharma Gaia, A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*. Berkeley 1990.

BATCHELOR, MARTINE, and KERRY BROWN (eds.): *Buddhism and Ecology*. London: Cassell 1992.

BRUUN, OLE, and ARNE KALLAND (eds.): *Asian Perceptions of Nature: A*