

The Patchwork Robe

The Buddha Recycles

“The real living life is the life of awareness that the whole world is one being.”
—Reverend Gyoko Saito¹

In this century the world may eventually turn its back on religions that do not *rise to the challenge presented by the ecological crises of our time*. History has witnessed the decline of ideologies, religions, and practices that were out of touch with their time. Religions of the world today will suffer a similar fate if they remain disconnected from the environmental issues of our day.

I once visited with a person who had lived for three years in a Jesuit-run Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand. When asked if Thai Buddhist institutions were actively working toward solving these and other social problems, he smiled and said, "There is one good drug rehab program. However, the typical Buddhist attitude is that the drug problems are impermanent, and will go away in time." This kind of indifference to social problems is an aberration of the spirit of Buddhism.

In fifteenth and sixteenth-century Japan, a wide-spread Buddhist cultural practice, the “Way of Tea,”² arose among practitioners who came to be known as “teaists.” These “teaists” developed a philosophy based upon three practices—harmony, respect, and purity, that lead to four benefits. Applied by eco-Buddhists today, this philosophy of teaism offers an intelligent basis for compassionate action as we grapple with our current ecological crises. Consider the following interpretation of “Three Practices and Four Benefits.”

From three practices:

harmony with nature,
humility,
and purification of the earth,

Follow four benefits:

harmony among people,
respect for all beings,
purification of the self,
and tranquility.

Consider the first practice—Harmony with Nature. Some years ago, my teacher, Reverend Saito, wrote, "The real living life is the life of awareness that the whole world is one being. But in our everyday life, if we are not truly alive, then our life becomes conceptualized as merely part of the universe. A living being does not say, 'a part of my body is sick,' or 'a part of my heart is stopping,' or 'only my brain is enjoying something, but my heart is cold.' When we come to the real awareness that all of the world's pain is my pain and that my pain is the pain of the whole world—then our eyes are open."

Today, our ecological crisis has, at its root, a spiritual sickness—no longer possible to ignore. The Reverend Haya Akegarasu³ said, "I am not such a limited self, conceptualized self, as to exist apart from others." By becoming more aware that we are not apart from planet Earth, not apart from rocks and seas, not apart from nature itself, we begin to understand how our afflictions of the spirit, and how our hopes of transformation, are all inter-connected in the All-Inclusive Sangha⁴ called planet Earth. Our current ecological crisis presents us with the opportunity to transcend our perceived limitations and “take refuge” in our true nature. As we practice harmony with nature, a benefit follows—harmony among people.

Consider the second practice—Humility. The word “humility” comes from the Latin *humilis* which means "on the ground, low." It means humble—not proud or full of self. The practice of humility transforms selfishness into selflessness—a truth at the heart of all great spiritual traditions. Reverend Shuichi Maida⁵ compared this transformation to be, “like a Phoenix which revives and flaps its wings. One is reborn into a new life. This is the life of 'freedom without hindrance.' This is the very extreme form of dynamism. This is the life in which we can do all things."

From the practice of humility emerges the benefit of a world in which everything and everyone—trees, rocks, waterfalls, flowers, the poor, the rich, the homeless, children, men, women, those who suffer, endangered species, rainforests, and the climate are respected. The practice of humility introduces us to a truly holistic benefit—grounded in an inclusive community—in short, respect for all beings.

Consider the third practice—Purification of the earth. The teasts viewed the environment as a projection of our state of consciousness and our state of consciousness as a projection of the environment. Cleaning up our pollution and reducing our carbon footprint are excellent examples of what I call the “purification” of the planet.” When we engage in, even small, acts of loving-kindness, toward Planet Earth, we are embracing the world as one being—contributing and strengthening the creation of an inclusive community of loving-kindness. By making harmony, humility, and purity our daily spiritual practice we open the door of the fourth benefit—a state of active tranquility.

Stepping through this door, we find ourselves as welcomed members of an all-inclusive sangha—“Planet Earth.” Saito Sensei said that when our eyes are open, we see that the whole world is one being. This view brings us to the radical proposition that the Sangha consists of only one being—the planet earth itself.

Gautama Buddha, the embodiment of harmony, respect, purity, and inner peace is said to have found soiled scraps of discarded cloth in the village streets. Sewing the rags together, he made a robe for himself, this “Buddha of The Patchwork Robe.”

NOTES & REFERENCES

¹ Reverend Gyoko Saito (1927–2001), Higashi Honganji sect. Unpublished document on file with Karida Buddhist Sangha, P.O. Box 44803, Rio Rancho, New Mexico, 87174.

² See the essay “Chanoyu —The Way of Tea”

³ The Reverend Haya Akegarasu (1877-1954) was a [Shin Buddhist](#) scholar, a former head of administration of the [Higashi Hongan-ji](#) sect, and Reverend Saito’s teacher.

⁴ *Sangha* is a Pali term originally applied exclusively to the male members of the early monastic community. With the passing of time, the concept of Sangha widened. Over a millennium ago, women were included. In modern times, some Buddhists have even expanded the concept to include trees! The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, wrote that the Sangha includes all elements supportive of our meditation practice, such as trees, sky and flowers. Nhat Hahn, Thich. *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*. Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1998.

⁵ Shuichi Maida (1906–1967) Maida was one of the most important modern Shin Buddhist thinkers. See: <http://maida-center.org/> Also see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C5%8Ddo_Shinsh%C5%AB