



# Christian / Buddhist DIALOGUE



## PART V “God and Nature”

In the West we have grown to view ourselves as in some way separate from the natural world. This has brought us notions of stewardship, dominion, superiority and separation. One of the most powerful conversations of this millennium questions and seeks to redefine that relationship.

### Christian Comment

#### *Environment as a spiritual duty*

Jesus taught his followers to love God, and to love others as they love themselves. This can be extended to include loving our environment, and treating our environment, as we love ourselves. For some, this is a radical concept. The writings in the Hebrew scriptures describe God, telling humans that they have dominion over the earth, and all it contains. For thousands of years, many people have understood this to mean that they can treat the earth in whatever way they choose. This has led to the justification of all sorts of practices that are harmful to the environment. To this day, there are Christians who believe that they don't have to take care of the environment, because their Christology, and their interpretation of scriptures, leads them to believe that Jesus will return imminently, and they don't have to worry about things running out.

But one of the underlying messages that Christ teaches is that of faithful stewardship. The call to faithful stewardship encourages us to ask ourselves questions such as, “How do we take care of what we have?” or, “How do we make use of the resources that God has given us, in such a

way that there is plenty for all, and plenty for generations to come?” We see that our stewardship of the earth and of all nature, is as much a response to Christ's ministry as is our stewardship of our financial resources, and our stewardship of each other. There is an interdependence between our human lives and of all creation.

*Galatians 3:28* tells us, *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* The unity that comes from our self-identification as Christians, extends to our unity with the environment. As Christians, we are called to action. Our faith isn't meant to be kept within the doors of our sanctuaries and our church halls. For me, this is a call to respond by making myself aware of the ecological problems we face in our world, and respond to them. Locally, we are in a debate about the use of wind farms, to cut down on our community's reliance on expensive forms of energy. The debate has had its passionate voices on both sides of the debate, and I lend my voice to those who are backing the need for alternative energy sources. I take part in our annual letter-writing campaigns to Amnesty International, and have lobbied for more responsible actions of big energy companies which are plundering the earth's resources: oil, forests, etc. Little actions are also important, and that includes preaching faithful stewardship from the pulpit, and modeling good stewardship whenever possible.



## Buddhist Comment

*We could approach this topic in numerous ways. The exploration and explanation of a fundamental Buddha-nature which interpenetrates all existence is a hugely interesting philosophical question. However, because he has demonstrated such a sincere grappling with his concern for the natural world and his Buddhist faith, I called on my brother, Kanzan Don Purchase, to address this question in terms of a simpler but perhaps more pressing one.*

Shakyamuni Buddha taught that suffering exists in the world and we must practice diligently to end it. The concept of ignorance, the root cause of suffering, can be interpreted as our lack of understanding of the true nature of the material or natural world. Ignorance leads to our craving material goods and the resulting abuse of the natural world. Buddhist practice includes four Bodhisattva Vows, the first being "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them." This particular vow always caught my attention because I found it difficult to envision how anyone could save all sentient beings in the world. What could impact so many?

Another concept taught by Buddha is that of non-duality. There is no you-and-me, no this-and-that. Throughout his adult life, Shakyamuni traveled by foot, in forest and field, and was caught up in the rhythms of the natural world. He could not help but see, through direct experience, a non-separateness or non-duality between himself and nature. To be clear, this does not mean we are all identical, rather it points to a non-separateness. You are not separate from a starving child in Africa, or the criminal in jail. You are not separate from the trees in the forest, or the water in the river. So the Buddha does not make a direct reference to the non-duality of man and nature, rather he assumes we will "discover" or recover it for ourselves through contemplation.

Returning to my dilemma with saving all beings,

with time and practice the answer came to me. Climate change affects all beings all around the world, we are all implicated. (Whether you believe climate change is caused by human activity, or is the result of natural climactic cycles, the impact of climate change is far reaching.) Any contribution I could make in terms of reversing the trend to climate change, or alleviating the negative impacts caused by climate change represents a skillful means I can enact to help reduce suffering.

With this insight I realized that I could fulfill my vow by becoming involved in community environmental projects; participate in inter-faith environmental issues; write letters to my MP, MPP, Prime Minister; get a rain barrel; do my laundry at night; use my green bin. Each action taken compounds when others follow suit and our draw on our limited natural resources goes down, landfill goes down, carbon emissions goes down. Through my volunteer activities and letter writing I increase the visibility of public concern on this topic and possibly impact public policy. And with each action there is a ripple effect with a far-reaching impact.



## Christian Reply

I loved reading about the Buddhist understanding of non-duality. This gives expression, and language, to a concept that I feel is very important: the idea that we have a connection to everything else in the natural world. And I empathize with Don's response to the first Bodhisattva vow, which states, "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them." Don's response was, "I found it difficult to envision how anyone could save all sentient beings in the world. What could impact so many?" This echoes a feeling of helplessness that frequently washes over me, when I look around the world and see all of its needs, all of its hurts, all the places that need healing. What can I possibly do to help? How can I possibly make a difference?

That need to at least try to make a difference is as evident in the Buddhist understanding of our relationship with the environment as it is in our Christian response. Although we use different words to describe that relationship and commitment, it's evident that our response to the cares of the world are very, very similar.

## Buddhist Reply

There are two important shared values in this dialogue for me. The first is what Buddhists, like Kanzan, refer to as interconnection. This is the recognition that humans do not have special status as beings. We're not like the elite credit card holders who get bumped to the front of the line. There is no boundary that demarks human civilization from the natural world, be that animals, mountains, rivers or air. I think it was this realization that prompts Japanese Buddhists to speak of 'shinjin gakudo', "From the beginning everything is fully Buddha-nature". It is due to our Buddha-nature that we are connected.

The second value is that of responsibility. For us to engage in any spiritual NIMBY-ism would be akin to trying to disavow any responsibility for your own sore foot! As Meg correctly points out we are called to go beyond simple acknowledgment of the inter-relationship and to take responsibility for suffering beings and our shared environment. Again as she and Kanzan point out we each have our capacities and talents and have to find our own unique ways to demonstrate this responsibility in our own lives and as committed congregations of faith.

*This dialogue is between Reverends Innen Ray Parchelo, of the Red Maple Buddhist Congregation, Renfrew, Ontario and Meggin King, of the United Church of Pugwash, Nova Scotia.*