



## ***Environmental Buddhism Across Borders***

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**Abstract:** This paper begins to build a comparative framework for understanding the intersections and possibilities of Buddhism and the environment across sectarian and national borders. Even as groups like the *International Network of Engaged Buddhists* are attempting to frame a unified Buddhist position on environmental issues, Buddhists in different places are interpreting and adapting Buddhist teachings in ways specific to and meaningful in each society. Can the efforts of Buddhists to develop and implement an environmental ethic or activism in one location be translated into other Buddhist societies? Through two case studies—of the adaptation of a Buddhist environmental training manual in *Theravāda* Southeast Asia and the use of pilgrimage walks or *Dhammayeitra* to promote environmental awareness—this paper will critically examine the process involved in translating Buddhist environmentalism across sectarian, social, political, and economic borders.

**Keywords:** Buddhist environmentalism; transnationalism; engaged Buddhism; Dhamma walk

The environmental crisis is a global phenomenon which requires a collaborative and collective response. Every major religion in the world has formulated an ideological response, with some factions within each tradition articulating ways in which interpretations of tradition can support environmental concerns. Buddhism is no exception. The challenge is a lack of a centralized authority to speak for Buddhism as a whole. Given the diversity among those who call themselves Buddhist, it is difficult to identify what the “Buddhist” response to the environmental crisis is. Debates exist concerning interpretations of Buddhist scriptures and whether there is an inherent Buddhist ecological ideology.

Both Buddhist individuals and groups have articulated ways that the teachings can be used to respond to environmental issues. Many of these Buddhist individuals and groups have initiated actions and created rituals that deal with environmental problems in specific locations and have encouraged people to take responsibility for the impact of their behavior on the earth. But, how do these site-specific interpretations, practices, and activisms translate across Buddhist borders? Are there ways that different Buddhist traditions, in diverse locations across the globe, can share and learn from each other to build a collective Buddhist environmental movement?

Based on over twenty years of ethnographic research on Buddhist environmental activists in Thailand, this paper begins to build a rough comparative framework for understanding the intersections and possibilities of Buddhism and the environment more broadly. While focused on Buddhist environmentalism, my approach offers insight into the broader process of borrowing and adaptation across the Buddhist world, particularly considering what David McMahan calls “modern Buddhism” (2008), the ways that Buddhism has adjusted to a globalized, modern world. No Buddhist society exists in isolation, neither historically, as the spread of Buddhism across Asia demonstrates, nor in contemporary times with the forces of globalization at play. This paper attempts to understand the process of translation of Buddhist ideas in the modern context: how Buddhist ideas and concepts are framed in response to modern issues such as environmentalism, and how these newly interpreted ideas get translated as they move from one context to another.

Translation—of words or ideas—necessitates comparison. Translation is not a simple substitution of a word in one language with its equivalent in another. The meanings of the respective words or concepts may be quite different in the new context. Translation therefore requires comparative examination of how these ideas move from one setting to another, what influences the process of their movement, and what meanings they take on in a new, localized context. Sihlé and Ladwig, in their introduction to a collection on “a comparative anthropology of Buddhism,” point out that “comparison on the most basic level enhances a better understanding of the particular through decentering the perspective of analysis.” Comparison “helps us to understand distributions of traits and processes of diffusion and appropriation. Recurrences, patterns, and structures become visible only through the exploration of similarities and differences” (Sihlé and Ladwig 2017, 117, emphasis in original).

Certainly, examining the growing field of Buddhism and environment (Clippard 2011; Darlington 2017; Swearer 2006)—and religion and ecology more generally (Grim and Tucker 2014)—benefits from such an etic and emic comparative perspective. The patterns, structures, and recurrences, as well as differences in interpretation and practice, emerge more clearly through comparison as Buddhist environmental concepts and actions move from one society to another. Yet, at the same time, the processes and forms taken owe much to the randomness of history. Translation in modern Buddhism involves both a conscious borrowing and the particular accidents through which people encounter new ideas. For example, as discussed below, the forms that the *Dhammayietra*, or Dhamma Walks, in Cambodia took only evolved as they did because certain American Quaker activists happened to be in the refugee camps in Thailand as the idea of the walk was first raised, or because Maha Ghosananda, a leading Cambodian monk, had been exposed to the founder of the Japanese sect Nipponzan Myōhōji as well Gandhian thought when he studied in India in the 1950s. Examining the process of the translation of Buddhist environmental practices across a small number of cases primarily based in Southeast Asia goes beyond understanding the specific histories of these situations. It helps us recognize the complexities involved in translating Buddhist ideas, especially the intersection of vernacular meanings with transnational interpretations. New

forms of practice—whether a manual for Buddhist environmentalism or a Dhamma walk for peace or environmental awareness—emerge from both localized contexts and international perspectives.

I approach Buddhism as a lived religion enacted by people in particular places and circumstances (see Tannenbaum 2015). Yet, as a lived religion, Buddhism is also a living religion, adapting and changing in response to broader, often global pressures and influences. Focusing on how Buddhists adapt to environmental issues provides a model for understanding the dynamic nature of Buddhism in the modern world as both localized and transnational (see Maud 2017, 427–428).

Several factors impact how individual Buddhist societies respond to environmental problems; assessing these factors across borders in a comparative analysis enables a deeper understanding of both the possibilities and challenges involved in the process. In the examples presented here, the factors considered include the forms of Buddhism within each society; the place of Buddhism in each cultural context; the economic situation and degree of economic development; the kinds of environmental issues faced in different locations and how they are understood in the society; and how much international awareness, support, and engagement each situation receives.

The *International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)*, a socially engaged Buddhist organization, is attempting to frame a Buddhist position on environmental issues and climate change. However, the situation in East Asian, *Mahāyāna* Buddhist societies such as South Korea (which is predominantly Christian) and Japan differs dramatically from the environmental challenges of the *Theravāda* countries of mainland Southeast Asia or the *Vajrayāna* societies of the Himalayas. Can the somewhat successful efforts of “tree ordinations” performed by monks in Thailand<sup>1</sup> be translated into activism among Tibetan Buddhists? Can Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness and its environmental aspects inspire Buddhists in Japan negotiating the problems of a developed and religiously pluralistic society? Can Buddhist approaches based on no-self and co-dependent arising be implemented where Buddhism is a minority religion? Through a handful of case studies this paper will critically examine the process involved in translating Buddhist environmentalism across sectarian, social, political, and economic borders. Using the comparative factors outlined above we can begin to see how approaches in individual societies and situations could potentially be expanded to help Buddhists in other places enact creative yet appropriate approaches to environmental problems.

The links between Buddhism and the environment occur on multiple levels. First are specific teachings that imply a relationship between Buddhist values and nature. Concepts such as dependent arising (*patticasamupadda*, Pali) and stories from the *Dhammapada-atthakatha* and the *Jataka*’s of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* illustrate a close connection between humans and nature or the need to care for the natural world as an aspect of practicing Buddhism. These interpretations do not always come easily,

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<sup>1</sup> Monks in Thailand began performing tree ordinations in 1988 to sanctify trees and the surrounding forest in order to protect them from being cut down and to raise awareness about environmental problems and humans’ dependence on nature. The trees are only symbolically ordained, not seen as actual *bhikkhu* (Darlington 1998, 2012).

however, and there are debates among Buddhist scholars as to the authenticity of citing concepts from the Buddhist scriptures as ecological (Pedersen 1995).

Second, these environmental practitioners seek to apply the abstract concepts they glean from the Buddhist dharma in meaningful and effective ways for the communities in which they work. These forms of practical action that Buddhist environmentalists employ take a wide range of forms, from tree ordinations to supporting sustainable agriculture to protesting large-scale economic development. These actions usually emerge in particular locations to address site-specific, locale-based environmental issues, drawing from particular forms of Buddhist practice. Though, these practitioners, and the peoples with whom they work, remain connected with a larger sense of what it means to be Buddhist. The key is how Buddhist activists enact their approaches: To what degree are their actions informed by the practices and ideas of Buddhists (and others) in different settings? Further, how do they translate these influences into meaningful acts for their own followers?

I examine two case studies that illustrate the connections between Buddhism and environmentalism mentioned above. First, I explore the evolution of an environmental education manual written for Buddhists in Southeast Asia, which demonstrates both how the teachings can be interpreted ecologically and how advocates, using Buddhism to promote environmental action, find ways to ground these interpretations in specific, local frames. Tracing the development and spread of this manual across three Southeast Asian societies, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, demonstrates how Buddhist environmentalists borrow, translate, and adapt ecological interpretations into new situations. However, this manual remains at the level of translating ideas. Whilst later versions of the manual outline actions that could be taken, the text's focus is to provide tools for educators, both monastic and lay, not taking direct action.

The second case takes the form of a protest tactic that Buddhist environmentalists have developed and adapted from pilgrimages. We find these ritualized walks in both *Theravāda* Southeast Asia as well as in parts of *Mahāyāna* East Asia. Comparisons between how these walks emerged, the influences on their development, and how they have been spread offers additional insights into how Buddhist environmentalism crosses borders.

I recognize that two examples are insufficient for developing a full analysis of the global Buddhist environmental movement. Three key points begin to emerge, however. First, as the spread of Buddhist environmentalist ideas increases, the more abstracted the ideas become. The focus becomes finding ways of making complex ideas—Buddhist teachings and ecological principles—relevant in a diversity of settings. Second, non-Buddhist and transnational perspectives often influence both Buddhist concepts and the forms of transmission and practice. This process illustrates McMahan's (2008) idea of modern Buddhism well, as the ease of international travel and communication contribute to the confluence of a globalized world with Buddhist practice. These first two points underline my third notion: that as ideas and methods of Buddhist environmentalism spread they are translated and adapted, often significantly, to meet local people's conceptions, needs, and meanings. The environmental issues addressed may be similar around the world, but the methods through which people address them

tend to be more successful the more locally they are framed, even with transnational influences.

### **A Cry from the Forest**

Together with the *Buddhist Perception of Nature Project* (founded by Nancy Nash, a U.S.-born journalist and environmental education consultant living in Hong Kong) and *Wildlife Fund Thailand*, Professor Chatsumarn Kabilsingh<sup>2</sup> of Thammasat University wrote a book that drew from Buddhist teachings “to formulate an ethical approach to nature and environmental protection and to promote nature conservation through the teachings of the Buddha” (Chatsumarn 1998, xv). A simplified version of the book was published in 1987 in Thai and English under the title, *A Cry from the Forest*. The *Buddhist Perception of Nature Project* distributed the book to temples and teachers’ colleges across Thailand to support its efforts at promoting nature conservation to the larger populace (Chatsumarn 1998, 3–4). Chatsumarn, in her later work *Buddhism and Nature Conservation* (1998), described the project as

an educational project attempting to draw teachings available in the Tripitaka (Buddhist Canonical Texts) to formulate an ethical approach to nature and environmental protection and to promote nature conservation through the teaching of the Buddha (Chatsumarn 1998, xv).

Also in 1987, the *Buddhist Perception of Nature Project* published another short book, *Tree of Life: Buddhism and Protection of Nature*, aimed at educating Buddhists about environmental ethics. Unlike *A Cry from the Forest*, the target audience for *Tree of Life* appears to be more international as it was published in English, Tibetan, and Thai. The authors of the short chapters of *Tree of Life* included H.H. the Dalai Lama, Chatsumarn, Dr. Nay Htun (a Burmese scientist), and Nancy Nash. The fact that the books *A Cry from the Forest* and *Tree of Life* were both published in the same year, by the same organization, reflects the effort to expand ecological interpretations of Buddhist teachings.

*A Cry from the Forest* offers a good case for following the process of sharing, translating, and adapting Buddhist concepts of ecology and environmentalism and how they are applied in specific societies. Not only did *A Cry from the Forest* begin as an international collaboration that sought to promote particular interpretations of Buddhist teachings and encourage conservation actions, it served as a model for similar, yet more explicit, projects first in Cambodia then Laos. The general equations of Buddhist concepts with ecology found in Chatsumarn’s work carried into similar discussions in the education manuals produced in the neighboring countries. Yet, the authors of the books in Cambodia and Laos expanded and adapted the ideas from *A Cry from the Forest* to make them first, more directly relevant for the specific contexts of each of these countries, and second, concrete guides for educators promoting environmental ethics and actions among their constituents.

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<sup>2</sup> Chatsumarn Kabilsingh ordained as a nun in Sri Lanka, and is now known as Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. Following Thai practice of using first names professionally, I refer to her throughout the paper as Chatsumarn.

The original project produced in Thailand consciously involved an international flavor. Including an English translation, even though the book was primarily used in Thailand, lent the book an aura of authority and the sense that the ideas were “modern” and “Western” (Darlington 2012, 81). Nancy Nash, the American founder of the *Buddhist Perception of Nature Project*, was inspired by the Dalai Lama to make Buddhism relevant for effecting positive impacts in the contemporary world. She sought to educate people about the issues facing the environment, and drew from religious teachings in the process, beginning with Buddhism. Her goal was to “enable ordinary people to understand the links between their beliefs and everyday behavior and broader environmental issues” (Rolex Awards 1997). The Project extensively researched Buddhist scriptures and sought out sources of environmental ethics, values, and inspiration for conservation. Chatsumarn drew from the *Vinaya*,<sup>3</sup> the Jataka stories, and numerous other Buddhist texts, and sought examples and stories that highlight the importance of natural resources. She examined Buddhist views of nature as well as connections between Buddhism and the forest, water resources, and animals. While she wrote in a Thai context, Chatsumarn described these connections in general Buddhist terms. No pragmatic actions were suggested, nor were specific means for teaching the knowledge provided in *A Cry from the Forest*.

Inspired by the Thai publication of *A Cry from the Forest*, and possibly *Tree of Life* as well, given a reference to Tibetan contributions to the project (Buddhist Institute and MEEP 1999: 1), a group of environmentalists in Cambodia initiated a similar educational program. The support for these programs garnered from the United Nations, the United States Agency for International Development, and various Cambodian non-governmental organizations reflects the international interest in these educational programs. Chatsumarn herself even consulted on the creation of the Cambodian book, carrying the research and motivations from the original project into the new setting. Moreover, this Cambodian text drew from Chatsumarn’s original book, using its scriptural interpretations of concepts such as co-dependent origination as the basis for justifying the use of Buddhism in environmental projects. We cannot consider the 1999 Cambodian publication *Cry from the Forest: a ‘Buddhism and Ecology’ Community Learning Tool* a direct translation of Chatsumarn’s book, but rather a loose adaptation.

The Cambodian authors expanded from the Thai book, adding specific activities and educational questions to make the teachings relevant and useful for Khmer monks working with local lay people. Teams of researchers travelled to different parts of the country interviewing people, seeking indigenous Khmer stories that illustrated environmental values embedded within Cambodian society. The audience clearly comprised local monks, educators, community leaders, and people who work closely with various communities across the nation. Addressing these diverse educators, the authors described their purpose and their use of local material as a means of communicating with people directly. In such a vein they described the use of stories as

intended to provoke discussion about the environment, particularly environmental problems that affect your local community, and to stimulate

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<sup>3</sup> The *Vinaya* is the monastic code of discipline.

ideas about how the Buddhist community can play an active role in promoting environmental awareness as means toward achieving healthy, beautiful environment in which to live (Buddhist Institute and MEEP 1999, 4).

These stories give the manual a Khmer tone, even in the subsequent English version. Generally only one or two pages long, the stories illustrate specific issues within the chapter themes (e.g., Buddhist Way of Life = Good Environment; Building a Sustainable Environment; Preserving Natural Resources; The Value of Forests; etc.). Illustrations accompany the stories for the educators to aid communication with non-literate people, or simply to expand upon the meanings within the stories. Following each story and illustration set are questions to prompt discussion.

Key to the Cambodian version are its practicality and specificity for the Cambodian situation. The book examines Buddhist concepts and teachings that Chatsumarn touched on in the original, though goes beyond brief philosophical discussion of how these teachings relate to the environment. The Cambodians sought practical applications to enact these interpretations within their own context. In the introduction, the authors lay out their three-fold purpose as follows:

It aims to develop better understanding among people a) concerning the concept of the environment from a Buddhist perspective; b) about the degree and causes of environmental degradation in Cambodia and elsewhere; and c) as a means to provide ideas for practical actions inspired by Buddhist principles and methods to solve environmental problems within local communities (Buddhist Institute and MEEP 1999, 5).

While Chatsumarn articulated the importance of reaching people through their own cultural and religious understandings, the Cambodians did a more thorough and explicit job of accomplishing this. The original book was intended to reach a broader, more generic Buddhist audience (thus the publication of the book in both Thai and English, and its links with *Tree of Life* in English, Tibetan, and Thai). In essence, the broader the audience, the more general the references to the Buddhist teachings, the kinds of environmental problems being addressed, and the stories and examples used to illustrate them.

One can observe the influences of the Thai version on the Cambodian manual in a handful of examples of members of the Sangha engaged in environmental actions. In specific sections, such as on spiritual and cultural beliefs, the Cambodians reference Thai monks undertaking Buddhist environmental activism. The authors touch on Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun's use of spirit beliefs in his home village in northern Thailand to accompany a tree ordination ritual to preserve the forest. The monk who performed the first tree ordination in 1988, Phraphru Manas Nathiphitak is cited for his innovative use of Buddhist ritual to deal with logging and drought. Mostly, though, the references beyond Cambodia are short and vague.

While the Thai and the Cambodian contexts are strikingly distinct—one a rapidly developing nation with its accompanying environmental, economic, and social issues; the other recovering from war and a genocidal regime run by Khmers themselves—they

both differ from the third nation to pick up the *Cry from the Forest* project, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). It took Laos an additional six years after the Cambodian book to publish its version of the Buddhist environmental manual, which it did in 2005. The authors, two Lao scholars and a German anthropologist, acknowledged the strong influence of the Cambodian version of *Cry from the Forest*, even as they adapted it for the specifics of the Lao situation. They compiled it shortly after the Communist government of Laos relaxed its regulations on Buddhism, which it had co-opted or suppressed since 1975 (see Holt 2009: 173–183). Despite tight controls, Buddhism remained strong in Lao society. There may be relatively few monks, but people still used their spiritual beliefs and practices to inform their lives. The authors argue that the Sangha holds social capital for educating about and initiating environmental and conservation projects. As such, they describe the value of using Buddhism for this process as follows:

The thinking of many people in Lao PDR is still very deeply influenced by Buddhist values and we believe that spreading information and teaching about the environment in a language that appeals to the people is a very important option, that can in some cases be more beneficial than importing foreign concepts of teaching and knowledge transmission, that are difficult to grasp for local people (Souphapone et al 2005, 6).

The authors reference Buddhism as language rather than belief system. Further, as a language, Buddhism can educate people as an indigenous system, a method that people can relate to and understand. The approach of the Lao authors is not unlike that used by Chatsumarn in the original Thai version of *A Cry from the Forest*, but is more grounded in assessing what the local people need and will comprehend.

A good example is how authors frame and present the environmental concepts underlying each book. In the Thai version, the environmental concepts are taken for granted and the vocabulary used is general; the introduction to the chapter on the “ecological crisis” focuses more on the Buddha's connections with nature and his teachings on how to live a life with compassion and balance. It touches briefly on the problems of development and their contributions to environmental issues, but does not elaborate on ecological concepts or scientific ideas involved. There is an unspoken assumption that the readers already have knowledge of both ecological concepts and the science that supports them.

The Cambodian version similarly understates the ecological ideas involved. As with the Thai book, the authors emphasize the interpretations of the Buddhist teachings and place them within a cultural context. The Lao version, *Environmental Education Activity Manual for Monks and Educators Teaching at Primary Schools in Lao PDR*, borrows extensively from the Cambodian manual, but goes beyond it to explain the ecology in clear, simple terms. The book begins with a detailed essay by German anthropologist Patrice Ladwig, which sets the context for the use of Buddhism for environmental education. This section echoes Chatsumarn's work, although it provides more of the Lao context along side examples from Thailand and Cambodia, and quotes from Buddhist leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama. The book then details the environmental situation in the Lao PDR and highlights the urgency of educating people on how to understand



and deal with it. The specific lessons provided begin with ecological perspectives—what are the problems, the definitions of ecological concepts, and the science involved—which are then addressed through Buddhist stories and concepts. The chapter headings range from “What is Biodiversity?” to “Leaves, Sunlight, and Oxygen,” to “The Food Chain.” Authors address none of these topics in either of the previous versions.

While the Lao manual targets Buddhist monks and primary school teachers, it contains less emphasis on Buddhism itself than either of the previous versions. Many of the lessons incorporate Buddhist stories and teachings, but not all of them. In the Thai and Cambodian versions, each environmental issue is addressed through Buddhist concepts and stories. As the Lao authors articulate,

Another important task is to transform these sometimes complicated teachings and to put them in a language that can be understood by laypeople of different educational levels and different ages. Only a dhamma that can be understood by the people and can give them guidance is a beneficial Dhamma (Souphopone et al 2005,12).

The evolution of *A Cry from the Forest* through its Thai, Cambodian, and Lao incarnations demonstrates the open way in which both environmental concepts and interpretations and application of Buddhism to address environmental issues shift through the translation process. Authors and translators in each new setting maintain the book’s primary environmental message while rethinking how its presentation can best fit different cultural and political contexts. Paralleling the ways that Buddhism itself spread across Asia, the spread of Buddhist environmentalism reflects both connections to core concepts and teachings as well as the necessity of adapting to local contexts and transnational influences in order to be relevant.

### **Walking for Change**

Interpreting Buddhist concepts in ecological terms and seeking ways to spread these interpretations is only half the equation of Buddhist environmentalism. To have an impact, Buddhist environmentalists must put their ideals and ideas into practice. Examples of Buddhist environmental action include ordaining trees; supporting sustainable agriculture; protesting deforestation while planting trees for reforestation; challenging destructive economic development projects; and undertaking Dhamma walks to highlight environmental problems and encourage local communities to engage in conservation.

Two examples of how Buddhist Dhamma walks have been adapted as a tactic for environmental awareness and activism provide insight into the process of the transmission and translation of actions for Buddhist environmentalism across sectarian boundaries. These cases reveal complex intersections and cross-border influences as these various walks evolved.

As part of my research on the Thai Buddhist environmental movement, I learned about the *Dhammayatra*, a Buddhist “Dhamma walk” for Songkhla Lake in southern Thailand. Organized by monks and lay activists, the walk aimed to raise awareness and concern for the deteriorating condition of the lake and its impact on surrounding

residents. The first walk in Thailand occurred in 1996, emerging from a growing number of Buddhist monks engaged in conservation and environment work across the country. This walk took place only four years after the Dhamma walk (“*Dhammayietra*,” Khmer) began in Cambodia as part of the peace, reconciliation, and repatriation movement there. The influence of the walks in Cambodia on the Thai activist monks is clear, with the paradigm shifting from the Cambodian aims of peace and reconciliation to the Thai acknowledgement of environmental concerns.

Pilgrimages have a long history in Buddhism, often taking the form of extended, formal walks. Walking pilgrimages incorporate meditation, compassion, humility, and merit-making, with a focus on relieving suffering and individual spiritual progress. Beginning in the twentieth century, a few Buddhists began to use walks as a conscious means for ending social suffering. First among these efforts were the members of Nipponzan Myōhōji, a small Nichiren Buddhist order in Japan. Founded by Nichidatsu Fujii early in the twentieth century, Nipponzan Myōhōji developed a commitment to nonviolent social protest and utmost simplicity. One of the group’s main activities is the Peace March, a form of political demonstration based on the Nichiren ascetic practice of chanting “*Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō*” (derived from the Lotus Sutra) while “walking to the beat of a hand-held drum” (Stone 2003, 77). The walks focus primarily on nuclear disarmament (because of the impact of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and human rights, although they have been held for other causes, such as building awareness of the slave trade and racism or calling for prison reform in the United States.

As a form of activism or engaged Buddhist practice, Dhamma walks first occurred in Japan with emphasis on nonviolence. Nipponzan Myōhōji may be a small order, but it is one that has extended its message beyond Japan through building numerous Peace Pagodas around the world. Groups of Nipponzan Myōhōji Buddhists have maintained a presence in several contested places worldwide, including in the Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand in the 1980s. They shared their message of peace and their method of focused walking as a tactic for social change and joined with other groups on their own Dhamma walks. Japanese monks from Nipponzan Myōhōji were present at the first *Dhammayietra* in Cambodia in 1992 (Poethig 2004, 209; Stone 2003, 78).

The Cambodian *Dhammayietra* is a month-long peace walk by monks and lay people across different parts of the country to promote peace and reconciliation after the lengthy civil war and the Khmer Rouge genocide (Poethig 2002; 2004; Skidmore 1996; Weiner 2003, 111–113). The first walk originated in the refugee camps in Thailand as the United Nations worked to secure an end to the civil war and repatriate the hundreds of thousands of Cambodian refugees in Thailand and spread around the globe. The walks, neither fully Buddhist nor Cambodian in origin, first emerged in conversations among some of the international aid workers in the camp. These aid workers consulted with Maha Ghosananda, the highest-ranking monk outside of the country, who had been active in the camps and among Cambodians in exile promoting peace and the reestablishment of Buddhism after the Khmer Rouge genocide. The organizers, informed by Nipponzan Myōhōji monks, American Quaker activists, and discussions at the annual meeting of INEB, created a walk that would bring the first group of returning refugees

symbolically across the Thai border and the Cambodian countryside to the capital, Phnom Penh.

While in India for doctoral studies in the 1950s, Maha Ghosananda had met Nichidatsu Fujii. Fujii inspired Ghosananda to learn Gandhi's philosophy and methods of non-violence, which then informed his work in Cambodia (Poethig 2002, 23; Weiner 2003, 114). In the 1960s, Ghosananda studied in Thailand with the Buddhist philosopher Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, whose teachings inspired many of the Thai engaged Buddhists. As the spiritual leader and inspiration for the *Dhammayietra*, Ghosananda imbued the walks with concepts of peace, non-violence, and reconciliation that were translated from both Buddhist and non-Buddhist sources.

Given the socio-political, economic, and psychological damage arising from both the Cambodian civil war (1967–1975) and the Cambodian-Vietnamese war (1977–1991), the *Dhammayietra* understandably focused on promoting democracy, peace, reconciliation, resisting violence, reconstructing individual and community identities (Skidmore 1996), and reestablishing Buddhism. Over the years following the instigation of the *Dhammayietra*, the focus of the walks shifted dependent on both local needs and activities. The walks shed light on issues ranging from democratic elections and constitution, domestic violence and women's issues, and landmine awareness (Weiner 2003, 113). In 1995, Nipponzan Myōhōji organized the Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This walk departed from Auschwitz in Poland before arriving at the Thai-Cambodian border and subsequently crossing into Vietnam. The walkers in the *Dhammayietra* of 1995 accompanied the pilgrimage as it crossed Cambodia, and a few of the organizers continued to Japan, the walk's destination (Poethig 2004, 206), again reflecting the intersections between these two different forms of Buddhism in sharing methods of public protest.

By the fifth annual walk, in 1996, issues of environmental destruction became key aspects of the practice. This walk began in Phnom Penh and traveled southwest, highlighting connections between the civil war, illegal logging, and deforestation (Poethig 2002, 24; 2004, 206). Weiner notes that the walkers planted almost 2,000 trees that year,<sup>4</sup> despite opposition from the authorities (Weiner 2003, 124, n. 11). This was the same year as the first of the *Dhammayatra* walks in southern Thailand that also held a strong environmental emphasis, specifically on concerns about the state of Songkhla Lake. Cambodia's *Dhammayietra* V contained a broad environmental message, pointing out the problems of logging and deforestation and their connections with conflict. Ghosananda articulated only general connections between Buddhism and nature as the underpinning of this walk, unlike the more explicit socio-economic analysis that informed the Thai versions.

We find an example of Ghosananda's relatively vague notion of the connections between Buddhism and the environment in the tree ordination that he performed as part of the *Dhammayietra* of 1998. By this time, Thai monks had been performing tree

<sup>4</sup> Skidmore (1996, 15–16) notes that Bodhi tree seedlings from Sri Lanka were planted each day of the first walk. This was not environmental, however, but done as a symbol of reconciliation and a means of promoting Buddhism (1996, 20–21).

ordinations to promote forest conservation for a decade. Yet despite the adamant stance of the Thai environmental monks that the tree itself was not becoming a monk but rather only symbolically reflected the dependence between humans and the forest (Darlington 2012), Ghosananda thought otherwise. Poethig (2004, 207) quoted Ghosananda as saying at the time, “When we ordained a tree, it became a monk . . . and we told the people. When you kill the tree, then you kill the monk.”

The Cambodian *Dhammayietra* shifted over time from being heavily influenced by outside advisors—Nipponzan Myōhōji monks, Quaker activists, diverse Asian members of INEB—to being run by and mostly involving Cambodians themselves. At the same time, the numbers of participants dropped, and the issues addressed expanded. The walks served a strong purpose of simultaneously connecting Cambodia with a transnational community even as it translated the concepts and issues involved into modes that articulated a Khmer perspective (Poethig 2004). The tactic of using Dhamma walks to address social and political issues again moved beyond the Cambodian borders as the Thai Buddhist activists applied the idea for Songkhla Lake.

The Thai Buddhist environmentalists who began the *Dhammayatra* (Thai version) for the lake drew from multiple sources themselves, although they primarily incorporated methods borrowed from the Cambodians. The high-ranking Cambodian monk, Maha Ghosananda, even briefly joined the first walk (Santikaro 2000, 207). Phra Phaisan Visalo, an activist and scholar monk who lived in northeast Thailand, encouraged the organizers. He worked with a few other Thai Buddhist activists to help with the Thai portion of the international peace walk by Nipponzan Myōhōji in remembrance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Hiroshima walk, using the Nipponzan Myōhōji practice of chanting and drumming while walking, strongly influenced the formation of the Dhamma Walk for Songkha Lake (Mayer 2005, 246). Further inspiration for walk organizers came from reading radical Thai authors, the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, and Gandhi, all of which reflects an international perspective (Mayer 2005, 251).

The issues addressed by the Songkhla Lake walk first targeted the environmental condition of the lake and its socio-economic impact on the people living around it. Second, the marchers hoped to engage younger people in Buddhist activism and local concerns, as many had moved away from the villages seeking work in the cities. Third, southern Thailand is the site of intense conflict between Buddhists and Muslims and the marchers hoped to bring people from the two groups together over the common problem of the environmental condition of the lake.

The monks who initiated the *Dhammayatra* belonged to *Sekhiyadhamma*, an organization that supported activist monks across Thailand. Few, if any, of the original organizers came from the Songkhla Lake region. They brought their comprehension of the environmental and social problems to the lake and sought to pull in local people. With each walk, as with the walks in Cambodia, those marching listened to the local people they encountered and through engagement with them adapted the issues and methods to meet the needs and concerns articulated by the local Thai peoples (Darlington 2012, 193; Mayer 2005; Santikaro 2000). The kinds of issues the walks

highlighted included loss of fish and wildlife, bad quality and reduced levels of water, loss of land to housing and other development, and the breakdown of community (Mayer 2005, 250; Santikaro 2000, 208–209).

Although the organizers of these walks framed the *Dhammayatra* in Buddhist terms, they opened the events to everyone and eventually gained some involvement from the Thai Muslim community. Over the years, whilst the walks remained heavily influenced by Buddhism, organizers incorporated elements of both Islamic and indigenous animistic practices into the walks' ritual settings. Once again, the walks were translated from a broader, more abstract approach to fit the specific needs and serve a meaning-making purpose to the local participants.

At the same time, numerous foreigners joined the walks every year. One key participant was the American monk, Santikaro Bhikkhu, a disciple of the Thai philosopher monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. Theodore Mayer, an American anthropologist, chronicled the walks. Mayer argues the presence of foreigners lent authority to the environmental aims of the walk and its Buddhist elements, especially as some of the foreigners included monks such as Santikaro (Mayer 2005, 258–259).

A different form of walk came about in South Korea as a means of protesting the environmental concerns relating to the drastic increase in economic development. Initially, the concept of a walking Buddhist practice that the Koreans used, specifically taking the form of *samboilbae*, “three-steps-and-one-bow,” came from Tibet. Yoon and Jones (2014, 298) describe how the Tibetan pilgrimage practice of walking and performing fully body prostrations was “introduced to Korea during monastic training sessions at *Tongdosa* Temple in 1992.” These South Korean monks maintained the meditative and spiritual intention of that practice, but soon appropriated it as a Buddhist protest tactic. The Son Buddhist master, Sukyong, adapted the Tibetan practice as a means of challenging the *Saemangeum Reclamation Project* (SRP), which aimed to reclaim four hundred square kilometers of tidal flats on the southwest coast of South Korea for rice farming. After the development project began in 1991, two issues arose. First, in 1996, a different land reclamation site resulted in severe environmental damage, destroying bird and other species' habitats and reducing biodiversity, raising concerns about the eventual impact of the *Saemangeum* project. Second, rice prices fell and government support of rice farming decreased, which led to questions about any positive effects from the project.

In 2003, Sukyong joined together with three other religious leaders, Catholic clergyman Paul Moon Kyu-hyun, Protestant Reverend Lee Hee-won, and Won Buddhist cleric Kyomu Kim Kyung-il, to protest continued work on the SRP. They undertook a sixty-five-day, three hundred and fifty kilometer pilgrimage from *Saemangeum* to Seoul following the *samboilbae* practice of taking three steps, followed by a full-body prostration bow (Yoon and Jones 2014, 299; Bu and Chi 2014, 68). The pilgrims aimed to change public opinion about the project and highlight the suffering that frequently resulted from government development projects.

Ultimately, the campaign failed and the reclamation project was completed. Nevertheless, the tactic of *samboilbae* spread within Korea, borrowed by other social

campaigns beyond the environmental movement. Yoon and Jones (2014, 299) argued that “owing to a lack of international coverage, there has yet to be a diffusion of the use of *samboilbae* as a protest tactic outside of Korea.”

## Conclusion

Yoon and Jones’s (2014) point raises a critical issue: How and why do the practices and ideas used by Buddhists for environmental campaigns spread beyond the specific contexts within which they emerged? Why do some textual interpretations and practical tactics get picked up and translated into different settings while others, such as the *samboilbae*, remain parochial and relatively unknown beyond their borders? And how can we begin to compare the environmental efforts of different Buddhist groups across borders?

Here I have presented only two examples of the process of the transmission and translation of Buddhist environmental practices: one, the spread and evolution of a manual for interpreting Buddhist teachings for monks and educators; the other, the use of walks or pilgrimage techniques for raising awareness or, as in the Korean case, as a protest tactic. In the case of the environmental manual, we see how key Buddhist concepts, such as dependent arising or the Buddha’s relationship with the forest, are translated into abstract yet meaningful forms for promoting environmental awareness, while the explicit methods for this education are adapted and translated into local contexts. The Cambodians and the Lao use their own stories and set the manual up with framing contexts that make it relevant for the political as well as social situations within their borders, even while acknowledging briefly the models coming from Thailand.

The walks are more complicated in the translation process. The influences on the origin and evolution of each case reflect a transnational dialogue across the Buddhist world and beyond. The tradition of pilgrimage found within each form of Buddhism blends with philosophies borrowed from other schools of Buddhism and non-Buddhist approaches, such as Gandhian protest walks and American Quaker peace activism. The rise of the *Dhammayietra* first in Cambodia, then in Thailand owes much to the accidents of history. Had Maha Ghosananda not gone to India to study, he would not have met Nichidatsu Fujii, nor been influenced by Gandhi’s teachings. Fujii’s *Nipponzan Myōhōji* followers explicitly aimed to spread their message of peace and their method of chanting pilgrimage, and therefore were in the refugee camps as the idea of the first *Dhammayietra* arose. The *Dhammayietra* were, as Poethig (2004) argues, transnational in origin and in engagement, even while the Cambodians continually translated them to fit the specific needs and understandings of the people they targeted. The close ties between the Khmer and the Thais over the centuries, the emerging conversations and engagement of the *International Network of Engaged Buddhists* in Bangkok at the time, and the presence of the *Nipponzan Myōhōji* peace walk across Southeast Asia all led to Thai Buddhist activists picking up and adapting the Dhamma walks as a method themselves.

South Korea, on the other hand, existed with greater homogeneity (although religious plurality) and relatively more isolation from other Buddhist societies. Certainly, Korean Buddhism interacted with and was influenced by both the Chinese and the Japanese over time, but in ways that led more to ideals of holding onto national

distinctions rather than borrowing and adapting their ideas and tactics. Korean Buddhist environmentalists took on a Tibetan practice of pilgrimage rather than the Japanese Nipponzan Myōhōji approach. And while the *samboilbae* campaign against the SRP engaged a diverse participation within South Korea, with leaders from different Buddhist and Christian groups, unlike in Cambodia or Thailand no one from outside of Korea contributed to the development or implementation of the walk. Yoon and Jones (2014) are right that international media did not cover the campaign, thus constricting its spread beyond Korea. But perhaps the reason for this neglect lies in the fact that the international community did not participate in the action from the beginning. The *samboilbae*, instead, was more of an indigenous practice in South Korea, its Tibetan influence notwithstanding.

Many other unexamined cases may shed more light onto the process of the transmission and translation of Buddhist environmentalism. Protesting nuclear power and weapons forms the basis of Buddhist protests in both Japan and the United States, with strong involvement and cross-national influences by Buddhist activists. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) contains elements that apply Buddhism to protecting the natural environment. Even as internal critiques emerge about GNH, Buddhists elsewhere, such as the Thai engaged Buddhist leader and activist Sulak Sivaraksa, call for the adoption of core ideas of GNH in their own countries. Thai environmental monks modeled means of adapting Buddhist rituals to form the symbolic core of the environmental movement using tree ordinations (Darlington 1998; 2012), a practice that has spread to other *Theravāda* but not to *Mahāyāna* societies.

Things to consider through examining these cases include: the forms of Buddhism involved; the state of economic development of the societies; the geographical locations and the situated cultural perspectives, including the place of Buddhism in the society; the kinds and degree of environmental degradation they face and the underlying causes; and the amount of international influence, involvement, and attention each situation receives. So far, the examples I present here reflect an intricate process of borrowing ideas and concepts at their most abstract, such as condensing the concept of dependent arising to a simple statement of interdependence. Meanwhile, in the process of translation, new elaborations make these concepts meaningful and practical for local people, their needs, and understandings, despite transnational elements.

The Buddha told his followers to “Be ye islands unto yourselves.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the process of the spread and translation of Buddhist environmental ideas and practices is living up to this admonishment. There is no doubt that these actions are Buddhist, and yet as they spread and change, they take on local forms and meanings. As Poethig (2002; 2004) argues with the *Dhammayietra* in Cambodia, these actions are simultaneously transnational and local. The ideas, concepts, interpretations that form the common core of Buddhist environmentalism, those elements that are shared across national and sectarian borders, tend to be more general and broader. Once a new group adopts an approach to a new situation, they translate ideas and practices into forms relevant and meaningful for the local people involved. In this way, Buddhist environmentalism

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<sup>5</sup> From the *Maha-parinibbana Sutta* in the *Dīgha Nikāya* II: 33, as well as other *suttas*.

exists as a broad category of contemporary engaged Buddhism that has spread in its various guises across the Buddhist world. Each manifestation of it, however, takes on the language and cultural trappings of individual places, often so different as to prevent us from identifying a unified Buddhist environmental movement.

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