



NATURE AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION & BUDDHIST STUDIES

Presented by Robekkah Ritchie

HOW ARE NATURE AND CLIMATE
DISCUSSED IN THE SCIENTIFIC
STUDY OF RELIGION?

HOW ARE THESE TOPICS
APPROACHED IN BUDDHIST
STUDIES?

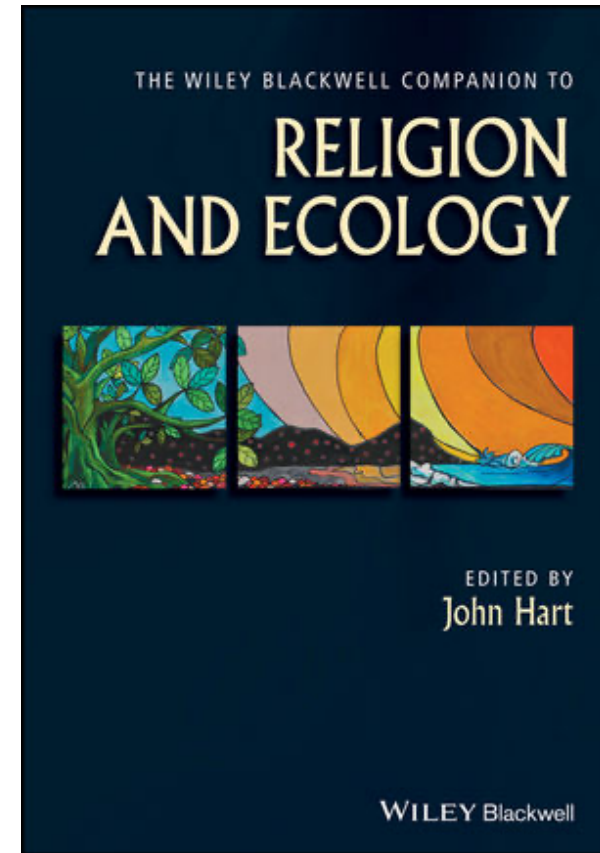
Overview of our schedule for today

- **Introduction to how religious studies approaches topics of the environment and ecology**
- **Introduction to Buddhism**
- **Introduction to Buddhism and sustainability**
- **Quick case studies: Vegetarianism in China, Bhutan's carbon footprint**
- **Looking deeper: case studies of how Buddhism and the environment overlap in Thailand**
- **Specific examples using the Santi Asoke movement of Thailand**
- **Western interpretations using the example of Birken Forest Monastery in Thailand**

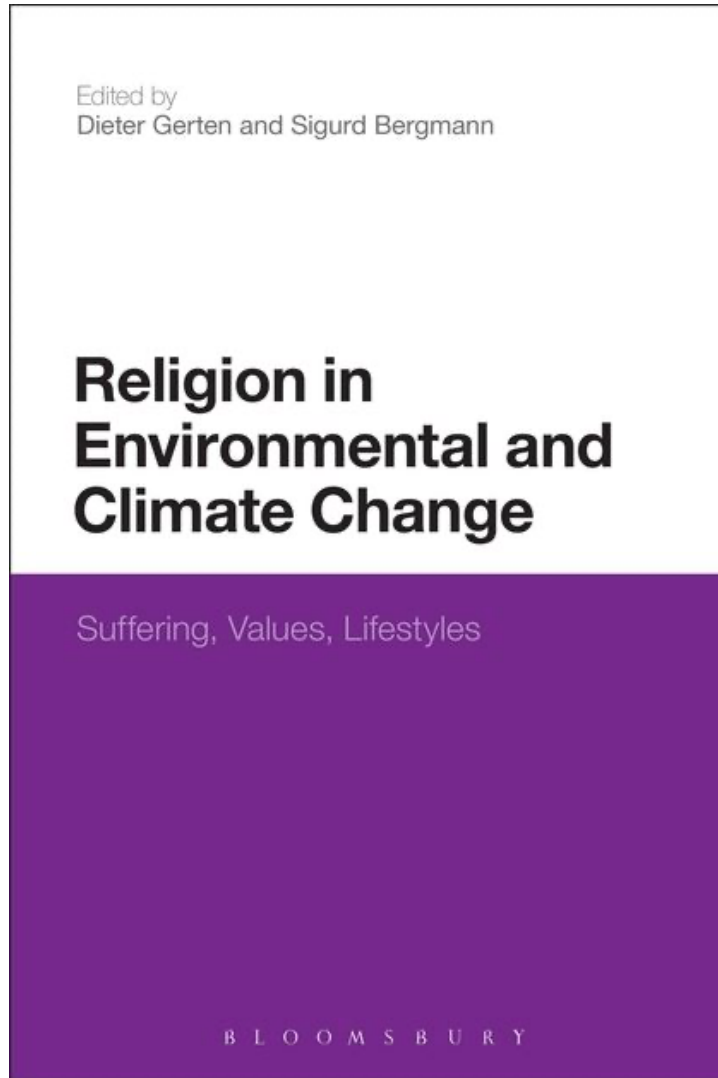
HOW ARE NATURE AND CLIMATE DISCUSSED IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES?

As an example, this compilation of works discusses:

- **The ways traditional concepts of nature in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and other religious traditions have been shaped by the environmental crisis.**
- **The changing nature of theology and religious thought in response to the challenges of protecting the environment.**
- **Various conceptual issues and themes that transcend individual traditions—climate change, bio-ethics, social justice, ecofeminism, and more.**
- **Some of the immediate challenges faced in caring for the Earth while looking to the future of religious environmentalism.**



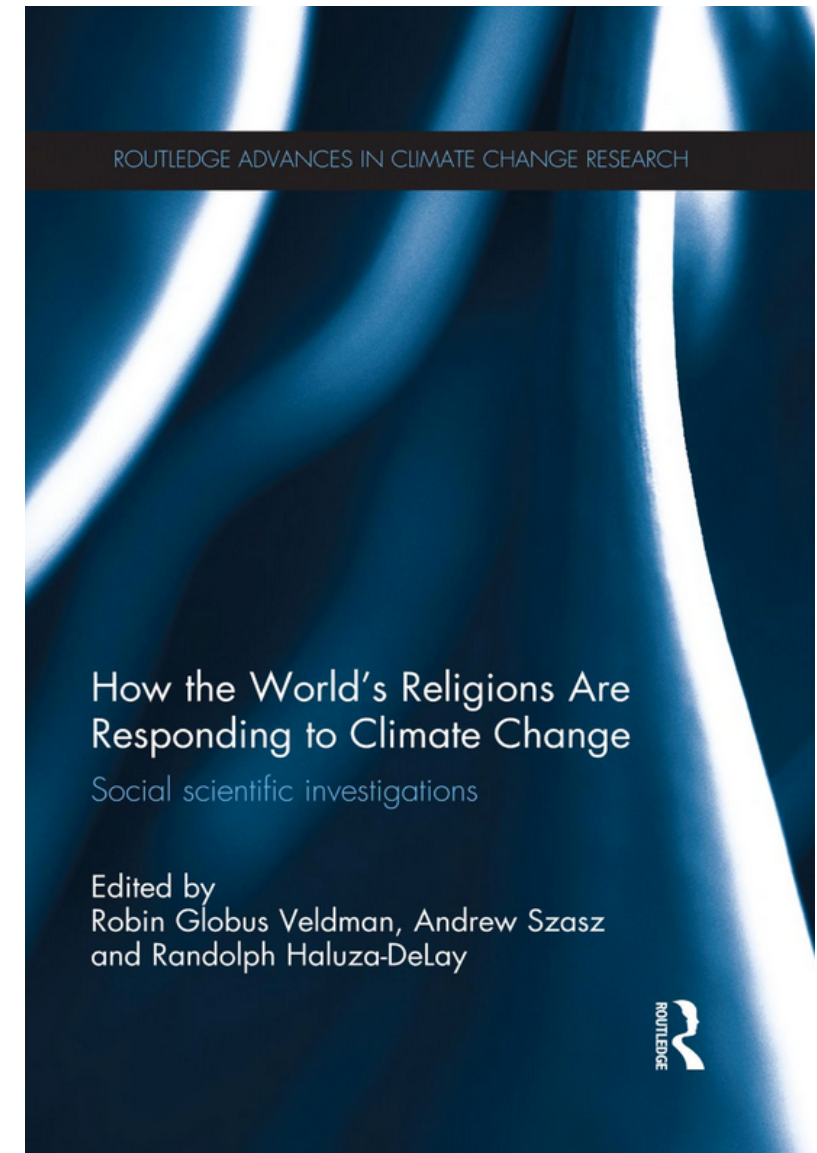
THIS INTERSECTION WITHIN RELIGIOUS STUDIES IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS "RELIGION AND NATURE", "RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENT", AND "RELIGION AND ECOLOGY".



RELIGION IN ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE:

“Focussing on religion allows for analysis of various human modes of perception, action and thought in relation to global environmental change.

On the one hand, religious organizations are aiming to become "greener"; on the other hand, some religious ideas and practices display fatalism towards impacts of climate change.”



Publications are a great indication of important themes present in scholarly discussions on religion and the environment, but it is also helpful to look at other forms of collaboration and exchanges. These next examples are from working groups, conferences and forums.



An example from the “Religion and Climate Change in Cross-Regional Perspectives” shows examples of how this focus can be applied:

Dialogues across regions and religions have given special attention to three features of climate change, with a focus on water:

- **the effects of glacial melt in the Andes and Himalayas**
- **climate-related stress upon urban water systems in South America and South Asia**
- **vulnerabilities of small island archipelagos in the Caribbean and the South Pacific**

Colloquium on Religion and Climate Change

Colloquium on Religion and Climate Change
McGill University, September 20th 2019, 9 am – 4 pm, Birks building

McGill university in Canada held a colloquium on Religion and climate change. We can see here some of their topic discussions:

In this Colloquium on September 20th 2019 in the Birks building several McGill scholars discuss the many intersections between religion and climate change and how handed-over traditions from ancient times and from east and west can inform us how to better respond to the effects of present-day climate change. This includes not only catastrophic influences to the natural world in which we live, but also encompasses changes to our lives, our hopes and fears (increased anxiety, depression, doomsday feelings) as well as changes in society and politics (from new literary and movie genres, to discussions about divesting, immigration politics, inter-national relations etc.).

Program:

		12.00-13.15	Lunch
8.30-9.00	Arrival and coffee	13.15-13.45	Reading Literature
9.00-9.15	Words of Welcome		Ecologically: Expanding the
9.30-10.00	The Apocalyptic Imagination and Climate Change (Gerbern S. Oegema)		Ecocritical Canon (Stephanie Posthumus)
10.00-10.30	The Abrahamic Religions and Climate Change (David Goodin)	13.45-14.15	A Handsome Condition: Climate Change and the Problem of Communication (Darin Barney)
10.30-11.00	Coffee	14.15-14.45	Tea
11.00-11.30	Buddhism and the Environment/Climate Change (Lei Kuan Lai)	14.45-15.15	The Best Divest (Gregory Mikkelsen)
11.30-12.00	Religion and Climate Change: Discussion	15.15-16.00	Panel Discussion on Politics and the Future of our Planet (Chair: Samuel Nelson)



The International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture

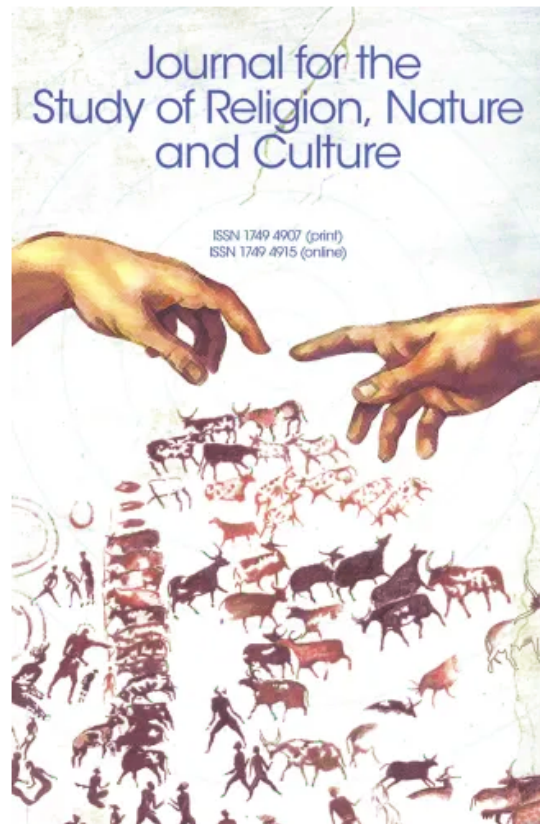
Ecology and Gender
Working Group

Ecology and Critical
Theory Working
Group

Ecology and
Philosophy Working
Group

Ritual, Religion and
Nature Working
Group

Pedagogies of
Religion and Ecology
Working Group



The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture explores through the social and natural sciences the complex relationships among human beings, their diverse ‘religions’ (broadly and diversely defined) and the earth’s living systems, while providing a venue for analysis and debate over what constitutes an ethically appropriate relationship between our own species and the environments we inhabit.

<https://www.issrnc.org/>
<https://www.issrnc.org/journal/>

EXAMPLES OF HOW HOW NATURE AND CLIMATE CAN BE DISCUSSED IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

- **HISTORICAL CONTEXTS**: How did the ancient greek religions engage with nature?
- **SCRIPTURAL**: How do Buddhist texts discuss the relationship to the envorinment?
- **IN SPECIFIC RELIGIONS**: What is the importance of nature in Shinto (Japan's indigenous religion)?
- **SPECIFIC DEITIES OR RELIGIOUS FIGURES**: in Celtic mythology Artio is the bear goddess of the wilderness. How is she depicted? What is her role in contemporary contexts (she is featured in the video game *Smite* for example)?
- **PRACTICES**: How does Hatian Voodoo use medicinal herbs for healing and spiritual development? Why do some Buddhist monks ordain trees?
- **INSTITUTIONS**: How is the Lutheran minastry discussing climate change? How are Buddhist monks in Thailand influcing forests and curtailing deforestation?

EXAMPLES OF HOW HOW NATURE AND CLIMATE CAN BE DISCUSSED IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

- **SOCIOLOGICAL**: How does religion impact Americans' views on climate change?
- **BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXTS**: What was Hildegard von Bingen's relationship to nature?
- **REGIONAL STUDIES**: What are the religious perspectives on climate change in the Mam Altiplano of Guatemala?
- **POLITICAL**: How does the relationship between the Catholic church and politicians in Poland influence environmental bills passed in parliament?
- **EXPLORING TERMINOLOGY**: How is the term "conservation" or "sustainability" used within contemporary New Age contexts?
- **RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN OR BETWEEN GROUPS**: How do inter-faith dialogues or inter-religious groups approach topics of climate and the environment?

ACTIVITY:

Using the below categories (or other categories you can think of) brainstorm 3-5 potential research topics that can bridge discussions of nature and climate in religious contexts. You can also try to integrate areas of your own experience/interest.

Type your ideas in the chat

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• HISTORICAL CONTEXTS• SCRIPTURAL• SPECIFIC RELIGIONS• SPECIFIC DEITIES OR RELIGIOUS FIGURES• PRACTICES• INSTITUTIONS | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• SOCIOLOGICAL• BIOGRAPHICAL• REGIONAL STUDIES• POLITICAL• TERMINOLOGY• RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN OR BETWEEN GROUPS |
|--|---|

GETTING FOCUSED WITHIN BROADER FIELDS



Religious Studies



Buddhist Studies



Engaged Buddhism



Buddhism and the environment



Specific case studies

ACTIVITY:

Before we start learning a bit about Buddhism and its relationship(s) to the environment, we need to first introduce Buddhism.

Take 10 minutes in a small group (3-4 people) and discuss with other members what you know about Buddhism.

Even if you are not so familiar with Buddhism, we often come to topics with ideas/preconceptions, and it's interesting and helpful to investigate our own relationship with a certain topic before going deeper.

Group questions to help start the conversation: What do I think of first when I think of Buddhism? What is my impression of the Buddha or Buddhists? What are some key words that come to mind?

Make a small summary of a few sentences of what you discussed and post it in the chat.

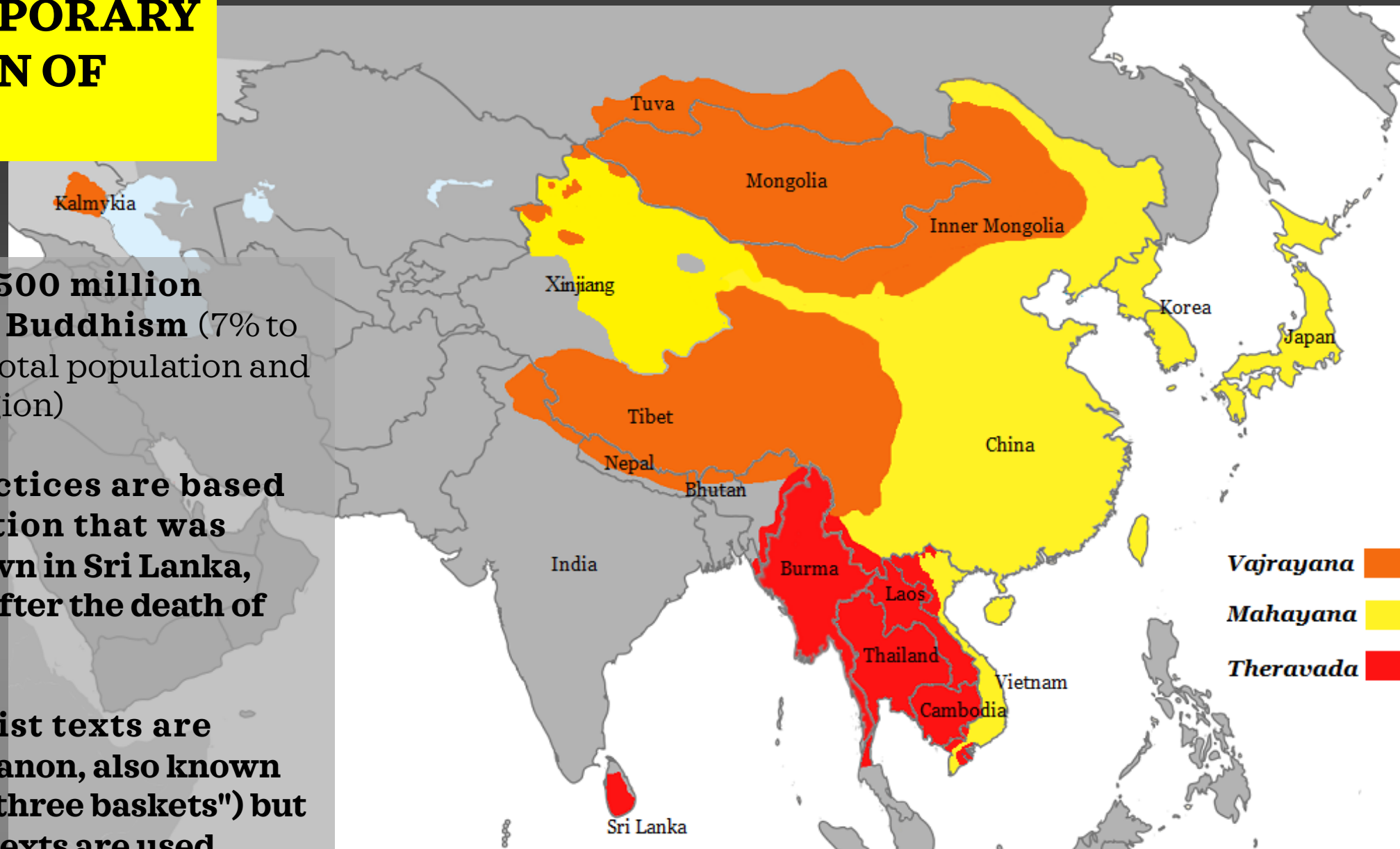
THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM BEGINNING IN THE 5TH CENTURY BCE

- The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama (or “the Buddha” meaning “awakened one”) was born and lived in the dark orange circle in Northern India c. 5th to 4th century BCE
- Notice the three major forms of Buddhism represented with the Red, Green, and Blue arrows
- Take note of the complexity and overlap of these three schools in different regions
- Not all areas of this map continue to be predominantly Buddhist—as seen with the area of origin in India



THE CONTEMPORARY DISTRIBUTION OF BUDDHISM

- **Approximately 500 million people practice Buddhism** (7% to 8% of the world's total population and the 4th largest religion)
- **Beliefs and practices are based on an oral tradition that was likely written down in Sri Lanka, about 400 years after the death of the Buddha**
- **The core Buddhist texts are called the Pāli Canon, also known as the *Tipiṭaka* ("three baskets") but many additional texts are used depending on the branch of Buddhism**



GENERAL OVERVIEW OF BUDDHISM

Varun Soni, dean of Religious Life at the University of Southern California, explains the fourth largest religion in the world, Buddhism.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lxq-RiLb-6M>

Damien Keown, Buddhist scholar at the University of London, discusses 10 things to know about Buddhism

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5HxC2q90RU>

Introduction to a day in the life of a monk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4n-X2Dj01AE>

While you watch these clips, keep in mind the previous activity where we looked at our preconceived notions about Buddhism.

Are you surprised by anything in the videos? How is your previous understanding of Buddhism changing?

BUDDHISMS

Within academic contexts, buddhism is becoming less frequently referred to as a singular entity, and the term “buddhisms” has emerged to better describe the multifaceted beliefs and traditions. Within this plethora of traditions, there is also a continual state of transformation and translocative movement:

“there is no pure substratum, no static and independent core called ‘buddhism’ – either in the founder’s day or in any later generation. What we have come to call ‘buddhism’ was always becoming, being made and remade over and over again in contact and exchange, as it was carried along in the flow of things...to study the historical or contemporary expressions of buddhism is to trace the flow of people, rituals, artifacts, beliefs, and institutions across spatial and temporal boundaries.”

Thomas A. Tweed, “Theory and Method in the Study of Buddhism: Toward ‘Translocative’ Analysis,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 12 (2011): 23

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism#/media/File:Four_Scenes_from_the_Life_of_the_Buddha_-_Enlightenment_-_Kushan_dynasty,_late_2nd_to_early_3rd_century_AD,_Gandhara_schist_-_Freer_Gallery_of_Art_-_DSC05124.JPG

BUDDHISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

“The relation between Buddhist thought and contemporary environmental and ecological concerns has become one of the most important dimensions for the development of Buddhist thought as applied to contemporary issues.


Although for many practitioners the supportive function of Buddhism in relation to their environmental concerns seems unproblematic and obvious, closer readings of texts and more historically and philosophically informed explications of traditional Buddhist thought have led to a large body of discussion and critique.”

“Oxford Bibliographies: Buddhism and the Environment” by Richard Payne

EXAMPLES OF LITERATURE EXPLORING BUDDHISM AND ECOLOGY

- Badiner, Allen, ed. *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*. Parallax, 1990.
- Batchelor, Martine, and Kerry Brown, eds. *Buddhism and Ecology*. Cassell, 1992.
- Tucker, Mary E., and D. R. Williams, eds. *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*. Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Padmasiri De Silva. *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism*. Macmillan, 1998.
- Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. *Buddhism and Nature Conservation*. Thammasat University Press, 1998.
- Kaza, Stephanie, and Kenneth Kraft, eds. *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*. Shambhala, 2000.
- Henning, Daniel H., ed. *Buddhism and Deep Ecology*. Xlibris Corp, 2001.
- Payne, Richard, ed. *How Much Is Enough? Consumerism, Buddhism, and the Human Environment*. Wisdom Publications, 2010.
- Cooper, David E., Simon P. James. *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*. Routledge, 2017.
- James, Simon P. *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*. Routledge, 2017.
- Loy, David, ed. *Ecodharma: Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis*. Simon and Schuster, 2019.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ENVIRONMENT FROM PROMINENT BUDDHIST TEACHERS




THE DALAI LAMA 2:51

Caring for Our Global Environment
Dalai Lama 35K views • 4 years ago

His Holiness the Dalai Lama speaking on taking daily responsibility to change our environment in response to global warming in ...


CC



2:00:21

Spirituality & the Environment
Dalai Lama 38K views • Streamed 7 years ago


His Holiness the Dalai Lama and religious leaders will participate in a discussion on "Spirituality & the Environment" at the ...



THE DALAI LAMA 1:34

Environmental Awareness
Dalai Lama 27K views • 8 years ago


His Holiness the Dalai Lama talks about the importance of environmental awareness in this short clip from first session of the Mind ...



1:24:22

Universal Responsibility & the Inner Environment
Dalai Lama 65K views • Streamed 7 years ago


His Holiness the Dalai Lama will speak on "Universal Responsibility & the Inner Environment" at the University of Portland in ...



1:46:26

Inspiration for the Global Environment
Dalai Lama 15K views • Streamed 7 years ago


His Holiness the Dalai Lama will give a talk on "Inspiration for the Global Environment" at the Veterans Memorial Coliseum in ...



2:07:46

Universal Responsibility & the Global Environment
Dalai Lama 11K views • Streamed 7 years ago


His Holiness the Dalai Lama along with political and environmental leaders will discuss "Universal Responsibility & the Global ...



5:28

Environment: The Dalai Lama on the Tibetan Environment
TibetCouncil • 4K views • 12 years ago

During an event hosted by ATC in June 2007, the Dalai Lama spoke about the importance of Tibet's environment.



2:00:21

Spirituality & the Environment - His Holiness the Dalai Lama at University of Portland
WildFilmsIndia 184 views • 1 month ago

His Holiness the Dalai Lama and religious leaders will participate in a discussion on "Spirituality & the Environment" at the ...

Dalai Lama: Caring for Our Global Environment

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRwlygihP7I>

<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/zen-master-thich-nhat-hanh-love-climate-change>

Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh: only love can save us from climate change

Jo Confino

Leading spiritual teacher warns that if people cannot save themselves from their own suffering, how can they be expected to worry about the plight of Mother Earth



▲ Thich Nhat Hanh: we must look beyond our separate selves to save Mother Earth from climate change. Photograph: AP

Zen master **Thich Nhat Hanh**, one of the world's leading spiritual teachers, is a man at great peace even as he predicts the possible collapse of civilisation within 100 years as a result of runaway climate change.

The 86-year-old Vietnamese monk, who has hundreds of thousands of followers around the world, believes the reason most people are not responding to the threat of global warming, despite overwhelming scientific evidence, is that they are unable to save themselves from their own personal suffering, never mind worry about the plight of Mother Earth.

Quick case study: Chinese Buddhists and Greenhouse-Gas Emissions

A recent study in *Contemporary Buddhism* has considered the environmental impact of vegetarianism and Buddhists in China. Greenhouse gas, the major source of increased global warming, is closely linked with livestock production, which is thought to contribute between 18-29.7% of all greenhouse gas emissions.

Meat consumption worldwide has been rising steadily and in China, the changing diet which incorporates more meat has been cause for environmental concern. Chinese Buddhists, both lay and ordained, have various degrees of vegetarian diets and though they comprise a small percentage of the population within China, they have a large global impact.

Tseng concludes that 39.68 million metric tons of CO₂ are offset by Buddhists in China – which is 9.2% of the greenhouse gas emissions from France. He suggests that “the vegetarian practice of Chinese Buddhism should attract more Buddhists or lay people to follow, if the additional environmental and health benefits of vegetarianism could be emphasized.”

Tseng, Ampere A. “Reduction of Greenhouse-Gas Emissions by Chinese Buddhists with Vegetarian Diets: A Quantitative Assessment.” *Contemporary Buddhism*, 2017, 1-19.

Quick case study: Buddhism and the Environment in Bhutan.

- Bhutan is a small and remote kingdom located in the Himalayas between India and China.
- Buddhism was first introduced to Bhutan in the 7th century CE. Vajrayana Buddhism is the state religion and between two-thirds to three-quarters of the Bhutanese population practice Buddhism
- Bhutan is the first and only country to officially be carbon negative. Bhutan's carbon footprint is 2.2 million tons of CO₂, and because of the preservation of forests, the country absorbs around 6-7 million tons of CO₂.
- The region has been identified as a global biodiversity hotspot and counted among the 234 globally outstanding ecoregions of the world and Bhutan has dedicated 72% of its land to forest cover.



Buddhism, Economics, and Environmental Values in Bhutan.

Rather than being eroded by modernization, there may be a synergistic relationship between development and Buddhism in Bhutan. Many middle-aged Bhutanese in rural villages follow religious practices absent a deeper understanding of the more nuanced aspects of Buddhist philosophy. Many farmers suggested that their understanding of Buddhist teachings is increasing through media exposure, government outreach, and their children's education. The following statements are representative of sentiments voiced in nearly every village:

Now, with this generation, people are more like that [religious] because students are learning more from books that the government has supplied so children are learning more about religion. Even the adults are learning about this and becoming educated by non-formal education that is due to the help of the government. (Man, Somrang Village, March 23, 2006)

Compared to the past, there are more religious people now because the teachings are more common. People are more aware now because they can hear teachings through the media [radio and newspapers]. (Woman, Tshochekha Village, March 8, 2006)

At the same time, the Bhutanese government is using Buddhist philosophy as a foundation for its development policies, which attempt to strengthen the country's cultural traditions, avoid the emergence of a society addicted to consumption, and promote environmental values (NEC 1998).

Environmental values do not necessarily require a religious basis. The government's environmental message also highlights economic justifications for conservation, which are relevant in a country that depends on agriculture and hydropower for income. However, Bhutan's Buddhist heritage provides a cultural context in which such environmental values can take root as the country develops, much like the cultural context in Japan (Pierce et al. 1987)

LOOKING DEEPER: CASE STUDIES OF HOW BUDDHISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT OVERLAP IN THAILAND

The current diversity of Buddhism in Thailand is in large part due to the changes that occurred in recent decades. Tensions from urbanization, modernization and economic migration (sometimes called “the crisis of modernity”) spurred religious change in relation to the existing *saṅgha*, (Buddhist order) but also in the popularity of spirit cults and the emergence of new Buddhist groups as well as increased interest in Buddhist ecology and socially engaged Buddhism.

“Buddhism in Thailand today is marked by a cacophony of voices, a pluralism that includes a continuation of traditional forms and practices, a new sectarianism, an efflorescence of magical cults, a multifaceted reform movement, and an internationalism attuned to the emergent global community. Today, Thai Buddhist identity extends beyond the borders of a local community and the nation-state to an increasingly globalized world.”

The interaction and development of Buddhist (both Theravāda and Mahāyāna), Hindu and animist traditions (with the understanding that these were not syncretic, “pure” or removed traditions) which had melded together in Thailand, provides rich opportunities to understand contemporary mixtures of lived beliefs and practices. Because of the deep cultural and institutional connections in Southeast Asia to Buddhism that have developed beginning in the first millennium CE, there are few aspects of Thai life that are not influenced in some way by these traditions.

INTRODUCING BUDDHISM IN THAILAND



While watching these clips, take note of the following:

- **locations/surroundings/buildings**
- **interactions between monastics and lay persons**
- **Material culture (clothing worn, art and artifacts being used)**
- **Rituals and bodily postures**

Buddhist culture: Philosophy pivotal to Thailand's resilience:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsmMnyRbDao>

Morphing Monasteries: Commercial Buddhism in Thailand

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67jYg-TrCik>

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LOOKING DEEPER: CASE STUDIES OF HOW BUDDHISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT OVERLAP IN THAILAND

Two examples of modern developments in response to environmental concerns:

Ordination of trees:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-31650591/buddhist-monk-ordains-trees-to-help-the-environment>

Monks making robes out of recycled plastic:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wu23IkOomw>





LOOKING DEEPER: CASE STUDIES OF HOW BUDDHISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT OVERLAP IN THAILAND

**Introducing the Santi Asoke group in Thailand and their approach to
sustainability**



Huts called “kutis” where monastics and members live



A main building with renovations to make it look more integrated with its natural surroundings



Asoke garden and water tower



Asoke lay members preparing to give food to the monastics



Lay persons giving alms to nuns (called *Sikkhamats*)



Students lining up in an Asoke community



Asoke monks (called *Samanas*) gather with the group founder Bodhirak during the annual festival



Interior of the main hall (*sala*) in Asoke community in northern Thailand



Asoke-designed Buddha



BIRKEN FOREST MONASTERY, CANADA

Theravada Buddhist Monastery based on Thai Forest Tradition,
headed by Ajahn Sona

Our present community is set in the forest about an hour from the nearest significant town, close enough to be available to people who cannot dwell in the forest all the time. It is a place where many come for restoration and where they can learn to make changes in their own urban and suburban environments. At times I have lived in extremely primitive monasteries, without electricity, without running water, with outhouses, and using wood gathered by hand. Such a life is entirely feasible for seasoned monastics, but people who are raised with electric lights, flush toilets, and faucets that produce warm water are unlikely to find that lifestyle applicable in their own. So our community at Birken has many of the modern conveniences but few of the modern inconveniences. We have demonstrated that this can be done, and done relatively easily. Doing so can create a sanctuary for the diverse flora and fauna around us, and an emotional sanctuary for humans that does not require an excessive, frivolous use of resources to accomplish.

Ajahn Sona, "Birken: The Tradition of the Green Forest Monastery" **Green Monasticism: A Buddhist-Catholic Response to an Environmental Calamity**, (2019) 153.





THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND
ATTENTION!

I WELCOME AN OPEN DISCUSSION
AND QUESTIONS FOR THE DURATION
OF OUR TIME TOGETHER