

# ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND COSMOLOGY: A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

*by Brian Edward Brown*

*Abstract.* The ground for a Buddhist environmental ethic is rooted in one of the earliest formulations of Buddhist teaching, the principle of dependent co-origination. This concept provides an ecological perspective where nothing exists in and of itself but only as a context of relations, a nexus of factors whose peculiar concatenation alone determines the origin, perpetuation, or cessation of that thing. The primacy of dependent co-origination is consistent with the subsequent development of Mahayana Buddhism and its concept of Tathata (wondrous Being), as understood through the complementary doctrines of the Tathagatagarbha (embryonic consciousness) and the Alayavijnana (Absolute Consciousness). Together, these specify the ontological and epistemological framework for understanding wondrous Being as the movement toward its own self-revelation: it comes to recognize itself as the essential nature of all things in and through the human mind, which is grounded on and informed by it. Through such a cosmology, coherent with the classical ideals of a bodhisattva, Buddhism reinvigorates the human in an ethic of mindful awareness of, reflection upon, and care for life in its entirety, as the species that can identify the integrity of the whole in the richness of its diverse particularities.

*Keywords:* Alayavijnana (Absolute Consciousness); bodhisattva (enlightened being); Buddha nature; Cittaprakrti (innately pure mind); cosmology; dependent co-origination; Dharmakaya (Cosmic Body of the Buddha); dukha (suffering, unhappiness); Hinayana; independent self-subsistence; Mahayana; self-emergent reality; sentient beings; sunyata (emptiness, nonsubstantiality); Tathagatagarbha (embryonic consciousness); Tathata (wondrous Being, Suchness); Vijnanavada (consciousness-only school).

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We gather here to celebrate the fiftieth annual Star Island Conference sponsored by the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science. Specifically, we convene to address the phenomenon of ecomorality, exploring the thesis advocated by the international Earth Charter that “the protection of the Earth’s vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.”

It is noteworthy that we engage this issue in a year that marks another anniversary directly related to the substance of the theme we are exploring. In 1973 the United States Congress passed the Endangered Species Act, landmark legislation that for the first time accorded rare plants and animals and their habitats protection against extinction. Yet this thirtieth anniversary of its passage has gone largely unheralded. Rather than hailed as an established public consensus for the extension of legal rights to the natural world and the consequent human responsibilities and obligations for its care and integrity, the Act remains tenuous and exposed to political threats that would eviscerate the fundamental protections it has thus far accorded to threatened fauna and flora. Sensitivity to the moral value and legal significance of the nonhuman communities of living beings that interdependently define the planetary coherence that is the biosphere are all too often marginalized by the idiom of an economic exigency that confines value to the immediate satisfaction of human want. Accordingly, commitments to biodiversity, natural habitats, and the preservation of planetary air, waters, and soil frequently are sacrificed to a conception of the natural world as mere resources for consumption and exploitation.

If the significant ecomoral values already articulated and initiated by the Endangered Species Act are to survive and advance beyond the deprecations of the reified orientation that would otherwise relegate its anniversary to a silent dismissal, concerted efforts are needed to identify a cosmology that will enhance and maximize the integrity of the whole earth community. It must be a cosmology capable of sustaining the ethical principles of the Act and other domestic and international expressions of the need for protection for the earth that transcend the narrow confines of human self-interest. Such practical measures for the enhancement of life for the innumerable communities of nonhuman beings will prove resilient and persistent to the degree that they are grounded in an understanding of the universe as a coherent, self-emergent reality.

Only when the human species knows the fundamental organic continuity between the universe, the earth, the emergence of life in its rich plenitude, and the evolution of human consciousness can humanity properly know itself and be appropriately guided in its future relationship with the planet. If in the past the human species has assumed a proprietary and exploitative dominance over the natural world, this has largely been a function of a radical ignorance of its own coherence with and derivative status within the unfolding story of the universe.<sup>1</sup> Not until humanity knows its own significance as the self-conscious modality of the universe will it be

sufficiently dynamized to make the decisive changes required to halt the ongoing deterioration of the earth community. A functional cosmology, in which the universe as primordial self-expressive reality is as much a psychic-spiritual as a physical-material process which becomes conscious of itself in human thought, is the necessity of the present moment (Berry 1988; Berry and Swimme 1992).

Within Mahayana Buddhism, the complementary traditions of the Tathagatagarbha and Alayavijnana represent a cosmology and corresponding anthropology that are strikingly contemporary. As we proceed I shall suggest English equivalents for these terms, but now it may suffice to say that together these two terms define a coherent understanding of the Buddha Nature, the Mahayana belief in the inherent potentiality of all sentient beings to attain the supreme and perfect enlightenment of Buddhahood. Applied to the human realm, they provide the rationale for and description of the Buddhist path as the process in which individual consciousness is transformed into perfect wisdom. The content of that wisdom is reality as a dynamic totality of mutually interdependent causes and conditions, an integral universe of innumerable, mutually interpenetrating, diverse forms and expressions of Tathata—"wondrous Being" or "Suchness"—Buddhism's term for the unqualified, indeterminate absolute reality.<sup>2</sup>

Such an understanding has been deeply rooted and consistently emphasized since the inception of the Buddhist tradition. The principle of *pratyasamutpada*, "dependent co-origination," conveyed the notion that the appearance and coming into being, the existence, of any particular thing is a dynamic, collaborative process of many other things. Nothing exists in and of itself but only as a context of relations, a nexus of factors whose peculiar concatenation determines the origin, perpetuation, or cessation of that thing. A line from the Pali Canon, revered by all the schools of the Buddhist tradition as an original statement of the enlightened founder himself, pithily formulates the fluid contingency which is the very nature of the phenomenal world:

*This being, that becomes;  
from the arising of this, that arises;  
this not becoming, that does not become; from the ceasing of  
this, that ceases.*

(Majjhima-Nikaya 2:32; Samyutta-Nikaya 2:28)

In such a universe, any element is the combined shape and apparent form of a specific number of other elements; its unique nature is to have none; its identity can be defined only as the expressive manifestation, the conditioned representation, of those other elements. Thus it was that the Buddha and the Abhidharma school of his followers taught that the worlds of persons and things were just so many clusters, groupings, literally "heaps" (*skandhas*) of five basic psychophysical elements. *Rupa*, or material form,

is the first and includes the four primary elements of earth, water, fire, and air as well as the five sense organs and their respective sense objects. The second is *vedana*, which represents all sensations—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—experienced through the contact of physical and mental organs with the external world. The third, *samjna*, refers to the perceptual experiences of noticing, naming, and recognizing. The fourth cluster, *samskara*, includes all good, bad, or indifferent dispositions, tendencies, volitions, strivings, impulses, and emotions. The fifth basic element is *vijnana*, or consciousness, as either pure awareness or the process of ideation and thought.

Through these five basic psychophysical elements, or clusters, early Buddhism identified existence as a thoroughly contextual process: no person or thing is an independent, self-subsisting reality but comes into being, persists, and dies as a given function of other factors; life perdures only as a complex aggregation of multiple conditions. From its origin, then, the Buddhist tradition reflects a conceptual framework rooted in the central intuition of an ecological perspective where nothing exists in autonomous isolation but everything is defined as the composite derivative and collaborate synthesis of other elements.

The failure of the human mind to adequately grasp the truth of dependent co-origination, or “the together rising up of all things,” remained the consistent concern of Buddhist analysis. Ignorance persisted on the one hand in the projection of the ego as the discrete, self-consistent, self-individuating, and self-directing center and end of the individual personality and on the other hand as a tenacious belief in the autonomous status and independent sufficiency of all other entities or things. The painful alienation (*dukha*) between oneself and the world of persons and things is a function of that primordial ignorance which imputes a false self-derived and self-contained identity to persons and things.

The object of Buddhist soteriology or process of liberation was to bring that ignorance to an end. Through philosophical analysis and meditative wisdom the tradition never departed from its goal of exposing the radically contextual nature of reality, exposing the component parts, the heap of relations that give a thing its identity. A striking example of the relentless focus applied by Buddhism to reveal the mutual interdependence and combined aggregation that defines the existence of all phenomena is the text called *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* by fifth-century monk Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa. One of the most influential scholastic commentaries, exhaustively detailing the types and methods of meditational praxis, this manual intensively discloses the feature common to its otherwise various subjects. Specifically, it contains innumerable references to, and precise instructions for, meditations on the inevitability and experience of old age, sickness, and death; on the subdivision of the human body into thirty-two parts, each with a specific function and relationship to the

others; on varieties of physical decomposition and decay; on the minute details of breathing and eating; and on a comprehensive correlation of each of the thirty-two parts of the body (both human and nonhuman) with one of the four primary elements of air, earth, fire, and water. But whether the meditations involve macabre concentration on a bloated and festering corpse or a more refined attention to the inflow and outflow of breath, all such exercises share a common purpose: to see reality as it is, as a realm in which nothing arises and comes into being of its own power but whose origin and persistence is a function of conditions, factors which are themselves products of other factors. Unifying the rather peculiar and at times exotic meditations is the universality of organic process. Whether it is the process of breathing, the process of age, disease, and dying, or the processes of decomposition and decay, the *Visuddhimagga's* unremitting exposure of phenomena as organic aggregations of multiple constituent elements is designed to pierce the illusion of a world populated by autonomous beings and entities, extraneous and unrelated.

As Buddhism continued to evolve, around the first century of the common era the Mahayana phase of its development began. The creativity of this period would remain vibrant for some eight hundred years. I want to draw our attention to the significance of two complementary notions that emerged from Buddhist reflection during this time, those of the Tathagatagarbha and the Alayavijnana.<sup>3</sup> In and through these concepts the ecologically sophisticated description of reality in the principle of dependent co-origination assumed the status of a more coherent cosmology. The earlier Hinayana tradition had identified the precise delineations of phenomenal reality as contingent and dependently co-arisen. But, while the intense reductive analysis of persons and things into their clusters of component elements (skandhas) accurately reflected the web of multiple conditions which together define the identity of any particular phenomenon, the tradition neglected the universe as a cohesive, unified reality.

The focus was individual liberation of the mind from the ignorance that projected an illusory significance onto persons and things as absolute, unconditional realities in and of themselves. The goal of the path was to achieve freedom from the suffering and unhappiness (dukha) that arose from the subsequent attachments to those erroneously conceived phenomena.

With the evolution of the Mahayana schools, Buddhist reflection matured to a more expansive interpretation of the path and the nature of wisdom, revealing the truth of dependent co-origination. We shall now rely on a fifth-century text called the *Ratnagotravibhaga* (Takasaki 1966), which became the authoritative source for the theory of the Tathagatagarbha, a term that now needs some decoding. Garbha means "embryo," and Tathagata is an alternative designation for the Buddha. As such, the term came to signify the inherent capacity of all sentient beings to attain the supreme and perfect enlightenment of Buddhahood; all beings are

embryonic Buddhas (Tathagatas) by virtue of their innate endowment with the Tathagatagarbha. I want to avoid the obvious problem of weighing us down here with technical Sanskrit terminology, so I shall refer to the concept of the Tathagatagarbha as “embryonic consciousness,” understood as the innate capacity of all beings to grow into and attain a more perfect, more comprehensive awareness, equivalent to that attributed to the Buddha. Looking for further specifications of this embryonic consciousness, we find important indications of it in a second-century text that became a primary resource for the fifth-century text that we are following (Wayman and Wayman 1974). In that earlier sutra the notion of embryonic consciousness was defined as a beginningless, uncreated, unborn, undying, permanent, steadfast, intrinsically pure reality which, when liberated from the defilements of ignorance that conceal it, becomes manifest as the Cosmic Body of the Buddha (Dharmakaya), coextensive with the entire universe. Put otherwise, the Cosmic Body of the Buddha is referred to by the term “embryonic consciousness” when it remains obscured by ignorance (Wayman and Wayman 1974, 104–5).

The implication of identifying embryonic consciousness as Cosmic Body is critical for articulating an adequate contemporary cosmology from within the resources of the Buddhist tradition. While enhancing the role of human consciousness, primary subjectivity is now understood as grounded in the universe itself in its religious symbolization as the Cosmic Body of the Buddha. The Buddhist path could now be interpreted as more than the mere individual struggle to overcome erroneous misconceptions and extricate oneself from the pains of ensuing attachments. With the theory of embryonic consciousness as Cosmic Body the path assumed its macrophase significance while simultaneously intensifying the value of its earlier microphase dimension. The universe, religiously conceived as the Cosmic Body of the Buddha, journeys to perfect self-consciousness as that totality, in and through the human mind. The progressive insights of the human mind into the nature of reality are the embryonic maturations in ever more exact self-awareness of that Cosmic Body.

As the Buddhist tradition continued to refine this basic cosmology, it further specified the ontological identity of the embryonic consciousness and the Cosmic Body of the Buddha as but variant modalities of one and the same unconditional, indeterminate, all-inclusive, nondifferentiating wondrous Being, or Suchness. The designations of embryonic consciousness and Cosmic Body are merely linguistic distinctions referring to wondrous Being as ultimate reality. When wondrous Being is fully self-conscious of its own integral totality as the primordially pure immaculate essence (dhatu) of all things, is perfectly self-aware as universal body, it is referred to as the Dharmakaya. Until it attains that ultimate self-disclosure, wondrous Being is fully present in all sentient beings in various embryonic stages of self-realization. The movement that characterizes

wondrous Being from embryonic consciousness to Cosmic Body is the necessary emergence of itself to itself in perfect self-knowledge. Indeed, our fifth-century text characterizes wondrous Being as Cittaprakṛti, the innately pure Mind present in all sentient beings through which it recognizes itself as the wholeness of reality in the plurality of its forms.

The wisdom which perfects that ultimate self-recognition is nothing other than the truth of dependent co-origination, now reinforced by the doctrine of nonsubstantiality, or Emptiness (Sunyata). This term represented the insight of a rich literature within Mahayana Buddhism preceding the development of the cosmological scheme that we are here exploring. That literature was collectively designated the Perfection of Wisdom literature (*Prajnaparamita*) and includes such renowned texts as the Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra. The fifth-century *Ratnagotravibhaga* had to incorporate the doctrine of Emptiness from that earlier tradition and did so by correctly identifying Emptiness as equivalent to the fundamental principle of dependent co-origination. All things are empty of their own self-subsisting autonomy but exist as dependently derived and conditionally produced by a universe of multiple, interdepending factors. Far from denigrating the value of phenomenal reality, Emptiness identifies their true nature as dependently co-originating. With that clarification, the text advances its cosmological reflection by reviewing different modes of human insight into the nature of reality as empty. The varying perceptions represent the acuity with which wondrous Being as the innately pure Mind moves from embryonic self-awareness to perfect self-consciousness as the essential nature of all things as one Cosmic Body.<sup>4</sup>

It begins by noting the mindset of that group of persons simply designated “ordinary beings.” Their crass materialism seizes upon persons and things as independent, discrete, self-subsisting entities. In them, wondrous Being’s self-understanding is utterly opaque. Without any clue to the conditional status of phenomena as constituted by a vast web of interdependencies, such persons define themselves in terms of substantial egohood (*ahamkara*), and their relation to other persons and things is largely a function of their craving and possessive self-reference, that is, their sense of “mine” (*mamakara*). Because ordinary beings lack any sensitivity to the relative, determined, and conditional status of phenomena, the notion of nonsubstantiality, or Emptiness (Sunyata), is scarcely conceivable. Among persons with such a degree of ignorance, wondrous Being as innately pure Mind remains fundamentally obscure to itself.

The text then turns its attention to the classical position of the Hinayana tradition, as discussed above, and credits its analytic reflection on and critical awareness of phenomena as dependent and provisional. Differing from the gross superficiality of ordinary beings, representatives of the Hinayana (the *śravakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*) attained a genuine perception of the truth of reality. The adherents of that early Buddhist tradition cor-

rectly understood that persons and things do not exist in and of themselves. As fundamentally qualified by a whole series of causes and conditions, they are indeed empty and totally lacking in the permanence and substantiality accorded them by the ignorant majority.

Despite their initial success in overcoming the illusion of the gross substantiality of existent elements, the Hinayana adepts became entrapped by the very categories of their own analysis. They reduced phenomena to the major constituents of the five heaps or clusters of psychophysical elements. Some within the tradition further delineated those five into yet smaller subclassifications. In the process, however, they tended to devalue phenomenal reality as essentially marked by impermanence (*anitya*), suffering (*dukha*), absence of self (*anatma*), and impurity (*asubha*), and regarded it as a repulsive source of pain and sorrow. Initially more sophisticated and accurate in its insight into the nature of phenomena as derivative and dependent on multiple constitutive factors, the Hinayana erred by denigrating the conditionality and relativity of existence as itself unconditional. By absolutizing the classifications of its own analysis and its consequent descriptions of phenomena as impermanent, painful, without selfhood, and impure into ultimate facts, the Hinayana tradition never perfected the intuition of universal nonsubstantiality, or Emptiness. In its followers the self-comprehension of wondrous Being as the originally pure, undivided essential nature of phenomenal reality is aborted. Blocked by an ignorance that fragmented existence into certain fundamental, irreducible units, wondrous Being never conceives of itself as the undifferentiated coherence of the universal whole.

Following this critique, the text turns to its own tradition to censure the ignorance of certain novices to the Mahayana path. Unlike the "ordinary beings" and the followers of the Hinayana tradition, these are bodhisattvas, "enlightened beings." But among this group, who formally acknowledge the doctrine of Emptiness, are those who seriously misapprehend its genuine significance by conceiving it as some unconditional reality, transcendent and separate from the realm of conditioned phenomena. Reified as something to be attained outside of and beyond mundane reality, Emptiness so conceived implies the denigration of phenomenal existence. Misunderstood and clung to as a reality existing absolutely and independently of the five psychophysical elements and the entire conditioned world that is coextensive with them, such an Emptiness becomes yet another expression of ignorance.

An even more serious delusion occurs when the Mahayana doctrine of Emptiness is misapprehended as signifying utter nihilism. To assume that Emptiness means the actual unreality of phenomena and to dismiss their appearance as the mere product of an illusory imagination is a perverse distortion of the revelatory nature of Emptiness itself.



Here an important clarification must be made about the images so commonly used throughout the Wisdom literature in its teachings about Emptiness. As an example, consider a passage from the Diamond Sutra that refers to the emptiness of phenomena as stars, magical apparitions, clouds, dewdrops, bubbles, lightning flashes, or reflections of the moon in water.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of these similes is not to postulate the absolute nonexistence of things but only to deny the status of phenomena as independent, self-subsisting entities; the similes are comparative statements indicating a certain degree of reality, not unqualified assertions of a total nullity. Rather than denying the existence of such things, the emptiness implied by these images reveals the reality of phenomena as opposed to how they are perceived by the ignorant. Like stars, things, appearing as so many independent, ultimate realities, are distant, unreachable, unattainable, insignificant, and seen only in the darkness of ignorance; like magical apparitions, their semblance of individual, ultimate significance is a deception and the fraudulent pretense of ignorance; like dewdrops, their existence is temporary and evanescent; like bubbles, the factors of experience, while actual, are insubstantial and lasting but a moment; they are like a flash of lightning and as impermanent as clouds.

By disclosing the emptiness of an independent self-subsistence in all things, Emptiness does not imply their absolute nullity, or nonexistence. As the true nature of phenomena, Emptiness does not diminish the value of things but is the very mode by which their essential nature as a mutually interdependent, co-originating whole becomes manifest.

This is the understanding that defines the perspective of mature bodhisattvas. Genuinely enlightened, they skillfully avoid the errors of conceiving Emptiness as some ultimate reality existing independent from and transcendent to phenomenal existence or as something that suggests a total nothingness. There is a consciousness in which wondrous Being attains a precise self-awareness. As Mind innately radiant, wondrous Being becomes actually so in them. Reviewing the vast and diverse realm of phenomenal existence, these bodhisattvas know all things as empty of essential distinction and separate particularity. Instead, their wisdom understands the coherence and totality of all things as one Cosmic Body.

Let us pause for a moment and note the overall significance of our text. Its clarification of wondrous Being in its dual modalities as embryonic consciousness and Cosmic Body is important to a Buddhist ecology. I stated at the outset that an adequate environmental ethic must be grounded upon a cosmology capable of rendering the universe as a coherent whole in which human consciousness is an intrinsic self-expression of that larger reality. Human concern for and protection of the earth community will be more carefully informed and appropriately guided when human consciousness comprehends its own significance as evolved from and dependent upon the entire cosmic process. That the universe may understand

its entirety in its innumerable particularities defines a clear purpose and singular responsibility for human thought and behavior. Such a cosmology and attendant ethic is indicated by the *Ratnagotravibhaga's* general analysis of wondrous Being.

In the text, Buddhism suggests that wondrous Being is the movement toward its own self-revelation. It must come to recognize itself as the essential nature of all things. It can do so in and through the human mind, which, grounded upon and informed by it, attains an ever more exact insight into the nature of reality. From the gross materialism of ordinary beings through the more refined analysis into conditional relativity of the Hinayana tradition, past the mistaken notions of Emptiness of some within the Mahayana, the inherent tendency of wondrous Being to know itself as the perfectly pure essence—the indeterminate, unqualified Suchness of all things—embryonically moves toward perfect self-realization as one universal reality, or Cosmic Body.

In the idiom of an environmental ethic two fundamental positions have here been identified as utterly inadequate for animating and sustaining the behaviors that are necessary for the well-being of the planet and its many communities of beings. There is the obvious failure of the all-too-“ordinary” orientation that remains oblivious to the mutual interdependencies that make the being of one critical for the welfare of the whole. Disturbingly, the depredations from this common ignorance have now become global in their repercussions. The witness of the flower, exemplifying the essential contributory presence of moisture-bestowing clouds; pollinating bees, butterflies, and other insects; the wafting of the seed-bearing winds; and the multitudes of microorganisms nurturing the soil of its roots—that is, the flower as community—is a mode of perception that is all too rare.

But just as injurious is the morally vapid position that induces a neglectful indifference to the fate of the earth in the misguided pursuit of some spiritual reality like the misconceived Emptiness doctrine soundly repudiated by our text. In it, Buddhism castigates those human spiritual ideals that may entrance the mind with a fixation that blunts its awareness of and sensibility to the plight of other beings.

Unquestionably, Buddhism in its long historical evolution and culturally diverse spread is replete with meditational exercises which it unambiguously identifies as therapeutic to the afflictions that plague the human mind. A common dimension of such multiple praxes is the recuperative peace that restores the mind as it frees itself from the obsessions of desires, angers, fears, anxieties, and other preoccupations generated by any number of ego attachments. Learning to cultivate a more peaceful self-liberation by expanding the mind's awareness beyond the narrow barriers of its own self-absorption is a singular benefit and joy that Buddhism has always celebrated.

But our text cautions against infatuation with meditative states or notions of spiritual perfection that would denigrate the value of the earth community and lead us to abdicate responsibility for its fate. In this repudiation we hear the twofold dynamic of Buddhist meditative experience: stopping and seeing. To stop the mind in its painful compulsions that emerge from its confining and narrow self-addictions we must have a receptive, open attentiveness to and a clear vision of the presence and condition of absolutely everything in our world. The silent cultivation of uncluttered awareness realized on one's meditation cushion is a highly ethical preparedness for penetrating insight and sensitive responsiveness to both the wisdom and suffering of all things conceived as one's body. For that is what the cosmology of our text has instructed.

Now, having clarified somewhat the way in which cosmology implicates ethical concern and behavior, I briefly turn to another tradition of Buddhism known as the *Vijnanavada*, or *Consciousness Only* school, which reinforced the notion of reality as a self-reflecting whole and the status of human consciousness as intrinsic to that process.<sup>6</sup> According to this school, the universe in the plurality of its forms is the self-manifestation of wondrous Being through its designation as *Alayavijnana*, which I render *Absolute Consciousness* rather than its more literal and common designation as "storehouse consciousness." More specifically, the tradition teaches that the *Absolute Consciousness* contains universal seeds (*bijas*), which, as archetypal self-determinations, are actively and persistently projected by the *Absolute* as the innumerable forms of the phenomenal universe. The physical shapes and contours of the cosmos are in fact the universal self-particularizations of consciousness. The apparent solidity and uniform stability of these forms by no means invalidates their origin in and persistence as mere consciousness. The abiding character of matter attests to the uninterrupted continuity of the *Absolute's* self-manifestation.

The *Vijnanavadin* (*Consciousness Only*) tradition does not impugn physical consistency and concrete tangibility. Instead, these are the very forms in which *Absolute Consciousness* manifests itself. It is not the material solidity of empirical phenomena but only the notion or idea of their externality (apart from consciousness) that is disputed by the doctrine of *Consciousness Only* (see Brown [1991] 1994, 204–5; Chatterjee 1975, 74–75). The error is to misunderstand the primordial and sustaining reality of the *Absolute Consciousness* and to interpret the perceived objectivity of things as evidence of their independent self-subsistence. Yet that is what happens. Because of an inherent ignorance, individual phenomenal consciousness regards itself as an independent autonomous ego. Even though it evolves out of and is grounded upon the *Absolute*, phenomenal consciousness fails to understand its own derivative status.<sup>7</sup> Instead of recognizing the universal *Absolute Consciousness* as the generic animating principle of all things, the phenomenal mind misapprehends it as the

uniquely particular and exclusive center of its own discrete self-identity (i.e., as an atman). It misconceives itself as self-derived.<sup>8</sup> This mode of self-delusion (atmamoha) is accompanied by a correspondent self-conceit (atmamana) and self-love (atmasneha) in which the individual considers itself superior to all others in its possession of a unique selfhood, to which it develops a profound attachment.

Such fundamental misapprehension by the phenomenal consciousness and its consequent distortion of its own identity as an independent, self-subsistent reality in turn pervades its perception of all other persons and things. Its constant self-regard as an autonomous ego instinctively transfers to its apprehension and interpretation of the phenomenal world, which is then invested with a similar degree of self-reality. If the psychophysical organism is considered to be a discrete, self-determining center of unique personal identity (an atman), it is so over against a plurality of similarly unrelated egos and a world of unconnected, self-standing objects and things (dharma).

This coordinate form of ignorance, which interprets the phenomenal universe as constituted by innumerable discrete particularities, independent from one another and from consciousness, is repudiated by the Vijñānavāda tradition's continuity with the central intuition of dependent co-origination that had animated the entire development of Buddhist thought from its earliest expression. While earlier traditions had identified the dynamic through which all things come into being as derivatively dependent on a host of multiple conditions, the Vijñānavāda stressed that their contingent interdependency is rooted even more fundamentally in the ultimacy of Absolute Consciousness, which projects and sustains the phenomenal universe as its own ideal manifestation and transformation.

But if phenomenal consciousness dependently originated from and is actively sustained by Absolute Consciousness, the reverse is no less true: the Absolute attains plenary self-awareness as the indeterminate, unconditional nature of all things in and through the human mind. Collectively, the forms of the phenomenal universe and of human individuality are the images (nimitta) in and through which Absolute Consciousness appears to and recognizes itself.<sup>9</sup> Because the structure of the phenomenal consciousness evolves from immanent, archetypal self-patterning (bijas) of the Absolute Consciousness, and because that phenomenal consciousness exists as the differentiated identity of the Absolute Consciousness, the perceptions of the phenomenal consciousness are the perceptions of the Absolute.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in the cosmology expressed in the complementary notions of the Tathāgatagarbha (embryonic consciousness) and Alayavijñāna (Absolute Consciousness), the significance of the human mind is paramount. Even though it has an instinctive tendency to fragment reality into discrete, unrelated particularities of persons and things, that inherent ignorance is not its essential nature (svabhava) nor its essential mode of activity (akara).

Rather than being an absolute and definitive state, ignorance is but a qualified condition or an associated mental activity (*caitta*) of the human mind.<sup>11</sup> While human consciousness may be originally deluded about the nature of itself and the universe, it is not itself essentially delusive; it may well be the vehicle through which ignorance is manifested and perpetuated, but it is at the same time the very locus within which wisdom realizes its perfection. Just as the structure of human consciousness originates and assumes its form from the innate self-determinations (*bijas*) of the Absolute Consciousness, so too does the ignorance that accompanies it germinally develop from within the very ground of the *Alayavijnana*. But concomitant to and simultaneous with the seeds of ignorance there likewise exist innate seeds of wisdom (see Tsang 1973, 531–33), which actively inform the mind through various stages of progressive illumination. Moving from the initial stage of “moral provisioning” through the stages of “intensified effort” and “unimpeded penetrating understanding,” wisdom embryonically matures, instructing the mind in the true nature of all things as *pratityasamutpada*, a universe of mutually interdependent coexistences emerging from and sustained by Absolute Consciousness.<sup>12</sup> In this process, wisdom perfects itself as it transforms phenomenal consciousness in a twofold form. The tenacity of ignorance in its projection of a multiplicity of independent, autonomous entities dissipates through the mature illumination of the universal equality wisdom (*Samatajnana*) and the profound contemplation wisdom (*Pratyaveksanajnana*). Conjointly, they illumine the mind, that it may discern precisely the unique features and peculiar characteristics of all things while at the same time comprehending their complete equality as the self-manifesting forms of wondrous Being.

What is critical to note from the perspective of an environmental ethic is that human consciousness is a product of neither ignorance nor wisdom; its natural condition is rather the very interplay of their mutual presence. As indicated in the theory of the *Tathagatagarbha*, Absolute Reality must come to know itself in the totality of its plenitude as the unconditional, indeterminate wondrous Being of all things. It can do so because, as Absolute Consciousness, it projects the plurality of the phenomenal universe as its own self-determinations, which it then recognizes as itself in and through human consciousness. Thus, the human mind, itself derivative and conditioned, nevertheless assumes its authentic status as the self-conscious modality of the Absolute. That the Absolute Consciousness “seeds” the mind with both ignorance and wisdom suggests that phenomenal consciousness is defined as the active interplay between the two. Fundamentally oriented toward and engaged in the understanding of the universe of which it is a part, human consciousness realizes itself in the necessary dialectic between an ignorance that perceives oneself and the plurality of all other persons and things as essentially discrete self-subsistent realities and the wisdom that delineates the emptiness and nonsubstantiality (*sunyata*) of

all things, comprehending their innumerable mutual interdependencies in their integrity as one universal body (the Dharmakaya). This movement of the mind from ignorance to wisdom, from crass materialism to the universe as sacred body, is the very movement of Absolute Consciousness from an implicit to an explicit self-awareness. Such a cosmology, defining the coincidence of human understanding of reality as the self-intuition of that reality, resonates from within the Buddhist tradition with the indications of contemporary physics and biology. It confirms their image of a primary reality that actualizes a concrete self-awareness in human reflection. Together with them it advocates urgently challenging humanity to free itself from distorted arrogance, to recognize itself as having originated in dependence on a reality more than itself, and to understand that it is conditioned by and coexists in dynamic interdependence with all things. Such a cosmology, grounded in universal Emptiness, would reinvigorate humanity, in an ethic of reflection upon and care for life in its entirety, as the species which can identify the integrity of the whole in the richness of its diverse particularities.

The four classical vows of the bodhisattva well express the serious commitment demanded by such an ethic at this moment in earth history. In their conceptualization and embodiment they may appropriately reinforce and illustrate the central intuition and significant challenges confronting the high ideals and practical concerns of the Endangered Species Act, the anniversary of which this reflection initially celebrated. Fully awakened to the severity and scope of planetary degradation, compassionately responsive to the suffering of vast communities of living beings whose identity he understands as his own, the bodhisattva affirms the fearless resolve to protect and liberate. Undaunted by a deep-rooted collective ignorance and greed and nurtured by the wisdom of the ten thousand things (dharma) of the natural world, he unreservedly dedicates himself to the consequences of living in a universe that he daily embraces as his own body.

It is perhaps fitting to conclude with the words of the vow itself, intoned on a daily basis throughout the Mahayana Buddhist community: "Beings are numberless, I vow to free them. Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them. Dharma-teachings are boundless, I vow to perceive them. The Enlightened Way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it."

## NOTES

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1. Thomas Berry is the seminal thinker who has interpreted human cultural history and indicated its future development within the larger dynamics of the universe. See, for example, "The New Story" and his other penetrating essays in Berry 1988. More recently, he joined mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme in an extraordinary collaboration (Berry and Swimme 1992).

2. Generally translated as "Suchness" or "Thusness," Tathata has been more recently rendered as "wondrous Being" by Masao Abe in his profoundly instructive collection of essays, *Zen and Western Thought* (1985).

3. The doctrine of the Tathagatagarbha is found in the *Srimala Sutra* and elaborately developed in the *Ratnagotravibhaga*. The *Lankavatara Sutra* and the later *Cheng Wei-Shih Lun* define and explain the concept of the Alayavijnana.

4. See chapters 10 and 11 of the *Ratnagotravibhaga* and Brown [1991] 1994, chap. 6.

5. See the *Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita* in Conze 1972, 68, and Brown [1991] 1994, 150–51.

6. The *Ratnagotravibhaga* delineated Tathata (Suchness) as the universal, immaculate essence of phenomenal existence, which as embryonically present in all sentient beings is referred to as the Tathagatagarbha. That the nature of Tathata is to determine itself in the coherence of its universal integrity was indicated by Cittaprakrti as a cognate expression of Tathagatagarbha. This designation became explicit in the *Lankavatara Sutra's* identification of the Tathagatagarbha as the Alayavijnana, or Absolute Consciousness. The *Lankavatara Sutra* in turn became a critical source for the development of the Vijnanavada as exemplified for the present essay by the *Cheng Wei-Shih Lun* of Hsuan Tsang. See Brown [1991] 1994, 179–81; Tat 1973.

7. According to the Vijnanavadin tradition, human consciousness consists of a sevenfold modality. The first five sensorial consciousnesses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching represent the simple awareness of the respective data appearing before consciousness. It is the sixth, manovijnana, or mind consciousness, which is the unifying principle of that raw sense information as apprehended by the first five. It accounts for the constitution of objects within consciousness and their intelligibility or rationality. As the consciousness that perceives ideas, it is the faculty of formal conceptualization. Intellection proper is attributed to the seventh consciousness, the manas. It systematically categorizes information and acts upon it, pondering, calculating, and directing means to specific ends. Thus, it is the organ of conative intentionality and the source of ego identity, with its attendant craving, thirst, and desire. All seven modes of consciousness are grounded upon and evolve from the Alayavijnana.

8. This form of ignorance, atmagraha, is peculiar to the manas. See Brown [1991] 1994, 215ff.

9. For a more detailed explanation of nimitta as the self-manifested images of the Alayavijnana, see Brown [1991] 1994, 217ff.

10. According to the *Cheng Wei-Shih Lun*, the Alayavijnana and the sevenfold empirical consciousness are said to be simultaneous with and mutually present to each other and thus are neither identical to nor different from one another. See Tsang 1973, 131–33.

11. For a clarification of the distinction between svabhava and caitta as applied to consciousness in the *Lankavatara Sutra* and the *Cheng Wei-Shih Lun*, see Brown [1991] 1994, 223–24.

12. For a detailed explanation of the five stages, see Tsang 1973, 665–809.

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