

# **Green Dharma**

Clearing the Pollution of Our Minds to Save the Environment

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the relationship in Mongolia between Buddhism and the environment, as well as the condition of that relationship, the environmental work being done out of the motivation of Buddhist beliefs, and how to improve the environmental condition through Buddhism. Great understanding of this topic was obtained through interviews with Buddhist monks, of both Mongolian and Western origins and from both urban Ulaanbaatar and the rural countryside of Mongolia. Perhaps some of the greatest understanding came from simple everyday observations and interactions with the Buddhist community. Concrete textual information came from reading endless Buddhist sutras, scholarly books, essays, and articles to support the views from interviews and observations.

This paper shows that the connection between Buddhism and the environment is incredibly strong and even inseparable. By simply acting out of true compassion and wisdom, the two basic and central tenants of Buddhism, one will naturally treat the environment with great respect; with the exact same respect one would show one's own mother, as is further explained. This intrinsic and profoundly strong relationship makes Buddhism an excellent path for solving environmental problems. And considering the state of the environment in Mongolia, a country with a majority population of Buddhists, this path is ultimately the best way to enact change.

However, this paper also addresses how the weak condition of Buddhism in the new post-Soviet materialistically driven Mongolia is not yet able to have the same kind of positive effect amongst the people as in the past. However, the research does also show the impressive work that is being done by the Buddhist community in the environmental field. Of most importance though is the examination of how through personal change, following Buddhist beliefs, the greatest environmental change can occur. The revival of Buddhism as a powerful spiritual force in Mongolians' lives is crucial to the revival of the beautiful natural environment around them.

Dedication:

This paper is dedicated to Maitreya Buddha.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction	Pg. 6
Key Terms	Pg. 13
Methodology	Pg. 14
Environmental Reality Of Mongolia	Pg. 17
The State of Buddhism in Mongolia	Pg. 19
The Relationship Between Buddhism and the Environment	Pg. 23
<i>Dependent Origination</i>	Pg. 25
<i>Karma</i>	Pg. 28
Why the Relationship is Struggling	Pg. 30
Current Action	Pg. 35
The Next Step	Pg. 40
Conclusion	Pg. 44
Works Cited	Pg. 48

## Introduction

The well-known environmental problems that plague our planet continue to grow more and more dangerous. As the world population rapidly approaches seven billion people<sup>1</sup>, humans are putting a greater toll on the environment than ever before. It is evident that “biodiversity is in decline at all levels and geographical scales”<sup>2</sup>, as the *Global Outlook* report from the United Nations has made clear. The earth’s warming atmosphere has resulted in glacial melt and the relocation and reduction of species’ natural habitats. As industry continues its ceaseless march, air and water pollution continue to pose devastating problems for the natural world and local communities alike. Oil spills, illegal hunting and fishing, and trash dumping are slowly destroying the earth’s oceans and lands. These are but only a handful of issues, but all in all, the natural environment, as well as the people that inhabit it, are in dire trouble.

In many ways, Mongolia is a microcosm of the global environmental crisis. The issues Mongolians face are unique and country-specific, but similar to environmental issues throughout the world, they are severe, and they demand attention and action. Mongolia’s specific environmental issues of desertification, short water supply, dirty air, and trash pollution are especially interesting because of the country’s unique stage of development and modernization. To understand the complexity of the contemporary environmental situation in Mongolia, it is

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/popclockworld.html>

<sup>2</sup> Global Outlook, 2. Summary of the Second Edition of the Biodiversity Outlook. <http://www.cbd.int/doc/meetings/cop/cop-08/official/cop-08-12-en.pdf>

necessary to examine the stages of westernization that the country has undergone. The first major form of western influence came under the name of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Before the Soviet presence, Mongolia was largely unaffected by the western world. Traditions, customs, religions (Buddhism and shamanism), and most things intrinsic to Mongolian life prospered. After 70 years of Soviet occupation and their authoritarian dictatorship style of governance, however, many of these aspects of traditional Mongolia were suppressed and lost from the popular consciousness. The influence of the Soviet transition and the degradation of Mongolian culture was complex and multifaceted, but it ultimately set Mongolia on a path towards serious environmental problems. It should be noted, however, that although the Soviets can be blamed in hindsight for so much damage, they did do an excellent job at the time of environmental protection and education. Students were taught about environmental issues and the state mandated one day per week as a day for all citizens to clean up trash from the streets. Many elders in Ulaanbaatar today look back at the Soviet era with nostalgia for the cleaner city and greater governmental efficiency, especially regarding the environment.

Although there was better environmental consciousness on the part of the government under the Soviets, there was also a more complex and deep-seated influence within the loss of traditional Mongolian culture through the transition to westernization. The Soviets introduced western-style living and consumer goods (especially plastic ones) on a scale never seen before in Mongolia. They encouraged the development of Ulaanbaatar into a Western city, a city seeking to

move nomadic herding ger dwellers into high-rise apartment buildings. These changes all detrimentally impacted the environment. But even this aspect of Soviet influence isn't the most crucial aspect of Mongolia's westernization process. The greatest influence that the Soviet's had was in their withdrawal in the early 1990s. The Soviets had introduced a new standard of living for Mongolians, particularly urban Mongolians, and when Mongolia was finally given independence, the most natural and enticing path to follow was forward into greater development and modernization. It is understandable on the part of the Mongolians for wanting to develop further and join the western world. I believe blame can be placed, however, on the extremely drastic transition into a capitalist and democratic nation with the collapse of the USSR.

The very rapid transition from Soviet control to wide open, unhindered capitalism is perhaps the fundamental root of many of the environmental problems Mongolia faces today, at least those which aren't predominantly connected to less controllable global factors, namely global warming. The greatest environmental problems Mongolia faces today are desertification, diminishing water supply, air pollution in Ulaanbaatar and other larger cities, and trash pollution. I have little doubt that these problems existed both before and during Soviets occupation. However, I have even less doubt that these problems have become grossly magnified and further widespread with the sudden and largely uncontrolled onset of capitalism.

Capitalism, the quest to maximize capital most often in the form of material goods and money, is a profound force. Once a nation sets down this economic



path in order to develop and work in conjunction with the rest of the modern world, the benefits can be extraordinary just as the costs can be terribly detrimental. As a system that strictly adheres to the values of individualism and liberalism, capitalism is often considered to devolve into an inherently ruthless, often chaotic economic system. Unfortunately for Mongolia, the transition to such a system coincided with a population which, for the past two or three generations, had been denied the ability to practice any religion or cultural traditions. These religions and traditions were integral to Mongolians' profound respect and stewardship of the land for centuries before the arrival of the Soviets. The Soviets were partially able to maintain environmental cleanliness by their state-imposed measures, but when Mongolians were left without that domineering state and very little religious or traditional knowledge, the environment took the brunt of the transitional damage.

The suppression of Buddhism resulted in perhaps the greatest damage for Mongolia in relation to changing views of the environment and people's relationship to it. Buddhism officially came to Mongolia in the 14<sup>th</sup> century under the Yuan Dynasty when Kublai Khan made it the official religion of the empire. Since that time, it has been an integral aspect of Mongolian life, especially an integral part of Mongolians' respect for the natural world. It is also necessary to mention here that, historically, Mongolian care for nature has also been heavily influenced by the cultural practice of shamanism, a very decentralized spiritual practice with heavy ties to the environment. Shamanism has impacted all Mongolians, even Buddhist monks, for it is an influence which is not doctrinal, but

rather just a part of Mongolian life. However, just as Buddhism was suppressed by the Soviets and lost from Mongolian culture, so was shamanism and it is just now recovering some of its influence. Because Shamanism is so esoteric and unorganized, Buddhism is the best and most natural vehicle for making people aware of the damage they inflict upon the earth. As will be explained in greater detail, Buddhism doesn't teach how to solve environmental issues or even tell followers to respect the environment because of the danger it is in. Rather, the environmentalism that Buddhism teaches is purely intrinsic. By learning and truly following only the most basic teachings of the Buddha, one will treat the environment with the same compassion as one would treat one's own mother.

It is important to examine why Buddhism is such a strong protector, educator, and activist concerning the environment. The more practical examination, however, is why this connection is failing in Mongolia today, as well as how to recover Buddhism to help address Mongolia's many environmental issues. The relationship between Buddhism and the environment is both unique and essential to contemporary Mongolia. As such, this relationship deserves greater attention. This realm of study and thought is quite new to Mongolia. Within the Buddhist monastic community, it may have always been obvious and intrinsic. But for scholars and everyday laity, this union of environmental issues and religion is a new concept emerging into the popular consciousness.

There has been a moderate amount of literature published on the topic by some leading lamas and scholars, many Buddhist communities (particularly in the West) actively pursue environmental agendas, and high ranking lamas throughout the

world often speak extensively on the relationship between the Dharma and nature. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Lama Yeshe, the founder of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), are all powerful and very influential speakers and advocates of environmental preservation and action. One leading Buddhist scholar from Japan, Suichi Yamamoto, has written a few essays on the environment-Buddhism relationship. His work and comprehension of the material is quite extensive as he delves into some of the trickiest and most subtle points within schools of Buddhist philosophy on consciousness. A lay couple from Canada, the Feuersteins, have written a book, free for download on the internet, entitled “Green Dharma” which goes into great depth on modern environmental problems and how Buddhism can relate to these problems. I have seen and briefly perused many other books and magazine pieces that also deal with this subject; however I have found many of these publications to be rather repetitive and basic, especially once one is familiar with environmental issues and Buddhism. Of greater note is the lack of material on this subject with particular focus on Mongolia. There has been much written on Buddhism’s revival in Mongolia in the post-Soviet era and much researched on the environmental problems that plague Mongolia, but very little done on the combination of these two topics. In this critical time of immense change within both the environmental and religious sectors of Mongolia, I find it incredibly necessary to examine this relationship in greater depth.

Through this study, I hope to explain the environmental problems of Mongolia to a greater extent. I will address possible root causes of those problems as well as

some historical context. But of greater importance is the inextricable relationship which Buddhism shares with the natural world. This research explores that connection in great depth, as well as the crucial issue of why that connection is so weak at this point in history. Further, I hope to offer areas of further research on this subject that will benefit both the environmental movement and the revival of Buddhism in Mongolia.

## Key Terms

Dharma: the foundation of Buddhism, the broad term for the teachings of the Buddha

Duality: the misled view of unenlightened beings as seeing the world from the vantage of a divide between a “me” and the rest of world. ‘Non-duality’ is seeing the reality that all things are in fact reliant upon one another and intricately connected.

Emptiness: not literally void of anything, but rather the recognition that nothing is permanent in this world, everything is always changing. Thus, everything is “empty” of permanence

Environment: in this paper, it is everything natural in the world: land, water, air, anything and everything in nature (used synonymously with ‘nature’ and ‘natural world’)

Hambolam: the Head Lama of a monastery

Laity: followers of Buddhism not in the Sangha (also referred to as ‘lay people’)

Ovoo: a pile of rocks usually on mountain tops (exactly same structure as a cairn) but which serves as a kind of shrine and place of worship

Lama: a member of the monastic community (synonymous in this paper with ‘monk’)

Sangha: the monastic community

## Methodology

For this research project I used four methods for collecting information. By doing the predominant amount of my research in Ulaanbaatar, I was able to conduct many personal interviews, often in English for better clarity and direct transfer of information. I interviewed lamas, both Mongolian and Western, as well as members of the laity. I was also able to conduct interviews via translation during my trip to Amarbayasgalant Monastery. Secondly, I found many textual resources on or related to this topic. I drew from many libraries in Ulaanbaatar, including the American Center for Mongolian Studies (ACMS) and the Foundation for the Preservation of Mahayana Buddhism (FPMT), as well as from many online resources. Thirdly, lectures and informal interviews/discussions with Buddhist monks were very helpful and informative. Finally, I relied upon pure personal observation and experience. By living with Buddhist Mongolians, visiting multiple monasteries throughout Ulaanbaatar as well as Amarbayasgalant Monastery in Selenge Aimag (province), and simply living everyday life in Mongolia, I gained invaluable insight into both Buddhist culture and the status of the environment.

The strategy for conducting my research was to learn as much about Buddhism as possible and to spend as much time as I could around the Buddhist community, especially the monastic community. As Buddhism, and most Eastern religions, is incredibly foreign to a Western-trained mind even with some academic knowledge, it was very important for my research and deeper understanding of the material to delve into the religion. Buddhism is a very complex religious philosophy so to

best understand the subtlest aspects that relate to the environment, it is necessary to understand how they work within the Buddhist religion in its entirety. I also sought to talk with lamas of differing viewpoints and backgrounds. By speaking with both Western and Mongolian monks, 70 year old and 17 year old monks, monks from various sub-traditions within Buddhism, and monks from the countryside as well as from Ulaanbaatar, I was able to ensure my exposure to various and diverse facets of the relationship between Buddhism and the environment. The same was true for my textual resources, as I read literature across the spectrum: original sutras translated into English, magazine articles, Western authored and Eastern authored books, and online references from all over the globe.

I ran into two major obstacles while conducting my research. The most difficult obstacle to deal with was translation. I was able to interview some very amazing Mongolian lamas, but they either had no, or very limited, English ability and I had even more limited Mongolian ability. But because much of the material I was asking about was often quite complicated and only well understood by the monastic community, much of that information couldn't be communicated as deeply as desired, even with the help of a good translator. It was also difficult to find sutras that were translated into English, especially considering that it is rare to even find texts in Mongolian. The second obstacle was due to the complexity of the material. It was very difficult at times to fully understand the concepts that I was being told about or reading about. This made it all the more imperative and motivating to immerse myself further into the religion and learn as much as I

could.

It is also important to mention here the biases I hold which have probably influenced my research and writing of this paper, no matter how hard I have tried through this whole project to suppress those biases. I inevitably have a very Western-trained mind so the mindset, philosophies, and lifestyles of Mongolians are not only very foreign to me, but also very appealing as they are a fascinating and welcome change from those prevalent in the United States. I am also very conscious of the natural environment and consider environmental issues to be a high priority. Perhaps the largest bias, however, is one which I have developed during my time here in Mongolia. With some limited Buddhist education at my college in the States, I have truly dove headfirst into Buddhism and now after my experiences and education here in Mongolia, I would actually label myself as Buddhist, if a label must be placed. This could obviously present some challenges in maintaining a strictly academic approach to this project. However, I believe that I have persistently and successfully kept personal beliefs and other mentioned biases quite separate from my research. I believe my Western oriented mind, strong academic upbringing and life, and previous religious views, or lack thereof, have actually helped me to maintain an appropriate academic view and analysis of my research.

### Environmental Reality of Mongolia

Environmental degradation is extremely apparent and hard-hitting in Mongolia. As the climate changes on the global level, Mongolia suffers less



precipitation. The result is drier land and less water supplied to the nation's rivers and lakes. Mongolia thus faces serious desertification which, in turn, affects the essential livelihood of herders and all people of the countryside. Animals tear up more land and eat any and all remaining grass across the steppe. This is especially true with goats, which are particularly damaging to the land. As the world market for cashmere products continues to grow, herders are recognize this sector as an opportunity for great immediate financial and material gains. They are increasing their goat herds, but in turn are doing more damage to the land. With diminishing grass, the land turns into pure desert. Winds blow the sand into towns and into other fertile lands, ruining them as well, and allowing more treacherous sandstorms to occur which may prevent a herder from doing his work for an entire day.

These types of problems in the countryside, water supply and desertification, cause many people from the countryside to migrate to the cities, in particular Ulaanbaatar, in search of greater profits and a more stable way of life. As is evident upon first flying or driving into Ulaanbaatar, an entire suburban network of ger districts has sprung up due to this massive migration. The rapid growth of these ger districts over the past ten years has resulted in immense environmental problems. Because of the poverty of these areas, coal is the cheapest and most popular form of fuel for cooking and heat. But the resulting filthy smoke from burning so much coal throughout the expansive valley has given Ulaanbaatar tremendous problems with air pollution and the nickname "Smoke-baatar".<sup>3</sup> Smog is by far the most complained-about environmental problem in the city, and it also

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<sup>3</sup> N. Baterdene. April, 2009.

has the most immediate impact on people's health.

The final major environmental issue Mongolia faces, especially in Ulaanbaatar, is trash pollution. With the sudden onset of capitalism in the early 1990s, there also came the introduction of mass amounts of plastic goods, wrappers, and containers. Plastic itself is nothing new to the country, but without the Soviet government-imposed one day per week devoted to cleaning up the streets, trash now lays littered everywhere. Without adequate infrastructure to handle the proper disposal and recycling of all the litter, it is cast out onto the streets and into nature. The largely dried-up riverbeds that run through the city are perpetually filled with plastic bags and food wrappers. It is not uncommon to see someone eat an orange and simply leave the peel lying on the sidewalk or, and this is perhaps the most disheartening of all, to see a little girl finish a lollipop and throw the stick at her feet and continue walking. In the countryside, the sudden massive influx of plastic is also problematic. Herders often simply burn their wrappers and other trash. And glass vodka bottles are simply left shattered out on the steppe. This lack of concern and awareness causes much of the harm to the environment. More importantly, the lack of education about the wrongness of these actions is most critical. The environmental problems that Mongolia faces are tremendous. Most importantly, and alarmingly, these issues are only becoming worse. The consequences of these, and new problems, will only continue in the absence of drastic and concerted change.

The State of Buddhism in Mongolia

During these past twenty years there have been many interesting developments within Mongolia in parallel with increased detrimental human impact on the environment. One especially intriguing development is the revival of Buddhism as the dominant majority religion. Oppressed along with all other religions during Soviet domination, Buddhism lost its strength amongst the people. Religious education, rituals and traditions were prevented; sacred texts and ancient monasteries were destroyed. Two full generations grew up under the governance of an official atheist state with no freedom of religion. When Mongolia opened up to the world in the 1990s, so too did religion. Along with an influx of western religions that continues en force today, Buddhism reemerged, yet had to start anew in many ways. Only the eldest members of the population, especially the ex-monks who managed to survive the purges of 1937, still held any knowledge of what Mongolian Buddhism was like before the Soviets came. Very few monasteries were left and only Gandan monastery was left open and operating throughout, although it was purely an attempt by the Soviets to feign cultural and religious sensitivity. As a result, Mongolia was essentially a blank canvas. Although many Mongolians were drawn to various western religions, most returned to the Buddhist tradition of their grandparents and great-grandparents. Today 50% of Mongolians identify themselves as Buddhist, although 40% don't identify with any particular religion, and Christians, Shamans, and Muslims make up the remaining 10%.<sup>4</sup> Buddhism's challenge over the past 20 years has been a game of catch-up. The religion has had to completely educate a largely "atheist"

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mg.html>

population of monks and nuns just in order to get the institution up and running again. As Baasansuren Lam, the Hambolam of Erdene Zuu Monastery in Kharkhorin, noted, it took a huge ten year span, from 1991 until 2001, just to get the religion back up to speed in Mongolia. As a result, monasteries have only recently been able to reemerge as institutions of spiritual leadership for the lay population, as well as maintain the same kind of community involvement that monasteries typically have.<sup>5</sup>

At Amarbayasgalant Monastery in northern Mongolia just 100 kilometers due west of Darkhan, another interesting phenomenon of the Buddhism revival is occurring. The monastery is the third biggest in Mongolia and one of the few with monks who live within the monastery's walls. But of greatest interest is the age of their monks. Besides the core of adult lamas, there is a very large contingent of about twenty young monks between the ages of eight and eighteen. As monasteries, such as Amarbayasgalant, work to achieve the size and influence they had before the Soviet era, they are encouraging families in the area to send their children, or one of their children, into the monastic life, a practice which was common before the oppression. The future for monasteries with such large and youthful groups of monks is promising. In twenty, or even ten, years those monasteries will once again have large and well-educated life-long members of the Sangha.

The two most crucial factors affecting the state of Buddhism in Mongolia are economics and education. Mongolia has been struck with an intense fever of

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<sup>5</sup> Hambo Lama Baasansuren. 5/9/2009.

materialism and intrigue with the benefits of capitalism. The reality is that capitalism, and human ignorance, hatred, and greed (the Three Poisons as taught by the Buddha) which underlie it, have easily dominated any attempts to develop Mongolia in a responsible and environmentally conscious way. Before the Soviet period, Mongolians had incredibly strong ties to nature that followed through into the practice of their daily lives. These ties can be largely attributed to the nationwide prevalence of shamanist and Buddhist religious beliefs. There is indeed strong devotion by Mongolian Buddhists today, but as Lama Konchog Norbu points out, there is very little education on the religion to match this devotion. Very few lay people, especially among the younger generations, truly understand what it is they are doing when they, for example, go to the huge Buddha statue at Gandan to pray and give offerings.<sup>6</sup> Without a good education of the religion and the teachings of the Buddha, people may at one moment bow and pray to an image of the Buddha seated beneath his bodhi tree of enlightenment, surrounded by pristine, green forest and wild deer. Upon leaving the temple, however, they would not think twice about throwing a plastic wrapper on the ground.

As mentioned above, Mongolians are heavily influenced by their shamanist traditions and beliefs, as well as many other cultural superstitions that have generated and become widespread over the years. Mongolians are very practical people and will use any means to get by or accomplish something. This same trait holds true when it comes to religion and spirituality. My homestay father in Dadal soum, Ch. Batbold, told me that he and his family were both Buddhist and

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<sup>6</sup> Lama Konchog Norbu. 5/22/2009.

shamanist. They only go to the local monastery once, maybe twice, a year to pray and make offerings in the hopes for a good year or season for their animals, the quality of the grassland, and the health of the family. They will go additional times if one of them is especially sick or having troubles, but if a lama cannot help them or conditions don't improve, they don't think twice about going to a local shaman for his or her help.<sup>7</sup> The attitude and practice of my host father is very much prevalent amongst many Mongolians today. Buddhism in Mongolia just doesn't have the same kind of strength and total devotional foothold amongst the people as it does amongst the Tibetan people or in countries like Thailand where 94.6 percent of the population is Buddhist.<sup>8</sup>

#### Relationship between Buddhism and Nature

The actual relationship between Buddhism and the environment is quite simple really. The two core qualities that are most necessary to develop, and which are most stressed by the Buddha and by teachers today, are wisdom and compassion. By developing these two qualities, one will naturally treat the entire world, not only other humans, but every form of life and every part of the earth, with equally great respect and care. This is the way in which Buddhism intrinsically teaches one of the best environmental ethics possible. But what is the fundamental relationship that humans have with the natural world? What is that foundation upon which the Buddha taught compassion for all of life? It is only proper to rely upon the words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to explain that

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<sup>7</sup> Ch. Batbold. 4/11/09.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html>

connection and more:

It seems quite simple. First, it is important to realize we are part of nature. Ultimately, nature will always be more powerful than human beings, even with all their nuclear weapons, scientific equipment, and knowledge. If the sun disappears or the earth's temperature changes by a few degrees, then we are really in trouble. At a deeper level, we should recognize that although we are part of nature, we can control and change things, to some extent, due to our intelligence. Among the thousands of species of mammals on earth, we humans have the greatest capacity to alter nature. As such, we have a twofold responsibility. Morally, as beings of higher intelligence, we must care for this world. The other inhabitants of the planet - insects and so on - do not have the means to save or protect this world. Our other responsibility is to undo the serious environmental degradation that is the result of incorrect human behavior. We have recklessly polluted the world with chemicals and nuclear waste, selfishly consuming many of its resources. Humanity must take the initiative to repair and protect the world. Of course, when we say, "humanity" or "society", it's obvious the initiative must come from individuals. It is wrong to expect our governments, or even God, to give us any guidance on these matters.<sup>9</sup>

This quote by the Dalai Lama indirectly addresses some aspects of Buddhist philosophy and thought that further dictate the religion's inherent environmentalism. His statement "we are part of nature" introduces the concept of "dependent origination," while saying that we must "undo the serious environmental degradation that is the result of incorrect human behavior" brings up the well known, yet often misunderstood, concept of karma. And his stressing of the importance of the role of the individual is also a key point of Buddhism- the belief that for all change and good to occur, we must first change ourselves. Dependent origination and karma are the two main points that I will focus on here. I will discuss the role of the individual later in regards to how change can be made.

Dependent origination can be a difficult concept to fully grasp. This is

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<sup>9</sup> [www.dalailama.com/page.94.htm](http://www.dalailama.com/page.94.htm) HH the Dalai Lama.

especially true when reading this explanation of the concept: “This description of reality is not a holistic hypothesis or an idealistic dream. It is your life and my life, the life of the mountain and the life of the river, the life of a blade of grass, a spider web, the Brooklyn Bridge. These things are not related to each other. They’re not part of the same thing. They’re not similar. Rather, they are identical to each other in every respect.”<sup>10</sup> It is rather difficult for a person to see how a river and the Brooklyn Bridge are the same. But this is because of the limitations we unconsciously place upon our minds and scope of thought. The basic idea for us to understand is that this dualistic thinking we place upon our vision of the world is false, that “nothing that exists, exists in utter independence or isolation from everything else.”<sup>11</sup> We see the world from the point of view of there’s a “me” and then there’s everything else. This dualistic thinking is ignorant of the reality our person exists because of everything else. The entire world is connected in some way or another. The interconnectedness of everything from an original Buddhist perspective may be best seen in the Flower Garland Sutra. This sutra presents a description of a vast net hanging in the Palace of Indra (the God of Thunder). The net has countless knots tied in it with jewels tied into each knot. Each jewel reflects every other jewel tied into this complex net, symbolizing the interconnectedness, and dependent arising, of all life upon everything else in the world, even in the universe. The net hangs in a perfect balance, so if any knot or jewel is cut out, the balance and harmony of life will be thrown off. This great, complex net is essentially a metaphor for the complexity and interconnectedness of

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<sup>10</sup> J. D. Looi, *Teachings of the Earth: Zen and the Environment*. pp. xi–xii.

<sup>11</sup> Feurstein, *Green Dharma*. Pg 55.



everything in our environment, including our intricate ties to the natural world. If we cut out a knot in the net by destroying a part of the environment, we throw off the balance of the entire world. It is also said that this net is so complex that it is impossible to know where in the net is the most delicate and crucial point- where, if cut, will finally cause the whole net to collapse. This is exactly the concern regarding increasing environmental degradation and the potential collapse of an ecosystem, an unfortunately common reality of the modern day.

Another aspect of this net metaphor and dependent arising in regards to the environment is the intrinsic value of nature. Because everything is identical when examined at its deepest, purest nature, everything is then equal. It is said that all living and even non-living things have equal dignity and an intrinsic value.<sup>12</sup> Everything in an ecosystem is of equal value, so it is only moral to treat everything as such. This means, when analyzed further, that one should treat every tree or rock as equally as one treats the human beings in that ecosystem as well. This relationship between humans and nature actually reaches into some of the deepest realms of Buddhist philosophy of the mind. Suichi Yamamoto, a leading Buddhist scholar, discusses:

Because the destruction of the environment is inter-connected to personal destruction by the Non-Duality of Life and its Environment, preventing environmental destruction becomes critical. Moreover, the consciousness-only doctrine in Mahayana Buddhism explains that the eighth alaya-consciousness in the realm of the human's deep consciousness is connected to the physical world, *i.e.* mountains, rivers, the Earth, etc. Therefore, the ruination of the environment will affect the human's deep consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Yamamoto, Suichi. *Mahayana Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*. Pg. 179.

<sup>13</sup> Yamamoto, Suichi. *Buddhist Perspective on Environmental Education*. Pg. 177.

The “consciousness-only doctrine” itself is not necessary to be familiar with.<sup>14</sup> It is just important to understand that in this doctrine it is believed that there are eight levels of our consciousness going from our five gross senses and working further into subtler levels of our consciousness with each next level, each of which holds its own function. But of the most importance to understand is the eighth, and final, level of consciousness, often referred to as the alaya consciousness. It is believed that there, in that most subtle layer of our thoughts, is the root of everything that we are: the root of all seven other layers of consciousness, of our bodies, of our environment. This alaya consciousness is also the place where all the karma from our other seven layers of consciousness is stored, hence also giving it the name of the “store consciousness”.<sup>15</sup> But it is now necessary to address the topic of karma to fully explain how destroying the environment equates to destroying our consciousness, and thus our very existence.

Karma, in its simplest sense, is defined as how our actions create causes for future actions. The process of karma is as such: with every action of our life, a karmic “seed” is “planted” in the subtlest levels of our consciousness, the alaya consciousness previously mentioned. Depending on the nature of our actions, those seeds are either positive or negative. In the future (a future lifetime that is), these seeds will come to fruition causing us either a good or bad situation or

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<sup>14</sup> This consciousness-only doctrine and school of thought is but one view within the complex network of beliefs within Buddhism. It is not the end-all of views and is debated within the Buddhist community, as most schools of thought are. I chose to examine this doctrine because of how well and how deeply it incorporates many central aspects of Buddhism, particularly dependent origination and karma, with environmental views. It also had some of the most accessible and comprehensible literature written on it as compared to other major schools of thought.

<sup>15</sup> Yamamoto, *Ethics*. Pg. 171.

experience. It becomes clear quite quickly that acting due to the influence of any of the Three Poisons (ignorance, hatred, and greed) will create negative karmic seeds, and thus will detrimentally influence one's future life. Acting with pure compassion and wisdom, the two basic tenets of Buddhism, however, will produce positive karma and a positive future life.<sup>16</sup>

In relation to the environment, one of the most basic ideas of karma advises to not harm or kill any life. Doing harm to any life creates serious negative karma in an individual's consciousness. If people have any sensibility and concern for their next lives—specifically which realm they will be born into (human, animal, hell, god, etc)—they will clearly avoid harming the environment. Killing an animal, chopping down a tree, or even just throwing trash on the ground, are all actions that develop negative karma. This kind of karma is understandably known as individual karma, for it is the karma of one person, of one mind. There is a second kind of karma that needs to be considered, however. “Common karma” refers to the accumulated karma of a group of people, whether these people are defined by nationality, ethnicity, familial ties, or even geographical location. This kind of karma “informs not only the outer layer of the social consciousness of a family, an ethnic group, a nation, and humankind as a whole, but their subconsciousness as well.”<sup>17</sup> And because the environment and social scene of a group isn't owned or controlled by any one person, but rather by the group as a whole, common karma dictates the nature of these. As the Abhidharma-

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<sup>16</sup> Lama Thubten Gyatso. 4/29/2009.

<sup>17</sup> Yamamoto, *Ethics*. Pg 172.

nyayansuara text states: “mountains, rivers, the earth and so on are born from ‘common karma,’ and sentient beings are born from ‘individual karma’.”<sup>18</sup>

It is now possible to return to the unresolved question of how the act of destroying the environment is also an act of destroying the foundation of our consciousness. The common karma created by a certain group plants karmic seeds in the alaya consciousness that will affect the natural environment of that group in the future. So for example, people living within Mongolia today are inflicting serious damage on the environment. This creates terribly negative karmic seeds for Mongolians as a whole, and they will face those consequences in the future in the form of major environmental problems. This is one way in which Buddhism is related intrinsically to environmental respect. This environmentalism is not a project or a noble cause for donation, but rather a matter of directly affecting one’s current and future lives.

### Why The Relationship is Struggling in Mongolia

Of all the Mongolian traditions and religions suppressed by the Soviets, Buddhism was the largest and hardest hit. The Soviet party reported in 1934 that there were 843 major Buddhist centers, about 3,000 temples, and nearly 6,000 other buildings associated with the religion. There were also a reported 112,000 monks in the country. By the 1940s, nearly every monastery was partially or completely destroyed and every monk had been killed or had apostatized.<sup>19</sup> There

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<sup>18</sup> Yamamoto, *Ethics*. Pg 172.

<sup>19</sup> Jerryson, Michael, *Mongolian Buddhism: The Rise and Fall of the Sangha*. Pg 90.

was almost nothing left of the religion in Mongolia by 1990, and even then Buddhism remained only in the minds of the very eldest. This loss of such a powerful and influential institution, one that had been an intrinsic part of Mongolian life for centuries, was a great shame as Mongolia transitioned into the dangerous capitalist world with very little guidance. In the past, Buddhism had always been a personal and national tool of guidance, but just when Mongolia needed that guidance more than ever, it ceased to exist.

Despite 50 percent of the population identifying as Buddhist today, and Buddhism's strong, intrinsic environmental teachings, Mongolians still treat their environment very poorly, and serious problems, as mentioned above, continue to plague the country. This disconnect can be traced back to two main causes. The first reason is a major lack of education on Buddhism and the second is the great focus on material gain and other aspects of the capitalist market, rather than spiritual and personal development.

The issue of inadequate education issue reaches back to the Soviet era. Under the Soviets, religion was brutally oppressed and considered evil. To a certain degree, that attitude remains within the government and some of the population today. Upon gaining independence, Mongolia opened up once again to freedom of religion, but continued to deny the role of religion in the government, just as most modern democracies strive to do. Because of the extremely strict separation of church and state, there is no religious education of any kind in the school systems in Mongolia today, not even simply scholarly courses. Emerging from the Soviet era, Buddhism in Mongolia was essentially crippled without

educational means. The destruction to Buddhist property and influence in society was enormous. So without functioning monasteries, without many educated monks, and without any alternative avenues of education on the religion, Buddhism had a long way to go to once again reach its pre-Soviet era status. As Lama Gyatso said, Buddhism had “degenerated to the point of almost not even existing.”<sup>20</sup> In one actual case, the laws separating church and state were so strict, he said, that when they were trying to build the FPMT center in its present location, they had trouble with government approval simply because of its proximity to a school. Construction was only approved because the entrance was located on the opposite side of the building from where the school was so that school children wouldn’t walk by the door everyday. The anti-religious sentiments of the Soviets are still very much present in Mongolia to this day, which strongly influences religious educational opportunities.

Buddhism has had an extremely slow revival over the past 20 years. Education remains a very large issue despite many efforts at improvement. Children may grow up in a “Buddhist” household, but they may never actually understand the depth of the religion’s teachings and the positive role it can play in their lives. It is also problematic that Buddhism is often viewed as being a “lazy” religion in which one merely sits and thinks while the Sangha relies upon the lay community to sustain their existence with free food and shelter. This view is misconstrued, but it is understandable when one looks at how the new western religious missionaries in town act. Westerners are everywhere trying to spread the

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<sup>20</sup> Lama Thepten Gyatso. 6/3/09.

word of their religion. It is no wonder that many people who are raised as uneducated Buddhists turn to another seemingly more available religion, or abandon religion all together. Neither of these options is inherently bad, but they do illustrate the willingness of Mongolians to abandon their ties to Buddhism, and this willingness can be largely attributed to the lack of education on the Buddhist tradition. Furthermore, this decline in Buddhist identity poses a serious problem with regard to the environment. In every western religious tradition, the texts blatantly state that a single almighty God created the earth and everything on it for the use of his most beloved creation, human beings. Regardless of the creation story, many of the new religions in Mongolia present fundamentally different relationships with nature. For so many centuries, Buddhism taught the people a strong environmental awareness and respect. But today very few people actually know and understand the Dharma, the Buddha's teachings, and those messages of wisdom and compassion, of dependent origination and karma. Very few recognize the interconnectedness of all of life. And too many are acting out of motivation by the Three Poisons.

The second major problem preventing Buddhism from teaching on the environment is people's new materialist obsessions. As mentioned before, Mongolia is now a capitalist country with a newly found intense focus on material gain. This focus causes two problems: it distracts Mongolian's attention to any sort of religious or spiritual practice and it encourages people's actions that are motivated by any combination of the Three Poisons. Under capitalism today, people believe money to be the key to success and personal happiness. This is a

sad belief because it actually only keeps people contained in samsara. Everyone is seeking happiness in money, cars, nice homes, and expensive jewelry. But nothing in or about these objects gives happiness that lasts for very long. One gets over the initial thrill of the item and begins to desire something bigger, better, or nicer.

People seek to be better, richer, and “happier” than everyone else around them while very few people seek to help others for purely altruistic reasons. This is the nature of capitalism and it directly reflects the way people are acting- motivated by the Three Poisons of Desire, Greed, and Hatred. It also perpetuates those kinds of actions and develops a cycle of samsara which is extremely difficult to break out of. This quest for unattainable permanent happiness finally also has the effect of keeping people from pursuing a religion or much of anything with mental effort beyond how to make the most money possible. I have painted a rather grim picture of capitalism and human nature under it, but it should be noted that the degree to which people experience this kind of samsara varies tremendously. Not all Mongolians lives are as terribly caught in the cycle of samsara, but everyone, besides the practitioners whom have reached the highest levels of spiritual liberation and wisdom of the world, is caught in some way. But sadly very few today have the will or the time to learn about the life of suffering that they are leading. Perhaps even sadder though is the fact that the biggest reason for this uncontrollable materialism is the lack of Buddhism in Mongolians’ lives, a religion which was once so naturally a part of their very being as a people for so long.

#### Current Action



It is important to maintain a high sense of optimism. That is one important aspect of Buddhism that lamas, practitioners, believers, and scholars must all remember. No matter how far down in the realms of hell one may be born in a future life time, it is always possible to work one's way back up the ladder of life realms, maybe even becoming a Buddha some day. This same attitude is true for the environment. Even though modern Mongolia, and all the world, may be suffering the consequences of negative common karma from ages ago, and more often than not may be only adding to that accumulation of negative karmic seeds, there is still hope. Even in the lowest realms of hell or with the worst environmental problems, there are always some positive karmic seeds that will come to fruition and offer a person, or entire nation, the opportunity to turn conditions around. In fact, today there is great environmental work being done by Buddhists and monasteries all over Mongolia. And as Buddhism works to regain its' strength, the influence of monks is growing once again amongst communities and even the entire nation. Many of the monasteries that have been able to recover the quickest following the Soviet withdrawal are doing some very impressive environmental work today. Although the work is rather basic and was just begun relatively recently, the more important fact is that it is occurring at all. Erdene Zuu Monastery in Kharkhorin is leading the way in the monastic environmental effort. Hambolam Baasansuren of Erdene Zuu is an energetic and smiling young monk who can be credited with initiating the many great environmental efforts undertaken by the monastery. There is even a non-profit charitable branch within the monastery entitled the Erdene Zuu Endeavor (EZE). Under the EZE, much has

been accomplished in the environmental sector. In 2005, The Environmental Buddhist Elementary School was opened and 30 young monks from throughout Mongolia are taught conservation methods alongside their education in religion. The monastery also runs the Traditional Mongolian Ecology Project, which “aims to minimize damage to protected woodland in the region.” Poor families in Kharkhorin commonly send their children to the already sparse forests to take down trees for firewood and to sell to local restaurants. As a result, the monks organized this life skills course to teach conservation and basic religious beliefs as well as many other character-building skills. And the next step in the project is to teach local kids traditional crafting skills to sell to tourists, stimulating the local economy and creating a sustainable forestry operation. A third project is the protection of a 2,000 square meter area a few kilometers outside of town as an area to experiment in forestry without disruption from grazing animals. The wooded area also serves as a meditation spot for the monastery and visitors alike. Also in the hills just outside of town, the EZE built a small ecology temple, dedicated to the Deity of Ecology. The temple contains pictures of wildlife, maps, notes of encouragement to treat nature with respect, and a calendar produced by the monastery which points out the specific days that people should not cut trees or kill animals based on local belief. Finally, the EZE has reached out to the local men’s prison to teach horticultural skills to the inmates.<sup>21</sup> The efforts of Hambolam Baasansuren and his fellow monks have been immense and the results reflect that effort.

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<sup>21</sup> Mongolian Buddhist Environment Handbook. Pg 36-37.

At Amarbayasgalant Monastery, there is a very important ovoo worshipping ceremony conducted once a year. All the lamas of the monastery and many local men gather at a large ovoo on the top of a nearby sacred mountain for the purpose of making the spirit of the mountain content. It is believed that the spirits of the mountains control things in nature like the quality of grass, how much rain is received, temperature, and many other things. This ceremony is very popular amongst the local herders because their livelihood relies on these master spirits being content and gracing them with favorable conditions to graze their animals and live their lives. There are offerings in mass quantities of incense, food and drink as the monks chant sutras. In this way, the spirit is calmed and made happy and will hopefully treat the human dwellers of his area with kindness and good fortune.

Many other monasteries are doing equally impressive and important work, whether it is activist work as at Erdene Zuu or more spiritual work as at Amarbayasgalant. Monasteries are beginning to regain some influence in the community after many, many years of oppression and the struggle to revitalize. As monasteries are regaining influence, so too are individual lamas. Famous high-ranking members of the Sangha have always had a significant role within the community, but that influence has, for obvious reasons, been weakened in Mongolia. But as the prestige and influence returns, the effect that monks can have on environmental awareness and education of the populace is growing. The historical legacy of this is huge: it is said that a man cut off a tree branch for firewood so the tree told the Buddha that he had lost one of his children. The

Buddha realized the severity of such an action and henceforth taught the harm that is done by cutting down trees and harming other life forms. While this is probably just a metaphor since trees can't talk, other actions by leaders in the Buddhist community are not. Recently, the Dalai Lama realized that the Tibetan people needed to stop hunting big game in northern India and the Himalayas for the animals' pelts, which are used in traditional Tibetan outfits, because of the harm it was having on the ecosystem. He taught the people of the severity of the damage to the environment and to the species of animals and the pelt hunting was stopped for good, with minor cultural sacrifice. Another noble of example revolves around a great Indian lama named Bakula Rinpoche who was an Indian Ambassador and a great lama to Mongolia. At the time, the marmot was in danger of becoming extinct in Mongolia as local people were hunting them endlessly for their delicious meat. Bakula Rinpoche ordered a stop to the hunting of these animals in a region of Mongolia where the hunting was especially bad and the people listened.<sup>22</sup> Finally, we can look at Hambolam Baasansuren of Erdene Zuu Monastery for the same kind of influence and motivation in the environmental sector. The work of his monastery has already been described at length, but it is important to recognize him as the motivator of much of the work. Not only has he been at the leading edge of the Buddhist environmental movement in Mongolia, helped revive his monastery to be one of the biggest and most influential in the country, and done all of this by his early thirties, but he also does his own individual work in teaching environmental awareness. Through the months of June and July, he and his monks

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<sup>22</sup> Lama Gyatso. 5/12/2009.

visit to twenty of the most sacred mountains in the Kharkhorin region for prayers and offerings, asking for good weather and rain. At each of these ceremonies, Baasansuren gives a short talk on the ceremony and takes the opportunity to convey environmental messages and teachings to the people present.<sup>23</sup>

Baasansuren is just but one more great lama in a lineage of active monks doing great things for the environment out of a deep understanding of the Dharma and the tight connection between their religion and the natural world.

### The Next Step

Although the actions of individual monks and the monasteries are incredibly important in enacting positive environmental change and working to educate Mongolians on the subject, the most important avenue of change doesn't involve planting trees or giving talks. The best way in the Buddhist belief to create a population of environmental stewards is to change each individual. The Dalai Lama was once asked if he thought one person could change the world. His simple reply was, "Yes."<sup>24</sup> Many people in history have said "you can change the world" or something to that effect, but few mean it and fewer believe it. And only someone with the wisdom of the Dalai Lama actually understands the truth in it. Changing one's self is genuine and the most powerful way to make a difference. As Lama Thubten Yeshe explains it, "Check your own life, from the time you were born up to now- how many times have you changed your mind? Who changed it for you? Buddha didn't change it. Jesus didn't change it. Who changed

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<sup>23</sup> Hambolam Baasansuren. 5/9/2009.

<sup>24</sup> [www.dalailama.com/page.94.htm](http://www.dalailama.com/page.94.htm) H.H. the Dalai Lama.

your mind? Analyze this for yourself.”<sup>25</sup> Many people, in America at least, do short-term volunteer environmental work for self-centered reasons- the desire either to look good in the eyes of others or in a vain attempt to make up for the lack of doing altruistic work through the rest of the year. And although doing the work is still good, and develops good karma, most people don’t understand the true importance of the work and certainly don’t have the right motivation behind their efforts. This is due to their ignorance of the interconnectedness of all life and related concepts such as dependent origination and karma. Because of this widespread ignorance, especially present in modern day Mongolia, there are three main modes of changing the individual. As Lama Yeshe commented above, it is each person’s mind that changes; individuals change *themselves*. The three paths are meditation, mindful living, and education. Taking one of these paths alone will not adequately change one’s self; it must be the right combination of all three for the necessary change to occur, for an individual to do their part in changing the world.

Meditation is the core of Buddhist practice. Through meditation, the deep introspection of one’s mind or a subtle aspect of life, one works to create a stillness of the mind, a great concentration on the object of meditation. As the Buddha said to his son,

Rahula, develop meditation that is like air; for when you develop meditation that is like air, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as the air blows on clean things and dirty things, on excrement, urine, spittle, pus, and blood, and the air is not repelled, humiliated, and disgusted because of that, so too, Rahula,

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.lamayeshe.com/index.php?sect=article&id=128>. Lama Thubten Yeshe. “Anxiety in the Nuclear Age.” Berkeley, CA. 7/13/1983.

develop meditation that is like air; for when you develop meditation that is like air, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain.<sup>26</sup>

The Buddha paints a vivid image of the clarity that meditation can create and how anything that comes to mind, the “arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts”, will simply float by like a cloud overhead and nothing more. Through this avenue of deep thought and concentration one has the ability to uncover some of the greatest truths of life with the final goal of understanding the ultimate reality of things. This ultimate reality is basically to realize the emptiness of all things. Although emptiness is a complicated topic and not necessary to fully understand here, the aspects of interconnectedness, dependent origination, and karma are all intrinsic to the ultimate reality of life. And if the individual can realize these theories of life, then he or she will naturally treat the environment with great respect just as Baasansuren does and just as the Buddha taught. There is a common meditative exercise in which one thinks solely about the reality “everyone was at one time your mother.”<sup>27</sup> Assuming the Buddhist beliefs of rebirth, karma, and dependent origination are all indeed true, then it is entirely possible for the worm in the dirt beneath your feet to have at one time been your mother, father, best friend, or anyone.

Living mindfully is the next logical step in conjunction with the lessons and insights gained from meditative practice. For example, one realizes from the mother meditation that one should treat all sentient beings with the same respect that one would show a mother or father. This attitude drastically changes one’s

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<sup>26</sup> Feuerstein, *Green Dharma*. Pg. 137.

<sup>27</sup> Lama Konchog. 5/5/09.

interactions with the natural world. Mindfulness is crucial. We must be mindful of every aspect of our actions: our intention, our motivation, the actual action, and the way we feel about what we've done. These four aspects are what determine how good or how bad one's karma is. In relation to the environment, we see that we must be especially mindful of our motivation. If one acts out of selfishness, as mentioned above, then it undermines the good act one is doing. Developing motivation from true compassion and wisdom is the key. That compassion and wisdom is developed from good meditative practice and continued real life application by living mindfully. Everything we do, say, or think must be mindful and out of compassion. As Lama Yeshe so convincingly put it,

In our daily lives, each of us should all dedicate ourselves to bringing peace and happiness to all beings, and this determination itself is a powerful way of bringing peace and success into our lives. But this doesn't mean not to act, either; to just be passive. But when you do act, act with wisdom and without selfishness, hatred or emotional fear. In that way, you will educate yourself and others.<sup>28</sup>

If an individual can accomplish this sort of behavior, motivation, and attitude, or at least be really good at it, the effects that he or she will have upon the world will be tremendous. They not only set themselves up for a good rebirth and ability to continue their positive influence in their next life, but they positively impact everyone in their life and perhaps influence others to act following the same principles. If this occurs, then the positive common karma that will accumulate will be quite substantial. With that common karma there is a better hope for the environment of the future.

In the case of such global issues as the conservation of the Earth, and

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<sup>28</sup> [www.lamayeshe.com/index.php?sect=article&id=128](http://www.lamayeshe.com/index.php?sect=article&id=128) Lama Thubten Yeshe, "Anxiety in the Nuclear Age." Berkeley, CA. 7/13/1983.



indeed in tackling all problems, the human mind is the key factor. Whether they are problems of economics, international relations, science, technology, medicine or ecology, although these issues seem to be beyond anyone individual's capacity, where the problem begins and where the answer must first be sought is within. In order to change the external situation we must first change within ourselves. If we want a beautiful garden we must first have a blueprint in the imagination, a vision. Then that idea can be implemented and the external garden can materialize. Destruction of nature resources results from ignorance, lack of respect for the Earth's living things, and greed.<sup>29</sup> –H.H. the Dalai Lama

### Conclusion

Mongolia's environment is in a very dire situation. Just by walking the streets of Ulaanbaatar or driving through the vast steppe of the countryside, the problems are quite evident and clearly affecting the lives of the Mongolian people, as well as all the animals, plants, and other forms of life all around. The destruction being done to the environment has gotten worse with the opening of the country to the global capitalist market as there is a greater focus on material gain than ever before. As mentioned above though, this new system and intense materialism is in actuality just a reflection of the nature of the people. As people act with the motivation of personal gain (greed), avoidance of dealing with environmental issues (hatred), and refusal to see the world for how it truly is (ignorance), the environment continues to be harmed. A large amount of negative karma is accumulated which affects the condition of the natural world. In other words, it causes the environmental problems that Mongolians see today.

Sadly, the capitalist spirit and material obsession of Mongolians today also perpetuates and encourages this kind of behavior motivated by the Three Poisons. And although half of the population identifies as Buddhist, there is a clear

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<sup>29</sup> [www.dalailama.com/page.83.htm](http://www.dalailama.com/page.83.htm) H.H. the Dalai Lama. 11/20/1991.

disconnect occurring. The Soviet oppression caused Buddhism to reemerge in the 1990s a broken and nearly extinct institution. True knowledge of the Dharma and Buddhist beliefs, particularly those in relation to the environment, is very low. The religion has taken very long to recover even just some of its prior influence within Mongolia. As a result, many Mongolians are leaving the religion behind, especially as new Western religions often offer a more enticing path, fueled by the monetary wealth of Western churches and missionaries. Although these religions may be good for some people in their spiritual support and guidance, they are not good for the condition of the environment in Mongolia. Rather, Buddhism is the best path for environmental change. There is not a single major religion from the West which comes to the conclusion that worms, cats, your neighbor, and all other sentient forms of life were at one time your mother and you should thus treat them all as such. This deep level of environmental respect and stewardship is unparalleled. Sadly, Buddhism is struggling. The anti-religious stance of the Soviets remains within many people and the government today and misperceptions of Buddhism hurt revival efforts as well. It is a religion and way of life that has been such an intrinsic part of Mongolian culture for so long, but it now faces significant new challenges to its strength.

Although the situation may look grim for both the environment and Buddhism, there is still much optimism and great work being done. Monasteries, notably Erdene Zuu in Kharkhorin, and leading monks in the country are forging ahead to bring the Dharma back into people's lives. Environmental projects in local communities are being started, messages of the importance of respecting the

natural world are being included more often in talks given by lamas, and a new young generation of monks is being brought up with an education not only in Buddhism, but also on the environment.

The most hope and focus, however, is on the individual. Buddhism stresses above all else the importance of genuine personal change. True and lasting change will not come from any outside force. We must train our minds and explore the true nature of the world through meditative practice. Then we must apply what we learn from our practice to our daily life and live mindfully, with great compassion and wisdom. As Yamamoto states, “It will be possible to create an environment conducive to the symbiosis of all living things, including human beings, by recognizing that the world is governed by the principle of dependent origination and by creating a feedback loop of merciful, good ‘common karma.’ Until now, human refashioning of the environment, it seems, has been single-mindedly directed toward the fulfillment of human desires.”<sup>30</sup> In this way we will treat the environment with immense care and respect and we will inspire others to do the same. Our common karma will begin to accumulate more and more good seeds and we will eventually see those seeds ripen in the form of an improving environment, rather than a declining one as we are so used to today. With Buddhism, Mongolia can see this positive change occur. As Lama Gyatso phrased it so succinctly: “We must remove the pollution of our minds, not from the environment.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Yamamoto, *Ethics*. Pg 173-174.

<sup>31</sup> Lama Gyatso. 5/12/09.

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