

## Article

# The Fourfold Environmental Protection Initiative of Dharma Drum Mountain

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**Abstract:** This article explores the unique environmental ethos advocated by Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM), an international Buddhist spiritual, cultural, and education foundation founded by the late Chan Master Sheng Yen. It presents a critical reflection on orthodox models of Western environmental ethics and illuminates the constraints of mainstream critical approaches when confronted with the intricate ecological philosophies embedded in Buddhist traditions. Central to the DDM's model is the profound interweaving of spiritual cultivation with environmental consciousness, a stance that fosters a multidimensional dialogue that engages various ecological narratives. This approach not only resonates with aspects of Western environmental thought but is also firmly grounded in a distinct philosophical tradition that emphasizes spiritual growth as integral to genuine ecological engagement. In this article, it is argued that DDM's holistic initiatives necessitate an expanded, diversified environmental discourse that accommodates a spectrum of cultural and philosophical insights. Consequently, this examination serves a dual purpose: it provides an insight into DDM's environmental philosophy, and it can stimulate a paradigm shift while urging consideration beyond conventional boundaries and advocating for a spiritually inclusive approach to environmental awareness and preservation.

**Keywords:** Buddhist environmentalism; nonanthropocentrism; ecoBuddhism; Dharma Drum Mountain; environmental crisis



**Citation:** Shiu, Henry C. H. 2023. The Fourfold Environmental Protection Initiative of Dharma Drum Mountain. *Religions* 14: 1509. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121509>

Academic Editor: Deborah Orr

Received: 19 October 2023

Revised: 18 November 2023

Accepted: 5 December 2023

Published: 6 December 2023



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## 1. Introduction

During the second half of the twentieth century, global consciousness experienced a significant transformation regarding environmental issues. That period marks heightened awareness of an increasingly dire ecological crisis, a recognition propelled by manifest environmental degradation. This includes coastlines contaminated by petrochemical effluents, urban skies blanketed in oppressive smog, forests ravaged by uncontrolled deforestation, and water sources saturated with deleterious pollutants. This ecological decline has been significantly facilitated by the appropriation of technologies such as high-energy-consuming machinery and chemical pesticides. This reflects a persistent anthropogenic drive to exert dominance over the natural environment.

In the literary realm, a pivotal work that accentuates the catastrophic implications of unrestrained pesticide utilization is Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962). The evocative title portends a dystopian world, unsettlingly quiet and devoid of the familiar sounds of birds chirping, indicative of an ecological precipice.

Equally important is Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Leopold 1949), which advocates for a sophisticated ethical rapport with the environment; its pivotal essay "The Land Ethic" pioneers a revolutionary environmental ethic.<sup>1</sup> This approach, distinctively nonanthropocentric, is deeply rooted in evolutionary biology and ecological principles. The ascension of ecology to a discipline of paramount importance, partly due to Leopold's prescience in merging ecological knowledge with ethical considerations, was instrumental in reframing the discourse surrounding the environmental repercussions of human technological progression on biological life and its habitats.

Leopold's profound insights catalyzed this shift in perspective, laying the foundational ethos for the subsequent emergence of the "deep ecology movement".<sup>2</sup> His contributions implored a reassessment of humans' place in the biosphere, advocating for a role that is integrative rather than hierarchically superior, thereby profoundly reshaping the ethical parameters of human engagement with the broader environment.

This historical epoch marked the genesis of "environmentalism" as an emerging scholarly field. Its emergence can be traced back to the vibrant environmental activism of the 1960s and 1970s, which evolved in tandem with the broadening scope of applied ethics and the larger philosophical discourse within academic circles. Academics within this sphere often categorize theorists according to their ethical orientations, whether anthropocentric or nonanthropocentric. Constructs such as "biocentric ethics" and "animal rights" emerged to articulate and critically analyze the foundational precepts underlying environmental ethics. The ascendancy of the environmental movement in the twentieth century, spurred by tangible ecological crises and bolstered by seminal literary contributions from figures such as Carson and Leopold, facilitated a systematic scholarly inquiry into the intricate dynamics between humans and the environment. Such an academic pursuit has sought to explore the ethical implications of humans' actions, reconceptualizing human responsibility and potential pathways to harmonious coexistence within Earth's broader ecological systems.

Adopting a recent definition provided by Anna R. Davies, "environmentalism" is characterized "as a general term to refer to concern for the environment and particularly actions or advocacy to limit negative human impacts on the environment. Such concerns and actions are not new, and the roots of what we now understand to be environmentalism can be traced back to ancient civilizations. Contemporary environmentalism is associated with a range of social and political movements that have emerged to promote particular environmental philosophies and practices. There have been numerous attempts to classify these activities, with most adopting a dualistic strategy contrasting those who are concerned to protect the environment for its own sake (ecocentrism) and those who are concerned with the environment because of its role in human development (anthropocentrism). However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to group the range of environmental concerns, organizations, and actions in this way, not least because the 21st Century has seen environmental concerns increasingly addressed through various forms of public policy. Nonetheless, systemic environmental challenges remain, and emergent varieties of environmentalism with novel qualifiers—including "new," corporate, authoritarian, and even postenvironmentalism—are being identified and debated across disciplinary boundaries and between academics and activists as well as policy makers and shapers". (Davies 2020, p. 259).<sup>3</sup>

This elucidation offers an examination of the concept of environmentalism, illuminating its layered complexity as it has transitioned across distinct historical epochs and societal paradigms. Environmentalism, as articulated, can be perceived as a comprehensive construct that amalgamates a vast array of actions, advocacies, and philosophical doctrines all dedicated to attenuating the detrimental impacts humans have exerted upon the natural environment. Half a century ago, Lynn White reminded us that current ecological challenges stem from a technological and scientific paradigm rooted in medieval Western history and deeply intertwined with Christian dogma; hence, it becomes evident that addressing the escalating environmental crisis demands a broader spectrum of actions and advocacy beyond traditional Christian norms. This necessity arises from the recognition that the predominant Christian ethos, centered on the belief that nature exists primarily to serve humanity, has inadvertently contributed to ecological degradation. Therefore, the resolution of this crisis requires a fundamental shift in values and perspectives, embracing a more inclusive and diverse set of principles that acknowledge and respect the intrinsic worth of nature independent of its utility to humans. This paradigm shift would entail cultivating new attitudes and approaches towards the environment, potentially drawing from various cultural, philosophical, and religious traditions that offer alternative views on the human–nature relationship (White 1967). Notwithstanding the depth of this interpretation,

it is evident that there exists an omission regarding the spiritual and religious dimensions important to environmentally conscious thinking.

Such oversight results in the exclusion of pivotal drivers that have historically been seminal in galvanizing conservation efforts and sustainable practices. The spiritual underpinnings of environmentalism often resonate with a profound sense of interdependence among all life forms. It involves a perspective that transcends a mere functionalist or instrumentalist regard for nature and beckons a deeper ethical call to action while being anchored in doctrines that advocate for the intrinsic worth of all beings, the sanctity of life, and an imperative of bequeathing a verdant planet to subsequent generations.

While the narratives surrounding environmentalism acknowledge the philosophical bifurcation between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, they stop short of delving into the intricate ethical obligations intrinsic to these ideologies. Regardless of whether one gravitates toward a biocentric paradigm or an anthropocentric rationale for environmental preservation, each perspective demands adherence to ethical standards that ensure the preservation of the environment's wholeness and vitality. This ethical dimension of environmentalism transcends mere advocacy or legislative initiatives. It necessitates a profound commitment to transformative lifestyle adaptations, the adoption of sustainable modalities, and a shared ethos that bridges distinctions of nationality, culture, and socioeconomic stratifications. The trajectory of twenty-first-century environmental discourse calls for a more integrative methodology that seamlessly incorporates these pivotal aspects, thereby molding perspectives, practices, and policies that foster a balanced and symbiotic rapport with our planet.

## 2. Critiques of Buddhist Environmentalism

Within the ambit of environmental ethics, a critical challenge has emerged that transcends the boundaries of mere definitional clarity to identify an ethically persuasive stance. This complexity has led scholars to delve into the philosophical foundations of Buddhism, particularly in the context of the emerging discourse on "Green Buddhism".<sup>4</sup> Such investigations seek to determine how Buddhism, as a structured belief system, responds to environmental crises and ethical conundrums. The central thematic question guiding this exploration is the nature and substance of Buddhist environmental ethics. Specifically, is there a tangible, pragmatic Buddhist approach to contemporary environmental crises? Academia extensively explores Buddhism's prospective contributions to environmental ethics, a discussion that gained momentum with the publication of the anthology *Dharma Gaia* in 1990. This work marked the genesis of scholarly pursuits at the intersection of Buddhist philosophy and environmental ethical considerations.

Subsequent academic discourse has often characterized Buddhism as intrinsically eco-conscious, pointing to its doctrines that seem to advocate ecological preservation. Some scholars have directly labeled Buddhist teachings as "ecological," referencing specific scriptural and doctrinal bases, a viewpoint articulated with clarity in a recent contribution by David R. Loy (2019). However, others have long approached this assertion more cautiously, recognizing the complexity arising from the cultural, historical, and geographical diversity within which Buddhist teachings operate. This nuanced perspective acknowledges the multifaceted contexts surrounding Buddhist tenets, suggesting that Buddhism's environmental ethics cannot be understood in a monolithic or oversimplified manner.

The task of juxtaposing Buddhist precepts with contemporary environmental paradigms remains intricate. As Pragati Sahni (2008) observed, "It is believed predominantly that nearly all Buddhist teachings in their application to the environment remain unclear and ambiguous. Thus scholars at both ends of the spectrum have legitimate reasons to trust their own interpretation and doubt others. Emerging from this it is no surprise then that much uncertainty and mystification in this area of study continues to exist" (2). As a result, Buddhist perspectives on environmental stewardship often manifest as "unclear and ambiguous," facilitating myriad interpretations and occasionally inviting criticisms of misrepresentation.

One prominent critique within this dialogue involves the apparent lack of direct ecological mandates within canonical Buddhist texts. While it is accurate that key teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, do not explicitly address environmental stewardship, their core principles—mindfulness, compassion, and recognition of interconnected existence—lend themselves to ethical interpretations that extend naturally into ecological consciousness. These principles imply that ecological damage inevitably results in universal suffering, thereby extending ethical and moral imperatives to all life forms. Although texts from the Pali Canon suggest an ecological awareness through metaphorical language, reverence for natural entities, and specific monastic codes that preclude environmental harm, these references are framed within the broader soteriological focus of traditional Buddhism, which is centered on the cyclical view of existence (*saṃsāra*) and the pursuit of liberation (*nirvāṇa*) (Sahni 2008).

In contrast, Buddhist environmentalism presents a temporally immediate perspective, highlighting the urgent ethical mandates arising from palpable environmental crises. Consequently, Buddhist environmentalism has faced scrutiny for potentially oversimplifying foundational Buddhist concepts such as *pratītya-samutpāda* (dependent origination), particularly in its treatment of “interconnectedness”. Also, the expansion of certain terms, such as “mindfulness,” to encompass environmental awareness and stewardship has sparked debates about doctrinal fidelity. The integration of modern ecological theories, including the Gaia hypothesis and deep ecology, into the Buddhist framework, while conceptually harmonious, complicates traditional boundaries and prompts discussions about the authenticity and doctrinal integrity of Buddhist environmentalism within the wider scope of Buddhist practice.

In contemporary discussions surrounding environmental ethics and religious philosophy, Ian Harris’s scholarly works (Harris 1995a, 1995b, 1997, 2000) stand out for their depth and incisiveness. Harris articulated a critical reflection on the emergent phenomenon of “ecoBuddhism,” cautioning against the oversimplified conflation of traditional Buddhist principles with modern environmental terminologies. His work underscores the necessity for a comprehensive analytical framework, eschewing reductive interpretations and encouraging a more intricate comprehension of Buddhist environmental thought. According to Harris, ecoBuddhism draws heavily upon traditional forms from East Asia, yet it is distinctly influenced by the spiritual dynamics of the American West Coast. Harris (1995a, p. 200) criticized that “Owing an obvious debt to East Asian manifestations of the tradition, yet clearly influenced by the remarkably eclectic world of West Coast spirituality, ecoBuddhism provides a perfect subject for scrutiny given its twin geographic poles in Japan and California, the epitomes of inauthentic Buddhism and sham traditionalism, at least so far as Matsumoto and Giddens et al. are concerned”.

Harris (2003) critically examined the integration of Buddhist terminology within ecological discourses, cautioning against potential misinterpretations in such ecoBuddhist narratives. He has challenged the assumption that the doctrine’s emphasis on animal welfare necessarily equates to an inherent ecological orientation within traditional Buddhist teachings. He has suggested that these interpretations might instead reflect broader societal ethics rather than deriving explicitly from Buddhist doctrine. Harris has further explored how certain Buddhist principles, including dysteology and the concept of impermanence, might unintentionally devalue the intrinsic worth of the natural world, undermining the urgency for environmental stewardship. He has argued that the ecological principles often attributed to Buddhism may correspond more closely with general environmental philosophies, or, more problematically, they may distort fundamental Buddhist teachings. Similarly, Malcolm David Eckel (1997) questioned the coherence of a singular Buddhist ecological doctrine, proposing instead that a more structured approach could emerge through an individual’s experiential relationship with nature. Both scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding the diverse historical and cultural dynamics that shape various Buddhist communities in the development of any Buddhist environmental philosophy.

Building on this analytical foundation, Donald Swearer (2006) proposed a comprehensive typology for understanding ecoBuddhism, distinguishing a fivefold taxonomy: eco-apologists, eco-critics, eco-constructivists, eco-ethicists, and eco-contextualists. The eco-apologist perspective identifies a natural alignment between Buddhist teachings and ecological principles, whereas the eco-critic perspective highlights potential disparities. The eco-constructivist stance acknowledges that while Buddhist scriptures do not explicitly advocate for environmentalism, relevant ecological values can be derived from Buddhism's teachings. The eco-ethicist perspective insists that any ecological insights be evaluated within the broader framework of Buddhist ethical teaching. Conversely, the eco-contextualist approach supports a more flexible interpretation, suggesting that Buddhist ecological ethics should be contextually adjusted to meet specific environmental and cultural needs.

Swearer's nuanced categorization, especially the inclusion of the "eco-contextualist" perspective, provides a sophisticated understanding of the diverse ways in which Buddhist thought can engage with and contribute to contemporary environmental debates, moving beyond a one-dimensional interpretation. Utilizing Swearer's typological analysis illuminates the intricacies and profound dimensions of this scholarly debate, central to which is the determination of the fundamental nature of Buddhist ecological ethics.

Despite the spectrum of viewpoints, the relevance of intertwining Buddhism with environmental ethics is crucial. While discussions on doctrinal purity and authenticity persist, the integration of Buddhist philosophies with ecological principles provides a vital paradigm for navigating contemporary environmental predicaments. The rise of eco-Buddhism signifies a modern philosophical endeavor to mitigate the growing ecological uncertainties that are characteristic of our modern time. In the realm of contemporary ecological discourse, various scholarly positions have emerged regarding the synthesis of Buddhist principles with environmental ethics. For instance, eco-constructivist perspectives, as exemplified by Sahni (2008), advocate the alignment of Buddhist doctrines with a form of virtue ethics to address current environmental crises. In contrast, eco-critics, represented by scholars such as Harris, challenge the legitimacy of blending distinct Buddhist and ecological spheres, questioning the authenticity of the resulting frameworks.

### 3. Discourse on Buddhist Environmentalism in the West

Historically, adaptability has been a hallmark of Buddhism's enduring legacy. Originating in ancient India and spreading across diverse cultural landscapes in Asia, Buddhism has demonstrated remarkable flexibility, evolving in response to an array of societal, cultural, and intellectual exigencies. This evolutionary nature challenges the notion of a singular "authentic" or "traditional" Buddhist practice, as what many modern scholars consider traditional is, in fact, the outcome of centuries of contextual adaptation and doctrinal evolution. This historical lens compels a reevaluation of what constitutes the "original" expression of Buddhism. It raises critical questions about whether interpretations based solely on foundational texts, such as the Pali Canon, are sufficient, or whether the influence of external philosophies on East Asian manifestations of Mahāyāna Buddhism, for example, necessitates a broader analytical purview for understanding subsequent ecological interpretations within these traditions, as suggested by Harris.

Critics who view Buddhist environmentalism as a deviation from traditional Buddhist practices perhaps fail to recognize the dynamic nature of Buddhism and its capacity to respond to cultural and existential circumstances over time. Buddhism's vitality lies not in unwavering fidelity to its initial iterations but in the pragmatic application of its central philosophies, notably the commitment to alleviate suffering. This adaptability is especially pertinent when considering the urgent environmental challenges confronting contemporary society. Consequently, the interaction between Buddhism and modern environmental dilemmas offers a rich tapestry of interpretations, disputes, and potential resolutions. With its profound doctrinal heritage, Buddhism stands as a potentially invaluable resource in formulating responses to the complex ecological issues of the modern era.



The discourse on Buddhist environmentalism in Western contexts, while diverse in its methodologies and deliberations, can be broadly categorized into two primary frameworks: The first framework seeks to theoretically integrate foundational Buddhist doctrines with environmentalist principles, an endeavor encapsulated by Swearer's aforementioned five-fold taxonomy. The alternative framework emphasizes the practical application of Buddhist teachings within the sphere of environmental advocacy. This orientation, termed "engaged Buddhism," manifests with particular prominence in the West, symbolizing a deep-seated ecological awareness.<sup>5</sup> Examples of this manifestation include alliances with deep ecology, the mindfulness paradigms advanced by the Plum Village tradition, and a wide array of ecologically driven activist initiatives. Furthermore, specific renditions of Western Buddhism overtly embed and advocate elements of Buddhist ecological consciousness and practice.

One notable observation that emerges from the multifaceted perspectives on Buddhist environmentalism is the perception that Buddhist responses to environmental challenges are predominantly a concern of Western scholars and practitioners. This view situates the discourse within the realm of "Western Buddhism" or as a subject primarily within Western academic scrutiny, effectively sidelining the contributions and perspectives of Asian Buddhists. An examination of the anthology *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology* (1990) underscores this observation. Of its thirty-one chapters, a mere four contributions hail from non-Western authors: Chatsumarn Kabilsign, Padmasiri De Silva, Mobi Ho, and Thich Nhat Hanh. Among these four writers, De Silva's prominent academic contributions are primarily within Buddhist psychology and counseling; Nhat Hanh and Ho, frequent collaborators, have advanced the engaged Buddhism paradigm in Western contexts. Chatsumarn, who received her full monastic ordination as Dhammananda Bhikkhuni in 2003, offers a unique voice representative of traditional Asian Buddhism within the volume.

A similar trend is discernible in another anthology, *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism* (2000), wherein segments such as "Environmental Activism as Buddhist Practice," "Home Practice, Wild Practice," and "Challenges in Buddhist Thought and Action" exclusively feature contributions from non-Asian scholars. This disproportionate representation of Western voices within the contours of Buddhist environmental discourse inadvertently reinforces the prevailing assumption that ecological responsiveness is largely the purview of "Western Buddhism" or a primary focus of Western academic explorations. Such a narrow viewpoint risks overshadowing the rich ecological engagements and contributions of Buddhists from Asian traditions.

Buddhism's origins in the Indian subcontinent, amid a milieu of diverse religious and philosophical systems, played a substantial role in shaping early Buddhist interpretations of the natural world. The fundamental Indian cosmological concept of *samsāra* perhaps nurtured an attitude of ambivalence or even disillusionment with the material world, often perceived as transient and fraught with suffering. However, Buddhism's journey eastward marked a significant transformation in its doctrinal and practical attitudes toward nature. The East Asian intellectual milieu, particularly in regions such as China, Korea, and Japan, presents a departure from Indian metaphysical presuppositions. Indigenous philosophies, such as Daoism and Confucianism, which stress harmonious coexistence with the natural order, exerted considerable influence on the evolution of Buddhist thought in these areas.

Daoism, with its principle of all-pervading Dao, or "Way," potentially augmented an affirmative valuation of nature within East Asian Buddhism. In addition, the influence of animism, as manifested in the Shinto tradition, on Japanese Buddhist thought is notably profound. This interplay highlights a significant cultural synthesis, where the animistic perspectives inherent in Shintoism have been intricately woven into the fabric of Japanese Buddhist philosophy. An illustration of this comes from Japanese Zen Master Eihei Dōgen (1200–1253), who articulated a more ecologically amicable stance. The conceptualization of Earth as the "true human body" represents a notable divergence from traditional Indian Buddhist perspectives. This approach resonates with Daoist tenets emphasizing cosmic harmony and uniformity. Additionally, it aligns with Shinto doctrines, particularly the

concept of *kannagara* (the way of the kami or spiritual essence) and the practice of *harae* (the pursuit of purity). This synthesis of ideas reflects a unique integration of diverse philosophical and religious elements, illustrating a cross-cultural enrichment of spiritual understanding.<sup>6</sup> For Dōgen, such an understanding suggests a complex interdependence between humans and the environment, wherein nature is not merely instrumental for spiritual advancement but possesses intrinsic sanctity. This philosophical stance amplifies the imperative for ecological preservation, recognizing nature as a sacred entity worthy of reverence and protection.

The diverse perspectives within Buddhist traditions offer a rich reservoir of concepts that can significantly contribute to the development of emergent environmental ethics. Within the extensive philosophical domains of Buddhism are principles that can foster a deep sense of ecological reverence, which is crucial as humanity grapples with critical environmental emergencies. These profound spiritual insights have the potential to inspire new frameworks for environmental harmony and sustainability.

Proponents of eco-Buddhism assert the organic evolution of philosophical traditions. They emphasize Buddhism's historical malleability, highlighting its adaptive prowess across diverse spiritual needs as well as different cultural and intellectual terrains. From their perspective, East Asian Buddhism's sensitivity to nature epitomizes another evolutionary chapter in Buddhism's dynamically rich history of adapting to sociological phenomena, timely resonating with global ecological exigencies. The intricate nexus between Buddhist philosophy and ecological thought unveils a multifaceted and stratified interplay. It is conceivable that any venerable religious tradition traversing myriad cultures and epochs will inherently manifest internal dialectics and heterogeneities.

#### 4. DDM's Fourfold Environmental Initiatives

Dharma Drum Mountain is an international Buddhist spiritual, cultural, and educational foundation founded by the late Chan Master Sheng Yen. The center focuses on educating the public in Buddhism, with the goal of improving the world and establishing a "Pure Land on Earth" through Buddhist education. A meticulous analysis of the environmental initiatives of DDM unveiled a nuanced East Asian contribution to the ecological discourse. The focus was particularly on the operational ethos of DDM, an organization that represents an intriguing confluence of authentic lineage and scholarly engagement.

Master Sheng Yen, a distinguished figure within Chan Buddhism, is recognized as a lineage holder of the Linji and Caodong schools, ensuring the continuity of traditional Chinese Chan.<sup>7</sup> Sheng Yen's academic credentials, including a doctoral degree from Rissho University in Japan with a concentration on Buddhist literature, affirm his scholarly acumen and critical engagement with canonical texts. This synthesis of traditional adherence and scholarly exploration underpins Sheng Yen's strategic guidance on DDM, particularly in molding responses to contemporary environmental calamities. He adapted Chan practices and hermeneutic approaches to Buddhist scriptures, aligning them with urgent ecological imperatives. These endeavors challenge assertions such as those of Harris (1997), who views Western environmental concerns as extrinsic to Buddhism and accuses proponents of Buddhism's environmental pertinence of textual selectivity.<sup>8</sup>

During his seminal discourse at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in 2000, Sheng Yen expounded on the foundational aims of DDM's ecological stewardship initiatives. He advocated a comprehensive strategy dedicated to the preservation of the spiritual, social, everyday living, and natural environments, an approach that distinguishes itself by transcending the conventional focus on natural environments alone (Ng 2018). DDM's philosophy forges an integrative perception of environmental conservation. This innovative fourfold schema underscores the indivisibility of natural conservation efforts from the broader contexts of spiritual enrichment, societal welfare, and the enhancement of habitual living spaces.

This recalibration challenges the conventional environmental narrative, which predominantly focuses on wildlife preservation, recycling endeavors, and antipollution policies, thereby necessitating a reconceptualization of traditional environmental paradigms. It also represents a concerted effort to bridge the chasm between safeguarding the physical environment and nurturing the internal landscapes of human consciousness, social harmony, and day-to-day existence. Rather than adhering strictly to what might be characterized as established “Buddhist ethics” in environmental discourse, this methodology suggests a more expansive, holistic mode of spiritual practice, refraining from delineating environmentalism within the confines of Western philosophical or ethical paradigms. By proposing a spiritual dimension to ecological conservation, DDM’s approach encourages reconsideration of environmentalism. It also invites an exploration beyond traditional Western frameworks, advocating for a more inclusive, spiritually nourishing practice that recognizes the interconnectedness of all facets of existence. This nuanced understanding can prompt individuals and communities to acknowledge that the health of our natural surroundings is inextricably linked to the well-being of our spiritual lives, societal structures, and lived experiences, thereby necessitating a harmonized approach to environmental guardianship.

In this expanded environmental discourse, Sheng Yen articulated an ethos wherein an environment transcends its naturalistic confines, representing instead the multifaceted context of human existence. He posited that the environment is both the fruit of circumstantial retribution (*yibao*) and the arena for spiritual practice, underlining the dynamic tension between humans and their surroundings. This tension, he suggested, furnishes the foundational ground upon which individuals can navigate their spiritual evolution and address karmic encumbrances.

A closer inspection of Sheng Yen’s explications of the “environmental protection of nature” (*ziran huanbao*) revealed an alignment with more conventional environmentalist thought. He advocated for the sustenance of robust ecosystems, endorsed eco-friendly Buddhist burial practices, and recommended curbing the usage of items such as incense and paper money, all familiar tenets within mainstream environmental dialogues. A unifying theme across these diverse interpretations of the “environmental protection of nature” is the principle of intrinsic human–nature interconnectedness. Sheng Yen emphasized the realization that humans are integral components of nature, necessitating stewardship akin to self-care. This notion resonates with traditional Buddhist teachings that advocate a harmonious coexistence with all sentient beings (Sheng 2011b, pp. 42–45).

In addressing the intricate relationship between human beings and the natural world, Sheng Yen articulated the necessity of embracing environmental safeguarding principles: “We need to adopt the concept of protecting the natural environment. The natural environment is the ‘material world’ mentioned in the Buddhadharmā. The physical body is our primary environment of retribution, and the environment is our dependent environment of retribution. We should take care of and protect the entire natural environment, just like how we care for and protect our own body. If we do so, our world would be truly blessed” (Sheng 2011a, p. 16).

This discourse draws upon doctrinal foundations in the *Pusa yingluo benye jing* (Sūtra of the Diadem of the Primary Activities of the Bodhisattvas), a text within the Indian Mahāyāna tradition, rendered into the Chinese linguistic context in the fourth century CE by translator Zhu Fonian. The sūtra employs the paradigm of “direct karmic retribution” (*zhengbao*), juxtaposed with “circumstantial karmic retribution” (*yibao*), advocating a view of interdependence. This philosophical construct delineates the inseparability of the mind and environment, emphasizing their reciprocal nature in the processes of emergence and purification. Through this, it underscores a foundational Mahāyāna tenet, advocating the intrinsic links between sentient beings and their environmental contexts, thereby advancing a compelling argument for environmental stewardship grounded in spiritual and ethical disciplines:



Good sons, the term “land” signifies the abode of all noble and holy beings. Consequently, all sentient beings, noble and sanctified, dwell within the lands of their karmic retribution. Ordinary beings reside within the realm of the five aggregates, which is identified as the land of “direct retribution,” whereas shared physical environments such as mountains, forests, and the great earth are known as the land of “dependent retribution”. Even the saints who have reached the first stage [of Bodhisattvahood] inhabit two kinds of lands. The first is the land of genuine wisdom, where prior wisdom form the “land” for subsequent wisdom. The second encompasses lands that transform and manifest purity or impurity across countless eons, adapting as necessary. This principle extends even to the lands of the Immaculate Stage. All sentient beings, up to and including those in the Immaculate Stage, do not dwell in pure lands as their karmic fruition. Only the Buddhas reside in the supreme Middle Way, which is the primordial nature of Dharma. For this reason, I once expounded broadly upon the gates to the Pure Land for all sentient beings from the platform of the Universal Light Hall.<sup>9</sup>

Sheng Yen’s discourse invites a nuanced understanding of environmentalism, suggesting that contemporary responses to ecological crises be viewed not as modern impositions but as continuations of a rich historical legacy of ecological sensitivity integral to Buddhist philosophy. It can be seen that the crux of DDM’s environmental advocacy hinges on the essentiality of spiritual cultivation. Within DDM’s ethos, spiritual refinement takes precedence, advocating that those aligned with their inner harmony are predisposed to minimizing adverse environmental impacts. This introspective pathway is paralleled by a strong emphasis on the practical embodiment of environmental virtues characterized by restraint in consumption, proactive ecological conservation, and a mindful appreciation for Earth’s limited resources. Integral to this philosophy is the drive to inspire communal respect for and preservation of our global environment.

DDM’s environmental philosophy is anchored in the quest to sustain a “spiritual environment” (*xinling huanbao*), aspiring to actualize an experiential “pure land” in our lived reality. This endeavor is infused with principles of sincerity, humility, compassion, and loving-kindness, extending beyond personal spiritual growth to encompass a compassionate approach to interpersonal relationships, societal welfare, and global ecological systems. Advocating for the protection of our spiritual environment, DDM encourages a minimalist ethos, restraining the excesses of human desires and, thus, promoting efficient resource use and pollution reduction. A communal spirit underscores the responsibility toward societal well-being, while a commitment to the natural environment calls for a comprehensive understanding and respect for Earth’s ecosystems, advocating sustainable coexistence and cooperative stewardship.

In contrast to more conventional ecological models that prioritize physical conservation efforts, the Buddhist framework advanced by DDM underscores spiritual cultivation as the fundamental premise for enduring, meaningful ecological solutions. This approach is deeply rooted in the fundamental Buddhist concept of “dependent origination,” highlighting the intrinsic interrelationship of all life forms’ experiences. This doctrinal backdrop enhances the comprehension of DDM’s environmental strategy as a variant of engaged Buddhism, directed at resolving ecological predicaments. Like contemporaneous engaged Buddhist movements across Asia, DDM’s environmental commitment transcends religious confines, positioning itself as a universally accessible initiative unbounded by specific sectarian or theological parameters.

The synthesis of Buddhist philosophy with environmental stewardship, particularly via Sheng Yen’s concept of “protecting the spiritual environment,” embodies a sophisticated integration of spiritual and ecological consciousness. This paradigm acknowledges the deep interplay between individual internal states and the broader environmental continuum, suggesting that the ecological imperatives embraced by Sheng Yen extend beyond conventional conservation strategies. They prescribe a multifaceted approach that integrates inner spiritual development with broader environmental conscientiousness. The

notion of “protecting the spiritual environment” transcends mere ecological guardianship; it resonates as a mobilizing ethos, inviting adherence to a set of principles that nurture a unique cosmovision and its resultant practices. Consequently, it serves as a cohesive point, intertwining core Buddhist tenets with the exigencies of contemporary environmental challenges and urging an expansive, more inclusive global audience toward a unified, holistic environmental perspective.

Sheng Yen articulated an interconnection between the purity of human consciousness and the condition of the surrounding environment, an emphasis that aligns seamlessly with Mahāyāna Yogācāra principles that posit that the state of human consciousness fundamentally shapes the perception of all external realities. His insights create a critical nexus for engaging in theological and ecological discourses. In positioning spiritual cultivation at the core of environmental guardianship, Sheng Yen introduced a revitalized paradigm into intricate debates concerning sustainable development and ecological preservation. This innovative approach to environmental spirituality effectively deconstructs traditional dichotomies that often separate spiritual introspection from ecological realities. Sheng Yen advocated for a notably integrative approach to spiritual environmentalism, presenting a strategy that pairs individual spiritual progress with collective environmental health, thereby offering a holistic solution to the complex environmental issues of our time. In this framework, environmentalism transcends its conventional designation as an external endeavor. Instead, it is recentered as an integral component of individual existential contemplation and spiritual practice. By doing so, Sheng Yen encouraged a reflective environmental ethos wherein the commitment to ecological stewardship is as much an inward journey of spiritual growth as it is an outward effort to conserve and protect the natural world. This repositioning signifies a crucial step toward reimagining and cultivating sustainable interactions between humans and their broader environments, grounded in the principles of introspective purity and comprehensive compassion.

DDM’s environmental protection strategy extends to more direct forms of interaction with our immediate surroundings and social constructs. One primary aspect is the “protection of the living environment” (*shenghuo huanbao*), which emphasizes the environmental implications of everyday habits and choices. Sheng Yen called for an intentional simplification of daily life to minimize the environmental footprints left behind by modern consumerist lifestyles. He highlighted how societal norms, amplified by persuasive advertising, often drive wastefulness and pollution and contribute to broader existential suffering. In this context, Sheng Yen introduced the concept of “cherishing blessings” (*xifu*), a principle that urges individuals to find contentment in simplicity and recognize the value of what they already possess (Sheng 2011a, pp. 56–60). This approach to environmentalism is not merely about physical cleanliness and sustainability but also encompasses mental and spiritual cleanliness, encouraging people to participate actively in initiatives such as recycling drives, voluntary social services, and other lifestyle alterations aligned with holistic environmental preservation. It prompts the introspection of personal ethics and behavioral norms as individuals navigate their paths within the broader framework of “fourfold environmentalism”.

Completing the quartet of environmental protections is the safeguarding of the social environment, referred to as “*liyi huanbao*” in the original Chinese context. This concept, equated to etiquette and ritual, operates on dual planes: the personal and the communal. It calls for a reevaluation and subsequent reform of ceremonial practices to address issues of extravagance and ecological harm, particularly in traditional Buddhist contexts. These reforms, argued in the name of environmental preservation, extend to a range of communal rituals that include weddings, funerals, and specific religious ceremonies, such as “captive animal release” (Zimmerman-Liu 2023, pp. 10–12). Sheng Yen advocated this form of environmentalism, with a focus on the observance of rules and etiquette, emphasizing the critical nature of interpersonal relations and individual conduct. Respectful interaction and mindfulness in thought, speech, and action form the bedrock of this approach. This aspect of environmentalism, particularly in its call for the reformulation of social rituals,

exhibits a modern sensibility that aligns with a humanistic Buddhist vision. It seeks to strike a balance by creating a dialectic between traditional religious practices and contemporary environmental ethics. Thus, it reinforces modern values by reinvigorating them with traditional legitimacy, demonstrating that ecological responsibility does not exist in isolation but is a natural extension of comprehensive spiritual living and social harmony.

In synthesizing Sheng Yen's teachings, a hierarchical structure emerges within the fourfold path of environmental protection, delineating the spiritual, social, living, and natural environments. Foremost is the safeguarding of the spiritual environment, underscoring the intrinsic nexus between internal tranquility and external harmony. Successive to this is the preservation of the social environment, which emphasizes the cultivation of respectful interpersonal dynamics through conscientious verbal and physical interactions. Upholding decorum, civility, and proper etiquette in daily engagements substantiates the very essence of social environmental protection. Progressing to the third tier, the emphasis shifts to the protection of the living environment. This doctrine advocates for an existence marked by cleanliness, orderliness, and respect for communal spaces. This ethos extends to resource utilization, prompting individuals to engage in ecologically sustainable behaviors, such as waste reduction, through practical means. The fourth stratum pertains to the protection of the natural environment, a universal task that involves immediate and consistent action. It involves practical steps, such as reducing waste generation and prudent management of natural resources, symbolizing a direct commitment to preserving the natural world (Sheng 2011b).

As Zimmerman-Liu (2023, p. 9) noted, "The basis for all kinds of environmental protection is 'protecting the spiritual environment', which is mainly a matter of purifying the mind by 'treating others with compassion, by acting with wisdom, and by alleviating our own vexations and impurities'. Protecting the spiritual environment is then expressed through and intertwined with protecting the social environment, protecting the living environment, and protecting the natural environment". The distinctiveness of this fourfold framework for environmental protection lies in its holistic approach, wherein the safeguarding of our natural surroundings is conceptualized not as an isolated endeavor but as a consequential progression from the nurturing of spiritual, social, and living environments. The crux of this methodology is the prioritization of cultivating these three integral aspects of human interaction with the world rather than an immediate, direct intervention in natural landscapes. This paradigm underscores the necessity of a foundational preparation that ensures the sustainability of environmental conservation efforts. It subtly shifts the focus from short-term, goal-oriented solutions, often sought as rapid remedies for environmental issues, to a more profound, intrinsic alteration in human behaviors and societal norms. By emphasizing spiritual, social, and living environments, this approach advocates for a transformative lifestyle and ethical change, which organically engenders a resilient, enduring protection of the natural environment.

In essence, this strategy advocates a preventive ethos over a curative stance, foreseeing that genuine, lasting environmental stewardship stems from a deep, reflective change in human consciousness and day-to-day practices. It posits that a harmonious balance with nature is achievable not merely through direct actions on the environment but through a more rounded development of human attitudes and a collective ethical evolution, laying the groundwork for sustainable coexistence between humanity and the natural world.

Within DDM's doctrinal framework, the safeguarding of the four distinct yet inter-related environments is not an ancillary concern but rather a central tenet of its Buddhist practice. This principle is further echoed in DDM's additional initiatives, all constructed upon the foundational ethos of fourfold environmental protection designed to foster spiritual advancement. One such initiative is the "Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance Campaign," which integrates the philosophical underpinnings of the "Four Kinds of Environmentalism" into its core practice methodology. Complementarily, the "Six Ethics of the Mind" initiative delves deeper, offering comprehensive guidelines for managing the spectrum of human interactions, encompassing even our engagement with the natural world (Sheng 2015).

Within the broader canvas of DDM's teachings, monastic leaders skillfully interweave traditional sūtra exegesis with contemporary ecological imperatives, advocating for a lifestyle that respects environmental sustainability. This concerted approach is crystallized in the organization's mission statement, which ambitiously aspires to elevate human moral character and actualize an earthly Pure Land. Central to achieving this lofty ideal is the instrument of education, positioned as a transformative tool for individual and collective betterment. In this regard, DDM extends its doctrinal teachings to pragmatic daily living, providing a set of precept-like guidelines that nurture sensibilities crucial for the effective enactment of the fourfold environmental protection initiative. These practical directives encompass nine specific areas that emphasize a lifestyle of mindful consumption and ecological responsibility: "(1) reduce your carbon footprint as much as possible (take public transportation, conserve electricity, etc.); (2) recycle resources (washed so they will be reused and not burned); (3) eat locally produced food without fertilizers and pesticides (support natural farming); (4) conserve water; (5) do not use plastic bags; (6) do not drink bottled drinks; (7) carry your own bowl, chopsticks, and cup; (8) practice vegetarianism; (9) deal with animals appropriately (including do not "release wildlife" unless it has a chance of surviving without harming local communities)" (Zimmerman-Liu 2023, p. 12).

Through these concrete, actionable measures, DDM underscores a commitment to ecological stewardship, integrating spiritual principles with environmental consciousness into daily life. This synthesis not only elevates individual adherents but also contributes meaningfully to the collective pursuit of environmental equilibrium and ethical maturation. In this holistic framework, Sheng Yen encapsulated not only the physical aspects of environmental stewardship but also the spiritual and ethical dimensions, advocating a comprehensive approach that harmonizes personal well-being with the universal welfare of the natural world.

## 5. Conclusions

In addressing the urgent imperatives of contemporary environmental crises, it becomes evident that applying the lens of Western environmental ethics to critique Buddhist ecological paradigms is an exercise that offers little contributory value to the global endeavor of planetary preservation. The Western academic tradition, characterized by its methodological precision, pragmatism, robust theoretical scaffolding, and explicit ethical codification, represents a paradigmatic approach fundamentally distinct from the ontological and epistemological contours of Buddhist environmental thought. Despite the apparent philosophical tensions between traditional Buddhist teachings and contemporary Western environmental narratives, there is promising potential for harmonious convergence. Amid escalating global environmental threats, gleaning wisdom from ancient traditions (e.g., Buddhism) can offer alternative avenues and innovative approaches to ecological sustainability. This process necessitates not just adjustments in policies but also significant shifts in our knowledge systems and value structures, prompting a more holistic transformation in how we perceive and interact with the natural world.

As illustrated by this case study of DDM, a Buddhist ecological ethos emerges that does not conform to Western anticipatory frameworks but instead forges a unique pathway for spiritual and environmental interconnectivity. This approach defies the categorization schema proposed by Swearer, as it encompasses elements of eco-apologetics, eco-constructivism, eco-ethics, and eco-contextualism, thereby resisting singular classification. Master Sheng Yen, the architect of this integrated ecological vision, recognized the consonance between core Buddhist philosophies and ecological stewardship in an eco-apologetic stance. Concurrently, he advocated for the nuanced recontextualization of ancient wisdom and ritual practice to resonate with the exigencies of the modern era, indicative of an eco-constructivist perspective. His interpretation of ecological consciousness, framed within the Buddhist mental cultivation consonant with the Bodhisattva ideal and the pursuit of manifesting a "Pure Land", aligns him with eco-ethical principles. Furthermore, his propensity for adaptive scriptural interpretation, as demonstrated by initiatives such as

invoking Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha as an emblem for mindful consumption and environmental preservation, aligns with eco-contextualism. This adaptability is further evidenced in his critiques of certain traditional Buddhist practices, such as incense burning or bamboo plaque inscriptions, from an environmental standpoint, thereby donning the mantle of an eco-critic when necessary.

The DDM model eludes rigid classification within the established methodological and typological structures of Western environmental ethics. However, it is not bereft of intersections with these Western narratives. This complex hybrid philosophical construct underscores the necessity for environmental discourses to transcend cultural, disciplinary, and epistemological boundaries. It advocates for a more inclusive global environmental ethic that embraces diverse methodologies and philosophies, recognizing their unique contributions to collective ecological enterprise. This perspective not only enriches the environment-related dialogue but also fosters a multifaceted, culturally synergistic approach essential for addressing humanity's shared environmental challenges of our contemporary world.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Leopold pioneered the concept in Western environmental literature that ethical consideration should expand to include all of nature, not just humanity. His work, *A Sand County Almanac*, articulates a potent connection to the natural world, achieved with intellectual rigor and informed expertise free from pedantry. This work evokes a profound moral resonance without inducing guilt or resistance, largely attributable to its lucid and intelligent prose. It stands as an essential text for nurturing deep ecological awareness.
- <sup>2</sup> The ecocentric ethic, originally articulated by Aldo Leopold, posits that all species, humans included, emerge from a prolonged evolutionary narrative and share intricate interconnections in their life processes. This perspective emphasizes the integrity of the biotic community, advocating for the preservation of both ecosystem composition and ecological dynamics. Contrasting sharply with anthropocentrism, which prioritizes human beings and human interests, ecocentrism adopts a more expansive worldview, acknowledging the inherent value of all organisms within an ecological context. This approach extends beyond the principles of biocentrism, which ascribe intrinsic value solely to living entities, by also encompassing environmental systems in their entirety, including their abiotic components. "Deep ecology," a term developed by Arne Naess to contrast with "shallow ecology," advocates an intensive inquiry into the philosophical and spiritual bases underlying environmental dilemmas while adopting a biocentric perspective. It frequently integrates insights from Asian wisdom traditions, including Buddhism, while underscoring the inherent worth of the natural environment independent of human utility.
- <sup>3</sup> Looking up the definition of "environmentalism" within the framework of human geography provides us with the field's specialized emphasis on dissecting environmental phenomena through the complexities of societal formations, cultural dimensions, and geographical configurations. Contrary to a simplistic interpretation of environmentalism as the safeguarding of natural landscapes, human geography scrutinizes this concept via a lens that examines the reciprocal impacts between human endeavors, conventional behaviors, and the environment. This analytical stance recognizes the complexity underlying environmental predicaments, identifying their origins in a spectrum of factors such as urbanization trends, allocation of resources, cultural ethos, and economic modalities, which are quintessential studies within human geography.
- <sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the history and development of "Green Buddhism," see Kaza (2019), pp. 65–87.
- <sup>5</sup> An illustrative example within this discourse can be found in the contributions of Sulak Sivaraksa, particularly his 2014 scholarly article titled "Ecological Suffering: From a Buddhist Perspective".
- <sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of Dōgen's perspective on environmental interconnectedness with the human body, see Leighton (2022).
- <sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive collection of Sheng Yen's writings, both in Chinese and translated into English, visit <https://www.shengyen.org/books-grid.php?s=E> (accessed on 18 October 2023).



- <sup>8</sup> Swearer (1997, p. 39) criticized Harris's position as "founded on too narrow a construction of the Buddhist view of nature and animals based on selective reading of particular texts and traditions".
- <sup>9</sup> Taishō edition of the Chinese Tripiṭaka, vol. 24, no. 1485: 1015c–1016a.

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