

# A Study of Gary Snyder's Ecological Holism and Buddhism

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## Abstract

Caught up and got mired in the multi-dimensional environmental problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people gradually come to understand that the root cause of environmental crisis lies not merely in the emission of the industrial pollutants. Since the early period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been a lot of warnings and suggestions issued by environmental conservationists and scholars. Humans are merely members of the biotic community and “land ethics” should be lived up to. There are also some ecologists, religious leaders, and politicians emphasizing the importance of spiritual dimensions and sublimation in dealing with eco-crisis. Snyder often employs the analogies of the “Jewel Net of Indra” of *Hua-yen Sutra* and “mandala” of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism to explicate his notion of ecological holism. Snyder firmly believes that “cross-fertilization” of cultures bring about the sublimation of spiritual dimensions and the awakening of human minds. For Snyder, ecological salvation is possible only when spiritual dimensions is taken into account.

**Key Words:** Gary Snyder, Ecological holism, Mandala, Jewel Net of Indra

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## 摘要

身處於全球環境問題層出不窮的二十一世紀，人們逐漸發現生態危機的主要導因並不僅僅是一般所認知的全球工業化進程所帶來的污染。從二十世紀初期開始，在西方就有一些環保學者強調人類只是生態社群的成員、呼籲政府及人們要注重「土地倫理」。後續更有一些生態學者強調精神層面昇華的重要性。史耐德多次運用大乘佛典的觀念——《華嚴經》之中的「帝網天珠」及藏傳金剛乘佛教的「曼荼羅」——來表達他的「生態系統整全觀」。史耐德始終相信世界上各個文化必須「交互施肥」。人類文明在不斷的互動中，產生昇華的精神文明，使人心有所覺悟。因此，對史耐德而言，將精神層面融入生態理念並加以實踐可謂是生態救贖不可或缺的重要一環。

**關鍵字：**蓋瑞·史耐德、生態整全觀、曼荼羅、帝網天珠

## I. Introduction

### A. Ecological Crisis Nowadays and Its Root Causes

Aldo Leopold gives us his definition of “land ethic” in his *A Sand County Almanac*. Land ethic “is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold, 262). The spirit of “land ethic,” however, with the severe pollution of human consciousness resulting from the dualistic Enlightenment mentality, has been violated.

In 1962, with her publication of *Silent Spring*, Rachael Carson cried foul over the use of DDT and pesticides. She vehemently offered her admonitions that improper use of DDT and pesticides would certainly entail a “silent spring,” with birds and insects no longer chirping and hopping. However, few people listened to her admonitions.

As a result, with the coming of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, multi-dimensional facets of environmental problems have become the nightmarish albatross hanging around global governments’ necks. Human beings find themselves caught and trapped in varieties of environmental problems, which are threatening the health of our planetary home. Ozone depletion, carbon dioxide buildup, chlorofluorocarbon emissions, water depletion, deforestation, toxic wastes, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, greenhouse effect, and climatic changes are some of the recurrent elements which have made the environmental problems a veritable crisis—a global ecological crisis. The effects of the crisis are felt worldwide and are so disastrous that they are upsetting the respiration, clogging the pores and lungs, and polluting the circulatory system of our ancient Mother Earth, or “Gaia,” as coined by the atmospheric chemist James Lovelock. Moreover, our Mother Earth, Gaia, has been gradually shorn of her tresses when those immoderate and avaricious lumberers destroy tropical rainforest at alarming rates. Species of plants and animals are now becoming extinct each day.

In 2006, a documentary film “An Inconvenient Truth,” directed by Davis Guggenheim, was released. This film was based on former United States Vice President Al Gore’s campaign, with a view to educating citizens about the severity of climate change and global warming and re-energizing the environmental movements. Documenting a keynote presentation (dubbed “the slide show”) that Gore has presented throughout the world, the film was a critical and box-office success, winning Academy Awards for Best Documentary Feature and for Best Original Song. According to Gore in his *Earth in the Balance*, “Nothing less than the current logic of world civilization” runs counter to the well-being of our Mother Earth” (269). This dominant and exploitative logic or worldview results in not only the massive achievements of the industrial world but the ecocrisis itself. In his searching for the root cause, Gore says that “the more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual” (12). For Gore, the dominant worldview of unrestraint exploitation is extremely detrimental to the planetary well-being or, in the words of Aldo Leopold, to “the integrity, stability, and beauty of

the biotic community.” The global environmental crisis is tantamount to the global spiritual crisis which takes its roots from the alienated way in which we conceive ourselves as superior beings apart from nature. “We have misunderstood who we are, how we related to our place within creation, why our very existence assigns us a duty of moral alertness to the consequences of what we do” (Gore, 258).

The degradation of land ethic and unrestraint exploitation are the result of human beings’ desire for “more progress.” This insatiable desire takes its root in the thought of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century— the so-called “Enlightenment mentality.” With this mentality, they came to be convinced of the notion that humans could become “the measure and master of all things”— the inevitable result of the Cartesian dualistic thinking.

Overwhelmed by the desire to conquer nature and make more and more progress, the West, since the Great Enlightenment of the eighteenth century onward, have been gradually convinced of the Cartesian notion of “mechanical nature”—nature, in its physical form, has no soul, feels no pain, exists only to serve human beings, who, the only beings endowed with rationalistic soul, are capable of and legitimate in exploiting natural resources for their own needs. Human being as “I” with soul and the physical natural world as “the other” without soul are so sharply distinguished that they stand opposed to each other. The truth, however, has been revealed that human beings, in doing so, are courting disasters by upsetting the originally-balanced “food-chain.”

The suffering of our Mother Earth and of human beings is primarily due to inappropriate human interventions in nature and in its process. It is a must that humans re-examine and change their mindset and worldview with regard to “nature”—nature in both its physical and spiritual manifestations. Ecological crisis is, in fact, “an outer manifestation of an inner [spiritual] crisis,” to summarize the gist of Al Gore’s observation quoted above.

Alerted by the harms caused by the industrial mentality and the deterioration of our environment and ecological crisis as its results, deep ecologists, especially Arne Naess, religious people, such as Dalai Lama, and political leaders, such as Al Gore, all believe that, in order to save our earth and its inhabitants, human beings must, first of all, develop their compassion, change their anthropocentric worldview into an eco-centric cosmology, remove their greediness, and raise their ecological consciousness. Only by these four changes can we change our attitude toward nature, improve our exploitive societies, and protect our Mother Earth and wildlife.

I firmly believe that Buddhism can play a very important role in changing our anthropocentric mindset and thus bring about a sustainable eco-sphere.

## **B. Religion as “Re-ligament” between Humans and Mother Nature**

In a keynote lecture, on the topic of “spiritual ecology: religion and environment,” delivered to the graduate students of the English Department of Tamkang University on Oct. 24, 2008, Holmes Rolston, professor of philosophy at Colorado State University and renowned for his efforts in the promotion of environmental ethics, referred to the important role played by

“religions” as the “re-ligament” between human and nature. Indeed, the word “religion” originates in the Latin word “*ligere*,” which is the root of “ligament” and “link.” Therefore, religion, implying “re-ligament” or “re-linking,” means an activity that restores a connection. For Christians, it means the restoration of an essential connection between humans and the God. A former Presbyterian pastor, Rolston skillfully employed the overtone of the word “religion,” “re-ligament,” to illustrate simultaneously the broken bond and the resultant wound between human and nature and the remedy that we humans can adopt to bridge the gap and heal the wound. In other words, religions worldwide, through “re-interpretation” of their spiritual dimensions, can play the role of “spiritual bridges,” essential bridges that can re-connect and restore the lost bond or intimacy between humans and the Mother Earth.

Ecology, as it is always implicated by spiritual ecology, has to start from the transformation of our life and sublimation of our mind or our “skin-encapsulated ego,” as is called by Alan Watts (qtd. in Macy, 53 ). The conventional notion of the autistic and ego-bound self with which we have been raised and to which we have been conditioned by the mainstream culture has to be undermined because it, as a false reification, is detrimental to our planetary home. According to Gregory Bateson, this false reification of the self is basic to the planetary ecological crisis in which we find ourselves, at present, getting caught and trapped. The small “self” is merely a tiny part of a “much larger field of interlocking processes” of cybernetics’ discoveries (Bateson, 331). What’s worse, this reified, commodified, and ego-bound self is a by-product of Cartesian dualism--the primary root cause culpable for the present environmental injustice, racism, and planetary crisis. Bateson continues his observation and writes that:

If we continue to operate in terms of a Cartesian dualism of mind versus matter, we shall probably also continue to see the world in terms of God versus man; elite versus people; chosen race versus others; nation versus nation; and man versus environment. It is doubtful whether a species having both an advanced technology and this strange [biased] way of looking at its world can endure (337).

The autistic “skin-encapsulated ego” has to be drilled and become “porous,” able to be permeated by air, dew drops, and sunlight from our nurturing Mother Earth. The small and cocooned “self” is thus transformed, and sublimated into the “ecological self” or the “eco-self,” “co-extensive with other beings and the life of our planet” (Macy, 53). This notion, as the fundamental tenet of the deep ecological movement, is referred to as “widening circles of identification” by Arne Naess, the founder of the movement. This spiritual idealism of widening sense of self, or “Self-realization,” can only develop from the very moment when we give up the narrow and ego-bound Narcissism in which we presently dwell.

In this paper, I choose Gary Snyder as the target for research due to the fact that Snyder devoted all his life to the pursuit of “the new, larger humanism” (Snyder 1980, 113) primarily in relation to the organic dialogue between Buddhism and ecology. He often cites the Mahayana Buddhist analogies of “Jewel Net of Indra” and “mandala” to explicate his notion of the “eco-system,” a holistic worldview of ecology.

### C. Gary Snyder and His Critique of the Dominant Worldview

Gary Snyder, among the many contemporary Western poets, is a prolific poet who absorbs into his writings the greatest amount of the essence of Asian cultures, especially that of China and Japan. During his interview with Ling Chung in 1976, when Prof. Chung, now the Dean and Chair Professor of the Faculty of Arts of Hong Kong Baptist University, paid a visit to his homestead in Northern California, Snyder once told Prof. Chung that he inherited not the culture of Western European but, instead, the cultures of the American Indian, China, and Japan, and that he then was studying all by himself the language of Chinese Mandarin (my translation, Chung, Ling, i). The deep fascination of Snyder with Oriental cultures is inherent in and can be accounted for by some geopolitical factors. According to the minutes recorded by Prof. Chung for her interview with Snyder, “[t]he Culture of West Coast is a marginal culture to the European tradition. This new culture looks further west to the Far East and Asia (qtd. in Chung, Ling, 4). The Americans of the Eastern part of the U.S., still with their eyes looking toward the Europe and identifying with the European mainstream, tend to regard the culture of the Western part as that of a marginal one. According to Snyder, the culture of Western America, however, is definitely not a marginal one, in that the Western part of the U.S., during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has already developed a diversified culture embracing and synthesizing the cultures of American indigenous people, Eastern Asia, India, and Mexico (my translation, Chung, Ling, i). The so-called Northwestern America, where Snyder himself lives, should be called “the Shore of Eastern Pacific,” implying its deep cultural and spiritual connection with the Far Eastern Asia, which, with its diversified and exuberant cultural heritage, is also definitely not a marginal culture. Timothy Gray, in his “Gary Snyder : Poet-Geographer of the Pacific Rim,” clearly indicated that, in addition to Gary Snyder, there are still some poets of the Western America looking toward the further west, toward the Oriental cultures of the opposite shore of the Pacific Ocean. As early as 1955, the poet Kenneth Rexroth launched his vehement criticism against those intellectuals of Euro-centrism, criticizing their arrogant ignorance of the enthusiastic interest in Asian philosophy and literature that has long permeated among the poets of the Western America, or, in the words of Snyder, the poets of the Shore of Eastern Pacific (Gray, 19).

Snyder has been trying his best not only to absorb essential nutrition from both the Oriental and the Occidental but to hold the opinion that the cross-dialogue and interaction among global cultures is essential and positive. For Snyder, the cultural soil suitable for the sound development of bio-centric community is one that has underwent countless “cross-fertilizations” (Snyder 1966, 126). However, the anthropocentrism of Judeo-Christian traditions prohibits such process of cross-fertilization

The Western world is abound with “socially and politically entrenched attitudes and institutions that reinforce our misuses of nature and our cruelty toward each other.” The major civilizations of Western world “objectify and commodify the natural world,” regarding nature as a mere inanimate resource and a target of opportunity” (Snyder 1995, 61). Snyder writes that:

For several centuries western civilization has had a priapic [of Priapus] drive for material accumulation, continual extensions of political and economic power, termed “progress.” In the Judeo-Christian worldview, humans are seen as working out their ultimate destinies (paradise? Perdition?) with planet earth as the stage for the drama—trees and animals mere props, nature a vast supply depot. Fed by fossil fuel, this religio-economic view has become a cancer: uncontrollable growth. It may finally choke itself and drag much else down with it (Snyder 1995, 53).

This insatiable drive for material accumulation and hegemonic expansionism on the part of western governments, which is inherent in the anthropocentric mindset of the Judeo-Christian traditions, accounts for the widespread and deteriorating ecological crisis and environmental racism, which, as the two sides of one coin, combined together to form the “Gordian knot” of contemporary environmental crisis.

## **II. Towards Ecological Holism: Snyder’s Interpretation of Buddhist “Mandala”**

According to the Vajrayana perspective, there are certain fundamental energies that circulate incessantly in the “ocean of being” or, in the words of ecology, the bio-sphere. These energies are rooted in the Buddha-nature and can be called into manifestation with the languages of symbols. The most important symbolic language is that of the “mandala.” The mandala points to reality as it is experienced beyond thought. Reality, as revealed by mandala, is nothing other than wisdom—the holistic wisdom that has went beyond the confinement of dualistic thinking.

If we divide the word “mandala” into two separate parts—“manda” and “la”— for further analysis, we can get to the core meaning of this word. “Manda,” in its Chinese translation, refers to “ti-hu,” that is, the purified essence obtained from the extraction of milk. “Manda,” therefore, means “purified essence.” “-la,” as a suffix, means “obtaining.” “Mandala” refers to the obtaining of “the essence,” the supreme enlightenment of the Buddha.

Snyder is fond of employing the image of “mandala” of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism to explicate his notion of ecological holism. In his *A Place in Space*, Snyder observed thus:

An ecosystem is a kind of mandala in which there are multiple relations that are all-powerful and instructive. Each figure in the mandala—a little mouse or bird (or little god or demon figure)—has an important position and a role to play. Although ecosystems can be described as hierarchical in terms of energy flow, from the standpoint of the whole all of its members are equal (76).

In a balanced eco-system, “food chain” denotes the reciprocal relations between “eat and being eaten,” the incessant energy transfer that guarantee the ongoing process of eco-sphere. Snyder strongly emphasizes the point that humans play an indispensable role in the food chain.

The act of eating and being eaten is a sacramental or spiritual act. To eat with piety and gratitude is an act of becoming oneness. Killing an animal or plant for food is not a cause for lament, but for festive celebration. This is so because a sacramental energy-exchange is taking place. Human beings are both the “guests at the feast” and the “meal” (Snyder 1995, 76). When alive, humans eat and, simultaneously, are eaten. At the very moment we humans eat in order to survive, there are, at the same time, billions of bacteria and micro organisms inside our bodies that feast on the nutrition circulated in our bodies. Moreover, when we die, we become the food for the insects and micro-organisms in the soil. The idea of ecosystem as mandala implies the sacred aspect of the holistic eco-sphere, where sacramental energy-transfer, the incessant cycle of life-and-death, goes on constantly. Every creature in this holistic and sacred sphere is indispensable and equal. This, however, hinges on the awakening of human mind. With the awakening of human mind, a well-balanced food chain can be maintained and an ecologically peaceful world can be hoped for.

But, how can the “awakening of human mind” be achieved? In his constant dialogue between Buddhism and ecology, Snyder, by citing Vimalakirti, the Buddhist layman, opines that “[t]he experience of emptiness engenders compassion” (Snyder 1990, 23). Indeed, Snyder discusses the Buddhist “emptiness” in many of his poems collected in his *Mountains and Rivers without End*.

In Mahayana Buddhism, “emptiness” of *Prajnaparamita* refers to the “emptiness of selfhood” (*Svabhava-Sunyata*). It is actually an extension of the no-self doctrine (*anatman*) of early and primitive Buddhism, a doctrine originally expounded by Buddha himself. What is the “self” that the Buddha rejected and tried to demolish? On the common sense level, Buddha never rejected the idea of self. The Buddha himself, as indicated by the sutras, often used the first-person pronoun “I.” The “self” the Buddha tried to demolish is one that is perpetual, unchanging, unitary and autonomous. Thus, “emptiness” or “emptiness of selfhood” means the annihilation of the self-sufficient and self-subsistent entity, the destruction of all that denoting qualities of independence and determinateness. Everything in this mundane world is the result of dependent co-origination and impermanence. Only when we look deep into the nature of things, that is, “dependent co-origination” and “impermanence”, can we hold on to every moment in our lives, open our minds to and be “oneness” with the sufferings of the world—compassion. Moreover, Mahayana Bodhisattvas make vows that they will never enter nirvana unless the sufferings of the beings are all annihilated.

Also, Snyder employs the Hua-yen Buddhist image of Indra’s net to illustrate the web of relationships in an ecosystem. He quotes David Barnhill, saying that:

[T]he universe is considered to be a vast web of many-sided and highly polished jewels, each one acting as a multiple mirror. In one sense each jewel is a single entity. But when we look at a jewel, we see nothing but the reflections of other jewels, which themselves are reflections of other jewels, and so on in an endless system of mirroring. Thus in each jewel is the image of the entire net (Snyder 1995, 67).

In the *Hua-yen Sutra*, the Buddha unveils the reality of the universe— realms-embracing realms and without any obstruction. This has been corroborated by modern science and has become the established truth of modern cosmological study. The web of relationships in an ecosystem makes one think of the image of Indra's net. Humans, animals and plants live mutually on each other, just like the interpenetrating jewels on the net. There is a constant exchange of energy— an ongoing cycle of life-and-death affairs. According to ecological perspective, our universe, as depicted by this Indra's net, is a realm of biological desires and need, just like the Buddhist notion of “*karma*” which drives everything in this mundane world.

### III. Conclusion

Ecology, for Snyder, means the scientific investigations of the interconnections, energy transfers, reciprocal connections, and cause-and-effect networks within eco-system. Human beings are located and embedded completely within the system. Human societies come into being with the rest of nature. The walls between nature and culture gradually crumble.

Drawing analogy between such Buddhist images as “mandala” and “jewel net of Indra” and ecosystem, Snyder is conveying the notion that our eco-system, as a whole, is sacred, in the sense that both mandala and jewel net of Indra are manifestations of Buddha-nature. Every creature is indispensable and, with its intrinsic value, should be respected and protected.

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