



Special Focus: Buddhism in the Anthropocene

# Buddhism in the Anthropocene: Opening the Global to the Planetary

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At the Origins Centre, a Buddhist centre in the Southwest of Western Australia, a plastic Earth hangs above the central shrine. Displaying a seamless composite of NASA satellite photographs, the continents and oceans are lightly obscured by patches of cloud, a gentle reminder of the precious, thin atmosphere that protects the Earth from the vacuum of outer space. The planet is suspended above a table made of heavy planks of local timber adorned with recently offered native flowers and four white bowls whose contents symbolise the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air. Next to these, hand-written notes share wishes and prayers made by visitors to the centre for family, friends, and strangers far afield. Forming the focal point of the shrine, the globe is intended as a reminder of the people, animals, and ecologies that depend on the health of planet Earth. As the centre is committed to environmental activism (see Abrahms-Kavunenko, this issue) this perspective of Earth from outer space symbolises the centre's commitments to “engaged” Buddhist practice (Gleig 2021; Fuller 2021; Hsu 2022; King 2012). Here the Earth is a witness to, and a reminder of, the problems and possibilities of life on a global planet.

Radically transforming the ways that vast numbers of people around the world conceive of the planet and the cosmos, the vision of the Earth from outer space has influenced the history of global environmental movements, the development of climate science, and the notion of the Anthropocene. The first popular image of the Earth from above was the “Earthrise” photo captured by American astronaut William Anders on Apollo 8 in 1968. Taken as the Earth rose from behind the stark lunar landscape, this portrait of a small colourful planet Earth floating in the vastness of a darkened outer space, resonated with growing concerns about environmental destruction (Poole 2010). For those born after 1968, the “Earthrise” photo and the subsequent “Blue Marble” that was taken by Apollo 17 astronauts in 1972 have become naturalized as ways of imagining the Earth and are thought to have galvanized the birth of global environmental movements (Poole 2010). These impressions of the Earth, and the journeys out of lower Earth's orbit which they accompanied, completely altered the ways that vast populations on the planet saw their place within the cosmos (see Olson and Messeri 2015 for a broader discussion). Pictures depicting the Earth floating within the vast expansiveness of outer space have been used by artists and environmentalists to draw attention to climate change and other ecological problems. Explorations into outer space influenced former NASA scientist James Lovelock and key collaborator Lynn Margulis to form the Gaia hypothesis which saw the planet as an interconnected and self-regulating ecosystem (Lovelock 2020 [1979]; Lovelock and Margulis 1974; see also Olson and Messeri 2015:





Figure 1: Shrine at the Origins Centre, Balingup, Western Australia. Photo by Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko.

36). Though the first people to suggest that industrial activities could influence the climate date back to the early nineteenth century, satellite imagery of the Earth and explorations of the atmospheric conditions on other planets have been key to the development of climate science in the twentieth and twenty first centuries (Olson 2018).

When the editors of this Special Focus put out a call for a “Buddhism and the Anthropocene” workshop to be held in the northern summer of 2022, Saskia’s photograph of the planet Earth “hanging by a thread” as Jovan put it, above a Buddhist shrine seemed an appropriate invitation to open conversations about how Buddhists are relating to widespread ecological challenges, and their engagements and contestations with the “global”, that forms one half of this journal’s mandate. The Anthropocene, imperfect as it is as a concept (see below), was chosen as the most widely legible term for investigating the diverse ways that Buddhists have understood and are understanding the ecological changes in the places that they live. Following from Bruno Latour, the Anthropocene in this context can be taken as an opportunity to think in terms of the planetary, where the Earth no longer features only as a background but becomes an active social and ecological actor in human affairs (Latour 2017).

A collaboration between the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany, and the Centre for Buddhist Studies at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, the “Buddhism and the Anthropocene” workshop brought together an international group of anthropologists, geographers, historians, and religious studies scholars to discuss the ways in which Buddhists around the globe are responding to the climate crisis, extreme weather events, radical environmental degradation, plummeting biodiversity, pollution, melting glaciers, rising sea levels, and other related phenomena. In organizing this workshop, the conveners were interested in exploring enmeshed case studies, that investigate how particular groups of Buddhists in diverse but specific social, ecological, and historical contexts were and are responding to the conditions that are associated with the Anthropocene epoch. Over two and a half days we discussed examples from Sri Lanka, India, the Himalayan region, Inner Asia, Nepal, China, Australia, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the United Kingdom.

Together we explored how Buddhist practitioners and communities are conceptualizing and dealing with the unprecedented impact of human beings on global environmental processes.

### **The Anthropocene is Dead, Long Live the Anthropocene!**

The term, the “Anthropocene”, traces its lineage back to the verbal exasperations of meteorologist and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen at the International Geosphere-Biosphere Program meeting in Mexico in early 2000. Apparently frustrated by a lack of ways to explain the scale of the planetary changes that anthropogenic influences were having, Crutzen suggested that rather than living in the Holocene we were living in a new epoch, the Anthropocene (Irvine 2020: 11–12). In 2009, the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy was set up to decide upon whether the Anthropocene should be formally recognised by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (Irvine 2020: 12). As we sat down to write the introduction to this Buddhism in the Anthropocene Special Focus, the twelve geologists who were part of the small panel making up the Subcommission voted against a move to define 1952 as the start of the Anthropocene (Witze 2024). After fifteen years of debate, the vote defeated efforts within the geological community to agree upon a defining moment which signals a geological epoch shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene.

These debates in geology have tended to revolve around the documentation of specific stratigraphic markers (Witze 2024).<sup>1</sup> After much deliberation and controversy, 1952 had been put forward as the most promising date, as this is when the presence of plutonium, caused by hydrogen bomb experiments, appears within the sediment of Crawford Lake in Ontario, Canada. The 1950s is a tempting decade to herald this new epoch. The decade following the Second World War marks the start of what many scholars in the social sciences have labelled the Great Acceleration (see for instance Morton 2013; Steffen et al. 2015), a period characterised by a radical increase in ecological destruction, species loss, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, pollution, urbanisation, and consumption patterns. The very attempt to find and enshrine an exact date that canonically demarcates an epochal transition, and the presumption that this is scientifically possible, says something of the ways in which time and the markers of time are approached during this era of ecological destruction (see Irvine 2020). Many scientists have critiqued this endeavour, challenging the idea of resting the Anthropocene era on one distinctive recordable stratigraphic moment. Instead, a diachronous approach has been suggested, one that looks to the gamut of emergent processes as indicating the shift in epoch, rather than fixing on a particular aspect of the epochal change or a distinct date (Edgeworth et al. 2023; Ruddiman et al. 2015). Others have argued for conceptualising the Anthropocene as an event rather than an epoch—akin to other great extinction events in the Earth’s history—so as to better account for the geographical and temporal heterogeneity of processes of human–environment interactions (Bauer et al. 2021; Gibbard et al. 2022).

Within the social sciences, both the naming of the Anthropocene and the suggested stratigraphic markers used to identify the advent of the new geological era have attracted many critiques. Social scientists have suggested alternative names which foreground particular periods or processes (such as the colonisation of South America, the emergence of plastics, or the ascendance of capitalism). In bringing together scholars engaging the topic of Buddhism and the Anthropocene, the editors of this Special Focus were (and are) very aware of the ever-multiplying shortcomings of the term. The use of the Anthropocene here is not an end in itself, but rather a provocation to bring scholars together to look at the plethora of issues that gravitate around this term. Whilst some of the papers directly speak to the limitations bound up in the use the Anthropocene (King; Millington), what draws together this Special Focus is the attention that each of the authors have taken to embed the perspectives of the people they are discoursing with within the worlds in which they are a part. If what Amitav Ghosh (2017) has called “the great derangement” is in large part sustained by the

<sup>1</sup> Markers in the geological record identified by the field of Stratigraphy, which concerns itself with strata, chronology, and deep time.

illusion that human beings are conceptually distinct from the rest of the world, the writings that follow seek to “rediscover kinship” with the more-than-human world. Here the Anthropocene is a goad to engage with the “long-overdue humbling of human exceptionalism ... at the very core of the Buddhist teaching” (Schröer, this volume: 39).

### Rethinking the “Global” in Global Buddhism

The *Journal of Global Buddhism* was founded at a time when the discourse of globalization was in full bloom, a discourse that speculated widely on the “withering of the nation-state”, and about global flows and “scapes” (e.g., Appadurai 1991). The globe was being rethought as the new scale of human action, challenging the methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller 2002) that was present in earlier social sciences. The journal was interested in publishing works that challenged the notions of static boundaries between Buddhisms as an “Asian” phenomenon, and of geographically bound “local” traditions. At the time, new research was emerging concerning Buddhism in non-Asian contexts, such as the Americas and Europe. These studies complemented the traditional scholarly domains through which Buddhism was traditionally understood, including textually-oriented Buddhist Studies and Philology. The emphasis of the journal was on interconnection, flows between world regions, transnational Buddhist movements, and the dynamics of migration.

As productive as this turn to the global has been, in much of this literature “the global” has tended to be accepted as a passive, more or less stable, backdrop to human action. Taking leave of this framing of the global, the articles that follow open visions onto the manifold ways in which the worlds that Buddhists inhabit are far from simple settings for human activity. This Special Focus asks the reader to reconsider how Buddhists exist *within*, and *with*, the world, the globe, and the “global”. Here it is worth recalling one of the Buddha’s most famous gestures, the *bhūmisparśa* mudra. In myriad iterations of this image the Buddha is depicted seated with his hand outstretched towards the soil, calling on the Earth as witness to his commitment to and achievement of enlightenment. In this mudra the Earth is not a passive recipient, but an active partner in the story of the Buddha’s enlightenment. Is it possible, or desirable, as Latour (2018) writes, to shift our focus from “the global” to “the Terrestrial,” where the earth is no longer just a stage upon which human action takes place but an acknowledged actor in a new kind of *geo*-politics, where the “geo” itself is an active agent? If the Anthropocene is, in part, a state of consciousness (Howe 2019) in which the dominant geological force is aware of its impact on the planet, what does it mean to be “awake” to this situation as a Buddhist (Schneiderman 2012)? What modes of action (or inaction) become available? Can Buddhist ideas, practices and societies help us to rethink this present epoch?

### Environmental Activism and Ambivalence

Buddhists in both urban and rural contexts are grappling with the effects of intensifying climate change, toxicity, global deforestation, air pollution, species loss, and other concatenating ecological problems. Activists both within and outside of Buddhist societies, have looked to Buddhist moralities, philosophies, and practices as providing potential ethical, psychological, and social support (Harms 2022). Buddhist notions of interdependence are often invoked in the hope of generating a new appreciation of human and more-than-human entanglements, or what Thich Nhat Hanh (2021) calls “interbeing”. Mindfulness and other contemplative practices have been suggested by some as, alongside being helpful ways of dealing with everyday stresses, being necessary aids in the building of cognitive and social resilience in the face of climate catastrophe (Anālayo Bhikkhu 2019).

Whilst in popular culture, Buddhism is often portrayed as broadly ecological, being associated with vegetarianism, an environmental sensibility, low consumption, and compassion towards other animals, some scholars have critiqued the idea that Buddhism is inherently sensitive to environmental issues. Johan Elverskog (2020) argues that rather than being a boon for ecological health, Buddhist institutions have historically enabled and accompanied the expansion of agricultural and extractive economies, which have had a detrimental effect on living systems. In contemporary contexts most Buddhists must navigate global capitalism along with changing expectations about material success, consumption, and wealth (see Brumann, Abrahms-Kavunenko, and Świtek 2021). In some settings there is a perceived positive relationship between spiritual and material growth (see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019a, 2019b; Scott 2009; Kitiarsa 2008; Shmushko, this volume) meaning that advancements in material wealth and consumption can be believed to assist in the acquisition of spiritual merit, and/or vice versa (Abrahms-Kavunenko and Milligan 2021; Bowie 1998; Spiro 1982; Tosa 2012). When there is “a correlation between material growth and spiritual growth” (Elverskog 2020), and where the scale of Buddhist abundance reflects an expanding economic context, lavish ceremonial offerings involving waste and wasting can and have become a part of Buddhist material culture (see Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2022).

Interconnected with global economic transformations and the exchange of goods, the materials used to produce ritual items at Buddhist temples and within rituals have changed. In some cases, formerly biodegradable items have been replaced by plastics, posing new questions about the relationship between spiritual and environmental pollution (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2022; Bhutia 2022; Brox 2022; Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2022; Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2023). As Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko (2022), Kalzang Dorje Bhutia (2022), Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2023), and Trine Brox (2022) have noted, ritual items made from or wrapped in plastics can become deeply ambivalent, being at once a source of purification and generative of pollution. Buddhists must navigate changing material items such as heavy fibreglass Cham masks that have replaced wood in Sikkim (Bhutia 2022), the “mummy materiality” of polyester prayer scarves in Mongolia wherein single-use ritual items have multiplied but cannot easily be disposed of (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2022), and the “reincarnation of objects that may otherwise be seen as waste” (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2023: 7). In a similar vein, even explicitly “environmental” ritual acts can have ambivalent effects. Sacralisation of landscape features has been used to defend against environmental destruction (Darlington 2012), and yet this very sacralisation may encourage flows of pilgrims and tourists, generate waste, and bring other negative environmental effects (Bhutia 2022; Wang 2019).

### **The Special Focus**

In providing a variety of case studies, this Special Focus is keen to highlight and contemplate the ambivalences that are present within Buddhist perspectives as Buddhists navigate widespread and worsening ecological degradation. Whilst some of the cases discussed at the workshop and in this issue involve Buddhists who see themselves as actively helping to protect (Sirisena) and/or to help regenerate local ecologies (Abrahms-Kavunenko), this issue is also about those who are living within and making sense of their ecological situations (King; Millington; Schröer; Shmushko). Though some of the Buddhists in this Special Issue inhabit forests relating daily to animals and plants (Abrahms-Kavunenko; Schröer; Sirisena), Buddhist revitalization and development can also involve massive environmental impacts, such as the flooding of landscapes with “a sea of cement” (Shmushko). The articles that follow draw attention to the specific material circumstances of how Buddhists and Buddhist practices are differently positioned in the world—in relation to, and sometimes set against, the surrounding ecological systems on which they depend.

The Special Focus opens with Prabhath Sirisena's autoethnographic article, emerging from his experiences living as an *araññavāsī* (forest-dwelling order) monk in Sri Lanka. Through his beautifully written diaries, vivid descriptions, and analytical framings, he details the attentiveness and care that the forest-dwelling monks demonstrate towards the animals that surround them and the forest ecosystems that they inhabit. The piece is not a romanticisation of the ecologies in question; monks can and do die from the physical and psychological challenges that come from living within the jungle. Distinct from scholarly abstractions, Sirisena argues that this order of monastic practice can generate an ecological ethic that includes love and care for fellow beings. As the challenges of the present era involve developing an environmental and inter-species ethos which is sensitive and responsive, here the approach is not prescriptive, but rather evocative of a practice and commitment that could offer inspiration and guidance for the enrichment of a Buddhist eco-ethic.

Focusing on earlier periods of the *araññavāsī* and their relationships with their more-than-human surroundings, Frederik Schröer's article investigates the role of feelings in early Buddhist contemplative practice. Pointing out that different environments "are charged with affective atmospheres, moods, or energies, which impact us through our bodily presence in immediate and pre-conscious ways" he looks at discussions of fear and vulnerability in early Buddhist sutras. By investigating how early Buddhist practitioners responded to the seemingly hostile jungles in which they practiced, he unpacks how Buddhists reject the notion of the bounded self. The forest is not some idealised place to carry out peaceful Buddhist practice, but an immersive reality which can "elicit terror and fear". As he writes, "while early Buddhism ultimately sought to transcend the world, feelings based in affective entanglements beyond the human play vital roles in the teachings aiming at this final goal." Such a focus Schröer argues, "holds potential for overcoming the anthropocentrism at the root of our current condition of escalating environmental crises in the Anthropocene, by contributing to the enacting of more sustainable ecological relations that foreground feelings such as care." Forests challenge practitioners with difficult feelings of fear and discomfort, "humbling" renunciates as they are immersed in the present, active and sometimes unsettling world.

Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko's piece about Australian Buddhist practitioners, takes us to a very different kind of forest in the Southwest of Western Australia. Here Buddhists see their relationships with local ecologies as marked by continuous interactions and ongoing work. Disturbed ecologies are not left to auto-rewild, nor does such an approach make sense in a place where colonial mismanagement has led to voracious introduced plants choking rivers and invasive species outcompeting native marsupials. Labour on the hill of the centre aims to rehabilitate Jarrah forests and is carried out daily by volunteers and the centre's resident lama. In this context animals are seen as tutelary figures, companion species, and co-communicators. The appearance of a flock of black cockatoos or the return of native marsupials is indicative of successful labour, both physical and contemplative. "Dynamic interrelationships" with native animals, rather than being peripheral to Buddhist practice are a key part of life at the centre and an important indication of successful environmental and soteriological work.

The next article, by Matthew King, contemplates the perspectivism of Mongolian and Tibetan scholars and their intellectual forebears in pre-revolutionary Inner Asia. In doing so he critiques the separation of human and natural history within Buddhist Studies, seeking inspiration from Buddhist sources to argue against the frames which have been used to interpret them. He follows Dipesh Chakrabarty in arguing that the Anthropocene's muddying of the nature/culture divide undermines the centrality of humanism which is frequently found at the core of Buddhist Studies. Engaging Inner Asian and Tibetan philosophical and historical sources, he suggests a more dynamic way to view one's place in the world, one which sees the interrelationship of mind and material as co-constitutive. In this perspective "the vessel-like world and its

sentient contents are produced by the other: knowledge and, indeed, environments, are co-produced and fundamentally perspectival.”

Alice Millington’s piece discourses actively with the concept of the Anthropocene. Based on her recent fieldwork in the Himalayan region, she questions the novelty of the modern era in being an epoch in which human activities have profound geological and meteorological significance. She contests that there is a common understanding amongst her Himalayan Buddhist interlocutors that, in a sense, they have always been living in the Anthropocene—that is, in an era where human beings have deeply influenced the environments they inhabit. Millington also calls for a deeper recognition of gods and spirits as non-human actors, agreeing with Bubandt (2018) that there is a need “de-secularize” the Anthropocene. She argues that Buddhist-inspired temporalities, specifically those that understand the current epoch as a “dark age” of spiritual decline (such as *kawa nyampa*), could provide a counterpoint to dominant characterisations of an Anthropocene.

In the final article in this Special Focus, Kai Shmushko takes us to the mega-city of Shenzhen in southern China. Using Felix Guattari’s notion of “the three ecologies”, she examines the relationships between urbanization, the environment, and Buddhist practice in an “urban village” located within the city. The article explores how various registers of environmentalism enter into Buddhist practice, both in a highly commodified temple complex and amidst the grassroots Buddhism of an artistic community. Here environmental concerns are bound up with ambivalences, as they intersect with developmental programs, state policies, and other drives to urbanize and “modernize” Chinese society. In one highlighted case, state policies against the burning of incense and other offerings, which are framed as reducing environmental harm, are multivalently active, intending as much to purify “superstition” as the city’s air. “Clean worship” models are developed alongside the expanding commodification, and increasing material impacts, of Buddhist institutions and practices.

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