

## The Importance of Guru Yoga as an Environmental Ethic in Tibetan Buddhism

Cameron Gehlert

At this time, our world is being wrecked by climate change and a myriad of other human-caused environmental issues. People of faith are looking deeper to find ways they can help their environment. This commitment to the environment has become evident in practitioners of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes compassion and wisdom, which are two important virtues that can help keep our planet pristine for all life. In Tibetan Buddhism, wisdom and compassion are best represented as unified perfection by the sacred guru, one's supreme spiritual guide to enlightenment. All blessings, spiritual and physical, are said to come from the guru, which is why a disciple must do everything possible to please and never harm the guru. To help develop this, practitioners cultivate a tantric method called guru-yoga. Buddhism is a religion that is unified with virtue ethics, so, the most important training of guru-yoga in the Tibetan tradition should be cultivated as the ultimate virtue ethic by seeing the planet itself as a type of guru.

The Tibetan tradition of Buddhism is probably one of the most complex religious systems of the world and, by far, the most complex of Buddhism ("Buddhism—The Major Systems and Their Literature."). Due to its almost fluid complexity, a wide array of social issues can be combatted through clear thought processes and debated to find the best solutions. Tibetan Buddhism contains goals for the protection of nature and the humans and non-human life, such as animals and even spirits, contained within it (Goodman) However, Tibetan tradition lacks an explicit environmental ethic which is desperately needed at this time. The reason is because the

Buddha did not have to speak at lengths about the ecological state of the planet because it was not a pressing issue in ancient India ("Environment—Revision 3—GCSE Religious Studies."). The Buddha, for the most part, only gave teachings in response to questions or what will help someone right then right now. If he taught on every issue that could ever arise, we would never be able to compile it all or study it due to its immensity. Therefore, it is on the shoulders of the modern practitioners and lineage holders to develop an ethic out of the teachings of the Dharma. The question is what teaching and method to use.

One of the foundational practices of Tibetan Buddhism is the tantric method of guru yoga. Guru-yoga, grossly simplified, is the joining of the disciple and the guru's buddhanature as one ("What is Guru Yoga: Part One"). When one finds their sacred teacher and takes this one as the guru this means this person will be none other than a Buddha. To take that further, the guru will be recognized as a physical manifestation as the *dharmakaya*—the unmanifested "true" existence that all enlightened beings manifest from. So, if you see the guru as the dharmakaya you then realize all aspirations and blessings come from the guru and all Buddhas and bodhisattvas are manifested from the guru (Rinpoche). Thus, there is complete non-duality between all and the guru.

The belief of guru-yoga is really the initial, central component, and zenith of the path to enlightenment. As many teachers put it, such as Lama Zopa Rinpoche, it is the path entirely. According to lineage teachers, guru-yoga is the fastest way to reach enlightenment compared to the Theravada and non-tantric Mahayana traditions. However, they do not claim it to be the best path for everyone. This has to do with a practitioner finding "the right fit". The Buddha was very wise and knew there could never be a one-size practice that fits all. Although, all traditions venerate one's spiritual teacher it is only in the Tibetan tradition where one is given the training to see their

teacher as the Buddha and complete expanse of the emptiness of reality; the dharmakaya. However, any individual can take the basics and apply to any being they consider a teacher or mentor. Through the guru-yoga method one can see the purity of their teacher and are able to let go of the ego and fully accept the teachings. That is the point of the practice, to help purify an obscured mind and wholeheartedly accept and quickly master the Buddha's teachings while cultivating virtue.

In accordance to the Tibetan tradition, once the disciple grasps the importance of their teacher and continuing this practice and keeping their vows to the guru all the blessings will flow. This practice creates infinite merit, good karma, that are received into the student's mental continuum. This moves the mind to the capacity of ultimate spiritual realizations. Along with the spiritual blessings this merit gives one physical blessing such as wealth, a perfect body, and plenty of food. With these material blessings one will have no other concerns or needs other than the Buddhadharma. So, one doesn't practice guru-yoga to be a billionaire; but it will help to make sure they have every resource possible to cultivate the Dharma. As the practitioner understands this, they then view the guru as the foundation of their whole life.

Currently, the world has a plethora of environmental issues and concerns. The sad part about these problems is that they all stem from humans. Just to name a few of them: deforestation, extinction, pollution, and climate change. These all endanger not just human life, but all life on earth. Due to negligence as citizens of earth we have begun to create a literal hell on earth. There is an alarming disappearance of species, land turning to deserts and sinking under water, and some cities with unbreathable air. If these things sound scary that's because they are. When people exclaim that the earth is dying, they are by no means fearmongering but stating a cold hard truth. These are not simple problems and they require major changes and innovative solutions.

Presently, in the environmental realm of philosophical thinking there are numerous theories on how humanity should move towards sustainability. Out of those various ethics traditions the one that most closely aligns with Buddhism is known as virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is the emphasis over moral character rather than set norms or rules (DesJardins 135). Buddhism seeks for one to reach enlightenment. Part of the path to enlightenment is perfecting certain virtues such as compassion, equanimity, loving-kindness, and joy. One cannot just gain these virtues through teachings and studying; one must practice and cultivate these virtues intensely. Virtue ethics and Buddhism even both agree that the root of humanity's problems is a "dysfunctional psychological state" and this state needs to be eliminated through developing virtues (Keown). The same philosophy is applied to environmental virtue ethics. As Rosalind Hursthouse puts it, "training (in appreciating and honoring the environment) begins to shape a particular way of perceiving, acting in relation to, feeling and thinking about, the natural world.". Environmental virtue ethics is the next step of virtue ethics when it comes to in relation to the environment. To simplify it means being environmentally conscious as a method to be ethically upright; although there are not many, explicit, role models to learn this way of life from (Hursthouse).

Another environmental thought system that relates back to Buddhism and environmental virtue ethics is the concept of Green Buddhism. Green Buddhism is the Buddhist thought system mainly developed by Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Green Buddhism seeks to treat the world how people would treat themselves to reach a stance of high morality (Callicott 103). The major concern with Green Buddhism is that it does not go far enough. People should not just treat the environment like how they want to be treated or treat their neighbors. People must take it up a notch and treat the world and its environment better than any normal man or woman.

Environmental virtue ethics and Green Buddhism are both methodologies going in the right direction, however, they are not perfect. Neither theories are well-developed, in the sense of how far they go, nor do they have a wealth of knowledge from specialized teachers or masters. They need to be better developed and morph into something much larger than what their original purposes even intended.

The solution being proposed, in depth, is that we must visualize our planet as the holy guru. By using that logic one can realize that any practice that helps the earth, or protects it, is a form of devotion and practitioners of the Tibetan tradition will begin a rich environmental ethic, which currently does not exist *explicitly* in Buddhism. The guru-yoga method will be the completion of both environmental ethics and Green Buddhism. Fully engaging the ethic into Tibetan Buddhism will encourage people who come for teachings from the Tibetan tradition to take it back home to practice it in daily life. This will be especially helpful because many people who are from Western lands, which are responsible for a lot of environmental problems, are now coming to Tibetan Buddhism. It will even help those who are not of the Tibetan tradition or any religion as the guru can be considered any teacher that is sacred or important to oneself—whether it is a Zen roshi or an elementary school teacher.

The earth is already like the guru, so visualizing it as the guru should not be hard. The major similarity to the Earth and the guru is that both are the ultimate providers. Everything that keeps people alive is from the planet. Water, shelter, food, medicine, clothing... everything physical is directly from the earth. Unless it is a meteorite, the earth has provided for you. Even things like watching videos on phones are the result of components used from the environment. Also, enormous amounts of spiritual inspiration come from the planet. No matter what religion, there has always been some component that mentioned the character of the environments of earth

or its beauty. The provider-aspect of the earth is especially prevalent in Buddhism. These include the earth shaking in response to the demon Mara when he asked the meditating soon-to-be Buddha under the Bodhi tree, “who can confirm the merit for you attaining enlightenment where others have failed” or the Sal tree bending its branches to help Maya Devi give birth to Siddhartha. So, this right here proves the encompassing nature of how the planet is like a mother is to her only son- loving, compassionate, and will give everything she can. Similar to the guru-disciple relationship.

Due to the providing nature of the guru and Earth it is correct to assume that one cannot survive spiritually without the guru or physically without the planet. All realizations gained on the path to enlightenment come from the guru. So, devoting oneself to the guru creates all the causes necessary to realize enlightenment. However, if the student neglects the guru and decides to cultivate their ego and its desires it would be like kicking oneself into the pits of Hell. The same philosophy goes when looking at humans’ relationship to the planet. By taking care of and living sustainably with the planet they will be provided with everything we need. On the other side if they mistreat the earth and use it unsustainably, they can only be harmed- not out of spite, but because they have destroyed the causes to be cared for by the planet. This is most evident with climate change. Due to the degrading ways of treating the environment there is the creation of a planet that will be uninhabitable for people and other lifeforms. So, therefore the utmost care should be given to the earth which is achieved by treating the planet like the guru. One would never harm the guru, exploit, or even talk poorly of. One maintains the mindset of devotion and looks up to them how a young boy does to his father. That same mindset can be given to planet Earth. This should not just be some Earth Day activity, but a way of life for the practitioner.

Now, it may be sounding like Gaia hypothesis here, but this is not the goal of guru-yoga centered on the earth. However, there are similarities between the two. The most notable similarity is giving the earth intrinsic value. Gaia hypothesis views the earth as a complex living super-organism with ecosystems working as physiological systems. Guru-yoga ethic gives the earth intrinsic spiritual value. Gaia theory also explains that the earth guides the development of life (Ogle). Guru-yoga explains that, as the guru, the planet guides the development of practitioner on their path to enlightenment.

There are a few main differences between guru-yoga ethic and the Gaia hypothesis. Gaia hypothesis is a pseudo-scientific based theory that has no overt spiritual component. Guru-yoga does not make earth into a literal guru. Even though wisdom can be learned from the planet it is not physically or consciously the same as a guru like His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Also, Gaia hypothesis is just a theory about what the earth is while guru-yoga gives a comprehensive practice and lifestyle change teaching. Although, the Gaia theory is often used by people who believe in it as a reason for helping the environment it does not say what one should do. On the other hand, the guru-yoga ethic is a method on how one should treat and interact with the planet. The Gaia hypothesis is comprehensive, but it is not the same as guru-yoga ethic and is just not enough, on its own, to get people to care for the earth.

Another important factor is how the earth is seen. The Gaia hypothesis states that the planet is “a single living organism forming a vast biotic community in which a complex grid network of energy currents... an interconnected web of life. Guru-yoga ethic states to see the earth as the guru which means not seeing the earth as an organism, which would denote it being a sentient being. It may be a very large complex sentient being, but still a sentient being at that. The guru is not a sentient being—the guru is enlightened and does not experience suffering, but reflects it to teach

the disciple. That is why one follows the guru. Taking inspiration on how to live life from a “worldly” being would only cultivate worldly habits and not the precious virtues of compassion and loving kindness. The guru-yoga method also explains that the earth is our precious teacher, i.e., the guru. The Gaia hypothesis does not say the planet is the virtuous teacher.

The planet is a teacher in multiple ways. The earth teaches impermanence through seasonal change, natural disaster, and the decay of organic material. The earth teaches samsara, “the cycle of life”. This can be understood by watching a fallen tree. The tree soon dies and begins to decay. From death insects start to make home then plants grow out of the rotting log. Soon the tree becomes almost powder like and decays down into just elements. These elements are taken in by other plants then those plants are eaten, and the cycle continues. The earth also shows that dukkha (suffering) is everywhere—such as a beetle trapped in a spider web or tree suffering a fungal infestation. The earth teaches the woes of desire. This can be evident when male birds fight to the death over a female who could be a potential mate. The planet demonstrates ignorance through animals that confuse harmless species as poisonous. This list goes on and on. If one meditates on something in nature they will surely, at some point, realize a teaching. Just by gazing out into the environment one can learn so much and become inspired. This has been modeled by people like Aldo Leopold, John Audubon, Jane Goodall, and Rachel Carson. When someone becomes full of aspirations, they can cultivate them into moral virtues through many different means such as: philosophy, art, science, or writing. The possibilities are endless when one takes the guru’s—the earth’s—teachings to heart.

The guru-yoga ethic will make the environment a place of harmony. This is because it is a very active practice. Guru-yoga does not stop after one gets up from the meditation cushion; it is a lifelong practice that is part of everything one does. When the earth is viewed as the most



precious guru everything is done for the guru. This will create harmony for the earth by seeing it as the guru because of the instructions of never neglecting or harming the guru, do whatever the guru needs, and the guru is the most precious thing in life.

The first major component of guru-yoga is to never, under any circumstance, cause harm or neglect to the guru. If one does then it is no different from harming or neglecting all the infinite Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Dharma protectors, etc. This of course would mean extremely heavy negative karma for the transgressor. So, it is in the best interest to prevent any negative causes to come towards the guru if one can help it. When this is applied to the earth it means stopping all harmful habits to make sure guru-disciple vows, samaya, are kept pure. This could mean driving less, eating less meat, or refraining from plastic use. First, one eradicates the most destructive behaviors in order to protect the environment. This can be the stopping of littering, dumping of hazardous waste, or using gas-guzzling vehicles. Then one moves on to stopping subtler negative behaviors such as using straws, soap with micro-beads, and non-organic foods. Finally, one stops all actions that are harmful to the environment and substitutes them with virtuous actions. When this point is reached that means one is ready to perfectly give to the earth, the guru, whatever it needs.

The next virtuous method of conduct with the guru is to always please the guru. To please, in this connotation, does not mean worldly pleasure or hedonism. This would only be counter-productive because the guru does not have desires, like people, due to their enlightened nature. Pleasing means practicing what the guru recommends for one's personal growth or what will make the guru happy. The happiness of the guru is not gained through debauched endeavors; it is gained by practicing deeply even when one might think the guru "may not notice". The guru's whole goal

is for the disciple to grow and attain perfection, so seeing them cultivating virtues brings ultimate happiness to the guru as well as the disciple.

The happiness of the guru is just the reflection of the practitioner's happiness gained from the advice of the guru. This means practicing what the guru wants or needs can only assist a disciple on the path. Seeing the earth as the guru then means one will go out of their way to help the environment. They won't ask "is this going to be inconvenient for me?" they simply just do what needs to be done. Practitioners would work tirelessly for the planet in every facet of their life from product-choice to politics. People also will become more engaged in environmental efforts such as trash pickups and green activism in government. The beneficial part of one's life being devoted to the earth is that it will bring ultimate blissful happiness. Serving the guru is one of the most rewarding practices and will give the individual a sense of consistent accomplishment and enjoyment because it means they are on the path to enlightenment at the speed of a thunderbolt.

Finally, after perfectly cultivating the non-harming and pleasing mindset towards the guru one can fully see the guru as the most precious thing in their life. Soon a practitioner of the ethic can see the preciousness of the planet- the great giver who we all are at the mercy of. Seeing the earth as a precious jewel averts a nihilistic view that the earth is just some rock which leads us to become apathetic towards environmental issues. This then prevents the practitioner from falling from the perfect relationship with the planet.

These practices may seem quite daunting, but they will become so absorbed into one that they are second nature. This helps with developing the guru-yoga ethic of the earth into a practice and not just a mere philosophical argument. It begins with simple meditation the same way on how regular guru-yoga would be practiced. While one is meditating, they can view the earth, as the whole planet or just a favorite ecosystem, and visualize the guru as melding with the earth until

the two are inseparable in your mind. Then requesting the inspirations, as one does in the meditation, continue to keep this simultaneous earth-guru vision. The yoga continues to merge the meditator's mind with the guru. Once this is finished the practitioner will feel closer to the earth and take on all forms of helping with an open heart.

Then everything they do for the earth becomes service to the guru. This is where it becomes extremely beneficial to move towards an environmentally conscious lifestyle. It can start with recycling with the thought "these resources are of the precious earth; I shall not waste them". Another could be conserving water by thinking "water is the foundation of all life; I will not treat it any less". This continues and continues until everything that is done is with the mind of protecting and sustaining the planet.

Once the more physical aspects of interaction with the earth are realized the next step is mindfulness of oneself to the environment. This is the constant thought and analysis of how one interacts with the planet. Such as, admiring the environment's beauty and meditation on its impermanence and cyclical existence. Or, understanding more on all the interdependent movements of the planet and that life is not dualistic. There are then resources to help cultivate mindfulness of oneself and the planet by studying and meditating on them. Such as, a literary work by His Holiness the Dalai Lama- which is considered Dharma because His Holiness is considered a human form of the Buddha of Compassion. The most profound spiritual work he has given on the planet from an environmental viewpoint is known as the "The Sheltering Tree of Interdependence". This is a poetic work with 30 stanzas of His Holiness voicing concern for the degradation of the environment (Gyatso). The excellently composed extolls the beauty of the planet and how all are dependent on it. This is just one work that could be used in the Tibetan tradition and, hopefully, inspire more treatises that concern the environment.

By practicing the guru-yoga ethic one will finally see results when it comes to environmental ethics. This will also give one the sense of spiritual morality which is something that is very important to Buddhism. With the guru-yoga ethic, Buddhism will be able to have a comprehensive outlook and practice system on the environment that can be utilized by many. This will cut the ego and its desires which have caused the awful shape the planet is in today.

## Works Cited

- "Buddhism - The Major Systems and Their Literature." *Encyclopedia Britannica*,  
  
[www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism/The-major-systems-and-their-literature#ref300472](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism/The-major-systems-and-their-literature#ref300472).
- Callicott, J. Baird., and James McRae. *Environmental Philosophy in Asian Traditions of Thought*. SUNY Press, 2014.
- DesJardins, Joseph R. *Environmental Ethics*. Cengage Learning, 2012
- "Environment - Revision 3 - GCSE Religious Studies." *BBC Bitesize*,  
  
[www.bbc.com/bitesize/guides/z4b42hv/revision/3](http://www.bbc.com/bitesize/guides/z4b42hv/revision/3).
- Goodman, Charles. "Ethics in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy/Spring 2017 Edition)." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,  
  
[plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/ethics-indian-buddhism/](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/ethics-indian-buddhism/).
- Gyatso, Tenzin. "A Buddhist Concept of Nature." *The 14th Dalai Lama*, Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 18 Nov. 2016, [www.dalailama.com/messages/environment/buddhist-concept-of-nature](http://www.dalailama.com/messages/environment/buddhist-concept-of-nature).
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. "Environmental Virtue Ethics." *Ned Hettinger*,  
  
[www.hettingern.people.cofc.edu/Environmental\\_Philosophy\\_Sp\\_09/Hursthouse\\_Environmental\\_Virtue\\_Ethics.pdf](http://www.hettingern.people.cofc.edu/Environmental_Philosophy_Sp_09/Hursthouse_Environmental_Virtue_Ethics.pdf).
- Keown, Damien. "'Buddhism and Ecology: A Virtue Ethics Approach' Contemporary Buddhism." Goldsmiths, Oct. 2007, [eprints.goldsmiths.ac.uk/archive/00000197/](http://eprints.goldsmiths.ac.uk/archive/00000197/).

Ogle, Martin. "Gaia Theory | Model and Metaphor for the 21st Century." *Gaia Theory*, North American Association for Environment Education, 2004, [www.gaiatheory.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/gaiapaper.pdf](http://www.gaiatheory.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/gaiapaper.pdf).

Rinpoche, Lama Zopa *The Heart of the Path: Seeing the Guru as Buddha*. Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, 2009.

"What Is Guru Yoga: Part One?" *Study Buddhism – an Extensive Source of Buddhist Teachings* — *Study Buddhism*, Berzin Archives, [studybuddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/lam-rim/student-teacher-relationship/theory-and-practice-of-guru-yoga/what-is-guru-yoga](http://studybuddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/lam-rim/student-teacher-relationship/theory-and-practice-of-guru-yoga/what-is-guru-yoga).