



International Journal of Science, Architecture, Technology and Environment

Karuṇā Beyond Anthropocentrism: A Critical Reconstruction of Mahāyāna Compassion for Contemporary Environmental Ethics

Dr. Le Hong Linh^{1*}

¹Post-Doctoral Fellowship, School of Buddhist Studies and Civilization, Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, UP

*Corresponding author, lehonglinhgbu@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63680/ijstate102634.29>

Abstract

This paper reconstructs Mahayana Karuna as a relational ethical framework relevant to contemporary ecological crises. Instead of positioning Buddhism as existentially environmentalist, I analyze the transformation of karuṇā by way of pratītyasamutpāda, śūnyatā, and bodhisattva ethics. I then undertake a philosophical hermeneutic, and comparative ethics of Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva, Huayan, and Tiantai references. I conclude that karuṇā can critique anthropocentrism by meaningfully eroding the metaphysical distinction between human subject and the more-than-human others. This reconstruction does not require attributing sentience or personhood to non-human entities; rather, the sense of ecological care would be rooted in the metaphysical notions of relationality and dependent arising. Such a reading of Mahāyāna karuṇā as relational and dependently arising offers a novel contribution to non-anthropocentric environmentalist ethics, based on careful qualifications of Mahāyāna doctrines and history.

Keywords: karuṇā; Mahāyāna Buddhism; śūnyatā; pratītyasamutpāda; environmental ethics

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The ecological crises of the present have posed questions that reach further than environmental management, technological development, and public policy: climate change, loss of biodiversity, destruction of habitats, pollution, land degradation and the intensification of natural resources exploitation, all culminate in the more basic question about the very grounds of the ideas of ethical responsibility: who or what counts as morally considerable, and on what grounds?

Contemporary approaches to environmental ethics have given rise to several ways of addressing this issue. Anthropocentric approaches generally justify environmental protection based on human interests, human welfare, or the interests of future generations. Animal-centred approaches extend moral consideration to sentient beings, while biocentric and ecocentric approaches seek to recognize value in living organisms, ecological communities, or ecosystems. Despite these differences, many approaches still retain a conceptual

structure in which an autonomous human moral subject encounters a non-human world that then becomes an object of moral consideration.

As a result, the ecological crisis reveals not only the inadequacy of particular environmental policies but also the limitations of inherited assumptions about subjectivity, agency, and value.

In this vein, Buddhist philosophy has gained interest as a potential wellspring of alternative moral and ontological resources. Apparently the teachings of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), *anātman* (non-self), and *śūnyatā* (emptiness) cast doubt on the presumption that things exist as independent, autonomous things. The Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition elaborates these concepts with the *bodhisattva* ideal, which includes wisdom and compassion as coequal aspects of religion.

Karuṇā is a concept that has a significant position among these. While *karuṇā* has often been translated as "compassion", as a feeling of moral or emotional response to the pain of others, this notion may not work as a satisfactory interpretation of this term in Mahāyāna.

So, the question that the current work poses, is whether, instead of simply as an emotion aimed at the suffering, a redefinition of *karuṇā* as an ethics of responsibility based on a Mahāyāna attack on the notion of independent existence, can be made.

This question is mainly relevant to current environmental ethics as anthropocentrism is not simply the statement that humans are the most valuable, but it is the presupposition of a structure of evaluation, based on which the human subject functions as the privileged locus of moral evaluation.

Such a critique within the Buddhist tradition would this way have to go beyond broadening the scope of moral concern. It would have to challenge the metaphysics that privilege the human being as the neutral points of assessment.

This paper addresses that issue by critically reconstructing Mahāyāna *karuṇā*. Neither is the aim to argue that past Buddhist thinkers had in place a modern environmental ethic, or to assert that Buddhism already foresaw much of what contemporary environmentalism has to say. Rather, the study examines whether selected Mahāyāna philosophical resources can be responsibly reconstructed for contemporary ecological thought without sacrificing their doctrinal specificity.

The first version of this study quite explicitly states the core problem as reduces *karuṇā* to psychological empathy and distinguishes that from *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda*. The present version has elaborated that core idea to the main argument of this article.

1.2 Problem Statement

Contemporary environmental ethics has increasingly challenged human exceptionalism, yet significant philosophical difficulties remain. Anthropocentric perspectives ground environmental value mainly in human welfare, while sentience-based theories extend moral consideration to beings capable of experiencing pleasure or suffering. Biocentric and ecocentric approaches move beyond these positions, but still require further philosophical justification for attributing moral standing to non-human organisms, species, and ecological systems.

The issue is not, it turns out, even that the moral circle is insufficiently inclusive. The real issue is the nature of the moral subject. When human beings are viewed as independent agents opposed to nature, expanding the moral community tends to be additive: the human subject changes little, and the population of objects deserving of moral concern increases.

A similar conceptual problem arises when Buddhist ideas are applied to environmental ethics. We may interpret *karuṇā* as feelings of compassion for animals, ecosystems, or communities of the future, and *pratītyasamutpāda* as "all things are interconnected." Such interpretation often obscures important doctrinal nuances within Buddhist teachings in service of the empty-sounding phrase, "we are all interconnected." Dependent origination establishes conditioned arising, but not contemporary ideas of rights and moral persons and intrinsic value.

So the present study not only reconstructs selected Mahāyāna doctrines to testing their capacity to de-center humanity without the tools of today's contemporary categories being uncritically superimposed onto Buddhist teaching.

1.3 Research Gap and Rationale

Academic debates on Buddhism and the Environment Written debates on Buddhism and environmental ethics have expanded greatly in recent decades. The initial works considered ecological concerns of non-ego impermanence dependent origination and compassion. Later works but revealed that the Buddhist traditions are not a single environmental thought of in time.

But, three key areas are absent. The first concerns *karuṇā*. Existing scholarship frequently treats compassion as an effective response, rather than a transformation of selfhood. Such approaches may detach compassion from the Mahāyāna critique of *svabhāva* and preserve the subject-object structure that Mahāyāna philosophy seeks to destabilize.

Secondly, many interpretations prematurely infer non-anthropocentrism from interdependence. By itself, dependent arising does not necessarily entail equal moral treatment for everything. So subtler reasoning is needed.

Third, there is unwarranted historical conflation of Indian and East Asian Mahāyāna traditions. Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamaka*, Śāntideva's *bodhisattva* ideals, Huayan interpenetration, Tiantai Buddha-nature-thought etc. all belong to different philosophical lineages and these should be studied comparatively and not as one uniform worldview.

This paper fills these gaps by relating '*karuṇā*' to philosophical reconstruction, claiming the primary strength of this discussion does not lie in ascribing a pre-established inherent value to nature, but in questioning the autonomous human subject as the presupposition of the concept of moral responsibility. It separates historical interpretation from philosophical reconstruction.

1.4 Aim and Objectives

This study aspires to reconstruct philosophically the Mahāyāna *karuṇā* as a relationally oriented ethics so that it can constitute a 'critical ecology' that calls into question the anthropo-centric assumptions of current environmental thinking.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues three interrelated objectives:

1. What is the doctrinal relationship among *karuṇā*, *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* in some Indian and East Asian Mahāyāna sources? Focus on the works of Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva, Huayan, and Tiantai thinkers.
2. To reconstruct *karuṇā* as an ethical mode of responsibility that is relational in its orientation and that effectively troubles the modern divide between the human and the more-than-human worlds, without distorting Buddhist compassion into modern-day environmentalism.

3. To assess what use, and where, our reconstructed account of *karuṇā* can have for present non-anthropocentric environmental ethics, in particular when considering ecological responsibility and the moral relevance of non-sentient things.

1.5 Research Questions

The study is guided by three research questions:

RQ1. In what way does the concept of *karuṇā*, *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* in selected schools of Mahāyāna serve to reconfigure conventional ideas of self, other, and moral responsibility?

RQ2. How, from what (relational!) perspective, can we reconstruct Mahāyāna *karuṇā* as a relational moral principle that bears what it posits, so that the latter is not necessarily equated with non-sentient occurrences as persons, having a sentient, subject-like moral destiny?

RQ3. What implications and limitations can this re-construction of *karuṇā* have for non-anthropocentric environmental ethics today?

1.6 Scope and Delimitation

This article documents the range of materials included in the publication, which does include a sample of selected Indian and East Asian Mahāyāna texts.

Indian Mahāyāna is focused on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. East Asian Mahāyāna looks into the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* and Huayan writings on interpenetration, as well as Tiantai writings on Buddha-nature and insentient things.

It is not taken that they are comparably historical. Instead they are juxtaposed to analyse the evolution of compassion and emptiness, and relationality and the more-than-human world in Mahāyāna.

Is this page helpful? Keep this in mind as you read it: Theravada and Vajrayāna literature are not defined as authorities and are called upon only whenever used for contextual clarification.

The research is philosophical and hermeneutic in nature and not empirical. It will not try to give a complete history of Buddhist environmentalism and ethnographic description of the present-day Buddhist ecology.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Buddhism and Environmental Ethics

There have been various stages in the development of scholarship in the field of Buddhism and environmental ethics.

Initial environmental readings placed great weight on a Buddhist philosophy of no-self, dependent origination compassion moderation, and abstention from attachment. These teachings were read as the ways to liberate us from modern human hubris.

But as Asoka Ekkanayake states, "it would be an error to assume that Buddhists historically did not articulate ecological ethics in the modern sense." The religious, socio-economic, and political setting of Buddhist communities in history cannot be equated with modern environmental values. Also, Buddhism did not define a singular "nature" as the modern West does.

This is of particular importance methodologically.

A modern Buddhist environmental ethic must so be able to identify:

1. What Buddhist texts historically claimed;
2. How later Buddhist traditions developed those claims; and.
- 3....and how modern researchers might have the ability to piece these back together for ecological ends.

The present study follows the third approach while also considering the first two.

2.2 Dependent Origination and Relational Ontology

Pratītyasamutpāda is an important philosophical tool for the present argument. While it may be tempting to interpret dependent origination as the modern idea that 'everything is interconnected,' this expression is philosophically incomplete. Its deeper implication is that phenomena lack intrinsic existence (svabhāva); their existence is conditioned. Madhyamaka develops this insight through Nāgārjuna's critique of svabhāva. His analysis does not treat emptiness as an underlying substance connecting everything. Instead, the absence of intrinsic existence means that events cannot be understood apart from the conditions through which they arise. This distinction is crucial for environmental ethics. Relational understanding challenges the ontology of isolated entities and emphasizes their conditions of existence. This way, pratītyasamutpāda is significant not because it proves that all things are identical, but because it challenges their independent existence.

2.3 Śūnyatā and the Critique of Substantialism

The more radical turn of the doctrine of śūnyatā brings the critique of independent existence into even sharper relief. What emptiness means is not nothingness, but an absence of autonomous, independent existence in the world. It also does not mean that emptiness is a cosmic substance or universal ecological field. Śūnyatā denies intrinsic existence, not conventional existence. These two errors are avoided by Madhyamaka: anthropocentrism, by inverting the human subject into a centre for delineating the world, and ecological substantialism, by turning 'Nature' or the 'Earth' into some new absolute [metaphysical object]. It is the destabilisation of the search for a fixed ontological centre, which offers the opportunity for non-anthropocentric ethics, but śūnyatā itself is not an environmental theory. Its ecological relevance can only be recognized through the consideration of its implications for personhood and responsibility in the present.

2.4 Karuṇā and the Bodhisattva Ideal

Mahāyāna karuṇā cannot be extracted from the bodhisattva ideal where liberation is not envisaged as a private victory. The practice of wisdom goes hand in hand with a commitment to the liberation of others. Śāntideva is significant for the way in which his account of compassion shifts the axis of the relation of self and other. There is nothing merely emotional about this shift, which is based on interrogating the self as an autonomous node of consciousness. This matters to the environment not through direct concern, but through a subtle but powerful shift in the basis of ethical 'due', as anthropogenic responsibility is considered relational.

2.5 Huayan and the Logic of Interpenetration

Huayan philosophy brings an East Asian development of Mahāyāna relationality. The Avataṃsaka Sūtra and Huayan commentary writings depict a world of mutual co-emergence and interdependence. Through the metaphor of Indra's Net, it shows how the jewels reflect each other without losing their conventional identity. It is not simply a world of interconnected things, but a place where things cannot be known independently. We see the ecological relevance in the worldview of ecosystem with ongoing process of co-conditioning things. But it should not be mistaken for premodern ecological science, for it is only philosophical resources for developing the altered conception of relationality.

2.6 Tiantai and Insentient Phenomena

Another contribution to Mahāyāna thought is the influence of Tiantai. The arguments over insentient matter possessing Buddha-nature attempt to undermine the exclusive access religious significance has to those entities that are animate. This is significant for environmental thought as it reduces the insentient's place as mere objects to serve the spiritual or moral needs of the motivated animate. Again, the doctrine should be evaluated historically, and to say that "Buddhism says that plants and stones have Buddha-nature" is dubious. Tiantai will instead be used as an example that other Mahāyāna schools did not accept the sentient-insentient division, so avoiding the anachronism of bringing modern ecological questions to bear on the ancient sources.

3. Methodology

3.1 Philosophical-Hermeneutical Approach

This research of the study works with philosophical hermeneutics to analyze the philosophical terms and reconstruct the conceptual scheme of *karuṇā* based on some Mahāyāna texts.

The analysis begins with the assumption that doctrinal terms are best understood in their historical and philosophical context before they are translated into modern categories.

So it is mainly focussed on the relation between *karuṇā*, *śūnyatā*, *pratītyasamutpāda*, *bodhicitta*, and the subject – object duality.

3.2 Comparative Ethical Analysis

The second methodological step engages the reconstructed account of *karuṇā* with present day environmental philosophy.

This comparison features: - anthropocentric environmental ethics - deep ecology - post humanism - new materialist approaches.

The aim is not to show that Buddhist thought and modern ecological philosophy are the same. Rather, the study highlights areas where their philosophies align and where they differ.

3.3 Critical Reconstruction

The methodological principle of the study can be characterized like this - critical reconstruction.

This results in not speaking of historical Buddhist texts as statements on modern day environmental issues and also not excluding the contextual influence the texts might still have.

The analysis instead asks:

What conceptual possibilities can arise when Mahāyāna teachings are interpreted in dialogue with contemporary ecological issues, while preserving their doctrinal integrity?

This chapter addresses the methodological issue raised in earlier Buddhist environmental writing that there is a risk of applying modern ecological concerns when analyzing Buddhist traditions.

4. Analysis

4.1 From Compassion as Emotion to Compassion as Relational Responsibility

Standard compassion involves an equation of subjectivity and objectivity: a subject learns of suffering, and acts to alleviate it. Mahāyāna philosophy would complicate this potentially problematic equation by removing the "ontological independence" of subject and object. If the compassionate subject is empty of *svabhāva*, and the object of compassion is dependently arisen, Compassion cannot be grounded in an autonomous subject

acting upon an intrinsically existing object. The traditional distinction between subjects and objects remains, but need not be thought of as absolute. In this way, *karuṇā* can be characterized as "relational responsiveness [which] arises from understanding of dependent origination, "and the moral problem is transformed: "who should I care about? becomes "what happens to the concept of responsibility when self and other are not ontologically separate?"

4.2 *Karuṇā*, Śūnyatā, and the Transformation of the Ethical Subject

The connection between *karuṇā* and *śūnyatā* is that means key to the argument. Without *śūnyatā*, *karuṇā* can be understood as an altruistic action performed by a stable subject for another stable subject. With *śūnyatā*, the agent of compassion, the recipient of compassion, and the compassionate act are all dependently arisen. This does not diminish the moral significance of action, but it means that action can be understood without reification of those acted upon. This undermines anthropocentric assumptions that treat the human subject as the primary evaluator of moral value. And enables an ethical engagement with the human subject that does not situate it as an independently grounded and metaphysically supreme subject over the entire more-than-human world.

4.3 The Three Modes of Compassion

Mahāyāna texts differentiate aspects of compassion that may be identified analytically:

1. Compassion oriented toward sentient beings;
2. Compassion informed by the nature of things; and.
3. Non-referential compassion (*anā lambana-karuṇā*), which operates without a fixed subject or object.

The first level is most closely aligned with normal ethical compassion. We become aware of the suffering beings, and help them.

The second offers a philosophical perspective. Beings are not believed to be independent objects; instead, they are dependently originated events.

The third indicates the most revolutionary change, for this consists in the breaking down of the hard distinction between subject, object, and action of compassion.

This progression is significant for environmental ethics.

On the first level, environmental ethics would deal with animal suffering and the suffering of humans caused by ecological destruction.

At the second, ecological suffering becomes intelligible as relational. Ecological suffering is understood as a nexus of interconnected processes: climate disruption pollution biodiversity loss, and habitat destruction.

At the third stage, ethical responsibility is no longer understood as a separate subject acting on an outside world.

That is the moment where *karuṇā* is finding its most vital relevance in a post-anthropocentric ethics.

What is remarkable is not that compassion ends up 'ecological', but that its very setup threatens the notion that the moral subject has a duty of responsibility to the other as a separate object.

4.4 Beyond the Sentience Boundary

The second challenge here arises from the conventional focus of *karuṇā* on sentient beings. If *karuṇā* is a response to living beings, is there scope for concern for forests or rivers? Should we argue that these latter are

just secretly sentient, too, and if we do then we need to provide some other reasons why they are, and our Buddhist thinking has this in spades! Instead, what this work clarifies is the distinction between sentience and relational significance: to be sentient is to feel suffering, to be ecologically significant is to be a part of conditions in which beings arise flourish suffer and strive for liberation. A forest need not possess personhood to hold ethical significance; its relational role as a condition (*pratya*) is sufficient: relationality in Buddhism, no stranger to natural entities, offers this possibility.

4.5 Huayan and the Ecological Field

This elaboration of the argument becomes even more convincing with the Huayan explanation of interpenetration. Indra's Net describes events as mutually reflexive and conditioning. The ecological import of this idea can be understood by comparing to planetary systems of atmospheres waters soils, microbes plants animals, and human groups that act as a network of interdependent relations rather than as discrete beings. Huayan so brings a language for describing ecology philosophically and relationally. But, Huayan interpenetration does not need to be cast as a history-making scientific discovery of ecological system theory; ecology describes the sciences of plural species relationships, while Huayan conceptualizes the philosophy and salvation of their existence. Their relation is one of philosophical analogy comparative philosophical resonancenot historical identity.

4.6 Tiantai and the Sentient–Insentient Distinction

Tiantai developments for insentient events do add complexity to the boundary between non-sentient and sentient reality. Here too, their role is the potential to deny that the insentient realm is totally irrelevant to religious interests in this world, this way allowing for a space of ecological concern that is distinct from animal ethics. But this is a necessarily historically specific argument. Tiantai should not be taken to demonstrate, some posteriori, that all Buddhism was non-anthropocentric; the point is that it offers certain resources for conceptualizing the relationship between the categories 'sentient beings' and the 'field of things' that is, in our current environment, implicated in the destruction of a web of relationships and conditions, which create and sustain various lives.

5. Discussion

5.1 Mahāyāna Karuṇā and Anthropocentrism

The penultimate paragraph of this article states the precise thesis that can be articulated: "Mahāyāna karuṇā does not prescribe environmental ethics directly; rather, it transforms the moral subject." While anthropocentric ethics starts with the human being and looks to what extent, it asks, the moral community should extend, Mahāyāna philosophy asks not whether the subject exists, but whether the subject is, as it were, self-existent; only if the human subject is dependently-formed can human interests inclusive of their idea of morality be presumed to be the normative authority of value. It does not preclude human interest, but constrains human interest as what the beyond-human might be. The reconstructed Mahāyāna ethic will contest anthropocentrism, but will not erect "nature" as a new absolute. What remains is relational responsibility.

5.2 Comparison with Deep Ecology

Deep ecology offers a valuable comparative perspective by challenging the idea that environmental value is limited to human interests. Its focus on ecological identification and the broader ecological self-aligns with Buddhist critiques of the isolated ego. But, these two approaches should not be conflated. Deep ecology may develop a positive view of the ecological Self, while Madhyamaka remains cautious about considering any self

as metaphysically substantial. This difference is important. Deep ecology expands the ecological self (Naess), whereas Madhyamaka deconstructs the notion of self altogether. Mahāyāna so gives a unique post-anthropocentric view: not an expanded self, but a critique of the self as an independent ontological center.

5.3 Comparison with New Materialism and Posthumanism

Contemporary post humanist and new materialist theories seek to displace human exceptionalism, through the notions of distributed agency, material entanglement, and shifting human/animal/non-human boundaries. These perspectives and Mahāyāna philosophy have significant commonalities; yet these should not be exaggerated. New materialism is a product of debates on matter, agency, embodiment, and political ontology, whereas Mahāyāna has a soteriological approach to duḥkha ignorance, liberation, wisdom, and compassion. Their relationship should be one of dialogue rather than identity. Mahāyāna can provide an often neglected element in environmental philosophy: the transformation of attachment and grasping. Environmental degradation does not only include a misunderstanding of the natural environment, but also craving consumption the taking of resources and the domination of others, both structural and ethical.

5.4 Relational Significance Rather Than Simple Intrinsic Value

One important consequence of this reconstructed understanding is that it offers for a different approach to valuing the environment. Unlike most environmental ethicists, who ask whether nature has any value in itself, Mahāyāna philosophy directs us to ask, "how does the destruction of an ecosystem affect the conditions for the origination, functioning, and suffering of beings?" (this may be called relational significance). It does not assume that the value of a system depends on its value to humans, nor does it necessarily grant a value of personhood to ecosystems. Instead, value is determined by the web of relations that makes up the world. Relational significance may act as a mediating position between anthropocentric instrumentalism and the metaphysical armchair theorizing about prescriptive intrinsic value or personhood.

6. Toward a Mahāyāna Framework of Ecological Responsibility

All five principles can be summarized: First, non-substantiality rejects the view that entities exist as independent substances. Second, relational arising understands things through the conditions and relationships through which they emerge. Third, non-dual responsibility challenges the absolute separation between autonomous subjects and external objects. Fourth, compassionate responsiveness calls for relational understanding to be expressed through karuṇā rather than remaining theoretical. Fifth, structural engagement extends compassion beyond individual suffering to the social, economic, and institutional structures that generate ecological harm. Together, these principles provide a Mahāyāna system for contemporary environmental discourse without reducing Buddhist philosophy to environmentalism.

7. Practical Implications

The version of karuṇā as reconstructed here has practical consequences.

Firstly, it advocates for and for environmental policies that understand ecological systems as anything but a set of resources.

Second, it offers a philosophical foundation for including non-human life interests in environmental considerations, without having to give each ecological individual a right of its own.

Third, it backs up the link between ecological responsibility and social justice. Environmental inequalities often pollution displacement, lack of resources and adverse impacts of climate change happen in a unequal

way. More impoverished and less powerful communities can be more affected. So a relational understanding of *karuṇā* demands a recognition of both human and non-human aspects of ecological pain.

Fourth, the setup questions approaches to environmental responsibility that focus solely on individuals. While individual consumption decisions still matter, ecological crises are created by institutions markets infrastructure, and political decisions. Compassion, in other words, must be structurally engaged.

The last element in *bodhisattva* practice that we're discussing is the *bodhisattva* ideal that our focus on ethics should encompass long-term action rather than occasional emotional worry.

8. Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations that should be discussed.

Firstly, this study is of a philosophical and hermeneutic nature. It does not offer empirical data; it does not speak directly to the environmental practices of living Buddhist communities. Second, the inquiry is not comprehensive. *Nāgārjuna*, *Śāntideva*, *Huayan*, and *Tiantai* do not constitute the entire spectrum of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Third, the research does not suggest that the Buddhist thinkers who wrote down the early ideas were intentionally addressing climate change, the loss of species or the anthropocene. Fourth, the ecological significance formulated here is recon-structive. It is arrived at by way of philosophical interpretation, not historical equivalence. And lastly, the very notion of non-anthropocentrism is something that originated in modern environmental philosophy. It is to be employed as a category of analysis and not as an autochthonous category of classical Buddhist thought.

This is a crucial point to bear in mind to be methodologically rigorous.

9. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that *Mahāyāna karuṇā* offers an important conceptual resource for modern non-anthropocentric environmental ethics, but only through careful critical reconstruction. The argument begins with the relationship among *karuṇā*, *pratītyasamutpāda*, and *śūnyatā*: dependent origination challenges independent existence, while emptiness prevents relationality from becoming a new metaphysical substance.

Compassion, in this context, cannot be treated as an interstitial subject that acts on the other. The *bodhisattva* transformation of self-other relation is this way the ethical side of *Mahāyāna* relationality.

This has significant environmental consequences. The destruction of forests rivers ecosystems, and atmospheric systems does not require viewing them as sentient beings for ethical relevance; their importance arises from the relationships that form the basis of life. *Huayan* interpenetration supports this perspective, while *Tiantai* discussions of insentient occurrences highlight historically specific difficulties with strict sentient-insentient boundaries.

Because of this, this study refutes both the presumption of Buddhism as inherently environmental philosophy and the theory of Buddhist ecological ethics to impute consciousness or moral personhood to natural occurrences. An alternative of a "re-constituting of *karuṇā* as relational ethical responsibility" emerges.

The deepest ecological implication is that neither humanity nor 'Nature' must act as a fixed metaphysical center. *Śūnyatā* changes how we understand ourselves, *pratītyasamutpāda* changes how we understand relationships, and *karuṇā* turns these insights into ethical responsiveness and ecological responsibility.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this article.

References

- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman. Polity*.
- Curtin, D. (1999). *Challenging the Frontier of the Human: Toward an Earth-Sensitive Ethics*. Indiana University Press.
- Garfield, J. L. (2015). *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Harris, I. (1991). How environmentalist is Buddhism? *Religion*, 21(2), 101–114.
- Harris, I. (1995). Buddhist environmental ethics and detraditionalization: The case of EcoBuddhism. *Religion*, 25(3), 199–211.
- LaFleur, W. R. (1989). *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*. Princeton University Press.
- Loy, D. (2003). *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*. Wisdom Publications.
- Macy, J. (1991). *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory*. State University of New York Press.
- Morton, T. (2010). *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard University Press.
- Nāgārjuna. (1995). *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (J. L. Garfield, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Naess, A. (1989). *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Cambridge University Press.
- Plumwood, V. (1993). *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge.
- Rolston III, H. (1988). *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. Temple University Press.
- Śāntideva. (1997). *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* (V. A. Wallace & A. B. Wallace, Trans.). Snow Lion.
- Sponsel, L. E. (2012). *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*. Praeger.
- Tucker, M. E., & Williams, D. R. (Eds.). (1997). *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*. Harvard University Press.
- Ziporyn, B. (2016). *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Introduction to Chinese Buddhist Philosophy*. Indiana University Press.