

BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (4) THE ONENESS OF LIFE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

MOST WESTERN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS hold that life is the product of a supreme creator, placed into its environment as part of a grand plan. Science suggests that life sprang forth from inanimate surroundings—that it is merely a phenomenon of a higher complexity.

The Buddhist view of the relationship between life and its environment, between people and their surroundings, is very simple yet profound in its implications. It explains that life naturally emerges wherever causes and conditions are suitable for it to do so. The place where life emerges and exists is called an environment. “Environment” means surroundings, and life is what it surrounds. For human beings, environment includes our families, communities and workplaces, as well as the landscape upon which we live and all life that fills it. Life cannot exist apart from its environment, and life in turn profoundly effects its environment.

At the dawn of life on Earth, the oceans teemed with single-celled organisms. Some of these began to absorb the carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere and in turn give off oxygen (O₂). Gradually these simple organisms evolved into plant life, producing more and more oxygen. An atmosphere that once contained little oxygen slowly transformed into one that was oxygen rich, as new forms of oxygen-breathing life evolved. Some of that oxygen (O₂) was transformed into ozone (O₃), creating a layer in the atmosphere that blocked out much of the sun's harmful radiation, cooling the land and oceans and protecting life. Under this protection, life flourished and evolved. Life thus transformed the environment, making it more conducive to more forms of life.

Human beings are immersed in an environment rich with myriad forms of plant and animal life, divorced from which we cannot survive. Because we depend on the water, air and the plant and animal life that surrounds us, our environment truly deserves the name “mother nature”—giving birth to and nourishing human beings. Furthermore, our very bodies are composed of the same elements found in our environment—the liquid component of our bodies, for instance, is similar in composition to seawater.

That we depend on and closely resemble our environment make the Buddhist concept of the oneness of life and its environment a matter of common sense. But the Buddhist view goes beyond a merely mechanical connection; it recognizes a common thread that binds living entities and their environment. This thread is the true aspect of all phenomena, the Mystic Law, which can be understood as the very life of the universe itself.

While science recognizes that life arises from the environment and is an extension of that environment, Buddhism sheds light on why this is so. It is because the environment itself is “alive”—because the universe is brimming with the potential for life.

The “oneness” we have been referring to derives from a Chinese term that literally means “two but not two.” On one level, people and their surroundings are distinct and separate entities. Naturally, it is important to recognize and appreciate this distinction. Yet when viewed from the standpoint of the essential reality, or what the Lotus Sutra refers to as the true aspect of all phenomena, they are one and the same.

Nichiren Daishonin states: “It means that all beings and their environments in any of the Ten Worlds, from Hell at the lowest to Buddhahood at the highest, are, without exception, the manifestations of *Myoho-enge-kyo*. Where there is an environment, there is life within

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it. Miao-lo states, ‘Both life (*shoho*) and its environment (*eho*) always manifest *Myoho-rence-kyo*.’” He equates *Myoho-rence-kyo* to the true entity or true aspect of all phenomena.

The Daishonin also writes, “The Environment is like the shadow, and life, the body. Without the body there can be no shadow. Similarly, without life, the environment cannot exist, even though life is supported by its environment (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4, p. 146). The phrase translated here as “is supported by” can also be understood as “is created by” or “is formed from.”

When people’s inner lives are misguided or unbalanced, the environment—human society, the ecosystem, oceans, atmosphere and geography—is negatively influenced.

It is important to realize that this is not a static relationship. The connection between us and our surroundings is dynamic, alive. We are constantly exerting an influence on our surroundings while our surroundings are constantly influencing us. What should concern us is whether we are exerting a positive, valuable influence on our environment, and whether we are responding to the influences of our environment in positive and valuable ways.

If we don’t like what we see in our environment, we can work to change it for the better. And to do this, the principle of oneness with our environment suggests that we must simultaneously work to better ourselves.

Today our world stands at the brink of an environmental crisis. The habits of humankind have been causing cumulative global environmental effects that are beginning to degrade the well-being of humanity. The dangerous depletion of the Earth’s protective ozone layer and global warming caused by the burning of fossil fuels are just two publicized examples. In addition, some 50,000 species are becoming extinct each year, many from causes directly linked to human influence.

According to the principle of oneness of life and the environment, a fouled environment is the product of polluted hearts and minds. It in turn functions to pollute the bodies, hearts and minds of those living within it. The ongoing destruction of nature, in this light, is clearly a sign of people’s ignorance of the true nature of life.

In our study of Buddhism we often use the term life-condition to describe our inner mental or emotional state. Life-condition, however, actually refers to the whole picture of our internal and external circumstances. Not only does it mean one’s outlook, frame of mind, heart and spirit; it also includes one’s surroundings—the harmony of one’s family setting, work environment, role in the community, prosperity, etc. All of these things characterize our life and its environment.

When we view ourselves and our environment as essentially one, we see the value of cultivating and enriching our inner humanity while working to improve our external circumstances. To attend exclusively to either the internal or the external will leave us going in circles. The purpose of the SGI movement is to enable a positive transformation in the lives of individuals, who in turn act with wisdom to exert a positive influence on their environment. As the preface to the novel *The Human Revolution* reads, “A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind.” Understanding of this principle is perhaps best expressed in our determination always to improve ourselves while working positively for the well-being of others and the improvement of our environment. □

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