IN HIS BOOK, A Sand County Almanac, ecologist Aldo Leopold recounts expeditions he and his friends made into the wilderness of the American Southwest in the early part of this century. He tells about his relentless campaign to kill all the wolves. One day, spotting a wolf down ridge from the hunting party, he shot first and then moved to where the body of the wolf was lying.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter's paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

Leopold entitled this section of his book "Thinking Like a Mountain," a phrase that has become a slogan for the deep ecology movement. Buddhists trained to cultivate mindfulness can appreciate the possibilities for true understanding embodied in that slogan.

During the past few centuries almost every ecosystem and primal culture on the Earth has been disrupted, and in many cases totally despoiled, by aggressive human beings. This multitude of ruins is embedded in our consciousness—the massive deforestation, the human caused increase in the rate of species extinction, and the replacement of complex and diverse plant and animal communities with monocultures of cereal grain or tree plantations.

Some beings must die in order that human beings may live. However, when whole forests of ancient growth are clear-cut, and when whales and other marine mammals are threatened with extinction to satisfy narrow human needs, it is clear that nature is being wantonly exploited.

Buddhist teachings emphasize the middle way. Right livelihood, self-realization, nonviolence, doing no harm...principles that are affirmed in our practice. Practice gives rise to mindfulness and true attention to the place wherein we dwell. Practicing within our bioregion, the interpenetration of all beings becomes more evident.

Dharma comes forth in Gaia, and the Earth manifests in the Buddha way. The power and beauty of nature turning through the seasons links each being inexorably into the song of interbeing. The richness and fullness of life is found here and now in the ways of Earth.

Earth is forthcoming, and we are forthcoming as part of the Earth. We are empowered in the present moment by touching the whole of our interbeing. Great compassion leads to great love. This love is powerful and helps human beings connect deeply with all other beings.

Some people say, "I love the Earth. I want to help all living beings." But such statements are abstractions. We can conceptualize the Earth as a system of interactions, as Gaia. But can we explore a true understanding of the whole Earth? Can we expand our self-identity sufficiently to feel true solidarity with the entire Earth?

Perhaps a few extraordinary people can develop such an identification, but I suspect most of us have much difficulty understanding the entire Earth. We can relate only with a few beings in our lifetime. We have long-term intimate relationships with a few people—our spouse, the other members of our family, our parents, perhaps a few close friends maintained over many years, and a house pet. We understand the universal through the specific.

Buddhism wears a unique face whenever and wherever it manifests. Frequently, Buddhism enters a culture and presents the image of that culture most denied by its participants. Buddhism in Japan
revolutionized the cultural meaning of death. In the West, Buddhism presents a new face to the environmental crisis—which is, on a deeper level, a crisis of character and cultural integrity.

I suggest that in North America, as well as in Europe and Australia, Buddhists will develop an ecocentric Sangha, an international community that practices the Way together. An ecocentric Sangha is not human-centered, but centered in the biosphere. Participants will be dedicated to self-realization for all beings, not just human beings. The Sangha is a witness for the bioregion, engendering new growth and affirming the rights of other species.

In an ecocentric Sangha we are members, not stewards or master elites, in the land community. Each bioregion is graced with sacred places. Each bioregion exists beyond artificial boundaries of counties, states, or nations. Mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. Mountains and rivers are becoming realized beings.

There is a Sangha in every bioregion, perhaps marked by a specific mountain, forest, section of coastline, or watershed. The ecocentric Sangha encourages service to the place wherein all beings dwell. Members serve in order to maintain a continuous harmony within the place. Out of this wider responsibility comes great expansion of self into the greater Self of the bioregion.

I dwell in a bioregion noted for its redwood trees. Redwood trees are only one species among many in the forest, but they are very big and sometimes very old. Many people, including some ecologists (who should recognize that the trees are not the forest), call my homeland the Redwood Forest. Instead of calling ourselves the Redwood Zendo or even the Zendo in the Redwoods, it might be more appropriate to call ourselves People of the Redwoods or better still, People in Service to the Redwood Forest. When our self is very broad, deep, and tall, serving the forest is the same as serving ourselves.

Only a small area of this Earth can be our homeland during this lifetime. Dwelling mindfully in a bioregion, caring for it, becoming intimate with its seasons, its moods, and becoming friends with its codwellers—the plants and animals—requires clear intent and regular practice. In our ecocentric Sangha, we appreciate and hasten our self-realization through the Self-realization of all beings. Practicing in our bioregion, our life affirms all other life.

"All beings are Buddha," said the Enlightened One. Though all animals are Buddhas too, I frequently notice people acting as if this applies only to their personal domesticated pets, particularly dogs and cats. We often project our own fear and ignorance of other species onto so-called wild animals who happen to come into our space.

In my bioregion, for example, some people express fear of black bears. Occasionally, during the early winter months, a few bears will come out of the forest and amble through yards, search through dumpsters for tasty morsels, and perhaps growl at the family cat. Some people shoot any bears found on or near their property. Others call the police, who will usually shoot the bear as well.

Yet in the eighteenth century, when Spanish adventurers first arrived in what is now called California, they discovered native Americans fishing almost side by side with bears. The bears respected the space of the humans, and the humans respected the space of the bears. All shared in the feast of fish returning from the sea to spawn in the freshwater rivers. Respect for the space essential to other life forms is a precept for our Sangha.

The bioregion of an ecocentric Sangha might include a vast wilderness area where humans beings come to visit, but only a few at a time, and more in the fashion of a pilgrimage than an intrusion. Sangha members practice allowing all other creatures, especially wild creatures, all the space they need to be fruitful and happy. Buddhism teaches us that there are no real enemies in the world, except our own delusion born of ignorance, fear, and greed.

Before the last wild condor was captured and relocated in protective custody to the San Diego zoo, a well-known environmental leader in California, David Brower, wrote the following words:
A condor is 5 percent feathers, flesh, blood, and bone. All the rest is place. Condors are soaring manifestations of the place that built them and coded their genes. That place requires space to nest in, to teach fledglings, to roost in un molested, to bathe and drink in, to find other condors in and not too many biologists, and to fly over wild and free. If it is to be worthy at all, our sense of ethics about other living things requires our being able to grant that their place transcends our urge [185] to satisfy our curiosity, to probe, to draw blood, to insult, to incarcerate. We can respect the dignity of a creature that has done our species no wrong—except, perhaps, to prefer us at a distance.5

People in an ecocentric Sangha work with the rich bounty given to them without striving for great wealth at the expense of the life forms of the bioregion. A truly rich and full life can be expected from serving "all our relatives," as Native Americans say. Great diversity characterizes the ecocentric Sanghas. Some serve the ancient forests and glaciers of southeastern Alaska, while others serve a desert.

Some will serve in nuclear waste repositories or toxic waste dumps. The level of discipline held by people in such a Sangha would make most monasteries look like models of anarchy. Their practice will be guided in part by scientific knowledge of these toxic wastes, the rates of decay, and the extent of harm that can come to beings when exposed to these toxic substances.

Knowledge of appropriate ways of handling and monitoring these toxic substances will be very highly valued. People of the Toxic Waste Dump will probably experience higher rates of cancer than most other people. Perhaps they will choose to not have children, and recruit other Sangha members to join them in nuclear practice.

The Dharma teaches us that all is impermanent. All is changing. Change, in the form of evolution, has no direction, no finality. However, evolutionary change tends to develop greater diversity. Protection of biodiversity is another precept of an ecocentric Sangha.

Buddhist wisdom, including the awareness that everything is related to everything else and that the mind is a vast ocean of ignorance, is echoed in the modern science of ecology. Barry Commoner, author of The Closing Circle, summarized one of the laws of ecology in this way: Nature is more complex than we know and possibly more complex than we can know.4

Another law of ecology can be stated as follows: Nature knows best. Massive human intervention in ecosystems tends to be detrimental to those systems. Humans frequently oversimplify the complex, diverse [186] systems of nature due to limitations in their understanding of self-realization and their commitment to commercially exploit all possible by-products. The suicidal practice of clear-cutting in ancient-growth forests is still subsidized in most timber-producing nations, in spite of the fact that human beings cannot create a rainforest or put the chain of life back together once the whole ecosystem has unraveled.

Dwelling in harmony means dwelling as if life in the broadest sense, not just human life, really matters. It means liberating our minds from the shallow and anthropocentric attitudes drilled into us by a consumer culture that rewards the desire to manipulate others for selfish purposes; violence as a way to solve problems; egocentric individualism; and an intense fear of nature.

Dwelling in place means cultivating mindfulness of the multitude of blessings that flow freely to us each day. Freed from the desire for greater worldly wealth or political power and liberated from the belief in unrestrained growth, we can settle effortlessly into the delightful flow of energy we call nature. Joyful moments and rewarding experiences multiply when socially perpetuated illusions and false needs, so artfully promoted in our culture, are allowed to drop away.

In a bioregion, Sangha members are not stewards of the land, nor are they managers of a plantation. Indeed, the term plantation implies a master-slave relationship. In the Klamath-Siskiyou bioregion, where I dwell, the U.S. Forest Service practices clear-cutting. Loggers cut every tree in a
certain parcel of land, remove the commercially valuable trees, and burn the rest. New trees are planted in this clear-cut area, and it is thereafter called a plantation. Plantations are not sustainable forests. Sustainable forests are expressions of the soil, air, and water—rich, diverse communities coevolving. Sustainable forests are necessary for sustainable human communities.\(^5\)

Mindful practice in an ecocentric Sangha includes the recognition that genetically engineered organisms have been introduced into the free environment and some living beings may have been biologically altered or genetically engineered by human beings. Should they be killed to prevent them from reproducing or joining with another [187] organism? How will we treat genetically engineered beings if we follow the principle of harmlessness? We can be compassionate with genetically altered organisms just as we are compassionate with exotic species introduced to our bioregion by European settlers. To demonstrate compassion, however, does not mean deliberately propagating exotic or genetically engineered organisms. Many people will oppose further experimentation by the genetic engineering industry, and while the pace of genetic engineering may be slowed, it is unlikely that Sanghas will be spared from dealing with this issue.

Buddhist teachings include numerous references to a deep sense of oneness with all beings. In addition to zazen and other meditative practices, an increasing number of individuals are exploring socially engaged Buddhism. An ecocentric Sangha is both socially engaged and practicing what Thich Nhat Hanh calls interbeing. One of the precepts of the Order of Interbeing states:

Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation which helps realize your ideal of compassion.\(^6\)

In an ecocentric Sangha there is compassionate discussion of dilemmas and paradoxes that members living in complicated societies must face, including issues around ethical investments, political activism, and social relationships.

Walking meditation is a way that the ecocentric Sangha practices directly with the bioregion. A Sangha in the foothills of the California Sierras holds a "mountains and rivers sesshin." Walking meditation in the mountains might include contemplation of Dogen's "Mountains and Rivers Sutra."

Some Sanghas may be located in large cities. Nonhuman life forms can also be included in the urban Sanghas. Discussion among the members of the Sangha will concern many questions: What is the essential nature of the place where this city has been built? Where are the rivers or streams? (Under the streets, turned into sewers?) What [188] native species are no longer found within this city? Have land owners introduced exotic plants in this city and, if so, what impact have they had on the habitat of native species? How can human beings and wildlife live harmoniously in the city? Where does the city obtain its water supply? Have dams been built that impede fish from returning to their spawning grounds? Does the city government encourage recycling?

The people of an urban ecocentric Sangha practice diligently, just as do members of an ecocentric Sangha in the countryside or in a wilderness. Cities, however, are home to many alienated intellectuals who live in delusion and serve the circles of power by manipulating language and images to enhance the appearance of human competence and success. Skillful practice in large cities and in regions where technology is idolized and runs rampant, such as major industrial centers, military bases, or factories where nuclear bombs or hazardous chemical compounds are created, may require a willingness to take on the suffering created by these human inventions.

The ideals of right practice and right livelihood take on new meaning in the context of ecocentric Sanghas. Perhaps the greatest challenge for members of an ecocentric Sangha is to let go of feeling that they are in control. Industrial civilization is out of control at the present time. Ways to help bring it
under control include smashing the illusion that we can burn fossil fuels, or create new species of animals with biotechnology, or control the growth of trees on plantations through the use of chemical herbicides and fertilizers without threatening the very continuation of life on Earth.

The quality and richness of life manifests from a deep understanding of ourselves in relation to a place. In our technocratic culture there is widespread belief that we can satisfy any desire, anywhere. By participating in an ecocentric Sangha, we become more honest with ourselves and identify more profoundly with the other sentient beings in our midst. The journey home is joyful and simple. Settling down into our rightful place as human beings in harmony with our bioregions, we find rich companionship with life.

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Endnotes