



The Intersection of Sentient Beings and Species, Traditional and Modern, in the Practices and Doctrine of Dharma Drum Mountain

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The seven fig trees (moraceae ficus, deciduous arbor, also known as the white flesh fig and Philippine fig) in front of the Library & Information Center (LIC) are native to Dharma Drum Mountain. Master Sheng Yen called them the “Seven Tathagatas.” Having taken root here over 100 years ago, all seven have been deemed rare and old, and placed on the official protection list by the New Taipei City Government.

Chinese characters are included where it may assist a reader familiar with Chinese to identify pronouns or specialized terms. Traditional Chinese characters are used to preserve the format of the original material. Pinyin romanization is used, but where an established proper name uses the Wade-Giles romanization system, the established form is used. In these cases, the pinyin romanization is included in parentheses.

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To protect these fig trees the LIC's original site was moved back and its orientation altered, creating a picturesque contrast between man-made and natural elements, as well as the stirring scenery that has become a Dharma Drum Mountain Complex landmark.

*The "Seven Tathagatas" have been infected by *Phellinus noxius*, a pathogen that causes brown root rot, which is common in tropical and semi-tropical forests. After trees are infected, they are usually cut down and burned to avoid further spread of the disease. But because of the special causes and conditions that surround these seven trees and Dharma Drum Mountain, in April of 2011 the organization opted to employ tree surgery instead. During the surgical operations, steel ribs were set up to support the trees and prevent the danger of collapse. The infected areas were then removed and the infected surrounding soil replaced (the diseased soil had to be fumigated). After the operation the trees need three to five years to recuperate, and it is hoped that the "Seven Tathagatas" will regain their original vitality, with a new lease on life.*

—*Treating Trees in Distress*, signboard in front of trees at Dharma Drum Mountain

The language of this signboard is carefully crafted to reflect the deep concern for the preservation of the natural environment at Dharma Drum Mountain (*Fagushan*; DDM). The vocabulary of the sign reflects several different environmental concerns. On the one hand, the trees are "rare and old." They are also "natural elements" that contrast with "man-made elements." They contribute to the "stirring scenery" at DDM. The purposes described in the sign are not exhaustive of the diverse functions of the trees. Rather, they point to a multi-layered relationship of humans with the trees. This relationship with trees is also not in isolation. The sign does not only mention the *moraceae ficus* fig tree species, it also mentions *Phellinus noxius*, a fungus. This fungus is described as a "pathogen" that infects the trees. This terminology of disease contrasts with the Buddhist epithet of "Seven Tathagatas." *Tathāgata*, the Thus Come One, is a word that refers to a buddha. It is not clear that Sheng Yen's epithet actually suggests that he thinks the trees are buddhas, but it does denote reverence for the fig tree, as opposed to aversion for the "pathogenic" fungus. Neither the fungus nor the trees are animals, as understood by modern science, but there are a series of further relationships also suggested by this sign. The diseased soil was fumigated. Although the fumigation agent is not specifically identified, it seems safe to assume that the soil insects, nematodes, fungi, and other categories of species in the soil were killed to preserve these trees.

Although fungi and trees are not animals, nematodes and insects are. These animals are generally understood to be sentient beings in Buddhist discourse. Thus, in order to preserve seven non-sentient beings, many sentient beings were killed. Through this process, humans select certain species to preserve and certain species to destroy, which blurs the “contrast between man-made and natural elements.” The “natural” elements are human-selected ones that appear in a human-engineered landscape. This problematizes words such as *natural* and *man-made* and reveals a complex series of relationships that does not fit into a single Buddhist or biological framework. The definition of terms such as *animal* and *sentient being* overlap but also require further examination.

Sheng Yen (1930–2009) is the founder of DDM located in New Taipei City, Taiwan. In his spiritual environmentalism, he described natural environmentalism in terms of the protection of both individual bodies of sentient beings, as well as species. This approach extends beyond a practice that is merely concerned with salvation of sentient beings to include a concern for the diversity of life on earth and the preservation of species as a discrete category. This approach, however, does not reject earlier notions that include all six realms of existence. In other words, two ways of envisioning collide at DDM. Sheng Yen must negotiate pre-modern Buddhism with the modern notion of environmental protection (*huanjing baohu*) in order to forge his spiritual environmentalism. In the practices and doctrine of DDM, modern notions of ecology and species thus do not replace but operate in a complex relationship with traditional notions that include ambiguous boundaries between animals, humans, and the sentient beings in other realms of existence. In this chapter, I show how the result of these complex relationships is an alliance between pre-modern Buddhism and modern science that redefines boundaries and margins to form a mutualistic alliance of cosmologies.

13.1 ANIMALS

Animal, (kingdom Animalia), any of a group of multicellular eukaryotic organisms (i.e., as distinct from *bacteria*, their deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA, is contained in a membrane-bound nucleus). They are thought to have evolved independently from the unicellular eukaryotes. Animals differ from members of the two other kingdoms of multicellular eukaryotes, the plants (Plantae) and the fungi (Mycota), in fundamental variations in morphology and physiology. This is largely because animals have developed muscles and hence mobility, a characteristic that has stimulated the further development of tissues and organ systems.¹

This definition from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* presents a biological definition of the word *animal*. In Chinese, this definition corresponds most closely with the word *dongwu*. This definition contrasts sharply with the Buddhist definition of animal. In Buddhism, the traditional definition of animal relates to the six realms of existence. These realms consist of hell-beings, hungry ghosts, animals, asuras, humans, and devas. In Chinese, the word *chusheng* refers to those beings that inhabit the “animal” realm. The word *chusheng* better correlates to the word *beast* in English because *chusheng* live a life of suffering due to karmic consequences from a previous life.² Another significant distinction is that, biologically speaking, humans are subsumed within the category of *dongwu*, whereas in Buddhist cosmology, *chusheng* and humans abide in distinct realms because of karmic conditions. Humans have earned their birth in the human realm through positive karma from previous lives and thus experience less suffering than animals. Finally, in Buddhist cosmology, all distinctions are much more fluid. Creatures in all six realms of existence are sentient and are subject to the cycle of rebirth. Distinctions are only temporary, and each sentient being may be born in any one of the six realms in its next life, depending on her karma—just as she has been reborn many times in the past.

From an ethical standpoint, the five precepts³ and the *vinaya*—the code of conduct for monks—prohibit killing. However, in some versions of the vows, the severity of the offense is different for animals and humans. For example, in the Pali Theravadin Vinaya, there is a distinction between killing animals and humans. Killing a human is one of the four grave offenses called *pārājika* (*siboluoyi*) offenses. If a monk or nun commits one of these offenses, he is expelled from the sangha. However, killing an animal is an offense that requires expiation. This type of offense is called a *prāyaścittika* (*boyiti*) offense and requires confession to three other monks or nuns. Therefore, killing a human is a much more serious offense than killing an animal, but nonetheless, both forms of killing are offenses.⁴ On the other hand, Mahayana vows varied. For example, the *Brahma Net Sutra* prohibited the killing of all sentient beings equally.⁵

At DDM, someone who accepts the full set of lay precepts, including the five precepts known as the Bodhisattva Precepts, also strives to awaken all sentient beings.⁶ Thus, DDM initiates vow to engage in a special relationship with all sentient beings, including animals. They must assist animals in the process of awakening.

The biological definition of animals thus differs from the Buddhist definition in several key ways. An animal is generally defined based on its morphology and physiology and perhaps is most distinguished by muscular features that allow it to move. This type of animal is defined by its material characteristics. The definition suggests nothing about whether an animal is sentient, and it implies nothing about its history of deeds, whether it can be reborn, or whether it possesses the capacity to achieve realization. On the other hand, Buddhist texts often emphasize sentience and rebirth over detailed morphological and physiological traits. For example, the twentieth vow of the *Brahma Net Sutra* admonishes disciples of the Buddha to reflect, “throughout the eons of time, all male sentient beings have been my father, all female sentient beings my mother. I was born of them. If I now slaughter them, I would be slaughtering my parents as well as eating flesh that was once my own.”⁷ The physiological and morphological details of a sentient being are temporary karmic conditions, and presume a moral relationship with other sentient beings. Animals also possess the ability to achieve buddhahood, although that may require being reborn as a human first. The biological definition is better suited for identification, whereas the Buddhist definition is related more to identifying a karmic status and moral obligation. However, the lack of emphasis on how to identify an animal in Buddhism does not necessarily imply that the biological definition, which focuses more on identification, is suitable in identifying sentient beings for Buddhists.

13.2 ARE TREES SENTIENT?

In May and June of 2014, I spent five weeks at DDM to conduct research. I was a visiting graduate student and lived in the student dormitories at Dharma Drum Buddhist College. Dharma Drum Buddhist College was a secular university that offered undergraduate, masters, and doctoral degrees in Buddhist Studies. It has since been renamed Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts, as it is opening a new campus that will offer majors in a liberal arts curriculum in addition to Buddhist Studies. Dharma Drum Buddhist College is located at the DDM World Center for Buddhist Education. The complex also includes a four-year monastic training university called Dharma Drum Sangha University and a practice center for lay people. While at DDM, I interviewed staff, professors, and students and observed the practices there. In interviews, I asked about environmental practices and philosophy, as well as the global activities of the organization.

When I asked monks, nuns, students, and professors at DDM about the environmental practices there, many of them discussed the great effort which has been committed to preserving trees. One nun provided a very detailed account of the tree transplanting process and justification for preserving the trees. In regard to the seven fig trees—the Seven Tathagatas—she explained that the library was originally planned to be built in the location of the seven fig trees in front of the current library, but the plan for the building was set back so as not to damage the trees. She further explained that when trees grow large enough, they can provide a dwelling place for formless spirits. The trees in front of the library are the home to 70 billion spirits. Sheng Yen protected the trees to protect the spirits. Now those spirits may serve as dharma protectors for Sheng Yen and DDM. Many monastics have had dreams about the trees prior to becoming monastics. Without being familiar with Sheng Yen or DDM, these men and women have found their way to DDM, drawn by the trees.

The nun explained that Sheng Yen compared the location of DDM to a Ming chair. The location of the campus has one tall mountain behind it and a mountain on each side. There are two streams that flank both sides of the campus. Originally, these were too narrow for good *fengshui* (the proper flow of energy, or *qi*, through the landscape), but in the late 1990s, an earthquake and typhoon caused the two streams to become wider. The nun explained that it was the dharma protectors that caused these streams to widen and improve the *fengshui*.

In another case, the nun explained DDM was beginning construction for the new campus, but there was an old tree there. The tree was to be moved from its location at the site of the planned campus to a spot in front of the administrative building. Sheng Yen knew the tree did not want to move, so he spoke to it the day before it was to be moved. Then just before it was moved, the monks and nuns gathered around it to chant. When it was moved, it was loaded on a 14-ton truck, but the truck got stuck. Sheng Yen spoke to the tree again. A 50-ton truck was brought in to move it the next day. When it got to the hole where it is was to be replanted, it again would not come off the truck. Sheng Yen spoke to it, and it eventually came off the truck. It would not go in the center of the hole, but chose a spot where it was more comfortable. Later, the nun who told me this story met a Jewish woman who studied Native American religion and had come to visit DDM. The woman took a look at the tree and said it was the most powerful tree she had seen. It was sick, but she hoped it would become well again.

These stories are based on one nun's account, and represent one of many perspectives. When I asked another nun about the story, she seemed rather taken aback by the story. While the first nun said Taiwanese regulations prohibit altering rivers—suggesting that the rivers must have been widened by the earthquake and typhoon—the second nun noted that stones had been placed by the river for river improvement. Indeed, the rivers are heavily engineered. Both nuns referred me to a video that captured the tree transplanting process.

In the video, Liao Chiu-Cheng (Liao Qiucheng), Associate Professor of Forestry at National Chiayi University, narrates the transplanting process. The process begins with the cutting of roots on October 12, 2003, followed by the actual transplanting on June 25, 2004. The tree that is transplanted is a *lubua tree* (*lubua shu*, *Scolopia oldhamii* Hance) that is nearly 100 years old. The video focuses on the technical aspect of the move, describing and showing the technology in detail. It shows the tree being lifted onto a flatbed of a tractor trailer by crane; the tree is pulled to the new location; and the tree is dropped into its new place by a crane. It does not show the monks or nuns chanting or Sheng Yen talking to the tree. The video begins and ends with a statement by the President of Dharma Drum Buddhist College, Zeng Jiquan. President Zeng explains that DDM is preserving the primary forest on its campus and is explicit that the trees are sentient:

According to the spirit of our [form of] Buddhism, living things are sentient. Even if they are trees, they still have the same sentience.

Therefore, although the video focuses on the technical side of the transplant, it is clear that trees are viewed as sentient. At the end of the video, President Zeng states:

We at Dharma Drum Mountain emphasize environmental protection—the meaning of environmental protection. We think that each and every element of the natural world has meaning in its survival. Thus, in this transplant process, we want to provide a very good example for the people of the world. That is, living things are sentient. Toward all living things, we all wish to say [we] can respect them, cherish them, and relate with them. That is a big and important message for society to be drawn from this transplanting of the primary forest. [That] is what Sheng Yen often emphasizes.⁸

When President Zeng discusses the natural world, he talks about it collectively. When he mentions the survival of each and every element, he talks about the meaning of their survival, rather than individual spirits. Even when he mentions the sentience of the forest, it is the collective of trees together that possess sentience, which might imply a different type of sentience than the sentience of individual beings.

The nun who described the 70 billion spirits spoke in a very different way. To her, the spirits were discrete, active agents. The *lubua tree* itself had the power to actively resist movement, and the spirits that lived in the Seven Tathagatas were able to actively protect DDM. They were able to widen the rivers to improve the *fengshui* at DDM. Both the view of a sentient collective and the view of plants as individual active agents have precedence in the Buddhist literature. I discuss briefly the active role of plants in this section, and discuss the collective view in a later section.

The nun's explanation suggests that some trees possess sentience or they provide an abode for a number of formless spirits. This sort of story is not unprecedented in Buddhist literature. For example, there are several stories in the *Jātaka* tales—stories of the Buddha's previous lives—in which the Buddha appears as trees or even a tuft of *kusa* grass.

In the *Kusanjāli Jātaka* tale, the Buddha is a tuft of *kusa* grass that dwells at the base of a wishing tree. King Brahmadata of Banaras had only one pillar supporting the roof of his palace, and the pillar had become shaky. He sent some carpenters out to prepare a new pillar. They searched all over for a suitable tree, but the only suitable tree was the wishing tree. Despite the carpenter's hesitation to cut down the wishing tree, the King ordered them to cut it down. They begged the tree for forgiveness, and told her they would come back the next day to cut her down. The wishing tree burst into tears. The following day, the Buddha-grass transformed into a chameleon and moved up the side of the tree to make it look like it had holes in it. When the carpenters saw the tree was full of holes, the carpenters decided not to cut it down because it was rotten. After telling this story, the Buddha reveals that he was the *kusa* grass sprite, and Ānanda was the tree sprite.⁹

In the *Rukkhadhamma Jātaka*, the Buddha is the spirit of a sal tree in the Himalayas. He admonishes the trees, shrubs, bushes, and plants of his family to take up abode in the forest. Some vegetative spirits, however, defied his advice and inhabited giant trees in open spaces. One day, a storm snapped the branches and upturned the roots of the trees in open

spaces, while the trees in the forests were left undamaged. The spirits who had lost their homes, weeping, took their children in their arms, and set out for the Himalayas.¹⁰

In both tales, the sprites and spirits are active agents, but in the first tale, the future Buddha and the future Ānanda function as if their bodies are the kusa grass and the tree. This is similar to how the nun at DDM described the *luhua tree* resisting those that were moving it. In the second story, the spirits are mobile. They take the trees as homes and are able to leave when their homes are destroyed. This is similar to how the nun described the spirits reside in the Seven Tathagatas.

From the multiple interviews I have conducted at DDM, this nun's account of the tree spirits and the dharma protectors is the only description of its kind—although I did not ask all my informants specifically about the trees. This could be because it represents only one nun's understanding, but considering that there was an organized chant and Sheng Yen spoke to the tree, this view may be more widespread. The video did not include the narrative the nun described, so this view at least does not appear to be the understanding that DDM is promoting in their official media. However, the *Jātaka* tales demonstrate that the nun's account is not an unprecedented one, and it does represent at least one of the many perspectives within the DDM organization.

It is not completely clear how formless spirits and sentient trees fit into the six realms of existence. There is not a vegetal realm. They could belong to a number of realms, devas perhaps or hungry ghosts, but they do seem to be sentient. From a Buddhist perspective, the quality of sentience is key to determining proper conduct. Since they are formless, they cannot be directly killed, but on the other hand, judging from the nun's account, preserving their home does help these beings and bring good fortune to DDM. These relationships also reflect a set of priorities in relation to animals. It is possible that maintaining good relationships with these spirits is a tradeoff for the killing involved in fumigating the roots of the Seven Tathagatas.

While the case of the Seven Tathagatas demonstrates the broad and ambiguous range of sentient beings, it does not directly address the realm of the beasts. One area in which there exists a significant literature directly related to animals is the recent discourse on the animal release (*fangsheng*) ceremony. In the next section, I briefly discuss the *fangsheng* discourse to identify and develop the varied views on animals.

13.3 ANIMAL RELEASE

In 1999, Lucia Liu Severinghaus and Li Chi published an article in the journal *Biological Conservation* that demonstrated that the practice of *fangsheng* was common in Taiwan. They brought the attention of the scientific community to a mode of introduction of invasive species that had previously not drawn much attention from scientists. Animals, including non-native turtles and fish, were being bought from pet stores or local markets to be released. In a global market, pet stores and markets were carrying more species non-native to the region. Later articles confirmed this practice was not confined to Taiwan. For example, in a 2012 article, Liu, McGarrity, and Li demonstrated that *fangsheng* has been a significant mode by which breeding populations of non-native bullfrogs have been established in Yunnan Province, China.¹¹

However, by the time of the publication of the Severinghaus and Li article, leaders of the Taiwanese Buddhist community were already imploring followers not to participate in the ritual in the way that it had frequently been practiced. For example, the largest Buddhist organization in Taiwan is Buddha's Light Mountain (*Foguang Shan*), and the founder of Buddha's Light Mountain Hsing Yun (*Xingyun*) criticized the way *fangsheng* was being conducted.

In 1998, Hsing Yun wrote, "Freshwater fish are set free in the ocean, and saltwater fish are released in ponds or streams. People have even released poisonous snakes where they can harm people... To pay such intensive attention to releasing life is not to release life. It may go by the pretty name 'releasing life,' but, in truth, it is not moral. One ought to promote the release of life according to conditions, not according to pre-arranged design."¹² In his book *Chan de Shijie* published in 1999, Sheng Yen also implores his followers not to participate in animal release. He cites ecological reasons similar to Hsing Yun's about how animals are released into unsuitable environments, but he also argues against the suffering of individual animals as well. For example, he provides an example of how people will buy a turtle to release, but the turtle endures the suffering of having the releasers' initials carved on her shell. He continues that these turtles are sometimes captured again, and rereleased, whereas if they were never caught and rereleased at all they would survive just fine. As an alternative, Sheng Yen proposed that money that would otherwise be spent on *fangsheng* be donated to the rehabilitation of endangered species, so they can be nursed back to health and returned to the wild.¹³

The ceremony had also been critiqued in the scholarly religious studies literature, especially related to Japan. There have been a variety of views expressed in both popular and scholarly literature that have associated Buddhism and Japanese culture with an affinity for nature as opposed to the Western dominion over nature. In response, some scholars have used the *fangsheng* ceremony to demonstrate that the Japanese affinity for nature is a modern construct that does not consider the considerable countervailing evidence. For example, Duncan Williams examines the most well-known medieval site for the ritual, Iwashima Hachiman Shrine, and demonstrates that the ritual was used by the Shogunate—Japan’s military authorities—to pay obeisance to a powerful potential adversary in order to maintain the status quo. The result was that many fish were caught to be rereleased with as many as two-thirds dying in the process.¹⁴ Barbara Ambros argues that *fangsheng* and other Buddhist rituals historically tended to relate to the propitiation and salvation of animals, rather than care for them in the present life. It was more important that animals attained a good rebirth than that their welfare was improved in their current life.¹⁵

Neither of these historical arguments fits Sheng Yen’s position. Sheng Yen’s descriptions are not only related to the welfare of individual animals but also to the preservation of the ecosystem. There is an overlap between these two purposes, but they are both simultaneously present. It is clear that the reasons that Sheng Yen offers to critique the modern practice of *fangsheng* relate to the welfare of animals in their current life. He is concerned that an animal is introduced to an environment where it can thrive—for example, a cold-water fish is not introduced to a warm water stream. He also rejects the notion that an animal should be caught and rereleased just for the purpose of performing the *fangsheng* ritual. The alternative he proposes of nursing and rearing endangered species also provides benefits to the individuals of the endangered species. Yet, at the same time, his concerns also entail consideration for the health of the ecosystem. Releasing animals into the ecologically appropriate ecosystem also presumably enhances the viability of the ecosystem. This is even clearer in the fact that he does not suggest nursing any unhealthy animal back to health but specifically endangered animals. This requires thinking about animals as more than individuals—not only in terms of the health of another sentient being but also in terms of the robustness of the species. Thus, Sheng Yen promotes both individual animal welfare and species-level conservation practice.

This view, particularly the species-level conservation component, develops in response to modernity. Sheng Yen himself adopts the language of modern ecology. Thus, his critique of the *fangsheng* ritual is stated in modern terms in response to modern problems, but it is rooted in Buddhist doctrine. Instead of focusing on salvation as Ambros suggests has been the historical focus of *fangsheng*, Sheng Yen focuses on ecological conservation and animal welfare. Sheng Yen's interest in ecological conservation is demonstrated by his concern for the fitness of an animal to a particular environment and the preservation of endangered species. This interest fits neatly into a conservation biology paradigm as represented by scientists such as Severinghaus and Li who have criticized the *fangsheng* ritual as a mode of entry of invasive species. At the same time, Sheng Yen is also concerned with the welfare of individual animals. Both of these views find precedence in Buddhism. The concern for the welfare of sentient beings was discussed above, and the concern for the integrity of the ecosystem as part of the Dharmabody is discussed below. These two concerns, however, also often clash.

To illustrate this point, the Seven Tathagata trees provide multiple functions to the ecosystem. If they die, birds may lose their place to nest, caterpillars may be deprived of their food source, and the atmosphere would lose another source of oxygen. In short, the ecosystem would be altered. Moreover, if the entire primary forest that DDM occupies was eliminated, the new ecosystem would be entirely different and likely support a less diverse group of species. Therefore, fumigating the roots of the tree may kill some individual insects, nematodes, fungi, and other organisms, yet by saving the tree, not only will the trees be able to continue to support the species it has been supporting, but nematodes and insects that live in the soil will be replaced in the future by individuals of the same species. If the surgery is successful, only the species *Phellinus noxius* described as the "pathogen" on the signpost in front of the Seven Tathagata will be eliminated.

13.4 SHENG YEN'S ECOLOGICAL VIEWS

In order to understand Sheng Yen's broader ecological views, it is also important to understand a broader movement of which he is a part, Humanistic Buddhism. This form of Buddhism is generally attributed to the great Chinese reformer Tai Xu (1890–1947) and his student Yin Shun (1906–2005), who coined the term *Humanistic Buddhism* (*renjian fojiao*)

and brought the movement to Taiwan.¹⁶ Three of the four major Buddhist organizations in Taiwan—Buddha’s Light Mountain, Tzu Chi (*Ciji*) Compassion Relief, and DDM—are all associated with the movement. Even some monastics in the fourth organization, Chung Tai Chan Szu (*Zhongtai Chan si*), also claim their organization is a form of Humanistic Buddhism.¹⁷ The Humanistic Buddhism movement puts much more energy into education and charitable service and focuses more on this-worldly activities than the afterlife. One component of this is the Pure Land on Earth¹⁸ (*renjian jingtu*) doctrine. Unlike Amitābha’s Pure Land *Sukhāvātī*, the Pure Land on Earth is on this earth, in this present life. Thus, a practitioner does not need to wait to be reborn to another Pure Land, she only needs to purify her mind in order to see that this world already is a Pure Land. One of the doctrinal foundations for this type of Pure Land is the Vimalakīrti Sutra, from which Sheng Yen often quoted the phrase “When the mind becomes pure, the Buddha land also becomes pure.”¹⁹

According to Sheng Yen, although the best way to purify the mind is traditional Buddhist practice, those who are not ready for a more traditional practice can practice the Four Environmentalisms.²⁰ These Four Environmentalisms—spiritual environmentalism, social environmentalism, living environmentalism, and natural environmentalism—translate Buddhist concepts into non-sectarian language. Underlying these Four Environmentalisms is the idea that each part of the universe is intimately connected. In his 2000 speech at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, Sheng Yen described this environmentalist message:

The Buddha told us in the sutras and precepts that we should take loving care of animals, and that we should not harm the grass and trees, but regard them as the home where sentient beings lead their lives. In the stories of the Buddha’s past lives, when he was following the Bodhisattva path, he was once reborn as a bird. During a forest fire, he tried fearlessly to put out the fire, disregarding his own safety by bringing water with his feathers. In the Avatamsaka Sutra it is said that mountains, waters, grass, and trees are all the manifestation of the great bodhisattvas. So, Buddhists believe that both sentient beings and non-sentient things are all the Dharmabody of the buddhas. Not only do the yellow flowers and green bamboo preach Buddhist teachings, but rocks can also understand Buddhist doctrines. Therefore, Buddhists regard our living environment as their own bodies. The Buddhists’ life of spiritual practice is by all means very simple, frugal, and pure.²¹

Through this passage, Sheng Yen portrays a kind of sentience of the entire universe, including non-sentient beings such as rocks and waters. The trees are not sentient beings, but they are home to sentient beings. At the same time, as part of the Dharmabody, even rocks can understand the dharma. The Dharmabody to which Sheng Yen refers has several different doctrinal explanations. One explanation is its existence as one of the three bodies (*trikāya*, *sanshin*), which consists of the dharma body (*dharmakāya*, *fashen*), reward body (*sambhoga-kāya*, *baoshen*), and transformation body (*nirmāṇakāya*, *huashen*). The dharma body is the body of the buddha that encompasses the entire universe due to transcendence of self. It can be equated with emptiness or buddha nature. The reward body is the joy body derived from the merits of the bodhisattvas. The transformation body is the body that enables a buddha to appear in the world and teach other sentient beings. The three bodies are not separate but unified. According to this understanding, the mountains, waters, grass, and trees appear as part of the transformation body in order to teach sentient beings, but they are simultaneously part of the Dharmabody, which encompasses the whole universe. What Sheng Yen is establishing here is that all beings are part of the same body, so that hurting the environment is hurting oneself. Individual sentience beings possess an individual sentience, but they also are part of the Buddhahood of the entire universe.

This is possibly what underlies statements of President Zeng in his remarks about moving the *lubua tree* quoted earlier. He says that even trees are sentient. This sentience is perhaps through the universal buddhahood of the universe. Indeed, one of the phrases that introduce the video of the transplanting of the tree is “Build a Pure Land on Earth.”²² The project of moving the trees is not viewed in isolation. It is viewed as creating a Pure Land on Earth. President Zeng speaks of trees in the plural, almost as the entire primary forest itself, which suggests he is thinking more of a collective sentience.

While on the one hand Sheng Yen and President Zeng discussed Buddhist conceptions of sentience, Sheng Yen also adopted the modern language of species. To Sheng Yen, these species are like organs of an even greater Dharmabody. The interests of individual animals, species, and sentient beings of other realms do not always appear to be the same. It is clear that in the case of the Seven Tathagatas, the surgery and fumigation killed fungi, nematodes, insects, and possibly other organisms in order to save a tree that may be an abode not only to animals, but also possibly billions of spirits. However, the outcome of balancing the multiple interests does not

always play out in the way it did with the Seven Tathagatas and the organisms dwelling in the ground. Sheng Yen provides an example of a case involving an apparent conflict of interest between insects and trees:

Ecological resources are very strange. At Dharma Drum Mountain, there is a banyan tree. Two weeks ago, it was still full of leaves, When I went back to see it again last week, the leaves had already been gnawed bare. This tree was eaten by very pretty caterpillars. After eating, the caterpillars became butterflies. I think this is worth it. The tree leaves, after having been eaten by the caterpillars, can support many butterflies. Even though most of the caterpillars died after eating and did not become butterflies, this is the self-regulation of the ecology of the natural world. Even though the leaves are eaten bare, next year it will definitely again grow a full tree of green leaves.

From a different perspective, if we spray these caterpillars with pesticides, whether or not the tree will be protected is one thing, but the ecological cycles will be damaged.

Therefore, at Dharma Drum Mountain, we do not intentionally attend to these caterpillars. They themselves look for food to eat. Life and death is a natural cycle. Humans know not to do things that jeopardize their own survival, but must take one step further to respect the right of other organisms to survive.²³

Although in the case of the Seven Tathagatas, the insects were sacrificed for the trees, in this case, the tree is sacrificed for the insects. There are prohibitions against killing at DDM, but there also seems to be a great concern in protecting species and ecosystems and in building a Pure Land on Earth.

Although President Zeng begins and ends the video of the transplanting of the trees with remarks on the sentience of trees, the majority of the video is devoted to showing and describing the technical process of moving the tree. While the religious rituals, such as the monastics chanting, are left out, Liao Chiu-Cheng, the professor of forestry, describes the technical aspects of moving the tree in detail. These editing decisions not only suggest that DDM seeks to identify itself with science, but that it is actively using scientific and technological methods to achieve its goals. On the one hand, Sheng Yen used the language of spiritual environmentalism as a way to communicate with non-Buddhists, but on the other hand, he also employs it and, in some cases, modifies practices based on scientific or ecological knowledge.

13.5 CONCLUSION

There are multiple layers of understanding animals in the DDM organization. There are individual animals, species, and the entire Dharmabody. Unlike in the biological understanding of animals, animals fall under a greater umbrella of sentient beings, which is a more relevant category to Buddhist morality than animals. Otherwise, to be consistent with the biological definition of animals, animals would need to be split into at least two Buddhist categories, humans and beasts. Yet, these two categories do not exhaust the categories of the six realms of existence, which also include devas, asuras, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings. In at least one nun's view, these formless spirits also are worthy of protection, and take an active role in the ecosystem.

These multiple relationships demonstrate that environmental decisions are not represented well by a continuum of environmentally destructive versus environmentally friendly. Both fungi and trees are living things, and DDM made the decision to protect one over the other, even at the cost of killing creatures dwelling in the soil. Environmental decisions seem to require a more dynamic approach of weighing multiple interests. There were likely multiple views and perspectives within DDM about how to manage the Seven Tathagatas. The categories that I have identified are based on a comparison of diverse and disparate materials. Sheng Yen, President Zeng, and the nuns with whom I spoke, each presented a personal understanding of DDM's form of Buddhism. At the same time, the nuns and President Zeng refer to Sheng Yen as the authority.

There are also a number of non-human actors. According to one nun's account, some tree sprites that lived in the Seven Tathagatas altered the two rivers flanking the DDM campus. Sheng Yen notes the mountains, waters, grass and trees are all manifestations of the bodhisattvas. The environmental decisions are not only made in reference to multiple interests, but these environmental actors are also active in participating in the decision-making process. This suggests that the "picturesque contrast between man-made and natural elements" indicated on the signboard in front of the Seven Tathagatas is not as deep and static as it may first appear. Just as the library was set back to accommodate the Seven Tathagatas, the surgical intervention of humans is what allowed the trees to survive. Humans are engaged in dynamic relationships with a diverse group of

non-human agents—as organs of the same Dharmabody, as a species in an ecological web, and as individuals that deserve humane treatment.

Modern science and technology play an unmistakable role in DDM's ecology. Not only does DDM adopt technical procedures, such as tree surgery and tree transplanting, Sheng Yen also promotes new forms of Buddhist practice based on the principles of conservation biology. He supports the targeted rehabilitation and release of endangered species rather than a more traditional *fangsheng* ritual focused on the mutual salvation of the animal and the releaser. Science and technology are used as methods to communicate with and relate to people. The video of the tree transplanting emphasizes the advanced technology that DDM uses, while not addressing chanting and other Buddhist rituals involved in moving the tree. This strategy fits into Sheng Yen's overall framework of spiritual environmentalism, in which he uses a secular vocabulary to communicate Buddhist principles. Sheng Yen does rank traditional Chan practice above the practice of the Four Environmentalisms, but both forms of practice may be used side by side. Indeed, the monks and nuns may perform chants for the success of the tree transplant, while scientific technologies are used to perform the transplant.

Not only decision-making but also problem-solving involve a balancing of multiple systems. Vows against killing, concerns for animal welfare, and species-level conservation each represent values that on occasion may conflict, but these different value systems are applied flexibly. Moreover, modern scientific and traditional Buddhist techniques are also integrated into approaches to ecological problems at DDM. This creates a flexible and dynamic process for protecting the environment and a multi-dimensional approach to the understanding of animals. The modern biological and traditional Buddhist concepts of animals differ, but, in practice, they can operate simultaneously. Whereas the physicalist biological definition of animals provides a basis for ecological discourse, the sentience-based Buddhist model focuses on moral behavior. Sheng Yen took seriously the physical ecological demands of organisms, while, at the same time, integrating the understanding of their function within traditional Buddhist discourse. In this way, he also aligned DDM with the ethics of conservation biology and used the appeal of science, technology, and environmental discourse to communicate with non-Buddhists. In this ecology, professors of forestry, dharma protectors, and caterpillars sculpted the landscape together.

Rather than using one way of environing to exclude the other, Sheng Yen and DDM found a way to integrate modern science and pre-modern Buddhism. The global environmental movement became a way of reconfiguring identity and regenerating tradition in a way that spoke to an audience of a new generation. An environing of inclusion pulls a classical Buddhist cosmology of dharma protectors and tree sprites from the margins and harmonizes it with a hegemonic scientific cosmology and global environmental movement. For the Chinese environmental humanities (CEH), DDM's spiritual environmentalism (*xinling huanbao*) provides a positive example of how careful alliances can elevate the profile of communities on the margins, and give voice to local people, local trees, local dharma protectors, and their shared cosmologies.

NOTES

1. "Animal," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
2. For further discussion on beast/*chusheng*, see Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 35–8.
3. DDM discusses the five precepts on its website: DDM, "The Five Precepts."
4. An English translation of the Pali Theravadin Vinaya is available online: Thanissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff), *The Buddhist Monastic Code I*, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/bmC1.pdf>. Accessed 3 Jan 2015.
5. For an English translation of the Brahma Net Sutra, see Sutra Translation Committee of the United States and Canada, *Brahma Net Sutra*.
6. DDM, "Bodhisattva Precepts."
7. See the Sutra Translation Committee of the United States and Canada, *Brahma Net Sutra*.
8. "Fagushan dashu banjia—Luhuashu banjia shiji quanjilu."
9. Chapple, "Animals and Environment in the Buddhist Birth Stories," 140–142.
10. *Ibid.*, 140–142.
11. Liu, McGarrity, and Li, "The Influence of Traditional Wildlife Release on Biological Invasions," *Conservation Letters* 5 (2012): 107–114.
12. Hsing Yun, ed., *Foguangxue*, 327, quoted in Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth*, 149.
13. Sheng Yen, *Chan de shijie*, 314–315.
14. Williams, "Animal Liberation, Death, and the State," 149–162.
15. Ambros, "Animals in Japanese Buddhism."
16. Shi Zhiru. "Buddhist Responses to State Control of Religion in China at the Century's Turn," 125–157.

17. Schak and Hsiao, “Taiwan’s Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups.”
18. This is the standard English term that DDM uses. However, the Chinese equivalent 人間淨土 is more literally translated as Pure Land of the Human Realm. This could suggest an anthropocosmic view. For a more detailed description of this concept, see DDM, “A Pure Land on Earth,” http://old.shengyen.org/e_content/content/about/about_02_1_1.aspx. Accessed 30 Nov 2017.
19. See Shi Sheng Yen. *Renjian jingtu sixiang*. Find excerpts translated to English online at DDM, “A Pure Land on Earth,” http://old.shengyen.org/e_content/content/about/about_02_1_1.aspx. Accessed 30 Nov 2017.
20. Sheng Yen, “Cong dongya sixiang tan xiandai ren de xinling huanbao,” 41–61.
21. “Speech Presented in Environmental Protection Workshop,” 7–8.
22. “Fagushan dashu banjia—Luhuashu banjia shiji quanjilu.”
23. Sheng Yen. *Chan de shijie*, 313–314.

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