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**THE HUMAN BEING AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN DIFFERENT CULTURES –  
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**The Buddhist Vision of the Environment**

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## **Abstract**

In thirteenth-century Japan, the Buddhist monk Nichiren Daishonin – whose interpretation of the Lotus Sutra inspires the contemporary Soka Gakkai Buddhist movement – taught that life at each moment encompasses the body and mind, the self and the environment of all sentient beings, as well as all insentient beings. From this perspective, life at each moment permeates the entire realm of phenomena and is manifested in each of them.

This vision of the interpenetration between life, in its moment-to-moment existence and manifestation, and all phenomena, introduces the Buddhist principle of dependent origination, in light of which the very way we understand the environment changes profoundly. In Buddhism, nothing exists autonomously or in isolation. Every phenomenon comes into existence in dependence upon causes and conditions. This means that what we call the "self" and what we call the "environment" are not separate realities but emerge within the same network of interdependencies. Our life is always expressed within a concrete context: relationships, social conditions, ecosystems, cultural structures. At the same time, that context is continuously shaped by the actions, choices, and inner states of the people who inhabit it. Environment and subject co-determine each other. In light of dependent origination, even what we call the "natural environment" is not a mere external backdrop: it is part of the same causal network that includes thoughts, values, economic systems, and collective behaviors. Ethical, political, and economic choices produce effects that sediment into the shared world. Responsibility, therefore, is not abstract. Every action enters the network of conditions and alters its equilibrium. To understand the truth of dependent origination is to recognize that caring for the environment is not a concern separate from personal transformation. The quality of the world we inhabit depends on the conditions we collectively contribute to generating, and each of us is an active participant in this network.

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## 1. The Emergence of the Environmental Question and the Role of Religions

Traditionally, in any discourse on material reality, the term *Nature* was predominantly used. Human beings have always thought of themselves as standing before Nature – *Creation* in theistic worldviews, or otherwise everything that surrounds and sustains life. A fundamental characteristic of the idea of Nature is that on one side stands the human being, and on the other side everything else – Nature itself – a place through which human beings move, observe, take, utilize, and defend themselves. To an extreme, Nature functions as a kind of vast supermarket in which we find everything we need.

Today the term *Environment* has come to prevail, signaling that something has shifted – that our perception of the world we live in has been transformed: from a Nature that was almost static in its totality and taken for granted, to a world that has 'shrunk', is being 'consumed' and 'deteriorated', compelling us to see it as mutable and impermanent. We ourselves are now *inside* Nature and part of it, and it has become our vital Environment with which we must responsibly establish a mutualistic symbiosis.

This transformation has occurred, and continues to occur, on a very short temporal scale when compared to that of macro-historical events. It is a temporal escalation that mirrors the surge of the curve describing the concentration of greenhouse gases versus time. The gravity of the climate crisis, together with the rapidity of its advance, produces reactions in society and in individuals that range from the impulse to deny or downplay the problem, to fatalism or a kind of indifference, to the decision – in the best of cases – to commit oneself to finding a way forward.

If at the rational level there can be many nuances of approach to the problem, at the deeper interior level of each person a common fundamental dimension is taking root, one that can be summarized in the progressive loss of hope – of trust in oneself, in the communities in which one lives, and in society as a whole. This loss of hope strikes most dramatically the younger generations, the very ones upon whom the future of our planet will depend.

The 59th CENSIS Report<sup>2</sup> of 2025 reveals that many young people perceive the future as less controllable and more uncertain than previous generations did. The primary causes identified are not only economic (precarious employment, difficulty achieving autonomy), but are also linked to global systemic crises, including the climate crisis. The environmental crisis in particular is a factor that:

- reinforces the perception of living in a fragile and unstable world
- contributes to the belief that the future may be worse than the present
- fuels a sense of climate anxiety, widespread especially among young people and young adults

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<sup>2</sup>Censis. 59° *Rapporto sulla situazione del Paese*. Roma: Censis, 2025.

CENSIS also underscores that younger generations are not simply disillusioned. They are often far more sensitive to environmental and social issues, and they call for institutions better equipped to address the challenges of the future. It is precisely this last observation that provides the starting point for emphasizing the importance of the role that religions can play in reopening hearts to hope.

Daisaku Ikeda, recently deceased Buddhist mentor, Third President of the Soka Gakkai and subsequently of the Soka Gakkai International, affirms:

*“How do we instill hope in human beings? How do we give value to life?”*

*In the answers to these questions lies the meaning of the original mission of every faith [...] every doctrine contains within itself the principles and wisdom necessary to realize the happiness of people.”<sup>3</sup>*

He further states:

*“In the context of modern interreligious dialogue, it is therefore necessary to accept and value the multiple characteristics of each individual faith and, at the same time, to grasp the profound truth and wisdom present in its doctrines.”<sup>4</sup>*

This is an earnest appeal to seek what unites rather than divides, to create a network of dialogues that build peace rather than feed the separations that breed conflict. Ikeda’s optimism is grounded in a deep trust in the infinite potential of each individual existence – a trust that is foundational to the path of emancipation indicated by Buddhism. By continuing to walk a path of dialogue and mutual improvement, each faith will be able to manifest its intrinsic value, and it will ultimately be possible to realize an alliance of “religions for the human being” capable of transforming itself into the greatest force for the realization of lasting peace.

In summary: a religion fulfills its mission when it enables each individual to live a happy and fulfilled life, providing the spiritual tools needed to overcome every difficulty and suffering and transform them into opportunities for growth and human development.

## **2. The Buddhist Approach to the Concept of Environment**

With these premises in place, it is possible to offer some insights into the Buddhist approach to the relationship between each person’s life and the environment – both the immediate and the global environment. Buddhism does not begin with a revelation but with the search for an answer to the question: “Is life only suffering?” Are we destined to passively traverse the eternal cycle of birth, development, decline,

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<sup>3</sup>Nichiren. *Raccolta degli scritti di Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. I (Firenze: Istituto Buddhista Italiano Soka Gakkai, 2008-2013), pag. xi. Di seguito citato come RSND.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. xi.

and death that we share with all living beings – sentient and insentient alike – and with every phenomenon in the universe? Is there an ultimate reality that underlies and gives meaning to all of this?

Without undertaking here an in-depth exposition of the answers Buddhism offers to these existential questions, it suffices to note that, for Buddhism, the manner in which each person responds to the sufferings they must face is largely determined by the fact that their vital conditions typically lack the power and wisdom necessary to transform and resolve those sufferings. At the same time, Buddhism reveals that power and wisdom are innate in the life of every individual and are unlimited, and teaches the means to develop and manifest them. This is what is traditionally called the path to enlightenment, or the attainment of Buddhahood – a condition of absolute and indestructible happiness.

Once awakened to ultimate reality, the original question evolves into the one expressed with urgency in the Lotus Sutra:

*“This is my constant thought: how can I cause all living beings to gain entry into the unsurpassed way and quickly acquire the body of Buddha?”<sup>5</sup>*

From this, one understands how Buddhism offers a profoundly humanistic vision that places at its center the absolute value of the dignity of life, and that in its practice of “giving joy and removing suffering” addresses both the individual life and the environment in which that life is manifested.

In thirteenth-century Japan, the Buddhist monk Nichiren Daishonin – whose interpretation of the Lotus Sutra inspires the contemporary Soka Gakkai Buddhist movement – declared, at a time when the country was being devastated by natural catastrophes and internal strife:

*“If you are even slightly concerned for your own personal safety, you should first of all pray for order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land.”<sup>6</sup>*

And further:

*“Therefore, quickly reform the tenets that you hold in your heart [...] If you do so, then the threefold world will become the Buddha’s land, and as such, how could it ever decline? [...] In a land that knows no decline, in a realm that knows no destruction, your body will find peace and security, and your mind will be calm and undisturbed.”<sup>7</sup>*

It is notable that Nichiren links prayer to a change in the “direction of the heart” – that is, to an inner transformation – which is nonetheless capable of manifesting itself and becoming the cause of the transformation of the surrounding world. This is a foundational principle of Buddhism, which Nichiren helps us to understand when he affirms:

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<sup>5</sup>*Il Sutra del Loto* (Milano: Esperia, 2014), p. 319.

<sup>6</sup>RSND, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

*“[...] life at each moment encompasses the body and mind, the self and the environment of all sentient beings of the Ten Worlds as well as those of all insentient beings in the three thousand realms, including plants, sky and earth, and even the most minute particles of dust. Life at each moment permeates the entire realm of phenomena and is manifested in each of them.”<sup>8</sup>*

This mutual interpenetration or interdependence is richly represented in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition by the net that adorns the palace of Indra: each node of the net consists of a jewel that reflects the light of all the other innumerable jewels. In the metaphor of Indra’s Net, when a single jewel changes in luminosity, position, or transparency, that alteration is immediately reflected in all the other reflected images. Not only that single node changes, but the entire configuration of mutual reflections. In the same way, an inner transformation, an ethical choice, or a change in one’s manner of relating does not remain confined to the one who enacts it but propagates through the web of relationships, progressively redefining the entire shared context.

The vision of the interpenetration between life – in its moment-to-moment existence and manifestation – and all phenomena introduces the Buddhist principle of dependent origination, *Engi* in Japanese, in light of which the very way we understand the environment changes profoundly. In Buddhism, nothing exists autonomously or in isolation. Every phenomenon comes into existence in dependence upon causes and conditions. This means that what we call the “self” – conceived as a separate and self-subsisting entity – actually emerges within the same network of interdependencies.

Within this perspective, one can in turn understand the concept of *esho-funi*, a Japanese expression that literally means “non-duality of life and environment.” *Esho* refers to life and environment, that is, the context in which life is manifested; *funi* means “two but not two” – distinct but inseparable. This is not an assertion that life and environment are identical, but that neither can exist without the other.

Nichiren Daishonin writes:

*“[...] if the minds of living beings are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land; there are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds.”<sup>9</sup>*

And further:

*“The ten directions are the ‘environment’ and living beings are ‘life.’ The environment is like the shadow and life, the body. Without the body, no shadow can exist, and without life, no environment. Moreover, life is shaped by the environment.”<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>RSND, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 574.

This is a metaphor of extraordinary power: it does not assert that the body is superior to the shadow, but rather that both are inseparable dimensions of a single reality. Life is always expressed within a concrete context: relationships, social conditions, ecosystems, cultural structures. At the same time, that context is continuously shaped by the actions, choices, and inner states of the people who inhabit it. Environment and subject co-determine each other. In light of dependent origination, even what we define as the “natural environment” is not merely an external backdrop: it is part of the same causal network that includes thoughts, values, economic systems, and collective behaviors. Environmental conditions influence the quality of life, but the quality of life – understood also as the quality of consciousness and relationships – influences environmental conditions. Ethical, political, and economic choices produce effects that sediment into the shared world. Responsibility, therefore, is not abstract. Every action enters the network of conditions and alters its equilibrium.

To understand *Engi* – dependent origination – and *esho-funi* – the non-duality of life and environment – is to recognize that caring for the environment is not a concern separate from personal transformation. It is the same dynamic viewed from two inseparable perspectives. The quality of the world we inhabit depends on the conditions we collectively contribute to generating, and each of us is an active participant in this network.

In contemporary terms, we may say that the Buddhist diagnosis of the distorted relationship between humanity and the environment – which lies at the root of the ecological crisis – begins from a central concept in Buddhism: ignorance, or fundamental darkness, which prevents us from perceiving the reality of dependent origination. It is the structural tendency inherent in the more superficial dimensions of human life to perceive oneself as an autonomous entity, separate from the world that surrounds it, one that can therefore consume, manipulate, and modify without feeling the consequences of those actions upon itself and upon the environment at large.

Fundamental darkness or ignorance in turn determines the prevalence in life of the three poisons – anger, greed, and foolishness – powerful forces that pollute our lives and fuel the spiral of suffering. According to Ikeda, fundamental ignorance manifests in a brutal absurdity: the belief that the misery of others can be the foundation of one’s own happiness. Applied to the environmental crisis: the belief that the exhaustion of natural resources can be the foundation of one’s own prosperity.

The Buddhist response is therefore not primarily technical or normative. It is transformative: it requires a change in the direction of the heart, not merely in behavior. It requires what Ikeda calls the transition from the small self – the self illusorily separated from everything else – to the greater self, the self that recognizes itself as part of a vaster network of life. In the Buddhist vision, no thing possesses an isolated and independent existence. Everything is in relationship. Awareness of this interdependence is the foundation of an authentic environmental ethics.

Awakening to this truth produces an important effect: one comes to understand that the lives of others, the reality that surrounds us, and the entire cosmos share with us the same interdependence, and from this

understanding arises an irrepressible inner movement of compassion for life in its entirety – one capable of radically transforming our behavior in everyday life.

In Nichiren Buddhism, upon which Ikeda's thought is grounded, the emphasis falls on the conduct of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth: in the Lotus Sutra they appear as wondrous beings who emerge from the earth itself – from the concrete reality of the world – to propagate the Dharma in the present age, solemnly vowing to dedicate themselves to the salvation of all. Today we understand that these beings are not distant celestial figures, but rather ordinary people who choose to act in the world with wisdom and compassion, transforming their own lives and sustaining those of others through the daily practice of “giving joy and removing suffering.”

In Daisaku Ikeda's vision, the figure of the Bodhisattva is not an ascetic ideal reserved for a select few, nor a spiritual goal remote from everyday life: it is, on the contrary, the most concrete and radical model of human presence in the world. The Bodhisattva is one who, having understood the interdependent nature of reality through practice and the wisdom that derives from it, chooses not to withdraw from the suffering encountered in the world, but to live it together with others, transforming it from within. Ikeda roots this figure at the heart of Nichiren Buddhism, where the path toward enlightenment is not a flight from the phenomenal world but a deepening of responsibility toward it.

What distinguishes Ikeda's reading from more traditional interpretations is his insistence on the active and social dimension of the Bodhisattva. For Ikeda, the Bodhisattva's vow – the resolve not to attain liberation alone but together with all others – is not an act of passive humility, but one of transformative courage. It is the choice to remain fully present within history, with all its contradictions, and to exercise the capacity to create value even under the most adverse circumstances. In this sense, the Bodhisattva is a profoundly worldly being in the noblest meaning of the term: one who engages in work, political life, relationships, education, and art, recognizing in every daily gesture an opportunity to manifest one's Buddha nature and to sustain the lives of others.

This vision has profound implications for the environmental question as well. If the Bodhisattva is one who recognizes in the other – in every living being – a dimension of the self, then care for the Earth is not an external duty imposed by an ethical norm, but the natural expression of one who has understood *esho-funi*, the inseparability of life and environment. The Bodhisattva protects the environment because they feel it as part of themselves; the destruction of the ecosystem is experienced as a wound to one's own life and to the lives of others.

In summary, *Engi*, or dependent origination, describes the relational structure of all reality, while *esho-funi*, the non-duality of life and environment, applies that principle in a specific way to the relationship between the living subject and its context.

### 3. Points of Convergence Between the Buddhist Vision of the Environment and the Proposal Contained in *Laudato Si'*

At this point it may be useful to highlight some possible points of convergence between Ikeda's environmental thought and Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*.<sup>11</sup>

Pope Francis builds his encyclical around the concept of *integral ecology*: an approach that refuses to separate the environmental crisis from the social, economic, and spiritual crisis. The guiding thread running throughout is: "everything is connected." Yet "everything is connected" is precisely the most concise possible paraphrase of the Buddhist concept of dependent origination, *Engi*.

Integral ecology, which unites the environmental, social, and interior dimensions as inseparable, finds a counterpart in the vision of *esho-funi*, which inseparably unites life and environment.

The two approaches converge in their conclusion that the ecological crisis cannot be resolved without an inner transformation. Pope Francis speaks of *ecological conversion*. Daisaku Ikeda speaks of *Human Revolution*. For both, destructive behaviors arise from a distorted view of reality, and that view can be transformed.

A superficial reading of the non-duality of life and environment might lead to viewing the human being as merely one component among many in reality, one being among others. Concerned that this might occur, *Laudato Si'* urges us not to regard the human being as the product of mere chance or physical determinism, with the consequent risk of weakening people's sense of responsibility toward our environment.

Ikeda's Buddhist vision provides on this point a revolutionary interpretive key: the very process of evolution, whatever interpretation we may wish to assign it, has produced the current cosmos, and the evolution of humanity has gradually enabled the universe to become aware of itself. That is, human life allows the universe to perceive itself, since human beings are forms of life capable of discerning the laws that operate within the ecological system and of being conscious of the ultimate nature of life itself. Human beings thus bear the responsibility of contributing to the creation of value in the evolution of life through their understanding of the dynamics of the universe and of the interrelationship between life and its environment. We might say, with Ikeda, that the universe itself has entrusted humanity with the mission of protecting the Earth's complex ecological system and of contributing to the creation of value within the biosphere.

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<sup>11</sup>Francesco, *Laudato si'*: *Lettera enciclica sulla cura della casa comune* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015)

#### **4. Human Revolution: The Buddhist Proposal for the Awakening of a Positive Environmental Responsibility**

The operational proposal advanced by Daisaku Ikeda and the Soka Gakkai Buddhist movement – responding to the pressing contemporary need to offer hope and to enable each person to become an agent of both personal and social change – has a name: *Human Revolution*. It is a path of faith, practice, and study that carries us from ignorance of interconnection to full awareness of dependent origination – which is another way of indicating the enlightened nature inherent in the life of each individual.

Human Revolution is a revolution in actions and behavior. It means deliberately committing oneself to conduct grounded in compassion, and undertaking actions that break the cycle of a life lived in the lower life-states, making the life-conditions of Bodhisattva and Buddhahood a concrete reality. When Human Revolution extends from the individual to the family, to the nation, and to the entire world, it becomes a noble and peaceful revolution for the establishment of lasting peace, without which no global reform of the environment is achievable.

Daisaku Ikeda writes that the Human Revolution of a single individual will contribute to a change in the destiny of a nation and will ultimately lead to a change in the destiny of all humanity. Human Revolution is therefore not a vague or merely spiritual concept. It is a transformative process that Ikeda describes with precision: it begins in the life of the individual, in their daily practice, in their capacity to expand the circle of their identity from the small self to the greater self – the self that recognizes itself as part of the global community of life – and radiates outward, transforming relationships, communities, and institutions.

The environmental crisis we are witnessing is teaching us with severity that the potentialities of our world are limited. Buddhism is capable of offering the key to avoiding falling prey to despair and anguish over an uncertain tomorrow, by awakening awareness of the infinite potential inherent in each person's life and enabling us to break the shell of existential isolation, opening ourselves to a life of participation and collaboration.

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