

# Working in Harmony

## Environmentally Engaged Buddhism in South Korea

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## **ABSTRACT**

The topic of the thesis was Buddhist environmental activism in South Korea. The purpose of the study was to portray the activism and social engagement of Korean Buddhists to conserve the environment and to motivate the awareness of the people in how environmental destruction affects nature and society. This was done to then examine how Buddhist environmental activism is expressed in Korea, if working with political issues is compatible with Korean Buddhism, what the challenges for Buddhists working with environmental issues are, and who the environmentally engaged Buddhists are. Data was collected by using a multiple methods approach; a combination of secondary sources, overt active/participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. The analytical framework consisted of themes distinguished in the literature: environmentalism in Buddhist teachings and environmentally engaged Buddhism. Buddhist environmental activism in Korea is expressed in various ways; through organizations, networks, inter-religious collaboration, education, services, social and traditional media, protests, debates, and unusual, attention-drawing behavior. Political issues are compatible with Korean Buddhism, as passages in texts and teachings support this, along with the existence and activities of environmentally engaged Buddhists that are operating in South Korea today. Challenges come mostly from colliding interests, and those involved are mainly middle-aged women.

Keywords: Buddhism, engaged Buddhism, environmentalism, activism, South Korea

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Caroline Brestan  
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## ABBREVIATIONS

ATA – Amita Association

BEH – Buddhist Eco-Harmony

EAK – Earth’s Allies Korea

GFN – Green Faiths Network

KEMU – Korean Environmental Movements United

## GLOSSARY<sup>1</sup>

*Akuśala-mūla* - The ‘Three Roots of Evil’; the unwholesome mental states of *rāga* (greed), *dveṣa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion). All negative states of consciousness are seen as ultimately grounded in one or more of these three.

*Anātman* – Non-self, the absence of self (*ātman*); the key Buddhist doctrine that both individuals and objects are devoid of any unchanging, eternal, or autonomous foundations.

*Ārya-aṣṭaṅga-mārga* – The ‘Noble Eightfold Path’; the route that leads from *samsāra* to *nirvāṇa*. Consists of *samyag-dṛṣṭi* (‘right view’), *samyak-samkalpa* (‘right resolve’), *samyag-vāc* (‘right speech’), *samyak-karmānta* (‘right action’), *samyag-ājīva* (‘right livelihood’), *samyak-vyāyāma* (‘right effort’), *samyak-smṛti* (‘right mindfulness’), and *samyak-samādhi* (‘right meditation’).

*Ātman* – The concept of an independent, unchanging, and eternal identity at the core of individuals and entities. Denied by most branches and schools of Buddhism.

*Bhikṣu* – An ordained Buddhist monk, and a member of the *saṃgha*.

*Bhikṣuṇī* – An ordained Buddhist nun, and a member of the *saṃgha*.

*Bodhisattva* – ‘Enlightenment being’; the embodiment of the spiritual ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The ideal is inspired by Buddha’s long career before he became enlightened, and *Bodhisattva* refers to a person’s path towards enlightenment and Buddhahood.

*Buddha* – An epithet of those who have achieved enlightenment, the goal of Buddhist religious life. One of the ‘three jewels’ and the ‘three refuges’ of Buddhism, along with the *dharma* and the *saṃgha*. An important function of a Buddha is to act as a teacher, leading

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<sup>1</sup> All definitions come from Damien Keown’s (2004) *A Dictionary of Buddhism*.

others to salvation by educating them on Buddhist principles. Buddhas are distinguished from other enlightened beings by the fact that they discover the truth (dharma) themselves, instead of hearing it from others. All schools of Buddhism believe there have been many Buddhas in the past and there will be more in the future. It is commonly believed that there can never be more than one Buddha in any particular era, and the ‘historical Buddha’ of the present era was Siddhartha Gautama (a prince in present-day Nepal in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, who later became enlightened).

*Catvāry ārya satyāni* – The ‘Four Noble Truths’; the foundational propositions of Buddhist doctrine, expressed by the Buddha in his first sermon.

*Daśa-śīla* - The ‘Ten Precepts’; key moral rules common to almost all schools of Buddhism. They are: (1) to not kill or injure living creatures; (2) to not take what has not been given; (3) to avoid misconduct in sensual matters; (4) to abstain from false speech; (5) to not take intoxicants; (6) to not eat at the wrong time; (7) abstention from dancing, singing, music, watching shows; (8) abstention from wearing garlands, perfumes, cosmetics, and personal adornments; (9) to not use high seats or beds; (10) to not accept gold or silver. The laity usually only follow the first five of the Ten Precepts.

*Dharma* – The Buddhist teachings; the reality or truth of phenomena that make up the world and universe. One of the ‘three jewels’ and the ‘three refuges’ of Buddhism, along with the Buddha and the *saṃgha*.

*Duḥkha* – Un-satisfaction, the cornerstone of Buddha’s teachings. The first of the Four Noble Truths, which is infused in every aspect of life. It includes all sorts of physical pain and anguish, sorrows, existential anxiety, unsatisfied needs, and even joys, because of their impermanent nature.

*Dveṣa* – Hatred, one of the three roots of evil.

*Karma* – A central belief that underlies all Buddhist thinking, which states that all free and intentional actions have consequences. There is no escape from these, and they affect an individual’s level of un-satisfaction and whether they will be reborn or not (and what form they will be reborn into).

*Karuṇā* – Compassion, a virtue which is important in all schools of Buddhism, but is especially emphasized by the Mahāyāna.

*Kōan* – Brief stories or dialogues from the Seon tradition, upon which its students focus during their meditation in order to figure out their meaning.

*Mahāyāna* – 'The Great Vehicle'; one of the main branches of Buddhism, predominant in North and East Asia.

*Maitrī* – Kindness, benevolence, or goodwill. An important Buddhist value, to be used towards all in a spirit of generosity which is free of attachment or thoughts of self-interest.

*Moha* – Delusion, one of the three roots of evil.

*Nirvāṇa* - The goal of the Noble Eightfold Path; the end of *saṃsāra*.

*Pratītya-samutpāda* – 'Dependent origination', a fundamental Buddhist principle on causation and the ontological status of phenomena. The doctrine teaches that all phenomena develop in dependence on causes and conditions and lack intrinsic being.

*Rāga* – Greed, one of the three roots of evil.

*Samgha* – The Buddhist community, especially the monastic part; those who have been ordained as monks or nuns. One of the 'three jewels' and the 'three refuges' of Buddhism, along with the Buddha and the dharma.

*Saṃsāra* – The repeated cycle of death and rebirth that individuals undergo until they attain *nirvāṇa*.

*Seon* – The Korean translation of the Chinese term Chan, pronounced Zen in Japanese, and one of the main branches of Korean Buddhism. It is characterized by its attention to scriptural, doctrinal, ritual, and philosophical matters, as well as to the practice of meditation, dharma talks by recognized masters, dialogues, and *kōan* study.

*Theravāda* - The 'Way of the Elders'; one of the main branches of Buddhism, predominant in most of South and Southeast Asia.

*Triratna* – The 'three jewels' of Buddhism, consisting of the Buddha, the dharma, and the *saṃgha*.

*Triśaraṇa* – The 'three refuges' of Buddhism, consisting of the Buddha, the dharma, and the *saṃgha*.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Religion is an important aspect of life for a majority of the Asian population; it is often integrated into everyday life, as well as personal and group identity. Environmental consciousness is a growing trend in mainstream circles worldwide (Kaza, 2006, p. 184), but it has always been a vital part of Buddhism; environmentally engaged Buddhism is therefore not a new phenomenon.

Unsustainable development heightened by globalization has during the past couple of decades intensified the process of revitalization and the emergence of several new environmental organizations in South Korea. Some are faith-based; others are not. Several of them are active both in the country and abroad; others are domestic only (Yoon & Jones, 2014, pp. 295-296). This thesis will focus on Buddhist environmental activism in South Korea.

## 1.1. Buddhism in South Korea

Korean Buddhism is a part of the East Asian Mahāyāna<sup>2</sup> Buddhist tradition. Beginning with its official introduction from China to the Korean peninsula in the late fourth century and continuing today, Korean Buddhism has, during its sixteen-hundred-year history, developed in a close relationship with Chinese Buddhism (Park, 2011, p. 373). At the same time, it has also spawned its own unique views, due to its blending with indigenous Shamanism; nature-spirit worship (Moon, 1997, p. 42).

In 1945, after World War II and Japan's 35-year annexation of Korea, the country was divided in two at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Three years later, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was declared in the north, and the Republic of Korea founded in the south. Since then, Buddhism has been suppressed in the former. In the latter, an intense conflict broke out between factions of monks, following the restoration of native Korean rule in 1945 (Keown, 2004). During the period of annexation, the Japanese had put pressure on Korean monks and nuns to abandon their distinct traditions and ways of life in order to embrace Japanese Buddhist practices instead. Some monks (but no nuns) accepted the new style, while others resisted. The opposing sides in the postwar conflict were the monks who had gotten married and given up numerous normal monastic precepts, and those who had not (Keel, 2004, pp.

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Great Vehicle' (Sanskrit); one of the two main branches of Buddhism, mainly followed in North and East Asia. The other is Theravāda, the 'Way of the Elders' (Pāli); predominant in most of South and Southeast Asia (Keown, 2004).

433-434) (Nathan, 2017, pp. 103-104). In Japan, it was (and still is) common for Buddhist clerics to marry. This lifestyle was legalized during the early years of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), but goes completely against mainstream Buddhist doctrines (Bielefeldt, 2004, p. 386). Celibacy is required of all members of the *samgha*<sup>3</sup>; sex is viewed as a powerful bond to the mundane world and inappropriate for someone who has renounced home and family (Keown, 2004).

In postwar Korea, the monks who had remained in celibacy demanded a full return to it and a firm implementation of traditional Korean rules. Furthermore, they also wanted the former group to be evicted from monastic properties, and these assets to be turned over to their control. The latter group, united under the now-dominant Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism<sup>4</sup>, ultimately won out after a number of court battles, legislative victories, and open hostilities. And so, after an uneasy transition period, the married monks left the monasteries, and monastic life went back to pre-Japanese practices. Since then, the Jogye Order has managed the revival and renaissance of Korean Buddhism (Keown, 2004). Some hostility occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s between Buddhists and Christians (the latter group having grown considerably over the last century), leading to the burning of some Buddhist temples, but in general, Buddhism has taken its place as a fundamental part of Korean society once more (Keel, 2004, p. 435). Along with Confucianism, Buddhism now makes up one of the two veins of philosophical traditions in Korea (Park, 2011, p. 373). About 25% of South Korea's total population of nearly 47 million in 2000 identify themselves as Buddhist in government and Gallup polls (Tedesco, 2002, p. 135).

With the largest community of followers among religions in Korea, Buddhists in South Korea have responded in various ways to the many needs and crises in contemporary society, including actively pursuing environmental protection and ecological conservation (Bu & Chi, 2014, p. 56). Many monks and nuns with keen social consciences are leading movements devoted to numerous social, political, and environmental causes (Keel, 2004, p. 435). According to Tedesco (2002), their activities have gone mostly unnoticed by Korean mass media, however. They have also been ignored by academic observers within Korea and in the

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<sup>3</sup> The Buddhist community (Sanskrit), especially the monastic part; those who have been ordained as monks (*bhikṣu*) or nuns (*bhikṣuṇī*) (Keown, 2004). Known in Korean as □□(*seungga*) (Park, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> The largest and most prominent order in Korean Buddhism. It was founded by the monk Myeongjeok upon returning to Korea from China in 821 A.D., from where he brought Seon Buddhism (Lee, 2015, p. 5). Seon is the Korean translation of the Chinese Chan, known as Zen in Japanese, and one of the main branches of Korean Buddhism. It emphasizes meditation, along with dharma talks and dialogues with recognized masters (Keown, 2004).

West, too, with a few exceptions. Confucian bias against Buddhism, along with large-scale conversion to conservative forms of Protestantism and Catholicism, and the secularization or abandonment of traditional cultural values associated with modernization have all contributed to the neglect of Buddhism by mainstream Korean intellectuals and foreign social scientists (Tedesco, 2002, p. 134).

## **1.2. Aims**

The general topic of this thesis is religion and environmentalism in East Asia, with special focus on environmental activism among Buddhists in South Korea. During my enquiry into earlier research on this, I have found that the Buddhism and environmental engagement in Korea is much less covered than that of other Asian countries (at least in English-language material). The aim of the thesis is to portray the activism and social engagement of Korean Buddhists to conserve the environment and to motivate the awareness of the people in how environmental destruction affects both nature and society.

## **1.3. Research Question(s)**

The main research question of the thesis is:

- **How is Buddhist environmental activism expressed in South Korea?**

The sub-questions of the thesis are:

- **Is working with political issues compatible with Korean Buddhism?**
- **What are the challenges for Buddhists working with environmental issues?**
- **Who are the environmentally engaged Buddhists in South Korea?**

In order to answer these questions, I will use a framework consisting of themes distinguished in existing literature on Buddhism and environmentalism.

## **1.4. Demarcations**

Studies concerning Buddhism and environmentalism raise questions about gender, socio-economic status, age groups, and differences between various orders of Korean Buddhism, among other things, but while specializing further into one aspect would have been very interesting, due to the time- and size-frame of the thesis, the decision has been made to not do this. These issues will have to be untouched this time.

This study is about one country in Asia, not several, again due to the boundaries of the thesis.

The reason why South Korea has been chosen is partly because Buddhism and environmentalism there has been much less researched about in comparison to other Asian countries (as previously mentioned in the Aims chapter), and partly because of personal interest in the region. Focus is on Seoul. Interviews have been conducted with lay people, not monks and nuns.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The thesis relies on primary and secondary sources. Focus is on South Korea, but there is also data from other countries and/or organizations in Asia. This is both because much more research is available on Buddhism and environmentalism in other Asian countries, and because it will make the thesis more comprehensive, as it allows me to compare my material in relation to other countries.

In order to find out how Buddhist environmental activism is expressed in South Korea, I have collected data by using a multiple methods approach; a combination of overt active/participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and secondary sources on site in Seoul (Bryman, 2012, pp. 11-12). Qualitative research has enabled me to understand the issues at hand (Bryman, 2012, p. 380). Overt observation, meaning that my status as a researcher was known to the individuals I studied, along with participant observation, where I engaged in social settings for a period of time, have also been an important part of this (Bryman, 2012, p. 441). Included in the latter are my observations of behavior, conversations with others, and interviews (Bryman, 2012, p. 714). Participant observation and interviews have also been suitable methods for the topic of my thesis and its research question(s). This primary data has been collected with the use of snowball sampling, where I made initial contact with individuals who were relevant to my research topic and then used them to establish contacts with others (Bryman, 2012, p. 202).

By using the concept of semi-structured interviews, I could prepare a number of questions in the form of an interview guide, but also adapt their order to each interview informant. The questions were framed in a general manner, so that further ones could be asked in response to significant replies (Bryman, 2012, p. 716). Each informant was also encouraged to talk freely about their views on the matters at hand, their work, and the questions already asked.

Merely making observations is not always enough to create an understanding of the issues involved in a research project like this. Observations sometimes need to be combined with interviews and the reading of appropriate material (Aspers, 2011, pp. 141-142). Secondary

sources, providing information that I as a researcher have not been personally involved in collecting, have been necessary in giving a background on my thesis topic, designing an analytical framework (Bryman, 2012, p. 13), and reviewing and discussing earlier research relevant to mine (Bryman, 2012, p. 9); that on Buddhism, environmentalism, et cetera. Ultimately, they have also allowed me to answer the research questions of the thesis. The secondary sources that have been used in the thesis are articles and books, websites/homepages, social media pages, and brochures.

I have chosen the multiple methods approach because I believe that it has been necessary to emphasize a more open-minded view of the research process (Bryman, 2012, p. 12) in order to get as much information and materials as I have needed to carry out the writing of the thesis, discover common factors, map the environmental organizations' activities, and consequently reach well-rounded answers to my research questions. In short: it has suited my research topic and question(s).

## **2.1. The Setting**

I conducted the field work from mid-January to early February. Most organizations were contacted beforehand via their social media pages. I introduced myself and informed them about the nature of my proposed visit. January is the busiest month of the year for the groups, since that is when they plan their activities for the rest of the year. Several representatives were able to meet up with me for interviews, however. I was directed mostly to English-speaking individuals, since I do not speak Korean. After returning to Sweden in February, another person that I had previously been in contact with via one organization's social media account, Mr. Yang, answered my questions in writing via e-mail.

Something that influenced the process of finding informants was the language issue. Consequently, I visited different places and organizations in Seoul to complement the interviews with observations; Buddhist groups, environmental groups, information centers for tourists, the Templestay Information Center<sup>5</sup>, an English-language Buddhist library, and Korean culture centers. Via the Templestay Information Center, I came into contact with Ms. Gong, who became one of my interviewees. She did not speak English, but another informant, Ms. Lee, offered to translate between me and Ms. Gong. That allowed me to sit down with the two of them together.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Templestay' is a cultural experience program created by the organization Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism. The program was designed to promote and increase the public's understanding of Korean Buddhism (Korea Tourism Organization, 2018).

Each informant chose when and where to meet up with me for their interview. One session was conducted at the office of the informant, Ms. Park; the two with Ms. Gong and Ms. Lee at a Buddhist charity café. I introduced myself and explained the purpose of the interview. The informants were asked if they would mind being recorded, and I explained to them that they would be anonymous. I asked my prepared questions, as well as some that I thought of during the conversations. The interviewees were also encouraged to speak freely.

Something that was concerning during the interviews with the informants was that I was 'bothering' them with questions in their daily lives. While the interviewees all identified as activists, they might not be comfortable with being asked questions about their activities and personal attitudes surrounding their work and faith. This did not seem to be the case, however. None of the interviewees showed a reluctance to answering the interview questions, with one exception, where an informant refused to respond to one. She did not want to say why. The question was skipped, and the interview continued. The informant did not mind resuming the interview and did not seem to hold back after that; she continued to answer the other questions thoroughly. The person who replied to my questions in writing claimed to answer every question he had the knowledge to give a response to, and with as much information as possible.

## **2.2. Material**

Much has been written on Buddhism and environmentalism, and an acceptable amount on it in the case of South Korea. The majority of the material used in the thesis consist of secondary, academic literature. These sources are a mix of older research and new material (1990-2017), making Buddhism and environmentalism an active and exciting field of research. The facts and data from the sources match each other. For these reasons, I regard them as up-to-date, and therefore suitable for use in the thesis.

The primary sources that have been used are transcribed data from interviews and observations, along with websites, brochures, and social media accounts. The material from the interviews is more subjective for several reasons. The interviewees also talked about events in which they have participated themselves, and they are therefore not external to or independent of the parties involved in the phenomena. The individuals in question therefore have personal connections, as well as opinions and views, of what has occurred. The fact that things became personal, however, is no coincidence and not so strange either, as many of the interview questions were asked to the individuals about themselves.

The websites, brochures, and social media accounts that have been used mostly belong to Buddhist environmental organizations. They are not as objective as the academic literature, since they, while being sources, also ‘advertise’ their own activities. The sites, leaflets, and accounts are worth mentioning, however, as they contain facts that match those of other sources.

### **2.3. Ethical Considerations**

The thesis work has been carried out in accordance with the Swedish Research Council’s guidelines on good research practice (Swedish Research Council, 2017, pp. <https://publikationer.vr.se/en/product/good-research-practice/>). Each interviewee has been given a pseudonym; this is to protect their identity, and also to bring ‘life’ into the text instead of using ‘Interviewee 1’, ‘Interviewee 2’, and so on. The organizations that the informants work for have also received new names.

I am also aware of the issue of access and equality during fieldwork, as noted by Sultana (2007). When conducting fieldwork in South Korea, I needed to be sensitive to histories of colonialism, development, globalization, and local realities. I also had to avoid exploitative research and the continuation of relations of domination and control (Sultana, 2007, pp. 374-375). All the informants were university-educated and seemed familiar with the research process. Whenever I was unsure of places, phrases, or certain historical events (which were mentioned during all interviews), I asked for explanations. My talks with the informants were good and fruitful; all of them were willing and eager to answer my questions, and thorough in their answers.

Another ethical issue was the importance of showing respect for any interviewees by respecting them as individuals and as informants. Extra awareness was needed for ordained monks and nuns, as there are special rules to be followed when being in contact with them.

Communicating with informants in a manner that is as honest and objective as possible was also imperative, both regarding observations, conversations, and the interview questions themselves, which I tried to phrase in a neutral, yet relevant, manner. I also sought to be mindful of what I said and did. Upon agreement by all the interviewees, I recorded them and took notes, so that there would (hopefully) be no confusions on my part.

## **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The main topics of the thesis are environmentalism, Buddhism, and South Korea. A lot of research has been conducted on all of these in general, but in comparison with other

countries, there is much less on Korea. Still, I have found several articles and books that are directly relevant to these three topics, and more on environmentalism and Buddhism overall. Here, I will review and discuss mostly the ones directly relevant to South Korea.

A majority of the research found on Buddhism and environmentalism in Korea covers one or several of the following themes: socially engaged Buddhism, Buddhism on the international arena, inter-religious dialogue, and philosophy.

Research on socially engaged Buddhism in South Korea covers a variety of topics. These include the framing processes of social movements and their affects (Lee, 2010); the mapping of various contemporary Buddhist movements (Park, 2010) (Yoon & Jones, 2014); monastery life and practices (Cho, 2013); Buddhist eco-tourism (Lee, et al., 2013); protests against government-driven, nature-damaging development projects (Bu & Chi, 2014); Buddhism as a way to ‘handle’ contemporary urban life for young people (Kim, 2016); and Buddhist attempts at ‘making a comeback’ and gaining mainstream popularity via social engagement (Tedesco, 2002). Most argue that the *sangha* and the lay people can both learn many things from each other, including the former figuring out their place in modern society, and the latter changing their mindset to a simpler, happier, and more environmentally friendly lifestyle; this will, apparently, benefit both nature, the nation, and themselves. Moon (1997) has taken a hard stance against environmental destruction, both in South Korea and in the rest of the world. He has connected it to economic and technological advancement, self-centered interest and materialism, and so forth. Moon has further explored an alternative perspective of the relationship between humans and nature; the Buddhist monastic spirit and the implications of their spiritual message, so that humans can re-examine themselves and communities, change their mindset, and make the world a better place in all aspects (Moon, 1997, p. 42). Minton, Kahle & Kim (2015) have investigated the relation between religion and sustainable consumption-related behaviors. Using values research, self-determination theory, and inoculation theory, they have examined the link between religion and sustainable behaviors from groups of both South Korean and American consumers. Their results have showed that highly religious Buddhists are more likely participate in sustainable behaviors than Christians and atheists, with little difference between locations (Minton, et al., 2015, p. 1937).

A majority of the authors of research on Buddhism on an international stage are critical, especially of Mahāyāna Buddhists’ ‘weak’ or ‘failed’ attempts of spreading their message on an international stage and gaining recognition by the global community (Adams, 2008). They



also point out that this might be because while the Buddhism has strong ties to nature, there are also aspects of it that hinder this spread. Examples of their arguments include: that there is no single view of nature or the environment that crosses all Buddhist branches; that Buddhism is not a nature religion per se, as insight and awareness is reached in the human mind (it does not depend on land or any other physical forms); that some environmentally engaged Buddhists step too far away from the core beliefs and interpret principles too narrowly (from an environmental point of view only); and that Buddhism has had too little influence in solving environmental issues in predominantly Buddhist countries (Kaza, 2006). There is also critique against the narrow, ‘national focus’ of Korean Buddhism: time, energy, and resources need to be spent on moving away from ‘nation-protecting Buddhism’ to a ‘global community-protecting’ kind instead (Adams, 2008).

On inter-religious dialogue, views seem to have changed over time. Scholars of older research tend to claim that Buddhism and Christianity have tried to exclude one another in their attempts to win favor amongst Koreans, while recent researchers generally argue that prominent figures of the two religions have instead broadened a common ground of understanding and are now allies, with the environmental movement being an integral part of the two parties coming together (Kim, 2014). Some, however, claim that this collaboration is very limited and has remained merely at the level of synchronized action at an agreed time and place, and a passive acceptance of each other as religious institutions. No long-term strategies, such as doctrines or programs, have been established between Buddhism and other religions in Korea (Bu & Chi, 2014).

Research on philosophy includes the basics and main ideas of Buddhist ethics, especially the principles behind environmental ethics and activism (Hershock, 2006) (Sahni, 2008) (Kelbessa, 2011); Buddhist thought reimagined to handle environmental issues (Jun, 2014); material culture in poetry, myths, and monastic rituals (Kaplan, 2017); Buddhist environmentalism (Swearer, 2006); and the differing stances that monks and nuns of various Buddhist schools have taken throughout history in regard to conservation and environmentalism. In pre-modern times, Buddhist cultures did not have to give much attention to the conservation of species and habitats, as their values meant that there was no over-exploitation of the environment. In modern times, that has changed, due to the influx of Western ideas and values (such as communism and capitalism) (Harvey, 2000). Most scholars agree that Buddhist thought can positively influence lay people’s views and habits relevant to the environment.

## 4. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This section begins with some foundational Buddhist concepts and beliefs that make up the world view.

### 4.1. Buddhist Concepts and Beliefs

Buddhists do not believe in the existence of gods and/or goddesses. The Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) is believed to have been silent when asked metaphysical questions about this. The concept of a god as an omnipotent and omniscient creator of the world is rejected, and this deity cannot be held responsible for the state of the world. The Buddha is not seen as a god either, but his experiences of the true reality of the *catvāry ārya satyāni*<sup>6</sup> and attainment of *nirvāṇa* (enlightenment) have gained a sacred status (Sahni, 2008, p. 4).

A central belief that underlies all Buddhist thinking is the doctrine of karma, which states that all free and intentional actions have consequences. There is no escape from these, and they affect an individual's level of *duḥkha* (un-satisfaction) and whether said person will be reborn or not (and what form they will be reborn into) (Keown, 2004). A person must act out of free will and then bear the burden of the determined consequences of such actions. Individual responsibility is therefore a vital part of Buddhist thought; intentional actions can be regarded as good or bad, right or wrong (Sahni, 2008, p. 4).

Karma is acted out within *samsāra*, a repeated cycle of death and rebirth. *Samsāra* is divided into levels or realms, and beings are born into these according to the actions that they performed in the past (Keown, 2004). There is a realm for good, moral beings and a hell for evil, immoral ones. The experience of good or bad realms depends solely on the nature of actions performed (Sahni, 2008, p. 4).

All the above features have at their center the concept of *duḥkha*, the first of the Four Noble Truths, which is infused in every aspect of life. It includes all sorts of physical pain and anguish, sorrows, existential anxiety, unsatisfied needs, and even joys, because of their impermanent nature (Keown, 2004). Life is marked by the constant struggle to overcome *duḥkha* through *samsāra*. Individuals undergo the latter until they achieve the ultimate goal, the attainment of *nirvāṇa* (the goal of the Path; the end of the cycle). Achieving *nirvāṇa* also means the end of un-satisfaction (Sahni, 2008, p. 5).

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<sup>6</sup> The 'Four Noble Truths' (Sanskrit); the foundational propositions of Buddhist doctrine, expressed by the Buddha in his first sermon (Keown, 2004).

## 4.2. Environmentalism in Buddhist Teachings

Since the 1970s, there has been debates on whether an inherent ecological ethic exists within Buddhist teachings, or whether Buddhism can support an environmental practice (Darlington, 2017, p. 488). Some scholars have been critical or cautionary in their approach, claiming that Buddhism is basically anthropocentric and focused on helping humans achieve release from *samsāra* (Harris, 1995) (Schmithausen, 1997). Others have used the concept of *pratītya-samutpāda* (‘dependent origination’) to argue that Buddhism is environmental at heart, since humanity is part of the larger ecosystem and must answer to it (Macy, 1990) (Swearer, 2006). Dependent origination is one of the fundamental Buddhist principles, focusing on causation and the ontological status of phenomena. The doctrine teaches that all phenomena develop in dependence on causes and conditions and lack intrinsic being (Keown, 2004).

Buddhist philosophy and practice functions well with current issues, such as environmental ones. While emphasizing the personal nature of an ancient spiritual path, Buddhism also contains ‘guidelines’ that make up a social ethic capable of addressing the problems that characterize contemporary times. A Buddhist ecological stance can be found in the first prescription of the *ārya-aṣṭaṅga-mārga*<sup>7</sup>; that of ‘right view’ (Byrne, 2006, p. 118). This perspective contains the previously mentioned doctrine of dependent origination, where things exist not in their own right, only interdependently. It is one of the primary Buddhist teachings often associated with ecological principles, along with *karuṇā* (compassion), *maitrī* (kindness), and *anātman* (no-self) (Darlington, 2017, p. 488). The universal model of *pratītya-samutpāda* challenges the sovereignty (and assumed autonomy) of the self over other, contesting humanity’s ‘hubris’ regarding its traditional role as nature’s conqueror (Byrne, 2006, p. 118). This view is often further illustrated in South Korea with the image of ‘Indra’s Net’<sup>8</sup>. The Korean Buddhist environmental organization Indra’s Net Life Community takes its name from this image (Lee, 2008, p. 124). The nun Jiyul – who has become nationally famous in South Korea for her extreme forms of protesting – also uses Indra’s Net in her teachings. She sees it as a fitting metaphor for nature’s interdependent formation and sustainment that exists beyond the seemingly limiting boundaries of time and space, and is witnessed in each and all beings. According to her, life, which can therefore be

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<sup>7</sup> The ‘Noble Eightfold Path’ (Sanskrit); the route that leads from *samsāra* to *nirvāṇa* (Keown, 2004). Known in Korean as □□□ (*paljeongdo*) (Park, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> An image used by Fazang, a patriarch and philosopher of the Hua-Yen school of Chinese Buddhism, to illustrate dependent origination. Fazang compared the universe to a cosmic net strung with jewels such that in each jewel, the reflection of all the others can be seen (Keown, 2004).

defined as ‘ecological connections’, is consequently found amid the relations between constituting elements, including one’s self (Cho, 2013, p. 266).

The Buddhist argument that the destruction of the environment is caused by people who are driven by economic and material benefits has received increasing support. Buddhist activism promoting environmental concerns has grown into a significant socio-political force (Byrne, 2006, p. 118).

### **4.3. Environmentally Engaged Buddhism**

Engaged Buddhism is a contemporary movement found throughout the Buddhist world, consisting of Buddhists of all branches who engage with the problems of their society – whether they are political, social, economic, racial, gendered, environmental, or of another nature – based on their Buddhist worldview, principles, and spirituality (King, 2017, p. 167).

In contemporary South Korea, Buddhist temples offer various ways to effectively accommodate the needs of lay people. The temples build large urban centers that attract individuals by providing convenient places for worship and social gathering. Beginning in the mid-1980s, when South Korea’s economy began growing at a rapid rate, Buddhism benefited from the prosperity as society’s increasing wealth poured into the temples. Around this time, urban mega-temples emerged and saw unprecedented success in attracting followers. These kinds of centers have memberships of 50,000–200,000 people, and offer not only religious activities but also services in every aspect of daily life. This includes daycare, kindergarten, banking, organic food markets, medical clinics, weddings, and funerals. As a result, these centers have become leaders in creating Buddhist culture for city residents (Park, 2010, pp. 27-28).

Traditional monasteries, mostly located in secluded mountain areas, are also finding new opportunities as increased leisure time and car ownership make it possible for people to visit these kinds of places. Monasteries have reacted to that trend by offering regular meditation retreats, seasonal festivals, and sacred sites for pilgrimages. People find relief from the stress of city living in the calm mountain sites and restore balance to their lives through meditation courses. Meditation retreats and simple temple visits have become popular for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, including many foreign visitors to Korea. Furthermore, old and new sacred sites attract large groups of people seeking blessings (Park, 2010, p. 28).

While such Buddhist activities boost the number of lay followers and the social status of Buddhism, they are becoming capitalistic ventures, charging money for retreats and other

programs, and asking for donations for their ongoing expansion and rising maintenance costs. Many temples compete with one another in new construction projects, such as building their own museums with large statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas<sup>9</sup>. The most popular sites, which attract thousands of people every day, are showered with donations from worshippers seeking healing and blessings (Park, 2010, p. 28).

This development is somewhat controversial, as members of the *samgha* are forbidden from receiving, handling, or engaging in transactions of money. It is one of the *daśa-śīla*; the ‘Ten Precepts’, key moral rules common to almost all schools of Buddhism (Keown, 2004). The Precepts are: (1) to not kill or injure living creatures; (2) to not take what has not been given; (3) to avoid misconduct in sensual matters; (4) to abstain from false speech; (5) to not take intoxicants; (6) to not eat at the wrong time; (7) abstention from dancing, singing, music, watching shows; (8) abstention from wearing garlands, perfumes, cosmetics, and personal adornments; (9) to not use high seats or beds; (10) to not accept gold or silver (Harvey, 2000, pp. 94-95). On the other hand, this does not prevent the acceptance and use of money by a monastery’s lay staff, as the laity usually only follow the first five of the Ten Precepts (Keown, 2004). Monasteries have long been involved in a wide variety of economic enterprises. These commercial operations reflect Buddhism’s origins in the urban, mercantile centers of ancient India and in the systems of exchange, trade, and commerce, as well as the legal status of property and ownership, that developed there. The spread of Buddhism along trade routes resulted in Buddhism and commerce going hand-in-hand. The material needs of Buddhist worshipping practice also stimulated the development of numerous crafts and guilds, as well as construction, agriculture, and other technologies (Hubbard, 2004, p. 872).

Among the diversity of coexisting Buddhist practices – including meditation for lay people, showing respect and offering to Buddhist deities, and urban groups of Buddhists aiding each other in their daily lives and caring for those who are marginalized in society and to environmental conservation – some movements stand out: grassroots communities based on Buddhist values that are trying to develop principles fitting twenty-first century life. Simple and ecological living, with less consumption, more sharing, and a strong emphasis on self-discipline through meditation, prayer, and study (Park, 2010, pp. 28-34) (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 296). They pursue another way of thinking and living, in response to modern society’s focus on mass production, mass consumption, commercialism, competition, and the

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Enlightenment being’ (Sanskrit); the embodiment of the spiritual ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism (Keown, 2004).

exploitation of natural resources. Some of their activities include building schools and medical clinics in impoverished parts of the world, and educating and helping local residents and organic farms. Engaged Buddhists go one step further from usual Buddhist rituals and daily practices meant to free beings from this death-bound life; they become active partakers in sorting out social and political issues. Consequently, they expand their horizons to try to better a problem-driven world instead of just simply letting go of worldly attachment (Park, 2010, pp. 28-29). An example of having this different attitude is the monk Pomnyun, founder of the Jungto Society, a Buddhist organization based in South Korea. In this community, the members combine Buddhist cultivation and social change (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 297). Pomnyun has criticized the separation between clerics and lay people as creating a false notion that only the former can perform Buddhist practices leading to the ultimate goal, which is the attainment of happiness and enlightenment; the laity are therefore left out from the practice and play the peripheral role of supporting the clerics. He has stated that Buddhist practice is not something to be controlled by experts but a means of changing one's direction in life (Park, 2010, p. 32).

This unconventional way of thinking has led to the envisioning of a new direction for the Buddhist laity (Park, 2010, p. 32). Like many other 'engaged' groups, Jungto Society cuts across the lay-monastic divide, and also includes both Buddhists from traditional Buddhist countries as well as Western converts. Their aim is to reduce un-satisfaction, suffering, and oppression by reforming unjust and oppressive social and political structures, while maintaining the traditional Buddhist emphasis on inward spiritual growth. This development is, to some extent, a response to the allegation that Buddhism has been too passive and detached, emphasizing meditation and withdrawal instead of reaching out to the public. Unlike in the Theravāda tradition, where members of the *saṃgha* are not allowed to work, monks and nuns of the Mahāyāna tradition may include volunteering or missionary work in their daily activities. Given the nature of a cleric's life, they have always had to rely on the material support of the lay community, and in time, a balance of exchange between lay people and the *saṃgha* was established, through which both could evolve by mutual support. This relationship forms the dynamic base of Theravādin societies, and the discipline between the two groups is much stricter than in Mahāyāna ones (Keown, 2004). In Thailand (a Theravāda Buddhist country), for example, members of the *saṃgha* that misbehave and do not follow the rules they have vowed to follow lose lay people's support in all aspects (Darlington, 2012, pp. 197-198).

The possible blurring of boundaries between the laity and the *samgha* is just one of several risks that engaged Buddhists take. Another one is the fact that their work overlaps with politics and business interests, and getting involved in those kinds of issues is dangerous. Vast amounts of money and power are in the balance, and in several countries, engaged clerical Buddhists have had to pay a high price because of their work. In Thailand, monks that work to protect the country's forests face serious challenges, and threats. If they are seen as becoming too 'political', they may possibly lose the support of the public or that of people in power positions (King, 2009, pp. 131-133). Some monks have had to give up their status; others have been assaulted or murdered for their beliefs (Darlington, 2012, pp. 197-198).

Sometimes, well-meaning engaged Buddhists end up causing damage instead. In Taiwan, a ritual known as *fengsheng* is often performed. It involves preaching the doctrine of dependent origination, chanting Bodhisattva vows (including the pledge to liberate all beings before one enters *nirvāṇa* and leaves the world), and releasing animals into the wild, with wishes for the animals' rebirth as humans. The ritual is based on compassion, and is believed to bring its partakers religious merit through the act of saving the lives of the animals from captivity by returning them to nature. Without being attentive to the larger context within which the ritual is performed, however, its impacts on the ecosystem and the animals are often not what the participants intended. Animals might be caught and sold explicitly for the ritual, not simply released from captivity. Species that are non-native to the local flora and fauna are released into unfamiliar ecosystems, which results in death or competition with native animals. These are only a few of the unintended negative ecological consequences stemming from the *fengsheng* ritual, one that has a growing number of critics, including conservationists and ecologists (Darlington, 2017, pp. 487-488).

In South Korea, environmentally engaged Buddhism has resulted in new forms of activism. An example of this is the so-called '*Samboilbae* March' of 2003, which was a part of an anti-campaign against what is known as the Saemangeum Reclamation Project, the world's largest land reclamation project at its time. *Samboilbae*, meaning 'three-steps-one-bow' in Korean, had previously been used by the monk Sukyong in an anti-dam campaign in 2001, as a new means of protesting. The routine of walking three steps followed by a full body bowing originally comes from a Tibetan Buddhist practice, typically carried out by pilgrims to Mount Kailash wanting to purge their bad karma. It usually involves taking one step followed by a

single bow, but occasionally includes three steps as repentance for *akuśala-mūla*<sup>10</sup> or as homage to *triratna*<sup>11</sup>. *Samboilbae* was first introduced to Korea during monastic training sessions at Tongdosa Temple in 1992 and was practiced during lay retreats a couple of years later. Thus, while *samboilbae* was a recent import from Tibetan Buddhism, Sukyong took this traditional Buddhist practice and turned it into a new, non-violent, and recognizably Buddhist protest tactic (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 298).

The protest was initiated following president Roh Moo-Hyun's retraction of a campaign promise to cancel the reclamation project. The project had caused growing opposition due to its potential to destroy over 40 000 hectares of coastal wetlands habitat, vital for over 370 species of marine life. Furthermore, critics claimed that the project would cost numerous local residents their livelihoods. And so, on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003, Sukyong led an inter-faith group, consisting of Buddhist and Christian leaders, on a silent *samboilbae* march over a distance of 300 kilometers from the Saemangeum tidal flats to Seoul. They declared that the march would be an act of personal prayer and penance, as they themselves felt guilty of contributing to violence and destruction. After 65 days, the march reached the nation's capital. It had been extremely physically challenging for the group, with Sukyong being briefly hospitalized during the march (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 298).

While the reclamation project was continued in the end due to a decision by the Supreme Court, the determination and physical suffering of the marchers garnered the *samboilbae* march extensive media coverage and sympathy among the general public in South Korea. In spite of the anti-campaign's ultimate failure, the success of the *samboilbae* march in shifting public opinion encouraged the usage of this new tactic throughout Korean protest culture (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 299). The humility, painful self-sacrifice, and personal repentance embodied by the march radically distinguished its walkers from the antagonism and physical violence that is common during protests in South Korea, consequently drawing the sympathy of the general public and strengthening the protest's perceived legitimacy (Cho, 2013, pp. 262-263). As an original and effective 'tactic of persuasion', the practice of *samboilbae* quickly spread beyond the environmental movement and was soon adopted by a range of

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<sup>10</sup> The 'Three Roots of Evil' (Sanskrit); the unwholesome mental states of *rāga* (greed), *dveṣa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion). All negative states of consciousness are seen as ultimately grounded in one or more of these three (Keown, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> The 'Three Jewels' or 'Triple Gem', revered by all Buddhists and forming the core of the faith; the Buddha, the dharma (the teachings), and the *saṃgha* (the monastic community). Also referred to as the 'Three Refuges' (*triśaraṇa*) (Keown, 2004).



causes, joining the broader selection of protest strategies in South Korea (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 299).

## **5. ENVIRONMENTALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM IN SOUTH KOREA**

In this section, I will present my findings in the field and in existing secondary literature on Buddhist environmental activism in South Korea and its organizations. First, I will describe the interviewees, their organizations, what kind of issues they work with, and other things that we discussed during the interviews.

Ms. Gong is a 50-year-old activist, originally hailing from the countryside in Korea's southern region. She is now based in Seoul, working for the organization Buddhist Eco-Harmony (BEH), which she has done since March 2016. She is the secretary general of the organization, coordinating and arranging meetings, workshops, and events. She also participates in meetings with other Korean organizations. Her work is domestic, within South Korea. Ms. Gong identifies as a Mahāyāna Buddhist, and is a member of the Jogye Order. She has always been a Buddhist, and she considers Buddha's teachings to be the truth. She joined her organization because she believes that it plays an important part in local communities and Korean society in general (Gong, 2018).

Ms. Lee is a 52-year-old activist. She originally comes from the Korean countryside, but moved with her family to Seoul at the age of 8. Ms. Lee works for the organization Green Faiths Network (GFN), something she has done since 2012. Like Ms. Gong, Ms. Lee is the secretary general of her organization, and does very similar kind of work: coordinating and arranging meetings, workshops, and events. She also participates in meetings with other international organizations, both from other parts of Asia and the rest of the world. Her work is international, interacting mostly with foreign groups. Her organization has members of all major faiths in South Korea: Buddhist monks, Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, and more. One of the monks is also a scholar who studied in Oxford. He holds dharma talks and meditation lunches, and works for a government institute. He also gives spiritual support. Most members of the network try not to eat meat, and use non-disposable items out of concern for the environment. Ms. Lee identifies as a Mahāyāna Buddhist, but is not a member of a specific order. She became a Buddhist during university, after previously being a follower of other religions. She was attracted to Buddha's teachings, because he was against the caste system and showed a higher acceptance of women; Buddha was ahead of his time

[sic]. Ms. Lee joined her organization because she is interested in the ecological community and wants to be a part of it (Lee, 2018).

Ms. Park is a 27-year-old activist. She is originally from Seoul and works for the Korean Environmental Movements United (KEMU), one of South Korea's largest non-governmental environmental organizations. Ms. Park has worked for the group since 2015 as an international campaigner and coordinator. She operates as an intermediary between KEMU and Earth's Allies Korea (EAK), and also handles the latter's campaigns and programs in the Asia-Pacific region. Her work is both international and domestic. The organization focuses on many issues, but Park's areas are trade and investment issues, and corporate crime. During my interview with her, Ms. Park said that she is not religious. KEMU is a secular organization, but it interacts with Buddhist groups and activists. Park joined KEMU and EAK because she is interested in social, economic, and environmental justice. She wants to change the world for the better, and feels like the local level is a good place to start on. She chose the KEMU specifically because they tackle all the issues mentioned above (Park, 2018).

Most Buddhist orders and organizations collaborate with other groups (both Buddhist, other religious, or non-religious ones), either on a regular basis or more seldom. Joining forces is crucial to making a change, according to Ms. Park (2018). She also told me that her organization, the Korean Environmental Movements United (KEMU), hired a Buddhist nun to work with their anti-nuclear campaign. She was sent by her monastery to work with KEMU for a year, from January 2017 to January 2018. Christian organizations, Catholics and Evangelicals, have joined as well. Furthermore, KEMU held a communal event for faith-based and secular organizations during the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, France. They worked together during the conference, and also prayed together during the event (Park, 2018).

KEMU also collaborates with Buddhist temples. The organization's vice president is very close friends with many Buddhist monks (Park, 2018). Sometimes when members of KEMU travel around Korea for their work, they stay in Buddhist temples. These temples donate a lot of money to the organization, and they all have a good relationship with each other (Park, 2018).

Mr. Yang is a 34-year-old activist. He is originally from Seoul, but currently lives in Canada. He works as a volunteer for the Amita Association (ATA), and has been a member of the organization since 2011. Mr. Yang has computer skills, so he helps the group with work

related to that, such as updating and administrating their website, and uploading material to it. He follows a combination of Mahāyāna and Seon Buddhism. Mr. Yang has been a Buddhist since 2010. He decided to join the ATA in 2011 after being inspired by the dharma<sup>12</sup> talks of its founder, as well as going through big changes in his personal life during the same year, and caring about the environment in general. Mr. Yang believes that Buddha's teachings are deeply related to many political issues, because Buddha himself was involved in many of them during his lifetime; he created a group of Buddhist practitioners, in which everyone were equal, regardless of sex, or class, and so forth. His life and teachings went against the caste system [*sic*] (Yang, 2018).

All informants shared a worry over climate change, air pollution, and nuclear power plants. Several of them talked about the struggle to convince the Korean public that nuclear power is not 'cheap and clean' (Gong, 2018). Ms. Lee (2018) talked about seeing these issues from a Buddhist perspective: "They have the same roots and driving forces. Greed, hatred, and ignorance has caused the [power] plants, climate change, and injustice." [*sic*]. Gong and Lee both agreed that nature has 'rights' like humans do, and that it should be respected. Even rocks should be seen as precious [*sic*].

### **5.1. Buddhist Environmental Movements in South Korea**

The beginning of Buddhist environmental movements in Korea coincided with the establishment of the Buddhist Institute of Environmental Education in March 1988 (Bu & Chi, 2014, p. 58). In the same year, the urban-based Jungto Society was established by the monk Pomnyun, as part of the institute (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 297). While their main activities are to promote peace and ecological preservation, the society is most famous for its humanitarian aid programs in impoverished regions of the world. Its social work is non-paid and volunteer-run (Park, 2010, p. 27). In 2008, Jungto had 13 chapters in Korea, in addition to the Seoul headquarters, and 12 overseas chapters. It has published the Jungto Monthly since 1988, produced other publications, and operated Jungto Internet Broadcasting for spreading its work and maintaining its membership. The society also offers places of worship at dharma centers, education for members at the Jungto Academy, and retreat programs at the Jungto Retreat Center in a remote forest in the North Gyeongsang Province (Park, 2010, p. 32).

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<sup>12</sup> 'To bear' or 'to support' (Sanskrit). The Buddhist doctrine or teachings; the reality or truth of phenomena that comprise the world and universe. One of the 'three jewels' (*triratna*) and the 'three refuges' (*triśaraṇa*), along with the Buddha and the *samgha* (Keown, 2004). Known in Korean as □□ (dharma) (Park, 2011).

In 1993, the Seton Interreligious Research Center was founded in Seoul, with the single goal of promoting interreligious dialogue in South Korea. The center's activities have focused on two distinctive events: one consisting of a small group of 10-13 scholars who meet four times per year and who represent major Korean religious traditions; the other is an annual, ten-month lecture series on a specific theme that is open to the public. Some of the lecture series have been published by the Korean Paulist Press. About a third of them deal with Buddhist-Christian dialogue (Kim, 2014, p. 72).

In 1994, the National Campaign for Clean Land was created by Song Wol-Ju, the then-secretary of the Jogye Order, along with the 'In Purity and with Fragrance' movement, initiated by the monk and writer Beopjeong in 1994. However, more wide-scale Buddhist involvement in the environmental movements did not occur until the relaunch of the existing Buddhist Institute of Environmental Education under its new name, Eco Buddha. From the start, Eco Buddha took a populist-oriented progressive line, with the goal of tackling pollution problems and the connected cases of socio-economic injustice (Bu & Chi, 2014, p. 58).

Furthermore, the Indra's Net Life Community, founded in 1999 by Dobeop, the head monk of Silsangsa Temple, and Lee Byung-Chul, the head of the Guinong Movement<sup>13</sup> headquarters, brought more change to the existing Buddhist environmental movement by encouraging its followers to practice a natural way of life centered on agricultural community and staying away from the urban secular lifestyle (Lee, 2008, p. 119) (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 297). This includes eating vegetarian, not wasting any food whatsoever, using biological toilets, composting, recycling, and organic farming (Lee, 2008, p. 128). As of 2014, the community is still led by Dobeop (Bu & Chi, 2014, p. 58). He performs physical labor for the community, undertakes pilgrimages, and writes many articles and books that offer Buddhist guidance (Lee, 2008, p. 129). Indra's Net also runs special environmental education courses aimed at sharing their ecological ideas. Their three-month program has become popular nationally; during its first year, 150 alumni had settled in rural areas, attempting to spread organic farming around the country. Things taught in the courses include: ecological agriculture, local food trade schemes, sustainable settlement, right livelihood, as well as ecological philosophy, with self-reflection, harmony, and meditation practice (Lee, 2008, p. 131).

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<sup>13</sup> An eco-community movement founded in 1996 (Lee, 2008, p. 126).

In September 2001, the monk Sukyong founded the Buddhist Environment Alliance to deal with several environmental issues that drew national attention. Around the same time, the Jogye Order decided to establish an environmental committee under the direct supervision of its general secretary. This committee then introduced the 'People's Action for Saving Jirisan Mountain'. Recently, leaders of the environmental movement have begun exchanging information and offering mutual support with other organizations on the issue of nuclear energy (Bu & Chi, 2014, pp. 58-59).

From 2001-2006, the nun Jiyul started and led a movement against the construction of a high-speed railway tunnel through Mount Cheonsung by using several notable strategies, which had the desired effect of causing a national media frenzy. Jiyul went on a hunger strike, and she and several other movement followers sued the government on behalf of 'Fischer's clawed salamander', a species of salamander that supposedly lives on the mountain (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 300). Jiyul was interviewed by the press, and her movement held dialogues and organized emergency committees, trying to further their cause. Over a hundred teachers from the South Gyeongsang Province joined them and held a speech on the importance of letting living creatures be. The movement tried to appeal to the public's empathy, and the issue became so famous that even the Korean president and prime minister intervened several times to try to calm the protestors down. The tunnel was built in the end anyway, but the anti-tunnel movement put the planned construction on hold for more than two years (Lee, 2010, pp. 1-2).

Religions can play an important part in dealing with environmental problems, as they tend to have a vast range of material resources at their disposal and the ability to mobilize people. In South Korea, Buddhism is one of the major non-political groups playing such a role when it comes to the country's environmental challenges. One of the ways in which Buddhist environmental activism occurs in Korea is through inter-religious collaboration; most notably with Christianity, which is another influential non-political group in the country (Bu & Chi, 2014, pp. 53-54). This alliance has taken several forms; conferences with representatives of the main religions of Korea, for example. These events have led to annual meetings, at which delegates have discussed various environmental issues from a religious perspective, resulting in protests and mass demonstrations under a united, inter-religious front against various land and river projects in Korea. When the government wanted to build a 33 kilometers long seawall along Korea's western coast, which would destroy local biodiversity, Buddhist delegates (along with Christian ones) carried out a 65-day, 350-kilometers-long pilgrimage

from where the wall would start in the south, all the way to the Korean president's office in Seoul. This pilgrimage became known as the *Samboilbae* March, as previously mentioned (Bu & Chi, 2014, pp. 65-66) (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 298).

In Korea, there has been increasing concern over the fading popularity and influence of religions. Over the past fifteen years, religious membership has been rapidly shrinking, especially among the younger generations. A sense of crisis has led clergies and monks to conclude that their institutions must find a way to reverse this trend. Some Buddhist leaders have understood the positive effect of taking on ecological issues as a responsible public institution can have on the image of Buddhism among the younger generations. Buddhism has advocated an eco-friendly lifestyle for a long time, which these teachers of the religion think should now be a legitimate part of its official teachings (Bu & Chi, 2014, pp. 57-58).

All in all, Korean Buddhism has, as a reaction to the ecological crises it has come across during the last thirty years, founded numerous environmental organizations, each assigned with a different task appropriate to its size and the expertise of its members (Bu & Chi, 2014, p. 59).

## **5.2. Buddhist Locations in Seoul**

During my fieldwork in Seoul, I visited several different locations relevant to my thesis work. These include a Buddhist temple, shops, information centers, and offices of environmental organizations.

### **5.2.1. Jogyesa Temple**

The Buddhist temple I visited was an urban one, lying in the middle of Seoul, in the historically and culturally important district of Jongno-gu. Its name is Jogyesa, and it is the chief temple of the Jogye Order of Buddhism. The temple was originally established in 1395, and it bore the name of Gakhwangsa. The current structure was, however, built in 1910 by monks wanting the independence of Korean Buddhism and the recovery of Koreans' self-esteem during the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula (1910-35). In 1937, the temple was moved to its present-day location, where it was reconstructed, being completed in 1938. At this time, the temple was known as Taegosa. It received its current name, Jogyesa, in 1954 (Lim, et al., 2016, p. 900).

The temple consists of several buildings, including a TV station owned by the Jogye Order. The buildings are spread out on a court. Iljumun, the One Pillar Gate, marks the main entrance to the temple area. Like all the other buildings, it is very colorful, with intricate wooden beams in blue, green, and gold. The roof has blue tiles, and the pillars that hold the gate up are red and wooden, with grey stone bases. A golden sign against a black background welcomes the visitors to the temple in *hanja*, Korean written with Chinese characters. Yellow paper lanterns hang on the left and right entrance openings. The Main Dharma Hall, Daeungjeon, is the largest temple building in Seoul. It is located in the center of the Jogyesa Temple area. Inside it, there is a large hall and three golden, several meters high Buddhas (representing celestial Buddhas Amitābha, Śākyamuni, and Bhaiṣajya-guru) on top of an altar, which is decorated with pink flowers. Another, smaller Buddha is in a glass case on a smaller altar on the right side of the room. Lit candles in holders stand on top of both altars, in front of the Buddha statues. Lotus-shaped lamps and paper lanterns hang from the ceiling, and like the outside of the building, the inside décor is a combination of red, green, blue, and gold. Behind the Main Dharma Hall is Geuknakjeon, Paradise Hall, built in honor of Amitabha. It is a long, narrow building, painted in the same colors as the others. Beomjongru, the Brahma Bell Pavilion, is to the left of the Main Dharma Hall. It is a small, square building that houses four temple instruments, which are played before morning and evening chanting. The four instruments are the Brahma Bell, Dharma Drum, Cloud Gong, and Wooden Fish. A so-called ‘pagoda tree’ grows to the left of the Main Dharma Hall, and a lacebark pine tree grows in front of it. These trees are both believed to be over four hundred years old. A ten-story *stūpa*<sup>14</sup> houses a relic of the Buddha, which was brought there by a monk after it was given to him by the royal court of Thailand. Other buildings and items in the temple include a souvenir shop and a donation box made of stone in the shape of a smiling Buddha statue (Lim, et al., 2016, p. 902). There is also a small café in the temple area, serving tea, coffee, and vegetarian soup.

I visited the temple three times in one month, all in the late afternoon and early evening. In the weekdays, the temple area was half-full. In the weekends, there were much more people there. Despite larger crowds, the area was fairly quiet and peaceful. This is because visitors are encouraged to keep the volume down when entering the temple area, to not disturb the monks. Through loudspeakers attached to the buildings, chants coming from the Main

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<sup>14</sup> A religious monument originally built to honor the memory of a Buddha or another enlightened person. *Stūpas* usually contain relics and holy items (Keown, 2004).

Dharma Hall can be heard, read aloud by a monk. Before walking through the gate to the temple area, each visitor bows three times in three directions: front, diagonally to the left, and in the same way to the right. The visitors were a of all ages and genders, but a large portion of them were middle-aged and senior Koreans. There were many tourists there, too. They were mostly younger. Buddhists of other schools and countries visited, as well. On several occasions, I observed Theravāda monks from Southeast Asia. They could quickly be distinguished by their saffron- and orange-colored robes.

### 5.2.2. Buddhist Information Centers

On the left side just after the main entrance to Jogyesa, there were two information centers; one for Korean-speakers and one for English-speakers. In the latter, a helpful Korean woman in her fifties, was volunteering. She helped me find some of my informants. I was one of three visitors in an hour. The small house smelled of incense, and there were two desks for workers, as well as larger table, inside it. At this center, all visitors were invited to try traditional Korean Buddhist calligraphy. The volunteer woman showed me a book with different patterns and messages and urged me to select one. Per her instructions, I then drew a Korean calligraphy painting. After this, I had a conversation with the woman and a Canadian tourist about Buddhism, Korea, and why we were all interested in these topics.

Across the street from this center was another one: the Templestay Information Center. It was in the bottom floor of a modern, tall building. The interior design was modern, as well; a large, light, and airy room, with big windows towards the street. The center was never full of visitors; a handful of people, at most. The workers there were mostly Korean women in their forties and older. Like the temple area, it was quite calm and quiet. Half of the room was a shop, with souvenir items for sale, and pamphlets with information about the Templestay Program in racks. The other half was a combined gallery and activity area. Along two of the walls, more items were on display; censers, paintings, scrolls, and more, with informative notes in front of them. A long table was set up against the third wall, where visitors (mainly children) could draw Buddhist art; postcards and posters, among other things. Next to the long table was a raised part of the floor, where visitors were offered to participate in a tea drinking ceremony with a Korean Buddhist nun. This would then be followed by a talk, which I said yes to.

The nun was very nice, and we talked about her life and mine, both of our countries, and a little bit about the environment. I asked her if she was involved in any activism herself, or if



she knew of anyone who was; she was not and did not know any Buddhist environmental activists. She focused more on meditation and personal fulfillment. She did, however, mention a form of environmental ‘activism’ that the Templestay organization practices; the restaurant operated by the organization serves vegan temple food only, and they have a policy of not throwing away anything when preparing and cooking the food, or any of the leftovers; not even a grain of rice (as per Seon Buddhist custom). I found that very interesting. The nun encouraged me to make a reservation at the restaurant; it was fully booked for two months ahead, as it is quite popular.

### 5.2.3. Buddhist Shops

The Buddhist shops I visited were usually next to or nearby Buddhist temples. Most of them were small, with only one or two narrow aisles. They were usually packed with many different Buddhist items on display from floor to ceiling, with more small stands outside the shops. Some, especially those that vended clothes and/or food, were a bit more spacious. The shops sold, among other things: Buddha statues of varying sizes and materials, including metal, wood, and porcelain; prayer beads, bracelets, and amulets with different icons and symbols in gold, made of wood or traditional Korean lacquerware in numerous colors; Buddhist books in a handful of different languages; small wooden gongs; incense and censers; paper lanterns in various colors; bells; candleholders; postcards; traditional masks; fridge magnets and keychains; rings, including prayer ones with rotatable mantras on them; necklaces with Buddhist-themed pendants; larger packs of water bottles and food, including rice and vegetables, that could be donated to the Jogye Order’s clergy or a specific monk or nun of one’s choice; bags, backpacks, blankets, slippers, shoes, and other traditional Buddhist clothing, both for lay people and the clergy, and more. The food available for donation is always vegetarian, as the Jogye Order’s clergy members do not eat meat or seafood (Lee, 2015, p. 8). The clothes for lay people were colorful (although usually in darker shades), while all clothes, blankets, and bags meant for monks and nuns were in different shades of grey and made of cotton or flax. Grey clothing made of simple materials is traditionally worn by the Korean *samgha*, as a reflection of the strict mentality of Korean monastery life (Lee, 2015, p. 8).

Most of the shops did not seem very busy. It was usually just me and perhaps one or two more individuals there at the same time. This might be because I was there when it was off-season for visitors, as most of these shops were in Insa-dong, one of Seoul’s most popular areas for tourists. Only one store, which was inside the Jogyesa Temple area, was crowded

when I visited it. The customers in all shops were mostly middle-aged Koreans, with an even distribution between men and women. The stores were all on main streets, and clearly visible. The people that worked in the shops were all very welcoming and helpful, no matter if they spoke English or not. Roughly half of the shop staff spoke English. Nearly all of them were women, in varying ages: middle-aged in souvenir stores, and a mix in the ones that focused solely on Buddhist clothing items.

#### 5.2.4. Offices of Environmental Organizations

I visited the offices of several organizations, both headquarters and branch offices. About half of them had fairly small premises, and the other half had larger ones, reflecting the size of their organizations. The purely environmental organizations had quite modern, open-plan offices, with high ceilings and light, airy rooms. Their buildings were usually on less busy streets. The Buddhist environmental groups had smaller spaces and combined traditional with modern in their facilities; manned front desks upon entering the offices and light rooms with floor heating, decorated with many Buddhist artefacts, such as censers, paintings, and portraits of prominent monks and nuns, and more. Their buildings were often on busy main streets. All organization offices were visible in the environment.

In most organizations, the workers were middle-aged Koreans. The gender ratio was fairly even in the purely environmental groups, but in the Buddhist ones, women were in the majority. Very few of the office workers spoke English.

## 6. ANALYSIS

### 6.1. How Is Buddhist Environmental Activism Expressed in South Korea?

Buddhist environmental activism is expressed in a number of ways in South Korea: through organizations, networks, inter-religious collaboration, specialized education and services, social media presence, other media, protests, debates, and unusual, attention-drawing behavior, among other things. This is similar to the situation in other Asian countries, such as Thailand and Taiwan. For instance, in Thailand, environmentally engaged monks put much focus on the Thai forests, and they often use a combination of education and rituals that draw attention to environmental issues and their consequences; de-forestation, erosion, mudslides, floods, soil degradation, and more (King, 2009, pp. 130-131). In Taiwan, Buddhist clerics and lay people voice their activism through certain rituals that may include the preaching of doctrines, the chanting of vows, and the release of captive animals into the wild, with wishes

for the latter to be reborn as humans (*fengsheng*). These ceremonies are based on compassion, and are also believed to bring its participants religious merit through the act of saving the animals' lives from captivity by returning them to nature (Darlington, 2017, pp. 487-488).

Organizations are historically essential to attract the attention of the public and decision-makers. Group activities tend to get more noticed than solo ones, although there are exceptions. Most of the informants also claimed that joining forces with other environmental groups in South Korea is vital to achieve change. There are several network groups for this; they bring together leaders of different environmental groups and/or religions in Korea (and internationally), in order to strengthen cooperation and spread their shared values further. Inter-religious collaboration occurs regularly in the forms of meetings, conferences, and shared protesting, most notably with Christianity, another influential group in the Korea.

Some organizations offer specialized education and services in the form of courses, academies, institutes, places of worship at dharma centers, and retreat programs, among other things. Courses are usually open for the public, but some are for members only. Participants are taught the philosophy of the organization. Some groups educate local farmers and schoolchildren in organic farming. One monk who is a member of the Green Faiths Network is also employed at a governmental science institute. He hosts 'meditational lunches', gives donations, offers spiritual support, speaks at meetings and seminars, and holds public talks (including dharma ones).

Many groups follow certain guidelines or rules. These are often based on the five of the Ten Precepts that lay people usually follow, in combination with principles considered good for the environment. Some of the rules lay members try to follow include not eating meat, growing and/or buying organic products, and using non-disposable items.

Most organizations are active on social media, regularly updating their pages with anything they find relevant to their work; newspaper articles, chronicles, event news, academic literature, and so forth. Depending on an organization's nature, structure, and working language, they might have members sharing items they believe are of interest to the group and its other followers, as well as have international members. The organizations usually also have their own websites. The languages used in them indicate the focus of the groups: those who work internationally use English or English and Korean; those who work domestically are often only in Korean. Nearly all websites use green in their color themes, reflecting the nature of the organizations. They have clearly visible links to their social media accounts and

groups they collaborate with, and the front pages are filled with pictures of the organizations' activities, especially their excursions and social work with farmers, children, and senior citizens. Some of the groups have quotes from Buddhist doctrines or their Buddhist founders and/or leaders on their pages. Some have Buddhist symbols there, or incorporated in their logotypes: the lotus flower, a symbol of purity in Buddhism, is visible in many places on the website of one of the organizations.

Some groups use other forms of media to spread their work and maintain their membership numbers, as well. This usually takes the form of Internet broadcasting, and the publishing of magazines, newspapers, and other related works.

Protesting is a common form of expressing activism in general, and naturally, in the case of Buddhist environmental activists in South Korea, as well. It is, however, tricky to protest while at the same time following Buddhist rules. Many clerics and lay people have therefore often taken to very 'Buddhist' forms of opposition, using peaceful, non-harming means. Buddhist environmental protesting in South Korea usually happens around the same time as certain events take place, such as the building of something infrastructural that will hurt local wildlife, or the construction of nuclear power plants that pose a danger to humans and nature. These protests can also take the forms of public debates between activists and representatives from the other side of the issue. Both clerical and lay members take part in the debates, showing that both have a voice within their organizations.

Unusual, attention-drawing behavior, such as extreme fasting, long and symbolic marches, self-immolation, and suing the government in the name of a threatened animal, and so on, has also occurred on several occasions. This kind of strategy is usually initiated by a single activist or a small group, who's odd approaches catch the attention of the public and the media. Using this type of tactic has, in some cases, affected and even reformed the manner in which protests take place in South Korea. Examples of this includes the nun Jiyul's anti-campaign against a high-speed rail tunnel in 2001-2006; the monk Sukyong's 2001 anti-dam campaign; and the '*Samboilbae* ('three-steps-one-bow') March' of 2003 (which was a part of an anti-campaign against as the Saemangeum Reclamation Project), among others (Bu & Chi, 2014, pp. 65-66) (Yoon & Jones, 2014, p. 300).

Doing something unusual to raise awareness over environmental issues is not unique to engaged Korean Buddhists. By comparison, it occurs in Thailand, too. There, environmental monks have been trying to draw the attention of lay people since the late 1970's, through

activities like forest conservation, the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries, and the promotion of sustainable agriculture. Their best-known and most unusual ritual, however, is the tree ordination, through which monks consecrate community forests and emphasize the interconnections between people and nature (Darlington, 2007, p. 170). The ritual has gained national (and international) attention, much like the uncommon forms of protesting in South Korea.

## **6.2. Is Working with Political Issues Compatible with Korean Buddhism?**

Working with political issues while being Buddhist is not a problem, so the short answer to the question is yes, based on the passages that can be found in Buddhist texts and teachings and the existence of environmentally engaged Buddhists that are active today. Some researchers say ‘no’, however. Harris (1995) and Schmithausen (1997) are critical and cautious, respectively, to the idea of Buddhism being an environmental religion, and instead claim that its focus is on humans and helping them to reach *nirvāṇa*. Others, like Macy (1990) and Swearer (2006), argue the opposite: that Buddhism is eco-friendly, as humans are part of the larger ecosystem and must answer to it.

To my informants, the response to the question was a clear ‘yes’. The issue is, however, not a simple one, but quite complex. The answer depends on one’s interpretations of Buddhist doctrines. In Buddhist texts and teachings, environmentalism is present in numerous places. The Noble Eightfold Path (one of the main doctrines of Buddhism) addresses the concept of ‘right view’. The eight parts of the Path function as ethic ‘guidelines’, which are capable of tackling the issues found in the world today, including environmental ones. The ‘right view’ perspective includes the doctrine of dependent origination (that all phenomena develop in dependence on causes and conditions and lack intrinsic being), which is a strong argument for Buddhism being an inherently eco-friendly religion. It would mean that humankind is a part of a larger, all-encompassing ecosystem, and that our actions would affect the environment, for better or worse. Therefore, we also have a responsibility towards nature; us harming it will come back full circle and, in return, harm us.

The doctrine of dependent origination is one of the most prominent Buddhist teachings often associated with ecological principles, together with compassion, loving-kindness, and no-self. The holistic model of dependent origination contests the sovereignty (and assumed independence) of the self over other. It challenges humankind’s ‘hubris’ regarding its traditional role as nature’s conqueror.

The image of Indra's Net is another example, often used in Korean Buddhism, of how everything (according to Buddhist teachings) is connected. Jiyul, the prominent Buddhist nun and activist, who has become a household name in South Korea due to her extreme forms of activism, has often used the Indra's Net view in her teachings. She sees it as a good metaphor for the independent formation and sustainment of nature, existing beyond the seemingly limiting boundaries of time and space. It is witnessed in every being; life is 'ecological connections'.

The fact that there are environmentally engaged Buddhists operating in South Korea, and that there are so many of them, can in itself be seen as an argument for the legitimacy of combining political issues with Buddhism. Thousands of Koreans are involved in organizations and orders that actively, and in different ways, try to tackle various political issues. Countryside temples offer retreats and courses, so that followers can relax and be close to nature. Urban ones attempt to take care of society's marginalized individuals. Some organizations try to cope with the contemporary world and take their philosophy one step further by establishing self-sufficient ecological communities based on Buddhist principles. They also engage in developmental projects in both Korea and in other parts of the world, especially impoverished ones. Engaged Buddhists are active participants in the handling of both social and political issues, and try to better a world full of problems. The example of the 2003 *Samboilbae* March having such an effect on the traditional forms of protesting in South Korea shows that socially engaged Buddhism can assist in creating new ways to handle other political issues, as well, not just environmental ones.

All the informants claim that political issues and Korean Buddhism are compatible and justifiable. Their word is not law, but it is worth mentioning how they reason on the issue. One of the main reasons they gave for believing this was that Siddhartha Gautama himself took such stances during his lifetime, even if his intentions might not have been political. Gautama saw all humans as equal, and his life and teachings went against the caste system; this was highly controversial during the time he lived [*sic*]. Several informants felt that Buddhists in South Korea have a responsibility to respect and 'look after' nature, both as citizens of the country (as one view is that the population is responsible for its nation and its wellbeing) and as Buddhists (as a community, with teachings to 'prove' it). This attitude exists in other parts of Asia, as well, including in Thailand and Taiwan.

The contents of the sources used in the thesis raise other, bigger issues, which are related and relevant to especially my second research question: who is responsible for 'saving' the

environment, and can Buddhism help in doing this? Is it international organizations, such as the United Nations? Or is it the industrialized nations, who on the one hand has contributed the most to environmental destruction worldwide, and on the other have the means to reduce the damage and supply aid? Are corporations, which seem to be only interested in making money, no matter the cost, the ones to blame? Or does responsibility lie with the people of every country in the world as a whole, on the grounds that each nation has a duty to look after its own population and environment and take care of its own problems? The most likely answer is that all of us can do our part and help tackle environmental destruction, and that Buddhism can help with this by inspiring people to take both individual and collective responsibility.

### **6.3. What Are the Challenges for Buddhists Working with Environmental Issues?**

Challenges for Buddhists working with environmental issues mostly consist of opposition from those who disapprove of their activities. These are usually powerholders whose interests collide with the Buddhists'; local and national politicians, governments, businesspeople and companies that are involved in projects and/or activities that damage the environment (Gong, Lee, Park, 2018).

In South Korea, it is usually easier to gain the approval of local authorities than the national government. Some administrations, especially Lee Myung-Bak's (2008-2013) and Park Geun-Hye's (2013-2017), were difficult to deal with, as they started massive national projects that had a negative impact on the environment and favored nuclear power [*sic*] (Gong, Lee, 2018). Informant Ms. Park (2018) spoke of the 'Nuclear Mafia'; the people and companies that run South Korea's nuclear power plants, and the academics and politicians that support them.

These challenges are similar to the ones that Buddhists in other Asian countries face, as well. In Thailand, the government and politicians have favored economic growth over environmental protection for decades. Hundreds of people have died because of floods linked to deforestation. While logging is no longer permitted in the country, widespread illegal logging continues. Ecology monks have come up with different ways of working against deforestation. The most common strategy is a combination of education and ritual in order to help local people protect the forests. Many times, the locals are unaware of more eco-friendly forms of agriculture and often do not understand the relationship between the cutting of trees

and negative effects like erosion, mudslides, flooding, soil degradation, and more. A strategy that is being used to combat deforestation in Thailand is so-called ‘tree ordination’, where monks turn trees into sacred objects. Harming them will have massively negative karmic consequences (King, 2009, pp. 130-131).

The monks in Thailand that work to protect the forest face serious challenges, and threats. Standing in the way of powerful companies looking to make a profit is dangerous. If the monks there are seen as becoming too ‘political’, they might lose the support of the public or of powerful individuals (King, 2009, pp. 131-133). Some monks have had to give up their status; others have been murdered for their beliefs. Questions about how monks and nuns should behave in the modern world, and the relations within the *samgha* arise, as well (Darlington, 2012, pp. 197-198). In South Korea, the situation seems a bit different. While power-holders are often against Buddhist environmental activists that try to stop destructive projects, the public’s reaction has usually been more positive towards Buddhists getting involved with social justice issues, as shown by their support during the *Samboilbae* March and the nun Jiyul’s campaign against a high-speed rail tunnel that would negatively affect local biodiversity.

Because of the profit interest of these (and other) businesses, organizations tend to be wary of accepting company donations. Some of their members are completely against it. This in turn leads to smaller budgets for groups and their activities (Gong, Lee, 2018).

Another challenge is the engaged Buddhists themselves performing practices and rituals without being aware and/or mindful of the consequences. A clear example of this is the *fengsheng* ritual performed in Taiwan. Animals are released, accompanied with preaching and vows, but said animals are many times not native to the local wildlife. This often results in devastating consequences for ecosystems, with the sudden introduction of new, foreign species, who might thrive and ‘take over’ or, because they are not adapted to their new environment, die anyway (Darlington, 2017, pp. 487-488).

#### **6.4. Who Are the Environmentally Engaged Buddhists in South Korea?**

The environmentally engaged Buddhists are men and women of all ages, educational and financial backgrounds, and from all parts of the country. The most common groups that get involved in the countryside seems to be middle-aged and senior individuals, especially women. In the cities, the gender distribution is more equal, and most workers are in their 30’s and 40’s. Those in representative positions in urban organizations, along with those who



work internationally, are often older and more experienced, however, and they are usually also university-educated and English-speakers.

Most of my interviewees are women. All informants have a university background. Half of them come from the countryside; half from cities. Most of them are in their fifties. All but one speak English and work internationally.

Most Buddhists are involved in purely Buddhist organizations, but there are also those that work or volunteer for inter-religious or non-religious organizations. During my interview with Ms. Park (2018), she told me that a Buddhist nun came to work as a volunteer at the Korean Environmental Movements United for a year. Interviewee Ms. Lee (2018) is a Mahāyāna Buddhist working for an inter-faith, environmental network.

## 6.5. Discussion

It has been difficult but interesting to map and navigate through South Korea's numerous Buddhist environmental activist groups. They have struggled to achieve major change from the start, and, while having won some battles, they continue to struggle; against politicians, corporations, and even academics. It is clear that many powerholders in Korea during the past couple of decades have favored economic growth over 'thinking green'.

The monks of Thailand seem to have faced more severe consequences for being environmentally engaged than their South Korean equivalents. I am not sure why, but my best guess is that it has to do with the Thai monks belonging to a different branch of Buddhism, Theravāda. Within that branch, the relationship between the laity and the *saṃgha* is different, and stricter. Theravāda clerics seem to have a larger influence over the public than what their Mahāyāna equivalents do (while still being deeply respected, of course). Buddhism is also more widely practiced in Thailand than in Korea. Powerholders and moneymakers with interests in the former might feel more threatened and inclined to stop the monks there than in the latter. But this is just my guess.

As one might guess, the title of the thesis ('Working in Harmony') refers to the activities of the environmentally engaged Buddhists in South Korea and the way they are performed. In most cases, activists and their organizations have found ways to protest using very 'Buddhist' methods. Even if their work is difficult and their struggle is long, the Buddhism aspect of it is, and has always been, as important as the environmental one.

## 6.6. Conclusion

The aim of the thesis has been to portray the activism and social engagement of Korean Buddhists to conserve the environment and to motivate the awareness of the people in how environmental destruction affects both nature and society. Fieldwork was carried out in Seoul, in the form of interviews and observations. This material was complemented with articles and books on Buddhism and environmentalism. The analytical framework consisted of themes distinguished in the literature: environmentalism in Buddhist teachings and environmentally engaged Buddhism. The analysis led to several conclusions:

Buddhist environmental activism in South Korea is expressed in many different ways. This includes through organizations, networks, inter-religious collaboration, specialized education and services, social media presence, other media, protests, debates, and unusual, attention-drawing behavior. Activists work with all kinds of environmental issues: nuclear power, water and air pollution, the disruption of ecosystems, and more.

Political issues can be seen as compatible with Korean Buddhism, as there are passages that can be found in Buddhist texts and teachings supporting this, along with the existence and activities of environmentally engaged Buddhists that are operating today. Environmentalism is very political; Buddhism (and religion in general) can be used as a political force. Even if scholars might not agree if Buddhism is environmental at heart, my informants had no problems with uniting their beliefs, religious and societal.

The main challenge for environmentally engaged Buddhists is opposition from those whose interests collide with the activists'. In Thailand, for example, this friction between powerholders and clerics has sometimes resulted in the latter being forced to step down as such. In some cases, monks have had to pay the ultimate prize: with their lives. In South Korea, several major projects have started and/or continued despite protests from environmental activists on both smaller and larger scales. There is also another challenge in criticism from those who believe that activism is not the 'purpose' of Buddhism; that it is 'too worldly' and that the *samgha* should not get involved in temporal matters. An additional problem related to this critique is that good intentions sometimes have negative consequences. A clear example of this is the Taiwanese Buddhist ritual *fengsheng*, where captive animals are released into the wild. Many times, however, said animals are not native to the area into which they are released, and so, this is potentially disastrous for the local ecosystem. Environmentally engaged Buddhists' way of doing things can therefore be

controversial. Keeping in mind that good intentions are not always enough is important. The *fengsheng* ritual has also been criticized for being performed for selfish reasons, as it is believed to bring its participants religious merit through the act of saving the lives of animals from captivity by returning them to nature. Some animals have also been caught and sold explicitly for the ritual, not simply released from captivity. What is the point of it then, if not for selfish reasons?

Buddhism may or may not be an environmental movement, but it can definitely be a vehicle for one. Buddhism gives guidelines for how to handle different topics and issues, and how to work together in (and for) harmony.

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