

ECOLOGICAL SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Investigating an Epistemic Virtue in East Asian Buddhism

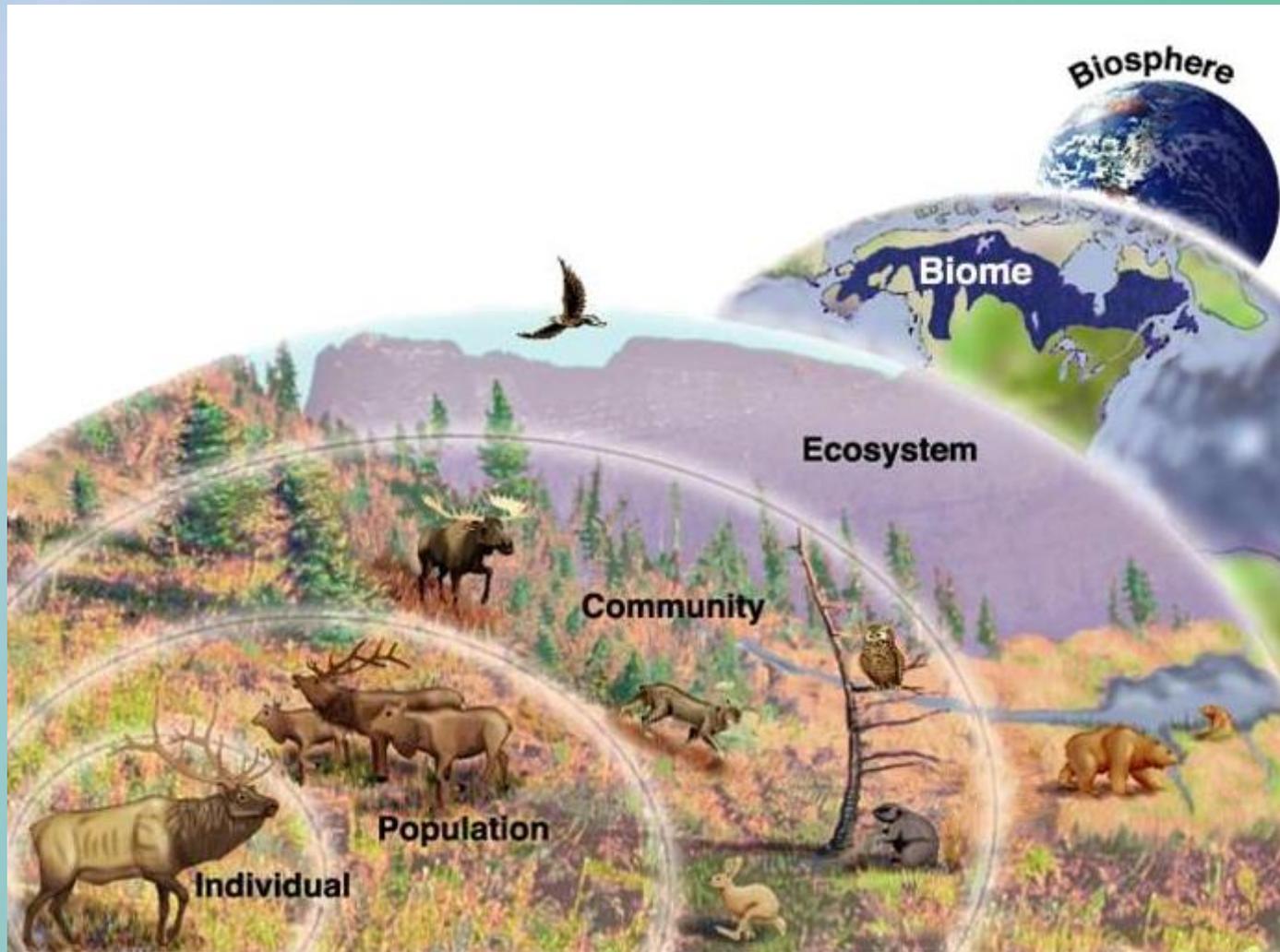
2018 NEH Summer Institute: Buddhist East Asia

Jesse Butler

Department of Philosophy and Religion

University of Central Arkansas

jbutler@uca.edu



Where are the humans?

The Anthropocene

newly proposed geological epoch, signaled by the collective long-term impact of humans on the planet



Ecological Self-Understanding as an Epistemic Virtue

Vice of Deficiency	Virtue	Vice of Excess
Self-Ignorance and/or Denial	Ecological Self- Understanding	Egocentric Self- Focused Bias
failure to recognize oneself as a responsible being in the world, through either ignorance or denial of one's embodied agency	veridical recognition of oneself as an embodied agent in the world , embedded within interdependent relations between oneself and one's environment	self-interested emphasis on oneself as a privileged or transcendent being apart from one's embedded relationality in the world

“Ecological Self-Understanding: A Cross-Cultural Epistemic Virtue”

- Forthcoming article in a special topics issue of *Science, Religion, and Culture* on Cross-Cultural Studies in Well-Being
- Identifies Ecological Self-Understanding as a virtue in contemporary Confucian (e.g. Tu Weiming) and Native American (e.g. Viola Cordova) Philosophy
 - Draft article w/ references available at:

https://www.academia.edu/34072067/Ecological_Self-Understanding_A_Cross-Cultural_Epistemic_Virtue

Current Project Question:

To what extent is ecological self-understanding identifiable in Buddhist philosophy & practice?

Ecological Self-Understanding in Buddhism

- Embodied Relationality:
Relational Ontology & Interdependent Origination
- Relational Agency:
Understanding **Karma** in Terms of **Transformative Intentional Action** and **Responsibility**
- Cultivation of Virtuous Agency:
Responsive Virtuosity (e.g. Hershock's Chan-based account of *upāya*), as well as the "**Middle Path**" between Nihilism & Eternalism

Tensions between Buddhism and Ecological Self-Understanding

- **Anatman:** How can there be self-understanding if there is no self? (Answer: anatman negates eternal selves, but not impermanent relational selves)
- Status and Treatment of Animals: e.g. negative karmic valence and problematic **animal release practices**
 - Embodiment vs **Body as an Illusory Construct:** Is Buddhism compatible with Naturalism (e.g. Christian Coseru, Owen Flanagan, Evan Thompson)?
- **Transcendence** and External Salvation: e.g. popular lay conceptions of **Pure Land** practices and **Tariki** (perhaps delusional, per Kasulis' interpretation of Shinran?)

Tentative Conclusion and Working Hypothesis:

Buddhist views and practices exhibit a **spectrum of ecological virtuosity and vice**, but there are central aspects of Buddhism that can be identified with the cultivation of ecological self-understanding.

Vice of Deficiency	Virtue	Vice of Excess
Self-Ignorance and/or Denial	Ecological Self-Understanding	Egocentric Self-Focused Bias
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Negative valence towards embodied existence• Dependence on external salvation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dependent Origination• Karmic Agency• Responsive Virtuosity• Middle Way	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive valence towards otherworldly transcendence• Self-interested pursuit of merit and salvation

Open Question: Can the vices be rectified from within the Buddhist repertoire? Are they due to **delusion**, for instance?