Is Colorado Buddhism Green? A Study of the Interaction of Buddhist Practice with Environmental Concerns

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Abstract
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Is Colorado Buddhism Green?

A Study of the Interaction of Buddhist Practice with Environmental Concerns

A Thesis

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Abstract

The human community is paying more attention to our growing environmental crisis. Religious beliefs are often proposed as effective ways to address environmental ethics. It is often supposed that Buddhism is a “green” religion because of its intimate associations with nature. My research focuses on whether or not Buddhism in Colorado influences Buddhist practitioners’ environmental awareness by identifying and evaluating Buddhist ecological attitudes and values. My research questions include: (1) what aspects of Buddhist practice refer to the elements of natural environment, (2) do Buddhist practitioners profess different attitudes and behaviors than non-Buddhist practitioners, and (3) If so, how does Buddhism influence Buddhist practitioners’ environmental consciousness? Through a case study of Shambhala Meditation Center in Denver, Colorado, I seek to answer my research questions to understand if Buddhism in Colorado is “green” and how Buddhist practice connects with the natural environment. I also conducted a comparison of environmental attitudes and behaviors between Buddhist practitioners and non-Buddhists to analyze whether (1) Buddhist practitioners have more environmental concerns about the earth, and (2) their daily activities reflect their pro-environmental behaviors.
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Chapter One: Introduction

For a few decades now, more and more attention has been drawn to our growing environmental crisis. Buddhist scholars and environmentalists alike have debated the possible solutions for the crisis and have been searching for a principle of living a “green” lifestyle. Religious beliefs and practices have become an effective part of humans’ presence in ecological systems in many parts of the world. Buddhism is part of this presence, and it is generally recognized to be an “eco-friendly” religion. It encourages an intimate connection with the natural world. Its ethics of non-injury and boundless loving-kindness for all beings provides a vision of the natural world as a whole. “When nature is defiled, people ultimately suffer” (Kabilsingh 1996). It is often said that the philosophy and central teachings of Buddhism emphasize the essential unity of human beings and the natural world, making it a “green” religion (Cooper and James 2005). This project explores the connection between Buddhist practice and the natural environment to identify and evaluate Buddhist ecological attitudes and values.

Buddhism was introduced into North America by Asian immigrants in the 19th century. It is the fastest growing religion in the United States, with over 2 million practitioners (Rowe 2012). American Buddhists are composed of both Asian Americans and a large number of converts of other ethnicities. There are many American Buddhist.
traditions such as Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Japanese Zen, Korean Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, etc. My project focuses on Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s Kagyupa order, which is one important orders of Tibetan Buddhism in North America. Tibetan Buddhism, the Buddhist culture to enter America most recently, was transmitted by Tibetan lamas to the United States in the early 1970s (Lavine 1998). Four main orders were introduced by four representative Tibetan lamas, which promoted the development of what is now known as American Vajrayana: they are Geshe Wangyal’s Gelugpa order, Deshung Rinpoche’s Sakyapa order, Tarthang Tulku’s Nyingma order, and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s Kagyupa order. Among these orders, Trungpa Rinpoche’s Kagyupa order has focused more attention on meditation and contemplation, and sought to create a vision of “enlightened society” (Lavine 1998). As the Tibetan tradition moved to the west, it was challenged by American culture which is self-reliant and democratic. Preserving the essence while adapting to local cultures and environments, Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes meditation and contemplation, which are indispensible for the truly American Buddhist consciousness. One of the great contributions of Buddhism to North American is teaching practical methods of meditation.

In order to seek out Buddhist ecological attitudes, my research consisted of a case study of the Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver (the SMCD) in Colorado. The SMCD is a part of the Shambhala International community, which was founded by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. The Shambhala International community consists of 165 meditation centers throughout the world and is now led by Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche (Shambhala meditation center website). In conducting fieldwork at the SMCD with an
interdisciplinary scope, I drew from ecological ethics and measures of environmental consciousness. Through the process of interviewing Buddhist practitioners, observing meditation, and analyzing collected data, I was able to (1) explore whether or not American Buddhism is “eco-friendly”, (2) inquire whether it has an effect on Buddhist practitioners’ environmental consciousness, that is, being concerned about the environment and displaying pro-environmental behavior, and (3) compare the environmental awareness between Buddhist practitioners and non-Buddhists.

Research Goals and Methods

The intent of this case study was to better understand the connection between Buddhist practice and the natural environment, as well as Buddhist practitioners’ environmental awareness. I set up my research questions: (1) what aspects of Buddhist practice refer to the elements of natural environment, (2) do Buddhist practitioners profess different attitudes and behaviors than non-Buddhist practitioners, and (3) If so, how does Buddhism influence Buddhist practitioners’ environmental consciousness?

To explore the aspects of Buddhist practice that refer to the elements of natural environment, I set up more questions to be answered: (1) what process of meditation relates to the natural world, (2) how does Buddhist meditation deal with emotions, such as transforming anger or hatred into loving and compassion, and (3) does this transformation connect human bodies with the outside world?

Additionally, I investigated the level of Buddhist practitioners’ environmental consciousness, which includes environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior.
Through comparing the attitudes and behaviors between Buddhist practitioners and non-Buddhists, I analyzed whether (1) Buddhist practitioners have more environmental concerns about the earth, and (2) their daily activities reflect their pro-environmental behaviors. For those Buddhist practitioners who hold different attitudes and behaviors toward the environment, I further sought to understand whether or not Buddhist practice plays a crucial role in influencing practitioners’ environmental attitudes, and if so, how it influence their attitudes and awareness.

I used a combination of methods to answer my research questions, including observation, participant-observation, and oral interviews. Observation was used as the primary method to collect and analyze data at the SMCD. My objects of observation were the Buddhist practitioners, the process of meditation, and the center. Ethnographers usually start observation by four phases: observing setting; observing and tracking events and event sequences; counting, census-taking, and ethnographic mapping; and searching for indicators of socioeconomic difference (Schensul, LeCompte 1999). Following these four phases, I photographed the Center, drew sketches and took notes of the meditation process. First, I observed the physical environment of the SMCD, including its location and the surrounding, and compared it with the external environment of the Boulder Shambhala Meditation Center. I also photographed the inside structure of the SMCD to determine whether it supports the physical environment. For example, I explored if there are any windows; if the windows frame views of the natural world; and how much of the waste is recycled. Second, I observed the setting of the meditation practice by photographing and taking field notes. In order to better understand the meditation
practice, I did participant observation, which is practicing meditation while observing. I participated in the Wednesday Morning Group Meditation to record the ritual. Through this method, I gained a first-hand personal experience in terms of how meditation practice empowers practitioners to be more aware and in what process it relates to the natural world.

I also conducted oral interviews among 12 practitioners. My population is Buddhist practitioners at the SMCD who are self-professed Buddhist believers. My interview questions include: (a) what do you usually eat? If they are vegetarians, I will ask them why they have chosen not to eat meat to determine if their decision is based on Buddhist principles. (b) Do you usually walk or drive or take bus or choose other means of transportation? If the answer is driving, I will ask them what kind of vehicle they drive to determine the fuel efficiency. (c) Do you recycle? What do you recycle and how often? (d) Do you do compost in your garden if you have one? (e) What other activities do you usually do to support environment? (f) Does the surrounding space make you feel good when meditating? (g) Do you prefer to meditate outside? Since to be green is not cheap, informants’ personal and household incomes were also investigated based on their willingness to tell. Furthermore, I fortunately had the opportunity to interview the center director. Through interviewing and recording the director, I collected the information of the environment-related programs and activities to explore how the SMCD leads to an ecological life style.

My ethical obligation is to do no harm (American Anthropological Association 2012). I kept personal information confidential and not forced individual to share
information within the community that might damage their social reputations. Since my interview questions involved informants’ incomes, I used a coding system for confidentiality of data and always asked for permission before I did anything on my informants. I also asked for permission to record my informants. The audios helped to record a full data. I input the data into my computer after the interview was completed.
Chapter Two: Background

Many Buddhist scholars and environmentalists promote Buddhism as ecological religion because of its intimate associations with nature. Therefore, terms such as “green Buddhism” or “eco-friendly Buddhism” have been used in the field of Buddhist ecology. However, the definition of “eco-friendly Buddhism” remains undefined. The definition of “eco-friendly” from the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “not environmentally harmful”. Oxford Dictionary defines it as something “not harmful to the environment”. “Green” and “eco-friendly” religions are terms referring to those that promote ecological views of things and provide a way of living well. It is supposed that “green Buddhism” is a way of life stressing the essential unity of human beings and the natural world (Cooper and James 2005).

Buddhist teachings and practices have intimate associations with nature on account of the Buddhist conception of the world, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings. This view was expressed in the influential volume work *Dharma Gaia* “The fruit of Buddhism – mindful living – cultivates a view of human beings, nature, and their relationship that is fundamentally ecological” (Badiner 1990). It is also expressed eloquently, “Buddhism views humanity as an integral part of nature, so that when nature is defiled, people ultimately suffer” (Kabilsingh 1996). Buddhist ethics follow the basic understanding that “when we abuse nature, we abuse ourselves”. The
nature-based wisdom of Buddhism treats the natural world as a whole that is called “cosmic ecology” by scholar Francis Cook (Swearer 2006).

**Early Buddhist Views on Nature**

A Buddhist principle of ecology can be found in early Buddhism and Buddhist literature from the following aspects: particular texts (*vinaya*), the life of the Buddha, and Buddhist doctrines. Eco-apologists consider Buddhist monks’ style of life as environmentally friendly, and point out some *vinaya* rules such as those that prohibit monks from cutting down trees, from eating animal meat, and from contaminating water (Swearer 2006). Since forests are home for wildlife, monks also respect the animals that live in forests. The first precept in Buddhism is “Do not kill”. Another widely recognized credence in Buddhism is that trees play a crucial role in the life of the Buddha. Buddha was born in a grove of saltree; Buddha’s study was in the company of a banyan; and his enlightenment was attained under a tree. The early Buddhist community lived under large trees, in caves, and in mountainous areas. In addition, Buddhist doctrines express ecological significances. Teachings such as *paticca samunppada* (interdependent co-arising), *anatta* (not-self), *sunnata* (emptiness), and *tathagatagarbha* (the womb of suchness) represent a nondualistic, nonhierarchical, holistic worldview, which conjoin all beings together (Swearer 2006). In the Dharma – the teaching of Buddhism about a way to end suffering – *beings* refers to both nonhumans and humans, which implies ecological and environmental concerns in Buddhism. The following charts (Fig. 1, 2) show the pivotal core principles of all Buddhism.
The Four Noble Truths, upon which Buddha’s whole scheme of life hinges, are these:

1. Life on earth is full of suffering
2. Suffering is generated by desire
3. The extinction of desire involves extinction of suffering
4. The extinction of desire is the outcome of the righteous life.
Compassion (Karuna) and loving kindness (metta) for all beings arises directly from the understanding of suffering (Kaza 2002). The process of self-control suggested by Buddha will enable human beings to conserve natural resources (Karin and Raj 2011).

**Buddhist Environmental Ethics**

The rapid development of industrialization and urbanization process of human beings has been a cause of the pollution of the natural environment. A modern dilemma is the rapid development of economy that depends on insatiable consumption and the consciousness of acting without degrading people themselves and their environment. We are not threatened just by the pollution of the environment, but also by an insidious pollution of the mind (Silva 1990). As R.M Salas has pointed out in the last century, the Buddha’s attempt to overcome unwholesome human craving can provide an ethic for the next century (Silva 1990).

In general, Buddhist philosophy sees greed and desire as the root of causing all suffering. Human beings are no longer satisfied with a simple way of life and they are looking for more services and goods. Two primary modern Buddhist views, interdependence and compassion, suggest an ecological concept of living to support environment.

The heart of Buddhist understanding suggests that all things – objects and beings – exist interdependently (Badiner 1990). With this concept in mind, we see everything in our experience is part of us and we are part of it. American ecologist Aldo Leopold defines ethics as dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants as
“community” (1997). As Leopold asserts, an individual is always located in a social environment, an individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts and it is not separate from the nature. David Barnhill also explains the notion of nature as community in the volume *Buddhism and Ecology*:

> Seeing nature as community is a “radical” perspective: it changes at the root level our view of nature. We can see some implications of this perspective by considering how it opposes the traditional view of nature as “Other”… If nature is our community, then it is not separate from us but rather is the fundamental existential context of our lives… And when we treat something as Other, there is little if any sense of obligation to it. But if nature is our community, then our obligation is to preserve it (Barnhill 1997).

The Buddhist understanding of interdependence implicates the idea that we have the responsibility to preserve nature, and to participate in this preservation as community.

In Buddhist psychology, compassion is a form of empathy (Makransky 2012). We sense others’ suffering just like our own and wish to free them from it. The practice of non-harming (*ahimsa*) arises from the view of compassion. It includes several precepts such as not killing, not stealing, not lying, and it extends to all beings – not merely to those who are useful to humans. It also applies to the suffering of all plants, animals, rocks, and mountains as well as to the sufferings of human that are caused by race, class, or gender discrimination (Kaza 2002). According to Buddhism, compassion makes people better understand the nature of suffering and wish to free others from suffering.
Tibetan Buddhism is growing rapidly in Colorado. Tibetan Buddhists in Colorado account for 3% of the estimated 1 million in the U.S., putting the state behind only New York and California in the number of practitioners (Barna 2008). Boulder is home to Naropa University, which is founded by the Tibetan Buddhist monk Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, initiating the order of Kagyupa, sought to create a vision of “enlightened society” in North America by founding schools and a “secular” meditation program called Shambhala Training, which is a part of Shambhala International Community (Lavine 1998).

Chögyam Trungpa arrived in Boulder in early 1970 to teach a course on Buddhism at the University of Colorado (Bye 2005). Later, Naropa was founded in 1975 under the idea of mixing contemplative studies with Western intellectual and artistic traditions. Naropa Institute (the name was changed into University in 1999) was a Buddhist-inspired, ‘nonsectarian’ liberal arts college. According to Marvin Casper, a professor at Naropa, the basic idea of beginning of the school was that “if you look at things from different perspectives, you can get to their essence” (Bye 2005). Today, Naropa has been developed into a fully accredited university with a number of undergraduate and graduate programs.

There are dozens of Buddhist centers and several retreats in Colorado. The Colorado Rockies provide a safe and supportive environment for meditation and retreat. Significant Buddhist site such as Great Stupa is located at a meadow at the upper end of Shambhala Mountain Center’s main valley, which is built as a memorial to Chögyam
Trungpa Rinpoche. The rocky peaks and forests in Colorado support Buddhist practitioners with their health, deepened awareness and transformation. As it is asserted by Shambhala Mountain Center: the center combines the natural beauty, unspoiled wilderness, blue skies and crisp mountain air with the comforts of a modern retreat campus (Shambhala Mountain Center website).

The Global Shambhala

In the beginning of the book of *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, Chögyam Trungpa explains the name “Shambhala”. It is a story about a legendary kingdom, a place of peace and prosperity in Tibet (Trungpa 1984). It is said that the teachings that have been given personally by Buddha are preserved and considered as the most profound wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism. The legend makes people believe that practicing meditation and following the Buddhist path of loving kindness and concern for all beings could lead them to enlightened society.

In order to reach the Shambhala vision, that is creating an enlightened society, we should discover and foster our fundamental nature of basic goodness to face and antidote the world’s great problems. According to Shambhala principles, every human being has a basic nature of goodness, and discovering real goodness comes from appreciating very simple experience (Trungpa 1984). When we experience the world’s goodness, we are trying to understand how we live and our relationship with ordinary life. It is considered by Shambhala tradition that the world is in turmoil; we harm ourselves, each other and our planet. Shambhala is both a spiritual path of study and meditation that
helps us work with our minds, as well as a path of serving others and engaging with our world (Shambhala website). Today, Shambhala is becoming a global community that brings together thousands of members and friends all over the world. According to the Shambhala website, it has online communities and more than 200 Shambhala centers, groups, and individual members, located in over 50 different countries. Shambhala centers offer meditation, study, and contemplative practice, as well as a range of cultural and social activities.

The current lineage holder of the Shambhala teachings is Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, one of the most revered meditation masters of Tibet. He is an incarnation of Mipham the Great, and son of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Born in India and grew up in Boulder, Colorado, his background embraces both Eastern and Western cultures (Shambhala Mountain Center).
Chapter Three: Literature Review

The literature search focused on this project was multi-disciplinary. Since the main task of the project was to examine the American Buddhist influences on environment, various topics such as religion, ecology, and American Buddhism history were addressed. For over a century, considerable research has been assembled on the relationship between Buddhism and the environment that provides multiple perspectives on the subject. Topics related to the development of American Buddhism and Buddhist practice are also given attention. The findings of this research, from Buddhist scholars and environmentalists, help to better understand the “green” level of American Buddhism.

Buddhism and Ecology

Research on the co-evolution of Buddhism and environmental consciousness has been a developing topic of research since the 1890s. Daisetz Suzuki, the Japanese author of books on Zen Buddhism, has been recognized as one of the first “to bring any serious attention to Buddhism as an environmentally-friendly tradition” to the West (Johnston 2006). Suzuki’s first work in English was published in 1907, and another significant book An Introduction to Zen Buddhism was published in 1934 (Johnston 2006). Other scholars such as Gray Snyder, an
American poet, began to publish essays on Buddhism in the 1960s. In his work, Snyder contemplates the concerns of Buddhist spirituality and nature. At the same time in the early 1960s, academics working in the fields of both sociology and ecology began to evaluate Buddhist perspectives on nature, and have found Buddhist doctrines and Buddhist practice to be extremely useful (Williams 1997). Buddhist masters in both Asia and the West began to dedicate themselves to the development of a sense of concern for the environmental crisis in the late 1980s. Well-known Buddhist leaders, such as Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama, have been drawing upon ecological concerns in their speaking and writings.

Important scholarly conferences and publications on Buddhism and ecology were more close to the present. One of the first and most important conferences on Buddhism and nature took place in Middlebury, Vermont in 1990 (Johnston 2006). A second important conference in this academic field was hosted by The Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) at Harvard University (Johnston 2006). As products, some important scholarly publications were written, one of which is the volume *Buddhism and Ecology*, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (1997). This scholarly volume that brought together scholars of Buddhism and environmentally engaged Buddhists includes representative cultural areas such as Southeast Asia, East Asia, and North America, and specific examples from Japan, Thailand and United States. In this book, twenty religionists and environmentalists examine Buddhism's understanding of the natural world, sections deal specifically with Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and American Buddhism.
These religionists and environmentalists took a narrow view to investigate the “green” theme in Buddhist literature and practice, little research, however, pays attention to anthropological or sociological perspectives (Johnston 2006).

One of the essays is anthropological work written by Leslie Sponsel and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel. It discusses an ideal attribute that the Thai Buddhist monastic community may have to promote a green society in Thailand. The authors hypothesize that the local monastic communities of Thailand have the potential to promote a green society and that some actually do so (Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel, 1997). This essay discusses the limitations of the monastic community and analyzes the special status and power that the local community may have to work as a model of green society.

In the section of American Buddhism, essays focus on the view of nature as community and American Buddhist response to the land. David Barnhill interpreted Gary Snyder’s view of nature as community. As it has been discussed in the last chapter, seeing nature as community changes at the root level of our view of nature (Barnhill 1997). The characteristic of Snyder’s thought of Buddhism and ecology was that he saw “each in terms of the other”. He has taken a Buddhist idea to suggest an ecological perspective and therefore considered our relationship to nature as being a part of the community (Barnhill 1997). Barnhill also mentioned that Snyder’s notion of community strengthened “a deep sense of place”, which I will expand later in this chapter.

In the article “American Buddhist Response to the Land”, the author Kaza looked at two centers that are located at west coast. One is Green Gulch Zen Center and the other is Spirit Rock Meditation Center, to assess environmental practices at American
Buddhist centers and to explore how American Buddhist centers translate Buddhist environmental philosophy into actual practice. The comparison of these two rural Buddhist centers makes the analysis more convincing. Through comparing the physical environment, the history, and the visitors of the two centers, the author analyzes the strong similarities and differences that are significant in evolution of ecological culture at both sites. In order to understand the transmission of ecological culture, the notion of “The Land Ethic” has been explained: “It enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals…” (Kaza 1997) As people live on the land, they become part of the land. Perhaps the biggest difference is that Green Gulch is a residential center while Spirit Rock has never been residential. Based upon Gary Snyder’s three core aspects of the practice of a reinhabitory ecological ethic (feeling gratitude to it all; taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into your own life), the essay evaluates the two centers by examining the three aspects of practices such as Zen meal chant recite, land stewardship activities, walking meditation, etc. (Kaza 1997). At the end the essay, some interesting questions have been raised from this comparative research. The author pointed out that it is unclear whether ecological practices are primarily motivated by Buddhist tradition or by American environmentalism (Kaza 1997). It is also unclear what elements impact Buddhist centers to be more ecological in practice and concerns (Kaza 1997). For future research, the author listed some Buddhist institutions, including Shambhala Center in Colorado, for additional case study work to better understand the evolution of ecological culture and to answer these questions.
Another influential work is the edited collection *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology* (Badiner 1990). This book explores the ground “where Buddhism and ecology meet” through bringing together the significant issues of Buddhist ethics, Buddhist practice and teaching, environmental awareness, and problems of development. The essays and poems in this book explore the intimate relationship between Buddhist teachings and environment. In one essay named “Early Buddhist View on Nature”, the author Chatsumarn Kabilsingh pointed out directly, “Buddhism views humanity as an integral part of nature, so that when nature is defiled, people ultimately suffer” (1990). The relationship between Buddha and tree in Buddhist literature indicates the early intimate association: Buddha was born in a grove of saltree; Buddha’s study was in the company of a banyan; his enlightenment was under a tree; and the early Buddhist community lived under large trees, in caves, and in mountainous. “Directly dependent on nature, they cultivated great respect for the beauty and diversity of their natural surroundings” (Kabilsingh 1990).

Buddhist practice often leads to experiencing extended mind. One essay explores a sense of place and Zen practice. A sense of place is the feeling you have for where you live. It is the relationship with the local ecology including decisions about the way we use material resources in our daily life, such as we drive or take the bus; and countless sense impressions expressed by the Earth, such as when you see a sparrow with a twig in its beak, it must be nesting season. “Cultivation of a sense of place shows up in our daily life both in the local ecology and as an experience of realizing a greater degree of selflessness” (Codiga 1990). Cultivating a sense of place occurs in the local ecology and
could effectively reverse the environmentally destructive trends through recognizing selflessness. The goal of Zen practice is self-realization for all beings. By cultivating a sense of place, we will know some of nature’s myriad things well, and then may be able to establish the greater identity with all phenomena (Codiga, 108). As a result, wisdom and compassion arise from this insight. The point of view that “the entire Earth – is our genuine human body” expresses the identification with all life. Zen practice allows the local ecology, the society, and the Earth to heal themselves. Through practicing Zen, the relationship with the local ecology is cultivated. We can communicate with nature; nature speaks clearly by manifesting the truth.

The Arguments of “Green Buddhism”

Though numerous positive opinions of the intimate relationship between Buddhism and the nature have been well presented, some scholars held opposite views. Some debates about the idea of eco-Buddhism have been intense discussing what makes Buddhism “green”.

In the book *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, the authors David Cooper and Simon James attempt to provide philosophical characteristics of a Buddhist virtue ethics (Johnston 2006). They argue that it is the concern of human life that makes Buddhism “green”. Cooper and James examine environmental ethics and virtue ethics and concluded that the true connection between the religion and environmental thought begins from a concern for human well-being (2005). They argue that the view of “Buddhism is ‘green’” should be elaborated or defended because the Buddhist virtues
should be exercised with respect to non-human life and the wider world which sustains life (Cooper and James 2005). This view reveals that all Buddhist environmental concerns are based on people’s life and can be practiced. “Green Buddhism” is a very recent and modern notion with no secure basis in Buddhist tradition. The claim that all life is dependent on each other remains highly abstract and general. It provides a very weak and fragile basis where the relationship between human beings and the natural world is built (Cooper and James 2005: 110). To demonstrate their assertions, the authors specifically point out that in the literature Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays on Buddhism and Ecology, “the rhetoric of inseparability is ubiquitous…Unfortunately, these authors do not descend from such rhetoric to offer a more literal account of how they see human beings in relation to nature” (Cooper and James 2005: 110). Buddhism provides little way to explain the inseparable relationship between human beings and the rest of the living world; and the Buddhist philosophy and conceptions have no special application to the living world. Therefore, the authors conclude that the view of Buddhism is “green” is not because it teaches the inseparability of humanity from nature, rather, it is its view of human life. The true connection between Buddhism and environmental thought is to be found in Buddhist virtues.

A journal Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal (2007) gathered together five essays to try to articulate particular issues about Buddhism and nature. In this journal, James and Cooper wrote an introduction to summarize these essays. Damien Keown points out that Buddhism is in certain respects amenable to environmental concerns not because of its “worldview”, but because of its conception of
living a good human life (James and Cooper, 2007). Ecological concerns are modern issues while Buddhist cosmology is ancient. Keown asserts that the intellectual core of the tradition still conceives of the natural world in pre-modern terms; Buddhism provides no convincing answer to modern ecological problems (Keown 2007). Buddhist views regard the environmental crisis as psychological crisis. For example, Buddhists would not blame inferior technological development or poor conservation methods that mainly cause the environmental issue, rather they would blame bad behavior and attitudes such as greed or hatred (Sahni, 2004). Buddhist virtues of love (metta), compassion (karuna), gladness (mudita), equanimity (upekkha), non-greed (araga) and non-harming (ahimsa) are all supporting ecological concern. However, Buddhist virtue ethics has not been developed into a mature attitude of respect to ecology, because virtues are rooted in an ancient system of morality and are incapable to respond to such a modern issue. Keown concludes that a virtue ethics approach offers a basis for a Buddhist ecological ethics; a virtuous person might act ecologically through Buddhist teachings and practice, however Buddhist virtues could not bring the power to solve ecological problems (2007).

In another essay of this journal, John Holder discusses the question that whether or not humans are regarded as being natural on the early Buddhist conception from a quite different way of thinking. He quotes from Schmithausen’s essay “The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethic” to indicate that early Buddhists placed no value on nature because they considered the natural world as a place of “suffering, decay, death and impermanence” (1997). Early Buddhism cannot provide any special solutions to the environmental crisis because the problems we now face emerged only in the past several
centuries. However, the author points out that the way both the skeptics and the proponents of Buddhist environmentalism examined is “methodologically backward” – they tried to match the contemporary environmental ethics with the ancient doctrines and practices of Buddhism (Holder, 2007). He opposes the pessimistic assertion that the natural world is ultimately unsatisfactory and human beings are seeking to escape. Holder explores the relationship between human beings and the natural world from Buddhist conception of nature, and stresses that dukkha (dis-satisfactoriness) is the root of concern for the natural world. The early Buddhist environmental ethic is based on a concern for the suffering of all beings. He further points out that the concern for the suffering of all beings leads to a concern for the whole ecosystems where these beings live.

Ruben Habito writes that early Buddhism “provides no viable ground to support a positive and caring attitude toward the environment, from a strictly and properly Buddhist perspective” (2007). From the Buddhist perspective, the universe can be seen as a repeating cycle of the four phases: creation, maintenance, annihilation, and a return to the state of nothingness (Habito 2007). Since everything goes back to annihilation, the ecological crisis is in the stage of annihilation and there is no motivation to take any steps for ecological restoration. He analyzes Mahayana Scriptural text, including Lotus Sutra and Mahayana teachings to suggest that Mahayana traditions may possibly provide a greener view of natural world. He brings the notion of global dukkha to refer an “ailing condition” of our earth community and stresses that the Buddha’s own focus was on the individual human being’s awareness of dukkha. The author outlines a structure of the Four Noble Truths to concretize our global ecological healing in terms of a Buddhist
approach. Human beings must first be awoken to this fact. He states that an awakening to global dukkha would cultivate *bodhicitta*. “Buddhist meditative practice, whether in the Zen, Insight/Vipassana, or Tibetan tradition, can be a fertile ground for the arising and cultivation of *bodhicitta*.” (Habito, 2007) The second step is to identify the root causes of this issue, and third to envision a utopian world to inspire and empower generation by generation; and the Forth Noble Truth could be reformulated about the concrete steps to be taken.

**The Development of American Buddhism**

Academic researches on topics related to Buddhism have been conducted by American scholars since 1892 (Queen 1999). The acceptance of Buddhism in America took place in 1983 with the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago (Smith 2006). Buddhism has spread across America over 100 years. It is an ethnic faith sustained by Chinese and Japanese immigrants, as well as European converts (Smith 2006). In order to study the development of American Buddhism, we cannot avoid the preliminary questions that how Buddhism has been transformed from Asia areas mainly through books into America within the last few decades, and what kinds of change ought to be made after this encounter between the religious traditions of East and West.

As it has been counted in the volume *American Buddhism*, there were between 3 million and 4 million Buddhists in the United States in 1999, among which about 800,000 were converts (Queen 1999). Therefore, American Buddhism is composed of two parts: Asian American Buddhist immigrants and Euro-American Buddhist converts. The first
part in the book *American Buddhism* emphasizes Asian American Buddhist identities. Buddhist temples have served not only the spiritual but also the cultural and social needs. While Euro-American Buddhists focus more on spiritual need, the ethnic groups focus more on cultural function. They participate in religious ritual for the purpose of immigrant families gathering (Queen 1999). Nevertheless, it has been more than one decade since the book has been published, ethnicity, as it is predicted in the book, is diminishing. Although ethnicity continuous playing a crucial role in the Buddhist Churches of America, it is getting more “Americanization” due to “the high level of inter-marriages, new converts, and to the less ethnic-oriented fourth-generation membership” (Tanaka 1999). In *Buddhism in America*, Richard Hughes Seager even divides American Buddhist population more specifically with three defined groups: one group is Buddhist converts that are often referred to as western or Euro-American Buddhists; the second group is immigrant or ethnic Buddhists; and the third group is composed of Asian Americans who have practiced Buddhism in the United States for four or five generations, they are neither converts nor immigrants (Seager 1999).

American Buddhism has grown by leaps and bounds with a very uneven fashion. Academic theses and dissertations focus more on Zen Buddhism, but little on Tibetan Buddhism in America and on a range of Pacific Rim immigrant traditions (Seager 1999). However, despite less research on Tibetan Buddhism, the Naropa Institute always plays a crucial role in American Buddhist studies due to its pioneer spirit and perspective. Using the model of American higher education, Naropa combines meditative practice with academic discipline to provide a non-sectarian environment for liberal education. The
volume *American Buddhism* includes Robert Goss’s essay *Buddhist Studies at Naropa: Sectarian or Academic?* to discuss Chögyam Trungpa’s teaching lineages and the Americanization of Buddhist education at the Naropa Institute. Trungpa introduced a new non-Buddhist lineage of Shambhala training into his educational strategy, which develops awareness of our basic goodness, love, and sanity. When being asked about whether and to what extent Naropa University is a “Buddhist” institution, Naropa describes itself as a Buddhist-inspired, “nonsectarian” or non-Buddhist liberal arts institution (Bye 2005). It applies the Buddhist approach to education, rather than purely talking in terms of converting people to Buddhism (Bye 2005). Naropa’s 1995 self-study report quoted Trungpa to express the Shambhala vision as its institutional vision of education:

> When human beings lose their connection to nature, heaven and earth, then they do not know how to nurture their environment, or how to rule their world – which is saying the same thing. Human beings destroy their ecology, at the same time, destroy one another. From the perspective, healing our society goes hand in hand with healing our personal, elemental connection with the phenomenal world (The Naropa Institute).

Naropa’s unique educational vision and its particular emphasis on contemplative education prepare students to challenge global problems such as economic development and environmental issue. The engaged Buddhism programs equip students with the skills in community organizing, leadership, and conflict resolution.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discusses some significant researches on the theme of Buddhism and the nature. Since 1890s, Buddhism has been discussed as an environmental-friendly
tradition by academic scholars, Buddhist community, and environmentalists. One important work is the scholarly volume *Buddhism and Ecology* that examines Buddhism's understanding of the natural world. I found one of these essays written by Kaza very significant. It compares two rural Buddhist centers that are located at west coast. Kaza poses question for future study about whether ecological practices are primarily motivated by Buddhist tradition or American environmentalism. Another influential volume is *Dharma Gaia*, which explores intimate relationship between Buddhist teachings and environment. One important essay discusses a sense of place and Zen Buddhism provides research methods for my thesis project.

Arguments against the assertion that “Buddhism is green” are discussed as well. Scholars such as James, Cooper, and Keown argue that it is the concern of human life that makes Buddhism “green”; Buddhism as an ancient religion could not provide any solution for modern issue such as environmental problems. Through exploring both positive and negative attitudes towards the relationship between Buddhism and the nature, I have gained more comprehensive understanding of this theme and was able to conduct research with less bias.
Chapter Four: The Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver

In this chapter, I will look into the physical environment of the Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver, including its location, its surroundings, and inside of the Center. Besides, I have also visited the Boulder Shambhala Meditation Center and the Shambhala Mountain Center to explore their physical environments. I will compare the external physical environment between the sites in Denver and Boulder; however, I did not do most of my research at the Boulder Shambhala Meditation Center. I hope to better understand Shambhala principles and spirit that would possibly inspire our ecological awareness through my visits. Furthermore, I will explore the programs and activities in the Center that supports Buddhist principles while attempting to analyze the Center’s environmental awareness. I visited the SMCD ten times for the research throughout the winter and summer of 2015. All of the individuals I encountered kindly welcomed me even though I was not a part of their community. My goal is to explore any efforts that have been made by the Centers to promote Buddhist values and environmental attitudes, as well as to lead a life style to their practitioners. I will link to the next chapter by proposing that the physical environment of the Center “sets up” practitioners to have “environmental awareness”.

28
Building Appearance

The site of Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver is a fair distance away from the heart of Denver, though it is not very far from University of Denver campus. It took me about fifteen minutes to drive from campus to the site. The actual site is located in the second floor of a two-story building, which is surrounded by dense vegetation including trees, flowers, and grass. In front of the building, there is open ground that is planted with brushwood, cobblestone, rocks and flowers. It looks just like a large front yard of a house with a sidewalk down the middle. On the backside of the building, there is a long mound covered with trees and grass. The parking area is on the side of the building, right between the “front yard” and back mound. On the street, there are some parallel parking spaces available for visitors as well. Since the building is in the middle of a rather deserted area, the street view combined with the decoration in front of the building creates a unique and peaceful image. There is a shopping center right across the street of the meditation center. The actual Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver only occupies the second floor of the complex. The first floor of the building is open to a few individually owned businesses. However, I noticed that none of these businesses acquired an open sign, nor had customers walk in during my visits. I inferred that the lack of customers visit is due to their store location. Also the quiet atmosphere might not attract the attention of many visitors. Furthermore, compared to other buildings within this neighborhood, the SMCD area is more natural and open to the public. Returning to nature is the purpose behind the founding of the SMCD. I believe this purpose was incorporated into the blueprint by the physical expression of its architecture design. The external
environment reflects the Center’s attempt to reach a sense of inner peace. The nice front yard, the beautiful street view, and the quiet surroundings provide visitors a great meditation place.

I also went to Boulder to compare the external environments between the Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver and the Boulder Shambhala Meditation Center. It took me around one hour to drive there. In contrast with the physical environment of the SMCD, the Boulder Shambhala Meditation Center is located in a city area instead of an open meadow. Right next to it holds the First United Methodist Church of Boulder, and right across from it is the Boulder County Justice Center. The spaces in between buildings are much narrower compare to the SMCD. The building of the Boulder Shambhala Center is much taller than the SMCD; all four floors of the building are dedicated to the meditation center. The architectural design is easily recognizable since the designs are based on Tibetan Buddhist elements. The main color scheme of the building is yellow, red, black, green and white. These colors symbolize earth, fire, air, water, and cloud respectfully (blue and black are sometimes interchangeable). The flat roof on the building has white and red battens surrounding the edge of the rooftop; this highlights the special characteristics of Tibetan architecture. The whole building is featured with grandeur and symmetry. Compared the atmosphere of the SMCD, the Boulder site created a much different feeling to me. The center does not provide free parking because of the limited amount of space provided to the center, but there is some side parking around the center. Street parking that is shared with other institutions costs
$1.25 per hour. There is still a limited amount of parking to share among the businesses around it.

Comparing only external environment of these two Shambhala centers, I found that the SMCD is more open to the public; it provides a wide street view and a quiet meditation environment as well as free and spacious parking space. While walking on the path surrounded with trees and flowers on the side of the SMCD, practitioners are able to connect with nature to aid them in reaching inner peace. On the other hand, the meditation center in Boulder cultivates a much nobler and more solemn atmosphere not only because of its location but also its architectural design. These comparisons are based on the fact that both the Denver Center and the Boulder Center are branches of Shambhala Community, which are operated by the same principles and spirit. So far the Denver and Boulder are the only two Shambhala centers, besides the Shambhala Mountain Center, in the Denver area that have strong local support. Although these two centers run under the same principle; however, each meditation center brings me different feelings because of their special building appearances and natural surroundings.

**Inside the Building**

My first visit of the SMCD was landed on a snowy morning in February 2015. The whole city was covered with snow. Even though the site is not far away from where I live, the weather condition dictated that it was not going to be a nice morning commute. Snow accumulated above my ankle and it completely covered the path toward the
entrance of the center. However, from the minute I walked into the center I found myself surrounded by a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

As I opened the door, the first thing I saw was a scholar’s table against the wall with a stack of business cards and program introductions on top of it. A scroll of a Chinese ink bamboo painting hangs on the wall right above the table. The symbolism of bamboo in Chinese culture is being straightforwardness and persistent, and being able to adapt to its surroundings. Bamboo paintings, as a recognized subject of East Asian art, are extremely appreciated by many Asian cultures. The scholar’s table plus the Chinese ink painting creates a picture that is full of East Asian cultural elements.

The structure of the second floor is pretty simple: all of the rooms are on the right side, while all of the bulletin boards are on the left side of the wall. The Shambhala Meditation Room is right next to the scholar’s table, followed by Vajrayana Shrine Room, Shambhala Shrine Room, and restroom. The Shambhala Meditation Room is divided into multiple sections. The living room and kitchen are connected together in the main room. Within the main room there is another room that is dedicated to a shrine room which allows visitors to perform meditation and discuss meditation. The Shambhala Meditation Room is mainly used for Sunday Open House, Group Meditation Practice, and all kinds of meeting or group discussion. The bulletin boards are used to inform visitors and practitioners of on-going activities and upcoming events. In the hallway, there are six chairs, three sets of shoe racks, and several clothes hangers for visitors to take off their shoes and coats and feel at home.
On my first visit, I met with the center director during the Sunday Open House hour in the living room of Shambhala Meditation Room. The purpose behind the Open House is to provide opportunities to meet and discuss with others. An authorized meditation instructor is also in place to offer a talk on meditation practice and meditation instruction to anyone who needs help (Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver). The living room impressed me deeply because it is arranged just like my own apartment. The furniture includes couches, chairs, and tea table are all present; snacks are prepared on the tea table for visitors like me. Next to the living room there is a small kitchen that has cabinet and some appliance along with decorations such as plants. Coffee maker is ready with all the ingredients necessary to create freshly brewed deliciousness. Ceramic cups, instead of disposable cups, are right beside the coffee machine; it highlights the idea of environmental preservation by eliminating disposables. Right by the sink are sponges and dish soap to take care the mess after enjoying the treat. It is worth mentioning that two big trashcans are put in an eye-catching location of kitchen, one of which has a striking recycling sign on the top of the lid. Recycling instructions are illustrated with both pictures and text, giving a detailed explanation about what should be recycled and what kind of trash would not be acceptable to recycle. The other trashcan is a little smaller than the recycle bin, which is used as a general garbage pail. Having the kitchen in this room made me feeling at home. All the setup of the room gives off a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere. There are a variety of plants and flowers in each room, some of which were ikebana and others were pot plants (I will explain ikebana as one of the center programs
later in this chapter). Later during my visits, I noticed that plants and flowers were changed very often.

After I introduced myself to the director and practitioners there, I made a cup of coffee for myself and took a seat in the sofa. We all sat around the tea table, talking while drinking coffee and having some snacks. The reason that the director and I arranged our first meeting during Sunday Open House is because it would help me to get a better sense of what Shambhala is all about and what kind of meditative path the SMCD is offering. We discussed much about Shambhala teachings and spirit, and the differences of Buddhist rituals of the East and West. A short time meditation practice led by the director was right after Open House discussion. Following the instruction, I had my first attempt at a sitting meditation experience and got a preliminary idea of Shambhala teaching.

Sitting meditation is a Buddhist mental practice that helps awaken people’s genuine heart. In order to embody the Buddhist mindset, the SMCD encourages people to practice regularly, through which way the practitioners’ awareness would be enhanced.

The center director of the SMCD explained to me:

“A Lot of people come to the center with the sense of being confused or wanting something more, and what we do is we first start with where we are… We are not trying to say that you need to do more these things, but what we really encourage people to do is to practice meditation regularly.”

When someone is practicing regularly, there is a level that he could become more aware. Once he becomes more aware of the body, the foundation of mindfulness has been successfully set up. Kabat–Zinn, a famous teacher of mindfulness meditation, defined that “mindfulness is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (2012: 1). I
will expand on how sitting meditation practice cultivates mindfulness and awareness in the next chapter.

My second visit to the SMCD was on a Thursday night for a Shambhala class named Dharma Thursday: Body, Speech and Mind. It is a weekly group of sitting meditation practice that takes place every Thursday evening during January and February. After the meditation is a Dharma discussion and tea drinking. On that Thursday night, the Dharma discussion topic revolved around generosity, one of the six paramitas (the other five are discipline, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom (Trungpa, 2006)). Almost all of the twenty practitioners participated in the discussion right after the sitting meditation and actively gave their response and opinions. The only appropriate time for me to conduct my interview was after they had finished the discussion. As the night progressed, everyone was getting tired after a long day working followed by a whole evening of practice. I could completely understand if practitioners had no time or energy to answer my questions and wanted to go back home. Surprisingly, many more practitioners than I expected actively wanted to be my informants. As they said, they were also trying to be generous with their time to help me with my research, even though this was only my second time visiting the SMCD, and for most of the practitioners, this was their first time meeting me. Their trust and willingness made me feel so welcomed, and I no longer felt nervous or like an outsider.

Later in the spring, I participated in Wednesday Morning Group Meditation Practice for several times in the early morning beginning at 7:30am. Since the group meeting landed on a weekday morning, not as many people came, compared to weekday
nights or during weekend. About a half of a dozen people who showed up, most of whom were retired, to practice morning group meditation in main shrine room. In this glittering room, red and gold cushions are placed neatly into several rows on the floor. In the back of the room, there are two rows of chairs. This allows people to choose a more comfortable meditation seat to get started. Most people sit on a traditional meditation cushion while others prefer to practice meditation in a chair. A red table was in front of the room with beautiful set, including pictures of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche; two candles on each side, incense in a golden burner, and seven copper bowls filled with water. There are also two potted plants on each side of the table (plants are changed seasonally), being put together with crystal balls as decorations. A huge image of Buddha featured with Tibetan Buddhist art hangs above the table on the middle of the wall (see photo 1). The set up on the table and decorations around the table are arranged in a symmetrical pattern. Practitioners might have their own ways to set up the table, the important point is that everyone needs something that is meaningful to them that can reach their heart. Moreover, the east side of the room is customized to have a lot of windows in order to frame a great view of natural world. During the morning meditation practice, the sun shines into the room and makes the whole room extremely bright with positive energy. I preferred to sit by the window so that I could soak up the sunshine while meditating.
Programs & Activities Related to Environment

The Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver has organized many activities and classes related to the natural environment. Some of the activities are ongoing all year round while some are only available during certain months of the year.

Early Summer Ikebana took place in June of 2015. This activity lasts all day long from 10am to 5:30pm, and can be seen as a conversation with branches. Ikebana (also known as Kado) is a compound word from the Japanese ikeru (meaning “keep alive, arrange flowers, living”) and hana (meaning “flower”) (Japanese-English Character Dictionary). Ikebana, originated in China, is an ancient art of floral arrangement. In Shambhala teaching, Ikebana is a contemplative practice that awakens our senses for the natural beauty and teaches the basic patterns of harmony through arranging flowers. The
program allows practitioners to sit in silence and examine the lines and curves of stems. Working with fresh materials requires the practitioners to connect with nature and also keep an appreciative attitude of the relationship between human and nature. Shambhala teaching regards human beings as a part of nature and follows the same progression with all forms of life. Hence, we are learning about ourselves as we are when working with natural materials in Ikebana (Shambhala Kado). Through arranging of branches, flowers, water, and space, practitioners can settle down, notice the space, and uplift themselves and others. The ultimate purpose of Ikebana is not limited to make pleasant flower arrangements, but to cultivate appreciation for each moment, to work with obstacles, and develop respect for ourselves, others and all forms of life (Shambhala Kado).

The SMCD also offers meditation retreats in two forms: a weeklong practice without going far from home, and the Spring Meditation Retreat at the Shambhala Mountain Center. The former one is organized in the main shrine room of the SMCD, focusing on sitting and walking meditation, chants, talks, and discussions. The Spring Meditation Retreat offers one week or two-week outdoor retreat at the land center. Practitioners have the opportunities to go beyond the cushion to an environment in nature to further develop their deepening meditation practice. Luckily, I had the chance to personally experience the mountain center in the early autumn of 2015. The Shambhala Mountain Center is a 600-acre mountain retreat surrounded by grassy fields, trees, and streams. It provides the practitioners with views of forests, gentle meadows, valleys, and rocks. The distance from parking space to the site of the center was about a quarter mile; it provides enough parking spaces for all the visitors whom would like to participate. In
order to reach the Shambhala Mountain Center, I had to walk on a trail and traverse a wide meadow. At the entrance of the trail, there was a warning sign with the words “In order to protect our wildflowers, please do not collect plant material.” I walked down the trail and saw another notice board with a phrase on it “Please walk gently on our Mother Earth in peace with all our relations.” Under the friendly prompt there was another phrase “Mitakuye Oyasin”, which according to the board was from the Lakota language, meaning literally “all my relation” or “all are related”. This worldview of interconnectedness that is held by the Lakota people of Native America was very similar to the Buddhist understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature. This notice board further gave an explanation about why it is similar to the Buddhist understanding. When we are drinking water, it flows through our body, goes into a stream. It then turns into water vapor and goes up into the clouds, comes down as rain and then nourishes all beings again. “We are constantly transforming into something else… As an integral part of this sacred hoop of life we are not inherently separate from the beings we protect or destroy.” (Notice board in the Shambhala Mountain Center) The board also listed the names of all wild birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians.

It was during early autumn with lavender flowers on both sides of the trail were purple while the grasses turned into yellow and aspen trees became golden. If you looked at the distant mountains, they were all green with mixed Colorado blue spruce, limber pine, and fir trees all over them. These native plants put on a colorful show that paints the mountain center with a spectacle view. I enjoyed the beautiful landscape while walking through the trail and wooden bridge. The Great Stupa of Dharmakaya is located at the
upper end of the Shambhala Mountain Center’s main valley, which is built to honor Chögyam Trungpa after his death. While walking along the trail from the Shambhala Mountain Center up to the upper end, you can see this magnificent sight (see photo 2). Inside the stupa, there is an enormous Buddha stature meditating in a lotus pose. Below the Buddha stature, there are series of cushions for visitors to join Buddha in meditation. A spacious retreat in the Shambhala Mountain Center allows people to walk the trail, visit the Stupa, experience the intimate relationship with the land, and make better friends with ourselves and our world.

![Photo 2: The Surrounding of The Great Stupa (photo by the author, September 2015)](image)

Besides the long retreats, the SMCD organized outdoor meditations in Washington Park for a few times. They chose this site because it is relatively close to the SMCD and the landscape is filled with natural beauty. When practicing meditation, they
emphasized walking and being more contemplative and open to the space. They also had everyone sit in the grass, and someone led a meditation for short period time around 20 minutes. However, they do not organize outdoor meditation very often since it is not easy to find the right place. Shambhala traditions require a shrine in front of the practitioners along with incense and candles. Outdoor meditation creates a lot of difficulties in recreating the same setting used in an inside environment even though it is more natural and relevant to the idea of returning to nature. Despite the difficulties in recreating an outdoor meditation environment, the SMCD still tried to offer various outdoor activities besides meditation. They have outside barbecue every year at the High Plains Environmental Conservation Center in Loveland. The High Plains Environmental Center is located about an hour north of Denver. It has a “living laboratory” focusing on sustainable design practices to reduce the consumption of natural resources and to enhance people’s awareness and knowledge about how to live in better harmony with the land (High Plains Center). One of the core values of the High Plains Center are dedicated to educate people about what they do to enhance people’s awareness and knowledge about how to live in the world sustainably (High Plains Center). In the summer of 2015, all of Shambhala in Colorado, including the members of the SMCD, went to the High Plains Center to celebrate the summer. The purpose of this outside activity was not only to have a barbecue but also to learn about the center and to work with all the development that was happening in Loveland. Shambhala members learned about land stewardship and sustainable living through integrated examples. For instance, Shambhala members were helping the center landscape native plants. The High Plains
Center taught them that native plants, birds, and insects all have intrinsic connections, and one cannot live without others. This point of view was pretty much the same as Buddhist environmental ethic that all beings exist interdependently and are all a part of our land. It has been realized that native plants, birds and insects are being diminished because of suburban growth. By landscaping native plants, Shambhala members aim to help prevent the loss of wildlife, as well as cultivate awareness of sustainable living.

**Leading to a Life Style**

The Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver is currently renting their building to operate everything. Because of this, the SMCD is using Xcel energy instead of any wind or solar energy because the owner is not offering any access to wind or solar energy, and the center is not allowed to change it. That is also the reason why they cannot compost there. However, the SMCD is making every effort to be environmentally friendly.

The SMCD does recycle every a few days since the recycle bin gets full very quickly. They put all the recycling together, and someone takes it to properly dispose of it. The SMCD gives a highly detailed instruction about recycling in order to facilitate the level understanding of recycling to children and old people. Since programs of the SMCD are open to all ages, it has a lot of old practitioners as well as children come to visit. The SMCD offers classes for children such as Mindful Kids, and also offers day care for those children who are the part of a Shambhala family membership. Therefore, the SMCD pays particular attention to provide guidance of children’s self-awareness not only in class but
also in daily life. It is worth mentioning that the center encouraged children to create their art making of mural on the theme of rainbow, mountain, and river. Children’s artworks were displayed on Shambhala Harvest of Peace 2015, and later were hung on the bulletin board so that every visitor can appreciate them (see photo 3 and photo 4).

Photo 3: “Rainbow, Mountain, River”, drawings by the children at the SMCD

Photo 4: “Rainbow, Mountain, River”, drawings by the children at the SMCD

Photo 3&4: Photos by the author at the SMCD, September 2015.

The SMCD also pays attention to waste. They are providing ceramic cups and ceramic bowls to the public instead of disposable eating utensils. Practitioners and members there,
even visitors like me, wash our own dishes and put them back to the spots. Through this way, the center is leading a lifestyle that promoting recycling and waste management.

The SMCD offers opportunities for practitioners to do outside activities and be close to the nature. The geographic location of Colorado State provides a lot of wonderful spaces for retreat. The Front Range of the southern Rocky Mountains is located in the central portion of Colorado. It is a home for forests, wild animals, and natural plants, and is also a peaceful and hard place (because of its terrain and natural environment) to relax and remove the ego. For example, in the book *Dharma Gaia*, Suzanne Head described her retreat experience in the Sangre de Cristo Mountain in southern Colorado. She narrated to readers that she traversed the slopes several times, chose a spot a thousand feet up a cliff near a large cave to get a lot of space and a vast view; she watched the sun and clouds move across the valley to determine her movements, and was greeted from hummingbirds every morning before the sun-rise (Head 1990). Colorado provides numerous places to slow down your mind and become more synchronized with your body, gaining considerable respect for the power of gravity and nature’s rhythms (Head 1990). Shambhala Mountain Center provides such an opportunity to settle down our mind and temporarily let go of the chains that hold us back to just dwell in this peaceful wilderness. They also have an excellent land stewardship that allows practitioners to create an intimate relationship with the land. By taking care of the land and setting up the notice boards, the center is leading an ecological life style as an example for all the practitioners and thousands of visitors. Practitioners come for Buddhist teaching, but they also spend time walking in the garden, on the beach, or across the hills; “The landscape
itself is spiritually inspiring and is seen as part of the meditative experience” (Kaza 1997). Shambhala members gained more knowledge about the natural world from the mountain retreat, outdoor barbecue and other outside activities. They realized how important native plants and animals are for Colorado. Most of them have enough knowledge to inform others on how native plants save water and prevent soil erosion (personal communication with center director, June 14, 2015). The most important part is that the plants are a part of the land which is interdependent with many other lives who share the same ground.

Shambhala teachers never tell practitioners what they should do. They do not say you should recycle, or you should conserve water. However, people in the SMCD are very conscious of environmental conservation. The SMCD and the whole Shambhala community are leading an environmentally friendly lifestyle for all members. The SMCD is trying to be more careful about how much waste they have, as well as their impact on environment such as having a clean and beautiful front yard, picking up the trash and making sure that environment in the SMCD is comfortable. As a consequence, the practitioners are influenced gradually by its environmentally friendly lifestyle.

Furthermore, the specific geographical environment of Colorado will contribute to promoting the development of Buddhism, and vise versa. A lot of believers from East Coast and West Coast have been attracted to this state by its mountains and valleys, and they come here for long retreat or outdoor meditation. At the same time, with the enhancement of environmental awareness provided by Buddhist practitioners and the public, natural plants, wild animals, and community garden are in the process of being protected and restored. Culture is adaptive to the environment. Culture, rather than
genetic potential for adaption, accommodation, and survival, explains the nature of human societies (Steward, 1972:32). The environment is an important element to influence the culture of a community. Cultural and natural areas generally connect with each other because the culture represents an adjustment to the particular environment (Steward, 1972:35). Tibetan Buddhism, as a cultural system, was transmitted by Tibetan lamas to the United States and was rooted into the state of Colorado. At this point, it is unclear whether or not the rapid development of Tibetan Buddhism in Colorado is an adaptation to the environment. Yet, what Tibetan Buddhism is trying to do is that it tries to provide people who have a sense of being confused with an adaptive strategy. For instance, Colorado native plants are beautiful and easy to grow. Buddhist teachers therefore offer various opportunities to be close to them, such as Ikebana class and the High Plains activity.

As a conclusion, the Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver, part of Shambhala community, is leading an ecological friendly life style that would influence its practitioners’ environmental awareness. The physical environment of the center that includes external surroundings and internal environment presents visitors its ecological attitudes and concerns. The clean and beautiful front yard, the way of recycling, and all other efforts to become more “green” influences its practitioners. I will explore whether or not practitioners are truly influenced by the center’s life style in the next chapter. Furthermore, some of the center’s contemplative practices, such as Ikebana, awaken our sense for the natural beauty and develop our respect for all forms of life. The SMCD also organizes outside activities such as long retreat, outdoor meditation, and outside barbecue.
When practitioners are doing outside activities, they are more open to the nature and being conscious of the interdependence of all beings.
Chapter Five: Meditation Practice and Environmental Awareness

In the last chapter, I discussed Shambhala Meditation Center of Denver being used as a window to look into American Buddhism in terms of how the center embodies Buddhist mindset and how the center leads to a life style. In this chapter, I will focus on sitting meditation practice and practitioners’ life style in order to understand their levels of environmental awareness.

Sitting Meditation Practice

The Shambhala teachings focus on discovering our basic goodness. According to the Shambhala vision, the issues of the world are caused by people’s ignorance, and over appreciation of themselves. People fail to develop sympathy or gentleness; instead, we take our lives for granted or feel depressing and burdensome (Trungpa 1984: 35). The practice of meditation helps to develop our gentleness of our mind and an appreciation of our world, which has been taught and transmitted orally by Buddhist teachers throughout the last 2500 years. The regular meaning of “meditation” is similar to the word “contemplation” that emphasizes a person’s thoughts on something (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). In the Shambhala tradition, the concept of meditation is different with its regular meaning; in this instance it means unconditional meditation without any object or
idea in mind. The short-term goal of sitting meditation is to train our state of being, so we can then have our mind and body synchronized, while the final goal is to learn to be without deception, to be fully genuine and alive by discovering our basic goodness (Trungpa 1984: 37). Trungpa compared the practice of meditation to a vehicle that travels on our life journey, through which we experience all the texture of the highway, including ups and downs, hope and fear (1984: 37).

The basic process of meditation is “sitting on the ground, assuming a good posture, and developing a sense of our spot, our place on this earth.” (Trungpa 1984: 36-37) A good posture is very important for developing our sense. Meditation requires an upright posture that is seen as natural to the human body. An upright posture makes practitioners feel alive and tall; when a person sits more upright, he is ready to be a warrior. The word “warrior” here is not referring to making war on other; being a warrior is the tradition of human bravery, meaning not being afraid of who you are (Trungpa 1984: 28). With a straight back, the shoulders become straight automatically and the hands can relax naturally on the thighs. With this good posture, practitioners pay attention to both their bodies and breath. As a person breathes in and out, he is constantly in the process of dissolving and coming back to the posture. At the same time, his mind works synchronized with his breath.

When one thought takes you away completely from what you are actually doing – when you do not even realize that you are on the cushion, but in your mind you are in San Francisco or New York City – you say “thinking,” and you bring yourself back to the breath (Trungpa 1984: 40).
When practitioners use the term “thought”, it does not have to be something related to sitting meditation or Buddhism. It could be anything. When I first experienced sitting meditation, I simply followed the director’s instruction to breathe, and my thoughts arose without borders, and then I pulled myself back to the breath. My thoughts were about the thesis paper, my hometown, the birds that was singing outside the window, etc. This moment, I was thinking about what kind of job I should look for, and I turned to think what to eat for lunch the next moment. Followed the director’s “deep breath”, I went back to my breath, and back to my posture.

Developing a sense of spot means having a steady mind and rediscovering our basic goodness. In that posture, practitioners have a strong sense of being that they are there properly and genuinely; they have mind working with breath, but they always maintain body as a reference point (Trungpa 1984: 39-40). When body, breath, and mind work together, practitioners feel they are there – sitting between heaven and earth, and then they realize that the heaven, the earth, everything in the world deserve them and they deserve the whole world. They begin to appreciate the world. The significance of Shambhala meditation practice is to educate people to be honest and genuine. From being honest and genuine with themselves, people can also learn to be honest with others, with the rest of the world. Through this way, people overcome warfare in the world, and take the burden of helping this world (Trungpa 1984: 41).
Meditation Practice at the SMCD

Group meditation practice at the SMCD lasts for one hour, including bowing, sitting meditation, chanting, walking meditation, and discussion. All these parts of Buddhist ritual, except the discussion, take place in the main shrine room, with a shrine and several incenses and candles in front of practitioners. Rituals are seen by scholars of religion as windows into the larger religious worldview of a community, as rituals express the relationships to others and to people’s spiritual life within the community (Seager 1999: 4). There are many Buddhist rituals, most of which have their origins in Asia but are being transplanted and adapted to the United States (Seager 1999). Shambhala ritual strengthens Shambhala culture and expresses its values.

I fortunately had the chance to practice meditation with other practitioners. After we entered the meditation room, we first bowed to the shrine once. I picked one chanting book that is offered by the center for every practitioner, and sat down on a cushion by the window, where I could bask myself in the sunshine. When practicing, most of the practitioners prefer sitting cross-legged. We placed our hands on our knees or thighs with palm down and got well prepared for meditation. An instructor who led the meditation sat at a table facing all the practitioners. There was a large clay alms bowl with a handle wooden in it beside the table. The alms bowl of a Buddhist monk is used for begging alms in traditional Tibetan Buddhism. The practice of food offering is a means to release selfishness in Asian Buddhist rituals. In Shambhala meditation, the alms bowl is no longer used for food begging; instead, it is now used as a gong to attract practitioners’ attention and to start meditation. We started our meditation after the instructor beat the
alms bowl for three times. We closed our eyes and began to pay attention to our breathing and our mind. I felt peaceful and relaxed by breathing in and out. Since this was a weekly group meditation practice, the instructor did not give any special instructions to guide our meditation. However, through letting my body on the cushion and my mind in my body, I automatically slow down my mind and felt more aware. I expanded my awareness to recognize any sound or smell or sensation. My awareness became more open and I was aware of any noise; I heard people were chatting, cars were moving around, and leaves were rustling. Then I paid attention to my mind again with a deep breathing, bringing peacefulness and calmness.

The next part followed by sitting meditation was chanting. Shambhala chanting text makes reference to the nature world. Words such as “lotus”, “ocean”, “sun”, “moon”, “tiger”, and “lion” are referred to several times.

…This world of water, trees, rocks, sky, and earth is our heritage. This natural wonderment is our original playground… When we good travelers are intoxicated with our seeming immortality, remind us that death is always following us. We should sip life’s every moment like our last drop of water (Shambhala Chanting Book).

The sentences and phrases that related to natural world in the chanting book further demonstrate that all beings exist interdependently; everything in our experience is part of us and we are part of the natural world. Shambhala lineage sees our world as a treasure and we should treat every being with gentleness and compassion.

Walking meditation was right after chanting. Practitioners walked around the room more slowly than we would normally for eight to ten minutes. We folded our hands and relaxed them in front of our abdomens. My head was relaxed and my gaze was fixed
down. This posture allows my awareness focus on my steps. We slowed down our steps enough so that we could notice the lifting of the foot and the stepping on the ground. Movement can strengthen our awareness and is a wonderful opportunity to cultivate mindfulness (Weisman and Smith, 2011). Through the process of “stepping - lifting”, one could “notice the shift of weight and the gradations of pressure that happen from one foot to the other” (Weisman and Smith, 2011). Practitioners are more aware of the ground where their feet are placing on. Outdoor walking meditation even offers better opportunities for the feet and mind to get an intimate connection with the earth. Practitioners are not only feeling the rhythm of walking, but also the nature’s rhythms and the power of gravity. They are absorbing the wild energy of the land as well. As I discussed, sitting meditation has the process of connecting with natural environment by being more aware to recognize any sound or smell or view. Similarly with sitting meditation, walking meditation interacts with nature world by stepping on the ground and focusing on the sensation of walking.

We alternated periods of sitting meditation (15 – 20 minutes per period) with walking meditation (8 – 10 minutes per period) for one hour to one and half hours in total. Beating the alms bowl by instructor means starting or ending each period. After we finished practicing meditation, we put the chanting book back on the table (the SMCD does not allow chanting book to be taken home) and bowed to the shrine again to end up meditation. The last segment was discussion that took place in living room. All practitioners sat around the tea table, talking about any topics that are happening or interesting. We discussed a lot about the weather, the landscape in or around Denver, and
our feelings of meditation or outdoor activities. Shambhala meditation practice, as one form of the Buddhist ritual, offers a spiritual path of engaging with our world and strengthens Shambhala vision and Shambhala community.

**Our Basic Goodness**

The reason that Shambhala meditation practice offers a spiritual path of serving all beings and engaging with our world is because it helps to discover our basic goodness and develop our gentleness and compassion.

Trungpa emphasized the importance of discovering our basic goodness, on the basis of which people can be honest and genuine and help this world. Basic goodness here is not a “for” or “against” view, nor opposed to bad, instead, it is unconditional, or fundamental (Trungpa 1984: 42-43). According to Trungpa, the goodness refers to those things that are there already and beyond the willingness of human being. For instance, earth is always earth; heaven is always heaven; the four seasons occur free from anyone’s demand; whether or not you like it, day and night are always there (Trungpa 1984: 43). Human beings are living in the world because the earth allows us to stand on it, the air allows us to breathe, and the sun gives us light and warmth. Because of the alternation of day and night, the four seasons, the landscape, the buildings and cities, and all the other natural laws and orders, human being get survived. These natural laws and orders are basic goodness.

People often take for granted this goodness because it is so basic, it can easily be forgotten. However, Shambhala teachings insist that we should appreciate what we have.
We should appreciate sunlight that gives us vegetation, appreciate rain and dew that offer water, we should also appreciate ourselves as human beings, since we have passion, aggression, and ignorance, and our body is equipped with digestive and respiratory system and everything that is necessary to keep our body healthy and functioning. Human existence is a natural situation, which has the same principle with the law and order of the world, and it is workable and efficient (Trungpa 1984: 44).

In Shambhala tradition, the first step to realize our basic goodness is to appreciate what we have by asking us what we are, who we are, where we are, and how we are as human beings (Trungpa 1984: 44). The process of appreciating our world is a process of awakening our heart. In Buddhist tradition, the idea of bodhicitta is “awakened heart”. The sitting practice of meditation is a good way to rediscover our basic goodness and to awaken our genuine heart, because we are open to ourselves, and being willing to face our state of mind.

When a person practices sitting meditation with that good posture, he starts to appreciate the world and awakens his genuine heart, his mind synchronizes with his body. When he looks at a tree, he is not just looking; rather he is seeing something beyond a simple tree. He might see the leaves turning brown and falling off the tree, and then realizes seasonal alteration. Looking is the first projection of synchronization of body and mind, and the more you look, the more inquisitive you have, the more you are bound to see (Trungpa 1984: 53). Since the practitioner is genuine and honest, his looking process is unrestricted and he could have so much to look at. He has nothing to lose because he already removed his ego, so that he could settle down and appreciate the world genuinely.
When he is seeing everything in the world with his awakened heart, he realizes that mountains are full of life, trees are so tall and straight, bees and butterflies are singing and dancing while flying. He sees red as passionate, yellow as harvest, green as alive, etc. … He sees all beings in the world as they all have feelings. He appreciates everything around him and would like to explore the entire universe.

With the synchronization of body and mind, practitioner starts to cultivate a sense of place that is the feeling you have for where you live. As I mentioned in chapter three, people are cultivating sense of place through countless decisions about the way we use material resources in our daily life. People decide whether or not they should recycle papers and cans; if they should take a bus or drive; if they are awakened by birdsong before sunrise; if they could tell where the tap water comes from and where all dirty water goes. Meditation practice is a means to identify with the local ecology and to express this identification (Codiga 1990).

**Practitioners’ Life Style**

I had the opportunity to speak with practitioners at the SMCD by asking them several questions related to the natural environment in order to understand their life style and environmental awareness. My interview questions were quite simple and easy to answer so that they would not feel too overwhelmed, and could give the answers with high credibility. The questions are as follows:

A. What do you usually eat? (If you are vegetarians? If yes, why?)
B. Do you usually walk or drive or take bus or other? (If drive, what kind of vehicle?)

C. Do you recycle? (If yes, what do you recycle and how often?)

D. Do you do compost in your garden if you have one?

E. What other activities do you usually do to support environment?

F. Does the surrounding space make you feel good when meditating?

G. Do you prefer to meditate outside?

Some of my informants truly impressed me. When being asked about “What activities do you usually do to support environment?” My second informant, who looks like forty to fifty years old, told me that she arranges 100 percent wind energy at her house, as well as “on demand hot water heater” which could save energy since it heats water only upon demands. Moreover, she composes both in her garden and to the city program. Denver Compost Collection Program accepts all organic material such as yard debris, meat, bones and dairy scraps that are collected by program participants. “I collect all yard debris and the waste that worms won’t eat … they have a very hot compost machine, it takes bones, meat, and things that worms do not get.” (Personal communication, February 5, 2015) She mentioned that she used to be a vegetarian. Her reason for not eating meat was because of environmental issues. She was just starting to eat organic meat half a year ago since her memory was not good and meat helps memory. This lady unfolded a strong sense of place that she was not only acting eco-friendly but also learned the knowledge that related to environmental conservation. She learned the
operating principle of electric tankless water heater, and the city environmental program in Denver. She even learned how the compost machine works.

Not every practitioner knows well about compost or recycle and already participants actively. However, most of them are doing their best to either learn those environmental activities or devote themselves to environmental conservation within their power. The first informant who was close to being vegetarian was still learning about compost. She learned from her children, who are very green oriented, and also from watching videos on the greening environment. Learning how to grow her own vegetables was another activity to support environment. Her vehicle was Toyota Prius which is a hybrid electric sedan with about 46 miles/gallon, while her personal and household incomes ranked the highest category, over $50,000 and over $100,000 respectively (personal communication, February 5, 2015). I therefore conclude that she is cultivating a strong environmental awareness because she chose a highly gas efficient vehicle (when talking about her vehicle, she could say exactly about its fuel consumption) not due to economic limit and she was willing to grow her own vegetable in her yard even though it takes up more time.

The fourth informant, who has already been practicing Buddhist meditation for 35 years, also showed his environmental awareness through answering the questions. He tried to recycle everything that could be recycled such as containers, plastics, cardboards, and also do compost in his balcony. He preferred meditating outside and was trying to do it when he had chance. Taking his income into account (unemployment at this point, before was second lowest for both personal and household incomes), he did what is right
for environment within his own power, such as composting in his balcony when he has no yard or garden (personal communication, February 17, 2015).

Besides the recycling and composting that were investigated throughout my interview questions, informants stated their own ways to support environment, many of which I found very interesting. For example, a 92 years old practitioner has solar panels in his house. Additionally, he has “zero-scaping garden”, which is also known as xeriscaping, to reduce the requirement of water from irrigation (personal communication, April 8, 2015). This landscaping conserves fresh water. Another lady who has practiced Shambhala meditation for 4 years did not do compost, however, she was extremely cautious with the packaging for the products she bought. She felt uncomfortable with the hard palstic, which is the main reason that she does not shopping at Costco (personal communication, February 19, 2015).

When being interviewed, the seventh informant, who led the morning group meditation, mentioned that she believes keeping a nice green space in her garden is important for the environment (personal communication, February 25, 2015). Having a clean and beautiful garden and making sure the environment is comfortable is another activity to support our environment. This point of view is quite similar with the SMCD center’s attitude towards the natural environment. “We are trying to be more careful about how much waste we have, also our impact on environment like having a clean front yard, picking up the trash and making sure that the physical environment makes people feel good” (the SMCD Director, personal communication, June 14, 2015). Practitioners at
the center were doing exactly the same thing with what the center was trying to do to help the natural environment.

One informant told me that she normally dried her clothes by air. 50% of her laundry was air-dried. She also washed everything in cold water. She was conscious of electricity consumption. “I try to turn lights off” (personal communication, February 17, 2015).

Not every informant indicates a high level of environmental awareness. Some of the informants’ behaviors were in conflict with their environmental concern. For example, my last informant with higher environmental consciousness did not compost since his house does not offer it. “I am recycling things everyday, but my house does not offer compost, which is too bad” (personal communication, June 14, 2015). Denver recycling and compost collection programs require residents to apply for recycle bins and schedule for pickup service (City and County of Denver). The eighth informant whose vehicle was a truck realized that his car is less fuel-efficient, so that he tried to not drive too much (personal communication, February 25, 2015). However, practitioners at the SMCD exposed their own ways to be aware of environmental issues, such as having solar energy, keeping a clean yard, or being cautious with packaging material.

**Codification of Interview Results**

In this section, I will analyze the data that I collected from Buddhist practitioners through oral interview at the SMCD. I will list all the questions and their brief answers to visually illustrate their environmental awareness. The interview questions are unable to
embody every aspect of environmental issue, nor to fully reflect people’s environmental consciousness. However, we could still look into the level of their attitudes and awareness by studying the first-hand data. The final part of data analysis is a quantitative comparison between Buddhist practitioners’ environmental consciousness and non-Buddhists’ environmental consciousness.

Figure 3: The informants’ answers for Question A&B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants No.</th>
<th>What do you usually eat?</th>
<th>Do you usually drive?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Do not eat meat for breakfast or lunch</td>
<td>Drive; Toyota Hybrid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Used to be. Now start to eat meat, organic only</td>
<td>Drive; Subaru Forester; cut back on driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Not vegetarian, even eat junk food sometimes</td>
<td>Drive; Toyota Corolla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Not vegetarian, eat everything</td>
<td>Walk and take bus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Vegetarian</td>
<td>Drive; Toyota Hybrid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Not vegetarian, but minimize eating meat</td>
<td>Drive; Subaru Forester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Not vegetarian, but minimize eating meat</td>
<td>Drive; Truck; cut back on driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Not vegetarian, but minimize eating meat</td>
<td>Drive; Truck; cut back on driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Not vegetarian, eat everything</td>
<td>Drive and walk; Lexus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Not vegetarian, eat everything</td>
<td>Drive; Lexus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Not vegetarian, but minimize eating meat</td>
<td>Drive and walk; Honda CR-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Not vegetarian, organic meat only</td>
<td>Bike and walk; Subaru</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unexpectedly, most of my informants responded with a no to being a vegetarian, which was different with what I had expected before. Only 1 out of 12 informants (8%) was a vegetarian, while 4 of them (33%) claimed that they eat everything. It is worth noting that 7 out of 12 people (58%) were cautious of eating meat because of environmental reasons; they either choose organic meat or minimize eating meat. They explained that they paid extra attention to not eating unethical meat. If they have to eat meat due to the body needs, they preferred to choose organic meat because it has less of a negative environmental impact and healthier for human body. Practitioners’ dietary attitudes were influenced by the center and Shambhala tradition. The SMCD does not encourage practitioners to become vegetarians, but they do emphasize the importance of
balanced diet. However their idea of balanced diet does not include too much animal product (the center director, personal communication, June 14, 2015).

According to the data I gathered, 10 out of 12 practitioners (proximately 83%) usually drive when they go somewhere, and 11 out of 12 people (proximately 92%) do have their own vehicles, which are high percentages. However, among these 11 practitioners, 64% of them recognized their vehicles as fuel-efficient. I noticed that there are two people owning Toyota Hybrid that can save much gas. Considering their incomes of both personal and household (above average), the reason they choose a Hybrid is mostly about their environmental consciousness, and not their need to save on gas money. “We have a lot of people with Hybrid at this center” said the center director (personal communication, June 14, 2015). The data of this interview question shows that most people at this center own vehicles and they prefer to choose fuel-efficient vehicles. Moreover, many practitioners prefer walking and bicycling; 4 out of 11 people (approximately 36%) express that they try not to drive too much.

Figure 4: The informants’ answers for Question C&D

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants No.</th>
<th>Do you recycle?</th>
<th>Do you do compost?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Yes. All bottles and cans; always</td>
<td>Just started, still learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Yes. Everything that I can; always</td>
<td>Yes, room compost and city compost program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Yes. Paper, glass, cardboard, plastic; always</td>
<td>No, I have no garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Yes. Container, plastic, cardboard; always</td>
<td>Yes, in my balcony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Yes. Everything that I can; always</td>
<td>Yes, in my garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Yes. All papers and cans; every week</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Yes. Everything that I can; always</td>
<td>Yes, in my garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Yes. Glass, cardboard, plastic; always</td>
<td>Used to do it. Not right now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Yes. Everything that I can; always</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Yes. Every week</td>
<td>Used to do it. Now too old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Yes. Everything that I can; always</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Yes. Paper, cardboard, can; everyday</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4: The oral interview data collected from SMCD (the author, 2015)*
The questions C and D closely relate to people’s environmental consciousness and environmental behavior. 12 out of 12 people (100%) claimed that they recycle more than one items, and 3 of them mentioned that Denver has a recycling program that picks up recycling things collected by residents every other week. 5 out of 12 people (approximately 42%) were doing compost, while 2 people used to do it. In total, 100% of my informants recycle and 58% of them have composted or have been composting.

Figure 5: The informants’ answers for Question E

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants No.</th>
<th>Other activities to support environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Try to grow my own vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>100% wind energy; on demand hot water heater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Dry cloth by air; try to turn lights off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Worked as a philosophy instructor to teach students special aspects on environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Learn and write Zerofootprint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Be cautious with packaging material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Keeping a nice green garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Try not to drive a lot; have a bicycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Be not wasteful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Have solar in my house; use xeriscaping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Visiting Rocky Flats Cold War Museum and learning radioactive contamination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Try not to drink cow’s milk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the city recycle program in Denver more or less impacted on people’s awareness and led them to recycling, the answers of question E indicate informants’ own consciousness and willingness to support environment through different ways. Some of the activities are untraditional, such as learning and writing Zerofootprint, which is a software that helps companies and individuals measure, track, and manage their environmental impact (Mourtada, 2010). One significant activity that impressed me was visiting Rocky Flats Cold War Museum to learn radioactive contamination of the Denver area. The Rocky Flats Plant was a nuclear weapons production facility located about 15 miles away from the city of Denver. The Plant has been shut down and people began to
remove surface contamination until 1990s. However, the underground contamination will be residual for thousand years. The wind from the Plant blows contamination toward populated areas of Denver that would cause long-term public health issue. “Still a lot of people here do not realize the consequence of radioactive contamination” Dr. Prince from University of Denver told me (personal communication, Oct 2014). This informant already realized this environmental issue and concerned about its potential risk. Even though his activity was indirectly involved with environmental support, visiting the museum, learning radioactive contamination, and making donation are all uplifting environmental awareness.

Figure 6: The informants’ answers for Question F&G

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants No.</th>
<th>Does the surrounding space make you feel good when meditating?</th>
<th>Do you prefer to meditate outside?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>No, because it is distracting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>No, it is inconvenient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>No, no shrine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Yes, when I walk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>I like outside, but prefer inside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>I like outside, but prefer inside</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The last interview question was about their feelings of meditation spaces. 100% informants stated that they feel good with the surrounding space when meditating. However, only 6 out of 12 informants (50%) expressed their preference of outside meditation. The other half of informants claimed that they prefer inside meditation since outside meditation is distracting or inconvenient. Similay, the SMCD has difficulty to offer outdoor meditation since the inconvenience in recreating outdoor meditation.
environment. One informant pointed out that she usually meditates when she walks, which would be a great way for both meditation and being close to nature.

**Comparison Using Descriptive Statistics**

In order to compare environmental consciousness between Buddhists and non-Buddhists, I collected data about Americans’ environmental consciousness from the website of General Social Survey (GSS), which conducts a data-collection program based on scientific research. On GSS, there are a lot of surveys about environmental consciousness, many of which are very similar with the oral interview questions. The data collected from GSS relate to “eating meat”, “recycle”, and “drive” that are illustrated as follows:

Chart 1: Percentages of people who refuse to eat meat for environmental reasons

![Chart 1: Percentages of people who refuse to eat meat for environmental reasons](image)

Chart 1: Data from GSS, 2006

Data from GSS illustrates that majority of participants (69%) never refuse to eat meat for environmental reasons, while only 3% of them always to refuse for
environmental reasons. The percentage of participants who often and sometimes refuse to eat meat is 28% in total. Compared with what I collected from the SMCD, 33% of informants eat everything, which means they never refuse to eat meat for environmental reasons; while 58% of them either sometimes or often refuse to eat meat; and 8% of my informants always refuse to eat meat. A column chart has been drawn to illustrate the comparison.

Chart 2: A Comparison Between Non-Buddhists and Buddhists for Eating Meat

From chart 2, we could easily conclude that Buddhists refuse to eat meat more often or pay more attention on what kind of meat they eat than non-Buddhists.
Chart 3: Percentages of recycling cans and bottles.

![Chart 3: Data from GSS, 2006](image)

Chart 3 shows that 36% and 24% of the participants recycle cans and bottles always and often respectively, while 4% of them never recycle. By contrast, 100% of my informants asserted that they recycle the things that should be recycled very often.

Chart 4: Percentage of people who drive less for environmental reasons.

![Chart 4: Data from GSS, 2006](image)
Chart 4 shows the percentages of frequency that people drive less because of environmental reasons. More than half participants (58%) never cut back on driving for environmental reasons. Concluding from what I collected through oral interview, 4 informants asserted that they tried not to drive too much to support environment, and 7 informants owned fuel-efficient vehicles. Only 2 informants neither cut back on driving nor owned fuel-efficient vehicles, with an extremely low percentage of 17%, which is much lower than non-Buddhist.

As a conclusion of this chapter, Shambhala meditation practice, which focuses on body, breath, and mind, educates people to be honest and genuine. With a genuine heart, people can also learn to be honest with others, with the rest of the world. We start to appreciate the world and cultivate a sense of place that would awaken our environmental awareness. I gave some examples of practitioners’ life style to indicate their environmental attitudes. I also analyzed the data of oral interview that I gathered from the SMCD and compared it with the data from General Social Survey website. I conclude that Buddhist practitioners have a higher level of environmental consciousness than non-Buddhists.
Chapter Six: Discussion

It had been discussed for a few decades by Buddhist believers and environmentalists that if Buddhism is an “eco-friendly” religion. Although a large number of scholarships present a positive attitude of the powerful interconnection between Buddhism and nature, some scholars argue that there is nothing fundamentally “green” or the idea of eco-Buddhism is inappropriate. However, even those who disagree with the appropriation of Buddhism for ecological ends in the end believe “that Buddhism can support at least what might be called a strong anthropocentric environmental ethics” (Johnston 2006). Buddhist philosophical ethics of “selflessness” (anatman), “interdependence” (paticca samunppada) and “non-violence” (ahimsa) suggest that Buddhism has been related to environmental consciousness.

To give my own point of view, I conducted my field research at Shambhala Meditation Center in Denver to evaluate American Buddhist ecological attitudes and values. I collected data mainly through participant observation and oral interview. I have discussed environmental attitudes from institution level (the SMCD) and individual level (practitioners) to see how the center leads to an ecological life style and how practitioners are influenced by Buddhist practice. I concluded that Buddhism in Colorado relates in all
different ways to the environment through the Buddhist values, beliefs, programs, and practices.

**The Discussions of Buddhist Virtue Ethics**

In the literature review section, I have presented that some scholars who argue with the appropriation of Buddhism for ecological ends assert that there is nothing fundamentally “green” about Buddhist religious ideology because the ecological issue is a modern problem while Buddhism has an ancient cosmology. Keown pointed out that virtue ethics focus on what sort of person we are, rather than what sort of action we should perform. Therefore, he concluded that Buddhist teachings indeed provide the basis for an environmental virtue ethic, but could not bring the power to solve ecological problems.

However, the way that Buddhist teachings are trying to awaken us is its virtue ethics — considering “who we are” or “what kind of human we should become”, rather than saying what kind of action we should take. As the center director discussed, Buddhist teachers never encourage people to be vegetarian or to reject leather jackets; they never tell practitioners what they should do. People become very conscious of environmental conservation through practicing meditation.

Moreover, scholars such as Keown, James, Cooper, and Habito who hold the negative attitudes, in the end all believe that Buddhism can support a strong environmental ethics. Lucas Johnston stated in his article:
These debates about Buddhist ethics indicate just how contested interpretations of some texts and traditions can be... Buddhism ethics are not completely amenable to Western philosophical categories, but for the purposes of comparative work, the discourse of Buddhism ethics still seems to be one of the most promising place for cultivating cross-cultural cooperative ecological efforts (2006).

Meditation Practice and Shambhala Teachings

It has been widely pointed out that Buddhist thinking opens up new possibility for ecological thinking (King 2009: 118). “Socially engaged Buddhism” is used to refer to the application of the dharma to social issues such as civil rights, nuclear weapons, and environmentalism (Seager 1999: 201-202). The fundamental principle of engaged Buddhism is to acknowledge the truth of the interdependence of all beings.

I have discussed about Buddhist meditation in the previous chapter in terms of why and how it connects with the natural environment, as well as in which process it helps improve practitioners’ environmental awareness. Shambhala teachings emphasize cultivating enlightened awareness through meditation. It focuses on discovering our basic goodness by developing our sense. Shambhala meditation requires a good posture so that our body and breath can be synchronized. When body, breath, and mind work together, practitioners develop a sense of place to feel everything surrounded – the earth, the heaven, the air, etc. From sitting between heaven and earth and being exposed to the natural world, practitioners begin to be honest and genuine with themselves, and with the whole world. Once practitioners develop their sense, they start to discover the basic goodness and appreciate what we have. Based on the synchronization of body and mind,
and their awakened heart, Practitioners then further cultivate a sense of place to make decisions in terms of the way they live.

Through this process, meditation practice develops practitioners’ gentleness and compassion, and prompts them to be more aware when using material resources in daily life. To demonstrate it, I have participated in meditation practice for several times, and detailed my personal feelings during the practice in previous chapter. I have discussed how meditation process connected to the natural world, such as every sense feeling the world, as well as Shambhala chanting text referring to the natural world.

**Environmental Awareness at the Center Level**

I have discussed the SMCD’s Buddhist attitudes and ecological awareness through an in-depth description of the physical environment of the SMCD, as well as a comparison between the SMCD and the site of Boulder to better understand Shambhala spirit. Based on outer appearance, the SMCD preserved a lot of natural habitat or it builds itself around the nature. It gives off a more ecofriendly feeling to visitors. Boulder’s Shambhala Center appears to contain a lot of Tibetan Buddhist element around building, but the actual center is restricted by the space around it since it is located in the more populated part of the city.

Programs and activities related to environment that have been organized by the SMCD further reflect the center’s concern about environment problems. The Ikebana class focuses on a connection with the nature world and a cultivation of appreciating all forms of life. Meditation retreat that took place at the Shambhala Mountain Center offers
an opportunity for practitioners to experience the intimate relationship with the land, the mountains, and the tress to better awaken their genuine heart. Other outdoor activities such as outdoor meditation and barbecue also provide practitioners opportunities to understand our natural world and make a better friend with the earth. The idea of connecting with the land and nature is done in a form of influencing instead of teaching directly. Outside activities and meditation help the practitioners to come in close contact with the nature, allowing them to fully experience the meaning behind all the teaching about preservation of environment. All the signs along the whole trail up the Shambala Mountain Center are great message to its visitors. It sets the positive example for many to follow. Recycling and alternative energy usages are major emphasis of the mountain site of Shamhbala Center. Sadly this site cannot adopt alternative energy due to limited consent from the landlord; however recycling never stops at the site. Members of the mountain center staff influence many practitioners by leading a green life. Recyclable trash goes home with some of the practitioners because the recycle bin would fill up way sooner for waste management service to pick up. Teaching recycling to youth by simply doing is more influential comparing to only talking about a certain concept. Helping the youth develop a sense of environmental preservation is important to their later development. The mountain site also allow organize various out door activities which all geared toward the same goal: appreciating nature. Those members within the Shambhala Moutnian site do not teach what is right and wrong member of the team simply do what they do and practitioners follow what the members do, and by the time they realize; they have already adopted a habit of caring for the environment.
Environmental Awareness at Individual Level

One practitioner mentioned that people rarely realize that what they are doing is actually not good for the natural environment. For example, they are not conscious that the vehicles they drive are gas guzzling, which would contribute to air pollution. He believed that meditation practice teaches people to be more aware (personal communication, October 12, 2015).

In order to use data to support this point of view that Buddhist practice indeed improves practitioners’ environmental awareness, I interviewed 12 practitioners at the SMCD who are self-professed Buddhist believers and practice at the SMCD regularly. As I have analyzed in chapter six, my informants revealed a higher level of environmental awareness than non-Buddhists. I have compared three daily activities that relate to environmental attitudes: meat eating, recycling, and driving less. The data presented that the percentages of Buddhist practitioners who refuse to eat meat, recycle cans and bottles, and driving less for environmental reasons are all much higher than non-Buddhists. Moreover, I have presented many activities that practitioners did to support environment. Some of these activities were the same with the center’s activities, such as keeping a nice and green yard, while most of activities were more diverse and express practitioners’ own ways to concern of environmental issue. From learning my informants’ life styles, I found that the practitioners’ ecological attitudes and activities were influenced by the center, at the same time presented a great diversity of the level of ecological awareness.
Limitations and Future Study

It should be taken into account that the city of Denver is already in a higher ecological level. The city is running recycling program and compost collection program, which influence residents’ ecological attitudes to some extent. Furthermore, Aspen, in Colorado’s Rocky Mountains, is third United States city to run on 100 percent renewable energy (Robbie 2015). It is fair to consider that those programs in city and county of Denver and its peripheral areas are leading an ecological life style to residents as well.

Moreover, the data from GSS website that was used to compare with the data I collected from the SMCD was not the most recent. According to the website, the most recent update is in 2006, which is nine years ago. I believe that people’s environmental consciousness in United States has been changed since more and more attention has being paid on environmental issue. Despite all this, I hope to provide my first hand data to fill the gap in anthropological field to study how Buddhist practice really empowers people to be “green”.

Another limitation is that even if I do not profess myself as a Buddhist believer, my values and thoughts have been influenced by Buddhism. As a person originally from China, where it has the largest national Buddhist population, I have been heavily affected by Buddhist culture for most of my family members are Buddhists. Such a background offers me a better understanding about the Buddhist perspective on the one hand, and perhaps leads to some bias on the other hand. However, being familiar with Buddhism brought some advantages to me. I chose this topic as my thesis project due to my personal interest; as an international student, I was eager to study the differences between
Chinese Buddhism and American Buddhism. Furthermore, when conducting research at the SMCD, I discussed the significance of Buddhism in Asia with the practitioners there, and shared my knowledge with them. I learned a lot from the Center, and the practitioners learned from me at the same time.

Possible future study may include a comparative research on two or three Buddhist centers located in different regions to test whether ecological awareness is mainly promoted by Buddhist tradition or by American environmentalism. For example, the research can be conducted on one test subject with regionally higher ecological level, and the other with lower ecological level. Through this way, the influence factor of regional environmentalism could be minimized. The hypothesis could be: if the research data indicates that the practitioners of both regions have higher ecological attitudes and awareness than non-Buddhists, it can be further suggested that Buddhist practice indeed has some environmental influence, thus it is Buddhist tradition and philosophy rather than American environmentalism that makes Buddhist practice more “green”.
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