

The Monastic Rules of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism / The Bhikshu Pattimokha and the Ten Major and Forty-eight Minor Bodhisattva Precepts from the Net of Brahma (Brahmajala) Sutra. - Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D. from Gethsemani III, May 2008

"O Monks, indeed, the entire world is burning; all things are burning. Monks![1]

In the Buddha's third sutta, called the Fire Sutta, he says, "The senses are on fire." Then he goes on to specify: "The eyes are on fire. The objects of sight are on fire, the eye consciousness is on fire. . . ." and so forth. After describing our perception of the universe through the senses as an afflicted state, he prescribes the antidote to the burning of the senses, namely, the moral precepts.

The Buddha's antidote appears in the Flower Adornment Sutra: "Able to eradicate the fires of all afflictions; this is the perfection of morality." (Sila Paramita)

By the Buddha's definition, putting out the fires of afflictions constitutes the perfection of morality. Thus the precepts of the monastic rule are the antidote to the burning of the senses. By extension these precepts are the antidote to the fires of the world, by inference the antidote to the warming of the climate worldwide. From the Buddha's perspective, a moral code exists to counteract fires, that is to say, to eradicate the burning that afflicts oneself and the world.

This leads us to our topic today: the impact on climate change of teachings embedded within the precept codes, and the role of monks in making visible their centuries old compassionate relationship with the natural world.

My presentation on the Buddhist monastic codes will be followed by that of Sister Judith Sutera, who will speak about the Rule of Saint Benedict. She and I had a similar experience; we discovered that there are relatively few specific teachings on the environment vis-à-vis contemporary ecological thought. I am collating two distinct Buddhist Rules, that of the Theravada tradition from Southern School Buddhist lineages as well as that of the Mahayana, from East Asian Buddhist Tradition, known as the Northern School lineages. The Southern tradition, by and large, stems from Pali language recensions, and the Northern tradition, by and large, from the Sanskrit language recensions of the Pratimoksha text of the Buddhist monastic rules.

All Buddhist monastic traditions honor the Pratimoksha rules. Buddhist traditions that are not specifically monastic would also acknowledge and respect the Rule. The Mahayana tradition says that the Bodhisattva Precepts found in the Brahma Net Sutra (Brahmajala Sutra) came from the Buddha's mouth directly as he sat under the Bodhi Tree. When he opened his wisdom eyes, using his universal vision, this was what he taught first: that there are ways to end suffering and that the Pratimoksha is the best way.

The Bhikshu and Bhikshuni precepts, collected as the Vinaya Pitaka, have an interesting provenance in that the Buddha did not speak them at the beginning of his teaching. When he did deliver them, he offered them not as a coherent, systematic code of behavior, but one by one, and only as the monks and nuns went astray. As they behaved in ways that lead away from liberation,

in ways that would obstruct their path, the Buddha said, “Ah! Bhikkhus! Avoid this behavior because it will hinder your path to liberation.” So bit by bit we got the 227 Theravada Rules, the 250 Mahayana Rules, and the 348 Bhikshuni Rules—the different monastic codes that exist within Buddhism.

When one ordains as a monk, one has usually already taken the Five Lay Precepts. To advance towards ordination one begins as a Shramanera by observing the Ten Novice Precepts. Then, after an appropriate amount of time, one takes the Bhikshu or Bhikshuni Precepts for Monks and Nuns. In the Mahayana tradition, and only there, another set of Precepts is available at this time, the Ten Major and Forty-eight Minor Bodhisattva Precepts. These two codes are not honored universally in the Buddhist world. Theravada monks, for example, do not often take the Bodhisattva Precepts. Because my tradition is the Mahayana and honors both Pratimokshas, I will offer insights from both Pratimokshas.

Sister Judith and I looked into our respective rules and found relatively few specifically environmental references as we would define them today. Why would this be? One possible reason might be because our monastics traditions going back 2550 years for Buddhists and 1500 years for Christians were embedded in a world-view very different from what we have now in the twenty-first century. Perhaps the Sangha community and the Christian cenobites for whom these rules were spoken lived holistically in Nature; i.e. they never imagined a life that was broken from the environment. They were so immersed in the natural world, their lives were so inextricably tied to the environment, that it went without saying that all teachings applied to the natural world and to its human inhabitants as one, not two. There was simply no other world in play; it didn't require a special name. Ecological sanity didn't have to be pointed out; that we live as one with our natural surroundings was simply a given

I should say at the start that I have benefited from others' writing and clear thinking on Buddhism and the environment. There are a number of edited volumes of essays on Buddhism and Ecology, for example, Dharma Rain, a comprehensive sample of essays gathered from Theravada, Mahayana and Tibetan sources edited by Professor Stephanie Kaza. Many of the contributors point to the absence of specific teachings matching what we would call ecology or environmental concerns in contemporary parlance. So in order to address the concerns and criteria of the twenty-first century's environmental consciousness and the movement that has arisen, we have to glean from the Buddha's words and from bits and pieces in the Vinaya teachings that relate to our contemporary concern for this fractured world, this fragmented globe, where so many people are guided by global markets and their values, where the earth is a commodity, and where humanity and the natural environment are seen as adversaries, or as separate entities, broken one from the other.

Since Buddhist monastic texts do not explicitly address these concerns, I want to look at the actual monastic practices that arise from the Pratimoksha Rules in order to glean the values and the perspectives that created a cohesive and consistent approach to the environment among Buddhist monastic communities. I will attempt to show how those precepts serve as an interface to our lives in the world, engaged in the environment. I will read these texts and frame our methodology as if the Buddha were an environmentalist concerned with preserving habitat,

saving species from extinction, limiting population, coping with toxic air, dwindling water, arid land, melting ice, deadly unseasonal storms, and more importantly, as if he were addressing a pervasive air of corporate greed in an industrialized humanity, polarized between morbid obesity and grinding scarcity.

This hermeneutic is quite applicable to the present time, because the models of the Arhat and the Bodhisattva, and the guidelines of the precepts and rules of deportment from the earliest days of the Sangha to the present are still with us, after thousands of years of continuous usage. We have sources, but we now have to examine them in the light of the environmental concerns that face us today. We will construct an environmental model from the various precepts that have come down to us: in the Mahayana tradition, the Dharmagupta, also known as the “Four Part Vinaya”; in the Theravada tradition, which uses the Pali Vinaya; and in the Tibetan tradition, which uses the Mulavarvastivada Vinaya,

The Pratimoksha expands on the five lay precepts, which restrain the behaviors of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and using intoxicants. Considering these five at face value, one can see that holding these rules will have impact on our actions in the environment. Restraints against killing, stealing, lust and lying appear in the basic moral guidelines of many major world religions. Four of the basic five precepts are mirrored in the other religions’ monastic codes. We will look in particular at the first four and put them next to the Ten Commandments of Judaism and Christianity, the Holy Koran of Islam, and Hinduism's Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali.

In all our Pratimoksha rules, the monastic precepts function as an interface. They are tools and guidelines to facilitate a monk's resolve to live the holy life and still make skillful decisions about the situations that that he or she will encounter in both the inner and outer worlds. In some cases individuals choose to withdraw from the world, in some cases to remain in contact while transcending the world. Finally there are individuals who enter the world and from there help living beings cross over; this would be typical of one who has made the Bodhi Resolve. In any case, the rules allow one to engage the world without leaving the Path. I believe that is their real function, and if we use that as our hermeneutic, we will shed some light on our stated topic. In general, monastic rules specify an interface for skillful living on the planet.

How do the codes help us live skillfully? The Pratimoksha Codes arise to guide monks towards harmless, compassionate engagement with the world, using virtuous behavior and wise expedient means. I think it is useful to identify views that both monastic rules honor and from those views sketch an ecological view, based on attitudes trained by the observance of the rules.

Themes

I identify three main themes from the Pratimokshas that underlie the specific precepts.

#1 No Greed

First among these views is the foundational idea that one who follows the monastic rule lives simply and without greed. Beyond a doubt, greed is the ruling ethos of our global marketplace culture. In this marketplace world—the culture in which we live our monastic lives—more is

good and new is best.

The monastic rule celebrates human life in the world without honoring greed. Monks say, “There is an alternative world view that functions without insatiable greed, a world view that has sustained our lives for centuries, a view that is thriving at the present.” That world view emphasizes moderation instead of excess, the Middle Way instead of extremes, and sufficiency instead of life-denying scarcity.

#2: No Harm

Second is the emphasis on ahimsa, a Sanskrit word that means “not harming,” or “non-violence.” The basic idea is that there is almost always a choice available, a way to live skillfully that is not at some fellow creature's expense. Ahimsa is an important hallmark of monastic codes.

#3 Interdependence as a Way to Preserve Human Values in a Hi-Tech World

Third is “interdependence,” the foundational idea that places our human lives on the planet back into an animated world, rejecting the alienation, sterility and life-denying airlessness of the industrial, mechanized world. The monastic codes give us a humanity that is not broken from nature but is interdependent with it. The Pratimoksha rules take into account the presence of ghosts, ancestors, spirits, seasons, plants and animals, and they stitch humanity back into the fabric of life instead of carelessly authorizing or providing religious sanction for humanity to bloat and consume or destroy the rest. We humans with our machines are the only species that has become a force of nature in itself. A word we propose cautiously to describe this view is “non-anthropocentricity,” meaning that humans are part of rather than the center of the universe.

Let us now look more closely at the basic underlying themes of the Pratimoksha codes in Buddhism to see how they guide our relationship to the world in which we live.

#1 Moderation and Sufficiency Instead of Greed

Monks have always lived simply, but that does not imply bitter compromises with scarcity. Instead they celebrate sufficiency, joyful, even sacred sufficiency. Monks rules celebrate contentment, and gratitude with sufficiency. Monks do not survive by competing in the trenches with everybody else for their slice of a dwindling pie of resources. They believe that if you live mindfully, carefully, avoid extremes and celebrate moderation, there is plenty. Gratitude for that sufficiency makes life joyful. Living simply, with contentment instead of greed, is a hallmark of monastic codes East and West.

The Buddha said that greed, hatred and delusion are Three Poisons. Of the Ten Evil Deeds, three of them are evils done by the mind. Greed is the foremost of those evils. Can you say it more strongly? Greed poisons the mind. When you take poison you get sick. Advertising in the marketplace tries to convince us that greed is best, is essential to our lives. Monks not only do not honor greed in their Rule, they also do not make satisfying greed a guiding ethos in their daily lives. And yet monastic orders still thrive.

The Middle Way is a key theme in the Pratimokshas that the Buddha taught, and it is central in Benedict's Rule as well. For us to point this out might be considered a blessing for our culture. The monastic emphasis on sufficiency may become a saving alternative when fossil fuels are no longer readily available. Some scenarios describe "peak oil" and the changes that will inevitably occur when the oil economy is no longer sustainable. At that time the Safeways and 7-11s will not have food because the trucks will no longer roll, because gas and oil will be unavailable or too expensive. Freeways are a very fragile ecosystem. Once the maintenance trucks don't roll the freeways quickly become unusable. It takes one jack-knifed big rig to shut an exit. If the tow trucks are out of gas and can't clear the downed truck, then before long, nothing will move. When the trucks stop rolling because there is no gas and the maintenance vehicles can't get out to do upkeep, the weeds will grow up through the cracks and choke the highway. Traffic will shut down and this expensive, highly-engineered, six-lane expanse of flat concrete will become a long playground for shuffle board, barbecues, sunbathing, and baby strollers.

Moderation: knowing when to stop. The Buddha said, "Happiness results from contentment, and fewness of desires." Since greed is a poison, practicing contentment counteracts greed. The practice of resting content and grateful with just enough arises from knowing sufficiency. This idea is significantly different from frugality and is the opposite of a world-view based on scarcity. As mentioned above, scarcity is the idea that everybody is struggling for a share of the same pie. In this view, since there is only so much to go around, scarcity leads inevitably to contention and competition. The monk's vision is based on a radically different view, the notion that sharing, reducing desires and resting content with moderate needs is the source of happiness.

A verse from the Chinese tradition says, "If you can be content, you will always be happy. If you can be patient, your heart will know peace." The Chinese characters tell their own story; their literal meaning is: "Know sufficiency, always happy. Able to be patient, spontaneously at peace." In other words, "One who knows sufficiency is always happy. One who is able to endure patiently is inherently at peace."

These are monastic virtues that monks exemplify with every meal. At the same time, they are lessons that can speak easily to the culture at large. Monks have been living skillfully without honoring greed. Making do with sufficient material goods allows space for more spirit, more nourishment for the heart, more joy, and more satisfaction in life. If we can preserve this perspective for humanity it can become the larger gift of our conference.

I would wish for our conference to make this reality of the monastic life more visible. Why so? Many sensitive economic barometers say that the dollar, and with it, the world's prosperity, is going to follow peak oil and turn down. I was in India in September and most merchants and hotel money desks didn't want my dollars; they only wanted rupees. Rupees were considered a more stable currency. In Amsterdam the preferred currency now is the euro, not the dollar. Whether we like it or not, in a post oil economy we are going to have to find an alternate model for our culture. The monastic model has been around for a long time and it works. It has been virtually invisible because of the widespread view that making do with less is hurtful, life-denying, unsexy; it goes counter to the spirit of laissez-faire hedonism. There is a prevalent notion that monks by living simply, live in pain, and that somehow by reducing greed, we are

leading joyless lives. In fact the spirit thrives when we know sufficiency and give thanks that our needs are met.

#2 Ahimsa and Human Kindness

The second underlying perspective is ahimsa, the Sanskrit word that means non-harming and also non-violence or harmlessness. A commitment to not harming, to living blamelessly, is noble, and also central to our monastic vocation. Clearly this view is embedded in both Pratimoksha Codes, in various injunctions not to kill, not to light fires on open ground, not to dig the earth, to liberate beings when you witness their peril, and not to eat meat. This principle is the unambiguous presence of ecological concerns included in the Buddha's restraints for the Sangha. Reverence for life means that many, but not all, monks have from the outset enjoyed plant-based diets instead of meat-based diets. Research is appearing every month to testify that removing meat from one's diet does more to reduce one's carbon footprint than buying a hybrid vehicle. Livestock are responsible for more harmful gases than internal combustion engines.

By and large monastic kitchens have been vegetarian-friendly, if not completely vegetarian. Many people are surprised to learn that Buddhist communities worldwide are not entirely vegetarian, with the exception of the Chinese and Vietnamese traditions. Why is that? Most Theravada monks still derive their daily meal from alms donated by lay house-holders; they accept what they are given. Tibetans traditionally lived at altitudes that did not permit the growing of grains and gardens. But even these culturally determined customs are changing in light of the global exchange of information and awareness of environmental realities. As lay donors wake up to the benefits of harmless, plant-based eating, monks' diets will follow suit.

That monks have traditionally avoided participating in the armed forces and military combat is also a significant part of ahimsa. The Pratimoksha forbids monks from taking up arms, or even from performing as a military envoy for a country. Monks may not visit battle fields or places of armed combat. The caution here is perhaps that armies might take advantage of a monk's non-combatant status to employ him or her as a messenger to benefit one side or another of the conflict.

#3 Preserving Human Values in the Hi-tech World

To introduce the third basic view embedded in our Pratimoksha rules I offer a prayer I recited on October 3, 2003, at the dedication of the new Technology Center at the library of the Graduate Theological Union, UC Berkeley's neighboring seminary.

A Prayer for Appropriate Technology: "Tools as if Spirit Mattered."

Let us first invoke Indra's Net, the interlacing net of pearls which in the Buddhist Pantheon is said to adorn the heavenly palace of Shakra Devanam Indra, lord of the "Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods." The net contains an infinite number of perfect, transparent pearls. Each pearl perfectly reflects the totality of pearls. In each pearl one can see all the pearls and the entire network of pearls is gathered back by a single perfect pearl.

May the electronic tools we use in the Technology Center reflect the totality of the spirit in the same way. May every micro-circuit that sustains our cyber-reality mirror the interdependence of the Internet, each node, each module, each chip carry us faithfully into contact with the totality of the entire World Wide Web. May each monitor and tube reflect accurately, reliably, without bias, the data that can become information, the information that can become knowledge, the knowledge that with grace and compassion, can become wisdom.

May we stay mindful, as we use our electronic shovels and digital chisels, that the tools are means to an end, that wisdom and compassion are the ends of those means. May our virtual servants clarify our human values and enhance our basic human kindness instead of leading us to serve the technology that too often is designed to serve marketing, marketing that is in turn the servant of greed and the bottom line.

In this way may we make each keystroke a blessing, each printout a prayer, each slideshow a sacrament for the earth and sky .

Monasticism offers a systematic solution to a current crisis of “human values in the hi-tech world.” Monastic rules contain a perspective based on virtue and human values. This traditional and consistent point of view provides a useful benchmark from which to review appropriate and inappropriate uses of technology. It is too often the case now that if we can make a tool or a weapon, we will do so without reference to human values. There is no doubt that human society’s mores and behavior follow our technological advances. Television, cell phones, computers, email, the world wide web, even specific software such as Microsoft Word and what are called massively-multiplayer computer games compel us adapt our behavior to suit the program’s needs. Psychiatrists and public health professionals are publishing warnings that the excessive use of computers, leading to addictive behavior, is already out of control. These findings hold true only for developed nations where computer use is widespread. It is also important to acknowledge that between developed and developing countries there are great disparities in opportunity to access the Internet and the information and educational/business opportunities tied to this access. Suppose the power grid went down suddenly, and nobody had privileged access to the hi-tech tools that we have come to rely upon? Where would society turn to recall our traditional mores and patterns of virtuous conduct?

Internet addiction in Australia among youth has already reached thirty percent, according to a study from 2007. Korea has an even higher percentage. In the United States interaction between fathers and children is less than thirty minutes per day. Compare that to the average of four hundred and twenty minutes that children spend each day with the Internet, television, cell phones, game consoles, and mp3 players.

Monasticism’s rootedness in scripture, its emphasis on virtue, compassion, ethical integrity, and service to spiritual values can provide a model for reshaping our priorities as a society.

The vision of interdependence embedded In the Pratimoksha is very helpful in analyzing our relationship with technology. Monasticism offers a potential solution to the crisis of preserving human values in the hi-tech world. Monasteries provide a laboratory for judging appropriate uses

of technology. Why? Because embedded in our rule is a time-tested lifestyle that prioritizes spirituality and preserves traditional human values. Monastic rules do not celebrate greed but instead praise sufficiency, simplicity, contentment, gratitude, harmless relationships with all living beings, and interdependence with the natural world.

The fact that we are knit into the fabric of living beings means that monks can advocate and exemplify the on-going use of embedded ethics, of ancient and sustained wisdom tools. Techne: tools we make; technology: what people do with their tools. We can identify, hold high and demonstrate the use of the tools of compassion, wisdom, virtue, kindness, patience, contentment, selflessness. Because we give priority to these virtues we can authentically say, “No, we don't have to use this new product just because we made it. And we don't have to make it and market this new tool or weapon, simply because we can.” We don't have to buy it just because the marketplace tells us it's cool or new, despite being given that patriotic duty by our current president. I am suggesting that our monastic rules suggest questions that society at large too rarely asks: Is it appropriate technology? What is the standard by which to judge whether or not to make, market, distribute and use these tools?

#4 Reanimating Nature: Interdependent Relations with All Beings and Spirits

The fourth value is interdependence and reanimating our interdependent relationship with all things. In “Indra's Net” Buddhist commentarial literature describes a net of interlaced pearls cunningly contrived so that the totality of the net appears by reflection in each and every single pearl. In one, you see all. The contemplation of Indra's Net gives us an striking image of interdependence. It models a world set back on its foundations of pre-modern but globally connected values.

Now in terms of interdependence there is a notion in the Pratimoksha called “same body, great compassion.” I feel kindred to all beings with whom I share an identical physical makeup and a single nature. Earth, air, fire and water make up the body, and inside we share one identical awakened nature. The earth element makes up the teeth, bones, tendons, skin, and we share them with all mammals, invertebrates, insects. We share the same air: heart, lungs, arteries, skin pores, mouth. We share fire: for humans, 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit; for fish a little less. Without that fire, you die. And then the water that makes up over 80% of our bodies: blood, tears, saliva, etc. From the Buddha's perspective, this is the way things are. This is nature and this is us.

My tradition, the Chinese Chan and Pure Land Schools, shares with our Thai Forest tradition neighbors the cultural identity of “High Church Buddhists.” When you come into the Berkeley Monastery there are lots of images of Bodhisattvas, Dharma Protectors, Arhats, and dragons. The “Protestant Buddhists” tend to have a problem with that. New meditators who only know Zen, or Vipassana psychotherapists who met their Buddhism in the West, where it is shorn of its animistic Asian culture, react with surprise, even dismay. “What are you doing with all these images everywhere? I've never seen so many dragons in one place before.”

The Buddha Dharma that came from Asia in the Sutras and in the Pratimoksha is a world full of gods, dragons, spiritual pantheons of animated and invisible creatures of all kinds. Sutras tell us

that every Dharma-gathering attracts an Eight-fold Pantheon of devas, dragons, yakshas, asuras, gandharvas, garudas, nagas, demons, and fairies of all descriptions. The sutras describe the Buddha's purview, which includes countless living beings in worlds that exist within worlds. This Buddhist connection with the realms of spirit is confirmed by indigenous peoples the world round, pre-modern peoples, earth-based peoples, who call the earth Pachamama, Mother Earth, Gaia, the Earth Household. They find the world a miraculous place of wonder, of terror, and most of all, of sentient spirit.

In their actual practices monastic communities East and West inhabit the pre-modern world more than the modern scientific, linear, reductionist, post-modern world. I think most monasteries are closer to the Pachamama view of mother earth in their day-to-day practices. In this view humanity is part of, and not apart from, kinship with all creatures. We are knit into and inextricably related to all other species. Our role as humans is to stay humble and reverent, not to waste, to be grateful and wise in our sharing and stewardship of resources, and to show compassion to other neighboring species who inhabit this planet with us. The Buddha in the sutras describes the Earth as a community to be lived in harmoniously and wisely, not as a commodity to be exploited and consumed by the strongest and most ruthless.

To put into practice the views outlined here reanimates nature in our daily lives. We move one step closer to a respectful relationship with the resources that we usually only exploit. This lesson is primary in re-evaluating the contribution monastic communities make towards global healing. Nobel Laureate Al Gore in his updated "Inconvenient Truth" (TED.com) says that humanity's capacity for greed is the primary cause of our current climate crisis.

The Buddha named greed as a poison of the mind, and said essentially that the destruction and the healing of the world is done in a single thought. The mind purged of greed is the road to awakening. The mind filled with greed poisons the earth and creates the potential for affliction and suffering for all its inhabitants equally. You don't flush greed away, you transform it, transmute it by generosity and by giving.

In pointing to the monk's world where nature is full of spirit and our lives resemble pre-modern, indigenous culture's interdependent, animated world view, I am not advocating a retreat to a mythical Golden Age of blissful innocence, an Eden before the temptation. Instead I am suggesting that we follow the Buddha's insistence on seeing things as they are, that we follow the wisdom of earth-based peoples who have always known that nature is one texture, one fabric and humanity is knit into it inextricably. We are all familiar with the famous, life-changing photograph of the planet earth, taken from the moon. The year was 1969 and the photo came to be known as "Earthrise." Once we saw that photograph, things were different. We saw the limits. We saw the finite quality of our home, our earth household. We noticed that close by our planet there is nothing but inky black space.

Once we've seen the reality of our finite family of living beings spinning on the tiny blue marble of our planet in a vast, empty, infinite universe, there is no turning backwards to an isolated, self-interested, tribal view of life as a struggle for survival. We need to expand that view, incorporating the monastic wisdom and compassion that asks us to evolve, to step back from the

fevered dream of the competitive marketplace to a pre-modern person's awe and appreciation of the interrelated power of the natural world, but with a global concern for all beings as one large body, one interrelated sentient family. We need to combine pre-modern wonder with a global ethic.

A monastic pre-modern lifestyle that includes a post-global ethical connection to the earth and all its living beings can be a significant, healing gift from the monks to a world of weary, discouraged souls who have very little hope of finding a workable alternative view in the town square of our post-modern culture.

Conclusions: The Contribution of Monks

Monastic practices can model spiritually awakened, connected lives. Before they eat, monks in the Theravada tradition say,

Wisely reflecting, I use alms-food not for fun, not for pleasure, not for fattening, not for beautification, but only for maintenance, and nourishment of the body, for keeping it healthy, for helping with the Holy Life, thinking thus: I will allay hunger, without over-eating, so that I can continue to live blamelessly and at ease.

The Mahayana version of this meal blessing, known as “The Five Contemplations,” says essentially the same thing:

This offering of the faithful is the fruit of work and care;
I reflect upon my conduct, “Have I truly earned my share?”
Of the poisons in the mind the most destructive one is greed;
As a medicine cures illness, I take only what I need
To sustain my cultivation, and to realize the Way:
So we contemplate with gratitude on this offering today.

Here is an example that is not from the Pratimoksha but that is built into the daily liturgical practices of monks, skillful ways of celebrating connections with the environment throughout the day. Every day we make our most intimate contact with the environment through our tongue. We physically embody the planet by taking in food through our mouths, food that sustains our lives. By reciting meal blessings we stay cognizant of the reality that we are mendicants, and that the food we eat comes to us not through our own efforts but through the efforts and sacrifice of others. That is how our lives are sustained. So we reflect as we eat, “What did I do to earn the food? Did I do anything meritorious to repay the kindness of this offering? I prefer to eat without inspiring greed, so I reflect on the fact that the food is medicine that keeps me from the illness of malnutrition. Ultimately we eat to wake up, to help with the Holy Life, to become more wise and compassionate. So every day we contemplate with gratitude on the offering of food. This practice is a blessing for food, and is a good example of the practices that monks, both Catholic and Buddhist alike, can offer to people who are going to have to radically change their views and habits, if the economic indications are accurate.

I want to encourage all of us to recognize the contribution of engaging more actively and more consciously in activities we have pursued for centuries, only under the radar. I'm talking about sharing our stories, stories that highlight our unique monastic knowledge and lore, parables and stories from scripture that carry the examples of ecologically sound wisdom in the teachings of Jesus and the Buddha. Stories that teach ways to live that have been honored by Benedict, and the Sangha of Sages. Teachings that envision the bigger context for our actions and that value the deeper connections. Stories that encourage us to stillness and to contemplation. Stories that advocate and exemplify righteous ways of living and their rewards. Media and the marketplace celebrate the temporary profit of the bottom line. Our president encourages us to shop, in order to heal our spiritual malaise. Monks instead can offer methods of behavior that dignify the spirit.

A moment ago I referred to two meal blessings that offered a fresh and earth-healing perspective on food. If we were to gather our stories, parables, prayers, expedient methods, blessings, and publish them or put them on a website, we could share this goodness with the world and provide access to the wisdom that we are so rich in. So, monastic story-tellers, Gospel and Dharma speakers, precept holders, and meditators, let's speak up in a single voice.

I have a story to share, from a pilgrimage that I took in the early days of my monastic formation. The pilgrimage was a long prayer for world peace. I practiced outside for nearly three years, without ever going indoors. My companion and I walked and bowed, rain or shine, and I had a vow of silence as well; I didn't speak for six years. My companion was another monk who did the talking for both of us. We made a full prostration every three steps, and traveled about a mile per day up the Pacific Coast Highway from South Pasadena to Ukiah, a distance of about 800 miles.

When we reached Santa Barbara we saw a man with long, braided black hair, and a snap brim fedora pulled low. He was standing beside the highway watching us bow. We would see him and then we wouldn't; he blended in with the trees. We bowed all morning, and he stayed with us only at the periphery. At the end of the bowing day, he was still shadowing us. We stopped and then he approached and said, "Excuse me, I've been watching you two and I wanted to say that my teacher is a medicine man for the Rosebud Sioux. He told me to watch you and learn from you and also to give you two a message. He says that you're neat and you have to stay neat. What does that mean? When you're neat you slip right through. No blame. No mistakes. You disappear. That's what he wanted me to tell you, so you can keep going. Here is an eagle feather and some ceremonial blue corn. This will help you make it all the way."

People who live by a monastic rule, who value the invisible and the virtuous, and who keep the old stories alive, can teach us all how to stay neat, that is, how to live skillfully and blamelessly on the earth. Monks can have an important role to play. As the economy depresses and people are forced to adapt, we can offer them the gift of our monastic practices and the wisdom they contain.

[1]Throughout this presentation, I use the term "Monks" as gender non-specific, to refer to both male and female monks.