**No-Self, Natural Sustainability, and Education for Sustainable Development**

Chia-Ling Wang

*Institute of Education, National Taiwan Ocean University*

**Abstract**

*This paper explores the significance of sustainability and several ways in which education for sustainable development (ESD) can be considered. It presents several issues related to the theories of sustainability and ESD, which are generated based on a firm concept of anthropocentrism. ESD has been used for developing a scientific understanding of the world and is expected to effectively address the environmental damage facing humans. However, this is a narrow view of sustainability, through which learners do not gain an authentic understanding of nature. If the phenomenon of ecological interdependence is true, a non-anthropocentric stance of sustainability is the actual representation required for ESD teaching. Ecological wisdom in Buddhist philosophy indicates that natural sustainability corresponds to human living in harmony with the natural environment, an insight derived particularly from the Buddhist concept of the no-self. Instead of denying the existence of ‘I’, the no-self is the loss of self-preoccupation. This notion highlights the non-dual relation between the self and this world. If I am I and nature is nature, then human sustainability differs from natural sustainability. Only when I am nature and nature is I can natural sustainability translate into human sustainability. This state presents actual sustainability for humans. We can achieve ESD by turning to nature, and learning to see nature in ourselves. Nature comes to all beings, manifesting itself in all beings.*

Keywords**:** sustainability, education for sustainable development, no-self, nature, Buddhism

**Introduction**

The notion of ‘sustainability’ and related strategies have been discussed in the past three decades under worsening environmental crises. Certain people prefer using the term, ‘sustainable development,’ rather than sustainability. Sustainability has various definitions. As defined in the *Brundtland Report* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), sustainability is the systematic, long-term use of natural resources that can be available for future generations. Development is encouraged for progress in both economic and social aspects, without having to destroying environmental resources. Based on this description, sustainability is considered from the viewpoint of social justice, ethical acceptance, moral fairness, and economic soundness. Sustainability generally refers to long-term prospects with ecological, political, economic, and societal implications. It is a dynamic process that extends to the global level (Filho, Manolas & Pace, 2009). Education plays a central role in promoting sustainable development. A UNESCO report (2012) released by the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development defines ESD as follows:

ESD is education for the future, for everyone to acquire the values, competencies, skills and knowledge that are necessary to shape sustainable development. It is essential to ensure a successful transition to green societies and economies. This calls for a reorientation of current formal and non-formal education at all level….ESD creates active and ecologically responsible citizens and consumers who are prepared to address the complex global and local challenges facing the world today, such as climate change. (UNESCO, 2012, p. 16)

Note that the displayed quotation is indented left and right side by 20 point, has normal font size and 1 line space before and after. The first line after a displayed quotation is aligned left. No quote marks at start and finish of quote. Full stop at end of quote, then citation in brackets e.g. ...and therefore cannot be built into a viable definition as they stand. (McDowell, 1994, pp. 146-147). Where possible, citations should be given in the text, not in separate endnotes. But if the author has not done this consistently, and it would introduce potential errors to make the change, then leave citations in notes. But references should NEVER be given in the notes after a displayed quotation: always give the reference after the quotation, in accordance with the style outlined above.

According to this document, ESD is practiced with the goal of achieving green societies and economies. Its mission is to cultivate ecologically responsible citizens and consumers. The aim of ESD appeals to a sustainable society, with economic development resolving global ecological crises such as global warming, climate change, pollution, and resources shortage. This general concept represents the functions of sustainability to people. However, when viewed broadly, as a way of life, ESD cannot be considered without including the relationship between humans and nature. Sustainable living is required for changing how we think of ourselves and for developing a more sustainable way of being in the world. Reorientating ourselves as ‘being in and of the world’ (Danvers, 2009) is essential to ESD.

Murray (2011) developed the ‘sustainable self’ as a personal approach to ESD, indicating that being ‘unsustainable’ is a habit that is not easily altered. Moving toward sustainable habits involves how we think but changing our manner of thinking requires more time than expected. Therefore, he promoted six attributes (or qualities) that enable people to live with sustainability in mind. These attributes are awareness, motivation, empowerment, knowledge, skillful means, and practice. Murray offered specific recommendations with detailed examples for obtaining these attributes, which are extremely helpful for ESD practice.

Apart from them, however, I agree with Bonnett’s claim that a metaphysical transformation is also required for an adequate response to our environmental predicaments (Bonnett, 2006). These crises can be overcome only through knowledge and strategies that apply to real problems and through an ecologically sustainable view that corresponds to natural law, which can be considered philosophical or viewed with Bonnett as an ‘attitude of mind.’ For changing our unsustainable lifestyles, I argue that a conceptual transformation should first break through the unfitting notion of an opposition between humans and nature, which has been concealed in our minds a long time.

In the Western philosophical tradition, Descartes distinguished between the nonphysical human mind and the physical body. Christian instruction has perpetuated the notion of dualism (e.g., God/humanity, spirit/matter, good/evil, and heaven/earth). These dichotomies lead to a fragmented view of relations between human and nature and inform the modern notion that nature is part of the material world; it is to be conquered and utilized to benefit human welfare. Following its application in modern science, nature has become a material object that is to be explored and exploited using new technologies for human purposes. This dualist thought is the source of current ecological crises. Instead of integrating ourselves into this world, humans have regarded themselves as beings separate from this world, or even as its rulers. Consequently, humans have destroyed the ecological environment, and considerable sustainable measures are required for treating the human problem.

In classic Asian philosophy, the relation between humans and nature is regarded in a different manner. All beings in nature are embedded in an organic oneness. In my view, this holistic thinking regarding living in nature comprises valuable wisdom for exploring the significance of sustainable human living. I have found that Buddhist philosophy offers a rich discussion on the role of ecology in the profound relation between the self and the universal, which may typify a wise attitude for leading a green lifestyle, leading to the balanced development of all creatures and maintaining an ecologically sustainable world. Regarding an individual approach to sustainability, Buddhism provides valuable thought to promote ESD and furthermore to ‘move our action from ego to eco—to become Naturally Smart’ (Clarke, 2012). The Buddhist concept of the *no-self* shows a profound wisdom for realizing the sustainable self. The *no-self* is the notion of the self that is fully compatible with a natural progression. The individual can use this authentic approach to move toward the sustainability of being-in-this-world. I attempt to elaborate on the *no-self* and analyse its ontological foundation of non-dualism to reveal a significant aspect of being in nature.

This paper first presents several issues in ESD discourse that are caused by a firm concept of anthropocentrism. Their positions might hinder sustainable practices in education. Afterward, I adopt ecological concepts from Buddhist philosophy by considering an approach to living in harmony with the natural environment. I suggest that the *no-self* can foster sustainable relations between us and nature. Its significance is compatible with the ultimate purpose of ecological sustainability. In closing, I offer recommendations in considering implications of ESD.

**The Notion of Anthropocentrism-Based Sustainability**

Many approaches have been used to examine sustainability (or sustainable development). It is regarded as a conceptually problematic term for which various interpretations have been offered. The meaning of sustainability is difficult to be pinned down. Shiva (1992) indicated that the ‘development’ in sustainable development was based on the growth of the market economy. She distinguished between two types of sustainability approaches. Most policies toward sustainability concern ‘sustainability in the marketplace’ rather than ‘sustainability in nature.’ This approach to sustainability is oxymoronic because it negatively affects both the environment’s natural progression and people’s chances of survival in nature. Stables (2013) found a conceptual conflict in the notion of sustainable development. For Stables (2013), this term is an oxymoron: ‘“Sustainability” implies lack of change, whereas “development” implies change’ (p. 182). He elaborates further:

‘Sustainable development’ is a piece of political rhetoric designed to act as a regulative ideal to guide our actions in response to this threat, but it is difficult to see how it can have any very profound effect. (Stables, 2013, p. 183)

According to Stables, sustainability is more of a political slogan than a concept based on logical reasoning. It is a hypothesis on existence for sustaining life on Earth but a proposition that can never be achieved in reality. Our lives are limited, a subject discussed in literature, in which many poets mourn the death. For Stables, permanence can be pursued only by appealing to spiritual experiences in the arts and humanities. Stables observed that the crisis of unsustainability prompts human action for change. Much rhetoric on sustainable development is governed by a utilitarian logic of means-ends instrumentalism for improving unsustainable conditions. However, such expectations generally lead to naught.

Bonnett offered his critique of educational policies for sustainable development. He reviewed the rationale behind the general stance toward ESD. In his view, the logic of ESD has been inspired by an overweening technoscientific paradigm for immediate gratification and short-term human gains. As a metaphysics of mastery, implicit scientism is employed for satisfying material well-being through the channel of sustainable development (Bonnett, 2013b), a stance observable in certain ESD practices and reflected in its instrumental values. For examples, ESD is applied to improving schools or to promoting national economic competition by developing green technologies (Bonnett, 2013a). Differing from these ideas, Bonnett proposed a non-instrumental concept of development as a goal for humanity. He preferred viewing the essence of sustainability as an ‘attitude of mind’ (Bonnett, 2006, p. 274). A mind for sustainability involves human openness, responsiveness, and a responsibility for things in nature (which includes creatures and non-creatures). Bonnett explained that this differs from form ‘sustaining’ the resources required for further purposes but is regarded ‘as a concern to let things be (as they are in themselves)—to safeguard, to preserve, to conserve’ (Bonnett, 2006, p. 274). In addition, he suggested an appropriate approach to ecological thinking regarding ESD. A holistic view includes social, economic and environmental factors; acting based on the systematic wisdom of the whole. Bonnett focuses on how people construct sustainable relations with nature. In his argument on ESD concepts, he provided a route for thinking of our basic stance toward the natural environment.

According to these critiques, the problem of sustainability development is that its goals are pervaded by a heavily instrumental and anthropocentric perspective. Human living conditions are considered to be of primary importance. Based on this viewpoint, ESD focuses on human development and develops a scientific understanding of this world. Moreover, it is expected to effectively resolve the environmental damage facing humans. However, this expectation reveals a narrow sense of sustainability, in which learners do not gain an authentic understanding of nature. If ecological interdependence is a natural phenomenon, a non-anthropocentric stance of sustainability is the actual representation that must be taught in ESD. In accordance with Bonnett’s notion, which views ‘sustainability as an attitude of mind,’ this would entail maintaining an open mind toward nonhumans rather than guarding a closed mind by considering only ourselves.

**Sustainability in Nature and the Nature of Sustainability**

Sustainability in nature has never been a problem. Nature inherently functions in a sustainable and harmonious manner. All creatures live under its care for generations. The crisis of unsustainability begins with human overexploitation, which destroys the natural inner balance, in turn presenting problems for human life. A double-blindness results here: First, a large amount of human exploitation invades the tranquil natural environment. Second, humans intend to solve these self-created problems without being aware that nature has its own rules in which humans are embedded. Po-Lin Chi is a well-known Taiwanese aerial photographer. He has taken more than 300,000 aerial images of Taiwan and continues to seek unique views at different latitudes to document the panorama of Taiwan. Similar to colourful scenic paintings, his photographic landscapes evoke aesthetic sensibilities. Many environmental detriments are also captured in his images. A journalist once asked him, ‘Where is the most beautiful place in Taiwan?’ He responded, ‘The most beautiful place in Taiwan is the place where there are no human beings.’ This is an extremely somber response, which sadly indicates the natural suffering resulting from humans’ ruthless treatment of the environment.

An examination of sustainability concerns not only human sustainability but also involves an interrelated system that includes all living beings in nature. In this interdependent ecological system, human values are not the guide. Nature has its own supreme and omnipresent laws (*dao* in Chinese Daoism) for operating all creation. This law sustains humans and all other beings. How humans fit into natural law is the essence of sustainability for humans, which can be a good lesson for ESD. Interpreting the ‘development’ in sustainable development is improper when equating economic development or scientific improvement with the environment. Nevertheless, an authentic understanding is warranted, in which richer interrelations are developed between humans and humans, humans and the environment, humans and various creatures, and even humans and diverse non-creatures. These interrelations can be viewed as ‘an ethic that can sustain the best that is in us while empowering us to live in harmony with the natural environment’ (Newton, 2003, p. 2). In its development, humans renew themselves through a dynamic progression; sustainable living is thus accomplished. However, how can this sustainable living be established? I explore this notion by drawing from Buddhist ecological wisdom. A possible harmonious integration between humans and nature is discussed based on the *no-self*.

**The Concept of the *No-Self* in Buddhism**

Before discussing Buddhist concept of the *no-self*, a related concept requires clarification. From a Buddhist ecological perspective, no self-existent thing exists. Everything is dependent on everything else, and things are empty of their own being. Their being is dependent on everything. They do not have an essence of their own. Being empty allows various configurations to occur. Because of emptiness, things can ‘own their own being, to be themselves by themselves (King, 2009, p. 46). The ‘perfection of wisdom’ in Buddhism involves realizing this emptiness, in which all fixed beings and entities consciously constructed in our mind are ‘none.’ Under this realization, boundless openness and an extremely flexible mind can be generated.

The constitution of the self is identical to that of things. According to the Buddhist view, the essence of self does not exist. The word ‘I’ typically refers to something that constitutes one’s personal identity. However, the essence as the core of one’s identity does not exist, nor does an unchanging metaphysical entity within people. This notion is called the *no-self* in Buddhism and can be understood from several perspectives (King, 2009, p. 19): First, humans are compound beings, composed of multiple thoughts, emotions, and intentions. No single entity constitutes one’s selfhood or is the basis for one’s identity. Second, humans are beings who are always in progression, changing every moment. We are constructing ourselves based on the choices we make. Rather than in isolated circumstances, these choices are made in a great web of interdependence. Third, similar to all other things in this world, humans are conditioned by others and condition others in return.

*No-self* does not mean that ‘I’ does not exist but reminds us that we are constantly becoming ‘other-than-we-were’ (King, 2009, p. 20). When I consider, ‘I am’ in this moment, which becomes ‘I was’ in the following moment. The consciousness of ‘I’ is thus illusory; it is not something we can retain. The *no-self* approximates a spiritual level of selflessness, reminding us that humans should be free of the attitude of egotism. The human ‘self’ is neither the center of the universe nor the ruler of its surroundings. All manipulations for securing the material conditions for existence are based on illusory intentions. There is neither a subject ‘I’ who can receive nor an object ‘things’ that can be received because nothing is substantial. The physical ‘I’ still exists; the notion that we should deny is a sense that clings to the ego. Therefore, the *no-self* is rather the ‘loss of self-preoccupation’ (Loy, 2003, p. 184) than the self-dissolving in this world. Instead of the self-consciousness that we guard, the sense of self is what, on the contrary, we must forget. This self-forgetting ‘allows the things of the world to “incorporate” me’ (ibid.). The self and this world thus interpenetrate. The more one forgets the self, the deeper one becomes involves in this world, which corresponds to the Buddhist practice of nonattachment. It is the end of clinging to the notion of ‘I.’ Buddhists believe that clinging to ‘I’ is the reason for the generation of psychospiritual suffering. This mistaken notion is also at the core of the problem of human condition (King, 2009).

*No-self* is a Buddhist deconstruction of the self, an ontological status of the self rather than a conceptual imagination. Buddhist philosophy suggests that people should be aware of this reality and change their cognition, habit, and life according to this ontological fact, thereby achieving a goodness of life—a coherence with natural life. By exploring the reality of the *no-self*, one discovers the self. This genuine ‘I’ differs from the illusory ‘I’ based on self-consciousness.

**A Relationship of Non-duality with Others**

As the ego-self is expelled from the consciousness, the nature of the self emerges. Similar to how the *no-self* sees one’s self, one can see things as they are in themselves. This is because of the absence of duality in the mind. No difference is made between the self and others. In this sense, there is no ownership, no control, and no instrumental considerations. As in one’s body, both the right hand and left hand belong to a single organic structure. They never intent to control each other, only to cooperate in an integrated manipulation. ‘Letting things be’ is how the *no-self* treats all beings. This is similar to the concepts by Heidegger and Bonnett, that we should not disrupt things in nature so that they can flourish. This notion manifests a spiritual practice of being with others, which can also be observed in Chinese Daoism.

For Nhat Hanh (2008), the *Diamond Sutra* is the most ancient text on deep ecology. This scripture involves highly profound ecological wisdom. It reveals the non-duality of the self and this world. The *no-self* is deeply interpreted in this Mahayana classic. For instance, the *perfection of giving*, in which there is no giver, no receiver, and no act of giving, is discussed in the *Diamond Sutra* (King, 2009). In reality, these three have not vanished, but the giver cannot have these three elements in mind when practicing the *perfection of giving*. If the three elements are embedded in the mind, one cannot be free of any conscious or subconscious thoughts of ‘I’ and ‘you.’ This concept of Buddhist charity is also highlighted by a sentence in the *Diamond Sutra*: ‘If a Bodhisattva retains the notion of an ego, a personality, a being and a life, he is not a true Bodhisattva’ (Nan, 2004, p. 55). Bodhisattva is the Buddhist virtuous status reserved for a person with great compassion and a sense of morality.

The notion of a personality and a being are connected to those of society and humanity in modern language. According to Nan (2004), there are two types of notion regarding the ego. The first is the idea of separating living, physical beings; that is, I am I, and you are you. The other type of ego is nonphysical, which is the intention of those who want to achieve (e.g., a high status or social power) and become superior to others. When one has this aim, the notion of a personality and a being cannot avoid being incorporated into an ego self. The fourth notion, ‘a life,’ entails the lifespan (i.e., the desire that ‘I’ live a long and healthy life), which is the ultimate desire for most people. These four notions present the ego, in which a feeling of ‘I’ is grasped. Irrespective of the circumstance, these four notions are frequently packaged as one. This sentence states that a Bodhisattva should not distinguish between the self and others (including other beings, except from humans). As shown in this example of Buddhist virtue, if it is given, it is given. It is performed while being forgotten; having forgotten the notion of an ego, a personality, a being, and a life, there is no intention of attaining them in return. As written in a poem, ‘Events are like spring dreams, gone without a trace’ (ibid.). Never selfish, nature gives birth to all things, yet it possesses nothing, which is the highest form of wisdom that humans can learn. From the perspective of this lesson from nature, when relating to others and attempting not to get caught, one thinks and acts in notions of a person, a being and a life. These notions are all empty in their being, which is occupied by nothing; however, if they reside in one’s mind, complete wisdom cannot be manifested.

**The *No-Self* and Sustainability**

How does the *no-self* contribute to the thinking of sustainability? According to Buddhist non-dualism, no bifurcation can be drawn between humans and nature because all things are interdependent. Humans and nature are in a state of oneness. There is no difference between the *no-self* and the self. If an ‘I’ is not identified in us, the *no-self* and the self become identical. Humans are never this distinctive; a person is merely an integral part of nature. Following this line of non-duality, no dual notion of sustainability and non-sustainability can exist. Nature is permanently ‘Being-as-it-is’ (Suzuki, 2006, p. 286). Sustainability emerges because of human requirements. Paradoxically, human desire is also the source of unsustainability. Strategies for sustainability are derived from human fears of a limited lifespan and of deteriorating living space. However, these strategies do not address the core problems of sustainability. As shown in the warning in the *Diamond Sutra*, the desire of a lifespan is related to our persistence of the ego self, identical to the ownership of space.

Both life and death are natural phenomena. There is a life-death differentiation in the notion of the lifespan. In the natural movement of circulation, death creates opportunities for the living; it is an essential element of life. Conversely, the journey of life finally reaches its termination in death. Both life and death are caught in a constant process of natural sustainability. Similarly, the cells in human bodies must be renewed cyclically for healthy living. Regarding human growth, the death of an old notion allows new thoughts to emerge. Regarding concepts of sustainability, we can derive the essence of sustainability from nature, rather than seeking sustainability from an anthropocentric viewpoint. If nature itself is sustainable, then humans, as part of it, should be sustainable. However, this condition is attained only when humans and nature become integrated. An example of this concept is shown in a well-known Chinese metaphor: A mountain can be observed at three levels of awareness, ranging from shallow to deep. The first stage involves a sighting of a mountain. This first glimpse involves a superficial understanding of it. At the second stage, the mind doubts that the mountain was observed, suspicious of initially discerning a mountain. After observing additional scenes, one starts to dispute whether what one saw was actually a mountain, or whether it was part of some other experience because an understanding of the original observation is different from later experience. At the final stage, the doubt has been rectified by a life of many experiences. One eventually sees this mountain as a mountain, as it truly is. This mountain-watching metaphor is compatible with the three stages of realizing this world in one’s life, from a young age to middle age to old age. The Japanese Zen philosopher Suzuki examined this analogy from the viewpoint of Zen and explained that the final stage can be regarded as follows:

I am in Nature and Nature is in me. Not mere participation in each other, but a fundamental identity between the two. Hence, the mountains are mountains and the rivers are rivers; they are there before me. The reason I can see the mountains as mountains and the waters as waters is because I am in them and they are in me. (Suzuki, 2006, p. 284)

Suzuki revealed the notion of *interbeing* in this example. Nature is not separate from oneself. The mountains are actually mountains when assimilated into one’s being, and one is absorbed into them. In this manner, for Suzuki, pure subjectivity is pure objectivity. Subject-object opposition does not exist, only the oneness between them. Instead of a human knowledge of nature, one sees nature as it really is. Our inner life is complete after merging into nature and becoming one with it. Because I discover my Being-as-I-am, I can see nature’s Being-as-it-is. Both Being-as-I-am and Being-as-it-is are called s*uchness* in Buddhism. *Suchness* is the state of being as is. In line with this notion, if I am I and nature is nature, my sustainability differs from natural sustainability. Only when I am nature and nature is I can natural sustainability be my sustainability. This state is real sustainability for humans.

**Implications for ESD**

In ESD policies, as Sterling (2009) indicated, we ‘tend to devalue one side against the other (ecology against economics, nature against people, values against facts, etc.)’ (p. 81). Instead, we must see all things in relation, rather than in opposition, to each other, which is an appropriate attitude for sustainable development. Certain thoughts of the discussed *no-self* may apply to ESD. A practice for liberating ourselves from dualistic thinking, *no-self* thinking entails recognizing our interdependence with others. Nature manifests supreme reality. It is the target we must live with and learn from. In nature, no rule of mutual opposition or destruction exists. This non-duality can transcend the limitations of physical structures, allowing the existence of all beings. In natural sustainability, there is no beginning and no end; everything is developing in its own becoming while experiencing interbeing with others. Regarding education, we can venture into nature while learning to see nature in ourselves. Nature comes to all beings (include humans), manifesting itself in all beings.

Providing a good recommendation for educational practice, Bonnett (2009a) indicated that school must offer not only abstract and intellectual models but also opportunities for students to experience elements of nature. These experiences favourably affect students’ attentiveness and their engagement in nature, by which ‘a *mutual anticipation* (and invitation) of self and world is in play in which each is called forth’ (Bonnett, 2009b, p. 32). This teaching is related to cultivating *ecological literacy*, as advocated by Orr (1992). Orr claims that one component of ecological literacy is a broad understanding of how people and societies are interrelated as well as associated with natural systems and how they might engage in these relations in a sustainable manner.

**Concluding Remarks**

This paper examined several controversies related to sustainability and sustainable development. Certain relevant critiques of ESD practices were also discussed. Traditional Buddhist ecological wisdom was offered in considering these sustainability issues, which are generated from a belief in humans’ dual relationship with nature. In nature, nothing can be conquered; only our dualistic thinking can be overcome. Based on this thinking, the *no-self* might offer us a sustainable approach for living in nature and act as a therapy for our egocentrism toward the outside world. If people realize that their identity is not the self, then every being in the natural world becomes an integral part of the self. Nature has its inner order for maintaining constancy in its operations. The actual sustainability is that no sustainability exists in mind. Sustainability is not a name based on anthropocentric view; it is simply natural progression. Concerning the aim of sustainability, a vital question is what we should seek to ‘sustain.’ When viewed broadly, ESD promotes the prosperity and development of humans and nonhumans. They can never be dichotomized; both are merged into a natural oneness.

**Acknowledgements**

This research was sponsored by the National Science Council, Taiwan, under project number 104-2410-H-019 -018 -.

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