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LINK BETWEEN MASAO ABE'S ZEN PHILOSOPHY AND ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary environmental crises such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss raise not only scientific and political questions but also ethical ones about how humanity understands its place in nature. Western environmental ethics offer important frameworks for addressing these issues. This study examines the relationship between Masao Abe's Zen philosophy and ecological responsibility, and argues that Abe's thought offers a distinctive perspective grounded in compassion, interconnectedness, and non-duality. Using a qualitative, library-based philosophical approach, the study applies conceptual analysis and comparative interpretation to Abe's writings, drawing on the Buddhist concepts of karuna (compassion), sunyata (emptiness), and dependent origination, and places them in dialogue with Western environmental ethics. Abe's Zen philosophy challenges anthropocentric and dualistic views that separate humanity from nature. Compassion functions as a catalyst for ecological care, extending moral concern to all forms of life and encouraging sustainable practices. Interconnectedness provides an ethical framework that emphasizes the mutual dependence of all beings and awareness of the consequences of human actions on the environment. Non-duality dissolves the perceived divide between humans and nature, presenting environmental care as an expression of self-awareness and shared existence. By engaging both Eastern and Western philosophical perspectives, the study concludes that Abe's Zen philosophy provides a transformative and practical approach to ecological ethics, fostering a deeper sense of environmental responsibility and harmony between humanity and the natural world.

Keywords: *Masao Abe; Zen Buddhism; Ecological Responsibility; Environmental Ethics; Compassion; Interdependence; Non-Duality; Sustainability*

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The ecological crisis, marked by climate change, species extinction, environmental pollution, and natural calamities, reveals humanity's failure to act as responsible stewards of the Earth. Rising global temperatures, the loss of forests and wetlands, the acidification and overfishing of the seas, and the accumulation of waste are not isolated problems. They are interrelated symptoms of a pattern of life in which natural systems are treated primarily as resources for human use. Despite the scale of these problems, humanity has persistently sought solutions through scientific inquiry and philosophical thought, and the interconnectedness of humanity with nature underscores that human survival depends on ecological well-being.

Scientific knowledge and environmental policy are indispensable, but they do not by themselves explain why knowledge of environmental harm so often fails to change behavior. Many analysts have therefore argued that the crisis is also a crisis of values and worldview. Lynn White's influential essay argued that the roots of the crisis lie partly in cultural assumptions about humanity's place in nature (White, 1967), and philosophers since then have asked what kind of ethics, and what kind of self, would make sustainable living possible. This is the space in which philosophical reflection on the environment operates: it examines the assumptions, values, and attitudes that precede particular policies.

Philosophers such as Arne Næss, Peter Singer, and Hans Jonas have contributed significantly to environmental ethics. Næss emphasizes a holistic understanding of nature and its intrinsic value (Næss, 1989); his earlier distinction between "shallow" and "deep" ecology called for a fundamental questioning of the human-centered attitudes behind environmental degradation (Næss, 1973). Singer extends moral consideration to animals and their suffering (Singer, 1990). Jonas highlights humanity's responsibility toward future generations and the preservation of life, arguing that technological power requires a new ethics of responsibility (Jonas, 1984). Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which enlarges the moral community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, is another landmark of this Western tradition (Leopold, 1949).

While these Western approaches provide valuable insights, Masao Abe's Zen philosophy offers a distinctive perspective by integrating Eastern principles such as interdependence, non-duality, and compassion. Abe, a leading figure of the Kyoto School tradition and a long-time participant in Buddhist–Christian dialogue, argues that these concepts can inspire ecological responsibility by fostering a deep sense of unity with the natural world. For Abe, the question is not only what human beings ought to do for nature, but who the human being fundamentally is, and how that understanding of the self shapes the way nature is perceived and treated.

Conceptual Background: The Notion of Zen

Buddhism is concerned with ethics, psychology, and logic, guiding people toward enlightenment through moral principles. It sets a standard for living that can lead to the attainment of the Buddhist ideal, whether understood as the state of the arhat or, in the Mahayana tradition, Buddhahood. One branch of Buddhism, often called Meditation Buddhism, incorporates practices such as calligraphy, giving it a unique and creative role in Japanese culture and society. In this tradition, spiritual cultivation is not confined to the meditation hall: it shapes painting, poetry, gardening, the tea ceremony, and other arts through which attention to the present moment and to the natural world is refined.

Zen began in China as Chan and was later brought to Japan, where it evolved into its own distinctive style. It also spread from China to other parts of East Asia, including Vietnam. In Japan, Zen became popular during efforts to renew the Buddhist tradition at a time when it was in decline. Unlike the Pure Land school, which emphasizes reliance

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on an other power, Zen emphasizes self-reliance and the direct realization of one's own nature. It provides a framework for gaining knowledge and is used by Buddhist monks in Japan to develop both their spiritual and community lives.

Meditation is a core practice in Zen. It involves reflecting on life experience to gain insight and quieting the habitual activity of the discriminating mind. Bodhidharma, the figure traditionally credited with bringing Zen to China, is associated with a way of directly understanding one's true nature without reliance on scriptures or rituals (Smart, 1999). This approach presents Zen as a simple and direct path to enlightenment that favors intuition over formal practice. Dumoulin's history shows that this emphasis developed gradually through the encounter of Indian Buddhism with Chinese thought, including Taoism, rather than appearing fully formed (Dumoulin, 2005).

Zen's influence extends beyond religion, affecting martial arts and other cultural practices. A key aspect of Zen is living in harmony with nature, which derives partly from Taoism and Shinto, two other traditions that value the natural world. Zen emphasizes two ideas: first, that language and concepts can create an artificial way of understanding nature, so that the living reality of things is lost when it is only described; and second, that life should be lived in the present moment, flowing with time rather than resisting it (Dumoulin, 2005).

At its core, Zen promotes living in harmony with nature by understanding the interconnectedness of all life and avoiding dualistic thinking, which separates humans from the environment. By focusing on the present, Zen encourages a way of life that naturally supports ecological balance. These ideas form the foundation of Masao Abe's philosophy on ecological responsibility.

Review of Related Literature

Scholarly discussion of Buddhism and the environment is substantial and not uniformly optimistic. Collections such as Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought bring together interpretations of how Asian traditions understand the human place in nature (Callicott & Ames, 1989), and anthologies of Buddhist environmentalism present teachings on interdependence, compassion, and non-harming as resources for ecological practice (Kaza & Kraft, 2000). Joanna Macy has related the Buddhist teaching of dependent co-arising to the language of general systems theory, suggesting that Buddhist and scientific descriptions of mutual causality illuminate one another (Macy, 1991), and Thich Nhat Hanh's notion of "interbeing" expresses the same insight in a popular register (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987).

Other scholars urge caution. Ian Harris asks how environmentalist Buddhism really is, noting that classical Buddhist texts were not written to address environmental problems and that modern "green Buddhism" involves interpretive reconstruction (Harris, 1991). Donald Swearer similarly assesses Buddhist eco-philosophy as a creative modern interpretation whose claims need to be weighed against the diversity of Buddhist traditions (Swearer, 2006). These critical studies are relevant here because they remind the reader that any claim about what Zen implies for ecology is partly an act of philosophical interpretation, and the present study treats Abe's position in this light.

Abe's own work occupies a distinctive place in this literature. Writing from within the Kyoto School tradition associated with Keiji Nishitani, whose Religion and Nothingness develops the standpoint of emptiness in conversation with Western nihilism and religion (Nishitani, 1982), Abe develops the idea of sunyata as a dynamic, self-emptying reality, and he applies it in dialogue with Christianity, existentialism, and Western philosophy (Abe, 1985; Abe, 1995). The collection of his dialogues edited by Mitchell shows how his mature thought developed through sustained engagement with other traditions (Mitchell, 1998). Although Abe is better known for his work on emptiness and interfaith dialogue than for systematic environmental ethics, his treatment of self, nature, and compassion offers rich material for ecological reflection, which this study seeks to draw out.

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Statement of the Problem, Research Questions, and Thesis

Although Western environmental ethics are well developed, many of them continue to frame the human–nature relationship in terms of separation, whether through stewardship, rights, or duties. Such frameworks are indispensable, but they leave open the question of motivation: why should a person who experiences the self as separate from nature feel bound by obligations toward it? This study asks how Abe's Zen philosophy might address that limitation. Specifically, it seeks to answer three questions: (1) How does Abe interpret the core concepts of Zen, particularly emptiness, selflessness, and compassion? (2) How do compassion, interconnection, and non-duality ground ecological responsibility in Abe's thought? (3) How does Abe's perspective compare with Western environmental ethics and Indigenous ecological perspectives, and how does it respond to criticism?

This paper argues that Masao Abe's Zen philosophy offers transformative insights into ecological responsibility through its emphasis on compassion, interconnection, and non-duality, challenging the anthropocentric and dualistic paradigms that dominate ecological ethics.

Significance and Scope of the Study

The study is significant for philosophy because it brings a major twentieth-century Buddhist thinker into conversation with contemporary environmental ethics, and for readers in Philippine and wider Asian contexts because it explores an ethical resource that lies close to regional religious and cultural traditions. It is also significant for environmental education because it highlights the role of attitude and self-understanding in sustainable living alongside knowledge and regulation.

The scope of the study is conceptual. It concentrates on three themes in Abe's thought: compassion, interconnection, and non-duality, and on their implications for ecological responsibility. It does not attempt a complete account of Abe's philosophy, a survey of Buddhist environmentalism, or an empirical assessment of environmental programs.

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METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, library-based philosophical design. It relies on conceptual analysis and comparative interpretation rather than empirical data collection, which is appropriate for a question concerned with the meaning, coherence, and ethical implications of philosophical concepts. The study is hermeneutical in character: it seeks to understand Abe's texts in their own terms before asking what they imply for a problem, ecological responsibility, that Abe addressed only in part.

Sources and Selection Criteria

Primary sources are the writings of Masao Abe, principally Zen and Western Thought (Abe, 1985), his later work on interfaith dialogue (Abe, 1995), and the collection of his dialogues, Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue (Mitchell, 1998). These were selected because they present Abe's interpretation of emptiness, no-self, and compassion, and his engagement with Western thought. Secondary sources on the history and nature of Zen include Dumoulin (2005) and Smart (1999), with Nishitani (1982) providing the Kyoto School background.

For the comparative component, the study draws on three representative works of Western environmental ethics, chosen because each represents a distinct approach: holistic and deep ecology (Næss, 1973, 1989), animal ethics (Singer, 1990), and the ethics of responsibility toward future generations (Jonas, 1984). Leopold (1949) and White (1967) are used for historical context. Studies of Buddhism and ecology (Callicott & Ames, 1989; Harris, 1991; Kaza & Kraft, 2000; Macy, 1991; Swearer, 2006; Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987) and of Indigenous ecological knowledge (Berkes, 2012; Kimmerer, 2013) inform the discussion of related perspectives.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four steps. First, Abe's texts were read closely to identify his interpretation of Zen and its key concepts, namely sunyata (emptiness), no-self, karuna (compassion), pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), and non-duality. Second, these concepts were organized into three themes bearing on ecological responsibility: compassion, interconnection, and non-duality. Third, the ethical implications of each theme were examined, together with illustrative practices that are consistent with Abe's framework, such as the ethical treatment of animals, sustainable agriculture, conservation, renewable energy, and ecological restoration. Fourth, Abe's position was placed in dialogue with Western environmental ethics and Indigenous ecological perspectives, and common objections to it were considered and weighed.

Trustworthiness and Interpretive Safeguards

In philosophical research, rigor is a matter of textual fidelity, conceptual clarity, and fairness to opposing views. To support these aims, claims about Abe's position are tied to his published works, technical terms are used consistently and explained when first introduced, and Western positions are represented by their own principal texts rather than by secondary caricature. Illustrative applications are distinguished from Abe's own claims, so that the reader can tell where the study interprets and where Abe asserts.

Scope and Limitations of the Method

The study is interpretive and conceptual. It does not test the effectiveness of Zen-informed environmental practices, and its examples of ecological action are offered as illustrations of the ethical framework rather than as empirical evidence. The analysis is limited to Abe's English-language writings and to the selected comparative sources. As in

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any interpretive work, other readers may weigh the texts differently, and the conclusions are offered as a reasoned reading rather than a final verdict.

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RESULTS

The analysis yielded four sets of findings: Abe's interpretation of Zen, and three themes through which that interpretation grounds ecological responsibility. Table 1 summarizes the themes, and the sections that follow present each in turn.

Table 1. Summary of findings

Theme	Buddhist root	Core claim in Abe's thought	Ecological implication
Compassion	Karuna	Compassion arises naturally from realizing the emptiness of self and extends to all living things.	Ethical treatment of animals; sustainable farming; conservation; reduced consumption and waste.
Interconnection	Pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination)	Nothing exists independently; failure to see this sustains anthropocentrism.	Awareness of the wider consequences of human action; renewable energy; protection of forests and species.
Non-duality	Sunyata and non-dual awareness	The separation of humans from nature is an illusion produced by habits of thought.	Environmental care as self-care; reforestation and wetland protection; affinity with Indigenous kinship views of nature.

Abe's Interpretation of Zen

Masao Abe's interpretation of Zen places considerable emphasis on compassion, interconnectedness, and non-duality, integrating insights from both Eastern and Western perspectives. In his dialogue with Western philosophical and religious thought, Abe attempts to bridge the gap between differing traditions in order to foster a global understanding of spirituality that can address contemporary ethical and ecological challenges (Abe, 1985). His interpretation centers on the idea that realizing the emptiness of the self is fundamental to developing compassion and understanding one's unity with all beings. This view aligns with Buddhist teachings in which enlightenment is inseparable from compassionate engagement with the world, a concept Abe explains in conversation with Western thought on relational being.

Through this dialogue, the principle of interconnectedness emerges as central to Zen practice, highlighting the mutual dependence of all existence. Unlike the Western notion of an autonomous self, Abe describes a "no-self" or selflessness that underpins the interdependence of all beings. This does not mean that the self does not exist in any sense; it means that the self has no fixed, independent substance apart from its relations. This interpretation draws on the Zen concept of sunyata (emptiness), which Abe interprets as the reality of mutual existence that refutes isolation. Emptiness here is not nothingness in a negative or nihilistic sense but the openness that allows each being to be what it is in relation to everything else. In dialogue with Western existentialism, Abe juxtaposes this view with Western

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ideas of individual agency, arguing that the realization of interconnectedness challenges the ego-centered approach to ethics found in Western traditions and instead promotes compassion through unity.

Abe's exploration of compassion draws on Eastern views of non-dual awareness, which dissolves the boundary between self and others. Compassion, for Abe, is not merely an ethical stance but arises naturally from the dissolution of ego, where the welfare of others is seen as inseparable from one's own well-being (Mitchell, 1998). In his comparative analysis, Abe finds resonance with Christian doctrines of love and compassion but emphasizes that Zen compassion emerges not from divine command but from the direct experience of interconnectedness. This shift, he argues, creates an embodied compassion grounded in mindfulness rather than in adherence to moral imperatives. His engagement with Christian ideas of self-emptying love, discussed in his work on the dynamic character of emptiness, reflects his conviction that the religions can illuminate one another without being reduced to a single doctrine (Abe, 1985, 1995).

Abe's dialogue extends to ecological concerns, where he contends that Zen's insight into interconnectedness provides a basis for environmental ethics. Western environmental philosophy often centers on stewardship, but Abe believes that Zen's focus on non-attachment and selflessness fosters a respect for nature that transcends instrumental value (Abe, 1985). By reinterpreting Zen compassion through this lens, Abe proposes that the protection of the environment is not an obligation but a natural expression of a selfless being aware of its integral relationship with the world.

Finally, Abe's interpretation encourages a global spirituality that harmonizes Western and Eastern philosophies, suggesting that Zen's perspective on compassion and interconnectedness can serve as a remedy for the alienation found in modern society. His work offers an accessible entry into Zen for Western audiences, emphasizing that understanding one's place within the interconnected web of life fosters compassion and responsibility toward others. This dialogue between traditions offers a transformative vision in which spirituality and ethics are interwoven, addressing both personal and collective well-being.

Compassion as a Catalyst for Ecological Responsibility

Compassion is a key idea in Abe's thinking about care for the environment. In Zen, compassion is not limited to kindness toward people; it extends to all living things, including animals, plants, and the entire planet. This compassion derives from the Buddhist principle of karuna, the compassionate wish to relieve suffering, which encourages people to act in ways that reduce suffering, whether of other humans, animals, or the environment. It is closely associated with the Buddhist ideal of non-harming (ahimsa), which gives the principle a concrete ethical content. For Abe, compassion is not simply something people are obligated to practice; it is a natural response that comes from understanding how deeply a person is connected to everything around them.

This point marks a difference in the logic of motivation. In duty-based ethics, the agent first perceives the other as separate and then acknowledges an obligation toward it. In Abe's account, the sense of separation is itself loosened, so that the suffering of another being is not an external fact to be weighed but something that touches the agent's own life. Compassion, in this sense, is less a rule that restrains the self than the spontaneous activity of a self that has ceased to defend its isolation.

Treating animals with kindness and respect is one expression of this compassion. Ethical treatment of animals not only prevents unnecessary harm but also helps protect ecosystems, since animals play important roles in maintaining ecological balance, for example through pollination, seed dispersal, and the regulation of populations. When people avoid practices such as overfishing or factory farming, for instance, they help preserve species and allow nature to thrive. Within Abe's framework, such actions can be understood as expressions of compassion that arise naturally when the interconnectedness of all life is recognized. This concern for animal suffering converges with Singer's

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argument that suffering matters morally whatever the species of the sufferer (Singer, 1990), though the philosophical grounding differs: Singer argues from the capacity to suffer and the principle of equal consideration, while Abe's account begins from the realization of emptiness and no-self.

Compassion can also guide how the Earth's resources are used. Sustainable farming ensures that food is grown in ways that do not harm the soil, water, or surrounding ecosystems. Conservation efforts, such as protecting forests and wildlife, show respect for the Earth's value and help maintain biodiversity. Recognizing that nature is not separate from humanity but part of a shared web of life enables people to make choices that are kinder to the planet, including choices about what to buy, how much to use, and what to leave for others.

Abe's perspective, in short, is that when people truly understand their connection to the world, compassion flows naturally into how they live. They consume less, waste less, and care more about preserving the planet for future generations. This concern for those who come after resonates with Jonas's imperative of responsibility (Jonas, 1984), although, again, it arises here from realized interconnection and not from a formal principle. Compassion is therefore not merely a duty but an expression of shared humanity and of humanity's place within nature's interconnected web. By embracing compassion in everyday life, people can build a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the world around them.

Interconnection as an Ethical Framework

Abe's idea of interconnection addresses one of the main roots of ecological problems: humanity's separation from nature. In Zen Buddhism, the concept of pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination) teaches that everything in the world is connected and depends on everything else in order to exist. No living thing or natural element can exist independently. A tree depends on soil, water, sunlight, and fungi; the soil depends on the decay of other organisms; and human beings depend on the air, water, and food that these relationships produce. Abe uses this idea to challenge the common human-centered view, or anthropocentrism, which often places human needs above the health of the environment.

On this view, many environmental problems, such as deforestation, pollution, and the overuse of resources, persist because people fail to see how their actions affect the larger web of life. When forests are destroyed, for example, not only are the trees harmed: animal habitats are disrupted, the air that humans breathe is affected, watersheds are altered, and the climate changes. This lack of awareness of interconnection allows harmful practices to continue, damaging the planet and the life it sustains. The problem, in this analysis, is not only a lack of information but a habit of perceiving things in isolation from one another, so that the costs of an action are assigned to someone else or to a later time.

Conversely, actions guided by an understanding of interconnection can help protect and restore the environment. Renewable energy such as solar or wind power is one example of this awareness, since it reduces the harm caused by burning fossil fuels, which pollute the air and contribute to climate change. Similarly, conservation efforts such as protecting forests and endangered species show respect for the interconnectedness of ecosystems. These practices accord with Zen principles by promoting balance and harmony in nature. The affinity between this teaching and ecological science has been noted by Macy, who relates dependent co-arising to the systems view of life (Macy, 1991), and by Næss, whose ecosophy stresses relational, total-field thinking over the picture of isolated individuals (Næss, 1989).

Abe's concept of interconnection thus offers a way to rethink humanity's relationship with the Earth. Understanding that harming the environment also harms people and other living beings allows individuals and societies to make choices that benefit the planet as a whole. This perspective encourages a shift away from selfish, short-term actions

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toward thoughtful, long-term care for the Earth. It reminds us that humanity is not separate from nature but part of an interconnected system, and that respecting this connection is essential to solving ecological crises.

Non-Duality and the Illusion of Separation

Non-duality is one of the main ideas in Zen and plays an important role in Abe's approach to ecological issues. It challenges the belief that humans and nature are separate from one another. According to Abe, this separation is an illusion created by the way people think. The mind divides experience into subject and object, self and world, human and nature, and then mistakes these conceptual divisions for the structure of reality itself. Humans are not outside or above nature but deeply connected to it, and when people harm the environment they are in effect harming themselves, because they are part of the same system.

The idea of non-duality encourages a change in how people behave toward the environment. If people understand that they are connected to nature, they are more likely to care for it. Instead of seeing environmental protection only as a duty, they may come to see it as something that also benefits their own well-being. Taking care of the air, water, and land, for example, directly improves the quality of life of humans as well as of other living beings. It is important to note that non-duality in Abe's sense does not erase distinctions or reduce nature to a mere extension of the self. The claim is that distinctions are real and yet not separate, so that each being is itself precisely in its relation to others.

This principle can be seen in the practices of many Indigenous cultures, which regard nature as family or kin. Such communities treat the Earth with great respect, understanding that their survival is tied to the health of the environment. Practices such as sustainable farming and forest management reflect the idea that humans and nature are one, and through them these communities maintain balance and harmony in their relationship with the natural world. Studies of traditional ecological knowledge describe such relationships as systems of knowledge, practice, and belief that have developed over generations (Berkes, 2012), and Indigenous writers describe reciprocity between people and land as a lived ethic (Kimmerer, 2013).

Non-duality also resonates with modern policies aimed at restoring the environment. Initiatives such as reforestation and the protection of wetlands reflect an understanding of the connection between humans and ecosystems. These efforts not only repair damaged environments but also benefit the people who depend on them for clean air, water, and resources. Non-duality thus encourages a shift in perspective in which caring for nature is no longer seen as separate from caring for humanity, but as an integrated effort that supports the well-being of all life.

Synthesis of the Findings

Read together, the three themes form a sequence. The realization of emptiness and no-self (3.1) removes the ego-centered standpoint; interconnection (3.3) names the structure of mutual dependence that this realization discloses; compassion (3.2) is the way that realization shows itself in action toward others; and non-duality (3.4) names the overcoming of the separation between self and world that underlies the whole. The result is an account in which ecological responsibility is not added to the self from outside but flows from a changed understanding of what the self is.

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DISCUSSION

Interpretation of the Findings

The three themes are best understood as aspects of a single movement of thought: the transformation of the self. For Abe, realizing the emptiness of the self removes the ego-centered standpoint from which nature appears as an external object to be used or managed. Interconnection supplies the understanding of how beings depend on one another, compassion expresses that understanding as concern for the suffering of others, and non-duality names the realization that self and world are not finally separate. Ecological responsibility, on this account, is not an obligation imposed from outside but follows from a changed understanding of what the self is. This is the central contribution of Abe's philosophy to environmental ethics, and it explains why the examples of ecological action in Section 3 are described as expressions of awareness rather than as duties.

This reading also clarifies the relation between Abe's thought and the question of motivation raised in the Introduction. Where a duty-based ethics must persuade a self that experiences itself as separate to accept obligations toward nature, Abe's approach works on the self's understanding of itself, so that care for nature becomes an extension of self-care. The contribution is therefore less a new set of environmental rules than a different answer to the question of why one should care at all.

It should be noted that the specific practices discussed in the Results, such as sustainable farming, renewable energy, reforestation, and wetland protection, are applications that are consistent with Abe's framework. They illustrate how the framework could be lived out, and they should not be read as policy positions that Abe himself defended.

Abe and Western Environmental Ethics

Western environmental philosophies such as deep ecology stress that nature has intrinsic value, meaning that it is valuable simply because it exists and not only because it benefits humans. Næss (1989) articulates this holistic view, Singer (1990) extends moral consideration to sentient animals, and Jonas (1984) grounds responsibility in the preservation of life for future generations. These approaches provide valuable insight. However, many such philosophies still frame the relationship in terms of a moral agent who owes duties to a natural world standing over against that agent. This dualistic framing creates a divide that can make it harder for people to see themselves as part of the natural world, and it can unintentionally maintain a barrier between humanity and the environment.

Abe's Zen philosophy seeks to overcome this limitation by emphasizing unity and interconnectedness. In Zen, there is no real separation between humans and nature; they are part of the same whole. Abe encourages the development of an awareness of this unity not merely as an idea but as something deeply felt and lived. When people recognize that they are intimately connected to nature, they are more likely to take care of it. This shifts environmental care from being only a responsibility to being a natural expression of self-awareness and harmony.

The contrast should not be overdrawn. Deep ecology in particular is not uniformly dualistic: Næss's notion of identification with the wider natural world, and his call for a "self-realization" that extends beyond the narrow ego, have long been noted to share affinities with Eastern thought (Næss, 1973, 1989). The difference from Abe may lie less in the conclusion than in the route to it. Abe's distinctive emphasis is on the realization of emptiness and no-self as the ground of that identification, and on compassion as arising from direct experience rather than from moral imperative or divine command. Singer's utilitarian approach and Jonas's ethics of responsibility, by contrast, are explicitly principle-based, which gives them strengths that a spiritual approach may lack, namely clear criteria for adjudicating conflicts of interest and for guiding public policy.

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The comparison also bears on the relation between religion and environmentalism more generally. Whereas White (1967) argued that certain strands of Western religious thought encouraged human domination of nature, and Leopold (1949) called for an ethical extension to the land community, Abe's contribution is to show how a non-theistic, non-dualistic spirituality can ground an ecological ethic. His readiness to find resonance with Christian love while insisting on the distinctiveness of Zen compassion suggests that environmental ethics can be pursued through dialogue among traditions and not merely through the competition of rival theories.

Indigenous Ecological Perspectives

The conception of nature as kin found in many Indigenous cultures parallels Abe's non-dual view in treating the human–nature relationship as one of belonging rather than of ownership or mastery. The parallel is offered here as a point of philosophical dialogue and not as an identification of the two traditions. Indigenous ecological knowledge has its own cultural and philosophical foundations, often tied to specific places, languages, and communities, and the diversity of Indigenous peoples means that generalizations should be made cautiously (Berkes, 2012). The significance of the comparison lies in showing that the ethical practices associated with non-duality are not merely theoretical but have been sustained in lived communities, and that reciprocity with the land can be a daily practice and not only a philosophical thesis (Kimmerer, 2013).

Counterarguments and Abe's Response

Some critics argue that Zen principles such as interconnectedness and non-duality are too abstract and may not lead to real-world solutions. Abe answers this concern by integrating mindfulness and ethical action into his philosophy. Mindfulness encourages people to be fully aware of their actions and their impact on the world around them, and ethical action follows naturally from this awareness, inspiring behaviors that support both people and the planet. In this way, Abe's Zen philosophy bridges the gap between abstract ideas and practical solutions, offering a meaningful approach to modern ecological challenges.

A related criticism is historical. Harris (1991) and Swearer (2006) point out that classical Buddhism did not address environmental problems in the modern sense and that "green Buddhism" involves reinterpretation. This objection is fair, and the present study accepts that Abe's ecological reading of Zen is a creative philosophical development. It does not follow, however, that the reading is arbitrary. The doctrines of dependent origination, non-harming, and compassion supply real conceptual resources, and philosophical traditions routinely extend their principles to problems that earlier thinkers did not face.

A further question is whether an ethics that treats responsibility as a spontaneous expression of awareness can guide action where awareness is lacking or where interests conflict. Non-duality might also be misread as a denial of real differences among beings, or as a quietism that discourages social and political action. Abe's account is persuasive as an account of motivation and character, but it is less explicit about institutional, legal, and policy mechanisms, and it leaves open how competing claims, for example between human livelihoods and species protection, are to be resolved. Western frameworks, which specify rights, duties, and obligations toward future generations, may therefore complement rather than be displaced by Abe's approach.

Implications

For environmental ethics, the findings suggest that attention to the transformation of the self and to the habits of thought that sustain the human–nature divide is a necessary complement to rules and duties. For environmental education, they suggest that cultivating mindfulness and awareness of interdependence may support sustainable consumption, conservation, and long-term thinking alongside the transmission of scientific knowledge, a possibility that merits further study. For interreligious and intercultural dialogue, the study illustrates how a tradition outside the

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mainstream of Western philosophy can enrich a global conversation about responsibility without requiring that its participants abandon their own commitments.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on a selected body of Abe's English-language writings and on a small set of representative Western sources. Future research could examine Abe's critics more fully, compare his view with other Buddhist environmental thinkers and with other Kyoto School philosophers, and engage Indigenous philosophies directly through primary and community-based sources. Empirical studies could also investigate whether mindfulness-based approaches and education in interdependence influence pro-environmental attitudes and behavior, and whether such approaches work in different cultural contexts, including the Philippines.

Conclusion

Masao Abe's Zen philosophy provides a meaningful way to address today's ecological crises by focusing on compassion, interconnection, and non-duality. These principles challenge the idea that humans are separate from or superior to nature. Compassion encourages people to act in ways that reduce harm and protect ecosystems, while interconnection reminds humanity that all life forms depend on each other to survive. Non-duality goes further by breaking down the illusion that humans and nature are divided, showing that people are deeply connected to the natural world.

Abe's approach blends spiritual understanding with practical action, offering a powerful framework for caring for the environment. By fostering awareness and empathy, his philosophy encourages sustainable choices that respect the interconnectedness of life on Earth. This perspective promotes a balance in which humanity and nature can thrive together. Through this Zen-based mindset, Abe provides a vision of unity and cooperation that supports both individual well-being and the health of the planet.

The study has argued that the distinctive strength of this approach lies in its account of the self. By locating ecological responsibility in a transformed understanding of who one is, Abe addresses the question of motivation that rule-based ethics often leave open. The study has also argued that this strength has limits: because the approach is more explicit about character than about institutions, it is best joined with the rights, duties, and policies emphasized in Western environmental ethics and with the practical wisdom of Indigenous communities. Taken together, these traditions suggest that responsibility for the Earth requires both a transformation of the heart and a reform of the structures through which human beings live.

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