Most Western religious traditions hold that life is the product of a supreme creator, placed into its environment as part of a grand plan. Science suggests that life sprang forth from inanimate surroundings.

The Buddhist view of the relationship between life and its environment, between people and their surroundings, holds that life is neither created nor merely a physical phenomena, but an ever-present potential in the universe. It explains that life naturally emerges wherever causes and conditions are suitable for it to do so. The place where life emerges and exists is called an environment. Environment means “surroundings,” and life is what it surrounds. For human beings, environment includes our families, communities and workplaces, as well as the landscape upon which we live and all life that fills it. Life cannot exist apart from its environment, and life in turn profoundly affects its environment.

Human beings are immersed in an environment rich with myriad forms of plant and animal life, apart from which we cannot survive. Because we depend on the water, air and the plant and animal life that surrounds us, our environment truly deserves the name “mother nature”—giving birth to and nourishing human beings. Furthermore, our very bodies are composed of the same elements found in our environment—the liquid component of our bodies, for instance, is similar in composition to seawater.

That we depend on and closely resemble our environment makes the Buddhist concept of the oneness of life and its environment a matter of common sense. But the Buddhist view goes beyond a merely mechanical connection; it recognizes a common thread that binds living entities and their environment. This thread is the true aspect of all phenomena, the Mystic Law, which can be understood as the very life of the universe itself.

While science recognizes that life arises from the environment and is an extension of that environment, Buddhism sheds light on why this is so. It is because the environment itself is “alive”—because the universe itself is brimming with the potential for life.

The “oneness” we have been referring to derives from a Chinese term that literally means “two but not two.” On one level, people and their surroundings are distinct and separate entities. Naturally, it is important to recognize and appreciate this distinction. Yet when viewed from the standpoint of the essential reality, or what the Lotus Sutra refers to as the true aspect of all phenomena, they are one and the same.

Nichiren Daishonin states: “Environment is like the shadow, and life, the body. Without the body, no shadow can exist, and without life, no environment. In the same way, life is shaped by its environment” (“On Omens,” The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 1, p. 644).

When people’s inner lives are misguided or unbalanced, the environment—human
society, the ecosystem, oceans, atmosphere and geography—is negatively influenced. It is important to realize that this is not a static relationship. The connection between our surroundings and us is dynamic, alive. We are constantly exerting an influence on our surroundings while our surroundings are constantly influencing us. Nichiren explains: “If the minds of living beings are impure, their land is also impure, but if their minds are pure, so is their land. There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds” (“On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,” WND-1, 4).

If we examine the state of the global environment today, we find a long list of human-caused problems, some with potentially dangerous consequences. These include the depletion of natural resources, deforestation, water and air pollution, the rise in carbon dioxide levels that results in global climate change, large-scale species extinctions, degradation of the earth’s ozone layer, increases in environmental toxins, lowering of ocean oxygen levels, radioactive pollution and more.

According to the principle of the oneness of life and its environment, a fouled environment is the product of polluted hearts and minds. In turn, this fouled environment functions to pollute the bodies, hearts and minds of those living within it. The ongoing destruction of nature, in this light, is connected with people’s ignorance of or lack of appreciation for the true nature and value of life.

Ultimately, addressing and changing these problems requires a change in the collective will of humanity. But a change in the will of humankind must begin with a change in the awareness and inner resolve of individuals—with even one person developing the will for change and acting courageously upon it.

In our study of Buddhism we often use the term life condition to describe our inner mental or emotional state. Life condition, however, actually refers to the whole picture of our internal and external circumstances. Not only does it mean one’s outlook, frame of mind, heart and spirit; it also includes one’s surroundings—the harmony of one’s family setting, work environment, role in the community, prosperity, etc. All of these things characterize our life and its environment.

When we view ourselves and our environment as essentially one, we see the value of cultivating and enriching our inner humanity while working to improve our external circumstances. To attend exclusively to either the internal or the external will leave us going in circles. The purpose of the SGI movement is to enable a positive transformation in the lives of individuals, who in turn act with wisdom to exert a positive influence on their environment. As the preface to the novel The Human Revolution reads, “A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind” (p. viii). When we each gain genuine confidence that a transformation of our inner resolve will absolutely yield a transformation in our environment, we can become a cause for effecting genuine change. Understanding of this principle is best expressed in our determination always to improve ourselves while working positively for the happiness and well-being of others. As Buddhists, our strong and consistent prayers to produce positive change in ourselves and in our environment, and to enable others to do the same, will ensure that our efforts bear rich fruit.

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