

## Reinterpreting Buddhist Environmental Ethics Through the Lens of Agential Realism

Rezza Prasetyo Setiawan

Center For Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies, Universitas Gadjah Mada Yogyakarta

Email: [rezzaprasetyosetiawan@mail.ugm.ac.id](mailto:rezzaprasetyosetiawan@mail.ugm.ac.id)

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<b>Kata Kunci:</b> <i>Agential Realism</i> <i>Anicca</i> <i>Anatta</i> <i>Ekologi</i> <i>Etika lingkungan Buddhis</i>	<b>Abstrak</b> Komunitas-komunitas beragama telah aktif terlibat dalam usaha mengatasi masalah-masalah lingkungan. Sehubungan dengan itu, etika lingkungan Buddhis sangat relevan oleh karena perhatiannya terhadap penderitaan makhluk hidup. Namun, etika lingkungan Buddhis telah dituduh bersifat biosentris oleh karena penekanannya yang hanya terbatas pada makhluk hidup alih-alih mendekati alam secara lebih holistik, dan karena kurangnya perhatian pada aspek sosio-politik dari masalah-masalah lingkungan. Untuk mengatasi masalah tersebut, artikel ini akan menggabungkan pendekatan <i>agential realism</i> dengan etika lingkungan Buddhis sehingga dapat dicapai sebuah interpretasi etika lingkungan Buddhis yang tidak biosentris dan lebih holistik. Artikel ini akan secara khusus membahas konsep anatta dan anicca dalam filsafat Buddhis untuk diintegrasikan dengan <i>agential realism</i> Karen Barad yang mengkritik masalah representasionalisme dan esensialisme. Sintesis yang dihasilkan kemudian akan diterapkan untuk memahami etika lingkungan Buddhis sebagai implikasi etisnya.
<b>Keywords:</b> <i>Agential Realism</i> <i>Anicca</i> <i>Anatta</i> <i>Buddhist environmental ethics</i> <i>Ecology</i>	<b>Abstract</b> Religious communities have been actively engaged in addressing environmental issues. In this regard, Buddhist environmental ethics have been useful because of its attention toward the alleviation of suffering for all living beings. However, Buddhist environmental ethics have been accused of biocentrism because of its overemphasis on the living elements of nature instead of approaching nature more holistically and because of its ignorance to the socio-political aspect of environmental issues. To address this issue, this article will argue that by incorporating an agential realism approach to Buddhist environmental ethics, biocentrism could be eliminated in favor of a more holistic interpretation of Buddhist environmental ethics. The article will specifically deal with the concepts of anatta and anicca in Buddhist philosophies to

	integrate with Karen Barad’s agential realism that criticizes the problem of representationalism and essentialism. The resulting synthesis will then be applied to understand Buddhist environmental ethics as its ethical implication.
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## Introduction

Religion is important to incorporate into environmentalism. Nasr (1990) has pointed out that what was missing from science was the spiritual significance put into humans’ understanding of nature. The missing spiritual significance of science has allowed modern humans to understand nature only as an object to exploit instead of as an entity to respect. In regard to the spiritual significance of nature, many religious communities have been actively addressing environmental issues. Whether explicitly or implicitly, religions have been involved in many ways with environmentalism (Baugh, 2019). Joint efforts from interreligious communities have also sprouted in many movements (McKim, 2023), emphasizing the need for joint cooperative efforts in tackling this global issue.

There have been studies done by Buddhist scholars addressing the environmental issues (Kaza & Kraft, 2000; Payne, 2010). The individual and ethical aspects of Buddhism have been explored in an effort to translate Buddhism into environmentalism. However, Simon P. James (2013) pointed out how Buddhist environmental ethics have a narrow scope that is limited only to living beings as their main attention, which he calls biocentrism. He argues that there is still much to say about environmental ethics from the standpoint of Buddhism. The social, economic, and political dimensions of environmental problems have to be rectified to solve the environmental issues instead of focusing only on one aspect of the issue.

To address this problem, this article’s main objective is to incorporate the concept of agential realism to allow for a more holistic approach to nature through the language of Buddhist environmentalism. Barad’s agential realism criticizes modern essentialism and representationalism by proposing a diffractive and performative approach to reality. Both the diffractive and the performative approach to reality proposed in agential realism is coherent with the Buddhist idea of anatta and anicca. Therefore, this article will specifically explore both anatta and anicca through the diffractive and the performative approach.

To achieve the objective, the body of this article will be divided into two parts. First, the article will explain Karen Barad’s idea of agential realism to lay out the theoretical framework used in this article. Second, both the concept of anicca and anatta will be explained through the theoretical framework that has been laid out in the previous section. Lastly, the

article will conclude by restating the main argument and propose the implication from this article's interpretation on Buddhist environmental ethics.

### **Agential Realism**

As a theoretical framework, Karen Barad's onto-epistemology was constructed as a criticism toward a philosophical view in science which separates ontological issues from its epistemological issues. To address this problem Barad tries to shift the attention from the separation to a more integrated view of ontology, epistemology, and ethics, creating an onto-epistemological approach she calls agential realism. This view emphasizes on the inseparability of ontology and epistemology by arguing that the way reality is acquired will influence the ontological status of said reality.

This section will explain the main arguments of agential realism that are going to be used to analyze Buddhist environmental ethics in this article. The section will be divided into three main parts. The first part will present Barad's criticism against representationalism and present their proposed diffractive approach as an alternative to representationalism. The second part will then criticize reflexive approach to reality and present Barad's diffractive alternative to reality. Lastly, the third part will explain Barad's idea of intra-action and natureculture which will prove to be useful to apply on Buddhist environmental ethics in the next section of the article.

### ***From Representationalism to Performative Approach***

Barad argues that representationalism is a problematic approach to understanding reality. There are at least two points of weakness in representationalism Barad presents that are going to be relevant to this article's exploration on Buddhist environmental ethics. First, Representationalism puts an excessive power for words over the material reality, which creates a skewed perception of reality. With a representationalist understanding of reality an imbalanced power relation will take place because of its overemphasis on the authority of words to represent the one "true" reality. Representationalism therefore becomes the root of many societal issues including gender injustice, religious discrimination, and racism. Second, representationalism also implies an essentialist view of reality, where things are understood as having one essential nature, static and unchanging. Essentialism views things as having been set with their own attributes, leaving no space for change and variations in this ever-changing and dynamic nature of reality. This static understanding of reality is problematic in its own right because of the presumed unchangeability of things, which often does not fit with reality.

Instead, Barad proposes a performative approach, derived from Judith Butler's idea of performativity explained in her work, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) which shows Barad's tendency toward feminist and queer studies. In this perspective, performativity in relation with others is what identity is. It is a dynamic relation, and thus also a dynamic identity, where identity is not something that is statically ascribed to someone but rather, identity is a *doing* and *becoming*. This is an important point in Barad's idea because this performative approach is pulled to ontological level by Barad, arguing that matter does not exist prior to its relationality. This approach "... shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality ... to matters of practices/doings/actions." (Barad, 2003, p. 802). Everything exists in relation with everything else. This concept will be important later when we shift our attention back to Buddhism.

### ***From Reflexivity approach to Diffractive approach***

Barad takes insight from optical science to see the approach which she calls reflexivity and contrasts it with the diffractive approach. In the representationalist paradigm of knowledge, it is understood that knowledge is derived through the representation, which is effectively believed to mirror the reality of the object in question. Feminist science studies scholar have pointed out the insufficiencies of reflexivity: (1) its ignorance of crucial social factors such as gender, race, and religion, and (2) its basis on representationalism which would allow representationalism to be reproduced in the body of science (Barad, 2007, p. 87). It is apparent that the existence of the object in this paradigm becomes static and essentialist because of its faith in the objectivity and reliability of the representation as an honest and unbiased reflection of the object.

Barad also points out that the reflexivity approach also implies a sense of separation between the knower (subject) and the known (object), which is what diffractive approach wants to eliminate. "It is a critical practice of engagement, not a distance-learning practice of reflecting from afar." (Barad, 2007, p. 90). The separation between the knower and the object is a false belief that is reproduced in representationalism and reflexivity approaches. Barad argues that there is no separation between the knower and the known because—taking examples from her extensive expertise with quantum physics—in the act of measurement itself the object has been influenced by the measurement acted by the measurer, by the knower (Barad, 2010). Hence, the act of knowing is also an act of influencing the object. There is an inextricable relation between the knower with the known. Here objectivity has a different

meaning; "... objectivity is about being accountable to the specific materializations of which we are a part" (Barad, 2007, p. 91).

Another important point from the diffractive approach is that it—as the phenomenon of diffraction in optical physics does—expects variety and differences instead of producing a single truth (Barad, 2014). Each specific materiality will produce different results so there should not be one single image as in the reflexivity approach but rather a whole spectrum of difference according to the many different parameters exacted in the point of measurement. This is important to see reality not as a single fixed reality but instead as a whole spectrum of reality, each according to different relationality.

### ***Intra-action and "natureculture"***

Derived from its basic assumption of inseparability of everything, Barad proposes the use of the word "intra-action" instead of "interaction" because she wants to deny the separateness and individuality—and essentially, essentialism—of things implied in the word "interaction" where two separate individual things are implied to influence each other. This shifting away from separateness of things is a big theme in Barad's onto-epistemological framework. This part is important because here we could understand how Barad's diffractive approach differs from reflexivity approach which still leaves a gap between the knower and the known object, indicating separateness, the metaphysics of individualism (Barad, 2007, p. 56). We could also see this in her attempt to incorporate ontology and epistemology in a conjoined onto-epistemological framework to avoid the separation of being from the act of knowing the being itself. She even goes as far to argue that matter would not exist prior to its relation with other matters.

To further incorporate this idea of inseparability, Barad coined a neologism "natureculture." Just as space and time were understood as separate before Einstein's general relativity, nature and culture are also seen as separate in Western paradigm, and just as Einstein's theory puts space and time as an inseparable continuum in the term "spacetime," Barad also wants to stress the importance of the inseparability of nature and culture by coining the term natureculture. Barad explains that what we do in social context and how we perceive and experience nature cannot be separated. She gives an example from the conception of the theory of special relativity by Einstein, which for Barad was not an isolated experience where Einstein made it up in an empty space. His opportunity to work with time synchronicity when he worked as a patent clerk influenced how he perceived time and how he came up with the

special relativity. This idea of inseparability of nature and culture, along with the terms intra-action and natureculture are useful in examining closely the concept of anatta in Buddhism.

### **Buddhism and Agential Realism**

There are three marks of existence in Buddhist philosophy: *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*. Things are impermanent (*anicca*) and thus they are always in a state of insufficiency (*dukkha*) and also do not have any inherent true self (*anatta*). These three marks of existence are related with Barad's framework. Nonrepresentationalism and non-essentialism that Barad promotes could be easily and closely related to the concept of *anatta*, or the non-existence of self. *Anicca* or impermanence of things is also related to the performative approach used by Butler and Barad, with an enriched interpretation of impermanence being the result of an incessant performative relation of things. However, this article will specifically focus only on *anatta* and *anicca* as both ideas can be interpreted in direct association with representationalism and essentialism that Barad criticizes in their agential realism.

### ***Anatta and Sunyata as shifts from representationalism***

The concept of *anatta*, along with *sunyata*, are two of the main assumptions in Buddhist teaching. Both essentially argue that there is no essence in things, either in oneself or in the world, because everything is in a constant state of changing, which we will talk about more later. This teaching is in contrast with the teaching from Upanishadic and Vedantic about *atman*, which is the permanent, unchanging, immutable, omnipotent, and intelligent essence of an individual (Buswell, 2004, p. 18). This notion of *atman* is denied by Buddhist teaching, arguing that there is actually no essence in individuals or in anything.

This is important because it becomes a shift from essentialist, representationalist perception of reality to a more non-essentialist and non-representationalist perception of reality. Reality then is not defined by the existence of essences, which could be defined arbitrarily by words and epistemological categorization. In another word, this idea implies that there is no room left for words and theories to dictate reality.

As a specific example, we could try to pull out an example from the reality of Myanmar's Buddhist-nationalists damaged relations with the Rohingyas to elaborate this point further. There is an onto-epistemological issue that is at play in the conflict, in which there is constructed an essentialism which puts Buddhism and Myanmar nationalism as static and inherently related identities, representation of their existence through an ethno-nationalistic paradigm. This essentialist and representationalist interpretation of identity is then used to

construct an antagonism against the Rohingyas. As a result, they are denied their basic needs and of their rights of recognition in the state of Myanmar. A reformulation of meaning is important to deconstruct the unhealthy relationship between religious practice with nationality, which has produced a destructive impact that is caused by the representationalism driving the pattern of thought in that context.

To put it more generally, the biocentrism that the Buddhists are accused of by James at the introduction of this article could be seen as a result of this essentialist and representationalism. James points out that there is a pattern of biocentrism where Buddhist environmental ethics are centered only on the living beings, with some even excluding plant life. Also there is a tendency to ignore the social, political, and cultural aspects of nature, seeing them as separate from the existence of the living beings. A different understanding of the emptiness of the world—of *sunyata*—will allow us to see that there is not any meaningful separation between one “thing” with the others, including between the animate and the inanimate things, because they all are always in a constant change, and do not have any essence in itself.

### ***Anicca as performative intra-activity in becoming***

Anicca is the understanding that everything is in a constant state of changing. Everything is impermanent and nothing is static. Buswell explains it well in his encyclopedia, saying that in the concept of Anicca “things in the world change in two ways. First, they change throughout time. Second, everything in this world is influenced by other elements of the world, and thus all existence is contingent upon something else” (Buswell, 2004, p. 23). This shows that everything does not only change in itself in the concept of anicca, but rather in an entanglement with everything else, forever influencing each other. It is also important to remember that it is through this concept of constant change and constant influence that the concept of anatta has to be understood. Because things constantly change and influence each other, things do not have a static essence in itself.

Barad’s criticism against the static representationalist and essentialist view of reality does not stop in ontological categories. Rather, it is an onto-epistemological statement. Impermanence, seen through the performative approach, does not only deal with ontological issues but also in epistemological sense. Thus, by viewing the concept of identity through this approach, we could understand that identity is also ever-changing, a continuous activity and doing, with dynamic nature continuously intra-acting with everything else. “There is no overarching sense of temporality, of continuity, in place. Each scene diffracts various

temporalities within and across the field of spacetime-mattering” (Barad, 2010, p. 240). Everything is impermanent (anicca), including identity. Identity should not be confined to the representationalist formation of words and static definition.

Identity is dynamic because it is determined by the intra-activity among matters. One relation produces one kind of identity while another produces a different kind of identity. Every specificity produces different identities in a performative sense. Through this lens we could see the diffractive nature of reality, not a singular identity reflected as a true representation of an absolute truth. One specific configuration makes one specific doing/activity of an identity becoming while another specific configuration will make a different specific doing/activity of an identity becoming. However, this specificity still has to be seen in the frame of entanglement. Identity is not limited only for persons or even humans. Humans put labels and give names to everything from the smallest subatomic particles to the largest superclusters of galaxies and stars. Every form of identity from male and female, this country or that country, this religion or that religion, all are constructed by humans as static and unchanging attributes inherent in every “thing.” This is false and both Barad and Buddhism have put a big objection against essentialism. We have already seen some of their negative excesses and see how the concepts of Anicca and Anatta in Buddhism could help in criticizing the essentialist representationalism of the reality, putting reality back to the messy, freeform, and chaotic reality in intra-related entanglement that it is supposed to be.

### **A Buddhist Environmental Ethico-onto-epistemology**

Barad’s expertise as a quantum physicist has produced an interesting take on reality, where reality at the smallest scale is being examined. The weird nature of quantum reality has put Barad at the position where they realized that the diffractive approach is considered better than the reflexive approach in viewing reality, even in bigger scales like including society. The problems of representationalism is taken as a problematic structure that needs to be criticized. This problem of representationalism is also what is being dealt with through some of the basic tenets of Buddhism including Anatta and Anicca that we have explored before.

Viewing the world in a deeper sense than mere representations, both Barad and Buddhism have put a big attention and emphasis on the problem of putting essences and static labels as representations of what reality really is. In representationalist perspective, variety is viewed as anomaly; diversity as monstrosity; and difference as enemy. The dynamic nature of reality cannot be represented justly in representationalism. Diffractive approach is more responsible in dealing with difference, diversity, and variety that are naturally occurring in



reality. Anicca is important to be seen as one of the foundational assumptions of reality. The awareness of the impermanence of things is important to understand that in a dynamic relation of many materialities, identities and epistemological categorizations are meaningless. Definitions and identities have to be seen not as an unchanging “thing” but as an intra-activity of things in many-to-many relationships where everything is always in a process of changing. Definitions and identities have been the specter that corrupts our understanding of our reality and our environment.

Our environment has always been seen as “the other” and as something separate from humans. Modernism has put humans in an opposition against nature as if humans have to conquer nature to develop themselves and to be “modern” with a settler colonialism mentality (Whyte, 2022), bringing destruction by changing without any consideration to the existing entanglements between every component in the conquered environment. What we do is always seen as “influencing” nature as if nature is a separate thing from humans, and humans from nature. In this sense, nature is also seen as a passive object that becomes a victim of humans’ evil deeds and needs our protection. This is a false thought because nature has already existed for billions of years without needing humans in it and it will continue to exist far after the last humans face extinction. The awareness of Anicca and Anatta as the basic assumption of reality is important to understand that we are none, and in reality one with every element in our universe. Damaging the relationships also damages our relationship with everything. Our karma, whether it is good or bad intra-action with anything, will be carried over and ultimately get back to ourselves because in reality there is no separation between us as ourselves and us as part of the totality of nature.

Humans’—every person’s—existence is entangled with each other, and with every component in the aggregate reality. The separation of one from another is a fictitious label put by people who are ignorant of the nature of reality in which they are a part of. The Western world had separated themselves as “the rational West” from “the mystical Oriental world” to put them into submission (King, 2001). Religions, race, gender, and social constructs have been put as labels in an imbalanced power relation. Nature and culture have been separated as if they do not have anything to do with each other. In reality how we live—culture—and nature cannot be separated because for us to even exist is to be in entanglements with everything else. Natureculture is an effective neologism Barad created for people to be aware of the inseparability of both.

In this sense, to respond to James’ argument about the biocentrism of Buddhist narratives, we could see that even in the most basic assumptions of Buddhism we could see the

inseparability of all things including all aspects of human activity. Social, political, economical, and all other aspects of human life are closely entangled with the reality of natureculture because the reality is always changing and it is lacking a static essence. How humans understand themselves through social, political, and economical activities is always entangled with how they relate themselves with the reality they are living in.

## **Conclusion**

This perspective from Karen Barad is important to incorporate with Buddhism because, in practice, Buddhist practitioners are still vulnerable to essentialism and representationalism although there are already the basic concepts being taught against them both. By incorporating Agential Realism to Buddhist understanding of Anicca and Anatta, it is easier to understand the concepts of impermanence and non-self. However, this research has not touched deeper into other teachings of Buddhism because of the limitation in this research. It would also be interesting in seeing the potential relation constructed with other teachings in Buddhism which touches on the more mythological narratives. Further research is needed to explore these possibilities.

This article has also dealt with two of the most basic assumptions in Buddhism philosophical teaching. Karen Barad's Agential Realism has been an interesting lens through which we understand the concepts of Anicca and Anatta. The ever-changing reality in Anicca and the absence of a static self in our reality in Anatta is paramount in understanding reality without getting trapped in essentialism and representationalism which have pushed people into ignorance and misunderstanding of their own reality. Because Barad does not agree with the separation between ontology, epistemology, and epistemology, then having a better understanding about the reality is in reality an ethical thing to do and it is paramount to our ontological reality as well. A better understanding of our reality and of our natural environment will ultimately lead to a better ethics with our environment, by realizing the intricate entanglement between our existence with the natureculture we are living in.

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