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Buddhism and Ecology: Balancing Convergence, Dissonance, and the Risk of Anachronism

This collection of nineteen essays is an important addition to the materials now available on the ways in which Buddhism and awareness of the intricate webs of life intersect. The volume is based on presentations delivered at the Buddhism and Ecology Conference at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions, one of ten such conferences between 1996 and 1998 on the general subject of religion and ecology. Collectively, the essays present a wide range of views on the emerging Buddhist engagement with the complex issues generally referred to by words such as "environmental" or "ecological." Because other books and seminal essays on the relevance of Buddhist views and practices to such issues have been available on this topic since the early 1970s and particularly during this decade, it is no longer possible for any single volume to address the entire panorama of diverse issues which "Buddhism and ecology" encompasses. This collection, nonetheless, provides a particularly rich development of many relevant issues. The conference convenors sought to balance descriptions of the basic problem with statements by adherents, scholarly analyses of individual issues, profound methodological self-consciousness, and application of all of these to real world problems. The volume thus has general appeal even as it provides scholarly specifics.

This is not to say that this collection is encyclopedic, for it is not. Its most obvious shortcoming is its lack of any detailed coverage of Tibetan Buddhist approaches, although there are portions which address the Dalai Lama's many comments on ecological awareness. Geographically, the focus is on the tradition in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Japan, and North America. Chinese Buddhism is mentioned often, although it is not the focus of any particular essay. In particular, there are essays by respected scholars on Theravāda in Thailand, Mahāyāna in Japan, and American Buddhism. There are, however, only scant references to Europe, Brazil, and Australia.

A great strength is the focus of many contributors on methodological issues. There are particularly careful considerations of interpretation and retrieval problems, as well as caveats regarding the risks of misreading and distorting Buddhist views (see, for example, the excellent essays by L. Lancaster, D. Swearer, K. Kraft, M. D. Eckel, A. Sponberg, and I. Harris). These are very helpful for readers who wish to assess the enduring stereotype of "Eastern" religions as promoting a sense of harmony between human beings and "nature." Indeed, many of the contributors advocate

vigilance when trying to equate Western environmental discourse and Buddhist insights.

It is particularly interesting to see how the general topic pushes one to consider (1) what Buddhism is generally “about,” and (2) the nature and complexity of extending culturally and historically bound conceptual and praxis resources to contemporary problems. The juxtaposition of so many views and arguments regarding the risks of anachronism, misconstructions of culturally relative values and expression, and terminological revisionism enables the reader to see both possibility and problem in the task of assessing the ecological significance of Buddhist insights, concepts, words, and practices. This helps the reader deal with what Swearer (p. 40) refers to as the “well-intended but problematical interpretation of Buddhist thought by eco-apologists.” The fact that Western cultural sensibilities and intellectual history drive the critique of contemporary environmental practices is regularly pointed out, as is the less well-known fact that terms and concepts associated with that pervasive critique can influence how contemporary scholars and practitioners see Buddhism and even which forms of Buddhism appeal to us as the most attractive. Failure to heed these methodological warnings can, as pointed out by many of the essayists, result in a significantly distorted view of Buddhism.

Equally fascinating, though less noticeable, is the lack of informed discussion on what ecology is or “is about.” Environmental studies, education, philosophy, ethics, ecojustice, and, of course, “ecospirituality” are, like Buddhism itself, not simple topics but instead a family of either historically or conceptually related approaches and traditions of discourse. These approaches and their discourse styles do not have their origins in any specifically religious or secular domain, but instead are drawn from a vast array of sources. Failure to notice this complexity leads to oversimplification. A lack of ecological sophistication is revealed, for example, when the term “ecology” is bandied about as if it means a single, obvious thing. This young, developing “science” (the word was coined in 1866 by the German Darwinian Ernst Haeckel) has already grown into a bewildering forest of concerns and approaches. In this collection, then, while there is the expected sophistication in assessing various Buddhist subtraditions, the deference to the quasi-scientific terminology “ecology” and “environmental” subtly reflects the too often unacknowledged hegemony of certain scientific presuppositions in our academic subcultures.

There is also no serious engagement with the dissonance between, on the one hand, the heavy commitment in ecology-based disciplines to systematic empirical exploration of very specific realities, and, on the other, the almost complete lack of interest in such explorations in the Buddhist

traditions. Unqualified assertions that Buddhists are interested in things “as they really are” abound in the volume, implicitly suggesting that at least some Buddhists would want to explore the world and its specific realities rather closely. Yet none of the writers expressly compares the Buddhist commitment to know things “as they really are” with the empirical investigations that are the foundation of ecological awareness. In addition, some authors seem to equate Buddhist interest in the moral order of the universe or “the eternal cosmic harmony” with the science-based commitment to ferret out specific details of the intrinsic, dynamic harmonies of ecosystems. If this equation is valid, one might expect some discussion of the Buddhist insight in relation to attempts to know the daily realities of nonhuman creatures. The latter have been generally ignored because of a relentless, pervasive, culturally varied anthropocentrism found inside and outside Buddhism. So in these essays, the issue of empirical exploration of living communities’ intrinsic harmonies and succession, so central in the history of ecology, remains unconnected to the important Buddhist commitment to know “things as they really are.” There is, of course, no necessary overlap between the Buddhists’ sense of “things as they really are” with environmental studies’ sense of “things and relations as they actually exist,” but the potential for overlap begs at least some reference to the obvious issue, as when R. Gross (p. 292) notes, “... Buddhism always suggests that we need to deal with things as they are, not with fantasies...”

Similarly, the many references to Indra’s net and the interdependence of all living beings and non-living things are used without much contemplation of anything more than their vague relation to ecological notions. This classic metaphor certainly sounds like explicitly ecological notions, and the similarity fairly suggests the possibility of convergence. But even if, from the standpoint of environmental studies, living beings do exist in a web that goes beyond any individual, it is worth exploring how these similar sounding notions actually work. It is a cornerstone notion of contemporary ecological understanding that each living being is inextricably connected to *some* other living beings and the larger “environment.” This happens to be true in a very specific sense which is quite different from the almost trivial, physics-based sense in which each being is connected to *all* other living and non-living entities through gravitational attraction. The matter of relation is important in ecology precisely because it is special and limited. Even the larger biological realities such as ecosystems and bioregions have their own distinctive intrinsic harmonies which are constantly evolving, even if they also participate in the larger biological harmonies of the planet. To leap from these special relations to a more general relation to all things, as in the Indra’s net metaphor, needs some careful

talk and not mere assertion on the ground of similar sounding ideas about interrelation.

Further, while the assertions and discourse used to describe the specific relations of living things and their local communities often sound like the talk about Indra's net, as a historical matter the notions have been used in fundamentally different ways. It is not very helpful to confuse metaphysical (for lack of a better word) speculation about the total interdependence of all reality with descriptions of the biological realities participating in a very specific kind of verifiable interdependence among the multiple entities of any ecosystem. Arguing that every entity is internally and externally related to its environment is qualitatively different than arguing that there is an eternal cosmic harmony and total interdependence of each entity with all other entities. This does not suggest that the underlying conceptualities cannot be construed as convergent, but, without attention to relevant and needed qualifications, the reader will be positively misled. As always, anachronism and revisionism are great risks when notions are pulled out of context as inevitably occurs when generalities dominate.

Whatever the congruence of these notions, each is pertinent to important ethical considerations. The claim of interdependence is closely linked to the First Precept, as is seen in the common reasoning that other living beings should not be harmed because they were at some time one's own father and mother. But notice that the ethical implications of the specifically ecological sense of things "as they really are" may not be the same as the First Precept's prohibition of lethal harms. Knowledge derived from ecology-driven awareness of some nonhuman animals' unique features will suggest that certain human practices will be immoral with regard to some animals while not immoral with regard to others. For example, ethology-based observations of elephants' complex cognitive abilities and their rich social systems suggest that they have a much greater capacity for special kinds of suffering while in captivity than do more familiar domesticated animals. This is so because, upon investigation, it is apparent that captivity harms intelligent social individuals like elephants but not some individuals who are neither social nor intelligent enough to notice captive circumstances. The interdependence of elephants on each other and their habitat is of a qualitatively different nature from the interdependence of many other living forms with their habitats and genetic relatives.

As is well known, Buddhists inherited and then passed along as an integral part of their beliefs the Indic, pre-Buddhist assertion that elephants are members of a realm "below" the realm of humans. This core belief in a hierarchy of life forms seems to have caused Buddhists to ignore important suffering of individual captive elephants whenever it served humans to

hold elephants captive at, among other places, Buddhist temples. The belief that humans are a distinct and “higher” group, all other animals being grouped “below” human in a separate realm, may have been either cause or consequence of Buddhists’ consistent disinclination to explore the day-to-day realities that ecological sciences focus directly on. Whatever it was, as a historical matter the competing sense of the interdependence of all things was used only in the rarest instances to suggest the impropriety of captivity even in the face of some First Precept formulations that prohibited non-lethal harms (most of the formulations expressly prohibit only killing). In summary, the Buddhist assertions of a general connection of all living beings and indeed all things did not, because of radical ignorance of certain ecological realities, produce great responsiveness to specific situations of particular nonhuman animals. And this, inevitably, had to affect ethical awareness dramatically.

The essayists’ lack of attention to these dissonances and incongruities may be as telling about the nature of modern scholarship as it is about the likelihood that contemporary Buddhists will soon change the long history of the tradition being positively uninterested in empirical exploration of the world. Such disinterest risks, of course, the foundering of the entire enterprise, for how can one live in an ecologically sound manner while dismissing radically the crucial relevance to moral agents of ever-varying details of the world in which one lives? Dismissing an engagement with the phenomenal world is not likely to make for ecological education, literacy or, in short, sophistication.

Amidst the methodological caveats and subtleties mentioned above and the many assertions of the applicability of Buddhist wisdom and praxis to, or at least its congruence with, contemporary concerns about destructive modern lifestyles, the volume contains important acknowledgements that, to use Swearer’s words (p. 37), “there is no univocal Buddhist ecological hermeneutic” across or even within contemporary Buddhist cultural traditions. As Eckel says (p. 340) in answer to the question of whether there is a Buddhist philosophy of nature, “If the intention of the question is to identify a simple, unified vision of the sanctity of the natural world, the answer must be no. If anything there is the opposite.”

Working out such caveats in some detail, several essayists address critics of eco-Buddhism. Noriaki Hakamaya, not a contributor, is perhaps the most strident critic of eco-Buddhism, while Harris, Sponberg, and Lambert Schmithausen (not a contributor) are less strident but very cautious about the sometimes revisionist, sometimes one-dimensional shortcomings of much that has been written. Yet, whatever one’s conclusion about the relation of Buddhism and contemporary environmental concerns, one

cannot help but notice that Buddhist praxis in particular has much to offer those seeking ways to live as integral parts of their local bioregions or, indeed, the whole earth. As Sponberg notes (p. 351), “[there is] much within traditional Buddhist ethics that does indeed speak to the ethical aspects of the environmental crisis confronting us today.” The simple fact is that there are “many Buddhisms” and many ecological theories and concerns, and some overlap in these attempts at holistic visions is inevitable. The real questions are, then, how and in what ways are there overlaps, and why? The essayists explore this with gusto, pointing out the peculiar relevance of the Buddhist concern to find a mode of living to act out the experiential realization of the oneness with other life and indeed the entire moral order. This is not to say that certain features of Buddhism can’t be used in just the *opposite* direction, for as Kraft notes (p. 275), “It was not uncommon in Asia to use beliefs about karma to *evade* responsibility...”

Apart from the many examples provided, some general claims, such as those of Gary Snyder (not a contributor), are described at length (both positively and negatively). There is also some subtle analysis of the role of certain rituals in establishing Buddhist credentials for the claim of environmental sensitivity. As noted below, D. Williams adds a fine piece debunking the claim that the Japanese ceremony of animal release supports unqualifiedly the assertion that the ritual reflects respect for animals and the environment more generally.

Institutional-level Buddhist awareness of environmental issues is examined in the two essays dealing with the practice of several contemporary American Buddhist monasteries. The role of Thai monks as de facto custodians of environment niches or ecosystems is also examined amidst frank observations about how the monastic system can impede such concerns. There remains considerable difference over the relevance of the Thai Buddhist monks’ involvement to environmental matters. Swearer’s essay examines the positive features, while Harris cautions (p. 387) that in “Thai Buddhist critiques of the negative environmental consequences of multinational logging activities and the like, we can observe that the arguments have no discernibly Buddhist character.”

The volume’s many specific examples provide very helpful, “on the ground” analyses which reveal how the more theoretical issues play out in the lives of some Buddhists. As the subtitle “The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds” suggests, at issue is the relevance of Buddhist attention to the importance of each individual avoiding intentionally created suffering for other living beings, an approach that has obvious potential for ecologically-attuned spirituality. Of course, such an orientation will be, as noted above, crucially reliant on specific information about the realities of other

animals and ecosystems that is not available in traditional Buddhist sources. The contemporary Buddhist, then, must go well beyond the tradition to get the specific kinds of information that enable one to assess the impacts of intentional actions.

The inclusion of practical considerations is particularly important, for such information dovetails nicely with the specific thematic development. This combination does, however, make the series of essays read unevenly, since it pushes the reader to switch from complex conceptual and scholarly surmise about the whole tradition to much less rigorous descriptions which seem to accept the position that Buddhism is ecologically advanced and might have resources for dealing with nuclear energy, population and consumption, and the status of nonhuman animals.

But thematic development remains a very difficult issue, as evidenced by the essays and other comments dealing with the tradition's view of and relationship to other animals. The two essays dealing with nonhuman animals in Indian and Japanese subtraditions illustrate some basics of the complex Buddhist view of nonhuman animals. C. Chapple suggests that inclusion of so many tales of nonhuman animals in the *Jātakas* indicates a positive view, although he qualifies that at the end with the observation that the Buddhist view of nonhuman animals was by no means simple and included very negative aspects as well. Chapple suggests (p. 143) that Gotama's "descriptions [contain] ... remarkable detail and accuracy" and that the *Jātakas* are "very effective didactic tools." This is an important claim, but it needs to be balanced by some other, frank observations. Both Gotama and the early Buddhists got many of the most fundamental realities of many nonhuman animals dead wrong. The best example is the failure to see the eminently matriarchal nature of elephants, without which one cannot understand them or man's impact on elephant groups. In the *Jātakas* it is always a male elephant who leads the group. This is simply wrong, for it is always females who lead elephant social groups. This error reflects a patriarchal imposition on the easily verifiable reality of matriarchal leadership and defense of groups. As to the didactic quality of the stories, they do teach virtues and the Buddhist worldview, but they also convey very important meta-messages to the effect that nonhuman animals are "lower" and in important ways deemed far "less" than humans.

Other essayists in the volume incidentally supply information on the early Buddhists' negative views of nonhuman animals. Williams' essay regarding the medieval Japanese ceremony of releasing living beings is a model of restraint in assessing what at first appears to be the positive implication of an apparently animal-friendly ritual. In fact, a fuller assessment of the pre-ritual practices suggests some rather negative attitudes to-

ward both nonhuman animals and humans dominated by the Japanese elite. As Williams suggests (p. 156), the inconsistencies continue when contemporary Japanese Buddhists attend banquets at which the flesh of whales is served as a means of “memorializing whales.” But even as Williams concludes that the release ceremony is “other than an environmentally friendly act” (p. 156), he hints at how truly complex the issue is by noting that there were many unrecorded private acts of compassion which are very relevant to the book’s general themes. He laments (p. 157) the troubling tendency to compare the best of Buddhist tradition with the worst of other traditions in order to make a point about Buddhist ecological sensibilities.

Even though the issue is touched on in many other essays (because the tradition has, relatively speaking, a remarkable record of bringing nonhuman animals into its ethical considerations), the issues beg more discussion. As Sponberg rightfully points out, the characteristic Buddhist contention that humans are “above” all other animals in the order of things is an essential assertion of the tradition and not one which can be dispensed with easily. He suggests that the hierarchy (his term) is necessary but one of compassion rather than dominance, as in the Abrahamic traditions.

One wonders, however, if the undeniable anthropocentric features of traditional Buddhist claims, especially when made in the face of the tradition’s refusal to explore other animals’ actual realities, will allow the tradition to be fully “ecological.” It could be argued quite forcefully that any anthropocentric claim is in tension with the interdependence and impermanence experiences that are, as liberation-related features, arguably *more* central to the Buddhist vision of life. As Eckel notes (p. 344), the Buddhist experience is more properly understood as “acentric.” In essence, the claim about where humans stand in relation to other animals is irrelevant to any practitioner’s soteriological concerns.

In sum, these essays reflect the idea that even if the tradition has on the whole rarely, if ever, noticed the specific realities of other animals or taken them seriously, it nonetheless has much to say on the obligation of moral agents to refrain from lethal impacts on other animals. The articles do not consider, however, that the tradition was not particularly consistent in recognizing that there are radical, non-lethal harms which might concern the moral agent.

Given the complexity of both Buddhism and environmental issues today, however, it is inevitable that there will be some shortcomings when so many authors address such diverse realities in a single book. Yet if only one text could be used in a classroom, this is perhaps the most complete text for the scholar and student because of its sophisticated essays on methodological issues, statements from adherents, and various descriptions of

practical, real world problems (it is also accompanied by an exhaustive bibliography). While it might be best if the text was used in conjunction with others which provide additional statements from adherents — such as *Buddhism and Ecology*, edited by Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown (New York: Cassell, 1992), or *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, edited by Allan Hunt Badiner (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1990) — all in all, this text is essential reading for what Lancaster (p. 3) refers to as this “significant moment in Buddhist studies.” The goal of the long conference series, namely, explicating what Harvard’s Larry Sullivan refers to in his Preface as the inextricable, organic link between religious life and ecology, has been well advanced by this collection. It may not be a definitive exploration, but it is an important and particularly long step in a journey that promises to continue in the coming centuries. Indeed, as Harris’s closing essay concludes, “it must be admitted that the work, for scholars and scholarship, is only just beginning.”