



How 'Green' is Buddhism?

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Is Buddhism an environmentally-friendly or 'green' religion? The answer depends on what one means by 'Buddhism' and 'green'. Buddhism, for its part, is a broad church, encompassing a range of traditions, some of which are more in tune with contemporary environmental concerns than others. Likewise, the adjectives 'environmental' and 'green' can be legitimately applied to a variety of positions. Would a green thinker hold that it is morally permissible to cull a certain population of animals in order to preserve the integrity of a particular ecological community? Or would she contend that any such action would violate the moral rights of the animals involved? The point is moot: often environmental or green thinkers can be found on both sides of the debate.

This paper provides a brief introduction to the complex relations between Buddhism and environmental thought. Like most work on this topic, its primary aim is to determine the extent to which the canonical Buddhist teachings are environmentally-friendly, yet towards the end it also touches upon the question of whether Buddhist practices should be so regarded.

Environmental thinkers often maintain that an environmentally-friendly worldview will be (a) holistic (that is, cognisant of the intimate relations, causal and otherwise, that obtain between all things in nature) and (b) non-anthropocentric (that is, not perniciously human-centred). At first sight, the Buddhist worldview would appear to satisfy both of these criteria. Firstly, according to the central Buddhist teachings of 'not-self' (in Pali: 'anatta') and 'conditioned arising' ('*paticca-samuppāda*') any thing is regarded as being the thing it is, not on account of its possessing some essential nature or 'self', but because of the coincidence of certain conditions. Hence Buddhist thinkers maintain that any thing can only be adequately understood holistically, that is, in terms of its relations to other things. Secondly, the Buddhist teachings portray humans as thoroughly worldly beings, not elevated above the rest of the world by virtue of their possession of immortal souls, but like everything else, 'not self' and impermanent. Moreover, like all unawakened beings they are thought to be subject to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth ('*samsara*') and the law of 'karma' by which it operates.

On the basis of observations such as these many commentators have concluded that Buddhism is essentially an environmentally-friendly or green religion. According to Buddhism, one hears, we humans are at root 'one' with the rest of the natural world and therefore morally obliged to treat it with care and concern.



But these conclusions are too fast. True, Buddhists maintain that all things, human and non-human, are 'not-self' and impermanent. But it remains an open question whether such claims are equivalent to modern day ecological claims about the causal continuity between human beings and the rest of the natural world. What is more, even if humans are regarded as being in some sense 'one' with the nonhuman world, it remains a further question how or indeed whether this claim about what it is to be human bears upon how the matter of how we humans ought to act. Indeed in many Indian traditions of Buddhism the continuity between the human and non-human realms is not celebrated. Humans might be like non-human beings in the sense that they are not-self, impermanent, subject to rebirth and so on, but they are also like other beings in the sense that their lives are marked by dis-ease ('dukkha'), and this is certainly not regarded as something to celebrate. On the contrary, it is said that the wise individual will seek to awaken from the cycle of samsara in which she and her fellow beings are caught up.

To be sure, this need not entail a devaluing of the natural world. Indeed in some Buddhist traditions natural settings are thought to be especially conducive to the meditative practices that enable awakening ('nirvana', or in Pali, 'Nibbāna'), and this tendency in the teachings is evident even today in the practices of Thai forest monks (1). What is more, while downbeat conceptions of the natural world have long been popular in Indian Buddhist traditions, they have typically been less so in those of China, Japan and Korea. Quite the reverse: influenced by Daoist and in Japan, Shinto, cosmology, East Asian Buddhist traditions have often portrayed the natural world as a spiritual realm, in which natural phenomena intimate the truth of the Buddha's teachings (2).

Many writers on Buddhism and the environment focus their attention on what Buddhists have to say about what nature is like. However, it is important to note that the primary aim of the Buddhist teachings is not to set out a quasi-scientific theory of nature, but rather to inspire human beings to overcome the self-centred craving that gives rise to dukkha. Like ancient Greek thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, the Buddha is primarily concerned with human development, with developing a philosophically-based set of practices by means of which we might be able to live more fulfilling, and ultimately 'nirvanic' lives.

To live such a life, the Buddha claims, one does not need, for instance, vast quantities of wealth (quite the opposite). Instead, he advocates that each of us develop our character, or, to be more precise, that we each develop certain virtues of character and rid ourselves of certain vices (3). In the most general terms, the Buddha maintains that we should aspire to live our lives in harmony with the true nature of things, that we should not only understand the truth of the teachings of 'not-self', impermanence and so on, but that we should live selflessly and without obsessing about worldly things.

In this sense, then, and despite initial appearances, the Buddhist worldview would seem to be inherently anthropocentric. But care must be taken here. Although the Buddha is primarily concerned with human life, he maintains that an ideal such life will be marked by certain dispositions to act well in our relations with nature (which is not to say that the awakened individual will only care for nature because she wishes to live a fulfilling life). So, for instance, the Buddha warns of the dangers of the vice of greed. Better, he says, to live a life of frugality and temperance than one marked by the relentless urge to consume. He maintains that the good Buddhist will be mindful of his actions and their consequences, environmental or otherwise. Most notably, the Buddha maintains that to live an awakened life one must be compassionate, not just in one's relations with one's fellow humans, but in one's dealings with non-human animals as well. Heinrich Harrer provides one particularly striking example of Buddhist attitudes towards animals in his book *Seven Years in Tibet*. Reporting the efforts of the local populace to build a dyke to protect Lhasa from flooding, Harrer writes that 'there



were many interruptions and pauses. There was an outcry if anyone discovered a worm on a spade. The earth was thrown aside and the creature put in a safe place.' (4) Such attitudes might be bad for construction companies, but they are good for worms, and, if the Buddha is right, they are good, that is, spiritually edifying, for construction workers as well.

According to Buddhism, then, a truly fulfilling life will in certain respects be a green one too. It is a further question, however, whether the Buddhist teachings are in tune with what we nowadays think of as environmental objectives.

Consider the animal liberation movement, for instance. Advocates of animal rights would no doubt be pleased to see that in Buddhism animals are regarded as having moral value. But they might be less pleased to learn that animals themselves are often portrayed as leading lives ruled by vice and hence by dukkha. Indeed according to traditional Buddhist cosmology it is no good thing for a human being to be reborn as an animal; in fact, it is considered to be the result of bad karma generated by past misdeeds. What is more, many contemporary advocates of animal rights would be surprised to learn that despite Buddhist injunctions against taking life, even Buddhist monks are not all vegetarian. To be sure, traditions such as Zen Buddhism denounce meat-eating. But in countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, where Theravada Buddhism predominates, monks obtain food from alms, and to refuse to eat food given, even meat, would deprive the donor of the opportunity to generate good karma (5).

In addition to this, there is the issue of endangered species. The conservation of endangered species of animal is one of the primary objectives of some of the most influential environmental organisations. But why, on Buddhist principles, should one strive to conserve individuals of one species simply because the species of which they are members is classified as endangered? At first glance, it would seem that for Buddhists dukkha is dukkha, and whether it is experienced by a white rhino or a rat is of no moral consequence at all.

It is emerging that there is no clear and simple answer to the question of whether Buddhism is a green religion. But that is no cause for dismay, for the general topic of Buddhism and environmental thought can be approached from other, perhaps more illuminating directions. So rather than asking whether Buddhism conforms to our preconceived notions of what counts as 'green' thought, one could ask what we can learn from Buddhism. Such inquiries can be taken in a number of directions. What, for instance, is the connection between experiencing natural environments and coming to see the world mindfully and selflessly? Can Buddhist philosophy help us to understand the moral implications of modern issues such as biotechnology? What is the relation between a good (that is, spiritually fulfilling) life and a green life? Such questions, moreover, need not be high-flown and philosophical. There is, for instance, the general issue of how Buddhist teachings are played out in practice. This essay has focused on the Buddhist teachings as set out in the canonical texts of Buddhist traditions. But it is perfectly legitimate to ask how the Buddhism portrayed in those texts relates to the Buddhism that is actually practised in countries such as Sri Lanka and Thailand. And here there is much work to be done on the good work of organisations such as Sarvodaya Shramadana in Sri Lanka (6) and the Hag Muang Nan Group in Northern Thailand (7). In these examples of 'Engaged Buddhism', one sees not just the old Buddhist teachings put into practice, but a new and distinctively Buddhist approach to environmental matters taking shape.

Notes

(1) See Tiyanich, K. (1997) *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-century Thailand*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

(2) See LaFleur, W. (2000) 'Enlightenment for Plants and Trees', in S. Kaza and K. Kraft (eds.) *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, Boston: Shambhala, pp 109-16; and James, S. P. (2004) *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*, Aldershot: Ashgate.



- (3) See Cooper, D. E. and James, S. P. (2005) *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- (4) Harrer, H. (1997) *Seven Years in Tibet*, London: Flamingo, p 211
- (5) Harvey, P. (2000) *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 157-165
- (6) See <http://www.sarvodaya.org>, the website of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement.
- (7) At <http://www.dharmanet.org/engagedasia.htm> you can read more about Hag Muang Nan Group and other examples of 'Engaged Buddhism' in Asia.

Useful reading and resources

- Harris, I. (2000) 'Buddhism and Ecology', in D. Keown (ed.) *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*, Richmond: Curzon, pp 113-136
- Schmithausen, L. (1991) *Buddhism and Nature*, Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies
- Tucker, M. E. and Williams, D. R., (eds.) (1997) *Buddhism and Ecology: the interconnection of dharma and deeds*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press
- Waldau, P. (2000) 'Buddhism and Animal Rights', in D. Keown (ed.) *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*, Richmond: Curzon, pp 81-112

Website

<http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/buddhism/buddhism.pdf>, a useful bibliography provided by the Harvard-based Forum on Religion and Ecology.