

## INTRODUCTION

# BUDDHISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

**Simon P. James and David E. Cooper**

It is often supposed that Buddhist teachings and practices are in line with the concerns of latter-day environmental thinkers; that Buddhism, in short, is a distinctively 'green' or 'eco-friendly' religion. Such was the view expressed, for example, in influential works such as the edited collection *Dharma Gaia* (Badiner 1990).

In retrospect, this earlier confidence in an alliance between Buddhism and radical or 'deep' ecology seems premature. Certainly anyone wanting to maintain this alliance would have to respond to the sceptical voices raised by, especially, Lambert Schmithausen and Ian Harris (for example, Harris 2000; Schmithausen 1991). And there remain, moreover, important tasks of clarification. What precisely is meant by 'Buddhism'? After all, Buddhism is a broad church, and it cannot be assumed at the outset of one's enquiry that the teachings and practices of different traditions are all of a piece. What, moreover, is meant by 'environmental' concerns? Different environmental thinkers are often committed to very different, and sometimes diametrically opposed, causes. Is Buddhism supposed to be 'environmental' because of its emphasis on compassion for non-human animals? Or is it committed to promoting the health of wider ecological communities through acts of wildlife management, such as the culling of overabundant species? Arguably, it cannot be both.

There is, therefore, much room for work on the broad topic of Buddhism and the environment, and a need to articulate that topic into a number of more particular issues that may then be addressed in detail. In this volume we have gathered together five new essays that respond to this need and represent the best recent work in the field.

One often hears that Buddhism is 'green' on account of the Buddhist conception of the world; that 'the Buddhist worldview', in emphasising the interconnectedness of all things, including human beings, is singularly 'eco-friendly'. In the first essay in this volume, Damien Keown takes a different line. In Keown's view, Buddhism is in certain respects amenable to environmental

concerns; however, this is not on account of its 'worldview', but because of its conception of human life, and, in particular, its account of what it means to live a good human life. Keown's suggestion, then, is that the Buddhist dispensation takes the form of a virtue ethic, similar in certain general respects to the ethical systems of thinkers such as Aristotle and Aquinas. To be sure, this claim has been defended before—for example, in Keown's own study *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. But in his essay for this volume Keown extends his earlier work by drawing out the 'environmental' implications of the Buddhist virtues. With their emphasis on compassion, self-restraint, non-violence, non-greed, and so on, he suggests that Buddhist teachings provide the basis for an *environmental* virtue ethic.

John Holder sees the virtue ethical approach of writers like Keown as consistent with his own. Yet his essay introduces several interesting new themes. First, Holder raises the question of whether, on the early Buddhist conception, humans are regarded as being *natural*. His answer is an emphatic yes; although he stresses that the 'naturalism' implied is of an 'emergent', rather than a 'reductive', sort (which, very roughly, is to suggest that although, according to the teachings of early Buddhism, all phenomena are natural, not all can be explained in terms of interactions at the micro-physical level).

In the second part of his paper, Holder builds on his account of naturalism by considering the ethical implications of the early Buddhist conception of nature. This conception is often regarded as somewhat pessimistic: for early Buddhism (one often hears), the natural world is ultimately unsatisfactory, a realm of impermanence and suffering from which one should seek to escape. Holder demurs. For early Buddhism, he argues, one is enjoined, not to escape the natural world, but to learn to regard it without craving. This, however, is not a solely anthropocentric endeavour, since to achieve this freedom from craving one must develop certain kinds of 'environmental' concern: notably, compassion for non-human sentient beings, and hence a concern to promote the health of those habitats, wild or anthropogenic, on which they depend.

Ruben L. F. Habito, by contrast, is more pessimistic about the 'green' credentials of early Buddhism. He writes that early Buddhism, with its focus on the awakening of human beings and its emphasis on the impermanence of all natural things 'provides no viable ground to support a positive and caring attitude toward the environment, from a strictly and properly *Buddhist* perspective'. Mahayana traditions, he suggests, provide a rosier (or rather, greener), outlook. In making his case, Habito considers several Mahayana teachings, including the non-duality of *samsāra* and *nirvāna* (which 'can pave the way for a positive evaluation of earthly realities') and the East Asian conception of 'the Buddhahood of grasses and trees'.

In the later sections of his paper, Habito frames our current environmental situation in terms of some canonical Buddhist teachings. Our modern situation is, he maintains, one of 'global *dukkha*'—of war, poverty and disease, as well as various environmental ills. Our first task must be to awaken to this fact; our

second, to identify its root causes in the ethos and institutions of modern life; our third, to envision the cessation of global *dukkha*; and our fourth is to take steps to bring this about.

Like most writers in the field, Keown, Holder and Habito focus on the ethical aspects of our relations with the natural world. With Ian Harris's paper, however, we move on to the different, yet related, topic of the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Harris begins with a brief survey of the role of nature in western art, before considering Indic attitudes towards the natural world. All this, however, serves as a prelude to his main theme: the depiction of nature in art inspired by Sino-Japanese Buddhist traditions. Harris identifies the distinctive features of such art, including its minimalism (in contrast to the *horror vacui* evident in much Indic visual art), its realism (evident, for instance, in Japanese Buddhist mandalas, which often evoke actual landscapes) and its attention to the everyday (related, perhaps, to teachings on the non-duality of *samsāra* and *nirvāna*). In addition, Harris draws attention to the socio-political aspects of the topic: the nationalistic motivations for D. T. Suzuki's famous writings on 'the Japanese love of nature', and, more generally, the relations between art and the 'aristocratic values of dominion and control'.

In the fifth and final paper of this volume, Susan Darlington considers Buddhism, not just in theory, but in practice. Her focus is on the Thai practice of consecrating areas of forest by symbolically 'ordaining' certain prominent trees. Tree ordination has been used for the purposes of forest conservation in Thailand since the late 1980s. Despite initial opposition from some more conservative members of the Sangha, the practice has gone on to do much good, not least for the local people who depend for their livelihood on the maintenance of 'community forests'. Now, however, Darlington contends that the practice is 'increasingly used to support national agendas and to undermine the power of the rural people whom environmental monks aim to help'. Tree ordination, it seems, has been appropriated by those in power to serve their own ends. Darlington ends by suggesting that 'Unlike tree ordinations, spirit beliefs and local or regional rituals ... still hold sufficient power and meaning for villagers to serve as focal points for environmental projects'. Her point raises some interesting questions. If spirit beliefs and local rituals are good for villagers and good for the forest, should Buddhists therefore encourage them? It is not clear that they should not. What is important, surely, is not that people are 'Buddhists', but that *dukkha* is ended. And now, in the midst of our various environmental crises and the 'global *dukkha*' of which Habito writes, the time is perhaps right for the sensitive employment of 'skilful means'.

## REFERENCES

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