

Against Holism

Rethinking Buddhist Environmental Ethics

Simon P. James

November 2007

Contents

Abstract	3
Keywords	3
1.	3
2.	4
3.	5
4.	6
5.	8
6.	10
7.	11
8.	12
9.	14
References	15

Abstract

Environmental thinkers sympathetic to Buddhism sometimes reason as follows: (1) A holistic view of the world, according to which humans are regarded as being ‘one’ with nature, will necessarily engender environmental concern; (2) the Buddhist teaching of ‘emptiness’ represents such a view; therefore (3) Buddhism is an environmentally-friendly religion.

In this paper, I argue that the first premise of this argument is false (a holistic view of the world can be reconciled with a markedly eco-unfriendly attitude) as is the second (in speaking of emptiness, Buddhist thinkers are not proposing an ‘ecological’ conception of the world). Yet the conclusion is, I suggest, true: Buddhism is in certain respects environmentally-friendly, not for the reasons cited above, but because of the view, encapsulated in its teachings and practices, that certain dispositions to treat the natural environment well are an integral part of human well-being.

Keywords

Buddhism, virtue ethics, holism, emptiness

1.

Two assumptions are often made in studies of the environmental implications of Buddhism: (1) that Buddhism is an environmentally-friendly religion, and (2) that this is because of the stress placed, in its teachings, on the ‘oneness’ of humans and nature. In this paper I argue that while (2) is false, (1) is true, that (to be more precise) Buddhism is environmentally-friendly, not on account of its endorsing some notion of the ‘oneness’ of humans and nature (which it doesn’t), but because of its distinctive conception of the good life.

Before setting out this argument, however, it is necessary both to clarify what it might mean to say that humans and nature are ‘one’ and to explain why anyone might think that Buddhists endorse such a view. A good place to begin in doing this is with the concept of nature, the realm that, according to (2), humans are supposed to be ‘one’ with. It might seem appropriate, then, to begin with a question such as the following:

Q1) What do Buddhists believe nature is?

This, however, is a poorly formed question, and for several reasons. For one thing, it is not clear who the ‘Buddhists’ referred to are. Buddhism is, after all, a broad church, and Buddhists from different traditions often believe different things about nature. Indeed it cannot be assumed at the outset of our inquiry that their comportsment

towards nature is best understood in terms of *belief*.¹ A further complication is that it is not obvious what, in this context, the term ‘nature’ means. It is not clear, for example, whether QI is meant to refer to nahire-as-opposed-to-the-supernatural or to nature-as-a-realm-relatively-unaffected-by-human-activity, or to some other conception. Moreover, even if we can specify what *we* mean by nahire in the present context, it is a further question whether any traditions of Buddhism have entertained such a conception. For instance, one would not be justified in assuming that Buddhists have subscribed to the notion that reality can be divided into two realms, the supernatural and the natural.

I will engage with some of these issues below. For the moment, however, I would like to consider one answer to QI that is often implied in discussions of the topic:

A) Buddhists believe that all things are empty.

The argument I intend to refute runs, therefore, as follows. Since they believe in the emptiness of all things, Buddhists are committed to the view that humans are in some sense ‘one’ with nahire; moreover, it is because they believe this that they tend to act well in their relations with the natural world.

2.

Before considering the teaching of emptiness (Sanskrit: *sunyata*), some qualifications are in order. First, the teaching is understood in several different ways within the broad tradition of Buddhism, with the result that it can be misleading to speak of *the* teaching of emptiness at all (see, for instance, Harvey, 1990: 104–118). I will be treating the teaching of emptiness as it has been articulated in the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism. Moreover, in the interests of keeping my account as accessible as possible, I will be presenting a very simplified account of that teaching.

Second, it must be borne in mind that, according to Buddhists, emptiness, whatever it is (and, indeed, regardless of whether it can properly be said to *be* anything at all), is not something that can be adequately understood in a merely intellectual way, but that it has rather to be experienced. So it is important at the outset that one be aware of how much — or rather, how little — any intellectual account of emptiness, such as the one I will be presenting below, might be able to achieve.

How, then, is one to understand the teaching of emptiness? As so often in the shidy of Buddhism, it is best to begin with the ‘Noble Truths’ identified by the Buddha. The first of these Truths states that our lives aren’t as satisfying as they might be, are

¹ The view that a religion must be defined in terms of the beliefs it embodies is culturally specific. Compare Ninian Smal’s assessment of the importance of belief in Christianity (1989: 247) with Gavin Flood’s account of the difficulties faced by any attempt to define Hinduism in terms of a set of beliefs (1996: 12).

always marked, that is, by *dukkha* or suffering. The second identifies the cause of this dis-ease, namely, our inveterate tendency to crave things, to lust after them or to seek obsessively to be rid of them.² Accordingly, the purpose of some of the most important Buddhist teachings is to undermine our attraction or attachment to the things we crave. And this, indeed, is the basic purpose of the teaching of emptiness: to loosen the hold things have upon us. As the Zen teacher Yasutani puts it, ‘Once you realize the world of [emptiness] you will readily comprehend the nature of the phenomenal world and cease clinging to it’ (quoted in Kapleau 1985: 79).

According to the emptiness teaching, we crave things (using this term in its widest sense) because we tend to see them as existing in themselves, independent both of their relations to other things and of their relation to us. This is not to say that the world is merely nothing, an absence of things. The claim is, rather, that whatever exists cannot do so on account of its possessing a non-relational essential nature: things, as Buddhists say, are empty (*sunya*) of ‘self-existence’ or ‘own-being’ (*svabhava*). Instead, it is said that any particular thing is what it is because of the coincidence of certain conditioning factors. So on this account, the mug of coffee on my desk, say, is the particular thing it is, not because it is imbued with an inherent nature, but because of the relations it bears both to other things and to me, the perceiver. If I could perceive it as such, if, that is, I could see it for what it is — conditioned, impermanent, a partial reflection of my own caffeine-addled mind — it, like anything, would have less of a hold on me.

3.

This is of course the barest sketch of the teaching of emptiness. I will have more to say about it below. For the moment, it will suffice to note that, condensed into such a brief summary, the teaching might seem to have something in common with the positions espoused by modern proponents of environmental holism (‘ecological holists’, as I shall refer to them).

The reasons for this conclusion are not hard to discern. Ecological holists such as Aldo Leopold and Arne Naess are defined as such on account of their commitment to a holistic conception of the natural world, according to which any element of that world can only be adequately understood in terms of its relations to other elements. And, in this, they would seem to be of a piece with Buddhist thinkers. For to say, with Naess for example, that organisms — or more generally, things — must be conceived as ‘knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations’ (1999: 3) is (one might suppose) to concur with the Buddhist’s view that all things are what they are on account of certain conditioning factors. One might expect the ecological holist and the Buddhist to agree that a tree, say, is not a hard-edged, independent object, but a nexus in a

² Or more precisely, our tendency to crave what we take things to be. See Section 5 below. Furthermore, I am using the term ‘things’ here in a very broad sense to denote, not just material objects, but any object of craving.

web of relations including, not just so many tons of wood and leaf, but the soil, sky and sun — even, perhaps, the natural environment as a whole. More generally, one might conclude that Bill Devall is right in suggesting that ‘Buddhist wisdom, including the awareness that everything is related to everything else... is echoed in the modern science of ecology’ (1990: 161).

And one might, indeed, be tempted to go further. For if these conclusions are well taken, one might expect Buddhists to endorse what, for ecological holists, is often regarded as the central lesson of holism: that *we* — i.e., us humans — should be regarded as *one with* nature, not necessarily *in tune* with it, but *parts of or even identical with* it. One might therefore expect Buddhist thinkers to endorse the view here summarised by one ecological holist:

[T]he central intuition of deep ecology... is the idea that there is no firm ontological divide in the field of existence. In other words, the world is simply not divided up into independently existing subjects and objects, nor is there any bifurcation in reality between the human and nonhuman realms. Rather all entities are constituted by their relationships. (Fox, 1999: 157: emphasis removed)

Furthermore, one might conclude that *this* is why Buddhism is an environmentally-friendly religion: that the Buddhist, like the ecological holist, considers nature worthy of some kind of positive moral concern because she regards it as a holistic system with which she, and indeed all other natural things, are in some sense ‘one’. Indeed one might be tempted to endorse the view espoused by one commentator, that the teaching of emptiness (interpreted as the view that ‘nothing has a separate existence’), when internalised through practice, enables us humans to ‘experience ourselves and nature as one’ and so fosters ‘respect for the beauty and power of nature’ and the flowering of an innate ‘biospirituality’ (Badiner, 1990: xvi-xviii).

4.

The argument implied here (I will call it The Unity Thesis) runs roughly as follows:

- Premise 1. A holistic view of the world, according to which humans are regarded as being ‘one’ with nature, will necessarily engender environmental concern.
- Premise 2. The Buddhist teaching of emptiness represents just such a holistic view of the world.
- Therefore, Buddhism is an environmentally-friendly religion.

The argument is valid (or rather, it could easily be made valid were it to be formulated in a more careful but more cumbersome manner). But is it sound?

Premise 1, for its part, is often assumed to be true, especially by writers towards the dark green pole of the environmental spectrum. And this assumption is also made in much of the literature devoted to ‘Green Buddhism’. So, to give one of many examples,

the Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh claims that since ‘human beings and nature are inseparable’, ‘we should deal with nature the way we should deal with ourselves... we should not harm nature’ (quoted in Harvey, 2000: 151). But this does not follow; indeed, Premise 1 is false.

Its falsity might not, however, be obvious. After all, there are no doubt some people, perhaps many, who believe that they and perhaps humans in general are in some sense one with nature, and who are thereby moved to act well in relation to the natural (roughly, non-artefactual) environment. But there is no reason to conclude that someone who subscribes to such a view must, of necessity, adopt an environmentally-friendly attitude. Consider a proponent of materialism, someone (let us suppose) who subscribes to the notion that everything, she included, is made of matter. Such an individual clearly believes that we are one with nature (for her, the material universe), but there is no good reason to think that she must be moved by a positive moral regard for the natural world. She *might* be. But she might be a terrible scourge of the environment.

Or consider Spinoza’s conviction that humans, and indeed all things, are parts of a single reality, ‘God or Nature’ (*Deus sive Natura*). Despite believing that humans are in this special sense ‘one’ with nature, Spinoza himself was an inveterate anthropocentrist. Here he is:

... Not that I deny that the lower [i.e., nonhuman] animals have sensations. But I do deny that we are therefore not permitted to consider our own advantage, use them at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us. (1996: 135)³

Despite his conviction that humans are ‘one’ with nature, Spinoza maintains that we are justified in doing whatever we like with our cousins in the animal world.

The salient point here is that general claims about humanity’s continuity or identity with the rest of nature can, in different hands, generate diametrically opposed prescriptions for how one ought to treat the natural world.⁴ And the upshot of this is that *even if it* turned out that Buddhist references to the emptiness of all things signalled a holistic view of the world, according to which humans are ‘one’ with nature, that in itself would not suffice to demonstrate that Buddhism is environmentally-friendly.

³ Note 1 to Proposition 37 of Part 4. On the environmental implications of Spinoza’s thought, see chapters 11–13 of Witoszek and Brennan, 1999.

⁴ It could be contended that environmental concern is engendered not merely by a commitment to the view that humans and nature are ‘one’, but by the feeling of being ‘at one’ with nature. This possibility is worth exploring: there are, no doubt, all manner of ways in which one might feel at one with nature, some of which might foster certain kinds of environmental concern. Whether any such experiences *necessarily* foster environmental concern is, however, another matter. After all, though talk of being ‘at one’ with nature tends to conjure up images of benign harmony, it is possible to conceive of someone who acts poorly with his dealings with nature but who nonetheless feels ‘at one’ with it. Think, for instance, of the trophy-seeking hunter’s feeling that he is ‘at one’ with a nature red in tooth and claw.

5.

There are therefore grounds for denying that the teaching of emptiness, even if it did entail the oneness of humans and nature, would necessarily engender any kind of positive regard for the natural world. There are good reasons, that is, for thinking that Premise 1 is false.

What, though, of Premise 2, the claim that the teaching of emptiness indicates an ‘ecological’ variety of holism? One thing to note, in judging the veracity of this claim, is that, for many ecological holists, to say that humans are ‘one’ with the world that surrounds them is to say that they are subject to the same ecological laws, of energy transfer and the like, as everything else. This, for instance, is part of Aldo Leopold’s point in claiming that we ought to regard ourselves as ‘plain member[s] and citizen[s]’ of the ‘land-community’ (1949: 204).

The Buddhist account is, however, quite different. For one thing, to say that all things are empty of self-existence is not to say, in the manner of the ecological scientist, that all things are causally connected, for such talk would imply precisely that degree of distinctness among things that the teaching of *śūnyatā* is meant to undermine (Cooper, 2003: 48). For according to that teaching, the relations between things (again, using the term in its widest sense) are internal, which is to say that any particular thing would not be the thing it is in the absence of certain relations between it and other things. As David E. Cooper explains, ‘Just as the relatives in a family require one another in order to be the cousins, brothers or whatever which they are, so [according to the emptiness teaching] things... in general require one another in order to be what they are’ (2003: 49).

This observation does not, in itself, fatally undermine all attempts to ground some conception of the unity of humans and nature on the emptiness teaching. Indeed, that teaching *does* entail that, in one quite particular sense, humans and the world (if not, perhaps, nature) are inseparable. For it is said that to fully appreciate the teaching of emptiness is to realise, not just that things ‘out there’ in the world, are bound together by internal relations, but that what we take to be the world is internally related to *us*, to those human concerns, perspectives and ‘conceptual proliferations’ that are brought into play in its presenting itself to us as a world in the first place (Burton, 2001: 179). Hence, picking up, presumably, from such scriptural remarks as ‘it is in ... perceptions and thoughts that there is the world, the origin of the world’ (Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1999: 90), *The Diamond Sutra* maintains that material objects are ‘a convention of language’ (Iyer, 1983: 27) and the Sixth Patriarch of Ch’an (Zen) that ‘all things were originally given rise to by man’ (Yampolsky, 1967: 151). This anti-realist tendency certainly furnishes a sense to the proposition that the world is not separate from human existence, but this is evidently not the sense intended by ecological holists such as Leopold.

And there are still other differences between ecological holism and the teaching of emptiness. Consider, for example, what the world of emptiness must actually be like.

There is, of course, a limit to how far reflection can get you here: emptiness, recall, is something to be experienced, rather than merely pondered. Indeed, the world of emptiness, the world as it appears in awakening, is said to be ineffable. The upshot of this is that any world that can, as it were, be ‘effed’ cannot, on the Buddhist account, be the world of awakening but must instead (in line with the anti-realist conclusions canvassed above) reflect certain unawakened concerns, perspectives, and so forth. This, in turn, means that the world of ecological science, precisely because it is *not* ineffable, must to a certain extent reflect our state of unawakened ignorance (*avidya*). Indeed, on the Buddhist view, any world we can capture in words, whether natural or urban, is considered to belong to *samsara*, the realm of craving and delusion. And this, for its part, is said to be a realm from which the wise will seek *liberation*. Hence the liberated person, far from celebrating his or her oneness with the realm of nature, is one who is said to have ‘overcome the world’, to have overcome nature (Mascaro, 1986: 72).⁵

The views of the ecological holist and the Buddhist are in this respect quite different. It is certainly not the aim of Buddhist practice to realise that we are one with nature in anything like the sense identified by ecological scientists. But although the arguments developed above may suffice to demonstrate this, they do not, in themselves, refute Premise 2. For, after all, not all ecological holists seek to ground their ideas in science. While, as we have noted, many follow Leopold in appealing to the findings of ecology, many others follow Naess in looking to holistic metaphysical systems of the kind articulated by thinkers such as Spinoza and Whitehead. We have seen that references to emptiness bear scant resemblance to the holistic views espoused by scientifically-minded ecological holists such as Leopold. Might they have more in common with these metaphysical conceptions of ecological holism? Indeed, might the ultimate aim of Buddhist practice be to realise, not one’s continuity with the natural world as described by ecological science, but one’s unity or even identity with Nature, conceived as reality as a whole?

Suggestions of this kind certainly have a popular appeal. It is often supposed that to awaken to Nirvana is to realise one’s unity with the universe. (The notion is there, for example, in the joke about the Zen master and the hot-dog seller. ‘What can I get you?’ asks the latter. ‘Make me one with everything,’ the Master replies.) Popular they may be, but claims to this effect are false. For talk of becoming one with everything encourages the idea that the ‘everything’ referred to is some kind of self-existent metaphysical whole, one that exists ‘through itself’, like Spinoza’s *Deus sive Natura*. But for Buddhism any such talk of self-existent Absolutes evinces a failure fully to appreciate the universality of the teaching of emptiness. For to say that all things are empty is not to say that they are what they are in relation to some self-existent abso-

⁵ Verse 254. See further, Hanis, 2000: 122–123 and Schmithausen, 1991: 12–13. Such statements must be balanced against the view, embodied in traditions such as Zen, that the world of awakening is in some sense identical to the world as it appears to the unawakened. On the roots of such views in Madhyamaka thought, see Harvey, 1990: 103–104. On their implications for our relations with the natural world, see Eckel, 1997.

lute, Emptiness. On the contrary, the emptiness teaching holds true of all ‘things’, so that even *silnyata* is said to be devoid of self-existence.⁶

So Buddhists do not aspire to realise their ‘oneness’ with the nature described by ecological science nor, indeed, with the Nature referred to by holistically- inclined metaphysicians such as Spinoza. But there are yet more reasons for doubting the veracity of Premise 2. For consider, once again, the ecological holist’s position. The crucial thing to note here is that it is precisely that, a position: the ecological holist is clearly committed to a particular view (that the world is a network of interrelated elements, and so on). Buddhist references to the emptiness of things, however, must be interpreted differently. To be sure, one might be suspicious of claims, voiced by Zen Buddhists in particular, to the effect that such talk has *no* philosophical connotations; yet it must be admitted that its primary aim is not to articulate a position that could, as it were, be set down on paper and subjected to critical evaluation. Although talk of emptiness ‘does work’ in the teachings of Buddhism, its function is essentially practical. Its work, in the context of intellectual debate, is not to articulate a position but to expose the emptiness of, and thus to loosen one’s attachment to, any particular position — not, one might say, to paint a picture of the world, but to loosen the grip any such pictures have on us. (Indeed, this was essentially the aim of the founding text of the Madhyamaka tradition, Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (*Fundamentals of the Middle Way*).⁷

6.

Premises 1 and 2 of The Unity Thesis are therefore both false. Buddhist talk of emptiness does not imply a conception of holism of the kind espoused by modern-day ecological holists. Moreover, even if it *did* imply such a conception, that would not necessarily engender any kind of positive moral regard for the natural environment. What is more, even if the teaching of emptiness entailed ecological holism and ecological holism entailed some form of environmental concern, that would not justify the conclusion that Buddhism as a whole is environmentally-friendly. For as I noted earlier, we have been considering the teaching of emptiness as it has been developed

⁶ See further, Abe, 1989: 128–129 and Ryoen, 1999: 294. This is not to deny that some Buddhist traditions (notably, the Yogacara and Tathagata-garbha) have been more amenable to ‘metaphysical’ readings of *silnyata*, according to which it is not simply an adjectival quality of things, but ‘something’ existing in its own right.

⁷ As Jonai’don Ganeri notes, a metaphysical holism, according to which the world is ‘like a net, where entities are merely the knots in interlocking ropes... acquiring whatever capacities they have by virtue of their relative position in the whole network and not in virtue of having intrinsic properties’ ‘sits ill’ with Nagarjuna’s ‘scepticism’ (2001: 67).

in one specific (yet influential) Buddhist tradition, the Madhyamaka, and the general conclusion would not therefore be warranted.⁸

Admittedly, other writers have criticised ‘ecological’ readings of Buddhism. Ian Harris, for one, has questioned whether the religion ought to be regarded as offering a form of ecological holism. (‘[M]uch that masquerades under the label of ecoBuddhism...’ he concludes, ‘turns out to be an uneasy partnership between Spinozism, New Age religiosity and highly selective Buddhism’ (2000: 132).) Yet for Harris these reflections cast doubt on the conclusion of The Unity Thesis, as well. He suggests, in other words, that because Buddhism is not presenting an environmentally-friendly form of holism it should not be thought of as environmentally-friendly at all (or at least, that it shouldn’t be thought of as being *as* environmentally-friendly as it is often supposed to be).

But this conclusion is unjustified. For one thing, Buddhists do have some interesting things to say about holism, and indeed some things that are relevant to environmental issues.⁹ Furthermore, leaving aside the issue of holism, there is no need to conclude that because the premises of The Unity Thesis are false, Buddhism can have nothing to offer environmental thinkers. For perhaps Buddhism *is*, in some sense, environmentally-friendly — just not for the reasons set out in The Unity Thesis.

7.

But if not to The Unity Thesis, where is one to turn? What other basis could there be for environmental concern in Buddhism?

Here it may be helpful to recall the question with which we began:

Q1) What do Buddhists believe nature is?

In trying to answer this question, and in trying to relate that answer to environmental matters, we have been led to what looks on the face of it to be a dead-end.

In view of this, it may be best to begin anew with a different question:

Q2) How do Buddhists think one should live?

This is a more promising beginning. After all, the Buddhist teachings do not focus on nature per se. It is true that ancient sources provide an elaborate cosmology; however, nowhere in the scriptures can one find a ‘theory of nature’ in anything like the modern sense, one on a par with those offered by Neo-Darwinism or, earlier, by Aristotelian

⁸ Some ecological holists maintain that the Buddhist teaching of conditioned arising (*pratītyasamutpada*), rather than that of emptiness, indicates a form of ecological holism. (The teachings are in fact intimately related — see further, Musashi (1993: 192–195).) On the differences between the teaching of conditioned arising and ecological holism, see Cooper and James, 2005: 111.

⁹ For a discussion of Buddhist holism and its implications for environmental ethics, see James, 2004: Chapter 4.

teleology. The focus is elsewhere, on the question of how one should live in order to attain freedom from *dukkha*. Speculations on *nahire* are regarded as being worthwhile only to the extent that they bear upon this, more pressing issue.

So, how do Buddhists think one should live? This question can be approached from several angles; however, one especially illuminating response focuses on those traits of character that, according to Buddhism, one would do well to develop. Thus one answer to Q2 runs roughly as follows. For Buddhists, one should be generous, compassionate, mindful, and so on — one would do well to live a life exemplifying these ‘virtuous’ character traits. Furthermore, one should develop these particular traits because of their relation to the ultimate goal of awakening from *samsara*. So one should be generous, compassionate, etc., because these are the virtues by which an awakened life is marked.

The general claim here, then, is that Buddhism provides a conception of the good life (or what is equivalent, human well-being) as well as an account of the virtues by which such a life may be defined. The claim, in short, is that Buddhism can be framed as a (eudaimonist) virtue ethic, one similar, in certain formal respects, to Aristotle’s ethics or that of the Stoics. Now this is a bold proposal, and one that would not be endorsed by all writers on the topic. But it is not my aim here to provide a thorough defence of it.¹⁰ In the remainder of this paper, I will turn instead to the task of examining the ‘environmental’ implications of some candidate Buddhist virtues. My suggestions in this regard can therefore be regarded as contributions to the wider project of demonstrating that Buddhism can yield an ‘environmental virtue ethic’.¹¹ I will not be able, in the few pages remaining, to provide an adequate defence of this larger claim. (I will not be able, for instance, to do justice to the differences between Buddhist traditions on these matters.) Nonetheless, I hope that I may be able to give some indication as to how such a virtuous ethical treatment of Buddhist environmental ethics might proceed.¹²

8.

Let’s begin with compassion (*karuna*). Translated into the idiom of virtuous ethics, the Buddhist view is that a disposition to feel and act compassionately is an integral part of a good (i.e., awakened) life.¹³ At first sight, this might seem a banal observation. After all, who, apart from Nietzscheans and sergeant majors, doesn’t think compassion a good thing? Yet *karuna* is different from compassion of the common or garden variety,

¹⁰ For a detailed defence of this claim, see Keown, 2001; Cooper and James, 2005: Chapter 4.

¹¹ On environmental virtue ethics, see Sandler and Cafaro, 2005.

¹² For a more detailed account, see Cooper and James, 2005.

¹³ Which is not to say, of course, that the genuinely compassionate person will be moved to develop such dispositions by a self-interested wish to better herself. On the relation between virtue ethics, environmental concern and self-interest, see James, 2006.

not least because it is said to be an occasion for bliss, rather than sorrow (Buddhaghosa, 1991: 310). This might seem surprising, given the Buddha's assessment of the amount of suffering in the world. Yet on the Buddhist account, the awakened individual is not depressed by the sufferings of others because his sympathy is always tempered by non-attachment. So although he feels for 'samsaric' beings, he does not, so to speak, feel their feelings in the same way they feel them. For the kinds of feelings we are here discussing are classified as *dukkha*, and this means that they are bound up with a host of self-centred delusions. Now an awakened individual must be able to recognise, in a comparatively detached and objective sense, that the feelings of whatever being he is faced with are deluded in this way; however, in empathising with 'samsaric' beings he does not find himself party to their delusions. Hence he does not suffer in the same way as those he aims to help (Gowans, 2003: 142).

But here is, perhaps, not the place for a detailed analysis of the concept of *karuna*. The important point for the present discussion is that if compassion is a virtue, then it is, on the Buddhist account, one that extends naturally to all sentient beings, not just to humans, so that someone who is compassionate in his dealings with other humans but not in his relations with non-human sentient beings would not be considered genuinely compassionate at all. Hence, assuming what seems obvious, that some non-human animals are sentient, *karuna* counts as an 'environmental' virtue, one, that is, that may be associated with a positive moral regard for the natural (roughly, non-artefactual) world.

As well as being compassionate, a good Buddhist is said to exemplify a certain gentleness of disposition — not timidity (think, for example, of the fearsome figures portrayed in some of the literature of Zen), but an unwillingness to stamp one's mark upon the world. This is partly a result of the great emphasis placed on abiding by the 'First Precept' of Buddhist practice, the injunction against intentionally killing — or more broadly, harming or injuring — sentient beings. The good Buddhist takes care not to harm her fellow travellers in *samsara*, human or non-human. But this is not to say that she is gentle *only* in her relations with sentient beings. True, one would not expect her to spend her leisure time hunting foxes or shooting pigeons, but neither would one expect to find her tramping through the temple gardens, kicking up the carefully raked sand or carving her initials into the ornamental rocks. On the contrary, the woman who is non-violent in her relations with sentient beings would also be gentle in her dealings with non-sentient beings, with plants, even rocks, and not just with humans and foxes. She would, in the words of one commentator, have developed a 'delicacy' towards her surroundings (Herrigel, 1999: 79).

This gentleness, for its part, is intimately related to a third Buddhist virtue, the humility that, in the *sutras*, is said to correspond to the 'destruction' of pride (*mana*) (e.g., Walshe 1995: 469). As with *karuna*, this differs from what one might ordinarily think of as humility. To be sure, the humble man does not regard himself as being superior to his fellows, but neither does he rank himself 'worse than, or equal to anyone' (Saddhatissa 1994: 107; cf. 110). To say that he is humble is, rather, to say

that he has freed himself from the self-centredness evident, amongst other things, in a preoccupation with such self-estimation. Indeed, no longer obsessed with the relation of things or people to himself, the humble man finds himself able to ‘see other things as they really are’ (Murdoch, 1997: 385), in their ‘thusness’ (*tathata*). It seems reasonable to suppose that such humility would counteract, not just egoism, but also that variety of anthropocentric conceit, epitomised in Spinoza’s attitude towards animals, that reckons things only in relation to human satisfaction. Thus, in one Buddhist *sutra*, we are encouraged to think of cows, not only as producers of milk and ‘medicinal drugs’, but as ‘our great friends’ and as beings endowed with their own ‘beauty’ and ‘health’. A few verses later, those who kill and sacrifice cows are rebuked for regarding them as nothing more than ‘appendage[s]’ to our lives (Saddhatissa, 1994: 33¹).

A fourth Buddhist virtue is, perhaps, that of mindfulness (*smṛti*) — an alert awareness of, amongst other things, feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations (the rise and fall of the breath, for instance). In the context of Buddhist practice, a dispassionate awareness of these factors is thought to foster a sense of their transience and, accordingly, freedom from attachment (see further, Gowans, 2003: 189–91). But as ever in Buddhism, the ability to do this is not regarded as being of benefit only to the practitioner. Mindfulness is thought to go hand in hand with a caring and attentive attitude towards others. And, indeed, the virtue would seem to bear upon one’s comportment towards the natural world, as well. After all, many of us behave poorly in relation to the environment, not because we are uninformed about environmental issues, nor even because we don’t care about them, but because we do not pay sufficient attention to how we are acting at any particular moment. I, for one, tend unthinkingly to leave lights on in my house, to throw beer cans in the trash, to leave the TV on ‘standby’, and so on. In doing these things I am like the novice who, in one Zen story, is scolded by his teacher for thoughtlessly pouring bathwater on the bare ground, rather than giving it to the plants (Senzaki and Reys, 1971: 83¹). Like compassion, gentleness and humility, the virtue lacking in such behaviour clearly has implications for our moral relations to the natural world, even if more work would be needed to identify what precisely those implications are.

9.

As I have conceded, this is merely a thumbnail sketch of a Buddhist environmental virtue ethic. Nonetheless, I hope that the general thesis I have defended in this paper is clear. To recap: I have suggested that Buddhism is, in certain respects, an environmentally-friendly religion. But I have argued that this is not on account of the fact that Buddhists believe we are ‘one’ with nature in anything like the ecological holist’s sense (which they don’t) and because such a belief necessarily engenders environmental concern (which it doesn’t). Instead, I have made the tentative suggestion that Buddhism is environmentally-friendly, not because of what it says about nature

per se, but on account of its view of human life, and, in particular, because of what it says about the virtues an ideal such life would exemplify. The good Buddhist treats nature well, I have argued, not because she believes she is ‘one’ with the natural world, but because she has, through practice, come to develop certain virtues of character. She treats nature well, that is, because she is compassionate, gentle, humble, mindful, and so on, not just in relation to her fellow humans, but in her dealings with all things.

References

- Abe, Masao. 1989. *Zen and Western Thought*, edited by William LaFleur. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Badiner, A.H., ed. 1990. *Dharma Gaia*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Buddhaghosa. 1991. *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, Bhikkhu Nanamoli (trans.). Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Burton, David. 2001. ‘Is Madhyamaka Buddhism really the Middle Way? Emptiness and the problem of nihilism’, *Contemporary Buddhism* 2, No.2: 177–90.
- Cooper, David E. and James, Simon P. 2005. *Buddhism. Virtue and Environment*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Cooper, David E. 2003. *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Devall, Bill. 1990. ‘Ecocentric Sangha’, in A.H. Badiner (ed.) *Dharma Gaia* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press), pp. 155–164.
- Eckel, Malcolm David. 1997. ‘Is there a Buddhist philosophy of nature?’, in M. E. Tucker and D. R. Williams (eds.), *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 327–349.
- Flood, Gavin. 1996. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fox, Warwick. 1999. ‘Deep ecology: A new philosophy of our time?’, in N. Witoszek and A. Brennan (eds.), *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield), pp. 153–165.
- Ganeri, Jonaidon. 2001. *Philosophy in Classical India: The Proper Work of Reason*. London: Routledge.
- Gowans, Christopher W. 2003. *Philosophy of the Buddha*. London: Routledge.
- Hanis, Ian. 2000. ‘Buddhism and ecology’, in D. Keown (ed.), *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics* (Richmond: Curzon), pp. 113–136.
- Harvey, Peter. 2000. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harvey, Peter. 1990. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, History and Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Herrigel, G. 1999. *Zen in the Art of Flower Arranging*, translated by R. F. C. Hull. London: Souvenir.
- Iyer, Raghavan, ed. 1983. *The Diamond Sutra, with Supplementary Texts*. Santa Barbara: Concord Grove Press.
- James, Simon P. 2006. 'Human virtues and natural values', *Environmental Ethics* 28(4): 339–353.
- James, Simon P. 2004. *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Kapleau, Philip. 1985. *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment*. London: Rider.
- Keown, Damien. 2001. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mascaro, Juan. *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*. Middlesex: Penguin.
- Murdoch, his. 1997. *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Musashi, Tachikawa. 1993. 'The Madhyamika Tradition', in T. Yoshinori (ed.), *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, Early Chinese* (London: SCM Press), pp. 188–202.
- Naess, Arne. 1999. 'The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movements: A summary', in N. Witoszek and A. Brennan (eds.), *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield), pp. 3–7.
- Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. 1999. *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas from the Anguttara Nikaya*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications.
- Ryoen, Minamoto. 1999. 'Three Zen Thinkers', in T. Yoshinori (ed.), *Buddhist Spirituality: Later China, Korea, Japan and the Modern World* (London: SCM Press), pp. 291–306.
- Saddhatissa, H., trans. 1994, *The Sutta Nipata*. Richmond: Curzon.
- Sandler, Ronald and Cafaro, Phillip, eds. 2005. *Environmental Virtue Ethics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Schmithausen, Lambert. 1991. *Buddhism and Nature: Die Lecture delivered on the Occasion of the EXPO 1990, An Enlarged Version with Notes*. Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies.
- Senzaki, Nyogen and Reys, Paul. 1971. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. Middlesex: Penguin.
- Smail, Ninian. 1989. *The World's Religions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spinoza, Baiuch. 1996. *Ethics*, trans. E. Curley. London: Penguin.
- Walshe, Maurice, trans. 1995. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Witoszek, N. and Brennan, A., eds. 1999. *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield
- Yampolsky, P., trans. 1967. *The Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch*. New York: Columbia University Press.

The Ted K Archive

Simon P. James
Against Holism
Rethinking Buddhist Environmental Ethics
November 2007

Environmental Values, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 447–461.

<www.jstor.org/stable/30302381> & <www.doi.org/10.3197/096327107X243231>

2007 The White Horse Press

Author affiliation: *Department of Philosophy, Durham University, Durham DH1
3HN, UK*

Author correspondence: s.p.james@durham.ac.uk

www.thetedkarchive.com