Buddhism and ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds

Edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams

Reviewed by Steven Heine

Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds
Philosophy East & West, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2001)
p. 136-138

Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams, is the first book in the series on "Religions of the World and Ecology" edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. The book series is an outgrowth of a series of conferences held from 1996 to 1998 at the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, funded primarily by the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation in addition to a variety of other sources. Each volume of the series is to be edited by Tucker along with a specialist in the respective tradition. By the time this review appears, several other volumes will have been published, including books on Hinduism and Confucianism. The aim of the series is to examine the similarities and differences in the attitudes of world religions to ecological issues in an era in which " f rom resource depletion and species extinction to pollution overload and toxic surplus, the planet is struggling against unprecedented assaults ... that are aggravated by population explosion, industrial growth, technological manipulation, and military proliferation heretofore unknown by the human community" (p. xv). The series editors hope to stimulate

"scholars of religion to respond as engaged intellectuals with deepening creative reflection" (pp. xxx-xxxi) rather than remain as seemingly uninvolved armchair observers of the ongoing environmental crisis.

Buddhism may be a likely candidate for the first religious tradition to be examined in the book series because it appears to have a special affinity with environmental concerns and causes for several reasons. The basic Buddhist philosophy of karmic causality and dependent origination stresses the interdependence of all sentient beings who participate in transmigration throughout the six realms; the nonduality of humans and nature; and the moral retribution that awaits those who violate the sanctity of existence. This nondualistic worldview is enhanced, especially in Mahayana Buddhism in East Asia, by interaction with the organic cosmology of indigenous Chinese religions based on yin-yang ideology, and the result is a pantheistic notion that, according to Lewis Lancaster, asserts that "(t)he rocks, trees, lotuses, streams, mountains -- all have Buddha-nature" (p. 13).

Furthermore, in recent years some Buddhists have been among the leading voices trumpeting the need for ecological awareness and action. For example, the Council of All Beings, a ritual in which one places oneself as in a trance in the position of another species in order to appreciate the impact of ecological decline on it, was designed by Buddhists and has become popular among environmentalists of all persuasions. Also, there are several examples of Buddhist movements establishing environmentally sustainable rural communities in America, and the group known as "engaged Buddhists," many of whom are associated with the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, have consistently led protests against the misuse of nuclear power and a host of other issues. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that there has always been another side of Buddhism, which after all is largely a monastic tradition for home-leavers -- a side that is hermetic, withdrawing, and socially and environmentally disengaged and, at times in history, corrupt, at least as a by-product of benign neglect.

The question is, which side of Buddhism will prevail in the discourse concerning environmental issues? Will it be the one emphasizing how to analyze and act on the ecological crisis based on the inseparability of all forms of existence? Or will it be the face of Buddhism that may appear disconnected with and neglectful of current social issues in focusing exclusively on the individual quest for enlightenment or, as was the case in medieval China, on the growth of powerful, independent temple complexes? While several of the contributions to

the volume rather uncritically celebrate the former side of Buddhist discourse, the more constructive essays make it clear that a notion of Buddhist engagement with the environment must be grounded in a careful, thoroughgoing understanding of the history of Buddhist thought and the impact of Buddhist institutions in society.

The book's nineteen essays, covering many different aspects of Buddhist history and thought, are carefully organized by the editors into the categories of Overview (one essay), Theravada Buddhism (two), Mahayana Buddhism (three), Buddhism and Animals (two), Zen Buddhism (two), American Buddhism (three), Applications (three), and Theoretical and Methodological Issues (three). Another way of classifying the various contributions is to group them into three categories. The first group includes essays focusing on traditional Buddhist doctrines, literature, or rituals that deal with nature and may express an incipient ecological worldview. Some examples of this category include Steve Odin's discussion of Kukai's philosophy of nature in comparison with Aldo Leopold, Christopher Chapple's analysis of jataka tales, and Duncan Williams' examination of the medieval Japanese Buddhist ritual of releasing animals (hojo-e). The second category is the largest group and contains essays dealing with modern interpretations and appropriations of Buddhist environmentalist strategies, ranging from the thought of the Thai monk Buddhadasa, as discussed by Don Swearer, to the creation of utopian Zen centers in America like Green Gulch, as analyzed by Stephanie Kaza and Jeff Yamauchi, to the interpretation of Gary Snyder's poetry by David Barnhill.

The third group has the fewest contributions and takes a critical approach to the whole question of whether traditional Buddhism is really environmentalist. In a thoughtful essay based on an interpretation of Ito Jakuchu's painting "Yasai Nehan" (Vegetable nirvana), Ian Harris Challenges most of the rest of the book but in a very evenhanded fashion. His "central contention is that , with one or two notable exceptions ..., supporters of an authentic Buddhist environmental ethic have tended toward a positive indifference to the history and complexity of the Buddhist tradition." He points out, for example, how ninth-century Chinese temples contributed to deforestation campaigns in the hopes of salvaging patronage during a time of political turmoil. This commentator feels that the counterpoint offered by Harris must be heeded and addressed so that green Buddhists do not end in a kind of triumphalism about the tradition they feel that they inherit, in a way that stymies rather than abets the appropriation of Buddhism from an ecological standpoint.