ABSTRACT

Environmentalist concerns have moved centre stage in most major religious traditions of late and Buddhism is no exception to this rule. This paper shows that the canonical writings of Indic Buddhism possess elements that may harmonise with a //de facto// ecological consciousness. However, their basic attitude towards the causal process drastically reduces the possibility of developing an authentically Buddhist environmental ethic. The classical treatment of causation fails to resolve successfully the tension between symmetry and asymmetry of relations and this has tended to mean that attempts to inject a //telos//, or sense of purpose, into the world are likely to founder. The agenda of eco-Buddhism is examined in the light of this fact and found wanting.

TEXT

Published material relating to Buddhism and environmental ethics has increased in a moderate fashion over the last few years and may be divided into four broad categories:

1. Forthright endorsement of Buddhist environmental ethics by traditional guardians of doxic truth, of whom H.H.Dalai Lama [1] is perhaps the most important representative.

2. Equally positive treatments by predominantly Japanese and North American scholar/activists premised on an assumption that Buddhism is blessed with the resources necessary to address current environmental issues. Generally this material limits itself to identifying the most appropriate Buddhist doctrinal bases from which an environmental ethic could proceed, e.g. the doctrines of interpenetration, //tathaagatagarbha//, etc. (e.g., Aramaki [2], Macy [3], and Brown [4]).
3. Critical treatments which, while fully acknowledging the difficulties involved in reconciling traditional Asian modes of thought with those employed by scientific ecology, are optimistic about the possibility of establishing an authentic Buddhist response to environmental problems (e.g., Schmithausen [5]).

4. Outright rejection of the possibility of Buddhist environmental ethics on the grounds that the otherworldliness of "canonical " Buddhism implies a negation of the natural realm for all practical purposes (e.g., Hakamaya [6]).

In this paper I shall move backwards and forwards between positions 3 and 4 - my heart telling me that 3 makes sense with my mind more in tune with position 4. Category 1 material mainly relates to dialogue with other religions and aims to paint Buddhism in a favourable light. I shall have nothing further to say on this. I hope to show that work belonging to the second category, while superficially attractive, fails some way short of providing an adequate and rigorous basis for the erection of a thorough-going Buddhist environmental ethic. The minimum qualification for an authentic Buddhist ethics is that it is able to construe causation in such a way that goal-oriented activity makes sense. In other words Buddhist causation must be shown to be teleologically meaningful. In our context a positive moral stance towards the environment is premised on the idea that one state of affairs can be shown to be preferable to another; for instance, that the world will be demonstrably worse if the black rhino becomes extinct. Now, I would not wish to argue against this in general terms but I shall contend that it is difficult to ground such a view on a sound Buddhist footing, most importantly because any activity of this kind presupposes a certain teleology and an accompanying belief in the predictability of cause/effect relations.

Let us now examine the idea of causation in more detail. Yamada, in an article that draws on a very substantial body of prior Japanese scholarship, shows that the \textit{pratiityasamutpaada} formula can be read in two significantly differing ways - the so-called "reversal" and "natural" sequences. The first he believes to be a characteristic of the \textit{Abhidharma}, with the second more closely associated with the Buddha himself.[7] The reversal sequence, beginning with ignorance (\textit{avijjaa}) and ending with becoming-old and dying (\textit{jaraamara.na}), is said to describe elements causally related in temporal succession. In this manner the time-bound and soteriologically meaningful, concepts of \textit{karma}, \textit{bhava}, \textit{bhaavana}, etc., so crucial to the whole idea of Buddhist \textit{praxis} are made comprehensible. The natural sequence, by contrast, beginning with \textit{jaraamara.na} and ending in \textit{avijjaa}, stresses non-temporal relations of interdependence, simultaneity, or mutuality. In this way:

The twelve \textit{a"ngas} are not so much causal chains, in which the cause precedes the effect in rigid succession, but the factors of human existence which are interdependent upon each other simultaneously in a structural cross-section of human life.[8]
This typically //Mahaayaanist// rendering, then, associates chronological causation with the //Abhidharma// of the old canon, while simultaneous relations (//akaalika//) represent a complementary position implicit in the teachings of the Buddha yet only made explicit in the //Mahaayaana/>. The implication here seems to be that the natural sequence, while obviously present in the writings of the old canon, was either consciously or unconsciously neglected.

For Yamada, //Abhidharmic// scholiasts deviated, for some inexplicable reason, from an atemporal understanding of causation to the extent that they came to adopt a theory of strict one-to-one cause-effect relations "along the flow of time"[9] known in Japanese as //gookan engi setsu// (=karma activated dependent origination theory?) I shall now suggest that the Abhidharmic adherence to asymmetry, i.e., to a strict temporal sequencing of //dharmas//, is not quite as strong as may have been expected from Yamada's treatment of the subject.

The //Sarvaastivaada// accepts six basic kinds of relation (//hetu//) between entities. Of these six, two - the simultaneous relation (//sahabhuuhetu//) and the associated relation (//samprayuktahetu//) - suggest a roughly similar character of mutuality. In fact, the //Sarvaastivaada// came under attack from a variety of other Buddhist schools [10] under the suspicion that these two interrelated //hetu// undermined the basis of temporal causation understood as essential to the efficacy of ethical and soteriologically meaningful activity. It is clear, for instance, that Sa"nghabhadra was perfectly happy with the notion of mutuality in relations to the extent that he derives his simultaneously produced relation (//sahotppannahetu//) from the ancient "when this...that" formula.[11]

Some scholars [12] have attempted to show that simultaneous and temporal theories of causation are complementary. While the latter represents a unidirectional flow of causes and effects, the former points to the spatial relations that must also hold between co-existent entities. //Sahabhuuhetu//, then, concerns relations in space, not in time. It indicates a principle of spatial unity or aggregation. Of the twenty four modes of conditionality (//paccaya//) recognised by the Pali //Pa.t.thaana//, the sixth and seventh, in their traditional order, are closely related. These are, respectively, the co-nascence condition (//sahajaatapaccaya//) and the mutuality condition (//a-n-nama-n-napaccaya//). The former condition occurs in four basic kinds of relation, i.e., those between mentals and mentals, mentals and physicals, physicals and physicals and physicals and mentals. So exhaustive is this list that we could be forgiven for thinking that the vast majority of the possible relations between the entities envisaged by //Theravaada// Buddhism may be found under this heading. In fact, relations of the first type, i.e., mentals to mentals, are acknowledged, by a range of //Theravaada// thinkers, to be:

. . .symmetrical. That is, the relation between the two terms A and B holds good as between B and A.[13]
two //paccayas// and there is a widely held view, endorsed by Karunadasa, among others, that the //a~n~nama~n~na// condition is "the same as the //sahabhuuhetu// of the //Sarvaastivaadins//."[14]

Buddhaghosa in his //Vibha"nga// commentary, //Sammohavinodanii//, distinguishes between a strictly //sutta//-based, temporal form of causation extending over many thought-moments (//naanaacittakkha.nika//) on the one hand, and an abhidhammic, non-temporal version said to occur in a single thought-moment (//ekacittakkha.nika//), i.e. to all intents and purposes, instantaneously.[15] According to Buddhaghosa then, the //suttas// favour asymmetry with the //abhidhamma// plumping for a spatio-symmetric view of relations. This categorisation differs sharply from Yamada's understanding of an //Abhidhamma// unequivocally promoting uni-directional causation, and, in my opinion, his less than enthusiastic support for non-//Mahaayaanist// positions tends to make him uncritically conflate a great range of sources. In fact, the true situation on //sutta// and //abhidhamma// readings is probably somewhere between the positions of Buddhaghosa and Yamada. It seems that the Pali commentarial traditional never successfully managed to reconcile these two radically divergent readings and in the final analysis, elegant solutions to complex textual traditions are impossible to achieve. Nevertheless, it is obvious that //akaalika// relations i.e. those not bound by time were not entirely overlooked by the //Theravaada// even though some modern apologists have been reluctant to admit this fact.[16]

The //Sautraantika// school seems to have offered four basic objections to the //Sarvaastivaadin// position on mutual relations not least because it seemed thoroughly imbued with a spirit of symmetry. The //Sautraantika// also advanced a more radical theory of momentariness (//k.sa.navaada//) by denying any element of stasis. For the //Sautraantikas//, //dharmas// disappear as soon as they arise though this response to the problem of true causal efficiency is no more satisfactory than the position it sought to replace. Nagao's rather flimsy defence of //k.sa.navaada// fails to come to terms with this fact. He argues that the doctrine:

\[
\text{does not mean the total extinction of the world; on the contrary, it is the way by which the world establishes itself as //full of life and spirit// (my emphasis).} \\
[17]
\]

Now, though irresolvable differences remain, all three early schools of Buddhism exhibited a tendency to view causation in spatial/horizontal terms, even though this tendency was often obscured behind the lush vegetation of temporal/vertical thinking.

It looks likely that, as Buddhism developed, a gradual radicalisation of the concept of impermanence occurred with rather more emphasis placed on symmetric relations between entities. The common sense view, perhaps related to the introspective/empirical observations of an early meditator's tradition that set a radically impermanent mental flux against the relative permanence of non-mental entities, was in time reformulated and rationalised by an emerging scholastic tradition.[18] These scholastic traditions, then, begin a process that results in the severing of links with common sense asymmetric causation to the extent that the temporal flow of a single chain of causes and effects was eclipsed by the space-like aspect of symmetry. In my view, the increasing dominance of symmetry in Buddhist
thought provides a fertile breeding ground for the development of the //Avata.makasutra// doctrine of the radical interpenetration of all things and this, in a circuitous manner, undoubtedly has come to influence the writings of many contemporary environmental thinkers.

//Mahaayanists// in general wish to preserve a time-like asymmetry of causation in its common-sense form, while negating it from the ultimate perspective. Naagaarjuna holds that four alternative positions, the tetralemma or //catu.sko.ti//, logically exhaust the possible connections between causally related entities. Now, the dominant view within the //Mahaayanist// exegetical tradition is that Naagaarjuna's negation of the four alternatives is absolute. In other words, relations between entities can never be meaningfully articulated in terms of any of the four positions of the //catu.sko.ti//. Indeed, no other position is possible. Absolute negation (//prasajyaprati.sedha//) in this case results in the total denial of causal relations between substantial entities. Using this as a starting point, Naagaarjuna moves on swiftly to propose that entities engaged in causal relations must be empty ("//suunya//"). Of course, he has already underlined the centrality of //pratiityasamutpaada// as the bedrock, the central authority from which all Buddhist thought must flow. This being so, the affirmation of causal relations leads inexorably to a negation of substantiality. Now, an empty entity has no distinguishing mark, its value is zero ("//suunya//"). Furthermore, all conditioned entities must share this same null value and in this sense they are equivalent. If this is accepted Charles Hartshorne's intuition [19] that Naagaarjuna exhibits a prejudice in favour of symmetry is confirmed and we shall expect Naagaarjuna to experience some difficulty in accounting for any purposeful directionality of change, or "emergence into novelty" to use the jargon of process theology.

The earliest extant commentary on the //Muulamadhyamakakaarikaa//, the //Akutobhayaa//[20], is traditionally ascribed to Naagaarjuna, though this attribution tends to be rejected by modern scholarship. Interestingly, the use of absolute negation (//prasajyaprati.sedha//) of the four positions of the //catu.sko.ti// is not one of the obvious features of this early text. In its treatment of //MMK//.XVIII.8, the four //ko.tis/ are said to represent a series of graded steps related to the spiritual propensities of those engaged on the Buddhist path. This reading, in part confirmed by the later commentaries of Buddhapaalita and Bhaavaviveka [21], singles out the fourth and final //ko.ti// as the closest approximation, given the constraints of language, to the true nature of things. If we relate this to our earlier discussion of the four possible modes of production, it is apparent that the "neither different nor non-different" position, if is legitimate to invoke the law of the excluded middle here, reflects a rejection of both symmetric and asymmetric accounts of causation - a deeply puzzling notion. We might have expected a more satisfactory resolution of the problem, assuming of course that anyone in the early //Madhyamaka// was aware of, or indeed interested, in the matter. If so, we shall be disappointed, for the early //Madhyamaka// transcends, rather than resolves the tension. By retaining his strong adherence to the Buddha's teaching on //pratiityasamutpaada//, i.e. by insisting on the objectivity of the causal process, Naagaarjuna and his followers adopt a view of reality that, in so far as it can be articulated, is constituted by causally related and empty entities that are neither different nor non-different one from another. Elsewhere I have termed this
outlook "ontological indeterminacy." [22] Naturally Ruegg is reluctant
to accept that the //Madhyamaka// would have countenanced such an
irrational depiction of reality as //coincidentia oppositorum// but
what strikes one forcibly here is the parallel with the doctrine of
symmetric interpenetration characteristic of some of the later phases
of Buddhism, such as the Chinese Hua-Yen school. [23] In the
//Yogaacaara// again we find some evidence of a distinction between
//akaalika// and unidirectional relations, even though the precise
form of the distinction does not fully harmonise with that observed in
other strands of the Buddhist tradition. As we would expect of a
philosophical tradition with a specific interest in the mechanics of
consciousness //(vi~j-naana//), the //Yogaacaara// treatment of
causation gives priority to the non-temporal factors that, as we have
already seen in the Pali literature, apply to relations between mental
to suggest that the term //pratiityasamutpaada// is
not intended to define causal relationships as customarily understood
for it represents "...the realm of mutual relatedness, of absolute
relativity [which] constitutes an absolute otherness over against
selfhood and essence." [24] Chronological proliferation operates only
from the perspective of conventional understanding, for, in reality,
//pratiityasamutpaada// denotes "unity in a transhistorical
realm." [25]

Returning now to Naagaarjuna's picture of causation and reality
at //MMK//. XVIII.9, we hear:

Independent of another //(aparapratyaya//) (Ruegg's
[26] rendering of this difficult term), at peace
//("saanta//) not discursively developed through
discursive developments, without dichotomising
conceptualisation, and free from multiplicity
//(anaanaartha//): this is the characteristic of
reality //(tattva//)." [27]

This verse occurs in the context of a discussion of causal factors so
we may, without doing violence to the text, conclude that //tattva//
is inextricably related to //pratiityasamutpaada//. Comparison with
the //ma"ngala"sloka// reveals a number of parallels. //Tattva//, for
instance, is said to be at peace, or still //("saanta//). The term
//anaanaartha// also occurs in //MMK//.XVIII.9, although
significantly //tattva// is not related to the usual binegation of
positive and negative positions, i.e. neither without differentiation
nor devoid of unity (the fourth //ko.ti//), as one would expect by
reference to the //ma"ngala"sloka//. A consistent reading suggests
that the quiescence and non-multiplicity of causally related entities
is a function of their entirely symmetrical relations and one might be
inclined to term this kind of relation "interpenetration". Ruegg, of
course, rejects this interpretation. However, his treatment of the
passages is ambiguous for he upholds Candrakiirti's view that a
reality devoid of differentiation has the value of emptiness while,
elsewhere in the same important article, he also wants to maintain
that the //Madhyamaka// understanding of causal relations is "in a
certain sense indeterminate and irrational" [28]. In the less equivocal
opinion of la Vallee Poussin, Naagaarjuna holds only to the
conventional expression of temporal causation, for: "There is, in
absolute truth, no cause and effect." [29]

To summarise, the centrality of the notion of causation is
non-negotiable, located, as it were, at the heart of the tradition. This seems to have led some early Buddhist schools to emphasise spatiality as against temporality, perhaps because this was perceived as entailing fewer intractable philosophical problems. The early //Madhyamaka// does not follow this lead preferring instead a transcendent approach to the problem of causation.

CONCLUSION

The gulf between spatial and temporal interpretations of causation was never satisfactorily reconciled in early Buddhism. An obvious starting point in any theoretical construction of an authentic Buddhist environmentalist ethic must be the doctrine of causation understood in its temporal sense yet, though the doctrine allows for a highly coherent account of the arising and cessation of suffering, and in particular of the interaction of mental factors, it has rarely been invoked as the basis of a "scientific" explanation of the natural world. This is, in good measure, because Buddhism has regularly embraced chronological causation at one moment only to reject it in the next. Here is an excellent example of the corrosive character of the "rhetoric of immediacy".

From the cosmological perspective Buddhism recognises an //ad nauseam// unfolding and dissolution of worlds that act as receptacles for countless beings yet this picture is essentially anti-evolutionary or dysteleologic. All is in a state of flux yet all is quiescent for all forward movement lacks a sense of purpose. As Faure has made clear, the gulf between these two levels is not always easy to negotiate, even given the "teleological tendencies of controlled narrative"[30] that Buddhism has generally employed to minimise the incongruence of its various building blocks.

The theory of //karma// is clearly crucial to any Buddhist explanation of the world. On this account the "natural realm" is, at any point in time, regarded as a direct result of Stcherbatsky's "mysterious efficiency of past elements or deeds."[31] There is, then, no magnet at the end of history drawing events inexorably towards their ultimate goal, no supra-temporal //telos// directing events either directly or indirectly. The narrative and soteriological structure of Buddhism appears, despite some recent attempts to indicate otherwise, essentially dysteleologic [32].

Now, this need not preclude the possibility of purposiveness altogether, yet, when other available teleologies are considered, prospects are not especially encouraging. Woodfield, in an important study, shows that only two further positions remain for the Buddhist and one of these, the animistic alternative premised on the notion that entities are directed by the souls or minds that inhere within them, cannot possibly be appropriate. We are left then with the Aristotelian idea of immanent teleology in which objects behave teleologically because it is in their nature to do so. In other words the "source of a thing's end-directedness is to be found within the nature of the thing itself, not in some external agency."[33]

It is clear that, from the //Madhyamaka// perspective, no entity exists that could possibly possess a nature of this kind. The fact of //ni.hsvabhaavataa// then precludes the possibility of immanent //tele//. The //Abhidharma// position, bearing in mind our earlier discussion, is perhaps more difficult to characterise. //Dharmas// are
the ultimately unanalysable constituents of nature but can
//dharmas//, which are at least regarded as possessing own-natures
//svabhaava//, also be said to act as the source of their own
end-directed movement? There is general agreement of all of the early
schools of Buddhism that //dharmas// are simple and discrete entities.
As such their capacity for internal relations with other //dharmas//
makes no sense. Relationships must be of a purely formal kind. If this
is accepted two things follow:

1. //dharmas// cannot mutually cooperate to bring about events on the
macro scale – we may wish to compare this with process theology's [34]
comparatively successful attempt to account for change, and even
novelty, as the result of the prehension [i.e. serial co-operation]
of internally related simples within an overarching Christian
teleological structure.

2. //dharmas// do not possess //tele// though, on the level of
convention, societies of such entities may be said to possess ends,
though only in the most highly provisional sense.

The theory of //dharmas// represents a pseudo-explanation, a
reformulation of the original insight of the Buddha into the fact that
all things change. It gives no information on how this may occur. The
theories of causation and of //karma// hover above all mechanical
explanations and are never successfully earthed within them. In this

sense we can talk about an "ontological indeterminacy" at the heart of
Buddhist thought. At best all we can say is that Buddhism accepts //de
fæcto// change. It cannot account for it!

If we now root our discussion in the more concrete situation of
environmental ethics we begin to see the difficulty in determining a
coherent Buddhist approach. There are difficulties in determining how
best to act with regard to the natural world, unless that response has
been specifically authorised by the Buddha. The problem here is
twofold. In the first place, few of the Buddha's injunctions can be
used unambiguously to support environmentalist ends [35] and in the
second, the dysteleological character of Buddhist thought militates
against anything that could be construed as injecting the concept of
an "end" or "purpose" into the world. It is, for example, very hard to
see how a specifically Buddhist position on global warming or on the
decrease in diversity of species can be made, unless of course one can
appeal to the supranormal intelligence of a handful of contemporary
Buddhist sages. In this connection, the Far-Eastern appeal to the
Buddhist notion of the "interpenetration of all entities" will not do,
for I hope that I have shown that the symmetric bias of this approach
cannot even satisfactorily account for the raw fact of change itself,
let alone for those aspects of change deemed harmful to the natural
environment.

Schmithausen has observed that Buddhist spiritual and everyday
practice may contribute to a sort of //de facto// environmentalism,
though he is careful to point out that this does not, in itself
"establish ... nature ... as a value in itself"[36]. It is worth
pointing out that even in the realm of interpersonal relations, and in
relations between humans and the higher animals, "commitment to
extrapersonal welfare" is found only in a "highly qualified and rather
paradoxical sense."[37]. In this light Schmithausen's programme for a
reformation of Buddhism through de-dogmatisation of the inconvenient
Buddhist teachings on animals, etc. is little more than a bit of
tinkering around on the margins. I hope that I have been able to show that it is the dysteleology deeply rooted within Buddhism that is the essential problem for any future Buddhist environmental ethic, not a bit of local difficulty with animals. It is not so much that Buddhism has a difficulty in deriving an ought from an is, it is that it faces the more fundamental difficulty of defining an "is" in the first place. On the theoretical level, then, the best Buddhism can offer at the moment is an endorsement of those aspects of the contemporary environmental agenda that do not conflict with its philosophic core. The future development of a coherent and specifically Buddhist environmentalism, assuming that this is indeed possible, will be fraught with many difficulties.

NOTES


[8] Ibid., p. 271.


[10] The main opponents to this apparent notion of simultaneous causation were the //Daar.s.taantikas// (cf. //Mahaavibhaa.saa// [//Taishoo// 27, p.79c7-8]) and the //Sautraantikas// (Vasubandhu //Abhidharmako"sa// 83.18-84.24). The //Sautraantika// objections to
the notion of mutual causality were fourfold.


[12] Ibid.


[16] It is certainly curious that Ledi Sayadaw (op cit) fails to make any specific reference to //a~n~nama~n~na// in his treatment of the //paccayas//. Again, Nyanatiloka is extremely cautious in treatment of simultaneity in causal relations; see Nyanatiloka Mahaathera, _Guide Through the //Abhidhamma-Pitaka//: Being a Synopsis of the Philosophical Collection Belonging to the Buddhist Pali Canon_ (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971), p. 156.


[27] //aparapratyaya.m "saantam prapa~ncair aprapa~ncita.m. nirvikalpam anaanaartham etat tattvasya lak.sa.na.m//.


[32] The term "dysteleology" seems to have been coined by the Protestant theologian E. Heckel to denote the "purposelessness of nature".


