



Padmasiri de Silva. *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998, xviii + 195 pages, ISBN: 0-333-67906-7, GB £57.50.

Reviewed by
Pragati Sahni

Department of Historical and Cultural Studies
Goldsmiths College, University Of London
hsp01ps@gold.ac.uk

Journal of Buddhist Ethics 7 (2000): 73-75

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to jbe-general@jbe.la.psu.edu.

It is clear from the outset that the author of this book has taken on a monumental task. Not only does he explore the issues of environmental ethics and education in Buddhism, but he also summarizes the nature of Buddhist ethics, social ethics, and economics. Furthermore, each chapter is compared to and contrasted with various theories and models in Western ethics in order to develop a contemporary Buddhist perspective. This book is, thus, extremely broad in scope.

Each chapter is dominated by a discussion of Western ethical models, and there is a constant effort to understand Buddhism in relation to these models. However, nowhere is it stated which form of Buddhism is being looked at, whether the Buddhism of the Pali canon, later Buddhism, Zen, or socially engaged Buddhism. But since mention is made of all of the above, it must be assumed that the book covers the entire Buddhist history until present day. Though this is not problematic in itself, the possibility of a detailed academic analysis is reduced.

The definition of ethics and its various types is given in the introduction, the first of eight chapters, which is helpful to a general reader unfamiliar with the discipline. Buddhism is promoted as being an amalgamation of different strands of ethical theory identified as consequentialism, teleology, deontology, and virtue ethics. In the author's words, "Buddhist Ethics are more holistic ethics, where the different strands may be put together within its own framework" (pp. 24–25). Although a justification for this assertion is promised at a later point, apart from some generalizations, the author

does not provide a clear explanation to justify this assertion in later sections of the book.

Chapters two and five deal with environmental philosophy and environmental ethics respectively, with the author drawing a rather unusual distinction between them. Environmental philosophy apparently emerges in relation to the Four Noble Truths, the doctrines of no-self, impermanence, and dependent origination. *Dukkha* is understood as the disharmony between self, society, and nature, thus giving it an environmental interpretation. In his examination of the term “*dukkha*,” the author concludes that, though its meaning encompasses much more than what is expressed by the ecological crisis, “The ecological crisis comes very close to the state of ‘*dukkha*,’ for it is the result of an egocentric state as well” (p. 35). Chapter two goes on to make the very important point that, though there was no project of an environmental ethics, per se, in the doctrine of the Buddha, there is something resembling an implicit ecological sensibility therein. Ambiguities within the tradition itself are believed to exist only in so far as we are unable to experience this sensibility. Of course, many would disagree, especially since early Buddhism is rife with examples of ambiguities that cannot be so easily dismissed.

A discussion of anthropocentrism, sentientism, and respect for life leads the author to the ecocentric approach in the chapter on Buddhist environmental ethics. The ecocentric approach in Buddhism can be derived from some perspectives of the human-nature orientation. The first precept is discussed in terms of *mettā* and *karuṇā*. In rules laid down for the monks, many can be seen as ecofriendly. The Buddha was opposed to animal sacrifices. The doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* is seen as having great bearing on environmental ethics in terms of its causal connections, which leads us to the notion of interconnectedness. Meditational practices are strongly recommended to develop a moral conscience in relation to the environment. At the start of this chapter, two meanings of anthropocentrism are given. The author does not clarify which sense of it he is denying. In fact, the critical debate of whether Buddhism is anthropocentric is not referred to at all.

In the beginning of chapter two, the author once again states the aim of the book as threefold: “(i) [T]o explore a diagnosis of the human domination of nature in terms of the central Buddhist doctrines already referred to; (ii) to construct a Buddhist orientation towards the non-human world in terms of the material found in the discourses of the Buddha; and (iii) to examine the case for a Buddhist ethic of sustainability” (p. 30). The very next chapter on Buddhist ethics, *prima facie*, does not seem to fit this schema. It does, however, as promised in the introduction, give a critical, detailed analysis

of Buddhist ethics and compares it with Kant and deontology and with Utilitarianism and teleology.

Moral dilemmas, self-deception, and moral weakness are the theme of the next chapter. These may be eliminated by understanding the laws of *karma* and dependent origination, thereby clearing the way for developing an ecological sensibility.

In terms of the aim of this book, the chapter on pedagogy and ecological sensibility is of cardinal importance. Stressed therein is the need to translate environmental philosophy in a way that appeals to people from different professions, cultures, and religions. The author takes his cue from Buddha's skill as a teacher. The Buddha's teachings, filled with compassion, varied according to the persons whom he was teaching. He constantly used stories, poetry, paradoxes and metaphors. "To look at the pedagogy of the Buddha as an aid to developing ecological sensibility" is what the author intends to highlight (pp. 148–149). A further look at sensibility shows that there has to be a blending of rationality and sensibility for either to have any meaning. Similarities between eco-feminism and Buddhism are discussed. Culture stories in Buddhism that embody this sensibility are quoted, mostly from the *Jātakas*. How these stories are environmental, however, is not made clear.

The book, as mentioned earlier, contains a chapter on economics. In it, green economics as an alternative to present-day consumerism is considered. The author constructs a Buddhist theory of economics and bases it on scriptural evidence, such as the advice given to householders on wealth, the rules for monks on simple living, and the role of kings and rulers. By following the teachings of the Buddha, we are told, this alternative model can become a reality. The author claims this as the only chapter in the book exploring practical issues, but it really comes across as no different from the philosophical chapters for it lacks an economic analysis of particular issues and any concrete explanation of sustainability in the Buddhist context (p. 176).

The book ends on a pragmatic note to the effect that the meaningfulness of environmental ethics is derived from its effectiveness in practice. The Buddha's own life and teachings are the embodiment of this effectiveness. In short, "Environmentalism has to be a 'way of life'" (p. 180).

In sum, the author has tried to cover too much in a 184-page volume. Buddhism, environmentalism, ethics, and education are all complex issues, and to address all these in one volume is bound to lead to a lack of detailed analysis. Nevertheless, Dr. de Silva does raise some pertinent questions about the role of education in environmental ethics and paves the way for studies of a similar kind.