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The Eco-Buddhism of Marie Byles

Peggy James¹

Abstract

Marie Beuzeville Byles (1900–1979) was a key figure in the historical development of Buddhism in Australia, and the nation's conservation movement. From the 1940s she began to develop an eco-Buddhist worldview and Buddhist environmental ethic that she applied in her day-to-day conservation activities and articulated over the course of four books on Buddhism and dozens of published articles. She is recognized in Australia for her Buddhist environmental thought, the influence that her ideas had in a key environmental debate of her day, and her international profile as a Buddhist. Most histories of modern eco-Buddhism, however, do not mention Byles's work, and there has thus far been little scholarly analysis of her writings. This paper examines Byles's eco-Buddhist ideas and activities in detail, and assesses the historical significance of her contribution.

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Introducing Marie Byles

Marie Beuzeville Byles was a controversial woman. Born at the beginning of the twentieth century, she is remembered in Australia today not only as a pioneering Buddhist and conservationist, but also as a groundbreaking lawyer, feminist, adventurer, and pacifist (see, e.g., Croucher, Cadzow, Lines, Mosley). She only embraced Buddhism from mid-life onwards, but wrote more than one hundred articles and four books on religious and ethical matters, including human-environment relations. Her books were published in England, with one also published in America, and her articles appeared in Buddhist journals such as *Middle Way* (England), *World Buddhism* (Sri Lanka), *Maha Bodhi* (India), *Vesak Sirisara* (Sri Lanka), and *Mettā* (Australia). Her work was also published in journals discussing many faiths, such as *Vedanta and the West* (America), *Mountain Path* (India), and *FFT Quarterly* (India), the journal of Gandhian thought, *Gandhi Marg* (India), and Australian environmental journals such as *Sydney Bushwalker* and *Bush Walker*. Despite Byles's output, and recognition within Australia of her Buddhist inspired environmentalism, existing accounts of the history of eco-Buddhism do not acknowledge her work (e. g., Harris, Johnston, Chapple, McMahan). Following a brief sketch of Byles's life in the first section of this paper, the second section outlines her eco-Buddhist philosophy and ethics, the third shows the practical application of her ethics, and the final section analyses Byles's ideas and their historical significance.

Byles arrived in Sydney from England in 1911 and spent her teenage years in the bush land suburb of Beecroft. She read the poetry of the English Romantics, was taken on hikes by her father, and was a vegetarian like her mother. She was raised as a Unitarian, her grandfather having become a Unitarian Minister after his expulsion from the Congregationalist Church for his controversial views. When she became an adult, however, she did not adopt the Christian faith. She studied law after

World War One in a class of men, and became the state's first practicing female solicitor. She then traveled alone around the world by cargo boat, climbing mountains in Britain, Norway, Canada, and New Zealand (Byles, *By Cargo Boat*).

In the 1930s, Byles became an active conservationist. She joined the Councils of the Wild Life Preservation Society and the Federation of Bush Walking Clubs, the primary bush walking-conservation group in the state. During the Great Depression, when the Government was particularly receptive to new park proposals, Byles participated in several successful campaigns for national parks and wilderness areas, in particular securing the reservation of Bouddi National Park in 1935. Around the time of the Dust Bowl, she studied geology and soils at Sydney Technical College. She became familiar with the 1939 book, *The Rape of the Earth*, the title of which she later frequently quoted. It was a world survey of soil erosion and an early ecological science text that outlined the relationship between development, vegetation clearance, hydrological problems and erosion. The authors argued,

Soil erosion has made a knowledge of the underlying principles of human ecology—the art of living together with animals, insects and plants—one of the most urgent needs of mankind, and particularly of those who can clearly see the consequences of the uncontrolled or mis-controlled use of science for exploiting natural resources. (Jacks and White 38–39)

Just before the 1940s, Byles commenced her religious journey, prompted partly by an unsuccessful mountaineering expedition to China. Her readings over the next few years included the *Bhagavad Gita*, as well as books about Mahatma Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer. She read the Tasmanian-based Frank Woodward's *Some Sayings of the Buddha* and Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. Julian Huxley's proposed reconciliation of

religion and science greatly impressed her (Byles “Many Lives”; Huxley 235–304). Drawing on her readings, she drafted a book on the importance of moral values throughout history, and the need to cultivate people of goodness to shape and uphold new post-war plans (“Historic Light”). She briefly attended Congregationalist services, and unsuccessfully applied to join the Quakers, who rejected her after she revealed her interest in Buddhism. Byles then undertook a serious study of the Pāli Canon using the available English translations. By the mid forties, her articles on Buddhism were being published overseas, she was working on a plan for a Buddhist retreat center, and organizing meditation retreats in her own Sydney home. She was also active in the conservation movement in the post-war reconstruction period, as well as urban planning and wilderness management.

In the growth-oriented 1950s, Byles deepened her involvement in Buddhism and became concerned about resource depletion. She traveled to India, where she visited the places associated with the historical Buddha, practiced meditation alone in the Himalayas, and went to Gandhi’s ashram. She met with Bhikkhu Jagdish Kashyap at Nālanda’s recently re-established Buddhist study center, and found him receptive to her Pāli interpretations (Byles “Letter from Rajgir”). She took an interest in Indian forestry, and in forest-depleted Uttarakhand visited Sarala Behn’s Lakshmi Ashram for girls based on Gandhian Sarvodaya principles (Byles “Many Lives”; Klenk). In Sydney, she participated in the new Buddhist Society of New South Wales (NSW), hosting meetings and events in her home, and arranging the purchase of bush land nearby for a Buddhist meditation center (Croucher). In 1957, the year her *Footprints of Gautama the Buddha* was published, Byles traveled to Burma. She studied meditation under lay master U Thein, learning the Ledi Sayadaw method at the Maha Bodhi center at Mandalay. She then returned to Burma to receive further instruction, this time from Mohnyin Sayadaw at Monywa (Byles *Journey*).

In the 1960s, Byles broadened her knowledge of Buddhism and campaigned locally against urban sprawl. She visited Burma again where she met the celebrated Mingun Sayadaw and learned nun Daw Dhammacari.² Her books *Journey Into Burmese Silence* and *The Lotus and the Spinning Wheel* were published, and she made two trips to Japan, where she learned more about Mahāyāna Buddhism, and the new way of life being practiced at Nishida Tenkō's Buddhist-inspired intentional community, Ittōen. She met D. T. Suzuki outside Tokyo, and practiced *zazen* at Ruth Fuller Sasaki's European *zendo* in Kyoto. She also met Zen trainee Irmgard Schloegl, and Oda Roshi at the Daitoku-ji Monastery.³ Byles learned about Pure Land and the way of *nembutsu* from a Shinshū priest, while in London her book *Paths to Inner Calm* was published. In Sydney, Byles organized a campaign against the development of rezoned bush land near her home. The land included the property owned by the Buddhist Society, which sold the land to developers at a large profit and terminated Byles's membership. A few years later, Byles was violently assaulted in her own home. She continued with her work, including corresponding with Thomas Merton, who found her book *Footprints* a "joy to read" (Merton).

In the 1970s, Byles maintained her dual involvement in Buddhism and environmental issues like the pollution crisis and the problem of consumption. She continued to write for Buddhist journals, and turned to *nembutsu* practice in the still-painful years after her assault. She also used Alexander posture therapy to help with pain management and wrote a book about it to help others (*Stand Straight*). She continued to write for bush walking journals, live simply on her land, and work with the local conservation group. She also donated her property to the Na-

² The Mingun Sayadaw is called the "Tripitaka Monk" in *Path to Inner Calm*.

³ Irmgard Schloegl is called "Maria" in *Paths to Inner Calm*.

tional Trust to ensure its long-term conservation. Byles stayed on the land as a caretaker until her death, but with some assistance in her later years.

After Byles's death, her bush land property Ahimsā was recognized for its environmental and religious significance, and protected under State heritage laws. Martin Fallding, who grew up next door to Byles, became an award-winning environmental planner specializing in biodiversity protection (Fallding). Peg Putt, who knew her through family, became leader of the Tasmanian Greens and a high-profile wilderness advocate (Putt). Gillian Coote, who learned about Byles through a close friend, made a film about her, became a Zen *rōshi*, and followed her example in bush regeneration (Coote). Sarala Behn, whose Sarvodaya work Byles helped to fund through donations, trained students involved in the Chipko movement to halt timber harvesting (Devi; Klenk). Today, Byles's contribution is honored through the annual Marie Byles environmental award, and in the naming of Byles Creek in Sydney.

Byles's Eco-Buddhist Ideas

Byles's eco-Buddhist writings and ideas emerged from the early 1940s onwards, as her environmentalism and Buddhism interacted. She presented eco-Buddhist ideas in more than forty of her articles and books, the most significant being "Our Attitude Towards Nature" (1948), "Can Bushwalkers Save the Bush?" (1970), and "Pollution, Grasping and Us" (1971). Her writings were sometimes punctuated with humor, and occasionally short on detail. Byles, however, tailored her writings to suit her readers, in a manner similar to the way in which she said the Buddha taught in the terms of his students' beliefs (*Footprints*). Her articles for generally atheist, agnostic or Christian bush walkers, therefore, generally did not explicitly refer to Buddhism. Similarly, her articles for reli-

gious readers generally only incorporated, rather than emphasized, her ecological interpretations of Buddhist texts. An examination of the body of Byles's writings nonetheless reveals a fairly clear and consistent set of eco-Buddhist concepts, ethics, and arguments.

Byles's approach focused on the teachings of Gautama Buddha, rather than what she called "the dogmas and doctrines of learned Buddhists" (*Lotus* 11). She argued that the Buddha had said that his teaching should not be accepted on hearsay or as tradition. The Buddha had simply aimed to show the practical way to the end of suffering "here and hereafter," and had said that it should be tested in practice by each individual (*Footprints* 15). The essential teaching of the Buddha, Byles argued, centered on the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path. This was the foundation on which her eco-Buddhism was built.

Environmental philosophy and Buddhist attitudes to nature

Byles appreciated that overall the Buddhist texts did not particularly emphasize the beauty of nature or environmental protection. She admired the sensitivity towards nature found in Zen poetry and art, and recounted the Pāli Canon story about Kassapa's delight in the forest and climbing crags (*Paths; Footprints*). She noted, however, that nature involved harsh sacrifice as much as unspoilt wild beauty, and the beautiful and the ugly in nature ultimately had equal significance, due to the deathless essence in each ("Can Bushwalkers"; "Mysticism"). Byles noted examples of environmental protection—the leader of the Bright Forces protecting nesting birds, and the potter who took care not to injure tiny insects. She nonetheless asked whether many readers of the Pāli Canon remembered or took seriously these stories ("On Wanting Little").

Byles argued that environmental damage had not been so great during Gautama Buddha's day and a new attitude towards nature was

now required. She noted that there had been immense forests and jungles in the Buddha's day, but these had now been lost (*Lotus*). In the past, desertification had affected small areas of land, she said, but the destruction was now worldwide ("Our Attitude"). Byles argued that the Buddha's teachings should be adapted to modern conditions ("Adapting Buddha's Teaching"). She wrote, "The Buddha spoke of avoiding 'onslaught in creatures' and had he been alive today with the rapid destruction of earth itself, he would certainly have included the earth along with creatures as not to be slaughtered" ("Right Livelihood"). Byles therefore recovered relevant stories from the Buddhist texts, such as those noted above, and included them in her eco-Buddhist writings for modern day readers.

Environmental philosophy and the Four Noble Truths

Byles described the notion of dependent co-arising in her works, given its relation to the Four Noble Truths. In *Footprints*, apparently drawing primarily on Theravādin sources, she outlined the notion using the words of Yasa the disciple:

I have found that this life is a ceaseless becoming, a ceaseless passing on to something else . . . All things of earth are composed of different parts or of other things; and they depend for their existence upon each other and upon other things. When they are dissolved they are separated only to come together, a ceaseless cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. Our knowledge of them is gained through our five senses and our intellect, which is the sixth sense (171–172).

Yasa continues on to say that *nirvāṇa* is not composed of nor dependent upon other things, nor is it subject to death or rebirth. *Nirvāṇa* is around

us and everything, he says, and in us and everything, but can only be known with inner sight, not with the six senses. This permanent, unchanging essence can only be known through a giving up of the sense of self, which is an illusion, and accepting or embracing *anattā* or no-self.

Later, in *Paths to Inner Calm*, Byles outlined Mahāyāna views of interdependence. She writes that Mahāyāna Buddhism insists that the mortal, changing world of *saṃsāra* and the deathless, unchanging world of *nirvāṇa* are one and the same—there is an essential essence that was in all things and in all “not-things,” and a oneness of humans and nature and the unchanging (195). She notes that Chinese and Japanese culture had helped to shape the Mahāyāna understanding of interdependence, citing, for example, the influence of native Shintoism on the idea of the oneness of humanity and nature.

In her more explicitly environmental writings, Byles expressed the notion of the interdependence in ways suited to her audience. In her play about the Buddha and how it is wrong to kill animals, written for Theravādin audiences in 1950s Sydney, the Buddha says, “that all life is one, that all things are bound together in suffering and in tears” (“Little Scenes”). For the readers of the *Middle Way* in the Zen-oriented 1970s Byles wrote, in a more upbeat tone, that, “The Buddha-heart is in a sprig of plum blossom, and also in the humblest worm and the vivisected rat” (“Pollution, Grasping and Us” 36). For Sydney’s bush walkers, more familiar with the ideas of Thoreau and ecological science, she wrote “the universe is one undivided whole, the same will-to-live running through all, even rocks and stalactites,” and alluded to ecological concepts like the food web—connecting all living things as both prey and predators and demanding mutual sacrifice (“Can Bushwalkers” 7, 5; Smee; Cadzow).

Byles outlined the relationship between connectedness, transience, and *anattā*, and the problem of suffering on earth, in her description of the Four Noble Truths in *Footprints*. The First Truth, she noted,

involves accepting that suffering is inherent in the life of the earth; the Second Truth that suffering arises because we crave and cling to the things of the earth, which are all transient; and the Third that suffering ends when we give up our cravings and attachment to transient things, and realize that we are not separate, individual selves but also changing and transient. She stressed the Third Truth—that our individual selves are an illusion and we have no-self (*anattā*), and that suffering ends “when we practice unselfishness and finally become selfless” (218). She noted that the Fourth Truth involves following the Eightfold Path to end attachment and suffering.

The concept of *anattā* and its relationship to attachment and suffering were central to Byles’s writings on the environment. She wrote that “the sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ and ‘me’” led to a grasping for a higher standard of living, which in turn led to environmental problems like dangerous pollution (“Pollution” 36). She argues that it was because of “consciousness of being a separate individual that there is greed and self interest,” and that this self-interest was at the heart of increased demand for products such as cement and limestone, and impacts on natural areas where limestone was to be mined (“Can Bushwalkers” 6). Byles indicated that to solve these and other environmental problems, it was first necessary to let go of the self, and the sense of I and mine and me, or reduce the self to zero. Becoming selfless was a goal she noted was common to Buddhism, other religions, and Gandhi (*Journey*). She observed that some Buddhists accepted *anattā* but did not act selflessly (“*Anattā* in Practical Living”). She stressed however that one should do so because of the consequences—it would end suffering in practice (*Journey*).

Byles’s discussions of interdependence, transience, and *anattā* rarely expanded on the issue of rebirth. She noted that Nāgasena had developed the doctrine many years after the Buddha’s death (*Journey*).

She argued that although the doctrine could be said to form part of Buddhism, it was not an essential teaching of the Buddha (*Footprints*), and that the Buddha's essential teachings were compatible with the worldview of modern science and psychology—that is, with a world composed of ceaselessly changing, interacting particles and subconscious forces (*Footprints; Journey*). More generally, Byles argued that certain intangible issues could never be clearly described in words, learned philosophical discourse would not end misunderstanding, and the Buddha himself had maintained “a noble silence” concerning the ineffable (“On Understanding” 35).

Environmental ethics and the Eightfold Path

Byles included descriptions of the Eightfold Path in all of her books on Buddhism. She stressed that it comprised a down-to-earth set of ethical and spiritual practices for use in everyday life, to find *nirvāṇa* in the here and now, and end the suffering caused by the “crude greed for material goods,” and “the fear of nuclear weapons” (*Lotus* 246). Byles sometimes listed the Five Precepts that the Buddha taught, however she more usually employed the precepts to interpret and explain the Eightfold Path. Her writings suggest that she regarded the Eightfold Path as an integrated program of ongoing training, but that some of the Path's steps and associated norms were of particular importance to environmental protection.

Describing the Eightfold Path generally, Byles indicated that the first two steps, right views and right aspiration, were designed to reorient the thoughts—towards the Four Noble Truths, *anattā* and self-renunciation, harmlessness (*ahiṃsā*), and loving-kindness (*mettā*). She said the third step, right speech, was concerned with carrying over one's thoughts into words—the need for avoiding backbiting and so on—and

the fourth and fifth steps, right action and right livelihood, with carrying the thoughts over into activities. Right action involves conduct that does not injure or kill other beings (*ahimsa*), and avoids sexual wrong-doing and stealing, and right livelihood requires earning a living in ways not injurious to other beings. The sixth step, right effort, she wrote, requires the application of measured persistence to thoughts and activities in order to promote helpful states of mind, while the last two steps were designed to still random thoughts and promote inner peace. These involve, respectively, mindful awareness of the body, mind, and illusions including separateness, and meditative practice to transcend this world and discover oneness and deathlessness.

The precept of *ahimsa* was particularly important to Byles's environmental ethics. The injunction of non-harm, she argued, should be applied not only to humans and other creatures, but all of nature, as "nature is alive" and "even the mineral kingdom has a life" ("Our Attitude" 33; "Right Livelihood"). She argued that the practical, modern meaning of the Buddhist precept should be understood through Albert Schweitzer's doctrine of reverence for life ("On Wanting Little"). This meant recognizing that while no living beings should be harmed, one could not have life without destroying life—hence, one could only avoid and minimize harm as far as possible, and compensate for unavoidable harm in other ways or places. In support of this principle of non-harm to nature, Byles relied on a blend of ethical approaches to persuade her readers. For non-Buddhist bush walkers, she argued that nature had "rights of its own" to non-harm and bush walkers had a duty to respect them ("Our Attitude" 33). She successfully used this approach in practice to argue for protected wilderness areas (further discussed in section three). Byles also warned of the practical ecological consequences of exploiting, rather than avoiding and minimizing harm to, nature—arguing to bush walkers that, as the universe was one entity, "nothing can be injured without the injury of all and that if we expect nature to give we must

take as little as possible out of nature” (“Can Bushwalkers” 6). For Buddhists, she indicated, from the Pāli Canon, that the Buddha had taught that killing living things brought remorse and sorrow, but refraining from harm eventually led to the spread of loving kindness throughout creation (*Lotus*).

Ahiṃsā, Byles argued, was related to the virtue of *mettā*, another key feature of her environmental ethics. Byles drew on the Buddha’s teachings in the *Karaṇīyamettā Sūta* to argue that loving kindness should, like a mother’s selfless love and care for her child, be extended to all creation, including the mosquito that stings us (“*Mettā* in Practical Living”). She argued that it was an ethic specifically taught and practiced by the Buddha, as well as other religious teachers including Gandhi. She suggested that cultivating *mettā* had beneficial consequences—“If we had *mettā*, there would be no problem of the erosion of the soil or the rape of the earth, and there would be no possibility of war” (“*Mettā* in Practical Living” 10). She also suggested that *mettā* could help to harmlessly stop others from damaging the environment. The injury caused by a bully who harmed animals, she argued, would not be stopped by harming the bully, but rather by loving-kindness. “Fire cannot be put out by fire,” she said, only positives can cancel out negatives (“Boundless Love” 2).

Practicing loving kindness, non-harm and selflessness towards nature, Byles indicated, began with the Eightfold Path step of right aspiration. “The destruction of nature has its origin in the mind, that is in the thoughts,” Byles said, “and it is only in the mind and its thoughts that the cure can be found” (“Can Bushwalkers” 7). She therefore suggested that bush walkers should reorient their thoughts towards interconnectedness and unselfishness by, for example, asking themselves if they truly needed or only wanted the products and profits from damaging activities that took place in the natural areas they valued. To practice non-harm in thoughts towards nature, Byles suggested that people

should let go of resentment towards trivial difficulties—including even the storm that blows the roof off our house (“*Mettā* in Practical Living”). We should also give up judging or measuring others who harm nature, she said, and asked bush walkers to consider with her, “whether we are any better... than those tourists who carve their name on Ayres Rock” (“Ayres Rock” 8). To train the thoughts towards loving kindness, Byles suggested that people should sit for ten minutes each day, and suffuse all with *mettā*, “including the soil and the trees and the wildlife” and even those who were injuring the world (“*Mettā*: Sixteen Times”).

Byles generally noted the need for gentle, truthful words, but had relatively little to say about right speech in relation to the environment. She indicated, however, that it was wrong to “get emotional and angry” and “complain” about the environmental problems caused by others, because it spread hatred (“Emotionalist Conservationists” 11). She argued that one could still work for conservation, but praised, as a good example, a restrained and judicious editorial that had noted an environmentally damaging incident, and simply made a reasoned plea for better regulation.

Byles had much to say about right action towards the environment, especially harmless action—applying her Schweitzer-derived formula—and compassionate engagement. For Buddhist readers, she recounted Buddhist stories of harmlessness towards animals, but argued that today right action involved avoiding and minimizing harm to all life “including that of the tiniest insect, and the grass and trees,” and she sometimes provided practical examples, such as transplanting shrubs taken for the building of a house (*Footprints* 219; “On Wanting Little”). Byles argued that the Buddha’s teaching was not a passive one of inaction, as sometimes suggested, but involved the taking of compassionate action to stop the suffering of humans and creatures. The Buddha himself never turned aside from such action, she said, intervening even to

prevent the torment of fish (*Lotus*). She argued that a disciple of the Buddha, although knowing that “the object of life is the denial of the reality of the things of time and space so that we may find what is Beyond,” must also take action using the “weapons of love, non-violence and truth” (*Lotus* 251). These were the methods used by Mahatma Gandhi, she said, a man of the same spiritual lineage as the Buddha, and she argued that such action was urgently needed today, given horrors such as atom bombs.

She also presented an environmental, and modern, interpretation of right livelihood. Harmlessness was at the core of right livelihood, she said, and referring to Albert Schweitzer, stated that one’s livelihood “must not injure the rest of creation any more than can be helped” (“Right Livelihood”). Amongst wrong livelihoods she included not only the proscribed butcher, soldier, hunter and so on, but also occupations supported by profits from others doing harm, such as copper mining companies that injured miners and poisoned streams (“Right Livelihood”). She queried the taking of dividends from manufacturers of harmful products, such as armaments, nuclear weapons, poisons, and intoxicants, but also allowed that exactly how to minimize injury through right livelihood was for each to decide. She added that right livelihood involved not only the right work, but also undertaking the work in the right spirit—that of selflessness, humility, and non-attachment to the outcomes.

Byles’s writings also point to the significance of right mindfulness and right meditation to environmentalism. She understood right mindfulness as including a constant watchfulness and truthfulness with oneself, and she challenged readers to observe themselves if they were becoming “hot under the collar” about environmentally damaging activities (“Reduce Self to Zero”). She argued that it signaled a concern about self and a selfishness that would have adverse consequences, such as

wasting energy better spent on working for conservation, or internal quarrels over minor issues (“Emotionalist Conservationists”). The corrective, letting go of the separate self and gaining awareness of the oneness of all creation and the uncreated, could be achieved through right meditation (*Paths*). Right meditation was thus an important element of Byles’s eco-Buddhism and its emphasis on *anattā* and selflessness.

Byles’s Applied Eco-Buddhism

Byles applied her eco-Buddhist ethics to a range of environmental issues, such as forestry, pollution, soil erosion, mining, and wildlife—providing clear examples of the practical, contextual meaning of her ethics. Insofar as Byles understood the Eightfold Path as a complete set of practices for everyday use, each of the steps on the Path could be considered as important to her issue-specific approaches, including for example meditation practices that helped heighten awareness of *anattā*. However, her eco-Buddhist writings highlighted only certain Buddhist norms and Eightfold Path steps in relation to different issues. At least three environmental issues recur in her work, including resource consumption, animal welfare, and wilderness management.

Consumption

Byles noted the connections between the problems of increasing consumption, resource depletion, and pollution. Her analysis of the problems was essentially grounded in right view—she indicated that selfish grasping after nature was the source of the environmental damage and associated suffering, including pollution (“Pollution”). She argued that an “insistent crying for a higher and yet higher standard of living for an affluent and still more affluent society” had caused the continuing, un-

satisfied demand for products like timber (“Can Bushwalkers” 6). She said that by man’s mistaken belief that he could simply take from nature had been responsible for the conversion of large areas of land into desert, and the decreasing food and timber resources of the world (“Mark Morton” 12).

Her solution to these problems relied on right aspiration and awareness of *anattā*, right action based on *ahiṃsa* and selflessness, and right livelihood. Byles challenged readers to think about issues such as how much food they used, and whether they really needed new timber furniture, and to re-orient their thoughts away from grasping and the sense of I and mine and me (“Pollution”; “Ayres Rock”). She said that thoughts must first be turned towards oneness with the Great Unity to help solve the problems of excess consumption and pollution. Right action based on *ahiṃsa*—avoiding and minimizing harm to nature—Byles said, was also needed “to stop the rape of the earth which is threatening us with worldwide starvation” (*Footprints* 219). She encouraged readers to live more selflessly and simply, drawing on the story of a Zen monk who would not waste even a single grain of rice (“Pollution” 36). Regarding livelihoods, she applauded the simple, partly self-sufficient living of Gandhian communities and Zen monasteries that grew their own food (*Lotus, Paths*).

Byles applied her ethics in her everyday life by practicing simple and selfless living at her Sydney property Ahimsā. She subdivided her land and offered two blocks to her spiritually inclined, conservationist friends as gifts, and on her own lot established a small, unpainted home and meditation hut (Petersen; Fallding). She only sparsely furnished her home and walked rather than using a car for transportation. She tended an organic vegetable garden and beehive to provide food, and ate only two meals a day (Cleveson). Indeed, her lifestyle was so spartan that it was apparently unacceptable to a visiting Buddhist nun in the 1950s, Sis-

ter Dhammadinna (Croucher). At Byles's suburban legal practice she practiced profit sharing with her staff, and she made donations to many causes, including funds to build meditation huts for Buddhists in Burma (Ronalds; *Journey*).

Animals

Byles was concerned about animal suffering and saw many incidents of it in the Buddhist communities she visited. She noted varying attitudes to it, including degrees of indifference. She also observed different practical interpretations of *ahimsa*, such as in Burma where Buddhists ate meat, but did not kill termites (*Journey*). She argued however that animal suffering should be avoided and minimized as much as possible, based on the Buddha's teachings of *anattā* and selflessness, loving-kindness, compassion, and *ahimsa*, and right aspiration, right action and right livelihood.

To help reorient thoughts towards selfless connection and harmlessness, she asked readers to reconsider whether they really needed to swat at mosquitoes, or new medical treatments that required the torture and vivisection of animals ("Can Bushwalkers"; "Pollution"). She also indicated that the Buddha had taught that if one suffused all creation with loving-kindness, the lust to eat flesh and harm animals would die within (*Footprints*). To support her argument for compassionate and harmless conduct towards animals, she recounted the Jātaka Tale involving Queen Malicka's intervention to stop animal sacrifices by the King. She drew on the Buddha's teachings to General Siha about neither killing nor eating animals for food, and his example in rendering compassionate aid to suffering animals (*Footprints*; *Lotus*). She noted the prohibited livelihoods, and also suggested that right and harmless living might involve not eat-

ing meat provided by butchers, and not wearing fur coats made from the hunting of wild animals (“Right Livelihood”).

Byles applied these ethics in her own life, for example, by not eating meat and by using natural therapies for physical ailments. She walked rather than rode on the half-starved ponies she was provided with in the Himalayas, and was kind to the sickly dog she found at the Mohnyin meditation center (*Lotus; Journey*). She worked to protect wildlife habitat on and around her property Ahimsā through bush regeneration and activism using Sydney’s planning laws, and helped establish a local environment group that assisted with this work. In fact, it was Byles’s ultimately unsuccessful action to protect part of this habitat from development that led to her expulsion from the NSW Buddhist Society. Her lifestyle did not rely on the livelihoods of butchers or hunters, and she used her legal skills to support several wildlife-related causes, including conveyancing to establish the Wirrimbirra flora and fauna sanctuary in southwest Sydney.

Wilderness

Byles argued in favor of the preservation of wild areas, with some to be completely free from human interference including hiking. The Buddha, she suggested, had a preference for areas for solitude and would certainly have cast a sorrowful eye over the loss of wild lands today (“The Buddha’s Preference”). She argued however for protection of wild areas based on principles of selflessness, *mettā*, and *ahiṃsa*, and practices of right aspiration and action.

She said to fellow bush walkers that their mental attitude towards primitive or wilderness areas should be unselfish, and loving—we should “regard nature as a living being we love deeply” (“Our Attitude” 33). She said we should let go of any selfish human desire for primitive

areas for our own use (“What is a Primitive Area”). Right action in the establishment and management of wilderness areas involved selflessness and harmlessness. She argued that primitive areas—as opposed to national parks generally—should not be established or managed for the purpose of benefiting humans, although humans should not be actively prevented from entering them. The reason for this, she wrote, drawing on her interpretation of *ahimsa*, was that nature was a living being, and as such “nature has rights”—nature should have the right to flourish without harm as far as possible, even the limited harm caused by providing for walkers (“Our Attitude” 33). These protected places would provide compensation for the unavoidable harm caused elsewhere by humans. Bushwalkers, she concluded, should selflessly allow the flowers to “blossom and the kangaroos and wombats enjoy their lives, whether anyone sees them or not” (“What is a Primitive Area” 5).

Byles famously applied this argument in 1945 to persuade the Federation of Bush Walkers to adopt a policy position of supporting fully protected primitive areas, where the interests of nature and wildlife prevailed over those of humans (Mosley). The decision helped to delay the declaration in the Kosciusko State Park of a primitive area that would have permitted recreational use. It allowed time for ecological surveys of the Park and further debate on primitive areas boundaries. In 1963 scientists who supported a strictly controlled reserve succeeded in having a protected primitive area declared that stopped ski industry plans there (Slattery). In the following years, management changed in Kosciusko and other parks. In NSW today, wilderness areas are managed to allow for some limited human use, but nature reserves allow for flora and fauna protection to take precedence over human access. With increasing user pressure and indigenous involvement, Byles’s application of reverence for nature to parkland management is again attracting interest (Slattery).

Byles's Historical Contribution

Byles's eco-Buddhism involved consciously modernizing the Buddhist texts to help her mostly Western readers to appreciate and use the Buddha's teachings in their day-to-day lives, including, in the case of active conservationists, their environmental campaigning. In describing the Buddhist philosophy of dependent origination and its relationship to suffering, she made links to modern physics, psychology and ecological science, drew on Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, and sometimes used Romantic language. In describing the Buddhist ethics associated with the Eightfold Path, she developed interpretations drawing on the ideas of Albert Schweitzer and Mahatma Gandhi. Her eco-Buddhist ethics incorporated deontological and consequentialist elements, but as a whole can be best understood as a virtues approach—consistent with her early concern to cultivate better people to shape and uphold post-war plans and laws. Her eco-Buddhism was essentially an integrated program to help humans to become more selfless and harmless towards the environment over time, ultimately leading towards liberation from suffering. Byles herself admitted that hers was a very long-range plan, and that suffering would not quickly cease (“Can Bushwalkers” 7). This emphasis on cultivating virtue in her eco-Buddhism suggests the influence of Marcus Aurelius' s Stoicism, a philosophy she greatly admired and in which she saw parallels to the Eightfold Path (“Marcus Aurelius”). At the time that Byles developed her eco-Buddhism, from the 1940s onwards, it comprised an original—and eclectic—contribution to both Buddhism and environmentalism.

Some Buddhists, such as Nālanda's Jagdish Kashyap, encouraged Byles's work, but her approach also attracted criticisms that foreshadowed some of those directed at eco-Buddhists today—in particular, that it was not sufficiently orthodox. In 1960, for example, Anagarika Sugatananda—previously Francis Story, whom Byles had met on a Sri

Lanka stopover on her travels—accused Byles of not understanding Buddhism and reducing it to “a mere scheme of morality” because she did not accept the doctrine of rebirth as an indispensable element of the Buddha’s teachings (Sugatananda 3). He argued that following the Eightfold Path involved absolutely accepting rebirth as part of the Four Noble Truths and Right View, and that the life-process necessarily involved lifetime after lifetime in *samsāra*. Byles responded by thanking him for the lesson in humility, agreeing that the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path were not a mere system of ethics, but noting that many other Buddhists agreed with her that even non-Buddhists—those who did not accept all Buddhist doctrines—could tread the Eightfold Path (“Can Non-Buddhists”). Byles certainly appreciated that many Buddhists did not share her interpretations of the texts—at times, she labeled herself a heretic like her grandfather—but she nonetheless considered herself a “sincere disciple of the Buddha” (*Footprints* 14; “Many Lives”).

Her philosophy drew on a Buddhist understanding that all things are transient, inter-connected and have no permanent, separate self; that the illusion of self leads to grasping and suffering; and that ending suffering relies on fully realizing *anattā* or no self. In her clearer and more nuanced writings, Byles differentiated between no-self and the ethic of selflessness, and argued that one should—rather than necessarily would—practice unselfishness towards others and nature, because of the consequential benefit of helping to alleviate one’s own suffering and that of other beings. Byles’s mid-century interpretation anticipated some aspects of the later deep ecology approach—such as an emphasis on the connectedness of humans and nature, and explanations of interdependence that drew in part on modern ecological science. However, her eco-Buddhism also differed in significant ways—particularly in its emphasis on an explicit ethic of selflessness and an ontology based on an absence of self. Deep ecologists like Arne Naess, for example, have specifically rejected the idea of a selfless approach to nature, arguing that

“when people feel they unselfishly give up, even sacrifice, their interest in order to show love for nature, this is probably in the long run a treacherous basis for ecology” (24). He illustrated this point with reference to “the ‘unselfish’ mother,” who created tense, anxious children who were “affected by their mother’s hidden hostility towards life”—a stark contrast to Byles’s references to the selfless mother of the *Karaṇīyamettā Sūta* (Naess 23). Deep ecologists like Naess have promoted instead an ethic of ecological self-interest based on identification with nature and an expanded Self, but stress that the self-interest to be pursued is not the egocentric interest of the narrow self (25). Naess has argued that this non-egocentric orientation would arise naturally through the process of identification, rather than through moral exhortation.

Were she alive today, Byles might dismiss these differences in approach as simply a matter of semantics—she argued that spiritual terms, such as Self, *ātman*, and *anattā*, carried very different meanings for different people, and were extremely difficult to explain outside of their specific religious or philosophical contexts (“On Theravāda Buddhism”). She argued in favor of understanding spiritual or metaphysical concepts using actual experience, an open heart and “inner sight,” rather than learned discourse and “subtleties of reason”—an approach unlikely to endear her to most philosophers (35–36). The difference between Byles’s approach and deep ecology likely is partly semantic—those of us who have not fully experienced no-self or Self may never know—but this approach, with its emphasis on following the Eightfold Path steps to cultivate selflessness and realize *anattā* is less likely to be so troubling for Buddhists.

Byles, of course, stressed not only the ethic of selflessness, but also *mettā* and *ahimsa*. Byles—who sometimes used the term loving-kindness interchangeably with compassion—distinguished her approach from Zen, arguing that Zen said little about loving-kindness, and she had

seen little evidence of it in Zen practice (*Paths*). She felt the use of the stick to hit meditators in *zazen*, for example, was inconsistent with both loving-kindness and non-harm, although she understood that the stick was supposed to help in cutting through illusions. She found it difficult to reconcile Zen's history of association with the military class with the ethic of *ahimsa*, and argued that Zen's harsh training methods were better suited to producing warriors than the people of loving-kindness and non-violence needed in a world threatened by atomic weapons. She was also concerned that at least some books on Zen seemed to justify "a current idea in the West" that one need only act spontaneously, in accordance with natural inclinations, and enlightenment could be found at once (*Paths* 195). Byles's views on Zen clearly set her apart from other eco-Buddhists of her day, such as Gary Snyder. Byles, however, regarded the strong interest in Zen in the West during the 1960s as something of a fashion that would pass. She did believe that Zen's great ecological sensitivity would continue to be relevant and appreciated, and in this, particularly, she seems to have been correct.

Byles's modern interpretation of *ahimsa*, drawing on the teachings of both the Buddha and Albert Schweitzer, was sometimes communicated to readers, particularly bush walkers, using the language of duties and rights. With a holistic conception of nature, encompassing even the earth's soils, she argued that nature had a right, as a living being, to be protected from harm—a right which she interpreted as involving humans avoiding and minimizing harm to the environment as far as possible, and providing compensation for harm caused. Considered in its historical and geographical context, her interpretation of the ethic of non-harm was both significant and politically astute. In the decades following, a duty to assess harm to the environment caused by new developments, in order to avoid and minimize the harm, was codified in law in many jurisdictions throughout the world. In NSW, for example, planning legislation that required environmental impact assessment of new de-

velopments was passed in the year of Byles's death. In many places subsequently, a requirement for compensation to nature for harm caused—using certain types of environmental offsets—was also incorporated into various laws. Martin Fallding is now a leading practitioner in this field in Australia as a result of his work on the use of biodiversity offsets. Such practices could be expected to continue to evolve over time, in response to future environmental conditions and ethical and political debates.

Byles's ethic also included an emphasis on application or engagement, a characteristic that anticipated later eco-Buddhist approaches. Byles argued that acting to alleviate the suffering of humans and creatures on the material plane may be somewhat futile, but was still demanded by compassion—and the example of the Buddha—and it need not distract from the pursuit of the Beyond. She appreciated that becoming attached to and entangled in worldly concerns was to be avoided, but argued that it was impossible “to step out of the game of life” and a human society that was continually evolving (*Lotus* 251). One must find a middle way, she indicated, between selfish attachment to and callous detachment from worldly concerns, and act as skillfully as possible in the world while still working towards fully embracing *anattā* and realizing *nirvana*. On engagement, Byles's writings showed an influence—the ideas of Gandhi—that recurs in eco-Buddhist history, from Byles and the Sri Lankan Sarvodaya group, through to Joanna Macy and others.

Overall, Byles's work sheds new light on the history of Buddhist environmentalism. It shows that eco-Buddhism was already developing in the Oceania region, and particularly in Australia, by the mid twentieth century. It provides further evidence that the development of eco-Buddhism was a truly global phenomenon, and not confined to America. Her work and travels highlight the importance of Theravāda, and not just Zen, to post-war eco-Buddhism, and of former British Empire nations and their networks to eco-Buddhist history. Byles's successful ap-

plication of her ideas in the 1945 debate over wilderness management can be seen as a milestone in the history—as a significant mid Twentieth century example of eco-Buddhism affecting government policy. The episode also provides a clear early example of Buddhism influencing environmentalism—by showing how Buddhist-inspired arguments persuaded an established group of environmentalists to relinquish their own interest in wilderness access to minimize harm to nature as a whole.

Her work is particularly important in the context of Australian eco-Buddhist history. It shows clearly that eco-Buddhist ideas were already developing vigorously in Australia decades prior to the contribution of deep ecologist John Seed (Mulligan and Hill). It also shows that eco-Buddhism was changing Australian environments before John Seed's activism to protect the northern NSW rainforests. Byles's Sydney property Ahimsā, with its modest home and meditation hut, flourishing bush land surrounds, and history as the site of a small spiritually aware community, is now an important early example of an Australian place physically shaped by the application of eco-Buddhist ethics. Ahimsā has considerable religious significance—it was the site of some of the earliest gatherings of the NSW Buddhist Society, meditation practice sessions, and celebrations of Buddhist events such Vesak. Today, Ahimsā adjoins the Lane Cove National Park, and in the river valley bush land, Gillian Coote Roshi, Martin Fallding and the National Trust help to maintain the environmental legacy of Marie Byles's eco-Buddhist practices.

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