

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/>

Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics

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Review of
Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics

Eric Sean Nelson*

Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics. By Simon P.
James. Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2004. 142 pages.
ISBN: 0754613674.

Zen Buddhism has often been seen as disclosing a different, more receptive experience of nature. Instead of imposing predetermined constructs, ideologies, theologies, and worldviews onto the world, it suggests that one can shake up and clean out the eyes, ears, and mind in order to look and listen responsively to things as such in their interdependence and uniqueness. Despite skeptics who deny the value of applying an ‘ancient eastern philosophy’ to a ‘modern western problem’, Zen Buddhism articulates an ethics of care for sentient beings and of nature as a whole that has significant implications for environmental thinking and practice. Given the recently proclaimed ‘death of environmentalism’, and the continuing prevalence of views reducing nature to a mere object for exploitation, there is salience in anything that reminds us that there is more to life than human

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projects and challenges us to consider that responsibility extends beyond human obligations.

Simon P. James's provocative and trenchant work *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* transforms such intuitions about Zen's openness to nature by systematically articulating in relation to both Mahayana Buddhist and western philosophy the import of Zen for ecology and environmental ethics. This work also serves as an excellent introduction to Zen philosophy and ethics in general, since it richly unfolds these dimensions of Zen in response to its critics. The relative brevity of this work makes it at times more of a prolegomena, but one that will surely inspire further inquiry into the ethical and environmental import of Zen Buddhism.

James answers the charge that Zen is intrinsically irrational and anti-philosophical by clarifying how Zen's employment of tension, paradox, aporia, and absurdity (such as in *kōan* practice) *presupposes* and *requires* rationality rather than suppressing it in the name of irrationality or mystical intuition. Although Zen throws cognitive constructs into question, and thus challenges thinking, this clearing away of and release from misconceptions and reifications is done for the sake of generating insight, mindfulness, and wisdom. That thought can question and unsettle itself, and the self confront and encounter itself, is not the impossibility but indeed the very possibility of philosophy.

Is there such a thing as Zen Ethics?

Although it has been suggested that Zen has no ethics, even by some of its twentieth-century Japanese proponents, Zen has persistently addressed the question of what kind of life is best worth living. One argument against the possibility of Zen ethics is that Zen is inherently antinomian, amoral, and hostile to ethics as a type of dualistic thinking that is overcome in awakening. Zen can have no ethics if it is 'beyond good and evil'; if moral

conduct, including the Buddhist precepts and Mahayana perfections (*pāramitā*), is merely a device to be tossed aside after serving its purpose. Given that partaking in a different kind of ethics does not necessarily mean having no ethics at all, James correctly shows that such an argument profoundly misinterprets Zen. Zen practices imply an ethic since they involve the cultivation of *character* (to the point of the spontaneous realization of no-self) according to a model of what a person *should be* (awakened, compassionate, and so on). James fittingly argues that this ethic is a kind of ‘virtue ethics’, since it differs from ethics defined as obedience to a set of commands or the application of an abstract *rule*—such as utility or the categorical imperative—governing actions about what one *should do*. He argues that the Buddhist concern with happiness is *eudaimonistic*, since it is oriented toward the flourishing and cultivation of human and sentient life rather than the application of a universal rule.

Zen ethics shares with virtue ethics a type of eudaimonistic question concerning the best way of life. It employs a parallel language of perfections (*pāramitā* understood as excellences that are comparable with Aristotle’s virtues) and skillful means (a sense of appropriateness akin to Aristotelian *phronesis*, yet without Aristotle’s bifurcation of practical and theoretical reason). However, James risks confusing this powerful analogy and ‘family resemblance’ with identity by not carefully distinguishing at times the important differences between Zen and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Zen ethics can only be analogous since it gives a different answer to what constitutes happiness and virtue.

James deepens his argument by demonstrating that the constituents of the Buddhist way of life (e.g., the Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, precepts) are constitutive and exemplary of such a ‘good life’ rather than being merely instrumental means to be abandoned upon its realization. One transcends these constituents, abandoning the raft on reaching the

other shore, only in the sense that they are perfected and realized. They have become the spontaneity and freedom of a ‘second nature’ rather than being left behind. Wisdom (*prajñā*) is nothing less than to spontaneously live a deeply compassionate and hence ethical existence. The Buddhist notion of expedient or skilful means (*upāya kauśalya*) does not signify ethical relativism or nihilism but the situation-oriented appropriateness that openly and compassionately responds to things as they are. Compassion (*karuṇā*) is the central virtue or perfection to be cultivated and spontaneously generated. This responsive spontaneity overrides moral rules. Yet it is not relativistic arbitrariness if it is the *phronetic* consequence of wisdom (*prajñā*) or the skilful manifestation of the virtue or perfection of Buddha-nature.

Yet how can one be compassionate given the emphasis on ‘no-self’? The examples of ‘Samurai Zen’ and the uses of Zen in modern Japanese militarism indicate that Zen shock tactics do not lead to compassion by themselves. Selflessness can be deeply unethical if it leads to indifference to the suffering of others and the inappropriate sacrifice of self and others. These cases illustrate how attachment to emptiness (*śūnyatā*) can in fact undermine compassion. James’s analysis suggests that there are different tendencies within Japanese Zen Buddhism: Whereas some might seem satisfied with their experience of *satori*, remaining in emptiness and an unresponsive selflessness, others challenge themselves further by de-centering or ‘emptying emptiness’ so as to respond to the suchness, thusness, or as-is-ness (*tathatā*) of things. Despite the fact that some conceive awakening as complete, and non-attachment as the indifferent abandonment of morality and compassion, others live and continuously deepen not only awakening but the precepts as a way of life that manifests the perfection and compassion of Buddha-nature while serving as a needed exemplar for others to emulate.

Can there be a Zen Environmental Ethics?

The next set of issues pursued by James is whether Zen is anthropocentric and, if so, whether it can yield an adequate environmental ethics. He argues that Zen virtue ethics is not inherently human centered if (1) human well-being is defined by natural well-being, (2) nature is not merely instrumental for but constitutive of the human good, and (3) regard for and care of the natural world is good for its own sake beyond issues of human health, longevity, and well-being. Although it has been argued that Buddhism is inherently anthropocentric because it is primarily concerned with human awakening, James responds that Zen awakening is tied to the challenging and decentering of the human and conventional such that insight is gained from and into the wider network of life. Whereas ethicist Peter Singer, perhaps like Indian Buddhism, limits ethics to a response to the suffering of sentient beings (which is already fairly ambitious judging by human behavior), Zen extends the moral circle to encompass all life as a reflection of the inherent Buddha-nature of all things, as expressed in Dōgen's discussion of "mountains and rivers" in the *Shōbōgenzō*. In Chan and Zen Buddhism, emphasis is laid on learning from and becoming like the natural world—from the uncarved block to the flow of the river—and natural entities are seen as teachers, models, and exemplars.

Two difficulties of using non-harm (*ahimsā*) as a basis for an environmental ethic are (1) its limitation to sentient beings rather than nature as a whole and (2) the possibility that some take it as a rule to rigidly avoid intentionally or accidentally harming any creature whatsoever. For James, the latter is more characteristic of Jain than Buddhist thought. It is incompatible with Zen insofar as respecting nature cannot mean total non-intervention in the natural world. As one is always a participant in nature, naturalness rather than otherworldliness is exemplary. Although the traditional notion of *ahimsā* was not applied to nature as a whole, and the mere

fact that all things have Buddha-nature does not necessarily imply that they have a moral status, Zen's aesthetic and ethic of naturalness suggests respecting nature as such and as a whole. This ethical holism stresses minimizing harm through unfolding the excellence or virtue of respecting natural entities, whether living (plants, animals) or otherwise (mountains, streams, ecosystems). Of course a clod of dirt or drop of water cannot actually be 'harmed' in the way of sentient beings. Nevertheless, the air, the land and the water can be damaged such that they also call for the virtue of *ahimsā*.

Whereas holism and individualism are generally opposed to each other in western thought, James uses Dōgen and others to explain how each being—just as each dewdrop distinctively reflects the moon and each moment is the singular expression of the entirety of time—has supreme worth in and through itself and in relation to everything else. Thus Zen treasures the most ephemeral and fragile, such as the blossom, the dewdrop, and the leaf.

On the basis of these and additional arguments, James proceeds in Chapter Four to examine the charge that Zen cannot yield an environmental ethics in which natural beings have an intrinsic value and is potentially nihilistic because of its focus on emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and no-self (*anātman*). However, according to James, "intrinsic value" in ethics does not mean "non-relational" but rather "non-instrumental" such that a Buddhist can be committed both to the ultimate emptiness and interdependence of natural entities as well to their non-instrumental character. Contemporary Engaged Buddhism has fruitfully shown that the two claims can complement each other. In an intriguing analysis, James considers whether dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) entails that things are internally or externally related and whether it can be articulated as a relational multiplicity. The nihilistic interpretation fails to accord with Zen accounts

of awakening, including its ethical character, and forgets that emptiness is not a positive ontological assertion but a skilful means of dismantling fixed 'realities' in order to awaken responsiveness to the disclosure and singular event of the thing itself in its thusness. As other recent works have shown, the use of such phenomenological language can be quite fruitful in explicating the experiential tendencies of East Asian Buddhism and correcting the view that they are variations of Idealism. It would be interesting to more thoroughly articulate the difference between Zen responsiveness and, for example, Heidegger's letting/releasement (*Gelassenheit*, which seems to lack the Buddhist dimension of compassion) or Levinas's precognitive ethical responsiveness to the Other (which is restricted to human relations).

In the final chapter, James responds to the criticism that Zen cannot motivate environmental practices, especially political activism, because of its supposed escapism and quietism. This view misses the profoundly practical character of Zen as an engagement with and opening up of the world. It forgets that the *wuwei* of Zen is not letting be in the sense of indifferently accepting anything, since *ahimsā* calls for emptiness rather than holiness and accordingly does not only concern one's own actions but also those of others. These interpretations, echoing earlier Neo-Confucian critiques of Chan, profoundly miss the social dimension of Buddhism. If *karma* and merit do not purely apply to an isolated self, and they cannot, then the individual is deeply responsible for what happens to others. It is certainly important to distinguish Zen responsiveness from western conceptions of accountability and guilt, which presuppose a constant identity. In Zen, responsibility is perfected as a natural and effortless responsiveness to things as they are—especially the spontaneous compassion in response to the actual suffering of others exemplified by the figure of the bodhisattva. For masters such as Dōgen, mindfulness in the ordinary and

everyday is the perfection of *zazen*. In answering the critique of Zen's supposed quietism, James also reflects on the contrary criticism that traditional Zen has at times been overly active in politically problematic ways. He accordingly discusses the political conservatism within traditional Zen as well as its unfortunate role in Imperial Japan. These issues need more extensive treatment to suitably respond to the recent work of Brian Victoria and others. James notes but could more fully articulate the point that advocates of Engaged Zen need to be mindful of the possible dangers of engagement, since activism can learn from Zen but also endanger Zen's interruptive and responsive tendencies through politicization and institutionalization. As this work excellently shows, Zen is not a mechanism or theory for resolving every problem. It is not a policy, political program, or general moral theory at all but rather a profound and ecologically insightful response to questions of the kind of life best worth living.¹

Notes

¹ I would like to thank James Mark Shields for his helpful suggestions concerning this review.