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*Environmental Ethics in Buddhism:
A Virtues Approach*

Reviewed by Deepa Nag Haksar

University of Delhi
nh.deepa@gmail.com

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editor@buddhistethics.org

A Review of *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*

Deepa Nag Haksar¹

Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A Virtues Approach. By Pragati Sahni. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007, 224 pages, ISBN: 978-0415396794 (cloth), US \$160.00.

Two very different streams of philosophy are straddled here by Pragati Sahni to show how understanding the deeper concerns about nature and life in early Buddhism might provide a philosophy of environmental ethics consistent with contemporary concerns. The author's training as a philosopher enables her to examine the idea of "nature" in the history of western philosophy as it extends to contemporary debates on environment and ecology on the one hand, and imaginatively explore the meaning of nature in early Buddhism via a meticulous analysis of relevant Buddhist literature on the other. The book is enriched throughout by the author's original interpretations of Pali texts. She is aware of the risks a comparative study such as this might run, but meets the challenge through a passionately argued view that a significant "Buddhist environmental ethics" can be recognized if the subtleties of Buddhist virtue ethics are understood in the larger context of Buddhism itself.

Questions concerning environmental ethics in early Buddhism can be difficult, as the traditional scriptures do not provide any explicit definition of the subject. By identifying the plurality of views, the author

¹ University of Delhi. Email: nhdeepa@gmail.com

delineates problems of finding contemporary environmental features such as those, for instance, that address value, justice, conservation and sustainability in the ideas and beliefs of the ancient religious philosophy of Buddhism. She categorizes four main areas of scholarship in this field while assessing their strengths and weaknesses. The “Partisan” environmentalists are those who unquestioningly believe Buddhism to be environmental, though the evidence they base this on may be inadequate. The Partisan approach also includes writings of and about Buddhist activists and those Buddhists who promote environmental consciousness. “Positivists” view environmental issues by using genuine Buddhist sources to validate their claims. The “Sanguine” approach is that of those who have adopted a non-judgmental stance to determine to what extent Buddhism may be seen as ecological while they question and analyze texts. The “Sceptics” are scholars who are sceptical about the presence of environmental ethics in Buddhism, considering environmental Buddhism to be conceptually impossible, and finding other approaches flawed or inaccurate. The exercise is comprehensive, covering the thoughts of several well-known traditional scholars, influential contemporary ethicists, clergy and philosophers from within Buddhism, and various other perspectives from the West and Asia. To illustrate the dilemma of most scholars who embark on a study of Buddhist environmental ethics, Sahni points to Ian Harris’s paper “Causation and ‘Telos’: The Problem of Buddhist Environmental Ethics,” where Harris admits that while his heart is drawn to the optimistic view that Buddhism contained a response to environmental problems, his mind was more inclined to the positions that reject such a view. However, the fact that no explicit Buddhist environmental ethics exists in the scriptures is reiterated so many times in the book that one wishes the author’s interpretation of the texts could have led to a more positive, elaborated theory.

Having said that, Sahni demonstrates quite convincingly how existing approaches fall short as viable theories of Buddhist environmental ethics by not focusing on Buddhism's message of the virtuous life that significantly engenders reverence for the natural world. She proposes a different approach that would be able to address two concerns. The first involves an impartial discussion of the implications of nature as employed in the history of philosophy. "Nature" in this context is neither clear-cut nor unequivocal. Its complexity must be acknowledged before analyzing Buddhist views of nature. The second concern attends to notions of the moral life and virtues in Buddhism generally as a foundation upon which to develop a theory of "Buddhist environmental virtue ethics." Towards the first concern, a vigorous analysis traces western historical conceptions of nature from three points of view, covering ideas presented in the writings of A. Krebs, Descartes and Plato. Although Krebs's views, to the author, are somewhat positive and those of Descartes and Plato indifferent, if not dismissive, of the importance of nature, the latter two remain noteworthy. For instance, even the Cartesian marginalization of nature has a positive angle, which not only shows the relation between man and nature or non-human beings but also admits that man is somehow different. Sahni then progresses to her second concern, which is an exposition of the Buddhist "worldview"; i.e., *saṃsāra*. She points out that the very notion of classifying beings, both human and non-human, on the one hand and the natural universe on the other, not only expresses Buddhism's reverence for nature in a unique worldview but demands a singularly different approach to the very understanding of the relationship between the moral life, environment and the notion of "world." Thus, an environmental ethics in early Buddhism can be said to emerge mainly from the inclusive ethical beliefs couched in a particular cosmological understanding of nature.

Somewhat disappointing is the brief discussion on what the author refers to as the “aesthetic” perspective, alluding to the rich and varied descriptions of nature that exist in the early Buddhist scriptures. She shows that early Buddhism does not neglect the beauty of nature, even though such descriptions are really meant to advise monks not to get lost in the sheer sensuous joy of experiencing the charm of moonlit nights or the verdant forests. To her such depictions are after all recognition of the importance of the natural world as they are also part of the ambience that forms *saṃsāra*. What is lost here, however, is the more rounded conception of reverence towards the fecundity of nature, available in the Buddhist way of life, sanctioned by the scriptures. For although an aesthetic theory does not explicitly exist in early Buddhism, the true aesthetic is the *contemplation* of nature, which is quite in keeping with the general practice of detached meditation and an objective regard for natural beauty that actually complements the “virtuous.”

The conception of *dhamma* is examined with reference to Damien Keown’s interpretation of the term, among other associated and accepted ideas, to mean a universal or cosmic law that applies to the physical and moral spheres. The origin of the word is traced in Pali and interpreted by the author; she also shows the close relation of *dhamma*, as universal cosmic law, to the doctrine of dependant origination, *paticcasamuppāda*. She undertakes a study of teachings on *dhamma*, *paticcasammuppāda*, and *saṃsāra* with reference to the *Nikāyas* in order to establish the influence that virtue ethics has on Buddhism’s attitude towards the natural world. Analyzing several interpretations of the *Aggañña Sutta*, which are often understood to be a Buddhist account of the origin of the universe and of society (including Gombrich’s distinct view that holds it to be a satire on the *brahmanical* caste system), Sahni argues that although this may be held as true by some Buddhists, the connection between Buddhist cosmogony and Buddhist ethical ideas implicitly available in the *Sutta* can be explored more deeply and in

other ways fertile to the development of environmental ethics. Attending to early scriptures, Sahni confirms the claim of Paul Williams that *dhamma* as *paticcasamuppāda* is the rational, coherent structure of the world. The Buddhist rendering of this concept reveals it as a law that extends to everything in existence or potentially so. Sahni points out: “An awareness of *paticcasamuppāda* is the awareness that nature, be it human or non-human, is governed by the same law. In this universality lies cosmic connection” (69–70).

Sahni goes on to argue that since a fundamental belief that underlies all Buddhist thinking is the doctrine of *kamma*, according to which all intentional actions have consequences, i.e., the individual must act out of free will, intentional actions themselves are also conceived as good or bad, right or wrong. This then forms the moral essence of Buddhism. Furthermore, *kamma* comes to fruition within *saṃsāra* (the world). Characterized as both endless and cyclical, *saṃsāra* is the platform where actions are performed, and is divided into realms or levels where beings are born according to their deeds. Thus, rebirth in *saṃsāra* rests on individual responsibility and virtuous living. A review of the topic of “future generations,” of great importance in contemporary environmental ethics, leads to the conclusion that there is no single beginning nor final end as the present endlessly creates the future, via the chain of *kamma* and *saṃsāra*. Thus, based on the cosmological approach, the continuity of *saṃsāra* encompasses future generations, as there are actually no new beings. In addition, with regard to the issue of anthropocentrism, another important aspect of contemporary environmental ethics, the cosmological approach demonstrates that although humanity is important in early Buddhism, it is not considered superior. Rather, in its remarkable notions of causality and process, the Buddhist worldview regards human and non-human beings as, in some senses, “equal.” Sahni argues that the Buddhist standpoint may be understood as a form of weak anthropocentrism and that also “[t]his

metaphysical-physical-ethical world-view acts as a system of checks and balances for the functioning of considered preferences rather than felt ones ... the theory of morality and retribution (that actions will have corresponding consequences) makes certain that actions are done in such a way that ensures the best consequences” (88). She further elaborates how an understanding of cosmological realities and the practice of ethics are tied to attainment of self-realization, so that isolation from them would not allow the aspirant success in spiritual activities.

There is also a stimulating discussion on virtue ethics, which brings to light the various theories put forward by classical and contemporary thinkers, including an examination of Damien Keown’s comparison of Aristotle’s and Buddhism’s virtue ethics that focuses on the significance of *dharmas*. The author stresses that Buddhism does not support an insubstantial theory of liberation as it is grounded in certain ideals. As the *Dhammapada* puts it: “Destroy the forests (of desire) and not the trees, from the forest is fear born, by removing forest and thicket, Nibbāna is attained, monks” (92). The practice of living a virtuous life and along with it the protection of oneself and others are constant themes in the Pali Canon. The Buddha, in *Sedaka Sutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, preaches: “And how is it monks, that by protecting others, oneself is protected? By forbearance non-violence, universal love and sympathy...” (86). Analysis of the *Nikāyas*, contemporary interpretations of *Abhidharmic* perspectives and other texts brings to light the subtleties of Buddhist virtues and the invitation to cultivate a life of simplicity, non-violence, self control, mindfulness, universal love, and other virtuous qualities directed towards character building, self regulation, and inner spirituality. It is pointed out that ethics is not outside *nibānna* but part of it. An exciting discussion of the *Jātaka* tales further enlightens the relevance of reverence for non-human beings and the natural world in Buddhist folklore.

The refreshing quality of this book lies largely in its creating a suitable methodology for the subject itself in the absence of any available theory or approach by which Buddhist environmental ethics can be meaningfully understood. The approach here goes beyond the limits of contemporary Western methodologies by virtue of a many-layered discussion that attends to various implications of passages from the Pāli Canon most relevant to Buddhist ethics. The bibliography and notes are impressive, and give full support to the author's thesis. It is certainly a "must read" for anyone seriously interested in environmental issues as well as the significance of Buddhism in today's world.