OF ECO-BUDDHAS AND DHARMA-ROOTS:
VIEWS FROM THE EAST ASIAN BUDDHIST TRADITION

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Abstract

This paper discusses broadly Buddhist perspectives on nature and environment in East Asia by using examples from the primary sources. While the overall position is critical of the commonly held views that Buddhism has traditionally held nature in veneration and has fostered ideas akin to modern environmentalism, it does indicate that in certain cases, Buddhism did so. Nevertheless, the Buddhist position has nearly always been firmly grounded in spirituality and belief. Otherwise an utilitarian approach has been apparent. Therefore, when issues concerning the natural world occur in the sources, they nearly always have an eschatological perspective.

1. Introduction

Much of what we find today in writings dealing with Buddhism and environmentalism consists of a kind of apologetical discourses in which the authors strive to show that Buddhism traditionally and potentially, if not inherently, has always promoted conservation and protection of the natural resources.\(^1\) While this trend is both positive and understandable from

\(^1\) There are numerous examples of this to point to, but for the sake of brevity I shall here limit myself to a few of the more representative ones including Yamamoto, Shuichi, “Environmental Ethics in Mahayana Buddhism: The Significance of Keeping Precepts (śīlapāramitā) and Wisdom (prajñā-pāramitā),” The Journal of Oriental Studies 12 (2002): 137–55; Kaza, Stephanie, and Kenneth Kraft, ed. Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000); James, Simon P. James, Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), etc. Much of this discussion can be found in articles, where there is a marked tendency to read contemporary, modernist notions on environmentalism into a traditionalist Buddhist discourse, or perhaps better: to re-formulate traditional Buddhist discourses to agree with or in some cases, even to encompass modern environmental issues. Such endeavors, praiseworthy as they may appear, nevertheless distort the general discussion of religion and environmentalism. In the end they tend to obfuscate rather than clarify, but of course all in the name of Buddhism and nature. For an extensive listing of such writings, see Williams, Duncan Ryuken, "Buddhism and Ecology Bibliography," published by The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University, accessed January 4th, 2013. http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/buddhism/buddhism.pdf.
the perspective of halting the ongoing degradation of the natural environment worldwide, it nevertheless constitutes a sort of pious ‘back-reading’ rather than reflecting a serious attempt at disclosing original data inherent in the primary sources. Or stated differently: Attempts at understanding whether Buddhism has traditionally had something akin to ecological thought has tended to be overshadowed by contemporary concerns rather than reflecting views maintained by the tradition itself as seen against documented history.\(^2\) What we are served instead is something along the lines of ‘how to imagine a Buddhist environmentalism’ or ‘we Buddhists also love nature.’ Although well-meaning and conscientious, such writings are not very helpful when trying to understand whether Buddhism has traditionally had ideas on environmental protection and conservation, or whether such notions are exclusively the creations of worries over the global, climatic predicaments and over-consumption of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The purpose of the present essay is to try to put some perspective into the current discussion on Buddhism’s relationship with the natural environment by going back to the primary sources and traditions in order to see what they have to say on the issue in question.\(^3\) Although I will include material that is of a more general Buddhist nature, especially at the beginning of this essay, I shall look at East Asia broadly. In the course of this I will investigate a number of select cases that all—in various ways—address Buddhist concepts and views relating to the natural environment, including the resources deriving from it, and how the tradition dealt with them.

It is all too easy to claim Buddhism as a champion for modern environmentalism. Especially so if one willfully ignores the origins and concerns which shaped the religion throughout the historical continuum. Hence, to know what the primary sources have to say, can be an invaluable aid to our present understanding of the problem. That being said, I do not pretend to have exhausted the issue here. Concepts of sustainability including resource management have taken on a number of different forms in the East Asian cultures, and it is impossible to cover them all within a short essay such as this.

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\(^3\) One attempt at letting the Buddhist primary sources speak on behalf of the environment, can be found in: Schmithausen, Lambert, “The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4 (1997): 1–42. However, in this case also it is evident, that the existence of an ecological attitude in early Indian Buddhism can only be argued for as a byproduct of Buddhist practice in general. It is never a focus of Buddhist discourse.