

nature in Ancient India was “the fact that utilization often involves injuring or even killing of living beings” (4). Such consequences could not be taken lightly by Buddhists, according to whom the injuring or killing of living beings is believed to have evil consequences for the perpetrator’s future rebirths, and for whom it is considered immoral to bring injury or death to sentient beings who fear death and recoil from pain just as much as humans do. Thus the first moral precept of Buddhism is abstention from injuring or killing, and the cultivation of love toward all beings. Once this principle is extended to plants—for after all, plants are the abode of many little animals—we have in our hands ethical guidelines from which nature could only benefit. Yet a strict application of this precept is unthinkable since even the most basic activity of gathering and preparing food involves killing innumerable animals and plants. Accordingly, Schmithausen suggests that instead of devising various cleansing ceremonies to get rid of the bad karma “inevitably” accumulated, as the ancient Buddhists did, we should try to follow the first Buddhist precept to the best of our capacity and give up unskillful habits that encourage unnecessary cruelties and excessive exploitation of nature.

With regard to its evaluation of nature, Indian Buddhism is at best neutral and at worst negative in that all the different kinds of existence are characterized by unsatisfactoriness and inevitable decay. From the practical, or relative, point of view, however, nature receives a very positive evaluation in the hands of the hermit who finds in it the silence, solitude and constant reminders of the truth of impermanence that are so crucial to his meditative practices and spiritual awakening. Wild nature therefore provides the ideal conditions for the perfection of humanity and, translated into twentieth-century aspirations, this old Buddhist evaluation of nature could take the form of arguments for the conservation and restoration of nature as a means to promote mental health and global happiness.

Though brief, this study is an excellent introduction to both the possibilities and difficulties of using Indian Buddhist doctrines to address our environmental crisis. Well-documented, it abounds in footnotes providing useful information to the specialist—though this can also become distracting to the newcomer. One major shortcoming, acknowledged by the author, is the decision not to discuss the possible implications of the doctrine of emptiness for an environmental ethics. Through his clear argumentation, Schmithausen demonstrates that although some elements of ancient Indian Buddhist doctrine may be unfriendly to the environment, others, such as the moral qualities of benevolence and compassion, should appeal to us as adoptable attitudes for the immediate benefit of nature.

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The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism. By Tilmann Vetter. Leiden: E.J. Brill. 1988. ISBN 90-04-08959-4. Pp. xxxvii + 110.

This book is a gift to the world of Buddhist studies. Most known for his work on the Buddhist epistemologist *Dharmakīrti* (seventh century CE), Vetter has here

proven his mastery over earlier Buddhist materials in this attempt to arrive at the earliest teachings of the Buddha. The result is a sensible picture of how Buddhism began and progressively turned into the elaborate religious and philosophical system that we now know as *Theravāda* Buddhism. An important factor in Vetter's success is his method of presenting the doctrinal elaborations of the Dharma as the Buddha's (or the tradition's) response to the theoretical and practical challenges which gradually presented themselves. The author accomplishes this by critically comparing Pali, Sanskrit and Chinese versions of the oldest sections of the *Sutta-piṭaka*, working from the hypothesis that the many inconsistencies that can be found in the Buddhist scriptures serve as indicators not only of the development of the Buddha's own thought, but also, and perhaps mostly, of developments subsequent to the Buddha's death.

Contrary to the orthodox perspective, Vetter argues that it is upon perfecting the fourth stage of *dhyaṇa*-meditation that the Buddha was released from the cycle of birth and death—not upon the realization of the four noble truths. It is not inconceivable, however, that the Buddha would have subsequently and similarly examined his experience of the fourth *dhyaṇa*, in order to dispel the remaining theoretical doubts about the implications of his achievement. Vetter argues that the perfection of *dhyaṇa* was the cause of his liberation—not this later reasoning—and in this respect it is the *dhyaṇa* system of meditation that must be regarded as the Buddha's original contribution to humanity. The orthodox belief that the realization of the four noble truths enabled the Buddha's liberation, and the tradition's increasing emphasis on the practice of discriminating insight—as opposed to *dhyaṇa*-meditation—as the real way to nirvana, is explained as the result of repeated contacts with non-Buddhist traditions, according to which liberation could be achieved only by the realization of some truth.

A second point, which logically follows from Vetter's interpretation of the enlightenment experience, is that the very first discourses of the Buddha must have consisted in directives on the practice of *dhyaṇa*-meditation and that it is only later, upon noticing that his first disciples could not easily enter this meditative state, that the Buddha would have elaborated the noble eightfold path, the four noble truths, the doctrines of karma, interdependent origination, and so forth. These were introduced, according to Vetter, in order to give a theoretical basis to his teachings and to meet the aptitudes of his followers for attaining the spiritual goal.

Having advanced his theory regarding the original teachings of the Buddha, the author then embarks on an illuminating presentation of the three different paths to liberation that evolved out of the practice of *dhyaṇa*-meditation. The first of these paths consisted in the practice of a slightly different system of *dhyaṇa*-meditation. This was accompanied, in the fourth stage, by the realization of three kinds of knowledge, or at least one kind, namely, the realization of the four noble truths. According to Vetter, the addition of the knowledge of the four noble truths at the end of the *dhyaṇa* practice is the result of the growing influence of the practitioners of the second path who put their emphasis on knowledge as opposed to asceticism. According to them, a discriminative insight into the transitory and unsatisfactory nature of existence, which springs from categorizing the

person into five constituent parts, is sufficient for liberation. The third path, however, completely dismisses knowledge. It consists in the progression through the four stages of *dhyāna* meditation, followed by the four stages of formless meditation, and the culmination in the cessation of apperceptions and feelings. Vetter's discussion of these various paths is intriguing for he also shows how various Buddhist doctrines grew in parallel fashion to the meditative practices.

This book is an excellent addition to Buddhist scholarship, and may become a classic in the field. It contains valuable information about early Buddhist doctrines and practices, in a style accessible to all. It should make a fine textbook for introductory and intermediate courses on early Buddhism at the university level.

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***Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing.* By Rosemary Radford Ruether. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992. ISBN: 0-06-067022-3. Pp. x + 310.**

By far the most substantial work by a Christian theologian on certain implications of the Gaia hypothesis, Ruether's *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* is a vivid illustration of how the environmental crisis is forcing a major reexamination of the underpinnings of Western culture. From the thought of ancient Babylonian, Mesopotamian, Hebraic, Greco-Roman, early Christian, and native American cultures, Ruether sifts for golden (or "green") cultural nuggets that might help us eschew ecological suicide. Dividing the work into four principle sections—Creation, Destruction, Domination and Deceit, and Healing—Ruether probes the underside of Western civilization's treatment of both women and nature, reiterating the ecofeminist critique of their dual oppression by a patriarchal culture.

While providing a helpful and terse overview of the Gaia hypothesis, a scientific theory first espoused by James Lovelock which claims that the Earth is a self-regulating, living organism, Ruether does not tease out the ethical and theological ramifications of Gaia directly. Speaking of the religious reverberations of Gaia, Ruether notes that it has become an instrument of ecofeminists who see in an earth goddess a way of avoiding a pernicious male deity. She sagely cautions against, however, such an interchangeable approach to God:

The term Gaia has caught on among those seeking a new ecological spirituality as a religious vision. Gaia is seen as a personified being, an immanent divinity. Some see the Jewish and Christian male monotheistic God as a hostile concept that rationalizes alienation from and neglect of the earth. Gaia should replace God as our focus of worship. I agree with much of this critique, yet I believe that merely replacing a male transcendent deity with an immanent female one is an insufficient answer to the 'god-problem' (4).

Dedicated to eco-justice, Ruether is critical of militarism, sexism, consumerism, and systemic poverty and injustice that constitute ominous threats to organic life. She assumes that the Earth forms a living system, thereby accepting