
Ahimsā, Karuṇā and Maitri: Implications for Environmental Buddhism

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My aim in this paper is to explore Buddhism as potential theoretical grounds for an environmental ethic. Specifically, I wish to show how the doctrine of *ahimsā*, and the attendant attitudes of benevolence and compassion, may provide a solution to one aspect of the environmental ethicist's dilemma. Though there is precedent for such an application, particularly in the careful work of Lambert Schmithausen (1991a, 1991b) and Christopher Key Chapple (1993), many of the problems raised by this scholarship have yet to be adequately addressed. In order to understand exactly what aspect of the environmental ethics problem will be considered here, it is necessary to outline briefly the theoretical task of environmental ethics.

The task of environmental philosophy can be said to have two dimensions: one metaphysical, and one axiological (Callicott 1987, 116). The metaphysical challenge is to bring the view of humanity and its relationship to nature in line with what is known from the science of ecology. In essence the challenge is to replace the idea that humans are ontologically separate from nature with the more ecological view that humans are one species in an interdependent bio-geological system (Callicott and Ames 1989, 3, 4, 51–64; Rolston 1991, 90).¹ The axiological aspect of the problem is somehow to incorporate the natural world into our moral equations: to give nature moral weight. On this analysis, the primary deficiency of existing ethical theories is that they have not given consideration to non-human entities; value, insofar as it has been assigned to nature at all, has been instrumental. While some have argued that a utilitarian basis for valuing nature is sufficient, many seeking to ground an

environmental ethic disagree. They argue that the anthropocentric position which assigns worth to the non-human world solely on the basis of its worth for humans is what has brought us to an environmental crisis in the first place, and that a fundamental revision in the way we value the natural world is needed (see Deutsch in Callicott and Ames 1989, 259–65). As Rolston suggests, because it demands that there be non-human objects of duty, environmental ethics stretches classical ethics to the breaking point (1991, 73).

The axiological aspect of the task of environmental ethics, so defined, is the main focus of this paper. In what follows it will be argued that through the doctrines of non-injury (*ahimsā*), friendship (*maitri*) and compassion for all sentient beings (*karuṇā*), Buddhism provides ground for expanding the moral community beyond the human realm, and in so doing can contribute positively to an environmental ethic. In expanding this thesis I will also try to address some of the difficulties, actual and theoretical, in applying these doctrines to environmental problems, and in so doing attempt to redress a lack in previous discussions of Buddhism and ecological issues. It is my hope that these remarks will be of interest to anyone concerned with the problems of environmental ethics, both non-Buddhists open to the possibility of cross-cultural contributions to environmental thought, and Buddhists who are interested in thinking about how pan-Buddhist principles relate to the demands of environmentalism.

The prohibition against killing is the first, and arguably most important, of the Five Buddhist Precepts (*Pañca Śīla*), which are considered the minimum moral requirements for both monks and lay people (Harvey 1990, 199, 202; Saddhatissa 1970, 87). This precept simply states that one ought to “abstain from killing any living, animate being” (Schmithausen 1991b, 1), and has been interpreted to include “anything that has the life force,” i.e., animals as well as humans, and sometimes plants (Conze 1959, 70). It is complemented by *ahimsā*, the proscription against injuring living beings (Schmithausen 1991b, 1). This injunction has its roots in the ancient Indian ascetic traditions (*Śramaṇas*), in which not only animals and humans but also plants, seeds, and the elements were viewed as sentient, and therefore as possessing life-force (Schmithausen 1991a, 5; 1991b, 3). Accordingly, some early Buddhists seem to have viewed at least plants as sentient beings, and there are certain scriptural passages which proscribe the killing or injuring of plants and seeds (*Sutta-Nipāta* 146, 394, 704, cited in Schmithausen 1991a, 6–7). However, since the later Indian, Tibetan and Far Eastern schools of Buddhism have generally understood only humans and animals to be sentient, the doctrine of *ahimsā* has tended to be applied only to humans and animals

(Chapple 1993, 10; Schmithausen 1991b, 4, 66ff., 79).

The original rationale for the precept against killing or injuring living beings is twofold. One is the doctrine of karma, and the belief that to harm living things would lead to evil consequences for the perpetrator, such as an unfavorable rebirth (Chapple 1993, 23; Schmithausen 1991a, 5). The second basis is the common suffering of living beings: the idea that since all sentient beings fear death and wish to avoid pain, they should be treated with compassion (*karuṇā*) and friendship or loving kindness (*maitri*). These notions worked together to form the prohibition *against* killing and compassionate caring *for* the welfare of all beings. Later arguments for compassion included the idea that since all sentient things lack a substantial self, they must be considered equal to oneself and should be treated as such. As well there was the view that since all things are linked by karma in the cycle of *saṃsāra*, all beings are interrelated, and deserving of compassion and benevolence (*Samyutta-Nikāya* II, 189f., cited in Schmithausen 1991a, 41). This latter argument for compassion was particularly developed in the Mahāyāna tradition, where it was coupled with the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, which states that all sentient beings (*sattvas*) have the capacity to attain Buddhahood (Ruegg 1980, 236–9). The following passage from the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* exemplifies the Mahāyāna understanding of all beings as interrelated:

[I]n the long course of transmigration here, there is not one living being that, having assumed the form of a living being, has not been your mother, father, brother, sister, son, or daughter, or the one or the other, in various degrees of kinship. (1978, 212)

Thus the injunction not to kill or injure living beings has its roots in the idea that all things are connected by karma and share in suffering, and should therefore be treated with care and kindness. What I would like to suggest is that Buddhist non-harming and compassion should be considered important from an environmental ethicist's point of view because of what these principles signify in terms of the relationship between humans and animals. As suggested previously, to provide grounds for expanding our realm of moral consideration beyond the bounds of humanity—to derive a non-anthropocentric morality—has been one of the major stumbling blocks in developing an environmental ethic. In this light the Buddhist view is significant because it is an example of a moral perspective which takes into consideration non-human entities. As Schmithausen suggests,

Stating the traditional Buddhist attitudes of non-injuring (*ahimsā*), benevolence (*mettā/maitri*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) to entail an 'ecolog-

ical' behavior, is surely justified in so far as these attitudes are not limited to human beings as their object but include also other living beings, especially animals. (1991a, 32)

Within Buddhist history there are many examples which illustrate that the principles of *ahimsā* and compassion entail a moral community extended beyond the human realm. The famous Buddhist King Ashoka (274–232 BCE) not only restricted the killing of animals and consumption of meat, but also made provisions for the medical treatment and shelter of animals, and prohibited the needless burning of forests. Buddhist statesmen after him are said to have invoked similar measures (Chapple 1993, 25–6). In China, the Mahāyāna code of conduct (the *Fan-wang-ching* or *Brahmajāla Sūtra*) inspired vegetarianism as well as “Liberating Life” societies, which purchased animals, fish, and birds intended for slaughter to free them (Chapple 1993, 25–6, 29, 30). In contemporary practice there are also similar examples. Sri Lankan Buddhists, for example, reportedly will check piles of leaves before burning them to ascertain that no small animals are hidden within (Schmithausen 1991a, 35). In Thailand, monks have taken the extraordinary step of “ordaining” trees; that is, they have made trees members of the sangha in order to protect them from loggers (Chapple 1993, 67).² The latter can be seen as an example of a broader eco-justice movement current in parts of South and South-East Asia, initiated by various Theravāda reformists such as Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, Sulak Sivaraksa and A.T. Ariyaratna. While it should be noted that these reformers have not gone without criticism from more conservative fellow Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism (e.g. Harris 1995, 179), these examples are significant because they show how at least some Buddhists have taken Buddhist principles to imply directly-active care for non-human creatures. In addition, many ecologically-minded North American Buddhists have invoked the ideal of compassion for living beings, together with an understanding of the interrelatedness of all phenomena, as a basis for their concern for other species and the natural world (e.g., Kaza 1990, 24; Aitken 1984, 168–73; Jones 1989, 136–45; Hayes 1996).

There is, however, one main problem with the Buddhist notions of compassion and *ahimsā* in terms of providing foundations for an environmental ethic. This difficulty arises as a result of the tendency within Buddhist morality to focus primarily on avoiding intentional (*sañcicca*) acts which directly cause harm or suffering, since the view is that only intentional acts accrue karmic demerit (Schmithausen 1991a, 29–30; Ruegg 1980, 235). Thus, what makes an action right or wrong is not so much its actual, objective consequences, but the motivation behind the action.

This focus on intentions and karmic demerit, in turn, is related to morality's functional place on the Buddhist spiritual path. That is, good moral conduct is useful in the sense that it is a precondition for and a reflection of spiritual progress, and bad conduct (i.e., mal-intended conduct) is bad insofar as it impedes such progress (Harvey 1990, 196–7; Saddhatissa 1970, 18–9).

The problem that the primacy of intentionality raises for environmental ethics is revealed when one looks at why the First Precept and *ahimsā* failed, for the most part, to lead to the practice of vegetarianism. While vegetarianism would seem to be a logical corollary of the Buddhist views of non-injury, loving kindness and compassion, it has not in fact been widely practised in the Buddhist world, having become common only amongst certain Mahāyāna monks (Ruegg 1980, 236–8; Chapple 1993, 26). The principal reason stems from the idea, expressed in *Vinaya* I: 237f., that monks could accept meat offered to them as alms so long as they did not suspect that the animal was butchered expressly for them (cited in Schmithausen 1991a, 32; Ruegg 1980, 235). This position was no doubt influenced by the fact that monks were dependent for their existence on the food donated by laymen, and that it would not only be impolite but impractical to refuse any offering, including meat. Furthermore, monks were inhibited from being selective in their diet by the fact that to refuse an offering would deprive the donor of the karmic merit associated with the act of giving. On the donor's part, it was considered permissible to procure meat that was already available, but not to kill an animal intentionally. This has led to the tendency for Buddhists to look unfavorably upon butchering, fishing, and hunting, but it has not prevented most Buddhists from going to the butcher's shop or fish market. An anecdote which illustrates how problematic this reasoning can be from an environmental point of view involves a group of Kashmiri Buddhists. In order to rid themselves of some predatory wolves, these Kashmiris reportedly lured the animals into a high-walled corral, and as a group threw in large stones to kill the animals. Since there was no way of knowing who exactly had killed which wolf, no one was specifically responsible for the animals' suffering, and no one was considered 'karmically accountable'! As this example illustrates, because of the focus on the intentionality and karmic consequences of an act, in most cases only the direct killing of animals is viewed as morally culpable. But in trying to employ Buddhist principles in the development of an environmental ethic, this emphasis on intentionality creates great difficulties, since many if not most of our environmental problems are unintended, and, however devastating, only indirectly result in harm to animals and their habitat.³

Two other problems for 'green Buddhism' are related to this emphasis

on intentionality and karmic merit. The first problem is the concept of a 'hierarchy of moral wrong' based on amount of effort it takes to kill or injure something, so that it is worse to kill, for example, a seal with a club than a snail with your foot (Harvey 1990, 201–4). The second problem is the ability to neutralize the bad karma of killing through "making merit" (Theravada tradition), or through worshipping or evoking a Buddha or Bodhisattva (Mahāyāna), or by performing various rituals of atonement (Schmithausen 1991a, 9–10). Clearly, both of these positions pose great obstacles to an environmental ethic. Of course it is troubling from an environmental point of view that merit-making and atonement ceremonies can make acceptable many behaviors that are damaging to nature. And secondly, to overlook the killing of small creatures because it takes little effort violates the ecological principle that all species within an ecosystem are essential to the functioning of that system. The fact that Buddhism does not proscribe the killing of insentient but living organisms, such as plants and seeds, is also problematic from an ecological perspective, since much that needs to be done to redress environmental ills involves the protection of habitat (soils, plants, and water) rather than individual creatures. While an argument might be made that one needs to protect habitat in order to protect and show kindness to animals—and indeed in certain books of discipline the killing of trees is proscribed in order to avoid harming the animals that dwell in them (Schmithausen 1991a, 35, 42–5)—the emphasis on amount of effort and intentionality would still remain an obstacle to a 'Buddhist environmentalism'.

Part of the solution to these problems may lie in emphasizing the connection between knowledge and intentions. That is, to commit an act when it is knowingly associated with harm or injury must surely be viewed in an important way as intentionally causing harm, even if harm or injury was not the primary or direct aim of the action. So, for example, while a tobacco advertiser may argue that he or she is not intentionally causing harm to people by encouraging them to smoke, if the advertiser knows the connection between smoking and cancer, it would be difficult to argue that such an advertiser does not knowingly cause harm by promoting the sale of cigarettes. Similarly, many environmental problems such as acid rain, pollution, and deforestation are not the direct intentions of our actions, but it is increasingly clear that they are the indirect results of our everyday activities, such as heating our homes, driving cars, using wood and paper products, and buying commercially available food. Therefore, for *ahimsā* and compassion to work as moral principles in an environmental ethic, the emphasis would have to be on avoiding both *direct* and *indirect* harm to living beings, and stress must be on the fact that

knowingly causing harm, even indirectly, implies intentionally doing so.

There is precedent in the Vinaya (I:237f., III:72, IV:134, cited in Schmithausen 1991a, 30, 32 and Ruegg 1980, 235) for a principle which says that when an agent knowingly commits an act that causes harm, the act is intentional; in trying to apply the doctrine of *ahimsā* toward developing an environmental ethic in a Buddhist context, it will be necessary to invoke such a precedent in order to highlight the immoral nature of even so-called indirect or unintended harm.⁴ To avoid reliance on “merit-making” and atonement ceremonies to combat karmic effects of immoral acts, one would need to divert attention away from karmic merit or demerit and focus more on the concrete effects of actions on other sentient beings. But if, as Schmithausen has suggested, many of the practices and rituals centered on avoiding or negating karmic demerit arose out of the tension between the ideal of non-harming and the pragmatic requirements of everyday life, then this need for a shift away from karmic effects may prove to be a most difficult stumbling block for the development of a Buddhist environmental ethic, and one which will require more than appeals to scriptural precedent. In addition to such appeals, it is a problem that will have to be addressed by environmentalists who are sensitive to the social and practical exigencies functioning within a specific cultural milieu.

Ironically, in one sense it may be easier to invoke *ahimsā* and compassion as a rationale for environmental change in North America and Europe, where the karmic aspects of the doctrine, and its attendant problems, are not likely to carry as much weight. Although it is a much-controverted position, a significant number of Buddhists in North America do not consider the doctrine of karma to be central to their belief. And while karma may be important for understanding the origins of *ahimsā* in the Indian context, I would argue that the notion of compassion (*karuṇā*) and benevolence (*maitri*), based on the idea that all sentient beings fear death and wish to avoid suffering, is a more important basis for the doctrine than karmic considerations (see *Sutta-Nipata* 146–50; Schmithausen 1991a, 5, 33, 44; Chapple 1993, 1–20).⁵

However, this focus on compassion and kindness itself has both positive and problematic consequences for an environmental ethic. Insofar as it is based on the simple but powerful recognition that all beings, like oneself, wish to cling to life and avoid death and suffering, it seems to have universal appeal and applicability. As a moral ideal it illustrates how many environmentally harmful actions are also ethically unacceptable because of lack of care for suffering beings. On the other hand, the principles of compassion and kindness are a problematic basis for an environmental ethic for the following reason. Since presumably only the indi-

vidual can judge if his or her actions are motivated by compassion and benevolence, moral culpability is essentially determined subjectively. Not only does this leave open the possibility of self-deception, more importantly it indicates that compassion for sentient beings as an ethical principle fails to define what actions should be taken in specific situations. When the wood buffalo herd in Alberta was threatened with tuberculosis, should compassion have led wildlife officers to nurse the individual sick animals, or to cull the herd, thereby safeguarding the welfare of the rest? Should compassion lead one to stop medical testing on animals, or to persist with such research for the sake of those suffering with disease?

This problem of determining the specific actions implied by the principles of *ahimsā* and compassion touches on a larger issue for environmental ethics—the issue of trying to apply an ethic of intention to what is really a consequentialist problem. Environmental ethicists have objective goals in mind, such as the protection and well-being of wildlife and natural habitats. But an ethic which focuses principally on subjective factors like intentions bases its discrimination between right and wrong actions on these internal qualities rather than on objective goals. An ethic of intention will thus inevitably underdetermine what actions should be deemed good or bad—a seemingly unacceptable position for an effective environmental ethic. In this way the Buddhist emphasis on the intention rather than outcome of an action raises difficulties for environmental ethics.

However, it should be pointed out that the difficulty of making an ethic effective in producing certain behavioral results is not unique to Buddhist or even intentional ethics. As Eugene Hargrove points out, ethics are normative, not descriptive: they tell people generally what they ought to do, but they do not describe how people actually behave (in Callicott and Ames 1989, xx). In other words, morals and values can give tenor and direction to laws, but it is laws that will determine right action in specific situations. In this sense, no ethical principles will determine specifically what is to be done, or what is right, in every situation. But this fact does not obviate the value and importance of moral norms. What I would argue on the basis of this discussion is that the examples described in this paper of caring for non-human beings show that the Buddhist principles of non-injury, friendliness, and compassion could prove productive conceptual resources for an effective environmental ethic.

Endnotes

1. Perhaps the most cited statement of this metaphysical difficulty is the article by Lynne White Jr. (1973), "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," in which Christianity is identified as the source of Western anthropocentrism. Here I am interested merely in pointing out what has been identified by environmental philosophers as a problem, rather than discussing the validity of arguments that would point fingers. For a discussion of White's view and Christian responses to it, see "Part Three" in Kinsley (1995).
2. Since Harris (1995, 179) objects to this practice on the grounds that there is no precedent for it in the Buddhist disciplinary rules (*Vinaya*), I assume that this gesture on the part of the monks is not merely symbolic. Given the clearly anthropocentric assumptions underlying ordination, one can understand why Harris and others would find the practice unacceptable, but one has to appreciate, I think, the ingenuity and good intentions of the Thai monks.
3. See also Lambert Schmithausen's discussion of this issue in Part II of *Buddhism and Nature*, especially 32–7.
4. See "Farewell to the raft" in Richard Hayes (1996, in press) for a useful discussion of secondary intentions, relevant to this issue.
5. In fact, Bikkhu Buddhadasa (Swearer 1989, 80–2) argues that the doctrines of karma and rebirth have been fundamentally misunderstood, and in fact do not reflect the true teachings of Buddhism, which center on how living beings can overcome suffering.

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