

Alastair Gunn and Ruth Walker.
Buddhism and Environmental Ethics in
Context
Kuala Lumpur:
Centre for Civilisational Dialogue
University of Malaya, 2003

The book introduces various approaches from the viewpoint of secular environmental ethics. The first one is that of moral extensionism, which extends moral status to the welfare and rights of animals and the ecosystems. The other approaches refer to the holistic environmental ethics, deep ecology, and eco-feminism. Similarities and differences of these various perspectives to Buddhist teachings are then pointed out. Buddhism actually does not have an explicit project of environmental ethics. There is no such need as Buddhism does not make a sharp distinction between humans and nature. Instead it emphasizes mutual interdependence of things, and it has an eco-centric view. Religions with anthropocentric views have usually shown less concern for the environment. Also, Buddhism does not expound an ethic of stewardship. It rather considers humans as neighbors to the other less intelligent beings.

Buddhism fosters a culture of mental development and self-transformation through meditation. It is expected to lead to limited resource consumption, moderation, compassion and non-violence and to overcome greed, selfishness and egoistic desires toward material things, immortality or perfection. Buddhism is anti-authoritarian and does not require adherence to any dogmas or institutions, but focuses

on personal development. It also places value on critical reasoning and is compatible with a scientific worldview. The doctrine of rebirth is a strong motivation to treat others well, including animals and nature. Ahimsa (non-injury) is a fundamental value that is opposed to the intentional injury or killing of any living being. Humans and higher animals, which have the capacity to attain nirvana, have intrinsic value. Animal sacrifices and sport hunting are forbidden. Vegetarianism is encouraged. Most animal experiments, e.g. for cosmetics, are prohibited. Even lower animals, plants and trees should not be harmed unnecessarily.

Finally, the book discusses such controversial issues as pest control to save endangered species, human population control, and genetic engineering. The monograph ends with a chapter on Buddhist and Christian monasticism, which both had a positive influence on environmentalism.

Assoc. Professor Dr. Stephen Bucher
Visiting Scholar, Centre For Civilisational Dialogue
University of Malaya (10.4.2007-11.7.2007)