world such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Rachel Carson, alongside some less well-known yet clearly influential people. Our great environmental thinkers span a very broad timescale, from the fifth century BCE to the present day. They include a number of people who might be described as activists, such as Chico Mendes; alongside philosophers or more traditional ‘thinkers and writers’ such as John RuskIN and Arne Naess.

Finally, I emphasize that this book is certainly not exhaustive – as already mentioned our choice of subjects proved to be extremely difficult. Furthermore, it certainly does not pretend to be an overview of the lives of the fifty greatest environmental thinkers the world has ever known. We believe that it includes some people who would fall into this category of those who have had arguably the greatest global influence on environmental thought and action; but most importantly, all people in the book have made very substantial contributions to environmental thinking in some form or another. It is hoped that some readers will derive great benefit and pleasure from the book because it introduces them to previously unknown lives. As a whole, I hope that this volume will be of interest to all who would like to find out more about the lives of individuals past and present who have influenced thinking about the inter-relationships that exist among people, other species, and the natural world.

Joy A. Palmer

BUDDHA fifth century BCE

How astonishing it is, that a man should be so evil as to break a branch off the tree, after eating his fill.¹

Born Siddharta Gotama into a royal family in northern India, c. fifth century BCE, the young prince was overwhelmed by the universality of suffering, old age, illness and death that he witnessed whenever he was allowed outside the palace gates. He took early to a life of contemplation, meditation, austerity and simple living so as to fathom the riddle of life and death, and to resolve his insufferable despair over the endless, meaningless cycle of re-death and continual rebirth, until he attained enlightenment (nirvana). The natural settings surrounding Buddha’s whole life appeared to have inspired, if not Buddha’s own thinking directly, the imagery attributed to the sequence of events leading to his enlightenment. It has been remarked that ‘the Buddha Gotama was born, attained enlightenment, and died under trees’. What textual records we have, furthermore, testify to ‘the importance of forests, not only as an environment preferred for spiritual practices such as meditation but also as a place where laity sought instruction’.² [So said the Buddha] … Seeking the supreme state of sublime peace, I wandered … until … I saw a delightful forest, so I sat down thinking, “Indeed, this is an appropriate place to strive for the ultimate realization of … Nirvana”³. Gotama was likely reacting to rapid commercial urbanization and the rise of merchant and artisan classes in his region, and a concomitant agrarian economy responsible for the deforestation of the Ganges region and consequent vanishing of animal life from its natural habitat.

In Buddha’s collected sermons there are compassionate calls to show due care and loving kindness towards all sentient creatures. Birds and animals bear witness to the Buddha’s testimony, and they also become dialogic partners in the ensuing discourses. ‘The Buddha Among the Birds’ is only one of the 550 stories from the Jataka tradition that narrates Buddha’s life among animals, and there are stories that recall Buddha’s experiences as an animal in his former births. It would seem that the Buddha was reevaluating the human–cosmos relationship prevalent in the Indic civilization since the arrival of the Vedic Aryans with their proclivity towards sacrifice, exploitation of animals for agriculture and warfare, and subservience to a brahmanic pan-naturalism, with its ingrained fear of nature.
Buddha succeeded in shifting perception from one of fearful warring nature-forces to that of the benign disposition of nature.

The Buddha interacted in deep empathy with people from all strata of life, including the settled merchant classes and trading groups travelling to the region, and from his reflections developed a form of social ethics which he practised and preached. These teachings were handed down and later recorded in the Pali canon, brought together into 'three baskets'. The coded teachings of the enlightened one (or 'buddha') on a broad ethical paradigm that connected with the path of liberation from suffering, despite their heavy emphasis on ascetic life (i.e. renunciation or withdrawal from society), contain innovative and vital knowledge about Buddha's thinking on the environment. One insight that is nowadays seen as holding a key to the growth of Buddhist ecological consciousness over the course of two millennia and across Asia is that of 'dependent arising' (pratitya-samutpada): 'on the arising of this, that arises'. The causal principle of interdependence registers an ecological vision that, as a recent scholar aptly put it, 'integrates all aspects of the ecosphere — particular individuals and general species — in terms of the principle of mutual codependence'. The relational model underpins the sovereignty and presumed autonomy of the self over other beings and creatures (animals or plants). The ideals of dharma and virtues developed in accordance with this insight have been topics of intense reflection and debate among Buddhist schools, and have also been implemented at different historical junctures, such as by Emperor Ashoka after his conversion to Buddhism. He institutionalized care and welfare towards animals, as the following edict poignantly records for us: 'Here no animal is to be killed for sacrifice ... the Beloved of the Gods has provided medicines for man and beast ... medicinal plants ... [R]oots and fruits have also been sent where they did not grow and have been planted along the roads for use of man and beast.'

Another side of the causal principle of interdependence is the consequent or karmic continuum, which suggests that every action conditions a being's personal history of suffering, the cessation thereof and subsequent liberation from the karmic continuum: 'on the cessation of this, that ceases'. From the particularity of individual suffering (karmic action-effect), the Buddha was able to generalize to humankind, the animal world and natural environment themselves as distinctive manifestations of the cumulative effect of karmic conditioning. He eschewed any hierarchical dominance of one order of being over the other. A social and ecological ethic (dharma) based on undoing the cyclical and all-devouring chain of karmic effects or conditionings was the primary goal of Buddha. His followers applied the teachings in several different directions. This is borne out in the Buddha's expectation that monks and lay Buddhists alike ought to strive always for the 'welfare of the many', 'the happiness of the many', 'compassion for the world'.

Buddha's teachings, however, did not separate out a unidimensional emphasis on environmental ethics from an ontology and ethics of spiritual transformation or sacred-making dharma of the human and natural worlds alike. It has been argued that ontological notions such as Buddha-nature or Dharma-nature provide a basis for unifying all existent entities in a common sacred universe, even though the tradition has come to privilege human life vis-à-vis spiritual realization. In other words, Buddhism underscores the inherent moral worth and 'considerability', in principle at least, of all beings towards which there are certain mutual and reciprocal obligations. We might not ordinarily consider the humble gurgling stream as having any particular obligation towards human beings, but the small schools of fish might be very appreciative of the sustenance and safe ecosystem that the cool water provides for them. For contemporary Buddhists this qualification has become even more urgent, given that some of the kinds and patterns of disjuncture of human-earth relationships that we face nowadays did not exist and might not even have been foreseen by Gotama in his despondent wanderings through the comparatively less disruptive urban environment of his day.

While Buddha may have realized the diversity and interconnectedness of the biocommunity, his worldview was neither entirely naturalistic nor as biocentric as Buddhism in its different forms has sometimes become. In this context, while the relevance and role of the environment is recognized in the ecology of individual movement towards Nirvana, the blurring of individual autonomy and particularity necessary for an ethic of duties, rights and the legal protection of minorities and endangered species, weakens the empowering strength needed for a balanced ethic of poly-ecosim. The Buddha's refusal to prescribe unqualified vegetarianism, it is often argued, is indicative of such a weak link in the Buddha's otherwise noble and promising prolegomenon for all future environmental ethics. Nevertheless, the Buddha's plea for compassion for all life forms in their mutual interdependency and the aestheticization of nature that undergirds his wisdom-teachings, paved the way for a radical transformation of attitude towards
nature in regions to which Buddhism travelled. For instance, the Dalai Lama is an ardent advocate of environmental compassion and an ethic of universal responsibility, which he sees very much lacking in the present, modern-day hectic world. Again, the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh has evolved another strand of wisdom-concentration as a necessary ingredient in the development of a sustainable natural habitat for humans and natural beings alike.

More generally, despite the predominance of non-vegetarianism in Buddhist communities, the rights and ethical protection of certain liberties of animals have been recognized in Buddhism. Many Buddhist monasteries across Asia have banned the cooking of animal flesh as this involves the killing of animals, whether or not the direct intention is the act of consumption at the dinner table. Buddhist environmentalists are active in modern-day Sri Lanka in their efforts to preserve the lush beauty of the island state from despoilment through extensive technological development and the ravages of an ethnic war. They too can be said to be continuing a practical environmental ethics fostered centuries ago when Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka.

Likewise, the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet in the seventh century engendered a nationwide programme for the preservation of the heavenly-natural oasis that remained a mysterious land for much of the outside world. The ruling Lamas proscribed injuring and killing of animals, big and small. The moral practice of showing respect for and responsibly using nature became a way of life for the Tibetans. Even though Tibetan Buddhist metaphysics continued the influential Indian Buddhist doctrine of the absence of self-nature or intrinsic existence of properties and substances alike, proclaiming this ‘emptiness’ of all things has strengthened its moral framework on three counts.

1 Moral properties such as those of the good, compassion, and loving kindness or respect, though by no means absolute, have a solid presence (contingently supervenient on ‘emptiness’), in as much as human interaction or ethical life generally presupposes these properties.

2 A pluralistic ontology that has fair regard for members within it, without privileging any particular species, easily gets translated into a non-anthropocentric respect for biodiversity.

3 The religious-soteriological ‘end’ requires certain self-motivated ethical practices and norms, including restraint on desires, meditation on the limits of the ego-self, altruism based on the moral properties of reverence and deep (but not condescending) compassion for all living and non-sentient beings. In other words, the normative constructs for monks, nuns, lay people, farmers and nomads too, underscore concern for the environment.

The Buddhist ethic of living in harmony with the earth accordingly pervaded all aspects of Tibetan culture. Perched on the ‘roof-top’ of the world, Tibet’s environment was recognized as being crucial to the stability of ecological environs and crop cycles in much of neighbouring Asia. For instance, the ten or so major rivers that wind through Asia feed off the river valleys and smooth glacial icecaps of Tibet, and the monsoon relies on Tibet’s abundant natural vegetation and dense forests. Its wildlife and natural animal sanctuaries maintained an equilibrium and contributed in different ways to the enrichment of the environment, providing manure for controlled husbandry and organic re-vegetation, as well as fuel (from yak dung), and so on. However, after the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the situation has dramatically altered: massive deforestation, land erosion, pollution of rivers, depletion of resources, excessive killing of animals, and general degradation of the environment have had an adverse environmental impact on south-east Asia, which has been subjected to uncontrollable flooding from the monsoon deluge each year. Buddhists are also concerned that the construction of the world’s largest dam on the Yangtze river in China will add to the eco-disequilibrium being visited upon much of Asia by China’s modernist ambitions and imperiousness.

Transcending the human-centric (ego-bounded) perspective is one of the great strengths of Buddha’s interdependent or interconnected vision of all things within the natural–human–social matrix. As de Silva puts it: ‘The Buddhist environmental philosophy may be described as a shift from an egocentric stance towards an ecocentric orientation’.5 The key ontological and moral concepts that help ground Buddha’s ecological thinking comprise:

- **pratitya-samutpada**
- **karma** (Pali **kamma**)
- **dukkha** (Pali **dukkha**)
- **dharma** (Pali **dhamma**)
- **sila**

- interdependent conditioning
- the law of moral causation
- unsatisfactoriness
- reciprocity of obligations or rights within the bounds of duties
- cultivation of virtues, disciplines, and the overcoming of vices. Among the virtues
highlighted are: restraint, simplicity, loving-kindness, compassion, equanimity, patience, wisdom, non-injury, and generosity.

These concepts rest on: (1) a general principle of consequentialism (the gravity and impact of one’s actions judged by their consequences), moderated by (2) a teleology (a larger purpose or particularity of ends towards which each species strives even in the apparent absence of agency – hence the mountain having its own silent telos), and (3) a deontology (dharma for dharma’s sake), intended as a check against excessive altruism, unmitigated utilitarianism, and ritualized narcissism or a ‘grand narrative’ teleology.

Notes

1 Anguttara Nikaya, vol. III, p. 262.
4 Ibid.
7 Swearer, op. cit., p. 20.
9 De Silva, op. cit., p. 31.

See also in this book

Bashō, Gandhi, Tagore

Buddha’s major writings


Further reading


PURUSHOTTAMA BILIMORIA

CHUANG TZU fourth century BCE

All the fish needs is to get lost in water. All man needs is to get lost in Tao.¹

The two most famous and enduring works of philosophical Taoism, both composed during the classical period of Chinese thought (c.500–200 BCE), are the Tao Te Ching (or Dao De Jing) and the Chuang Tzu (or Zhuang Zi). They are works, moreover, in which subsequent generations, right down to the present, have claimed to find an enlightened attitude towards the natural world, a ‘doctrine of harmony with the natural environment’.² Traditionally the Tao Te Ching was attributed to one Lao Tzu or Lao Tan, supposedly a contemporary of Confucius (sixth–fifth century BCE), and the Chuang Tzu to a later disciple. Modern scholars, however, favour the view that the latter work was the earlier, with the Tao Te Ching being a third-century BCE compilation by unknown authors who, in a manner then familiar, annexed their thoughts to the name of an ancient, and perhaps mythical, sage.³
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