



Johan Elverskog. *The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. xiii + 176 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-5183-8.

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Published on H-Buddhism (May, 2021)

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Among the many strange features of the Pure Land are jeweled trees. Why jewels? Why would you want to be reborn in such a place? Paul Harrison has provocatively answered this question by claiming that visualizing the jewels in all their myriad combinations is meant to induce psychedelic experiences. Johan Elverskog's latest book suggests another answer to this question: the trees of the Pure Land are bejeweled because historically Buddhism was always about wealth creation. And equally, because Buddhist culture valued wealth creation, the cost of environmental degradation in the course of creating wealth was a blind spot—unseen, unnoticed, unconsidered.

Both inside and outside of academia, Buddhism is often represented as an environmentally sensitive religion, one committed to the preservation, protection, and aesthetic appreciation of the natural world. Only rarely is this image questioned. Elverskog's new book provides an important dimension in assessing how and why Buddhism came to be seen as a green religion, and why this perception is historically wrong. In breaking this new ground, Elverskog establishes an environmental methodology for the study of Buddhism, an approach that does not presume that Buddhism was always and uniformly concordant with contemporary environmental concerns and values. This makes it possible to exam-

ine the history of Buddhist institutions more fully—that is, to go beyond standard historiography to also examine their effects on the environment.

In his introduction, Elverskog notes an important hermeneutic issue, pointing out that “all too often it is these modern interpretations that are projected into the past and taken to represent the tradition as a whole” (p. xiii). In passing we note that this also describes other aspects of contemporary representations of the tradition, from doctrinal emphases, such as the interpretation of *pratītyasamutpāda* as interconnectedness, to prescribed practices, such as mindfulness. Like other reinterpretive projects, the modern nature of the eco-Buddhist reinterpretation is frequently cloaked by the claim that it is true of Buddhism from its very beginnings—and that it is not, therefore, either an interpretation or a reinterpretation at all. In some of its manifestations it is also an apologetic project proclaiming the superiority of Buddhism to other religious and ideological systems.

This critical aspect of Elverskog's project is motivated by a desire for a more accurate history of the effects of Buddhist institutions. “Only after we jettison our long-sedimented orientalist and eco-Buddhist fantasies can we begin to understand the profound role that Buddhism had in transforming not only Asia's history but also its

environment” (p. 5). Elverskog’s constructive dimension is the establishment of an academic discourse that engages the environmental significance of Buddhist thought and history.

Contrary to the image of Buddhism as a religion that taught abstinence and voluntary simplicity, Elverskog informs us that it has for most of its history been a “gospel of prosperity:” “In place of the popular view of Buddhism as centered on renunciation and antimaterialism, we need to substitute the recognition that Buddhism was in fact centered on wealth” (p. 3). The representation of Buddhism as a teaching of abstinence is rooted in a methodological error—focusing solely on an idealized image of the Buddhist monk as represented by the vinaya, as if the vinaya is a record of how monks actually behaved, rather than a record of the many ways that monks misbehaved. For example, we know from the work of Gregory Schopen that monks did handle money and did make donations for the memory of family members.[1] The modern adoption by Buddhist laity of behavioral standards established for monastics is effectively identical with the same process from medieval to modern Christianity as discussed by Jean Delumeau.[2] Particularly important in both processes is the issue of status—monastics being presumed to be of a higher moral status, and members of the laity wishing to gain that status.

Elverskog also shifts perspective on the vinaya when considering prohibitions on what monks can own or receive from the laity. Rather than the idealized renunciates, Elverskog looks instead to the lay persons making gifts. This perspective reveals the wealth, prosperity, and conspicuous consumption of the laity—and that the vinaya does not object to such consumption by the laity, only to monastics participating in it. Elverskog’s work gives specific issues such as vinaya rules a discursive range in which their significance can be seen as parts of much wider cultural practices characterizing Buddhism throughout its history up until the present.

The Buddha’s Footprint is divided into two main sections. Part 1 is titled “What the Buddha Taught,” while the second is “What Buddhists Did.” In addition to the introduction and conclusion, each part comprises five chapters. In the first part, Elverskog discusses Buddhist teachings on the natural environment. Perhaps most relevant to contemporary concerns is the manner in which Buddhist teachings have promoted “the legitimacy of wealth creation” (p. 19) and the exploitation of the environment that is the necessary consequence of wealth creation. Although framed as part of the history of Buddhism, these dynamics continue to play a role in present-day apologetics. At least two monastics speaking at a recent conference on Buddhism and economics argued for the compatibility of Buddhist teachings and capitalism.[3] These monks were implicitly doing what Elverskog does explicitly in questioning Max Weber’s assertions that Buddhism lacked “economic rationalism and rational life methodology” (p. 39).[4]

The successful expansion of Buddhism needs to be seen as a multidimensional phenomenon. Rather than being philosophically or doctrinally superior to any of the contemporary religions in India, the doctrine of *anatman* and what Elverskog calls “karmic intentionality” may have appealed to a rising class of merchants. The idea of a fixed and unchanging self would have been a conservative force resistant to the possibilities for social mobility in a changing social reality of money, commodities, a market economy, and urbanization (p. 47). This enabled merchants and entrepreneurs to act as free agents, exploiting the natural world in order to gain wealth and improve their social status. More concretely, Buddhist monasteries were actively involved in expanding agricultural land and irrigation systems. These expansions increased not only populations in urban developments around the monastery but also the surplus available for supporting monks (p. 41).

Ironically, the creation of wealth and the destruction of natural environments led to literary output valorizing the now increasingly distant world of nature. And generally, the nature being portrayed was a crafted re-creation of the natural. A pertinent instance is the Chinese Buddhist poet Xie Lingyun (385–433), known as the first nature poet, whose writings extol nature, seclusion, and a vegetarian diet. Xie's romanticized view of nature, and his life of leisurely aesthetic appreciation of nature was only possible because of the labor of the hundred serfs who worked his family's land (p. 53).

The second part of the book offers "a framework for understanding Buddhist Asia as a unified space, which the social system of Buddhism, premised as it was on expanding into the commodity frontier, brought together" (p. 63). This broad view of a Buddhist Asia taken as a whole contrasts with a more common approach that focuses primarily on the specific instance and its context. Although Elverskog does not make this argument explicitly, the intellectual project of Buddhist studies in general necessarily entails a dialectic interplay between the individual or case study approach, and generalizations at various different levels. In this case Elverskog's generalizations are supported by specific instances from across the Buddhist world. This is how he is able to write a book that treats "Buddhist Asia" as a whole.

The impact of the Buddhist social system is examined in chapters on the commodity frontier, agricultural expansion, urbanization, and what the author calls "the Buddhist landscape," that is, the "politics of landscape" by which Buddhists "transformed the landscape with Buddhist monasteries, temples, and stupas, and these structures in turn transformed social realities" (p. 108). Massive monuments, such as Borobudur, are memorable instances, but the Buddhist landscape includes the many temple complexes found across Asia. In the case of Kōyasan and Hieizan, these are still active

training and administrative centers, while the Potala has now been converted to a museum. Buddhist monasteries also expanded a society's presence to frontiers, where they established new centers of economic activity.

An ironic instance of the connection between economic activity and Buddhism is the site of Mes Aynak in present-day Afghanistan. In the fifth to seventh centuries, copper mining provided an economic basis for the establishment of a vast complex of Buddhist monasteries, and being close to the route of the Silk Road, these were connected with both India and China. Today, new mining technologies have made it feasible to extract copper that had been unreachable using manual mining. This technology, however, would destroy the site and its archeological heritage.[5]

Elverskog employs several key concepts that may be unfamiliar to some readers, such as myself. For those accustomed to hearing about the "prosperity gospel" of modern Protestant Christianity, Elverskog's use of the idea of a "prosperity theology" in relation to Buddhism is a surprising turn of phrase. In modern, largely Evangelical Christianity, the prosperity gospel promotes the idea that God wants you to be wealthy, and if you are devout enough, and accord yourself to his will, you will be made wealthy. Material well-being, therefore, is a sign of God's grace.[6] In contrast, the prosperity theology of the Buddha is that since financial means can help support monastics and generate merit, money is a good thing.

Another key concept is that of the commodity frontier, which refers to the "spacial, environmental and socioeconomic" edges of a society from which raw materials were extracted (p. 4). The Buddhist social system was at the heart of extractive economies that expanded across the entirety of Asia. Key to seeing the Buddhist social system is a methodological shift to considering three kinds of Buddhist agents: monastics, laity, and state. All three played important roles in the history of Buddhism in relation to the environ-

ment. Representations of Buddhist praxis have often focused on monastics, while Buddhist history is often represented in terms of state actors. The Buddhist identity of laity as agents seems to often be obscured by other identities, such as nationality (p. 75).[7] Bringing these three concepts together, Elverskog asserts that “driven by the Dharma’s prosperity theology, these three categories of Buddhist actors moved out onto the commodity frontier and there drove the large-scale interlocking processes of agricultural expansion, marketization and commodification of the economy, urbanization, deforestation, landscape transformation, and the transmission of crops and diseases” (p. 4). Also transmitted were socially transformative technologies, from wet-rice agriculture to metallurgy and weaving.

The tendency to focus on Buddhist doctrine and the representation of Buddhism as a “good religion” has contributed to a disciplinary myopia that fails to see these aspects as important parts of the tradition that need to be considered when writing the history of Buddhism: “As a result, much of Buddhological research reads like the work that justified European colonial expansion: Buddhism brought culture, civilization, technology, economic development, writing, and art to benighted people on the periphery” (p. 5).

Not so long ago, it was something of a novelty to learn that Kūkai is credited with constructing a dam that effected water management for farmers on the island of Shikoku, or that Tangtong Gyalpo built iron bridges across the steep river gorges of Bhutan and Tibet, making travel more feasible. And often these accomplishments are presented in isolation from their economic and environmental significance, as abstractly motivated by compassion. Rather than idiosyncratic behaviors of a few exceptional individuals, these instances reflect the history of a Buddhist culture actively engaged in controlling, manipulating, and exploiting the natural world.

So, what attitude is appropriate in response to this perspective on the history of Buddhist teachings and actions in relation to the environment? Elverskog carefully avoids the temptation to turn in the direction of a “truth of Buddhism revealed” sort of thing. Nor does he follow the path of easy cynicism—“religious institutions are corrupt, so what can you expect?” Nor does he essentialize a positive interpretation of Buddhism—that may be true, but Buddhism is really all about ending suffering for all sentient beings, and this is all just a mistaken understanding of the true teachings.” Instead, Elverskog points to the reflexive relevance of the teaching of impermanence for Buddhism *per se*. Buddhist teachings are always being reinterpreted and as a consequence Buddhism is itself subject to change. As Elverskog says in his closing summary:

[T]he Buddha also taught that everything changes. And thus the history of Buddhism might give us a glimmer of hope since the Dharma has itself changed. It is no longer a tradition premised on the creative destruction of the commodity frontier. Rather, if anything, Buddhists are now at the forefront of environmental awareness and action. The recent environmental history of Buddhism shows us that traditions and people—and thus the world they live in—can in fact radically change. (p. 120)

In closing, we note that Elverskog has made a reputation for himself by focusing on the edges of the field of Buddhist studies: Buddhism in Central Asia (*Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*, 2013), in the Mongol dynasty (*Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism and the State in Late Imperial China*, 2006), and a translation and study of the Mongolian history of Altan Khan (*The Jewel Translucent Sutra: Altan Khan and the Mongols in the Sixteenth Century*, 2003). In this most recent work, he turns to examining Buddhist history more widely, but from the perspective of environmental sciences. The methodological significance of this work is widely applicable to the entire range of

Buddhist studies. Knowledge production, even in the form of Buddhist texts, is always located in an environmental context, a context that is appropriately understood as equally economic, social, cultural, and historical as well as ecological.

Notes

[1]. See essays in Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Monks, Nuns and Other Worldly Matters: Recent Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), and *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

[2]. Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th Centuries* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

[3]. See also, for example, Rod Burylo, *The Wealthy Buddhist: Buddhist Ethics, Right Livelihood, and the Value of Money* (Nepean, ON, Canada: Sumeru Press, 2018). Instead of compatibility, some authors propose Buddhist values as a kind of palliative for the oppressive character of neoliberal capitalism. See for example the collection of essays *Ethical Principles and Economic Transformation: A Buddhist Approach*, ed. László Zsolnai (London: Springer, 2011). This latter volume is reviewed in *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, 4th ser., no. 1 (2020): 73–87, <https://pwj.shin-ibs.edu/2020/6917>.

[4]. Quoted from Max Weber, *Hinduismus und Buddhismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), 330.

[5]. Brent Huffman, "Are Chinese Miners Destroying a 2,000-Year-Old Buddhist Site in Afghanistan?" May 17, 2012, Asia Blog, Asia Society website, <https://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/are-chinese-miners-destroying-2000-year-old-buddhist-site-afghanistan-images>.

[6]. See Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[7]. See also Richard K. Payne, "Beyond the Nation-State," OUPblog, Oxford University Press,

2013, <https://blog.oup.com/2013/08/buddhism-beyond-nation-state-geo-political-division/>.

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Citation: Richard Payne. Review of Elverskog, Johan. *The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. May, 2021.

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