

Keown, Damien (2006) 'Buddhism and Ecology: A Virtue Ethics Approach'  
*Contemporary Buddhism*. In press, October 2007

<http://eprints.goldsmiths.ac.uk/archive/00000197/>

# **Buddhism and Ecology:**

## **A Virtue Ethics Approach<sup>1</sup>**

Damien Keown  
*Professor of Buddhist Ethics*  
*Goldsmiths College*  
*University of London*

### *Notes*

- Length 6865 words
- Font: Times Extended Roman
- Date of this version: 3 August 2006
- Email: *d.keown@gold.ac.uk*

## ***Introduction***

Whether Buddhism has a compelling ecological dimension or not has been a much discussed question in recent years. I think I should put my cards on the table at the outset and say that I count myself among the sceptics in this respect. I see little evidence that the Buddha or his followers, at least down to modern times, have been greatly concerned with questions of ecology. If anything, there is more evidence of a negative presupposition about the value and status of the natural world in Buddhism. In contrast to Christian teachings, the world was not created by God who, as the book of Genesis tells us (vv.9ff), saw that his creation was *good*, and being good, worthy to be preserved. On the contrary, in Buddhism there seems to be an acceptance, even an expectation that the world will decline. This is thought of as a basic characteristic of the cosmic order: the eventual destruction of the environment is a basic feature of *samsāra*, and exactly what we should expect. Efforts to prevent it may therefore be seen as naive and deluded and contrary to a proper understanding of Dharma, or natural law. Against this background I see no obvious basis on which to address specific ecological questions, such as whether the world is a better place with the black rhino in it than without it. In general, Buddhism seems not to regard the conservation of nature as anything more than a prudential matter, and we are given no explicit reasons as to why we might have have a moral obligation to preserve it.

It has to be recognized, furthermore, that the concerns of ecology are essentially modern ones, and the ecological problems we face today such as greenhouses gases and global warming are only intelligible against the background of a scientific understanding of the world. Until Buddhism updates its ancient cosmology it is not clear how it will take part in a dialogue which is conducted in the vocabulary of

modern science. Although there are certainly many Buddhists today who have an excellent knowledge of science, it seems to me that the intellectual core of the tradition still conceives of the natural world in pre-modern terms. For the present at least, therefore, I do not see Buddhism as in a position to offer convincing answer to modern ecological problems. I agree with Ian Harris<sup>2</sup> that Buddhism's ecological credentials are far from being conclusively established, and I also share the view that much recent interest in this area is driven by Westerners pursuing a green agenda. The American Buddhist and writer on ecology Stephanie Kaza herself disarmingly admits 'At this point it is unclear whether ecological practices are primarily motivated by Buddhist tradition or by American environmentalism.'<sup>3</sup>

Lest this prologue sound unduly negative, let me hasten to add that as we are all aware Buddhism is not a monolithic structure, and some strands or traditions may be more or less resourceful than others in addressing environmental issues. For example, Schmithausen has contrasted what he calls the 'pro-civilization strand' with the 'hermit strand.'<sup>4</sup> There are also certain underlying features of Buddhist moral teachings that may be conducive to the development of an environmental philosophy. What I wish to do in this paper is to explore one of these by drawing on the Western tradition of virtue ethics and providing an introductory sketch of how it might provide a foundation for ecology in Buddhism.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Virtue Ethics***

Virtue ethics can claim to be the West's oldest systematic body of ethical theory, and it is one that has both secular and religious dimensions. Originating in the ethical treatises of Aristotle, the tradition was continued by classical Roman authors such as Cicero and then revived by Aquinas in the Middle Ages. Given a Christian

interpretation it became the dominant approach to ethics down to the Reformation, only to be rejected along with other religiously-based ethics in the Enlightenment. In modern times Deontological and Consequentialist theories of ethics have enjoyed prestige, but during the last half of the twentieth century their weaknesses have become increasingly apparent and dissatisfaction with them has lead to the search for alternatives. In 1981 Alasdair Macintyre published an influential volume entitled *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*<sup>6</sup> which revived the project of virtue ethics and placed it firmly on the agenda as a mainstream approach to the resolution of contemporary ethical problems. Philosophers such as Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and many more have made important contributions to the debate, and theologian Stanley Hauerwas has been a leading protagonist of the virtues approach in the field of Christian ethics.

### **Virtue Ethics as ‘Middle Way’**

Virtue ethics is an approach which emphasizes the role of the agent more than the action, focussing more on the character of persons than rules (as in deontological ethics) or the consequences of acts (as in consequentialist theories). While not discarding acts and their consequences, it does not see them as disembodied deeds, instead placing central importance on the sort of person we are and wish to become. Celia Deane-Drummond, the author of a recent book which develops a Christian virtue ethics approach to ecology, sums up the approach as follows:

Virtue ethics, unlike other approaches, asks us to consider not just the action, but the agent himself or herself. It focuses on what sort of person we are, rather than what sorts of action we should perform. Actions, where they are considered, are in the light of who we are as persons, rather than detached from human character. The basic premise of virtue ethics is that goodness is a fundamental consideration, rather than rights,

duties or obligations. Furthermore, virtue ethicists also reject the idea that ethical conduct can be codified in particular rules.<sup>7</sup>

Another key aspect to virtue ethics is that it looks at actions in the context of an overall life: we might say that it is more concerned with the whole movie than a single frame. The reason for developing particular states of character is to live a balanced and rounded life and to achieve a state of fulfilment, happiness or flourishing. It can be seen that virtue ethics is not unconcerned with consequences, since its aim is the fulfilment of human potential and the long-term happiness that accompanies it. Aristotle called this state *eudaimonia*, a term which the Christian commentators translated as *beatitudo* or blessedness. While having one eye on the consequences of moral conduct, virtue ethics is also flexible enough to embody rules and precepts which flag up the danger areas and steer us away from the kind of behaviour which experience has shown are not conducive to human wellbeing in the longer term.

## Virtue defined

Virtue is excellence or fitness of purpose. The virtue of a knife is to be sharp and cut well. In the human context a virtue, according to Aristotle, is a particular trait of character which through exercise and habituation becomes customary or natural. He defined virtue as ‘a state of character (*hexis*) concerned with choice (*prohairesis*) lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle that the man of practical wisdom (*phronimos*) would determine it.’<sup>8</sup> Hursthouse defines a virtue as ‘a characteristic trait a human beings needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well,’ while Yearly sees virtue as ‘a disposition to act, desire and feel that involves the exercise of judgement and leads to a recognizable human excellence or instance of human flourishing.’<sup>9</sup>

The classical Western tradition recognized four main or cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.<sup>10</sup> Prudence can be defined as ‘an intellectual virtue concerned with the practical operation of reason in the guidance of conduct.’<sup>11</sup> ‘Prudence’ is the English translation of the Latin *prudentia*, which in turn is derived from the Greek term *phronesis*, a word usually translated as ‘practical wisdom.’ Practical wisdom is simply the intellect operating in a practical as opposed to theoretical mode. Here, its scope relates to human affairs: to things to be done and choices to be made as opposed to reflection on eternal truths such as geometrical axioms or the principles of mathematics. The latter is the business of theoretical wisdom, or *sophia*. In modern English prudence has come to be associated with cautious parsimony and is a term much favoured by politicians who control the strings of the public purse. In ethical discourse, however, it means much more than this and is often described as the ‘mother’ of all the virtues, since without it the other virtues lack direction and purpose. A simple definition of prudence provided by Aquinas is ‘wisdom in human affairs,’ and the exercise of this wisdom gives rise to a developed ability to make choices relating to practical matters which arise in daily life.

Aquinas distinguishes three levels at which prudence can be applied: individual prudence, aimed at the good of the individual; domestic prudence for family life; and political prudence aimed at the common good.<sup>12</sup> The scope of prudential action includes taking counsel, deliberation and contemplation, critical self-reflection, and finally the practical execution of what has been decided upon. This process is not purely a reflexive one but requires detailed investigation of the matter at hand and empirical knowledge of the natural world of the kind provided, for example, by science. It is recognized that there will always be a degree of uncertainty in human

choice and action such that no course of action can be regarded as completely free of ambiguity or contingency. The practical intellect, unlike the theoretical intellect, can only aspire to limited certitude, and so in virtue ethics there can never be a guarantee of being one hundred percent right in the manner, for instance, of one who adheres at all times to a pre-ordained code of rules or scrupulously calculates the utility produced by competing alternative courses of action in the style of consequentialism.

To briefly characterise the remaining virtues, justice (*justicia*) may be defined as ‘a moral virtue concerned with people’s actions toward and with others in the social order.’<sup>13</sup> Justice is distinctive among the virtues in that it governs relations with others and is concerned that each is given his due. It is the principle that seeks fair dealing and right relations among individuals and society at large. Aquinas comments that ‘justice is the habit whereby a person with a lasting and constant will renders to each his due’.<sup>14</sup> It is just choices, when written down and codified, which provide the basis for law.

Fortitude or courage (*fortitudo*) can be defined as ‘a preservative moral virtue concerned with the direction and control of emotions that would otherwise prevent the attainment of excellence.’<sup>15</sup> It has been defined as ‘the ability to stand firm in the face of difficult circumstances, to be willing to suffer for the good, with a clear-sighted knowledge of what that good may be.’<sup>16</sup> Furthermore it is said that, ‘Fortitude is necessary in order to preserve the good that is perceived by prudence and established by justice.’<sup>17</sup>

The virtue of temperance (*temperamentia*) can be characterised as ‘a moral virtue of inclination concerned with the direction and control of the emotions needful for the

attainment of excellence.<sup>18</sup> It seeks self-control and the sublimation of the passions so that they are not allowed to distort perception and judgement through an egocentric bias which favours the interests of the agent. Temperance involves self-restraint governed by reason, sponsors related virtues such as chastity and humility, and counteracts intemperate attitudes manifested for example in pride, and wrath. The outcome of the practice of temperance is an ordered state of being and an integrated character typical of a balanced and well-integrated individual.

### ***Buddhism and the Virtues***

What I wish to do now is consider the four cardinal virtues just described from the perspective of Buddhism. As a point of departure I will take for granted the notion that virtue ethics provides a useful frame of reference for understanding Buddhist moral teachings. I think there is a growing consensus to this effect and it seems relatively uncontroversial to claim that Buddhism teaches that human perfection as expressed in the concepts of Buddhhood, arhatship, bodhisattvahood, and so forth, is achieved through the lifelong practice of virtues such as wisdom and compassion. I think it is also true that Buddhism would tend to regard today's ecological problems as having a psychological basis, for example as stemming largely from greed, selfishness, ignorance, and apathy, and as such falling within the sphere of moral psychology. To quote from a recent thesis by my student Pragati Sahni:

In all likelihood the early Buddhists would view the environmental crisis as a psychological crisis. They would not blame inferior technological development or poor conservation methods as the cause of the crisis, but bad behaviour and attitudes (greed, hatred and delusion). This can be deduced from the fact that all problems are traced in Buddhism to perverted views, and hence, ultimately to a dysfunctional state of mind.<sup>19</sup>

These dysfunctional psychological states are precisely what virtue ethics seeks to eliminate and so we seem at least to have a common starting point which views the question of the long-term wellbeing of nature as depending not on technology but on human qualities such as wisdom, compassion, self-discipline, and mindfulness,

Turning now to a consideration of the four cardinal virtues discussed above, the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom seems to have a counterpart in *prajñā*. *Prajñā* is the intellectual faculty which apprehends truth, and which is cultivated and deepened through exercise in conjunction with meditational practice (*samādhi* or *bhāvanā*). It has to be noted that in general Buddhist sources tend to emphasise the theoretical intellect over the practical intellect. *Prajñā* is generally seen as the faculty which apprehends the eternal truths of Buddhist doctrine, such as *duḥkha*, no-self (*anātman*), dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), and the like. Little attention is devoted to explaining the involvement of the intellect in the process of practical decision-making, in deliberating with respect to the concrete and particular rather than the general and abstract. Perhaps the practical intellect is what is designated by the term *jñāna*, although I am not clear how sharply and systematically the distinction between *prajñā* and *jñāna* is made. There is some information in the Abhidharma about the psychology of this process of making practical choices which involves designated subsidiary mental functions such as paying initial attention to a subject (*vitarka*), sustained reflection on it (*vicara*), resolution (*adhimokṣa*), and choice (*cetanā*) issuing in virtuous action (*kuśala karma*). Whatever the precise nature of this process, it seems clear that at some level or other *prajñā* and perhaps *jñāna* will have a critical role to play in analyzing environmental questions and reaching judgements about what needs to be done.

Decisions affecting the environment need to be taken with care relying on the various facets of *prajñā*. Careful deliberation concerning the evidence, not just by a limited group of specialists, but ideally by a wide body of citizens drawing on their own experience, is an essential preliminary to a prudent policy. The ability to plan and prepare for future problems which may be reasonably foreseeable is the task of the practical intellect, as is the capacity to make urgent decisions arising out of ecological disasters and emergencies.

The second of the classical virtues, justice, is one that has no close analogue in Buddhism. Indeed, outside of the narrow field of *vinaya*, it seems that the concept of justice is virtually unrecognized in Buddhist thought. It is hard to know what specific terms would be used in Buddhism to express this notion, other than some loose and general sense of ‘Dharma.’ Chapter 19 of the *Dhammapada* is usually translated as ‘The Judge,’ ‘The Just,’ ‘The Righteous,’ or some such term. The Pāli term is *dhammattha*, meaning ‘the man who stands on Dharma.’ Verse 256 tells us that such a man does not make judgements hastily or suddenly (*sahasā*), and that the wise man (*pandita*) is one who investigates both right and wrong (*attham anatthañca*). The next verse adds that the man who stands on Dharma, or as we might say, the just man, makes decisions calmly (*asahasena*), in accordance with Dharma (*dhammena*) and impartially (*samena*). Other than passing references of this kind, however, the concept of justice is little explored by leading thinkers, in striking contrast to the Western tradition which has produced a mass of literature on justice down the centuries from Plato to Rawls. Indeed, the first university in the West, in Bologna, began as a law school.

This hiatus may pose something of a problem, since it is not immediately apparent how a Buddhist ecology would set about deciding between competing interests in the absence of a principle which could weigh the interests of the parties concerned by reference to some objective scale. The virtue of justice will require fairness such that each is given his due in the distribution of resources and that the squandering of resources by one group at the expense of another is avoided, as is the exploitation of those with limited economic means by the rich. The interrelationship between socio-economic and environmental systems is a complex one and justice must ensure that the rights and duties of different constituencies are respected and that environmental policy is based—as Eric Katz puts it—‘on a secure foundation of philosophical and ethical reasoning, not the unstable and variable dictates of prudential self-interest.’<sup>20</sup> Questions such as whether to destroy the habitat of rare species by flooding a valley in order to generate hydro-electric power for the local community pose problematic choices which require careful assessment and a just resolution of the competing interests. What resources would Buddhism draw on to decide questions of this kind? Traditional virtues like compassion (*karuṇā*) offer little guidance, since presumably one should show compassion to both sides. Removing greed and hatred from the equation do not resolve the question either, since even with a totally detached and impartial assessment difficult choices still remain.

Justice has a particular job to do over and above that of prudence. Justice has the task of ensuring that each receives his due by establishing general principles, rules, codes of practice, laws, treatises and agreements. Such matters are vital in today’s world where global interests frequently come into conflict and the preservation of the environment involves international cooperation. In a world where all are wise, a just solution may come forth spontaneously, but where adjudication has to be made

among competing interests, sanctions imposed and compliance compelled, justice has an important task to perform and it is not clear how a Buddhist ecology would function without a clear and explicit concept of justice to underpin it.

In contrast to justice, Buddhism has much more to say about the virtue of temperance. References to self-control and self-restraint, abound in Buddhist literature, for example in the *Dhammapada* which speaks again and again of the importance of gaining control over the senses. But perhaps it is in the complex of ideas associated with *sīla* that this virtue finds its clearest expression. *Sīla* is the internalised self-imposed discipline which enables one to ward off temptation and preserve moral purity. It can be contrasted with the externally imposed obligations of the *Vinaya*, although in practice the two will often coincide in their aims and outcome. Buddhaghosa states that the characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*) of *sīla* is ‘the coordination (*saṃādhāna*) of bodily action and the foundation of all good states.’<sup>21</sup> *Sīla* is said to provide the basis for religious practice and spiritual development just as the earth provides the ground on which plants and seeds can grow and cities can be built. As well as promoting the growth of other virtues it also protects them and is likened to a suit of armour, an umbrella, and a cave.<sup>22</sup> With respect to ecology there is every reason to think that a person who is well-disciplined, self-controlled and restrained will consume less of the earth’s resources than a person whose appetites are uncontrolled. A person constrained by *sīla* is less likely to be self-indulgent and will be better equipped to resist the inducements of consumerism to accumulate more and more possessions. It goes without saying that a nation which practised *sīla* would have very different patterns of consumption to one that did not.

Given its association with self-control and self-discipline, *śīla* seems also to overlap with the fourth Western virtue of fortitude. Fortitude means standing firm in the face of adversity, and *śīla* certainly trains one to do that. There is also a more specific virtue, that of *vīrya*, which becomes famous as the fourth of the six perfections (*pāramitās*) of a bodhisattva. *Vīrya*, in its most basic sense, is the virtue of a brave man, a hero who displays courage and does not flinch in the face of danger. More generally it connotes resolution and firmness of purpose in the projects to which one commits oneself. In this sense it seems to come very close to fortitude. Whichever terminology one uses, it is clear that projects of the kind undertaken by ecologists, which are often on a planetary scale, require a good degree of fortitude since there are likely to be setbacks at every stage. Projects such as reducing global emissions of CO<sup>2</sup> require years of planning, negotiation and education, and even then it is not an easy matter to reach agreement and meet targets.

The foregoing is simply a brief and not very systematic sketch of how Buddhist virtues correspond to the four classical Western ones. It seems that three of the four find ready analogues in Buddhism. The fit is not exact, but this it is only to be expected given that each culture or society will make its own evaluation concerning which particular virtues it regards as most important. A Buddhist ecology may well have a different emphasis to a Western one, and distinguish different virtues as primary. We should not therefore expect that the Buddhist configuration of cardinal virtues will coincide exactly with the Western one, but at the same time it would be surprising if there were not some overlap.

Buddhism has a wide range of other virtues to draw on. Two of the six perfections of a bodhisattva not so far mentioned are generosity (*dāna*) and patience (*kṣānti*). There

are outstanding examples of *dāna* in Buddhist literature, as exemplified by Prince Vessantara and bodhisattvas who sacrifice themselves to tigresses. The donation of money, time, or resources by private citizens and governments is the basis on which much ecological work is carried out, as well as being the resource on which disaster appeals depend, as in the case of tsunamis and the like. Other important virtues include sympathy (*anukampā*), love (*mettā*), modesty (*hiri*), non-covetousness (*anabhijjhā*), mindfulness (*sati*), and skilful means (*upāya-kauśalya*) or the ability to give appropriate teachings.

## Virtue Ethics and Ecology

Although virtue ethics has made a contribution to many areas of applied ethics it has so far not been developed very far with respect to ecology. Perhaps this is because the virtues are linked to an ancient system of morality and therefore thought incapable of responding to what is essentially a modern challenge. How, then, might an ecology based on the virtues be constructed? Thomas E.Hill Jr was one of the first writers to propose an environmental ethics based on the virtues. He made reference to certain human ideals that were needed if natural environments were to be preserved and identified certain virtues as having particular relevance to the environment. In particular he linked humility, gratitude and self-acceptance with care for and an appreciation of nature. He wrote:

The main idea is that though indifference to non-sentient nature does not necessarily reflect the absence of virtues, it often signals the absence of certain traits which we want to encourage because they are, in most cases, a natural basis for the development of certain virtues. It is often thought, for example, that those who would destroy the natural environment must lack a proper appreciation of their place in the natural order, and so must

be ignorant or have too little humility. Though I would argue that this is not necessarily so, I suggest that, given certain plausible empirical suggestions, their attitude may well be rooted in ignorance, a narrow perspective, inability to see things as important apart from themselves and the limited groups they associate with. Or reluctance to accept themselves as natural beings.<sup>23</sup>

Hill gives particular emphasis to the virtue of humility, which suggests an interesting connection with certain qualities Buddhists are encouraged to develop, such as a sense of modesty and shame encompassed by the terms *hiri* and *ottappa*, factors which restrain inappropriate behaviour and encourage a sense of proper decorum. Egocentricity (*ahamkara*) and pride (*māna*) are frequently criticized. Indeed according to the *Aggañña Sutta* it was due to a sense of pride and conceit (*mānātimāna*) with respect to their appearance that matter appeared and was consumed by the ethereal survivors of the preceding cosmic destruction.

Geoffrey Frasz seeks to refine Hill's concept of humility by insisting that it be measured or appropriate to the context. He renames this virtue 'openness' and regards it as the mean between arrogance (too little humility) and false modesty (too much humility). He writes:

In a positive sense, openness is an environmental virtue that establishes an awareness of oneself as part of the natural environment, as one natural thing among many others. A person who manifests this trait is neither someone who is closed off to the humbling effects of nature nor someone who has lost all sense of individuality when confronted with the vastness and sublimity of nature ... We value openness to other people ... since it fosters feeling of love and appreciation for other persons. It may be that this quality ... will foster similar openness toward nature'.<sup>24</sup>

Although there is no precise Buddhist virtue corresponding to openness, it seems to involve an attitude similar to those expressed in the *Brahma-vihāras* of love (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), gladness (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). In addition to their inwardly transforming effect, these attitudes have an open and other-directed quality about them in their emphasis on caring, compassion and love for others. They call for a positive disposition towards all beings, oneself included, and affirm self-worth while restraining arrogance.

It also seems likely that the wellbeing of the environment will be promoted by the constant emphasis on simple living and contentment found in Buddhist literature. Non-greed (*arāga*) and contentment with what one has (*santuṣṭi*) seem to be foundational virtues which support ecological concern. Keeping material needs to a minimum and limiting possessions to a robe and bowl, food for a day, simple lodgings and medicine are practices which consume the minimum natural resources. By contrast luxury items such as high beds, garlands and adornments, were discouraged.

A further important virtue to be considered in the context of ecology is *ahimsā*, which means non-harming or non-violence.<sup>25</sup> This virtue will have a special bearing on the treatment of animals and its implications need to be carefully considered. Given that different species often exist in competition for resources, there will be situations in which the good of one species conflicts with that of another. For example, when rabbits breed too rapidly they become a plague, destroying vegetation and spreading disease to other species. However regrettable in terms of individual loss of life, when considered at the level of the species it seems prudent to carry out a cull in these circumstances. The same may be said of attempts to eradicate malaria-bearing mosquitoes and other pests which threaten human life. In the aftermath of the

outbreak of ‘mad cow’ disease in the UK almost five million animals were slaughtered between March and October 1997. More recently, millions of chickens have been slaughtered in Asia and elsewhere in order to inhibit the spread of ‘bird flu’. Are these policies in conflict with the principle of *ahimsā*, and, if so, what would have been the Buddhist solution to these problems? A Buddhist ecology which lacked the ability to manage populations may find it has limited resources with which to maintain a balanced environment. Questions of this kind require a serious assessment of the moral status of human beings in relation to animals, which brings us to the thorny question of anthropocentrism.

### ***Anthropocentrism v Biocentrism***

Another possible reason why virtue ethics has not so far been popular with ecologists may be that since it concerns above all human subjects, it is thought too anthropocentric to make a contribution to an area in which human beings are regarded as the problem rather than the solution. Rather than an ethics centred on the human subject, contemporary environmental ethics has tended to adopt a biocentric approach in which all living creatures, and even inanimate nature itself, are seen as having inherent worth and interests which rival those of human beings.<sup>26</sup> The best example of this is James Lovelock’s theory of Gaia<sup>27</sup> which sees the world as an organic whole in which all the species on the planet act in concert to produce ecological equilibrium. Various ‘new age’ readings of the Gaia hypothesis seek to attribute personality to Gaia as an earth goddess presiding over a resacralized nature. If nature is regarded as a moral agent in this way it is conceivable that moral virtues might be applicable to her behaviour, but such notions are speculative and problematical. Instead the conventional understanding among traditional virtue ethicists would be that moral agency is a faculty exercised only by human beings. However, given modern

discoveries concerning the advanced abilities of certain animal species, such as chimpanzees and dolphins, it would seem unwise to rule out *a priori* any possibility of virtuous behaviour being exercised by a non-human species. If there are species which possess the necessary mental faculties such as memory, foresight and reasoned judgement, it would seem reasonable to suppose that they are capable of the exercise of the virtues to the extent that they possess those capacities.

Does the fact that only human beings (and possibly a limited class of animal species) can exercise moral agency condemn virtue ethics to an anthropocentric position? Certainly there are some ecologists who will see this human-centred aspect as a defect, but the virtue ethicist can respond that the starting point for resolving environmental problems has to be our own human nature, pointing out that unless we put our own house in order first we are not likely to have much success in fixing up the rest of the planet. A critical look at ourselves, our values, habits and lifestyles, is surely advisable before rushing out to hug trees and cuddle koalas. Since humans are allegedly the culprits of many ecological problems such as climate change, water pollution, deforestation, desertification and the general mismanagement of resources, the solution would appear to lie in a reform of human attitudes rather than in what are often romanticised philosophies of nature which have little proven value in delivering practical results. Indeed, portraying non-human creatures as active participants in the moral community is itself a kind of reverse anthropocentrism.<sup>28</sup> To start from theories about the biosphere and thus make ecology the basis of ethics, moreover, seems to be putting the cart before the horse: what is required is an ethical foundation upon which sound ecological practice can be based. Virtue ethics places human beings at the centre of the ecological drama but it does not follow from this that it maintains that

only the interests of human beings need to be considered. Virtue ethics is certainly capable of affirming the value of nature while recognizing that it is other than human.

An ancient concept in virtue ethics is that of the ‘common good.’ This holds that the well-being and flourishing of individuals can only be achieved in community, and that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two whereby each enhances the good of the other. From here it is only a short step to the view that the flourishing all living things needs to be promoted because it is constitutive of our own flourishing.<sup>29</sup> This is somewhat different to the traditional Christian view in terms of which man is the steward of the natural order, since it does not assess the worth of creatures simply in terms of their worth for human beings. In this scheme each creature is allowed its own place, and the distinctiveness of human beings is simply that they can sometimes glimpse the whole picture. As Stephen Clark writes:

Those who would live virtuously, tradition tells us, must seek to allow each creature its own place, and to appreciate the beauty of the whole. It is because human beings can sometimes come to see that whole, and know their own place in it, that—in a sense—they are superior to other forms. Our ‘superiority’, insofar as that is real, rests not upon our self-claimed right always to have more than other creatures do (which is what our modern humanism amounts to), but on the possibility that we may (and the corresponding duty that we should) allow our fellow creatures their part of the action.<sup>30</sup>

This distinction between human beings and other species is not based on any notion of hierarchical superiority but at the same time recognises there is a difference between humans and other creatures. Animals can thus be included in the moral community but not on the basis of being moral agents in the way human beings are. As Celia Deane-Drummond puts it:

I suggest that the inclusion of animals in the moral community of humans is not so much with reference to the specific behaviour of animals as being ‘moral’, like humans, even though they may act in ways that are in some sense precursors of human morality, but rather it is the choice of humans to welcome those unlike as well as like ourselves as those to whom we have specific responsibilities and with whom we share a common life.<sup>31</sup>

Such a view stops short of attributing rights to animals, but neither does it view them simply as instruments for human use. Animals are part of the biotic community in which all living creatures share, and so their interests cannot be excluded from considerations of the common good. This good is not simply human good or the good of any single species so much as the collective well-being of all in which the good of individuals is recognised to the extent that it does not harm the common good. Since humans have a clearer perception of this good than other species it could be said that they have a duty or at least a responsibility to consider the wellbeing of animals in deliberations which may affect them.

So what does this mean in practice? Does it mean that we must all become vegetarians and stop wearing leather shoes and jackets? A moderate virtue ethics might regard this as exaggerated if imposed as a universal requirement. The relationship between humans and animals is a complex one, and it is difficult to legislate in abstraction from the particular circumstances. The consumption of meat may be necessary for dietary reasons in certain circumstances, and developing countries cannot be expected to abandon meat consumption, even when meat is a rarity. Furthermore, in the developed countries what would become of the herds of animals presently reared for food? These animals are not pets and cannot be looked

after by well-intentioned city-dwellers.<sup>32</sup> There is also the more imponderable question of whether it is better to rear animals in humane conditions in which they are well cared-for and then painlessly slaughtered, or for them never to exist at all.

Rather than requiring vegetarianism, a more prudent option might be to encourage people to exercise the virtue of temperance and reduce their consumption of meat. Linked to this the virtue of compassion might lead us to campaign for the overall improvement of conditions in which animals are kept, for example by abolishing cruel practices of the kind involved in factory farming.

While affirming our kinship with other creatures, and acknowledging their interests as part of the common good, wisdom also recognises the difference between human and other species with whom we share the planet. Humans can choose how they are to live, and are able to deliberate and reason in an abstract way which other animals cannot. This ability brings with it a greater capacity both for harm and for good, and should be seen not as a cause for pride or superiority but as a gift to be used with responsibility and humility. Thus while it is possible to reject speciesism in the sense that one species (the human one) is superior to every other in all respects, and to view animals as, so to speak, fellow travellers, we still retain a sense of the distinctiveness of human nature and of its unique identity in the context of the uniqueness of other species. Something of this kind seems to be intended by the phrase ‘a precious human rebirth’ found particularly in Tibetan sources, and foreshadowed by earlier illustrations about how difficult it is to gain a human rebirth.<sup>33</sup> Of course, many Buddhists will disagree with the anthropocentric tone of the discussion at this point and insist that animals and perhaps even inanimate nature be given equivalent moral standing with human beings. I can only respond that the notion of leaves and trees

attaining enlightenment, as Chan-jan envisaged,<sup>34</sup> is not one that virtue ethics would find easy to accommodate.

## ***Conclusion***

Let me conclude by summarising some of the reasons why a virtue ethics approach seems to offer a basis for a Buddhist ecological ethics. The first reason is because it is grounded in the practice and tradition of Buddhist itself. One only needs to read the *Dhammapada* to see that the Buddhist ideal of human perfection is defined in terms of the virtues exercised by an individual who treats all beings with kindness and compassion, lives honestly and righteously, controls his sensual desires, speaks the truth and lives a sober upright life, diligently fulfilling his duties, such as service to parents, to his immediate family and to those recluses and brahmans who depend on the laity for their maintenance.

As Bhikkhu Bodhi writes, summarising the central themes of this text:

Quarrels are to be avoided by patience and forgiveness, for responding to hatred by further hatred only maintains the cycle of vengeance and retaliation. The true conquest of hatred is achieved by non-hatred, by forbearance, by love (4-6). One should not respond to bitter speech but maintain silence (134). One should not yield to anger but control it as a driver controls a chariot (222). Instead of keeping watch for the faults of others, the disciple is admonished to examine his own faults, and to make a continual effort to remove his impurities just as a silversmith purifies silver (50, 239). Even if he has committed evil in the past, there is no need for dejection or despair; for a man's ways can be radically changed, and one who abandons the evil for the good illuminates this world like the moon freed from clouds (173). The sterling qualities distinguishing the man of virtue are generosity, truthfulness, patience, and compassion

(223). By developing and mastering these qualities within himself, a man lives at harmony with his own conscience and at peace with his fellow beings. The scent of virtue, the Buddha declares, is sweeter than the scent of all flowers and perfumes (55-56). The good man, like the Himalaya mountains, shines from afar, and wherever he goes he is loved and respected (303-304).<sup>35</sup>

A Buddhist ecology, then, coincides with these teachings and simply calls for the orientation of traditional virtues towards a new set of problems concerned with the environment. If we require a concrete illustration of how a virtuous person might act towards the environment we can turn to the example of the Buddha. The Buddha is never depicted harming nature and on the contrary seems to have enjoyed spending time in simple natural environments such *āvāsas* and *ārāmas*. Causing harm to animals or to nature seems inconceivable in his case, and we cannot help but feel it would be totally *out of character* for him, which is precisely the state an ecological virtue ethics would seek to engender in us all.

Even being enlightened, however, does not bring the power to solve ecological problems: since no-one has a crystal ball to see into the future, the virtues cannot always tell us what it would be best to do in a given situation. What the virtues *can* do is guide us in grasping the issues at stake and in accepting or rejecting possible courses of action under consideration. The virtues would encourage us to understand clearly the nature of the problem, listen carefully to the views of others, meditate and reflect deeply and insightfully on the alternatives and their pros and cons, reach a resolution, and act with integrity in the execution of the course of action decided. As Frasz writes, ‘the thrust of environmental virtue ethics is to foster new habits of thought and action in the moral agent—not just to get the immediate decision made

right, but to reorient all actions henceforth in terms of holistic, ecologically based way of thinking.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is a slightly modified version of a paper first presented at a conference entitled ‘Buddhist Ecology and Critique of Modern Society’ at SOAS, London, 17-18 February 2005.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Harris, I., *Buddhism and Ecology*, in *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*, D. Keown, (ed), Curzon Press: London, 2000:113-135; also, *Getting to Grips with Buddhist Environmentalism: A Provisional Typology*. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 1995. 2: p. 173-190.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Sahni P. *Environmental Ethics in Early Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*. PhD: University of London, 2004, p.37.

<sup>4</sup> Schmithausen L. *Buddhism and Nature*. Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1999, p.32f.

<sup>5</sup> This paper was written before I had a chance to see the two recent major recent publications on Buddhism and virtue ethics by Simon James and David Cooper which have advanced the subject considerably. See *Cooper, D.E. and S.P. James*, *Buddhism, virtue and environment*. Ashgate world philosophies series. 2005, Aldershot; Ashgate. James, S.P., *Zen Buddhism and environmental ethics*. Ashgate world philosophies series. 2004, Aldershot: Ashgate.

<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre A. *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond. *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p.6.

<sup>8</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* ii.6, 1106b36-1107a2. W.D.Ross (trans) Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1925.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Macmillan T. ‘Virtue-Based Ethics: A Comparison of Aristotelian-Thomistic and Buddhist Approaches.’ *Religion East and West* 2002(2):37-50.

<sup>10</sup> To these, Christianity added three more, the so-called ‘theological virtues’ of faith, hope, and charity.

<sup>11</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004:41.

<sup>12</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004:12.

<sup>13</sup> Macmillan TF. ‘Virtue-Based Ethics: A Comparison of Aristotelian-Thomistic and Buddhist approaches.’ *Religion East and West* 2002(2):37-50, p.42.

<sup>14</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004:15.

<sup>15</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004:42 slightly amended.

<sup>16</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004:17.

<sup>17</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004:17.

<sup>18</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004:42 slightly amended.

<sup>19</sup> Sahni P. *Environmental Ethics in Early Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*. PhD: University of London, 2004:13.

<sup>20</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p.42.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Visuddhimagga* I.20.

<sup>22</sup> For references see Keown D. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001:48-54.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Sahni P. *Environmental Ethics in Early Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*. PhD: University of London, 2004:186.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Sahni P. *Environmental Ethics in Early Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*. PhD: University of London, 2004:192.

<sup>25</sup> As Schmithausen has pointed out, many of the virtues such as *ahimsā* and *mettā* were directed towards individuals rather than species or eco-systems, which suggests that their original inspiration was non-ecological. However, this does not preclude these virtues taking on an ecological dimension now even if they have not done so far.

<sup>26</sup> Buddhist virtue ethics has, according to Whitehill, an advantage over its Western counterpart in being both biocentric and ecological. In Buddhist thought, he suggests, membership of the moral community extends beyond the human species, although I suggest below that its scope is not as broad as some imagine. See Whitehill J.

‘Buddhism and the Virtues.’ In: Keown D, ed. *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000: 17-36.

<sup>27</sup> Lovelock J. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Second ed. Oxford: OUP, 1987.

<sup>28</sup> As suggested by Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004:43

<sup>29</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p.42.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004: 66.

<sup>31</sup> Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p.73.

<sup>32</sup> The preceding arguments against seeing vegetarianism as a moral obligation are suggested by Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004:75.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. S.v.475; S.ii.263; A.i.35; M.iii.169. See Harvey P. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000:.29f.

<sup>34</sup> See Lafleur W. ‘Enlightenment for Plants and Trees’ in Kaza S, Kraft K. *Dharma Rain : sources of Buddhist environmentalism*. 1st ed. Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 2000:109-116.

<sup>35</sup> Introduction to Acharya Buddharakkhita’s translation of the *Dhammapada*.  
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/sutta/khuddaka/dhp1/index.html> Accessed 27 January 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Sahni P. *Environmental Ethics in Early Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*. PhD: University of London, 2004, p.214.