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human? Does taking genetic material from other organisms, or exploiting indigenous knowledge in order to produce patented pharmaceuticals, constitute breaching the second precept (i.e. not taking what is not given)? Others arguments appear more emotive, such as mice being genetically modified to produce human sperm. There is no doubt about how passionate the author is about GMOs.

The final two essays focus on digital media and how excessive use can change people in general and the young in particular: in extreme cases neurologically as well as in terms of behavioural development. Here as elsewhere in the book Epstein does present the positive side of advanced technology too, as well as addressing the argument that such technology itself is neutral but can be put to good or bad uses, comparable to firearms. To the latter arguments he asserts that the existence of a technology will predispose us to use it, and more than once quotes that ‘to a man with a hammer everything looks like a nail’ (a quotation that Epstein attributes to Abraham Maslow, in his 1966 The Psychology of Science (New York: Harper & Row), rather than Mark Twain). He argues that the way in which much of the internet, and social media in particular, is financed by advertising should be of particular concern to Buddhists. The concomitant fuelling of consumer desires — which are easily gratified online — serves to bind one further to saṃsāra. There is much more to these essays and I found this section of the book to be the most interesting. Internet years are like dogs’ years and anything written about the online world is prone to be out of date before it is published, but these essays are still relevant. However, Epstein’s tone appears alarmist in places and I detected a sense of generational distance between him and the young people about whose development he seems particularly concerned. In such places he appears to be addressing an audience of concerned parents who need to educate their children for their children’s own protection. If so, I am not certain how effective the approach is, as the horse may have bolted long before and digital natives are probably best understood on their own terms.

The same passages — often verbatim — are found in several of the essays (the hammer/nail quotation appears no fewer than three times), but that is perhaps not surprising given that they originated as public talks to different audiences. I found myself questioning this, but a non-academic reader might find the sense of ‘layering’ useful in easing themselves into a particular topic. By and large the essays are well-supported by footnotes and by Pali and Chinese canonical references — as well as insights from contemporary Buddhist masters — but not in every case. I wanted to read more about the ‘ancient Buddhist teaching’ that the earth itself is a great bodhisattva (p.14), but there was no accompanying reference. One of the geneticists quoted at length expresses his concern at the intermingling of DNA from prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells (p.94), but if we wish to understand what is getting him so exercised we have to put the book down and look it up ourselves. The book would also benefit from an index.

With the above in mind, Responsible Living is a thought-provoking and timely contribution to the literature on contemporary Buddhist Ethics. Although it appears
primarily aimed at a Buddhist readership it will offer insights to anyone with an interest in Buddhism and technology.