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Book Review

Johan Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), xiii + 176pp., $55.00 (cloth), ISBN: 9780812251838.

Among the common ways an academic writer might promote a research project, or pitch a book proposal to a publisher, is to frame it in terms of debunking established myths or challenging conventional understanding about a particular topic or issue. The new book is thus presented as an overdue reassessment of popular imagining or received wisdom about the main subject matter, serving as a necessary corrective to historical misinterpretations, unexamined assumptions, or unduly romanticized renderings. If that can also be connected to important issues of contemporary relevance or pressing urgency—such as war, violence, racism, or environmental destruction—all the better, as the new book might thereby receive greater attention, possibly beyond the confines of a narrow academic milieu.

At times, this kind of conceptual and narrative framing can result in groundbreaking studies that greatly enhance our understanding of important topics or developments, with both historical and present-day relevance. However, at times the drive to come up with a radically new interpretation or showcase a creative scholarly acumen, in a way that involves the debunking of normative viewpoints or established narratives, can lead to less successful results. In somewhat extreme cases, a novel interpretation can create a newfangled assessment or storyline that is even more one-sided and distorted than the conventional understanding of the topic at hand. Accordingly, what might have been meant to serve as an opportune corrective of entrenched views can turn into an alternative paradigm that is even further removed from reality than the one it tries to displace, or can set up various kinds of superfluous obfuscations or distortions.

In his latest book, Johan Elverskog applies this kind of approach, especially common in American academia, to the oft-mentioned intersections of Buddhism and environmentalism. Specifically, he argues against a popular representation of Buddhism as an environmentally friendly religion, which wrongly postulates that Buddhism is intrinsically aligned with pressing ecological concerns. Instead, he depicts Buddhism as a religious and political system that is principally concerned with wealth creation, primarily achieved via the exploitation of human and natural resources, with devastating consequences for the environment. Thereby, he aims at debunking an important facet of contemporary (mis)representations of the religion, which supposedly give naïve, one-dimensional, or overly romanticized spins on key aspects of its historical record and contemporary predicament, or misconstrue some of its basic ideas and proclivities. Notwithstanding the occasional caveats and qualifications noted in the book, the end result comes across as a wholesale indictment of Buddhism. The overly negative assessment of Buddhism goes well

beyond a putative expose of its negative impact on the natural environment, which is highlighted as a central theme in the environmental history of Asia.

The basic idea of the book resonates with the author's youthful experience of great disappointment and consternation, when he first discovered firsthand that the actual Buddhism existing in contemporary Asia is at variance with what he assumed the religion to be all about. That is an experience that I—and presumably many others—can readily relate to. In his case, that was especially related to his preconceived notions about Buddhism as a religion that is in tune with progressive sensibilities about the natural environment, including those put forward by proponents of deep ecology. That kind of shallow understanding, in turn, is a subset of modern constructions of Buddhism as a religion that is uniquely in tune with key facets of modernity, including rationalism, scientific thinking, egalitarianism, and progressive politics.

The book is fairly succinct, its main body consisting of only 130 pages, with quite a bit of that space taken by pertinent illustrations (plus 69 pages of notes). The writing is good, and while the author presents a wealth of historical data and analysis, the main lines of argument are presented with clarity and are easy to follow. The book mostly focuses on the first two millennia of Buddhist history: from the time of the Buddha until around 1500 CE, with scattered references to modern concerns and happenstances. By and large, Elverskog challenges the prevalent Eurocentric paradigm, which still tends to dominate the writing of economic and religious history. He rightly points to the importance of writing a comprehensive environmental history of Asia, in which Buddhism plays a central role, although perhaps not nearly as primary and impactful as presented by him.

The book is divided into two parts, each comprising of five short chapters. The first part is a survey of early Buddhist outlooks and teachings, with a focus on key ideas and attitudes that influenced various forms of ecological exploitation. It starts with the life story of the Buddha and an outline of his teachings, in which the Buddha is depicted as a supporter of the new market economy that emerged in India. Ignoring the embrace of monastic poverty by the Buddha and his followers, we are told that such an economic outlook entailed a positive view of wealth as a sign of virtue, and poverty as an indication of moral failure.

This kind of prosperity gospel purportedly found an especially receptive audience among the urban-based elite, especially the merchant classes, which in Elverskog's retelling of Buddhist history for the most part replace the monastic renunciates as the main representatives of Buddhism. The first part of the book also briefly notes some of the key developments and paradigm shifts within Buddhism, such as the emergence of Mahāyāna, the (limited) promotion of vegetarianism, and the Buddhist involvement in the political and social spheres. Throughout his somewhat truncated discussion of all these issues, the author always ends up relating virtually all major developments within Buddhism to an overriding concern with the acquisition of wealth, and the attendant procurement of power and status. That directly leads to a commodified view of the natural world, as something to be exploited rather than cherished and protected.

In the second part of the book, the author presents a historical overview of the manifold actions undertaken by Buddhists over the centuries, under the impact of their deleterious ideology. These actions involved an unrelenting and exploitative push for control of people and resources, with a host of negative impacts on the environment, including commodification, agricultural expansion, deforestation, and urbanization. Chapter 6 provides a brief survey of the spread of Buddhism across Asia, framed around a highly problematic assumption that 'Buddhist Asia' can be

viewed as a unified space, brought together by the social system of Buddhism. At the core of that imagined system, according to the author, was a relentless drive for expansion into the commodity frontier, the main topic of Chapter 7. In the final three chapters, the discussion covers the putative role of Buddhism in agricultural expansion, urbanization, and landscape alteration, all of which are subjected to harsh—and for the most part decontextualized and somewhat one-sided—critiques.

At its core, Elverskog's main line of argument aims at invalidating a supposedly prevalent view of Buddhism as a religion that is in tune with ecological sensibilities and principles. To some degree, he has a valid point, but that also involves the attacking of a straw man, inasmuch as most well-informed scholars in Buddhist studies don't subscribe to the view of Buddhism as an eco-friendly religion, or show much interest in exploring the intersections between Buddhism and environmentalism. Even perfunctory knowledge of the relevant historical records, or passing familiarity with the present-day realities of countries where Buddhism is a dominant religion, clearly indicate that ecological consciousness—as presently constructed or understood—has not been on the radar of most Buddhists through their tradition's long and convoluted history. There are exceptions, of course, such as the ecological concerns expressed by some contemporary Buddhists, which can be used as a basis for creating a more positive view of the potentially fecund junctures between Buddhism and ecology.

Accordingly, it strikes me as a bit unfair to critique individuals and communities that existed centuries ago for not sharing our ideas and concerns, especially about what is essentially a present-day exigency, namely the ecological catastrophe we are all facing at this point in time. People in ancient India, to give but one example, had very different demographic profiles and lived in vastly different environments, where large scale ecological disaster was not a principal concern. Accordingly, their attitudes about expanding agriculture to feed themselves, or create cities where different civilizational patterns could take hold, cannot in reality be equated with the depressing myopia, short-sighted policies, and existential environmental crisis we face today. So yes, of course, ancient Buddhists, like other people living in premodern times, were not environmentalists in the modern sense. Nor did they ascribe to progressive political outlooks, along the line of those embraced by those on the left. But why should we expect them to be like (some of) us, given the vastly different economic, social, and ecological predicaments they had to content with?

We can of course criticize Buddhists, past and present, for a number of things. However, I am not sure we can so readily isolate them and their religion as key culprits in the discussion of this kind of large historical trajectories, especially in reference to the kinds of shortsightedness and destructive behaviors that are imputed to them throughout the book. Even more so when such overly generalized critiques are made the basis of selective uses or one-sided interpretations of the extant evidence, which tends to result in exceedingly broad characterizations that are not applicable to many times and places. That bring us to a related problem with the inexact and partial characterization of Buddhists as environmental villains. Who are we exactly talking about when we use the label 'Buddhists'? I suppose monastics can be placed in that general category, but such vague labeling becomes more dicey when the discussion focuses on the laity, which is mostly the case throughout the book.

In some parts of Asia, such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, we might be able to talk about predominantly Buddhist populations. However, in vast areas of Asia, such as China and other parts of East Asia, that label cannot be applied so freely, given that much of the population, including those who worship at Buddhist temples, tend to have much more complex or multilayered religious identities, which also overlap

with other kinds of identities. Usually that includes wide-ranging engagements with other cultural and religious traditions—such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto—as well as with a host of popular beliefs and practices that are widely diffused among the general population. That being the case, we can hardly talk about Buddhist populaces or Buddhist nations, except perhaps in the most general terms.

Given these complexities, I cannot see how we can so readily ascribe Buddhist ideology as the main driver behind multifaceted patterns of action that directly impinge on the natural environment, especially if they are primarily driven by economic, social, or political concerns. Yes, Max Weber might have made a valid point about the importance of taking religious ideas seriously, but we need not push that line of argument too far or apply it indiscriminately. That is especially the case in the context of large empires with strong centralized states such as China, where other factors were always much more important, even during the periods of great flourishing of Buddhism. There, Buddhist agency was always restricted or circumscribed, as Buddhist institutions were subordinate to an authoritarian state and its bureaucratic apparatus. Consequently, putting a major blame on Buddhism for general policies that involved environmentally-related matters such as agricultural expansion and urbanization is really widely off the mark, even if we can find examples of Buddhist communities that were engaged in actions that had negative environmental impact. A somewhat analogous situation also occurred in ancient India, where Buddhists had to contend with an intrenched Brahmanical establishment, as well as other centers of secular and religious power.

The situation becomes even more dicey when the author writes about Buddhist polities or Buddhist cultures, which according to him were directly involved in and primarily responsible for environmental destruction. To some degree, that might apply to states that can be deemed to be Buddhist, such as traditional (pre-communist) Tibet, which can be viewed as an isolated case of a Buddhist theocracy of sorts. But even in such instances, there are other factors besides Buddhist 'ideology' at play. Consequently, the exact structure and flow of causal relationships tends to be difficult to ascertain or map clearly. In a contemporary context, we can observe that in predominantly Buddhist nations such as Thailand. While the majority of Thais might identify themselves as Buddhists, the religion is not really a dominant factor in agricultural, industrial, or environmental policy, especially at the central governmental level. The same is even more true of Japan and Korea, where Buddhist impact on environmental practices tends to be minimal, not to mention China, where the Buddhist influence is nil. Furthermore, at times, when within certain Buddhist milieus there are some conscious efforts toward an environmental involvement, that increasingly goes in a positive direction.

It is a bit disappointing that many of the examples presented in the book of state-initiated policies and activities, which had negative environmental consequences, were not really undertaken by polities that can be characterized as 'Buddhist', in any meaningful sense. As already noted, that certainly applies to pretty much all the Chinese states that rose and fell over the last two millennia, even those that expended generous patronage to the Buddhist Sangha. That brings us to another problem with the book: its lack of sufficient data to support many of its expansive claims or assertions, and the selective or problematic use of specific data points, which are treated as instances of reliable historical evidence that supports the author's predetermined perspective. While for reasons of space I cannot go into too many details, below I give several pertinent examples of this tendency.

For instance, there is an offhand critique of 'Buddhist urbanization', which supposedly had immensely negative impact on the environment in ancient India, during

the third century BCE, under the Mauryan empire. Under the rule of Chandragupta (r. 321–297? BCE), the empire's capital Pataliputra was supposedly the largest city in the world. Cities everywhere occupy lots of land and require sizable resources for their construction and continuance. However, what are the alternatives to the ubiquitous—and presumably inevitable—process of urbanization? Is it also self-evident that urbanization almost always needs to be viewed in a negative light, or judged from a contemporary perspective? More importantly, in this particular episode in Indian history, it is unclear what any of that has to do with Buddhism. Chandragupta was definitely not a Buddhist, and the same can be said of Chanakya (375–283 BCE), his principal advisor, who is celebrated as one of the great philosophers, political theorists, and jurists of ancient India. In fact, the emperor is said to have renounced his throne to become a Jain monk toward the end of his life. In the same vein, his empire can hardly be characterized as being Buddhist, so it is unclear how this sort of evidence adds to the overarching (and overwrought) critique of Buddhism as an eco-unfriendly religion.

Similarly, the author takes to task the 'Buddhist urban elites' in Mathura during the early centuries of the common era for their consumption needs, although it is not at all clear to what degree the local elites were actually Buddhist, and in which way the situation would have been different if there were no Buddhists in the city. Did the urban population growth really have that much to do with the putative prosperity gospel of Buddhism, or what is driven by a host of other factors? The same applies to the problematic discussion of Nanjing (Jiankang), which became the capital of the Sui dynasty (581–618) after it reunified China. While the first Sui emperor was a patron of Buddhism and there were a number of Buddhist monasteries in the city, China already had a very long history of urban planning and capital construction, which predated the introduction of Buddhism. Simply put, the notion that Buddhist monks and 'Buddhist traders' were key agents in Nanjing's urbanization is simply not true.

Furthermore, the Chinese capitals of Sui and the succeeding Tang dynasty (618–907) had numerous Daoist abbeys; by the late seventh century, there were also Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, and Manichaean temples. On the whole, there was hardly anything uniquely—or even remotely—Buddhist about commence, urbanization, agriculture, and forestry during this period in Chinese history, even though Buddhism was a central part of the religious landscape. That is not to say that Buddhists were not implicated in these general processes. But so was everybody else, and the primarily actor was the authoritarian state and its spawning bureaucracy, which were primarily based on Confucian and legalist principles.

The basic line of argument, deployed in much of the book, is that if there were patterns of human activity that had detrimental effects on the natural environment in areas with substantial Buddhist populations, Buddhism must be a major culprit. That tends to be the case even though the discussion revolves around basic factors that shaped the development of human civilization throughout the world, such as agricultural expansion, deforestation, and urbanization. The author also tends to make too much out of references to agriculture that are scattered throughout the Buddhist canon. For the most part, the passages cited are not really about the Buddha's supposed advocacy of agriculture per se, but about illustrating various points of Buddhist teachings and practices. Ancient Buddhists lived in agricultural societies, so it is not surprising that they used images and similes based on the immediate world that surrounded them. If such texts were written now, perhaps they would feature references to computers, satellites, and smartphones, but that can hardly be taken as a sign that Buddhism is behind the kinds of technological

developments and consumerist attitudes that drive much of present-day culture and society.

Notwithstanding the caveats and issues raised above, the author makes a partially valid point about the basic problem of identifying Buddhism as an explicitly eco-friendly religion, as judged by the actions of its followers. However, he is on less firm ground when it comes to his overly one-dimensional and generalized explanation of the core ideas and attitudes that were/are behind those patterns of action. As already noted, in very broad brushstrokes, he characterizes Buddhist teachings as a prominent form of prosperity theology, at the core of which is an overriding concern with wealth generation. That is further connected with a penchant for empire building, which inevitably leads to the exploitation of people and natural resources.

This kind of preoccupation with wealth, according to the book, is not an innocuous element within a larger doctrinal or soteriological system. Rather, it is the central elements of the whole edifice of Buddhism, in which the generation and possession of material wealth is seen as a sign of positive karma. It was precisely this kind of attitude—rather than Buddhist ideas about solitude, compassion, meditation, nonduality, and the like—that supposedly spearheaded the success of Buddhism as a missionary religion, with highly disruptive and negative consequences for the environment. An especially troublesome part of that protracted process, according to the author, was the wanton exploitation of natural resources on the commodity frontier, undertaken by the monks, the laity, and the Buddhist state. The basic problem with this exceedingly broad and one-sided characterization of the Buddha's teachings is that is it false. It involves a highly cynical and largely misleading reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrine and worldview, which neglects core aspects of the tradition's beliefs, values, and practices.

I don't have space to describe the main philosophical and soteriological frameworks that configure the major mappings of the Buddhist path(s) of spiritual practice and realization, which at any rate are discussed in many publications. But surely Buddhist teachings, as conveyed in canonical texts and transmitted by cumulative traditions, have something to do with renunciation, detachment, compassion, transcendence, and liberation, among other things. Admittedly, there is a range of possible readings and interpretations of canonical literature, but the one proposed by the author will hardly be recognizable to both Buddhists and informed external observers. That is not to say that there are not many historical and contemporary examples of monks being obsessed with money and power, or lay persons behaving in questionable ways. However, such examples of Buddhist ignorance and greed can perhaps more readily be explained as failures to abide by (supposedly) professed ideals, rather than by the problematic notion of Buddhism being an insufferable form of prosperity gospel.

While I admire the author's effort, in light of the above-mentioned concerns and qualifications, I find the book to have serious problems and cannot quite recommend it. Nevertheless, I commend him for his attempt at tackling this important but thorny topic, especially given the pioneering nature of the scholarly endeavor introduced in the book. As he rightly points out, writing a comprehensive environmental history of Asia is a worthy undertaking, as is the study of the intersections between Buddhism and environmentalism. For time being, however, it seems that a more prudent approach might be to engage in a series of small-scale and in-depth studies, which provide nuanced analysis and are based on prudent use of all extant evidence. When there are enough of them, then perhaps it will be possible to write a comprehensive and reliable environmental history, which goes beyond the

limitations of the present study. In meantime, we can be grateful to Elverskog for initiating a discussion on this fascinating topic.

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