

***The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia.* By Johan Elverskog. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. XIII, 176 pages. \$55.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0812251838.**

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Johan Elverskog's *The Buddha's Footprint* is a scathing rebuttal to the popular reception of Buddhism as an eco-friendly, inherently green religious tradition. Through a close interpretive reading of particular points of the Buddhist textual canon and a detailed analysis of historical documents from Buddhist Asia, Elverskog refutes the Eco-Buddhist claim that the Buddhist tradition has *historically* been a positive force for environmental wellbeing. He summarizes his book's argument quite well in the conclusion, stating: "Inspired by the Dharma's prosperity theology, Buddhists were protocapitalists who exploited the natural world relentlessly as they pushed into the frontier" (p. 115). In arguing this position, Elverskog finds himself working against a long-established belief stemming from Max Weber that Buddhism (and Buddhist Asia) lacks "economic rationalism and rational life methodology," which makes it "apolitical" and "otherworldly" (p. 39), a belief that underpins the contemporary Eco-Buddhist worldview. Nonetheless, he crafts a solid argument against this tradition of thought and highlights the main religious roots, socio-cultural developments, and ecological consequences of Buddhism's protocapitalist prosperity theology.

Elverskog begins his book with a story of him encountering backpacks made of snow-leopard skin in Bhutan and the shock and disconnect from realizing that Buddhists could so callously own bags "made from one of the most endangered animals on the planet" (p. ix). I expect many Western Buddhists (and scholars of Buddhism) to have similar reactions to this book as Elverskog did those backpacks. Despite scholars such as the late Ian Harris slowly chipping away at the normative

green Buddhist position, it has still remained the default way in which Buddhism is seen in Europe and the United States. Thus, coming into contact with this well-researched and well-written account of the environmental destruction committed by Buddhist cultures throughout history may similarly result in shock in Eco-Buddhism's proponents. That said, there are many omissions with which those familiar with green Buddhism might take issue and, given that this book runs at a short 120 pages, the lack of depth on certain topics can at times be frustrating. These positives and negatives will be explored in the chapter summaries that follow.

The book is split into two halves, "What the Buddha Taught" and "What Buddhists Did," each with five chapters. Chapter 1 gives a very basic presentation of the origins of the Buddhist tradition in the figure of Siddhartha Gautama, outlines some of the textual sources for Buddhism's "prosperity theology" such as the *Milindapañhā*, and looks at how Buddhism positioned itself towards the interests of the merchant class by making an explicit connection between merit and wealth (p. 49). These points underpin this chapter's argument that rather than being perceived as a radical for his rejection of the caste system or anticipating the class critiques of Marx, the Buddha's radical progressivism lied in his call to "leave the farm, the family, and the old traditions behind, to move into the city, and to create a new religious identity within the world of commerce" and that, in Buddhist Asia, "one's status came to be defined solely by one's wealth" (pp. 17, 19).

Chapter 2, "Buddhism(s)," outlines some of the basic religious, philosophical, and practical developments of the Buddhist tradition post-Śākyamuni Buddha. It includes some interesting explanations for how the various schools of Buddhism each encouraged a relationship between the protocapitalist laity and the monastic "field of merit" and how this led to a broader positive valuation of wealth. However, while environmental historians who have little experience with Buddhism might find this chapter useful, scholars of Buddhism (and Buddhists of each of the three vehicles) may rightfully take issue with some of Elverskog's presentation. For example, he introduces Theravāda Buddhism (and the other early schools of Buddhism) as "Hinayana" and says that the Mahāyāna "held that these Buddhists had misunderstood the Buddha's true teaching" without actually taking up any defense of the Theravāda. This kind of pejorative presentation (rejected

by contemporary Mahāyāna Buddhists such as Geshe Lhakdor<sup>1</sup>) is all the more curious given how he quickly reverts to calling this early tradition “Nikaya Buddhism” for the duration of the book. Furthermore, there are two separate instances where Elverskog claims that Mahāyāna Buddhists came to view the Buddha as a “god,” which, as the scholar of Buddhism knows, is simply untrue. Buddhism has a specific word and cosmological understanding of a “god” (Skt. *deva*; Tib. *lha*), and while using the word “god” to denote a celestial being who is able to intercede in the affairs of humans might be a useful framing for environmental historians who lack any previous understanding of Buddhism, it is still a gross misrepresentation. Finally, Elverskog writes that tantra has “long been declared an abomination” because of its “ostensible transgressions,” an incredibly loaded claim, and his citation for this simply reads: “On the popular views of tantra, see Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion...*” (pp. 29, 134). He goes on to contradict this position and rightly notes that, rather than abiding on the peripheries of society as “abominations,” *tantrikas* were welcomed in the royal courts of India. This begs the question: Who is decrying tantra as “abominable”? The answer (according to his Urban citation): the Christian public.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore unclear why Elverskog made this claim in the first place. Given how this book is attempting to dispel mistaken Western notions of Buddhist history, it is unfortunate that he perpetuates a colonial Christian narrative of tantra as an abomination or a bastardization of an early tradition.

Chapter 3, “Buddhists,” takes up the phenomenon of Buddhist vegetarianism as a means to distinguish between monastic Buddhism, lay Buddhism, and Buddhism at the level of the state. Elverskog writes that “linking Buddhism so closely to monks perpetuates ahistorical normative claims about Buddhism and obscures lived history” and that we must “turn our attention to how the very architecture of the Dharma sustained a system of exploitation on the commodity frontier” (p. 38).

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1. For example, Geshe Lhakdor not only rejects the Hīnayāna as derogatory but also uses the term *bodhisattvayāna* instead of Mahāyāna because the latter implies that it is greater than the Theravāda. This discussion begins at 16:08 in the following video: Geshe Lhakdor, “Positive Mental Attitude—A Key to Happiness,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (11 Nov. 2019).

2. Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

Making a clear distinction between these categories of Buddhists is important, but his choice to use the topic of vegetarianism to make this point seems a little forced. Yes, it makes sense to dispel another normative Eco-Buddhist position (that all Buddhists are vegetarian) during this larger argument, but the topic is much more complicated than Elverskog's treatment here. He writes that vegetarianism is a "late" or "wholly modern" development of Buddhism that erases "much of Buddhist history" (p. 37). But this in itself is an erasure of the many individuals, texts, and traditions that indeed espoused vegetarianism as a Buddhist ideal throughout history.<sup>3</sup> Large swathes of the pre-modern Buddhist world *were* vegetarian, and while he is right to note that the many contemporary interpretations of Buddhist vegetarianism do not mean "that all Buddhists have historically been vegetarian," *many were* (p. 37). Yet instead of treating vegetarianism as he does Eco-Buddhism, through an analysis of its textual sources in the *Laṅkāvatāra* and *Mahāparinirvāṇa* sūtras and looking at how this impacted (or failed to impact) Buddhist cultures, he dismisses even the widespread Chinese Buddhist vegetarian tradition on the grounds that Emperor Wu's (the head of the Buddhist state) embrace of vegetarianism did not affect the larger Buddhist community and that Chinese monastics only embraced the practice as a means to assuage the effects famine (p. 34). Ultimately, this discussion comes across as a missed opportunity for engaging a rich aspect of Buddhist history, and this outright dismissal of Buddhist vegetarianism weakens the authority of his overall argument.

Chapters 4 and 5, on "Wealth" and "Consumption" respectively, turn more closely towards the material concerns of the Buddhist state and laity, and it is here that Elverskog's historical approach to Buddhism and the environment begins to take on weight. In chapter 4, Elverskog starts to directly address Weber's claim that Buddhists had "a disinterest in material power" and makes a strong, historically validated argument that the idea of *anātman* "radically challenged both

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3. Such as the many scholars in Tibet who supported this tradition and encouraged vegetarianism in their monasteries, and the requirement of vegetarianism for Chinese monastics that Elverskog dismisses as unimportant. For examples of the former, see Geoffrey Barstow, ed., *The Faults of Meat: Tibetan Buddhist Writings on Vegetarianism* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2019).

the standing social order... and the possibility of wealth production” (pp. 39, 45). In direct opposition to Weber, Elverskog makes a cogent argument equating Christian and Buddhist effects on the economy, stating: “As Christian prosperity theology today legitimates the neo-liberal order, the Dharma legitimated the marketization of society in early India through the concept of *anatman*. And as the Dharma spread, these market-based ideas were institutionalized across Asia” (p. 48).

Chapter 5 builds on this idea and looks at how other points of Buddhist scripture not only lacked any concern for the natural state of the environment but *actively supported its manipulation*. The support for this position rests largely in passages that use analogy or are highly interpretable, and hence there is room in this chapter for some disagreement with respect to how these should be read. However, Elverskog presents a good amount of corroborative historical material to support his argument and looks not at how these passages *can* be read, but how they *have* been read throughout Buddhist Asia’s history. In doing so, he shows how Buddhism laid the foundation for the kind of consumption patterns that supported a broad extractive economy and environmental degradation. In short, Elverskog shows that “contrary to popular notions, the Dharma did not enshrine or promote the protection of nature,” but instead “promoted the exploitation of nature for economic and societal ends” (p. 59).

The second half of the book, “What Buddhists Did,” opens with chapter 6, which looks at “The Spread of Buddhism.” Here, Elverskog gives a concise account of how the Buddhist tradition spread along trade routes and provides accompanying maps and timelines to give those unfamiliar with Buddhist history a good primer before looking at the specific socio-economic developments of Buddhist Asia that are developed in the proceeding chapters. After this is established, chapter 7 continues to look at how “the success of the Dharma was intimately connected to the expansion of the market economy” in the context of “The Commodity Frontier” (p. 75). Elverskog explains how Buddhists not only played a major role in monetizing the Asian economy, but also held a willingness “to exploit not only the natural world for monetary gain but also the people who lived in proximity to the resources” (p. 76). This willingness led to a largescale colonizing project in which the resources of the economic periphery were taken from those in the area on the grounds that the humans on the periphery were “inhuman

beasts” for not acting in harmony with the dharma, which even led to resource wars in certain cases (p. 78).

Chapter 8, “Agricultural Expansion,” looks at how the Buddha’s preference for “the beauty of the human manipulation of nature” over “the beauty of nature” itself resulted in massive agricultural development across Buddhist Asia (p. 85). It looks at some of the historical consequences of this preoccupation with agriculture, such as the use of slave labor in monastic agricultural projects (p. 89), and gives an interesting account of how irrigation technologies spread alongside the dharma, giving Buddhism a material basis for religious expansion. It ends with another comparison to European colonialism and argues that similar to the “Columbian Exchange,” we can think about a “Buddhist exchange” wherein the cultivation and trade of rice, sugar, cotton, and tea had “earth-shattering environmental consequences” for Buddhist Asia (p. 101).

Chapter 9 gives a very brief account of how, alongside agricultural expansion and the commodification of the frontier, urbanization played a key role in the success of Buddhism across Asia (p. 99). It looks at some of the numbers of monasteries and monastics in city-centers in Asia’s history and conducts a brief mathematical exercise to determine the resources necessary for sustaining such a monastic population. And while it is clear that urbanization was supported by romantic notions of cities found in texts such as the *Cakkavatti-sihanāda-sutta*, what is not clear is the cause-effect relationship between Buddhism and urbanization. Elverskog writes that the number of resources necessary for sustaining a city such as Pataliputra, the largest city in the world in third century BCE, indicates that “the environmental impact of Buddhist urbanization was immense” (p. 103). It is not evident, however, whether there were intrinsic religious motivations for this broader social drive to urbanize or if Buddhism was a secondary force in this process. Nonetheless, this drive towards urbanization certainly existed in Buddhist Asia, and this contributed to an extractive economy and the degradation of the natural world.

The final chapter of the book, “The Buddhist Landscape,” presents a solid discussion of how “Buddhists and the Dharma were the sole driving force in one sphere of activity: the politics of landscape” (p. 108). In short, Buddhists constructed monasteries, temples, and *stūpas* across Buddhist Asia, which drastically altered the surrounding landscapes and social realities. Through constructing these buildings, not

only was the landscape changed symbolically (through new social and religious associations), but also *physically* due to the vast amounts of exotic woods, gold, and so forth required to construct these buildings properly.

Overall, Elverskog builds a compelling argument through each of these chapters that questions the historicity of the Eco-Buddhist paradigm. His book does well to show that Eco-Buddhism is a novel, contemporary development of the Buddhist tradition that lacks strong historical precedent in Buddhist Asia. Rather than call for the preservation of the natural world, Buddhist texts, communities, and the state all actively encouraged the exploitation of the environment in the pursuit of wealth and consumption. Elverskog's portrayal of the Buddhist "prosperity theology" brings attention to some often-overlooked ideals in Buddhist texts and paints a thought-provoking picture of the environmental history of Buddhist Asia as one not dissimilar to Protestant northern Europe. As a result, he certainly accomplishes the goal he set for the book, "to reveal how Buddhists acted in the world and how their actions have shaped the environmental history of Asia" (p. 8).

That said, scholars familiar with the topic may take issue with particular aspects of *The Buddha's Footprint*. The earlier criticisms of chapters 2 and 3 are but two examples of issues that seem inconsequential but ultimately detract from the authority of this text. The book would be greatly strengthened by addressing some of the counterpoints to his historical narrative in order to paint a more nuanced portrait of Buddhism's relationship with the environment and nonhuman animals. Take, for instance, the discussion of *ahimsā* and animal rights in chapter 7. While Elverskog presents an interesting take on how *ahimsā* and animal rights were used to justify human exploitation, he neglects to look at the historical trends of animal rights *for their own sake* and the interesting histories of vegetarianism that have been explored recently by scholars such as Geoffrey Barstow.<sup>4</sup> This counterpoint is perhaps an exception to the broader trend, but even if it were included to subsequently be refuted it would help strengthen his overall argument. Omissions or simplifications are perhaps necessary while writing for popular audiences, but this is an academic work for

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4. See Geoffrey Barstow, *Food of Sinful Demons: Meat, Vegetarianism, and the Limits of Buddhism in Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).



academic audiences. One would therefore expect it to be comprehensive and accurately present all relevant information in order to make the strongest argument possible. The book is short at 120 pages, so these omissions are frequent and somewhat obvious to those familiar with the topic and take away from what is otherwise a strong piece of academic work.

These gaps in the text likely arise due to the scope of Elverskog's project. In the introduction Elverskog writes that he does not want to focus on the actions of "Indians," "Laotians," or "Japanese" but "the actions of *Buddhists*, who, following the Dharma, felt fully justified in exploiting the natural world toward religious ends" (p. 6). This blanket categorization of pre-modern Asia as "Buddhist" and the treatment of this category as a universal makes it difficult for *The Buddha's Footprint* to present a highly nuanced historical analysis. Further, while he couches his work in Max Weber's notion that "religious ideas drive human action" (p. 3), the idea of a "Buddhist Asia" overlooks the ways in which Buddhist countries differed from each other, often in significant ways. India was not just Buddhist; it was also Hindu, Jain, Sikh, and so forth. China was not just Buddhist; it was Daoist and Confucian. Similarly, wherever Buddhism went geographically, it was met with different socio-political structures that affected the material culture and economic model (extractive or otherwise) in various ways. Elverskog's work to show the textual roots and material consequences of Buddhism's "prosperity theology" is quite brilliant, but painting all of Buddhist Asia with a single brush detracts from the strength of the overall argument. That said, this is not an excuse to dismiss Elverskog's work (far from it) but a call for further research to be done on the ways in which extractive logics of *particular* Buddhist traditions in *specific* geographical locations have shaped the environmental history of Asia through its "prosperity theology." Elverskog has laid very solid foundations for future scholars to look at individual Buddhist cultures and analyze the historical effects of the tradition on the environment in more nuanced ways.

So, where does this leave Eco-Buddhism? In the preface, Elverskog writes: "We need a better understanding of the Buddhist tradition's historical relation to the natural world in order to make as powerful an argument as possible about future possibilities" (p. xiii). *The Buddha's Footprint* provides such an understanding and can serve as a critical whetstone for Eco-Buddhism to sharpen its philosophical and practical



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tools. As Elverskog notes in his conclusion, “Buddhism has changed, and it is having a positive environmental impact in the world today” (p. 119). Rather than refute Eco-Buddhist positions, Elverskog’s work provides a useful foil for it and sheds some light on the extent of this change. Despite the initial shock of encountering Buddhism’s environmental historical reality, those ecologically concerned Buddhists who read this book will inevitably be hopeful for the current direction of contemporary Buddhism.

