

BOOK REVIEWS

Roaming Free Like a Deer: Buddhism and the Natural World. By Daniel Capper. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022. 289 pages. Paperback. ISBN-13: 978-1-5017-6196-6.

REIKO OHNUMA

Daniel Capper's *Roaming Free Like a Deer: Buddhism and the Natural World* offers a highly accessible, clearly written, synthetic account of Buddhism's relationship to the natural world across seven cultural zones: India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, Japan, Tibet, and the West. While it does not offer any substantively new or original research, it does offer a highly readable account informed by a wealth of secondary sources from both Buddhist studies and environmental studies. Moreover, although it deals with a wide variety of cultural contexts and diverse Buddhist phenomena, it successfully brings them together through the use of a consistent set of interpretive frameworks and thematic focal points that allow for easy comparison between different cultures. This is the book's greatest strength, making it ideal for undergraduate courses on Buddhism and the environment, Buddhism and nature, or Buddhism and animals.

The book is divided into an introduction, eight chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction, the author first cites two major shortcomings of the existing literature on Buddhism and the environment that the book hopes to improve upon. The first is that "a great number of environmentalist writings investigate Buddhist approaches to nonhuman nature primarily in terms of the ideals of the tradition, thereby overlooking some rather serious real-world limitations" (p. 3). In contrast, Capper aims to investigate "the material lives of Buddhists" (p. 4) and the "lived world of Buddhism" (p. 5) in order to illuminate not only the eco-friendly ideals of Buddhism but also some of their real-world, practical limitations. A second shortcoming of the existing literature is the multiplicity of Buddhist contexts and phenomena focused upon and the lack of any critical framework for comparing them to each other. The remainder of the introduction introduces the theoretical concepts and categories that the book will use to offer such a critical, comparative framework.

The book's standard of measurement for determining an environmental strength, for example, is whether or not it contributes to a "sustainable biosphere" (as described by the environmental ethicist Holmes Rolston) in terms of "meeting the needs of both

humans and nonhumans today while not sacrificing their systemic ecological needs of tomorrow” (p. 9). Importantly, this is an ethic that is “ecocentric” rather than anthropocentric or biocentric, extending ethical consideration not only to humans and animals, but also to abiotic elements of the environment such as stones, rivers, mountains, and gases. A second crucial concept is that of “relational animism” (explored more fully in ch. 1), a phenomenon in which personhood and agency are attributed to various nonhuman elements of nature, which exist in relationship and community with human beings. The instances in which Buddhists either attribute or decline to attribute personhood to various nonhuman elements of nature is one of the main points of comparison throughout the remainder of the book. Finally, in addition to these two foundational concepts, the introduction also lays out “three touchpoints for ecological comparison” that reappear in every cultural context treated throughout the book: (1) Buddhist views on vegetarianism; (2) the practice of religion by animals and other nonhuman elements of nature; and (3) the phenomenon of “nature mysticism,” here defined as “a powerful experience of oneness of the human and the nonhuman . . . in an altered state of consciousness experience that transcends both time and space” (p. 16). By grounding the subsequent chapters in this shared set of concepts, the book succeeds in offering a holistic discussion rather than a set of unrelated case studies.

Chapter 1 further lays the groundwork for the ensuing chapters by expanding upon the notion of “relational animism.” Here, the author first draws a distinction between older and newer conceptions of animism: the older conception (propounded by Edward Tylor and James Frazer) posited animism as a form of indigenous belief in the *souls* of individual creatures (including animals, plants, and other elements of nature). This is distinct from the more recent phenomenon of “New Animism,” which avoids the idea of individual souls and instead defines animism *relationally* in terms of living within a community of human and nonhuman “persons” and recognizing each “person’s” own specific form of agency. Because it avoids the notion of individual souls and instead emphasizes persons existing in relationships, this newer conception of animism is more compatible with the Buddhist ideas of no-self (*anatta*) and dependent arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), making it possible for us to speak about instances of “Buddhist animism.” Having laid out the possibility of a truly Buddhist animism, the second half of chapter 1 then discusses one of the major limitations upon Buddhism’s ability to grant personhood to nonhuman elements of nature: its system of karma and rebirth. This system strongly asserts the superiority of a human rebirth (since only human beings are capable of attaining the ultimate goal of nirvana) and thus leads to a general attitude of human exceptionalism. Perhaps even more importantly, this system also draws a sharp dividing line between sentient and insentient beings. Thus, whereas human beings and animals are brought together by both being sentient beings who transmigrate, other elements of nature (such as plants, rocks, and water)—being

insentient and nontransmigrating—seem to constitute nothing more than a “spiritually inert backdrop” (p. 32) or the “overlooked furniture of Buddhist existence” (p. 33). As a result, “personhood attitudes toward animals far outnumber personhood attitudes toward other nonhuman entities” (p. 35)—a tendency that gives Buddhist thought a powerfully biocentric bias that is inconsistent with the type of environmental ethic needed to tackle twenty-first-century challenges such as climate change. This biocentric bias will become one of the major themes in later chapters of the book.

Chapter 2, the last of the introductory chapters, focuses upon India but limits itself to a consideration of the roles played by animals and other elements of nature in the life story of the Buddha (including the *Jātakas*, or stories of the Buddha’s previous lives, in which the Buddha himself often appears as an animal). This chapter establishes a fundamental ambivalence that will characterize all of the remaining chapters of the book: on the one hand, the Buddha’s life story contains a wealth of eco-friendly resources, with the Buddha, for example, enjoying “vivid personhood relationships with an expansive array of natural beings” (p. 39); on the other hand, the life story also asserts the superiority of humans over other beings and often takes for granted the human prerogative to exploit the earth and its resources. On the one hand, the Buddha displays the virtues of loving-kindness, compassion, and nonharm toward a variety of nonhuman beings; on the other hand, he also assumes a general culture of meat-eating and does not clearly advocate a vegetarian diet. We are thus left with a picture of both positives and negatives, environmental strengths and environmental weaknesses. Since the basic argument of the chapter is that the Buddha’s life story “provides a model for later Buddhists to emulate” (p. 61), this pattern of both strengths and weaknesses will be replicated in each succeeding chapter of the book.

The following six chapters constitute the heart of the book and take the reader on a highly informative journey throughout the Buddhist world, with chapter 3 focusing on Sri Lanka, chapter 4 on Thailand, chapter 5 on China, chapter 6 on Japan, chapter 7 on Tibet, and chapter 8 on the West. Each chapter focuses on Buddhist phenomena specific to the region in question, with a good balance between textual ideals and everyday practices, premodern and modern phenomena, and eco-friendly ideals and their real-world limitations. Also to be commended is the author’s decision to conceive of “Buddhism” in a broadly inclusive manner and to skillfully demonstrate the fuzzy dividing lines between “Buddhism” and various forms of indigenous “folk,” “popular,” or “nature” religion.

Rather than summarizing each of these chapters, I will list only some of the many topics discussed. They include tree spirits, serpent deities, and elephants being treated as persons and shown engaging in religious practices (Sri Lanka); the tradition of forest monks living in the wilderness and sometimes taming wild animals through loving-kindness meditation (Sri Lanka); sangha-sponsored beauty contests for water buffalo to support the success of poor farmers (Thailand); the practice of ordaining

trees as Buddhist monks (Thailand); Buddhist monastic vegetarianism (China); perceiving sacred mountains as enlightened mandalas (China); the perfect buddhahood of plants and all elements of nature (Japan); nature-mystical practices of meditatively identifying with the moon or with the planet Venus (Japan); the practice of releasing animals intended for slaughter (Tibet); the environmentalism of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (Tibet); and the environmentalism of modern Buddhist figures such as Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano, Philip Kapleau Roshi (1912–2004), and Stephanie Kaza (the West). Of course, many of these topics straddle the boundaries between several cultures, which helps to bring the chapters together, as does a shared focus on the major concepts established in the introduction. Intriguingly, the author also characterizes some of these cultures as having a consistent thematic focus in their approach to nature: for Japan, it is a love of nature only after it has been purified by culture; for Tibet, it is the ideal of “sustainable taming” (pp. 168–89 *passim*). (The book might have benefited, in fact, from a few more of such analytical insights.) Finally, I also appreciate that the author’s discussion is never overly romanticized or idealistic; throughout the book, he keeps a clear eye on the actual conditions of environmental devastation that currently characterize many predominantly Buddhist countries.

In some ways, the conclusion may be the most satisfying section of the book as Capper is here able to draw on all of the preceding chapters to offer some general assessments of Buddhism’s environmental credentials as a whole. First, he finds that relational animism, or vibrant personhood relationships with animals and other elements of nature, is extremely common across the Buddhist world, despite Buddhist doctrine’s insistence on the low moral status of animals and the insentience of plants and other natural phenomena. These personhood sentiments, when combined with the Buddhist virtues of nonharm, loving-kindness, and compassion, result in a tradition that “provides a rather strong platform for animal welfare efforts” (p. 217). At the same time, however, Buddhist notions of karma and rebirth do “result in the targeting of compassion toward animals but not toward plants, minerals, or water, resulting in a limited biocentric orientation” (p. 217). Buddhism thus “lacks the ecocentric elements required by a full environmental ethic” (p. 218), especially in the era of climate crisis. A further problem with Buddhist compassion is that it is directed solely at *individuals* rather than the species and larger ecosystems of which they are a part. This creates difficulties when it comes to addressing “the complexities of ecosystems that persist through constant predation of some type” (p. 218). In order to be more compatible with a sustainable biosphere, then, Buddhism would need to become less biocentric and more ecocentric, with a focus not only on individuals but also on larger systems. Although the doctrine of dependent arising seems precisely suited to thinking in terms of larger systems, Capper also refutes those who have suggested that the idea of dependent arising is inherently eco-friendly. In fact, as he points out, even when a Buddhist thinker

(such as Dōgen 道元 [1200–1253]) uses the idea of dependent arising to proclaim the perfect buddhahood of animals, plants, and rocks, such voices have a tendency to place equal value upon *everything*—toxic waste and oil spills just as much as elephants and plants. As Capper notes, “a clean environment requires difficult choices, and a worldview that values all existents equally provides an unsteady platform for making these value-laden choices” (p. 219). The overall conclusion reached—as one might have predicted from the beginning—is that Buddhism contains ample resources that *might* support a sustainable biosphere, but without adaptation it is incapable of offering a full environmental ethic that can deal with our contemporary ecological crisis.

The conclusion also summarizes the book’s findings on each of its “three touch-points for ecological comparison.” With regard to Buddhist views on vegetarianism, Capper concludes (as expected) that such views are complex and multifaceted, with a general divide between the Theravada and Mahayana worlds—the former often taking meat-eating for granted and the latter having a significant body of scriptural sources that promote vegetarianism, although nowhere in the Buddhist world is this ideal fully realized. With regard to the practice of religion by animals and other natural phenomena, Capper finds that although “the mainstream of the tradition denies the ability of any being other than a human to practice Buddhism” (p. 222), stories from across the Buddhist world suggesting otherwise are frequent and easy to find. Finally, with regard to nature mysticism Capper finds that although it does exist in many places in the Buddhist world, “it does so at best on the margins” (p. 223) and is most likely to appear in either Chinese or Vajrayana contexts.

Overall, *Roaming Free Like a Deer* offers a cohesive and accessible account of Buddhism’s relationship to the natural world. Its coverage of multiple cultural contexts and diverse phenomena, together with a consistent interpretive framework used throughout, makes the book a unique contribution to a burgeoning field. That being said, although it has much to offer to professional scholars of Buddhism and graduate students in Buddhist studies, it is perhaps best suited for an undergraduate or general audience.

Tanluan: “Commentaire au Traité de la Naissance dans la Terre Pure” de Vasubandhu. Chinese text compiled, translated, and annotated by Jérôme Ducor. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2021. cii + 474 pages. Paperback. ISBN-13: 978-2-251-45089-6.

DENNIS GIRA

Readers who have conducted research on East Asian Buddhism, and especially on the Pure Land tradition, will know that Tanluan 曇鸞 (Jp. Donran; 476–542) is the first