

# The Case of the Snow-Leopard-Skin Backpacks

Johan Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020, hb, 177pp.

*reviewed by Dhīvan Thomas Jones*

Johan Elverskog, a Professor of Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University, Texas, begins his book with the story of how, while travelling in Bhutan after graduating from Berkeley, and while full of enthusiasm for the pro-environmental message of Buddhism, came across a matching pair of backpacks made of snow-leopard skins. Peter Mathiessens's 1978 travel book, *The Snow Leopard*, had long highlighted the beauty and rarity of this living symbol of the Himalayan region. The encounter threw up lingering doubts in Elverskog about whether Asian Buddhism was really as ecologically sensitive as books such as Allan Badiner's *Dharma Gaia* had made it out to be.<sup>1</sup> These doubts led, over time, to the project of doing some research into the contribution of Buddhism to the environmental history of Asia, and the book reviewed here is the result of this work. Elverskog's conclusion is that, far from being especially eco-friendly, Buddhism has always – from its origin in northern India to its flourishing in China, Tibet, Korea and Japan – encouraged wealth-creation through the exploitation of natural resources. He helpfully sums up his conclusion in the form of a 140-character tweet: 'Elverskog overturns eco-Buddhism narrative by showing how Buddhists across Asia transformed the environment by commodification, agro-expansion, and urbanization' (119).

The natural response of the average western Buddhist to Elverskog's conclusions might be incredulity. How could the Buddhists of Asia possibly be just as bad as capitalist Protestant westerners? Didn't the Buddha clearly teach non-harming and respect for nature? Don't Buddhists believe in the interconnectedness of humans and nature? Such questions reveal the eco-Buddhist assumptions of the average western Buddhist, and Elverskog wants to disabuse such Buddhists of those assumptions. Does he succeed? This review will be divided into three parts. In the first part, I will summarise Elverskog's arguments and discoveries, which do indeed upset our usual preconceptions about Buddhism. But in the second part, I will draw attention to some alarming gaps in Elverskog's arguments. In the third part, I will salvage what I can from Elverskog's conclusions, while defending eco-Buddhism.

# I

Elverskog briefly alludes to how what can be called ‘eco-Buddhism’ is a modern western construct, and not a historical reality. While this idea might make sense to scholars, it is probably news to the average western Buddhist. To spell out the claim, the scholar of Buddhist modernism might say that the idea that Buddhism is in some sense deeply environmentally friendly and ecologically sensitive, together with the image of Asian Buddhists living in harmony with nature, is a historical fantasy. But this does not mean it is false. Rather, it is a very specific *interpretation* of Asian Buddhism, by westerners, under the conditions of our own beliefs and needs, an interpretation which is only partially connected to Buddhist tradition. Unfortunately, Elverskog does not review the characteristics of eco-Buddhism (also called Green Buddhism and Buddhist environmentalism) in his book, preferring instead merely to gesture towards some of its stereotypes and exemplars. For instance, he quotes from Gary Snyder, the Buddhist Beat poet, and long-term environmentalist:

And Japan quibbles for words on  
What kind of whales they can kill?  
A once-great Buddhist nation  
dribbles methyl mercury  
like gonorrhoea  
in the sea.<sup>2</sup>

While agreeing that Japan is a peculiarly un-environmentally-conscious nation, Elverskog asks, *contra* Snyder, whether Japan was in fact ever an environmentally-aware nation, and whether Buddhism ever made any difference, and concludes that that Japan wasn’t and Buddhism didn’t. The idea of eco-Buddhism, according to Elverskog, drawing on existing scholarship, is a *mélange* of Romanticism, Deep Ecology, and some de-historicised interpretations of particular Buddhist teachings. Elverskog doesn’t mean to undermine or discredit modern western Buddhism, only to refute the false idea that eco-Buddhism is the same as original, traditional Buddhism. I think there is every reason to think this analysis is correct. Buddhism, like all pre-modern religious traditions, developed in Asian cultural contexts with no awareness of an environmental crisis. The idea that Buddhism is capable of addressing climate change and habitat destruction is by necessity a contemporary re-interpretation of an ancient religious tradition.

Elverskog goes on to review the early history of Buddhism, starting with what we know about the Buddha and the early Sangha. Elverskog emphasises how the Buddha did not condemn the amassing of wealth, but rather encouraged his lay followers to make money in order to support the monastic

sangha. Although there is certainly a great deal of scriptural evidence in the Pāli canon to support this view, Elverskog draws out its implications more fully than usual. He describes the Dharma as a kind of ‘prosperity theology’, taking certain Protestant Christian beliefs about the holiness of wealth and applying the label to early Buddhism. ‘With this term, I refer to the Buddhist conviction that wealth is good. The Buddha instructed his lay followers and the monastics to acquire wealth. Wealth indicates moral standing and good karma, and poverty indicates moral failure and bad karma’ (41). In this way, Buddhism resonates with merchants and metropolitan elites even today. Based on a metaphor of money, the Buddhist teaching of karma encouraged social mobility and trade. Images of jewels and wealth illustrate ideals of both worldly prosperity and spiritual realization.

A discussion of vegetarianism in the Buddhist tradition (chap.3) gives Elverskog the chance to rehearse a distinction between the high monastic ideals of Buddhism, based on the ethical principle of non-harming (*ahimsa*), and the historical facts about what Buddhists (monastic and lay) actually eat, namely, animals. Elverskog relies on similar arguments to show the importance of wealth in Buddhism, drawing on studies of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) to demonstrate the pervasive role of money in Buddhist culture. He goes on to make the unusual argument that the Buddhist teaching of *anātman*, or no-self, was instrumental in encouraging a pro-attitude towards wealth creation: ‘the Buddhist idea of *anatman* or no-self promoted the possibility of everyone acting as free agents in the new market economy’ (47) – hence, through the *anātman* teaching, the Buddha ‘embraced the social transformations of the time’, such as urbanization, trade, and a free-market economy.

Because of the importance of wealth and trade, Buddhism supports an economic order that allows wealth-creation. Elverskog draws the logical conclusion: ‘contrary to popular notions, the Dharma did not enshrine or promote the protection of nature. Instead, it specifically promoted the exploitation of nature for economic and societal ends’ (59). With this theoretical conclusion in hand, Elverskog goes on to discuss themes that exemplify it, drawn from the history of the pan-Asian spread of Buddhism. As the pro-market, pro-wealth Dharma spread to new lands, ‘the protocapitalist drive at the heart of the Buddhist tradition’ (75) was constantly engaged in the exploitation of natural resources at the commodity frontier. The extraction of timber, metals, gems and so on created trade networks with Buddhist monasteries at their centres.

Buddhists, and especially Buddhist monks, expanded agriculture, often using slave labour, and engaged in the systematic development of irrigation. Historians have previously thought that state organisation was necessary for large-scale irrigation systems, but it seems that Buddhist monasteries were just as capable. The dependence of Buddhist monastics on food grown by lay

followers partly explains this interaction of monasteries and food production. But Buddhism is also implicated in the growth of cities, and the enormous depletion of resources from the surrounding areas implied by urbanization, quite beyond the direct perception of city-dwellers themselves. Elverskog sees urban Asian Buddhists as no different from modern people who consume resources with little idea of where it comes from or of the effects of procuring it. In this way, Buddhists played a significant part in shaping the landscapes of Asia, turning forests and all kinds of natural resources into wealth, according to the free-market logic of the Dharma.

## II

Elverskog's bold thesis is stimulating, but embodies a failure to make two important distinctions in relation to Buddhism. First, it fails to distinguish between *facts* about Buddhist history and the *values* at the heart of Buddhism as an ethics and soteriology. As a historian, Elverskog has drawn out a number of themes from his studies of Asian Buddhism that not only run contrary to the eco-Buddhist narrative about the environmental credentials of Buddhism, but which also put Buddhists in the position of being key players in the environmental destruction of Asia. This is striking, and leads to questions about the Buddhist beliefs and practices that justify the exploitation of natural resources; that is to say, given the *facts* about Asian history (exploitation, urbanization, agriculture expansion), how are Buddhist *values* implicated? By not making the fact/value distinction, Elverskog comes up with some unsatisfactory explanations.

Let us consider a large-scale parallel. A scholar of religious studies might observe that some modern Christians, such as Quakers, understand Jesus' teaching to imply non-violence. The scholar might then look at European Christian history. Look at the Crusades, the scholar might say. They show that European Christians were violent, in the name of Christ. Scholar overturns non-violent Christian narrative by showing how Christians across Europe persecuted Muslims and Jews in the name of Christ and Church. It would be not hard for a Quaker or anyone knowledgeable about Christianity to point out that this tweet simply fails to distinguish between *facts* about European history and Christian *values*. Clearly, the Crusaders hadn't taken Jesus' teaching about non-violence to heart, and this requires historical explanation, but it doesn't undermine the importance of non-violence in Christian belief and practice, for those who value it.

Elverskog's failure to distinguish facts and values leads him to some erroneous interpretations. For instance, he discusses Buddhism and vegetarianism to illustrate the persistent western mistake of thinking Buddhism is eco-friendly. Elverskog reports that, while westerners think that Buddhists are

vegetarian, the fact is that the Dalai Lama was disappointed when in 1998 François Mitterrand didn't offer him a meaty meal (32). Elverskog traces this appetite for meat back to the Buddha: 'The Buddha allows monks to eat meat as long as they have not killed the fish or animals themselves. If others kill and prepare an animal for consumption, a monk is allowed to receive it in his begging bowl and to eat it' (33). Elverskog explains this attitude in terms of the Buddha's emphasis on the ethics of intentionality: 'if you have not killed the animal, no karma is generated by eating its flesh' (34). But all this is factually incorrect.<sup>3</sup> According to well-known Buddhist teachings, attributed to the Buddha, a monastic may receive meat in his or her begging bowl only if he or she has not (1) seen (2) heard or (3) suspected that the animal was killed specially for them.<sup>4</sup> This was later called the 'threefold purity' of almsfood. Hence, the Buddha allowed his monks to eat meat, but not (as Elverskog writes) when they themselves had not killed the animal, but in fact only when they were sure that the animal's death was not for their sake. To eat meat that one knew had been killed for oneself would certainly involve an unwholesome intention, an unskillful karma, that would implicate one in harm to an animal. In short, the Buddha taught that while it was not unacceptable to eat meat, Buddhist practitioners should not cause harm to animals. Non-harming (*ahiṃsa*) is the most important Buddhist ethical value. But in fact Buddhists down the centuries have found it hard to be vegetarian, presumably because of their desire to eat meat, and not because the Buddha allowed it.<sup>5</sup>

Following the same logic, though Buddhists in Asian have exploited natural resources, this fact does not necessarily imply that Buddhist values do not include care for the environment. Without discussing the fact/value distinction, Elverskog cannot 'overturn [the] eco-Buddhism narrative', which is a contemporary narrative about Buddhist values, not a narrative about the facts of Asian history.

The second distinction that Elverskog fails to make is between what anthropologists of Buddhism have described as two religious systems within Buddhism: 'nibbanic Buddhism', the form of Buddhism practised by (some) monastics, aiming at nirvāṇa or salvation through the practice of meditation, and 'kammatic Buddhism', the Buddhism practised by lay followers (and some monastics), aiming at a good rebirth through the generation of merit and good karma. While the distinction was first formulated by Melford Spiro in relation to Theravāda Buddhism (in Burma),<sup>6</sup> some version of it can be formulated both for the Buddhism of the Pāli canon, and for the forms of Buddhism practised across Asia. The goal of nirvāṇa or complete Awakening depends on renunciation and meditation, and not many Buddhists take it up. But Asian Buddhists have always formulated some version of a more accessible yet nevertheless valuable proximate goal for ordinary people living household lives,

whether that goal is a favourable human rebirth or rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land.

With this distinction in mind, two points become clearer. First, Elverskog's argument that the *anātman* teaching played a role in promoting a free market economy looks unlikely, or at least looks to be unsupported by any evidence. The *anātman* teaching is only ever discussed in relation to forms of meditative reflection aiming at insight (*vipaśyanā*). For Buddhists aiming at a good rebirth, it is necessary to emphasise the existence of a self as agent, who can act and who will reap the harvest of their actions. Elverskog, however, goes on to link his interpretation of the *anātman* teaching with his interpretation of Buddhism as a form of prosperity theology: 'As Christian prosperity theology today legitimates the neoliberal order, the Dharma legitimated the marketization of society in ancient India through the concept of *anatman*' (48). Not only is it unlikely that the Dharma does anything of this sort, but Elverskog makes no effort whatever to define or analyse Prosperity Theology or to say in what way Buddhism resembles it. It seems to me unlikely that Buddhism *as a whole* can be interpreted as being much like Prosperity Theology, since renunciation is so central to nibbanic Buddhism.

The second point is that modern western Buddhists tend to be interested in 'nibbanic Buddhism' rather than 'kammatic Buddhism'. They tend to be less interested in the teachings about giving to monastics and generating merit for a future good rebirth, and more interested in learning about meditation, going on retreat, and developing liberating insight. Indeed, this is a distinctive feature of modernist Buddhism, distinguishing it from tradition Asian Buddhism, in which lay people typically do not meditate.<sup>7</sup> Even if, as a matter of historical fact, Asian Buddhists have exploited natural resources and not been environmentally friendly, this would probably not matter to Buddhist modernists, since they look to Buddhist teachings about meditation and *nirvāṇa* for inspiration. In this way, the nibbanic/kammic Buddhism distinction intersects with the fact/value distinction. The 'eco-Buddhism narrative' is a narrative about the values of nibbanic Buddhism, not the facts about the environmental activities of kammatic Buddhists. Elverskog fails to overturn eco-Buddhism narrative by not distinguishing facts from values, nor nibbanic from kammic Buddhism.

### III

In his Preface and Introduction, Elverskog cites scholars who are critical of eco-Buddhism. These scholars are only named in the notes, and their views are hardly discussed. The reason for this apparent omission may be that their criticisms of eco-Buddhism revolve around Buddhist *values*, not facts about Buddhist history. The critics of eco-Buddhism argue, for instance, that early

Buddhist texts do not show a positive evaluation of nature, but instead teach that conditioned existence in this world, in fact in the entire round of rebirth, is unsatisfactory. Elverskog claims that ‘a more trenchant critique of eco-Buddhism is that it ignores what Buddhists actually did’ (3), but this is implausible, since facts about Buddhist history do not necessary tell us much about Buddhist values. A proper review and evaluation of scholarly critiques of eco-Buddhism would be desirable, but Elverskog doesn’t attempt anything like it.

However, Elverskog’s presentation of Asian history does offer much food for thought. His analysis of the Buddhist contribution to agricultural expansion, urbanisation, and market-driven exploitation of natural resources, raises big questions about how Asian Buddhists thought about humanity’s relationship to nature and the environment. His historical perspective certainly explodes any possible fantasy about a Buddhist paradise somewhere in Asia. However, this is hardly news. The deforestation of Thailand, a 90% Buddhist country, in the 1960s and 70s, is obvious to any visitor, and shows how Thai Buddhists were more interested in exploiting their country’s natural resources for money than preserving its forests.<sup>8</sup> The value of Elverskog’s narrative is perhaps that it shows how the deforestation of Thailand is consistent with Buddhist attitudes across Asia and throughout history. Indeed, Elverskog is thoroughly successful in showing how Buddhists have been just as good as other human beings across the globe at exploiting the natural world for their own ends.

Given this sobering conclusion, it is in fact quite appropriate to puncture any balloon of Buddhist exceptionalism about the environment. Elverskog’s book is a success inasmuch as it shows how the tendency amongst Buddhist modernists to regard Buddhism as special and superior to, for instance, Christianity, in relation to attitudes to the modern world, is not just complacent but irresponsible.<sup>9</sup>

Elverskog’s conclusion presents what he calls ‘a ray of hope’ (119). He argues that the study of Buddhist history shows that Buddhists can change. Modern Buddhist environmentalism, both in Asia and the west, leaves behind the resource exploitation of the past and ‘is having a positive environmental impact in the world today’ (119). Given his arguments about the exploitative nature of Buddhism, you would think that Elverskog should try to account for the kind of change he sees as hopeful, but he does not. However, I think it is arguable that Buddhist values such as non-harming (*ahimsa*) have always been implicitly pro-environmental, that Buddhist meditation has always sought to overcome the ego’s separation from nature, and that Buddhist aesthetics have always valued experiences of beauty. It has been central to the work of many modern Buddhist teachers across the world to draw out these Buddhist values against the background of our worsening global environmental crisis. By contrast, I am not

entirely convinced that Elverskog's book is actually going to help this effort, although I would be pleased to be wrong about this.

But let me end by solving the case of the snow-leopard-skin backpacks.<sup>10</sup> It would seem that the use of animal skins for clothing and household use has long been popular, even fashionable, among Tibetan peoples, such as those living in Bhutan, where Elverskog had his fateful encounter with those backpacks in the early 1990s. But in 2006, the Dalai Lama, while conducting a Kalachakra ceremony in India, took the opportunity to call on Tibetans to stop using animal skins such as those of tigers and leopards, for the obvious reason that the Tibetans should preserve their natural environment and not harm animals. Videos smuggled out of Tibet showed bonfires of animal skins, as Tibetans took their spiritual leader's words to heart, and gave up their fashionable furs. Let us hope that those snow-leopard-skin backpacks in Bhutan have likewise gone up in smoke, and their wearers have become as eco-Buddhist as the Dalai Lama has.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Hunt Badiner (ed.) (1990), *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, Berkeley: Parallax.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Snyder (1974), "Mother Earth: Her Whales", from *Turtle Island*, New York: New Directions, p.47. Snyder is also the author of *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), a kind of manifesto for a Buddhist environmentalism.

<sup>3</sup> I take this opportunity to note that Elverskog's book contains a number of factual inaccuracies, suggesting a lack of familiarity with the Buddhist tradition: (23) the demon holding the Wheel of Life is Yama, not Māra; (25) nirvana does not mean 'extinction' but the 'going out' or 'quenching' (as of a flame); (27) Elverskog characterises the Mahāyāna monk as trying to 'transcend conventional reality', which is a complete misunderstanding of the distinction of ultimate and conventional reality; (54) Elverskog claims that 'the Buddhist canon never extols poverty as a virtue, only wealth' – he has perhaps not read the *Dhammapada* very thoroughly, or at least has not distinguished voluntary from involuntary poverty. The book also includes Pāli and Sanskrit words, sometimes with diacritics, sometimes not. There are also a number of maps with tenuous or unstated relationships to the book's narrative, as well as some mistaken words and references. All this would suggest that the book did not go through a final editing process.

<sup>4</sup> See the Jīvika Sutta, *Majjhima Nikāya* 55 and elsewhere. Elverskog (135 note 3) actually quotes this very teaching, from the Pāli *Vinaya*, but appears not to have understood it.

<sup>5</sup> The Dalai Lama now recognises that Buddhists ought to be vegetarian, even though he himself eats some meat for health reasons:

(<https://www.dalailama.com/messages/transcripts-and-interviews/barkha-dutt-interview-part2>).

<sup>6</sup> Melford E. Spiro (1982 [1970]), *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, 2nd ed., Berkeley: University of California Press. Winston King had already made a comparable distinction in relation to Theravāda in Sri Lanka.

<sup>7</sup> This topic is explored in David McMahan (2008), *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, Oxford University Press, e.g. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Described in Kerry Brown (1992), ‘In the Water There Were Fish and the Fields Were Full of Rice: Reawakening the Lost Harmony of Thailand’, *Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown, London: Cassell, 87–99.

<sup>9</sup> The ‘myth of Buddhist exceptionalism’ is exploded by Evan Thompson (2020), *Why I am not a Buddhist*, New Haven: Yale University Press, Introduction, and chap. 1.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2006/animal-skin-clothes-burned-in-tibet-after-dalai-lamas-call> for a fuller account.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, His Holiness the Dalai Lama with Franz Alt (2020), *Our Only Home: A Climate Appeal to the World*, London: Bloomsbury.