

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MIKE Welcome to the *Free Range Podcast*. I'm your host Mike Livermore. Today's episode is sponsored by the Program on Law Communities and the Environment at the University of Virginia School of Law. With me today is Jessica Locke, an associate professor of philosophy at Loyola University Maryland who writes in the areas of Buddhism and Western psychology and cross-cultural philosophy. Hi, Jess. Thanks for joining me today.

JESSICA LOCKE: Thanks so much for having me. I'm pleased to be here.

MIKE So you've described your work as thinking about the ongoing reshaping and re-articulation of Buddhist ethics to meet contemporary, social, and political concerns of which of course, sustainability is a big one. It's a huge contemporary, social, and political concern. Currently, our notion of the environment and environmentalism is, of course, quite far removed in many ways from the context in which Buddhism developed over the years. So I'm looking forward to chatting with you about these themes.

But maybe to get us started, we could begin with your own engagement with Buddhism as a scholar. What drew you to this area of study? What kinds of questions are you interested in? Yeah, what does your work look like?

JESSICA LOCKE: Right. So I got interested in Buddhism-- I had finished my BA in philosophy and history at Boston College already. But towards the end of that period of time, I started getting interested in contemplative practices. And in the years, like my early 20s, the years after my BA, I became a yoga teacher and got very interested in Vedanta philosophy and practice.

And then along the way, in that period of time, I wanted to get more training in meditation, and so kind of not intending to get interested in Buddhism, stumbled into a Buddhist center just to take a meditation workshop. And then it was just off to the races. It was just clear immediately that this was actually my path. And so then by the time I went to grad school to do a PhD in philosophy, I showed up there and said, I my background is in continental philosophy mainly and history of philosophy.

But I really want to do a cross-cultural philosophical dissertation and integrate Buddhist philosophy into my doctoral work. And to their credit-- I was at Emory University, and to their credit, they were extremely open-minded about that. Not all philosophy departments are. And I also just had wonderful resources because the graduate division of religion there has a wonderful set of professors who teach Buddhist studies. I was able to study Tibetan there.

So it turned out to just be a very auspicious situation that allowed me to integrate really kind of in a holistic way sort of my whole person of what I was passionate about in philosophy, which I didn't really speak about that. But as an undergraduate, I got into philosophy sort of as an activist at Boston College. It's a Jesuit University. And so they have this whole kind of social justice orientation throughout their undergraduate program, but including or especially in philosophy.

And so I did a lot of service learning and a lot of social justice-oriented philosophical sort of applied work in my undergrad degree. And so then what really inspired me when I stumbled into Buddhism, I ended up getting involved in the Shambhala community that has this whole paradigm of creating enlightened society as the sort of ethos and the reason for practicing.

And so that felt kind of very resonant with my background in philosophy also. So altogether, those sorts of interests of both Western philosophy and my Buddhist practice really complemented one another. And I sort of managed to forge an academic path of study that was able to mobilize both of those things

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah, that's really awesome. It's a really interesting story and it is, it's kind of a unique and great place to be at to have such an integrated path of scholarship. One question that folks might have is, what's different about how you approach questions about Buddhism or how you approach questions about Buddhism within a philosophy department and coming from a philosophy background with a PhD in philosophy versus what folks might traditionally associate with the study of this kind of thing, which would happen in a religious studies department?

We have several scholars at the University of Virginia in our religious studies department who are interested in Buddhism in various ways. So yeah, that's the question, are these things just-- are these just words, philosophy religious studies and we're all kind of doing the same thing? Or do you see a substantial methodological distinction, at least, broadly?

JESSICA LOCKE: Right, right, super interesting question, and honestly, a difficult question. I do want to speak very, very briefly to what you said at the very beginning of your comment about how it's wonderful to be able to integrate my personal and kind of professional interests. And that's true. But the biggest liability there is that if one aspect of those things wobbles, then it affects the other. And so I do want to be completely transparent that the Shambhala community, the Buddhist community that I was a part of for 10 years collapsed in a sexual abuse scandal.

And that really having that personal experience of grief and instability then definitely affects my work and has, in fact, affected how I've thought about and worked on Buddhist philosophy in the ensuing years since that's happened. It's both a very enriching experience and also quite vulnerable and, I guess, risky in some ways. But to speak to your other point, your real question, what does it mean to do Buddhist studies in a philosophy department instead of a religion department?

I do think that a lot of it is methodological. My experience because, also, many of my colleagues in Buddhist studies are in religious studies departments and much of my coursework in Buddhist studies was in religious studies departments. And of course, there's, I think, a much greater emphasis on historiographical and anthropological understandings of religious traditions.

I think a lot of times, the sort of doctrine of a particular tradition often in a religious studies context can get couched more in an anthropological kind of frame and sort of understanding the social and historical factors that produced these views rather than just interrogating the views just on their own terms as the products of human reason or ways of trying to understand the world, which I think is much more sort of the bread and butter of a philosopher.

So I have a ton of respect and appreciation for all of my religious studies colleagues and I definitely stand on their shoulders or benefit from their work so much. But as a philosopher, what I really like about how my discipline enables me to approach the Buddhist tradition is really interrogating the ideas themselves, seeing sort of in a nichanian way which ideas kind of dance and what I can actually-- how the rubber hits the road, how we can make use of them, how these ideas actually cash out in the world.

I can do a little bit more kind of creative application and interrogation, and honestly, take the tradition seriously as intellectual interlocutors and kind of, like, push them when I don't think that they're being rigorous enough. So that's really how I see what it means to be a philosopher who works on Buddhism. And there's also just something inherently, I think, both [CHUCKLES] terrifying and humiliating and creative about being a cross-cultural philosopher.

Since I don't work exclusively on Buddhist philosophy, I also draw from the Western tradition and other non-Western philosophical traditions. And so there's always the risk of dilettantism when you're in that kind of zone. And there's always going to be religious studies people who more about the topic that I'm working on than I do. There's always going to be continental philosophy people who more about that figure or that tradition that I'm working on.

But that kind of dance of really trying to draw from more than one tradition and draw them into a sort of productive dialogue is, for me, in my experience, the work of the cross-cultural philosopher. And that's really generative for me.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah, it's all super interesting. And there's a ton of interesting threads that we could pick up there. I mean, the interaction between life as a regular person and life as a scholar and how those two things interact or don't interact with each other is fascinating. We could spend time talking about that. This interplay of internal versus external perspectives and different intellectual traditions and bringing them together is super interesting. So maybe we'll return to some of these.

But again, as kind of stage setting, one of the questions that a listener might have is, what's going on with Buddhism and what is this interaction between contemporary Western philosophy and this like really old very diverse tradition that we call Buddhism? So of course, Buddhism has been in a really interesting period of change over the past-- well, it's always changing. Everything's always changing, but let's say the past 100 years as there's been this engagement between the West or interest in the West with Buddhist practices and ideas.

And there are lots of issues that come up when people from different backgrounds approach this tradition. And so you're doing this as a scholar, as a practitioner. Other folks are kind of addressing it as purely from a scholarly perspective or purely from a practitioner's perspective. So for example, how do we think about questions like cultural appropriation versus cross-cultural engagement? Is this something that you-- is that, for example, a set of issues that you worry about, that you kind of are playing around with? Or is that a mistaken way of thinking about some of these issues?

JESSICA LOCKE: Oh, no, certainly not mistaken. [CHUCKLES] I think a really, really important concern to hold in mind always as a cross-cultural philosopher and as a scholar of contemporary Buddhism, Western Buddhism. To a great extent, some of the issues that you're raising or this question touches on relate to this phenomenon called Buddhist modernism that is this generation of or is constituted by this generation of a sort of mutual process of exchange and influence between "East and West"-- putting that in scare quotes-- of generating a new kind of edge, a new frontier in the Buddhist tradition.

And I would say, interestingly, hardly anyone who practices or is in the process or participating in the creation of Buddhist modernism or practicing in a Buddhist modernist tradition would really cop to that. [CHUCKLES] Nobody really seems to identify as a Buddhist modernist. Everyone wants to say that what they're doing is, like, totally faithful to the word of the Buddha.

And it's not meant to be a slur, but it is meant to point out that the Buddhist tradition is dynamic. It has always been dynamic. Since the time of the Buddha, 2,600 years ago, Buddhism has traveled all over the world into all kinds of historical and cultural contexts that it has met with and adapted to and blended with.

And so there's actually not a single Buddhism. There's multiple Buddhisms. And so saying that we're now kind of in an era of Buddhist modernism isn't to say that there's something false about the new iteration of Buddhism that we're seeing emerge today. Otherwise, we'd have to say that Zen Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism are false inauthentic forms of Buddhism.

However, none the less, we can, I think, take care and try to-- I think kind of the question that you're pointing to is, like, wonder, ask the question of, to what extent might Buddhism be sort of molded in the image of something maybe unsavory or that might corrupt some important aspect of the tradition such as, for example, capitalism?

So when you see, like, *McMindfulness* as one of the sort of cartoonish examples of that. There might be lots of people that say you know, corporate mindfulness, is this really producing liberation in the way of the Buddha or the way that the Buddha would have advocated? And I think that that's a genuine question to ask. So I think that there's-- for me, where I fall in this is that I'm always aware that I'm threading a needle between dogmatic piety and colonialist editorializing.

[BOOTH CHUCKLING]

MIKE It's a fine needle. That's a tough needle to thread, yeah.

LIVERMORE:

JESSICA LOCKE: Because I don't want to simply curate a tradition and just hold it up like this perfect jewel that can't be touched and can't ever even be interrogated or questioned. But I also don't want to just say that I can pick up the parts of it that I like and make it what I want to, even if it's just optimizing for the alienations of late capitalism. But one interesting little anecdote about this dynamic that really surprised me actually--

Because I kind of came into this a little bit more maybe on the zygomatic conservative side and I've spent a few summers studying language and philosophy, Buddhist philosophy in Nepal. And some of my past research is on the Tibetan Buddhist mind training tradition and Buddhist moral phenomenology and moral psychology and views of ethical moral habituation.

And so some of those practices that I was studying are things that have been or are actively in the process of being secularized and offered in non-Buddhist contexts as sort of you could say a part of the compassion movement, sort of the mindfulness 2.0 movement. And so I've asked some monastics, plenty, like, several, what do you think about this secularization of this really revered Tibetan tradition of mind training, the Lojong tradition?

And don't you think that something is lost when you're not talking about emptiness, when you're not talking about vast, unfathomable, Bodhisattvic motivation and compassion and things like that? And to a person, they were all like, it's fine.

MIKE Yeah, not worried.

LIVERMORE:

JESSICA LOCKE: Totally. I'm so unconcerned, like I'm just-- the view is out of compassionate altruism and generosity, if this is useful to people, they can make of it what's beneficial to them. So that's the other side of this, is that I think that there's a lot of dynamism and flexibility often on the side of the sort of natively Buddhist cultural side of it, that they're less conservative maybe than I would have initially have expected them to be.

MIKE Yeah, it's really interesting. And there is-- and this kind of goes back to something that you mentioned earlier,
LIVERMORE: there is something a little patronizing--

JESSICA LOCKE: Right.

MIKE --about not engaging with the ideas in a tradition, like, that you're going to hurt the tradition somehow.

LIVERMORE:

[BOTH CHUCKLING]

So it's a really-- but at the same time, you want to recognize that you come from a place of cultural power and that these are traditions have been threatened in lots of ways. So yeah, I mean, I guess, this is just something that you design in your mind and that just manage as you do this work.

JESSICA LOCKE: Yes, it's on my mind. I manage it and I also seek out the feedback and reality check of others, both my interlocutors within the tradition, monastic scholars and the like, and also other cross-cultural scholars, philosophers, Buddhist studies scholars to give me a gut check. But to your point earlier, I mean, I do think that there is something patronizing about saying, like, we simply just have to take the tradition's expression of its views at face value and we can never kind of prod them about, well, what follows from that?

What about this problem? I think if you've ever seen, at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, debate practice, have you ever seen this?

MIKE I have in other Buddhist contexts, not at a Tibetan monastery.

LIVERMORE:

JESSICA LOCKE: So there's a million videos on YouTube. It's so fascinating to watch, but like it's quite an-- you could say almost like an athletic event of something like jousting. And they are not shy about calling BS.

MIKE Oh, yeah that's like part of the-- I mean, I've always thought of that as part of the tradition. It's kind of an
LIVERMORE: interesting kind of dialogic. If we think of different communities have different norms around discourse, like, Buddhism is not a everyone be nice to each other kind of intellectual environment.

JESSICA LOCKE: Totally. And I mean, again, it's like I want to put this in context that I'm not advocating some kind of colonialist debunking or something like that, but I'm also not saying that we need to play nicey nice. We can actually have a real philosophical conversation and treat each other as intellectual equals.

MIKE Yeah, absolutely. Super interesting. So one of the areas that is pretty lively in this interface of, again, quote
LIVERMORE: unquote, "Western ideas and Buddhist ideas" and people putting these ideas into practice, and it sounds like from your own history, you were interested in activism and social engagement, and there's this idea of socially engaged Buddhism that I thought we might talk a little bit about. So for some, again, if we take the big step back, they might see this as almost like an oxymoron.

Some folks have this reputation or this idea of Buddhism as associated with quietism, the monastery that's removed from society or the solitary meditator on the mountaintop. But this notion of socially engaged Buddhism is a really big deal for a lot of people in and around Buddhism these days. So what is this idea of social engagement? How does it relate to Buddhism, both contemporary Buddhism or more traditionally? And then I guess the question takes us back to your research agenda is, in what ways is this not or is this reshaping and rearticulating Buddhist ethics?

JESSICA LOCKE: Right, right. OK, so to your initial point, yes, and for some, there is something wonky philosophically about socially engaged Buddhism. In Buddhist studies, Max Weber is sort of notorious for having described Buddhism as unpolitical and even anti-political because it was so concerned with individual sort of solitary monastic practice, basically.

And there are some Buddhist conservatives who will not necessarily-- I mean, they wouldn't put it in those terms, but would say that, in fact, Buddhist soteriology is defined by the task of achieving individual liberation. It's just a solitary affair through and through. It's about releasing oneself from samsara. And of course, there's-- within even canonical Buddhisms, of course, there's concepts and values like compassion that have a social valence and all of that.

But ultimately, it's about getting yourself out of samsara and certainly not about adorning samsara and making samsara more livable. The point is like, no, samsara is its defects cannot be corrected. [CHUCKLES] It's irredeemable. Just get out. So from that perspective, this idea of a socially engaged Buddhism seems to be, like, misplacing your efforts or something.

But on the other hand, there are especially, emerging in the 20th century, lots and lots of both Asian Buddhist thinkers, monastics in traditional contexts, and scholars, and European and North American scholars of Buddhism who are kind of pointing out the relevance of Buddhism to social engagement.

And there's a few different sort of methods for how that can come about. Some people will point out in a sort of exegetical sense sort of conceptual affinities between Buddhist principles and some sort of social or ecological principles. So I'm thinking, for example, in this vein of the activist Joanna Macy and how she connects the concept of co-emergent arising or interdependence with something like deep ecology as one example.

Some of the social engagement-- socially engaged Buddhist theorists will be more generative, more explicitly generative and say, look, I want to push Buddhism in this direction. I think it has sort of gas in the tank to expand its ethical mandate to include social and/or ecological themes. And then there's other thinkers who will try to apply Buddhist principles.

And I think that a lot of times where these sorts of thinkers are coming from is from the standpoint of already having an existent commitment, existing commitment to Buddhism, how can we say this is how our tradition speaks to this contemporary issue, like anti-racism, like peacemaking, or anti-war, or that kind of thing?

MIKE LIVERMORE: OK, this is really, really fascinating and you've helped introduce the environment into the conversation. And we're also playing with a lot of complex concepts here that maybe not everyone is familiar with. So one of the ways that maybe we could move forward is to take a problem like environmental protection. And I'll offer what might be like a couple of standard Western ways of thinking about these kinds of problems.

And then maybe you could articulate what is different or what is the same in a kind of a Buddhist-- and of course, as you say, there's many Buddhisms. But what are some ideas from Buddhism that people have thought might have something to say about these kinds of challenges? So just to say, OK, we're worried about clean air or we're worried about climate change or we're worried about species extinction. And like a standard Western utilitarian approach would be to say, OK, well, people's well-being is affected by the quality of their environment.

And so the quality of the air, whether the climate is stable, all those kinds of things. And therefore, it makes sense for us to care about the environment. It's really quite straightforward. We could have a rights-based approach. We could say people have a right to a clean environment or people ought not to harm each other. And the environment is one of the ways that we could harm each other. We ought to respect each other and that attending to the harms that we create through our conduct that travels through the environment is one of the ways that we can be attentive to those kinds of obligations.

OK, so those would be-- and then species preservation, that's actually a really hard problem in Western philosophy. And there's environmental ethicists who think about this and, should we respect species as having some interests of their own? Or is it just that species are important inputs into other interest bearers like people? Should we be worrying about animals as interest bearers? And then what's the complex relationship that goes on in nature where there's a lot of animal suffering? Should we intervene there? And we've had prior guests on the podcast to talk about some of those issues.

So anyway those are just the thumbnail sketch of how certain Western philosophical, ethical, moral traditions might compute some of these questions. So what have folks thought that Buddhism adds to this conversation or asks us to subtract from this conversation or offers a different perspective than what we would get from that kind of those standard Western models?

JESSICA LOCKE: Yeah, really interesting question. So one interesting kind of background dimension to your question is that, within Buddhist studies and within Buddhist ethics, there's considerable debate about how to even think about the nature of Buddhist ethics. There's some Western scholars who try to systematize Buddhist ethics and actually say that Buddhist ethics enacts, basically, a version of consequentialism, for example, utilitarianism, utilitarian thinking, or that Buddhist ethics is an iteration of virtue ethics.

MIKE Virtue ethics, right.

LIVERMORE:

JESSICA LOCKE: And I can definitely-- when these theorists put these views out there and I can read them and kind of get what they're coming from. And for me, just in my own view, I do think that it's better to think about Buddhist ethics just on its own terms, not as an iteration of some more, quote unquote, "familiar to a Western reader normative system from Western philosophy or Western ethics."

And overall, I tend to think of, while there's definitely a normative dimension to Buddhist ethical thought, you're going to find precepts, you're going to find virtues that are held up as the most felicitous way of being, things that we ought to cultivate in ourselves. What are wholesome and unwholesome states and things like that? Overall, I tend to think of Buddhism as being more like its own kind of thing. [CHUCKLES]

And I'm a little bit echoing. I'm sympathetic to the interpretation of Buddhist ethics from Jay Garfield, who reads it as more or less a form of moral phenomenology of the work of transforming the way that we experience the world. Phenomenology, you could say capital P phenomenologies or is it European tradition from the 20th century French and German thought, mainly studying the structure of conscious experience?

But phenomenology with a lowercase p, we could just think of as ways of understanding what shapes our experience of the world. And moral phenomenology as interrogating critically, what are the sort of avenues of agency that we can exploit for transforming the way that we experience the world in a more felicitous way within the sort of paradigm of Buddhism in a way that's liberatory or compassionate?

And so when I think about it in those terms, there are, again, different Buddhisms, so I can't speak to what's common to literally every Buddhist tradition in the world over across history. But there are a couple of Buddhist concepts that are foundational and maybe that various Buddhist traditions would hold as, at least, some kind of commonly held foundation.

And some of those would be like the-- I mean, something that would definitely be shared by all Buddhist traditions is something like the Four Noble Truths and the articulation of human suffering and liberation, the pathway out of suffering, or the concept of karma and understanding how cause and effect produce, not only sort of the quality of our experience in a given moment, but also, literally, the world that we're experiencing and like practical material sense.

And also principles of moral psychology and problematizing the ways that self-cherishing, our attachment to the existence of a concrete self, which is considered from a Buddhist standpoint to be mistaken and ignorant, how that produces ethical problems and thinking about how certain afflictive emotions arise from that orientation of self-cherishing.

So that's a basis of Buddhist ethics sort of basic foundational concepts and Buddhist ethics. And what's interesting then when we get into this environmental or ecological frame that you're bringing up, one interesting thing that we see a lot of engaged Buddhist environmental thinkers doing is mobilizing those foundational ethical principles in a sort of collective or ecological framework.

And so this is a way in which you could say the unit of analysis of Buddhist ethics is changing or is changed under these sorts of theories, where these concepts that were really structured around thinking about individual experience, individual liberation and confusion and the pathway out of it and things like that, how might we apply that to a collective situation or to an ecological situation?

And so in that respect, some of that can be a little radical. Some of it involves neologisms, thinking about-- to say collective liberation, collective karma. There's a little bit of textual evidence for that in canonical Buddhism, but it's often fairly radical, honestly. And so that's the way in which I think some traditionalists might look at those engaged Buddhists and say, you're kind of just making stuff up here.

But I do think that there is something structurally-- I don't think they're making things up in the sense that they're holding to a structural similarity between what it means to liberate the individual and trying to think about the ways in which selfhood might function at a group level, how karma might function at a collective level, and how liberation might function at a collective level.

MIKE Yeah, this is all super, super interesting. I think I keep saying that, but it is. So just a couple of points to just
LIVERMORE: reiterate there and then maybe just offer a thought on this. So one possibility, so I was kind of-- gave the quick wrap on Western moral philosophy. And so we could say, well, there's a way in which the various Buddhist traditions are a little orthogonal to the-- they're not necessarily opposed.

So there's nothing necessarily inconsistent about being a consequentialist and then also having some views that you kind of pull out of Buddhism. But they're not the same thing just because there's not inconsistencies. Well, there's lots of things that-- they're just kind of-- maybe they're just orthogonal to each other, which is interesting. It's an interesting possibility. But then what you were kind of recently talking about is how some folks in the engaged Buddhism movement or people who are kind of in this space are thinking about how Buddhism can be responsive to the modern challenges associated with the environment.

I mean, in a way, this is very similar to what went on in Western moral philosophy a couple of decades ago where the field of environmental ethics kind of came into being. And there was a lot of thinking about, well, wait a second, are we looking at the right unit of analysis? Right?

JESSICA LOCKE: Yeah.

MIKE We tend to have this individual, human individual at the centerpiece of our moral universe. And there's also
LIVERMORE: animals, you know? Peter Singer, right? There's also animals.

JESSICA LOCKE: There's also animals.

[BOTH CHUCKLING]

MIKE And there's all of the other life on the planet, right? And it's organized in lots of different ways. And there's
LIVERMORE: ecosystems. And there's this whole world that we have an effect on. And maybe we need to rethink some of the foundational principles. I don't think that's fully caught on. I mean, there's threads in environmental ethics, probably hasn't led to a huge wholesale paradigm shift within Western moral philosophy, and which, of course, is hugely diverse as well.

So in any case, I guess, maybe that's my question, is what do you think of that analogy? Is it kind of just something that's playing out on two separate tracks where they just have intellectual traditions that are responding to the facts of the modern world and they're just doing it in some ways that are not surprisingly similar because the facts on the ground that they're addressing have certain characteristics to them? So that's one thing that's happening. But then there's also this engagement.

So that's the question is, in what way is it kind of two tracks dealing with the same set of issues? In which way is there kind of cross-pollination and interaction between the two tracks?

JESSICA LOCKE: Interesting. OK, so--

MIKE And feel free to just abandon my track idea altogether.
LIVERMORE:

JESSICA LOCKE: No, no, no, I mean, let me know if I'm addressing the tracks as you're sort of imagining them. But what your question brings to mind is a point that has been made by the engaged Buddhist environmental activist David Loy, who has coined, actually, this term ecodharma.

And he is very explicit about the fact that, traditionally, Buddhist philosophy generally, much less Buddhist ethics, doesn't deal with environmental issues because those issues didn't come up right in the historical context in which the teachings of the Buddha were emerging or were being articulated. And so he's just totally honest, like, look, this is not-- I'm not being some faithful interpreter of the canonical texts.

But kind of to your analogy of Western moral theory and the emergence of environmental philosophy, he says, the ecological crisis is in our midst. It is one of the most pressing moral issues of our time. And so if we are not deploying all of the theoretical resources that we have, particularly if we're already committed to a tradition like Buddhism, then what is it that we're actually doing?

And so he's really trying to push, really, I would say, Western Buddhist convert communities to rethink their sort of otherworldly transcendental orientation of what their Buddhist practice means and actually in engage more concretely in the situation that's right under their noses, right under our noses.

And at the same time, so while he's really trying to put convert Buddhist communities on the spot, He also says, if we can't do this, the Buddhist tradition is irrelevant because this is a form of suffering that is prominent and important and underway empirically. This is happening. And so if our tradition can't speak to this, then it is just going to be a historical anthropological artifact.

And so there is something that I think that I don't think that I'm being-- I'm editorializing too much. I think he would really say that it's the nature of Buddhism to adapt and evolve and transform itself as it comes into contact with novel circumstances, socially and historically and culturally. And this is the circumstance to which Buddhism really needs to kind of, if not adopt, then at least, adopt a stance of nimbleness.

And the survival of the tradition really depends on it. The viability of the tradition really depends on it.

**MIKE
LIVERMORE:**

Yeah, yeah, I mean, that's interesting. And so that really is a kind of almost internal to Buddhism kind of conversation in some sense, that is, this is we live in a world that requires us to address these kinds of issues. So maybe one of the things that we could do is just play around with some of the ideas that we've been kind of mentioning. What do they have to say about the environmental-- the policy environmental law in the environmental context?

So a couple that you've mentioned-- so interdependence, right? So this is an idea that's very common in many Buddhist traditions, maybe foundational to all Buddhist traditions. You talked about samsara, which is kind of the world, the world of suffering, the kind that we're casually familiar with. Our manifest image is a term that's used in other circles for that kind of idea. It's just how we-- the world that we come into and how we understand it. Impermanence, right?

The idea that everything is kind of temporary, it doesn't have essences that persist forever. And OK, so one could, I think, look at some of these ideas and there's kind of maybe a facial obviousness in how some of them might be applied. So interdependence would be something that's very similar to John Muir's ideas or just ideas that come out of ecology that the world is a complex place. You pull on a thread, and the whole thing, it's attached to everything else.

And so one could just say, well, that's just a kind of a basic recognition that our actions have all kinds of consequences on the natural world and that the natural world is a complex interwoven thing that we have to be very careful about intervening in. So that would be one set of ideas that might come out of the notion of interdependence. But as you know, there's other things too, like so this idea of samsara that the world is just suffering.

And what you need to do is kind of come to the right relationship with that world rather than try to make it somewhat better in some sense, to reduce suffering in a facial way of, say, making people's lives a little bit less painful, extending their lives, that kind of thing. That's a mistaken way of orienting your efforts. Or an idea like impermanence which is to say, well, maybe the issue isn't so much that we-- for environmentalists, that we're causing all this change.

The problem is that we have this notion that the world shouldn't be changing and that we're trying to cling to an idea of nature that we've essentialized and that we have-- we're kind of reified this notion. And that's just a mistake. You're never going to get anywhere if you're trying to just cling on and grasp onto a fundamentally impermanent state of affairs. So yeah, so anyway, I just those I throw those out there as food for thought.

So what's your take on how we can deploy and whether we can deploy these concepts or in service of trying to think through questions in environmental ethics either as someone who is really in the tradition and kind of adheres to a whole set of ideas that come out of attrition or, as many, many people are, they kind of pick and choose a different moral ethical ideas and they're very pragmatic and just put them into practice where they see them fitting?

JESSICA LOCKE: Right, right. Well, I mean, the first concept that you drew on, interdependence, is, in fact, I would say, I think one of the primary concepts used by Buddhist environmental ethicists because, as you note, it is such a foundationally important concept in Buddhist philosophy that is both-- it describes the world.

And it's so important that even in the Pali canon, the early Buddhist texts, it is said that if you understand interdependent arising, interdependence, you understand the Dharma. I think that's the whole ballgame. And that's just one specific set of one Buddhist philosophical tradition. But nonetheless, I think that points to how important this is. It's not just some random concept that's cherry picked out of nowhere by environmental Buddhist environmental theorists.

And what I think makes it so juicy as an ethical concept though, is that it is this descriptive sort of ontological illustration of being, the way the world is, the way the world exists. Which is to say what it means, truly, is that everything that exists is dependent upon causes and conditions. Nothing exists autonomously or independently. And as you note, I think that there's lots of affinities with sort of ecological thinking and other environmental sort of paradigms.

What's soteriological, what's liberatory about that in the Buddhist tradition is that that can really-- thinking that way can really displace some of our habitual tendencies for how we place ourselves in the world, how we experience our own selfhood and what we seek out in the world. And so you were also kind of noting impermanence as another key kind of teaching.

One other sort of philosophical concept that I would add to that discussion is emptiness, which is one of the key teachings in the great vehicle, the Mahayana Buddhism that emerged about 500 years after the lifetime of the Buddha. And emptiness holds that all that exists, including the individual, is empty of intrinsic existence, that nothing exists separately.

So you could say interdependence is sort of like the flip side of emptiness, the other side of the coin of emptiness. And if we think about ourselves in the world in this way, as not separate, not inherently existent, not permanent, but rather in dynamic interdependent relationship with everything else in the world, that stands to really displace our tendency toward selfishness and our sense of separation from others.

And that sense a sense of separation is what gives rise, of course, to then thinking about, well, I've got my own interests that are in competition with everyone else's and I need to do whatever it takes to protect me and mine. And that's the biggest ethical problem that needs to be solved in Buddhist soteriology, in the Buddhist study of liberation.

And I think that it doesn't take a really vast imagination to really see how that might apply to a sort of Buddhist ecological ethos of really thinking about how to displace the sort of anthropocentrism that has been so much at the root of our ecological crisis and the sort of thinking of humanity as not only separate from but dominant over nature, other non-human animals and the environment.

And so this is another-- I was referencing earlier how kind of the unit of analysis can change in Buddhist environmental theory. And I think this is a sort of example of saying, look, interdependence is a sort of-- it's not just describing our own individual-- the stakes of our own individual liberation. We can apply this to modernity and coloniality and all kinds of aspects of what motivates our extractive relationship with the natural environment.

MIKE
LIVERMORE:

So what the is, I think, kind of-- just coming to mind as we talk through this is a key difference-- again, you'll correct me if I'm wrong, [CHUCKLES] but a key difference that I see here between, say, some standard Western ethical frameworks, broadly and for thinking about environmental issues and what we can say broadly comes out of various Buddhist traditions, is the relationship between, let's just say, liberation and ethical practice, which is not something that Western philosophers talk a lot about.

We think about in terms of what is good? What has value? What are our obligations? And that kind of thing. And it's not really about me in what I'm supposed to do. It's just what I'm supposed to do in some sense. What I have most reason to do. That kind of thing. But it's not a path to anything or that's not the idea. Whereas, there is an idea of liberation that comes out of Buddhism that you've mentioned several times.

And so I'm going to just see what you think of this thought, which is that, in a way, thinking of Buddhism as providing ethical resources for thinking about how we should address environmental problems that is kind of-- I've been approaching this question. I'm kind of questioning along those lines. Maybe that's a little off. And maybe a better way that's more in keeping with the tradition would be something or the traditions would be something along the lines of that engaging in environmental questions and--

What these are, these are opportunities for kind of Buddhist ethics and Buddhist practice to flourish in a contemporary environment, maybe even saying words along these lines. So which is to say an idea like interdependence is-- it has this liberatory effect if you really understand it of allowing you to see clear of your own kind of self orientation.

And you know what? It turns out engaging in environmental activism or engaging in environmental ethical thinking is destabilizing in exactly that way. It's a recognition of interdependence as both an opportunity for personal clarity and as a kind of direct and irreducible part of that, you're engaging in kind of improving the conditions of the world. So anyway, that's just a thought. I'm curious what you think of that.

JESSICA LOCKE: Well, so one thing that comes to mind-- the first thing that comes to mind is that one way of approaching ethical theory generally and certainly a prominent way of approaching ethical theory in the Western world tradition is an a normative way of saying, what kind of rules should I adopt in my behavior to avoid being a monstrous jerk?

And I think there's been plenty of ink spilled by Western philosophers trying to come up with the most morally defensible maxim, you could say, to live by, and maybe a lot of Western environmental ethics deploys, that sort of attitude of, like, what are our obligations? What is just behavior in an ecological sense or an environmental sense?

Personally, this is my hot take on those sorts of approaches to moral life, is that you can come up with the best, most defensible rule, and there's a whole other set of personal qualities that you also need to develop alongside that rule that will allow you to live by them. Because a lot of times, the rule says you can't act selfishly, for example. You need to be selfless. That's hard for a lot of people.

I'll go on record personally. So I think, personally, this is why, interestingly, I mentioned earlier that some theorists, some Buddhist ethical theorists read Buddhist ethics as a form of consequentialism. Some read it as a form of virtue ethics and read it as different in kind from Western moral theories. I, personally, haven't seen many people arguing that Buddhist ethics is deontological, meaning, duties based.

And so I think that is kind of getting a little bit to your question of that maybe I don't think Buddhist ethical reflection, environmental ethical reflection is necessarily so concerned with what is the correct way to be engaging environmentally or what is the correct ethical relationship that I should be having with environmental policy or with environmental issues per se?

Personally, I think that there's a much stronger emphasis in Buddhist ethical reflection generally, and including within an ecological paradigm of transforming the relationship that we have with our environment, sort of from the very ground up so that it's not-- moral life isn't necessarily a matter of following the right rule but it's more a matter of spontaneously enacting what follows naturally from the kind of relationship that we have with others and with the world.

And that comes from having conditioned our consciousness in a particular way through practice. And so I do think that, while I think there's lots of interesting concepts that Buddhist environmental philosophers can articulate that come from maybe Buddhist canonical ethical theory, things like interdependence or things like the figure of the bodhisattva, which we haven't talked about yet, but which is also kind of at play sometimes in this discourse, and we can certainly sort of forge these conceptual affinities and conceptual connections.

But ultimately, that exercise can get a little bit academic. [CHUCKLES] And I do think that there's something to your sort of intuition that you're raising that Buddhist ethics isn't a strictly academic exercise. It's about self-transformation and transforming the ways that we experience ourselves in the world. And so in that respect, I actually think this is less discussed I think in the Buddhist environmental literature to my knowledge.

But there's a particular kind of attunement to place and to environmental phenomena that we can see in a lot of Buddhist literature across different Buddhist traditions that I think actually sort of helps illustrate the sort of first personal-- well, I would say a first personal kind of relationship with the environment that is very different from this kind of like human-centered, how should I act within the environment?

And instead, enact something like-- how can I put this? Being in a subtle communicative, compassionate relationship with the environment as an awake and expressive phenomenon. And so when I'm saying this, this sounds a little woo woo, but--

[BOTH CHUCKLING]

--but we see in like Indian and Tibetan Buddhist texts, we can read about teachers doing rituals to subdue local deities and interacting with local environmental deities that are sort of inhabiting a particular place, geographically speaking. In East Asian Buddhism, we read about the sacralization of geographic features, like mountains, sacred mountains.

Also in Tibetan Buddhism or rather more like the pre-Buddhist autochthonous tradition of Bon, there's this real emphasis on the importance of elemental energies and relating to the elements as kind of expressive, communicative forces. And what I think is powerful about this within the context of Buddhist environmental thought is the way that it reframes how human beings are in relationship with their environment and seeing the environment actually as powerfully responsive and alive.

Like, it's an interlocutor. And some of this, we can see shades of this articulated in the concept of Buddha nature tathagatagarbha, which is the sense that all sentient beings and even possibly the phenomenal world is Buddha, is awake, is enlightened. There's this communication of compassionate wisdom that is the arising of everything, of all phenomena.

And so I think maybe the zen teacher Dogen expresses this when he says the mountains and rivers are sutras, are teachings, are word of the Buddha. And so I think that, to conclude this thought, I think that we can turn to a lot of the Buddhist ethical concepts from a normative standpoint as a way to get us away from a mechanistic view of nature or an anthropocentric placement of humanity within nature.

But I also think that there's so much juice in a lot of Buddhist environmental writing and practice that tunes us into the sort of magic of the phenomenal world, the speech of the world that is in open defiance of the modern rationalistic mores that are I think directly related to the extractive colonialist paradigms that are responsible for the ecological crisis.

**MIKE
LIVERMORE:**

Yes. I mean, that's a really interesting set of ideas. It actually links up to some earlier podcast guests. Laura Candiotta was one that talks about loving nature. That's a podcast episode that we did. And there was a lot about this idea of communication and understanding and developing a particular relationship to place. She's a philosopher in Europe.

So yeah, maybe just the final thing, appreciate you taking the time to chat with me today, but something I wanted to raise that I'd be curious to your thoughts on. So obviously, we've been talking a lot about the moral resources that we have in Buddhism and Buddhist ethics and thinking about how they apply to the environment and social questions. But obviously, there's-- Buddhist isn't a moral magic-- a magic moral bullet.

There's troubling historical, there's troubling contemporary dynamics in cultures that have very strong Buddhist influences. During World War II, zen Buddhists, leading figures were involved in the nationalist movement. Myanmar is a contemporary example where folks speaking out of a Buddhist tradition have been complicit with and even kind of promoting some really terrible repression of folks.

So how do you respond to these kind of historical issues? Is it just kind of, that's the complexity of any human institution or is there any kind of specific-- for someone who isn't really inclined to buy into any of this thinking and, in part due, to some of these bad historical and contemporary examples, what thoughts might you offer?

JESSICA LOCKE: Yeah, the Myanmar thing--

[BOTH CHUCKLING]

--I have had to do a lot of answering for Myanmar as a Buddhist ethicist. And I will just point out that I think that this is true in all kinds of traditions the world over, that there's a huge difference between the views that are espoused on paper and the actual cultural instantiation in a particular time and place, and the ways in which a society might be defined as Buddhist culturally.

But that doesn't necessarily mean that the way that society manifests is a specific expression of a Buddhist view per se. And obviously, I think I don't know that one could really justify genocide on the basis of Buddhist philosophy. Maybe the Burmese regime manages that.

But overall, I think that this is where we're seeing a phenomenon that I think happens in plenty of instances of a yawning gap between the actual doctrine of a particular tradition and then the ways that it gets institutionalized. That's sort of how I've come to understand when societies go against their avowed views, is that's what's at play.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Right. And of course, as you're absolutely right, like, pick a moral tradition or religious tradition. There's been some bad behavior that's been just attempted to be justified according to it, of course. All right, well, Jess, this has been a super interesting conversation. I suspect we could keep talking for a while on various themes, but we have to end at some point. And so yeah, this has just been really, really interesting. I appreciate you taking the time to chat with me today.

JESSICA LOCKE: Thank you so much for having me. This was a pleasure.

MIKE LIVERMORE: And listeners, if you enjoyed this episode, let us know. You can give us like, a rating, subscribe to the podcast, and follow us on social media. It'd be great to hear from you. Till next time.

[MUSIC PLAYING]