

BOOK REVIEWS

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Anthony Le Duc. *Buddhist Environmental Humanism: Doing Good for Self and Others*. UK, Ethics Press, 2025. ISBN 978-1-83711-112-1, 259 pp.

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1. Introduction

In an era marked by deepening ecological crises, environmental ethics has increasingly become a vital field of inquiry, stretching across disciplines, cultures, and belief systems. Yet, as debates about climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation intensify, a critical question remains: Can personal moral transformation be as important as technological innovation and policy reform in saving the planet?

In *Buddhist Environmental Humanism*, Anthony Le Duc offers a compelling and timely response. Grounded in the moral framework of Theravāda Buddhism, the book proposes that true environmental sustainability requires not only systemic change but a radical shift in human consciousness. Through the lens of “Buddhist environmental humanism,” Le Duc argues that the cultivation of inner virtues, mindfulness, compassion, generosity, and ethical responsibility can transform how individuals and societies relate to the natural world.

This review explores the book’s central argument, thematic range, evidentiary basis, structure, and intellectual significance. It concludes by reflecting on the author’s unique perspective and the broader relevance of his work in today’s environmental discourse.

2. Moral Self-Cultivation as the Heart of Ecological Ethics

At the core of Le Duc’s argument is a bold and refreshing thesis: that the environmental catastrophe confronting humanity is fundamentally a spiritual and ethical crisis. Drawing on classical Buddhist concepts, especially the “three poisons” of greed, hatred, and delusion, he asserts that ecological destruction stems from moral failings that cannot be resolved through policy or science alone.

Instead, Le Duc contends that a path to sustainability must begin with the transformation of the self.

His proposed model of “Buddhist environmental humanism” bridges the gap between anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches. Unlike deep ecology, which may downplay human agency in favor of nature’s intrinsic value, Le Duc centers the human person not as master over nature, but as a morally responsible being embedded in an interdependent world. The clarity of this thesis and the coherence with which it is developed across the book’s chapters mark it as a significant contribution to both Buddhist and environmental ethical thought.

3. Scope, Depth, and Methodological Rigor

Le Duc’s exploration covers wide terrain, doctrinally, philosophically, and ethically. The book is structured into twelve chapters, methodically moving from diagnosis to ethical prescription. Early chapters outline the spiritual roots of the ecological crisis, while later chapters propose a Buddhist response grounded in interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and virtue ethics.

The author’s approach is both analytical and normative. He neither imposes Buddhist views dogmatically nor romanticizes them as inherently eco-friendly. Instead, he critically engages Buddhist texts, examines their limitations, and offers a reinterpretation suited for the modern ecological context. His writing reveals both fidelity to tradition and an innovative moral imagination. The text’s careful structure, beginning with analysis and culminating in a constructive ethical framework, makes it intellectually satisfying and pedagogically effective.

4. Evidence and Interdisciplinary Engagement

To support his argument, Le Duc draws on a robust mix of sources. He skillfully weaves classical Buddhist texts with contemporary scholarship in environmental ethics, political ecology, and religious studies. Thinkers such as Ian Harris, Joanna Macy, Bryan Norton, and Pope Francis (via *Laudato Si*) appear in dialogue with Buddhist teachings, enriching the book’s interdisciplinary breadth.

The real-world implications of Le Duc’s arguments are not ignored. He references environmental disasters in Southeast Asia, such as flooding in Thailand, and highlights Buddhist ecological actions like tree ordination ceremonies and monastic conservation efforts. These examples, though brief, demonstrate the living relevance of Buddhist ethics in addressing real ecological challenges. While additional ethnographic material could have further grounded his theory in practice, the philosophical rigor and range of examples lend the work persuasive authority.

5. The Flow of Ideas and Internal Coherence

The book's structure mirrors the ethical journey it advocates. From the recognition of suffering (environmental and spiritual), to the identification of its causes, to the envisioning of a path forward, *Buddhist Environmental Humanism* follows a narrative arc not unlike the Four Noble Truths.

Each chapter builds organically on the last, offering readers both conceptual clarity and progressive insight. For instance, the shift from discussing Buddhist understandings of suffering to notions of ecological responsibility, solidarity, and mutual service unfolds naturally, allowing the moral framework to take shape with elegance and depth. The flow is logical, and the argument is increasingly persuasive as the reader moves through the text.

6. Critical Reflections and Constructive Contributions

Le Duc's work stands out in its ability to bridge abstract theory and lived ethical concern. The book resonates with contemporary spiritual calls for ecological conversion, akin to those in *Laudato Si'*, but offers a distinctively Buddhist voice focused on personal virtue and mindful living.

Yet, some limitations are worth noting. The book emphasizes inner transformation but gives limited attention to how Buddhist ethics might inform environmental policy, institutional reform, or international law. In an age when structural and global action is necessary, the role of spiritual ethics must also connect with systemic change. Nevertheless, Le Duc's focus on the inner life is a vital and often underappreciated component of sustainable action. In this way, his contribution is not so much a final answer as it is an invitation to deepen the conversation.

7. Authorial Background and Intellectual Perspective

Anthony Le Duc brings a unique background to this project. A Vietnamese Catholic priest and theologian based in Thailand, Le Duc's interreligious and intercultural experience enriches his reading of Buddhism and ecology. He writes not from a place of romanticism or detachment but from deep engagement, academically, spiritually, and pastorally.

His position allows him to offer both a sympathetic critique and a constructive reinterpretation of Buddhist traditions. His prior scholarship on religion and ecology, particularly in Southeast Asia, provides a solid foundation upon which this work builds. This blend of scholarship and lived perspective gives the book a rare authenticity.

8. Framing within Genre and Discipline

Buddhist Environmental Humanism is best understood as a contribution to religious environmental ethics. It speaks clearly to scholars of Buddhist studies, moral philosophy, religious ethics, and sustainability studies. While the book is accessible to a broader audience, its core strength lies in its ability to advance academic discourse while remaining spiritually and ethically grounded.

Le Duc avoids doctrinal rigidity or speculative theology. Instead, he remains focused on values, virtues, and practices that can cultivate a deeper sense of ecological belonging. His work aligns with others in the eco-philosophical and spiritual ecology fields, yet its emphasis on the transformative power of Buddhist moral psychology offers something distinct and necessary.

9. Contemporary Relevance and Lasting Value

As ecological despair grows, many people are searching for frameworks that do more than inform; they want to be transformed. Le Duc's book offers precisely this: not a quick solution to environmental problems, but a long, steady path of ethical awakening. His call to reimagine our relationship with the Earth through inner transformation is both deeply traditional and radically contemporary.

His vision aligns with many indigenous, Christian, and interfaith perspectives, making the book a valuable resource in dialogues that cross cultural and religious boundaries. Whether one is Buddhist or not, the invitation to live with compassion, mindfulness, and simplicity is universally resonant.

10. Conclusion: A Vital Contribution to Ecological Ethics

Buddhist Environmental Humanism is more than an academic text; it is a moral call. In lucid prose and well-reasoned argumentation, Anthony Le Duc reminds us that the solution to our ecological crises does not lie solely in the realm of politics, economics, or science. Rather, it lies equally in the domain of ethics, spirituality, and character formation.

By placing Buddhist virtue ethics at the heart of his environmental vision, Le Duc revitalizes ancient wisdom for a modern, imperiled world. His book challenges us to reimagine environmentalism not as external activism alone, but as internal transformation rooted in compassion and responsibility.

This work is essential reading for scholars, activists, educators, and spiritually engaged citizens concerned about the future of our planet. It offers not only critique but a constructive path forward, one that recognizes that healing the Earth begins with healing ourselves.