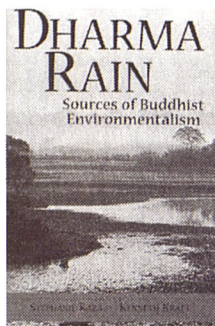


BOOK REVIEW



Review: Barry Briggs
Dharma Sound Zen Center

*Dharma Rain:
Sources of Buddhist
Environmentalism*
Edited by Stephanie Kaza
and Kenneth Kraft
Shambhala, 2000

The Buddha, when she appears in the world, extends a nourishing rain to each of us, regardless of our condition and situation. As this rain falls, all the grasses, shrubs, and trees become fresh and glossy. But when we humans encounter this dharma rain, most of us simply unfurl umbrellas and continue along in our daily habits.

Why would we avoid this life-giving nourishment?

Perhaps we think umbrellas will shelter us from the world's many discomforts. Perhaps we think umbrellas add a certain stylish flair to our lives. Or maybe we fail to notice how our arms have frozen into position, umbrellas aloft.

It's hard work supporting an umbrella and, worse, these umbrellas—our mind-habits and self-concerns—hinder our ability to participate fully in the world.

Dharma Rain, Sources for Buddhist Environmentalism, addresses the urgent need to set aside our umbrellas and embrace the world with open hearts and clear eyes. As the 75 teachings gathered in this book make clear, Buddhism can play a unique and critical role in the environmental suffering that affects every being on the planet. Because Buddhist teaching clarifies the nature of suffering, it con-

tains the seeds through which humans can help end all suffering.

However, Buddhist teachings in themselves make little difference.

No matter how thoroughly we understand the "three poisons" of anger, ignorance, and desire, or how keenly we comprehend the principles of cause and effect, without practice we have little hope of transforming our lives. Through sincere practice our inherent compassion, wisdom, and truthfulness can emerge to guide our response to suffering. A rich anthology such as *Dharma Rain* can encourage the reader to practice deeply.

Just as the Lotus Sutra recognizes the diverse needs of plants, so *Dharma Rain* brings together Buddhist teaching from many sources to address diverse human interests and capabilities. The editors, Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft, have organized these resources in ways that make it easy for each reader to identify subject areas that connect to their personal situation.

The first section of *Dharma Rain* reflects the environmental wisdom of ancient Indian, Chinese, and Japanese teachers, as expressed in sutras, poetry, and recorded talks. Following this section, modern teachers from Thich Nhat Hanh to Gary Snyder interpret and assess traditional Buddhist teachings on the environment. Two subsequent sections focus on Buddhist activism (sometimes called "engaged Buddhism"). The three remaining sections illuminate ways in which Buddhist practice can manifest in environmental awareness and responsibility.

Each of us will find nourishment in this book, according to our unique condition and situation. Although every section contains something of interest, I was most engaged by the first section, "Teachings from Buddhist Traditions," with its excerpts from the Lotus Sutra, the Hua-Yen Sutra, and poetry from Chinese and Japanese masters. For example, in a poem entitled, "The Coincidence of Opposites," the Chinese Zen master Shih-t'ou (700-790 C.E.)

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wrote directly about the importance of the engaged life:

If you overlook the Way right before your eyes,
How will you know the path beneath your feet?

We hear an echo of Shih-t'ou' toward the end of *Dharma Rain*, in a *gatha* by the modern Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh:

The mind can go in a thousand directions.
But on this beautiful path, I walk in peace.
With each step, a gentle wind.
With each step, a flower.

In poems written 1,300 years apart, these great teachers remind us that the true way is right in front of us in every moment. As we stand from our cushion for walking meditation, Shih-t'ou guides us. As we leave the dharma room for breakfast, Thich Nhat Hanh points to our mind-path. Their words illuminate the question that arises naturally from meditation practice: *What is this?* This simple question connects us intimately with the world around us—our environment.

The writings collected in *Dharma Rain* originated because Buddhist practice inevitably reveals the great vow that resides within each of us: *I vow to help all suffering beings.*

Zen Master Seung Sahn calls this vow our "direction." As meditation practice clarifies the truth of our lives—our condition, situation, and relationship to this world—we can draw on our inherent wisdom and compassion to help end suffering. When we perceive the truth, cause and effect become clear and we see how action affects the environment. This teaching is not abstract, but is deeply rooted in our experience of every moment. Several years ago in *Primary Point*, Zen Master Seung Sahn wrote:

Starting from here, we need to fix this world, make this world a better place.

"Starting from here," means moment after moment, how can we help? This focus on beneficial action in every moment is the great gift of Buddhist practice. The gift of *Dharma Rain* lies in its ability to inspire both practice and action.

Through practice, we can let go of desires, ideas, beliefs, fears, and hopes; then we can use the stuff of everyday life to reach out and offer a helping hand. Through practice, we can realize that getting drenched with dharma rain isn't so bad. Long ago, the Japanese Zen master Daito (1282–1337) wrote about this.

No umbrella, getting soaked,
I'll just use the rain as my raincoat.

But we don't need to take Daito's word for it. Let's all get wet together.

An excerpt from the Lotus Sutra

You should understand that it is like a great cloud
that rises up in the world
and covers it all over.

This beneficent cloud is laden with moisture;
the lightning gleams and flashes,
and the sound of thunder reverberates afar,
causing the multitude to rejoice.

The rain falls everywhere,
coming down on all four sides.

Its flow and saturation are measureless,
reaching to every area of the earth,
to the ravines and valleys of the mountains and streams,
to the remote and secluded places where grow
plants, bushes, medicinal herbs,
trees large and small,
a hundred grains, rice seedlings,
sugar cane, grape vines.

The rain moistens them all,
none fails to receive its full share.

The parched ground is everywhere watered,
herbs and trees alike grow lush.

What falls from the cloud is water of a single flavor,
but the plants and trees, thickets and groves,
each accept the moisture that is appropriate to its portion.

All the various trees,
whether superior, middling, or inferior,
take what is fitting for large or small,
and each is enabled to sprout and grow.

Root, stem, limb, leaf,
the glow and hue of flower and fruit—
one rain extends to them
and all are able to become fresh and glossy.

The Buddha is like this
when he appears in the world

(*Dharma Rain*, pp. 44-45)