

Buddhist Religious Ecological Concepts

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INTRODUCTION

Among many contemporary issues one of the main issues that required an urgent answer is the ecological crisis created by man's unnecessary and improper involvements into the environmental processes. In this consumerist and capitalist society man's intended purpose is to earn money by any means. He does not seem to be satisfied with gifts of nature. He exploits as much as he can with greedy dispositions. For this egoistic purpose of man the environment has always helped in the past. However early people, even primitive people used the environmental resources with limited expectations. They knew that natural resources are limited and henceforth they had to be protected. This knowledge was gained not by so called science but by their religious morality. Religious morality always controls one's desires to some extent. Even within the secular life style man is required to fulfill his needs with some intuitions towards the external world. Man who has the light of religious morality and oriented behavior by religiosity never harms the environment for the sake of his own existence.

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Modern man has lost considerably his orientation of religious morality and behavior. He seems to over use the environment and its resources. As a result of that, modern man has to face many ecological crises. These were created by man and therefore he is totally responsible for them. Modern studies may suggest many solutions for these ecological crises. For instance the concept of development centers on the theory of sustainable development. Modern man thinks of the nature and tries to achieve the development goals with minimum harm to the nature. However my point is that rules and regulations which are introduced and implemented externally are unable to answer effectively for these ecological issues. Man is required to go back to his basics. He should be able to control his desires and obey the environment.

Buddhist teachings on ecology give some profound attitudes towards the whole universe. Most importantly Buddhist morality internally emphasizes that the external world is not isolated from mankind. It is a part of man's life. Mankind is dependent on ecology. These attitudes are planted internally. This holistic approach can be used as the foundation of environmental ethics. In this presentation my aim is to grasp Buddhist religious and philosophical morality towards ecology.

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND RELIGION

Modern science and technology, with their destructive productions, have created many ecological crises as global problems. Though many of them come from the Western region, they have threatened the whole world. As far as this critical condition is concerned all nationalities should get united and face them. On the other hand, in recent years the growth and development of science and the advancement of technology have changed man's attitudes towards the environment. One of the big issues regarding the negative attitudes of modern man on the eco system is that he thinks that he is able to change it at his will. Thus, unlike in the past, today the environment has become secondary to man. In other words man thinks that ecology depends

on man.¹ Ethically concerned, the basic problem is the relationship between man and nature. Along with such a growth, man has been trying to control and master nature and thereby makes use of nature only for enjoyment. This has led to corruption and pollution of nature. This kind of disharmony between man and nature has led to the problem of environmental degradation, a basic threat to global living. In this situation man's tendency has gone towards his basics to find moral solutions to these global crises. According to Buddhism the nature can be used for spiritual enjoyment. However Buddhist advice is to let the nature as it is and enjoy only the beauty of nature with the attitude of non-craving.²

Environmental ethics concerns the moral relationship of human beings to the environment and its non-human contentemporaries.³ The discipline of environmental ethics has been therefore one of the important modern introductions to the arena. The main debate in this field is between instrumental value and intrinsic value. To put this into simple words we can ask the question of whether nature is a means or an end. As we perceive today modern man thinks that the environment is for the use of their own. This attitude cannot be taken as a random incident as it has a causal chain. This is a creation of anthropocentrism of modern thought. Though Buddhism accepts the supremacy⁴ of mankind regarding his potentiality to achieve spiritual development it never undermines the other universal phenomena. As man's existence and his moral development depend upon the environmental factors, fundamentally the dichotomy of man and universe is illogical.

All the religions of the world have traditionally expressed some ethical concerns for the environment and its creatures. The earth had been treated with some kind of religious significant. As a result of modernity, science,

1. Ecology is the scientific study of interactions among organisms and their environment, such as the interactions organisms have with each other and with their abiotic environment. - Wikipedia

2. Dhammapada

3. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

4. According to Dhammapada to be born as a human is a very rare thing.

economy and politics, the religious ethics was replaced by humanism.⁵ Traditional profound and grateful attitudes towards nature had been condemned and neglected consequently they have disappeared from the implementation. This is the best time to consider religious environmental ethics in order to preserve the eco-system. No doubt that religion may support the intrinsic value of ecology. For them though we use nature for the survival as a tool, the environment is an end that helps to keep the balance of both living and non-living things. As a proto-science religion was able to understand the nature and interpret it by various theories in the past.⁶ In contrast the modern man is disturbing the balance in the nature by many ways and means. Human beings may do certain duties towards their fellow beings. There is a global effort to protect humanity with its utmost standards in the contexts of human rights and responsibility, freedom, justice, law and equality. Religion emphasizes that in similar way we have a set of duties towards our environment.⁷

NATURE WORSHIP

Nature worship is one of the significant features of the primitive religion and this ritual was one of the main reasons for origin of religion. For example early Indus-valley people worship various natural objects as gods and goddesses. In early Vedic religion natural phenomena were worshipped at varied degrees. As they perceived the nature as an abode of divine powers they respected it. On the other hand they benefited from nature in many ways, and as a result they wanted to show their gratitude towards it. Though we say nature worship was a primitive way of early religion, their intention and attitude were so profound. Their mere purpose was to show the genuine gratitude towards nature, as they correctly understood there were many benefits and advantages of nature. They knew that their survival totally depended on gifts received from the natural world. Today nature and its underlined theories have been discovered and interpreted scientifically

5. Buddhism is also can be taken as humanism par excellence. Yet Buddhism works on a collective effort.

6. In the past man's world view was constructed by religion.

7. Now rights of animals and other living organisms are under discussion on the global context.

whereas the modern man has lost his more important morality. So we should go to our roots in order to find solutions for environmental problems.⁸

Morality as it has been proved today's evidences cannot be completely established with modern ethical codes and legal system as they are implemented externally. But in this regard, religious ethic is so successful in molding a society as religious moral principles come from internal emotions. Buddhism never regards nature as a sacred place that thus should be venerated. However the Buddhist attitude on nature is a moral standard that emphasizes the interdependency of man on natural phenomena. Therefore the environment and its resources should be utilized with the attitude of content.⁹ The environment, with its all gifts, are for the survival of all species and therefore it should be protected for the future. Thus nature should be preserved and conserved with positive attitudes. Natural resources as we understood were limited and consumption of the resources only made them more so. The Buddhist attitudes of non-greedy and content with the minimum needs can be highly valued in this regards.¹⁰

THE GOLDEN RULE

Almost in every religion this important theory of golden is mentioned in different ways. Even in Buddhist ethics one of the central themes is that "one should treat others in exactly the same way as one treats oneself"¹¹. The Buddha has stated that the basis of the other- regarding principle is an inference from oneself to another. According to Prof. Dharmasiri this inference may work in two ways. Firstly one can think oneself in terms of others. The value of oneself or self-personality can be derived from others. Secondly one can consider others in terms of oneself. For example one should consider that the state which is unpleasant to me must be so to others. This reflection brings the abstaining from killing or harming others.¹²

8. While Buddhist practices base on the nature it respects as gratitude.

9. Santutti paramam dhanam - Content is the ultimate wealth

10. For instance Sigalovada Sutta says that a person should accumulate wealth as a bee collects pollen from a flower.

11. attanam upamam katwa

12. Dharmasiri, Gunapala. Fundamental of Buddhist Ethics, 26-27 pages

Not only the social environment consists with units of human beings but also the external environment consists with animals, flora and fauna, air and other objects can be treated in the same way of treating others and oneself. The personal morality in Buddhist teaching derives as an intrinsic value.¹³ By developing sympathy towards the external world, one can become identical with it. This profound realization is to bring the attitude that no other things can separate from one. With this ultimate justification of human morality man is responsible for preserving the environment and its resources.

UNIVERSAL LOVE

Buddhism goes beyond the boundary of the earth. Therefore Buddhism is concerned about universalism, but not about globalization as it is a narrow type of attitude to restrict nature only to this planet. According to Buddhist cosmology there are innumerable number of worlds and species. Therefore a faithful Buddhist devotee must extend his or her loving-kindness to all species whether seen or unseen in meditation.¹⁴ It should be practiced with mindfulness. So that the Buddhist method is so clearly specific in this regard. As this is done by one's mind and thought, there is no limitation. It is the duty and responsibility of everyone to extend loving-kindness beyond all boundaries. There are numerous occasions in the Buddhist context that reveal the value of universal love. For instance once the Buddha said that in spreading love, one must think of all possible kinds of living beings in the universe. Therefore the Buddhist attitude is to extend love to all beings. This utterance is the Buddhist conception of universalism.¹⁵ A man should love others in the same way that a mother loves her one and only son as *Metta Sutta* suggests.

13. As Madupindika Sutta reveals one's whole world is a interdependency of the internal world and the external world.

14. Karaniya metta sutta

15. However it is a meaningless thing to talk and research on the universe according to Buddhism.

HOLISTIC APPROACH

The nature of an ordinary personality as Buddhism understood is being separated from others. Firstly the individual identifies 'I' which is the objective or inner world. Then he or she goes to the objective world 'other' or external world. But this division is completely wrong as this leads to ignorance. This dichotomy paves the way to ego-centrism. Such a person is called '*prutajjana*' in the Buddhist terminology which means 'the separated one'.¹⁶ According to Buddhism continued desires to fulfill various needs in men generate both mental and physical sufferings in the cycle of existence. Buddhism believes that natural processes are affected by the morals of man. That is, man has both good and bad qualities. Because of ignorance, man has bad qualities. Due to wisdom, man has good qualities. These good and bad qualities of man are reflected in man's physical action and speech. Man will inevitably exploit the nature if he has bad qualities. On the contrary, if man has good qualities, he will be friendly with nature. Therefore, we see that human morality and natural environment are closely related.¹⁷

In Hua-yen Buddhism we find a simile or a legend of Indra's net to show the interdependence nature of man and ecology. According to this legend, this whole universe is covered with this net and threads are joined with a diamond. In all diamonds other diamonds' reflections can be seen. Therefore this net is interrelated. No diamonds can separate from others. If one diamond separates or divides from others the net will collapse. This view brings the so called holistic approach to the nature. The universe should be taken as a whole. When we consider the nature as a part of our life, the intrinsic value of nature becomes prevalent. Buddhist attitude towards the nature is based on the theory of depending arising. Nature depends on man. Man depends on nature. Buddhism supplies with examples of proper attitude and behavior towards nature. Kindness, Compassion, Sympathetic and Equanimity should be extended to animal life and to nature in general without reservation.

16. Buddhist theory of depending arising explains that in this universe nothing is separated.

17. As Agganna Sutta explains from the begging of the universe interactions between Physical and Psychological world paved the way for the evolution of the society and nature.

NATURE AS A SACRED PLACE

For many religions nature is a holy place as human beings dwell and survive in it. Early primitive religious followers believed that the nature is full of gods. In Shintoism nature worship is the veneration of *kamis*. *Kamis* are gods dwelling in the universe. This belief has influenced to Mahayana tradition also at variety of degrees. Even according to Buddhism there may be innumerable number of various kinds of species dwelling in trees and other places. Mahayana Buddhists believe that this universe is a place where all Buddhas live. This universe is a field of Buddhas and Bodhisatvas. Mahyanist conception of ecology therefore treats the universe as a sacred place. Even in the practice of Buddhism nature and natural places has been taking as motivating places for spiritual developments for the years.

CONCLUSION

The universe is a complex web of relations. Human relationships are far more important in the social context. Yet relationships of man with the ecological aspects also play a major role for human existence. Humans also have decisive reciprocal relationships with natural factors. All animate and inanimate things in the nature are relative to each other. They mutually help each other for their longer existence. Each individual human being is interlined with others, with animals as well as with the ecosphere. Whatever relation is there in the macrocosm it is there in the microcosm too. Thus in order to understand the universe and its complex web of relations we have to look within ourselves, realize our potential and ourselves. The knowledge of the universe and its complex relationships ultimately can change one's attitudes towards nature. Even in the practice of Buddhism environmental aspects contribute with compassion. Thus Buddhist teachings can be used to enlighten people about the inevitable co-existence between man and the nature.

Buddhism is always an eco-friendly religion. Man is advised not to exploit the nature but to enjoy it without the desire of grasping. Buddhist moral framework can highly contribute to mitigate ecological crisis that have stemmed from human activities. Once we gain the knowledge of this complex web of relations, our attitudes towards nature will

automatically change. We will no longer want to exploit nature but will rather make friends with it. We are part of nature and we have no moral right to destroy it whatsoever. To understand this important reality modern man has to go to his basics to find religious moral principles on environment.

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