

BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE MAINTENANCE OF HEALTHY ECOLOGY

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In today's globalizing profit-oriented and consumerist system all the living beings in their natural diversity are perceived as resources, useful for humans but not in and of themselves. This anthropocentric view believes that sustaining our way of life and our individual habits of mind are basic elements of a democratic society that should be tolerated and sustained, even if it entails our being cruel, our polluting the biosphere, our driving to extinction other life forms, and our declining quality of life. It is taken as a matter of fact to pay little or no attention to the nonhuman domain of flora and fauna. Such an attitude has led to atrocities perpetrated by humans against ecology and the tremendous loss of natural beauty and diversity. The destruction and debasement of the ecology has been constantly occurring through cruel methods of hunting, fishing, butchering, deforesting, over-mining, excessive use of pesticides, and pollution in various forms. Buddhist attitude towards ecology, which is the opposite of such an anthropocentric view, is similar to what Arne Naess of Norway calls deep ecology. Deep ecology believes that faulting cruelty, respecting other life forms for their intrinsic worth irrespective of their potential usefulness to humans, and arguing that through such respect and nurturance, our own lives will be greatly enriched, made more meaningful, and assured of a better chance at survival. Such a thinking that expects that people recognize not only that they are an important part of nature, but also that they have unique responsibilities to nature as moral agents. The profit-

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oriented, globalizing consumerist world promotes environmental crisis which needs to be rationalistically addressed.

Our current social order that promotes competition rather than cooperation has resulted in the concentration of resources in the hands of a few. From a Buddhist perspective any policy governing social and economic development, the primary criterion should be the well-being of the members of the society as a whole and the social system would be viewed as an integral part of the total ecosystem. Thus, from Buddhist perspective societal development would be guided along lines that promote the health and well-being of the social order without harming the natural systems within which human society is lodged. Buddhist idea of “One’ world that is the home to all known life” and its virtue ethics and positive values of compassion, equanimity, and humility are important contribution towards building an ecologically wholesome society.

Buddhism has always been steeped in the sacredness of nature and scholars like Lynn White Jr (1967) have claimed that Buddhism is more explicitly positive in its concern for the natural world unlike the Judaic-Christian faiths which place humans and their artifices over and against the natural world of animals, plants and the physical environment. Buddhologists such as Venturini strongly emphasize the necessity of ‘harmony with nature,’ but do so in the context of an ‘ecology of the mind’ which aims at a ‘purified’ world with man. The Buddhist texts speak of harmlessness to the plant and vegetable kingdom (*bījaḡāma* *abhūtagāma*). As a matter of fact, the Buddhist custom of Rainy Retreat (*vassāvāsa*) owes its origins to such a concern. Incurring such damage is an offence which requires expiation on the part of the monk. This may be interpreted as an extension of the principle of noninjury (*ahiṃsā*) to the vegetable kingdom. A consequence of this insistence is that animals and plants are to be respected and such respect arises naturally from the insight, provided by Buddhist cosmology, that all sentient beings are intimately interrelated. One can find a good example of this in the Thai monks who, amongst themselves and with laypeople, work to protect remaining areas of virgin forest and to reforest other areas whose previous felling had led to disruption of water supply or flooding.

In Chan/ Zen school the traditional ideal has been one of harmony with nature, particularly emphasized through such actions as blending meditation huts into the landscape, not wasting any food in monasteries, landscape painting, landscape gardening, and nature poetry. In paintings, human beings are just one part of a natural scene, not the focus. Great attention is paid to seemingly insignificant aspects of nature, for insight into them can give an intuitive appreciation of the inexpressible and cryptic suchness which runs through the whole fabric of existence. Such a harmony with natural phenomenon is also visible in the different poems of the *Theragāthā*. They admire the delightful rocks, cool with water, having pure streams, covered with Indagopaka insects (verse 1063), resonant with elephants and peacocks, covered with flax flowers as the sky is covered with clouds (verse 1068), with clear water and wide crags, haunted by monkeys and deer, covered with oozing moss, those rocks delight me (verse 1070), forests are delightful (verse 992). The Buddha is also said to have had a positive effect on his environment. Accounts of the Buddha's life are richly embellished with allusions to nature. He was born under a tree and as he took his first steps, lotus flowers sprang up. During childhood he often meditated under a *jambo* tree. He gave his first sermon in an animal park and his Enlightenment took place under a *peepal* tree. When he lay down between two *sāl* trees to die and pass into Nibbāna, these are said to have burst into a mass of unseasoned blossom, which fell on him in homage. It goes without saying that the Buddhist ideal for humanity relationship with animals, plants and the landscape is one of complimentary and harmonious co-operation.

A society founded upon the Dhamma recognizes that one should aim to promote the goal of the greater unit to which one belongs, and as a minimum should never seek private fulfillment in ways that inflict harm on others. The ideal is nicely pointed out in the "six principles of harmony and respect" which the Buddha taught to the Saṃgha: loving kindness in thinking, speech, and deeds; sharing gains made righteously; and following a common code of ethics and morality. Thus, in a Buddhist approach to social and economic development, the primary criterion that would govern policy formulation should be the well-being of the members of the society as a whole. The economy would be assigned to the place where it

belongs and, in turn, the social system would be viewed as an integral part of the total ecosystem. Thus, economic development would be guided along lines that promote the health and well-being of the social order without harming the natural systems within which human society is lodged. By pointing out that the vulgar chase of luxury and abundance is the root-cause of suffering, Buddhism encourages restraint, simplicity, and contentment. By extolling generosity as a basic virtue and the mark of a superior person, it promotes a wide distribution of basic necessities so that no one has to suffer deprivation. Buddhist idea of “One’ world that is the home to all known life” and its virtue ethics and positive values of compassion, equanimity, and humility are important contribution towards building an ecologically wholesome society.

Forest represents the ideal place for meditation for monks. The ideal of forest dwelling has an important place in Buddhist thinking and the forest was employed as a meditational device. A number of prominent Buddhist writers recommend mindfulness of the forest as a means of gaining insight into impermanence. In fact, Theravāda monks specializing in meditation are known as forest monks, whether or not they actually reside in the forest. The forest-dwelling monk, the hermit, is no longer afraid of the wild animals because he on his part does not threaten them but offers them safety and friendship; is happy in the solitude of the wilderness because he has abandoned worldly desires and is content with little. Buddhism appreciates the spiritual benefits of wilderness. The solitude and silence of the wilderness is perceived as most favorable to meditation. On the whole, Buddhist attitude towards wild nature is quite positive and on account of this positive evaluation it ought to be preserved as well as restored in case it has been destroyed for some reason. From this point of view, the “hermit attitude” towards nature deserves, nowadays, to become, as a supplement to the traditional Buddhist ethics of not killing any living being and of compassion and benevolence, the attitude of all Buddhists. Indeed, it appears that this attitude is, in fact, an important element in the rise of ecological movements in some Buddhist countries. In the case of a renouncer and ascetic living in the wilderness (*aranya*) one may say that it is primarily the wild animals (and plants) that constitute his society, so to speak. For lay people, forests may not be

so inviting, but there is karmic fruitfulness in planting groves and fruit-trees for human use. The famous Indian Buddhist king, Asoka, is known to have prohibited the burning of forests without reason.

Buddhism does not see humans as having either dominion or stewardship over the animal kingdom and on the contrary, human higher status implies an attitude of kindness to lesser beings, an ideal of noblesse oblige. This is backed up by the reflection that one's present fortunate position as a human is only a temporary state of affairs conditioned by past good karma. One cannot detach oneself from the plight of animals, as one has oneself gone through it (S.II.186), just as animals have had past rebirths as humans. Moreover, in the cycle of births, every being one comes across, down to an insect, will at some time have been a close friend or relative, and had been very good to one. Keeping this in mind, one should return the kindness in the present. Since human beings are social creatures who naturally come together for common ends, this means that a social order guided by Buddhist principles would consist primarily of small-scale communities in which each member can make an effective contribution. Only small-scale social arrangements can rescue people from the portending future disaster. Considered from a Buddhist point of view, the huge polluted megacities and uncaring bureaucrats and politicians typical of our age are unsuitable for a proper welfare of sentient beings. The most suitable and compatible economy would be small-scale and localized. Such an economy would use simple technology which would not drain natural resources and in its production would be aimed principally at local consumption, so that there would be direct face-to-face contact between producers and consumers. The driving force of such an economy would be the promotion of well-being both material and social, not commercial profit and unrestrained expansion.

As the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh says, "We classify other animals and living beings as 'Nature', a thing apart from us, and act as if we're somehow separate from it. Then we ask, "How should we deal with Nature?" We should deal with Nature the same way we should deal with ourselves: nonviolently. Human beings and Nature are inseparable. Just as we should not harm ourselves, we should not harm Nature". As part of Conditioned

Arising (*paticcasamuppāda*), humans are seen as having an effect on their environment not only through the purely physical aspects of their actions, but also through the moral/ immoral qualities of these. That is, karmic effects sometimes catch up with people via their environment. It is thus said that, if a king and his people act unrighteously, this has a bad effect on the environment and its gods, leading to little rain, poor crops and weak, short-lived people. Right actions have the opposite effect. The environment is held by Buddhism to respond to the state of human morality; it is not a neutral stage on which humans merely flounce or a sterile container unaffected by human actions.

This clearly has ecological ramifications: humans cannot ignore the effect of their actions on their environment. This message is also strongly implied by the *Aggañña Suttanta*, which gives an account of the initial stages of the development of sentient life on earth. This occurs when previously divine beings fall from their prior state, and through consuming a savory crust floating on the oceans, develops physical bodies, and later sexual differentiation. At first their environment is bountiful, but it becomes less so the more they greedily take from it. They feed off sweet-tasting fungus, and then creepers, but these in turn disappear as the beings differentiate in appearance the more beautiful ones become conceited and arrogant. Then they feed off quick-growing rice, gathering it each day as they need it. But through laziness, they start to gather a week's supply at a time, so that it then ceases to grow quickly, which necessitates cultivation. Consequently, the land is divided up into fields, so that property is invented, followed by theft. Here, then, is a vision of sentient beings and their environment co-evolving (co-devolving). The beings are affected by what they take from their environment, and the environment becomes less refined and fruitful as the beings morally decline. All this takes place according to the principle of Conditioned Arising in which nothing exists on its own, as each thing depends on others to condition its arising and existence. Thus, the relationship of all things, which includes humans and their environment, is inter-dependent. In other words, nothing can exist by itself, but makes its own contribution to the whole. The Buddhist principle of interdependence also means that humans and the world are inextricably linked a relationship that needs to be sustained through love. The ecological interdependence between

animals and their habitat is clearly perceived in the *Jātakas* where the emigration of tigers from a forest enables the forest beings felled by wood-cutters, but also deprives the tigers of their former habitat.

The Buddhist values mean that environment should not be over-exploited. As the Tibetans say very wisely that not too much of anything that is precious should be taken from the earth, as then its quality fades and the earth is destroyed. The Buddhist ideal, in fact, is co-operation with nature, not domination. The interdependence of human and all other forms of life in a finely balanced chain of being has always been a fundamental Buddhist belief. True development will arrange for the rhythm of life and movement to be in accordance with the facts, while maintaining awareness that man is but part of the universe, and that ways must be found to integrate mankind with the laws of nature. The economist E.F. Schumacher points out that Buddhism is not so anthropocentric as the so-called Middle Eastern religions, and that its attitudes do not therefore allow for the possibility that mankind has the right to take from nature, to see nature as simply for humanity; particular use, or to exploit, dominate and oppress it. As he puts it, “Man is a child of nature and not the master of nature.” He describes Buddhist attitude with reference to ecology as follows:

“The teaching of the Buddha... enjoins a reverent and non-violent attitude not only to all sentient beings but also, with great emphasis, to trees. Every follower of the Buddha ought to plant a tree every few years and look after it until it is safely established. He does not seem to realize that he is part of an ecosystem of many different forms of life. As the world is ruled from towns where men are cut off from any form of life other than the human, the feeling of belonging to an ecosystem is not realised. This results in a harsh and improvident treatment of things upon which we ultimately depend, such as water and trees”.

Thus, as pointed out by Schumacher in the Buddhist concept of economic development, we should avoid gigantism, especially of machines, which tend to control rather than serve human beings. With gigantism, we are driven by an excessive greed in violating and raping nature. If bigness and greed can be avoided, the Middle Path of Buddhist development can be achieved, i.e., both the world of industry and agriculture can be converted into a meaningful habitat.

The earliest monastic rules as enshrined in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* contain numerous injunctions against environmental irresponsibility. Some are basically sound advice governing personal and communal hygiene, but others are designed to avoid harm to sentient beings. Thus a monk may not cut down a tree or dig the earth because that would destroy small life forms and he must not empty a vessel of water containing, say, fish, onto the ground. In Buddhism, killing or injuring living beings is regarded as both unwholesome and fundamentally immoral; for, on the one hand, killing or injuring them is bad karma entailing evil consequences for the perpetrator after his death, and on the other all living, sentient beings are afraid of death and recoil from pain just like oneself. Monks and nuns are even prohibited from injuring plants and seeds. Time and again, Buddhism declares spiritual attitudes like benevolence as well as actual abstention from killing or injuring animate beings to be the right attitude or behavior for monks as well as lay people. Buddhism also accepted the popular belief that trees are inhabited by sprites or divinities protecting them. Trees deserve gratitude for the service they render people, especially offering shade and fruits, and should not be injured or felled by a person who has benefitted by them. This idea may not imply that the tree is actually regarded as a sentient being, but at least it is treated as if it were one, i.e., like a friend or partner. Of course, protecting a useful tree from injury is, at least *de facto*, also in the interest of its long-term utilization.

Buddhism sees egoism and greed as the main cause of misery and harm. There is no doubt that environmental disaster is to a great extent due to the insatiable greed of humans. Buddhism on the whole, though does not mind wealth and prosperity, but they have to be acquired and used in full accord with the ethical norms, among which not to kill or injure living beings, and- so one may add- not to destroy their habitat, is the first. The ideals are rather, contentment (*saṃtuṭṭhi*) and- in the case of rich lay people- liberality (*cāga*). Being content with little and avoiding wastefulness are, of course, attitudes favoring a moderate and careful utilization of nature. The *udumbara-khādikā* method blamed by the Buddha, the method of shaking down an indiscriminate amount of fruit from a *figusglomerata* in order to eat a few, is precisely the same as

the one employed in drift-net fishing, where many more animals are killed than utilized. The only reasonable attitude is to regard all fellow-creatures with compassion and sympathy, and cautiously help them in case of emergency, without damaging others. This is in fact a fundamental attitude in Buddhist culture, and as long as the environment is intact, leaving nature alone is probably the best thing one can do. For instance, by gifts to animals, even such as throwing dish-water or remnants of food into a pool or river in order to feed tiny water animals or fishes, or by freeing, out of compassion, an animal from a rope or trap.

Buddhist attitudes *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *mettā* (benevolence), and *karuṇā* (compassion) entail an ecological behavior as these attitudes are not limited to human beings alone but also include other living beings. Since the rise of technology and science, nature has been commoditized and manipulated. Our comforts have been gained at great expense to all life forms: countless peoples have been displaced by its advances; countless species become extinct each year; the earth itself is burning and groaning. To use up non-renewable goods, a possibility in the near future unless something definite is done can be the ultimate form of violence. Thus, utter caution must be exercised in the consumption process. Thus, in a Buddhist approach to social and economic development, the primary criterion that would govern policy formulation should be the well-being of the members of the society as a whole. The economy would be assigned to the place where it belongs and, in turn, the social system would be viewed as an integral part of the total ecosystem. Thus, economic development would be guided along lines that promote the health and well-being of the social order without harming the natural systems within which human society is lodged. By pointing out that the vulgar chase of luxury and abundance is the root-cause of suffering, Buddhism encourages restraint, simplicity, and contentment. By extolling generosity as a basic virtue and the mark of a superior person, it promotes a wide distribution of basic necessities so that no one has to suffer deprivation. Buddhist idea of ‘One’ world that is the home to all known life” and its virtue ethics and positive values of compassion, equanimity, and humility are important contribution towards building an ecologically wholesome society.

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