

Revisiting the Buddhist View of Environmental Ethics: A Plausible Enquiry

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Abstract

Buddhist ethical tradition derives its inspiration from the Buddha, the savior of beings. His love of solitude and silence was matched only by his universal compassion towards the suffering of creatures. The core of the Buddha's teachings is a moral code of conduct for everyone. The purpose of this research paper is to explain current ecological concepts, ecological balance, and the preservation of our environment as they relate to Buddhism. The earth is the only planet in our solar system to have been endowed with life. However, the planet's climate is the only reason life has been able to exist here. The study of the relationships between humans, animals, plants, and trees is referred to as ecology. In actuality, the study was started long before the Buddha was born. Ancient Indians had a great deal of interest in plants and saw them as an integral component of their existence. The fact that the first signs of life were discovered in plants is evidence of the Indians' superior mental capacity. They valued the unwavering belief that plants and trees are the first children of Mother Earth. Then the animal showed up. Fauna and flora complement one another. For their existence and sustenance, they are inextricably linked to other people. It is indisputable that plants are essential to the survival of both human and animal existence. As everyone knows, it is almost difficult to list all the advantages that plants provide for us. This paper aims to examine how Buddhism approaches the environmental attitudes.

Keywords: Buddhism, Ethics, Ecology, Concern for Environment.

Introduction

The main concern is how the moral potentials of Buddhist culture contributes to the development of ecological stereotypes of contemporary human behaviour. The primary conceptual understanding of Buddhist ecological ethics that shapes the attitude towards nature are to be taken into consideration, along with their rituals, ceremonies, and traditions of environmental significance. The fundamental tenets of Buddhism's ecological ethics, include the ideas like Bodhisattva-kindness and compassion for all living things, Ahimsa, the principle of nonviolence, Karma, the manifestation of human responsibility towards the environment and so on. The distinctive benefit of these ideas are found in the fact that they have already improved the ethical culture and the mindset of common people in several nations, fostering environmental awareness and assisting social values. While dealing with the topic of ecology, Prof. Dipak Kumar Baruah, in his "Applied Buddhism: Studies in the Gospel of Buddha from Modern Perspectives" writes, "E.P. Odum expands the ecosystem idea to include any unit including all the organism in a given area interacting with the physical environment so that a flow of energy leads to a clearly defined topic structure, biotic diversity and materials' cycles within the system."¹

The environmental issues are wide-reaching not just because of it compromises humankind but also because of its strong necessity and a coordinated effort to resolve. Both mankind as a whole and each individual person in particular are challenged by the environmental issues. Deep ethical significance is given to the first inherent sense of oneness between man and nature. A sense of responsibility for the lives of other living beings and a sense of engagement in all that occurs on Earth are becoming increasingly important in today's world. Most of the time, environmental issues are not caused by evildoers who seek to ruin the earth. The situation is even more complicated. People's acts and the results of those efforts become disconnected as a result of the division of labour and the ensuing isolation of man. This disparity happened at the motivational level. Even highly specialized science cannot account for all the effects of human activity, and modern technology expands the possibilities of our actions in both space and time. With reference to this, The *Dhammapada* says: "Until evil does not ripen, the fool considers it to be sweet like honey. When the evil ripens, then the fool abandons to grief."¹

Objectives and Methodology

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss about what presently terms ecology or balancing ecological factors or for as preservation for the flora and fauna is concerned as discussed in Buddhism. The study also deals with the importance of the moral potential of Buddhist culture for the formation of ecological stereotypes of modern human behavior. The paper is descriptive in nature, presented from the philosophical point of view. The paper is based on both primary and secondary sources and these secondary sources are collected from books, articles and periodicals published in reputed journals.

Discussions

Our environment is all about what is around us. Anything outside of our surrounding is a component of our environment. The French words '*environ*,' which means surrounding, and '*ment*,' which means achievement, are the roots of the English word "environment." Our environment consists of both living and non-living elements, such as light, soil, people, animals, water, germs, and air. The study of the biological, physical, chemical, social, and cultural factors that surround and influence living things both inside and outwardly is what the term "environment" literally means. The environment in which organization operates including air, water, land, natural resources, flora and fauna, humans, and their inter-relationships is the definition of the term 'environment.' The natural environment consists of the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the lithosphere and the biosphere. Its major components are water, air, land, so land energy and living organisms. Environment can be defined in a number of ways, but common connotation is- "Environment is the sum of all social, economic, biological, physical or chemical factors which constitute the surroundings of men/ living organism, which is both creator and moulder of this environment."² The environment has an impact on humans just like it does on inanimate objects. The question now is: why ethics has a concern in the environmental field? Ethics is the study of human behaviour. The environment is now made up of non-living objects rather than people. Discussions over the environment are a worldwide problem. Earthquakes, volcanoes, snowfall, population growth, the use of biocides, deforestation, wilderness destruction, animal abuse, and more regional issues which are all examples of terrible natural disasters that philosophers concerned about

¹ *Dhammapada*, Riga: Uguns, 1991, p. 15.

² D.D. Mishra (S. Chand), *Fundamental concepts in Environmental studies* as per UGC Model. Curriculum for undergraduate.

preventing. The origin of environmental ethics may be traced back to environmental policy. So, we have some moral responsibilities and duties towards non-human nature as well, i.e., there is no place for unprincipledness in such nature. Environmental ethics as a branch of applied ethics came into the scene in the west during 1970's. However, environmental ethics is no longer limited to the western tradition. Environmental ethics is now days recognized worldwide.

The environmental ethics is defined as the- "Environmental ethics is the discipline that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents."³ The environment is divided into two parts-one is the nature of physical world and another is the nature of the living beings. The physical environment of Buddhism refers to all natural elements of the universe created by Rupa-Kshandha, which are not just physical rupas but other physical phenomena. We experience Rupaskhandha when we have pleasant or painful feelings. There is no indifferent physical feeling. According to Buddha Ghosh, the sum of the four primary elements (būta) such as earth, water, fire and air is rūpakshanadha. There are two types of rūpakshanda- (a) Būtarūpakshanadha, (b) Material (upadanā) rūpakshanadha. When the physical feeling is healthy it is kusala-vipaka and when the physical feeling is unpleasant it is akusalavipaka.

Living beings means human or non-human. According to Buddhism, human beings, the sum of the five kashandhas of changing elements. Known as the pañcakshandhā, namely- 1. Rūpa, 2. Vedanā, 3. Sañjñā, 4. Samāskāras, and 5. Vijñāna. And non-human beings are made up of arūpakshandha. The sanskarakshandha is an aggregation of good and bad qualities decided human nature from moral point of view. The samāskāraskshandha creates a man a sensible animal.

Following to Buddhist philosophy all living beings are included of rūpa and arūpa dhatu. Although their basis features, i.e., warmth, form and consciousness are the same, non-human beings such as animals, insects, plants, trees etc. They are not belong to pañcakshandha. They cannot message their knowledge to the next generation and are incapable of creating any culture and its environment because they are deprived of sañña and sanskārakshandha.

Although there are differences between human and non-human beings in terms of physic-psychological formation, they are interdependent. This is how Buddhist philosophy finds similarities between the environment and people. According to them, people have a moral responsibility and duty towards the environment. The nature and description of environmental ethics in early Buddhism is a complicated subject. Buddhists generally talk about a simple and non-violent gentle life. All animals and humans are spiritual beings. Lord Buddha used to say to refrain from doing such things which are detrimental to the natural world. According to Buddhism the main cause of the world is 'Dukkha'. Lord Buddha declined to question-answer which did not directly or indirectly support on the main problem of human suffering and its ending. He spoke of 'Nirvāna' as the way of liberation from 'Dukkha'. According to Buddhism everything in the world belongs to nature which is not organized and created by Man.

Buddhists believe that their religious and ethical literature encompasses the seeds of environmental ethics. Although Buddha did not teach directly his followers about the environment, they were influenced by various behaviors, for example, he set rules that monks and nuns should never relieve themselves near running water where people want to wash or drink. Likewise, he also ruled that monks and nuns should not disrupt the established habitat of any other creature, nor kill other living creatures,

³ Klaus Bosselmann Environmental Ethics, January 2009 (<https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1943?rskey=eTlieY&result=19&prd=OPI&print#:~:text=1%20Environmental%20ethics%20is%20the,sociology%2C%20politics%2C%20and%20economics.>)

for example- when building new quarters. The environment gives us lot of benefits if we live simply in harmony with the environment. According to Buddhism, changeability is one of the persistent principals of nature. Nothing in nature is fixed, everything is changeable. According to the trend of world evolution, primitive barbarians have become civilized people today. Without the defense of the earth's water, Soil, air, and temperature, the true awning cannot be protected; if the tree canopy is not protected; animals and birds are endangered; if animals and birds are endangered, human existence is endangered. Therefore, just as human beings depend on the environment for their survival, the environment also depends on human beings. As part of the ecosystem, an inseparable relationship exists between man and his environment. So, it can be said without any doubt that the environment is terribly affected by the good-evil, moral-immorality of human effort. Buddhists have come to worship nature with the love of reverence and devotion. They realized that everyone in nature is dependent on each other. Man should not act to dominate nature. Kindness of nature can be enjoyed by giving up our greediness. According to the Buddhist environmental ethics, the activities of nature are solely affected by the morality or immorality of human behavior. So, the moral responsibility and duty of man towards the natural world cannot be denied at any cost. If we can properly adhere to the Buddha's ideals, it seems that the environmental crisis or any kind of environmental hazards will surely minimize and come to an end. The basic provisions of the ecological ethics of Buddhism, in particular, such as concept of Karma expresses the human-environment relationship and responsibility. Ahimsa -the principle of nonviolence, Bodhisattva also teaches the kindness and compassion for all living beings.

The Law of Karma- the expression of human environmental responsibility

The understanding of the law of karma can help to overcome the gap between actions and their consequences. The law of karma states that all our actions, words and thoughts form the conditions of our existence in the future: each of us experiences the consequences of what we thought, said and did in the past. Thus, the law of karma encourages a person to take responsibility for his current life as well as all the future ones. What is the mechanism of the law of karma? In popular understanding, each act has moral value; acts committed by an individual in relation to other creatures return to him back in the next life. Karma is not to be performed at an extreme level as no one can escape the consequences of their own actions, but at the same time it is assumed that everyone can consciously create better conditions for their future life. In this sense, an individual forms his own karma. The 14th Dalai Lama says in his sermon: "I, as a Buddhist monk, think that believing in laws of karma is very useful in everyday life. If you believe that there is a connection between the action and the result, you will become more attentive to the consequences produced by your actions in your own life and the lives of other people."⁴ In the *Abhidharmakosa*, karma is the current arrangement of *dharma*s, which, according to the law of conditioning (*pratītyasamutpāda*), affects the location of *dharma*s in subsequent moments. Here, Karma is divided into mental, bodily and verbal. Since actions and words are first born in consciousness, consciousness is considered to be the main determining aspect. Our thought is the originator of both personal fortune and the fate of the whole world that is why moral degradation of society entails the

⁴ Tenzin Gyatso, *The 14th Dalai Lama, Zhizn' na Zemle*. Lektsii i stat'i po probleme ekologii, Moscow: Tsentri tibetskoy kul'tury i informatsii, 1996, p. 22.

physical degradation of the world. As the 14th Dalai Lama says, “a spiritual man is the one who participates in a joint effort to save the Earth”.⁵

Again, the law of karma is a powerful tool for moral self-regulation of a person. It prompts him to reflect on the consequences of his actions, on the measure of responsibility for the committed acts. In essence, the law of karma is another form of expression of the golden rule of morality: “Act towards the others the way you would like them to act towards you”.⁶ And, since Buddhists do not separate a person from other living beings, the scope of this rule is not limited only to social, intraspecific relationships. Here lies the enormous environmental significance of the law of karma.

Equal consideration of all beings and the Ahimsa principle

Moral behavior is the consequence of biological and social progression of a man. The level of his consciousness - the ability to analyze his actions can be judged according to his moral views. The dynamics of moral views of mankind shows the development of the sphere of people to whom a person has a sense of ethical duty. Until recent times there have been various groups of people who have been discriminated according to gender, age, class, nation, race, etc. Even though the equality of people, to a large extent, is still being only declared, nevertheless, legal recognition is a big step towards its implementation. In the twentieth century, the movement for moral attitude towards animals began to gain strength. “Until we include animals in our common circle of well-being, there will be no peace in the world.”⁷ In his opinion, “ethics is the responsibility for everything that lives.”⁸ Today we are faced with the need to distinguish our moral duty to nature. Environmental pollution primarily affects the life of animals. The mass death of animals due to oil spills, radiation, pesticides, etc. has become familiar. Environmental reality dictates the need for strict legal and moral sanctions for the conservation of wild animals. In this case, understanding of interrelationships between humans and animals as full representatives of biota can be helpful. Buddhist ethics to resolve this problem is very much significant. Buddhists do not deny that animals possess the ability of thinking and emotional sufferings. They believe that due to a number of circumstances animals simply do not have the conditions for the development of these qualities. The first sermon of the Buddha, *Dharmacakrapravartana Sutra*, along with five ascetics was heard by two gazelles. Their image entered the mind and heart of the Buddhists so much that these gazelles became a symbol of the first turn of the wheel of dharma. Among the animals most revered by Buddhists are: elephant, bull, lion, turtle, swan, peacock, as well as all animals representing the twelve-year cycle. The attitude of Buddhists towards animals can be characterized as glorious. Buddhists were recommended to treat all beings as if they were your mother or father. In a series of innumerable rebirths, any living creature could be in his past rebirths our mother or father. All living things in the universe are interrelated. The daily prayer says: “Like me, all my kindhearted mothers are drowning in the ocean of samsara. Give me a blessing on spiritual work of raising

⁵ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Beyond Religion. Ethics for a Whole World*, Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.

⁶ Oyuna V. Dorzhigushaeva and Aryana V. Kiplyuks, (2020) “Environmental Ethics of Buddhism”. *International Journal of Environmental Science and Development*, Vol. 11, No. 3, March 2020. P. 154
(<https://www.studocu.com/in/document/banaras-hindu-university/master-of-arts/environmental-ethics-in-buddhism-understanding-karmas-role-intl-1243/128178541>)

⁷ Ibid. p. 153

⁸ Ibid. p. 154

Bodhicitta so that I could save them soon.” Again, the evening prayer says: “Visible and invisible beings, and those who are near me and those who are far away, may all be happy, may all be joyful. Do not harm one another, do not hate anyone anywhere. And do not wish evil to one another. As a mother sacrificing her life while protecting her child, infinitely love all things.”⁹ In all Buddhist texts we mostly see the phrase “all living beings” rather than “man”, “people” etc. Even King Ashoka’s state edicts emphasizes the need to care for all living things. In particular, he ordered to dig the wells along the roads and to plant trees “for the delight of animals and people.”¹⁰

Buddhists do not separate humans from other animals. The human embodiment is only one of many in the chain of rebirths. In Jātaka tales – texts about renowned events from the past births of Buddha, we see that many times before Buddha was reborn in the form of an animal, for example, an elephant, a buffalo, a woodpecker, etc. In jatakas, the equivalence of life of animals and people is emphasized. In one of the jatakas, Buddha rescued a dove from a tiger, and then the tiger demanded something equal to that dove. Buddha cut off a piece of his body and put it on one bowl of scales. On the other bowl was the dove. Only standing himself on the scales, he was able to balance the bowl. Each life is equal to another life. “At the heart of *jataka* lies ... the idea of an endless chain of interconnected causality of beings through which all living beings pass. Birth in one state or another is determined by the totality of actions committed in past births. Each creature shapes itself, determines its future with its behavior.”¹¹ Jatakas had an enormous impact on the spread of Buddhist ethics among the people. Written in the form of enthralling stories, they inconspicuously attracted ordinary people to self-improvement, formed Buddhist values such as generosity to those who ask, humbleness, tolerance, truthfulness, refraining from harming to beings, theft, rude speech, etc. In *Dhammapada* Buddha provides a very subtle, ecologic image of nonviolent behavior. “As a bee, having collected juice, flies away without damaging the flower, so let the sage act in the village.”¹² Tolerance as the main category of Buddhist Ethics. The entire history of Buddhism is accompanied by nurturing in people such a wonderful human quality as tolerance. Even Buddha said to his disciples: “When going to other countries, respect the gods of others, because if they exist in their minds, then they really exist”.¹³ His followers also practiced a similar attitude to other religions. We cannot find a single country where Buddhism is a monoreligion. In all countries, Buddhism coexists peacefully with other religions. For example, in India with Hinduism and Islam, in Japan with Shintoism, in China with Taoism and Confucianism, etc. Moreover, the Buddhist tradition does not demand from people who address the Buddhist priests, come to Buddhist temples and even practice Buddhism, to be necessarily Buddhists who have taken Buddhist refuge. The concept of tolerance is one of the main ethical categories of Buddhist ethics. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama pays great attention to its explanation. For example, he states: “Tolerance and patience should not be interpreted as signs of weakness. These are signs of strength.”¹⁴ By exercising conscious tolerance, you control the situation and do not allow feelings, such as anger or pride, to prevail over the mind. In

⁹ S. F. Oldenburg, *Pervaya Buddhiyskaya vystavka v Peterburge*, SPb, 1919, p. 3.

¹⁰ D. C. Sircar, *Inscriptions of Asoka*, Delhi, 1957, p. 40.

¹¹ Dzhatki, ili Skazaniya o podvigakh Bodkhisattvy, St. Petersburg: Chernyshev, 1993, pp. 3-4.

¹² Ibid. p. 6

¹³ Oyuna V. Dorzhigushaeva and Aryana V. Kiplyuks, (2020) “Environmental Ethics of Buddhism”. *International Journal of Environmental Science and Development*, Vol. 11, No. 3, March 2020. P. 154

(<https://www.studocu.com/in/document/banaras-hindu-university/master-of-arts/environmental-ethics-in-buddhism-understanding-karmas-role-intl-1243/128178541>)

¹⁴ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Worlds in Harmony: Compassionate Action for a Better World*, 2009, p. 64.

addition, tolerance for other people, for life situations and other beings speaks of the breadth of your views, of general emancipation. Tolerance is one of the qualities inherent to bodhisattvas – Buddhist saints. These qualities are called *paramitas*, while *paramita* of tolerance is called *kshanti-paramita*. *Kshanti-paramita* is again of three-fold. It includes tolerance to other living beings, tolerance to life circumstances, and tolerance that come with wisdom and penetration into deep essence of things and phenomena. Cultivating tolerance is of great environmental importance. Lack of tolerance for other creatures is a sign of modern times. People create sterile spaces around themselves, free from animals, insects, microflora. Other creatures scare them because of seeming unpredictability of their behavior. A residential person feels a hidden danger of natural objects, he or she prefers the adjustable comfort of a big city, animals on the TV screen, created with the help of computer graphics. Finding himself or herself face to face with nature, he or she experiences psychological discomfort and tries to overcome it, remaining within the framework of familiar ideas. People represent natural objects in the form of an enemy to be conquered, transfer anthropomorphic relations to their relations with nature. As an example, we can remember plenty of Hollywood films where enemies of mankind are either birds, or insects, etc. A person practicing tolerance treats living creatures with compassion, understands their problems, mental state and level of consciousness development. he or she can put himself or herself in the place of another and understand the true reasons for his behavior. As L. Mall writes in his study *Ashtasahasrika-prajnaparamita-sutra*: “The development of a bodhisattva to the level of ‘*avinivartaniyabodhisattva-mahasattva*’ does not mean the creation of a highly developed and specialized personality, on the contrary, a bodhisattva turns into an all-encompassing personality that contains everything.”¹⁵ Buddhists reflect in the following way: you have an enemy and you consider him a bad person, but take a closer look at him. It turns out that he has friends, like you, and they consider him a good person. Most possibly, at that moment when he talked with you, he had some problems, and therefore he treated you in that way. Enemies also help a person practice *paramita* of tolerance. If there are no enemies, a person does not know the strength and depth of his tolerance practice; his practice without probation has no strength. “*Shantideva* said that both friend and foe love you and do good, the only question is time.”¹⁶ Friends support and help, enemies criticize and point out mistakes, stimulating further self-improvement. Tolerance to life circumstances is necessary because suffering is permanent in *samsara*. The law of stress of living environment is opposed to another law - the law of maximum stress of life. The offspring of one pair of individuals, multiplying exponentially, seek to fill with themselves the entire globe. But the pressure of living environment restrains this ability, deceiving the degree of tolerance of the body to external influences. Living being constantly strives for ecological expansion and at the same time adapts to changing living conditions. The law of the pressure of living environment is relevant to any type of life. Be it a society, with its laws, wars, morality, or a colony of bacteria in a drop of water. As Lama Sopa Rinpoche advises, “If the problem can be resolved, there is no particular reason to be upset about it, we must solve it. If the problem cannot be changed, then it also makes no sense to become unhappy or to dislike it.”¹⁷ The same principle can be applied to the issue of human needs. The human needs tend to grow continuously. Often, the growth of needs is not caused by real need and is provoked by the concepts of prestige or advertising campaign from producers of goods. People call themselves consumers, not noticing the humiliating subtext of this word. Advertisements shift the value

¹⁵ L. Mall, *Ashtasahasrika-prajnaparamita kak istoricheskii istochnik*, PhD thesis, 2007

¹⁶ G. J. Thinley, *Kyasnomu svetu*, Ulan-Ude, 1995, p. 56.

¹⁷ L. Sopa, *Preobrazovaniye problem v radost'*, St. Petersburg: Terent'ev, 1995, p. 14.

consciousness of people, reduce their individuality, impose goods and services they do not need. Erich Fromm takes this problem quite harshly: "We must prohibit the use of all forms of hypnotic effects, applied both in the field of consumption and in the field of politics. These methods constitute a serious threat to mental health, especially to clear and critical thinking and emotional independence."¹⁸

Conclusion

Finally, a brief summary of the Dalai Lama's remarks on harmonious relationships with the environment is provided here. Dalai Lama upholds the belief that all harmful acts are contrary to fundamental human nature and that people are meant to be non-violent. He expresses his ideas with the knowledge that viewpoints of religious traditions may be of great assistance to anyone who wish to create a more diverse and all-encompassing framework for comprehending human-earth relations. Buddhist environmentalists are interested in using the cosmological concept to link environmental rights and human rights. This led them to argue that it is unacceptable for humans to dominate nature. All living things have the right to breathe clean air, drink fresh water, and find food. According to the Dalai Lama, who also asserts that a clean environment is a human right like all others. "Without an understanding of the religious life that constitutes the human society that saturates the natural environment and that, for better or worse, alter all the world's natural system," he adds, "no understanding of the environment is adequate."¹⁹

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¹⁸ E. Fromm, *Imet' ili byt'?* M, Progress, 1990, p. 194.

¹⁹ Bharati Puri, *Engaged Buddhism, The Dalai Lama's World View*, p.93