

ECOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF BUDDHIST ETHICS

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Introduction

Buddhism is world religion based on principles and nature's law. Each landmark of Buddha's life indicates moral principles in living life. Buddhism also sees humans as part of nature, not as separate from it. As moral choices over nature are concerned humans are seen at the priority however their rational capacity exceeding the limit thus they become moral agents of the ecological system. According to Buddhist teachings, the moral and ethical principles are governed by examining whether a certain action, whether connected to body or speech is likely to be harmful to one's self or to others and thereby avoiding any actions which are likely to be harmful. So on this note this research paper tries to seek ecological relevance of Buddhist ethics with reference to Maitri, Karuna Mudita and Upekha.

Thich Naht Hanh summarizes the Buddhist view of harmony, "We classify other animals and living beings as nature, acting as if we ourselves are not part of it. Then we pose the question 'How should we deal with Nature?' We should deal with nature the way we should deal with ourselves! We should not harm ourselves; we should not harm nature...Human beings and

nature is inseparable". Man has developed a tendency to divide the natural kingdom as per their choice and need so the anthropocentric view exactly contradicts here. Anthropocentrism is a philosophical view which holds that human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world. Human being at the center of the environment itself means man has got moral responsibility towards the other environmental factors however contradiction lies here in its ethics that man has become the dominant agent in the environmental structure. As Buddhism advocates a gentle non-aggressive attitude towards nature, anthropocentrism develops a perspective of ethical responsibility towards nature. According to the '*Sigalovada Sutta*', "A householder should accumulate wealth as a bee collects pollen from a flower. The bee harms neither the fragrance nor the beauty of the flower, but gathers pollen to turn it into sweet honey". Similarly, man is expected to make legitimate use of nature so that he can rise above nature and realize his innate spiritual potential.

Buddhist Ethics and Ecology

'Ecology' has developed as a phenomenon on environmental ethics with the increasing

environmental degradation and crises in the world. The idea of sustainability must deeply rooted in innate consciousness of human beings otherwise conservation of natural resources would be highly impossible. However Buddhist ethics has got importance for sustainability and prosperity of natural resources. As Buddha taught a way of life, Buddhist ethics therefore has a close connection with an environment as well. The simple fact that Buddhist ethics are rooted in natural law makes its principles both useful and acceptable to the modern world. The fact that the Buddhist ethical code was formulated over 2,500 years ago does not detract from its timeless character.ⁱ

Buddhism expresses a gentle non-violent attitude towards the vegetable kingdom as well. It is said that one should not even break the branch of a tree that has given one shelter. Plants are so helpful to us in providing us with all necessities of life that we are expected not to adopt a callous attitude towards them. In Asia, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity acted as a way of transformation in individual and collective consciousness for promoting an earth-friendly way of life.ⁱⁱ

Buddhist environmentalists assert that the mindful awareness of the universality of suffering produces compassionate empathy for all forms of life, particularly for all sentient species. They interpret the *Dhammapada*'s ethical injunction not to do evil but to do good as a moral principle

advocating the nonviolent alleviation of suffering, an ideal embodied in the prayer of universal loving-kindness that concludes many Buddhist rituals: "May all beings be free from enmity; may all beings be free from injury; may all beings be free from suffering; may all beings be happy." Out of a concern for the total living environment, Buddhist environmentalists extend loving-kindness and compassion beyond people and animals to include plants and the earth itself.ⁱⁱⁱ

Though change is inherent in nature, Buddhists believe that natural processes are directly affected by human morality. Buddhist environmentalists see their worldview as a rejection of hierarchical dominance of one human over another or humans over nature, and as the basis of an ethic of empathetic compassion that respects biodiversity. In the view of the Thai monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, "The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise.....then we can build a noble environment."^{iv}

The Buddha's own example provides the original impetus for such locations: "Seeking the supreme state of sublime peace, I wandered....until.....I saw a delightful stretch of land and a lovely woodland grove, and a clear flowing river with a delightful forest so I sat down thinking, 'Indeed, this is an appropriate place to

strive for the ultimate realization of... Nirvana'. (*Ariyapariyesana Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya*). This Sutta perspective more emphasis on the human body in and out is part of the nature. Each stage of Lord Buddha's life indicate the association of nature however for Nirvana glorious nature is essential. Pleasant nature brings peace, harmony and can help to attain stage of Nirvana. Buddhist environmentalists' compassion necessarily follows an understanding of all life-forms as mutually interdependent. Among contemporary engaged Buddhists, the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, has been the most insistent on the central role of mindful awareness in the development of a peaceful and sustainable world.^v

Anthropocentrism and Buddhist Four Brahmavihara (Sublime Abode)

As anthropocentrism view centers its attention on human beings as center of the nature however being center itself represent human moral responsibility toward nature. It is a struggle between human moral responsibilities toward nature over need of the human surviving. So let the human behavior fill with four abode i.e. Four Brahmaviharas toward the ecological structure for sustainability. Brahmaviharas are seen as central virtues and intentions in Buddhist ethics. "The four Brahmaviharas are considered by Buddhism to be the four highest emotions. The word Brahma literally means 'highest' or

'superior.' It is also the name given to the supreme god in Hinduism during the Buddha's time. Vihara means 'to dwell', 'to live' or 'to abide.' Thus the Brahmaviharas are not emotions one occasionally feels but those that one 'lives in' and 'lives by' all the time. These four Brahmaviharas are loving-kindness, compassion, (vicarious) sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These four virtues help one to develop right action which promotes happiness, generates good merit and trains the mind for ethical action.

1. *Maitri* (loving - kindness) - Humans have to develop loving kind nature toward environment in order to balance natural structure. Habitat loss or destruction is big problem caused by humans includes land conversion from forests, etc. this loving kind attitude must feel with bio centric approach. Biocentrism approach deals with all living being must consider at Centre of the environment. To cultivate loving kind nature this approach is very essential as each life has its own value and has got sustaining capacity. Loving kind attitude is an ethical duty of human being toward all creatures.^{vi}

2. *Karuna* (compassion) - The compassion is deep feeling of empathy, care and deep sensitivity towards all. Eco centric approach is depended on feeling of compassion. D. Lindenmeyer and M. Burgman, in their work '*Practical Conservation Biology*' states that "The eco-centric ethic was conceived by Aldo Leopold

and recognizes that all species, including humans, are the product of a long evolutionary process and are inter-related in their life processes".^{vii} Interdependence attitude must be based on feeling of interrelation because dependence creates dominance and relation creates compassion toward living being therefore it is human responsibility toward all living being to cultivate eco centric compassion.

3. *Mudita* (Joy with others) - Understanding deforestation, sustainable prosperity with respect to value called *Mudita* i.e. to feel happy in others is essential. However the idea of feeling happy in others happiness is depended on human conscience about earth as a whole life process. This idea is more coined in understanding deep ecology. Deep ecology is a somewhat recent branch of ecological philosophy that considers humankind as an integral part of its environment. The philosophy emphasizes the interdependent value of human and non-human life as well as the importance of the ecosystem and natural processes. It provides a foundation for the environmental and green movements and has led to a new system of environmental ethics.^{viii}

4. *Upekhaa* (indifference or apathy) - As humans are greatest source of pollution, need of conservation is at the highest risk because human greed about excessive use of natural resources does not allow to have conservation of natural resources. Primary focus is upon maintaining the health of the natural world,

conservation of energy and biological diversity. The concept of Eco-Spirituality is interwoven in the practice of Upekhaa. It is a Eco spiritual responsibility of "an individual to take time to observe and to be a part of the natural world, to understand the systems at work in the environment," Sustainability and eco-spirituality has conscious interrelation for the conservation of natural resources however consciousness lies in understanding empathetic ecological balances and ones relation to the earth. One has to consciously understand, lesser the pollution encourages to increase in conservation moreover lesser the habitat loss gives rise to Biodiversity. Hence Eco spirituality is conscious interconnection to the environment, an empathetic responsibility towards one's own environment for long and lasting sustainability.^{ix}

Conclusion

It is a human anthropocentric moral duty over eco centricism to sustain nature's prosperity. This duty lies in the understanding need of human life and sustainable prosperity. These virtues of Buddhist ethics such as not to kill, not to still, not to indulge in lust (five precepts) helps one to understand the ecological balances.

The *Karaniyametta Sutta* enjoins the cultivation of loving-kindness towards all creatures. This bio centric view makes oneself relies common surviving, therefore a reverential attitude must be cultivated towards all forms of

life. Such an ethic highlights the virtues of restraint, simplicity, loving-kindness, compassion, equanimity, patience, wisdom, nonviolence, and generosity. These virtues represent moral ideals for all members of the Buddhist community.^x

Human responsibility is to cultivate compassion towards all living beings. Dependence of living beings need loving kind attitude, empathetic feeling towards all. A sense of universal responsibility for oneself and for all is essential factor however this can be possible with the help of Buddhist ethics. Four brahma vihara are nothing but moral attitude toward natural prosperity. Each factor of nature is interrelated and possesses capacity to conserve nature however conservation is moral approach toward sustainability. Thus *prajna* means understanding one's own nature, *sila* means protection of the environment and *karuna* means compassion towards all living beings.

Endnotes

1. Dharmasiri Gunapala, *Fundamentals of Buddhists Ethics*, p.27
2. Ramesha Jayaneththi, *Buddhist Ethics towards preventing the Ecological Crisis in Asia*
3. Donald K. Swearer, *Buddhism and Ecology: Challenge and Promise*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*

6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habitat_destruction#Human_causes
7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecocentrism#>
8. <http://environment-ecology.com/deep-ecology/63-deep-ecology.html>
9. http://www.mercyworld.org/_uploads/_ckpg/files/Seeds%20of%20Eco-Spirituality.pdf
10. Donald K. Swearer, *Op. Cit.*

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4. James, Simon P., Buddhism and Environmental Ethics in Steven M. Emmanuel (ed.), *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, Wiley - Blackwell Publishers, 2013.
5. Jondhale, Surendra and Beltz, Johannes (ed.), *Reconstructing the World: B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004
6. King, Sally. *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2009.
7. https://dhammadawiki.com/index.php?title=4_Brahma_Viharas

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