

Ecological Responsibility in Buddhist Thought

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Abstract

Buddhism teaches that the natural world should not be viewed merely as a resource to be exploited; rather, it should be regarded as a sacred entity connected to the cosmic order and spiritual life. It emphasizes to practice genuine environmental stewardship with all beings and advocates ecological responsibility through the core values of compassion, non-violence, moderation and a deep respect for all lives. In this regard, Buddha presents some important principles that form the core of Buddhist ecological responsibility. These principles are Citta Niyyati Loka (the world is led by the human mind), Paticcasamuppada (Dependent-co- arising), Samma Ajiva (Right Livelihood) and Majjhima Patipada (the Middle Path). Buddhism shows a path of life that is designed to get rid of suffering. This cannot be achieved simply by trying to manipulate the external world. Instead, true progress comes from nurturing the right mindset towards both our physical surroundings and our social environment. Thus, Buddhism moulds a person's character in order that one may achieve not only happiness here and hereafter, but also the ultimate bliss of Nirvana; a person in the Buddha's day carefully used any things without any waste.

Keywords: Buddhism, Ecological Responsibility, Moderation, Compassion and Non-violence

Introduction

Buddhism teaches that the natural world should not be viewed merely as a resource to be exploited; rather, it should be regarded as a sacred entity connected to the cosmic order and spiritual life. It emphasizes to practice genuine environmental stewardship with all beings and advocates ecological responsibility through the core values of compassion, non-violence, moderation and a deep respect for all lives. Buddhist ecological and ethical wisdom always reminds us to cherish the environment and show equal kindness to all living beings and maintain a clear, mindful outlook. It also helps us understand real world ecological crises, encouraging us to adopt creative and innovative thinking solutions for sustainable development. Buddhist treats nature as our first and ultimate teacher, because humanity cannot be separated from the environment or the wildlife around us. Therefore, we need to see ourselves an integral part of the larger body of the Earth. Humans, animals, ecosystems and natural resources are interconnected and completely interdependent with one another. Every elements of the Earth plays a vital role to smooth functioning of the natural

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environment and they also are maintaining ecological balance. For the long run survival of humankind, it is absolutely essential to respect and protect the ecosystem, because we simply cannot safeguard human life without first preserving the natural world that sustains it.

Etymologically, ‘ecology’ means the science of ‘home’. “We make the world a ‘house’ for ourselves, races, religions, cultures, sovereign ties, ideologies etc.. But we are not truly at home in this world, or in these houses that are driven by the body’s desire for ceaseless existence, and also secretly threatened by the body’s desire for sudden annihilation. Desire stands opposed to compassion because it is destabilizing contraction at the source of all suffering.”¹ Now an important question comes to our mind: What does real sense of ecological responsibility look like? Here, Buddhists suggest that “ecological responsibility involves and requires a foundational layer of spiritual awareness”.² They also believe that it cannot be selective because it demands accountability toward every part of existence. It is not simply a matter of taking care of other living beings and things out of a sense of our own vulnerability. Rather, we must recognize that we continually live and function with the help of everything that surrounds us, and the entire ecological system. “The ecological responsibility is not only a question of what we do, but also of what we think and feel.”³ This statement means that we need to address the causes of environmental degradation as well as its effects.

Modern society is now confronted with massive environmental crises that our ancestors never could have anticipated. Natural resources such as air, water and soil are polluted to such an extent that human survival is threatened. Even the life of other animals and plants are facing the same crisis and numerous species have already become extinct and many more are rapidly disappearing. As a result of massive deforestation, rich topsoil is washing away, leaving behind barren rock. The indiscriminate use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and weed killers has wrecked the natural balance of beneficial bacteria in cultivable land, causing damage that is almost irreversible consequences. Global weather patterns have changed dramatically and unpredictably to an alarming degree and it leads to chaotic weather repercussions. Scientists warn that global warming will likely submerge low-lying land to island and coastal settlements as a result of melting polar icecaps. At the same time, our stratospheric ozone layer is also thinning with significant holes in some places, creating major health risks due to expose us harmful solar radiation. Since human activity is the clear cause of all these issues. Because of this, we must rethink our lifestyle to take urgent measures to prevent impending environmental catastrophes.

Objective of the Study

This article aims to explore the concept of ecological responsibility from a Buddhist perspective, showing how philosophical and spiritual insight can help solve today’s

¹ Our Houses all Shattered, We come Home to Emptiness written by Ramachandra Gandhi in Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism (ed.) by Julia Martin, (Delhi: Published by Tibet House and Sri Satguru Publication, 1997) Pages-7-8

² Gratitude towards Everything that lives, written by Radha Burning in Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism (ed.) by Julia Martin, (Delhi: Published by Tibet House and Sri Satguru publication, 1997) P.-10

³ Ibid. P.11

environmental degradation. Through this viewpoint, Buddhists demonstrate that we are deeply responsible for protecting the environment that keeps us alive. Furthermore, it shows how traditional Buddhist teaching promotes compassion and non-violence as vital responses today's ecological decline.

Methodology

This research relies on conceptual and synoptic methods. This article has been prepared from trusted secondary sources such as well-known books, scholarly articles, and other relevant materials. By diving into Buddhist philosophical principles and seek to establish a conceptual continuity that reveals an appropriate way of life and helps us rediscover ourselves.

Interpretation

“Buddha himself has cautioned that he could only show the way, not assume the responsibility for those to whom he showed the way”⁴. According to his teaching, every action we take carries a threefold effects. Effects are- individual, others or society and the vital ecosystem upon which survival and nourishment depends. This environment isn't just nature-it includes both social conditions and institutions, which are interrelated to our everyday life. Since our actions affect all these aspects of life and we are inherently responsible for any consequences of one's actions and thus one's responsibility extends to all of them. In this regard, Buddha presents some important principles that form the core of Buddhist ecological responsibility. These principles are Cittena Niyyati Loko (the world is led by the human mind), Paticca-samuppada (Dependent-co- arising), Samma Ajiva (Right Livelihood) and Majjhima Patipada (the Middle Path). These principles are briefly discussed below –

Cittena Niyyati Loko (The world is led by the human mind)

Buddha taught that “the world is led by the human mind”.⁵For Buddhists, “the mind is one phenomenon which influences everything. If a person's intentions and ideas are ethically unwholesome, suffering is the natural outcome, where ethically wholesome intentions and ideas lead to happiness”.⁶

It is true that the modern world is deeply influenced by a materialistic outlook. The majority of humanity has come to believe that sensory pleasure and the accumulation of wealth are the ultimate purpose of life. Western civilization, in particular, has increasingly embraced materialistic values, placing great importance on affluence and luxury while exploiting natural resources in the pursuit of wealth and power. As a result, humanity is left with a polluted Earth, the global depletion of non-renewable natural resources and a host of social crises. Buddhists argue that “all this misery is due to humankind falling under the power of

⁴ Universal Responsible, written by Ravindra Varma in Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism (ed.) by Julia Martin (Delhi: Published jointly Tibet House & Sri Satguru Publication, 1997) P.146.

⁵ An Ethical Lifestyle as a strategy for survival, written by Lily De Silva in Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism (ed.) by Julia Martin (Delhi: Published jointly Tibet House & Sri Satguru Publication, 1997), P.107

⁶ Dhammapada VV. PS.-1-2.

wrong views and immorality. If we think that the present situation is untenable, there is no alternative but a rediscovery of ethical values and return to righteousness”.⁷

Paticcasamuppada (Dependent co-arising)

Buddhists recognize that “human beings are part of nature”.⁸ Our environment is made up of the Earth elements (prithavi), fluidity elements (apo), the heat element (tejo) and the mind. Because these elements are shared by both human and the natural world, the very forces of nature-including gravity, the Earth’s rotation and orbit movements, the weather and the rays of the Sun and the Moon-form the essential conditions for human existence. Mother Earth provides the nourishment, we need to survive and we cannot exist without her. Therefore, we are casually bound with nature.

Nature has an incredible capacity to heal and rejuvenate itself. However modern human pollution has completely overwhelmed this natural capacity. During the Buddha’s day, human waste was the primary cause of environmental pollution and the Buddha explicitly urged his disciples to give up habits that made their surrounding unclean. But today, the elements of pollution are manifold from the industrial waste, chemical waste and nuclear waste to the release of dangerous toxins into the global atmosphere, polluting the very air that all living beings breathe.

Environmental stress and negative human emotions give us a destructive psychological pollution. Buddhism teaches that our minds and our breathing are closely connected. When we are calm, our breathing is quiet and normal. When the mind is agitated by negative emotions, the breathing pattern is changed. As a result, it is ultimately given us serious physical issues like psycho somatic diseases, high blood pressure, heart disorders, cancer, and so on.

In the present ear societal tensions such as international mistrust, war and terrorism have transformed our surroundings into an environment filled with trauma and stress. We find ourselves breathing in not just physical smog and pollution, but we breathe a psychological toxicity as well. Our planet is far more than just land and biological ecosystems; it functions as a highly connected psychological sphere because humanity and nature are completely interconnected. The state of the world mirrors are the state of our collective mind. Hence, the importance of the Buddha’s pronouncement is that the world is led by the human mind. This means that we can change our environment for better or for worse, depending on our intention and actions- whether through our physical, verbal or mental. Buddhism emphasizes that the ultimate responsibility for our current global environmental crises-which impact directly on us. Buddhism describes how human greed (Lobha), aggression (dosa) and delusion (moha) are the main causes as wanton exploitation of nature, while their opposite- of non-greed (alobha), non-aggression(adosa)and non-delusion (amoha) modes enabled by people to manage natural resources for human well-being with caution and concern for other living fauna and flora.

⁷Ibid., P.-108

⁸Ibid.,P.-108

Samma Ajiva (Right Livelihood)

“Samma Ajiva is highly relevant to ecological ethics because it promotes compassion, sustainability, and responsibility in one’s profession”⁹. It encourages us to choose livelihoods that actively shield the environment rather than exploiting it. In today’s world of environmental crisis, the Buddhist principle of right livelihood provides a practical valuable guidance for building an eco-friendly conscious and a morally grounded society.

Right livelihood teaches the avoidance harm on living creatures. Today, however, we practice harming forests, rivers; wildlife and broader ecosystem, turning these industries into primary sources of suffering. Jobs that destroy forests, pollute rivers, or exploit wildlife directly violate this core principle. Samma Ajiva encourages us a lifestyle rooted in moderation and simple living. It reminds us that overconsumption and unchecked greed are the leading forces behind environmental crises like climate change, and biodiversity loss. Choosing an ethical livelihoods promote sustainable agriculture, eco-friendly businesses, and renewable energy.

According to this principle, we must choose a harmless occupation to make a living- one which avoids causing long-term unhappiness and protects our moral growth. Our work should never consider as a cause of physical and moral danger to others. But in this era of scientific and technological development, the most successful business ventures involve those activities condemned by Buddhism as being morally harmful: trading in liquor, weaponry, poisonous chemicals, meat and slavery. These are trades which degrades the human mind, rendering it insensitive to morality and spiritual development. The world has experienced great ecological disasters such as at Hiroshima, Bhopal and Chernobyl, to name just a few, through weapons and chemicals which have been manufactured in the process of so called development; and it is feared that the evil consequence of these disasters may be far reaching. All these unwholesome trades have adversely affected the world.

Majjhima Patipada (The Middle Path)

“Buddhism advocates adherence to the Middle path in all matters, philosophical and practical”¹⁰. It means that extremes are to be avoided. Unfortunately, modern societies have let in their inordinate greed for wealth and power drive them to exploit natural world in more. Widespread tropical deforestation can be cited as an obvious example. This destruction has resulted unprecedented global climate changes shifts, severe soil erosion, massive landslides and the tragic extinction of a large number of species of both fauna and flora. It seems many people could not understand that nature operates a deeply integrated ecosystem, where its various parts- such as the Earth with its rich variety of plant and animal life, rivers, ocean, air and rainfall are bound together by natural laws of cause and effect. When we harm one part of this system, the consequences inevitably ripple out to affect others. Nature, with its vast capacity for change and sustainability, is kind to human beings when we co-operate with natural systems in building civilizations. But when people acts out of pure greed - essentially trying to ‘rip open the goose that lays the golden eggs’- nature is unable to mobilize its rejuvenating mechanism for sustainability. That is what has happened today, and

⁹ Ibid. P.112

¹⁰ Ibid. P.113

it is perhaps to avoid even such possibilities that Buddhism upholds the virtue of following the middle path.

According to Buddhist philosophy, causal laws operate the physical, biological and psychological world. For example, mental qualities displayed by people along with their attitudes and values, also affect physical and biological conditions. We see clear evidence of this in issues like deforestation, which ultimately stems from human greed. Thus, it is shown how various energies in the universe interact to bind all of nature into single, integrated whole- an ecosystem. Humankind must respect this fact as reality of nature. If we decorate our lives with a sense of ecological responsibility, that is considered as real sense of ecological responsible. . The Middle Path is a far better approach to prevent both privation or poverty and indulgence or affluence. Government must always supports the large scale industry and exploitation of natural resources, but it needs to release policies based on the Middle path with appropriate technology are far superior, and would pay handsome dividends in the long run, in a world that is threatened with imminent ecological catastrophes.

Ecological Responsibility in Buddhist Thought

From the Buddhist point of view, “things are interdependent and thus conditioned upon each other. The Buddhist dialectic enables us to see that cause and effect, the pattern of events, plays a significant role in natural ecosystem. Buddhists also believe that one’s action have a three-fold effect. They affect oneself, others or society, and the environment on which one depends for nourishment and survival. This environment consists of nature as well as the social conditions and institutions that relate to our everyday life. Since one’s actions affect them- and one is responsible for the consequences of one’s actions, one’s responsibility extends to all of them”¹¹. It means that our responsibility is universal for two reasons- First, human beings and all other phenomena are completely interdependent and Second, true compassion generates an altruistic attitude brings with it a special responsibility to ensure that whatever we do benefits others. We must make sure our acts do not cause of suffering, but instead create conditions that lead to the alleviation or extinction of suffering. In this regard, we need to become mindful of the relation that every act bears to our universal responsibility.

We know that the environment itself is a magnificent spectacle of inter-relatedness and mutual interdependence. Everything in this world- whether animate and inanimate- is completely reliant on everything else. Together they constitute a self sustaining ecosystem in which each supports the other, whether unknowingly or knowingly. Not only compassion or altruism, but also self-interest requires that we regard the survival of the biosphere ecosystem as a need and value. The system is self-sustaining, but it can sustain itself, or survive, only on the basis of several conditions. These are-“i) minimum depletion, ii) maximum replenishment, iii) maximum use of materials and sources of energy that are renewable, that do not lead to disjunctive symbiosis destruction, iv) maximum recycling of waste or remnants of use, v) utilization of resources through a technology that conserves and replenishes and vi)

¹¹ Universal Responsible, written by Ravindra Varma in Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism (ed.) by Julia Martin (Delhi: Published jointly Tibet House & Sri Satguru Publication, 1997) P.146.

maximum mutual co-operation or dovetailing of one another's roles and mindfulness of the fact that one is a part of system, not its perspective master"¹².

Conclusion

Buddhism shows a path of life that is designed to get rid of suffering. This cannot be achieved simply by trying to manipulate the external world. Instead, true progress comes from nurturing the right mindset towards both our physical surroundings and our social environment. Thus, Buddhism moulds a person's character in order that one may achieve not only happiness here and hereafter, but also the ultimate bliss of Nirvana; a person in the Buddha's day carefully used any things without any waste. The Buddha always appreciated his disciples, who took greater care. In this regard we can understand from a historical dialogue between King Udena and the Monk Ananda. The personal attendant of Buddha shows how carefully the Monks used the robes which were offered to them. When a monk gets a new robe, the old robe is used as a coverlet, the old coverlet as a mattress cover, the old mattress cover as a rug, the old rug as a duster, and the old tattered duster is kneaded with clay to repair cracked floors and walls. These were lessons of frugality which inspired ancient Buddhist civilization. Their relevance for the present ecological crisis cannot be overestimated. Ancient Buddhist civilization was faced only with natural disasters such as occasional floods, droughts, famines and epidemics. But today's problems are enormous, varied and global in dimension. All these are man-made problems. We must radically change our lifestyles. We must give up our materialistic philosophy of life and espouse an ethical philosophy with a spiritual goal. If humankind is to act with ecological responsibility, we have to choose a simple lifestyle which is non-aggressive.

"Buddhists were speaking of four types of pleasures."¹³ that a person can enjoy in life. These are *atthisukha* (material prosperity) *bhogasukha* (the enjoyment of sense pleasures), *anansukha* (the pleasure of being debt-free) and *Anavajjasukha* (the pleasures of being blameless). In the present context of the Eco-crisis, one could be said to be debt less only if one has not over consumed natural resources, if one is not responsible for the plunder of the planet, if one has lived a simple life- enjoying simple pleasures within one's family circle without being a burden to society and Mother nature *Anavajjasukha* is the happiness one gains by spending such a debt-free life.

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¹² Ibid., P.-147

¹³ An Ethical Lifestyle as a strategy for survival, written by Lily De Silva in *Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism* (ed.) by Julia Martin (Delhi: Published jointly Tibet House & Sri Satguru Publication, 1997), P.116

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