

BUDDHIST RESPONSE TO ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Jaharlal Debbarma

Research Scholar, Centre for Buddhist Studies,
University of Hyderabad, India.
debbarma.jauhar@gmail.com

Abstract- The paper emphasizes on the role of Buddhist worldview for the proper and sustainable relationship between humans and their environments. The progress of science and technology has brought a tremendous changes and discoveries in term of trade, commerce, electronics, information technology, transportation and entertainment industry. These changes not only promote socio-economic development in many possible ways but, also affect the environment dangerously. The large scale exploitation of nature due to population growth, accelerated development of productive forces, and the ever increasing utilization of natural resources for human comfort have led to a dangerous ecological imbalance. Hence, this paper examines the tenets of the Buddha and throws a light on the current ecological challenges we face today. It also suggests methods and practices to maintain the ecological balance in man-nature relationship.

Keywords: Buddhist worldview, Environment, Interconnectedness, Suffering, Self-consciousness

I. INTRODUCTION

Human civilization has progressed so much that we have come to a point where we live in delicate time both morally and environmentally. The advancement of science and information technology has made our life comfortable and has turned the world into a global village. However these developments have also brought the environmental degradation critical to our survival in 21st century. Environmental degradation have endangered not only human life but also the future of the planet itself. Until and unless the collective effort of the intellectual community and the people at large undertake to preserve nature, human existence is in peril. This is where we can emulate from the rich Buddhist teachings as its teaching offer us a solution for the root causes of the ecological crises and suggests ways to minimize potentially tragic consequences of the crises.

A. Buddhism and Ecology

Ecology as a scientific activity and Buddhism as a way of life may sound disconnected, yet they have one common ground i.e. Nature. Buddhist teaching of noble Eightfold Path offers us as guide to human behaviour towards a healthy way of life in the face of all the ecological challenges and suffering caused by it. Many ecologists, social activists and scholars from the East and the West view Buddhism as an ecological religion while seeking answers to stop the mindless exploitation of the natural resources. One of the most significant aspects of Buddhist philosophy is its identification of man and nature as interconnected and interdependent. However, humans due to their never-ending sense-desires for material goods such as electronic gadgets car, machines,

entertainment, fashionable clothes and accessories in everyday life have put an excessive and unbearable pressure on the natural resources. Technology has made life on the planet further complicated with people seeking and getting stuck with electronic toys like mobile phones, computers and televisions. Moreover the consumerist society has unfortunately targeted human greed and controlled human behaviour by fueling our demand for unessential consumer products and make us fail to distinguish between our needs and wants.

B. Buddhist Worldview on Man-Environment Relationship

Buddhism teaches that man and nature are interconnected and to think of them as separate entities is an error. If we look at the Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Origination it clearly suggest that nothing hold independently of its own, but all things in the world exist in correlation with one another. Further it also suggests the ways to overcome problems from its origin. The short formula can be described by way of arising as “When there is this, that comes to be; (*Imassmim sati idam hoti*), with the arising of this, that arises. (*Imassuppādā idam upajjati*)” while by way of cessation going “When this is not, neither is that (*Imasmim asati idam na hoti*), with the cessation of this, that ceases. (*Imassa nirodhā idam nirujjhati*).” (Payutto, 1996:79). Through the analysis of Dependent Arising the reason for global eco-crisis can be characterised as follows: because of ignorance, we perform various actions; because of actions we are aware of sensations: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. Because of the awareness of sensation, body and mind are forms (the animated organism) ready to function. Because of the presence of body and mind, six senses are equipped. Because of the sense bases, there is a contact between awareness and outside world and this contact generates feeling of pleasure, pain or indifference. As the feelings are caused by the sense contact, we have a desire to seek pleasurable sense object and consume products which are made from petro-chemicals producing carbon dioxide as a by-product. (cf Piyobhaso, P. B. 2009:118) To put the process in line with the traditional formula, it will be; Because of sense-desire there arises consumerism, because of consumerism there arises commodity production, because of commodity production, there arises resource extraction, because of resource extraction there arises green-house gas release and because of green-house gas release there arises climate change and environmental crisis. (ibid.)

C. *Buddhist Approach to Ecological Challenges*

Buddhism will suggest that before we find ecological solution, first we need to acknowledge the truth that the world is full of suffering. In general, the Buddhist sees craving, aversion, and delusion within the human mind as the root causes for human suffering. Buddhist teaching offer us how to overcome the negative forces of greed (lobha), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha). As excessive greed will make life bound to extreme sensuality and hedonism (kama-tanha) and in limitless expansion and possessiveness (bhava-tanha). Hatred will bring destructive and violent attitude toward oneself, other, and the natural world (vibhava-tanha). Destructive patterns of consumption generate un-ending cycles of desire and satisfactions. The ecological crisis that we face today can be used as a catalyst to acknowledge the consequences of our craving and our pursuit for more material wealth and power and realize our need to change our assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward the nature. We need to educate ourselves from the catalyst of ecological crisis and know that the Earth has ecological limits which should not be crossed. We can create more unbiased, compassionate human beings and mindful societies that generate greater individual and collective well-being while reducing ecological crisis to manageable levels by learning from our mistaken beliefs and activities.

It may sound difficult for us but if we don't make a swift and dramatic reductions in fossil fuel use and put efforts to increase carbon sequestration, global temperature will continue to rise. The rise in global temperature will bring injury and death for millions of people worldwide and extinction of many of the Earth's species. The physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing of millions will be threaten with the stress and trauma. Ecological crisis may also trigger social and political unrest in the world. These will bring injustice to the poor nation with low in-come communities and people who are subjected to oppression and discrimination, communities which have contributed little to climate degradation will pay greater price. If we fail to make fundamental changes in our uses of energy consumptions, agricultural, forestry, manufacturing, transportation, and other systems, in few decades irreversible climate shifts may occur which can be a great threat to human civilization. We can adopt a meaningful path toward ecological solutions only by recognizing these truths.

Buddhist teaching offers some effective ecological solutions by urging us to adopt a simple lifestyle and moderation, respect for life and non-violence, simplicity and compassion, and right livelihood.

D. *Respect for life and Non-violence*

Buddhism preaches that one shouldn't think of one's existence as more important than anyone else's since all are interconnected, interrelated and, above all interdependent. It teaches compassion and non-violence not only towards fellow humans but also towards other living organisms and inanimate materials because overuse of such materials leads to

nonviolence. It also teaches that nature as their friend and teacher will help us live in harmony with nature. These will help in understanding that human and nature are interconnected and extend the appreciation all the lives in the planet.

E. *Simplicity and moderation*

Living simple life in moderation with material goods is what Buddha has taught. Greed and craving will bring only miseries and sorrow, since human want never end but keep demanding for more threatening nature and its natural resources. This is the reason why the ecological solution doesn't lie outside but within an individual. Hence an environmentalist Joanna Macy formulate the idea of greening oneself.

F. *Right livelihood*

Buddhist way of livelihood is to abstain from killing, to lay aside all weapons, to feel shame in killing, to saw compassionate and be merciful to all lives which will provide sustainability to all living beings. A livelihood that avoids harming others, such as trading in alcohol or poisons, weapons etc., lives in harmony with nature.

G. *Right Mindfulness*

Buddha taught to be mindful of one's thoughts and actions. Mindfulness in our actions will heighten awareness to control our desire and emotion and the thoughts and behaviors they generate. Practicing mindfulness continuously gives a sense of awareness when we are causing harm to ourselves or to others, the climate, the nature etc., further strengthening our capacity to continually shift and think and act positively. Mindfulness helps in understanding our intrinsic interdependency with other people and the natural environment. It also enhance human values and dignity instead of subordinating people, animals, and nature for the craving of material wealth and power.

II. CONCLUSION

Buddha has always taught people to live a life of contentment and appreciate the natural cycle of life. As greed and craving will only bring miseries and sorrows to one's life, since demands for human material possessions can never be satisfied and will keep demanding for more, threatening our own environment. As Mahatma Gandhi has rightly said, "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed." (T. N. Khoshoo, at el. 1995, p.67). Hence the real solution for environmental crisis begins with the individual. If we all come together and show our loving kindness, compassion appreciative joy and equanimity for the natural world and all of the beings that inhabit it, and make a pledge to overcome the forces of craving, aversion, and delusion, we regain our own inner stability and strength to live closer to the nature. Individually and collectively, we can serve and protect all life. Together, we can seek to ensure that our descendants and fellow species inherit a livable planet.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Harvey, Peter. (2000). *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2]. T. N. Khoshoo, at el. (1995). *Mahatma Gandhi and the Environment: Analysing Gandhian Environmental thought*, New Delhi: The Energy and Resources Institute Press.
- [3]. Henning, Daniel H., (2002) *A manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, Buddha Dharma Association Inc.
- [4]. Huong, Gioi. (2012) *Buddhism and Ecology in the Pitāka and Nikāyas*. New Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers.
- [5]. Martin, Julia (ed), (1997) *Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publication.
- [6]. Pandey, K.C. (ed) (2007) *Ecological Perspectives in Buddhism*, New Delhi: Readworthy Publication.
- [7]. Payutto, P.A., Bruce Evans trans. & ed. (1996) *Buddhadhamma*, Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation Press.
- [8]. Piyobhaso, Phramaha Bhatsakorn. (2009). *A Buddhist Perspective on Global Warming- our Inevitable Fate? Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis*. UNDV Conference Volume. Bangkok.
- [9]. <http://www.undv.org/vesak2011/book/enviromental.pdf>.