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Original Article

Buddhists View on Deep Ecology

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Abstract:

Buddhist literature has stressed that natural environment and human beings need to live in close and complete harmony, as well as plants and animals are the objects of unlimited love, kindness and benevolence, as they do not put any pre-condition for their invaluable services extended to us. The Buddha himself spent a major part of his life under trees and in the forest, as already mentioned earlier. It left a deep impact on his thinking and teaching. In the Buddhist view, human beings are a part of this universe and not a special creation. The universe was not created for human being, nor is human being the highest form of intelligence. The teachings of Buddha have 'Oneness', ecocentric, and spiritual orientations with loving and compassionate concern for all living beings. These teachings can contribute to each other for holistic and deeper attitudes toward various ecological and environmental issues. In Buddhism it is highlighted that- we may develop an ideal model with the metaphor of 'mother-child' relation with regard to our relation to nature for satisfaction of our needs and not of greed. The mother out of affection feeds her child as per the requirement. But an adult self-supported child does not require mothers' support any more. If now he demands still from the mother this is out of his greed. If without adjusting with the harmonious course of nature we use nature, it takes retribution. Now extending the Buddhist teaching of interdependence and kindness we can change our attitude towards nature from one of 'domination' to 'co-operation'.

Keywords*: Ahimsā, Ecology, Interdependence, Oneness, Greater Self.*

Introduction:

There is no question of doubt that Buddhism as a whole takes care nature or environment the most. Even Buddha is regarded as a great admirer of nature. There are, at least, four illustrations which reflect Buddha's inclination towards nature. These are: (a) Buddha was born under a tree; (b) Buddha was enlightened under tree; (c) the first sermon in the Deer Park at *Sāranāth* and (d) Buddha got the Nirvana between the two *Sāla* Trees at *Kuśinagara*. This reflects that Buddha started his life under trees. This again reflects the affiliation of Buddha in particular and Buddhism in general towards nature and environment. The Buddhist tradition revealed that Buddha looked at the *Bodhi* tree constantly for seven days after the enlightenment from a nearby spot located inside the *Mahābodhi* Temple Complex. Buddhism has a highly great regard on flora and fauna. The mountains, streams, trees, flowers, animals, birds, and insects are praised for keeping the environment peaceful congenial for meditation. It is also important to observe here that there seems to be imparted some sort of training in Ecology for monks and Buddhism. Even in *Vinaya*, the monks are advised to recycle their old ropes. They are also warned not to pollute water or green grass. As Buddhism has strong reservation regarding the sustainability of environment, it always gives outmost importance on the judicious use of natural entities. Even as regards the use of tooth-wood for monk (*Danta kāttha*), it has been suggested in Buddhism that tooth-wood must not exceed eight fingers in breadth and length. This measurement ensures reservation of must needed tooth-wood and also for teaching his followers to lead a modest life with a minimal necessity. In the Buddhist view, human beings are a part of this universe and not a special creation. The universe was not created for human being, nor is human being the highest form of intelligence. The teachings of Buddha have 'Oneness', ecocentric, and spiritual orientations with loving and compassionate concern for all living beings.

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These teachings can contribute to each other for holistic and deeper attitudes toward various ecological and environmental issues. To Buddhism, humans are part of nature. If the environment is destroyed or degraded, humans cannot survive nor have a quality life. By abusing the environment, humans abuse themselves and their descendants as well as future generations of all life. The basic Buddhist concept bars "unskilled" behaviour which is inappropriate, incorrect, and abusive toward the environment and its variety of living things. The environment can be defined as the aggregate of all surrounding things i.e. biotic and a biotic community and conditions that influence the life of individual organisms, including humans. It is the sum of all external things i.e. living and non-living organisms, circumstances, and influences that affect the development and ultimately the survival of an organism. One of the most illustrative influences of Buddhist thought on nature conservation is its doctrine of rebirth and reverence of special trees. This doctrine holds that a human being after dying can be reborn as an animal, or an animal upon dying can be reborn as a human being. Buddha further contends that a perfect man should abstain from injury to seed and plant life. Even the branch of tree gives us shelter should not be destroyed. In this context, it may be remembered that the *Sigālavadasūtta* asks a householder to accumulate wealth as bee collects nectar from a flower without harming either the fragrance or the beauty of a flower. A human being is required to make appropriate use of nature so that the continuity of a beneficial pattern of man and nature relationship is not threatened. This way of life reflects modern concept of social ecology that binds to safe ground the social balance and fore shake plundering of nature.

Thus, eco-sensitivity is the hallmark of Buddha Philosophy. In fact, Buddhist literature laid emphasis on the preservation of forests. Buddha felt that without proper vegetative censer in the environment, human life is in jeopardy. That is why, conservation of reserved forests (*rakkhita vana*) likes migādava at *Sāranāth*; *Venuvana* at Rajagaha, *Jetavana* at Savatthi etc. beautiful and peaceful woodlands were maintained for Arahats and thinkers to ponds and mediate there in silence. According to Buddhism, a noise-free environment was explicitly requisite for meditation which actually goes against noise pollution as witnessing everywhere in the world. For Buddha, noise-pollution creates harmful effects on human psycho-somatic system. We know that India is the home of Buddhism. *Ṛṣis* and aesthetics had been observing in nature the useless secret portion and procuring afflatus from its aesthetical influences of the ages. Buddhism was nurtured by the ideas, views, thoughts and morals of the contemporary *Vedic* scriptures. Buddha himself obtained inspiration from the occult beauty of Nature and expresses his acute appreciation. The company of birds, animals, and beasts has also been considered to be pleasant. The sweetest melody of birds at the dawn of the day made him anxious to hear the echoing of eternal songs. The free fearless movements of the beast as well as other animals have been the cause of enthusiasm for him. Our *Vedic Ṛṣis* sought under the shade of beautiful groves of blossomed trees or in the caves of hills or on the highest summits of mountains for solutions to the problems related to the welfare of humanity; in the same way, Buddhist *Bhikkhus*, inspired by the mountainous landscapes, harmonious sceneries of green trees, and melodious songs of clouds, lived in mountain caves and under green trees seeking a way for man to act for humanity.

Though the Buddhism talks about the protection of the society and environment, it gives importance on the three-fold training or *trividha sikkha* (i.e. higher virtue, higher mind, higher wisdom) of human being and seven factors of the enlightenment, which are the basis ethical sensibility to the environment and society. The *Mahāparinibbānasutta of the Dighanikaya* discusses about the three-fold course of training like cultivation of ethical conduct (*sila*) meditation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññ̃a*). These three are inter-connected in the sense that the first is left behind while the second is undertaken. When the ethical conduct is firmly established, the Meditation, the transformative power of wisdom becomes possible. It is rightly mentioned in the *Tanhabaggo chapter of the Dhammapada* that the thirst for enjoyable object makes a man blind of his own future and hence he can go to any extent for his enjoyment adopting injury to human and non-human beings including environment. An individual having such freedom can have 'real sympathy' towards nature, environment, human and non-human beings. An individual possessing such a mental state cannot do harm to others. If he cuts trees, injures animals etc. he will be condemned as found in the *Vinayapitáka*. It has also mentioned in the *Bhaisajya-skandhaka* that how different trees serve us as medicines in our everyday life.

We can say that only advice to protect society and social beings or to adopt *ahimsā* will fall flat upon others until and unless they are enlightened with wisdom. To Buddhism, there is a potentiality in human being to develop into a higher ethical awareness. This will happen through the concerted practice and discipline. In modern time, the suffering of mankind is found in the global level due to the violence in mind, body and speech. All individual beings have become disintegrated because they are suffering from afflictions worldliness (*bhavaroga*) due to the absence of right vision (*samyagdrsti*) regarding the status of the objects.

'*Opammakathā*' in the *Milindapañ̃ha* is devoted to the Buddhist awareness towards nature and its various components living as well as non-living, which exist in our surroundings. Nāgasena establishes that nature is our best teacher and we can take many very good lessons from them for attainment of purification of our personality and ultimately that of *arhathood* and *nibbāna.* Buddhist literature has stressed that natural environment and human beings need to live in close and complete harmony, as well as plants and animals are the objects of unlimited love, kindness and benevolence, as they do not put any pre-condition for their invaluable services extended to us. The Buddha himself spent a major part of his life under trees and in the forest, as already mentioned earlier. It left a deep impact on his thinking and teaching. Prescription of various Dhutaŋgas like, *Āraññ̃ikaŋga* that means living under the root of some

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tree, *Abbhokāsikaŋga* that means living under the open sky etc., clearly suggests how much importance the Buddha attached to the forest and environment.[1] Saŋkicca Thera expresses his feelings by saying that he has lived in the forests, in caves surrounded by fierce animals, but he never neither thought of harming them in any way nor did they tried to harm him. The Buddha's message of forest protection was also taken by Emperor Asoka, when he stated and took up a number of actions for the same. He planted trees beside the roads and banned the random killing of birds and animals for food. Even in the royal kitchen, he ordered for reduce in killing of animals in such a large number. It was constantly reduced to one deer and one or two peacocks which too, was to be completely banned after sometime. Not only that, Asoka opened hospitals for treatment of sick animals, which sufficiently clarifies his anxiety for environmental improvement and ecological balance. Through planting of Banyan trees and Mango groves etc., Asoka tried to balance oxygen and carbon-dioxide for pure atmosphere. That is why; he ordered not to burn out forests uselessly or for violence only.

According to Buddhism, human being is part of nature. If human beings destroy the nature, they destroy themselves. To Dalai Lama, "Universal responsibility is the real key to human survival. It is the best foundation for world peace, the equitable use of natural resources and through concern for future generations, the proper care of the environment."[2] The Buddhist ethics have intrinsic regard for life. There is shown sympathy for all living beings, since the suffering is common. However, man is placed at the top, and there is created the hierarchy of animals and insects, of course, depending upon the size of each one. Thus, among the animals the elephant is given the highest place. Trevor Ling gives the series of the sizes of mosquito-dog-elephant-man, in which, each one proceeding one is less important that it's immediate next. But Buddhist *Ahimsā* and *Paticca-samutpāda* find sufficient parallels in Ecology, mainly in terms of mutual co-dependence of all natural phenomena. Therefore, it would be the case that the ecological concept implicit in Buddhism were very sound and scientific. The remedies prescribed by the Buddha obviously offer a solution for saving the world today. These are basically based on what the modern ecologists' term as "sustainable development, reducing greed", relinquishing the desire to plunder nature and human society. Since ecological changes and environmental pollution is the problem of modern times, we have to think over the possible solutions in the light of the Buddha's teachings. The blind race of materialism and so-called scientific thinking of today made man civilized. Therefore, he lost many valuable worldly goods of his life also. It is true to say the greedy man is yet to realize that for the survival of human species one should be kept in an endless and peaceful position. To harm any aspect of nature is as good as doing harm to one. Armed with the knowledge of science and technology if we do not link ourselves with ethically skill-full ways of using our achieved powers we will destroy ourselves, destroy the happiness of the future generations to come. Material development divorced from spiritual concern tends to develop selfish individualistic outlook and makes man greedy exploiter and polluter of nature. It is ultimately human beings who suffer as a result of greed, violence and delusion. We face today many challenges to our survival such as, draught caused by deforestation, flood and soil erosion, increase in global warming serious threat to ozone layer from chloroform carbon discharged by refrigerator along with many others.

Out of greed people run after more and more possession; the same greed forces people to exploit others- to exploit nature beyond people's necessity; and the same greed makes people violent and aggressive. The same has also been realized by Mahatma Gandhi. He says that nature has plenty to mitigate the basic needs of humans, but the problem with modern man is that they fail to realize or rather confuse between the basic needs and greed. Instead of 'the attitude of possession', Buddhism advocates a 'sense of belongingness' as the ideal relation on our part to nature. It tells us to change our mindset from 'having mode' to 'being mode' of life. The reality of human beings is to be realized as an integral part of his environment and in learning how to 'live-together' in this world of interdependence of humanity and nature in a harmonious balance. The story of *vyāghra jātaka* (no. 272) may be relevant here. It goes like this: *Bodhisattva*, one tree goddess, a tiger, and a lion were living in the same forest. Once without listening to the warning by *Bodhisattva*, the tree goddess drove the tiger and the tiger and the lion away from that forest. Afterwards, the greedy woodcutters came and destroyed the abode of the goddess. This story may be used in an extended sense to signify the model of protecting woodlands and forests with the help of wide animals. In *Ariyapariyesana sutra of Majjhima Nikaya* the Buddha recognizes the importance of forest both for mediators and for laypeople. After realizing enlightenment (*buddhatva)*, he set down for meditation in a delightful forest. Continuous rising of agrarian economy in and through deforestation and rising economy in and through deforestation and rising of commercial urbanization were matters of concern to the Buddha. So, we see in different sermons the Buddha taught people to be compassionate to take due care for and love to all creatures. The *jātaka* stories testify Buddha's life in earlier births as birds and animals. In the Buddhist world view, we see various types of inter relatedness and dependence of the total bio-community.

Let us now examine the question of feasibility of an ethical approach founded on the precept of non-violence and on the virtues of loving kindness and compassion to all-plants, animals and humans without any kind of discrimination. Buddhism advocates a middle path between excessive enjoyment or consumerism and extreme self-mortification and in

[1] *Majjimanikāya* (Hindi Translation) Rahul Sankrityayan, Mahabodhi Sabha, Sarnath,1964, P. 349.

[2] A Turning of the wheel to mark the consecration of the status of Lord Buddha and the International conference on Ecological Responsibility:

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the light of this; we are to derive the barest minimum from nature to fulfill our needs. Precepts are meant to restrain ourselves from our greed-satisfaction. Here it may further be objected that what is called greed today will be considered as need tomorrow. In response to this, it is to be borne in mind that when we speak of the minimum, it leads us to say that it is due to us.

By extending love, compassion and non-violence in practice we can take interest in protecting the right to happiness of the future generations. Apart from philosophers and theologians, many environmental scientists of today are also pointing to the ethical perspective as necessary to reduce presently and to overcome in the long run many types of environmental crisis. Any kind of devaluation of other creatures and rating them as lower than human beings empathetically disconnect us from the harmonious principle of nature and this leads us to do harm to others. As a result of this, moral degradation, we ignore our relation of interdependence and responsibilities towards nature and this increases the intensity and multiplicity of environmental crisis, a challenge for ourselves to meet for our survival.

The unexpected progress of materialism tends to develop individualistic attitude too, which has caused serious harm to man. Man has lost the sense of peaceful co-existence and the view of 'live and let others live'. He does not hesitate in harming others in order to gain something for himself. Rapid mechanization, smokes discharged by vehicles, factories etc. have polluted the environment and people feel choked due to rarity of fresh and pure oxygen. Mutual distrust has increased so deep that one is not ready to listen to others' advice easily howsoever it may be good. Rapid deforestation has resulted in a tragedy to the world. In such an inadequate situation, Buddhism comes with a shining light. For a healthy life and balanced personality, it prescribes its Middle or Noble Eightfold Path. It gives the idea and ideal of *Brahmavihāra,* which teaches us how to attain peace within and how to create a pleasant environment in social life.

Conclusion:

Buddhist ethics based on non-violence, loving kindness and compassion "takes us beyond the polemicizing dualities of animal versus human rights and human interests versus environmental protection and nature conservation. It is surely from such an all-encompassing ethical sensibility that we can best consider, rationally and sensitively, the rights and interests of the entire life community of the planet. It is also enlightened self-interest because when we harm others, including the environment, we inevitably harm ourselves"[3]. The final message of Buddhism is: Let all creatures be happy. Let us not endanger ourselves by endangering the beauty of earth caused by pollution, deforestation and desertification. To make our planet the abode or home for all in the real sense of the term, let us utilize the powers that we achieve in the field of science and technology skill-fully so that nature's harmony is not disturbed and this can be done to a large extend by linking ethical elements of restrains and virtues to our new powers.

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[3] Fox, Michael W. *Bringing Life to Ethics: Global Bioethics for a Humane Society*, State University of New York press, 2001, P.178.