

Symbiosis with the Global Environment: Buddhist Perspective of Environmental Education

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Introduction

THE negative aspects of religion symbolized by terrorism and fanaticism have become hot topics discussed in the world in recent years. In such an age, it would be more inspirational if we could emphasize the social contribution of a religious philosophy rather than the negative aspects. One area of focus that requires attention is the elusive symbiosis between human beings and the global environment. The conundrum includes not only the difficulty between the symbiosis of human beings and the global environment, but also the symbiotic relationship between various countries and ethnicities. Moreover, it is necessary to understand and reflect on the negative causal features of modern science and technology that symbolize advances of the present civilization. From this perspective, the obstacles of a fluid symbiosis between human beings and the global environment rest solely on the much needed refinements of a culture, society or nation.

Recently, we discussed the meaning and relationship between Buddhist thought and environmental problems, not only from the viewpoint of natural phenomena, the environment and the perspective of time which are basic ideas in Buddhism, but also from viewpoint of values, ethics and lifestyle.^{1,2} Returning to the fundamentals, the objectives of this paper are to discuss the relationship between Buddhist philosophy and environmental problems, and to describe how Buddhist principles could be applied to educational methods to enhance our understanding of current global issues.

The Relationship of Buddhism and Environmental Problems

How does Buddhism deal with environmental problems? To answer this question it is first important to understand the concept of inevitability in Buddhism. Environmental problems are not inevitable, essential or expletive in Buddhist philosophy. Natural phenomena or nature were considered in early Buddhist teaching as suffering (*ku*; italic terms in

parentheses are Buddhist terms in Japanese), void (*kuu*), impermanence (*mujo*) and non-self (*muga*), and the incomprehensibility of natures transitory state. Moreover, the concept of nature is not referenced to as an object of attachment, but rather as part of an ascetic training of Buddhism to escape or remove oneself from any devotion to nature as a whole. As a result, early Buddhism was basically not interested or focused on nature in this regard; rather, it accepted that the everlasting truth of nature was its impermanence and natural cycle of destruction and formation.

Because this basic recognition of early Buddhism is similar to Mahayana Buddhism, Buddhist ethics relating to nature are difficult to distinguish and recognize. Then, from what perspective does Mahayana Buddhism observe current environmental problems? Here, we would like to apply the Mahayana Buddhist views of natural phenomena, the environment and the theoretical way of the practicing Bodhisattva.³

Although Mahayana Buddhism acknowledges nature in parallel to previous early Buddhism, it also recognizes the environment as essential to life and in a positive perspective. For instance, Buddhist concepts such as the application of the Non-Duality of Life and its Environment (*e-sho-funi*) and the Origination in Dependence (*engi*) are commonly referred to. The Non-Duality of Life and its Environment is the concept that life and its environment are two distinct phenomena but non-dual in their fundamental essence. The concept of Origination in Dependence indicates that an entity does not exist and induce independently, but that every entity exists due to its relations with or conditions pertaining to other entities. The essence of these concepts recognizes the value of nature and the environment. If nature is understood only by the viewpoints of suffering, void, impermanence and non-self, the environment does not positively have any value. However, these concepts from Mahayana Buddhism properly evaluate the environment as part of a balanced system. Because the destruction of the environment is interconnected to personal destruction by the Non-Duality of Life and its Environment, preventing environmental destruction becomes critical. Moreover, the consciousness-only doctrine in Mahayana Buddhism explains that the eighth alaya-consciousness (*alayashiki*) in the realm of the human's deep consciousness is connected to the physical world, *i.e.* mountains, rivers, the Earth, etc. Therefore, the ruination of the environment will affect the human's deep consciousness.⁴ In other words, unlike early Buddhism that relates human existence from the viewpoint of a physical relationship with nature, Mahayana Buddhism points to a deeper relationship, beyond consciousness between the human existence and

the natural surroundings.

Environmental problems, thus, lead to the suffering of the theoretical way of the practicing Bodhisattva. Destruction and pollution of the environment directly and indirectly affect the well-being of all life and Bodhisattvas. Since all life is affected, it becomes essential to remove the affliction of environmental degradation so that the theoretical way of the practicing Bodhisattva can be attained.

Environmental destruction and pollution cause biological extinction, and deteriorate the ecosystem as a whole. This process in turn infringes the spirit of a Bodhisattva's compassion towards all living things from the viewpoint of the Origination in Dependence which attaches importance to every relationship. Thus, the actual destruction and pollution of the environment becomes a goal for Bodhisattva's to overcome.

Currently, human desire of material things is a necessary condition for the maintenance and the development of the socioeconomic system in society. Thus, environmental problems are not only an appearance of negative or evil passions and desires (*bonno*), but also a causation and manifestation of amplifying negative passions. It is necessary for the theoretical way of the practicing Bodhisattva to overcome negative passions and to change the socioeconomic system in motion that further fuels negative and evil passions. From a Mahayana Buddhist perspective it is inevitable for environmental problems or issues to occur, but the purpose of Buddhism and the theoretical way of the practicing Bodhisattva is to overcome these problems as mentioned above.

Solving Environmental Problems

How can Buddhism help solve environmental problems? The social revolution that Buddhism suggests is not a radical one but a gradual, sustained revolution. There is a famous sentence by Mahatma Gandhi that Good travels at a snail's pace.^{5,6} The revolution that Buddhism intends is similar to this concept. The accomplishment of a social revolution starts from one person and the Human Revolution. In order for individual people to begin acceptance of environmental problems as their own personal concern, education becomes vital. Only education can provide the driving force for such a renewal of awareness where environmental problems become personal problems.

For this reason, Soka Gakkai International (SGI) proposed the establishment of "an international decade of education for sustainable development" at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South African in 2002.⁷ SGI's contribution to the decade

of education for sustainable development started from 2005. In the proposal, SGI President Ikeda mentioned that the following three aspects are essential for environmental education; 1) To learn and deepen our awareness of environmental problems and realities; 2) To re-examine our life styles and renew these toward environmental sustainability; 3) To take personal responsibility to solve environmental problems, and to empower people to take concrete action to resolve the problems we face. These aspects are basic steps towards sustainable development and critical for environmental education. We would like to examine these three points with respect to Buddhism.

Deepening Our Understanding and Awareness of the Environment

It is important to deepen our understanding and awareness of environmental problems. Currently, modern natural and social science research provides sufficient explanations pertaining to natural occurrences and predications of environmental problems. From a Buddhist perspective, it is sufficient to leave the research to scientists. Buddhism, on the other hand, is not particularly concerned with environmental issues from a scientific perspective, rather, Buddhist philosophy proposes unique perspectives to the root causes of environmental problems by concepts such as the Non-Duality of Life and its Environment (*e-sho-funi*) and the Origination in Dependence (*engi*) as mentioned before. Here, we would like to discuss how the concepts of Origination in Dependence and the Five Defilements (*go-joku*) apply to the perspective of time from the perspective of Buddhism.

In Buddhist thought, recognizing the occurrence of any phenomena is first justified by the doctrine of Origination in Dependence where everything is somehow connected. Therefore, the key principles for maintaining our world are inherently linked to bio-diversity and symbiosis in nature. This mutualism is suitably expressed in the simile of Indra's Net describing the aspect of "arising from causation (*engi*)" in the Huayan or Flower Garland Sutra (*kegon-kyo*) in Buddhist literature.⁸ The simile describes a great net that hangs in the palace of Indra, the God of Thunder. The net has countless joints or knots adorned with jewels in a beautifully complex mesh. Each of these jewels clearly reflects all the other jewels in the net, so that every part of the net reflects all other parts. The knots of the net express each living entity, and the net is stabilized so that the relation is complicated. The reason each link or knot is expressed as a jewel implies that each living entity has value beyond imagination, and projecting other jewels signifies the mutual respect and

deep relationship each living entity has towards one another. But, if parts of the net are cut out or a jewel is removed, the stability of the mesh will be lost. It is said that the mesh of the net is so complex that it would be extremely difficult to pinpoint the area that has been cut or removed, and even more difficult to determine where the next break may occur which would eventually bring the entire net down. This parable correctly explains the process of environmental degradation and collapse of an ecosystem. At present, we often overlook the impact of the extinction of a few small animals in nature. However, the simile of the sutra suggests that it is very difficult to predict where and how the potential extinction will influence the ecosystem in the future. Further, we are forewarned that the entire ecosystem could collapse by the destruction of one link. The parable distinctly reveals the meaning of the concept, “arising from causation.”

In Buddhism there is also the concept of the Five Defilements (*go-joku*) that elucidates the perspective of time and civilizations.⁹ Environmental problems in general can be attributed to an aspect equivalent to the defilement (impurity) of the period (*ko-joku*). The Five Defilements (*go-joku*) consists of the Defilement of Period (*ko-joku*), the Defilement of View (*ken-joku*: impurity of thought), the Defilement of Evil Passions (*bonno-joku*: impurity in instinctive greed, anger and stupidity), the Defilement of Sentient Beings (*shujo-joku*: increase of sufferings as a result of the defilements of view and evil passions) and the Defilement of Life (*myo-joku*: weakness of life force and shortening of longevity of living beings). In the *Hokke Mongu* (Volume 4),⁹ T'ient-t'ai describes that the Defilements of Evil Passions and the Defilements of Views are fundamental principles of life. He also mentions that the root cause of the Defilement of Period (*ko-joku*) stems from the Defilement of Evil Passions and the Defilement of View, which subsequently leads to the Defilement of Life and of Sentient Beings.

Since the present age is already engrossed with various desires, it may be fair to say that the world is already invaded by the Defilement of Evil Passions which will consequently lead to the degradation of the environment. Consequently, society becomes intensely greedy where the present civilization recklessly consumes all natural resources; those who consume faster, make more money and are considered successful. As Gandhi pointed out, “Earth provides enough to satisfy everybody’s need, but not everybody’s greed.”^{5, 10} The other causation of environmental problems is the devotion to the self (*ga*), *i.e.* devotion to material things and devotion to the false view (*akken*), which is thought to be connected to happiness. This is another way to explain the Defilement of View

(*ken-joku*). Supporting this concept, Gandhi refutes the machine-civilization describing, “What I object to, is the *craze* for machinery, not machinery as such.”¹¹ He does not argue against technological advancement in machines per say, but refutes the allegiance to machines and the false ideology connected to the satisfaction generated by machines.

Re-Examining Our Current Life Styles and Sustainability

When we deepen our understanding and awareness of the environment and causation of environmental problems, we begin to not only re-examine our daily life styles but also cultivate ethical values and a sense of responsibility towards nature, other people and future generations.

The standpoint of the fundamental biosphere egalitarianism is a basic principle of Buddhism.¹ This concept is based on the understanding of life in Buddhism where the realms of the Five Aggregates (*go-un-seken*) reside within the Three Thousand Realms in One Life (*ichinen-sanzen*). The realms of the Five Aggregates consist of matter (*shiki-un*; form), perception (*ju-un*), conception (*sou-un*), volition (*gyo-un*) and consciousness (*shiki-un*). The differences between various individual lives are not essentially different since all individual living beings are a temporary unification of the Five Aggregates of life. Therefore, Buddhist ethics relate to all living beings.

What we have been attempting to discuss in this section is how two fundamental principles in Buddhism, the wisdom of the Dependence in Origination and the wisdom of the middle way,¹² offer an ethical framework that can be used to arrive at a solution for environmental problems. An understanding of the functionality and workings of these two concepts should work as a driving force to expand and educate fundamental Buddhist precepts for maintaining a balanced environment.

A true understanding of the concept of Dependence in Origination allows us to consider the severity of the destruction of life, capture, or pillaging of living things. We should interdict behavior, as described above, in principle because it means, first, that we will destroy the relationship between each living entity, and second, that we will destroy the potential for being born again in the future. The causal factors leading to the extinction of any species should be particularly forbidden according to Buddhist canons.

Apart from the seriousness of species extinction, we must also consider how to sustain the capture of wildlife (hunting) and forest degradation (deforestation) for cultures that depend on these actions to survive. This paradox for some remote cultures corresponds to the Buddhist con-

cept of conducting environmental degradation with justifiable “reason” versus “intentionally (without reason).”¹² Moreover, according to the ethics of the Buddhist middle way, the destruction and capturing of living things is acceptable as long as the creative potential of an ecosystem is not destroyed. The ethics of this middle way neither denies the survival of remote cultures, nor affirms the destruction of an ecosystem, as long as securing the benefits for the cultures in need does not exceed the creative potential of an ecosystem. However, in order to secure the protection of ecosystems it is important to have reliable surveillance and management systems put in place.

The wisdom and ethics of Buddhism should also augment the ethical norm. This is what is meant by keeping the precepts.¹² In this article, we will describe the precepts of “not killing” and “not stealing” from the viewpoints of environmental problems. Buddhism forbids “killing” and “stealing,” because killing any living entity itself is an offense against the precepts of not killing, and stealing natural resources and habitats from ecosystems or by exploitation from developing countries is also an offense against the precept of not stealing. However, precepts in Buddhism are not absolute. The Brahma-net Sutra propounds on the First Major Precept on Killing,¹³ “He should not intentionally kill any living creature,” and on the Second Major Precept on Stealing¹⁴ states, “He should not intentionally steal any valuables or possessions and even those belonging to a needle or a blade of grass.” These precepts forbid killing and stealing without apparent reason “intentionally” in the both precepts.

Therefore, this means that sufficient justification is acceptable. Then, what kind of justification is acceptable? If we kill living things in order to support our own survival it is in fact justifiable. In Buddhism, however, eating a living entity is equivalent to stealing the body of the living entity. But since this is the minimum requirement for supporting human life, the condition of “without reason” or “intentionally” attached to the precepts of “not killing” and “not stealing” need not apply here. Therefore, in principle, a code of conduct in Buddhism is maintaining the precepts of “not killing” and “not stealing” except when necessary for supporting human life. The ethical norm in this logic is based on wisdom from the concept of Dependence in Origination and the Buddhist middle way. In addition, the precepts of “not killing” and “not stealing” in Buddhism are similar in meaning as of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Asteya* (non-stealing) in the eleven vows of Gandhi.^{5, 15}

Taking Personal Responsibility and the Empowerment of the People

An important point for resolving environmental problems and applying Buddhism to education is the action of taking personal responsibility with concrete action toward a solution, and critical to simultaneously give “courage” and “power” to other people and society to act in the same manner. It is also necessary to induce ethics as a “vow,” and to accompany action with a “mission” and conduct both vow and mission with “pleasure (or sense of fulfillment).” It is also important that actions toward the solution of environmental problems agree with the way of the Bodhisattva which is the ultimate actualization and practice of the Buddhist philosophy. Otherwise, environmental problems will persist to be a separate ideological problem from the philosophy.

Thus, we should take action to resolve environmental problems utilizing the way of the Bodhisattva.^{1,4} The basic spirit of a Bodhisattva is to put on the “Buddha’s clothes (*nyorai-no-koromo*),” to sit on the “Buddha’s seat (*nyorai-no-za*)” and to enter the “Buddha’s room (*nyorai-no-sitsu*)” in the three rules for propagating sutras (*gukyo-no-sanki*), chapter ten of the Hossibon in the Lotus Sutra. Putting on the “Buddha’s clothes,” sitting on the “Buddha’s seat” and entering in the “Buddha’s room” respectively mean maintaining patience (*ninniku*), meditation on intangible phenomena (*kuu*) and having compassion (*jihi*) for others. Here, maintaining patience (*ninniku*) means ceaselessly confronting negative or evil passions (*bonno*), practicing to preach the Buddhist doctrine at the risk of one’s life (practicing of *Fushaku-shinmyo*) and enduring any shame. Moreover, meditation on intangible phenomena (*kuu*) indicates the wisdom of Buddhism expressed in the thought that “all things of this world are non-substantial,” which can be linked to the theory of Origination in Dependence, where admitting the mutual relation of the two as inseparable. The last is compassion to give easiness to all living beings and to extract their suffering.

Even if a person takes action for solving environmental problems, he/she will not be able to easily find the beginning to a solution. Therefore, much endurance is needed. Moreover, endurance is needed in controlling personal desires and keeping resolutions pure in essence. As a result of these efforts a person will be able to revolutionize his/her own life style and live ethically. It is important for the compassion of Bodhisattva to extend equality to all living entities such as humans, animals and plants without defining between good and evil. This is as the Buddha explains “Whether visible or invisible, and those living far or near, the born and those seeking birth, may all beings be happy!”¹⁶ It is espe-

cially important that the objects of compassion extend to the “invisible,” “living far” and “seeking birth.”

Promotion of environmental education based on the above-mentioned Buddhist ethics is similar in meaning to the description given by the chairman emeritus of The Club of Rome, R. D. Hochleitner, who stated that each of our attitudes towards nature will be revolutionized and the relation of human and nature will also be harmonized through environmental education.¹⁷

Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed some Buddhist perspectives regarding reasons for dealing with the environmental problems and how they might apply to education.

Two fundamental Buddhist concepts for dealing with environmental problems were mentioned; where the environment has the same value as humans as from the two Buddhist doctrines of the Non-duality of Life and its Environment and the Origination in Dependence; and the inevitability of overcoming environmental problems through the practice of the way of the Bodhisattva, because environmental problems are evil for people and nature.

A possible solution to the environmental problems we face today may be to apply these Buddhist principles to environmental education. These applications are, 1) to learn and deepen our understanding of environmental problems, 2) to re-examine our life style, and 3) to take personal responsibility and to empower other people. It is important to recognize environmental problems and the realities not only from the stand point of research results from natural and social sciences, but to also grasp the problem and the causation from unique Buddhist viewpoints of the Origination in Dependence and the Five Defilements. The wisdom from the Origination in Dependence and the middle way of Buddhism should be augmented for the re-examination of our current life style. Moreover, the actions for solving our problems, *i.e.* taking personal responsibility and empowering other people, is one way to live as a true Bodhisattva of the Earth.

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