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A spiritual dimension and environmental education: Buddhism and environmental crisis

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Abstract

Buddhists believe that a well-trained mind that is developed to its highest capacity of intuitive insight and wisdom can help resolve environmental problems through its adherence to the Five Precepts and pursuance of the Eightfold Path to the cessation of suffering, as well as through showing loving-kindness and good-will to all. Buddhists also believe that selflessness and kindness are essential human characteristics which are needed for a peaceful society. It is argued in this paper that these beliefs represent a set of deeply-embedded cultural values that have shaped, as well as constrained, environmental education in schools and elsewhere in Buddhist countries.

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1. Introduction

Humankind is facing a global environmental crisis. Various strategies have been proposed to deal with environmental problems. While these efforts have been effective in solving some environmental problems, new problems are emerging because the roots of the environmental degradation have not been solved. Most strategies focus on end-of-the-pipeline control and treatment rather than prevention (Cremo & Goswami, 1995). Furthermore, many existing strategies are primarily based on the material world's point-of-view (as opposed to the spiritual world's), and have been unable to produce desirable results thus far. Arguably, the environmental crisis can be seen as a crisis of the human spirit. It has been argued that reducing the spiritual pollution in peoples' minds will also reduce natural pollution (Cremo & Goswami, 1995). Therefore, in solving these problems, special attention must be paid to the values of the spiritual world.

Indeed, our spiritual relationship with the environment can play a crucial role in environmental protection. But it is regrettable that people are turning their backs on the spiritual world as they indulge themselves in endless greed and desire of the materialistic world that invariably lead to the destruction of the environment. To mitigate the adverse effects of such a phenomenon, the concept of good deeds and harmonious coexistence of all living things on earth needs to be reinstated in people's mind. In this regard, all major religions in the world, which have a shared principle of promoting good deeds, denouncing bad deeds and fostering peace and happiness for all humankind, can play a crucial role (Chabhubhantarik, 1992; Thurman, 1992; McDermott, 1994; Payutto, 1994a; Cremo &

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Goswami, 1995). This paper will explore the role of one specific religion, namely Buddhism, in environmental protection.

2. Overview of Buddhism

Buddhism was founded in the north-eastern part of India some 2,500 years ago by Siddhartha Gautama, who is also known as the Lord Buddha or the Enlightened One. He is considered enlightened because he discovered what is called “the Four Noble Truths” about life which are (1) the Truth of Suffering (*dukkha*); (2) the Truth of the Origin of Suffering (*samudaya*); (3) the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (*nirodha*); and (4) the Truth of the Way Leading to the Cessation of Suffering (*Magga*). The last Truth is also known as “the Eightfold Path” which consists of (1) Right Understanding, (2) Right Thought, (3) Right Speech, (4) Right Action, (5) Right Livelihood, (6) Right Effort, (7) Right Mindfulness, and (8) Right Concentration (Chahudbhuntarik, 1992; Sivaraksa et al., 1993). According to the Lord Buddha, this path will ultimately lead to true happiness and freedom from all suffering – an emancipation from the cycle of being born, getting old, being sick and dying. This life cycle is illustrative of a core Buddhist belief that everything is impermanent, changing, and interrelated. Another important belief is that we should cultivate four sublime attitudes, referred to as the *Brahmaviharas*, which include loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (McDermott, 1994). It is generally accepted that, through these teachings, the Lord Buddha provides a system of analytical thinking, critical reflection, reasoned attentions, and thinking by way of causal relation or by way of problem solving, which helps guide people towards living a balanced and harmonious life with one another and with nature (Payutto, 1994a).

3. Buddhism and the environmental crisis

It is undeniable that human actions which are influenced by greed (*lobha*) or aversion (*dosa*), such as headless consumption of goods and services and reckless exploitation of natural resources, have had adverse impacts on the environment both directly and indirectly. The gravity of greed and aversion is also perpetuated by egoistic views and beliefs (*ditthi*) which makes the problem more difficult to solve (Payutto, 1994b). The problems with people’s endless desire and greed can hardly be addressed through the advancement of science and technology, because Science knows very little about the human individual (Payutto, 1994b) and it is incapable of changing human behaviours (Payutto, 1995). This is where Buddhism can play an important role. From a Buddhist perspective, any attempt to solve environmental problems must be based on three aspects: behaviour, the mind, and understanding.

1. Behaviour: there must be both external and internal constraints of human behaviours. External constraints are rules and regulations (*vinaya*) prohibiting actions harmful to the environment, and internal constraints are conscious intention (*sila*) arising from religious faith and training in moral conduct.
2. Mind: the love and appreciation of nature, which leads to the natural desire to protect the environment, must be encouraged and promoted. The desire to conquer and exploit nature, and more specifically the ill-founded view that nature is an obstacle to human development, must be minimised and rectified. In Buddhist terms, the mind can be trained through what is known as *samadhi*.
3. Understanding: in order to understand the causes and effects of environmental problems, people must have some understanding of natural order and ecological systems. Only with such an understanding that people can start to realise the importance of environmental protection. Buddhists refer to wisdom and understanding as *panya*. *Panya* plays an important role in monitoring the activity of the aforementioned two aspects and keeping them on the right track.

It should be noted, however, that the three aspects are interrelated and mutually supportive. Even when people understand the cause and effect of environmental problems, they will not change their behaviours harmful to the environment if their minds do not have the desire to do so. Thus, *panya* must be supported and enhanced by *sila* and *samadhi*. In other words, the three aspects must be integrated in the same process of problem-solving; together they represent a comprehensive solution to environmental problems (Payutto, 1995).

Pertinently, Buddhists believe that hatred and aversion cause destruction to others and themselves, and that greed and selfishness cause scarcity (Thurman, 1992). Greed and selfishness, in particular, are the cause of environmental destruction as Phra Buddhadasa Bhikkhu expressed in the following quotation:

When we are slaves to selfishness, there's no way we can hope for peace. Once Buddhists are genuine Buddhists who seriously and sincerely follow religious teachings, then we'll be able to conserve nature. And as long as we have selfishness, more forest destruction cannot be prevented (Buddhadasa 1990 cited in Kiatiprajuk 1990, p.39).

Greed and selfishness are notable examples of problems with the human mind. Therefore, we should concentrate our efforts on solving the psychological causes of environmental problems before attempting to solve material problems with sophisticated technology (Thurman, 1992; Payutto, 1994b). And it is in this regard that Buddhism can help address environmental problems. As Payutto (1997) pointed out, the Lord Buddha taught people to conduct their lives in the following ways:

- Consume less and consume only those things which are necessary for living.
- Live in harmony with nature, other people, and other creatures, as well as understanding the natural laws of the cycle of birth, old age, sickness, and death.
- Use nature wisely, and learn from nature to help improve their minds and behaviours.

It is clear that the above guidance of the Lord Buddha can, directly and indirectly, contribute to less destruction of the environment and lower pollution through the promotion of reasonable consumption and respect for other creatures and nature.

4. Buddhist teaching on preservation of nature

Buddhism has had a long and close relationship with nature and, in particular, forests. The Lord Buddha was born under the Sala tree, enlightened under the Bodhi tree, gave his first sermon in the forest named Isippitanamarukatayawan, and died under the Sala tree (Religious Development Committee, 1992). The Lord Buddha lived closely with nature and taught his followers to take care of nature. The first precept is to abstain from taking life of living forms. This precept is based on loving-kindness and can be seen as an environmental ethic to conserve animals and plants. More specifically, the Lord Buddha was supportive of water conservation as seen in the discipline he introduced prohibiting monks and nuns from disposing waste into canals or rivers. It is considered sinful to pollute water because all life forms depend on water to survive. In addition, according to Phra Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, deforestation is unacceptable in Buddhism, and it is important to show respect for trees that provide food, canopy and protection for all forest-dwellers. More generally, Buddhism emphasises the importance of human harmonious co-existing with nature while denouncing human conquering of nature. It also emphasises compassion, respect for all living creatures, and harmony between living things sharing the planet (Kabilsingh, 1987). All of the above demonstrates that the Lord Buddha had a vision for environmental protection and conservation as he taught his followers to love and respect nature (Kabilsingh et al., 1991).

5. Thai Buddhist monks' perspectives on the environmental crisis

The abbot of Pa Sukhalo Temple in Chaiyaphum Province, Phra Phaisan Visalo, is reputed as an environmentalist because he has devoted himself to forest conservation. He has helped raise awareness and tackle problems of deforestation in north-eastern Thailand, especially in the Kaeng Khlo and Phu Khieo districts of Chaiyaphum province. In his view, Buddhist monks play an important role in protecting and conserving the forest because they are living close to the forests and the people in local communities respect them and will listen to their guidance. One of his strategies is to discourage people from growing cassava and sugar cane because these crops are believed to damage the soil. At the same time, he introduced a system of integrated farming as an alternative to existing agricultural systems that were based on mass cultivation of single crop species. He also initiated a program called "Dhamma Yatra for Songkhla Lake" to raise awareness among local communities of the problems with water pollution. Twenty monks and 120 laymen participated in this program, which clearly illustrated how Buddhist monks can contribute to environmental conservation (Chetchotiros, 1996).

Another respectable monk in Thailand deserving of mentioning is Phra Buddhadsa Bhikkhu. In his perspective, an organism in the universe cannot exist independently of others, and people in a society must be mutually support one another. He believes that fairness in a society can only occur when human beings return to a state of balance with nature i.e. a system of “natural socialism” (Bhuntarikviwat, 1995). In his view, the teaching of the Lord Buddha or “Dhamma” is actually part of nature itself. In other words, Dhamma is the law of nature; it is based on the understanding of man's duty in relation to the law of nature, and it is the result which accrues to man when acting in accordance with that duty (Sivaraksa et al., 1993). These principles are clearly in line with the fundamental principles of environmental protection and conservation.

6. Forest and Thai people

Deforestation has long been a problem in Thailand. It is complex problem resulting from the need for national economic development fuelled by the capitalist desire (*tanha*), and from the social and economic problems which leave local people with no choice but to cut down forests to fulfil their needs. The situation is worsened by corrupted government officials who seek personal benefit from forest-related government contracts and activities. While there are laws to protect natural resources, there remain many loopholes that allow some people to over-exploit natural resources. (Phra Thepwisuthimatee 1993 cited in Suvajo et al., 1993).

It is interesting to note, however, that forests do still exist in some parts of Thailand, especially in the North and the Northeast, partly because villagers believe that there is a spirit or supernatural power embedded in the trees. Theerasartsawat et al. (1992) conducted a study on the local environmental protection system in the Northeast of Thailand and reported that there were three main factors which help preserve forests in local communities, which are (1) the initiatives of local monks to take care of the forests, (2) collaborative work between non-governmental organisations and the abbots, and (3) local beliefs in ancestor ghosts.

The third factor is worth elaborating in more details. Essentially, local villagers will select a forest and build a small shrine for their ancestor ghosts to dwell in. They believe that their ancestor ghosts would protect their villages and cast good spells on their lives (Chamratpun et al., n.d). This special forest is called “Don Phu Ta” or “Don Phu Ta Forest”. “Don Phu Ta” has been a holy place as well as a source of food and products for local communities for a long time. Most villages have their own “Don Phu Ta Forest” and will select a representative called “Tao Jum” who is believed to be able to communicate with the ancestor ghosts. Toa Jum plays an important role in fostering awareness of a community forest in the local villagers’ minds, and will teach and give suggestions regarding forest conservation to the villagers (Katetet, 1996). Importantly, villagers believe that their ancestor ghosts would be angry if they cut down trees or take wood from “Don Phu Ta”. This system of traditional belief helps prevent people from invading the forest, and thus promoting forest conservation. It is also important to note that many villagers in the Northeast of Thailand believe that the areas within temples and the areas where ritual practices are conducted are holy areas. There is a customary law which protects conserves the forest in these areas, and therefore the trees in these areas have preserved. Non-governmental organisations and monks have used these local beliefs about ancestor ghosts and local respect for monks as tools to persuade local villagers to protect and conserve the forest.

One notable conservation initiative based on the above local belief system is the 1997 “ordination” of 50 million trees for the special occasion of the Golden Jubilee of His Majesty the King, whereby 50 million (generally big and old) trees are chosen for ordaining ceremonies which involved yellow robes being wrapped around the trees. In doing so, it was believed that the local villagers will not cut them down, and that these trees and the forests there were in will be conserved for our next generations (Sukothai Thammathirat University, 1997).

7. Buddhism and environmental education

Skamp (1991) concludes the importance of spirituality and environmental education as follows:

Spirituality has been argued to be the centre of our relationship with the environment. Environmental educators need to be aware of this spiritual dimension... students of environmental education need to be conscious of their connectedness with themselves, others, and the environment, near and far, past and present...the importance of spirituality cannot be overlooked.

Our response to 'Truth' as we see it (conscious or otherwise) will be a powerful (perhaps the) determinant of the actions we take for the environment (Skamp, 1991, p.84).

...teachers of environmental education need to seriously consider the role of spiritual development of the students in their care when they are focusing upon humankind, with the world in which they live. (Skamp, 1991, p.85).

Education and religion are two important tools which can be used to address environmental problems. They help enlighten individuals and give them greater insight into their own nature and the consequences of their actions. Education can help find novel ways of fostering positive attitudes and attributes to overcome environmentally destructive behaviours (Thurman, 1992). These positive attitudes and attributes include integrity, honesty, generosity, thriftiness, loving-kindness, social responsibility, and care for others (NIER, 1991). More specifically, education for the environment or sustainability helps encourage students to develop an attitude of caring for the Earth (including the biosphere) and its resources, and to actively participate in maintaining and improving the quality of their environment. In doing so, environmental education helps students develop their personal spiritual relationship with the environment, thus leading to their desire and willingness to take actions for the environment (Skamp, 1991). More generally, teachers, students, and other related personnel of environmental education should also be conscious of connectedness among themselves, others, living things, society, and the environment, both near and far, past and present. This holistic approach to environmental education can help address environmental problems in a more comprehensive and effective manner.

Significantly, the Lord Buddha recognised the importance of education *in, about, and for* the environment. It was implicit in his teachings that he deeply cared about the environment and that he had an insight regarding ecosystems. His emphasis on harmonious co-existence between humans and nature, for example, demonstrates his understanding of the interdependence among all living things and their environment. Interestingly, the Lord Buddha often used nature as a medium, and drew analogy between nature and human behaviours, in order to demonstrate and explain his teaching which is, again, illustrative of his insight regarding connection between humans and nature (Kabilsingh, 1987). The human attributes which the Lord Buddha advocated, such as loving-kindness, compassion, and altruism, seem to fit perfectly with those values needed to overcome environmentally destructive behaviours mentioned above. In this regard, Buddhist beliefs and practices concerning the environment can, and do, play an active role in environmental protection (Kabilsingh, 1987).

8. Conclusion

From a Buddhist perspective, environmental problems are caused by greed and endless desire of people. Therefore, any environmental protection strategies must pay special attention to the psychological dimension of human nature. In this regard, this paper has shown that a number of Buddhist principles and beliefs, particularly *sila*, *samadhi* and *panya* can contribute to solving environmental crisis. It has also shown that Buddhist monks can play a crucial role in conserving forests in local communities. More generally, Buddhism can go hand in hand with environmental education in terms of promoting harmonious living between all living creatures and the environment and fostering environmentally friendly attributes such as selflessness, thriftiness, loving-kindness, social responsibility, and compassion. It is proposed that development of science and technology to solve environmental problem is not adequate in itself to deal with environmental crisis because science and technology are incapable of changing the human minds. Such a development must be supplemented by environmental education that focuses on human spiritual relationship with the environment, and by turning to religions, not only Buddhism, but also other major religions in the world which all have one thing in common, that is the promotion of good deeds and the denunciation of bad deeds. To sum up, we should take into account religions and their spiritual teachings when formulating environmental education curriculum. It is proposed that only through such a strategy that we can foster the notion of "environmental citizenship" needed for effective and sustainable environmental protection.

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