

Buddhist Thought on Humans and the Earth

The Buddhist Attitude Towards Nature

- Lily de Silva

Modern man in his search for pleasure and affluence has exploited nature without any moral restraint to such an extent that nature has been rendered almost incapable of sustaining healthy life. Invaluable gifts of nature, such as air and water, have been polluted with severely disastrous consequences. Man is now searching for ways and means of overcoming the pollution problem as his health too is alarmingly threatened. He also feels that it is irresponsible and morally wrong on his part to commit the future generations to a polluted planet. If man is to act with a sense of responsibility to the natural world, to his fellow human beings and to unborn future generations, he has to find an appropriate environmental ethic today to prevent further aggravation of the present pollution problem. Hence his search for wisdom and attitudes in a hitherto neglected area of knowledge, namely, religion.

Buddhism strictly limits itself to the delineation of a way of life designed to eradicate human suffering. The Buddha refused to answer questions which did not directly or indirectly bear on the central problem of human suffering and its ending. Furthermore, environmental pollution is a problem of the modern age, unheard of and unsuspected during the time of the Buddha. Therefore it is difficult to find any specific discourse which deals with the topic we are interested in here. Nevertheless, as Buddhism is a full-fledged philosophy of life reflecting all aspects of experience, it is possible to find enough material in the Pali canon to delineate the Buddhist attitude towards nature.

The word “nature” means everything in the world which is not organized and constructed by man. The Pali equivalents which come closest to “nature” are *loka* and *yathabhuta*. The former is usually translated as “world” while the latter literally means “things as they really are.” The words *dhammata* and *niyama* are used in the Pali canon to mean “natural law or way.”

Nature as Dynamic

According to Buddhism changeability is one of the perennial principles of nature. Everything changes in nature and nothing remains static. This concept is expressed by the Pali term *anicca*. Everything formed is in a constant process of change (*sabbe sankhara anicca*).^[1] The world

is therefore defined as that which disintegrates (*lujjati ti loko*); the world is so called because it is dynamic and kinetic, it is constantly in a process of undergoing change.^[2] In nature there are no static and stable “things”; there are only ever-changing, ever-moving processes. Rain is a good example to illustrate this point. Though we use a noun called “rain” which appears to denote a “thing,” rain is nothing but the process of drops of water falling from the skies. Apart from this process, the activity of raining, there is no rain as such which could be expressed by a seemingly static nominal concept. The very elements of solidity (*pathavi*), liquidity (*apo*), heat (*tejo*) and mobility (*vayo*), recognized as the building material of nature, are all ever-changing phenomena. Even the most solid looking mountains and the very earth that supports everything on it are not beyond this inexorable law of change. One sutta explains how the massive king of mountains — Mount Sineru, which is rooted in the great ocean to a depth of 84,000 leagues and which rises above sea level to another great height of 84,000 leagues and which is very classical symbol of stability and steadfastness — also gets destroyed by heat, without leaving even ashes, with the appearance of multiple suns.^[3] Thus change is the very essence of nature.

Morality and Nature

The world passes through alternating cycles of evolution and dissolution, each of which endures for a long period of time. Though change is inherent in nature, Buddhism believes that natural processes are affected by the morals of man.

According to the *Aggañña Sutta*,^[4] which relates the Buddhist legend regarding the evolution of the world, the appearance of greed in the primordial beings — who at that time were self-luminous, subsisting on joy, and traversing in the skies — caused the gradual loss of their radiance and their ability to subsist on joy and to move about in the sky. The moral degradation had effects on the external environment too. At that time the entire earth was covered over by a very flavorsome fragrant substance similar to butter. When beings started partaking of this substance with more and more greed, on the one hand their subtle bodies became coarser and coarser. On the other hand the flavorsome substance itself started gradually diminishing. With the solidification of bodies differences of form appeared; some were beautiful while others were homely. Thereupon conceit manifested itself in those beings, and the beautiful ones started looking down upon the others. As a result of these moral blemishes the delicious edible earth-substance completely disappeared. In its place there appeared edible mushrooms and later another

kind of edible creeper. In the beings who subsisted on them successively sex differentiation became manifest and the former method of spontaneous birth was replaced by sexual reproduction.

Self-growing rice appeared on earth and through laziness to collect each meal man grew accustomed to hoarding food. As a result of this hoarding habit, the growth rate of food could not keep pace with the rate of demand. Thereupon land had to be divided among families. After private ownership of land became the order of the day, those who were of a more greedy disposition started robbing from others' plots of land. When they were detected they denied that they had stolen. Thus through greed vices such as stealing and lying became manifest in society. To curb the wrong doers and punish them a king was elected by the people and thus the original simple society became much more complex and complicated. It is said that this moral degeneration of man had adverse effects on nature. The richness of the earth diminished and self-growing rice disappeared. Man had to till the land and cultivate rice for food. This rice grain was enveloped in chaff; it needed cleaning before consumption.

The point I wish to emphasize by citing this evolutionary legend is that Buddhism believes that though change is a factor inherent in nature, man's moral deterioration accelerates the process of change and brings about changes which are adverse to human well being and happiness.

According to a discourse in the Anguttara Nikaya, when profligate lust, wanton greed, and wrong values grip the heart of man and immorality becomes widespread in society, timely rain does not fall. When timely rain does not fall crops get adversely affected with various kinds of pests and plant diseases. Through lack of nourishing food the human mortality rate rises.[6]

Thus several suttas from the Pali canon show that early Buddhism believes there to be a close relationship between human morality and the natural environment. This idea has been systematized in the theory of the five natural laws (pañca niyamadhamma) in the later commentaries.

According to this theory, in the cosmos there are five natural laws or forces at work. They can be translated as physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws, and causal laws. While the first four laws operate within their respective spheres, the last-mentioned law of causality operates within each of them as well as among them.

This means that the physical environment of any given area conditions the growth and development of its biological component, i.e. flora and fauna. These in turn influence the

thought pattern of the people interacting with them. Modes of thinking determine moral standards. The opposite process of interaction is also possible. The morals of man influence not only the psychological makeup of the people but the biological and physical environment of the area as well. Thus the five laws demonstrate that man and nature are bound together in a reciprocal causal relationship with changes in one necessarily bringing about changes in the other.

The commentary on the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta goes on to explain the pattern of mutual interaction further.[8] When mankind is demoralized through greed, famine is the natural outcome; when moral degeneration is due to ignorance, epidemic is the inevitable result; when hatred is the demoralizing force, widespread violence is the ultimate outcome. If and when mankind realizes that large-scale devastation has taken place as a result of his moral degeneration, a change of heart takes place among the few surviving human beings. With gradual moral regeneration conditions improve through a long period of cause and effect and mankind again starts to enjoy gradually increasing prosperity and longer life. The world, including nature and mankind, stands or falls with the type of moral force at work. If immorality grips society, man and nature deteriorate; if morality reigns, the quality of human life and nature improves. Thus greed, hatred, and delusion produce pollution within and without. Generosity, compassion, and wisdom produce purity within and without. This is one reason the Buddha has pronounced that the world is led by the mind, *cittena niyati loko*. [9] Thus man and nature, according to the ideas expressed in early Buddhism, are interdependent.

Love Letter to the Earth

-Thich Nhat Hanh's prayer of praise and gratitude for our planet

Dear Mother, there are those of us who walk on Earth but still wish to seek a Promised Land elsewhere, not knowing that you are the wondrous Pure Land, present in this moment. They are not able to see that the Kingdom of Heaven exists in their own hearts. They are not able to see that if their minds are calm and peaceful, then the very ground they are walking on becomes the Pure Land. We are able to play and enjoy this Pure Land day and night thanks to that insight, thanks to the practice of dwelling peacefully with mindfulness in the here and now. We have the Kingdom here and are no longer searching for it elsewhere. You have the capacity to carry us hundreds of millions of years into the future, after which you may manifest as another planet and we as other wonderful forms on you.

Respected Mother, you have children who are proud of themselves as brilliant mathematicians, skilled artisans, gifted

architects, but few are able to see that you are the greatest mathematician, the most accomplished artisan, and the most talented architect. We only need to look at a branch of cherry blossoms, the shell of a snail, or the wing of a bat to see this truth. We have talented artists, but how can our paintings be compared to the works of art that you reveal to us in the four seasons? How can we paint such compelling dawns or create such radiant dusks? Our musicians are geniuses, but how can our songs measure up to your wondrous orchestra of Earth and Sky, or the magnificent sound of the rising tide? We have brave soldiers, knights, and heroes who have endured extreme heat and cold and traversed mountains and rivers, but how many of us have your patience and capacity to embrace? We have great love stories, but who among us has your immense love that includes all beings without discrimination?

“I like to walk alone on country paths, rice plants and wild grasses on both sides,

putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness,

knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth.

In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality.

People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle.

But I think the real miracle is not to walk on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth...

a miracle we don't even recognize.”

- Thich Nhat Hanh
