Karatoya: NBU J. Hist. Vol. 8 : March, 2015 ISSN: 2229-4880

In Search of the Ecosophy: Enviornmentalism in Buddhist Philosophy

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Abstract: *His Holiness Dalai Lama says, "Destruction of nature and natural resources results from ignorance, greed, and lack of respect for the earth's living things. This lack of respect extends even to the earth's human descendants, the future generations who will inherit a vastly degraded planet if world peace does not become a reality and if destruction of the natural environment continues at the present rate. This paper gives an in dept study on the notion of environmentalism in Buddhist Philosophy. A special mention is made of the Jataka tales that beautifully enumerates the environmental philosophy in Buddhism.*

Keywords: ecosophy, reciprocal dynamic, *Bodhisatta*was, *Ja¯takas,* Pali Canon.

Mayra Caldecott in his book *Myths of the Sacred Tree*, describes Gautama Buddha's experience at Bodh-Gaya-

At Bodh-Gaya he sat under a tree and did not move from there for forty-nine days. Time passed and did not pass. He could feel the great tree drawing nourishment and energy from the earth. He could feel it drawing nourishment and energy from the air and the Sun. He began to feel the same energy pumping in his heart. He began to feel that there was no distinction between the tree and himself. He was the tree. The tree was him. The earth and the sky were also part of the tree and hence of him. When his companions came that way again, they found him so shining and radiant they could hardly look at him directly. "What has happened?" they asked. But he did not reply. How could he possibly explain in words the experience that had given the key to the questions that had troubled him so deeply for so long?[1]

Ecosophy and ecophilosophy are neologisms formed by contracting the phrase ecological philosophy. While Professor at University of Oslo in 1972, Arne Naess introduced the terms "deep ecology movement" and "ecosophy" into environmental literature. Naess defined ecosophy in the following way:

'Ecosophy is a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of Sofia (or) wisdom, is openly normative, it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe. Wisdom is policy wisdom, prescription, not only scientific description and prediction. The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant

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differences concerning not only the 'facts' of pollution, resources, population, etc. but also value priorities'...[2]

Does Buddhism offer any special perspective on the ecological crisis? Do its teachings imply a different way of understanding the biosphere, and our relationship to it, which can really help us at this critical time in history when we are doing so much to destroy it?

There are reasons to doubt it: after all, Śākyamuni Buddha[3] lived in a very different time and place, Iron Age India. He and his society knew nothing about climate change, ozone holes, melting glaciers, or extinction events; for that matter, they also knew nothing about carbon dioxide or the other elements of the periodic table, the cellular structure of life, DNA, and innumerable other scientific facts we take for granted now.[4]

So what does Buddhism have to offer us today, as we struggle to respond to the eco-crisis?

II

Alan Sponberg has made pertinent contributions to this area of research. He looks at early Buddhism and Maha¯ya¯na and the Buddhist environmentalism mostly from the soteriological point of view[5]. Giving a liberal thinking, Sponberg says that the seed of environmentalism is contained in the Buddhist doctrine of no-self.[6] He further says that "individual identity is perceived as a dynamic and developmental stream of karmic conditioning" that continues over many lifetimes and life forms.[7] The self when taken in this particular way will lead us for "compassionate, environmental sustaining altruism."[8]David Kalupahana also takes a strong stand on the issue of the presence of environmentalism in (primarily early) Buddhism in his essay "Towards a Middle Path of Survival."[9] Pragati Sinha remarks, Kalupahana claims that most interpretations of Buddhism in the modern world are based upon misunderstandings and so do not comprehend that the Buddha's was not an absolutistic theory of nature. Human beings were a part of nature; they were dependently arisen like everything else that existed and according to Kalupahana, the dissolution of this distinction in understanding will reveal a significant relation between nature and humanity.[10]

P. D. Ryan's in his book *Buddhism and the Natural World* reflects an extremely positive attitude and creates a vivid picture of Buddhist environmentalism especially through deconstructing the myth of the *AggaññaSutta*. Ryan's writings are also inclusive of analyses on wilderness, animals and images of nature based on ideas of interdependence and compassion.[11]

However it is very important to mention the works of Joanna Macy[12]. Paticcasamuppa¯da (dependent co-arising or dependent origination) is a fundamental Buddhist concept that engages Macy's attention and through a close study of its implications she is able to arrive at the conclusion that it does indeed positively contribute to an environmental ethics[13]. After having analysed the Buddhist theory of dependent co-arising, she relates it to the Buddhist approaches to kamma, self, perception, and ethics. She believes that it is through the changing of the individual that a conversion in attitudes to nature can happen and this view culminates in the arising of a new sense of self.[14] It also suggests how individuals can contribute to ecological goals by altering the way they see themselves. Macy finds that the Buddha's teaching of dependent co-arising, which she also refers to as the law of causality, applies to the objects and events of daily life. She explains that for the Buddha causality did not imply one thing causing another in turn (in a linear sense), rather it meant that things provided the appropriate conditions or occasions for others to arise, and by the arising of others these things themselves were affected. In this Macy saw "mutuality" or a "reciprocal dynamic" where it was not the things themselves but the relationship between them that became important. She finds that two baskets of the Pali Canon – the Sutra and the Vinayapitaka – support this meaning but in the third – the Abhidharma (Pali: Abhidhamma) – there is slight change and shift in meaning. Macy believes, "These shifts tend to weaken the moral thrust of dependent co-arising, and blur its distinctiveness from the causal views the Buddha contested."[15]

III

Lord Gotama adopted non-violence and it is said, "Having forsaken the destroying of life, the ascetic Gotama abstains from destroying life, without stick, without weapon, humble, with kindness, he lives with compassion for the welfare of all living beings."[16] In the Dhammapada it is stated that the life of each and every being is dear to it and all tremble at the thought of pain. Therefore one should never harm others for they too can suffer like one's own self.[17]

The virtue of respect for life is also suggested in the Eightfold Path under right action and right livelihood. Right action and livelihood specify how an individual ought to act and live in this world. He must act such that all life is respected. Under right action (*samma¯ kammanta*) Buddhism suggests, just like the first precept, abstinence from killing (*pa¯na¯tipa¯tavera¯mani¯*, D II 312). Right livelihood (*samma¯ a¯ji¯va*) also supports respect for all life. By adopting the correct means of making a living, a person can ensure that no being is hurt and protection is extended to everything that can suffer. This sense is conveyed by specifying that certain forms of making a living are to be avoided at all costs. The Buddha says, "Monks, a lay disciple ought not to indulge in five

trades. Which five? Trade in weapons, trade in human beings, trade in flesh, trade in spirits and trade in poison."[18] Especially to be noted is a ban on the professions of hunters and butchers and others, who may physically harm other living being.[19] The *Theri¯ga¯tha¯* also mentions that certain professions generate evil results – pig and sheep butchers, hunters, thieves and murderers – and no amount of splashing of holy water can free them of their destiny.[20] People who injure their fellow creatures are admonished by being warned that they too will suffer ill consequences of their actions for the effects of the latter are never lost.[21] Thus, a respect for all life was emphasized in Buddhist literature. Respect extends to plant life as well. It is true that one is unable to establish that plant life is sentient on Buddhist principles, however this does not rule out respect for plants derived from precepts such as "non-injury to seeds and plants". Respect for life thus is a constant theme in the *Nikaya¯s* and in other texts and its practice is reiterated over and over again.

Theravādin monk Thanissaro says,

'There are . . . acts with damaging consequences that, when performed unintentionally, reveal carelessness and lack of circumspection in areas where a person may reasonably be held responsible. Many of the rules dealing with the proper care of communal property and one's basic requisites fall in this category . . . the minor rules that do carry such penalties may be regarded as useful lessons in mindfulness.'

Another factor in Buddhism that contributes to a good environment is the indirect endorsement of simple living. Pragati Sinha well articulates that in Buddhism simple living is essentially articulated through non-greed (*ara¯ga*) and contentment (*santutthi*) and corresponds with the definition of an environmental virtue as well. The Buddha appears to approve that living simply would advance the agent's quest by providing an impetus towards liberation. The virtue does not have a direct ecological motive in Canonical literature, but can be seen to support ecology implicitly. That simplicity is a foundational virtue for an environmental virtue ethics is not in doubt. As an environmental virtue it recognizes that such living plays a positive role in reducing the demands made on the natural world and consequently in protecting the environment. Thus any philosophy that supports a simple life and contentment not based on material possessions is bound to be inherently environmental.[22]

IV

The Ja¯takas, a part of the KhuddakaNika¯ya of the SuttaPitaka or the first basket of the Pali Canon are a collection of over five hundred stories that in common dialect are called folklore. Each story conveys a moral that is considered as the basis of

righteous conduct by early Buddhists. The renowned Buddhist scholar T. W. Rhys Davids, in his book *Buddhist India*, writes, "When the original *Ja¯taka*was being gradually formed most of the stories were taken bodily over from the existing folklore of northern India."[23] K. R. Norman believes that "Although many Ja¯takas can be regarded as being non-Buddhist, or even pre-Buddhist, there are some which are certainly Buddhist."[24] Furthermore though it is true that all the *Ja¯takas*are not purely Buddhist in origin, more recent research also shows that they did assimilate Buddhist principles in all seriousness and so cannot be so easily overlooked due to their origin.

A study of the ethical and factual content of the *Ja¯takas*reveals both accommodating and pessimistic aspects of importance in determining the nature of environmental discourse. In the *Kusana¯lija¯taka*, the *Bodhisatta*was born a deity and was dwelling in a clump of *kusa*grass (*kusana¯l. igacchedevata¯*).[25] He became friendly with atree deity that also lived nearby. The tree was very strong and the trunk was also beautiful. It received great attention from the king because of it hugeness. It happened that the king's palace needed a strong pillar as the old one had rotted and this tree was the only tree that seemed strong enough to hold up the roof. Under these circumstances the king gave permission for the tree to be cut down. On hearing this, the deity of the tree burst into tears for her home would be destroyed. The *Bodhisatta* promised to help her out of her predicament. He assumed the shape of a chameleon (*kakan taka*), worked his way up the tree and made it appear full of holes. On seeing the holes, the woodcutters declared the tree to be rotten and unfit to be cut and this averted the tree being chopped. The explicit moral outlined in the story itself is that the wise should be respected and befriended irrespective of their position. However on closer examination the tale also has many indirect environmental implications. It brings awareness about the protection of trees, even though the protection comes from a simple spirit living in a clump of grass. However on closer examination the tale also has many indirect environmental implications. It brings awareness about the protection of trees, even though the protection comes from a simple spirit living in a clump of grass.

The *Godhaja¯taka* tells the story of a greedy monk who developed a taste for the flesh of lizards.[26] In order to fulfill his yearning he tries to kill the *Bodhisatta*, who is a lizard in this lifetime. The monk does not succeed and is warned by the *Bodhisatta* that he will go into the realm of suffering for not practisingselfcontrol (*asaññatam.*). Other than greed, various forms of craving (such as the craving for delicious food or *rasatan ha¯*) are criticized in the tales.[27] Craving for hugely wasteful and exotic foods may harm health, have no added nutritional value and be produced through severe environmental costs.

Much on the treatment of animals can also be derived from the *Ja¯takas*. There is a diversity of animals contained within the tales; some 70 animals in all are mentioned, with monkeys and elephants topping the list.[28] The sacrifice of animals, an accepted

practice of the time, appears to have greatly perturbed the Bodhisatta of the Ja¯takas. Animal sacrifice was deplored and intentional injury in this form became especially unacceptable to the Buddhists. There appears to have been an underlying awareness that the precept implying respect for life was compromised due to such acts. In the Matakabhattaja¯taka a goat that was to be sacrificed by a Brahmin showed signs of great joy and great sorrow.[29] The goat explained the reason for each emotion. In a previous life the goat had been a Brahmin who had sacrificed a goat, due to which he was born a goat in the last 500 lifetimes and each time had to have his head chopped off. He had laughed because this was his last birth, but he had cried for the Brahmin would be doomed for killing a goat. The sacrifice was stopped. In another story the Bodhisatta was born a king and vowed to stop the sacrificing of living creatures in his land.[30] He devised a clever strategy for this. He announced in his kingdom that any being that indulged in animal sacrifice would, in turn, be sacrificed to a certain Banyan tree. The result of this was that none of his subjects, during his reign, harmed another living creature for fear of being sacrificed themselves. Scholars identify two reasons for the general Buddhist opposition to animal sacrifice. One could be seen as compassion, that the Buddha did not want animals to suffer (and so having an indirect bearing on the environment).[31]tale that is of considerable ecological significance and also concerns animals is the *Ka¯sa¯vaja¯taka*, where the *Bodhisatta*is an elephant himself.[32]The tale revolves around the deceit of a man who dresses as a Brahmin in order to lure elephants and then kill them for their ivory. The *Bodhisatta* realizes his true intentions and drives him out of the forest. Attention is drawn to this particular tale only to illustrate that there was some awareness about the pain suffered by animals and there is acknowledgement that killing an elephant for material gain (ivory) is not an acceptable act. Thus this story relates directly to present day ecological problems.

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[17]*sabbetasantidan.d.assa*

sabbesam. jı¯vitapiyam.

Atta¯nam.upamam. katva¯

Na haneyyanagha¯taye(Dp 130)

[18]*Pañc'ima¯ bhikkhave van.*

ijja¯ upa¯sakenaakaran.ı¯ya¯.Katama¯ pañca?Satthavan.ijja¯,

sattavan.ijja¯, mam.savan.ijja¯, majjavan.ijja¯, visavan.ijja¯. (A III 208)

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[28]Chapple, "Buddhist Birth Stories," pp. 145–6. Chapple has listed the different types of animals exhaustively

[29]J I 166–8.

[30]*Dummedhaja¯taka*, J I 259–61.

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[32]J II 196–9.