

**THE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA AND THE FEELING OF
ECOSPHERIC BELONGING**
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I record my deep sense of gratitude to the members of the Department of Philosophy, especially to its Head of the Department, for extending me an opportunity by inviting me to write a paper for the felicitation volume of Professor Raghunath Ghosh, a distinguished scholar of Indian Philosophy of our time. In late eighties of the last century I joined the Department of Philosophy of North Bengal University as a part-time researcher for my Ph.D programme and I was fortunate enough to work under the supervision of Prof. Ghosh. This short article is the revised version of my paper discussed in the 5th International Conference held in Colombo from September 6-8, 2013 organized by Sri Lankan Association for Buddhist Studies and I consider this as my humble tribute to my teacher Prof. Raghunath Ghosh.

Today, not only the existence of man but of all the creatures on this planet is in question. To get rid of it varied reflections on the concept of environment are taking off from different directions. Thinkers of environment are in search of the way to move to 'eco-centrism' from 'ego-centrism'. Today we are earnestly in need of a space where we can inhale pure air. But day by day it becomes hard to get. Not only air but the environmental degradation in all respects is going on and threatening the existence of all creatures living or non-living on this planet. Armed with the knowledge of science and technology man has massively misused the environment and has exploited Nature for the sake of his narrow interest. The consequence goes against him. His own existence is now questioned. The most knowledgeable race on the earth lives such an eco-unfriendly life that it is surely a suitable example of 'human folly' what Russell said in his Lloyd Robert Lecture 1949 and forecasted that "it would make human survival doubtful"¹. To get rid of it new ways of thought, new theories are being developed. Some thinkers of environment have emphasized on the development of a sense of belonging which they call 'eco-spheric belonging' and advocated a new branch of philosophy called 'Eco-sophy,' the core of which is Environmental Ethics. Their viewpoint gets inspiration in the findings of the science of ecology, the study of interrelationship between animals, plants and their inorganic environment which are considered as the conditions for their struggle for existence. On the basis of this fact followers of eco-sophy realize the need to extend our moral conscience to non-human world too. They have questioned the traditional

anthropocentric view of ethics which does not acknowledge the intrinsic value of creatures other than man and is responsible for divorce of human being from Nature. The proponents of ecosophy want to move towards a morally 'deep world' from a 'shallow' human-centered morality, to search a way which lead away from anthropocentric to cosmo-centric, from 'ego-centrism' to 'eco-centrism',

However, a question may arise here: "In what sense are we reasonably led away from the anthropocentric to the cosmo-centric value stance?" Professor Borouah (2005) of IIT Kanpur in his paper titled "Environmental Wisdom" has tried to answer this question by introducing the concept of "interdependence" which, according to him, is the key concept for introducing such an ethics. For him, it may be the foundation of distribution of values irrespective of human, non-human and non living being.² Arne Naess (1973) also emphasized on the principle of interdependence, which he considered, as a cognitive basis for a sense of ecospheric belonging. I think, teachings of the Buddha can easily accommodate to such a modern approach. From environmental perspective the law of Dependent Origination (*Paṭīyasamudpāda*), the central principle of Buddhism may provide the foundation of environmental ethics and can open a space for 'eco-spheric belonging'. This paper is a humble attempt to this direction.

The theory of dependent origination may provide the foundation of environmental ethics in two ways. Firstly, it says that the interconnectedness, the interdependence and conditionality of all which is the key concept of ecospheric belonging. According to this law, everything comes into existence depending on another. Since the existence of everything is conditional and dependent, it implies that the beings and objects of the world exist interdependently, but not independently. Definitely an ecological vision which vitiates all species of the planet is integrated as a whole are found its room within this principle. The Buddha laid emphasis on this principle. While addressing to the *Bhikshus* he said, "Whoever beholds the *paṭīyasamudpāda*, beholds *dharma*. Whoever beholds *dharma* beholds the Buddha". The term *dharma* means the system of faith which is rooted in the teachings of the Buddha. The interconnectedness of all beings and non-beings of this planet which derives from the law of dependent origination also implies the fact that nothing in the world is static and can have an exclusive separate unity. Within this model individual

entities are to be said by their very nature conditional as well as relational. Therefore, the law of dependent origination may be acceptable as a foundation of what the modern environmentalists want to introduce to stop the ecological degradation. Moreover, following the four noble truths which are the logical consequence of the law of dependent origination we may feel that the present environmental degradation is the effect of our greed. From the perspective of environment we may reconstitute the four noble truths of the Buddha in the following way: I) there is environmental degradation for which we are suffering and our existence on the earth is in question, ii) our greed is the cause of such suffering, iii) there is cessation of such degradation and finally, iv) there are ways of this cessation. Let us analyze.

There is the threatening of human existence posed by the major environmental factors most of which are caused by man. They are like deforestation, ozone depletion, loss of bio-diversity, heat emissions from industrial installations into the atmosphere, danger of applications of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture, establishment of nuclear plant etc. Their contribution for deterioration of environment cannot be denied. A close observation of modern development will reveal that the present system of modernization is built upon the exploitation and colonization of nature. To satisfy the desire (especially, the desire of capitalist country) man ignores the interconnection of human being with nature and is likely to think that man's freedom and prosperity comes from "an ongoing process of emancipation of nature, on independence from, and dominance over natural processes by the power of reason and rationality" (Vandana Shiva & Maria Mies, 2010, 6). Therefore, for which the humanity is going to suffer immensely are of our craving which leads man to dominate nature.

We find, according to the Buddha, that the cause of suffering is thirst (*taṇhā*). Thirst is originated from our wrong conception of self which is ego-centric. This concept of self leads us to think our self as a separate independent unit and creates our firm belief on the idea of insular, independent individuality. On the basis of such belief the most knowledgeable race on the earth considers himself as a distinctive feature with independent moral status and ignores the intrinsic value of other nonhuman being and denies their rights to live on the earth. The dominant ethical tradition which is human-centered has been developed on this wrong belief and

denies extending our moral concern to other being than man. This egocentrism is because of ignorance, what the Buddha repeatedly pointed out. Ignorance means lack of proper knowledge. It is the root cause of all our suffering. Knowledge means knowledge of wisdom. Knowledge divorced from wisdom is not considered knowledge in true sense, rather it increases our suffering. Addressing the august audience Bertrand Russell in his Lloyd Robert Lecture 1949 has warned that unless man increases his wisdom his knowledge and competence combined with folly will increase his suffering. According to him, knowledge without wisdom is only a 'power for evil'. The Buddha in his teachings emphasized on right knowledge (*sammāditthi*) and the concept of *Bodhisattva*, the highest state of being can be attained by a person only when he / she takes resolve to win enlightenment. The third noble truth of the Buddha leads us to the way of light by which we become aware of the third noble truth of the Buddha that the environmental hazard can be stopped if the cause of it can be uprooted. We realize that a journey from ego-self to eco-self only can lead us to environmental upgradation.

Finally, following the fourth noble truth of the Buddha we may say that there is a path to reach a state free from suffering from environmental degradation. The path recommended by the Buddha to be free from suffering is also applicable here. The paths are as follows: i) Right views (*sammāditthi*), ii) Right resolve (*sammāsankappa*), iii) Right speech (*sammāvāca*), iv) Right conduct (*sammākammānta*), v) Right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), vi) Right effort (*sammāvayāma*), vii) Right mindfulness (*sammāsati*), and viii) Right concentration (*sammāsamādhi*). The eight paths constitute three principles, such as conduct (*śīla*), concentration (*Samādhi*) and knowledge (*prajñā*). Among these *śīla* consisting of five precepts are applicable to common people. Among these five precepts we can directly associate the precept the *prāṇatipāta virati* (restraining from killing of any living being) with environmental wisdom. Only the person exercising this particular precept can acquire environmental wisdom, which according to the environmentalist, is 'the principle guiding force' of developing the sense of belonging. The precept *prāṇatipātavirati* encourages us to practice of non-violence. It not only does mean abstention from killing but also from any kind of injury to others which in turn move us to recognize the value of others - both physical and non-physical. 'It is interesting

to note that by 'All living being' the Buddha wanted to include all kinds of living beings born and yet to born.³ In this connection we may refer to the use of unborn infant of lamb for making the most fibulas hat for the sake of man, without considering the right to live the animal. Again in *Suttanipāta* the Buddha says, "know ye the grasses and the trees... Then know the worms, and the worms, and the moths, and the different sorts of ant... know also the four-footed animals small and great, the serpents, the fish...the birds...know the marks that constitute species are theirs, and their species are manifold (*The ocean of Buddhist wisdom*:151). This is the result of realization of total connectedness of all. Restraining from all kinds of violence includes both physical and non-physical of all creatures. In *vinaya* it is advised that the monks should not pollute water or green grass with urine or excrement (1964: ii). In the *Dighanikāya* (1.11) doing any harm to seeds, plants and trees is strictly prohibited. Similarly *Bahmajālasutta* considers setting fires to field, seed and woodlands as sin (*Dighanikāya*-1). All these clearly shows that the Buddha's teachings tell us to live with Nature which the modern thinkers of environment call as 'eco-sophic belonging'. Two concepts named *Mettā-bhāvanā* and *Karuṇā-bhāvanā* in Buddhist ethics are essential to live with Nature. *Mettā-bhāvanā* (loving kindness) is that attitude of mind through which we can extend our love to all living being. It is a way 'of moving to eco-centrism from egocentrism. The feeling of pity for all beings who suffer and the determination of eradication of suffering is called *Karuṇā-bhāvanā* (compassion). The cultivation of these to eradicate the negative aspects of our mind, like ill-will, hatred, fear, selfishness, greed etc. and we feel a first person experience to others which restrain us from doing harm to others.

From what has been said, it follows that the teachings of the Buddha take us away from the ethos of egocentrism which is based on our false belief of individuality and can relate to life as it actually is. In other words, the law of dependent origination shows that the idea of insular, independent status about our being is a myth. Everything is interdependent. Realization of this law may lead us to environmental wisdom which develops the loving-kindness and compassion in our mind and can able to stop the present environmental degradation by connecting our decentered self with the whole universe. The Buddha taught us that we create as well as destroy our own environment by our mind. The cultivation of our negative aspects of mind makes

a road block between the kinship of human being and nature whereas the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion leads our mind to the world of eco-spheric belonging. We are in urgent need of such a theory which can rationally establish the extension of ethical scope from anthropocentricity to cosmo-centricity.

NOTES& REFERENCES:

1. In his Llyod Robert Lecture on November 29, 1949, Bertrand Russell said, "...We are in the middle of a race between human skill as to means and human folly as to end.... The human race has survived hitherto owing to ignorance and incompetence, but given knowledge and competence combined with folly, there can be no certainty of survival" ("Environmental Wisdom" by Bijoy H. Boruah in *Readings in Environmental Ethics*: 2005:23)
2. B. Borouah has written, "The survival of anything in the universe is a matter of its vital dependence on other things, including the whole system of things, biosphere and ecosphere included. ...Perhaps this is cosmic interdependence, which I consider to be the foundation of the distribution of values over the cosmic order as a whole, without any hierarchical discrimination."(*Readings in Environmental Ethics*: p-26)
3. *Ye keci pāṇabhūtaṭhi taṣā va thāvāra vā anavaśeṣā, Dīghā vā ye mahantā vā majjhīmā rassakā aṇukathūlā. Dīṭhā vā yeḅa adiṭṭhā ye ca dūre basanti avidūre' Bhūtā va sambhavesī vā savve sattā bhavantu sukhittā.* (Sukamal Choudhury:1997:56)

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