

BUDDHISM AND THE ECOCRISIS

(The role of Buddhism in enhancing environmental philosophy and psychology in the west today)

by Phil Brown

Buddhist Peace Fellowship

*" The world grows smaller and smaller,
more and more inter-dependent.....
today more than ever before life
must be characterized by a sense
of Universal responsibility, not only
nation to nation and human to human,
but also human to other forms of life"*

H.H. the Dalai Lama

Buddhism provides all the essential elements for a relationship to the natural world characterized by respect, humility, care and compassion. This article seeks to demonstrate this point by drawing on material from the book "Buddhist Perspectives on the Ecocrisis" edited by Klas Sandell. Sandell's book utilises Buddhist concepts from the Theravada tradition though readers who explore the Mahayana tradition will find it an equally rich source of doctrine supportive of environmental care. Although specific acknowledgements have not been given in the body of this article, the writer has quoted liberally and extensively from the articles by Lily de Silva and Klas Sandell.

According to Bhikkhu Bodhi in the preface to Sandell's book: "The current crisis arising over environmental pollution and the over-exploitation of our natural resources has gripped the attention and aroused the concern of virtually every human being alive today. The anxiety provoked by the "ecocrisis" stems from a cause lying far deeper than the immediate predicament which it creates. For the ecocrisis does not confront us simply as one more set of problems to be disposed of through further research and legislation. It comes upon us, rather, as a disturbing manifestation of the dangers inherent in unbridled technological proliferation and industrial growth and a grim portent of even graver dangers ahead if current trends continue unchecked. Thereby it causes us to reassess some of the basic premises upon which modern Western civilisation is grounded and the goals towards which so much of

our energy and wealth are directed.

"The development of Western technology was spurred by the belief that applied science could eliminate all human wants and usher in a golden age of unlimited prosperity for all. Now, having utilized technology to subjugate nature to serve human desire, we have doubtlessly succeeded in making life more comfortable and secure in many respects that it had been in an earlier era. However, our smog-covered cities, polluted waterways, devastated forests and chemical dumps remind us painfully that our material triumphs have been gained at terrible price. Not only is the beauty of the natural environment gradually being destroyed, but its capacity to sustain life is seriously threatened, and in the process of vanquishing nature, man himself has placed himself in danger of losing his humanity. For the most part the approaches to environmental protection that have been sponsored and implemented in official quarters are those that are consonant with the dominant technocratic mentality. They thus operate within the same closed frame of reference, and draw upon the same fixed premises, as the projects originally responsible for the ecocrisis. Unable to envisage any alternatives to the aims of industrial society, their proponents simply assume that our troubles stem from a lack of adequate scientific expertise and thus that they can be remedied through greater scientific ingenuity and more efficient technological management. However, while so much money is poured into research aimed at extending human control over the environment in order to prevent specific hazards, the basic presupposition at the root of the whole ecocrisis is allowed to stand unquestioned, namely, that the means to achieve human well-being lies in increased production and consumption."(Bhikku Bodhi in Sandell,1987, p v & vi)

"We are now coming to recognise that the project of gaining mastery over nature springs from a number of assumptions specific to Western industrial society: that happiness and well-being lie in the satisfaction of our material needs and sensual desires; that the basic orientation of humankind to nature is one of conflict and struggle aimed at subjugation; that nature must be conquered and made subservient to the satisfaction of our desires. We can also see that these assumptions are fallacious ones which, if not challenged and replaced soon, may well have grave consequences for humanity". (Bhikku Bodhi in Sandell,1987, pvii)

East Asian philosophies and religions, can provide the West with rich sources of material which advocate harmonious and peaceful co-existence between humankind and the natural world. Prominent among the Eastern religions in this respect is Buddhism. Buddhist philosophy can also make a major contribution to the development of a new environmental philosophy and environmental psychology for the West because it does not presupposed the existence of god, but is based on individual insight, and thus ought to have a great deal to contribute to a "world view" continually influenced by scientific thought. As stated by Albert Einstein, "If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism."

Unlike the above mentioned assumptions which underlie Western Civilisation, the following aspects of Buddhism are supportive of environmental care:

Philosophic insight into the interconnectedness and thoroughgoing interdependence of all conditioned things.

Humankind is a part of nature and no sharp distinction can be drawn between itself and its surroundings, as everything is **impermanent** and subject to the same natural laws. According to Buddhism the factors of existence are interconnected by the laws of causality. Although the factors are not fractions of the whole, yet they are interconnected and interdependent. This awareness of the fact that everything is impermanent, and that humankind is subject to the laws of causality, must be seen as an important basis for a proper understanding of humankind's role in nature. Such an awareness promotes humility and thoughtfulness.

Buddhist doctrine is rich in information concerning the interconnectedness and interdependence of all conditioned things. In this paper, however, the writer will mainly present information on one aspect of the doctrine, namely the **interrelationship of human morality and nature**.

Though change is inherent in nature, Buddhism believes that natural processes are affected by human morals. Several suttas from the Pali Canon show that early Buddhism believes that there is a close relationship between human morality and the natural environment. This idea has been systematised in **the theory of the five natural laws (*panca niyamadhamma*)** in later commentaries. According to this theory, in the cosmos there are five natural laws at work: namely, physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws and causal laws. This means that the physical environment of any given area conditions the growth and development of its biological component, i.e. fauna and flora. 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 humankind influence not only the psychological make-up of the people but the biological and physical environment of the area as well. Thus the five laws demonstrate that humankind and nature are bound together in a reciprocal causal relationship with changes in one necessarily bringing about changes in the other. The world, including nature and humankind, stands or falls with the type of moral force at work. If immorality grips society, humankind 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 the reason the Buddha pronounced that the world is led by the mind, *cittena niyatiloko*. Thus humankind and nature, according to the ideas expressed in early Buddhism, are interdependent.

These views on action and reaction in humankind's relationship with nature seem to come very close to certain modern scientific concepts. For example, in the West, studies of ecology and human ecology have observed how various elements in nature are interconnected and how human encroachment in one way or another leads to repercussions in time and space.

Its thesis that happiness is to be found through the restraint of desire in a life of contentment rather than through the proliferation of desire, & its goal of enlightenment through renunciation and contemplation.

According to Buddhist doctrine, humankind must learn to satisfy its real needs and not its desires. The resources of the world are not unlimited whereas humankind's greed shows neither limit or satiation. Modern humankind's unbridled voracious greed for pleasure and acquisition of wealth has exploited nature to the point of near impoverishment.

Buddhism tirelessly advocates the virtues of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion in all human pursuits. Greed breeds sorrow and unhealthy consequences. Contentment is a much praised virtue in Buddhism. The person leading a simple life with few wants is upheld and appreciated as an exemplary character. Miserliness and wastefulness are equally deplored in Buddhism as two degenerate extremes. The excessive exploitation of nature as is done today would certainly be condemned by Buddhism in the strongest possible terms.

Its appreciation of Nature's beauty

Nature's beauty is appreciated by Buddhists because it is recognised as valued by those of high spiritual attainment. The Buddha and his disciples regarded natural beauty as a source of great joy and aesthetic satisfaction. In various ways the Buddha has stressed the need for close contact with nature and pointed out how advancement of mind leads to a greater appreciation of nature. By default one could say that the misuse of nature tends to indicate low spiritual attainment.

Its ethic of non-injury and boundless loving-kindness for all beings.

The well-known **Five Precepts** (*panca sila*) forms the minimum code of ethics to which every lay Buddhist should adhere. Its first precept involves abstention from injury to life. Buddhism also prescribes the practice of *metta*, "loving-kindness" towards all creatures in all quarters without restriction. This is reflected in the *Karaniyametta Sutta (Sutta-nipata)* which says:

"May creatures all be of a blissful heart.

Whatever breathing beings they may be,

No matter whether they are frail or firm,

With none excepted, be they long or big

Or middle-sized, or be they short or small

Or thick, as well as those seen or unseen,

Or whether they are dwelling far or near,

Existing or yet seeking to exist,

May creatures all be of a blissful heart."

The understanding of **kamma and rebirth**, too, prepares the Buddhist to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards animals. According to this belief it is possible for human beings to be reborn in subhuman states among animals. It is possible that our own close relatives could be reborn as animals. Therefore it is only right that we should treat animals with kindness and sympathy.

The Buddhist notion of **merit** also engenders a gentle non-violent attitude towards living creatures. Kindness to animals is a source of merit, and such merit is needed for human beings to improve their lot in the cycle of births and to approach the final goal of Nibbana.

Among Buddhists there is a reverential attitude towards long-standing gigantic trees. They are called *vanaspati* in Pali, meaning "lords of the forests." As huge trees such as ironwood, the sala and the fig are also recognised as the Bodhi trees of former Buddhas, the deferential attitude towards trees is further strengthened.

Its cultivation of detachment

Buddhism points to the difference between unselfish love and the kind of love that is linked to attachment and the urge to possess. The cultivation of detachment encourages an unselfish appreciation and enjoyment of nature without thought of profit and exploitation. We can also describe the contrast between attached and detached love as the difference between greed and need. It is quite obvious that a large proportion of the production that today leads to an intensification of environmental problems and to the impoverishing of the Earth comes under the category of greed.

Its notion of harmony in the relationship between humankind and nature

Despite what has been said above regarding natural laws and impermanence, Buddhism still holds that humankind's position in nature is a unique one. If humankind has a unique position in nature why don't Buddhists feel justified in attempting to dominate nature? The reason is that Buddhist doctrine engenders a strong sense of humility towards nature and encourages "loving-kindness in our interaction with it.

This combination - the recognition of humankind's unique position in nature together with the ideal of spiritual development and humility towards nature - gives support to the achievement of a harmonious relationship between humankind and nature. This implies the possibility of a withdrawal from the usual ways of thinking, ranging from

human submission to nature to its domination of nature. A harmonious relationship with nature leading to cooperation with it, should be seen as a "third alternative" and not as a compromise between submission and domination. In the search for such a cooperative attitude towards nature, Buddhist philosophy can be an important source of inspiration.

As we have seen above, Buddhist philosophy has much with which to enhance environmental philosophy and psychology in the West. **"The environmental crisis we face today needs active help and the world's estimated 500 million Buddhists can make a major, positive impact by becoming active conservationists"** (Nancy Nash, in Sandell,1987, p74)

Buddhists are well placed philosophically to do so, for as Lily de Silva remarked, "The Buddhist admonition is to utilise nature in the same way as a bee collects pollen from a flower, neither polluting its beauty nor depleting its fragrance. Just as the bee manufactures honey out of pollen, so man should be able to find happiness without harming the natural world in which he lives."(Sandell, 1987,p28)

Readers wishing to participate in a **Buddhist environmental group** could consider joining the **Buddhist Peace Fellowship** by writing for more information to Gillian Coote, Secretary, Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), 31 Bonnefin Rd, Hunters Hill, NSW 2110 . Alternatively, they could contact **The Rainforest Information Center**, Box 368, Lismore, N.S.W. 2480. This Center is run by John Seed, a dedicated Buddhist conservationist.

"May ALL Beings Be Happy"

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PO Box K1020 Haymarket NSW 2000 Australia

Buddhism, religion and philosophy that developed from the doctrines of the Buddha, a teacher who lived in northern India between the mid-6th and mid-4th centuries BCE. Buddhism has played a central role in the spiritual, cultural, and social life of Asia, and, beginning in the 20th century, it spread to the West.Â Professor of the History of Religions and of Far Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, 1964â€"85; Dean, Divinity School, 1970â€"80. Author of Religions of the East and others. See Article History.

Buddhism, religion and philosophy that developed from the teachings of the Buddha (Sanskrit: "Awakened One"), a teacher who lived in northern India between the mid-6th and mid-4th centuries bce (before the Common Era). Buddhist thought and Western philosophy include several interesting parallels. Before the 20th century, a few European thinkers such as Arthur Schopenhauer had engaged with Buddhist thought. After the post-war spread of Buddhism to the West there has been considerable interest by some scholars in a comparative, cross-cultural approach between eastern and western philosophy. Much of this work is now published in academic journals such as Philosophy East and West.

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