

IN SEARCH OF BUDDHIST FOUNDATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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Abstract

In this paper, various attempts to found an environmental ethics in Buddhism are subject to critical considerations. It is shown that the criteria for an adequate environmental ethical theory require theoretical accommodation of internal value in nature and natural entities, and existence of natural diversity and holistic entities with distinct ontological status. However, this proves to be too restrictive for any attempts to construct a Buddhist environmental ethics.

Environmental problems are among those urgencies pressing us for timely solutions. And, like many others, environmental crisis gives rise to the question whether Buddhism can contribute anything to the attempt to alleviate the situation. The question is apparently clear. However, a consideration of answers commonly given shows us that it is too broad and therefore prompts us to redefine it.

Many who give an affirmative answer raise a famous example in which Buddhist monks lead local people in the activities of 'tree ordination'¹ and also of other environmental movements led by local monks. However, monks' activities do not comprise a good answer because there are a lot of counterexamples. Some popular monks, for instance, had a big area of forest cleared so that 'forest temples' could be constructed as peaceful places for meditation retreat.

This points out that we should not understand by the term, 'Buddhism,' a religious institution with its members. The above examples pose us a question which of those activities by monks is in accordance with the true Buddhist spirit. To distinguish Buddhist from non-Buddhist activities, 'Buddhist worldview' therefore needs to be understood. As a result, the question should be so refined as to inquire whether Buddhist worldview can be utilized as a basis to tackle the environmental crisis.

Ways to answer this redefined question can be classified into two: (1) The Buddhist way of world understanding should be used as the foundation on which appropriate environmental framework is constructed.² It is anticipated that this approach will yield a characteristically Buddhist solution; (2) Conditions that environmentalists believe to be necessary for environmental protection should be used as a framework for which Buddhism needs to provide a foundation.³

Apparently, answers to these questions do not seem to diverge. Yet, they bear an asymmetrical relationship. The answer to the first question may not be accepted by those

¹ E.g. trees are wrapped around with a piece of cloth whose color resembles that of monk robe. Usually, around those trees believed to have some spirits dwelling inside, colorful cloth or either old or new monk robes are tied, and people treat them the way they treat sacred objects. Therefore, the method of tree ordination gives trees in a forest this sacred look that is believed to drive deforesting squads away.

² See, for example, papers collected in Atthachinda Deepadung. (ed.). (1993). *Seminar on Ethics and Environmental Crisis*. Nakorn Pathom: Humanities Department, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University.

³ See Lambert Schmithausen. (1997). The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4, pp. 1-74.

who prefer to approach the problem with the second question while it can be sure that the answer to the second question will be endorsed by those who work with the first question. The reason is that the conditions posed by the environmentalists are more restrictive. We shall see below that there are cases in which Buddhism can support some environmental practice, but still fails to meet the environmentalist criteria.

Before we proceed, there is a possible objection to the above consideration that it leaves out some other alternative to deal with the question. That is, some argue that Buddhism can not provide any foundation for environmental ethics whose aim is to protect this world. That is because it rather teaches people to renounce this world.⁴ However, this does not seem to be really problematic because it is not difficult to see that, despite that sort of teaching, Buddhism does not reject the mundane level of reality (*lokiya*). The instruction of renunciation belongs to the 'religious' order having as its goal spiritual development, which concerns the relationship between an individual and the transcendental reality (*lokuttara*). At the same time, Buddhism also gives instruction in what one ought or ought not to do, which belongs to the 'moral' order embedded in the mundane realm. More than that, in order to renounce this world through enlightenment, one need to start with moral practice as prescribed in the threefold training (*sikkhattaya*). Therefore, Buddhism does not only accept this world—the mundane reality—but also prescribed moral orientation in the realm.

Another related point is that some suggest that fruits of spiritual development be utilized as the basis of environmental movement. Nevertheless, this can not be considered to be a general framework since it implies that environmental protection depends on spiritual development in each individual, which is not timely—the insight development is difficult and not something for which people in general are happy to endeavor. The proper environmental ethics should provide a rationale for people with different spiritual progress to take care of the environment.⁵

Distinguishing between the two levels of teachings e.g. moral and religious, we are aware that moral principles are prescribed for all whereas religious goals depend on each individual. This however does not completely exclude an ethical consideration that refers to the spiritual development. Apart from their practical aspect, spiritually developed individuals also have the aspect that can be loosely termed, 'cognitive'— they have more access to the truth about absolute reality. Granted that practice is based on understanding, the environment-friendly conduct purportedly observed in those with well-developed mind should have its root in their understanding of the absolute truth. If that truth is discovered, the question about Buddhist contribution should be answered. This will be discussed in 2.3 and 2.4.

Next are the environmentalist conditions, after which proposed Buddhist solutions are critically considered against the background of these conditions.

1. The basic conditions that the environmentalists use as criteria for judging adequacy of proposed theories comprise the followings. (1) Nature and things in nature have value in themselves. They have value neither because they can satisfy human needs nor because human existence depends on them. (2) Diversity in nature has value in itself. (3) Nature does not consist only of particular things but also holistic entities such as

⁴ See Neungnoi Boonyanetra. (1994). Environmental Ethics in Buddhism. *Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies* 1(1), p. 7 and Schmithausen. (1997). op.cit., pp. 4-6.

⁵ Schmithausen. (1997). op.cit., pp. 7-8.

forest, species, and ecosystem. In other words, holism is endorsed.⁶ Any proposed ethical theories need to be able to accommodate all these three elements.

2. Those important points are below which Buddhist scholars raise in support of the thesis that there is something in Buddhism that can provide an environmental ethical foundation.

2.1 In the Discipline (Vinaya), proscriptions are found that seem to bear the tone of environmental concern. For example, it is forbidden that monks damage plants, cut a tree, or pass waste into a water resource. However, the Discipline is not sufficient for two reasons. First, the rationale behind some of these is not related to environmental care, but others such as respectability of the monastic order. Second, though some other proscriptions was motivated by the perception of value in things in wilderness e.g. animals' lives⁷, the rationale is not sufficient because it does not cover holistic entities as indicated in the third environmentalist condition. For example, when the Buddha barred his disciple, Moggallāna, from turning the earth surface upside down with his psychic supernatural power to provide starved people with a sort of edible soil, he gave a reason that particular animals would be harmed, not their species.⁸ Suppose we grant that the third condition was met—that the whole species were taken into account, those particular and holistic entities without sentience such as trees and forest are still left out. Of course, it will not do to explain that they should be preserved for the sake of living animals because that implies they have no internal value, which is against the first condition.

2.2 In *Aggañña Sutta*, the relationship between human moral condition and state of the world is related. When human morality decreases, the world becomes less and less livable. This implies that human beings should conduct themselves morally in order to preserve the good condition of the world. This should become a basis for environmental ethics. However, the problem is that human happiness is used as the criterion for judging the state of the world. This violates the first principle.

2.3 Loving-kindness (*mettā*), non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and identification with other living beings as fellows in the birth-and-death cycle (*saṃsāra*) are raised in support of Buddhist environmental relevance. Although they run into the same kind of problem in 2.1, a consideration of this point will lead us to some other crucial aspects. Loving-kindness is broader than abstinence from infliction and killing. For instance, in cases that some type of animals is so overcrowded that the ecosystem is badly affected, the teaching to avoid taking life does not permit us to solve the problem by culling. But, it is possible that the principle of loving-kindness dictates otherwise in order to benefit the greater number of other living beings in the effected ecosystem.⁹ Even though it seems the principle allows a consideration of ecosystem e.g. a holistic thing, it is precisely in

⁶ These conditions are derived from Schmithausen. (1997). op.cit., p. 39n; Arne Naess' s *The Shallow and the Deep Long-Range Ecological Movement* and Bill Devall and George Sessions's *Deep Ecology* in Louise P. Pojman. (ed.). (1994). *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*. Boston: Jones and Bartlett.; and Baird Callicott's *Environmental Ethics* in Lawrence C. Becker. (Ed.). (1992). *Encyclopedia of Ethics*. Vol. 1. New York: Garland.

⁷ Boonyanetra. (1994). op.cit., pp. 9-10.

⁸ Schmithausen. (1997). op.cit., pp. 21.

⁹ It may not be easy for some to imagine how loving-kindness can justify killing. The obstacle will be lifted if it is considered the case of poultry culling to prevent the spread of avian influenza and so a possible mutation of the germs into a new type of bird flu that may lead to a pandemic.

the view of each living beings' well-being, and thus violates the first and the third condition— ecosystem is treated as means to animals' happiness and it is particular animals that are the objects of concern, not their whole species.

Neungnoi Boonyanetra suggests that 'mettā' and 'chanda' (aspiration) as states of mind are opposite to 'taṇhā' (craving). These former states are realized '...in individuals who see the truth that everything is under the law of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda)...They are motives free from the idea of self...the wish to see everything exists in their valuable conditions, ones in which their perfect values are maintained...' ¹⁰ This suggestion seems to enable us to satisfy those environmentalist conditions. The appreciation that everything has value in themselves satisfies the first condition; the wish that everything remains in their valuable conditions satisfies the second condition (since diversity is implied); and, despite the ambiguity of the term, 'everything,' in relation to the holistic concept, it should be save to infer that the acceptance of everything as they are should allow a Buddhist support to the idea of holistic entities together with their internal value. Nevertheless, the crucial point is the connection between the insight into the dependent origination and 'mettā/chanda.' What makes those people with the insight see value in all things. The knowledge of interdependence does not seem to have anything to do with value.

2.4 The idea of dependent origination seems to make Buddhism a viable candidate for the foundation of environmental ethics, especially because it seems to imply holism, which in turn connotes equality among all things and is also linked to the idea of lessening attachment to self and self-interest. ¹¹ These mean that anthropocentric stance is avoided. Human beings are no longer the source or attributers of value; and nature and its diversity have value in themselves. However, 'holism' so implied has a sense different from that endorsed by the environmentalists. As for Buddhism, the holism in question is in the ontological level while that of the environmentalists is in the ethical level. According to Buddhism, holism refers to interdependence of all that exist. A particular thing is what it is because of the other things. On the other hand, according to the environmentalists, holism means the approach of ethical consideration that does not include only particular things but also holistic entities. The crucial point is that, as for Buddhism, particular and holistic entities are not ontologically distinct. They are equally constituted by the web of interdependent factors. However, the distinction is required by the environmentalists.

Moreover, to some extent, anyone, even those anthropocentric ethicists, accepts the interdependence in the ecosystem since it can be scientifically explained. And yet, not all of them see that it is necessary to construct an ethical theory that meets the environmentalist criteria. Therefore, it is still questionable why the doctrine of dependent origination should lead to that sort of ethical theory. Perhaps, the answer can be found if we return to the connection between the insight into the interdependence and the result of lessened self-attachment. The more a person sees things have no essence, the less she becomes selfish and so is less likely to exploit nature. Nevertheless, selfishness is not the sole factor of environmental depletion. Selfless individuals can cause natural damages too, say for the sake of others. Thus, it is necessary to go further as to explicate that, when the self-attachment is lessened, that person has 'mettā/chanda'

¹⁰ Boonyanetra. (1994). op.cit., p.21.

¹¹ Ibid.

developing in her, and consequently sees the value in all things. The problem that remains is the aforementioned lack of explanation about the connection between the insight and 'mettā/chanda.'

In addition, it is not evident whether the perceived value has objective existence as the environmentalists require. It seems to be only a subjective consequence. One possible answer is the idea that the mind free from self-attachment can better perceive objective values. The Venerable Payutto once raised this in response to the question of how to accept the teaching that, in a sense, 'heaven' and 'hell' are in the mind when it is clear that many wicked persons enjoy mental well-being. He clarified that the wicked could not perceive inner dissatisfactions because their mind was too coarse due to the density of self-attachment. Ignorance made their mind insensitive to values that occurred in it.¹² His response shows that values occur in the mind when deeds are done, but their existence may not be evident if the mental faculty is not adequately refined. These values are identified with mental qualities e.g. wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*). Therefore, although the basis for objectivity of value is found, it can not be understood how the value of things in nature and the nature itself can share this sort of ontological status. In fact, if Buddhism could provide an ontological basis for these things in the first place, there would be no need for the above considerations.

3. From the above, it can be concluded that Buddhism can satisfy the environmentalist criteria only if it can answer the following questions.

3.1 Is there anything in the Buddhist doctrine that allows us to indicate the existence of value-in-itself that belongs to nature and natural entities—something just like wholesome and unwholesome qualities that provide the ethical foundation?

3.2 Is there anything that allows the assertion that holistic entities exist really as something whole? Buddhism seems to allow some sort of holistic entities. For example, we may classify 'society' as something holistic. But that is simply because we refer to the minds of people in that collectivity.¹³ This approach does not seem effective when it comes to the cases of species, forest, or ecosystem.

3.3 Is there anything that supports the value of natural diversity without the need to refer to benefits of humans or animals?

Ontological inquiry appears to be hopeless because it is generally held in Theravada Buddhism that there exist only four types of things e.g. mind (*citta*), mental qualities (*cetasikas*), forms (*rūpas*), and *Nibbāna*. It is not imaginable how things indicated in the three environmentalist conditions are related to these types.

It is questionable if we should simply turn back on the environmentalist criteria and resort to the approach of deriving from Buddhism its own foundation of environmental ethics. That is because it is believed that, developed by those who closely study environmental crisis, the criteria have a firm root in the reality of the situation. Another possible way out is for Buddhism to set a new set of criteria that can respond to the needs to preserve holistic entities and diversity while the reference to the internal value and the existence of holistic entities as belonging to distinct ontological types are at the same

¹² P. A. Payutto. (1999). *Kamma – Hell and Heaven for People of New Generation*. Bangkok: Sahadhammik, pp. 155-157.

¹³ See discussion in Pagorn Singsuriya. (1999). Social Conscience and Justifiable Interference. *Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies* 1(1), p. 25-31.

time avoided. Of course, all anthropocentric stances must be avoided. However, this seems to be desperate.

To sum up, the environmentalist criteria utilized in environmental ethics to judge adequacy of proposed ethical theories are very restrictive and therefore pose a challenge that Buddhism can not easily overcome if it aspires to give an environmental ethical foundation. Actually, this is an impregnable challenge to all other religions with the same aspiration.