

REVISITING BUDDHA'S MORAL TEACHINGS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

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Abstract—*Buddhism is a religion based on the teachings of the Buddha. It is a set of moral guidelines and practices which can bring us to the ultimate state of reality and peace. A very important means to attain freedom from suffering in Buddhism is to refrain from destructive actions. Because these actions cause harm to others and create mental disturbances in us which generate suffering and keep us away from seeing the real nature of things in the world. Thus ethical action is an important part of the Buddhist teachings. People are less aware that environmental destruction is not only because of technological development but also of the ego centeredness of people. Hence it becomes essential to be aware also on the importance of protecting mental factor for environmental protection. Through this paper an attempt has been made to discuss on this pertinent issue with help of the Buddha's teachings. According to Buddha, actual enlightenment in the life of people is possible only by protecting physical and mental environment of the people. So, if we are able to propagate the Buddha's teachings properly then the problem of environmental destruction will be minimized significantly and definitely it will be functional for the protection of our society from the imminent danger that we would have to face. This is why the main aim of this paper is to highlight the role and significance of the teachings of Buddhism in protecting our environment and thereby to draw the relevance of the same.*

Keywords—Buddhism, environment protection, morality etc.

I. PRELUDE

Buddhism is a religion based on the teachings of the Buddha which are not concerned with the worship of a deity like those of some other religions. It is a set of moral guidelines and practices which can bring us to the ultimate state of reality and peace. The main goal of the Buddhist teachings is to attain freedom from suffering by

observing the world as it really is and denying the distorted projections created by our thoughts and emotions. A very important means to attain this goal is to refrain from destructive actions, since these actions cause harm to others and create mental disturbances in us which generate suffering and keep us away from seeing the real nature of things in the world. Again those who attain the goal of freedom perform their acts in a loving and compassionate manner towards others and helping those others they in turn want to be more happy and free. Thus ethical action is an important part of the Buddhist teachings.

Environmental protection refers to any activity to maintain the quality of natural environment through preventing the emission of pollutants or reducing the presence of polluting substances in our environment. Environmental protection is becoming one of the most important issues for government and general mass. Several organizations are working for the protection of our environment, but less aware that environmental destruction is not only because of technological development but also of the ego centeredness of people. So it becomes essential to be aware also on the importance of protecting mental factor for environmental protection. Through this paper an attempt has been made to discuss on this pertinent issue with help of Buddha's teachings. More than two thousand years ago, Buddhism has been linked to environment and has a responsibility to share knowledge of global resistance against environmental degradation. The concept of interdependent co-arising is at the root of Buddhist understanding. The interpretations of the teachings of suffering and realization are used with other nature-specific references in the Buddhist texts to create a more complete philosophy of environment in Buddhism (Shende, Patil & Janbandhu, 2014). According to the Buddha, actual enlightenment in the life of people is possible only by protecting physical and mental environment of the people. He has given importance of proper environment to get success in physical as well as spiritual development. Good environment includes less polluted place with protection of nature having necessary opportunity of good education, medical cure, employment facilities and opportunity of spiritual practice.

II. METHODOLOGY

The present study is concerned with the causes, effects and remedies of environmental issues by applying the basic teachings of Buddhism which are

recognized by almost all. The main aim of this paper is to highlight the role and significance of the teachings of Buddhism in protecting our environment and thereby to draw the relevance of the same. Historical and analytical methods are used to fulfill what has been attempted by this paper.

III. DISCUSSION

Buddhism has a concept of the non-duality of living beings and its environment (*E-sho-funi*) which means life and its environment are two distinct phenomena but non-dual in their fundamental essence. So, it explains the relation between subject and its environment. Both the subject and its environment coexist or are non-dual in a situation which is a result of karma. The karma seed is composed of two karmas: Common and Individual karma. The text of *Abhidhamma-Nyayanusara* interprets that mountains, rivers, the earth and so on are born from common karma and living beings are born from individual karma. So individual humans are born from individual karma and the natural environment of mountains, rivers, and the earth is produced by common karma of the human race. The improvement of the karma of humans will improve its environment resulting from common karma. Hence, the subject and its environment are integral and not dual in Buddhism.

Solution to the environmental problems is itself a part of the practice of the teachings of Buddhism. We can state the practice of the way of the Bodhisattva using the six *paramitas*. The six *paramitas* are composed of *Dana Paramita* (Generosity), *Sila Paramita* (keeping precepts), *Kshanti Paramita* (patience), *Virya Paramita* (effort), *Dhyana Paramita* (unwavering), and *Prajna Paramita* (wisdom). *Dana Paramita* means giving a fortune, preaching a law or removing fear, i.e. doing something good without regret for a person and nature, *Sila Paramita* means keeping precepts such as not hurting or killing living entities and not stealing, *Kshanti Paramita* means enduring sadness and pain, *Virya Paramita* means doing your best and always making effort to do better, *Dhyana Paramita* means being unwavering or steadfast in all endeavors, and *Prajna Paramita* means obtaining true cognition of wisdom from the concepts of 'Dependent-origination' which means an entity does not exist and generate independently, but every entity exists only because of its relation with the conditions of other entities and the 'Middle-way' which means a path of moderation between two extremes.

Therefore, a Bodhisattva who practices the Six *Paramitas* is someone who is acting in accordance with protecting the environment and reducing environmental problems. Buddhists will be able to contribute for solving environmental problems if these codes of conduct and ethical norms are exercised in Buddhist tradition.

In Buddhism morality is basically focused on the Five Precepts (*Panchasila*). Using these precepts, we can handle environmental problems with many other issues of our time. For Buddhadasa, the Five Precepts are required in abstaining from doing violence—

- To the life and body of people, animals and other living beings;
- To other people's property;
- To that which dearly loved by others;
- To other people's rights and identities;
- To one's own conscience and intellect (Khantipalo, 1992).

First Precept: *Panatipata Vermani*- I undertake the training to refrain from killing

In the first precept, we promise not to destroy, cause to destroy any living being. By accepting this precept, we recognize our relationship to all life and realize that harming any living creature harms oneself. Non-violence is not only the absence of violence, but the presence of care, good will, mindfulness and charity toward other beings. Non-violence shows itself in compassion and the sense of appreciation concerning the happiness and well-being of others.

Second Precept: *Adinnadana Vermani*- I undertake the training of refrain from stealing

Stealing consists of the discounting of other beings and a lack of respect for their dignity and rights as individuals. In this sense, stealing can be considered violence against people and their property. The second precept involves more than simply non-stealing. For example, careless borrowing would be included in stealing here when subconsciously one does not have any intention to return the item. No body owns the tree, but earth, nature or Dhamma itself, grew a tree according to its own laws. The tree is only in terms of its usefulness; to gain material wealth is a selfish and delusive act of stealing from other beings.

All social systems recognize that punishment is essential for theft, immorality and violence. But the *Kutadanta-Sutta* explains that punishment will not change society. In order to stop crime, Buddha suggests that economic conditions of the people should be improved (Rahula, 1990).

Third Precept: *Kamesu Michhachara Vermani*-I undertake the training to refrain from sexual misconduct.

The third precept of refraining from sexual misconduct may be extended to the exploitation of the natural environment which is a form of rape and violence. Greed, craving ignorance and aversion are the basic forces for exploitation. This precept would reasonably include birth control measures to limit the size of families. Today population explosion is a burning problem which will increase pressures for exploitation of the remaining forested areas. So, we must practice this precept in our own lives refraining from exploiting others.

Fourth Precept: *Musavada Vermani*- I undertake the training to refrain from false speech.

The fourth precept involves something more than not telling lies. It implies that one speak the truth only, not to engage in idle talk and not to use unfriendly words. It also calls upon us to recognize the dignity, rights and identities of all living beings. It is considered to be one of the most difficult precept for people to keep since it includes not only lying, but harsh speech, backbiting and idle gossip (Khantipalo,1992).

Fifth Precept: *Sura Meray Majja Pamadthana Vermani*- I undertake the training to refrain from substances that intoxicate and lead to carelessness.

This precept speaks of refraining from consuming any intoxicating substances and avoiding involvement in their production and trafficking. It is also concerned with the immediate and long-term effects of intoxicating substances. The Buddha says to Sigala that there are six dangers of drink which are the actual loss of wealth, increase of quarrels, susceptibility to disease, an evil reputation, indecent exposure and ruining one's intelligence (Rahula, 1990).

According to B.R. Ambedkar, the revivalist of Buddhism called as Modern Buddha, the essence of the true Indian nation lies in Buddhist tradition. For him

Brahmanism is an anti-thesis to humanistic values and nature's biological ethics. He upholds the views of the Buddha on conservation of animals and all living beings from destruction. Invoking the ideas of the Buddha, Ambedkar condemned the killing of animals in the following passage: "that sacrifice neither were nay oxen slain, neither goats, nor fowls, nor fatted pigs, nor were any kinds of living creatures put to death. No trees were cut down to be used as posts, no Dabbha grasses mown to strew around the sacrificial spot" (Ambedkar, 2006, p. 267). This bitter critique on nature's exploitation was launched by Buddha against Brahmanism more than two thousand years ago and it was recalled by Ambedkar with his Neo-Buddhist Movement to facilitate equal rights to all living beings.

Ambedkar is advocating not only harmonious relationship between human beings but also proposing an organic relationship with all living beings. In this context he said, "Love is not enough; what is required is Maitri. It is wider than love. It means fellowship not merely with human beings but with all living beings. Is not such Maitri necessary? What else can give to all living beings the same happiness which one seeks for one's own self, to keep the mind impartial, open to all, with affection for everyone and hatred for none"(Ambedkar, 2006, p.129). Thus, loving kindness and compassion towards all living beings is an essential feature of Buddhism which is also propagated by Ambedkar.

Ambedkar also speaks of eco-sensitivity and eco-gospel based upon ethical treatment of all living beings. For the Buddha, according to Ambedkar, a king, a rich man and popular persons are not great men. A great man for him is "a man given to the welfare of many of many folks, to the happiness of many folks" (Ambedkar, 2006, p.293). Thus the essence of being a human in Buddhist thought is one who lives for others.

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF *PARAMITAS* AND *PANCHASILA* OF BUDDHISM

Paramitas, the Six Perfections and *Panchasila*, the Five Precepts of Buddhism may be understood to imply the interdependence and co-existence of all entities and events which become helpful to minimize pollution for saving our environment.

4.1.Rejection of Anthropocentrism

Buddhism is completely averse to the notion that nature and all created things exist for the benefit of mankind. Mankind is part of the entire cosmic order but not in a position of dominance. Humans are just as much subject to the natural order of the universe as any other form of sentient existence. Buddhism is ecocentric rather than anthropocentric since it views humans as an integral part of nature.

4.2.The Interdependence of All Things

Buddhism strongly emphasizes the interdependence of all entities and events. There is no entity animate or inanimate and no event however trivial which is not in some way interconnected with every other. In the exposition of the Thai monk Buddhadasa Bikkhu, it is stated that the entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth also. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise then we can build a noble environment (Sandell, 1987).

4.3.Co-existence rather than Conquest

The aim that Buddhism instills in every individual mind is emancipation from suffering. The route to that emancipation is not the pursuit of power and possessions but the rejection of the pursuit of those materialistic goals which are so greatly imperiling the human future. Buddhism does not teach conquest of man over natural environment, other species or other groups of the human family. Co-existence is vital and this requires a recognition and respect of those other species and groups and not an attempt for dominance.

4.4.The Rights of Future Generations

The Dalai Lama has given expression to the Buddhist perspective in relation to the future generations of this world. It can be expressed that if we develop good and considerate qualities within our own minds, our activities will naturally cease to threaten the continued survival of life on Earth. By protecting the natural environment and working to halt the degradation of our planet we will also show respect for

Earth's human descendants—our future generations (Dalai Lama, 1987). The great Buddha can be said as the pioneer in protection of the physical as well as mental environment. According to the Buddha, actual up-grading in the life of people is possible only by protecting physical and mental environment of the people which will inspire his future generation and so on.

4.5.Success and good environment

Buddha has given importance of proper environment to get success in physical as well as spiritual development. According to him, the overall development of a people starts from his existing environment. In *Mangala (Auspice) Sutta*, the Buddha had said, *Patirupa desh vaso ca Pubbe ca kata-punnata Attasamma panidhi ca Etam mangala muttamam* (Dhammananda,1993). Its meaning is-‘To reside in a suitable locality, to have done meritorious actions in the past, and to have set oneself on the right course. This is the supreme blessing.’ Suitable locality or proper place here means the place with good environment. Good environment include less polluted place, with protection of nature, having necessary opportunity of good education, medical cure, employment facilities and opportunity of spiritual practice. It is obvious that one can live and get success easily physically as well as spiritually, if he is an inhabitant of good environment.

4.6.Conservation of animals

Buddha's teachings have several discourses for preservation of animals and birds which are given equal importance in the Buddhist literature. Five precepts which are basic teachings of Buddha prohibit killing and slaughtering the animals. The Right livelihood of eight-fold noble path prohibits the trade of animals, meat etc. Hunting was one of the entertainments of Kings but the king who comes in contact with the Buddha such as the great Ashoka could not be seen going in hunting. In this way Buddha had given great contribution for preservation of animals which is the part of environmental protection.

4.7.Mental pollution and environment

Mental pollution is also a significant factor that effects the environment. It is intangible things but has great effect in making good and bad environment. Buddha's teachings emphasize to make good mentality in order to get peace of mind. The first

verse of Dhammapada states mind as the forerunner of states. All the activities are based on the mind so if mind get polluted several problem would arise and if mind is free from pollution, environment becomes so pure that everyone will be able to enjoy calm and peace.

Buddha had spent whole life in teaching how to develop good mind. According to him, the cause of suffering is the polluted mind and to get free from it one should be free from the polluted mind. *Cakkavattisihanada sutta* of *Digha Nikaya* points out a close link between man's morals and the natural resources available to him. It says that man's moral deterioration accelerates the process of change in nature bringing adverse effects on human well being and happiness. *Cittena Niyati Loko* is a Buddhist theme, which means the world is governed by mind. Human mind dominated by greed, hatred and delusion produces pollution within and outside. Generosity, compassion, loving-kindness (*Metta*), altruistic joy and wisdom produce purity inside and outside of human mind. The whole teachings of the Buddha are concentrated to get rid from polluted mental vibration and to produce positive vibration in the environment.

4.8. Delightful Environment through Good Mentality

Buddha had said that good or bad environment is also the product of the vibration produced by people living at the place. Good vibration is produced by the people who are free from defilements; the place would be cheerful and peaceful where the saintly person without defilement lives. It is because each and every person produces mental vibration in the atmosphere creating good or bad environment. So, the place would be delightful if there are people living with good vibration and vice versa.

According to the Buddha, mental vibration has powerful effect in making the environment delightful. Only making good environment physically is not sufficient, people inhabitants should also possess good mentality in order to make the place delightful. One can't live happily and peacefully at that place if the majority of people are full of anger, hatred and illusions. But people even with full of tension can feel happy and peace if the place is full with loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. In this way a person with good mentality can contribute for the good environment in the society.

V. CONCLUSION

The absolute goal of us is an environmentally sustainable society without harming the needs of our future generations. Hence from the Buddhist point of we can conclude that—

- (i) As a bee gathers honey from a flower and departs from it without injuring the flower, or its colour or its fragrance, we should use the elements of environment to find happiness in life without causing any harm to the natural world.
- (ii) Greed of human beings must be controlled so that there is no desertification and harmony of eco-system is jeopardized.
- (iii) We must deal with trees, plants, animals, forests with great compassion as taught by the Buddha.
- (iv) We must try to understand the implications of the Buddhist theory of Dependent Origination which states that every effect has a cause or every action has equal and opposite reaction in accordance with Newtonian Mechanics.
- (v) We must promise to protect both physical and mental environment from the pollution of Kaya (body), Vacana (speech), and Mana (mind).

If we are able to propagate Buddha's teachings properly then the problem of environmental destruction will be minimized significantly and definitely it will be functional for the protection of the society from the pollution of Kaya (body), Vacana (speech), and Mana (mind). Buddha has given utmost importance on protection of both physical as well as mental environment. Hence for him, good environment means the conjunction of accomplished states of physical and mental environment. He taught that for those who wish to follow his path should practice loving-kindness, not to harm the life of all beings, not only to protect mankind, but also to protect animals and vegetation. With the perfect wisdom, he saw that all beings in the universe were equal in nature, and in this phenomenal world, lives of all humans and animals were inter-related, mutually developing, and inseparable. Therefore, we can say that the teachings of Buddhism in protecting our environment are undoubtedly relevant and hence they have practical value.

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