

# **Buddhist Ethics on the Environment : Reconsidered<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. Introduction**

Primitive men subsisted on food occurring in nature, i.e., fruits or plants, and on hunting. Life in that age was totally dependent on nature for food that was there in nature for man to collect or hunt. At the same time, man had been trying to make progress in order to have a convenient and comfortable life up to the Age of Agriculture.

The main characteristics of man in the Age of Agriculture are that he knew how to grow crops and raise livestock. In this age, man was still dependent on nature for all the plants and animals on which he subsisted came from nature. Even the shelters of man and animals such as land, farm, grassland, timberland, including the weather, all belonged to nature. But man in this age had advanced one step, that is, he had some knowledge and understanding of nature; therefore, he learned to harmonize with nature and make something for himself. Man was able to grow crops and raise livestock for his direct benefit to help him work in harmony with nature. From observation, man learned that plants and trees grew from seeds buried in the soil. If the soil was moist, then plants and trees could grow well. Knowing the proper seasons for planting, he chose to grow crops in the seasons most fertile for plant growth. Thus, The life of man in that age was still in harmony with nature. By learning from and action in accordance with nature, man knew how to do things that would directly benefit him.

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Nevertheless, man in the Age of Agriculture still faced the problem that he knew only the aspects of nature that were apparent and involved with his daily life, especially where crop growing and animal raising were concerned. He only knew and noticed the occurrences of natural phenomena but did not have a deeper understanding of nature. He did not know the underlying factors behind those phenomena and did not understand how natural disasters such as floods earthquakes, and epidemics occur. Not knowing the definite causes of these natural disasters, man fell under their power. Wanting a better life, man tried to develop himself by learning more about the laws of nature. Knowledge about the laws of nature enabled man to see the causes of natural phenomena so that he could better control nature. He could better solve problems caused by nature and better utilize it to serve his purposes. For example, he could boil water and use the steam to propel ships or trains. This is how steam engines came into being. With it, man could build factories which manufacture a great number of goods at a time. With technological progress, man further hoped that from learning about the laws of nature he could triumph over nature. Then he could solve all problems and become happy and prosperous. Thus, man worked towards his goal which was winning over nature. In that age progress was made in many fields of knowledge which were divided into branches since more details needed to be known and studies became more specific. Finally, the agro-society developed into an industrial society.

The major characteristic of the Industrial Age which was apparently different from that of the Agricultural Age, was a progress that require material abundance. Man tried to build things that would bring comfort to his life since he had learned more about the laws of nature, to the point that he set his aim to triumph over nature in order to succeed in making his life perfect.

It should be noticed that even though man has at present developed himself to the point that he could control nature in part, he has reached a dead alley. When he succeeds in solving one problem, it turns out that he has created other problems which may be even more serious and some of which he cannot find a way to solve.

## 2. Past problems of world society

Since the beginning of the Development Decade (1960-1970), the main objective of the world has been to solve population problems, especially in developing and underdeveloped countries. The problems are : poverty illiteracy and sickness etc.

The developed Countries, especially the industrial societies, serve as models on which the development to solve these problems are based. Mental problems ensue, most prominently in the model countries. Man becomes restless, highly stressed, and lonely. There are more people but the individual becomes more isolated. There is an increased feeling of alienation. There are more cases of mental illness and suicide. Life has no meaning. Even though man is able to get rid of many epidemics through development, there are new and fatal diseases occurring as a result of unnatural living, depressed minds or a polluted environment. There are chemicals in the environment and in the food. Some diseases are caused by social, moral or cultural adversities. There are heart diseases, high blood pressure, cancer, hepatitis, allergies, and AIDS. There are also diseases that used to disappear and reoccur, such as cholera and tuberculosis.

Development is mainly measured by economic standards. The factor that makes the economy progress is industry and it is technology that makes industry progress. Thus, technology is an important factor in industrial development. Developed or underdeveloped countries are thus judged by technology, economy, production, and distribution of income. Therefore, they are the countries in which the average income of the people is much lower than those of industrial countries. In other words, they are nonindustrial or have very little to do with industry.

In the past development was tied in with components and factors that made a society a developed one by relying on industry as a significant deciding factor in developing an industrial society. Since development must rely on technology which in turn is based on scientific knowledge; therefore, science and technology become a core or have a major role in development in order to achieve the goal which is economic growth.

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**Development for economic growth is important. Nature of the environment has always been used to create growth. It has been used to create a readiness which is called development or stepping into industry.**

It is evident that in becoming an industrial society, man has encountered social ills, mental conflicts, and environmental problems respectively. Environmental problems are those that concern man's livelihood and dwelling, that in the extreme could result in the world becoming no longer inhabitable.

### **3. Environmental problems**

At present, the environment is an issue of worldwide interest. Research results and day-to-day events reveal that a great problem of the world in the 1900's is the environmental problem. A drastic decrease of timberlands and crises occurring from the deterioration of forests and soil, all reflect the seriousness of problems which will occur to man and the world in the future.

Environmental problems mean the negative changes in the environment caused by human behavior. The changes have accumulated to the point that they exceed the capability of the environment to adapt to them. The results are the deterioration of water, air, and soil, the extinction of plants and animals, and the loss of the beauty of the scenery.

Environmental problems occurring at present are a new phenomenon to mankind but they have been caused by human activities since the Industrial Revolution, technological development, and rapid population increase. They have become more serious by degree only within the last 200 years. The three crucial environmental problems faced today are :

1. The Dwindling Supply of Natural Resources. In order to maintain a living, man's past, present, or future has to rely on natural resources. When the need for natural resources man must search for them to adequately satiate this need. But the resources he has found are available for use only once. Man has now searched nearly every square inch of the earth's surface, and continues to take natural resources out while the need for these resources increases.

2. The Toxic Problems. In an ordinary course of living the search for natural resources, manufacturing, and scientific and technological development, often produce toxins. These toxins of varying quantity and toxicity cannot be easily destroyed or contained and remain in the world, sometimes forever. Thus

people are affected by these toxins in different quantities and degrees of danger.

The toxins must be worried about are the elements radioisotop waste, toxins from agriculture and industry, and toxins or germs from hospitals.

3. The Ecological Problem. No matter how extensive or limited, ecosystems (must) have mutual and interdependent relationships. There are both physical and biological factors in ecosystems that support each other. If one changes, the other will as well. Human activities in the use of toxic elements have caused an imbalance in ecosystems. This was clearly manifested by the severe effects of earthquakes in Russia, the extinction of wild animals and plants, the suffering caused by floods in Bangladesh, India and the south of Thailand, heat and drought in many regions of the world, and the decrease of ozone in the atmosphere, etc.

No matter how severe the changes within an ecosystem are, man still must continue living on this world and receive the impact of these changes.

It has been 250 years since the Industrial Age which started from the Industrial Revolution but industrial progress has not yet spread all over the world. Nevertheless, it has already caused a great deal of problems. If this progress had spread all over the world, what kind of disaster would it have caused? A development determined by the economy tends to make poor people poorer and more precarious, that is, the number of poor people increases while the environment deteriorates. Comes next century, how can this world under the same environment which becomes more deteriorated, survive?

## **4. Impact on man**

The developments that have been going on in different parts of the world, whether in developed, developing or underdeveloped countries, all create problems in damaging the environment. In affluent developed countries, though the numbers of the population are not great due to efficient population control, still there is a great deal of consumption and waste. In poor underdeveloped countries with great numbers of population, even if each of them consumes little and the amount of waste matter is also little, they amount to a great deal of consumption and waste matter in the world since there are many people and the population increases very fast. The impact is on both sides : the natural environment has a problem of the depletion of good matter and the increase of

waste matter, and the population who cause this problem have a problem of technology since it is the medium that man uses to manage nature either in a positive or negative way. Besides being man's tool, technology itself is an alien environment that emerges to superimpose nature. Not only is technology used by man to manage the environment, some technologies are also used as tools to manage fellow men, such as war weapons, poisons, and kinds of addictives.

As a matter of fact, man has built technology for his own benefit but it is also dangerous in one aspect, that is, it is dangerous to man's way of living. Besides causing problems for the environment, it causes changes in the life of the individual, and the management of businesses or the systems of society. The ensuing problems are health problems and the loss of self-dependency. The former directly causes physical and mental suffering and the latter makes man unable to live happily by himself without having to depend on technology.

Concerning health, there is a direct danger from matter or radiation that man has used without realizing their effects, such as CFC which creates a gap in the ozone level in the atmosphere through which the ultraviolet rays from the sun could penetrate to the earth and destroy all living things. It can cause skin cancer, suppress the body's immune system, cause cataracts, and endanger the lives of many species of marine plants and animals. When these living things are in danger, the food chain in the sea becomes disturbed, thus destroying the balance in the bio-system of all plants and animals, and also increasing the temperature of the earth's crust.

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Sociologically speaking, besides direct physical and mental problems, there are also many other problems such as crime, insecurity of life and property, problems of the family, the elderly, sex, race, unemployment, including the fear of a nuclear war. Some problems are specific, indirectly related to, and have an effect

on other problems, but some have a direct impact on them. All these problems are caused by material affluence or the economy. They are problems of the developmental age and are directly caused by development with a widespread impact all over the world

## **5. Buddhist world view concerning nature**

For Buddhism, the relationship between man and nature shows a mutual reliance or dependency. There are beliefs concerning the worship of spirits. The spirits residing the forest are called tree spirits who inhabit huge trees which are called spirit trees. Cutting down trees may result in disasters and propitiative rites must be performed to appease the spirits. Even the tree spirits have to depend on wildlife. The mighty tree spirits whom man regards with awe have to rely on animals and give importance to wildlife in the forest.

Buddhism emphasizes good feelings between man and man, man and plants, and also man and animals. One of these feelings is a virtue called gratefulness. Buddhism does not teach man to feel grateful towards his fellow men alone but also towards all animals and plants. A Buddhist proverb in the in the Khuttakanikaya emphasizes even gratefulness to plants.

"Anyone sitting or reclining under the shade of whichever tree should not break or cut the branches and leaves of such tree. One who harms a friend is lewd."

Besides teaching about the mutual worth of one another, Buddhism also teaches man to regard all plants and animals with compassion, that is, regard them as fellow beings who share his friendship and goodwill. It has been seen that at present problems and obstacles in human development are based on the following characteristics:

1. Each field of study and system of creating progress expands until it overfills the limit and has to be sub-divided. Each sub-division then grows to the peak of its specific field.

2. There is an intent to use knowledge and technology as tools to overcome nature. Besides winning over nature, it is also like taking advantage of nature by using technology to destroy nature in the form of production and consumption, or the process of industrialization.

These two characteristics make man's knowledge diversified and unrelated.

The problems cannot be really solved and many more new and strange problems ensue because of the disharmony and lack of mutual support in the living system between man and nature, man and society, and man and his own life. Even the body and mind are not in harmony and are unbalanced.

In the past, even though man had experienced social problems, especially mental ones, he did not pay attention to moral values. Now that there are environmental problems, people begin to see the importance of ethics to the point that they proclaim that man must be ethical and use ethics to help solve problems seriously. The obstacles that make solving developmental problems unsuccessful come from three vices namely,

1. Craving--a desire to make oneself affluent with material things, that is, a desire for profit.
2. Ambition--a need to be great, to have power over others from individual level to national level, that is, a desire for power.
3. Obstinacy--an adherence to or a craze for a certain value, belief, religion, or ideal.

Even though vices are a part of human nature, they are corrigible since by nature man is an animal capable of being trained and developed. When man is developed, his vices change to virtues and intelligence. Ethics is not something that goes against the mind. True ethics must be one of contentment and happiness. If properly developed, man would be able to conquer his own inward nature which is more real than conquering outward nature like in the present society.

Buddhism explains that man has a mutual relationship to support one another. Life, nature, and society are the three components of the fundamental system of human existence. For man to be able to exist in harmony, he must first know about nature. To know nature is to know the facts of nature in order to treat nature properly, that is, he must have intelligence. Thus, man has to develop his intelligence.

When man is wise enough to know the facts of nature to the point that they have become clear to him, he can understand the necessity to exist in mutual support to create a harmony that results in a life free of suffering or problems. He will be free, and with wisdom or true understanding of nature, he can utilize his knowledge by being able to evaluate and support society with benevolence which is a virtue of balance. Thus, getting at the depth of Buddhist



Dharma means a thorough perception of the facts of nature, of the symbiotic relationship of all things, an awareness of the necessity to exist in mutual support, including the ability to follow the moderate path in order for life and development to proceed in balance.

At the highest level of development, wisdom, virtue, and happiness or freedom from suffering, are the joint components of a complete whole. This is the principle that must be observed in the development of man, society, and nature which is called a holistic system consisting of :

1. Man or human life system--Man is considered on big holistic system consisting of two sub-systems of body and mind.

2. Society--A social relationship that can be separated into specific issues : economy, society, politics, government, education, and culture. These are issues that man is usually concerned with in dealing with his fellow men as duties or social obligations.

3. Nature--The natural environment which is at present called an ecological system, meaning the natural environment which, when leaving out the individual, is nature.

The three systems when related, may have either a positive or negative result on man. They must be correctly developed to render positive results.

## **6. Three types of ethics in the holistic system**

Ethics in the holistic system is the interactive principle governing the three major components consisting of :

1. Man--the interaction between himself and his ideal--this is the personal ethics.

2. Society--the interaction between individuals in different positions expressed as duties or social obligations--this is the social ethics.

3. The natural environment--the interaction between man and the environment--this is the environmental ethics.

In Buddhism the fundamental ethics in the holistic system emphasizes a development that can reach at the facts of nature according to the system of the relationship between the causes of all things, in conjunction with intelligence and the system of natural relationship. When properly conducted, the desired result naturally ensues.

In the interaction among the three components called the holistic

ethics, man is the component with an objective in selecting what to do. He is a special animal in that he has a will to create and invent. There are two meanings attached to the word "intellectual" as man is called : one as an individual who is a part of society and the other as a being existing in nature. Besides creating social systems, man also invents and makes tools and equipment which are called technology, a new environment of man which is different from the natural environment. These tools are also used by man on his fellow men, society, and nature.

The three components are different in that since man is the factor that has an objective but society and the natural environment, including technology, are factors without an objective; thus, man is considered the acting factor. However, even though society and technology are environmental or non-objective factors, both of them result from human objectives.

In Buddhism, the desired process of development starts with human development first. There are two steps to it : the development of man as he is the center of development and has to be completely developed in behavior, mind, and intelligence, and the development of the system of continuous good living. In this context the levels of ethics in the holistic system are morality, concentration, and wisdom.

As a human being and the center of a relationship with himself, society, and the natural environment, man must be developed according to the Threefold Training : morality, concentration, and wisdom in that order to ensure that a good man will have a desirable interaction with himself, other people, and things. The Threefold Training helps each man to grow into a perfect person and have a good life complete with fundamental ethics namely : the Five Basic Buddhist Precepts of Moral Practices; the Five Laws; and the Precepts for a Householder or the Four Basic Virtues of Life : truth, self-control, endurance, and charity. Then he can develop towards concentration, persistence, and wisdom or wisdom or knowledge of the world and life. Therefore, man as a human resource is considered a capital or factor in economic and social development. It is necessary to develop this resource into a quality one with a good health, diligence, perseverance, responsibility, skill, knowledge, and an ability both in professional and academic knowledge. This is the personal ethics.

Human relationship which is based on social systems is formed to serve as a tool to enable the process of the causes of the natural law to operate

in a way that may be beneficial to mankind. There are sub-system such as economic, political, administrative, and educational systems. Activities performed in these systems all serve to make them stronger and more efficient to reach achievement. Therefore, all these systems must harmonize on a basis of social ethics to support and give man a chance to develop his work, achieve a good life, and be free and peaceful. Thus, the social measure is creating an atmosphere of non-exploit and also one of mutual support, both society-wise and naturewise through social ethics consisting of duties, social obligations and gratefulness and economic, family, political, governmental, and educational ethics.

Environmental ethics in Buddhism is based on the world view of:

1. Self-denial--by regarding that all things in the world and the universe happen according to related factors which depend on one another such as the instinctive fear of death, love of happiness, and hatred of suffering. All things are in a state of uncertainty and suffering. At this level, conscience in the development of self-denial by relying on good-living and compassion.

2. The world and life are a holistic system and must be developed according to holistic principle. Man is not a component of the world separate from society and nature. Man has a special characteristic of possessing a free will to choose how to deal with himself, society, and the natural environment because he is an animal capable of being trained. He has the potential to develop himself towards goodness, beauty, and happiness through the principle of Three fold Training :morality, concentration, and wisdom.

3. since man must live together, there is a relationship between fellow men in doing activities together. He has to rely on the principle of humanity to achieve the desired relationship between himself and his family, community, and all things which reveal the ethical relationship that can be related to all things universal by the holistic principle.

4. The holistic principle is a system of human development that raises the level of man from a basic one to the highest level. By developing wisdom and virtues to achieve a relative factor that is in accord with the whole, the highest achievement of man is wisdom, that of society is harmony, and that of the natural environment is balance.

## 7. Summary

The three crucial environmental problems facing us today, which we have to solve are : the dwindling supply of natural resources, the toxic problem, and the ecological problem.

Above all, no matter how severe the changes within an ecosystem are, man must still continue living in this world and face the impact of these changes.

Actually, being aware of environmental problems, man has tried to find a way to protect the environment by using scientific and technological knowledge which we have and be passing preventative laws enforcing penalties.

The Thai government also tries to solve environmental problems by emphasizing scientific, technological and social education, enacting laws and regulations and so forth, The problems still remain. On this ground, Buddhist ethics on conservation of the environment ought to be the way out.

Apart from being the center of the whole, man is also the environment of his fellow men. He is among society and nature and is related to them by activities such as production and consumption, the necessary activities to perform to create balance and unity with the natural world. Through virtues of mutual dependent interactions : gratefulness, moderation in consumption, or the consumption of natural resources to fulfill instinctive needs, is raised to the level of virtue to quench man's craving and liberate him from desires by using wisdom as a development tool.

The main teachings given by the Buddha which are the principles of environmental conservation and the foundation of living in relationship to the natural environment consist of 3 parts : the principle of moral precepts, the principle of moderate consumption and the principle of gratefulness.

They show the way to make people happy by utilizing the least amount of matter and energy while aiming at happiness and social correctness.

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