

Religion and Environmental Ethics

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ABSTRACT

The growth and development of science and the advancement of technology with all its constructive and destructive forces have made the problems of environment, and of the relationship between man and nature, increasingly important. Along with this growth, man has been trying to control and master nature and thereby make use of nature. This has led to exploitation and pollution of nature, which has all along been nourishing, protective, sheltering, life-giving, creative and maternal. This kind of disharmony between man and nature has led to the problem of environmental degradation, a basic threat to global living. This threat will infinitely increase so long as we do not find a way out.

1. Introduction

According to a quotation from Paul Santmire, "*The earth is in danger of destruction.*" The time has come today when we are all feeling the pinch of the environmental crisis towards which we are heading. This environmental crisis is engulfing us at such a (rapid) speed that we can no longer ignore it, saying that it is an affair of the environmentalists. We all need to deteriorate. The question arises as to how the environmental crisis is related to religion or what the role of religion is in resolving the crisis. Here I would like to quote Lynn White (in Beabour, 1973: 57) who wrote, "*Since the roots of our (environmental) trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious.*" Also, quoting Harold W. Wood, "*in so far as ordinary people are concerned, it is religion which is the greatest factor in determining morality.*" (Wood, 1977: 101)

I shall address myself to the root causes of our environmental crisis, how we can remedy this problem and what the contribution of Buddhism is to resolving or reducing the environmental crisis. One could as well think that this burning problem of the ecological crisis is a problem of the ecological sciences

or a problem of technology and that religion or morality need not concern itself with this problem. As far as the ecological sciences are concerned, in order that such disciplines are effective as political programs of action, they need to be related to a new attitude and a new concern for the well-being of the environment. This new attitude has to be provided by ethics and by religion. My attempt in this paper will be to briefly state what sorts of attitude have caused the present day crisis and how the West is now turning to the East in search of new attitudes. I shall show how Buddhism, an eastern religion, can provide this new attitude, which is needed to reverse, stop, or at least reduce the environmental crisis.

2. Responsibilities to the Natural World

The present day environmental crisis has its roots in a period more than 2000 years ago. It has arisen due to our lackadaisical attitude towards nature, the attitude is that nature's resources are unlimited and that nature is made for man, for his use. If we look back into history, we can see how ethics has progressed and how the concept of rights and duties has undergone change. Holmes Rolston III wrote in 1975:

"if we now universalize 'person', consider how slowly the cycle has enlarged to include aliens, strangers, infants, children, Negroes, Jews, slaves, women, Indians, prisoners, the elderly, the insane, the deformed and even now we ponder the status of fetuses. Ecological ethics queries whether we ought to again universalize, recognizing the intrinsic value of every ecobiotic component." (Rolston, 1997: 831)

There was a time when women, slaves, blacks were not given any rights. Even the religious bodies gave sanction to the maltreatment of these individuals. Under such circumstances, the question of reverence for nature was hardly imaginable. In a male dominated society, two books that were quite effective in extending ethics were the work of women. In 1852, Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* where she put forth a simple argument that blacks were not commodities to be exploited but were members of the moral community. In this connection, Abraham Lincoln characterized Stowe as the lady who caused the civil war. A century later Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* (1962), which once again questioned American assumptions. It argued that all life forms,

even insects, were not commodities but deserved ethical consideration. Thus, we see that there has been a historical extension of ethical concern as described by Aldo Leopold (1970: 47) in his essay **“The Land Ethics”**. In this essay Aldo Leopold identified three ethics:

- (1) religion as a man-to-man ethics,
- (2) democracy as a man-to-society ethics,
- (3) a yet undeveloped ethical relationship between man and his environment.

We would agree with Leopold that these three ethics are stages in the development of a general ethic in which man extends his thinking in stepwise fashion from man-to-man relationships to the totality of human existence. He says that here we have come to a stop, for : *“There is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land, to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land, like ‘Odysseus’ slave girls, is still property. The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations. When god-like Odysseus returned from the wars in Troy, he hanged, all on one rope, some dozen slave girls whom he suspected of misbehavior during his absence. This hanging involved no question of propriety, much less justice. The disposal of property was a matter of expediency not of right and wrong. Criteria of right and wrong were not lacking from Odysseus Greece. The ethical structure of that day covered wives, but had not been extended to human chattels.”*

Leopold continues, “the extension of ethics to this third element in human environment is an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity”. (Leopold, 1970: 47) The content of the next step in this ethical extension is *“we abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from the aesthetic harvest it is capable of yielding under science, and of contributing to culture. That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.”*

Leopold has pointed out that we are still not prepared intellectually for the extension of the social conscience from people to land. “Philosophy and religion have still not yet heard” of including nature in an expanded morality. Thus we can see that if we wish to avert the environmental crisis we need to change our conception of morality or extend our conception of morality. The need for morality occurs only when there is a conflict. Earlier environmental ethics was

not needed, or we can say, its need was not felt. Today due to dwindling environmental resources and excessive pollution, we need a morality which will take into account man's relationship with nature.

3. Judeo-Christian Heritage and Man's Domination of Nature

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, there is a dichotomy between people and nature. The first of the myths in the Bible is that God creates humans after his previous five days' work. With Divine blessing they are granted dominion over the rest of creation : *Then God said "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."* (*Genesis, 1972: 1: 26*)

Lynn White opines that according to the sacred text, humans are above all forms of life. People are masters-not members-of the world. Every creature of the earth has been created to serve a human necessity. Lynn White (in Beabour, 1973: 96) wrote "God planned all of this explicity for man's benefit and rule; no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen". White quoted Genesis 1:28 of the Old Testament to justify his views. God shaped man, "in his own image" and then God commands his favorite artifact to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living that moves upon the earth". Moreover, Passmore (1974: 12) pointed out:

"Western ethics would have to be not extended. He agrees with Leopold that the West stands in need of 'a more ecological approach in which man regards the soil as a partner to be cherished rather than as a captive to be raped'. But in search of such an ecological approach, he tells us, men will turn in vain to a Western-type ethic, however extended. They will need to look, rather, to 'Hindu and Buddhist faiths or the peasant cultures of Asia'."

For the Biblical belief in mankind's dominion, Passmore subjects White's theory to considerable qualification. He holds that the Old Testament leaves open the possibility of an attitude of absolute despotism towards nature

on the part of mankind, and believes that this ability has actually occupied the centre of the stage till recently within Christianity. (Passmore, 1974: 9)

It appears that we need a greening of religion if we want to save our planet. We require efforts on every front, science, technology, and more so in religion. I say, “more so in religion” because, come what may, even if we are becoming agnostics or atheists, in time of need or distress, there is always such a thing as hope which keeps a man going.

4. Buddhist Ethics and the Man-Nature Relationship

Let us have a look at Buddhism and see how far the greening of religion is required with regard to Buddhism. First of all arises the question of the anthropocentrism found in religions. Man is the centre of the universe; all of nature is created for man. Man has to perfect nature. Actually, Buddhism can be described as a religion much concerned with releasing man from suffering. Though it does not directly deal with environmental ethics, yet in the Buddhist writings, concern for nature can be found. The natural world passes through alternating states of evolution and dissolution. Buddhists have a very soft attitude for nature. They regard living things with great respect and love. They also consider nature as their loving friend.

Men have just the opposite attitude towards nature. They are aggressive due to selfishness. As a matter of fact, nature is considered as *Svabhāva*, or Dhamma. Dhamma is the universal order including its processes, i.e., the laws of nature. Buddhism explains nature as **Dhamma**. On this, the entire world functions and keeps on going. Dhamma draws a clear line between man and beasts. Man is supposed to be morally sound and of good conduct. Therefore, there has to be a code of conduct in human behaviour and also an order in nature.

According to Buddhism, changeability is one of the perennial principles of nature. Dhamma represents the ethical laws of the universe, like the laws of nature. The universe is also governed by laws of Dhamma for the sake of individual and social good. Thus Dhamma includes all good and sensible behaviour and actions. According to Buddhism, the “world” is of three kinds, viz. (**Majjhima-Nikāya**, vol. I, 1958: 173) the world of formation (*sankhāra loka*), the world of beings (*satta loka*), the world of space (*okāsa loka*). These three

include what we call nature. Today we notice the deteriorating condition of nature, and this is because of man's greedy attitude towards nature due to which the whole human race has to suffer the consequences. The theory of cause and effect is continually working in nature.

Buddhism believes that natural processes are affected by the morals of man. That is, man has both good and bad qualities. Because of *avijjā*, or ignorance, man has bad qualities like *lobha*, *dosa*, *moha* etc. and due to *paññā*, or wisdom, man has good qualities such as *alobha*, *adosa*, *amoha* etc. These good and bad qualities of man are reflected in man's physical action and speech. Man will inevitably harmfully exploit nature if he has bad qualities. On the contrary, if man has good qualities, he will be friendly with nature. Therefore, we see that human morality and the natural environment are closely related.

Man's survival is totally dependent on the providence of nature. When man feeds his needs, the whole natural order is disturbed, and consequently, everything on earth suffers. It is rightly said that greed breeds sorrow and unhealthy consequences, but contentment is a much praised virtue in Buddhism. Thus, Buddhism condemns excessive exploitation of nature. Individual moral development and social concerns are therefore inseparable in Buddhist ethical structure. Actually, a devout Buddhist must own nothing beyond the basic necessities, no hoarding is permitted.

Buddha saw that there exists harmony in everything, even in nature. Man can only maintain harmony by his sensible non-greedy behaviour. Co-existence must be the relation between man and nature in order to prevent all kinds of imbalances in nature and human society. The best way to do this is to follow the principles of the Five Precepts (*Pañcasīlā*).

Buddha loved all human beings dearly and therefore, he stressed non-violence. Those who practise this great principle he called noble ones (*ariya*). *Ahimsā* is integral to the eightfold path. Monks are forbidden to travel during the rainy season simply to avoid any destruction of insects while going through the fields. Monks will never even think of destroying any tree or vegetation unnecessarily, because these could be the dwelling places for birds or insects.

The *Mettasutta* describes in detail how one should cultivate and extend the *brahmavihāra* of compassion and good will towards all beings. The *sutta* urges those who wish to attain the 'state of calm' that accompanies morally perfected behavior to ceaselessly cultivate benevolent thoughts towards

all living beings and wish never to cause them harm. Thoughts of “boundless love” are to pervade the whole world “without any obstruction”. In the *Mettā* teaching, two features of ethical cultivation are given primacy; these are non-harm and loving kindness towards all beings. If these are developed to the fullest extent, spiritual release and moral perfection will be realized.

The **Four Noble Truths (Ariyasacca)** are actually the essence of Buddhism. Buddhism considers man as part of nature, but man has gone astray from nature and has become himself a victim of *dukkha*, and he does not know its cause (*samudya*). This is all due to ignorance. He needs *nirodha* that is available in Buddhism. He needs to attain the status of arahant. This state of spiritual freedom is known as *Nibbāna*.

When man realizes his ignorance, he comes to rightful understanding that he is nothing but part of the natural environment, and when this realization comes, there is a harmonious relationship between him and nature, and he attains absolute peace and contentment. Moreover, the **Eightfold Path** leads man to the ultimate good-towards *Nibbāna*. He becomes a good friend of nature and not its destroyer.

The Buddha's constant advice to his disciples was to resort to natural places such as forests. There, undisturbed by human activity, they could devote themselves to meditation. The open air, natural surroundings and forest trees have a special fascination for the Eastern mind as symbols of spiritual freedom. It is seen that the ascetics live in forests. Home life is regarded as a fetter that keeps a person in bondage and misery. The chief events in life took place in the open air. In the *Vanaropamasutta* and the *Jātaka* it is said that anyone who constructs monasteries, a flower garden, plants for shade, a bridge, a pool, a well, a residence, or roads for public use gains much spiritual merit. Such action will bring in happiness all day, all night, and all the time. In their life after death, they will go to heaven.

Buddhism advocates a gentle non-aggressive attitude towards nature. According to the *Singālovādasutta* (**Digha-Nikāya, vol. III**, 1958: 188) “*a householder should accumulate wealth in the same way as a bee collecting pollen from a flower. The bee harms neither the fragrance nor the beauty of the flower, but gathers pollen to turn it into sweet honey.*” Similarly, man is expected to make legitimate use of nature so that he can rise above nature and realize his innate spiritual potential.

The Buddha often used examples from nature to teach. The flickering, difficult-to-guard mind is compared to a monkey “Just as a monkey, faring through the woods, catches hold of a bough, lets it go, and catches another, even so that which we call thought, mind, consciousness, that arises as one thing ceases as another, both by day and night.” (Rhys Davids, 1965: 66) On the one hand, it simply evolves the fickle condition of the mind.

Buddhism is said to be, and undoubtedly, a religion which has a high sense of morality and humanity. A moral being is fully conscious about his environment and feels it his duty to preserve it. Several *suttas* from the Pāli cannon, such as - *Vanaropamasutta*, *Bhutagāmavagga*, *Patirupadesavāsa* in *Mangalasutta*, *Rukkhasutta* or *Jātaka*, show that early Buddhism believed there was a close relationship between human morality and the natural environment. This idea has been systematized in the theory of the five natural laws (*Pañcaniyāma*) (Atthasalini, vol. 1-2, 1965: 354).

In his life, the Buddha was closely related from birth to the natural environment, and after his enlightenment, he spent the rest of his life amidst nature. Even his enlightenment wouldn't have been possible had he not gone to nature in search of Truth. A devout Buddhist realizes the contribution of nature in his personal life; he receives mental and physical support for his sustenance from nature. Such a person will always do his best to preserve, nature to make it clean and free from pollution. Buddha's teachings and its derivations are absolutely impossible without a clean and peaceful natural environment. If nature is not protected and preserved the ethics of Buddhism can never be achieved. Nature becomes a friend to him, a real source of spiritual inspiration. Flora and fauna must be protected for natural beauty and aesthetics. All these help a Buddhist to express his love and compassion to all beings, and this is the essence of Buddhism. The Buddha could be considered a naturalist in his philosophy and a true environmentalist in practice. Thus Buddhism is a science and art for total living, and Buddhism offers a solution and means to maintain a balance in nature and to preserve it for the coming generations.

Therefore, preservation of nature is a human duty. It is man's moral duty to preserve nature and have an environmental conscience so that good people inherit this earth for good living. If one is fully aware of Lord Buddha's Dhamma and its implications, nature can be preserved without ruination.

Thus, we can see that Buddhist ethics is an ecocentric ethics. It stresses an environmentally friendly attitude. It is not anthropocentric theme. Buddha's life itself was closely related to the natural environment from his birth until his passing away (*parinibbāna*). Buddhism expresses love and compassion for all beings. It stresses a non-exploitative, non-aggressive, gentle attitude towards nature. Man should live in harmony with nature, using its resources for the satisfaction of his basic needs without harming the natural world in which he lives. If we follow the teachings of such an ecocentric ethics, we would go a long way toward reducing the environmental crisis.

5. The Traditions of Human Beings to Nature

However there are two ways in which one can despise nature. One of these is to look down upon nature as having no intrinsic worth and no value. Its value lies in serving human kind. As has been pointed out by Bacon (1934: 76) "Let the human race recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest." Bacon emphasized, "The empire of man over things depends wholly on the arts and sciences." He thought that through science man should know the secrets of nature as these would help him to lift God's curse on Adam at least partially. Thus what sin had shattered, science could repair. Bacon's philosophy served as the charter of the Industrial Revolution. Thus, we see that the scientific progress that we find in the west has at its roots a certain religious philosophy of nature. There is nothing created from which we cannot derive some use.

It is this attitude to nature which has led to our environmental crisis. Man in this tradition has been so egocentric that he has refused to give rights to others, for example, to the slaves, blacks, and women. Where such egocentrism was prevalent, the question of rights of nature or of animals did not arise at all. Now people in these traditions are realizing their folly and are either turning to the east or else reinterpreting their traditions.

The second way in which nature is despised is found in the east. Nature is regarded as a hindrance to spiritual upliftment. Thus, where nature is being exploited for cash in the west, in the east, there was neglect of one's own body, as seen amongst ascetics. Here again, there were two trends. On the one hand, nature was worshipped; on the other hand, in sacrifices of animals, nature was destroyed. Such contradictory practices were found. Both trends are extremes.

On the one hand destroying nature, despising nature, neglecting nature to such an extent that even one's own body is seen as a hindrance for spiritual upliftment. On the other hand we find pantheism, nature being worshipped. The rift between the soul and the body has reached a climax. Nature has not been created for man. At the same time in this universe every being is dependent on every other. There is interconnectedness in the entire creation. This interrelation, interconnectedness is a very complex and mysterious relation. We are part of this web of relation.

6. The Ecological Conscience: Self-Realization or Holistic View

The whole is a mysterious whole within which one lives. The Self-realized persons strive for the growth of as many individuals as they can and for the whole. They feel themselves part of a cosmic adventure greater than themselves though an adventure whose destiny partially depends on their actions in the present. The more Self-realized a person is the more interconnectedness he sees in the universe.

Once we realize that human beings are a part of the nature, we will not treat nature and the non-human world as having merely instrumental worth. We will allow things to flourish in their own right and use them only when necessary, i.e., we would curb wanton use of the non-human world.

If one really expands oneself to include other people and species and nature itself, altruism is not required. The larger world becomes part of our own interests. It is seen as a world of potentials to increase our own self-realization, as we are part of the increase of others.

In every relation we should see a mirror of the macrocosm. Thus whatever relation is in the universe, the same relation affects in the microcosm. This indicates that the whole is interrelated. The universe has to be seen as a gestalt, so we should not think that more information will make things clearer. We need a re-orientation in thinking so that we can learn from specific simple things by examining, appreciating and recognizing their defining relations with other things.

If we see the ecosystem as part of ourselves, if we see ourselves as intricately related to the ecosystem, then we would see the needs of the ecosystem as our own needs: there is thus no conflict of interests. Rather, we see the ecosystem as a tool which would further one's own realization and fullness of life.

If we progress along the lines of identification, the very notion of environment would be required. This would be a very wide interpretation of the concept of love. In love one loses one's identity and becomes part of the large whole. This being the aim of a Self-realized person, he would hardly ever think on the lines of using nature. We should never use nature as a means. Nature should be valued as being independent of us and of our valuing. Nature can be compared to our friends. If we misuse and maltreat our friends, we tend to lose them. The same is true of nature.

The term "Self-realization" indicates a kind of perfection. Self-realization includes personal and community Self-realization. It is conceived also to refer to an unfolding of reality as a totality. By doing so the mysteries of the universe will slowly unfold themselves and man will see more and more interconnectedness in the universe. Self-realization involves not only one's own progress (for I am related to others) but also progress of others. My progress is linked up with the progress of others because I am interconnected with them. According to Naess (1993: 89) there are three types of realization - **self-realization, ego-realization, Self-realization** with capital 'S'

The Self of Self-realization has been referred to as universal self, the 'Absolute' or the 'Atman'. Also self-realization, self expression and self interest are various terms used to talk about ego-realization. In ego-realization there can be extreme incompatibility of the interests of various individuals, as goes the Norwegian proverb 'one man's bread is another man's dead'. Self-realization requires the unity of social, psychological and ontological hypothesis. We need not repress ourselves; we need to develop our self. Increasing maturity would relate more of our personality to more of the environment. This would make us act as a whole and therefore act more consistently. This would be more meaningful and desirable.

Our ego need not be ignored or suppressed in order to achieve self-realization. We are not so selfish and egoistic as we think ourselves to be. Our personality is not so narrow as we think it to be. We need to understand ourselves and our potentialities. Our sources of joy can always be cultivated in such a way that we enjoy ourselves while relating with others, while broadening our self to come in contact with the Self.

“The norm ‘Self-realization’ is a condensed expression of the unity of certain social, psychological, and ontological hypothesis ... We need not repress ourselves; we need to develop our Self. The beautiful acts are natural and by definition not squeezed forth through respect for a moral law foreign to mature human development. Increasing maturity activates more of the personality in relation to more of the milieu, it results in acting more consistently from oneself as a whole. This is experienced as most meaningful and desirable, even if sometimes rather painful.” (Naess, 1994: 57-59)

We think that we can cultivate ourselves by acting egoistically but as a matter of fact our personality is not as narrow as we think. Our sources of joy are much deeper. We need not cultivate our ego and become self-centred in order to realize our potentialities. Rather by being more generous and by identifying with others, humans as well as the ecosphere, will we realize our potentialities and realize the ‘Self’.

The higher the Self-realization attained by anyone, the broader and deeper is the identification with others. The decrease of egocentricity is inevitably linked to an increase of identification and care for others. Here, what is implied by (care for others)? Is it merely other human beings and most animals or does it imply the ecosphere in general? In Buddhism, the identification has to be with the total ecosphere. As far as human beings are concerned, there is hardly any need for further clarification. Almost every religious tradition would accept it. If I want to realize myself, I should take my friends, relatives, and other humans along with me. Further on, it also implies that if I want to realize myself, then I have to take the whole of humanity with me. I can do this when I have no enemies, I identify with all. If I want to realize myself, I have to forget my egocentricity; as long as I have my ego, I cannot realize my Self. The moment I realize the true nature of my Self, I would identify with every person. The more Self-realized a person is, the more he will identify with others. There is unity in diversity. That is why one can say that the higher the level of Self-realization attained by anyone, the more its further increase depends upon the Self-realization of others. In Self-realization, ego-centricity has no role to play.

The next question that arises is that of identification with nature. What is its role in man’s Self-realization? Undoubtedly only man is capable of

Self-realization. But for this he has to identify also with nature. There is no special effort which man has to make. When he is following the path of Self-realization he is wonder struck at the beauty of the ecosphere.

Thus Self-realization is a process in which the more Self-realized a person is, the less egocentric he will become, and more and more he will identify with others as well as with nature, for he will see other human beings who identify with ecosphere as well.

The universe is a complex web of relations. Each individual human being is intertwined with others, with animals as well as with the ecosphere. Whatever relation there is in the macrocosm, it is there in the microcosm. Thus in order to understand the universe and its complex web of relations, we have to look within ourselves, realize our potential and realize ourselves. The knowledge of the universe will automatically follow.

Once we have knowledge of the complex web of relations, our attitudes towards nature will automatically change. We will no longer want to exploit it but will rather make friends with it. We are part of nature and if we try to bring any changes in it, any changes in its homeostatic balance, it would have repercussions on us.

7. Conclusion

If we want to save ourselves we have to save our planet. We cannot afford to be selfish and think only of ourselves any more. We need to have concern for future generations. These generations too have a right to a livable environment. Whether we look at the problem from the conservationist anthropocentric point of view or from the preservationist eccentric point of view, one thing is clear, that natural resources are diminishing and that we have to save our planet or else we will all soon be extincted. For all this we need to act right away, to look inwards. With this we will be able to control our desires, thereby reduce the exploitation of nature by hoarding more and more. We will consume only as per our minimal requirements and thus reduce aggression and pollution of nature and thereby help in saving the planet.

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