

NONVIOLENT ECOLOGY: THE POSSIBILITIES OF BUDDHISM

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INTRODUCTION

Nonviolent ecology refers to a society which is economically and socially just, ecologically sustainable, and non-killing and compassionate in relating to its environment (Anderson 1972, Barnaby 1988, Brown and Shaw 1982, Goldsmith 1988, Myers 1984). This essay draws on principles and insights from Buddhism as one foundation for developing a nonviolent ecology.

But first some preliminary comments are needed about the violence which some suppose to be inherent and pervasive in nature and in human nature. One major point is that violence and nonviolence are relative rather than absolute conditions. Some regions are prone to violent forces in nature such as hurricanes or earthquakes; however, there are other regions in which such violent forces are negligible or even absent. Competition and predation between animal species can be violent; however, there are also nonviolent relations between species such as mutualism (Kropotkin 1914, Lackner 1984, Montagu 1952). Within our own species, individuals and groups can be very violent in their social interactions (Feibleman 1987); however, most interactions are nonviolent (Howell and Willis

1989, Melko 1973, 1981, Montagu 1976, 1978, Sponsel 1991). Such considerations lead to the conclusion that there are environments and societies which are nonviolent, and thus a nonviolent ecology is not limited to romantic or utopian ideals.

While there may well be more than one way to cultivate a nonviolent ecology, Buddhism can certainly be pertinent for such an effort. Disregarding the variation in Buddhist orthodoxy and orthopraxy (Lester 1987), at the generic level there are several important principles inherent in Buddhism which can be applied by individuals and societies for the creation and maintenance of a nonviolent ecology. Of course these principles are most relevant to Buddhist individuals and societies. Granted, these principles may not be sufficient, but they provide one useful place to start. Here they are offered as possibilities for consideration rather than as any rigid doctrine. It should be noted that here the interpretation of these principles is influenced by the authors' background in Western philosophy, anthropology, and ecology.

BUDDHIST PRINCIPLES FOR A NONVIOLENT ECOLOGY

Unity and Interdependence

Buddhism is ecocentric rather than anthropocentric since it views humans as an integral part of nature (Sandell 1987:32). As Kaza (1990) explains, Buddhism focuses on the interaction of mind and nature through the three practices of direct knowing, discriminating awareness, and deep compassion:

By cultivating these three practices, one's actions in relation to the environment come to be based in relationship and interconnectedness, rather than in dualistic subject-object modes of separation. Through this approach, one's

orientation to the world is fundamentally altered from dominant species to member of a community, from part to process (p. 22).

With interdependence as a core understanding, an environmental ethic becomes a practice in recognizing and supporting relationships with all beings (p. 24).

The Buddhist transcends separateness from nature and instead identifies with the welfare of all beings (Smith 1958:118). Nirvana (the awakening into a state of bliss) is reached when the boundary separating the finite self from its surroundings and also all mortal craving are extinguished (Smith 1958: 125, 131). Accordingly Kaza (1990:25) recognizes that:

An environmental ethic is not something we apply outside ourselves; there is no outside ourselves. We are the environment, and it is us.

From this recognition of the unity of human and nature it follows that the laws of nature apply to humans as well as to other living beings (Komin 1985:175). Thus the *Dhamma* includes the discovery of the nature of things which encompasses the character and processes of the environment as system (Rajavaramuni 1985:57).

Limits and Sustainability

While environmentalism emphasizes that natural resources are limited, Buddhism is more direct in encouraging individuals to limit their resource consumption to the optimal satisfaction of the four basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. This vantage point renders ecology a very concrete and personal matter. Following the Middle Way, one lives and progresses in accord with the principles of detachment and moderation (Saddhatissa 1970:74). In short, the Middle Way avoids the

extremes of denial (asceticism) and overindulgence (consumerism) (de Silva 1987:27-28). This is the "rationed life" (Smith 1958:94). (This contrasts with the emphasis in materialist consumer societies on the maximal satisfaction of needs, wants, and desires). Thus Buddhism points to the fundamental distinction between need and greed (Sandell 1987:35). Implicit in the Middle Way is also moderation in population reproduction as well as in economic production and consumption. In such ways Buddhism can contribute to ecological sustainability as well as economic and social justice. Similarly, biologist Kozlovsky (1974:106) identifies as "the fundamental rule" of human ecology: "Live as simply and as naturally and as close to the earth as possible, inhibiting only two aspects of your unlimited self; your capacity to reproduce and your desire for material things."

Compassion for Diversity

Although in recent years conservationists have shifted their emphasis from individual species to whole ecosystems, Buddhism has long advocated reverence and compassion for all life. In the case of animals this encompasses invertebrates as well as vertebrates. For meditation Buddhists seek a natural and peaceful environment, the highest expression of which is the forest (de Silva 1987:21-22). Thus traditionally temples were often built in forests, and by association the surrounding forest became sacred space to be preserved rather than exploited (Brockelman 1987:97, Buri 1987:4, Pei 1985). Traditionally this would tend to promote the conservation of all the species diversity within the surrounding ecosystem. It is noteworthy that the greatest diversity and complexity of life is found in tropical rain forests. (For more discussion on the mutual relevance of Buddhism and forests see Sponsel and Natadecha 1988).

Existence and Rights

Buddhism considers the intrinsic value of both humans and nature as providing a more meaningful way of living (Buri 1987:4, Kabilsingh 1987:8, 11). This is in contrast to extrinsic value, the economic valuation of nature for resource exploitation for the market economy. An individual should limit personal use of natural resources to obtaining optimal satisfaction of basic needs. Instead of the use of nature, the Buddhist is more concerned with the contemplation of nature, especially through meditation. All life forms have a natural right to existence as functional components of the ecosystem; thus the Buddhist should avoid the use of pesticides and other unnecessary destruction of life. Thich Nhat Hanh (1988:41) writes:

We should deal with nature the way we should deal with ourselves! We should not harm ourselves; we should not harm nature. Harming nature is harming ourselves, and vice versa. If we knew how to deal with our self and with our fellow human beings, we would know how to deal with nature. Human beings and nature are inseparable. Therefore, by not caring properly for any one of these, we harm them all.

Thought and Action in Relation to Responsibility

The key to Buddhist ethics is the primacy of the mind (Saddhatissa 1970:28, Thich Nhat Hanh 1988:44). The Dhammapada (sayings of the Buddha) begins with the words: "All we are is the result of what we have thought" (Smith 1958:121). From positive thoughts flow positive actions and positive consequences, whereas from negative thoughts flow negative actions and negative consequences. Furthermore, the actions of an individual in the present life can influence the next one as well. The source of suffering is in the individual, and likewise the source of happiness is in the individual.

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Enlightenment derives from the understanding of this elemental reality (Saddhatissa 1970:33). Thus ignorance rather than sin is the problem (Smith 1958:121). Wisdom and morality are mutually reinforcing (Saddhatissa 1970:123-124). Accordingly, Buddhism would encourage the cultivation of environmental understanding through education as well as the practice of environmental ethics as a basis for a nonviolent ecology.

As Kaza (1990:25) cogently explains:

The qualities of our thoughts and actions are inextricably linked and have a powerful impact on the environment. It is here that Buddhism can offer a great gift to the world. The root of the environmental crisis lies in the *habits of mind* as much as the destructive habits of behavior [emphasis added].

Also relevant to responsibility are the first of both the negative and positive precepts which are complementary. Non-killing, (the first negative precept), means to abstain from taking life. *Karuna*, (the first positive precept), is deep and universal compassion or loving kindness toward all life (Saddhatissa 1970: 90, Skolimowski 1990:29).

Since the first negative precept extends to all life, it includes forms such as insects which are not usually identified as a concern of environmentalists. Also because of this precept normally Buddhists would not be involved in the kind of violence which is sometimes practiced by radical environmentalists (Manes 1990). A nonviolent ecology would realize its ideals through its actions toward all life forms, even those which are violent towards humans or nature. Education and persuasion rather than violent confrontation would be used to reach those humans who degrade or threaten other humans and/or nature.

Individual Dependence

Because the locus of either happiness or suffering is in the individual, it is up to each individual to cultivate positive thoughts from which will flow positive actions from which will flow positive consequences. This action rests on the realization of the Four Noble Truths and the pursuit of the Noble Eightfold Path (see Lister 1987). It also depends on following the Middle Way of detachment and moderation, while satisfying basic needs and avoiding greed. Meditation in nature is an important part of this process of reaching *nirvana*--the union with nature through the extinction of ego and of all mortal cravings. Thus Buddhism would not blame the ecocrisis on science, technology, industry, business, advertising, government, or some other amorphous scapegoat. Rather it would view the ecocrisis as the product of the collective behavior of individuals who are driven by circumstance, ignorance, and/or greed instead of by wisdom, need, moderation, compassion, and nonviolence.

CONCLUSION

If Buddhists followed the above principles as a basis for environmental ethics in their daily actions, then it seems likely that the consequences would promote a nonviolent ecology. As Bodhi (1987:vii) writes:

With its philosophic insight into the interconnectedness and thoroughgoing interdependence of all conditioned things, with its thesis that happiness is to be found through the restraint of desire in a life of contentment rather than through the proliferation of desire, with its goal of enlightenment through renunciation and contemplation and its ethic of non-injury and boundless loving-kindness for all beings, Buddhism provides all the essential

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elements for a relationship to the natural world characterized by respect, care, and compassion.

To some degree there are Buddhist societies which have a nonviolent ecology, but less so in the present than in the past. As Berry (1987:6) observes:

The smaller Buddhist countries of South and Southeast Asia, in their pre-modern period, had minimal impact upon the life systems of their regions because of limited populations, village modes of life, and few large urban centers--supported, of course, by a spirituality that exalted a lifestyle detached from earthly possessions [see Bennett 1976].

Part of the problem is that in any religious and/or philosophical doctrine, there is often an embarrassing discrepancy between ideals and practices (Callicott and Ames 1989). Moreover, in many Buddhist societies modernization has greatly increased this discrepancy (Anderson 1972, Bennett 1976, Kunstadter 1989, Sponsel and Natadecha 1988:306-308, Swearer 1981). The ubiquity of this discrepancy suggests that good ideals are not enough, but that other factors such as material circumstances are also important. This is one reason why a nonviolent ecology must also be economically and socially just.

Despite the discrepancy between ideals and actions, in recent years there has been "a kind of Buddhist revolt against the deterioration of nature" in countries like Thailand, according to Sulak Sivaraksa (Gray 1987:25). Thus in Sri Lanka, Thailand, USA, and Brazil, among other countries, Buddhists are becoming environmental activists and applying the principles of Buddhist ethics and ecology (Alyanak 1991, Badiner 1990, Darlington 1990, Davies 1987, Kabilsingh 1987, Sandell 1987, Sponsel and Natadecha 1988). The multiplicity, variety, and

energy of these revitalization movements offers hope that it may not be too late to develop a nonviolent ecology.

As Shrader-Frechette (1981:28) notes: "How to view man's relationship to the environment is one of the great moral problems of our time." Buddhism offers some insights for the solution of this problem, especially for Buddhist individuals and societies. Buddhism has endured for more than 2,500 years because people have found it meaningful. However, there are discontinuities as well as continuities in its history. In the future Buddhism will continue to adapt as it helps humans adapt to new circumstances and challenges.

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