



THE GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: A BUDDHIST REFLECTION ON ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Jaharlal Debbarma

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Centre for Buddhist Studies, School of Humanities, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India.

ABSTRACT

With the advancement of modern technology, globalization, and industrialization has resulted in uncontrolled emission of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, creating a grave environmental crisis. The exploitation and pollution of the planet has brought ecological catastrophes and has put the eco-system and human existence in jeopardy.

With the ego-centric, individualistic and consumeristic attitude of the people, this time of crisis needs an assessment of the value and the belief system that we profess. Though Buddhism does not explicitly endorse remedies for ecological crisis, Buddhist teachings of interconnectedness and metaphysics implicitly suggest a viable solution. My paper will deal with an analysis of global ecological crisis according to the principle of Dependent Origination (Pratīyasamutpāda) and Buddhist understanding of suffering (collective suffering). An effort will be made to provide a new vision to Buddhist ecological perspective. The above Buddhist philosophy will be applied to ethical values and belief systems of modern society. The challenge will be substantially to transform the modern individualistic and consumeristic values. The emphasis would be on the interconnectedness of the nature and the relation between human and planetary sustainability. In a way environmental crisis will be referred to "spiritual crisis" as A. Gore (1992) has pointed out. The paper will also give importance to global consciousness, as well as to self-actualization and self-fulfillment.

KEYWORDS : Environmental crisis, Pratīyasamutpāda, Interconnectedness, Suffering, Self-consciousness, Global Ecology

Introduction:

The advancement of modernity has resulted in an un-mindful uses of natural resources and the degradation in ethical values. Humankind is beset with many environmental problems due to ignorance, greed and lack of respect for the Earth's living beings, further in the name of progress and modernization unplanned and immoderate developments have led to much environmental catastrophes. The natural resources such as air, water and soil are polluted to such an extent that human survival is at stake. Even animals and plant life are endangered and numerous species have been already extinct. Due to large scale of deforestation, fertile topsoil has eroded, exposing the bare rock underneath. The indiscriminate use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers and weed killers by the farmers has brought many irrevocable consequences as the natural bacterial balance of arable land has lost equilibrium. The climate pattern has changed drastically resulting in chaotic and unpredictable weather repercussions. As a result of global warming and climate change scientists have predicted that the melting of polar icecaps in the Antarctic may possibly lead to inundating islands and coastal habitats. The depletion of ozone layer due to global warming has led to direct exposure of harmful UV rays adversely affecting human health, animals and plant life. All this environmental problems and their ill effect that we face today can be linked to human activities. It is a high time that we rethink about our way of life, values and goals if we are to overcome the environmental catastrophe.

Understanding Global Ecological crisis by analysing the Doctrine of Dependent Arising (Pratīyasamutpāda).

An analysis of present global Eco-crisis is provided through the doctrine of Dependent Arising which basically pertains to the causal relations between things. Furthermore, it also suggests the ways to overcome problems from its origin. The short formula can be described by way of arising as "When there is this, that comes to be; (Imassmi sati ida hoti), with the arising of this, that arises. (Imassuppāda ida upajjati)" while by way of cessation going "When this is not, neither is that (Imasmi asati ida na hoti), with the cessation of this, that ceases. (Imassa nirodhāda nirujjhati)." (Payutto, 1996, p.79)

Through the analysis of Dependent Arising the reason for global eco-crisis can be traced as follows: because of ignorance, we perform various actions; because of actions we are aware of sensations: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. Because of the awareness of sensation, body and mind are forms (the animated organism) ready to function. Because of the presence of body and mind, six senses are equipped. Because of the sense bases, there is a contact between awareness and outside world and this contact

generates feeling of pleasure, pain or indifference. As the feelings are caused by the sense contact, we have a desire to seek pleasurable sense object and consume products which are made from petro-chemicals producing carbon dioxide as a by-product. (Piyobhaso, P.B. 2009, p.118) To put the process in line with the traditional formula, it will be; Because of sense-desire there arises consumerism, because of consumerism there arises commodity production, because of commodity production, there arises resource extraction, because of resource extraction there arises green-house gas release and because of green-house gas release there arises climate change and environmental crisis. (ibid.)

The Dependent Arising also offers the other way round (cessation) to understand how the problem comes to a cease. We may begin with controlling our sense desire by being content with what we need not what we want. Then consumerism is reduced, less consumerism reduces commodity productions, fewer productions bring less resource extraction. With fewer resources extraction, the emission of green-house gas would be reduced and hopefully it would decrease the dangers predicted as the consequences of climate change. The solution to climate change problem as recommended by IPCC is to reduce the green-house gas emission by 25% to 40 % below 1990 levels by 2020, and by at least half by 2050. If this action somehow fails, as most people are concerned, climate change is going to be inevitable and this may lead to a catastrophe in our world. Through the analysis and interpretation of Dependent Arising I have tried to look at the ecological problems in view of the principle of cause and effect and help us in understanding this global eco-crisis from the Buddhist perspective.

Understanding the collective Ecological Suffering

According to Buddha, life is dukkha with its threefold understanding: - (Suffering or pain (dukkha-dukkha), Impermanence or change (viparinama-dukkha), Conditioned states (samkhara-dukkha). Humankind in this modern world is full of sufferings such as health problems caused by air pollution, contamination of water, consumption of unhygienic food and above all sufferings due to environmental crises or degradations. According to Buddhism nothing is permanent all things are in constant flux and in change. Hence our present ways of suffering may be different from those of the time of Buddha; they might not have come across any sufferings due to environmental problem which we face today. He and his society might not have heard anything about climate change, ozone depletion, global warming, melting of glaciers and extinction of species, etc. These ecological crises have driven us to analyze and rethink the idea of development, progress and modernization. Few instances from the recent tragic events might highlight the aggravated environmental situations that we are

confronting today. On 30 July 2014, landslide occurred in the village of Malin in the Ambegaon taluka of the Pune district, Maharashtra. Deforestation, ground levelling are possible causes of landslide. "Re-lentless rain naturally was the trigger. But the use of heavy machinery to flatten land for agriculture may have aggravated the crumbling of the hilltop. We observed that the slope of the hill was flattened almost halfway," said Ashim Kumar Saha, Head of the Department (Central Region), GSI.

So what does Buddhism offer us when we are faced with many ecological crises at present? Buddha knew that there is dukkha in the world and there are methods to remove it. Analysis and application of Buddhist worldview may perhaps offer us plausible solutions. According to Buddha the main reason for our unhappiness are humans' psychological craving, the unskillful view and the defilements of greed, hatred, selfishness and mutual destruction. To end suffering, we have to overcome cravings. The means to overcome such desires he suggested methods such as self-restraint, minimal consumption, sharing and other mindful ways and thus restraining our acquisitive focus on "I, me, and mine." These practices will enlarge our capacity for empathy and contentment, for they suggest interdependency. When we understand this interconnectedness then, human sufferings due to environmental problems might be resolved. As Robert White quoting Jose Kalapura says that, "[T]he Buddha taught that respect for life and the natural world is essential. By living simply one can be in harmony with other creatures and learn to appreciate the interconnectedness of all lives. The simplicity of life involves developing openness to our environment and relating to the world with awareness and responsive perception. It also enables us to enjoy without possessing, and mutually benefit each other without manipulation." (White, Robert A, 1995. pp.47-74)

Buddhist reflection on ecological responsibility.

We know that global ecological crises are due to the unmindful extraction of natural resources and their misuses. Human activities have great consequences on the life of the animals, plants and their natural surroundings. However we seem less bothered and act that our daily activities of life has nothing to do with the ecological degradation of the world. Our ignorance, greed and lack of respect and compassion for the earth's living beings have over-shadowed our perception of interdependency with nature. As our environment is experiencing floods, droughts, ice-melting in the Arctic, rapid disappearing of forests and animal and bird species are becoming extinct every year, we continue to increase our consumptions. That is to say, human beings are responsible for such problematic issues and such issues can be addressed only if they realize their involvement in it. Therefore, it is high time that we need to ring the bell of mindfulness in us. As the future of all life, including our own depends on our mindful steps we can call on to mindfulness by following the five steps suggested in the Buddhist teachings.

1. The first step of mindfulness is to abstain from killings and to save life and respect it. We have heard that many animal species from the earth are on the verge of extinction. For example the numbers of tigers in India is reducing due to human poaching. If any endangered species disappeared, there is no way that this life-form can ever be retrieved back. No matter how small or big the life is, its absence creates a vacuum that cannot be filled in any other ways, and such a vacuum affects everything else in the ecosystem. Hence we need to be mindfulness in our action and abstain from killings. As abstaining from killing, laying aside all weapons, cultivating shame in killing, being compassionate and

merciful lives provide welfare to all living beings.

2. The second step of mindfulness is not to steal but to share and to give. Stealing from the environmental system is like killing the ecological system of the earth. For example if we cut all the trees and clear the forest, the mountain and the habitats that live on the mountain will suffer. If we over-cut trees streams would become congested with the sediments that wash off the mountain slopes. Consequently, this would be the stealing of the life of fish in the river, of birds that come to feed on fish, of the mammals that come to feed on the birds. This virtue, if being cultivated, encourages people to abstain from possession of illegal wealth and obstructs unmindful plunder of natural resources.
3. The third step of mindfulness is abstinence from sensual misconduct. This practice teaches self – control and be satisfied with the available resources.
4. The fourth step of mindfulness is abstinence from false speech: A person abstaining from false speech speaks truth, becomes reliable, firm and trustworthy, and speaks pleasantly, is polite and does not deceive people. If such virtue is practiced, people cultivate respect not only for each other, but also for their surroundings. Thus, the practitioner of satya does not deceive others in order to make huge profits in business neither does he exploit natural resources.
5. The fifth step of mindfulness is abstinence from intoxicants: One who abstains from intoxicants provides a healthy social environment for others to live by sober behaviour.

Conclusion:

The problem of environmental crises that we face today is due to the unmindful satisfaction of man's greed. According to *Dhammapada* 'The most glorious conquest is the conquest of oneself.' And from experience we know it is not at all easy. The crux of environmental crises resolution still lies in limiting and eradicating greed in human beings. We can do this by ringing the bell of mindfulness in us and by practicing compassion, cultivating habits in frugality and simplicity, and taking upon ourselves to be responsible toward environmental sustainability.

REFERENCES

- Primary sources: | 1. Hardy E. ed. (1979) *Auttara-Nikāya* Part IV. London: Pali Text Society | 2. Morris R. ed. (1976) *Auttara-Nikāya* Vol. II, Oxford: Pali Text Society. | Secondary sources: | 1. Dhammika, S. (1987) *Gemstones of the Good Dhamma (Saddhamma-maniratana)* An Anthology of Verses from the Pali Scriptures, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, | 2. Harvey, Peter. (2000) *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. | 3. Hanh, Thich Nhat, (2008) *The world We Have: A Buddhist approach to Peace and Ecology*, Berkeley: Parallax, | 4. Henning, Daniel H., (2002) *A manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, Buddha Dharma Association Inc. | 5. Huong, Gioi. (2012) *Buddhism and Ecology in the Pitāka and Nikāyas*. New Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers. | 6. Macy, Joanna. (1991) *World as Lover, World as Self*, Berkeley: Parallax | 7. Martin, Julia (ed), (1997) *Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publication. | 8. Pandey, K.C. (ed) (2007) *Ecological Perspectives in Buddhism*, New Delhi: Readworthy Publication. | 9. Payutto, P.A., Bruce Evans trans. & ed. (1996) *Buddhadhamma*, Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation Press. | 10. Piyobhaso, Phramaha Bhatsakorn. (2009). *A Buddhist Perspective on Global Warming - Our Inevitable Fate? Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis*, UNDV Conference Volume. Bangkok. <http://www.undv.org/vesak2011/book/environmental.pdf> | 11. Sahni, Pragati, (2008) *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A virtues approach*, London: Routledge. | 12. Sandell, Klas (ed), (1987) *Buddhist Perspectives on the Ecocrisis*, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society. | 13. Sebastian, C.D. *Majjhima-Nikāya 1:4:8, Resent Researches in Buddhist studies*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Pub., 2008. | 14. White, Robert A. (1995) "Spiritual Foundation of an Ecologically Sustainable Society", *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* 7.2