

AN IMPLEMENTATION OF BUDDHIST ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CAMBODIA

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Abstract

The subject of this research centers on the solution to environmental crises that Cambodia meets today caused by rapid technological developments. Various scientific and technological solutions are offered by empirical sciences. Yet these solutions are not sustainable, because new problems emerge to replace the existing ones. This paper argues that it is only through a change of consciousness that can affect a lasting solution. Buddhism is an important resource for environmental ethics, and Buddhist traditional environmental ethics is the most sustainable solution for minimizing our current environmental crises.

บทคัดย่อ

เนื้อหาของงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้มีศูนย์กลางอยู่ที่ การแก้ปัญหาสิ่งแวดล้อมวิกฤตที่กัมพูชากำลังประสบอยู่ทุกวันนี้ อันเป็นผลสืบเนื่องมาจากการพัฒนาเทคโนโลยีที่รวดเร็ว ได้มีการเสนอวิธีแก้ปัญหาทั้งด้วยวิทยาศาสตร์และเทคโนโลยีโดยวิธีวิทยาศาสตร์เชิงประจักษ์ แต่ทางแกเหล่านี้ก็ไม่ยั่งยืนเพราะมีปัญหาใหม่ๆ เกิดขึ้นมาแทนปัญหาเดิม บทความนี้ต้องการเถียงว่ามีวิธีเดียวที่จะแก้ปัญหานี้ได้อย่างยั่งยืน นั่นก็คือการเปลี่ยนจิตสำนึกของประชาชน พุทธศาสนาเป็นแหล่งสำคัญสำหรับจริยศาสตร์สิ่งแวดล้อมและพุทธจริยศาสตร์สิ่งแวดล้อมเป็นแนวทางในการแก้ปัญหาภาวะสิ่งแวดล้อมวิกฤติในปัจจุบันที่ยั่งยืนที่สุด

Introduction

Cambodia is a small country that lies along the delta of Mekong River in Southeast Asia with lush forests and diverse flora and fauna. Cambodia has a rich biodiversity. Natural resources are the mainstay of Cambodia's economy, but in recent years, many of Cambodia's natural resources have been heavily exploited.

The cultural recognition of Cambodia's natural resources has a long history. It can even be seen in the ancient temples of Angkor where it was expressed in the many detailed stone carvings in the bas-reliefs. In Khmer tradition, human life is considered as being of the same nature as other forms of life. Thus people in Cambodia traditionally live among and with all living things and take care of these gifts of Nature. Nature is the mother that has nourished her children in Cambodia from times immemorial. Traditionally, we Cambodians, being Buddhists, regard our relationship to the environment as sacred and having ethical dimensions. But at present we are losing these perspectives due to need and greed. This paper is born out of the concern for this crisis.

Environmental ethics, treats the problem of how man should relate to the environmental crisis he is faced with today. This crisis is often brought about by human activities. Various scientific and technological solutions are offered by science to meet the challenge of these environmental crises. But it is the conviction of this paper that these scientific solutions are not sufficient to address this crisis; indeed they may create new and even greater problems.

The thesis of this paper is that traditional Buddhist environmental ethics can provide a valuable philosophical solution to our current environmental crises.

Environmental Crisis

Modern technology is a blessing to people. It has made life more comfortable in many ways. But technology has also caused many environmental problems, global warming, ozone layer depletion, deforestation, and reduction in biodiversity. Many scientists consider reduction in

biodiversity as one of the greatest challenges facing humanity today. It affects our ecosystem and ultimately all life including human life. Everything humans do has an effect on the environment.

Deforestation is one of the factors causing Global Warming – the increase of average temperature of the atmosphere, oceans, and land-masses of the Earth. The main cause of this warming is thought to be the burning of fossil fuels, such as coal, oil, and natural gas, which releases into the atmosphere carbon dioxide and other substances known as greenhouse gases. As the atmosphere becomes more polluted, the earth retains more heat as a result of the “greenhouse effect”. As Peter Singer explains:

... The use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) threatens the ozone layer shielding the surface of our planet from the full force of sun’s ultraviolet radiation. Damage to that protective shield would cause cancer rates to rise sharply and could have other effects, for example, on the growth of algae. The threat was especially acute to the world’s southernmost cities, since a large hole in the ozone was found to be open up each year over Antarctica, but in the long term, the entire ozone shield was imperiled (Singer, 2002, pp14).

Humans require a healthy environment for their own good health. Modern technology gives humankind many benefits. It also presents many challenges to our environment.

Buddhist Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics is concerned with man’s appropriate use of this planet. The word ethics is derived from the Greek word “ethos” meaning “custom” and refers to attitudes and values that guide human behavior. Ethics in the philosophical sense is the reasoned examination of what “customs tell us about how we ought to live”. Thus environmental ethics addresses how man ought to live in harmony with his environment.

The genesis of Buddhist ethics is very close to the natural world. In the Buddhist ethical system virtue is contained in all rational beings.

Sahni mentions that,

Buddhism's understanding of nature is innately cosmological and it is only in this sense that nature can be recognized in Buddhist thought. (Sahni, P., 2008 pp164)

The practices of Buddhism for solving environmental crises are in direct conformity with the concern of Buddhism to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings. Human life and other forms of life are regarded as being of the same matter. This means that developing ethical norms and plans of action based on Buddhist practices leads to solving environmental problems.

The Buddhist Perspective on Sustainability

In the Buddhist tradition, a householder should accumulate wealth as a bee collects pollen from a flower. The bee harms neither the beauty nor the fragrance of the flower, but gathers pollen to turn it into sweet honey. Similarly, human beings should take resources from nature without damaging the environment. As the Dhammapada suggests,

*As a bee without harming the flower, its color
or scent, flies away, collecting only the honey,
even so should the sage wander in the village.*

A natural resource is something that exists in nature and is of value to human life. Water, forests, minerals and plants are all examples of natural resources. Natural resources are often renewable. Fish and trees, for example, will continue to be produced by nature so long as we use these resources in a sustainable way.

Many of the environmental problems we are experiencing around the world are caused by the destructive human use of the earth's resources. The resources are placed under increasing pressure to provide for the

industrial and urban needs of the consumer society. Resources are judged solely by their economic worth rather than their life-support capacity.

The very first teaching for those entering monkhood is the “Four Habitual Practices”. These are: to wander around for alms; to wear simple, used clothes; to live at the bases of trees; and to use natural medicines. They demonstrate the Buddha’s intentions for monks to live simply, economically, and in harmony with nature.

These four principles serve as a reminder that man must depend on nature for many of his needs including food, clothing and shelter. This contrasts greatly with the concepts of materialism and consumerism, which follow often lead to excess and the notion of satisfying one’s desires with no sense of limits.

The Buddhist Perspective on Forest

It is well-known that the Buddha had a special preference for forest dwellings. His entire life involved around trees and forests. For example,

- He was born under a tree,
- He attained his Enlightenment under a tree
- He passed away under a tree.

The Buddha considered the planting of trees and the preservation of forest groves as important meritorious acts, which provided the additional benefits of the purifying the mind and the eliminating of cravings.

Buddhist monasteries accept the plant world as edifying and even conducive to the purification of mind. It is no coincidence that many Buddhist monasteries are found in forests or in the best maintained plant environments. Buddhism, as a rule, adopts a gentle and grateful attitude towards the plant kingdom.

The presence of Buddhist forest monastery has helped protect these areas of forest over the centuries. More recently in Cambodia, monks have begun to ‘ordain’ trees in order to highlight the sanctity of trees and protect them against logging. This was done around Cambodia dur-

ing a peak of logging and in response to the development of a large plantation.

Buddhist monks “ordain” trees by wrapping a saffron robe around the trunks to signify the sacredness of all trees. The abbot of *Wat Samrong* in northern Cambodia is generally credited with being the first to adopt the ordination ritual to sanctify trees. He developed the ritual as a means of educating people about the environmental importance of the forest and the dangers of logging.

Rituals such as tree ordination can serve as a focal point to emphasize the urgency of preserving natural resources, and as a way of teaching about the inter-relationships between Buddhism, nature, and the environment as a whole.

The Buddhist Perspectives on Animal Rights

Animals were an important part in the Buddha’s conception of the universe. The Buddhist concept of rights extends from the human world to the animal kingdom. Thus, the Buddha was the first to speak of animal rights.

The famous dictum “May all beings be well and happy” in the *Metta Sutta* covers not only human beings, but all sentient beings, including animals. “May all those who are inflicted with pain be relieved. May all beings inflicted with fear be relieved”. Here too “all beings” includes all sentient beings including animals.

Findings

Environmental changes have been taking place in our planet from time immemorial. What is particular to our times is that human activity is destroying the ecosystem at an unprecedented manner and ever accelerating rate.

We need address the current environmental crisis in a rational manner so as to protect the health and lives of current and future generations.

Cambodians have been living with nature from the beginning of time in ways that are supported by Buddhist beliefs. But due to pressures created by growing population and increasing greed, we have begun encroaching on Mother Nature to such an extent that we are destroying her. This paper should be an eye-opener to all Cambodians to return to their traditional Buddhist values and respect nature by living in harmony with it. Cambodian developmental plans must concern themselves with ways that protect and sustain the environment. We must turn away from development which is destructive to Cambodia and ultimately to the planet.

Hopefully, this paper is just a beginning for the reader to seriously consider what needs to be done to protect and keep the balance of our planet's ecosystem. This paper also is an effort to encourage the reader to take personal action to help restore the integrity of our planet's environmental systems and thus secure the humankind's future. I hope to persuade you to dedicate at least 5-10% of your times and resources to the solution of these looming crises.

Conclusion

In this paper the writer has applied some aspects of Buddhist ethics to specific environmental problems. In many cases Buddhism advocates living at peace with nature. Many aspects of this Buddhist philosophy are the same to the ethics advocated by the "nonanthropocentrism" of such Western philosophers, as Peter Singer.

This paper concludes that the application of traditional Buddhist beliefs in Cambodia provides valuable guidance for solving our planet's current environmental crises.

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