

Buddhist Ethics and Ecocriticism: A Confluence of Eastern Practices and Western Theory

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Abstract

With the advent of the anthropocentric mindset, the status of nature has been relegated to an all-time low. Instead of considering ourselves as a minute part of the vast sacred cosmos, the capitalist mindset has us believing in the dialectic of 'man and nature' which are far-removed from each other. The proposed paper will attempt to shed light on the imbrication of Buddhism which originated from the East in the ancient times, and Ecocritical discourse, which originated in the West recently. *Daya*, *Anukampa* and *Nirvana* being theological perspectives, the paper will try to trace their contexts in the Buddhist religion and situate them contextually in the western ecocritical paradigm. It will put forward the concepts of Buddhist Ecology and view how the ethics of nature converge in Buddhism and Ecocriticism.

Keywords: Buddhism, Ecocriticism, Buddhist Ecology, Buddhist Ethics, *Daya*, *Anukampa*, *Nirvana*

It is said that when people saw the Buddha soon after his enlightenment, they were so struck by the extraordinary peacefulness of his presence that they stopped to ask: "What are you? Are you a god, a magician, or a wizard?" Buddha's reply was stunning. He simply said: "I am awake." His answer became his title, for this is what the word *buddha* means in Sanskrit "one who is awakened." While the rest of the world was deep in "sleep," dreaming a dream known as the waking state of life, the Buddha shook off the slumber and woke up (Smith and Novak, 3-4).

It is as if the whole world is indeed in the waking state of life, sleeping over the anguish that mankind is causing to the only home that we have, i.e. the Earth. We are plundering the natural resources of the Earth beyond measure, and are altering the habitat of numerous non-human species. With no regard left for the sanctity of the non-human world, humans have come to think of themselves as the 'masters' of the Earth. The need of the hour is to shake off this delusional slumber and realise that we are standing at the brink of the tunnel. If nature does not get its due now, it will be the end of us.

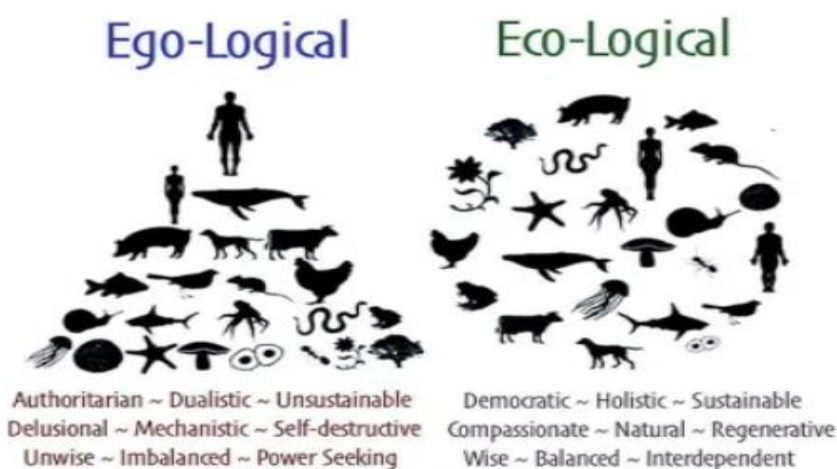
The five Precepts of the Buddha (known as *Pancasila* in Pali and Sanskrit), which is the central set of doctrine for the Buddhists, mentions abstaining from harming living beings as its first commandment. It stresses that this practice is based on the Buddhist notions of *daya* (sympathy) and *anukampa* (concern) for all living beings, which lays the road to the

spiritual path of *nirvana*. Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism “as the study of the relationship between literature and environment, conducted in a spirit of environmentalist praxis.” In an era when the planet is reeling under unprecedented assaults and a massive wave of ecocide, there is an ever-increasing need for more discourses which talk of our surroundings, ecology and nature. Ecocriticism views literature from a nature-conscious perspective, and propounds a radical shift in our contemporary attitude towards nature. It calls for humans to leave selfishness aside and to view this planet, along with its all living beings, as one family who have equal right over the earth.

Angelika Krebs, in her *Ethics of Nature*, describes nature as “that part of our world which has not been made by human beings, but comes into existence and vanishes, changes and remains constant in virtue of itself.” (Krebs, 7) that implies that plants, animals, mountains, soil, rocks et cetera are ‘natural.’ Nature does not need humans to survive, but in the current Anthropocentric era, humans are altering the course of nature to a large extent.

“Ecocide is criminalized human activity that violates the principles of environmental justice, such as causing extensive damage or destroying ecosystems or harming the health and well-being of a species.” (Wikipedia, n.p.) The sustainable interaction of harmonious man and nature is a thing of the past, when humans only took as much resources from nature as they required for sustenance. In the current Anthropocentric era, humans are selfish and consider themselves superior to all other organisms on Earth. Human ties with nature have taken a major hit with the advent of this selfish mindset. We are living in an age of constant capitalist development where the symbiotic relationship that we shared with the nature is a thing of the past. Everything is now a commodity that has to be hijacked for maximum material benefit. Nature has been hijacked for human “wants” instead of “needs” which will never end. Instead of considering ourselves as part of nature, we have begun to view ourselves in dialectical terms as two opposing forces. It has come down to nature vs. humans.

This can be explained on the basis of this pictorial representation. In the eco-logical setup, humans constitute a holistic network of organisms in the Earth, where there is no hierarchy. It is a democratic setup where every organism, from the tiniest ant to the mightiest lion and sequoia tree, have equal right over the Earth. It is sustainable, because one species



will not exploit and deplete the 'other' and 'weaker' species. It aligns well with the First Precept of the Buddha, as the Buddhist notions of *daya* (sympathy) and *anukampa* (concern) are adhered to. Recognising all animals as our own kin, who feel the same feelings as we do, is a central commandment of Buddhism. The sympathy for all creatures originates from empathy.

In the ego-logical setup, ego takes the centerstage instead of sympathy. In this scenario all organisms are hierarchically structured, where the tiniest and the weakest organisms are at the lowest rungs of the pyramid. The mighty humans are at the top, at whose behest this pyramid is operating. Every creature in this pyramid exists for the benefit of the humans. It is an authoritarian order, where humans occupy the Derridean socio-hierarchical "centre" ; and every other organism is at the "margin." Being an unsustainable and mechanistic order, it does not take emotions into consideration. It views the Earth as a developmental project where the anthropocentric mindset rules. If we continue with the ego-centrism, our future generations will curse us because there will be no nature or natural resources left for them. With the advent of the anthropocentric mindset, the status of nature has been relegated to an all-time low. Instead of considering ourselves as a minute part of the vast sacred cosmos, the capitalist mindset has us believing in the dialectic of 'man and nature' which are far-removed from each other.

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar also had explicit and implicit ecological dimensions in his thought. For Ambedkar, ecological problems do not occur solely because of the over-exploitation of natural resources, but because of the iniquitous access to the natural resources by different social groups. According to him, ecological inequity is deeply rooted in caste prejudices where Dalits exist outside the ecological space. He believed that nature, just like other things, is 'castised.'

The recent COVID-19 epidemic is a stark reminder of how far we have come from nature, and the reality of our unsustainable and toxic relationship with it. The current socio-economic system has put an immense pressure on the environment, and the current pandemic that we are going through establishes that when even one single element in nature is destabilised, it leads to a cascading effect. As humans venture deeper and deeper into wildlife and previously uncharted territories, it leads to a disruption in the well-established balance and an encroachment in the natural ecosystem. Since nature acts as a buffer between humans and diseases, too much altering of it is causing unprecedented implications, which can very well be noticed in the wake of current COVID fiasco. There have been nature-linkages to numerous outbreaks in the past, such as AIDS, SARS, Ebola and Lyme disease. With the natural habitats shrinking rapidly, humans and animals are coming in close contact with each other. There is a never-ending greed for economic development which leads us to foray into wild landscapes. This, in turn, then leads the viruses to find new hosts- us humans.

This material greed is now posing a magnanimous threat in front of us, one that cannot be ignored anymore. Hence, there is an urgent need to reassess our relationship with nature, and to find ecology-centric and sustainable solutions, hopefully before the human race is wiped off the face of the earth. Nature does not need humans to survive, it was doing well on its own before they arrived, but humans definitely need nature to survive.

From the brink of the deep ditch that we currently are stuck in, the solution lies in more discourses that revolve around nature and nature-writing, coming into existence as a result of the Anthropocentric attitude of humans. Ecocriticism offers a nature-centric paradigm to literature, so that we may become more ecologically-conscious. William Rueckert coined the term "ecocriticism" for the first time in his critical writing "Literature

and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978. Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as a “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist’s praxis.” (The Environmental Imagination, 430). Patrick D. Murphy opines that ecocriticism is the literary criticism that arises from and is oriented towards a concern with human and non-human interaction and interrelationship. There are two branches that ecology may be classified under viz. shallow ecology and deep ecology. These two are seemingly similar on the surface, but different at the core. Shallow and deep ecologies both believe that nature should be protected at all costs. However, shallow ecology is essentially anthropocentric in its approach towards nature conservation. Though rallying for a sustainable future, it believes that nature exists for the service of mankind. Shallow ecology believes that humans should extract resources from nature in a sustainable manner, so that there is enough left for the future generations to consume. It reinforces the problematic dialectic of humans vs. nature, and subconsciously posits humans as the masters or controllers of the Earth. Deep ecology, on the other hand, does not believe that humans are the controllers or masters of the Earth. It believes that every organism in nature has an intrinsic value, and every organism was put on Earth for a particular purpose without any need of hierarchy. It does away with pitting nature against humans (and vice-versa) and views the whole Earth as one. The term “deep ecology” was coined in 1972 by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. Philosophically, the concept of deep ecology is rooted in the works of Henry David Thoreau, Lewis Mumford, Rachel Carson, Theodore Roszak and others, but historically it certainly reaches back to Buddhist philosophers. Naess has summarised his thoughts on deep ecology lucidly in eight points, which are as follows:

1. The well-being of human and nonhuman life on earth have value in themselves.
2. The interdependence, richness, and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
5. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with substantial decrease of the human population. Moreover, the flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. The changes in policies will affect basic economic and technological structures.
7. Ideological change is required in order to emphasize quality of life rather than striving for an ever-higher standard of living.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation to help implement these changes (Naess, 68).

The concepts of deep ecology also find resonance in the ancient tradition of Buddhism. Buddhism is more of a spiritual system than an organised religion which focuses on developing an understanding of ourselves and the cosmos, rather than worshipping a deity. It also provides a relational understanding of our dependence on nature, and the need to develop a healthy kinship with the non-human creatures of the Earth. In the current anthropocentric era, human wants have taken over the human and non-human needs. We are, as if, living inside the bubble of “self” which manifests itself in the form of our strained relationship with the nature around us. There is a sharp division and dialectical opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ According to the

Buddhist thought, this sense of disconnection exhibits itself in the form of three roots of evil, also known as “the three poisons”: greed, ill-will and delusion. Every facet of our consumerism and material growth-driven life speaks volumes of these three poisons. Greed is the root cause of the untrammelled development throughout the globe. Similarly, ill-will of one nation towards the other, and delusion of “self” being more important than community and Earth has widespread ramifications.

Buddhism originated in India around 500 years before the birth of Christ. The West is now coming round to the viewpoint that there is a huge reservoir of wisdom outside the bubble of their hegemonic self. Francisco Varela, in *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* opines that many psychiatrists, psychologists and scientists regard the discovery of Buddhist philosophy in the West today as a second renaissance (Varela, 22). Alan Watts says that historically speaking, the Buddha was the world’s first psychologist and psychotherapist. Rooting for the thought of universal responsibility in whatever we do, Buddhism concerns itself with the intertwining of all life on Earth, comprising of all the human and non-human forms of life inhabiting the Earth.

It would be unfair if the discussion does not mention the Five Precepts of the Buddha. Known as *Pancasila* in Pali and Sanskrit, it is the central set of doctrine for the Buddhists. It mentions abstaining from harming living beings as its first commandment. It stresses that this practice is based on the Buddhist notions of *daya* (sympathy) and *anukampa* (concern) for all living beings, which lays the road to the spiritual path of *nirvana*. It relates to non-violence, which not only equates to the absence of violence, but the presence of goodwill, care and empathy for other sentient beings. Life is easily taken, but is impossible for us to give. As we do not enjoy dying ourselves, it is unwise for us to use our knowledge to destroy others (Khantipalo, 2). The Buddha said, “Identifying ourselves with the others, we can never slay or cause to slay.” (Sulak, 42). By recognising ourselves as the part of the vast cosmos, we develop affinity with every creature, and understand that by harming any living creature we harm ourselves. The Third Precept speaks of refraining from sexual misconduct. This can be extended to the exploitation of nature, and our lecherous and voyeuristic behaviour towards ecology. We are inconsiderate towards the needs and boundaries of the environment, and constantly harass it for maximum material benefit.

Hence, the theological perspectives of *daya*, *anukampa* and *nirvana* are not only relevant in the context of Eastern wisdom of Buddhism, but these essentially translate to the most important precepts of western Ecocriticism. Ultimately, the goal is an eco-conscious society in which every individual understands his sense of universal responsibility. Since the ethics of nature overlap in both Buddhism and Ecocriticism, a nuanced and extensive study of a canopy of both these paradigms is required. It would do well to close the argument with the address of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, given on 4th February in New Delhi. He stated,

Since I deeply believe that human beings are social animals. They are of gentle nature and so I think the human attitude towards our environment should also be of a gentle nature. If we exploit our natural environment in an extreme way, today we might get some benefit but in the long run we ourselves will suffer and our next generations will suffer. I think, it is also important to bring about internal balance within human beings themselves. Since negligence of the environment - which has resulted in lots of harm to the human community - came about by ignorance of the very special importance of

the environment, I think it is very important first of all to instil this knowledge within human beings. The key thing is the sense of Universal Responsibility, that is the real source of strength, the real source of happiness. From that perspective, if in our generation we exploit every available thing: trees, water, mineral resources or anything, without bothering about the next generation, about the future, that's our guilt, isn't it? So, if we have a genuine sense of universal responsibility, as the central motivation and principle, then from that direction our relations with the environment will be well balanced. (Lama, n.p.)

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