

Buddhist Attitude towards Sustainable Development

Postawa buddyjska a zrównoważony rozwój

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Abstract

Religion plays a significant role in *Human Action*. *Buddhism* is one of the most important religions of India. There is an argument that, Buddha places emphasis upon a logical understanding of the cause of human suffering. He explains ignorance as the root link in the causal chain and, thus, shows the way towards Nirvana. Human suffering is not due to the devaluation of nature. It is due to the pain that is associated with the cycle of birth and rebirth. Hence, Buddhist philosophy is dysteleological in its nature. That's why it is hard to discuss *sustainable development* within the framework of Buddhist philosophy. In this paper, I have argued that Buddhist philosophy places a substantial emphasis upon sentient as well as non-sentient beings. Essentially, as per the Buddhist concept of Buddha-nature, I have argued that Buddha-nature is present in all sentient and non-sentient beings.

Key Words: Buddhist Philosophy, Sustainable development, Buddha-nature, Rebirth.

Streszczenie

Religia odgrywa znaczącą rolę w kierowaniu *ludzka aktywnością*. *Buddyzm* jest jedną z najważniejszych religii w Indiach. Budda kładzie nacisk na logiczne zrozumienie przyczyny ludzkiego cierpienia. Wskazuje na ignorancję jako źródło w łańcuchu przyczynowym, a tym samym wskazuje na drogę do Nirwany. Ludzie cierpienia nie wynika z dewaluacji natury. Jest spowodowane bólem związanym z cyklem narodzin i odrodzenia. Stąd filozofia buddyjska ma charakter dysteleologiczny. Dlatego trudno dyskutować o zrównoważonym rozwoju w ramach filozofii buddyjskiej. W tym artykule przedstawiam argumenty za tym, że filozofia buddyjska kładzie istotny nacisk tak na bytu czujące, jak i nie-czujące. Zasadniczo, zgodnie z buddyjską koncepcją natury Buddy, Budda-natura jest obecny we wszystkich bytach czujących i nie-czujących.

Słowa kluczowe: filozofia buddyjska, rozwój zrównoważony, Budda – natura, odrodzenia

Introduction

People started using the word *Sustainable Development* when the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural resources presented the *World Conservation Strategy* (Baker, 2006, p. 18) in 1980. The aim of the strategy was to give importance to sustainable development through the conservation of existing resources. The World Commission on Environment and Development published its report entitled *Our Common Future*, which is also known as Brundtland Report, in 1987. This report links sustainable development to social, economic and ecological dimensions (Baker, 2006, p.19). It lays stress

upon Human Good-will for the well-being of both the present and future generations.

Religion plays a very significant role, in varied ways, in sustainable development. It influences human behaviour or gives support to the belief system. It encourages the progress of human condition for a better world. *Human behaviour towards nature is deeply conditioned by religion* (White, 1967, p. 1205). When religion argues that God has created everything in the world or when religion says that God is omnipresent, the followers tend to respect all sentient and non-sentient beings. However, when religion is more human centric then it contributes towards the devaluation of nature. Lynn White Jr. ar-

gued that the western religion, which is anthropocentric in form, was the root cause of the ecological crisis (White, 1967, p. 1205; Edelglass, 2009, p. 428). This is the prime reason of the degradation of relationship between the human and natural world. Religion influences human action and belief system significantly. Therefore, religious teachings, to a great extent, can affect the harmony between the human and natural world. Sustainable development focuses upon human belief system and behaviour towards the natural resources. There are two different perspectives for understanding this development. *First*, there is the standpoint of anthropocentrism which accords more importance to human life. The theory says that human life has a greater significance than all other living and non-living entities. Therefore, human beings can use other living and non-living entities for their own development. *Second*, there is egocentrism which gives equal importance to all living and non-living beings. For the purposes of this paper, both perspectives are significant. In the first part of the paper, there is an elucidation upon the viewpoints of a few scholars. These intellectuals argue that Buddhist thought places emphasis only upon human problems and their solution. Therefore, Buddhist philosophy is dysteleological in nature (Harris, 1995). In the second part of the paper, I have argued that there are possibilities to bring the notion of sustainable development within the Buddhist framework.

Buddhism and Ecology

Buddhism started as an ethico-religious system and placed more emphasis upon the moral fact of suffering and the painful nature of life. It explained that suffering is necessarily associated with a causal factor. Otherwise, there would be no way out. So, there is a need to search for its genesis. Buddha explained that suffering is due to craving, which is itself due to ignorance. Ignorance exists as regards the real nature of things. Buddha had a practical (also spiritual) goal, namely, *Nirvana*. The main objective of Buddhist philosophy is to get rid of the sufferings and sorrows of life, which are caused by desires and attachment. In order to get rid of the root cause of suffering, namely, desires and attachment, Buddhism puts forth the need to give up the belief in the body-soul dualism. It, therefore, provide us with an extensive analysis of mind. Buddha maintained silence with regard to the questions of the existence of soul. He did not want to make a commitment to the ontological position of the eternality of an enduring soul. He, instead, presented an analysis of human person *per se*, as an existential being. His main concern was to pave way for *Nirvana*, the cessation of suffering, without making a metaphysical commitment in the reality of the self or soul. We will, further, elucidate upon the Buddhist notion of rebirth in next section. The important point, here, is that Buddhist teachings

focus upon human suffering and emphasize upon the total extinction of suffering. Buddha gave the four noble truths as his basic philosophy. Four Noble truths are all about suffering and its extinction. For Buddhism, the attainment of Nirvana is the prime purpose of life. Buddhist response on the question of reality of external world is that the external world exists due to our ignorance. The philosophy of the wheel of existence brilliantly explains the cycle of birth and rebirth without any reference to an eternal self. Here, Buddha shows that, ignorance is the root cause of all suffering. Scholars argue that Buddhist philosophy provides immense motivation for the extinction of ignorance and attainment of the state of liberation. Notwithstanding, it barely provides any encouragement for right action, as an attempt to save the natural world or for sustainable development. Lambert Schmithausen in his paper, entitled *The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics*, writes that Early Buddhist theory does not motivate us for preserving natural or sustainable development. It propels us only towards the desire and endeavour to liberate oneself from sorrow (Schmithausen, 1997, p. 11). Let us try to understand the argument through a diagram.

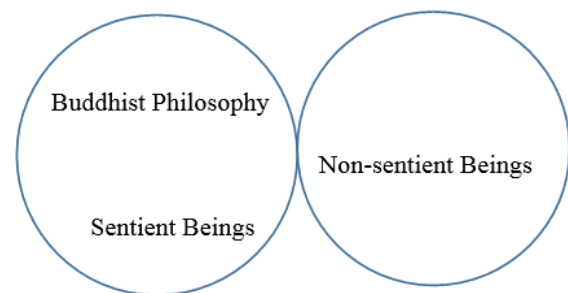


Figure 1. Early Buddhist Philosophy and Sentinent Beings versus Non-sentinent Beings

The above figure clearly shows that Buddhist teaching is intended purely for the sentient beings. Schmithausen writes that the idea of mutual dependence or inter-connectedness or interrelatedness of all things is not mentioned in the early Buddhist texts (Schmithausen, 1997, p. 13). Ian Harris has also argued that Buddhist philosophy follows the anthropocentric tradition, which is solely devoted to the liberation of human beings from suffering (Harris, 1995). He points that, Ian Harris has argued that, dysteleology is deeply rooted in Buddhist thought. Therefore, one cannot talk about environmental ethics within the Buddhist framework. He believes that it is very hard to decipher the Buddhist approach towards the natural world. We find it quite difficult to discuss the problem of global warming or decrease in the diversity of species from the Buddhist point of view (Harris, 1994, p. 53). In the next section of this paper, we will elucidate upon the notion of Buddhature and argue that Buddhism is a fertile resource

for the philosopher, who is seeking a theoretical background for sustainable development.

The Notion of Buddha-nature

Tathagatagarbha tradition holds that *Tathagatagarbha* is one's true self. It means the womb or embryo of the *Tathagata* (Gethin, 1998, p. 251; Harvey 2013, p. 139). The *Lankavatara Sutra* notably and influentially asserts that *Tathagatagarbha* must be understood as Buddha-essence or Buddha nature with the substratum as consciousness (*alaya-vijnana*). *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* teaches that there exists a real permanent element in the sentient beings and this element enables sentient beings to become Buddha. According to Buddhism, pure Buddha nature (*tathagatagarbha*) is present in all beings and, therefore, all are potential Buddhas. In other words, *Tathagatagarbha* must be understood as the Buddha essence, which is present in all sentient beings (Harvey, 2013, p. 139). It means that Buddhist thought sees Buddha essence as the seed-potency, in every sentient being, which can be cultivated by following a proper path. Here, it is very significant to note that, the word *Buddha* means a person who has awakened from the sleep of ignorance and has gained perfect knowledge. To further clarify, when we talk about Buddha nature it means that all sentient beings have the Buddha essence or all sentient beings have the capability to achieve the state of Buddha by following the right path. Some Buddhist scholars have also argued that Buddha-nature is also present in the non-sentient beings. William Edelglass in his work, entitled *The Ecological Self*, writes that, for some of the Buddhist traditions, Buddha essence is not only present in the sentient being but also in the non-sentient nature (Edelglass, 2009, p. 429). Ruben L. F. Habito, in his work entitled *Environment of earth sangha: Buddhist perspectives on our global ecological well-being*, has mentioned how the Japanese Buddhist thinker, Annen, in the tenth century, and his followers, in the Tendai tradition, have given significance to even grass and tree. Tendai tradition argues that grasses and trees can also attain Buddhahood (Habito, 2007, p. 143). Thus, we can argue that the Buddhist tradition gives equal importance to nature and also raises our spirit for sustainable development. Here, it is significant to note that, the Mahayana Buddhist thought argues not only for the liberation of the self but also for the liberation of others. The concept of Bodhisattva, which essentially includes compassionate love, becomes significant here. Bodhisattva helps others achieve the state of Buddhahood. The vows of Bodhisattva consist in helping others get rid of their suffering. A person who aims at attaining full Buddhahood is called Bodhisattva (William, 2009, p.55). In other words, one who has apprehended the problem of suffering or the four noble truths of Buddha, and wants to attain the state of Buddhahood is called Bodhisattva. We need

to understand that this is not a simple desire. One needs to take a vow, to be reborn, in order to attain the state of Perfect Buddhahood (William, 2009, p. 55). Bodhisattvas generate infinite compassion not only for all the sentient beings in the present time, but also future generations. Therefore, a person who is seeking ultimate happiness, or Nirvana or wants to attain the state of Buddhahood, has to essentially remain concerned about the natural resources of the future generations. The idea of rebirth is, also, a strong argument in the favour of Buddhist thought giving due significance to sustainable development.

Buddhism does not believe in an eternal self. Buddha argues that a changeless self is not a substantial entity and elucidates upon the notion of mind and body. He argues that mind is not self, but just a word that represents all the activities of the body. Buddhism also says that, in order to achieve Nirvana, one has to exhaust all inclinations. For this, one life is not enough. As mentioned above, in order to attain Nirvana, one needs to go through the cycle of birth and rebirth until the attainment of Buddhahood. While explaining dependent origination, Buddha brilliantly expounds upon the problem of birth-rebirth without any reference to an eternal soul. He explains that ignorance is the root cause of suffering. Buddhism inspires us to understand the problem of suffering and walk towards the state of Nirvana. Dependent origination shows ignorance as the root cause of the cycle of the birth and rebirth. Buddhist notion of rebirth gives us ample reason to think about sustainable development. If man is not involved with creating awareness for self as also others, about the problem of devaluation of nature, then mankind will, soon, have nothing to save for the future generations. We, therefore, need to be concerned about the resources that are essential for the well-being of future generations. Dalai Lama argues that the idea of rebirth gives us one reason to have a direct concern with the future generations (Gyatso, 2007). He writes that one should not exploit nature. Swearer writes that Buddha-nature provides a basis for unifying all existent entities in a common sacred universe (Swearer, 2001, p. 230). Buddhist environmentalists also argue that Buddha has given importance to nature because Buddha was born, attained enlightenment as also died under the trees (Swearer, 2001, p. 232). Therefore, the existence of tree and nature is pertinently linked to salvation. We, thus, have enough evidence to believe that the notion of sustainable development can be discussed within the Buddhist framework.

Buddha's profound belief in promoting common good and interest, mutual welfare and wellbeing, nobility of life and its perfection justifies his great compassion for humanity. Out of these sublime truths, Buddha evolved a genuine code of ethics and morality, the practical side of his philosophy, in the form of a simple yet practical system of human life. These are the five noble precepts known as *Pancasila*, which are considered as the basic teaching of Bud-

dha and are accepted by all schools of Buddhism. They are:

- (1) not to kill,
- (2) not to steal,
- (3) not to tell lies,
- (4) not to live immoral life and
- (5) not to consume intoxicants.

Among the five noble precepts, the first holds great significance for the purposes of this paper. It is non-violence or not-killing which is known as *ahimsa*. It is the prominent and common concept in all Indian religions. It includes positive love in the form of compassion and friendship towards all beings in thought, word and deed. Buddhism prohibits killing in any form. Life is dear to all creatures. All living beings, irrespective of age, sex, size – from the time of their conception in their mother's womb, are included within this precept's fold. The precept wards off any scope for, recent ethical issues of concern like the, devaluation of nature. In this connection, His Holiness Dalia Lama writes that although we do not believe that tress or flowers have minds, we treat them also with respect (Gyatso, 2007; Habito, 2007, p. 136). Therefore, one should not exploit nature gratuitously (Gyatso, 2007).

Conclusion

Religion always plays an important role in the progress of social well-being. Buddhist philosophy is a fertile source for the theoretical support of sustainable development. The Buddhist notion of rebirth is essentially linked with the concern about the future generations and the resources for their well-being. Therefore, Buddhist thought not only talks about the liberation of all sentient beings but also warns against unethical human action towards the natural world. Buddhist spiritual beliefs and practices contribute towards, or in the least encourage, right action for sustainable development.

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