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UNIT 10. Assessment Component 2

Critically evaluate the ecological legacy of the religious/spiritual tradition of Buddhism (Unit 8)

After the widely read article of Lynn White 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' was published in 1967 by *Science Magazine*, there have been a variety of debates bubbling up. Among these, some theses have been widely accepted, like it is the basis of what has posteriorly been known as Religion and Ecology field and movement. This thesis asserts that human ecology, and therefore environmental attitudes, are deeply conditioned by religious beliefs. 'Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion' (White 1967: 1205).

However, there have also been some debates that are still quite controversial and haven't yet received large academic agreement. Such is the case of the hypothesis that puts the responsibility of Judeo-Christian worldviews as lying at the roots of western degradation of the environment, which relates the biblical accounts with western science and its exploitative models of development¹ (White 1967). Or the discussion around the idea that Buddhism and other religions that originated in Asia present more holistic and egalitarian worldviews, therefore modeling more positive environmental lives and empathetic attitudes toward non-human animals than those rooted in Abrahamic religions² (White 1967).

What concerns us here is the thesis of Asian traditions, particularly Buddhism, offering positive environmental beliefs and attitudes. For this manner, we will first present a brief overview of the Buddhist mindset in its various forms, which includes the teachings of The Four Noble Truth and the principle of dependent origination or *paticca sumuppada*. Secondly, to surmise from it what could inform a positive environmental attitude, bringing particular attention to those Buddhist concepts with specific ecological connotations, particularly: the universal motivation of compassion (*mahakaruna*) and the moral ethic of loving-kindness (*metta*), the interconnectedness of all beings in *samsara* through *karma*, the figure of the *bodhisattva* and the concept of Buddhahood or Buddha Nature shared by all living forms. Having presented these, we will compile some of the main literature and studies aligning with or weakening such hypothesis, so that we conclude with a wide outlook of the still emerging environmental Buddhist thought field.

Since the time Buddha Shakyamuni taught the dharma in India, over 2500 years ago, Buddhism has spread throughout different places and in different times, giving form to different traditions with different focuses about this same dharma (Habito 2007). However, the major philosophical characteristic that informs the Buddhist worldview is a normative common to all of the different schools that originated; it is known as *paticca sumuppada* or the

¹ See for example Cronon 1997; Nash 1991; Baer 1966 or Sittler 1954.

² See for example Schumacher 1973; Snyder 1969; Toynbee 1972 or Naess 1973.

principle of dependent origination, which sets an intrinsic causal interdependence between each and every phenomena within the universe (Swearer 2005). Furthermore, as Donald K. Swearer presents, this interdependency would be not only cosmological; but it also conjoins existential, moral and ontological interdependence (Swearer 2005).

These Buddhist principles are gathered in what is known as the first public teaching of the Buddha, The Four Noble Truths, which occurred at Sarnath in the north-eastern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It propounds the universal nature of suffering that is fundamental to all sentient beings (*dukkha*); its causes or sources; its cessation; and the path leading to its cessation (Swearer 2005). It is by detailing the logical and causal interrelations between these Four Noble Truths that the whole philosophy of Buddhism takes form. At the same time, this account presents the story of the path Buddha himself experienced in the achievement of *nirvana* or liberation (Swearer 2005). Which does not represent an actual physical place outside this world as it is often mistakenly understood, but describes a mental state in which reality is no longer conceived as inherently existent; on the contrary, it is coemergent and thus, codependent (Gyatso 2002).

Furthermore, this potential state of liberation is presented as achievable to all forms of sentient beings, this is known as Buddhahood or Buddha Nature. 'Since we have a mind that has a nature of mere luminosity and knowing, all of us have the fundamental substances necessary for the attainment of Buddhahood' (Gyatso 2002: 19). In this way, Buddhism represents the path that overcomes the sources of suffering by gaining awareness of how our mind works and how by way of dualistic views, it conceives phenomena as being independent, thence developing a directly non-dual perception of reality (Gyatso 2002).

Having seen the main fundamental principles of Buddhism, applicable to its different major traditions –namely Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana³ (Kaza 2006)–, we can now relate them, and some other deeper characteristics, with a potential ecological significance; or what can be defended as Buddhist environmental thought.

Probably, the strongest moral principle of the majority of religions is related with love and compassion. Likewise, Buddhism speaks at its philosophical core about compassion (*karuna*). Nonetheless, this compassionate motivation presents some peculiarities by conceiving it with a universal pretension (*mahakaruna*) (Gyatso 2002). This means that under the Buddhist philosophy, this compassionate empathy is equally addressed to all sentient beings in their different forms of life, human and non-human, and it is the result of developing the awareness of the First Noble Truth, i.e. the universality of suffering in every sentient being (Swearer 2005). In this way, if every sentient being suffers, we are called to embody nonviolent universal loving-kindness (*metta*) as a moral principle, equally deserved by all forms of life; which involves not only human and animals, but also plants, spirits and the earth itself.

The Vietnamese Zen monk and master Thich Nhat Hanh says 'We humans think we are smart, but an orchid knows how to produce noble, symmetrical flowers, and a snail knows how to

³ See for example Tucker and Williams 1997 or Habito 2005.

make a beautiful, well proportioned shell. We should bow deeply before the orchid and the snail and join our palms reverently before the monarch butterfly and the magnolia tree' (Nhat Hanh 1992: 85).

To see more deeply how this universal compassion as a moral code conjoins all forms of life we have to talk about *karma* and rebirth in *samsara*. These words represent the cosmology of Buddhism, and speak about the evolution of the different forms of lives on a common moral ground; where every sentient life participates in an endless karmic continuum of births and rebirths, which is known as *samsara* (Swearer 2005). If we conceive these births and rebirths in a wider picture, taking place from beginningless time, there is no living being that has not been connected in some kind of kinship before to every other being. Therefore, we are connected to all forms of life by this process of taking birth and rebirth.

There is a commonly practiced meditation in Tibetan traditions that guides us into the deep moral meaning of this assumption; where the practitioner, firstly, remembers the kindness received from one's own mother in this life. Secondly, due to rebirth, the assumption is made that each and every living being has been our mother; therefore, each and every living being has previously expressed this love and kindness towards us. In this way, this practice of going through the process of seeing all sentient beings as one's own mother in the countless previous lifetimes, recalls the importance of being kind to others, no matter which life-form is present in this life-time (Loden 2005).

This attitude of universal compassion is embodied in Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions by the figure of the *bodhisattva*, which makes reference to those who take the vow and path, lifetime after lifetime, of service to all beings who are suffering (Kaza 2006). 'For as long as space endures, and for as long as sentient beings remain, until then may I, too, abide to dispel the misery of the world' says Shantideva's classic eighth-century text *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* (Shantideva 1979: 167).

Another commonly practiced meditation is known as *tonglen*, its Tibetan meaning expresses the actions of "taking and giving" and guides us into the embracement of this *bodhisattva's* attitude by training our minds to reverse its innate trend toward self-cherishing, and establish the mental habit that transforms it into that of cherishing others. In this way, 'taking' refers to taking all beings' suffering from them; and 'giving' refers to giving all your happiness and good conditions to others (Loden 2005). In this manner, as the meditator breaths in, visualizes and feels that is taking on the suffering of others in the form of black smoke that comes into the body through the nostrils, coming down into the chest and destroying the self-cherishing attitude that covers his or her heart. In this manner, by the power of the motivating vision of compassion, both, the suffering of living beings and the meditator's self-cherishing attitude become obliterated. Now, as the meditator breaths out and with the power of the motivating vision of love, visualizes and feels the process of giving away all his or her happiness, good conditions and realisations in the form of white light that emanates to all beings and becomes whatever is required for those beings (Loden 2005). Obviously, the purpose of this practice is not taking away the actual suffering of others, as this would not be

possible, but to train one's own mind on becoming more compassionate and loving (Loden 2005).

As mentioned before, these compassionate and loving attitudes are naturally and equally within us all. The concept of Buddhahood or Buddha Nature makes reference to the potential of becoming enlightened in all forms of life; the potential to awaken that clear state of mind that lies within us all: 'sentient (animal) and nonsentient (plant) beings and even the earth itself were seen as capable of achieving enlightenment' (Kaza 2006: 193).

In this way, the Buddhist path is one that leads us to the awakening of this awareness; the awakening of this nature that breaks through limited and dualistic views separating the world between the sense of self and others (Kaza 2006).

In the light of what has been exposed, we can assert that, indeed, Buddhist ontology and philosophical worldview present ideas that may inform a positive ecological attitude. As such, the holistic principle of causal interdependence that integrates not only human condition but the wholeness of the ecosphere; conceiving both, particular individuals as well as general species, under relations of mutual codependence (Swearer 2005: 2628), where the ideal of the *bodhisattva* rolls into an ethical moral code of nonviolent universal compassion. However, these philosophical views can present theoretical inconsistencies and deficiencies when applied to the present time and its concerns. Furthermore, they may not be necessarily reflected in the attitudes of the practitioners, leading them towards ecological concern. As Ruben L. F. Habito expresses answering himself to the question of whether Buddhism supports an active engagement with the ecological crisis: 'Not necessarily, but yet, possibly' (Habito 2007: 132).

Some scholars have pointed at the anthropocentric input Buddhism can create on its practitioners focusing on human liberation and nothing else, which would relate to environmental and other issues aside by not being an urgent matter on the path of freeing one's own mind from suffering (Habito 2007). Thus, considering the environment just as the physical world, 'receptacle [...] which is left behind as one moves on in the path of purification' (Habito 2007: 133).

Nonetheless, this dualistic view that separates this world (*samsara*) and the one to be perceived once liberated (*nirvana*), would represent a misunderstanding of the Buddhist doctrines where the concept of emptiness (*shunyata*) or ultimate view of reality is presented (Habito 2007). 'Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is also not other than emptiness' says the Heart Sutra on a presentation of the profound wisdom on the nature of emptiness, a fundamental part of the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* (Gyatso 2005). This non-dual view would situate earthly realities as relevant as metaphysical ones in Buddhist practices (Holder 2007), where the environment or physical world would not be a transient place but rather a place where enlightened beings 'seek to be reborn, not out of karmic necessity but out of compassion and with the intention to liberate all beings from their various forms of *dukkha*' (Habito 2007: 135). 'I came to realize clearly that the Mind is no

other than mountains and rivers, the great wide Earth, the Sun, the moon, the stars' says a Japanese Zen Master in a thirteenth-century text (Kapleau 1965: 212).

Other scholars also point out the possibility of Buddhist anthropocentrism for its focus on the ethics' agency and its consequences on humans, rather than sharing this agency under a biocentric vision with nonhuman forms as well (Swearer 2005). Nonetheless, these assertions are argued by those who bring the attention to notions like the interdependent causality or Buddha Nature, which provides a solid ontological unity that unifies 'all existent entities in a common sacred universe' (Swearer 2005: 2629) or ascribe 'intrinsic value to all species by affirming their shared dharmic nature' (Swearer 2005: 2629), 'even though the tradition privileges human life in regard to spiritual realization' (Swearer 2005: 2629).

Other critical voices like Ian Harris are particularly sceptical and caution the fact that westernized ways of Buddhism may skim over the philosophy of the tradition by trying to complement approaches to environmental thought by taking whatever seems applicable without necessarily engaging in a deep understanding of Buddhist traditions, thus diminishing these ancient philosophies (Kaza 2006). Nevertheless, despite these still unsolved questions of a still young movement, the interest in Buddhist environmental thought and action grows more and more (Kaza 2006).

To summarise, the potential of Buddhism and Buddhist leaders informing beliefs and attitudes should be considered before the critical ecological situation we face. Buddhist practices, communities, and leaders all around the globe provide more and more examples of sustainable lifestyles, grounded in simple and ascetic values as well as loving and compassionate ethics. Examples of this can be found in His Holiness the Dalai Lama's 1989 Nobel Peace Prize speech on proposing to make Tibet an international ecological reserve; the foundation of the Zen Order of Interbeing by the monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh; the "forest monks" from Thailand ordaining elder trees to protest against overexploitation; or the academic Buddhist activism of Joanna Macy and John Seed (Kaza 2006).

All of these occurrences would be gathered under and defended by academics of the Ecology and Religion field like Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, Roger S. Gottlieb or Bron Taylor⁴; whose work, furthermore, anticipates the idea that not only Buddhism but all spiritual traditions have an increasingly critical role to play in the efforts addressing the current ecological crisis. As James and Cooper assert, 'the time is perhaps right for the sensitive employment of 'skilful means'' (James and Cooper 2007: 95).

In these times when the unprecedented scale of the environmental crisis touches every corner of the world and the individual capacities of politics, economics, education and technology have shown themselves insufficient; the work of different scholars, theologians and spiritual leaders point clearly at the fact that we need collaborative responses before the

⁴ See for example Grim and Tucker 2001, 2014; Tucker 2010; Gottlieb 2010 and Taylor 2016a, 2016b.

multidimensional nature of the ecological crisis. It is in this context that Buddhism and other traditions from the world religions have turned their gazes towards contributing to the situation by offering moral and spiritual means to be joined with those political, economical and educational.

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