

Buddhist ideals of environment

by Sita Arunthavanathan

Buddhism primarily teaches suffering and its eradication. But by no means is it melancholy and dismal with nothing for here and now. On the contrary its philosophical and ethical teachings enlightened the thought system of mankind for over 2 1/2 millenia and would continue to do so for many more to come.

Some Western scholars are of opinion that Buddhist attitude towards nature and environment is "predominantly negative". If we delve into the Pali Canon it can be proved that they are wrong and biased, and although environmental pollution did not pose a problem as it is today, Buddha was very conscious of the pollution of the environment and as such he could be called the world's first environmentalist.

Environmentalism is a phenomena highlighted around early 1960s after the catastrophe of the two World Wars. The development of nuclear warfare and the implications of the new technologies sent a shock through the thinkers of the day, when they observed man manufacturing bombs to put on the head of man. The discovery of strontium in mothers milk after atmospheric nuclear testing and the spread of DDT through the environment were the first two eye-openers that created an ecological consciousness in the early 1960s. It was then realized that things on earth were inter-connected by complex ecological cycles. This awakening in the West, well past the middle of the 20th century is in reality a re-awakening from the Buddhist perspective of ecological ethics.

The central and the most profound teaching of the Buddha, '*Paticca Samuppada*' (Dependent Origination), which postulates cause and effect shows that everything is inter-dependent. Man does not exist as a Superman, but as a being connected, inter-connected and interacting with his environment constituting of animals and plants. Buddhism does not believe in a Creator and as such birth and death are dependent on causes outside ourselves, linking us inextricably with the outside world.

According to Buddhism Five Natural Laws (*Pannca Niyama Dhamma*) make the world go round. These laws are physical (*utuniyama*), biological



(*bijaniyama*), psychological (*cittaniyama*), moral (*kamma niyama*) and causal (*dhamma niyama*), these govern the entire cosmos. Hence physical environment of any given area conditions the growth and development of its flora and fauna, which in turn has an impact on the thought pattern of the people interacting with them. Verily, the modes of thinking determine the moral standards; morals influence not only the psychological composure but also the biological and physical environment. These Five Natural Laws clearly demonstrate that man is "a part of and not apart from nature" and that there is a deep sense of kinship between man and nature and a reciprocal causal relationship.

According to Vinaya rules value of animal life was equivalent to that of plant life. In *Karaniyametta Sutta*, *pana*, *satta*, *bhuta*, all mean those that breathe and move. '*Thavara*' occurring in the *Sutta* means trees. This fact of reckoning trees as having life is indicated by Vinaya (*manussa jiva sannino rukkhassimim*). In *Vasettha Sutta*, Buddha gives a classifica-

tion of life (*jati vibhanga*) as it is (*yatha thatha*) and in the ascending order (*anupubbena*). Then he explains the classification starting with grass and trees (*tinarukkha*), as the most primary stage of life and man as the most developed stage. Vinaya forbids monks to nip off leaves, cut down trees or burn down forests (*daye alimpetabbo*) or even cut a branch. There is an instance where the Buddha told them to cut down the forest of defilements (*klesha*), rather than forests of trees. The bio-diversity ideals are illustrated by the fact that groves (*aramas*) or Buddha's dwelling places were in nature's most picturesque spots, many of these were animal parks or plant reserves. To mention a few, *Migadaya* where Buddha preached his first sermon was a deer park; *Veluvana* (*velu-bamboo*) was a Bamboo Grove; *Kalandaka Nivapa* was the Feeding Ground of Squirrels. Buddha also chose a sylvan abode for his Demise - the Park of Sal trees at *Kusinara*.

There are many instances in the Canon which shows that Buddha was a lover of nature. He was

fascinated by the scenic beauty of *Vesali*, *Udena Cetiya*, *Capala cetiya* etc. Not only the Buddha but also Arhats admired the natural beauty of cascades, waterfalls, rivers, birds, trees and so forth as evinced by *Theragatha*. They admired nature unsullied by sensuous thoughts as genuine appreciators of nature's harmony. Meditation leading to insight was recommended in forests, at roots of trees thus emphasizing the connection between mental development and the trees.

Buddhism encourages the growing of groves and forests (*arama ropa vana ropa*), building bridges etc. and say that *Sakra*, became the king of gods due to his undertaking such projects. Doesn't this compare well with the modern ideas of re-afforestation and landscaping to add beauty to the environment?

Buddha's feelings for animal life could be assessed by the manner he revolted against animal sacrifices at which thousands of animals were slaughtered to attain *Moksha*. *Kutadanta Sutta* is a glaring example which describes a sacrifice at which 700 each of bulls, steers, heifers, goats and rams were to be killed. Hundreds of trees were cut down to be used as posts to tie these thousands of animals.

Buddhist belief in a 'samsaric' cycle that an animal could be one of your own loved ones reborn, the ethical teachings of the First Precept - abstinence from killing and teachings such as "all beings recoil from sufferings", "comparing yourself to those whom you torture or kill" etc. prompted treatment of animals with compassion. Sale of flesh or connected with it in any way is one of the five trades prohibited by the Buddha. Buddhist ethics stimulate harmonious living, peaceful co-existence and inter-relationship between man and other species.

Environmental concern of the Buddha is also to be seen by his prohibiting the monks to pollute green grass with saliva, urine and faeces. They were instructed to put any remnants from their begging bowls to a receptacle and never to flowing water and cleanliness of water in ponds, wells and rivers was maintained with public spirited caution. Buddha advised the monks always to drink strained water, so much so, that among the few things a monk carried with him, was a water strainer.

To be continued

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Buddhist ideals of environment - part 2

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(Continued from yesterday)

Today the world's most lithal form of pollution is said to be untreated sewerage and World Health Organization has estimated that dirtywater is the cause of 4/5 of the world's diseases. Isn't Buddha's realization of the dangers of water pollution far in advance of modern scientific research?

Noise pollution too received Buddha's attention. He considered noise an absolute disturbance to the serene minds bent on meditation. Bhayabherava Sutta says how even the rustling of leaves falling from a tree petrifies those whose inner selves are impure with rage (lust), dosa (animosity) and moha (delusion). According to this Sutta such characters need loud noises to keep their composure. Can it be that raga, dosa and moha have assumed such gigantic proportions today, that music which was always something soothing and mellifluous to the ear is now a thunderous, deafening noise?

Buddha's environmental ideals with regard to building, cleaning and maintaining of a

Vihara compare very well or even surpass the modern concepts of building. Cullavagga gives detail accounts of instructions given by the Buddha with regard to the construction of kitchens, wells, well bunds, water tanks, toilets, septic tanks and so on. All these were to be constructed on higher ground to prevent rain water flooding and also seepage. Drainage problem had been well attended to.

If high ground was not available such a ground was to be built with gravel (marumbam upakiritunti). If it was not strong enough the ground was to be re-inforced with stones, bricks and planks (itthakachayam, sitacayam darucayani). Buddha recommended even toilet covers of wood for closing the holes for urine and faeces. The toilet was to have a small tank for water, with a long ladle to take the water. After using the toilet bowl was to be kept upside down.

Buddha advised the building of a structure to preserve drinking water (paniyasalam) with a small enclosure to store the water (paniyamandapam). This was to be built on high ground to prevent rain water flooding it. To

protect the water from falling leaves and dirt, the roof was made of logs and walls plastered in and out. A special ladle was to be kept for taking water. Every minute detail had been seen to leaving no room for pollution of any sort.

Buddha has recommended the way to keep doors and windows, chimneys and expel air taking into account the direction of the dust-laden winds. Details are given regarding cleaning and maintaining of furniture, carpets, rugs, pillows, mattresses and every imaginable article including the robes, begging bowls and other meagre possessions of monks. How furniture and other heavy items should be taken out without damaging the walls and door frames, how to dry, dust, bring them in mopping of floors, washing of walls, colour washing, cleaning cobwebs - all the minute instructions given in cullavagga put modern spring cleaning into shade. These ideals completely obliterate the allegations of those Western writers who say that Buddhism is only supra-mundane with nothing for here and now.

Technological advancement has created a gulf between the life of man and his cultural values on one hand and environment on the other. Through greed and covetousness (Raga) there is relentless, ruthless exploitation of both replenishable and non-replenishable natural resources. Production of more and more modern goods, create an intense greed to possess them. Commercialism has given rise to jealous competition and resentment thus creating animosity (dosa).

All these are due to ignorance and delusion (Moha). Environment could be kept clean only if we cleanse ourselves and adhere to noble Buddhist teachings such as being satisfied with little and not clamouring for more and more (alpecchata), considering happiness as the prime wealth (santutthi paramam dhanam) etc.

Unless man removes the impurities of raga, dosa and moha from his inner self, there can never be a pollution free environment is the sublime, perennial truth that Buddha taught over 2500 years ago.

(Concluded)