



Environment, Morality, and Moral Responsibility: A Philosophical Analysis in the Light of Buddhist Virtue Ethics

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Abstract: *Environmental crises, in the present days, are highly concerning issues to us. The human domination thought or the anthropocentric thought needs to be wiped up to protect our environment. It is not only our responsibility to save the environment, it is our duty to respect the value of the environment. In Buddhism, it is claimed that Buddha inheres in every being. So, everything is a spark of Buddha. According to Buddhist thought, every being has value, i.e., intrinsic. Nobody has the right to destroy the value. Buddha's teaching teaches us how we are mutually dependent on each other. The virtues and principles in Buddhism prescribe us to be moral and respectful towards every individual being. In this paper, I tried to discuss Environmental issues and their solutions in light of Buddhist Virtue ethics. I mentioned here how Buddhist virtues help us to cultivate an ecological self that will make us morally respectful towards the environment.*

Key Terms: *Intrinsic Value, Environmental Crisis, Revitalization, Prakriti, Brahmavihar, Pancasila, Ecology, Environmental Awareness, Ecological self.*

I. Introduction

The moral dilemma is confined to the conflicts between whether ethics is the subject matter only for humans or the subject matter to all beings. The term "being" is so complicated in philosophical discourse. Moreover, the conflict belongs regarding the issues: what kind of being is to be considered as a subject matter of ethical or more significantly moral discourse. The fundamental goal of the present era, i.e., *sustainable development* is not possible to attain if we are not concerned about the ethical value of the environment.

However, it cannot be denied that ethical discourse was confined within the boundary of human beings before the appearance of some fundamental ethical conflicts from the deep ecological point of view concerning environmental issues. Therefore, anthropocentrism dominated its place. In Indian philosophy, the outlook toward the

environment was different. Concerning the environment, the Indian philosophy provides a holistic outlook. The holistic nature of Indian ethics considers everything under moral discourse no matter whether the object is animate or inanimate.

However, environmental Ethics is a discipline of philosophy, specifically a branch of applied ethics that deals with the value of the environment and the moral relationship between the environment and human beings. A fundamental problem of present civilization is the extinction crisis, more significantly the extinction crisis of the environment. If we look at the climate we can observe a rapid rate of change. UNESCO (2020) has reported that since 1975 the last 100 years experienced unprecedented and dramatic climate change. It is reported that in that period the global temperature has increased by 1 degree Celsius two-thirds of the global. From the beginning of civilization, we have considered ourselves as superior beings among all species and so using natural resources without thinking about its consequences. Every year, the world is suffering from several natural hazards. And, now we are come to realize that whatever is happening in nature, is the result of our excessive consumption of natural resources. So, I would like to say that nature is now in a state of ventilation. If we are not concerned about nature as soon as possible, the world will no longer be enough to sustain lives. Therefore, in recent times, issues regarding the environmental crisis become a crucial issue among environmentalists. The environmental crisis now become an international issue among us. The technological and industrial revolutions worldwide badly affect our environment day-to-day. Moreover, huge consumption of natural resources, excessive population rate, etc. are also causes of the environmental crisis. And, the crisis leading us toward a devastating result in the future. We all are highly concerned that we are part of our ecological system, and every species including planets are mutually dependent on each other. Harming the environment, directly and indirectly, means that we are leading our lives in crisis. So, we need a



concrete ethical system that will protect our environment and the ecosystem as well.

To deal with environmental ethics, the problem of value is a key important problem that we face. The question raised: What kind of Value does nature possess? Whether the value is intrinsic or extrinsic or instrumental? The value of nature is fundamental to dealing with environmental ethics. In recent times, thinkers have been highly concerned with the value of the environment or nature. From the ecological point of view, it can be claimed that nature has intrinsic value. Intrinsic value is called self-value. Therefore, Nobody has the right to destroy the intrinsic of Nature.

This article is designated to explore the Buddhist view on the environment. The article contains four different sections including a conclusion. The first section briefly discussed the environmental issues and enclosed the requirement for a hard-core ethical theory that can be more significant in this present world scenario. Section two included a discussion on environmental value from ancient Indian perspectives, more significantly from Vedic perspectives. The third section is the heart of the article which includes Buddhist aspects on ethics and environment. The last section is a concluding remark of the entire discussion of this article.

II. Indian Perspectives on the Environment and Its Value

In the last twentieth century, many philosophers as well as environmentalists are concerned with this environmental crisis. Aldo Leopold in his concept of "Land Ethics" (1949), Arne Naess in his concept of "Deep Ecology" (1970), and many other thinkers provided their opinions on the account of environmental ethics with their theories.

In Hinduism, it is mentioned that the ultimate goal of every human being is to perform four *purusarthas*. i.e. *dharma*, *Artha*, *kama*, and *Moksa*. Dharma in the Indian context always translates as duty and obligation, right and virtues (Pankaj Jain; 2024). It is the belief that every individual is bound by their dharmas (duties). To protect every being either animate or inanimate is one of the duties of every individual being. Even the Hindu metaphysical view holds that the whole of nature including all animate and inanimate beings are made of *Panca-bhutas* (Five fundamental elements viz. *ksiti*, *apas*, *tej*, *marut*,

and *bom*). As a part of the five fundamental elements, we must respect each other.

However, though issues regarding environmental crisis are a new matter of discourse in Western thought, from the very ancient period Indian thinkers are concerned with the environmental value of the environment. From the Vedic period, Indian Sages (Rishin) are highly concerned with the environment and its relationship with human beings. In Vedic literature, the earth is considered the great mother of the goddess (*Mata Bhiumi*), even though the earth and other material objects have spiritual value and therefore we worship them. In Indian culture, it is said that all Species are dependent on the earth (Prakriti). Similarly, we are not exceptions. Therefore, we share an integral relationship among all species.

To achieve a healthy, productive, safe, and sustainable environment for all, we have to make an environment that includes the totality of ecological, physical, social, economic, and political environment. In the environment, there must be justice for every living and non-living being so that they enjoy equal rights, values, and freedom. Environmental justice refers to the condition where every species (including all living beings) and non-living beings are considered with equal value and respect.

In Indian Culture especially in Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, perspectives on the environment or nature were rich. In fact, in the pre-Vedic period, environmental awareness among people was remarkable. According to Hindu Vedic scriptures, all creatures are created by the supreme being God. And therefore, only God has sovereignty over all creatures. Humans have no power of domain over other creatures. Since all creatures are created and guided by God and his rules, all species have the same and equal value and respect.

In Hinduism, it is a core belief that killing an animal is highly forbidden. In fact, in Hinduism, Hanuman and Ganapati are considered the most powerful gods. Moreover, we still consider the river Ganga, the banyan tree, and Tulshito be holy. In Vedic literature, especially in *Rikveda* and *Atharva Veda*, many hymns are dedicated to *Prithibi*. That's why we chant the *Srutivachana*:
"Sarve Bhavantu Sukhin Sarve santuniramaya|



*Sarve bhadraniṣyantu ma
kaschitduḥkhabhaghbhavet||
(Vrihadaranyakaupanisad 1/4/14)”¹*

It means that ‘ MayEveryone be happy, May everyone be emancipated from suffering, May everyone enjoy absolute peace, nobody will suffer ever.’ It is said in *Prithibisukto* of *Atharva Veda* that “*matabhumiputrohomprithyibya*”(12/1/12)². The hymn suggested that we must consider the *Prithivi* or nature as a mother and ourselves as a son of nature. Therefore, there is a mother-child relationship between nature and us.

However, it is to be noted that the heart of Hinduism lies in the principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*). From the Vedic to Buddha, Jaina, Samkhya-Yoga, and almost every philosophical tradition of India, the principle of ‘non-violence’ is reflected as a core value of human beings. On the very perspectives of the principle of ‘non-violence’, we, the sentient being must hold a nature of protector, not a destroyer.

III. Buddhist Virtue Ethics and Environment

Dealing with the environment and its ethics in Buddhism is a complicated task. If we look at early Buddhism and its texts, it does not contain any specific definition of environmental ethics to respect its value for sustaining our lives. The Buddhist understanding of environmental ethics is contained in the teaching and practice of Buddha and their idea of virtues. This article attempted to discuss Buddhist environmental ethics based on their virtue ethics and tried to evaluate the importance of Buddha’s teaching to solve the present environmental crisis as well.

Buddhist philosophy is primarily concerned with human life and liberation. The fundamental teaching of Buddha is “*Sarvam DukkhamKhalidam*”³. It means that our life is full of suffering. So, the emancipation of Dukkha or suffering was the main focus of Buddhist philosophy. The four novel truths

(*caturaryasatyani*), the eightfold path (*astangikmarg*), the concept of four *Bhramhavihar(s)*, five fundamental duties (*panchasila*), and *Upay-kausalya* are used to attain liberation by ending the suffering of a being. But, their understanding of the environment and its value is also contained within their theory of virtue. The above-mentioned core ethical principles of Buddhism can actively imply genuine environmental ethics. To talk about Buddhist environmental ethics Pragati Sahni (2008) Claimed that the “Buddhist position on nature is understood as an environmental virtue ethics”⁴ She considered the Buddhist understanding of nature as a form of virtue ethics.

The ‘dependent origination’ principle in Buddhism can be practically applied to the Environment. The Principle states that everything is dependent on each other. Within the dependent system, nothing can be superior to others. Moreover, according to Buddhism, Buddha is present in every being. We, human beings are not different from other beings. We are in the same boat. Therefore, every being is a moral and spiritual being. Every being possesses equal respect and value. Hence, it is completely immoral to destroy the moral value of any being.

However, in this article, I adopted the approach to explain Buddhist virtue ethics and their view on nature or environment equivalently. Virtue ethics, by its name, concentrates on virtues and human characteristics. Virtue ethics suggests that a virtuous person will act morally without harming others. So, to act as a moral person, we have to be a virtuous person. The characteristics of a human being must be guided by virtues. In Buddhism, the Buddha mentions the concept of *Pancasila* which refers to right conduct. The term “*panca*” means five and the term “*Sila*” means conduct. According to Buddha, we must perform all these *Silas* to attain liberation. To explain the *Sila*, it is said by Buddha that: “*panomnahane*”⁵ means ‘do not kill animal’. This principle of Buddha shows the importance of all species in nature. In our Indian culture, Human beings and other species are considered spiritual in nature. Everyone has feelings and emotions. And, so, as we feel pain while we are hurt by something, others also feel pain for the same cause. Harming someone intentionally, never be the nature of human beings. Buddha suggested that everyone

¹R. Pandit (2020) “PrachinBharaterPariveshbbhabna” Published in the *Anuranan. Vol.8. Published by Anuranan.* pp 4.

²Ibid, pp. 5

³ Among the four fundamental principles of Buddhism. Buddhists believe that all *beings* fall under the realm of suffering from the very beginning of his/her birth. The ultimate goal of every individual being must be toward the cessation of suffering.

⁴P. Sahni(2008). *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism.* New York: Routledge. Pp.92

⁵T. Rabindranath (2020). *Buddhadeva.* Kolkata: BiswabharatiPrakasani. pp.13



must be memories and follow these *Silas* every day. However, the first *Bhrahmavihara*, i.e., *Maitry* (friendship) teaches us to treat every being as a friend. Buddha understands that we have to be spiritually connected with all other beings. To do this, we can destroy our greed, anger, hate, jealousy, etc. According to Buddhism, the fundamental cause of suffering is our excessive desire. We have to destroy our desire to act as moral beings. To explain the importance of *Maitry Bhavna* to all, Buddha asserted:

“jkechipanbhutatthi
Tasa bathabrabaanbasesa|
Digha ba je mahantaba
Majjimarassakaanukathula|
Ditthaba je ca adittha
Je ca dure basantiabidure|
Bhuta basambhabesiba
Sabbe sattabhavantusukhittat⁶

It signifies that ‘every species either strong or weak; tall or great; miniature or fat; perceived or unperceived; who lives remote or nearby; who born or will be born have a happy soul.’ Buddhadeva dreamed of an enemy-less society where everyone would share love. The second virtue of *Bhramavihar*, i.e., *karuna* (kindness) simply signifies being kind to everyone. Friendship, kindness, and love can make a society ideal or just.

However, Buddhist virtue ethics are recommended for human beings who seek to attain liberation. But, these core virtues of Buddhist virtue ethics can be applied to the environment to save the world from environmental crises. A virtuous person with kindness and love always acts as a moral being. the recent environmental crisis can only be solved if we become moral to the environment with love, friendships, kindness, and respect. Within our ecological system, the value of every species has intrinsic value in nature, according to the Buddhist point of view. Having a life means having feelings and emotions. Moreover, every species is important to sustain and save our ecology within the environment. Harming nature will not only destroy our ecological system but its consequences will destroy the next generation. To be moral to nature is not only for our needs but also for our responsibilities and duties.

However, the fact that we cannot live if we stop to consume natural resources. We need food and other resources for energy which we get from nature. But, another fact is that we are

consuming natural resources without any restrictions or limitations. We are consuming nature in a huge amount or quantity more than our necessities. If we become moral to nature and decide to consume nature as little as possible, then maybe we will be able to solve the present environmental crisis. In *Dhammapada*, it is said that:

“As a bee gathers honey from the flower without injuring its color or fragrance, even so the sage goes on his alms-round in the village” (*Dhammapada*, verse 49)⁷

The Buddhist way of ‘purification’ of our behavior and core virtues allows us to think ‘rich’. Practicing these virtues as suggested in Buddhism makes a person think globally. A morally virtuous person never acts for self-interest, rather his or her aim is aimed toward entire humanity as well as the entire species. Buddhist virtue ethics is undoubtedly a good hypothesis to protect our environment, but not sufficient. Along with these virtues we need environmental awareness. Without environmental awareness among us, it is difficult to find a solution to our current environmental crisis. Meditation in Buddhist philosophy occupies or plays a great role that helps a human being to concentrate on himself and to realize the value of nature, especially the value of all species within nature. So, to protect our environment not only do we have to be bound up with Buddhist virtues at the same time we must have environmental awareness.

IV. Conclusion

World organizations are indeed taking action on environmental issues. Also, the Indian government taking some projects in favor of the environment to preserve the environment as well as our ecology. But, the fact that without having ecological awareness among us, it is quite difficult to achieve such successes. The Buddhist virtue ethics can be practically fruitful to create such environmental awareness. Practicing virtues suggested in Buddhism can build an ecological self and make human beings moral towards the environment. Revitalization of the environment is now highly required. Developing only laws can never be sufficient to protect our environment. Along with the law, we must have an ecological self that will help us to respect our environment. To cultivate an ecological self there is no alternative

⁶Ibid, pp. 27

⁷A. Buddharakkhita (2014). *Dhammapada* (Translated). California: Dharma Publishing, pp.23



way instead to practice Buddhist virtue and meditation. However, to discuss these environmental issues by sitting in an air-conditioned room is meaningless. As charity begins from home, environmental awareness must begin from the individual level, and then from the collective level. However, we have responsibilities toward our future generation. It is our responsibility to give them a safe, sustainable, social, political, and economic environment.

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