

Buddhist Virtues in Social and Economic Development: Environmental Preservation and Restoration

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Modern Environmental Problem and Buddhism:

“How can Buddhism contribute to solve our present era’s problems?” Gautama Buddha in particular was known for giving problem-solving sermons (對機說法), like a physician prescribing medicine that suits the illness (應病與藥), that were no doubt consulted with such questions by an upāsaka or an upāsikā every day - as he made his rounds begging for alms. Now we, Buddhists also need to gather our courage and use our brains to deal with the problems that beset us in our present era.

The weightiest and most serious of these modern problems are environmental issues. The major environmental changes that have been occurring on a global scale since the twentieth century are posing a potentially mortal threat to the ability of the earth’s environment to support humankind. Issues of energy and resources; environmental pollution; food and water insecurity; climate change; disappearing plants and animals; population conflicts have acquired a scale that our ancestors never had to deal with.

Environmental problems are also serious because there is no external enemy for us to rally together and fight. The main cause of environmental change has been changes in human behavior, our lifestyle and our sense of values—we ourselves have been the number-one offenders in bringing about these awful problems. However, if we just ignore these problems because we find it hard to deal with them, they will simply get a lot worse. If we think about it, we can see that because we are the ones who caused the problems, we should be able to overcome these difficulties, reflect on our actions and reform them in such a way as to resolve the problems. There is plenty of room in this process for Buddhism to make a contribution.

*Sabbapāpassa akaraṃaṇ, kusalassa upasampadā,
sacittapariyodapanaṃ, etam Buddhāna sāsanaṃ. (Dhammapada 183)*

Do not what is evil. Do what is good.

keep your mind pure. This is the teaching of Buddhas.

The teaching above is one of the most important essences of Buddhism. What are we doing now that is “evil” or “good” for the environment, and how can we purify our hearts? The time has come for every person to think about this and take action. Without

action based on sincere self-reflection, it will not matter how advanced environmental technologies become, or what environmental policies are adopted, because such things cannot bring about a fundamental solution to environmental problems.

Through the considerations it became clear that Buddhism can be a good principle or an effective indicator for the environmental problems, and also can give us the “vision”, which is more important than the law, natural science or technology. Here I will try to identify the significance of the role of Buddhism in environmental preservation and restoration.

***Hita* (altruism) as a Guide to Environmental Action**

Now let us take a look at what we need to do to achieve these improvements. Yukihiro OKADA has already argued in his thesis 「環境問題に対する仏教思想の有効性 [The Validity of Buddhist Thought as a Way of Dealing with Environmental Issues]」 (2000) that “the Buddha’s teaching about being satisfied with little (少欲知足)” and “the altruistic behavior (利他行) of a bodhisattva” can serve as effective guides to action that will contribute to solving environmental problems. He considers “being satisfied with little” as the proper basis for individual lifestyles, and “altruistic behavior” as the basis for action aimed at protecting the environment. In other words, we should of our own accord try to reduce the burden we place on the environment, and transfer to others the benefits we do receive. This is doing good for the environment as defined by Buddhism.

Before proceeding further, we need to examine the possible range of altruistic behavior; altruism in Chinese is written with two characters that, taken separately, mean “利 benefit” and “他 others”. In this context, what is meant by “others”?

Y. Okada emphasizes that the meaning of “others” must include the environment and not be confined to other human beings. I think that this is a very important point of instruction for Buddhists trying to deal with environmental issues, because confining altruistic behavior to other people introduce the threat of possible bringing further pressure to bear on the natural environment. Knowledge of Japan’s Buddhist heritage and its historical religions sensibility clearly reveals the potential for putting the natural environment on the same level as other people (human) as an object of altruistic endeavor.

Our original manner of perceiving our environment, in other words our environment view (Umweltanschauung) is fundamental importance to every other consideration. The nature of our environment view can cause our efforts to change in a certain direction to backfire and have the opposite result. For example, people in Japan are now seriously worried about the country’s decreasing birthrate, but viewed from a global perspective, the doubling of the world’s population during the second half of the twentieth century was an abnormal phenomenon. Rapidly increasing human population and rising population pressure are straining the environment and threaten to exacerbate

problems of climate change and food scarcity.

Thus I would like to take a look at what Buddhism has taught regarding the environment and, while referring also to modern scientific knowledge, try to clarify the environment view of Buddhism with which we are familiar.

The Irreplaceability of life:

In attempting to address how Japanese Buddhism perceives the environment, what aspects of the environment (Umwelt) can serve as the objects of altruistic behavior, and how this can lead Buddhism to protect the environment, I will start by examining how Buddhism treats the subject of life. The environmental sciences (Umweltwissenschaft) consider the environment to be that which surrounds and supports living things (Lebewesen), and so our definition of living things will have a significant effect on our environment view. How we define the life process and what constitutes a living thing will form the foundation of how we think about the environment.

In our daily routine, the most everyday acts are nonetheless essential for maintaining life and cannot be performed by another. All types of behavior that constitute our life processes, including things that we must do for ourselves, have an impact on the environment, and we bear the responsibility for the results of those impacts brought about by our actions. This can be seen as an explanation derived from the environmental sciences of the Buddhist teaching that one being one's own *karma* and one's own *phala* fruition (自業自得). This is a vital concept for exploring the phenomenon of our own lives as they relate to the environment.

Precisely because, one being one's own karma and one's own fruition, every life is precious and irreplaceable. If the actions that allow us to live could be performed by another, and if we did not have to bear the responsibility of the results of what we do, this would make us replaceable.

Although being alive makes us unique and irreplaceable, when the phenomenon of life is withdrawn, our bodies lose their coherence and return to the soil to be broken down into elements that will go into making up other living things. This is obvious because all living bodies consist of more than 99.9% oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, and nitrogen, as does the planet Earth itself. Because our bodies are composed of the same materials as the other beings in the environment, when living things die, more than 99.9% of the material that composed their bodies consists of elements that go into constituent elements of the bodies of other living things.

Before modern chemistry and biology existed, these concepts were present in the form of the Buddhist doctrine "the five aggregates have no self (五蘊無我), These terms existed to teach us that we are not composed of special, unique matter and that there is no such thing as a fixed, invariant and unchanging *me* with singular characteristics. Thus, while our existence in the world is a one-time-only phenomenon and our actions during

our lives cannot be replaced, the elements that go into our existence are shared in common with the diversity of other living things. All beings in this world are totally interrelated in coexisting relationships.

When we fail to comprehend the cycle of existence described by the concept of “the five aggregates have no self” and instead get stuck in pursuing only our own survival, we damage our relationship of coexistence with the natural environment, which in turn works to threaten our own survival. That is, acts of selfishness and egoism are “doing what is evil” to the environment and serve to destroy our own lives.

On the chemical level described above, all living things are basically the same; recent research in the biological sciences shows that not only the millions of species of living things existing on Earth today but every form of life that has existed throughout the entire history of the planet originated from a single photocell. Space scientists also now believe that the most abundant elements in the universe are the same four elements-oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, and nitrogen-of which we and all living things are made. The origins not only of our own species and every single other living thing on Earth but also of rocks and stars can all be traced back to the gases and dust that went into forming the universe. This seems to me to be the same as what Sēng Zhào (僧肇 *Sōjyō* 384-414) said in *Zhào-Lún* (肇論 *Jyōlon*): “The heavens, earth, and men all spring from the same root; we are one with everything in the world.”

Tradition of the View on Life (Lebensanschauung)

Though time scales may vary, all beings in the world follow the same kind of natural life cycle-birth, senility, illness and death (生老病死). Zhàn Rán (湛然 711-782), sixth patriarch of the Chinese Tiān Tái school (天台宗), wrote: “Grasses and trees sprout up and die back. When an eon has passed, even dust and stones will disappear (*The Adamantine Lancet* 『金剛錍』 Taisho 46.784b). This kind of thought was made possible by the philosophical foundations already existing in China that taught “all things are evenly equal (萬物齊同¹). Zhuāng Zhōu (莊周 369? BC- 286? BC) is said to have held that the Tao is found in things like worms, millet, brasses and trees, roof tiles, flagstones, and dirt-clods. (Fukunaga 1981)

The traditional Chinese Tiān Tái concept of attaining Buddhahood of grasses and trees (草木成仏論) is thought to have been inherited and expressed by the Japanese Tendai sect 天台宗 sect and the Shingon sect 眞言宗, which hold that “grasses and trees, countries and lands, all attain Buddhahood 草木國土悉皆成佛” or more recently, that “mountains and rivers (=the natural surroundings) and grasses and trees all possess the Buddhahood potential 山川草木悉有仏性.” I have discussed the issue of how these two passages came into being in detail elsewhere (Okada 2002) and do not intend to delve

¹ The idea that, in light of original source of truth, the Tao, everything that discernibly exists, including human beings, is equal and of uniform status

into this issue here.

However, I would like to point out that neither passage appears in the Buddhist Scriptures; both originated in Japan, and that former became popularly known in the latter half of the ninth century (Sueki 1995), while it has only been confirmed that the latter appears to have come into use in the second half of the twentieth century. And I do not intend to enter into a difficult doctrinal discussion of the terms *buddhadhātu*. I mention the phrases “grasses and trees, countries and lands” and “mountains and rivers, grasses and trees” to call attention to the fact that not only humans and animals but plants and inorganic things are being discussed as equally existing parts of the environment. The important point here is that Japanese Buddhism has traditionally taken the view that life in the environment includes all of these things equally.

The view of Zhàn Rán regarding the attainment of Buddhahood by plant life and the view of Japanese Buddhism regarding the attainment of Buddhahood by grasses, trees, countries and lands are the antithesis of the vegetarianism of Indian Mahayana Buddhism. The Mahayana Buddhism of India banned eating meat, in sympathy with the overall religious practices of the society at that time, which also prohibited eating meat. However, if your reason for not eating meat is compassion for animals, the next question is, what about plants? Are they not living things? Recent Buddhist scholarship has suggested that this line of thought may have led to placing plant life in the same category as inorganic matter (Schmithausen 1991).

I have searched all extant Mahayana Buddhist Scriptures and found only two exceptions to the placement of plant life together with tiles, stones, and so on as unconscious or insentient beings or their classification as not-living things (Okada 1999). The two exceptions are found in the Lotus Sutra *Saddharmapundarīkasūtra* 法華經 and in the *Śurangamasūtra* 首楞嚴經. “The Parable of the Herbs” in chapter 5 of the *Saddharmapundarīkasūtra* compares the way large-, medium-, and small-sized plants are all watered by the same rainfall and as a result grow, flower, and bear fruit to the way the great diversity of all living things derive benefit from the same Buddhist Law.

The *Śurangamasūtra* teaches: “All manner of plants are the same as sentient being and are no different from human beings. Plants are reborn as humans and when humans die they also become all manner of plants and trees.” With the passage of time, the parable of the herbs in the *Saddharmapundarīkasūtra* had an important impact on the Chinese Tiān Tái doctrines in Japan during the late-tenth to early-seventeenth centuries; this seems natural enough in view of how living things are viewed in China and Japan. After all, plants do sprout, grow, and die.

The Lives of Things: Funerary customs *Kuyou* 供養

We can naturally assume that native Japanese traditional concepts similar to Chinese idea that “all things are evenly equal” were behind Japan’s acceptance and

inheritance of the Chinese *Tiān Tái* doctrines on attaining Buddhahood of grasses and trees. These traditional concepts include the idea of “eight million deities 八百万神”, the belief that every wonder beings and phenomena are deities. Looking even further back in time we find what was probably the original, underlying concept--- a view on life expressed by customs present in Japan since the prehistoric Jomon period of *ano yo okuri*, literally: “send-off to the other world (=Funerary customs).” In the same locations where people made graves for other people, they also made graves for shells (shell middens), graves for animals (animal bone burials), and graves for broken earthenware (as seen at the Sakiyama shell midden 崎山貝塚, the Sannai Maruyama archaeological excavation 三内丸山遺跡 site [Fig.1], and elsewhere), and it is supposed that they also performed “send-off to the other world” ceremonies.



Fig 1 graves for broken earthenware (photographed by Okada)

The custom of holding a sent-off to the other world persists to this day in Japan in the form of tribute ceremonies *Kuyou* for objects, animals (器物供養・動物供養) and Tribute Ceremonies for Laboratory Animals in Japan and Korea². Traditionally, tribute ceremonies are held for needles, writing brushes, and other objects, and in more recent

² Subsequent history can be traced to cenotaphs of tribute (供養碑 *Kuyou Hi*) for military (laboratory) animals before the World War II. Relating to this item, it is considered the *kuyou* for animals in colony. The oldest establishment of tribute ceremonies for laboratory animals in Korea is "Kuyou Hi (供養碑 cenotaphs of tribute) for laboratory animals" (currently owned by Museum of Medical College, Seoul National University,) built in 1922. Until now, it was thought that the *kuyou* for animals might be carried out only in Japan, however newly, it was found that the *kuyou* for laboratory animals has been carried out by 國立毒性科學院 National Institute of Toxicological Research 韓國食品醫藥品安全廳 of Korea Food and Drug Administration from 1973, and confirmed that the ceremony is carried out in front of “*Doubutsu kuyou no hi* 動物供養之碑 (the cenotaphs of tribute for animals) ” which was built during the colonial period. VELDKAMP found a record The Police Bulletin (警務彙報) 331 that in 1933 a *kuyou* ceremony for laboratory animals was carried out by Japanese in front of the same cenotaph of tribute 動物供養之碑*. On the other hand, OUE recorded an epitaph on *Jūkon hi* 獸魂碑 (Cenotaph of Animal Soul) (Chinese classics) remained in the vicinity of building of College of Veterinary Medicine of Seoul National University: “慰魂 獸禽之靈 稟性各異 靈魂如一. 可惜生命 義死不避. 爲人類福祉 同類保健 不怨天不怨人 可憐其靈 爲靈默念 祝願冥福 幸須群靈 更進明界 二回卒業生桐邨作祝書” (OKADA 2010A,2010B)

times new types of *Kuyou* 供養 have emerged one after the other, for example, for personal computers scissors (sponsored by big beauty salon chains, these take place at Zojoji Temple 増上寺, Tokyo, on August 3, as the syllables for this date [hachi-gatsu mikka for ha-sa-mi] are similar to the Japanese word for scissors), for pachinko machines (at Sensoji Temple 浅草寺, Tokyo, on August 8 [from the sound “pachi-pachi”), for disused false teeth (at Myokoji Temple 妙興寺, Okayama Prefecture, on October 8 [Fig.2]).



Fig 2 *Kuyou* for disused false teeth (at Myokoji Temple)

All of these *Kuyou* ceremonies for objects 器物供養 serve to promote recycling of valuable resources. Some people say that these events are held because they are the only way to collect and recycle these end-of-life articles and that they are merely a convenience for the benefit of the people involved. However, is holding a *Kuyou* ceremony for used possessions really the same as recovering them for recycling? No, it is not the same thing at all, because these *Kuyou* ceremonies grew out of feeling of gratitude toward the possessions that have served us; they are a fond farewell to things that have come to the end of their useful and precious lives because we have used them. Also involved is the consciousness that they are being sent off to be reborn anew.

Thus, these *Kuyou* ceremonies indicate that people feel that such items have their own “life,” and feel respect for them. This respect for the substance of things, for their own value can be understood as an environmental sensibility present in Japan since the Jomon 縄文 period. It is also the answer to the question posed earlier about why we can place the environment on the same level as other humans as appropriate objects of altruistic action. Because this worldview regards as equal the lives of humans, animals, plants and objects, the environment (grasses and trees, countries and lands) is, in fact, an appropriate object of altruistic behavior.

We can not find this view of life in Indian Buddhism, and we can assume that this

is why only the lives of animals were placed on the same level as humans' in Indian Buddhism. In the *Jātaka*, a collection of stories of the former lives of Śākya Buddha and others, we find many examples of bodhisattva practice in which the lives of birds and beasts are saved, such as the story of King Sivi, in which a bodhisattva rescues a dove, and the tale of Prince Mahāsattva, who sacrifices his own life to help a starving tigress and her cubs. These stories show that in his former lives the Buddha acted altruistically toward creatures other than humans. However, there are no stories in this collection of compassion being shown to plants or objects.³ I would like to emphasize that, by contrast, Chinese and Japanese Buddhism extended the range of altruistic action to include plants and inanimate objects, creating for the first time the potential for expanding altruism to embrace the entire natural world.

Good Balance and *parasparapratyaya*

There are the diverse environments on earth, and therefore we find many kind of environmental problems. But after all every environmental problems are the same, the problem of the relationship in the environment, the power balance. When a relationship among men, among being in the environment becomes complicated and loses its balance, an environmental problem occurs. If the life-network in the environment keep exchanging intelligence, getting enough feedback and good power balance, an environmental problem is hard to occur.

This relationship in the life-network can be expressed in one word: *parasparapratyaya*; and we Buddhist have known this wisdom, since a long time ago.

³ I have already written about the Jātaka tales of the bodhisattva as the Tree deity. And Prof. Dr. Schmithausen discussed precisely once more about this topics (Schmithausen 2009)

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