

**Buddhism and Ecology:
A Virtue Ethics Approach¹**

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Introduction

I think it is clear from the extensive secondary literature that Buddhism has a large number of resources to draw on with respect to the environmental problems we face today. Since my own particular interest is in the field of ethics, however, I would like to focus on those features of Buddhist moral teachings that have the potential to ameliorate the crisis. Since everyone recognises that this crisis is global in nature and cannot be solved by Buddhists alone, or indeed by any single group, I would also like to explore a specific set of moral resources available in both East and West which might collectively be brought to bear on the problem. I have in mind those particular qualities or traits of character known as virtues, and I will endeavour to sketch out some points of comparison between traditional Western and Buddhist ethics in this respect.

I take for granted that virtue ethics provides a useful frame of reference for understanding Buddhist moral teachings. Buddhism teaches that human perfection as expressed in the concepts of Buddhhood, arhatship, bodhisattvahood, and so forth, is achieved through the lifelong practice of virtues such as wisdom and compassion. I think it is also true that Buddhism would tend to regard today's ecological problems as having a psychological basis, for example as stemming largely from greed, selfishness, ignorance, and apathy, and as such falling within the sphere of moral psychology. To quote from a recent book by Pragati Sahni:

In all likelihood the early Buddhists would view the environmental crisis as a psychological crisis. They would not blame inferior technological development or poor conservation methods as the cause of the crisis, but bad behaviour and attitudes (greed, hatred and delusion). This can be deduced from the fact that all problems are traced in Buddhism to perverted views, and hence, ultimately to a dysfunctional state of mind.²

These dysfunctional psychological states are precisely what virtue ethics seeks to eliminate and so we seem at least to have a common starting point which views the question of the long-term wellbeing of nature as depending not on technology but on human qualities. I am not the only one to have suggested the value of such an approach, and a number of recent publications, including the one just quoted from, have attempted to address environmental questions from the perspective of virtue ethics³

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics can claim to be the West's oldest systematic body of ethical theory, and it is one that has both secular and religious dimensions. First formulated in the ethical treatises of Aristotle, the tradition was continued by classical Roman authors such as Cicero and then revived by Aquinas in the Middle Ages. Given a Christian interpretation it became the dominant approach to ethics down to the Reformation, only to be rejected along with other religiously-based ethics in the Enlightenment. In the last few decades it has begun to attract attention once again and is being applied in a wide range of contexts. Virtue ethics is an approach which emphasizes the role of the agent more than the action, focussing more on the character of persons than rules (as in deontological ethics) or the consequences of acts (as in consequentialist theories). A key feature of virtue ethics is that it looks at actions in the context of an overall life. The reason for developing particular states of character is to live a balanced and rounded life and to achieve a state of fulfilment, happiness or flourishing.

The classical Western tradition recognized four main or cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.⁴ There is no direct correlation with these virtues in

Buddhism, although we find many points of overlap and similarity. Prudence, or the faculty of making wise choices in practical affairs, corresponds broadly to *paññā* (wisdom), although Buddhist sources generally emphasise the theoretical intellect over the practical intellect. There is no specific Buddhist virtue of justice, although this quality is highly praised. Chapter 19 of the *Dhammapada*, for example, is usually translated as ‘The Judge,’ ‘The Just,’ ‘The Righteous,’ or some such term. The Pāli term is *dhammaṭṭha*, meaning ‘the man who stands on Dhamma.’ Verse 256 tells us that such a man does not make judgements hastily or suddenly (*sahasā*), and that the wise man (*pañḍita*) is one who investigates both right and wrong (*atthaṃ anattañca*). The next verse adds that the man who stands on Dhamma, or as we might say, the just man, makes decisions calmly (*asahasena*), in accordance with Dhamma (*dhammena*) and impartially (*samena*).

Buddhism has a good deal to say about the virtue of temperance. References to self-control and self-restraint, abound in Buddhist literature, again, for example, in the *Dhammapada* which speaks repeatedly of the importance of gaining control over the senses. But perhaps it is in the complex of ideas associated with *sīla* that this virtue finds its clearest expression. *Sīla* is the internalised self-imposed discipline which enables one to ward off temptation and preserve moral purity. It can be contrasted with the externally imposed obligations of the *Vinaya*, although in practice the two will often coincide in their aims and outcome. *Sīla* is said to provide the basis for religious practice and spiritual development just as the earth provides the ground on which plants and seeds can grow and cities can be built. With respect to ecology there is every reason to think that a person who is well-disciplined, self-controlled and restrained will consume less of the earth’s resources than a person whose appetites are

uncontrolled. A person constrained by *sīla* is less likely to be self-indulgent and will be better equipped to resist the inducements of consumerism to accumulate more and more possessions. It goes without saying that a nation which practised *sīla* would have very different patterns of consumption to one that did not.

Given its association with self-control and self-discipline, *sīla* seems also to overlap with the fourth Western virtue of fortitude, which means standing firm in the face of adversity. There is also a more specific virtue, that of *virīya* or *vīrya*, which becomes famous as the fourth of the six perfections (*pāramitās*) of a bodhisattva. *Virīya*, in its most basic sense, is the virtue of a brave person, a hero who displays courage and does not flinch in the face of danger. More generally it connotes resolution and firmness of purpose in the projects to which one commits oneself. It is clear that projects of the kind undertaken by ecologists, which are often on a planetary scale, require a good degree of fortitude since there are likely to be setbacks at every stage. Projects such as reducing global emissions of CO² require years of planning, negotiation and education, and even then it is not an easy matter to reach agreement and meet targets.

It is not my intention to suggest that Western virtues can be mapped directly onto Buddhist ones, or vice versa. Indeed, we should not be surprised if different cultures recognise or give prominence to different virtues. Buddhism, for example, recognises virtues that are not much emphasised in the Western tradition, such as mindfulness (*sati*), a virtue that can have an important bearing on ecology. The objective of a comparative study of this kind is limited to showing that comparable tools exist within different traditions with which to tackle today's global challenge.

Virtue Ethics and Ecology

Although virtue ethics has made a contribution to many areas of applied ethics in the West, it has so far not been developed very far with respect to ecology. Perhaps this is because the virtues are linked to an ancient system of morality and therefore thought incapable of responding to what is essentially a modern challenge. How, then, might an ecology based on the virtues be constructed? Thomas E. Hill Jr was one of the first writers to propose an environmental ethics based on the virtues. He made reference to certain human ideals that were needed if natural environments were to be preserved and identified certain virtues as having particular relevance to the environment. In particular he linked humility, gratitude and self-acceptance with care for and an appreciation of nature.

Hill gives particular emphasis to the virtue of humility, which suggests an interesting connection with certain qualities Buddhists are encouraged to develop, such as a sense of modesty and shame encompassed by the terms *hiri* and *ottappa*, factors which restrain inappropriate behaviour and encourage a sense of proper decorum.

Egocentricity (*ahaṃkāra*) and pride (*māna*) are frequently criticized. Indeed according to the *Aggañña Sutta* it was due to a sense of pride and conceit (*mānātimāna*) with respect to their appearance that matter appeared and was consumed by the ethereal survivors of the preceding cosmic destruction.

Geoffrey Frasz seeks to refine Hill's concept of humility by insisting that it be measured or appropriate to the context. He renames this virtue 'openness' and regards it as the mean between arrogance (too little humility) and false modesty (too much humility). Although there is no precise Buddhist virtue corresponding to openness, it

seems to involve an attitude similar to those expressed in the *Brahma-vihāras* of love (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), gladness (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). In addition to their inwardly transforming effect, these attitudes have an open and other-directed quality about them in their emphasis on caring, compassion and love for others. They call for a positive disposition towards all beings, oneself included, and affirm self-worth while restraining arrogance.

It also seems likely that the wellbeing of the environment will be promoted by the constant emphasis on simple living and contentment found in Buddhist literature. Non-greed (*arāga*) and contentment with what one has (*santuṣṭi*) seem to be foundational virtues which support ecological concern. Keeping material needs to a minimum and limiting possessions to a robe and bowl, food for a day, simple lodgings and medicine are practices which consume the minimum natural resources. By contrast luxury items such as high beds, garlands and adornments, were discouraged.

A further important virtue to be considered in the context of ecology is *ahiṃsā*, which means non-harming or non-violence.⁵ This virtue will have a special bearing on the lifestyle people adopt and the potential it has for causing harm to human beings, animals, and inanimate nature.

Anthropocentrism v Biocentrism

However, approaching ecology primarily through the virtues is not without its problems. One possible reason why virtue ethics has not so far been popular with ecologists may be that since it concerns above all human subjects, it is thought too anthropocentric to make a contribution to an area in which human beings are regarded as the problem rather than the solution. Rather than an ethics centred on the human

subject, contemporary environmental ethics has tended to adopt a biocentric approach in which all living creatures, and even inanimate nature itself, are seen as having inherent worth and interests which rival those of human beings.⁶ The best example of this is James Lovelock's theory of Gaia⁷ which sees the world as an organic whole in which all the species on the planet act in concert to produce ecological equilibrium. Various 'new age' readings of the Gaia hypothesis seek to attribute personality to Gaia as an earth goddess presiding over a resacralized nature. If nature is regarded as a moral agent in this way it is problematic how moral virtues might be applicable to her (or its) behaviour. The conventional understanding among traditional virtue ethicists is that moral agency is a faculty exercised only by human beings. So, does the fact that only human beings (and possibly a limited class of animal species) can exercise moral agency condemn virtue ethics to an anthropocentric or 'speciesist' position? Certainly there are some ecologists who will see this human-centred aspect as a defect, but the virtue ethicist can respond that the starting point for resolving environmental problems has to be our own human nature, pointing out that unless we put our own house in order first we are not likely to have much success in fixing up the rest of the planet. A critical look at ourselves, our values, habits and lifestyles, is surely advisable. Since humans are allegedly the culprits of many ecological problems such as climate change, water pollution, deforestation, desertification and the general mismanagement of resources, the solution would appear to lie in a reform of human attitudes rather than in constructing what are often romanticised philosophies of nature. To start from theories about the biosphere and make ecology the basis of ethics, moreover, seems to be putting the cart before the horse: what is required first is an ethical foundation upon which sound ecological practice can be based. Virtue ethics places human beings at the centre of the ecological drama but it does not follow

from this that it maintains that only the interests of human beings need to be considered. It is certainly capable of affirming the value of nature while recognizing that it is other than human.

An ancient concept in virtue ethics is that of the ‘common good.’ This holds that the well-being and flourishing of individuals can only be achieved in community, and that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two whereby each enhances the good of the other. From here it is only a short step to the view that the flourishing of all living things needs to be promoted because it is constitutive of our own flourishing.⁸ This is somewhat different to the traditional Christian view in terms of which man is the steward of the natural order, since it does not assess the worth of creatures simply in terms of their worth for human beings. In this scheme each creature is allowed its own place, and the distinctiveness of human beings is simply that they can sometimes glimpse the whole picture. As Stephen Clark writes:

Those who would live virtuously, tradition tells us, must seek to allow each creature its own place, and to appreciate the beauty of the whole. It is because human beings can sometimes come to see that whole, and know their own place in it, that—in a sense—they are superior to other forms. Our ‘superiority’, insofar as that is real, rests not upon our self-claimed right always to have more than other creatures do ... but on the possibility that we may (and the corresponding duty that we should) allow our fellow creatures their part of the action.⁹

This distinction between human beings and other species is not based on any notion of hierarchical superiority but at the same time recognises there is a difference between humans and other creatures. Animals can thus be included in the moral community but not on the basis of being moral agents in the way human beings are.

Animals are part of the biotic community in which all living creatures share, and so their interests cannot be excluded from considerations of the common good. Since humans have a clearer perception of this good than other species it could be said that they have a duty or at least a responsibility to consider the wellbeing of animals in deliberations which may affect them. Thus we still retain a sense of the distinctiveness of human nature and of its unique identity in the context of the uniqueness of other species. Something of this kind seems to be intended by the phrase ‘a precious human rebirth’ found particularly in Tibetan sources, and foreshadowed by earlier illustrations in Buddhist literature of how difficult it is to gain a human rebirth.¹⁰ Of course, many Buddhists will disagree with the anthropocentric tone of the discussion at this point and insist that animals and perhaps even inanimate nature be given equivalent moral standing with human beings. I can only respond that the notion of leaves and trees attaining enlightenment, as Chan-jan envisaged,¹¹ is not one that virtue ethics would find easy to accommodate.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by summarising some of the reasons why a virtue ethics approach seems to offer a basis for a Buddhist ecological ethics. The first reason is because it is grounded in the practice and tradition of Buddhism itself. One only needs to read the *Dhammapada* to see that the Buddhist ideal of human perfection is defined in terms of the virtues exercised by an individual who treats all beings with kindness and compassion, lives honestly and righteously, controls sensual desires, speaks the truth and lives a sober upright life, diligently fulfilling his duties, such as service to parents, to his immediate family and to those recluses and brahmins who depend on the laity for their maintenance.

A Buddhist ecology, then, coincides with these teachings and simply calls for the orientation of traditional virtues towards a new set of problems concerned with the environment. If we require a concrete illustration of how a virtuous person might act towards the environment we can turn to the example of the Buddha. The Buddha is never depicted harming nature and on the contrary seems to have enjoyed spending time in simple natural environments such *āvāsas* and *ārāmas*. Causing harm to animals or to nature seems inconceivable in his case, and we cannot help but feel it would be totally *out of character* for him, which is precisely the state an ecological virtue ethics would seek to engender in us all.

Even being enlightened, however, does not bring the power to solve ecological problems: since no-one has a crystal ball to see into the future, the virtues cannot always tell us what it would be best to do in every situation. What the virtues *can* do is guide us in grasping the issues at stake and in accepting or rejecting possible courses of action under consideration. The virtues would encourage us to understand clearly the nature of the problem, listen carefully to the views of others, meditate and reflect deeply and insightfully on the alternatives and their pros and cons, reach a resolution, and act with integrity in the execution of the course of action decided. As Frasz writes, ‘the thrust of environmental virtue ethics is to foster new habits of thought and action in the moral agent—not just to get the immediate decision made right, but to reorient all actions henceforth in terms of holistic, ecologically based ways of thinking.’¹²

Notes

¹ This paper is adapted from my article 'Buddhism and ecology: A virtue ethics approach,' *Contemporary Buddhism*, 2007. 8(2):97 - 112.

² Sahni P. *Environmental Ethics in Early Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*. Routledge, 2007, p.13.

³ See Cooper, D.E. and S.P. James, *Buddhism, virtue and environment*. Ashgate world philosophies series. 2005, Aldershot; Ashgate. James, S.P., *Zen Buddhism and environmental ethics*. Ashgate world philosophies series. 2004, Aldershot: Ashgate.

⁴ To these, Christianity added three more, the so-called 'theological virtues' of faith, hope, and charity.

⁵ As Schmithausen has pointed out, many of the virtues such as *ahimsā* and *mettā* were directed towards individuals rather than species or eco-systems, which suggests that their original inspiration was non-ecological. However, this does not preclude these virtues taking on an ecological dimension now even if they have not done so far.

⁶ Buddhist virtue ethics has, according to Whitehill, an advantage over its Western counterpart in being both biocentric and ecological. In Buddhist thought, he suggests, membership of the moral community extends beyond the human species, although I suggest below that its scope is not as broad as some imagine. See Whitehill J.

'Buddhism and the Virtues.' In: Keown D, ed. *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000: 17-36.

⁷ Lovelock J. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Second ed. Oxford: OUP, 1987.

⁸ Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p.42.

⁹ Quoted in Celia E.Deane-Drummond *The Ethics of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004: 66.

¹⁰ E.g. S.v.475; S.ii.263; A.i.35; M.iii.169. See Harvey P. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000:29f.

¹¹ See Lafleur W. 'Enlightenment for Plants and Trees' in Kaza S, Kraft K. *Dharma Rain : sources of Buddhist environmentalism*. 1st ed. Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 2000:109-116.

¹² Quoted in Sahni P. *Environmental Ethics in Early Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*. Routledge, 2007, p.214.