

Shin Buddhist Ecology: Grounded upon Tension between the Actual and the Ideal

Mitsuya Dake

I. Buddhist thought and ecology

Environmental problems are now becoming far more serious than one decade ago in spite of devoted efforts made by those deeply aware of the crisis. It is obvious that science and technology alone cannot solve such problems. Now, each one of us needs to undergo a fundamental change in our life style and way of thinking. But what alternative life style and way of thinking might there be, and how can we find them?

Many people, in search of clues to find such a life style and way of thinking, have positively taken up Buddhist perspectives and approaches to the environment.

For example, such Buddhist ideas as the concept of sentient beings (*bhāva*, *sattva*), the teaching of “all sentient beings possess Buddha nature,” the concept of interdependence (*pratitya-samutpāda*), or the metaphor of Indra’s jeweled net are examples of a Buddhist point of view that can provide useful approaches to our consideration of the problems of the environment.

But why are many people taking note of Buddhist thought? Why are Buddhist concept of sentient beings and the concept of interdependence, and so on, taken up by those who are deeply aware of the ecological crisis?

As we observe various discussions about Buddhism and ecology, we

may suggest that the following three concerns are deeply linked to the reasons why Buddhist concepts are taken up in those discussions.

First: criticism of any thinking that presupposes an anthropocentric relationship between human beings and all other existences on earth, including animals, plants, and minerals etc., has led to the central debate regarding the notion of the environment today. Recent approaches to the question of the environment point to the fact that modern civilization, which continues to hold an overwhelming influence in the world, has prospered precisely because it looks at the relationship between humans and the environment from an anthropocentric point of view. Today's thinking on the environment reveals that such an anthropocentric mode of thinking has itself become the fundamental cause of environmental problems.

As a result, much attention has been given to the fact that Buddhist thought is not based on an anthropocentric perspective of nature. For example, the term *bhava* and *sattva* which are often found in Buddhist scriptures, point not just to human existence but also to all existences that have feelings. That is why they are usually translated as "sentient beings" in English, or as *shujo* or *ujo* in Chinese. From this perspective, human beings are not considered to be the central existence in the natural world. Instead, human existence is understood to be just one part of nature. There are also cases in which human beings are described by words that distinguish them from other existences, such as *manuṣya*, *puruṣa*, or *bāla*. However, these terms characterize human beings as things that possess societies, culture, or, value systems, in contrast to other existences, and, of course, this distinction is not made from an anthropocentric point of view. In this sense, the concept of *bhāva* and *sattva* can represent an alternative view as to the relationship between humans and the environment today.

Second: Today's thinking on the environment seeks to find the theoretical justification for the protection of the environment in its intrinsic

value, that is, in the value which all life is said to possess, quite independent of human beings. This is a criticism of an earlier emphasis on nature's instrumental value, or its use value, which sought to determine whether an existence is in some sense useful or not. Instead, today's thinking on the environment seeks to base its view of nature in the unique and irreplaceable value that is possessed by each individual existence.

As a result, for example, much attention has also been given to the teaching of Mahayana Buddhism that all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature. Moreover, as this theory is developed in China and Japan, not only grasses and trees but also mountains and rivers were called *shujo* or *ujo*. As a result, some people think that this Buddhist understanding of Buddha-nature provides insight into the intrinsic value of individual existence, quite independent of human beings and offers an important viewpoint to our consideration of the problems of the environment

Third: criticism of the dichotomous and mechanical world view has also become the focal point of the issues of the environment. Descartes' mind and body dichotomy of Seventeenth century, provided a basis for modern science in a sense, but, on the other hand, it also led to a mechanical view of the world in the progress of modern technology. This mechanical view of the world made people conceive of the surrounding world as a lifeless world of material in a self-conclusive system. However, as modern technology contributes to the devastating ecological problems today, this mechanical view of the world has come to be severely criticized.

In this context, the Mahayana Buddhist idea of interdependence (*pratitya-samutpāda*), or the metaphor of Indra's jeweled net are now being looked upon as views that can provide useful approaches to our consideration of the problems of the environment. The metaphor of Indra's jeweled net which is found in *The Avatamsaka Sūtra* is as following:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indora, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out indefinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel at the net's every node, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glitting like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that the process of reflection is infinite ¹.

This image of Indra's jeweled net suggests that this entire world and all individuals living within it are in a relationship of limitless interdependence and reciprocal inter-connectedness. The holistic and organic understanding of the relationship between whole and individual or many and one provide us an alternative view. Such a view helps us to understand the global expansiveness of the world in which today's environmental problems arise. The world may have been born from individual causes, but it is now expanding without limit. This Mahayana Buddhist perspective expressed by the metaphor of Indra's jeweled net may suggest an alternative world view that provides us with the foundations for an ecological life.

II. The potential to distort the original purpose of Buddhism

We can say that these three concerns, the issues of anthropocentrism, intrinsic value of existences, and dichotomous and mechanical worldviews, underlie all tendencies to view Buddhism as an alternative form of ecological thought.

An understanding of environmental problems from Buddhist perspectives may well be linked to a resolution of those problems. However, at the same time, we should be very careful about coming to quick and easy conclusions about this, since the tendency to regard Buddhist doctrines as identical with the idea of the environment has the potential to distort the original purpose of Buddhism. Moreover, as we try to resolve today's environmental problems, that tendency is often tied to a failure on our part to recognize that the essence of the problem lies in the structure of the modern age itself.

For example, the non-anthropocentric view of existence in the Buddhist teachings does not simply regard the self and the other as being in harmonious oneness. Rather, when Buddha teaches of 'not taking life', he states

All are frightened of the rod.
For all, life is dear.
Having made oneself an example,
One should not neither slay nor cause to slay.²

Here we can see that the Buddha's instruction not to kill recognizes that existence includes relationships of confrontation between the self and others. The phrase 'having made oneself an example' presupposes not only feelings of fearfulness and the wish not to harm or be harmed, but also what action one might take. This contradictory relationship between the actual and the ideal motivates us to follow his instruction. If we only believe that the Buddhist teaching not to kill presupposes a simple, harmonious relationship between living beings we may lose this sense of tension and drift away from the fundamental purpose of Buddhism.

In the same way, to conclude that Buddhism sees the intrinsic value in living beings in this world, or in the natural environment itself, because of the Mahayana Buddhist idea of Buddha nature ("All beings have

Buddha nature.”) would also be to depart from the fundamental purpose of the Buddhist teachings. That is to say, it is doubtful whether Buddha nature, which is often interpreted as the potential for attaining Buddhahood, could function, just as it is, as the theoretical foundation for the value of life.

There are many interpretations regarding the meaning of Buddha nature, but if we only attach to questions like whether all existences have Buddha nature or not, or what Buddha nature is, we will lose the tension underlying the idea of Buddha nature. With these attitudes, we may not understand Shinran’s idea of shinjin as Buddha nature and Dogen’s thought of inseparability of zazen and Buddha nature.

In this sense, we should not expect a direct response to the problems that have arisen in today’s world from Buddhist thought as it has been expressed up until now. To do so would simply be to force the Buddhist teachings opportunistically into the framework of the present age.

At the same time, however, — and let me emphasize this again — we can search for the basis for such a response within the Buddhist teachings as we grapple with notions of the environment. Although we might still hunt for clues within existing Buddhist thought, the main thrust of our examination would be to develop new theories as to that thought, as well as form by which we might respond to today’s environmental problems. It would also be necessary to call into question the very framework of the environmental problems today from the perspective of these fundamental Buddhist ways of thinking.

In addition, — and this is the third point that I will focus on — it is one thing to know the essential Buddhist viewpoint on the environment, but it is quite another to attempt to resolve the problems of the environment. In order to solve those problems it will be necessary to develop a connection between that method of thought and concrete norms of behavior in modern time.

III. The idea of interdependence as the fundamental perspective and method of thought in Buddhism

What, then, is the fundamental Buddhist method of thought? There are diverse teachings within the Buddhist tradition. However, we can agree that the idea of *pratītya-samutpāda* acts as the pillar for the Buddha's teaching.

After his attainment of enlightenment, the Buddha explained that *pratītya-samutpāda* was the truth that he had contemplated from his seat of enlightenment. The Buddha also declared, "Those who see the dharma of *pratītya-samutpāda* will see me. Those who see me will see the dharma of *pratītya-samutpāda*." Thus, it represents a method of thought that clearly and existentially answers the questions of why delusion and suffering exist in our actual lives and how one might be able to become free of that delusion and suffering.

In other words, the idea of *pratītya-samutpāda* represents the fundamental perspective and method of thought in Buddhism. This is the reason that the idea of *pratītya-samutpāda* is elucidated at every stage of development in Buddhist history and in every Buddhist tradition. For instance, it is the idea that clarifies the structure of delusion (self-attachment), which is the cause of suffering, and it is also the notion that clarifies the state of the non-self-nature and emptiness of existence. It is the idea that brings about the mutual identity of the world of enlightenment and the world of delusion. As such it has led to unique doctrinal systems, with special characteristics have been constructed historically in a wide range of Buddhist traditions. That is to say, a diversity of approaches to *pratītya-samutpāda* has existed historically within the Buddhist teachings. In this sense, I believe that the idea of *pratītya-samutpāda* is the method of thought that lies at its foundations.

Let us consider now what kind of viewpoint might be taken by a Buddhist follower, whose ecological way of living is informed by Buddhist

ideas, while adopting the notion of the environment as a central concern.

Norms of behavior for Buddhist followers are based in the precepts. In that sense, it is possible that the point of view taken by one who upholds the precepts might suggest a basic attitude that would allow one to come to grips with the idea of the environment from the perspective of the Buddhist teachings. Of course, this is not to say that the Buddhist precepts, which were assigned to priests and lay followers, would be applicable as they are to the issue of the environment. Precepts, for instance, were enacted in order to preserve the community. More specifically, the purpose was to accomplish the perfection of an individual's practice. The intent of the precepts was not to preserve the environment or nature per se. Rather, the goal was the preservation of the environment of practice so that practice might be perfected.

Still, the existence of Buddhist precepts clearly indicates that it is a religion that seeks to put the teachings into practice, since it bears great concern, not just for the community of priests, but also for the greater society that surrounds it. Also, the precepts, which represent individual, internal norms of behavior for the Buddhist follower, do not necessarily exhibit any special perspectives on Buddhist ethics. However, as we have seen earlier, they are deeply rooted in the fundamental Buddhist method of thought, as is evident in the precept not to take life.

As we have already seen, this precept not to kill involves a contradiction. Therefore, the Buddha expounded the control of one's desires as the practical aspect of that rule. For instance, Sakyumuni Buddha warned his followers against simply living in response to one's desires, being controlled by one's desires, or being submerged within delusion and defiled passions. He explained,

Knowing fulfillment is (to know) wealth, happiness and peace; one who does not know fulfillment might be wealthy, but he would (still be) poor ³.

As long as a human being is alive, he will have many desires, both great and small. However, Sakyamuni Buddha realized, to be controlled only by one's desires or to live just in order to satisfy them would not match the image of what a human being should be. Sakyamuni described human desire as "thirst." He likened the mind of greed, in which desires increase without cease, to a state of terrible thirst. Thus, "lessening desires" and "knowing fulfillment" means that one becomes free of the state of being controlled by one's greedy heart and mind, and one turns one's deluded desires into an aspiration for enlightenment. Buddhism does not simply teach that one should abandon one's desires. Instead, one is to know deeply the basic essence of human desires and, making that the turning point, redirect one's desire (in this case it becomes referred to as *bodhi citta*), based on wisdom and compassion. In the history of Buddhism, the control of desires has been sought through various methods of practice. In other words, it might be said that the viewpoint of maintaining the Buddhist precepts and the insight into the contradictory structure of the existence of the self, which becomes clear with the performance of practice, give rise to the development of a new and true mode of expression that is based on the Buddhist method of thought for Buddhist followers whose religious concern is to realize Sakyamuni's wisdom.

The controlling of desires in everyday life is a norm of behavior that cannot be lacking if we are to grapple with the problems of the environment. However, no matter how often one teaches of "lessening desires" and "knowing fulfillment," or, about compassion, they simply end up being pleasing words. And, they would be completely meaningless if they were used in way that would allow us to evade our responsibility.

For instance, while alive, we are unable to escape the act of taking life. This, however, is not to rationalize or justify such an act. Rather, we must look squarely at our own commission of the sin of taking life, and bore down deeply so as to penetrate into the root of our desires or defiled passions. For example, a feeling of gratitude for the food we eat is not to

eliminate the sin of taking life or to justify the act of killing. Rather, it gives expression to our insight into the basic contradiction inherent in our existence.

Although we are considering the problem of the environment today, is it not that we are also facing the same problems within ourselves?

With those thoughts in mind, I shall present an aspect of Japanese Buddhist spirituality that can be found in the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, paying special attention to the ideas of Shinran. Shinran (1173-1262) is considered to be the founder of the Shin Buddhist tradition, which is one of the largest Buddhist denominations in Japan today. His Buddhist thought, grounded in the Mahayana theory of wisdom, opened up a way to enlightenment for ordinary people. It is my hope that this might provide some useful contribution to our consideration of the problems of the environment.

IV. The possibility of Shin Buddhist ecology

Nearly thirty years have already passed since the Rome Club sounded an alarm to persons who had not yet questioned the great amount of production, consumption and elimination going on throughout the world. In comparison with that time, people's concerns about the environment have certainly grown, as have their concerns about building a sustainable society. There are signs that the idea of ecology is developing, in that humans are taking another look at our close relationship with nature, especially the symbiosis between human beings and nature, and acting accordingly. Moreover, lively debates are taking place in the area of environmental ethics, which considers a new ethical framework in which to resolve environmental problems and re-examines the norms of human behavior in the natural world.

There is a tendency to believe that these many active discussions are leading to counter-measures for the protection of the environment and that the environment is being preserved. Certainly, people who have

concerns about developing a sustainable society are certainly increasing in number. However, the fact remains that there are still many who elect to postpone any changes in their behavior until sometime in the future.

It is becoming increasingly important that we know about the need to deepen our understanding and change the norms of our behavior in order to protect the environment. In fact, it has become absolutely necessary that we do so. At the same time, however, as we become more aware of the importance of this kind of knowledge and these new norms, it is also necessary that we consider the problems of the environment from the standpoint that we are incapable of performing actions based upon such knowledge.

In considering of the issues of the environment, Shinran's deep insight into human existence has not until now been taken up as a point. I believe, however, that he offers a very important perspective. In *A Record in Lament of Differences*, Shinran's words are recorded in this way,

There is a difference in compassion between the Path of Sage and the Path of the Pure Land. The compassion in the Path of Sages is expressed through pity, sympathy and care for all beings. But rare is it that one can help another as completely as one desires.

In this life no matter how much pity and sympathy we may feel for others, it is impossible to help another as we truly wish; thus, our compassion is inconsistent and limited. Only the saying of nembutsu manifests complete and never ending compassion, which is true, real and sincere ⁴.

For Shinran, the good that we perform and our acts of compassion are not thorough- going; we are not able to fulfill them as we might wish. Is this understanding of human beings a mere resignation to the "realities" of life? Not in the least. What it means is that Shinran was able to encounter the truth and reality of the nembutsu as he stood before the tension

between the actual and the ideal.

Today, we human beings seek to justify ourselves and rationalize our actions through the use of human values such as humanism or justice. The issue of the environment also harbors the potential that we will fall into the abyss if we take even one false step. In that sense as well, Shinran's understanding of human beings contributes a very important perspective to the manner of engagement toward the resolution of the problems of the environment.

Today's environmental problems arose when that environment was no longer able to support human civilization, which was a human product. The power of human beings arose when our state of comfort and the potential for self-perpetuation overcame the power of nature to recover from them. Accordingly, it is not a problem of the environment, but rather a problem of humanity. And that humanity refers to each and every one of us, who live here in today's civilized society.

Shinran's understanding of the nature of human existence is not mere words. Rather, in a variety of ways they provide us with a useful perspective and can help us to develop constructive ways of thinking about our lives today. However, what is even more important is that they also become manifest in our own way of life.

Notes

- 1 *The Avatamsaka Sutra*, quoted from Francis H. Cook *The Hus-Yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*, 1977
- 2 *The Dhammapada*, trans. John Ross Carter and Mahinda Paliawadana (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 25 (Dhammapada v. 130).
- 3 Butsusu-nehanyakusetsukyokaikyo (The Last Teaching Sutra), Taishoshinshu-daizokyo Vol. 12, No. 389, 1111c, translation by author.
- 4 A Record in Lament in Divergences, Chapter 4, The Collected Works of Shinran(CWS), p.663

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