

Review

Buddhist way of life and environmental concerns

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Environmental concerns in the 20th century have been thrown into sharp relief because of the growing consciousness about environmental disasters of cataclysmic dimensions staring us in the face. The Green Peace Movement, World Wildlife Fund, the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and many more such movements and organizations working for the preservation of Nature have foregrounded environmental issues. These developments, of course, augur well for us as well as for our coming generations. However, for preserving the environment, there is a need to learn to co-exist with Nature in all humility and not look upon Nature as an alien territory to be colonized and to be exploited or as a rival to be defeated in the struggle for existence. For this to happen, there is not a need for piecemeal approaches to preserving environment, but a need to radically shift our thinking, a kind of paradigm shift as it were. For this there is a need to adopt a holistic world view like the Buddhistic *Welthanschauung*. The mechanistic Cartesian-Newtonian world view that had become all pervasive in about the last three centuries has led to a profound cultural imbalance. Excessive technological growth has created an environment in which life has become unhealthy. Polluted air, traffic congestion, chemical contaminants, and radiation hazards are integral features of economic system obsessed with growth and expansion. Technological intervention is severely disrupting and upsetting the ecological processes that sustain our natural environment and are the very basis of our existence. Man has to transcend mechanistic structures, reach higher and higher levels of consciousness and ultimately realize the totality of his being. This self realization only will move us to higher values of life. Buddhism with its emphasis on the middle way and self control can help us control our greed to acquire and consume more than we need. This check on acquisitiveness will help us conserve our natural resources. Practicing *Metta* and *Vipassna* will refrain us from over consumption and will also cleanse us of psychological impurities. Buddhism can help us cultivate a morally wholesome attitude which will in turn correct all those imbalances which have crept into our psychological make up because of atomistic and mechanistic ways of thinking. Once a Gestalt view is inculcated, no longer will man view the universe as a machine made up of multitude of objects but as an indivisible dynamic whole whose parts are inter-related and interdependent. Adoption of such a holistic world view in today's sensate culture is nothing short of a paradigm shift. This paper endeavours to emphasize the need for such a paradigm shift.

Key words: Buddhistic *Welthanschauung*, Buddhism, psychological impurities, paradigm shift.

INTRODUCTION

The post modern world today reflects a state of ferment if not crisis. The glitter of media-dominated world is a sign of progress associated with the triumphant march of liberal democratic values and of the techno-culture, both

espoused by the west. Commodity fetishism, ever increasing levels of consumption, insatiability of desire and heightened individualism are synonymous with improved standards of living and progress. However, under the shining veneer, a certain hollowness is palpable, the hollowness visible in anomic normlessness, moral and ethical vacuum, destruction of ecosystems, stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction and many other such manifestations which make the very idea of progress and

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happiness unviable. The multiple crises which is looming large on us and which threatens to render the world unfit for human life is a symptom of a deeper malaise, which needs a proper diagnosis before any remedies can be suggested.

THE PERIOD OF INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

With the advent of industrial revolution, the juggernaut of material prosperity started rolling, enriching a few and impoverishing all others. Its inexorable march has been continuing unchecked since then. The tremendous amount of material progress made in the last about three centuries has itself distorted the modern mind. There is a tendency to equate material prosperity with happiness and then to believe that its attainment is possible on the basis of the materialist philosophy of enrich oneself (Misra, 1990). There is a belief that this prosperity is going to pave the way to universal peace as well. Concern for environment, ethical and moral considerations and religious world views which kept a check on man's naked greed in the past have fallen by the wayside. However, peace still is a far cry and the world seems to be sitting on a power keg. Our making confessions to psychiatrists and psychological counselors, speaks volumes of happiness attained by us under the new dispensations. Schumaker (1977) suggests that the foundations of peace cannot be laid by universal prosperity, in the modern sense, because such prosperity, if attainable at all, is attainable only by cultivating such drives of human nature as greed and envy, which destroy intelligence, happiness, serenity and thereby the peacefulness of man. It could well be that rich people treasure peace more highly than poor people, but only if they feel utterly secure, and this is a contradiction in terms. Their wealth depends on making inordinately large demands on limited world resources and thus puts them on an unavoidable collision course, not primarily with the poor (who are weak and defenseless) but with other rich people. To Schumacher's statement, the researchers would like to add that the rich are brought into an unavoidable collision course with nature as well.

On probing the capitalist models of development, it can be said that these models draw their sustenance from scientific paradigms based on mechanistic, Cartesian-Newtonian world view and on Darwinian evolution. The Cartesian-Newtonian world view which is essentially mechanistic replaced the old holistic views which looked upon nature as an organism, as a spiritual universe. The Darwinian evolution by painting nature not as a benevolent mother but as a monster "red in tooth and claw" to use the words of Tennyson, an impersonal machine which selects only the fittest, pits man against nature and the colonization of nature becomes a dominant theme of progress. The vision of earth as a living organism and nurturing mother served as a cultural

constraint restricting the actions of human beings. These cultural constraints disappeared as mechanistic views of the universe which look upon nature as a mechanical system provided a scientific sanction for manipulation and exploitation of nature. How misplaced these mechanistic views have been, even many scientists like Capra (1982) have themselves admitted. According to Capra (1982) as we penetrate into matter, nature does not show us any isolated building blocks, but rather appears as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of a unified whole. The holistic views look at the world in terms of relationships and integration (Capra, 1996). Buddhism is an example of such holism because according to Buddhism, human mind, the human body, the external world and society are intricately interconnected through an all embracing network of cause and effect to make a psychologically sensitive and responsible ecosystem (Tsong, 1985). Lack of thinking holistically, has been the reason for the present mess.

The obsession with prosperity and limitless economic growth has created a physical and mental environment in which life has become extremely unhealthy. The health hazards created by the economic system are caused not only by the production process but by consumption of various goods that are produced and advertised to sustain economic expansion. Excessive consumption and strong emphasis on high technology not only creates massive quantities of waste but also requires huge amounts of energy. Non-renewable energy derived from fossil fuels powers most of the production processes and with the decline of these natural resources energy itself has become a scarce and expensive resource. In their attempts to maintain and even increase their current levels of production, the world's industrialized countries have ferociously exploited the available resources of fossil fuels. These processes of energy production have the potential to cause unprecedented ecological disturbance and human suffering. Man has given vent to all his cruelty and aggressively in destroying nature. Man has been ruthless in destroying biodiversity and in ensuring that the earth becomes unfit for coming generations. However, of late there is a growing realization that such wanton violence against nature is going to boomerang upon us. Once again, not muffled but quite high, voices of sanity recommending an ethical and moral living in accordance with holistic world views like Buddhism are heard.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Buddha's ethical middle path is the golden mean of Aristotle. Self-indulgence and self-mortification are equally ruled out. In his very first sermon in Saaranath, he said: "There are two extremes, O monks, from which he who leads a religious life must abstain. One is a life of pleasure devoted to desire and enjoyment: That is base,

ignoble, unspiritual, unworthy and unreal. The other is a life of mortification: It is gloomy, unworthy, unreal. The perfect one, O Monks, is removed from both these extremes and has discovered the way which lies between them, the middle way which enlighten the eyes, enlightens the mind, which leads rest, to knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana. This middle way is the Eight fold Path, as it is called: Right Faith, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right action, Right Living, Right Effort, Right Thought, Right Self-concentration" (Holmes, 1957).

To slow down the rapid depletion of our natural resources, there is a need to follow the middle path and to have to keep a check on the materialistic way of life. Manufacturers today spend enormous amount of money on advertising to keep up a pattern of competitive consumption and many of the good consumed are unnecessary, wasteful and outright harmful. Schumacher (1975) has illustrated the value dependence of economics very eloquently by comparing two economic systems embodying entirely different values and goals. One is our present materialistic system, in which standard of living is measured by the amount of annual consumption along with an optimal pattern of production. The other is that system of economics which may be termed as Buddhist economics, based on the notion of 'right livelihoods' and the 'middle way' which the aim is to achieve a maximum of human well-being with an optimal pattern of consumption.

The four-fold truth, on which Buddha's whole scheme of life hinges is: Life on earth is full of suffering; suffering is generated by desire; the extinction of desire involves extinction of suffering; the extinction of desire is the outcome of the righteous life. The process of self control suggested by Buddha is the need of the day. It is by self control that human beings will be able to save themselves from over consumption and it will also enable them to conserve natural resources [Humphires, 1960; Jones, 1979; Kalupahana, 1976]

It is the sharpening awareness of the impending environmental disaster, as a consequence of development that has made man understands that the human system is a part of eco-system. The community of man is embedded in the natural environment, and there has to be an ecological balance for man's survival. Being aware of the relation between the flora and fauna, plants, birds, animals' microorganisms and Man, there is a need to live together. Taking the case of India, it can be said that the country has a rich heritage of species and genetic strains of flora and fauna. Over 8% of the species are found in India. India is tenth among the plant rich countries, eleventh in terms of endemic species of higher vertebrates and sixth among centres of diversity and origin of agri-biodiversity in the world. But as the forests become bare, many of these species are fast becoming extinct or are at the verge of extinction. Such species pose a threat to geneticists, animal behaviorists, botanists, zoologists, economists and all those who have a lot to learn about

and from them. What is needed is to recognize that destruction of our bio-diversity is a permanent and irreversible loss (Laxmi et al., 1999)

A believer of Buddhism abstains from killing living creatures; he lays down the stick; he lays down weapons. He is compassionate and tender hearted; he seeks with friendly spirit the welfare of all living creatures. This is what is essentially needed for maintaining ecological balance [Edwin, 1917; Walse, 1962)].

The materialist to whom physical death is an absolute end fears, it is true, no hell but he too will agree that a little hope in this life will bring benefits and from such hope there can spring faith in others and charity towards them. Charity is a horrid word to modern ears and love is scarcely any better, especially since Hollywood has got hold of it. So let us say friendliness, which is the literal translation of the Buddhist term 'Metta'. Practicing Metta, man would have sympathy for other species and other forms of life which are threatened by extinction.

The psychology of the East is simple and profound. The soul, or inward life, alone is real. Eternity is a vital aspect of reality. The present existence of the soul is not more certain than its pre-existence of its future existence and these three-the past, the present and the future lives-are stages in an entirely natural process. The destiny of every animal and plant is to find its true self or in other words advance towards perfection of which its nature is capable. Thus man's attachment with material and temporal goods is the chief cause of human suffering. And not only does this tendency, with its derivative desire cause suffering in the present earth life, but it also causes suffering to be reproduced for the self in future earth-lives. Desire in itself is not bad. In the East, where the soul is the supreme and fundamental reality, the identification of God with the world-soul, or soul of universal Nature, is the outcome of a movement of thought which is at once natural and logical.

Religions have indeed been persecuted in the East, but always for social or political reasons. Of Buddhism, the dominant creed of the East, one may say more than this; one may say that it has never persecuted, that, in practice as well as principle, it is an entirely tolerant creed. Throughout the long history of Buddhism, the Buddhists have been uniformly tolerant; and have appealed, not to the sword, but to intellectual and moral suasion. There is not a single instance, throughout the whole period, of even one of those religious persecutions which loom so largely in the history of the Christian church. Peacefully, the reformation began and it was done in peace. So far as its own action is concerned, the Buddhist church has continued till to-day with the idea of torturing a fellow-man to death because of his theology happens to differ from one's own, is wholly alien from the Eastern tone and temper of thought, as alien as is the assumption which makes religious persecution possible,-- the atheistical assumption that Divine Truth can be imprisoned in a form of words (Holmes, 1957). At this

point, Buddha's teaching must not be misunderstood. The disciples are taught to desire and strive for enlightenment, deliverance and Nirvana. Desire for the pleasures that minister to the real self is wholly good. It is desire for the pleasures that minister to the lower self, to live in it, to cling to it, to rest in it; it is the desire to identify oneself with the individual self and the impermanent world instead of the universal self and the eternal world; it is this desire which is evil and is causing ceaseless suffering to mankind (Walse, 1962). If the self is to be delivered from suffering, desire for what is impermanent, changeable and unreal must be extinguished. Our sufferings are rooted in greed, hate and illusion. This too often manifests itself in the acts of greed and hate, of desire and aversion. Our hubris springs from ego and desire to dominate and conquer the world springs from hubris. Buddhism, with its emphasis on attaining the "Not-Self" state will help to conquer these so that humans become notably calmer and more balanced. This will also enable in thinking of humanity as a whole. After being cleansed of this hubris, there will be development of an attitude of humility towards all life forms.

THE WAY TO NIRVANA

Guenther (1949) states that with nirvāna "the ideal personality, the true human being" becomes reality. The way to Nirvana, the final beatitude that transcends suffering, karma and Samsara and is sought in Buddhism through extinction of desire and individual consciences, is a scientific process of discipline through a three fold path viz,

1. Avoidance of vice and practice of virtue.
2. Practice of meditation.
3. Banishment of ignorance and attainment of insight.

For the renunciation, the way is rigorous but methodical. It is designated as Bhavana, which is really a system functioning in two stages: Cultivation of mental concentration (Samadhi) and development of clear insight into things as they are (Panna or Vipassna). Prior to the first stage must be perfected the virtues (Sila) thus bringing under control mind and senses; this consists of proper speech, action and livelihood. Here 'the whole heap of unwholesomeness' composed of sensual desire, ill-will, torpor, agitation; worry and perplexity, which obstructs the way, is overcome. Mind prepared in this style must now be developed or cultivated so that the insight that is essential for emancipation may dawn. It consists of strenuous Endeavour to check the arising of evil not yet arisen, to defeat evil already arisen, to develop good not yet arisen and to cultivate good already arisen, mindfulness (Sati) and intent state of mind and concentration.

Mindfulness takes the form of meditations, the deep realization that what ever springs up ipso facto subsides.

Upon this realization sorrow is finally overcome and Samsara (life in the world) loses its poignant edge. This knowledge makes a person passionless (Virago). The practice of virtue and meditation is to be used as a means for the final liberation. With this realization, 'The dewdrop slips into the shining sea' (Arnold, 2010). In Dhammapadda, Buddha declared 'Not by matted hair not by lineage not by caste does one become a Brahmana. He is a Brahmana in whom there is truth and righteousness and who does not hurt by body, speech or mind'. Does not hurt by body, speech and mind is the essence of Buddhism. Thus, Buddhism attaches the greatest possible value to compassion and generosity. Gautam Buddha called upon his disciples to show charity even to those who did not embrace Buddhism. He enjoined upon them not to be cruel to animals either : 'I allow you monks, to suffuse with a heart of love these four great snake families for warding of self, for the guarding of self and for the protection of self 'and:

'For the footless my love,
My love for the bipeds,
For the four-footed my love,
My love for those with many feet.'

Such was the gospel of Buddha who came to be known as the compassionate (Coomaraswamy and Horner, 2000). Buddha urged his Bhikkus to go to all countries, and preach love and non-killing and equality. King Asoka after his conquest of Kalinga, renounced war and sought peace in Buddha's gospel of love and ahimsa.

Today when the world is torn between hatred and discord by conflicting ideologies and by economic competition and trade pacts, the middle way and self control advocated by Buddha can help us control our over dependence on natural resources by control of over consumption habits. Buddha's teachings had the great effect of producing tolerance so that throughout the long history of two thousand six hundred years of Buddhism, its adherents have never appealed to sword but to the intellectual and moral persuasion. Buddha's teachings, in fact, paved a way for a religion of active piety based on a belief in the perfectibility of human spirit.

SUMMARY

Human survival and development depends on world peace-on whether it can prevent nuclear war, on whether it can harness modern science and technology for the betterment of human welfare, on whether it can forestall serious environmental damages, on whether it can develop the appropriate adjustments and institutions to share the fruits of technical change equitably enough to ward off hunger, malnutrition and the conflicts generated by the yawning gulfs which now separate the haves from the have-nots.

Buddhism offers a practical method offers an attitudinal change in man and gives a sense of direction and goal of life to help restore sustainability of Nature. Self-control prepares the way for the development of more positive and active virtues. When the baser tendencies of man's nature are kept under control, they lose their baseness and cease to obstruct the outgrowth of nobler tendencies. Thus control of aggressivity will prepare for gentleness and compassion; the control of covetousness, for the outgrowth of charitableness and generosity; the control of lust, for the outgrowth of purity and unselfish love; and so forth. Thus Buddhism with its catholicity of vision, with its emphasis on compassion and empathy and with its endeavours to cleanse the human mind of hubris which is the root cause of aggression, avarice and lustful covetousness, can help in building an atmosphere of peace and respectful co-existence and can hence enable in transforming the present world into better place to live in.

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