

The Three Characteristics of Existence in Buddhism and Environmental Well-Being

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Introduction

As the environmental crisis unfolds in complex and multifarious ways, it is becoming increasingly clear that this is an inter-disciplinary issue with multi-layered causes as well as approaches towards finding effective solutions. The scope and seriousness of the crisis have become such that it requires a concerted effort from multiple disciplines—science, sociology, public policy, economics, and religion—in order to address all of its dimensions. While no doubt each field is able to offer its own method of dealing with the issue, to rely on any single sector is probably unwise and ultimately less successful than the multi-disci-

* In his paper, the author uses Pali, a Prakrit language native to the Indian subcontinent. It is the language of much of the earliest extant literature of Buddhism. In Theravada Buddhist studies, for example, the Pali terms for *karma* and *nirvana* are, respectively, *kamma* and *nibbana* and appear as such in this chapter.

plinary approach. Thus, each respective field must make its own contributions to the entire effort if the problem is to be effectively solved. This paper is concerned with the contribution made by religion, in particular Theravada Buddhism, which is adhered to by the majority of the peoples in the countries of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. Theravada Buddhism, however, also has great appeal to many people outside of the region and its teachings can influence people in their thinking and actions.

Buddhism, both its Theravada and Mahayana ambits, has also been subject of investigation as resource for environmental ethic. The aim of this task is to delve into the Buddhist tradition in order to retrieve useful elements to advance an environmentalism that is not only faithful to the tradition but also applicable to the modern religio-socio context. Religion finds its relevance and purpose when it is able to respond to the most pressing issues of human life. In the contemporary era, few would dispute that the issues associated with global warming and climate change cannot be faced with an attitude of nonchalance and unconcern. In this paper, I set out to present one possible way that Buddhist teachings may be examined in order to advance a vision of human-nature relationship that promotes environmental well-being. The model proposed for this paper envisions human-nature relationship as that of “mutual service and gratitude on the journey towards liberation.” This model is derived from reflections on what Buddhism holds as the ultimate value in life. The word “value” here no doubt easily conjures up issues related to the notion of intrinsic value often discussed and debated in environmental ethics. While this inquiry is certainly motivated by what goes on in secular environmental ethics as the question of intrinsic value is of particular interest to many of the environmental philosophies, the result of the reflection pertaining to Buddhism is quite different from what one might expect.

The difference surely is due to the distinctiveness of Buddhist thought which leads us to conceive of ourselves and of nature in unconventional ways. This, however, is the unique contribution of Buddhism to the cause

of environmental well-being, and worthwhile for us to consider in a serious manner.

Assessing Value in Nature in Accordance with Buddhist Teachings

In secular environmental ethics, especially those that lean towards non-anthropocentric epistemologies, there is great importance placed upon recognizing the presence of intrinsic value in nature or specific natural entities. A thing is said to be intrinsically valuable when it is seen as an end in itself and does not possess value on account of serving a particular purpose for the benefit of others, usually human beings. The value conferred upon an object for its usefulness to human beings is called instrumental value. Those things which are intrinsically valuable, according to Paul W. Taylor, possess teleological centers of life with adaptive mechanisms and biological functions that aim towards self-flourishing and self-propagation (2002: 74-84). Holmes Roston III, moreover, argues that the intrinsic value in natural entities is present independent of human valuation, meaning no human mind is needed to confer intrinsic value on the object (2002: 143-153). By admitting that natural entities possess intrinsic values, human beings are thus morally obligated to treat nature with due respect (Afeissa, 2002: 152). Non-anthropocentrists insist on according intrinsic value to natural entities because of the fear that if nature were only seen as instrumentally valuable, human beings would feel that they had the right to wantonly exploit nature at their own will, thus bringing destruction to the environment, and the entire humanity along with it.

While the question of intrinsic value is not fundamental to religious systems per se, due to the influence of secular ethics on the field of religious studies, one often encounters the same question applied to religion when the environment is a matter of concern. With respect to Buddhism, while a number of scholars such as Lambert Schmithausen, Ian Harris, and John J. Holder have delved into the issue of the value of nature, either

denying that Buddhism accorded any positive intrinsic value to nature or contending otherwise, I argue that expending energy on this matter may prove to be futile. In view of Buddhist doctrines, in particular, the Three Characteristics of Existence, a Buddhist environmentalism will be better served by taking the focus away from the issue of whether nature does or does not have intrinsic value in order to examine other ways to envision human-nature relationship that promotes environmental well-being.

When one asks the question of whether a natural entity possesses intrinsic value, there is a presupposition that there exists a container or holder of value. The notion of a substantiated entity, one that serves as the holder or possessor of the intrinsic value is normative in Western philosophy. Nonetheless, applying the same categories to Eastern philosophical systems such as Buddhism may encounter great difficulties. The greatest obstacle presented by Buddhism to the idea of an entity possessing intrinsic value is in Buddhism's very denial of a static and fixed substance that can hold such value. Moreover, due to the fact that the Buddhist doctrine of not-self negates the possibility of a holder of value, it also cannot take a stance as to whether the value in nature is positive or negative. Buddhism's threefold doctrine of *aniccā-dukkha-anattā* known as the Three Characteristics of Existence together deny the concept of self (*attā*) and serve as the starting point for our reflection on what Buddhism perceives as the ultimate value in life, and how this understanding helps us to conceive a model for human-nature relationship.

Aniccā or impermanence serves as the first characteristic from which the other two characteristics are derived. It asserts that everything is in a state of flux, and the impression of things being permanent is simply an illusion (Hawkins, 1999: 42). The *Dhammapadda* affirms that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent (Dp. 277). Impermanence is seen at all levels of reality. At the cosmic level, impermanence is seen in the evolution and disintegration of the universe in repetitive cycles taking place throughout beginning-less time. At a closer level, impermanence is seen in the changing of the seasons of the year, the various phases in one's life be-

ginning from being a tiny embryo in the mother's womb to being a grown, independent adult, and finally becoming a weak elderly before taking that last breath in life. In the same manner, impermanence is seen in how people enter into and fall out of relationships, in how we buy a new shirt only to discard it when it is old and torn as a result of wear and tear, and in how our feelings and emotions go on roller coaster rides in accordance with the train of events that takes place in our lives. In fact, by contemplating on the things that take place all around us from the macroscopic to the microscopic level, we will see that the only constant in life is change.

The second characteristic of existence is *dukkha*, translated as mental or physical pain or suffering. *Dukkha* is also highlighted in the first of the Four Noble Truths, which states that all conditional phenomena and experiences are ultimately unsatisfactory. In the *suttras*, the Buddha is quoted to explain the noble truth of suffering in the following manner:

Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and anguish are suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering. This is called the noble truth of suffering. (A.III.61)

The phrase “the five aggregates affected by clinging” denotes the Buddha's system of classification of the categories that come together to form an impermanent composite. Therefore, life is but a composite of the five aggregates (*khandha*) divided into two parts (mental and physical). The four aggregates of feeling, perception, dispositions and consciousness comprise the mental part while the form is the physical part of the individual. In every life experience that takes place, representatives of all these five aggregates are present in some particular configuration. According to the Buddha, suffering is linked to impermanence because impermanent things are in themselves unreliable, and to place trust and dependence on them is doomed to failure. Suffering represents the unsatisfactoriness that comes from the dislocations in one's life when one undergoes the trauma of birth and fear of death, the experience of sickness and old age, the discomfort in being tied to what one dislikes and separated from what one loves. *Dukkha* has its origins in *tanhā*, often translated as desire or craving. In English,

the word desire does not necessarily connote something negative. One can have a noble desire for virtues or happiness. Nonetheless, this kind of desire is not what is meant by *tanhā*, which represents the self-centered desires for private fulfillment that causes loss of personal freedom and leads to increasing pain and suffering (Smith, 2009: 102). These desires or cravings are not only for material things but also for such things as relationship, power and status. Therefore, when our life is inundated by unwholesome tendencies of obsession, attachment, and clinging that pervert authentic humanity, causing us to take actions that either harm ourselves or harm others or harm both, we experience suffering in our life. *Dukkha* is not limited to painful experiences but also to pleasurable experiences because even such experiences are impermanent and thus liable to suffering (Nyanatiloka, 1997: 110).

The third characteristic of existence explicitly states what has already been forcefully implied by the two other characteristics, that is, there is no self existing real ego-entity, soul or any other permanent substance either within the body and mental phenomena of existence or outside of them. This is the central doctrine of *anattā* (not-self) that distinguishes Buddhism from other religions, and must be taken seriously by anyone attempting to examine Buddhism for resources of environmental ethics. The negation of self is the doctrine upon all Buddhist philosophy is built. Thus, an accurate understanding of Buddhism rests on the realization that reality is comprised of mere continually self-consuming process of arising and passing bodily and mental phenomena, and that there is no separate ego-entity within or without this process. C. H.S. Ward asserts, “We must try to overcome the difficulty of thinking of ‘will’ without a ‘willer’; of ‘deed’ without a ‘doer’; of ‘suffering’ without a ‘sufferer’; in a word, of life being carried on without personal agents” (quoted in Love, 1965: 304).

Thus, in Buddhism, human existence as we observe it is comprised merely of processes of the mental and physical phenomena which have been taking place since time immemorial and will continue far beyond what we can imagine in our mind. The fact that the five aggregates are

present and “co-operate” in these processes does not mean a presence of any self-dependent real ego-entity or personality (Nyanatiloka: 160). Each configuration of aggregates is a momentary force or entity disconnected from the next. In order to illustrate this doctrine, Buddhist teachers have often employed the image of a cart that is essentially a composition of all its parts, the wheels, the axel, the pole, the cart-body, and so forth configured in a particular relationship to one another. It is emphasized that the notion that there is a fixed and permanent entity called “cart” beyond its aggregates is simply an illusion (Vis.M.XVIII). The revered Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa also used the action of the wheel of a chariot in order to explain the momentary nature of life events:

In the ultimate sense the life-moment of living beings is extremely short, being only as much as the occurrence of a single conscious moment. Just as a chariot wheel, when it is rolling, rolls [that is, touches the ground] only on one point of [the circumference of] its tire, and, when it is at rest, rests only on one point, so too, the life of living beings lasts only for a single conscious moment. When that consciousness has ceased, the being is said to have ceased, according as it is said: “In a past conscious moment he did live, not he does live, not he will live. In a future conscious moment not he did live, not he does live, he will live. In the present conscious moment not he did live, he does live, not he will live (Vis.M.XVIII).

The five aggregates, according to the Buddha, are not under control or ownership of any persistent substance. It is mistaken to consider these *khandhas* as “this is mine” or “this is I” or “this is my self” (Varanasi, 1999: 14). The processes observed are the result of Dependent Origination (*Pa-iccasamuppāda*) also known as “the wheel of life” or “the wheel of becoming.” This wheel is a chain of 12 links (*nīdanas*), each link serving as cause for the subsequently resulting effect, and as resulting effect for the preceding cause. The various factors linked together create a chronological sequence as follows:

With Ignorance as condition, there are Volitional Impulses.
With Volitional Impulses as condition, Consciousness.
With Consciousness as condition, Body and Mind.
With Body and Mind as condition, the Six Sense Bases.
With the Six Sense Bases as condition, (sense) Contact.
With Contact as condition, Feeling.
With Feeling as condition, Craving.

With Craving as condition, Clinging.

With Clinging as condition, Becoming.

With Becoming as condition, Birth.

With Birth as condition, Aging and Death, Sorrow,
Lamentation, Pain, Grief and Despair.

The presentation of the 12 links usually begins with the element of ignorance (*avijja*). One sees that the existence of ignorance gives rise to volitional impulses, which in turn gives rise to consciousness, and so forth. While this formulation demonstrates how suffering comes about in our life, it can also be used to explain the cessation of suffering when the various elements that lead to suffering are extinguished (Le Duc, 2015: 126). Although ignorance usually appears first in the formula in the text, the chain is not a linear sequence, and ignorance must not be understood as the root cause or the first cause of suffering or the other elements in the chain. Ignorance is placed first in the chain simply because it is seen as the most logical and convenient element with which to begin the presentation (Payutto, 1995: 83). The various conditions ultimately lead to suffering, grief, dissatisfaction, and various feelings associated with *dukkha*.

This reality of *dukkha* results in further accumulation of unwholesome tendencies that, in turn, leads to perpetuating ignorance which keeps the cycle of suffering (*samsāra*) to repeat itself in an indefinite continuation (Le Duc, 2015: 127). In light of the doctrine of *anattā*, however, any question that attempts to prove the existence of a self such as: Who is the cause of suffering?, Who suffers?, Who is the owner of this body? are considered in Buddhism to be improper questions. The only question that can be asked is, Which cause is responsible for that result?

The theory of Dependent Origination, thus, declares that all things exist in a continuum characterized by an unceasing process of integration and disintegration as a result of various conditions. This reality of impermanence does not allow for any possibility of an intrinsic entity. According to Phra Prayudh Payutto, "The continuum of cause and effect which enables all things to exist as they do can only operate because such things are transient, ephemeral, constantly arising and ceasing and having no in-

trinsic entity of their own” (1994:15). Thus, the principle of Dependent Origination shows that in the various events in nature, all the properties of impermanence, suffering, and not-self are seen, all of which reinforce the Buddhist denial of the existence of any real substance which could be duly called “self.”¹

The Buddhist negation of an intrinsic self departs from the primary concerns of many environmental philosophies, especially the non-anthropocentric brands. As stated previously, the fundamental aims of the non-anthropocentric environmental ethics is to argue for the existence of various degrees of intrinsic value in nature or in particular natural entities in order to justify moral obligation on the part of human beings to refrain from treating nature as a mere instrument for human pleasure. Although the aim of the project is noble, when applied to the context of Buddhism, it becomes impractical, because essential Buddhist teachings refuse to recognize the existence of a holder of value. The Buddhist negation of a real self demonstrated by its three characteristics of existence—impermanence, suffering, and particularly not-self—makes it difficult for it to accommodate this secular ethical notion. In fact, Buddhist teaching, when taken to its ultimate conclusion, tells us that given enough time, however unthinkably long it may be, all the entities in the universe, particularly human beings, will change and eventually cease to exist. This is so because the entire cosmos is impermanent. The most fundamental aim of Buddhism is for all sentient beings to undergo self-cultivation and self-transformation in order to achieve liberation from *samsāric* life. This state of liberation, called *nibbāna* is the state in which all the five aggregates are destroyed, and the person is free from suffering or cravings associated with mundane existence, and in a state of perfect and lasting happiness. The Buddhist concern, however, is not only the transformation of a few individuals but of all sentient beings from the lowest to the highest. It is this very urgent goal of true happiness for all sentient creatures that motivated the Buddha to inquire into the way to make it possible and the task of propagating his teachings a lifetime project. Thus, for Buddhism, the ultimate value is not in holding on to what is impermanent and settling for temporary

happiness, rather through self-cultivation and self-transformation, achieve total emancipation. In this goal, there is no room for trying to affirm a self, building it up, protecting it, or preserving it.

According to Bhikkhu Bodhi:

The teaching of *anattā*, or not-self is not so much a philosophical thesis calling for intellectual assent as a prescription for self-transcendence. It maintains that our ongoing attempt to establish a sense of identity by taking our personalities to be “I” and “mine” is in actuality a project born out of clinging, a project that at the same time lies at the root of our suffering. If, therefore, we seek to be free from suffering, we cannot stop with the transformation of the personality into some sublime and elevated mode as the final goal. What is needed, rather, is a transformation that brings about the removal of clinging, and with it, the removal of all tendencies to self-affirmation. (1990: Internet)

Human-nature relationship of mutual service and gratitude

At first, it seems that the Buddhist negation of intrinsic entities and the intrinsic value of these entities presents a pessimistic situation for a Buddhist environmentalism. How can we enter into relationship with nature if we do not even see value in nature, or even value in ourselves? How can we try to promote well-being in nature and in ourselves if the ultimate value lies not in existence in this world but in *nibbāna*? These questions and concerns are legitimate. However, this outlook does not spell an end for a Buddhist environmentalism. To the contrary, the Buddhist perspective can contribute to it in a very profound way. Reflecting on the Buddhist insistence on not-self and the denial of intrinsic value in mundane entities, human or otherwise, helps us to re-orientate our attention and energy away from the legalistic debate regarding what entities possess what rights and what duties ought to be assigned to human beings, to envisioning a more harmonious relationship characterized by personal disposition towards the other. We oftentimes find ourselves too preoccupied with “winning” the best for ourselves while justifying why the minimum of rights and privilege ought to be accorded to others. This reflects a mentality where selfish

needs and desires trump the well-being of others, and personal responsibility towards the other should stay at the lowest possible degree. The designation of rights and responsibilities is a source of ongoing conflict in all the various dimensions within human society.

The issue is even more problematic when rights are extended to non-human entities and human accountability towards them is expected. The Buddhist worldview with its negation of intrinsic self and its nullification of the intrinsic-instrumental value debate opens up for us a different and creative way of perceiving ourselves as well as perceiving others. This is the source of inspiration to formulate a model of human-nature relationship characterized by “mutual service and gratitude on the journey towards liberation.” This relationship model, though does not displace us from our rightful place in the universe, helps us to be less obsessed with ourselves and more conscious of the presence of others. It also helps us to see that our journey in *samsāra*, in the cycle of life, is far from a solitary sojourn, but one alongside a great number of companions and friends.

Let us first address the implications of the Buddhist rejection of ascribing intrinsic value to impermanent entities on human-nature relationship. Here it is important to affirm that by no means does the negation of intrinsic value in natural entities is to be seen as degrading or denying human worthiness. It is also not advocating some sort of ontological equality between human beings and nature, as some Buddhist environmental enthusiasts have attempted to claim.² It is quite clear in Theravada Buddhism that the state of life as human beings, by virtue of having more joy and less suffering than animals as well as the ability to achieve spiritual progress and emancipation, is a much more favored one.

In the Buddhist conception, however, all beings have their merit in so far as they either have the potential to attain emancipation or contribute to another's emancipation. The non-recognition of intrinsic value in Buddhism is a strong exhortation to not delude oneself into thinking that one must be attached to an intrinsically valuable ego-self and lose sight of the

ultimate good of liberation from *samsāric* life. By not claiming intrinsic value for ourselves, we are less likely to make demands in order to satisfy our selfish desires. Rather, we become transformed from being people who demand things to build up our ego-self to being those who put ourselves at the service of others. In the Buddhist conception of interpersonal relationship as well as human-nature relationship, by insisting that we not be obsessed with our ego-self and its worth, it opens up for us the possibility of seeing human beings and nature in a reciprocal and cooperative relationship in order to help relieve the suffering of one another and help each other to make progress in self-transformation and state of life.

The *Jataka* tale of the hungry tigress illustrates very poignantly how we ought to put ourselves at the service of the other, not just for their sake but ultimately for our own sake as well.

One day, when wandering in a forest along with his disciple Ajita, the Bodhisatta saw from the top of a hill that a tigress was lurking to kill and eat her own cubs out of hunger. Moved by compassion he thought of sacrificing his own body to feed the tigress and save the cubs. So, he sent away his disciple in search of some food for the tigress lest he might prevent him from his sacrifice. No sooner than Ajita left the site, the Bodhisatta jumped from the precipice in front of the tigress and offered his body. The noise of the fall caught the attention of the hungry tigress, who in no time scooped over him and tore him off in pieces and feasted upon them with her cubs.

When Ajita returned and did not find his guru in the same place, he looked around and was surprised to see that the tigress no longer looked hungry. Her cubs were also frolicking. But soon, he was shocked to detect the blood stained rags of his guru's dress scattered there. So, he knew that his guru had offered his body to feed a hungry tigress and protected her young ones as an act of great charity. Now, he also knew why was he sent away by his guru.³

This story of the Bodhisatta and the hungry tigress presents us with a way of understanding ourselves in relationship to others as a relationship of placing ourselves at the service of another. However, genuine service on behalf of the other never implies no personal gain whatsoever. In the story, the Bodhisatta sacrifices his own life for the hungry tigress who is about to kill its own cub to satisfy its hunger. However, with this sacrifice, not only does the Bodhisatta carry out a karmically favorable act for himself, he also prevents the tiger from carrying out a karmically unfavorable act by killing

its own cub. Indeed, the Suttras in the *Anguttara Nikāya* teach that there are four types of people: those who act on behalf of oneself but not others, those who act on behalf of others but not oneself, those who act neither on behalf of oneself nor of others, and those who act both on behalf of oneself and on behalf of others. Of these four, the last type of person is considered to be “the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest of these four” (A.IV.95).

Another tale, *Suvannamiga Jataka*, beautifully illustrates a relationship characterized by mutual service between human and nature that can take place. In this story, a golden stag becomes trapped in the snare of a hunter. Despite his strong efforts and encouragement of his wife, he could not free himself. His devoted wife decides to rescue her husband by confronting the hunter when he comes to collect his catch. She offers her own life in place of her husband’s life. Stunned by this tremendous act of self-sacrifice, the hunter decides to free both of them. In gratitude for the hunter’s change of heart, the deer later present the hunter with a jewel they had found in their feeding ground and implore the hunter to abstain from all killing, to establish a household, and to become involved with good works.⁴

This story suggests the possibility of human beings and nature benefiting each other in how each is able to act in one’s respective capacity on behalf of self and others. The service that human and nature perform for one another, however, does not always have to be as dramatic as shown in the tale above. One of the services that nature does is to facilitate the human activity of meditation on the *Dhamma*. According to David J. Kulupahana, natural settings not only create fewer distractions when it comes to sense pleasures, but also “provide a natural experiential ground for realizing impermanence and dependent arising, that is, the nature of the world” (2009: 5). Indeed, the Buddha encouraged his monks to increase their virtue by resorting to “the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw” (M.I.181; I.346; I.441; III.4; III.116.). The service that human

and nature do for one another, therefore, is not unidirectional, but mutual and symbiotic.

The Buddhist way of valuing, which does not conceive of intrinsic values in natural entities, also has other benefits for an environmental ethic. Certainly, it forswears the controversies of the intrinsic-instrumental value dichotomy that causes much debate and headache for environmental ethicists. In these systems, there is much disagreement regarding who or what has or does not have intrinsic value, and if it possesses intrinsic value, in what degree is it? And there is also controversy as to whether the intrinsic value in various entities objectively exists or has to be conferred upon by a conscious valuer.⁵ Buddhism, suggests Phra Prayudh Payutto, introduces a way for us to value each other in a way that does not start with the question of what can I get from a particular person or thing.

This kind of attitude is self-centered and risks leading down the path of exploitation of the other. Moreover, the moment that one feels that one cannot get more from the other, one ceases to value the other. On the other hand, the way to value in which we realize and appreciate all that the other has given us, leads us to true gratitude for the gifts that we have received. This then makes the way for goodwill towards the others and the desire to protect the other from any harm that may come their way (Payutto, 2010: 20). The *Khuddaka Nikāya* states: “A person who sits or sleeps in the shade of a tree should not cut off a tree branch. One who injures such a friend is evil.”

The good-will that human beings exhibit towards nature not only results from our gratitude to nature for all that nature has done for us, but it also comes from an understanding that because both human beings and nature are bound together in the natural process of birth, old age, suffering, and death in *sa sāra*, we are truly companions on a journey where the final destination is emancipation for all sentient beings. The recognition of this companionship is essential in forming an internal disposition that sub-

sequently is demonstrated in concrete actions of cooperation and mutual service rather than destructive ones.

The principle of Dependent Origination reminds us that all things in the world come about as a result of causality; thus, there is a real connection between ourselves and the things around us. Buddhism's teaching on karmic effect on rebirth reminds us that any animal that we see running in the forest may in fact be one of our ancestors because in the course of beginning-less *samsāra*, that living being may have been our father, mother, child, sister, or daughter (S.2.189-190). By the same token, that living being may be our very mother or father in a future life. Whether with fellow human beings or non-human nature, when we are able to recognize the intrinsic connection between ourselves and others in the world, it is easier to envision a journey accompanied by friends rather a solitary one. Even within the human realm itself, experience shows that the happiest people do not make their strivings in isolation of other people, but in concert with others. We are encouraged to make progress but not neglecting the poor, the unfortunate, the marginalized, and the weak among us. We are best when we lift others up as we attempt to do the same for ourselves. The Buddhist *samsāra*, thus encourages us to expand our boundary of kinship and companionship beyond our self, our family circle, our human realm, to include all the entities in the circle of existence.

Generosity (*cāga*) in Giving (*dāna*)

In order to nourish a mutually beneficial human-nature relationship of mutual service and gratitude, Buddhism calls for a program of self-cultivation that helps us to develop various virtues such as mercy, compassion, moderation, and responsibility. While there is much that could be discussed about these virtues, this section will focus on one that perhaps does not always come up automatically, that is the virtue of generosity (*cāga*). Generosity is the antidote for greed and attachment and is considered to be an essential quality of a superior person (*sappurisa*), alongside other important qualities of faith, morality, learning and wis-

dom (Bikkhu Bodhi, 1995). According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, generosity as a spiritual quality is important because “the goal of the path is the destruction of greed, hate and delusion, and the cultivation of generosity directly debilitates greed and hate, while facilitating that pliancy of mind that allows for the eradication of delusion” (Ibid.). True generosity is the underlying impetus for the practice of *dāna parami*, the perfection of giving that brings about wholesome *kamma* essential to the path of enlightenment (Jootla, 1995). Indeed, giving is an admirable act and Buddhism focuses a great deal on giving. However, the kind of giving that Buddhism is interested in is not just any act of giving, but those acts of giving that are motivated by the genuine internal disposition of generosity.

Giving is so fundamental to Buddhism that the Buddha usually preached to newcomers by beginning with this topic (V.I.15,18). Giving is also listed as the first of the 10 perfections (*pāramitā*), which are necessary for anyone who aspires to travel the path towards arahantship. In the *Anguttara Nikāya*, eight motivations for giving are specified: to insult the recipient, from fear, to reciprocate, expecting a future gift in return, because giving is good, because of the sense of justice, because of gaining a good reputation, and to ornament and equip the mind (A.IV.236). Among these, the Buddha taught that the most superior reason for giving is with the intention that it will benefit the effort to attain *nibbāna*. Giving with pure volition is what makes it an act of generosity.

Susan Elbaum Jootla remarks:

Ariyas—noble ones, those who have attained any of the four stages of holiness—always give with pure volition because their minds function on the basis of wisdom. Those below this level sometimes give carelessly or disrespectfully, with unwholesome states of mind. The Buddha teaches that in the practice of giving, as in all bodily and verbal conduct, it is the volition accompanying the act that determines its moral quality. If one is offering something to a monk, doing so without adopting a respectful manner would not be proper. Throwing a coin to a beggar in order to get rid of him would also be considered a defilement of giving. One should think carefully about the relevance and the timing of a gift for it to bring the best results. A gift

given through an intermediary—for example, having a servant give food to a monk rather than giving it by one's own hand—also detracts from the value of the gift. (1995: Internet)

The object given may be both material and non-material things. Material things include food, clothes, and money, while non-material thing would be words of encouragement, and most important of all, the *Dhamma* itself. The gift of the *Dhamma* was given first by the Buddha, then subsequently by the monks. Lay people participate in giving the gift of *Dhamma* by supporting the *Sangha*, which has the direct mission of imparting this gift to the general public, with essential material things. Besides giving to the recluses and brahmins, people are also expected to give to the destitute, wayfarers, wanderers and beggars. Lily de Silva describes the Suttas' assessment of the qualities of the person who gives generously as follows:

He is munificent (*muttacago*) and is interested in sharing his blessings with others (*dānasamvibhagarato*). He is a philanthropist who understands the difficulties of the poor (*vadannu*). He is open-handed and is ready to comply with another's request (*payatapani*). He is one fit to be asked from (*yacayogo*). He takes delight in distributing gifts to the needy (*vossaggarato*), and has a heart bent on giving (*cāgaparibhavitacitto*). (De Silva ,1995: Internet)

Moreover, the gift of a good person is given out of faith, given respectfully, given in a timely manner, given unreservedly, and given without injuring himself or others (A.III.173). In all these acts of giving, the Buddha said that the giver “is joyful before giving;” “has a placid, confident mind in the act of giving;” and “is elated after giving” (A.III.336). This demeanor is to be maintained even when the act of giving involves great self sacrifice on the part of the giver.

An illustration of this perfection in giving is cited by I.B. Horner when he selected the story of the hare from the *Jātaka* collection (J.308). In this story, Sakka, disguised as a famished brahmin, approached the hare asking for food. Because the hare had nothing in his house to offer the religious man, he decided to offer himself, inviting the religious to eat him, then jumping into the fire. At the moment of self sacrifice, the story recounts, “Then offering his whole body as a free gift he sprang up, and like a royal swan, alighting on a cluster of lotuses, in an ecstasy of joy he fell on the

heap of live coals” (Francis and Neil, 1897: 37). Fortunately, it was only Sakka’s test of the hare’s virtue and the coal was made cool so as not to do any harm to the hare. In fact, instead of feeling the burning heat from the coal, the hare felt that it was icy cold. This type of completely selfless act of sacrifice is also seen in the story of the guru who gives his life to feed the hungry tigress related above.

How does the virtue of generosity reflected in the perfection of giving strengthen the human-nature relationship of mutual service and gratitude? In the previous section, it has already been mentioned how nature is of service to human beings, not only providing physical sustenance but also facilitating spiritual growth. There is no question that without nature, human beings cannot survive. Without the oxygen produced by plants, human beings would not be able to sustain life. The processes taking place in nature is also extremely conducive to the spiritual progress of human beings when they meditate and reflect on them. The service that nature offers to human beings is constant and unceasing. The relationship of mutual service, by the very phrase, implies a reciprocal relationship and human beings must also put themselves at the service of nature. True service requires giving, and giving not just in a haphazard manner, but giving with a joyous and peaceful heart, giving out of true generosity.

The virtue of generosity strengthens the relationship of mutual service because it responds to nature’s generosity towards human beings with our own mode of generosity. Human generosity reflects our appreciation of the Buddhist doctrine of *kataññukatavedi* in which one is conscious of the favor that one receives and has the mind to reciprocate such favor. This is the teaching of gratitude that we apply not only to other human beings but to any entity that acts on our behalf. The *Phra Dharmakosajarn* points to the Buddha as the embodiment of gratitude. After the Buddha achieved Enlightenment, he traveled to his homeland to pay gratitude to his father as well as to the surrounding environment. In addition, the Buddha displayed gratitude to the Bodhi tree under which he sat to meditate seven days before achieving his ultimate goal of Enlightenment (*Phra Dharm-*

kosajarn, 2011: 16). The virtue of generosity also strengthens human-nature relationship because it is the opposite of the defilements of selfishness and attachment that are so detrimental not only to our own well-being but also to the well-being of nature. It would not take much to convince us that much of the environmental devastation taking place is due to human attachment to material possessions and selfishly accumulating them, causing great strains on natural resources and upsetting the ecological equilibrium.

The generosity that human beings display towards nature has to be in a way that is appropriate to our status in the world, reflecting the degree of ethical and spiritual development that we have undergone. Human generosity may be displayed through reforestation projects in order to maintain suitable habitats for animals and insects. Human generosity may be demonstrated in reduction of the usage of chemicals that are harmful to the natural environment and the atmosphere. It may take place through financial donations to projects that promote environmental well-being, and organizations that publicize information about environmental destruction and climate change. Generosity can also take place through supporting the *Sangha* and particular religious leaders to give spiritual guidance on environmental issues.⁶ Through these acts of service for the sake of nature, human-nature relationship can be reinforced and strengthened in significant ways.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Buddhist teachings on the Three Characteristics of Existence provides a starting point for reflecting on human-nature relationship that departs from the popular investigation that focuses on the issue of intrinsic-instrumental value and the rights and obligations derived from the designation of value in various entities. These teachings highlight a basic commonality in all sentient beings from the lowest to the highest, which is the desire for transformation and true happiness. Awareness and appreciation of this common aspiration provides the impetus for a human-nature relationship built on

mutual service and gratitude as all entities carry out their journey in *samsāra* and strive for eventual liberation from the cycle of rebirth. In this paper, the virtue of generosity in giving was highlighted as an essential disposition in nourishing and reinforcing such a relationship of mutual service and gratitude. As it can be seen, while Buddhism may not conform to traditional approaches of secular environmental ethics, its spirituality and teaching can indeed make a unique contribution to promoting environmental well-being when conscientiously considered and applied in our life.

Endnotes

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