

How does Buddhism Contribute to the Environmental Problems?

Shuichi Yamamoto and
Victor S. Kuwahara

Introduction

THERE are many environmental problems. The global problems include the global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer, the deforestation, and the decrease of biodiversity, desertification, acid rain, and the seawater pollution etc. and there are an endocrine-disrupting chemical, agricultural chemicals and the food additive for the problems in livelihood zone. These problems become the biggest task in the world because it means destruction of the living base of the human race at the present and the near future. Various counter measures have been taken for environmental problems. These are basically divided into two measures by the development of the technology and by the control of the human activity besides the investigation of the cause. However, a religion cannot be expected to contribute directly from a quite same standpoint of the science and technology. If the religion could contribute the solving problems, it would be that an examination of method that enables control of human activities, i.e. conversions of lifestyle and sense of values, examination of the environmental ethics, brewing of the ethical recognition, examination of the civilization and its conversion from a global view. As for these, the positive participation of the religion might be possible.

We have examined up to now that how does Buddhism contribute to the environmental problems from the basic viewpoints of that environmental problems will cause physical and mental suffering for all living beings and that the mission of Buddhism is to reduce and remove the suffering for them. They are that the views of nature and environment, the cause and the feature of the environmental problems¹, the meanings of the Buddhist precepts², the ideal way of a civilization³, the ideal ways of the environmental education and the environmental ethics⁴ and so on, from the viewpoints of Buddhism. In the paper, in order to solve the problems we would like to describe three points that recognition of the environmental problems, reexamination of lifestyle, practice and activity

to solving the problems.

1. Recognition of Environmental Problems

A lot of people should share the problem for environmental problems. First for that, it is necessary to recognize the current state and the cause of these problems deeply. The current recognition of the problem will not be able to be requested besides the search for the science. However, the causes of the problems have to be investigated not only from the movement and cycle of material by the human activity from the standpoint of science but also from the factors of society and the human being. At the latter, Buddhism is able to study about the cause of the problems. Moreover, Buddhism can also recognize it from the deeper viewpoint of a person, and can show the principle of an evolution of human beings and the environment. It is also important for keeping the environment and nature to be proper to recognize the meanings and the roles of them.

(1) Fundamental biospheric egalitarianism in living things and symbiosis thought

It is an important aspect in environmental ethics as to how human beings, living things and non-living things are perceived. In respect to Buddhism, humans, living things and non-living things are fundamentally recognized to be equal in life levels. The term “life levels” does not refer to the common meaning of “life”, but refers to the fundamental power as life energy which supports living beings. Buddhism teaches that this fundamental power which can be called “life” potentially also exists in non-living things.

One characteristic concept of Buddhism in recognizing the occurrence of every phenomena, i.e. living things and nature, is found in the concept of Dependent Origination⁵ (*engi*; italic terms in parentheses are Buddhist terms in Japanese, and so forth). The concept means that an entity does not exist and generate independently, but that every entity exists only because of its relations with or the conditions of other entities. Buddhism teaches that an entity cannot exist independently because of the fundamental interdependence and interconnectedness of all phenomena. Relation of ontology (relation of space) and relation of formation (relation of time) are included in the concept. The concept of nature and environment seen in the concept of Dependent Origination (*engi*) is similar to concepts of ecology. Everything is somehow connected. Therefore, the very principles of bio-diversity and symbiosis of nature

and living things are primary in maintaining our world. This concept of Dependent Origination (*engi*) underlies everything in Buddhism.

On the other hand, Buddhism has concepts that “life” can transmute and reborn (*rinne-tensho*) and that an ideal way of “life” in human and living beings is enlightenment (*Jobutsu*)⁶. Here, the enlightenment means the most ideal state of “life” and present the realm of “Buddha” in the “life”. This recognition is derived from that every living being have the same “life” as well as humans. Therefore, every living being is fundamentally equal in Buddhism.

(2) Non-duality of life and the environment and the principle of evolution

An “environment” can only be defined when there is a corresponding subject. The viewpoint of the environment in Buddhism recognizes not only the relation of every living being and inorganic material like the ecology but also the deeper layer of “life”. This is a viewpoint of karma and a subject and the environment are the expression of the karma.

Buddhism has a concept of the non-duality of living beings and its environment (*e-sho-funi*)⁷ which explains the relation between subject and its environment. “*E-sho*” is a contraction of the Japanese terms “*e-ho*” and “*sho-ho*.” The syllable “*ho*” here means manifest effect, or results of karma. “*Sho-ho*” indicates the living beings or the subjective world, and “*e-ho*” indicates the insentient environment or the objective world. The effects of an individual living being’s past karma manifest themselves in both its subjective life and its objective environment. Since the syllable “*funi*” means “two in phenomena but not two in essence”, “*e-sho-funi*” means “life and its environment are two distinct phenomena but non-dual in their fundamental essence.” Both the subject and its environment coexist or are non-dual in a situation that is a result of karma.

From the viewpoint of the Buddhist concept of karma, the environment is considered to be derived from the karma seed (*go-shuji*), marked in the alaya-consciousness (*araya-shiki*) in the school of consciousness only (*Yuishiki-ha*) which should be called Buddhist psychology⁸. The karma seed (*go-shuji*) is composed by two kinds of common karma (*gu-go*) and individual karma (*fugu-go*). While common karma (*gu-go*) is karma shared with others, individual karma (*fugu-go*) is karma that is not. These concepts of common karma (*gu-go*) and individual karma (*fugu-go*) are relative ones, and shared common karma (*gu-go*) is changed according to the subject involved.

It is described in the text of Abhidharma-nyayanusara (*Junshori-ron*)⁹

that mountains, rivers, the earth and so on are born from common karma (*gu-go*), and living beings are born from individual karma (*fugu-go*). Individual humans are, therefore, born from individual karma (*fugu-go*), and the natural environment of mountains, rivers and the earth is produced by common karma (*gu-go*) of the human race. As a result, the world of human's deep psychology is connected with the physical world in the alaya-consciousness (*araya-shiki*). The improvement of the karma of humans will improve its environment resulting from common karma (*gu-go*). Therefore, in the non-duality of living beings and its environment (*e-sho-funi*), the environment (*e-ho*) is derived from the common karma (*gu-go*), while the living beings (*sho-ho*) is derived from the individual karma (*fugu-go*). That is, the subject and its environment is integral and not dual in the Buddhism.

The principle shows that the subject and its environment can be changed and improved as well as that the environmental problems caused by the karma in the deeper layer of the life. Therefore, the revolution of the subjective karma can revolve not only the subjective human but also its environment.

The earth science has recently revealed that living beings and the environments had evolved both while mutually interacting. This is a concept of the mutual evolution of living beings and the environments. The Buddhism contains not only a physical side but also "mutual evolution" at the root level of "life" though the concept of the science contains only a physical side.

2. Reexamination of Lifestyle

Next, we should examine what way of life is suitable for solving the environmental problems. To say, this is reexamination of lifestyle. The examination of the way of human life in Buddhism demands improvement of the ethics consideration including other living beings, people in the world and generation in the future, reexamination of lifestyle and examination of ideal way of own desire.

(1) Ethics for living beings and earth ethics

When the ethics for others of humans or living beings in Buddhism, two philosophical concepts: the "Dependent Origination (*engi*)" and the "Middle-Way (*chudo*)" are important. Both concepts serve important viewpoints that contribute to solving environmental problems. As mentioned above the doctrine of "Dependent Origination" denotes spatial and time relations. The ethics for humans to nature would be able to

examine from the “Dependent Origination”.

Diversions that harm these dependent origination relationships are contradictory to Buddhist wisdom. Thus, maintaining a balanced ecosystem with biodiversity is very important from the viewpoint of concept of “dependent origination” in Buddhism. Because every living being can live in even by relations with other living beings and inorganic nature, Buddhism must deny the human activities to cut the relations. What should be considered in maintaining biodiversity is in that case, whether it thinks about continuing an individual living thing or it thinks about continuing at the level of the species or the ecosystem. In other words, there are two standpoints where an individual life is esteem like “reverence for life” of Albert Schweitzer¹⁰, and where securing stability of ecosystem is valued like “land ethics” of Aldo Leopold¹¹. This question is similar to the question in the “life centrism” of the environmental ethics. Although Buddhism is the “life centrism”, it is necessary to describe the wisdom of the “middle-way (*chudo*)” in Buddhism in order to examine this.

The typical thinking way of the “middle-way” in Buddhism is well shown in the “middle-way of suffering-and-happiness”. The “middle-way of suffering-and-happiness” is led from the training of Shakyamuni. This is neither standpoint that denies neither hedonism nor asceticism, and affirms it also. That is, while accepting the value of either principles or extremes the “middle-way” demands harmony between the two and does not accept an inclination to either side. It is important for the middle-way to include both sides in balance. When Buddhism will examine the ethics from the ideas of the “middle-way” and the “dependent origination”, the ethics will be the situation ethics. Here, Buddhism emphasizes “compassion” and “not killing (*ahimsa*)”. Buddhism that insists on the equality of all living beings, naturally, “compassion” and “ahimsa” will reach all living beings.

Then, Buddhism will examine the ethics to the living beings from the “dependent origination”, “middle-way”, “compassion”, and “ahimsa” in consideration of each situation. It becomes a natural conclusion that the Buddhist does not desert the seabird covered with the oil that had flown out from the stranded tanker, and also that he makes an effort to the relief of a dying animal. However, the Buddhist might adjust the number of antelope that increases too much according to the situation. Buddhism basically esteems all living beings. However, when the other species might become extinct by a certain species that increased too much, Buddhism will not deny adjusting the latter species in order to keep the harmony of the ecosystem and to conserve the former. Howev-

er, the method of exterminating will adopt the method of not killing as much as possible from “compassion” and “ahimsa”. Concretely, it is likely to practice birth control, and to be thought about the isolation of the female and the male etc. The many human acts such as development should be denied most because a decrease of the biomass and extinction of the species by it will ruin the stability of the ecosystem and will affect the other species. Therefore, the maintenance of the biodiversity and the stability of the global ecosystem will be valued from a standpoint of the earth ethics.

(2) Spiritual civilization and appropriate desire

The biggest problem for the solution of global warming is that the consumption of a material necessary to support the human race in the limited material system of the earth is too excess. Carbon dioxide not treatable by photosynthesis of land plant and phytoplankton remains in the atmosphere because the consumption speed is high. Therefore, one of the measures is to maintain the human activity by the exhaust of lesser carbon dioxide with a new technology. The limit might exist though the effort of this has done until now and is going to continue hereafter. Therefore, another method of decreasing consumption by human being, that is, the human activity can do nothing but be controlled. Then, the issue is how to control the desire in the basis of the consumption activity of humans. However, it seems to have avoided the problem of the desire up to now. At the present richness for humans is material richness, and the index to measure is economy. Therefore, the human race who has always located economical development as a proposition seems to have avoided the problem of the desire to support an economic activity. Economical development is maintained by always stimulating the desire, and increasing consumption. On the other hand, an effort to technological development to decrease carbon dioxide exhausted has been made. However, now, the method is breaking down with the depletion of resource and the environmental problems.

Buddhism has insisted that the way of being for the desire is one of the biggest problems of humans. When thinking about the solution of environmental problems including the depletion of the resource, it is necessary to consider about two in way of being for the human desire. One is to control the desire for material, and another is to change the direction for it.

In the human desire, there is a physiological, material, and mental one. Especially desire for material might expand infinitely, though physiological desires, i.e. sleep desire, appetite and sexual desire, are adjust-

ed by the central nervous system and the age, etc. Buddhism has searched for the cause in which the desire happens, and has inquired into controlling the desire and way of being for appropriate desire.

A Buddhist monk in ancient India, Vasubandhu (*Seshin*) explains that the desire is caused by devotion to the self (*ga*) in the manas-consciousness (*mana-shiki*) as the root ego¹². The self attachment within the unconscious ego affects human behavior. That is, as a result, the self (*ga*) is greedy for its likings and is attached to them. In other words, this attachment to likings is devotion to material dealing with sight, voice, smell, taste, and touch grasped by the fifth consciousness (*go-shiki*) on the surface of the manas-consciousness. This attachment becomes devotion to fixed ideas and false views which are thought to be connected to happiness. This devotion, however, is not connected to happiness in the least. Accordingly, the more the devotion to one's likings is strengthened, the more satisfaction is not obtained. And it becomes never-ending desire for material.

Then, Mahayana Buddhism teaches, integrating an individual and the small self with the large self (the ninth clean consciousness: *Konpon-joshiki*) as the whole cosmos, as the method of an elimination from self attachment, and cleaning the ability equipped in the sense of organs as the method of elimination of the desire for material. This is realistically to live with the sense of value that people who knows fulfillment will be happy even if he is poor, and people who does not know satisfaction is poor even if he is rich, described in the sutra (Butsu-Yuigyo-Kyo)¹³. It is indispensable that the human race's sharing such sense of values, especially people in the developed country, embodies it. This practice of "knowing fulfillment" becomes ethically basic that controls the desire for material.

Another method to reduce material consumption is to change the direction where the desire proceeds. That is, the desire is made toward not a direction where material richness is requested but a direction where mental richness is requested. The never-ending desire for material bounds to depletion of the resources and immediate deterioration of the environment directly. However, even if it is limitless, requesting mental richness does not promote resource waste and environmental destruction. In this meaning, the direction of the vector in which the desire is satisfied should not make toward a material direction but a mental direction. The purpose of training in Buddhism is an enlightenment, that is, the completion of a human's way of life. It is the completion of humans for spiritual and completion of an action keeping compassion. Anyway, controlling the desire and making the desire toward the direction to

mental richness have a large meaning to solve environmental problems.

3. Practice and Action for Solving the Problems

Finally, we would like to describe the ideal code of conduct and ethics norm in Buddhism as it relates to environmental problems. Schroeder-Frechet, K.S. (1981)¹⁴ describes that human beings are miserably incompetent in decision-making and ethical thinking, although they have many analytical strengths in the area of science and technology. In other words, the behaviors of people are not inherently ideal, though many people in the world recognize to have to solve environmental problems. Then it is important how people behave ideally. We should ask whether the practice to solve environmental problems can be continued there. The motivation to continue might be needed. There is no problem if it is possible to continue only by appealing for the meaning, though the purpose of solving the problems is not only for the self but also the entire human race. However, it is not too easy actually.

Do human beings have the capability and methods for ideal behavior? We think that maybe some contrivance is necessary. Human society generally requires a good reason (profit or incentives) for conducting good intentions. Thus, it is important for a system to be designed that offers some positive incentives or profit for good intentions towards environmental problems. This is only possible if an efficient profitable system is designed in society. For instance, some good examples are the tax reduction incentives and subsidy allocation when contributions are made to conserving and protecting the environment, such as buying energy conserving products. In short, it is necessary to design a system that has visible and concrete results for those who help solve environmental problems. This is an issue that should be reflected in the policy.

From a Buddhist perspective, solving and contributing to the eradication of environmental problems is itself part of the practice of Buddhism. In other words, solving environmental problems is a natural aspect of the Buddhist philosophy. One important example is the practice of the way of the Bodhisattva using the six paramitas. The six paramitas are composed of *Dāna paramita* (generosity), *Śīla paramita* (keeping precepts), *Kshanti paramita* (patience), *Vīrya paramita* (effort), *Dhyāna paramita* (unwavering) and *Prajñā paramita* (wisdom); *Dāna paramita* means giving a fortune, preaching a law or removing fear, i.e., doing something good without regret for a person and nature, *Śīla paramita* means keeping precepts such as not hurting or killing living entities and not stealing, *Kshanti paramita* means enduring sadness

and pain, *Vīrya paramita* means doing your best and always making effort to do better, *Dhyāna paramita* means being unwavering or steadfast in all endeavors, and *Prajñā paramita* means obtaining true cognition of wisdom from the concepts of “dependent origination” and the “middle-way”.

Thinking concretely the six *paramitas* from the viewpoint of practice for solving environmental problems: *Dāna paramita* (generosity) includes donating an environmental movement, making schools for the improvement of education in the developing countries, teaching whereabouts of environmental problems and methods to solution, contributing to technical co-operation and the development to decrease pollution, not giving fruitlessly fear of the problems but giving the precise knowledge and the sense of security, moreover offering appropriate living places for wildlife. *Śīla paramita* means keeping precepts such as “precept of not killing” and “precept of not stealing” in Buddhism. As we have already examined these precepts¹⁵, intentionally killing living beings commits “the precept of not killing” and destructing the living ground of wild flora and fauna by development and the destruction of nature offend against “the precept of not stealing”. Therefore, it is necessary to suppress such acts. *Kshanti paramita* (patience), *Vīrya paramita* (effort), and *Dhyāna paramita* (unwavering) mean that enduring and getting over much difficulty caused by acting to solve the problems without disturbing. *Prajñā paramita* (wisdom) means that learning the wisdoms from the concepts of “dependent origination” and the “middle-way”, and that obtaining truth recognition at a standpoint of correct views of nature and environment, or creating a method of solving the problems and practicing it.

Therefore, actions and perseverance for solutions towards environmental problems corresponds to the Bodhisattva way very well. It is even more important to establish the true meaning of the six *paramitas* as a intuitive part of Buddhist practice, which is not something separate from protecting and conserving the environment. In other words, a Bodhisattva who practices the six *paramitas* is someone who is acting in accordance with protecting the environment and reducing environmental problems. Buddhists will be able to contribute to solving environmental problems more positively if these codes of conduct and ethic norms are maintained in Buddhist practice.

References

- ¹ Yamamoto, S. (1998) Contribution of Buddhism to Environmental Thoughts, *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 8, 144–173, and Yamamoto, S. and Kuwahara, V.C. (2008)

The Middle-way of Buddhism and Environmental Problems, *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 18, 89–101.

² Yamamoto, S. (2002) Environmental Ethics in Mahayana Buddhism: The Significance of Keeping Precepts and Wisdom, *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 12, 137–155.

³ Yamamoto, S. and Kuwahara, V.C. (2005) Deforestation and Civilization: A Buddhist Perspective., *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 15, 78–93.

⁴ Yamamoto, S. (2001) Mahayana Buddhism and Environmental Ethics: From the Perspective of the Consciousness-Only Doctrine, *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 11, 167–180, Yamamoto, S. (2003) Environmental Problems and Buddhist Ethics: From the Perspective of the Consciousness-Only Doctrine, in “*Psychology and Buddhism: From Individual to Global Community*”, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York, 239–257, and Yamamoto, S. and Kuwahara, V.S. (2006) Symbiosis with the Global Environment: Buddhist Perspective of Environmental Education, *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, vol. 16, 176–185.

⁵ *ibid.* *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 8, 144–173.

⁶ *ibid.* *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 8, 144–173.

⁷ *ibid.* *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 8, 144–173.

⁸ *ibid.* *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 8, 144–173, *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 11, 167–180, and *Psychology and Buddhism*, 239–257.

⁹ Abhidhama-nyāyānusāra (Junshori-ron) was written by Samghabhadra of the Sarvāstivāda school (Ubu) and translated into Chinese by Hsüantsang (Genjo).

¹⁰ Roderick Frazier Nash (1989) *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (History of American Thought and Culture), Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

¹¹ Aldo Leopold (1949) *A Sand Country Almanac*, London, Oxford University Press.

¹² *ibid.* *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 8, 144–173.

¹³ Butsu-Yuigyo-Kyo (Sutra) *Taisho-shinshu-daizo-kyo*, vol. 12, 1111 (under).

¹⁴ Shrader-Frechette, K.S. (1981) *Environmental Ethics*, Boxwood Press. This sentence is translated from the Japanese book (1993) to English.

¹⁵ *ibid.* *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 12, 137–155.