

Ecosophy and Buddhist Wisdom

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1. Ecosophy: A more Comprehensive Ecology

IF we turn our eyes to “the self,” not “human beings” in a metaphysical sense, but as a more pragmatic existence, we can see that our natural environment plus our social and cultural environments impact us in complex ways, and the influences of not only the current generation, but also our past and future generations psychologically shape our identity. When we discuss ecological issues, the scale of relationships that this idea encompasses becomes infinite, and just focusing on the problematic relations between human beings and nature among all the other countless relationships in our reality removes us from the fundamental solution. In other words, a more comprehensive approach to ecology is required.

Thus far, perhaps the ideas of the French psychoanalyst and post-structuralist Felix Guattari (1930–1992) are closest in conceiving a framework for a more comprehensive ecology. He suggests that it is self-deceiving to view our actions as having three separate components of mind, society and the environment. The only way to solve the current ecological imbalance brought about by scientific technology is to adopt “ecosophy,” which is a way of viewing the world as a combination of the three areas of environment, social relations and human subjectivity articulated ethico-politically. Ecosophy is an integration and sublimation of three ecologies: environmental ecology, social ecology and mental ecology.

Guattari’s emphasis in ecosophy seems to be practical creativity, rather than theoretical comprehensiveness. Ecology is a practical discipline. To take a practical approach by ascertaining the countless relationships that cross paths, and to reconstruct the whole requires nothing other than human creativity. I consider that Guattari’s point is to revive uniform human subjectivity in current global capitalism toward specialization (*singularité*). Ecosophy by its original definition is an ecological philosophy, but the true nature behind this concept may be

his wish for humanity to develop creative ecological wisdom.

Let us also recall, Arne Naess (1912–2009), the Norwegian philosopher who proposed the concept of ecosophy earlier than Guattari. Naess, known as the progenitor of Deep Ecology, arrived at ecosophy as a result of deeply analyzing human existence through relational thinking. Naess postulates: if the term “ecophilosophy” is used to describe the study of issues that are relevant to both ecology and philosophy, then “ecosophy” is the philosophy that needs to be used to tackle the problems that we individually face. This ecosophy can be explained as the study of the intellectual output of a subject that creates ecological relationships, and this understanding of ecosophy as the study of practical wisdom of an individual sets up the framework for a larger concept of wisdom that captures the aspects of natural science from an ecosystem viewpoint, to the aspects of political action from a sociological viewpoint, and even includes the aspects of the internal revolution of consciousness that occurs from a psychological viewpoint. Naess’s ecosophy aims to be a comprehensive ecology which also involves components of mind, society and the environment by focusing on the creative ecological wisdom of human beings.

2. The Limitations of Ecosophy

As explained above, the comprehensive ecology proposed by ecosophy places great importance on the development of humanity’s creative ecological wisdom.

However, ecosophy is not without its limitations. First of all, most ecosophists tend to neglect the ecological advances made by scientific technology. Without the dualistic worldview that separates people and nature or the mechanical approach of viewing nature, we would not even recognize the ecological crisis at hand. Secondly, if each individual has their own creative ecosophy, is there not a need to have some type of universal environmental ethic? Acquiring a creative long-term ecological intuition deeply rooted in one’s personality is not an easy task. Thirdly, Guattari’s unilateral condemnation of the psychological homogenization brought about by capitalism and the mass media may be regarded as a type of bias. It is because of mass media that humankind can widely share knowledge, and maintain a sense of togetherness as a society.

To summarize, the most fundamental flaw of ecosophy’s environmental philosophy lies in its exclusivity. Ecosophy currently appears to be a philosophy that excludes modern rationality and humanism.

3. Buddhism—a Non-positional Ecosophy

I believe the next step in the discussion of ecosophy is the conceptualization of a philosophy of creative ecological wisdom that is far removed from any kind of positionality. Therefore, as one possible model, I would like to introduce a philosophy that is representative of the non-Western camp: Buddhism.

Besides the concepts of dependent origination and non-self (Skt. *anātman*), there are yet many Buddhist traditions that deserve attention in their possible contribution to the discussion on ecology. One is the emphasis that Buddhism places on the practice of “wisdom” (Skt. *prajñā*). Wisdom in Buddhism is defined as the spiritual power to discern the truth of all phenomena. The goal of Buddhism is none other than to complete this power of wisdom to awaken to the state of Buddhahood. The features of the completed wisdom of a Buddha are fully congruent with the qualities of creative ecological wisdom.

Shakyamuni awakened to the truth that all things in the world are interconnected, and this wisdom allowed him to transcend his personal suffering, to find happiness together with others, and come to know the joy of achieving harmony with nature. With this realization came the mental ecology of revitalizing oneself through recognizing secular illusions and freeing oneself from the attachments of a false-self, the social ecology of recreating healthy ties with others by overcoming the animosity and sadness that floods society through the power of compassion, and the environmental ecology of sharply perceiving the indivisibility of oneself and nature. Shakyamuni taught that we should seek an ecological balance in all areas where we have subjective encounters. Perhaps the wisdom of Shakyamuni’s realization was a creative ecological wisdom toward a more comprehensive ecology.

The characteristic of non-positionality will become clearer if we examine Buddhist ecology from the perspective of wisdom. Early Buddhist texts define a person of wisdom as one who distances themselves from secular views of “only this is true,” distances themselves from argument, and frees themselves from all attachment¹. Of course, Buddhism inherently possesses a religious position. However, non-positionality is the position of Buddhism.² Early Buddhism avoided arguing with others of any doctrine from any particular stance, as positionality leads to prejudice, and away from a correct understanding. In the context of ecosophy, this means Shakyamuni’s Buddhism is a non-positional “philosophication” of creative ecological wisdom.

4. Buddhism's Rejection of Secularism

Rereading through early Buddhist texts in search of a non-positional ecosophy will surely advance us on the path to an expansive ecology that encompasses all fields. However, Buddhism's view that our salvation is achieved through disengagement from secular society is a serious obstacle on this path.

Early Buddhist teachings generally direct disciples to carry out their practice toward liberation in remote mountainous areas, as Shakyamuni disliked secular life and all the enticing distractions that abound in it. Liberation is a condition where one is free from all attachments of the mind and body, and in the completion phase, one enters a state of nirvana of no remainder to rid themselves of their body in order to detach themselves from the source of delusion. The teaching that life infinitely cycles through birth and death is an ancient Indian tradition that was incorporated into Buddhism, and the ultimate objective of the practice was to detach oneself from the entity that continues to cycle. At present, there are probably a number of researchers who deny the premise of a Buddhist environmental ethic because of Buddhism's rejection of secularism. In addition, there may be those that criticize Buddhist practice as self-directed salvation that will actually hinder the attempt to connect on an ecological level.³

Is rejection of secularism a fundamental basis in Buddhist thought? Does Shakyamuni, a virulent proponent of non-positionality, who pointed out the absurdity of clinging to any particular notion, believe that only the state of liberation from the secular is the ultimate truth? This does not seem consistent. Considering the non-positionality of the Middle Way, the real intent of the Buddha probably lies between secularism and anti-secularism. When we reexamine early Buddhist texts with this in mind, we see Shakyamuni on the one hand recommending his followers to distance themselves from the sources of confusion to reach the shores of enlightenment, but on the other hand, states, "He for whom there is neither this shore nor the other shore, nor yet both, he who is free of cares and is unfettered—him do I call a holy man."⁴ By saying this, he points us to a non-positional state. This is Shakyamuni's true intent—to achieve complete non-positionality, to free ourselves from all attachments, which is Buddhism's practice of an ideal.

5. Ecosophy from the Perspective of Japanese Buddhism

Only when Buddhism becomes free of anti-secularism, can its

creative ecological wisdom be used to the full extent. In order to investigate the possibilities of the ecological wisdom of this-worldly Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism becomes most significant, and even within the many schools of Japanese Buddhism, I think the philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism deserves a more thorough consideration.

Nichiren was a priest of thirteenth century Japan. The mainstay in his approach to sociological thought lies in the principle of “establishing the correct teaching for the peace of the land” (Jpn. *rissho ankoku*). In the history of Buddhism, there are no other schools that compare to Nichiren Buddhism in the way that directly ties personal practice to social change.

Nichiren’s ecology can be distinguished by the following three characteristics.

Firstly, Nichiren’s philosophy contains a cosmic humanism of the Middle Way. All life, including humans, face the issue of birth and death, and even in physical nature, all things face creation and destruction. Humans, living things and nature all have at their core, a primordial truth. Nichiren named this truth Myoho-Renge-Kyo. He sought human dignity on the basis that humans are capable of realizing and then taking subjective action for this fundamental cosmic truth of the Mystic Law (Jpn. *myoho*). Nichiren’s ecological position is neither anthropocentrism nor ecocentrism. Nichiren places neither humans nor nature, but the truth of the Middle Way, i.e., the Mystic Law, at the center. However, since the truth of the Middle Way can only find expression through the actions of human beings, I would like to call this “humanism of the Middle Way.”

Secondly, Nichiren considered nature and humans to be partners within a single entity. Nichiren’s key concept that defines his approach to nature, is in the principle of the “non-duality of life and its environment” (Jpn. *esho funi*). This concept is one of the ten relationships, i.e. the ten non-dualities, developed by Miao-lo Chan-jan who is a patriarch of the Chinese T’ien-t’ai school of Buddhism, and essentially states that the objective realm, or world of the environment, and the subjective self, or life, are separate aspects of the same entity. According to Buddhist ontology, humans are nature and nature is humanity, and both mutually support each other’s existence. Humans and nature are one entity, and at the same time they are equal partners.

Thirdly, Nichiren Buddhism contains a perspective for creating the environment. Nichiren’s slogan for social practice, the principle of establishing the correct teaching for the peace of the land, incorporates a process of shaping the social and natural environments into an ideal

state through the salvation of humanity's spirit. Nichiren's thinking contains a desire to reconstruct both nature and society. However, in his writings he states, "people are certainly self-empowered and yet they are not self-empowered," and "people are certainly other-empowered and yet they are not other-empowered,"⁵ indicating a Middle Way-stance where reconstruction is carried out by self-empowered humans as well as other-empowered nature itself.

6. Conclusion

In my humble opinion, the biggest problem that Buddhist ecology faces is that it disparages the physical and material aspects of existence compared to other systems of thought and religions. For Buddhists, our physical bodies and the matter around us were not endowed by a Creator, and we do not believe in the substance of a soul. All living things and nature are essentially non-substantiality. Therefore, living things are merely physical entities without a master, and nature is simply matter. Buddhists, generally view animals as soulless automatic machines, and on this point, are eerily similar to Descartes, who was one of the most active proponents of the mechanized worldview of nature. What is worse, in contrast to Cartesians, Buddhists understand the essence of the world as being relative, so they basically do not objectify nature, and ignore it. A brilliant Buddhist philosopher may see the entire universe inside a single flower, but may fail to truly observe the flower itself. Buddhists may resonate with the mystical poetry of William Blake, but fail to hold interest in botany or zoology that helped foster ecology.

This disparagement of the physical and the material in Buddhist thinking brings apathy toward the environment. How will Buddhism respond to this criticism? It is true that Buddhism stands on the proposition that everything is connected to everything else. Buddhism teaches that not only the physical and the material but even mental constructs do not have any real substance. To stay true to the belief that the reality of this world is completely relative, Buddhists endeavor in ecological action in order to fulfill their role in the relational whole of things, but not because of the inherent sanctity in the things around them. However, if Buddhism is able to expand on the stringent non-positionality that Shakyamuni advocated, and apply it to even the denial of the positionality of non-substantiality, then a new aspect will emerge. T'ien-t'ai Buddhism, although following in the footsteps of the Madhyamaka tradition, avoids attachment to even the principle of the

Middle Way and shows this understanding of its non-positional nature through the unification of the three truths of non-substantiality, temporary existence and the Middle Way. T'ien-t'ai advocates, "since [this cyclic world of] *samsāra* is [indivisible with] *nirvāna*, there is no extinguishing [of craving] to be realized" and "there is not a single color or scent that is not the Middle Way,"⁶ thereby creating a basis for sanctifying the secular and discovering the ultimate dignity of the phenomenal world. If this can be achieved, all living things housed in physical bodies and even all non-living things will come to have inherent ultimate value individually and will not be lost in the conglomerate relational soup of reality. The reason why I chose Nichiren Buddhism as an ideal ecosophy is partly because of its unique characteristic of the practical development of T'ien-t'ai Buddhism. Expanding on this, if we, as Buddhists, can somehow overcome the high philosophic hurdle of disparaging the physical and the material, then Buddhism will become a more comprehensive ecosophy with wide applications for all humanity.

NOTES

¹ *Sutta-nipāta*, verse 895–7.

² The Japanese Buddhist scholar Hajime Nakamura described the non-positionality of the Buddha in the following way: "according to early Buddhism, the Buddha never directly states, 'This teaching is the truth,' or attacks his opponents saying, 'what you preach is false.' He does not clash with other beliefs. This is because the Buddha does not have a particular position to argue from. Gautama found the absolute significance of peace and tranquility of not arguing with others over metaphysical differences. In summary, his position was of non-positionality."—translated from Japanese. Nakamura, *H. Gouri Shugi—Higashi to Nishi no Rojikkū—[Rationalism—Eastern and Western Logic—]* (Seidosha, 2005) p. 93.

³ Habito, R. "Bukkyo wa Kankyō Shisō Tariuruka [Does Buddhism Have an Environmental Philosophy?]," Mitsuya, D. (ed.) *Kyousei Suru Sekai—Bukkyo To Kankyō [A Symbiotic World—Buddhism and the Environment]* (Hozokan, 2007), p. 164.

⁴ *Dhammapada*, verse 385.

⁵ "The Meaning of the Sacred Teachings of the Buddha's Lifetime," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* volume II (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2006) p. 62.

⁶ *The Great Cessation-and-Contemplation* 摩訶止觀 (Mo-ho chih-kuan). Swanson, P. L., trans. (Kosei Publishing Company, 2004) pp. 8–9.