Lessons from Ancient City of Anuradhapura

Buddhist perspective on roots of global environmental crisis

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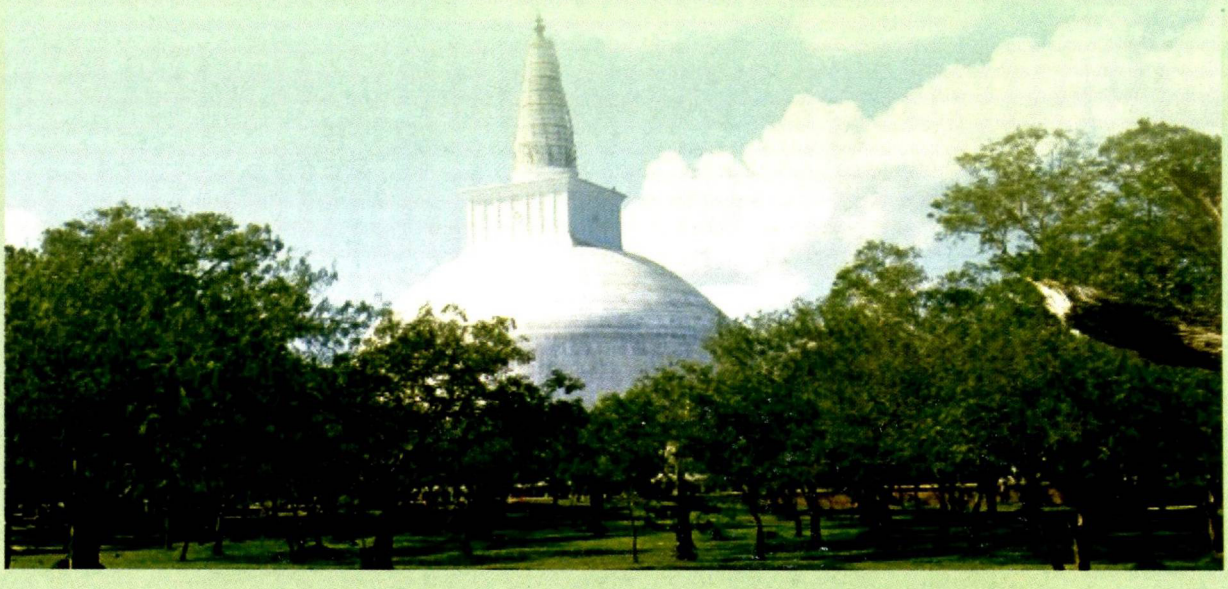
The current environmental crisis, focused primarily on climate change, for which human activity is largely responsible, has attracted the attention of leaders and policy makers across the world. Viewed from a Buddhist perspective, the origin of the environmental crisis stems from roots lying far deeper than the immediate predicament which it creates. Without a proper understanding of the root causes, formulation of enduring solutions becomes difficult and often illusive.



Nature and Environment in Buddhist Literature

Numerous references to laws of nature and environment are found in what is generally considered as Buddhist literature. However, most of them were only peripheral to the main teachings of the Buddha Dhamma since the focus of attention in Buddhism was primarily on human mind and body. An attempt is made below to explain briefly a few key references to environment occurring in selected Buddhist literature. It provides only a very brief summary.

In the Theravada commentarial concept of Niyama Dhammas, fivefold laws of nature or Niyama (cosmic order) seem to appear. These Fivefold Niyama are as follows: Utu-niyama: the seasonal order; Bija-niyama: the germinal order; Kamma Niyama -law of Action; Citta Niyama - psychical order; and Dhamma Niyama - Law of Nature.

It may be noted that, the Citta or the mind and the act of thinking, is also treated as a cosmic order and a force of nature, and perhaps the supreme force of all. Similarly, Dhamma or the natural phenomenal sequence (dhamma-niyama) literally means 'that which bears (dhareti)' its own nature, including its universal characters, namely, growth, decay, dissolution, etc. The dhamma-niyama is best summarized in the formula (Sayadev, 2003) : 'When that exists, this comes to be. From the arising of that this arises. When that does not exist, this does not come to be. When that ceases, then this ceases' (Paticcasamuppada).

In this connection it may also be pertinent to consider the five 'great essentials' of matter, (or the five material Dhatu) namely Pathavi, Apo, Tejo, Vayo and Akasa or the space element. By the first essential quality 'pathavi' what is meant is the earth, soil, or rock. By the second essential quality 'apo' we understand the viscous matter, the moisture or the more obvious fluid apo manifested in this or that liquid. By the third essential quality 'tejo' we understand the element of heat, glowing heat, or flaming heat. By the fourth essential quality 'vayo' we understand atmosphere in motion.

The fifth is 'akasa' or simply the space in which all others exist. The five 'Great Elements' (Dhatu) incorporated the entire physical system of the earth and Universe. However, from a Buddhist perspective, the well known teaching of the Buddha, states that 'the whole world, its origins and decay and the entirety of universal processes are contained in the pañcakkhndha or the human body which is only less than two metres long'.



The Aggañña Sutta is often used as a Buddhist explanation of the origins of life on earth while Sattasuriya Sutta is employed by some to explain the termination or the end of the world. These expositions are in fact open to challenge. For instance the aggañña sutta was meant to explain the myth of differentiation of different races and species. It was found indeed in a sermon for two Brahmins who occupied high ranks of the caste hierarchy in ancient India.

The Sattasuriya sutta was similarly meant to explain the impermanence of life and the futility of greed, by using the metaphor of the seven rising suns, leading to desiccation and destruction of the entire earth system. The core concepts of Buddhism explained through such metaphorical suttas need not get clouded by them, and need not be taken as Buddhist analyses of natural phenomena. In particular, use of suttas to claim and justify Buddhism in the light of growing environmental crises is not only nonsensical but can also bring Buddhism into disrepute.

Thus the present trend of global warming as attempted by some need not be compared with the contents of the Sattasuriya Sutta, or the modern concept of 'biodiversity' need not be compared with the content of the agañña sutta. However, explanation of the niyama or the cosmic order, particularly in relation to the explanation of citta niyama as a force of nature, may have much meaning if subjected to deeper scrutiny.

One current example is the attempt to use Sattasuriya (or Sattasuriyaggamana) Sutta in controversial debates on predictions on the end of the world. The long calendar of Mayan civilization (dating back to the 5th century BCE) comes to an end in 2012 and it has been prophesied that, the world will come to an end next year! Some Buddhist writers too attempt to argue that this may happen with the rise of seven suns as allegedly prophesied in the Sattasuruya sutta. However, it may be noted that the Buddha refused to speak on the beginning or end of the world and the universe. In Buddhist teaching the entire world and the universe is visible and incorporated in the panchaskanda or the human body. It is therefore, needless to say that such attempts are meaningless and futile from a Buddhist perspective.

The Buddhist perspective



As noted above, the analysis of the natural world, its origins and termination is not in the hard core of Buddhist teaching. Such descriptions had to be used by the Buddha to explain certain central concepts such as, anicca (impermanence), craving and greed (lobha). It is our contention that, such descriptions have largely crept into Buddhist literature through the prevailing concepts of Hinduism -the base religion of India. To use some of the narrations of the world as gospel truths is not only diluting Buddhist teachings but may also find itself in conflict with the mainstream of modern science.

It has also been contended that, from a Buddhist perspective environmental pollution is nothing but the external manifestation of man's internal moral pollution, which has assumed alarming levels and reached a crisis proportion today. A number of suttas in the Pali Canon such as the Aggañña, Cakkavattisihanada and some in the Aïguttaranikaya gives expression to the belief that when moral degeneration becomes rampant in society, it causes adverse changes in the human body as well as in the environment . In essence, some Buddhists believe that moral consciousness/the human mind, the human body, the external world consisting of fauna and flora, and society are intricately interconnected through an all-embracing network of cause and effect, to make one whole psychologically sensitive and responsive system.

It is this fact that the Buddha succinctly summarizes in the stanza: "Cittena niyyati loko, cittena parikissati Cittassa ekadhammassa sabbeva vasam anvagåti". (The world is led by the mind, it is dragged hither and thither by the mind". Buddha's theory of paticcasamuppada too maintains a similar principle, that mind and matter, man and nature are interconnected and interdependent. Further, the same truth of inter-dependence of Man and Nature is reiterated in the commentaries through the theory of the five cosmic laws, pañca niyama dhamma. Causal laws operate within the first four spheres as well as among them. Accordingly, when mankind comes under the grip of greed, hatred and delusion, its downfall is brought about by famine, fire/weapons, and disease respectively (Dighanikaya Atthakatha). The situation in the modern world is such that 'all three morally unwholesome motivational roots seem to be highly active and man is receiving retribution for his own immoral actions'.

The relation between mind and matter is still not adequately sorted out or explained by modern sciences. It is conceded that, as Lily de Silva (2002) contends, Buddhist texts sometimes connect up degenerated human moral behaviour with the deterioration of environment. For example, historically, most people in Sri Lanka believed that when there are tyrant kings, their actions affect rainfall patterns creating droughts as well as floods. As pointed out earlier, in Buddhism, human mind is a supreme force of nature and refining and sharpening of it may provide it with some supernatural powers that can affect the environment in various ways. However, any attempt towards proving it scientifically is obviously fraught with innumerable problems. It is my contention that such beliefs are largely from Hinduism, and they need not be used literally as miraculous truths, but as logical products of degenerated human behaviour guided by ignorance and greed.



Kuttam Pokuna: Outstanding example of a bathing place

As Erich Fromm aptly observed, man has to change his attitude from the 'having mode' to the 'being mode' of life. Man motivated by the 'having mode' tries to satisfy his greed extracting as much as possible from nature, thus leading to excessive exploitation bringing in its wake all the ills of pollution and depletion. Man inspired by the being mode on the other hand utilizes nature's resources to satisfy his needs and this attitude leads to conservation and sustainability of nature.

As de Silva (2002) demonstrated, Vipassana meditation teaches man to lead a simple life satisfying his basic needs. Appicchata, or the ability to be satisfied with little is methodically cultivated as a virtue of great value. If it is cultivated collectively by mankind, giving up the present trend of unabated consumerism, much of the sting of the eco-crisis can be mitigated. All the ills of large-scale deforestation such as soil erosion, landslides, changes in weather-pattern, drought, floods etc. are fundamentally related to consumerism. Without changing to a simple life style an effective solution to these life threatening problems cannot be easily sought. Vipassana meditation cleanses man of his psychological impurities.

Metta or the loving kindness, forms a part and parcel of the meditative life. If one practises metta one would refrain from over-exploitation and over consumption out of sympathy for future generations. In practising metta a man would also have sympathy for other species and forms of life which are increasingly threatened by extinction. The environmental crisis has to be treated as the result of a deep-seated moral crisis. Man has to cultivate a morally wholesome attitude and lifestyle for a change for the better and this has to be accepted as a survival imperative. The Dalai Lama summarized the Buddhist approach to this issue in the following words:

"Peace and the survival of life on earth as we know it are threatened by human activities that lack a commitment to humanitarian values. Destruction of nature and natural resources results from ignorance, greed and lack of respect for the earth's living things".

Anuradhapura - A case study of Sustainable Urban Planning

There are certain lessons that could be learnt from the ancient wisdom. In this regard, the case of Anuradhapura from Sri Lanka is briefly outlined. Anuradhapura was the ancient capital city of Sri Lanka for nearly 14 Centuries. It was King Pandukabhaya (4th Century BC) who upgraded Anuradhapura. It was a Brahmin Jothiya who did the town planning. There were hospitals with medicinal troughs, and toilet systems at meditation centres.

At the peak of its development, the city was of equal size as that of the Greater London area today. Anuradhapura was served by three main city tanks, namely Abhaya Wewa (or Basawakkulama), Nuwara Wewa and Tissawewa. They are used for both irrigation and domestic use. The Tissawewa was originally built for the exclusive use of Buddhist clergy by royal edict and only later used for irrigation with continuing priority for the use of Sangha.

The city had two large park areas of which Mahamevuna Uyana was the largest. The name Mahamevuna is derived from Maha Megha Vana meaning the 'great forest of rain clouds'. It is amazing to note that the modern concepts linking the 'clouds with forests' was recognized at such an early age. The other was the sprawling Nandana Uyana. These were largely assigned to the use of Buddhist clergy of Maha Vihara.

The protection and development of 'urban forests' was undoubtedly for multiple uses but primarily for meditation. The Buddha highly recommended forests, foot of trees and empty houses and buildings (araññagato va, rukkhamålagato va, suññagaragato va) as ideal places for the meditation practice. In addition, ponds of different forms and sizes, such as Eth Pokuna and Kuttam Pokuna are outstanding examples as bathing places. The Gold Fish Park (Ran masu Uyana) below the tank bund of Tissawewa was an exquisite pleasure garden, utilizing seepage water from the tank.

At its zenith of development it was claimed that there had been some 60,000 Buddhist monks resident in and around this sacred city. Large stone canoes still found in ruin for medical treatment and to store porridge for alms, were there to cater to such a large population of monks as well as laymen. Also the lovamahapaya - a large multi-storied building that had over 1000 rooms to accommodate Buddhist monks was constructed. The ruins of it are still observable.

The stapas or the large globular Buddhist monuments that often took the form of 'bubbles of water' symbolized the impermanence of life. This inculcated in the minds of people the fact that life is only short lived and transitory. The people emulated the simple living styles of the Buddhist monks, that obviously demanded very little from nature.

There are many ruined sites of padhanaghara or meditation centres for pacifying and training the minds, all provided with flowing water and exquisitely sculptured toilet facilities. These meditation centres that are architecturally designed, were mistakenly originally thought to be palaces of kings by archaeologists. It took some time to re-identify them as places of meditation. They were often surrounded by flowing water, and perhaps to practise the technique of water focused meditation (tatastha), matching it with the dry environment in which they were found.

This ancient city brings forth the following messages, perhaps still valid for a rapidly urbanizing modern world.

(a) Establishment of urban forests not only to serve as 'urban lungs' and places for pleasure but also for meditation and achieving the tranquillity of mind. They can also perform the much ap preciated function as 'carbon sinks'.

(b) Establishment of meditation centres in big cities for mental health and leisure.

(c) Landscaping the cities taking into account their natural settings and local resources. Anurad hapura was created as an amphibious urban landscape with three major reservoirs (nakharavapi) and river flowing through it, having due regard to the relatively dry climate of the area.

Conclusions

It appears that, most statements on the environment and natural world found in Buddhist literature may prove extraneous to the core teachings of Buddhism that need not be clouded by some metaphorical explanations. There are many systems belief embedded in Hinduism that have found their way to Buddhist literature after the parinibbana of the Buddha.

This is quite natural considering the religious environment to which Siddhartha Gautama was born in Ancient India. They may have their scientific validity but it would be unwise to deviate from the core teachings of the Buddha centred entirely on the development of human mind. Mind always takes precedence over nature, and the mind is supreme and all dhamma are mind -made (Manopubbangama dhamma, manosettha manomaya). The roots of the current environmental crises can be ultimately traced back to craving and greed, and the lack of a deep understanding of the impermanence of life. Only a civilization that harbours and thrives on such universal truths can reverse the present trend of global environmental destruction and threats to the very survival of life on earth.

"Devo vassatu kalena, sassasampatti hetu ca, phito bhavatu loko ca, raja bhavatu dhammiko" (Let the rains arrive on time and let there be rich harvests, Let the world be rich and prosperous and may the King be just and righteous).