Towards a Buddhist View of Nature

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Is There a Buddhist View of Nature?

In looking at a body of literature representative of a system of thought and practice from the remote past, there is little to be gained in examining that literature in the hopes of finding answers to questions and issues that belong essentially to our own times. In particular, examining classical Buddhist literature in the hopes of finding clearly stated views on what we at the end of the twentieth century call nature would probably produce nothing but frustration. This is so because, as I shall argue, nature, at least in the sense that is probably intended in the question "What was the Buddha's attitude towards nature?", is an essentially modern concept. For this reason, the shortest and probably the most honest answer to the question "What was the Buddha's attitude towards nature?" is exactly the same as the only honest answer to the questions "What was the Buddha's attitude towards quantum mechanics?" and "What was the Buddha's attitude towards feminism?": he had none.

People tend to feel cheated when short and honest answers are given to questions that they regard as important, and nature and its preservation is an issue that an increasing number of people these days quite rightly regard as extremely important. Therefore, after demonstrating that the Buddha had no attitude at all towards what we now think of as nature, I shall try to deal

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with the key isue of how classical Buddhist ideals might be applied to the problem of what moderns call nature.

What Is Not Nature?

The theory of meaning that dominated the thought of Buddhist philosophers in India for several generations could be stated as follows. It is only for the sake of convenience that one assigns a symbol, such as a word or a sentence or some graphic sign, to stand for a multiplicity of things towards which one wishes to act in a particular way. Symbols have meaning, therefore, only insofar as they have some practical purpose, and they have a practical purpose only insofar as they divide the universe into two parts. One part is the set of particular things towards which one has a desire to act in a given way; the other part is the set of particular things towards which one does not wish to act in that way. A symbol that stands for everything, in other words, serves no practical purpose and therefore is meaningless. If, therefore, one is looking at a question such as "What was the Buddha's attitude towards nature?" from the point of view of the predominant theory of meaning accepted by most classical Buddhists, the first task is to determine whether a question is being asked about how to behave towards some part of the universe and how not to behave towards the remainder. This task amounts to answering the question "What is not included within nature?" or, what amounts to the same thing, "For what does the word *nature* not stand?"

What in the View of a Modern Person Fails to be Nature?

When a person living at the end of the twentieth century shows a concern for what people in the past thought about nature, the concern is almost surely motivated by a search for some way that human beings

could think about and act towards the non-human world without destroying it. The first rough attempt at an answer to the question of what nature does not include for a person at this moment in history might be: humanity. When speaking, for example, of getting back to nature, or appreciating the beauty of nature, or taking a nature hike, what a modern person is talking about most usually is the set of things that have not yet been reorganized and transformed for purely human purposes. Thus a lake that has resulted from a stream being dammed by a beaver is likely to be regarded as still being part of nature, but a lake that has resulted from a river being dammed by a team of human engineers to prevent flooding of human dwellings or to generate hydroelectric power is not.

But the line of division between the non-natural and the natural as discerned by modern society does not really lie between human beings and the rest of the universe. There are human beings whose lives are commonly regarded as being still so close to nature that the people in question are still part of nature. Even in the minds of some animal rights activists there is a world of difference between an Inuk hunter and an urban stock broker wearing a parka made of animal pelts or eating a slab of animal flesh. Stock brokers, some would argue, are no longer part of the world of nature and so are not morally entitled to wear furs and eat meat. But the Inuit are still part of nature and so, like foxes and wolves, cannot be censured for eating and wearing whatever nature provides for their survival. The American Zen master Philip Kapleau, for example, writes in a book advocating vegetarianism for most people that some people are morally exempt from a meatless diet:

> The killing and eating of animals may be condoned under certain circumstances. Native peoples like Eskimos and Laplanders presumably have little choice but to hunt and fish in order to preserve a way of life in harmony with their unique

> environments. What saves them, or at least those still rooted in their traditions, from the karmic fate of the usual hunters and fishermen is their view of hunting and fishing as a holy rite. Since they do not separate themselves from the hunted by feelings of superiority and dominance, their identification with the animals they hunt and fish is grounded in respect for and humility toward the common Life Force that animates and binds them both (Kapleau 54).

It is often not clear in the writings of romantics like Kapleau whether an Inuk is still considered to be part of nature when he brings down his prey using a high-powered rifle with a telescopic sight and hauls it back home on a gasoline-powered sled.

The principle implicit in the view of those who try to draw some kind of division between human beings and nature seems to be that human beings are still perceived as being part of nature until they become too technological. Just how much technology is excessive and thus unnatural may be a matter of purely subjective judgement. But it does nevertheless seem to be the case that when people at the present moment in history show a concern for nature, what they are most concerned about is that part of the world that has not yet been subjected to an obviously deleterious application of human ingenuity and dexterity. In other words the world of nature as perceived by moderns is that world whose very survival is threatened by human interventions, while the non-natural world comprises just those human beings whose actions and products inflict such a degree of damage that what is acted upon likely will cease to exist in the future.

Given the above provisional definition of nature, one might ask what the Buddha's attitude was towards nature in that sense. It is to this question that the answer would be that he had no attitude at all towards nature in that

sense. Since, so far as we can claim to know on the basis of extant sources of information, at the time of the Buddha no one was aware of the application of human technology to a degree that threatened the survival of other forms of life, the world of nature as that world whose very survival is threatened by human interventions did not yet exist. Therefore neither the Buddha nor anyone else in his time of history (some 2500 years ago) had an attitude towards nature as we now think of it.

Nature, as we moderns tend to think of it, as that whose continued existence is threatened by human activity, is something that only we moderns have had to think about. Looking to thinkers of the past for clearly stated solutions to problems that they never had to face is almost sure to be a waste of time. What may not be a waste of time, however, is to examine how in fact some people of the past thought about the world and the place of human beings in the world and to see whether such attitudes, even if apparently outmoded, might be recast so as to be applicable to our current situations.

What in the View of the Buddha Lay Outside of Nature?

In order to gain a better appreciation of the values embedded in the fundamental teachings of the Buddha, it is useful to examine some of the tenets of systems of thought to which Buddhism stood in opposition. Throughout the history of Buddhist thought in India, the rival school that Buddhist philosophers made the greatest effort to refute was the Sāṁkhya school along with the closely allied Yoga school. Roughly speaking, the Sāṁkhya system of metaphysics may be seen as the theoretical foundation upon which the formal practice of Yoga was established.

A principal tenet of the Sāṁkhya-yoga system of philosophy is that the universe is partitioned into two

mutually exclusive categories: matter, which is perishable; and spirit, which is imperishable. All the material aspects of the world are collectively called *prakṛti*, a Sanskrit word that comes as close as any in that language to being an equivalent of the word *nature*. Included in the category of *prakṛti* are all the sense faculties of the physical body along with all the sensible objects, such as colours and sounds and tastes, that can be apprehended through the physical senses. Also included in this material category is the human intellect, which is seen as the faculty that collects the data of the five senses and organizes them into a comprehensible picture of the world. Built into the intellect is a tendency to view itself as a perceiving subject and to view the data of the senses as perceived objects. A consequence of this tendency is that the world of experience comes to be viewed as an opposition of "I" (*ahaṁkara*) and "other". What all of the material world, including the intellect, has in common is that it is constantly changing form; each form is therefore transitory. In other words, each form is destined to cease existing in its present state and to pass into a new state that amounts to death to the present form. The intellect, which is capable of recognizing the mortality of all material states, is thereby capable of recognizing its own mortality, since it too is material. From this recognition of perishability or mortality stems all human anxiety and discontent (*duḥkha*).

This discontent stems, according to the Sāṁkhya philosophy, from a fundamental error. The error that human beings consistently make consists in believing that their identity as human beings resides in the intellect. A human being's *real* identity resides, according to the Sāṁkhya school, not in the material and therefore mortal intellect but in the non-material and immortal soul. To emphasize the point that the soul is the real human being, this soul is called the *puruṣa*, an ordinary Sanskrit word that literally means Man. Man achieves freedom from the anxiety that results from the recognition of the mortality

of all matter by learning that his true identity is the immortal spirit, which is not in any way mixed up in or associated with the world of material nature. The method of learning what one's true human identity is consists of systematically withdrawing from the impressions of the senses and bringing the activities of the intellect to a standstill through the formal practice of yoga. The sense of profound calm that is experienced through the practice of yoga is interpreted as the soul's isolation (*kaivalya*) from and independence of matter.

As can be seen from the above brief account of the Sāṁkhya-yoga system of theory and practice, the whole system is founded upon the principle of a radical dualism between Man (*puruṣa*) and Nature (*prakṛti*). Man in his essence stands forever outside Nature, and it is only when he erroneously sees himself as being part of Nature that he experiences suffering and discontent. One further doctrine, peculiar to the Yoga school, is that Man is essentially like God (*Īśvara*) in his eternal separation from Nature. The only difference between Man and God is that the former is prone to the erroneous view that he is part of Nature, whereas the latter is perpetually aware of his perpetual separation from Nature.

The Buddhist rejection of the existence of both God and of a soul can best be understood as a rejection of the idea that there is anything whatsoever that stands outside Nature. For in the Buddhist view, everything without exception is liable to change and death. Freedom from anxiety and discontent consists for the Buddha not in recognizing that a human being is essentially separate from nature, but in recognizing precisely the opposite: that there is nothing outside of nature and therefore there is no way of escaping nature. Freedom from the anxiety of death results not from realizing that one is essentially immortal but in coming to accept and feel at home with one's inevitable mortality. Put in other words, Buddhist

nirvāṇa consists in overcoming the alienation from Nature that human beings instinctively feel.

It was said above that the answer to the question "What was the Buddha's attitude towards nature?" is that he had none, if we take *nature* in the sense that it is most likely to be understood in twentieth-century usage. And now it can be added that if we take *nature* (*prakṛti*) in the sense that it had at the time of the Buddha, he had no *particular* attitude towards it; that is, since everything was nature, his attitude towards nature was his attitude towards everything, and so he had no attitude towards nature that could be distinguished from his attitude towards anything else.

Classical Buddhist Ethics

It was pointed out in the preceding section that according to the Buddha human beings do not and indeed cannot ever stand outside nature. It can be said in addition that according to the Buddha human beings do not hold any special or privileged place even within nature. Human beings have exactly the same nature as everything else in that, like everything else, they come into being as a result of a multiplicity of causes. And, like everything else, they perish. And human beings have exactly the same nature as every other *conscious* being in that, between the time when they come into being and the time when they die, they resist change. Like every other living thing, human beings would prefer not to have to die. Like every other living thing, human beings would prefer not to be injured, captured, enslaved or subjected to the wills of others. It is this recognition that human beings are of the same nature as all other living things that serves as the foundation of Buddhist ethics.

The first principle from which every Buddhist moral precept is derived can be stated simply: act towards every living thing in such a way as to maximize their opportunity for happiness. Thus the principal Buddhist virtue is friendship (*metta*), which is understood as living in the world with this attitude towards all living beings:

> Let all beings be happy, secure, and contented in mind. Whatever living beings there are, frail or firm, tall, without exception, whether long or large, or middle-sized or short, small or great, whether seen or unseen, whether living far or near, whether they already exist or will exist in the future, let all living beings be contented in mind. ... Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, so one should cultivate an unbounded heart towards all beings and friendship towards all the world (Sutta Nipāta 145-151).

The particular forms of behaviour that living a life of friendship towards every living thing takes are expressed throughout the Pali literature of Buddhism in such stock formulas as the following:

> Abandoning the taking of life, the Buddha [and the disciple of the Buddha] lays down the bludgeon and the sword and lives without taking life, full of compassion, concerned for the welfare of all living beings (Brahmajāla Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya, section 1.8).

This concern for the welfare of all living beings is explicitly extended in numerous Buddhist texts to include such living beings "as are propagated from roots, from stems, from joints, from cuttings and from seeds" (Brahmajāla Sutta 1.11). In other words, friendship does not end with animal life but is to be extended towards all plant life as well.

In keeping with this moral guideline, every person who formally undertakes Buddhist practice makes a solemn vow "not to harm but to cherish all life." The practice thereby undertaken consists in cultivating the awareness that since all living beings in nature are mortal but would prefer not to be, there is no rational basis for preferring one's own life over the life of others, or for preferring the well-being or comfort or happiness of oneself or one's own family or clan or race or nation or species over the well-being or comfort or happiness of any other being's self or family or clan or race or nation or species. And, needless to say, once such awareness is cultivated, Buddhist practice consists in trying to act in full accordance with that realization.

Buddhist practice ideally consists not only in living as harmlessly as possible, but also living as simply as possible by limiting one's acquisitiveness and consumption. Thus a second solemn vow that Buddhists take is to "avoid taking what is not freely given, both from the village and from the forest." Not taking what is not freely given from the village means not taking what other human beings regard as property, and not taking what is not freely given from the forest entails not exploiting the non-human part of nature by regarding it as resources for human use. Thus the Buddha left numerous detailed instructions to his disciples not to construct dwellings in locations or from materials that would worsen the living conditions of animals, birds, fish and insects; not to travel in places or during times of the year in which animals and plants might be injured by the traffic; and not to follow methods of agricultural cultivation that would result in the death of insects, rodents, snakes, worms and other living things.

Buddhist Ethics Applied to What Moderns Call Nature

It should be obvious that nothing could be further from Buddhist ethical principles than the patterns of life

that have come to dominate the twentieth century: consumerism, economic developmentalism, nationalism with its inevitable militarism, and the plundering of natural resources for purely human use. And yet, curiously enough, awareness of the necessity for everyone to follow Buddhist ethical guidelines, rather than to leave them to be observed by a handful of monks, is quite a modern phenomenon. The American Zen teacher Robert Aitken (1984:164) has rightly observed that "We do not find Buddhist social movements developing until the late nineteenth century, under the influence of Christianity and Western ideas generally." And the American Zen Buddhist poet Gary Snyder has noted that

> Although Mahayana Buddhism has a grand vision of universal salvation, the actual achievement of Buddhism has been the development of practical systems of meditation toward the end of liberating a few dedicated individuals from psychological hangups and cultural conditionings. Institutional Buddhism has been conspicuously ready to accept or ignore the inequalities and tyrannies of whatever political system it found itself under (Devall and Sessions 251).

Throughout its history in Asia, institutionalized Buddhism has been sadly reluctant to react to injustice except in circumstances in which Buddhism itself has been "persecuted," and Buddhists have all too often perceived themselves as victims of persecution when the state did little more than reduce the level of tax exemptions on monastic properties and the level of public funding of temples. In the specific area of environmental concerns, institutionalized Buddhism in Asia and even in the West has not only failed to provide leadership but has, with lamentably few exceptions, been relatively sluggish even in following.

The development of the concept of "Buddhist economics" had to wait for a European, E.F. Schumacher, who wrote: "It is clear ... that Buddhist economics must be very different from the economics of modern materialism, since the Buddhist sees the essence of civilization not in a multiplication of wants but in the purification of human character" (Schumacher 46). He goes on to say,

> The keynote of Buddhist economics, therefore, is simplicity and non-violence. From an economist's point of view, the marvel of the Buddhist way of life is the utter rationality of its pattern - amazingly small means leading to extraordinarily satisfactory results.
>
> For the modern economist this is very difficult to understand. He is used to measuring the 'standard of living' by the amount of annual consumption, assuming all the time that a man who consumes more is 'better off' than a man who consumes less. A Buddhist economist would consider this approach excessively irrational: since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption (Schumacher 47-48).

Schumacher's description of the "Buddhist" view of the essence of civilization echoes a statement made in 1930 by M.K. Gandhi who described the vow of non-possession to be followed by members of his Ashram in these terms:

> Perfect fulfillment of the ideal of Non-possession requires, that man should, like the birds, have no roof over his head, no clothing and no stock of food for the morrow .... Only the fewest possible, if any at all, can reach this ideal. We ordinary seekers may not be repelled from the seeming impossibility. But we must keep the ideal

> constantly in view, and in the light thereof, critically examine our possessions and try to reduce them. Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment, and increases the capacity for service (Gandhi 46).

Conclusion

It must be acknowledged, I think, that the current ecological crisis has resulted in an appreciation of the natural environment that is probably without precedent in human history. Such phrases as "the interconnection of all things in nature" are more poignant for us than they have been for any of our predecessors who may have used similar expressions. But this is not to suggest that the values of traditional religions such as Buddhism no longer have practical relevance to our situation in an age of sophisticated and consistently misused technology. On the contrary, the Buddhist ideal of a life of simplicity, non-violence towards all living beings and non-acquisitiveness is one that human beings must learn to follow very soon if they have any interest in the continued survival of their own and countless other species. One cannot find much inspiration in the rather poor record that Buddhists in the past have had in living up to this ideal. Most likely, such responses to the environmental crisis as the so-called "deep ecology" movement as presented in the writings of Arne Naess, Bill Devall, George Sessions and E.F. Schumacher will do as much to promote the health of modern Buddhist practice as the Buddha's ideals will do to inspire the practice of deep ecology.

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