

Environmental Ethics of Buddhism

Oyuna V. Dorzhigushaeva and Aryana V. Kiplyuks

Abstract—The article deals with the importance of the moral potential of Buddhist culture for the formation of ecological stereotypes of modern human behavior. Rituals, rites and customs of environmental importance, and the main philosophical categories of Buddhist ecological ethics that influenced the attitude to nature in the Baikal region are considered. The basic provisions of the ecological ethics of Buddhism, in particular, such concepts as Karma – the expression of human environmental responsibility, Ahimsa - the principle of nonviolence, Bodhichitta – kindness and compassion for all living beings. The special value of these concepts lies in the fact that they have already had a beneficial effect on the mentality and ethical culture of the peoples of many countries, softening the mores and instilling respect for the Environment.

Index Terms—Environmental ethics, human environmental responsibility, ethical culture, Buddhism, moral, ecological traditions, religious ethics, basic concepts.

I. INTRODUCTION

The environmental problem is global, not only because it poses risks to the humanity, but also because its solution requires significant universal effort. It is a challenge to the humanity in general and each individual person in particular. The initially inherent sense of unity between man and nature takes on deep moral meaning. Today it becomes more and more important to awaken in people a sense of responsibility for the life of other living beings, a sense of involvement into everything that happens on Earth.

In most cases the environmental problems arise not because of some villains who seek to destroy the planet. The situation is much more complicated. The division of labor and subsequent alienation of man led to a gap between the actions of people and the consequences of these actions. This gap occurred on motivational level. Modern technology extends the possibilities of our activities in time and space, and even highly specialized science is not able to calculate all the consequences of people's activities. The Dhammapada says: "Until evil does not ripen, the fool considers it to be sweet like honey. When the evil ripens, then the fool abandons to grief" [1].

II. RESULTS

The law of karma. The understanding of the law of karma

Manuscript received August 25, 2019; revised January 6, 2020. This work was supported in part by RSF, project №19-18-00412

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can help to overcome the gap between actions and their consequences. The law of karma states that all our actions, words and thoughts form the conditions of our existence in the future: each of us experiences the consequences of what he thought, said and did in the past. Thus, the law of karma encourages a person to take responsibility for his current life as well as all the future ones.

What is the mechanism of the law of karma? In popular understanding, each act has ethical value; actions committed by an individual in relation to other creatures return to him back in the next life. Karma is to some extent fatal as no one can escape the consequences of their own actions, but at the same time it is assumed that everyone can consciously create better conditions for their future life. In this sense, an individual forms his own karma. Here you can see the potential way out of a critical situation, including the environmental one. The 14th Dalai Lama says in his sermon: "I, as a Buddhist monk, think that believing in laws of karma is very useful in everyday life. If you believe that there is a connection between the action and the result, you will become more attentive to the consequences produced by your actions in your own life and the lives of other people" [2].

In the Abhidharmakosa system, karma is the current arrangement of dharmas, which, according to the law of conditioning (pratītyasamutpāda), affects the location of dharmas in subsequent moments. Karma is divided into mental, bodily and verbal. Since actions and words are first born in consciousness, consciousness is considered to be the main formative factor. Thought is the creator of both personal destiny and the fate of the whole world, that is why moral degradation of society entails the physical degradation of the world. As the 14th Dalai Lama says, a spiritual man is the one who participates in a joint effort to save the Earth [3].

Geshe Jampa Thinley identifies four characteristics of karma.

- 1) The certainty of karma means the following: what reason you create, so the result will you get. When you create negative karma, it is impossible to get a good result. This is the quality of karma. You must understand that if you harm others, you cannot achieve happiness ... This law will never change, because it is a law of nature [4].
- 2) There cannot occur phenomena with no reasons coming from a certain moment. "If you take positive actions, you should not worry about the future – you will have 100% positive results" [5].
- 3) "The reason you created does not disappear" [6].
- 4) Multiplication. Any action has a lot of consequences, just as circles on water from a thrown stone. By planting one seed, you can get many apples and trees in future. At the same time, a bad deed can give a lot of bad results.

The role of the avijn āpti element in the law of karma is of extreme interest. This element gives moral meaning to

actions, gestures, and words. Different people can perform the same action with different goals and for different reasons. The *avijn ģpti* element takes into account the ethical value of each act and adjusts its karmic consequences. For example, it neutralizes the consequences of good deeds which were based on reward, etc.

The law of karma differs from the doctrine of retribution in other religions, it transfers the burden of responsibility for one's destiny as well as the fate of the world onto the shoulders of people, each person in particular. The law of karma is impersonal; there is no one to judge and give punishment. It can be compared with the natural science law, no one can arbitrarily cancel, for example, the law of gravity.

In Buddhist eschatology, the degradation of the world is due to the moral degradation of people, their frivolous attitude to their responsibilities to the world. In *karikas* 99-102 of the *Abhidharmakosa* text, the destruction of the world and the death of living beings are described. The time of the end are characterized by sharp reduction of human life and catastrophic decline in the moral condition of people. They are vicious, obsessed with immoral appeals, money making and committed to false teachings. The causes of death are war, famine and disease. Vasubandhu notes that these disasters will not be the same across continents. Listing the types of destruction of the world - by fire, water and wind, Vasubandhu argues the possibility of destruction of atoms. Taking into consideration that Vasubandhu wrote *Abhidharmakosa* in the 5th century AD, we find this hypothesis very challenging for its time. In contrast to European orientation towards progressive development, the Buddhist philosopher models downward-type sociogenesis as one of the possibilities for society development. As a source of cosmogenesis, Vasubandhu indicates the totality of karmic traces of living beings' activities. In the 19-20 centuries the concept of common social karma was developed by *Buryat Buddhist philosophers* [7].

The law of karma is a powerful tool for moral self-regulation of a person. It prompts him to reflect on the consequences of his actions, on the measure of responsibility for the committed acts. In essence, the law of karma is another form of expression of the golden rule of morality: "Act towards the others the way you would like them to act towards you". And, since Buddhists do not separate a person from other living beings, the scope of this rule is not limited only to social, intraspecific relationships. Here lies the enormous environmental significance of the law of karma.

Equal treatment of all beings and the principle of *ahimsa*

Moral behavior is the result of biological and social evolution of a man. The level of his consciousness - the ability to analyze his actions - can be judged according to his ethical views. The dynamics of ethical views of mankind shows the expansion of the circle of people to whom a person has a sense of moral duty. Until recent times there have been various groups of people who have been discriminated according to gender, age, class, property, nation, race, etc. Only recently, the Geneva Convention on Human Rights declared that all people are equal. Although the equality of people, to a large extent, is still being only declared, nevertheless, legal recognition is a big step towards its

implementation.

In the twentieth century, the movement for an ethical attitude towards animals began to gain strength. Its theoretical justification was made by the great humanist of our times, Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer created a universal ethics, according to which the ethical attitude of man to animals was completing the duty of man to the world. "Until we include animals in our common circle of well-being, there will be no peace in the world." In his opinion, "ethics is the responsibility for everything that lives."

Today we are faced with the need to recognize our moral duty to nature. Environmental pollution primarily affects the life of animals. The mass death of animals due to oil spills, radiation, pesticides, etc. has become familiar. Environmental reality dictates the need for strict legal and moral sanctions for the conservation of wild animals. In this case, understanding of interrelationships between humans and animals as full representatives of biota can be helpful.

How does Buddhist ethics solve this problem? Buddhists do not deny that animals possess the ability of thinking and emotional sufferings. They believe that due to a number of circumstances animals simply do not have the conditions for the development of these qualities. The first sermon of the Buddha, *Dharmacakrapravartana Sutra*, along with five ascetics was heard by two gazelles. Their image entered the mind and heart of the Buddhists so much that these gazelles became a symbol of the first turn of the wheel of dharma. Among the animals most revered by Buddhists are: elephant, bull, lion, turtle, swan, peacock, as well as all animals representing the twelve-year cycle.

The attitude of Buddhists towards animals can be even characterized as exalted. A Korean Zen master told his monks: "From the time of plowing and sowing, until the food touches your mouth and saturates your body, it is not only the work of a man. By doing all this, the oxen suffer great pain, not to count the insects dying at the same time. It is not worthy to profit from the sufferings of others. How can you bear the thought that others are dying in order for you to live? How can you, having an easy life, complain about hunger and cold, when a peasant is freezing and starving. Everyone who wears good clothes and eats good food has a great debt" [8].

Gelug school recommends to treat all beings as if they were your mother or father. In a series of innumerable rebirths, any living creature could be in his past rebirths our mother or father. All living things in the universe are interrelated. The daily prayer says: "Like me, all my kindhearted mothers are drowning in the ocean of samsara. Give me a blessing on spiritual work of raising Bodhicitta so that I could save them soon" [9]. The evening prayer says: "Visible and invisible beings, and those who are near me and those who are far away, may all be happy, may all be joyful. Do not harm one another, do not despise anyone anywhere. And do not wish evil to one another. As a mother sacrificing her life while protecting her child, infinitely love all things" [10]. In all Buddhist texts we mostly see the phrase "all living beings" rather than "man", "people". Even King Ashoka's state edicts emphasize the need to care for all living things. In particular, he ordered to dig the wells along the roads and to plant trees "for the delight of animals and people" [11].

Buddhists do not separate humans from other animals. The human incarnation is only one of many in the chain of rebirths. In Jātaka tales – texts about legendary events from the past births of Buddha, we see that many times before Buddha was reborn in the form of an animal, for example, an elephant, a buffalo, a woodpecker, etc. In jatakas, the equivalence of life of animals and people is emphasized. In one of the jatakas, Buddha rescued a dove from a tiger, and then the tiger demanded something equal to that dove. Buddha cut off a piece of his body and put it on one bowl of scales. On the other bowl was the dove. It outweighed. Only standing himself on the scales, he was able to balance the bowl. Each life is equal to another life. “At the heart of jataka lies ... the idea of an endless chain of interconnected causality of beings through which all living beings pass. Birth in one state or another is determined by the totality of actions committed in past births. Each creature shapes itself, determines its future with its behavior” [12]. Jatakas had a huge impact on the spread of Buddhist morality among the people. Written in the form of fascinating stories, they inconspicuously attracted ordinary people to self-improvement, formed Buddhist values such as generosity to those who ask, meekness, tolerance, truthfulness, refraining from harming to beings, theft, rude speech, etc.

In Dhammapada Buddha provides a very subtle, ecologic image of nonviolent behavior. “As a bee, having collected juice, flies away without damaging the flower, so let the sage act in the village” [13].

Many Buddhist terms possess the negation prefix “a”. This suggests that Buddhism does not accept the axiological basis of morality of modern society. In the world of himsa - violence, it speaks about non-violence - ahimsa. In the world of “constancy”, it speaks about variability (anityata). In the world of “unchanging essences”, it speaks about universal interdependence. In the world of “class interests” it speaks about personal responsibility for one’s fate and the fate of the whole world.

Tolerance as the Main Category of Buddhist Ethics

The whole history of Buddhism is accompanied by fostering in people such a wonderful human quality as tolerance. Even Buddha said to his disciples: “When going to other countries, respect the gods of others, because if they exist in their minds, then they really exist”. His followers also practiced a similar attitude to other religions. We cannot find a single country where Buddhism is a monoreligion. In all countries, Buddhism coexists peacefully with other religions: in India with Hinduism and Islam, in Japan with Shintoism, in China with Taoism and Confucianism, etc. Moreover, the Buddhist tradition does not demand from people who address the Buddhist priests, come to Buddhist temples and even practice Buddhism, to be necessarily Buddhists who have taken Buddhist refuge.

The concept of tolerance is one of the main ethical categories of Buddhist ethics. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama pays great attention to its explanation. For example, he states: “Tolerance and patience should not be interpreted as signs of weakness. These are signs of strength” [14]. By exercising conscious tolerance, you control the situation and do not allow feelings, such as anger or pride, to prevail over

the mind. In addition, tolerance for other people, for life situations and other beings speaks of the breadth of your views, of general emancipation. Tolerance is one of the qualities inherent to bodhisattvas – Buddhist saints. These qualities are called paramitas, while paramita of tolerance is called kshanti-paramita. Kshanti-paramita is threefold. It includes tolerance to other living beings, tolerance to life circumstances, and tolerance that comes with wisdom and penetration into deep essence of things and phenomena.

Cultivating tolerance is of great environmental importance. Lack of tolerance for other creatures is a sign of modern times. People create sterile spaces around themselves, free from animals, insects, microflora. Other creatures scare them because of seeming unpredictability of their behavior. An urbanized person feels a hidden danger of natural objects, she prefers the adjustable comfort of a big city, animals on the TV screen, created with the help of computer graphics. Finding herself face to face with nature, she experiences psychological discomfort and tries to overcome it, remaining within the framework of familiar ideas. People represent natural objects in the form of an enemy to be conquered, transfer anthropomorphic relations to their relations with nature. As an example, we can remember plenty of Hollywood films where enemies of mankind are either birds, or insects, etc.

A person practicing tolerance treats living creatures with compassion, understands their problems, mental state and level of consciousness development. She can put herself in the place of another and understand the true reasons for his behavior. As L. Mäl writes in his study *Ashtasahasrika-prajnaparamita-sutra*: “The development of a bodhisattva to the level of “avinivartaniya bodhisattva-mahasattva” does not mean the creation of a highly developed and specialized personality, on the contrary, a bodhisattva turns into an all-encompassing personality that contains everything” [15].

Buddhists reflect in the following way: you have an enemy and you consider him a bad person, but take a closer look at him. It turns out that he has friends, like you, and they consider him a good person. Most possibly, at that moment when he talked with you, he had some problems, and therefore he treated you in that way. Enemies also help a person practice paramita of tolerance. If there are no enemies, a person does not know the strength and depth of his tolerance practice; his practice without probation has no strength. “Shantideva said that both friend and foe love you and do good, the only question is time” [16]. Friends support and help, enemies criticize and point out mistakes, stimulating further self-improvement. Buddhist writer Ayusha Tenchoy believes that enemies give people a chance to show irrespective love, love without attachment.

Tolerance to life circumstances is necessary because suffering is permanent in samsara. The law of pressure of living environment is opposed to another law - the law of maximum pressure of life. The offsprings of one pair of individuals, multiplying exponentially, seek to fill with themselves the entire globe. But the pressure of living environment restrains this ability, determining the degree of tolerance of the body to external influences. Living being constantly strives for ecological expansion and at the same

time adapts to changing living conditions. The law of the pressure of living environment is relevant to any type of life. Be it a society, with its laws, wars, morality, or a colony of bacteria in a drop of water. As Lama Sopa Rinpoche advises: “if the problem can be resolved, there is no particular reason to be upset about it, we must solve it. If the problem cannot be changed, then it also makes no sense to become unhappy or to dislike it” [17].

The same principle can be applied to the issue of human needs. The human needs tend to grow continuously. Often, the growth of needs is not caused by real need and is provoked by the concepts of prestige or advertising campaign from producers of goods. People call themselves consumers, not noticing the humiliating subtext of this word. Advertisements shift the value consciousness of people, reduce their individuality, impose goods and services they do not need. Erich Fromm takes this problem quite harshly: “We must prohibit the use of all forms of hypnotic effects, applied both in the field of consumption and in the field of politics. These methods constitute a serious threat to mental health, especially to clear and critical thinking and emotional independence” [18]. They worsen a person’s quality of life, inspiring him that without possessing a particular thing or service, he is not a full-fledged consumer. Constant dissatisfaction due to artificially created needs allows to manipulate the human mind. “Pret”, the image of the eternally hungry creature in Buddhism, is an analogy of such consciousness preoccupied with the mode of possession.

Tolerance to life circumstances helps a person maintain a positive mood, regardless of the mode of possession, external conditions. In this sense, spiritual sermons drawing a person’s attention to the wealth of the inner world, to his unity with the Universe are very important.

Bernard Shaw once said: “If we exchange apples, then we will have one apple, but if we exchange ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.” The common mental field creates an opportunity for our communication and an opportunity for understanding. Those who are aware of the common mental field do not need words. Buddha casts a glance at the flower, and Kashyapa smiles back at him. This is a dialogue of people in the same consciousness. Such a universal type of consciousness is called prajnaparamita consciousness. A number of Buddhist sutras are associated with prajnaparamita, which form the basis of doctrine. These sutras are considered as reflecting true reality as much as linguistically possible. They are very difficult to perceive; they are distinguished by a special prajnaparamita logic. A.M. Pyatigorski calls it the metalogic of multi-valued logic. They were created by enlightened beings, bodhisattvas, and those who are able to perceive them adequately also become enlightened. In the Ashtasahasrika-prajnaparamita-sutra the typology of living beings is based on the ability to perceive and generate prajnaparamita texts. The Russian philosopher G. Pomerantz compares the bodhisattvas and the knowledge that they represent with holes in Absolute Reality.

This knowledge gives people a sense of ownership in everything that happens in the universum. It is called omniscience; it does not mean knowledge of every detail, but recognition of the true nature of any phenomenon, the ability to see the unity in the unit. Buddha is called Tathagata, as he

is able to see reality without mediation (tathatu), that is, the “suchness” of the world.

To achieve this level of knowledge, a practitioner must cultivate bodhicitta. Geshe Jampa Thinley called it “philosophically moistened” with kindness and compassion. Without bodhicitta, any knowledge is considered empty and worthless. Indeed, logic without morality turns into a logic of immorality; psychology without morality is psychology of immorality; freedom without morality turns into freedom of immorality; science without morality is the science of extermination. Kindness and compassion should be the motivating force for exploring the world.

III. CONCLUSION

What principles of Buddhist philosophy seem to us the most important for the formation of the ecological paradigm of thinking? Firstly, the vision of the world in dynamics. Secondly, the internal relationship of all phenomena and events. Thirdly, the moral basis of scientific knowledge. Fourthly, nonviolent thinking. Fifthly, progressive movement of the mind towards a universal consciousness that postulates unity of micro- and macrocosm.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

O.V. Dorzhigushaeva conducted the research; A.V. Kipyuks edited the paper; all authors had approved the final version.

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