

Buddhist Approaches to Cultural Ecology by Means of Virtue Ethics

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Abstract

Humans are social beings that have a long history of development since the Paleolithic (the Old Stone Age) to the contemporary day and the IT world. Humans try to survive by creating cultures to correspond to the environment from generation to generation. The environmental adaptation of humans is the way of cultural ecology.

As the development of humans approached the modern era of the third millennium, the global cultural ecology changed into an IT society. Many new innovations were created to service social demands. Daily life is much more convenient and luxurious nowadays. Transport and communication function on a global scale. The IT society most responds to the increase in social consumption. Economic development is a matter of great concern. People place a great significance on materialism. However, with the growth of materialism, violence in the form of corruption, crime and terrorism happens around the world. This denotes that a cultural ecology with a great concern for materialism does not absolutely respond to the sustainable development of humans. It reveals a lack of balance in the present system of cultural ecology. If we consider human nature we see that it is composed of physical (material) and mental dimensions. Therefore, the productivity of humans as a culture is subject to the processes of mind and material. Furthermore, as ecology is composed of technology and nature, cultural ecology is the interrelation of mind and a material with the technologies and nature. Regarding the modern day, violence happens because of a lack of concern about the mental dimension of cultural ecology. The imbalanced development between mental and material dimensions means that the society has been experiencing a systematic collapse. People cannot approach true peace and happiness. From a Buddhist perspective, mind is a dominant dimension. It is the forerunner of speech and action. If the mind is undeveloped to be pure from immorality, speech and action must affect people and ecology in a negative way. Thus the polluted mind is a cause of the self-violence involved in global issues. To give back the balance of cultural ecology,

it is necessary to develop the mind to be moral through Buddhist virtue ethics. Therefore, this paper will clarify the weak points of the interrelation between human beings, technologies and nature in the cultural ecology that are less concerned with the dimension of mental development. Besides, the paper will show how the Buddhist approaches in the form of Buddhist virtue ethics can respond to the sustainable development aspect of cultural ecology by regarding the Pāli canon and other academic texts.

Key words: cultural ecology, virtue ethics, approach and sustainable development

Introduction

Buddhist Approaches to Cultural Ecology by Means of Virtue Ethics. Human beings have a long history of evolution. Their nature is to live in groups, interacting with the environment and sharing resources. The evolution of humans is therefore closely associated with the environment. Julian Steward has observed this issue and concluded that the interrelation of humans and the environment is the theory of cultural ecology. He suggests that cultural ecology is a way for humans to utilize the environment in order to support their subsistence activities and productive arrangements under the rubric of culture.¹ In fact, the main features of culture which relate to the subsistence activities and economic arrangements are social, political and religious issues.² Therefore, the utilization of the human environment is influenced by these three subjects. Furthermore, Juan Carlos Miguel De Bustos has determined cultural ecology as the interaction between a culture and the material world.³ The culture is composed of material and symbolic dimensions.⁴ The material dimension consists of the objective physical circumstances, which are created to face the nature, such as goods, instruments, practices and institutions.⁵ On the other hand, the symbolic dimension is referred to spiritual and symbolic relations.⁶ Thus, cultural ecology in the aspect of De Bustos is a component of the material and the symbolic.

¹ Julian Steward, "The Concept and Method of Cultural Ecology," 327-328, accessed September 7, 2014, [http://anth198.pbworks.com/f/Steward+\(1955\)+-+Theory+and+Method+of+Cultural+Ecology.pdf](http://anth198.pbworks.com/f/Steward+(1955)+-+Theory+and+Method+of+Cultural+Ecology.pdf)

² Ibid., 327.

³ Juan Carlos Miguel De Bustos, "Cultural Ecology," In *Culture, Communication and Ecology*, Infoamerica, last modified July 2, 2009, 49, accessed September 1, 2014, http://www.infoamerica.org/icr/n01/infoamerica01_bustos.pdf.

⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

In fact, if we consider human nature as a biological concept, it has two components, the physical body or material and the mind. Thus, the culture, which is a human product, is subject to the processes of the mind and the material. Then, the associations of the environment and the three subjects of the culture of Steward and the material and symbolic concepts of De Bustos are classified into the mental and material dimensions. This means that the environment in the sense of the world material and the culture in the forms of social and political, belong to the material dimension while culture in the forms of religious and symbolic concepts are as the mental dimension. As I said before, if we want to clarify the components of ecology, there are two parts to it; technology and nature. Therefore, cultural ecology is the interaction of mind and materials with the technologies and nature. Regarding the cultural ecology of today, most countries have several policies to develop their social, political, economic and educational systems for the betterment of their people. The South American countries tend to focus their ecological education projects on social movements and human right issues, while Europe countries find significance in political, social and economic studies.⁷ England and Denmark have policies to support the international development and social change projects in the universities.⁸ In Asia, countries such as India, Thailand, China and Vietnam appear to emphasize courses in socioeconomic development in their universities.⁹ However, due to the emphasis on material development rather than mental development that can be seen above, the global cultural ecology has been found more in negative issues. The civil wars, the political violence, terrorism, crimes and other critical issues never seem far away from this world. This is because human beings are competitive. Human and biological communities share the biological concept of competition, and the raw, compassionless struggle to survive in the particular biotic environmental situation.¹⁰ Biological cooperation in the form of symbiosis only happens for the survival of the species.¹¹ In fact, there is competition, even within the species itself. Competition can be found operating in the smallest social unit, the family. It is found in many businesses. A more severe level

⁷ "International Development & Social Change," Rice University International Program, accessed January 13th, 2014. <http://abroad.rice.edu>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ J. Steward, *op. cit.*, 323-324.

¹¹ Ibid., 324.

of competition has been seen in the forms of conflicts, crimes, violence, terrorism, civil war and world war. Therefore, to develop cultural ecology by putting the emphasis on the material dimension in the forms of social, political and technological substances cannot reduce the competitive spirit in the nature of human beings. To do this, it is necessary to review the mental or religious dimension, that is, the part of cultural ecology that remains. Perhaps it is the only key that can unlock the negative attitude that human have to adapting to their environment. To approach cultural ecology, the mental dimension should be developed into a balanced situation with the material dimension.

From a Buddhist perspective, the Buddha said:

*Manopubbangamadhamma
manosetthamanomaya
manasacepadutthena
bhasativakarotiva
tatonamdukkhamanveti
cakkamvavahatopadam.*¹²

This means the mind is the dominant dimension. It is the forerunner of speech and action. If a man speaks or acts with an immoral mind, it will follow that the man will suffer as the wheels of a cart follow a bull's foot. According to this verse, the mind can be corrupted or it can be moral. If it is not to be a cause of suffering, it must maintain a condition of virtue or morality. In the secular view, virtue is the controversial issue to be discussed by philosophers and ethicists to discover the right way for people to find true happiness. Aristotle defines virtue as quality of good.¹³ It can be classified into two kinds, intellectual and moral; virtue in the sense of morality is referred to as the result of habit which arises in humans by nature.¹⁴ Aristotle describes the character of moral virtue as follows:

“...From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtue arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature...Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do a virtue

¹² Dhammapada, “Dhammapada Verse 1: CakkhupalattheraVatthu”, accessed September 8, 2014, <http://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=001>

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 7, accessed September 10, 2014, <http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3113/aristotle/Ethics.pdf>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.”¹⁵

That means virtue will be benefit for people and society when it is adopted as their natural behaviors. In the mid-20th century C.E., Aristotle’s concept has been developed into the notion of ‘virtue ethics’. This compound word “virtue ethics” has been described as being about the virtues that make for the good life.¹⁶ Furthermore, Rosalind Hursthouse emphasizes that in the practice of virtue ethics it is very important to possess virtue as the correct conception of decision without prejudice on what is truly good for others.¹⁷ In fact, different people must have different points of view. Therefore, different people must have dissimilar attitudes to the correct conceptions of virtue practice. Then, the question must arise as to what are the kinds of virtues that people should follow to approach cultural ecology?

In Buddhism, the Buddha already has provided a virtue ethics for people to follow as the noble path to achieve a good life and true happiness. It is known as the Noble Eightfold Path, and is composed of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.¹⁸ This is the Middle Path which is not the sense-pleasures of the secular and not the self-torment of the ascetic. It is the course to achieve calming, awakening, true knowledge, super-knowledge and *Nibbāna*.¹⁹

The first two paths, which are the right view and the right intention, are at the level of training in the wisdom (*paññā*). There is a potential in people to think in the right way. At least they should have the right understanding and right attitude about the veracity of the Four Noble Truths. That means people must pay attention to the laws of nature in which all beings are suffering (*dukkha*) from birth, aging, illness, death, and

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Alistair MacIntyre, Note for a lecture, Aristotle and Virtue Ethics (London, April 27, 2005), accessed September 4, 2014, <http://www.mel-thompson.co.uk/lecture%20notes/Aristotle%20and%20Virtue%20Ethics.pdf>.

¹⁷ Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics and Human Nature,” *Hume Studies*, vol. XXV, no. 1&2 (April/November, 1999):78, accessed September 4, 2014, <http://www.humesociety.org/hs/issues/v25n1-2/hursthouse/hursthouse-v25n1-2.pdf>.

¹⁸ *The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Sanyutta-Nikāya)*, tr. F.L. Woodward. Part 5 (London: Pali Text Society, 1979), 358.

¹⁹ *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Piṭaka)*, tr. I.B. Horner. Vol 4 (London: Pali Text Society, 1982), 15.

from the impermanent character of things.²⁰ One should understand, more importantly, that the experience of suffering has its cause (*samudaya*) which is *Taṇhā* (craving) or the ‘thirst’ for forms, flavors, odors, sounds, tangible and mental objects.²¹ It fetters people with pleasures so that they must be born again and again.²² This craving is conditioned by ignorance, which hinders people by making them ignorant of the realistic nature of objects.²³ On the way, there is the stage of cessation from suffering (*nirodha*). It is the stage of passionlessness.²⁴ The mind absents itself from ignorance and craving. Moreover, there is the path (*magga*) to achieve the stage of cessation, which is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Furthermore, they should recognize the three characteristics of things, which are suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*) and unreality (*anatta*). When they have followed this right thinking, they must become concerned with how life is suffering. They will notice that all other beings also have the suffering that they do. They must know that things are always changing and unreal. They cannot hold anything forever. The next three paths, which are right speech, right action and right livelihood, have been classified as the moral training (*sīla*). This is the way to keep a livelihood pure in speech and action by at least following the Five Precepts. These are to abstain from destroying the lives of themselves and others, taking things without permission, sexual misconduct, false speech and taking any intoxicants or drugs. The last three paths, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, are significant for training in mentality (*citta*). This means that after people have purified the verbal and corporal by abstaining from unwholesomeness, their minds will have the quality to be trained to achieve true knowledge. Right effort means people put much effort into accumulating much wholesomeness. This stage must support people’s minds into developing consciousness into the higher stages of right mindfulness and right concentration, which are the levels of meditation. With the right practice in meditation, wisdom must appear and the true knowledge will arise. With true knowledge, the ignorance that conditions the craving will be completely destroyed.

²⁰ Op. cit., 357.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ *The Book of the Kindred Sayings* (Sanyutta-Nikāya), tr. F.L. Woodward. Part 3 (London: Pali Text Society, 1975), 146.

²⁴ Op.cit.

People's minds will reach the stages of the cessation of thirst, but will remain calm and awake. With the pure mind, people have no feeling of greed, delusion and hatred. Then, they can be immersed in the true happiness of Liberation or Enlightenment. Therefore, this kind of Buddhist virtue ethics, the "Noble Eightfold Path", is not just the answer for the religious tradition. It also responds to the secular issue of what is truly good for others. This is because having the right view and the right intentions about the Four Noble Truths and the three characters of things must assist anyone in finding the way to approach true happiness. Then, *sīla* is the path that the Buddha suggests as the virtue action to be brought into daily practice for the welfare of the practitioner and others. Particularly, in regard to the insight system, the virtue action will bring the mind or *citta* to the stage of being soft and ready to be trained. Then, when the mind has been made pure by meditation practice, it must reach the stage of cessation from greed, delusion and hatred. This pure mind must attain the stage of true peace and happiness. With this situation of peace and happiness, the mind will give effect back to the actions in a positive way. Furthermore, when the mind has been trained more by meditation practice through the stage of Awakening from ignorance, the practitioner will become more concerned with the suffering of others. Then, compassion, loving-kindness and sympathy will arise in the mind; replacing craving. As a result, the feeling and action of harmfulness to others and the environment will not happen. One will have a positive attitude and reflect positive action onto cultural ecology.

Conclusion

Human is an important factor in controlling the direction of environmental adaptation or cultural ecology. To sustainably develop cultural ecology we must be concerned with the development of human virtue by decreasing the competition and selfishness in human nature. From a Buddhist perspective, the Buddhist virtue ethics in the form of the Noble Eightfold Path is the middle path for both secular and religious faculties to apply to the daily search for true happiness and peace. The aspiration of this noble path is to pure the mind from ignorance and to reach the stage of Liberation or *Arahanta*. However, in the case of an approach to cultural ecology in the third millennium, the goal of following this middle path is to decrease the feelings of greed, delusion and

hatred in the minds of the people. With less of these immoralities, people must realize true happiness and peace. Then, they can share their happiness and peace with others in the form of compassion, loving-kindness and sympathy. As a result, the profits on any business will be of less concern than the quality of good in humans. Then, violence will not be the major issue in a society, and the cultural ecology of that society will be grounded in a truly sustainable development.

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