

SOME THOUGHTS ON BUDDHISM AND THE ETHICS OF ECOLOGY

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The population explosion and technological development are usually blamed for the present ecological deterioration, and the present situation can be viewed as an entirely biological "Catch-22" with the pressure of population on resources either necessitating further technological innovation and development or technological innovation and development opening up the way for population growth or both in a mounting dialectical interaction. But both population and technology are the intended consequences of human action and therefore supposedly a result of human attitudes and ideas which are under human control and revision.

The attitude and ideas which have produced the so-called ecological crisis have been traced to the Judeo-Christian heritage of our western civilization by at least two writers, John Black and Lynn White, Jr. Specifically to the two notions that man is separate from the rest of nature, and that nature was meant to be subdued and dominated by man. The command in Genesis that man is to go forth and multiply and the Christian idea that infanticide and abortion are to be classed with murder are regarded to have had less effect in bringing about the present situation. In this paper I am exploring the possibility that another world view might be more compatible with ecological ethics. In doing this, I am trying to bring together parts of man's intellectual life which admittedly have little in common, and for that reason this is not as practical as other attempts to unify less disparate forms of man's intellectual life. Lynn White, Jr., mentions the vogue of Zen Buddhism and rejects it saying that it is "deeply conditioned by Asian history" and that he is "dubious of its viability among us." Instead he suggests the radical alternative Christian view of St. Francis of Assisi. (Perhaps the same kind of thing might be said of the often proposed revitalization of the religion and world view of the American Indian.) Joseph Needham seems to suggest the alternative of Taoism with again the same sort of reservation. John Black offers the possibility of utilitarian ethics which includes our posterity, but I would reject this as having the usual defects associated with utilitarianism; lack of philosophical justification and internal in coherence if it is not arbitrarily limited to some finite number of people.

The situation revealed by ecological studies does not in itself provide a foundation for a kind of ethics, of course. What it does provide is a framework of a finite number of alternatives. Some choices among these alternatives are either disastrous or they are incompatible with each

other. Prescriptions cannot be derived directly from descriptions, yet it becomes apparent to the ordinary man that certain things should be done. The intervening factor here is the sort of person the ordinary person is and what he wants. It is not true that there is only a purely contingent relationship between what is the case and what a person ought to do. Given a certain sort of person with certain sort of wants in a particular situation what he ought to do necessarily follows. And further, correct scientific descriptions particularly in the social and biological sciences have logically necessary consequences for their subject matter and some of these consequences determine what sort of person one is. This is as far as I want to go into the relation of "is" and "ought" and the naturalistic fallacy which is a side issue here, but I want to make it clear that I believe that ecological "oughts" can be gotten from ecological "is's" in this rather complicated, dialectical way.

Ecological laws are generally about particular kinds of cause and effect relationships and system of relationships. Ecology, being a derivative science, does not have scientific theories which are strictly its own. Its foundations are broad systematic generalizations, such as that there are succession sequences in forest growth. Ecology does have a selection principle for those important and relevant cause and effect relations and broad systematic generalizations and it has an emphasis, with ethical implications, as to what is important and relevant about them. Differing interests within ecology will produce a different selection of cause and effect relations for subject matter, so we have plant, animal and human ecology. [This selection principle may pick out effects of laws which are only trivial curiosities as far as physics, chemistry and anatomy are concerned (just as it is the working of a camshaft which is a result of the laws of mechanics and its shape which is of importance to us but its composition which is of importance to the scrapmetal man). One general impression of ecology is that of its subtle and complex interrelations of system of cause and effect relationships and the radical biological consequences of some chains of cause and effect relations.]

Three very broad systematic generalizations which I heard in a lecture on human ecology but for which I cannot trace the source, are as follows:

1. Everything is connected to everything else. (This one I believe is attributable to John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club.)
2. Everything must go somewhere.
3. There is no such thing a free lunch. (The third has clear ethical overtones).

Now I wish to present what I consider the primary cosmological and moral tenets of Buddhism, (they are equally straightforward) and to tie them together with ecology.

The primary cosmological tenet is the law of Karma which is older than Buddhism. It is, roughly speaking, that everything is connected with everything else, in particular man's actions and future results. The consequence of Karma is, roughly speaking, that there is no such thing as a free lunch. The parallelism that I am intending to draw is obvious: man is tied into an inexorable natural system and this is diametrically opposed to the special prerogatives of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Now, there are two aspects of the law of Karma found in popular Buddhist and Hindu religion which are not clearly present in the more or less official sayings of Buddha himself. These are that there are direct connections between evil acts and evil consequences in the sense of reward and punishment, and that the individual self is preserved through reincarnation in an after life and that to the self the evil consequences accrue. Buddha's original teachings are only concerned with the great effort to remove ignorance which is necessary to discover the consequences of actions because of their complexity and obscurity. Nor is it clear that the individual self is preserved eternally. In the twelve links of causality it is ignorance which causes the dispositions; these are preserved and cause consciousness at rebirth. It is disputable how individual and personal this consciousness is. I will return to this point with reasons derived from other Buddhist tenets for rebirth not being of recognizable personal ego, in early Buddhist teachings and I will link this view with the ethical stance of ecology.

The principle *moral* tenet of Buddhism is mindfulness or the destruction of ignorance. Knowing is not enough, but knowing and doing are wedded in Buddha as in the Greeks. Knowing is difficult, minding is the easy part of mindfulness. Mindfulness is first understanding oneself, one's actions and consequences, the cause and effect relationships leading to pain and then removing or abstaining from the causes. Again the parallelism with ecological ethics is obvious: knowledge of the web of cause and effect relationships comes before action. The emphasis on knowledge rather than action and the assumed continuity of knowledge and action are also non-Christian.

To return to ecology, there is only one ethical alternative for man to that of being mindful of the environment. It can be summed up in the slogan which I feel could only have come readily to the lips of an American living in an American environment. It is: If you are booking on the *Titanic* there is no way to go but First Class.

The implied assumption here is that enjoyment is a private affair. One can, at least, temporarily separate oneself from the environment and other people. This possibility is based on the assumption of the existence of an at least temporarily separable independent ego. This abstract entity has

been necessary to Christian theologians in order to have an object of ungratified praise or blame and to be the ultimate author of good and evil acts and to give theologians answers to some of the unanswered questions of blame raised in the Old Testament (in order for them to say along with Harry Truman "The buck stops here"). The concept of ultimate individuality has also been needed by philosophers of democracy and capitalism as the ultimate political and economic unit. This notion has been severely criticized. Marxists have viewed the notion of an independent ego an illusion or a warped reflection of the world (perhaps, the Buddhists would say the *veil of Maya*), a bit of ideology caused by the economic conditions of a competitive, individuating, capitalist society.

The economic conditions produce a class consciousness in which men are alienated from their products (the consequences of their action) and their relations with other men. (The notion of individual rights and democratic freedom was an outgrowth of the economic conditions as well, but it was not carried so far as to make "one man, one vote" politically respectable, although that consequence was drawn by the politically unrespectable, lover of geometric reasoning, Thomas Hobbes).

According to the Marxist critique the separate self who maintains himself first class on the *Titanic* is nothing but an artificial product of social and economic competition and of alienation and defense. To be sure the tyrant, aristocrat and entrepreneur can exist (there are some grounds for the distinction of separate independent men) but they cannot exist separately even temporarily; and in maintaining the facade of independence they develop signs of mental peculiarities to which we give the normative description of mental diseases and they require self-delusion in large quantities. (A less intellectual modern critique of the atomic-self and competition as opposed to community is found in the life style of the hippy. Its defects have been variously described as anti-social, anti-technological, and anti-action and in general it embodies upper and middle class luxuriousness and escapist tendencies. The Marxist would brand it as the ultimate in catatonic, solisistic, capitalist nihilism rather than a revolt against bourgeois values.)

A second attack on the notion of the independent ego comes from Freud, but Freud's view is traceable to Schopenhauer and from him back to Eastern thought. It is that the supposed independent ego is only the visible, socialized part of a deep unconscious structure. The deepest sources of individuality are the *id* and *superego* which are an un-individualized sink of unconscious infantile and biological actions and reactions with parents and the world.

The consequences of the combined truths that everything is connected to everything else and the nature of human nature is that one can only live

in opposition to and in separation from others by diminishing oneself and by denying the true causal relations among actions. One can go First Class on the *Titanic*, but one cannot be entirely happy about it. It is a long known fact that the search for individual happiness is delusive. This is represented by the rich American in Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* who at the high point of the party persists in asking to everyone's dismay "Was this the genuine article? Was this the real guaranteed height of a Good Time?" And it is just a fact of the history of ideas that where moral philosophies center on one's individual duties as in Stoicism or in Epicureanism, there are also signs of social breakdown and alienation.

One knows that there is something wrong with booking First Class on the *Titanic*. What is wrong with it is that one's own personal happiness is trivial compared to how the rest of the world is working. It is the additional cosmological hypothesis about the insubstantiality of the independent human self which points up a defect in this ethical alternative to ecological mindfulness.

A similar critique of human individuality appears in some traditional interpretations of Buddhism. It is the Buddhist doctrine of no-soul, that ego is an ever-changing composite of events and that the notion of an independent ego is an illusion or abstraction. It has been a problem for Buddhism that if the soul does not survive death to be reborn what is the point of mindfulness. Why bother with the extreme exertion to discover the causes of pain and eliminate them if one only has to wait until death. The doctrine of individual Karma has been thought necessary to support the Buddhist way. But when the view that the well-being of the person resides in the person's relationships with the others in this world and their well-being, then the popular view of an individual Karma is unnecessary and a possibly unwarranted interpretation of Buddhist saying. We cannot be happy with ourselves. We have no real self. We can only be happy when things in general are going well. (Due to the finitude of human nature, as Spinoza would say, first the going well of things close to us and then of those more remote. Therefore our present well-being transcends our place and time and our death and dissolution.) The Buddhist doctrine of no-soul avoids the extreme self-seeking consequences which would follow from the ethical alternative of a combined acceptance of Buddhist mindfulness and individual Nirvana. It also answers the question of why not go First Class in this life if death is at hand.

The notion of individual Karma which was present prior to Buddhism and which was later incorporated in popular exposition of Buddhism I consider to be the main factor in Buddhism's not being an acceptable religious philosophy because it is not particularly believable and without the return of consequences of immoral acts the whole rationale for

avoiding those acts falls to the ground. But the adherence to Buddha's principle prescription to banish ignorance and to be mindful will reveal the true causes of human well-being, the illusion of human individuality and consequently the irrelevance of death. The notion of individual Karma is then redundant. But Buddhism retains a central truth of Karma: that all acts have consequences.

Traditional Buddhism in some of its interpretations has had from the western point of view other defects which detract from it as an acceptable ethic. These have been its other-worldliness, its retreat to a "higher self" and its quietism. These may be foreign elements imported from Taoism or Hinduism. Taoism's ideal of understanding of nature is Buddhist as well, but Taoism's withdrawal from organized feudal society to a primitive communal life is ambivalent and its implied non-inference with nature is akin to the quietist element in Buddhism. The magical and alchemical tradition in Taoism of preserving the material self for eternity is completely unrealistic, yet it has its parallel in the preservation of the higher self or atman in Hinduism and Buddhism. Quietism and retreat to a higher plane of existence are either inherent defects in Buddhism from a western point of view or else they are inherent problems in interpretation for the presentation of Buddhism to an Indian audience. I believe that Buddha tried to prevent this characterization of Buddhism with his work program and his denial of the self and of any other world. Buddhist ambiguities on the existence of the self or soul can be interpreted, I believe, as an attempt to avoid, on the one hand, nihilism and with it the rejection of the Buddhist ethic, and to avoid, on the other hand, the doctrine of an eternal soul. By nihilism, I mean the western view that there is a separable self as postulated in the western, Christian tradition, but that this self disappears at death. If this is correct then the true Buddhist view would be that the self lies in its relation to the world and others. Morality lies in first understanding, then improving, purifying and altering some of these relations. The Buddhist doctrine of the not-self and the true-self is that of an unimproved and of an improved self but that there is no separate self. The result of this is the union of self and world in a sense which depends on the understanding of what a self means and the dissolution of the self in the sense of the illusory atomic-self and finally with a retention of an appreciation of all things and therefore, in a sense the expansion of the self.

Buddhism has seldom been characterized as an optimistic philosophy. With all human effort the dire consequences of the correct insight of Dostoevsky that all is permitted and of Camus' *Caligula* that nothing makes any difference may only *possibly* be avoided. Their ethical stance may be justified. We can only be as sure as they in fact were sure, that nothing will be right nor will anyone be happy unless by chance everyone tries mindfulness.

In Buddhism, after removing the interpolation of religious elements, there is only commitment to truth and to the understanding of the true nature of people and of the true causes of pain and sorrow. The moral code is only to act to change it for the better. The only cure is through understanding (mindfulness) of man and his environment and through *technological* control and regulation of the world, of man, of oneself. But primarily the exhortation is to understanding. There is no recommendation to a Buddhistic attitude or to be an ecology nut until one understands what it means. A large measure of what mindfulness means depends upon seeing what the world is like without it (as Buddha did), unless one happens to be born a Buddha (which even Buddha was not). One must see war, overpopulated India, armies, capitalism, communism and organized religion at work—one must see it to believe it. In Buddhism it is attainment of knowledge first and the attempt, which would fail without knowledge, to aid family, friends and one's own well-being second. Ignorant technological intervention is as ill-advised for the disciple as it always was. For example: 1) Population control depends upon the correct understanding of the consequences of technology, of the relating of men and war, and men and women, as well as men and food. 2) The Buddhist prohibition against killing is a consequence of the awareness of the universality of suffering, the unity of all living things and the impossibility of individual escape, (e.g., the lack of a unitary non-related self) and it is also a primitive attempt at ecology. But as ecology it has become a failure and is resulting now in more suffering. However, the mindfulness of Buddhism suggest the right direction in which man must move. The mindfulness of Karma is the understanding of one's own pain and its true causes and the understanding of the true causes of the pain of others and of others in the future. It requires a long look into the mind of man and at his environment as well. It is ecological, economic and psychological understanding and it is technological know how as well, then it is the destruction of the causes of pain. The question for Buddhism divested of individual Karma is the question of Camus—why not suicide? But there is no individuality, so suicide is irrelevant. Then why not the doomsday machine and the destruction of all suffering, the suicide of life itself? This was an option not open to Buddha. I am not at all sure that Buddhism is not justifiably characterized by Nietzsche as a life-weary philosophy and that Buddha would jump at the chance. However, I believe the doomsday machine is an illusion just as escape from this planet to another when this one becomes intolerable is an illusion. Life is not a thing that is easy to stamp out. Its conditions just grow worse. And as Buddha preached as the condition of life grows worse, the ability to be mindful grows less. This is why he preached a middle way and not destructive asceticism. The parallel with technological application

of technology is that ecology is only possible in a fairly well-to-do society which can postpone and plan its economy.

The two Buddhist cosmological tenets that man is tied into a natural web of cause and effect relationships by his every act and that the self is not a separate or separable thing, along with the Buddhist precept of mindfulness seem to provide a philosophical and ethical tradition more compatible with ecological principles than the Judeo-Christian tradition. But in Buddhist precepts and in practice there is no easy solution. The salvation of every living thing must be guaranteed, gradually but finally all together. This seems to be a common, and I must say, a commonly impossible ideal.

NOTES

¹ Black, John. *The Dominion of Man* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1970).

² Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilization in China*. 3 vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1954).

³ Stcherbatsky, F. Th. *Buddhist Logic*. 2 vols. (New York: N.Y. Dover Pub., Inc., 1962).

⁴ White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, Volume 155, No. 3767 (March 10, 1967), pp. 1203-07.

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