

Some Aspects of the Ecological Ethics in Chinese Buddhism

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HUMANKIND has, by the present time, distinctly acknowledged its responsibility in the face of the current ecological crisis. Global warming (and, possibly, ensuing global cooling), rise of the level of the ocean, melting of polar and mountain glaciers, deterioration of water and air, natural calamities having become more frequent—such as floods, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes et al.—all this has made people seriously consider further ways of evolvement of human being and nature, on elaborating a strategy of stable development.

A number of researchers, in their time, took notice of the fact that the religion dominating in this or that culture, also determines, in particular, man's attitude to nature and ways of interaction with it. Thus, Lynn White, Jr., laid the blame for the ecological crisis on West European Christianity, with its accentuation of man's domination over nature.¹ It is noted there, for example, that «Christianity, especially in its Western form, is the most anthropocentric of all the world religions. As early as in the 2nd century A.C. both Tertullianus and St. Irenoeus of Lyon insisted that when the God was creating Adam, the latter already contained anticipation of the image of embodied Christ—the other Adam. Man's attitude to nature is to a great extent determined by the fact that he, as well as the God, is transcendent as related to the world. Being completely and irreconcilably opposed to ancient paganism and Asian religions, except, perhaps, for Zoroastrianism, Christianity not only established dualism of man and nature, but also insisted on considering it established that the God's will consists exactly in providing that man exploit nature for his purposes». Alternative, solicitous attitude to nature, as presented, for example, in views and deeds of St. Francis of Assisi, was later eradicated and was looked upon, rather, as a certain marginal line of the teaching.

Pagan West European traditions, with their sacred groves, fauns, centaurs, gnomes and other fantastic natural beings, used to be eradicated with fire and sword. In the long run it resulted in the development of the mechanistic attitude to nature, to the world, as presented in the philo-

sophical tradition of the Modern Time. Nature was conceived as a kind of clockwork functioning according to native laws.

The situation wasn't much better in Russia, with its Orthodox Christianity. However, in our country pagan traditions, not completely eradicated, were stronger and, besides, the very logic of the infinite expanse of the unbounded Russian plain imposed somewhat different, more cautious treatment of nature, based, true, not on esteem, but, rather, on dread of the mighty forces of nature.² A certain role belonged also to the fact, that the Russian man was ever anew colonizing Russia, moving from one place to another and having no time anywhere to change natural environment to such an extent as to make it lose its ability for self-restoration. Thus, the words said by V.O.Klyuchevsky more than one hundred years ago, still remain topical: «Peasants' settlements along the Volga river and in many other places of European Russia, with their primitive character, with the absence of simplest living comfort, up to now make, especially on a traveller from the West, the impression of temporary, occasional camps of nomads who are just about to leave their hardly assimilated places in order to move again to new ones. That reflected migratory vagrancy characteristic of earlier times, as well as chronic fires—circumstances which from generation to generation inculcated disdainful indifference to home improvement, to comfort in everyday domestic situation» (p. 87).

In the 20th century the influence of mankind on nature assumed a threatening character practically in all places of the Earth. The blame for it may be, possibly, laid on one more side of human activity—material production. More than 30 years ago a book by B.Commoner—«*The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, Technology*»³ was issued, in which the author was trying to substantiate the incompatibility of modern economic system (both capitalist and socialist) and nature preservation. First of all, it is not remunerative for the producer to put expenses for ecology into the cost price of the commodity. As is known, any trader seeks to maximize profit at any cost. For ages, humankind conceived nature as gratuitous store of resources and as a dump to throw out what's been exhausted. Till recently, indirect expenses for fighting maladies caused by bad ecology, damages from calamities etc., in fact, were never included into economic calculations. Besides, the economic and ecological cycles themselves do not coincide, i. e. nature hasn't enough time to restore itself during all the short periods.

Of late, the governments of almost all states of the world have been adopting different programs and plans of actions aimed at improving the ecological situation. And a great role in the elaboration of a new ecolog-

ical ideology may, no doubt, be played by East-Asian Buddhism with its strongly articulated ecological orientation.

Any traveller, investigator, or just an average man getting to a Chinese or a Japanese buddhist monastery or just a park, is astonished by the surprising beauty, harmony of what is natural and what is artificial. Fanciful trees, brooks, rocks are to be met in the neighborhood of refined pavilions, arbors, from which exciting views of the surrounding landscape are seen. As distinct from this, Indian or Ceylonese buddhist monasteries are deprived of such fascination. And, naturally, the question comes, why it is so.

To my mind, the basic reason lies in the fact that the East-Asian, first of all the Chinese, Buddhism is to a considerable extent synthesis of Buddhism and Taoism and has also undergone the influence of Confucianism. Traditional Chinese religions by their essence have a considerable ecological touch. A well-known Russian investigator of Confucianism L.S.Perelomov notes that «in China as early as in the ancient time a stable tradition of gratitude to nature took shape... In the judgments of “Analects” one may single out four fundamental principles of mutual relations of society and nature:

1. In order to become a worthy member of society, a man is obliged to constantly extend his knowledge of nature, to know not only behavior habits of beasts and birds, but also natural laws of the growth of trees and grasses.

2. It is only in nature that man and, consequently, also society can receive vital power and repose.

3. Therefore it is necessary to solicitously treat both the animal kingdom and the natural resources.

4. Solemn prayers should be regularly held and sacrifices made in honor of the spirits of the Heavens and of the Earth, and, what is most important,—on the highest state level».⁴

Mencius, used to give considerable attention to problems of mutual relations of nature and man. In the long run, Mencius connects with thrifty use of nature the possibility of incarnating the kindest nature of man and of realizing the principle philanthropic rule. In a society, where people will always have enough of clothes, of food, of other means of life support (for example, of wood to build and to heat home), harmony will reign.

No less attention to problems of nature was given by Sun-zi. In the long run, the power of the state depends exactly on its resources, first of

all on natural resources. That is why hunt, fishing, procurement of timber, berry-picking *etc.* must be carried on at strictly definite time and in places specially allotted for it.

The ecological ethics of Taoism is based on somewhat different principles. Tao (the Way), the fundamental Taoist category, in the words of Ye.A.Torchinov, «presents itself as a substantivized regularity of all existent, the law of spontaneous being of cosmos, man and society; the generating basis genetically preceding the world of “shaped” things; the principle of cyclic character of time, “the Way”, the mode of life of a devotee, striving to unite with Tao as the ontological essence of the world» [26]. Man, following Tao, should not interfere into the natural course of events, realizing the principles of «no deed» (*wu-wei*) and of «naturalness» (*zi-ran*). Taoist texts, describing Tao, constantly resort to «natural» allegories. Thus, Tao is often compared with water, weak and fluid, but, thanks to these properties, all-conquering and all-piercing. The Taoist ideal is a small patriarchal state remaining in homeostasis. This is how it is described in «*Dao de jing*» (paragraph 80):

“Let the state be small and sparsely populated. If there are [in the state] different tools, they should not be applied. Up to the end of their lives people should not go far [from their places]. If there are [in the state] boats and chariots, they should not be used. Even if there are warriors, they should not be presented. Let the people begin again to weave nodules and use them instead of writing. Let their food be tasty, their dress beautiful, their dwelling comfortable, and life happy. Let different states that are in the neighborhood of one another look at one another, listen to the neighbors’ cock-crow and dogs’ barking and let people up to old age and up to the death refrain from visiting one another” [27].

«*Zhuang-zi*», another fundamental Taoist treatise, advances the idea of simplification, rejection of wisdom, of excessive technical devices distorting natural course of things. In ancient times harmony between people and nature reigned, until sages came and brought sedition and discord.

In times when properties of life did not suffer damage, people’s walk was steady and glance inexorable. In those days there were yet no paths in the mountains and neither boats nor bridges in lakelands. All creatures lived together, and people’s settlements clung to one another. Beasts and birds gathered in packs and flocks, trees and grasses in their growth used to achieve full length. Therefore everyone could adjust a lead to a beast or to a bird and thus go on a walk, or could bend a tree and look into a crow’s or a tomtit’s nest. In those times people lived together with birds and beasts like descendants of one kin. How could

they know who is a noble and who a mean man! («Zhuang-zi», chapter IX) [28].

One more episode is also very significant.

While going on travels in Southern lands Zi-Gong achieved the Chu kingdom and was already returning to the Jin territories. When he was walking along the Northern bank of the Han river, he noticed a man who was digging up a kitchen-garden and was watering it, for which purpose he was time and again getting into a well with an earthen jug in his hands. The man laboured indefatigably, trying his hardest, yet his work was moving slowly.

—There exists now a machine, which waters a hundred of vegetable patches for one day!—Zi-Gong shouted to him.—It does not require much efforts, but the work with it moves quickly. Don't you desire, esteemed gardener, to use it?

The man who was working at the kitchen-garden raised his head and asked: «What is that machine like?»

—It is made of wood, its backpart is heavy and forepart is light. Water pours from it in a stream, like a boiling spurt from a spring. They call the machine water-wheel.

The gardener frowned and said with an ironical grin: «I've heard from my teacher that one who works with a machine, himself does everything like a machine, and one who does everything like a machine, has a heart that also becomes a machine. And when the heart becomes like a machine, chastity and purity disappear. And if there is no chastity and no purity, neither will there be strength of mind. And one who is not strong by mind, will not preserve Tao in himself» (chapter XII).

On the whole, Taoism, being opposition to Confucianism, sees the reason of the destruction of harmony between man and nature, of the loss of Tao in that people lost the feeling of unity with the whole world, lost naturalness, began to consider the opinions of the sages, to apply technical devices. But in reality it's all blunders. The world is a single whole, there aren't «this» and «that» in reality.

Indian Buddhism proceeds from the idea of illusory, transient character of the *sansara*. In the world where all is determined by causality-dependence origin, where suffer (*duhkha*) dominates, it is possible to talk only of compassion (*karuna*) for all the living, and of non-harm (*ahimsa*) to what is also involved in the infinite round of deaths-and-births. This attitude towards the surrounding world found reflection also in monastery construction where natural environment plays a subordinate role. Moreover, in Theravada Buddhism such phenomena as decomposition, decay etc., were object of meditation.

Chinese Buddhism as a whole proved to be near to the Taoist view of the problem of mutual relation of society and nature, corroborating it with a number of postulates. First of all, the very attitude toward *sansara* changed, it was looked upon rather positively, as a hope for eternal existence, and not negatively, as in Buddhism. Besides, practically all Chinese Buddhists adopted the idea of identity of *nirvana* and *sansara*, elaborated as early as in the 2nd century B.C. in the teaching of Nagarjuna. As it followed from the idea, all living creatures possess the «nature of Buddha» (*fo xing*) and, consequently, all of them will in the long run come to elucidation and become buddhas. Moreover, the principle of possessing the «nature of Buddha» was extended also to inanimate beings. Thus, Jizang (549–623), the principal systematizer of the *sanlun* school (the school of «three shastras»), wrote about the presence of the nature of Buddha in insensible things: not only emptiness (*sunya*, *kong*), but also grasses and trees possess the nature of Buddha.

But the ecological ethics of Chinese Buddhism, as it seems to me, has reached its peak in no other trend, but *Chan*, which presents, as many researchers noted (in particular D.Suzuki and A.Watts) synthesis of Buddhism and Taoism. The Chan in its finally developed form shifted the accent from the liberation from *sansara* to the lucidity and awareness of the unity of all the existent. The truly elucidated man is conscious of the fact that all the surrounding possesses Buddha, is Buddha. This reality is beyond expression in words and at the same time is conceivable, it lends itself to conceiving in the process of what D.Suzuki so fortunately called the «art of life».

The Chan's dicta—“*wen-da*” (Japanese “*mondo*”), “*gong-an*” (Japanese “*koan*”), different stories are full of nature images, they draw attention exactly at the harmony of nature, which is just Buddha.

Thereby, cardinal difference of the ecological ethics of the Chinese Buddhism from Indian one, in my opinion, derives from its close relationship to traditional Chinese teachings, strongly oriented towards natural basis.

Notes

¹ Уайт-мл, Л. Исторические корни нашего экологического кризиса // Глобальные проблемы и общечеловеческие ценности. Сост. Л.И.Василенко, В.Е. Ермолаева.— М, 1990. С. 188–202

² in more detail: Ключевский В.О. Сочинения в девяти томах. Курс русской истории. М., 1987. Т. 1. С. 63–89

³ Коммонер Б. Замкнутый круг: природа, человек, технология. Л., 1974

⁴ Конфуцианское “Четверокнижие” [“Сы шу”]. Переводы с китайского. М., 2004. С. 24