

## A BUDDHIST VIEW OF ECOLOGY: INTERDEPENDENCE, EMPTINESS AND COMPASSION

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1. Interdependence, emptiness and compassion represent three very significant themes in the Buddhist teachings. Although they are especially developed in certain Mahayana and Vajrayana schools, we can safely say that interdependence, emptiness and compassion are integral and important elements of Buddhist doctrine, beginning from the very teachings directly attributed to the Buddha down to the later schools we just mentioned. And the impact of these three basic ingredients of Buddhism is obviously all-pervasive both in terms of Buddhist doctrine as well as in terms of Buddhist meditation practices.

I think, at the very outset I have to emphasize, to have clear perspective of things, the following fact: in the Buddhist understanding, interdependence, emptiness and compassion are two-dimensional. On the one hand they are doctrinal concepts or ideas, and on the other they propose spiritual dimensions to be 'realized' within the individual. To realize or experience 'compassion' within oneself is an obvious and evident fact. But the inner realization of 'interdependence' and 'emptiness' is not easily comprehensible, and is easily misunderstood and quite often end up in being viewed mostly as concepts or ideas. Actually, as we will see, realization of emptiness and interdependence in its truest sense indicates that a profound transformation has taken place in the individual, exactly in the same way as a strong development of compassion is an indication of deep transformation. Therefore, since realization is a fruit of contemplative practice, we would better look at what is essential in Buddhist contemplative practice.

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First of all I would like to mention one recurrent definition of the Buddha: in the Pali scriptures he is characterized as the one who is *sada sato*, which means the one who is constantly aware, the one who is naturally and habitually attentive. If we think of it deeply, the state of attentiveness ascribed to the Buddha is an exceptional one, and it is dramatically different from the condition of mind, which we tend to consider as the 'normal' one. In our so-called 'normal' condition, *sati* (Pali) or *smṛti* (Sanskrit), that is to say, mindfulness or awareness, is anything but free: as a matter of fact, we lend the vital force of attention either to what attracts us or to what elicits our aversion or, finally, to what needs to be done. So usually our mindfulness comes alive depending on whether there is a task to be accomplished or some pleasure to be pursued or something unpleasant to be avoided. Otherwise our attention tends to go into abeyance, to be dormant or momentarily dead.

In other words, for the common mind awareness is not a value in itself but rather, it is used in order to get something that we think is valuable. Now what the Buddha teaches and what, in my opinion, a number of contemplative traditions outside Buddhism teach as well, is that an awake consciousness is a value in itself. Actually it is the fundamental value, out of which all the other fundamental values - i.e., basically, wisdom and love - can arise, and without which no fundamental value whatsoever can be born.

2. It is said in the *Paramatthajotika*, that "only what awareness contemplates can wisdom understand". I feel this statement suggests in a nutshell what the purpose and the function of Buddhist contemplation is. As a matter of fact, there are innumerable forms and varieties of Buddhist meditation. Nonetheless some fundamental structures of it are shared by the majority of the schools. The central one is the bipolar structure of *samatha* and *vipassana* (*vipasyana* in Sanskrit). We can say - but of course, this is an oversimplification indeed! - that *samatha* is mindfulness in a calmly concentrated aspect, whereas *vipassana* is mindfulness in an exploring and investigating aspect. *Samatha* leads the practitioner into states of mental absorption, *vipassana* promotes a deeper and deeper understanding or wisdom, which ultimately is the factor which is responsible for liberation or enlightenment. It should be understood that

these two forms of meditation are not to be seen as two alternative routes. Rather, they are like two wings which are both necessary to fly.

In other words, it is deemed to be impossible to develop a penetrating awareness (*vipasyana*) without the foundation of stability and at-ease-ness which comes from practicing *samatha* or calm abiding or relaxed concentration. On the other hand, it is also considered that an exclusive practice of *samatha*, although it could produce happy mental states, cannot however, bring about liberation from sorrow. The Buddha himself strongly emphasized this point when - as it is mentioned in his biographies - he abandoned some spiritual teachers with whom he had been studying and practising asceticism. His reason for leaving them was exactly the fact that he found their teachings as fundamentally inadequate in so far as it was based on *samatha only*.

3. To sum up: the realization of interdependence, emptiness and compassion in classical Buddhism indicates the fullness of growth or liberation or enlightenment. In later Buddhism it indicates the fullness of Buddha-nature which is in every thing and beyond every thing. The core of Buddhist meditation is mindfulness, which - as we saw - is to be cultivated in two ways, i.e., according to the mode of relaxed concentration and according to the mode of explorative awareness. Within this basic bipolar structure, there are a number of variations, especially regarding the investigative meditation, its field and its functioning.

We will deal briefly with this issue later on. For the time being it is enough to say that in order to see, namely, in order to have insight (*vipassana*) into the true nature of things, a substantial amount of inner peace or *samatha* is required. Other wise, as any experienced meditator knows, the mind will be held captive by thoughts and emotions and there will be no basis whatsoever for insight and transformation. This *samatha-vipasyana* model is prominent in the majority of Buddhist schools (Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana) and it looks like some sort of 'root archetype' of the Buddhist meditation.

It is true, as we have already mentioned that in terms of the *vipasyana* polarity, the kind of emphasis, which each Buddhist school

chooses, can be quite different. However, a different emphasis does not mean different conclusions about the Ultimate. I am aware that a number of Buddhist schools see themselves as being strongly in mutual contrast. It is well known, for instance, how much conflict has piled up over the centuries among the three Buddhist vehicles. Nowadays, however, because of the growing influence of the inter-religious spirit in the overall religious scene of the world, a corresponding inter-buddhist spirit is also emerging. The inter-buddhist dialogue seems to be developing especially in the western world, with the help of some great Asian Buddhist masters like, for example, Ajahn Buddhadasa. Of course, an inter-buddhist dialogical attitude should not imply in any way an overlooking of the differences among schools. But it does mean, however, the fostering of a non-sectarian stand and an objective and sensitive attention for what is similar, in addition to an awareness of differences.

4. Now, the Buddhist view considers contemplation or *samatha-vipasyana* as something capable of gradually bringing the practitioner into seeing deeply into the fact that no phenomenon whatsoever seems to have a nature which is definable as independent, intrinsic, separate and permanent. That is to say, no phenomenon seems to exist intrinsically, in and of itself, but, rather, it can exist only in relationship with or dependent on other phenomena. In this sense, each phenomenon as well as each individual appears to be empty of an unchangeable and independent core and this is what is technically called emptiness or *sunyata*.

For the sake of historical clarity, it might be helpful to remember that the idea of *sunyata* after its emergence in the *Prajna-paramita* literature, which is the foundation of Mahayana Buddhism, was then further developed by Nagarjuna and the Madhyamaka school [from second century CE. onwards]. Over the centuries, further development and conceptualization took place, and certainly the great Tibetan master Tsong Khapa [nineteenth century] provided one of the most brilliant and penetrating analysis of *sunyata*. R. Thurman, one of the leading authorities in the field of Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhist studies, writes in a recent work: "Voidness does not mean nothingness, but rather, that all things lack intrinsic reality, intrinsic objectivity, intrinsic identity ... Lacking such static essence or substance does not make them not exist, it

makes them thoroughly relative ... So the *via negativa* of the *Prajna-paramita* does not annihilate things; it frees them from entrapment in negativity, opening them up to a creative relativity"<sup>1</sup>.

A western Buddhist nun, Thubten Chodron, who belongs to the Tsong Khapa lineage or Gelugpa School of Tibetan Buddhism, explains emptiness in a very clear and practical way. She says:

To say that all persons and phenomena are empty of true or inherent existence means that all persons and phenomena are empty of our fantasized projections on them.

One of the principal deceptive qualities that we project onto persons and phenomena is that they are inherently existent, that is, that they exist without depending on causes and conditions, namely, the parts of which they are made and the consciousness that conceives them and gives them a name ... Things are empty of our fantasized projections onto them. Still, they do exist, but they exist dependently ... Emptiness is not nihilism. Rather, people and phenomena are empty of our fantasized projections upon them. They do not exist in the way they appear to us at present, but they do exist: they don't exist independently, but they do dependently exist ... For example, someone who is wearing sunglasses sees dark trees. In fact, there are no dark trees. However, we cannot say there are no trees at all. There are trees; they just don't exist in the way they appear to the person wearing sunglasses<sup>2</sup>.

5. Therefore, it is fairly obvious that insight into universal interdependence means simultaneously insight into emptiness. Given the fact that no thought, no perception, no emotions exists in itself, by itself, of itself, and given the fact that - instead - each thought, perception and emotion can exist only in dependence of something else, then in the Buddhist terminology it is said that each thought, perception, emotion and ultimately everything is empty. Empty of that dense one-sided and biased type of reality which we automatically impute onto them.

<sup>1</sup>R. Thurman, Foreword to *Mother of the Buddhas* by Lex Hixon, Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 1993, p.vii.

<sup>2</sup>Thubten Chodron, *What Color is Your Mind*, Ithaca, N.Y.: 1993, pp.34-36.

Now, if this realization, far from arising as an occasional intuition, begins to occur on a rather frequent basis, and if the realization of emptiness, far from showing us the inner and the outer world in a dry and cold light, begins, instead, to put us in touch with an awesome sense of spaciousness and truth, then we start waking up to the profound existential value of the realization of emptiness. Which means waking up to the two major fruits of this realization, namely, more freedom and more compassion.

I think there is something important to be stressed here once again: although the conception of emptiness has given birth to a highly sophisticated philosophical speculation within a number of Buddhist schools, its first and foremost meaning and function is spiritual, namely, soteriological, that is to say, practical, in keeping with the most fundamental orientation of all the major Buddhist teachings. Therefore, I feel one should be very cautious and humble in dealing with this subject.

A contemporary Tibetan master, Gyatrul Rinpoche, in presenting teachings about how to transform adversities of life into a positive force, says: "It should be understood that, if someone is not on a spiritual path, then in a sense this teaching is irrelevant and somewhat useless"<sup>3</sup>. I believe a very similar observation could be made about teachings on emptiness: they were born from spiritual practice and are meant to foster and sustain spiritual practice.

Now, as we mentioned above, the major fruits of realization of emptiness through spiritual practice should be more freedom and more compassion. Why freedom? I think an answer to this question can come from different levels. It might be helpful to touch upon a high level realization first and then we could switch on to more basic levels. It seems to me that recently David Loy has offered an excellent formulation of what appears to be a high realization of emptiness. He writes:

So our most problematic dualism is not life fearing death, but a fragile sense of self dreading its own groundlessness.. By accepting and yielding to that groundlessness I can discover that I have always

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<sup>3</sup>Gyatrul Rinpoche, *Ancient Wisdom*, Ithaca, N.Y.: 1993. p.33.

been grounded not as a self-contained being but as one manifestation of a web of relationships which encompasses everything.

This solves the problem of desire - by transforming-it. As long as we are driven by lack, every desire becomes a sticky attachment that tries to fill up a bottomless pit. Without lack, the serenity of our nothingness, i.e. the absence of any fixed nature grants the freedom to become anything.<sup>4</sup>

If we use a more classical Buddhist terminology, we could say that ignorance generates attachment and attachment generates suffering. Loy's brilliant synthesis shows the fundamental meaning and implications of these three key concepts (ignorance, attachment and suffering) through a skilful use of contemporary language. Ignorance is defined as ignorance of emptiness (or groundlessness) and of its non-destructive nature. Out of this ignorance attachment comes, along with its two wings, fear and aversion. Fear is the deep underlying dread that our lack of a solid and permanent self will destroy us; attachment in its most specific meaning is attachment to any experience, activity, mind-state, emotions, situations, things, etc., which we think will fill up the groundlessness; aversion is aversion towards any experience which seems to go into the opposite direction.

This constant flux of fear-attachment-aversion does not succeed, of course, in making an individual whole, solid and free. On the contrary, it generates more and more frustration and anxiety, that is, *dukkha* or suffering. In classical Buddhist terms, we have just described the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, and the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering, the cause being ignorance and attachment. But the first two truths are only a half of the Buddhist teaching. The other half is the teaching about the healing from suffering and its cause (third truth, liberation or enlightenment) and the teaching about the cure, or the path which can lead out of suffering (fourth truth).

6. So we are back to *samatha-vipassana* meditation which is the core of the Buddhist contemplative path. We can now look again at Buddhist

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<sup>4</sup>D. Loy, "Avoiding the Void: The Lack of Self in Psychotherapy and Buddhism", *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 24 (1992), p.176.

meditation in the light of what we have said so far. The backbone of this contemplative practice is no more and no less than watching and understanding in depth this movement of attachment-fear-aversion. This is also the reason why *bhavana*, contemplation, is considered to be the most radical purification practice. As a matter of fact, the more we contemplate on the attachment process, the more we disidentify from it and the freer we are. The more we gain insight into the hopelessness of expecting completeness coming from attachment, the more we let go of our self-centred cravings and fears and become more comfortable with our elusive and mysterious nature. This way, through constant meditative purification, we begin, in David Loy's terms, to 'accept and yield' to our 'groundlessness'. And we begin to perceive that, underneath our frantic attempts at fabricating a solid ego facing a solid world, there is a sense of 'open boundlessness' to use Masao Abe's definition of emptiness or groundlessness. Each step in this purification movement, each step into accepting, letting go, disidentifying, each step into emptiness is a step into freedom. And this is the more basic and accessible level of freedom we mentioned before.

In what we just said there is a crucial aspect of ecology which in Christian terms could be expressed through the statement 'everything is grace'. Let us examine it according to Buddhist contemplative practices. In the fifties, Hubert Benoit, a French psychoanalyst who was also a Zen practitioner, wrote an important book *La Doctrine Supreme*. In the last chapter of this book, when summing up his reflections, which appear to be very much nourished and sustained by the Zen tradition, he writes: "It is a question of understanding the exact nature of humility and of seeing that in it is to be found the key of our liberty and our greatness". Later on he remarks:

The whole problem of human distress is resumed in the problem of humiliation. To cure distress is to be freed from all possibility of humiliation. Whence comes my humiliation? ... It comes from the fact that I try in vain not to see my real powerlessness. It is not powerlessness itself that causes humiliation, but the shock



experienced by my pretension to omnipotence when it comes up against the reality of things<sup>5</sup>.

All negative states – Benoit suggests – are at the bottom of humiliations; but we tend to give them other names. However, unless we make full use of humiliation, we cannot develop humility. By ‘using humiliation’ Benoit means the capacity to remain motionless in our humiliations. He says:

From the moment at which I succeed in no longer moving in my humiliated state, I discover with surprise that there is the unique harbour of safety, the only place in the world in which I can find perfect security... if I struggle against humiliation it destroys me and it increases my inner disharmony; but if I let it alone, without opposing it, it builds up my inner harmony<sup>6</sup>.

So humiliation can generate humility, a state of imprisonment can generate freedom, everything is grace, everything is interconnected, everything is workable and usable: a pinnacle, indeed, of ecology and eco-spirituality. As a Taoist author Huachun Daoren [seventeenth century] says: “Rotting plants have no lustre, but they turn into foxfire and glow in the summer moonlight. So we know that purity emerges from impurity and light is born from darkness”<sup>7</sup>. Of course, once again we are back to contemplation: in fact, there is no way of remaining motionless in our humiliations and frustrations unless our contemplative awareness is well established, that is to say, unless a capacity for friendship, for a non-judging and unconditioned friendship for whatever happens inside ourselves is well established: this is the fire which allows the transformation to take place, which can turn base metals into gold. So we are talking again about the basic contemplation of suffering, namely, the contemplation of what is conditioned. It is through this contemplation that we can touch upon what is unconditioned, the open boundlessness,

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<sup>5</sup>H. Benoit, *La Doctrine Suprême*, Paris: 1951; Engl.Transl. *The Supreme Doctrine*, New York: 1974, pp.238-239.

<sup>6</sup>H. Benoit, *The Supreme Doctrine*, pp.240-241.

<sup>7</sup>Huachun Daoren, *Back to Beginning*, Engl.Transl. by Thomas Cleary, Boston: 1990, p.6.

the emptiness, the Buddha-nature (and I personally feel perfectly at ease and happy to think of God exactly in these terms). If we like to use an alternative terminology we could also say that through the contemplation of humiliation one enters into the vastness of humility: 'humility is endless' as T.S. Eliot said<sup>8</sup>.

In the tradition of the Christian desert Fathers, it is mentioned that a young monk boasted with Abba Sisoe about his spiritual attainment. He said: 'The practice of the remembrance of God is with me all the time Abba'. 'I do not see anything great in that', the Abba replied, 'the really great thing would be for you to generate humility'<sup>9</sup>. I believe we should keep in mind that this primacy of humility is rather common in Christian contemplative authors. Not so in the Catholic official list of virtues: in the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas we find humility to be only a subsection of temperance: quite a humble location!<sup>10</sup>.

In terms of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, therefore, I presume that one of the most promising areas could be a comparative reflection between humility on the one hand and emptiness of the other hand. And this, in my opinion, not only because of the obvious affinity between the two concepts, but also, and first of all, because, both, true humility as well as true emptiness, are mature realizations on a spiritual path. Since I am personally convinced that the contemplative dimension should be the 'cutting edge' of inter-religious dialogue, I see the comparison between the experience of humility and the experience of emptiness as being more fruitful than a more philosophically oriented inquiry about possible Christian equivalents of Buddhist emptiness.

7. We also mentioned compassion. Of course, it would take another paper only to introduce this topic. Let us just say this. Unless we are grounded in emptiness (i.e. Unless we are totally humble), compassion cannot arise in us, because self-centredness prevents us from seeing and touching the universal inter-connectedness. Ultimate compassion is not a

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<sup>8</sup>T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, East Coker, II

<sup>9</sup>C. Campo and P. Draghi (eds.), *Deti e Fatti dei Padri del Deserto*, Milano: 1975, p.54.

<sup>10</sup>*Summa Theologica*, II-II, 143.

reaction or an emotion. Rather, in its unconditional and non-dualistic nature, it is not different from emptiness; or, if we prefer, it is the other side of the same coin; and emptiness-compassion is Buddha-nature.

A Benedictine monk, Brother Steindl-Rast, who is actively engaged in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, uses the word 'belongingness' when he reflects on interdependence<sup>11</sup>. This way, I feel, the naturalness of compassion becomes more evident. That is to say: interdependence, namely, emptiness, i.e. being empty of a fixed and separate existence, means that everything belongs to everyone else, it means that every one belongs to everyone else. And this realization cannot be but the root of compassion, the divine root of compassion, since compassion is Buddha-nature. And Buddha-nature is also emptiness and humility, which, in Meister Eckhart's words, is a 'root planted in the depth of God'<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>F. Capra and D. Steindl-Rast, *Belonging to the Universe*, San Francisco: 1991; Italian Transl. *L'Universo come Dimora*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1993, pp.26-27.

<sup>12</sup>M. Eckhart, *Opere Tedesche*, Firenze: 1982, p.222.