

Usefulness of Buddhist Ethics to Overcome the Challenges of Environmental Conservation in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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Introduction

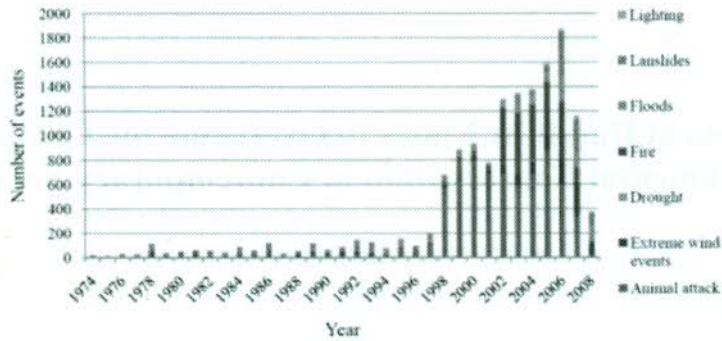
Sri Lanka was ranked as the 2nd most affected country by extreme weather events in the world in 2017 (Eckstein et al., 2019). Climate vulnerability of the country; the number of natural disasters and affected people has been increasing over the decades. In the meantime, human activities cause to create many environmental problems such as deforestation, water, air and noise pollution, coastal degradation, soil erosion, and harm to bio-diversity and it has been increasing over the time. These environmental problems causing adverse affects on climate, human life, nature, socio-economic conditions, agriculture and production, food security, cultural practices and governance process in the country. Buddhist teaching and ethics address environmental problems and conservation by developing people's thought. This paper analyses how Buddhist ethics and teaching address environmental problems and how it could be used to overcome the current environmental problems?. Buddhist teachings explain, human needs to be met by way of a simple lifestyle with minimum materials, frugality, and relaxed contentment. As a bee collects pollen from the flower, without polluting its beauty or diminishing its fragrance, so do the human needs as to the nature. Similarly to modern governance theory, Buddhism emphasises the peoples' participation as an essential requirement to protect the environment and nature.

Aim & Background

People have been facing many difficulties due to environmental problems and climate change over the decades. During 1998-2017, more than 11,500 extreme weather events caused approximately 526,000 deaths and US\$ 3.47 trillion direct lost across the world (Eckstein et al., 2019). In Sri Lanka, the number of natural disaster incidents has been increasing (Figure 01) and 29 million people were affected by extreme weather events during 1974-2008. Of them 43%, 47% and, 6% were affected by drought, flood and wind respectively. Around four percent affected by the tsunami in 2004 (UNDP, 2009).

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Figure 01: Trend of Disaster (1974-2008)



Source: adopted from UNDP, 2009; Page 72

The effects of the climate crisis are complex and adverse in many areas including socio-economic, cultural, political and governing process. Extreme weather events cause a considerable number of deaths, illness, property damages. For example, the country had lost 246 lives and around US\$ 3129 million due to massive landslides and flood occurred after heavy monsoon rain in 2017 (Eckstein et al., 2019). The climate crisis and environmental degradation have close inter-relationship (Wiggins, 2009).

Sri Lanka experienced environmental problems due to human activities such as deforestation for development programmes, water, air and noise pollution by improper waste disposal, and soil pollution through improper agricultural practices and chemical use. For example, forest coverage had decreased from 70% in 1900 (Fernando, 2019) to 17% in 2018 (Deforestation Statistics for Sri Lanka, 2019). Many plants and animals disappeared and various species have been listed as endangered. The government has taken steps to control the situation through policy, laws, rules and regulations and programmes. However, the problems are challenging to manage. The main objective of this study is to analyse the usefulness of Buddhist teachings and ethics to resolve the current environmental problems in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

This study is based on both primary and secondary data. The collected data and information is analysed using qualitative approach: descriptive method.

Findings

According to Chakkawaththi Sihanada Sutta, since environment belongs to every creature of nature, humans are only a part of the environment. Therefore,

rulers have a responsibility to protect the environment, including animals and plants (Dhammasiri Ven, 2018). When preparing policies and laws, policy makers should pay attention to protect the environment. When the policies turn to implementing stages, the general public has a prime responsibility to protect the environment. This responsibility has been explained in many Suttas and Pali canons.

According to Buddhism, damaging or destroying of seeds and vegetation (propagated from roots, stems, joints, cutting and seeds) is a sin and offence (Dhamminda Ven, 2019) and preventing from damaging such plants and vegetation explain as merit and seela of the people. Also, Buddhist teachings encourage the practice of metta (loving kindness) like a mother who loves her one and only son, to all creatures, including visible, invisible, born and awaiting for birth.

"Mātā yathāniyaṃputtaṃ āyusā ekaputtamanurakkhe
Evampi sabba bhūtesū mānaṣaṃ bhāvaye aparimānaṃ"

If individually extended metta towards every creature, the environment would be protected.

As a prime concern Buddhism, emphasises a clean and safe environment for everyone such as ethics prescribed to prevent air, water, soil pollution and waste management. Polluting water and green grass with saliva, urine, and feces, and garbage is prohibited for monks by many Vinaya rules (disciplinary rules) promulgating as an offence (De Silva, 2013, Dhammasiri Ven, 2018). Also, it recommends that monks should dispose of food waste into places where there are no grasses or water in which living creatures are found (Kuddaka Nikaya, 2005: 110 cited Dhammasiri Ven, 2018). Furthermore, in the Karaniya Metta Sutta, simple lifestyle with minimum materials, frugality, and relaxed contentment are recommended for the people. At present, one of the serious environmental problems is waste management. In 2016, Sri Lanka generated 2.6 millions tonnes of municipal waste and the volume will be doubled by 2050 (Kaza et al., 2018). More than 50% of the households dispose of garbage by burnt and a considerable percentage of households dispose of dumping on road sides, water ways and other public places (Department of Census and Statistics, 2015). The national waste management policy in Sri Lanka leading to 3R (Reduce, Reuse and Recycling) principles to mitigate the problem. Since the citizens are one of the main actors of the waste management policy implementation, following the Buddhist ethics related to environment will useful to mitigate some of the environmental problems such as environmental pollution, deforestation and improper waste management practices across the country.

Conclusions

At present, Sri Lanka as well as the world are experiencing numerous

harmful effects of environmental degradation. Buddhist ethics explains how to protect environment through ethics. Make awareness and encouraging the people to follow them will helpful to protect the environment in Sri Lanka. Public awareness can be done through the temples and Sunday Dhamma School by adding some lessons to the textbooks.

Keywords: Socio-Economic, Climate Crisis, Environment, Buddhist Ethics

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