

# The Humanistic Ethics to Nurture the Environment

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## ABSTRACT

*We humans thrive physically in our 3-foot-by-3-foot-by-6-foot aura (personal domain) and learn, as we progress through the various stages of life, the skills necessary for survival. We give care to the business of living healthfully, happily, prosperously and peacefully by taking action to insure these conditions of existence. The inner space of our minds is in constant flux, affected by the greater space "out there", our environment. This paper points out that our attention to life and its complexities is the result of a four-pronged paradigm, a progression, as it is, from thoughts, to feelings, to emotions, to intuitions, or attitudes. When attitudes are established they govern the ways we move about, adjust to cope with, and survive in our space – out there. Elements of our environment are thought of mostly as things happening, in a permanent way or just passing, and we complain about the discomfort, or express joy about the pleasantness. Humanistic Buddhism teaches that each human (and all sentient beings) survives by a dharma of co-dependent origination. This states that for all things in our environment, we humans and life's conditions are dependent, one on all the others. By observing the doctrinal moral guidelines set out in the Six Paramitas, viz. generosity, ethics, patience, energy, concentration and wisdom, we can develop compassionate attitudes with respect to treatment of ourselves, other beings and our environment within our ethical aura, which we discover can be changed through the power of spiritual, mental and physical unity.*

## Introduction

A person living on planet earth and having any concern—thoughts, feelings, attitudes—about his/her relationship with the environment is operating from a position of humanistic ethics. There is a fairly direct balance between feelings and attitudes, and that ratio is evident when evaluating the *human condition* according to known environmental factors. My point in directing our attention and ferreting out human concern brought on by environmental conditions is to have us consider both the impact of the environment on the human, and vice versa. In the Humanistic Buddhist sense we have a responsibility to give care to our environment, and in the karmic sense our treatment of the relationship, human-to-environment, has its pay-back.

In this presentation I will slant the general subject of "environmental ethics" toward a few of the notions surrounding both the ethical doctrines found in Humanistic Buddhism (HB) and nature of the environment. Being human we have become, since the middle of the last century, more sensitive to protection and preservation of our natural resources. Science has made us knowledgeable of plant and animal species which are dying out in our generation and those which have ceased to exist centuries ago. Herds of buffalo, for example, used to exist on the central, southern and western plains of the United States. They were a readily available food source for Native American tribes. But, with the many thousands of settlers migrating from the east to the west, these and many other natural resources began to dwindle. The demands brought on by swelling population growth far exceeded the rate of natural supply. In

the lakes, streams, forests, plains and mountains in countries throughout the world, natural elements are being extinguished by humankind at a rate greater than an adequate supply can be generated and maintained.

My emphasis is to not reiterate the details of the danger our planet is in due to the deterioration and contamination of resources which support human life, and leave it at that. I will devote the greater amount of emphasis to exploring ways we humans can generate energy to develop an awareness of sensitivity to the environment and apply attitudinal and motivational factors to gain ecological balance. This can be done according to the principles of Humanistic Buddhism, those doctrines of wisdom and morality, and the practice of mindfulness to self-healing and the healing of our environment.

### **Taking Action, Giving Care**

In applying the teachings of Venerable Master Hsing Yun on Humanistic Buddhism to environmental ethics, we learn the importance of developing attitudes of concern, caring and compassion. An attitude of wanting to preserve and clean-up the environment then transfers back to thinking, the first step in Jung's paradigm leading to attitudes, then intuition (Hall and Lindzey, 1978 and Jung, 1921). Of course, these attitudes of wanting to help must be wholesome and can, in following the Buddha's teachings, come from the humanistic viewpoint of compassion. Master Hsing Yun emphasizes action in giving care to other people and our environment. In his message to the First International Conference of Humanistic Buddhism at the International Academy of Buddhism at Hsi Lai University he writes:

The world is changing quickly. To grasp these changes and use them for our good, we must fully comprehend the inter-workings of societies, science, economics, governments and the environment. If Buddhism is to develop as a viable religion in the world, it must adapt itself to the conditions which are present in this world. Every choice we make of the future of Buddhism should be founded on clear reasoning and good intentions... Humanistic Buddhism emphasizes our treatment of other people above everything else. No one can ever expect to come into full awareness of the Bodhi mind if they do not... treat other people with compassion, respect and unflinching kindness (Hsing Yun 1999).

With respect to taking action, Master Hsing Yun says, "[all] of us must live fully, virtuously and compassionately in this world before we can ever expect to transcend anything (1998)." We first must take action to set our mind in the direction of pursuit—to seek out areas, places, time, people, natural resources and the like, which need attention and are in danger. We are at the starting point in finding a way to extend our compassion to our environment. Humans are the most obvious elements of the environment in our world, but humans look to such phenomena as weather and geography and geographic characteristics as something we can do nothing about. We are victims, so to speak, regarding the impact of the environment on our lives. We abide by however the architecture and infrastructure is constructed (or not) for human comfort and safety. We dress in warmer clothes in cold weather, stop our automobiles

at red signals, pay taxes in hopes our streets and freeways are made secure and safe, and so forth. We may be outraged that humans and human-created conditions are ignored most of the time when there is serious concern about environmental ethics. The wholesome, correct, moral and ethical treatment of our environment should begin with the human element when we investigate ways of giving care to the environment. “Taking Action To Give Care” must be our slogan if we hope to live in a safe, healthy, pleasant and open world.

Joanna Macy reminds us that the wheel is the symbol of the Dharma and how the dependent co-arising of all things is as interconnected as the hub, spokes and outer rim of the wheel. We *are* our environment. She explains in the following:

The insight into the nature of reality which the Buddha presented, in a wealth of metaphor, story and philosophic argument, revealed the interdependence of all phenomena. In contrast to the thinkers of his time, he saw all things in process, intrinsically connected and sustaining each other in intricate patterns of mutual causality. To comprehend this co-arising was tantamount to wisdom, and its social implications were embodied in the Buddha’s teachings of compassion, nonviolence, and sharing, and in the customs of the Sangha he founded (p. 239).

### **The Human as Humanistic**

Innumerable human beings oftentimes in their lives at varying degrees carry on their normal daily routine without concern or thoughts for the welfare of others. There are occasions where in forced social conditions a person must step out from the comfortable, safe milieu of home and workplace and BE someone else—be on stage, as it were. He/she dresses in proper attire to suit the event: the play, the party, the sporting event, the office, the human-place in the environment of those happenings, requiring an unnatural change in physical appearance. One must fit the mold of what is proper and socially acceptable. With this attitude of “difference”, we put on a mask of a false self, not a mask of difference, but one of indifference.

These attitudes of strange places and strange roles, with a push to BE like the others in another milieu, I propose drives a wedge between the identity of true self of a individual and his/her nominal humanness—a valid attitude of being ethically human. The Dalai Lama explains attitudes and efforts in the Humanistic Buddhist sense (ethically):

Effort is the state of mind that delights in virtuous actions. It is said that if you are endowed with perfect effort... there is no endeavor in which you will not succeed... Armor-like effort enables you to endure any form of suffering or hardship in the process of working for the benefit of others (pp. 219-220).

Someone asked in a meeting I attended with eco-psychologists, “If our environment is so fragile, how can we who inhabit this planet, live on it without leaving a scar or imprint? I can sum up the answers that came as obvious... “develop a more concerned, caring, compassionate attitude.” Ecologists continually fight for

“ecological balance”, and it is man’s and woman’s duty to “fix it” so the balance will support that environment *out there*, and *in here* within each human being. Many psychologists perceive humans as entities who could be subjected to survival and adaptability tests of nominal environmental configurations. For example, some subjects in sensory-deprivation experiments are tested for mental alertness before and after the experiment. Pre and post mental and physical tests results may support or negate hypotheses regarding a human’s ability to sustain a healthy situation.

We give thoughts to things we should or shouldn’t do, evaluate our decisions, then perhaps without cause, flippantly change our minds. But, at some point there is a degree of mindfulness (in the Buddhist sense) which will permeate our thoughts and help us arrive at the right attitude about some condition of life—in this case giving attention to the environment. We who have been reborn in this human world live in constant adaptation to this world. We learn that we are superior to other mammals, birds, reptiles, insects and other forms of “lower” life. The human species judges everything else according to itself under the assumption that humans are better, smarter, more civilized than any other creature. In a general sense, humans use and abuse animals, eat animals in order to sustain life, kill animals for decorations, clothing and trophies, harness some for transportation and work, and even own some as pets.

Humans have evolved to our present state according to the law of survival of the fittest. We accept this as a given law of natural evolution. However, I would like to show some comparisons which may bring questions to the idea of superior environmental organisms. We grow up with the vacant feelings that the lower species are unimportant and insignificant to our state of being. Small is sightless in our eyes, except when hoards of ants invade our kitchen and spiders spin webs across out paths and doorways. Our objective attitude is to eliminate those creepy-crawlers which infringe on our comfort, health and safety. But, we are not alone on this planet and could not survive without the “lower” creatures. We humans must develop the wisdom of oneness from Humanistic Buddhism, and that all sentient beings have buddha nature. I propose that “nature” is the presence of naturalness—the essential properties of naturalness. From chemistry we learn with two parts hydrogen and one part of oxygen, the results when combusted or combined produces water. Water is not the basic or primary element, but we think of water as naturally flowing in our streams and rivers. All elements and compounds survive in a natural state and, if scientifically compatible, can be combined to produce other natural states. We humans have evolved from a lower state to a complex, compound conglomerate. This rationale is pertinent to the job we humans have to do in living up to the responsibilities as humans in our humanistic environment.

### **Attitudes and Karma**

Although they may not be introduced or argued in a psychological sense, attitudes are known to be the direct amplification of human emotions and feelings, following the process of perceiving and thinking. I will discuss attitudes here to help the reader associate the importance of his/her understanding in relation to morals and ethics in the general sense of human behavior. I assert that methods for “treating” the

environment, as in taking some kind of action to give care to environmental factors, can be identified through positive and negative attitudes. If there is an attempt to encourage the human population to have an awareness of the frailty of our environment and adopt methods to protect it, education is the first step. Advertising through the media, and educating students of all ages in stimulating thought about, and respect for, the environment, to adopt and put creative ideas to work, develop moral responsibility and, as Buddhists, wake up to the cognitive and associative attitudes of moral behavior and preservation.

According to Hilgard (p. 620), attitudes are prominent in addressing human behavior in three realms, namely the cognitive components, affective components and behavioral components. This is consistent in bordering on basic beliefs but may take on a broader scope as we advance from attitudes to the *intuitive* realm.

Psychologists may study attitudes in testing situations to attempt in allocating degrees of social importance and to offer a guide for matching human personalities, mental alertness, interests and mental ability. Cattell in Hall and Lindzey states... "An attitude of a particular individual in a particular situation is an interest of a certain intensity [to take] some course of action with respect to some object (p. 537). Factor-analysis in the study of attitudes resolves that: people whose attitudes persist over a long period of time are more likely to act on those attitudes than not (p. 549).

My explanation of attitudes as orientations of personality will suffice for the purpose here to give the reader the broad view of the graduated movement from *thinking, feeling, sensing* (emotions) to *intuiting* (attitudes). These terms are adapted from Jung's paradigm, where he holds two major attitudes of orientations of personality: *extraversion*, orienting the person toward the external, and *introversion*, the introverted attitude toward the subjective world.

Extraverted attitudes are those in the positive direction for learning ethical standards regarding the environment. In illustrating the steps of Jung's four foundations necessary for establishing attitudes, he offers the following:

Suppose that a person is standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado river. If the feeling function predominates she will experience a sense of awe, grandeur, and breath-taking beauty. If she is controlled by the sensation function she will see the Canyon merely as it is or as a photograph might represent it. If the thinking function controls the ego she will try to understand the Canyon in terms of geological principles and theory. Finally, if the intuitive function prevails the spectator will tend to see the Grand Canyon as a mystery of nature possessing deep significance whose meaning is partially revealed or felt as a mystical experience (Hall and Lindzey, p.125).

The need to recognize that human intuition, as a precursor to attitudes, is not implied. However, attitudes are lasting, give reason to one's actions and are difficult to change. One may have an intuitive feeling that a milieu one finds oneself in is the right place to be at the right time, but attitudes about that place may change and then we must reconnoiter, understand and re-affirm *intuitively*.

In order to sustain our thinking, feeling, sensing and intuiting in a given moral respect, we must cultivate an attitude of ethics. Only then will those values persist, and, of course without practice, moral values decay. We will become imbued with, know and follow the principles of ethics—in this case Humanistic Buddhism and its doctrines which apply to the environment. To have the aptitude to distinguish true rightness and wrongness, we must have the essence of nature built into our everyday thinking, feeling and acting. I assert here there is a basic condition in humans adopting an ethical approach, a way of treating the environment. We human beings *are* our environment. As our condition of life changes from day to day and year to year, karma is the force, the energy keeping our humanness, and its natural state, in balance. Venerable Master Hsing Yun asks regarding the natural flow of life... “if we waste our energies in dissipation and self-centered activities, are we not foolishly turning our lives against the natural flow of that which alone is deeply true?”

Whenever we fail to flow with the harmonious current of the natural world within us and around us, we bring trouble to ourselves... our treatment of the natural world around us will always cause problems when we are excessive in our desires or lax in our vigilance (Hsing Yun, p.17).

What humans overlook, and an awareness which needs to be attended to, is the unbalance of the human element with the complex components of nature.

### Wisdom in Environmental Ethics

I have attempted to show that ethics are the most important factors which condition humans' relationships with the environment. Humanistic Buddhism teaches that when we develop a respect and love for the environment we can effect the feeling to an acceptance of the things our environment imposes on us, be they in a negative or positive sense. I sense this “acceptance” can be built upon the development of human acts in gaining *wisdom*. I propose that humans can develop wisdom in strengthening their attitude toward environmental well being. This, of course, includes the work toward a mutual state of employing ethical sharing that is learning about wisdom. In the Buddhist sense, the “Perfection of Wisdom” is best interpreted as changing from ignorance, lethargy or mal-adaptation by way of the *Six Paramitas*. I shall summarize these from detailed descriptions by Venerable Master Hsing Yun and H.H. the Dalai Lama. These are referred to as “perfection” but are taught as “ways to perfection.” The Sanskrit word paramita is translated as crossing over from ignorance, or from *samsara* to *Nirvana*, so these are six ways in the crossing over, and not considered the actual achievement of wisdom in themselves. We would not assume we will reach perfection but, practice to become aware of our state as humans living in *samsara*. *Samsara* can be defined as “the ocean of birth and death; the wheel of becoming; the phenomenal universe.” (Thien-An, Glossary)

The six perfections are: 1. generosity/giving (*dana*); 2. morality (*sila*); 3. patience/forbearance (*ksanti*); 4. energy (*virya*); 5. meditation (*dhyana*); and, 6. wisdom (*prajna*). Each is described briefly in the following.

1. *Generosity/giving* is sharing what one has or being generous in action when seeing another in need. It is an attitude of willingness to give one's own possessions, body, virtues and so forth. This kind of giving is dedicated to others' benefits and not dependent upon the condition of poverty of the intended receiver. This practice counter attacks miserliness in that it serves a purpose of increasing one's practice of generosity. We do not discriminate regardless of ethnicity, belief, color or any limitations. There are three types of generosity: giving of the Dharma, giving of protection, and giving of material possessions. The intention in practicing generosity should be with the wish to help others achieve enlightenment, and the attitude in this act should not be motivated by pity. This would match the attitude needed to help protect and preserve the environment, where the ethical practice is selflessness and not for gaining merits.
2. *Ethics*, the second perfection, or state of being ethical is the willfulness of abstaining from engaging in any act suspected of being harmful to others—ethical behavior to perfect one's mind as well as directed toward the environment and other humans. With the observance of ethics one will, by nature, seek respect within the community. One clears the way of wrongful acts to practice generating virtuous thoughts, words and deeds, thereby eliminating lust, anger and delusions. The Five Precepts, or vows, taken by a Buddhist *upasika* or *upasika* clearly spell out the wrongful acts from which one should abstain. They are: 1. refrain from harming any living thing; 2. refrain from taking what is not given; 3. refrain from any kind of sexual misconduct; 4. refrain from harmful speech, gossip or lying; and 5. refrain from using alcohol and other drugs or substances which would harm the body and cloud the mind.
3. *Patience* is that state which sustains practice in the face of violence, harm and ill-will inflicted by others. Attitudes tempering generosity and ethical behavior will not be sustained without the strong will built up from patience. Putting others' joy and well-being first is for the patient-one to also express perfection (wisdom) for the person crossing over the vast ocean of samsara. Through patience we learn to step back and not get over anxious and develop a negative attitude of intolerance and hate for those persons who don't meet our expectations. It takes the practice of patience to develop a willingness toward ethics and generosity.
4. *Energy* or effort follows patience in an appropriate sequence. The practice of patience helps generate energy. It serves as the foundation for practice whereby we avoid falling into lower realms of existence—just as in this present state we avoid sloth and torpor. If, through your strong attitudes to grow with the previous paramitas, positive attitudes toward energy will build and defeat any senses of weariness or discouragement. Some devotees trying to strengthen their practice of ethical and moral ideals may find their attitude to perfection is slipping and diligence to the work to be done is weak. However, through the force of one's generosity and patience, benefits of unknown personal strength can be realized. The metaphor of crossing over to nirvana, or perfection, takes on more meaning and we find we can persist past gossip, lethargy and distraction and come to focus our energy on enlightenment in the welfare of all sentient beings.

5. *Concentration* is placed fifth in the list of paramitas, but it, as an effort of practice, actually permeates each of the other five. In order to break the delusions which our minds have been under, we strive even harder to set a routine of meditation as the discipline which helps us see our original purity which was already there. Concentration is the discipline of practice—it is the practice of wisdom. The function of concentration, or meditation, is to work to control our minds so that we can guide it toward any virtuous object. We seek to eliminate delusions by the second paramita of morals or ethics, and we see with concentration that it is time to set aside emotions and let attention to breathing become the energy – being mindful of our breath in the relaxed state, we have the flexibility of practicing both analytical and tranquil meditation.
6. *Wisdom*, the beginning and all-consuming paramita in the practice of the other five, helps us analyze the nature of all phenomena—the ways and means of forming attitudes and practices in eliminating all evil, cultivating good and purifying the mind. With wisdom we can direct love and compassion within the self toward beneficial goals of purity of mind and purity of our environment as we see in order to perfect and preserve the Dharma. In this life as a human, we now understand that we must make use of our special qualities and apply these skills to giving care and taking action. This is the direction of our life as Buddhist and along the way we cherish our nature within by the practice of wisely moving across the sea of *samsara* from ignorance to nirvana.

### Conclusion

Venerable Master Hsing Yun reminds us that “humankind has learned to manufacture an enormous variety of material goods, and yet still we have not learned how to balance our needs and desires with the imperative of nature. How much of the earth have we polluted and how many of its ecosystems have we destroyed? The fact that we cannot ...measure the totality of our destruction shows we have violated the harmony and balance of nature.”(p.18). He states further:

Nature and karma are similar, if not the same. When we do something good for the world, a good reward comes to us. When we do something evil to the world, a painful retribution results. Cause and effect for the spokes on a wheel that turns continuously, without beginning or end... Buddhist masters work not so much to overcome the cycle [of birth and death}, but rather to see deeply into their own basic nature...(pp.18-19).

Before we can discuss, comment on in any respect, and condone or condemn the application of ethical treatment of human’s environment, there has to be explicit standards given over to reason and purpose in ethical treatment of human to human. The environment is of rare concern as the stage on which humans act, but the stage must be a safe, favorable and comfortable place to support the human actors. What may be missing in our evaluation of ethical treatment is that humans lack the practice of treating other humans ethically. Piyadassi Thera stresses the point of environmental protection that human problems are internal and the solution is to be sought within. Accordingly, those interested in protecting the environment have raised their voice



against air, sea and land pollution. But what of our mind pollution? Are we equally interested in protecting and cleansing our minds? The Buddha points out as quoted by Piyadassi Thera:

For a long time has man's mind been defiled by greed, hatred and delusion (ignorance). Mental defilements make beings impure; mental cleansing purifies them. The Buddhist way of life is an intense process of cleansing one's action, speech, and thought. It is self-development and self-purification resulting in self-realization. The emphasis is on practical results and not on philosophical speculation of logical abstraction (p.14).

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