

Environmental Ethics of Buddhism: Ecological Values in the Mirror of Wisdom by Erdeni Galshiev

Galina P. Dondukova and Erdeni P. Dmitriev

Abstract—The aim of this article is to analyze one of the most outstanding works of Buryat didactic literature – *The Mirror of Wisdom* by Erdeni Khaibzun Galshiev (1855 – 26 June (9 July) 1915) and to identify the Buddhist ecological values in it. We argue that in the modern context of global environmental awareness as well as local ecological problems in the Baikal region, Russia, *The Mirror of Wisdom*, and its described practices for laymen have become extremely significant and can serve as the guideline for sustainable living. We start with the overview of the historical background of Buddhism on the territory of the republic of Buryatia, Russia, go on with the general structure of *The Mirror of Wisdom* by Erdeni Galshiev, and proceed to the analysis of ecological values, such as non-harming to other creatures, the law of karma, non-attachment, and so on. The analysis shows that although written a century ago and not aimed initially to bring together the inter-related issues of population, consumption and the environment, *The Mirror of Wisdom* suggests certain conclusions concerning these issues and can contribute to ecological sustainability as well as economic and social justice.

Index Terms—Buddhism in Buryatia, ecological values, environmental ethics of Buddhism, sustainable living.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of global environmental concern resulted in searching for new sources of ecological values; and while many religious texts and practices have an anthropocentric lens, the attention of environmentalists has focused on the Buddhist eco-centric views on humans as an integral part of nature [1]-[3]. As Rita Gross points, “While Buddhism is not homocentric in the way that monotheistic religions are, nevertheless, most forms of Buddhism do regard human life as more desirable than any other form of life because of the spiritual potential thought to be inherent in and limited to the human condition. Only human beings can practice meditation and become enlightened. However, Buddhism does not believe that the purpose of non-human nature is to serve human needs [4]. Rather, human beings are one kind of life in an ecosystem within which all elements are affected in exactly the same way by whatever actions occur. Furthermore, in traditional Buddhist societies in which most people affirm rebirth, all sentient existence is thought to be interconnected and related by virtue of karmic ties from past

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G. P. Dondukova is with the Department of Organization and Management of Scientific Researches, East-Siberia State University of Technology and Management, Ulan-Ude, Russia (e-mail: galina.dondukova11@gmail.com).

E. P. Dmitriev is with the Institute of Philology, Foreign Languages and Mass Communication, Buryat State University, Ulan-Ude, Russia (e-mail: erdeny.d@gmail.com).

lives, and rebirth in non-human realms is highly possible. These views provide some basis for environmentally and ecologically sound practices” [2]. Thus, the Buddhism from the ecological point of view has many ethical guidelines, which can influence on people’s everyday practices and can discourage excessive consumption and reproduction.

The ecological problems of the Baikal region attract more and more attention in recent years. Deforestation, contamination of soil and water, and many other issues of negative influence on natural landscapes in the Republic of Buryatia, Russia, are mostly due to anthropogenic impact [5], [6]. In these conditions, Buddhist texts as the source of ecological values turn into an ideological tool to affect the local population. The aim of this article is to analyze one of the most outstanding works of Buryat didactic literature – *The Mirror of Wisdom* by Erdeni Khaibzun Galshiev (1855 – 26 June (9 July) 1915) and to identify the Buddhist ecological values in it. *The Mirror of Wisdom, explaining accepted and rejected under two laws*¹ was written in the beginning of the 20th century, however, it stays relevant and valuable even one hundred years after. In recent years, *The Mirror of Wisdom* receives close attention in the republic of Buryatia, Russia. It is notable, that the interest to this book is not artificially forced by the Buryat Buddhist Sangha², but comes from the ordinary Buryats. Its translation into Russian was revised, the new edition was published. *The Mirror of Wisdom* is widespread through social networks, audiobooks, and is broadcasted on the *Buryat Fm* radio. The Buddhism is perceived as part of Buryat ethnic identity, that is why for the Buryat people *The Mirror of Wisdom* serves as the source of not only Buddhist, but also Buryat traditional worldview. Apart from its potential for the revival of Buryat traditional culture, we argue that in the modern context of environmental awareness *The Mirror of Wisdom* and its described practices of Buddhism for laymen have become extremely significant and can serve as the guideline for sustainable living.

We start with the overview of the historical background of Buddhism on the territory of modern Buryatia, Russia, go on with the general structure of *The Mirror of Wisdom* by Erdeni Galshiev, and proceed to the analysis of ecological values, such as non-harming to other creatures, the law of karma, non-attachment, and so on. The analysis shows that although written a century ago and not aimed initially to bring together the inter-related issues of population, consumption and the environment, *The Mirror of Wisdom* suggests certain conclusions concerning these issues basing on the understanding of the idea of interdependence and the practice of replacing compulsion with equanimity.

¹ Further on just *The Mirror of Wisdom*

² *Sangha* means community

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Buryatia, Russia, is one of the most northern areas of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan branch, mainly Gelug school, started to spread on the territory of modern Buryatia in the beginning of the 17th century. At that time Buryatia was an inseparable part of the Mongolian world. However, in the late 17-18 centuries the territory of ethnic Buryatia was incorporated into the Russian empire. With the borders fixed, Mongolian and Tibetan lamas were prohibited to arrive to Buryatia. Nevertheless, these restricting measures led to positive results: The need in local educated lamas increased the theoretical and cultural level of Buryat Buddhism. Large temples were opening faculties of philosophy, logics, astrology, medicine etc.; as well as printing houses and workshops for painters, woodcarvers and sculptors. Buddhist monasteries were transforming into spiritual and cultural centers of traditional Buryat society with great influence on all spheres of life. The 19th century – the beginning of 20th century marked the period of prosperity - the so-called “Golden age” of Buddhism in Buryatia. The amount of well-educated lamas among Buryats were growing, including such historical personalities as Agvan Dorzhiev, who was one of the teachers of Dalai lama the 13th, and Petr Badmayev, a specialist of Tibetan medicine widely known in the West. By the end of the 19th century, a certain autocephality of Buryat Buddhism was achieved. The archival documents state the existence of 34 datsans³ (datsangs) on the territory of Buryatia, with publishing houses in 29 of them [7]. At that period 600 names of xylographic books and brochures in both Tibetan and Mongolian were published there.

The works of Buryat religious leaders of the 19th century, their translations and commentaries of famous Buddhist texts influenced the formation of the moral model of behavior of the local population in accordance with the fundamental Buddhist attitudes. The scholars note that in Mongolia and Buryatia, where Buddhism has dominated over the past four centuries, spiritual adaptation was no less important for the development of environmental consciousness than physiological and economic adaptation to vulnerable natural environment of Central Asia [8].

With the October revolution Buddhism in Buryatia suffered decline and repressions, almost all datsans were destroyed, and religious books burnt. The situation started to change gradually after the Second World War; and only with the collapse of the Soviet Union the revival of Buddhism as well as Buryat traditional culture came to the forefront. Today, the centuries-old traditions and practices gain new significance in the context of global environmental concerns. The ideas, which for a certain period were esteemed as “backward” or “archaic”, are now reappraised and applied for a balanced interrelation of nature and society [9].

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Mirror of Wisdom, explaining accepted and rejected under two laws by Erdeni Khaibzun Galshiev is treated as one of the most outstanding works of Buryat didactic poetry

of the beginning of the 20th century. Erdeni Galshiev (1855 – 26 June (9 July) 1915) was a Buryat Buddhist monk. There is a few information about his biography, but it is known that as a young boy he went to Tibet and studied at Drepung monastery. In 1897 he received the degree of *dorampa*⁴, returned to Buryatia and stayed at Kudunsky datsan for many years.

The Mirror of Wisdom was originally written in Mongolian, but also had a Tibetan variant. Its Mongolian version was further revised at will of the author after his death by one of Galshiev’s students – Choidak Vanchukov. During the years of antireligious movement in the Soviet Union the monument was lost and re-found only in 1966. A Buryat literary critic Tseren-Anchik Dugar-Nimaev introduced *The Mirror of Wisdom* to academic society, published it in Buryat language as well as made a Russian translation.

The work represents *subhashita*, a genre of Buddhist didactic poetry which is a combination of two Buddhist issues – the secular and the sacred. It can be characterized as an aphorism that clarifies positive and negative qualities of people, good and bad actions, etc. *Subhashita* is usually a quatrain where the two initial lines express the thesis, while the last two lines give an example. The most famous work in this genre is a collection of aphorisms *Subhasita ratnamidhi* [The Elegant Sayings] of Sakya Pandita (13th century). In comparison to work of Sakya Pandita, which consists of 457 verses, *The Mirror of Wisdom* contains 1000 verses. Noticeably, the work of Galshiev has no borrowings from the previous *subhashitas*; all quatrains are original and based on his own life experience and knowledge [10]. However, the continuity of Buryat work is obvious. The author himself writes in the colophon: “Following the kind sermon about two laws of Sakya Pandita, our first Mongolian spiritual teacher, being guided also by other shastras, I have united everything seen and comprehended during long time in order to show in words full of sense samples of accepted and rejected for their clarification and realization by laymen people of my native land”⁵ [11].

The Mirror of Wisdom by Galshiev is divided into 8 chapters. Following the rules of the genre the author describes the two laws gradually passing from the secular to the spiritual. The first six chapters are devoted to worldly issues, starting with extremely practical advices for well-being of your body, property, and family, to the instructions for improvement of your mind, interrelation with other people, good intents and good deeds. The last two chapters describe the ten black sins of body, speech and mind, and in general follow the principles of *Lamrim* for laymen. In such a way, *The Mirror of Wisdom* represents a certain guideline for self-cultivation, which can lead to wellbeing and enlightenment. The analysis of the ecological values inscribed in *The Mirror of Wisdom* is performed with methods of close reading taking into account broader cultural and historical context of Buryatia and the Buryat people.

⁴ *Dorampa* is one of the categories of the Geshe degree – the highest Tibetan Buddhist academic degree for monks, which was granted after the victory in religious dispute

⁵ All translations of quotations from Russian are made by the authors, unless otherwise indicated.

³ Buddhist temples

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Principle of Ahimsa

Buddhism is eco-centric rather than anthropocentric since it views humans as an integral part of nature. Buddhism promotes the environmental ideas of interrelationship and interconnectedness of all beings, when humans are perceived as members of community, not its dominant species. One of the major ecological principles of Buddhism is the principle of *ahimsa* or non-violence to other creatures. This idea is found in *The Mirror of Wisdom*:

136

Also refrain from

tying, beating cattle.

And will not haunt you

sufferings of undesirable diseases and other man's anger.

[11]

There are numerous accounts of Buddhists who go to great lengths to avoid killing insects, worms, or the smallest life forms. *The Jataka Tales*, which provide accounts of the Buddha's previous lives, describe incarnations as animals and trees that influenced the religion's attitudes toward the environment. *The Vinaya*, which guided the discipline of the early Theravadin monks, prohibited travel during the rainy season to prevent monks from stepping on worms that surfaced in the wet weather and warned them not to drink unstrained water and to treat plants and wild animals with respect and kindness [12]. The same idea of non-harming to all kinds of creatures, even the smallest ones, is expressed by Galshiev:

789

Do not take life of various creatures,
even as small as a louse in a nest.

Otherwise, your virtues and longevity will reduce
even in present life. [11]

According to the principle of *ahimsa*, Buddhist precepts encourage to be vegetarians as a way of doing less harm to other sentient beings. However, due to objective reasons the people of Tibet and Mongolia could not follow this principle in the same manner as it was promoted in India: while the climate conditions of South and Southeast Asia allow to live on a plant diet, the severe climate of Central Asia demands higher calorie expenditure even for body warming [8]. In *The Mirror of Wisdom* we can trace the same attitude. The author encourages not to kill animals for food, however, this precept does not sound as a strict taboo:

680

Whenever possible do not eat meals
made of meat of killed or not killed.

In the sutras of Vehicle⁶, it was preached many times,
that the root of compassion will decay. [11]

In the contemporary situation of overpopulation on the planet and excessive animal breeding for consumption, Buddhist ideas of non-violence, not killing animals for food

attain environmental value. Indeed, diminishing meat consumption may have a positive feedback on the environment.

Further on, the idea of not killing animals is directly connected to the image of a hunter. While meat-eating was not considered a reprehensible act in Central Asia, hunting for fun was clearly condemned sinful [8], [13]. Today, in the age of urbanization, the majority of people have no need to go hunting for food. Instead, hunting and fishing turns into a way of entertainment, and even tourism. From this perspective, such religious precepts about hunters, even written one hundred years ago become actual for the local population of Buryatia today, and can positively impact on the fauna of the Baikal region.

901

Remember that for daring to take life of living creatures,
the hunter will pay only with his own life.

If the gods could wash human sin,

then even those who killed the living would be innocent. [11]

Interrelationship with all life on the planet is a basic Buddhist understanding. It is said that in the cycle of reincarnations all beings have touched our lives at one time or another [12]. As O. Dorzhigushaeva claims, Gelug school recommends to treat all beings as if they were your mother or father. In a series of innumerable rebirths, any living creature could be in his past rebirths your mother or father. All living things in the universe are interrelated [14]. Likewise, Erdeni Galshiev reflects in *The Mirror of Wisdom*:

962

Consider all the living creatures seen by your eye
as your father and mother who have been supporting you
since beginningless time.

Suppressing the fire of anger

the soul will soften, and embrace the saving mercy. [11]

In addition to non-violence to other creatures, Mahayana Buddhism developed an active attitude towards them embodied in the institute of *bodhisattvas*. A *bodhisattva* is usually described as a person on the verge of Buddhahood who declines full liberation out of sheer compassion to help fellow beings to escape the cycle of worldly suffering [15]. It is said that *bodhisattva* vows not to go into *nirvana* until there is at least one suffering creature. "Taking a bodhisattva vow, a practitioner is obliged to direct his activities for the benefit of all living beings without exception, without any division into worthy and unworthy of salvation. The object of his activity are all the living beings. This implies the need to take care of the physical survival of all these creatures" [16]. It is necessary not only not to harm the living beings, but take care of them and even ensure that they also pursued good deeds. Such attitude again shows some basis for environmentally and ecologically sound practices. The same idea of taking care of all the creatures is expressed by Galshiev:

985

Lead to virtue other living beings

according to their capabilities.

They all will become virtue friends

to you, as well as your relatives. [11]

⁶ By sutras of Vehicle the author means the sutras of Mahayana (Sanskrit: "Great Vehicle"), one of the two main existing branches of Buddhism, spread on the territory of Tibet and Central Asia, including Buryatia.

B. The Law of Karma

The principle of *ahimsa* is linked inseparably to the law of karma. Understanding of the law of karma can help to overcome the gap between actions and their consequences. The law of karma states that all our actions, words and thoughts form the conditions of our existence in the future: each of us experiences the consequences of what he thought, said and did in the past. Thus, the law of karma encourages a person to take responsibility for his current life as well as all the future ones [14]. In other words, each act has ethical value; whatever you perform, good or bad, it will return to you in the next life. In such a way, with the future rebirths in mind, instead of violence one should extend loving-kindness and compassion towards all creatures:

787

Any suitable charity
give for the sake of future rebirth.
You will surely keep this presented item
as food in your future rebirth. [11]

The ideas of rebirth and karma, making more positive and less negative acts prompt ecological behavior: anti-environmental actions, for example forest arsons, can lead to harming nature, as well as death of numerous animals. Moreover, from the Buddhist point of view, it can lead to disruption of the Buddhist path and worsening of your karma:

830

With intent, do not make fire in the mountains,
wildwood and similar places.
As many lives will be burned
as many times you will be burned. [11]

The verse of Galshiev states the idea of numerous rebirths and their interconnection, and what is more, it prompts the insignificance of material wealth achieved through destructive actions. Despite the wealth brought by the arsons to a person in his or her current life, such actions would affect further incarnations. Thus, apart from pointing attention to your personal actions, the idea of rebirths and the law of karma gives us ample reason to think about sustainable development. As His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama says, “Our belief in reincarnation is one example of our concern for the future. If you think that you will be reborn, you are likely to say to yourself, I have to preserve such and such because my future reincarnation will be able to continue with these things. Even though there is a chance you may be reborn as a creature, perhaps even on a different planet, the idea of reincarnation gives you reason to have direct concern about this planet and future generations” [17].

C. Non-attachment

The Four Noble Truths, often associated with Buddha’s enlightenment experience state that there is suffering; that there is a cause for suffering (desire / attachment); that there can be an end to suffering (nirvana); and that the way to end suffering is the Eightfold Path. As Rita Gross notices, “The Second Noble Truth, with its emphasis on desire as the cause of suffering, is the key to a Buddhist environmental ethic” [2]. Indeed, the Second Noble Truth cultivates a sense of

nonattachment. Arising from desire, the idea of gaining material wealth or attachment to things is considered to be a sign of ego. However, it is necessary to note that to let go of attachments from the Buddhist point of view does not mean, as is often misunderstood, to deny oneself all worldly goods and activities. Rather it is about cultivating a sense of nongrasping and not using external objects to prop oneself up [12]. “Translated into more ecological language, a conventional lifestyle of indulging in desired levels of consumption and reproduction results in the misery of an environmentally degraded and overpopulated planet” [2]. The same idea of human desire as the cause of suffering is expressed by Galshiev:

925

Night and day – all the time do not think about
the ways to increase property and livestock.
Although you have a cattle, a herd and so on
filling the whole valley, but you are a shepherd working
for strangers. [11]

There is no point to desire plenty of material wealth, either property or livestock. One is the owner of something only for the period of his current life; that is why any goods should be perceived as belonging to strangers. Such non-attachment can keep you from excessive consumption. Galshiev points that instead of wealth, it is better to strive for virtue:

51

Think that good deed is more valuable
than gold, silver and other valuable items.
If virtue ends – death will come,
if wealth ends - you will not die. [11]

In the contemporary ecological situation, the views expressed by Galshiev can be seen as the promotion of sustainable development. The idea of the Middle Way, i.e. avoiding both excessive austerity and excessive indulgence in one’s thoughts and actions, the balance between need and greed, corresponds to the idea of a society where living conditions and resources are used to continue to meet human needs without undermining the integrity and stability of the natural system.

D. Individual Responsibility

Happiness or suffering – everything is dependent on the individual. It is up to each individual to cultivate positive thoughts from which will flow positive actions from which will flow positive consequences. With the ecological problems it is all the same: one should realize her individual responsibility for the environment. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama says: “The Tibetan Buddhist attitude is one of contentment, and there may be some connection here with our attitude toward the environment. We don’t indiscriminately consume. We put a limit on our consumption. We admire simply living and individual responsibility...” [17]. Erdeni Galshiev in *The Mirror of Wisdom*, though speaking about sinful actions in general, touches the same idea of individual responsibility:

812

Do not commit sin for the reason
that others also commit wrongdoings.

Although one hundred thousand people have committed a
sin,

In retribution each one will be burnt in tama individually.
[11]

From ecological perspective this idea proposes that we
should not blame only the industries, technologies,
government, and others, but to see the ecocrisis as a product
of collective behavior of individuals who are driven by
circumstance, ignorance, or greed instead of realizing their
personal responsibility and acting with wisdom, moderation,
compassion, and nonviolence in mind.

V. CONCLUSION

The analysis of *The Mirror of Wisdom* shows that despite
the fact that at first sight the author's advice may seem
extremely general and practical, the work by Erdeni Galshiev
contains fundamental values of Buddhism. What is more,
many of verses can be applied for the current ecological
problems, both local and global. The analysis of more than
fifty *subhashitas* revealed correspondence to such Buddhist
ideas of environmental importance as interdependence of all
beings, the principle of *ahimsa* – non-violence to other
creatures, the law of karma and non-attachment to material
wealth, as well as individual responsibility for a person's
thoughts and actions. The sermon of positive knowledge and
humanistic foundations in *The Mirror of Wisdom* makes its
author Erdeni Galshiev to be viewed as one of the most
prominent representatives of the Buryat enlightenment of
pre-revolutionary time. Today *The Mirror of Wisdom* turns
into a favourite book for constant rereading in the Buryat
society. In perspective, the ecological values included in it
will increase the environmental consciousness of the Buryats.
Following the Middle Way principle, which can be applied to
almost any question, the ideas promoted by *The Mirror of
Wisdom* can contribute to ecological sustainability as well as
economic and social justice.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

G. P. Dondukova conducted the research, made
translations and wrote the paper; E. P. Dmitriev analyzed the
materials; all authors had approved the final version.

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Galina P. Dondukova was born in Ulan-Ude, the republic of Buryatia, USSR on December 26, 1987. In 2009, she graduated the Buryat State University, Ulan-Ude with a degree in linguistics. In 2013 she received the degree of candidate of philological sciences at the Buryat State University, Ulan-Ude. In 2019 she defended a PhD thesis at the University of Warsaw, Poland and received the degree of doctor of philosophy (in literary studies).

She is a senior researcher at the Department of Organization and Management of Scientific Researches at the East-Siberia State University of Technology and Management, Ulan-Ude, Republic of Buryatia. Her academic interest are environmental ethics, Buddhism, ethnic identity, Buryat literature.

Dr. Dondukova is the author of more than 15 scientific papers.



Erdeni P. Dmirtiev was born in Ulan-Ude, the republic of Buryatia, Russian Federation on July 31, 2002. In 2019, he graduated the linguistic Gymnasium no.3, Ulan-Ude, Russia and entered the Buryat State University, Ulan-Ude, Russia. He is an active volunteer of local ecological movements, regularly takes part in ecological actions around lake Baikal. He is the member of NGO "Children of Baikal".

He is currently a student at the Institute of Philology, Foreign Languages and Mass Communication at the Buryat State University, Ulan-Ude, Russia. His academic interests are environmental ethics, ecological problems.