

Analysis of Buddhist Teachings in *Princess Mononoke*

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Introduction

In this essay, I will discuss some Buddhist teachings incorporated in Miyazaki Hayao's *Princess Mononoke*, exploring how the movie challenges the binary of "good" and "evil", promotes harmony between human and nature, encourages mankind to show universal compassion and responsibility, as well as calls for reflection on our fear of death.

Duality between "good" and evil"

The film *Princess Mononoke* often adds complexity to characters and avoids simply dividing them into "good" and "evil" parties. In the movie, no characters are labelled as absolutely "evil" in nature. For example, Eboshi, the female leader of the Iron Town, seems evil because she orders annihilation of the forest gods and even shoots at Nago, the boar god, driving him mad. However, her killing seems to be justified with her "good" intentions of stopping the animal gods from impeding her workers' mining of iron sand in the forest and ensuring her people can make a decent living. This in turn makes us ponder over the contrast between good intention and evil action, and ultimately, what counts as "good", and what counts as "evil".

In Buddhism, "evil" is not used to refer to a bad human nature, but the three poisons: ignorance, greed and hatred, while "good" is the absence of the three poisons (Impey et al. 2013:102). The three poisons are causes of suffering of oneself and others. In Eboshi's case, destroying the forest reflects her ignorance because while seeking for superficial benefit of sustaining the operation of the Iron Town, she fails to observe and understand the law of interdependence which suggests that humans eventually rely on nature for survival. Therefore, from the Buddhist perspective, Eboshi is not an "evil" person, but the one who is affected by her ignorance and should learn to get rid of it. To conclude, the "good/evil" binary is not portrayed as black-and-white in the film. This can arouse the audience's interest in exploring the intentions or causes behind "good" and "evil" labels.

Dependent co-arising

I interpret that the movie also brings out the Buddhist theory of dependent co-arising, which is mutual dependence between humans and other life forms. Moro, the wolf god, once mentions that "forest and life are interdependent", and that with the death of the forest, "both will perish" (Miyazaki 1997). Moreover, throughout the story,

Prince Ashitaka has visited both the Iron Town and the forest, promoting co-existence of humans and the forest. These demonstrate that the movie intends to dissolve separation between the two sides, invite the creation of a “harmonious society” (*kyōsei shakai*), which is a Buddhist ideal (Dessi 2013:346, quoted from Rinzaishū Myōshinji-ha 2011), and promote dependent co-arising.

According to Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk, dependent co-arising suggests that nothing exists as a single, independent entity, and that everything arises and ceases depending on various causes and conditions (Kane). In other words, humans cannot survive without the support of the nature. Human over-exploitation of natural resources or destruction of the environment will eventually lead to human suffering when natural resources like water and food become insufficient to support basic survival needs of humans. In the film, the fights between the animal gods and men from the Iron Town also cause mutual casualties that make both sides suffer. Thus, the Buddhist concept of dependent co-arising is promoted in the film. It propagates the importance of maintaining co-existence and harmony between humans and nature, reminding mankind of their kinship with nature.

Undivided world

Understanding that all life forms are interconnected and exist only in mutuality, we can see, from a Buddhist point of view, that the world is undivided. In the undivided world, all existences “share the same essence, the same Buddha nature” (Bhatt 2008:111), meaning that despite different forms different creatures may take, they are equally capable of attaining enlightenment in Buddhism. There is also an idea from the Japanese Buddhism: “mountains and rivers, plants and trees, all attain Buddhahood (*sansen sōmoku shikkai jōbutsu*)” (Dessi 2013:346), indicating that natural objects share the same essence as humans. Therefore, humans should have the feeling of oneness or sameness towards other life forms in the world.

However, due to delusion in human minds, one of the three poisons (or evils) in Buddhism, we may instead perceive ourselves to be “separate selves in a separate world full of separate things” (Batchelor 1992:34). As we have the illusion that we are an independent, lasting self (Batchelor 1992:32), we develop a strong sense of separation between humans and other life forms, such as nature, as well as within humans. For instance, in the film, Eboshi disregards the forest and animal lives. She once comments that iron making weakens the forest and hence “costs fewer lives” (Miyazaki 1997). “lives”, by her definition, does not include non-humans’, denoting

her human-centric sense of self. It is driven by this mindset that she orders annihilation of the animal gods and destruction of the forest.

Reflecting on the environmental degeneration in the film and even in the real world, I argue, from the perspective of Buddhism, that these environmental problems are the consequence of human violation of the Eightfold Path, which is caused by three “poisons” (ignorance, greed and hatred). Buddhists believe that the Eightfold Path helps one reach enlightenment and end the cycle of suffering. Violating the Path and doing evil deeds will result in negative consequences. As mentioned, being lost in “delusions of separateness” (Batchelor 1992:36) (i.e. one of the three poisons) is the core cause of human destruction of the nature. The delusions shape the conceit “I am” (Somaratne 2009:120) and blind us from understanding the important Buddhist concept of “non-self”, which means that there is no permanent self, and that names and terms like “I” and “human being” do not correspond to anything that exists, as ultimately, “there exists only changing energies” (Gunaratn 1982:6). Hence, the delusions hinder one from performing the “right view” of the Eightfold Path, which requires clear understanding of concepts including impermanence and non-self. Affected by this deluded view of the world, humans are more likely to be controlled by another “poison”, their self-centered greed, to exploit the environment as they want. This in turn violates the “right thought”, “right action” and “right livelihood” of the Eightfold Path because of the thoughts to harm other living beings, the harmful acts and the use of violence against the nature to make own living (Fieldling 2008:334-335).

Universal compassion

As humans and nature are interdependent, ignorantly destroying the environment will in turn threaten human survival. Realizing the world is undivided, humans should learn to show their compassion to all forms of life equally.

In the story of *Princess Mononoke*, Eboshi shows great compassion for socially marginalized prostitutes and lepers, giving them jobs and respectful life. She even attends to the lepers by washing their rotting flesh and bandaging them (Miyazaki 1997). On the other hand, she mercilessly shoots at animal gods like Nago, the boar god, Moro, the wolf god, and Shishigami, the deer god. These show that Eboshi shows compassion only to people in the Iron Town, the community that she believes she belongs to.

Contrary to Eboshi, Ashitaka displays his universal compassion for both humans and nature. When Eboshi's arm is bitten off by Moro, Ashitaka protects her from the deadly lumps coming out of the body of Night Walker (i.e. headless deer god). When San, a girl raised in the forest, attacks the Iron Town, and is hit unconscious by a villager's shot on her mask, Ashitaka rushes over to her and shakes her awake (Smith 2003:26). Evidence show that Ashitaka helps whoever in need with universal compassion. From his equal loving kindness to all life forms, we can see how he is free from the sense of inclusion and exclusion involved in the action of grouping, and thus free from the delusion of mind.

Ashitaka's behaviors demonstrate what Buddha Sakyamuni taught us: to seek for well-being of all (*Sarvodaya*), including self and others in the whole world. The Buddha also advises his fellow monks to "shower compassion on the entire world, for the good, for the welfare, for the happiness of divine and human." (Bhatt 2008:108, quoted from Vinay Pitaka I.23). Moreover, he suggests that this love and compassion for others should become as "natural and instinctive as it is for our own selves" especially after we realize the interdependence of life (Bhatt 2008:114). As there should be no distinctions among life forms in the undivided world view, we should identify ourselves equal to every life form in the world, treating them the same way we treat ourselves. For instance, Santideva, an Indian Buddhist monk, mentions the moral obligation to dispel the suffering of others as he does for his own suffering, and benefit others as he benefits himself (Bhatt 2008:114). Thus, we have the responsibility to show universal compassion, generating joy and goodness in the world as in our selves.

Universal responsibility

Other than universal compassion, as most environmental problems are caused by human beings, we have the collective responsibility to eliminate them. In the movie, after Shishigami's head is shot down and taken away, he becomes the Night Walker. Searching around for his head, he causes large destruction of the forest. When Ashitaka succeeds in retrieving Shishigami's head, he says, "It has to be returned by human hands." (Smith 2003:45) In this sentence, Ashitaka seems to suggest that humans must be responsible for compensating for their evil deeds to the environment. It is interesting here that Ashitaka has not harmed the nature and any animals throughout the story, but he is the one who makes the compensation, suggesting that it is the collective responsibility of mankind to save the nature which they have ignorantly destroyed.

According to Somaratne (2009:123), a Buddhist scholar, we are heirs of our actions; what we have done to the environment, which aligns with how we perceive the environment and how we want to live, determines what we experience in the present living environment. In the story, humans murder the god of life and death to seek for immortality, which in turn causes large-scale destruction of both the Iron Town and the forest. In daily life, environmental issues like more extreme weather and global warming are also the consequences of our long-term harmful actions or excessive exploitation of the environment for fulfilling our insatiable desires for luxurious lifestyle.

To change the currently deteriorating environment, which is caused by our evil deeds, we have the universal responsibility to change our actions together from now on to shape a better future environment. In Buddhism, a moral deed has “collective influence”, which means it brings consequences not only to the doer, but also others and the environment (Somaratne 2009:123). If each of us starts changing his/her attitude towards the environment and taking actions to protect it, instead of harming it, the environmental deterioration may gradually slow down. To conclude, we should bear universal responsibility to combat global problems.

Death

The film also shows the fear and failure to accept death in both animal gods and humans. For example, Nago, the boar god, cannot accept death. Moro, the wolf god, points out that Nago “fear[s] death” after he is shot by Eboshi (Miyazaki 1997). I interpret that combined with his hatred towards humans, Nago’s fear for death, which may be gradually turned into resentment towards his death when the pain from his wound grows, forms a curse in his body, demonizing him. Humans also want to avoid death. In the story, humans’ desire to control life and death can be demonstrated by their hunting of Shishigami, deer god of life and death. When it is rumored that the deer god’s head can confer immortality, the emperor and Eboshi are eager to catch him. Nevertheless, when Eboshi witnesses that Shishigami takes away the lives of Moro and Okkotonushi, another boar god, she does not hesitate to shoot his head down for fear that he brings death to mankind as well. I interpret these actions to reflect humans’ greed to have longer lifespan and their underlying fear of death.

The movie shows us that death is inevitable for all life forms, including animal gods and humans. To overcome the fear of death, *Princess Mononoke* reminds us to contemplate death as Moro does in the story. When Moro lies on the ground in his final moments, he calmly accepts his coming death as he understands that death is just

part of the natural cycle. Buddhism provides a more specific way for us to understand death. That is to break through our ignorance to digest the concept of non-self.

Ignorance causes us to have a strong sense of self, driving us to frequently “identify ourselves with our actions” (Gunaratn 1982:6). However, ultimately, independent and lasting selves do not exist, since body and mind, particularly our ego-consciousness, are constantly changing (Gunaratn 1982:8). Thus, to break through ignorance and have the right view, it has been stated in the *Visuddhi Magga* that we have to understand “There is no doer but the deed There is no experiencer but the experience.” (Gunaratn 1982:6) By this, with reference to Gunaratne (1982:8), it can be concluded that “all life is just a process”; there is no dead person, but a process of dying. Thinking in this way, we can be more relaxed to face death as a natural process of life. Hence, the film encourages our contemplation on death.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Princess Mononoke* provokes our thoughts on “good/evil” binary as well as the interdependence and impermanence of life, encouraging us to perform universal compassion and responsibility.

(Word count: 2269)

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