

A Prince, A Monk, A Lord Surprisingly: An Environmentalist

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There I saw a delightful stretch of land and a lovely woodland grove, and a clear flowing river with a delightful forest so I sat down there thinking, 'Indeed, this is an appropriate place to strive for the ultimate realization of that unborn supreme security from bondage, Nirvana.'

GAUTAMA BUDDHA

"It is not difficult to forgive destruction in the past which resulted from ignorance. Today however, we have access to more information, and it is essential that we re-examine ethically what we have inherited, what we are responsible for, and what we will pass on to coming generations."

DALAI LAMA

Abstract: In the contemporary phase where sequels of earth shakes are confronted by Ecuador, Taiwan, Japan and Afghanistan, the concept of nature and environmentalism is gaining the due weight -age. The relationship among Mother Nature, human beings and innovations are now witnessed from sustainability perspective too. Here several problems can be solved by the beliefs of Lord Buddha which have been accepted over ages in slow degrees with the advent of over exploitation of natural resources. Despite the scholarly theories given by economists, environmentalists and philosophers even in the era of 21st century, it is the teachings of Lord Buddha that can serve the global crisis of resources. Lord has always been awakening the followers at large for an ethical utilization of means eliminating all sorts of exploitation of natural resources. Revisiting those lines by Lord Buddha and upgrading the surroundings besides updating the technology, a lucid vision has to be made. This paper explores the Human-Nature relation in contemporary modernized word and how these conflicting issues are being overcome by Buddha-Nature relation or Buddhist Environmentalism or Engaged Buddhism.

Keywords: Climate Change, Engaged Buddhism, Environmentalism, Karma, Sustainable Development.

1. Buddhist Environmentalism

The principal religions of much of Asia are far more diverse including Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism originating in India, Confucianism and Daoism in China, and Shintoism in Japan. Buddhism is selected because it is more widespread geographically with in excess of 376 million adherents worldwide making it the fourth largest religion. Also it shares

several important attributes such as non-violence (ahimsa) with Hinduism from which it sprang and Jainism with which it co-evolved.

There are three main types of Buddhism (Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana) each with various manifestations; thus, there is a wide range of approaches to nature as well as to the religious life. Nevertheless, underlying this diversity are the core principles of the Triple Refuge, the Four-fold Noble Truths, and the Noble Eight-fold Path. A person becomes a Buddhist by publicly vowing to take refuge in the enlightened one (Buddha), his teachings (Dharma), and the community of Buddhists (Sangha). These three refuges can be related to nature. The birth, enlightenment, teaching, and death of the Buddha were each closely associated with trees. Dharma means nature, among other things. One common source for Dharma instruction is the Jatakas, fables that illustrate the core virtues in the Buddha's teachings. Also they exemplify pivotal principles like interdependence, the first precept of non-violence, and moderation (Middle Way). The more than 200 rules for monks (vinaya) include non-violence, compassion, and loving kindness towards all beings. Thus, monks are prohibited from killing other animals for food or even in self-defense. They are not supposed to dig in the ground to prevent harming organisms in the soil. Laity, like monks, may practice meditation in natural places such as forests and caves, pursue pilgrimages to sacred sites associated with the Buddha, practice vegetarianism to reduce harm to other beings, and participate in environmentalism as a form of socially engaged Buddhism. Environmental degradation obviously contributes to the suffering of humans and other beings. Buddhist practice includes nonviolence, compassion, and loving-kindness through awareness, simplicity, restraint, and action on behalf of all sentient beings. Non-harming (ahimsa) is the cardinal ethical precept of Buddhism, recognizing that other beings and things shun suffering and seek happiness each in their own ways.

The Four Noble Truths that the Buddha discovered through enlightenment are that all existence is suffering (dukkha); suffering is caused by ignorance, hatred, and desire; suffering can end by eliminating these causes; and the means to end suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. This path encompasses right view, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation. These can be related to nature in various ways. For example, following right livelihood ideally includes avoiding any occupation that harms other beings such as hunting, fishing, or butchering. Also Buddhism distinguishes between need and greed. Accordingly, a

Buddhist would pursue the Middle Way by minimizing harm to other beings through modestly satisfying the four basic needs recognized by the Buddha (food, medicine, clothing, and shelter). Clearly restraint in material consumption would also reduce pressure on the environment as well as waste and pollution.

Since the 1970s, there has been a growing movement in many parts of the world that is variously called Buddhist ecology, Buddhist environmentalism, eco-Buddhism, or green Buddhism. This movement applies concepts and principles from Buddhism to deal with particular environmental issues in order to relieve the suffering of other beings. Among Buddhist environmentalists are Robert Aitken, Allan Hunt Badiner, Stephen Batchelor, Rita Gross, Ruben L. Habito, Daniel H. Henning, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Kent Jones, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Philip Kapleau, Stephanie Kaza, Kenneth Kraft, John Daido Looi, Joanna Macy, Thich Nhat Hanh, Steven C. Rockefeller, John Seed, Padmasiri de Silva, Sulak Sivaraksa, Gary Snyder, Michael Soule, Christopher Titmuss, and Duncan Ryuken Williams.

The Asian open-billed stork provides a striking example of the practical side of Buddhist environmentalism. By the mid-1950s this stork had been extirpated from most of its natural range in Asia, the most notable exceptions being India and Sri Lanka. Although in Thailand this bird was supposed to be protected by law since 1960, its numbers were still diminishing as a result of poaching and habitat destruction. Indeed, the only remaining colony in the country was located in the vicinity of a Buddhist temple called Wat Phai Lom north of Bangkok. Monks and wildlife conservationists joined forces, and the temple was recognized as a bird sanctuary by law in 1970. The population of open-billed storks in Thailand increased from 4,000 in 1964 to 30,000 in 1980, about half of the world's population of this species. Wat Phai Lom is the most important reason for the conservation and recovery of this {C} species in Thailand. It provides a protected area, especially during the autumn and winter months of the stork's annual migration cycle in Asia (Sponsel 2014).

2. Nature, Karma and Buddhist Ethics

The core of Buddhist karma-based ethics is respect for life, particularly sentient life. On the everyday level of understanding, Nature changes according to the karma of all sentient beings. Mental pollution causes environmental pollution, and environmental pollution fosters mental pollution. The starting place for understanding just about anything about Buddhism is

karma. Karma is the causal network of intentional actions, both mental and physical, that is the foundation of Buddhist ethical understanding. The foremost principle of Buddhist karma-based ethics is ahimsa, the principles of non-harming and of respect for life. This does not only refer to respect for human beings, but also for every manifestation of life on the planet, especially sentient life. As one's mind is purified, one's actions are purified. As a result, not only do mental attitudes that are dissonant or harmful to Nature disappear, but one's new mental states lead directly to more enlightened actions in relation to Nature and more enlightened influence on others about Nature.

There is also influence from action to mind. As we act more responsibly towards life in Nature or life as Nature, the more our actions will purify and clarify our minds. Consideration of our actions and their consequences will lead us to more environmentally responsible ethical behavior. Buddhist monks and nuns vow to follow moral precepts that prohibit harming of the environment. There are vows for protecting the purity of the water; for not killing sentient beings who live in the earth; for not killing insects, birds, and animals; for not starting forest fires; and for respecting the life of trees, particularly ancient ones.

In the contemporary world, Buddhist monastic communities are developing a new ways of applying ancient Buddhist principles to their own environments. For example, in the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, monks, nuns and lay people are getting involved in recycling; in teaching temple residents and the supporters of temples not to pollute their air, earth, and water; and in reforesting temple properties. While performing the ancient Buddhist rite of rescuing birds and animals originally consigned to death and liberating them, they are developing a new ecologic concern for making sure that those sentient beings are released into environmentally suitable habitats. The principles of compassionate ecology are also being taught in the Association's Buddhist schools. In closing, I would like once again to stress the importance of the preservation of the unsullied natural world as a place for practice on the Path to enlightenment (Epstein 2005).

3. Buddha- Nature Conflict

All life is interrelated and interdependent. Nature, or we could say our natural environment, is alive and at least partly conscious. It is neither sacred and perfect nor evil and to be conquered. The deep reality of Nature is not separate from our fully enlightened nature

(Buddha-nature). Buddhists understand 'Nature' as a useful conventional designation without any unique, intrinsic reality of its own that absolutely distinguishes it from what is 'not Nature'. In a less technical sense, it is the conditioned world prior to extreme human distortion of the patterns of interrelationship between humans and the rest of the living beings on the planet. It can also be understood as the living web that interconnects individual beings, both sentient and non-sentient, in interdependence. What is ultimately real about that web is its Buddha-nature, its Buddha-ness. That deep reality of Nature is not separate from our own fully enlightened nature. When we purify our minds, we experience the true nature of Nature, and then we see that we are actually living in a Pure Land or Buddhaland. That Buddhaland is not somewhere else, but right here. The Sixth Chan Buddhist Patriarch the Venerable Huineng quoted the Buddha as saying: "As the mind is purified, the Buddhaland is purified"(Toh 2004).

4. Buddhism and Sustainable Development

Over the last five decades of its 2500 year history, the spread of the Buddhist faith worldwide has witnessed the emergence and growth of a movement known as "engaged Buddhism" or sometimes referred to as "socially engaged Buddhism" (Jones, 2003; Queen, 2000; King, 2009). As interpreted and enacted by individual practitioners, institutions, organizations or networks in both global South and North contexts, engaged Buddhism seeks to actively build a more compassionate, loving, nonviolent, just and sustainable world. For engaged Buddhists, their faith transcends individual-centred belief, understanding, rituals and a search for "enlightenment" to also encompass social action across all dimensions of life. This growing interest and commitment to such an "engaged" perspective to Buddhism does not imply, however, that the Buddha himself and his teachings were "disengaged" or alienated from social practices and relationships. Throughout his journey as a teacher, following his "awakening", the Buddha role-modelled to his disciples and followers not only the challenging goal of individual cultivation but also the active integration of Buddhist values, principles and knowledge into daily individual and community social living. Engaged Buddhists today are re-reading and re-conceptualizing this holistic understanding of the Buddha's teaching in the light of contemporary social, economic, political and cultural realities, thereby eschewing a socially passive and individually-centred practice that can develop in some traditions, schools or institutions. Engaged Buddhist thinking and practice has spanned a wide range of fields and issues of societal

and worldly responsibilities, problems, conflicts and peacelessness, including preventing and resolving armed conflicts and militarization, promoting human rights, dealing with social injustices, intercultural and interfaith understanding, harmony and dialogue, counseling for jail inmates and caring in hospices. Concomitant, however, with the emergence of awareness and of urgent advocacy to face and transcend the deepening ecological crisis, engaged Buddhists have also joined hands, hearts and spirit with peoples of diverse faiths or spirituality traditions or no professed faith, to build more sustainable futures. Drawing on basic principles, values and faith wisdom of Buddhism, engaged Buddhists have provided some helpful insights as well as concrete strategies and practices that promote “sustainable development” and education for sustainable development (Toh 2010).

5. Buddhism and Innovative Sustainable Development

The Buddha, with great compassion for the world, required his followers to practice the four boundless states (appamanna) of loving kindness (metta), of compassion (karuna), of sympathetic joy (mudita), and of equanimity (upekkha). This practice of ‘metta’ or universal love, begins by suffusing one’s own mind with universal love (metta) and then pervading it to one’s family, then to the neighbors, then to the village, country and the four corners of the Universe. It is time we all took the middle path in using our natural resources. We could no longer senselessly overexploit our resources and use up our natural energy without sustaining them for the future generations. Buddhism teaches us the manner in which to consume these elements. To a monk who has newly been initiated into the sangha, the knowledge of such matter is fundamental to the learning to the learning and practicing of the Buddhist precepts. It teaches him to use his intellect to examine carefully the objects being consumed and their end results. He is trained to be vigilant over the five sensual organs. Once fully understood how these senses interact on the mind, he is made to learn have command over them so they do not veer from the desired path. I have no doubt in my mind that the Buddhist middle path is the way to solve many of today’s world crises. But the sufficiency economy is the philosophy that has been developed based on both the Buddhist middle path principle and the practical understanding of the modern economy. We can witness Buddhist teaching at work and hope to leave our children and their children with a better economy and environment; an economy that is more humanly sound, and an environment that is more sustainable and safer for every being on this planet earth. We are in

an ecological crisis. What is happening all across the globe shows that we, human beings and the natural environment are in crisis - due to the lack of some careful and forward thinking? Environmental scientists have shown that the globe is in crisis now: ice is melting in Iceland and the ozone-layer is damaged. Recent activities such as Kyoto protocol direct us to take effective measures to overcome global crisis. Plenty of signs in natural disasters demonstrate that earthly resources are also limited and the development process in many developing nations that aims at eliminating poverty from the globe can move smoothly only to a limited extent. When the planet is in crisis, we are obligated and forced to rethink our actions in the past and present and take creative precautions to prevent the imminent disaster. Over the centuries, Buddhism as a religion has shaped society, social customs, practices and way of thinking in many nations in Asia. In shaping morals and ethical concerns of these nations, Buddhism has contributed substantially. The rapid growth of science and technology, trends of secularization, individual and profit driven capitalism, increasing influence of consumerism are gradually challenging the values and ethos of Buddhist civilization and lives. The most venerable Professor Dr. Phra Dharmakosajarn, stated that the United Nations and the ideals of Buddhism are sharing the same objective, which is to bring world peace. As for the sustainable development issue, he commented that beside from concentrating on economic and social developments, humanity has to keep the environmental factors in mind. According to Buddhism, conflict, intolerance and disharmony arise out of desires, hatred and ignorance. To develop confidence, tolerance, and harmony it is important to cultivate common values or universal ethics. Therefore, promotion of education, dialogue, social and economic development would lead for sustainable development of peace in the world. The Buddha welcomed teachers of other religions, but he never attempted to convert any or urged anyone to change their beliefs, traditions or teachers. In this regards, we find evidence throughout the Pali Canon where wandering ascetics, sophists and philosophers come to meet the Buddha and discussed or exchanged their different views concerning the way of spiritual practice and liberation (Sraman 2014).

Buddhism teaches that if we wish to save the environment, we must first analyze our lives to determine how our self-deification is destroying the world by depleting, overpopulating, and polluting the environment. The Buddhist approach to solving the global ecological crisis then includes: (a).Compassion is the basis for a balanced view of the whole world and of the environment. (b)The use of the "save and not waste" approach means that nothing in nature is

spoiled or wasted. Wanton destruction upsets the vital balance of life.(c).Ecology is rebuilt through the philosophy of Sarvodaya (uplift of all), which is based on loving kindness, compassionate action, and altruistic joy. Suval Sivaraksa and Aubrey Meyer have suggested the following modifications of the Buddhist four Noble Truths to make them relate to ecology:

- i. Climate change is a reality. It is the source of flooding and drought, desertification and loss of land.
- ii. Climate change is caused by over-consumption of fossil fuels, loss of soil, and excessive herds of livestock. Individual over-consumption in the global North is an expression of greed and a fear of loss. Fear and greed are root causes of all suffering. Capitalism thrives on individual fear and greed.
- iii. The climate we have to change is the climate of greed and fear, in which consumerism and profiteering can thrive.
- iv. To overcome suffering; start at home, with yourself. Ask yourself: Where can I cut down my consumption? How can I repay my carbon debt to my children's children? Plant trees. Don't fly. Eat local and organic foods.

6. Buddhism and Forest Conservation In Southeast Asia

Over the past 12 years more than 500,000 square miles of forest has been lost worldwide, an area equivalent in size to the state of Alaska. Even more has been degraded or replaced with palm oil or rubber plantations. Among the countries with the highest national rates of deforestation, three of the top five (Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia) are located in Southeast Asia. So it's no small matter that the region's forests, in addition to an astonishing diversity of plants and animals, host a community of Buddhist monastics dedicated to their conservation. Over the past three decades, these 'ecology monks' have built a small, but influential movement and the future of Southeast Asia's forests may just rest in their hands. Forests have a deep and longstanding association with Buddhism, figuring prominently in the religion's lore. It was under the Bodhi tree that Siddhartha Gautama achieved enlightenment and in grove of Sal trees where he physically passed. While not 'sacred' in the usual sense of the term, many Bodhi trees have become Buddhist pilgrimage sites and the forest remains an important retreat for meditation. This is probably best seen in the Thai *thudong* or 'Forest Monk' tradition, in which monks wander and sleep in the forest emulating the practice of the Buddha and his early disciples.

It was in Thailand in the mid-20th century where the philosophers Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and P.A. Payutto laid foundation for Buddhist environmental activism. They viewed the growing influence of capitalism in Thailand, with its emphasis on individualism and attainment of material wealth, as standing in stark opposition to central Buddhist tenets of detachment from desire and no-self. Their influential writings reinterpreted core Buddhist teachings and inspired a new generation of ‘engaged Buddhists’ in the region, who saw it as part of the religious duty to engage with society to promote social and environmental justice.

After a series of floods and landslides ravaged Thailand in the 1980s, killing and displacing thousands, deforestation came under sharp scrutiny. The suffering that resulted from short-sighted economic exploitation gave an increased resonance to the Buddhist environmental narrative. Monks began to utilize direct action to draw attention to their message, inventing new religious traditions in the process. One of these new strategies, tree ordination, has come to symbolize the loosely tethered movement.

The ceremony, in which a tree is wrapped in the monk’s saffron robe and blessed, implies that nature should command the same respect one reserves for monks. In Theravada Buddhist countries where monks are often the most revered figures in society, the act was highly provocative. It angered some and captured the imagination of many others, but whatever their reaction, people were paying attention.

Deforestation accounts for more than one-sixth of greenhouse gas emissions globally. With high carbon density, the forests of Southeast Asia have been a critical focus of programs such as REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and land Degradation), which is designed to incentivize forest conservation by transferring funds from developed to developing countries for carbon storage and ecosystem services that we all benefit from.

In Cambodia, monks have been instrumental to early REDD successes. Venerable Bun Saluth was inspired by the Buddhist environmental movement while studying in Thailand. He founded the Monks Community Forest in Oddar Meanchhay Province, which was once the final stronghold of the Khmer Rouge. Cleared of much the physical remnants of war, the province is now home to 13 community forest groups that comprise the nation’s first REDD pilot project. The project conserves some 65,000 hectares of forests and provides livelihood diversification for

10,000 associated households. Monks from Sam Raong pagoda play key roles in forest monitoring to discourage hunting and land clearing. Promoting a soft approach, monks educate offenders using Buddhist teachings. They regularly participate in community outreach, even running their own radio show.

With equal parts wisdom, charisma and moral authority monks have huge potential to forge consensus and influence action on issues such as deforestation in their own countries. But beyond that, there is potential for the unique philosophy that undergirds their movement to deepen international understandings about our shared responsibility to the environment and to our fellow humans.

Across Southeast Asia ecology monks are forging a middle path in development, one that recognizes both the instrumental and the intrinsic value of nature and balances economic growth with the rights of local communities. We would do well to take note (Adams 2014).

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