

# A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BUDDHIST ATTITUDES TOWARD ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND THE FOSTERING OF BUDDHISM IN SRI LANKA

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## Introduction

The term 'environment' is a complex concept. The general meaning of environment is surroundings or status of physical, chemical and biological around an organism. There is an inseparable relationship between environment and human beings than the other animals. First, the environment provides life support systems for all organisms of the earth, second, it provides all materials for human economic systems and finally wastes generated by various activities are cleaned or absorbed by the environment and provide good quality environment for all organisms. However, by now world is suffering from numerous environmental problems due to both human and natural activities. Even natural hazards have been accelerated due to various human activities (Sudhamma, S. 2001). Therefore, water pollution, air pollution, deforestation, wastes accumulation, noise pollution, floods, droughts, landslides, soil erosion, land degradation, global warming, ozone depletion, biodiversity depletion, natural resources exhaustion are frequent environmental issues in the present world.

Both developed and developing countries have used various approaches to protect and conserve the environment they include command and control approaches( i.e. introducing laws and regulations) quality management approaches (i.e. introducing management standards) and economic approaches (i.e. introducing market based instruments such as taxation, polluter pay principle, licenses, permits...etc Despite all these

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efforts, there is no reduction of environmental problems and that is why it is time to explore the value of Buddhist attitudes towards environment.

There is a closer relationship between the environment of Sri Lanka and Buddhism. The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (Sri Lanka environment outlook, 2009) has shown the value of environment in Sri Lanka pointing out that Sri Lanka is one of the biodiversity hotspots of the world. On the other hand, when exploring the historical evidence such as Mahāvamsa, Chūlavamsa, and inscriptions, it is easy to prove the relationship between Theravada Buddhism and the environment of Sri Lanka, where Sinhala Buddhists were the main protectors of both environment and Buddhism (Deegalle, M. 2006) At present, both environment and Buddhism have come under threat due to various reasons (Pragati, S. 2008). Hence, this research mainly aimed at identifying the relationship between Buddhist attitudes towards environmental conservation and fostering of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

### **Materials and methods**

Researcher used both primary and secondary data. The key informant interviews, direct observations and group discussions were the methods of primary data collection. Books, journal articles, newspapers, relevant institutional data and the internet were the sources of secondary data. Qualitative approach to data analysis was used and text was the main mode of data interpretation. Mihintale Divisional Secretariat area was selected as the study location.

### **Results and discussion**

The researcher explored two dimensions of the problems. First, how Buddhist attitudes or Buddhist's teaching protect the environment and second, how Buddhism is protected when conserving the environment in Sri Lanka.

Buddhism is a philosophy which guides to achieve the Nirvana (the state of supreme bliss). The teaching of Gauthama Buddha can be found in Buddhist canonical literature or the Pali Canon where there are three divisions called the *Tipiṭakas* or three baskets (Wimalatissa, K. 2014). These individually are called as the *Vinaya pitaka*, the *Sutta pitaka* and the *Abhidhamma pitaka*. When exploring these three pitaka, it is easy to find numerous examples that the Buddha has well guided the four groups of the Buddhists i.e. *Bhikshu* (monks), *Bhikshuni* (Buddhist nuns), *Upāsaka* (lay male followers) and *Upāsika* (lay female followers) to protect the environment. A *Bhikshu* promises to keep around 250 vows and *bhikshuni* keep 348 (Czanecka, J.P., Tyrell, H. 2003). As well as *Upāsaka* and *Upāsikā* keep five precepts or *pañcasīla*. There are a number of vows and precepts that have been sermonized by the Buddha with relation to conserving environment.

When exploring the life of the Buddha, the birth, the enlightenment, and the passing away have all been taken place in the natural environment. These incidents alone are sufficient to understand the attitude of the Buddha on environment. The most famous dharma sermons have been made by Buddha in the forests such as Besakala forest, Chaliaya pachche sandun forest, Parileya forest, Kibulwat maha wanaya, wisalpura wanaya, Jeewaka Amba wanaya, Andun wanaya, Weluwanaya, Baranes Nuwara Migada wanaya ...etc. The Buddha does not disturb to use environment for the betterment of human lives on the other hand misuse of environment or over exploitation of environmental resources is abhorred. In the *Sigālovāda sutta*, the Buddha has pointed out that the way of using environmental resources. The use of environmental resources in the manner of how bees take honey from a flower without harming fragrance and other parts of a flower was given as an example. This is further explained through the sermon called *Udumbarakhādana* parable sermonized to the son Deegajanu Koliya where the Buddha explained that the right behavior of persons who are desirous of eating wood apples. If a *bhikshu* or *bhiksuni* has become ill, herbal materials

found in the environment such as leaves, roots of trees, husk, ...etc can be used until death but if other monks and nuns use these materials without reason, it falls under the wrong thing or *dukkata āpatti* according to *Vinaya Piṭaka*. If a monk is suffering from an illness, wastes generated by him can be removed into water but if other monks are doing so is a wrong thing it falls under *dukulā vinaya*. Within the *Pañcasīla*, the first precept promises not to harm any life and as Abenayake has pointed out; there is a deeper meaning within the term 'life'. Further through the concept of karma, the Buddha has explained that harming environment is as a sin and protecting environment is merit.

All examples cited above show that the Buddhist attitudes on environment are eco-friendly. Buddhism guides to use environment in a friendly manner without harming it because healthy environment is the foundation for any organism of the earth. All these attitudes were included in Sri Lanka after the arrival of Mahinda thero in 246 B.C. Today the Buddhist population is about 70.2% in Sri Lanka (Department of census and statistics in Sri Lanka, 2011). If all Buddhist follow the Buddhist teaching on environment, it is not difficult to protect the environment of Sri Lanka. On the other hand, when environment is protected Buddhism also will be protected because forests provide ideal places for Buddhist monks and nuns for activities such as meditation. Even *Upāsaka* and *Upāsikā* often like to observe sīla in a forest monastery than a village temple because of the calm natural environment.

### **Conclusions:**

There is a priceless value of environment and Buddhism in Sri Lanka but by now both have been threatened due to various reasons. Therefore, it is time to use Buddhist ethics to protect and conserve environment of Sri Lanka. If it is possible to give religious value to a threatened forest in Sri Lanka, there is a high potential to protect it. This would be more effective

than imposing rules and regulations. Finally, it will be possible to give a positive message to the world ridden by massive environmental challenges.

**Keywords:** Environmental conservation, Buddhism, Buddhist ethics, forest conservation

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