



## BUDDHIST ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY FOR A BETTER WORLD

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Human beings of the twenty first century suffer than ever before in human history due to unexpected natural problems. One of the major problems that the human beings face today is the environmental problem. We have inherited this earth together with plants, animals, rocks, minerals, seas, rivers and lakes. As a result of ecological degradation, in the present time, air, water, and earth have been polluted. Various life forms have been driven to extinction and the quality of life of the human beings is also getting considerably affected. *H.M. Saxena* says that “Ecological thinking came to the fore in the late twentieth century. “The term “environment “etiologically means surroundings. Literally, it is an English word formed by two words, “environ” and “ment” which means “encircled” or all round. Thus, the environment is a complex of many variables which surrounds man as well as all living organisms.”<sup>1</sup> It further says that the “environment is the source of life on earth and it not only directs but also determines the existence, growth and development of mankind and all its activities. As society developed, man’s impact on the environment grew in scope and strength.”<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to understand that most of the environmental problems are getting more and more aggravated due to corruption in the hearts of humans. They are largely responsible for the ecological degradation. This paper is an attempt to show the uniqueness of the teachings of the Buddha concerning the environment. And it is expected that the Buddha's teachings will contribute in some way to overcome numerous environmental problems that we experience today.

It is able to understand that "two thousand six hundred years ago, during the age of the Buddha, the world was certainly not considered to be over populated; one would have felt that there was little need for teachings on the vulnerability of nature."<sup>3</sup> However, according to the teaching of Buddha conveys a broader meaning to the term environment. The Buddhist interpretation of "everything" (*Sabba*) for instant will be helpful to understand what we perceive as nature. "What monks is everything? Eye and visual objects, ear and sound, nose and odour, tongue and taste, body and touch, mind and concepts these are called everything."<sup>4</sup> In this context "nature" is seen as being directly connected with human lives. When human beings tend to gratify senses, it is possible to arise craving. The craving of human being tends to exploit the nature in a multitude of ways. As it is said by the Buddha in *Dhammapada* (Delightful are the forests where worldings delight not: the passionless will rejoice (therein) (for) they seek no sensual pleasures."<sup>5</sup> This stanza contains a meaningful word "*kāmagavesino*" (seeker of carnal pleasure) in a broad meaning, when a person is overwhelmed by passion; he is capable of doing various types of heinous crimes, under any condition. And such a person will not enjoy the beauty of the world. In this context, the Buddha contrasts the nature of the mind of

spiritual seeker with the attitude of the ordinary person. The Buddha instructs all human beings to deal with nature as enlightened persons with the attitude of sublime thoughts. The Buddha further instructed monks showing strategic methods of interacting with the environment in the exemplary manner of "a bee that just only takes pollen of a flower, without doing any harm, even to a petal". When a bee has taken pollen of the flower it can produce fruits in the future. If we adapt such a method in our relationship with the environment we can definitely prevent various types of ecological crises. If we are able to adopt the foresaid method there will be no need to then map out environmental policies and environmental forums to safeguard nature.

There is no doubt that the Buddha can be called a great environmentalist who was concerned about the nature as a sacred asset. This treasure is now becoming exposed to various problems due to science and technology. Especially, the scientific invention and testing of biological weapons has increased the environmental problems. And the ozone layer also is being damaged day by day. As examples for the ecological problems: Rainfall patterns have changed and deforestation has occurred climatic changes and land has become as barren. The destruction and debasement of the ecology has been constantly occurring through cruel methods of hunting, fishing, butchering, over mining and excessive use of pesticides. In order to protect the environment, the "Intellectuals have proposed that we must give up our cruel and selfish attitude towards flora and fauna, should respect all life forms...however, as we live in a pluralistic world...what is needed is a cooperative effort, by all men and women of spiritual sensitivity regardless of their faith. Such an approach would fall within the parameters laid down by the teaching of the Buddha."<sup>6</sup>

Further, it is said by: *Thich Nhat Hanh* that “We should deal with nature the way we should deal with ourselves, we should not harm ourselves, we should not harm nature...human beings and nature is inseparable.”<sup>7</sup>

Especially, Buddhism does not see any conflict in contemplating nature, appreciating it aesthetically and harnessing it for human use. Buddhism has a very viable and humanistic framework for ethical concerns related to the environment. Buddhism is more explicitly positive in its concern for the natural world unlike the Judaea Christian faith which places humans and their artifices over and against the natural world of animals and the physical environment. *E.F Schumacher* points out that “Man is a child of nature and not the master of nature”<sup>8</sup> but most of the time human beings try to exclude nature from their lives because they want to overcome nature. We cannot expect favours from nature; we must take them.”<sup>9</sup>

Buddhism classifies all the categories of the environment into four parts such as air, water, earth and heat. All these elements are possible to be conceived under the environment. At a deeper level, the Buddha describes the nature of the world as a network of many sided relationships and causal patterns. Thus ...physical laws (*Utu niyāma*) biological laws (*Bīja niyāma*) moral laws (*Kamma niyāma*) psychological laws (*Citta niyāma*) and laws of liberation (*Dhamma niyāma*). Buddhism considers these universal laws and man as part of nature.

It is important to understand that Buddhism deals with nature with an ethical concern. *Hajime Nakamura* in a study of environment and humanity in eastern thought says: “According to Buddhism humans constitute just one class of living beings and have no right of unlimited exploitation

of animal and plant lives, which form a part of nature...Buddhist thought is its zest for harmony with nature. The joy of enjoying natural beauty and of living comfortably in natural surroundings was expressed by the monks and nuns. “*Hargrove's* conception of ecological thinking as a kind of “seeing” may help us to grasp the importance of understanding different worldview orientations. It happens that often stories, parables, metaphors, diaries, biographies, poetry, authentic narratives of experiences... help us to approximate the intended meanings of these doctrines.”<sup>10</sup>

The above two statements show that the environment is a very necessary condition, for the development of human knowledge, literature, music and art etc. Those who are away from nature will lack knowledge in these fields. The Buddha employed different types of similes and metaphors as a way of communicating his Dhamma message to his audience. For example “the *Pahārāda Sutta of Aṅguttara Nikāya* has used a graphical description in order to explain the dept of his teachings, where the doctrine is compared to the ocean, and gradual progress gets one deeper and deeper into the ocean. It is said that those who wish to explore precious gems and pearls may explore the deeper ocean.

Most of the incidents: birth, enlightenment and the passing away in the life of the Buddha occurred under the shadow of trees and he often instructs for his followers to go to the forest for the cultivation of meditation practices. The atmosphere of the natural environment was considered as an incentive for spiritual growth. The Buddha instructed people to cultivate benevolence and compassion for the environment in the (*Metta sutta*) discourse on living kindness. It can understand that the Buddhist attitudes

towards the environment were developed among “Various forms of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, perceive each of the animals and plants as capable of becoming a Buddha.”<sup>11</sup> The Buddhist *Jātaka* stories present an anthropomorphic view of animals showing their truly human qualities of both good and bad, heroic and evil qualities.”<sup>12</sup> “Buddhism also accepted the popular belief that trees are inhabited by spirits or divinities protecting them. Trees deserve the gratitude for the service they render to people, especially offering shade and fruits, and should not be injured or felled by a person who has benefited by them.”<sup>13</sup>

The Buddhist texts speak of harmlessness to the plant and vegetable kingdom as a matter of fact; the Buddhist custom of rainy retreat (*Vassāvāsa*) owes its origin to such a concern. This may be interpreted as an extension of the principle of non injury (*Ahimsā*) to the vegetable kingdom. What follows from this insistence is that animals and plants are to be respected. There is an assumption that each plant and even the smallest sentient beings are inter-related.

According to Buddhist ethical teaching “the *Sila* concept, for example, of abstaining from destruction of life includes within it non injury and the love and protection of life of very sort, both human and animal (*pāṇātipātā pahāya pānātipātā pativirato hoti nihitadaṇḍo nihiatasattho lajjī dayāpanno*). But in the *Sikkhāpadas* of the *Pātimokkha* where both prosecution and punishment are contemplated the gravity of the offence of killing is fixed at different levels...the destruction of human life is classed among the *Pārājika* offences...under the monastic discipline.”<sup>14</sup>

How much the Buddha was considered about the environment is that the rules for monks that prohibit cutting down trees, destroying plants, digging in soil and so

forth may be interpreted as a warning that the minute forms of life may be destroyed by these actions. As illustrated in the *Pali* canon, a certain form of life called one faculty (*Ekindriya jīva*) (inhabits trees, plants and the soil and even water may have creatures or breathers (*Sappānaka udaka*) in it. According to the Buddhist ruling principles it is even a duty of a king to protect animals in his kingdom as it is discoursed in the *Chakkavatti Sehanada Sutta*. The wild beasts and the birds in the air should be protection by the ruler. We have to be conscious of the fact that beings are affected by what we take from their environment and the environment becomes less refined and fruitful as the beings morally decline. Thus, as illustrated in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* every living being and every minute thing is significant. The modern problem of environmental destruction is to a very great extent a product of a unbridled development guided by a profit oriented economic system. Such a system which is largely the product of the Western civilization and its attitudes and values, appeals to deep rooted human instincts like search for material safety and greed for wealth and comfort. It is very sad to note that “It is estimated that nearly 70 million animals were sacrificed to research in 1980 and millions of primates, dogs, cats, sheep, rabbits, pigs, birds, rodents, and other animals are routinely subject to experiments and test.”<sup>15</sup> If we do this kind of harassment for animals before long such species will be wiped out from the environment. Thus, the 1992 *Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit* agenda was about limiting the threat to biodiversity, forests and climate, and not about restrictions on automobiles, agribusiness and free trade.

Any types of species in the environment are useful to keep the balance of nature and also they helpful to make bio diversity in the environment. The Buddha’s concerns on



nature is highlighted in the *Vanarōpa Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* thus: the planters of groves and fruitful trees, and they who build causeways and dams, and wells constructed and watering sheds, and to the homeless shelter give, of such as these, by day, by night, forever merit can be cultivated.

At present, the environmentalists from every part of the world have been making every possible effort to save the earth from deforestation but still they have not been able to materialize their dream. More than two thousand six hundred years ago the Buddha pointed out very important saying: “cut down the forest of passions (*vana*) but not real trees. From the forest of passions springs fear.” The Buddha laying down the rule in question, explains, why do you foolish people cut down and cause others to cut down trees. Indeed, people believe that trees have life. (*Katham hi nāma mogha purisā rukkham chindissathā’pi chindāpessathā’pi, jivasaññino manussā rukkhasmiṃ.*) The *Vibhaṅga* commentary defines *Bhūtagāma* as vegetation arising from any of five sources. “From bulbs, rhizomes or tubers (e.g. potatoes, tulips) /from cuttings or stakes, willows, raised bushes, /from joints, sugar cane, bamboo, /from seeds, cone, and beans.”<sup>16</sup> Buddhism protects each and every plant on the earth.

It is said that of the “fifty states of America, Texas alone emitted a hundred and sixty five million pounds of toxic wastes in 1987. Hawaii, being the last on the list, is said to have pumped out 2.6 million pounds of toxic chemical every year...the report called environmental protection agency’s inventory of toxic chemicals emitted by US industries in 1987. The study reports that environmental pollution caused by these toxic emissions has become a

threat to all living things. Chronic respiratory diseases, cancer, birth defects and psycho behavioural shortcomings are directly linked to air pollution...one in four of all Americans now living will be affected, approximately 800,000 cases being diagnosed each year. According to the *New Zealand’s National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research*, all the ozone between 13.5 kilometers (8.3 miles) and 19 kilometers (11 miles) above the earth has already been destroyed.”<sup>17</sup>

All these examples show sufficient evidence of damages that have been by so called developed countries. Before long, all human beings, animals, vegetation, will be destroyed, once and for all, from the earth.

*Senāsanakkhandhaka* of the *Cullavagga Pali* deals with a number of measures which were taken by the Buddha to prevent environmental pollution and safeguard health and sanitation in the community of monks. Instructions are given on disposing wastes, use of toilets, places for steam bath and avoiding pollution of the air, water and the vicinity.

The *Bhikkhuni Pātimokkha* says with reference to the disposal of wastes that, whoever should throw out urine, rubbish or remains of food over a wall or over a fence is guilty of an offence of expiation. In the place where *Sekhiya* precepts explain on the pollution of food and water it is said that one should train oneself as: “I will not ease myself or spit, if not ill, on green corn” “I will not ease myself in the water.”<sup>18</sup>

Now, it is able to see that how much Buddha was concerned about the mistakes in our day to day lives. The Buddhists are very sensitive about nature and living beings.

The Buddha highly values wholesome actions of kindness to animate beings. In brushing the washing water from a plate containing food particles into a pool, if it is done with the intention of feeding creatures living therein; even this seemingly trivial action is meritorious.

The disciples of Buddha enjoyed the aesthetic beauty of the environment and they were very sensitive on the movements of nature. Especially, *Thera* and *Therī Gāthā*, the collection of verses composed by the early saints is full of descriptions of nature *Thera Kāludāyi* praises the beauty of nature in autumn.

“The delightful trees in bloom diffuse their scent all around, in all directions having shed their petals, hoping for fruits, it is time to go forth from here.” “The trees are now crimson, lord, having shed their (old) foliage, about to fruit. They seem illuminated as though aflame. The time partakes of flavor, o great hero.”

“Many saintly monks such as *Thera Ekhavihāriya*, *Thera Sappaka* and *Thera Tālaputa* etc speak of forest, flora and fauna, birds and beasts and flowing rivers and water ripping down from mountain slopes as stimulants for their quest.”<sup>19</sup> The *Thera Tālaputa* utters, *Kadā nu kaṭṭhe ca tine latā ca, khandhe imehaṃ amite ca dhamme, ajjhattikānevā ca bāhirāni, saman tuleyyaṃ tadidaṃ kadā me* (this is the wish of *Thera Tālaputa* “living in the jungle as he did, to see no difference between the composition of his own being and the material things of the world like grass, dry wood and creepers. One thus gets naturally merged in the world in which one exists. There could be no over-inflation of an ego which expands and spreads forcibly over every other thing around.”<sup>20</sup>

In this context it is possible to take into account that Buddhism does not see any difference between oneself and nature and it conceives both as being interdependent. It is clearly pointed out by *Hajime Nakamura* “If a person is making an effort, in order to carry out Buddha’s instructions for guarding his senses, one must inflict a tremendous degree of violence upon one’s mind.”<sup>21</sup>

Now, we are moving at the threshold of our destruction and man is used to do much harm to the environment at the expense of even his life because of money. Economic development needs to be guided along lines that promote the health and wealth and the wellbeing of the social order without harming the natural system. Nature should be viewed as an integral part of the whole ecosystem within which human society is lodged. By pointing out that the vulgar chase of luxury and abundance is the root cause of suffering, Buddhism encourages restraint, contentment, and simplicity. As means for true happiness in the world, the Buddhist approach of moderation based on the middle way can provide a healing touch in times of severe ecological degradation. Greedy and egoism are the foremost causes of environmental destruction. Most of the ecological disasters occur due to the unending craving of humans.

The *Anguttara Nikāya* tells a story about the attitudes favoring a moderate and careful utilization of nature: The story of a banyan tree which was known for its lovely and cool shade. One day came a man who ate his fill of fruit, broke a branch, and went his way. The spirit who was dwelling in the tree thought that how amazing, how astonishing work of man. Suppose the tree were to bear no

more fruit. And the tree bore no more fruit. The *Udumbara Khādikā* method blamed by the Buddha, the method of shaking down an indiscriminate amount of fruit from a *figus glomerata* in order to eat a few, is precisely the same as the one employed in drift-net fishing, where many more animals are killed than utilized. Such a Buddhist strand can furnish a viable basis for ecological ethics including active protection and even restitution of ecosystems and thus peace not only with nature but also within nature.

The above story shows that when man becomes rampant about the environment, then the environment gives hazards to humans such as killer diseases heart ailments, cancer, diabetes and AIDS etc. In the final analysis, all these can be traced to man's moral deterioration. Buddhism offers man a simple moderate lifestyle eschewing both extremes of self-deprivation and self-indulgence, and satisfaction of basic human necessities, reduction of wants to the minimum. It is only when each man adopts a simple moderate lifestyle that mankind as a whole will stop polluting the environment. If people follow try to fallow the Buddhist precepts and doctrinal points in dealing with the environment a good environment to live in peace and harmony can be created.

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