

## A Brief Analysis on Buddhism and the Significance of the Natural Environment

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### Introduction

Buddhism is profoundly an ecological religion. It powerfully expresses human identification with nature. Buddhists believe that all things, including humans, exist by their interrelationship with all other parts of nature. To think of one's self as isolated from the rest of nature is being unrealistic. The awareness of protecting life and living environment has been generated in recent time. The Buddha manifested himself as the compassionate protector of all beings. The practice of loving-kindness and not to harm the life of any being with his perfect wisdom, he saw all beings in the universe were equal in nature, and in this phenomenal world, all human and animals were inter-related, mutually developed, and inseparable. Thus, when analyzing the Buddha's Dhamma, it is understood how important the environment has been considered by the Buddha.

### Buddhism and the Natural Environment

There has been a close connection between Buddhism and the natural environment from the time that bodhisattva prince Siddhartha was born under the blooming Sāla tree in the *Lumbini* Park. Another early story recounts the young prince accompanying his father king Sudhodana to the ploughing ceremony at the opening of the rainy season. The prince sat under a rose-apple tree and while concentrating on his breath attained the first meditative absorption (*Jhāna*) later, as a young man, the prince abandoned the palace and became a wandering

ascetic at the banks of the River Anomā.<sup>1</sup> He travelled to a mountainous and forest area and studied with the two famous teachers: *Ālāra Kālāma* and *Uddakarāmaputta*. Following this he practised austerities and meditation in *Urūvela* located by the river *Nerañjarā*. After his enlightenment he taught Dhamma to group of five disciples at the deer park in *Isipatana*. For forty-five years the Buddha travelled and taught Dhamma to people until the time he passed away in the *Sāla*-tree grove, a park in the kingdom of the Mallians.<sup>2</sup>

The reported connection between Buddhism and the natural environment is not accidental or insignificant; rather it is intentional and important. Places of natural abundance, especially those full of forests, rivers, birds, cicadas and flowers, are 'suitable abodes' (*patirūpadesa*), because they contain clear air which help remove toxins from the human body. These beneficial influences can be verified by science. Before attaining enlightenment as the Buddha, the bodhisattva developed the 'perfection' (*pāramitā*) for five hundred and forty-seven lifetimes - a time comprising 'one hundred thousand world cycles and four incalculable periods,' from his birth as a young man *Sumedha* until his birth as the prince Siddhartha. After all this time he was surely well aware of which places are suitable to live in - which places are suitable to practise Dhamma and develop the mind. For this reason, it is apparent that the important incidents in the Buddha's life occurred in natural environment.

There are many passages in *Tipiṭaka* describing the importance of the natural environment. The natural environment contains valuable resources. An example is when the bodhisattva as a tree-deva asked the Brahmin who is sweeping at the trunk of a tree: '*Brahmaṇa*, you know that this tree possesses no mind; it cannot hear and has no feelings. Then why do you make the effort and continually ask it about sleeping happily?'

the Brahmin replied: 'Large trees only grow in remote, tranquil places, and they are the dwelling places of devas. Because of the valuable natural resources, I respect this tree and its incumbent devas.' The tree deva confirmed these words by saying: 'at the foot of a large focus tree growing in front of the premises that is surrounded by a fence and formerly honored by people, there is a hidden treasure that belongs to no-one. Go and dig this treasure up'<sup>3</sup> although this story resembles a fable and lacks substantiating evidence, it still could be true.

The natural environment is sometimes a location providing medicinal plants. On one occasion, when the Buddha was residing at the Jeta grove near *Sāvatti* many monks suffered from fever and required medicinal roots. The Buddha said: 'Monks, I allow the use of medicinal roots-turmeric, ginger, sweet flag, arum, galangal, vetiver, nut grass, and other medicinal roots that are not considered food. When these medicines are offered, they can be kept for one's entire lifetime. If there is a necessity monk can consume these; if there is no necessity, there is a minor offense for consuming them.' The Buddha allowed other natural medicines, for example oils such as Neem-oil, leaves such as Neem leaves, and fruits such as Myrobalan. (*Vinaya Piṭaka Mahāvagga*) There are many such references in the Buddhist scriptures related to the natural environment. What do these texts teach us? They teach that the natural environment is a rich source of medicinal substance, which have tremendous value for human beings.<sup>4</sup> A closer examination reveals that various leaves, vines and plants, including mushrooms, have medicinal qualities without exception.

### Buddhist Contribution to the Environment

Followings are certain Buddhist suggestions to their communities more than a hundred years ago.

1. "Reducing meat consumption or becoming a vegetarian. This is an act of compassion and lessens one's impact on the depletion of resources. A kilo of beef needs some 100,000 liters of water against 750 liters for the production of a kilo of wheat.
2. Living simply. This puts into practice one's vows of ethical conduct without superfluous possessions.
3. Reducing one's use of plastic. We use plastic packaging for a few hours, sometimes even a few minutes, whereas it takes 500 years to degrade completely.
4. When offerings are made, adopt healthy solutions. Buy fruits rather than sweets plant flowers instead of cutting them.
5. Transform one's mind"<sup>5</sup>

The aim is to encourage the change of direction in the human race. This requires mobilization of ordinary citizens. A dominant minority does not impose a right direction. For this, much greater awareness is necessary, putting essential emphasis on the role of education.

### Buddhist Teachings in Protection of Environment

Those who do not have right vision towards the environment will behave in a manner that is destructive to the environment. In the biological environment, there are plants that produce seeds from the roots, from the trunk, from the stem, from tender leaves and from within seeds.<sup>6</sup> According to Dhamma one should avoid destroying such plants and it is considered a virtuous-practice of the person who has right view. "*mūlabījaṃ, khandhabījaṃ, phulubījaṃ, aggabījaṃ, bījameva pañcamaṃ iti vā iti evarūpā bījāgamā bhūtagāma samārādhā paṭivirato hoti...*"<sup>7</sup> from the above example one must understand that. Just because someone

has knowledge of science, it does not mean that the environment will be protected by that person. Together with the knowledge of the facts a person should also be sensitive towards environment through the knowledge of Dhamma.<sup>8</sup>

Everything in the world and everyone in the world are interconnected in the same manner. This is a co-operation to keep the world out of complications. The *Milindapañha*, mentions what a tree can give a man.<sup>9</sup>

1. "It gives fruits and flowers for the benefit of human beings without expecting anything.<sup>10</sup> This is the most important contribution of a tree.

2. The tree provides its shadow to anyone who approaches it for resting. Therefore, human being should have such gratitude towards trees. We should not break even a branch of the tree which we already got some benefit. If one breaks, he is considered as treacherous one.<sup>11</sup>

3. The tree provides its shadow to anyone who approaches it without any discrimination, even to a person who comes with an idea of cutting it".

This is what we receive from a tree in this world. However, in turn people do not do much to protect trees. The jungles are the places that people find to be useful. There are jungles that are so naturally beautiful which normal persons cannot appreciate.<sup>12</sup> The prince Siddharatha chose the jungle to meditate. Even after he became the Buddha, he never forgot to mention the above idea to his disciples. This evidence proves the significance of natural environment.

The Buddha praised the natural environment in *Ariyapariyesana sutta*. "I considered: this is an agreeable piece

of ground; this is a delightful grove with a clear flowing river with pleasant, smooth banks and nearly a village for alms resort. This will serve for the striving of a clansman intent on striving" and I sat down there thinking: 'this will serve for striving'.<sup>13</sup>

Concerning the Buddhist ethical teachings of the environment, it mentions not to pollute the green grass and pure water. According to *Pācittiyapāḷi* using the green grass as toilets and dropping garbage are prohibited. If any monk commits so it is considered as an offence. There are several rules concerning the environment. Using rivers as toilets or spitting on water is also prohibited.<sup>14</sup>

Love and care towards the animal world are thoroughly recommended in Buddhism. It includes the human and all animals. When one gives up killing living beings, give up arms and looks at every living being in a humanitarian way. It becomes the morality of that particular person. 'Abandoning the taking of life, he dwells refraining from taking life, without stick or sword, scrupulous, compassionate, compassionate, trembling for the welfare of all living beings.'<sup>15</sup>

In Buddhism, it is considered that protecting and safeguarding nature as a responsibility of a government. In the *Cakkavattisīhanāda sutta*, it is said as follows: "Yourself depending on the Dhamma, honoring it, reverting it, cherishing it, doing homage to it and venerating it, having the Dhamma as your badge and banner, acknowledging the Dhamma as your master, you should establish guard, ward and protection according to Dhamma..." The group of discourses preached to deities or *Devatāsaṃyutta* in *Samyuttanikāya* examines how the human beings can contribute the environment with enacting some activities. As depicted, it grows gardens and forests can be regarded as appraisable functions. The Buddha teaches us to

show proper respect to environment with a sense of gratitude. He therefore, realized the importance of trees and advises not to cut or even pluck a leaf, as the shadow of a tree is also good for humans.<sup>18</sup>

The Buddha's concern for preservation of green trees is not because we are directly benefited from them, and we should therefore be grateful to them, but it expresses the sense of love and kindness towards all beings including flora.

Early disciples of the Buddha adhered to such ideas by resorting to solitude and living with a loving mind for practising concentration and further spiritual advancements. *Sankicca thera* expresses his feelings by saying that he has lived in the forests, in caves surrounded by fierce animals, but he never neither thought of harming them in any way nor did they tried to harm him. There are numerous instances of seers undergoing severe penance by living in the dense forests full of fierce animals and poisonous reptiles, but nothing wrong happens to them.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever has been discussed above highlights what we can learn from the past. As ecological changes and environmental pollution is problem of modern times, we should think over the possible solutions in the light of teachings of Buddha. While talking of activism, we have first to understand, comprehend and realize the deeper meaning of the Buddha's concern to the environment and its balance; and then to act upon. Environmental protection is not important for recluses only, but even to the common people in their day to day lives. Clean and pure oxygen are not only necessary for the homeless recluses but also to the ordinary people and other beings. If the huge mammals and giant creatures got fossilized due to sudden fall in the temperature; global warming could kill future generations of living beings. Therefore, Buddhist activist ought to be serious about his safety of his surroundings and environment as a whole.

### Modern Environmental Problem and Buddhism

How can Buddhism contribute to solve the problems present era's? Gautama Buddha in particular was known for preaching problem - solving sermons, such as prescribing medicines that suits illnesses. At present, Buddhists also need to gather our courage and use brains to deal with the problems that beset us in our present era.

The weightiest and most serious of these modern problems are environmental issues. The major environmental changes that have been occurring on a global scale since the twentieth century are posing the ability of the earth's environment to support humankind. Issues of energy and resources; environmental pollution; food and water insecurity; climate change; disappearing of plants and animals; pollution and conflicts have acquired a scale that our ancestors never had to deal with. Environmental problems are also serious because there is no external enemy for us to rally together and fight. The main cause of environmental change has been changes in human behavior, lifestyle and sense of values – the mankind has been the number-one offenders in bringing about these awful problems. However, if we just ignore these problems because we find it hard to deal with, they will simply get a lot worse. If we think about it, we can see that because we are the ones who caused the problems, we should be able to overcome these difficulties, reflect on our action and reform them in such a way as to resolve the problems. There is plenty of room in this process for Buddhism to make a contribution.

“Do not commit what is evil. Do what is good

Keep your mind pure. This is the teaching of Buddha's.”<sup>20</sup>

The teaching above is one of the most important essences

of Buddhism. What things do we do for the environment, and how can we purify our hearts? The time has come for every person to think about this and take action. Without actions based on sincere self-reflection, it will not matter how advanced environmental technologies become, or what environmental policies are been adopted, because such things cannot bring about a fundamental solution to environmental problems. The consideration is clear that Buddhism can be a good philosophy or an effective indicator for the environmental problems, and also can give us the “vision”, which is more important than the Law, natural science or technology.

### Conclusion

According to the aforementioned facts everyone can apprehend the vital role of Buddhist teachings in preserving a balanced environment.<sup>21</sup> A person who enacts in ethical way does not destroy the shelter-providing branch of a tree. In fact, it is needless to explain in detail that in a Buddhist perspective such kind of ethical teaching yields the utmost benefit for both individual and for the society. The beauty of nature is the visual object that can be used to practice concentration and way of gaining the ultimate truth – what Buddhists expect in their religious life. Human beings are unable to separate themselves from nature because they depend on air, water and food which are given by nature. This connection shows the significance of interrelation between human beings and the environment. Concerning all of the above factors, it is noticeable that the Buddha promoted a great eco-philosophy among people as an ethical concept towards improving the environment.

### End Notes

1. “*Ramaṇīyo esa bhūmibhāgo pāsādiko ca vaṇasaṇḍo naḍīca sansandati, setakā suppatiṭṭhā ramaṇīyā.*” *Majjhima Nikāya, Ariyapariyesana*

*Sutta*, CSCD.

2. Phra Sigambhiranyana, (2011). p.518.
3. Jātaka Tales, Vol. I.
4. Piyaratana, W., Wimalajothi, M. (2016), p. 132.
5. Joseph Serra, (2011). pp. 468-469.
6. Piyaratana, W. (2011). p. 481.
7. Dīghanikāya I, (1982). p. 6.
8. Piyaratana, W. (2011). p. 480.
9. Milindapañha, (1969). Ed. Rhys Davids, T.W., Oxford: Pali Text Society, p. 409.
10. ‘*Rukkho nāma pupphaphaladharo.*’ *Milindapañho*, (1969). p. 409.
11. “*Rukkho upagatamanupaviṭṭhānaṃ chāyā deti*”. Petavatthupāli, (1977). p. 54.
12. “*Ramaṇīyāni araṇṇāni yattha na ramatī jano*  
*Vītarāga ramesanti na te kāmagavesino*” *Dhammapada*, (1995). p. 99.
13. The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha, (1995). p. 114.
14. “*Na uduke uccāraṃ vā passāvaṃ vā khelaṃ vā karissāmīti sikkhā karamāyā.*” *pācittiyapāli*, CSCD.
15. The Long Discourse of the Buddha, (1982). p. 44.
16. The Long Discourse of the Buddha, (1982). p. 44.
17. “*Arāmaropā vanaropā ye janā setukārakā*  
*Pāpañca udapānañ ca ye dadanti upassayaṃ*  
*Tesaṃ divā ca ratto ca sadā puññaṃ pavaḍḍati*” *Samyuttanikāya I*, (1996). p. 33.
18. Yassa rukkassa chāyāya, nisideyya sayeyya vā  
*Na tassa sākhaṃ bhañjeyya, mittadubbho hi pāpako.*  
*Yassa rukkassa chāyāya, nisideyya sayeyya vā*  
*Khandhaṃ pi tassa chindeyya, atto ce tādiso siyā ti.*  
*Yassa rukkassa chāyāya, nisideyya sayeyya vā*  
*Na tassa pattaṃ bhindeyya, mittadubbho hi pāpako.*

- Yassa rukkassa chāyāya, nisideyya sayeyya vā*  
*Samūlaṃ pi taṃ abbhute, atto ce tādiso siyā' ti.*” *Petavatthupāli*, (1977).  
 p. 54.
19. “*Vasitaṃ me araññesu, kandarāsu guhāsu ca*  
*Senāsanesu pantesu, vālāṃiganisevite*  
*Ime haññantu vijjhantu, dukkhaṃ pappontu pāṇino*  
*sāṅkappaṃ nābhijānāmi, anariyaṃ dosasaṃhitam*” *Teragāthā, CSCD*.
20. “*Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ kusalassa upasampadā*  
*Sacittapariyodapanam etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ*” *Dhammapada*, (1995).  
 p. 183.
21. Wimalajothi, M. (2015), p. 142

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