

# BUDDHIST SCRIPTURAL STUDIES ON THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

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by Phra Rajapariyatkavi\*

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## 1. BUDDHISM AND THE VALUE OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

There has been a close connection between Buddhism and the natural environment for example:

i. Prince Siddhartha was born under the blossoming Sāla tree in Lumbini Park.

ii. Prince Siddhartha sat under a rose-apple tree and while concentrating on his breath attained the first meditative absorption (*jhāna*).

iii. Prince Siddhartha abandoned the palace and became a wandering ascetic at the banks of the River Anomā.

iv. He practiced austerities and meditation in the Uruvelā locality by the river Nerañjarā.

v. He taught the Dhamma to the group of five disciples at the Deer Park in Isipatana, near Banaras.

vi. He passed away in the Sāla-tree grove, a park in the kingdom of the Mallians, Kusinara.

Natural environment contains valuable resources and animals. Once upon a time when the bodhisattva as a tree-deva asks the brahman who is sweeping at the trunk of a tree: 'Brahman, you know that this tree possesses no mind; it cannot hear and has no

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\*. Prof. Dr., Rector, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University MCU, Pahonyothin Road, Wang Nio Ayutthaya, Thailand.

feelings. Why then do you make the effort and continually ask it about sleeping happily?’

The Brahman replied: ‘Large trees are the dwelling places of devas. Because of the valuable natural resources I pay respects to this tree and its incumbent devas.’ The tree-deva confirmed these words by saying: ‘There is a hidden treasure that belongs to no-one. Go and dig this treasure up.’

The natural environment is also a location providing medicinal plants. The Buddha allowed the monks to use of medicinal roots—turmeric, ginger, sweet flag, arum, galangal, vetiver, nut grass, and other medicinal roots.

At one time the physician Jivaka-Komārabhacca studied medicine-subjects at Takkasilā for seven years. He was able to remember all that he learned but the studies never came to an end so he went to his teacher and asked: ‘When will my studies come to an end?’

His teacher replied: ‘Jivaka, you walked around the city of Takkasilā at a radius of ten miles and bring back anything which is not medicine.’

Jivaka did as his teacher suggested, but he could not find anything that can’t be used as medicine. He returned to his teacher and said: ‘I could not find anything that cannot be used as medicine.’

His teacher answered: ‘Jivaka, your studies are over. With this much knowledge you can make a living.’

## 2. GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

The description of Vessantara’s hermitage by Mount Gadhamādāna. This hermitage was surrounded by abundant natural resources, both animate and inanimate. The environment as described here can be divided into different categories:<sup>5</sup>

**2.1. Fruits:** Surrounding the hermitage were many fruit trees - mango, wood apple, jackfruit, bodhi trees, red meranti, rose apple, myrobalan, Indian gooseberry, jujube, persimmon, banyan, and fig...

**2.2. Flowers:** In the hermitage there were many flowering trees: *Wrightia*, *kutaja*, nutmeg, mangrove trumpet tree, ironwood,

Albizia, golden-shower tree, ebony, eagle wood, crown flower, banyan, looking-glass mangrove, padauk, pine, kadamba, sky-flower, crape myrtle, mimosa, and red meranti, ...

**2.3. The Lotus Pond with Aquatic Plants and Animals:** Near the hermitage in a delightful area was a lotus pond full of lotuses, resembling the lotus pond in the heavenly garden of Nandavana. The pond contained three kinds of beautiful lotuses: green, white and red.

**2.4. Birds:** Many multi-colored birds lived near the hermitage. They played with their mates, singing and vying with one another with their cries. Four flocks of birds lived near the lotus pond: nandikā birds, jivaputtā birds, puttāpiyācano birds, and piyaputtāpiyānandā birds. The songs of the flitting birds in the trees was like divine music, ...

**2.5. Four-legged Creatures:** Many animals lived in the forest including lions, tigers, donkey-faced yakkhas, elephants, hog-deer, muntjak, brow-antlered deer, palm civet, fox, wild dog, flying lemur, squirrel, yak, gibbons, slow loris, langur, and monkeys. By the lake there lived many sambar, gaur, bear, buffalo, rhinoceros, boar, mongoose and cobra.

### 3. MONASTERY ENVIRONMENT

One day King Bimbisāra of Magadha thought: ‘Where should the Buddha reside? Having had this thought, King Bimbisāra offered the Veluvana Grove to the Buddha to use as a monastery residence. It was located at the base of Mount Vebhāra. An important attribute of Veluvana was its adjacency to the River Sarasvati. Originally it was a royal park belonging to King Bimbisāra and it was a delightful place full of natural beauty.

Here is a description of Veluvana Monastery:

*‘Whoever has not seen the delightful and magnificent Veluvana, the residence of the Well-Farer and the community of noble disciples, is one who has never seen the Grove of Bliss. Someone who has seen the magnificent Veluvana, considered to be a grove of bliss—a place of rejoicing for human beings, has seen the Grove of Bliss belonging to Sakka king of the gods. The gods abandon the Grove of Bliss and come*

*to the world of humans to admire the magnificent Veluvana, finding uninterrupted delight.*

From the time of the Buddha till the present day, names of monasteries usually end with the word *ārāma*, e.g.: Veluvanārāma, Jetavanārāma, Ghositārāma, Nigrodhārāma, and Wat Beñjamaborpitradusitavanārāma. The word *ārāma* originally meant ‘pleasure park.’ Usually these parks already possessed a rich natural environment, with trees, streams, and numerous flowers. When the land was designated as a monastery, it was further developed as a place of peace and therefore the term *ārāma* was preserved.

#### 4. THE SURROUNDINGS OF PLACES FOR DHAMMA PRACTICE

There is ample evidence for the connection between Dhamma practice and the natural environment. When people seek a quiet place to practice meditation they usually think of forests, trees, mountains and rivers. An example of the connection between practice and the environment is found in the Buddha’s teaching on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, sensations, the states of mind, and mindobjects.

In the context of mindfulness of the body, the Buddha advised: ‘Here a monk, having gone into the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down crosslegged, holding his body erect, having established mindfulness before him.’ There are many other examples of this connection, for example the subject of ascetic practices (*dhutanga*), which are undertaken to subdue the defilements. The Buddha established ways of practice for monks to subdue the mental defilements, which include direct references to the natural environment:

The eighth *dhutanga* is called the ‘observance of living in the forest’ (*āraññikanga*), which means that a monk vows to not stay in a residence (‘a building for sitting or sleeping’) near a house or village, but remains at least 600 meters away. The reason for stipulating that someone who wishes to subdue the defilements live in the forest is that the forest is conducive to this task: this natural environment promotes well-established concentration, helps to prevent the disturbances from sensual impingement, dispels fear, reduces the attachment to life, and offers a taste of seclusion. The

ninth dhutanga is called the ‘observance of living at the root of a tree’ (*rukhamulikanga*), which means a monk lives under a tree and does not live in a place covered with a roof.

The eleventh dhutanga is called the ‘observance of staying in a cemetery’ (*sosānikanga*), which means a monk determines to constantly stay in a cemetery overnight.

There are criteria in the Buddhist texts specifying which places are suitable and unsuitable for Dhamma practice. The most suitable place to develop concentration is the place where one’s teacher resides. But if this place is inconvenient for some reason, then one should choose a place that is suitable for practice and avoid the following eighteen ‘disadvantageous’ places: (i) a congested place; (ii) a new place; (iii) an old place; (iv) a place next to a road; (v) a quarry; (vi) a recreational park; (vii) a flower farm; (viii) a fruit farm; (ix) a place with much traffic; (x) a place next to a town; (xi) a place next to a commercial forest; (xii) a place next to rice paddies; (xiii) a place where people of conflicting interests live; (xiv) a place next to a pier; (xv) an overly remote place; (xvi) a border area; (xvii) a place ‘not conducive to well-being’; (xviii) a place without ‘good friends.’ One can see that in most of these disadvantageous places there is potentially a destruction of the natural environment, for example populated places near a town or in developed agricultural areas.

A meditator should choose a place with the following five characteristics: (i) neither not too far nor not too near inhabited areas; a place that can be reached without too much difficulty; (ii) a place not busy during the day and not noisy at night; (iii) a place without too many insects and bothersome animals and without too much wind or sun; (iv) a place where it is not too difficult to acquire the ‘four requisites’; (v) a place where learned elders live of whom one can ask questions in time of doubt.

## 5. ATTITUDE TOWARD THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Although trees do not possess consciousness (as this term is understood by human beings), they possess a principle of maintaining life similar to human beings. This principle is called the ‘nature (or truth) of a tree’ (*rukka-dhamma*), as mentioned by the bodhisattva when he conversed with the devas: ‘The more

relatives a person has, the better. Even for trees in the forest: the more trees the better. A lone tree, although standing tall, can be snapped by the wind.’ The nature of a tree is similar to the life of all sentient creatures: a tree is born, it grows, and it dies, and it returns to the earth to resume this cycle of life and death.

For this reason the Buddhist texts encourage people to be considerate of all plant life. The Buddha laid down a training rule for the bhikkhus, requiring that they stop traveling for the three months of the rainy season and stay in one place. This training rule contains an important issue in relation to nature conservation: the rainy season is the time when plants begin to sprout and grow, and small animals propagate. If the bhikkhus were to wander through the woods and mountains during this time, they might step on and destroy the young saplings and unintentionally kill the small animals, as confirmed by the people’s criticism at the time of the Buddha: ‘Why is it that the ascetics, the sons of the Sakyans, wander about during the cold season, the hot season, and the rainy season, trampling on the green grass, injuring single-faculty life forms, and destroying many small creatures?’ As a consequence, the Buddha instructed the bhikkhus to stay in one place for the three months of the rainy season. In the monks’ book of discipline (*Vinaya Pitaka*), there are at least two sections addressing concern for the natural environment. For example, in the section on plants (*Bhūtagāma-vagga*) it states:

It is forbidden for a monk to damage (cut or sever) plant life. If a monk disobeys this rule he must confess a transgression of this training rule. The first rule in this section states: ‘A bhikkhu commits an offense of expiation as a consequence of destroying plant life.’

It is forbidden for a monk to pour water that contains living creatures onto plants or the ground. A monk who disobeys this rule transgresses the tenth training rule (‘containing animate beings’): ‘A bhikkhu who knows that water contains living creatures and pours or asks another to pour onto plants or earth commits an offense of expiation.’

In the section on minor training rules (*sekhiya-vatta*), there is a rule that takes into consideration the natural environment by

forbidding a monk to urinate, defecate or spit on green plants or into water. A monk who disobeys this rule commits an offense of wrongdoing: ‘One should observe the training rule that unless one is ill one should not defecate, urinate or spit on green plants,’ and ‘one should observe the training rule that unless one is ill one should not defecate, urinate, or spit into water.’

In another text there is a Buddhist saying expressing concern for the natural environment: ‘A person sitting or lying under the shade of a tree should not break off the branches from this tree, because a person who harms a friend is a bad person.’

Although people might think that trees and other plants have no consciousness, they should still be grateful to such plants, like the red-breasted parakeet who felt gratitude towards the tree that had provided it with nourishing fruits and flowers. Sakka, the king of the gods, asked the parakeet: ‘These other trees have fresh, verdant leaves and abundant fruit. Why does the parakeet’s delight in this dry, hollow tree not diminish?’

The parakeet replied: ‘The fruits of this tree sustained me for many years. Although I know it now bears no fruit, I still maintain the friendship as before. A bird who seeks fruit and abandons the tree because it is barren, is selfish and foolish, destroying his companions.’

## 6. CONCLUSION

There are numerous passages in the Buddhist texts referring to the natural environment, demonstrating the connection between human beings and nature, and conforming to the framework of Dependent Origination.

There are numerous references in the texts to the natural environment and to the relationship between human beings and other living creature.

When we speak of a modern, developed and technologically advanced city, we tend to think of skyscrapers, modern office buildings, superhighways, automobiles, and bustling people. Modern cities in the Buddhist texts, however, are described in a very different fashion. For an example let us look at the description

of Vesālī, which is described as a model modern city: ‘The city of Vesālī is bountiful, covering a wide territory, with many residents, highly populated, in which it is easy to find food, containing 7,707 palaces, 7,707 high-roofed houses, 7,707 pleasure gardens, and 7,707 lotus ponds’.

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