

BUDDHIST ENVIRONMENTALISM: AN APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist Environmentalism is a form of "religious environmentalism", which involves the conscious application of religious ideas to modern concerns about the global environment. Religious environmentalism is a post-materialist environmental philosophy that emerged from the West and has its roots in the eighteenth century European "Romantic Movement" (Tomalin 2004, p. 265-295). Religious environmentalism in Buddhism finds support in the belief that it is intrinsically environment friendly and by relating religious environmentalism with Buddhist environmentalism, we can strive towards sustainable development and human flourishing.

Environmental research is a relatively new area of study that became popular with the awareness of environmental degradation and the fact that natural resources were rapidly diminishing due to unsustainable overuse by human beings. Religion being a primary source of values in any culture; has direct implications in the decisions human make regarding the environment. Thus, religion can be used in seeking a comprehensive solution to environmental problems. This is true in the case of Buddhism; one of the earliest eastern religious traditions in the world. This paper deals with environmental perspectives in early Buddhism and relates it to 'religious environmentalism' in order to show that it is the correct approach for sustainable development.

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One of the greatest threats that we as human beings face in the present world is the threat of environmental degradation and dwindling of natural resources such as forests, water resources, mineral resources etc. In order to come up with sustainable practices so as to save the planet and its resources for the future generations' one definite recourse is to depend on the environmental teachings of the Buddha.

This paper deals with environmental perspectives in early Buddhism and relates it to 'religious environmentalism' as a response to environmental degradation so as to secure a sustainable approach for development. This study is based on the canonical texts of early Buddhism like the *Vinaya Pitaka* and *Sutta Pitaka*. Religious environmentalism involves the conscious application of religious ideas to modern concerns about the global environment. It is a post-materialist environmental philosophy that emerged from the West and has its roots in the eighteenth century European "Romantic Movement" (Tomalin 2004). Religious environmentalism in Buddhism finds support in the belief that it is intrinsically environment friendly.

Early Buddhist literature is replete with aesthetic descriptions of nature-based metaphors, similes and analogies. The importance of nature can be understood from the elaborate descriptions and allusions of plants, animals, forests, sacred groves, pleasure groves, hermitage, hunting grounds, meditative enclosure and agricultural spaces.

Buddhism believes in the reciprocal relationship between human morality and the natural environment. There are references suggesting that when lust, greed and wrong values grip the heart of humanity, immorality becomes widespread in the society, timely rain does not fall and the crops fall victim to pests and plant diseases [AN. I, 147].

The references to nature in the early Buddhist texts suggest that nature was the most important entity in the lives of the people when these texts were being composed. We find aesthetic description of nature and nature - based metaphors and analogies in the texts. They include evocative scenes of sermons and meditations under trees, in groves, deep forests, caves and on rocks. Most of the scenes

described in the stories have nature as the background the stories are always narrated by the Buddha amid natural surroundings like the bamboo groves or pleasure groves, surrounded by plants and trees. Numerous references in the early Buddhist texts suggest that plants and animals were to be treated with respect and kindness.

The attitude of early Buddhism towards animals and plants can be understood from the well known Five Precepts (*Panca Sila*) of Buddhism, which forms the minimum code of ethics in Buddhism and proves that the traditional ideal was one of harmony with nature and a friendly attitude towards the environment.

The first precept was “not taking life” or “not killing or harming” or “non-injury to life” and was explained as the casting aside of all forms of weapons and being careful not to deprive a living thing of life. Buddhism holds fundamental the precept of not taking life, hence the treatment of animals is included in the first Buddhist precept – not to harm or injure living things (*pranatiapatadvirati*). The Buddhist monks and nuns had to abstain from practices which would even unintentionally harm living creatures. There is a reference in the *Vinaya Pitaka* where the Buddha made a rule against travelling during the rainy season because of possible injury to worms and insects that come to the surface in wet weather (VP I. 137).

The second precept: refrain from taking what is not given/ “not stealing,” engages global trade ethics and corporate exploitation of resources. The third precept is refrain from sexual misconduct. The fourth precept of “not lying,” may be connected with the issues in false advertising that promote consumerism. The fifth precept of refrain from carelessness and “not engaging in abusive relations,” can be interpreted through an environmental lens and can cover many examples of cruelty and disrespect for nonhuman beings.

According to Kaza (2006, p.191) non-harming extends to all beings and this central teaching of non-harming is congruent with many schools of eco-philosophy which respect the intrinsic value and capacity for experience of each being.

Buddhist ideal of non-harming extended to all sentient beings. The Buddha is also described as having avoided harm to seeds and

plants. It was an offence requiring expiation for a monk to fell a tree or to ask someone else to do so (VP. IV.34—5). Here, the occasion for making the rule was that a god who had lived in a felled tree complained to the Buddha. In addition, lay people complained that Buddhist monks, in felling trees, were ‘harming life that is one-facultied’ (*ekindriyajiva*): i.e. only possessing the sense of touch. The Buddha thus banned the destruction of ‘vegetable growths’ by monks. Indeed, the rule against monks wandering during the rainy season was made to avoid people’s accusations that Buddhist monks were ‘injuring life that is one-facultied and bringing many small creatures to destruction’ by trampling growing crops and grasses (VP. I.137).

According to Chapple (1993, p.10) early Buddhism was strongly influenced by the Upanishadic principle of *ahimsa* or non-harming—a core foundation for environmental concern. In its broadest sense non-harming means “the absence of the desire to kill or harm”. Acts of injury or violence are to be avoided because they are thought to result in future injury to oneself.

In Buddhism the fourth Noble Truth describes the path to end suffering of attachment and desire through the practice of the Eightfold path. One of the eight practice spokes is Right Conduct, which is based on the principle of non-harming. The Four Noble Truths explains the nature of human suffering as generated by desire and attachment. The medicine for such suffering is the practice of compassion (*karuna*) and loving kindness (*metta*).

The early Indian *Jataka* Tales recount the many former lives of the Buddha as an animal or tree when he showed compassion to others who were suffering. In each of the tales the Buddha-to-be sets a strong moral example of compassion for plants and animals.

The first guidelines for monks in the *Vinaya* contained a number of admonitions related to caring for the environment. Monks were not to dig in the ground or drink unstrained water. Wild animals were to be treated with kindness. Plants too were not to be injured carelessly but respected for all that they give to people.

There were instructions to monks to recycle old robes (VP. II. 291). Cleanliness, both in the person and environment, was highly

commended. Several rules prohibited monks from polluting green grass and water with saliva, urine and faeces (VP. IV, 205-206) and there was the ideal of having a quiet environment (AN. V.15).

The Eightfold path of Buddhism also includes the practice of Right View, or understanding the laws of causality (*karma*) and interdependence.

The Buddhist worldview in early India understood there to be six rebirth realms: *devas*, *asuras* (both god realms), humans, ghosts, animals and hell beings. To be reborn as an animal would mean one had declined in moral virtue. By not causing harm to others, one would enhance one's future rebirths into higher realms. In this sense, the law of *karma* was used as a motivating force for good behaviour, including paying respect to all life.

In the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the Buddha asks monks not to intentionally destroy life of any living being down to a worm or an ant (VP. I.78.4) so the indicator of the Buddhist commitment to the ethic of not injuring life forms is found in the abundant references to animals in the teachings of the Buddha.

There is a Buddhist belief that humans have a unique opportunity to realize enlightenment which other creatures do not, although they do not believe that humanity is superior to the rest of the world. Unlike the Vedic texts which regard animals as tools for human sustenance or sacrifice, the early Buddhist literature accords them an important place in the hierarchy of life. The importance of animals can be seen in the *Jataka* stories of the Buddha's former lives. The Buddha is said to have had several births as animals before he was born as human being. Buddhism considers animals as potential humans and as beings that can teach humans some moral lessons. From the 550 *Jataka* stories, a full half of them 225 have animals as central characters. Seventy different types of animals are mentioned and 319 animals or groups of animals appear in these 225 stories.

In the monastic code of discipline, it was an offence requiring expiation if an animal was intentionally killed (VP. IV. I24—5). An offence requiring expiation was committed if a monk used water while knowing that it contained breathing creatures (VP. IV.I

25); to avoid this, a water-strainer was part of the traditional kit of a monk (VP. II.I 18); it was an offence to sprinkle water on the ground if there were living creatures there that would be harmed by this action (VP. IV. 48—9).

The Buddha was critical of the practice of animal sacrifice, both because of the cruelty involved and because it did not bring about the objectives that the Brahmins hoped for. In the *Kutadanta Sutta* (DN.I.127—49), the Buddha describes a sacrifice which he had himself conducted for a king in a past life where no animals were killed, no trees were felled and the only offerings were items such as butter and honey (DN. I.141).

Besides sacrifices, the main reason for killing animals was to provide food. Although the Buddha discouraged killings, he did not propagate vegetarianism. The position on meat eating in early Buddhism was that a monk could eat meat provided it is ‘pure in three respects’: if the monk has not seen, heard or suspected that the animal has been killed specifically for him (VP. I. 237—8). Elsewhere, the Buddha explains that a monk receives food as a gift from a donor, and his loving kindness for donors and other creatures is not compromised by such eating, if it is ‘blameless’ by being ‘pure in three respects’ (MN. I. 386—71). If they were given flesh-food, and it was ‘pure’ as described above, to refuse it would deprive the donor of the karmic fruitfulness engendered by giving alms-food. Moreover, it would encourage the monks to pick and choose what food they would eat.

A lay Buddhist was not to kill an animal for food, or tell someone else to do so. One passage (AN. II.253) states that a person would be reborn in hell if he kills and encourages others to do so. Hence, to make one’s living as a butcher, hunter or fisherman came under the category of ‘wrong livelihood’ (AN. II.208), to be avoided by all sincere Buddhists. A third element of the Eightfold path, ‘Right Livelihood’, concerns how one makes a living or supports oneself. The early canonical teachings indicate that the Buddha prohibited five livelihoods: trading in slaves, trading in weapons, selling alcohol, selling poisons and slaughtering animals.

A king, besides being the protector of his subjects, was also

expected to protect animals so one of the duties of a compassionate *Cakkavatti* (King) was to protect animals and birds (DN. III.61). There are stories wherein if a king and his people acted unrighteously, it had a bad effect on the environment and its gods, leading to little rain, poor crops and weak, short-lived people (AN. II.74—6). The *Cakkavattisihanāda-sutta* states that when humanity is deteriorated or demoralized through greed, famine is the natural outcome; when moral degeneration is due to ignorance, epidemic is the inevitable result; when hatred is the demoralizing force, widespread violence is the ultimate outcome and so on [DN. III, 71]. The point of the *sutta* is to show that environmental health is bound up with human morality.

In the earliest Buddhist *suttas* there are many references to nature as refuge, especially trees and caves. Peter Harvey (2000, p.156) writes that ‘the Buddha’s own association with and appreciation of such surroundings can be seen from the location of key events during his life. He was born under one tree, was enlightened under another, gave his first sermon in an animal park, and died between two trees.’ After the Buddha achieved enlightenment at the foot of a *bodhi* tree, for the remainder of his life, he taught large gatherings of monks and laypeople in protected groves of trees that served as rainy-season retreat centres for his followers. The Buddha urged his followers to choose natural places for meditation, free from the influence of everyday human activity. Early Buddhists developed a reverential attitude toward large trees, carrying on the Indian tradition regarding *vanaspati* or “lords of the forests.” Protecting trees and preserving open lands were considered meritorious deeds. While communal monastic life was always important in Buddhism, time alone in the forests and mountains was also very important. It was an opportunity for developing certain qualities. It is believed that time in the company of animals and nature could aid spiritual development. Forests were ideal spaces for meditation, and we find references like ‘these are roots of trees, these are empty places. Meditate, monks.’ (MN. I.118). “For lay people forests may not be so inviting, but there is karmic fruitfulness in planting groves and fruit-trees for human use” (SN. I.33).

Besides the early Buddhist canonical text, we can also observe

environmental concerns in the policy of *dhamma* propounded and propagated by the Mauryan monarch Ashoka. Buddhist tradition considers him as an exemplary king and a devout *upasaka* (lay follower) who redistributed the relics of the Buddha and enshrined them in 84,000 *stupas*. Buddhist texts present Ashoka as a vile and evil man until he came under the influence of Buddhism. Ashoka has been credited with the introduction of his policy of *dhamma* and most of his inscriptions are about *dhamma* (the Prakrit form of *dharma*). *Dhamma* was in essence an attempt on the part of the king to suggest a way of life which was both practical and convenient, as well as being highly moral. The theme of *ahimsa* (non-injury) is an important aspect of Ashoka's *dhamma* and is frequently mentioned. Ashoka's rock edict 1 announces bans on animal sacrifices on certain kinds of festive gatherings and also reports a reduction in the killing of animals for food in the royal kitchens. This may have been no more than a desire on his part to make his own belief in non-violence wide-spread. The hints against useless practices in other edicts, and the prohibition of festive gatherings would suggest that he did not approve of the type of ritual that led finally to the sacrificing of animals. The ceremony of *dhamma* is described as consisting in proper courtesy to slaves and servants, respectful behaviour towards elders, restraint in one's dealings with all living beings, gentleness to animals and liberality to *shramanas* and *Brahmanas*. Another important aspect of Ashoka's *dhamma* was that he refers to having made provisions for medical treatment, planting beneficial medicinal herbs, and digging wells: all these things were done for the benefit of people as well as animals. One of the most remarkable and innovative aspects of Ashoka's idea of his own *dhamma* and the *dhamma* of a king was his renunciation of warfare and his re-definition of righteous conquest. Ashoka's policy of *dhamma* can thus be interpreted as a reflection of his Buddhist beliefs and the environmental ethics in Buddhism. This example of how a king of early India got influenced by the environmental ethics in Buddhism and tried to propagate it as a way of life to his subjects can be used to incorporate Buddhist environmental teachings in the present day discourse about environmental protection and conservation.

The research and writings on environmental issues basically

arose because of the stark realization of the environmental crisis that we as human beings face, and the conflicts which they have led to.

Scholars have resorted to theories of religious environmentalism to research on these issues. Religious Environmentalism is a worldwide movement of political, social, ecological and cultural action. It is a global phenomenon, involving members of virtually every religious group, race, and culture on the planet. Religious environmentalism is both rooted in tradition and a creative transformation called forth to meet the demands of the environmental crisis. Religion has a particularly important role to play in environmentalism because of its distinct capacity to motivate (Gottlieb 2006, pp. 467—509).

Religion can be used in seeking a comprehensive solution to both global and local environmental problems, thus religious environmentalists have connected religious ideal and practices with environmental concerns. Once focused on the environmental crisis, the resources of religion have a distinct and enormously valuable role to play in trying to turn things around. According to the theories of religious environmentalism, the attitudes and values that shape people's concepts of nature come primarily from religious worldviews and ethical practices, hence, the moral imperative and value systems of religions are indispensable in mobilizing the sensibilities of people toward preserving the environment for future generations.

From the mid 1970's onwards a curiosity to understand environmental issues in Buddhism began to develop and thereafter a considerable quantity of research dedicated to the subject has been undertaken and literary works supporting or disputing Buddhist environmentalism have appeared. This research area has grown at a pace coinciding with dawning awareness of the negative impact of large scale environmental devastation and the need to address it (Sahni, 2008, pp. 8—9). As a major world religion, Buddhism has a long and rich history of responding to human needs. With the rise of the religion and ecology movement, Buddhist scholars, teachers, and practitioners have investigated the various traditions to see what teachings are relevant and helpful for cultivating environmental

awareness. The development of green Buddhism is a relatively new phenomenon, reflecting the scale of the environmental crisis around the world.

Buddhists taking up environmental concerns are motivated by many fields of environmental suffering—from loss of species and habitat to the consequences of industrial agriculture. As interest has developed in Buddhism and ecology, the fields of thought have expanded through various writers as well as popular and academic discourses. Scholars like Peter Harvey, Pragati Sahni, Donald K Swearer, Lily De Silva, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Stephanie Kaza and many others have written on issues of nature, ecology, environment and Buddhism. Informed by different streams of Buddhist thought and practice, they draw on a range of themes in Buddhist texts and traditions.

Many of the central Buddhist teachings seem consistent with concern for the environment, and a number of modern Buddhist teachers advocate clearly for environmental stewardship.

According to Lily de Silva (1994, p 24), several *suttas* from the Pali canon show that early Buddhism believes there is a close relationship between human morality and natural environment. She writes that humans depend on nature for survival, be it for food, clothes, shelter, medicine or other needs. For maximum benefit, humans have to understand nature so that they can use natural resources while living harmoniously with nature. Thus, kindness to animals was the source of merit in Buddhism—and could be used by human beings to improve their lot in the cycle of rebirths and approach the goal of *Nirvana*.

Harvey (2000) writes that it was the law of *karma* which backed up compassion as a motive for following the precepts and further determined the attitude and treatment of the natural world in Buddhism. It meant that one cannot intentionally harm beings without this bringing harm to oneself at some time.

According to Swearer (2001, p. 232) the natural world was central to the Indic Buddhist conception of human flourishing—perhaps, in part, because of the urbanizing environment in which it was born. While nature as a value in and of itself may not have

played a major role in the development of early Buddhist thought and practice, it was always one key component of the tradition's account of the preconditions for human flourishing. The textual record, furthermore, testifies to the importance of forests, not only as an environment preferred for spiritual practices such as meditation but also as a place where the laity sought instruction. But forests, rivers, and mountains remain an important factor in Buddhist accounts of human flourishing.

Sahni (2008) writes that nature in early Buddhism has been treated with a conservationist approach. She gives credit to the attainment of *nirvana*, respect towards nature and animals and aesthetic appreciation of the beauty of nature as the reasons behind the conservationist approach in Buddhism.

Coming to grips with the environmental crisis has meant that religious people had to become political and ecological activists. It is clear to most religious environmentalists that pious words about "caring for God's creation" or "having compassion on all sentient beings" will not come to much unless there are dramatic changes in the way we produce and consume, grow food and get from place to place, build houses and use energy. Yet when environmentalists try to help create the needed changes, they frequently come up against the dominant social structures of industrialized society: profit-oriented corporations and a political elite more interested in preserving power than the environment. Consequently religious environmentalists are mounting a widespread challenge to the prerogatives of private property and the complicity of do-nothing (or do-too-little) governments (Gottfried, 2006, p. 7).

What a particular religion says and what that religion's followers actually do are two different things. Therefore it would be imperative for Buddhist practitioners as well as preachers and scholars to propagate the discourse on environmentalism in Buddhism to bring about a change and try to reverse the process of environmental degradation. To begin with, we should remember that for millions of people religion remains the arbiter and repository of life's deepest moral values. In this context, religion provides a rich resource to mobilize people for political action. Religion prompts us to pursue the most long-lasting and authentic values. "Thus if religious leaders

start to preach a green gospel, condemning human treatment of nature for its effects on the nonhuman as well as the human—it is likely to have more of an effect than statements by say, a comparable number of college professors” (Gottfried, 2006, pp. 12—13).

Religion can thus enable us to take at least the first step towards collective change. Buddhism does offer rich resources for immediate application in resource usage and consumerism—areas which are now developing some solid academic and popular literature. The numerous references to nature in Buddhist literature certainly justify the importance of nature in the early Buddhist tradition. The reasons may be many. Kindness and compassion towards all living beings could have been a result of the first precept of non-injury to all beings in Buddhism. The Buddhist precept of non-injury to all living beings could also have resulted because of the Buddhist concepts of *ahimsa*/nonviolence, *karma* and rebirth. The importance of nature as the only resource base of humans during those times, when they had not yet discovered the methods of producing artificial and synthetic materials could have been yet another reason for the veneration of nature. In the absence of modernisation and industry, nature was everything for the humans of those times, nature was the only resource base for their security, sustainability and flourishing. Humans fulfilled all their needs from nature, adored nature and also took solace in nature. Hence the expression of love and understanding of nature and the presence of environmental ethics in early Buddhism can be adequately understood through the early Buddhist literature. The texts suggest that natural resources were free to be enjoyed by humans and animals alike. The references to few warnings voiced by the Buddha about consequences of misusing nature may have meant a careful use of resources so as to ensure their sustainability being the main objective of the Buddha’s warnings. This aspect of environmentalism in early Buddhism may thus be considered as a case of Religious Environmentalism so as to seek a comprehensive solution to present global environmental crisis. The elements which support an ecological ethic may be stressed and the realization that what we have been doing is wrong and that it is time to change our ways, is very important. If we are to make the necessary but extraordinary difficult changes in the way

we live, we will certainly benefit from every voice which can help motivate us. If early Buddhist environmental ethics are stressed and propagated in a full-fledged manner, it will definitely help curb the global environmental crisis that we face today, and then we can strive for security, sustainability and human flourishing.

ABBREVIATIONS

AN:	<i>Anguttara Nikaya</i>
DN:	<i>Digha Nikaya</i>
MN:	<i>Majjhima Nikaya</i>
SN:	<i>Samyutta Nikaya</i>
VP:	<i>Vinaya Pīṭaka</i>

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