

Green Buddhism: Buddhist Ethical Concern for the Forest

Chatsumarn KABILSINGH Ph.D.*

* Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Bangkok 10200

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Green is the color of life and fertility. Suddenly we have become so intensely aware of greenness because ~~because~~ we are at the verge of losing lives. It is only appropriate that we should focus more on “Green Buddhism”, that is Buddhism and its application with concern for greenness, which does not limit its meaning only to the green of the trees and forest but the liveliness in humanity.

Government and individuals are becoming more and more concerned about the ecological crisis which the world is now facing. There have been attempts to rectify the problem through various means but mostly the attempts have not been able to wrestle with the fundamental cause of it. Philosophers and thinkers are now trying to understand the root cause of the problem so as to enable them to handle it more efficiently and effectively. Hence we now read more about ecology, deep-ecology, etc.

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I. Important Buddhist Teachings

In order to understand Buddhist ethical ecology, it is necessary to understand the basic teaching of Buddhism wherefrom arises Buddhist ethical ecology. After the enlightenment, the very first sermon the Buddha gave to the first group of disciples was the “Four Noble Truths” which is also the essence of Buddhism. Teachings on any other topics can always be linked to this core teaching. In other words, other teachings are but the enlarged explanation from the “Four Noble Truths”.

The Four Noble Truths

The very first truth is suffering (dukkha). Buddhism points out to the suffering of body and mind which is undeniable and inescapable from the time of birth to death. It is a common experience shared by everyone alike. But the kind of suffering which is the concern of Buddhism is the suffering in the clinging to self which Buddhism professes to overcome.

The important point in facing the very reality of existence is to understand and realise the nature of suffering. The suffering of mankind is the actually clinging to existence, to the state of “to be”. This first Noble Truth, when applied to the ecological problem, is the capability to realize that nature as a whole, is facing a critical stage of suffering. That ecological system needs immediate attention in order for the world to survive.

The second Noble Truth is the cause of suffering. This is very much in the spirit of Buddhist teaching which explains that everything has its cause. The fact that mankind faces suffering of existence means that there must be the root cause of it. The Buddhists trace the root cause of human existence to ignorance (avijja) and explain the state of interdependence of nature with a theory of dependent origination (Paticcasamuppada) as the cause of it. The theory of dependent originations further explains the state of existence in twelve links of dependent origination. While one factor is the result of other, it is in turn the cause of the next factor. These factors are linked together in a circle in a chain - like manner and therefore could begin at any one particular factor but for convenient sake we usually begins with ignorance (avijja).

These twelve links are usually interpreted to cover the past, the present and the future life which are causally connected.¹ But this interpretation leads a

1. Abhidhammattha-Sangaha 8.6 quoted by S. Chatterjee & D.Datta. An Introduction to Indian Philosophy, India : University of Calcutta, 1960, p. 122.

person to accept at least three births in order for the round of dependent origination to complete which is unacceptable to modern thinking. Buddhadasa, a leading monk scholar in Thailand denied this interpretation and explained that each circle of dependent origination is completed with the clinging notion of self – I, me and mine.² Man , with his ignorance, does not realize the true nature of self which is illusion. There is no real self, but because of his ignorance he misunderstands the illusory self to be real and tries to grasp and hold on to it, hence nourishes suffering in various forms.

This second Noble Truth shows clearly the cause of suffering of human existence. Looking at the problem of the present world ecological crisis, it may be applicable to point out that when we have accepted that the ecological crisis is suffering we must by all means try to find the cause of it if we hope to rectify the problem.

Buddhism views man as part of nature but we have seen how man alienates himself from nature and with this misconception they try to conquer nature. In the process of conquering nature, he makes all kinds of attempts to take advantage of and to deplete nature of its rich resources. With this fundamental ignorance man actually depletes himself in the long run. Therefore, in the cause of nature conservation, man has to look and search from “within” to realize his own blunder and see face to face this fundamental ignorance as the root cause of the ecological crisis of mankind.

In order to conserve nature, man has to search for ecophilosophy to understand his ignorance and rectify his distorted mentality in order to cope with the most immediate task of saving the natural environment.

The third Noble Truth is the cessation of suffering (nirodha). This follows

2. "Patīccasamuppāda", Essential Teaching of Buddhism (Thai)
Chatsumarn Kabilasīn, ed. Bangkok, 1981.

directly from the second Noble Truth. We have seen in the above discussion how suffering is caused by certain conditions; therefore, when these conditions are removed the suffering would cease. Buddhists believe that this freedom of suffering is attainable here and now if conditions are fulfilled; therefore, there is no reason to postpone it. When a person is free from attachment or clinging to the notion of illusory self, he has actually broken the fetters which bind him. He is therefore free or liberated. In Buddhism, a person who has attained this state is called “arahanta” or venerable person. This state of spiritual freedom is known as cessation of suffering (Nibbana or Nirvana).

This cessation of suffering may again be compared to the problem of ecological crisis that we are now facing. When we are able to identify the cause of the ecological crisis we now have to look for the cessation of the ecological problem also. Once when man realizes his ignorance, he comes to rightful understanding - that he is nothing but part of the natural environment. When he treats nature as equal to himself, he realizes that with unity of man and nature, he becomes peacefully contented and this contentment radiates and affects his environmental surroundings, Nature as a whole is again healthy and returns to its peaceful stage. Man is no more alienated from nature. This unity brings nature back to its complete totality. But this stage may be achieved after all the evils done to nature are rectified and restored to its original stage.

The fourth Noble Truth in the teaching of Buddhism speaks of the path (magga) through which cessation of suffering is achieved. Buddhism is sometimes superficially criticized as being pessimistic with the emphasis on suffering, the first Noble Truth. The fourth Noble Truth which provides the path to cessation of suffering will show that in spite of the fact that Buddhism teaches that the world is full of suffering, Buddhism also provides the means to overcome it. The path recommended by the Buddha consists of the eightfold path which is readily available to everyone alike.

Right view. That is to have the knowledge of the Four Noble Truth in order to lead us towards Nirvana, the spiritual goal. Applying right view to eco-ethics, one will see clearly that he must have the right knowledge of himself and his place in this inter-related world.

Right resolve. The knowledge of the truth must be reinforced by right resolution to reform life in that path. In eco-ethics, this path may be clearly pointed out that man must be determined to root out the cause of the world's suffering, namely man's own ignorance and greed.

Right speech. Right determination must be able to be actualized and be the guiding light to control our speech. Right speech consists not only in abstaining from lying, slander, etc., but also in the speech to foster the right path. In eco-ethics, right speech may be applied to the much needed communication in order to educate the mass towards problem of ecology. Right speech consists of both the warning against exploiting nature on the one hand and giving constructive advice on how each of us can help save nature on the other. Right speech includes providing reasons so that people would come to the right understanding and realize the seriousness of the ecological situation.

Right conduct. Right resolution leads not only to right speech but also conduct which includes the primary Buddhist commitment to observe the five precepts; abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech and intoxicating liquors.

In eco-ethics, right conduct may be also seen from various levels. For example, deforestation is both killing (of the trees and thus nature). Right conduct should not limit a person only not to harm nature but it must also be coupled with the five dhammas, that is the five positive things to be done. That is, a person does not only abstains from destroying nature, but he also protects and preserves nature by the best means available. In the next precept, he not

only abstains stealing but also makes offerings, giving in return, and so on.

Right livelihood. In order to be able to carry out right resolution to its fullness one must have right livelihood. For example Buddhism discourages trading of weapons, etc. Applying this to eco-ethics one does not indulge himself in logging, poaching, in producing chemicals so as to harm natural environment, etc.

Right effort. While a person is trying to maintain the above mentioned path he needs also the right effort to strengthen the right path. In eco-ethics, a person must always be striving forward, if he stops even temporarily he will automatically glide downward. For example, logging may be a benefit gaining livelihood, so there is forever a temptation to go back to resume it. Right effort will strengthen him on the right path. The social context is important and plays significant role to weaken or strengthen this right effort.

Right mindfulness. A person who is already on the right path must be mindful of his right knowledge through constant contemplation on the positive energy already achieved and lessening of the remaining negative energy. Mindfulness is the essential practice in Buddhism which is applicable in all circumstances.

In eco-ethics, a person must be constantly reminded of this mindfulness of his rightful path, realise the good cause of it and strive onward with every possible effort.

Right concentration. With the success of all other seven previous paths a person is freed from passion and evil thoughts and now fit to proceed to their higher stage of concentration. The result of this unhampered concentration on truth is perfect insight or wisdom which is capable of removing the causal ignorance, thus freeing a person from the source of suffering.

In summary, the eightfold path in Buddhism may be applied step by step with the hope to rectify the ecological crisis the world is now facing. Buddhism explains the suffering and prescribes a method to remove that suffering. It clearly explains the problems in detail and emphasizes the inter-relatedness of every existing thing on earth.

II. Man And Nature

Before going in depth as regard to the teaching related to environment, it is important and necessary to see how Buddhism looks at nature in totality.

In the description of the physical world there seems to be twofold way of expressing and describing nature in the texts, namely, a true description and an analogy, both of which were drawn from the context of life and surroundings of that time, namely the northern districts of India. The Jatakas (birth stories of the Buddha) are filled with narration of beautiful and bountiful nature.

Such was the physical context which Buddhism sprang from. But as Daisaka Ikeda writes, “With the emergence of cities, he produced an almost entirely artificial, urban environment. In the process, human beings have exerted an evil, degrading and destructive influence on the natural ecological system. And this influence has produced the many environmental problems that today have reached a global scale.”³

The same author points out that “Solving this issue is inseparably related to problems of the self and relations with other human beings. Persons whose inner environments are distorted and sullied come to desire to rule and control the external environment - social, cultural and natural. A degraded and evil total environment disrupts the rhythm of the spiritual universe and strengthens the power of the selfish ego. But, since everything in man’s inner universe and

3. “Buddhism and Ecology”, tr. By Richard L.Gage.

everything in the global ecological system are mutually inter-related, compassion and wisdom can restore universal harmony.”

Buddhist View of Natural Phenomena

As the idea of Creator-God is quite alien to Buddhism. All the natural occurrences are accounted for in terms of the laws of Dependent Origination (Paticca Samuppada) viz.,

1. When this is, that is (= when A is, B is)
2. This arising, that arises (= A arising, B arises)
3. When this is not, that is not (= when A is not, B is not)
4. This ceasing, that ceases (= A ceasing, B ceases) ⁴

Hence, in the case of the world, the Agganna Sutta explains thus: “there comes a time, when, sooner or later, after the lapse of a long, long period, this world passes away. And when this happens, beings have mostly been reborn in the World of Radiance; and there they dwell, made of mind, feeding on rapture, self-luminous, traversing the air, continuing in glory; and thus they remain for a long long period of time. There comes also a time, when sooner or later this world begins to re-evolve. When this happens beings who had deceased from the World of Radiance, usually come to life as humans. And they become made of mind, feeding on rapture.....and remain thus for a long, long period of time.”

After that, the earth with its savor spread out in the waters, and it became colorful and tasty. Beings were attracted to it and began to feast. In so doing, their self-luminance faded away, and then the moon and the sun became manifest, and so did star-shape and constellations. Thereupon, night and day, months and year came to pass. Then their bodies became solid, some well-

4. Majjhima-Nikaya II, p. 32 and passim.

favoured and some ill-favoured. The Sutta continues in this manner, and finally the evolution of human society came into existence in toto.

It is interesting to note also that human conduct, moral or immoral, has significantly affected the courses of nature. Here, the Buddha described the situation in a cause-effect fashion thus;

At such time, monks, as rajahs (kings) are unrighteous, the ministers of rajahs also are unrighteous. When ministers are unrighteous, brahmins and householders are also unrighteous. Thus townsfolk and villagers are unrighteous. This being so moon and sun go wrong in their course. This being, constellations and stars do likewise; days and nights months and fortnights, season and years are out of joints, the winds blow wrong, out of season. Thus the devas (gods) are annoyed. This being so, the sky-deva bestows not sufficient rain. Rains not falling seasonably, the crops ripen in wrong season, men who live on such crops are short-lived, ill favoured, weak and sickly.⁶

On the contrary, when kings are righteous so are the ministers and the rest, moon and sun go right in their courses, and so do the others.

Rains seems to be to most important factor for sustaining plant life and other living things on earth. And as such, when there is no rain for a long period of time, along with the appearance of the second sun upto a seventh sun, all plants and trees including all others come to an end.⁷

Therefore, it is quite clear that, from the Buddhist point of view, things are interdependent and thus conditional upon each other as the laws of Buddhist dialectic prevail, whereby when A is, B is and so on. It shows that cause and effect, the sequences of events, play a significant role in nature. That is to say,

6. F.L. Woodward (tr.) *Anguttara-Nikaya* Vol. II, (London : P.T.S. 1960) , pp. 84-85.

7. E.H. Hare (tr.) *Anguttara-Nikaya*, Vol. IV, (London: P.T.S. 1961), p. 64.

all are natural phenomena or natural processes; nothing is arbitrary. This is quite important and practical because it means we can direct the situation at hand and work out what is desirable by creating a favourable cause and condition, and by avoiding what will produce a negative result.

III. Buddhist Ethical Concern for the Forest

Buddhist teaching deals directly with the attitude towards the forest. The Buddha himself spent all the major events of his life amidst natural surroundings of forest. He was born under a huge Sal tree in the garden of Lumbini in the north of India. Here it was recorded that the queen mother was enchanted with the garden for “its trees covered all over with lovely blossoms and echoing with rhythmical singing of birds and cheerful humming of swarms of bees.....”⁸

When the would-be-Buddha left his palace seeking for spiritual salvation, at the end of six years of austerities he chose to sit under a shaded Bo tree on the bank of Neranjara river under which later on he became enlightened. The tree has become the most sacred and significant symbol throughout Buddhist world. It has been protected and replanted again and again wherever Buddhism has taken root. It was recorded that the Buddha spent a week meditating facing the tree as a mark of gratitude and appreciation for having sheltered him during his quest for enlightenment. This is extremely significant in determining his attitude towards trees and forests and it is the reason why such a teaching is considered one of the basic Buddhist ethics towards trees and forest.

*“The tree that gives you pleasant shade, to sit
or lie at need, you should not tear its branches down,
a cruel wanton deed.”⁹*

8. Now Known as Rummindei in Nepal discovered in 1896 and identified by Sir Alexander Cunningham.

9. Canto vi, vv. 11 – 22.

It is to be pointed out for our interest that the first Buddhist community was a community of forest-dwellers. It was the fashion in India at that time for those who were interested in seeking spiritual salvation to leave the household life and wander from village to village. Forest dwelling became part of their life-style. Buddhist monks initially lived under trees in natural surroundings. Residences of the monks were only a later development and even then the monks' residences were situated in forest dwellings. Therefore the Buddhist community must be mindful of the attitude towards the forest which is their native abode. In every respect a monk was encouraged to respect each tree and not to cause any harm to it. This is clear in the monastic rule that the monks (and nuns) have to follow; "for destruction of vegetable growth (including trees) there is an offence of expiation."¹⁰

Another incident which deserves quoting here was the case of the monk Channa who, by clearing out the plot for the building of a vihara, cut down a large tree which was a cetiya (an object of worship). His action was much criticized by the lay people. The cetiya in question was a large, long standing tree that people respected and worshipped. The worshipping of aged trees has always been a practice in Buddhism that serves as a very efficient way of preserving them. Buddhism re-enforces it by making it a rule that the Sangha (community of monks and nuns) respect, worship and thus preserve large and aged trees.

Buddhism does not give importance only to large trees. The respect for nature penetrates to all living things including plants. A monk is not allowed to wear sandals made from palm leaves or young bamboo because they may harm young palm trees causing the disruption of their growth.¹¹

In consuming fruits and grains, the monks must be careful not to stop their growth. That is, they are not allowed to eat grains and fruits that can still grow.

10. Pacittiya XI.

11. Sanghadisesa 7, Thai Tripitaka vol. I, p. 654.

As to fruits, five kinds of fruits are allowed:

1. Fruit that has already been burnt by fire.
2. Fruit that has already been marked by weapons.
3. Fruit that carries finger-nail marks.
4. Seedless fruit.
5. Fruit of which seed has been removed.¹²

The rule on fruits shows that the Buddha was indeed very concerned that a monk should not destroy the growth of a fruit while consuming it. Fruits fallen from the trees are also allowed. This practice is basically formed out of compassion of the Buddhist practitioner. We may eat fruits with respect and with a sense of preservation, not of exploitation.

During the Buddha's life time, forest dwellers used tooth-wood to clean their teeth, but some monks went to the extreme of destroying the wood. Some would even flick novices with it. So the Buddha lay down a rule that tooth-wood must not exceed eight finger-breadths or be shorter than four finger-breadths in length. This is for the preservation of the much needed tooth-wood. The idea is that though the monks have to depend on natural resources, they must do so at minimal necessity not to destroy the source of it.

On the one hand a Buddhist, following Buddhist ethical code, should not harm trees and forest. On the other hand, there is also teaching expressed through action of how to plant trees. This may be seen in the story of Ven. Ananda, the Buddha's personal attendant and cousin. Following a request by Anathapindika, the Buddha's lay disciple, and the people of Savatthi to have the Bodhi-tree planted at the entrance to the monastery called Jetavana, Ananda obtained the seeds from the Bodhi-tree at Gaya and had it planted in the presence of a large and distinguished gathering including King Pasenadi and Visakha, the great lay-woman disciple. Since then the tree has been named "Anandabodhi."¹³

12. Thai Tripitaka Vol. VII, p 8.

In Thailand the practice of a tree-planting ceremony is again revived in this century to rectify the problem of deforestation and imbalance of nature caused by it. Therefore, at important royal functions, e.g. the King's birthday, a tree-planting ceremony is usually performed by various government and non-government organizations making merit as an offering to the king.

From the above evidence it would be sufficient to say that the Sangha, through its principles and practices handed down from the past as part of the country's cultural heritage, has provided a great service to forestation and wildlife preservation. Forest monasteries are not only ideal in Buddhist civilization but extend generously the products of its life-giving activities. The forest affords protection to all beings, offering shade even to the axe man who destroys it.

In Thailand, forest dwelling monks appeared early in Thai history since the first kingdom – namely Sukhothai. Forest dwelling monks delight in living in the forest, caves, among natural surroundings. We find forest wats prevalent especially in the north-east of Thailand. These forest wats not only preserve forest settings, but also provide shelter and natural habitat for various animals. Forest wats become natural conservation areas.

In conclusion, it may be mentioned again that Buddhist texts provide a large store of teaching in regard to living with other living beings with respect on the basis of living – kindness and compassion. The teachings not only forbid the killing of lives but also support the conservation of lives at all cost. Buddhism, therefore, can be taken as an appropriate channel to raise the moral of conservation not only of wildlife but also of forests and natural resources and ecological systems. Buddhist ethical ecology provides a different way of looking at nature and hence conservation of nature is actually conservation of mankind.