

# Buddhist Ethical Views on Environmental Problems

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## 1. Introduction

Today, when we are living in the age of the global village that brings us closer together. But, this also means that we are facing global issues that include the threat of war, economic crises, racial conflicts, environmental degradation and natural disasters. Humanity can no longer ignore the fact that what happens on the part of the earth will create a tremendous impact on others. For example, in 2004, the Sumatran earthquake and tsunami struck Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and other Southeast Asian states. The Sichuan earthquake and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 shook the entire Asian continent and brought forth the love and concern of the world to their fellow human beings. It cannot be denied that the collective karma of all human beings is the main cause of both natural and human-made disasters. We must also admit that it is greed, anger, and ignorance in humanity that has produced natural disasters far beyond human resistance. Humans have pampered themselves in over-exploiting the earth's resources, thus making nature appear on us.

### Ethical View on Animals

Man's cruelty towards animals is another expression of his uncontrolled greed. Today we destroy animals and deprive them of their natural rights so that we can expand the environments for our convenience. Maybe we are already beginning to pay the price of this selfish and cruel act. Our environment is threatened and if we do not take stern measures for the survival of other creatures, our existence on this earth may not be guaranteed. It is true that the existence of creatures is a threat to human existence. But we never consider that humans are the greatest threat to every living on this earth and in the air whereas the existence of other creatures is a threat only to certain living being. Since every creature contributes something to the maintenance of the planet and atmosphere, destroying them isn't the solution to overcome our disorders.

We should take all other measures to maintain the balance of nature. The Buddha taught very clear in His teachings against any form of cruelty to any living beings. Dr. Sura Narain Sharma wrote in his book of 'Buddhist Social and Moral Education' that "The first precept is important from both human sensitivity point of view and the existing economic point of view of an agrarian society because the killing of hundreds of animals means a great loss to the development economy" [1] Slaughtering animals even for religious sacrifices entail offense. The Buddha denounced such bloody sacrifices. In this regard, one day the Buddha saw a man preparing to make animals sacrifice. "when asked why he will be to kill innocent animals, he replied that it was because it would please the gods. The Buddha then offered Himself as the sacrifice, saying that if the life of an animal would please the Gods then the life of a human being, more

valuable, would please the gods even more." [2] According to the *Vasala Sutta*, the Buddha clarified the meaning of outcaste to the Brahmin called *Aggi Bhāradvāja* that if a person hurts a living being, he is an outcast. [3] In stead of destroying the life of any living things, we have to be more compassionate to them because of all tremble at violence and fear death. The *Dhammapada* testifies this fact by providing some stanza as follow-

"All tremble at violence;  
All fear death.  
Putting oneself in the place of another,  
One should not kill  
Nor cause another to kill." [4]

In the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the Buddha usually instructed his disciples to cultivate loving kindness to all, even to the small creatures. Once, a monk by the name of *Dhaniya* who was the son of a potter had made a clay hut for himself, and he was about to set it on fire so that this hut might be a more refined look. The Buddha criticized him as the activity of burning involved the destruction of some living creatures. [5] Once again, the Buddha ordered some monks of the *Alavi* Province not to throw water which contains some insects to the grass or clay. Or not to cause others to do so, in such cause, a monk becomes guilty of *pācittiya*. [6] Referring the attitude of monks to all living beings, it is said in the *Metta Sutta* that as a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings [7].

The Buddha sometimes emphasized the need for developing a psychological attitude to the non-human world. For instance, a monk who was bitten by a snake and died. The Buddha said that if only the monks had suffused with the heart of amity the four royal families of snakes, the monks would not have died. In this context the Buddha uttered the following verse:

"May I have kindness with the footless?  
With those of who feet may I kindness have,  
May I have kindness with the many-footed?  
Nor those that have two feet;  
Let not four-footed ones me harm,  
Nor those with many feet." [8]

### Ethical Views on Plants

Buddhism expresses a gentle, non-violent attitude towards the vegetable kingdom as well. It is said in the *Petavatthu* that One should not break the branches of a tree for shelter. [9] Plants are very helpful to us in providing us with all necessities of life. To clarify that, the Buddha often admonished the monks to meditate under the tree if he is not lucky enough to have a monastery. In addition to that, according to the *Vinaya* rule, the monks are prevented from

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injuring trees and plants because people in the hands of the Buddha believed that trees and plants are creatures with one sense-faculty (i.e., touch). [10] The Buddha has forbidden the monks to eat fruit with seed if they do so, they disturb the fruit.

On one occasion, the Buddha laid down a rule that the monks should spend their times in the temple in the rainy seasons. If they wander here and there, they will destroy the life of animals and plants. Destroying trees whether it is big or small means deprives the life of plants. Accordingly, a man how to sit under such a tree should look after it anyways rather than destroying it. Furthermore, throwing hot water into the grass is also considered to be an act of betrayal. Taking it into consideration, the Buddha instructed monks and nuns not to do so. Monks and nuns have to follow the rule of not to urinate, defecate, not to spit on the green plants and useful water because it will be worthy of using for people and animals. If a monk or a nun pollutes water, grass, and plants, he or she entails behavior offense, and such an act is declared to be a dukkata offense. [11]

### **Ethical Views on Water**

Most of the *Jātaka* tales like *Mahāsupaina Jātaka* inform us that the bad behavior of the king and his people affect water. The above *Jātaka* story stated that owing to the unrighteousness of the king and his subjects; the rain does not fall regularly. As a result of it, trees and plants suffer, and the great famine occurs in the world. As water is vital in our daily activities, it is important to take precaution while using it. Such a view is supposed to be an environmental ethic for all. Some people pollute water with their urine, excreta, and spittle. People in some countries build dams and pipelines which limit the movement of animals. They pave the earth and build reservoirs, altering the circle.

The Buddha has been criticized such acts which contaminate water in many ways, and this sort of bad behavior is considered to be an ethical offense. According to the *Vinaya* rules, monks are not allowed to defile water with urine, etc. If one does so, he is guilty of breaking the rule, and his offense is declared to be dukkata. [12] To prevent from misusing of water, the Buddha explained the noble eightfold paths which include right livelihood. We might say that the right livelihood signifies nonhunting of beings and vegetations, proper use of water, and being frugal in their use.

### **Lose of Resources on Earth and its Consequences**

The earth, nowadays, covers with thick smog (which is created by man) is growing thick enough to choke man and kill him shortly. The world resources for a living are strictly limited, but man is reproducing himself at a frantic rate, which has led to a population explosion. Man is raping his environment, which mothers him by supplying him with food, water, and air. The air helps purify the water, the water irrigates the plants, and the plants help to renew the air. Men heedlessly intervene in these transactions. For instance, the man cut down the forests which transpire water and oxygen; we built dams and pipes restrict the movement of animals. We open the ground and build reservoirs, altering the cycle. Our action is that we pollute our environment. Technological water-matter, like noxious gases, pollutes the air. Insecticides and pesticides are destroying valuable plants

like diatoms, which produce 75% of new oxygen, and other vegetation, which is responsible for the production of the rest of the oxygen, and radiation has become a living threat to all forms of life.

Now we are facing ecological disaster and environmental problems due to our ill-treatment to the earth, the forest, and water which are sources of life and energy. To gratify our senses, we have misused the rivers and seas. The man has a boundless desire for material and the thoughtless exploitation of nature without having a sense of mutual protection and goodwill. The crisis is dramatically apparent in many parts of the world. A scientist in this modern world is making various weapons and bombs to destroy his fellow beings, animals, and vegetations wantonly and to spread radiation that is ultimately harmful to living things on earth. Using modern equipment, man can kill his species without seeing them. Considering these matter, it is fair to say that men are digging their own grave at a frantic rate.

Food shortages are becoming acute, and people become more and more painfully aware every day. According to the current news, eighty percent of the world's undernourished children are in South Asia and Africa and the programs to increase breastfeeding are the challenging in a poor community. [13] Nowadays the earth as an ecosystem is changing to the effects of globalization and man. More carbon dioxide is now in the atmosphere than has been in the past 650,000 years. This carbon stays in the atmosphere and acts like a warm blanket. We've overloaded the atmosphere with heat which comes from our cars and factories etc. When the ice sheets in the Arctic, it is melting at an alarming rate, and it is causing the oceans to rise. Rising ocean levels at about six feet will cause massive devastation and economic catastrophe to population centers worldwide over the next 100 years or sooner.

### **The Buddhist Attitude towards Environmental Conservation**

In the above chapter, we have learned that there is enough light has been thrown on environmental problems and some solutions through Buddhist ethical views. In the third chapter, we have come to know how is dangerous we face in the present moment and the future because of our greedy and misuse all the resources on earth. We must say that man is only a part of the great evolutionary process and he will not be able to survive if he does not show brotherly feeling towards his earthly partners who in turn, help man to survive. In the comic time scale, man is only a very recent newcomer to earth and consequently must show due respect to his senior brethren. Man must not behave as host but as guests on this earth. In the absence of such attitudes, they may cause harm to the environment. The current chapter will deal with the Buddhist attitude towards environmental conservation.

Some examples of protecting the environment can be seen in the discourses of the Buddha. Buddhism teaches that it is a meritorious deed to grow flora that keeps the balance of the physical environment, creates beauty and helps men differently. To prove the above facts, a deity asked the Buddha, "Whose merit grow by day and night, who is the righteous, virtuous person that goes to the realm of bliss?"

The Buddha replied that ‘the merit of those who construct the park for public use is considered to be a great meritorious deed which will grow by day and night and such doers will go to heaven. [14] The above reply of the Buddha helps us to understand the importance of conservation and nature of the environment. *Sakka*, the lord of gods who is said to have reached this status as a result of social services for people. In his former life, *Sakka* was a young man by the name of *Māgha* in *Macāla* village. Together with his thirty companions, he built parks, ponds, roads, rest houses for the public. The rest house he created was well known because there were many rooms in which some are for monks and ascetics, some for the sick, and some for pregnant women. There were some wonderful pictures in the rest house. [15] Similar to this, King Asoka who was believed to have been born in 304 B.C and his death took place in 230 B.C established the rock edicts and pillar edicts all over India. Among them, in rock edict No. 1, he said, ‘In my domain, no animals are to be slaughtered and sacrificed’. [16] Animals such as goats, cows, and sows which were with the young or suckling, he protected, and so were the young trees less than six months. Cruel practices such as caponizing cocks, or burning forests to trap and kill animals were barred. On certain days, months the fish were protected. In the same time, elephants and bulls were prohibited to be killed. Even billy-goats, rams, boars and other animals that are usually castrated were not allowed to be castrated or cattle branded on certain specified days.

The king provided medical treatment not only to human beings but also to animals. We can see this evidence in the rock edict No. 2. It said King Piyadasī makes provision for two types of medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals”. Herbs and plants necessary for the medicine were cultivated in his Empire. Water for human beings and animals was provided by providing wells. Trees such as banyans and mangoes were planted and the rest-houses were constructed on waysides for the comfort of people traveling here and there. In that ways, the king himself paid attention to the environment.

All these traditions which I mentioned above have been handed them down from generations to generations through the Buddhist countries in Asia. Even today, some monks and nuns in Buddhist countries take the responsibility of protecting the environment. Their attitudes toward nature are based on Buddhism which can be considered a strong force for conservation. In those countries, there are many forest monasteries, and the monks in such areas offer protection of plants and animals. Thousands of monks and nuns serve as an example of compassion for all living beings. They even cover some trees with robes to prevent them from being cut. It means such trees are ordained as the community of monks and nuns. Then the lay devotees pay respect to the trees instead of destroying them. These attitudes could certainly seem to involve concern for the future of the natural environment.

Some Buddhist texts point out that it is the responsibility of the king or the government to protect trees and other organic life. Among those texts, the *Kūṭadanda Sutta* is well known, and it says that the state administration should protect flora and fauna. [17] If a king is righteous, his

ministers will be righteous; the country will be righteous, and the natural world will become a friend, rather than an enemy. [18] Being contented or desiring little is important Buddhist teaching because it enables the environmental protection. Such person, who has the least desire, uses the available resources moderately, eats moderately, uses only required clothes, uses dwelling place to protect him from flies and mosquitoes and takes medicine just to cure his diseases

Buddhism praises chastity as a virtue in its own right. For example, once *Ananda* explained to King *Udena* how monks and nuns use the robes as follow. “When new robes are received the old robes are used as coverlets, the old coverlets as mattress covers, the old mattress covers as rugs, the old rugs as dusters, and the old tattered dusters are kneaded with clay and used to repair cracked floors and walls”. [19] Thus nothing usable is wasted. A wasted man is derided as a fruit eater who shakes the branch of a tree and all the fruits (ripe or unripe) fall. Then he would collect only what he wants and leaves the rest of the fruits to rot. Such a wasteful attitude is deplored in Buddhism as antisocial and criminal.

The Pali term of *katinnūta-katavedi* will give the light to protect the natures. Those terms mean gratitude and thankfulness respectively. As mentioned in chapter two, after the enlightenment of Buddha, who stood for one week gazing at the Bodhi tree to show his gratitude and appreciation because the tree had sheltered and nurtured him. Gratitude for nature shows our appreciation and thankfulness for blessing and gift.

Compassion and loving-kindness are other factors to maintain the environment. Although those two words mean freedom to all living beings, here, it is fair to say that all nonliving things to have the right to grow freely without any disturbing. We human beings must realize that we are not the owners of nature and we interconnect with other beings. So we have to practice compassion and loving kindness for all living beings and protect the natural environment. These religious thoughts have shown a great deal of respect for the conservation of flora and fauna.

## 2. Conclusion

In the future of our planet completely depends on acts which should be with moral, social ethics and most importantly discipline.

The teachings of the Buddha-like noble eightfold paths, loving-kindness (*Metta*), compassion (*Karuna*), a *clear sense of proportion (Mattaññū)*, and gratitude and thankfulness (*Katinnūta-katavedi*) denote the gradual mental culture of man. In that case, Buddhism inspires one to understand the value of the environments as well as its conservation. An attempt has been made in the fourth chapter to point out Buddhist instructions on the conservation of the environment.

All the basis teachings of Buddhism like three characteristics, action (*kamma*), transmigration (*samsara*), etc., can be correctly defined by Dependent Co-ordination.

This shows that all problems concerned with the man and the world have to be solved by Dependent Co-ordination. One who accepts the operation of causal laws can grasp this fact. This understanding enables one to know that everything is mutually dependent and their existence and continuation rest on this mutual dependence. This knowledge makes one realize that one's duty is another's right and prompts him to perform his duty properly. This will bring about the cessation of causes leading to a breach of peace and harmony. None who has properly understood the doctrine of Dependent Co-ordination would remain silent on the environmental crisis. Fruitful social revolutions, social reformations, and development activities are usually set in motion by individuals who have grasped the meaning of Dependent Co-ordination.

Accordingly, it may be concluded that Buddhist teachings can be used to find out a solution to the environmental crisis. If that is so, the adherents of Buddhism can hopefully and successfully conserve the environment through the practice of the doctrine of the Buddha. I hope the Buddha's teachings will help to bring peace and harmony on the matter of environmental crisis and at the same time, it will be a platform to control and prevent avarice and ignorance.

## References

- [1] BSME. p. 104
- [2] D. 1. P. 127
- [3] TGM. P. 179
- [4] Dhp Verse No. 129
- [5] EPEB. p. 229
- [6] Pācittiya pali bhikkhu patimokkha. P. 142
- [7] S. 1. P. 46
- [8] EPEB.P. 126
- [9] Petavatthu. II. P. 52, 53
- [10] Vin. IV. P. 34
- [11] Pācittiya Pāli bhikkhu patimokka. P. 554
- [12] Pācittiya pali bhikkhuni palimokha. P. 554
- [13] TSTI Sunday April 6, 2008, Colombo
- [14] S.1.Vanaropa Sttta. P. 60
- [15] Dha. 1.167
- [16] BDPTP. P. 125
- [17] Kutadanda sutta, p, 264
- [18] A.II. 74
- [19] Vin Vol. II 291