

Buddhism and Environmental Awareness

The Buddhist Attitude Towards Nature (Extracts)

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<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/desilva/attitude.html>

Buddhism strictly limits itself to the delineation of a way of life designed to eradicate human suffering. The Buddha refused to answer questions which did not directly or indirectly bear on the central problem of human suffering and its ending. Furthermore, environmental pollution is a problem of the modern age, unheard of and unsuspected during the time of the Buddha. Therefore it is difficult to find any specific discourse which deals with the topic we are interested in here. Nevertheless, as Buddhism is a full-fledged philosophy of life reflecting all aspects of experience, it is possible to find enough material in the Pali canon to delineate the Buddhist attitude towards nature.

Buddhism commends frugality as a virtue in its own right. Once Ananda explained to King Udena the thrifty economic use of robes by the monks in the following order. 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. Thus nothing is wasted.

Those who waste are derided as "wood-apple eaters." A man shakes the branch of a wood-apple tree and all the fruits, ripe as well as unripe, fall. The man would collect only what he wants and walk away leaving the rest to rot. Such a wasteful attitude is certainly deplored in Buddhism as not only anti-social but criminal. The excessive exploitation of nature as is done today would certainly be condemned by Buddhism in the strongest possible terms.

Buddhism advocates a gentle non-aggressive attitude towards nature. According to the *Sigalovada Sutta* a householder should accumulate wealth as a bee collects pollen from a flower. The bee harms neither the fragrance nor the beauty of the flower, but gathers pollen to turn it into sweet honey. Similarly, man is expected to make legitimate use of nature so that he can rise above nature and realize his innate spiritual potential.

Buddhism also prescribes the practice of *metta*, "loving-kindness" towards all creatures of all quarters without restriction. The *Karaniyametta Sutta* enjoins the cultivation of loving-kindness towards all creatures timid and steady, long and short, big and small, minute and great, visible and invisible, near and far, born and awaiting birth. All quarters are to be suffused with this loving attitude. Just as one's own life is precious to oneself, so is the life of the other precious to himself. Therefore a reverential attitude must be cultivated towards all forms of life.

The construction of parks and pleasure groves for public use is considered a great meritorious deed. Sakka the lord of gods is said to have reached his status as a result of social services such as the construction of parks, pleasure groves, ponds, wells, and roads.

In his greed for more and more possessions he has adopted a violent and aggressive attitude towards nature. Forgetting that he is a part and parcel of nature, he exploits it with unrestrained greed, thus alienating himself from nature as well. The net result is the deterioration of man's physical and mental health on the one hand, and the rapid depletion of non-replenishable natural resources and environmental pollution on the other. These results remind us of the Buddhist teachings in the suttas discussed above, which maintain that the moral degeneration of man leads to the decrease of his life-span and the depletion of natural resources.

Buddhism offers man a simple moderate lifestyle eschewing both extremes of self-deprivation and self-indulgence. Satisfaction of basic human necessities, reduction of wants to the minimum, frugality, and contentment are its important characteristics. Each man has to order his life on normal principles, exercise self-control in the enjoyment of the senses, discharge his duties in his various social roles, and conduct himself with wisdom and self-awareness in all activities. It is only when each man adopts a simple moderate lifestyle that mankind as a whole will stop polluting the environment.

This seems to be the only way of overcoming the present ecocrisis and the problem of alienation. With such a lifestyle, man will adopt a non-exploitative, non-aggressive, gentle attitude towards nature. He can then live in harmony with nature, utilizing its resources for the satisfaction of his basic needs. The Buddhist admonition is to utilize nature in the same way as a bee collects pollen from the flower, neither polluting its beauty nor depleting its fragrance. Just as the bee manufactures honey out of pollen, so man should be able to find happiness and fulfillment in life without harming the natural world in which he lives.

Buddhist Contribution to Environmental Protection (Extracts)

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On right livelihood for example Buddhist teaching requires every person to consider the manner in which the performance of his duties as employee would impact on society and the future. Employment, for example, in the armaments industry, which imperils the human future, would be a violation of the path of right livelihood.

Any employment which causes damage to the environment such as manufacturing of toxic substances, felling of forests and the adverse exploitation of marine resources would also be a violation of right livelihood. Any employment which involves damage to the environment such as working in the nuclear industry, manufacturing toxic substances, and the exploitation and depletion of marine resources would be included in this prohibition.

Kutadanta Sutta Buddhism points out that it is the responsibility of the government to protect trees and other organic life. It is described in the *Sutta* on Buddhist polity

named, 'The Ten Duties of the King.' (*Dasarajadhamma*). The *Kutadanta Sutta* points out that the government should take active measures to provide protection to flora and fauna.

Pupphavagga in Dhammapada, points out that one should live in the environment without causing any harm to it. It states: 'As a bee that gathers honey from a flower and departs from it without injuring the flower or its colours or its fragrance, the sage dwells in his village.' The flower moreover ensures the continuity of the species and the bee in taking pollen does not interfere with nature's design.

Buddhism strongly emphasises the interdependence of all entities and events. There is no entity animate or inanimate and no event however trivial which is not in some way interconnected with every other. No entity or event is an island unto itself. The linkages and inter-linkages are all-pervasive and inextricable.

In the exposition of the Thai monk Buddhadasa Bikkhu, "the entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. When we realise that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise then we can build a noble environment."

The aim that Buddhism instils in every individual mind is emancipation from suffering. The route to that emancipation is not the pursuit of power and possessions but the very opposite – the rejection of the pursuit of those materialistic goals which are so greatly imperilling the human future.

Conquest of the natural environment, of other species or of other groups of the human family is hence the very reverse of the ideals which Buddhism teaches. Co-existence is vital and this requires a recognition and respect of those other species and groups and not an attempt at dominance.

According to *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* the ideal king is expected to protect not only people but quadrupeds and birds.

King Asoka's 5th Pillar Edict stating that he in fact placed various species of wild animals under protection is one of the earliest recorded instances of a specific governmental policy of conservation.

Also, in Sri Lanka, edicts were issued that not a drop of water was to be permitted to flow into the sea without first serving the needs of agriculture. There were also royal edicts prohibiting the felling of virgin forests.

In the result Buddhism offers us a range of powerful concepts for the protection of the long-term future through such principles as interdependence, universalism, moderation, trusteeship, environmental protection, environmental education, sustainable development and a consciousness of the rights of future generations.

Buddhism's infinite treasury of wisdom cannot any longer be neglected without damage to the human future.