

The Significance of Environment Conservation

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Overview

Environment is the surrounding in which a person, animal or plant lives and protecting the environment will be beneficial to the entire beings of the universe. The researcher intends to investigate about the Buddhist perspective to protect the environment as the entire world faces burning ecological problems at present. Environmental protection is becoming one of the critical problems facing mankind today as people pollute the environment risking the lives of the entire beings. The threat of the environmental pollution is so severe that it affects the ecology immensely. Since Buddhism is an ecological religion, many have viewed that reality is profoundly ecological. It reveals that there is a close relationship of human identification with nature. Buddhists believe that entire things in the world including humans exist by their interrelationship with all other parts of nature. It is unrealistic to think of one's self as an isolated thing from the rest of nature.

Although the consciousness of protecting life and living environment has been greatly concerned at present in the world, Buddhism is one of the main basic laws which were

set out by the Buddha after the understanding of the reality. The Buddha established a complete compassion and is respectfully seen as the compassionate protector of all beings. He taught that for those who wish to follow his Path should practice loving-kindness and not to harm the lives of all beings or not only to protect mankind, but also to protect animals and vegetation. With his perfect wisdom, He saw all beings in the universe were equal in nature, and in this phenomenal world, lives of all human and animals were inter-related, mutually developing in an inseparable relationship. Therefore, when analyzing the teachings of the Buddha, it is possible to realize how the Buddha has emphasized the importance of protecting the environment.

Objective

The objective of this research is to investigate into the Buddhist view concerning environment as presented in canonical texts. As a result of human activities, the whole world is encountering severe issues ecologically. The environmental protection will result in the well-being of the mankind. Therefore, the purpose of this research paper is to present some of the views presented in Buddhist doctrine regarding the conservation of environment.

Methodology

With the purpose of finding the perspective of Buddhism on environment protection, Buddhist canonical texts were mainly used in this research.

Research Problem

What are the factors presented in Buddhism regarding the environment protection?

Discussion and Analysis

The Value of the Natural Environment and Buddhism

It is possible to see that there has been a close connection between Buddhism and the natural environment from the time that Bodhisattva prince Siddhartha was born under the blossoming *Sâla* tree in the Lumbini Park up to the present day. Another early story recounts the young prince accompanying his father king *Suddhodana* to the ploughing ceremony at the opening of the snowing season. The prince sat under a rose-apple tree and while concentrating on his breath attained the first meditative absorption (*jhâna*) later, as a young man, the prince abandoned the palace and became a wandering ascetic at the banks of the River *Anomâ*. He travelled to a mountainous and forested area and studied with the two famous teachers: *âlâraKâlâma* and *Uddakarâmaputta*. Following this he practiced austerities and meditation in *Uruvela* locality by the river *Nerañjarâ*. After his enlightenment he taught the Dhamma to a group of five disciples at the deer park in *Isipatana*. For forty-five years the Buddha travelled and taught the Dhamma to people until the time that he passed away in the *Sâla*-tree grove, a park in the kingdom of the Mallians.

The reported connection between Buddhism and the natural environment is not accidental or insignificant; rather it is intentional and important. Places of natural abundance, especially those full of forests, rivers, birds, cicadas and flowers, are 'suitable abodes' (*patirûpadesa*), because they contain clear air which helps to remove toxins from the human body. These beneficial influences can be verified by science. Before attaining enlightenment as the Buddha, the

Bodhisattva developed the 'perfection' (*pâramitâ*) for five hundred and forty-seven lifetimes- a time comprising 'one hundred thousand world cycles and four incalculable periods,' from his birth as the young man *Sumendha* until his birth as prince Siddhartha. After all this time he was surely well aware of which places are suitable to live in which places are suitable to practice the Dhamma and develop the mind. For this reason, the important incidents in the Buddha's life occurred in places of natural abundance.

There are many passages in *Tipi akâ* describing the material importance of the natural environment. In some instances the natural environment contains valuable resources and animals. An example is when the Bodhisattva as *atree-deva* asked 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 feelings. Why then do you make the effort and continually ask it about sleeping happily?' the Brahman replied: 'Large trees only grow in remote, tranquil places, and they 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: 'at the foot of a large focus tree growing in front of a persimmon that is surrounded by a fence and formerly honored by people there is a hidden treasure that belongs to no-one. Go and dig this treasure up' (*Jâtaka Tales*, Vol., I) although this story resembles a fable and lacks substantiating evidence, it still could be true.

The natural environment is sometimes a location providing medicinal plants. On one occasion when the Buddha was residing at the *jetagrove* near *Sâvattimany* of the monks came down with fever and required medicinal roots. The Buddha said: 'Monks, I allow the use of medicinal

roots-turmeric, ginger, sweet flag, arum, galangal, *vetiver*; nut grass, and other medicinal roots that are not considered food. When these medicines are offered they can be kept for one's entire lifetime. If there is a necessity, monks can consume these; if there is no necessity, there is a minor offense for consuming them.' The Buddha allowed other natural medicines, for example oils like neem-oil, leaves like neem leaves, and fruits like myrobalan. (Vinaya PiṭakaMahāvagga).

What do these texts teach us? They teach that the natural environment is a rich source of medicinal substance, which have tremendous value for human beings. A closer examination reveals that various leaves, vines and plants, including mushrooms, have medicinal qualities without exception.

Contribution of Buddhism for the Environment

Some changes are easy to implement. Certain Buddhist teachers have already made suggestion to their communities, more than a hundred to date, including:

1. Reducing meat consumption or becoming vegetarian. This is an act of compassion and lessens one's impact on the depletion of resources. A kilo of beef needs some 100,000 liters of water against 750 liters for the production of a kilo of wheat. Providing vegetarian meals at meeting will reduce one's ecological foot-print.
2. Living simply. This put into practice one's vows of ethical conduct without superfluous possessions.
3. Reducing one's use of plastic. We use plastic packaging for a few hours, sometimes even a few

minutes, whereas it takes 500 years to degrade completely. Recycle activity.

4. When offerings are made, adopt healthy solution. Buy fruit rather than sweet things, plant flowers instead of cutting them.
5. Plant trees
6. Transform one's mind

The aim is to encourage a change of direction in the human race. This requires mobilization of ordinary citizen, as we have already seen. A dominant minority does not impose a right direction. For this, much greater awareness is necessary, putting essential emphasis on the role of education.

Buddhist Teachings in Protecting the Environment

Those who do not have right vision towards the environment will behave in a manner that is destructive to the environment. In the biological environment, there are plants that produce seeds from the roots, from the trunk, from the stem, from tender leaves and from within seeds. The Dhamma teaches to avoid destroying such plants and it is considered as a virtuous practice of the person who has right view. "*mūlabījamò, khandhabījamò, phulubījamò, aggabījamò, bījamevapañcamamò itivāitievārūpābījā gamābhūtagāmasam ārādhāpaṭiviratohoti...*" (Dīganikāya I, 6) from this we must understand one thing. Just because someone has huge knowledge of science it does not mean that the environment will be protected by that person. Together with the knowledge of the facts that person should also be sensitive towards environment through the knowledge of the *Dhamma*.

Everything in the world and everyone in the world are interconnected to each one in somehow. This is a co-operation to keep the world out of complications. In the Milindapañha, it mentions what a tree can give to a man. (Milindapañho 409)

1. *Rukkhonâmapupphaphaladharo*. This is the most important thing of a tree that it is giving fruits and flowers without expecting anything for the benefit of human beings.
2. *Rukkhoupagatamanupaviṭṭhânamò châyâdeti*. The tree provides its shadow to anyone who approaches it for resting. Therefore, human beings should have such gratitude towards trees. We should not break even a branch of the tree which we already got some benefit. If one breaks, he is considered as treacherous one. (Pethhavattupâli 2006). p. 54)
3. *Rukkhocâyâvemattamò nakaroti*. The tree provides its shadow to anyone who approaches it without any discrimination, even to a person who comes with an idea of cutting it.

In a spectacular world, this is what we get from a tree. But in turn people do not do much to protect trees. To find success through Buddhist liberation, the jungles are the places that people find to be useful. There are jungles that are so naturally beautiful which normal persons cannot appreciate.

“*Ramanòyâniaraññâniyatthanaramatījano*
Vītarāgaramessantinatekāmāgavesino” (Dhammapada 99)

Even prince Siddharatha chose the jungle to meditate. Even after he became the Buddha, he never forgot to mention

that to the monks. This evidence proves the significance of natural environment.

“I considered: this is an agreeable piece of ground; this is a delightful grove with a clear flowering river with pleasant, smooth banks and nearly a village for aims resort. This will serve for the striving of a clansman intent on striving” and I sat down there thinking: ‘this will serve for striving’ (The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha, 114)

Concerning the Buddhist ethical teachings of the environment, it mentions not to pollute the green grass and the pure water. Using the green grass as toilets and dropping garbage are prohibited in the *bhikkhunòvibhanga*, *pâcittiyapâli*. If any monk commits so, it is considered as an offence. There are several rules concerning the environment. Using river as toilets or spitting on water is also prohibited. “*Na udakeuccâramò vâpassâvamò vâkhelamò vâkarissâmītisikkhâkaranòyâ.*” (pâcittiyapâli)

Love and care towards the animal world is thoroughly mentioned in Buddhism. It includes the human and all animals. When one gives up killing living beings, give up arms and looks at every living beings in a humanitarian way becomes the morality of particular person.

‘Abandoning the taking of life, he dwells refraining from taking life, without stick or sword, scrupulous, compassionate, trembling for the welfare of all living beings.’ (The long Discourse of the Buddha 44)

In Buddhism it is considered that protecting and servicing as the responsibility of government. In the *Cakkavattisīhanâdasutta* it is said as follows:

“Yourself depending on the Dhamma, honoring it, reverting it, cherishing it, doing homage to it and venerating it, having the Dhamma as your badge and banner, acknowledging the Dhamma as your master, you should establish guard, ward and protection according to Dhamma....” (The long Discourse of the Buddha 44)

The group of discourses those preached on deities or Devatâsamòyukta in Samòyukkanikâya examines how the human beings can contribute the environment with anacting some activities.

“*Arâmaropâvanaropâ ye janâsetukârakâ
Pâpañcaudapânañca ye dadantiupassayamò
Tesamò divâcarattocasadâpuññamò pavadòdòti*”
(*Samòyukkanikâya I, 33*)

As depicted there, growing the gardens and forest can regard as appraisable functions in terms of Buddhism.

Greeneries are in a way, our benefactor and the Buddha preaches to show proper respect to them with a sense of gratitude. He therefore, realized the importance of trees and advises not to cut or even pluck a leaf, as the shadow of a tree is also good for us:

*Yassarukkassachâyâya, nisideyyasayeyyavâ
Na tassasâkhamò bhañjeyya, mittadubbho hi pâpako.
Yassarukkassachâyâya, nisideyyasayeyyavâ
Khandhamò pi tassachindeyya, attocetâdisosiyâti.
Yassarukkassachâyâya, nisideyyasayeyyavâ
Na tassapattamò bhindeyya, mittadubbho hi pâpako.
Yassarukkassachâyâya, nisideyyasayeyyavâ
Samûlamò pi tamò abbhute, attocetâdisosiyâ’ ti.
(*Pethhavattupâli 54*)*

The Buddha’s concern for preservation of green trees is not exhibited simply because we are directly benefited from them, and we should therefore be grateful to them, but it expresses the sense of love and kindness towards all the beings including flora.

Early disciples of the Buddha adhered to such ideas by resorting to solitude and living with a loving mind for practicing concentration and further spiritual advancements. SañkiccaThera expresses his feeling by saying that he has lived in the forests, in caves surrounded by fierce animals, but he never neither thought of harming them in any way nor did they tried to harm him. There are numerous instances of seers undergoing severe penance by living in the dense forests full of fierce animals and poisonous reptiles, but nothing wrong happens to them. In the word of Sañkicca:

“*Vasitamò me araññesu, kandarâsuguhâsuca
Senâsanepantesu, vâlâmiganisevite
Imehaññantuvijjhantu, dukkhamò pappontupânòino
sankappamò nâbhijânâmi, anariyamò dosasamòhitamò*”
(*Teragâthâ 327*)

Whatever has been discussed above refers mainly to the past. As ecological changes and environment pollution is the problem of modern times, we have to think over the possible solution in the light of Buddha’s teachings. While talking of activism, we have first to understand, comprehend and realize the deeper meaning of the Buddha’s concern to the environmental importance and balance; and then to act upon. Environmental protection is not important for recluses only, but even to the common people in their day to day life. Cleaning and purifying oxygen is not necessary for a homeless recluse only, but to an ordinary person and other

beings also. If the huge mammals and giant creatures got fossilized due to sudden fall in the temperature; global warming could kill future generation of living beings also. So a Buddhist activist ought to be cautious about his concern for safety of his surroundings and environment as a whole.

Modern Environmental Problem and Buddhism

“How can Buddhism contribute to solve our present era’s problems?” Gautama Buddha in particular was known for giving problem -solving sermons, like a physical prescribing medicine that suits the illness, that were not doubt consulted with such questions by and *upāsaka* or and *upāsikā* every day – as he made his rounds begging for alms. Now we, Buddhists also need to gather our courage and use our brains to deal with the problems that beset us in our present era.

The weightiest and most serious of these modern problems are environmental issues. The major environmental change that have been occurring on a global scale since the twentieth century are posing a potentially mortal tread to the ability of the earth’s environment to support humankind. Issues of energy and resources; environmental pollution; food and water insecurity; climate change; disappearing plants and animals; pollution conflicts have acquired a scale that our ancestors never had to deal with. Environmental problems are also serious because there is no external enemy for us to rally together and fight. The main cause of environmental change has been changes in human behavior, our lifestyle and our sense of values – we ourselves have been the number-one offenders in bringing about these awful problems. However, if we just ignore these problems because we find it hard to deal with them, they will simply get a lot worse. If we think about it, we can see that

because we are the ones who caused the problems, we should be able to overcome these difficulties, reflect on our action and reform them in such a way as to resolve the problems. There is plenty of room in this process for Buddhism to make a contribution.

*Sabbapāpassaakaraṇaṃ kusalassaupasampadā
Sacittapariyodapanamō etamō buddhānasāsanaṃ*
(Dhammapada 183)

Do not what is evil. Do what is good

Keep your mind pure. This is the teaching of Buddhas.

The teaching above is one of the most important essences of Buddhism. What are we doing now that is “evil” or “good” for the environment, and how can we purify our hearts? The time has come for every person to think about this and take action. Without action based on sincere self-reflection, it will not matter how advanced environmental technologies become, or what environmental policies are adopted, because such things cannot bring about a fundamental solution to environmental problems. Though the consideration is become clear that Buddhism can be a good principle or an effective indicator for the environmental problems, and also can give us the “vision”, which is more important than the law, natural science or technology.

Morality and the Attitude of Noble Persons for Protecting Environment

It can be stated in Buddhism that main reason for all kinds of problems whether internal or external are due to unwholesome thoughts originated in the mind of man. *AggaññaSutta* reveals about the evolution of the world as well as the moral degeneration man causes the deterioration

of not only man's personality but also the environment. It is revealed in many discourses that when the heart of the man is gripped with lust, greed and perverse values, immorality becomes widespread in society and even the weather pattern gets disrupted. When the seasonal rain fails, people will have to face problems with their cultivations. In this manner, it is very clear that man and nature has a close relationship. The interdependency of man and nature has been systematized in the theory of the five cosmic laws (pañcaniyâmadhamma). The five cosmic laws are:

1. Physical laws (utu niyâma)
2. Biological laws (bîjaniyâma)
3. Psychological laws (cittaniyâma)
4. Moral laws (kammaniyâma)
5. Causal laws (dhammaniyâma)

When these five cosmic laws are considered, it is possible to understand that how those interdependently help for the existence of the universe. The morality of mankind influences for both the psychological make-up of the people and the biological and physical environment of the area. In this manner, the five cosmic laws determine that man and nature bound together in a reciprocal causal relationship with changes in one necessarily bringing about changes in the other. It shows that man is solely responsible for the shaping of environment.

Another significant point is that the term '*vana*' 'forest' has been used by the Buddha to represent dual meanings of the word which can be meaningfully applied to the present world context. A Dhammapada Verse says 'cut down the forest of passion but not real trees. From the forest of passion

springs fear', (*"Vanamòchindathamârukhamò - vanatojâyatibhayamò - Dhammapada v283"*). The contemporary world is engaged in cutting down trees thereby eliminating 'forest of trees'. According to the Buddha, it is necessary to cut down the 'forest of passions' in oneself, which persist in hindering one's intellectual and spiritual growth. When passion is cut down, one does not want to think of cutting down individual trees in a forest of trees. So, it is clear that the passionate desire that drives one to cut down trees. Consequently, the moral plays a very important in protecting environment.

The greatest Buddhist characters in morality are the ones who has attained to the deliverance, the final goal of Buddhism. Those who have who attained to the highest stage of mind are known as *Arahants* (Enlightened persons). The term 'Arahant' is derived from the root 'arh', 'to be worthy' or 'deserve'. I. B. Horner denotes following four Pâli forms of the noun: 'arahâ, arahat, arahant, and arahan'. It may also be used as a verb, which in Pâli turns out to be 'arahati, 'to be worthy'. Etymologically, then, the 'arahant' is 'the worthy one'. According Edward Conze, "The ideal man, the saint or sage at the highest stage of development is called an 'arahant'. The Buddhists themselves derived the word 'arahant' from the two words 'Ari' which means 'enemy' and 'han' which means 'to kill', so that an Arahant would be 'A slayer of the foe', the foe being the passions. In this manner, Noble disciples become disenchanted with material form, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness. Being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Such kinds of persons are the ideal persons in society as they do not harm anyone or anything like ordinary people.

According to Buddhist tradition, enlightened persons show friendly attitudes to the environment. AranantaVagga of the Dhammapada is one of the best accounts regarding this matter. Following expressions are good examples for the eco-friendly nature of the enlightened persons.

“The mindful ones exert themselves. They are not attached to any home or dwelling place. Like swans that abandon the lake, they leave home after home”.

“Delightful are the forests where worldly men delight not; the passionless will rejoice (therein), (for) they seek no sensual pleasure”.

Those ideas really reveal how enlightened persons engaged with environment. With such kind of attitudes, environment is always secured and there is no any affects to the nature.

Theragâthâ, the collection of verses expressed or composed by the enlightened persons who belong to the early period, is full of descriptions of nature and environment. The deep appreciation of nature in those verses could be regarded as the best of natural beauty experienced by them. The verse sung by Arahant SappakaThera is a good example in this regard. It is as follow:

“When cranes with clear bright wings, terrified by fear of black clouds, flee to shelter, then the river Ajakarani delights me”.

Many enlightened monks speak of forest, flora and fauna, birds and beats, flowing rivers and water dripping down mountains slopes with a pleasant attitude. ThâlapuThera addressing himself says in this manner:

“In a cave and on a mountain crest, frequented and plunged into by wild boars and antelopes or on a naturally pleasant place or in a grove rain sprinkled with fresh water you will rejoice there in your cave house”.

Those verses really expose how enlightened persons spent their lives in the natural environment without any disturbance to it. As dispassionate ones, they experience natural beauty in the true sense of the meaning. Although they have seen natural beauty, they do not try to possess it by harming to it. That is the difference between ordinary people and the enlightened persons.

When we consider about enlightened person, their life philosophy was to live rather than ‘to have’ ‘to possess’. Such kind of mental state can be achieved through the real understanding of life. People who think with self-ideas cannot be expected to have an open mind. As a result of eradicating all kinds of passions, the enlightened persons do not possess any kinds of unwholesome thoughts. Such a person does not do any harmful things to living and non-living environment. So, it is very obvious that people can secure the environment with the change of the attitudes from the enlightened persons in Buddhism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that Buddhism presents the necessary guide in protecting the natural environment. The vital role of Buddhism in preserving a balanced environment can be understood even through the expressions of enlightened persons presented in the verses expressed by them. The moral development of persons will be very helpful in preserving the environment for the future generation. The

nature and its beauty become a very useful object for Buddhists to gain the realization of the true nature of worldly things. The beauty of nature becomes a visual object which can be used to practice concentration. When the concentration is trained properly, it paves the way to gain the ultimate realization or the deliverance which is the final aim for a Buddhist in life. Since human beings are inseparable from nature as they depend on air, water and food, there is a significant interrelation between human beings and the environment. Therefore, it is possible to say that Buddhism encourages people to create a good environment as it helps to gain the spiritual environment in various aspects giving a greater significance to the environment conservation.

Key Words

Keywords: Environment, Environment Protection, Buddhist Perspective, Ecology

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