

Buddhist Scriptural Studies on the Natural Environment

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Introduction

Buddhism and the Value of the Natural Environment

There has been a close connection between Buddhism and the natural environment from the time that the bodhisattva—Prince Siddhartha—was born under the blossoming Sāla tree in Lumbini Park up to the present day. Another early story recounts the young prince accompanying his father King Suddhodana to the plowing ceremony at the opening of the sowing season. The prince sat under a rose-apple tree and while concentrating on his breath attained the first meditative absorption (jhāna). Later, as a young man, the prince abandoned the palace and became a wandering ascetic at the banks of the River Anomā. He travelled to a mountainous and forested area and studied with the two famous teachers: Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. Following this he practiced austerities and meditation in the Uruvelā locality by the river Nerañjarā. After his enlightenment he taught the Dhamma to the 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 Sāla-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’ (patirūpadesa), because they contain clear air which help remove toxins from the human body. Contact with these natural places through the five senses brings a sense of ease and peace to the mind. These beneficial influences can be verified by science. Before attaining enlightenment as the Buddha, the bodhisattva developed the ‘perfections’ (pāramī) 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 Sumedha 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 Buddhas life occurred in places of natural abundance.

There are many passages in the Tripitaka 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 a tree-deva asks 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 Ficus 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.’¹ Although this story resembles a fable and lacks substantiating evidence, it still could be true.

Another story tells of the hunter Sonuttara who wished to know where the white elephants reside. The queen told him: ‘The abode of the white elephants is delightful, with a lotus pond nearby containing many lotuses, beautiful embankments, abundant water, and bees spreading pollen. The white elephants bathe in the lotus pond.’ Sonuttara rushed off across seven mountain ranges and then climbed Mount Suvannapassa. From there he looked down and saw nearby about eight thousand white elephants in just such a place described by the queen.’²

The natural environment is sometimes a location providing medicinal plants. On one occasion when the Buddha was residing at the Jeta Grove near Sāvatti many 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.’³

At one time the physician Jivaka-Komārabhacca travelled to Takkasilā and studied medicine there for seven years. He was able to remember all that he learned but the studies never came to an end so he went to his teacher and asked: ‘Venerable teacher, I have studied the arts and sciences in great detail and very quickly. What I have learned I have retained and I have studied for seven years, but I have still not finished. When will my studies come to an end?’ His teacher replied: ‘Jivaka, in that case take a spade and walk around the city of Takkasilā at a radius of ten miles and bring back anything that you can find which is not medicine.’

Jivaka did as his teacher suggested, but he could not find anything that can’t be used as medicine. He returned to his teacher and said: ‘I walked around the city of Takkasilā at a radius of ten miles but could not find anything that cannot be used as medicine.’ His teacher answered: ‘Jivaka, your studies are over. With this much knowledge you can make a living.’⁴

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

General Environment

There are many references in the Buddhist scriptures to the natural environment. One clear example of this is the description of Vessantara’s hermitage by Mount Gadhamādana. This hermitage was surrounded by abundant natural resources, both animate and inanimate, which produced a delightful environment conducive to mental well-being. It would be hard to find a place on this earth equal in perfection. The environment as described here can be divided into different categories.’⁵

1 Jātaka Tales, Volume I.

2 Ibid.

3 Vinaya Pitaka, Mahāvagga.

4 Ibid.

5 Extracted from Jātaka Tales, Part II.

1) Fruits: Surrounding the hermitage were many fruit trees - mango, wood apple, jackfruit, bodhi trees, red meranti, rose apple, myrobalan, Indian gooseberry, jujube, persimmon, banyan, and fig - with glistening, ripe fruit dangling within reach. Grapes and sandalwood fruit were as sweet as honey. There were beehives without bees from which a person could reach out and feed. Some of the mango trees were just beginning to bud, others were shedding petals, while others were producing abundant fruit, both ripe and green, with the color of a frog's back.

2) Flowers: In the hermitage there were many flowering trees: Wrightia, kutaja, nutmeg, mangrove trumpet tree, ironwood, Albizia, golden-shower tree, ebony, eagle wood, crown flower, banyan, looking-glass mangrove, padauk, pine, kadamba, sky-flower, crape myrtle, mimosa, and red meranti, with abundant, dense blossoms. The Albizia, mangrove trumpet trees, and pennywort were fragrant, and the chaste-trees and padouk blossomed by Lake Mucalinda. The Putranjiva, mahua, orange tree, drumstick tree, Himalayan screw pine, night blooming jasmine, hibiscus, wild almond, blackboard tree, banana, safflower, Rauenhoffia, Harrisonia, rosewood, croton, Burmese grape, cotton tree, Ouratea, gardenia, eagle wood, and nutmeg trees produced abundant flowers. The ain trees, crape myrtle, santol, and flame-of-the-forest had crimson blossoms. The scent of the golden-shower tree blossom pervaded the air for a fortnight without dispersing. The green and white rosewood trees and Crataeva blossomed in abundance. The woods were full of cinnamon and sweet basil.

3) The Lotus Pond with Aquatic Plants and Animals: Near the hermitage in a delightful area was a lotus pond full of lotuses, resembling the lotus pond in the heavenly garden of Nandavana. The pond contained three kinds of beautiful lotuses: green, white and red. The water was clean and clear, enabling a person to see the schools of fish, turtles and crabs. Many kinds of fish were swimming in the pond: silver-barb, snakehead, catfish, dragonet, and carp, along with alligators.

4) Birds: Many multi-colored birds lived near the hermitage. They played with their mates, singing and vying with one another with their cries. Four flocks of birds lived near the lotus pond: nandikā birds, jivaputtā birds, puttāpiyācano birds, and piyaputtāpiyānandā birds. The songs of the flitting birds in the trees was like divine music, including the songs of the barbets and koels. The forests and lake were home to coucal, wildfowl, and hastilinga calling one another, as well as egrets, herons, lapwing, crane, black and red hawks, ibis, jacana, teal, night-heron, stork, kingfisher, quail, partridge, pelican, sparrows, weaver birds, shama, paradise window-bird, swift, hornbill, and sea-eagle, each one singing and calling one another.

5) Four-legged Creatures: Many animals lived in the forest including lions, tigers, donkey-faced yakkhas, elephants, hog-deer, muntjak, brow-antlered deer, palm civet, fox, wild dog, flying lemur, squirrel, yak, gibbons, slow loris, langur, and monkeys. By the lake there lived many sambar, gaur, bear, buffalo, rhinoceros, boar, mongoose and cobra.

Monastery Environment

What sort of natural environment is suitable for a monastery? At one time King Bimbisāra of Magadha listened to a gradual teaching culminating in the Four Noble Truths and he attained stream-entry. Following this he invited the Buddha and the community of monks to receive a meal at the palace. After the Buddha and his disciples had finished the meal the king had this thought: 'Where should the Buddha reside? Where

is a place that is neither too near nor too far from the village, where receiving communication is convenient, where those interested can visit, not too busy during the day and peaceful at night, not noisy, where not too many people are passing through, a place of privacy, and suitable for seclusion? Indeed, I should offer the Veluvana Grove to the community of monks with the Buddha as the leader.’

Having had this thought, King Bimbisāra offered the Veluvana Grove to the Buddha to use as a monastery residence. Veluvana means ‘Bamboo Grove.’ It was located at the base of Mount Vebhāra, which is one of five important mountains in that area. The other four are Gijjhakuta, Kārakuta, Vepulla and Isigili. An important attribute of Veluvana was its adjacency to the River Sarasvati.

Veluvana was the first Buddhist monastery. Originally it was a royal park⁶ belonging to King Bimbisāra and it was a delightful place full of natural beauty. King Bimbisāra felt proud when this park was converted into a monastery and he believed this place imbued with Dhamma would provide a shelter for all Buddhists. The chief queen Khemā had never visited Veluvana Monastery and had no wish to do so. The king therefore asked a poet to compose a poem praising Veluvana in this way:

‘Whoever has not seen the delightful and magnificent Veluvana, the residence of the Well-Farer and the community of noble disciples, is one who has never seen the Grove of Bliss (belonging to Sakka king of the gods). Someone who has seen the magnificent Veluvana, considered to be a grove of bliss—a place of rejoicing for human beings, has seen the Grove of Bliss belonging to Sakka king of the gods. The gods abandon the Grove of Bliss and come to the world of humans to admire the magnificent Veluvana, finding uninterrupted delight. The great Veluvana came to be through the meritorious actions of the king, graced by the power of the Teacher. Who can adequately describe this beauty?’

A similar story is the establishment of Jetavana Monastery. Originally the land was used as a park by Prince Jeta. Later, Anāthapindika purchased this land to build a monastery and offered it to the Buddha so that he and the monks could reside there during the rainy season. Well thought-out plans were made when constructing the monastery, to establish a ‘place of joy’ (ārāma) conducive to the physical and mental well-being of the monastic and lay communities. Many monastic buildings were constructed along with cloisters, refectories, walking paths, ponds, wells, temples over the water, and pavilions.⁷ Here is a description of Jetavana Monastery:

‘Anāthapindika built the delightful monastery in a lovely area by spending eighteen koti [180 million measures of currency]. He built the gandha-kuti for the One Endowed With Ten Powers.⁸ In the center of the monastery he built a row of halls, pavilions, lotus ponds, walking areas, and resting places for the day and night. Surrounding the Buddha’s gandha-kuti he designated a residential area for fifty senior monks.’

Besides the lovely natural environment, there were four buildings at Jetavana Monastery created to sustain faith and promote ‘perfect insight.’ These buildings were called the ‘great buildings’ (mahā-geha): the kareri-kuti, the kosamba-kuti, the gandha-kuti, and the salalāgāra. King Pasenadi of Kosala built the salalāgāra; the remaining three

⁶ ‘Park’ here is used for the Pali word uyyāna, referring to a place where people could walk and admire the flowers and trees. Such parks were public places, owned and looked after by the government or monarchy, and provided places for people to rest and relax.

⁷ Vinaya Pitaka, Cullavagga.

⁸ Gandha-kuti means ‘fragrant hut’ and refers to the residence of a mendicant. Here it refers to the residence of the Buddha. It is also called the mahāgandha-kuti, because it had special importance and was well-adorned.

buildings were built by Anāthapindika.⁹ The cases of the two monasteries, Veluvana and Jetavana, describe specifically the relationship between the natural environment and monasteries, and in general the relationship between the natural environment and Buddhism.

From the time of the Buddha till the present day, names of monasteries usually end with the word *ārāma*, e.g.: Veluvanārāma, Jetavanārāma, Ghositārāma, Nigrodhārāma, and Wat Beñjamaborpitradiusitavanārāma. The word *ārāma* originally meant ‘pleasure park,’ although these days it means ‘monastery.’ The reason this word is attached to the name of monasteries is in the past, from the time of the Buddha, monastery properties were originally parks belonging to wealthy merchants or royalty. Usually these parks already possessed a rich natural environment, with trees, streams, and numerous flowers. When the land was designated as a monastery, it was further developed as a place of peace and therefore the term *ārāma* (‘place of delight’) was preserved.

The Surroundings of Places for Dhamma Practice

There is ample evidence for the connection between Dhamma practice and the natural environment. When people seek a quiet place to practice meditation they usually think of forests, trees, mountains and rivers. An example of the connection between practice and the environment is found in the Buddha’s teaching on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, sensations, the states of mind, and mind-objects. In the context of mindfulness of the body, the Buddha advised: ‘Here a monk, having gone into the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down cross-legged, holding his body erect, having established mindfulness before him.’¹⁰ There are many other examples of this connection, for example the subject of ascetic practices (*dhutanga*), which are undertaken to subdue the defilements. The Buddha established ways of practice for monks to subdue the mental defilements, which include direct references to the natural environment:

The eighth *dhutanga* is called the ‘observance of living in the forest’ (*āraññikanga*), which means that a monk vows to not stay in a residence (‘a building for sitting or sleeping’) near a house or village, but remains at least 600 meters away. The reason for stipulating that someone who wishes to subdue the defilements live in the forest is that the forest is conducive to this task: this natural environment promotes well-established concentration, helps to prevent the disturbances from sensual impingement, dispels fear, reduces the attachment to life, and offers a taste of seclusion.

The ninth *dhutanga* is called the ‘observance of living at the root of a tree’ (*rukkhamulikanga*), which means a monk lives under a tree and does not live in a place covered with a roof.

The eleventh *dhutanga* is called the ‘observance of staying in a cemetery’ (*sosānikanga*), which means a monk determines to constantly stay in a cemetery overnight.

There are criteria in the Buddhist texts specifying which places are suitable and unsuitable for Dhamma practice. The most suitable place to develop concentration is the place where one’s teacher resides. But if this place is inconvenient for some reason, then one should choose a place that is suitable for practice and avoid the following eighteen ‘disadvantageous’ places: 1) a congested place; 2) a new place; 3) an old place; 4) a place

9 P. A. Payutto (Venerable Phra Brahmaganabhorn), *Dictionary of Buddhist Terms*, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, 2551, pp. 40-48.

10 *Mahāsātipatthāna Sutta*, *Digha Nikāya*; PTS: D. II. 291.

next to a road; 5) a quarry; 6) a recreational park; 7) a flower farm; 8) a fruit farm; 9) a place with much traffic; 10) a place next to a town; 11) a place next to a commercial forest; 12) a place next to rice paddies; 13) a place where people of conflicting interests live; 14) a place next to a pier; 15) an overly remote place; 16) a border area; 17) a place ‘not conducive to well-being’; 18) a place without ‘good friends.’ One can see that in most of these disadvantageous places there is potentially a destruction of the natural environment, for example populated places near a town or in developed agricultural areas.

A meditator should choose a place with the following five characteristics: 1) neither not too far nor not too near inhabited areas; a place that can be reached without too much difficulty; 2) a place not busy during the day and not noisy at night; 3) a place without too many insects and bothersome animals and without too much wind or sun; 4) a place where it is not too difficult to acquire the ‘four requisites’; 5) a place where learned elders live of whom one can ask questions in time of doubt.¹¹

Behavior Conducive to the Natural Environment

Although trees do not possess consciousness (as this term is understood by human beings), they possess a principle of maintaining life similar to human beings. This principle is called the ‘nature (or truth) of a tree’ (rukka-dhamma), as mentioned by the bodhisattva when he conversed with the devas: ‘The more relatives a person has, the better. Even for trees in the forest: the more trees the better. A lone tree, although standing tall, can be snapped by the wind.’¹² The nature of a tree is similar to the life of all sentient creatures: a tree is born, it grows, and it dies, and it returns to the earth to resume this cycle of life and death.

For this reason the Buddhist texts encourage people to be considerate of all plant life. The Buddha laid down a training rule for the bhikkhus, requiring that they stop traveling for the three months of the rainy season and stay in one place. This training rule contains an important issue in relation to nature conservation: the rainy season is the time when plants begin to sprout and grow, and small animals propagate. If the bhikkhus were to wander through the woods and mountains during this time, they might step on and destroy the young saplings and unintentionally kill the small animals, as confirmed by the people’s criticism at the time of the Buddha: ‘Why is it that the ascetics, the sons of the Sakyans, wander about during the cold season, the hot season, and the rainy season, trampling on the green grass, injuring single-faculty life forms, and destroying many small creatures?’ As a consequence, the Buddha instructed the bhikkhus to stay in one place for the three months of the rainy season.¹³

In the monks’ book of discipline (Vinaya Pitaka), there are at least two sections addressing concern for the natural environment. For example, in the section on plants (Bhūtagāma-vagga)¹⁴ it states:

It is forbidden for a monk to damage (cut or sever) plant life. If a monk disobeys this rule he must confess a transgression of this training rule. The first rule in this section states: ‘A bhikkhu commits an offense of expiation as a consequence of destroying plant life.’¹⁵

11 Anguttara Nikāya, Vol. V, PTS: A. V. 15-16.

12 Jātaka Tales, Part I; PTS: J. I. 329.

13 Vinaya Pitaka, Mahāvagga, Vol. 1.

14 Bhūtagāma means (stationary) plant life, of which there are five kinds: 1) plants that propagate by rhizomes, e.g. ginger and turmeric; 2) plants that propagate by trunk/branches, e.g. banyan and other Ficus; 3) plants that propagate by nodes or buds, e.g. sugarcane and bamboo; 4) plants that propagate by stems, e.g. aquatic morning glory and sweet basil; 5) plants that propagate by seeds, e.g. beans and rice.

15 Vinaya Pitaka, Vol. II, Mahāvibhanga, Duiyabhāga.

It is forbidden for a monk to pour water that contains living creatures onto plants or the ground. A monk who disobeys this rule transgresses the tenth training rule ('containing animate beings'): 'A bhikkhu who knows that water contains living creatures and pours or asks another to pour onto plants or earth commits an offense of expiation.'¹⁶

In the section on minor training rules (sekhiya-vatta), there is a rule that takes into consideration the natural environment by forbidding a monk to urinate, defecate or spit on green plants or into water. A monk who disobeys this rule commits an offense of wrongdoing: 'One should observe the training rule that unless one is ill one should not defecate, urinate or spit on green plants,' and 'one should observe the training rule that unless one is ill one should not defecate, urinate, or spit into water.'

In another text there is a Buddhist saying expressing concern for the natural environment: 'A person sitting or lying under the shade of a tree should not break off the branches from this tree, because a person who harms a friend is a bad person.'¹⁷

Although people might think that trees and other plants have no consciousness, they should still be grateful to such plants, like the red-breasted parakeet who felt gratitude towards the tree that had provided it with nourishing fruits and flowers. Sakka, the king of the gods, asked the parakeet: 'These other trees have fresh, verdant leaves and abundant fruit. Why does the parakeet's delight in this dry, hollow tree not diminish?' The parakeet replied: 'The fruits of this tree sustained me for many years. Although I know it now bears no fruit, I still maintain the friendship as before. A bird who seeks fruit and abandons the tree because it is barren, is selfish and foolish, destroying his companions.'¹⁸

Conclusion

There are numerous passages in the Buddhist texts referring to the natural environment, demonstrating the connection between human beings and nature, and conforming to the framework of Dependent Origination.

There are numerous references in the texts to the natural environment and to the relationship between human beings and other living creatures. This relationship is explained in many different ways including through the teaching of Dependent Origination (paticcasamuppāda).

The teaching of Dependent Origination can be summarized as follows: 'When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.' Dependent Origination is a key teaching in Buddhism because it weakens the belief in 'past-action determinism,' 'theistic determinism,' and the 'doctrine of non-causality.'¹⁹ Dependent Origination reveals that all things are interconnected according to causes and conditions. This process is 'open' and flexible, according to the respective causes and conditions. Buddhism presents three groups of definitions for the 'world':

- 1) The world of birth and death (samsāra-loka), that is, all conditioned phenomena that arise according to cause and effect; the world of living creatures (satta-loka); and the world in space—the universe (okāsa-loka).

16 Ibid.

17 Jātaka Tales, Part 1; PTS: J. IV. 73.

18 Jātaka Tales, Part 1.

19 Pubbekatavāda: a theory that whatever is experienced is due to past actions; issaranimmānahetuvāda: a theory that whatever is experienced is due to the creation of a Supreme Being; ahētuvāda: a theory of accidentalism, that whatever is experienced is uncaused and unconditioned. These three theories teach a logical interrelationship of things, but they teach a course of events that is fixed and unyielding.

- 2) The world of human beings (manussa-loka); the heavenly world, of the six divine sensual realms (deva-loka); and the Brahma world, the Brahma realms (brahma-loka).
- 3) The world of sense desire—the four ‘unhappy realms,’ the human realm, and the six divine sensual realms (kāma-loka); the world of form (rūpa-loka)—the sixteen fine-material Brahma realms, of those who have attained the fine material absorptions (jhāna); and the formless world (arūpa-loka)—the four formless Brahma realms, of those who have attained the formless absorptions.

All of these worlds above are interconnected, both physically and mentally. All conditioned things are causally connected and interdependent, in a process of arising, being sustained and ceasing, and all conditioned things have a multi-dimensional influence. According to the Buddhist teachings, beings from different realms (and including the natural environment of each such realm) are connected to other realms. When a person cultivates virtue, he or she will extend the feeling of goodwill (intentionally or unintentionally) thus: ‘May all beings, who are companions in the cycle of birth, old age, sickness and death, be happy! May they harbor no mutual hostility or ill-will. May they experience no physical or mental suffering. May they be happy in body and mind. And may they be vigilant, escaping from all misery and danger!’ All living things are interdependent: humans and plants, birds and four-legged animals, terrestrial and aquatic animals, and even humans and the climate are interdependent.

When we speak of a modern, developed and technologically advanced city, we tend to think of skyscrapers, modern office buildings, superhighways, automobiles, and bustling people. Modern cities in the Buddhist texts, however, are described in a very different fashion. For an example let us look at the description of Vesālī, which is described as a model modern city: ‘The city of Vesālī is bountiful, covering a wide territory, with many residents, highly populated, in which it is easy to find food, containing 7,707 palaces, 7,707 high-roofed houses, 7,707 pleasure gardens, and 7,707 lotus ponds.’ This passage is another confirmation that a healthy natural environment is essential for sustaining the life of humans and other animals, regardless of in the past or in the present day.

Human beings cannot survive alone on this planet, nor can the elephants, horses, cows, buffalo, birds, snakes, insects. Not even the trees, plants, rivers and mountains are completely independent. All creatures and all things in this world exist interdependently, allowing them to be born, be sustained, and pass away as different formations. For example:

- Things support, create, protect, and nourish each other, allowing for birth and maintenance as a distinct entity.
- Things act as food for other things, providing a balance in the cycle of birth, sustenance and death.
- Conflict, struggle, crowding and oppression lead to the evolution of new phenomena.

The Buddhist textual passages concerning the environment were not merely composed for academic research. They are an attempt by wise individuals from the past to show that humans, who tend to think they are the center of the universe, must be aware of their connection to the natural environment in order for life to proceed without difficulty. Humans are unable to sustain their lives by relying only on material, technological products and gadgets, without depending on the natural environment. The severe and dire problems for humans stemming from contemporary natural dangers, which humans are unable to solve only confirm this truth: humans have severed their link

with the natural environment or with nature, even though this connection is innate and not an artificial creation. The fact remains that in this universe, only nature will endure while human beings will not.