

Cut Desire but not the Tree: Buddhist Eco-Ethical Concepts to Overcome the Present Environmental Crisis

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Introduction

As a result of modern human activities against the environment, the environmental crisis is alarmingly increasing more than ever before. In these modern times, the biological environment has been threatened due to huge development in sciences and high technology. This threat has now spread to the oceans, earth, the atmosphere, and outer space. Due to industrialization the rising temperatures have risen drastically thereby making the ozone layer thinner and thinner. Glaciers have started to melt down causing the ocean water levels to rise - reducing the land areas in the world. De-forestation results in desert-expansion and destroys other wild-life and thereby, some animals become extinct. Due to the hi-tech wars fought, there is an increase in the levels of radiation and thereby more diseases are caused or spread. Further, the overuse of natural resources at ever-increasing speeds is some of the many problems that the world is facing today. Moreover, in the modern world people are struggling to achieve the highest level of development without considering the value and need of the environment. These humans' behaviors have created the various eco-crises across the whole world. By destroying the environment, human beings have put their lives in a dangerous position. Even though modern ecologists try to apply modern scientific techniques in order to resolve ecological crises, the world is still in a critical situation. The cardinal reason for all environmental crises can be mentioned as craving (*taṇhā*) - in the Buddhist point of view.

Did the Buddha foresee the Modern Environmental Crisis?

During the time of the Buddha there was no need to talk much about the environment as the environment was never threatened by any reason. Although, the Buddhist teachings do not specify the value of each category that threatens the environment, it shows us the emotions towards the environment at most times and it's closely related with its activities. In this regard the Buddha's eco-ethical teachings are really important. According to Buddhism, human beings are interconnected. Therefore, whenever Buddhism talks about human beings, it also concerns the environment which surrounds them. The person naturally connects with the environment variously whether socially oriented or, biological; therefore, the Buddha, when he mentions a person – one's environment must be taken into consideration.

The teachings of Buddhism use the words *Dhammatā* and *Dhammaniyāmatā* to explain the natural laws. According to Buddhism the natural things that belong to the world can change all the time.¹ If one does behave accordingly towards the natural environment, he can protect the environment around him. There is a sensitive connection between the human behavior and the open environment. This is the reason that emphasis is made on the environment during the times of the Buddha.

¹ *Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā* . 277, Dhammapada.

Buddhist teachings in protection of 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 virtues-practice of the person who has right view.² From this we must understand one thing. Just because someone has huge knowledge of sciences 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 the environment through the knowledge of the *Dhamma*.

It is a well known fact that the tradition of the Brahmins was detrimental to the animal and plant world. They sacrificed thousands of animals, cut trees from superstition, and destroyed the smaller plants to prepare the ground for the sacrifices. The Buddhist thought these actions showed the cruelty & uselessness of the sacrifices. Therefore, to make the sacrifices meaningful these inhuman methods had to be stopped. According to the *Kūḍadantasutta* it is appreciated the way the old Brahmins conducted their rituals which did not harm the environment. These Brahmins did not kill goats, hens, pigs and did not destroy the live plants in the surrounding areas for their rituals of sacrifices.³ Therefore, it is clear that by not killing animals and plants - showing their respect for the environment.

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.⁴

1. *Rukkho nāma pupphalhaladharo*. This is the most important of a tree; it is giving fruits & flowers without expecting anything for the benefit of human beings.
2. *Rukkho upagatamanupaviḍḍhānaḍḍ janānaḍḍ chāyā deti*. The tree provides its shadow to anyone who approaches it for resting. Therefore, human being 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.⁵
3. *Rukkho chāyā vemattaḍḍ na karoti*. 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 place that people find to be useful. There are jungles that are so naturally beautiful which normal persons cannot appreciate.⁶ Even Prince Siddhattha chose the jungle to meditate.

² *Mūlabījaḍḍ, khandhabījaḍḍ, phalubījaḍḍ, aggabījaḍḍ, bīja bījameva pañcamaḍḍ iti vā it everūpā bījagām bhūtagāma samārambhā paḍḍivirato hoti, idampi 'ssa hoti sīlasmīḍḍ...Dīghanikāya.I. 6*

³ *Tasmiḍḍ kho brāhamaḍḍa yaññe n' eva gāvo haññiḍḍsu. Na ajeḍḍakā haññiḍḍso. Na kukkuḍḍasūkarā haññiḍḍsu. Na vividhā pāḍḍā, saḍḍghātaḍḍ āpajjiḍḍsu, na rukkhaḍḍ cijiḍḍsu yūpatthāya. Na dībbā lūyiḍḍsu barihīsattāya. Dīghanikāya. I. 143.*

⁴ *Miḍḍindapañho. 409*

⁵ *Yassa rukkhassa chāyāya nisīdeyya sayeyya vā Na tassa sākhaḍḍ bhañjeyya mittaddubbho hi pāpako. Petavatthu.*

⁶ *Ramaḍḍiyāḍḍi araññāni yattha na ramatī jano Vītarāgā ramessanti n ate kāmagavesino. 99. Dhammapada*

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-flowing river with pleasant, smooth banks and nearby a village for alms resort. This will serve for the striving of a clansman intent on striving.’ And I sat down there thinking: ‘This will serve for striving’⁷

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 *Bhikkhuivibhāga*, *Pācittiyapāli*.⁸ If any monk commits so it is considered as an offence. There are several rules concerning the environment. Using rivers as toilets or spitting on water is also prohibited.⁹

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, gives up arms and looks at every living being 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.’¹⁰

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

‘Yourself depending on the *Dhamma*, honoring it, revering 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*...’¹¹

It is mentioned even in the *Jātakapāli* that the preservation entire animal life is the responsibility of the king.¹² Buddhist instruction for the political authority in preserving the environment is shown from the above quotations. Unfortunately, it seems like modern political authorities in the world are lacking of such concerning even though there can be seen various international organizations in the world. Without concerning such ethical teaching, human beings are destroying the environment which could be protected for keeping balance to the world.

It is the way a person uses the environment that will determine the damage that is done to the environment. That is why the Buddhism emphasizes on the environmental behavior. Here we pay more attention to how we should look at the environment from the Buddhist point of view. In this sense our concerning could be not only about the trees and animal but also other lifeless things. The lifeless environment means the things that are apart from animals and trees that are natural resources. Food, clothes, houses and medicines are some of the basic needs of the humans. While fulfilling those needs the man has to pay better attention to the long term protection of the natural resources. In Buddhism this is mentioned as *Sammā ājīva*. Man must not be greedy but should only

⁷ Bhikkhu Ñāṃamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, (BPS: Kandy, 1995), p. 114

⁸ *Yā pana bhikkhū ī uccāraṃ vā passāvaṃ vā saṃkhāraṃ vā vighāsaṃ vā harite chaṃṃ heyya vā chaṃṃ hāpeyya vā pācittiyaṃ. Bhikkhū ivibhāga*, *Pācittiyapāli*.

⁹ *Na udake uccāraṃ vā passāvaṃ vā kheṃaṃ vā karissāmi ti sikkhā karaṃīyā*. Ibid

¹⁰ Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, (Kandy: BPS, 1996), p.44

¹¹ Ibid. p.198

¹² *Dhammaṃ cara mahārāja migapakkhīsu khattiya Idha dhammaṃ carivāna rāja saggaṃ gamissasi*. 3446. *Jātaka*.

fulfill the required needs. The greediness of man does not have limited on the natural resources. The world is getting poorer and poorer due to the greediness of man to find more and more wealth and for that using the natural resources available without a limit. Schumacher in his book *Small is Beautiful* points out the words from Mahatma Gandhi as follows: “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need; but not for every man’s greed.”¹³

The world is having such limited facilities. But human desire is boundless. Therefore, it is unable to fulfill the human’s desire with limited facilities. Human beings have to satisfy with the facilities what they are having. This is the reason that the theory of *Santu□□hi* has been given a life importance in Buddhism.¹⁴ The meaning of this is the happiness to become self sufficient and have limits on the needs. This kind of an attitude will bring protection to the lifeless resources in the world.

In fact government in every country has a considerable responsibility in the solving the environmental problems at all times. On this matter the governments can promulgate or enact new rules if the approved rules aren’t sufficient on this matter. Not only that, making an alert about environmental problems and a real understanding among the people also interesting.

Buddhism recognizes greediness as the mainstream to arise all kinds of environmental problems and the *Cakkavattisīhanādasutta* provides the ample examples to assure this notion.¹⁵ As narrated there many environmental problems have evolved due to craving and greediness. Even the whole human beings lived together with harmony craving and greediness has been caused to arise the environmental crisis. With reference to the canon sometimes kings those lived in ancient time have ignored and neglected their duties that should be done necessarily by them at the community. Notwithstanding, some Suttas very clearly predicts what are the right actions of the kings on the protecting of the environment. In fact the rulers should be righteous ones. That means they should have enough knowledge in the governing the country. Not only that he should respect and honor the religion whatever he follow though without disgracing to others’ religions. Actually, as mentioned in the same source protecting any kind of human being, poor or wealthy, those live in town or village in the same country can mention as the duty of the ruler.

The group of discourses those preached on deities or *Devatāsamyutta* in *Samyuttanikāya* examines how the human beings can contribute the environment with enacting some activities.¹⁶ As depicted there growing the gardens and forests can regard as appraisable functions in terms of Buddhist. In addition, with reference to the commentary it can designate that *Ārāma* as pleasure gardens in present time where it is grown fruits and flowers.¹⁷ It is evident that the pleasure gardens in the time of the Buddha such as Veluvana, Jetavana, Jīvakambavana etc have been mentioned with the aforementioned Pāli term those located at the vicinity of main cities where the people went for their pleasure and leisure. On the other hand the Pāli term *Vana* offers the meaning of forest whether it grown naturally or artificially with reference to the same source. Aforementioned Sutta says how to grow the forests more and more. As depicted there one can develop the vegetation next to the forest which has grown naturally. In

¹³ F.H. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), p.26

¹⁴ *Santu□□hi parama□ dhana□*. Dhammapada. 204

¹⁵ *Dīghanikāya*. I 65.

¹⁶ *Samyuttanikāya*. I .33.

Ārāmaropā vanaropā ye janā setukārakā
Pāpañca udapānañ ca ye dadanti upassayam
Tesaṃ divā ca ratto ca sadā puññaṃ pavaddati

¹⁷ *Sāratthappakāsani*. I 88.

Buddhist point of view it has mentioned a meritorious action which causes to increase the merit in day and night because of it conduce to happiness of the individual and others. An ant commences his long journey with a single step; anyhow he is able to fulfill his achievement. In the same way anyone can commence to cultivate a thick jungle with a single plant and later on he can receive the benefit of it; and on the contrary: even destroying a single tree in a forest could cause deforestation over the lapse of time. Hence we have to choose good way or bad way since our contribution goes to make a thick jungle or destroy a thick jungle.

Likewise the government has a considerable responsibility; the individual also has its own sensibility on the protecting the environment as pointed out by the teaching of the Buddha. He mentions that we habitually point our fingers at others in blame while forgetting our own duty. Albeit, it seems that the accomplishing the self duty is better than the recriminating to others in Buddhist point of view. Therefore, I would like to examine some points that how the individual can contribute to approach the environmental crisis in Buddhist point of view. As mentioned at the beginning craving is the cardinal reason in the environmental crisis with reference to the teaching of the Buddha. Therefore the individual has a duty to protect the environment in balance. Once, the Buddha indirectly emphasized to reduce the craving with using a simile of a forest.¹⁸

In this context ‘Vana’ means the unwholesome such as greed, hatred, delusion etc in Buddhist point of view. When we reduced such kind of unwholesome defilements it causes to protect the environment in balance. As pointed out by the Buddhist teaching protecting the environment is easy when we reduced some defilement. Following are few interesting incident that mentioned in the canonical texts that cause preserve the environment.

The five precepts those prescribed by the Buddha cause to build an ethical behavior and an excellent society without any hesitation. In this room I don’t struggle to examine all five precepts - only the first one. This precept has concerned with abstaining the killing of any sentient being since every being has a right to live until the last breath.

If anyone kills any being it is recognized as an unethical practice by sophisticated society due to above mentioned reasons. Actually even though the killing may be on a small scale or grand scale – interference by humans should be compulsory. Hence, if the individual can restrain from interfering that it cause to build a sophisticated society and to keep a balanced environment. Because of at the very beginning it was discussed that how the killing of animals leads to an environmental crisis.

There is an interesting incident in *Vinayapiṭaka* which concerns with the above discussion. According to the accounts of rain retreats of the Buddha, he has spent his twelfth rainy retreat at Verañjā. On that time there has been a severe famine at Verañjā and Buddha and his disciples also faced this situation. Five hundred horse merchants who came from Dakkhināpatha, allowed each monk, a bowl of grain per a day. While this severe drought was occurring, Moggallāna approached the Buddha and asked to turn over the soil at the vicinity of that area with his miracle power, to bring up the essential soil upwards.¹⁹ Then the Buddha questioned the Moggallāna, as to what will happen to those beings who live under the surface of soil? Then Moggallāna replied, I am able to create hand and put all beings there. Even though, the Buddha didn’t instigate his intention considering the condition of every being. Actually the beings that live under the soil are worms that contain one faculty according to Jainism. Even though they are less value when it compare with other animal, the Buddhism has protected the rights even of the microcosm world. One scholar examines “There are only about 4400 species of

¹⁸ *Vanaṃ chindatha mā rukkhaṃ vanato jāyatī bhayaṃ*. Dhammapada. 283.

¹⁹ *Vinayapiṭaka, Verañjakkhandam.*

mammals, while there may be as many as 30,000,000 species of insects”.²⁰ However, it is evident that the humans who are animal rights, advocate mostly some forms of life, like: elephants, horses, monkeys, and few kinds of birds, though very rarely the insects. Notwithstanding, it is more evident that the Buddhism advocates all of the above mentioned species of insects; alike: all species of mammals and the above mentioned incident that happened in the Verañjā village is the best example in this context. In order to control some of the monks, the Buddha had to prescribe a discipline rule in this context. When the Buddha dwelled at *Ālaviya*, the monks dug the ground to build up a monastery. The people who saw this incident complained to the Buddha about this. Because of, the majority have thought the microorganisms held one faculty *Ekīndriya*. Then he prescribed if any monk dig or cause to dig the ground, he becomes into faultiness of *Pācittiya*.²¹ This isn't so much serious fault. Though, it causes to protect the right of all beings.

There isn't any argument or debate about the greatness of the Buddha as a religious teacher who arose in human history and he always advised others to follow the right way since he understood it before all. Accordingly, historical evidence explicitly determines that his birth, enlightenment and great passing away all occurred under trees in open places which cause the designation of the interrelationship between Buddhism and the environment. In this context I would like to examine in what way the Buddha followed at the environment to be an example for others. The beginning of this article discussed how wasting things was a reason for the imbalances in the environment.

Notwithstanding, the Buddha has shown an excellent way for us to act. As mentioned in the discourse of *Dhammadāyāda* the Buddha has caste away the remaining food on the ground where there wasn't grass *Appaharite*, and in the water where weren't any kind of sentient beings, *Apānake*²² - because the oil-content of the food causes harm to the environment. There are few places where it mentions this method that follows the dictates of the Buddha. Every Buddhist knows that the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away – all happened coincidentally, under a tree or in natural environment; and during his forty five years of mission, he spent his time mostly under the trees or in the forests more often than the time he spent in the monasteries. Not only that, he took many examples and similes from the natural environment - when he teaches his sublime doctrine for his followers. He always applauded right actions done by his disciples with the natural environment.

The discourse on *Sundarika* or *Sundarikasutta* examines how the Buddha advised for the heretics to keep the environment in balance and it shows how they followed the un-adversary advices of the Buddha obediently.²³ At the very beginning this Sutta refers how a certain Brahmin was known as Sundarika offered the god of Fire with some kind of oblation and after that how he intended to offer the rest obligation for a suitable recluse or ascetic. Notwithstanding when he saw the Buddha he became too angry, extremely, however he became to calm after hearing the advice of the Buddha. Later on he was eager to offer the rest oblation for the Buddha but he was advised to put it on a place where wasn't grass *appaharita* and weren't any sentient beings *apānake* as mentioned above. It seems that the meaning of the obligation in this context is milk rice or *pāyāsa* in Pāli. Anyhow, a comment from the commentary suggests that milk rice can be put under the grass grown over a height of a neck of a general person. That means there isn't harm for the grass from the content of the milk rice - for such kinds of grass have long since

²⁰ Damien Keon. Contemporary Buddhist Ethics. (Surrey: Curson, 2000), p.95.

²¹ Vinayapiṭaka, Pācittiyakhaṇḍikā.

²² Majjhimanikāya. I. 13.

²³ Samyuttanikāya. I. 167.

grown enough. In addition the same commentary says that the Buddha wanted to show an example with protecting the precept that was lay down by himself as not to destroy any kinds of plants. It has mentioned especially in the chapter of morality or *Sīlakkhandhavagga* in *Dīghanikāya* that the general people have believed that the Buddha alike his disciples have restrained destroying any seed or plant.²⁴ Actually this explains how the Buddhist tradition contributed to preserve the balance of the environment in the time of the Buddha. In the next step the Buddha has advised the Brahmin place the milk rice with the bowl and the imperative mood that mentioned here is *opilāpehi*; because if the food, like milk rice, is put immediately to little rims, streams etc, it causes harm to sentient beings. Nonetheless the commentary emphasis putting a large amount of food into the great ocean isn't a matter due to huge amount of water.²⁵ In addition the Sutta refers that the milk rice has made a sound while it becoming to split when it put into water by the Brahmin. Actually a simile of a well heated plough, in whole day time that was put in water, was brought up to delineate the nature of the milk rice. In fact, the most interesting thing in this context is how some kind of food causes harm to the environment. The same narration was mentioned in few places in the canon and the incident with the Brahmin Kasībhāradvāja is most interesting, likewise: the above mentioned one.

Conclusion

With reference to the above mentioned incidents: every one can apprehend the vital role of Buddhist teachings in preserving a balanced environment. In addition one birth-story utters a genuine way for human beings in the environment due to interrelation of each other.²⁶ As uttered there, the person who enacts in ethical ways doesn't destroy the shelter-providing branch of a tree. In fact, it is needless to explain in detail that such kind of ethical teaching yields the utmost benefit for both individual and the society, in a Buddhist perspective.

The beauty of nature is visual object that can be used to practice concentration and to way of gaining the ultimate truth – for what Buddhist expect in their religious life. Human beings are unable to separate themselves from nature. Life of the being depends on air, water and food which are given by nature. This connection shows the significance of interrelation between human being and the environment. Concerning all of the above factors, it is noticeable that Buddha promoted amongst the people to build a great eco-philosophy as an ethical concept towards improving the environment.

²⁴ Dīghanikāya I 5. *Bhūtagāmasamārambhā parivirato samaṇogotamo*

²⁵ Sārattappakāsanī. I 233.

²⁶ Jātaka□□hakathā IV 13.

*Yassa rukkhssa chāyāya nisīdeyya sayeyya vā
Na tassa sākham bhañjeyya mittadubbho hi pāpako*

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