

From Forbidding Cutting Trees to Actively Engaging in Planting: A Case Study of Environmental Practice in Chinese Buddhism

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Environmental issues came about with our uncontrolled or imbalanced way of life and production. The popular Mahāyāna maxim - “bodhisattvas are weary of latent causes whilst the ordinary dread consequences” most aptly depicts our lackadaisical stance here. We will only be concerned when our environmental concerns escalate to endanger our very own survival. It was in 1962 that Rachel Carson instrumentally published the famous *Silent Spring* which jostled us out of our ignorant bliss for our precious environment. Resultant of this, the United States had subsequently established her Bureau of Environmental Protection in 1970. Two years later, The United Nations called for the first ever conference of United Nations on Human Environment’ in Stockholm, Sweden. This marks a formal start of environmental protection efforts at governmental level of the UN member countries.

Given the concerted efforts from all quarters, environmental issues are no longer alien to us these days. There is no denial of our environmental predicament, unless some rectifying measures do address our global dilemma; we are truly in trouble. Things are likely to get worse and not better if we should still rest on our laurels.

Unthinkable and dreadful it may be to those who are environmentally focused; however, there can be a different scenario in the Buddhist teachings. The Buddhist way of life, from its very inception had called for a balance and harmony in accord with our environment. Buddhism might just provide the proverbial food of thought for us.

In recent years, quite a number of Buddhist conferences and forums pertaining to environmental issues at both national and international have been held. In addition, investigations and yet a larger number of researches are being conducted to ascertain the validity of the purported Buddhist theories and solutions. All these endeavours for environmental protection and restoration could provide legitimate guidance to our society at large.

In China, well known Buddhist teachings and sayings are adopted in public education. The fundamental theories of Cause and Effect, Dependent Origination (of the Hua Yan, Vijnaptimatra and Tian Tai perspectives) and the Chan School’s egalitarianism inclusive of all beings as well as physical world in terms of Buddha Nature; the Pure Land School’s practical philosophy of ‘purified mind purified land and beautifying land benefiting sentient beings’ serve as beacons of Buddhist practices for environmental issues.

The ecological theories are also found in the Buddhist practices; abstinence from harm and killing, releasing captured animals, protecting all forms of beings, vegetarianism,

cherishing merits and an attitude of gratitude are some of the more clear-cut examples seen.

Environmental issues are given a holistic treatment; both mental motivation and resultant physical manifestations are duly delved into. Focusing on and curtailing of the propelling forces from our unskillful mental motivation is a special insight of Buddhism. They reveal the root cause together with an ultimate solution to our global plight. All the above are some pertinent examples of environmentally aware Chinese Buddhists' endeavours to date.

On the surface, it appears somewhat difficult to find any new topic left to further discuss. However, there is yet a small but significant area – tree and environmental protection in Chinese Buddhism not much attended to.

What I seek to address here is the paradigm shift from a passive forbiddance of tree cutting within early Buddhism context in India to a proactive engagement of tree planting in the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition. We shall see shortly, how Chinese Buddhists played a noteworthy role in environmental protection and restoration from past to present.

The Buddha and trees

The value of trees and forests in our ecosystem needs no introduction. The percentage of trees or forests denotes a crucial index of an environment therein. It is interesting to note that the more important events of the historical Buddha's life were closely associated with trees and forests. He was said to have taken birth under a sal tree at Lumbini Park, attained full enlightenment under a pippala tree which came to be known as the Bodhi tree – tree of enlightenment. The Buddha's first discourse to the five bhikkhus was given under the trees at the Deer Park; and he passed on to mahāparinirvāṇa between two sal trees in Kushinara. This goes without saying that the Buddha spent the larger parts of his life in the forests.

The Buddha's prohibition on tree-cutting

The Buddha and his disciples of old had all led "forest-friendly" lives; unlike our so-called developed societal living with its entailing ills these days, the Buddha and all our ancient wise had blended in naturally with nature at its best. At the same time, the trees and forests provided shades, shelter and most conducive environment for spiritual cultivation. This epitomises a win-win situation just as the bees and flowers.

In the *samaññaphala sutta* the Buddha categorically states that a bhikkhu is to abstain from damaging any seed and plant life; such is an integral part of virtue to be cultivated by a bhikkhu.¹

“Whereas some priests and contemplatives, living off food given in faith, are addicted to damaging seed and plant life such as these — plants propagated from

¹ DN, i.64-65

roots, stems, joints, buddings, and seeds — he abstains from damaging seed and plant life such as these. This, too, is part of his virtue.”

This clearly demonstrates the Buddha’s forbiddance of harming trees and other living plants. He had also laid down a precept called 梵 prāyaścittika/ pāyattika in sanskrit , or pācittiya/pācittka in pali. The impelling incident for this enactment is well recorded in the *Vinaya of the Five Categories of the Mahāsāka Sect*.

Local bhikkhus, to the chagrin of the non-believers had cut down some trees to build a dharma hall for the Buddha to preach in. When the Buddha arrived, he promptly held the following dialogue to rectify the “un-eco-friendly” behaviour:²

[The Buddha] asks the bhikkhus: “who built this dharma hall?”

[The bhikkhus] answer: “we did.”

[The Buddha] again asks: “who cut down the trees and weeds?”

[The bhikkhus] answer: “we did too.”

The Buddha then admonished blames the bhikkhus, “you fools, should not have done this. You should think of trees and grasses as having lives just like human. By doing so, you make others generate evil thoughts.”

Having duly admonished thus, blamed the bhikkhus, the Buddha told them, “I lay down a precept for you bhikkhus. From today on, it should be said like this: ‘if a bhikkhu kills trees and other living plants, he commits pāyattika.’”

In the *Vinayamātrkā Sūtra*, the Buddha enumerated five kinds of trees not to be cut down, i.e. the bodhi trees, sacred trees, big trees in the road, trees in the Sītavana (Sīta-vana) , and Nyagrodha (Nigrodha) trees.³

If not cutting trees depicts an act of environmental protection, planting trees would suffice as the act of environmental restoration. In *Vanaropa Sutta* of Saṃyukta Nikaya, the Buddha asserted that those who engage in gardening and forestation will gain merits day and night.⁴ However, the act of planting trees is likely to be the sole domain of the laity. Monks and nuns are not to dig soil and till the land. It would be a violation of the pāyattika rule, just as the act of tree cutting or forest clearing.⁵ This is because in the course of cutting or planting trees, one is likely to kill or harm other lives accidentally. This precept is well observed in the Theravāda countries even today, it may be an exception in Cambodia though.⁶

The Paradigm Shift in China

² 《五分律》卷第六，T22，41.3

³ T24, 829c

⁴ SN I.47 SN I.47

⁵ 南传比丘戒九十二忏悔的第十条 Yo pana bhikkhu paṭhaviṃ khaṇeyya vā khaṇāpeyya vā, pācittiyaṃ (若有比丘挖掘或命人挖掘土地，犯忏悔)。南传比丘戒九十二忏悔的第十条 Bhūtagāmapāṭavyatāya, pācittiyaṃ (砍伐树木，犯忏悔)

⁶ The Cambodian monks have planted a lot of trees in the temples as well as outside, especially after the long term civil war. Refer to Yi Tong’s article, *the Function of Environmental Protection of Buddhist Temples in Cambodia*.

Chinese sangha are prohibited from cutting or setting fire on trees without valid reasons. The all encompassing egalitarian principle of Buddha Nature doctrine extends to even the inanimate - stones and rocks, let alone trees and grasses. Non-sentient existence though they may be, we are to protect and care for them in the same manner as we should care for sentient beings.

Unlike our Theravāda counterparts, Chinese sangha toed the line of the sangha yonder years and readily take to gardening, reforestation and land cultivation. This has never been and never was the intention to violate the Buddha's teaching. One has to only look into the Chinese Buddhism praxis to see its validity for the naturalisation of Buddhism into Chinese societies.

Self-sufficient is the single most embedded quality expected of even the sangha. While our Theravāda counterparts live by piṇḍapāta or alms from the laity we are to content with preparation of our own food. Monks living in monasteries of yesteryears and present day alike are actively engaged in physical work – gardening, tree planting and even farming too answering to the situational demand. Mental cultivation and physical activities should synergise in our spiritual path for Chinese sangha; neither the former nor the latter is more superior or inferior. It is never a hindrance to the other.

Societal dictate had “unwittingly” yielded positive manifestations – Chinese sangha not only abstain from tree cutting but are very much “environmentally engaged” if I may coin the phrase. The term “chu po (出坡)” literally means going to the hills is synonymous with Chinese Buddhism. The vinaya reformist patriarch, Grandmaster Bai Zhang's famous maxim - “a day without work is a day without food” most aptly depicts our Chinese sangha scenario in this respect.

Chinese sangha's attitude to tree planting has the *Vinayamāṅḱā Sūtra* as motivation. In the sutra, the Buddha is believed to have clearly said:⁷

If a bhikkhu plants for the triple gems three kinds of trees, namely, fruit trees, flower trees and leave trees, there are only merits but no wrong doings.

Acts of Chinese monks planting trees, tilling land etc, are not meant to cause any damage to the environment; on the contrary, these unseemly acts have made possible their proactive contribution to environmental preservation and restoration.

The courageous innovation and skillful adaptations of Grandmasters yesteryears to Buddhist hermeneutics are not meant to invalidate the Buddha's teaching. They have left us a legacy of modern day environmental conservation instead. While observing the precept of not harming trees, the seemingly peculiar acts of land tilling and reforestation allow Chinese sangha to actively participate in environmental conservation even today.

Tree planting tradition and contribution of Chinese monks in China

⁷ T24, 829c

In China, a natural and favourable environment conducive to spiritual cultivation proved the determinant factor for our fore-masters in temple building. This inevitably led them to dwell far away from city crowds; country sides, the hills, mountains and other remote locales were duly chosen. It became customary for Chinese sangha then to build monasteries therein. This scenario had prompted Li Yu, an eminent Jing Dynasty imperial historian to record as such: “Among famous mountains monks occupied the most.” The commoners’ use of “朝山 (chao shan, i.e. to worship a mountain)” when visiting temples further strengthened Li Yu’s observation, especially during his era.

From the outset Li Yu’s description seems to fit the bill, however upon further scrutiny, it would call for a divergent retake of his view. Normally, a place becomes famous for two reasons: either being spiritually sacred or naturally beautiful. Many famous mountains were unknown to the public or even without a name before our fore-masters built temples there. They later became well known because there were venerable monks or great masters, whose strict training, profound wisdom and great compassion had deeply touched, enlightened and saved the people. These were spiritual guides for the people - what the masses were after in the mountain ultimately. Therefore, it was not a question of a place being famous by itself; rather a place became famous because of our insightful fore-masters.

There are of course mountains of another category which are famous for their breathtaking sceneries in their own right; On the other hand, it is likely that these too have been further enhanced and well conserved by generations of monks who lived there. This category came to be known to people generations later. All in all, a more accurate account of Li Yu’s record would perhaps be – “among the famous mountains, monks built most” if I may be so audacious to quote so. One does not have to be an expert; even a novice would find plenty of examples of this category.

At the beginning of Wu De (武德) era, the first Tang Dynasty emperor, the famous Ven Hui Man (慧曼) was a hermit in Hai Yu Mountain (海虞山). He discovered that the climate and soil were suitable for Catalpa trees. Upon his encouragement, the locals had planted tens of thousands of Catalpa. At the same period of time, a temple constructed in the Xiu Rong county of Xin Zhou province. (忻州秀容县) was named “Umbrella Pine” commemorating the large numbers of “Umbrella Pine” planted within the vicinity.

The famous Chan Master Zhi Xian (智闲禅师) while constructing Jing Li Monastery (净寺) of Tang Nian County in Ezhou (鄂州唐年县) had planted 200 pine trees and duly called them “the cool world”. In the tenth year of Yuan He (元和, 815), when rebuilding the Da Yun Monastery (大云寺) in Liu Zhou (柳州大云寺), an unknown numbers of trees plenty of trees and 30,000 bamboos were also cultivated.

According to Shui Zhu Jing(《水注经》), some 25 km away from the ancient old city of White Horse(白马县), there was a monastery named Sheng Ma(神马寺) all surrounded with lush green woods resultant of monastic interest in nature. The Mi Yin Monastery (密印寺) built by Ven Ling You (灵佑) which dates back to the Dang Dynasty demonstrates

another classic example of monastic conservation of nature. It stood out amidst the barren hills of Mount Wei with its surrounding tall and ancient trees. The forest is preserved even today thanks to the wise intervention of Mi Yin Monastery.

The scenic charm of the much lauded Mout Emei otherwise known as the sojourn of Bodhisattva Samanthabhadra was also assisted by monastic interests and intervention. The Nan Mu woods in the vast areas of Fu Fu Monastery (伏虎寺), between Qing Ying Pavilion (清音阁) to Jing Long Monastery (金龙寺), were planted by ven Ji Wan (寂玩) in Qing Dynasty and ven Hong Ji (洪济) in Ming Dynasty respectively. It is said that both of them had recited a word from the Lotus Sutra as they planted each tree. This goes to show their devotion and respect to the environment in ‘reforestation’, an alien word which might not have been coined then.

Whenever a temple was built either in a mountain or a plain, our fore-masters paid special attention to its spiritual, practical and aesthetic values. Flora and fauna were cultivated within and without temple boundaries. Far-sighted planning, architecture and landscaping ensured optimal living for the residents and other sentient beings without sacrificing its aesthetic values, too.

In Shui Dynasty, Ven Hui Yuan (慧苑) of Wu De Monastery(武德寺) brought seedlings of Chinese jujube from Qing Zhou (青州) thousands of miles away, and planted them around Kai Yi Monastery (开义寺) in the city of Bing Zhou (并州). This yielded a big wood of Chinese jujubes. During the Zhen Guan (宗贞) era of the second emperor in the Tang Dynasty, ven Fa Tian planted pine trees on both sides of the road leading to Yu Quan Monastery of Dang yang (当阳玉泉寺). In 759, the Chan Masters, Qing Xian and Tan De (清闲、昙德) of Tian Tong Monastery (天童寺) in Mao Xian County of Ming Zhou (明州鄞县) also planted 10 km of pine tress along the road sides.

In addition to all the above monastic “interventions” for better environment, a most distinct case study of tree-planting for ecosystem can be seen in Ven Ming Yuan’s (明远) resourcefulness and far-sightedness just as his namesake. Ven Ming Yuan of Kai Yuan Monastery (开元寺), way back in the Yuan He (元和) era of Xian Zong (宪宗) Tang Dynasty had more than ten thousand pine, fir, nan mu, Chinese Juniper etc planted along the banks of Huai Shui (淮水) and Si Shui (泗水), in the flood prone Si Zhou area. The yearly flood had thence been permanently averted in the low landed Si Zhou. By planting trees, they have successfully created a sound ecological environment. For instance, in the Yuan He (元和) era of Xian Zong (宪宗) of Tang Dynasty, Ven Ming Yuan (明远) of Kai Yuan Monastery (开元寺) in Si Zhou(泗州), planted over ten thousand of trees, pine, fir, nan mu, Chinese juniper, etc, in the banks of Huai Shui (淮水) and Si Shui (泗水), permanently solved the yearly floods, because that area was a low land.

Tea-planting apart from tree planting marks another key feature as monastic legacy for Chinese Buddhism in China. Popular tea plantations had even pushed some temples to prominence. These temples are known for their special “temple – tea” i.e. the Zhu Ye

Qing (Bamboo Leaf Green) tea in Mt Emei, the Mao Feng (Heir Peak) tea in Mt Jiu Hua, and the Qi Pan (Cheese Board) tea in the bhikhuni temple Xi Shi An just to name a few.

Resourcefulness and harmony with nature and laity do seem to be a skillful domain of our fore-masters in China. Let us now move on to the different scenario in the ancient towns and cities. Facing with a comparatively more fragile environment than the mountains and country sides, the monastic then had honed another skill – gardening in addition to tree-planting. While creating a favourable environment, these skills were also instrumental in drawing the laity to the Dharma.

Many temples had and even have to date their own unique gardens, some of which became main attractions to the masses. The peony in the White Horse Monastery in Luo Yang (洛阳) and the clove in the Fa Yuan Monastery (法源寺) in Beijing are just two and yet there are more in the cities of China.

What is most vital is that great care was taken in tree-planting and gardening in view of space constraints in the cities. Careful selection of exceptional species was no doubt a determinant factor for our fore-masters’ “ecological intervention” albeit unintentional I believe; resultant of which many rare species of our flora and fauna are to be found only in temples today.

Reduction of botanical species which intensifies environmental degradation has been one of the more outstanding ecological issues today. By planting trees and other plants in the temples, some rare botanical species have been preserved. This is another direct contribution of tilling the land and tree-planting in Chinese temples; the value of trees to our life and environment need no introduction.

Conclusion

From non-cutting trees to actively engaging in planting, monastic of old in China have affected a proactive stance to protect our environment. This invariably led to a beneficial tradition and practice in Chinese Buddhism.; leaving behind a legacy of abundant experiences and heritage of environmental awareness and conservation. Sangha and laity alike do toe their line doing our bids for a better tomorrow to date. Public education has achieved its purpose for environmental concern. Consensus has been reached among Buddhist followers in China, thanks to years of education and propaganda. Many lay disciples voluntarily call for people to plant trees in addition to releasing captured animals as one of their favorite ways of practicing the dharma. Our tree-planting for environment has scaled another height. Buddhists from China, Japan and Korea have unanimously concurred beyond Chinese shores. In October 1998, delegates of the said countries jointly declared April of each year to be “tree-planting month”; thus, sealed regional consensus with concrete steps forward in environmental conservation. This signifies concerted cooperation to promote enterprises of environmental protection as well as purifying the society.