

Protecting Environment through the Teachings of Buddha

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Abstract

Recently, the word ‘environment’ is actively being used because it needs attention more than anything else. The rush to protect the environment is the minimum move one can do for oneself. Many ways of protecting the environment are discussed but until and unless people don't realise themselves to be an integral part of the environment nothing will work. Buddhism is a religion that has long recognized the interconnectedness of all things, including humans and the natural world. The paper aims to build a framework for understanding the possibilities of Buddhism in order to protect the environment. As such, Buddhism has a lot to offer in terms of promoting environmental awareness and sustainability.

The paper explores the ways in which Buddhist teachings and practices can be applied to environmental issues. For example, the practice of mindfulness can help us develop a deeper awareness of the natural world and our impact on it. Buddhist concepts such as non-attachment and non-harming can help cultivate a more sustainable relationship with the environment. The study concludes by offering a foundation to develop a new way for protecting the environment with inner self involvement. Buddhist path of moral action, mindfulness and meditation, and wisdom, the figure of the bodhisattva, who is dedicated to working to lessen the suffering of all sentient beings, serves as a model for sustaining a commitment to working toward what may seem like an impossibly lofty goal. The study demonstrates the potential for Buddhism to play a role in fostering environmental awareness and sustainability by examining the ways in which Buddhist teachings and practices can be applied to environmental challenges.

Keywords: Environment, Buddhism, Mindfulness, Sustainability, Possibilities and Challenges, Teaching and Practices, Co-existence, Meaningful Actions

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Introduction

The environmental problems faced by our earth today are unusual and unprecedented in nature. Unavoidable challenges of the environment like air depletion, air pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation and degradation of forests etc has made our earth fall into the trap of existential crisis. Interaction between biotic and abiotic components of the ecosystem over billions of years has created companionable habitat for species. However, overexploitation of natural resources has caused us to question our relation with limited natural resources. On one hand, humans connect themselves with the environment through the habitat provided by natural resources. On the other hand, humans have become the destructors of their own homes. With such realisation an urgent need to protect the environment has been discussed and decided by people around the world. However, until and unless people don't recognise themselves as an integral part of the environment nothing will work. It is a must to analyse our attitude towards the environment in an ethical manner.

The idea of doing good deeds and living in harmony with all other living things on earth needs to be reintroduced into people's minds in order to lessen the negative effects of environmental destruction (Thathong, 2012). A sense of involvement in everything that occurs on earth and a sense of responsibility for the lives of other living things are becoming increasingly essential lessons to be learned in today's society (Dorzhighushaeva & Kiplyuks, 2020). This can be achieved through the teachings of Buddhism. Buddhism is believed to have a peculiar and important contribution for discussing environmental issues with a moral and ethical treatment towards natural resources. Due to humans' intrinsic desire for material possessions and experiences to satiate them, the external pursuit of want is what drives climate change. The preservation of the environment can greatly benefit from our spiritual connection to it. But it is regrettable that people are ignoring the spiritual realm in favour of the endless greed and desire of the materialistic realm, which inevitably results in environmental devastation.

Buddhism allows us to think, analyse and recognise the environment as an integral part of one's life. Such a way of thinking would be helpful in combating climate change. This paper intends to analyse Buddhist insights and will be able to aid in this effort. It is possible to argue that the environmental crisis is also a crisis of the human soul. It has been suggested that lowering spiritual pollution will also lower natural pollution (Cremo & Goswami, 1995).

Environment and Buddhism

The term 'environment' refers to a broader domain encompassing all aspects of biology, physiology, ecology and society that have an impact on human health and well-being, either directly or indirectly. Today, when the environment is seen degraded or destroyed, humanity faces the consequences of difficulties. Environmental degradation is the term used to describe a shift in both the quantity and the quality of environmental factors that adversely impacts the existence of species, damages ecosystems, and results in extinction of organisms. Environmental deterioration is a very serious issue that has had detrimental effects in many nations. Therefore, everyone who lives on the planet has a duty to safeguard the environment and maintain it clean at all times. On a personal, local, national and global level environmental protection is needed for the good of every species and organism present on this planet (Nhat, 2019). Anthropogenic activities affect the atmosphere which further leads to many extended environmental problems. Therefore, we need to have some policies, rules, and norms that guide such human behaviour (Salako, 2017). Some reasons for environmental threats are irrational use of natural resources, outdated techniques to solve today's environmental problems, underfunding, bureaucracy crisis, extensive development of infrastructures etc has led to environmental problems to accelerate at the global level very quickly (Morgacheva & Levashova, 2021). Such anthropogenic activities are a result of a lack of direction to an increasing population and their greedy demands.

A moral commitment is required to solve environmental problems of the world where people need to have an awakened conscience. Such a fundamental change can be achieved through religious awareness which allows human beings to connect themselves with their natural world in a conscious manner. Buddhism being one such religion of the world that comes from the land of India, allows a man to focus on his spiritual problems and how he must deal with them. Looking inside one's own problems and learning to resolve them in a non-violent (ahimsa) way teaches one to understand the importance of non-violent attitude toward the external world as well. An attitude of ahimsa or non-injury provides a deeper level of realisation of our interconnectedness with other species of the world. Buddhism has always integrated itself with nature. The core of Buddhism is the environment. For instance, Bodh Gaya, a historical location, is thought to have been where the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, experienced his "great awakening" (mahabodhi; Sanskrit). Gautama Buddha, who had given up the life of a prince in order to travel and practise asceticism, was sitting in meditation beneath the Bodhi

tree (pipal tree or *ficus religiosa*) on the banks of the Phalgu River. Gautam Buddha attained his enlightenment under a tree symbolising the importance of being connected with nature. Collaborating with nature, one can work towards creating a more sustainable and regenerative relationship with the environment. Nature is not something to be controlled or dominated, but rather something to be nurtured and cared for. When one treats nature as its friend, it develops a deep appreciation for its beauty and its importance in lives.

Buddhist masters have repeatedly emphasised the value of living in harmony with nature, respecting all living things, scheduling time to meditate, leading a simple life, and using nature as a spiritual force. This is possible only when we have coordination with nature to indulge in loving-kindness, compassion, impartiality and joy. The Buddha realised during his lifetime that the idea that one is an isolated entity is a delusion. All things are related to one another, and because of our connections, we do not exist independently. This is because that is, this is not because that is not, this is born because that is born, and this dies because that dies, according to Buddha. The mind and its surroundings are understood to be interdependent and inseparable from all external and internal phenomena. Selfishness and greed are prominent examples of issues with the human mind. Therefore, rather than trying to solve material issues with cutting-edge technology, we should focus our efforts on addressing the psychological causes of environmental problems. In this regard, Buddhism can aid in resolving environmental issues. Lord Buddha taught people to live their lives in the following ways, as highlighted by Prayutto (1997) was mentioned in Thathong's article 'A spiritual dimension and environmental education: Buddhism and environmental crisis' (Thathong, 2012):

Consume less and only that which is necessary for survival. Live in harmony with the environment, other people, and other animals, and be aware of the natural laws governing the cycle of birth, ageing, illness, and death. Utilise nature wisely, and use what you learn to help people's minds and behaviour.

Buddhist Models of Protecting Environment

In his article 'Buddhism, Nature and Environment' (Bloom, 1972), Bloom mentions that "For Buddhism a man's problem does not lie outside of him but within him— in his mind, his thought, his values and their consequent actions." Therefore, spirituality must be the primary focus to understand human beings and its nature. The principles of the spiritual world must be given special consideration when resolving environmental issues. The preservation of the

environment can greatly benefit from our spiritual connection to it because it allows us to connect with the ecology. But it is regrettable that people are ignoring the spiritual realm in favour of the endless greed and desire of the materialistic realm, which invariably results in environmental destruction. To mitigate the negative effects of such a phenomenon, people must once again embrace the idea of doing good deeds and living in harmony with all other species. All of the world's major religions can play a significant role in this regard because they all share the values of encouraging good deeds, condemning bad deeds, and fostering peace and happiness for all people (Devkota, 2020).

The Bodhisattva ideal has proven to be motivating for eco-Buddhists in an era of climate instability where it can feel like one's individual actions are meaningless even though everyone's individual actions taken collectively are catastrophic. By emulating the Buddhist path of moral action, mindfulness and meditation, and wisdom, the figure of the Bodhisattva, who is dedicated to working to lessen the suffering of all sentient beings, serves as a model for sustaining a commitment to working toward what may seem like an impossibly lofty goal (Edelglass, 2021).

The Aggañña-Suttanta, the Lotus Sutra, and the teachings on Gaia, mindfulness, compassion, interdependence and impermanence are all powerful examples of ancient Buddhist wisdom which are relevant today in bringing balance and change, in harmony with the earth (Trone, 2018). Unquestionably, headless consumption of goods and services and reckless exploitation of natural resources are examples of human behaviours motivated by greed (lobha) or aversion (dosa), which have both direct and indirect negative effects on the environment. It is more challenging to resolve the issue because egoistic views and beliefs (ditthi) also serve to perpetuate the gravity of greed and aversion (Payutto, 1994). This is where Buddhism can play an important role.

Education on Environment from Buddhist Perspectives

Environmental education on the other hand is the need of the hour. Environment and its sustainability can only be done when people have basic knowledge about nature. The ecosystem, biodiversity, the ecology and the atmosphere are subjectives which must be taught to students so that they can learn and contribute to Mother Earth. Environmental education assists students in creating a personal spiritual connection with the environment, which increases their desire and willingness to take environmental action (Skamp, 1991). Intriguingly,

the Lord Buddha frequently drew parallels between natural phenomena and human behaviour to illustrate and explain his teachings, which is yet another example of his insight into the relationship between humans and nature (Thathong, 2012). Buddha's emphasis on the peaceful coexistence of people and nature, for instance, shows that he is aware of how interdependent all living things are with their surroundings.

Buddhism is recognised in its teachings as one of the top religions for putting forth concepts related to sustainability and environmental protection. These ideas can be found in Buddhist teachings as well as in its ritualistic structure and modes of daily practice. Studying Buddhist philosophical concepts regarding environmental preservation and sustainable development is crucial for both theory and practise (Nhat, 2019). A systematic relationship between man and nature is described in the teachings of Buddhism.

For instance, the theory of causation (*pratītyasamutpāda*) also called karmic causality. People and nature coexist in harmony for the sake of both their survival and development. Sadly, if one party is depressed, everyone is impacted. All things in the world are different and plentiful, but they all coexist in a partnership that provides support and effects. Both the cause and the effect of the other's existence are their shared presence. Everything and every phenomenon in the world exists as a result of specific circumstances or causes (Nhat, 2019). Eventually, any person who believes to be non- nuisance for the future generation must get the knowledge of what Buddhists call 'mindfulness'. A good way to prevent harming the environment and other living things is to be "mindful" of how your actions affect the rest of the world. What many Buddhists think is that the world won't return to peace, harmony, and balance until this indifference stops and we learn to be mindful and compassionate. People will then be able to live happier lives and be free from the detrimental effects of craving as a result.

In the world that is now being disturbed, disrupted and degraded, Buddhism must be followed. Only teachings such as calmness, compassion and connection are widely visible in Buddhism. As the Dalai Lama has pointed out:

We are facing significant environmental challenges, and it is crucial that we take concrete action to address them. However, meaningful change can only happen when individuals and communities come together to take responsibility for their actions and work towards sustainable solutions.

Buddhist teachings encourage a sense of collective responsibility and emphasise the importance of working towards the common good. Therefore, Buddhism can be a valuable resource for individuals and communities who are looking to take action to protect the environment and create a more sustainable future. Ultimately, the teachings of Buddhism can help individuals cultivate a greater sense of awareness, compassion, and responsibility towards the environment, and inspire them to take meaningful action to address the environmental challenges we face today.

The idea that nature and all other created things exist for the benefit of mankind is completely rejected by Buddhism. Although not in a position of dominance, humanity is a vital component of the cosmos' order. Like all other sentient beings, humans are subject to the natural order of the universe. People must learn to have a command on their actions. Right action, a path mentioned in Buddhism includes the precept- “abstain from harming sentient beings”. In the world where war has become a normal thing people must rise in bulk to attain ahimsa. Wherein poaching, hunting sports, killing of animals directly or indirectly, cutting trees, polluting the environment or exploiting any being must be abstained. Owing ignorance, greed, and a lack of regard for the other living things on the planet, nature and natural resources are being destroyed. If world peace does not materialise and environmental destruction proceeds at the current rate, this lack of respect even extends to the descendants of the first humans who inhabited the planet. These descendants will inherit a planet that has been severely degraded. Consider how burning fossil fuels causes global warming, an activity that at first glance seems relatively benign, but evidence suggests that if it is not curbed in the coming years, it may reach an uncomfortably high level that poses a serious threat to much of life on earth.

Conclusion

In Buddhism, the natural environment is considered a fundamental aspect of life and is therefore given great importance. Buddhist teachings emphasise the interdependence and interconnectedness of all living beings, including humans and the natural world. Therefore, the well-being of the natural environment is crucial for the well-being of all living beings. The concept of interdependence also highlights the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions and the impact they have on the environment. Buddhist teachings encourage practising mindfulness and compassion towards the environment, which can lead to sustainable living practices. In addition, Buddhism's principle of non-harming (ahimsa) encourages a lifestyle that is in harmony with nature, including reducing waste and consumption, and promoting

conservation and preservation of natural resources. Many Buddhist organisations and communities around the world are actively engaged in environmental conservation and sustainability initiatives, such as promoting renewable energy, reducing carbon footprints, and protecting natural habitats. Overall, Buddhism's teachings on interdependence, compassion, and non-harming provide a strong philosophical foundation for environmental protection and sustainable development. However, for Buddhism, just as for many other religions interested in the cause of ecological sustainability, it is even more significant when it is the philosophical perspectives in the original Buddhist teachings where it has discussed this topic in great detail from both a worldview and a religious perspective. Buddhists believe that human greed and unbridled desire are to blame for the problems with the environment.

From this perspective, any effective environmental protection strategies must take into account the psychological aspects of human nature, and work to promote greater awareness, compassion, and wisdom. This might involve education and awareness-raising campaigns to help people understand the impact of their actions on the environment, as well as programs to promote mindfulness and well-being in individuals and communities. The ultimate objective of such tactics would be to motivate people to lead more sustainable and balanced lives, in tune with nature, and with a deeper feeling of connection and obligation to other living things and the environment.

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