

## Buddhism and Ecology: Theory and Practice

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Bhikkhu Bodhi (1987:vii) identifies several of the core principles, values, and practices that are most relevant in Buddhism and ecology: “With its philosophical insight into the interconnectedness and thoroughgoing interdependence of all conditioned things, with its thesis that happiness is to be found through the restraint of desire in a life of contentment rather than through the proliferation of desire, with its goal of enlightenment through renunciation and contemplation and its ethic of non-injury and boundless loving-kindness for all beings, Buddhism provides all the essential elements for a relationship to the natural world characterized by respect, care, and compassion.”

*Pratitya-samutpada* or *paticca-samuppada* refers to mutual causality, the interconnectedness and interdependence of all conditioned things. The origin of all phenomena is dependent on causes and conditions. Nothing originates or exists alone or by its own agency. This is affirmed by an “Earth Gatha” from Thích Nhất Hạnh (1990, p. 195):

Water flows from the high mountains,

Water runs deep in the Earth,

Miraculously water comes to us, and sustains all life.

*Dukkha* (suffering) is the central theme in the Four Noble Truths discovered by the Buddha during his enlightenment (see Table 1, Drda 2011). *Samudaya*, the second truth, recognizes that the ultimate cause of suffering is ignorance and desire. A correlate is that genuine happiness is achieved through restraining desire and pursuing voluntary simplicity.

As Peter Timmerman (1992:74) cautions: “How can we survive on a planet of ten billion points of infinite greed?” Several publications have critiqued the rampant materialism and consumerism of modern Western and other societies from a Buddhist perspective (Badiner 2002, Kaza 2005, Payne 2010).

*Anatman* or *anatta* (not-self) is the goal of enlightenment through detachment. Monks and nuns are supposed to forego the usual materialism of the daily world to pursue voluntary simplicity and poverty, satisfying only their essential needs of food, water, robe, shelter, and medicine. In effect, this significantly reduces their ecological footprint (environmental impact).

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Table 1 - The Four Noble Truths

1. All existence is suffering
2. Suffering is caused by ignorance and desire
3. Suffering can end
4. The way to end suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path

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The Noble Eightfold Path is the set of pragmatic measures that the Buddha taught his followers to pursue enlightenment and ultimately reach *nirvana*, the liberation from suffering with its endless birth and death cycle (*samsara*) (Table 2). Each of its eight principles is relevant to nature to the degree that it is correlated with extending nonviolence, compassion, and loving-kindness to all beings, not only humans (Koizumi 2010). This is illustrated by the Discourse on Loving-Kindness (*Metta Sutta*):

“Let all creatures indeed be happy (and) secure; let them be happy-minded.

Whatever living creatures there are, moving or still without exception, whichever are long or large, or middle-sized or short, small or great, whichever are seen or unseen; whichever live far or near, whether they already exist or are going to be, let all creatures be happy-minded” (Lopez 2014:248).

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Table 2 - The Noble Eightfold Path

1. Right understanding
2. Right thought
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood

6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right meditation

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*Ahimsa* is the ethic of non-harming or non-injury, the first of the five precepts (*pancasila*). This means not only to avoid causing any harm, but also to practice compassion and loving-kindness toward all beings (Chapple 1996).

*Karuna* means compassion and *metta* is loving-kindness. The primary aim of Buddhists is to pursue boundless loving-kindness toward all beings. This is described in the *Jatakas*, a collection of 547 accounts of the Buddha's previous incarnations. Most of these parables are about an animal that sacrifices its own life to save others. The *Jatakas* engage the pivotal Buddhist virtues of wisdom, nonviolence, compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity. Also they demonstrate the interdependence among beings (Appleton 2010, Sahni 2008).

The Buddha was enlightened during lengthy and intensive meditating under a Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*). Furthermore, from his birth to his death critical junctures in his life were associated with trees. Throughout his life the Buddha frequently resided, meditated, and taught in groves of trees, forests, mountains, and caves. Many of his followers have emulated this (Sponsel 2012:31-42).

The Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1998) explains the relationship between Buddhism and nature:

“Everything arising out of Dhamma, everything born from Dhamma, is what we mean by “nature.” This is what is absolute and has the highest power in itself. Nature has at least four fundamental aspects.... nature itself; the law of nature; the duty that human beings must carry out toward nature; and the result that comes with performing this duty according to the law of nature.”

Alienation from nature is recognized by ecopsychologists as a major source of illness, emotional as well as physical. Human health and that of nature are interdependent. Various programs developed by Buddhists, among others, include experience and meditation in nature as a source of healing for individuals and families (Coleman 2006).

The *Sangha* is the Buddhist community of monks and nuns, and more generally, also of laypersons. Among the more than 200 rules for monks in the monastic code are specific measures to practice the non-harm of other beings. It is a serious offense for a monk to intentionally cut, burn, or kill any living plant. Monks are even supposed to filter or at least examine the water that they use for any purpose to avoid consciously harming any visible organisms. Also monks are prohibited from polluting water in any way.

Vegetarianism, while optional for most Buddhists, is a way to reduce the harm that one causes to other beings (Bodhipaksa 2009, Ricard 2014). It is also the most ecologically sound diet because it reduces one's ecological footprint. The lower one eats on the food chain from plants to animals, the less energy is consumed, and the less waste is produced.

*Upaya* is skillful means in teaching and practicing the *Dharma*, the Buddha's teachings. For instance, in northern Thailand and elsewhere, some environmental activist monks symbolically ordain large trees to promote forest conservation. The saffron-colored cloth customarily worn by monks is ceremonially wrapped around a tree trunk to signal its sacredness. In effect, the tree becomes a surrogate monk, and thereby is usually protected (Darlington 2012). To kill a monk is the worst crime in Buddhism.

Worldwide numerous Buddhist centers pursue some combination of conserving energy and other resources, recycling, reducing waste and pollution, organic farming, vegetarianism, and voluntary simplicity (e.g., Roberts 2009). Moreover, Buddhists are increasingly addressing the reality of the existential threat of global climate change (Dunne and Goleman 2018, Stanley, et al., 2009).

The enormous amount and diversity of activity in the arena of Buddhism and ecology is apparent from a search of associated key words on Google.com. For more on this subject see Barash 2014, Johnston 2006, Kaza 2019, Kaza and Kraft 2000, Loy 2018, Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel 2017, and Tucker and Williams 1997.

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