

# Buddhism and Ecology



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## ABSTRACT

The main concern of the Buddha's teachings is to find out the reason and remedy to resolve the predicament of human suffering or Dukkha. More precisely the Buddhist doctrine deals with the factors that create human dissatisfaction and all types of afflictions in general.

On the path to reach his goal or the realization of Nirvana, the Buddhist doctrine promotes : patience, generosity, nonviolence, solidarity, equanimity, understanding, tolerance, wisdom, compassion, love and kindness towards all creatures and forms of lives without any distinctions.

These are the ethical values over which Buddhism stands.

In the second Noble Truth , the Buddha explain the cause of Dukkha with the Pali word "Tanha", which means craving or constant thirst which lies at the bottom of all human motivations and desires.

In the Aggañña Sutta (DN27) of the Pali Canon, the Buddha describes the beginning of Life on Earth and how human activities changed the primordial natural landscape. Devine beings felt.

*Keywords:* Dukkha, Nirvana, nonviolence

## Introduction

In the Buddhist mythological world, the earth flourishes naturally, but desire and attachment created by selfishness was responsible of the negative impact of humans on earth.

In short, human actions motivated by desire and craving destroys the natural order of things.

These tendencies basing its modus operandi over a false concept of self existing “I” creating de sense of “ me, my, mine ” and consequently it develop : I want, I like, I do not like it, I hate.

This strong sense of “I”, propels human beings to pursue their objects of desires and on the way to do so, they protect and feed “ Ego” needs of sensuous gratification and self preservation.

## This is perhaps the most striking idea of Buddhism.

Understanding the role of the “Ego” is a pivotal issue because in Buddhist doctrine it is considered the source of all evil actions.

Humans and general species co-exists in terms of the principle of mutual codependence, therefore the prevalence of autonomous self which develop strong selfishness over or against the “other”, creates, among others, the ecological unbalance.

Buddhist ethic rejects hierarchical dominance of one human over another or humans over nature and promote the basis of a universal compassion that respects all forms of lives rather then conquering it.

The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh once said:

*“We human beings classify other forms of lives as “Nature” acting as we are not part of it”.<sup>1</sup>*

In Buddhist view, people are part of nature and by abusing the environment, people abuse themselves as well as all forms of lives.

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<sup>1</sup>The Path of Compassion: Writing on Socially Engaged Buddhism, 1988,41.

For contemporary engaged Buddhists like H.H. the Dalai Lama for example, a sense of responsibility rooted in compassion lies at the very heart of an ecological ethic:

*“The world grows smaller and smaller, more and more interdependent ... today more than ever before life must be characterized by a sense of universal responsibility, not only ... human to human but also human to other forms of life.”*  
(*Compassionate Economy*, Amsterdam 1990 )

The teachings of the *Buddha* encompasses all living beings of the six realms, animate or inanimate. Considering so, Buddhism can be described as no discriminative spiritual tradition where the ethical values and respect for all lives are not restricted to human only. In such sense, as Buddhism sustains the interdependent relationship of all phenomenas, is strongly concerned about the environmental issues.

As Peter Harvey says: *“The environment is thus held to respond to the state of human morality: is not a neutral stage on which humans merely strut, or a sterile container unaffected by human actions. This clearly has ecological ramifications.”*<sup>2</sup>

Though change is inherent in nature, environmentalist posit that natural ecological unbalance processes are directly produced by human unethical behaviors.

The Buddhist doctrine of interdependent origination links together all forms all lives stating :

*“On the arising of this, that arises; on the cessation of this, that ceases (SN12.61).”*<sup>3</sup>

The *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which is considered one of the most influential *Mahāyānā Sūtra* of East Asian Buddhism, describes a cosmos of infinite realms upon realms, mutually containing one another.

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<sup>2</sup> An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics, pag. 152/153

<sup>3</sup> Assutavā Sutta, SN 12.61

As Sogyal Rimpoche says : “ *Modern science speaks to us of an extraordinary range of interrelations. Ecologists know that a tree burning in the Amazon rain forest alters in some way the air breathed by a citizen of Paris, and that the trembling of a butterfly’s wing in Yucatan affects the life of a fern in the Hebrides. Biologists are beginning to uncover the fantastic and complex dance of genes that creates personality and identity, a dance that stretches far into the past and shows that each so-called “identity” is composed of a swirl of different influences. Physicists have introduced us to the world of the quantum particle, a world astonishingly like that described by Buddha in his image of the glittering net that unfolds across the universe. Just like the jewels in the net, all particles exist potentially as different combinations of other particles.* “

So when the reality is analyzed, we find that it has no more reality than a dream or like an illusion, as *Buddha* said:

*Know all things to be like this:  
A mirage, a cloud castle,  
A dream, an apparition,  
Without essence, but with qualities that can be seen.*<sup>4</sup>

The causal tenet of interdependence is an ecological vision that integrates all aspects of the ecosphere. The fundamental doctrine of dependent co-arising or dependent origination, teaches that existence of any single thing is conditional to the existence of all other things, very condition follows another and all are part of an orderly sequence of cause and effect.

In the view of the Thai monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: “*The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise... then we can build a noble environment. If our lives are not based on this truth, then we shall perish.*”

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<sup>4</sup>Samadhirajasutra

The image of the universe as a vast web of many-sided jewels each constituted by the reflections of all the other jewels in the web and each jewel being the image of the entire universe symbolizes the world interdependency.

Our birth and existence is dependent on causes, effects and conditions, inextricably linkages denying us any autonomous existence. We and all the Nature are inseparable, entwined, one.

Humans are seen as having an effect on their environment not only by their physical actions but specially through the moral or immoral qualities of these.

Buddhist Karma<sup>5</sup> and ethics is focus on human actions and its consequences. Even if the inclusion of plants and animals in Buddhist soteriology may be important because it attributes value to nonhuman forms of life, nonetheless, humans deeds have the primary responsibility in creating the present ecological crisis.

The concepts of *Karma* and rebirth, integrate the existential sense of a shared common condition of all sentient life-forms. Every act of man has an effect on the universe. Thus man is part of the process and is subjected to all the rules of Nature.

The law of *Karma* ultimately places mind's decisions responsible of all consecutive actions performed by body and speech, considering mind resolve as the first cause.

It is the mind which makes and shapes our personal and global destiny.

H.H.the Dalai Lama states : *"If we develop good and considerate qualities within our own minds, our activities will naturally cease to threaten the continued survival of life on Earth."* (Badiner, 1990)

Such a mind should be freed from the three poisons of greed, aversion, and delusion-ignorance, which are the bases of our problems.

In his book, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*, Al Gore says:

*"The more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual..."*

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<sup>5</sup>Intentional action performed by body, speech and mind

In materialist society consumer goods are produced in speed and quantity far beyond the real needs of people, as well as machines that replace manpower. Advertisement and promotion media try to enhance the desire and craving for a variety of goods and throw-away products which are wasting our resources unnecessarily.

This underlying a short term orientation that is principally concerned with economic benefits of fews, rather than with long-range ecological balance considerations beneficial to all.

*“Science and technology have given humankind powerful means for research and development. ....Yet much of science and technology has been used to promote industrial development for mass consumption and military use with little concern to all living beings and the environment” (Henning and Mangun, 1991).*

Al Gore considers modern civilization and society to be dysfunctional and addictive in terms of the environment: *“The disharmony in our relationship to the earth, which stems in part from our addiction to a pattern of consuming ever-larger quantities of the resources of the earth, is now manifest in successive crises, each marking a more destructive clash between our civilization and the natural world..... rainforests, ozone layer, climatic balance, species extinction, etc... all these suggest the increasing violent collision between human civilization and the natural world.” (Gore, 1992)*

As Manfred Max Neef suggests : *“The Economy of diversity, interdependency and solidarity is an Economy which recognizes the economical development as a subsystem of a bigger one: the Biosphere.”*<sup>6</sup>

The pursuit of happiness through consumerism and materialism and reaching the upmost Buddhism happiness state or *Nirvana* are two different paths.

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<sup>6</sup>Chilean Economist, he wrote “Experiences in Barefoot Economy (1981) and Human scale development (1991)” among others

## **The teaching of the Buddha is mainly aiming for human ethical improvement.**

Man becoming an ethical wholesome person by the elimination of bad qualities, desires and attachment within. Buddhism promotes social stability, peace and a balance relationship among all living beings and with the environment by teaching morality and the practice of Meditation. The five precepts<sup>7</sup> and the wholesome deeds, Paramita<sup>8</sup>, are good examples. These can be considered as the ethical foundation of a peaceful and harmonious society since Buddhism does not distinguish your good or my good, good is good for all.

Growing spiritually in Buddhism is understood as the pursuit of peace, contentment, equanimity and rejoice through an inward development which rises as a consequence of mind's control and his purification from unwholesome behavioral patterns.

The mind state of awareness and mindfulness has to do with the capacity of deactivating our "Ego" which in turn purify our selfishness repetitive tendencies like desire and attachment. Byproducts of meditation practice are : patience, generosity, tolerance, solidarity, love, equanimity, compassion and kindness among others. This give to our lives a sense of meaning and purpose beyond material success, making us understand we are part of and interdependent inward and outward reality. Those special moments provide also an important source of strength and perspective during difficult situations.

Besides, we will understand and bear in mind that reaching a balance, solving conflicts and problems associated human behaviors it requires differentiate from what we need and what we want.

In the different stages of Eightfold Path<sup>9</sup> (SN 45.8) the Buddha point out that "Right" qualities are needed to reach human ethical improvements and mind purification. Specially in terms of "Right Livelihood"<sup>10</sup> he asks us to make a difference, to draw a line, between what we need and what we want. To strive for our needs and modify our wants.

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<sup>7</sup>No killing, no lying, no stealing, no having improper sexual intercourses and no taking any intoxicants

<sup>8</sup>Patience, Ethics and Discipline, Generosity, Effort and Diligence, Meditation and Wisdom

<sup>9</sup>The fourth of the Noble Truths. Magga-vibhanga Sutta SN 45.8

<sup>10</sup>"Abstain from making one's livelihood a profession that brings harm to other" Walpola Rahula

He tells us that our essential and fundamental needs can be fulfilled but our wants are endless like a bottomless pit.

Over 2500 years ago the *Buddha* was born in a forest and the decisive events in his life occurred in natural settings. Buddha was born, attained enlightenment and died under trees, giving rise to an environmental ethic with a concern for nature and all his form of lives.

If we wish to strive for a better world, we must begin by transforming ourselves ... by discovering our true inherently *Buddha* (awake) Nature.

To be an enlightened being means to be completely awake and free from “Ego” dictatorship selfishness.

This it might takes time, no doubts it will be a long and difficult path but, is a definitive solution that this ancient tradition is offering to the contemporary world.

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