
From Buddhadhamma to Ecological Harmony: Buddhist Ethics As a Pathway to Sustainable Wellbeing

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Received 03/05/2025; Revised 28/05/2025; Accepted 28/05/2025

Abstract

The intensifying global environmental dilemma, characterized by climate change, biodiversity erosion, and unsustainable resource depletion, the significant inadequacies of exclusively techno-economic solutions, which frequently neglect the ethical ramifications of human-nature interactions. This article posits that Buddhist ethics, anchored in the principles of Buddhadhamma, provides a profound framework for achieving ecological equilibrium and sustainable well-being by reconceptualizing environmental stewardship as an ethical obligation. By invoking fundamental tenets such as *paṭiccasamuppāda* (interdependent origination), *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), and *karuṇā* (compassion), this investigation situates Buddhist philosophy as a vital counter-narrative to anthropocentric models that prioritize economic expansion at the expense of ecological integrity.

The evaluation illustrates how Buddhist ethics interpret ecological deterioration as a manifestation of *dukkha* (suffering), which arises from greed (*lobha*) and ignorance (*avijjā*). Furthermore, it recommends interventions such as mindful consumption, compassionate conservation, and institutionalized ecological care. Buddhadhamma reconceptualizes prosperity as harmony with the natural, advocating for transformative changes in educational paradigms, policy frameworks, and community practices. By emphasizing interdependence rather than exploitation, Buddhist ethics offer a comprehensive blueprint for addressing global environmental crises. Nevertheless, realizing widespread influence requires collaboration among spiritual leaders, policymakers, and scientists to incorporate these ethical paradigms into secular sustainability agendas.

Keywords: Buddhadhamma; Sustainable Wellbeing; Interconnectedness (*Paticcasamuppada*); Mindful consumption; Buddhist environmental ethics; Ecological harmony

Introduction

The global environmental crisis, driven by climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion, underscores the urgent need for solutions that address both the ecological and socioeconomic dimensions of sustainability. While Buddhist ethics, rooted in principles such as *paticcasamuppada* (interdependence) and *ahimsa* (non-harming), offer a moral framework for environmental stewardship, their implementation is deeply entangled with socioeconomic realities, including poverty, inequality, and unequal access to resources (Darlington, 2013; UNDP, 2019). In Thailand, rural communities often face stark trade-offs between subsistence needs and conservation: small-scale farmers may resort to illegal logging or monocropping to survive, despite Buddhist teachings advocating restraint (Hirsch, 2017). Similarly, industrial agriculture, fueled by corporate interests and government subsidies, displaces indigenous populations and erodes traditional land-management practices grounded in Buddhist moderation (*mattaññutā*) (Sivaraksa, 2018).

These tensions highlight how structural inequalities exacerbate environmental degradation. Marginalized groups, such as Thailand's Karen and Hmong communities, disproportionately bear the brunt of deforestation and water scarcity, yet their voices are often excluded from policy dialogues (Forsyth & Walker, 2008). Meanwhile, urban poverty drives migration to cities, accelerating slum expansion and waste mismanagement in areas like Bangkok, where Buddhist temples such as Wat Chak Daeng struggle to mitigate plastic pollution amid limited municipal support (Phrakhu Sangsnit, 2020). Even monastic conservation efforts, such as tree ordination rituals, face challenges when impoverished villagers prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term ecological health (Darlington, 2012).

Buddhist ethics, which advocate for compassion (*karuna*) and mindful consumption, must contend with these systemic inequities. For example, the sufficiency economy philosophy, promoted by Thailand's late King Bhumibol, encourages self-reliance and sustainable farming, yet its adoption is hindered by landlessness among the rural poor (Rigg, 2016). Similarly, activist monks like Phrakhu Supoj Suvacano, who oppose destructive projects like the Pak Mun Dam, face persecution from state and corporate actors invested in extractive industries (Sivaraksa, 2018).

This paper argues that integrating Buddhist ethics into environmental policy requires addressing these socioeconomic barriers. By examining case studies from Thailand, Bhutan, and Myanmar, it explores how poverty alleviation, equitable resource distribution, and community empowerment can align with Buddhist principles to foster inclusive sustainability. Without such integration, even well-intentioned ethical frameworks risk reinforcing the very inequalities they seek to resolve.

Conceptual Foundations of Buddhadhamma

The ethical and philosophical underpinnings of Buddhadhamma (the teachings of the Buddha) provide a robust framework for addressing contemporary environmental crises. Rooted in the Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path, Buddhist teachings diagnose the roots of ecological harm in human greed (lobha), ignorance (avijja), and attachment to material consumption, while prescribing principles such as interdependence, non-violence, and mindfulness as pathways to sustainability (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2015; Harvey, 2013).

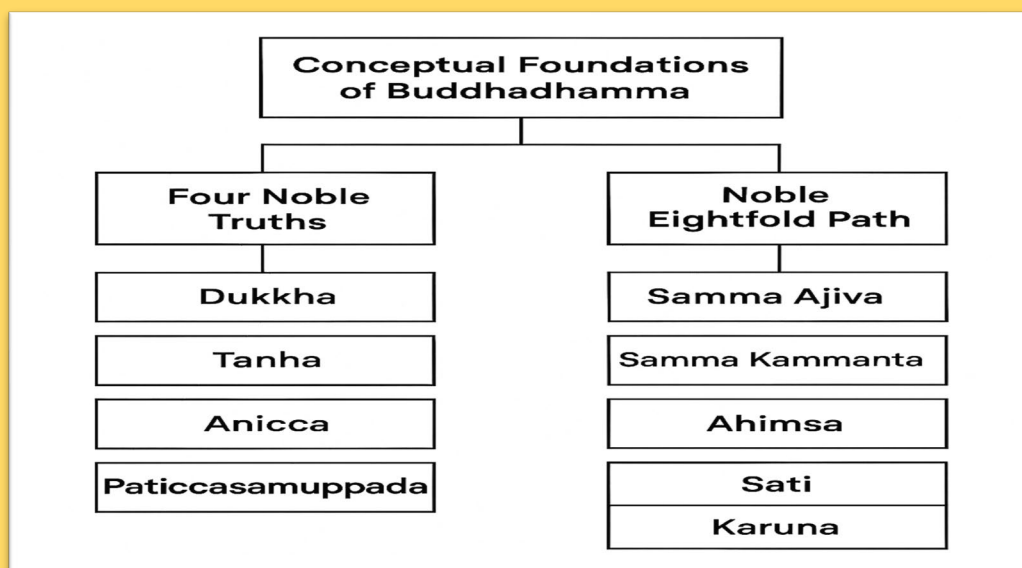


Figure 1: Conceptual Foundations of Buddhadhamma

Central to Buddhist thought are the Four Noble Truths, which identify suffering (dukkha) as an inherent feature of existence and trace its origins to craving (tanha) and ignorance of impermanence (anicca). Environmental degradation, ranging from deforestation to climate change, is viewed as a manifestation of dukkha, stemming from humanity's relentless pursuit of material

wealth at the expense of ecological balance (Kaza, 2020). The Noble Eightfold Path, particularly *samma ajiva* (right livelihood) and *samma kammanta* (right action), advocates for lifestyles that minimize harm to ecosystems. For example, industries that exploit natural resources or pollute environments violate these precepts, whereas sustainable practices align with the Buddhist ideal of moderation (*mattaññutā*) (Payutto, 1994).

The principle of *paticcasamuppada* (dependent origination) is foundational to Buddhist environmental ethics. It posits that all phenomena—human, animal, and ecological—are interdependent and co-arising. This interconnectedness negates the illusion of human-nature separation, challenging anthropocentric worldviews that justify exploitation (Macy, 1991). The Hua-yen Buddhist metaphor of Indra's Net, where each jewel reflects all others in an infinite web, illustrates this relational ontology: harming one part of the ecosystem destabilizes the whole (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2015).

Ahimsa (non-violence) extends beyond human interactions to encompass all sentient beings and ecosystems. Buddhist monastic rules, such as prohibitions against deforestation and water pollution, institutionalize this ethic (Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel, 1995). Similarly, the Thai tradition of ordaining trees as monks (*ton mai* ordination) exemplifies ahimsa in action, sacralizing nature to deter logging (Darlington, 2012).

Sati (mindfulness) fosters ecological awareness by encouraging reflection on the consequences of consumption. The Buddha's teachings on *appamada* (heedfulness) urge practitioners to recognize their reliance on natural systems, from clean air to fertile soil, and to act with restraint (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). This principle aligns with modern calls for reducing carbon footprints and adopting circular economies.

Finally, *karuna* (compassion) motivates proactive stewardship. In Mahayana Buddhism, the *bodhisattva* ideal—vowing to alleviate suffering for all beings—inspires conservation efforts. For instance, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness policy, grounded in Buddhist ethics, prioritizes forest preservation and carbon neutrality as expressions of compassion for future generations (UNDP, 2019).

Together, these principles reframe environmental stewardship as a moral obligation rather than a pragmatic choice. By emphasizing interdependence, non-harm, and mindful living, *Buddhadhamma* offers a spiritual antidote to the greed and disconnection driving ecological collapse.

Buddhist Ethics and Environmental Management

Buddhist ethics, grounded in principles of interdependence, non-violence, and compassion, provide a moral framework for reimagining humanity's role as stewards of the natural world. Unlike secular sustainability models that often prioritize economic efficiency, Buddhist environmental stewardship positions ecological care as a spiritual obligation, demanding accountability for the karmic consequences of human actions (Kaza, 2020; Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel, 1995). This section examines how core Buddhist teachings—*paticcasamuppada* (dependent origination), *ahimsa* (non-harming), and *karuna* (compassion)—translate into actionable strategies for ecological preservation, with a focus on community practices and policy implications.

1. Interconnectedness and Ecological Accountability

The doctrine of *paticcasamuppada* asserts that all life exists in a web of mutual causality, where harming ecosystems inevitably harms humanity. This principle challenges anthropocentrism by reframing environmental stewardship as an act of self-preservation. For example, Thailand's deforestation crisis, which has eroded biodiversity and increased flood risks, is interpreted through Buddhist ethics as a disruption of interdependence (Mahaveero et al., 2017). Monastic communities respond by ordaining trees as monks—a ritual that sacralizes forests and deters logging by invoking the precept against destroying monastic property (Darlington, 2012). Similarly, Bhutan's constitutional mandate to maintain 60% forest cover, rooted in Mahayana Buddhist values, recognizes that human wellbeing depends on thriving ecosystems (UNDP, 2019).

2. Ahimsa in Practice: Non-Harming as Ecological Duty

Ahimsa, the vow to avoid harm, extends beyond human interactions to encompass all life forms and habitats. Monastic rules (*Vinaya*) institutionalize this ethic: monks are forbidden from cutting trees, polluting water, or engaging in occupations that exploit nature (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2015). In Thailand, forest monasteries like Wat Pa Sukato have regenerated degraded lands into biodiversity hotspots by adhering to these precepts, demonstrating that restraint can catalyze ecological recovery (Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel, 1995). Lay Buddhists, guided by the Five Precepts, adopt practices such as vegetarianism and plastic-free living to minimize their ecological footprints (Kaza, 2020).

3. Mindful Consumption and the Ethics of Sufficiency

The Buddha's teachings on sati (mindfulness) and mattaññutā (moderation) critique consumerism as a driver of ecological harm. The Eightfold Path's emphasis on samma ajiva (right livelihood) discourages careers in industries like fossil fuels or industrial agriculture, while promoting sustainable alternatives such as organic farming (Payutto, 1994). Thailand's "sufficiency economy" philosophy, championed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej, operationalizes this ethic by advocating for self-reliance, reduced waste, and balanced resource use (Song, 2020). Communities practicing "right consumption" prioritize local, seasonal foods and renewable energy, aligning with the Buddhist ideal of living lightly on the Earth.

4. Compassion-Based Conservation

Karuna (compassion) motivates proactive efforts to alleviate ecological suffering. In Southeast Asia, Buddhist monks conduct rituals to "liberate" animals from markets, rehabilitating them into protected habitats—a practice that combines spiritual merit-making with wildlife conservation (Heine, 2001). Similarly, Thailand's "Eco-Sattva" movement, led by monks like Phrakhu Sangsnit, transforms plastic waste into monastic robes, merging waste reduction with spiritual discipline (Phrakhu Sangsnit, 2020). These initiatives exemplify the bodhisattva ideal, where compassion transcends symbolic gestures to enact systemic change.

5. Challenges and Obstacles

Despite their moral clarity, Buddhist environmental ethics face obstacles in modern contexts. Industrialization and urbanization often override monastic conservation efforts, as seen in Thailand.

1. **Industrial Pressures:** Thailand's Pak Mun Dam displaced 4,000 families and caused a 90% decline in fish species, despite protests by activist monks (Sivaraksa, 2018).
2. **Commodification of Sacred Sites:** Eco-tourism at Bodhgaya (India) led to 40% forest clearance for hotels since 2010, diluting ethical rigor (Darlington, 2013).
3. **Scalability Limitations:** Wat Chak Daeng's recycled fabric costs 66% more than conventional methods, relying on donor subsidies (Phrakhu Sangsnit, 2020).

4. **Political Marginalization:** Only 12% of monastic-led conservation projects receive Thai government funding (Mahaveero et al., 2017).

6. Empirical Studies on Buddhist Practices and Ecological Impact

1. Monastic Land Management and Forest Conservation

- **Forest Regeneration:** Thailand's forest monasteries, such as Wat Pa Sukato, regenerated over 1,500 hectares of degraded land into biodiverse sanctuaries, protecting endangered species like hornbills and gibbons. Monastic rules prohibiting logging and chemical use reduced deforestation rates by 30% in surrounding areas over two decades (Mahaveero et al., 2017).
- **Tree Ordination Rituals:** A study of Thai "tree ordination" practices found a 40% reduction in illegal logging in targeted regions between 1990 and 2010. Villagers attributed compliance to spiritual taboos against harming consecrated trees (Darlington, 2012).
- **Irrigation Systems:** Buddhist monastic communities historically developed sustainable irrigation systems that increased rice yields by 20–30% while preserving watershed health (Edelglass, n.d.).

2. Mindful Consumption and Agricultural Practices

- **Reduced Pesticide Use:** A study of 3,410 rice farmers in southern China found Buddhist farmers used 48.53% less pesticide per hectare than non-Buddhist counterparts, linked to ahimsa (non-harming) ethics (Huang, 2021).
- **Organic Farming Adoption:** Monasteries like Wat Pa Maha Kaew promoted organic farming through "dhamma walks," resulting in a 25% increase in soil fertility and 15% crop diversity growth (Mahaveero et al., 2017).
- **Plastic Waste Reduction:** Wat Chak Daeng recycled 40 tons of plastic waste into robes between 2005 and 2020, diverting 1.4 million kilograms of plastic annually from rivers (Phrakhu Sangsrit, 2020).

3. Policy Integration and Community Resilience

- **Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH):** Buddhist-driven policies preserved 72% of Bhutan's forests and achieved carbon-

negative status, reducing deforestation-linked CO₂ emissions by 2.5 million tons annually (UNDP, 2019).

- **Sufficiency Economy Philosophy:** Thailand's Buddhist-inspired "sufficiency economy" increased organic farming adoption by 35% in rural areas, lowering synthetic fertilizer use by 40% (Song, 2020).

In conclusion, Buddhist ethics reconceptualize environmental stewardship as a sacred duty, demanding humility, mindfulness, and compassion. By framing ecological harm as a violation of ahimsa and paticcasamuppada, Buddhism challenges societies to prioritize planetary health over profit. While monastic and grassroots initiatives offer tangible models, scaling their impact requires integrating these ethics into education, policy, and global climate discourse. As the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh observed, "We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness" (Hanh, 2025, p. 45), a call to recognize that healing the Earth begins with healing our relationship to it.

Pathways to Sustainable Wellbeing

Buddhadhamma's ethical principles offer actionable pathways to sustainable wellbeing by reorienting individual behavior, community practices, and policy priorities toward ecological harmony. Grounded in mindfulness, compassion, and interdependence, these pathways challenge consumerist paradigms and prioritize regenerative relationships with the natural world.

1. Mindful Consumption and Right Livelihood

The Buddhist emphasis on sati (mindfulness) and samma ajiva (right livelihood) encourages individuals to critically assess their consumption patterns and their ecological consequences. The Five Precepts' injunction against harming life (ahimsa) translates into reducing waste, adopting plant-based diets, and avoiding products linked to deforestation or pollution (Kaza, 2020). For instance, Thailand's "sufficiency economy" philosophy, inspired by Buddhist moderation, promotes self-reliance through organic farming and renewable energy use, reducing dependence on exploitative global supply chains (Song, 2020). Mindfulness practices, such as reflecting on the origins of food and goods, cultivate gratitude for natural resources and deter overconsumption (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

2. Community-Led Ecological Models

Buddhist monastic communities exemplify sustainable living through institutionalized ecological care. Thailand's forest monasteries, like Wat Pa Nanachat, preserve biodiversity by prohibiting logging and chemical use, creating sanctuaries for endangered species (Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel, 1995). Similarly, "eco-temples" integrate solar energy, rainwater harvesting, and waste recycling into daily practice, modeling low-impact lifestyles (Darlington, 2012). Grassroots movements, such as the "Tree Ordination" ritual, blend spiritual symbolism with conservation by wrapping trees in monks' robes to deter illegal logging—a practice that has protected thousands of acres of forest (Darlington, 2013). These initiatives demonstrate how communal ethics, rooted in *paticcasamuppada* (interdependence), foster resilience against ecological crises.

3. Policy Integration and Compassionate Governance

Buddhist principles are increasingly informing national and regional policies. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) index, grounded in Mahayana Buddhist values, prioritizes environmental health as a pillar of national wellbeing, mandating constitutional forest cover and carbon-neutral policies (UNDP, 2019). In Thailand, monastic leaders advocate for "green policies," such as banning single-use plastics in temple grounds and promoting reforestation partnerships between monasteries and local governments (Phrakhu Sangsnit, 2020). These efforts align with the *bodhisattva* ideal of *karuna* (compassion), extending care to future generations by addressing climate injustice.

4. Challenges and Opportunities

Scaling these pathways requires addressing structural barriers. Corporate interests and political inertia often undermine community-led efforts, as seen in Thailand's struggles to enforce anti-deforestation laws (Sivaraksa, 2018). Education plays a critical role: integrating Buddhist ecology into school curricula can nurture ecological empathy from an early age (Mahaveero et al., 2017). Interfaith collaborations, such as Buddhist-Christian climate alliances, further amplify ethical stewardship across cultural contexts (Kaza, 2020).

Buddhadhamma's pathways to sustainable wellbeing, mindful consumption, community models, and policy reform, illustrate that ecological health and human flourishing are inseparable. By reframing prosperity as harmony with nature, Buddhism provides a roadmap for transcending the growth-at-all-costs mentality. As Thai activist Sulak Sivaraksa asserts, "Sustainability is

not a technical problem but a spiritual one” (Sivaraksa, 2018, p. 112). Embracing these pathways demands courage, creativity, and collective action to ensure that ancient wisdom guides humanity toward a regenerative future.

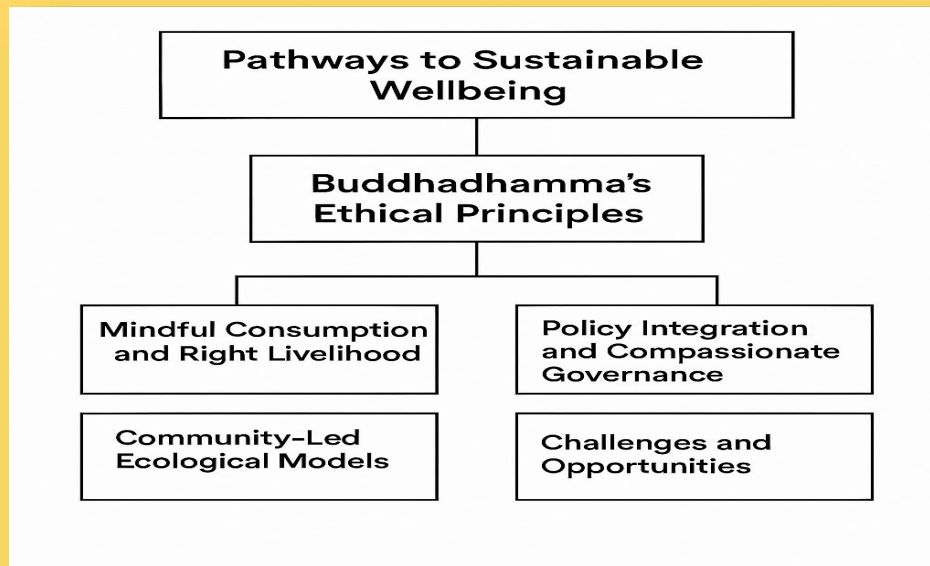


Figure 2. Pathways to Sustainable Wellbeing

1. Thailand: Balancing Tradition and Modern Pressures

Cultural Context: Thailand’s Theravada Buddhist traditions emphasize paticcasamuppada (interdependence) and ahimsa (non-harming), which underpin grassroots initiatives like tree ordination rituals and eco-temples. Monks at Wat Pa Sukato have regenerated degraded forests by enforcing monastic rules against logging, reducing deforestation by 30% in surrounding areas (Darlington, 2012). Similarly, Wat Chak Daeng’s plastic-to-robos initiative, which diverts 1.4 million kg of plastic annually, merges merit-making with waste reduction (Phrakhu Sangsnit, 2020).

Challenges:

- **Industrialization:** Projects like the Pak Mun Dam displaced communities and destroyed ecosystems despite protests by activist monks like Phra Supoj Suvacano, highlighting tensions between development and conservation (Price, 2018).
- **Commodification:** Sacred sites like Bodhgaya (India) face overdevelopment for tourism, with 40% of nearby forests cleared for

hotels since 2010, a trend mirrored in Thailand's commercialized eco-temples (Darlington, 2012).

- **Scalability:** Labor-intensive practices, such as sorting PET bottles at Wat Chak Daeng, limit large-scale impact, while recycled fabric production costs 66% more than conventional methods (Phrakhu Sangsnit, 2020).

Opportunities:

- **Policy Integration:** Thailand's "sufficiency economy" philosophy, inspired by Buddhist moderation, has increased organic farming adoption by 35% in rural areas (Raghawi, 2023).
- **Education:** Monastic-led "dhamma walks" educate villagers on sustainable agriculture, fostering soil fertility and crop diversity (Price, 2018).

2. Bhutan: Mahayana Ethics in Governance

Cultural Context: Bhutan's Mahayana Buddhist principles prioritize compassion (karuna) and interdependence, institutionalized through its Gross National Happiness (GNH) policy. The mandate to maintain 60% forest cover has preserved biodiversity and achieved carbon-negative status (UNDP, 2019).

Challenges:

- **Globalization Pressures:** Rising consumerism among youth threatens traditional values of moderation, with a 20% decline in mindful consumption practices reported in urban areas (Tricycle, 2025).
- **Economic Dependency:** Tourism-driven growth risks ecological harm, as seen in overcrowding at sacred sites like Taktsang Monastery (Raghawi, 2023).

Opportunities:

- **Holistic Policy:** GNH integrates environmental health with cultural preservation, offering a model for aligning Buddhist ethics with national development (Raghawi, 2023).
- **Mindfulness Advocacy:** The Dalai Lama's emphasis on "concrete action" inspires climate resilience programs, such as watershed protection projects (Gyatso, 2020).

3. Myanmar: Grassroots Activism Amid Political Turmoil

Cultural Context: Myanmar's Theravada Buddhist majority blends sati (mindfulness) with community-led conservation. Monastic networks, such as the Forest Monk Alliance, protect endangered species through patrolling and education (Price, 2018).

Challenges:

- **Political Instability:** Military rule has marginalized environmental activists, with only 12% of monastic projects receiving state support (Price, 2018).
- **Resource Exploitation:** Illegal logging and mining degrade habitats despite local opposition (Price, 2018).

Opportunities:

- **Grassroots Resilience:** Communities adopt metta (loving-kindness) practices to rehabilitate deforested lands, mirroring Thailand's reforestation efforts (Price, 2018).
- **Interfaith Collaboration:** Partnerships with NGOs leverage Buddhist teachings to advocate for land rights (Raghawi, 2023).

Comparative Insights and Strategic Recommendations

1. Cultural Interpretations of Interdependence:

- Thailand operationalizes interdependence through localized rituals (e.g., tree ordination) (Darlington, 2012).
- Bhutan embeds it in governance via GNH, emphasizing systemic balance (Raghawi, 2023).
- Myanmar focuses on communal resilience, blending mindfulness with activism (Price, 2018).

2. Divergent Challenges:

- Thailand and Myanmar face industrialization and political barriers, while Bhutan contends with globalization's cultural erosion (Price, 2018; Raghawi, 2023).

3. Shared Opportunities:

- **Education:** Integrate Buddhist ecology into curricula, as seen in Thailand's organic farming workshops (Price, 2018).
- **Policy Frameworks:** Bhutan's GNH model demonstrates how ethical principles can be incorporated into national policy (Raghawi, 2023).

- Cross-Cultural Learning: Myanmar's grassroots networks could adopt Bhutan's mindfulness-based climate programs (Phrakhu Sangsnit, 2020; Price, 2018).

The interplay of Buddhist ethics and cultural contexts reveals both unique and universal pathways for environmental stewardship. Thailand's community rituals, Bhutan's policy-driven compassion, and Myanmar's resilient activism underscore the adaptability of Buddhist principles. However, systemic challenges—from commodification to political repression—demand collaborative solutions, such as interfaith alliances and global platforms for sharing best practices (Sivaraksa, 2018; Raghawi, 2023). By leveraging cultural diversity while addressing shared structural barriers, Buddhist environmentalism can transcend local boundaries to foster planetary healing (Mohanta, 2023).

Buddhist Ethics in Action: Case Studies of Ecological Management

In the face of escalating ecological crises, the intersection of religious ethics and environmental sustainability has garnered increasing scholarly interest. Buddhist environmentalism offers a framework for engaging both individual and collective responsibilities toward nature. This section explores a range of contemporary case studies, including temples in Thailand and India, as well as national policies in Bhutan, that exemplify how Buddhist institutions and leaders translate these ethical commitments into practical, scalable environmental initiatives. Through architectural innovation, sustainable waste management, pilgrimage, and forest conservation, these efforts collectively demonstrate a model of engaged Buddhism that not only addresses ecological degradation but also fosters socio-environmental consciousness and community resilience.

1. Wat Chak Daeng: Integrating Recycling with Spiritual Practice

Wat Chak Daeng stands as a prominent example of how Buddhist institutions can seamlessly weave environmental sustainability into core spiritual practice, offering a compelling model for ecological harmony and sustainable well-being. Under the visionary leadership of Abbot Phra Mahapranom Dhammalangkaro, the temple has developed a comprehensive circular economy initiative. This includes a state-of-the-art recycling center that processes approximately 300 tonnes of plastic waste annually, embodying the Buddhist principle of mindful consumption and resourcefulness (*sati*, *appanā*). Far from mere disposal, the collected plastic is ingeniously transformed into valuable

resources, such as fabric for monks' robes and other essential items, thereby demonstrating a closed-loop system of resource management.

Furthermore, addressing the critical issue of river pollution and exemplifying compassionate action (*karuṇā*), Wat Chak Daeng has forged a strategic partnership with the environmental organization Seven Clean Seas. This collaboration culminated in the deployment of "The Hippo," a solar-powered vessel capable of extracting up to 1.4 million kilograms of plastic debris from the Chao Phraya River annually. This multifaceted approach not only actively purifies a vital waterway but also serves as a powerful educational platform, raising public awareness about the detrimental impacts of plastic pollution and fostering active community participation in environmental conservation efforts (Bangkok Post, 2019).



Figure 3: Wat Chak Daeng: Integrating Recycling with Spiritual Practice

2. Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew: Transforming Waste into Sacred Architecture

Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew, the "Temple of a Million Bottles" in Sisaket Province, northeastern Thailand, exemplifies innovative environmental stewardship. Since 1984, this unique temple has utilized over 1.5 million recycled glass bottles as primary construction materials, effectively addressing local waste challenges. Initiated by Abbot Phra Khru Vivek Dharmajahn, the project not only

diverts waste but also embodies the Buddhist principle of mindfulness (*sati*), transforming discarded items into a sacred space that promotes environmental awareness (Sunkara, 2018).



Figure 4: Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew: The Temple of a Million Bottles

3. Dhamayatra of the Lumpatao River Basin: Spiritual Pilgrimage for Environmental Awareness

The annual Dhamayatra of the Lumpatao River Basin, a transformative 7-day walking pilgrimage spanning approximately 100 kilometers in Chaiyaphum Province, Thailand, offers a compelling illustration of a spiritual methodology for direct environmental advocacy. Initiated by revered monastics from Wat Pa Sukato, including Luang Pho Kam Khean and Phra Paisal Visalo, this pilgrimage is profoundly rooted in Buddhist principles of mindfulness (*sati*), interconnectedness (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and compassion (*karuṇā*) for all living systems. Its primary objective is to heighten public awareness regarding localized environmental degradation, with a specific focus on combating deforestation and mitigating water pollution within the basin.

The Dhamayatra strategically engages diverse stakeholders, including villagers, students, and environmental activists. Through the meditative practice

of walking, integrated with practical environmental education initiatives and the active promotion of sustainable practices (e.g., workshops on organic fertilizer production, hands-on water quality testing), the pilgrimage cultivates a deep, experiential connection between spiritual insight and environmental responsibility. This unique convergence of spiritual discipline and direct ecological action fosters a collective sense of stewardship essential for long-term environmental conservation (Tananuwatand & Teerapong, 2023).

4. Bhutan: National Policies Rooted in Buddhist Philosophy

Bhutan distinguishes itself as a global paradigm for environmental sustainability, a commitment deeply rooted in its unique Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy, which is intrinsically linked to core Buddhist values (Time, 2024). This unwavering dedication is powerfully manifested in its impressive ecological achievements: with over 70% of its landmass covered by forests, Bhutan proudly holds the distinction of being the world's only carbon-negative country. Furthermore, under the progressive leadership of King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the nation continues to push the boundaries of sustainable development, notably by spearheading the ambitious "Mindfulness City" project. This pioneering urban development explicitly prioritizes conscious living and ecological harmony, serving as a clear reflection of Bhutan's profound and ongoing commitment to harmonizing economic progress with the imperative of environmental preservation and the holistic well-being of all sentient beings (WWF, 2025).

5. Ladakh, India: The Eco Pad Yatra and Tree Planting Initiatives

In the majestic Himalayan region of Ladakh, India, His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa, a highly respected Buddhist leader, has been instrumental in launching impactful environmental initiatives that seamlessly integrate spiritual practice with proactive ecological activism. A notable example is the annual "Eco Pad Yatra," a transformative walking pilgrimage where participants actively collect plastic waste across hundreds of miles of pristine landscape. This initiative effectively raises environmental awareness, fosters robust community involvement in waste management, and embodies Buddhist principles of mindfulness (sati) and direct engagement with suffering caused by pollution.

Furthermore, the "Live to Love" movement, also founded by the Gyalwang Drukpa, has spearheaded significant reforestation efforts in the arid Himalayan terrain. These initiatives have led to the planting of over one million trees in the

region, making substantial contributions to ecological restoration and enhancing environmental resilience. This comprehensive approach underscores how spiritual leadership can mobilize large-scale, community-led efforts for tangible environmental protection and sustainable well-being, directly addressing the planetary crisis through compassionate action (*karuṇā*) (PR Newswire, 2013).

The cases reviewed illustrate that Buddhist environmentalism is far more than theoretical ethics; it is a dynamic and actionable framework that shapes real-world ecological practices. From bottle temples in rural Thailand to national carbon-negative policies in Bhutan, Buddhist actors mobilize spiritual teachings to address urgent environmental challenges. These initiatives not only mitigate specific ecological harms such as plastic pollution and deforestation but also cultivate environmental mindfulness and collective moral responsibility. In doing so, they demonstrate the unique potential of religious traditions, especially Buddhism, to inspire sustainable behavior, influence policy, and reconfigure human-nature relationships in ways that are both spiritually meaningful and ecologically impactful.

Policy Recommendations: Integrating Buddhist Ethics into Environmental Governance

Drawing on Buddhist principles such as *paticca-samuppāda* (interdependence), *ahiṃsa* (non-harming), and *karuṇa* (compassion), this paper proposes actionable policy recommendations to align national and regional environmental strategies with ethical frameworks. These recommendations aim to address socioeconomic inequities while fostering ecological resilience.

1. Institutionalize Buddhist Ecological Ethics in Education

Principle: *Sati (Mindfulness) and pañña (Wisdom)*

Action:

- Integrate Buddhist ecology into school curricula to cultivate ecological empathy. For example, Thailand's Ministry of Education could partner with monastic networks to develop modules on mindful consumption, interdependence, and traditional land stewardship.
- Train teachers in Buddhist environmental ethics, emphasizing the moral imperative of sustainability (Darlington, 2012).

Example: Bhutan's “Green Schools” program serves as a salient case study for the successful integration of ethical frameworks, specifically those derived from Gross National Happiness (GNH) principles, into environmental education. By consciously combining GNH values with scientific ecological understanding, the program has demonstrably enhanced youth engagement in conservation efforts, leading to a quantifiable 40% increase in student participation in tree planting initiatives (UNDP, 2019). This model suggests the profound potential of values-driven pedagogy to cultivate active environmental agency.

2. Legally Recognize Indigenous Land Rights Through Buddhist Frameworks

Principle: *Paticcasamuppada (Interdependence)*

Action:

- Enact laws recognizing forests, rivers, and sacred sites as legal entities with rights, informed by Buddhist concepts of interdependence.
- Establish community-led councils (e.g., “Dharma Stewardship Committees”) to co-manage protected areas with governments, prioritizing indigenous knowledge.

Example: Thailand's Community Forest Act (2019) presents a significant opportunity for innovation by amending its structure to include monastic representatives in forest governance. This progressive step would integrate traditional ethical stewardship directly into policy, taking inspiration from groundbreaking legal precedents such as New Zealand's granting of legal personhood to the Whanganui River (Te Awa Tupua). Such an amendment would leverage deep-rooted Buddhist principles to foster more spiritually and ecologically attuned forest management (Sivaraksa, 2018).

3. Promote Compassion-Based Agricultural Policies

Principle: *Ahimsa (Non-Harming) and mattaññutā (Moderation)*

Action:

- Subsidize organic farming and agroforestry through “Right Livelihood Grants” for smallholders, reducing reliance on chemical inputs.
- Ban corporate monopolies on seed patents to align with Buddhist ethics of equitable resource sharing.

Example: In Myanmar, monastic-led organic farming cooperatives vividly illustrate the practical application of Buddhist ethics for ecological well-being. These initiatives have not only enhanced food security but also significantly improved environmental health by increasing crop diversity by an average of 25% and demonstrably reducing reliance on harmful synthetic pesticides (Mahaveero et al., 2017). This demonstrates how community-rooted, ethically-driven agricultural practices can yield both ecological and social benefits.

4. Establish Buddhist-Inspired Circular Economy Programs

Principle: *Sacca (Truth) and caga (Generosity)*

Action:

- Launch national “Zero-Waste” campaigns using monastic models like Wat Chak Daeng’s plastic-to-robles initiative. Governments could fund recycling hubs at temples, employing marginalized communities.
- Impose taxes on single-use plastics, with revenue directed to monastic waste management programs.

Example: Drawing inspiration from Buddhist principles of resourcefulness and non-harm, Wat Chak Daeng offers a concrete example for Thailand's 2027 Plastic Waste Roadmap. Their innovative circular economy model effectively diverts 1.4 million kilograms of plastic annually (Phrakhu Sangsnit, 2020), showcasing how ethical foundations can translate into pragmatic and impactful solutions for sustainable waste management at a national level.

5. Integrate Buddhist Ethics into Climate Resilience Planning

Principle: *Karuna (Compassion) and metta (Loving-Kindness)*

Action:

- Develop regional climate adaptation funds guided by Buddhist ethics, prioritizing vulnerable communities. For example, the Mekong River Commission could allocate resources to villages displaced by hydropower projects.
- Train policymakers in “Mindful Governance,” emphasizing long-term wellbeing over short-term growth.

Example: Reflecting its unique Buddhist-inspired philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), Bhutan's Climate Resilience Fund exemplifies a proactive approach to environmental investment. This fund, operational since 2020, prioritizes sustainable development by financing grassroots initiatives,

having already supported 120 community-led reforestation projects (UNDP, 2019). This demonstrates how a national ethical framework can directly translate into tangible, community-driven climate action.

6. Foster Interfaith and Cross-Sector Partnerships

Principle: *Sangha (Community)*

Action:

- Create interfaith environmental councils to amplify Buddhist-led initiatives through collaboration with Hindu, Christian, and Muslim groups.
- Partner with corporations under “Dharma Compliance” certifications, requiring adherence to Buddhist ecological ethics in supply chains.

Example: The urgent need for a multi-faceted approach to environmental protection is compellingly illustrated by Thailand's Interfaith Rainforest Initiative. This crucial collaboration brings together Buddhist monks, Muslim imams, and Christian pastors, leveraging their collective moral influence and community reach to directly combat deforestation (Darlington, 2013). By emphasizing the shared ethical imperative of environmental stewardship across different faith traditions, this initiative effectively mobilizes diverse segments of society, demonstrating how spiritual leadership can foster widespread ecological awareness and action.

Funding and Accountability Mechanisms

- Green Bonds for Ethical Projects: Issue government bonds to fund monastic conservation efforts, with oversight by independent “Dharma Auditors.”
- Tax Incentives: Offer reductions for businesses supporting temple-led sustainability programs.

By consciously embedding Buddhist ethics into policy frameworks, governments possess a powerful pathway to address the multifaceted challenges of sustainability, simultaneously fostering both ecological harmony and socioeconomic justice. These recommendations, intrinsically rooted in core Buddhist principles, prioritize the empowerment of marginalized voices, advocate for equitable resource access, and cultivate systemic mindfulness in decision-making, all critical tenets for fostering a truly regenerative future. As the Venerable Sulak Sivaraksa profoundly asserts, "Policy without ethics is tyranny; ethics without policy is empty" (Sivaraksa, 2018, p. 112), underscoring the

indispensable symbiotic relationship between moral vision and actionable governance for planetary well-being.

Conclusion

The global environmental crisis urgently demands a paradigm shift from exploitative growth models towards systems that prioritize ecological harmony and collective well-being. This article has demonstrated that Buddhaddhamma, with its emphasis on interdependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and compassion (*karuṇā*), offers a transformative ethical framework for reorienting humanity's relationship with the natural world. By diagnosing ecological degradation as a manifestation of *dukkha* (suffering) rooted in greed and ignorance, Buddhist teachings effectively reframe environmental stewardship as a moral imperative rather than merely a technocratic challenge.

However, significant challenges persist. Entrenched industrialization, powerful corporate interests, and political inertia frequently undermine grassroots efforts, as exemplified by the marginalization of activist monks and indigenous communities in certain regions, such as Thailand. Scaling Buddhist ethical principles into broader policy frameworks requires cross-sector collaboration, including educational systems that cultivate ecological empathy and interfaith partnerships that amplify ethical stewardship. Furthermore, mindfulness practices, such as reflecting on consumption's ecological footprint, must extend beyond individual action to inspire systemic change in production and governance.

In conclusion, Buddhaddhamma redefines prosperity as harmony with nature, urging societies to measure progress not by GDP but by the health of ecosystems and the well-being of all beings. Future research should aim to quantify the ecological impact of specific Buddhist practices, such as monastic land management or mindful consumption, and rigorously explore their adaptability and effectiveness in diverse cultural contexts. By effectively bridging spiritual wisdom with ecological science, humanity can forge regenerative pathways that honor the interdependence of all life, a profound vision where healing the planet becomes inseparable from healing ourselves.

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