

# BUDDHIST ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS A Holistic Continuum!

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**Abstract:** It is indeed remarkable to find ecologically significant statements in Buddhist doctrines. Long before environmental disasters made their diabolical appearances and there by forced us to understand the inter-connection of things, Buddhist teachers knew very well such insight was crucial for the welfare of humanity. Moreover, the Indian and Chinese Buddhist monks spoke much more than the mere interconnection of the natural world; they included the vital role of the mind too. The article provides an ecological vision based on early Buddhist literature.

**Keywords:** Ahimsa, Ashrama, Buddha, Compassion, Forest, Kindness, Nature, Pollution, Tree, and Wisdom.

## 1. Introduction

Nature and its affluent diversity have always influenced the consciousness of India, from time immemorial. The sages of India lived in the forests, co-existing with the flora and fauna and the animals and taking care of them almost equally or even much better than themselves. The Hindu, Buddhist and Jain, the three religions that evolved from the ancient India altogether promoted an ecologically rich and sustainable consciousness which became the heritage and ethos of India throughout the millenniums and centuries. The *Vedas, Aranyakas, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Upanishads, Tripitaka, Aagamas*, etc., the most important sacred texts of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism and commentaries on them written by sages and mystics in different ages from these religious traditions, depict all types of life, i.e., divine, human, animal and plant life as interdependent, co-existing and even inextricably interwoven. The impacts

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of nature, holistic outlook and its sustainability have therefore become a deeply rooted doctrinal, experiential and spiritual inheritance, custom and tradition of the Indian consciousness that has been transmitted continuously from its very inception. The later religions that made inroads into this culture imbibed the ecological spirit and integrated to a certain extent into their own expressions of faith.

The forest became the deposit of knowledge through a number of Rishis who stayed in huts that fostered an ecological balance between the humans, animals, and the vegetation calling the whole continuum as an *Ashrama*, a spiritual heritage. This forest dwelling helped them to detach themselves from the daily chorus of ordinary life and to concentrate on a meditative path and to impart thus the acquired wisdom to the next generation through the disciples who lived, worked, meditated and continued the great traditions and customs. This ancient wisdom imparting method is still continuing in all over India, as an abode and oasis of ecological living, existing, co-existing and pro-existing all types of lives among almost all religions, irrespective of arrived from abroad or evolved from here. One of the best known and described *Ashram* is that of Kanva, immortalized by the great epic poet and writer, Kalidasa through his play, *Abhijnanasakuntala* (The Sign of Shakuntala). The inextricable intertwining of the plant life, animal life and human life is well narrated by this sage through the play how they were interdependent and how even the plant life and animal life were sharing the happiness and depressions of Shakuntala. Thus, Ashrams became the embodiment of sustainable ecological, spiritual and intellectual life from where the great philosophical schools of India evolved. Today, in exotic tourist resorts, mountain tops, banks of rivers and deep valleys, innovative and technologically driven *Ashrams* are springing up continuing the tradition.

## **2. Buddhism: Consciousness with Compassion**

Buddhism tries to generate a consciousness with compassion. In order to create such a consciousness, Buddhism has made deeper philosophical analysis on the external world, internal self and constructed logical systems for the transformation of consciousness. Thus due to the philosophical underpinnings and the experiential structures, Buddhism has many different movements considering Buddha as a great elder who showed the path towards Buddha as God and many births of Buddha in different eons. However the general core principles of Buddhism are the following: The four Noble Truths which strictly aim at removing the suffering and delusion

from all beings, the practice of non-violence, the loving kindness and compassion towards plants and animals, the relevance of karma or rebirth which holds that a human being can be reborn as an animal according to his karma, the interdependency in which we learn how all beings are essentially inter-woven and reality evolves through interaction of relationship etc. are the great values and practicing them can help coming generations bring fresh life and promise to the earth and all beings.

The Buddhist vision of dependent origination, in which everything depends on everything else, can also function both as an insight into the nature of reality and as a basis for analysis of environmental problems. Understanding the self from an interdependent ecological perspective radically recast the task of protecting the planet. What does it mean to feel the pain of a blue whale or rainforest as one’s own? John Seed declares that “I visualize myself as being one leaf on the tree of life ... and I realize that the sap of the tree runs through every leaf, including me.”<sup>1</sup>

### **3. Buddha’s Love for Nature**

Nature had been very dear to Buddha in all the important occasion of his life. There are very many instances which would obviously support this statement. Let us look into some of the instances of his life. “All Buddhist literature state that the Buddha was born in a grove of Sal, lovely straight-backed trees with large leaves. According to legend, when the Buddha was born he took seven steps, and lotus flowers sprang up as he walked.”<sup>2</sup> He attained Buddha hood and breathed his last under a tree; he preached his first sermon in a deer park and from then on he preached and taught outdoors in the shade of trees.

All those above mentioned instances are edifying messages with much relevance to the present generation that seeks its pleasure and glory through the so-called material welfare at the cost of nature, which in reality sustains it. In today’s context, therefore, it is relevant to raise a question such as this; what is the understanding of happy life? Often happiness in the present society is associated to one and one’s belongings. The more one can grab and hoard for one the happier one would be no matter even if it is at the cost of the happiness of one’s fellow human beings or nature. In one of the well-known sutras, the Buddha speaks of the happiness on living in an

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<sup>1</sup>Wes Nisker, “The Rainforest as Teacher: An Interview with John Seed,” *Inquiring Mind*, Vol. 8, 1992, 2. <<http://www.rainforestinfo.org.au/deep-co/inqmind.htm>>

<sup>2</sup>Bainer, Allan Hunt, ed. *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*. London: Parallax Press, 1990, 9.

appropriate environment. The environment he speaks of whether village, forest, or valley is embellished, when the right kind of people living there. There should be a perfect harmony between the people in the place and the place itself. The ecological harmony or balance is achieved when people live with nature without disturbing its flora and fauna and giving it due respect and accepting ‘the right to live’ of every being. Drawing inspiration from Buddha’s teachings we must approach nature like a bee that collects nectar from a flower but does not harm them in any way. We could use nature for our genuine needs without causing it any harm. The diabolical phenomenon of ecological destruction gets embodied only when we approach nature with selfish motives and exploitative attitude. If this is the attitude we are likely to cherish, then there is no doubt that our plight would be no different from that of the farmer who killed his goose that would give him a golden egg each day.

The foundation of Buddhist life is a healthy rapport between plants, animals and humans with underlying profound compassion and loving kindness. Compassion creates a foundation for balanced view of the entire world and of the environment in which we live. It is only by exercising loving compassion towards nature that a human being can perfect oneself to be a cherisher and sustainer of life.

#### **4. Constructing a Compassionate Consciousness**

Loving kindness or *mudida* and compassion or *karuna* are the two cornerstones on which the whole edifice of Buddhism stand. “Loving kindness is understood as the wish for others to be happy and compassion as the wish to alleviate suffering.”<sup>3</sup> Both these qualities according to Buddha are innate in a human being. Before turning to the plight of others or the crisis of the world, we must recognize the fact of our own suffering and seek to uproot its causes with great effort and fervency. Such an insight can definitely help us to lead others to the way of freedom from their inner struggles and pains. Ultimately, loving kindness and compassion extend to all living beings; people, animals, plants and the earth itself.

The Buddha describes how a disciple should cultivate loving kindness:

[Then let me think:] In joy and safety  
 Let every creature’s heart rejoice,  
 Whatever beings there are,  
 No matter whether timid or blood,

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<sup>3</sup>Batchelor, Martin and Brown, Kerry, eds., *Buddhism and Ecology*, New York: Cassell Publishers, 1992, 4.

With none expected, long or big  
 Or middle-sized or short or thin  
 Or thick or those unseen  
 Or whether dwelling far or near,  
 That are or that yet seek to be  
 Let every creature’s heart rejoice.  
 Let none betray another’s trust  
 Or offer any slight at all or even let them wish in wrath  
 Or revenge each other’s ill.  
 Thus as a mother with her life  
 Will guard her son, her only child,  
 Him extend without bounds  
 His heart to every living being.<sup>4</sup>

The root of compassion according to Buddha is wisdom. As for him it is not an introverted ‘intellectual’ quality but it is something that gives rise to a spontaneous concern for life. “In this, *bhikkhu*, a wise person, one of great wisdom, does not intend to harm the self, harm others, or harm both others and self. Thinking in this way, such a person intends benefits for the self, benefit for others, and benefit for the whole world.”<sup>5</sup>

Five hundred years after the Buddha, the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, expressed what this insight means for ‘Bodhisattva’.<sup>6</sup> According to him, the essential nature of all bodhisattvas is a great compassionate heart, and all living beings are the objects of its compassion. Thus a Buddhist should treat all living creatures with love and compassion and set them free. In this present world where people are longing for clean water, food and air, we need numerous Bodhisattvas, having great heart of compassion towards all living as well as non-living things. Like the Bodhisattva of ancient times, the modern bodhisattva would help us to create a new earth.

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<sup>4</sup>Batchelor, *Buddhism and Ecology*, 4.

<sup>5</sup>Batchelor, *Buddhism and Ecology*, 6. A Bhikkhu is one who has devoted himself to the task of following the path by renunciation of the distraction of the worldly affairs. A Bhikkhu keeps the ten precepts and his daily life is governed by 227 rules.

<sup>6</sup>Bodhisattva is one whose ‘being’ or ‘essence’ (*sattava*) is Bodhi, that is, the wisdom resulting from direct perception of truth, with the compassion awakened thereby. In Theravada, Bodhisattva is an aspirant for Buddha hood. In Mahayana, the Bodhisattva is the ideal of the path as contrasted with the Arahat of the Teravada. He is one who, having practiced the ten Pramitas and attained enlightenment, renounces nirvana in order to help humanity on its pilgrimage.

## 5. Practising Compassion

The compassionate morality, on which the Buddhist training is based, does not come from following the rules without question but out of love and respect for all life. Elsewhere in the scriptures the Buddha spells out what he means by morality or the right way to lead our lives. According to Buddha, it is the abstaining from killing breathing things, stealing, and misconduct in sexual desires that are called right action.

One of the clearest explanations of moral conduct is found in the Buddha's advice to his son Rahula. Buddha admonishes his son that any act – be it mental, physical, or verbal – should be undertaken only after adequate reflection. If the physical act one wishes to do lead to the harm of self and other, then that physical act is unskilled. But if one finds an act sound and good after reflection, that it would not harm anybody, it is a skilled act. This would produce happiness and its result is delight. This admonition of the Buddha to his son Rahula is a solid evidence for the fact that Buddha preached and practiced morality that includes not only the human beings but also every animate and inanimate being. The great virtue non-violence of ahimsa embellishes the whole edifice of Buddhist morality. The ultimate concern for Buddhist morality is to create the condition for the realization of spiritual fulfilment, nirvana.<sup>7</sup>

## 6. Interdependence

According to Buddha, all things in the universe come into existence as a result of particular condition and there is no creator called God as the first cause because universe has no beginning. When we understand the nature of ourselves and of the world in this way we are liberated from the idea that we and other things somehow exist on our own, independently and separately from everything else.

The great Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna developed this idea of Buddha into what is known as the doctrine of “emptiness”. According to him, to assert that things are empty is not to deny that they exist; it is simply to deny that they are self-existing. As for him the most convincing reason that things are empty of self-existence is that they are dependent upon external conditions to cause them to exist.<sup>8</sup> When Buddhism came to China this doctrine of emptiness was further developed to emphasize how things do not merely depend on their own immediate set of causes for their

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<sup>7</sup>Batchelor, *Buddhism and Ecology*, 7.

<sup>8</sup>Batchelor, *Buddhism and Ecology*, 10.

existence but upon everything in the universe. The above mentioned idea is beautifully and thoughtfully summed up in the Avatamska.

All lands are my body  
 And so are the Buddha’s living there;  
 Watch my pores,  
 And I will show you the Buddha’s realm.  
 Just as the nature of the earth is one  
 While beings each life separately,  
 And the earth has no thought of oneness or difference  
 So is the truth of Buddha.<sup>9</sup>

The Chinese Buddhists in particular realized how all things are intimately linked with each other. They called this doctrine of the ‘mutual interpenetration and interfusion of all phenomena.’ The philosophy of interpenetration indeed had a great influence on the Zen tradition. The Buddha and his followers are certainly a source of inspiration for the present generation to break out of its self-centeredness and understand the interconnection of all living things. The Buddhist understanding of interpenetration thus creates in us an ecological awareness.

### **7. Compassion towards Nature**

Concern for the welfare and even compassion towards the natural world had been an important element of thought in the history of Buddhism. The Buddhist notion that human beings are essentially dependent on and interconnected with the environment, has given rise to a necessary respect for nature. Despite the Buddhist realization that human beings have unique opportunity to realize enlightenment, which other creature do not, they have never cherished or encouraged the thought that humanity is superior to all other living beings. Buddhist respect for nature is evidently and explicitly revealed in many of the dialogues between the Buddha and his disciples.<sup>10</sup>

### **8. Five Habits to Control Greed**

The Buddhist concept of action manifests itself in the five basic precepts such as refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicating substances. These five precepts (*panca sila*) are relevance in solving the problem of present ecological crisis. The environmental approaches towards these rules are the following: to control the destruction

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<sup>9</sup>Batchelor, *Buddhism and Ecology*, 11.

<sup>10</sup>Batchelor, *Buddhism and Ecology*, 12.

of nature, realization that one is stealing from the resources of future generations, exploitation of nature is violence.

In Buddhist perception, even though change is inherent in nature, still natural processes are affected by the morals of the humanity. The *Agganna Sutta* which speaks of the Buddhist story of the evolution of the world, illustrates how an originally simple, just and genuine, now has turned out to be a much more complex and unjust, through human greed and other vices such as, stealing and lying leading to moral degradation of humanity and thus cause adverse effects on nature. Buddhist concept on evolution wants to emphasize that although change is inherent in nature, ultimately it is human's morality that shapes the changes in the universe. The human immoral actions cause lasting and irreparable damage to nature. According to a discourse of Buddha in the *anguttara nikaya*, when lust, greed and wrong values grip the heart of humanity and immorality becomes widespread in society, timely rain does not fall, crops fall victim to pests and plant diseases. Through the lack of nourishing food the human mortality rate raises.

Similarly several *suttas*<sup>11</sup> from *pali* canon speaks about the intimate relationship between human morality and the natural environment. This mutual relationship between nature and human morality is further explained in more detail by the *Chakkavattisihanadi Sutta*.<sup>12</sup>

## 9. Nature as Dynamic

We cannot but admit the fact that we have an innate relationship with nature. First and foremost we are very much a part and parcel of the created world. Though we are different from other animal, we are not superior to them. We are different just because we are spiritual beings with self-consciousness and moral responsibilities. In other words, unlike the other animal we are blessed to be conscious of what we are doing. In spite of this special blessing, we are unduly impertinent to the nature; we tend to promote a culture of destruction to the nature. As a spirited beings, capable of self-consciousness our existence and participation in this world demands that we give meaning to everything.

Changeability is one of the most persistent principles of Buddhism. Everything changes in nature and nothing remains static. There are only ever changing, ever moving processes. Solidity, liquidity, heat and

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<sup>11</sup>*Suttas* originally means thread or string, but here it is applied as the part of Pali canon containing the narratives about dialogue by the Buddha.

<sup>12</sup>Lily de Silva, "Early Buddhist Attitudes toward Nature" in *Buddhism and Ecology*, Stephanie Kaza and Kennet Kaft, eds., Boston: Shambala, 2000, 92-94.



mobility, recognized as the building of nature are all ever changing, ever moving process. Even the most solid looking mountains and the very earth that supports everything on it are not beyond this law of change. Buddhism illustrates it with the example of rain. Though we use a noun called ‘rain’ which appears to name a thing, rain is nothing but a process of drops of water falling from the sky. Apart from this process, the activity of raining, there is no rain as such which could be expressed seemingly static nominal concept.<sup>13</sup>

### **10. Nature as Beautiful**

For Buddha and his disciples, natural beauty is a source of great joy and aesthetic satisfaction. They attained great joy in preserving nature in its original state without causing any imbalance. They were quite careful about their actions and had in their mind always the pledge of compassion and loving kindness towards all living beings.

In the present society many poets and writers draw inspiration from the nature because of the feelings it arouses in their hearts they involve themselves emotionally with nature. For instance, they may be able to see a deer in a dewdrop, they may compare the sun rays passing over the mountain top to like blush on a sensitive face, the lips of their beloved in a rose petal, etc. But the appreciations of sages are quite different. They were sensitive towards the beauties and harmony towards nature and their appreciation is coloured by spontaneity, simplicity and spirituality. They appreciated the nature for its own sake and derived perfect joy by the sensuous association and self-projected ideas. The Elder Mahakashyapa has expressed his appreciation of the beauty of nature in the following way:

Those upland glades delightful to the soul,  
Where the Kaveri spreads its wildering wreaths,  
Where sound the trumpet-calls of elephants:  
Those are the hills wherein my soul delights.  
Those rocky heights with hue of dark blue clouds  
Where lies embossed many a shining lake  
Of crystal-clear, cool waters, and whose slopes  
The “herds of Indra” cover and bedeck:  
Those are the hills where in my soul delight.<sup>14</sup>

His religious appreciations are beautifully blended with a profound knowledge of the teachings of the Buddha.

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<sup>13</sup>Silva, “Early Buddhist Attitudes toward Nature,” 92.

<sup>14</sup>Silva, “Early Buddhist Attitudes toward Nature,” 101.

## 11. Practice of Contentment

Human beings depend on nature for their survival; for their food, drink, clothing, shelter, medicine and other needs. Because of our greed we destroyed nature and deprived ourselves from maximum benefit. In order to have maximum benefit we must understand nature. By understanding nature, for instance, the seasonal rainfall, method of conserving water by irrigation, the physical condition required for the growth of various food crops, we could get better returns for our farming. But our learning has to be accompanied by moral restraint, if we are to enjoy the benefit of the natural resources for a long period of time. Humanity must learn to satisfy its needs and not to feed its greed. The resources of the world are limited whereas human greed has no limit.<sup>15</sup>

Consumerism is accepted as the order of the day. It is quite astonishing and disheartening to note that Americans alone have consumed the same quality of natural resources as had been consumed by all humanity in the previous four hundred years. This sort of ego-oriented consumerism had apparently given rise to an energy crisis on the one hand, and pollution problem on the other. Modern humanity in its unbridling greed for pleasure and acquisition of wealth is killing ‘the goose that laid the golden egg’. Buddhism fervently advocates the virtue of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion in all human activities. “Greed breeds sorrow and unhealthy consequence.”<sup>16</sup> Contentment is the highly praised virtue of Buddhism.

As per the doctrine of Buddha, miserliness and wastefulness are equally undesirable. Wealth in itself should not be the end but only means to the end, satisfaction of human need. It has only instrumental value. In accordance with the teachings of Buddhism hoarding is a senseless anti-social habit. Buddhism considers prudence as a virtue, to be practiced diligently. The wasteful attitude is not only antisocial but also criminal.

Buddhism promotes a gentle, non-violent outlook towards nature. In *sigalovada sutta*, we read that a house holder should gather wealth as a bee assembles nectar from a flower. The bee does no harm to the fragrance or beauty of the flower, but gathers nectar from it to transform it into sweet honey. Similarly human beings are expected to make genuine use of nature so that one can rise above nature and realize one’s spiritual prospective.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Silva, “Early Buddhist Attitudes toward Nature,” 101.

<sup>16</sup>Silva, “Early Buddhist Attitudes toward Nature,” 95.

<sup>17</sup>Lily d Silva, “The Hills Wherein my Soul Delights,” in Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brow, eds., *Buddhism and Ecology*, London: Cassell Publishers Ltd., 1992, 22.

## 12. Compassion towards Animal Life

The well-known five precepts (*panca sila*) are to be followed by every Buddhist. The first precept is non-injury to life. It is explained as casting aside of all forms of weapons and being careful not to deprive a living being of life. Every person, who follows Buddhism, is expected to refrain from meat. Buddhist monks and nuns have to follow even stricter code of rules than the lay person and they abstain from practices which would even unintentionally harm living creatures. For instance, they do not travel during rainy season because it is possible to harm worms and insects that come to the surface in wet weather. The same concern for non-violence prevents the monks from digging the ground. There are several instances which we can see in Buddha’s life where he strongly opposes any injury to the living being, no matter whether it is deliberate or non-intentional. At one instance Buddha strongly objected one of his disciples, when the latter set his clay on fire in order to give it a fine finish. Buddha prevented him from doing so, because many living creature would have been burned in the process. Later on his hut was taken down to prevent it from setting a bad example to the coming generation.<sup>18</sup> The scrupulous non-violent attitude towards even the smallest living creatures prevents the monks and nuns from drinking unstrained water. The term non-violence cannot be just confined to abstaining from injuring just living creatures, but it means cultivation of compassion and sympathy for all living creatures.

The understanding of *kamma* and rebirth also prepares the Buddhist to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards animals. According to this belief, it is possible for a human being to be reborn as an animal according to their action. The Buddhist notion of merits also engenders gentle nonviolent attitude towards the living being. It is said that if someone throws dishwashing water on a pool where there are insects and other living beings, intending that the creatures would survive with the tiny particles out of it then the person would get merit because he has done an act generosity. Humans and beasts can live and let live without fear of one another if only humans cultivates sympathy and regard for all life.

Buddhists observe the non-violent attitude not only towards animal life but also towards the plant life, which provides us with food for our very existence. It is said, we should not even break the branch of a tree that gives us shelter. Plants are helpful to us in providing us all necessities that we are expected not to adopt uncaring attitude towards them. Among

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<sup>18</sup>Silva, “The Hills Wherein My Soul Delights,” 23.

Buddhists, large old trees are revered in the most excellent manner. Trees are called *vanaspathi* in *pali* which means Lord of the forest.

In Buddhist view the construction of parks and groves for public use is considered a great deed that gains much spiritual merit. *Sakka*, the Lord of gods, is said to reach this position as a result of service such as the construction of parks, ponds, wells and roads. Trees are of immense importance in Buddhist life by the very fact that the chief event in the life of Buddha took place in open air under different sorts of trees: “He was born in a park at the root of a tree in Kapilavatthu; he attained enlightenment at the root of Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya; he inaugurated his missionary activity in the open air in the deer park at Isipatana, and he attained Pari nibbana too in the open air in Pava.”<sup>19</sup> Buddha’s constant advice to his disciples was to take resort to natural habitats such as the forests. The reason for this admonition is that in forests they could devote themselves to meditation undistributed to human activity.

### **13. Buddha against Pollution**

Environmental pollution has become a common issue in the present society. It has assumed such a vast proportion today that humanity has been impelled to recognize the presence of an eco-crisis. We can now no longer turn a blind eye to such inhuman acts, as our very existence is threatened. All living beings are already experiencing the traumas of pollution-related epidemic like malaria.<sup>20</sup>

Pollution to this extent was unheard of during the time of Buddha. However, there are sufficient evidences in scripture to give insight into the Buddhist attitude of pollution. Cleanliness both in the person and in the environment is highly required. The monks were very concerned about keeping water clean, be it in river, pond or a well. Several rules prohibit monks from polluting green grass with saliva, urine, etc. In today’s world, it is not the case because we can only see pollution; the heightened pollution is eating up the very life of every living being.

Today noise is considered as a serious personal and environmental pollution troubling everyone. Noise causes disturbances especially for students and it is also a thorn to the one engaged in the first step of meditation. Buddha was strongly against making any sort of unnecessary noise. It is said that once he even ordered a group of monks to leave the monastery because of their noisy behaviour. He enjoyed solitude and

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<sup>19</sup> Silva, “Early Buddhist Attitudes towards Nature,” 99.

<sup>20</sup> Silva, “The Hills Wherein My Soul Delights,” 25.

silence immensely and spoke in praise of silence, as it is more appropriate for a mental culture. The Buddha and his disciples lived in silence and solitude in monasteries because it would help them for their meditation. Thus, through aforementioned elements we can understand that the Buddhist values are needed to stop the present eco-crisis.

#### **14. Interdependence of All Beings**

Buddhist teachings recognize that all things are interdependent and conditional upon each other. Every condition follows another and all are part of an orderly sequence of cause and effect. Buddhism views people as part of nature. If the environment is destroyed, people cannot survive nor have a quality life. By abusing the environment, people abuse themselves and, their descendants as well as future generations of all life. A tree falling in the forest changes the life of a banker in the city.<sup>21</sup>

The Buddhist vision of reality is often spoken in terms of absence. In the Buddhist understanding there is no need for a self, although the Buddha never said that there is no self. It is no longer necessary to uphold the idea of a lasting life. According to Buddha, reality works perfectly well without such a self. Moreover, the self has only managed to cause trouble and disharmony more than good. The fear that the denial of self would give us no ground to stand on is realized to be in itself groundless. Our feeling of security upon having a separate self is utterly false; because, it is only in an undivided world that everything essentially supports everything else. “When the conviction that there is a solid, enduring self, co-existing with millions of solid, enduring others in a world of solid, enduring things, fall away, a universe of magically interrelated process and events is revealed.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the dreadful alienating sense of separation should be dispensed within the order to bring freedom to us. The intimate and indispensable relation between everything in the world is apparently reflected in the words of Uisang, a seventh-century Korean Buddhist monk: “In one is all in many is one. One is identical to all, many identical to one. In one particle of dust are contained ten directions.”<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly Chinese Buddhist philosophers developed this vision of the world into the doctrine of ‘the unimpeded interpretation of all phenomena.’ “The doctrine clearly states that everything in the universe is

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<sup>21</sup>Daniel H. Henning, *Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, Bloomington: Harvard University, 2002, 17.

<sup>22</sup>Batchelor, *Buddhism and Ecology*, 35.

<sup>23</sup><http://naturalwisdom.blogspot.in/2011/11/uisangs-ocean-seal.html>

literally contingent upon everything else; nothing stands alone, everything is linked through space and time.”<sup>24</sup>

According to Vazubandhu an Indian Buddhist philosopher of fourth century, “the world is created for an intention.” In other words the environment we find ourselves in and the way we experience it are the result of how we have chosen and agreed to live. Suppose our intention is driven by self-centeredness, greed and attachment, then we will not perceive the world in its interrelatedness; on the other hand we will see it only an object to be exploited to satiate our never ending desires. The polluted atmosphere, land and river are ultimately the consequences of the greedy desires of human mind. It is not at all fair to place responsibility for the afore-mentioned calamities, on the shoulder of industrialist, politicians, and so on. This is what often we are prone to do. It is only but knee-jerk reaction of a mind that insists on duality to make sense of life – in this case by dividing this world into ‘innocent’ and ‘guilty’.

In accordance with the teachings of Buddha it is when we dissolve the rigid boundaries of the self, that we inevitably reveal our relation with, and mutual dependence upon the other living being. This teaching of Buddha should by all means break through our heart, only then could it express itself as love and compassion. Thus, to put it in a nutshell, everyone and everything in this universe is interrelated with everything else. Therefore no separation from any thing is advisable or possible.

### **15. Eco-Spirituality in Buddhism**

Today more than ever we need to learn about the depth of eco-spirituality as we face the devastating issues of climate change, water pollution, acid rain, deforestation, hazardous waste disposal and the total annihilation of many plants and animal species. In response to the growing global environmental crisis, scholars have begun to explore religious traditions as a possible resource for the development of environmental ethics. A religious spirit of human kind can well serve our need to relate fruitfully to the earth and its myriad life forms.<sup>25</sup>

Changing our habit of consumption, and pattern of distribution, we can bring some change in our mother earth. Buddhism, as we have seen in many instances, gives importance to nature – the trees, plants animals, etc. It considers human being as part of nature. A Buddhist monk wrote:

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<sup>24</sup>Batchelor, “The Sands of the Ganges,” 36.

<sup>25</sup>Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Buddhism and Deep Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, 112.

When shall I come to dwell in a forest,  
 Amongst the deer, the birds and the trees;  
 They say nothing unpleasant,  
 And are delightful to associate with?<sup>26</sup>  
 Winding back and forth  
 Among green trees,  
 The golden shuttle of the Oriole weavers silk,  
 The colour of spring.  
 A monk sits dozing...  
 Even the stones smile.<sup>27</sup>

The deep ecological awareness recognizes that nature and the self are one with values inherent in all living beings, including the trees and other plants, and is therefore basically a spiritual awareness. The human spirit is concerned with finding one’s self within the universe so that the individual may feel connected and one with the cosmos rather than separated and isolated. Thus, ecological awareness can be considered spiritual. Not surprisingly, this sense of oneness with nature is consistent with the religious feeling all over the world be it Christian, Jain, Hindu, etc.

Contemplation, though very central to Buddhist, does not root out nature, the abode of beauty. It is not just poetry or a canticle on nature but it expresses the deep bound relationship based on Dharma. In this regard Buddha speaks to a Brahmin of a sacrifice where, no bulls are slain, nor were trees cut down for sacrificial posts, nor were grasses mown for the sacrificial grass, and those who are called slaves or servants or workmen did not perform their tasks for fear of blows or threats, weeping and in tears. Buddha’s life is founded on compassion; compassion for suffering humanity, for plants and for animals, even for the inanimate beings. It provides for a spirituality founded and centred on the principle of love.

## **16. Creating a Compassionate Consciousness**

In the innermost, Buddhism teaches, every creature is aglow with illumination. This inner light shines out when a person is filled with compassion, generosity and self-control. Hearing, reflection, and meditation would uproot the tendencies of the mind, which are destructive both for the environment and for us. Delusion is the cause of this widespread ignorance, greed and breakdown of traditional values; the solution to delusion is self-transformation by enlightenment – whence

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<sup>26</sup>Batchelor, “Even the Stones Smiles,” 13.

<sup>27</sup>Batchelor, “Even the Stones Smiles,” 15.

humans realize the transitory nature of material goods and render selfless service in love and compassion.<sup>28</sup>

Tantric or *Vajrayana* Buddhism proposes the doctrine of transformation, which would not only transform the person and bring enlightenment but also contributes to the well being of the whole world. The present ecological crisis did not happen abruptly. People are to be blamed for such a situation on this earth. Some of the important factors of the ecological crisis are power-play, anthropocentrism and the greed of humanity.<sup>29</sup>

In this modern and postmodern atmosphere of greed and mindless misuse of resources, Buddhism offers some effective solutions like adopting a simple lifestyle, conducts workshops to bring awareness among the people and meditation to cultivate the feeling of oneness with nature. Buddhism also provides variety of exercises and approaches to reconnect people with nature on an ecological and experimental basis. Some of the methods, exercises and approaches are ecology walk, awareness of six sense-doors, guided meditation, observing nature, the ten step deep evolution method, the council of all beings, listening and awareness of the Devas of the place exercise, guided tree meditation, *metta* meditation and the ecological prayer.

We need to be encouraging within ourselves qualities such as simplicity, balance, compassion and understanding. We are each the starting point of a world-order based on these qualities. In such ways Buddhist practice would work inwardly at transforming the mind and outwardly transforming the world. Buddhism also teaches us that we are the part of the living planet and we need to find our role in protecting the earth and its life. Simplicity and compassion advocated by Buddhism can be the key word in our approach to present eco-crisis and this spirituality can be an important source of inspiration to face and respond to the environmental problems of our world. As the fires of greed and ignorance continue to rage across the landscape, our descendants will face the enormous challenge of reshaping human-nature relations. It is especially the work of the youth, who has to carry these ideas and practice the values of Buddhism such as loving kindness, compassion, non-violent etc., in order to bring change in our destructive environment.

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<sup>28</sup>Batchelor, "The Sands of the Ganges," 36.

<sup>29</sup>Oliver Inchody, "Ecological Reality," *Journal of Dharma* 36, 3 (July-October 2011), 302.



## 17. Conclusion

What has been tried in this article is to shed light on the significance of ecology related to Buddhism. The Buddha and the Buddhists throughout the millennia emphasized on desire, craving, attachment, etc. and his practical measures for overcoming them have the enormous potential to remove the human causes of environmental degradation, more than any other religious tradition. Buddhist teachings though anthropocentric in focus, attack the root cause of human attitude that count for so many of our modern social and environmental ills. The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight-Fold Paths challenge consumerism, materialism, wasteful competition and the self-centred individuality that destroy the possibility of sound social and ecological relationships and tried to construct a compassionate consciousness towards, the human, animal and plant life.

Together with Buddha’s teachings and messages, there are several features from the other religious traditions such as eliminating greed and practicing ahimsa from Jainism and the ecological continuum of Hinduism can generate a new consciousness that transform the society for protecting and safe guarding the environment that highlights the importance of ecology and the interdependent life. The Ashrama life promoted by these religious traditions promotes frugal life style and contains restrictions against the unnecessary destruction of plants and animals. Thus the religious traditions of India as a whole prove to be a powerful influence and means for social and environmental improvement.

Every day, every hour and even at every moment our abode is being polluted. The rapid increase in the factories and vehicles that emit thick and hazardous fume into the atmosphere is threatening our very existence here on earth. People of today are more exposed to various inoperable deceases and epidemics. It is the humanity itself that to be held responsible for all these calamities. The polluted environment is our own making. It is high time for us to realize the importance of creating an eco-consciousness and the relevance of ecology in our present consumerist and materialistic society, wherein everyone with selfish interests seeks for his/her own glory and welfare. At this juncture, one must let ecological awareness empower us. One must take resort to environmental education at the earliest and discover the fact that every one of us is related to each other and more essentially to the universe that sustains us.

The principles and values inculcated by the religious traditions lead to the premise of all our contributors that the search for solutions to the ecological global crisis begins within each of us. To transform the world,

we must begin by transforming ourselves or, to put into other words, by constructing a compassionate consciousness towards the plant life, animal life and life of other human beings. The significance of ecology is not only in the Buddhist religion alone but also other religions also promote ecological care and concern. Our task today is to live and act responsibly coupled with a spirit of oneness with the whole creation. This sort of responsibility can certainly lead the greedy, chaotic world into the previous orderly world, wherein every living being lives in perfect harmony and tranquillity, in cosmos than chaos. It can be achieved only through the transformation of the consciousness of the greedy and unhappy human life of today.

The scale of the environmental crisis now goes beyond any individual's capacity to imagine it. Local losses touch every corner – a tree taken down, river polluted, the town woods cleared for a mall, dead fish float on poisoned lakes, etc. As the damage deepens, the suffering spreads. People around the world struggle for clean water, air and safe food. At the turn of the millennium, religions are being asked to come forward with relevant teachings and take a stand against global ecological destruction. The Indian compassionate consciousness which is based on *Ahimsa*, and interdependence, being a spiritual, philosophical approach based on acceptance and compassion for all living beings and which also contain values, awareness, and concepts which can take a stand against the global ecological destruction.

Tagore in his essay *Tapovan*, 'Forest of Purity' elucidated that Indian civilization has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture of the forest has fuelled the culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life, which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization.<sup>30</sup>

Let once again the forest impart wisdom!

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<sup>30</sup>Rajeev Sharma, Naveen Aggarwal and Sandeep Kumar, "Ecological Sustainability in India through the Ages," *International Research Journal of Environment Sciences* 3 (2014), 70.