

Buddhist Concepts in Conservation of the Environment ¹

Duan Kamdee ²

At present, the environment has become the subject of worldwide interest since research findings and world events have shown that the world's greatest problem in the 1990's is the environment. The drastic decrease in forestsize and the resulting crises all point to severe future problem. The accumulated environmental changes are exceeding the adaptability of the environment. The ensuing results are the deteriorating quality of water, air and soil quality, the extinction of plant and animal species, and the loss of beautiful scenery.

The environment is everything around us, having man as the central point. Broadly speaking, the environment can be divided into 3 types:

1. **Natural Environment** : This refers to natural resources such as air, water, minerals forests, soil, all forms of energy, and all living organisms from plants, animals, to man himself.

2. **Man-made Environment** : Using his knowledge and ability, man has turned natural resources into new inventions such as edifices, dams, roads and machinery.

3. **Social Environment** : This includes systems of government, types of family, religions, education, professions, beliefs, attitudes and conventions. The social environment serves as a tool to pass on knowledge and set a pattern for people in society to follow in conducting themselves.

To maintain his living, man has directly utilized the natural environment for food, clothing, shelter, medicine and relaxation. With his knowledge and ability, he has also made use of the environment to build machinery and various constructions for his own comfort. Moreover, he has used society as a tool to pass on knowledge, thought and behaviors to himself and the following generations in order to live in society happily and usefully. All the three types of environments are deeply and intricately related, creating a relationship often referred to as the "Ecosystem."

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² Dr. Duan Kamdee, Associate Professor, Dept. of Philosophy and Religion

Problems Concerning the Environment

The present day environmental problem is often considered a new phenomenon. The roots of the problems faced today go back over 200 years to the start of the industrial revolution. It is only recently, however, with rapid technological development and a population explosion, that the fruits of these problems have become so noticeable and severe.

The 3 crucial environmental problems faced today are :

1. The Dwindling Supply of Natural Resources. In order to maintain a living, man's past, present, or future has to rely on natural resources. When the need for natural resources increases, man must search for them to adequately satiate this need. But the resources he has found are available for use only once. Man has now searched nearly every square inch of the earth's surface, and continues to take natural resources out while the need for these resources increases.

2. The Toxic Problem. In an ordinary course of living the search for natural resources, manufacturing, and scientific and technological development, often produce toxins. These toxins of varying quantity and toxicity cannot be easily destroyed or contained and remain in the world, sometimes forever. Thus, people are affected by these toxins in different quantities and degrees of danger.

The toxins that must be worried about are the elements radioisotope waste, toxins from agriculture and industry, and toxins or germs from hospitals.

3. The Ecological Problem. No matter how extensive or limited, ecosystems (must) have mutual and interdependent relationships. There are both physical and biological factors in ecosystems that support each other. If one changes, the other will as well. Human activities in the use of toxic elements have caused an imbalance in ecosystems. This was clearly manifested by the severe effects of earthquakes in Russia, the extinction of wild animals and plants, the suffering caused by floods in Bangladesh, India and the south of Thailand, heat and drought in many regions of the world, and the decrease of ozone in the atmosphere, etc.

No matter how severe the changes within an ecosystem are, man still must continue living on this world and receive the impact of these changes.

As we know now, the factors creating environmental problems stem from population growth, the side effects of scientific and technological development, traditions, cultures, values, beliefs and the rising standards of living. At the same time, man has tried to solve environmental problems through scientific and technological development in order to eliminate toxic elements; restore the environment; provide medical and public health and sanitation, create social measures for the prevention and elimination of

environment or ecological problems.

Being aware of environmental problems, man has tried to find solutions by searching for ways to protect and control natural resources so that they are used most beneficially. The two methods of doing this are :

1. by applying scientific and technological knowledge.
2. by passing preventive laws and enforcing penalties.

Work in Thailand has been done to solve environmental problems by emphasizing scientific technological and social education. Possible new and safer technologies can be used to replace old and dangerous technologies, and enforceable laws and regulations can be enacted. Some examples are as follows :

1. Solving the Problem of Air Pollution. Air pollution is the presence of elements dangerous to human health and livingthings, such as high concentration of carbonmonoxide and lead in the air. One method that the Thai society uses in the campaign to decrease air pollution is to encourage motorists to use unleaded gasoline, farmers to stop using DDT as insecticide, and instead, turn to pyrethrin. Pyrethrin is extracted from a kind of flowers and is effective as insecticide with no dangerous effects on human or animal life.

2. Solving the Problem of Water Pollution. Polluted water contains elements and impurities which are harmful to human health and life when consumed. One way to solve this problem is by encouraging people not to discard refuse into rivers and canals. In case the rivers become too shallow or clogged, the government sets up a budget for dredging. If the water in any waterway becomes polluted by waste material from nearby industrial plants, the government punishes those responsible and ensure that all the waste is cleaned.

3. Solving the Problem of Soil Deterioration. Deteriorated soil is unfit for people to use. Deteriorated soil results from several factors such as the disposal of toxic elements in the soil, the erosion of surface soil, and/or the misuse of land. These factors reduce the productivity of the soil which causes farmers to face poverty. The government, the private sectors and individuals use several methods to solve the problem of soil deterioration, such as educating people in scientific and technological knowledge and passing laws against deforestation.

While people are the most important factor causing the destruction of natural resources, they are also the most important factor in solving this problem. Scientific and technological knowledge or laws are important devices which help; but actually, the best and most efficient way to solve the problem is to build up a sense of awareness and appreciation of the value of natural resources. This can be accomplished through

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education and the dissemination of information. Solving the problem through conservation - by building up a sense of awareness - gets to the root of the problem. Taking precaution before things get out of hand prevents ensuing damage.

The environment is influenced by the way each person leads his life in society. Man cannot isolate himself from the environment because he is a part of it. He depends on the environment to live, especially for the necessities of life. All human actions on the environment affect man himself sooner or later, one way or another.

It is the nature of the human society to develop. However, all nations must make careful and wise use of their natural resources and the environment to develop their communities and societies. To really render benefits and happiness to the masses, and kind of development must be based on the proper management of resources and environment. The main principles should be the development for higher production and conservation of natural resources so that the environment will always be available for use. If these principles are not observed, the development of countries will be retarded due to the lack of raw materials, deteriorated environment and natural resources, and/or pollution. Finally, the quality of life will be affected, creating such problems as deteriorating health and sanitation, starvation and aridity of agricultural lands. This will all lead to unwieldy social problems. Drought will force country people to migrate to big cities where they will create problems associated with slums and unlawful activities. Thus, it can be said that social stability can be maintained only so long as the environment is natured, protected and restored at the same time as natural resources are being utilized.

The Relationship between Buddhism and the Environment

Since its beginning, Buddhism has been closely linked to forests. The Buddha himself left his palace to search for truth in the forest where he spent 6 long years of suffering. His enlightenment itself was achieved under the shade of the Bodhi tree. He later passed into Nivana under the Sala tree in royal garden called Salavanodayana.

Looking back at the beginning of the Buddha's life, one can see that even though he was a prince he was born in the forest, that is, Lumbini - Vana Garden, under the shade of the Sala tree.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha spread Buddhism by travelling to many places. Wherever he went, monasteries were built in his honour. The first monastery built for him by King Bimbisara was in a bamboo grove and it was called Veluvana which means bamboo forest. Subsequent monasteries were all forest monasteries, such as Wat Jetavana which was in a garden. Wat Umbavana which was built by Doctor Jivaka was called Jivakambavana or Wat Mahavana and Umbapalivana. So, it can be said that the

abodes of the Buddha have always had something in connection with forests. Therefore, Buddhist monasteries in the time of the Buddha always had the words "Vanaram" or "Pa", which mean "forest", as part of their names.

The Buddha saw a close relationship between life and nature. He knew well the impact on nature and the environment if nature and the environment were treated improperly, causing a state of "imbalance". Thus, he set up principles about this relationship and gave advice for all Buddhists to follow. Since the Buddha had been well aware of environmental problems and pointed them out to all his followers, he gave advice for observation and practice. He also showed the ways to prevent these problems from happening. Thus, the environmental problems worried and talked about presently are not a new topic to Buddhism.

The main teachings given by the Buddha, which are the principles of environmental conservation and the foundation of living in relationship to the natural environment, consist of 3 parts :

1. The principle of moral precepts (sila)
2. The principle of moderate consumption
3. The principle of gratefulness

1. The principle of sila - deals with the relationship with the outside environment, other people, other things, without encroachment. These make up basic foundation of co-existence on friendly terms with others in society. The Buddha enlarged this into 3 principles :

1.1 As a principle for every human being to practice at all times, known as "Nityasila." (Pali-Suttanta-Pitaka. Silakhantha Vigga, vol. 9 : 4-188) This consists of 5 precepts which are the foundation for all sila

1. Refrain from killing.
2. Refrain from stealing.
3. Refrain from adultery.
4. Refrain from lying.
5. Refrain from drinking alcohol or using drugs.

1.2 As a principle for monks, with specific measures to deal with transgressions, this strict principle is necessary for controlling the behavior of the monks in a unified pattern. A great number of precepts concerning the environment were set up. One of which stated that "If a monk intentionally kills living beings, it is a Pacittiya" (Pali-Vinaya-Pitaka. Mahavipanga, vol. 2 : 139). Living beings include all creatures with one exception. No matter how big or small, all have an equal right to live.

In the same matter, the Buddha stated "If a monk knowing that the water has living beings in it, uses that water, it is a Pacittiya." (Pali-Vinaya-Pitaka. Mahavipanga, vol. 2 : 140)

The precept also emphasizes that even the microorganism in drinking water has a right to live. So a monk should not violate this right. Any violator is a transgressor.

To encourage people to have a sense of love for animal as they have for their own lives, the Buddha described the nature of all living beings by saying that

*All tremble at punishment;
All fear death;
Comparing others with oneself,
One should neither kill nor cause to kill.*

and All tremble at punishment

*For all life is dear;
Comparing others with oneself,
One should neither kill nor cause to kill.* (Pali-Suttanta-Pitaka. Dhammapa,

vol. 25 : 49)

"Living beings" in the Buddha's words does not mean only beasts big or small but also includes every man. If man is well aware of this fact and spreads this awareness, then man and man, man and animals will live happily in the world.

Moreover, in Buddhism all plants are equal to all animals and deserve to be well taken care of no less than the animals. Therefore, the Buddha set up a precept protecting plants stating that if a monk removes a part of a growing plant so that it is broken away from its place of growth, it is a Pacittiya". (Pali-Vinaya-Pitaka. Mahavipanga, vol. 2 : 134). Violating plants here means causing the plants to die in every way whether by uprooting, felling, cutting or picking.

In the section connected with the manner of urination and stooling (Pakinnaka), Buddha stated "A monk should train himself; I will not when not sick, stool, urinate or spit on green plants and into water" (Pali-Suttanta-Pitaka. Mahavipanga, vol. 2 : 834)

The conservation of water reserved for consumption is considered quite important. Regarding this matter, the Buddha set a precept stating, "monks must be conscious not to defecate, urinate or salivate in the water." Later on, when some ailing monks could not follow this precept, the Buddha changed it to "When not ailing, monks must be conscious not to defecate, urinate or salivate in the water." This precept evidently aims at keeping water free for human consumption. Generally, monks have no possessions or activities that would create pollution to nature and the environment. They have only their natural internal body wastes that they must dispose of. The place

for getting rid of the body wastes must be proper and obviously never in a river.

The Buddha, being aware of the importance of the environment, set up precepts forbidding monks from cutting trees, even picking flowers or fruits, or making the environment dirty or deteriorated in any way.

1.3 As a principle called "Dhutangavatta" (Vissuddhimaaga : 59-83) encouraging monks who observe the practice of residing in the forest or under the shade of the trees to practice Dharma and for monks get rid of their vices by using severe methods. The Buddha enlarged upon this precept as follows :

1. Monks residing in the forest should take their proper seating when entering the assembly of monks.
2. Monks residing in the forest should not enter the village too early in the morning and leave too late in the day.
3. Monks residing in the forest should not pay social visits to households before or after a meal for it is improper.
4. Monks residing in the forest should not be reckless physically or verbally for it is negligent.
5. Monks residing in the forest should not talk too much, foolishly or with a sharp tongue.
6. Monks residing in the forest should be obedient.
7. Monks residing in the forest should maintain composure and self-restraint.
8. Monks residing in the forest should moderate their eating.
9. Monks residing in the forest should always persevere.
10. Monks residing in the forest should be industrious.
11. Monks residing in the forest should maintain a steady mind.
12. Monks residing in the forest should have a composed spirit.
13. Monks residing in the forest should be wise.
14. Monks residing in the forest should be industrious in pursuing and studying in three graduated stages; Sila Samadhi and Panna
15. Monks residing in the forest should try to gain enlightenment through meditation.
16. Monks residing in the forest should observe Dharma which is the highest instrument of Vivana.

The Buddha advised Buddhist monks to use the forest as a place for meditation since the quiet environment was favorable for peace of body, peace of mind and peace from passions.

2. The Principle of Moderate Consumption (Bhojanemattaññuta)

An important environmental problem is the dwindling supply of natural resources which is not sufficient for human needs. Man, an important factor contributing to this problem has great desires and cravings. His greed and need are incessant, the more he searches for and uses natural resources, the more depleted or changed they become.

Concerning the consumption of natural resources, Buddhist principle states that one must follow the middle path, that is, not to consume according to one's like or to serve one's craving. Development should not place emphasis on material fulfillment to meet satisfaction.

The middle path involves moderation in consuming. It is a quenching of desire, a consumption aimed at uplifting the quality of life. It is the raising of spirit above desire, the subduing of greed by controlling the senses and awareness of consuming in moderation. The Buddha's words on this matter were :

1. Craving breeds grief, extinguishing craving in extinguishing grief.
2. The less monks are slaves to craving, the higher they can thrive.

To raise the spirit and the sub-conscious mind above desire, the Buddha showed that the wealth which is the true essence of life is the wealth of the mind. When the mind is highly developed man will have a pleasant and balanced relationship with the environment. The 7 Dharmas are :

1. Saddha - faith in the principle adhered to and the good deed performed.
2. Sila - keeping the body and words clean.
3. Hiri - being ashamed of doing evil.
4. Ottappa - being afraid of evil.
5. Bahusacca - being well educated.
6. Caga - sacrifice and generosity.
7. Panna - apprehension of reason, goodness and badness, reward and punishment, gain and loss.

These 7 Dharmas are very helpful because they support an individual to perform beneficial virtuous deeds, and use wisdom to govern every deed.

3. The Principle of Gratefulness - Since man, the natural environment and society interdependent on one another, the Buddha preached Dhrama by stating how to perform one's duties interactively with gratefulness, so that all life would have a smooth and balanced relationship.

Every man should be in the position of Kataññu - being grateful to someone of something, and Katavedi declaring gratitude by reciprocating. The Buddha said that

gratitude and reciprocation are marks of a good person. Gratitude should not be given only to people but also to non-human beings, such as streets, shelters or the natural environment. All are beneficial to us. Anything that gives us shelter and comfort must be preserved. This is gratitude. A man who is grateful is called a good person. Thus, conserving the natural environment is practicing the Dharma of gratefulness. One who can practice it is considered to have Patirupadesa, a proper environment which leads to progress like a wheel leading a vehicle. Examples of Patirupadesa are good company, good conduct and good background, without which it is quite difficult to progress.

Reforestation, the Buddha states, is also an act of merit as it helps to create a good environment. "Anyone who grows forests or orchards, builds bridges, watersheds, digs water wells or gives shelters, receives merit all the time day and night. (Pali-Suttanta-Pitaka. Sangyutta, vol. 15 : 53). Conserving the natural environment, digging water wells, and growing trees are of great continuous benefit to people in the society. Thus, the Buddha's words, "the doer receives merits all the time both day and night."

Since Buddhism teaches about the conservation of natural resources, a tradition has arisen to erect a Buddha image in the posture of "fixing the eyes." This commemorates the incident when the Buddha, with his right and on his left hand, standing in the northeastern direction of the Bodhi tree, fixed his eyes on the tree without blinking for 7 days to signify his gratefulness to the Bodhi tree for having given him shade until he attained enlightenment.

Concerning the usage as utility of natural resources, Buddhism puts and emphasis of the principle of moderate consumption, or the middle path, the consumption of the 4 necessities of life is not consumption to satisfy craving, but instead consumption for the maintenance of life according to awareness and the ability to rise above desire.

Monks who practice Dharma in the forest or under the shade of a tree are praised for their conduct. Phramahakasapa Thera, for example, was praised as being as virtuous as the Buddha himself.

Later on in the country's Sukhothai period, a tradition started in building 2 types of Buddhist monasteries.

1. Arannavasi - forest monastery. Monks who reside in this type of monastery are called forest monks.

2. Gamavasi - monastery situated in a village or town. Monks who reside in this type of monastery are called town monks.

These two kinds of monks do their duty in conserving natural resources by setting themselves as models and preaching morality to make people aware of the value and necessity of the environment, to love nature and pride in their beautiful art and culture. Besides being models, these monks also teach people to appreciate the value of developing the mind by relying on the proper environment to practice Dharma; that is, meditating while walking under the shade of trees. The quiet and peaceful atmosphere makes those who experience it feel pleasant and peaceful. Their wayward thoughts and anxieties can be erased within a very short time, making their mind peaceful and their body fresh from the contact with the balance of nature.

As for development which goes hand in hand with conservation, monks take the role of society's spiritual leaders, as good advisors who bring benefit to people who come to them. Monks show laymen the way to Dharma. Monks stress that spiritual development must always be in conjunction with material development. People should bear in mind that material development alone, as emphasized at present, creates, physical and mental health problems, the more materially developed people are, the poorer they become. Though they have material comforts, they remain unhappy. People become increasingly estranged from a lack of spiritual progress and balance.

The principle of development employed by the monks aims at the maximum potential of life itself, that is, teaching people to change their lives so that they may progress materially and spiritually. They should learn self-reliance and self-respect, being certain that their own potential can be developed to the highest degree through wisdom. The monks teach people not to destroy their natural and social environment, including their local customs, traditions, cultures and original ways of living in society. Emphasis is put on living one's life wisely in accord with that of community and its people and resources by using the 7 Dharmas of a good person, for example, regarding the body, people are taught to consume the four necessities of life by following the middle path, creating a balanced relationship with the environment. Regarding society, they are taught to develop a relationship with others by adhering to the principle of Sila to bring about peaceful coexistence. Regarding the mind, they are taught to control their mind by practicing meditation. Regarding wisdom, they are taught to be aware of Sankhara or Truth as the way of the world and life.

Looking at the precepts the Buddha laid down as principles for monks and novices to follow, it can be seen that there are many which have been laid down to conserve nature and the environment from deteriorating. The precepts forbidding monks from digging up soil, cutting wood, making a fire outside the shelter are precautions against deforestation and forest fires.

The precept forbidding monks and novices from disposing or discharging waste in the water or on green plants and specifying that they use a toilet is meant to prevent health dangers with proper sanitation and to keep the environment free to infestation and preventing germs and other organisms from spreading.

Even the virtuous principles of mercy, sympathy, gratefulness and moderate consumption that the Buddha taught are principles that encourage the awareness of the conservation of nature. Nature should be utilized properly, not exploited or wasted. This is to maximize the fertility of the environment.

In Buddhism, man is seen as a part of nature and related to nature both alive and dead. This is according to the principles of Anicca (impermanence) and Anatta (non-entity) which are independent and perpetual. Thus, man has a duty to understand and act in accordance with the law of nature through paths that can be arranged into 3 groups called traisikkha which consists of Sila Samadhi and Panna.

Sikkha is a Pali word equivalent to the Sanskrit word Suksha. Here it means the paths of life : Sila, Samadhi, Panna, not the study of subject matters in the usual meaning.

Sila, Samadhi and Panna are the paths which can touch the deepest recess of the mind and cause a change of behavior while rendering material happiness.

Thus, Buddhism shows ways to make people happy by utilizing the least amount of matter and energy while aiming at happiness and social correctness. One particular behavior that can lessen the destruction of the environment is for consumers of great amounts of material and energy to decrease their consumption while increasing their quality of life.

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