

BUDDHISM FOR SUSTAINABLE THINKING

The Role of Religion in Protecting Environment without Abandoning Science and Technology in the Development Process

Ven. Dr. Mahinda Deegalle
School of Historical and Cultural Studies
Bath Spa University, United Kingdom

We are in an ecological crisis. What is happening all around us across the globe shows that we, human beings and the natural environment around us, are in crisis due to lack of some careful and forward thinking. Environmental scientists have shown that globe is in crisis now when ice is melting in Iceland and Ozone layer is damaged. Recent activities such as Kyoto protocol direct us to take effective measures to overcome global crisis. Plenty of signs in natural disasters demonstrate that earthly resources are also limited and the development process in many developing nations that aims at eliminating poverty from the globe can move smoothly only to a limited extent. When the planet is in crisis, we are obligated and forced to rethink of our actions in the past and present and take creative precautions to prevent the imminent disaster.

From the experience of observable facts around us, we know that environmental crisis challenges all humanity and eco system. This imminent vulnerability makes us to be more responsible and accountable in whatever we do, either in agricultural activities or in over consumption of earthly resources. This may be the reason that we are forced, individually, collectively, nationally and internationally, to discuss today on the significance of cultural values and religious ethos that are conducive to sustainable development projects and making people aware of using such resources in daily life to prevent the imminent danger. From every corner, whether developed or undeveloped, ecological sustainability has become an important issue both academically and in practical terms in conducting our daily lives.

After the Tsunami catastrophe on 26 December 2004 in South and Southeast Asia embracing brutally thirteen diverse nations with different religious and cultural ideologies, we are now more alarmed of natural disasters, though the Tsunami itself was triggered initially by a natural earthquake which had significant negative impact of unimaginable scale. Until that tragic event, tropical countries in the region such as Sri Lanka which treasure sandy beaches for tourist industry and religious traditions such as Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka which had inculcated a quite comfortable attitude among its followers to imagine that natural disasters of that scale which could take the lives of nearly 40,000 people, displacing several millions will not take place because of Sri Lanka's precious location on the globe. Before the Tsunami, the majority of Sinhalese who lived along the coast of Southern Sri Lanka never imagined, most of them and the academics in Sri Lanka and abroad sarcastically referring to the episodes of ocean floods that resulted the journey of Duttagamani's mother to Rohana recorded in the sixth century CE *Mahavamsa* as false, fabricated accounts of religious nature rather than historical, objective, narratives in the western sense of historiography, that their friendly ocean, a sight of comfort and livelihood, will wipe them out from the surface of earth one day. Noting the significance of such natural disasters and constantly reflecting upon the

ecological crisis at hand around the globe, in this paper, I plan briefly to examine some concerns raised in Theravada Buddhism and some of the religious and cultural resources found in the Buddhist practices which can educate us in the preservation and posterity of the globe and its environment.

Over the centuries, Buddhism as a religion has shaped society, social customs, practices and way of thinking in many nations in Asia. In shaping morals and ethical concerns of these nations, Buddhism has contributed substantially. The rapid growth of science and technology, trends of secularization, individual and profit driven capitalism, increasing influence of consumerism are gradually challenging the values and ethos of Buddhist civilization and lives. The global environmental crisis also has brought about criticisms in general on the role of religion and paused challenges in Asian and Western civilizations. How contemporary Buddhists and Buddhist institutions respond to nature, environment and environmental crisis need to be examined.

Questioning the contribution of science to human welfare and preservation of nature, in recent decades, as a religion Christianity has been accused as being the dominant religion which shaped the context and cultural ethos in the countries in which modern science gradually developed from the sixteenth century onwards. Environmentalists as well as progressive theologians such as Lynn White have blamed Christianity and its biblical teachings for allowing and sanctioning humans to have dominion over the natural world. It is often religious scriptures that were widely known in the West which shaped human thinking and attitudes in the context of emerging science that are blamed for sanctioning exploitation of the natural environment and its resources with an increasingly influential and damaging anthropocentric perspective.

Today religious leaders, environmentalists, policy makers, government officers, scientists and politicians lament on the environmental crisis. The roots of environmental crisis lie in industrialization, rapid population growth, expanding capitalism, and consumerism. A serious worry is the planet is being raped of all of its natural resources to cope with the explosion of the population growth. The developing countries face serious challenges on environment degradation and pollution.

Market forces have also contributed to the environmental crisis. Multi-national companies and corporations of the developed world have exploited the developing countries. These companies are fuelled by greed, materialism and wealth. They have expanded the need to consume more. Consumerism, which encourages satisfaction and happiness dominate people's lives alienating them from religious and cultural values of simplicity. It is often accused that multi-national companies and human beings who are in position of abusive power have exploited the planet of its natural resources. Today there are many environmental problems such as deforestation, pollution, nuclear waste dumping, land degradation, water depletion, the extinction of animal and plant life, loss of biodiversity, climate change, produce of green house gasses, the depletion of the earth's ozone layer. Today a significant number of people of the globe suffers from poverty and are subject to war and violence. Diseases such as Aids are spreading and natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes are quite common today. Humanity today witness catastrophic signs of 'global warming' and 'environmental crisis.'

The damage that our consumption can do to the environment is rather astonishing. There has been a recent report about the consumption of paper. Recently, a Web site

commented that McDonalds alone “needs 800 square miles of trees to make the amount of paper” needed “for a year’s supply of packaging.”ⁱ

What can Buddhism do to sustain the environmental resources?

In environmental circles, Buddhism tradition has often been viewed in a more positive light than most of other religious traditions. The attitude to nature and environment in the Buddhist tradition has a significant diverse views ranging from South Asian Theravada Buddhism to East Asian Mahayana Buddhism. In mixing with native traditions of those countries that Buddhism spread, in the cultural interaction, Buddhism has produced rather creative responses and activities in using the nature for its teachings and practices. Buddhism is often characterized as a religious philosophy very much in tune with nature and environment. In this section, I plan to discuss some Theravada Buddhist ideas in relation to environment and sustainability.

On the topic of environment and Buddhism, one can find both romantic and critical works. Several scholars produce some of the important academic publications on the subject: Ian Harris, Padmasiri de Silva, Peter Harvey and Damien Keown. The areas of research on Buddhism and ecology are becoming popular. It is not uncommon now that Buddhist groups hold conferences on this theme as witnessed in the *Buddhist Ecology and Critique of the Modern Society* (2005) the international conference held at School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.ⁱⁱ Highlighting the significance of religious teachings on the ecology, recently an *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* has been produced by drawing attention to ecological concerns.ⁱⁱⁱ

Whatever people might say about Buddhist teachings and contemporary practices in Buddhist societies, there is no doubt that the Buddha was very much concerned with nature and Buddhist attitudes towards it. There are many occasions in the Pali canon that the Buddha advises people not to pollute the environment. It is not an exaggeration, one could say the Buddha was the first recycler among world’s religious teachers. The directions that he gave to his disciples of using robes are rather astonishing.

Buddha’s doctrine of economic development is very much a balanced way of life. He advised to use resources efficiently without beings a slave to desires and attachments. The foremost challenge for a Buddhist scholar today is presenting the teachings of the Buddha without misinterpretation to meet the needs and thinking of the contemporary world. In today’s world, one of the most urgent problems is searching for resources to remedy the environmental degradation. Environmental protection is an issue both in primarily Buddhist countries as well as in the western world. Humanity today is faced with many kinds of environmental problems, pollution of natural resources and noise. The Buddha shows ways to gain peace and happiness if we learn to love and respect nature.

Buddhist across the world are now realizing the necessity of interpreting the teachings of the Buddha on human relationships with nature and environment and identifying sustainable ways of life and finding ways to enhance one’s physical as well as spiritual wellbeing while consuming earthly resources.

Non-violence is a fundamental tenet in Buddhism. *Ahimsa* (non-violence) promotes non-harming attitudes to fellow human beings and eco system. Reverence for all forms of life is a crucial practical virtue in this tenet. Gentleness in all actions of body, speech and

mind creates a healthy cultural and religious value that celebrates sustainable environment.

Some recent Buddhist concepts such as 'Interbeing' which based on classical ideas of Dependent Origination attempts to capture the creative imagination of the environmentalist by proposing that nothing can exist by itself. Over the centuries, Buddhists have maintained that all things around us exist only as part of an interconnected totality. For some Buddhists, all the things in the environment such as trees, rivers, animals, water, streams, plants, mountains, soil, rocks and landscapes are sacred. They are conducive to spiritual growth and human existence. They strongly believe that the things in the nature have a significant impact on human livelihood. At the same time, human life style itself has a significant impact on the nature itself.

Buddhists in the Preservation of Nature: Contemporary Responses

There are many environmental groups who adopt activism on a global scale to protect the planet from unwanted destruction and prevent the depletion it from its natural resources. Buddhists who are self-conscious about their engagement in protecting the environment and other similar socially important issues are nowadays commonly identified as Engaged Buddhists.

This term itself is rather new. Its origin is attributed to a quite persuasive Asian Buddhist thinker and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk activist Thich Nhat Hanh. This monk poet invented this useful term in 1963.^{iv} The term has expanded nowadays to "socially engaged Buddhism." This form of Buddhism is engaged in social activities. They practice the *dharma* and mindful and compassionate action to alleviate *dukkha* caused by social and economic problems. Engaged Buddhists are concerned with social, political and economic problems. They involve in non-violent and direct action to eliminate poverty, war, disease, exploitation and oppression.

The environmental crisis is a threatening one. Partly, it is a result of social, political and economic problems. Some of these are understood as resulting from ignorance. No doubt some of these are direct results of insatiable desire and boundless greed. Modern Buddhists are concerned with the environmental crisis and use spiritually to heal the earth and humanity to overcome environmental crisis. Saving planet has become an important enterprise for most of them.

Doctrinal form of Buddhism is known to be otherworldly emphasizing the transcendence. Modern thinkers, however, use even traditional teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, virtue of Loving-kindness and compassionate action to heal the human minds and earth by lessening suffering and making a positive impact on the world.

We can look at a few contemporary Buddhist responses to some of the problems that we face with regard to nature. For example, in Thailand, there is a generation of monks who are actively involved in preserving nature. Kerry Brown (1992: 87) records the impact of environmental crisis in primarily Buddhist Thailand as follows:

The land boom is nation-wide. As agri-business sweeps in, the price of land soars out of reach...villagers are being priced off the land and forced to clear national forest reserve illegally...Almost 80 per cent of the jungle which once blanketed Thailand has disappeared in less than 25 years, stripped away to feed the world market...the

land was eroding, the air was hotter, the rainy season was shorter and when it did come, the whole place flooded.^v

In the 1990s, several Thai monks were involved in environmental preservation as a spiritual exercise. Their actions were motivated by the apparent environmental crisis in their own neighbourhood. They noted that modern Thailand had faced a dangerous environmental crisis. Within three decades, Thailand had lost 80% of its forest.

When we can see the crisis through our own eyes, we are now eager to build a sustainable future for the planet and for our future generations. We are thinking more now in interdependent terms. As peoples, nations, countries, we are not anymore isolated individuals. All our actions have impact on another; another's behaviour one day will have impact on me. We think more now to act in a responsible manner. We are aware of our responsibility. What we can do for future. What we should do keep harmony. We are forced to do things to minimize dangers.

There are many things that concern us when we want to explore the issues of sustainability. *A Little Book of Hope*^{vi} identifies 12 items that need our attention: (i) transport, (ii) habitat, (iii) energy, (iv) water, (v) economics, (vi) biodiversity, (vii) organization, (viii) food, (ix) health, (x) oceans, (xi) peace, and (xii) education. For all these concerns, cultural values are useful and insightful both in understanding their value and in preserving them without harming them and without exploiting them with selfish motives.

Poverty is often closely associated with the exploitation of earth and its resources, in particular, the forest. Some issues are: how can we eliminate poverty? What is the individual responsibility in it? Can debt relief make a significant improvement in developing countries? All these require cooperation between nations and multinational companies and each individual who considers this planet one's home.

Past is gloomy and unpleasant. There has been a great destruction of planet's resources. They are results of human ignorance and selfish motives. There is a necessity to reflect on them from an ethical perspective. Humans have both responsibility to protect and potentiality and capability to adopt healthy lifestyles that foster earthly resources. Safeguarding resources is an important concern of modern world.

Concluding Remarks

Broadly speaking, religions encourage us to cultivate healthy attitudes. Develop good qualities that benefit others. Virtues cultivated in human minds generate new awareness and care that is essential to overcome planetary crisis. By these means we can minimize our negative impact on earth resources. We can prevent certain dangers. By protecting the natural environment, we respect the natural right to life of all of earth's living things. Our challenge is to reduce degradation of the planet. Sustainable earth is our challenge.

ⁱ Jocelyn Stock Andy Rochen, "The Choice: Doomsday or Arbor Day,"

<http://www.umich.edu/~gs265/society/deforestation.htm> (accessed on 18 April 2006).

ⁱⁱ The conference was held on 17-18 February 2005. It was sponsored by University of London and Dongguk University, a Buddhist university in Seoul, South Korea.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. B. Taylor (London: Continuum International, 2005).

^{iv} Thomas Freeman Yarnall, (2000) “Engaged Buddhism: New and Improved! (?) Made in the U. S. A. of Asian Materials,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 7 (2000):

<http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/7/yarnall001.html>

^v “In the water there were fish and the fields were full of rice: reawakening the lost harmony of Thailand,” edited talks and interviews with Ajahn Pongsak, compiled by Kerry Brown, in Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown, *Buddhism and Ecology* (London: Cassell, 1992), pp. 87-88.

^{vi} Rory Spowers and Tim Willmott, *A Little Book of Hope* (Hopsters, 2003), p. 7