

AN ARTICLE ON CONSERVATION OF ENVIRONMENT IN BUDDHISM

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Abstract

Buddhism has had a long and close relationship with nature and, in particular, forests. The Lord Buddha was born under the Sala tree, enlightened under the Bodhi tree, gave his first sermon in the forest, and died under the Sala tree (Religious Development Committee, 1992). The Lord Buddha lived closely with nature and taught his followers to take care of nature. The first precept is to abstain from taking life of living forms. This precept is based on loving-kindness and can be seen as an environmental ethic to conserve animals and plants. More specifically, the Lord Buddha was supportive of water conservation as seen in the discipline he introduced prohibiting monks and nuns from disposing waste into canals or rivers. It is considered sinful to pollute water because all life forms depend on water to survive. In addition, according to Buddadasa Bhikkhu, deforestation is unacceptable in Buddhism, and it is important to show respect for trees that provide food, canopy and protection for all forest-dwellers. More generally, Buddhism emphasises the importance of human harmonious co-existing with nature while denouncing human conquering of nature.



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Discussion: It also emphasizes compassion, respect for all living creatures, and harmony between living things sharing the planet (Kabil Singh, 2007). All of the above demonstrates that the Lord Buddha had a vision for environmental protection and conservation as he taught his followers to love and respect nature. In Buddhism, the self is understood as an ongoing *process* rather than an underlying *thing*. Despite what's inferred from conventional reality, there is no one, single, abiding entity or essence behind or within our thoughts, words and deeds. Buddhist principals treat the mind and body, the self and environment, as inseparable. Environmental destruction is therefore an outer manifestation of an inner affliction. If our thoughts are polluted, then our actions will be polluted too, and so will their consequences. Hence in Buddhism, 'individuality' – a notion particularly well embedded in Western culture – is an oversimplification: an illusion in the sense that our preconditions and assumptions lead us to believe that we are completely separate from everyone and everything else in the universe. It is the belief of Buddhism that moral consciousness, the human mind, the human body, the external world consisting of fauna and flora and society are intricately interconnected. It is also believed that human ignorance is the primary cause of the reduction

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of biodiversity and the destruction of the natural ecosystem on the planet. Buddhism has long advocated reverence and compassion for all life. The original, genuine teaching of Buddhism is a theory of universal interconnectedness, which, by dismantling the separate, continuous ego-self, leads to identification with and responsibility for the whole world of beings. Buddha believed in bodily existence and hence to the food chain and to nature as it actually is. While environmentalism emphasizes that natural resources are limited, Buddhism is more direct in encouraging individuals to limit their resource consumption to the optimal satisfaction of the four basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. There are a lot of forests and trees that are directly associated with Gautama Buddha. Creation of gardens near the monasteries and stupas seems to have been derived from the description of the gardens of Nalanda and Takshasila during the time of Lord Buddha. A lot of references to forests have been made mostly in Tripitakas, Attakathas and Jatakas from the Buddha period, some of which are stated below: Lumbini Vana: According to Pali literature, Lumbini vana was lying between the Kapilavastu kingdom in the west and Devadaha kingdom in the east. Divyavadana gives detailed description of this forest and mentions that Lord Buddha was born in this forest under an Asoka tree. Ambapali Vana: Various Buddhist literatures have described about this forest which was situated towards Vaisali. Lord Buddha before travelling to Kusinagar for his Mahaparinirvana spent the last year of his life in this forest. Before he travelled to Kusinagar, Lord Buddha accepted the food offered by Amrapali, the owner of this forest, who presented this forest to Lord Buddha and the monk community. Asoka Tree: The Asoka tree is considered the birth tree, since it was this tree in the Lumbini Vana under which Siddhartha Gautama was born. There are some early sculptures depicting the branch of the Asoka tree which Mayadevi held during the time of delivery. The Bodhi Tree: The Sacred Fig tree also called the Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) in Hindi, is a species of banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), which is native to India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and China. The Bodhi Tree was a large and very old Sacred Fig tree located in Bodh Gaya, about 100km from Patna under which Gautama Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment or Bodhi. According to Buddhist texts the Buddha, after his Enlightenment, spent a whole week in front of the tree, standing with unblinking eyes, gazing at it with gratitude. King Asoka was most diligent in paying homage to the Bodhi tree, and held a festival every year in its honour in the

month of Kattika. The Bodhi tree and the Sri Maha Bodhi propagated from it are famous specimens of Sacred

The Sal Tree: Some scholars identified the Sal tree as the one Lord Buddha was born under. However, most Buddhist literature mentions that Lord Buddha passed away (into Mahaparinirvana) under a Sal tree. There are some sculptural panels showing that Lord Buddha passed away in between two Sal trees. The Banyan Tree: From ancient times, the banyan has been an object of worship with religious and sacred values. Buddhist literatures describe Lord Buddha to have spent his fteenth rainy season at Kapilavstu in Nigrodharam (monastery constructed in a Banyan forest). The Jamun Tree: There are several references regarding the association of this tree with Lord Buddha. A sculpture depicting the rst meditation of Siddhartha shows that while living at his father's palace, Siddhartha was brought to sit under a Jamun tree (*Syzygium cumini*) to witness a ploughing contest as a representative for the king. Animals in Buddhist Doctrine: Animals have always been regarded in Buddhist thought as sentient beings, different in their intellectual ability than humans but no less capable of feeling suffering. Furthermore, animals possess Buddha nature (according to the Mahāyāna school) and therefore an equal potential to become enlightened. Moreover, the doctrine of rebirth held that any human could be reborn as an animal, and any animal could be reborn as a human. An animal might be a reborn dead relative, and anybody who looked far enough back through his or her infinite series of lives would eventually perceive every animal to be a distant relative. The Buddha expounded that sentient being currently living in the animal realm have been our mothers, brothers, sisters, fathers, children, friends in past rebirths. One could not, therefore, make a hard distinction between moral rules applicable to animals and those applicable to humans; ultimately humans and animals were part of a single family. They are all interconnected. The Jātaka stories which tell of past lives of the Buddha in folktale fashion, frequently involve animals as peripheral or main characters, and it is not uncommon for the Bodhisattva (the past-life Buddha) to appear as an animal as well. The stories sometimes involve animals alone, and sometimes involve conflicts between humans and animals; in the latter cases, the animals often exhibit characteristics of kindness and generosity that are absent in the humans. Also recorded in the Jatakas is how, in a past life as King Shibi, Shakyamuni sacrificed himself to save a dove from a hawk. Recorded in the Golden Light Sutra, is how Shakyamuni in a past life, as Prince Sattva, came

across a starving tigress and her cubs, he fed himself to them so that they would survive. The above examples taken from/found in Buddhist literature show that Buddhism strongly advocates the conservation of all kinds of life forms existing in nature.

“Ahimsa-paramo-dharmah” - is one of the basic virtues of Jainism, which means non-injury to living beings. To kill a living being is considered to be the greatest of sins. Practice of non violence is not just limited to humans or animals but is extended to all forms of life. All living beings are regarded as equal. Jainism also stresses on the moral responsibility of the humans in their mutual dealings and relationships with the rest of the universe and hence it is a religion of compassion which aims at the welfare of all living beings. An important principle of Jainism as expressed in Sutrakrta-anga (1.11.33) is: ‘A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated’. Jain Agams depict nature in a very unique way as it says that the five main elements of nature; Prithvi (land, soil, stones, etc), Jal (Water resources including cloud), Agni (Fire), Vayu (Air) and Aakash (Sky) are living creatures and must be treated as living beings. These five types of elements go on to form five classes of beings (as shown alongside) such as vegetation, trees and plants, fungi and animals. This unique concept of Jainism restricts its followers from harming any living creature and eventually leads to limited consumption as well as help protect the environment. Lord Mahavira, who lived in forests and jungles most of the time during his asceticism, attained Keval Gyan (omniscience) on the bank of river Rijuvalika below a Sal tree. It is noteworthy that Mahavira is the 24th and last Tirthankar of Jain and all others also lived their ascetic life in similar manner. They preached sitting in Samavasharana after enlightenment. The Samavasharana itself is a complete ecosystem. Lord Mahavira has clearly warned in Acharanga Sutra (first Jain Anga Sutra) that contamination of any natural resource is not desirable in any case. He has gone into details of contamination. Jainism considers these as weapons to creatures (natural resources). Due to their perception of ‘livingness’ of the world, Jains hold an affinity for the ideals of environmental movement. The practice of non-violence in Jainism fosters an attitude of respect for all life forms and assumes the most extreme form. Many Jains wear mask to prevent individual creatures from getting killed while breathing and speaking. The advanced monks and nuns would sweep their path to avoid trampling on insects. One of the ways Jain monks or the followers of Jainism, observe non violence is by restraining themselves from eating the roots like potato, radish, carrots, ginger etc, especially

during the 4 months of rainy season. The reason behind this is they think that during harvest of these vegetables, earth is dug out and the soil organisms are killed more during rainy season. Jains called this period as “Chaumasu” or “Chaturmas”. In this period, even the monks do not wander from one place to another in order to avoid any unintentional killing of any form of life. For example, on a rainy day, they would observe fasts as they cannot walk on the wet streets to get “Gochari” (get food for themselves).

Jain scriptures motivate people for minimal consumption. They emphasize on Tyaga (Sacrifice). Jain Shravaka / Shravikas (Laymen and women) are preached to minimize their Bhoga (Consumables). The seventh vow for Jain households is Bhogopbhog Pariman Vrata (Vow). This vow restricts them from unlimited consumption of natural resources. Moreover, this vow is a Shiksha Vrata (Educational vow). It preaches its observers to learn and educate themselves towards limiting their consumables. In Jainism, there are 24 Tirthankaras in different generations who revitalized the Jain order every time. The first tirthankara, Bhagvan Rishabh Nath is said to have received perfect knowledge under a Banyan tree, making the tree sacred to Jains. All 24 tirthankaras have one tree species associated with each of them, under which they are believed to have achieved enlightenment. Non violence against animals: A famous tale about the merciful King Megharath (whose soul became the sixteenth Tirthankara – Bhagvan Santinath) exemplifies the teachings of the Jain dharma – it is the utmost duty of everyone to protect and help those who are less fortunate than us. Apart from ‘Ahimsa’, all the Jain vows are easily apt to be interested in ecological terms. For example, ‘Aparigraha’; the discipline of non-possession, prevents one from indulging in the acquisition of material goods, one of the root causes of current ecological concerns. In this tale, two Gods from the court of Indra took the form of a pigeon and a hawk respectively, in order to see whether there actually were kings who were brave and merciful enough to lay their own lives for those who came to them for shelter. On earth, King Megharath was sitting in his court surrounded by his courtiers, when a pigeon flew in from an open window and fell into his lap. At the very instant, a hawk flew into the court and demanded the pigeon, saying it was its prey. King Megharath said that since the pigeon came to him for shelter he cannot give it to the hawk, but offered his own flesh in return. The hawk stated that it wanted the same amount of flesh as the pigeon, so a weighing scale was brought in and the pigeon was put on one while the king cut out some of his own flesh and put it in the other. But no matter

how much of his own flesh he put in the scale, the pigeon remained heavier. The king finally got ready to put his entire body on the scale, disregarding protests from his courtiers, saying that it was his duty to protect the bird over anything else. Hearing this, the pigeon and the hawk returned to their divine forms and praised the king for his mercifulness. Jainism believes that an awareness of the sacred relationship between humans and the environment is necessary for the health of our planet, and for survival of mankind. We are called to the vision of our Tirthankaras and their philosophy that life, for its very existence and nurturing, depends upon a bountiful nature. Human beings need to derive sustenance from the earth and not deplete, exhaust, pollute, burn, or destroy it. Only a healthy “environmental ethic” dedicated to conservation and wise use of the resources can save our planet.

It should be noted, however, that the three aspects are interrelated and mutually supportive. Even when people understand the cause and effect of environmental problems, they will not change their behaviours harmful to the environment if their minds do not have the desire to do so. Thus, *panya* must be supported and enhanced by *silā* and *samadhi*. In other words, the three aspects must be integrated in the same process of problem-solving; together they represent a comprehensive solution to environmental problems.

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