

## Eco-mindfulness in Buddhism

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Many of those involved in the ecological movement have found inspiration and parallels within the Buddhist tradition. The Buddhist philosophy of karmic causality and dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*) convey the notion of interdependence of humans and nature. Today, especially in the United States, there are many movements, such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, to promote eco-living and sustainable communities, which call for humans to be mindful of the environment and make conscientious choices for the benefit of all sentient beings and non-sentient entities. Just as humans have been the cause of the gradual deterioration of Nature, we can also be the solution towards an eco-conscious living, which not only fosters a healthy environment, but also enables us to build good merit. The core Buddhist teaching, which must be embraced by all eco-minded practitioners is the notion of interdependence, which has been expounded by notable Japanese Buddhist figures in the eighth century, such as Kukai (774-835) of the Shingon School and Dogen (1200-1253) of the Soto Zen sect, who both viewed that non-living life forms—trees, plants, and the earth—could also achieve enlightenment. Their view is based on the ontological notions of Buddha-nature (*tathagata-garbha*) and Indra's Jewel Net, which is a powerful image found in Huayen's (Jpn. Keron) Avatamsaka Sutra. This paper examines Buddhist teachings and sutras, which support eco-friendly and sustainable movements in our society and world today.

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Those awakened and compassionate sentient beings engaged in the ecological movement around the world can find inspiration and affirmation within the Buddhist tradition. In particular, the Buddhist philosophy/science of karmic causality and dependent origination (Sk. *pratitya-samutpada*) assert that Humans and Nature, or sentient beings and non-sentient beings, are interdependent, which implies that we need to take care of each other for mutual benefit. Otherwise, our neglect and exploitation Nature will lead to mutual suffering.

Today, especially in the United States, there are an increasing number of "eco-mindful" groups, practicing this interdependent relationship between Humans and Nature. For instance, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), an international network, which was originated in Hawai'i and currently headquartered in Oakland, California, has been active since 1978 to promote eco-living and sustainable communities; also located in California, in Muir Beach, is the Green Gulch Farm Zen Center. By their exemplary living, practice and outreach, these movements call for all people and communities to be mindful of the environment and make conscientious choices for the benefit of all sentient and non-sentient beings.

Due to climate change and the deleterious effects upon our natural habitat, we must all assume the

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responsibility to “heal” Nature and do due diligence for our children and future generations. Just as humans have been the *cause* of the gradual deterioration of Nature, we can also be the *effect* towards eco-mindful living, which not only fosters a healthy environment, but also enables us to build good merit for the benefit of all parties involved, particularly Nature. The core Buddhist teaching for eco-mindfulness is the Sanskrit term, *pratitya-samutpada* (dependent origination), which can be found in two central Mahayana sutras in East Asia, the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (a.k.a. Flower Garland Sutra). These two important and influential sutras have been expounded by notable Indian Buddhist masters, such as Nagarjuna in the second century, Japanese Buddhist masters, such as Kukai (774-835) of the Shingon School and Dogen (1200-1253) of the Soto Zen sect, who viewed that non-living life forms—trees, plants, and the earth—could also achieve enlightenment (Jpn. *satori*). Their view is based on the ontological notions of Buddha-nature (*Tathagata-garbha*) and Indra’s Jewel Net, which is a powerful image found in Huayen’s (Jpn. *Kegon*) *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

The term “mindfulness” draws upon one of the *samadhi* or deep meditative categories in the Eightfold Path, along with concentration and right effort. In fact, when Buddha realized enlightenment, he was sitting under the pipal tree and surrounded by Nature, even calling witness to Mother Nature to overcome the temptations of Mara, the god of the underworld. When Buddha was in meditation (Skt. *dhyana*), he was “mindful” of the interconnected relationship between sentient beings and non-sentient beings. Consequently, the Sanskrit word for “mindfulness” (*sati*), which is one of the eightfold path, is an awareness of things in relation to things; that is, there is relative value or truth, a key principle in Buddhism. The venerable Thich Nhat Hahn wrote a best-seller called, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, which can be used as a guide for even the novice and expert practitioners of Zen meditation and mindful living. By “eco-mindfulness,” I am draw upon the same mindfulness principles in Zen, which were explicated by Thich Nhat Hahn and expounded eloquently by the late great D. T. Suzuki, and taught by Dogen, the esteemed patriarch of the Soto Zen school. The prefix “eco-” directs the single-pointed, *mu-shin* (Jpn. no-mind), *anatta* or “non-self” mindfulness and awareness to Nature. Eco-mindfulness views all sentient and non-sentient beings as equal in Buddha-nature so that there is no hierarchical relationship between the two, but rather a harmonious, happy and mutually beneficial relationship exists. Where there is an equilibrium and mutually dependent relationship, all involved parties seek to promote the welfare of each other since each party realizes Newton’s Third Law of Thermodynamics that “for every action, there is a reaction” or in Buddhist terms, “dependent origination.” The notion of dependent origination or *pratitya-samutpada* is the most important teaching in Buddhism. *Pratitiya-samutpada* explains the cause-effect relationship in Buddhism and is the core teaching and is embedded in the Four Noble Truths, namely, that suffering is caused by self-centered desires (Pali. *tanha*; cf. Second Noble Truth) and in turn, one can eliminate suffering by eliminating self-centered desires (Third Noble Truth; a.k.a. Nirvana). Hence, with nature as well, there is a dependent relationship between sentient beings (i.e., humans) and non-sentient beings (i.e., nature).

The concern for the welfare of nature has always been an important element in Buddhism. The recognition that human beings are essentially dependent on and interconnected with their environment—i.e. non-sentient beings—has given rise to an instinctive respect for nature. Although Buddhists believe that human beings have a unique opportunity to realize enlightenment, they have never asserted that humans were superior to the rest of the natural world. This respect for nature is clearly revealed in Buddha’s exchange with one of his close disciples, Maha Moggallana, when the monks’ custom of receiving daily food from the local people as charity

was undermined by a famine:

The venerable Moggallana went to the Blessed One. He said, “Lord, alms food is hard to get in Veranja now. There is a famine and food tickets have been issued. It is not easy to survive even by strenuous gleanings. Lord, this earth’s under-surface is rich and as sweet as pure honey. It would be good if I turned the earth over. Then the *bhikkhus* (monks) will be able to eat the humus that water plants live on.”

“But, Moggallana, what will become of the creatures that depend on the earth’s surface?”

“Lord, I shall make one hand as broad as the Great Earth and get the creatures that depend on the earth’s surface to go on to it. I shall turn the earth over with the other hand.”

“Enough, Moggallana, do not suggest turning the earth over. Creatures will be confounded.” (*Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta Vighanga, para. 1*)

In another exchange the Buddha compares the kind of religious ceremony he approves of, with those common at his time:

In this sacrifice, Brahmin, no bulls were slain, no goats or sheep, no cocks and pigs, no were various living beings subjected to slaughter, no 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. But those who wanted to do something did it, those who did not wish to did not: they did what they wanted to do, and not what they did not want to do. The sacrifice was carried out with ghee, butter, curds, honey, molasses. (*Digha Nikaya 5*)

Consequently, the Buddha gave rules forbidding people to pollute lakes and rivers, as well as keeping saliva, urine and feces away from green grass (*Vinaya IV*, 205-206).

The natural environment, uninhabited by humanity, was also respected as the ideal place for cultivating spiritual insights. In eighth-century India, dwelling in nature was clearly preferable for Shantideva to life in a monastery or town:

When shall I come to dwell in forests  
Amongst the deer, the birds and the trees,  
That say nothing unpleasant  
And are delightful to associate with? (*Digha Nikaya II, Anguttara Nikaya*)

Milarepa, Tibet’s great yogi-saint, was also fond of praising the benefits of living alone in the wild:

This is a delightful place, a place of hills and forests.  
In the mountain-meadows, flowers bloom;  
In the woods dance the swaying trees!  
For monkeys it is a playground.  
Birds sing tunefully,  
Bees fly and buzz,  
And from day until night the rainbows come and go.  
In summer and winter falls the sweet rain,  
And mist and fog roll up in fall and spring.  
At such a pleasant place, in solitude,  
I, Milarepa, happily abide,  
Meditating upon the void-illuminating Mind. (*Samyutta Nikaya I, 33*)

And Zen master Dogen too:

Even zazen hours advance. Sleep hasn’t come yet.  
More and more I realize mountain forests are good for efforts in the way

Sounds of the valley brook enter the ears, moonlight pierces the eyes.  
Outside this, not one further instant of thought. (*Jataka I, 199f*)

Recent studies on the interdependent relationship between sentient and non-sentient beings have made some significant strides to raise eco-mindfulness. In particular, there are three studies on Buddhism and the environment, which have provided some helpful stepping-stones: (1) Princeton University professor, Peter Singer's "sentientism." In his article, *All Animals are Equal* (1989), Singer argues that we should extend the same amount of consideration that we give to human beings to (non-human) animals. Singer claims that the only objective property that would give consideration to human beings, yet excludes all (non-human) animals can only be membership in the species *homo sapiens*. Singer explains that equality does not necessitate equal rights. To treat humans and (non-human) animals equally, Singer argues, does not mean that we treat them exactly the same way; that is, Singer advocates for equal consideration. For instance, just because animals cannot vote, it does not mean that they cannot feel pain, pleasure, fear, etc.; thus, if a creature can suffer then its suffering should be regarded to as important as any other creatures' suffering; (2) Paul Taylor's biocentric approach called "vitalism" is the idea that living organisms cannot be entirely explained in terms of the same forces and materials that account for the behavior of non-living objects. According to vitalism, there must be some additional "vital force" present in living organisms that distinguishes the living state from the non-living. Vitalism is a natural philosophical position for sentient beings who have no knowledge of the details of physical matter. Recognition of the molecular basis of life allows for a materialistic philosophical position, which adopts the hypothesis that the same physical laws govern both living and non-living objects. In other words, "all living things have equal worth"; and, (3) University of Texas professor, Baird Callicott's holistic ecosystem ethics. Callicott espouses a holistic, non-anthropocentric and environmental ethic. What he labels the "extentionist" approach confers "moral considerability" on individual organisms. Actual environmental concerns, however, focus on transorganismic entities: endangered species; threatened biotic communities and ecosystems; rivers and lakes; the ocean and atmosphere. Callicott believes that an adequate environmental ethic must be holistic. These three studies have provided some promising and inspiring research on lessening the gap between sentient and non-sentient beings.

Additionally, in the Zen poet and eco-philosopher Gary Snyder's perspective, the bioregional community "does not end at the human boundaries; we are in a community with certain trees, plants, birds, animals." Snyder encourages others to take up the practice of "reinhabitation," learning to live on the land with the same respect and understanding as the original indigenous people.

There have been some promising recent studies on the "sentience" of plants conducted in Europe. In 2005, Italian botanist Stefano Mancuso wrote an article for the Society for Plant Neurobiology on plant intelligence. Mancuso claims that plants are very intelligent, given that they display effective survival strategies by means of regulating their food during nights. In 2012, in his book, *What a Plant Knows*, Daniel Chamoritz claims that plants can "see" us. They can distinguish whether you are wearing a red shirt or blue shirt—very interesting! Finally, a study was conducted in 2013 at the John Innes Centre in the United Kingdom by Antonio Scialdone and other scientists. They claim that weeds (*Arabidopsis thaliana*) can do complex arithmetic, as they can measure or ration starch in leaves to prevent starvation a night. Of course there should be more studies on the sentience of plants, but these studies do "plants justice" and may help us to better appreciate our Mother Nature.

### Buddha's View on Nature

Buddha had compassion (Skt. *karuṇā*) for Nature even before his enlightenment. During the time he was practicing severe austerities, he is said to have developed compassion even for a drop of water (*udabindu*) and was determined not to destroy even a minute creature (*Majjhima-nikaya* 1.78). Additionally, the Buddha had a profound appreciation of a beautiful surrounding. In the "Discourse on the Noble Quest," Buddha describes his renunciation, striving and his enlightenment and freedom, his search for a suitable place for his strivings. He saw a delightful piece of land, a soothing forest grove, a river flowing besides with clear water and fords, and a village close by where he could collect alms (*Ariyapariyesana-sutta*, 1.167). Also, the Buddha expressed great respect and gratefulness for the environment. Immediately after attaining enlightenment, Buddha remained standing before the seat where he sat and the tree that provided him with shade, gazing at them for one week without blinking his eyes (*Vinaya-pitaka* 1.28).

A first step in keeping peace with nature calls for contact with ecological suffering in the world today. One must meet directly the ravaged land of industrial clear-cuts, the chemical soup of polluted waters, the sprawling megacities filled with traffic and smog. In these places of life-threatening deterioration, peacemaking as a practice has real consequences for both human and nonhuman beings. In Thailand, for instance, Buddhist monks have gained international recognition for galvanizing local people to address environmental violence in their villages. Two of the most effective methods have been tree ordination ceremonies and peace witness walks (Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft, eds., *Dharma Rain: Sources for a Buddhist Environmentalism*). These tree ceremonies grew out of the frustration of village monks with the national plundering of local forests. Villagers were suffering loss of food, firewood, and homes. In response, forest monks took traditional orange monks' robes and wrapped them around senior trees in the forest in a formal ordination ceremony.

In the United States, Buddhist activists have joined resistance efforts for forest protection and nuclear arms reduction. A small group who call themselves "ecosattvas" were impelled to protest the logging of old growth redwood groves in northern California. The Buddhist scholar Donald Swearer writes:

Many Buddhist practitioners have found in one of the central ideas of Buddhism—the principle of interdependence—an ecological vision that integrates all aspects of the ecosphere—particular individuals and general species—in terms of the principle of mutual co-dependence. Within this cosmological model individual entities are by their very nature relational, thereby undermining the autonomous self over against the "other" be it human, animal, or vegetable. (Tucker and Williams, *Buddhism and Ecology*)

The Dharma states that all things are interconnected. There is nothing in existence, which exists as a separate, fixed, isolated entity. Things only exist in relationship and connection with other things. In fact so much so that the boundaries between things are only useful conventions, provisionally true, but by no means absolute. This view is also found at the heart of the ecological perspective, particularly as influenced by systems theory, which recognizes that everything in this world is woven into a subtle and intricate web of relationships.

### Conclusion

The idea of the interconnectedness of all things finds its fullest expression in the Hua-yen Schools of Chinese Buddhism. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, an important Buddhist text central to Hua-yen School, we find a symbolic representation of reality in the image of Indra's Net. Imagine stretching out into infinite space, in every direction, a network of golden threads, a three-dimensional net filling the whole of space. At the juncture

of every thread is a sparkling, iridescent, multifaceted jewel. Now imagine we take a closer look at one of these infinite jewels. Looking closely we see that in each facet of the jewel there is a reflection of each and every other jewel in the infinite network... as the play of light sparkles and glimmers in one jewel so that slight change is reflected in each and every other jewel, and that change in each jewel is reflected again throughout the entirety of space.

Buddhism has seen no need to develop a special and separate position on nature and ecology. And indeed we might be well justified in concluding that in fact Buddhism has no particular environmental ethic at all. By the same token, however, we would have to conclude also that Buddhism is an environmental ethic, in that it cannot be put into practice without completely transforming one's every response to nature and the environment.

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