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### The Middle Path to Sustainability: Buddhism and the Environmental Crisis

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#### Abstract

*This paper considers the ways that Buddhism, through important principles of Buddhist thought could help contribute to the resolution of the contemporary environmental crisis. For instance, while some firmly believe that nature is for enhancing human enjoyment via the laws of nature as resources, (Buddhism) cultivate an understanding of interdependence with nature and extending compassion to all living things through its mindful living. These ideas evolve from basic foundational aspects, such as, DPratīyasamutpāda (dependent origination), Ahimsa (non-violence), karma, and the Middle Way which are helpful to understand of ecological or environmental responsibility from a Buddhist perspective, therefore creating a more balanced relation with the planet as such. In contrast it rejects all dominant perspectives that claim that humans are more important than nature. That is to say, while Buddhism offers a complexly interrelated view of the world that promotes ethical living and care about all beings. The paper investigates examples of these principles turned into actions, including voluntary simplicity, mindful consumption, and spiritual activism. Emphasis will be placed on examples of recent Buddhist movements such as Engaged Buddhism, and forest monasticism that demonstrate how ecological ethics of responsibility become a lived practice. A Buddhist perspective offers a non-anthropocentric way of thinking to sustainability; and one that offers an opportunity for a deeper, more lasting ecological transformation, compared to other religions that have done so.*

**Keywords:** Buddhist Ethics, Interconnectedness, Sustainable Living, Mindful Consumption, Non-anthropocentric, Ecological crisis

#### Introduction:

Environmental challenges today exceed what technology or law can remedy. Climate change, biodiversity extinction, and water shortages are symptoms of how our disconnection with nature has developed. Many current systems regard the earth exclusively as a resource, where short-term profit drives the consumption mentality rather than a long-term commitment for balance as an integral part of natural systems. The basis of this crisis is a hegemonic worldview that separates humans from nature, creating a worldview wherein the natural world is only an object to be consumed (Merchant, 1980). Furthermore, contemporary economic systems, reinforced by an anthropocentric worldview, tend to prioritize short-term needs over ecological considerations (Kaza, 2000). In contrast, Buddhism articulates an alternate worldview, inviting us toward the understanding that all life is interdependent and persuades us toward liberating decisions as an act of mindfully and compassionately engaging. This paper investigates how

Buddhist values – particularly dependent origination, principles of non-harm, karma, and the middle way – provide models for sustainable living. From forest monks to eco-activist, we will demonstrate how notions of Buddhist ethics are already enacting positive change in society. It is also significant to contrast conflicting values, particularly secular and other faith-based views, with Buddhist views, in order to show how their ancient path bears continued and profound relevance.

## **1. Philosophical Foundations of Buddhist Ecological Thought:**

Buddhist philosophy provides not only spiritual guidance, but also a very practical way of perceiving our connection to the natural world. Rather than perceiving the environment as separate from us, the ideas in Buddhism invite us to recognize our complex relationship with all forms of life. This section will examine four central concepts underpinning a Buddhist ecological vision: dependent origination, non-violence, karma, and the Middle Way. These concepts are not merely ideologies; they are a way of guiding our actions in relation to the natural world and to each other.

### **1.1 Interdependence and Dependent Origination:**

A foundational principle of Buddhist thought, or *Pratītyasamutpāda*, or dependent origination, is that phenomena arise dependent on multiple, interrelated causes and conditions. The Buddha's observation captures this idea succinctly in the *Samyutta Nikaya*: "When this is, that is; with the arising of this, that arises" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 533). This perception rejects the idea that anything exists in isolation and delineates a world of interrelatedness.

This perspective is also strikingly similar to that of ecological science, which sees nature as a complex network of interdependencies. An ecosystem, for instance, can only grow or languish based on the health of all its interacting systems (Capra, 1996). In Buddhism, the interconnected nature of reality offers a critique of ways of seeing ourselves as separate from nature in a human-centered way.

### **1.2 Non-Violence and Reverence for Life:**

Ahimsa, or non-violence, as a foundational aspect of Buddhist ethics, extends well beyond abstaining from physical harm. No thoughts and intentions, speech, and attitudes are applicable; thus, it could be seen as an ethical system of care. The First Precept, "I undertake the precept to refrain from killing any living being," is an example of this sentiment (Harvey, 2000). In the environmental realm, the act of refraining from killing as a basis for Ahimsa challenges the acts of pollution, land development, or causing (or participating in the suffering of) animals.

Ahimsa also encompasses the cultivation of compassion and supporting life. Given today's climate crisis, Ahimsa could be demonstrated through vegetarianism and veganism, wildlife conservation, and humane farming practices (Kaza, 2000). As a simple concept, the more harm we avoid, the less suffering we impose on ourselves and others, and the better humans as a collective.

Stories from the *Jataka Tales*, the accounts of the past-lives of the Buddha, support the full ethic in story form. As one of the most dramatic accounts, *Bodhisattva* ultimately gave up his body to provide food for a starving tiger and her cubs, depicting extreme solidarity and empathy for other beings (Appleton, 2010). Such stories instilled and cultivated life-respectful internal values within practitioners and challenged utilitarian views of nature.

Ahimsa leads us to understand that animals, plants, and ecosystems are worthy of intentional respect beyond their usefulness. This view overlaps with the philosophies of deep ecology.

### **1.3 Karma and Ethical Responsibility:**

The concept of karma in Buddhism is based on the meaning of ‘action’ (and consequences of actions) and its extensive implications for environmental ethics. Every decision—whether it is thought, spoken, or enacted—sets in motion a cascade of consequences that impact not only one’s own destiny but also the world that we all share (Harvey, 2000). If we use this perspective it follows that ecological harm—polluting a river, environment, and relation are committing negative karma and creating negative ecological effects that the ecosystem and the social world must respond to. For example, clearing habitats or deforestation creates more than just ecological damage, it can contribute to climate instability, which compromises food systems and human health, but it is one act of many consequences that all show karma’s systemic way of enactment. Similarly, actions of care—taking care that some basic forms of energy are conserved, renewable energy choices, voting on clean eco-initiatives, etc.—we generate positive karma whereby these acts represent relationships of care, consciously create meaningful choices within the human and non-human communities (Zsolnai, 2011). This way, the Buddhist notion of ethics makes ecological responsibility greater and leaves no evasion in morality. While karma aspects often differ from some secular approaches in relation to personal responsibility, it reminds us of the weight of even small decisions made every day. Governments and technologies and policies of governance matter and are important, but Buddhism emphasizes that change starts at the level of the individual who chooses differently. In this way, it resonates with aspects of calls for an environment in the movement.

### **1.4 The Middle Way and Voluntary Simplicity:**

The Middle Way (Majjhimā Paṭipadā) preaches a life of moderation, avoiding both extremes of indulgence (often termed consumerism) and forms of self-denial (often termed austerity). In this environmental sense, it asks us to consume mindfully and ethically, as well as engage in a thoughtful balance with the external world (Rahula, 1974). This perspective contrasts sharply with the consumerism that fuels the current environmental crisis. Buddhism teaches that attachment to possessions and sensory pleasures leads to suffering—not only for us, but for our planet. Voluntary simplicity becomes a spiritual and ecological practice. We can do this by consuming less, producing less waste and valuing being content over having more (Harvey, 2000).

Buddhist monastic life is an active example of the Middle Way. Monks and nuns possess very few possessions as they depend on the receipt of alms/donations from the rest of the community. Monks and nuns live simply and allow ample time for spiritual development, devoid of material want. These examples of human life illustrate that we do not need to consume to find meaning and happiness. Rather, we find meaning and happiness through living ethically and mindfully (Harvey, 2000).

To a larger extent, the Middle Way asks societies to pursue development and growth with consideration of ecological limits. The Middle Way asks us to avoid the mistake of continuous stochastic economic growth and supports the movement towards new approaches to economics like sustainable agriculture, energy consumption from renewable

sources, local conservation efforts and more equilibrant sustainability. Each of these approaches involves the consideration of human needs while remaining cognizantly aware of the contribution and the limits and boundaries we seek from/with the Earth.

## **2. Buddhist Environmental Ethics in Practice:**

Buddhist ecological teachings are not confined to theoretical frameworks; they shape how people live, interact, and respond to the world around them. This section highlights how the core concepts of interdependence, non-violence, karma, and the Middle Way are expressed in tangible actions. From personal lifestyle choices to collective initiatives, these principles guide practices that aim to reduce harm and nurture the planet.

### **2.1 Mindfulness and Environmental Awareness:**

Mindfulness, or *sati* in Pali, is a core Buddhist practice that increases awareness of the present moment. Mindfulness invites people to witness their thoughts and actions without immediate judgment and with precision and care. Mindfulness as a practice for environmental issues can be a strong recognition of the ecological footprint of one's daily life.

Thich Nhat Hanh (2008) has stressed that "mindfulness is the basis of all Buddhist practices." This is an awareness of our eating, consumption, transportation, and disposal of materials. A mindful eater knows the resource, labour, and environmental cost of every meal. As a vital effect, mindfulness can support gratitude, lower rates of overconsumption, and deepen engagement in sustainable food systems.

Buddhist communities also engage in larger educational experiences with eco-mindfulness in retreats or workshops. These experiences may weave together mindfulness meditation and environmental education in theory and practice, prompting contemplation and self-reflection of the individual's connection to nature.

### **2.2 Sustainable Agriculture and Eco-Friendly Livelihoods:**

Buddhist monastic communities have practiced sustainable agriculture for centuries as a way of living in harmony with nature. Gardens and orchards tended by monks demonstrate the practice of sustainable agriculture. These areas are typically founded in traditional organic practices and minimal resource use arising from the Buddhist ethic of non-harm (*Ahimsa*). Sustainable farming is more than functionality; it is acted out of profound respect for the Earth.

Buddhist centers and lay communities have begun to embrace modern, sustainable farming practices such as permaculture and agroecology. Demonstrating the interdependent nature of food systems in Buddhism, these practices have an environmentally-friendly design approach that seeks to resemble natural, ecosystem patterning (Zsolnai, 2011). They emphasize soil health, biodiversity, and closed loop systems while minimizing waste.

Plum Village, the famous mindfulness community in France founded by Thich Nhat Hanh, is perhaps the best-known example of how many Buddhist centers deal with departures from conventional agriculture. Plum Village has integrated meditation and organic farming, inviting residents to treat soil management as an extension of meditation practice Hanh (2008). Where sustainability is more than a technique; it is lived experience - where care meets ethics meets ecological awareness.

Buddhism provides a way of thinking about livelihoods beyond agriculture. Buddhist principles are situated in other livelihoods such as eco-tourism and fair trade cooperatives, or small-scale crafts that recognize the importance of ethical sourcing in terms of work that benefits people and the planet. The shift is more than ethical values; it is about the constellation of care, fairness and commitment to a good, healthy and ecologically sustainable future.

### **2.3 Engaged Buddhism and Environmental ActivismL:**

Engaged Buddhism as introduced by people like Thich Nhat Hanh and Sulak Sivaraksa incorporates the insights of spirituality, into direct action with social and environmental issues. Rather than withdrawing from worldly suffering, or being passive observers, engaged Buddhists use mindfulness and compassion to motivate systemic change including ecological justice.

Engaged Buddhists across Asia and beyond have organized tree planting campaigns, cleaned upriver polluted rivers, and protested against unsustainable development. For example, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) supports many grassroots environmental work in communities facing climate changes like deforestation, increasing scarcity of water, and displacement of communities (Loy, 2010).

Also important, is that Engaged Buddhism does not stop with superficial measures but rather seeks to transform the structural conditions that create environmental harm, like economic exploitation, corporate greed, and governmental inaction. This is also in keeping with the Buddhist tenet of Right Livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), which calls on those who Alight to conduct their lives in an ethical and a non-harming way.

An exemplary practice is the Thai 'tree ordination' ceremony that has been established by monks of the order of monks like Phramaha Bunchuai Saischeua. In this practice, monks ritualize the ordination of trees as monastics to protect them from being logged (Darlington, 1998). By having the trees given a sacred status, these monastic communities are using a spiritual and strategic method to exemplify the interconnectedness of life and an ethical basis on which to conserve.

### **2.4 Buddhist Monasticism and Ecological Stewardship:**

The monastic communities in Buddhism can provide powerful examples of simple sustainable living; it is about as simple as possible. Monastics have few personal belongings, they receive the necessities of life from people through their reliance on the community, and they are mindful consumers. These patterns create ecological footprints that are extraordinarily small and reflect restraint, gratitude, and balance.

In much of Southeast Asia, monastic institutions have expanded the role of individual conversion for ecological change into centers for ecological education, activism, and practices for change. Monks and nuns engage in tree-planting efforts, act protectively to protect sacred groves, and lead efforts to protect native species. Being in a position of moral leadership in host communities, monks and nuns have the ability to influence the policy and behavior of the public.

In many instances rituals of various types will connect ecological acts with spiritual acts. Rituals that bless and/or sanctify rivers, mountains, or forests make the act serve as a reminder of the sacredness people attach to nature (Matus, 2003). The rituals serve a

function beyond that of an official event and build emotional and ethical ties between people and their ecological environment.

Monastic life can also provide a source of inspiration for lay followers. The simplicity, mindfulness, and ethical prowess of monastics serve as powerful counter-narratives to consumerism. By demonstrating that living a good life does not necessitate excess, monastics provide a model of a lifestyle that is consistent with Witt's ecological values.

## **2.5 Challenges and Opportunities:**

Despite these beneficial contributions, there are still challenges to garden Buddhist environmentalism. Globalization, urbanization, and the allure of consumer culture have created challenges for traditional Buddhist ways of life. For some communities, it is difficult to balance ecological ideals with the need to make a living, particularly in areas facing poverty. Furthermore, these tensions can give rise to innovative responses. Collaborations with secular organizations, interfaith networks, and the scientific community offer new frames for advancing Buddhist environmental action. Partnerships can capitalize on both the strengths of ancient wisdom and contemporary tools to widen the scope of sustainability initiatives. More importantly, some Buddhist communities are increasingly engaging with environmental concerns as they become more critical. From policy advocacy, education, and lifestyle innovation, the engagement has been at least partly driven by a desire to explore how their spiritual roots could flourish in concert with a planet in crisis.

## **3. Comparative and Interdisciplinary Perspectives:**

Buddhist environmental ethics take a particular stance in the broader global dialogue about human induced ecocide. Although the analog concepts of care and stewardship arise in many worldviews, Buddhism offers a unique expression in a non-human-centred direction, including mindfulness and inner transformation. This section considers how Buddhist ecological thought relates to other religious traditions and secular frameworks, as well as its connections to the sciences, economics, psychology, etc. to provide a broader understanding of sustainability.

### **3.1 Comparison with Other Religious Environmental Ethics:**

Religious traditions have shaped societal relations with the natural world, and while many traditions advocate for care for creation, they differ in understanding the values of these foundations and motivations. The core tenets of interdependence and non-harming offer a particular quality to the environmental ethics of Buddhism.

#### **3.1.1 Christianity:**

Christian views often frame responsibility for nature in term of stewardship; humans are seen as custodians of God's creation. This line of thought is embedded in the belief that humanity is entrusted by God to care for Earth, requiring them to act as good stewards of the Earth (White 1967). While this framework can lead to abdication of responsibility, applying the term stewardship still emerges from the anthropocentric hierarchy of humans above all other nature.

Buddhism does not provide humanity with a status above all other beings. Buddhism recognizes a cosmology, encompassing all life-forms, and denies the idea of supremacy above nature.

#### **3.1.2 Islam:**

Islamic teachings, the concept of *Khilafah* (stewardship or vicegerency) similarly places humans in a role of responsible management over the Earth. The Qur'an warns against corruption and excess, urging balance (*mizan*) in creation and ethical use of resources (Foltz, 2003).

While there is shared emphasis on restraint and responsibility, the theological foundation differs. In Islam, the natural world is seen as a sign of divine will and care for creation is a form of obedience to God. Buddhism, with its nontheistic orientation, grounds environmental care in personal ethical development. Through mindfulness and the law of karma, individuals are called to care for nature not due to divine command, but through recognition of interdependence and consequence.

### **3.1.3 Indigenous Traditions:**

Many Indigenous spiritual traditions maintain deep ecological wisdom, often seeing the Earth as alive, sacred, and inhabited by spirits. These traditions typically emphasize reciprocal relationships with land, animals, and ancestors (Berkes, 2012). There is a profound resonance here with Buddhist teachings on the sanctity and interconnectedness of all life.

However, Indigenous traditions are frequently localized and specific to particular lands and cultures. Buddhism, while it arose in a particular cultural context, offers a more universally applicable ethical framework. Yet, the synergy between these worldviews can be powerful. Integrating Indigenous perspectives into Buddhist environmental thinking allows for grounded, place-based practices informed by local ecological knowledge.

### **3.2 Buddhism and Secular Environmentalism:**

Secular environmentalism is limited in scope because it is inclined to rely largely on science, regulation and technological innovation to remedy ecological problems. While these are indispensable resources, secular environmentalism tends to miss the ethical and spiritual basis of altering behaviors and perspectives.

Buddhism complements this secular approach by engaging directly with the human aspects of environmental degradation: greed, ignorance and disconnection. Buddhism calls us to acknowledge that in order for any outer change to be effective and enduring, there must be inner transformation. Without a personal commitment to change consumption and attachment behaviors, policy initiatives will only ever be partially effective. If we value consumption over climate then climate will not be forgiven by technology. Furthermore, Buddhism provides practitioners with principles regarding simplicity and nonattachment, guiding them on how to appreciate and live well by having less; how to practice intentionality (Kaza, 2000).

It is also important to draw attention to the similarities Buddhist understandings of systemic interdependence and interconnection share with ecological sciences. This foundation can expand transdisciplinary inquiry beyond disciplinary borders. The ethical and contemplative aspects of Buddhism can add depth to what would otherwise have a pure instrumental orientation.

### **3.3 Interdisciplinary Dialogue and Integration:**

Secular environmentalism sometimes takes a focus on science, regulation, and technological innovation to address ecological issues. While these tools are undoubtedly important, secular environmentalism often lacks the ethical and spiritual depth needed to

alter behaviors and mindsets at a different level. Buddhism links secular practices that address climate change and environmental destruction to something more transformative in people's lives, shifting towards new engagements with human greed, ignorance, and disconnection. It is not enough to enact outer change; there has to be an inner transformation to create sustainable social change globally.

### **3.4 Challenges in Integration:**

While high levels of interest exist to bring Buddhist ethics into broader sustainability conversation, there can be friction. The cultural or religious underpinnings of Buddhist ethics can complicate acceptance. This can include misunderstandings or completely ignoring Buddhist practices such as meditation or principles like non-harming, where some people may interpret these as secular or mildly faith-based practices.

There is also the opportunity for superficiality and commodification. Concepts like 'mindfulness' or 'karma' is sometimes used in a popular cultural context that is unrelated to the ethical foundation of these practices or concepts. When it is stripped of the ethical foundation, the potential for transformation diminishes.

Some Buddhist change models also emphasize long-term transformational change of individual values. While deeply impactful, these individual, personal transformations will not work quickly enough for the escalating climate crisis. Not to say we should not work for that, but we also need policy change, systems change, and culture change, which can cause a moment of needed change to have too high of a bar to reach. It can be hard to combine the timelines of personal transformation or drift with immediate change in our policy, systems, or culture or different timelines of change.

However, with both the increasing and frantic urgency of the environmental crisis (though ecological collapse is already underway and has hit certain communities) that has opened up spaces for pluralistic dialogue. More and more diverse communities have looked for more grounded, ethical, and meaningful ways to fuel responses to ecological collapse. If we engage with Buddhist ethics thoughtfully and respectfully, there are invaluable tools regarding sustainability that come from different aspects of Buddhist ethics for both inner responsiveness (sustainability) and outer responsiveness.

### **Conclusion:**

Buddhism offers a meaningful and practical approach to today's environmental crisis, combining spiritual understanding with real-world responsibility. The teachings of Buddhism—interdependence, non-violence, karma, and the Middle Way—extend beyond theory to a way of living that resonates with the world.

Interdependence reminds us all forms of life are connected and the impact of one part of the natural world ultimately impacts us all. This perspective leads to humility and a shift in perspective from dominating nature to living as part of nature that includes our planet, as a whole.

Non-violence, or ahimsa, gives this awareness its practical form. It calls us to live not just compassionately towards all forms of life, but also to acknowledge how they may affect their environment. Choosing habits with less potential for harm—waste reduction, plant-based foods, conservation, etc. is not only prudent but an extension of our ethical duty.

Karma provides the grounding for responsibility; our actions have a legacy, not just in our lifetime but into the future. Pollution and exploitation of nature don't stop with us—they do the opposite and continue on. Just the acknowledgment of this helps people think more progressively about their environmental behaviors.

The Middle Way provides a path of moderation that is absorbed into thoughtful consumption. In a world based upon material excess, there is profoundness in pursuing simplicity and attainment.

Another strength is Buddhism's readiness to have a conversation. By relating to science, economics, psychology, and ethics Buddhism is holistic. It connects personal practice to global accountability showing how human spiritual growth can catalyze environmental regeneration. In light of the exacerbating problems of climate change and ecological breakdown, practices like Buddhism can provide both direction and hope. Its Middle Path encourages compassion, awareness, and responsibility, not merely as lofty ideas to ponder but as essential parts of recovery.

The Buddhist approach to sustainability is not about preserving nature from people, but restoring the relationship between nature and people. Attending to the Earth is a function of attending to the self. In this there is real potential for a more relationally balanced and compassionate world.

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