

# The Spirit of Environmental Preservation in the Buddhist Teachings and Present-day Thai Life

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## 1. Introduction

**M**OST people today have become more aware of environmental problems and responsibility because they themselves are facing environmental crises and disasters. Modernization with its human avarice and irresponsibility is more and more harmful to our environment and quality of life. All kinds of development are in vain without human development based on moral or ethical cultivation. Today, we are on the wrong track of development caused by lack of education, right motives, and right views. We certainly need a sustainable development to cure our ailing society.

Environmental concern was probably formed around the late 1970s as seen in several articles and books. P. A. Payutto whose present monastic rank in Thailand is Somdet Phra Puttakosajarn explains that environmental problems today are 1) The destruction of natural resources and 2) The increase of waste in the world. An example of the destruction of natural resources is forest devastation which leads to global warming and drought. Moreover, the increase of waste in the world certainly leads to problems of overloaded waste both on land and in the water.<sup>1</sup>

Since environmental problems nowadays are extremely critical, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development met at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from June 3 to 14, 1992, in order to reaffirm the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment which had been adopted at Stockholm, Sweden, on June 16, 1972. The Declaration was endorsed by the 47th session of the United Nations General Assembly on December 22, 1992. Some Principles of the Declaration can be mentioned as following examples:

**Principle 1:** Human beings are at the center of concern for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.<sup>2</sup>

**Principle 9:** States should cooperate to strengthen endogenous capacity-building for sustainable development by improving scientific understanding through exchanges of scientific and technological knowledge and by enhancing the development, adaptation, diffusion and transfer of technologies, including new and innovative technologies.<sup>3</sup>

**Principle 25:** Peace, development and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible.<sup>4</sup>

After the Rio Declaration (1992) environmental ethics began to flourish in most universities in the United States in which books and articles on it appear almost weekly today. The Rio Declaration supported the Earth Charter centrally concerned with the transition to sustainable ways of living and sustainable human development. The Earth Charter values sustainable ways of living and sustainable human development. It calls for respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence, and peace.

Sustainable development is a kind of economic development necessarily regarding environmental and ecological conservation. It protects our natural resources while reducing poverty. It is thus emphasized in the Earth Charter which reminds us that our environmental, economic, social, political, and spiritual problems are interdependent. The Earth Charter was finally approved by the Earth Charter Commission at UNESCO in Paris in 2000.

Our contemporary hi-tech development has been proved wrong. It turns against nature and is hazardous to life.

## 2. Environmental Concern Today

Human Life today is facing serious environmental crises unknown in ancient days. We have to admit that we need to uplift our moral consciousness and learn to respect nature. Our defilements, i.e., greed, hatred and delusion produce the fall of nature. We should consider nature and all natural environments as contributive to human development. These attitudes pacify human aggressiveness toward nature and turn humans into friends and live in peace with the environment. As to our economic life and usage of technology, we need to live a sufficient life, i.e., to consume only what is needed and only as much as we really need. We should avoid and abandon a prodigal life. Besides, we should use science and technology only to serve our needs and do so with concern for our natural environment. Through these views and practices, we

are able to have a sustainable development, and can enjoy the benefits of our environment to the fullest. In other words, environmental concern today calls for more understanding and responsibility toward nature. We need to change ourselves and adapt to the way of nature. World religions, such as Buddhism, always encourage followers to live according to nature. Living against nature will lead to one's downfall.

Many passages in the Buddhist Scriptures encourage environmental concern and preservation of nature. For example, in the Vinaya of the Tipitaka, monks are forbidden to cut down trees and plants because they are considered a kind of living being. Generally, in most Buddhist countries, people live close to nature. They are farmers, animal keepers, and so on. They learn to live according to nature and benefit from their natural environments. In the Aṅguttaranikāya II, 32, the Buddha teaches his followers to choose a suitable environment to live, study and work in order to finally attain good lives, prosperity, and peace.<sup>5</sup>

Buddhists are taught to attain the perfection of morality (*sīla-sampadā*) in order to know about an organized life-style and good activities, work, and the environment which are all beneficial to personal growth. Through the Buddhist Scriptures, we thus learn to adopt the basic level of morality, e.g., proper conduct in our relationship with society and nature.

Buddhist texts show a respect for non-human sentient beings and the natural environment that support them and humans. For example, the Book of Vinaya (the Buddhist Discipline for Monks) of the Tipitaka (the Buddhist Scriptures) reveals a dialogue between King Udena and Ānanda, the Buddha's personal attendant, to show Ānanda's concern for natural conservation as follows :

Venerable Ānanda, what will you do with those old robes that are worn thin?

Your majesty, we will make them into upper covering.

Venerable Ānanda, what will you do with those upper coverings that are old?

Your majesty, we will make them into mattress coverings.

Venerable Ānanda, what will you do with you do with those mattress coverings that are old?

Your majesty, we will make them into ground coverings.

Venerable Ānanda, what will you do with those ground coverings that are old?

Your majesty, we will make them into foot—wipers.

Venerable Ānanda, what will you do with those foot—wipers that are

old?

Your majesty, we will make them into dusters.

Venerable Ānanda, what will you do with those dusters that are old?

Your majesty, having torn them into shreds, having kneaded them with mud, we will smear a plaster—flooring.<sup>6</sup>

Having heard venerable Ānanda's answers, King Udena was very pleased and gave him 500 women cloths in addition to the 500 inner robes his concubines had earlier given to the monk.

Buddhist knowledge and practice are crucial to environmental conservation and development. Buddhism encourages environmental ethics through its confidence in human wisdom and efforts to overcome one's own defilements. While western philosophy encourages human beings to master the universe and other living beings, Buddhist philosophy supports the use of wisdom and compassion to overcome one's own defilements as well as to live for the sake of all beings according to the law of Nature. Instead of being trained to exploit nature and other beings, Buddhists are taught by Buddhist teachings to love nature and all natural beings in the world. The Buddhist Scriptures refer, for example, to the two enlightened disciples of the Buddha, Sāriputta and Mahā-Kassapa, who can find the beauty of nature which contributes to their mental qualities:

Sāriputta: Forests are delightful, where (most) folk find no delight. Those without attachment will delight; they are not seekers after sensual pleasures.

Mahā-kassapa: With clear water and great boulders, frequented by monkeys and deer, covered with moisture and moss, those rocks delight me.<sup>7</sup>

Through the words of Sāriputta and Mahā-kassapa, we learn that the natural environment not only brings pleasure to ordinary onlookers but also supports a spiritual practice. It is therefore worth it for us to protect it.

### **3. Environmental Preservation in the Buddhist Teachings and Its Application in Thailand Today**

The life and teaching of the Buddha as recorded in the Tipitaka (the Buddhist Scriptures) have well proved his environmental concern. Throughout his life, he worked close to nature. He considered forests

and wildernesses places of solitude and tranquility suitable for meditation and his search for enlightenment. Apart from forests and wildernesses, the Buddha and his disciples liked to stay in caves, under big trees and under shelters provided by cliffs. Only when they were invited to stay in a city or near a city, would they reside in a building. It should be noted that several precepts in the Buddhist discipline obviously express Buddhist environmental concerns. Monks have to dwell in their residences during the rainy season. This is the period of the Buddhist rain retreat. In the Buddha's time, his disciple monks wandered from place to place in all seasons. They accidentally crushed green grass and injured small animals in the field and thus, were blamed by villagers. The Buddha then prescribed a monastic rule for monks to be in residence for three months of the rainy season.<sup>8</sup>

Since environmental preservation can be achieved through sustainable development, we then should consider the Buddhist teaching on sustainable happiness which is described as follows:

- 1) Happiness of possessing one's property which is the outcome of one's own effort and moral conduct.
- 2) Happiness of possessing one's property for the sake of one's own self, one's own family, the needy and the public welfare.
- 3) Happiness of freedom from debt.
- 4) Happiness of blameless conduct.<sup>9</sup>

For Example, The King of Bhutan and His people are particularly devout Buddhists. They live modest but sufficient lives. They prefer living with nature and in a natural environment to living among materialism and modern technology. The Bhutanese aim to attain the ideology of GNH (Gross National Happiness). Though Bhutan is considered a poor country with a low income and simple life style, the people are content with their Buddhist way of life.

In Thailand, Thai people learn to live according to nature and find happiness in simple living through His Majesty (the late) King Bhumibol Adulyadej's New Theory for the Solution of Drought for Farmers. According to this Theory, each farmer who owns an average of six acres per family should get the most benefit from the land by dividing it into four parts. The first part, about 30% of the land, is used for water storage by digging a pond where fish are kept and water is used in the dry season. The second part, 30% of the land, is used for growing rice which yields food to the family during the whole year. The third part, 30% of the land, is used for growing vegetable and fruit plants for

eating and selling. The fourth part which is 10% of the land is used for building a house, raising animals and growing small plants.<sup>10</sup> Through this management of land, farmers will be able to live sufficiently and overcome all difficulties throughout their lives.

The environmental concern, according to Buddhist teachings, is not limited merely to trees, forests and lifeless beings. Love and compassion toward animals are also emphasized by the Buddha in the Tipitaka as follows:

Creatures without feet have my love,  
And likewise those that have two feet,  
And those that have four feet I love,  
And those, too, that have many feet.<sup>11</sup>

In Thailand, because people are mostly faithful Buddhists and generally love animals, they took active roles for the sake of animal protection and preservation about ten years ago. For example, the National Elephant Institute, Lampang Province under the Patronage of Her Royal Highness (the late) Princess Galyani Vadhana Krom Luang Naradhiwas Rajanagarindra was established when some authorities in Lompong Province in Northern Thailand cooperated with the Forest Industry Organization in returning elephants to the forest at Doi Pha Muang Wildlife Sanctuary in Lampang. Since then, the staff members of the National Elephant Institute have offered to take care of the released elephants in the Sanctuary.

Formerly, the National Elephant Institute was the only young Elephant Training Center. It became the Thai Elephant Conservation Center and upgraded to the National Elephant Institute under the Patronage of Her Royal Highness (the late) Princess Galyani Vadhana Krom Luang Naradhiwas Rajanagarindra in C.E. 2002.

The National Elephant Institute is responsible for providing care for and protecting elephants. There is an elephant hospital with veterinarians in it. The Institute takes care of elephants free of charge. Besides, Her Majesty Queen Sirikit has initiated a mobile veterinarian project in the Forest Industry Organization which is responsible for sending veterinarians to cure sick elephants and provide medical check-ups for elephants throughout the country.

The late King Bhumibol is the most outstanding example for his work in environmental preservation and development. He encouraged Thai people who worked in the fields to preserve natural resources and work according to nature. He advised hill-tribe people in Thailand to grow

Vetiver grass in order to protect their mountainside fields from being destroyed by floods. The Vetiver grass is good in conserving soil and water since its root is very long and holds fast onto land. It can be used as a natural wall in order to slow down the flow of water and thus keep the soil wet enough for good planting. The King's innovation of the use of Vetiver grass in plantations is well recognized by many international leaders. He was praised for his natural conservation and protection of natural environments as well as his work for the decrease of global warming. On February 28, 1993, the International Erosion Control Association thus presented him the International Merit Award. In addition, the United Nations declared December 5 (the King's Birthday) as World Soil Day and the Year 2013 as the International Year of Soils.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Many Thai Buddhists nowadays are beginning to become aware of the value of environmental preservation. The government and volunteers are trying their best to save wild animals who can barely find their food in the forests and roam about the edges of the forests near the villages. We are a part of nature. We learn that if nature and our environment to be deleted, both natural and social, are destroyed, we cannot live happily and can hardly survive. Our environmental concern should not exist merely in our generation but had better extend to the next generations for the sake of the entire world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> P. A. Payutto, *Karn Pattana Tee Yang Yeun* [Sustainable Development] (Bangkok: Sahadhammic Press, B.E. 2541/C.E. 1998), pp. 31–46 (in Thai).

<sup>2</sup> Louis P. Pojman, Comp. *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), p. 566.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 567.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 568.

<sup>5</sup> P. A. Payutto, *A Constitution for Living, the Pali Canon: What a Buddhist Must Know* (Bangkok: Printing House of Thammasat University, B.E. 2551/C.E. 2008), p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> Cuhlavagga XI, 13–14; Vinaya II. 290–292, translated by G. A. Somaratne in *Most Venerable Phra Brahmapundit, Chief Editor, Common Buddhist Text: Guidance and Insight from the Buddha* (Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya: Mahachulalongkorrajavidyalaya University, 2017), pp. 490–491.

<sup>7</sup> Theragāthā 992 and 1070 translated by Peter Harvey in *Ibid.*, p. 440. <sup>8</sup> Henry Clarke Warren, ed. and trans., *Buddhism in Translations* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), pp. 414–417.

<sup>9</sup> P. A. Payutto, *A Constitution for Living, the Pali Canon: What a Buddhist Must Know*, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Pragas Wacharaporn. *Phra Raja Panithan Nailuang* [His Majesty the King's Resolution] (Bangkok: Prapansarn Printing, B.E. 2542/C.E. 1999), pp. 205–207 (in Thai).

<sup>11</sup> Culla-Vagga (v.6) in Henry Clarke Warren, ed. and trans., *Buddhism in Translations*, p. 303.

<sup>12</sup> The National Identity Foundation, *Royal Activities and International Cooperation* (Bangkok: Rungsilp Press, B.E. 2558/C.E. 2015), pp. 100–104.

### Author Biography

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