BUDDHISM AS A TOOL OF PRESERVING NATURE

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Abstract: One of the core issues we are witnessing worldwide is the exploitation and destruction of nature without moral restraint, which poses a great threat to life on Earth. Many seminars, conferences, symposia, etc., are being organized, and laws and acts are being passed to address this problem, yet it persists. Thus, these laws and acts are not sufficient to solve this problem unless and until we change our attitude toward nature. This realization prompts me to examine the various Buddhist theories to determine whether they are useful for addressing the exploitation of nature in our present-day world. Although Buddhism aims at liberation, many Buddhist texts describe nature and emphasize the need to protect and conserve it for life on earth. Buddhism views nature as interconnected with all forms of life and emphasizes a kind, non-harmful attitude toward it, rooted in the teachings of the Lord Buddha. Thus, this article explores whether Buddhist metaphysical and ethical theories, such as Dependent Origination, the Law of Action, Mindfulness, Non-violence, Non-possessiveness, etc., can serve as tools for caring for and preserving nature by changing human attitudes toward it.

Introduction

Buddhism is one of the major Dharma and Philosophical Schools of India, without God, developed from the teachings of Gautama (c.567 B.C.-c.487 B.C.), known as Lord *Buddha* (Enlightened One). Although this religion originated in northeastern India between the late sixth century B.C. E. and the early fourth century B.C.E., it has now become a world religion as it has spread almost all over the world, which proves its importance and popularity to date. We know this religion was developed out of discontent with the Brahmanic sacrifice and rituals. The teachings of *Buddha are* contained in the three *Piṭakas*, or Baskets of the Law: the Sutta Piṭaka, the Vinaya Piṭaka, and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, which deal with tales, the discipline of the monks, and doctrines, viz., psychological, ethical, and metaphysical, respectively. All three *Piṭakas* have divisions and subdivisions that constitute the whole *Pāli* canonical literature of Buddhism, and it is believed that before 241 B.C., all these canonical works were compiled and completed. The main languages of Buddhist Canonical literature are *Pāli* and *Sanskrit*, but most texts have been translated into various languages, including English, and are widely accepted.

Although Buddhism's main goal is the absolute cessation of suffering to achieve liberation (Nirvān), Buddhist literature offers ample insights into caring for nature. We all know that Buddha spent many years in the forest meditating and attaining liberation. Given nature's significance, he placed great importance on it, including soil, flora, fauna, rivers, etc. Nature has two broad parts: biotic and abiotic. The biotic part includes all living creatures, such as animals and trees, whereas the abiotic part refers to the world's non-living elements, including earth, water, fire, air, and ether. In Buddhism, the Pali words 'loka' and 'yathābhūta' are closely connected to the meaning of the word 'nature'. '*Loka'* means "world" and '*yathābhūta'* denotes "things as they really are." Again, the two words *dhammatā* and *niyama* appear in the *Pali* Canon to mean "natural law or way." In Buddhism, importance was given to the diversity of the natural world, which we notice when the Buddhist texts mention different types of clouds and soils, which are more or less similar to the modern classification of clouds

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and soils, and concern was also shown about deforestation, which causes the degradation of soil quality. Buddhist texts mention many rivers, such as the Gaṇges, the Yamunā, the Mahi, and the Sarabhū, which play a vital role in the environment. Buddhist texts mention plants such as medicinal herbs, grasses, and forest trees. Thus, we find a concept of nature in Buddhist Texts. Along with this rich concept of nature, these Buddhist texts include principles that can serve as tools to protect our natural world. Buddhist Philosophy can be divided into three main parts: epistemology, Metaphysics, and Ethics. We find that the proper management of nature can be grounded in some metaphysical as well as ethical principles, advocated by Lord *Buddha* himself, which include principles of dependent origination (*Pratītyasamutpādavāda*), theory of impermanence (*Anityavāda*), theory of law of action (*Karmavāda*), mindfulness, nonviolence (*Ahiṁsā*), and non-possessiveness (*Aparigraha*).

One major global problem we see today is the exploitation of nature without moral restraint, which leads to issues such as ozone layer depletion, global warming, and biodiversity loss. Cutting trees arbitrarily, polluting the vital elements of nature such as air, water, and soil carelessly, killing non-human animals mercilessly and needlessly, and using natural resources disproportionately have become regular phenomena that have brought the threat of extinction of all types of living beings on our planet. Unbridled greed, ignorance, and a lack of awareness and reverence for life are the main causes of such irresponsible and destructive human activities. To address this alarming predicament, experts in science, religion, ethics, and social work have sought solutions for years. We see seminars, conferences, etc., held at intervals; laws and acts are regularly passed to address this problem, but it persists and compounds day by day.

Thus, these laws, acts, etc., are not sufficient to solve this problem unless and until we change our attitude toward nature. This realization prompts me to examine ancient texts, such as Buddhist texts, to see whether they offer any means to address our present-day exploitation of nature. Though Buddhism aims at liberation, many Buddhist Texts not only embody the concept of nature but also emphasize the need to protect and conserve nature for life on earth. Buddhism views nature as interconnected with all forms of life and emphasizes a kind, non-harmful attitude toward it, rooted in the teachings of the Lord Buddha. Thus, the aim of this article is to explore how Buddhist theories like the Dependent Origination (*Pratītyasamutpādavāda*), Impermanence (*Anityavāda*), Law of Action (*Karmavāda*), Mindfulness, Non-violence (*Ahiṁsā*), and Non-possessiveness (*Aparigraha*) can act as tools for caring for and preserving nature and thereby help us get rid of this present-day environmental concern through the change of human attitudes and behaviors towards nature.

In this article, I mainly used hermeneutical, descriptive, and analytical methodologies. Using a hermeneutical methodology, I have sought to interpret and understand the theories presented in Buddhist texts. Using the descriptive method, I present Buddhism's original metaphysical and ethical theories, and I adopt an analytical methodology to explain why and how some of these theories can serve as tools to address today's environmental degradation by protecting and conserving the environment.

Some scattered works have addressed this area, but none have shown Buddhist doctrines as tools for protecting nature. Some articles have explored the connection between Buddhism and the environment, highlighting that Buddhism can serve as the foundation of modern environmental virtue ethics, but a research gap remains in showing how and why Buddhist metaphysical and ethical theories can be used to preserve nature.

The article has two main sections. The first section on Buddhist metaphysical theories is divided into three sub-sections, highlighting how some Buddhist metaphysical theories can protect nature. The second section, divided into two parts, explores how

some Buddhist ethical theories can safeguard nature.

I. Metaphysical Concepts

If we examine Buddhist metaphysical theories such as Dependent Origination, Impermanence, Mindfulness, and the Law of Action, we see that these teachings can serve as a defense of, and a means to protect and conserve, the natural world.

I:1: Theory of Dependent Origination (*Pratītyasamutpādavāda*)

In Buddhist Philosophy, we find two main causes of human suffering: craving (*tṛṣṇā*) and ignorance (*avidyā*). In Buddhist Philosophy, ignorance does not mean a lack of knowledge, but the failure to realize the true nature of reality: that everything is dependent and impermanent. Buddhism teaches that everything, including man and nature, is interdependent because all existence is caused and conditioned. Everything is interdependent. Everything arises out of something. It is called *Dhamma*. In the *Saṁyutta Nikāya*, a Buddhist Text, the theory of Dependent Origination has been discussed at length, highlighting that "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases". This teaching of Lord *Buddha* emphasizes the truth that everything in this world is causally connected. Thus, in the Buddhist view, man and nature are not poles apart; rather, they are interconnected and thereby interdependent. So, anthropogenic activities significantly impact nature. Dalai Lama, a world-famous Buddhist monk, observes: "Peace and survival of life on earth as we know it are threatened by human activities which lack a commitment to humanitarian values. Destruction of nature and natural resources results from ignorance, greed, and lack of respect for the earth's living things".

I:2: Theory of Impermanence: (*Anityavāda*)

The corollary of the Buddhist theory of Dependent Origination is the theory of impermanence, which can help restrict man's insatiable desire beyond need, as it teaches that everything in this world is impermanent. An ordinary man believes everything, like body, mind, fame, wealth, social position, and like this, is permanent, and from this understanding results his/her chain of desires for excessive accumulation or possession; and as everything is interconnected and interdependent, man and nature are also interconnected and interdependent, and such aggressive tendency of accumulation of man affects the other part of existence, i.e., nature. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, another Buddhist Text, emphasis is given on the contemplation that aging, illness, death, and separation from dear and near ones cannot be avoided. In the *Saṁyutta Nikāya*, it is emphatically stated that all the dependently originated phenomena, such as birth, existence, clinging, craving, etc., are impermanent. The *Dhammapada,* another famous Buddhist text, says: "All conditioned things are impermanent. When one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering". These teachings can restrain man's unlimited desire to use natural resources beyond what is needed. The Dhammapada expresses care, love, and affection for nature: "Delightful are the forests where ordinary people find no pleasure. There the passionless will rejoice, for they seek no sensual pleasures". Thus, the theory of impermanence can preserve our nature by making us aware, responsible, thoughtful, and kind towards nature.

I:3: Mindfulness

To remember that everything in this world is interdependent and thus impermanent, Buddhism advocates mindfulness practice. We see *that the Buddha places immense importance on the mind because he believes it* leads the world. Thus, when the mind is engulfed by greed, delusion, hatred, and other detrimental qualities, it pollutes both

within and outside our mind; whereas when it is endowed with moral values like love, compassion, generosity, and so on, it purifies our mind. Non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion are key virtues embedded in *Buddhism's* moral philosophy, which can be achieved through the practice of mindfulness, as this practice enables a person to realize the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things and the reality of ever-changing impermanence. This realization arrests man's uncontrolled greed, hatred, delusion, etc., and makes him/her responsible towards his/her surroundings, without which he/she cannot survive.

I:4: Law of Action (*Karmavāda*)

Another important teaching of Lord Buddha is *karmavāda,* or the law of action that teaches every action (*karma*) has its result (*vipaka),* and good actions, encouraged by kindness, compassion, and like this, lead to happiness, while bad actions, motivated by greed, hatred, ignorance, etc., bring suffering. In Buddhist texts, *karma* is defined as any intentional or volitional act, including mental, physical, and verbal. Many Buddhist texts emphasize the unavoidable fruit of action. In fact, the law of action, often considered the 'golden rule of morality', holds that one reaps the fruits according to the seed one sows. In the same vein, it is stated that one should contemplate that he/she is the absolute owner or heir of his/her actions, and that he/she will have to face the consequences of his/her own works. "I am the owner of my actions, heir of my actions, actions are the womb (from which I have sprung), actions are my relations; actions are my protection. Whatever actions I do, good or bad, of these I shall become the heir".

Thus, we human beings are solely responsible for our actions, whether favorable or unfavorable. Another famous Buddhist text warns that the degradation of morality, such as decadence, needless greed, and wrong values, can lead to adverse outcomes that endanger human life. The Buddhist Text clearly shows the link between mankind's demoralization and natural calamities. It observes that greed brings famine, ignorance begets epidemics, and hatred provokes violence. In the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, we find *a prediction of the deterioration of human morals and its consequences*. The Text predicts that the degeneration of human morality will reduce food supplies and shorten life spans on Earth. Thus, human beings master their own fate. The law of action teaches us to take responsibility for our own world. If we care for nature and don't harm it, we will have a healthy, sound nature in which we can live happily and peacefully. The 14th Dalai Lama says, "I, as a Buddhist monk, think that believing in the laws of karma is very useful in everyday life. If you believe that there is a connection between the action and the result, you will become more attentive to the consequences produced by your actions in your own life and the lives of other people". He thinks it is the duty of a spiritual man to participate in the effort to save the Earth. Thus, the law of action can serve as a tool to protect and preserve our natural world.

II. Ethical Concepts

Like Buddhist metaphysical theories, some of its ethical theories, mainly Non-violence and Non-possessiveness, can also play a vital role in protecting and conserving nature.

II:1: Non-violence: (*Ahiṁsā*)

Beyond the above-mentioned metaphysical theories, some Buddhist ethical principles can also protect and preserve nature. The quintessence of Buddhist ethics is the five ethical precepts, known as *Pañca Śīla*, which are prescribed to strengthen moral

behavior among mankind. Amongst these five precepts, non-violence **(*ahiṁsā*)** is the cornerstone of Buddhist morality. This precept is advocated in two senses, viz., negative and positive. In its negative sense, it teaches us to refrain from injuring or killing any living creature, as each and every living creature is a sentient being, including animals and insects, and thus has the capacity to feel suffering and to want to live. The positive aspect of this precept is cultivating virtues such as compassion and sympathy toward all living creatures. This positive sense refers to loving-kindness (*mettā*), one of the four fundamental virtues of 'Divine Abiding' (*brahma vihāras*) of Buddhism. Buddhist texts advise cultivating loving-kindness toward all creatures, regardless of size, shape, weight, distance, etc. Buddhism holds that love and compassion should be extended not only to human beings but to all sentient beings; otherwise, both are incomplete. This message of loving-kindness toward all creatures reflects a harmonious relationship between man and nature and inspires us to cultivate compassion among all beings. We see that this practice of loving-kindness is so powerful it can discipline wild animals, and Buddha himself tamed a wild elephant that attended him in the forest. We know that any type of violence is terrible, and that's why in the *Dhammapada,* it is said: "All tremble at violence, all fear death. Comparing oneself with others, do not harm, do not kill." The Dhammapada shows an effort to keep man from striking others again, teaching that striking others cannot yield happiness; one can find happiness only by avoiding harm. Even in Buddhism, one essential criterion for attaining holiness is non-violence toward all living creatures, which can elevate a man into a holy man able to live peacefully with emotions subdued. Thus, one can be considered holy in the eyes of Buddhism if and only if one avoids all types of violence toward all creatures. This principle of non-violence can be extended to nature to promote responsible human activities that curb harm to it.

II:2: Non-possessiveness (*Aparigraha*)

Like non-violence, the Buddhist concept of non-possessiveness can also help protect nature. Buddhist non-possessiveness is grounded in the theory of impermanence: in Buddhism, aparigraha means letting go of excessive desires and attachments by recognizing their impermanent nature. The Buddhist theory of impermanence teaches that reality is ever-changing, and this realization helps us detach from excessive desires and possessions. We all recognize that two dreaded diseases of today's world are materialism and consumerism, and both harm nature, as ignorance and disproportionate greed destroy natural resources. Buddhism teaches us how to overcome such extreme greed, which can help us protect nature. The key to curbing insatiable greed lies in the Dhammapada, which considers contentment (santuṣṭi), or peace of mind, the greatest wealth and thus the most important virtue for curbing unlimited greed and the habit of consumerism, two root sources of all suffering. We know natural resources are limited; thus, man should practice contentment to curb unrestrained greed and use these resources carefully and legitimately. Man should be satisfied with what is needed and avoid the tendency to misuse them, which is possible only through the practice of non-possessiveness.

Conclusion

Thus, we find that these Buddhist theories can be effective tools for addressing current challenges related to nature. Many Buddhist Texts emphasize the close relationship between human morality and natural resources. Humans depend on natural resources for food, clothing, shelter, water, medicine, etc.; without them, humans and other living beings cannot survive. Thus, man's moral conduct plays a vital role in protecting and preserving the natural world; without it, human existence will disappear. In this way, Buddhist teachings on Interdependence, the Law of Action, Non-violence,

Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Non-possessiveness offer strong messages of awareness, responsibility, and kindness toward nature and all living creatures in a holistic way. These teachings can serve as guiding principles and tools for protecting and conserving nature.