



## Environmental Crisis: An Explanation from Buddhist Standpoint

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### Abstract

*Global warming, water and air pollution, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, rising sea-levels and climatic change are the emerging environmental problems of the today. Over exploitation of natural resources for production and consumption is the most common cause for these environmental problems. Attempts to address these problems in the past have been unsuccessful in the sense that the solutions themselves gave rise to newer adversities. This is because, the root cause of these problems have not been are not properly addressed. The paper investigates Buddhist Eightfold Path as a new strategy to answer the present environmental crisis. By controlling human behaviors one may able to control over akusala kamma (unwholesome deed) and exploitation of natural resources.*

**Keywords:** *Akusala Kamma, Dukkha, Eightfold Path, Environmental Degradation*

### Introduction

Global warming, water and air pollution, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, rising sea-levels and climatic change are the emerging environmental problems of the today. Most of these environmental problems are generated by humans in order to promote their own comforts. While making comforts to the humans with the help of technological advancement, we intentionally or unintentionally contribute to the destruction of the natural environment. Excessive consumption due to scientific and technological development is a key factor in the emergence of the environmental problems. For example, every year we are cutting trees as well as destroying forests catering to human needs and greed to such an extent that it could completely wipe out the world's rain forests making millions of species' life in endanger.

Though science and technology have contributed largely to the environmental crisis, it may be asked whether they could be also used in the project of environmental protection. Technology may have a role in finding the solution of the crisis, but it cannot solve the root cause of the crisis, which is human behavioural crisis. For example, purification methods of air, water and soil, alternative energy technologies, conservation of endangered species, good transport systems, rapid production processes, etc. are due to technological advancement. It cannot stop, however, the extensive use of natural resources, because technology itself depends on and consumes the natural resources. Again all these developments for environmental protection are out of human selfishness and their attachment towards material gains for pleasant livelihood. Thus, Buddhist tradition views environmental problem as the human psychological problem. Indeed, this is not only an environmental degradation but also a moral crisis for human beings.

Because of our selfishness and short sightedness we are blind to the long term consequences of our actions, i.e., huge consumption of natural resources, dumping toxic wastes on earth, etc. Human arrogant/intemperance behaviour is largely due to the false belief of human superiority that they are in the central place controlling everything leads wrong consequences. Effects of human greed for comforts, directly or indirectly affects human health and wealth. For example, each year almost twenty nine billion tonnes of carbon dioxide<sup>1</sup> and other harmful gasses like methane, nitrous oxides, and chlorofluorocarbons are produced and these are responsible for the greenhouse effect.<sup>2</sup> Massive use of natural resources is bringing new challenges everyday for human survival.

The root causes of environmental and moral crisis is lobha, moha and dosa. *Lobha* is greed that refers to the attitude to embezzle others wealth. *Dosa* refers to the spiteful thought of destroying others happiness or wealth. And *Moha* deludes one's mind towards materialistic world. These are recognized as the root cause of attachment and attachment is the source of all conflicts. *Dhammapada* verse 251 says; “*natthi ragasamo aggi, n’atthi dosasamo gaho; n’atthi mohasamam jalam, n’atthi tanhasama nadi* (there is no fire like passion, no capturer like hatred, no net (snare) like delusion, no torrent like craving).”<sup>3</sup> As such, *lobha*, *moha*, and *dosa* become cause for akusala kamma (unwholesome deed), which causes environmental problems. There are three kusala (wholesome) roots, i.e., *alobha*, *amoha* and *adosa*. *Alobha* is expressed as sacrifice, generosity, detachments and contentment. *Adosa* manifests as living-kindness, compassion and forgiveness and *amoha* refers to wisdom, insight and understanding. It means practice of *alobha*, *amoha* and *adosa* generates wholesome deed, temperance, and such human behaviour help to overcome environmental and moral problems.

Buddha began his teachings with the existential problem of human suffering (*dukkha*), caused by desire (*dukkha-samudaya*). He also taught that it is possible to stop suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*) and preached the path to remove suffering (*dukkha-nirodha-magga*) consisting of the eight-fold path (*ashtangika-magga*): right view (*samma ditthi*), right conception (*samma samkappa*), right speech (*samma vaca*), right action (*samma kammanta*), right livelihood (*samma ajiva*), right effort (*samma vayama*), right mindfulness (*samma sati*), and right concentration (*samma samadhi*), described as the middle path (*majjhima-patipada*). In the language of the four noble truths, the cause and solution of current environmental issues may be tracked as: the environmental degradation is the present day *dukkha* for all sentient beings. The cause for *dukkha* is human desire for pleasant things and comfort, *dukkha* can be stop. By practicing the eightfold path or middle one can overcome the present environmental *dukkha*.

### Cause and Condition

Things originate depending upon causal conditions. The interdependence between all things is the theory of *paticcasamuppada* (dependent origination), in which arising of each thing depends on others and nothing exists on its own. The *Majjhima Nikaya* (II. 32) says, “*Imasmim sati idam hoti, Imassuppada idam uppajjati. Imasmim asati idam na hoti, Imassa nirodha idam nirujjhati* (When this is, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.

When this is not, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.”<sup>4</sup> The term *paticcasamuppada* refers to the chain of causal existence or causal connection of

<sup>1</sup>World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Rising temperatures, (July 7, 2015; [http://wwf.panda.org/about\\_our\\_earth/about\\_tcc/problems/rising\\_temperatures/](http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/about_tcc/problems/rising_temperatures/)).

<sup>2</sup>Prieto, Hernando Gutierrez. (2008). “Bioethics and Ecology: Towards sustainability Bioethics.” *Vniversitas Bogota*, 117: 275-294.

<sup>3</sup>*Dhammapada*. (2013). Translated and edited by S. Radhakrishnan. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup>*Majjhima Nikaya*. (1954-1959). Translated and edited by I. B. Horner, Vols. I-III. Oxford: The Pali Text Society.

phenomena. Indeed, Buddhism denies the existence of any permanent entity, and gives an explanation of how the beings arise according to conditions, and how the world ceases from the cessation of conditions. This inter-relationship of things strongly emphasizes the interconnectedness of cause and effect, which is explicitly described by the twelve nidanas. The definition of *paticcasamuppada* as twelvefold formula is stated in Samyutta Nikaya II 1:

And what is the *paticca-samuppada*, *bhikkhus*? With ignorance (*avijja*) as condition there are [volitional] formations (*sankhara*); with formations as condition, consciousness (*vinnana*); with consciousness as condition, mentality-materiality (*nama-rupa*); with mentality-materiality as condition, the six fold base (*salayatana*); with the six fold base as condition, contact (*phassa*); with contact as condition, feeling (*vedana*); with feeling as condition, craving (*tanha*); with craving as condition, clinging (*upadana*); with clinging as condition, becoming (*bhava*); with becoming as condition, birth (*jati*); with birth as condition there is ageing-and-death (*jara*)-and-(*maranam*), and sorrow (*soka*), lamentation (*parideva*), pain (*dukkha*), grief (*domanassa*), despair (*upayasa*); thus there is the arising of this whole mass of suffering (*dukkha*). This is called the *paticcasamuppada*, *bhikkhus*.<sup>5</sup>

In the language of the *paticcasamuppada*, the cause and solution of current environmental issues may be tracked as, because of sense-desire there arises consumerism, because of consumerism there arises commodity production, because of commodity production, there arises resource extraction, because of resource extraction there arise green-house gas release and because of green-house gas release there arise climate change, water and air pollution, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, rising sea-levels.<sup>6</sup>

Nothing exist its own including nature and human beings. All beings are equally important and interdependent and there are also effects of nature on humans and vice-versa. Thich Nhat anh, a Vietnamese Zen monk explicitly defines *paticcasamuppada* in terms of human nature intimate relationship. He says;

*Paticca-samuppada* is sometimes called the teaching of cause and effect, but that can be misleading, because we usually think of cause and effect as separate entities, with cause always preceding effect, and one cause leading to one effect. According to the teaching of Interdependent Co-Arising, cause and effect co-arise (*samutpada*) and everything is a result of multiple causes and conditions. The egg is in the chicken, and the chicken is in the egg. Chicken and egg arise in mutual dependence. Neither is independent. Interdependent Co-Arising goes beyond our concepts of space and time.<sup>7</sup>

He coined the term 'Inter-being' to advocate the interdependent relationship with the humankind and nature;

All phenomena are interdependent. When we think of a speck of dust, a flower, or a human being, our thinking cannot break loose from the idea of unity, of one, of calculation. We see a line drawn between one and many, one and not one. But if we truly realize the interdependent nature of the dust, the flower, and the human being, we see that unity cannot exist without diversity. Unity and diversity interpenetrate each

<sup>5</sup>Samuyutta Nikaya. (1922). Edited & translated by C. A. F. Rhys Davids & F. L. Woodward, Vol. II. London: The Pali Text Society.

<sup>6</sup>Piyobhaso, Phramaha Bhatsakorn. (4-6 May 2009). "A Buddhist Perspective on Global Warming - Our Inevitable Fate?." In *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis* (115-128), paper presented at The International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations, Thailand.

<sup>7</sup>Hanh, T. N. (1998). *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation*. Sydney: Broad way Books.

other freely. Unity is diversity, and diversity is unity. This is the principle of Inter-being.<sup>8</sup>

Realization of fundamental nature-human interdependence on each other is hoped to solve, at least reduce, the present environmental suffering. Humans are seen as having an effect on their environment not only through the purely physical aspects of their actions, but also through the moral/immoral qualities. While considering these, relationship between human and nature and its interconnectedness Buddhism advocates 'value of life' and 'respect for life' as central to their ethics (environmentalism). This is because, "The fool is tormented thinking 'these sons belong to me', 'this wealth belongs to me'. He himself does not belong to himself. How then can sons be his? How can wealth be his?" The sense of 'I', 'mine' and 'me' lead to greed and self-interest, which are the cause of individual and collective suffering. The early Buddhist texts explain about suffering and rebirth; all things and all lives, all events (except nibbana) arise depending on specific causes and conditions, which in their turn have also arisen dependent on causes and conditions. To solve environmental problems, it is helpful to let go the false nature of the self and the sense of 'I', 'mine' and 'me' and the resulting selfishness.

### **Buddhist Ethical Principle of Eightfold Path**

Eightfold Path is said to lead to freedom from all suffering, emancipation from the cycle of being born, getting old, becoming sick and dying. One may say that the noble eightfold path is nothing but the eight golden principles for human beings; this describes the way to end suffering and be compassionate for other. Eightfold path aims at promoting and perfecting the three essential of Buddha training and discipline, i.e., *Sila* (ethical conduct), *Samadhi* (mental discipline) and *Panna* (wisdom).

Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood constitute ethical conduct or *sila*. This is built on the vast conception of universal love and compassion for all beings, which affirms for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many. Right speech means abstaining from telling lie, divisive speech; harsh speech/ language and frivolous talk. This leads to right action. Living styles based falsehood has direct impact on environment. For example, most of the chemical companies publicize their environmental sensitivity; but in reality they dump toxic waste in the rivers and other water bodies, and pollute the natural environment putting human and other lives at risk. Right action means abstaining from killing, stealing and unlawful sexual misconduct or one may say abstaining from wrongful conduct through the body. Abstaining from killing, stealing and unlawful sexual misconduct are related to human physical actions, which linked with Buddhist first three precepts.

Abstaining from killing affirms non-violence, which may be interpreted as restraining oneself from exploitation of natural resources and advocates a compassionate attitude towards nature. Abstaining from stealing means refraining from taking what is not given, which explain nature has elements like forest, river, mountain, and sea that are not given to anyone particularly but to all forms of life and they are not being taken for one's own satisfaction at the expense of other living beings. Abstaining from sexual misconduct warns against physical misuse of nature similar to misconducts against women. The exploitation of the natural environment is violating the ecological order. Nature is partner to human beings, who therefore must foster a loving attitude towards the natural environment and other living beings.

Right effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration refers to the second important training of mental discipline or *samadhi*. Right effort is enforced by mental energy.

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<sup>8</sup>Hanh, T. N. (2000). "The Sun of My Heart." In *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, edited by Stephanie Kaze, 83-91. Boston: Shambhala, Distributed by Random House.

It can occur in either wholesome or unwholesome states. The same type of energy that energizes desire, envy, aggression, and violence can also fuel self-discipline, honesty, benevolence, and kindness.<sup>9</sup> Right Effort is about doing what one can, when one can, and because one can. When one apply effort to thinking about the changes one can make toward green transformation (Right Thinking), then take action to make those changes (Right Action), that's Right Effort. Indeed, right effort affirms to generate compassion and loving kindness to all living beings.<sup>10</sup> Right mindfulness is the controlled and perfected faculty of cognition. It is the mental ability to see things as they are, with clear consciousness. Right mindfulness leads to the mental ability to sense, to feel, to perceive things, to have mental formations clearly with full consciousness.<sup>11</sup> Practice of this helps one to understand his physical, vocal and mental actions towards others. This directly helps to be compassionate and care of others like oneself. Right concentration refers to the development of a mental force that occurs in natural consciousness. Concentration is a focus of mind where all mental faculties are unified and directed to one selected object. With the power of concentration, we can look deeply into the environmental crisis and be aware of the feelings of greed or craving that is confronting and to stop the excessive holding and consumption of the resources.<sup>12</sup> These eightfold path directs one to develop in right way for needful consumption and production, which contribute to reduce the environmental problems. Right Understanding and Right Thought go to constitute *Panna* or wisdom. Right understanding affirms understanding of things as they are. The theory of four noble truths explains things as they really are. Its ecological interpretation would be understanding beauty of natural order. Destroying the ecological order out of greed of pleasant things generates environmental problems. Right Thought consists of three factors; *nekkhamma* (selflessness), *avyapada* (loving-kindness) and *avihimsa* (harmlessness). It denotes the thoughts of selfless renunciation or detachment, thoughts of love and thought of non-violence, which extended to all beings. Right thoughts will eliminate wrong thoughts and this environmental degradation will be controlled at source itself.

Training of these three essential teachings help to develop the temperance human behaviour and also help to develop compassion and loving kindness towards all living beings. Because 'nothing exists on its own' all are interdependent on each other. Thus, one should respect each other. Practice of these eight ethical principles promote the *kusala kamma* and also promote the less consumption and less reproduction attitude.

### Conclusion

The eight fold path affirms the right way to lead our lives, which generate absence of harming or violence and compassion towards all beings. In Buddhism whether an action is right or wrong is determined by the agent's motivation and intention, which paved the way to that action. Therefore, taking personal responsibility with right motivation and intention toward an environment friendly solution is important. By minimizing the physical misdeeds

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<sup>9</sup>Chantana, Thongprayoon. (4-6 May 2009). "Buddhist Perspectives for Environmental Equilibrium." In *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis* (194-208), paper presented at The International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations, Thailand.

<sup>10</sup> Kamble, Rahul K. (4-6 May 2009). "The Noble Eightfold Path: Buddhist Response to Environmental Degradation." In *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis* (415-427), paper presented at The International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations, Thailand.

<sup>11</sup>Chantana, Thongprayoon. (4-6 May 2009). "Buddhist Perspectives for Environmental Equilibrium." In *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis* (194-208), paper presented at The International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations, Thailand.

<sup>12</sup> Chantana, Thongprayoon. (4-6 May 2009). "Buddhist Perspectives for Environmental Equilibrium." In *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis* (194-208), paper presented at The International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations, Thailand.

one may be able to purify both the body and mind, and that will result in well-being of all – human beings, other living beings, and nature.

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