

## **A Paradigm for Human-Nature Relationship in Theravada Buddhist Environmental Spirituality**

### **Introduction**

In an extended talk by the Thai scholar monk Phra Prayudh Payutto entitled “Thai People and Forests,” he posed a simple question to his listeners, “Is the relationship between Thai people and forests one of friendship or of enemies?” (Payutto, 2010, p.11). Obviously, Phra Prayudh intended for his listeners to conscientiously examine their attitudes and behaviors in order to evaluate the quality of human-nature relationship at the present time. Phra Prayudh’s question is a pertinent one, not only for his Thai listeners but for all people regardless of cultural and religious backgrounds. How human beings view nature and view themselves vis-à-vis nature has tremendous implications for the condition of the environment now and in the future. As humanity confronts the environmental crisis unfolding in ever more dramatic and disturbing ways, the way to wrestle with the matter undoubtedly has to be sought on multiple fronts. Religious systems that have significant influence on the life of the populace naturally serve as a wonderful resource because they inculcate into the human mind and spirit the way of living and being in the world as well as the way of entering into relationship with others. Buddhism is among the world religions that are most turned to for inspiration and directions on how to grapple with the problem, partly because it offers a unique approach that sets itself apart from other religious systems and environmental philosophies. At least for the significant part of the world population that adheres to Buddhism and many people who are intrigued by or sympathetic to Buddhist teachings, the Buddhist vision of human-nature relationship can help them to reassess their attitudes and behavior that negatively impact the environment and does not

contribute to either their own well-being or the well-being of non-human nature. In this paper, I aim to propose a model of harmonious human-nature relationship that is faithfully based upon fundamental Theravada Buddhist doctrinal teachings and can serve as a valuable response to models that have already been put forth by other Buddhist scholars, by other religious systems, or by secular environmental ethics. This paper is divided into three parts. The first section attempts to show that the defects in human-nature relationship ultimately reflect malignancies in human moral psychology itself. The second section aims to situate human-nature relationship within the overall Buddhist worldview in which human beings and nature become fellow travelers on a long path towards liberation from the cycle of suffering and rebirth. The final section proposes how human beings can engage in relationship with nature in such a way that promotes not only environmental well-being but personal spiritual progress as well.

One may articulate some doubts as to how a set of beliefs taught by a sage 2,500 years ago can contribute to the environmental crisis in the modern time. Certainly, in the Buddha's time environmental concerns were not of the same degree or nature as what humanity is grappling with at this time. However, both in the past and in the present, there are some basic issues that affect human and nature. Water sanitation was an issue of great concern because drinking unclean water led to life threatening disease. The Buddha's prohibition for monks to urinate in the river was no doubt related to this concern for preserving water sanitation (V.4.205-206). Human intrusion into forest land also took place as seen in the story of the two tree spirits who lost their abodes due to human interference. The story entitled *Vyagghajataka* goes as follows. Two spirits were residing in two trees in the forest. However, one of the tree spirits was bothered by the odor of the carcasses of the animals that the tiger and the lion had preyed on and

left behind. This spirit wanted to scare the culprits out of the vicinity. However, the other spirit warned him that this would not be a good idea. Despite the warning, the unhappy spirit followed through with this plan and scared them away. As a result, humans who previously only stayed at the edge of the forest for fear of the lion and tiger eventually became more bold and advanced deeper into the forest in order to hunt and find things to sell. The humans eventually would also cut down the trees of the forest in order to farm. As a result, the two tree spirits were left without a home (Chapple, 1997, pp. 141-142).

Today, scholars of Buddhism generally agree that in the Ganges region, urbanization and population growth were considerable. Deforestation, thus, had to take place in order for these urban hubs to appear along with mercantile activity and trade within and between population centers both in close and distant proximities. According to Lewis Lancaster, Buddhism found its beginnings and growth as part of a growing urban movement and not something just limited to the wilderness (Lancaster, 1997, pp.11-12). The Sakyamuni spent his childhood in a city environment, and even as a wandering ascetic, taught and lived in such an environment. Of the 4,257 teaching locales found in the early Buddhist canon 96 percent are in urban settings. At the same time, of the nearly 1,400 people identified in these texts, 94 percent are identified as residing in cities.<sup>1</sup> Thus, one can extrapolate that the environmental problems of the present day had its beginning even in ancient time as human societies developed using various means that affected the rest of nature. And even though the Buddha did not address environmental problems per se, the Buddha did teach the truths that led to suffering of sentient beings. The suffering

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<sup>1</sup> John Elverskog, "Buddhist Contributions to Environmental Ethics: From Creative Destruction to Creative Protection." Lecture delivered at International Conference on Ethics, Climate Change and Energy, Mahidol University, Salaya, Thailand, November 27, 2014.

experienced by human beings is often the result of the imbalances in how they build and maintain relationship with the people and things around them. These external defects, however, reflected more deep seated internal tendencies that serve as the root causes for all personal as well as social problems.

### **A misguided human-nature relationship**

If the historical Buddha were living in today's world and witnessing the multi-dimensional environmental crisis marked by serious issues such as deforestation, global warming, and species extinction, he would very likely diagnose the cause of this problem by calling attention to an unhealthy relationship between human beings and nature, which stems from malignancies within the human moral psychology itself. The Buddha divided the human situation into two states: wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*). The root causes of these unwholesome states are greed, hatred, and delusion, while the root causes of the wholesome states are non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. All animate life is impelled by these universal forces on an individual as well as collective basis. They are the motive forces behind our thoughts, words, and deeds. Thoughtful reflection on this reality tells us that the unwholesome roots lead to actions that result in suffering for ourselves and others in a way that contradicts with our inner desire for happiness. Thus, the realm of the unwholesome extends beyond what is considered as immoral since certain thoughts and actions, though not deemed immoral may still be considered unwholesome and is productive of unfavorable kamma-results (Nyanaponika Thera, 2008, p.4).

In basic sense, greed is that mental state in which one is constantly preoccupied with a feeling of need and want because he feels there is a lack in his life. And since his appetite is

insatiable, even when he obtains what he has desired, he continues to feel a sense of lack for lasting satisfaction. Hatred, which in the Buddhist sense includes other negative emotions such as disappointment, despair, anxiety and dejection, also has internal origins representing dissatisfaction towards oneself and others. Finally, delusion can be seen in the form of ignorance that leads to confusion and lack of directions. It can also lead to false views that result in ideological dogmatism and fanaticism. These three unwholesome roots manifest themselves in various degrees from mild to extreme. For example, greed may be expressed in a simple wish or in something more serious such as craving and self-indulgence. Similarly, hatred can take the form of mere dislike to something much more serious such as vengefulness and wrath. Delusion can range anywhere from dullness to conceit and ideological dogmatism (Nyanaponika Thera, 2008, p.5).

These three roots are not independent of one another, but rather are intertwined with one another and may serve as the force to impel one another. For example, a person who suffers from greed may also harbor great hatred when he is not able to attain the things that he desires due to real or perceived obstacles from others. In the same manner, delusion is the foundation upon which greed and hatred stand because delusion leads one to believe that one ought to want and need such and such a thing, or that one ought to hate certain people or certain things. Perhaps the biggest delusion of all is the false belief in a self or an ego that causes one to do various things on behalf of this ego – building it up, protecting it from harm, defending it from attacks, etc.

According to Buddhism, these three unwholesome roots are found in individual mental states. However, the negative consequences are not simply confined to the individual, but occur on the collective level as well. The social manifestation of the unwholesome roots are seen when

individuals who suffer from these unwholesome states vie with one another in society and try to outdo one another. One's hatred becomes the source that instigates the hatred in another person which leads to an escalation of hatred and violence. Social and political conflicts arise out of this cycle of hate that begins with individuals but eventually emerges on a community level. Hatred is an especially anti-social defilement because it results from conflicting interests between ourselves and others. We often see individual leaders and institutions promote hate for others in order to rally people to their collective cause or individual egotistical goals. Wars and atrocities take place on the common foundation of hate for the others. The presence of the unwholesome roots on a social level is likewise seen with regards to greed and delusion. We certainly have seen how some young people insist that their parents must buy them expensive mobile phones or clothes simply because their friends have these items. A society characterized by materialistic tendencies is formed when its members feel that lasting satisfaction comes from possessing various gadgets and things. And these thoughts are instilled in the people by advertisements produced by companies that feel that the indicator of success is uninterrupted growth year after year. The Buddhist scholar monk Bhikkhu Bodhi illustrates the intertwining of the three unwholesome states in our globalized world in the following manner:

“Through the prevalence of greed the world has become transformed into a global marketplace where human beings are reduced to the status of consumers, even commodities, and where materialistic desires are provoked at volatile intensities. Through the prevalence of hatred, which is often kindled by competing interests governed by greed, national and ethnic differences become the breeding ground of suspicion and enmity, exploding in violence and destruction, in cruelty

and brutality, in endless cycles of revenge. Delusion sustains the other two unwholesome roots by giving rise to false beliefs, dogmatic views, and philosophical ideologies devised in order to promote and justify patterns of conduct motivated by greed and hatred.”<sup>2</sup>

As we can see, personal and social problems in the Buddhist perspective all have their root causes in greed, hatred, and delusion. The imbalances in human-nature relationship that gives rise to the environmental crisis, then, must also be considered in this Buddhist framework that diagnoses the problem from a human moral psychological outlook. As Pragati Sahni contends:

“In all likelihood the environmental crisis to the early Buddhists is the manifestation of a psychological crisis because most physical actions and outward behavior are shaped by what is going on in the mind. As long as the mind is influenced by the three unwholesome principles of *raga*, *dosa* and *moha* or greed, hatred and delusion the human race will be stricken by environmental and other forms of exploitation, as well as selfish actions, greedy consumer cultures, dissatisfaction and other attitudes that can be looked upon as vices.” (Sahni, 2007, p.165)

Likewise, the late Thai monk Buddhadasa would remark that climate change and other imbalances in nature being experienced at this time is a result of an internal human moral degeneration that affects the external dimension of the world.<sup>3</sup> Philip Cafaro identifies three

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<sup>2</sup> Message for a Globalized World. Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter cover essay #34 (3rd mailing, 1996). [http://www.vipassana.com/resources/bodhi/globalized\\_world.php](http://www.vipassana.com/resources/bodhi/globalized_world.php)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.thaibuddhism.net/Bud\\_Ecology.htm](http://www.thaibuddhism.net/Bud_Ecology.htm)

ways that greed brings about detrimental effects on the environment (Cafaro, 2005, pp.148-149). First, environmental standards are breeched when businesses have greed as their driving motivation. In order to maximize profit, businesses can easily refuse to spend money on methods and instruments to safely eliminate chemicals and wastes that are produced by their factories so as not to pollute the lakes, rivers, and air that serve the needs human beings, animals, and plants. Second, greed can undermine the democratic process. This is most clearly seen when government leaders engage in acts of corruption such as instituting laws and policies that grant privileges to parties who make financial profits through environmentally destructive means. In this situation, the government leaders themselves would reap personal gains, which is the primary motivation for why they acted in a corrupted manner in the first place. Third, greed is the engine that drives overconsumption. Due to the desire for many things, people try to own the things that they do not really need. Companies try to maximize their profit by selling as much of a product as possible. And in order to make even more profit, they have to continually put out new products which they will try to convince the consumers that they must have even though what they have been using is perfectly adequate. Overconsumption harms nature severely because in order to produce all the things that supposedly satisfy human needs, an exorbitant quantity of natural resources must be used.

The environment can also be harmed equally by hatred that human individuals and groups display when they institute aggressive policies that aim to protect selfish economic interests. A country or organization may employ imperialistic or oppressive tactics in order to acquire control or monopoly of natural resources to which they will exploit for economic gains. As a result, entire oil fields can be depleted and entire forests can be laid barren so that company



executives and government officials can line their pocket with vast sums of money. While hatred in this militant form is obvious, there are also more subtle forms of hatred such as apathy. For the vast majority of the populace, when people are told of the immanent dangers to the environment demonstrated in the rapid loss of species, the depletion of forests, the pollution of rivers and the air, they often display some level concern but ultimately do little to change their own behavior, which contributes to this destruction in the first place. In a sense, apathy could be considered a passive form of hatred that collectively contributes to environmental destruction no less than the militant expressions of hatred. And while militancy may be limited to notorious individuals, groups, organizations, or governments, apathy is prevalent in the great majority of the people. This makes all people susceptible to blame when it comes to identifying contributing factors to the environmental crisis.

Delusion in the Buddhist framework is certainly a driving force behind the environmental crisis since it is the foundation for the other two unwholesome states previously mentioned. Sometimes referred to as ignorance or possessing false views, this is a condition where people become attached to material things thinking that they will bring about lasting happiness for them, not realizing that all things are impermanent. Ignorance is also seen in how people with expensive possessions such as cars, homes, and mobile phones are accorded higher social status. This phenomenon, then, becomes the model for how individuals in society behave and serves as the goal that all should attain to. Thus, armed with this delusion, we keep on hoarding and seeking without ever attaining the satisfaction that we long for, and the search goes on. Delusion and ignorance is also played out on a social level when it is believed that in real development, economic growth is the measure of national good, that high levels of production and

consumption signifies higher well-being, and the importance of unceasing GDP growth out-trumps sustainability (Ives, 2013, p.546). Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai scholar and Engaged Buddhist comments,

“Development can emphasize quantity or quality. With the former, we can measure results, but it is presumptuous to assume that more factories, schools, hospitals, food, clothing, jobs, or income will necessarily enhance the quality of life. Although these are all necessary, they are not sufficient... Development must also take into account the essence of our humanity.” (Sivaraksa, 2009, p.35)

Delusion in the form of having false views can also be manifested in other ways when it comes to the environmental crisis. For example, individuals and groups do not have adequate knowledge of the problem or misunderstand the issues due to absorbing one-sided information from governments or interest groups. Ignorance can be a result of denial of the magnitude of the problem based on shorted-sighted empirical experiences that one has without considering the larger scope of what is going on. An experience of an especially harsh winter, for example, does not deny the fact that global warming is indeed taking place. Delusion can result from ideological notions that persuade us that human beings ought to dominate nature according to some sort of divine ordination. Likewise, delusion can be the thinking that problems will eventually be fixed if scientists can think of clever ways to solve issues. Delusion can also be

manifested in the thinking that if all else fails, humanity can always try to find another planet to move to and call it home.<sup>4</sup>

Greed, hatred, and delusion, therefore, are the primary malignancies in the human psychology that impel human beings as individuals as well as collective entities to act in ways that are environmentally destructive. In any relationship, however, the party that inflicts the harm on others ultimately becomes the recipient of the effects of his own negative actions. The quality of human life, in the end, will also depend on the state of nature. The quality of the human spirit, likewise, will depend on how we deal with these poisons. The Buddhist outlook tells us that personal and social problems (depletion of the earth's natural resources and destruction of the environment; proliferation of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction; utter disregard for human rights; political, ethnic, and religious tensions; widening gap between the rich and the poor) all hinge on how prevalent these poisons permeate our thoughts, words, and actions in an interconnected manner. Conversely, how effectively these problems can be solved will depend on how the wholesome states—non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion—can gain a foothold in human lives. Unless these poisons are eliminated from human life, anything done on behalf of the environment will merely represent piecemeal quick fixes that do not lead to lasting results.

### **Re-positioning human and nature relationship in Buddhist cosmology**

The Buddhist analysis of the environmental crisis in light of the three poisons demonstrates that much of the problem begins with human misconception of themselves, which subsequently impacts their attitudes toward nature. Just as people often build up themselves and

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<sup>4</sup> According to BBC, more than 200,000 people around the world submitted applicants for the privately funded Mars One mission which aims to transport people on a one-way trip to the Red Planet in 2025.  
<http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150113-one-way-ticket-to-the-red-planet>

struggle for selfish interests at the cost of doing harm to other people, human beings also do the same to nature. Thus, the factors that contribute to unhealthy and conflicting interpersonal relationships are also reflected in the human-nature relationship, where we often witness a lack of concern, aggression, exploitation, and violence on the part of the former at the detriment of the latter. The task to remedy the environmental crisis at its core is to recognize and maintain the right relationship between human and nature so that each is able to carry out their respective roles in the universe.

It is of significance here that we make some clarifications on terminology. In some environmental circles, it has been argued that it is false to make distinctions between human beings and nature because, in fact, human beings are part of nature. Nature with the capital “N” includes all naturally occurring entities in the universe forming a holistic system of dynamic interrelations. The Deep Ecology movement portrays this kind of outlook. David Landis Barnhill writes:

“The philosophical views of deep ecologists are often grounded in an intuitive experience of nature as a unified totality that we can relate to and that in some sense we *are*. A sense of being part of a vast, inclusive whole can enable one to drop a confined view of the self, give a feeling of being fully a part of and at home in nature, and motivate environmental activism.” (Barnhill, 2001, p.78)

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeply into philological issues, it suffices to say that this Western sense of nature and the Deep Ecology notion of biospherical egalitarianism cannot find neat fitting parallels in Buddhist cosmology. In the Buddhist conception of the universe, human beings and non-human nature form separate entities, which

have co-existed since beginningless time and will continue to co-exist for much longer to come. Moreover, they are only part of a cosmological continuum that includes a total of six realms making up *samsara*. According to Ian Harris, *samsara* “denotes the totality of sentient beings (*sattvaloka*) caught in the round of life after life, although it may also encompass those parts of the cosmos that fall below the level of sentience and, as such, act as the stage or receptacle (*bhajanaloka*) on which the beginningless cycle of life on life unfolds” (Harris, 1997, p.381). In this *samsara*, the cycle of rebirth results in sentient beings ending up in one of the six realms, the lowest being hell (*niraya*) and the highest being heaven in which one exists as a god (*deva*). It is important to emphasize here that what we normally classify as nature is not equivalent to *samsara* because *samsara* comprises not only of natural but also supernatural entities such as ghosts and angels. Animals belong to the realm that is only less unfortunate than hell, and human beings are only less fortunate than the gods. However, the existence in none of these realms is permanent, and even if one has an auspicious birth as a god, he will eventually be reborn into a lower realm when all of his good *kamma* is exhausted. In reality, the six realms are essentially rough categories because in each of them, there is a wide range of states of life. Not all animals suffer in the same degree and not all human beings have the same degree of joy. While plants did not enjoy inclusion in the moral circle, trees were considered to be single facultied life forms that deserve protection from harm (Harris, 1991, p.107). What we can envision then is that the Buddhist *samsara* presents us with a picture of all the beings in the world linked together in the circle of birth and none of the states of life exist in isolation of one another. The human realm, though more joyful than the animal realm is but an intermediate on the way to attaining *nibbana*. And animals, although born in a realm characterized by much suffering and anguish, also travel

on the exact same path, albeit a much longer and more strenuous one. Still, it is undeniable that being born in the human realm is preferable since it presents a greater opportunity for spiritual advancement and emancipation.

The obviously more favored human realm over the animal realm may lead some to conclude that human beings are more valuable than nature. And while such temptation is understandable, in Buddhism how we behave does not necessarily depend on the act of ascribing value either to ourselves or to the other. In certain secular environmental ethics, there is a tremendous emphasis on the notion of human value versus the value of nature, with the idea that while the fact that the intrinsic value of human beings is beyond doubt, there needs to be a project that proves the existence of intrinsic value in nature.<sup>5</sup> The thinking is that the conception of the value of nature in mere instrumental terms has given human beings unrestrained freedom to exploit nature for their purpose. Thus, if nature is proved to possess intrinsic value, or value in itself, then by applying the Kantian ethical model to the matter, it necessarily means that human beings have a duty to respect the right of nature in the same way that human beings respect the right of one another. The human-nature relationship under this project is one characterized by obligation that comes from recognition of each other's intrinsic worth. Environmentalists fear that unless the intrinsic value of nature is affirmed, it will be subjected to human disrespect and exploitation in order to fulfill human needs.

The notion of intrinsic value or intrinsic worth from the Buddhist perspective, nonetheless, is a foreign one because Buddhism categorically rejects any notion of a fixed, static

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<sup>5</sup> For many environmental philosophers to hold an environmental ethic is to hold that non-human nature has intrinsic value in one sense or another. Thus, the notion of intrinsic value is the *sine qua non* of nonanthropocentric environmental ethic (Nunez, 1999, p.105).

entity, in effect the holder of intrinsic value. Buddhism's threefold doctrine of *anicca-dukkha-anatta* known as the Three Marks of Existence together deny the concept of self (*atta*). *Anicca* or impermanence asserts that everything is in a state of flux, and the impression of things being permanent is simply an illusion (Hawkins, 1999, p.42). *Dukkha*, translated as mental or physical pain or suffering, constitutes the second mark of existence and is directly related to the first. According to the Buddha's teaching, all things that are impermanent are one way or another unsatisfactory and to place one's trust and dependence on impermanent things is doom to failure. Suffering, thus, represents the unsatisfactoriness that comes from the dislocations in one's life when one undergoes the trauma of birth and fear of death, the experience of sickness and old age, the discomfort in being tied to what one dislikes and separated from what one loves. *Dukkha* comes from possessing *tanha*, which represents the selfish desires for private fulfillment that throws us out of a state of freedom and causes us to experience increasing pain and suffering (Smith, 2009, p.102). While *anicca* and *dukkha* are intimately connected with the Buddhist negation of self, it is in the doctrine of *anatta*, the third mark of existence that this negation is definitively stated. This teaching declares that there is no self existing real ego-entity, soul or any other permanent substance either within the bodily and mental phenomena of existence or outside of them. The *anatta* doctrine is a unique invention by Buddhism not found in other religions. An accurate understanding of Buddhism rests on the understanding that reality is comprised of mere continually self-consuming process of arising and passing bodily and mental phenomena, and that there is no separate ego-entity within or without this process.

In the Buddhist conception, rather than seeing life as a static and substantiated entity, one must envision it as a composite of mental and physical aggregates (*khandha*), all of which are

subject to impermanence and changeableness. In the human being, feeling, perception, disposition and consciousness make up the four mental aggregates, while form constitutes the physical and the final aggregate. Empirical observation may lead us to think that there exists a self-dependent real ego-entity or personality; however, what is actually taking place is the cooperation of the five aggregates in the various mental and physical phenomena, which has been going on since time immemorial and will continue for unthinkably long periods of time. (Nyanatiloka, 1997, p.160). Every configuration of aggregates is a momentary force or entity separate from the next. An often employed analogy to make this teaching easier to grasp is the image of a cart that is essentially an aggregate of all its parts, the wheels, the axle, the pole, the cart-body, and so forth placed in a certain relationship to one another. However, the cart as a static and permanent entity is a mere illusion (Vis.M.XVIII). The famous Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa explained the existence of beings as follows:

“In the ultimate sense the life-moment of living beings is extremely short, being only as much as the occurrence of a single conscious moment. Just as a chariot wheel, when it is rolling, rolls [that is, touches the ground] only on one point of [the circumference of] its tire, and, when it is at rest, rests only on one point, so too, the life of living beings lasts only for a single conscious moment. When that consciousness has ceased, the being is said to have ceased, according as it is said: “In a past conscious moment he did live, not he does live, not he will live. In a future conscious moment not he did live, not he does live, he will live. In the present conscious moment not he did live, he does live, not he will live.” (Vis.M.VIII)



Behind the five aggregates, we cannot find an underlying self that controls these processes. It is improper to consider these *khandhas* as “this is mine” or “this is I” or “this is my self” (Varanasi, 1999,p.14). C. H. S. Ward warns, "We must try to overcome the difficulty of thinking of 'will' without a 'willer'; of 'deed' without a 'doer'; of 'suffering' without a 'sufferer'; in a word, of life being carried on without personal agents" (Quoted in Love, 1965, p.304). The processes observed are the result of Dependent Origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), a theory that attempts to show that all phenomena are conditionally related to one another. The principle comes in two forms, long and short. The short form is a general formula that does not specify the main elements involved while the long form specifies the elements and how they are connected to one another in a chained progression. The short form is as follows:

*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.*

(S.II.21)

The longer form specifies various factors linked together that creates a chronological sequence as follows:

*With Ignorance as condition, there are Volitional Impulses.*

*With Volitional Impulses as condition, Consciousness.*

*With Consciousness as condition, Body and Mind.*

*With Body and Mind as condition, the Six Sense Bases.*

*With the Six Sense Bases as condition, (sense) Contact.*

*With Contact as condition, Feeling.*

*With Feeling as condition, Craving.*

*With Craving as condition, Clinging.*

*With Clinging as condition, Becoming.*

*With Becoming as condition, Birth.*

*With Birth as condition, Aging and Death, Sorrow, Lamentation, Pain, Grief and  
Despair.*

The text usually begins with the element of ignorance (*avijja*) as one of the twelve elements that form the entire chain. The existence of ignorance gives rise to another element which gives rise to another element, and so forth. This formulation is meant to show how suffering comes to be in the world. However, the converse, which begins with the cessation of ignorance and ends with cessation of death and decay depicts the process for extinguishing suffering. From the specified elements in the long form listed above, it is obvious that the principle of Dependent Origination has a physical and psychological import in that it sets out to explain how suffering comes about and how it may be extinguished. It describes actions and the consequences of the actions received by the individual who is solely responsible for how he conducts his life. This principle thus obviously applies to human beings who possess a conscious mind. While the theory of Dependent Origination in its long formula applies specifically to the human psychological condition, we can see from the short formula that it can easily be applied to physical phenomena taking place in the universe as well. Though some scholars such as Eviatar Shulman assert that Dependent Origination only applies to the principles of the mind (Shulman, 2008, p.307), the fact that the human condition was often explained by the Buddha using analogies from nature shows that the Buddha would not deny that this law of causation also applied on a physical level to the rest of the universe (Sahni, 2007, pp.68-69). The theory of

Dependent Origination, thus, posits that all things exist in a continuum of interdependence and inter-relatedness, characterized by an unceasing process of growth and decline as a result of various determinants. This ever changing and continuing process indicates that things cannot have an intrinsic entity. Every link constitutes itself as cause for the subsequently resulting effect, and as resulting effect for the preceding cause (Varanasi, 1999, p.14). In light of this theory, any questions that attempt to prove the existence of a self such as “Who is the cause of suffering?”, “Who suffers?”, “Who is the owner of this body?” are all considered in Buddhism to be improper questions. The only question that can be asked is "Which cause is responsible for that result". Phra Prayudh Payutto argues that inter-relatedness is a necessary consequence of not possessing an intrinsic entity. He writes:

“If things had any intrinsic entity they would have to possess some stability; if they could be stable, even for a moment, they could not be truly inter-related; if they were not inter-related they could not be formed into a continuum; if there were no continuum of cause and effect, the workings of nature would be impossible; and if there were some real intrinsic self within that continuum there could be no true inter-dependent cause and effect process. The continuum of cause and effect which enables all things to exist as they do can only operate because such things are transient, ephemeral, constantly arising and ceasing and having no intrinsic entity of their own.” (Payutto, 1994, p.15)

Thus, according to Phra Prayudh, the principle of Dependent Origination serves to show that in the various events in nature, all the properties of impermanence, suffering, and not-self are seen, all of which reinforce the Buddhist denial of the existence of any real substance which

could be duly called “self.” The Buddhist negation of an intrinsic self and subsequently that of the notion of intrinsic value either in human beings or non-human nature, has the effect of removing the emphasis on the obsession to search for and affirm the value of one or the other. In fact, if we take Buddhist philosophy to its ultimate conclusion, then when it comes to nature and human beings, given enough time, all the entities in nature, the cosmos, and in particular human beings, will change and eventually cease to be because all things are ultimately impermanent. What Buddhism does affirm is the ultimate value of spiritual liberation, a state in which a thing ceases to be. Buddhist soteriology calls attention to the ultimate good of liberation from *samsara* and attempts to devise a way for sentient beings to achieve this goal by emphasizing that all present states of life are merely stepping stones towards the final goal. Even though the human state is relatively more joyful than the animal state, it is only an intermediate level and not the highest in *samsara*. Thus, when examining the Buddhist cosmology, we see that the question of what has intrinsic value is not a matter that Buddhism shows a great deal of concern with, and neither does it preoccupy itself with the intrinsic and instrumental value dichotomy that is at the center of many discussions on environmental ethic. From the Buddhist perspective, both human beings and nature exist in a cosmological continuum in which the ultimate goal for all of the entities is emancipation. If there is to be something that possesses intrinsic value, then it is this state of permanence, happiness, and liberation.

### **Advancing a healthy human-nature relationship: Service, Companionship, and Solidarity**

The Buddhist negation of intrinsic value in all natural entities and ascribing ultimate value to *nibbana* does not spell the end of our effort to solve the environmental crisis or our attempt to promote a healthy and wholesome human-nature relationship. In this final section, I

propose that the Buddhist worldview opens up for us a completely new way of perceiving ourselves as well as perceiving others. This paradigm, though does not displace us from our rightful place in the universe, helps us to be less obsessed with ourselves and more conscious of the presence of others. It also helps us to see that our journey in *samsara* is far from a solitary sojourn, but one alongside a great number of companions and friends.

First, I would like to address the implications of the Buddhist rejection of ascribing intrinsic value to impermanent entities on human-nature relationship. Here it is important to affirm that by no means does the negation of intrinsic value in natural entities is to be seen as degrading or denying human worthiness. It is also not advocating some sort of ontological equality between human beings and nature as some Buddhist environmental enthusiasts have attempted to claim.<sup>6</sup> It is quite clear in Theravada Buddhism that the state of life as human beings, by virtue of having more joy and less suffering than animals as well as the ability to achieve spiritual progress and emancipation, is a much more favored one. In the Buddhist conception, however, all beings have their worth in so far as they either have the potential to attain emancipation or contribute to another's emancipation. The non-recognition of intrinsic value in Buddhism is a strong exhortation to not delude oneself into thinking that one must be attached to an intrinsically valuable ego-self and lose sight of the ultimate good of liberation from *samsaric* life. By not claiming intrinsic value for ourselves, we are less likely to make demands in order to satisfy our selfish desires. Rather, we become transformed from being people who demand things to build up our ego-self to being those who put ourselves at the

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<sup>6</sup> An example of this perspective is stated by Ronald Y. Nakasone who claims that the doctrine of Dependent Origination "validates the importance of all beings in equal measure" (Nakasone, 2009, p.49).

service of others. In the Buddhist conception of interpersonal relationship as well as human-nature relationship, by insisting that we not be obsessed with our ego-self and its worth, it opens up for us the possibility of seeing human beings and nature in an interdependent and cooperative relationship in order to help relieve the suffering of one another and help each other to make progress in awareness and state of life. The *Jataka* tale of the hungry tigress illustrates very poignantly how we ought to put ourselves at the service of the other, not just for their sake but ultimately for our own sake as well.

One day, when wandering in a forest along with his disciple Ajita, the Bodhisatta saw from the top of a hill that a tigress was lurking to kill and eat her own cubs out of hunger. Moved by compassion he thought of sacrificing his own body to feed the tigress and save the cubs. So, he sent away his disciple in search of some food for the tigress lest he might prevent him from his sacrifice. No sooner than Ajita left the site, the Bodhisatta jumped from the precipice in front of the tigress and offered his body. The noise of the fall caught the attention of the hungry tigress, who in no time scooped over him and tore him off in pieces and feasted upon them with her cubs.

When Ajita returned and did not find his *guru* in the same place, he looked around and was surprised to see that the tigress no longer looked hungry. Her cubs were also frolicking. But soon, he was shocked to detect the blood stained rags of his guru's dress scattered there. So, he knew that his *guru* had offered his body to feed a

hungry tigress and protected her young ones as an act of great charity. Now, he also knew why was he sent away by his *guru*.<sup>7</sup>

This story of the Bodhisatta and the hungry tigress presents us with a way of understanding ourselves in relationship to others as a relationship of placing ourselves at the service of another. However, genuine service on behalf of the other never implies no personal gain whatsoever. In the story, the Bodhisatta sacrifices his own life for the hungry tigress who is about to kill its own cub to satisfy its hunger. However, with this sacrifice, not only does the Bodhisatta carry out a kammically favorable act for himself, he also helps the tiger from carrying out a kammically unfavorable act by killing its own cub. Indeed, the Suttras in the *Āṅguttara Nikaya* teach that there are four types of people: those who act on behalf of oneself but not others, those who act on behalf of others but not oneself, those who act neither on behalf of oneself nor of others, and those who act both on behalf of oneself and on behalf of others. Of these four, the last type of person is considered to be “the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest of these four” (A.4.95).

Another *Jataka* tale beautifully illustrates a relationship characterized by mutual service between human and nature that can take place. In this story, a golden stag becomes trapped in the snare of a hunter. Despite his strong efforts and encouragement of his wife, he could not free himself. His devoted wife decides to rescue her husband by confronting the hunter when he comes to collect his catch. She offers her own life in place of her husband’s life. Stunned by this tremendous act of self-sacrifice, the hunter decides to free both of them. In thankfulness for the hunter’s change of heart, the stags later present the hunter with a jewel they had found in their

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<sup>7</sup> <http://ignca.nic.in/jatak025.htm>

feeding ground and implore the hunter to abstain from all killing, to establish a household, and to become involved with good works (Chapple, 1997, p.135).

This story tells us of the possibility of human beings and nature benefitting each other in how each is able to act in one's respective capacity on behalf of self and others. The service that human and nature does for one another, however, does not always have to be as dramatic as shown in the tale above. One of the services that nature does is to facilitate the human activity of meditation on the *dhamma*. According to David J. Kulupahana, natural settings not only create fewer distractions in term of sense pleasures, but also "provide a natural experiential ground for realizing impermanence and dependent arising, that is, the nature of the world" (Kulupahana, 2009, p.5). Indeed, the Buddha encouraged his monks to increase their virtue by resorting to "the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw" (M.1.181; 1.346; 1.441; 3.4; 3.116). We can see then that the service that human and nature do for one another is mutual and not unidirectional.

The Buddhist way of valuing which does not conceive of intrinsic values in natural entities also has other benefits for an environmental ethic. Certainly, it forswears the controversies of the intrinsic-instrumental value dichotomy that causes much debate and headache for environmental ethicists. In these systems, there is much disagreement regarding who or what has or does not have intrinsic value, and if it possesses intrinsic value, in what degrees is it? And there is also controversy as to whether the intrinsic value in various entities



objectively exists or has to be conferred upon by a conscious valuer.<sup>8</sup> Buddhism, suggests Phra Prayudh Payutto, introduces a way for us to value each other in a way that does not start with the question of what can I get from a particular person or thing. This kind of attitude is self-centered and risks leading down the path of exploitation of the other. Moreover, the moment that one feels that one cannot get anymore from the other, one ceases to value the other. On the other hand, the way to value in which we realize and appreciate all that the other has given us, leads us to true gratitude for the gifts that we have received. This then makes the way for good-will towards the others and the desire to protect the other from any harm that may come their way (Payutto, 2010, p.20). The *Khuddaka Nikaya* states: “A person who sits or sleeps in the shade of a tree should not cut off a tree branch. One who injures such a friend is evil.”

The good-will that human beings exhibit towards nature not only results from our gratitude to nature for all that nature has done for us, but it also comes from an understanding that because both human beings and natures are both bound together in the natural process of birth, old age, suffering, and death in *samsara*, we are truly companions on a journey where the final destination is emancipation for all sentient beings. The recognition of this companionship is essential in forming an internal disposition that subsequently is demonstrated in concrete actions of cooperation and solidarity rather than destructive ones. Phra Prayudh Payutto writes, “Since we must be bound to the same natural law we are friends who share in suffering and joy of one another. Since we are friends who share in both suffering and joy of one another we should help and support one another rather than persecute one another” (Payutto, 2010, p.21). The principle

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<sup>8</sup> This is an ongoing controversy among environmental philosophers, most notably Roston Holmes III and J. Baird Callicott. While Holmes III argues that intrinsic value exist objectively in nature, Callicott contends that no value can exist without a conscious valuer.

of Dependent Origination reminds us that all things in the world come about as a result of causality; thus, there is a real connection between ourselves and the things around us.

Buddhism's teaching on *kammic* effect on rebirth reminds us that any animal that we see running in the forest may in fact be one of our ancestors because in the course of beginningless *samsara*, that living being may have been our father, mother, child, sister, or daughter (S.2.189-190). By the very same token, that living being may be our very mother or father in a future life. Whether with fellow human beings or non-human nature, when we are able to recognize the intrinsic connection between ourselves and others in the world, it is easier to envision a journey accompanied by friends rather a solitary one. Even within the human realm itself, experience shows that the happiest people do not make their strivings in isolation of other people, but in concert with others. We are encouraged to make progress but not neglecting the poor, the unfortunate, the marginalized, and the weak among us. We are best when we lift others up as we attempt to do the same for ourselves. The Buddhist *samsara*, thus, encourages us to expand our boundary of kinship and companionship beyond our self, our family circle, our human realm, to include all the entities in the circle of existence.

Companionship, however, is not a mere recognition of the presence of a fellow traveler but something more profound. How many times have we sat on a bus or an airplane next to someone for hours without ever speaking a word to that person? True companionship implies the existence of a relationship, familiarity, intimacy, and mutual support. People who have been married for many years often refer to this word when they describe their relationship. Thus, companionship cannot be a superficial nod or a curious glance at someone's presence, but the desire to be connected to the other in spirit as well as in time and space. The Buddhist worldview

presents us with an opportunity to exercise companionship in a meaningful way with both fellow human beings and with nature as we travel through the mundane existence on the way towards liberation. True companionship must also entail solidarity with others on the life journey. In the remaining paragraphs of this section, I will describe some fundamental ways that human beings can demonstrate solidarity with nature so as to build a harmonious relationship that contributes to the flourishing of all.

First, human solidarity with nature needs to be reflected in our exhibition of loving kindness and compassion towards the pain and suffering of others. Loving kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) are two of the four sublime abodes (*brahma-vihara*) along with sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Loving kindness is the wish that all sentient beings, without exception, be happy while compassion is the genuine desire to alleviate the sufferings of others which one is able to feel. In the Suttras, the stereotypical text on loving kindness speaks of an overflowing and all-encompassing good will towards others:

“I dwell pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second quarter, the third quarter, and the fourth quarter. Thus above, below, across, and everywhere, and to all as to myself, I dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without enmity, without ill will.” (A.3.63)

Along with loving kindness, the person who exhibits compassion towards others and has their well-being in mind ultimately makes progress in his own spiritual state. For each of these as well as the other sublime virtues, the Buddha exhorted the monks to assiduously train themselves

so that they are able to carry out these good qualities beyond their immediate neighbors, extending to the entire world (Sahni, 2007, p.120).

As one can see, loving kindness and compassion when practiced diligently by the Buddhist person has direct implications on human-nature relationship. Simon P. James emphasizes that true compassion does not limit its beneficiary only to human beings but reaches out beyond this boundary. Thus, a person's dealings with non-human sentient beings, i.e. animals would reflect on his level of virtuousness (James, 2007, p.457). One may ask the question, if loving kindness and compassion are only extended to human beings and non-human sentient beings, then what good is that when it comes to plants and other non-sentient entities? Certainly, a person would hardly be considered compassionate if he goes about destroying rainforests which serves as the habitat for countless animal creatures big and small. In the same manner, a person would hardly be considered to be suffusing the world with loving kindness if he chooses to fill the air and rivers with dangerous chemicals that harm living things. Thus, the implication for loving kindness and compassion in the context of the environment is that it must respond to all dimensions of life that ultimately holds ramifications for different aspects of the environment. Buddhism indeed encourages people to be kind and compassionate in a thoroughgoing manner and not just on a selective basis.

Human solidarity with nature can also be exhibited in the gentleness that we display towards others so that we can contribute to their flourishing, as well as undoubtedly bring great benefits to ourselves. Gentleness is the positive derivative of the non-violence (*ahimsa*) First Precept in Buddhism, which stipulates that all actions that intentionally harm other sentient beings are considered morally wrong. In the *Dhammapada* one is reminded that just as one

recoils at the thought of pain and treasures his own life, so do other sentient beings. Thus, suffering should not be inflicted on others (Dp.129-130). Buddhism not only exhorts people to be gentle in their daily dealings with other people and animals, but it also encourages people to avoid means of livelihood that bring about intentional harm to others. Thus, making a living by trading weapons, trading human beings, trading flesh, trading spirits and trading poison ought to be avoided, according to the Buddha (A.5.177). In addition, pursuing occupations that involved hunting and butchering animals, stealing, and murdering resulted in terrible consequences to the individual that no water ablution can eliminate (*Therīgāthā* 242-3).

It must be emphasized again that the gentleness directed at other sentient beings does not exclude it being displayed towards non-sentient nature as well. In fact, the *Brahmajala Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikaya* contains provisions to be observed by monks that prohibit destroying seeds and vegetable growth (Sahni, 2007, p.124). Indeed, the Buddha himself set an example by refraining from harming seed and plant life (Harris, 1991, p.107). These provisions placed upon those engaged in monastic life suggest a thoroughgoing form of gentleness that reflects in how one treats all beings. It would be peculiar, therefore, if a person acted with great respect towards all sentient beings, but made a complete turn-about when it came to plants which in Buddhism is considered to be non-sentient or at best, border-line sentient beings.<sup>9</sup> One would expect that those who display gentleness towards people and animals would also extend this demeanor towards plants and even non-living things like a historic boulder or a cave. When gentleness permeates a person's veins, it is displayed in his actions which affect all the things around him.

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<sup>9</sup> See discussions on the sentience of plants in Schmithausen, Lambert. *Plants in Early Buddhism and the Far Eastern Idea of the Buddha-Nature of Grasses and Trees*. Lumbini International Research Institute, 2009. Also Findly, E. B.. "Borderline Beings: Plant Possibilities in Early Buddhism." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 122.2 (2002): 252–263.

A healthy and wholesome human-nature relationship then greatly depends on a human community that knows how to refrain from doing violence to its members and to others. By acting with gentleness towards others, environmentally negative events such as the extinction of animal species due to excessive hunting or the loss of plant species due to destruction of forests can be prevented.

Human-nature solidarity also expresses itself in our own exercise of moderation in how we consume resources. Concern for the well-being of nature demands high levels of control and discipline on the part of the human community. There is a tremendous number of texts in the Buddhist canon that exhorts the individual to exercise self-discipline and restraint in behavior, resisting temptation and indulgence in the senses. The *Aggañña Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* (D.III.80-98) tells a fanciful tale of the beginning of the world where as (pre)human beings went through moral degeneration, filling their hearts with greed, hatred, and envy, human lives became less and less joyful.<sup>10</sup> In the beginning, the beings were luminous and weightless creatures floating about space in pure delight. However, as time passed, on earth, there appeared a sweet and savory substance that piqued the curiosity and interest of the beings. They not only ate the substance, but due to greed seeping in, they ate it voraciously which led to its eventual depletion. In the meanwhile, due to endlessly feeding on the earth substance, the weightless beings eventually would not only become coarse individuals with a particular shape, but also lose their radiance. The story then goes on to tell how the natural world and human society continue to evolve in unwholesome manners as a result of the depraved actions of humanity.

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<sup>10</sup> Although the original intention of the Buddha in telling this story to the Brahmins is to critique the caste system as falsely deemed to be divinely ordained, the story obviously has valuable implications for human-nature relationship as well.

This tale demonstrates the Buddhist belief that there is a causal connection between human virtuousness and the state of the natural world. The lack of moderation, thus, can be seen to be a cause for great detrimental effects not only to the surrounding environment, but also to the state of one's own spiritual well-being. While Buddhism does not advocate abject poverty—recognizing the necessity of robes, medicine, food, and lodging—the Buddha indeed taught that dependence on material things was a hindrance towards spiritual progress. Monks and nuns were asked to live simply and exercise equanimity towards the alms that they received, not displaying joy or repulsion to the offerings (Sahni, 2007, p.128). Training rules for novice monks include prohibition from eating after the noon meal, satisfying sensual pleasures by beautifying the body and enjoying entertainment, and leading a lavish life by sleeping on comfortable beds and possessing money (Swearer, 1998, p.77). For the Buddha, a life that led to true happiness was not one controlled by sense desires, but rather by simplicity and having morality as a guide. One can immediately see how simple living advocated by Buddhism would have profound effect on environmental well-being. Maintaining moderation in one's life results in less pressure on natural resources, thus positively affect sustainability. I believe it does not take much for us to see that the less we make demands on nature, the more successful we will be in maintaining a healthy and balanced human-nature relationship. By setting limits on our lifestyle, focusing on what we truly need rather than what we like or what we want, the possibility for spiritual progress becomes more real, and the natural world also benefits from our exercise of restraint. As Donald Swearer remarks, "Once chooses less so that all may flourish more" (Swearer, 1998, p.93).

## Conclusion

This paper attempts to describe human-nature relationship in the Buddhist worldview as one of fellow sojourners in *samsara*, where solidarity in companionship is essential to the successful striving of sentient beings on the way to emancipation. Unfortunately, this relationship has been seriously marred by the mental poisons that affect human beings, namely, greed, hatred, and delusion. The consequences as can be seen are alarming amount of destruction to the environment in term of deforestation, species extinction, air pollution, and climate change. The Buddhist paradigm suggests that steps to rectify these consequences must start with human beings who has the ability of mental thought and bears the greater responsibility in the environmental crisis to reflect on our defects, to situate ourselves correctly in the universe, and perceive ourselves properly in *samsara* in order to make our journey a fruitful one for ourselves and for others. The Buddhist outlook reminds us that the ultimate value lies not in impermanent things, not in a falsely conceived ego-self, but in final emancipation from *samsara*. Though emancipation is the goal and effort of individuals, its realization requires interdependence. Thus, while one does not deny that in Buddhism, liberation is the result of one's own assiduous training and practice, effective methods will always involve one acting in relationship with others. This understanding of interrelatedness is re-enforced by the understanding of the law of conditionality in which things arise as a result of the causal forces applied to all forms of existence in *samsara*. The awareness of this interconnectedness alone, however, does not automatically lead one to act on behalf of nature. According to Alan Sponberg, "Environmentally sensitive practice in Buddhism is hardly a matter of simply affirming faith and belief in the ultimate interrelatedness of all things and then waiting hopefully for that truth to



manifest itself” (Sponberg, 1997, para. 33). The necessary dimension to be emphasized here is the developmental dimension in which human beings must train themselves in the virtues and qualities that help us deeply understand this interrelatedness and commit ourselves to acting in accordance with this realization. Otherwise, affirming interdependence or interrelatedness without acting with solidarity on behalf of nature becomes simply lip service, and does not lead to concrete benefits either for ourselves or for nature.

## ABBREVIATION

<b>A</b>	<i>Aṅguttara Nikaya</i>
<b>D</b>	<i>Digha Nikaya</i>
<b>Dp</b>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<b>M</b>	<i>Majjhima Nikaya</i>
<b>S</b>	<i>Saṃyutta Nikaya</i>
<b>Vis.M.</b>	<i>Visuddhimagā</i>

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