



Buddhism as Environmentalism

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Is there such a thing as a Buddhist environmentalism? Does Buddhism offer a distinct approach to ecological crisis, to the evidently imminent threat to the ability of the Earth's physical and biological systems to support life?

There are already many varieties of environmentalism. Some highlight a simple cause for ecological crisis, putting the blame on one group or another by virtue of their class, gender or nationality. Others regard technology as the root of the problem. Technologies have changed our relationships with the world and with each other, consuming more resources and producing more pollution. But we can't just blame technology. Technology is invented, operated and owned by people. However change comes about, it will do so because people learn to behave differently. Whatever our analysis of the causes of the crisis, we cannot ignore the question of how we motivate others – and ourselves – to change.

Change is the central purpose of the Buddha's teachings. So perhaps it would be more fruitful to think not of a Buddhist environmentalism, but of Buddhism as environmentalism. It will not be another ideological position, or a political platform. It will be what it has always been: a path, or journey of transformation that involves every part of us, body, heart and mind.

Leaving the Palace

Buddhism is a quest to end suffering. This includes all kinds of suffering. The Buddha encountered it in the form of the sickness, old age and death he saw outside the walls of the palace where he was brought up as a future king. It surfaced too in his feeling of being hemmed in inside his palace. And it was present throughout his period of teaching in the world he lived in, riven by war and caste. Suffering spurred the Buddha first to leave the palace, to break the bounds of status and material security. In time, the suffering of others was to shape his whole life, a life of simple wandering, and of heart to heart communication that moved the poorest and richest alike. And yet this was no life of miserable self-sacrifice, but a liberated life of beauty and bliss.

In our western lifestyles, many of us dwell in a kind of palace, relatively insulated from the kind of poverty and insecurity that affects much of the world. But, if only via our televisions,



we cannot help but be aware of the suffering outside the walls - half a billion people without clean water; animals under stress as their habitats disappear; the threats of pollution and climate change. Just like the Buddha, this faces us with a choice. We can retreat into our palace, or we can set out on a journey of change.

For the Buddha, to stay in the palace would have been a life of limitation, a life not fully lived. Our first response to suffering might be to ask ourselves whether we experience a similar sense of limitation with aspects of our own ways of living. And since we share much of our lifestyles with the society we live in, might there also be a collective sense of limitation? When limitation takes on this collective form, we are very often unaware of it. Because western societies are very often characterised by high-consumption lifestyles, they give rise to this kind of collective limitation. The flip side of materialism is boredom, anxiety and guilt.

Boredom comes from thinking that we can find real happiness from our possessions. But once the novelty wears off the new car, house or computer, we get bored and start looking for the next thing. Driven to consume more and more, we are bound to become anxious, since it takes time, money and energy to keep up the payments for things, and to protect and insure them. And not only do we have to protect things individually, but also as a society. Our consuming lifestyle is backed up by huge military forces and unequal trading relationships. From this comes guilt, since at heart we cannot ignore the connection between our wealth and the impoverishment of both people and Nature. Boredom, anxiety and guilt are so endemic in our society that we might not even notice them.

So what would a Buddhist environmentalism feel like? Perhaps we can compare it to what the Buddha-to-be might have felt when leaving the palace. We can imagine he would have needed some determination and courage to leave behind everything that was familiar to him, everything that gave him security. He must have been wholehearted in his quest and clear in his mind about the unsatisfactoriness of palace life, for himself and those he loved. But he must also have had a call to adventure, a sense of opening to the possibilities of life. Stealing through the night on his horse, he had let go of all the conventional expectations placed on him, all the narrow ways he was being defined. No doubt there will have been fear, but there must also have been a real sense of surrendering to life, a great upwelling of freedom and energy.

Even if we do not feel ready to literally leave behind all our possessions and head for the forest, we can still follow the Buddha's example. If we look around, we will see all sorts of responses to the ecological crisis. There is outright denial by some people that anything is wrong; others are locked in a kind of paralysed despair, or just hope that someone else will come up with a solution. Some make changes to their lifestyles, but perhaps out of a dry, and even self-righteous, sense of duty. Others might throw themselves into a kind of activism that spreads more anxiety, gloominess or anger and really just makes things worse.

A truly Buddhist response will be very different in spirit. It will be infused with a sense of liberation, the taste of freedom. At each step, it will connect us more deeply and richly with others, and with the natural world. It will mean having the courage to let go of old patterns, habits, ways of identifying ourselves, and sources of security. But that will not be in the spirit of miserable self-denial, but rather as a journey of adventure, opening out to the forces of life.

The Five Liberations

At the time he left the palace, the Buddha-to-be was looking for a way to end suffering. His journey led ultimately to the foot of the Bodhi tree and the experience we call Enlightenment, a complete waking up to the nature of suffering, its causes and the way out of suffering. His life turned from a quest for truth to the communication of a systematic path that others could follow.



The path is founded on the practice of meditation. When meditating, we encounter our own habits of mind - craving, hatred, a reluctance to look at things, a lack of energy or sense of purpose. These negative habits are the very things that bind us in to a harmful relationship with the environment. What estranges us from meditation estranges us from life. They are what prevent us from a healthy response to the world.

In meditation, we learn that we have a choice. In the place of habits that disconnect us from life, we can strengthen habits that connect – habits of kindness and clarity. These habits can then begin to transform our everyday life. It is from his five guidelines on how to live everyday life that we can draw a more detailed picture of a Buddhist response to the ecological crisis, of Buddhism as environmentalism.

1. The Liberation that comes from Not Harming Life

The Buddha taught that all life is interconnected. We can see that this is true if we look at the intricate ecological systems of the natural world. Living systems are so interlinked that our actions can have unintended and unseen consequences half a world away. This is significant enough on an ordinary level – it means that it simply will not work to treat the world as a machine for supplying our material wants, and as a giant dustbin for our material not-wants.

There is more to interconnectedness than this, however. It's not just that we are connected through our material transactions, it's that all life is intrinsically linked in its very being. This is difficult to understand, but we can begin to see it in our relationships with others. The implication is that if we are harming other life in any way, then we are harming our own happiness. Our own happiness is a mirror of how we treat others. This is because the life in ourselves is inseparable from the life in others.

In today's world of mass technology and international trade, we are often far removed from the consequences of our actions for other people or living things. But that does not mean that those actions will not affect us here and now. Ignorance of, or not looking at, the effects of what pollution we emit, or what goods we buy, alienates us from life. It deprives us of a healthy sense of living in harmony with others and with the world. But if we begin to become aware of those effects, and change our habits, then we can begin to enjoy a healthy, joyful sense of connection.

What we can do, over a period of time, is to train ourselves to push back the boundaries of our sensitivity to other living things. Non-harm is not a rule or an external observance, but a state of heart and mind. In each situation, we bring to bear whatever wisdom and compassion we have and try to avoid causing harm. And in each situation, we are becoming more aware of life, and less bound in our own self-centred concerns. This progressive liberation from causing harm will be at the heart of a Buddhist ecological awareness.

2. The Liberation that comes from Giving and Sharing

We need to move towards a world where we value the natural world, and each other, more highly. Perhaps the greatest obstacle in our way is the tyranny of the 'bottom line' - the rigid assumption that nations, companies and individual people will, and should, maximise their material profit. If this is the tyranny, then the liberation movement we need will consist of the opposite. Giving and sharing are subversive acts.

Individual acts of giving and sharing build communities - they are what community is made of. Communities might be local or global, and they might be based on the giving and sharing of such things as time, energy and knowledge as well as material things, but in any case they free us from our isolated sense of self. Sometimes it might feel more comfortable to stay behind our own front door, but it is an impoverished life that is not engaged with community at



some level. So a Buddhist environmentalism will never be a solo effort – it will be rooted in community. That might take the form of 'Sangha', community with other Buddhists, or it might mean other forms of community that are based on positive ethical values.

Acting as part of a community frees us from the commonly held frame of mind that reduces our predicament to, on the one hand, 'me' and my limited resources of time and energy, and on the other, the whole complex of apparently insuperable global problems. This results either in grandiose ambition or, more commonly, paralysed inaction or just not knowing where to start. In sharing our time, energy and qualities with others, we become more than the sum of our parts. It is only in doing so that we can begin to effect the scale of change that is needed, and at the same time free ourselves of the burden of carrying the world on our shoulders.

3. The Liberation that comes from Leading a Simple Life

We live in a time when food is scarce for the many because so much land is used to supply meat and biofuels to the few. And much of what we consume has hidden costs, such as the carbon emissions caused by transporting it. The most effective response is just to consume less, and consume more simply. In today's world, simple living frees up resources to meet other people's needs. However, it can also free ourselves.

The Buddha taught simplicity as a guideline for living because he knew how easily our lives and minds can be filled with clutter. We can miss the important things, such as other people or the beauty of Nature, because we're caught up with possessions. We can become more concerned about what car we drive than the purpose of the journey; or more concerned about which phone we use than we are about the quality of what we communicate through it.

The point of simplicity is not to make ourselves suffer in a hair-shirted way. It is to strip away what is inessential in our life so that what is essential can shine through. The prospect might not at first appeal – it might be a bit like giving up an addiction. But creating the space can also allow a richer experience of life to emerge, and a contentment that is less dependent on stimulation or possessions.

So the liberation that comes from leading a simple life is a liberation of time, energy and resources, a streamlining of our lives around their central purpose. It can lead to what the Buddhist teacher Sangharakshita calls aesthetic simplicity. 'The truly simple life,' he writes, 'glows with significance, for its simplicity is not the dead simplicity of a skeleton but the living simplicity of a flower or a great work of art.' (1)

4. The Liberation that comes from Speaking out the Truth

The Buddha's fourth guideline for living life is truthful communication. We often think of this as just not telling lies. But this is only half the story – the precept is telling us that to be happy, fully human and free, we need to learn how to speak out the truth. When we see something that needs to be communicated, we need to do so. Not only that, but we need to learn how to speak out skilfully in a way that can really be heard.

Our voices are part of the ecosystem. If we see some harm being done – to people, animals or the natural world in general – then to speak out is an expression of our connection with life. To put it in the language of systems, our voices are an important channel of feedback within the systems that are causing harm. If further harm is to be avoided, the global ecosystem needs advocates within human society. And by speaking out effectively, we are not only expressing, but also affirming and strengthening our connection with life. It might take many forms – conversations with friends, writing to those in power, supporting a campaign.

To develop the skill and habit of speaking out the truth, we will need to identify and overcome our own obstacles. Perhaps we are lazy or unconfident about doing so. Or perhaps we do



speak up, but we are so gloomy, angry or authoritarian that people switch off when they hear us! What we need to do is learn how to give voice to our heartfelt connection with living beings - both those we are speaking up for, and those we are speaking to. The Buddha himself exemplified this – speaking up on behalf of those of low caste by winning over the hearts and minds of many of those whose actions were contributing to their oppression.

5. The Liberation that comes from Awareness and Understanding

What is our greatest fear about the ecological crisis? Very many people shy away from thinking about this question or prefer not to talk about it with others. This reluctance to face pain is understandable and at times, perhaps, even necessary. But in the long run the 'not looking' can become a prison for us, turning into a dull sense of dread, inhibiting a full enjoyment of our lives.

Buddhism does not offer any easy answers to this. What it does do is encourage us to face our fears and look at reality. Perhaps some of the fear of ecological crisis is fear of personal hardship or fear of our own death or of those we love. And the scenarios that some people predict might cause us to ponder the prospect of death on a greater scale, and the fear that if we can't leave a healthy world behind us, that this renders our lives now futile and meaningless.

The Buddha's teaching of impermanence reminds us that change is part of reality. Even without imminent ecological crisis, nothing, not even the Earth, is fixed, substantial and permanent. The more we understand this, the more we understand that the meaning and significance of our lives does not lie in what material conditions we live in or leave behind. It lies in our connectedness with life.

But how can we be confident that this is so? As with everything in Buddhism, it is not a question of being intellectually convinced, but of trying and seeing for oneself. If we live a life of non-harm, sharing with others, simplified around a sense of purpose, and speaking out for life, then we experience connectedness more and more deeply. It shows itself as a natural loving kindness towards others, and a sense of beauty in the natural world. If we really look at these experiences, we will see that their very nature is to connect us with a significance that goes beyond our narrow sense of who we are, beyond words, beyond anything material or fixed.

This is how we free ourselves from the prison of fear of, or of not, wanting to look at a world in crisis. It is not a freedom that detaches us from the world, as if the world doesn't really matter. On the contrary, from this freedom arises a natural concern for others – a joyful, sustainable environmentalism.

Notes

(1) from 'The Simple Life', in Sangharakshita (1987) *Crossing the Stream*, Birmingham: Windhorse Publications

Recommended Reading

Akuppa (2002) *Touching the Earth: A Buddhist Guide to Saving the Planet*, Birmingham: Windhorse Publications

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