

Buddhism and Environmentalism

By Sulak Sivaraksa and Sonali Chakravarti

In the year 2001, the Buddhist Environmental movement has a unique responsibility. Buddhism has been linked to environmentalism for over 2500 years and there is a wealth of academic and spiritual literature on the topic and as Buddhists we have a responsibility to share knowledge in this time of global resistance against environmental degradation. The protests of 2000 have put the issues of globalization, capitalism, and the exploitations of labor and resources into the limelight. Many more people are willing to think about new paradigms for development and sustainability than ever before. As such, there is the potential to form meaningful alliances and coalitions along the path towards greater harmony with nature.

The concept of interdependent co-arising is at the crux of Buddhist understanding. Nothing is formed in isolation and like the jewel net of Indra, each individual reflects every other living being infinitely many times. An attachment to an atomized sense of self and the self-Other binary is the antithesis of interdependence and an obstacle to achieving the peace of enlightenment. A commitment to nature and a deep respect for all life can help foster a change from an individualized self to a self as interbeing. Thich Naht Hanh, the well-known Vietnamese monk, uses the term interbeing to describe a self made up entirely of non-self elements including conditions and relationships. To acknowledge these non-self elements is to realize how one's survival and ability to flourish is entirely contingent upon the quality of engagement with other sentient beings.

The Buddha's teachings can be divided into teachings about the nature of suffering and the path towards the end of suffering. While the development of wisdom and compassion are the path of the latter, the three sources of suffering are greed, hatred, and delusion. Delusion can take the form of attachment to self, ego, money, or power and can also be the belief that humans are the highest form of life and should view all other forms from a solely functional perspective. An attachment to scientific advancement and information technology as the keys to progress and happier lifestyles is yet another form of delusion. Frustration and futility are byproducts of delusion. Some people fear that once they understand the reality of the world and the universality of suffering they will be overwhelmed by the amount of work to be done and the level of commitment required. This paralysis is itself part of a delusional view of success, results, and pride. A societal change towards a more holistic view of nature will not occur in our lifetime. Just as the journey to achieving nirvana (*nibbana* in Pali) takes precedence over the end result, we must have faith in the journey towards a more interdependent worldview. Success comes in the form of small victories, individual transformation, and the strength of relationships.

The interpretations of the teachings of suffering and realization are often used in conjunction with other nature-specific references in Buddhist texts to create a more complete philosophy of Buddhist environmentalism. *Dharma Rain* is a collection of essays that includes sacred texts that emphasize a reverence for life, nature as teacher, and the nature of nature. The following excerpt is from the Metta Sutta, an important ritual prayer in the Theravada tradition:

Whatever living beings there may be,
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The Great or the Mighty, medium, short, or small
The seen and the unseen
Those living near and far away
Those born and to-be-born----
May all being be at ease! . . .

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child
So with a Boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings.

(Dharma Rain 29-30)

The equanimity of life does not lead solely to tolerance or non-harming, it leads to something much greater and more demanding---- it leads to the nurturing love of all living things as strong as the love of a mother for her child.

The rain metaphor for the teachings of the Buddha is another powerful metaphor for the equanimity of life in all its forms. All sentient beings in the delicate balance of nature benefit from the life-giving power of rain, each only taking what is needed and sharing the surplus.

The change of the seasons is a testament to temporality and the inevitability of change, death, and rebirth. This understanding about the nature of change and the model of response to change marks another major aspect in Buddhist environmentalism: understanding the dhamma of nature or, in other words, the nature of nature. Death in the cycle of nature is not to be feared, it should be embraced and understood for it gives meaning to life. The expression of the nature of nature in Buddhism combines the concepts of reverence for life and nature as teacher. The stillness and flexibility of trees, the patience of insects, and the firmness of the earth are all qualities to be explored and hopefully, internalized. The value of nonaction—the wisdom of silence and stillness---can best be learned from nature. As Thich Naht Hanh wrote, “We should bow deeply and reverently before the monarch butterfly and the magnolia tree. The feeling of respect for all creatures will help us recognize the noblest nature in ourselves”(Hanh 164).

Anthropocentrism is at odds with many concepts in Buddhism, including a reverence for all life and an understanding of interdependence, yet it is the central focus of traditional notions of development that aim to control and exploit the environment for the alleged benefit of humans. Anthropocentrism places humans at the highest level of intelligence and understanding and thereby sees other beings as less developed. This view overlooks the profound truths found in nature and emphasizes the functional value of nature as food, fuel, and shelter. A more holistic view acknowledges these roles of nature but only in the context of respect and responsibility.

Many in Southeast Asia have understood the philosophy and spirituality of Buddhism as a mandate to work on behalf of all sentient beings. NGO's have played a large role in this process while the role of the religious community has also been crucial. Certain orders, such as the Phra Sekhiyadhamma and Maha Ghosanande of Cambodia have long been committed to social activism regarding nature. I am currently part of the Ariyavinaya (noble discipline) project to transform the sangha.

Ariyavinaya refers to the code of conduct and the significance of discipline in the lives of monks and nuns. More broadly speaking it is the connection between spiritual training and practical action. The Ariyavinaya project consists of a series of workshops that focus on how the Buddhist community can better meet the demands of structural violence and consumerism in society. The workshops emphasize the need for greater social engagement in monastic communities, an attention to gender issues in Buddhism, and alternative education.

THE FORESTS

The Buddhist response to deforestation is a clear example of the tension between anthropocentrism and a holistic understanding of the web of life and the importance of the forest. Traditional Buddhist communities revolved around a forest monastery and this *wat* was the center of political, spiritual, and educational life. Living in harmony with the forest was the reality and there was not the forest/town division that existed in many European societies. However, once the process of industrialization began in Southeast Asia, forests became fuel-giving sources rather than life-giving sources. In Thailand, the Royal Forest Department (RFD) promoted the destruction of forests in order to cultivate eucalyptus for the pulp and paper industries. First the government ordered the destruction of thousands of hectares of forests and then, sensing the damage and the pressure from outside groups, the government ordered the protection of certain forests. Many of these newly protected areas were the homes of indigenous people and local people who had lived for generations in harmony with the forest but under the protective legislation could not maintain their livelihood. The media characterized these people as "backward" and reckless in their use of natural resources; the government was the savior and local people became the aggressors. Currently there is a Community Forestry Bill under discussion in the Thai legislature. This Bill would lay out six categories for

the classification of land and could help meet the needs of indigenous people but only if there is community participation in the process. In Burma, the concept of community forests is used as propaganda in order to hasten the monoculture of eucalyptus; governments cannot be the only source of decision-making, it is imperative that local knowledge about sustainability is given primacy.

In August 2000, representatives of the Thai RFD stood by as lychee trees were destroyed as part of an upland/lowland conflict in Pa Klang village over forest encroachment, water shortage, and chemical use. The Pa Klang village is largely populated by people from the Hmong ethnic group and the systematic discrimination against the residents of Pa Klang is representative of the treatment of many Hmong communities in Northern Thailand. Suradej Yangsaeng of Pa Klang village sees the potential for resolution if responsibility is taken for the destruction of property by the lowland people and the government issues a clarification of the status of Hmong land. He says, "As the issue of our ethnicity is widely attacked and we are being blamed all the time, I would like to ask what the state wants the Hmong people to do. It seems there is no way out of this situation. Now I am very concerned about the people in our village. The lychee trees and their farms are their only livelihood" (Watershed 47). Yangsaeng also notes that the upland and lowland people rarely meet and have wrongly depended on the government to act as a fair mediator for the conflict.

In Siam, government attempts at forest conservation have thus far been half-hearted attempts at making up for sins of the past. Moreover, the attempts at conserving forests have been at the expense of communities and the livelihood of working people. Environmentalism, as advocated by the government, is a farce and must be replaced by a new understanding of the mutually dependent relationship between all forms of nature.

A renewed interest in Buddhist tree ordination ceremonies is one way to raise awareness about local ecology and celebrate nature. These ordination ceremonies are similar to forest robes ceremonies where laypeople present monks with clothes, food, and offerings for the temple. At a tree ordination ceremony, the tree is sanctified by monastic robes and "the robes [stand] as a reminder that to harm or cut the tree---or any of the forest--- [is] an act of demerit" (Darlington 201). These trees are important markers of the sacredness of nature but education is necessary to connect this sacredness with the everyday patterns of consumption, waste disposal, and water pollution.

THE WATERS

In October 2000, the second public hearing for the million dollar Thai-Malaysian pipeline and gas separation plan was ended after less than an hour. The pipeline is a joint venture between the Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT) and Petronas, the national oil company of Malaysia, and will run through 44 fishing and farming villages in Southern Thailand. The hearing was ended after General Jaran Kulawanich, chair of the public hearing committee, called for a vote on

whether or not to proceed. Police barricades had kept nearly 5,000 village people from entering the building and the only people eligible for voting were proponents of the project who had paid 1000 baht to attend (Watershed 9). This type of mock participation orchestrated by the government is worse than no participation at all. It is demoralizing for organizers and is part of a strategy of deflection and evasion practiced by the government with the aid of corporate powers. Nonetheless, the rallies, seminars, and petitions must go on in order to raise the consciousness of more people about the issue.

FOR THE FUTURE

Raising the consciousness about natural resources should start before a threat of destruction. Preventive measures such as education and celebration are part of the Buddhist environmental movement in Siam.

The Moo Ban Dek school in Kanchanaburi was established to provide poor children with a nurturing environment for the development of heart, mind, and will. The concept of education extends beyond intellectual cultivation to the development of civic participation, environmental education, and spiritual understanding. Children at the school have a responsibility for self-government and self-discipline. Each day time is set aside for doing chores, caring for animals and for swimming in the river. "Nature" at Moo Ban Dek is not separate from "school" or "community" and environmental education is reinforced by science, civic education, and spirituality.

The annual Dhamma Walk is another way of spurring a change in the concept of nature and community. Initiated five years ago by Phra Sekhiyadhamma, a small network of socially engaged monks, along with NGO's in Southern Siam, the Dhamma Walk continues to be a unique event that brings together a diverse group of participants. The walk was organized to bring attention to the Songkhla lake, Siam's largest lake and organize a network around the lake in order to provide a greater local voice in policy making. The main issues concerning residents of the lake area were the depletion of fish, water pollution, reduced water levels, theft of water for urban and industrial uses, and loss of land (Santikaro Bhikku 208). The walk has been successful in starting a conversation about these issues but with issues such as the Pipeline looming in the near future, organizers of the Walk are eager to find new approaches for effective change. A similar walk takes place in northern Siam, maintaining the same commitment to forging relationships with local people and bearing witness to the effects of destruction and restoration at the walk sites.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Alternative communities are one way for communities to regain control of local resources. The act of setting up a local currency system or a cooperative requires the participation of a large number of residents thus building the social capital necessary to sustain any large scale project. Alternative communities also seek to transform economic relations by

making consumers aware of the production cycle and encouraging economic transactions that are embedded in the social life of the community. The Bia Kudchum is the local currency introduced last October in the Kudchum village of Northeastern Siam. The effects of the Asian Financial crisis linger on as a reminder of the fragility of a Thai economy dependent of international speculation. A local currency system encourages local production and distribution. Each villager can withdraw 500 Baht worth of the Bia Kudchum to be used for local transactions. The Bia Kudchum cannot be converted into conventional money and is not meant to replace the Baht. The relationship between local currency and environmentalism is not necessarily an obvious one. However, using natural resources for local production and distribution encourages the responsible use of resources with a constant attention to sustainability.

Another example of an alternative community in Siam is the Pak Moon Dam settlement community. After years of protests and clashes with the police, the residents of Pak Moon suffered defeat in the effort to stop the dam. They were promised compensation, both land and money, but have yet to collect it. The *Bangkok Post* reports:

Today, what is left of the once abundant and peaceful riverside villages is the grand edifice of the Pak Moon dam, which has been described by the World Commission on Dams as a financial and environmental disaster.

According to the commission's study, the 136-megawatt dam can produce only 21 megawatts of electricity. Out of 265 fish species recorded in the Moon river, only 96 remained after the dam was completed in 1994. The rapids were destroyed forever. The artificially created "fish ladder"-meant to allow fish to swim upstream of the dam to spawn-does not work. Income from reservoir fishing is exaggerated while the catch upstream of the dam has declined by 60-80% (Oct 23,2000).

Despite the failure of the dam, the community remained mobilized and has been experimenting with aspects of self-reliance and sustainability. The following initiatives have been implemented at the protest settlement and have improved the quality of life for many of the villagers:

- 1) A group was formed to open a traditional healthcare center that offers herbal sauna, traditional massage , and medicinal herbs to the members of the settlement;
- 2) Several community businesses have emerged. Producing for their own consumption, only the surplus is sold, thus meeting the needs of the members and reducing the amount of money flowing out from the community. Income generating enterprises include the production of natural shampoos and dish-washing liquids, herbal

teas and medicines, natural vegetables, microbe fertilizers, soy milk, and vegetarian food;

- 3) A youth environmental group was established; and
- 4) A preschool center that is run by volunteer teachers was built.

However, the efforts of the villagers have been thwarted again. In November 2000 a fire of unknown cause destroyed part of the settlement community.

Small businesses committed to ethical environmental practices are at the base of the deep ecology movement. The need to find practical alternatives to the current system is one of our biggest challenges. Although eco-consumption and eco-tourism can become warped representations of environmental ideals, they may be used as skillfull means to help us achieve a critical mass of environmentally conscious people.

The movement to renew the relationship between humanity and all other forms of nature has had many successes and equally many defeats. Human-centered discourse is slowly changing and there are many causes for hope: every time a tree is planted, every time a child swims in a river, every time we look upon each other with eyes of compassionate understanding, our commitment to interdependence is restored.

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