



BUDDHIST ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: FOUNDATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Buddhist thought, with its emphasis on interdependence, compassion, and non-harming (ahiṃsā), offers a profound framework for addressing contemporary environmental crises. This paper explores how Buddhist principles such as dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda), impermanence (anicca), non-self (anātman), and compassion (karuṇā) inform an environmental ethic grounded in responsibility, restraint, and reverence for life. Drawing on classical texts, modern interpretations by Buddhist leaders, and recent scholarship, the paper argues that Buddhist environmental ethics is not only compatible with ecological sustainability but also provides a spiritual and philosophical depth often missing in secular ecological discourse. By situating Buddhist ecological thought within both classical Indian traditions and global environmental philosophy, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on how ancient wisdom can guide contemporary ecological responsibility.

Keywords- interdependence, impermanence, environmental, ancient

Introduction

The environmental crisis of the 21st century—manifested through accelerating climate change, widespread biodiversity loss, air and water pollution, and unsustainable patterns of consumption—represents one of the most pressing challenges faced by humanity today. Scientific and technological interventions, including renewable energy deployment, climate engineering, pollution control mechanisms, and conservation biology, are undoubtedly essential for mitigating environmental degradation. Yet, many scholars argue that such solutions remain insufficient in isolation, as they do not address the deeper, underlying human attitudes and value systems that drive ecological exploitation [1]. Without a fundamental transformation in human ethical frameworks, including our relationship to the natural world, technological and policy measures risk offering only temporary or partial relief. Environmental philosophy, therefore, increasingly emphasizes the

necessity of integrating cultural, ethical, and spiritual dimensions into ecological discourse [2]. Such perspectives recognize that humans are not merely external observers of nature but participants within complex interdependent systems, whose ethical choices directly influence environmental outcomes. Religious and philosophical traditions play a critical role in shaping these ethical orientations. Buddhism, in particular, has gained attention for its potential contributions to ecological thought. Its doctrines of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anātman*), and compassion (*karuṇā*) provide a conceptual and ethical framework for understanding human-environmental relationships [3]. Dependent origination emphasizes that all phenomena—including human beings and ecological systems—arise in relation to causes and conditions, highlighting the interconnectedness of life and challenging the notion of human superiority over nature. Impermanence encourages recognition of the transient nature of all forms, prompting sustainable engagement with resources and discouraging exploitative overconsumption. The doctrine of non-self undermines anthropocentric biases by situating humans within a broader relational network, while compassion motivates ethical responsibility toward all sentient beings, including non-human life. Unlike certain Western intellectual traditions that have historically justified dominion over nature, Buddhism articulates a vision of co-existence, restraint, and mindful living [4]. Its philosophical and ethical insights offer not only guidance for personal conduct but also a foundation for collective ecological action. This paper seeks to explore how Buddhist teachings can inform environmental ethics, examining both classical doctrinal sources and contemporary applications. By analyzing these principles in dialogue with modern environmental challenges, the study highlights the potential of Buddhist ecological thought to provide philosophical depth, ethical rigor, and practical guidance for addressing the environmental crises of our era. The discussion situates Buddhist perspectives within Indian intellectual traditions while acknowledging their relevance and application in global ecological discourse.

Doctrinal Foundations of Buddhist Environmental Ethics

At the heart of Buddhist philosophy lies the doctrine of dependent origination: “When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises” (*Samyutta Nikāya* II.28). Nothing exists in isolation; all phenomena are conditioned and mutually dependent [5]. Just as a tree relies on sunlight, soil, and rain, human life depends on the functioning of ecosystems. Applied ecologically, dependent origination undermines the illusion that humans are separate from or superior to nature. Ecological destruction—deforestation, pollution, or climate disruption—inevitably rebounds upon humanity, eroding the very conditions for flourishing [6]. This principle thus provides a metaphysical basis for ecological holism, comparable to Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic,” but grounded in a spiritual ontology [7]. Unlike secular ecological systems theory, Buddhism frames interdependence as an ethical imperative: awareness of interconnectedness demands compassion and responsibility for the wider web of life [8]. The doctrines of impermanence (*anicca*) and non-self (*anātman*) further challenge exploitative approaches to the environment. *Anicca* emphasizes that all conditioned things are transient, including forests, rivers, and even climatic patterns [9]. Ecological crises today vividly demonstrate impermanence: soil fertility depletes, glaciers melt, species vanish. Greed operates on the illusion of permanence and inexhaustibility, but insight

into impermanence encourages restraint, moderation, and long-term sustainability [10]. The doctrine of anātman denies an independent, enduring self. Human identity is relational, constituted through body, consciousness, and environment [11]. This view undermines anthropocentrism by situating humans within, not above, the natural order. Environmental ethics inspired by anātman shifts focus from “human rights over nature” to mutual interdependence, recognizing that harming nature is ultimately harming oneself [12]. Buddhist ethics is also rooted in non-harming. The first precept—abstaining from taking life—extends beyond interpersonal conduct to include animals and ecosystems [13]. Compassion (karuṇā) motivates alleviation of suffering, whether human or non-human. Deforestation, habitat destruction, and pollution inflict suffering on sentient beings as well as future generations. From this perspective, environmental activism is not optional but a moral imperative consistent with the Bodhisattva ideal [14].

Ecological Sensibilities in Buddhist Texts

Although canonical Buddhist texts did not anticipate the industrial-scale environmental crises of the modern era, they nonetheless contain profound ecological insights that inform a sustainable and ethical relationship with nature. The Dhammapada, one of the most widely studied Buddhist scriptures, emphasizes contentment as a central ethical principle: “Contentment is the greatest wealth” [15]. This teaching encourages moderation, simplicity, and mindful consumption, offering a philosophical basis for sustainable living. By cultivating contentment and reducing attachment to material possessions, individuals are less likely to exploit natural resources excessively, fostering ecological balance. The Jātaka tales, narratives recounting the previous lives of the Bodhisattva, further illustrate ecological sensibilities through stories of compassion toward animals, plants, and natural landscapes [16]. In one such tale, the Bodhisattva sacrifices his own body to feed a starving tigress and her cubs, exemplifying radical compassion and the ethical significance of preserving life. These stories are not merely moralistic; they encode an understanding of interdependence between humans and other sentient beings, highlighting the moral imperative to protect vulnerable forms of life and their habitats. The Vinaya, the monastic code of conduct, includes explicit injunctions against the unnecessary destruction of plant life, demonstrating that ecological mindfulness was an integral aspect of Buddhist discipline [17]. Monks and nuns are taught to live in ways that minimize harm to their surroundings, reinforcing the principle that ethical conduct extends beyond interpersonal relations to the broader ecological community. Taken together, these sources reveal that ecological awareness is deeply embedded in Buddhist ethical and spiritual imagination [18]. Nature is not treated merely as a utilitarian resource; it is imbued with intrinsic value, deserving of respect and protection. By emphasizing interconnectedness, restraint, and reverence for life, these teachings provide foundational principles for an environmental ethic. Long before modern ecological science emerged, Buddhism offered a philosophical and moral framework that encourages humans to live harmoniously within the natural world, anticipating contemporary concerns about sustainability, conservation, and environmental stewardship.

Modern Buddhist Environmentalism

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Buddhist thinkers began actively applying classical teachings to the pressing ecological crises of modern society, bridging ancient wisdom with contemporary environmental concerns. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master and peace activist, introduced the concept of “interbeing” to articulate the profound interconnectedness of all life. According to this perspective, humans, animals, plants, and the elements are inseparably linked, forming a web of existence in which every action has ecological consequences. Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes this relational ethic through the statement: “The Earth is us. Taking care of the Earth is taking care of ourselves” [19]. This teaching underscores that environmental protection is not merely a utilitarian or scientific concern but an ethical and spiritual responsibility, deeply rooted in awareness of interdependence. The Dalai Lama has similarly highlighted the moral imperative of environmental stewardship, framing ecological responsibility as an expression of compassion (*karuṇā*). He repeatedly cautions that human survival and well-being are contingent upon the health of natural ecosystems, asserting that “Our future depends on the natural environment. Destroying nature is destroying ourselves” [20]. By integrating ethical reflection with practical urgency, the Dalai Lama situates environmental action within the broader framework of Buddhist morality and human responsibility. Contemporary Buddhist scholars, such as David Loy, have extended these insights into systematic frameworks that link personal practice with broader social and environmental transformation. In works such as *Ecodharma* and subsequent studies on climate justice, Loy identifies consumerism, alienation, and materialistic values as root causes of ecological degradation [21]. He argues that Buddhist principles—mindfulness, compassion, and awareness of interdependence—can guide both individual behavioral change and collective societal action, fostering sustainable lifestyles and ethical policies. Beyond philosophical discourse, Buddhist communities across Asia have adopted practical and culturally resonant ecological initiatives. In Thailand, monks “ordain” trees by wrapping them in saffron robes, a ritual that sacralizes forests and discourages logging [22]. In Ladakh, monastic and community leaders promote sustainable agriculture, water conservation, and soil preservation, demonstrating the integration of ecological knowledge with spiritual practice [23]. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, forest monasteries and sacred groves function as biodiversity preserves, highlighting how religious practice can directly support ecological conservation [24]. These initiatives illustrate how Buddhist thought inspires grassroots ecological activism, translating metaphysical and ethical principles into tangible environmental action. By connecting awareness of interdependence with concrete practices—from tree ordination to sustainable agriculture—Buddhism offers a model for ethical environmental engagement that is both culturally grounded and globally relevant. Such examples demonstrate that spiritual and philosophical reflection can provide practical guidance for addressing ecological crises, reinforcing the idea that environmental responsibility is inseparable from ethical and contemplative awareness.

Contributions of Buddhist Environmental Ethics

Buddhist environmental ethics contributes to ecological thought and practice in several profound ways, providing both philosophical foundations and practical guidance. First, its relational ontology challenges the dominant paradigm of individualism and aligns closely with contemporary ecological systems thinking [25]. In Buddhism, all beings are understood as interdependent, arising in relation to causes and conditions rather than existing as isolated entities. This perspective mirrors ecological science, which recognizes the intricate interconnections within ecosystems, from microorganisms in the soil to apex predators in forests. By emphasizing relational existence, Buddhist ethics encourages humans to see themselves as participants in a broader web of life, fostering a sense of responsibility for the health and balance of ecological systems rather than asserting dominion over them. Second, Buddhist environmental ethics articulates a robust ethic of restraint. Central to Buddhist philosophy is the understanding that craving (*taṇhā*) is the root of suffering. This insight provides a critique of consumerism and excessive material desire, which are major drivers of environmental degradation [26]. By cultivating voluntary simplicity, mindfulness, and moderation, individuals can reduce their ecological footprint and contribute to sustainability. Practices such as mindful consumption, limitation of waste, and conscientious use of resources emerge directly from this ethical framework, demonstrating how spiritual insight can translate into practical ecological action. Third, Buddhism promotes compassionate engagement (*karuṇā*), extending moral concern beyond humans to encompass all sentient beings. This principle motivates ethical behavior not merely as contemplation but as active participation in alleviating suffering—whether through environmental activism, habitat conservation, or mindful consumption [27]. By integrating compassion with awareness of interdependence and restraint, Buddhist ethics bridges the spiritual and the ecological, offering a holistic framework for environmental responsibility. It transforms ecological concern from a technical or utilitarian task into a moral and spiritual practice, emphasizing that protecting the environment is inseparable from cultivating wisdom, compassion, and ethical integrity. Through these three interrelated dimensions—relational ontology, ethical restraint, and compassionate engagement—Buddhist environmental ethics provides a deeply rooted philosophical and practical approach to ecological sustainability, highlighting the inseparability of human flourishing and environmental well-being.

Recent Developments (2020–2025)

In recent years, scholarship has increasingly emphasized the relevance of Buddhism for contemporary ecological thought and environmental ethics. Peter Harvey, a prominent scholar of Buddhist studies, has revisited the doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as a foundational concept for ecological ethics, arguing that recognition of interdependence provides both a metaphysical and ethical framework for environmental responsibility [28]. Ian Harris has similarly framed Buddhism as a “green religion,” highlighting its capacity to address the ethical challenges of the Anthropocene. Harris contends that Buddhist principles, when applied to modern ecological crises, can foster a moral and spiritual orientation that complements scientific and policy approaches to sustainability [29]. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Williams have documented a wide array of Buddhist responses to climate change, ranging from grassroots community initiatives to international networks promoting environmental education, conservation, and advocacy [30]. These efforts demonstrate that Buddhist engagement with ecological issues is not merely

theoretical but is being enacted in practical and culturally grounded ways across the globe. Local traditions further illustrate the integration of ecological stewardship within religious practice. In regions such as Bhutan and Sikkim, sacred landscapes, including forests, rivers, and mountains, are preserved through Buddhist rituals and teachings, blending biodiversity protection with cultural and spiritual identity [31]. These practices exemplify the potential for Buddhism to inform environmental conservation at the community level. At the same time, critical scholarship cautions against uncritical idealization. While Buddhist teachings provide ethical guidance, real-world Buddhist societies are not immune to environmental challenges such as deforestation, pollution, and resource overuse [32]. These critiques underscore the need for a reflective and context-sensitive application of Buddhist environmental ethics, emphasizing adaptation and critical engagement rather than romanticized assumptions.

Challenges and Critiques

Despite its significant contributions to environmental thought, Buddhist environmental ethics faces several notable challenges. One primary concern is that classical Buddhist texts were composed in historical contexts vastly different from the industrial and post-industrial ecological crises of the modern world. Consequently, reading these texts as direct prescriptions for contemporary environmental problems risks anachronism, as they do not explicitly address issues such as climate change, global pollution, or mass deforestation [33]. Scholars caution that while the ethical and philosophical principles are relevant, their application requires careful interpretation to align with present-day ecological realities. Another challenge lies in institutional priorities within Buddhist communities. Many monastic and religious institutions emphasize ritual observance, doctrinal study, and spiritual practice over active engagement with ecological issues [34]. This focus can limit the organizational and cultural momentum needed to implement large-scale environmental initiatives, constraining the practical impact of Buddhist ethics on ecological conservation. Finally, romanticized portrayals of Buddhism as inherently “eco-friendly” can obscure real-world contradictions. Even in Buddhist-majority societies, economic development, urbanization, and resource exploitation have contributed to deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss [35]. These realities highlight the need for a critical, context-sensitive approach: Buddhist environmental ethics should not be idealized as an unqualified solution but engaged thoughtfully, integrating its principles with contemporary ecological knowledge and strategies.

Conclusion

Buddhist environmental ethics offers a distinctive framework for responding to today’s ecological crises by integrating spiritual insight with ecological responsibility. Grounded in the doctrines of dependent origination, impermanence, non-self, and compassion, it emphasizes interdependence, restraint, and non-harming as guiding principles for sustainable living. Classical texts such as the Dhammapada, Jātaka tales, and Vinaya reveal ecological sensibilities, while modern leaders like Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama highlight the moral urgency of environmental stewardship. Contemporary Buddhist communities further demonstrate the practical application of these principles through rituals and conservation practices that unite cultural traditions with ecological action. While challenges remain—including risks of anachronism and

limitations in institutional priorities—Buddhist thought continues to provide ethical depth often missing in secular discourse. By complementing scientific and policy measures with a moral vision rooted in compassion and interdependence, Buddhist environmental ethics contributes meaningfully to global sustainability and to cultivating a respectful, mindful relationship with the natural world.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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