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Protecting Our Environment

Buddhism in Every Step 21

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Protecting Our Environment

Some say the 21st century is the century of environmental protection. It is easy to see why. Environmental pollution and ecological destruction have reached a point where they are serious threats to the health of humankind. The 1992 summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was regarded as a “Save the Earth” conference with the goal of achieving international cooperation in protecting our plants, animals, and natural resources. When we do our part to protect the environment, we give future generations a fair chance to live peacefully and work happily on a healthy and thriving planet.

Buddhism is a religion that embodies the spirit of environmental protection. The sutras not only advocate loving our neighbors, they teach us to love our environment too. The sutras say, “All living beings have Buddha Nature.” “All beings, sentient or not, have the same perfect wisdom.” There is a story about a bodhisattva who loved the environment so much that he feared polluting the great earth every time he discarded a piece of paper, feared shocking the planet every time he uttered a phrase, and feared injuring the ground every time he took a step. His keen awareness of the environment provides a good role model for us.

Unfortunately, people in Taiwan do not seem to care about the environment. They cut down trees without hesitation, throw trash anywhere they please, vent exhaust fumes without thought, and discard wastewater at their convenience. These callous acts have caused air pollution, water pollution, and general ecological degradation. Such actions reflect shortsightedness and disregard for public welfare. On the contrary, countries like Australia and New Zealand are much better at protecting the environ-

ment. Some rivers there are so sparkling clean that one can see all the way to the bottom.

From the sutras, we learn that Amitabha's Western Pure Land is a land of great beauty. We can learn a lot about environmental protection from Amitabha Buddha. In the Western Pure Land, the ground is covered with gold, and pagodas rise high into the sky. The land is pure and the atmosphere is serene. There is no pollution of any kind; toxins, violence, and nuclear threats are absent. The Western Pure Land is a place that many of us aspire to enter.

We can create a pure land right here on Earth. Most of the progress we have made in environmental protection is focused externally, but the important work actually lies within one's heart and spirit. Only when we have a healthy spiritual environment within can we be effective in protecting the physical environment.

I. The Buddha, a Forerunner of Environmental Protection

The Buddhist view of environmental protection is grounded in the law of conditionality. When the Buddha attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree,

he realized that all things arise because of interdependency. Nargajuna, the founder of the Madhamika¹ School of Buddhism says in *Pranyamula-sastra-tika*, “There was never a dharma² that did not arise from conditionality.” This means that nothing in the universe can exist independently, and all phenomena arise because of the culmination of various causes and conditions. The *Suka Sutra* says, “If sentient beings continually engage in the ten unwholesome actions, the impact will be felt in the environment, which will suffer. What are the ten unwholesome actions? First, the taking of lives causes the soil to be saturated with salt, and plants cannot grow. Second, stealing brings about harsh, cold weather and the proliferation of insects, causing crop failure and famine. Third, sexual misconduct causes storms and natural disasters. Fourth, lying contaminates the physical environment, causing it to be filthy and smelly...”

From this, we can see that when one engages in unwholesome actions—killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, duplicitous speech, harsh words,

¹ Madhamika means “the middle.”

² Phenomenon

foul language, greed, hatred, perverted views—one does not just harm oneself, but also harms the elements of the physical world. By the same token, when one performs wholesome actions, one can help reverse the damage to the environment. Our actions impact ourselves, others, and even the earth. Our existence is intimately intertwined. This is what we mean when we say, “We all are one, and we exist in dependence.”

In the *Agama Sutras*, the Buddha said that the planting of trees created shade for others, and merit for oneself. In Section Five of the *Vinaya-matrka-sastra*, it reads, “A bhiksu who plants three kinds of trees in honor of the Triple Gem—a fruit tree, a flowering tree, and a leafy tree—cultivates blessings and is not committing wrong³.” Planting trees not only beautifies the environment, it is also a form of practice. Throughout history, Buddhist temples and monasteries have followed the Buddha’s teachings by planting trees, growing flowers, and caring for the great earth.

³ Normally, bhiksus refrain from tilling the soil because insects in the earth may be harmed in the process.

To protect the environment, the Buddha ceaselessly reminded his disciples to protect trees and animals. The *Vinaya-matrka-sastra* states, “There are five types of trees one should not cut—bodhi trees, medicine trees, large roadside trees, trees in cold groves⁴, and nyagrodha trees⁵.” In the Buddha’s former life as a deer king, he laid down his own life to save that of a doe. A human king witnessed his compassion and was so moved that he designated the area as a wildlife sanctuary where hunting was forbidden. This story illustrates the Buddha’s love for the environment.

II. The Buddhist Tradition of Protecting the Environment

Most people regard the Buddhist religion as conservative and passive. Many think that Buddhism only teaches people to recite mantras and be vegetarians. They do not associate the religion with progressive ideas such as environmental protection. In truth, Buddhism has a long history of environmental

⁴ A cold grove is a place for exposing corpses, i.e. a cemetery.

⁵ *Ficus indica*

protection, well before the concept became popular as a modern social cause.

Throughout its history, Buddhism has had a profoundly positive impact on the environment. Monastics have planted trees, dredged rivers, repaired roads and bridges, and thoughtfully used and cared for natural resources. During discourses, monastics encouraged devotees to free captured animals, promoted vegetarianism, and reminded all to value the gifts of nature. From these actions, we see that monastics were environmental activists before the term “environmental protection” was coined. This tradition of nurturing the natural world continues to this day.

Protecting the environment does not always mean leaving it untouched, reserving it for viewing from a distance. We live on this planet and have to utilize the natural resources it offers. This, however, must be accomplished with utmost respect for nature. Venerable Mingyuan of ancient China planted thousands of trees along the Sizhou River to prevent flooding. Venerable Daoyu of Louyang saw that many ships had capsized along the Longmen Gorge on the Yellow River. To prevent further tragedy, he

and his friend Bai Juyi⁶ rallied the local residents to widen the river and so slowed its flow. These two examples are well documented, but there were many similar environmental works that escaped recognition. In their travels, many monastics had forged paths through the jungle and laid steps over jagged mountains to ease the passage for future travelers. Without any fanfare, they worked to balance the needs of the environment with those of humankind, practicing the bodhisattva spirit of providing convenience for all.

On March 4, 1992, during the annual Buddha's Light International Association General Conference, a workshop to promote "environmental and spiritual" protection was held. We encouraged everyone to start with beautifying the mind and spirit and then extend outwards to beautifying the environment. The following twelve guidelines were offered:

- a. Speak quietly—do not disturb others.
- b. Keep the ground clean—do not litter.
- c. Keep the air clean—do not smoke or pollute.
- d. Respect oneself and others—do not commit violent acts.
- e. Be polite—do not intrude on others.

⁶ A famous scholar and poet.

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- f. Smile—do not face others with an angry expression.
 - g. Speak kindly—do not utter abusive words.
 - h. Follow the rules—do not seek exemptions or privileges.
 - i. Mind your actions—do not violate rules of ethics.
 - j. Consume consciously—do not waste.
 - k. Be grounded—do not live aimlessly.
 - l. Practice kindness—do not create malice.

Furthermore, the International Buddha's Light Association, together with various governmental agencies in Taiwan, worked to preserve the water source of Kaohsiung by campaigning for planting new trees and preserving existing ones. By planting new trees—two million to be exact—we were able to directly protect Kaohsiung's water source. By recycling paper, we reduced the need to cut down trees, which also protected the water source.

When we Buddhists think of a pure, clean environment, we naturally think of Amitabha's Western Pure Land. On his path as a bodhisattva, Amitabha made forty-eight great vows. Through the strength of these vows, he manifested the Western Pure Land, a

land of unparalleled beauty. The ground is covered with gold, pagodas are built with seven kinds of gems, and all facilities are in excellent condition. In the Western Pure Land there is only public good, no public harm. There is only beauty, no toxin, noise or pollution. The weather is cool and pleasant, and the water has eight wonderful qualities: clear, cool, sweet, soft, soothing, peaceful, cleansing, and nourishing. Everyone in the Western Pure Land is kind, physically and mentally healthy, long-lived and free of the three poisons⁷. None of them would ever consider chopping down trees, and the landscape reflects such thoughtfulness. This is why we say Amitabha Buddha is our good teacher on how to maintain a sound mind and a healthy environment.

III. What We Can Do To Protect the Environment

When we talk about protecting the environment, we should first realize there are two facets to the problem—preserving inner sanctity and maintaining outer ecological balance. We alone are responsible

⁷ Greed, hatred, and delusion.

for our inner peace. To do this, we have to see into the emptiness of the three poisons—greed, hatred, and delusion. External environmental protection, such as natural habitat preservation, air purification, water source clean up, noise pollution control, trash management, and radiation protection, must rely upon the joint efforts of everyone.

We will first discuss maintaining outer ecological balance. There are two ways to protect the environment: treasure life and conserve resources. One of the Five Precepts is to refrain from killing, or in other words, to treasure life. In the *Brahmajala Sutra*, it states, “When a follower of the Buddha exercises compassion and sets a life free, he should recite, ‘All males are my fathers. All females are my mothers. Rebirth after rebirth, they give me life. All beings in the six realms of existence are my parents. Killing animals for meat is the same as killing my parents, indirectly killing the source of my body.’ If you witness someone killing an animal, you should save the animal, relieve its suffering, and spread the work of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas to save all beings.” The precept to refrain from killing is the expression of respect for all sentient life. At its most

basic level, the practice is to not kill. To take this a step further, we should save life and help those in need. When we see an animal hurt, we should care for it so that they may feel safe again. We need to have a proactive, compassionate, and protective attitude towards animals. Nowadays, people have exotic tastes and would not hesitate to eat anything that moves, regardless of whether it is of the sky, earth, or water. This type of indiscriminate slaughter and consumption not only defiles the inner spirit, it also disturbs the outer balance in our natural environment and increases the violent energy in the world. Therefore, to raise the quality of life we should promote protection of all living beings.

Buddhist masters of the past were in tune with our connection to all forms of life in the six realms of existence, especially animals. They were at ease in the company of lions and tigers. In the presence of wild animals, Venerable Huiyue of the Sui Dynasty would speak to them about the Dharma. Tigers would become tame and lie down like kittens at his feet. Venerable Cizang lived alone in the mountains and always made it a point to save animals that were hurt. When he ran out of food, birds would bring him

fruit. In *Samyuktapitaka*, there is a story of a novice monk who was near the end of his life span. One day, he saw a group of ants drowning in water and reached out to save them. Through his act of compassion, he gained a long life. All these stories serve as reminders for us to act with compassion. Protecting life is a basic moral principle of being human and is the best tool for transforming anger, violence, and sadness into tranquility.

In addition to nurturing and protecting animal life, we should also treasure plant life. Even a blade of grass is vital because it purifies the air we breathe. We must not neglect any life because each contributes to the delicate balance of which we are all a part. When we save a tree, we are making the world a little bit greener, and we may breathe easier. Protecting life also means that we should be protective of insentient objects, such as mountains and rivers and even everyday household items. A table, chair, or towel should be treated conscientiously because if we do not take proper care of them and they last only five years instead of the intended ten, we are indirectly wasting and harming “life.”

In addition to treasuring life, we can protect the environment by conserving resources. In our daily life, it is so easy to be wasteful. Consider paper as an example. A tree that takes ten years to grow can be chopped down in a matter of hours. For every ton of paper recycled, we save twenty trees. We can also save trees by using both sides of a sheet of paper. Trees are very important to our environment. They provide us with shade and play a key role in the water cycle.

Conservation yields benefits not only to the environment, but also to us directly. How much we have in life depends on our past actions, or karma. Karma can be compared to a bank account. You have to first make deposits and accumulate some savings before you can make a withdrawal. Conservation is tangible savings in our karma accounts. In this regard, I can speak from personal experience. Many devotees have complimented me on my intelligence. I believe my intelligence is a result of my past conservation. When I was still a young novice monk, I was very frugal with my writing paper. On one piece of paper, I would not only write on both sides but also between the lines. Sometimes I would even use a

different colored pen to write over existing text so I wouldn't waste the paper. It was only when I could no longer decipher my own writing that I grudgingly threw away a piece of paper. I believe the good karma that I accrued by making the most of each piece of paper brought me the gift of intelligence. Therefore, everyone can begin saving in his or her "karma account" by taking care of the gifts that nature has given us.

To save our earth, we must reduce the consumption of natural resources. There are many things we can do with minimal effort. Instead of using disposable paper plates and plastic utensils, we can use reusable ones. Plastic is not environmentally friendly. It is not biodegradable, sitting for centuries in landfills and producing carcinogenic gases if incinerated. We should all contribute to our planet's health by using fewer disposable items.

Another way to conserve resources is to recycle. We can recycle paper, aluminum cans, plastic bottles, and glass jars. As more people recycle, awareness will be heightened, generating momentum for the cause. By practicing recycling, we practice the teachings of the Buddha, strengthen the connections

among people, and help spread environmental awareness.

The following are some specific actions that can be taken:

- a. Consume moderately and do not overbuy unnecessarily. Excess food often rots and has to be thrown away.
- b. Maintain your car and follow emission guidelines.
- c. Minimize the use of disposable plates and utensils.
- d. Use glasses or mugs instead of paper cups.
- e. Take shorter showers.
- f. Do not litter and reduce the amount of trash
- g. Use energy-saving light bulbs or fixtures.
- h. Set the air conditioner to a higher temperature.
- i. Recycle old newspapers and motor oil.
- j. Bring your own shopping bags when shopping.
- k. Inspect your tires regularly. Flat tires wear more quickly and lower fuel efficiency.
- l. Choose durable and fuel efficient tires.

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- m. Use your car's air conditioner as little as possible. Automobile air conditioning systems are one of the main emitters of chlorofluorocarbons into the earth's ozone layer.
 - n. Buy and use more recycled materials.

In addition to protecting the physical environment, we have to take good care of our internal spiritual environment. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, "If one wants to be in a pure land, one should purify the mind. When the mind is pure, the land is pure." What this means is that the environment we live in is a reflection of our state of mind. To be successful in the movement to improve the environment, we must not neglect our inner spirit. From time without beginning, our pure nature has been defiled by greed, hatred, jealousy, and malice. We must work to turn greed into generosity, hatred into compassion, jealousy into tolerance, and malice into respect. When we change the way we think and the way we see the world, what we see, hear, and touch will take on a different quality.

We should care for our body and mind like we care for the physical environment. After all, our body

can be compared to the great earth. The circulatory system is like a river, flowing ceaselessly to transport nutrients to various parts of the body. The lungs are like forests in reverse. They take in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. Bones are like mountains, giving protection to our many delicate organs. Cells are like little forest animals, moving about with vitality. Our body is like a village with the six inhabitants of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and mind. The mind is like a village chief, directing and influencing the other inhabitants. If we want good physical health, we should start with our mental health. When we have inner stability, then our body will know peace.

How do we maintain purity in our internal environment? We simply have to be mindful of the Buddha. If you have the Buddha in your heart, everything you see in the world is the sight of the Buddha, everything you hear is the sound of the Buddha, everything you say is the word of the Buddha, and everything you do holds the compassion of the Buddha. Although we live in a world full of negativity, if we know how to preserve our inner sanctity, we can be more like the Buddha. Like a pristine lotus

that rises out of the mud of a pond, we can rise above
the distractions of the world.

Value every word

—they are the roots of dignity.

Treasure every grain of rice

—this is the way of wealth.

Speak with care

—it is the basis of happiness.

Protect even the smallest form of life

—this is the cause of longevity.