



# **Protecting Our Environment**

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**Buddhism in Every Step 21**

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# Table of Contents

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<b>I.</b>	<b>How the Buddha Exemplified Environmental Protection</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>How the Buddhist Tradition Supports Environmental Protection</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>III.</b>	<b>How We Can Protect the Environment</b>	<b>11</b>

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# Protecting Our Environment

The 21st century is said to be the century of environmental protection. It is easy to see why. Environmental pollution and ecological destruction have reached the point to where they are serious threats to the health of mankind. Global awareness of this issue has been growing for some time, though. Since the United Nation's "Earth Summit" in 1992, international support for conservation and environmental protection has grown. Addressing the challenge of doing our part to protect the environment in order to give future generations a fair chance to live and work in peace and happiness on a healthy and thriving planet has become the prime ethical and scientific concern for those living in this century.

Buddhism has quite a bit to say on this topic, for it is a religion that has always embodied the ethics of environmental awareness and protection. The Buddhist sutras, the sacred teachings compiled as far

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back as 2,500 years ago, implore us not only to love our neighbors, they teach us also to love our environment. The sutras teach us that all living beings have Buddha nature,<sup>1</sup> and that every being, whether sentient or not, has the same inherent perfect wisdom. There is a story from the sutras about one bodhisattva<sup>2</sup> who loved the environment so much that he worried about polluting the planet every time he discarded a piece of paper; he worried about startling the planet every time he uttered a phrase; and he worried about scarring the ground every time he took a step. This bodhisattva's deep, vigilant mindfulness of the environment provides us with a valuable example to emulate.

Unfortunately, in my adopted country of Taiwan, one observes and hears about the thoughtless acts of deforestation, the dumping of toxic trash, the venting of harmful exhaust fumes into the air, and the discarding of wastewater wherever it seems convenient. These thoughtless acts have contributed to air pollution, water pollution, and general ecological degradation. Such actions reflect shortsightedness and a disregard for the public welfare. Other countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, on the

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1. One's inherent pristine nature for which enlightenment is a process of uncovering.

2. A Buddhist practitioner who has vowed to become a Buddha to liberate all beings.

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other hand, are much further along in implementing measures to protect the environment. They have had great success in cleaning up their rivers so that their waterways are once again so sparkling clean that one can see all the way to the bottom.

The sutras do give us a wonderful example of an alternative to a world of ecological demise—Amitabha's Western Pure Land.<sup>3</sup> This is a land of great beauty, and we can learn much about environmental protection from Amitabha Buddha. The sutras tell us that in the Western Pure Land, the ground is covered with gold and exquisite pagodas rise up high into the sky. The land is unspoiled 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 Buddhists aspire to enter upon leaving this life. But we do not have to wait until that time comes.

What we must do is create a pure land right here on Earth. Yes, much progress is being made on our external environment, but the important work actually lies within each of our hearts and minds—within our spiritual environment. We will be effective in protecting the natural environment outside of us

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3. Amitabha is the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, who created the Western Pure Land out of compassion for all beings. Everything in this land is designed to support one's practice for learning the Dharma. Beings born in this land remain there until attaining complete enlightenment.

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only when we have a healthy spiritual environment within. This is the Buddhist way of protecting the environment.

## **I. How the Buddha Exemplified Environmental Protection**

The Buddhist view of environmental protection is grounded in the law of dependent origination. When the Buddha attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree, he realized that all things arise because of interdependency. Nagarjuna, a great second-century Buddhist commentator and scholar, explains in the *Treatise on the Middle Way*, “There was never any phenomena 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. With regard to causal relationships, the *Differing Karmic Outcomes Sutra* says:

*If sentient beings continually engage in the ten unwholesome actions, the impact felt will be that the environment 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*

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*and the proliferation of insects, causing crop failure and famine. Third, sexual misconduct causes storms, suffering, 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 the ten unwholesome actions—killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, duplicitous speech, harsh words, flattery, greed, anger, and wrong views—one does not just harm oneself, but also harms the physical world. By the same token, by doing wholesome actions, one can help to reverse the damage to the environment. Our actions impact ourselves, others, and even the earth. Our existence is intimately intertwined. This is what is meant by the phrase “oneness and coexistence.”

We know from the *Agama Sutras* that the Buddha taught that the planting of trees created shade for others, as well as merit for oneself. Section Five of the *Treatise on the Origins of the Vinaya* also says that the Buddha stated, “A monk 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 wrongdoing.” Planting trees not only beautifies the environment, but also is a form of practice. Throughout history, Buddhist temples

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and monasteries have followed the Buddha's teachings by planting trees, growing flowers, and caring for our great earth.

The Buddha repeatedly entreated his disciples to protect trees and animals and to be mindful of the environment. The *Treatise on the Origins of the Vinaya* further tells us that the Buddha also taught, "There are five types of trees one should not cut: bodhi trees, sacred trees, large roadside trees, trees in charnel grounds, and large shade-giving trees." One well-known story of a previous life of the Buddha depicts his deep concern for protecting animals. 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 witnessing this compassion was so moved that he designated the area as a wildlife sanctuary where hunting was forbidden. This story certainly illustrates how the Buddha exemplified an enlightened life of deep loving-kindness for the environment.

## **II. How the Buddhist Tradition Supports Environmental Protection**

People often regard the Buddhist religion as advocating conservatism and passivity. 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

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protection. In reality, Buddhism has a long history of environmental activism, well before the concept became popular as a modern social cause.

For the past 2,500 years, the Buddhist teachings have had a profoundly positive impact on the environment. Throughout history, monastics have been involved in planting trees, dredging rivers, repairing roads and bridges, and in general, mindfully using and caring for natural resources. They have long had a tradition of encouraging people to free captured animals, promoting vegetarianism, and reminding all people 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, however, only reserving it for viewing from a distance. We humans live on this planet, and we do have to utilize the natural resources it offers. Utilizing these precious resources, however, must be accomplished with the utmost respect for nature. Again we can draw upon the Buddhist tradition in the examples of Venerable Mingyuan of ancient China, who planted thousands of trees along the Sizhou River to prevent flooding. In addition, Venerable Daoyu of Louyang observed that many ships were capsizing along the Longmen

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Gorge on the Yellow River. To prevent further tragedy, he and his friend, Bai Juyi,<sup>4</sup> rallied the local residents to widen the river, thereby slowing its flow. These two examples are well documented, but there have been many similar environmental protection efforts that have escaped recognition. In their travels, many monastics throughout history have forged paths through the jungles and laid steps over jagged mountains in an attempt to ease the passage for future travelers. Without any fanfare, they have worked to balance the needs of the environment with those of mankind, practicing the bodhisattva spirit of providing convenience for all.

Fo Guang Shan's worldwide lay service organization, Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA), has long realized the connection between the internal spiritual environment and the external natural environment and has made protecting the environment a high priority. At the annual BLIA General Conference held in March of 1992, a workshop to promote "environmental and spiritual" protection was held. Everyone was encouraged to start with beautifying ones' own mind and heart and then to extend outwards into beautifying the environment.

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4. A famous scholar and poet of the Tang dynasty.

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The following twelve guidelines were offered:

1. Speak softly—avoid disturbing others.
2. Keep the ground clean—eliminate littering.
3. Keep the air clean—do not smoke or pollute.
4. Respect self and others—avoid committing violent acts.
5. Be polite—avoid intruding upon others.
6. Smile—avoid facing others with an angry expression.
7. Speak kindly—avoid uttering abusive words.
8. Follow the rules—do not seek exemptions or privileges.
9. Mind your actions—avoid violating the rules of ethics.
10. Consume consciously—do not waste.
11. Live with a purpose—avoid living aimlessly.
12. Practice kindness—avoid creating malicious thoughts.

As a direct result of the conference, during the following summer, in cooperation with the government of Taiwan, the BLIA conducted water conservation activities to preserve the water source of the city of Kaohsiung by campaigning for planting new trees and preserving existing ones. By planting new trees—two million to be exact—the water source of Kaohsiung was protected. By recycling paper, the

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need to cut down trees was reduced, which further protected the water source.

When we think about how to create a pollution-free, clean environment, let us draw again upon Amitabha Buddha's Western Pure Land as an example. While cultivating 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. Only beauty abounds—no toxins, noise, or pollution. The ground there is paved with gold, exquisite pagodas are covered in seven kinds of precious gems, and all of the structures are in excellent condition. In this blissful land, everything works for the enlightenment of all who reside there. The weather is always cool and pleasant, and even the water has eight wonderful qualities: clear, cool, sweet, soft, soothing, peaceful, cleansing, and nourishing. Everyone in the Western Pure Land practices loving-kindness and remains physically and mentally healthy, living long lives, free from the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. No one would ever mindlessly destroy trees, for the entire landscape reflects such thoughtfulness. This is why we say Amitabha Buddha is our wonderful teacher on how to maintain a sound mind and a healthy environment.

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### III. How We Can Protect the Environment

When we talk about protecting the environment, we should first realize there are two facets to the problem: cultivating inner peace and preserving outer ecological balance. The former originates on an individual level, the later on the communal level. Each one of us is solely responsible for our own inner peace. To achieve inner peace, we have to purify our own greed, anger, and ignorance. Successful efforts toward environmental protection, such as natural habitat preservation, air purification, water source clean up, noise pollution control, trash management, and radiation protection depend upon the joint efforts of everyone.

First, we must maintain outer ecological balance. There are two fundamental ways in which we can protect the environment; we can treasure life and conserve resources. In fact, the first of the five precepts is to refrain from killing, in others words, to treasure life. The *Brahma Net Sutra* instructs us to think in this way:

*When a follower of the Buddha exercises compassion and refrains from killing, he should think, "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*

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*animals for meat is the same as killing my parents, and is, therefore, indirectly killing the source of my body.”*

The precept to refrain from killing is the expression of respect for all sentient life. At its most basic level, the practice is to refrain from killing. To take this a step further, we should actively work to save life and help those in need. When we see hurt animal, we should care for it so that the animal can feel safe again. We need to have a proactive, compassionate, and protective attitude towards animals. People all too often have exotic tastes and do not hesitate to eat anything that moves, regardless of whether it flies in the sky, moves on the earth, or swims in water. This type of indiscriminate slaughter and consumption not only defiles our inner spirit but also disturbs the outer balance of our natural environment and increases the violent energy in the world. Therefore, to improve the quality of all life, **we should follow the example of the Buddha and promote the protection of all living beings.**

Many Buddhist masters of the past were in tune with the connection among all forms of life in the six realms of existence, especially animals. Some were even at ease in the company of lions and tigers. For example, Venerable Huiyue of the Sui dynasty would teach the Dharma to wild animals. Tigers

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would become tame and lie down like kittens at his feet. Another example is Venerable Cizang, who was a mountain hermit; he would always make a point to save animals that were hurt. When he would run out of his own food, birds would bring him fruit. In the *Sutra of Miscellaneous Treasures* there is a story of a novice monk who was able to extend his life because of his kindness. The novice monk's teacher was a great cultivator, and had developed the power to see into the karma of others. By using his powers he was able to see that his student, due to the student's karma from past lives, would die in the next few days.

"It has been a long time since you have seen your family," the teacher noted. "Why don't you return home to visit them?"

The novice monk took his teacher's suggestion and went to see his family. Surprisingly, several days later the novice returned.

"What did you do over the last week?" the teacher asked.

"Nothing important; I only visited my family."

"Think about it more closely," the teacher insisted.

The novice monk then recalled one peculiar situation: "While journeying home I did see a group of ants trapped in a puddle of water. I placed a leaf near the puddle so they could climb out, but did nothing more."

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The teacher then explained the significance of sending the novice monk home. He revealed that, due to the student's kind act of saving the ant's lives, the student's life was extended, so that he would live to a ripe old age.

All these stories serve as reminders for us to act with compassion. Protecting life is a basic moral principle of being human and the best tool for transforming anger, violence, and sadness into equanimity and peace. This is the message of the Buddha.

In addition to nurturing and protecting animal life, we must also treasure plant life. Even a blade of grass is vital because it works to purify 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 all may breathe easier. Protecting life also means that we **must be "protective"** of insentient things, such as mountains and rivers and even everyday household items. A table, chair, or towel should be treated respectfully, because if we do not take proper care of these things and they wear out quickly, we are indirectly wasting and harming the "life" of these resources. The Buddha teaches us to be mindful of everything we use.

In addition to treasuring life, we must protect the environment by conserving our resources. In our daily

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life, it is so easy to be wasteful. As an example, consider paper for a moment. Trees are very important to our environment. They provide us with shade and play a key role in the water cycle. A tree that takes ten years to grow can be chopped down in a matter of minutes, yet for every ton of paper recycled, we can save twenty trees. We can also save trees by using both sides of a sheet of paper. **This is just one example** of how we can conserve the environment.

Conservation yields benefits not only to the environment, but also to us directly. How much we have in life depends upon our past actions, or karma.<sup>5</sup> 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 mindfulness allows us to build up our good karma. 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 acts of conservation. When I was a young, novice monk, I was very frugal with my writing paper. On each piece of paper that I would use, 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 that I would not waste paper. It was only after I could no longer decipher

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5. The universal law of cause and effect.

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my own writing that I would grudgingly throw away the sheet. I believe the good karma that I accrued by making the most of each piece of paper brought me the gift of intelligence. Each of us can begin to amass a stockpile of good karma 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 that require only a minimal effort. Instead of using disposable paper plates and plastic utensils, we can use reusable ones. Plastic is also not environmentally friendly, because most types are not biodegradable, remaining for decades in landfills. Polystyrene foam products are known to emit carcinogenic gases when burned. We must 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. 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:

- Consume moderately and do not buy more than you need. Excess food often rots and has to be thrown away.

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- Maintain your car and follow emission guidelines.
  - Minimize the use of disposable plates and utensils.
  - Use glasses or mugs instead of paper cups.
  - Take briefer showers.
  - Do not litter and reduce the amount of trash.
  - Use energy-efficient light bulbs and appliances.
  - Set the air conditioner to a higher temperature.
  - Recycle used newspapers and motor oil.
  - Bring your own shopping bags when shopping.
  - Inspect your car tires regularly. Tires with low pressure wear more quickly and lower fuel efficiency.
  - Choose durable and fuel efficient tires.
  - 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.
  - Choose recycled materials, when possible.

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

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in the effort to improve the environment, we must not neglect our inner landscape. From time without beginning, our pure nature has been defiled by greed, anger, jealousy, and malice. We must work to turn greed into generosity, anger 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. The bones are like mountains, providing a protective frame for our many delicate organs. The cells are like little forest animals, moving about with vitality. Our body is also like a small town with six inhabitants: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and mind. The mind is like the town's mayor, 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 keep our internal environment "pollution free"? We do so by holding the Buddha in our heart. If you have the Buddha in your heart,

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everything you see in the world will be the sight of the Buddha. If you have the Buddha in your heart, everything you hear will be the sound of the Buddha. If you have the Buddha in your heart, everything you say will be the word of the Buddha. If you have the Buddha in your heart, everything you do will reflect the compassion of the Buddha. In order to purify the soil and rivers of our outer environment, we must work to purify our inner spiritual environment. This is having the Buddha in your heart. Just like a pure lotus that rises out of the muddy mire of a pond, we, too, can rise above the turbidity of the world to blossom with pristine compassion in the sun of Buddha's wise smile.

*Value every word*

*—this is the etymology of dignity.*

*Treasure every grain of rice*

*—this is the ground of wealth.*

*Speak with care*

*—this is the platform of happiness.*

*Protect even the smallest form of life*

*—this is the genesis of longevity.*