



## NATURE AND THE SACRED: EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT IN EARLY BUDDHIST TEXTS

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### ABSTRACT :

*This paper explores the concept of nature in early Buddhist thought, primarily as reflected in the Pāli Canon. Rather than presenting nature as a separate or sacred entity, early Buddhism integrates the natural world into its core metaphysical and ethical frameworks. Nature is perceived not as an object of veneration, but as an integral part of the cycle of existence (saṃsāra) and the law of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda). This paper argues that while early Buddhism does not espouse an environmentalist ethic in the modern sense, it provides a nuanced understanding of the natural world that emphasizes impermanence, interdependence, and non-self. A fundamental teaching in Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths, first articulated by Siddhārtha Gautama in what is traditionally known as the "Sermon at Benares." For the purpose of this discussion, only the initial two truths will be considered. The First Noble Truth is duḥkha, a term often loosely translated as "suffering," though this rendering only partially reflects the depth of its Sanskrit origin. Duḥkha encompasses the sorrow and distress inherent in human existence—it is the pain of birth, illness, aging, and death; the discomfort of encountering the unpleasant and the grief of separation from what is cherished. It also signifies the frustration of unmet desires. In essence, duḥkha conveys the innate dissatisfaction of life, and the First Noble Truth serves as a recognition of this fundamental condition.*



**KEYWORDS :** Buddhism, Nature, Teaching, Suffering, Environment.

### INTRODUCTION:

The relationship between human beings and the natural world has been a central theme in philosophical and religious thought. In early Buddhism, nature is neither romanticized nor anthropocentrically dominated, but is understood through the lens of existential inquiry. Drawing primarily from the Pāli Canon, this paper investigates how early Buddhist texts conceive of nature and the implications of this worldview for ethical conduct and spiritual development.<sup>1</sup> The Second Noble Truth explains that *duḥkha* arises from *trṣṇā*—a term that signifies craving or intense desire. This concept refers to the compulsive pursuit of pleasure, the clinging to personal wants, and the longing to

<sup>1</sup> Pasqualotto, Giangiorgio Il Buddhismo: i sentieri di una religione millenaria (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2003), 8 –9.

affirm one's own identity (a thirst for existence) or, conversely, the desire to escape or annihilate oneself (a thirst for non-existence).

### Nature in the Context of Saṃsāra and Dukkha

The foundation of early Buddhist thought lies in the Four Noble Truths, which diagnose the human condition in terms of suffering (dukkha) and prescribe a path to liberation. Nature, in this context, is not separate from the realm of suffering. It is part of saṃsāra—the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Natural phenomena are subject to the same conditions as all other phenomena: they arise, persist, and cease according to causes and conditions (paṭiccasamuppāda). Mountains, rivers, forests, and bodies are all impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha), and not-self (anattā). Thus, early Buddhism offers a perspective that demystifies nature, seeing it as transient and conditioned.

### Forest as a Spiritual Space

At that time, wilderness was not viewed as a symbol of ecological wealth, as it often is today. Instead, it was generally perceived as a hostile, perilous, and largely unknown realm due to its inaccessibility. Certain Buddhist texts, such as the *Suttanipāta*, praise the cultivation of trees and plants as meritorious deeds capable of generating positive karma. However, such acts were regarded on par with other community-oriented efforts, like constructing wells or building dams. The trees planted were typically fruit-bearing or agriculturally beneficial species, intended to support human needs. These activities were not driven by a concern for environmental conservation, but rather by a desire to enhance the well-being of society. As such, they cannot be equated with modern reforestation projects. On the contrary, they reflect an intent to expand human-managed nature rather than preserve wilderness in its untouched form.<sup>2</sup>

While nature is not sacralized, it plays a crucial role in the lifestyle and spiritual cultivation of Buddhist monks (bhikkhus). Forests (arañña) are often chosen as places for meditation and solitude. The *Arahantavagga* and *Dhammadāyāda Sutta* depict forests as ideal settings for renunciation and contemplation. The forest serves not as a romantic escape, but as a practical environment conducive to detachment and insight. This preference for solitude amidst nature supports the realization of impermanence and interdependence, free from worldly distractions.

In Green Buddhism, wilderness is regarded as a vital and sacred force that must be preserved at all costs. However, in early Buddhism, nature—particularly in its untamed form—was sometimes viewed with suspicion or even disdain. For instance, the Pure Lands—heavenly realms where the boundless compassion of the Cosmic Buddhas is fully manifested—are depicted as ideal human societies rather than natural landscapes. In both scriptures and artistic portrayals, these paradises are densely inhabited by countless enlightened beings, including bodhisattvas, śrāvakas, and pratyekabuddhas. Natural elements are significantly downplayed, and wild nature is entirely absent. In the *Longer Sukhāvatīyūhasūtra* (The Infinite Life Sūtra), the ground of Amida's Pure Land is described as flawlessly level, with no hills or elevations. The terrain is said to be adorned with seven kinds of precious materials—gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and various gems. There are no fierce animals lurking in forests or waters; instead, birds sing melodies that echo the teachings of the Dharma.

### Nature and the Law of Causality

In early Buddhist cosmology, natural events—like rainfall, harvests, or natural disasters—are not attributed to the will of deities but are governed by impersonal causal laws. The *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta* presents an ethical cosmology where social and environmental decline are linked to moral decay, suggesting that human conduct influences natural balance. This causal interconnectedness

<sup>2</sup> Schmithausen, Lambert "The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4, no. 1 (1997): 16.

fosters a sense of responsibility rather than dominion over nature. While not explicitly ecological, this view aligns with a systemic understanding of the natural world, emphasizing cause and effect rather than divine intervention.

### Deep Ecology

Deep Ecology falls short in resolving this issue, as it incorporates the hongaku principle, which asserts that all living beings, without distinction, possess an inherent right to thrive and flourish. Parkes cites Bill Devall and George Sessions' essay, "Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered," which introduces the concept of "biocentric equality" or "biocentrism." Drawing from Buddhist and Taoist philosophies, this principle holds that "all entities in the biosphere have an equal right to live, blossom, and achieve their unique forms of self-realization and unfolding."<sup>3</sup> This perspective reintroduces the earlier dilemma: granting every living being the right to flourish could mean refraining from actions against creatures that pose threats to humans, potentially impeding human progress.

### Non-Harming (Ahimsa) and Respect for Life

Although early Buddhism does not advocate for a detailed environmental ethic, it upholds the principle of non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) as central to ethical conduct. The first precept—abstaining from killing living beings—extends to animals and insects, implying a moral consideration of sentient life. The *Jātaka* tales, while didactic, often reflect sensitivity to the animal world and portray animals as past lives of the Bodhisattva. Such narratives, though moralistic, suggest a continuity between human and non-human life and reinforce the idea of shared existence within the natural world.

### Hongaku Principle

The hongaku principle presents a paradox: if all things possess Buddha-nature, then pollution and environmental exploitation could also be seen as expressions of the inherent buddhahood within every element of the universe. If this holds true, how can environmental action be justified? According to this perspective, pollution and environmental exploitation, in their various forms, might also have a right to exist and even thrive as manifestations of the Dharma. From the standpoint of Green Buddhism, this paradox is resolved through an asymmetric reinterpretation of Indra's Net of jewels.<sup>4</sup>

### Nature, Mindfulness, and Liberation

Green Buddhism, grounded in clear ethical principles, typically avoids misinterpretation by rejecting actions that harm people, animals, plants, or habitats. However, the hongaku principle, which posits that all things are inherently enlightened, raises challenges frequently discussed in Green Buddhism studies. These challenges are explored through an analysis of Graham Parkes' article, "Voices of Mountains, Trees, and Rivers: Kūkai, Dōgen, and Deeper Ecology."<sup>5</sup>

Meditation practices taught in early Buddhism often rely on natural elements—such as breath (*ānāpānasati*), body postures, or awareness of bodily sensations—all of which are natural processes. The practice of mindfulness involves deep observation of one's internal and external nature without attachment or aversion. Thus, nature becomes both the object and the medium of insight. Recognizing the impermanent and conditioned nature of all phenomena, including natural ones, is key to attaining liberation (*nibbāna*).

<sup>3</sup> Bill Deval & George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Layton: Gibbs M. Smith, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Ian Harris, "Buddhist Environmental Ethics and Detraditionalization: The Case of Eco Buddhism," *Religion*, no. 25 (1995): 205.

<sup>5</sup> Graham, Parkes, "Voices of Mountains, Trees, and Rivers: Kūkai, Dōgen, and Deeper Ecology." In *Buddhism and Ecology: the Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, edited by Mary E. Tucker, 111 – 128. Cambridge: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions. 1997

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## CONCLUSION

In early Buddhism, nature is not a domain to be worshipped nor a resource to be exploited. It is part of the same conditioned reality that gives rise to suffering and offers the possibility of awakening. The early Buddhist view of nature is deeply embedded in its metaphysical and ethical teachings, emphasizing impermanence, interdependence, and the potential for liberation through insight into the true nature of phenomena. While early Buddhism does not provide a formal ecological doctrine, its insights can inform a respectful and responsible attitude toward the natural world—one that sees nature not as other, but as part of the interconnected web of existence.

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