



## Concern for Environment as Reflected in Buddhist Literature

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**Abstract:** This paper is intended to point out the notion of environmental consciousness in early Buddhist literature. Environmental degradation is a great problem of present human society, but concern for living creatures and environment is not a recent phenomenon. If we look carefully we can find lots of care and affection towards environment, in early historical sources. The awareness may not be as scientific as today, but it was far ahead of its time. Buddhism; a religion based on morals and ethics, also focused on environmental protection. In the present paper we are focusing on Buddhist literature to understand the Buddhist stand point on environment.

**Key Words:** Environment, Ethics, Awareness, Buddha hood.

**Introduction:** As we all know, environment has an important role to play in the lives of not only human beings but also of all the living creatures. In modern times environmental hazards have become a global concern and due to the growing human civilization, the lives of other living things are being hampered. This also is making an impact on the environment, in turn making human lives difficult. So we can now a day find the growing concern and awareness for environment and also the need for preservation of flora and fauna. But this type of awareness is not entirely new. If we study the principal Buddhist literature, we can find the concept of protecting plants and animals. Buddhism had put emphasis on ethics and dealt with the question of environmental protection as an ethical issue. The present paper is intended to find out the hidden cause behind the Buddhist sympathy towards nature. For this quarry we have studied different Buddhist literature as well as the opinions of renowned historians of this field and used that information as Primary and Secondary source. Throughout this paper we have tried to highlight some issues that could be pointed out like this:

- 1) What does the Buddhist literary reference mention about the protection of animals and plants?
- 2) Could there possibly be any environmental imbalance at that point of time in 600BC?
- 3) Was there any serious awareness about environment in these literatures, rather than sympathy or affection?

**Study in the Literary Sources:** Buddhism advocates the concept of Coexisting i.e. humans, plants and animals should live together as a co- operative in this beautiful earth. So it is very much possible to find the environmental facts in the Buddhist literature. In this paper the focus will be on the environmental facts found in

literatures like Vīnaya Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka, Jātaka, Dhammapada, Milinda pañha, Lalitavistāra.

The Vīnaya pitaka (c 400 BCE – 300 BCE) consists five books i.e. Pārājika, Pācittiya, Mahāvagga, Cullavagga, Parivāra etc. It contains rules for the monks and the nuns as prescribed by The Buddha. The Buddha here in number of occasions forbade the monks and nuns to harm animals and plants. In the Mahāvagga of the Vīnaya text we find several examples where The Buddha advised the monks to show a great bit of respect towards the living creatures. The Charma Skanda of the Mahāvagga forbade the use of footwear made off bamboo and palm leaves. As during the process of making the footwear several trees were cut down so it caused the life of those young innocent plants. If any monk wore this; it would be considered as a bad deed and *dukkha* or the sufferings would be waiting for him.<sup>1</sup> The Buddha opposed the unnecessary cutting of trees. The value of plants to eradicate several diseases was well known at that time. The *bhikkhus* were only allowed to use roots of turmeric, ginger, *usira*, basil, *neem* and onion etc as medicine only during the time of illness but if these were consumed without necessity, it was considered as an offense of expiation.<sup>2</sup> This proves that they were aware of the medical value of those plants and so restricted their used to maintain their availability when needed for medical emergency. Buddhism also played a major role in protecting both domestic and wild animals. Monastic rules display the affection towards animals by them. Monks were not allowed to touch the tail, horn, ear, or neck of cows and were also not allowed to ride on the back of a cow. If any monk killed a cow it would be considered as bad karma and so bad fortune would be expected for him.<sup>3</sup> It is a well known fact that Buddha was against the slaughtering of domestic animals. He opposed the idea of slaughtering cattle during sacrificial rituals to gain merits. But we can find same kind of affection towards wild animals. According to the Vīnaya rules the use of the lion skin, tiger skin was strictly prohibited for the monks.<sup>4</sup> The Vīnaya rules forbade the monks eating animal flesh. It has mentioned certain animals such as dog, lion, tiger, bear, wolf, elephant, horse were not to be killed for food. The Buddha instructed the monks to stay away from animal killing. It was considered as bad karma for a monk.<sup>5</sup> Several other rules are also mentioned in the Vīnaya Pitaka where the monks were strictly prohibited killing animals. Pacittiya (86) of Vinaya Pitaka, forbade *bhikkhus* to use or possess needle case made off bone, ivory or horn.<sup>6</sup> According to Pacittiya (61) if a bhikkhu deliberately killed an animal it would be considered as an offense of expiation.<sup>7</sup> If a bhikkhu destroys any kinds of living plants or deliberately make use of water containing living creatures it would be considered as bad karma.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from Vinaya Pitaka a great deal of environmental facts can also be found in the Sutta Pitaka as well. A fine example can be found in the ‘Kutadanta Sutta’ of ‘Dīgha Nikāya’, a part of Sutta Pitaka where the ‘Enlightened One’ rejected the idea of killing animals during the sacrificial rituals for earning merits. According to the text, a brāhmana named Kutadanta had changed his mind and understood the uselessness of the animal slaughtering during the sacrificial rituals after his discourse with Buddha.<sup>9</sup> According to the ‘Aggañña Sutta of Dīgha Nikāya’, excessive greed is the cause of social problems.. These problems had gradually increased and became massive problems for human society.<sup>10</sup> According to the ‘Mahāparinirvāna Sutta’ of Dīgha Nikāya we find that the Buddha rejected the practice of meat eating and also listed

sixteen practices which would be considered as evil i.e. keeping ,killing, buying of sheep, pigs, hens , fish, birds for profit. It also tells the story that the animals gathered to pay their last respect to the Buddha during the time of his Parinirvāna.<sup>11</sup> According to the text numerous elephants were there to pay their homage to the Buddha and also number of cows, buffaloes, birds, bees, serpent king took part to listen to his last sermons. In the ‘Bhayaḥerava Sutta’ of Majjhima Nikāya<sup>12</sup> where the Buddha praised for the natural environment, as according to him forest was the best place to do meditation. He mentioned the forest as a very pure and sacred place and only pure soul person can feel the real taste of nature. In the several suttas of the Majjhima Nikāya respect has been shown towards the living creatures. According to the ‘Jivaka Sutta’ of Majjhima Nikāya, the Buddha gave his opinion to Jivaka about the meat eating. According to Buddhism meat eating should be allowed only when the killing is not seen, or heard or even suspected that the animal had been killed to feed the individual monk. If a monk killed any kind of living being it would be considered as a sin. So monks should sustain with blameless foods.<sup>13</sup> In the ‘Cūḷakammavibhanga Sutta’ of Majjhima Nikāya a great respect was shown towards animals. Here Buddha said that people often indulged in killing innocent creatures which resulted bad consequences for the people. Here the Buddha once again praised for love, compassion, kindness, mercy, non-injury to all living creatures. He also ruled out all those possibilities of earning merits through animal sacrifices during the ritual practices.<sup>14</sup>

The Khuddaka Nikāya consists of 15 treatises. Here we are going to focus mainly on two of those treatises i.e. Dhammapada and Jātaka. In Dhammapada we find several instances of good conducts or right ethics. We have told earlier that right moral ethics are very crucial to maintain peaceful co-existence with the environment. The Dandavagga (chapter 10) or the punishment of Dhammapada restrained people from killing animals. According the verse (1 and 2)<sup>15</sup>, it prohibits people from killing other living creature, as life is very precious to all. One should always stay away from killing living beings. It states clearly that one should not harm other living creatures, if anyone does so he will be sinful. This can be clearly understood that Buddhism was keen to protect diverse species of animals and plants.

The Jātaka tales are believed to be the previous lives of Buddha. According to Buddhism, each and every living being must take several births in the form of different creatures in their path towards Buddha hood. The present Jātakas are such previous lives where Bodhisattva was born in the form of different animals, plants or even god. This symbolizes the notion of equality which prevails in Buddhism. Also it mentions that future Buddha will also make this type of journey to attain Buddha hood. ‘Mahākapi Jātaka’(no-516) , the Buddha appeared in a form of a monkey. Through the form of a monkey he taught a great lesson to all, that an animal can also became a very good friend of human beings but we generally bear cruel attitude towards the animals.<sup>16</sup> ‘Nimi Jātaka’ had shown the presence of tigers and horses in the heaven and also points out that not only the animals but also birds can reach the state of heaven. ‘Tesakuna Jātaka’(no-521), depicts the story of a heirless king adopting birds as his own children.<sup>17</sup> ‘Mahāhamsa Jātaka (no-534)’depicts the affection of a golden goose towards its mates, and it’s intension to sacrifice its own life to protect them.<sup>18</sup> Buddhist scriptures also gave great deal of importance towards

various trees. Different trees have been attributed to different incidents of the life of Buddha. The *Śāl* tree in the Lumbini garden is associated with the birth of Buddha. Also, he was previously born as a *Śāl* tree spirit in Bhadda-sala Jātaka (Book iv),<sup>19</sup> The *Pipal* tree was the Bodhi tree of Sakyamuni. It is associated with the birth of Buddha and was depicted in different Buddhist monuments significantly.<sup>20</sup> The *Pātali* tree (*Bignonia suaveolens*) is viewed as the Bodhi tree of the Buddha Vipasyin. The *Champakā* tree (*Michelia champaka*) is considered as the Bodhi tree of Maitreya (successor Buddha). The *Udumbara* tree was the Bodhi tree of Buddha Kanakamuni.<sup>21</sup> These references were not only limited in literary texts but we can find the sculptural representations of animals and plants in all the major Buddhist sites.

**Significance:** These verses lead to a major historical question. Was ethics the only purpose behind the Buddhist sympathy towards environment as all the living things? It's argued that Buddha was against ritual sacrifices to protect domestic animals from slaughtering. This had an economic view. But why could he be so cautious about the protection of animals and plants? Environmental degradation is generally viewed as more recent phenomenon; it has become a global concern in the present world. Although the environmental situation in c.600BCE was not so severe as today, if we study the human activities closely we can find that the rapid change towards agrarian society and the spread of human settlement in mid Ganga valley from c.800BCE could have led to imbalance in the natural environment of the area. Large portions of the forests were cleared of by slash and burn method, which was argued in the famous iron debate. These forest areas were either incorporated into agricultural land or it became normal human settlements like villages and Janapadas. New urban centers began to emerge in mid Ganga valley.<sup>22</sup> We can find the references of burning forests in the story of Māthava Videha and also the story of Khāndava burning in the Mahābhārata<sup>23</sup>. It described the misery of the animals and also the aboriginal inhabitants of the forest region. In the Vana Parva of the Great epic, Yudhisthira had a dream of the deer, where he was requested by the animals to spare their lives so that they can reproduce and save them from extinction<sup>24</sup>. These depictions clearly indicate the human impact on environment of Gangatic plains in early India. This story is very much similar to Nigrodhamiga Jataka<sup>25</sup>, although the epic literature can be dated to 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE; it reflects different layers of early times as well. This act of human being impacted the ancient environment of India. Aśoka in his edicts (Major Rock Edict IV)<sup>26</sup>, mentioned about earlier times, when people were very much fond of hunting. Gradual hunting must have led to ecological imbalance, the scarcity of food and decreasing natural environment could have led to animal rampages in the localities nearby the forest area. We can establish this by the different hero stones and coins depicting kings fighting against ferocious animals. Also it could have led impact on local weather, causing improper rainfall, famines, drought etc. Although, these hazards were not as severe as present day, but they definitely impacted the life of the people.

It is a well known fact that Buddhism gave importance to ethics and morality. But it would be over simplification of facts if we describe all the Buddhist ideologies on the basis of morality only. Ideas and opinions are created from the urge of solving real life problems. The impact of human activities led the Buddhist thinkers to find a suitable solution to these problems. They forbade the killing of animals in sacrifices,

and instead offered animal products like milk, ghee, butter to establish the real importance of domestic animals. Similarly, the prohibiting of consuming the medical herbs without reason could be the effort to save these invaluable plants. According to the Anguttara Nikāya, if a man's mind is polluted by immorality it would definitely make an impact on the environment. We have mentioned earlier that environmental degradation is closely associated with moral degeneration. It is also mentioned in the Buddhist traditions that moral degradation is the cause of shortage of rainfall. At the same time there were several other problems that took place such as crop failures, human's deaths etc. Could there be awareness that environmental degradation could lead to environmental hazards? Although very hard to establish, it could be assumed that the concept of ecological balance was present among these thinkers. They used morality as a tool to reach to larger mass, which was later used by Asoka in his edicts. The banning of animal killings, plantation of several trees, by Asoka could be the proof that these environmental ideas were not limited as a textual and moral code of conduct. Rather than, it was adopted as a state policy. The Buddhist philosophers concluded that environmental issues could be resolved easily if the natural environment is undisturbed, and we let every being live their lives in their natural habitat.

**Conclusion:** In concluding words we can say that the concept of environment in Buddhist literature is much forward than it's time and is more relevant now a day. Environmental degradation has become a global horror and every aspect pointed out by Buddha; from excessive hunting to cutting of trees has led to this crisis. One of the objectives of studying history is to find out the past mistakes of human society and their solution to those problems. Here the solution could lie on understanding the environment. If we just understand the environment surrounding us, which was understood by Buddha and his real disciples' long time ago, there will not be any need to preach morality or pass laws to protect our beloved nature. The scriptures could only help us in that direction.

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