

Wisdom and Ethics:

A Buddhist Framework for Ecological Conservation

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Abstract

This article explores the potential of Buddhist philosophy to address contemporary ecological challenges, particularly climate change. It investigates the concept of interdependent origination, one of the fundamental principles in Buddhism that emphasizes the interconnected nature of all phenomena. By examining the root causes of suffering and the potential of Buddhist ethics to foster environmental consciousness, the paper argues that Buddhist wisdom, particularly as articulated through engaged Buddhism, offers a valuable framework for ecological conservation efforts.

The study delves into the interconnectedness between inner and outer ecology, suggesting that human actions, driven by self-grasping ignorance and its subsequent afflictions, contribute to environmental degradation. It explores Buddhist ethical practices such as the four immeasurables, patience, and generosity, which can cultivate a more compassionate and sustainable mindset. A case study of Khangchendzonga National Park in Sikkim, India, demonstrates the practical application of engaged Buddhism in conservation efforts. The park's unique blend of cultural and natural heritage reflects the deep-rooted Buddhist influence on local communities.

The paper discusses the role of Buddhist institutions and initiatives in promoting sustainable practices and raising awareness about environmental issues. While acknowledging the limitations and challenges in implementing Buddhist wisdom on a large scale, the paper proposes strategies for integrating Buddhist principles into broader conservation efforts. These include interfaith dialogue, policy engagement, community-based initiatives, and integrating sustainable practices within monastic settings. By cementing a deeper connection between humans and nature, Buddhist principles offer a valuable perspective for addressing the urgent ecological crises of our time.

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Introduction

We live in a world where everything is interconnected and every moment is intricately linked to its past and future counterparts. When the crown prince of the Sakya clan, Siddharta Gotama (563 BCE-483 BCE), left his palace in the dead of the night to find the truth of the world, no ordinary man could have expected that he would discover the reality of the cyclic world. Little did anyone anticipate that his journey would lead to such profound insights into the nature of existence? Through his practices and deep meditation, Siddharta became Buddha, discovering the wisdom of emptiness and interdependent origination.¹ His realization emphasized that nothing possesses inherent existence; rather, everything is devoid of independent existence. The genesis of every phenomenon is intricately connected to causes and conditions, illustrating their nature of dependent origination. After the attainment of Buddhahood, he imparted the dharma rooted in these principles for forty-five years before passing into *Mahaparinirvana* at the age of eighty.

The records state that, after attaining full awakening, Buddha Shakyamuni seated himself beneath the Bodhi tree, immersed in the bliss of omniscience through Samadhi. Seven days later, he emerged from this state, and during the initial watch of night; he pondered the concept of interdependent origination, contemplating how things come into existence. In the middle watch of the night, his reflections shifted to the cessation of phenomena, and in the final watch, he contemplated both the arising and ceasing of things within the framework of interdependent origination.

In the *Culasakuludayi Sutta (MajjimaNikaya)*, it states,

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not

¹ The term “interdependent origination” acknowledges all three levels of dependent origination, which will be discussed in the later in the paper. Throughout the paper, “interdependent origination,” “dependent origination,” and “dependent arising” are used interchangeably.

exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.”²

No phenomena escape the filter of interdependent origination. If anything has come into existence, it must have arisen due to certain factors. When something comes into being in such manner, it indicates that it lacks independent, inherent, or true existence. This aligns with the concept of Emptiness, wherein the Wisdom of Emptiness asserts that every phenomenon is devoid of independent existence, rendering the two concepts synonymous. This, avoiding both extremes, falls into the Middle Way.

Interdependent origination is a concept that is not only confined to sentient beings. As mentioned above, all phenomena or all that exist are dependently originated, hence having wider applicability even in today's world. As Buddha Dharma is based on logic and valid reasoning, it maintains a profound significance across the eras. Buddhist philosophy has been having productive discourses with various academic, social and scientific disciplines for a very long time and it is noteworthy that engaged Buddhism is a major tool through which we can address contemporary global issues as well. In particular, amid the escalating ecological crises and climate change driven by anthropogenic activities, Buddhist ideals offer more than just a tool for exploring these issues.

As the world grapples with environmental crises³, climate change, driven by anthropocentric activities occupies the centre stage. From untimely rain to severe famine, these occurrences have become increasingly prevalent today. Thanks to us humans, through our destructive activities, the death clock of the earth is ticking much faster. But climate change and its danger are often overlooked as something that does not affect us. Unless this issue is seen as a personal one, everyone tries to pass it off as something that should be dealt with by the authorities, not individually. While discussions on mitigating these perils are widespread and various measures are being implemented, the pressing need of the hour is to adopt an ethical and sustainable perspective to address this serious threat.

This paper aims to delve into addressing the root problem of ecological crises-ignorance, through the lens of the Buddhist concept of interdependent origination. This profound philosophy addresses the genesis of the problem as it recognizes the complex interconnection of all phenomena. Through this framework, the research will seek the efficacy of applying Buddhist ethics in addressing the issue and devising a sustainable solution for the escalating environmental threat by citing an example of a successful conservation effort from Khangchendzonga National Park, India. The study will also critically examine the challenges in applying Buddhist wisdom and ethics, while also exploring how these principles can be integrated by assessing the contributions of various Buddhist groups in India to ecological conservation.

² Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 1995.

³ Environmental crises include over population, biodiversity loss, lack of adequate resources and pollution.

Interdependent origination

Interdependent origination (*Pratityasamutpada*, *rten 'brel du 'bjungba*) is the foundation of Buddhist philosophy, representing the fundamental reality governing the entire world. Phenomena arise, exist, and decline through the interplay of multiple factors. Dependent origination elucidates how all phenomena emerge based on various conditions, primarily explaining the chain of causation that leads to the cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and the perpetuation of suffering. According to the *Prasangika Madhyamaka* (The Middle Way Consequentialist, *dbu ma thalgyurba*) Buddhist philosophical school, it is not necessary that phenomena only exist on dependence on cause and effect but can be understood in three levels:

1. Interdependent origination of effect dependent on the cause or the causal interdependent origination
2. Interdependent origination of wholes dependent on parts
3. Interdependent origination of mental imputation

Interdependent origination of effect dependent on the cause or the causal interdependent origination

It is the interdependent origination of all impermanent things. This level of interdependent origination states that phenomena come into existence (effect) due to certain causes and conditions. There cannot be a production if cause and effect are independent. It is just like the conducive conditions such as proper climate, water, nurturing and so on for an apple seed to give rise to apple trees and bear fruits. This level of interdependent origination is easily perceivable (even without the understanding of emptiness) and is accepted by all four Buddhist schools.⁴ This causal dependent origination is explored in the twelve links of dependent origination that will be discussed later.

Interdependent origination of wholes dependent on parts

Interdependent origination of wholes dependent on parts addresses that any phenomenon comes into being only with the integration of multiple parts that are mutually dependent. This permeates to all existent phenomena, be it impermanent or permanent.

For example, a table is a whole that consists of different parts such as legs and a top plank. It is through the integration of these parts that a table comes into being. This level of interdependent origination is subtler than the first level, but the understanding of emptiness is not crucial for its comprehension.⁵

Interdependent origination of mental imputation

Subjecting the phenomena under ultimate analysis (through the Four Essentials or other means of reasoning) results in the emptiness of the objective existence of any

⁴ The four Buddhist schools are: Vaibhashika, Sautrantika, Cittamatra (Yogacara) and Madhyamaka.

⁵ Gyatso and Chodron, *Buddhism: One Teacher, Many Traditions*, 2017, pp. 214-215.

phenomena. It forms the basic crux of this deepest level of interdependent origination.

This level states that every phenomenon merely exists by its designated identity. For example, a table can be taken as a designated or nominal object. Its parts, the legs, and the top plank form the basis of designation. But if we try to find out which part of the table is the exact table, we cannot find anything substantial. Because the actual table is neither its parts nor its collection of parts hence devoid of any objective existence. So all these conventionally existent phenomena exist by mere imputation of mind that provides a certain designation but lack any true essence ultimately. Acknowledgment of this level is specific to the Prasangika Madhyamaka.⁶

Elucidation of dependent origination in Sutra

Interdependent origination is elucidated in many major Mahayana Sutras, one of is the *Salistambha Sutra* or *The Rice Seedling Sutra*. This Sutra provides a detailed exposition of the principles of interdependent origination and the nature of reality, utilizing the analogy of a rice seedling. It is revered for its profound teaching of outer and inner dependent origination and the twelve links of interdependent origination.

It was when the Buddha Shakyamuni was residing in the Vulture's Peak (*Griddhrakūṭa*) in Rajgir with the sangha of 1250 bhikkhus and many noble beings, the Venerable Śāriputra asked Arya⁷ Maitreya for the meaning of the statement made by Buddha Shakyamuni in the morning while gazing at the rice seedlings. The statement made by the Buddha was,

“Bhikṣus, whoever sees dependent arising sees the
Dharma. Whoever sees the Dharma sees the Buddha.” (1.3)⁸

Having said this, the Bhagavān fell silent. Following the request of Ven Śāriputra, Arya Maitreya to elucidates the meaning of these Noble words of the blessed one which was rejoiced and praised by all the beings of higher realms and is revered as the noble Mahayana sutra “The Rice Seedling”.

The sutra outlines the twelve links of dependent origination, while Arya Maitreya elucidates dependent arising, explaining that something arises because something else already exists, and something is born due to the birth of another thing. This means that ignorance gives rise to the formation, expounding the cycle of samsara through the twelve links of interdependent origination. These links, in order, are: ignorance, formation, consciousness, name and form, six sense sources, contact, feeling, attachment, grasping, becoming, birth, and aging and death. Each link gives rise to the next, and the cessation of these links starts with the cessation of ignorance, leading to the end of suffering.

Further, the sutra expounds the meaning of Dharma. Dharma refers to the

⁶ Gyatso and Chodron, *Buddhism: One Teacher, Many Traditions*, 2017, p. 215.

⁷ The term ‘Arya’ refers to Noble being.

⁸ Dharmasagara Translation Group, *The Noble Mahayana Sutra The Rice Seedling*, 2018.

eightfold noble path, the noble truth of the path that leads to the cessation of all suffering, namely; Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

The Sutra states,

“The eightfold path of the noble ones,
combined with the attainment of its results and Nirvāṇa⁹,
is what the Bhagavān¹⁰ has called the Dharma.” (1.6)¹¹

The Buddha is one who comprehends all Dharma (all phenomena) and is endowed with the noble Dharmakaya, perceiving the dharma of those on the path and those who have transcended it. The Buddha said that one who sees interdependent origination can also see the ultimate Dharma—the wisdom of emptiness.

The sutra further elucidates the twofold classification of interdependent origination: outer interdependent origination and inner interdependent origination. This is followed by a further explanation of it through the principles of causal relation and the conditional relation of the classification. Causal outer interdependent origination describes the sequential process of natural growth where a seed leads to a sprout, which then develops into a leaf, stem, pedicel, pistil, flower, and finally a fruit. Each stage depends on the previous one but without conscious intention at any stage.

The conditional relation in outer interdependent origination is explained through the coming together of six elements: earth, water, fire, wind, space, and season. Each element plays a crucial role, such as the earth supports the seed, water moistens it, fire ripens it, wind opens it, space allows it room to grow, and season transforms it. None of these elements consciously perform their functions, yet their combined presence enables the sprout to form as the seed ceases. The sprout’s formation is not self-created, nor created by another or without cause rather it arises due to the specific conditions provided by these elements. This illustrates how the interdependence of these conditions leads to the natural process of growth and transformation.

Causal relation in inner interdependent origination begins with ignorance causing formations, leading through a sequence until birth causes aging and death. If ignorance does not arise, formations and the subsequent links in the chain do not manifest, preventing aging and death. The process unfolds without any element consciously producing or being produced by another, yet each stage arises from the existence of the preceding one.

The conditional relation in inner interdependent origination involves the coming together of six elements: earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness. The earth element provides solidity, water provides cohesion, fire digests food, wind manages inhalation and exhalation, space creates hollow areas, and consciousness generates name and form. These elements function without conscious intention, yet their combined presence leads to the formation of the body. None of these elements possess a self or individual identity; they are not beings, life forces, or personal entities. The body

⁹ Enlightenment.

¹⁰ Bhagavān refers to Buddha.

¹¹ Dharmasagara Translation Group, *The Noble Mahayana Sutra The Rice Seedling*, 2018.

arises from these interdependent conditions, without any element being inherently a self or belonging to anyone.

Thereafter the Sutra elucidates the twelve links of dependent origination namely,
 (1) Ignorance (2) Formation (3) Consciousness (4) Name and form (5) Six senses
 (6) Contact (7) Feeling (8) Craving (9) Clinging (10) Becoming (11) Birth
 (12) Old age and death

Ignorance gives rise to three types of formations: meritorious, unmeritorious, and immovable, which respectively lead to corresponding types of consciousness. Consciousness, in turn, conditions name and form, which enable actions through the six sense sources. These sense sources lead to contact, which produces sensation. Sensation conditions craving, leading to clinging and appropriation, which drive actions that result in becoming and rebirth. The process continues with birth leading to aging and death, illustrating the twelvefold dependent arising. This cycle, driven by various causes and conditions, is continuous and without an inherent self, reflecting the impermanent and interconnected nature of existence.

Arya Maitreya concludes the discourse by mentioning that, understanding Interdependent Origination with perfect wisdom leads to the realization of its true nature: unborn, uncreated, imperceptible, and devoid of inherent existence. One who comprehends this sees existence as unreal, impermanent, and selfless, abandoning reflections on past, future, and present states. All doctrines and beliefs in self, being, or ceremonies are relinquished as false and futile. Such understanding is prophesied to lead to an unexcelled awakening as a perfect Buddha.

The Buddha uses the analogy of a rice seedling, which gives rise to production depending on various conditions such as soil, water, sunlight, and appropriate nurturing. This simple yet effective metaphor serves to illustrate the principle that all phenomena arise in dependence on a complex web of causes and conditions. Just as rice seedlings cannot bring forth further production independently of these conditions, all phenomena similarly exist in dependence.

Elucidation of interdependent origination in treatises

The interdependent origination is widely explained in later treatises of several masters. One among them is the Nalanda master Arya Nagarjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. In the treatise, he states:

“Whatever is dependently co-arisen,
 That is explained to be emptiness.
 That, being a dependent designation,
 Is itself the middle way. (24.18)

“Something that is not dependently arisen
 Such a thing does not exist.
 Therefore a nonempty thing

Does not exist.” (24.19)¹²

Here, Arya Nagarjuna makes his point that Interdependent Origination and Emptiness are synonymous. Garfield in his commentary on *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* observes that the Emptiness and the phenomenal world are not two distinct things rather they are the two characterizations of the same thing.¹³

Arya Nagarjuna further states that this dependent designation is itself the middle way. This verse that states emptiness to be synonymous with interdependent origination and them being the middle can be proven by certain steps.

The first set of steps proves how emptiness is dependent origination, the second proves how dependent origination is middle and the last proves how emptiness means middle way.

i) To establish emptiness means dependent origination, one should reflect upon a set of five points:

1. Emptiness
2. Emptiness does not mean nothingness. It is the short form of the emptiness of independent existence.
3. The Emptiness of independent existence means nothing exists independently.
4. Nothing exists independently means everything exists by dependence.
5. Everything exists by dependence means everything is dependently originated.

Therefore emptiness means dependent origination.

ii) Dependent origination means the middle way.

To understand why dependent origination signifies the Middle Way, it is essential to examine the term itself, which comprises the words “Dependent” and “Origination.”

The term “Dependent” negates the notion of independence, thus rejecting the extreme of absolutism. Absolutism posits that phenomena exist independently and inherently, which dependent origination refutes.

The term “Origination,” on the other hand, rejects non-existence or nihilism. Nihilism suggests that phenomena do not exist at all, which is also contrary to the concept of dependent origination.

The combination of these two rejects the possibilities of both the extremes of nihilism and absolutism.

The rejection of these two extremes demonstrates that dependent origination falls into the middle way.

iii) Emptiness means middle way

Since emptiness is synonymous with dependent origination, and dependent origination is defined as the middle way, it logically follows that emptiness itself embodies the principles of the middle way.¹⁴

Emptiness, interdependent origination, and the middle way are interconnected

¹² Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakarikā*, 1995, p. 69.

¹³ Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakarikā*, 1995, p. 305.

¹⁴ Jinpa, *Science and Philosophy in the Indian Buddhist Classics: Vol 4*, 2023 pp. 351-353.

concepts that are central to understanding the ultimate truth (*Paramārtha Satya*). While they are not identical, they are synonymous in their implications.

Another significant literary work that vividly explains the interdependent origination is *In Praise of Dependent Origination* composed by the Tibetan master Lama Je Tsongkhapa. The text is dedicated to praising Buddha Shakyamuni for imparting the immaculate Dharma, which inspired Tsongkhapa to practice and finally experience the profound wisdom of emptiness. Recognizing the immense value of the teaching of dependent origination, the entire work extols its virtues, as the title suggests.

“Inherent existence, unmade and non-dependent;
Dependently- related, made and dependent;
How can these two states be combined
On one base, without contradiction? (26)

“Therefore, whatever arises dependently
Though always free of inherent existence,
Appears to exist from its own side;
So you said this is like an illusion.” (27)¹⁵

The idea of inherent existence is considered non-existent because it suggests independence, which is inherently impossible. All phenomena lack intrinsic existence and are instead dependently originated. Without the wisdom of emptiness, ordinary beings perceive objects as independently existing, like an illusion. While ordinary beings see phenomena as objectively real, in reality, they are akin to the nature of a dream. Every phenomenon is revealed to lack intrinsic nature only when subjected to ultimate analysis. As Arya Nagarjuna’s work *Ratnavali* (*The Precious Garland*) says,

“A form seen from a distance
Is seen clearly by those nearby.
If a mirage were water,
Why is water not seen by those nearby?” (52)

“The way this world is seen
As real by those afar
Is not so seen by those nearby
For whom it is signless like a mirage.” (53)¹⁶

The ultimate reality of any phenomenon is revealed only through close analysis that goes beyond conventional norms. Each phenomenon is like a mirage that disappears upon close examination. However, this does not mean that phenomena are non-existent; rather, they do not exist as ordinary beings perceive them, as objectively real.

¹⁵ Gyatso, *The Harmony of Emptiness and Dependent-Arising*, 1992, p. 117.

¹⁶ Hopkins, *Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland*, 2007, p. 100.

Ecological Crises: A Scientific Perspective

In recent years, the world has become increasingly aware of environmental issues and the urgent need to tackle the ecological crises threatening our planet. Ecology, the study of relationships between organisms and their environments¹⁷, offers crucial insights into the complex and interdependent nature of natural systems. The term ecology comes from the Greek words “oikos” (house) and “logos” (study)¹⁸, highlighting the interconnectedness of life and the environment. It provides a framework for understanding how living organisms, including humans, interact with each other and the physical world. Ecology is a dynamic and multifaceted field, examining the complex web of interactions between organisms and their surroundings, from the smallest ecosystems like ponds to the largest, such as oceans. These studies help us comprehend the natural world, its processes, and the effects of human activities on ecosystems.

The importance of ecology has grown in the face of global environmental challenges. Problems like climate change, deforestation, pollution, and the overuse of natural resources pose significant threat to ecological balance. Ecologists play a vital role in conservation efforts by offering scientific knowledge essential for protecting endangered species, restoring degraded ecosystems, and managing natural resources sustainably.

Understanding climate change

The United Nations defines climate change as long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. While such shifts can be natural since 1800s the human activities have been the major driver for climate change, primarily due to the emission of greenhouse gases. The climate change 2023 synthesis report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states that human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming, with global surface temperature reaching 1.1°C above 1850–1900 in 2011–2020. It also states that the emissions have continued to increase from 2010–2019, with unequal historical and ongoing contributions arising from unsustainable energy use, land use and land-use change, lifestyles, and patterns of consumption and production across regions, between and within countries, and between individuals.¹⁹

Origin of climate change

The Earth's climate has always been dynamic, influenced by natural factors such as

¹⁷ Begon, Townsend and Harper, *Ecology: From Individuals to Ecosystem*, 2006, p. xi.

¹⁸ Schwarz and Jax, *Etymology and Original Sources of the term Ecology*, 2011, p. 145.

¹⁹ Ed. Lee and Romero, *Climate Change 2023*, 2023, p. 4. Also refer to “IPCC, 2023: Sections.” In *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, p. 42.

volcanic eruptions, variations in solar radiation, and natural greenhouse gas concentrations. These factors have caused periods of warming and cooling throughout the planet's history, including ice ages.

However, the current phase of rapid climate change is primarily attributed to anthropocentric activities. The Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century marked the beginning of significant human impact on the climate. The widespread use of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas) for energy, deforestation for agriculture and urbanization, and industrial processes has led to an increase in the concentration of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere.

Latest Studies and Reports on Anthropogenic Ecological Challenges

The IPCC Synthesis Report of 2023 states that human activities resulting in the uncontrolled emission of greenhouse gases accelerated global warming to increase the global temperature by 1.1 degrees Celsius by 2011-2020 compared to 1850-1900.

The Emission Gap Report 2023: Broken Record – Temperatures hit new highs, yet world fails to cut emissions (again) published by UNEP stated that the Global Green House Gas emissions have reached a record high of 57.4 GtCO₂e in 2022, growing by 1.2 percent from the previous year, the major (two third) of the contribution due to the fossil CO₂ emission which has the potential of global warming up to 100 years.

Chapter 10 of the IPCC report examines Asia's climate, noting a general rise in surface temperatures across the region since the 20th century. It highlights significant climate changes throughout Asia, affecting various ecosystems such as terrestrial, coastal, and glacial habitats. The report indicates that Asian countries are facing hotter summers, rapidly growing energy demands for cooling, and increasing population growth with high confidence.²⁰

A latest report published by the Ministry of Family Welfare, Government of India, cases of more than 110 heatstroke deaths have been reported in India this summer, between March 1st and June 8th and more than 40000 individuals were injured due to the same.²¹

An Assessment of Long-Term Changes in Mortalities Due to Extreme Weather Events in India: A Study of 50 Years' Data, 1970–2019, an article published in 2021 on Weather and Climate Extremes has stated that the annual extreme weather events have been reported in Northern India in the past few decades by putting forward the evidence of 50-year data from 1970- 2019. Due to this extreme change in the weather and climate pattern, the anticipation of heat waves in Northern India has increased 100 times than before in summer. This has been seen apparently as the temperature has been soaring more than 50 degrees Celsius in many parts of the country this year. While many regions of India were facing extreme heat, some other areas were struggling with unexpected rains and the subsequent calamities including floods and landslides.²²

²⁰ IPCC Sixth Assessment Report, 2022

²¹ *The Times of India*, 2024

²² Ray, K., (et al). "An assessment of long-term changes in mortalities due to extreme weather events in India," 2021.

Ecological crises: Buddhist philosophical perspective

We have discussed the scientific origins of ecological crises and climate change above; however, it is necessary to examine their roots from a philosophical perspective as well. It is well known that scientific solutions alone, whether implemented by individuals or society, will not fully address these escalating challenges. Humans, as the “highest and most intelligent beings” in the animal kingdom, are not just rational but also emotional beings. Human attitudes play a major role in solving any kind of problem. Therefore, science and philosophy need to work together to tackle contemporary global challenges. Buddhist philosophy is arguably the most scientifically aligned and compatible philosophy. Addressing a scientific issue from a Buddhist perspective is significant for several reasons, as it introduces unique philosophical, ethical, and practical dimensions that can complement and enrich scientific understanding.

Nature has always been a kind witness to the major life events of Buddha Shakyamuni, from his birth under the Sala tree, his meditation under the Jamba tree in his palace garden, his attainment of Buddhahood under the Bodhi tree in Uruvela, the first turning of the wheel of Dharma in the deer park at Sarnath, to his Mahaparinirvana between two *Sala* trees in Kushinagar. It is also noteworthy that Buddha often delivered teachings in natural settings such as forests, gardens, and mountains, highlighting the importance of the natural environment in spiritual practices. Buddha consistently showed reverence to nature, recognizing that all life within nature significantly contributes to spiritual practices as well. The significance of nature in spiritual practices is also explained in the eighth century Nalanda master Bodhisattva²³ Śāntideva’s text *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*:

“When shall I come to dwell in forests
Amongst the deers, the birds and the trees,
They say nothing unpleasant
And are delightful to associate with?” (8.25)

“When dwelling in caves,
In empty shrines and at the feet of trees,
Never look back-
Cultivate detachment.” (8.26)²⁴

These verses illustrate how nature can support one’s spiritual practice, particularly meditation. Bodhisattva Śāntideva advises that the practitioner (Bodhisattva) should distance themselves from difficult, unreliable, and childish beings, and instead seek refuge in nature. (Verse 21-24) Nature, being free from all kinds of restraints, can

²³ Bodhisattva is one who has cultivated Bodhicitta or the Awakening mind which is a spontaneous altruistic intention to become Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings. In this context, Bodhisattva is an epithet given to Śāntideva in Nalanda tradition. According to the tradition, all the seventeen Nalanda Mahapanditas (Masters), including Śāntideva are also given the epithet of Acharya.

²⁴ Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, (trans), Batchelor, 1979, p. 93.

positively contribute to the spirit of meditation. It helps the practitioner detach from their attachment to possessions. What is the root cause of ecological crises or any kind of suffering?

The second noble truth addresses the origin of suffering, which arises from ignorance, specifically self-grasping ignorance. This form of ignorance perceives an independent and inherent nature of existence, distorting the view of reality. It is the inherent view of self or “I” that leads to the accumulation of negative karma due to unwholesome thoughts and actions, ultimately causing suffering. Arya²⁵ Nagarjuna, the second-third century Nalanda Master and prominent figure of Mahayana Buddhism explains this in his work *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Chapter 18, Verse 5:

“Action and misery having ceased, there is nirvana.
Action and misery come from conceptual thought.
This comes from mental fabrication.
Fabrication ceases through emptiness”²⁶

Arya Nagarjuna’s explanation of the rise and cessation of samsara is also known as the Five-fold Profundity, where he elaborates on this mechanism through five steps.

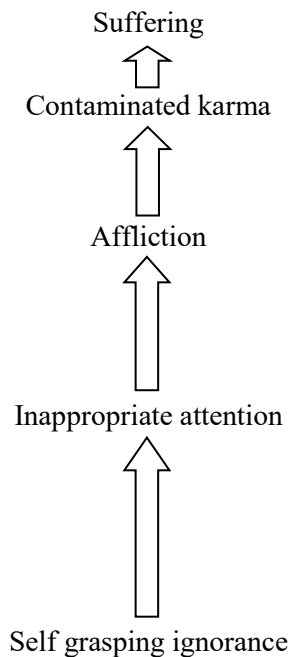


Figure1: Five-fold Profundity of Arya Nagarjuna

Self-grasping ignorance, the root of all sufferings, distorts one’s view to perceive

²⁵ Nagarjuna is given the epithet of Arya according to the Nalanda tradition as he is considered to be one of the greatest Buddhist philosophers of all time.

²⁶ Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamakarika*, 1995, p. 67.

oneself as inherently real and objectively existent. This leads to inappropriate attention, exaggerating the perceived qualities of objects. Consequently, this gives rise to afflictions, which fall into three categories: attachment, aversion, and ignorance. Attachment involves an involuntary pull, aversion involves an involuntary push, and ignorance is a mind whose apprehension does not align with reality. These afflictions lead to contaminated karma, the unwholesome karma that manifests through the three doors: body, speech, and mind. As it is known that “the karma one accumulates will not go to waste (whether positive or negative),” its repercussions ultimately trap one in the cycle of samsara.

To understand human-led ecological degradation and climate change, this mechanism of samsara must be viewed in a broader sense. By recognizing the interconnectedness of nature, ecology in a philosophical sense can be seen as two-dimensional: internal ecology and external ecology, or inner ecology and outer ecology. Inner ecology refers to one’s internal state, which can be wholesome, unwholesome, or a mixture of both. External ecology refers to the external environment of the being. This external ecology is always a reflection of the internal ecology, meaning that a person’s thoughts are manifested through their physical and verbal actions, which then impact their immediate environment. When one is under the influence of self-grasping ignorance and its subsequent build-ups, they tend to act negatively towards the outer world, which ultimately bears the consequences of these actions such as ecological crises. The unwholesome nature of one’s mind can lead to apathy towards the external environment, resulting in its degradation through various actions such as contributing to different forms of pollution, felling trees, and clearing forests.

Interdependent Origination and Ecology

It has been explained in detail in above that how interdependent origination pertains to every single phenomenon by elucidating its three levels. Similarly, interconnectedness is evident in ecology, emphasizing the interdependence of all forms of life within an ecosystem. Ecology, the scientific study of interactions between organisms and their environment, echoes the principle of interdependent origination. An ecosystem is a complex web where organisms, including humans and animals, interact with each other and their surroundings, coexisting in a way that is crucial for their survival.

When it comes to the concept of ecology or any global issue, we must see it deeper from the light of the two truths- the conventional (relative) and ultimate truth. Any kind of mundane realities can be categorized under conventional truth while the emptiness of every such phenomenon is the ultimate truth. Thus ecology is categorized under the conventional reality. Scholar S R Bhatt on his article *Buddhism and Ecology* mentions that the concern for the well being of mental and physical world an important element throughout the history of Buddhism.²⁷ We can consider the ‘well being mental world’ as the wisdom that leads one ultimately to the attainment of Nirvana and

²⁷ Bhatt, *Buddhism and Ecology*, 2008, p. 107.

Buddhahood, while the physical world can be considered as the conventional reality. Buddhism is never about acceptance of ultimate reality by rejecting the existence of mundane reality, because the conventional reality is the medium through which one can reach the ultimate. Hence the well being of the physical world is equally important as the mental well being for the achievement of the ultimate goal. In *Bodhicittavivarana*, Arya Nagarajuna quotes,

“Those who understand this emptiness of phenomena,
Yet (also) conform to the law of karma and its results.
This is more amazing than amazing!
This is more wondrous than wondrous!” (88)²⁸

This verse highlights the importance of acknowledging the law of karma and other conventional realities, even while being aware of the ultimate nature of the world. This is often quoted as the marking of understanding the emptiness of objective existence by the Prasangika Madhyamaka School.

Geshe Lobsang Khenrab and Geshe Tenzin Choephel in their article *The Dependent Origination and Ecology* connect the wisdom aspect and the practice (merit) with the ecology. They say that the core teaching of Buddhism is the view of dependent origination and the character of compassion and non-violence that one engages in his day to day life. It is from these strong roots of view and character that one exists and coexists in harmony with the environment and puts forth other virtues.²⁹

Interdependent origination can be seen on a much larger canvas as it pervades the whole of the universe where every phenomenon is interconnected. This is illustrated in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* with the metaphor of the infinite jeweled net of *Indra*. This distinctive teaching forms the basis of the Hua-yan school of Buddhism, which advocates the principle of “all in one, one in all.”³⁰

Interestingly, parallels can be drawn between this concept and smaller ecosystems discussed in the scientific world. For instance, a small pond is considered an entire universe of ecosystems, abundant with millions of organisms (both micro and macro) that coexist in remarkable ways. Applying this perspective to a plate of cooked rice on the table, we can discern the innumerable factors contributing to its presence in its current state. From the initial rice seedling, the farmer who planted it, and the nurturing climatic conditions, to the soil and water supporting its growth, and the individuals involved in harvesting and processing—the entire chain of events unfolds in interconnected dependency, each step reliant on those preceding and succeeding it.

From the above examples we can derive how complex the web of phenomena is, and how crucial it is to co-exist for the survival of oneself and that of the other. This opens up oneself to the need to practice ethical conduct and virtues.

²⁸ Nagarjuna, *A Commentary on the Awakening Mind*, (trans), Jinpa, 2007, p. 9.

²⁹ Khenrab and Choephel, *The Dependent Origination and Ecology*, 2008, pp. 131-133.

³⁰ Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, 1993, p. 41.

Buddhist Ethics for Ecological Conservation

Given that it is due to the harmful actions of humans that ecological balance has been disrupted and the world is rapidly moving towards destruction, it becomes our responsibility as humans to restore this balance and ensure the well-being of the entire planet. Recognizing the interconnected relationship between oneself and the environment, the next crucial step involves cultivating virtues. Ethical practices in Buddhism form the foundational principles alongside wisdom. These practices are diligently followed by the highest practitioners, the Bodhisattvas, over eons as they strive towards their ultimate goal of Buddhahood, combining meditation with the wisdom of emptiness. While Bodhisattvas engage in these practices at a profound level, their fundamental essence can be embraced by anyone, regardless of gender, race, or religious background. Some of them include the practice of:

- Four Immeasurables
- Patience
- Generosity

Four Immeasurables

The four immeasurable or *Chatvari Brahmavihara* are those four virtues a practitioner cultivates on their journey to their desired goal of Nirvana and Buddhahood. However, this can be practiced by any ordinary person and it can bring forth immense amount of merit. They are:

- a. Immeasurable loving kindness- a mental state of love which wishes the immeasurable beings to be endowed with happiness and its causes.
- b. Immeasurable compassion- a mental state of love that wishes immeasurable beings to be freed of suffering and its causes.
- c. Immeasurable joy- a mental state of love which wishes the immeasurable beings not to be separated from the happiness that they are endowed with.
- d. Immeasurable equanimity- a mental state of love that wishes immeasurable beings to be freed of the biased attitude of being excessively attached to some and aversion towards others.

These mental activities of wishing others to be freed of different kinds of suffering can bring forth a reformation from within.

Patience

The practice of patience offers profound benefits, as evidenced by its practitioners. These benefits extend both internally and externally. Patience has multiple connotations in Buddhism. They include the patience with regard to time; forbearance with regard to enduring pain and the fortitude that gives the one to face adversities. It is the mental unhappiness that fuels anger- the opposite of patience, which can destroy goodness in one. This can lead one to harm others and his environment which can lead to further undesirable consequences. Hence cultivating patience stands significant.

Generosity

Generosity is a virtue that acts as the direct antidote to stinginess. A self-centered attitude, which values oneself over others, leads to stinginess and the drive to amass material wealth. In this pursuit, one often neglects the importance of conserving the immediate environment. Over time, this neglect can result in ecological crises, endangering both one and others. Thus, practicing generosity is important for fostering a selfless mindset and ensuring environmental preservation.

Generosity, the first of the *Paramita*³¹, is classified into four:

1. Generosity of material resource
2. Generosity of love
3. Generosity of protection
4. Generosity of Dharma

Out of the four, the first three can be practiced from the perspective of ecological conservation.

For instance, providing essential resources for forest preservation, demonstrating loving kindness and care towards all living organisms including animals and plants, and safeguarding endangered species or conserving near-extinct plant or animal species.

Conservation of Khangchendzonga National Park

We have discussed above how Buddhist wisdom and practices are closely intertwined with ecology. The foundational principle of Interdependent Origination illustrates that the world's existence hinges on interdependence, emphasizing the necessity of coexistence for sustaining the world. While Buddhist wisdom elucidates the reality of existence, ethical practices such as compassion, loving-kindness, and altruism empower individuals to contribute to the well-being of the world.

However, doubts may arise regarding the practicality and feasibility of these ideas. An example of successful conservation effort with the immense contribution of Buddhist ideology and ethics is the Khangchendzonga National Park of Sikkim, India. Khangchendzonga National Park (KNP) in Sikkim, nestled in the Eastern Himalayas, represents a unique blend of nature and culture, earning it the status of India's only UNESCO Mixed Heritage Site in 2016. Spanning 1,784 square kilometers, the park includes diverse ecosystems across various elevations, such as Eastern Himalayan Alpine Meadows, Broadleaf and Conifer Forests, and the Tibetan Plateau Steppe.³² The park's designation as a mixed heritage site reflects its deep cultural and natural significance, rooted in Sikkim's animistic traditions and later enriched by the inception of Buddhism.

Buddhism was introduced in Sikkim in three phases. The first phase occurred in the eighth century when the great Buddhist Master Guru Padmasambhava who is also revered as Guru Rinpoche. According to tradition, Guru Rinpoche traveled to Sikkim on

³¹ Paramita refers to Perfection. The ten paramita are the practices one in Buddhist path follow in order to attain the desired goal of Nirvana and Buddhahood.

³² Denjongpa and Lachungpa, *Khangchendzonga National Park UNESCO World Heritage Site*, 2016, p. 8.

his way to Tibet, where he subdued the local spirits, transforming them into protectors of the land and elevating *Dzonga*³³ as the supreme deity of Sikkim and named the land as *Beyul Demojong*, meaning “the valley of rice”. He then set this land apart from the rest of the mundane world as a worldly paradise for the practice of Buddhism when it is in threat elsewhere.³⁴

The second phase of Buddhism’s spread in Sikkim took place in the early fifteenth century with the arrival of *terton*³⁵ Rigzin Godem Chen in fourteenth century. He is believed to have discovered several *terma*³⁶ that were left hidden by Guru Rinpoche before him closing the gates of *Beyul Demojong*, which became the foundation of the *Jang Ter*³⁷ tradition.

The third and the most significant diffusion occurred in the seventeenth century when three monks from Tibet- Khatsum Namkha Jigme, Kathod Kuntu Zangpo, and Ngadag Sempa Rigzin Phuntshog converged in Sikkim from different directions. After meeting at Yuksom, they established the Namgyal Dynasty by crowning Phuntsog Namgyal as the first king, with Khangchendzonga as a witness.³⁸

These three stages of diffusion vividly reflect the principal of dependent origination, particularly in its deep interconnection between nature, human society, and spiritual practice. From the very first phase, Guru Rinpoche’s recognition of Sikkim as *Beyul Demojong*, underscores the intrinsic link between ecological sanctity and the well-being of sentient beings. His act of subduing local spirits and consecrating the land highlights the view that nature is not separate from human existence but is integral to the spiritual and social fabric of life. The second diffusion, marked by Rigzin Godem Chen’s rediscovery of Guru Rinpoche’s hidden treasures, further emphasizes the sanctity of the environment as a space where Dharma flourishes, reinforcing the responsibility to protect it. The third and most significant diffusion, led by Lhatsun Chenpo and other two other monks, illustrates this principle through rituals dedicated to Khangchendzonga and the land’s deities upon opening the *Beyul Demojong*, affirming the mutual dependence between humans and the natural world.

This rich cultural and religious history continues to hold deep significance in Sikkim’s cultural identity as it acknowledges and venerates the environment as a living entity essential for societal harmony. Thus, Buddhist ideology and ethical practices have profoundly shaped Sikkimese society for generations and are deeply ingrained in the people of Sikkim.

The principle of interdependent origination has strongly influenced the conservation ethos in Sikkim highlighting the interconnectedness of all life forms and

³³ *Dzonga* is believed to be a deity who resides on of Khangchendzonga Peak. He was one of the major fierce local spirits who was subdued and transformed into the protector deity of land by Guru Rinpoche.

³⁴ Mullard, *Opening the Hidden Land*, 2011, p. 9.

³⁵ *Terton* refers to treasure revealer. It is believed that Guru Rinpoche has concealed several Dharma treasures, as in teachings, in many parts of the Himalayan region in various forms. Terton are the chosen ones who can reveal these precious treasures.

³⁶ *Terma* or *ter* refers to treasure

³⁷ Northern treasure

³⁸ Wangchuk and Zulca, *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit*, 2007, pp. 85-87.

the importance of ethical practices such as compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity in environmental conservation.

Sikkim's cultural practices not only celebrate their sacred landscape but also embody a deep sense of responsibility to preserve it for future generations. It includes the recitation of the *Nye sol* in every monastery of Sikkim on a daily basis. This prayer codified by Lhatsun Chenpo—one of the three monks believed to have opened the gates of *Beyul Demojong*—originated from a significant thanksgiving ritual dedicated to the land's deities, particularly the protector deity *Dzonga*. *Nye sol* holds special significance for ecological conservation because it includes the acknowledgment and apology for environmental transgressions like deforestation, pollution of lakes, and the degradation of hills and mountains and also serves as a guide to prevent such mistakes in the future.³⁹

A significant and unique cultural tradition in Sikkim is the annual celebration of the *Pang Lhabsol* festival, dedicated to honoring the guardian deity of *Beyul Demojong*, *Dzonga*.

On this festival, the mountain deity is invoked and prayed to for continued protection over Sikkim, highlighted by the vibrant display of the *pangtoed cham*—a distinctive masked dance performed exclusively for this occasion.⁴⁰

In addition to cultural traditions, there are also genuine efforts from stakeholders to protect their land. Some notable examples are the Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee and the HimalRakshak Volunteer system.

Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC)

Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee is a non-government organization working from the small town of Yuksom East Sikkim. Formed in 1996, the NGO actively engages among the stakeholders promoting conservation of the nature and sustainable income generation practices. In an interview with the president of Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee, Tsering Uden Bhutia,⁴¹ she explained that the organization was founded in response to the tourism boom in Yuksom, foreseeing the potential negative environmental impacts. Their goal was to promote sustainable and eco-friendly tourism. They advocate for responsible tourism by raising awareness among visitors about the importance of preserving natural environments and consistently collaborate with schools, local communities, the forest and other governmental departments, and monasteries on conservation efforts.

Tsering Uden Bhutia mentioned that the organization collaborated with Pemayangtse monastery⁴² in 2016- 17 in implementing a zero-waste policy, which was

³⁹ Denjongpa & Lachungpa, 2016, p. 184.

⁴⁰ Cham is a masked dance commonly performed throughout the Tibetan Buddhist culture but the pangtoedcham is unique and specific to the Pang Lhabsol festival.

⁴¹ Tsering Uden Bhutia, President, Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee, Yuksom, age, 45 years, interviewed via phone call, 18th June, 2024.

⁴² Pemayangtse monastery, located in Gyashing, West Sikkim, is one of the oldest and most important monasteries of Sikkim. It was founded by Lhatsun Chenpo.

successfully materialized later. Notably, Yuksom had banned single-use plastic as early as 1998, even before the global outcry against plastic pollution began. The success of KCC's efforts has extended beyond Yuksom, as they have collaborated with numerous state, national, and international organizations to promote ecological conservation and sustainable development. They also played a significant role in KNP being awarded the title of UNESCO Mixed Heritage Site in 2016.

Additionally, the waste management and recycling facility established in Yuksom exemplifies a prudent, well-coordinated, and environmentally responsible conservation initiative.

Bhutia, a Buddhist, explained that the people of Sikkim in general and Yuksom in particular, consider their land sacred. They view Khangchendzonga National Park not just as a sacred site, but as a sacred landscape. Every tree, flower, insect, and lake is considered sacred, and they feel a deep responsibility to conserve the land. She believes her ability to work for the well-being of the community and the environment is due to her past good karmas. This deeply ingrained belief in the law of karma fosters a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others and the environment.

Himal Rakshak Volunteers

Himal Rakshaks are community-based volunteers appointed for monitoring the high-altitude areas of the Khangchendzonga National Park. This system was introduced in 2006 by the Department of Forest, Environment, and Wildlife Management, Government of Sikkim, in association with World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)⁴³. Himal Rakshaks are residents of Sikkim, primarily from Yuksom, who have a genuine concern for wildlife conservation. With traditional livelihoods that rely on nature, they have worked closely with the environment for generations.⁴⁴

In an interview with one of the Himal Rakshak volunteers, Hissey Tsering Bhutia⁴⁵, he mentioned that there are more than 35 volunteers currently working. These volunteers primarily serve as porters, guides, and cooks for trekkers visiting Dzongri and Goechala summits.

Hissey Tsering Bhutia noted that since the inception of their system, the volunteers have collaborated with forest department officers for the conservation of the park. This includes conducting bi-annual patrolling and installing cameras in various high-altitude regions.

Coming from a monastic background, Bhutia believes that deeply ingrained Buddhist principles and values play a significant role in the conservation efforts of KNP stakeholders. He stated, "We believe in the value system of karma: if we do good deeds, we will get good results. So, keeping that in mind, we do good works so that we and our environment will stay safe and sustainable."

⁴³ The system came in force in 2008 under the leadership of WWF- Information collected from HisseyTseringBhutia during the interview.

⁴⁴ Government of Sikkim, *Guidelines for the Appointment of Himal Rakshak*, 2006.

⁴⁵ Hissey Tsering Bhutia, HimalRakshak Volunteer, Yuksom, age, 37, interviewed via phone call, 17th June, 2024.

Limitation and way forward

Buddhist wisdom and practices can contribute effectively to tackling the escalating global ecological challenges, complementing scientific and technological methods. The concept of dependent origination is central to understanding the interconnectedness and impermanence of all phenomena. In the modern world, where ecological crises like climate change, pollution, and environmental degradation are urgent concerns, this principle can highlight the interdependence of all living beings and natural systems.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that while these principles are promising; their practical application on such a large and increasingly uncontrollable scale is a formidable task. The successful implementation of Buddhist wisdom and practices largely depends on the attitudinal transformation of individuals. This transformation must come from within, highlighting that the real challenge is to inspire broad internal change.

Buddhist philosophy does not seek to achieve short-term, mundane goals. Instead, it offers a comprehensive way of life that guides practitioners toward permanent liberation from suffering. The journey towards this ultimate goal is gradual, spanning eons of consistent practice and profound personal transformation. Therefore, expecting immediate results from applying Buddhist principles to address urgent ecological issues is unrealistic. The nature of Buddhist practice inherently involves a long-term commitment, and significant changes may only become apparent over extended periods.

Ecological crises are inherently global, affecting diverse populations with varied cultural backgrounds. For those unfamiliar with Buddhism, the relevance of its principles to environmental issues might not be immediately apparent. This cultural diversity poses a significant challenge in raising awareness and educating such people on Buddhist wisdom as an approach to ecological sustainability.

To effectively integrate the Buddhist wisdom of Interdependent Origination and ethical practices, to combat ecological degradation, it is essential to address these limitations through strategic actions and initiatives. The application of this wisdom should emphasize the necessity for collective action in addressing environmental issues, while promoting mindfulness and incorporating ethical practices.

Promoting interfaith and interdisciplinary dialogue on a larger scale can raise awareness among people. Encouraging dialogue between Buddhism and other religious, philosophical, and scientific traditions can create a more inclusive and holistic approach to environmental issues. These discourses can help translate Buddhist insights into universally applicable principles and practices, making them more accessible and relevant to diverse audiences. National and international conferences and seminars on interfaith and interdisciplinary dialogues, conducted by many Buddhist organizations like Tibet House in New Delhi have successfully demonstrated how this system of sharing knowledge can be embraced for the greater good.

Advocacy and policy engagement by Buddhist communities and leaders is another effective approach. Buddhist communities and leaders can engage in advocacy and policy-making to influence environmental regulations and practices. By

participating in public discourse and collaborating with governments and organizations, they can help shape policies that reflect ethical considerations and promote sustainability. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama has consistently advocated for nature conservation globally, voicing against the exploitation of nature and animals and underscoring the interdependent nature of the world. Another significant example is the establishment and activities of ‘Khoryug,’ the environmental protection association founded under the patronage of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje. Under this initiative, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries in the Himalayas carry out projects focused on environmental protection, sustainability, and climate change resilience.⁴⁶

Community-based initiatives inspired by Buddhist principles can also have significant local impacts. For instance, Tsering Uden Bhutia mentioned efforts of Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee to encourage people to use cotton and recyclable *lungta*⁴⁷ (Wyl: *klungrta*) and *khadag*⁴⁸ in Khangchendzonga National Park, as synthetic cloth offerings, are popular due to their low cost but contribute to pollution. By promoting the use of cotton, even if slightly more expensive, conservation efforts are prioritized. Integrating sustainable practices within monastic settings is an effective way to initiate conservation and provide a model for the lay community. Similar to the Khoryug initiative, the Pemayangtse monastery has been proactive in raising awareness about environmental degradation. It has been declared the first zero-waste monastery in Sikkim, banning offerings wrapped in plastics. Tsering Uden Bhutia noted that people listen to the words of monks and *tulkus* with great reverence, and the monks of Pemayangtse have consistently tried to raise awareness about environmental conservation. Several other monasteries in Sikkim, such as the Guru Kubum Taklung Sang-Ngag Choekhorling located in Deorali, East Sikkim, have also banned the use of plastic on their premises and also following several conservation activities.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Ecological degradation and the resultant climate change are the most pressing issues humanity faces today. At the heart of these crises lies the impact of human activities, which have significantly altered the planet’s natural systems. Human activities have led to significant ecological degradation through deforestation, pollution, overexploitation of resources, and the emission of greenhouse gases. Industrialization and urbanization have accelerated the consumption of natural resources, leading to habitat destruction and the extinction of numerous species. The consequences of these are profound, ranging from global warming and biodiversity loss to extreme weather events like flash floods and sea-level rise. A significant barrier to addressing ecological degradation and climate change is the widespread apathy towards nature. Many people fail to recognize

⁴⁶ See 8th Khoryug Conference, Kagyu Office of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa.

⁴⁷ Wind horse prayer flags.

⁴⁸ Ceremonial scarf made of silk used widely among Himalayan Buddhist cultures.

⁴⁹ *The Sikkim Chronicle*, 2023.

the interdependent nature of the entire world; they rather view nature primarily as a resource to be exploited for economic gain. This anthropocentric mindset prioritizes short-term benefits over long-term sustainability, leading to policies and practices that harm the environment. This apathy is reflected in the lack of urgency in addressing climate change. Despite overwhelming scientific evidence, political and public responses have been slow and inadequate. The challenges of climate change are often viewed as distant problems that do not require immediate action, leading to procrastination and inaction.

Science and technology have been advancing rapidly, presenting numerous innovations that could help address the worsening challenges of ecological degradation and climate change. Technological solutions such as renewable energy, carbon capture and storage, and sustainable agricultural practices are vital for reducing environmental damage and are receiving significant attention. However, to effectively combat ecological degradation and climate change, a combined approach that integrates technological advancements with attitudinal and behavioral reforms is essential. Technology alone cannot solve these issues; there must be a fundamental shift in how humans perceive and interact with nature. This shift requires a deep understanding of the interdependent relationship between humans and the natural world. People must recognize the critical importance of conserving nature for the sustenance of both the environment and humanity.

While these philosophical and ethical frameworks offered by Buddhism, provide a robust foundation for fostering empathy and sustainable interaction with nature, their practical implementation faces significant challenges. These include the necessity for widespread internal attitudinal transformation and the cultural diversity that can hinder the immediate acceptance of Buddhist principles in environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, strategic actions such as promoting interfaith and interdisciplinary dialogues, engaging in advocacy and policy-making, initiating community-based projects, and integrating sustainable practices within monastic settings, offer promising pathways forward. By embracing these approaches and taking inspiration from several successful conservation efforts like the Khangchendzonga National Park and many other models, there is potential to create a more inclusive, holistic, and effective global response to ecological degradation, ultimately nurturing a deeper connection and responsibility towards the environment.

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