Buddhism and Deep Ecology: Protection of Spiritual and Cultural Values for Natural Tropical Forests in Asia

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Abstract—Buddhism and Deep Ecology have many similarities, including their ecocentric approach and concern for all living beings. They contribute to the protection of spiritual and cultural values associated with natural tropical forests in Asian Buddhist countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka, and both have a spiritual basis and present a holistic, value-oriented approach for protection of tropical forests. After a preliminary discussion of tropical forests and spirituality, Buddhism, and Deep Ecology, including their integrations and mutual contributions, this paper describes selected spiritual and cultural values within the above framework.

Tropical Forests and Spirituality

Without unforeseen drastic changes in the next decade, protected areas such as national parks and wildlife refuges may well be the only feasible and permanent way of saving some of the remaining Asian tropical forests and their rich biodiversity. However, most of the protected areas in Asia are already under severe depredation due to illegal logging, agricultural encroachments, poaching, and pithing (burning inside of trees). Such destructive practices occur in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist countries in Asia. In Buddhist countries, much of this depredation is associated with villages, even where Buddhist monasteries (or wats, temples, or pagodas) are often nearby. Current efforts, such as through foreign aid, government programs, legislation, nongovernmental organizations, science and technology, reforestation, and law enforcement, are simply not working to halt this irreversible destruction and degradation (legal and illegal) of Asian tropical forests and their protected areas. Obviously, something much more is needed, along with new ways of relating to forests, particularly protected forests.

Today there is greater recognition being given to the interrelationships between spiritual beliefs, practices of a community, and how that community relates to the environment and to the world. As a result, more people are looking at the potential for finding spiritually based solutions to problems that get at the basic causes and values, including ignorance and greed (as noted in Buddhism). These spiritual solutions can include changing values and ways of thinking and behaving from anthropocentric or "people centered" to ecocentered where all living beings are considered to be of value.

Buddhism

Buddhism presents a perception and awareness of nature through interrelatedness, "Oneness," loving kindness, and compassion for "all living beings." Buddhism is often summarized as the extinguishing of suffering. The Dhamma or Dharma (laws and teachings of nature) or nature orientation of Buddhism has numerous values and principles that are correlated with Deep Ecology.

Buddhism is based on impermanence, that everything is changing, that everything is constantly rising and falling away. It also acknowledges that everything that happens (human) depends upon the mind and conditioning. Buddhism focuses on the extinguishing of suffering, which is caused by attachment to anything through ignorance or greed. Buddhism recognizes impermanence in nature, or that everything is changing, or in process of changing, so that nothing is really worthwhile to attach to in the first place (such as illusions). Thus, by detaching, ignorance, greed, and suffering are extinguished.

To stop attachments, Buddhism provides the eight-fold noble path of right understanding: right motives or thoughts, right speech, right action, right means of livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Buddhism is basically Dhamma or Dharma (same) that has two interrelated areas: (1) the teachings of Buddha, and (2) nature that includes everything, including the laws of nature that apply to all life. An example of the teachings is the compassion and loving kindness that were taught by Buddha. Thus Buddhism has a respect for all beings and approaches them with compassion and loving kindness, such as a reverence for all life. The blessings of Buddhists often state, "May all beings be happy," and, "May all beings be peaceful."

On the Dhamma or Dharma in nature, it basically means that we (humans) are simply a part of life along with other living beings and that we are included in nature as just another species or living being among other living beings. It also means that there are laws in nature, like impermanence, that operate and apply to nature. Many of these values and laws from Dhamma or Dharma can be correlated with Deep Ecology.

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As a highly respected religion or philosophy in many Asian countries, Buddhism has great potential for influencing people and their thinking, values, and behavior toward tropical forests under Deep Ecology orientations. However, much of this potential has not been developed, nor have many Monks, Nuns, and lay people actually been exposed to Deep Ecology orientations per se. With increasing pressures on tropical forests, many Buddhist leaders are bringing forth more deep ecological orientations on an intuitive basis from their Buddhist backgrounds as well as through training experiences.

Deep Ecology

Deep Ecology can be considered to include spiritual dimensions of the environmental movement. It asks deeper questions that get at the real causes (such as ignorance and greed) behind issues as well as the "place," ethical concerns, ecological limits, and so forth. Deep Ecology recognizes Homo sapiens as a single species in the integrity of the ecosystem or universe, along with all of the other numerous species of plants and animals, and their interrelationships.

This deep ecological awareness is basically spiritual in nature; it recognizes that other forms of life on earth (and thus their well-being) have intrinsic value and inherent worth regardless of their "usefulness" for people. It further recognizes that human beings are only one particular strand in the web of life and calls for a paradigm shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric. Deep Ecology and its spirituality call for changing the way people think and act to include these new spiritual and value perspectives.

The following statement is "The Deep Ecology Platform" by Arne Naess and George Sessions, two ecophilosophers:

> 1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth, intrinsic value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
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> 2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are values in themselves.
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> 3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
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> 4. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
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> 5. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
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> 6. Policies must therefore be changed. The changes in policies affect basic economic, technological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
>
> 7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent worth) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be profound awareness of the difference between big and small.
>
> 8. Those who prescribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes (Sessions 1995).

Both Buddhism and Deep Ecology have an ecocentric and spiritual approach. They both define those problems created through ignorance and greed and solve such problems by moving from an anthropocentric orientation to a spiritually based ecocentric approach. Both Buddhism and Deep Ecology are basically concerned with change. They use values and perspectives that are based on spiritual and holistic principles for positive change in paradigms, attitudes, and practices for tropical forest protection.

Such change is based along clear and realistic lines contained both within Buddhism and Deep Ecology. Both are very similar and can be combined for greater potential in the way that they present a holistic, spiritual, and value-oriented approach to problems such as those presented by tropical forest destruction and degradation. This would include protection of spiritual and cultural values associated with tropical forests and protected areas.

Natural Tropical Forests and Values

Tropical forests are the richest and most diverse expression of life that has evolved on earth. They are complex and fragile ecosystems with webs of interlocking, interdependent relationships between diverse plant and animal species and their nonliving environment. Tropical forests approximate the primeval forest biomes from which they originally evolved, and contain more than half of the world's 10 to 20 million or more species of plants and animals. Worldwide, approximately 1.5 million species are presently recorded (Henning 1991).

Irreversibly, tropical forests are literally disappearing within our lifetimes. Most tropical forests are too complex and their species too diverse to regenerate themselves from present destructive patterns or to be managed on a sustained-yield basis. Thus, tropical forest destruction must be considered permanent and irreversible (Henning 1991).

By maintaining intact tropical forests in as close to natural conditions as possible, they can make immensely diverse, productive, valuable, and intangible contributions to all life on Earth on a long-range basis. As noted, present and future protected areas of natural or near natural national parks and wildlife refuges may well be the only feasible and permanent way of saving some of the remaining tropical forests and their rich biodiversity. Many of these protected areas, however, are currently undergoing severe degradation to the extent that their ecological integrity may be in serious jeopardy.

Worldwide, recognition is growing, that in addition to conservation and protection efforts of tropical forest countries, tropical forest destruction is an urgent global problem that requires international action and assistance. In addition, greater awareness of the values of tropical forests is required by the public, by thought leaders, including spiritual leaders, and decisionmakers. It is vital to address not only the destruction but the reasons and values why we should not destroy the oldest, richest, most complex, and productive ecosystems on Planet Earth.

Values are individual and collective concepts with emotional, judgmental, and symbolic components that we use to determine what is important, worthwhile, and desirable. Thus, values contain, and at the same time evolve from, judgements and beliefs about what is "good" or "bad" and "right" or "wrong." Values, therefore, can significantly influence human behavior regarding the protection or

destruction of tropical forests. Values must also be considered regarding the consequences of both the protection and the destruction of tropical forests (Henning 1992).

By their very nature, values are complex in both interpretation and influence. This is particularly true in regard to tropical forests that involve both anthropocentric (human-centered) and biocentric (ecology-centered) values. The tangible as well as the intangible values of tropical forests are difficult and sometimes impossible to define and formulate, let alone to quantify.

Some of these values may include: biological diversity, genetic diversity, species diversity, agricultural (genetic materials), medicinal, industrial, tropical forest people, maintenance of the web of life, climatic, water conservation, soil protection, outdoor recreation, education, ecotourism, creativity, cultural, spirituality, and future generations (Henning 1991).

There are numerous high-value interrelationships within intact and natural tropical forests that are as yet minimally undisturbed by development, particularly under intangible considerations. In addition to these varied and complex natural interrelationships themselves, some values may manifest as the very ecosystems that are tropical forests per se. This is particularly true of intangible values associated with spiritual and cultural aspects of Buddhism and Deep Ecology.

Spiritual Values

Human beings are innately spiritual creatures capable of, and drawn to, abstract thought. Spirituality connotes for each of us a diverse, broad, and deep range of relationships that define our underlying sense of identity to ourselves, with others, with life, with the earth, with the universe, and with a higher power.

Although the "higher power" in Buddhism might be considered Dhamma or Dharma (nature), Buddhism, with its philosophy and teachings, provides a definite way of perceiving the spirituality of these relationships, relating directly and indirectly to nature. Deep Ecology often refers to the "Ecological Self," which is spiritually based on relationships and responsibilities for all living beings and nature rather than the ego. Both of these spiritual approaches to nature and tropical forests are based on "Oneness," relationships, all living beings, and ecocentric orientations.

The enormous variety of life forms in tropical forests create a powerful spiritual environment, endlessly different and suspenseful as the most mysterious of all natural worlds. This spiritual response obviously has significant impact on virtually all human beings, regardless of their religious, social, and cultural background. This response and impact of tropical forests were experienced and noted by the Buddha.

More than 2,500 years ago, the Gauthama Buddha was born in a forest. As a youth he meditated under Jambo trees, studied among the Banyans, and found enlightenment beneath a great Boddhi tree. A denizen of the woods for the next 45 years, he died beneath a pair of Sal trees among his disciples. Buddhism originated and developed in the company and protection of a great life form: the tropical forest. Thus, Buddhist teachings gave rise to an ecological ethic with a strong concern for nature and the forest. They emphasize the importance of coexisting with nature rather than conquering it (Kabilsingh 1987).

Silva quotes Gauthama Buddha: "Just as with her own life a mother shields from hurt her own, her only child—let all—embracing thoughts for all that lives be thine" (Silva 1980). Protection of all life is a Buddhist tenant. A Monk's first vow is, "I abstain from destroying life." Although sentient beings, or living beings capable of feeling or perceiving conscious, are most often associated with the animal kingdom, some Buddhists include the plant kingdom when referring to sentient beings. Thompkin's "The Secret Life of Plants" and some plant research certainly suggest that plant life may respond with "feelings."

Buddhism begins with a reverence for life and its recognition of the interdependence of all life such as "Oneness." One of the most illustrative influences of Buddhist thought on nature protection is its doctrine of rebirth. This doctrine holds that a human being dying can be reborn as an animal, or an animal upon dying can be reborn as a human being. Hence it would point toward the protection of other living beings under this reincarnation consideration.

The Buddha taught that all sentient beings might attain nirvana, the cessation of suffering and the liberation from the wheel of birth and death. Mahayana, a radical reformation movement in Buddhism around the beginning of the Christian era, opened and stressed the possibility of liberation to greater numbers of beings. In the Gaia view, or the earth as a living organism, the earth itself is considered a sentient being.

With its settings of stunning natural beauty, free from the pressures of civilization, tropical forests provide undisturbed solitude and tranquility where Buddhist Monks, Nuns, and lay people could feel closer to Dhamma or Dharma or nature and to discover many dynamic aspects of spirituality. These experiences, particularly through Buddhist meditation, provide the realization of one's role or place in the natural scheme of the forests, the planet, and the universe. Besides the monastic lives in forest wats, temples, or pagodas, many Buddhist Monks go on extended walks alone or in groups to fully experience tropical forests and the forests' rich relationships to Buddhism.

In their solitude and monastic lives in tropical forests, Buddhists are exposed to and educated by the surrounding nature or by Dhamma or Dharma. For example, a Buddhist Monk from Thailand, Phra Prachak, said that he could observe impermanence or change, as well as other laws of nature or Dhamma in the forest, by observing young trees, middle-aged trees, and dying or dead trees. He could also observe Dhamma through young, middle-aged, and dying leaves on a single tree, such as rising and falling away.

With the interacting of tropical forests and Dhamma principles of nature, many Buddhists find they are able to find a sense of "Oneness" with surrounding nature and to recognize their interrelationships and interdependencies with everything that they encounter. Much of this comes by simply living in the forests and meditating so that they lose their sense of separation and gain a sense of "Oneness" and interconnectedness that is transforming on a spiritual as well as a physical and mental basis. It also provides a spiritual philosophy of the environment, or Deep Ecology, which recognizes the sacredness of tropical forests and the humble role of human beings in them as well as the need to reverse the harm that is being done to them.

Cultural Values

Wherever Buddhism has been influential in a country or culture, there has usually been some direct or indirect benefits for nature and tropical forests. In Buddhist literature, there are 21 tree species under which 25 Buddhas attained enlightenment with veneration and protection of these species as a natural consequence of this belief. In Sri Lanka, Buddhism has had the largest single impact on the protection of flora and fauna, with conservation measures beginning in the third century (Kabilsing 1990).

John Seed (personal communication) notes, "In Sri Lanka, sacred forest groves have traditionally surrounded temples or shrines. The 'temple forest,' or Aranya, has been referred to in Buddhist texts as far back as 200 A.D. Recent works by colleagues at the NeoSynsthesis Research Center (NSRC) in Sri Lanka, have demonstrated that these temple forests are, in many areas, also the last refuge of biodiversity."

However, formal government measures for nature protection require acceptance by the people based on their deep value convictions. Without public acceptance based on deep value convictions, many government protection measures cannot be successful. Studies of national parks in Thailand revealed large amounts of illegal logging and poaching might be stemmed only through an appeal to Buddhist values along Deep Ecology lines. Buddhist forest Monks in Thailand, with their strong concerns for nature and all living beings, are the strongest voices for protection of tropical forests in these areas (Henning 1994).

Buddhist forest monasteries (or wats) are naturally more concerned with forest protection than are monasteries in urban areas. There are approximately 700 Buddhist forest monasteries in Thailand. These monasteries are often located in the last remaining forested lands in their areas where they have a strong and mutual sense of concern and interrelatedness with local populations. Some are located in close proximity to national parks and wildlife refuges. Without the influence of these wats over the past century, there would be little forest remaining in many of these areas, not to mention needed support for the nearby protected areas of tropical forests (Henning 1994).

In the Rukkha Sutta, the Buddha admired those who sat at the foot of trees, who desired seclusion, and who had few needs. These teachings encouraged his disciples to lead a forest life and prevented them from destroying the forest. The Buddhist communities were primarily comprised of forest-dwellers, so these members had to be mindful for protection of the forest, which was basically their abode. Community members had to respect each tree with which they came into contact. The Buddha chose to live in the forest in order to imitate what he saw. He emphasized the value of living in the forest to his disciples and called on newly ordained monks to sit at the foot of a tree (Kabilsingh 1987).

A famous Buddhist story tells how a Monk, while making repairs, cut down a tree that was the abode of a Davida (god). Although the Davida urged him not to cut the tree, "to make an abode for yourself," the Monk went ahead anyway. In so doing, he struck the arm of the Davida's son. When the Buddha learned of this incident, he laid down a rule that forbade community members to destroy any plant growth. The story of the Davida portrays cutting down a tree as a selfish act. It disturbs the peace of others and deprives the wildlife of their natural habitat. It is also considered an ungrateful act since the monks depend on the trees in their forest dwelling (Kabilsingh 1987).

As the royal ruler of a Buddhist country (Thailand, in Southeast Asia), H. H. King Bhumibol Adulyade, on his sixty-fifth birthday, December 5, 2537 (or 1994), made the following pronouncement on forest protection: "In order to make the forest flourish, it is not necessary to plant one more tree. What is more important is to let the trees that are there grow of themselves and not to interfere with them. Just to protect them and not to harm them is enough."

This royal statement was quoted in a brochure (in Thai and orally translated) by an organization of farmers in Northern Thailand who, in combination with Buddhist Monks, pledged to ordain millions of trees and to create an awareness of forests and their needs for protection. The ceremonies would involve placing orange robes on trees as part of their ordinations so that they could be perceived as "Ordained Monks," a practice that is followed through much of Thailand by Buddhist Monks and communities in efforts to protect tropical forests.

In national parks and wildlife refuges in Thailand, it is not uncommon to see occasional Buddhist Monks who have located themselves in simple camps. These monks, along with those from nearby wats, generally have a good influence for protection over these areas with the nearby villages as well as with government agents. The monks often counsel and advise agents and villagers on spiritual and other matters that might affect the protected areas.

It is also a custom for park staff to practice Buddhist meditation in the early mornings before they proceed with announcements and the business of the day. Somboon Wongpakdee, Superintendent at Lansarng National Park, Tak, Thailand, noted that this practice clears the minds of his staff and encourages them to make greater moral efforts for park protection. Buddhism is also incorporated into training programs for government staff associated with protected areas.

Buddhism provides the foundation of the philosophy and religion for the cultures of Asian countries like Thailand as well as a strong basis for reverence for all forms of life and protection. Buddhist temples (wats, pagodas) can provide environmental education to local populations near protected areas as well as serve as a bridge for public participation with government agencies. Buddhist Monks, Nuns, and lay people can provide leadership and inspiration for bringing spiritually based ecological and biodiversity values of natural tropical forests to the public for their active participation.

In this sense, Buddhism can serve as an environmental educator for tropical forests as well as a spiritual mechanism for influencing the values and behavior of the public, government, and private institutions toward protection measures. It has the potential and ways, particularly with Deep Ecology, to provide spiritual paradigms and solutions to problems and issues that involve moral and value considerations for tropical forest protection or, without them, tropical forest destruction and degradation.

Tropical forests are intimately related to the cultures of tropical peoples through diverse influences on the entire range of knowledge, traditions, and values of the cultures. Asian Buddhism is very much related to the unique interface

between people and tropical forests found in countries like Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Laos. The institution of Buddhist forest wats, temples, or pagodas are especially a part of this unique interface and need the proximity of natural tropical forests. Hence, there is the concern and involvement for protection of natural tropical forests.

Damage to and loss of natural tropical forests also result in loss of significant cultural values and institutions, including lifestyles associated with forests and Buddhism. The impacts of deforestation extend a rippling effect throughout entire cultures, removing and eroding authentic and traditional characteristics, values, and life styles. The natural heritage of native plants and animals, the undisturbed landscape, and the native identity associated with natural tropical forests disappear forever. No reforestation, tree planting, agroforestry, or sustainable forestry projects can replace these natural tropical forests and their values through contributions to a given culture.

Tropical Asian countries and people lose much of their cultural and national identity without their tropical forests. This would certainly include many of the tangible and intangible values associated with Buddhism. The protection of tropical forests through Buddhism and ecological considerations, consequently, also extends to the protection of the unique and traditional Buddhism associated with a given tropical forest Asian country. This would be particularly true for the forest wats or temples. The values of tropical forests, including the cultural considerations, are the very essence of life for all.

Conclusions: Future Generations

Concerns and responsibilities for natural tropical forest must extend to future as well as present generations because these threatened ecosystems are highly susceptible to irreversible removal or very serious and damaging reductions, with resulting loss of spiritual, cultural, biodiversity, and other values and options for survival and quality of all life.

Buddhism and Deep Ecology recognize the moral or value obligation and responsibility to protect tropical forests for future generations of all species, plant and animal, known and unknown. They are concerned with the essential protection of natural tropical forests for their own sake for the future on an ecocentric rather than an anthropocentric basis.

Future generations of all forms of life require that tropical forests be protected in an intact and natural state. Humankind, including the Buddhist communities, need tropical forests for their tangible and intangible values, including those associated with spiritual and cultural values. Tropical forests could survive quite well without human presence and impacts. Yet it is only within intact, natural tropical forest environments that diverse and interdependent forest species can carry on their struggle for survival and evolution.

Hence the need to protect the ecological integrity of current national parks and wildlife refuges and to establish and maintain more protected areas of natural tropical forests in Asia. It is essential that present and future generations of all life have natural tropical forests for survival and quality. Buddhism, particularly under some Deep Ecology orientations, has very important roles to play in the protective process for spiritual, cultural, and other values associated with the remaining natural tropical forests and their future in Asia.

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