

# **An Ecosystem: Seeing via the Buddhist Theory of Dependent Co-Arising**

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## **Abstract**

The theory of dependent co-arising has this quality and can be applied in understanding the world, our present environment, as an ecosystem. Human beings lived in harmonious with nature. They dwelled in forest, caves and places endowed with natural water sources. They drew on their environment for their basic needs in food, clothing, shelter and medicine. Most of their tools were made roughly and simply from stone or wood. They did not have machinery and modern equipment to ease their day-to-day living. Therefore natural resources were, by and large, left to prosper and flourish as men had not yet learned to capitalize on them. Modern science and technology is very efficient tool for bringing about development to the world, it is neutral by nature and it must be utilized and controlled by a mature person, fully developed physically and spiritually. Buddhism views man a part of nature. If nature is destroyed man cannot live. By abusing nature, man abuses himself. Therefore, Buddhist ethics would follow from the basic understanding of nature. Only if we agree on this common ground, can we proceed to save the world.

**Keywords:** Ecosystem, Buddhist Theory, Dependent Co-Arising

## **Need of a response**

By burning the fossil fuels, releasing methane into the atmosphere, and destroying the rainforest, humans have despoiled the delicately balanced, favorable eco-system for over a century.<sup>1</sup> Today they find themselves living in the midst of an ecological crisis worsened by two decisive factors: Today the earth is much more densely populated and the rate of changes has enormously accelerated.<sup>2</sup> The increasing human population around the world raised the economic activities as well as the living standards faster than ecologically sustainable levels of production.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Schumacher, 1973, p. 96

<sup>2</sup> Schumacher.Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Aubrey Rose (ed.), 1992, p. 22

The magnanimity of the eco-crisis due to the extravagant human behavior could be learned from the increasing frequency of reports from around the world on contaminated waterways, polluted air, depletion of natural resources, and the global warming. The global warming in particular has altered the eco-systems and the living conditions for the entire planet, causing further damage to our agriculture, wild lands, and animals. The melting polar icecaps cause the rise of the oceans and threatening to submerge coastlines and the lives of the island peoples. The ozone layer that shields the earth from UV rays is now reduced, posing an immediate danger to human health for UV rays are said to damage the immune system, increase skin cancer and cataracts, and threaten the DNA molecules of all living things. In addition, toxic wastes that have accumulated on earth in the recent past in staggering quantities are damaging and changing the eco-system for worse. The chemical, heavy metal, biological, and nuclear wastes are causing a plague of environmentally caused diseases. Our planet is losing its greener lands in big quantities daily due to the overuse of chemical agriculture and the destruction of forests. Each year the earth loses thousands of millions of tons of soil through deforestation and poor land management, and that in developed countries alone around three thousand square kilometers of prime farmland are turned into buildings and roads.<sup>1</sup> There is also a crisis of biodiversity today. In the recent history, the planet lost many animal species as a result of the decimation of a variety of habitats and the killing of animals for sport, use, or food. The meat-eating culture that has prevailed throughout the world is now damaging the ecosystem at an alarming rate due to the over-utilization of water, grazing lands, chemicalized pesticides, and food additives. Ecosystems free to develop without human interference or intrusion have become increasingly rare. In every part of the world, the native peoples lose their land and culture and also their lives because of the modern people poisoning of their environments. In the underdeveloped world overpopulation decimates the landscape. In the developed world, the insatiable consumerism depletes natural resources contributing in an unprecedented way to global warming and the accumulation of waste on earth.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sandell, 1987, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> See, Gottlieb, 1996, pp. 6-7. He lists the following areas as acute environmental concern: global climate/atmospheric change, toxic wastes, loss of land, loss of species, loss of wilderness, devastation of indigenous peoples, human patterns and quantities of consumption, and genetic engineering.

When the magnanimity and the fatality of the present environmental crisis started to be felt in the west, some concerned people turned to eastern religions and philosophies for a durable solution. They found that the dominant religions and philosophies in the west had empowered humans to conquer the nature,<sup>3</sup> and that by doing so they had substantially contributed to the creation of the current ecological crisis.<sup>4</sup> When examining in the east they found Buddhism to be environmentally friendly with its philosophy of interdependence and the religion of compassion.<sup>5</sup> In the recent past, many Buddhist scholars and practitioners started responding to this unprecedented human-made environmental crisis by presenting in various angles the Buddhist perspectives on nature and the Buddha's moral teachings. Perhaps, due to a lack of a comprehensive articulation of an accurate Buddhist response based on the early Buddhist teachings to the present environment crisis, some westerners saw the Buddha's teaching to be antagonist to the preservation of the environment. Recently an author stated that Buddhism contains a "negative view of the material world of nature" and hence there is no hope for the preservation of nature.<sup>6</sup> In writing on the Buddhist attitude to nature, another scholar concluded: "In essence and theory, then, Buddhism cannot uphold an environmentalist ethic" because there is "nothing within the sphere of nature which can be said to possess any meaning or purpose." He stated further, "There can be no Buddhist justification for the fight to preserve habitats and environments. Everything, without exception, is subject to decay. It is not at all clear that change, within the natural world, can be positively affected by human interventions."<sup>7</sup> These misinterpretations not only misrepresent the Buddha's teachings but also damage the very environment that the whole populations in various Asian Buddhist cultures and countries have endeavored to preserve through their Buddhist ways of thinking and practice. This paper with reference to some Pali canonical texts, therefore, attempts to introduce the Buddhist theory of dependent

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the creation story of the Bible we read: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" (*Genesis* 1: 27-28).

<sup>4</sup> Breuilly & Palmer (ed.), 1992, p.6: "Many of environment problems of the world arise from the culture that has spread from Europe and North America over the last 500 years, affecting almost the whole world. And this culture is based on Western versions of Christianity, and has in turn affected the way that Western Christians think."

<sup>5</sup> Sandell, 1987, p. 5

<sup>6</sup> Davies, 1994, p. 6

<sup>7</sup> Harris, 1994, p. 25

co-arising (*paṭicca-sam-uppāda*) together with its related concepts of impermanence and intentional actions as a comprehensive framework for a Buddhist perspective in understanding the environmental problems together with their causes, solutions, and the paths leading to the solutions. The theory of dependent co-arising explains the interconnectedness and interdependence of nature and it matches well with the modern scientific understanding of nature. As a scholar of Judaism has put it, “the perception of the interdependence of natural things arises not from religion, but from careful scientific investigation.”<sup>8</sup> This careful scientific investigation was undertaken by the Buddha in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and was summarized in the theory of dependence co-arising which becomes the central philosophy of the Buddha. Many environmentalists today use this scientific theory to understand the links and the root causes of our present environmental problems. Once we understand the links and the causes, the solutions could be arrived at gradually by following a Buddhist way of life that consists of understanding, generosity, moderation, and compassion.

### Dependent Co-arising

*Paṭicca-sam-uppāda* is the name given in the Pali texts to identify the Buddhist theory of causation. The first word *paṭicca* has the meaning: “having moved toward”, “having gone forward”,<sup>9</sup> or “depending upon” or “dependently.” The second word *sam-uppāda* carries the meaning: “co-arising”, “coming into existence together.” Thus “dependent co-arising” or “this arises together depending on that” is the meaning of the word *paṭicca-sam-uppāda*.

The central point here is that there is nothing in existence that is not dependent on some other things. Nothing can arise on its own accord or independently. Things, events, situations, and processes are all inter-related, interdependent, and inter-linked, and they arise and cease depending on various other factors. What we call oil lamp, for example, remains being burnt depending on the wick, oil, container, oxygen, temperature and so forth.<sup>10</sup> All these factors are essential for the oil lamp to remain being lightened. These factors have their own histories and connections and are conditioned by some other factors. The wick, for instance, is the

<sup>8</sup> Solomon, 1992, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Also see, Kalupahana, 1992, p. 54

<sup>10</sup> See Saddhatissa, 1991, p. 141

result of twining strands of cotton together. Oxygen is a combination of some elements. Then the cotton has its own history and relations. In this way, the whole existence is shown as consisting of dependently co-arising and ceasing processes, things and events whose histories and the relations run infinitely in all directions.

To take another example, when rain clouds are present, the rain falls. There being rain, good soil, fertility and sunshine, the seeds sprout and plants grow. There being plants, animals have the eating grounds. There being eating grounds, animals live well. However, mere having of eating grounds is not the sole cause of their survival. Some other significant factors also contribute. For example, there should be enough water for the animals to drink. The area should be protected from the human intervention, particularly from hunting and burning.

The Buddha's main discovery of the truth about the universe consists of this theory.<sup>11</sup> It is said that his teaching and this theory are identical: "One who sees the dependent co-arising sees the teaching, and one who sees the teaching sees the dependent co-arising."<sup>12</sup> Through this theory, the Buddha spoke of the causes of things that arise from causes, and also of their cessation.<sup>13</sup> To understand the workings of the dependent co-arising within oneself and in one's world is the aim of Buddhist education: "When phenomena appear to an ardent and contemplating person, then all his doubts go away as he knows a phenomenon together with its causes; as he knows the ceasing of the conditions."<sup>14</sup> However, "the human beings who are delighting in attachment, delighted by attachment and excited by attachment, this position, namely, conditionality, dependent co-arising is not easily perceived."<sup>15</sup>

Buddhism is a religion of individual emancipation; hence it addresses mainly the problem of birth, old age, and death. For this reason, the theory of dependent co-arising is frequently elaborated in the Buddha's discourses in twelve factors that explain the psychological working of the individual.<sup>16</sup> The suttas explain how ignorance, formations, consciousness, mentality-materiality, six senses, contact, feeling, craving, clinging,

<sup>11</sup> Ud 1,2; Vin I, 1,2

<sup>12</sup> MN I, 190-191

<sup>13</sup> Vin I, 41: ye dhammāhetu-ppabhavātesaṃhetuṃtathāgatoāha, tesaṃcayonirodhoevaṃ-vāḍimāhā-samaṇo.

<sup>14</sup> Vin I, 2

<sup>15</sup> MN I, 167

<sup>16</sup> SN II, 1 ff.

becoming, and birth work together giving rise to a suffering individual, a worldly being. These causal links help the individual realize how his psychological processes work while connecting him or her to another birth every time when s/he is born. They also present us a method of identifying the causes of an issue by way of a series of questions and answers.

According to Buddhism, to find a solution to an issue, we must identify its causes first. If the problem of suffering were to be the main issue, a series of questions needs to be asked to understand it fully. In this scientific investigation, first question is: Why do we suffer misery and pain, old age and death? The answer that the Buddhist disciples come to know through the dependent co-arising is: It is because we are born and are subject to be born. Then a series of follow-up questions and answers could be made: Why are we born? The answer that they get is: it is because we are in becoming. Why are we in becoming? It is because of our clinging or attachment to things. Why do we cling to the objects of this world? It is because of our thirst for enjoyment. Why do we have this thirst? It is because of feeling. Why do we have this feeling? It is because of contact. Why do we have this contact? It is because of the six sense spheres. Why do we have the six sense-spheres? It is because of the psycho-physical organism. Why do we have this psycho-physical organism? It is because of consciousness. Why do we have consciousness? It is because of mental dispositions. Why do we have mental dispositions? It is because of ignorance.<sup>17</sup> In this manner, through a series of twelve links, the Buddhist disciple finds the causes for the arising of his suffering. The most important aspect of this finding is that one comes to realize the inter-dependence and inter-connection of the twelve factors. When one realizes this, he comes to know the strongest links that need to be broken in order to dismantle the process of the arising of suffering.

Thus this theory gives us a picture that things and events in this world are inter-related and inter-dependent. Therefore, when analyzing an issue we can come to know its connection to many other issues and hence, we could realize that, what we call an issue is really not an independent issue but one surrounded by a series of other issues. Similarly, we could come to realize that we cannot find the cause of an issue but a complex of causes that are linked with many others. This same method of identifying causes and links for the arising of suffering could be used with reference

<sup>17</sup> See also, Sharma, 1962, p.61

to today's environmental problems. The lesson for us is then when solving an environmental issue we must also find solutions to its related issues as well. For example, if the issue is the soil erosion, apparently, due to cutting down of trees, we must also be prepared to ask and answer why trees are cut down. Our questions and answers may also guide us to find solutions to the economic and spiritual poverties of the people in the given area in order to find some what a lasting solution to the issue.

In the early discourses, the Buddhist theory of causation is identified as the middle doctrine. The reason is that it avoids all forms of eternalistic and annihilationistic extremes. It is said that, "to him who perceives through proper insight the arising of the things of the world, the belief in non-existence (annihilationism) does not occur; to him who perceives through proper insight the ceasing of the things of the world, the belief in existence (eternalism) does not occur." "Everything exists this is one extreme; everything does not exist – this is another extreme. Without approaching either extreme, the *Tathāgata* (the Buddha) teaches a doctrine by the middle."<sup>18</sup>

By this middle doctrine of dependent co-arising, Buddhism rejects the extremist view of self-causation, the belief that my present environment and my experiences in it are a product of my own, that the doer who does is the same as the one who experiences the result. It also rejects the extremist view of external-causation, one does and another experiences, the belief that things that one experiences in the world are solely done by others. It denies the extreme view that considers time, God, karma (action), or fate as the causer of one's experiences. It also avoids the extremist view that recognizes a total absence of any causal relationship, that is, accidentalism where life is regarded as a product of the blind play of mechanical nature. It denies determinism. It rejects the view that sees a self or permanency in everything. It denies the view that combines the self and external causations together: half of my present experience is a product of myself and the other half is of another.<sup>19</sup>

By denying all these extremist views, the theory of dependent

<sup>18</sup> SN II, 16-17

<sup>19</sup> The Buddhist theory of causation establishes its middle position also by denying the extreme views that consider: everything is one; everything consists of a fixed number of elements; soul and body are one; soul and body are two; the cause evolves into a fruit like the seed evolves into a tree; the cause is seen as the fruit or that fruit is an illusion just like that the tree is seen to be a ghost at night.

co-arising makes us understand ourselves, our environment, our issues, the solutions to them, and the paths leading to the solutions, in a realistic way. It is through this understanding, one comes to know and see the reality of oneself, one's existence and environment: that the world and everything in it are a dependently arising and dependently ceasing delicately balanced system and that for the humans to survive and be happy in this system they must be moderate, considerate, and compassionate, and avoid all forms of extremist and separatist ways of thinking and practice, particularly by abandoning all forms of such harmful attitudes and behaviors as forms of extreme protectionism and extreme destructionist. Further, this realistic understanding provides a balanced view of life, and in turn a balanced way of life. It would recommend a balanced livelihood, a moderate life, neither extravagant nor miserly,<sup>20</sup> which is very practicable.

### A Universal Pattern

The theory of dependent co-arising explains the existence of a universal harmonious pattern, a causal cosmic order (*dhamma-dhātu*).<sup>21</sup> It explains the uniformity of the causal relations, the interconnection and interdependence of all things and life on earth and in the outer world. It explains that this world and everything belongs to it have a structure, a method of functioning, and that our planet earth is a delicately balanced system of interdependent parts, an ecosystem.<sup>22</sup>

Four characteristics of the theory of dependent co-arising are given in the Pali canonical texts. They are objectivity, necessity, invariability, and conditionality.<sup>23</sup> Objectivity is in the sense that the Buddhist causal law corresponds to reality, and that “those conditions alone, neither more nor less, bring about this or that event.”<sup>24</sup> Necessity means that when the conditions come together, events and things are produced; “there is no failure even for a moment to produce the events which arise when the conditions come together. Invariability means lack of exception or existence of regularity; a certain set of conditions gives rise to a certain effect, not to something totally different. The Pali word for conditionality is *ida-ppaccaya-tā* and its literal meaning is “relatedness of this” or

<sup>20</sup> AN IV, 282-283

<sup>21</sup> SN II, 25, 143; MN I, 396; Jayatillake, 1963, p. 448.

<sup>22</sup> DN II, 12-15; MN I, 324: *dhamma-tāesā*

<sup>23</sup> SN II, 26

<sup>24</sup> Jayatillake, 1963, p. 447



“this-condition-ness.” It has the meaning that a thing comes into existence only if the necessary conditions are available. “When that (A) is, this (B) is; with the arising of that (A), this (B) arises. When that (A) is not, this (B) is not; with the ceasing of that (A), this (B) ceases.”<sup>25</sup>

The past participle *paṭicca-sam-uppanna* or “dependently co-arisen” refers to the events or phenomena that have co-arisen depending upon conditions. It is a description of the effects; these effects are then traced back to their causes and conditions. All phenomena, everything that come under existence, becoming, the universe and the things in the universe, all forms of human experience and behavior, our present world, our environment and issues related to it are all causally conditioned phenomena (*paṭicca-sam-uppannādharmā*). The physical phenomena both organic (seed) and inorganic (season), natural occurrences like drought, earthquakes, and plant life, psychic phenomena as well as psychological processes, ways of thinking and ways of life, conceptions and theories, means and goals of moral behavior, arising and ceasing of suffering, workings of karma or intentional actions, the process of impermanence, the evolution and dissolution of the world are all causally conditioned phenomena and they function following the causal law of dependent co-arising. The things and events follow this law; hence the word *dharmatā*, the dharma-ness or the naturalness is used to identify that lawfulness. This lawfulness tells how nature works, how things work and are supposed to work when certain conditions are met. It also describes how everything, every individual thing or issue, in the universe and the relations among them are causally conditioned.

Things arise when certain conditions are met. When the conditions are absent, things will not arise. For a seed to sprout, grow and attain maturity, for example, three conditions have to be satisfied: the seed has to be fresh, unbroken, not rotten, not destroyed by the wind or sun; it must be well-planted; and have the benefit of the earth and water.<sup>26</sup> All three conditions must be met and the lacking of one will not bring about the result called sprouting.<sup>27</sup> In addition, if the conditions are not supportive the expected result cannot be achieved. “The seed,” for example, “sown in a field which is undulating, rocky and pebbly, salty, without depth of tilth,

<sup>25</sup> Ud 2; MN I, 263; 264; SN II, 70

<sup>26</sup> SN III, 54

<sup>27</sup> Jayatilleke, 1963, p. 447

without a water outlet and an inlet, with no water-course, and without dyke is not very fruitful, does not ripen to great sweetness, nor is it thought a flourishing plot.”<sup>28</sup>

An eco-system is maintained as long as the conditions required for its maintenance are present. If one condition were to be missing, a change in that system takes place. If people were to cut down trees that bear fruits in a given area, they will damage the eco-system for lack of trees deprives the area of from both new seeds and moisture required for the natural cycle of sprouting and the replacement of old trees with new ones to take place. Absence of trees forces the birds, animals, and insects who in many ways contribute to the cyclical natural maintenance of the eco-system to leave the area.

Buddhism teaches that everything is subject to the law of dependent co-arising: nothing appears outside of that law. As such, nothing is produced from a single cause; nothing is produced as a single result. There are always many causes and the product is always a plurality. In this way, Buddhism denies any independent status to anything; there are no independent things. The theory of dependent co-arising also explains the most basic and important principle of nature, that is, the impermanence, the things that arise come to cease.<sup>29</sup> It teaches that, that which arises, that which is born, that which is produced, must necessarily be subject to death and destruction, and that which is subject to death and destruction is not permanent. Though there is impermanence there is also continuity. Under the theories of dependent co-arising, impermanence and continuity, there is no place for a belief of an individual soul and there is no place for God. Nature is not a creation of God but a dynamic process of production, destruction and re-production.

This principle of impermanence applies to everything and to all times. At this very moment, the change is taking place in the whole cosmos, throughout the world, in our countries, companies, societies, and families, in our environment, trees in the forest, plants in the garden, the flower on the altar, in my whole personality, my body, limbs, perception, feeling, karma and my ways of thinking. Following this principle of impermanence, gone are the previous Buddhas and their

<sup>28</sup> AN IV, 237; see also 238

<sup>29</sup> DN II, 43: *yamkiñ ci sam-udaya-dhammamsabbamtañnirodha-dhammam.*

disciples, the dynasties and civilizations, the previous names of countries, cities, and the people lived in them. “See, that name for this mountain has disappeared, those people have died, and that Buddha has attained final passing away; so impermanent are formations, so unstable, so unreliable; it is enough to experience revulsion towards all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them; there will come a time when the name for this mountain will have disappeared, when these people will have died, and I (the Buddha) will have attained the final passing away; impermanent, alas, are formations, subject to arising and vanishing.”<sup>30</sup> Following the principle of impermanence, there comes a time when this great earth burns up and perishes and no longer exists. There comes a time when the great ocean dried up and evaporates and no longer exists. But still there is no making end of suffering for those beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving.

This explains why Buddhism encourages the individual to contemplate on the impermanence of oneself and things around him? Buddhism says that such reflections and contemplations eliminate all forms of our ignorance and desires. They eliminate greed, lust, hatred and delusion. They uproot conceit ‘I am,’ the root of all forms of man-made environmental disasters. It is through the proper understanding of impermanence of oneself and things related to him that one would be able to give up his acquisitive attitudes, his desire for power and aggressiveness.<sup>31</sup>

One of the main reasons for the exploitation of nature is the lack of understanding of the principles of dependent co-arising and impermanence. One who believes in a permanent Self acts to protect, promote, and enrich that Self to the extent of destroying natural resources. Similarly, one who believes in the permanency of the outside world, as a result of that misunderstanding, acts in such a way that the natural environment will be destroyed. This destruction is done due to his thinking that the nature is permanent and cannot be destroyed.

Even though, throughout the human history, the civilized man was able to become the master of his environment temporarily, his desire for a permanent mastership has led to many environmental problems. While

<sup>30</sup> SN II, 190-193

<sup>31</sup> Padmasiri de Silva, 1987, p. 45

failing to understand fully the laws of nature, the man thinks of himself as one who has been created in the image of God to be the master of the world.<sup>32</sup> While turning to a life of materialism, he tries to conquer the world to the neglect and destruction of all other species. This life of extravaganza of him, which is based on the materialistic ways of thinking, ruins the environment.

A way of life that is based on materialism cannot last long because the latter leads to permanent, limitless expansionism in the finite environment. There is a measure in all kinds of natural things in their size, speed, or violence. Buddhist advice is that people must understand and choose their basic needs and try to attain them. In this regard, moderation is highly valued as the best method of living,<sup>33</sup> and contentment is highly valued as the best wealth. Obvious fact is that one can satisfy only one's need, not one's greed. People's greed has become the major cause of many environmental issues and conflicts around the world.

According to the Buddha, the more one craves, the more one searches; the more one searches, the more he gains; the more he gains, the more he makes judgments; the more he judges, the more he wants; the more he wants, the more he tries to get; the more he tries to get, the more he acquires; the more he acquires, the more he becomes selfish; the more selfish he becomes, the more he needs security; to satisfy his need for security he has to keep weapons and this creates quarrels, wars, and various evil deeds.<sup>34</sup> Humans go against other humans because of their craving for wealth and sensual satisfaction. Craving is something that cannot be satisfied; the more one engages in to satisfy it the more he wants. Craving is like a blazing fire. It burns every fuel in whatever amount one puts in. People become slaves of craving.<sup>35</sup>

One outcome of understanding the dependent co-arising is the non-violent attitude that develops. In this regard, a scholar correctly stated that, "animals and plants are to be respected and such respect arises naturally from the insight provided by Buddhist cosmology, that all sentient beings are intimately interrelated."<sup>36</sup> Schumacher pointed out that

<sup>32</sup> Schumacher, 1973, p. 94

<sup>33</sup> SN I, 82 (Feer's edition)

<sup>34</sup> AN IV, 400-401

<sup>35</sup> MN II, 68

<sup>36</sup> Harris, 1994, p. 26

“the teaching of the Buddha... enjoins a reverent and non-violent attitude not only to all sentient beings but also, with great emphasis, to trees.”<sup>37</sup> According to him, the use of non-renewable fuels like coal and oil must be done with the greatest care and the most meticulous concern for conservation. “To use them heedlessly or extravagantly is an act of violence, and while complete non-violence may not be attainable on this earth; there is nonetheless an ineluctable duty on man to aim at the ideal of non-violence in all he does.”<sup>38</sup> While urging to lead a life based on the Buddhist principles, Schumacher says that the world’s resources of non-renewable fuels are limited in quantity so that “their exploitation at an ever-increasing rate is an act of violence against nature which must almost inevitably lead to violence between men.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Kamma and Morality**

It is through the theory of dependent co-arising that Buddhism presents the means of generating peace and harmony among people, and of developing in them a harmonious living with nature. This theory recommends simple life-styles and compassionate, loving and caring attitudes towards the natural environment. It explains why one must have a good moral character. It teaches that major part of Buddhist morality consists of one’s good conduct towards one’s environment: those who kill living beings, those who develop violent attitudes, and those who hoard wealth without caring for others are termed evil. Our evil behavior reflects our lack of understanding of this theory.

According to Buddhism, though change is inherent in nature, natural processes are affected by our morals. Though change is a factor inherent in nature, moral deterioration in humans accelerates and brings about change that is adverse to their well-being and happiness. To see this connection between human action and environment, it is also necessary to see the connection between our thoughts and actions. Holding of various extremist and separatist views means that they do not understand the theory of dependent co-arising and that they are not the followers of the middle path or of the noble eightfold path that consists of right view, right thinking, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right

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<sup>37</sup> Schumacher, 1973, p. 56

<sup>38</sup> Schumacher, 1973, p. 57

<sup>39</sup> Schumacher. 1973, p. 57

mindfulness and right concentration.

As it is noted, “Ideas are the most powerful things on earth.”<sup>40</sup> Correct thinking is essential for the correct performance; and again it is the performance of correct actions that generate correct ways of thinking while conditioning our lives and the present world in which we live. Most of the today’s environmental issues, if not all, are the product of our own collective thinking and behavior. They show how we have chosen to live, and they reflect the ways of our thinking, the philosophies that we follow.

According to Buddhism, “intention is the action, having intended people do actions by body, word and mind.”<sup>41</sup> Actions, in turn, move the people and the world.<sup>42</sup> It is the actions that shape people and their world or their present environment. According to the Buddhist theory of *kamma*, we are inheritors of our actions<sup>43</sup> because what we experience as our present environment is conditioned by what we have been doing on earth. It is said that “whatever one does by it he arises.”<sup>44</sup> We become heirs of whatsoever deed we do, be it good or evil.<sup>45</sup> If we have been doing good things, it is impossible that we be in this environmental crisis.

The Buddhist theory of *kamma* connotes the motivation behind the action and the consequences following from it. It is the motivational impulsion that determines the course of actions and the chain of consequences that entails the actions. The resultant chain of consequences can be seen in two levels: consequences accruing to the doer and the consequences accruing to the others and the environment. This means that any moral deed has a collective influence. A deed once committed leave lasting effects on the general system of sentient beings.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Buddhism points out that our present world for the most part is created from our own intentions<sup>47</sup> and our desires.<sup>48</sup> The environment we find ourselves in and the way we experience it are the consequences of how we have chosen and agreed to live.

<sup>40</sup> Schumacher. 1973, p. 94

<sup>41</sup> AN III, 415: *cetanā* ‘hambhikkhavekammaṃvadāmi; cetayitvākammaṃkarotikāyenavācāyamanasā.

<sup>42</sup> Sn 654: *kammunāvattatīloko/ pajā*.

<sup>43</sup> MN I, 390: *kamma-dāyādāsattā*.

<sup>44</sup> MN I, 390: *yaṃkarotitenaupapajjati*.

<sup>45</sup> AN V, 288: *yaṃkammaṃkarotikalyāṇaṃvāpāpakamvātassadāyādābhavanti*.

<sup>46</sup> See, Suzuki, 1907, pp. 181-182.

<sup>47</sup> SN I, 87 (Somaratne’s New edition), verse 206: *cittenanīyatīloko*.

<sup>48</sup> SN I, 88, verse 208

Decaying cities, gutted hillsides and polluted rivers, as described by a recent writer, are to be seen as consequences of our intentions. If our intentions are driven by self-centered greed, hatred, and delusion, then that will, through the process of dependent co-arising, determine the way we perceive the external environment. We will see the environment as a resource to be exploited to satisfy our desires and protect us against the things we fear. Greed, hatred, and delusion are short-sighted, mentally deadening and dehumanizing; therefore, the environment will reflect back those very qualities we inject into it.

There is a close link between human morality and the environment and vice versa. Moral degeneration affects the environment. When people are immoral, timely rain does not fall, and as a result, crops fall victim to pests and plant diseases. The final result will be the famine and death of people.<sup>49</sup> This relationship is also explained in a commentary under five functional natural cosmic laws.<sup>50</sup> Season-law, seed-law, mind-law, action-law, and phenomenal law are the five. Scholars have appropriated the five to represent the physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws and causal laws, respectively. Elaborating on these laws, a Buddhist scholar says, “While the first four laws operate within their respective spheres, the law of causality operates within each of them as well as between them.”<sup>51</sup> She then explains this link in following terms: “This means that the physical elements, i.e. earth, water, air conditions of any given area affect the growth and development of its biological component, i.e. flora and fauna. This in turn influences the thought patterns of the people who interact with the flora and fauna. These thought patterns determine moral standards. The opposite process of interaction is also possible. The morals of humanity influence not only the psychological make-up of the people but the biological and physical environment of the area as well.”<sup>52</sup> This analysis somewhat agrees with John Hick’s statement that, “All our deeds affect the human future, as the life of each of us has in its turn being affected by those who have lived before us. Instead of individual threads of karmic history there is the universal network of the karma of humanity, to which each contributes and by which each is

<sup>49</sup> AN I, 160: tesam a-dhamma-rāga-rattānaṃvisama-lobhābhibhūtānaṃmicchā-dhamma-paretānaṃdevonasa mmādhāraṇanuppavechati. tena du-bbhikkhaṃhoti du-ssassaṃsetaṅṅhikāṃsalākāvuttamtenabahūmanussāk ālaṃkaronti.

<sup>50</sup> *Atthasālini*, p. 854.

<sup>51</sup> Lily de Silva, 1992, p. 20

<sup>52</sup> Lily de Silva, 1992, pp. 20-21

affected.”<sup>53</sup>

Because natural resources in the world are limited, the equal and adequate distribution of these resources among all living beings is a necessity. It is important to encourage people to use natural resources wisely and moderately. The greedy people destroy natural resources for their immediate goals and satisfactions. The actions taken by them push the needy into an increasingly desperate poverty. This could be illustrated from a Buddhist discourse, where the leading cause for social disorder in a particular society is shown to be the lack of distribution of wealth and resources for the needy. As the discourse has it, in that society poverty grew rife because of resources not being distributed well. When poverty grew rife, people started to steal; then the production and the use of weapons increased. This resulted in an increase of violence and murder. With this, lying, evil speech, adultery, abusive and idle talk increased. Then covetousness and ill will, false opinions, incest, wanton greed, perverted lust, and hundreds of other evils started to increase.<sup>54</sup> It must also be noted that the elimination of the people's greed cannot be achieved solely by implementing the law and its punishments. It must be done by the gradual development of ethical and social values in people. This could be seen from model example given by a king who eradicated crimes by implementing a Buddhist plan which would successfully eliminate poverty and, as a result, social disorder. According to the plan, the king provided grains and other agricultural facilities for the farmers and planters; he provided capital for traders and businessmen, and he also provided adequate wages for government servants.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

Buddhism is interested in theory only so far as it is useful for practice. The theory of dependent co-arising has this quality and can be applied in understanding the world, our present environment, as an ecosystem. This theory and its other related teachings should be taught through a system of good education whose task is to understand this present world in which we live and make our choices. In that educational endeavor, the

<sup>53</sup> John H. Hick. 1983. *Philosophy of Religion*, third edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall. P. 143, as cited by Arvind Sharma, 1995, p. 179, who writes on same page that “Such a demythologized interpretation of karma, although undeniably attractive, poses extreme difficulties in the context of Buddhism.”

<sup>54</sup> DN III, 70-71

<sup>55</sup> DN I, 135-136.



first step must be to urge people reflect on how the present ways of life are simply not in our own self-interest, let alone in the interest of millions of other living beings and future generations. The next step must be to challenge the social structures such as education, religion, and economics that sustain and promote values that bind us to the ecologically destructive results of our actions. These steps must begin with an inner practice of self-transformation. Learning, reflection and meditation would up root the evil tendencies of the mind that are destructive to the environment. Promotion of Buddhist values such as simplicity, balance, equanimity, compassion and understanding must be done so that it will bring inwardly a transformation of the mind and outwardly a transformation of the world. In Bhikkhu Bodhi's words, "With its philosophic insight into the interconnectedness and thoroughgoing interdependence of all conditioned things, with its thesis that happiness is to be found through the restraint of desire in a life of contentment rather than through the proliferation of desire, with its goal of enlightenment through renunciation and contemplation and its ethic of non-injury and boundless loving-kindness for all beings, Buddhism provides all the essential elements for a relationship to the natural world characterized by respect, humility, care and compassion."<sup>56</sup> That is the kind of relationship that we must develop with reference to the nature. The philosophy behind this system is: live by letting others to live. According to this system, the best way to deal with the present environmental issues is by letting this planet earth to work in its own natural ways as much as possible.

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<sup>56</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1987, p. vii.

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