

Environmental Ethics: Thai Buddhist Perspectives

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MY remarks on Buddhist environmental ethics focus on three of Thailand's most noted contemporary spokespersons and interpreters of Buddhadhamma: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993), P.A. Payutto (1938–), and Sulak Sivaraksa (1933–).

BUDDHDADASA BHIKKHU:

The Dhamma is Nature

The news media and television coverage confront us daily with the extent and complexity of the environmental crisis: global warming, draught in Africa, the melting of the polar ice caps, rising sea levels, erratic temperature change, increase in violent storms, ocean and water pollution, and so on. For over 50 years science has made enormous contributions to our understanding of many aspects of environmental problems. Without collaborative scientific research we would be unaware of the nature of global warming, species extinction, or the effects of pollution on health. However, despite our increasing knowledge about the *facts* of environmental problems, they have not altered the kind of human behavior that is exploiting nature nor have the facts affected human habits of addictive consumption. Environmentalists increasingly realize that science and public policy are not sufficient to transform human consciousness and behavior for a sustainable future. Ethics, religion, and spirituality must be engaged to transform our understanding, attitudes, and actions in regard to our patterns of consumption and care for the earth.

Buddhadasa's identification of nature (*thammachat*) and the Dhamma can contribute toward transforming our understanding, attitudes, and actions regarding the care of the earth. It was Buddhadasa's perception of the liberating power of nature-as-dhamma that inspired him to found Wat Suan Mokkh, his monastery in Chaiya, in southern Thailand, as a center of teaching and practice. For Buddhadasa the natural surround-

ings of his forest monastery were nothing less than a medium for personal transformation:

“Trees, rocks, sand, even dirt and insects can speak. This doesn’t mean, as some people believe that they are spirits (*phi*) or gods (*thewada*). Rather, if we reside in nature near trees and rocks we’ll discover feelings and thoughts arising that are truly out of the ordinary. At first we’ll feel a sense of peace and quiet (*sangopyen*) which may eventually move beyond that feeling to a transcendence of self. The deep sense of calm that nature provides through separation (*wiwek*) from the troubles and anxieties which plague us in the day-to-day world serves to protect heart and mind. Indeed, the lessons nature teaches us lead to a new birth beyond the suffering (*qwam thuk*) that results from attachment to self. Trees and rocks, then, can talk to us. They help us understand what it means to cool down from the heat of our confusion, despair, anxiety, and suffering.”

(*Siang Takong Jak Thammachat*)

Destruction of Nature is Destruction of the Dhamma and Our Humanity

For Buddhadasa, it is only by being in nature that the trees, rocks, earth, sand, animals, birds, and insects can teach us the lesson of self-forgetting. In what I call, Buddhadasa’s “spiritual biocentricism,” being attuned to the lessons of nature is being at one with the Dhamma. The destruction of nature, then, implies the destruction of the Dhamma, and the destruction of the Dhamma is the destruction of our humanity.

Toward the end of his life the degradation of the natural environment became a matter of great concern for Buddhadasa. One of his talks at Wat Suan Mokkh in 1990, three years before his death, was titled, “Buddhists and the Care of Nature” [*Buddhasasanik Kap Kan Anurak Thammachat*]. This essay provides insight into both the biocentric and ethical dimensions of his environmental concern. The essay might be read as Buddhadasa’s plea for nature conservation and sustainability.

From an environmental perspective, I render the Thai term, *anurak*, as “conservation.” Many Thai monks are involved in efforts to stop the exploitation of forests in their districts and provinces. They have been called “forest conservation monks” (*phra anurak pa*). Wat Suan Mokkh exemplifies Buddhadasa’s dedication to preserving a natural environment. *Anurak*, as embodied in his life and work, moreover, conveys a rich, nuanced meaning close to its Pali roots: to be imbued with the

quality of protecting, sheltering, and caring for. By the term, *anurak*, Buddhadasa intends this deeper, dhammic sense of *anu-rakkha*, an intrinsic, active “caring for” that issues forth from the very nature of our being. Caring, then, is the active expression of our fundamental empathy for all creatures and the earth that we discover by hearing the Dhamma in the “voices of nature.” One cares for the forest because one empathizes with the forest just as one cares for people, including oneself, because one has become empathetic. *Anurak*, the ability to be in a state of empathy, is fundamentally linked to non-attachment or liberation from preoccupation with self which is at the very core of Buddhadasa’s thought. Caring (*anurak*) in the Dhammic sense, therefore, is the active expression of our empathetic identification with all life forms—sentient and non-sentient, human beings, and nature.

P.A. PAYUTTO (Phra Bhramagunabhorn):

Buddhism and the Forest

Acknowledged to be one of the leading scholar-monks in contemporary Thailand, P. A. Payutto was ordained at the age of eleven in 1950. Only one of four novice monks to pass the ninth and highest level of the *sangha* Pali curriculum since its inception, he received higher ordination and the monastic name, Phra Maha Prayudh Payutto in 1961. He graduated with first class honors from Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University, and later served as its deputy secretary-general as well as abbot of Phra Phirain monastery in Bangkok. His major contributions to the scholarly study of Buddhism include two Pali dictionaries, editorial leadership in the newest edition of the Thai Pali canon and the Mahidol University CD-ROM Pali canon, and his magnum opus treatise, *Buddhadhamma: Natural Laws and Values for Life*. In addition, he has written extensively on a variety of subjects including Buddhist education, Buddhism and science, Buddhist economics, Buddhism and the environment, as well as Buddhist doctrinal topics. For his outstanding contribution to Buddhist scholarship and education, he has received several honorary doctorates and in 1994 was awarded the UNESCO Peace Education Prize.

In the early 1990s Payutto addressed the question of the relationship between the Buddhist *sangha* and forests in reaction to what he saw as an excessively political response by some monks to extensive deforestation in northern Thailand and the encroachment by government and private enterprise on traditional village forest management in the

northeast. In these talks, later printed as essays, Payutto makes a case for forest preservation on the grounds of the example of the life and teachings of the Buddha, the traditions of early Buddhist monastic practice, and the development of Buddhism in Thai history. He bases his position on the doctrinal view that overcoming mental defilements (*kilesa*), one of the central teachings of Theravada Buddhism, requires separation (*viveka*) from the confusions, anxieties, and stresses of the getting-and-spending world that typify much of our lives; and, that during the time of the Buddha the forest was the preferred environment for the solitude required for achieving this state of mind. From a historical perspective, he argues that beginning with the thirteenth century Thai kingdoms, forest monasteries have been essential to the organization and practice of Buddhism in Thailand. Consequently, for the government not to support forest monasteries would contradict a practice that has defined Thai Buddhism from its early beginnings.

Unlike some so-called “Green Buddhists” who consider such philosophical concepts as dependent co-arising (*paticca samuppada*) and universal Buddha nature (*dhammadhatu*) to provide a biocentric ecological argument for the preservation and conservation of nature, Payutto supports a more human centered position that values the forest, or nature more broadly construed, as the ideal venue for the pursuit of Buddhist spiritual goals and moral values. He offers both doctrinal and historical justifications for his position, arguing that from a Buddhist perspective forest preservation rests on a religious rather than an ecological basis. It is a position that supports conservation on the grounds that an unspoiled natural environment best promotes Buddhist spirituality and has always held a prominent place within monastic traditions. At the same time, however, his position problematizes the activist role of Thai conservation monks who have politicized the role of the *sangha* in Thai society. Implied in Payutto’s position that relies upon a religious and historical justification for conserving natural environments like forests, is a critique of politically activist monks who, in his opinion, jeopardize the spiritual goal of Buddhist practice.

The Right view of Nature and of Human Beings

In contrast to the close interrelationship between the human community and nature in the Buddhist tradition, Payutto ascribes modern global environmental destruction to the dominant Western worldview flawed, in his view, by three erroneous beliefs: humankind is separated from nature, human beings are masters of nature, and that happiness results

from the acquisition of material goods. For Payutto conservation and preservation of the natural environment cannot be achieved simply by more astute public policy and better enforcement of conservation laws, but demand a paradigm shift, an ethical transformation not only of the prevailing attitude toward nature, but also toward our fellow human beings and our personal life objective. Advancing the Buddhist position that right view leads to right action, Payutto contends that until the right view prevails and human beings are seen as part of nature, the worldwide trend toward environmental degradation will continue.

SULAK SIVARAKSA:

Engaged Buddhist Activist and Environmentalist

Sulak Sivaraksa, Thailand's prominent lay Buddhist social activist and author, is widely known as a major figure in the international engaged Buddhist movement. In 1961, upon his return to Thailand from England where he completed university and law degrees, he became a publisher, university lecturer, and founding editor of the *Social Science Review*, Thailand's leading intellectual journal until 1976 when it was suppressed by the government. In 1971 he organized the Komol Keemthong Foundation whose purpose was to inspire young Thais to dedicate their lives to social justice and the common good rather than the sole pursuit of their own personal gain. The Foundation was the first of many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) S. Sivaraksa has inaugurated. Prominent among them are the Thai Inter-religious Commission for Development (TICD) and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), (Institute of Peace, Democratic Participation, and Justice), and the Spirit in Education Movement. Through these and other organizations and networks, S. Sivaraksa has devoted his life to the pursuit of economic and educational reform, social and environmental justice, human and civil rights. S. Sivaraksa has authored hundreds of essays and articles in Thai and several collections of essays in English, most notable among them are: *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*, *A Socially Engaged Buddhism, Religion and Development*, and *Siamese Resurgence. A Thai Buddhist Voice on Asia and a World of Change*. An abbreviated version of his autobiography in Thai has been published under the title, *Loyalty Demands Dissent: Autobiography of an Engaged Buddhist*.

In numerous writings S. Sivaraksa has spoken forcefully on the issue of environmental destruction, especially in his own country. Equally

important are organizations and movements he has created to promote environmental preservation and environmental justice. Most of the NGOs founded by S. Sivaraksa include an environmental agenda but for one, in particular, the preservation of the natural environment is uppermost. *Sekhiyadhamma* (Students of the Dhamma), is a network of Buddhist monks working in their communities to preserve local environments, principally forests that are essential to village economies. Their efforts are both educational, teaching villagers better ways to conserve natural resources, as well as political, protecting local social, cultural, and natural environments from the encroachment of commercial, industrial, and urban development. On the outskirts of Bangkok, S. Sivaraksa has established, a conference center, the Wongsanit Ashram, to exemplify the ideal of simple living close to nature or, as he fondly quotes Gandhi, “living simply so that others may simply live.” The Ashram serves as a center for the practice of a mindful, non-consumerist, other-regarding way of life.

He Fights against the Violence of Free Market Capitalism

Like his spiritual mentor, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, S. Sivaraksa grounds his environmental ethic on a holistic understanding of the Buddhist principle of interdependent co-arising conducive to a deep respect for nature. This knowledge of “inter-becoming,” a term he borrows from Thich Nhat Hanh, is achieved through the development of mindful awareness and leads naturally to an empathetic identification with and compassionate action toward all life forms. On this foundation S. Sivaraksa builds a guide for compassionate action using traditional Buddhist teachings—the Four Sublime Abodes (love, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity), the four Bases of Sympathy (generosity, kindly speech, life of service, impartiality), the five precepts (*sila*). For example, he applies the first precept against killing to the structural violence engendered against the poor and the natural environment by global corporate power.

S. Sivaraksa brings to his environmental agenda a sharp critique of governmental and commercial exploitation of nature at both global and Thai national levels. Applying the principle that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, he believes that the global economic structures of free market capitalism facilitate the concentration of wealth and power at the expense of the poor and the environment, a scenario that he characterizes as “structural violence.” Free market capitalism also creates a culture of consumption driven by greed, selfishness, and

acquisitiveness rather than promoting the qualities of simplicity, responsibility, and care that are essential to the preservation and conservation of nature. He finds in the culture of consumerism the illusion of autonomous, individualized selves undermining both human community and the mindful-awareness of the interdependence of human beings and nature.

S. Sivaraksa idealizes the rural Thai environment of relatively small self-sustaining communities living in harmony with the natural environment, not in a naïve, antique sense but as a practical example of a more humane, caring, and harmonious society. Rather than unrealistically advocating a return to a pre-modern, less complex era, he forges alliances and networks among people from many walks of life—academics, laborers, farmers, activists, civil servants, and even the business community—dedicated to the building of a more democratic, egalitarian, inclusive, and compassionate society. In recent years he has challenged numerous government and private projects that have dislocated villages or undermined traditional ways of life and the communities that support them. These projects include dozens of dams constructed without prior consultation with local populations geared mainly toward making abundant water supplies for industries at the expense of small-scale agriculture; the destruction of local forests in north and northeastern Thailand for the promotion of commercial enterprises, especially wood pulp eucalyptus plantations; and land loss around and the subsequent pollution of Songkhla Lake, Thailand's largest inland body of water.

S. Sivaraksa's Buddhist environmental philosophy owes a special debt to the thought of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Thich Nhat Hanh. Yet, in contrast to their more reflective and contemplative styles, he aggressively fights in the trenches for the cause of human and environmental justice. On March 6, 1998, he was arrested during a sit-in protest against the construction of the Burma-Thailand Yadana pipeline in Kanjanaburi province, south Thailand. Typical of S. Sivaraksa's style as an engaged Buddhist, he was putting his life on the line to protest both human rights abuses and the pipeline's potential for ecological damage.