

# THE GREEN DHARMA: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF BUDDHIST ONTOLOGY, VIRTUE ETHICS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Afsana Parvin

Department of philosophy, Raipur Block Mahavidyalaya, Bankura, West Bengal

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper evaluates the intersection of classical Buddhist ethics and modern environmental ethics. Contemporary environmental crises require a philosophical shift away from anthropocentric utilitarianism and Cartesian dualism toward holistic paradigms. This study analyzes how core Buddhist concepts—specifically *Pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), *Anattā* (non-self), and *Ahiṃsā* (non-harming)—provide a structurally coherent and non-anthropocentric foundation for ecological conservation. By evaluating historical canonical texts from the Pāli Tipiṭaka alongside contemporary academic commentaries, the paper highlights how Buddhist mindfulness, structural moderation, and virtue ethics translate into active environmental stewardship. Finally, the paper investigates the typologies of eco-Buddhism, critiques raised by textual skeptics, and the practical application of these principles in global movements such as Engaged Buddhism and modern conservation strategies.

**Keywords:** Pratītyasamutpāda, Ahiṃsā, Eco-Buddhism, Deep Ecology, Engaged Buddhism, Consumerism, Anattā, Vinaya Piṭaka

## INTRODUCTION: The Modern Ecological Crisis and the Need for a New Paradigm

The contemporary global ecosystem is undergoing unprecedented degradation. Anthropogenic climate change, rapid biodiversity loss, microplastic accumulation, and widespread habitat fragmentation are no longer merely technical problems requiring engineering or legislative interventions; they represent a fundamental crisis of ethics and worldview. For centuries, post-Enlightenment Western environmental paradigms have functioned within an anthropocentric stewardship or resource-management framework. This approach treats the non-human world primarily as a repository of raw materials (*instrumental value*) meant to sustain human economic expansion (Fisher-Ogden 63).

This exploitative outlook is philosophically anchored in Cartesian-Newtonian dualism, which enforces a strict boundary between the conscious human subject and the mechanical, non-conscious natural object. Even progressive models of resource conservation often operate under this dualism, managing nature from a position of detachment. Consequently, modern frameworks frequently struggle to inspire deep, long-term shifts in human behavior because they fail to dismantle the psychological alienation between humanity and the biosphere.

To break this philosophical gridlock, scholars and environmental ethicists are increasingly examining Eastern philosophical systems, particularly Buddhism. By treating the boundaries between "self" and "other," or "human" and "nature," as dangerous psychological illusions,

Buddhist ethics offers an alternative, non-anthropocentric paradigm. Rather than viewing humanity as an exceptional species tasked with either dominating or patronizingly managing the Earth, Buddhism asserts that human well-being is entirely continuous with the health of the biosphere.

This paper provides a systematic, textual, and philosophical analysis of how classical Buddhist concepts can be reconstructed into a robust environmental ethic. It explores the ontological foundations of radical interdependence, details the expansion of traditional moral precepts into ecological imperatives, categorizes the academic landscape of "Eco-Buddhism," addresses prominent textual critiques, and analyzes the real-world applications of these principles in grassroots eco-activism and institutional policy.

## ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS: RADICAL INTERDEPENDENCE AND COSMIC KINSHIP

To understand how Buddhism informs environmental ethics, one must first explore its baseline definition of reality. Buddhist ethics is never an arbitrary set of divine commandments or absolute categorical imperatives; instead, it flows naturally from its description of reality (ontology). If the world is understood as segmented and disconnected, ethical systems will reflect that division. However, if the cosmos is understood as an organic, unified process, moral actions must adapt to preserve that balance.

### DEPENDENT ORIGINATION (PRATĪTYASAMUTPĀDA)

The philosophical foundation of Buddhist ecology is *Pratītyasamutpāda*, commonly translated as "dependent origination" or "interdependent co-arising" (Brown 885). This doctrine states that no entity, physical or mental, possesses an independent, permanent, self-existing essence (*svabhāva*). Rather, all phenomena emerge, endure, and dissolve purely in reliance upon a web of causes and conditions (Sahni, *Environmental Ethics*). The foundational formulation of this causal law is recorded across the Pāli Nikāyas:

"When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases." (Majjhima Nikāya 1.262) In an ecological context, this formula provides a direct blueprint for systems biology and deep ecology. It establishes that human beings are not separate agents standing outside of a passive environment; rather, the human organism is an emergent process entirely dependent upon atmospheric, hydrological, geological, and biological systems.

Early Buddhist canonical literature explicitly connects human ethical behavior with these natural processes. In the *Aggañña Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 27), the Buddha presents a symbolic cosmogony that details how primitive, luminous beings gradually developed greed, possessiveness, and desire (*taṇhā*) (Singh 27; Trone 3). As their collective psychological attachments expanded, the physical environment responded through a parallel process of material degradation. The self-manifesting, abundant resources of the earth withdrew, replaced by harsh landscapes and scarce food sources that required grueling labor to harvest.

[Collective Psychological Greed (Taṇhā)]



[Erosion of Moral Restraints]



[Material Scarcity & Habitat Degradation]



[Institutionalized Labor & Conflict]

The *Aggañña Sutta* demonstrates that early Buddhism did not view environmental changes as purely accidental or isolated physical phenomena. Instead, it positioned human morality

and natural processes as mirrors of one another, showing that systemic greed alters the biosphere (Singh 27). Similarly, the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 26) reinforces this theme, warning that when rulers ignore ethical principles and allow poverty and greed to run unchecked, a cascade of natural disasters, shortened lifespans, and social decay inevitably follows (Singh 27).

## THE REALIZATION OF NON-SELF (*ANATTĀ*) AND THE ECOLOGICAL SELF

The psychological driver behind modern resource exploitation is the illusion of a permanent, isolated self (*attā* or *ātman*), which prioritizes immediate personal or tribal gain over the wider network of life. The Buddha's doctrine of *Anattā* (non-self) deconstructs this egoism by demonstrating that what humans call the "self" is actually an ever-shifting arrangement of five psycho-physical aggregates (*khandhas*): form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness (Gusmão). None of these aggregates exist independently; they require constant exchanges of energy, matter, and information with the surrounding environment.

When a practitioner realizes *Anattā* through contemplative practice, their rigid psychological boundaries dissolve. This internal shift directly mirrors contemporary frameworks like Deep Ecology, formulated by philosopher Arne Næss, which advocates for transitioning from a narrow "human ego" to a broadened "ecological self" (Cavazza 23). Cavazza notes that both Næss's ecosophy and Buddhist ontology resolve the subject-object split by anchoring the self within relationships (23). When a person understands that their breath is continuous with the atmosphere, their blood continuous with the waterways, and their physical form sustained by the soil, protecting the biosphere becomes as natural and intuitive as protecting one's own body.

## ETHICAL IMPERATIVES: FROM PERSONAL DISCIPLINE TO ECOSYSTEM CARE

Because Buddhist ontology establishes that all life is interconnected, its ethical frameworks focus heavily on minimizing harm and alleviating suffering across the entire web of existence.

## SYSTEMATIC BROADENING OF THE FIRST PRECEPT (*AHIṂSĀ*)

The moral code of Buddhism begins with the *Pañcasīla* (Five Precepts), the first of which requires a practitioner to abstain from destroying sentient life (Goodman; Woodhouse et al. 295). This commitment to *Ahiṃsā* (non-harming) requires deep empathy for the vulnerability of living beings. In classical settings, this precept was primarily applied to individual sentient creatures, particularly animals. However, contemporary eco-Buddhist thinkers have systematically expanded *Ahiṃsā* to encompass macro-environments and entire ecosystems (Acep).

This expansion is logical: an animal cannot survive without its habitat. Deforesting a mountain, strip-mining a valley, or polluting a watershed destroys the necessary conditions for thousands of sentient organisms to live. Therefore, macro-environmental destruction is recognized as a direct violation of *Ahiṃsā* due to the massive, compounding suffering it inflicts upon dependent life forms (Acep; Singh 27).

This perspective challenges Western environmental concepts like "animal rights" or "biocentrism," which can sometimes focus too narrowly on individual animals or species while ignoring the broader systems that support them. Instead, a Buddhist approach offers a systemic moral framework where the habitat and the organism are protected together.

## THE BRAHMAVIHĀRAS AS FORCES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

Modern environmental work often triggers significant emotional stress, leading to eco-anxiety, climate grief, or activist burnout. The Buddhist virtue ethics framework addresses these challenges through the *Brahmavihāras* (Four Sublime States), which provide emotional stability and motivation for long-term ecological advocacy (Acep):

1. **Mettā (Loving-Kindness):** Cultivating a genuine wish for the safety, well-being, and flourishing of all expressions of life across the biosphere, free from narrow anthropocentric biases (Singh 27; Trone 3).
2. **Karuṇā (Compassion):** Developing an active, empathetic response to the real wounds of a degraded Earth and its inhabitants, facing suffering directly without collapsing into avoidance or denial (Trone 3).
3. **Muditā (Sympathetic Joy):** Celebrating and drawing inspiration from successful conservation efforts, environmental victories, and signs of ecological resilience, which helps protect against cynicism.
4. **Upekkhā (Equanimity):** Maintaining a balanced, long-term commitment to environmental protection. Equanimity allows an activist to work passionately for the earth without becoming paralyzed by the immediate success or failure of their efforts.

## THE ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE: ANALYZING THE TYPOLOGIES OF ECO-BUDDHISM

As the field of religion and ecology matured into a formal academic discipline, scholars began analyzing the diverse ways contemporary thinkers connect Buddhism with environmentalism. Researcher Pragati Sahni highlights that the historical relationship between Buddhism and nature is highly complex, warning against oversimplifying early texts to fit modern ecological agendas (Haksar 207). To navigate this complexity, Sahni maps out four primary typologies that define scholarship in the field:

### The Sahni Typology of Buddhist Environmentalism

Approach	Methodological Framing	Strengths	Vulnerabilities
<b>The Partisans</b>	Enthusiastically champion Buddhism as an inherently ecocentric religion, relying heavily on modern green reinterpretations (Haksar 207).	Highly motivational for grassroots environmental activism and modern interfaith dialogue.	Can risk committing anachronisms by mapping modern ecological concepts onto ancient texts.
<b>The Positivists</b>	Focus rigorously on extracting explicit canonical texts and monastic rules to	Grounded in textual evidence, providing a clear philological foundation for green	May overlook texts that focus purely on trans-worldly liberation.
<b>Approach</b>	Methodological Framing	Strengths	Vulnerabilities
	validate modern environmental practices (Haksar 207).	principles.	

<b>The Sanguine</b>	Maintain a balanced, analytical approach, recognizing where early texts align with modern ecology while respecting historical context (Haksar 207).	Philosophically objective, providing a durable framework for contemporary environmental ethics.	Requires deep engagement with both ancient philosophy and modern ecology.
<b>The Sceptics</b>	Argue that early Buddhism focused primarily on escaping the suffering of <i>Samsāra</i> , viewing "Eco-Buddhism" as a modern reinvention (Haksar 207).	Serves as a vital intellectual check against romanticizing or distorting historical texts.	Can overlook the practical, compassionate ethics built into early Buddhist practice.

### TEXTUAL INSIGHTS FROM THE MONASTIC CODE (VINAYA PIṬAKA)

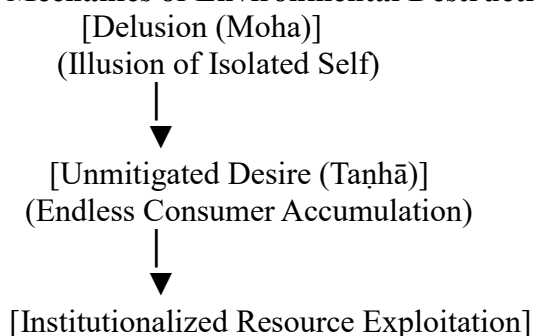
To resolve these debates, Positivist and Sanguine scholars look closely at the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the collection of monastic discipline rules. These texts show that early Buddhist communities practiced a lifestyle of radical minimization and ecological awareness (Singh 27). For instance, monks were explicitly prohibited from destroying plant life or clearing vegetation (*Pācittiya* 11), a rule established partly to respect popular contemporary beliefs that plants housed minor spirits, but also to prevent unnecessary damage to local ecosystems (Singh 27).

Furthermore, the *Vinaya* contains strict regulations regarding environmental hygiene and water conservation. Monks were forbidden from throwing waste, leftover food, or bodily fluids into green fields or public water sources (*Sekhiya* 74–75). Water had to be carefully strained through a filter (*parissāvana*) before use—a rule designed not only to protect the health of the monk but also to ensure that tiny aquatic organisms were not accidentally killed during consumption (Singh 27). While these rules were originally intended to maintain monastic purity and maintain good relations with the lay community, they established a practical lifestyle with a minimal ecological footprint.

### DECONSTRUCTING THE ROOTS OF DESTRUCTION: TAṆHĀ, MOHA, AND CONSUMERISM

From a Buddhist perspective, environmental degradation is not an economic or technological failure; it is a symptom of collective psychological imbalances. The tradition diagnoses the crisis by looking at the three unwholesome roots (*Akusala-mūla*): greed (*Lobha* or *Taṇhā*), aversion (*Dosa*), and delusion (*Moha*) (Singh 27; Trone 3).

#### The Mechanics of Environmental Destruction



(Deforestation, Carbon Emissions, Pollution)



[Ecological Crisis]

## THE CRITIQUE OF MANUFACTURED CRAVING

Modern industrial capitalism operates by systematically stimulating and monetizing *Tanhā* (craving) (Gusmão). Through advertising and planned obsolescence, consumer economies transform minor desires into urgent needs, driving an endless cycle of production, consumption, and waste. Buddhism identifies this cycle as a major source of *Dukkha* (suffering). True peace is not achieved by constantly satisfying desires, but by cultivating *Santutthī* (contentment) and internal clarity (Singh 27).

By practicing mindfulness, an individual learns to observe the rise of a desire without immediately acting on it. This space allows people to distinguish between genuine needs (*paccaya*) and manufactured cravings, directly undermining the psychological foundations of hyper-consumerism.

## RIGHT LIVELIHOOD (SAMMĀ ĀJĪVA) AS AN ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVE

Within the Noble Eightfold Path, the concept of *Right Livelihood* transforms these psychological insights into an economic framework. Historically, the Buddha barred lay practitioners from engaging in five specific trades that cause systemic harm: trading in weapons, living beings, meat, intoxicants, and poisons (*Ānguttara Nikāya* 5.177).

Recontextualized for the modern world, *Right Livelihood* offers a clear blueprint for a sustainable economy. It directly critiques industries that rely on resource depletion, fossil fuel extraction, toxic manufacturing, and animal exploitation. Instead, it advocates for an economic model focused on livelihoods that support the long-term health and stability of human communities and the wider environment.

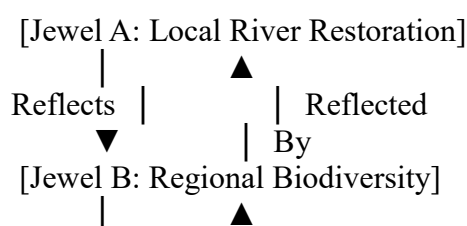
## ENGAGED ECO-BUDDHISM: TRANSFORMING INSIGHTS INTO GRASSROOTS ACTION

The intersection of Buddhist ethics and environmental responsibility is most clearly expressed in **Socially Engaged Buddhism**. This movement, championed by figures like Thich Nhat Hanh, Joanna Macy, and Sulak Sivaraksa, moves away from quietist withdrawal, treating social and ecological activism as an essential part of spiritual practice (Acep).

## THE METAPHOR OF INDRA'S NET

Engaged Buddhist thinkers frequently use the image of **Indra's Net** from the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* to illustrate interdependence. Imagine a vast net extending infinitely in all directions, with a multi-faceted jewel placed at every knot. Each jewel reflects all the other jewels in the net, showing that an impact on any single point resonates throughout the entire structure.

In modern environmental activism, this metaphor serves as a powerful reminder that local ecological actions have global consequences. Protecting a single forest or restoring a local river helps heal the broader global ecosystem.



Reflects | | Reflected  
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[Jewel C: Global Climate Stability]

## TREE ORDINATION CEREMONIES (BORD PHRA MAE KONGKA)

A striking practical example of Engaged Buddhism occurs in the old-growth forests of Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand and Cambodia. To combat illegal logging and commercial development, activist monks perform traditional ordination ceremonies for ancient trees (Acep). They chant sacred Pāli texts, sprinkle holy water, and wrap the trees in sacred saffron robes, effectively granting them monastic status.

<Sequence>

<Step title="Identification of Threatened Ecosystems" subtitle="Community Mapping">

Monks and local villagers locate vital, old-growth forest zones facing immediate threats from commercial logging or agricultural clearing. </Step>

<Step title="Ritual Sanctification and Chanting" subtitle="Sūtra Recitation">

The monastic community gathers around the foundational trees of the forest, chanting protective discourses (\*Parittas\*) to invoke spiritual care and cultural respect.

</Step>

<Step title="Investment of Saffron Robes" subtitle="The Ordination Act">

Monks wrap the trunks of the trees in sacred saffron robes, symbolically raising the forest's status to that of the Sangha.

</Step>

<Step title="Community Enforcement and Monitoring" subtitle="Ecological Protection">

The community establishes local monitoring networks. This cultural boundary effectively deters illegal loggers, who are reluctant to face the deep karmic consequences of harming an ordained monastic entity.

</Step>

</Sequence>

This creative ritual blends traditional spiritual devotion with direct ecological defense. It leverages deep cultural respect for the Sangha to create a powerful boundary, forcing loggers and developers to reconsider their actions out of respect for the sacred vows associated with the robes (Acep).

## NATIONAL GOVERNANCE: BHUTAN'S GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS MODEL

On a institutional level, the Kingdom of Bhutan offers a clear example of how Buddhist ethics can guide state governance. Bhutan explicitly rejects Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as its primary measure of development, choosing instead to prioritize **Gross National Happiness (GNH)** (Acep).

Environmental conservation is built directly into GNH as one of its four foundational pillars. Guided by these values, Bhutan's constitution mandates that at least 60% of the nation's total land area must remain under forest cover for future generations. By focusing on sustainability and ecological health over quick industrial profits, Bhutan operates as a carbon-negative nation, demonstrating that a society grounded in Buddhist ethics can create viable alternatives to destructive economic models.

## PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUES AND INTERNAL TENSIONS

A rigorous analysis of Buddhist environmental ethics must also examine the legitimate criticisms and internal tensions raised by textual scholars and historians. Skeptics point out that early Buddhism was primarily focused on transcending the suffering of *Samsāra* to attain *Nirvāna*, an orientation that can sometimes lean toward detachment from the material world rather than its preservation (Haksar 207).

From an ascetic perspective, nature was often viewed as a demanding teacher—a place of wild animals and harsh weather that helped test a meditator's discipline—rather than an ecosystem requiring protection. Early texts frequently describe the material world as inherently unstable and marked by *Anicca* (impermanence), which critics argue could lead to a sense of passive resignation during environmental crises.

Furthermore, field research reveals a real gap between ideal ethical frameworks and practical realities on the ground. In many developing Buddhist societies, local communities face systemic poverty, resource limitations, and a lack of formalized environmental training among local monastics (Acep). These practical challenges can sometimes limit the long-term effectiveness of grass-roots initiatives. These tensions show that modern eco-Buddhism cannot rely solely on ancient texts; it requires an active, ongoing effort to translate traditional principles into effective solutions for today's complex socio-economic realities.

## CONCLUSION: THE REALIZATION OF KINSHIP

Buddhist ethics provides a profound alternative to the utilitarian paradigms that drive modern environmental destruction. By anchoring its worldview in *Pratītyasamutpāda*, it reframes the Earth not as a collection of commodities to be exploited, but as an open-ended community of interconnected subjects. It transforms environmental protection from a series of restrictive legal obligations into a profound spiritual practice.

While operational challenges and historical tensions exist, the integration of deep mindfulness, consumer restraint, and active non-violence positions Buddhist environmental ethics as an invaluable resource. Ultimately, resolving the environmental crisis requires a shift from an attitude of domination to a deep realization of kinship with all life, a transition that the Green Dharma is uniquely equipped to guide.

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