

# VANAROPA (FORESTATION): AN APPLICATION OF BUDDHIST TEACHINGS FOR THE PROBLEM OF DEFORESTATION

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## 1. WHY SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

With the industrial revolution back in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the development of the world became a crucial issue. Countries focused on the economic development without thinking about the bad effects of this senseless rat race. As a result of industrial revolution and rapid growth of the world, numerous problems have come into existence. One of the greatest problems that the world is facing today is deforestation which causes an irreparable damage to the earth. Due to deforestation, environmental problems such as air pollution, water pollution, and soil pollution occur as major problems. Development is something essential but nature preservation is more important than development. Where there is no nature there is no life. Therefore, sustainable development is the answer for this burning problem.

Scientists are worried about this unbalanced development which is basically focused on material success without thinking about environmental issues caused by it. As human beings we live on earth with the help of nature. There is no argument that development is important but we cannot think about a life without nature. As long as the life on earth is concerned, the most essential fact for the survival of all beings is the preservation of nature. Therefore,

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development should go together complying with the nature and its natural order. Considering this important issue a new subject which is known as “Sustainable Development”, was introduced in 1980 at the International Union for The Conservation of Nature (IUCN). However, this new concept was known to general public in 1987 with the report of the Brundtland Commission formally known as The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). According to this commission, sustainable development is defined as follow. “It is the development that meets the present generation without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs”.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the whole world started to talk about this issue but unfortunately they almost forgot what they talked about and hardly thought of putting it into practice. The world thinks that economic growth is the most important thing but they do not aware that economy cannot solve all human problems. The developed countries show their commercial success to the world through super concrete forests and high technology.

One may think that sustainable development is a dream or something going against the economic growth of the world. This is a misconception. What sustainable development emphasizes is that to have an ecofriendly development while preserving the environment. Therefore, as we said earlier, development should go with the nature preservation. A quality of life will be assured when the soil, water, and air are protected. Though we are keeping a good economic status but poor in natural resources, there cannot be a quality life in such an environment. When the nature is affected, everything is affected. Therefore, environmental sustenance is the main reason for the healthy and quality life of both humans and animals.

## 2. BUDDHISM AND NATURE PRESERVATION

Buddhism is a religion which emphasizes the importance of the wellbeing of all beings. The central teaching of Buddhism is interdependent arising of phenomena and all the conditional things exist interdependently. Where there is no interdependency and interconnection there always arise problems. We are not

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1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable\\_development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_development)

exceptional as human beings. We too survive and subsist on nature as other organisms. Therefore, we must protect nature. By protecting the nature, one protects his own life. In the *Vatthu Sutta* the Buddha taught that the beings who dwell on earth sustain their life by rain.<sup>2</sup> It means that where there is no rain, there are no trees; where there are no trees, there is no life. *The Bhūripaṇṇa Jātaka* teaches thus. “Having stayed under a shade of a tree, if one destroys that tree, he is a sinner and the most ungrateful person.”<sup>3</sup> Here the Buddhism clearly teaches the protection of environment is extremely important. The other thing is to be grateful to the nature which gives us protection. In many other places in the *Suttapiṭaka*, the importance of the plants and trees is explained.

The Buddha’s life, from his birth to the great parinirvāṇa, is connected with the nature. He was born under a tree, attained enlightenment under a tree, and his great passing away also took place under a tree. The Buddha’s sermons very often have been delivered in forests and He had lived many times in the forest and His disciples also lived in association with the forest. According to the *Vinayapīṭaka*, monks and nuns are not allowed to destroy plants and trees. Spitting or urinating in water or on grass also prohibited for them. The protection of the nature including both flora and fauna is emphasized in the Vinaya.

As we know the Buddha was not an environmental activist. The reason was that environmental issues were not there at his time. Therefore, talking about the nature preservation was not required in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. However, in the suttas we find the Buddha admired the beautiful nature and the importance of growing orchard and trees. In the *Vanaropa Sutta*, such kind of teaching can be found. Here the Buddha taught that the one who grows orchard and trees acquires merit day by day.<sup>4</sup> This teaching emphasizes that the preservation of nature in proper way is a great

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2. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Saṃyutta Nikāya tr. Part I*, p.128. “*Vutthim bhūtā upajīvanti ye pānā pathavissitā*”, *Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyanā CD version 4*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, *Devatāsaṃyutta*, *Jarāvagga*, *Sutta 4*.

3. See the *Bhūripaṇṇa Jātaka* and also the *Mahābodhi Jātaka*.

4. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Saṃyutta Nikāya tr. Part I*, p. 122. “Those who set up a park or a grove, the people who construct a bridge, a place to drink and a well, those who give a residence; for them merit always increase, both by day and by night.

merit and it's a blessing for all beings. The other thing is harming the nature is a bad kamma. Therefore, damaging the nature in the name of development is going against the environment philosophy of Buddhism.

### 3. THE PROBLEM OF DEFORESTATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

What is deforestation? According to Britannica.com deforestation means “the clearing or thinning of forests by humans. Deforestation represents one of the largest issues in global land use. Estimate of deforestation traditionally are based on the area of forest cleared for human use, including removal of trees for wood products and for croplands and grazing lands. In the practice of clear-cutting, all the trees are removed from the land, which completely destroys the forest. In some case, however, even partial logging and accidental fires thin out enough to change the forest structure dramatically.<sup>5</sup> Explaining the causes for deforestation Natinalgeographic.com explains somewhat similar to the former. “Farming, grazing of livestock, mining, and drilling combined account for more than half of all deforestation. Forestry practices, wildfires and, in small part, urbanization account for the rest”.<sup>6</sup>

Due to money oriented economy and craving for material success forests are destroyed senselessly. Thick rainforests are being damaged and the wildlife is in a great danger around the world. Deforestation causes for the arising of various problems such as water pollution, air pollution, land pollution and also global warming. As a result of industrial wastes, water pollution and land pollution have become a big issue. The water in the sea and rivers already has been polluted. The water creatures have been facing a big threat. Some of them have been already extinct from earth. The scarcity of drinking water is really a big problem for the human being. Most of the ancient cities of the world have already become deserted places as the result of destroying the nature.

Air pollution is by far the most harmful form of pollution in our environment. The whole world is facing this unavoidable situation.

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5. <https://www.britannica.com/science/deforestation>.

6. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/deforestation/>.

Air pollution is caused due to many reasons. The main cause is industrial revolution. The next major reason is deforestation. Another reason for air pollution is excessive cattle breeding, farming and using automobiles and etc. Farming cattle for meat and milk is a big business in the world today. The cattle produce lots of methane due to rumination process. It emits a big amount of methane gas into the environment causing various problems to the nature. Using automobiles, people destroy the nature. Because of combustion of carbon based fuel such as wood, coal and natural gas, a big amount of gas emitted continuously and pollutes the air. Due to lack of oxygen, people face respiratory problems. There are various sophisticated aircrafts and weapons which cause a serious damage to the atmosphere.

According to world news, millions of flood victims are reported and thousands of human and animal lives are claimed due to heavy flood and also lots of food crops are washed away. The recent flash flood in Kedarnath town in Uttarakhand district in India is an example for such kind. Over one thousand people were killed by that flood. Though flood comes as a natural cause, sometimes the effect becomes serious due to human behaviours. For instance, deforestation causes heavy flood and it brings a big disaster to the world as a result of senseless practice of people who challenge ecosystem. This is one of the reasons for flood and long-term drought. People are facing global warming or greenhouse effect as a result of deforestation and the damage of eco-system. Carbon-dioxide, greenhouse gas increases in the atmosphere which causes for global warming. Due to global climate changing the ice-layers or glaciers melt increasing the world temperature. This causes various other climatic problems too; especially, damaging the cooling atmosphere where the flora and fauna cannot survive under high temperature. Specially, animals in the Arctic subject to extinction and the sea water level increases day by day.

The world is changing and technology is improving day by day. This phenomenon cannot be reversed or stopped. On the other hand, human beings are the only beings who can change things and invent new things as a result of their marvelous skill of thinking. Therefore, development is something that can only be acquired

by human beings. The advantage of development is tremendous. Therefore, development is something necessary. The problem is its disadvantages. Some scholars think that we cannot talk about a sustainable development. According to them, it cannot go together with the concept of development. However, most of the scholars and scientist believe that development can go together with sustainable development which means by protecting the nature without damaging biodiversity and eco-system. This is quite difficult task to maintain but it is our duty to be aware of the nature.

When we look into the problem of global warming and other related issues caused by industrial development, we can say that the middle path is the most important way to be applied here. Buddhism looks at any problems without going to extreme. There are two things in any conditioned dhamma. That is positive and negative nature. If we keep the middle situation, at least we can minimize negative effects. People are greedy by nature. This is the main reason for many problems. The innovative ideas may bring harm to people if they use them in wrong ways. There is a beautiful teaching in Buddhism. It says that “the knowledge of a fool may bring harm to himself.” Therefore, it should be used in a wise way. Development important but it should be expected in wise ways.

#### 4. FORESTATION: THE ANSWER FOR THE SURVIVAL OF PLANET

What is the answer for deforestation caused by humans? The only possible thing is to educate people and make them to grow plants and trees and be ecofriendly and introducing a nature loving life style. As a monastic who is responsible for teaching and guiding people to run their life meaningfully and righteous way, I have introduced plantation programmes or forestation for my devotees and local people at our temple area and I am closely working with local government plantation office to get their support for our activities. They are in positive response recently visited our temple and we discussed about future plans for forestation. They are willing to provide plants for the people in surrounding villages. Our new combine activity will be taken place on Sri Lankan New Year Day of 2019 on 13<sup>th</sup> of April, this year. My presentation will provide information of our past programmes and the coming programme with photo sand relevant data.