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**The Buddhist Perception of Nature:
Implications for Forest Conservation in Thailand**

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The world grows smaller and smaller, more and more interdependent...today more than ever before life must be characterized by a sense of Universal Responsibility not only nation to nation and human to human, but also human to other forms of life.

(His Holiness The Dalai Lama)

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on the Buddhist perception of nature in order to determine the role of Buddhist doctrine and practice in the conservation of natural resources. In Thailand, various NGO groups, Buddhist monks and academics believe that Buddhist values are a positive force in nature conservation. This paper will examine several case studies where Buddhist values are being revitalized in an effort to conserve natural ecosystems and to increase self-reliance for rural villagers.

The foundation of Thai society is Buddhism and this holds for the farmers who make up the majority of the population. Buddhism is an integral part of life in Thailand..1. The exact date Buddhism arrived in Thailand has not yet been determined, but evidence indicates that it has been around at least since the 13th century..2. Buddhism and Hinduism together have had influence in Thailand. "Buddhism was transmitted to Thailand not as a 'pure', abstract philosophy, but as a way of life with its concrete cultural expressions."..3. At the time that Buddhism and Hinduism came to Thailand, the Thai people already had their own beliefs which played a significant role in their daily lives. Buddhism adjusted itself with local ideology (particularly animism) in issues related to nature. Today, traditional rural communities are still rooted in these beliefs. However, they have been integrated within Buddhism and Hinduism to form a unique form of Buddhism to Thailand. As in Sri Lanka and Burma, Theravada Buddhism has been recognized as the religion of the State. Throughout history, Buddhism has been the basic and uniting force of the kingdom..4. "Although we live far removed from the days of the historical Buddha, the basic doctrines have been kept remarkably intact, especially in the Theravada tradition."..5.

It is important to note the relationship existing between the doctrinal tradition or 'great tradition' and local practices or the 'little tradition'..6. Of primary importance, in regards to nature conservation, in the great tradition is the doctrine of interdependence. And of primary importance in the little tradition is the belief in 'bpi' or spirits which inhabit trees and other plants and animal species in nature. The existence of both these concepts have much influence in regards to nature conservation in Thailand.

According to the Buddhist perspective, the loss of Buddhist values poses the biggest threat to the environment. With increasing industrialization, Buddhist values are being lost and Western materialist values are being adopted in their place. Thailand's economic growth and materialistic progress have been accompanied by unbounded ecological destruction. The race to industrialize is perceived as the antithesis of the Buddhist ethic.

Buddhism's benefits to nature protection throughout the faith's history might be described

as effective, in a largely passive role. Recently and increasingly, however, influential Buddhists are speaking out on the subject and helping bring about recognition of the active, even dynamic role the philosophy could play in conservation. "Buddhism is so close to nature that the religion deserves to be called a 'religion of nature.'"⁸ The relationship between Buddhism and nature stems from Buddha's life and teachings. The Buddha spent all of the major events of his life amid the natural forest and the tree became the most sacred symbol throughout the Buddhist world - the Bodhi tree. The first Buddhist communities were forest dwellers and Buddhist monks initially lived under trees in natural surroundings. The Buddha said, "there is no spot on the ground where men had not died and therefore every part of nature will be endowed with a spirit, these will be the spirits of the trees, the mountains and the water...."⁹ In Buddhist literature nature was never treated as something 'outside' the human realm but rather as an extension of human love. These ideas are linked to the attitude of respect for nature amongst the buddhist community.

Today many Thai monks are making an effort to revitalize the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha). They feel the Dharma provides values essential to self-reliance and to nature conservation. Buddhist economics refrains from greed and the desire to be rich and is satisfied with meeting basic needs..¹⁰ Spiritual values are perceived as more meaningful than material values. 'Buddha Kaset' or Buddhist agriculture means to apply Buddha Dharma to the daily life of the farmers as much as possible, to practice agriculture in a Buddhist way..¹¹

A consequence of Dharma practice is living close to nature. Loving not only human beings, but also animals and plants and all of nature. It is also Buddha's teaching that humans should live in an appropriate environment. This environment does not mean only having a good neighbourhood, but also a 'natural' environment. Many monks have completely changed the physical environment of the temple. They grow trees and plants in the temple grounds, rendering them peaceful and healthy places to stay and practice Dharma and meditation. Trees not only yield fruit, but make the environment green, the land fertile and the air healthy. At the same time, the relationship with nature is renewed as part of the process of 'going back to nature' that has taken place in the community they live in. "There must be a relationship not only with human beings, but also with all other beings and finally with the whole universe to create a balance, the harmony and unity of the All which is one."¹²

The Dharma is the paradigm for keeping the relationship of man in balance with all beings in the universe. This is difficult in practice because this balanced relationship is being broken through the consumeristic and materialistic values of modern society. "Forests are being cut down, fish and animals are almost no more to be seen in the wild. These facts are evidence of the corrupt relationship between man and the environment."¹³

In the Buddhist context, Inada made the following conclusions regarding man and the environment. In describing humanity's place in the environment, we should not treat humans or the environment as independent of each other. This is the major premise upon which all concerns for the environment must begin. Although this is a simple premise it is difficult to abide by as can be seen by the destruction of natural resources everywhere. In order to stop this destruction, there must be an alternative vision. The Buddha concentrated on human's experiential nature and developed a vision of the 'continuity of existence.' That is, to involve our nature is to involve the more extensive and unlimited relationship to our surroundings..¹⁴ "As living parts of a living environment, with every manipulation of our means of survival, we affect both our external surroundings and ourselves."¹⁵ "Buddhist philosophy is founded on the notions of phenomenal interdependence and interrelationship.... Such an outlook should have significant bearing for our approach to ecological problems."¹⁶ Rolson identifies 'Karma' as another Buddhist doctrine with relevance to nature conservation. Karma is a doctrine about the

persistence of moral value. Moral value is assumed present in human life. Through reincarnation, value is passed on to other generations and also to nonhuman lives. "This stretches morality out from personal life and supposes it to be present as a determinant in animal life, so that monkeys or snakes are what they are because of bad karma. Lives are of higher value, as far as individuals go, if they can get themselves reborn and have the possibility by stages of improvement to gain more value." .17. The other side of this belief is that animals, though they have less good karma than human lives, are in fact beings that once were and might be again human beings, and so are of high value. Humans here have relational links with all other forms of life. "This conviction is the principle root for the ethical injunction to 'ahimsa' or reverence for life. The first Buddhist commandment is that one should harm no living thing or minimize harm not simply to humans but to nonhuman animals as well." .18.

In Buddhism, the highest form of life is human life. However, a Buddhist monk is prohibited from harming plants or animals. The concept is to respect the rights of other living things without violating them in any way. For example, a monk is not allowed to plow, for small animals in the soil may be harmed, and before drinking water a monk must use a cloth strainer to filter out small insects that may be present in the water. The corresponding precepts for Buddhist laymen are not so strict. That is, only the deliberate destruction of animal and human life is prohibited. "Buddha attempted to harmonize the principles of nonaggression and preservation of life, taking into account the human need to consume animal and plant forms." .19.

Many Buddhist teachings remind monks and laymen of the importance of showing respect for trees which provide food, shade and protection not only for people but for all forest dwellers. Monks, for example, are forbidden to cut down trees. There is a Buddhist story of a monk long ago who cut a tree's main branch. The spirit of the tree complained to Buddha, that by doing so, the monk had cut off his child's arm..20. The results of the loss of respect for trees and nature are clearly evident today. Large areas of forest have been destroyed, erosion often follows, degrading watersheds, and making farming no longer possible.

It has been estimated that Thailand's forest cover has been reduced to approximately eighteen percent of total land area in 1988 from fifty three percent in 1961. If Buddhism explains the 'right' relationship between man and nature - where is it? And why is it not having a more positive force in Thailand? The momentum of the modernizing society and economic growth ethic is too powerful. As mentioned earlier, the race to industrialize is the antithesis of the Buddhist ethic. However, Buddhist values and teachings are having positive effects on a small scale. Buddhism with its emphasis on the avoidance of killing, compassion towards all living things, meditation in natural surroundings and reverence for trees and other life, should promote increased environmental protection. One objective of this paper was to determine if Buddhist doctrine and practice have a positive effect on nature conservation in Thailand. The following are examples of initiatives based in Buddhist doctrine and practice which are proving successful at promoting respect for nature.

Around many rural temples exist sanctuaries for the protection of animals and plants. In these areas monks prohibit the removal of living things. Such temple sanctuaries are generally too small to save a great diversity of species over a long term, but they are effective in preserving species to some degree.

Embodied in Buddhism, however, is much ecologists and other conservation experts explain is urgently needed if destruction of the natural environment is to be halted, and life on earth as we know it is to continue. Teachings emphasize the importance of coexisting with nature, rather than conquering it." .21.

If the foundation of Thai society is Buddhism and the farmers which make up the rural

majority, the basis for nature conservation is in the rural communities. In the context of rural communities in Thailand, Buddhist ideology prevails. Buddhism and local animist ideology complement one another. Buddhism teaches the importance of preserving life in different degrees for human needs as well as for the sake of conserving the diversity of plant and animal forms. This view complements the local belief in 'bpi' or spirits. Spirits are believed to reside in all aspects of the natural environment. For example, if we cut down a big tree, the spirit will cause harm to us. Thai people usually call the spirit of the big trees 'Theparak' or guardian spirit. The other famous spirits are 'Nang Tani', the woman spirit of the Banana tree and 'Nang Takian', the woman spirit of the Hopea tree. These spirits are considered to have supernatural powers that human being do not possess.

This view is a fundamental view of nature which still has influence in rural areas and determines the vision of the people. The community's way of life has been directed in this way. Prawase Wasi conceptualized the idea of the life of the community to have five inter-related components..22.

1. Moral Mind - practice of the Dharma will always result in diligence and patience rather than greed and material desires.
2. Production for Consumption - integrated farming will provide basic needs for the villagers as well as maintaining a balance with the environment.
3. Balance of Natural Environment - will result from appropriate production. It also depends on a human spirit which is not greedy and the ability to be economically self-reliant.
4. Economic Self-reliance - depends on production for consumption, a natural balance with the environment, and non extravagant behaviour. These factors create an economic system where everyone has enough to eat and spend, and no debt. Therefore the environment need not be destroyed.
5. Community Life - social life improves as man becomes closer to his environment. Food is abundant and there is time to cooperate. The temple operates as a social institution which helps develop the spirit, educates and is an important influence for reaching a balance economy and lifestyle.

The philosophy of self-reliance is very much rooted in Buddhist philosophy. It promotes integrated farming and the way of life attached to this kind of agriculture is closely attached to Buddhist teachings. This is why it is called Buddhist agriculture. According to Prawase, to practice Buddhist agriculture one must adhere to the following seven Buddhist principles;.23.

1. Itapachayata - effort to see things as being related to each other;
2. Attahi Attano Nato - self-reliance causes life and society to be happy and independent;
3. Sila - discipline in life;
4. Iddhipada - the path to success is determined by aspiration, effort, thoughtfulness and reasoning;
5. Sandosa - how to live a simple life;6. Kammatthana - how to train one's mind;
6. Sammaggi Dharma - unity.

These principles focus on the balancing relationship between economic pattern, the existing community culture, natural environment and production pattern in community life. It can be used to highlight the people's religion and their perspective in management of natural resources to serve the good of the community. These characteristics were common of all Thai villages before modernization and production for export rather than for consumption. Now, depending on the level of influence of modernization these principles still influence some aspects of the villages. They help maintain cohesion among people and communities. And they help to maintain a balanced view towards

resource use. In the northern region there exist many forest villages which have successfully conserved large areas of forest. One such village is Tung Yao in Lumphun province.

Conservation initiatives are being led by Buddhist monks. In northern Thailand, Phra Pongsak is working to counteract the environmental damage being caused by illegal logging. He and his followers are helping villagers to reforest highlands which have been devastated by logging and unsustainable farming methods. Phra Pongsak approaches villagers communicating through the Buddhist principle of Silatham - harmony or the balance of nature. He feels his conservation work is inseparable from Buddhist teachings..24.

The balance of nature is achieved and regulated by the functions of the forest. Hence the survival of the forest is essential to the survival of Silatham and our environment. It is all interdependent. When we protect the forest, we protect the world. When we destroy the forest, we destroy that balance, causing drastic changes in global weather and soil conditions, which in turn causes severe hardships to the people..25.

Phra Pongsak teaches that the forest is the creator of environmental Silatham, ensuring a healthy harmony in people's lives both physically and mentally. A forest is much more than timber. From the forest we get the four necessities of life - food, shelter, clothing and medicine. They balance the air we breathe, help regulate the rainfall, regulate the extremes of climate, and from their roots rivers emerge and water the lands below.

Other Buddhist monks working to promote conservation of forest resources by local villagers have encountered difficulties sometimes in persuading villagers through Buddhist teachings. In such cases, a Buddha statue may be built in the center of the forest in order to protect it. Respect for religion will keep the villagers away. Some feel that teachings and sermons by Buddhists lack a good grasp of the modern concept of conservation. They also feel that many are ignorant of the teachings of Gautama Buddha which advocate the careful use and preservation of natural resources. There has been some move towards setting up a Buddhist Conservation Committee in order to bring the various monks active in conservation in order to coordinate their efforts and education..26.

Forest monasteries such as those mentioned above can set examples in innovative forestry activities as well as involving villagers on a volunteer and educational basis..27. The villagers, in turn, are developing strong interests in trees and reforestation. Monasteries all over the country have had successful turnouts for tree planting and successful reforestation of degraded land with indigenous species. Villagers can see the benefits of such activities for them and for their environment. Buddhist conservation education questions whether nature is really something we can manipulate to our own ends. We are part of nature. Therefore, if we treat nature with lack of respect then we are destroying our own environment and this will cause harm to us. "Thinking about living in balance with plants and animals will benefit us in our relationships with others, and a society will develop similar to the natural balance and harmony present in the Dharma."..28.

In conclusion, there are many elements of Buddhist doctrine and practice which promote respect and conservation of nature. Buddhism tries to preserve life in different degrees for human needs and conserve animal and plant life forms. This is the fundamental view of nature which still has influence in rural areas and determines the vision of the people (Prawase, 1988). Therefore, it would appear that Buddhist ideology could be promoted as a positive force in forest conservation in Thailand.

Notes

1. Prawase Wasi, "Buddhist Agriculture and the Tranquillity of Thai Society," 1988, p. 17.
2. Seri Phongphit, Religion in a Changing Society, 1988, p. 3.
3. Ibid., p. 3.
4. Ibid., p. 4.
5. Inada, Kenneth K., "Environmental Problematics," 1989, p. 233.
6. Day, Terence P., Great Tradition and Little Tradition in Theravada Buddhist Studies, 1988.
7. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "How Buddhism Can Help Protect Nature," 1987, p. 7.
8. Yenchai Laohanavich, "A Thai Buddhist View of Nature," 1989, p. 259.
9. Usher, Ann Danaiya, "The End of Wilderness," 1990, p. 16.
10. Schumacher, E.F., Small is Beautiful, 1973.
11. Seri Phongphit, Religion in a Changing Society, 1988, p. 98.
12. Ibid., p. 153.
13. Ibid., p. 166.
14. Inada, Kenneth K. "Environmental Problematics," 1989, p. 243.
15. Belak, Brenda & Shotaro Iida, "Toward a Realignment of the Universal Garlands: A Proposal for a New Paradigm of Nature and Man," 1990, p. 3.
16. Ibid., p. 12.
17. Rolston, Holmes, "New Wine in Old Wine Skins: Science Based vs. Traditional Cultural Values in the Conservation of Nature," 1986, p. 7.
18. Ibid., p. 8.
19. Yenchai Laohavanich, "A Thai Buddhist View of Nature," 1989, p. 260.
20. Chatsumarn, Kabilsingh, "How Buddhism Can Help Protect Nature," 1987, p. 10.
21. Ibid., p. 8.
22. Prawase Wasi, "Buddhist Agriculture and the Tranquillity of Thai Society," 1988, p. 27.
23. Ibid., p. 29.
24. World Wildlife Fund, The New Road, 1990, p. 2.

25. Ibid., p. 2.

26. Ibid., p. 3.

27. Ibid.

28. Wibul Kemchalerm, "Forest Agriculture: New Options for Thai Agriculture," 1988, p. 151. References

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