

Ecology summary: Global recovery through Buddhist ecology

Colin Butler, William Yaryan

On behalf of the panel, moderators and audience

Bangkok May 25, 2010

The global ecological crisis is being paid very little effective attention, though chatter about it is increasing. High income countries and populations, in particular, have long been aware of the problem – in some cases for as long as five decades. Yet, in that time they have collectively left problems largely unattended, and these interconnected issues are now on such a scale that they threaten the foundation of global human well-being. Also threatened are Buddhist cultures and the capacity to transmit Buddhist teaching.

Particularly vulnerable are poor populations in low-income countries, such as slum dwellers living in areas at high risk of flooding. Global climate change is already accelerating the rate of sea level rise and this among other factors is also likely to reduce food production, especially in tropical countries such as India, Vietnam and sub-Saharan Africa. Deforestation is also an enormous problem which harms water supply, reduces habitat and contributes to climate change. A third developing crisis is the rising scarcity of oil and other fossil fuels, which is already driving up the price of food.

It is tempting to consider that the global ecological crisis is a bit like a bad haircut. Something that we can learn to live with. This is a critical error. In fact, the pollution caused by our collective actions, much of which is invisible, should be considered as like a poison which if unchecked will cause immense harm, including future generations.

We as Buddhists therefore have a duty to learn and to respond to these issues, in order to nurture recovery. The causes of these interlinked crises extend beyond individual and collective greed, ignorance and delusion, to also include unforeseeable consequences of well-intentioned policies and technologies. The timing is also crucial – humans have collectively behaved with profound disrespect to the environment for at least several decades, but only now is the collective environmental footprint colliding with limits to growth.

The panel on global recovery through Buddhist ecology thus recommends the following four action points by which Buddhists can promote global recovery:

1. That the similarities and interlinkages between Buddhism, ecology, and attitudes to nature and sustainability be widely studied, recognised, taught and practised. This will enable an improved Buddhist and compassionate response to the ecological crisis. It should also respect and utilise the best science and technology for restorative practices. We stress that technology is by itself insufficient. Reforestation, reduction of environmental harm, and promotion of right consumption are also required.
2. That the linkages and parallels between the widespread lack of respect for the Earth, and the similarly pervasive lack of respect for women, manifest in religions including Buddhism be considered.
3. That the United Nations Day of Vesak promote the establishment or endorsement of a global “eco-Buddhist” network, which would capture and enhance the growing and encouraging understanding of ecological issues evident at this meeting.
4. That Buddhists encourage a reduced consumption of meat, especially of chickens, pigs and cattle that are intensively farmed in crowded conditions. This practice is not only cruel, but has a high ecological cost.

Finally I would like to leave you with some highlights from our panel and the members of the audience. There were many comments on the links between Buddhism and ecology such as including interdependence and compassion. The benefits of contact with and protection nature were stressed many times by the Buddha. The versatility of bamboo and the gentleness and industry of the bees who go from flower to flower gathering nectar is a metaphor. Bees not only do this without hurting the flower, but they also give back by providing a pollination service. Collectively, we humans should treat nature with far more respect, like bees treat flowers. If we do this, we can still live from the interest of nature, and actively promote its restoration rather its destruction.