

Cambodian Buddhist Monks and Forest

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Abstract

This academic paper aims to show how the importance of Buddhist monks engaging in the forest. It focuses on the main three points 1) to awareness of the significance of the environment, 2) to reflect on the Buddha's life always based under trees and living in the forest for the whole of his life 3) to train the mind to cultivate loving-kindness, starting from oneself until the forest. It found that Khmer philosophy has been implied in Cambodian mindset both cultural perspectives and scientific manner for the sake of preventing the forest through Buddhist concepts, Moreover, this paper will reflect what Buddhist monks have done to prevent any illegal forest cutting down through Buddhist approaches such as to ordain the tree and including Dhamma Talk as well.

Keywords: Cambodian Buddhist Monk; Environment; Forest

Introduction

Living beings on Earth, Nature is also everything or environments that exist on Earth. It is focused on the natural resources in and on the ground as well as the animals and plants that live. Another meaning is nature refers to everything which there is on one makes it exist. One of the important natural resources, which relates closely to human beings, is the forest.

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When talking about the forest, it is known its element that is the tree. When people talk about trees, they always think of Buddhism, because Buddhism talks so much about nature, human-nature relations, and environmental issues such as the Buddha was not allowed monks to cut down any trees in the corner (Tipitaka, 1939).

Based on the Buddha's history asserted that the life of the Buddha is always associated with the trees of all the time, from the time of his birth, and he was in the forest during the enlightenment, and the last of his life was under the tree and he prostrated and passed way under a tree. Overall, in one lifetime, he lives with trees forever.

Traditionally, using religion to drive conservation is one of the most effective models globally, according to Yale University's Forum on Religion and Ecology, amid ever-increasing pressure on natural resources from fast-growing populations and industries. Religious leaders from Pope Francis to Indonesian imams have called for action to protect the environment.

Buddhists meditate in forests and consider them sacred, believing the Buddha was born in one and enlightened in another, said Chantal Elkin, a director at the non-profit Alliance for Religions and Conservation.

In order to forest conservation, the Buddhist monks have seen it simply as their duty to conserve forests in a Buddhist-based approach. (Chandran, 2019)

Regarding the forest value based on Cambodian Buddhism and the framework of Buddhist cultures that contributed to the construction of local Buddhist environments.

These practices and theories are included innumerable stories placing prominent Buddhist figures, including the historical Buddha, in particular places. Many of these stories concerned the conversion of local serpent spirits, dragons, and other beings associated with a local place who then became Buddhist and were said to protect Buddhism in their locales. Events in the stories as well as relics and landscape features were marked by pillars, reliquary shrines (stupas), caves, temples, or monasteries that often became the focus of pilgrimage or were considered particularly auspicious places for Buddhist practice, where one could encounter buddhas and bodhisattvas. Through ritual practices such as pilgrimage, circumambulation, and offerings, Buddhists engaged environments and their

local spirits. Landscapes were transformed into Buddhist sites that were mapped and made meaningful according to Buddhist stories and cosmology. Farmers, herders, traders, and others in Buddhist cultures whose livelihood depended on their environments engaged the spirits of the land, whose blessings they needed for their own good.

The meaning of local environments, Buddhists also transformed the material environment. In addition to building monasteries, stupas, and other religious structures, Buddhist monastics developed administrative and engineering expertise that enabled large-scale irrigation systems. As Buddhism spread through Asia, it brought agricultural technologies that created watery landscapes enabling rice production and increasing the agricultural surplus that made possible large monasteries and urbanization.

Some have argued that concepts such as dependent origination, the ethics of loving-kindness and compassion, and other ideas from classical Buddhist traditions suggest that Buddhism has been particularly attuned to the environment.

Buddhist ideas such as dependent origination, or its more environmentally resonant interpretation as “interdependence,” do not in fact provide a satisfying grounding for an environmental ethic. Partly in response to such critics, much scholarly work on Buddhism and the environment became more focused on concrete phenomena, informed by a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, archaeology, place studies, art history, pilgrimage studies, and the study of activism.

Instead of focusing primarily on universal concepts found in ancient texts, scholars are just as likely to look at how local communities have drawn on Buddhist ontology, ethics, cosmology, symbolism, and rituals to develop Buddhist responses to local environmental needs, developing contemporary Buddhist environmentalism. (Edelglass, 2021)

Significance of the forest

When talking about the significance of the forest, it would clearly see the various benefits and advantages of the trees, leading to the preservation of the environment in both the homeland and the world. Various scientific research found that the significance of the forest is as follows:

- The forest is the animal's habitat
- The forest provides a shelter for all beings
- Providing furniture including house building, table, and other furniture as well.
- Making a balance to climate change
- Giving fresh air to our human lungs.
- Preventing typhoons and floods, especially during the rainy season.
- To prevent collapse from the river bank
- Making fertilized soil
- Helps attract rain
- Helps to absorb oxygen from humans ប្រភពិទ្ទោ, ២០១៨

In the past, Cambodia's forests have suffered a series of alarming losses from year to year. The forests have been steadily declining since 1900, accounting for 75% of the total forest area, but now less than 40%. Gradually decrease if there is no prevention.

The Royal Government's principles for forest protection in collaboration with national and international institutions to manage forests well include:

- Increase forest cover to the Cambodian Millennium Development Goals, which set a target of 60% forest cover by 2005.
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- Establish community forestry (in 2008 there were 360 communities covering an area of 325,130 hectares)
- Post forest border posts
- Wildlife Research and Conservation
- Tree replanting (celebration)

Plant Day (July 9 every year) (Nhean, 2019).

In terms of the significance of the forest, the plantation is an important message with effectiveness that Cambodian ancestors have always done in many ways that can be summarized from three perspectives, including:

First, the corner contributes to the protection of the natural environment, especially in the forest.

Second, to express gratitude to the environment, because in our lives we cannot lack the environment from birth to death.

Third, the soul, because in the belief of the soul, we always believe that plants and big trees always take care of the soul which is the part of supernatural beings, power, and authority, so-called Totemic beliefs. For this reason, when they cross the road with big trees, they always remove the cab to pay homage to that tree.

Cambodian Buddhist monks in the Environmental Preservation

Cambodian Buddhist monks (Ven. Socheat Cheam, Ven. Ratanak Keo, 2018) play a crucial role for protecting the environment in this Kingdom because Buddhist monks do more useful tasks for the sake of society through Dhamma talk related to the Buddhist perspectives to preserve the trees/environment.

The environment is something around us that is directly or indirectly related to our lives. The environment is a social and cultural relationship that influences an individual or community. The forests, the rivers, the lakes, the oceans, and all the animals, small and large, the birds, the aquatic animals, the land, and the environment around us, are all part of the environment. We often see that in the pagodas in the districts, provinces, and rural areas, the monks and nuns at the foot of the pagoda always dig ponds and plant many big trees, such as the Koki tree, Teal tree, and Beng tree.

Moreover, other fruit trees take shade, beautify the pagoda, and serve the daily needs for future generations to see and know. And especially for the environment, because in general, the forest is one of the most valuable natural resources for sustaining human life, animals, and all kinds of plants, such as providing a source of food for human and animal life. Provides medicines for various ailments, provides valuable wood for

furniture, residential buildings, or other buildings, and a forest is a place of peace and tranquility that leads to wisdom. Like the Buddha, our Lord, who is enlightened with those natural environments. When there is a forest, the forest is a habitat for all kinds of animals (in Wat temple, there are many trees. There are always animals like birds, crows, crows, and many other birds).

The forest keeps the climate cool and the temperatures are comfortable for humans and animals, not too cold and not too hot. Forests attract rain and make it rain regularly according to the season. The forest helps to absorb the dirt in the air, leaving the air clean and fresh for people and animals to breathe easily. The forest is the storehouse of the earth's fertilizer, it can keep the quality of the soil intact, allow people to grow all kinds of crops, and the forest is a barrier against storms and erosion.

In addition, therefore, planting trees, digging ponds, and taking care of all the animals in the pagoda are contributing to the care and protection of the environment and show that the pagoda is a resort full of gardens. With all kinds of colorful flowers, full of small and large trees, the shade is bright, a refuge for birds of all kinds (Brahmapundit, 2019).

How valuable are trees to human life? In this regard, the vice-rector, in charge of the Preah Sihanoukraja Buddhist University's affairs, the Most Venerable Dr. Yon Seng Yeath said that human life needs the environment, the environment can be without us, but we cannot lack the environment.

The pilgrimage in the forest, what does Buddhism show about the tree (environment)? The Most Ven. Dr. Yon Seng Yeath added that Buddhism teaches us to be compassionate, and this compassion is not limited to humans and animals, it is important to be compassionate to the environment. He briefly pointed out that the forest belongs to us, so we must cultivate a love for the forest (Seng Yeath, 2022).

New Knowledge from Forest Preservation

The point of view of the Buddhist concept taught how to use the environment but not harm the environment (destruction), as he likened it to a beehive (bee) always covering the pollen but not destroying the flowering plant to perish.

To protect the forest, Cambodian Buddhist monks have crucial role-playing as a model to the Cambodian people through the Dhamma talk on the TV Show and bringing the Teachings of Buddha into practice in real society, especially to promote Buddhist ethics to the locals for urging to avoid cutting down the tree, and this approach will more useful to the local community as well.

In any way, the relationship between the ideals of Buddhism and the tree is found in three contextual meanings that can be learned from the forest as follows:

First, nature (environment) is like a master trainer who has given a lot of wisdom to students. If looking back at the trees, they have taught human beings countless lessons because we need to be flexible with the nature that nature has taught us.

Second, Nature (environment) is considered a spiritual force. Because of this, in ancient beliefs, we often say that large trees are taken care of (supernatural). In Buddhism, there is also the mention of deities, that is, deities who keep and stay in the tree.

Third, Nature is like the path of our life, because our life depends on the path of life, and which way to go. There is a Hindu proverb that says that a tree that grows well is always cut down to make a house, while a tree that grows upright is always abandoned. This means that when it comes to the way of life, flexibility is very important in daily life.

Therefore, to protect the environment, we must protect ourselves, and we must defend ourselves by opposing selfishness, giving alms against ignorance with wisdom, and against guilt with compassion.

Significantly, the environment, Samdech Phra Maha Ghosananda, a famous Cambodian Buddhist scholar used to say that if we respect the environment, then nature would bring goodness to us. When our heart is good, then the sky is clear. Trees, like our mothers and fathers, always feed us, take care of us, and give us everything, such as fruit, leaves, and branches.

Conclusion

In short, contributing to the care of trees is like saving our lives because we need trees and the tree also needs us to take care of it, otherwise, when the tree suffers, we also suffer, because this is a mutual dependence that could not separate from each

other. Therefore, human beings and the environment are intertwined; they cannot lack each other as well. Human beings need to know how to protect the environment and contribute to preservation. To reach this goal, Human beings have to train the mind in accordance with Buddha's teaching, promoting critical thinking for the environment and getting rid of mental defilement such as greed, hatred, and delusion.

Buddhism is playing an important role in the forest preservation of Cambodia. At present, it is observed that many monks are participating in activities to help protect the forest in Cambodia through establishing a program of education in the community and giving lectures on morality, discipline, and ethical manner through the media, such as radio and television talk show, for the sake of environmental protection and explain to the grass root level to more precise understanding related to this subject matter.

This study has found the most significant of the environment to support human beings and animals' lives around the globe. Buddhism, On the other hand, shows that nature and human beings are interconnected. In doing so, if the environment was destroyed, leading human and animal lives would completely die out on the earth.

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