

Buddhist Faith Statement



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Dharma

All Buddhist teachings and practice come under the heading of **Dharma**, which means **Truth and the path to Truth**

. The word Dharma also means “

phenomena

,” and in this way we can consider everything to be within the sphere of the teachings. All outer and inner phenomena, the mind and its surrounding environment, are understood to be inseparable and interdependent. In his own lifetime the Buddha came to understand that the notion that one exists as an isolated entity is an illusion. All things are interrelated; we are interconnected and do not have autonomous existence. Buddha said, “This is because that is; this is not because that is not; this is born because that is born; this dies because that dies.” The health of the whole is inseparably linked with the health of the parts, and the health of the

parts is inseparably linked with the whole. Everything in life arises through causes and conditions.

Ecology and Buddhism

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Many Buddhist monks such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, Venerable Kim Teng, and Venerable Phra Phrachak emphasize the natural relationship between deep ecology and Buddhism. According to the Vietnamese monk Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh:

"Buddhists believe that the reality of the interconnectedness of human beings, society and Nature will reveal itself more and more to us as we gradually recover—as we gradually cease to be possessed by anxiety, fear, and the dispersion of the mind. Among the three—human beings, society, and Nature—it is us who begin to effect change. But in order to effect change we must recover ourselves, one must be whole. Since this requires the kind of environment favorable to one's healing, one must seek the kind of lifestyle that is free from the destruction of one's humanness. Efforts to change the environment and to change oneself are both necessary. But we know how difficult it is to change the environment if individuals themselves are not in a state of equilibrium."

In order to protect the environment we must protect ourselves. We protect ourselves by opposing selfishness with generosity, ignorance with wisdom, and hatred with loving kindness. Selflessness, mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom are the essence of Buddhism. We train in Buddhist meditation which enables us to be aware of the effects of our actions, including those destructive to our environment. Mindfulness and clear comprehension are at the heart of Buddhist meditation. Peace is realized when we are mindful of each and every step.

In the words of Maha Ghosananda:

"When we respect the environment, then nature will be good to us. When our hearts are good, then the sky will be good to us. The trees are like our mother and father, they feed us, nourish us, and provide us with everything; the fruit, leaves, the branches, the trunk. They give us food and satisfy many of our needs. So we spread the Dharma (truth) of protecting ourselves and protecting our environment, which is the Dharma of the Buddha. When we accept that we are part of a great human family—that every being has the nature of Buddha—then we will sit, talk, make peace. I pray that this realization will spread throughout our troubled world and bring humankind and the earth to its fullest flowering. I pray that all of us will realize peace in this lifetime and save all beings from suffering."

"The suffering of the world has been deep. From this suffering comes great compassion. Great compassion makes a peaceful heart. A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person. A peaceful person makes a peaceful family. A peaceful family makes a peaceful community. A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation. A peaceful nation makes a peaceful world. May all beings live in happiness and peace."

Buddhism as an Ecological Religion or a Religious Ecology

The relationship between Buddhist ideals and the natural world can be explored within three contexts:

1. Nature as teacher
2. Nature as a spiritual force
3. Nature as a way of life.

Nature as Teacher

"Like the Buddha, we too should look around us and be observant, because everything in the world is ready to teach us. With even a little intuitive wisdom we will be able to see clearly through the ways of the world. We will come to understand that everything in the world is a teacher. Trees and vines, for example, can all reveal the true nature of reality. With wisdom there is no need to question anyone, no need to study. We can learn from Nature enough to be enlightened, because everything follows the way of Truth. It does not diverge from Truth".
(Ajahn Chah, Forest Sangha Newsletter)

Buddha taught that respect for life and the natural world is essential. By living simply one can be in harmony with other creatures and learn to appreciate the interconnectedness of all that lives. This simplicity of life involves developing openness to our environment and relating to the world with awareness and responsive perception. It enables us to enjoy without possessing, and mutually benefit each other without manipulation.

However, the Buddha was no romantic idealist. He also saw and realized that every living thing is suffering. He saw creatures struggling for survival in a precarious world. He saw death and fear, the strong preying on the weak and the devastation of thousands of beings as one lonely figure plowed the earth to reap the harvest. He also saw impermanence. As Ajahn Chah has

written:

"Take trees for example ... first they come into being, then they grow and mature, constantly changing, until they finally die as every tree must. In the same way, people and animals are born, grow and change during their lifetimes until they eventually die. The multitudinous changes which occur during this transition from birth to death show the Way of Dharma. That is to say, all things are impermanent, having decay and dissolution as their natural condition". (Buddha-Nature)

Nature is not independent and unchanging and neither are we. Change is the very essence of nature. In the words of Stephen Batchelor:

"We each believe we are a solid and lasting self rather than a short-term bundle of thoughts, feelings and impulses". (The Sands of the Ganges)

We do not exist independently, separate from everything else—all things in the universe come into existence, "arise" as a result of particular conditions. It is surely a mistake to see fulfillment in terms of external or personal development alone.

Buddha taught us to live simply, to cherish tranquility, to appreciate the natural cycle of life. In this universe of energies, everything affects everything else. Nature is an ecosystem in which trees affect climate, the soil, and the animals, just as the climate affects the trees, the soil, the animals and so on. The ocean, the sky, the air are all interrelated, and interdependent—water is life and air is life.

A result of Buddhist practice is that one does not feel that one's existence is so much more important than anyone else's. The notions of ego clinging, the importance of the individual and emphasis on self is, in the West, a dominant outlook which is moving to the East as "development" and consumerism spread. Instead of looking at things as a seamless undivided whole we tend to categorize and compartmentalize. Instead of seeing nature as our great teacher we waste and do not replenish and forget that Buddha learned his "wisdom from nature."

Once we treat nature as our friend, to cherish it, then we can see the need to change from the attitude of dominating nature to an attitude of working with nature—we are an intrinsic part of all existence rather than seeing ourselves as in control of it.

Nature as a spiritual force

For Shantiveda in eighth-century India, dwelling in nature was obviously preferable to living in a monastery or town:

*"When shall I come to dwell in forests
Amongst the deer, the birds and the trees,
That say nothing unpleasant
And are delightful to associate with."
(A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life)*

Patrul Rinpoche, one of the greatest Tibetan Buddhist teachers of the nineteenth century, writes:

*"Base your mind on the Dharma,
Base your Dharma on a humble life,
Base your humble life on the thought of death,
Base your death on a lonely cave."
(The Words of My Perfect Teacher)*

The Buddha taught that the balance of nature is achieved by the functions of the forest. Survival of the forest is vital to the survival of natural harmony, balance, morality, and environment.

Buddhist teachers and masters have constantly reminded us of the importance of living in tune with nature, to respect all life, to make time for meditation practice, to live simply and use nature as a spiritual force. Buddha stressed the four boundless qualities: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy (delight in the well-being of others), and equanimity (impartiality).

Retreats

Venerable Asabho has spoken of the value of living in retreat in Hammer Woods, Chithurst in England. The forest has its own rhythms and after a few days the metabolism and sleeping patterns adjust and the senses begin to sharpen to this new and unfamiliar setting. Ear and nose play a more important role when not having any comforts of life—gas, electricity, artificial light and the like.

Living in the fast and furious pace of the twentieth century our true nature is often dulled by the massive sensory impact unavoidable in modern urbanized living. Living close to nature is a very healing experience—to have few activities, few distractions. Learning to trust yourself and being more of a friend than a judge one develops a lightness of being, a light confidence. One realizes the truth of the notion of impermanence—the sound of animals, the texture of trees, the subtle changes in the forest and land, the subtle changes in your own mind. A retreat, or simply living in the forest with nature,

"helps people get back to earth, to calm you down—just living with the unhurried rhythms of nature. With nature, everything—birth, growth, degeneration and decay is just as it is, and in that holistic sense everything is all right. Touching lightly is the right touch, the natural touch in

which blame, praise, crises, retreats, progress, delays are just as it is and so all right". (Talks given at Chithurst Buddhist Monastery)

Living in this way we can appreciate the fragility of all we love, the fickleness of security. Retreat and solitude complement our religious practice and give the opportunity of deepening, refining, and strengthening the mind. By being mindful about the daily routine one pays attention to the flow of life—to see nature as a positive, joyful, spiritual force.

Nature as a Way of Life

The Buddha commended frugality as a virtue in its own right. Skillful living avoids waste and we should try to recycle as much as we can. Buddhism advocates a simple, gentle, nonaggressive attitude toward nature—reverence for all forms of nature must be cultivated.

Buddha used examples from nature to teach. In his stories the plant and animal worlds are treated as part of our inheritance, even as part of ourselves. As Krishnamurti said, "We are the world, the world is us." By starting to look at ourselves and the lives we are living we may come to appreciate that the real solution to the environmental crisis begins with us. Craving and greed only bring unhappiness—simplicity, moderation, and the middle way bring liberation and hence equanimity and happiness. Our demands for material possessions can never be satisfied—we will always need to acquire more, there is not enough in the universe to truly satisfy us and give us complete satisfaction and contentment, and no government can fulfil all our desires for security.

Buddhism, however, takes us away from the ethos of the individual and its bondage to materialism and consumerism. When we try to conquer greed and desire we can start to have inner peace and be at peace with those around us. The teaching of the Buddha, the reflections on Dharma, relate to life as it actually is. Namely to be mindful—receptive, open, sensitive, and not fixed to any one thing, but able to fix on things according to what is needed in that time and at that place.

The Right Actions

By developing the right actions of not killing, stealing, or committing misconduct in sexual desires perhaps we can begin to live with nature, without breaking it or injuring the rhythm of life. In our livelihoods, by seeking work that does not harm other beings and refraining from trading in weapons, breathing things, meat, alcohol, and poisons, we can feel more at one with nature.

Our minds can be so full, so hyperactive, we never allow ourselves a chance to slow down to be aware of our thoughts, feelings, and emotions, to live fully in the present moment. We need to live as the Buddha taught us to live, in peace and harmony with nature, but this must start with ourselves. If we are going to save this planet we need to seek a new ecological order, to look at the life we lead and then work together for the benefit of all; unless we work together no solution can be found. By moving away from self-centeredness, sharing wealth more, being more responsible for ourselves, and agreeing to live more simply, we can help decrease much of the suffering in the world. As the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna said, "Things derive their being and nature by mutual dependence and are nothing in themselves."

*Breathing in, I know I'm breathing in.
Breathing out, I know
as the in-breath grows deep,
the out-breath grows slow.
Breathing in makes me calm.
Breathing out makes me ease.
With the in-breath, I smile.
With the out-breath, I release.
Breathing in, there is only the present moment
Breathing out is a wonderful moment.*
(From a poem by the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh)

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