

Pratītyasamutpāda and Ecological Interdependence: A Buddhist Ethical Framework for Sustainability within the Indian Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a surge of interest in philosophical traditions from ancient times with potentially relevant views on the relationship between humans and their environment in light of the contemporary ecological crisis. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) includes the School of Buddhist Thought with its uniquely constructed values and metaphysics system based on the concept of interdependence (ayana). The concept of Pratītyasamutpāda or the principle of dependent origination explains that every thing or event comes into existence due to the presence of a number of other things or events. Depending on how the principle of dependent origination is interpreted, its potential implications in relation to ecological thought and environmental values can vary greatly. Traditionally it has been explained in terms of its relation to suffering and liberation; however, its other implications remain to be explored and elaborated in depth.

This paper discusses whether and how the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination can contribute to the ongoing debate about sustainability. This study primarily draws on scriptural sources from classical Buddhist literature, notably the Samyutta Nikaya and the Majjhima Nikaya, as well as on more recent literature on Buddhist environmental ethics. With a view to contributing to the ongoing discussion about solutions to the problems of the environment and ecological sustainability, the study draws on the resources of classical Buddhist literature to elucidate the interdependence nexus as a non-biocentric obstacle to anthropocentric strategies for achieving an ecologically sustainable regime. It seeks not only to elucidate a Buddhist ethic of ‘environmental sensitivity’ as one informed by compassion, mindful renunciation and a particular type of interpersonal awareness, but also to elucidate its potential to induce reforms of the lifestyle conditions that make possible a crisis in ecology. Finally, by introducing the resources provided by the classical Indian discussion of sustainability into current debates, it seeks to assert a claim in favour of the relevance of classical Indian philosophy to the attempt to solve an urgent world problem of environmental and moral substance.

Introduction

The relationship between Buddhism and environmental ethics has become a growing area of scholarly interest over the last thirty years or so. Early on, most academic discussions focused on fairly straightforward ethical values non-violence, compassion, the idea of living moderately. More recently, though, scholars have started asking deeper questions, particularly about whether Buddhist metaphysics, especially the doctrine of dependent origination, might have something genuinely useful to contribute to how we think about ecological philosophy today. Joanna Macy’s work has probably been the most

influential in this area. She reads dependent origination through the lens of systems theory, drawing a parallel between the Buddhist understanding of interdependence and what modern ecological science tells us about ecosystems — that they're not static structures but dynamic, constantly shifting networks where everything affects everything else. For Macy, internalising this relational view of existence isn't just philosophically interesting; it actually motivates people toward ecological responsibility and collective action.

David Loy approaches the problem from a different angle, focusing more on psychology. His argument is that the environmental crisis can't be separated from the culture of craving and chronic dissatisfaction that defines modern consumer societies. The Buddhist concept of *tanhā* roughly translated as craving or thirst gives him a framework for diagnosing why contemporary patterns of consumption are so destructive, and why they're so hard to break.

More recent scholarship has pushed these conversations further. A 2024 study on Buddhist eco-ethics argued that the tradition shouldn't be reduced to a set of individual moral rules, but understood as a holistic framework — one that weaves together metaphysical insight, compassion, mindfulness, and what the authors call relational ontology. The point is that sustainable action requires a shift in how we see ourselves in relation to the world, not just a change in behaviour. Other researchers working in Buddhist ecological philosophy have made similar arguments, suggesting that the doctrine of interdependence does real ethical work by grounding our obligations to the natural world in something more fundamental than sentiment or utility.

Literature Review

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philosophy have made similar arguments, suggesting that the doctrine of interdependence does real ethical work by grounding our obligations to the natural world in something more fundamental than sentiment or utility.

Methodology

The methodology of the current research will be qualitative and interpretive, mainly based on textual analysis and philosophical interpretation.

The primary sources of the current research will be the following classical Buddhist texts:

- Samyutta Nikaya
- Majjhima Nikaya
- Dhammapada

The secondary sources will be contemporary academic literature on Buddhist ethics, environmental philosophy, and sustainability studies.

The research methodology will follow a threefold approach:

1. Doctrinal analysis of dependent origination in early Buddhist texts
2. Interpretation of its philosophical implications
3. Evaluation of its relevance

Doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda

The doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda, or dependent origination, represents one of the most profound philosophical insights within Buddhist thought. Traditionally, this doctrine explains the causal chain through which suffering arises and ceases. However, when interpreted beyond its soteriological context, the principle of dependent origination offers a broader philosophical understanding of reality as fundamentally relational.

According to this doctrine, all phenomena arise in dependence upon causes and conditions. Nothing exists independently or permanently. This relational ontology challenges the notion of discrete, self-contained entities and instead portrays reality as an interconnected web of processes.

According to Buddhist philosophy, suffering arises due to craving and attachment.

Craving manifests as:

- desire for material accumulation
- endless pursuit of consumption
- dissatisfaction with existing conditions

In modern consumer societies, economic systems often encourage continuous consumption and production.

This leads to:

- overexploitation of natural resources
- environmental degradation
- ecological imbalance

Furthermore, the doctrine of dependent origination has important ethical implications. If all forms of life are interconnected, then actions that harm the environment ultimately harm human beings as well. Environmental destruction disrupts the ecological systems upon which human societies depend.

Buddhist philosophy also emphasises the role of psychological factors in shaping human behaviour. Ignorance (avidyā) and craving (tanhā) are identified as the fundamental causes of suffering. These psycho-

logical forces are equally relevant in contemporary environmental contexts.

Modern consumer societies often promote the endless pursuit of material satisfaction. This culture of consumption encourages individuals to seek happiness through the accumulation of goods and resources. However, such patterns of consumption frequently lead to environmental degradation and ecological imbalance.

By identifying craving as a root cause of suffering, Buddhist philosophy offers a powerful critique of consumer culture. The Buddhist emphasis on moderation and mindfulness encourages individuals to reconsider their relationship with material consumption and develop more sustainable lifestyles.

Implications for Sustainability Policy and Research

The insights derived from Buddhist philosophy also have important implications for sustainability research and policy development.

First, the Buddhist concept of interdependence provides a philosophical foundation for systems thinking in environmental policy. Policymakers increasingly recognise that environmental problems such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution are interconnected and require integrated solutions.

Second, Buddhist ethics emphasizes the importance of inner transformation. While technological innovation and regulatory policies are necessary for addressing environmental challenges, lasting change also requires shifts in human values and attitudes.

Third, Buddhist philosophy highlights the importance of ethical responsibility toward future generations. By recognizing the interconnected nature of life, individuals and societies become more aware of the long-term consequences of their actions.

These insights suggest that sustainability discourse may benefit from greater engagement with philosophical traditions such as Buddhism. Integrating ethical perspectives with scientific research can contribute to more holistic approaches to environmental governance.

Philosophical and Ecological Implications

The Buddhist concept of dependent origination offers a deep insight into the relational reality of existence. This contrasts with other metaphysical systems that focus on the concept of substance or reality as it exists. Buddhism offers a view of reality as a process of becoming.

From an ecological point of view, this concept of relational reality resonates strongly with modern ecological science. Ecosystems are systems that function through a network of interactions between various organisms, environments, and climatic conditions. The interdependence of existence offers an important lesson. If human existence depends on ecological systems, then the destruction of the environment threatens human existence.

In Buddhist philosophy, ignorance (avidyā) and craving (tanhā) are cited as the fundamental causes of suffering. These are psychological forces that play an important role in modern ecological problems. Buddhist teachings therefore offer not only a philosophical understanding of interdependence but also an ethical critique of unsustainable patterns of behaviour.

Applications for Sustainability Discourse

Buddhist interdependence informs sustainability by grounding systems thinking: policymakers must address interconnected crises like climate change and biodiversity loss holistically, beyond siloed interventions. Inner transformation via mindfulness and ethical shifts ;complements technology,

recognizing long-term intergenerational duties rooted in shared causation. Buddhist philosophy can provide the following important contributions to the study of sustainability:

1. **Relational Ontology** - The understanding that life is interconnected.
2. **Ethics of Compassion** - The extension of ethics to all living beings.
3. **Moderation and Simplicity** - The promotion of sustainable consumption.
4. **Inner Transformation** - The understanding that change is required at a psychological and ethical level.

Future Research Directions

This study opens avenues for comparative analyses of Pratītyasamutpāda with Western ecology (e.g., process philosophy), empirical examinations of sustainability in modern Buddhist communities, and applications to climate policy debates. Prioritizing interdisciplinary syntheses with ecological science could operationalise interdependence for global frameworks.

The following research opportunities arise from this study:

- A comparative study of Buddhist environmental ethics and Western ecological philosophy.
- A study of environmental practices in contemporary Buddhist communities.
- A study of the application of Buddhist ethics to the debate on climate change policy.
- A study that brings together Buddhist philosophy and ecological science.

Conclusion

The doctrine of Pratītyasamutpāda provides a deep philosophical understanding of interdependence. This doctrine, although interpreted in the context of liberation from suffering, has wider implications that extend to ecology. The paper argues that Buddhist metaphysics anticipates systems thinking in ecology. The modern ecological crisis can be interpreted through the Buddhist concept of tanhā (craving), which drives patterns of excessive consumption and unsustainable economic growth. The Buddhist virtue of karuṇā (compassion) provides an ethical basis for environmental responsibility by extending moral concern to all forms of life. Thus, the paper argues that environmental destruction is not only a technological or economic problem but also a psychological and ethical problem rooted in human desire. The Buddhist virtue of karuṇā (compassion) provides an ethical basis for environmental responsibility by extending moral concern to all forms of life. Unlike anthropocentric ethical systems that prioritise human interests, Buddhist ethics emphasizes compassion for all sentient beings. In this sense, Buddhist philosophy does not merely provide theoretical insights but also encourages practical engagement with environmental issues. By cultivating mindfulness, compassion, and moderation, individuals can develop attitudes and behaviours that support ecological sustainability.

The Buddhist philosophy of interconnectedness, compassion, and moderation is a valuable tool for dealing with environmental issues. The integration of this philosophy into sustainability issues could be a step towards developing a more holistic approach to dealing with environmental issues.

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