



Stories for the Environment: Understanding Buddhist Ecology Expressed in Parables

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Abstract: Buddhism, as one of the major philosophical traditions in the East, are often taught through parables. This paper examines four randomly chosen Buddhist parables within the framework of basic Buddhist teachings as they are found in the *Dharmakakkappavattana Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Pratityasamutpada Vibhanga Sutra*, which are traditional texts in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, and in the *Dhammapada* of the Theravada tradition. These texts are claimed to have been written according to the words of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. The study shows that these parables embody deep teachings that are found in the said Buddhist sutras. They reflect the four noble truths (the fact of suffering, its cause, its cure and the path to spiritual release), the idea of dependent origination (the interconnectedness of all beings), and the empty nature of all phenomena (things do not have an unchanging essence). Moreover, the parables bridge the gap between contemplation of the the emptiness of all that exists—a prescribed practice to see the (non)reality of things—and the practical application of compassion to all living things. This, in turn, allows for an understanding of Buddhist teachings as inherently ecological, caring for all forms of life, without thought of hierarchy or differentiation.

Key Words: environmental sustainability, Buddhism, Buddhist parables, compassion, Buddhist ecology

INTRODUCTION

If a picture paints a thousand words, a story may just bring one straight to enlightenment. Sages of the East know this, evidenced by the proliferation of parables in the foundational texts of its major philosophical traditions. Indian and Chinese philosophies share the use of stories in order to present an idea or describe the workings of a phenomenon. It has always been said that the wisdom that comes from the East often defy the logic of ordinary language. Words can only point but not give what is referred to (Ch. 35), as a verse in the *Tao Te Ching* says, as “true words seem paradoxical” (Ch.

78) and will not be understood if they are analyzed in the ordinary way. As the orientalist Heinrich Zimmer insists,

....To express and communicate knowledge gained in moments of grammar-transcending insight metaphors must be used, similes and allegories. These are then not mere embellishments, dispensable accessories, but the very vehicles of the meaning, which could not be rendered, and could never have been attained, through the logical formulae of normal verbal thought. Significant images can comprehend and make manifest with clarity and pictorial consistency the paradoxical character of the reality known to the sage: a translogical reality, which, expressed in abstract language of normal thought, would seem inconsistent, self-contradictory, or even absolutely meaningless....(1989, 25)

Stories, therefore, are a staple in Eastern philosophy, often told either to start a discussion or to reply to an argument. Studying them goes beyond the usual practice of reading a story in order to “find the moral” in it, although these stories do promote some practical values which are inherent in Eastern ways of thinking that do not dichotomize between intellectual and actually lived life. In effect, they are not primarily seen as pieces of literature which might be primarily concerned with aesthetics, but as philosophical texts that prompt reflection, and hopefully, inspire a change of view and lifestyle. The so-called “abstractive fallacy,”¹ therefore, will not be an issue here.

This paper intends to study four Buddhist parables in order to clarify how Buddhism expresses its core teachings and at the same time promote values that support environmental sustainability. Many have shown that Buddhist philosophy is supportive of environmental care (Mueanploy & Singkha 2015, 244), and that monks have, in the past decades, mobilized in order to directly address the issue of climate change and other dangers to the environment. For instance, Buddhist environmentalism has been gaining strength in Japan after the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident in 2011, when Buddhists organizations started expressing their disapproval of nuclear energy. (Dessi 2013, 336). In Thailand, “ecology monks” (Darlington 1998, 3, 7) in their effort to see the scriptures in light of environmental issues started ordaining trees in the 1990s, symbolically turning them into holy people so that they would be treated with respect and cared for. Here in Manila, the Taiwan Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, Philippines has as one of their missions environmental protection, and their recycling station has taken in tons of plastic and other wastes that would otherwise have clogged drains and harmed the environment.

If these movements are to inspire other similar movements that will address concerns over the degradation of the environment, telling stories that contain environment-friendly attitudes might help. It is therefore of interest to us to see how Buddhist parables deliver the point of its basic teachings. The *Pratityasamutpada Vibhanga Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Dharmakakkappavattana Sutra*, three of the major texts in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, as well as the *Dhammapada*, a major text in the Theravada tradition, will serve as the framework of the study. The *sutras* lay down not just the four noble truths that the Buddha, upon enlightenment, is said to have revealed, but also explains the

¹According to Brennan (1969, 227), this is a fallacy committed when one “uses a work of imaginative literature... to talk about something that is not the novel, poem or play.”

idea of dependent origination, which is essential in the understanding of the Buddhist view of phenomena as *emptiness*.

Four parables are randomly chosen from several collections of Buddhist stories: Travail of a Baby Leopard (Chang 2006, 52), Turtles and the Youth (Chang 2005, 63), An Arm for a Life (Talovich 2002, 19), and One Sitting, Forty Years (Yun 2006, 80). This study claims that these simple stories embody profound teachings that are expressed in more complex forms in the Buddhist sutras, and are more direct in expressing the inherent ecological values in Buddhist philosophy. These values might not be seen as apparent in the sutras because of their focus on the nature of the world as troubled (“life is suffering”) and its emphasis on detachment. In other words, these stories show examples of the practical applications of teachings that otherwise might be construed as world-denying.

Dependent Origination, The Four Noble Truths, and Bodhisattvahood

The Buddha known in this aeon, Siddhartha Gautama, is said to have realized after his meditation under the Bodhi tree that all phenomena are interdependent. Things arise not out of themselves but because of the coming together of causes and conditions that produce particular phenomena at a given time. But since things *come* to be, they also come to *not-be*. Thus, nothing is ever permanent; things constantly change as the things that come together to produce something continues in their inevitable processes of transformation. These, then, became the marks of existence succinctly summarized in the *Dhammapada* as impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) and insubstantiality (*anatta*):

277. “All conditioned things are impermanent”—
when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away
from suffering. This is the path to purification.

278. “All conditioned things are unsatisfactory”—
when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away
from suffering. This is the path to purification.

279. “All things are not-self”—when one sees this
with wisdom, one turns away from suffering.
This is the path to purification.

These, being the characteristics of existence, are not easily grasped in the ordinary consciousness of daily unreflective living. The ordinary mind tends to see things as lingering, staying the same and being around permanently. It works with the limitations of language that favors being rather than non-being or becoming. As a result, it takes for granted that things are permanent. But because things do constantly change, the shock of things not being the way they are anymore cause us pain. In verses 5 to 8 of the *Dhammakakkappavattana Sutra*, the Buddha speaks of the four noble truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of its origin in craving, the truth of the destruction of suffering, and the truth of the way of the destruction of suffering through the Eight-fold path: right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation.

Being the way to eliminate the craving (desire) that causes suffering, the eight-fold path starts with having the right view or understanding of the world as produced in a series of chains that are linked to one another, called “dependent co-arising.” The *Pratityasamutpada Vibhanga Sutra* says:

....From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications. From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness. From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form. From name-and-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media. From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact. From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling. From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving. From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance. From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. From birth as a requisite condition, then ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress and suffering.

The Buddha identifies the chain of these causes as the root of suffering. We will see that he starts with “ignorance.” Thus, it is ignorance that has to be eliminated first through understanding the nature of things as to be *without nature* (insubstantial) precisely because they arise out of its melding and transforming with other things. There is no *substance* that exists and perpetuates on its own. Everything is rather interconnected, and will not appear without all the other phenomena that come together and cause it to appear. Understanding this will lead to the understanding of constant change, which in turn will lead to the practice of detachment. For what is there to cling to if everything changes? Pain results from attachment that is caused by the belief that things persist. If they are understood as constantly flowing into nothingness there will be no cause for clinging, and one will be released from pain.

This interconnectedness of all phenomena has been clearly illustrated in the metaphor developed out of the description of the bejewelled universe in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out indefinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel at the net’s every node, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspections and look closely at it, we will discover that its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels so that the process of reflection is infinite. (Cook 1977, 2)

This beautiful image shows the Buddhist cosmic, not individualistic, view of the universe. It shows that everything, like the jewels in Indra’s net, reflects and is reflected by all other things. The universe shines in this never-ending reflective back and forth of these beautiful jewels. These infinite interconnections, when properly understood, leads also to the understanding of the need for compas-

sion. Buddhist specialist Daisets Suzuki speaks of *paranimana*, “the turning of merits over to another, to renounce oneself for the sake of others.” (Suzuki 1914, 576) In the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha enjoins practitioners, the Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas to “raise the mind of compassion, display the great mercy desiring to relieve others of suffering...” and here is the ultimately practical implication of the three marks of existence.

For those who do not study the sutras, the children and some laypeople, the parables are made available for contemplation. It is therefore interesting to find out how the basic teachings of Buddhism are expressed in them without the complex metaphysical rumination required in the contemplation of the sutras. Four parables that will serve as examples are each summarized below.

The Parables

Travail of a Baby Leopard. A baby leopard wanted to go hunting on its own but it could not find anything to eat. Very hungry, he came upon a dead elephant. Thrilled, he tried to gnaw at the carcass but found it too hard to bite into. Trying all body parts, the baby leopard discovered that he could start eating the elephant's anus. He chewed himself inside the body, hungrily devouring its stomach and blood. His feast lasted for days. Unfortunately, in this span of time, the elephant's body also shrivelled up in the heat of the sun. So the leopard was trapped. It was only after a long time, when the elephant's body started decomposing because of the rain, that the leopard was released. Coming out of the carcass, he realized that he had lost his strength, having spent all his energy trying to escape while bathed in blood and rotting flesh. (Chang 2006, 52)

Turtles and the Youth. A father and his son lived off a small farm. They were used to hardship but they lived happily and contentedly. But as the father grew older and weaker, the son had to take on more of the farm work. So one day, the father took all of his life's savings, gave it to his son and told him to buy a cow. On the way to the market, the boy encountered several children who were beating five turtles that were turned upside down, forcing the heads to come out of the shell. Upset, the boy tried to stop the other children from hurting the turtles, but they would not do as he asked. Instead, they tied up the turtles with a rope and whirled them around in the air like a lasso. As the boy persisted, the kids told him that they were willing to stop if he would buy the turtles from them. Beset with the dilemma of having to buy a cow and buying the turtles to save them, the boy decided to spend the money on the turtles. Having acquired them, he set them free. He then went back home and explained what happened to his father. His father, instead of falling into despair, told him that it was a good decision to save five lives with the money for the cow. That midnight, a cow miraculously appeared on their doorstep as a reward for the boy's compassion. (Chang 2005, 63)

An Arm for a Life. While walking through the forest on a clear, sunny day, the Buddha saw an eagle swoop down to catch a dove. But the dove sought refuge with the Buddha. The eagle then engaged the Buddha, telling him that by saving the dove, he was starving him, the eagle. The Buddha then asked what the eagle wanted to eat. When the eagle asked for meat, the Buddha took out a knife and cut a piece of flesh off his arm and offered it to the bird. But



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the eagle complained, saying that he would have gotten more meat off the dove. So the Buddha cut more flesh from his arm, until he was down to its bare bone. The eagle then asked if he regretted his action. When the Buddha replied in the negative, the eagle taunted him, accusing him of saying things only to appear good. The Buddha then said, “If my words are the sincere truth, may my arm grow back as good as new,” and it did. After seeing this, the eagle flew up and revealed his true self as the Emperor of Heaven. He paid his respects to the Buddha and flew away singing praises for his compassion. (Talovich 2002, 19)

One Sitting, Forty Years. After becoming a monk, Chan Master Foku Weize stayed in a hut on Cuiping Rock on Mt. Tiantai. He used whatever was around him to fix the roof of his hut, took fresh water as his drink and picked wild fruits for his food. One day, a woodcutter came by and asked Master Foku how long he had lived there. Master Foku told him he’d stayed there for forty years already. The woodcutter asked, “Are you alone?” The Master replied positively, explaining that in a mountain like that, one person was already too many. When asked if he had no friends, he clapped his hands and tigers and panthers appeared from behind his hut. Seeing the woodcutter startled, Master Foku waived the animals away and said, “My friends are many. The great earth, mountains, and rivers; the trees, flowers, and grass; the insects, snakes, and wild beasts are all my Dharma companions.” Moved by these words, the woodcutter stayed as Master Foku’s disciple. Since then, people were welcomed by grass, trees and animals on Cuiping Rock. (Yun 2006, 80)

The Interconnectedness of All Things, Compassion, and the Environment

Following is a table that identifies how the basic teachings of Buddhism, specifically the three marks of existence, are portrayed and how compassion is expressed in the stories in this study.

Parable	Impermanence	Suffering	Insubstantiality/ Dependent co- arising	Compassion
Travail of a Baby Leopard	The changes in the dead carcass. It shrivels in the heat of the sun, and starts rotting in the dampness brought by the rain.	The hunger of the leopard, and eventually, his being trapped inside the dead elephant. His greed is what led him to this terrible situation. He ended up worse than when he started.	The dependence of leopards on their pack; the leopard’s survival that depends on the body of the dead elephant.	There is lack of general compassion, not for the pack and not for the elephant, and also, metaphorically, not for the self. The greed of the leopard got him into trouble. Shows the merits of detachment.

Parable	Impermanence	Suffering	Insubstantiality/ Dependent co- arising	Compassion
The Youth and the Turtles	Life goes on and the father gets older, requiring changes in the life of the son.	Father and son are poor, yet they do not complain. They live simply, contentedly, and are happy to do the work in the small farm.	The dependence of the father on the son, of the son on the father; their dependence on the farm and other things that they require to till it; the son's encounter with the children and the turtles.	The sacrifice of the money for the cow to help him till the land, in order to save and free five turtles that are being harmed.
An Arm for a Life	The bright sunny day, ideal for a walk, turns into a situation that the Buddha has to intervene in, between a predator and its prey.	The dove's life is threatened by a predator.	The dependence of the eagle on meat in order to survive; the presence of the Buddha in the forest.	The Buddha's offering of his own arm in order to satisfy the need of the eagle, while saving the life of the dove.
One Sitting, Forty Years	The passing of 40 years, since Master Foku became a monk	Master Foku lives very simply in the woods, in the mountain. He has a simple hut which he maintains with natural things he finds around him.	The dependence of the monk on the mountain and all that is around him, the relationship between him and nature.	The openness of the animals, trees, grass and mountain to Master Foku, to the woodcutter, and eventually, to all people who come to Mt. Tiantai.

These simple stories portray nothing too extraordinary except for “An Arm for a Life,” that speaks of the magical power of the Buddha’s compassion, that even the Emperor of Heaven, disguised as a eagle, paid respects to him. Even the fable about the leopard narrates the natural flow of things, from life to death, to the process of decay, Without any metaphysical musings these stories take for granted the evolution of things from and their continuous devolution into nothingness. The different characters are shown to be dealing with this natural phenomenon in



various ways: the leopard's hunger makes him seek food on his own out of greed, instead of hunting together with the pack; the eagle swoops down for its prey and the dove runs away from the predator. Master Foku deals with what has to be done about his hut in the mountain in a calm way, having "sat" in meditation for a long time; and father and son bear with the hardships associated with tilling the farm in a gracious and cheerful way. Normal "evils" came their way: toiling, meanness from other people, hunger and death. In other words, they are all told within the context of the three marks of existence: impermanence, suffering, and insubstantiality.

On the other hand, extraordinary acts of goodness are shown, for instance, the Buddha cutting the flesh off of his arm to feed the eagle so that the eagle could let go of the dove; and the son giving up the chance to have a cow to make his work in the farm easier, just to free five turtles. But what is most prominent in these stories, especially in the last three, is the non-hierarchical way of looking at all beings. The Buddha resolves the dilemma of keeping the eagle hungry while saving the dove by offering his own flesh to satisfy the eagle's craving for meat. Master Foku lives with all the animals in the mountain and considers the mountain itself, its grass and trees, his friends. The son sees that the turtles' lives are as important as his and his father's lives, and was able to give up convenience to save them. These are perfect examples of an understanding of the interconnectedness of things, illustrated in the metaphor of Indra's net, which, as shown in these stories, becomes the basis of an ecological worldview. The characters become Bodhisattvas—individuals who continue to help other beings in the hope of alleviating suffering in this world. When all life, in whatever form, is respected as something valuable, it follows that insuring its safety becomes an immediate and important duty. Against the background of interconnectedness among all beings, saving one life means saving all.

George Marshall, in *Don't even think about it: why our brains are wired to ignore climate change* (2014, 219) suggests that if we turn environmental issues into a question of sacred values, we might be able to convince ourselves more to act in order to save earth from further destruction. Sacred values, he explains, are those that matter to us and are part of our life's "non-negotiables." The stories discussed here have shown such an attitude towards all kinds of life, and may have just illustrated Marshall's idea about the environment as a non-negotiable value.

CONCLUSION

The four parables studied in this paper are stories that exemplify compassion, which is for Buddhism the cure to suffering in this world, and the hallmark of Bodhisattvahood. The context in which

they are told assume the Four Noble Truths: that there is suffering in the world, that suffering is caused by attachments, that there is an antidote to attachment, and that is the cultivation of right living—in a word, *compassion*, as detailed in the Eight-fold Path. They assume that everything in the world is interconnected, and that differences in form need not cause discrimination. A turtle is as valuable as a human person, and grass and trees, as well as tigers and panthers, are “people” who can relate to other people. Although the sutras all point to the *insubstantiality* of things, the parables justify conventional reality through the practice of compassion. Any life is valuable and deserves to be saved, no matter what. This conviction, as shown in the parables, is the basis of the Buddhist ecological view. It promotes care of the environment and works for the prevention of its degradation.

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