

THE BUDDHIST ATTITUDE TOWARDS ANIMAL AND PLANT LIFE

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Ours is an era where man's insatiable greed has led him to the wanton destruction of this planet's natural resources. This is the result of a faulty teaching where man has been led to believe that the riches of the earth were placed here for his sole benefit and pleasure alone, for him to do as he pleases with them. Buddhism teaches that all living things are interdependent on each other and that man's existence depends on his learning to respect other forms of life. Some of Prof. Silva's examples of the 'scrupulous non-violent attitude towards even the smallest living creatures' quoted from the Buddhist texts may seem far-fetched to some readers, but it underscores the vital point that the Buddha refused to compromise on his concept of compassion for all beings that exist.

Ed.

The well-known Five Precepts (*panca sila*) form the minimum code of ethics that every lay Buddhist is expected to adhere to. Its first precept involves abstention from injury to life. It is explained as the casting aside of all forms of weapons, being conscientious about depriving a living being of life. In its positive sense it means the cultivation of compassion and sympathy for all living beings. The Buddhist layman is expected to abstain from trading in meat too.

The Buddhist monk has to abide by an even stricter code of ethics than the layman. He has to abstain from practices which would involve even unintentional injury to living creatures. For instance, the Buddha promulgated the rule against going on a journey during the rainy season because of possible injury to worms and insects that come to the surface in wet weather. The same concern for non-violence prevents a monk from digging the ground. Once a monk who was a potter prior to ordination built for himself a clay hut and set it on fire to give it a fine finish. The Buddha strongly objected to this as so many living creatures would have been burnt in the process. The hut was broken down on the Buddha's instructions to prevent it from creating a bad precedent for later generations. The scrupulous non-violent attitude towards even the smallest living creatures prevents the monks from drinking unstrained water. It is no doubt a sound hygienic habit, but what is noteworthy is the reason which prompts the practice, namely, sympathy for living creatures.

Buddhism also prescribes the practice of *metta*, “loving kindness” towards all creatures of all quarters without restriction. The *Karaniya-metta* Sutta enjoins the cultivation of loving kindness towards all creatures, timid and steady, long and short, big and small, minute and great, visible and invisible, near and far, born and awaiting birth. All quarters are to be suffused with this loving attitude. Just as one’s own life is precious to oneself, so is the life of the other precious to himself. Therefore a reverential attitude must be cultivated towards all forms of life.

The *Nandivisala Jataka* illustrates how kindness should be shown to animals domesticated for human service. Even a wild animal can be tamed with kind words. *Parileyya* was a wild elephant who attended on the Buddha when he spent time in the forest away from the monks. The infuriated elephant *Nalagiri* was tamed by the Buddha with no other miraculous power than the power of loving-kindness. Man and beast can live and let live without fear of one another if only man cultivates sympathy and regards all life with compassion.

The understanding of kamma and rebirth, too, prepares the Buddhist to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards animals. According to this belief it is possible for human beings to be reborn in subhuman states among animals. The *Kukkuravatika* Sutta can be cited as a canonical reference which substantiates this view. The Jataka provides ample testimony to this view from commentarial literature. It is possible that our own close relatives have been reborn as animals. Therefore it is only right that we should treat animals with kindness and sympathy. The Buddhist notion of merit also engenders a gentle non-violent attitude towards living creatures. It is said that if one throws dish-washing water into a pool where there are insects and living creatures, intending that they feed on the tiny particles of food thus washed away, one accumulates merit even by such trivial generosity. According to the *Macchuddana Jataka* the Bodhisatta threw his leftover food into a river in order to feed the fish, and by the power of that merit he was saved from an impending disaster. Thus kindness to animals, be they big or small, is a source of merit – merit needed for human beings to improve their lot in the cycle of rebirths and to approach the final goal of Nibbana.

Buddhism expresses a gentle non-violent attitude towards the vegetable kingdom as well. It is said that one should not even break the branch of a tree that has given one shelter. Plants are so helpful to us in providing us with all necessities of life that we are expected not to adopt a callous attitude towards them. The more strict monastic rules prevent monks from injuring plant life.

Prior to the rise of Buddhism people regarded natural phenomena such as mountains, forests, groves and trees with a sense of awe and reverence. They considered them as the abode of powerful non-human beings who assist human beings at times of need. Though Buddhism gave man a far superior Triple Refuge (*tisarana*) in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, these places continued to enjoy public patronage at a popular level, as the acceptance of terrestrial non-human beings such as *devatas* and *yakkhas* did not violate the belief system of Buddhism. Therefore among the Buddhists there is a reverential attitude towards especially long-standing gigantic trees. They are called *Vanaspati* in Pali, meaning “lords of the forest”. As huge trees such as the ironwood, the *sala* and the fig are also recognised as the Bodhi trees of former Buddhas, the deferential attitude towards trees is further strengthened. It is well known that the *ficus religiosa* is held as an object of great veneration in the Buddhist world today as the trees under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment.

The construction of parks and pleasure groves for public use is considered a great meritorious deed. Sakka the lord of gods is said to have reached this status as a result of providing social services such as the construction of parks, pleasure groves, ponds, wells and roads.

The open air, natural habitats and forest trees have a special fascination for the Eastern mind as symbols of spiritual freedom. The home life is regarded as fetter (*sambadha*) that keeps man in bondage and misery. Renunciation is like the open air (*abbhokasa*), nature unhampered by man’s activity. The chief events in the life of the Buddha too took place in the open air. He was born in a park at the foot of a tree in Kapilavasthu, he attained Enlightenment in the open air at the foot of the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, he inaugurated his missionary activity in the open air in the salagrove of the Mailas in Pava. The Buddha’s constant advice to his disciples also was to resort to natural habitats such as forest groves and glades. There, undisturbed by human activity, they could zealously engage themselves in meditation.