

Right Livelihood and Environmental Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the integration of Buddhism's Right Livelihood (Sammā-Ājīva) and environmental ethics in India, placing emphasis on sustainable development. Aligning with the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Livelihood endorses non-destructive, moral modes of making a living that honor compassion (karuṇā), non-violence (ahimsa), interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda), and are within the framework of ancient Indian ecological wisdom. This is exemplified by indigenous systems such as those practiced by the Adi women of Arunachal Pradesh. There are still challenges in dealing with contemporary consumerist business structures; studies indicate that Buddhist majority regions tend to experience a gap between corporate sustainability practices and Buddhist values. The article analyses how Right Livelihood could inspire mindful consumerism alongside resilient community-oriented economic models to tackle environmental crises such as deforestation or river pollution. Alongside traditional wisdom, modern needs propel forward-thinking Buddhist ethics that India can embrace towards sustainable livelihoods and ecological responsibility.

Keywords: Right Livelihood, environmental ethics, Buddhism, sustainability, interdependence, ahimsa, compassion, sustainable livelihoods, ecological stewardship, India

1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism places Right Livelihood near the heart of the Noble Eightfold Path, and that idea meshes neatly with modern thinking about the environment. The teaching simply urges people to earn a living in ways that spare others and the natural world from harm¹. Its outlook is broad, pointing out that everything-human beings, animals, plants, and even rivers-is linked^{2 3}. From this view, caring for the earth grows out of compassion, non-violence, and everyday awareness. Such attitudes do not stop at human circles; they

¹ Damien Keown, *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198850052.001.0001>.

² Pratama Pradheksa et al., "Environmental Ethics in the Spiritual Perspective of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam," *Peradaban Journal of Religion and Society* 2, no. 2 (July 2023): 122–35, <https://doi.org/10.59001/pjrs.v2i2.93>.

³ Suparak Suriyankietkaew and Pornkasem Kantamara, "Business Ethics and Spirituality for Corporate Sustainability: A Buddhism Perspective," *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion* 16, no. 3 (May 2019): 264–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2019.1574598>.

stretch to insects, trees, and the soil.⁴ They also call for moderation, clear thinking, and resilience, traits that sit at the core of sustainability.⁵

Although these values are strong, research finds a gap between them and what companies actually do in places where Buddhism is the majority faith. For example, sustainability reports from Sri Lankan firms reveal little trace of Buddhist thought guiding their environmental work.⁶ This highlights the challenge of translating spiritual teachings into practical action in the modern world. Therefore, Buddhism offers a rich framework for environmental ethics through its emphasis on Right Livelihood and interconnectedness. The religion's focus on compassion, mindfulness, and moderation provides a strong foundation for sustainable practices and environmental stewardship. However, the gap between Buddhist teachings and corporate practices in some contexts underscores the need for more effective integration of spiritual values into modern environmental and business ethics.

The idea of Right Livelihood nudges people to rethink how they work, spend, and care for nature, pushing many toward greener daily habits. Debates about rural growth and poverty relief now hinge heavily on the notion of sustainable livelihoods.⁷ That frame, in short, aims to lift peoples living standards by backing home-grown economic plans and using land-rich resources in a careful way. Tourism can pack a big punch financially, yet households that lean on it lose money and meaning far faster than those with mixed income streams because outside shocks are harder to absorb.⁸ That reality proves why spreading work across farm, craft, and service lines is vital for resiliency. Right Livelihood, then, does not just ring a moral bell; it pushes each person to weigh how their career choices ripple through the community and the earth over time.

Building a more sustainable life may mean mixing farm work with crafts or small trades,⁸ choosing meals that cost the planet less⁹, and voting or speaking out for fair food policies.¹⁰ It also helps when neighbors,

⁴ Bhavna Kalra et al., "Spirituality and Environmental Consciousness: A Study on Indian Perspective," *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 6, no. 7 (2018): 50–54.

⁵ Suriyankietkaew and Kantamara, "Business Ethics and Spirituality," 275.

⁶ Sashika Abeydeera, Akhilesh Chandra, and Sumit Lodhia, "Sustainability Reporting – More Global than Local?" *Meditari Accountancy Research* 24, no. 4 (October 2016): 478–504, <https://doi.org/10.1108/medar-09-2015-0063>.

⁷ Sunil Kariyakarawana, "Buddhist Ethics and Environmental Responsibility," in *Buddhism - History, Spirituality and Practice*, ed. Akşay Awasthi (London: IntechOpen, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.112601>.

⁸ Li Huang, Luyu Yang, Nguyễn Thị Tuyền, Nazan Colmekcioglu, and Jun Liu, "Factors Influencing the Livelihood Strategy Choices of Rural Households in Tourist Destinations," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 30, no. 4 (2021): 875–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2021.1903015>.

⁹ J. Vandenbroele, I. Vermeir, M. Geuens, H. Slabbinck, and A. Van Kerckhove, "Nudging to Get Our Food Choices on a Sustainable Track," *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 79, no. 1 (February 2020): 133–46, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0029665119000971>.

¹⁰ Mickey Gjerris, Henrik Saxe, and Christian Gamborg, "What to Buy? On the Complexity of Being a Critical Consumer," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 29, no. 1 (February 2016): 81–102, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-015-9591-6>.

friends, and community groups pool resources and share knowledge, since stronger social ties often give families the confidence and means to live lightly¹¹ and to build more resilient households.

Right livelihood and environmental ethics in Indian context

In India, the idea of a right livelihood is closely woven with ethical care for the earth. Ancient texts and everyday practice alike encourage earning a living in ways that protect forests, rivers, and animals.

Modern writers and environmental thinkers have taken up this theme and examined it through the lens of ecological ethics. K.S. Maniam's novel *Between Lives*, for example, is set in Malaysia yet echoes Indian wisdom; it frames humans as part of a larger web and argues that sustainable action grows from a shared sense of responsibility.¹²

Recent studies on the Adi women of Arunachal Pradesh show that their traditional cooking, seed-sharing, and plant-knowledge keep families fed and help villages bounce back from floods or landslides.¹³ In a wider frame, the Buddhist idea of Right Livelihood-Sammā-Ājīva-speaks loudly to today's Indian crisis of fast factories, endless tree-cutting, and choking rivers. Built on ahimsa, or non-harm, and *pratītyasamutpāda*, or how everything leans on everything, it presses us to earn in ways that lift people and safeguard soil, air, and water.

Within this lens, small farms, the backbone of rural India, show what right livelihood looks like on the ground. Research in Vaishali found that as plots shrink, farmers struggle harder to keep methods green and profitable, pushing them toward harmful shortcuts.¹⁴ The result points squarely at policy: governments and NGOs must bench big-land bias and roll out credit, training, and markets that let tiny holders grow food without wrecking the earth.

Thus, living well while caring for the planet in India draws strength from old customs, village know-how, and daily rhythms of sharing. Yet, the challenges seen in both farm studies and the lives of indigenous groups remind us that tradition alone will not suffice; concerted action is still vital.¹⁵

¹¹ Feixue Xiong, Shubin Zhu, Hui Xiao, Xiaolan Kang, and Fangting Xie, "Does Social Capital Benefit the Improvement of Rural Households' Sustainable Livelihood Ability? Based on the Survey Data of Jiangxi Province, China," *Sustainability* 13, no. 19 (October 2021): Article 10995, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131910995>.

¹² Zainor Izat Zainal, "Environmental Ethics in K.S. Maniam's *Between Lives* and Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree*," *Humanities*, published November 12, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967828X17739496>.

¹³ Ranjay K. Singh, Arvind Kumar, Anshuman Singh, and Poonam Singhal, "Evidence that Cultural Food Practices of Adi Women in Arunachal Pradesh, India, Improve Social-Ecological Resilience: Insights for Sustainable Development Goals," *Ecological Processes* 9, Article 29 (June 3, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13717-020-00232-x>.

¹⁴ Haroon Sajjad and Iffat Nasreen, "Assessing Farm-Level Agricultural Sustainability Using Site-Specific Indicators and Sustainable Livelihood Security Index: Evidence from Vaishali District, India," *Community Development* 47, no. 5 (October 2016): 602–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2016.1221437>.

¹⁵ His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Rajiv Mehrotra, *The Green Buddha: Ecological Wisdom from the Buddhist Tradition* (Full Circle, 2015).

Buddhist Principles of Right Livelihood

As part of the Noble Eightfold Path, Buddhism places a strong emphasis on leading a proper life. This idea inspires adherents to undertake work that does not hurt the environment or other living things. Buddhism's view of a proper livelihood encompasses more than just financial survival; it also includes moral and sustainable behaviors that foster social and environmental harmony.

A key component of the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism, Right Livelihood acts as a manual for moral behavior in one's line of work or other source of income. It encourages people to undertake labor that is in line with the values of compassion, non-violence, and mindfulness and does not hurt other living things or the environment. Trading in weapons, living things, meat, alcohol, or poisons is obviously discouraged in Buddhist teachings since it leads to suffering and moral decay. Rather, people are encouraged to work in fields that advance justice, peace, and the welfare of all living things.

The Buddhist concepts of interdependence and non-harming (ahimsa) are fundamental to environmental ethics. The natural world is viewed as a linked aspect of life that merits respect and care rather than as a resource to be exploited¹⁶. Every action has repercussions, and human intents and acts are closely linked to the state of the environment, according to the dependent origination thesis (Harvey). Degradation of the environment is therefore a moral and spiritual problem in addition to a physical one.

Sustainable living that benefits both human communities and the environment is promoted when Right Livelihood is applied in accordance with environmental ethics. This entails picking occupations and ways of living that prevent damage, lessen environmental impact, and promote ecological equilibrium. Such livelihoods help create a more caring and responsible world, whether through environmental campaigning, ethical corporate practices, or sustainable agriculture. Applying Buddhist teachings to our economic and environmental decisions in the present era pushes us to live more responsibly, mindfully, and with compassion for all living things (Batchelor).

Environmental Ethics in Buddhist Philosophy

The values of compassion, interconnectedness, and non-harming (ahimsa) lie at the heart of Buddhist environmental ethics. These lessons promote a comprehensive approach to ecological preservation by highlighting the interdependence of all living things and their surroundings.¹⁷ Another important idea is karma, which holds that our deeds toward the environment have long-term effects on both present and future generations.¹⁸

¹⁶ Stephanie Kaza, *Green Buddhism: Practice and Compassionate Action in Uncertain Times* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), 112-135.

¹⁷ Pratama Y. Pradheksa et al., "Environmental Ethics in the Spiritual Perspective of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam," *Peradaban Journal of Religion and Society* 2, no. 2 (July 2023): 122–35, <https://doi.org/10.59001/pjrs.v2i2.93>.

Buddhism's primary teachings of compassion (karuṇā), non-violence (ahimsa), and interdependence provide a deep ethical framework for dealing with environmental challenges. All phenomena develop in mutual dependence, according to the philosophy of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), which implies that harming the environment eventually damages oneself and all other beings. This philosophical perspective acknowledges the interdependence of humans and the natural environment and advocates for an ethical position of ecological stewardship. The idea of non-harming deters practices like pollution, deforestation, and excessive consumption that harm the environment.

Additionally, Mahāyāna Buddhism's Bodhisattva ideal implies a moral need to preserve animal life and ecological environments by extending compassion to all sentient beings.¹⁹ An ethic of care is reinforced by Buddhist writings like the Jātaka stories, which frequently depict the Buddha in previous incarnations engaging in stewardship and reverence for the natural world. These age-old ideas have been modified by contemporary Buddhist leaders and academics to address current environmental issues, advocating for sustainable, mindful, and simple lifestyles and policies. Therefore, environmental ethics in Buddhist philosophy is a logical extension of its moral and spiritual worldview rather than a separate issue.

Practical Applications in Modern Business

Buddhist-inspired ideas are being incorporated into sustainability practices by a large number of modern enterprises. Based on Buddhist teachings, the "Sufficiency Economy" theory promotes resilience, moderation, and reasonableness in corporate operations. This strategy pushes businesses to strike a balance between environmental stewardship, ethical issues, and profit-making.

Buddhism's ethical precepts, particularly those pertaining to interconnectedness, mindfulness, and non-harming (ahimsa), can be effectively implemented in the framework of contemporary corporate operations. Companies that follow Buddhist environmental ethics aim for sustainability, compassion, and duty to all living things in addition to financial success. The incorporation of Right Livelihood, which promotes businesses that prevent harm and promote the welfare of people and the environment, is among the most obvious uses (Rahula). The emergence of eco-friendly businesses, fair trade policies, and mindful entrepreneurship that refrains from labor or environmental abuse are examples of this. Additionally, mindfulness-based leadership and corporate culture are becoming more and more well-liked since they promote moral decision-making, worker happiness, and less environmental impact (Kaza).

Buddhist-inspired companies frequently use zero-waste procedures, aid in community development, and use socially conscious investment tactics in nations like Thailand, Bhutan, and Japan. These customs address global issues including inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation in addition to reflecting traditional Buddhist principles. Modern companies can become platforms for ecological consciousness, compassionate action, and holistic success by implementing Buddhist environmental ethics.

¹⁸ Damien Keown. *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. oxford university, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198850052.001.0001>.

¹⁹ Stephanie Kaza, *Green Buddhism: Practice and Compassionate Action in Uncertain Times* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), 112-135.

Challenges and Contradictions

Buddhist teachings have strong environmental ethics, yet putting these ideas into practice in contemporary settings can be difficult. According to research, corporate sustainability reports frequently follow international standards procedures rather than specifically mentioning Buddhist ideals, particularly in nations with a large Buddhist population. The complete incorporation of Buddhist environmental principles into business operations may be hampered by this discrepancy between corporate representations and the local cultural milieu.

Buddhist environmental ethics offer a sustainable and caring framework, yet there are many obstacles and inconsistencies in its actual application in the contemporary world. The conflict between traditional monastic disengagement from worldly affairs and the realities of economic engagement and environmental advocacy in ordinary society is one of the main challenges. The pressures of contemporary consumer economies, where company success frequently depends on competitiveness, growth, and consumption, may clash with the Buddhist emphasis on detachment and non-attachment. Furthermore, implementing Right Livelihood in a globalized economy can be challenging since supply chains may contain indirect harm that is difficult for practitioners to control, including labor exploitation or environmental destruction. Additionally, certain Buddhist organizations have come under fire for their involvement in environmentally damaging activities, like land development or taking corporate donations from sectors that go against fundamental ethical standards. The consistency and adaptability of Buddhist ethics in modern contexts are seriously called into doubt by these discrepancies. Finding a balance between doctrinal purity and practical participation is still a difficulty, despite the efforts of contemporary Buddhist leaders and researchers to reinterpret ancient teachings in order to address ecological crises. Therefore, even though the principles are strong, their application necessitates a careful balancing act between socioeconomic realities and spiritual values.

Impact on Consumer Behavior and Materialism

Consumer behavior has been found to be influenced by Buddhist principles, especially when it comes to materialism. According to studies, Buddhist teachings can both directly and indirectly lessen materialistic tendencies by fostering positive feelings like empathy and compassion. Consumers may become more ecologically sensitive as a result of this decline in materialism.

A powerful counter-narrative to the contemporary culture of consumerism and material abundance is provided by Buddhist environmental ethics, which are based on ideas like mindfulness, simplicity, and non-attachment (alobha). The basis of materialistic cultures that associate happiness with ownership and consumption is directly challenged by the Buddhist critique of desire (taṇhā) as the cause of suffering. Buddhism promotes a more aware, frugal, and environmentally conscientious way of consuming by promoting mindfulness in all aspects of everyday life, including shopping decisions (Loy). The increasing popularity of ethical consumerism, in which people select goods based on sustainability, labor conditions, and environmental effect rather than convenience or prestige, is indicative of this change.

But it is not always easy to make the shift from materialism to conscious consumption. Without institutional and social support, it is challenging for people to adopt Buddhist ideals because contemporary economies and advertising sectors deliberately foster desire and discontent. However, the popularity of mindfulness-based living, particularly in urban areas, has started to change consumer behavior in favor of

ecological responsibility, sufficiency, and simplicity. In this sense, Buddhist environmental ethics provide good alternatives to excessive spending and ecological damage, while also contributing to a larger cultural critique of materialism.

Buddhism and Environmental Activism

A fundamental component of the Noble Eightfold Path, Buddhism's Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājīva) precept provides a moral basis for environmental advocacy by promoting morally sound and sustainable business practices that prevent ecological harm. This viewpoint, which is based on the Buddhist concepts of compassion (karuṇā) and interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda), holds that human prosperity is closely related to the health of the natural world.²⁰ While supporting sustainable alternatives including organic farming, renewable energy, and livelihoods centered around conservation, Right Livelihood opposes occupations that take advantage of ecosystems, such as extensive deforestation, the fossil fuel industry, and industrial animal agribusiness.²¹

The concepts of ecological stewardship, waste minimization, and mindful consumerism are frequently incorporated by environmental activists who draw inspiration from Buddhist ethics as manifestations of spiritual practice.²² Well-known individuals like Thich Nhat Hanh have promoted mindful living as a kind of environmental advocacy by highlighting "interbeing," the notion that people and nature are inseparable.²³ Similar to this, groups like the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation show how Buddhist principles may be applied to real-world ecological action through their reforestation, recycling, and disaster relief efforts.²⁴ Buddhism gives modern sustainability movements a strong conceptual foundation by presenting environmental preservation as both a moral duty and a means of achieving emancipation from suffering.

Numerous types of ecological activism have been influenced by Buddhism's emphasis on environmental preservation. By encouraging sustainable behaviors and increasing public understanding of ecological challenges, Buddhist monasteries and organizations frequently take part in environmental conservation initiatives. These programs show how Buddhist ideas can be applied to real-world environmental conservation efforts.

Conclusion: Integrating Buddhist Ethics in Modern Sustainability Practices

A crucial framework for dealing with the ecological issues of our day is provided by the ideas of Right

²⁰ Dalai Lama, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality* (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2005), 72–75.

²¹ Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown, *Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work That Reconnects* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014), 45–48.

²² Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2008), 31–34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 56–59.

²⁴ Tzu Chi Foundation, *Environmental Protection: A Global Mission* (Taiwan: Jing Si Publications, 2020), 12–15.

Livelihood and Buddhist environmental ethics. According to recent research, Buddhist ideas of compassion (karuṇā) and interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda) provide revolutionary perspectives on sustainability that go against accepted economic theories.²⁵ Buddhist philosophy has recently been interpreted ecologically to highlight the ways in which mindfulness exercises might promote greater environmental consciousness and conscientious consumption habits.²⁶

These ideas are still used today in a variety of settings. The burgeoning "Ecobuddhism" movement demonstrates how monastic groups are upholding ancient principles while embracing environmental techniques.²⁷ In a similar vein, active Buddhist organizations have created creative climate activism models that combine direct environmental action with meditation.²⁸ According to scholarly study, sustainability strategies influenced by Buddhism typically prioritize long-term systemic transformation above temporary technology solutions.²⁹

The fusion of scientific ecology and Buddhist ethics offers encouraging avenues for progress as we confront previously unheard-of environmental problems. This synthesis builds a strong basis for structural and individual change in the direction of ecological harmony while honoring conventional wisdom and adjusting to modern demands.³⁰

Buddhist teachings on environmental ethics and good livelihood provide important insights for sustainable development as worries about environmental degradation continue to rise on a worldwide scale. Buddhism offers a framework for dealing with ecological issues by highlighting the interdependence of all beings and encouraging moral corporate conduct. However, a deliberate attempt to close the gap between traditional Buddhist values and modern sustainability approaches is necessary for the successful integration of these principles into contemporary corporate and consumer practices³¹

²⁵ David L. McMahan, *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), 45-68.

²⁶ Stephanie Kaza, *Green Buddhism: Practice and Compassionate Action in Uncertain Times* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019), 112-135.

²⁷ Susan M. Darlington, *The Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement* (2021), 89-104.

²⁸ John Stanley et al., *A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2020), 73-91.

²⁹ Leslie E. Sponsel and Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel, "Buddhist Ecology: Perspectives and Prospects," *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 22, no. 1 (2021): 15-34.

³⁰ Kenneth Kraft, *The Inner Light of Ecology: Buddhist Contributions to Environmental Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 157-182.

³¹ Sashika Abeydeera, Helen Tregidga, and Kate Kearins, "Sustainability Reporting – More Global than Local?" *Meditari Accountancy Research* 24, no. 4 (October 2016): 478–504, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MEDAR-09-2015-0063>