

THE DOCTRINE OF DEPENDENT ORIGATION AS BASIS FOR A PARADIGM OF
HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP OF RESPONSIBILITY

หลักปฏิจสุมุปาทในฐานะกระบวนทัศน์แห่งความรับผิดชอบร่วมกันที่ก่อเกิดมาจาก
ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างมนุษย์กับธรรมชาติ

Anthony Le Duc¹

Abstract

The doctrine of *paṭiccasamuppāda* or Dependent Origination is one of the most important teachings of Buddhism and serves as a source of inspiration for reflections on all kinds of issues including social, political, and spiritual. In this paper, the doctrine of Dependent Origination is examined as a resource for conceiving of a relationship between human beings and nature as one characterized by responsibility. This is done by reflecting upon the abstract form of the teaching as a law of universal causality that contains an environmental import. The environmental significance of this teaching appears when we realize that human thoughts and actions can lead certain things to arise in nature that may be either positive or negative. Based on these reflections, a paradigm of human-nature relationship of responsibility is proposed. In addition, the Buddhist virtues of moderation and contentment are presented as essential ways to nourish such a relationship.

Keywords: Dependent Origination, Theravada Buddhism, environmental spirituality

¹ Doctoral Candidate of Religious Studies Graduate School of Philosophy and Religion Assumption University of Thailand (ABAC).



บทคัดย่อ

คำสอนเรื่องปฏิจจสมุปบาทหรือหลักเหตุปัจจัยที่ต้องอาศัยกันเกิดขึ้น เป็นหนึ่งในคำสอนของพระพุทธศาสนาที่นับได้ว่าเป็นแหล่งบันดาลใจในการนำมาประยุกต์ใช้เพื่อแก้ประเด็นปัญหาไม่ว่าจะเป็นทางด้านสังคม การเมืองและทางชีวิตจิตใจ ในบทความนี้ ผู้เขียนได้สำรวจตรวจสอบหลักคำสอนดังกล่าวในฐานะเป็นทรัพยากรสำคัญที่เป็นจุดกำเนิดความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างมนุษย์และธรรมชาติที่ตั้งอยู่บนฐานของความรับผิดชอบร่วมกัน เพราะหลักปฏิจจสมุปบาทนั้นเป็นหลักเหตุและผลสากลซึ่งควรวรรวมไว้ซึ่งเนื้อหาสาระที่เกี่ยวข้องกับสิ่งแวดล้อม หลักนิเวศธรรมที่สำคัญนี้ปรากฏเป็นจริงได้เมื่อเราตระหนักรู้ว่า ความคิดและการกระทำของมนุษย์นั้นจะนำพาให้เกิดผลแก่ธรรมชาติได้ทั้งแง่บวกและแง่ลบ บนหลักการนี้ ผู้เขียนขอเสนอกระบวนการที่สัมพันธ์กันที่สัมพันธภาพที่เกิดจากความรับผิดชอบร่วมกันระหว่างมนุษย์กับธรรมชาติ และสัมพันธภาพนั้นจะเติบโตได้ก็ด้วยพุทธธรรมคำสอนที่ว่าด้วยการดำเนินชีวิตอย่างสมณะและสันโดษ

คำสำคัญ: ปฏิจจสมุปบาท, พระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท, ชีวิตจิตด้านสิ่งแวดล้อม

1. Introduction

This paper aims to do the following two objectives: (1) argues for the relevance of the law of Dependent Origination to the issue of environmental well-being in a way that is faithful to the canonical text, and (2) proposes a paradigm of human-nature relationship inspired by this fundamental Buddhist teaching. When turning to Buddhism as a resource for a religiously inspired environmentalism, perhaps no teaching in Buddhism gets mentioned more than *paṭiccasamuppāda* which is commonly translated as Dependent

Origination or Dependent Arising. Many scholars, especially those classified as “Green Buddhists”² see this concept as pertinent to the issue of the ecology because of a particular interpretation that leads to the idea of interdependence of *all* things. This kind of an interpretation, it seems, easily lends itself to environmental

² “Green Buddhists” are also sometimes referred to as “EcoBuddhists” because of they are enthusiastic supporters of the point of view that Buddhism is naturally environmentally friendly.

awareness and protection because it suggests intimacy, connectedness, and even oneness, between human beings and nature. On the other hand, a number of Buddhist scholars have also rejected this sort of holistic interpretation of Dependent Origination, asserting that this doctrine only pertains to the working of the human mind and how human suffering is generated or destroyed. Thus, Dependent Origination cannot be utilized as a resource for promoting environmental ethic and spirituality. In this paper, I propose a “middle way” of interpreting the doctrine of Dependent Origination. First, I propose that the teaching, especially in its abstract form, not only applies to the human condition, but also pertains to all things in the universe as a whole. Second, as a universal law of causality, it indeed contains an environmental import worthy of consideration in the discussion on Buddhist environmental spirituality. In particular, this teaching will serve as a resource for conceiving of a human-nature relationship characterized by responsibility and accountability. Finally, this relationship of responsibility and accountability will be nourished when human beings exercise essential virtues such as moderation and contentment.

2. Overview of Dependent Origination

According to the Buddha who taught this Dhammic principle, Dependent Origination is a naturally occurring principle that does not depend on the existence of either himself or any other enlightened Buddhist teachers in the world. The Buddha affirmed that “Whether an enlightened Tathagata were to appear in this world or not, this principle would still prevail as an enduring aspect of the natural order.”³ The Buddha also emphasized that this principle is essential to the Dhamma, which one must comprehend in order to say that he understands the Dhamma. “Whoever sees Dependent Origination sees the Dhamma,” declared the Buddha. “And whoever sees the Dhamma sees Dependent Origination.”⁴ Though on the surface it may seem simple, as the monk Ananda once remarked, the Buddha declared in the *Tipitaka* that this principle is much more profound than what one may initially perceive. It is part of the Dhamma, said the Buddha,

³ S.II.25.

⁴ M.I.190.



that is “deep, difficult to see, difficult to realize, calm and peaceful, subtle, not attainable through mere logic, refined, requiring a wise one to understand.”⁵

The principle of Dependent Origination comes in two forms, long and short. The short form is a general formula that does not specify the main elements involved while the long form specifies the elements and how they are connected to one another in a chained progression. The short form succinctly states:

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.

When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases. (S.II.21)

The longer form, on the other hand, specifies various factors linked together creating a chronological sequence as follows:

With Ignorance as condition, there are Volitional Impulses...

With Birth as condition, Aging and Death, Sorrow, Lamentation, Pain, Grief and Despair.

The text usually begins with the element of ignorance (*avijja*) as

one of the twelve elements that form the entire chain. One sees that the existence of ignorance gives rise to another element, which in turn gives rise to another element, and so forth. While this formulation is meant to show how suffering comes to be in the world, the converse, which begins with the cessation of ignorance and ends with cessation of death and decay, depicts the process for extinguishing suffering. Though ignorance usually appears first in the formula in the text, Phra Prayudh Payutto warns that this does not mean that ignorance ought to be taken as the root cause or the first cause of the other elements in the chain. The fact that ignorance appears first in the sequence is merely for the sake of convenience, and ignorance is seen as the most logical element with which to begin the chain.⁶ The end result is suffering, grief, dissatisfaction, and various feelings associated with *dukkha*. This reality of *dukkha* leads to the accumulation of unwholesome tendencies that in turn leads to perpetuating ignorance which keeps

⁵ M.I.167.

⁶ Phra Prayudh Payutto, **Buddhadhamma**. (Albany: Suny Press, 1995), p. 83.

the cycle of suffering (*samsāra*) to repeat itself in an indefinite continuation.

From the specified elements listed in the long formulation, it is obvious that the principle of Dependent Origination has a physical as well as a psychological import in that it sets out to explain how suffering comes about and how it may be extinguished. It describes actions and the consequences of the actions received by the individual who is solely responsible for how he conducts his life. This principle, thus, obviously applies to human beings who possess a conscious mind. Though the long form apparently only applies to human beings because of the elements unique to the human condition, the short form provides us with a more general way of looking at reality. The short form confirms our intuition that in the universe, causation is a natural law that applies to both human beings as well as to all the other entities. And what applies to human beings also is observed to occur in other aspects of life, albeit in different manifestations. In this paper, I will not focus on how Dependent Origination plays out in the psychology of human life, but how it holds import for human-nature relationship that has

environmental consequences. Most of the discussion then will involve the abstract formula because it has a more encompassing outlook.

3. The Relevance of the law of Dependent Origination to the Issue of the Environment

Now, let us begin by examining whether the law of Dependent Origination holds any import for our concerns related to environmental well-being. As presented above, the natural law of Dependent Origination comes in two forms – one that clearly applies to human life, and another that is a more general formulation with a seemingly more universal outlook. Nevertheless, a number of scholars argue that the abstract formula cannot be taken as a universal law which can be applied to all phenomena, but rather an abbreviated formulation of the longer chain. One such scholar is Eviatar Shulman. In her study of Dependent Origination that is philological in nature, Shulman asserts that the principle only applies to the working of the mind and is not meant to refer to all phenomena. According to Shulman, to interpret this principle as the nature of reality is to inject meanings into it that were not present



in early Buddhism, but only surfaced in later discourses on the subject.⁷ Shulman argues that the abstract formula (the short form) refers exclusively to the mental conditioning in human beings. Her argument lies in how the Buddha presented the twelve links in connection with the short form:

In the *Dasa-bala-sutta* of the *Nidana Samyutta*, the Buddha says: “*Imasmim: sati idam hoti... yad idam: avijjāpaccayā...*” (When this is, that is...That is: depending on ignorance...). The abstract formula is followed by *yad idam*, followed by the standard articulation of the 12 links. If the *yad idam* meant “for example”

or “such as,” we could accept the view that the 12 links are a private case of a general principle of conditionality. But it clearly does not. What it does express is more akin to “that is,” or even more precisely “that which is.” Hence it should be clear that the abstract formula relates precisely and only

to the mutual conditioning of the 12 links.⁸

Thus, for Shulman it is not possible to make Dependent Origination a universal law of causation. I am not convinced by Shulman’s assertion that this example indicates a rejection of a universal application of the doctrine of Dependent Origination. The fact that the Buddha spoke directly of the human situation after he mentioned the abstract formula in the passage cited by Shulman does not necessarily mean that he exclusively had the 12 links in mind when he taught about Dependent Origination. What we do know is that the Buddha was concerned with human liberation as the ultimate goal; thus, it would make sense that he delved into the reality of human consciousness without beating around the bush with other matters. But this does not mean that if someone were to ask the Buddha whether the law of causation could be applied in any way to non-human phenomena that he would reply in the negative. In fact, in the canonical

⁷ Eviatar Shulman, “Early Meanings of Dependent-Origination”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 36.2 (2008): 299.

⁸ Eviatar Shulman, “Early Meanings of Dependent-Origination,” p. 307.

texts, the human situation was often explained with analogies derived from observable events nature.⁹ For example, in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, it is said that just as a seed sown in a field is able to sprout due to the factors of soil, nutrients, and moisture, human life comes about due to certain causes.

As when a seed is sown in a field

It grows depending on a pair of factors:

It requires both the soil's nutrients

And a steady supply of moisture:

Just so the aggregates and elements,

And these six bases of sensory contact,

Have come to be dependent on a cause;

With the cause's breakup they will cease.¹⁰

Another example from the same *Nikāya* shows how human spiritual achievements come about as a result of processes that parallel with

those in nature. Here the Buddha teaches that the virtuous actions done by a person repeatedly is like the fruits reaped from work done in the field in a continuous manner.¹¹ Through these examples, we can see that Buddha saw the presence of causal forces in both nature and human lives. Things occurred in nature as a result of various conditions. The same sort of process also took place in human mental and physical phenomena. The difference between what took place in human beings and that in nature is that the psychological aspect was absent from natural phenomena, while causal forces in human life were psycho-physical. Thus, it is reasonable to interpret the shorter form as depicting the universal causal law that can be applied to all objects and entities in the world. The longer form, which applies specifically to the human situation, has basis in this universal principle; it is aimed at helping human beings to achieve enlightenment, which is the ultimate purpose of the Buddha's teaching.

Many scholars who accept the law of Dependent Origination as a universal natural law quickly comes to

⁹ Pragati Sahni, **Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: a Virtues Approach** (London: Routledge, 2007), p.68 .

¹⁰ S.I.9.

¹¹ S.I.12.



the conclusion that this law necessarily implies that there is an “interdependence of all things,” and that this law has an ecological import. In the Buddhist environmental literature, one finds a great number of discussions adopting an interpretation of Dependent Origination as a principle of universal interconnectedness, interdependence, and mutual causality of all phenomena. The following quotations highlight the centrality of this principle in the Buddhist environmental discourse:

When one brings the vast collection of Buddhist teachings into conversation with environmental concerns, one basic teaching stands out above all others in its relevance. That is the Buddhist teaching of interdependence, which is also one of the most basic aspects of the Buddhist worldview, a view held in common by all forms of Buddhism. Simply put, interdependence means that nothing stands alone apart from the matrix of all else. In fact, interdependence is to date the most commonly invoked

concept in Buddhist environmental ethics.¹²

Simply put, interdependence means that nothing stands alone apart from the matrix of all else. Nothing is independent, and everything is interdependent with everything else. Logically, the proof of interdependence is that nothing can exist apart from the causes and conditions that give rise to it. But those causes and conditions are also dependent on other causes and conditions. Therefore, linear causality and isolating a single cause or an event gives way to a more web-like understanding of causality in which everything affects everything else in some way

¹² Arvind Kumar Singh, “Buddhism and Deep Ecology: An Appraisal” In the proceedings of an International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak on the theme “Buddhist Virtues in Socio Economic Development” UNDV Conference Volume published by ICUNDV & Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Thailand, held from May 12-14, 2011, p.421.

because everything is interconnected.¹³

Perhaps the most well-known example of the interpretation of Dependent Origination as radical interdependence of all phenomena is the American Buddhist Joanna Macy who asserts, “This doctrine has provided me ways to understand the intricate web of co-arising that links one being with all other beings.”¹⁴ For Macy, this principle does not imply that one thing simply serves as the cause for another thing to arise in a linear sense, but itself is affected due to the rising of that thing, thus resulting in a “reciprocal dynamic” of co-arising.¹⁵ This way of interpreting *paṭiccasamuppāda* has led Macy and others to translate the doctrine as “interdependent co-origination” or “interdependent co-arising.” This understanding also lends to the

depiction of a Buddhist worldview that supports a form of ecological holism, in which the natural world is seen as a single whole. In this whole, human beings, nature, and everything else are inseparable from one another. Joanna Macy asserts that when we are able to dismantle the ego-self and its dualistic tendencies, we are able to attain an expanded self that transcends “separatedness, alienation, and fragmentation.”¹⁶ With this encompassing sense of self, we can begin to identify with an eco-self in which there is no longer a need for the category of “I” versus “you” or “it” because all those boundaries and definitions have been destroyed.¹⁷

According to Macy, along with the expanded notion of selfhood is the extended notion of self-interest, in which the Amazon Basin is seen just as much a part of our self as our own arms and legs. Its protection, therefore, comes naturally and no moral exhortation or sermonizing is

¹³ Rita M. Gross, “Toward a Buddhist Environmental Ethic,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (1997): 337–338.

¹⁴ Quoted in Pragati Sahni, *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism*, p. 17.

¹⁵ Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal*, (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2007), p. 33.

¹⁶ Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self*, p. 150.

¹⁷ Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self*, p. 151.



necessary since the need for virtue has become irrelevant.¹⁸

Despite the popularity of this way of interpreting *paṭiccasamuppāda*, it has not found complete consensus, and many prominent Buddhist scholars have criticized this particular understanding of the principle. D.E. Cooper and S.P. James charge this interpretation as hyperbolic rhetoric.¹⁹ Other scholars say that these conclusions are not supported by the texts. Sahni states, “Though in early Buddhist literature it is admitted that the various factors of the self are dependently originated, it is not claimed that such origination confirms an interconnection with all other life or that a person arises in interaction with everything else.”²⁰ Neither does the principle say anything about a mutual conditioning rather than a mere universal application of causation to all phenomena as depicted by the short form. According

to the Buddhist historian Lambert Schmithausen, Dependent Origination is really “Origination in Dependence” because things arise due to various conditions, and surmises that the interdependence interpretation was influenced directly or indirectly by the Hua-yen/Kegon philosophy that developed later on in the Mahayana tradition. Schmithausen states:

The idea of a mutual dependence, inter-connectedness or interrelatedness, here and now, of all things and beings does not seem to be expressed in the canonical texts of Early Buddhism. They only teach that not only suffering and rebirth but all things and events, except Nirvana, arise in dependence on specific (complexes of) causes and conditions, which in their turn have also arisen in dependence on causes and conditions, without any primary, absolute cause at the beginning.²¹

The attractiveness of the interpretation of radical

¹⁸ Joanna Macy, **World as Lover, World as Self**, p. 157.

¹⁹ David E. Cooper and Simon P. James, **Buddhism, Virtue and Environment**, (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Pub Co., 2005), p. 111.

²⁰ Pragati Sahni, **Environmental Ethics in Buddhism**, p. 20.

²¹ Lambert Schmithausen, “The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics”, **Journal of Buddhist Ethics**, 4: 13-14.

interdependence is clear. It seems intuitive that we can move from interdependence to ecological awareness quite easily. We can make a statement such as, “Because all things in the universe are interdependent, we ought to take care of the environment.” However, I do agree with the charge that this interpretation is not supported by the canonical texts of early Buddhism. In addition, I question whether this interpretation of radical interdependence makes for a practical environmental spirituality. While the principle affirms that our actions have consequences for ourselves and for others, with the effects may be close to home or far reaching, I cannot fathom how any action on my part, no matter how big or small would have effects on every part of the world and even the entire universe. To stress this kind of significance of my action may be good motivation to do good. However, in actuality, it may place undue pressure on the individual if he truly understands himself in this radical way. If we adopt Macy’s eco-self, then whatever a person does in any part of the world that slightly harms nature, we ourselves must feel guilt as if we are actually committing the act. To be sure, we ought to be aware and

sensitive of our role in certain events taking place in other parts of the world. For example, our need to serve shark fin soup at our wedding banquet contributes to the hunting and killing of sharks to the point of near extinction is undeniable. However, a healthy environmental spirituality cannot be developed from excessive feelings of guilt. I myself do not believe Buddhism would support this kind of pressure on the individual. After all, the Buddha made provisions for unintentional harm as a basis for reducing the burden of guilt in the individual. Moreover, I question Macy’s assertion that an awareness of an eco-self will make moral exhortation irrelevant. Experience tells us that despite the requirement of health warnings on cigarette packs accompanied by gruesome photos, they do not always keep smokers from filling their lungs with harmful chemicals. Whether it is the small ego-self or the extended eco-self, self-harming can very well take place nonetheless.

In the above discussion, I showed that the two interpretations of Dependent Origination—either as pertaining exclusively to the human mind or a law of radical interdependence of all phenomena—



are not reflected in the canonical texts. In context of environmental well-being, the first interpretation virtually excludes any possibility for relying on Dependent Origination to develop an environmental spirituality. The second interpretation, on the other hand, takes interdependence to an unrealistic extreme. I believe we can arrive at a more reasonable interpretation of Dependent Origination that is not only faithful to the intention of the teaching but also has significance for the environment. This interpretation may be said to be the “middle way” between the two above mentioned interpretations. First, the principle serves as a law of causation for both human beings as well as the entire universe. In the human situation, the law is applied on a physical-psychological level while in nature, the law plays out on a physical level. Moreover, Dependent Origination is a natural law rather than an ethical law, meaning that it does not place any particular value on the entities, whether they are the causes and conditions, or the things that arise. The law simply highlights the process of how things come into existence as a result of various causes and conditions. That being said, when we contemplate on this natural law, we

see that it can lead us to realize truths that hold moral implications for ourselves and for our relationship with nature. The environmental implications appear when we see that as a universal natural law, it includes in its manifestations a connection between human actions and effects on the person internally as well as other people and beings externally. The Buddha on numerous occasions highlighted this connection in his sermons. For example, in the *Cakkavattasihanada Sutta*,²² the Buddha said that when people behaved degenerately, filling their actions with ignorance, anger, and hatred, what resulted were war, famine, epidemics and other calamities. However, when people changed their hearts and their way of living, nature was restored to balance, and humanity experienced prosperity and peace.

The claim of causal link between human thought and action and arisen consequences can also be seen in other suttas of the *Anguttara*. In one sermon, the Buddha asserted:

Bhikkhus, when kings are unrighteous, the royal vassals

²² D.III. 58-77.

become unrighteous. When the royal vassals are unrighteous, brahmins and householders become unrighteous. When Brahmins and householders are unrighteous, the people of the towns and countryside become unrighteous. When the people of the towns and countryside are unrighteous, the sun and moon proceed off course. When the sun and moon proceed off course, the constellations and the stars proceed off course. When the constellations and the stars proceed off course, day and night proceed off course . . . the months and fortnights proceed off course . . . the seasons and years proceed off course. When the seasons and years proceed off course, the winds blow off course and at random. When the winds blow off course and at random, the deities become upset. When the deities are upset, sufficient rain does not fall. When sufficient rain does not fall, the crops ripen irregularly. When people eat crops that ripen irregularly, they become short-lived, ugly, weak, and sickly.²³

Similarly, in another sermon of the same *Nikāya*, the Buddha warned:

When people are excited by illicit lust, overcome by unrighteous greed, afflicted by wrong Dhamma...They take up weapons and slay one another resulting in massive human deaths; sufficient rain does not fall leading to famine and lack of grains; wild spirits are let loose harming human lives.²⁴

The examples cited above demonstrate that the Buddha indeed saw a real connection between human action and effects that arose in nature. Even without taking the principle of Dependent Origination as a theory of radical interdependence of all phenomena, that is *everything* depends on everything else, we can still affirm an intimate connection between beings in the world.

4. The Paradigm of Human-Nature Relationship of Responsibility and Accountability

When the law of Dependent Origination is seen as a universal law of causality, it can certainly help us to envision a way that human beings ought to enter into relationship with

²³ A.II.74.

²⁴ A.I.159-160.



nature that is congruent with this doctrine. In these paragraphs, I would like to propose the paradigm of responsibility and accountability as a meaningful way to envision human-nature relationship. Thus, relationship between human beings and nature has to do not so much with the way human beings and nature *are* ontologically, but has more to do with how human beings and nature *act* towards one another in concrete happenings that take place in every moment. Realization of this truth helps us to envision a human-nature relationship that is based on responsibility and accountability. Human beings, by virtue of our special status of having consciousness and capable of achieving liberation, can affect the process of giving rise to or extinguishing suffering, and consequently, have a special role in the world. Human beings must understand that our actions affect not only ourselves but others since one action does not necessarily give rise to a single effect, but can result in multiple effects. Our environmental spirituality thus arises from the understanding that the causal law is applicable within the individual, interpersonally, and between us and nature. This understanding tells us

that we cannot live in isolation of others, but are subjected to the common universal causal law where our actions, thoughts, and intentions must be taken into account.

The environmental spirituality that results from this interpretation of Dependent Origination is not one of nonchalance on the one end, and undue burden on the other extreme. Rather, it is a clear-minded spirituality that comes from realization that human beings and nature are companions in *samsaric* life in which both are bound together in the natural process of birth, old age, suffering, and death. Responsibility towards nature, therefore, is the task entrusted to all people—the lay folks, the religious, as well as the political leaders. The Buddha indeed taught that actions of influential individuals gave rise to things in the community; and actions of humanity influenced the outcome in nature. Thus, everyone is expected to be aware of the people and things that make up our relational life. In the *Sigalovada Sutta*,²⁵ the Buddha advised a young householder in great details on his duties on his parents, his wife, his

²⁵ D.III.180.

children, his servants, his friends and associates, as well as other important figures such as teachers, ascetics and brahmins. Though there is no specific mention of his responsibility towards nature in this instance, when we consider this *sutta* along with the other examples cited above, we are able to conclude that there is tangible effects on nature due to human actions. Nature could reasonably be added to the list of relationships that we must enter into and diligently maintain. Thus, human beings, at the very least, bear indirect duty to nature to promote its well-being. Our reflection on Dependent Origination, therefore, can lead us to understand our relationship with nature as that of responsibility and accountability. Cooper and James assert that to be responsible is to exercise readiness and eagerness to take on one's moral responsibilities rather than accepting them passively as something that one is fated to do.²⁶

Displaying responsibility and accountability to each other is a natural part of seeing each other as companions on a journey where the

final destination is liberation from suffering for all sentient creatures. The recognition of this companionship is essential in forming an internal disposition that subsequently is demonstrated in concrete actions and activities that give rise to positive effects instead of negative ones. Phra Prayudh Payutto writes, "Since we must be bound to the same natural law we are friends who share in suffering and joy of one another. Since we are friends who share in both suffering and joy of one another we should help and support one another rather than persecute one another."²⁷

The principle of Dependent Origination, thus presents us with a vision of the human community not as antagonists of nature, blindly doing things without awareness of how these actions may affect ourselves and others, but always conscious that all effects arise due to various causes and conditions. Human suffering comes from causes that take place in our very own mind. We can also be the source of the conditions that lead to suffering of other human beings and of the destruction of nature. Awareness

²⁶ David E. Cooper and Simon P. James, **Buddhism, Virtue and Environment**, p.104.

²⁷ Phra Prayudh Payutto, **คนไทยกับป่า**, (Bangkok: Karomwichakan, 2010), p. 21.



of this necessarily demands awareness of responsibility and accountability. This is an important foundation for embarking on the path that leads human beings to act more thoughtfully and virtuously as to ensure a harmonious human-nature relationship.

5. Relationship of Responsibility and Accountability Nourished by Virtues

Understanding of our responsibility and accountability towards nature as superficial knowledge alone is not sufficient for positive outcomes in human-nature relationship. A vision remains simply a dream and not reality when it is not supplemented by concrete actions for it to be realized. The Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha is practically useless if there were no Noble Eightfold Path to complement it. A harmonious human-nature relationship characterized by responsibility is enhanced when the individual strives for mental and spiritual development leading to inner self transformation, which subsequently manifests itself in the exercising of the various virtues that build a more positive human-nature

relationship. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into details about how to carry out this mental and spiritual development, it can be said that the course of self cultivation would not be much different from how one develops oneself in the overall Buddhist pedagogy. The only possible difference is that one intentionally includes nature in view alongside with all the other things that make up one's relational life so that when one thinks and acts, these thoughts and actions are directed positively to nature as well as to all who may be affected by them.

In our paradigm of relationship of responsibility and accountability, two of the most pertinent virtues that ought to be visible in the actions and activities of the cultivated person are moderation and contentment. Moderation and contentment serve as the antidote for the greed that is detrimental to one's quest for liberation. There is a plethora of texts in the Buddhist canon that exhorts the individual to exercise self-discipline and restraint in behavior, resisting temptation and indulgence in the senses. The *Aggañña Sutta* of the

*Dīgha Nikāya*²⁸ tells a fanciful tale of the beginning of the world where as (pre)human beings went through moral degeneration, filling their hearts with greed, hatred, and envy, human lives became less and less joyful.²⁹ In the beginning, the beings were luminous and weightless creatures floating about space in pure delight. However, as time passed, on earth, there appeared a sweet and savory substance that piqued the curiosity and interest of the beings. They not only ate the substance, but due to greed seeping in, they ate it voraciously which led to its eventual depletion. In the meanwhile, due to endlessly feeding on the earth substance, the weightless beings eventually would not only become coarse individuals with a particular shape, but also lose their radiance. The story then goes on to tell how the natural world and human society continue to evolve in unwholesome

manners as a result of the depraved actions of humanity. This tale clearly shows that there is a causal connection between human virtuousness and the state of the natural world. The lack of moderation, thus, can be seen to be a cause for great detrimental effects not only to the surrounding environment, but also to the state of one's own spiritual well-being. While Buddhism does not advocate abject poverty, the Buddha indeed taught that excessive dependence on material things was a hindrance towards spiritual progress. For the Buddha, a life that led to true happiness was not one controlled by sense desires, but rather a life of simplicity guided by wisdom and moral virtues.

Moderation is a virtue when it goes hand in hand with contentment (*Santutthi*), which Buddhism greatly advocates. In the *Suttas*, time and time again the Buddha reminded the monks to be content with simple things and avoid desire of many things. In the *Aṅguttara*, the Buddha says “I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome qualities to arise and arisen unwholesome

²⁸ D.III. 80-98.

²⁹ Although the original intention of the Buddha in telling this story to the Brahmins is to critique the caste system as falsely deemed to be divinely ordained, the story obviously has valuable implications for human-nature relationship as well.



qualities to decline as contentment.³⁰ In the same collection of discourses, the Buddha extols the monk who is content with whatever robe, alms food, and lodging he receives as “diligent, clearly comprehending and ever mindful, is said to be standing in an ancient, primal noble lineage.”³¹ As new robes are received, the old ones are not tossed away but made use of as coverlets. Likewise, the old cover-sheets are turned into floor-sheets, the old floor-sheets become foot-towels, the old foot-towels are used as dusters, and old dusters become floor-spreads.³² Thus, moderation is not only seen in how one obtains new things, but also demonstrated in how old things continue to be put to good use. Contentment is opposed to non-contentment and craving (*tanhā*) which focuses on fulfilling one’s needs with limited things. While human craving leads us to think that more material possessions and greater material wealth is desirable, Buddhism teaches us that contentment is the

“greatest riches”³³ whereas destruction of all cravings means overcoming all suffering.³⁴

One can immediately see how moderation and contentment advocated by Buddhism would have profound effect on human-nature relationship and environmental well-being. By setting limits on our lifestyle, focusing on what we truly need rather than what we like or what we want, consumerism, and subsequently commodity production, is reduced. This leads to less strain on natural resources and results in improved ecological equilibrium. Moderation and contentment also means true appreciation of the thing that one already possesses and intends to use it in the most meaningful way possible. Oftentimes, people discard a perfectly good mobile phone or tablet that they have been using simply because there is a new model out on the market that supposedly will bring about more satisfaction to the consumer. Such behavior is indicative of not appreciating the thing that one already possesses and how one’s life is being well-served by it. Exercising

³⁰ A.I. 13.

³¹ A.II. 27-29.

³² V.II. 291.

³³ Dp.204.

³⁴ Dp.21.

moderation and having contentment with respect to the environment, is ultimately a reflection of a person's sense of responsibility towards nature. It reflects our awareness of the limited natural resources available for human use. It also reflects our understanding that wanting more and owning more means placing unnecessary strains on nature. And it reflects our understanding that our behavior becomes the condition that gives rise to certain phenomena that take place in the world in accordance with the teaching of Dependent Origination. Thus, any spirituality that advocates simple living and contentment rather than constant striving for material possessions clearly reflect a sense of responsibility and are naturally beneficial towards environmental well-being. With the state of the natural environment as it is, there is a great need at this time for simplicity and contentment on the part of human beings.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to propose a paradigm of human-nature relationship characterized by human responsibility and accountability based on my interpretation of the doctrine of

Dependent Origination. I tried to show that while Dependent Origination in its long form only applied to the human condition, the abstract form has a universal application, and in particular has an environmental import. The environmental import does not lie in the claim of radical interdependence of all phenomena, but in the fact that this law of causality pertains to human-human and human-nature relationships. Contemplation on this law of causality leads us to recognize that human thoughts and actions do lead to certain effects arising in nature that can either be positive or negative. Realization of this reality, therefore, makes us aware that a healthy human-nature relationship includes the dimension of responsibility and accountability. I further proposed the virtues of moderation and contentment, which when exercised diligently and conscientiously, would positively reinforce this relationship and help promote environmental well-being. The development and exercise of virtues such as these are necessary because although the vision of a relationship characterized by responsibility is an admirable one, it cannot be realized without the necessary ethical actions that make this vision a reality. One may express



concern as to why in this relationship, human beings seem to bear the brunt of the responsibility while nature seems to be the beneficiary of human efforts. The answer is clear and simple. Human beings are entrusted with the responsibility because we are gifted with mental consciousness and the opportunity for self cultivation and transformation. Taking responsibility and holding ourselves accountable to our actions is both a privilege and a duty by virtue of our status in the world. Fulfilling this duty not only benefits others but also brings about spiritual progress for ourselves. Thus, living out this relationship of responsibility and accountability ought not be seen as an undue burden but a natural part of being human and having to live out our relational life in the most positive ways possible. Lastly, though the focus of this paper is the doctrine of Dependent Origination, I do not think that this teaching alone is sufficient for a full Buddhist environmental spirituality. Indeed, a well-rounded and meaningful Buddhist environmental spirituality must also be informed by other essential Buddhist teachings that help us to conceive of human-nature relationship in other ways, as well as how to make this relationship

harmonious and productive.³⁵ Nonetheless, in any reflection on Buddhist environmental spirituality, it would be severely lacking if the doctrine of Dependent Origination were left out of consideration.

Abbreviations

A	<i>Aṅguttara</i>
D	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
Dp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
M	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
S	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
V	<i>Vinaya</i>

³⁵ Other essential Buddhist teachings such as the Three Marks of Existence, the principle of *kamma*, and the teaching of *saṃsāra* are also important resources for reflecting on human-nature relationship.

References

- Arvind Kumar Singh. **Buddhism and Deep Ecology: An Appraisal**. In the proceedings of an International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak on the theme, 2011.
- Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.). **The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya**. 2nd edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003.
- Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.). **The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Complete Translation of the Anguttara Nikāya**. annotated edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012.
- Bhikkhu Nanamoli (trans.). **The Middle Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya**. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995.
- David Edward Cooper and Simon P. James. **Buddhism, Virtue and Environment**. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Pub Co, 2005.
- De Silva, Padmasiri. “Buddhism, the Environment and Human Future” In Padmasiri De Silver (Ed.). **Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis**, (2009): pp. 11-38. Retrieved from <http://www.undv.org/vesak2011/book/enviromental.pdf#page=27>.
- Eviatar Shulman. Early Meanings of Dependent-Origination. **Journal of Indian Philosophy**. Vol.36 (2). (2008): pp. 297–317.
- Joanna Macy. **World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal**. Revised edition. Berkeley, Calif: Parallax Press, 2007.
- Lambert Schmithausen. The Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics. **Journal of Buddhist Ethics**. Vol.4, (1997): pp. 1–74.
- Malalasekera, G. P. “The Status of the Individual in Theravada Buddhism.” **Philosophy East and West XIV**, no. 2, (1964): pp. 145–156.
- Oldenberg, H. et al. (Eds). **Vinaya Piṭaka**. Vol. IV. PTS, 1879-1883.
- Phra Prayudh Payutto. **Buddhadhamma**. Albany: Suny Press, 1995.
- _____. **Thai People and Forest (คนไทยกับป่า)**. Bangkok: Karomwichakan. 2010.
- Pragati Sahni. **Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: a Virtues Approach**. London ; New York: Routledge, 2007.



Rita M Gross. **Toward a Buddhist Environmental Ethic.** *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol.65, (1997): pp.333–353.

Walshe, Maurice (trans.). **The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya.** Second edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995.

