

## Ecological Concern in the Therāvāda Buddhist Robe

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### Abstract

This paper analyses the whole set of the Therāvāda Buddhist robe with the objective to ascertain how it adheres to the Buddhist principle of wholesome roots or kuśala mūla and thus has ecological value and also to bring in light the cosmic principle of harmonious coexistence of the elements of the universe and the mutual relationship between the whole and the parts through a creative lens towards the aesthetic aspect of the robe the design of which is made under the model of rice fields. The work explains kuśala mūla in contrast to akuśala mūla to understand the efficacy of the wholesome roots in sustainable existence. In the discussion, the paper gives an account of the total set of the robe used by the Therāvādi monks and the nuns along with its development from robe-scavenge to robe offering ceremony referring to the suttas regarding the use and backdrop to the offering of the robes with a brief portrayal of robe offering ceremony. Finally, it concludes that so far as the design, organisation, and use are concerned, the robe is a symbol of the Buddhist care for nature.

**Keywords:** Ecology, Therāvāda Buddhist robe, kuśala mūla, robe offering ceremony, Buddhist ecological concern

### Introduction

Ecology is the study of organisms, the environment and the relationship among organisms themselves and between organisms and the environment. Ecology studies at various levels, viz., organism, population, community, biosphere, and ecosystem. The Buddha's concern for ecology was more than the view of considering all the living beings in their natural diversity as mere useful resources for humans. He considered all forms of life as important as humans. For him, respecting other beings, regardless of their usefulness to human life, helps one live a meaningful life. Thus the ecological concern found in Buddhism is deep against the shallow one.<sup>1</sup> A minute study of the Buddha's major doctrines like Four Noble Truth, Aṣṭāṅgika Mārga, Paṭiccasamuppāda, etc., and the ethical principles like Brahmavihāra and Akuśala/Kuśala Mūla will reveal that the Buddha's approach towards life is very holistic. The prescription of śīlas (pancaśīla, astaśīla, and daśaśīla) and potimokkha rules for the monks and nuns are all meant to care for "other" elements of nature and to grow together with all the life forms and other objects of the world. Even the robes of the monks and nuns, the main theme of this paper, exhibit the Buddha's concern for the environment.

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<sup>1</sup> The human approach to ecology may be classified into two categories: deep and shallow. The shallow approach considers all the living beings in their natural diversity as the resources useful for humans. In this view, the living beings are not perceived in and of themselves. Sustenance of our way of life is the basic element of democratic society no matter how much harm it causes to other forms of life. On the other hand, the deep view of ecology, also called deep ethology, believes that respecting other lives, irrespective of their potential usefulness to human life, and through this act of respect and nurturance, our lives get enriched and more meaningful (Tobias, 1998).

Monks and nuns are not allowed to wear a robe made of un-cut brand-new cloth. The robes they use are sewn with cut pieces of clothes. A minute study of the design, the backdrop, and the history of the robe display how it is a symbolic representation of the Buddhist principle of kuśala mūla and the Buddha's ecological concern.

### **Three wholesome roots (kuśala mūla) in sustainable existence**

The Buddha categorises human actions based on the intention or motivation (*cetanā*) from which it springs up (AN 3:69). If a person performs an action out of greed, hatred, and delusion, his action is considered to be unwholesome or unskillful. On the other hand, if he performs the action out of love, detachment, and wisdom, his action is a wholesome one or skillful. Greed, hatred, and delusion are known as the 'three evil roots' or *akuśala mūla*<sup>2</sup> (in Pali), while love, detachment, and wisdom as 'three wholesome roots' or *kuśala mūla*. *Kuśala mūla* is the root of goodness, viz., detachment (*alobha*), absence of hatred (*adoṣa*), and non-delusion or absence of ignorance (*amoha*), i.e., wisdom. Detachment and non-hatred lead to the formation of generosity and loving-kindness respectively. Non-delusion means knowing and understanding the scriptures and the dhamma, knowledge of insight, path, and fruition. To know how the three skillful roots are useful in sustainable existence, let's understand the mire of unskillful roots.

Buddhism assiduously advocates the merits of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion for living a meaningful life at the societal level and for the sustenance of the environment as a whole. Greed, hatred, and delusion, being the three evil roots, are always the sources of negative mental states. Greed leads one to craving, self-indulgence, desire for wealth and fame, attachment, and lust. This again leads the individual to indulge in unwholesome deeds like stealing, hoarding things, sexual misconduct, etc. It prevents one from practicing letting go. Hatred, which spreads like poison, manifests as anger, vengefulness, resentment, dislike, grudge, and irritability. The offensive deeds like harsh speech, lying, slandering speech, ill-will, and killing spring from hatred. Delusion, another name for ignorance, generates distasteful deeds like wrong views and frivolous talks. Ignorance is not, however, not having an idea about a particular thing. It means unawareness about the true nature of life and nature, ignorance about the reality of interrelatedness of the elements of the universe. Ignorance is being unaware of our existence amidst various other elements of the universe and is being unaware of our existence as just a component as other beings. Delusion is said to be the fundamental of all evil roots<sup>3</sup>, for it precedes the rests. The chain goes like this— under the spell of ignorance, we look for the satisfaction of our desires through the acquisition and possession of material things, power, and name and fame. In this drive, greed remains the powerful force. Greed driven, we get attached to our objects of desire and hate those that come in our way. This creates a rift between self and other. It goes against the truth of the cosmos that exists as a whole of interconnected parts. Now the antidotes to these evil roots are detachment, non-hatred or love, and non-delusion or knowledge. With the dawn of knowledge, greed loses its strength, for the individuals learn that what they think to be theirs is not actually theirs. From this, follows detachment and finally, the self-other divide ceases to exist.

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<sup>2</sup> On the unskillfulness of greed, hatred, and delusion, the Dhammapada (18:251) says, "There is no fire like lust; there is no grip like hatred; there is no net like delusion; there is no river like craving."

<sup>3</sup> Dhammapada (18:243) says, "A worst taint than these is ignorance, the worst of all taints. Destroy this one taint and become taintless, O monks!"

## Therāvāda Buddhist robe: its history from cloth scavenge to kathina ceremony

The whole set of the robe consists of several parts. It is believed that the robes worn by Therāvāda monks and nuns today have come unchanged from the original robes of the Buddha's time. Basically, both monks and nuns wear three parts robes. They are *uttarāsaṅga* (outer robe), *antaravāsaka* (undergarment), and *saṅghāti* (upper robe). The *uttarāsaṅga* is the outer robe which is a large rectangle shape, about 6 by 9 feet.<sup>4</sup> It is generally wrapped to cover the left shoulder leaving the right shoulder and arm bare. However, when the monks go out of the monasteries, they wrap the robe covering both their shoulders. This style of wearing is called *parimandal*. The *antaravāsaka* is wrapped around the waist like a sarong, covering the body from waist to knees. It is worn under the *uttarāsaṅga*. The *saṅghāti* is an extra robe that can be folded and draped over the shoulder. Apart from these basic three parts robes, the nuns wear two more parts. They are *samkacchikā* and *udakasatikā*. *Samkacchikā* is worn under the *uttarāsaṅga* and *udakasatikā* is a bathing cloth that they carry with them.

Initially, the Buddha advised the monks and nuns to make their robes of the castoff clothes. For the Buddha, the clothes chewed by rats, charred by fire, stained by childbirth or menstrual blood, or used as a mantle to wrap the corpse before cremation are “pure” clothes. He asked the monks to scavenge cloth from rubbish heaps and cremation grounds and to use after washing them. Thus cloth, for monks, was not something to show off; it was meant just to cover their bodies. This cloth-scavenge (Mv<sup>5</sup>, VIII, 4.1) continued until the Buddha accepted the donation of a robe from his physician, Jivaka. It is a story of twenty years after the inception of the Buddhist Sangha. It is said that Jivaka also requested the Buddha to allow the monastics to receive robes donated by the laities. However, the Buddha allowed only those monks to receive robes who were endowed with five certain qualities (Mv, VIII, 5.1)<sup>6</sup>. Today, offering robes to the monks is a great ceremony in Therāvāda tradition. It is called *Kaṭhin*<sup>7</sup> *Chīvar Dana* or Kathina ceremony (robe offering ceremony)<sup>8</sup>. There is an anecdote behind this ceremony. Vinaya Pitaka accounts for the historical

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<sup>4</sup> The information about the whole set of the robe is gathered by the author from Gyanowada Bhikkhu of Margherita Buddha Vihar.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout the article, *Mahāvāgga* will be abbreviated as Mv.

<sup>6</sup> The Buddha allowed those monks to receive robes who are not biased with the bias of desire, not biased with the bias of aversion, not biased with the bias of delusion, not biased with the bias of fear, and who knows what has and has not been received.

<sup>7</sup> The word *Kaṭhina* literally means hard. It is the stock of cotton cloth provided by the faithful to be made up into robes for the use of the Sangha during the ensuing year. The whole of this cotton cloth must be dyed, sewn together and made into robes, and then formally declared to be available for immediate distribution— all on one and the same day. This practice can be seen even today among the Tai Buddhist communities of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (Sarma, 2022). The object of this was that the Sangha, or at least a minimum number of the Sangha, being able to be present throughout, so that there would be less chance of any mistake by which what was intended equally for all might come to be unequally divided among a few. All the members who have kept their *Vāssa* (*Vassāvāsa*) within the limits of the district within which the particular Sangha lives and who have taken part in the *Pavarana* are entitled to share in the distribution (Mv, Ch. VII). Also see Davids, T. W. Rhys & Oldenberg, H., 1882, p.149.

<sup>8</sup> *Kaṭhin Chīvar Dāna Utsav* or the Kathina ceremony or robe offering ceremony is an important religious festival of the Theravada Buddhists. It is celebrated from the day of *Pavarana* till the next

background of the Kathina ceremony (Mv, Ch. VII)<sup>9</sup>. Once the Buddha was staying at Sāvatti, in the Jetāvana, Anāthapiṇḍika's Grove. At that time about thirty Bhikkhus proceeded towards Sāvatti to visit the Buddha. But before they reached Sāvatti, Vāssa (rainy retreat) arrived and hence they halted at Saketa. They spent the period of Vāssa in discomfort thinking that they could not meet the Blessed One even though he was just six leagues away from the place where they halted. After three months, when the Bhikkhus had completed their retreat and had observed their Pavarana, they resumed their journey to Sāvatti. As it was raining, the waters gathered, and the swamps formed, their robes were all drenched, and they were exhausted. And when they arrived at Sāvatti, the Buddha asked them about their retreat and noticed their worn-out robes. Then, as the legend goes, the Buddha declared this robe offering ceremony. Then, the Buddha permitted them to celebrate the Kathina ceremony, albeit with certain conditions.

### **Ecological essence of the robe**

Monks and nuns are instructed to live with a minimum of possessions like two sets of robes, a begging bowl, a cloth belt, a needle and thread, a razor for shaving the head, and other things of bare necessity. The Buddha's chief concern was to show humankind a humble path of leading a content life. Robe also sends out this message. The use of the robe and the way it is made reflect the values that the Buddha wanted humankind to cultivate. Two such values that can be said to be replicated in the robe are frugality and aestheticism in harmonious co-existence (Sarma, 2018). The frugality in the robe complies with the Buddhist principle of living a simple life with minimum need where contentment is acclaimed to be a highly desirable virtue and wastefulness a seriously deplorable quality. A few stories are found in the Buddhist scriptures that tell about the importance of these virtues. One such story is that of Ananda's explanation (Vin<sup>10</sup> II, 291) to King Udena about the thrifty economic use of robes by the monk. When new robes are received the old upper robes are used as outer robes, old outer robes as undergarments, old undergarments as cover-sheets, old cover-sheets as floor-sheets, old floor-sheets as foot-towels, and old foot-towels are kneaded with clay and used to repair cracked floors and walls. The message behind it is we should take just what we need, not more. When people take from nature more than what they need, they transgress the unwritten rule of brotherhood that is already there in nature until humans break it. They forget the fact that others have the same right over nature as they have. It is simply gratifying selfish desires where greed, one of the three evil roots, works as the vital force. Hence, giving up the shares of others while taking for oneself is highly appreciable. It enlightens how to dispel greed by limiting the desire to just what is needed. When a person restricts his needs to the bare necessities only, he will leave resources for his fellows. A similar teaching is found in other scriptures like Isha Upanishad (1) which says, "Īśā vāsymidaṁ sarvaṁ yat kinca yagatyāṁ jagat// tena tyaktena bhunjithā mā ḡrdhaḥ kasyasvid dhanam//". Meaning, all this is for habitation by the Lord, whatsoever is individual universe of movement in the universal motion. By that renounced thou shouldst enjoy; lust not after any man's possession.<sup>11</sup> An individual's care for others

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full moon day, i.e., for one month long (usually in October-November). It is also one of the largest annual festivals in the Theravada tradition across the world in which the followers assemble in vihārs or monasteries and celebrate the day by offering robes, alms, and gifts to the Monastic Sangha.

<sup>9</sup> Also see Davids, T. W. Rhys & Oldenberg, H., 1882, pp. 146-147.

<sup>10</sup> Vinaya Pitaka is abbreviated as Vin.

<sup>11</sup> Aurobindo, S., Isha Upanishad, p. 5

intensifies as he does not covet the wealth of others greedily. He would understand that others too need the same as what he does. This act of using things of nature miserly with a generous sense of sharing prevents him from creating two worlds— self and the other, as said before.

Again, the organisation in the design of the robe, i.e., the way the pieces of clothes are stitched to make the complete robe, unfolds its aestheticism in the harmonious co-existence of the parts. The pieces of the clothes, which make the robe, are not sewn abruptly. Rather they are stitched in a very organized way. Noticeably, the inner design of the robe resembles strips, lines, embankments, and the squares of the fields. It looks like rice fields. The design reveals the Buddha's admiration for nature and its beauty. As per the legend, there is a story regarding how the design of the robe came into being. Once the Buddha was traveling with his disciple Ananda to Dakkhinagiri where he saw the fields of Magadha divided into rectangles, divided into rows, divided by dikes, and divided by intersections. The Buddha was enchanted by the majesty and elegance of the fields. Then he thought of making the robe modeled after the fields of Magadha (Mv, VIII, 12.1). He asked Ananda to design robes under the model of these fields and Ananda agreed to do so. Thus it can be said that the Therāvāda Buddhist robe the use of which displays the Buddha's concern for ecology owes its design to nature itself.

### **Concluding remarks**

Avaricious use of the resources leads to frustration at the individual level as human demand does not have any end. It, in turn, leads to ecological crisis and its associated problems in the social, cultural, political, and economic spheres. When each of us forms a vital component of the life of universe itself, we along with other beings are the parts of an organized whole wherefrom we derive our meaning. Apart from the others, we are nothing. Interconnectedness is the very essence of existence where avoiding greed, hatred, and delusion, and cultivating the trait of generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom is the skillful tool. In one sense, a robe can be said to be an institution of the practice of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. For it silently teaches not to long for the wealth of others and helps practice non-hatred by understanding the true nature of things. Again, the truth that our whole lot is associated with everything else is revealed in the design of the robe when the cut pieces of clothes maintain a mutual coherence to make a robe.

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