




Special Focus: Buddhism in the Anthropocene

Theravada Buddhism in the Anthropocene: The Role of the Radical Virtuosi

Prabhath Sirisena 
University of Colombo

This autoethnographic study of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka identifies an ecological ethic that can address the challenges posed by the Anthropocene, based on the praxis of a unique community: the radical forest-dwelling (*araññavāsi*) virtuosi, a distinct group within the Sri Lankan monastic Sangha. It discusses how Buddhist teachings, when put into practice, reveal an effective eco-ethic that might not be immediately apparent when one merely analyses the texts. Such a praxis is marked by an uncompromising love for fellow beings in shared habitats, and is evidently effective enough to trust with the protection of delicate ecosystems in a biodiversity hotspot. Emerging from arguably the most rigorous form of Buddhist monastic practice, this eco-ethic might not be easily attainable or sustainable for lay people. Yet, it reveals a range of possibilities wherein an alternative worldview can be adopted, and in doing so, makes a distinctive contribution to Buddhist environmentalism.

Keywords: Theravada Buddhism; Buddhist Ethics; Environmental Ethics; Anthropocene; Sri Lanka

The Ceylon ironwood trees stand tall like giants in the forest. They are in bloom, but I only know this from the soft, white petals that float down through the canopy. These trees have been standing tall here for hundreds of years, in a forest grove that possibly dates back to the time when the first Buddhist monasteries were established in Sri Lanka. A rock inscription in a nearby cave declares that a pleasure garden of a king was converted to a monastery here two millennia ago. Did these trees witness that change, I wonder, from a place for indulging in sensual pleasures to one that facilitates sense restraint?

I come around a bend in the narrow footpath through the forest and notice a great migration underway: a thick column of black ants, stretching out as far as one can see before it disappears into the undergrowth at both ends. I know that a monk has passed this way before me, for there are small twigs laid carefully alongside the ant column where it shares our path, alerting passers-by to be mindful of other beings using it.

On the way back, I witness a great massacre. The visiting hours, during which lay people can explore the monastery, bring eyes that are not as mindful, feet that are not as gentle. Thousands of ants lie dead along the footpath, crushed under the feet of lay Buddhists.¹

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Evaluating a wide selection of contributions to the field of Buddhism and ecology, Donald Swearer (2006: 124–25) proposes a five-fold taxonomy of Buddhist eco-philosophical positions: (1) eco-apologists, who hold that a Buddhist eco-ethic extends naturally from the “Buddhist worldview;”² (2) eco-critics,

¹ This and other such vignettes in this article are recollections of my past experiences made at the time of this writing. Events occurred as presented in them, but names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

who do not see the Buddhist worldview harmonizing with an eco-ethic; (3) eco-constructivists, who maintain that one can construct a Buddhist eco-ethic, though this is not co-terminus with the Buddhist worldview; (4) eco-ethicists, who draw an eco-ethic from Buddhist ethics rather than the Buddhist worldview; and (5), eco-contextualists, who define an effective eco-ethic as one based on each context and situation.³ An analysis of these positions reveals that some of them tend to place great emphasis on doctrine, derived primarily from how the Buddhist texts are interpreted by their proponents rather than how they are put into practice by Buddhists. Some eco-apologists, for example, ascribe an ecological significance to seminal Buddhist doctrines such as *paticcasamuppāda* (dependent co-arising) and *anattā* (not-self) in ways that seem to transcend their conventional religious confines, especially in Theravada Buddhism. Eco-critics, on the other hand, fail to see how the soteriological focus of early Buddhist teachings would leave the practitioner any room to accommodate a worldly concern for the environment. According to them, the ideal Buddhist seeks the end of existence and the world,⁴ and at most can only be equanimous to the happenings of the “world outside.” The other three positions appear less dogmatic and seem to find more ready support in actual Buddhist practice, but one may question their authenticity: it is not always obvious as to what extent, and in what sense, they are based on Buddhist teachings rather than modern sensibilities (Harris 2000).

What is not in question, however, is the importance of distinguishing a Buddhist ecological ethic that would help the religious tradition formulate a basis to answer the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. As argued by Stephen Gardiner (2011: 20), the Anthropocene can be seen primarily as an ethical failure. While dominant discourses about the nature of climate change tend to be scientific and economic, he views the deepest challenge as an ethical one, because “we cannot get very far in discussing why climate change is a problem without invoking ethical considerations.” He further points out that, at a more practical level, making the necessary policy decisions to deal with climate change would involve grappling with ethical questions. If the Buddhist teachings are to remain relevant in the worldly sense in these troubled times,⁵ the definition of an effective Buddhist eco-ethic is imperative.

The aim of this autoethnographic study of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka is to discuss how one may identify such an ethical foundation based on the praxis of a unique community: the forest-dwelling (*araññavāsī*) “radical virtuosī” (Silber 1981: 165), a distinct group within the monastic Sangha “adhering to a more radical renunciation, entailing a greater disconnection from the lay world”. This sets them apart from the conventional village-dwelling (*gāmaavāsī*) Sangha, referred to as the “institutionalized virtuosī” by Ilana Silber. These forest monastics are few in number, yet wield a disproportionately significant influence over how Buddhism is conceived in contemporary Sri Lanka, personifying an ideal against which other ways of Buddhist practice are measured. In the eyes of lay Buddhists, the forest monastics’ strict adherence to the Vinaya (Buddhist monastic code) positions them “as close as it is possible to get to acting out in daily life the spiritual goal of attaining *Nibbāna*” (Gombrich 2006: 89). Thus, we find the forest monastics’ relationship with the natural environment standing as the ultimate practical expression of any foundation for an eco-ethic

² Swearer (2001: 226) considers this worldview “holistic”—one that sees the world as “conjoined on four levels: existentially, morally, cosmologically, and ontologically.”

³ The proponents of these positions include scholars as well as lay and monastic practitioners of various Buddhist traditions.

⁴ In early Buddhism, the world is essentially the world of subjective experience, and the realization of *nibbāna* is, among other things, the end of this subjective world (e.g., *Loka-sutta*, SN 12.44 at SN II 74). Theravada Buddhism seems to have a more substantialist interpretation of the world in which it gets an objective existence (as expounded in the commentarial *Abhidhamma*) but the general attitude of detachment (*viveka*) and dispassion (*virāga*) towards the world is retained. One could argue that it is precisely the gradual abandonment of this worldview—in preference for a prosperity theology based on the karma theory—that eventually made Buddhism an expansive religious and political system connected with agricultural expansion, resource extraction, deforestation, and urbanization, as observed by Johan Elverskog (2020).

⁵ As indicated by the declaration that the Buddha’s teachings are beneficial here and now even for those who are sceptical of his soteriology (e.g., *Kālāma-sutta*, AN 3.65 at AN I 188)

that might be inherent to Theravada Buddhism, adding a complementary dimension to the current discourse on “Buddhist environmentalism” (Clippard 2011; Darlington 2018).

The Elusive Radical Virtuosi

The early Buddhist texts of the Theravada tradition record the Buddha repeatedly exhorting his followers to meditate, pointing out, “there are these roots of trees, these empty huts.”⁶ The texts also claim that many hundreds of monastics followed this advice successfully.⁷ The Theravada commentarial literature also names numerous disciples who have supposedly heeded this call during later centuries. Quite oblivious to the scepticism expressed in some academic quarters about the historicity and practicality of this Buddhist ascetic ideal (e.g., Schopen 2004), a small number of present-day Theravadins continue to place faith in the ancient texts, and have made it their life’s mission to seek out the roots of trees and empty huts in which to meditate. They are the forest-dwelling radical virtuosi.

Despite the long history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, contemporary forest monasticism is not an uninterrupted continuation of an ancient way of life; it is a result of a series of reform movements that swept the Theravada world in the past two centuries. The ascetic dimensions of modern Buddhist reform in Thailand have been studied by Stanley Tambiah (1976, 1984) and Kamala Tiyavanich (1997, 2003), and in Myanmar by Erik Braun (2013) and Guillaume Rozenberg (2010). In Sri Lanka, the anthropological and historical study by Michael Carrithers (1983) remains the singular major work on this subject, in which, among other things, the origins and early years of the country’s primary forest monastic institution, *Śrī Kalyāṇī Yogāśrama Saṁsthāva*,⁸ have been examined. Today, almost half a century since the time Carrithers conducted his fieldwork, the forest sangha of the *Saṁsthāva* continues to play an important role in Sri Lankan Buddhism (Sirisena 2021). This is no small achievement.⁹ Even under the best of conditions, few Buddhists find the austere way of life of the forest monastic an appealing prospect for themselves. And yet, over the past seventy years—a period in which Sri Lanka has seen many disruptive changes, including a devastating civil war—the *Saṁsthāva* has been able to steadily grow its community to about seven-hundred monks, and remains largely consistent with its originally purported values. This modern, and evidently resilient, reconstruction of forest monasticism is probably the form of contemporary Theravada practice that is closest to the asceticism followed by the Buddha and his direct disciples. As Reginald Ray (1994: 397) has suggested:

[T]here can be no doubt that the forest ideal was earliest (the Buddha himself followed it), was seen as superior (it led directly to realization), and was considered normative for earliest Buddhism (it represented direct emulation of the Buddha’s example, and, furthermore, those who followed it practiced what the Buddhist town-and-village renunciates would have preached).

Its religious significance notwithstanding, forest monasticism—and the Sri Lankan variety in particular—continues to be an understudied aspect of Theravada Buddhism.¹⁰ This can be attributed to several reasons. Broader trends within the anthropology of Buddhism (Sihlé and Ladwig 2017; Gellner 2017) seem

⁶ “*Etāni, bhikkhave, rukkhamūlāni, etāni suññāgārāni*” is a pericope (Anālayo 2007) that appears more than a dozen times in the Pali canon (e.g., *Dvedhāvitaḥka-sutta*, MN 19 at MN I 118).

⁷ In the *Mahāvaccagotta-sutta* (MN 73 at MN I 490) the Buddha says that there are “not one or two or three or four or five hundred, but many more” monks and nuns who are *arahants* (or fully-enlightened).

⁸ Sinhala: meaning the “*Śrī Kalyāṇī* Group of Monasteries,” so named because its ordination lineage supposedly originates from the historical *Kalyāṇī* Ordination Hall in Bago, Myanmar.

⁹ In a personal correspondence, Professor Carrithers mentioned that he was pleasantly surprised to read how the *Saṁsthāva* has managed to flourish in the way its founders intended, and not “gone the way of so many other reform movements over the millennia,” a risk he says was clearly apparent when conducting fieldwork in the 1970s.

¹⁰ There are notable cultural factors that make the forest monastic experience in Sri Lanka different from Thailand and Myanmar. In his guide to Sri Lankan forest monasteries, Venerable Nyanatusita (2018: 5) notes how one can be, and needs to be, more independent in Sri Lanka. Monastics who do not lean on the support of a charismatic teacher in order to develop their practice would find the country more suitable, he says, because there is no strong “teacher tradition” as in Thailand.

to emphasize the study of more conspicuous phenomena. Heterodox—and in the case of the *Samsthāva*, “ultra-orthodox” (Silber 1981: 183)—practices of individuals that embody “extreme” expressions of religious commitment appear to not have drawn much academic interest. Even when there is such interest, the secluded, ascetic nature of the forest monastic lifestyle, bound by a Vinaya interpretation that restricts engagement with non-monastics, makes scholarly access difficult.¹¹ Where access could be gained, language barriers and the need for specialized knowledge of Buddhist and cultural practices may further limit the extent of the engagement. The lack of insight into this community due to these reasons leaves a significant gap in our understanding of the diversity of contemporary Theravada Buddhism and the multiple ways it can contribute to environmental conservation.

I was able to circumvent these obstacles inadvertently, by having been a forest monk myself. I became an *anaḡārika* (a candidate for ordination) in the *Samsthāva* in December 2007, received the *pabbajjā* (going forth; novice ordination) in March 2008, and had the *upasampadā* (higher ordination) a year later, after completing the required training for each step. My intention was to remain a forest monk for the rest of my days. However, due to a multitude of reasons I had to return to lay life in October 2011, but I remain a practicing Buddhist and continue to maintain a close affinity with the *Samsthāva*.¹² Thus, the primary sources for what is discussed here are my own memories, as well as records in the form of personal journal entries, published and unpublished essays, and correspondence carried out as a monastic. This autoethnographic account has been enriched by conversations with current and former forest monks who were my contemporaries. As with all autoethnography, my main objective here is the purposeful and evocative sharing of personal experience in order to facilitate a nuanced understanding of the subject (Adams and Herrmann 2023).

Forest Monastics of the *Samsthāva*

The defining characteristic of the *Samsthāva* as a monastic organization is taking the texts seriously and trying to put them into practice.¹³ They profess a strict adherence to the Pali canon and the Theravada commentarial literature. Naturally, there are differences between individual monks with regards to what they consider canonical, the level of importance they attribute to the commentarial interpretations, and the level of intensity and commitment of their practice, but these have not been large enough to cause division within the community. The *Samsthāva*, by and large, remains the Buddhist monastic organisation that is the most faithful to the forest ideal in contemporary Sri Lanka. Its primary concern is with doctrinal studies and meditation practice, leaving most social obligations towards the laity in the hands of “village” monks.

Forest monastics are quite easily recognized by their comportment. Most of them—and exceptions are rare—conduct themselves in a calm and aloof manner, their actions marked by an attempt to maintain mindfulness. Their robes are of a duller and darker hue than those of “village” monks, and because a monk may only have two outer robes as stipulated in the Vinaya,¹⁴ theirs tend to appear timeworn. When outside the monastery, forest monastics wear the robe covering both shoulders and carry their bowl with them, also in contrast to

¹¹ Carrithers (1983: 201) notes how he was met with “strikingly similar treatment” when visiting monks of the *Samsthāva* in widely separated parts of the country. “I was received courteously, as at other hermitages, my questions were answered thoroughly, even enthusiastically, but when it came time for the monk to go about his duties, he would say firmly something like, ‘I have work to do now,’ and I would have to rise and leave.”

¹² Both are important aspects with regards to my positionality in this study. As I write this more than a decade later, there is admittedly a significant chasm between the Buddhist forest monastic ideal and my current circumstances. There are also substantial differences between my current doctrinal affiliations as a Buddhist—which could be labelled “pre-sectarian”—and the form of Theravada practiced in the *Samsthāva*. And yet, the forest monastic that I once was remains readily accessible in my mind, which continues to exert a strong influence on my work. Therefore, I can relate to Lila Abu-Lughod (2014: 390) when she describes having to “travel uneasily between speaking ‘for’ and speaking ‘from’” as I manage my “split selves” in this article.

¹³ H. L. Seneviratne (1999) offers an insightful view of the modern history and sociology of the Sri Lankan Sangha and its effect on the contemporary society, which has allowed this deceptively simple commitment on the part of the *Samsthāva* to be such a remarkable differentiating factor.

¹⁴ *Ticivānūjanana* at Vin I 289

their temple counterparts. The daily schedule of a forest monastic is simple: there are some communal duties, but most of the time is devoted to study and meditation.

Much of my monastic life was spent in one of the largest forest monasteries in Sri Lanka, which occupied an entire mountain range of about five thousand acres and was home to about one hundred monks.¹⁵ Over the years, it gained a reputation for being one of the main “meditation monasteries” in the *Samsthāva*, where monastic practice was given precedence over the study of texts. There are three large meditation halls where daily group meditation sessions and biweekly silent retreats are conducted, but most monks tend to prefer the solitude of their own hut (Sinhala: *kuṭṭiya*). These huts come in various shapes and sizes: the most common type is made with brick and mortar, often on top of four concrete pillars elevating it above the forest floor so as to keep animals and insects out. The most coveted are the cave dwellings, deeply significant for the monks due to their association with past sages, which is not a mere figment of imagination, but part of history memorialised by rock inscriptions. The caves in this monastery are augmented with brick walls on the open sides to make them more practical and comfortable—to the extent a simple space with a cement floor, a rock ceiling, and a mat to sleep on could be called so.

The forest that engulfs the huts, caves, and the meditation halls is not uniform. The best-preserved part of the old forest is also home to the oldest part of the monastery, where one finds the cave dwellings. Much of the mountain range is covered by young trees that have been planted through a reforestation project by the state’s Department of Forest Conservation. In operation since the early 2000s, this reforestation is aimed at reversing the damage done by government-led logging in the past, the remnants of which can be seen in the grasslands in some areas of the reserve. The entire forest is out of bounds for all human activity apart from those pertaining to the monastery. The only visitors to the forest are those who visit the monastery, for whom there are designated visiting hours; one does not see people on picnics, trips, or hikes in this forest.

Forest Monasteries and Forest Conservation

The fallen tree trunk has been lying here for ages, and each passing year a small piece of it gets consumed by the fires lit for dyeing the robes and blackening the bowls of monks in the monastery. This time, it will be for *our* robes and bowls. Five of us are preparing to ordain as novice monks, and we have collected firewood by foraging the forest for dead trees and branches.

This tree trunk, however, lies conveniently close to the fireplace, and we partake in the ritual of chopping a piece of it for our fire.

“What type of tree is this, *bhante*? It’s all hardwood,” I ask Venerable Ratana, the senior monk overseeing the proceedings.

“It’s Ebony.”

Ceylon Ebony (*Diospyrus ebenum*) is a protected species in Sri Lanka. It is also expensive: just one kilogram of it can be worth around thirty US Dollars—probably the most valuable type of local timber. And here we are, using this veritable fortune as firewood.

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¹⁵ The *Samsthāva* is primarily a male institution. Almost all its monasteries are exclusively for monks. In recent years, it has started a handful of monasteries for female renunciates. Among them, the nunnery associated with my “home monastery” described here is the largest, offering residence to more than a hundred nuns and lay women. The nunnery is a separate institution on its own land; there are no mixed-gender or “double” monasteries in the *Samsthāva*. While it is a topic beyond the scope of the current article, it is worth noting that the *Samsthāva* does not officially recognize the *bhikkhuni upasampadā* (higher ordination of female renunciates).



Figure 1: A Buddhist monk of the *Samsthāva* walking along a path in a forest reserve. (Photo: Nanditha Sirisena)

Sri Lanka, together with the Western Ghats of India, forms one of the thirty-six bio-diversity hotspots of the world, with a remarkable degree of endemism (Lindström, Mattsson, and Nissanka 2012). It is mainly in the forests—which cover 29.7 percent of the land—that this biodiversity and ecosystem diversity can be found (Rathnayake, Jones, and Soto-Berelov 2020). As party to the Paris Agreement, Sri Lanka’s “Nationally-Determined Contributions” to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change includes a goal of not only conserving but increasing this forest cover to 32 percent by 2030 (Sri Lanka Ministry of Environment 2021: 22). The changes made to Sri Lanka’s Forest Conservation Ordinance via the Forest (Amendment) Act allow for the introduction of a “management plan” that incorporates the goal of “obtaining community and non-state sector participation in the sustainable management of reserved forests.”¹⁶ One way this participation is facilitated is by granting permits to monastic institutions to establish their residences in protected forests, which, in the words of the Act, is supposed to develop a “benefit sharing mechanism.” The assumption is that the benefits sought by the monastics are also beneficial for the forest reserves.

Monasteries and monks’ dwellings located in forests have been part of the landscape of Sri Lankan Buddhism since its earliest days (Coningham 1995), so this is a continuation of a tradition that is more than two millennia old. Peter Harvey (2000: 178) notes that “conservation of species and habitat is not something that Buddhist cultures, in pre-modern times, have had to give much attention to, as Buddhist values have meant that the environment has not been over-exploited”. He cites Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (1988), who attributes the comparatively lower level of wildlife destruction in Sri Lanka to religious sensibilities. Whether this is still broadly applicable to Sri Lankan society is questionable, but in the case of forest monastics, it seems to hold true because forest monastics embody the most comprehensive form of renunciation in Theravada Buddhism.¹⁷ When joining the Sangha, they renounce all types of personal wealth. Not accepting money

¹⁶ Act No. 65 of 2009. https://www.env.gov.lk/web/images/downloads/acts/forest_amendment_act_no_65_of_2009.pdf (Accessed 6 July 2022).

and money-substitutes (such as credit cards),¹⁸ not engaging in any form of trade,¹⁹ and not accepting property and land,²⁰ are some of the most obvious ways in which the *Samsthāva* monks stand out from other Buddhist practitioners. The training rules also stipulate that the monastics do not damage plants and trees,²¹ dig the earth,²² or defecate, urinate, or spit in water.²³ This strict adherence to the Vinaya, and the conscious attempt to cultivate qualities such as *appicchatā* (being of few desires) and *santuṭṭhitā* (being easily contented),²⁴ incidentally make forest monastics particularly suitable to be the guardians of fragile ecosystems. The value of foraged wood, for example, is measured by what utility it serves in the simple duties of the monastery. Ebony can only be worth the fire it could kindle, not what it can fetch in the market the monastics have already renounced.

The benefits of this renunciation for forest ecosystems are reflected in research findings. For instance, in one study, the two sites that were most effective in protecting the Western Purple-faced Langur (*Semnopithecus vetulus nector*)—one of the twenty-five most endangered primates in the world, endemic to the wet zone in Western Sri Lanka—were forest monasteries (Rudran 2007). Apart from the primary habitat of this species in the Labugama-Kalatuwawa forest reserve, the best options for establishing satellite sites for conservation are deemed to be the areas surrounding these monasteries. Karunarathna and Amarasinghe (2012) observe how the only pristine forest patch that remains in Beraliya Mukalana, one of the largest rainforest reserves in Sri Lanka, is the area surrounding the monastery that is located inside the reserve. Other areas of the forest have been cleared for tea and rubber cultivation, or are impacted by illegal logging. The forest reserve is also being increasingly polluted by visitors coming on picnics and trips. In another study about a species of endemic gecko (*Calodactylodes illingworthorum*) (Karunarathna and Amarasinghe 2011), the same authors observed a similar phenomenon in the forest reserves in the Uva Province of Sri Lanka; forest monasteries were acting as refuges for endangered species, while the forests themselves were threatened by anthropogenic activities such as illegal logging and man-made forest fires for slash-and-burn cultivation. In the Southern region of Sri Lanka, the presence of a monastery inside the Kekanadura forest reserve has been a key factor in its preservation (Palihawadana and Singhakumara 2013). Meethirigala, the largest forest reserve in the Gampaha district, is probably better known for the forest monastery located there, and the presence of monks has mitigated illegal human encroachments on the forest (Kalubowila, Singhakumara and Rajathewa 2020). Thus, the establishment of a monastery has come to be known as a reliable method of forest protection in Sri Lanka (Bandaratillake 2001: 163).

However, there is also the rare instance when the monastery brings pollution to the forest. Jayaratne and Singhakumara (2021) note how the stream of visitors to Bodhinagala forest monastery is a main source of disturbance and anthropogenic pressure to the surrounding Dombagaskanda forest reserve, which is the tropical rainforest closest to Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo. It is a symptom of the perennial challenge faced by the *Samsthāva*, namely, managing the material wealth generated through “the relentless piety of the masses” (Carrithers 2017: 136, quoting Gananath Obeyesekere). I am not aware of the circumstances of this specific monastery, but in general the *Samsthāva* is good at avoiding such scenarios by being strict with how it

¹⁷ The monks of the *Samsthāva* are well aware that this renunciation, significant as it is, is only a means to an end. A common piece of advice given to junior monks is that, now that they have ordained the body, it is time to ordain the mind. The practice a monastic undertakes is one that entails cultivating more refined levels of renunciation, culminating in the most complete form, *nibbāna* (AN 6.55 at AN III 376). As Joanna Cook (2010: 11) argues, “Buddhist renunciation may be understood as a process of self-formation even though the end result ... is the realization of ‘non-self.’”

¹⁸ *Nissaggiya Pācittiya* 18 at Vin III 237

¹⁹ *Nissaggiya Pācittiya* 19–20 at Vin III 240–242

²⁰ *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, DN 2 at DN I 64: “The monastic refrains from receiving fields and land.” (*Khettavatthupatiggahaṇā paṭivirato hoti*). The Sangha as a collective, however, may accept the offering of a monastery (*Bimbisārasamāgamakathā* at Vin I 39).

²¹ *Pacittiya* 11 at Vin IV 34–35

²² *Pacittiya* 10 at Vin IV 33

²³ *Sekhiya* 75 at Vin IV 205–206

²⁴ *Dhammadāyāda-sutta*, MN 3 at MN I 13

manages the relationships with lay Buddhists and diverting the excess gains to other monastic communities (Sirisena 2021). The organisation is known to abandon monasteries altogether when the conditions for practice deteriorate to what they deem an unsustainable level (Carrithers 1983: 261)

An Eco-Ethic of Love

On the grassy, wind-beaten face of the tallest mountain at the monastery, *yōdayā*, “the giant,” stands alone. It is the only tree to have survived the logging frenzy of the 1970s that had taken away much of the lush forest that once covered this entire mountain range. The workers who are now reforesting it have cleared a footpath up the hill through the tall grass, so my friend Venerable Abhaya and I decide to pay him a visit.

The giant has obviously been through some rough times. A lightning strike appears to have taken away a good part off the trunk. And yet, with his gaunt branches spread wide like outstretched arms, enduring the relentless pounding of the strong winds, the giant still looks on.

And what a view he has.

Miles and miles out into the horizon, waves of mountains rise and fall until they merge with the sky. The bright red disk of the setting sun throws a golden veil over the landscape and paints the clouds with a vibrant scarlet palette. At the foot of the mountain, the thick canopy of the old forest stands out in dark green. Breaking the silence my friend asks, “Do these people know they’re living in heaven?”²⁵

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The serious practitioner of Buddhist teachings cultivates dispassion towards the natural world and aims to transcend it—so declare the eco-critics. And yet, one often finds that forest monastics, arguably the most serious practitioners, are not shy of expressing their love for the wilderness. This is no modern discernment either: it is a sentiment shared with the monastics of ancient past.

The *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthās*, “Verses of the Elder Monks and Nuns,” are two collections of early Buddhist texts in the Pali Canon that are close to the hearts of many monastics. Ascribed to the direct disciples of the Buddha, these poems relate personal stories about the struggles of lay and monastic life, the bliss of relinquishment, and the freedom of awakening. The verses of Venerable Mahākassapa Thera—declared by the Buddha to be foremost in austere practices²⁶ and generally considered by the Theravada tradition to be the personification of the forest monastic ideal—include ones that stand out in their evocative imagery of, and love for, the wilderness. For example:

Strewn with garlands of the musk-rose tree,
 these regions are so delightful, so lovely,
 echoing with the trumpeting of elephants:
 these rocky crags delight me!
 Glistening, they look like blue storm clouds,
 with waters cool and streams so clear,
 and covered all in ladybugs:

²⁵ This is an excerpt from an entry dated July 20, 2010, from a personal journal I kept as a forest monk. The original text was in English and is reproduced here with minor edits.

²⁶ AN 1.191 at AN I 23

these rocky crags delight me!²⁷

The Pali Canon records a conversation between the Buddha and Venerable Mahākassapa in which the latter declares that he has been living in the wilderness for a long time seeing two benefits: a happy life for himself in the present, and compassion for future monastics, in the hope that they may follow his example. The Buddha expresses his approval by saying that Venerable Mahākassapa is indeed acting for the welfare and happiness of the people.²⁸

Today, as it was then, the life of a forest monastic is not easy or convenient by conventional standards. Neither is the forest the only available abode, even for those who have ordained in the *Samsthāva*. The organisation operates several monasteries that are in village or urban settings, mainly for the benefit of monastics who need medical assistance or need to deal with government services of one form or another. The monks and nuns who remain in the forest do so out of their own volition, which indicates a preference for that way of life.

This preference probably originates from two intertwined sources. The first is indeed what Venerable Mahākassapa hoped for, a faithful adherence to the forest ideal deeply rooted in early Buddhism that reform movements such as the *Samsthāva* strive to uphold. The teachings draw the followers to solitude in remote places, and the monastic code ensures that they do not harm their environments.²⁹ As Frederik Schröer (in this issue) points out, the forest (*arañña*) encountered in early Buddhist texts—the same is true of today's forests—is a potentially dangerous place, and the practitioners have to confront the difficulties and fear induced by this environment.³⁰ They are to endure “cold, heat, hunger, and thirst ... the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and reptiles” so that the mind can remain undefiled by unskilful states.³¹ Thus, life in the forest becomes an intrinsic part of their gradual training (*anupubba-sikkhā*).³²

The second source that compels one to choose a life in the forest is a personal one. To be drawn to a teaching that promotes the forest ideal, one should already have a modicum of love for the ascetic lifestyle and its setting. Here, the forest itself becomes a reward, not merely a means to reach a goal. Like the Venerable Mahākassapa they attempt to emulate, forest monastics seem to find a pleasant abiding in the wilderness. It is possible that this call of the wild is common to all humans but finds easier expression through the life choices one makes in becoming a forest monastic. However, the texts also record that the Buddha saw enough reason to admonish his followers not to seek the forest life for its own sake, or for the material benefits it inevitably draws from inspired laity:

A person may be wilderness dweller (*āraññiko*) because of stupidity and folly; or because of corrupt wishes, being of wishful temperament; or because of madness and mental disorder; or because it is praised by the Buddhas and their disciples; or for the sake of having few wishes, for the sake of contentment, self-effacement, seclusion, and simplicity. Among these five kinds of wilderness dwellers, the person who does so for the sake of having few wishes ... is the foremost, best, chief, highest, and finest.³³

²⁷ Thag 18.1 at Thag 95 (verses 1062–1063)

²⁸ *Jiṇṇa-sutta*, SN 16.5 at SN II 203

²⁹ Monastics can still get lay people to do the “harm” on their behalf, which is how construction projects happen in forest monasteries. Historically, the *Samsthāva* has shown a capacity to uphold not just the letter but also the spirit of the Vinaya rules by trying to minimise their impact on forest ecosystems.

³⁰ There are instances of forest monastics in Sri Lanka being trampled to death or gravely injured by elephants, killed or injured by venomous snakebites, and violently attacked and murdered by humans. One such sad death was the assassination of Venerable Tambugala Ānandasiri by unknown gunmen in 1989. Venerable Ānandasiri was the subject of the concluding chapter of Carrither's (1983) book, and as the author admits, the book's perspective is deeply influenced by him (Carrithers 2014: 131). Forest monastics have also committed suicide. One of my friends in the monastery was among them.

³¹ *Sabbāsava-sutta*, MN 2 at MN I 10

³² *Kiṭṭāgiri-sutta*, MN 70 at MN I 480: “...final knowledge is achieved by gradual training, by gradual practice, by gradual progress.” (... *anupubbāsikkhā anupubbakiriyā anupubbapaṭipadā aññārādhānā hoti*).

My impression is that the monastics of the *Samsthāva* are at the very least aware of this main purpose in their decision to live in the forest, regardless of what drew them to it in the first place. I have yet to meet a “stupid” forest monastic, or one who has entirely neglected their training.

*

The torch light, which has been threatening to go out for a while, finally does so on the way to the hut. On this night of the new moon, the forest is engulfed in a kind of darkness I have never seen before. I lift a hand in front of my face but cannot see it.

I crouch down and start groping for the narrow path through the forest. It takes me a long time to reach the hut. It sits elevated on four concrete pillars, and there’s a step in front of the door.

I skip the step and stretch to climb into the hut, lest I disturb my long-time companion, a highly venomous pit viper³⁴ who has laid claim to the step for several months, and who might lie curled up there even now in the pitch blackness of the night.

*

A preference for solitude and the restrictions imposed by the Vinaya are not the only ways through which the forest monastic develops a bond with the forest. The teachings they follow are aimed at inculcating a mindset of love (*mettā*)³⁵ and compassion (*karuṇā*). The monastic not only “gives up killing living creatures, renouncing the rod and the sword” but also trains to be “scrupulous and kind, living full of compassion for all living beings.”³⁶ The *Metta-sutta*,³⁷ one of the most popular Pali texts among Sri Lankan Buddhists and recited every day in monasteries, uses an evocative simile to describe the meditation on love:

Even as a mother would protect with her life
her child, her only child,
so too for all creatures
unfold a boundless heart.
With love for the whole world,
unfold a boundless heart.
Above, below, all round,
unconstricted, without enemy or foe.
When standing, walking, sitting,
or lying down while yet unwearied,
keep this ever in mind;
for this, they say, is a holy abiding in this life.

³³ *Āraññika-sutta*, AN 5.181 at AN III 219

³⁴ *Hypnale hypnale*, a venomous pit viper species endemic to India and Sri Lanka with a potentially fatal bite (Kularatne and Ratnatunga 1999). After the oriental ratsnake (*Ptyas mucosa*), this was the most common snake species I encountered in this monastery, which was also home to the Sri Lankan cobra (*Naja naja polyocellata*), the Sri Lankan pit viper (*Craspedocephalus trionocephalus*), Russell’s viper (*Daboia russelii*), and Sri Lankan green vine snake (*Ahaetulla nasuta*).

³⁵ *Mettā* is usually translated into English as “loving kindness,” which appears to be a combination of *mettā* and *karuṇā*, as pointed out by my late teacher, Venerable Nāṇananda (2015). I consider “universal love” to be a more accurate translation, but “love” should suffice when the context is clear.

³⁶ “...pāṇātipātāṃ pahāya pāṇātipātā paṭivirato hoti. Nihitandaṇḍo nihitasattho lajjī dayāpanno sabbapāṇabhūtahitānukampī viharati” —a pericope appearing in many suttas on gradual training, such as in *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*, DN 2 at DN I 63.

³⁷ Snp 1.8 at Snp 26

The sutta begins with “this is what should be done by those who are skilled in goodness, so as to gain the state of peace (*santam padam*).” As Richard Gombrich has argued, the “deliverance of the heart through universal love” (*mettā-cetovimutti*) that this text alludes to is not merely a worldly attainment, but the realisation of *nibbāna* itself. “Love and compassion can be salvific for the person who cultivates those feelings to the highest pitch” (Gombrich 2009: 195). *Mettā* meditation is a practice all forest monastics try to develop in their daily lives, and while those lofty heights might not be reachable for everyone, they all take that first step towards the summit.

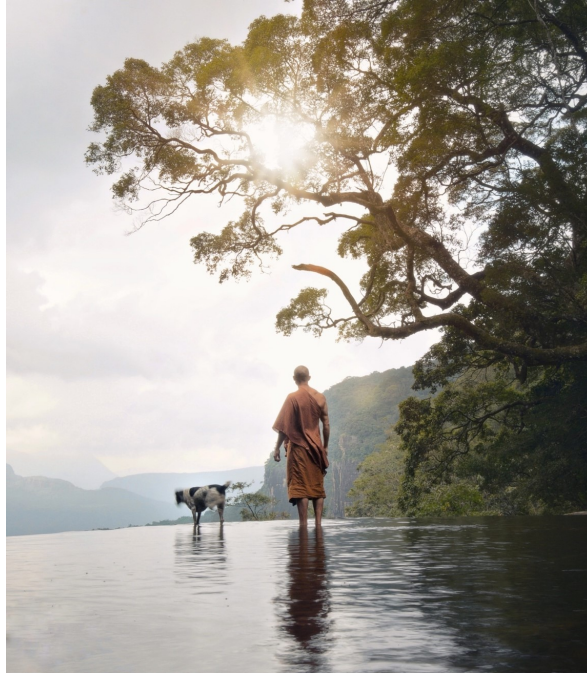


Figure 2: A forest monk at the top of Dūvili Ella, a remote waterfall in the protected Knuckles Mountain Range in Sri Lanka. (Photo: Hillside Hermitage).

Apart from its salvific capacity, forest monastics believe in another, more worldly blessing of *mettā*: protection from dangers in the forest. This is reflected in two other texts that are also recited daily in the monastery. The first is the *Mettānisamsa-sutta*,³⁸ which lists eleven benefits one can expect when *mettā-cetovimutti* has been well developed:

You sleep at ease. You wake happily. You don't have bad dreams. Humans love you. Non-humans love you. Deities protect you. You can't be harmed by fire, poison, or blade. Your mind gains concentration quickly. Your face is clear and bright. You don't feel confused when you die. If you don't penetrate any higher, you'll be reborn in a Brahma realm.

The other, the *Ahirāja-sutta*,³⁹ is interesting in that it is both a *mettā* meditation and a protective chant,⁴⁰ and specifically refers to snakes and other dangerous creatures, requesting them to not harm the practitioner:

I love the footless creatures,
the two-footed I love,

³⁸ AN 11.15 at AN 5.342

³⁹ AN 4.67 at AN II 73. The setting of this text is one where a monk had died due to a snake bite. The Buddha instructs the monastics to “spread a mind of love to the four royal snake families” for their own “safety, security, and protection.”

⁴⁰ Venerable Piyadassi (2011: 4), in his translation of “The Book of Protection” (Sinhala: *Pirit Pota*, a popular anthology of chants derived from the Pali canon), observes that this is the first instance where the Buddha uses the term *paritta* to refer to a protective chant. This text is traditionally referred to as the *Khandha-paritta*, probably because it is supposed to protect one's aggregates (*khandha*) from harm.

I love the four-footed,
 the many-footed I love.
 May the footless not harm me!
 May I not be harmed by the two-footed!
 May the four-footed not harm me!
 May I not be harmed by the many-footed!

The text continues to relate that the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are immeasurable, whereas “crawling things, snakes and scorpions, centipedes, spiders and lizards and mice” are limited. It requests these creatures to go away, now that the reciter has made this safeguard (*rakkhā*) and protection (*parittā*).

Thus, *mettā* not only facilitates the inner transformation of the monastic but also gives them the reassurance that their universal love will be reciprocated by others, including non-humans. It cultivates a capacity to share the forest compassionately with the many beings for whom it is home, to be mindful of small animals on the footpaths through the forest, to let a venomous snake rest at one’s doorstep.

*

At the top of the mountain that forms the oldest part of the monastery, standing above the canopy of ironwood trees, is a large flat rock. Fig trees have found footing in the cracks of the rock, their branches creating pockets of shade from the tropical sun. Here and there under these fig trees, there are small, levelled seats made of concrete. This evening, I’m sitting cross-legged in meditation on one of them.

As I’m doing *ānāpānasati*, the meditation on breath, I hear the rustle of leaves and chattering sounds. “The troop” has arrived—the troop of monkeys⁴¹ that have made this mountain their home. There’s a tug at my robes and I open my eyes. A curious baby monkey has approached me, and his mother gently pulls him back. Their leader, of impressive size and dignified comportment, passes in front of me, without threatening me or appearing to be threatened. The monkeys sit with me for a while. I feel privileged to share this forest with them, this shaded spot on the rock, this ephemeral moment. I close my eyes and resume my meditation, and their sounds fade away.

Relating to the Radical Buddhist Eco-Ethic

“Suppose an outcaste boy or girl, holding a pot and clad in rags, were to enter a town or village. They’d enter with a humble mind. In the same way, I live with a heart like an outcaste boy or girl, abundant, expansive, limitless, free of enmity and ill will.”⁴²

As I step out of the monastery on *piṇḍacāra*—the daily alms-round—with bowl in my hand and the robes covering both shoulders as stipulated in the Vinaya, I keep in mind this utterance of Venerable Sāriputta, the foremost disciple of the Buddha.

I approach the village and turn to the road I have chosen today to collect food for the single meal of the day. As usual, I am welcomed warmly. The dog of the first house, a small white creature, comes running to me, does a playful bow, and accompanies me on my walk. Along the way her friends join us. We make an odd collective, a monk surrounded by half a dozen dogs, going from house to house, patiently waiting for any offering of food.

⁴¹ Toque macaque (*Macaca sinica*), an endangered species of monkey endemic to Sri Lanka.

⁴² *Sīhanāda-sutta*, AN 9.11 at AN IV 376



Figure 3: A toque macaque clutching a forest monk's robe. (Photo: Hillside Hermitage).

The dogs of the village are not doing it for treats. They don't receive anything from these houses. From me they only receive love, and that too is expressed only mentally. It is not just for me that they do this—all monks who go on *piṇḍacāra* get accompanied. I haven't seen dogs do this for anyone but forest monks.

We talk about it at the monastery. Perhaps the dogs are responding to the silent compassion of monastics. Perhaps they see us as different from humans—a wilder species they find easier to relate to.

*

The Buddhist teachings, when put into practice, reveal an eco-ethic that might not be readily apparent when one merely analyses them from a scholarly distance. All Buddhist texts are essentially prescriptive, including the analytical frameworks such as dependent co-arising which are usually cited by eco-apologists. They are all oriented towards the singular goal of attaining freedom,⁴³ and only in the results of earnest practice we may judge their efficacy. Few Buddhists seem to take the texts as seriously as the radical virtuosi, a numerically minuscule group to which the forest monastics of Sri Lanka's *Saṁsthāva* Sangha belong. The Buddhist eco-ethic resulting from their practice is one of uncompromising love for fellow beings in their habitats, strong enough to trust with the protection of delicate ecosystems in a biodiversity hotspot.

The paths of practice, however, differ in levels of intensity and commitment for monastic and lay Buddhists, even though they eventually lead to the same goal (Anālayo 2018). When the Buddha declared that his teachings are “for the secluded, not those who enjoy company,”⁴⁴ he is primarily addressing the monastics. The early Buddhist texts as well as their Theravada interpretations are consistent in advocating a more relaxed approach for the laity. An eco-ethic emerging from arguably the most rigorous form of Buddhist monastic practice is unlikely to be attainable or sustainable for lay people, and advocating for it would be

⁴³ *Upasatha-sutta*, Ud 5.5 at Ud 56: “This teaching and training has one taste, the taste of freedom.” (*ayaṁ dhammavinayo ekaraso vimuttirasō*).

⁴⁴ *Anuruddhamahāvitakka-sutta*, AN 8.30 at AN IV 229

inconsistent with the Theravada tradition. It does, however, offer an ideal that Buddhists can look up to, much the same way the forest monastic is held up as the ideal practitioner of Buddhist teachings.



Figure 4: Forest monks on their daily alms-round in the Matale district of Sri Lanka, giving blessings to villagers who have offered them food, while a group of dogs from the village wait by their side. (Photo: Hillside Hermitage).

In addition to these fundamental differences in modes of practice, there are other factors that make a direct adoption of this eco-ethic difficult for the laity. Within the Buddhist community, the forest monastics stand as a special type of religious elite who combine a status of ultimate superiority with a narrowly defined involvement in, and influence upon, lay life; they have immense prestige, but little direct socio-political power. There is reverence for the “ultra-orthodoxy” of forest monastics, but they are also sometimes shunned for their deviance from the more “orthodox” monasticism that is represented by the way “village” monks traditionally engage closely with the laity. The “institutionalized, highly socialized model of renunciation” of village monks “provides the layman with a relatively easy means of accumulating merit and of participating in the renouncer’s pursuit of salvation without interfering with his own worldly activity” (Silber 1981: 183).

This has resulted in what Silber refers to as the “impotency of radicalism” (1981: 184). The forest monastic way of practice is usually seen as something to be admired from afar rather than emulated. Forest monastics have not been the ones to instigate broad changes in modern societies, either in the basic patterns of interaction with laity or in the worldly activities of lay Buddhists. Neither the forest monastics themselves nor the Buddhist laity seem to encourage or even expect the emergence of an ascetic who engages in both other-worldly and this-worldly activities with equal vigour. This lack of encouragement Silber regards to be a reflection and consequence of “the consistency and efficacy with which the mechanism of segregation has been working in Theravada societies” (1981: 185).

Thus, the radical eco-ethic that is manifest in forest monastic practice, so powerful and effective in its native domain, runs the risk of being relegated to a distantly aspirational realm by lay Buddhists. What is a matter of daily experience for the radical virtuosi can appear almost as other-worldly as *nibbāna* for the general Buddhist populace. However, this is not necessarily a cause for concern. As Donna Haraway (2016: 4) observes,

facing the challenges of the Anthropocene requires “making oddkin”: a term that seems to aptly capture the peculiar relationship between the radical virtuosi and laity. In explaining its use, she adds that “we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles.” Seen in that light, the eco-ethic contributed by the forest monastic can only enrich the growing, fertile grounds of Buddhist environmentalism.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
SN	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
Snp	<i>Sutta-nipāta</i>
Thag	<i>Thera-gāthā</i>
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

References to Pali texts are to the section and sutta number as in Sutta Central (<https://suttacentral.net>), and the volume and page number of the editions of the Pali Text Society (PTS). The English translations are based on those by Venerable Bhikkhu Sujato on Sutta Central.

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