

Metta for the Environmental Mirror

A Buddhist Approach to Environmental and Social Responsibility

By Ajahn Chandako

The Forest Tradition

Vimutti Monastery is a Buddhist community in the rural South Auckland area of New Zealand, and our particular lineage is known as 'the Forest Tradition'. This means that we take nature as our primary teacher and predominately live in tranquil environments such as mountains, caves and, of course, forests. Although the basic truths of nature exist everywhere, the environment we inhabit plays a powerful role in our conditioning. The Buddha himself was born in the forest, practiced in the forest, enlightened under a tree, founded monasteries in the forest and passed away in the forest. He clearly loved nature and encouraged his monks and nuns to develop meditation in secluded natural settings. This inclines the mind towards peace, while observing the workings of nature around and within us encourages the growth of wisdom.

A Radical Alternative

As our human society forges ahead at an ever-accelerating rate towards an uncertain future, the people of the world are faced with making crucial decisions about the relationship between their lifestyle and the long-term consequences for the planet. In this respect, forest monasteries offer some practical and time tested models for a sustainable and harmonious society. Because of the tranquility of a forest monastery, its radical protest against an unbalanced, misguided or unjust mainstream is easily overlooked. Because of the age of the monastic tradition, its particular relevancy to our contemporary crises may go unnoticed. However, when it comes to political action, although forest monasteries may speak little, the action they take is direct.

Buddhist monasticism has always been a profound stepping out of the mainstream of society. Even in the time of the Buddha, these communities were considered to be a challenge to materialism, deity worship, social class hierarchy and institutionalized discrimination. For 2,600 years Buddhist monks and nuns have been living examples of an alternative way of life based on virtuous living and sustainable environmental practices. They undermined the subtle but pernicious delusion pervasive in wholly worldly values. They have few possessions, live in small huts and are models of frugality. Their intentional simplification leaves a small carbon footprint, easing the burden on the earth's precious resources.

The Buddhist teaching of contentment with little directly confronts the materialistic attitudes of unbridled consumption. When it is increasingly clear that unrestrained and ungoverned corporate greed is crippling our natural environment and creating a massive discrepancy between a wealthy and powerful elite and a growing impoverished

underclass, an institution that is specifically designed to uproot greed is even more relevant. When the majority of wars have their roots in economic desire for wealth, the Buddha's firm non-violent stance on Awakening rather than acquiring, directly counters the culture of endless war.

Forest monasteries also challenge many of the assumptions underlying the mainstream economic system. For example, Vimutti does not charge for anything and relies entirely on donations. All teachings, accommodation, food, books and facilities are offered free of charge, and our continued survival depends entirely on individuals who feel they want to support our values and aspirations. Economic sustainability then manifests in a system of mutual generosity called 'dana'. Whereas other spiritual organizations might feel the need to incorporate profit making ventures in order to sustain themselves, forest monasteries rely solely on their community's integrity to attract support. The dana system not only counters many of the negative effects of a more self-centered system based on personal gain, it encourages the goodness in people's hearts to grow. Big hearted generosity, service and caring for fellow humans and animals then lays the foundation for a society that dwells in peace and is guided by wisdom.

Specific Benefits to the Environment

When Vimutti Monastery's 144 acre property was first purchased, there was a tremendous amount of environmental degradation. It was an abused, eroded, over-grazed and weed-ridden cattle farm with mudslides and collapsing stream banks. However, since the founding of Vimutti in 2004, we have worked tirelessly to resuscitate the land. In the first eight years we planted nearly 10,000 trees. In this way we have taken direct action to mitigate the harmful effects of greenhouse gases. The native trees include Kauri, Totara, Griselinia, Kahikatea, Pohutakawa, Kawaka, Cabbage trees, Ponga, Karaka, Kanuka, Rimu, Pittosporum and flax. Ferns and Tree Ferns made a strong comeback on their own, once the cattle were removed. Nearly every day we spend hours monitoring and looking after the trees. Regenerating the beautiful native New Zealand ecosystem is our local response to the global environmental crises.

As part of the regeneration process, a huge effort has gone into eradicating invasive plants. Entire hillsides that used to be covered with ragwort, for example, are now 99% ragwort-free. This was all accomplished by hand, without the use of pesticides. Many hundreds of large and thorny Darwin's Barberry bushes were removed from steep slopes, again, all by hand. Hundreds of large Goat Willow trees that choke streams and wetlands were taken out by chainsaw, and there is an ongoing effort to eradicate noxious weeds such as Himalayan Honeysuckle, Blackberry, thistles and Ink Weed. The effect of all this hard work is that native plants and trees are now flourishing in the valleys, stream banks and wetlands.

Other projects undertaken to nurture native regeneration include installing an electric fence to keep feral goats at bay and creating eight large ponds to provide homes for birdlife, rare species of frogs and other animals. Currently we are self-sufficient in our use of water through collecting rain, and solar panels provide the hot water in our main

building. Plastic, glass, paper and metal are all recycled, and we use only eco-friendly cleaning products.

Community, Resilience and Sustainability

Creating a sustainable community based on the aspiration for peace and wisdom is the long-term goal of Vimutti monastery. By establishing it as a community-owned, non-profit organization, rather than a private entity based on a few individuals, the monastery has a great potential to be viable for the long-term future. As one part of a larger and long-standing Forest Tradition, this monastery will hopefully remain a green haven dedicated to spiritual practice, environmental awareness and peace for many generations to come. Vimutti's ethnically diverse community is a microcosm of what our world could be: an opportunity for people of all nationalities to join together in harmony to work toward a noble, common goal.

As a religious center we have the opportunity to teach and influence a large and diverse audience. Our extended community sees Vimutti Monastery as a spiritual refuge, a place to be reminded of higher values and to learn skillful ways of living wisely within the world. People from the Auckland area regularly visit the monastery and benefit from its serene atmosphere and natural setting. The trees calm their hearts and bodies and inspire an appreciation of peace that they then take with them into their personal environments.

The Mirror

A forest monastery is designed to be a community dedicated to a deeper understanding of the truths of nature. The teachings of the Buddha, or the 'Dhamma', refer to nature, the laws of nature, living in harmony with the laws of nature and the teachings that accurately guide us to live in harmony with the laws of nature. In this sense being totally natural doesn't mean following all one's selfish desires. Self-centered desires may be natural as well, but they don't lead to real freedom or deep happiness for either an individual or a society. The Dhamma of the Buddha is a cultivation of the heart—just as we would cultivate a garden. Wholesome seeds are planted and noxious weeds are pulled. When the tree of our Awakening sprouts it needs care. We water it, fertilize it and protect it. In this way our aspirations for enlightenment are mirrored in the actual planting of and caring for trees.

There are some aspects of nature that lead to violence and suffering and others that lead to peace and harmony. When we begin to notice the interdependence of all things, we see that what we cultivate in our every thought, word, action and lifestyle has profound ramifications for other living beings and the planet we live on. When we become clearly aware of this connection, caring for the environment is recognized as an ethical issue requiring a simultaneous nurturing of both the inner and outer environments. The world around us is a mirror that reflects our mind. If we care about ourselves, if we have metta for ourselves, then having a deep love for the wellbeing of the natural environment we live in is the only response that makes sense.