

## ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY IN BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE: IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS PRACTICES

P.K.S.M. Wijesinghe<sup>1,\*</sup> and G.M.H.P.K. Rathwatta<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*Department of Accountancy & Finance, Faculty of Management Studies, Rajarata  
University of Sri Lanka, Mihintale, Sri Lanka*

\*Corresponding author (email: mayomiwijesinghe@gmail.com)

### INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental Responsibility (ER) have emerged as prominent topics within the contemporary business landscape. The growing number of environmental issues, such as carbon emissions, air and water pollution, and waste generation, has drawn significant attention to the importance of ER. As an example, in 2022, reporting through the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) often involves the disclosure of information regarding energy and water efficiency, waste reduction, and various other sustainability-related practices, frequently. Despite its high level of interest, the understanding of ER remains limited. Several factors, including historical, religious, cultural, and regulatory aspects, influence the implementation of ER practices, given that they are not legally mandatory for corporations (Helfaya et al., 2016). Religious beliefs have been recognized as influential factors shaping the behavior of individuals, groups, and society as a whole (Hope & Jones, 2014). Consequently, religion can play a considerable role in promoting environmental responsibility (Abdelzaher et al., 2017). Although some research has explored the influence of religious beliefs on ER practices in various contexts, such as Christianity (Hessel & Ruether, 2000), Hinduism (Upadhyay, 2019), and Islam (Abdelzaher et al., 2017), there is a dearth of studies from a Buddhist perspective. Moreover, within the realm of CSR, a few studies have investigated the impact of Buddhism (Abeydeera et al., 2016; Vu, 2018; Suriyankietkaew & Kantarama, 2019). However, comprehensive research examining the relationship between Buddhism and ER remains scarce.

Similarly, the Buddhist Perspective has been proposed as a viable alternative to the Neo-classical economic theory, which faced significant challenges during the period of the world economic crisis (Sharma, 2013). Buddhism offers a unique approach centered on learning and personal development, grounded in practical knowledge of the cosmos, rather than dismissing the existence of a superior power (Daniels, 1998). Key concepts inherent in Buddhist philosophy encompass the three universal truths, the four noble truths, the noble eightfold path, and the five precepts (Dunn & Jensen, 2019). Importantly, Buddhist philosophy aligns with the principles of rationality rather than being purely based on religious doctrines (Ranawakaarachchi, 2019).

Given the potential of Buddhist philosophy to provide an alternative framework, this study aims to explore its applicability in the realm of Environmental Responsibility (ER) practices. By investigating the environmental responsibilities embedded within Buddhist philosophy, the research seeks to understand how these principles can be effectively implemented in business practices. Through this exploration, the study seeks to shed light on how Buddhist ER practices can contribute to corporate efforts in achieving sustainable and responsible environmental outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

The study used the qualitative research methodology to investigate ER from the Buddhist perspective. Content analysis is used to retrieve data from primary and secondary sources. Content analysis involves collecting and analyzing data from various sources such as interviews, surveys, focus groups, and media texts (Krippendorff, 2013). The data were collected from primary and secondary data sources. The four interviews with Buddhist monks were the primary data collection. Then based on the explanations and directions of interviewed monks the secondary data were collected from *Suthra Pitakaya* of Pali canon. This translated Bhuddha Jayanthi Edition of Tripitakaya (Pali Canon Online - the Original Words of the Buddha, n.d.) is used for this study. The *Tripitakaya* contains a collection of the teachings of Lord Buddha (Dunn & Jensen, 2019) and the *Sutra Pitaka* is a compilation of discourses on Buddhist teachings. The *Sutta Pitaka* is organized into five nikayas(parts), or collections, each of which has its theme and structure. Nikayas are groupings of discourses or sutras that cover various aspects of Buddhist philosophy, ethics, meditation, and practical guidance for spiritual practice. The five nikayas are *Deegha Nikaya*: the Long Discourses, *Majjhima Nikaya*: the Middle-length Discourses, *Samyutta Nikaya*: the Connected Discourses, *Anguttara Nikaya*: the Numerical Discourses and *Khuddaka Nikaya*: the Collection of Short Texts. The data was analyzed by using qualitative content analysis which involves the systematic analysis of text data, using coding and categorization to identify patterns and themes (Krippendorff, 2013). The quality and reliability of the data in this study are ensured by using more than one data collection method to practice data triangulation. To ensure the quality and reliability of the data, data triangulation was employed by using multiple data collection methods. This approach strengthens the research findings by corroborating evidence from different sources, thereby enhancing the credibility and validity of the study's conclusions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Promoting Environmental Responsibility (ER) in the Buddhist philosophy*

According to Buddhist teachings, Environmental Responsibility entails maintaining compassion in physical actions, verbal activities, and mental activities towards both living and non-living elements of the environment. Lord Buddha emphasized the significance of showing affection for all living beings, akin to a mother's love for her children, as reflected in the *Karaniyameththa Suthraya*.

*“Mata yatha niyam puttam ayusa ekaputtam anurakkhe evam pi sabbabhutesu manasam bhavaye aparimanam”*

The *Aggannya Sutta* in *Deega Nikaya* emphasizes the impact of the environment on human behavior, stating that a distorted environment can lead to the decline of both spiritual and physical aspects of individuals. The Buddhist five precepts play a crucial role in promoting the well-being of all living beings and the environment.

Lord Buddha, being the founder of Buddhism, had a profound connection with the environment throughout his life. His birthplace, *Lumbini* Sal forest, and the location of his enlightenment, a natural setting, exemplify this bond. He frequently sought solace and meditation under trees, constructed meeting halls and almshouses, and utilized forests during the rainy season (*Vassa* period). Lord Buddha's *Parinirvana* (The term "*Parinirvana*" in the context of Lord Buddha refers to his final and complete passing away or death occurred in

*Kusinara's Sal* garden called *Upavattana*. Furthermore, he advocated the sustainable use of natural resources, as seen in the use of tree leaves to color robes without harming the trees.

His teachings were often conveyed through simple parables, using examples from nature to illustrate concepts such as the acquisition and use of wealth and the consequences of karma. Lord Buddha considered protecting the environment as a meritorious activity, highlighting the blessings bestowed upon those who engage in activities like planting flowers, building bridges, and constructing ponds (*Wanaropa Sutta* in *Sanyuktha Nikya*).

In essence, Lord Buddha's promotion of Environmental Responsibility is evident in his teachings, his profound connection with nature throughout his life, the use of environmental examples to explain Buddhist principles and the acknowledgment of the merits associated with protecting the environment. As such, he is regarded as one of history's greatest environmentalists, leaving a significant legacy that continues to inspire sustainable practices.

*The types of Environmental Responsibility themes/elements are contained in the Buddhist Philosophy*

This study explores seven aspects of environmental responsibility themes, namely human beings, water, air, land, animals, plants, and other resources (Helfaya et. al,2016), as preached by Lord Buddha. Under the theme of Human Beings, Lord Buddha emphasizes the significance of personal behavior in defining true humanity. He underscores that humans are the highest beings among animals and provides advice on sustaining life and managing personal wealth. Similarly, the animal theme elucidates the reasons for animal birth and consciousness descending into the mother's womb. Lord Buddha advocates compassion towards all animals, visible or not, and includes animal preservation as one of the Five Precepts (refraining from harming or killing animals). Buddhist philosophy stresses the respect and protection of trees, considering tree planting as a meritorious activity, even identified as a primary state task. Special rules for forest preservation are also imposed on monks. Centuries before scientific explanations, Lord Buddha's *Aggannya Sutta* detailed the creation, expansion, and future end of the world. Buddhism further asserts that earth (soil) pollution will lead to decreased human life span. Precautions are recommended before constructing temples to maintain the land's integrity. The text emphasizes sustainable use and protection of water resources. Similarly, it underscores the importance of clean air and discourages air and sound pollution. Buddhist philosophy critiques human suffering resulting from resource scarcity due to greed and competition. The *suttas* emphasize the significance of leading a humble, virtuous life, free from greed and competitiveness. In summary, this study draws upon Lord Buddha's teachings to underscore environmental responsibility themes encompassing human behavior, compassion towards animals, tree protection, earth preservation, sustainable water use, clean air, and the importance of humility and virtuous living.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The current study holds significant implications for modern businesses concerning environmental responsibility. Buddhism's Non-Harming Principle advocates for avoiding harm to living beings and the environment, making it applicable to business practices. Mindfulness plays a crucial role in this regard, as it encourages businesses to be aware and consciously utilize resources like energy, water, and raw materials. Additionally, Buddhism discourages fraudulent practices in business and promotes resource preservation,

interconnectivity, and compassion. The concept of balanced development, which considers moral limits and discourages wasteful consumption, is also emphasized. By integrating these Buddhist principles, businesses can align their operations with environmental sustainability, ethical conduct, and overall well-being. This study underscores the relevance of Buddhist philosophy in promoting environmental responsibility and its potential to enrich traditional economic theories. It offers valuable insights that complement various aspects of society and contribute to a more holistic understanding of environmental responsibility. Lord Buddha's teachings highlight frugality, resource conservation, and prudent resource management, further encouraging ethical behavior and the well-being of stakeholders in business practices. Moreover, the study explores Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and its link to Environmental Responsibility (ER). It establishes ER as a vital aspect of CSR and discusses its implications for business practices from a Buddhist perspective. In summary, this research sheds light on the significance of Buddhist principles in fostering environmental responsibility, particularly in business practices. It proposes a holistic approach to sustainable business conduct, blending ethical considerations, and resource preservation in alignment with Buddhist philosophy.

**Keywords:** Buddhist philosophy, business practice, corporate social responsibility, environmental responsibility

## REFERENCES

- Abdelzaher, D. M., Kotb, A., & Helfaya, A. (2017). Eco-Islam: Beyond the principles of why and what, and into the principles of how. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 155(3), 623–643.
- Abeydeera, S., Kearins, K., & Tregidga, H. (2016b). Does Buddhism Enable a Different Sustainability Ethic at Work? *The Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, 2016(62), 109–130. <https://doi.org/10.9774/gleaf.4700.2016.ju.00013>
- Daniels, P. (1998). Economic change, the environment, and Buddhism in Asia. *International Journal of Social Economics* 25(6/7/8), 968-1004.
- Dunn, S.L., & Jensen, J.D. (2019, January). Hinduism and Hindu business practices. *International Journal of Business Administration*, 10(1), 33-48.
- Helfaya, A., Kotb, A., & Hanafi, R. (2016). Qur'anic ethics for environmental responsibility: Implications for business practice. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 150(4), 1105–1128.
- Hessel, D., & Ruether, R. R. (2000). Christianity and ecology: Seeking the well-being of earth and humans. *Harvard University Press*.
- Hope, A., & Jones, C. R. (2014). The impact of religious faith on attitudes to environmental issues and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technologies
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology. *Sage Publications*.
- Pali Canon Online - The Original Words of the Buddha. (n.d.). <http://palicanon.org/>*

- Ranawakaarachchi, P. (2019). A comparative study of the Buddhist approach to organizational behavior based on the canonical sources. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.61.6099>
- Sharma, U. (2013). Lessons from the global financial crisis: bringing neoclassical and Buddhist economics theories together to progress global business decision making in the 21st century. *International Journal of Critical Accounting*, 5(3), 250. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijca.2013.055478>
- Suriyankietkaew, S., & Kantamara, P. (2019). Business ethics and spirituality for corporate sustainability: a Buddhism perspective. *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 16(3), 264–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2019.1574598>
- Vu, M. C. (2018). Skillful means - a Buddhist approach to social responsibility. *Social Responsibility Journal*, 14(2), 321–335.