Is There a Link Between Buddhism and Sustainability? Using Mindfulness and Interconnectedness as a
Means to Achieving a Sustainable Civilization

Biology 510: Biogeochemistry, Buddhism, and Global Change

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Since our shift to secular humanism, we have understood Nature and ourselves to be more like operating machines. We are a technologically advanced society but instead of progressing, we are continuing to destroy our planet. Our boundless economic growth has been the primary driver for what most believe to be our society’s success. Our actions reflect the carless and selfish ways of the western world which has ultimately caused a global shift (Aarssen, 2015). The Anthropocene, defined as the time interval where human activities now compete with global geophysical processes, suggests that we must change our relationship with the planet we inhabit before we destroy ourselves (Steffen et al. 2011). It is clear that there are a variety of solutions to this sustainability crisis. I argue that even if all these systems crash, Buddhist philosophies will remain and ultimately act as the fundamental solution. Buddhist philosophies themselves are not the system but rather the beliefs and values applied to a variety of systems. Values will change systems. The philosophies and teachings of mindfulness and interconnectedness will have an impact on civilization’s overall wellbeing and therefore alter the way we think and act with regards to sustainability. In this essay, I will argue that Buddhist philosophical perspectives, including mindfulness, provide the ultimate solution to achieving a sustainable civilization.

**Buddhist Philosophies:**

Most individuals recognize Buddhism and sustainability separately, however, lack a proficient understanding of their interdependence and consequently disregard them without a second thought. What at first glance may seem like complete opposites, actually coexist and compliment one another holistically. This essay strives to create a new vision and approach to looking at sustainability by implementing a value based system to a variety of sustainability efforts. There is a significant difference between a quick fix solution, one that is often temporary, and a fundamental change. The sustainability crisis does not need another quick fix but rather a complete lifestyle change. The Buddhist perspectives outlined in this paper are not presented as religion but rather as ideologies founded on a set of values in order to implement a change for achieving a sustainable civilization. In
Buddhism, nothing remains static, the environment is constantly in a process of change (Sandell, 1987). Although, it is natural for the environment to undergo change, Buddhism states that it is the principles of man which disrupt the natural cycles of evolution (Sandell, 1987). A man’s morals are determined by a mode of thinking and shaped by biological and environmental influences. Our genes have programmed us to be selfish, careless, and power driven species. Whereas, Buddhists advocate interconnectedness, mindfulness, and compassion which promote overall well-being. The earth does not need humanity to sustain itself, but we cannot exist without the earth. These philosophies of interconnectedness and mindfulness require a behavioural change that will test the morals and values of our inter-being.

**What is a sustainable civilization?**

Human activity currently governs 43% of Earth’s land mass and affects double the area (Keim, 2012). The sustainability crisis has gained a significant amount of attention over the years and it is influencing the way our governments and major corporations are shaped. Juech and Michelson (2011), argue that it is time to transition from an individualistic approach to a systems approach. This method is founded on holistic views of interdependence between the economy, politics, technology, environment, and societal values. A sustainable civilization encompasses these various systems, interact, and depend on one another for their success. The focus is primarily on the developed countries because these are seen as the foundation of the sustainability crisis and these countries are the future advocates for implementing its solutions (Fischer et al. 2012). If our global economy continues to cause a significant input-output burden, then a sustainable civilization rooted in both ecosystem and resource management will fail to succeed (Yamamoto and Kuwahara, 2010). Buddhism’s link with environmental thinking is founded on its focus of valuing human life and acknowledging its connection to the natural world through beliefs such as mindfulness, compassion, non-self, and interconnectedness.

**How can mindfulness provide the ultimate solution?**
Mindfulness can allow individuals to focus and refocus on their needs and well-being while shutting out the desires (Ericson et al. 2014). Ericson and colleagues (2014) define mindfulness as “taking note of what is going on within ourselves and outside in the world.” A greater part of mindfulness is an acceptance of what is currently happening, and being able to acknowledge it. This can be extremely uncomfortable at times. We are not human doings, but human beings; we must find harmony between the internal and external world, in order to be our best selves. There is no denying that our western world is consumer driven and we are victims to the hedonic treadmill. This phenomenon reveals that one’s well-being, based on an increase in material goods and income, is short lived because one shortly becomes accustomed to a given level of material prosperity (Ericson et al. 2014). We are only satisfied for a brief moment until we desire and crave the next best thing. Mindfulness is the tool to help promote awareness of one’s beliefs and values through its association with well-being and empathy (Ericson et al. 2014).

In their first study, Brown and Kasser (2005) sampled 206 adolescents recruited from schools. The researchers evaluated their subjective well-being (SWB) by assigning a point scale for the answers to specific questions. Their ecologically responsible behavior (ERB) was measured through 10 environmental behaviours and recorded on a 5-point scale (Brown and Kasser, 2005). The results revealed that personal well-being and ecologically responsible behavior were complementary and therefore indicate that if the individual was happier, they were living more sustainably (Brown and Kasser, 2005). This study also revealed that SWB and ERB were correlated with higher amounts of intrinsic and lower amounts of extrinsic values (Brown and Kasser, 2005). The researchers developed a second study in order to include mindfulness and lifestyle as a promoter to SWB and ERB.

The second study sampled 286 adults who were recruited via a newsletter and magazines over the internet (Brown and Kasser, 2005). The participants were drawn from 42 different U.S states and the District of Columbia (Brown and Kasser, 2005). The study methods replicated those of the first however, this time measured a degree of mindfulness using the “Mindful Attention Awareness Scale”
(Brown and Kasser, 2005). This involved a 15-item trait measure which assesses the frequency of open attention to and awareness of internal states and external events in the present (Brown and Kasser, 2005). The researchers concluded from the study that mindfulness in fact promotes both happiness and ecologically responsible behavior which can in turn validate the positive association between SWB and ERB (Brown and Kasser, 2005). They find that through mindfulness, one’s set of values and behavior is focused more on intrinsic values rather than extrinsic ones (Brown and Kasser, 2005). Contrary to popular belief, there does not have to be a trade-off between one’s personal well-being and an ecological well-being. Instead, acting more mindfully positively correlates with sustainability and well-being.

Amel and colleagues (2009) test the idea that in a consumer society, mindfulness may in fact be a necessary action toward a sustainable future. The researchers sampled a group of 100 participants from a Midwestern sustainability expo where they completed a questionnaire. The questions were founded on Baer et al. (2006) Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) focusing on those surrounding awareness and sensory connections to the natural world (Amel et al., 2009). The researchers then created a Green Scale which measured self-assessment of sustainable behaviours. Results reveal that acting with awareness was associated with acting more sustainably (measured by the Green Scale) (Amel et al., 2009). The researchers found no recordings of low mindfulness and high sustainable behaviours. They were also able to indicate that our autopilots can truly drive our unsustainable behaviours, choosing the easiest options. An interesting result from this study shows some individuals who recorded high mindfulness and low sustainable behaviours (Amel et al., 2009). When taking a closer look, Amel et al. (2009) noticed that these recordings reflected patterns of demographics and found these outliers were brought to the expo by a friend or family member and not out of their own interest. This could reflect the individual’s reluctance to change or denial of a global crisis. If we practice mindfulness, we are increasing our ability to focus our attention while letting go of our attachments to ideas. When we develop this ability, we will be more inclined to let go of our
desires and wants for consumption. Practicing mindfulness is being intentionally aware and if we become truly aware of this sustainability issue, actions can be taken to solve the crisis.

**How can interconnectedness provide the ultimate solution?**

As a species and as individuals, we do not act as if the health of the earth is urgently essential for our survival. When we talk about sustainability, it is important to acknowledge that all things are connected. This includes the systems of economics, society, biology, and nature are really one system of cohesive relationships. Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1991) concept of “inter-being” is a tool for guiding human beings in relating holistically and responsibly with all other beings and parts of nature. The Buddhist concept *paticcasamuppada* reflects on the idea that human beings rely on the environment to live and the environment needs humans to endure. Ecosystem components consist of living components and nonliving components that interconnect to each other in a complex way. A harmonious relationship with nature leading to cooperation with it, should be seen as an alternative and not a compromise.

When dealing with global change it is important to note that every action will become a reaction. This means that our actions will in turn affect the actions of the developing world. Vanel (2009) suggest that global interconnectedness demonstrates the solution for eliminating crisis and she suggests that governments should incorporate the concept of interconnectedness as policy. Achieving a sustainable civilization requires a linkage between what occurred in the past, what is occurring in the moment, and what will happen in the future (OECD, 2008). This shift will require both government incentives as well as societal participation. Buddhist philosophies encourage the idea that if we are aware of the interconnection between humanity and nature, civilization will achieve sustainable well-being. The Buddhist principle of *paticcasamuppāda* describes a connectedness between human beings and the environment (Kalupahana, 2009). A compassionate person lives not for himself but for others. Therefore, it is our compassion that reflects the awareness and understanding of the interconnectedness of all things.
Lu and Schuldt, (2016) sampled a group of 400 Americans and assigned the participants to different message treatments as part of a two (high or low compassion) times two (climate change cue present or not) factorial design. The two groups of participants were either presented with messages unrelated to global change or those with explicit links to the environment. The participants then both wrote a summary of what had happened in the message as well as complete a survey. Their emotions and compassion were measured based on a point scale and a Positive or Negative Affect Schedule containing 10 different items (Lu and Schuldt, 2016). The researchers evaluated the effects of compassion as an emotional framework to increase support for the topic of global change. Their results reveal that the high compassion condition resulted in an increase in self-reported compassion as well as the idea that global crisis was human caused. I argue that there is a direct link between compassion and sustainability and if we can become more compassionate, than perhaps we can consider the human side of global change.

Compassion is a prosocial emotion that is linked to increased care and concern for others, decreased attention to one's own needs, and a motivation to aid another person for their own sake (Lu and Schuldt, 2016). Selfishness is rooted in our genes and is at the foundation of working while on autopilot. If we can change our behaviours towards compassion and the non-self than we will become one step closer to reaching sustainability. Compassion has the potential to enhance social engagement and remind us of our interconnectedness, reducing emotional distance from one another and from the environment. The ‘we’ in well-being” is a reminder that together, we will live a happier and more sustainable life through compassion and holistic values of Buddhist philosophical perspectives.

How do we adopt these Buddhist philosophies for ourselves? A prime example is meditation practices which have proven to nurture both compassion and mindfulness (Lutz et al. 2008). Research by Lutz and colleagues (2008) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison reveal that during meditation, participants actually displayed enhanced emotional processing in brain regions linked to empathy in response to emotion-evoking calls. It does not require special training or years of practice
but rather voluntary time to connect with one’s mind and therefore the rest of civilization. In order to alleviate the negative effects of the sustainability crisis, individuals must acknowledge that these behaviour changes are not sacrifices, rather they are opportunities that extend beyond quick fixes and instead shape support for societal-level contributions.

We as the human species are held accountable for both the problems that have occurred as well as pressured to find solutions. We are a species of consciousness and we have the capacity to understand and analyze this global crisis and its potential solutions. Our consumer driven society obsesses over money where happiness has been misguided as a correlate with the Gross National Product. Studies have shown that above $14,000, the relationship between money and well-being in fact disappears (Leiserowitz et al. 2005). Mohatma Gandhi writes, "as human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world – that is the myth of the atomic age – as in being able to remake ourselves.” Sustainable development will not only require policies but more importantly a change in values and behaviours at the individual level.

I am a firm believer that Buddhist philosophies are at the foundation of this behavioural change and can instill the appropriate values to turn off our autopilot and create a shift in human behaviour. Buddhism shares no cultural boundaries; it moves fluidly from one culture to another. Its practice is internal and rooted in compassion which stems from an understanding that all life-forms are interdependent. Buddhism is not the system itself but a phenomenon that holds values and beliefs to implemented into all systems. Cultural evolution is quicker and can be more powerful than our genetically driven instincts. However, these instincts have been a crippling force holding us back from change. Buddhist philosophical perspectives, including mindfulness and interconnectedness, can trigger a behavioural change and put pressure on these genetic drives through embracing compassion and our inter-being to promote overall well-being. I dare you to spend a day living mindfully, becoming aware of the ground you walk on, the air you breathe, and the small glimpses of life that surround you. Remember, we are all sharing it with you.
Work Cited:

Aarssen, L.W. 2015. What are we? Exploring the evolutionary roots of our future. Chapter 12 – Becoming the solution.


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