The Monks Community Forest

A Buddhist forest project in Cambodia

A Buddhist monk in Cambodia and his prize-winning project working with local people to protect the forest on which they depend.

Discuss with class

Why are trees vital for human, plant and animal welfare?

Things to look out for in the video

Who is taking action?
What are they doing?
What reasons do they give?
What other reasons might there be?

Video (5 minutes)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCtCoU26JYU

Discuss after watching

Whose idea was this project?
Who else was involved?
What difficulties did they have?
What did they do, or learn, which helped them to succeed?

About this project

Bun Saluth is a monk in the Theravada tradition of Buddhism, living in a monastery in northwest Cambodia. Returning from studies abroad he was shocked to discover how much of the local forest had been cut down while he had been away.

In this video he explains how concerned he was about the threat to the local environment posed by logging of forest and the killing of wildlife – both out of concern for the welfare of animals and trees but also for the local population, who depend on the forest and its wildlife for food, both for themselves and to sell to others.



Monks in Cambodia are more commonly seen in their monasteries, meditating, chanting and teaching Buddhism, so Bun Saluth's decision to get involved in a community project to protect a forest was unusual.

Deciding something must be done to protect the rest of the forest, he and his fellow monks first applied for legal authority to oversee the forest. Then they worked with the local community to educate people about the forest's importance, and to patrol it to prevent illegal logging and hunting.

Initially some local people were suspicious that the monks wanted to own the forest themselves. However, in Cambodia, monks are greatly respected, so they soon won the trust of local people. Together they formed community groups and used a range of ways to encourage people not to harm or exploit the forest:

They provided education on the trees' role in absorbing CO2 and on the animals and plants which depend on the trees, upon which the people also depend.

They patrolled the forest. Where they found people hunting or cutting down trees illegally, they gave them a first and second chance, only reporting them to the police if they broke the law a third time.

They labelled the trees and put up the signs you see in the video, which say "monks' community forest" in Khmer, the local language.

As Cambodians greatly respect monks and consider it extremely unethical and disrespectful to harm them, they 'ordained' some of the trees, wrapping them in the yellow robes of a monk.

Trees are significant in the Buddhist tradition. As Bun Saluth says in the video, the Buddha lived outdoors and depended on trees for shelter. In addition, tradition says that Siddhartha (the Buddha-to-be) was meditating under a tree when he gained Enlightenment and became known as 'the Buddha,' 'One who knows or understands [the truth].' The tree has been known ever since as the Bodhi Tree - the tree of Enlightenment.

Engaged Buddhism

This project is an example of what has been termed 'Engaged Buddhism,' a term coined by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh.

This is a modern term sometimes used by Buddhists who believe that Buddhists should be more 'engaged,' or active, in looking after the environment, other people and animals, for example through political activity, or in social projects such as caring for the homeless or for people recovering from drug addiction.

Other Buddhists feel that this kind of ethical activity should be a normal part of Buddhist life anyway, so there is no need to call it Engaged Buddhism.



The Monks Community Forest project was awarded a prize from the United Nations Development Programme for its environmental impact and contribution to mitigating the effects of climate change.

Some relevant Buddhist teachings

Ahimsa (non-harming)
The Five Precepts
The Noble Eightfold Path
Dependent arising or conditionality (which implies interdependence)
Karma/kamma
The Three Marks of conditioned existence (lakkhanas/lakshanas)
The Five Niyamas or orders of conditionality

See the information sheet ***Karma and dependent arising*** for more information.

Ahimsa and The Golden Rule

In Pali and Sanskrit, the word ahimsa means, literally, non-harm. Like many spiritual leaders, the Buddha taught what has become known as The Golden Rule: that just as we ourselves do not wish to suffer so all other beings wish to avoid suffering too, and realising this, with compassion, we will avoid causing harm to others. This takes training: even if we don't mean deliberately to cause harm, all of us behave unkindly sometimes, through simple lack of awareness.

The principle of ahimsa is expressed in the Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts, two sets of training principles offered by the Buddha for those wishing to move towards Enlightenment by developing wisdom and compassion.

The Five Precepts

Behaviour to avoid	Behaviour to develop
Harming living beings	1 loving-kindness
Taking the not-given	2 generosity
Sexual misconduct	3 stillness and contentment
False speech	4 truthful speech
Taking intoxicants that cloud the mind	5 mindfulness, or awareness

More information about the Five Precepts
https://windowsintobuddhism.com/topics-11-16/five-precepts-2/

Reflect and discuss

- Why might Engaged Buddhism need to be called that?
- Why not just call it Buddhism?
- Should people of faith be involved in politics and social action?



More information about the Monks Community Forest

United Nations report
https://www.undp.org/cambodia/publications/case-study-monks-community-forest



Why take care of the earth?

Sometimes people talk about "stewardship" of the earth.

Traditionally a steward is someone who has the job of taking care of land and property on behalf of its owner. People who believe in God may believe that God has created the earth and therefore owns it and has entrusted humans with the practical task of taking care of it.

However, Buddhism does not involve belief in a creator God. This means that stewardship is not really a Buddhist concept. Yet Buddhists have other good reasons to care for the earth, based in the teachings of the Buddha.

Some Buddhist reasons to take care of the earth

- Buddhism teaches that everything depends on other things. This is the teaching of **conditionality,** or **dependent arising.** We live in a complex network of people, animals and plants, and all of these depend in various ways on a healthy planet.
- This means that everything we do has an effect. This is the teaching of karma/kamma.
- The first of the Buddha's five ethical precepts is to avoid causing harm and cultivate kindness. It's an act of kindness to look after the Earth so that people and other living things (and those who come after us) can benefit from an Earth worth living on.
- The Buddha taught that if we care for things, we will become kinder, less greedy, wiser people, expressing awareness, generosity and respect. We will cause less suffering to other living things and become happier ourselves.
- Changing ourselves for the better and benefiting others helps us move gradually towards the perfect wisdom and compassion of Enlightenment.

Reflect and discuss

- Is there open green space in or near your school, home and/or neighbourhood?
- To whom does it belong?
- Who's responsible for looking after it?
- How do you and others behave there?
- How could you help care for it?

Student activity

Research and write about a local environmental project involving local people working together. If possible, go and help with it and keep a diary about what it was like.

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