

Nature As Healer: Theravāda Buddhist Foundations for Contemporary Nature Therapy

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ABSTRACT

The connection between humans and nature represents a significant aspect of cultural and spiritual evolution. The Indian subcontinent, with its diverse human and natural environments, demonstrates this relationship predating the Buddha's enlightenment. However, Buddhist teachings catalyzed a revolution in Indian social and cultural history by integrating traditional ecological wisdom with innovative perspectives. Contemporary scientific approaches, including Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, and Nature Therapy, draw substantially from Buddhist principles. Nature therapy, a form of ecotherapy often attributed to Japanese Shinto and Buddhist practices (shinrin-yoku), warrants examination through its most historical roots. As Buddhism represents the oldest surviving Buddhist tradition, this research investigates Theravāda ecotherapeutic foundations within Theravāda Buddhism through selected discourses in the Suttapitaka and references from the Bhesajakkhandhaka. The findings reveal that Theravāda Buddhism introduced numerous nature-based therapeutic practices, including: mindful walking in natural settings; silent immersion in nature; natural imagery in teaching and guided imagery; preparation protocols for engaging with natural environments; techniques for addressing psychological and physiological challenges in forest settings; community engagement with natural environments; natural metaphors in Buddhist soteriology; environmental ethics emphasizing minimal harm; and intergenerational transmission of nature-based practices. Ultimately, this research reveals that through Theravāda Buddhist teachings, it is possible to discern that the Buddha introduced a systematic approach to nature therapy, predating modern therapeutic frameworks by over two millennia.

Keywords: *Theravāda Buddhism, Ecology, Ecotherapy, Shinrin-Yoku, Theravāda Buddhist Ecotherapy*

The relationship between humans and nature is fundamental to psychological, spiritual, and cultural well-being. The Indian subcontinent exhibits remarkable topographical diversity that has profoundly influenced both human settlement patterns and cultural development. The region encompasses extreme elevations ranging from the Himalayan peaks, which include the world's highest summit (Wilkinson, 2021), to the Meghalaya plateau, which receives the highest recorded annual precipitation globally (Murata, Fujibe, & Uyeda, 2007),

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and extends to the arid Thar Desert ecosystem in the northwestern territories. This pronounced environmental heterogeneity provided varied ecological niches that facilitated the establishment and evolution of early civilizations across the subcontinent, while simultaneously contributing to the formation of distinct religious and philosophical traditions that emerged in response to these diverse landscape conditions. Ancient Indian societies demonstrated profound ecological sensibility that transcended utilitarian perspectives, integrating nature into religious, philosophical, and everyday life (Chatterjee, 2016; Shaw, 2016; Tanwar, 2016), as evidenced by archaeological findings from the Indus Valley Civilization showing sophisticated environmental management alongside reverence for nature (Green & Petrie, 2018; Shirvalkar, 2024). This ecological awareness extended through early Vedic texts dedicated to nature deities (Basham, 1981, pp. 45–65) and the Aranyaka period's forest retreats for spiritual contemplation, establishing cultural foundations that later influenced Buddhist ecological thought with its integration of respect and spiritual engagement with the natural world. In ancient India, particularly during the time of the Buddha, people lived closely with the natural world. The Buddha himself spent much of his life in forests, under trees, and near rivers, regarding natural spaces as essential not merely for daily living but as profound contexts for spiritual growth and transformation.

Theravāda Buddhism, meaning "Doctrine of the Elders," evolved from the earliest Buddhist community focused on preserving the original teachings and monastic discipline (Joon, 2025; Willemen, 2017).

Buddhist teachings are complex, transcending strict categorization, encompassing philosophical inquiry, psychological insight, and ethical practice (Bodhi, 2000, p. 3). After his enlightenment, the Buddha spent forty-five years disseminating the Dhamma, presenting a path distinct from prevailing philosophies of his time. Misinterpretations, such as those by Bhikkhu Sāti regarding consciousness (MN 38), necessitated early efforts to preserve doctrinal integrity. The First Buddhist Council at Rājagaha, led by Mahākassapa, sought to codify the teachings through oral transmission of the Sutta and Vinaya Piṭakas (Hirakawa, 1990, pp. 69–70; Sarao, 2017, pp. 291–292). The "Five Points" controversy, as detailed by Cousins, played a crucial role in the early fragmentation of the Buddhist monastic community (Cousins, 2012, pp. 44–48). Over time, divergences in doctrinal interpretation resulting from this controversy led to the schism between the Mahāsāṅghika and the Sthaviras, the latter evolving into what is now Theravāda Buddhism. This tradition maintained a strong emphasis on experiential validation (*paccattam veditabbo*) and fostered solitary practice in natural environments, reflecting the close interplay between spiritual cultivation and nature. Theravāda Buddhism's profound respect for nature, emphasis on empirical inquiry, and advocacy of mindfulness in wilderness settings provide a vital foundation for understanding its alignment with modern nature-based therapies. Many contemporary therapeutic approaches, such as nature therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), reflect similar insights. Despite the growing popularity of modern nature-based therapies like Japanese Shinrin-yoku (forest bathing), the deep ecological wisdom embedded within Theravāda Buddhist practices remains underexplored in contemporary therapeutic literature.

This study seeks to critically examine Theravāda Buddhist teachings to uncover natural healing methodologies and to evaluate their relevance to modern ecotherapeutic practices. Through a detailed thematic exploration of selected Pali Canon suttas, the study aims to:

1. Identify nature-based contemplative and therapeutic practices in Theravāda Buddhism,
2. Compare these practices with contemporary nature-based therapeutic interventions,

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3. Propose pathways through which ancient Buddhist insights can enhance current mental health frameworks.

Ultimately, this research aspires to contribute to a revitalized understanding of the enduring bond between humans and nature, demonstrating how traditional Buddhist practices can inform and enrich contemporary models of healing through nature.

Ecology, defined in the APA Dictionary of Psychology (2018) as the study of interactions between organisms and their environments, has become increasingly significant in psychological research. Ecopsychology, an emergent discipline, promotes an ecocentric perspective that acknowledges the intrinsic bond between human psychological health and ecological well-being (American Psychological Association, 2018). Conservation psychology extends this perspective by investigating how environmental contexts influence behavior, attitudes, and well-being. Such interdisciplinary fields demonstrate growing recognition that human mental health and environmental health are profoundly interconnected, a premise that resonates strongly with Buddhist teachings on interdependence and conditioned co-arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Organizations like the International Society of Nature and Forest Medicine, the Association of Nature & Forest Therapy, and academic institutions such as the University of British Columbia's Multidisciplinary Institute of Nature Therapy are advancing nature therapy through research, methodology development, and educational programs that legitimize it as a therapeutic modality (Mahesh and Karunanayake, 2025). Research indicates that natural environments can enhance cognitive functioning, reduce stress, foster emotional regulation, and promote overall psychological resilience. These insights converge with Buddhist contemplative traditions that advocate for mindfulness, simplicity, and immersion in nature as integral components of mental development and liberation. Modern therapeutic models increasingly incorporate nature exposure as an essential component of mental health interventions. Although the APA Dictionary of Psychology does not formally list "ecotherapy" as a clinical modality, the American Psychological Association acknowledges the mental health benefits associated with contact with natural environments (Weir, 2020). Ecotherapy broadly refers to practices that intentionally engage human-nature relationships to promote psychological, emotional, and physiological healing (Doherty, 2016, pp. 22–48; Isham, Hurst, & Jackson, 2025). One prominent example is *Shinrin-Yoku* or "forest bathing," originating in Japan in the 1980s. *Shinrin-Yoku* emphasizes slow, mindful engagement with the forest environment through all five senses, encouraging an immersive sensory experience that fosters relaxation and well-being (Hansen, Jones, & Tocchini, 2017; Park et al., 2010; Wen et al., 2019). Rooted in traditional Shinto and Buddhist reverence for nature (Davis, 2025), *Shinrin-Yoku* has been scientifically validated for its effectiveness in reducing stress markers, improving mood, enhancing immune functioning, and decreasing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Bonham-Corcoran, O'Neill, & Burke, 2022; Park, Kim, Lee, & Park, 2021). Religious beliefs are an important element in shaping ethical or philosophical principles; according to Professor of Buddhist philosophy, Shōsen Miyamoto (1967), prior to the introduction of Buddhism into Japan in the sixth century no such philosophical thought existed in Japan (Kagawa-Fox, 2010). These perspectives collectively suggest that Buddhist teachings contain foundational elements of what might be considered "environmental ethics."

Despite the global recognition of *Shinrin-Yoku* and other nature-based interventions, the profound ecological sensibility embedded within Theravāda Buddhist practices remains relatively underutilized in contemporary ecotherapeutic discourse. The present study thus seeks to bridge this gap by examining the ecological dimensions of Theravāda Buddhist teachings and their potential applications in modern mental health practices, ultimately

contributing to a more holistic understanding of human-nature relationships in psychological well-being.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology to explore nature therapeutic elements in Theravāda Buddhist texts and their relationship to contemporary nature-based therapeutic approaches. The research utilizes primary textual sources, scholarly literature, and empirical studies to establish meaningful connections between ancient wisdom traditions and modern therapeutic practices.

Data Sources

Primary textual data were derived from the following sources:

Selected suttas from the Pali Canon's Sutta Piṭaka, specifically: *Dīgha Nikāya* (the "long" discourses), *Majjhima Nikāya* (the "middle-length" discourses), *Samyutta Nikāya* (the "connected" discourses), *Khuddaka Nikāya* (the "minor collection"). The *Bhesajjakkhandhaka* section of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, which addresses medicinal practices and physiological wellbeing in relation to wilderness environments. All Pali texts and their English translations were accessed through authenticated digital repositories, primarily 'SuttaCentral' and 'Access to Insight' websites, ensuring textual consistency and translation accuracy.

Contemporary nature therapy research was sourced from Scopus-indexed journals to ensure scholarly rigor and scientific validity. Additional relevant books and research articles were consulted to provide contextual and theoretical frameworks.

Analytical Approach

The study implemented an integrated analytical framework combining thematic and comparative analyses:

- 1. Thematic Analysis:** Canonical texts were systematically examined to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and practices related to nature engagement and therapeutic outcomes. These were organized into conceptual categories representing distinct naturetherapeutic approaches within the Theravāda tradition.
- 2. Comparative Analysis:** Within each identified thematic category, direct comparisons were made between Theravāda Buddhist approaches and techniques documented in contemporary nature therapy research.
- 3. The analysis focused on:** What specific nature therapeutic elements can be identified within the Pali Canon? How do these elements compare with frameworks and practices in modern nature-based therapeutic interventions? What potential exists for developing clinically relevant Theravāda Buddhist-Nature Therapy syntheses?

This integrated methodological approach allowed for the systematic identification of parallels, divergences, and potential complementarities between ancient Buddhist practices and modern therapeutic interventions within a coherent thematic structure.

Thematic Exploration and Comparative Framework

The Pali Canon richly documents the Buddha's profound affinity for natural environments. His life narrative is deeply intertwined with forests, riverbanks, mountains, and groves. Notably, the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN 16) recounts that during his final journey, the Buddha deliberately chose to rest and teach in natural settings, culminating in his Parinibbāna beneath the twin Sal trees at Kusinārā. The selection of nature as the context for crucial events,

birth at Lumbinī Grove, enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the first sermon at the Deer Park in Isipatana, and final passing amidst a forest, indicates a consistent pattern wherein nature serves as both a physical and symbolic environment for spiritual realization. The Buddha's decision to deliver teachings from locations such as the Bamboo Grove - *Siṅgālasutta* (DN 31), the *Gaggara* Lotus Pond - *Soṇadaṇḍasutta* (DN 4), and the Vulture's Peak – *Udumbarikasutta* (DN 25), further highlights the instrumental role of natural settings in his pedagogical method. As noted in the *Udumbarikasutta*, even his contemporaries observed his preference for forests, with Nigrodha commenting on the Buddha's propensity to reside "in the forest and empty huts."

This consistent choice underscores an experiential understanding that natural settings promote mindfulness (*sati*), tranquility, and deep introspection, key states conducive to both psychological healing and spiritual progress.

The Buddhist ethical framework, especially within Theravāda, articulates an implicit environmental ethic grounded in non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and interdependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Shaw distinguishes between "eco-apologists," who see Buddhism as inherently eco-friendly, and "eco-critics," who caution against retrofitting environmentalist ideals onto ancient texts (Shaw, 2016, p. 525). Nevertheless, key suttas demonstrate a clear reverence for nature and prescribe ethical relationships toward it. For instance, the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1) explicitly states that the ascetic Gotama refrains from injuring plants and seeds, affirming a respect for vegetal life despite the absence of attribution of sentience. Moreover, the *Gandhatthenasutta* (SN 9.14) offers a striking narrative where a forest deity rebukes a monk for sniffing a lotus flower without permission, equating even minor, unmindful interactions with nature to ethical lapses. Such stringent ethical sensitivity anticipates the principles of Leave No Trace environmental ethics and minimal impact philosophy in contemporary ecological thought. The *Kūṭadanta Sutta* further illustrates the Buddha's rejection of animal sacrifice, emphasizing compassionate stewardship toward non-human beings (Rhys Davids, 1968). After receiving the Buddha's counsel, Brahmin *Kūṭadanta* liberates hundreds of animals, a gesture aligning closely with modern conservation and animal welfare ethics. Finally, suttas such as the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (DN 8) describe the establishment of deer parks as sanctuaries where animals were protected, representing an ancient model of integrated spiritual and environmental preservation.

Nature Therapy Techniques in the Suttas

Beyond ethical considerations, the Buddha's teachings embed specific techniques that parallel modern ecotherapy practices.

1. Mindful Walking in Natural Settings

The *Udumbarikasutta* (DN 25) describes the Buddha walking mindfully through a peacock feeding ground by the *Sumāgadhā River*. This practice resonates strongly with contemporary mindful walking retreats, shown to improve psychological resilience, particularly among individuals with depressive symptoms (Schuling et al., 2018).

2. Silent Immersion in Nature

The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2) captures the scene where 1,250 monks remain in perfect silence at Jivaka's Mango Grove. Such silent retreats in nature are now recognized for fostering profound psychological benefits, enhancing sensory awareness, and promoting emotional regulation.

3. Natural Imagery in Teaching

Natural Imagery in Teaching employs guided imagery as a behavioral therapy technique that uses positive thoughts or images to regulate negative emotions (Kress, Dixon, & Shannonhouse, 2013), reduce stress, and enhance immune function (Trakhtenberg, 2008). Studies show that guided imagery with progressive deep muscle relaxation significantly decreases chronic stress perception and improves mental health-related quality of life (Stefanelli, 2025). Evidence suggests the Buddha and his disciples used similar "nature-related guided imagery" techniques in their teachings. The Dhammapada's Puppavagga uses floral imagery as metaphorical frameworks, while the *Pupphasutta* (SN 22.94) employs the lotus as a self-identification metaphor. The *Kakacūpama Sutta* (MN 21) compares a grove of sal trees to the cultivation of wholesome qualities in the mind. The *Mahāgosīngasutta* (MN 32) demonstrates how Theravāda Buddhism integrates natural settings to foster mindfulness and introspection. Within psychoanalytic theory, moral anxiety emerges from intrapsychic conflict between the superego and other components of the psyche (Carveth, 2017). The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2) provides a compelling illustration of nature-based therapeutic intervention. King Ajātasattu, tormented by moral anxiety after parricide, seeks solace with the Buddha. In response, the Buddha employs guided imagery, invoking metaphors of lotus ponds, mountain lakes, and reeds to facilitate cognitive and emotional restructuring. Recent findings by Nguyen and Brymer (2018) confirm that nature-based guided imagery outperforms urban imagery in reducing anxiety. The Buddha's therapeutic strategy thus mirrors modern interventions in both technique and effect. This episode exemplifies how nature imagery catalyzes psychological healing, promotes self-acceptance, and reorients existential despair into ethical regeneration.

4. Mindfulness Meditation in Natural Environments

Mindfulness, defined as "being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present", has deep roots in Buddhist tradition where nature and meditation are intrinsically connected. Unsworth, Palicki, and Lustig found that mindful meditation in natural settings reconnects urban adults with the environment, enhancing both psychological well-being and ecological consciousness, aligning with Kellert's observation that nature fulfills three fundamental needs in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000): autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Research by Howell et al (2011) demonstrates that nature connectedness and mindfulness positively correlate through their mutual contribution to psychological health. The *Araññasutta* (SN 1.10) presents a dialogue about wilderness dwelling, with the Buddha explaining that forest-dwellers "don't grieve for the past, nor do they pray for the future; they feed on whatever comes that day, that's why their complexion's so clear." In the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta* (MN 10), the Buddha establishes mindfulness meditation as the essential pathway to liberation, while the *Sampasādanīyasutta* (DN 28) and *Brahmasutta* (SN 47.18) reinforce its significance. Contemporary mindfulness-based interventions maintain connections to Buddhist origins, with Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) drawing directly from Buddhist practices while adapting them for secular contexts (Schlieter, 2017). Modern mindfulness approaches are inspired by *Theravāda* texts (Sharf, 2015), with Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) emerging from early MBSR work (Surya et al., 2020). These practices have gained mainstream adoption, with health organizations now recommending mindfulness-based therapy for specific depression treatments (Shonin et al., 2014). Significantly, the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta* explicitly recommends natural settings for mindfulness practice: "*arañña-gato vā rukkha-mūla-gato vā suññ-āgāra-gato vā...*" (DN 2) indicating the Buddha's recognition of natural environments as conducive to developing mindfulness and achieving therapeutic benefits.

5. Person-Environment Fit in Buddhist Contemplative Practice

Modern Person-Environment (P-E) Fit Theory posits that psychological well-being is optimized when individual characteristics align with environmental features (Edwards et al., 2006). This idea resonates with Buddhist instructions in the *Vanapatthasutta* (MN 17), where the Buddha advises monks to mindfully assess whether specific forest settings support or hinder their mental development. If a particular "jungle thicket" proves unsuitable for deepening meditation, practitioners are instructed to move to a more conducive environment. This mirrors the P-E Fit principle that not all environments benefit everyone equally, necessitating thoughtful matching between person and place. Recent studies, such as those by Kühner, Stein, and Zacher, confirm that enhancing P-E Fit improves psychological outcomes, including workplace satisfaction and environmental engagement (Kühner et al., 2024). In the Buddhist context, proper environmental selection directly supports the cultivation of insight (*vipassanā*) and tranquility (*samatha*), reinforcing that nature-based therapy must also consider individual needs and environmental compatibility. Moreover, this reflects a form of person-centered therapeutic reasoning, paralleling Carl Rogers' humanistic approach, emphasizing conditions supportive of self-actualization.

Priorities and Adaptation in Wilderness Therapy

The *Vanapatthasutta* further stresses that spiritual growth should take precedence over material comfort. The Buddha acknowledges that forest living may entail discomfort but affirms that enduring temporary hardship for the sake of inner liberation is worthwhile. This principle aligns with contemporary wilderness therapy, where participants often experience initial physical or psychological discomfort, which eventually catalyzes therapeutic breakthroughs (Russell & Hendee, 2000). Additionally, the Buddha recommends long-term environmental immersion for those who flourish in natural settings, anticipating research findings that extended exposure to nature produces cumulative mental health benefits (Bratman et al., 2019).

Reflection and reassessment of one's relationship with nature, as the sutta advises, mirrors modern ecological identity development, wherein individuals continually negotiate and deepen their bond with the natural world (Clayton, 2003).

Holistic Preparation for Wilderness Engagement

The *Bhayabherava Sutta* (MN 4) provides crucial guidance on preparing for solitary practice in potentially fear-inducing wilderness settings. Psychological impediments such as sensual craving (*kāmacchanda*), ill-will (*vyāpāda*), torpor (*thīna-middha*), restlessness (*uddhacca-kukkucca*), and doubt (*vicikicchā*) must be overcome to establish inner stability.

The Buddha's recommended antidotes, contentment (*santutthi*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), energy (*virīya*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*), anticipate modern therapeutic strategies for managing anxiety in wilderness therapy, including cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, and emotional regulation.

Additionally, the Buddha prescribes direct exposure therapy: encountering fear while walking, sitting, standing, or lying down without fleeing. This gradual desensitization strategy mirrors modern cognitive-behavioral techniques for fear reduction and resilience building (Foa & Kozak, 1986).

Furthermore, the *Bhesajjakkhandhaka* (*Khandhaka 6*) in the *Vinaya* Piṭaka evidences physical preparation, emphasizing the importance of maintaining bodily health alongside mental

readiness for wilderness practice, a holistic health model highly consonant with modern integrative therapies.

Community, Nature, and Spiritual Gathering

The *Gaggarāsutta* (SN 8.11) recounts a spiritual assembly at the *Gaggarā* Lotus Pond involving monks, lay followers, and deities. This community gathering in a natural setting highlights a collective dimension of ecotherapy: how nature can strengthen social bonds and communal spiritual practice. Research in environmental psychology similarly confirms that nature-based group activities enhance social connectedness, collective resilience, and community mental health (Marselle et al., 2019; Suto et al., 2021). Venerable Vaṅgīsa's poetic eulogy, likening the Buddha's radiance to the moon and sun—demonstrates how natural metaphors facilitate profound expressions of reverence and spiritual aspiration, further embedding ecological consciousness within Buddhist community life.

Sacred Activism and Environmental Restoration

The *Vanaropasutta* (SN 1.47) offers a remarkable precedent for sacred activism: active engagement in planting parks, building bridges, wells, and monastic residences is praised as meritorious acts whose "merit grows by day and night." This proactive stance toward environmental enhancement mirrors modern horticultural therapy and green infrastructure initiatives, which demonstrate measurable psychological, social, and ecological benefits (Soga et al., 2017). In contemporary therapeutic contexts, interventions like community gardening, urban greening, and habitat restoration are increasingly utilized to address depression, anxiety, and community disintegration. The American Horticultural Therapy Association traces the formal recognition of horticultural therapy to Dr. Benjamin Rush's 19th-century observations documenting positive outcomes among patients with mental illness (American Horticultural Therapy Association, n.d.). This historical perspective has been substantiated by contemporary research, including Adevi and Mårtensson's (2013) investigation of a Swedish rehabilitation program, which revealed that garden environments facilitated participants' physical and psychological recovery while simultaneously fostering social connections within a tranquil and meaningful setting. Thus, early Buddhist teachings not only advocate passive reverence for nature but also encourage its restorative cultivation, reflecting a sophisticated, integrated view of psychological healing, ethical action, and environmental stewardship.

Ecological Affect in Early Buddhist Poetry

The verses of forest-dwelling monks like Venerable Vanavaccha capture an affective intimacy with nature, wherein natural features actively "refresh" (ramayanti) the mind.

"The color of blue-dark clouds, glistening,
cooled with the waters of clear-flowing streams,
covered with ladybugs: those rocky crags refresh me." (Thag 1.13)

This language indicates a perception of nature as a co-regulator of emotional states, a notion now substantiated by studies on affective restoration in natural environments (Lim et al., 2020).

Similarly, Usabha's verses (Thag 1.110) liken natural flourishing to psychological growth, indicating a keen ecological attunement that nurtures both aesthetic appreciation and existential insight. The intergenerational transmission of nature-based contemplative practice in early Buddhism is clearly evidenced in the verses attributed to Venerable Vanavaccha's pupil. The pupil recounts his teacher's instruction: "My preceptor said to me: Let's go from here, Sivaka. My body stays in the village, my mind has gone to the wilds. Even though I'm

lying down, I go. There's no tying down one who knows" (Thag 1.14). This verse demonstrates that senior monks systematically passed down the importance of wilderness engagement to their disciples, continuing a tradition rooted in the Buddha's own emphasis on dwelling in natural environments. The teaching reflects a deliberate lineage of transmitting nature-based contemplative practices across generations, ensuring that connection to wilderness remained a living element within Buddhist monastic training.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study systematically examined the ecotherapeutic elements within *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings through a thematic and comparative analysis of selected Pali suttas and modern nature-based therapies. The findings reveal a profound and intentional integration of natural environments into Buddhist contemplative practices, psychological healing, and ethical frameworks, which aligns closely with contemporary ecotherapeutic principles. The research underscores the potential for developing a synthesized approach, *Theravāda* Buddhist Nature Therapy, that bridges ancient wisdom with modern clinical applications.

The analysis identified several key themes in the Pali Canon that resonate with modern nature therapy:

1. **Nature as a Therapeutic Setting:** The Buddha consistently chose natural environments, forests, riverbanks, and groves, for teaching and meditation, recognizing their inherent capacity to foster mindfulness, clarity, and emotional well-being. This mirrors contemporary practices like forest bathing, where immersion in nature is used to reduce stress and enhance mental health.
2. **Mindfulness and Nature Connection:** *Theravāda* Buddhism emphasizes mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) in natural settings, a practice now validated by modern psychology for its restorative effects on attention and emotional regulation. The *Araññasutta* and *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta* highlight how wilderness immersion combined with present-moment awareness yields psychological benefits, paralleling evidence from Attention Restoration Theory.
3. **Guided Nature Imagery:** The Buddha employed vivid natural metaphors (e.g., lotus flowers, mountain lakes) to convey spiritual and psychological insights, akin to modern guided imagery techniques used in therapy to alleviate anxiety and promote resilience.
4. **Person-Environment Fit:** The *Vanapatthasutta* prescribes an individualized approach to selecting natural environments for contemplative practice, anticipating modern theories of person-environment compatibility in therapeutic settings.
5. **Ethical Stewardship and Active Engagement:** The *Vanaropasutta* and *Brahmajāla Sutta* advocate not only non-harm toward nature but also active environmental stewardship (e.g., planting groves, protecting wildlife), aligning with horticultural therapy and conservation psychology.

The comparative framework demonstrated that *Theravāda* Buddhism's ecological consciousness is not merely incidental but a structured component of its soteriological path. The tradition's emphasis on direct experience (*paccattam veditabbo*) and empirical inquiry (*ehi-passiko*) into nature's role in mental transformation provides a robust foundation for ecotherapy. Notably, the Buddha's teachings on overcoming fear in wilderness (*Bhayabheravasutta*) and the intergenerational transmission of nature-based practices (e.g., Venerable *Vanavaccha's* Pupil's verses) reveal a sophisticated understanding of nature's therapeutic mechanisms.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER DIRECTION

The integration of Theravāda Buddhist principles with modern nature therapy yields three key contributions:

- **Clinical Applications:** Integrative interventions could combine mindfulness-based therapies (e.g., MBSR or MBCT) with guided nature immersion, drawing on Buddhist traditions of wilderness retreats and natural imagery.
- **Cultural Relevance:** In Buddhist-majority societies, such an approach provides a culturally congruent framework for mental health care that bridges traditional practices and contemporary therapeutic needs.
- **Environmental Psychology:** Theravāda's ecological ethics (e.g., the *Vanaropasutta*) can inform sustainable behavior by framing environmental conservation as both spiritually meritorious and psychologically beneficial.

Future research should empirically evaluate interventions based on *Theravāda* Buddhist nature therapy. For example, structured forest retreats incorporating sutta-based meditations could be tested to determine their efficacy relative to conventional nature therapy approaches. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaboration among Buddhist scholars, ecopsychologists, and clinicians may further refine these integrative models. This study highlights *Theravāda* Buddhism as a largely underexplored source of ecotherapeutic knowledge, offering enduring perspectives on the relationship between human well-being and the natural environment. Integrating these principles into contemporary therapeutic frameworks has the potential to broaden the scope of mental health interventions, fostering individual healing while cultivating an ethic of ecological interconnectedness.

Abbreviations

- DN – Dīgha Nikāya: (The "Long Discourses" of the Buddha)
- MN – Majjhima Nikāya: (The "Middle Discourses" of the Buddha)
- SN – Saṃyutta Nikāya: (The "Linked Discourses" – grouped by subject)
- Thag – Theragāthā: (Verses of the Elder Monks)
- Kd – Khandhaka: (Part of the Vinaya Piṭaka, includes Bhesajjakhandhaka)
- Dhp – Dhammapada: (A collection of verses—one of the most beloved Pāli texts)

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