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**DUKKHA AND INTEGRAL ECOLOGY**  
**Thinking Ecologically in Post-War Sri Lanka**

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**Abstract**

Ecological thinking in contexts such as Sri Lanka, which is recovering from long-term war, must attend to multiple dimensions of the ecological crisis. At first, it is important to consider the ways in which a war that has ranged for several decades has had significant ecological impacts on land, air, and waterways. It is necessary to understand that climate events—heavy flooding and tsunamis—continued to occur throughout the thirty years of war between the Sri Lankan State and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). A further complexity to add here is the fact that the state mechanism has consistently grabbed land from minority communities, particularly the Tamil and Indigenous communities, during the war years. This has worked to degrade the relationship between communities and their sacred lands. This paper reflects upon these multiple impacts and argues for the importance of dukkha or suffering as a concept that must be centered in ecotheology focused on Sri Lanka. The article is written in dialogue with Sister Rasika Pieris's work, which narrativizes suffering from the position of Buddhist and Catholic widows in Sri Lanka, to consider how we might mourn with Creation in the same way as we might with a widow. How do we think about suffering when Creation is multiply ravaged? What are the implications for ecotheology?

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, dukkha, post-war ecotheology, environmental suffering

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## **DUKKHA DAN EKOLOGI INTEGRAL**

### **Berpikir secara Ekologis di Sri Lanka Pasca-Perang**

#### **Abstrak**

Pemikiran ekologis dalam konteks seperti Sri Lanka, yang sedang memulihkan diri pasca perang berkepanjangan, harus memperhatikan berbagai dimensi krisis ekologis. Pertama-tama, penting untuk mempertimbangkan bagaimana perang yang berlangsung selama beberapa dekade telah membawa dampak ekologis yang signifikan terhadap daratan, udara, dan perairan. Perlu dipahami bahwa bencana-bencana alam—seperti banjir besar dan tsunami—terus terjadi selama 30 tahun peperangan antara negara Sri Lanka dan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Kompleksitas lain yang perlu ditambahkan di sini ialah fakta bahwa perangkat negara telah secara konsisten mengambil tanah dari kaum minoritas selama peperangan berlangsung, terutama dari komunitas Tamil dan pribumi. Hal ini telah merusak relasi antara komunitas-komunitas tersebut dan tanah sakral. Artikel ini merefleksikan berbagai dampak ini dan mengusulkan pentingnya *dukkha* atau penderitaan sebagai sebuah konsep sentral dalam ekoteologi Sri Lanka. Artikel ini ditulis dalam dialog dengan karya Suster Rasika Pieris, yang menarasikan penderitaan dari perspektif janda-janda Buddha dan Katolik di Sri Lanka untuk memikirkan bagaimana kita bisa meratap bersama Ciptaan dengan cara yang sama kita meratap bersama seorang janda. Bagaimana kita berpikir tentang penderitaan ketika Ciptaan dihancurkan bertubi-tubi? Apa implikasinya bagi ekoteologi?

**Kata-kata Kunci:** Sri Lanka, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, *dukkha*, ekoteologi pasca-perang, penderitaan lingkungan

#### **Introduction**

The ecological crisis in which we find ourselves is understood to be a polycrisis. That is, it presents us with a complex set of interactions between problems, uncontrollable processes, and varying antagonisms between competing ideologies.<sup>1</sup> It is also

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern, *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium*, Advances in Systems Theory, Complexity, and the Human Sciences (Hampton Press, 1999); J. Adam Tooze, *Shutdown: How COVID Shook the World's Economy*, Penguin Economics (Penguin Books, 2023); Daniel Hoyer et al., “Navigating Polycrisis: Long-Run Socio-Cultural Factors Shape Response to Changing Climate,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 378, no. 1889 (November 2023): 20220402, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2022.0402>.

a crisis not only of this contemporary time, but one which has been occurring for decades, due to centuries of the extraction of natural resources and human labor.<sup>2</sup> In a country such as Sri Lanka, we can outline a case study where both history and the present are persistently in polycrisis, and through which we can see the ecological crises manifest in various ways: from the ravages of the landscape due to war, to colonial laws that extracted resources from the land; from land grabs that disenfranchised minority and indigenous communities, to present day tourism and capitalist development which destroys the environment. As Sharae Deckard has observed, when we analyze the poetry and novels that come out of Sri Lanka, we frequently see the trope of a “blood-soaked landscape.”<sup>3</sup> This evocation is done in order to center the retraumatization of both human and land, where deathscapes are created by heavy militarization, deforestation, land grabs, burning of crops and villages, and the destruction of infrastructure. In both direct and indirect ways, in Sri Lanka, we see the constant radical reorganization of nature to eliminate life and sustain suffering and death.

In this article, I draw on research that looks at suffering and lived experience, working primarily with the concept of *dukkha* in the Eastern tradition. I present Sri Lanka as a case study of multiple crises and multiple sufferings and draw from other Sri Lankan scholars who contemplate the problem of suffering and the need for liberation. The various examples drawn from the Sri Lankan case are not meant to be comprehensive but rather, indicative, of the different ways in which ecological suffering occurs. The methodology used for this paper is primarily documentary research into the different environmental injustices present in Sri Lanka. For this documentary section, I drew on sources from political science, critical geography, environmental science, and indigenous studies, as well as reports written by such agencies as the UNHCR, the International Red Cross, Sri Lanka’s Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources, as well as the World Health Organization. For the explorations of *dukkha* and other discussions on

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<sup>2</sup> Laleh Khalili, *Extractive Capitalism: How Commodities and Cronyism Drive the Global Economy* (Verso, 2025); Gurinder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood, “The Trap of ‘Capitalism,’ Racial or Otherwise,” *European Journal of Sociology* 64, no. 2 (August 2023): 163–72, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000397562300036X>; Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021); Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (Polity, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Sharae Deckard, “The Land Was Wounded: War, Ecologies, Commodity Frontiers, and Sri Lankan Literature,” in *Ecocriticism of the Global South*, ed. Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and Vidya Sarveswaran (Lexington, 2015), 35–54.

ecotheology in Sri Lanka, I worked primarily with the scholarship of a variety of Sri Lankan voices, particularly Rasika Pieris. I also draw, throughout, from poetry from Sri Lanka that underscores the emotive natures of these crises.

This article primarily wishes to focus on the environmental crisis in Sri Lanka, looking at issues such as natural disasters, government policy, rapacious development, securitization, militarization, and oppression of minorities, which have exacerbated the environmental crisis. Some of the environmental damage done to the island occurred during thirty years of physical conflict, as well as targeted land grabs that the ethnonationalist state has made from minority communities such as the Tamil, Muslim, and Indigenous communities. It also indicates how training and other military actions by the LTTE also resulted in, for example, the felling of trees in forests. What the Sri Lankan state and its military did to the Tamil population was brutal and, in many ways, is still ongoing. Several scholars also point out that the last few years of the physical conflict may well fall under the definition of genocide.<sup>4</sup> The Sri Lankan state is ethnonationalist and driven by Buddhist fundamentalist ideology, and therefore has enacted historical and current violence on minority populations, particularly the Tamil community. In the present era, a lot of this violence has been visited on the Muslim community. This essay looks not only at how environmental damage is caused by state oppression and violence, but also at other causes such as rapacious development.

### Sri Lanka as a Land of Multiple Crises

Suffering, we might argue, hangs over the island nation, manifesting in these multiple ways and affecting all living things. In Sri Lanka, many moments of grief occur publicly and explicitly. Mourners will cast up their wailing loudly, with their hands thrown into the air. This grief is, importantly, a public spectacle; it must be

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Powell and Amarnath Amarasingam, “Atrocity and Proto-Genocide in Sri Lanka,” in *Understanding Atrocities: Remembering, Representing, and Teaching Genocide*, ed. Scott W. Murray (University of Calgary Press, 2016), 19–47; Oliver Walton, “Framing Disputes and Organizational Legitimation: UK-Based Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora Groups’ Use of the ‘Genocide’ Frame since 2009,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 6 (2015): 959–75; Vennila Mathialagan, “The Island’s Red Herring: Sri Lanka’s Sham Transitional Justice Process After 2009,” *The Social Contract* 17, no. 1 (2025); Mayooran Thevarajah, “The Genocide the World Forgot: The Attempted Erasure of Eelam Tamils in Sri Lanka,” May 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4454835>.

lived in an outright manner in order to be experienced, and also for the process of letting go of suffering. Suffering is not a quiet process, and it demands reflection and learning. Pireeni Sundaralingam provides vivid images of this kind of suffering and learning in her poem “Lot’s Wives”:

We stood,  
As women before us have stood,  
looking back at our burning cities,  
watching the smoke  
wise from our empty homes....  
Such death. The smell of justice  
drifting on burning wind.<sup>5</sup>

For ecotheologians, the polycrisis raises a significant question: how does the reality of suffering affect/effect how we theologize? How does the lived experience of suffering, especially that which arises from multiple points of crisis, affect ecotheology? Can we, as theologians, enter into or accompany the suffering of all sentient beings?<sup>6</sup> These discussions are intimately linked to the work of ecojustice within ecotheology. This means not only studying what is needed to protect the environment, but also challenging the multinational corporations, capitalism, power structures, and government inaction that cause and protract the suffering of all of Creation. There is a need to continue to center an ethics that has its basis in the reality of those who suffer, since they are victims of exclusion and poverty, and are more threatened by the current global economic policies that generate injustice and inequality. And this ethics has the capacity to understand the multiple linkages between, for example, ecological degradation and violent conflict.

### A Long, Brutal War

From July 1983 to May 2009, a civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan ethnonationalist state erupted. The ravages of this war in terms of its human, material, economic, and psychological costs are well

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<sup>5</sup> Pireeni Sundaralingam, “Lot’s Wives,” in *Out of Sri Lanka: Tamil, Sinhala and English Poetry from Sri Lanka and Its Diasporas*, ed. Vidyan Ravinthiran, Seni Seneviratne, and Shash Trevett (Bloodaxe Books, 2023), 360–61.

<sup>6</sup> Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God’s Redemptive Suffering with Creatures*, Duffy Lectures in Global Christianity (Orbis Books, 2019).

documented.<sup>7</sup> Attention has been paid to the environmental cost of such a long-term war, particularly due to the use of heavy shelling by the Sri Lankan army in the last few months of the war. This included the Sri Lankan army's use of acid, thermobaric bombs, cluster bomb munitions, and mines.<sup>8</sup> These bombs not only destroyed buildings and human lives but also vegetation and wildlife. Jennifer Dathan notes how there were an estimated five million Palmyra palms at the beginning of the war, but these have been almost entirely decimated.<sup>9</sup> Trees were chopped down by aerial shelling or cut by the state army or the LTTE to make shelters, bunkers, or for use as fuel. Landmines buried by the Sri Lankan state army also prevented farmers from being able to sow and manage crops. Soil erosion caused by long-term fighting also destabilized traditional methods of farming and land maintenance. The damage done to the soil and water wells, as well as the residue of large craters, has affected agricultural productivity.<sup>10</sup> Landmines affect human and non-human populations, with scholars noting the significant impact on large mammals with slow reproductive rates.<sup>11</sup> The constant uprooting and movement of human populations as they fled the fighting also meant more and more encroachment on wildlife habitats, affecting primarily deer and

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<sup>7</sup> An inexhaustive list includes: Nisha Arunatilake, Sisira Jayasuriya, and Saman Kelegama, "The Economic Cost of the War in Sri Lanka," *World Development* 29, no. 9 (September 2001): 1483–1500, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(01\)00056-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(01)00056-0); Samanth Subramanian, *This Divided Island: Life, Death, and the Sri Lankan War* (Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Press, 2015); Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (Routledge, 1990); Nira Wickramasinghe, "Sri Lanka's Conflict: Culture and Lineages of the Past," *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 1 (2006): 107–24; Daya Somasundaram, "Collective Trauma in Northern Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Psychosocial-Ecological Study," *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* 1, no. 1 (2007): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1752-4458-1-5>.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Detlef Briesen, ed., *Armed Conflict and Environment: From World War II to Contemporary Asymmetric Warfare* (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845293868>.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Dathan, "Environmental Impacts from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Sri Lanka," Action on Armed Violence, May 2018, <https://aoav.org.uk/2018/the-reverberating-environmental-impacts-from-the-use-of-explosive-weapons-in-sri-lanka/>; Urmi Sengupta and Kenneth Nielsen, *The Politics of Urban Land in South Asia: Current Challenges and New Directions* (Routledge India, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003530664>.

<sup>10</sup> Paola Bianca Camisani, "Sri Lanka: A Political Ecology of Socio-Environmental Conflicts and Development Projects," *Sustainability Science* 13, no. 3 (May 2018): 693–707, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0544-7>.

<sup>11</sup> Tharman Saverimuttu, Nadarajah Sriskandarajah, and V. I. S. Jayapalan, "Ecological Consequences of the War in the Tamil Homeland in Sri Lanka," in *Proceedings of International Conference on Tamil Nationhood & Search for Peace in Sri Lanka* (1999).

elephant populations, which need significant areas in which to forage and feed.<sup>12</sup>

The LTTE based their training ground in the forests of the North and the East, and the State army carried out a series of raids and bombing campaigns. These exercises caused significant disruptions to the dry-zone forests and other forms of vegetation in the area.<sup>13</sup> There was also significant clearing of mangroves for firewood and security reasons, which had indirect effects on fish species, prawns, and migratory birds that use mangroves as breeding grounds.<sup>14</sup> Mangroves are also known for reducing beach erosion by holding the soil in place and,<sup>15</sup> as such, the mangroves support a rich ecosystem of marine life. This brief and inexhaustive summary indicates the importance of understanding that the grief and suffering endured during the civil war was not only confined to human populations, but also to all sentient beings, and left large, visible, and perhaps unhealable scars upon the landscape. This is described well in the poem *Gini wadunu Piyapath* by the poet Sandarasee Sudusinghe,

The blue sky turned black  
 Even the God Nallur left  
 The smell of humanity dried  
 And for a second, the wind stopped right there.<sup>16</sup>

### The Reclamation of Land

This environmental suffering extends beyond North and the East. Since 1978, successive Sri Lankan governments have, using colonial-era laws, facilitated a significant amount of urban expansion through the reclamation of urban wetlands.<sup>17</sup> The sole driver of these acquisitions has been neo-liberal development and

<sup>12</sup> B. Devoic, "Sri Lanka: Physical Reconstruction and Economic Development as Conflict Prevention Factors," *CIRR*, n.d.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Derges, *Ritual and Recovery in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka*, Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series 62 (Routledge, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Goreau-Ponceaud, "Conflict and Environment in Sri Lanka, a Complex Nexus," in *Armed Conflict and Environment: From World War II to Contemporary Asymmetric Warfare*, ed. Detlef Briesen (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, 2018), 227–60.

<sup>15</sup> Ashara Nijamdeen and Thahira Thajudeen, "Exploring the Well-Being of Communities Adjacent to Coastal Forests: A Case Study from Sri Lanka," Conference on International Research on Food Security, Natural Resource Management and Rural Development, Czech University of Life Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic (September 14–16, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Sandarasee Sudusinghe, "Gini Wadunu Piyapath," in *Out of Sri Lanka: Tamil, Sinhala and English Poetry from Sri Lanka and Its Diasporas*, ed. Vidyan Ravinthiran, Seni Seneviratne, and Shash Trevett (Bloodaxe Books, 2023), 358.

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Local Government & Housing and Construction and Department of Town & Country Planning, *Colombo Master Plan Project* (1978).

real estate projects. In the Colombo metropolitan area alone, there exist many freshwater marshes, open waterways, estuaries, and paddy land.<sup>18</sup> Projects to “reclaim” these wetlands and turn them into viable building spaces have only increased apace as the state looked to draw in higher tax earnings from real-estate development.<sup>19</sup> As Missaka Hettiarachchi et al. note,

The state’s drive to make Colombo attractive for investment and skyrocketing real estate investments and prices had a bearing on the wetlands in number of ways: (1) privately owned wetlands came under pressure to be converted into marketable ‘land’; (2) slums and low-income settlements concentrated around wetlands were targeted to make way for prime real estate; (3) some parts of private wetlands were acquired and altered for improving necessary drainage and road infrastructure; and (4) small remnant patches of wetlands were converted into waterfronts or recreational areas to boost real estate value in their vicinity.<sup>20</sup>

These wetlands not only house a variety of wildlife, but also act as the main flood retention infrastructure for urban areas. This has affected not only the fragile but necessary ecosystems of the wetlands, but also impacted the lives and livelihoods of the urban poor. One key consequence has been a noticeable impact on habitat diversity, species diversity, and genetic diversity amongst indigenous wildlife, particularly due to the loss of native habitat, forcing amphibians, reptiles, and water birds into direct, and often dangerous, human encounters.<sup>21</sup> Another key consequence has been that every time the metropolis experiences heavy rainfall, various urban areas experience severe floods, leading to landslides and fatal weather-related incidents.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Urban Development Authority, *Environmental Management Strategy for Colombo Urban Area* (1994).

<sup>19</sup> Bart Klem and Thiruni Kelegama, “Marginal Placeholders: Peasants, Paddy and Ethnic Space in Sri Lanka’s Post-War Frontier,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 47, no. 2 (2020): 346–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2019.1572604>.

<sup>20</sup> Missaka Hettiarachchi, Tiffany H. Morrison, and Clive McAlpine, “Power, Politics and Policy in the Appropriation of Urban Wetlands: The Critical Case of Sri Lanka,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 4 (2019): 739, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1393801>.

<sup>21</sup> Missaka Hettiarachchi et al., “The Eco-Social Transformation of Urban Wetlands: A Case Study of Colombo, Sri Lanka,” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 132 (December 2014): 55–68, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2014.08.006>.

<sup>22</sup> “Sri Lanka: Floods and Landslides - May 2024,” ReliefWeb, May 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/fl-2024-000077-lka>.

Another reclamation project, one which has extended beyond the urban wetlands and has, in fact, taken land from the sea, is also a very relevant case here. This is the Port City project, which reclaimed land from the Indian Ocean in order to build a multifunctional cityscape. The environmental concerns raised by this project range from disruptions to marine habitats, damage to coral reefs, and coastal erosion caused by sand dredging.<sup>23</sup> It also affects the livelihood of 15,000 fisherpeople.<sup>24</sup> For this project, the military was also used by the state to evict the poor from the coastal and urban-coastal areas in order to facilitate the luxury hotels and apartments that were part of this cityscape, or Megapolis.<sup>25</sup> These evictions forced the slum clearance of low-income, multi ethnic and multi-religious urban communities.<sup>26</sup>

Sri Lanka's indigenous community has also been significantly impacted by processes of land grabbing and reclamation, especially due to expansions of monocrop plantations such as tea, coffee, rubber, sugarcane, and palm oil, which encroach upon indigenous forest lands. While these began during the colonial era, they continued past independence, and the indigenous communities are now in a situation where, by law, they are not allowed into the forests that they regard as sacred.<sup>27</sup> This causes not only the expected devastation of wildlife, but also, for the indigenous community, a spiritual wound.<sup>28</sup> As one indigenous chief said, "the forest is part and parcel of our lives. The forest was the home, school, temple, hospital, and everything ... today our children are not allowed into the forest since laws have been imposed against entering it."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Anupama M. Ranawana, "Rage against the Port City: Southern Theologies Mobilising for Climate Justice," *Politics* 43, no. 2 (May 2023): 236-49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957221124889>.

<sup>24</sup> Vintha Revi, "Colombo Port City Project: Controversial since Its Inception," Observer Research Foundation, December 28, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/colombo-port-city-project/>.

<sup>25</sup> Alessandra Radicati, "The Unstable Coastline: Navigating Dispossession and Belonging in Colombo" (PhD diss., London School of Economics, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Vijay Nagaraj, "From Smokestacks to Luxury Condos: The Housing Rights Struggle of the Millworkers of Mayura Place, Colombo," *Contemporary South Asia* 24, no. 4 (2016): 429–43.

<sup>27</sup> UN-REDD Sri Lanka, "Land Tenure Considerations in Sri Lanka's Proposed National REDD+ Strategy," 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Anupama Ranawana, "The Veddah and the Loss of the 'Kelle-Poje': Sri Lanka at 75," *Sri Lanka at 75* (blog), December 18, 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2023/12/18/the-veddah-and-the-loss-of-the-kelle-poje-sri-lanka-at-75/>.

<sup>29</sup> UCA News, "Sri Lankan Tribe Spurns Government Sponsorship," August 12, 2014, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/sri-lankan-tribe-spurns-government-sponsorship/71658>.

The above cases are, as mentioned above, not exhaustive, but they provide a robust snapshot of how the ecological crisis plays out in a country like Sri Lanka in multiple ways. These crises are promulgated by the effect of development policy, militarization, the ongoing impact of colonial era laws, and rapacious tourism, creating environments of suffering for human communities from minority backgrounds and for non-human populations as well.<sup>30</sup>

### Understanding *Dukkha*

How do we begin to understand and navigate the suffering when we think of the ecological crisis? This is not the suffering of natural existence but suffering that has been artificially created by humanity. What is learned and drawn from it? I wish now to turn to this issue of suffering and to open up a dialogue. As mentioned in the introduction, my hope here is not to provide a template or framework for doing theology, but some suggestions that arise from thinking with the concept of *dukkha* or suffering. I provide a few broad discussions of how *dukkha* is understood, but I will assert that climate change and global warming can be understood as *global dukkha* of the human race.<sup>31</sup>

The concept of *dukkha*, especially in the Buddhist tradition, has different levels; it is not simply suffering in a direct English translation. The Pali term *dukkha* thus extends beyond the typical notion of suffering. It encompasses not only physical and mental pain but also a fundamental, existential dissatisfaction that is seen to affect our lives. Sometimes, *dukkha* understood on an individual level can mean the disquietude that comes from anxiety, unease, irritation, or lamentation. Another level is knowing that nothing is permanent, and that all sources of happiness, joy, and pleasure will eventually lead to loss and pain. This is best illustrated in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta,

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get

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<sup>30</sup> Leoma Van Dort, “Neoliberalism and Social Justice in the City: An Examination of Postwar Urban Development in Colombo, Sri Lanka” (master’s thesis, St. Cloud State University, 2016), [https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/socresp\\_etds/7/](https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/socresp_etds/7/).

<sup>31</sup> Colin David Butler, “The Global Environmental Crisis and Sustainability of Civilization: Time for the Buddhist World to Awaken,” in *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis* (The International Buddhist Conference, 2009), 216.

what one wants is suffering; in brief, five aggregates subject to clinging is suffering.<sup>32</sup>

On the individual level, *dukkha* arises because of our desires and attachments, and aversions.<sup>33</sup>

A final way of understanding *dukkha* relates to the interdependency of everything. It understands existential vulnerability and fragility, and yet turns us to this precarious interdependence. What vulnerability and death have been created because of our attachments and cravings for wealth and profit? Yes, existence is unsatisfactory, but how do we encounter the forceful violence our craving (*tanha*) has visited upon the living world, a fragility and an end that is not part of the natural way of being? If we extrapolate from the individual to the collective, what collective desires and cravings have created unnatural death and suffering?

In Hinduism, *dukkha* is a fundamental concept translated as pain, suffering, and unhappiness. When the warrior Arjuna experiences *dukkha*, Krishna invites him to reflect on what pain and suffering are, what their causes are, and what needs to be done to cease these things. In this conversation, the main purpose is to achieve *moksha* or liberation. This is done through the removal of ignorance, which allows the person to realize the reality of the self, rise to their pure soul, and disassociate from Prakriti (matter). Again, here, the casting aside of the material or the too-weddedness to what is worldly causes *dukkha*.<sup>34</sup> Our cravings hinder us from participation in the harmony of the Universe, of participating in the cosmos, and realizing our interrelationship to every other being in the cosmos. With these broad definitions in mind, I wish to turn us to the understanding of a global *dukkha*.

### Final Thoughts: Toward a Global *Dukkha*

*Dukkha* may be understood as suffering at an individual and collective level, but a *global dukkha* draws on the effects brought on by the polycrisis of the environment.<sup>35</sup> This suffering has arisen,

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<sup>32</sup> Mahasi Sayadaw, *The Great Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta)* (Buddhasāsana Nuggaha Organization, 2000), 25.

<sup>33</sup> Sebastian Gäb, “Why Do We Suffer? Buddhism and the Problem of Evil,” *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 5 (2015): 345–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12207>; Palden Gyal and Owen Flanagan, “The Role of Pain in Buddhism: The Conquest of Suffering,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*, ed. Jennifer Corns (Routledge, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> Dhananjay Trivedi, “Philosophical Enquiry of Duhkha (Pain) in Shrimadbhagwat Gita and Yoga-Sutra,” *Indian Independent Philosophical Journal* 1 (August 2025): 14–26.

<sup>35</sup> Paul H. De Neui, *Suffering: Christian Reflections on the Buddhist Dukkha*, vol. 8 (William Carey Publishing, 2011).

in the Buddhist tradition, also because of our selfish craving for comfort and luxury. Desire for more and selfishness that sees other beings as disposable have led those who hold power and wealth to engage in industrial-scale environmental degradation. Bhikku Anālayo proposes a model based on the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism that we may also draw into our theologies and theological thinking.<sup>36</sup> Firstly, he suggests that the truth of *dukkha* recognizes environmental suffering, before moving to *dukkha-samudaya* (understanding the causes of suffering). From this, he encourages collective work towards *dukkha-nirodha* (the cessation of environmental suffering), and finally, *dukkha-nirodha-gamini patipada* (the overcoming of environmental issues).

Dr. Sister Rasika Pieris's work on suffering in gendered communities in Sri Lanka opens us up to how we might *think with* suffering and approach the latter parts of the model discussed above.<sup>37</sup> Reflecting on narratives of suffering amongst displaced Buddhist and Catholic women and widows, Pieris argues that understanding that suffering is always something that is in process. Drawing the Buddhist understanding of *dukkha* together with the Buddhist element of *karuna* (compassion), she also urges Catholic theology to be affected by the pain of the being that is suffering. This is somewhat akin to a discussion in the opening paragraphs of the possibility of entering into the suffering of other sentient beings. What theologies do we write if we understand this dynamic, ongoing, generational suffering, and interact, even touch the sufferings of other sentient beings? This is similar to liberation theology, which tells us that in order to understand a phenomenon, we have to draw our theology from the material experience.<sup>38</sup> Pieris also points us to the radical transformation wrought by suffering, and this may turn us to how we overcome suffering.<sup>39</sup> She notes that, especially in a country like Sri Lanka, where suffering is explicitly performed in both Catholic and Buddhist traditions, the action of suffering is vital. Without words, but with weeping, gestures, expressions, cries, ritual dances, and strategic silences, she

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<sup>36</sup> Anālayo, *Mindfully Facing Climate Change* (Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> Rasika Sharmen Pieris, *Breaking the Barriers: A Reflection on Suffering in Buddhism and Christianity in the Perspectives of War-Widows in Sri Lanka* (Dissertation, Radboud University, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Wipf and Stock, 2007); David Thang Moe, "Sin and Suffering: The Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology in Asia," *Asia Journal of Theology* 30, no. 2 (2016): 208-225.

<sup>39</sup> Rasika Sharmen Pieris, "Hope That Confronts Oppression and Suffering: Faith and War-Affected Women in Sri Lanka," in *Faith in the Face of Militarization: Indigenous, Feminist, and Interreligious Voices*, ed. Jude Lal Fernando (Pickwick, 2021), 89-111.

identifies how her research subjects, who are both Catholic and Buddhist, built strategies of survival. In our theologies, then, we need to consider that cessation and overcoming of the environmental crisis may come from an explicit expression of this suffering.

A final form of how cessation and overcoming can occur can be found in some of the responses of disadvantaged Sri Lankan communities to some of the crises I have discussed above. The suffering, the *dukkha*, turns itself into both grief and rage, but manifests as resistance movements that are then, we can argue, dually focused on cessation and overcoming. Across the country, whether it is a campaign by war widows or a campaign by local fishermen, what we see in response is significant resistance movements by marginalized communities against forced eviction, land acquisitions, and floods.<sup>40</sup> These have manifested as long-term campaigns that challenge laws, in some cases successfully taking land back from the government, or in spontaneous protests or educational campaigns.<sup>41</sup> These mobilizations, which look to protect both the environments and the lives of the people affected by rapacious development and land grabs, can be seen as a social movement of the environmentalism of the poor.<sup>42</sup> This is how *dukkha* rises beyond the self and becomes part of a larger, communal movement for change. Communal movements detach us from individualized cravings of the nation-state, or the family, or property, but reinscribe interdependency and collectivism. A consideration for further reflection and dialogue may be how we draw on this particular mobilizing impetus from suffering and how it might affect our ecotheological sensibilities.

In conclusion, centering this complex understanding of suffering and what must or can be done to overcome environmental suffering provides Christian theology with an approach that is reflective, reflexive, and, importantly, rooted in community and collectivism. We can, for example, look to the expressions found in the poems in this essay. These pour out in anguish; they tell of the intergenerational suffering that is visited upon both sentient beings and the Earth. We can also look at what

<sup>40</sup> Harini Amarasuriya, “The Politics of Environmental Movements in Sri Lanka,” *Polity* 8, no. 1–2 (2020): 21–28

<sup>41</sup> Benedikt Korf, “War, Livelihoods and Vulnerability in Sri Lanka,” *Development and Change* 35, no. 2 (April 2004): 275–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2004.00352.x>.

<sup>42</sup> Vivian Y. Choi, “Ecological States: Nature, Militarization, and Nationalism in Sri Lanka,” in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Sri Lanka*, ed. Kanchana N. Ruwanpura and Amjad Mohamed Saleem (Routledge, 2025), 325–34; Harini Amarasuriya, “Protests and Counter Protests: Competing Civil Society Spaces in Post-War Sri Lanka,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (2015): 49–55.

has been documented by different groups, such as the worker movements mentioned above. Together with expressions like poetry, song, and storytelling, we will be able to understand the causes of environmental suffering. Drawing from Pieris, we understand that having these explicit expressions of suffering is important for recognizing and understanding the causes of environmental suffering. From this, we move to ask the question asked in the model of global *dukkha*: what is needed to bring about the cessation of suffering, particularly suffering that has been caused by unnatural death? In part, we can return to Hindu and Buddhist understandings as discussed above, that the imposition of the human desire for growth and profit has caused this suffering. For Christians to work towards ceasing suffering, we are then called to re-orientation or a conversion away from exponential growth.

If one cause of environmental suffering is the desire by governments and corporations for growth, we need to urge the reorientation of society towards economies that focus less on production and consumption while promoting social, economic, and environmental justice. Certainly, the case studies indicated throughout this paper show how systems of colonialism, war, rapacious development, and profit-oriented planning by successive Sri Lankan governments have created death for both human and non-human parts of Creation. Thinking with Analayo and Pieris, we can argue for work to cease environmental suffering through an invitation to communities to accept responsibility for building diverse coalitions and mutually supportive ways of living. We see this happening already in the resistance movements discussed above in Sri Lanka, but also occurring throughout the world. The consideration of a global *dukkha*, of centering the concept of suffering in a multilayered way, provides, then, a map for Christian theology where we can look to various “tellings,” through lament rituals, poetry, case studies, and stories, to understand the cause of suffering, and then work towards the cessation of suffering. Importantly, this has to be work that is done collectively, and in community. We may build coalitions with multiple and diverse groups in order to mobilize towards overcoming environmental issues. Suffering, here, is not something to be “taken on” or valorized, but something to be dialogued with and centered within theological analysis and praxis. Suffering, Hinduism, and Buddhism teach us that suffering is part of life, but the suffering visited upon the environment is an unnatural death. In this analysis, we ask the question: what creates death and what creates life?

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